

# Book review: Owczarski, W. (2023). *Dreaming in Auschwitz: The Concentration Camp in the Prisoners' Dreams*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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*Summary.* In his book “*Dreaming in Auschwitz: The Concentration Camp in the Prisoners' Dreams*”, Wojciech Owczarski, a Polish professor of literature at the University of Gdansk, Poland, explores dreaming during the Second World War through the lens of the first-person accounts retrospectively written in the 1970s by Polish Auschwitz concentration camp survivors. The book is based on the accounts of survivors that were stored in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and translated into English in 2015, and offers an unprecedented access to the beliefs, desires, sufferings, and hopes of the inmates, as revealed through their dreams. The book takes an interdisciplinary approach to the dreams recalled decades after WWII, and dreamt especially during the imprisonment in Auschwitz, ranging from quantitative content analysis to the anthropological dream interpretation practises to the personal meaning the inmates gave their dreams. While numerous books have been written about WWII and the Holocaust, dreams have not featured in the centre stage. In dream research, posttraumatic dreams have certainly been of great interest, but even amongst studies on how war experiences have been reflected in the dreams of veterans and civilians, the material covered in the book offers a unique perspective to the Nazi occupation and oppression. The inner worlds of the concentration camp prisoners, as revealed in their dreams, are witness testimonies to the most unspeakable events of history but they also show how hard hope is to abolish from the hearts of people. Although we only have the accounts of survivors, there is no reason to believe that those who did not survive would have dreamt differently or would have held different beliefs related to dreams. Thus, this book that is based on the first-person descriptions of dreams dreamt by Polish Auschwitz inmates during their imprisonment at Auschwitz concentration camp and after liberation, can be considered to reflect the inner worlds of all those who were subjected to the most unspeakable horrors during the war. The many excerpts from the original dream descriptions, and the book itself, pay tribute to the men and women who survived, or perished at, the Auschwitz concentration camp during the Nazi regime..

*Keywords:* Dreaming, World War II, Auschwitz, Concentration camps

The book begins with an introduction that provides important background information about Auschwitz and its ethnic groups, elucidating the position of Polish inmates in the camp hierarchy. The Introduction also explains how the testimonies the book is based on were collected from the respondents. Briefly, in 1973 Polish medical doctor Stanislaw Kłodziński who was an Auschwitz survivor himself sent a questionnaire to almost 600 former Polish Auschwitz prisoners, inquiring about the survivors' sleep patterns and dreams before the war, during the war and at the camp, and after the war. Almost 150 replied, enclosing in their responses not only information about their retrospectively recalled dreams, but also about their daily lives before, during, and after the war. Although many sample characteristics cannot

be deduced from the original responses, such as age, education, or professional background, it is known that majority of the respondents were in their early twenties when they were arrested, and thus most were likely between 56-65 years old at the time the responses were written.

Owczarski approaches the first-person accounts from multiple perspectives, ranging from quantitative content analysis of dream characteristics to socio-cultural dream interpretation practices at the camp to peoples' personal beliefs about the meaning of their dreams. The main content of the book is composed of two sections, “Therapeutic effects of dreams” (chapters 1-4) and “The phenomenology of dream experience” (Chapters 5-8). Chapter 1 focuses on the quantitative content analysis of the inmates' dreams, utilizing the well-known Hall and Van de Castle (1966) content analysis scale (for more detailed results, see Owczarski, 2018). The dreams of survivors are compared to the Polish norms, established in 2017 by the author, which are based on the most recent dreams of 300 Polish adults, representative of the general population. Although aggression is not more prevalent in the inmates' dreams compared to the Polish norms, the victimization percentage, that is, dreamer as the victim of aggression, is much higher whereas the dreamer is much less often the aggressor. This seems reflective of the fact that at the camp the survivors were more likely to

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be helpless in the face of aggressive acts, and unable to defend themselves in any way or withdraw from situations involving aggression by the oppressors. Relatedly, emotions in the inmates' dreams were more often negative compared to normative Polish dreams, suggesting a general tendency for dreams to be emotionally less positive. Notably, dreams dreamt while imprisoned at the camp tended to include less aggression, and be more positive and less negative, compared to dreams about the camp (that is, where the setting of the dream was the camp). Dreams about the camp were often reportedly dreamt after the war, and the so-called "come-back dreams" where the dreamer was aware that s/he is back at the camp for the second or third time were characterized by sadness. This suggests that dreams about the camp, many of which were dreamt after liberation from the camp, were typical posttraumatic dreams.

Chapter 2 on "Therapeutic dreams in the camp" explores those dreams dreamt at the camp that had a positive effect, in terms of improved mood, increased hope, or enhanced health, on the dreamers. Altogether 12% of dreams dreamt at the camp had such positive effects as recounted by the dreamers themselves. Almost half of such positive dreams included being cared for and comforted by a relative, friend, or a supernatural being such as Virgin Mary, and being ensured that the dreamer would survive the camp. Such dreams often seemed to appear when the dreamer was at the weakest, suffering from severe illness or starvation combined with psychological despair. Also, some of the dreams with freedom themes, which there were many, came with the explicit notion of having helped maintain hope of eventually being released from the camp. These dreams, which often depicted the joy of freedom, places of beauty, or being reunited with loved ones, served as the beacon of brightness in the dark hell of the camp life.

Chapter 3 is titled "Nostalgic dreams". The author discusses the role of nostalgia in the Polish culture and history, and how nostalgia was an identity-defining phenomenon in Poland during 19th and early 20th century. He then relates this background to the nostalgic dreams that apparently had a detrimental effect on the dreamers. Nostalgia, defined as "a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period" can be considered as positive, psychologically adaptive, and even healing feeling, but it may also be described as a bittersweet state of mind, with both positive and negative emotional qualities. Many dreams that focused on past life and good memories left the dreamers with a yearning, and while some of these dreams were comforting and offered hope, some induced sadness, hopelessness, and sorrow. Waking up to the reality after a beautiful dream of loved ones or days past caused nostalgic grief and pain and longing for all that was lost, and these feelings were hard to cope with. The dreams that evoked feelings of nostalgia and longing were not experienced as healing, comforting, or therapeutic, quite the contrary.

Chapter 4 focuses on nightmares about the camp, especially on nightmares dreamt after the war. Of the 504 dreams, 26% have the camp as a setting, and majority of these camp dreams (68%) were dreamt after liberation from the camp. These camp dreams had the lowest percentage of positive emotions, highest percentage of apprehension, high victimization percentage, and lowest levels of friendliness. The content often reflected the most horrific aspects of life in Auschwitz, though it remains unclear how many faithfully replicated real experiences, and how many night-

mares might have been repetitive. The author discusses nightmares about the camp mainly in the context of the Jungian Compensation hypothesis, although mentions many other theoretical positions. He suggests that posttraumatic nightmares about the camp could have had a compensatory effect and sometimes helped the survivors to cope with their traumatic experiences. Aggression and anger, prevalent in these dreams, may represent the psychological powers to fight back and remain unyielding which may then help in overcoming traumatic experiences. As the author points out, it is impossible to verify whether these nightmares eventually brought any kind of resolution or relief to the dreamers and certainly many continued to exhibit posttraumatic symptoms 30 years after the war (Bergman et al., 2020). In a small set of dreams, however, the healing aspect seems to be present within the dream. In the "comeback dreams" the dreamers return to the camp for the second, third, or event sixth time. In these dreams they are often (but not always) calm and fearless, they know how to act, they protect and take care of loved ones who have also ended up on the camp, and they know they will eventually be released. The "comeback dreams" typically thus include a higher level of metacognition as the dreamers recognize the fact that they are back in camp. Although only few of the "comeback dreams" can be considered lucid, increased metacognition and access to autobiographical memories may make these dreams much less terrifying and more healing.

Chapter 5 opens the second section of the book, "The phenomenology of dream experience", and elucidates the role of dream interpretation rituals at the camp (see also Owczarski, 2017). The author begins by explaining the stark differences between the Polish and the Jewish cultures in appreciation and interpretation of dreams. While Jewish holy texts include hundreds of references to dreams and dream interpretation, the Polish culture lacks comparable traditional appreciation of dreams. Yet, the camp was a melting pot of cultures and practises, and dream sharing and interpretation apparently became common at the camp among all inmates. The author suggests that, as dreams were often (though not always) interpreted to predict a better future, the harsh camp life may have provided a fertile context for dream sharing and interpretation to arise. Moreover, the ritual of dream interpretation in itself carried meaning at individual, interpersonal and social levels. The interpretation rituals and practises not only offered hope, but structured life, enhanced interpersonal relationships, and strengthened bonds within the community. The rituals of dream interpretation might thus have been highly important for social life, even more so than assigning meaning to dreams.

Chapter 6 turns to looking at the dreams of Auschwitz survivors as personal testimonies of the Holocaust. When asked to write about their dreams, in the process of writing they came to reveal their most intimate, often previously unshared, experiences of camp atrocities and how, even years after liberation, their dreams kept pulling them back to Auschwitz. Escaping from the camp, being chased by SS men with dogs and captured, and dying in the gallows or in front of a firing squad, were common themes in the post-war dreams. While they never attempted to escape Auschwitz in reality, they kept escaping from the camp endlessly after liberation. Several dreams seemed also to reveal survivor guilt. What is clear from the accounts is that the Holocaust did not end with the war, but the inmates' lives, both dream lives and waking lives, were devastated for de-

cedes to come. These are the personal testimonies of the Holocaust that leave the reader speechless.

Chapter 7 investigates the attitude towards dreams and the styles in which the dreams were described, the dreams as literary narratives. Most of the respondents claim to assign no meaning to their dreams nor are they interested in dreams but still believe that dreams can carry symbolical content that may be predictive of future. Thus, the beliefs the survivors hold about dreams seem to be internally contradictory, appreciative on one hand and negating on the other hand. The author suggests that this contradiction may follow from the clash between the Polish cultural background where dreams were not appreciated and the few personally highly significant and unforgettable dreams the survivors had. Many were also haunted by their posttraumatic nightmares, and possibly did not wish to give these dreams any acknowledgement, as if such dreams could not have the power to affect their waking lives. The dreams themselves are described in various manners, some reflecting the writer's high education, knowledge of literature, and excellent writing skills. Some accounts even resemble well-known Polish or international works in style. Other accounts are written in formal, factual, distanced, even bureaucratic fashion with passive voice, as if the dreamer is not describing personal, emotional, highly intimate events.

Chapter 8 is dedicated to "Big dreams", those extraordinary, highly significant, and unforgettable dreams that, according to Jung, span from the collective unconsciousness and represent archetypes. Several of these big dreams include a Creator who shows the dreamer the true, evil nature of humans, and the dreamer has to bear witness to how human cultures over and over again succumb to war and destruction. In contrast to the very dark visions and end-of-the-world dreams, the Mother, often in the form of Virgin Mary, provides refuge and safety. The author offers several dream excerpts that can easily be interpreted from the Jungian perspective and discusses how Jungian archetypes are present in the Big dreams.

No matter what the reader's take is on the content, function, cultural aspects, or interpretation of dreams, the book is a recommended reading to anyone interested in the Holocaust and its effect on human psyche. The first-person accounts of life in Auschwitz and descriptions of dreams dreamt there and after liberation are powerful and transport the reader to a world that should never have existed in the first place. The interdisciplinary approach the author takes highlights how dreams can be approached on so many different levels and from different viewpoints, each of which offer a narrow glimpse to the multifaceted world of dreams.

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