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***Ocaleni z Mauthausen. Relacje polskich więźniów obozów nazistowskich systemu Mauthausen-Gusen* [‘Mauthausen survivors: Accounts of Polish inmates of the Nazi camps of the Mauthausen-Gusen system’], Warszawa 2010; 367 pp.**

History is created by humans, as someone has once put it. This was the underlying assumption for the authors on the book of Mauthausen survivors. Albeit the issues of, and around, concentration camps, labour camps, and mass extermination centres is quite well researched and studied, and although interest in these problems is remarkable, there is a number of matters continually unexplained or, simply, unknown; still, records made in this book enable to shed light on certain questions of humans and their attitude to the situation they have been thrown into.

Speaking of these issues, the most important steps for a historian undertaking to explain these phenomena include: surviving documents and, perhaps more importantly, accounts of witnesses who have survived the nightmare of wartime occupation, camp reality, and cruelty of existence at that time.

This second type of testifying to the historic truth has been excellently made use of by the publishers of the book in question. They have reliably and interestingly presented the vicissitudes of those who have survived the camp’s hell; this approach makes the book readable as a broad interview, with the reader figuring for themselves the faces and gestures of the story-tellers, seeing their suffering and fright. The significance of the historical truth is another thing: can the account of every individual whose account is contained in this book be regarded as the historical truth?

On analysing the individual utterances, a number of factors ought to be taken into account in order to come to certain conclusions, which, in turn, is no guarantee of certainty of answers given with respect to many essential questions. Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner is aware of these difficulties; as she states in the Introduction: “Over a hundred former prisoners of the Mauthausen-Gusen system, from all over Poland, and from many environments, of diverse professions, worldviews and life situation, diversified education level and, lastly, using various types of narrative and variously tackling their trauma of the experience – all are telling us stories of what they have been through.” (p. 5)

Not only does this book provide a record of the camp heroes' experiences: they are shown in a comprehensive light, with the whole lives of individual interlocutors being shown, with particular focus on their camp existence. The book's content might seem somewhat chaotic at first glance, but this is just apparent. It is arranged very logically, in reality. In the initial phase of our reading, we learn of a series of facts concerning these witnesses; this section goes on till the war's outbreak. The following segment is strictly devoted to what was going on with those individuals between the moment they were arrested and were back home. There is a plenty of harrowing accounts and descriptions of what was taking place in the camp: from the omnipresent famine, through to a hard slavish labour, and death, lurking at each step. The last section, the one of primary importance, is called biographical notes and features photographs of every interlocutor. This enables the reader to get to know of witnesses of those incidents, who are perishing at every moment – hence, it is so important to preserve their accounts in books like this one.

Another interesting observation is that the interviewees use an interesting language, termed a camp slang. Some expressions are not-quite-comprehensible to the uninitiated reader; hence, a glossary of camp expressions, enclosed at the book's end, appears to be extremely useful for understanding this specific language. This is all the more important that understanding this 'dialect' by the fellow inmates made the chance to survive immensely greater.

The name index, listing every person who has made a more or less essential contribution to this excellent book, is very useful. The pictures attached tell us a lot about the life and the excruciating conditions prevalent in Mauthausen and its affiliated camps. Many of them serve as express evidence to what was going on not only there but also in other such places.

To summarise, oral history written down and printed out is a well thought-over structure – and quite untypical one. This particular book comprises opinions of more than a hundred people, without a single specific course of thinking, as specific to one-author books. Some might find it hard to understand, while others will find the way the stories are presented to be evidence that history is never single and/or unambiguous but rather, complicated and hard to grasp. In our opinion, this is a strong point of this particular book, which certainly ought to join a canonical set of books on camps during World War 2. It should be hoped that the cycle will be followed up, and made available, to a broader public.