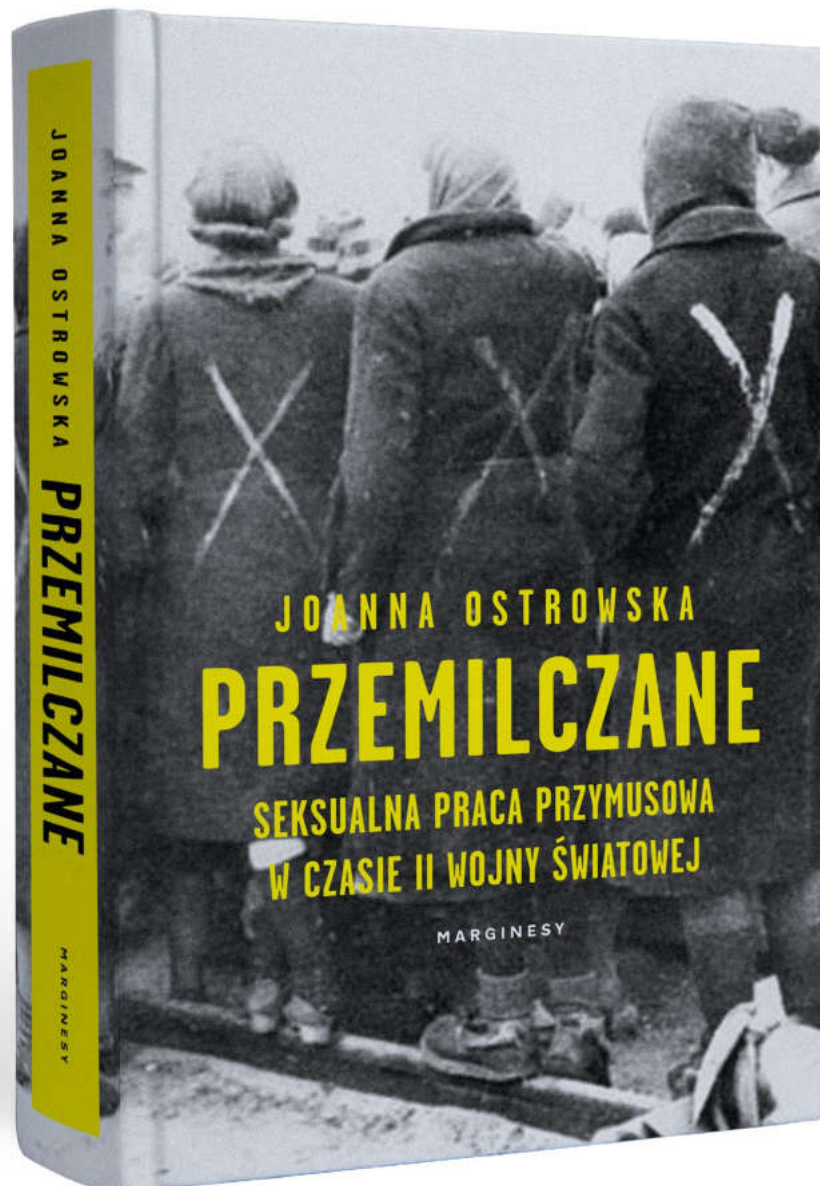


## ABOUT THE BOOK

The first book in Poland devoted in its entirety to sexual violence during the war. Forced sex labor in a Nazi brothel is still a taboo subject. The very existence of an administered prostitution system goes unmentioned. Unmentioned, too, are its victims. Also unmentioned is the post-war period – the time when the women forced into prostitution were accused of collaboration and had their hair publicly sheared off.

The biographical stubs of this book's heroines will remain incomplete. A scant few of them gave testimony, nobody made sure that they recounted their past. "The time was not right" - until now. Even now, the victims of sexual violence are "immaterial exceptions to the rule." Joanna Ostrowska goes on to fill in this gap.



# INTRODUCTION

“I want to speak... to speak! To speak it all out! Finally somebody wants to hear us. For so many years we said nothing, even at home we said nothing. For decades. The first year, when I came back from the war, I talked and talked. Nobody listened. So I shut up... It’s good that you’ve come along. I’ve been waiting all the while for somebody. I knew somebody would come. Had to come.” – says a Soviet field nurse, one of Svetlana Alexievich’s heroines [transl. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky]. The heroines of this book also remained silent for decades. Nobody ever asked them about their wartime past. Nobody ever came to them. Their suffering remained unexpressed.

The history of forced sex workers during World War II – of the victims of wartime sexual violence – will not ever become a typical causal narrative. Probably it will never enter the collective memory, either. It is too late now. The biographical stubs of this book’s heroines will remain incomplete. A scant few of the victims gave testimony, nobody made sure that they recount their past. Most of them function only as numbers in transport lists when shuttled from one cathouse in the Reich to another. Others have first names, family names, but still they remain anonymous. Their story consists of scrupulously cataloged departures. Paradoxically, often it is easier to establish the exact furnishings of a brothel’s rooms than the names of women working there. We know the number of beds, of washstands, of chairs, the “entry fee.” The shadows scuttling among the furniture will remain nameless forever.

The picture of wartime sexual violence consists of individual traces, an attempt to put them together resembles work at reconstructing a scattered mosaic, full of gaps and inconsistencies. It would be futile to expect responses to all the questions regarding those women’s fate. Thus we have to follow the data, the dates, the transport lists, the statistics compiled by German doctors, and the subjective testimonies from witnesses, and there were not many who dared to talk of the brothels at Auschwitz, of the establishments for the forced laborers, and finally of those for the Wehrmacht troops. One needs to swallow a bitter pill of disdain, condemnation and crass laughter, which often color the witnesses’ testimony, and to mine the most valuable content – the fact that those women existed, usually stigmatized, not understood by their contemporaries and forgotten by the historians. This forgetfulness, in addition, was wholly premeditated, to exclude them from the heroic narrative of the suffering victims and their tormentors, to erase them from the tragedy of World War II, which they simply did not fit in. Because they negate the black-and-white version

of the events, because they introduce an uncomfortable, disquieting confusion into the approved narratives, sometimes turning victims into more or less aware persecutors. In fact, this is not the place for any epithets or judgments. The history of forced sex workers reveals to us a picture of humanity – neither good nor bad. A fuzzy picture, knocked out of its moral frame.

Thus the experience of forced sex labor in a Nazi brothel still remains a taboo subject. The very existence of an efficient system for administering prostitution under the occupation goes unmentioned. Unmentioned, too, are its victims. Also unmentioned is the post-war period – the time when self-appointed judges equated their wartime fate with the sin of collaboration. In this situation every detail is precious – and every detail requires verification. Building this history meant an investigation of scant, secondary evidence, almost without primary sources, and often contrary to the memories of World War II as recorded to date. It is also a tale of painstaking crawl through thousands of archival files scattered all over Poland and abroad, all to find the one name, the one number penned in a margin. Such margins form my tale. A tale of numbers., of emotionless notes, of tedious reports, architectural blueprints. Of street names and initials. Of footnotes in tiny print. I call up all of them, with no desire to turn them into picaresque literature or a source of thrills, often preserving their original, emotion-free character. Because that is the only way the forced sex workers communicate with us. There they survived. That is how they are. Can human trauma be read from statistic data? I believe it can. Perhaps this, too, is what this book is about. About impersonal suffering, indexed, estimated with economic persistence. And thus all the more painful.

In Poland, the silence lasts to this day. Just as with the other groups of forgotten victims of Nazism, willfully unremembered. Silence is a symptom of the persistent hierarchy of suffering, based on the conviction that not everyone is allowed to belong in the “elite company” of victims and heroes. The post-war silence became perhaps the harshest punishment for the forgotten ones. Only one Polish woman wanted to share her story with me – with me only. Barbara. She was thirteen in February 1945. She was raped by Soviet troopers. In 2009 she wrote me a letter: “Thank you for your interest in those painful issues [...]. I realize your time is limited, while with me it is the other way round. The things we might talk about cannot be easily described in a letter [...]. I have denied the pain in my life almost entirely, not just because later on the life, as it does to so many of us, presented many other difficult obstacles to surmount.”

Barbara was silent for sixty four years.

# REVIEWS

For us, war means shooting, airplanes, bombs, clashing armies, suffering of people in the battle zones or in the occupied countries. Entering a discourse on sex, on matters of the bedroom, in this context? If at all, one would perhaps think of a girl awaiting her boyfriend's return from a guerrilla raid. Even women on the front lines are barely talked about, and when they become a subject, sometimes a sadly specific skew appears. Right after the war, in France, say, the easiest way to smother the issue of one's own collaboration in towns large and small was to accuse some few local women as quislings, on the level that everyone "gets," while not many would raise the call for debate on degree of heinousness. And as for the women in brothels for German soldiers and officers, or in such institutions set up for the concentration camp inmates? Forget it. This was where silence was to reign. As a result, the forced, organized prostitution was (and is) an almost unknown aspect of the war's tragedy. This Nazi crime was not persecuted, no compensation for the suffering women was even mooted.

The authoress, overcoming great difficulties, managed to break into this circle of silence. She shows that organized prostitution was an element in the Nazi machine for conducting war and ruling over conquered peoples. The Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (!) in the middle of the war (!) was dealing with brothels, condoms, etc. Hitler wanted to administer everything, and he had the capability to do so. His system was, in the area covered here, a merging of sexual obsession and modernized, state-of-the-art bureaucracy. Brothels were established by directives and regulations, with provisions made for inner organization and medical checks both for the women and for their male clients. Ratio of prostitutes to prospective clients was established. The brothels were specialized according to nationality, as well as separated along clients' service and rank lines. Vouchers were issued for admittance, with regulated allotments of time to be spent. And all this was somehow compatible with venerating the institution of German family, supposedly undamaged by the fact that the husbands, fathers, and sons would visit the prostitutes.

**PROFESSOR MARCIN KULA, Warsaw University, Institute of History**

Enormous labor in the face of shocking history, in the face of the piercing paradox that – as we can read in the Introduction – it could be easier to establish how a brothel's rooms were furnished than to recover the names of women working there. Joanna Ostrowska performed titanic work to try and restore the voice to those, whose experiences went unmentioned, whose personal histories were

coded almost exclusively in tiny details: spots on maps, initials, dates hastily jotted down in the margins of documents.

### **WERONIKA MUREK, Polish writer**

The author was the first in Poland to reach for stories of forced sex workers from the time of World War II.

“Who were they? Nobody knows”, “No mention of the wounded and killed forced prostitutes”, “Her fate remains unknown” - such sentences are scattered throughout the book. “Recruited” in street sweeps and humiliated in the camps, called “twists”, “girlies”, “Julias”, “the Puff women”, “showgirls”. After the war – simply whores. “The Unmentioned” is a tale read from the margins, for lack of testimonials compiled from numbers, street names, initials. Joanna Ostrowska, aware of the limitations, tells the doubters: “Can human trauma be read from statistic data? I believe it can. Perhaps this, too, is what this book is about. About impersonal suffering, indexed, estimated with economic persistence. And thus all the more painful.” Which does not mean there are no stories of the women themselves in Ostrowska’s book. There is Marianna, exploited in German brothel in Poznan at 19 Rybaki Street, and Helena, who, if she survived the war at all, in the post-war period paid for sexual congress with the occupiers by being whipped and having her hair sheared off. And then – with silence. They were erased from history as uncomfortable, because they shattered the rigid dichotomy of perpetrators and victims. For how would we term the inmates tormenting the helpless women in the Puffs, thus acting out their own humiliation? Ostrowska is the first in Poland to reach for stories of forced sex workers from the time of World War II. Why this late? Polish memory was, and is, ruled by martyrdom, heroism, manliness. Now those forgotten victims of the Nazis are somewhat less forgotten.

### **“POLITYKA” magazine**

It is not true that our knowledge of World War II is complete by now. As time goes by, we discover new lacunae, we gradually identify where certain things went unmentioned, forcibly forgotten. Sexuality in the conditions of wartime and the customs regulating that area under the occupation are the main subjects being “regained” now. They not only touch upon the daily life in wartime, but are also tied in with taboo and transgression. Taking up these subjects allows us not just a prurient look under the bedcovers, it allows to discover more forms of violence under the occupation.

Ostrowska utilizes psychological and historical interpretations, as well as gender-

based ones.

In “The Unmentioned” she transcends the taboo, showing what is hidden in the lacunae, points out to those who benefited from the silence and to the continued harm to the victims. This is a very important book, a milestone in the current historiography. This is precisely why “The Unmentioned” should be put on the shelves right next to Marcin Zaremba’s “Great Trepidation.”

**PAULINA MAŁOCHLEB, PH. D, Jagiellonian University, Department of Contemporary Criticism**

“The Unmentioned. Sexual forced labor during World War II” by Joanna Ostrowska is a most timely discussion on much tabooed actions from the World War II time. It joins academic disputes when the relatively overlooked area of Holocaust and Comparative Genocide Studies gains visibly on force. Ostrowska analysis of concentration camps’ puffs and other forms of sexual slavery from the time of the World War II unveils a dramatic performances of power, bodies, guilt and shame. It offers a much needed insight into somapolitics in wartime Germany and Poland and more than that: it joins the nowadays efforts to write histories of those categories of Nazi victims (homosexuals, Roma-Sinti, Jehovah witnesses and others) that have been overshadowed by globalized Holocaust.

The possible repercussions of the violence against women of war- and post-war era are still unassessed. Ostrowska’s book gives deep and one of the first explanations of how the societies might be confronted with suffering of victims of sexual slavery. Her work reveals meticulous archival work, that gave surprising results, despite the scarcity of traces and proofs. Her arguments are well grounded and supported by facts and figures. “The Unmentioned” book supplements the until-today written studies on the topic of sexual war-time slavery in Germany. Ostrowska’s focus on concentration camps located in today’s Poland supplements the existing research with valuable data. What is more, she opens floor for silenced voices of sexual violence victims, securing for them vital position in the narrative she constructs. The gripping narrative of her findings and the detailed and perceptive readings of documents and shocking first-hand accounts she managed to unearth convince that there is still much to be done if we want to understand how women were impacted by the extensive, prolonged and traumatizing exposure to war-time violence.

I strongly recommend this groundbreaking book for publication.

**ROMA SENDYKA, Jagiellonian University, Research Center for Memory Cultures**

DIE KZ-GEDENKSTÄTTE MAUTHAUSEN  
MAUTHAUSEN MEMORIAL  
VERLEIHT

Dr.  
**JOANNA OSTROWSKA**

für

„Przemilczane: seksualna praca przymusowa  
w czasie II wojny światowej“

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DDr. Barbara Glück  
Direktorin KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen / Mauthausen Memorial

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