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*Role of Sounds in “The Primer: Children in Majdanek Camp”
Exhibition at Majdanek State Museum*

Rola dźwięku na wystawie „Elementarz. Życie dzieci w obozie na Majdanku” w Państwowym
Muzeum na Majdanku

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ABSTRACT

“The Primer: Children in Majdanek Camp” is an educational exhibition devoted to the pre-war and camp fate of Jewish, Polish and Belarusian children. The exhibition is located in barrack 53 of KL Majdanek. The exhibition can be characterized as a scenographic, photographic and sound installation. The cacophony of sounds made by children playing during school breaks, their voices and the testimony of adult prisoners overlap. This overlap represents the palimpsest structure of time made of sounds. The sound aspect of the exhibition plays a key role in the reception of the exhibition. The time before the war is symbolized by the cheerful sounds of children. The time spent in the camp is not represented by the terrifying sounds of crying or screaming; it is replaced by a chorus of voices testifying to past events and is accompanied by the quiet sounds of a lullaby. Attention is drawn to the elements of the audiosphere of the exhibition – they illustrate children’s camp experiences, abandoning historical descriptions and boards, and using only eyewitness accounts and deeply symbolic objects. The exhibition is an interesting case of using relatively simple, yet strongly influencing the imagination of visitors, affective tools. Thanks to this, it was possible to avoid trivialization and oversimplification, as well as the information glut and didacticism known from conventional museums.

Keywords: soundscape; sound environment; memory; Holocaust; exhibition

INTRODUCTION

The exhibition prepared at the State Museum at Majdanek, titled “The Primer” (Pol. „Elementarz”), has been presented since 2003 and concerns the existence of Jewish, Polish and Belarusian children in the camp. The exhibition has been written about many times, emphasizing its various aspects (Banach, 2014; Grudzińska, 2003; Kubiszyn, 2020; Skórzyńska, 2010; Ziębińska-Witek, 2011). In 2002, “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre”, in cooperation with Majdanek State Museum, created an educational project with an exhibition held in a former camp storage room, barrack 53, and titled “The Primer: Children in Majdanek Camp”¹. The display was created and designed by Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, director and co-founder of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” in Lublin². The title “The Primer: Children in Majdanek Camp” refers to the time of childhood, which is, in normal conditions, supposedly a carefree period in which initiation into the sphere of social life takes place; in this case, however, it was stolen and replaced by a socialization into an abnormal context of the camp, as Witold Dąbrowski (“Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre”) puts it: “The first words children learn to write are *mother, father, house, dog, cat* (...). In the Majdanek primer, they learn words like *roll-call, crematorium, bloc, gas chamber, transport, number, camp and selection*” (Aviva, 2008).

The exhibition is arranged throughout the barrack, which consists of several isolated spaces, which at the same time outline consecutive stages of a visit (Grudzińska, 2003, p. 111)³. The first part, abounding with various historical facts, but a part that is also optional⁴, can be described as a very small introduction to the historical context of the camp. The second – named by the creator “The Primer World – Childhood and School” – should be perceived as a pleasant buffer space, terse both in the numerous objects and provided information. The third – “The Camp World” – by far the most effective part, but at the same time balanced by delicateness and subtlety, illustrates children’s camp experience by abandoning

¹ The exhibition was one part of a bigger project consisting of four elements. Three others were educational meetings for children in Lublin’s schools, methodological classes for teachers, as well as publishing the exhibition catalogue (see Grudzińska, 2003, p. 109).

² There were few other persons involved in the Project: Małgorzata Rybicka (visual setting), Marta Grudzińska (project coordinator), and Robert Kuwałek (content supervisor; see Szwarcman-Czarnota, 2003, p. 29).

³ One can see a spatial organization of the exhibition on a simplified yet quite accurate sketch (see Pietrasiewicz, Rybicka, Grudzińska, 2003b, p. 1).

⁴ Completely different setting occurs on exhibition titled “Kraków – czas okupacji 1939–1945” (“Krakow under Nazi Occupation 1939–1945”) displayed in the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow (Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa) and held in the former Emalia Factory of Oskar Schindler, where curator endeavours led to such space organization, that one is forced to walk through exhibition in designed way and sequence (see more Bednarek et al., 2010).

historical descriptions and charts, and instead using only eyewitness testimonies and deeply symbolic objects. The creators of the exhibition used several basic elements, the combination of which allows visitors to participate in discovering and learning about, as well as experiencing, the past of this place. These include unusual scenography and characteristic, symbolic objects, such as a wagon or an abandoned cradle, and completely surprising things, such as concrete wells from which the voices of former prisoners come. The sound layer of this exhibition is of great importance and carries a large emotional charge by recreating the audiosphere of a place whose inhabitants were annihilated, and the exhibition allows you to recall their presence through images and sounds that imitate their everyday functioning through the noise, confusion and sounds coming from the loudspeakers or school noise.

The development of sound culture in the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theater" is very important. The center is related to both the Grodzka Gate and the Theater (Skrzypek, 2008, p. 322). The role of sound in "The Primer" exhibition is not surprising, because it plays a key role in almost all exhibitions and is never marginalized. The exhibition encourages active participation, "audiences, moving around the space of the barracks, can open drawers containing information about the fate of children, slide catalog cards, look into the holes behind which slide viewers are installed, lean over the boards placed close to the ground, made of fired clay, on which fragments of witnesses' accounts have been imprinted, and above concrete wells from which their voices can be heard. The stories of former prisoners, overlapping with the remaining elements of the audiosphere of the exhibition, constitute – similarly to the exhibitions shown at the Grodzka Gate – a sound substance through which not only information about past events is conveyed, but also the narrators' emotions. They are expressed (and perceived by visitors) through aspects characteristic of live oral expression, such as the strength and melody of the voice, tempo, pause, and rhythm, as well as at the linguistic level, i.e. through the choice of vocabulary and grammar" (Kubiszyn, 2018, pp. 218–219).

THE PRELUDE

The introductory part of the exhibition shows the role of the historical background for understanding the camp prisoners' fate, devoting special attention to children's experiences. After entering the barrack, one has the opportunity to go forward or turn to one of the two twin-like tiny rooms on each of the sides. Turning left will lead to a space dedicated to Polish and Belarusian children, while choosing an opposite direction will allow one to learn about the Jewish children, who, in the Nazis' plan, were supposed to perish in gas chambers. Rooms are equipped with wooden objects, including shelves, cupboards and drawers, which by their nature

and specific clumsiness may trigger associations with the interiors of libraries or archives (Pietrasiewicz et al., 2003b, p. 2). By exploring the sources in the archive, one can find four types of documents, divided into four separate racks.

The first consists of testimonies, reflecting on numerous events in the camp. They define different areas of everyday life, which were very accurately described by Goffman in *Asylums* (1961), his work on total institution. Among the discussed events, one can find the so-called initiation rituals, such as crossing borders of the camp, registration and assigning numbers; everyday life in the camp reflects the total reliance on intuitions, but also the very ambiguous moment of transport to the camp – i.e. crossing the border of two worlds – which is so deeply engraved in the survivors' memory. In the descriptions presented, the creators of the exhibition wanted to convey the experience of Jewish children, which in some respects was similar, yet also significantly differed. There are, among others, testimonies about gas chambers and selections, some of which highlight the well-remembered phonic background of the dramatic events: “I heard a plaintive humming of a Jewish woman: the melody of the pre-war hit *The Town of Belżc*, but sung differently. It was in Yiddish: *Treblinka Eins*, *Treblinka Zwei*, and was a ballad about the arrival and detachment of children from mothers and fathers, a story about the fate of the transport from the ghetto to the Treblinka – from arrival to the end”⁵; “Mothers say farewell to their children; everyone knew that they were going to die, and that nothing could be done. We all walked proudly; no one wept. People walked to the sound of music because the Germans installed radio speakers. The turmoil was awful. It seemed that this was the end of the world”⁶.

The second type of documents is devoted to four individual life calendars of children imprisoned in Majdanek: Halina Birenbaum, Henio Żytomirski, Janina Buczek-Różańska and Piotr Kiryszczenko, which at the same time echo more general biographies of Jewish, Polish and Belarusian children's unfortunate times. The fate of the four mentioned persons has not been signaled at this point by sheer coincidence. These stories are supposed to be an initiation and a prelude to the exhibition, as in the following sections of exposition, formal calendars of life events begin to be gradually filled out and complemented by the voices of the protagonists, who talk about life in the camp or – to one's astonishment – keep silent.

The third layer of narrative is constructed through copies of museum cards, describing items related to the most intimate sphere of prisoners' life. One may find among them objects from a characteristic child's world (e.g. doll), but also more general categories of items used by children, such as clothes (shoes, jackets, hats), glasses or a Star of David.

⁵ A fragment of Stefania Błońska account from the exhibition.

⁶ A fragment of Estera Rubinstein account from the exhibition.

The fourth type of objects are reproductions of museum cards, with descriptions of the layout of the camp. Particular emphasis is placed on its infrastructure (including barracks, barbed wire, lighting, the crematorium, and cans of Zyklon B), although one may come across the records of whips or human ashes.

In the rooms, there are also media, which could have been considered modern at the time. Firstly, a wooden TV box, which “screens” black-and-white drawings of the animated film about the camp. Andrzej Janiszka, a former prisoner, made it for a girl Kryisia, camp friend’s daughter (Pietrasiewicz et al., 2003b, p. 6). Content relating to harsh conditions of camp life took the gentler form and therefore was more appropriate for a young audience, although the way one watches them may seem anachronistic. As you turn a crank, the images scroll up or down, creating from time to time unpleasant, squealing sounds. Secondly, a mysterious box with cut-out round holes was hung on one of the walls. By looking into it, one can look at 34 pre-war photographs of children captured in KL Majdanek (Grudzińska, 2003, p. 112). The light falls on the back of photographs through the holes cut in the walls of the barrack, and depending on the weather and time of day, images are saturated with different hues.

The introductory part may give an impression of difficulty and claustrophobia-inducing conditions. That effect comes as a result of intertwining small space with densely packed information. Rooms are rather small, and designed for a small number of people, while cupboards and shelves catalog multiple types of detailed documents. Even when visual elements enter the stage, such as pictures of objects, animated film or photographs, they create a specific atmosphere through the application of an archaic filter, which stripes them of color, inviting one to watch a movie but only when turning the crank oneself or being asked to view images individually through small holes. Additionally, the predominantly used material in the exhibition is wood, a material associated more with the past, rather than the present, due to its smell and phonic qualities reinforcing the aura of these spaces.

“THE PRIMER WORLD” – CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOL

The proper exhibition begins here, where a wooden wall divides “The Primer World” display into two parts. On the one side, we find a music box, which when opened, emits the melody of the famous pre-war Polish lullaby *A Little Spark Is Twinkling on the Ash Grate*⁷. One can listen to or read the lyrics of the song by turning the squeaking crank:

⁷ Polish poet and writer, Janina Porazińska, is the author of this lullaby.

Na Wojtusia z popielnika

Na Wojtusia z popielnika
iskiereczka mruga.
Chodź, opowiem ci bajeczkę,
bajka będzie długa.

Była sobie raz królewna,
pokochała grajka,
król wyprawił im wesele
i skończona bajka.

Była sobie Baba Jaga,
miała chatkę z masła,
a w tej chatce same dziwy
cyt! iskierka zgasła.

A Little Spark Is Twinkling on the Ash Grate

At Wojtus, from the ash grate [in a stove]
a little spark is twinkling.
Come, I'll tell you a fairy tale,
the fairy tale will be long.

There once was a princess,
she fell in love with a village musician,
the king threw them a wedding party
and the fairy tale is over.

There was a Baba Yaga,
she had a hut made of butter,
and that hut was full of mysteries
ssst! the spark went out.

Even though this element may seem less important, it creates strong, effective sensations. The lullaby is played constantly, encompassing a viewer slowly and unconsciously with every loop. Its sorrowful and lethargic melody spins through the entire exposure, evoking a strange, trance-like state⁸. On the other side of the wall, one enters the imaginary world of the classroom. Three boxes, standing on a desk, conceive Polish, Hebrew⁹ and Belarusian primers. On a blackboard hung over the desk, an inscription written with chalk states the names and ages of four children, whose stories we are going to listen to. Moreover, the room is filled with sounds of children playing during school break, coming from the distance. This part of the exhibition indicates a period of undisturbed childhood, frivolous fun with peers and learning in a multicultural context, but it also summons the building of intimacy with parents before bedtime. Biographically, it also marks the time before the destruction of basic primary social life groups.

Thanks to the limited number of objects and light space, the impact of the phonic elements is enhanced. Static material objects help dynamic sounds to stir the imagination and sink into the mind. In fact, the space structure resembles the rather fragmentary nature of a dream or foggy memory, rather than an actual classroom. It seems incomplete, impoverished in details, and lacks both children

⁸ One of the students records in her essay a tour guide's words stating, that a nine- or ten-years old student from a nearby primary school performs a lullaby (see Segit, n.d., p. 2).

⁹ This primer was digitalized and is available on the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" webpage https://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/publication/edition/10612?id=10612&from=&dirids=1&ver_id=&lp=6&QI=.

and items conventionally ascribed to it. Furthermore, it reveals the systematically-created tension between joyful childhood and anticipated fear. The classroom is empty but bears visual and sonic traces which can be interpreted in many ways. Does the noise reflect fun or maybe a racket involving children? What is actually happening at break? Are sounds moving away and will children come back to the classroom?

THE CAMP WORLD

In this state of uncertainty and expectation, one enters the biggest display space. Compositionally, the "World of the Camp" part consists of four main components: a cattle wagon, clay plates, concrete wells and wooden boxes hanging on the end of the barracks.

A ten-meter-long boxcar skeleton has been crammed into the barrack and located along its central axis. Since only a wooden door fragment was preserved, the contour of the metal structure draws a doubtful boundary between the boxcar interior and the exterior. For this reason, unlike other museums, where the carriages are tightly-covered with boards, dark and claustrophobia-inducing features, visitors gain access to the extending interior without entering and risking unpleasant, traumatizing experiences. It underlines the connection between the boxcar and the rest of exhibition space, and shows a piece of white fabric inscribed with the first and last names of hundreds of children imprisoned at Majdanek, which falls out of the car. The proposed solution tries to incorporate the indirect camp experience of transport and its victims by underlining the relationship between the successive imprisonment stages.

The boxcar functions as one of the primary objects employed in commemoration strategies in various war-oriented museums¹⁰. Usually, it symbolizes the act of uprooting and sentencing to exile, but in the context of the Nazi concentration and death camps, it additionally stresses a particular experience, i.e. a transition moment from the exterior to the interior of death, both metaphorically and literally understood¹¹. Moreover, as noted by Raul Hilberg, including trains in the Nazi rationale sets a landmark when the nature of the Holocaust significantly shifts from mobile *Einsatzgruppe* and stationary Jews, murdering process changes, to transporting victims to stationary camps. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Holocaust museums want to enrich exhibitions with that very artifact. According to Stier,

¹⁰ Box cars are used in many Holocaust-related exhibitions. Wagons can be traced in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Holocaust museums in Washington, Florida, and Dallas, but also in historical sites, such as Birkenau (more about commemoration strategies in relation to boxcars, see Stier, 2005, pp. 84–97).

¹¹ Train as trope to deal with a Holocaust representation can be traced also in different arts, such as literature (e.g. Wiesel's *Night*) or painting (e.g. Kitaj's *The Jewish Rider*).

boxcars have become sacred relics that not only allow a specific aura to arise but also function as a memory vehicle (Stier, 2005, pp. 82–83; more about boxcars and their symbolism, see Gottwaldt; 1999; Ziębińska-Witek, 2011, pp. 232–239). Thus, entering it should be perceived on the one hand as a special passage and initiation transformed into bodily insight, and on the other hand as both a journey into the past and one's depths. A similar idea seems to echo in Reich's *Different Trains* for string quartet and tape, as the composer explains the creation of the piece: "I traveled back and forth by train frequently between New York and Los Angeles from 1939 to 1942, accompanied by my governess (...). I now look back and think that, if I had been in Europe during this period, as a Jew I would have had to ride on very different trains. With this in mind, I wanted to make a piece that would accurately reflect the whole situation" (Reich, Hillier, 2002, p. 151).

The composition consists of three parts: "America – Before the War", "Europe – During the War" and "After the War". In constructing the second part of the piece, the composer used three Holocaust survivors' narratives – Rachela, Rachel and Paul – who in 1988 were his peers and lived in the United States¹². Reich chose those fragments of testimony, which were recorded in sufficiently pure tones, transcribed to musical notation, and imitated by a string quartet to obtain melodiousness, later in *Different Trains*¹³. In the deployed narratives, references both to childhood and school ("I was in second grade", "I had a teacher", "No more school"), and to the experience of a camp can be found ("Those cattle wagons", "They shaved us", "They tattooed a number on our arm", "Flames going up to the sky-it was smoking"; see Reich, Hillier, 2002, p. 153). Although "The Primer" creates no direct connection to Reich's *Different Trains*, the composition harmonizes it surprisingly well, following the topics and similar path of thinking.

The importance of testimonies in creating a display's narrative layer can be traced in clay plaques, the next component of "The World Camp" part. Inscribed with the prisoners' accounts, plaques are arranged in lines at the barrack side walls and laid on concrete plates. The exhibition lacks descriptions provided by historians, employing only testimonial voices instead. Hence, at this point, to signify their importance and preciousness, words were written and burned out on clay plaques, materials varying in function and symbolism to concrete (Pietrasiewicz et al., 2003b, p. 10). That part culminates in a few plaques placed at the barrack's back, which combine essential experiences in a broader form of categories, such as "role call", "block", "gas chamber", "crematorium", "number" and "camp selection", and which are also accompanied by exemplifications from

¹² Thus, both Reich and piece protagonists were children during the war.

¹³ "Different Trains for string quartet and tape begins a new way of composing that has its roots in my early taped speech pieces *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*. The basic idea is that speech recordings generate the musical material for musical instruments (...) the strings then literally imitate that speech melody" (Reich, Hillier, 2002, pp. 151–152).

testimonial excerpts. Two wooden boxes hang on the wall right behind the plaques. Despite their identical resemblance to the wooden photo box from the beginning of the exhibition, through holes, the viewer notices the outside world instead, with its vivid sensations and the sounds the nearby estate's inhabitants produce.

"Instead of the photos of children's faces, one can see the outside world: trees, distant houses, and the sky, when looking through the hole in the wall. One can feel a breath of wind on one's face. The holes are closed with small doors with mirrors attached to them. When opening the doors in the evening, there are delicate sun rays coming into the barrack, reflected against the mirror" (Pietrasiewicz et al., 2003b, p. 10).

Undoubtedly, the strongest and most effective effect created is by five wells located in the central barrack space. When passing by, or leaning over the dark pits, one can hear the voices uttered from the depths. The meager amount of light enhances the incertitude and mystery because the gaze is immersed in the well and one can see nothing but darkness. Moreover, the wells pierce the barrack floor and indeed are dug into the ground, which symbolically creates a vertical channel between the viewer and the underground world. The first wells may resemble a traditional watering hole, but overcoming hasty impressions, one learns they significantly differ. Strange wells do not reflect images nor sounds. On the contrary, the wells simultaneously speak with their own voice, and absorb light and sounds coming from the top: "When our group entered the barrack, the guide told us to approach the well. We were surprised. We walked, squinting, as our eyes did not accommodate to the darkness in the barrack. The well we saw resembled a village well. There was something missing. The pulley, rope and bucket were not there. Despite that, the well woke up. As soon as we bent over it, like Little Prince and the pilot, we heard a voice, the piercing voice of an elderly woman (...) his [Henio's] only trace, a silent trace, left after him was the photos. I was even more shocked with the dark emptiness I saw bending over the well and looking into the abyss" (Pietrasiewicz et al., 2003b, p. 12).

The strategy adopted in that element of the exhibition aims to provide the stories of particular child prisoners in an effective and therefore memorable manner. One can hear the accounts (Halina Birenbaum, Janina Buczek-Róžańska and Peter Kiryszczenko) spoken by already mature voices about camp incarceration from the period they were still children. Only a well-commemorating Henio Żytomirski remains silent and unable to articulate a single sound. It is so because Henio did not survive the war, nor did he create any account on his life in the camp¹⁴. Most probably, the best possible sonic means to respond to the representation dilemma becomes resignation from the sounds, the mute act of existence and silent presence,

¹⁴ More about Henio's life and projects related to him can be found in a small publication about him and on a project webpage about writing a letter to him (see Pietrasiewicz, 2005).

which is to testify about his life, yet due to epistemological and/or ethical reasons cannot dare to speak.

The epistemological limits described above become evident even to a schoolboy, who out of a cognitive impotence, decides to make an ethical demand to remember: “I cannot imagine many of the things; I am just unable to. I do not know many things. I will never find out about many of them. I know one thing; I do not want to forget it. I cannot. It is because of one of the wells, the one without the sound” (Grudzińska, 2003, p. 113).

However, the most controversial and remembered is the fifth well, which is presented in a highly succinct and symbolic manner, about the fate of the fifth child – a Jewish girl named Elżunia. When one opens the music box standing at the well, a girl starts singing¹⁵. Everything that is known about her comes from a note found hidden in a child’s shoe at Majdanek. The scrap of paper was stained with blood and concealed a short rhyme-lullaby with an inscription that the author is nine years old and sang these words to the tune of *A Little Spark Is Twinkling on the Ash Grate*:

Once there was Elżunia,
she is dying all alone,
because her daddy is in Majdanek,
and in Auschwitz her mom...

Była sobie raz Elżunia,
umierała sama,
bo jej tatuś na Majdanku,
w Oświęcimiu mama...

This part of the exhibition attracts the audience the most, magnetizing and affecting them to their limits. People stop and focus there more often, listening intently, unable to utter a voice or to be quiet either, starting to sob: “We heard a quiet, self-conscious voice singing to the tune of Porazińska’s lullaby, such cruel words. (...) The song ended, and I was paralyzed, stood still over the black depth” (Segit, n.d., p. 2); “I still remember the peculiar smell of the barrack, the twilight inside and children’s voices around (...) yet I was especially moved by *Elżunia’s Song*, titled this way by the exhibition organizers, which was heard in one of the specifically designed wells” (Grudzińska, 2003, p. 113); “Hoffman records her reaction to this song: ‘I believe this is the most piercing single verse I’ve ever heard and after all I have read, learned, and absorbed about the Shoah, the fragment strikes me with a wholly penetrating, unprepared sense of pity and sorrow’. She reports that others hearing the song and reading the words were similarly pierced” (Berlin, 2012, p. 397).

Phonic means engaged in the highly problematic task of dealing with traumatic Holocaust history, and seem to play a crucial role in the exhibition’s success and its persuasive impact. Wells emit testimonies from the depths of

¹⁵ Voice belongs to a third grade girl (see Segit, n.d., p. 2).

death, narrated directly by the survivors' authentic, yet mature voice¹⁶. Henio's story is based on emptiness and lack of sounds, whereas Elżunia's well sings with her contemporaneous peer's voice. The lullaby in particular leaves visible imprints on visitors, who, independently of age, refer to it in the accounts. On the one hand, lullaby usage acts as a compositional bridge, which opens and closes the exhibition. On the other hand, it functions as a companion in a mysterious journey. It is because, throughout the tour, the hummed lullaby from childhood accompanies us constantly, and when two music boxes are opened, melodies and lyrics merge or overlap each other. At first, we are unable to distinguish between the two different lullabies; all we can sense is the emerging strangeness at best. Unnamed feelings grow within us while moving closer to the exhibition core and immersion in the display. The looped lullaby put us in a trance-like mood, even if we had already started distinguishing words. However, at some point, Elżunia's song lyrics reach one's consciousness, with their unpredictable and excruciating power, stirring from pleasant lethargy with consecutive repetitions: "I enter the barrack. I can hear a melody: *Na Wojtusia z popielnika*, but the lyrics are different, about the camp. (...) This song [is played] continuously in the background¹⁷. I read. I can hear a voice. I go to the place it is coming from. It is a stone ring – a bottomless well. Memories of one child. A story of the camp life. Another well not far away, a story of a girl. Then another one – silent. Yes. (...) I can feel the song goes round. A moment of break, and it starts again. It makes me go into a trance. A rhythm of receiving information. And the smell. I cannot stand it any longer. My soul hurts. I cannot interpret everything that gets into me. I cannot. I do not want to. I do not understand. I leave" (Pietrasiewicz et al., 2003b, p. 12).

Expressed in the above quotation is the opinion of a junior high school student, concerning the cognitive and emotional difficulties he had while visiting the exhibition. One should emphasize that this reception is not rare and echoes among other display visitors. This became an argument for the critics, who defined the exhibit as terrifying and implicitly traumatizing children. Conservative newspaper "Rzeczpospolita" cited students, who said: "I did not know it would be so awful. I do not even know what to say" or "I imagined the exhibition as a less drastic one. The worst is that song about Elżunia. This is so sad – this girl was nine years old" (Mizeracka, 2004). In the same article, a museum employee, Marta Grudzińska, was reassured that students are always accompanied by a guide, and after the exhibition, they carry out discussions. That part is supposed to help students in expressing and dealing with aroused emotions. During these sessions, many students cry, but as we learn from Hoffman's account, the age variable seems less

¹⁶ Story of Piotr Kiriszczenko is read in Polish by a lector, not by the protagonist.

¹⁷ This sentence was omitted in the official translation and comes from the Polish version of a display catalogue (Pietrasiewicz, Rybicka, Grudzińska, 2003a, p. 12).

significant in determining the impact of the exhibition as we may be led to believe: “Hoffman tells us about a woman overcome with emotion at the same exhibit where she first heard Elżunia’s song. The woman sat down and wailed in the midst of the exhibition” (Berlin, 2012, p. 398).

The museum scholar and exhibition adversary claim that critics’ argument is invalid because one should first differentiate a controversial exhibition from a difficult one. Describing “The Primer” as a “brutal play on emotions” seems at least inaccurate, if not biased, and one should perceive it instead as an unconventional way of experiencing and sensitizing (Ziębińska-Witek, 2011, p. 210). In this respect, the effective aura students refer to depends not on a given form primarily, which actually is rather subtle and delicate, but on the very nature of the space and testimonies. Authors resigned from intermediaries, and instead of the historians’ narratives visitors are used to, they let narratives from survivors speak to a higher degree with their own voice. The lullaby, to some students the most terrifying exhibition component, derives its overwhelming power not from drastic images and words, but on the contrary from its poignant and horrifying meaning. An innocent, nine-year girl sings it to herself, probably anticipating her parents’ fate in the death camps. Moreover, she also sings about her own death, forced by the course of events to lay herself to metaphorically understood sleep.

CONCLUSIONS

“The Primer” exhibit analysis is an interesting case study, which shows how the usage of relatively simple sensory tools affects visitors’ imagination and tackles the still-unanswered Holocaust representation problem. Each attempt to deal with narration about the Holocaust encounters obstacles, but when it additionally grapples with the especially difficult concept of children’s suffering, the tasks the creators faced became even more solemn. Furthermore, the conception of the exhibition placed student visitors in a picture; thus, both content and form must have taken this into account.

Thus, authors purposely avoided terrifying voices and sounds known from other museums (e.g. fighting sounds, screaming or crying)¹⁸, and filled the soundscape with direct witnesses’ voices instead. Two testimonies are told by actual story protagonists – Halina Birenbaum and Janina Buczek-Róžańska. However, despite the great number of narratives, the exhibition manages to balance them with informational content. On the one hand, it avoids trivialization and excessive simplification, and on the other hand, it escapes informational satiety. Hence “The Primer” abandons the didacticism known from conventional museums, inundated

¹⁸ Such sounds can be heard in the Warsaw Uprising Museum. Besides mentioned elements, a wall – one of the central emotional exhibition parts – emits also sounds of a beating heart.

with charts and descriptions, and opts instead for experience and affect. The result involved authors reducing the number of objects to a minimum and, thanks to dim light and a hummed lullaby played in the background, they were able to summon a soporific atmosphere. The lullaby is simultaneously the most memorable and emotionally difficult component of the exhibition for both children and adults, and boys and girls refer to it. Unlike Elżunia's song, but equally intriguing, is Henio's well, which on the one hand serves as an excellent example of how powerful the effect of silence can be when juxtaposed with sounds. On the other hand, to illustrate the fate of the Jewish boy and his articulation limits, the exhibition uses the evocative and eloquent tool of silence.

The impact of the phonic elements of the exhibition is surprisingly good, thanks to the lesser exposition of light and the possibility of unrestricted movements, which helps to keep the viewer focused and deepen their imagination at work. The lullaby, constantly crooned in the background, puts visitors into a trance, although it should be noted that more or less consciously, various squeaking and creaking noises (hardwood floors, boxes, knobs) co-create the exhibition's soundscape, and to some extent prevent the viewer from being entirely carried away by the hummed melody. These two functionally different elements recreate an experience comparable to that of continuous awakening and staying on the reality and dream border. Additional tension is generated when the calmness of soothing lullabies intertwines memories from one's childhood with the scary, creaking sounds the floor, doors and cabinets produce.

However, despite the exhibition's high engagement and emotional demands, it still remains subtle and delicate when reflecting on the severity of the camp experience, because one needs to remember about the display location, and that students' trips, in one day, learn about gas chambers and crematoria and look at human ashes. In this context, the exhibition summons a radically different, semi-unreal and peaceful space, where visitors are invited to immerse into and experience camp history in another, less visually-oriented dimension.

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ABSTRAKT

„Elementarz. Życie dzieci w obozie Majdanku” to wystawa edukacyjna poświęcona przedwojennym i obozowym losom dzieci żydowskich, polskich i białoruskich. Wystawa mieści się w baraku 53 KL Majdanek. Wystawę można scharakteryzować jako instalację scenograficzną, fotograficzną i dźwiękową. Kakofonia dźwięków wydawanych przez dzieci bawiące się podczas przerwy szkolnej, ich głosy i zeznania dorosłych więźniów nakładają się na siebie. To nakładanie się reprezentuje palimpsestową strukturę czasu zbudowaną z dźwięków. Aspekt dźwiękowy wystawy odgrywa kluczową rolę w odbiorze ekspozycji. Czas przed wojną symbolizują wesołe odgłosy dzieci. Czas przebywania w obozie nie jest reprezentowany przez przerażające odgłosy płaczu czy krzyku; zastępuje go chór głosów świadczących o przeszłych wydarzeniach i towarzyszą mu ciche dźwięki kołysanki. Uwagę skupiają elementy audiosfery ekspozycji – ilustrują one doświadczenia obozowe dzieci, rezygnując z opisów historycznych i plansz, a wykorzystując wyłącznie relacje świadków i głęboko symboliczne obiekty. Wystawa stanowi interesujący przypadek wykorzystania stosunkowo prostych, a jednocześnie silnie oddziałujących na wyobraźnię zwiedzających narzędzi o charakterze afektywnym. Dzięki temu udało się uniknąć banalizacji i nadmiernych uproszczeń, a także informacyjnego przesytu i dydaktyzmu znanego z konwencjonalnych muzeów.

Słowa kluczowe: pejzaż dźwiękowy; środowisko dźwiękowe; pamięć; Holocaust; wystawa