

RE-DEFINITIONS OF SELF IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS

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The paper presents some most general conclusions from analysis of the problem of re-definition of self among prisoners of concentration camps¹. The camp is regarded here as a Goffmanian institution. E. Goffman defines total institutions as these social institutions (establishments, plants) which impose more restrictions on the individual than do other institutions. The limited contact with the outside world is often symbolized by high walls, barbed wire etc.² In our opinion concentration camps are a specific type of total institutions (due to planned genocide, drastic forms of killing and violence, ideology of killing etc.). We have therefore called them "total death institutions".

The term "redefinition of self" denotes the inclusion into the presentation of self of camp self-conception created by the institution of Nazi death camps as well as the use of certain methods of self-conception management. The situation of re-definition entails thus a differentiation between the camp inmates self-perception and their pre-camp conceptions of self. In our analysis we have used the dramaturgical approach and a notional frame from Goffmans's early works³.

The self-conception management methods are - according to Goffman - an attribute of the "performer". The "performer" is an aspect of self which contains dreams, preparations for role-taking and the sense of shame and fear. These are features of psychological nature. On the other hand self-conceptions which appear at the presentation of self are - in Goffmans's words - attributes of the "character". The "character" is an image of own person formed predominantly by the scenery of individual activity⁴. The "character" is thus socially generated.

Our analysis of particular interaction situations was made with regard to the above two aspects of the self of a concentration camp prisoner. The analysis enabled us to try out the applicability of Goffmans's notional frame in a description of the moral careers of inmates in "total death institutions". This was a second purpose of our study.

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According to Goffman, "under-life" is an attribute of all institutions. It makes the individual learn to steer the middle course between the official plan of action

¹ The analysis was made in my (M.A. thesis) *Redefinicje jaźni w instytucjach totalnych. Na przykładzie hitlerowskich obozów koncentracyjnych*, Łódź 1983 (niepublikowany maszynopis).

² E. Goffman, *Charakterystyka instytucji totalnych*, [in:] *Elementy teorii socjologicznych*, W. Derczyński, A. Jasińska-Kania, J. Szacki (eds.), PWN, Warszawa 1975, p. 157.

³ E. Goffman, *Asylums: Essay on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Penguin Harmondsworth, 1961; *Stigma*, Prentice Hall Inc., Engalwood Cliffs, New York 1963; *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin Harmondsworth 1959

⁴ Goffman, *The Presentation...*

and the institutional under-life. This dualism helps the inmates develop such self conceptions which can be presented in both spheres of life of the total institution. The conceptions of self develop on the basis of "material" in possession of the institution; this is a basis on which the individual seeks spheres of intimacy and other gratifications, since, as Goffman says, "such is his natural imperative": "The practice of reserving something of oneself from the clutch of the institution is very visible in mental hospitals and prisons but can be found in more benign and less totalistic institutions, too. I want to argue that this recalcitrance is not an incidental mechanism of defense but rather an essential constituent of the self"⁵.

In our view, adoption and utilization of the institutional definition of self (self-conception) alone occurred most often in the so-called "Zugang phase" (the initial period during which the prisoner learned his camp milieu). The mortification of the self in this period was most painful and drastic for a newcomer. The institution could then take full possession of the inmate. The situation changed with the passage of a "Zugang" into institutional "under-life" (upon internalization of secondary adjustment practices). Needless to say, the above conclusions refer to the "average" prisoner who was "a small part of the jug mass of human flesh"⁶.

According to Goffman the inmate continually balances between identification with the institution and opposition to it⁷. As an example phenomenon Goffman quotes the so-called "Ketman" described in "The Captive Mind" by Czesław Miłosz⁸. Ketman is a mendacious creed, it is a preoccupation with the effects of one's actions, with positive social evaluation and with protection of one's inside. Such actions were a result of camp imprisonment. And yet, they were not proofs of demoralization, as Goffman suggests. They were a simple necessity in saving one's life and personal dignity.

Nazi concentration camps differed considerably from mental hospitals, prisons, sanatoria and other institutions described by Goffman. The description of inmate's moral career, of his re-definition of self and of "under-life" in camp requires an expansion and supplementation of Goffman's notional frame:

1. The stages of inmate's stage becomes split into two sub-stages explicitly differentiated in memoirs of ex-prisoners :
 - a) the "Zugang" phase - the learning of camp milieu usually through mortification of inmates,
 - b) the period of realization - the deployment of defensive techniques characteristic of camp "under-life".
2. In the camp we encounter unusually drastic techniques of mortification of inmates. In all other types of total institutions the process of mortification is less severe. The following example shows one of the forms of mortification and the inmate's reaction to it: "In the corner there was an iron wheelbarrow. Here everyone cased nature without any embarrassment. This struck and humiliated me. In prison we were beaten on the face, abused and addressed by >Du< (pronoun, 2nd person sing.) Still, we managed to preserve the sense of embarrassment at relieving nature. It was a way of defending our

⁵ Goffman, *Asylums*, p. 279

⁶ V. Frankl, *Psycholog w obozie koncentracyjnym*, Warszawa 1962, p. 36.

⁷ Goffman, *Asylum*, p. 288

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 280.

humanity. Here the sense of shame was taken away from men; they became like animals"⁹.

3. The "socio-technique of fear" was used on a large scale in the camps (the welcome speeches, the singing camp anthems etc.). Fright, terror were usual characteristic features of inmate psyche and might contribute to adoption of institutional definitions of the self. Fear appears also in other total institutions but nowhere does it play a more important role than in the life of the camp inmate.
4. The initial stage of stay in camp (the "Zugang" stage) evokes in prisoners a "sick curiosity" ("the void of identity"). The prisoner, preoccupied with learning the new world, possibly lacks orientation in the sphere of social self, knowledge.
5. The way of treating prisoners was "justified" by the social context of the self (membership of another race) while the treatment of mental patients is based on the social context of the mind (mental disease).
6. The "fortress" technique (term by K.K.), often used in camp by the elite of intelligentsia, comprises more than just the tactics of "withdrawal" described by Goffman. This observation is confirmed by methods of "fortifying" oneself (of: intellectual creativity or social activities) which are absent from the "tactics of withdrawal". The "fortress" technique consists thus in barring oneself from desolation, helplessness or defeatism while consolidating one's own position.
7. The unofficial (not approved by the institution) social structure was as follows:
 - "doctors",
 - "dodgers",
 - "marks",
 - "the sick",
 - "muslims".

It seems that the above arrangement reflects the gradation of accessibility to restricted gratifications as well as the degree of redefinition of self observed in particular types of people.

The typology derives from camp language while the gradation is a part of our hypothesis. It should be noted that becoming a "muslim" is not a "withdrawal" technique but a result of starvation.

Doctors are a social group isolated by prisoners (unofficial group) as well as by the staff (official group). Only minimal redefinitions of pre-camp self-conceptions could be observed in this group. It is a group with most privileges. Goffman does not mention this type of group among inmates.

8. The tactic of taking advantage of others known as "immediate pressure" takes on a specific camp meaning which differs from that used in other kinds of total institutions. Immediate pressure often includes death penalty.
9. Due to the continual terror in camp, inmates were using certain relatively safe techniques of obtaining forbidden goods. They are exemplified by the "clandestine trade with deferred payment"¹⁰ described and classified in my

⁹ See: G. Timofiejew, Człowiek jest nagi, Wyd. Łódzkie, Łódź 1960, p. 12.

¹⁰ If we have to do with giving something to someone without his knowledge in hope of future reciprocation, also unofficial, then we shall call such contract „clandestine trade with deferred payment”.

previous work. It consists in offering something to someone without his in expectation of reciprocation (also unofficial) in the future.

10. The exchange of goods in camp was extended in relation to other total institutions and covered one more item – the man himself (“white slave traffic” – term by K.K.). Camp prominents often sold their “servants” (young boys) who were used for homosexual practices.
11. The widespread homosexual relations and the resulting redefinitions of self were unintended by the total institution although they were a part of it. They can be found also in other total institutions but in the camp they gained a new dimension of the protection of “outside” values.
12. Due to the absolute limitation of private possessions in camp, nature became an important source of “substitutes”. The “substitutes” were objects which replaced things of which the inmate was deprived by the staff on admission to camp. In Goffman “substitutes” have uniquely practical function of “other” things. We are of the opinion that substitutes serve also as reminders of the “outside” world – they are “signs of freedom”. These things were often found in nature: “the prisoners turned their thoughts to life and freedom whenever a croaking crow flew over the camp”¹¹.
13. E. Goffman does not take into consideration the role of symbolic culture in underlife and in the general strategy of life and pre-camp self-protection. The camp was a place of diverse intellectual creativity (prisoners organized poetic competitions with prizes, scientific conferences, theatrical performances etc.).
14. The “tactics of revolt” in camp had little in common with “mutiny” described by Goffman. The revolt of prisoners in camp occurred most frequently in the face of an immediate death threat. Under such circumstances it had features of extreme human desperation. Goffman’s “semi-mutiny” (e.g. verbal mutiny or a strike) was out-of-place in camp where there was a great probability of disproportionately drastic reaction of the staff.
15. In concentration camps prisoners had no possibility of restricting their “personal territories” where they could remain alone for some time. This was due to overcrowding of camps. Instead, prisoners created so-called “group territories” (term by Goffman). A group territory is a free place to which a group of inmates claim the right of ownership i.e. which they reserve exclusively for themselves in order to gain certain gratifications.¹²

An example of such space is a historical tower in Mauthausen which served “as a shelter for the weakest and those who went there for emotional support”¹³. The notion of “group territory” is very useful in the description of camp territoriality.
16. In describing “working an assignment” it seems necessary to introduce a concept of, what we have called, the “pretended self”. By using it, a prisoner had more chances of obtaining a better job. The pretended self consists in claiming certain credits and skills unconfirmed in reality in order to obtain a more profitable job. A prisoner skillfully accentuates his merits while suppressing faults.

¹¹ J. Madej, *Bicie i robota na mrozie*, [in:] *Jesteśmy świadkami*, Wyd. Lubelskie, Lublin 1969, p. 19.

¹² Goffman, *Asylums...*, p. 155.

¹³ W. Gębik, *Droga do Polski*, [in:], *Pamiętniki nauczycieli z obozów i więzień hitlerowskich*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1962.

17. Goffman does not take into account a possibility of second mortification which occurs at a transfer to a new camp. During such a transfer prisoners usually got mortified to a "Zugang" position at their destination "It was a shock for inmate that all previous years of hardships did not count any more. They took from us not only our miserable possessions (for general distribution) but even our numbers. Thus we were deprived of everything, even of our >lager< seniority. For some of us this fall to the position of a nameless Zugang meant reaching the deep end"¹⁴.

According to Goffman, a psychiatric patient, having internalized the practices of self-conception management, will apply them also after his release in his relations with other social groups¹⁵. This thesis remains unconfirmed in relation to the behavior of ex-prisoners of concentration camps. The ex-prisoner will usually treat his camp practices as past ones though once indispensable in surviving the camp and in keeping one's moral principles.

It is thus possible to say that re-definitions of self certainly occurred in concentration camps, but that they were a necessary condition for survival. A. Glinka takes a similar stand when analyzing moral change in prisoners and their self-defense. "They had to engage in double-dealing required of them to preserve a make-believe loyalty towards the staff and to pretend atrocity towards other prisoners. It was necessary to use deceit, quick wits, cunning, pretended compliance and even servility towards SS-men, in order not to arouse suspicion"¹⁶.

The world of underlife protected the prisoner's dignity and his pre-camp self-conception.

The presence of these two aspects of life in camp (official - and underlife) enabled the existence of two respective conceptions of the self: the official one and that functioning in underlife. Underlife practices defended personal autonomy. An individual stopped his self only when he could not function as a social being any more, usually due to a severe loss of consciousness. This social type of a "vegetable human being" occurred in camp conditions and was called "muslim". The loss of consciousness was a result of starvation. The "muslim" constitutes a point of interference of biology and society. On this stage, biology is usually the ultimate determinant of human actions.

In the words of Goffman the substantive self ("character") is not a property of the person to whom it is attributed, but dwells rather in the pattern of social control which is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him¹⁷. This is a consistently sociological approach. On the other hand the non-substantive self ("performer") has many attributes, among them adaptability. In the course of interaction a person may generate numerous self-conceptions aimed at obtaining profits in situations in

¹⁴ A. Gawalewicz, *Refleksje z poczekalni do gazu*, Wyd. Literackie, Kraków 1968.

¹⁵ Goffman, *Asylums...*, p. 155.

¹⁶ A. Glińska, *Moralność więźniów Oświęcimia*, „Etyka”, 1967, no. 2.

¹⁷ Goffman, *Asylums...*, p. 154.

which he gets involved. The category of non-substantive self is thus a sequence of competence ascribed to the individual¹⁸.

It seems that this non-substantial self may be of some significance for self-perception. If here is a way of presenting various contradictory self-conceptions in the same situations for various audiences, then such way of action informs us of the contents of self-conceptions, since the mode of presentation is subject also to the actor's evaluation. We learn such contents through getting acquainted with the type of interactional situation and the type of audience, both which must be known also to the actor in order to enable him to apply a given interactional technique.

¹⁸ In dramaturgism we usually take a position which cancels out the substantive character of self. The individual was usually seen as "peg" devoid of all meaning, on which attributes ascribed to the individual are hanged. See: M. Czyżewski, Miejsce analizy ramowej w socjologii Ervinga Goffmana, "Przełąd Socjologiczny" 1981, t. XXXIII.