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The Ethical Dimension of Holocaust Fiction: Representations of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski in Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews* and Andrzej Bart's *Fabryka muchołapek*

Abstract: The article analyzes the ethical dimension of Holocaust fiction through a comparative examination of two novels: Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews* and Andrzej Bart's *Fabryka muchołapek*. Specifically, the study focuses on the literary portrayal of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the Nazi-appointed chairman of the Łódź Ghetto. Drawing on Monika Polit's 2012 book *Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. Prawda i zmyślenie*, this analysis seeks to determine whether Epstein and Bart transgress ethical boundaries to imaginative representation of the Holocaust in fiction.

Keywords: Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, Leslie Epstein, Andrzej Bart, Monika Polit, the Holocaust

If this is true that suffering brings knowledge,
it is no less the case that knowledge brings suffering.
Leslie Epstein

I.

Blending historical events with fiction is a phenomenon that has been prevalent in literature for centuries. Such experimentation raises important questions about the boundaries between fact and invention, especially when dealing with traumatic or morally charged historical events. As early as the 1980s and 1990s, literary scholars, such as Berel Lang (*Writing and the Holocaust*, 1988), James E. Young (*Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Consequences of Interpretation*, 1988) or Dominick La Capra (*Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*,

1994), were already drawing attention to the risks involved in fictionalizing historical trauma – particularly the Holocaust. They emphasized that such treatment of history could lead to serious repercussions, especially in terms of how memory is preserved and how the boundary between fact and fiction is maintained. Unquestionably, when authors of fiction take such creative liberties with events of such magnitude, they risk distorting the historical record or diminishing the lived experiences of victims and survivors. Orwell's timeless novel *1984* remains strikingly relevant in this context: "For when it has been recreated (the past) in whatever shape is needed at the moment, then this new version is the past" (2008: 172). The writer's warning underscores the danger of allowing fiction to reshape historical perception, particularly in the context of the Holocaust, where historical accuracy is essential to safeguarding collective memory. The relevance of this topic has, if anything, intensified in recent years. This is undoubtedly due to the enormous popularity of fictionalized Holocaust narratives such as Heather Morris' *Tattoist of Auschwitz* (2018), which raise ongoing questions about the ethics of representation, but also because of the continuous presence of Holocaust denial and distortion in public discourse. Together, these developments call for an urgent critical examination of how the Holocaust is portrayed in fiction. In this article, I discuss the portrayal of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the chairman of the Łódź Ghetto, in Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews* and Andrzej Bart's *Fabryka muchołapek* and juxtapose it with historical accounts – drawing primarily on the comprehensive study *Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski: Prawda i zmyślenie* (2012) by the Polish scholar Monika Polit.

However, firstly, it is necessary to examine a specific categorization within Holocaust fiction. First and foremost, there are novels which use the Shoah as merely a 'backdrop' to the author's own, entirely made up story, for example, William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979), or John Boyne's *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* (2006); those that pretend to be the real stories of Holocaust survivors, for example, Heather Morris' *The Tattoist of Auschwitz* (2018); fake testimonial writings, in which their authors pretend to have survived the Holocaust, for example, Binjamin Wilkomirski; and finally, those that incorporate historical elements and figures but are advertised as fiction, for example, Max Czornyj's *Mengele. Anioł Śmierci z Auschwitz* (2022). In her 2013 response to critics, Monika Polit refers to a narrative strategy identified by Prof. Michał Głowiński as "counterfactuality": "a mode of narration – in this case of the Holocaust – that does not rely on testimony but instead uses it in a highly selective, arbitrary, and sometimes deeply harmful way" (Polit 2013: 578, author's translation.) The examples discussed above may all be regarded as particularly apt illustrations of this phenomenon. However, it is the last category that is the focus

of the present article, as my main objective is to discuss and determine how the representation of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski in fiction may influence, to some extent, the collective understanding or memory of the Holocaust.

Rumkowski was born on 27 February 1877 in a small town called Ilno, which lay in Vitebsk Guberniya. At the age of 15, he left his homeland and went to a Polish city Łódź. According to Monika Polit's *Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. Prawda i zmyślenie* (2012), which constitutes exhaustive research on Rumkowski's life, during his years in Łódź, even before the establishment of the ghetto, he was very socially active. In 1925, he was a member of the city's municipal council. He is also said to have been a member of the Orphanage Control Committee and the head of the Orphanage in Helenówek (Polit 2012: 45). Thus, when, on October 13, 1939, he was appointed head of the Judenrat (Jewish Eldership) in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, he was already a public figure in the city. Since the end of WWII, four novels have been published about Rumkowski: *Kupiec łódzki* (1963) by Adolf Rudnicki (not exactly a novel; more of a short story), Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews* (1979), Andrzej Bart's *Fabryka muchołapek* (2008), and *De Fattiga i Łódź* (2009) by Steve-Sem Sandberg. In all these works, Rumkowski is portrayed in a similar manner: as a greedy, wicked old man who enjoys other people's suffering. In fact, this particular depiction of Rumkowski appears to be so deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness that inserting a few short lines about him, in the form of an anecdote has, one might argue, become a prevailing trend among authors of Holocaust novels (as can be seen in Saul Bellow's *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970: 231) or Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1991: 114)).

II.

In his 1988 essay *Writing about the Holocaust*, Leslie Epstein explains his reasoning behind writing a Holocaust novel. He argues that while historians and rabbis seek to find meaning in the Holocaust, it is the novelist who bears a unique creative responsibility. This responsibility, he suggests, has the potential to inspire political change that could help prevent future atrocities (Lang 1988: 265). It is apparent from the reading of the novel that when writing it, Epstein not only attempted to confront the moral ambiguities of Holocaust history, but also to explore psychological and ethical dilemmas embodied by figures like the Chairman of the Łódź Ghetto. Interestingly, however, he seems to avoid directly revealing that his story is about Rumkowski. Instead, he names his protagonist, I.C. Trumpelman. As Monika

Polit observes, this name is not arbitrary – it carries symbolic weight and serves as a clue for attentive readers. She notes that the word 'trump', according to the *Collaborative International Dictionary of English*, can mean 'to trick, to deceive, or to fabricate', suggesting that the protagonist's name subtly reflects traits associated with Rumkowski and hints at the morally complex nature of his character (Polit 2012: 387).

Trumpleman arrives in Łódź – referred to merely as *our city* – in "the winter of 1918–1919", already possessing gray, "almost white" hair (Epstein 1979: 11). This early detail presents one of the initial discrepancies between the main protagonist of Epstein's novel and Rumkowski, who moved to Łódź at the age of 15, in 1892. Nevertheless, it is evident that Epstein drew inspiration from Rumkowski's life. For example, in many instances, Trumpelman is referred to as "Chaim". However, the author did not strive to provide a meticulous historical reconstruction of events, as noted by Friedman (1979: 165). *King of the Jews* is more of a picaresque novel, slightly inspired by history, which makes it a perfect example of counter factuality. During his first years in the Polish city, which Epstein discusses in his novel, its main protagonist, I.C. Trumpelman, is known as a miracle-working doctor. Whether he is a doctor is not explained. The reader only learns that one day Trumpelman decides to put a bronze-colored plaque saying "I.C. Trumpelman. Practicing Physician" on his door. Eventually, he ends up *persona non grata* in the city, having defrauded money through his other business – life insurance policies. By incorporating such a negative representation of the main protagonist in the introduction of the novel, Epstein encourages the reader to start questioning Trumpleman's alleged altruism from the very beginning. The author's disdain for Rumkowski becomes especially clear when he discusses his coming back from 'exile': "If only he had run off for good, if only that were the rise and fall of I.C. Trumpelman a practicing physician, then the fate of so many Jews would have been different. But he came back, he returned, like a burning bird from its ashes" (Epstein 1979: 22).

In her book *Witness Through Imagination*, Lilian S. Kremer mentions four crucial authors on whose works Epstein relied while writing his novel: Gerald Reitlinger (*The Final Solution, the Attempt to Exterminate the Jews of Europe*, 1953), Hannah Arendt (*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 1963), Leonard Tushnet (*The Pavement of Hell*, 1972) and Isaiah Trunk (*Judenrat: the Jewish Councils of Eastern Europe under Nazi occupation*, 1972) (Kremer 1989: 103). While in some of them Rumkowski is presented somewhat similarly (for instance Arendt and Reitlinger both mention the infamous incident of him creating his own currency with his face on it), others attempt to justify him: "I believe

that the stories of their lives [Czerniakow, Rumkowski and Gens] will confirm the conclusion expressed in the title of this book: that they were men who had good intentions" (Tushnet 1972: 168). In the fragment quoted above, the author states: "the fate of so many Jews would have been different" (Epstein: 1979: 22), presumably assuming that it would have been better; however, this is impossible to determine. After all, it is crucial to remember that the Litzmannstadt ghetto was the last ghetto to be liquidated; therefore, Jews who were under Rumkowski's rule lived the longest.

Having returned to Łódź and made amends with the people he had stolen money from, Trumpelman becomes the official physician of Orphanage Number 2. For the first time, there is a noticeable shift in the narrative, where Trumpelman's mellow and sensitive side is shown. According to Michal Unger, the author of *Reassessment of the Image of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski* (2004), Rumkowski, being a childless widower, always loved children and longed to have his own. He even raised money to establish a new orphanage in Helenowek, Łódź, of which he later became a director (Unger 2004: 13). When it comes to discussing Rumkowski's approach to children, Epstein seems to be more careful than other authors. Steve Sam-Sandberg, for instance, relying on Lucille Eichengreen's book, *Rumkowski and the Orphans of Łódź* (2000), portrays Rumkowski as a person with pedophile tendencies, providing the readers with some very detailed descriptions of him molesting his orphans (Sem-Sandberg 2009: 179). In *King of the Jews*, Epstein eschews such explicit scenes. Although in his novel there is no mention of Rumkowski sexually harassing his child-orphans, he does mention him having intimate relationships with the adult ones: "Then the word got out that one of the girls was going to bear the Director's child. Imagine the scandal! […] At last Miss Brilianstein came out the hotel door […]. What he wanted to know was: *Had it been a male child, a son*?" (Epstein 1979: 39, emphasis in original).

Though in the first chapter, which essentially delineates the character of Trumpelman, Epstein does present some correlation between Rumkowski and his protagonist, he clearly focuses on his negative side. In her monograph study, Kremer mentions a few instances of it. Firstly, the Trumpelman of chapter one is not a political activist or involved in any kind of community service. Rumkowski, on the other hand, was the head of the Jewish Community Council and was known for his fight against Polish antisemitism. Moreover, Rumkowski's marriage to a respected lawyer is reduced in the book to a meaningless liaison with a young singer (Kremer 1989: 107). That being said, it must be acknowledged that Epstein appears somewhat conflicted between two predominant narratives surrounding

Rumkowski: the first, the more widely accepted, which depicts him as a villain, and the second, less prevalent, according to which he was a man who found himself in an irresolvable conundrum and did what he could to help his fellow people, not always succeeding: "Epstein's Trumpelman is a complex and contradictory figure: a sinner-savior, a charismatic healer, an anti-pogrom activist, a persuasive speaker, a charlatan, a dictator and a gullible victim. He is less evil than the Nazis he obeys, and less good than the Jews he tries to serve" (Kremer 1989: 106).

It is as if Epstein sought to reconcile both perspectives of the conflict, a complexity that renders his novel a noteworthy example of Holocaust fiction. As Głowiński remarks, "in this case [of Rumkowski], there is no space for defense or condemnation […] [or] for any kind of unanimity. Because any judgment, entirely positive or entirely negative, would be a simplification, and in many cases, a mendacity of the issue" (Głowiński 2013: 551, author's translation). However, there are also those who criticize the novel for "treating the Holocaust as entertainment" (Rosenfeld 1980: 170). In his seminal *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Alvin Rosenfeld severely criticizes Epstein's take on the Holocaust and on Rumkowski, describing Epstein's novel as a "badly misconceived slapstick version of the Holocaust" (Rosenfeld 1980: 171). Rosenfeld's primary critique lies in the fact that Epstein chose farce as a prominent narrative mode in his novel: "Cows fall suddenly into the graves, guns fire and misfire at the wrong moments, a starving mother becomes the butt of mistaken jokes about cannibalism […] there is hardly a character in *King of the Jews* who does not seem to be vying for some comic prize" (Rosenfeld 1980: 171).

At the same time, Rosenfeld emphasizes that the incorporation of humor when writing about the Holocaust is not necessarily always inappropriate and unthinkable. He praises, for example, Rachumil Bryks, who wrote a few humorous stories about the Łódź ghetto, and Bernard Malamud. He claims, however, that when incorporating such a style, in the case of the Holocaust, one must be very careful and know "when to turn it off" (Rosenfeld 1980: 172). What Rosenfeld considers the most problematic when it comes to *King of The Jews*, is the implications that it could bear: "The 'Holocaust Novel' may now be seen as an available subgenre of contemporary fiction to be written by anyone who is on to and can master the 'formula'" (Rosenfeld 1980: 173). As we can observe today, in this sense his words were prophetic.

As already mentioned, Epstein's disdain for Rumkowski is visible in numerous fragments of the narrative. It is conveyed through the voice of the narrator:

> Friends! If only someone would invent a time machine so that we could fly back over the years. Then we could suddenly appear before Nisel and say, 'Don't listen! It's a trick! He's cunning! Cunning! And then, if he paid no attention, if he refused to carry out his orders, we could kill the old fox ourselves! Look! The boy is wavering! His arm, the arm with the gun is going down! We have to remember that he was a child, in spite of everything that he'd lived through. He still had to live through more' (Epstein 1979: 292).

The event described is the moment in which Nisel Lipczany, one of the orphans from Rumkowski's orphanage, is about to shoot Trumpelman but fails to do so after the Elder convinces him that it is Lipsky (another orphan), who is a real hero (Epstein 1979: 292), and, hence, he should be the one to kill him. The tone of the monologue I quoted above is highly emotional, with the speaker referring to the readers as friends. This personal involvement could imply that the narrator may be one of the orphans or other members of the ghetto who survived. Such a perspective is plausible, especially since an omniscient narrator is usually impartial and emotionally detached. When telling the story, Epstein's narrator is clearly biased and does not shun some severe criticism towards Trumpelman. The author himself admits:

> I began the novel with no narrator in mind. In fact, I began the first words many times, because the tone seemed so light, almost jaunty, and so inappropriate for a book on the Lodz (or any other) ghetto. But the voice no matter how many times I tried came out the same way: so, I gave up and perhaps fifty pages into the book I began to realize that it was not I who was speaking but one of the two children who lived to tell the tale (the other died or almost died on the boat coming to the not-so-welcoming America). I hope this strategy worked, but in the end, I take no credit because I realized I had no choice (e-mail correspondence with the author).

The implementation of such a narrative mode may be controversial. The emotional tone of the narrator makes readers sympathize with them more than they would with an emotionless and impartial one. This, consequently, results in the readers adopting the narrator's views and opinions, which unquestionably makes Trumpelman look like the oppressor and "the ghettoies" like his victims. Whether that is the "right" perspective cannot be confirmed nor denied, but what can be said is that Trumpelman was, above all, also a victim. However, Epstein does also make sure that his readers are aware of that, and hence can make their own judgments:

> 'He is', said the cannibal woman, 'a devil'.
> But the commando merely shrugged this indictment off.

> 'What you say may be true […]. But so is something else. Of all the ghettos of Europe, only Trumpelman's yet survives. How could this be accomplished except through the measures you describe? Whether or not he enjoyed his task is beside the point…' Hersh Einhorn, in the blackness, stood stiff. 'Comrade, I must inform you that Trumpelman has been sentenced to death by the underground movement […].
> Of course, you feel this way […] in my opinion, however, it would be a mistake to do so. In the eyes of history, it is you who will appear violent, vengeful, not the Elder' (Epstein 1979: 318).

To conclude, although in many instances in the novel Epstein expresses his personal opinions on Rumkowski, he simultaneously does not rob his readers of the ability to make their own assumptions. He does not impose one, "right", point of view but instead provides arguments, both for and against Rumkowski and his actions. Hence, his novel, albeit controversial, due to, for instance, the farcical narrative mode, remains one of the best, most reliable works of fiction on Rumkowski.

III.

Fabryka muchołapek is a Polish novel written by Andrzej Bart, published in 2008. In the book, Andres (Bart's *porte-parole*), a contemporary author from a Polish city, Wroclaw, finds himself in an unusual situation. He must report Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski's war crimes trial. The story, which, due to its surrealist tinge and whimsicality, can recall Kafka's *The Trial*, features a plethora of characters, starting with the defendant, judge, and attorneys, and ending with the inhabitants of the Łódź and Warsaw ghettos and other historical figures. Interestingly, Bart situates nearly his entire novel within a fantastical, non-existent realm. For instance, the judge of the trial appears to represent God himself: "Even when seated, he seemed to be taller than anyone in the room […], he had an aureola of gray hair and from beneath his brows he would give the audience different looks. He seemed to be bored, as if the duty he had taken upon himself was not of particular importance to him" (Bart 2009: 43, author's translation). These references, along with the specific way in which the witnesses' hearings are being carried out (the judge and attorneys conversing with people who are already dead), are examples of the novel's metafictionality. Although Bart draws upon historical facts to shape his characters, he integrates this information carefully, ensuring the readers perceive his book as a work of fiction rather than a historical account. What cannot go unnoticed is the fact that the novel abounds with seemingly redundant information about Andres,

as if Bart wanted to make sure that the fact that the narrator of *Fabryka muchołapek* is him, is clear to everyone:

> – Aren't you mistaking me for somebody else?
> – Why? Because I mentioned that Łódź is your beloved city? […] but when it comes to those workers from *Rien ne va plus*, those who would run out of factories and guard the streets to protect Jews from Czarna Sotnia, please admit it […] you made them up? I nodded and then asked him what that has to do with anything (Bart 2008: 17, author's translation).

In their article, Jacek Leociak and Marta Tomczok discuss the problem of Holocaust kitsch and its affective dimension, which aptly, as they argue, names the controversies concerning acts of fictionalizing historical figures and events related to the genocide of European Jewry: "In the case of any modern portrayal of the Shoah that raises ethical or aesthetic doubts one should mention affective Holocaust kitsch. This phenomenon manifests itself with the author changing from the previously traced track, interrupting the historical narrative, or digressing […]" (Leociak/Tomczok 2021: 31, author's translation). They illustrate their point by referring to *Fabryka muchołapek*, claiming Bart's narrator (who is his alter-ego) frequently takes precedence over Holocaust issues. As is argued, Bart appears to be using the Holocaust as merely a pretext for his own, controversial purposes (Leociak/Tomczok 2021: 33), namely, treating history as a mirror in which an artist can see his/her reflection.

According to Monika Polit, Bart's portrayal of the Litzmannstadt ghetto Elder in *Fabryka muchołapek* was inspired by such works as *Proces Hansa Biebowa* (1999) by Jerzy Lewiński or Hanna Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) (cf. Polit 2012: 378). Both authors discuss Rumkowski in a somewhat similar manner: "Chaim Rumkowski, Eldest of the Jews in Lodz, called Chaim I, who issued currency bearing his signature and postage stamps engraved with his portrait, and who rode around in a broken-down, house-drawn carriage" (Arendt 1963: 119). Bart includes both Biebow and Arendt as characters in his novel. Both are asked to testify during the trial. This is not an obvious choice, as Arendt did not know Rumkowski personally. The first question she is asked by the judge concerns her opinion on the role of the Judenrat. To that, she answers that she always considered Judenrats unnecessary and doing more evil than good. Then the judge proceeds to ask her about Rumkowski: "A particularly evil person. The carriage, the currency bearing his signature, the postage stamps

engraved with his portrait, or collecting panegyrical albums about himself. Such behavior in this particular situation is not just a mistake. It is a crime" (Bart 2008: 109, author's translation).

Arendt's speech is largely derived from a section of her *Eichmann*. Hence, the conclusion that when incorporating real historical figures, Bart does stick to facts and does them justice. In her judgment of Rumkowski, Bart's Arendt is very harsh and has a lot to say. She, for instance, compares the chairman of the Łódź ghetto to Adam Czerniakow (the head of the Warsaw ghetto), referring to Rumkowski's behavior during "Wielka Szpera" (deportation action which involved mainly children and the elderly). When asked to make a list of children and prepare them for a round up, Czerniakow commits suicide, unable to do such an atrocious thing, whereas Rumkowski delivers his infamous "Give me your children!" speech. Referring to these events, Arendt praises Czerniakow, calling his behavior noble and dignified, at the same time criticizing Rumkowski. All of this considered, one may question whether the inclusion of a character like Arendt was well-founded. After all, her opinion on the Elder, which she expressed in *Eichmann,* was entirely based on things she read and heard about him. Considering the fact that, as Monika Polit points out in her essay, there are more reliable sources, drawing on Arendt's account may seem like selecting the path of least resistance.

Arendt, however, is not the only historical figure who did not have much in common with Rumkowski, whom Bart puts on the stand and makes testify in front of the judge in his novel. Janusz Korczak is another famous name that appears in the narrative. Since Korczak never spoke about Rumkowski in his journal or in any other writing of his, Bart bases his testimony on Jani Szulman's account (cf. Polit 2012: 378). The doctor is called upon to inform the judge and the jury about Rumkowski's time in the Warsaw Jewish orphanage, where the Elder observed his modern pedagogical methods and sought to learn from them:

> – From what I remember, Mr. Rumkowski was always eager to learn and help […] if I might say so, he seemed to be an exemplary activist. I was not, however, close to him. We only discussed matters concerning the orphanage.
> – […] thus, it can be assumed that according to your memories, Chaim Rumkowski was a good person?
> – Yes, one can assume that (Bart 2008: 49, author's translation).

In her review of Bart's novel, Justyna Kowalska-Leder praises the author for his accurate representation of Korczak (Kowalska-Leder 2010: 322). This is an indisputable asset to the novel, and Bart's unique literary craftsmanship cannot be

denied. Later, however, she proceeds to make a harsh judgment, claiming that the novel neither presents the discussed issue from a different perspective, nor says anything new about it. Above all, she criticizes the author for not even attempting to understand Rumkowski (Kowalska-Leder 2010: 322). However, does not the entire plot of the novel revolve around exactly that? After all, Bart mercifully grants Rumkowski a fair, lawful trial, a chance for him to clear his conscience and, maybe even more importantly, to show the world there is more to his character than initially apparent. Hence, in my opinion, the concept and intentions themselves were good. The real question is whether Bart managed to make the most of them. In many instances, he did not. As Polit points out: "the names mentioned in the novel appear in front of the judge just to say what they have to say and then, just as quickly as they show up, disappear from it" (Polit 2012: 378, author's translation). A great illustration of that is the scene of Korczak's testimony. If the reader expects a conclusion, they will be disappointed because Bart does not provide his readers with anything more than a mere repetition of information that has already been discussed by many authors before him. Instead of focusing on Rumkowski, he tells the readers what they already know – what a noble and extraordinary man Janusz Korczak was (Bart 2008: 52). It is plausible that Bart decided to put him in his novel because he and Rumkowski are often compared. After all, they both used to work with children and were the heads of orphanages. Presumably, placing this legendary figure next to Rumkowski was meant to, once again, reinforce the notion (already ingrained in the Polish collective consciousness) that Korczak was a hero and Rumkowski a villain.

In the novel Bart does not provide the Elder with a voice of his own. Only once is he allowed to speak, and this only to announce that he will not say anything (Bart 2008: 382). Considering Rumkowski's predilection for giving long and passionate speeches, such a choice may seem incomprehensible. Emilia Słomińska suggests that this is perhaps due to Bart's opinion of the Elder – since he, himself, condemns his actions, he assumes that Rumkowski is not worthy of having the ability to defend himself and, thus, does not provide him with one (Słomińska 2015: 339).

Among the many allegations that Rumkowski is faced with during the trial, there are obviously also those concerning his alleged pedophilic tendencies. Towards the end of the novel, Bart introduces the character of Mrs. Horkheimer, who came all the way from New York and wrote a best-seller about Rumkowski (2008: 201). This character, unlike others presented in the novel, seems to be a figment of Bart's imagination, and (as I learnt from the author himself) was inspired by Lucille Eichengreen, a German writer of Jewish origin, and a Holocaust survivor. During

the War, Eichengreen inhabited the Łódź ghetto and later survived Auschwitz. In 2000, she published *Rumkowski and the Orphans of Lodz*, in which she wrote about Rumkowski's many abuses of power (including pedophilia): "In the first publication, Lucille was even mentioned by name, but she requested to change it, since, giving lectures all around the world, she presented people with a slightly different version of herself" (email correspondence with Andrzej Bart, author's translation). Upon entering the courtroom, Mrs. Horkheimer proceeds to explain to the audience why she was summoned: "While in the ghetto, I met two girls who used to live in his (Rumkowski's) orphanage and were molested by him. Then I thought to myself that if I managed to live, I would owe them something. That is why I wrote about their experiences in my book" (Bart 2008: 201, author's translation).

When questioned about the credibility of these stories, she asserts that she is intimately familiar with every detail of the girls' tragedy (Bart 2008: 201). However, Bart does not stop there; it is revealed that Mrs. Horkheimer, herself, is also one of Rumkowski's victims:

> After my parents died, he promised to give me a job in the kitchen, which granted me an additional meal in the evening, and, therefore, a chance to live longer […] Knowing about his proclivities, I tried to keep a low profile. One day, however […] he kissed me on the cheek […] took my hand, put it in the obvious area on his trousers and started moving it. I tried to pull my hand away, but he was very strong […] in the following weeks he would return and do the same (Bart 2008: 202, author's translation).

In the subchapter of her book *Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski – Prawda i zmyślenie,* titled, "Oceny literackie i interpretacje", Monika Polit argues that not every witness of the Holocaust is credible enough to be quoted. Her case in point are accounts and memoirs that were written down years after the tragedy: "I specifically mean the books of Lucille Eichengreen […]" (Polit 2012: 384). Having said that, Polit proceeds to present the readers with a short biographical note about Eichengreen. She mentions that in 1941, Eichengreen was sent to the Łódź ghetto, where she worked in administration. When the ghetto was liquidated, she ended up in Auschwitz, and later in other concentration camps. After the war, Polit adds, Eichengreen went to New York (Polit 2012: 348). So, one should not blame the authors who incorporated her accounts in their novels. After all, who, if not a person who has lived the nightmare of the Holocaust, should be considered a reliable source? In the author's note to *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust*, Eichengreen herself, however, stresses that memories are often flawed with inaccuracy: "remembrances do not

allow for certainty" (Eichengreen 1992, author's note). Thus, she, be it willingly or not, encourages the readers of her books to approach them with some degree of skepticism.

Rumkowski's trial ends with an obvious conclusion, with the prosecutor not choosing to deliver a closing statement, deeming the defense's argument sufficient. Bornstein, Rumkowski's attorney, poses a rhetorical question: could his client have acted differently given the circumstances? He argues that the answer is no, citing Rumkowski's God complex, nepotism and excessive pride. Ultimately, Bornstein suggests that Rumkowski can be blamed only for his flawed character. He even questions the purpose of the trial itself, implying that it may have been a waste of time, aimed merely at condemning a deluded man whose arrogance and foolishness were so extreme that, had he not been his defender, he would have struck him with his own cane (Bart 2008: 250). Subsequently, he proceeds to do exactly that. The dedication and vehemence with which he does it almost causes him to faint. The novel ends with Rumkowski not being granted forgiveness. But did the reader expect the ending to be any different? So black and white is Bart's perspective on the matter he chose to discuss that he does not, as Justyna Leder-Kowalska claims in her review of the book, "even make an attempt to understand the reasoning behind Rumkowski's action and therefore answer at least some of the questions that have, through the years, arose around his persona" (Leder-Kowalska 2010: 322, author's translation). While some of the critics appreciated the novel for its successfully executed postmodern portrayal of the Holocaust (Nowacki 2008; Radziwon 2009), the majority of them criticized Bart for his inadequacy, claiming that *Fabryka muchołapek*, "is a narcissistic display of the author, who lacks both knowledge about the topic he is discussing (the Łódź ghetto), and the skills to conduct a postmodernist narrative on the Holocaust successfully" (Tomczok 2019: 265, author's translation).

To conclude, critics seem to be unanimous when it comes to their opinion on Bart's novel: it is a good book about the city of Łódź and about the author's thoughts and feelings concerning it. However, it falls short as a compelling narrative about the Holocaust and the persona of Rumkowski.

IV.

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the ethical dimension of Holocaust fiction through the example of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski's representation in it, particularly in two novels: Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews* and Andrzej Bart's *Fabryka muchołapek.* It has also been an attempt to answer the question: is there a limit to imagination? In *Holocaust History: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics* (2000), Berel Lang argues that due to the nature of the Holocaust (the fact that a tragedy of such magnitude is incomprehensible to the human mind), every attempt to represent it properly is automatically doomed to failure (Lang 2000: 51). Through this claim, however, he does not question the intentions of those who take it upon themselves to discuss the Shoah, but rather he emphasizes the opacity of the subject. To this, Cynthia Ozick adds that, in her understanding, historical fiction is an oxymoron (Ozick 1999: 85). She encourages the readers to always make a clear contradistinction between fiction and history: "rights of fiction are not the same as rights of history […] if fiction annihilates facts, it is due to the privilege of imagination" (Ozick 1999: 84). Nonetheless, she compares the reliability of images recorded by camera to the unreliability of the word, claiming that in some instances, "the word" (by which she means Holocaust narratives), instead of dispelling doubts, creates more of them. It would be difficult to argue with this statement since, nowadays, when reaching for a Holocaust narrative, especially fiction, one must first ask questions and conduct research to verify what is real and what is not. At first glance, it may appear self-evident – does not the word "fiction" say it all? However, as this paper has demonstrated, the relationship between fiction and historical reality is often more complex than it initially seems. The practice of narrating fictional stories set against a historical backdrop has, after all, become one of the most commercially prominent literary strategies in contemporary literature. Its characteristic features are, for instance, the incorporation of a first-person narrator, who is a Holocaust survivor, or, as in *King of the Jews* and *Fabryka muchołapek* – telling a fictional story of a historical figure. The consequences of using such techniques are multifaceted. First and foremost, it could be argued that even though such narratives are not always reliable, they still contribute to the preservation of the memory of this immense tragedy:

> One could think that thanks to popular discount stores, like Auchan and Biedronka (where 'Holocaust Novels' can be purchased), society's perception of the Shoah changes and, from treating it as something extremely difficult and even sacred, it starts regarding it as a form of entertainment for *Highbrow* consumers of populistic kitsh.

> However, that is not necessarily the case. Sold at discounts, the topic of the Shoah encounters people who know nothing about it and learn nothing about it from the book they have bought. Discount Holocaust novels have no educational value (Leociak/ Tomczok 2023: 25, author's translation).

Commercialization of the Shoah is a topic that Jacek Leociak and Marta Tomczok discuss in their paper, *Auschwitz jako marka. Powieści o Zagładzie w ofercie sieci handlowych*. In the article the authors coin a specific term for a wide array of novels which constitute perfect examples of Holocaust kitsh – striped narratives (it is a reference to John Boyne's novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas,* which is a quintessence of the phenomenon). Unfortunately, the modern-day world has become so callous that it fails to recognize the ethical implications of commodifying the Holocaust for financial gain: *The Girl in The Red Coat*, *The Girl in the Green Sweater*, *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, *The Tattoist of Auschwitz*, *Auschwitz Lullaby* – it is an endless list. Having said that, however, I will argue that not every Holocaust novel is doomed to become just another example of a striped narrative. There are still authors who want to, and attempt to, educate through their fiction. It would be an oversimplification to suggest that Leslie Epstein and Andrzej Bart wrote their novels with commercial interests in mind, and I would argue against classifying their works as instances of striped narratives. Unquestionably, although they are not always successful in that, they do try to do history justice.

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