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## **ISOLATION DEPICTED WITH ART – THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN PRISON REALITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article concerns the role of culture in conditions of isolation in prison. The author argues that cultural activities are (together with education, work, or exercise) important in influencing the behavior of inmates in penitentiaries. People who are serving a prison sentence not only have a chance to assimilate culture in a passive way, but also to create it as well. Prison cultural products include paintings, prints, ballads and songs, proverbs, poetry and plays, ornate letters, as well as art objects created (often on request) for aesthetic and functional purposes. Art created “behind the walls” has various functions, such as mitigating the effects of isolation, promoting positive self-esteem for prisoners, or filling their time.

### **Key words:**

grypsery, culture, rehabilitation, prisoners’ creativity

### **1. Introduction**

The intention of the article’s author is an attempt to art, in this case the art created in prison as a catalyst of fulfilling the prisoners’ needs not only as the object of their enchantment. Creativity from “behind the walls” shows that the people who lose

their freedom lose their sensitivity as well which can be reinforced and used in their self-development through the process of creating. The prison does not create activities, and they themselves, even amateurish ones allow the prisoners to see life behind the walls of prison from another perspective.

This article illustrates the issue of culture in penitentiary units in a free way as it is not easy to correlate the empirical data with poetry, literature or other kinds of art.

## 2. Deprivation and the culture

The isolation of prison inmates (especially those serving long-term sentences) is inevitably accompanied by strong deprivation of various kinds of needs and also sensory and information deprivation. Stimuli acting on different senses are seriously limited or even completely eliminated. Prisoners try to create the conditions for fulfilling their needs from their own point of view, which, in conjunction with pathological experiences and distorted values system, often results in creating destructive mechanisms in prisoners' behavior. According to the law, the Prison Service is tasked with the re-socialization of the inmates. Their overriding goal is to shape desired behavior and attitudes of prisoners, so that after having completed their prison sentences, they can function properly in the society. A variety of rehabilitative actions of prison services are to lead to achieving the main goal, and also short-term goals in prison conditions and they ease the effects of deprivation.

One of important means of influencing the behavior of inmates is cultural activity<sup>1</sup>. Thus, I can run the risk of the thesis that culture in prison is not just a component of rehabilitation, but also some sort of defense against the restrictions of prisoners' needs to self-realize, as well as their self-esteem, creative, and aesthetic needs.

## 3. Culture in penitentiary – a historical sketch

The history of the impact on prisoners by corrective measures different than the isolation itself dates back to the seventeenth century. In prisons in Amsterdam, it was observed that if young boys and older prisoners with longer sentences stayed in the same cells, it did not bring good results. That is why they built a separate

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<sup>1</sup> See: J. de Michelis, *Prisoners' Participation in the Culture*, "Bulletin of the Human Rights Defender" RPO-MAT, No. 32, p. 283–307.

building in which young people could be held. It was the solution for cells in prisons<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, prison officials in Amsterdam showed that they cared about the moral improvement and education of prisoners by employing a pastor and a teacher. Similar facilities were founded in Lübeck (1613), Hamburg (1622), and in Gdańsk (1629). Thus, isolation gradually stopped playing the role of the only effective remedy.

Since 1876 the juvenile correctional home in Elmira (USA, New York) have used educational and cultural activities as a method of reclamation<sup>3</sup>. In Polish penology, cultural and educational activities were also accepted as important means of educating and rehabilitating. In prison regulations from 1931, it is specified that the work is to “fight illiteracy, expand mental horizons and raise the prisoners’ level of ethics and develop their sense of citizenship”<sup>4</sup>.

After the Second World War, the norms accepted in 1931 were repeated at the instruction of the Minister of Public Security from 11 June 1945 for the prison regulations (the first unpublished act for prison problems). In the prison regulations from 1955, there were some rules concerning cultural activities; including general education, vocational training, the common room, and reading classes. Prisoners could use movies, radio, print media subscribed for them by the prison administration, and take parts in readings. Criminal prisoners were allowed to organize ensembles with the permission of the prison’s warden. It is worth noticing that during that period legal regulations had to be politically correct according to the ideology of socialist country. For this reason, the range of cultural events was limited.

#### 4. Participation in a criminal culture today

In the current rules of imprisonment Chapter 8, entitled: “Ways of impact on prisoners and enforcement systems” regulates cultural and educational activities<sup>5</sup>. In § 39 cultural and educational activities is listed as one of the ways of impact on

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<sup>2</sup> See: E.J. Dukaczewski, *Historia instytucji i programów resocjalizacyjnych w Europie i USA* [The History of the Institution and the Concept of Rehabilitation in Europe and the USA] [in:] *Resocjalizacja nieletnich: doświadczenia i koncepcje* [Rehabilitation of Minors: The Experiences and Concepts], K. Pospiszyl (ed.), Warszawa 1990, p. 1915–1943.

<sup>3</sup> See: J.D. Pol, *Więzienna szansa* [Prison Chance], Warszawa 2008, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> The Minister of Justice from June 20, 1931 – the prison regulations, Coll. Laws 1931, No 71, pos. 577, quoted in: J. de Michelis, op.cit., p. 284.

<sup>5</sup> The Minister of Justice on August 25, 2003, concerning regulations of organization – order of detention, Coll. Laws of 29 August 2003, on the basis of art.249 § 1 of the Act of June 6, 1997 – Executive Penal Code – Dz. U. Nr 90, poz. 557, with amendments.

prisoners education, together with social activities, sports, as well as rewarding and disciplinary punishment. However, § 42 provides for the fact that cultural and educational activities or sports in prison can be organized in cooperation with institutions, organizations, associations and other entities and individuals outside the facilities.

The law grants the prisoners rights to participate in culture. The vast majority of prisoners participate in it passively. However, there is a group of active consumers of culture who use their talents, interests, and skills for creating something of artistic value. Nowadays, in each prison there is a library, where it is possible to watch TV (sometimes via a cable network); listen to radio and broadcast by the broadcasting center; and watch films on TV, on DVD, or video. Prisoners may participate in the common room activities. "In general, prisoners' background is rather passive. It requires strong commitment from the cultural and educational educators to enliven it. They must have interesting ideas and they have to find some prisoners who are willing to joint implementation of the ideas. They will be a kind of leaven. [...] In recent years, in prisons there have been done a lot in order to revive the culture and education work with inmates"<sup>6</sup>. One of forms of working with inmates is organizing knowledge quizzes and competitions such as geography, history, literature, law, and AIDS knowledge. Prisoners' meetings with interesting people, such as actors, journalists, and social activists also play a vital role. Prisoners also start their own ensembles, organize exhibitions, lead clubs of interests, and edit magazines for other prisoners. Another form of cultural activities, which is important to highlight, is co-organizing events for prisoners' families.

Positive aspects of promoting prison creativity in the society should be also stressed. This affects an appropriate attitude towards people who leave prison and in some ways raises awareness of public participation in the implementation of a prison sentence. "Press releases, reporting cultural events in prisons, exhibitions of paintings, sculptures and crafts, organized in the urban centers of culture, are important steps to show the public that there are also people behind the walls of prison. However, the people, who have gone astray, often think and feel like those who are free"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> J. de Michelis, *op.cit.*, p. 292–301.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 307.

## 5. Culture and folklore of the prison

In The Polish Language Dictionary we can find several definitions of “culture”. Among other things “culture” is understood as “the entirety of material and spiritual development of humanity collected, recorded and enriched in the course of its history, passed from generation to generation”, as well as a “degree of mastering in learning the skills, specialties, etc., high level of something, especially of intellectual and moral development”<sup>8</sup>. These definitions clearly show the evaluative and ennobling sense of culture. However, in sociological meaning of the term of culture contains both positive and negative aspects.

Culture in the broadest sense is a totality of tangible and intangible products of man, everything that was not created in a natural way, but as the result of human activities<sup>9</sup>.

The concept of culture refers to the ways of community life. Groups of people produce their own group culture<sup>10</sup>. In this context prison work could be called “culture” but it is safer to use the term of “folklore” understood as a creative artistic ability of a certain community.

## 6. Varieties of prisoners’ creativity

Prisoners’ creativity is an integral part of living in conditions of isolation. It is a kind of “safety valve” which allows to express the opinions and emotions of the convicted, allowing to reduce the impact of sensory deprivation and finally forming diversify the monotony of everyday life in prison. Among the various products of prison folklore there are paintings, prints, ballads and songs, proverbs, poetry and plays (“martyrdom”, “love”, “sentimental”, “philosophical” and “rakish”), as well as art objects created (often on request) for aesthetic purpose and functional objects or ornamental letters. It also happens that “props” made for the acts of autoimmunity purpose are sometimes richly decorated and carefully stored like amulets<sup>11</sup>. It should be taken into account that a part of these products carries

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<sup>8</sup> *Słownik języka polskiego* [The Polish Language Dictionary], M. Szymczak (ed.), Warszawa 1978, p. 1083.

<sup>9</sup> See J. de Michelis, *op.cit.*, p. 288.

<sup>10</sup> See: P. Sztompka, *Socjologia* [Sociology], Kraków 2002, p. 234.

<sup>11</sup> See: M. Szaszkiwicz, *Tajemnice grypsarki* [Secrets of Prison Language], Kraków 1997, p. 149–169.

contents specific for the group of “grypsera”<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, taking “prison artists” into account the issues related to the “prison’s second life” and penitentiary subculture are worth emphasizing. Most of these people have only basic schooling; they are not professional writers, often those who started creating art and writing only in prison.

There is something very constructive and... frightening at the same time. Just in the conditions of prison a man without any education and broader artistic interests, often avoiding books, theatre, cinema, begins to awaken his or her inner ME, the world of dreams and values and begins to reflect the way and sense of existence and expresses it. He or she agrees on spreading of what in the subculture of prison is regarded not only as intimacy but even a mystery. Such a manifestation of ME, this peculiar act of courage should be appreciated<sup>13</sup>.

## 7. “Secret message” as the language of prison subculture

Secret message is one of the basic elements of prison subculture. The literate meaning of the word “gryps” is a letter illegally delivered to or from the prison. “Gryps” is also a term for specific prison language which has a variety of functions; it is a transmitter of the objectives and standards (the “grypsera language”), means of group integration and distinguishing from other groups (function of underground). This language affects the personality of its users through a special way of formulating thoughts and expressing them, as well as creating soma basis consistent with the ideology of prison subculture. The “grypsera language” is marked by some linguistic phenomena such as forbidden words and phrases (“bluzgi”), insults (“wiąchy”), kinds of incantation (words and phrases expressing that something is forbidden), exclamations (often without any logical sense)<sup>14</sup>. This dialect is characterized by a strong and meaningful emotional expression and was sometimes used by professional writers like M. Nowakowski, M. Hłasko, G. Herling-

<sup>12</sup> “Grypsera” is a dynamic group in any larger population of offenders. It has a specific hierarchy of power, leadership, an informal code of actions, specific vocabulary and other features of this subculture. See: S. Przybyliński, *Podkultura więzienna: wielowymiarowość rzeczywistości penitencjarniej* [Prison Subculture: Multidimensional Penitentiary Reality], Kraków 2005, p. 30–32.

<sup>13</sup> *To są dni naszego życia. Antologia pracy więziennej* [These Are the Days of Our Lives... An Anthology of Prison Work], K. Raczyński (ed.), Opole 1995, p. 5–6.

<sup>14</sup> See: M. Szaszkievicz, op.cit., p. 23–42.

Grudziński, A. Stasiuk and J. Nasierowski<sup>15</sup>. “The “grypsera language” described the world’s “second life”. An ability to use the language was an important determinant of social status, and following and protecting the rules gave a position of power [...]. Rules, customs in “grypsera” actually limited the use of violence in resolving conflicts or even in contacts between prisoners. Moreover, the language itself replaced violence. Magical power was attributed to it. The words influenced the attitude towards the material state of things”<sup>16</sup>. The language of crime to some extent penetrates into everyday language. Its traces can be seen especially in dialects of soldiers, students and pupils. (Note: Such words or phrases, adopted from community or professional language to a commonly used language are called “argotisms”. They are short, relevant and universal at the same time. The term “argo” consistently used specifically in the work of Russian linguists has not negative emotional tone, as the word “jargon” and its designations, like “prison”, “criminal”, “thievish”<sup>17</sup>. This term is characterized by iconicity with its metaphoricalness and contextualism. There are vulgarities in it but “they do not seem to occur more frequently than in other social environments [...], and some of them are even forbidden or restricted in terms of use in special situational context”<sup>18</sup>.

## 8. “Prison artists”

Literature, poetry and art in prison in general, obviously coupled with the standards and “marked” with manifestations of “second life”, often is not far from art created outside prison in terms of themes and topics. It is significant that most of the tracks are written in a “grypsera” not a “normal” language. “Prison artists” respond with their art for the isolation, which is particularly severe in conditions of feelings’ scarcity. The artists’ works are far from any conventions or canons as they are not familiar with. “Lack of professionalism strikes in the literary and pseudo-literary works understood as independent from the artistic fashion [...], from common stereotypes and current bestsellers, from the requirements of publishers and reading habits. This is a rather intimate writing - for them and loved

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<sup>15</sup> See: *These Are the Days...*, op.cit., p. 5–12.

<sup>16</sup> P. Moczydłowski, *Drugie życie więzienia* [The Prison’s Second Life], Warszawa 2002, p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> See: *These Are the Days...*, op.cit., p. 199–200.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, op.cit., p. 200.

ones. This confessional candor meets authenticity [...]”<sup>19</sup>. In poetry the author normally describes the world only from his or her own perspective.

Creating in the conditions of isolation is not just “killing the time”, but also a kind of protection against internal feelings of emptiness and an attempt to feel the freedom in the act of creation. “Especially since the early nineties, when the opportunity to work for the prisoners is a distinction [...], doing arts and crafts has become the fundamental way to preserve humanity and individuality at the same time, education and getting to know oneself, showing that “I am still alive”<sup>20</sup>.

In literary and poetic works the prisoners do not often express remorse and regret for the crime they have committed. They rarely admit to a desire for spiritual renewal. Perhaps it is because of their bitterness that arises from the awareness of how they are perceived by society from “outside the wall”. And perhaps that is why in their works echoes the fear of freedom, the negation of universal values and adherence to “the second life” rules.

## 9. Elements of analysis and interpretation of selected poems

Various works were chosen in terms of forms and artistic value. As it has been mentioned, among the motives of poems, ballads or songs produced behind bars, there are similar issues that we face outside prison, however some of the works are typical for the members of the “grypsera” subculture in terms of content and emotions. Popularity of ballads and songs is connected with the need to revitalize the monotony of everyday life in prison, as well as willingness to express the prisoners’ own views and thoughts.

The largest group of songs is those with sexual content. Descriptions of memories of sexual experiences and a longing for women dominate in those songs. Here is a fragment of such a song. In the title and in the first line the singer should use the name of his beloved<sup>21</sup>.

[...] my beloved,  
 You’re my refuge,  
 You’ve been giving me your body,  
 and didn’t demand money.

<sup>19</sup> *These Are the Days...*, op.cit., p. 197.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 198.

<sup>21</sup> See: M. Szaszkievicz, op.cit., p. 153–154.

[...]  
I felt like in heaven with you,  
I saw only you in my dreams,  
Our love was beautiful,  
We were united all days and nights.  
My body wanted yours,  
Our bodies matched in one,  
The wind in grass played quietly,  
I plucked your bra from your breasts.

[...]  
Now we are separated,  
Because I'm captured in a dark cell,  
My thoughts flow towards you,  
Summer has become a winter.  
My eyes see grey walls,  
Small windows behind the blinds,  
My ears hear quiet crying,  
And prison keys grinding.

[...]  
I hope you'll been waiting,  
I've got only you,  
We'll be together like in heaven,  
You'll have me and I'll have you.

In Polish version the form of regular eight-syllable poem dominates, however in lines 12, 20 and 24 you can see some inconsistency. The rhymes are paired, female, and accurate. It is obvious that the author has a sense of rhythm and poetic intuition, however the rhyming verbs at the end of the lines indicate the author's lack of knowledge of poetic principles. Interpretation of the text is not difficult; the lyrical subject is identical with the author, who remembers tender moments that he spent with his woman and hopes to live together after being released. The confession: "You've been giving me your body, / And didn't demand money" gives the author's distorted picture. Although, the text is written in a "normal" language it contains "blinds" – a word derived from "grypsera language"<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> According to M. Szaszkiwicz, "a blind" is a veil of reinforced, opaque glass, and metal, used in police custody. It makes impossible to look through the cell window down and sideways. See: M. Szaszkiwicz, *op.cit.*, p. 187.

A form of another song is “grypsera manifest”, which expresses the fundamental objectives of the prison subculture, such as solidarity and struggle with the law authorities.

Let the courts collapse,  
 Let the files burn,  
 Let the prisoners hang their judges!  
 Then there will be den,  
 Cigarettes, girls,  
 And a party in best restaurants!  
 When the cops appear,  
 And turn their mugs,  
 They'll be beaten with their own nightsticks!  
 Then they'll be kneeling  
 And begging for mercy.  
 We don't have mercy on them!

Works of this type have a therapeutic role – they relieve frustration and give a sense of power<sup>23</sup>.

Those who think that prisoners do not happen to have true poetic talents are wrong. Some authors use pseudonyms whereas others their real names. One of the most interesting authors is Z. Kumorek, who wrote in the 1990s at the Remand Centre in Opole. Some fragments of his works were quoted in *The Anthology of Prison Works*, which was edited by Krzysztof Raczyński. Kumorek's ease of writing, form diversity, and abundant humor are special features that can be found in his texts. In some of his works, author addressed himself with bitter words:

\* \* \*  
 [...]
   
 “A wild correctness  
 Or God's vengeful hand  
 Makes me stumble  
 Even on straight roads.  
 [...]
   
 I've always had good intentions,  
 Why then is there a psychopath in me?”

<sup>23</sup> See: M. Szaszkievicz, op.cit., p.153.

Wherever I would go  
 There are prison bars in front of me.  
 Sir Christopher, today you have asked  
 Why I don't give titles to my poems  
 Well, all have the same title  
 Why? Why was I punished?  
 \* \* \*

The same author made an interesting and successful attempt to write Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in "grypsera language". In 1994 many guests from outside the prison including staff and students from Opole University had a chance to see the drama. An employee from the Institute of Polish Philology in Opole took care over substantive aspect of the project<sup>24</sup>.

Acrostics are interesting, usually concise form of expression made by prisoners. The first letters in each line reflect the essence of the work:

\* \* \*  
 Images explains my thoughts  
 Let a lie to be written,  
 Oh, guile is no longer my soul's guest  
 Very much you'd like to know my opinion  
 Easy to read my confession in the first letters!<sup>25</sup>.

## 10. A few words about prison art

The location where art is created is not very important. It just appears with the presence of people. In January 2011, during the nineteenth meeting of the Regional Director of the Prison Service in Warsaw with the directors of remand and detention centers, branch managers, and prison chaplains in attendance, lieutenant colonel Anna Osowska-Rembecka in her speech on cultural and educational activities in the units emphasized the fact that prisons apparently hostile to the art often becomes its source. Culture in prison not only softens manners, but also shows prisoners in a different light, giving them a chance to change. Such an op-

<sup>24</sup> See: *These Are the Days...*, op.cit., p. 8–10.

<sup>25</sup> See: L. Momot, *Love cię Kaśka. Po drugiej stronie muru* [Love Cię, Kaśka. On the Other Side of the Wall], Wrocław 1999, p. 118.

portunity brings more benefits than aggression, hatred, and revenge, which will consequentially backfire on society<sup>26</sup>.

Art created in the conditions of isolation in prison are sometimes presented at special exhibitions. In March, such an exhibition was shown at the Faculty of Social Sciences at UMW. The exhibition entitled, *Effects of Isolation in Prison* derived from one of the faculty graduate's collection includes "positive" and "negative" art. Poetry, sculptures, paintings, as well as products made from bread, straw, grains, and modeling clay are examples of "positive" art. Items used for self-inflicted pain, such as wire anchors, coils, loops, or syringes are "negative". You can also see calendars, collections of poetry and magazines edited by inmates. According to the Regional Director of the Prison Service in Olsztyn in Polish prisons "positive" art predominates "negative" one. The director stresses that nowadays prisoners do not have to create not only for themselves or for other prisoners from their cells, but they may work in workshops, they have professional assistance and possibility to show their art outside the prison<sup>27</sup>.

## 11. Summary

This article shows that culture can exist in such a place as prison. The culture is here considered as a factor of rehabilitation because it allows to rebuild the prisoner's personality. It is important to remember that prisoners are often deprived in the area of culture, they are often demoralized and unfit for using the culture's values.

Most of them are passive participants of cultural events that take place in prisons. Diverse methods of building the prisoners' a esthetics and emotional sensibility including the art and culture's influence is a factor in their positive changes.

Art created in conditions of isolation has various functions – it alleviates emotions, fills the time, helps in mitigating the effects of deprivation, is helpful in recovering prisoners, self-esteem fulfills the needs of aesthetics and creativity. It is important that in current Polish penitentiary system we are dealing with such a model of working with prisoners, which gives them the opportunity to explore their own sensitivity and artistic talents.

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<sup>26</sup> See: <http://www.sw.gov.pl/pl/okregowy-inspektorat-sluzby-wieziennej-warszawa/news,1770,spotkanie-noworoczne-w-okregu.html> [access: 22.04.2011].

<sup>27</sup> See: <http://kultura.wm.pl/39673,W-wiezieniu-sie-tworzy.html#ixzz1Kleo7lrO> [access: 23.04.2011].

Contacts with prisoners show that [...] the inmates are the same people as us. That is why Penitentiary Unit must be an institution for people, and its functions should be far broader than retaliation and reprisals. [...] The aim of healing is to save former offenders from re-entering into conflict with the law. It is neither easy nor possible in general application<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> *These Are the Days...*, op.cit., p. 189.