

### 3 Parallel readings

#### Narratives of violence

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“Interesting in all this was that she couldn’t believe how many superfluous bits of knowledge she had” (Nádas 2005, 430). Although many a thing has touched me during my long career as an interviewer and qualitative sociologist, it has been only a very few times that the stories overwhelmed me and began to live their own lives in my mind. On such occasions, I had to put aside those stories and did not analyze them. I wanted to be able to see clearly. This required me to establish a certain distance from the pictures evoked by those stories, while all I wanted was to preserve the complex feelings I had when listening to them. This was also the case with the two stories I am going to describe; both narrations hover around the phenomenon of sexualized violence. It was the monumental book *Parallel Stories* by Péter Nádas (2005) that inspired me to be alert to the sensory experience of violence and its limits in narrative representation.

Today I am most cautious when I actually get close to these stories. After some consideration, we named one of the women Róza and, therefore, I am writing about her as Róza. I first met Róza when we were conducting biographical interviews of Mauthausen deportees and members of their families.<sup>1</sup> In our essay *Abused Past – Forced Future* (Kovács and Vajda 2004), we avoided describing and analyzing violence. It was rather aimed at finding answers to what kind of paths of life had been influenced by the sexualized violence the women had suffered. The other woman was presented as Mari in my other writings (Kovács 2007, 2009). I met her on a workers’ colony when I was researching the everyday lives of those living there.<sup>2</sup> Details of violence were similarly avoided when analyzing her narrated life history. More so, those writings rather focused on Mari’s presence in both the closed and open world of ethnicity as well as its performative and discursive space. In Róza’s case, I blocked my emotional imagination to avoid being taken over by my visual imagination, while I applied methodological creativity to show how gender intersects with class and ethnicity in Mari’s case. My present writing is an attempt to get closer to the experience of violence.

#### **Context and methodological approach**

When discussing WWII, the Shoah, and other genocides in the twentieth century, numerous authors have studied the most horrendous forms of sexualized violence,

such as rape, being forced into prostitution, and forced sterilization (Auer, Amesberger, and Halbmayr 2004; Leydesdorff 2011). Some of these studies are close to trauma research driven by psychoanalytic and social psychology studies (Rosenthal 1999; Szász and Vajda 2012). Others link to the mainstream of historiography and social history (Browning 1998) or even to the literature of visual studies (Felman 1992). Much less is known about the period following National Socialism and the forced sterilization of Romani women. So far, only very few of these cases have been revealed (Zimmermann 1996).

Sexualized violence is a personal experience most difficult to approach. A wound on a person's sexuality is guarded by the strongest shame – it is often the case that even witnesses find it difficult to recall what they saw and even victims speak about it as if they were only witnesses to it. Those who manage to survive sexualized violence without visible consequences often strive to undo it even for themselves and conceal their wounds from the eyes of the other. Sexualized violence prompts such a feeling of shame, which even affects the chastity related to one's body (Didi-Huberman 2006; Seidler 2000). Put quite simply, the violence inflicted on the body creates such an unbearable bodily sensation that one cannot and wishes no more to identify with one's own sensation.

This chapter seeks to approach this experience from two perspectives: on the one hand, I am curious to know where the boundaries of narratives are, or more precisely where the place of violence can be located within the story of life. On the other hand, I intend to point out how shame and self-remorse derived from the experience of sexualized violence sets into motion gender and ethnic identities. Throughout the parallel reading of the two interviews, the following writings resonated in my mind in both conceptual and methodological terms: Shoshana Felman's (1992) essay on the film *Shoah* from the area of critical literary studies, *Gender Is burning*, a study by Judith Butler (1990) of feminist philosophy, and the related studies of Gabriele Rosenthal (1999, 2003) on biographical research.

The scientific description, or more precisely the biographical possibility of depicting violence, is also contradicted by the fact that neither Róza nor Mari had told "things as they had actually happened." I have to agree with Harald Welzer when he points out that those who grow up in a peaceful environment and therefore are prone to think of violence as a priori unusual, extreme, and psychologically deformed study it. In their case, even the thought of violence is unsettling. In order to avoid all this, violence is studied as something falling outside the self and is thus exoticized. One of the consequences of this whole process might be that social studies produced in the area deviate into moralizing or esthetics because of the unruly imagination (Welzer 2008, 191–192). Or contrary to all this, we describe factually, truthfully, and in greater detail the "technologies" of violence in order to compensate for our fundamental fright.

While I am not the person to do the latter, I am not armed to protect myself from committing the former either. Therefore, there is no other method left for me but to perform a parallel reading. Two women, two different historical epochs, social environments, and cultural patterns meet up in this text. These two would most likely have never met in real life. What is common for both women is that

they had been coercively sterilized without their knowledge: Róza as a Jew by Nazis in a German concentration camp, Mari as a Roma by a doctor in a Hungarian hospital – three decades later. The two cases are not comparable; definitely not to be compared in the same way, the actions of Nazism and Bolshevism have recently been compared by certain historical approaches (cf. Furet and Nolte 2001). Nonetheless, the two stories are parallel: both took place within the framework set by the short twentieth century where the dimensions of gender, race, and social status had crisscrossed each other ever so often.

## **Abused past**

### *Róza's life history*<sup>3</sup>

Born in 1930, Róza was the firstborn child of an assimilated Jewish family in a small town in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg (today Zakarpattia Oblast in western Ukraine). Her grandfather was in charge of quite a sizable farm that he managed together with the brothers of her mother. In spring 1939, right after the previously annexed northern territories of Hungary had been returned, armed men took her father to the headquarters of the gendarmerie in Tokaj, where he was severely beaten and strapped to the local bridge over the river Tisza. Although an acquaintance of his saved him from certain death, his injuries stopped him from working for months. In 1940, her father's license was withdrawn in accordance with the Second Anti-Jewish Law. One of their Christian friends provided him with black-leg work on an agricultural thresher machine until he was called to forced labor duty. In the same year, Róza started her graduate school at Beregszász (Berehovo) and commuted to school every single day until March 1944. As soon as she had to wear the yellow star sewn onto her clothes, the bus driver would not allow her on the bus anymore. Her uncles ultimately smuggled her to her grandfather's farm. Ghettoization started only little later. Róza's mother and brothers were taken to the Beregszász, while Róza, her cousins, and her aunts were taken to Kisvárda ghetto. Her aunts attempted to have her placed with her mother, but they failed. On June 2, 1944, Róza and her aunts were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and were placed in the twenty-sixth children's block because they admitted that Róza's mother had a twin sister. This is where Róza learned that the Nazis had already murdered her mother and smaller siblings in late May 1944. Although they only spent half a month in the children's block, Róza was "tested" for Mengele's so-called twins experiment and had acid fluids injected into her womb. Later, they were taken to Throne (Toruń) to dig trenches. Her relatives stayed with her all the time and tried to protect her from hard work. Regardless their caution, the girl of fourteen years once ran off to fetch water and drunken soldiers jumped from a by-standing train and tried to haul her into their compartment. It was only by the mercy of their officer in charge that she was spared. Furthermore, the camp commander once had her on public display completely naked in order to demonstrate how to clean up.

On January 10, 1945, Róza and her aunts were sent off to the Bromberg (Bydgoszcz) death march but were liberated on January 28 of the same year. One of

Róza's aunts died a few days later from typhoid fever. The women took shelter in an abandoned apartment and waited for instructions from the Russian command. While they were waiting, however, Russian soldiers attempted to break in and rape them. The women were conscious enough to form groups, and as some of those from Bereg spoke Russian, they managed to resist and were spared. Later they ended up in a Russian-French transit camp. When finally at home and at a hospital, Róza was diagnosed as barren due to the torture she had been subjected to at the concentration camp.

The late spring of 1945 found Róza and her aunts in the village of her grandparents where they had to cope with the fact that their neighbors had carted away all their belongings. It was in the summer of 1945 that she learnt about her father, who had starved to death in Mauthausen just a few days prior to liberation. Step-by-step, local peasants returned the family's furniture and a few animals, and her aunts were finally able to start farming again. This was not meant to last for long, though, as they lost everything in the course of the nationalization of goods. Róza continued going to school but was turned away from the college for teachers because she was labeled a "social-class alien." Instead, she completed a degree in shorthand and typing, and was hired as a secretary for the military. Because of her frail physical state and frequent illness, she was placed in the human resources department and tasked with only blue-collar work. At work, Róza was surrounded by male colleagues who kept coming on to her, and she found it more and more difficult to fend off their attention. In the meantime, she was asked to marry an Auschwitz survivor who was twenty years older than she was and a former admirer of one of her aunts. They married in Budapest in 1953 and moved from the village to the country's capital. Her husband was a lawyer and secured a respectable status for Róza. She lost both her aunts in the following year. They were hardly past their forties.

Róza and her husband continued to see doctors for almost ten years with the hope of having a child but ultimately failed. At the same time, she continued her studies and obtained two diplomas. Her husband died in 1987 after three decades of happy marriage. One year later, she married another man she knew from the Jewish cemetery and moved to Budapest. Róza developed a very close relationship with both her husband and his family. She was partially compensated when the compensation scheme was introduced and part of her family land was returned to her. At the time of the interview, Róza had been living an active social life: she regularly visited her hometown, looked after her family's land, partied with her old friends, and was a member of several Shoah survivor groups and umbrella associations.

In our essay (Kovács and Vajda 2004) ten years ago, we had come to the conclusion that Róza was somehow able to preserve her aptitude to live in partnership despite of the traumas inflicted upon her and her inability to have children.<sup>4</sup> After Hungary was liberated, Róza was immediately qualified for special pension. In the small town she lived in, she was not able to conceal her past as a Jew being deported to Auschwitz and harmed for life. Nevertheless, she still tried to explain to her male colleagues interested in the young and smart-looking woman that no relationship would ever work out, as she was not able to have children. In

an interview many years later, she explained in great detail how she had tried to keep the men at bay. Although she could not conceal her physical wounds, she was certainly not able to reveal the psychological trauma and stigmatization as a Jew following the Shoah. That is also why she chose an older and reliable partner who was not only similar to a father figure but also both a Jew and a survivor, and he could ‘picture’ and accept her even under those known and experienced circumstances. Her husband was able to see a picture of Róza that not even she herself was willing to see. He could accept that picture as belonging to her, while not harming her chastity yet again. As Róza remembers,

In this transit camp, we met Russian prisoners who were shot on a daily basis before our eyes. Quite a few of them were shot; they were just walking round the grounds and the German guards simply shot at them. And this is where the Russian prisoners gave us our first mirror – they tossed the mirror to us –<sup>5</sup> so that we could look at ourselves, and see what we actually looked like. – We looked into the mirror, and until we saw what the mirror – we had no idea how we looked.

### *Mari's life history*

Mari was born at the edge of a small village in Baranya county on the so-called Gypsy row<sup>6</sup> in 1950. Her father was a drunk and ended up in prison, while her mother went begging to provide for her four children. Mari escaped from home when she turned eighteen and applied for factory work in the larger village nearby where her fiancée was stationed as a soldier. She was allocated a tiny workers’ apartment and started at the factory, but her fiancée soon left her. A little while later, she got acquainted with a divorcee at the factory and became pregnant in 1970. The child died after eight and a half months of pregnancy though. In surgery during the Cesarean, her fallopian tubes were tied off without her knowledge or consent. When she returned home, Mari fell into a deep depression and her partner disappeared. Finally, she received help from a psychologist and got better.

After marrying at the age of thirty, she underwent several operations to try to be able to have a child, but all her attempts were in vain. She thought about adoption but was discouraged when the child protection administrator told her that she was most likely to receive a Romani child, which she did not accept. When her uterus needed to be removed thirty years later, she fell into depression once again. It was then that she realized that her fallopian tubes had been intentionally severed or tied off in 1970. She was ready to file a case against the surgeon, but her new doctor convinced her that responsibility for such old medical offenses had already expired. Mari was granted a special pension in the 1990s. She and her husband have been living on her special pension and his pay. Aside from having people over at their charming apartment or visiting her siblings and family, she became quite active in Roma civil organizations.

In previous studies, I provided a detailed analysis of Mari’s life history (Kovács 2007, 2009). Therefore, the present text is only designed to point out that – similarly to Róza – Mari’s choice of partners was greatly influenced by the fact

that her body had been a target of sexually and racially motivated violence. She was traumatized by the loss of her unborn child and could never recover from that trauma. Moreover, she struggled to have a child for over two decades and only learned about her sterilization in 2000. When talking about her three partners, Mari made it a point to call them “Magyar boys.”

The path and role of traditional Roma women have been a given pattern for Mari. It was the well-rehearsed role as mother and wife that would have awaited her if she had ever had a child.<sup>7</sup> Sterilization made it completely impossible for her to follow in this ethnically prescribed and strict pattern. In fact, the procedure that was meant to prevent Mari from passing on her ethnicity had actually managed to de-ethnicize Mari by robbing her of her female ethnic identity. Mari had to choose a partner who was ready to accept her childlessness and, therefore, had to step away from being a Roma. Her husband became a partner in her tragedy as well.

When they [the social workers of the orphanage] came to conduct the so-called “environment study” [adoption home study], they found all was in order; they didn’t identify any problems. Just before they were leaving, they said they would come clean and admitted that most of the children in the institute had a Roma mother and a Magyar father. Well, at that point I felt – I got so offended by all this that I decided to put a stop to it and said no.

## Narratives of violence

### *Róza’s story*

Róza’s narrative of her life history is full of details of physical violence and abuse. On many occasions, she almost cinematically recalled how her father had been beaten and tortured by the gendarme and how she had hidden under the bed when the harassment became regular. She vividly recalled their arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, taking off their clothes, the shower, the shaving, the freezing night, or later the physical terror of digging trenches in Toruń, the mass murder witnessed when marching on foot, and the executions. She talked at length about how the *Nazi Oberscharführer* (senior squad leader) had slapped her aunts with frenzy because they had dared to wrap a blanket on their heads against the cold. Her encounter with Lithuanian peasants offering her baked potatoes surfaced as well – when she was so anxious that she took the baked potatoes with her bare hands, got severely burnt, and stayed hungry. She elaborated for many minutes on the two distinct episodes when first German and later Russian soldiers forced themselves on her.

Nevertheless, she was unable to go into greater detail about the forced sterilization, even though she tried several times. The chronologically intact narration was interrupted for the first time when she reached this event:

And then I got placed in the children’s block, where in reality the experimenting – well, into the children’s block from where young people were taken to different experiments. My aunts managed to stay with me and they helped me; indeed, I owe my life to them. Well, and then – the circumstances

in Auschwitz – and that is where I heard that my mother and siblings had been taken to the crematorium. They were still alive in April and the beginning of May. They took them and – I had this horrendous feeling and I did not want to live. I recall now – I remember Imre Kertész<sup>8</sup> saying that when you're 13 or 14, you don't think much but simply concentrate on the goal of survival. To survive something you don't even see – you don't know what – just something horrendous, something – something horrible, but somehow you have to survive it and not think; no, one cannot think.

When Róza reached the part where she got married, about an hour later, she actually attempted to conclude her story (saying “*this had been a line in my life*”), and after taking a deep breath, she still chose to continue. She suddenly listed how much and how many people she had lost in the Shoah and what was awaiting her when she was finally returned home. While recounting this chain of loss, she reached 1953 – the year she married and lost her aunts – halted and remarked, “I somehow muddled through this – well, not muddled through; in fact, when I arrived home, I became quite ill. From that moment on, I was living with and under doctors' supervision.” It was quite obvious that we had reached another instance of violence, as her narrative self chose to leave this swirl using the same technique as before – yet again, Róza started talking about the impossibility of describing this experience while noting that being a survivor of the Shoah did not make someone more special. Then she went on:

I have not told you the most horrendous thing, although I was a victim of this experiment, and not the only victim: I could not bear a child. I was robbed of the possibility of having a family. I do not have children; I do not have a family and because of this lack, I have tried – in vain – and visited all the clinics in Hungary, which cost my husband a lot of money. You could have raised five children with that kind of money. And I did not work for a decade because of this, as we were constantly on the move, looking for a child, hoping that maybe – I was told that Auschwitz – well, it was such a stressful thing that happened to me.

After all this, she continued to tell me more about her life. About an hour later, she timidly suggested that we should stop and have lunch. Just as at other occasions, I thanked her for confiding in me and, in a similarly timid manner, asked her whether there was anything she would have liked to tell me but could not because of a lack of time or occasion. At that moment, the completely unexpected happened and the narrative of violence was told in her recounting process. It surfaced utterly isolated from the life history already concluded and without letting itself slip back into it, within a whirling drift of thoughts, as if layering all existing memories into the one, without being able to stop.

I have not told you the most important thing. Well, when I was placed in Block 26, right after we arrived in Birkenau, and after Mengele got to know

about my mother being a twin, I was given a number – not a tattoo. We were not tattooed. The children who were there, aged 13 or 14 and who had a twin, or their parents, or they themselves were twins – all of us were taken from this block to Auschwitz, where Mengele had his sur- sur- surgery; I don't know what to call it. I was taken inside, and there were boys among us, and there were girls. (. . .) Some of them are still living here in Budapest, and that is something the German television ZDF has actually produced a film about, but we have not received a videocassette to this day.

We were taken there and some of us got our hands examined, others their eyes, their body-shape – and some had (she cleared her throat) well, something was looked at – how could we children – how could the twins reproduce? I cannot tell you what kind of injection – they injected a kind of – somebody told me it was a phenol injection but I have no idea, so I won't tell you anything I don't know. They injected me a few times and this went on until I was taken to Birkenau to work. So it could have cost me my life, if my aunties hadn't been there.

They came to pick me up. I had a number and based on that number, I was taken. I got marked; I got spotted right at the selection, as soon as we arrived, and that was it. And this was the horrific thing – I didn't know what the consequences of that would be. But it is stated in all my medical papers – how can I explain it? – that this is the origin and basis of my sufferings.

When I was taken – well, one does not think (and again I am referring to Imre Kertész) one does not think – because we had no idea whatsoever what was happening to us. And you should not assume for a second that I knew it was an experiment. We did not know that; the others thought we were going to be killed and taken to the crematorium, never to return. Every time we went there, my aunties had to worry about whether I would be back. Not even the Blockältesters [block elders] knew exactly where we were taken. (. . .)

And I have not told you yet that outside, on Lagerstrasse in Birkenau, of course it was written that “Arbeit macht frei,” and there was music playing when we were walking in. And then we were led outside to carry bricks for a building site, or to a kitchen to do scullery work; to peel potatoes, to peel onions, whatever. And my aunts were always so keen that I bring a little something back to eat, a leaf of cabbage or anything really, that meant life. I haven't talked to you about the kind of food we got there; about the turnip soup and I don't know what. Ten of us had to drink from the same bowl – there was this bowl for the ten of us – and of course if the first one drank it all, there was nothing left for the nine others. Soup was carried to us in large cauldrons – that's what they called the large containers – and when the immensely hungry lifted the lid and dipped their hands into the hot soup, trying to fish something out, a piece of potato or whatever was in it, they scalded their hands, but that was nothing to be ashamed of.

In the morning when we woke up – and this is exactly how it happened – the women ran into the electric wire fence, as they could not take it anymore, and committed suicide. There was not a morning when I didn't see

this happen. We went outside for the roll call at three in the morning and there was no occasion when crowds of women didn't go for the wire fence. Their children had to be taken out of their arms, as they went for it with their children.

Neither have I talked to you about our arrival, as the arrival was a horror, and this memory eluded me; I did not want to talk about it. There was fire all round us and the whole trench was on fire when we were walking towards the selection. We were actually walking along a line of forest trees, so there were high trees on both sides of the road, large, sky-high pines or whatever, poplar trees perhaps, and next to them was the trench. That is where they were throwing them. The Poles ripped children from the arms of the women. In order to save the women, they were throwing the children into the fire, just like that, and they burnt alive. There was never fresh air in Birkenau, as there was such a stench from burning human fat that we were retching from the air itself.

### *Mari's story*

There was a certain order to Mari's narrative sequences as well. She just allowed some of the key turning points of her life to flash up and basically drew some kind of woman worker's autobiography that ended with her special pension scheme and talking about illnesses. Nonetheless, when I asked her to tell me about her life history in greater detail, she picked up another line of narrative and continued listing the stages of her family falling apart and then concluded by describing cases of illness once again. In her very first sentence, she started off by saying that her father kept beating her mother and ended up in prison because of some brawl. After my question directed at her childhood, the third sequence of her narrative started off in a similar manner as the first one but turned into telling a specific story – how Mari recalled her very last childhood conflict with her father.

When they were about to fight each other, I stood between the two of them. My mother was pregnant with my youngest brother. My father picked up the fire poker and was about to hit my mother when I jumped in between them. When I jumped, the iron rod was already in such motion that he could not stop it and so he actually hit me. Then I kind of cowered on the ground for a while, and he came up and said, "Don't be mad, my little daughter." That was when he left us for real, and for good.

At the fourth turn, I asked her to tell me about how she ended up working at the factory. Mari's longest narrative response to this question was an actual women's short story about the loss of her yet unborn baby, the period following that loss, and the story of her life leading up to the surgery she needed in 2000. At first, Mari made a brief reference to the fact that her parents had separated her fiancée from her because of her ethnic background and that she met the other Magyar man that got her pregnant later on. In sharp contrast to her previous narratives, this period

of her life was presented in small details, exactly to the minute. She recalled the hours and days spent in the operation room and at the hospital with an unusual level of detail – making what she had to say even more dramatic by including conversations. When she reached the part where her unborn child died, the narrative suddenly broke and continued in another, different layer.

The doctor went over and looked in the drawer, and his face was like – (sigh). He found the paper, took it out of the drawer, brought it to me and said, “Darling, do sign this, sign the paper. The baby is dead in you. The mother needs to be protected, as the baby is dead. Do sign this paper. We are going to take the baby by Cesarean cut because it has died already.”

You have to picture this – and I would not wish this on anyone – it was as if the doctor was standing over me on a high cliff and I was standing in a very, very deep cleft. At that moment, I switched off. I heard him, of course; he was shouting wildly over my head. I heard everything but it all seemed as if it came from very far away, as if it echoed back from a very big distance. Perhaps it helped me that what he was saying just kept pouring over me until eventually I recollected myself. I shook my head. I was not dreaming after all. This was true! The doctor seemed to notice as well. “Do you understand me, ma’am?” he asked, “Can you hear me?”

I shook my head again and said, “Yes of course.” Well, I was awake; I was saying that I wasn’t dreaming; that it was true.

By then, all the doctors and nurses in the hospital were in there with us. They were waiting for me in the corridor. Two of them gripped my hand and held the paper. All I had to do was sign with a capital letter B, as my maiden name was Bogdán. So I just wrote a capital B and that was enough for them. They saw my intention, and I assume some witnesses also saw that I meant to sign the paper, and then they grabbed me. Two grabbed my legs and two grabbed my hands and they threw me onto a stretcher like a pig. They started running with me, the cleaning woman with her mop bringing up the rear. Then I was in the operating theater and before I had time to feel afraid, I was already fast asleep. I was given some kind of anesthetic and afterwards, all I could remember was when I was waking up.

In the following half hour, Mari related the story of her mourning and bereavement, and described how she kept dressing and pampering a doll for such a long time that all she could do was stammering in the end and how her district’s doctor, the general practitioner, had shamed her for all that. Meanwhile she did not stop blaming herself for what had happened.

Honestly, I find my whole life kind of pointless. Although I did have big, lovely plans. I would not have been satisfied with anything less than four children. Seriously, I always said it would be nice to have four kids; and the children nicely, one after the other. Then with four children, a big family, they would have grown up nicely together. Well, this was never granted to me.

And what I am telling you now – I still do not agree with this – Why did they have to tie off my fallopian tubes? This shouldn't have happened but they tied me off then. Ten years before, I still had everything inside me; my ovaries, my womb were still there. Whenever I was a day or two late, my God, I was so happy: I was a new mother-to-be, I was a mother-to-be! Then I went here and there for different operations; I went to so many places. Always I went with the question of having my fallopian tubes freed up, untied. But when they saw my medical report, they told me there was no way, as both sides had been sterilized. They had been tied down, and I didn't even know what sterilization was; I just kept going.

When they saw my medical records, no one was willing to see me. Then finally they tried this womb-blow-through thing twice but it failed. It failed. And in the process, somehow my medical records got misplaced. Ten years later, I went back to have an operation and I asked for a copy but they couldn't find it. They didn't want to give it to me. And there wasn't – there was no medical report; they had destroyed it. Well, I said it was okay. But then, three years later, with all these cysts, they told me there was no point; they had to be taken out, as they might develop into cancer.

So I went to hospital and before they operated on me, everything went as per the routine, and there were questions about how many births I'd had, how they'd gone, and so on. That is when I told them that in '74 I'd had a stillbirth, and then they asked me why the baby had died. I told them it was due to premature separation of the placenta. "And you have not been pregnant since?" they asked. "Why not? How old were you at the time?"

I told them I was twenty and for reasons I didn't know, they had sterilized me. "Really? Why? At such a young age?" And then they asked whether I had the papers and I said no, the medical records had been misplaced. And the chief physician told the nurse to kindly go and find the medical records. The nurse left the room; she started looking for the document and she found it. I was completely shocked then.

And then I went into the room – I mean after the operation, I was lying there and thinking over this whole thing, this "much ado about nothing." It was for nothing, wasn't it? All the things I went through, the numerous operations. And they had taken everything out!

I wasn't crying but weeping. The nurse came in and asked me what was wrong. I told her "nothing" but she must have told the chief physician because he came in to see me and asked me what the problem was. He asked me whether I wanted to talk about it, and I told him I didn't.

But then I started saying I wanted to pursue the matter further and of course I was crying again, as it did still matter to me. I told him just the same, that it was a "much ado about nothing," and all those operations, what had they been for? Why did that happen to me? And that man was still alive! That chief physician who – I said I wished to file a complaint about him. Because at the time, I was such a pathetic small nothing myself, a silly one – a shrunken thing I was. All the time I just kept hoping "what if, what if, what

if” – I didn’t want to believe I could never have – ever. And now it was clear and I had to admit the facts. And then he told me – he said that after so many years, this case had expired. You understand, don’t you Évike? Dogs don’t eat their puppies, do they? They do not devour them.

### **Conclusion: a fatal secret**

Everything that happened to Róza and Mari was pointless suffering. There are no witnesses to what happened anymore. As the acts of violence inflicted on their bodies were carried out in greatest secrecy and under tight restrictions, there could never actually have been a witness that would support their stories from inside, or rather from ‘their side’, or in line.

In the case of Róza, the torture carried out in concentration camps was said to be scientific experiments on twins, and if that was not enough, the perpetrators spread lies about so-called vitamin injections. In the case of Mari, the physicians had interpreted the racially motivated and forced sterilizations as beneficial medical interventions. Ever since, Róza and Mari have not been able to obtain any knowledge about their bodies, which were forcibly ripped of fertility. They had no control over the sequence of acts on their bodies, nor could they become aware of precisely what had happened to them. What is more, because of the taboos of the world surrounding them and because of their own sense of *pudeur*, they could neither obtain more information from others nor even share their suffering.

In both cases, acts of violence were carried out in a clinic, and the victims were subject to the doctors’ authority, although the situations cannot really be compared. This structural oppression made it more difficult to develop a personal understanding of what is already incomprehensible. Decades later, Róza was given the chance to meet some of her fellow sufferers during the shooting of a ZDF film.<sup>9</sup> This meeting did not seem to have brought her any relief, though. For some reason, she never received the film but she also made no attempt to get it herself either. Mari got to the point when she wanted to file a lawsuit against her doctor, but she never did it.

From the very first minute, Róza was aware of the fact that everything that had happened to her was in consequence of her deportation as a member of a discriminated group due to their origin. In Mari’s case, this fact remained more of a suspicion – something that she has not even been able to voice herself. The racists had projected their origin onto their bodies and thus harmed their femininity. It seems that the healing process – getting over their trauma – follows the same approach: the violence she experienced keeps Róza locked in the past and forces her into the ethno-cultural and social space where the Shoah is a shared experience. Mari was set off onto a route that would lead her away from her Gypsy past and from her family, and would encourage her to break away from her status. We were allowed to bear witness: although these paths run in opposite directions, both are long and painful.

The academic world has been debating the limits of Shoah representations for quite some time (Didi-Huberman 2006; Frei and Kansteiner 2013; Friedländer

1992). After rejecting or marginalizing personal accounts in history writing for a long time, life histories began playing an important role. On the one hand, they embody the power of personal experiences of survivors while, on the other hand, researchers have had to face the limits of narration as well. “Can the subaltern speak?” This has also been one of the central questions in feminist philosophy (Butler 1990; Spivak 1988). The question becomes especially ardent in situations where the female body is simultaneously “hit” as being a member of an exploited social class – as a vulnerable woman – and as a subject to racial discrimination and stigma (Crenshaw 1991; Kóczé and Popa 2009). This permanent tension – as reflected so vividly in the survivors’ narratives quoted earlier – leads to the very start of the problem: women who were sterilized because of racial stigma would have to tell such an all-inclusive truth that is not attainable for them – thus turning into a paradox.

Their personal experiences would have to acknowledge and overcome the barriers stemming from the constitutive components of a functioning society itself: they would have to speak up from where the body, the ailment, the destitution, and the obscene are taboo. Therefore, they belong to the realm of silence and invisibility. Both Róza and Mari could only establish a shared “community of speaking and seeing” by taking a long path and choosing a partner, and insisting on these partnerships all their lives.

Turning ethnicity into situational experience constitutes such a crack that allows for the experience of violence to leak out from the realm of silence and take shape as a narrative. Thus the racist gaze is reversed. Róza did not become more of a Jew just because she withdrew into the community of those sharing Shoah experiences and marrying only Jewish men; Mari did not become less of a Gypsy because she did not marry Romani men. They were not able to live with their wounded female body unless they transferred that ‘body’ from the essentialist picture of race – at least as far as possible – into the situational representation of ethnicity. We are aware of the fact that only very few have been successful in accomplishing this feat. And we are also aware that only very few will be able to do the same.

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I saw Róza rummaging in her handbag, looking for pictures of old *beaus* and then remarking with a giggle to a friend that her husband must have taken them out. She was eighty by then. I saw Mari in her carmine/scarlet red tunic stirring mutton ragout for her husband while Balkan wedding rocks were playing in the background. She was just sixty by then. I could have started off this chapter noting that I have met two women – who were both in love . . .

## Notes

- 1 The Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project (2002–2005) was an international research endeavor on behalf of the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior in cooperation with the Institute of Conflict Research and the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance. In 23 countries, a total of 854 narrative biographical interviews with contemporary witnesses were conducted. I was the regional coordinator of the Hungarian

- research group. With Róza, I conducted a four-hour long interview and spent several hours with her on numerous occasions after the end of our research. The interviews were conducted in Hungarian. All data of her interview was anonymized prior to analysis.
- 2 I first met Mari during the course of another project between 2004 and 2007 in which we introduced students to the methodology of social science research and engaged them in fieldwork in a small industrial colony in South Hungary. We saw Mari every day during our three-week research stay, and I also visited her on numerous occasions after our research had ended. All data of her interview was anonymized prior to analysis.
  - 3 By life history, I mean the life lived through; by life story, I mean the narrated life as related in a conversation. In my previous analyses (Kovács 2007, 2009; Kovács and Vajda 2004), I applied the biographical-narrative interpretive method of Gabriele Rosenthal. She developed a method of narration analysis, which focuses on the structural difference between lived and narrated life history (*erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte*) (Rosenthal 1993).
  - 4 This means that we had attempted to reconstruct the whole life history as lived by Róza based on the data obtained from interviews. We had not given note to how Róza actually told her life history herself.
  - 5 – = one second break.
  - 6 “Gipsy row” is the name of the streets in a typical central European village where poor but settled Roma communities live segregated from the non-Roma neighborhood.
  - 7 Needless to say, I grossly oversimplify the situation at this point, as both the cultural and political context were much more complicated and varied when it comes to the question of Roma women having children (for key reading in the field, cf. Magyar-Vincze 2006).
  - 8 Kertész (1992).
  - 9 In retrospect, it is difficult to identify the film because Róza did not give me exact information, but she might have been thinking of the German documentation series *Holocaust* by Maurice Philip Remy, Guido Knopp, and Stefan Brauburger released in 2000. Róza did not appear in the series.

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