

*Johanna Kulmala*

## The whole history of suffering calls for narrative<sup>10</sup>

THE QUESTION OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN  
CONCENTRATION CAMP LETTERS

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to show how letters from Concentration Camp Sachsenhausen, despite being written under heavy censorship, still do formulate narrations, and these narrations can be analysed with model of narrative structure proposed by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (from now on L&W). I will also discuss letters which do not fit, fully or partially, into the model. The examples are from the letters of a medical student Miroslav Lorenc who spent approximately three years in Sachsenhausen (November 1939 – December 1942). Furthermore, I will discuss how the letter narrations may be used when writing fiction.

Miroslav's letters from Sachsenhausen are a parallel text to Writer and President Václav Havel's well-known prison letters to his wife. They are published under the title *Letters*

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10 Ricœur, Paul: *Time and Narrative* volume 1, 1993, 75.

to *Olga* (translated by Paul Wilson). Writing is a significant aspect of life when incarcerated. October 30 1981 Havel writes to his wife: “Language is the most proper medium of self-awareness and quite often it is not until you have formulated something that you realise what it is really about or how you feel about it ---.”<sup>11</sup>

Sachsenhausen was a camp first and foremost for political prisoners. In Nazi Germany, political prisoners had the privilege to write home, and in Sachsenhausen this opportunity was offered every two weeks. Those who were sent to camps for ethnic reasons, such as Jewish and Roma prisoners, did not have this right. They were often demanded to write one postcard home, on arrival at the camp. One of the ways the Jewish prisoners warned their relatives about the life-threatening conditions at the camp was writing: *Uncle Malakh-Amoves is also here.*<sup>12</sup> This is evidence of how the political prisoners wrote things between the lines, a topic to be partially discussed in this article too.

Paul Ricœur has pointed out that texts are open-ended and open to reinterpretations.<sup>13</sup> One essential part of my research is reading and interpreting the Sachsenhausen letters from today’s point of view. By this I mean taking the time gap between the writing time and the reading time (in this case spring 2017) into consideration. Historian Christina Douglas uses the term *historieempati* (historical empathy) which means approaching people from the perspective

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11 Havel, Václav: *Letters to Olga*, 1991, 245.

12 Personal communication with David Novotný 20 October 2016. Malakh Amoves = the Angel of Death in Yiddish

13 Kearney, Richard. “Between Tradition and Utopia”, 2002, 66.

of their own time and respecting them.<sup>14</sup> At the same time it is possible to make use of what we know today about the era they lived in.

Since no text exists in a vacuum or in isolation from its social and historical context, camp letters need to be placed into the right perspective. For example, in this extract we can see the significance of intellectual support Miroslav needed at the camp and how he received it by writing home.

*Es ist schon mehr als  $\frac{3}{4}$  Jahre seit ich meine Heimat verlassen habe. Zu der Zeit wäre für mich unertragbar der Gedanke, dass ich so lange von Euch und meiner Arbeit entfernt bleiben soll – aber jetzt nach meinen Erfahrungen sehe ich ruhig mit Vertrauen in die Zukunft. Es wird sich doch einmal das erfüllen wonach wir uns alle sehnen und wir werden dann alles besser schätzen können. Euch M.*<sup>15</sup>

(It is already more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  year since I left my home country. At that time the thought of having to be separated from you and my work for such a long time would have been unbearable – but now after my experiences I look at the future peacefully and with trust/confidence. It will one day fulfil what we all are longing and we will then be able to evaluate/appreciate everything better. Your M.)

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14 Douglas, Christina: Kärlek per korrespondens. Två förlovda par under andra hälften av 1800-talet, 2011, 54-55.

15 An extract from Miroslav Lorenc's letter, 28 August 1940.

Intellectual support is one of the key factors of survival according to Professor Vojmir Srdečný, who was also incarcerated in Sachsenhausen as a young student.<sup>16</sup>

#### CAMP LETTERS AND L&W

L&W was originally developed for the analysis of personal experience narratives, told in face-to-face interaction. Despite obvious differences between the oral narratives, studied by Labov,<sup>17</sup> and written letters, especially censored letters from a concentration camp, it is still my intention to demonstrate how the camp letters actually do have a narrative structure, fitting to L&W.

The L&W model consists of the following elements of narrative structure:

1. Abstract
2. Orientation
3. Complicating Action
4. Evaluation
5. Resolution
6. Coda

The elements 1 and 6 are not necessary for a fully formulated story. Abstract summarises, one way or another, the upcoming story. Coda, in turn, is the closing words of the

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<sup>16</sup> Personal communication with Professor Vojmir Srdečný 20 February 2013

<sup>17</sup> Labov, William: *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, 1972, 363.

story and it does not contain new information concerning the actual narration.<sup>18</sup> I will later demonstrate how Miroslav's letters follow L&W.

Labov himself comments on L&W, which was created in the 1960s, by defining it as "a particular way of recounting past events, by matching the order of narrative clauses with the original order in which those events occurred."<sup>19</sup> He also admits the limitations of his definition because L&W would define a remarkable part of literature as non-narrative material.<sup>20</sup>

L&W perceives narrative as "a particular way of telling past events".<sup>21</sup> Letters are a text type which formulates communicative interaction between at least two different participants, resembling to some extent discussions and other oral communications. This may be the reason why L&W offer a practical tool to study narrations of at least some correspondences. Also the material analysed in L&W is a collection of personal experiences, and the same theme is frequent in private correspondences.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, a collection of letters creates an interactive situation, and the narrations emerge from it, even if the other half of the correspondence was missing. This is actually the case with Miroslav's letters from Sachsenhausen, because he was not allowed to take along anything else than the

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18 *ibid*, 362-365.

19 *ibid*, 6.

20 *Ibid*, 6.

21 Labov, William: *The Language of Life and Death*, 2013, 15.

22 Labov, William: *The Language of Life and Death*, 2013, 78.

clothes he was wearing, at the end of his incarceration.<sup>23</sup>

According to Hyvärinen, “the Labovian model prefers the ‘epics’ over the ‘psychological novel’”.<sup>24</sup> This also supports my idea that the model would be suitable for studying at least certain types of letters, such as prisoner’s letters which cover the whole time from imprisonment until releasing, creating a classical dramatic structure.

One could even argue that camp letters combine the epic narrative and the narrative about daily life. When analysing personal stories about life and death, Labov writes: “Both genres [epic narrative and narratives about personal experience] strike a note of high seriousness: they deal with the fundamental problems of human existence: death and the danger of death and the relation of the living to the dead.”<sup>25</sup> Could anyone summarise the themes of camp letters any better?

A camp letter allows very little space for writing about one’s inner world. The following example demonstrates that the letters are filled with practical, even mundane issues.

*Als (ich) mir das Paket von Hause gemeldet wurde und ich wartete auf die Herausgabe – da hatte ich das Gefühl eines Kindes unter dem Weihnachtsbaume – etwas, was ich schon lange nicht erlebt habe. Besonders die Dinge zum Essen sind mir zugute gekommen. – In dem nächsten Packet sendet mir,*

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23 Personal communication with Ing. Jaroslav Franc 25 June 2015.

24 Hyvärinen, Matti: *Analysing Narratives and Story-Telling* 2007, 454.

25 Labov, William: *The Language of Life and Death*, 2013, 177.

*bitte, keine Wäsche- die kann ich hier nicht brauchen.*<sup>26</sup>

(When I was informed about the package from home and I was waiting for the delivery – there I felt like a child under the Christmas tree – something that I haven’t experienced for a long time. Especially the groceries have been useful for me. – Please, don’t send me any clothes in the next package, I cannot wear them here.)

One possible reason why Miroslav’s camp letters follow a perceivable narrative structure may be that letters are usually fully formed texts and the writer’s intention is – most of the time – to create a coherent text to fulfil the key role of delivering the message(s).

A bit later, I will offer examples which demonstrate that many of his letters actually do follow L&W. One particular letter (from 4 February 1940) that I have chosen for the purpose follows the model faithfully. I will also give examples of letters which formulate “imperfect” narrations, considered imperfect from Labovian viewpoint, to be exact.

In my narrative analysis I have also taken letters as objects into consideration, as part of narration. Gérard Genette has defined the term paratext as “a group of practices and discourses of all kinds and dating from all periods”.<sup>27</sup> Elements such as dedications and inscriptions, prefaces or notes are classified as paratexts in Genette’s book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. He uses the term in the context

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26 An extract from Miroslav Lorenc’s letter, 18 February 1940.

27 Genette, Gerard: *Paratexts: Treshold of Interpretation*, 1997, 2.

of literature and books in general, when discussing these elements, which exist at the borderlines of the text. However, in my view, it is also possible to find paratexts in letters.

In Miroslav's letters, the stationery and the instructions printed on it for the recipient, as well as the date when the letter has been written, are part of the narration, as they contextualise the letter. For this reason, I would argue that the term paratext would be valid also in the field of epistolary research. In this particular case I interpret the stationery and the date as abstract of the narration.

In L&W, the story (often) begins with an abstract, which one way or another, summarises the forthcoming narration. In letters, this type of initiation is possible, although not common. However, I am stating that a letter as a physical object and the date when it has been written, can function as an abstract of some kind. Concentration camp letters, have the specific stationery printed for the purpose and often the Third Reich stamps on them, along with the date, are objects, which non-verbally summarise the story of the letter. The stationery tells the reader immediately the writer's location and the purpose of the letter.

The instructions for the reader printed on the stationery may tell even more than a traditional abstract of L&W. For example, they warn the reader not to make any inquiries about the camp condition or the length of the incarceration, and they also define what items are permissible in the mailed packages and what not. Paradoxically, the instructions which are intended to guide the recipient in writing the reply, actually turn into a guideline for reading the letter sent from the camp. The fact that certain topics are forbidden speaks volumes to the reader and they must try to



read between the lines.

It is actually possible that one of the reasons why Miroslav's camp letters follow L&W relatively closely is these instructions. They guide the writer not to write about most of the topics relevant to camp life. Maybe this is why the writer is being led (unintentionally) guided to writing a stereotypical narrative text.

Non-textual factors have been interpreted as part of correspondence also in other studies. For instance, Kirsi Keravuori, who has studied self-learned writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Finland points out that sending e.g. clothes, clean bedsheets or lingonberries is a token of love and care, and thus also an essential element of a family correspondence.<sup>28</sup>

Here is a demonstration of how one of Miroslav's letters follows L&W quite conveniently, one might even say conventionally.

ABSTRACT

*Oranienburg*

*4./II.1940*

ORIENTATION

*Meine Teuersten!*

*Wie ich denke, habe ich Euch in dem letzten Briefe zu schreiben vergessen, dass ich das Geld (im Or) bekommen habe. Ich danke Euch dafür. Außerdem habe ich aber bisher von Euch keine Nachricht bekommen.*

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28 Keravuori, Kirsi: Arki kirjekuoressa: Itseoppineet kirjeenkirjoittajat 1800-luvulla, 2016, 49.

(My Dearest!

As I think, I have forgotten to write you in my previous letter that I have received the money (in Or)<sup>29</sup>. I thank you for that. Other than that, I have got no other news from you until now.)

A typical orientation in Miroslav's letters is the initial greeting and informing the parents about letters and packages he has received since his previous letter.

#### COMPILATING ACTION

*Ich bin zwar sehr oft bei Euch Tag und auch Nacht --man träumt auch oft davon wonach sich man sehnt, aber auf dieser Weise kann ich doch nicht erfahren was Neues bei uns zu Hause während meiner Abwesenheit vorgekommen ist. Ich hoffe dass Ihr gesund seid und dass Euch die Hoffnung auf das bessere Künftige – ebenso wie mir – genug Kraft und Freude gibt. – Habt ihr meine beiden vorigen Briefe bekommen? Was ist mit dem Buche, von dem ich geschrieben habe? Was macht Jiřa? Kommt sie oft zu uns? Habe ich nicht irgendwelche Briefe zu Hause bekommen?*

(Although, I am very often with you, day and night -- one also dreams often about what one is longing, but this way I still cannot experience what new has happened at home during my absence. I hope that you are well and that the hope for the better future – just like for me – gives you strength and joy. – Have you received my previous letters? How is it with the book that I wrote about? What is Jiřa doing? Does

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<sup>29</sup> Or. = Oranienburg

she visit us often? Haven't I received any letters to my home address?)

In a narration formed by a prison correspondence, the key complicating action is the separation from friends and family. This theme becomes apparent in many different ways. In this letter, Miroslav mentions also the familiar environment and how it may have changed while his absence. He also encourages his parents by reminding them of hope which would bring strength and joy. In addition, he asks about news from home and from people he knows, in order to maintain the connection to his home.

The question of changing landscape provides material for writing fiction too. During the incarceration, Miroslav was able to return to the familiar sceneries only in his mind, and this separation, even alienation from home is a strong theme. His letters provide authentic material to write about the separation in the context of concentration camp. Writing about the camp life is challenging for someone who has no personal experience about it, and for this reason, camp letters are valuable sources and they may even act as writing prompts in the creative process.

The names of people mentioned in Miroslav's letters, on the other hand, provide very few, or hardly any incentives for writing fiction. Certain names, such as Jiřa , are mentioned several times. Yet we learn very little about these people. Occasionally it is possible to find out the how the person mentioned in a letter is related to Miroslav, but in most cases it is not, because he usually refers to people by first names, or sometimes by initials only.

## EVALUATION

*In meiner Stellung habe ich wenigstens einem Vorzug vor manchen, dass ich nämlich doch in der höchsten Zeit meine Prüfung abgelegt habe. Ich weiss zwar nicht, welche Möglichkeiten es nach meiner Rückkehr geben wird, aber in dem Falle dass ich einmal meine Studien fortsetzen werde – da habe ich alles theoretische hinter mir und jetzt kommen nur die praktische Dinge.*

(In my position I have at least one privilege compared to others, that I have done my exam at about right time. I don't know, though, what opportunities there will be [for me] after my return, but in case I can continue my studies, I have studied all theory and next come the practical things.)

In this letter Miroslav evaluates his own personal situation concerning his studies and the possibilities to study further. Despite the change in topic when making the transition from complicating action to evaluation, the different topics still develop a flow of narration, which reflects at least something about the writer's inner mind on the writing moment. Although we must always bear in mind when reading camp letters that they were written under censorship, which means that the topics were restricted and the thoughts expressed in them are restrained, too.

## RESOLUTION

*Und diese ganze Geschichte wird für mich eine wichtige Lebenserfahrung bedeuten – die jedem neue Ausichten[sic] geben kann. Man lernt dadurch alles anders zu schätzen – be-*

*sonders das Heim – die Ruhe des Familienlebens und auch die Arbeit. Die zwei Begriffe – Heim und Arbeit bedeuten für mich jetzt immer mehr. Alles andere tritt weit zurück.*

(And this whole story will be an important life experience for me, it can give me new ideas. One learns to evaluate everything differently – especially the home – the peaceful family life and also the work. The two concepts – home and work mean even more for me now. Everything else is far behind.)

As Miroslav describes the time of incarceration as an important life experience, it is evident that he writes these words for the sake of the censorship. In the light of what we know today about the inhuman conditions at the camps, this is unquestionable.

On the other hand, he still continues writing about home and work and their importance in life, which can be both his genuine thoughts and at the same time acceptable topics to write about from Sachsenhausen.

CODA

*Es wird der schönste Augenblick meines Lebens sein, bis ich wieder die Türe unserer Wohnung öffnen (werde) und Euch entgegen stehen werde[.] – Hoffen wir dass es nicht lange dauern wird. Grüsst von mir alle Bekannten, die ich nicht einzeln nennen kann. Herzlich küsst und grüsst Euch Euer Mirek.*

(It will be the most beautiful moment of my life, when I can open the doors of our apartment and stand in

front of you again[.]– Let us hope that it will not take long. Send my greetings all acquaintances, whom I cannot mention by name. Cordially kissing and greeting you, your Mirek.)

Coda is not a necessary element in a story. However, it often exists in a letter, since the text type in question demands some kind of closing words. In this letter, Miroslav still continues writing about the same theme in the coda as in other parts of the narration – missing home. For the creative process of a fiction writer, the codas in Miroslav's letter reveal something about his emotions and the manners in which he is able to express them in the conditions he is living in. Later in this article I will discuss with examples how the elements of narrations can also be embedded in one another

#### SOME CRITICISM OF L&W AND ITS ADAPTABILITY

L&W has faced criticism over the course of time. For instance, Catherine Kohler Riessman argues that the model is not totally adequate to describe subjective experience, and she has enlarged the definition of narrative to capture actions and feelings.<sup>30</sup>

This is not a remarkable problem when analysing camp letters, because, as stated earlier, the opportunities to write about the subjective experience were very limited. Occasionally, it is possible for Miroslav to describe some actions or feelings, such as the refreshing effect of the spring sun.

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30 Kohler Riessman, Catherine: *Narrative Analysis*, 1993, 51, 52.

This kind of small detail also help a writer who has not personally experienced life at a concentration camp to comprehend the significance of changing weather patterns during the years of imprisonment. To study the matter further, it is also possible to utilise information available on weather conditions in general, for example the exceptionally harsh winter of 1939–40 having an effect on the prisoners of Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp.<sup>31</sup>

*Ich begreife dass Ihr um meine Gesundheit sorgt, aber ich muss Euch nur wiederholen, dass es überflüssig ist. Mir geht es noch besser als früher, denn die Frühlingssonne gibt jedem auch hier eine bessere Laune zu. — Ich möchte so gern diese schönen Tage in Euerem [sic] Kreise zu zubringen, aber man muss geduldig annehmen das was das Leben eben bringt und hoffen in das bessere Künftige.<sup>32</sup>*

(I understand that you are worried about my health, but I must repeat it to you, that it is unnecessary. I am doing even better than before, because the spring sun makes everyone feel better also here. – I would so much like to spend these beautiful days in your company, but one has to take patiently what the life brings and hope for the better future.)

As a side note, the example above also shows the difference between a camp letter and an oral narrative from a camp

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31 Morsch, Günter & Ley, Astrid (ed.): Das Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen 1936–1945: Ereignisse und Entwicklungen, 2010, 74.

32 An extract from Miroslav Lorenc's letter, April 7 1940.

experience. A letter is a narration from the actual place at that actual time, and this is what makes it unique.

Mishler was among the first to voice a key problem in L&W, when he proved it to be relatively inattentive to the interview context in the production of narratives.<sup>33</sup> L&W regards stories as independent and fully formed texts, which does not do justice to all types of existing narratives. However, it is characteristic of a letter to at least aim at being a fully formed text, due to its need to convey the message(s) to the reader. In this respect, studying narratives derived from letters is a different type of process compared to studying narratives of, say, a contemporary, fragmentary novel.

Admittedly, not all letters have a clear narrative structure. Some of them are purely informative, such as this one, from August 1940.

*Oranienburg 4./VIII 1940*

*Meine Teuersten!*

*Ich danke Euch herzlich für das Packet, das ich diesmal schon den 3./VIII bekommen habe. Die Vorschriften haben sich jetzt ein bisschen verändert. Künftig soll man nicht genau den Inhalt angeben – nur einfach: “Lebensmittel“[.] – Es soll ordentliche Verpackung haben. Rauchwaren, Konserven, Honig, Taschentücher u Medikamente dürfen nicht gesandt werden. Es grüsst und küsst Euch herzlich Euer M.  
Oranienburg 4 August 1940*

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33 Mishler, Elliot G.: Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative, 1991, 82, 83.



(My Dearest!

I thank you cordially for the package which I have received already 3 August this time. The Regulations have changed a bit. In the future one should not record the exact contents – just simply: “Groceries”[.] – It must have a proper package. Tobacco products, preservatives, honey, handkerchiefs and medicines are not allowed. You cordially greets and kisses your M.)

David Herman, another researcher criticising L&W, comments the model with following words:

“In an early presentation of his model, Labov --- argued that the skeleton of a narrative is a series of narrative clauses that are temporally ordered, that is, separated by temporal junctures.”<sup>34</sup>

Herman also notes that not all temporal sequences create a narration. He uses the instructions for heating a frozen pizza as an example of a text that “--- tells us not what happened in the manner of a story, but rather how to make something good to happen, in the manner of a prescription or, more precisely, a recipe.”<sup>35</sup>

Also, Labov himself has been selective in his own research. In his book *The Language of Life and Death* (2013), he refers to incoherent narratives, which are not included in the book.<sup>36</sup>

What needs to be taken into consideration in the cor-

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34 Herman, David: *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*, 2002, 31.

35 *ibid*, 88.

36 Labov, William: *The Language of Life and Death*, 2013, 40.

respondence that I am studying is that the letters which lack a narration are still part of the greater narration, which all the 78 letters formulate. This greater story covers Miroslav's years of incarceration in Sachsenhausen, and instructive letters offer relevant information about his camp life. Also, the relatively long explanations and reports about the packages received from parents are part of the greater story, even if they did not provide an essential narrative element to the story of one single letter.

Also it is worth noting that letters vary as text types. Some letters have very few, hardly any narrative elements. In the family correspondence which I am currently studying, there are some letters like that. For instance, Miroslav's old school friend Pavel Křivský writes letters which could be regarded as mini-sermons or motivational "speeches", rather than typical letters to a close friend. Still, even in Pavel's letters I have found traces (sometimes very vague ones) of L&W.

*Vzpomínáš ve svém dopise krásných chvil našeho mládí. Byl jsi trpělivým průvodcem mého rozbouraného vnitřního moře. Jsem Bobu za to velmi zavázán, že v dobách tak kritických svého života poslal mě Tebe. Vždyť Ty od Boha obdařen jsi zvláštním štěstím, kterého si musíš vážiti. Tvoje přátelství mě dobře prospělo a dovedlo by mě velmi dalko, leč 1 rok mnohé pokazil, ale snad to v budoucnu bude vše zase napraveno hlavně zase působením z Tvé strany. Víš, že ja jsem příliš citově založen, že nejsem tak abych se filosoficky vyjádřil potens actualiter.*

*Modlibou, prací, porozuměním zase mě pomáhej a já Ti budu neskonale vděčný. Vždyť si musíme považovati přátelství našeho, stojí na tak ideálním podkladu, přátelství*

*duchovním o kterém jsem Ti vypravoval o které se třebaš nevědomky, ale přece jistě snažíme. Pojem přátelství – jako vůbec vše ideální – je nemravně rozvrácen, zneužívá se ke všem možným podvodům, nemravnostem. Co jsem z domova poznal jsem mnoho přátelství a mnohá jsem pozoroval, ale poznal jsem brozné věci.*

(In your letter, you recall the beautiful moments of our youth. You were a patient companion of my troubled inner sea. I am highly obliged to God for sending me you in those critical times of my life. For God favoured you with a special happiness which you must cherish. Your friendship benefited me well and would have accompanied me very far, but one year spoiled a lot; however, all of this will hopefully be set right in the future, mainly by a renewed influence from your side. You know that I am too emotional, that I am not, to put it in philosophical terms, potems actualter.

Help me again through prayer, work, and understanding, and I will be infinitely grateful to you. For we must cherish our friendship, it is based on such an ideal foundation – a spiritual friendship which I told you about and which we, perhaps unknowingly, but quite certainly strive for. The concept of friendship – like all ideal things – has been immorally degraded, and it is abused for all sorts of frauds and immoralities. After leaving home, I have come to know many friendships and observed many others, but I have come to know terrible things.<sup>37)</sup>

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37 An extract from Pavel Křivský's letter to Miroslav Lorenc. Trans-

In the example above, Pavel refers to the different phases of his and Miroslav's friendship. The dimension of time gives that text a narrative structure: what was in the past versus what is now. The presence of complicating action (the challenges in personal life the friendship) is very obvious, as well as evaluation (Pavel's personal reflections on the significance of the friendship). In the future, I will discuss and analyse the narrative structures in Pavel and Mirek's correspondence in detail.

It is also certainly true, in the light of the criticism, that L&W is not suitable, at least not by itself, for analysing complicated texts or e.g. post-modern fiction. However, his model appears to be an applicable tool for analysing a correspondence, because letters are temporally ordered, creating a chronologically proceeding story.

#### MANY SIDES OF EMPLOTMENT

I have made an observation that in the camp letters, the different phases of narrations merge within one another. Especially the evaluation part of the story seems to frequently penetrate the whole letter or it may be attached to the result/resolution or the complicating action. Occasionally it is even impossible to detach the phases of narration from the text and determine which sentence belongs to which phase, but the phases are still noticeable.

For instance, in this letter, written right before Christmas 1941, the complicating action, evaluation and resolution are in the same "package". In a sense, it sums up the

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lation Dr. Daniel Soukup.

situation Miroslav is living in and his longing for home.

ABSTRACT

21./XII.1941

ORIENTATION

*Meine Teuersten! Euern lieben Brief von 15/XII habe ich erhalten und auch die Karte von A.K. – Richtet ihr aus meinen Dank dafür und auch meine Weihnachtsglückwünsche, ebenso wie dem Erhard, falls Ihr ihm schreiben werdet.*

(My Dearest! I have received your loving letter from 15 December and also the card from A.K.<sup>38</sup> – Thank her for me and tell also my Christmas greetings, also to Erhart, in case you write him.)

COMPILATING ACTION / EVALUATION / RESULTATION

*Ich stelle mir vor, wie schön das wäre, wenn ich zusammen mit Euch [bei] Onkel J. und Jiřa die Weihnachten zubringen könnte. Wie die Verhältnisse aber sind, muss ich, ebenso wie in den vergangenen Jahren mich damit befriedigen – nur mit Herzen bei euch weilen.*

(I imagine how beautiful it would be, if I could spend Christmas with you, Uncle J and Jiřa. With these conditions, I must, like in the previous years, settle for staying with you only in my heart.)

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38 A.K. is most likely Anny, Miroslav's girlfriend.

## CODA

*Ich wünsche Euch ein glücklicheres u fröhlicheres neues Jahr  
Euer M.*

(I wish you a happier new year.

Your M.)

According to Ricœur, narratives have their source in everyday life, in features such as conventions, customs and rituals.<sup>39</sup> In Miroslav's letters making references and sending greetings to various persons is a routine, which creates a narration of its own, a narration about his social network. Despite the fact that persons behind many names remain unknown, it is still possible to detect small life stories of people who are close to Miroslav's family.

For example, a lady called Slávka appears often in Miroslav's texts. He follows her life choices and wishes her well. I do not know if Slávka was a relative or a friend but through Miroslav we can see a bit of the life of a Czech woman living in the Protectorat of Bohemia and Moravia.

*Slávka hat also wieder ihr Posten gewechselt? Schade nur dass sie zu dieser Zeit nicht größeren Gehalt hat! Sonst ist aber für sie die frische Luft drausen [sic] jetzt im Frühling gut.*<sup>40</sup>

(Slávka has also changed jobs? It is a pity that she does not have better wages at the moment. But otherwise is the fresh air outdoors good for her now in spring time.)

Gerard Genette points out in his book *Paratext* that "an author's letters reveal an exact (particular) idea of what he wants to say about his work to a definite individual corre-

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39 Carr, David. Discussion: "Ricœur on Narrative", 2002, 168.

40 An extract from Miroslav Lorenc's letter, 17 May 1942.

spondent, a message that may even have no value or meaning except to that correspondent ---.<sup>41</sup> Miroslav is not an artist, but in his camp letters he refers to his life, both inside and outside of the camp. For this reason, I interpret the names he mentions, no matter how unknown to today's reader, as part of the narration.

The fact that Miroslav had many friends to whom he sent greetings and whose news he was eager to hear, tells also something about his personality and character. The plot and the character(s) are also closely connected together. In *Time and Narrative volume 1* Ricœur refers to Frank Kermode who has stated that character development means more narration and plot development, in turn, enriches the character.<sup>42</sup>

Professor Novotný pointed out that it is remarkable, however, that Miroslav never writes his fellow prisoners. Not even when he thanks for the food, he never mentions sharing it, even though sharing was a common practice among the Czech students in Sachsenhausen.<sup>43</sup> It is not possible to draw any conclusions about Miroslav's character or attitude to his peers, based on his Sachsenhausen letters only, but it is possible to use these observations in character building when writing fiction about life at the camp.

The names Miroslav mentions in the letters, cannot be placed in any chronological "slot" of the narration, but

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41 Genette, Gerard: *Paratexts: Threshold of Interpretation*, 1997, 373.

42 Ricœur, Paul. *Time and Narrative volume 1*, 1993, 37.

43 Personal communication with Vojmír Srdečný, 14 November 2012 and David Novotný 20 October 2016.

they add relevance to the story, just like the aforementioned monthly food packages from his parents. They tell a tale of an attempted dialogue between a prisoner and his loved ones. He tries to stay in touch with everyone but is only allowed to write short letters to his parents.

ABSTRACT

DEN 2. JULI 1942.

ORIENTATION

*Meine Teuersten! Eueren lieben Brief vom 29/VII und das Geld habe ich erhalten. Herzlichen Dank für beides.*

(My Dearest! I have received your loving letter from 29 July and the money. Cordial thanks for both of them.)

COMPILATING ACTION / EVALUATION

*Was Geld betrifft – da brauche ich nicht so viel – eine Hälfte möchte mir genügen. Die Schrift in dem letzten Briefe hat mich überrascht – natürlich als ich zu lesen angefangen habe, war mir das klar. Ich hoffe, Mütterchen, dass Du Dich auch bei so kurzem Sommeraufenthalt erholt hast. Die abwechslungs tut immer gut.*

(When it comes to money – I do not need it so much – half of the amount is enough. The writing in the previous letter surprised me – naturally when I started to read, it was clear to me. I hope, Mom, that you have relaxed also during such a short summer holiday[?]. Change is always good.)

When interpreting old letters, it essential to listen to the



eye witnesses of the events, if they are still available. I have been privileged to interview a few Sachsenhausen survivors, and one of them, Jaroslav Franc, told me that even though Sachsenhausen had a canteen, it offered very little to buy, in reality.<sup>44</sup> This is probably the reason why Miroslav writes that he does not need as much money as what his parents send him.

This extract is evaluative for most part, but it still has a slight tone of complicating action, at least from the outsider reader's point of view. We do not know what surprised Miroslav in the previous letter from his parents.

#### RESOLUTION

*Ja, die Hoffnung [sic], von der Ihr schreibt, ist das einzige was jedem von uns Kopf nicht sinken lässt. Nur die Hoffnung auf die bessere Zukunft bringt uns durch die schweren Zeiten. Die Feldarbeit kann dem O. nur zu Nutzen sein auch wenn er daran nicht gewöhnt ist. Ich habe allein auf mir kennen gelernt, was die frische Luft und Bewegung macht.*

(Yes, the hope you wrote about is the only thing that keeps our chin up. Only the hope of better future brings us through the difficult times. The field work can only be good for O, also when he is not used to it. I have learned the effects of fresh air and exercising.)

This letter reveals something about Miroslav's parents' previous letter. They have written about hope. The letters

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<sup>44</sup> Personal communication with Jaroslav Franc, 25 June 2015.

from home have not been preserved because Miroslav was not allowed to take them along when he was released. In epistolary research this is often one of the challenges: the other half of the correspondence is missing. We can, however, detect small traces of what the other participant has answered from extracts like this.

Another thing I have paid attention to here is mentioning physical work, fresh air and exercising. Miroslav refers to someone else (O) doing physical work, and he also writes about the effects of fresh air and exercising on himself. However, as he is not allowed to write about the life at the camp, this could be interpreted as a subtle, indirect message to his parents about his own situation, doing heavy work in ruthless conditions.

CODA

*Es küsst euch herzlich Euer M.*

(You cordially greet your M.)

Sometimes it is challenging to determine, whether the contents of the letter fit into the categories of L&W or not. In the letter below, from July 1942, I have interpreted Miroslav's statement that he is curious about all new arrivals in the family, meaning new babies being born, as a complicating action. This interpretation is debatable because it is only a brief mention of what kind of news interest him. On the other hand, in the greater narration, formulated by all the Sachsenhausen letters, missing home, family and news from home is one of the most distinctive complicating actions.

ABSTRACT

DEN 19./VII.1942

ORIENTATION

*Meine Teuersten! Herzlichen Dank für Eueren lieben Brief vom 14/VII. ebenso wie für den Packet und das Geld.*

(My Dearest! Cordial thanks for your loving letter and also the package and the money.)

EVALUATION

*Mit dem Packet stimmte das. Es freut mich sehr, dass die Bekannten auch nicht vergessen trotzdem ich schon so lange weg bin. Von Anny habe ich eine Karte bekommen. Richtet ihr aus meinen Dank und meine herzlichen Glückwünsche zu ihrem Namens tage. Wie ich sehe die "breitere Familie" vermehrt sich tüchtig.*

(The package was ok. I am delighted that the acquaintances have not forgotten [me], even though I have been away for a long time. I have received a card from Anny. Please thank her and tell congratulate her wholeheartedly for me on her name day. I can see that our "extended family" is increasing diligently).

COMPILATING ACTION

*Ich bin recht neugierig auf alle die Zuwächse.*

(I am very curious about all new arrivals.)

RESOLUTION

*Wenn ich von dem Gemüseverbrauch höre, muss ich an den Vater denken. Wie gefällt ihm das? Und wie sieht es aus mit seinem Fischerglück? Wie gern möchte ich Euch meine lieben wiedersehen! Wie habt Ihr euch im Laufe der Zeit verändert*

*ebenso wie alles, was ich vor so langer Zeit verlassen habe.*

(When I hear about consumption of vegetables, I must think of Father. Does he like it? And has he been lucky fishing? How much I would like to see my beloved ones! How you have changed during this time, like everything that I have left for such a long time.)

CODA<sup>45</sup>

*Herzlich grüsst und küsst Euch Euer Mirek.*

(Cordially greets and kisses you your Mirek)

Ricœur takes a critical approach to both common-sense concept of life-story and the distinction between real life and fiction. One of his key concepts is *emplotment*, which is a synthesis of heterogeneous elements.<sup>46</sup> In emplotment, a series of events, which are just a chronicle of events, are transformed into a story. In this process, stories obtain their meaning.<sup>47</sup> According to White, Ricœur sees historiographical emplotment as a poetic activity.<sup>48</sup> In other words, history has something in common not only with writing fiction but also poetry.

Actually, the reading process is part of emplotment because the reader makes his or her own interpretations about the texts. Thus, according to Ricœur, the act of reading

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45 Labov, William: *The Language of Life and Death*, 2013, 229.

46 Wood, David: "Introduction: Interpreting Narrative", 2002, 10.

47 White, Hayden: *The Metaphysics of Narrativity*, 2002, 144.

48 *ibid*, 145.

complements the emplotment. It takes place between the text and the reader, because stories are not only recounted, but also lived through the reader's imagination.<sup>49</sup> Also Labov says he never ceases "to be astonished at the powerful effect on the listeners of this other person's experience flowing through me." Having said that, he also reminds us of the role of the narrator too: "-- telling is adjusted in the interest of the teller."

## CONCLUSION

As my article with its various examples indicates, Miroslav Lorenc's letters from Concentration Camp Sachsenhausen seem to follow L&W almost entirely, if not fully.

Some categories are interlaced in the text, for instance evaluation and complicating action may emerge from the same part of the text. It is also worth noting that the themes of the greater narration, formulated by all the letters (78 altogether), stem from the individual letters. For example, the main complicating action appears to be the separation from home and family. This is the complicating action to be found in several letters, as well as in the whole correspondence from Sachsenhausen.

A deeper analysis is needed, in order to obtain more results about the narrations and a brighter vision on how to adapt L&W further. I also intend to compare Miroslav's letters to those written by other Sachsenhausen prisoners, in order to evaluate whether or not they follow L&W.

David Carr discusses the similarities between stories and

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49 Ricœur, Paul: "Life in Quest of Narrative", 2002, 27.

music: “The beginning – end structure must be deployed in time. In this respect stories are like music. A musical score may have many atemporal properties, but music occurs when it is translated into sounds that unfold one after the other.”<sup>50</sup> One way of looking at Miroslav’s letters is comparing them to a musical score. They narrate a story with a beginning – a middle and the end – from the arrest, throughout the camp years to the release. The letters do not reveal anything about his release, though, or if he survived the camp in the first place.

Other sources, such as interviews and documents in different archives have been of help in understanding the letters and filling in the gaps of narration. Michael Toolan compares a text to “a forest containing many potential routes to sense making, “rather than a path, which would be ‘like a pre-determined best route through a heterogeneous and chaotic environment’”.<sup>51</sup> Writing about camp letters and searching for the narration embedded in them means that I am surrounded by not only Miroslav’s letters, but also stories of eye witnesses, documents and historical research. This experience compares easily to walking in a forest – sometimes in a pathless forest.

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50 Carr, David. Discussion: Ricœur on Narrative, 2002, 168. (The word must originally emphasised with italics by the writer.)

51 Toolan, Michael. Making Sense of Narrative Text, 2016, 57.

*Thanks to her epistolary research and the people she has encountered in the process, she has become a great admirer of Tomáš Masaryk's Czechoslovakia.*

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