



## Lectures on beauty as a way to preserve the spiritual strength and dignity of women in the German concentration camp FKL Ravensbrück in the light of the documentation of prof. Karolina Lanckorońska

Wykłady o pięknie sposobem na ocalenie duchowej siły i godności kobiet w niemieckim obozie koncentracyjnym FKL Ravensbrück w świetle dokumentacji prof. Karoliny Lanckorońskiej<sup>1</sup>

<https://doi.org/10.34766/fetrv50i2.1086>

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**Abstract:** *Introduction:* The article aims at analysing the influence of beauty on the spirituality of women (in a philosophical sense) and the value of art history education during the secret teaching that women received in the all-female German Nazi concentration camp – FKL Ravensbrück. The clandestine lessons were initiated by the Polish teachers to save fellow prisoners, young Polish women, who were subjected to some criminal medical experiments conducted by the Germans. The researcher examines the role of telling stories about beauty and works of art in the extreme conditions, when the excruciating suffering was cumulating and depriving the prisoners of hope for survival. The author indicates the importance of influencing the listeners' with the value of beauty contained in the lecturer's words concerning the works of art and the emanation of her personal spiritual beauty. The research also underlines the role of the ancient method of learning through ekphrasis and emphasizes the therapeutic value of beauty. *Method:* Analysis of the source documents: the *mémoires* of the former Ravensbrück inmates and the results of Urszula Wińska's survey. *Conclusions:* Attending the secret classes by the Polish women-prisoners (so called "Rabbits", as they were subjected to the medical experiments) at FKL Ravensbrück and their education in the field of art history and aesthetics provided by prof. Karolina Lanckorońska had a double meaning. On one hand, it allowed the women to survive the camp (ad hoc effect of teaching), and on the other hand, it strengthened their need for a stronger attachment to their Polish roots and returning to the family home. It also boosted their love for the model of social life, in which one is to start one's own family and protect the lives of its members.

**Keywords:** FKL Ravensbrück, Karolina Lanckorońska, ekphrasis, beauty, secret teaching

**Abstrakt:** *Wstęp:* Przedmiotem artykułu jest analiza wpływu piękna na duchowość (w znaczeniu filozoficznym) kobiet i wartość kształcenia o historii sztuki podczas tajnego nauczania jakie kobiety otrzymały w niemieckim nazistowskim obozie koncentracyjnym dla kobiet – FKL Ravensbrück. Nauczanie zainicjowały polskie nauczycielki dla ratowania współwięźniarek, młodych Polek, poddanych przez Niemców zbrodnicy eksperymentem medycznym. Autorka bada rolę opowiadania o pięknie i dziełach sztuki w warunkach ekstremalnych, w których doznanie cierpienia było skumulowane i odbierało więźniarkom nadzieję na przeżycie. Wskazuje na znaczenie oddziaływania na słuchaczki wykładów wartością piękną zawartego w słowach wykładowcy o dziełach i emanacji jego osobistego duchowego piękna. Wypukła rolę antycznej metody nauki poprzez ekfrazę i podkreśla wartość terapii pięknem. *Metoda:* Analiza dokumentów źródłowych: wspomnień Ravensbrückianek i wyników ankiety Urszuli Wińskiej. *Wnioski:* Tajne komplety, w których uczestniczyły polskie kobiety-więźniarki w FKL Ravensbrück (nazywane „królikami” ze względu na to, że były przedmiotem eksperymentów medycznych) i kształcenie ich przez prof. Karolinę Lanckorońską w dziedzinie historii sztuki i estetyki posiadało podwójną wartość. Pozwoliło kobietom przeżyć obóz (skutek doraźny nauczania) i wzmocniło u nich potrzebę silniejszego przywiązania do polskich korzeni, powrotu do domu rodzinnego, umiłowania wzoru życia społecznego jakim jest założenie własnej rodziny i ochrona życia jej członków.

**Słowa kluczowe:** FKL Ravensbrück, Karolina Lanckorońska, ekfrazę, piękno, tajne nauczanie

<sup>1</sup> Artykuł w języku polskim: <https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/2022-2Filip.pdf>

## Introduction

As taught by Wanda Póltawska, even though young people, both man and women, are able to understand what a beautiful love is, they realise it is a perfection, and that it is difficult to obtain. To make young people eager to live their lives in such a way, that would enable them to achieve it, they must be shown the sanctity of life. They need to get the first-hand experience to commune with the beauty and be able to depart spiritually and physically from mediocrity, hatred, crime, that are shown, among others, in the media (Póltawska, 2014, p. 13). During World War II prof. Póltawska, née Wojtasikówna (born in 1921), was a „Rabbit” prisoner of Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück — an all-female Nazi German concentration camp in Ravensbrück (hereinafter referred to as FKL Ravensbrück). The term „Rabbit” refers here to several dozen female prisoners of the mainly Polish origin, brought by the Germans to FKL Ravensbrück in a special transport from the prison in Lublin (70 women) and from the ‘Pawiak’ prison (4 women). In the period from the beginning of August 1942 to the end of August 1943, the German medical personnel conducted medical experiments on the said Polish women and 12 female of other nationalities. Reduced to the level of slaves, prisoners were forced to undergo the said experiments. Memoirs of a factual nature concerning the „Rabbits” — female prisoners, were published in 1945 by Jadwiga Wilczańska. Her account of these medical experiments is entitled „The Rabbits” (Kiedrzyńska, 2019, p. 25-26; Woźniak, 1985, p. 105; Filipowicz, 2021, p. 537-540).

W. Póltawska, as well as seventy-three other Polish „Rabbits”, and nearly forty other young female prisoners of the Polish origin, own saving their lives to the Polish teachers — their fellow inmates. One of the teachers providing the secret lectures at FKL Ravensbrück was prof. Karolina Lanckorońska (1898-2002), who taught them about the art history (Wińska, 1985; Kiedrzyńska, 2019, p. 247-258; Drywa, Oratowska, 2015; Filipowicz, 2021, p. 541, 554).

The issue that is being analysed hereinafter concerns the influence of teaching about beauty on saving women’s spirituality: regenerating their spiritual

strength by stimulating the imagination, and liberating ones’ spirit thanks to directing their hearts and minds towards beauty. The article tackles the role of remembering the beauty and its history as well as the value of the word of mouth concerning the reality and the transcendence of beauty in art. The role of teaching about beauty in the conditions of terror – in FKL Ravensbrück – will also be emphasized. The source base of this analysis consists of the war memories of prof. Karolina Lanckorońska, who was a prisoner at FKL Ravensbrück for 24 months (from January 9, 1943 to April 5, 1945). The aforementioned documentation (Lanckorońska, 2001) shall be used to present the topics of prof. Lanckorońska’s lectures on art given by her during the occupation, both before and after her arrest by the Germans, in particular the ones conducted as part of the clandestine lessons in the camp. The importance of ekphrasis shall be shown as an essential part of the lecture on the sense of beauty. The research paper also underlines the importance of the bond between the man and supernatural beauty, which became the so-called “lifebuoy” thrown to women-“Rabbits” in FKL Ravensbrück. To illustrate this, issue some arguments of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas shall be mentioned and some reflections of prof Władysław Tatarkiewicz shall be quoted.

### **1. The lectures on art history conducted by prof. Karolina Lanckorońska during the war – in Lviv and at FKL Ravensbrück concentration camp**

Karolina Lanckorońska from Brzezcie, of the Zadora coat of arms, was a daughter of the count Karol Lanckoroński and Małgorzata, née Lichnowska. She received a careful upbringing and education. The primary place and environment where she received the education were her home and family, then she was taught by the professors of the Viennese gymnasium, and later she studied at the University of Vienna. In 1926 she obtained her Doctor degree

in Vienna under the supervision of Max Dworzak. In 1935, she received a Habilitated Doctor degree at the Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv. She was the first woman in Poland to gain scientific and didactic independence in the field of art history. A year later, she was granted the right to give lectures at this Polish university. She specialized in the works of Michelangelo (Kalinowski, Orman, 2001, p. 8-9).

After the Soviets entered Lviv in September 1939, prof. Lanckorońska, who was an associate professor at a time, continued giving her academic lectures on the Italian art from the period of 14th-century Siense painting. Prof. Lanckorońska was also referring then to her lectures on 15th-century Florentine painting that she had conducted before the war. In February 1940, she was commissioned by the occupation authorities to conduct a general course on Renaissance and Baroque art. In April of the said year, before she was made redundant by the university, she had given a lecture on the early sculptures of Donatello. There is a memory of prof. Lanckorońska dated to May 1942, the period after her arrest by the Germans (Hans Krüger, 1909-1998), concerning the creative use of her time in the dark pit of the prison in Stanisławów. At that time, she was reminiscing especially vividly the European art galleries, the collections of works of art from her family home in Vienna, the Prado in Madrid, Louvre in Paris, Uffizi in Florence, and Venice. The darkness surrounding her in the detention was increasing the intensity of that spiritual journey and the thought-provoked images and colours of the paintings known to her. Analysing her situation, prof. Lanckorońska then recalled an anecdote about El Greco, who, when had been asked why he was staying in a dark room, he supposedly replied to his guest: "The daylight prevents me from seeing the inner light" (Lanckorońska, 2001, p. 20, 24, 26, 51, 161; Bartelà, 1991; Donatello, 1926; Galicka, Sygietyńska, 2014, p. 22-29).

As a prisoner at FKL Ravensbrück, prof. Lanckorońska was giving lectures as a part of the secret teaching. The first of them concerned the catacomb painting. Then, in isolation — in the bunker, she was preparing the "talks" on history and cultural history that she was later on sending with the help of the washerwomen (Lanckorońska, 2001, p. 272).

At the end of October 1944, she became a block leader [translator's note: a kind of a functionary prisoner] in block 32, where, among others, the Polish women—"Rabbits" used to "live". On Sunday of early January 1945, she recalled conducting a lesson on Greek culture of the 6th century. Having a booklet with several reproductions of Rembrandt's works at her disposal, she introduced young prisoners to the subject of religious painting of the 17th century.

This way, together with her students, she said goodbye to Halina Wohlfarth: "It was the only mourning ceremony through which we could have commemorated Halina" (Lanckorońska, 2001, p. 313). Halina was one of the students of the clandestine lessons — the most talented one, keenly interested in the ancient history of the classical period. She had a great impact on the other women. As prof. Lanckorońska remembered, the level of Halina's group was advanced thanks to her — it was the best of all groups attending the secret classes in the camp. Halina regularly took notes on prof. Lanckorońska's lectures, and the said notes were later on found by an overseer while he was searching the block. That was the reason why Halina was sentenced to a camp prison located in the bunker, near which, in 1943, the Germans built a crematorium and a gas chamber (Lorens, Małachowska, 2020, p. 57). She was killed together with the room supervisor — Zosia Lipińska. At a secret Rembrandt lecture everybody missed her acutely. During the Holy Week of 1945, prof. Lanckorońska, on request of Marysia Grocholska (Czterwertyńska), taught the "Rabbits" about scenes from the Passion, "*Last Supper*" by Leonardo da Vinci and Tintoretto. Madam professor recalled the mystery of Christ's death and His Resurrection, teaching about the works of Michelangelo, which he painted in the last period of his life. She quoted the artist's reflections on art and beauty. The lecture on Emmaus in Rembrandt's paintings scheduled for Easter Monday was not carried out. It got postponed because Karolina Lanckorońska was called to join the group of French women. They were to leave the camp. The madam professor gave that lecture on the following day, on Easter Tuesday (Lanckorońska, 2001, p. 243, 304-305, 312-313, 325-326;

Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1922, p. 142, 144, 146; King, 2017, p. 72-77, 80-98; Lanckorońska, 1932; Bastek, 2010, p. 242-268).

The lecture on the catacomb art was, in the professor's opinion, particularly important, because of the similarity of the first Christians' fate and FKL Ravensbrück female prisoners. Living in epochs that were distant from each other, yet however, very close due to the persecution, martyrdom and martyr's death. They were united by a spiritual community: they had faith in supernatural life and were adhering to the teachings of Jesus Christ. They both placed hope in the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Despite the tragedy they kept on cultivating values, and finding salvation in prayers that were confirming the transcendence of the human existence due to its divine origin, dignity, and an inner freedom preservation. After descending under the surface of earth one may see the catacomb wall decorations depicting Daniel among the lions, the Good Shepherd, the Mother of God, the allegories of Moses, Jonah, Abraham and Lazarus, baptism, and the healed paralytic — all the above conveyed what was most essential message to those facing death: the truth about the resurrection (Rycerz Niepokalanej [Knight of the Immaculate], 1922; Sadurska, 1974; Iwaszkiewicz-Wronikowska, 2000; Jastrzębowska, Antczak, 2015, p. 254-292, 293-334).

## 2. The meaning of ekphrasis in teaching about art in the extreme conditions

Ekphrasis was used extensively by prof. Karolina Lanckorońska while she was giving the secret lectures on art history. Years later, Wanda Póltawska would recall that the lectures of Madame professor were indeed beautiful. When she had a chance to contemplate art in the museums, she would instantly recognize the paintings that prof. Lanckorońska was telling them about during the clandestine lessons

(Póltawska, 2004). Madame Professor was showing the said paintings to the girls with... words. She was explaining their content in a complete and utmost detailed manner, using the appropriate language functions, as per the Greek term *ekphrazein*, which stands for a skill of visual communication. The said skill comprises of paying attention to an object and analysing it carefully, in order to give a careful description of it to another person later on. The ekphrasis is a very well-constructed utterance in terms of the language skills (see Słodczyk, 2020, p. 77-141; Krzywy, 2012).

Telling stories about the beauty of works of art was preceded by the admiration for the perfection of the artistic workshop, and supported by the extensive knowledge of prof. Lanckorońska about the centuries-old human effort of reaching the ability to express the idea of the Great Mystery. The said description could contain descriptions of the vivid colours of the paintings presented in the style of the Procopius of Caesarea ekphrasis. The ekphrasis in question was about the form and lines of the architecture of the Hagia Sofia basilica, the colours of its plaster paintings and mosaics (Janocha 2005, p. 142-143; Procopius of Caesarea, 2006, p. 88-89).

As a detailed description of the images seen personally by the storyteller, the ekphrasis can be compared to an account of a journey through the world of beauty. In this story, the richness of the words used reflects the richness of the painting theme. It allows not only to observe the scene depicted in the painting, but also to find oneself there in the space created on the canvas — both with the artists, and the protagonists of their works. Ekphrasis allows the listeners to travel in time. It allows people to see the light that makes the colours on the canvas vivid. In extreme conditions, ekphrasis, as a conscious didactic procedure, was based on the verbal transfer of knowledge and working while using one's memory only. Ekphrasis fulfilled its role also thanks to the lecturer's empathy: it reached the roots of *caritas*, allowing the teacher to lend her personal good to the listeners, which constituted of the remembered aesthetic experience, knowledge of a beautiful work of art and sharing the admiration for its beauty. Ekph-

rasis introduced women-prisoners to the professor's personal reflection, to her spiritual life, to the wisdom (Grochowska, 2022, p. 6-7).

One of the most famous Polish art historians, Jan Białostocki (1921-1988), wrote in the early 1960s: "*Ars auro gemmisque prior* — Art is more valuable than gold and stones." (Białostocki, 2004, p. 9). He referred to the Romanesque reliquaries and the words of Sugeriusz — a Benedictine abbot living at the turn of the 11th and 12th century — the spiritual creator of the Gothic basilica in Saint-Denis, whose words are placed on the bronze door of this temple. The faithful who crossed it were admonished: <<*Whoever you are, if you want to appreciate the glory of this door, admire not the gold and the price, but the mastery of the work.*>>

Coming from the royal necropolis of France, this inscription was quoted by prof. Lanckorońska: <<... *Portarum quisquis attollere quaeris honorem / Aurum nec sumptius, operis mirare laborem, / Nobile claret opus, sed opus quod nobile claret, / Clarificet mentes, ut eant per lumina vera / Ad verum lumen, ubi Christus lanua vera. / Quale sit intus in his determinat aurea porta. / Mens habes ad verum per materialia surgit / Et demersa prius hac visa luce resurgit.*>> (Lanckorońska, 1934/1935, p. 157; after Julius von Schlosser: Schlosser, 1896, p. 271). Madam professor thus drew attention to the idea of the law of beauty: despite the differences in styles and goals developing over the centuries, the essence of art is independent of historical epochs. As the pieces are called the works of art — the creations of people who, through their craftsmanship and, in some way, previously discovered and understood perfection, were able to introduce immanent light into their work. Owing to the said light the artists were able to — using the matter animated in such a way, and submitted to them — lead the recipient of their individual works to the spiritual world. This is also how prof. Białystok used to teach about art. The costly material used by the creator does not constitute the value of the work. Its value, on the other hand, lies within the artistic maturity of a gifted man, trained in work and study, who in a human way makes perfection a reality with his own hands. A perfect work, according to the

philosophy of abbot Sugeriusz, is more valuable than gold. A man who is sensitive to beauty and has learned to recognize it, is able to perceive it and to be mentally satisfied with its light and truth, which a beautiful piece of art shows.

Based on the memories of women who had contact with prof. Lanckorońska at FKL Ravensbrück concentration camp, it should be assumed that the ekphrasis performed by her during lectures strengthened and liberated the female prisoners — the "Rabbits" — spiritually. The aesthetic experiences provided to women allowed them to stay in the world of beauty, i.e. in the world outside the camp. They enhanced their belief in the superiority of spiritual powers. Thanks to rationality, which is a spiritual — metaphysical — human endowment, ekphrasis that is the necessary element of the secret didactics, could play the role of the logotherapy invented for the students — "Rabbits". Influencing the young women with the beauty she referred to in her ekphrasis, prof. Lanckorońska contributed to saving their lives. Leopold Staff wrote about the healing value of a creative word in relation to Michelangelo's poetic reflections (first published in 1623). Madam professor taught about it as well: [the word is] "a manifestation of life in the most personal way [...] the image of a spiritual development [...] the most volatile, bending material that there possibly can be," the most difficult to master, expressing a metaphysical longing for infinity (Staff, 1922, p. XIII, XV-XVI).

Years later, Wanda Póltawska wrote about prof. Lanckorońska that her lectures were "ravishing", "artistic, stimulating the imagination", revealing the works of art conjured up by the professor, "they were on the verge of lessons and entertainment programs" (Wińska, 1985, p. 142, 355). Monika Dankowska was "impressed" by the professor and thanks to her lectures she left the camp "morally stronger", "physically resistant to body ailments" (Wińska, 1985, p. 352). Halina Zofia Bella, imprisoned for two weeks in the bunker, and immediately after that placed in the dark pit, thanks to the professor was "given the spirit of survival" (Wińska, 1985, p. 326). Genowefa Kluczek-Kącka testified that K. Lanckorońska was a "great friend of kings", who was speaking "constantly about the dignity and honour of the Polish women"

(Wińska, 1985, p. 304). Maria Kuśmierczuk did not remember the content of the lectures conducted by prof. Lanckorońska, on the so-called “*trzeciak*” (the third floor of the barrack bunk beds). She, however, recalled “that mood, the time without fear of death and hunger”. She remembered staring at the teacher, confining in her, and entrusting with the personal details of the “Rabbits”, that were scrupulously written on the edge of a handkerchief, which later on Karolina Lanckorońska handed over to the headquarters of the International Red Cross in Geneva (Wińska, 1985, p. 149). Mirosława Grupińska wrote that Karolina Lanckorońska gave her fellow prisoners “words of hope and encouragement” (Wińska, 1985, p. 135). She described that the lectures were “listened to with bated breath”, and that they were shaping the personality when women strongly felt the “thirst for knowledge”. The lectures were broadening the minds, teaching what “in the understanding of these wise, experienced women [i.e. teachers of secret classes] was the most valuable” (Wińska, 1985, p. 144; Księżyk, 2017, p. 86-102). They were a spiritual exercise.

### 3. The value of beauty in the process of enhancing the purposefulness of surviving the camp by women

Dr. Urszula Wińska (1902-2003), professor of Polish language and literature, one of the initiators of the secret teaching at FKL Ravensbrück concentration camp, conducted a survey among her fellow prisoners on the subject: “How did we change in the camp?” The study was expected to answer two questions. The first concerned the attitude of the fellow female inmates towards human beings before their stay in the camp. The second was connected with the attitude to work before and during the camp life. 64 women aged 15-50 answered the questionnaire. They had different social and educational backgrounds. The main goal of the survey and processing its results was a therapy: to get women, especially young ones, to express themselves and introduce them to the structured research work. It took almost two months to collect the responses and analyse them. The results were

read and discussed on Sundays. The survey participants were aware that they had written a story about themselves, while the trace of them — as the German authorities intended — should not have survived. There was a crematorium both in the nearby town of Fürstenberg and in Ravensbrück. Near the camp, the Germans — Sturmbannführer Sauer, Dr. Trommer and Moll — were killing prisoners in gas chambers hidden in the forest, and since November 1944 the gas chamber operated also in the camp (Kiedrzyńska, 2019, p. 115-118; Wińska, 1985, p. 12).

One of the main reflections found in the camp research material of Dr. Wińska (which unfortunately was lost) was that: “the value of a man lies in his inner qualities” (Kiedrzyńska, 2019, p. 257-258). The collection of responses from the post-war survey conducted by Dr. Wińska was entitled “The values prevailed. Memories from Ravensbrück” (Wińska, 1985; Filipowicz, 2021, p. 543 and 550).

In the light of the classical philosophy of being (Greek *το ον* or *ουσια*, Latin *ens*), the attribute of being is its beauty (Greek *kalon*, Latin *pulchritudo*). In the ontic category, beauty concerns the transcendentals, speaks in favour of the rationality of the work, is its property, expresses its proportions. Thanks to its perfection, the work shows the intention of the creator, who with the work of his hands, expresses the highest beauty and the source of the created beauty — the God himself (Kluza, 2011; Michałowicz, 2011).

Beauty stimulates the imagination by influencing the human senses. It is recognized by the man. However, since in the camp conditions at FKL Ravensbrück, the eyes of the listeners of art history lectures could not see the pieces they were learning about, the women- “Rabbits” experienced cognition on a level higher than the one of a sensory cognition. This higher cognition allowed women to transcend spiritually the matter of the camp, which was an atrocity (see, among others, Salska, 1985; Wińska, 1985, p. 17; Rutkowska, 1985).

From the memoirs of prof. Lanckorońska it can be inferred that the lectures on art, although difficult to conduct due to the lack of illustrations, were for herself a spiritual opportunity to return to the beauty that she knew, valued and longed for. By teaching about it during the clandestine lessons on art, she

spiritually saved both herself and each of her “sisters” — fellow prisoners. She wanted to experience this value, to return to a life of freedom in the midst of the beauty of nature, motherland, and home. The ugliness terrified her since the moment she had entered the gates of the German camp. She detested corrupt vulgarity, especially when she could not get away from it herself (Lanckorońska, 2001, p. 229, p. 284-285, p. 87-288).

In secret classes, the lecturer intensified in her students the cognitive act related to the power of will, its desire for beauty and goodness. People, unlike animals, feel the higher world and move towards it. Having an intellect and intellectual feelings, they have the ability in their rationality to arouse curiosity, thirst for knowledge, and admiration, as well as they expect to find the truth. When this hope is fulfilled, their sense of joy and well-being grows. The aesthetic feelings that people are able to evoke allow them to experience the beauty of things — both material and spiritual. This feeling and the awareness of its experience, evoke joy and pleasure. They lead to the nobleness. This does not exclude the feeling of contempt for evil overwhelming spirituality and the body. Evil, which can exist wherever there lacks the good (Kwiatkowski, 1947, p. 187-189).

Focusing on the beauty shared with the women during the secret lectures, drew their attention towards its transcendence, and introduced them to the spiritual well-being — to the extent that was possible at that time. Thus, the lectures helped to eliminate evil, violence and the feeling of suffering, even if only while they were going on and waiting for the next ones. The secret lectures were needed and much-awaited. They were giving a relief. They generated the good that women shared during sets. They led to the source of transcendence — the God himself. Women put their hope in them. The transcendence of values accompanied their lives in the camp. Dr. Wińska wrote about the trust in God's Providence in her reflection on Easter 1945 and the all-night prayer conducted in the Polish block by Józefa Kantor. The women were reciting the service of the Holy Saturday from memory. When in the morning they left the block as if they were going out of a church, on Lagrowa Street of FKL Ravensbrück they heard the news that the gas chamber in the camp had just been

closed. On the Easter Vigil, the oldest women from the block expected the inevitable selection... for the gas chamber. To avoid this, they coloured their grey hair and made their hollow cheeks pink. They were supposed to seem younger. They knelt around the barrack table and were whispering their prayers. Every fellow prisoner accompanied them in that prayerful hope. A similar situation had happened during their first Easter in the concentration camp in 1942, when a prayer and a long lecture on love for the homeland allowed Polish women to overcome all physical ailments. One of them was waiting for the evening “coffee”, the only meal they were supposed to receive that day. The lecture seemed to make the waiting time to be shortened (Wińska, 1985, p. 113-114, 127).

#### **4. Teaching about beauty as a contemplation of values**

Teaching art history as a part of the secret lessons in the concentration camp was deliberate. It was supposed to protect each “Rabbit” women's consciousness from the destruction caused by the aggregated suffering. During the occupation of Poland Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1886-1980), a historian of philosophy, ethics, art and aesthetics, continued giving the clandestine lessons at the University of Warsaw. He personally suffered and witnessed the suffering of the students he taught. He knew the value of compassion. The lives of the participants of the conspiratorial education were endangered to the same degree. But both teachers and their students were very brave and courageous. The other characteristics that they had shared were the internal resistance in order to maintain dignity, and their will to survive the war and repressions applied by the Germans throughout the territory of the occupied country (Tatarkiewiczowie, 2011, p. 221-226).

During the war professor Tatarkiewicz wrote a book “O szczęściu” [“On happiness”]. In the chapter entitled “Cierpienia” [“The Sufferings”] apart from reflecting on the suffering and atrocities of war, he formed a metaphor on a human psyche, explaining that it functions similarly to a spring. — it has an ability to absorb the received blows and to create

a limit of endurance to the strength of the experienced mental and physical blows. The said limit is the human spirituality. Although people have an influence on their education, the target potential of their own spirituality is not known to them, and those who experience suffering learn their fragility on their own. The constant influx of the causes of suffering and living in pain violates the barriers of human physical and mental resistance. In such circumstances, a relief from suffering, according to prof. Tatarkiewicz, can be brought to a person by another human being, influencing him with a transcendent good. The said good, as a source of hope, is sought by the mind and the heart of a person threatened with death, physically exhausted, on the verge of the internal resistance. After crossing it, with the pressure of forces causing suffering, human defence mechanisms can be significantly compromised. The salvation from this misfortune is then to receive from the other person some compassion and an impulse to live. In some way it is indispensable survive the difficulties accumulated over time (Tatarkiewicz, 2015, p. 154-155, 159, 557; Filipowicz, 2021, p. 546).

In the light of aesthetics, which is a branch of philosophy devoted to beauty, it is commonly accepted that what is perceived by our mind as harmonious in its colours, sounds and language, is beautiful. Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches in *Summa theologiae* about the truthfulness of beauty. Transcendental beauty is the intrinsic property of being. Along with unity and goodness, it remains in a specific relationship to the human senses, reason and will. External beauty, that is, the beauty of another being, is recognised by people through reason, and therefore extrasensorily. Hence, we distinguish the existence of spiritual, mental and moral beauty. After coming into contact with the being, a person recognizes what he or she likes about it as beautiful. Beauty is related to good. Good is perfection, it is praised as beauty: *bonum laudatur, ut pulchrum* (Sth 1 a, q 5, art. 4 = *Summa theologiae*, 1925).

People refer to something as beautiful when it makes an exceptional impression on them. It is hard to resist the beauty of things. This is due to their recognized perfection, their inner harmony, proportion, and coherence. Aquinas lists, after Aristotle, three objective conditions necessary for a thing to be

considered beautiful. They refer to the sensual beauty. Firstly, it is the perfection of the whole thing (*integritas*); secondly, the preservation of the proportions constituting harmony between its component parts (*consonantia*); and thirdly, its *brightness* and shine (*claritas*), perceived by the senses immediately, i.e. from the first encounter of a man with the said piece of work. Within the beauty, in the harmonious ordering of the entire being, a non-accidental greatness and an intellectually recognized reason of the origins of being are contained. (Aristoteles [Aristotle], 2010, s. 138-139; Sth 2a – 2ae, q. 180, art. 3 = *Summa theologiae*, 1926, p. 30-35; Tatarkiewicz, 2012, p. 376-377).

When it comes to the spiritual beauty the above-mentioned complexity is not the case. God is not complex in his very essence. He is absolutely beautiful in the unity of its spiritual and moral qualities. Only reason can judge beauty. The intellectual cognition of beauty causes a taste for beauty, which is an act of will. The recognition of beauty introduces peace into the spiritual powers of a man and his physicality, it gives one the feeling of the highest pleasure. Dealing with beauty, by recognizing it, integrates the inner powers of a human being. Recognizing beauty, as Aquinas teaches, is a virtue and as such it is active (Sth 1a, q. 5, art. 4, res. = *Summa theologiae*, 1925, s. 154-155). It directs the person from within oneself towards the community. Thus, teaching about beauty during secret classes brought women out of their loneliness, made it possible to get away from the feeling of being left unattended, without rescue.

Following Aquinas's teachings, it can be said that since beauty coincides with the good, teaching about beauty during art lectures spread both beauty and goodness (Sth 1a, q. 5, art. 4, res. = *Summa theologiae*, 1925, s. 154-155) among women-„Rabbits” and their teachers. Ultimately, it rebuilt their identity, anchoring them even more strongly to the supernatural source of their lives.

Communing with what is beautiful, is called contemplation. The existence of the state of contemplation confirms the metaphysical dimension of the human life and his spiritual abilities. It initiates in one's intellect the miracle of wisdom. (Sth 2a–2ae, q. 180, art. 8 = *Summa theologiae*, 1926, p. 64-68). In the case of women from FKL Ravensbrück the

contemplation was accompanied by the sense of the God's Truth presence, hope of surviving the camp, and the belief that they had enough physical strength and moral resistance to do so. All this thanks to stimulating the intellectual strength during courses on art history and beauty. The spiritual bond between the lecturer and the students enhanced their lives, just like in case of Mary and Martha from the Gospel according to St. Luke (Luke 10: 38-42). This example was given by Aquinas when he wrote that the sisters contemplated Christ, the incarnate Word of God, by listening to what he was saying when he came to visit the house of the said women and their brother (Sth 2a-2ae, q. 180, art. 3. 4). = *Summa theologiae*, 1926, p.31). In painting, contemplation is symbolized by lapis-lazuli, called the spiritual colour.

The effect of beauty can save from death (in the perspective of human abilities) as long as beauty is shared by one person with another. An example of the literary image of such an understanding of the role of harmony of beauty that unites the spiritual powers of a man are, among others, Silesian fairy tales by Gustaw Morcinek (1891-1963) — a writer, and a prisoner of the German concentration camps in Opava, Sachsenhausen and Dachau. Among the fairy tales of G. Morcinek, there is a story about the Plague Maiden and the way of controlling her actions. As long as the beauty of the music lasted, when Kalasanty Saturninus was playing the organs of the Cieszyn church choir, the spreading of fear and taking a heavy toll by the Plague Maiden, who entered the houses of Cieszyn's inhabitants without invitation, was suspended (Morcinek, 1984, p. 219-220; Filipowicz 2007, p. 171-175). The literary image of the impact of beauty setting a boundary to the sudden death through the good, devoted heart of Kalasanty, the shoemaker, and his music, is related to the story from 1713, when there was an outbreak of the Plague (Black Death) in Cieszyn.

## Summary

Person's education based on one's spiritual ability to learn the good, truth and beauty, leans towards the rationality, freedom and dignity of the human being.

The fruits of human education, which people can use by themselves or share with others, allow them to express their human identity and to affirm the reason for their existence. Both educating another person and learning from someone are possible, thanks to the human creative forces. However, the education in the concentration camps established by the Germans was strictly forbidden. It was the case because of their Prussian concept, and practice of treating people imprisoned there as slaves (see, inter alia, Karczewski, 2021, p. 200-203).

The Polish political prisoners imprisoned in FKL Ravensbrück (Infographics 2020) broke the prohibition of the camp authorities, according to which the spiritual life of female inmates had no right to exist. However, the Polish teachers obeyed the laws dictated by their own reason. Thanks to the secret lessons, they activated an internal defence mechanism — both within themselves and in the fellow prisoners educated by them, most of whom were a group of the so-called "Rabbits". This allowed many of them to survive the camp, maintain their female dignity and, despite the traumatic spiritual and physical burdens, return to their families, undertake education interrupted by the war, start their own families, give birth and raise children (see biographies in: Kiedrzyńska, 2019, p. 286-316 and reports of the Ravensbrück Family, 2022).

This classic knowledge about the role of rationality in a human life and saving it was emphasized by the Catholic priest, Fr. Wojciech Gajdus (1907-1957). He was a prisoner of the Stutthoff and Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg camps: "In the fight for survival, the most important weapon that the prisoners had at their disposal — and which the camp authorities were unable to control — was the reason" (Gajdus, 2013; Drywa, Oratowska, 2015, p. 78). In the light of priest Gajdus' memories, we understand that the intimacy of a human being — apart from a defenceless body exposed to blows and destruction — which is constituted by one's own thoughts and spiritual life, can become a metaphorical buckler. Rationality on the other hand, and the search for values that revive life thanks to the assimilation of knowledge about the existence of principia of eternal beauty and teaching about it, as well as having a persistent hope and believ-

ing in the supernatural good — despite everything, constituted what can be called the ancient shield and combat order of Greek hoplites. In 1943, at the end of the Lent, Polish prisoners-priests following the hoplites' example, protected their bodies against the beating by standing arranged in a square. They offered their suffering and pain received from Gust (ex. Kowalski), to God, just like Jesus Christ did. They were following the order of Fr. B. Pieckowski — the capo of the barracks, who had suffered the worst beating during that roll call: "Finally, one by one, they slowly and calmly make the sign of the cross. And this sign relaxes them: it drives the torment away [...]" (Gajdus, 2013, pp. 177-180).

When it comes to the secret lessons, the comparison to the Greeks concerns the virtue of prudence in the work of both teachers and students. This virtue was based on the rationality of women and their faith in the chance to survive the camp, to be liberated from it thanks to the active efforts to preserve physical and spiritual resistance, waiting for the end of the war and the possibility to leave the German soil, and return to their normal lives. The camp authorities did not manage to "seize" the spirituality of women. Learning was their way out, both to survive the camp, and find a way to rest. The time spent in the camp, that was devoted to studying was longed for and awaited by female prisoners — the Rabbits". The knowledge acquired in a direct contact with the teachers had become a *raison d'être* for Polish women by blending into their living values. The said values, which they acquired in their family homes, in Poland, lasted because the women remembered about history, the history of art, and about its indispensable element — the beauty. Moreover, these values constituted a barrier against barbarism (Filipowicz, 2022, p. 154-156 in an interview with the works of art conservator-restorer, Maria Magdalena Rymaszevska).

Thanks to participating in lectures on art, female prisoners — the "Rabbits" communed with beauty through words. They contemplated it, as beauty is not material, although people, as creators, need to use the real materials to make their beautiful pieces of art. Even though the beauty of the works that prof. Karolina Lanckorońska was teaching them about did not remain physically within the imprisoned

women reach (they could not see the works with their eyes, could not touch them) — it was real, and understood and felt as such. It existed for both prof. Lanckorońska, as well as for her camp sisters — the young listeners. Lectures given on the creations of the human spirit and human hands, the talks on the beauty of works that are transcendent, lessons on the history of art, that lasts... All that made both sides realise the transcendence of life. Women were strengthening their spirituality. Despite the violation of their freedom, the wounds inflicted on them by the German camp service, the killing of their fellow prisoners, students of prof. Lanckorońska did not lose their dignity (see the documentation of the women of Ravensbrück in: *Zapisy Terroru*, 2022).

When it comes to the women of Ravensbrück the value of teaching about beauty should be emphasized. It enhanced the life forces of women, even when they were utterly exhausted as prisoners. It can be concluded that not only the beauty itself, but also educating about it, the time devoted to learning about it, and the risks associated with it, were the expressions of love, and as one may say, they were pure love themselves. Irena Sendler, née Krzyżanowska (1910-2008) described what the spiritual beauty was when she recalled her father who was spoiling her as a child. When her aunts visiting the family home expressed their indignation, anticipating the disastrous educational effects of the excessive, in their opinion, warmth with which Dr. Krzyżanowski surrounded the only child, they heard: "You never know how our daughter's life will go. It may be that our caresses will be the most pleasant memories for her" (Mieszkowska, 2009, p. 65). Acting during the occupation under the pseudonym Jolanta, I. Sendlerowa was responsible for the Children's Section of "Żegota". There is a possibility that as a prisoner of Pawiak, I. Sendlerowa could have been sent to the FKL Ravensbrück concentration camp. Before the eventual transport to the camp or before being shot to death in Warsaw, she was bought out and saved from the hands of the German guards with money from the Polish Underground State.

(Translation: Agnieszka Wiesenthal)

## Abbreviations

Sth – Summa theologiae

Luke – Gospel according to St. Luke

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