

## Sława Harasymowicz and Uriel Orlow: In Conversation

Excerpted from the event held during *Radio On* exhibition, narrative projects, London, 27 July 2016

Uriel Orlow: So how did you begin? You found this history of a great-uncle that you didn't know. You knew your grandfather had a brother but you didn't know anything about him; then you just come across his story through researching family history. How did you decide to make work about it? What were the next steps?

Sława Harasymowicz: ... so what I had to do with it ... for years I was only vaguely aware of the fact that my grandfather had "a brother" ... and that it was somehow a tragic story. It was a sliver, something from a long time ago that we did not talk about ... That memory was not cultivated, so to speak.

Recently this story was relayed to me again, as part of a bigger conversation ... straight away, I sensed an ambiguity around the "mined" or "bombed" ships. My initial reaction to this information was to try to find out what really happened. There are a number of international archives holding various threads of information about this history – not complete, and sometimes mutually contradictory. But just to cut it to one important example: I came across an official war crimes investigation carried out by British Major N.O.Till, immediately after the event and until 1946.<sup>1</sup> The documentation is held in The National Archives and my trip to Kew was full of expectations, I imagined myself as this kind of hybrid noir detective-archivist, in anticipation of this explosive, almost illicit information and imagining what it's going to look like, and the kind of revelations I was going to find. And of course when I got there and was directed to the file – pre-ordered by me and prepared for my collection by someone else – I found a cardboard folder untied open, full of loose sheets of paper as if having been rummaged through, or edited, definitely more than once. There were hundreds of threads. Major Till carried out the investigation thoroughly, and the file provides really valuable information such as the conditions in the camp. But to me the key page is the one where Till concludes unequivocally that the ultimate responsibility [for the disaster] lies with the British RAF Intelligence who failed to pass the information they had received on to the pilots, to the crew. And that there was sufficient time for them to do so, and that further enquiry is strongly recommended along with an official apology to the victims' families.<sup>2</sup> But internet searches returned imagery, which is very strong, very evocative.

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<sup>1</sup> *Report on Investigations*, Major N.O. Till, WO 309/1592, National Archives, Kew.

<sup>2</sup> "It is understood that no such enquiry has taken place (...) it is felt that such an enquiry would go a long way to redress the present grievances". Till adds: "the contents of the above paragraph does not in any way affect the responsibility of the German authorities for placing these prisoners on board those ships" (*Report on Investigations*, p. 15).

I would like to borrow the following quote from an internet forum: "of course what ensued could — and should — have been avoided. A Swedish Red Cross doctor had already managed to get 250 French, Dutch and Belgian prisoners disembarked from the Thielbek. When he returned next day, he saw the Thielbek and its remaining prisoners had gone to join the other prison ships off Neustadt. He reported this to a senior British officer, and the Intelligence Report shows this was known at 83 Group RAF. The information did not reach the naval liaison attached to the British army advancing into Neustadt." As part of online discussion around the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wilhelm Gustloff sinking. Last accessed 6 September 2016. [www.politics.ie/forum/history/234438-70th-anniversary-greatest-marine-disaster-history-sinking-mv-wilhelm-gustloff-7.html](http://www.politics.ie/forum/history/234438-70th-anniversary-greatest-marine-disaster-history-sinking-mv-wilhelm-gustloff-7.html).

UO: Because obviously the archives contained no images ...

SH: Yes, archives as physical spaces, official holdings of historical and political information of interest to the public ... so yes, instead of visual images, they contained descriptions – of wanted criminals, for example, of the conditions on the ships, ships' tonnage, prisoners' numbers, dates, duration. The investigation folder at the National Archives contained no photographs, although the report refers to reconnaissance photos taken by a RAF pilot photographer immediately after the event, but I was unable to locate those images. They are listed among the "exhibits" backing up the line of enquiry. Number one on the list is a "signal message" – no further description.

UO: And did you have images of your great-uncle?

SH: No, I had no idea what he looked like. There was no photograph of him at home, and I based my idea of what he might have looked like on my grandfather's *Arbeitskarte* (a certificate of employment) photo from the occupation. I found out from a historian at Kraków's Historical Museum at Pomorska Street, which was a Gestapo prison during the war, that the Nazis used to destroy people's family albums at the point of their arrest, so literally but also symbolically erasing someone's identity. So no, I had no images of my uncle.

His name was Marian. I knew when he was arrested, and that he was involved in underground resistance along with his sister, brother and father in Union of Armed Struggle cell in Krakow.<sup>3</sup> Their main activity, as far as I know, was printing, replicating, reproducing, and distributing documents such as ID cards (*Ausweis*) or *Arbeitskarten*. They were critical survival papers, for example, for Polish soldiers returning from the front, for Jewish residents of Krakow, basically anyone needing to hide, and they also printed newsletters, which would then be illegally distributed through a range of channels, for instance, post offices. So yes, to go back to your question, no images of Marian, complete invisibility.

UO: That's an interesting starting point: you're an artist, you did research, uncovered that story, and you found documents but no images whatsoever. Now we are standing in an exhibition which is full of images so maybe we can think a little bit how these images – where they come from, what they do, how do they work?

SH: They come from imagination, and they come from the context, which actually is extremely visual. RAF Typhoons, the pilots and their uniforms, the three ships, including the biggest one, Cap Arcona – Titanic lookalike – and, of course, images of the concentration camp.

Cap Arcona was originally a luxurious transatlantic liner, with a tennis court on the deck, a dance hall and a swimming pool. But by the start of the Second World War it was already a ghost, past its prime, and painted grey to signal it was now a war ship, and it was as such

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Another separate "document trail" (International Red Cross Archives in Geneva and Swedish Red Cross Archives) led to Paul De Blonay, a Swiss IRC *delegate* (someone else than the Swedish Red Cross doctor - mentioned above) in Lübeck at the time, as he, in his own witness statement quoted in Till's report, *informed a "high ranking British Army officer"* about the prisoners being on the ships, with the officer's name spelt inconclusively in the documentation. Unfortunately, it seems that De Blonay deemed that particular mission finished at that point. Related or unrelated to the Neustadt Bay incident, De Blonay resigned as a Red Cross delegate in 1946.

<sup>3</sup> Union of Armed Struggle, or *Związek Walki Zbrojnej*, later renamed *Armia Krajowa*.

that it was used in 1943 to film German propaganda version of the *Titanic* story commissioned by Joseph Goebbels.<sup>4</sup> So, that particular ship was a film set in scenes of sinking, with water flooding into the interiors, the under-deck holds and boiler rooms, only for the ship to be sunk for real two years later, with prisoners in those very same spaces. Although, in 1945, it was fire, not water, which killed the thousands locked in the belly of the ship, in the holds. So here we have not only simply a few photos, but the entire film as a virtual walk through the ship from top to bottom even as it “sinks”.

This was problematic to me because those images and those relationships, between fact-fiction, and so on, are so visually strong, yet obvious, and they are too easy. So I had to not use them, or work through them, alter them, somehow.

There are no images of the actual catastrophe that I am aware of apart from three quick snapshots taken by someone through a window, from the shore, showing at a far distance the faint outlines of Cap Arcona and Thielbek, burning.<sup>5</sup>

As I found out from Alyn Beßmann, Neuengamme’s archivist, my uncle was “employed” in *Messap* commando, a work unit producing timers for anti aircraft missiles which I thought was particularly cruel, because he was this kind of worker to time, on time, and his own time was final<sup>6</sup>. I also received a clandestine photograph of the Messap prisoners at work. And it looks like an office. Rows of desks. One of the men half-turns to look directly at us, or, rather, of course, at the person he must have known to be taking the picture. And one of the other men with their backs turned towards us could be Marian<sup>7</sup>.

So it is hard to say there were no images at all, but there were no personal photographs and no definitive images of the actual catastrophe, the event. In a way, the images circle around it, stop before, and restart later.

UO: So he was in a concentration camp for three or four years?

SH: Over four years, first in Auschwitz for a couple of months, then he was transported to Neuengamme.

UO: So for over four years, he was making these timers for the anti aircraft missiles and then he was transferred to a ship at the end of the war as the concentration camp was liquidated and there he was killed ...

SH: ... in an air raid, hit by the RAF.

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<sup>4</sup> *Titanic*, 1943, directed by Herbert Selpin and Werner Klingler, black and white, sound, 85 minutes (Kino Lorber films).

<sup>5</sup> These images are held in Cap Arcona Museum in Neustadt, Germany.

<sup>6</sup> This production was part of wartime business of *Junghans*, the German luxury watch company.

<sup>7</sup> This is not what we imagine prisoners’ labour at concentration camps was like, and certainly in comparison to other hard labour commandos at Neuengamme in brick production, or canal regulation, digging into rock and sinking into mud of the river Elbe, Messap was seen as desirable, even though the long hours of precision work with magnifying glass and tweezers caused great strain to the eyes and even permanent eyesight damage (further information can be found on Neuengamme Memorial’s website, last visited on 10 September 2016, <http://www.kz-gedenkstaette-neuengamme.de/en/history/concentration-camp/slave-labour/>).

Cap Arcona was completely destroyed, but Thielbek<sup>8</sup> was salvaged five years after the sinking. It was cleaned of 800 tonnes of silt and other dutifully catalogued “ship debris” such as “13 whole bodies, 175 skulls and numerous other smaller human bones”. After this clean up it was deemed suitable for further commercial use. The name, Thielbek, was painted over – camouflaged – and replaced with Reinbek.<sup>9</sup>

So, in any case, from that silt, a spoon belonging to my great-uncle was excavated, a small metal spoon with his prisoner number (5 515) engraved on it. He would have had the same number tattooed on his arm, and the number snakes through, appears and reappears in archival documents. The spoon is just one small object among other small “belongings” of other prisoners, which were recovered at the salvage. They are like personal identifying objects. The spoon, or should I say the listing, anchors Marian to the ship. We do not know where this object may be now.

So, anyway, the silt, the spoon, are those key images which are visual but not actually “visible” or based on existing photographs.

UO: These are almost like symbols, they are images that refer to other images.

SH: And they are also independent images, they are slippery, you can’t nail the story using them, but they can evoke it...

{...}

UO: It strikes me that perhaps something else is going on between these works. They are unreliable as images, because we don’t know where the source-image comes from. They are not direct representations; we as viewers have lost the source which in turn connects to you having lost the source of that history and the connection to its memory. This means that there is no origin, only translation.

SH: ... but it also connects to my unease with ... the story is a cut out, that has a beginning and a sort of end, but it is suspended in time, and it is filled with fragments that do not stand still ... you know, I didn’t want this work to become another narrative, the point was not to replace one narrative with another, but rather to open it up and reveal certain themes

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<sup>8</sup> “Thielbek was hit under water surface by a number of rockets. Thielbek sank in ca. 20 minutes [along with with just under 3000 prisoners]. Only a few managed to survive. The concentration camp prisoners who were primarily kept in the front and rear cargo holds could not escape from the holds quickly enough to rescue themselves as the ship was sinking. (...) According to reports by eyewitnesses, a lot of people swam in the water on the day of the sinking. (...) The ship was hit by 7 small-calibre rockets (ca. 30 kg) under water surface and sunk in approximately 20 minutes. As it was going down, the water flooding its insides pushed many people out of the ship. That was confirmed by eyewitnesses who saw numerous people swimming in the water after the accident. When the vessel had sunk, it rested on its portside. Covers of all openings were washed away, leaving them open. Due to water current and pounding of the waves, many bodies floating inside the ship were washed out, leaving only a small number of bodies inside which were found during the present salvage operation. This explains why only a small portion of bodily remains was found (...)” (Source: Final Report, Water Police Lübeck Area, Criminal Investigation Department, Lübeck, 16 March 1950. Courtesy of ITS Arolsen).

<sup>9</sup> *Thielbek* (in 1945, a new ship, launched in 1940), owned by Knöhr and Burchard shipping company, changed hands and names several times. It operated under the German banner, then Panamanian and finally ended up as scrap in Split (Yugoslavia) in 1974 (Final Report...ITS Arolsen, and Wikipedia).

resting within, within how it's being represented, and the ways that we read those types of narrative, so for example I did not really want to create a "personal story".

To make an artistic project where Marian is symbolically, visually "re-constructed" would be ridiculous, because he perished: this is what we are faced with, and I am not "bringing him back" in an exhibition, I am asking questions. Although he is perhaps made – fragmentarily – present, his life is not "reconstructed".

When they were put on those ships, time splits: the timeline that was reaching a conclusion of victory went its own way, but they were pushed aside from that, you know, cast outside of that chronology, left frozen ... on the ships which were anchored at bay, immobilised, yet surrounded by movement and chaos and the war coming to an end.

UO: This use of fragments, whether it's images or sound, avoids providing a narrative, a story – could you say something about that in relation to working with this material in particular, with this story. Why not tell it?

SH: That's an interesting question that I suppose keeps coming back! Although as an artist I can play the role of an archivist or a historian, I don't actually try to be one, so it's artist *as* an archivist but definitely not *instead of*.

I am trying to form a response to this history, but I don't have an answer to what it "should" be, in me as much as in the audience ... so I am doing this through opening this war narrative up ("*thousands of concentration camp prisoners killed by a tragic mistake*"). The exhibition is not curating a Wikipedia page - it happened on such and such a day... whether it was 9 thousand dead or 7 and a half or 8 it doesn't matter, it's neutral. It is not about using a sentiment, "feeling sad" or "feeling angry" (like making a "sad film" or a "crime film"), in order to bring awareness in others, but I think it is about entering into a sort of relationship.

UO: You say "others" but actually specifically I'm thinking about the viewer. As a viewer, if you provide a story that is ready-made we can simply absorb it, whereas if you provide fragments we also have a fragmented character. We have radio signals, we have transmission and we have some kind of programme with fragments that we need to put together. It puts the onus, almost the responsibility, onto the viewer, to create that story in our head.

[...] I think it is also about the relationship between memory and post-memory. Marianne Hirsch, an American academic proposes the idea of post-memory precisely for the memories which we don't have – so second or third generation. Isn't what you're dealing with post-memory, a memory to which you don't have access, but it's still transmitted somehow and you are trying to get closer to it, but it's not there.

So what we have is an oscillation, an ambivalence between an imagination of something that is not remembered, that has no representation and an image.

SH: And on top of this, an ambivalence towards "narrative" as limiting contact with history and limiting our response to "history" because what we have been officially given is a certain narrative that is one of tragic error, a war drama, but it is a story that is dead, closed, put in its compartment in the archive.

It would be possible to just write this down on a large sheet of paper, and then why make artworks ... artworks are certainly not about showing history in pictures but about asking

questions. What happened, really? Why did I not know about it? But also, questions such as how does suppression of memory work? This is trying to get the audience to consider these things. So how does this work? When a monumental event such as this is covered up. When someone (who?) decides: document embargo of 50, of 75, or a 100 years is *sufficient* in such an such a case, what does the cover-up feed, and what can be thrown back at history, later, to try to make sense of an event like this, when you are essentially left alone to deal with it, to fill the gaps, to reimagine, but also to communicate that the erasure has not worked?

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Audience Member: This exhibition is part of a series of three; could you comment a little bit about this, about how you piece and see them together as a whole.

SH: I didn't want to make one exhibition and close it at that. I wanted to test a range of approaches of working with archive and with this history. So the first showing at Centrala in Birmingham was, let's say, totally archival ... in the sense that I used archival material, images and documents, originals, screen prints or digital print outs, treated as a montage, but the show was really structured as an archive. There was a film, for example, which was composed of fragments from a range of sources and which is what I would call a screen story. And the forthcoming exhibition at the Poetry Library at the Southbank in October will try to investigate the use of words and translation to deal with this history and its representation through mainly non-image based works.

But more than just the different artistic approaches, there is also the question of time at stake here – the first exhibition was based around the actual event, the outcome of the catastrophe; this show is about an anticipation and hope and the forthcoming final chapter will refocus on the limbo or “before” time, just like the autumn of 1939 described in Marian's diary<sup>10</sup> with the new reality under the German occupation, and people reading and re-reading books, lending them to each other, books passing from hand to hand, and everybody playing bridge, staying in, killing time, and because the German obligatory work decree<sup>11</sup> has not yet been introduced, and universities and cinemas and theatres and libraries have been closed down and it is illegal to go to the park.

And the work here [at narrative projects] is also an attempt to have a conversation with history through using absolutely no archival material at all (in the exhibition). But I think I've “failed”, you know, because the critical element here is the “radio” – which is, really, pure archive, however fictionalised.

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<sup>10</sup> Marian's personal diary from between 1939 and 1940, which stops just before his arrest and re-emerges decades later, handed to me by a distant cousin in late summer 2015.

<sup>11</sup> *Polish Decrees or Directives* from March 1940 introduced, among a range of discriminatory measures, compulsory labour to all Poles from the age of 14. Those who could not prove employment would be sent to Germany as slave workers or to forced-labour concentration camps.