

Buchenwald and Ivan Ivanji's Impossible Archive: The Voices of the Dead

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Abstract: How and what does the literature on Buchenwald remember? How does the paradox between the impossibility of archiving and the will to rescue the victims of concentration camps, and more specifically of Buchenwald, from anonymity, take shape in literature? The aim of this contribution is to answer these questions by analysing Ivan Ivanji's novel *Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald* [The Man of Ashes of Buchenwald] as an impossible archive containing the voices of the dead of the concentration camp. To this end, the parallels between Ivanji's novel and the anti-archive created by Danilo Kiš in his text *The Encyclopedia of the Dead (A Whole Life)* will be explored. Both texts aspire to reflect the (impossible) totality, while paying homage to the anonymous dead of the wars and dictatorships of the 20th century.

Keywords: Holocaust studies, trauma studies, literature and concentration camps, literature and the dead, Ivan Ivanji, Danilo Kiš

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For *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, history is the sum of human destinies, the totality of ephemeral happenings. That is why it records every action, every thought, every creative breath, every spot height in the survey, every shovelful of mud, every motion that cleared a brick from the ruins. (Kiš, *The Encyclopedia of the Dead (A Whole Life)*, 47)

Nobody knows whose ashes will be buried there.²
(Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald*, 32)

Introduction

Buchenwald is located at a distance of approximately 10 km from Weimar, the city of Goethe and Schiller, on the Ettersberg. The concentration camp had begun operating in 1937 and it had more than 140 slave labor subcamps. Until its liberation in April 1945, some 56,000 people died, of whom the names of 34,375 are known. Between 1945 and 1950, the Soviets used it as *Speziallager Nr. 2*. The number of prisoners was 28,455. According to Soviet documentation, 7,113 people died there. The

1. This contribution is framed within the Research Project "New paradigms in the cultural representation of spaces of mass violence: looking at and telling the 20th century from the 21st." (MINECO, 2023- 2026, PID 2022-140003NB-I00).

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2. All English translations of quotations not available in English are my responsibility.



website of the Buchenwald Memorial grants access to three books of the dead, three archives:

(1) Buchenwald Concentration Camp - Book of the Dead³: after ten years of research, more than 30,000 names of people who died in the KZ [Konzentrationslager] and subcamps were published in 2010. In 2011 another project began with the compilation of biographies and faces. Uncounted remain the thousands of people who died in other concentration camps after being deported.

(2) Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp- Book of the Dead⁴: It records information on 11,089 dead, but, as stated, it is impossible to know the exact number of dead: "This present register of death can make no claim to completeness." As in the previous case, "[t]he precise number of people who perished after deportation to the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp will remain forever unknown. The older estimate of 20,000 deaths among the inmates of Mittelbau-Dora is almost certainly too low."

(3) Soviet Special Camp No. 2 - Book of the Dead⁵ records information concerning 7,113 dead between August 1945 and February 1950. The difficulty of recording all the dead during this period is noted, mainly due to the silence and concealment conducted by the authorities before the fall of the Wall. As indicated on the website: "This Book of the Dead contains information on around 7,000 deceased. [...] [T]he work on the Book of the Dead was never intended to be able to verify the available death statistics exactly." All these books highlight, on the one hand, the desire to keep the memory of the dead alive and to prevent them from being forgotten. On the other hand, they stress impossibility of recording, the impossible archiving. This is something that already happened with the dead of the First World War, when for the first time the mass death of millions of human beings had to be faced.

In addition to all the above-mentioned efforts to remove thousands of Buchenwald's dead from anonymity, a chance discovery was made which, once again, led to the impossibility of giving an identity to those who died in circumstances that are only imaginable because they are unknown. In May 1997, during restoration and sanitation work at the former crematorium of the Buchenwald concentration camp, more than 700 urns containing ashes were found. The Erfurt-based company Topf & Söhne,⁶ which was responsible for the building of the Auschwitz ovens, was also responsible for the supply of urns for human ashes. Axel Doßmann⁷ presents this real event, which took place during the preparations of the city of Weimar as a European cultural city at the dawn of the new century, and introduces the speech given on 24 August 1997 by Volkhard Knigge, who was then director of the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora memorial. Knigge invited Auschwitz and Buchenwald survivor Ivan Ivanji to the burial ceremony of the ashes contained in the over 700 urns - hidden and forgotten ashes:

I can guess what they suffered, where they might have come from and who they were, because I know the exact history of the concentration camp where they died. But I don't know their names, I don't know the day of their birth and I don't know the day of their deaths, which weigh heavily on German history. I do not know with whom their loved ones shared their lives, I do not know who would have wept at their graves or called their names if they had not died a violent death here on the Ettersberg, but a natural death at home.⁸

It was perhaps these words spoken by Volkhard Knigge that inspired Ivan Ivanji to write his novel *Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald* [*The Man of Ashes of Buchenwald*], published in 1999. In his text, Ivanji gives these dead a voice, creating an impossible archive with them while seeking to pay tribute to them in literature.

In the following pages I will analyse Ivanji's novel as an impossible literary archive. To do so, I will start from the anti-archive created by Danilo Kiš (1935-1989) in *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (A Whole

3. "Die Toten 1937-1945. Konzentrationslager Buchenwald." Accessed December 29, 2023. <https://totenbuch.buchenwald.de/>. [The Dead 1937-1945. Buchenwald Concentration Camp]. "Biographien." Accessed December 29, 2023. <https://totenbuch.buchenwald.de/recherche/biography/reset/true>. [Biographies]

4. "Online Book of the Dead." Accessed December 29, 2023. <https://www.dora.de/de/recherche/online-totenbuch>.

5. "Totenbuch. Sowjetisches Speziallager Nr. 2." Accessed December 29, 2023. <https://totenbuch-speziallager.buchenwald.de/recherche/>. [Book of the Dead. Soviet Special Camp No. 2]

6. For further information see: "Topf & Sons – Builders of the Auschwitz Ovens." Accessed January 2, 2024. <https://www.topfundsoehne.de/ts/en/site/history/index.html>.

7. Axel Doßmann, *Volkhard Knigge, Geschichte als Verunsicherung. Konzeptionen für ein historisches Begreifen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020), 507.

8. Doßmann, *Geschichte als Verunsicherung*, 509.

Life),⁹ translated by Ivan Ivanji into German in 1986, which I consider fundamental to establish the basis on which *Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald* is built. I will then explore the mechanisms and narrative strategies Ivanji uses to shape his own archive of the voices of the dead from the ashes contained in the urns found in 1997. Finally, I will outline the conclusions drawn from the proposed analysis.

Impossible Archives: Danilo Kiš' *The Encyclopedia of the Dead (A Whole Life)*

According to Aleida Assmann,¹⁰ the word archive has its origin in the Greek word *arché*, which means beginning, origin, dominion, authority, and official body. From the beginning, the archive is presented as being linked to writing, bureaucracy, records, and administration. Assmann follows Derrida in asserting that the archive is a political category. The archive as a witness to the past leads to the idea that there is no political control without control of the archive, and whoever has control of the archive has control over memory. Archives are places of information assets, and they are also places of information gaps, they are collective knowledge repositories, which essentially obey three criteria: Conservation, selection, and accessibility. But can there be an archive that aspires to totality, an archive in which absolutely everything can be found? Based on a real event such as the Salt Lake City Mormon archive,¹¹ Danilo Kiš recreates in literature this idea of a total archive, which ends up becoming an anti-archive because of its impossibility.

The Encyclopedia of the Dead presents fantastic and uncanny elements from the very first page. The narrator, a woman, is invited to Sweden. As a climax to her stay in Stockholm, Kristina Johansson, her guide, and mentor, takes her to visit at night the Royal Library whose building reminds her of a prison. There is also a guard who holds the keys to all the doors. All the rooms look alike, each dedicated to a letter of the alphabet. The narrator goes to M in the hope of finding something about her father's life. And she finds absolutely everything in volumes "fastened by thick chains to iron rings on the shelves,¹²" covered in dust and cobwebs (her father had died two months before her trip to Sweden). The narrator is aware that she is facing the celebrated and famous *Encyclopedia of the Dead*: "a strange symbiosis of past, present and future."¹³ The only condition for being registered in the encyclopedia is to be dead and not to appear in any other encyclopedia. And everything, absolutely everything after 1789, is there. The narrator insists again and again that nothing is missing, nothing has been omitted, nothing has been forgotten, nothing escapes the attention of the encyclopaedia. In the *Encyclopedia* everything is written down, every event, material goods, but also its vision of the world and of God. It is neither an inventory nor an archive of names, although it is that too: "Thus, the *Encyclopedia* immerses us in the atmosphere of the times, in its political realities."¹⁴ As told by the narrator, the compilers must be a sect or a religious organization "whose democratic program stresses an egalitarian vision of the world of the dead, a vision that is doubtless inspired by some biblical precept and aims at redressing

9. "The Encyclopedia of the Dead" was first published in *Književnost*, May – June 1981; a year later, on June 12, 1982, it appeared in *The New Yorker* in a translation by Ammiel Alcalay." Danilo Kiš. *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 160.

"In his lifetime, Kiš came to personify liberal pluralist values that stuck in the throats of communists and nationalists alike. Since his death in 1989, his books have survived the wars that destroyed his country and even his language to find an audience around the world. *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* has been translated into twenty-five languages including Basque, Norwegian, Thai and, most recently, Korean." Mark Thompson, "Introduction: Danilo Kiš and pocket-sized novels," in Danilo Kiš. *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), ix.

10. Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München: C.H. Beck, 2018), 344–347.

11. Kiš transcribes in the Postscript to the volume *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* the news published in May 1981 in the Yugoslavian newspaper *Duga*: "East of Salt Lake City, the capital of the State of Utah, and deep in the Rockies' granite bowels, lies one of the most unusual archives in all the United States. It is reached by four tunnels blasted into the rock and consists of several underground rooms connected by a labyrinth of corridors. [...] They contain the names of eighteen billion people, living and dead, carefully entered on the 1,250,000 microfilms compiled to date by the Genealogical Society of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. [...] The names in these extraordinary archives come from all over the world. [...] The ultimate goal of this stupendous undertaking is to enter on microfilm nothing less than the whole of mankind – not only the part that is still living but also the part that has passed on to the other world." Danilo Kiš. *The Encyclopedia*, 161.

12. Danilo Kiš, *The Encyclopedia of the Dead (A Whole Life)* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 32.

13. Kiš, *Encyclopedia*, 36.

14. Kiš, *Encyclopedia*, 48.



human injustices and granting all God's creatures an equal place in eternity,¹⁵ because "each individual is a star unto himself, everything happens always and never, all things repeat themselves endlessly and unpeatedly."¹⁶ And in line with these goals, the style of the *Encyclopedia* is characterized by "an unlikely amalgam of encyclopedic conciseness and biblical eloquence."¹⁷

The narrator begins to read her father's biography (1910 – 1979). Aware that she has little time, she begins, with frozen fingers, to copy down the most important points. At a certain point, overwhelmed by the amount of information archived about her father, she can no longer select what to transcribe, and she begins to remember totally subjective details which not even the *Encyclopedia* seems to know: the narrator inserts her own memories, her own perception of her father, and both perspectives, that of the encyclopedia and that of the daughter, seem to merge, but there is also a sense of a struggle for memory control. There are certain things that the encyclopedia does not register: "And in the silence we could hear the wheezing of his lungs,"¹⁸ or when she comments "I could see in his eyes a glimmer of the terror that would flash behind his glasses a year later,"¹⁹ or when she mentions her father's gaze as he bids her farewell on the hospital stairs.²⁰ Although the philosophy of the encyclopedia is to aspire to record the totality of an individual life, subtly there are some fissures that point to the impossibility of archiving everything. In the *Encyclopedia* the record of her father ends with the drawing of a flower and the explanation that it was the basic motif of his paintings. The narrator screams and wakes up bathed in sweat, because after reading the last paragraph, she realizes that she didn't know everything about her father's last years. The very last information contained in the *Encyclopedia* is impossible for her to know. Or perhaps she does? It has all been a nightmare, which she has transcribed.

The *Encyclopedia* is articulated as an ideal of a concise yet total form of representation, as a fusion between brevitas and copia.²¹ The narrator attempts to transcribe that ideal of the encyclopedia as a concise and comprehensive totality, but her attempt is doomed to failure. As Aleida Assmann²² points out, this is a "paradoxical counter-memory," an "archive of the unarchived," where the difference between the important and the unimportant is obviated, and oblivion is equated with destruction. According to Riccardo Nicolosi,²³ Kiš's literature is a literature of memory, which gravitates around the disappearance of human beings in the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. The archiving of absolutely everything becomes synonymous with the total surveillance of the individual. In this vein, Katharina Wolf-Griesshaber²⁴ interprets the *Encyclopedia* as a counter-project to the archives of secret police forces in totalitarian countries, where the compilation of information about the individual serves to surveil, combat, and persecute them. In a broader sense, Mark Thompson²⁵ quotes historian Angus Calder: "it speaks for all the forgotten and anonymous dead' in twentieth-century Europe."

The novel *Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald* also embodies the idea of the archive that aspires to totality, that aspires to record the anonymous mass of Buchenwald's dead and its impossibility. Ivanji's novel is complex, both a survivor's testimony and a reflection on the memory culture and its effect on third generations.²⁶ In the following section, I will focus on Ivan Ivanji's impossible archive: its origin, its evolution, its form and its content, the voices.

15. Kiš, *Encyclopedia*, 34-35.

16. Kiš, *Encyclopedia*, 41.

17. Kiš, *Encyclopedia*, 35.

18. Kiš, *Encyclopedia*, 52.

19. Kiš, *Encyclopedia*, 52.

20. Kiš, *Encyclopedia*, 54.

21. Riccardo Nicolosi, "Das Enzyklopädische in der 'Enzyklopädie der Toten' von Danilo Kiš," *Die Welt der Slaven* LVI, (2011): 198, 215.

22. Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 399.

23. Nicolosi, "Das Enzyklopädische", 198, 208.

24. Katharina Wolf-Griesshaber, "Nachwort," in *Danilo Kiš. Die Enzyklopädie der Toten*, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2017), 69.

25. Thompson, "Introduction," xvii.

26. Although I will not address this issue in this contribution, I would like to point out that Ivanji's novels show a constant concern for the next generations and their relation to the Holocaust. For more information on this topic, see e.g. Volkhard Knigge and Sybille Steinbacher, *Geschichte von gestern für Deutsche von morgen? Die Erfahrung des Nationalsozialismus und historisch-politisches Lernen in der (Post-)Migrationsgesellschaft* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2019).

Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald: Origin and Evolution

The year of publication -1999- of *Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald* is relevant because the author inserts his text at a crucial moment in Germany for Memory Studies, i.e. the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new century. Bearing in mind the resignification of Buchenwald two moments stand out in memory culture: before and after the fall of the Wall. (1) The first stage before the fall of the Wall means resignification during the former GDR. Alexandra Klei²⁷ presents in her book, *Der erinnerte Ort* [*The Remembered Place*], an analysis of the Buchenwald concentration camp from an architectural vantage point. She examines the history of the camp and the resignifications undergone by the memorial, whose existence dates back to 1958, and whose main purpose is to be a place of learning. The focus on Buchenwald during the former GDR was essentially based on anti-fascist resistance, which clearly alludes to the myth on which the GDR was built. (2) In the second stage, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, especially during the 1990s, a new resignification takes place in the memorial Buchenwald / Mittelbau-Dora which is part of the new Memory Culture (*Erinnerungskultur*). As Aleida Assmann²⁸ explains in her book *Das neue Unbehagen der Erinnerungskultur* [*The New Unease of Memory Culture*], after the fall of the Berlin Wall in the 1990s, a new memory culture emerged in Germany, thanks to the efforts and financial investment of institutions, initiatives, *Gedenkstätten* (memorials) and museums, activities, projects, and programs. The media made it visible, and it was present in everyday life, with the *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones) in the streets, with outstanding buildings and monuments. And right at that time came the discovery of the more than 700 urns in Buchenwald, an event that Ivan Ivanji experienced at first hand thanks to the invitation of Volkhard Knigge. Undoubtedly, this episode inspired him to write the novel discussed in this contribution, which could be regarded as part of this new Memory Culture.

In the novel, the narrator is an omniscient figure who gives coherence to the whole story. He changes from first to third person, places himself inside and outside the story, presents facts, and gives his opinion and interpretation as well. The narrator can be identified with Ivan Ivanji,²⁹ although as he states in his autobiography (*Mein schönes Leben in der Hölle* [*My Beautiful Life in Hell*]) published in 2014: "Not everything written down in the first person is about me; not everything written down in the third person is about others."³⁰ The narrator describes, despite the difficulties in doing so, the origin and evolution of an anti-archive, of an impossible archive: the Man of Ashes of Buchenwald is made of the voices of the dead in the 701 urns, and aspires to represent the voices of all those who died in Buchenwald.

27. Alexandra Klei, *Der erinnerte Ort. Geschichte durch Architektur. Zur baulichen und gestalterischen Repräsentation der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011).

28. Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention* (München: C.H. Beck, 2016), 10-12.

29. Ivan Ivanji was born on January 24, 1929, in Zrenjanin/Banat. He was arrested by the Nazis in April 1944 and deported to Auschwitz as a political Jewish prisoner in May of the same year. In June, he was transferred to the Magdeburg satellite camp of Buchenwald concentration camp. In October, he was transferred to the Niederorschel satellite camp. In February 1945, he was transferred to the Langenstein-Zwieberge satellite camp. After the liberation of the concentration camp, Ivanji returned to Yugoslavia in September 1945. He studied architecture and German language and literature in Belgrade and worked as a teacher at the city's technical high school, an editor and, from the 1950s, as an interpreter for the Yugoslav government, in particular for Josip Broz Tito. Among other things, he was Deputy General Director of the Belgrade National Theater, Counsellor for Culture and Press at the Yugoslav Embassy in Bonn and Secretary General of the Yugoslav Writers' Association. He writes novels as well as articles on political topics in Serbian and German. He has been working as a freelance writer and translator in Vienna and Belgrade since 1992. He is the author of more than twenty novels, the latest, *Der alte Jude und das Meer* [*The Old Jew and the Sea*], was published in September 2023. He has been a critical friend of the Buchenwald Memorial for many years, as stated on the website of the memorial Buchenwald / Mittelbau-Dora. In 2019, he was awarded the Order of Merit of the Free State of Thuringia. He has been an honorary citizen of the city of Weimar since 2020.

For more information on his person and his work, see: (1) "Ivan Ivanji." Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://www.buchenwald.de/en/geschichte/biografien/ltg-ausstellung/ivan-ivanji>. (2) "Ivan Ivanji." Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://liberation.buchenwald.de/en/buchenwald-memorial/ivan-ivanji>. (3) Martin, Marco. "So habe ich Buchenwald überlebt." *Welt*, January 27, 2018. <https://www.welt.de/kultur/literarischewelt/article172904470/Eine-Begegnung-mit-Ivan-Ivanji.html>. Accessed December 14, 2023. [How I survived Buchenwald]. (4) Akrap, Doris. "Geburtstagsfeier von Ivan Ivanji. Erzählen gegen den Tod." *taz*, February 29, 2019. <https://taz.de/Geburtstagsfeier-von-Ivan-Ivanji/!5568954/>. Accessed December 14, 2023. [Ivan Ivanji's birthday party. Storytelling against death].

30. Ivan Ivanji, *Mein schönes Leben in der Hölle* (Wien: Picus, 2014), 6.



The narrator tells the story of the urns since the opening of the concentration camp, when the 1934 laws on the preservation of ashes were still in force. Records were kept of all processes, and if the families wished so, they could receive one of these sealed sheet metal boxes upon payment of 30 Reichsmarks, inside of which the ashes of their loved one were supposed to be.³¹ Afterwards, the urns served as intermediate containers, their contents were poured into sacks, or thrown into the Saale River, or dumped in a kind of sinkhole near the *Falkenhof* next to the *Lager*. The war was coming to an end and there were too many urns in between, so they remained hidden (the narrator imagines) until their discovery in May 1997.³² Once the urns are found, conversations as to what to do with the ashes take place. After representatives of the four major religions – a rabbi, an Orthodox deacon, a Catholic priest, and a Protestant priest – are called in, it is decided that the remains of the ashes stuck in the urns are to be poured into a container, which will then be buried in a sarcophagus next to the *Glockenturm* (bell tower) of Buchenwald. A survivor who is asked to read a funeral oration at the graveside points out, not without a touch of dark humour, that it is only by chance that he is not there. The chosen one, the former inmate, is none other than Ivanji, given the clues that he leaves in the text: “former diplomat”, “man of the theatre”.³³

Nobody except for the narrator knows it yet, but in the ashes of at least 701 incinerated people a chemical reaction unknown to science has begun. Despite belonging to the world of the fantastic, Ivanji endows his fictional creature with a certain veracity, establishing its origin at the precise time when Dolly the sheep is created and the concept of cloning becomes a reality. At that time, film director Spielberg was showing that a whole Jurassic world could be created from a dinosaur cell,³⁴ and the words “genetic manipulation” were all the rage. These are popular references known to all, which Ivanji complements with another, much older, literary allusion: much earlier, Goethe had already created a *homunculus* in his *Faust*. Throughout the novel, the process of formation of the *Aschenmensch* is described. It begins as individual drops flowing in the same stream. It is about voices that form an “it” (es) driven by a principle, which gives coherence to the “we,” essentially composed of male genes, and which does not have all the answers that the voices are making. The Man of Ashes of Buchenwald, an inexplicable organism made up of the voices of the dead, seeks information and answers about death. One day in April 1998, it causes all the buildings of the memorial Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora to lose power and all computer data to be erased.³⁵ The *Aschenmensch* has effects on nature and technology, they are small details that hardly anyone notices. It is like a strip of fog, then it is like an invisible cloud, something composed of compressed genes, electronics, and energy. It knows that Weimar as a European cultural capital will be the centre of attention in 1999, and therefore it wants to be ready in time with a clear intention: “We dead want to really get on the nerves of the living, dig up buried memories by force! This is our right. We want to irritate them by reminding them of us, by not letting them go. We want to attack their forgetfulness, strengthen their memory.”³⁶ Little by little it discovers its elasticity, its flexibility, it experiences movements and forms, it becomes “he” (er), and he calls himself the Man of Ashes, *der Aschenmensch*: “He is not dead. He was dead, but he didn’t stay dead because the past is not dead, cannot be dead, as long as someone remembers it.”³⁷

These quotes emphasize the intention of fighting against oblivion, compelled by the need to remember the dead. And like Danilo Kiš’ *Encyclopedia*, which only collects information about non-celebrities, Ivanji’s anti-archive also wants to be a tribute to the anonymous mass of the dead who gather in the man of ashes.

Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald: The Voices of the Dead

The voices of the dead contained in the Man of Ashes are very varied, representative of different ethnicities, different fates, different deaths. What they have in common is that they all died in appalling

31. See Klei, *Der erinnerte Ort*, 254-264. This section of her book is dedicated to the history and description of the space dedicated to the crematorium. The treatment of the ashes from the beginning of the concentration camp is explained here. On the discovery of the urns, see p. 258.

32. Ivan Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald* (Wien: Picus, 1999), 26-27.

33. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 32-37.

34. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 39.

35. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 99-103.

36. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 109.

37. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 126.

circumstances in the Buchenwald concentration camp. They are all victims and part of an anonymous mass. And although both survivors and more prominent dead are also mentioned, Ivanji gives all the protagonism to the nameless. Thus, the narrator inserts himself into the anonymous mass, distancing himself from inmates such as Jorge Semprún. In what follows, the voices will be analysed, voices whose stories converge in the Man of Ashes, who will eventually find a face and act.

The narrator inserts his own story³⁸ in Buchenwald. He is a survivor thanks to the death of another human being who has no name. Thus, the narration of the voice of a German communist, who reflects upon the question of the hierarchy among prisoners, explains the responsibility of sending another prisoner to his death:

If a young man, half a child, was to be sent to Auschwitz and I could get him out of the transport and send an aged sick man to the gas chamber instead of him, I did not hesitate. No! Not at all. I did it! And I do not regret it at all. No one else was there to do it, we had to take the responsibility. We took it on! Who else, if not us? [...]

Was it a collaboration with the SS? It depends on how you see it! If you let yourself be caught and shot by the SS, it was in a way also a cooperation, but a useless one, if you had not fought before. And we fought for room to maneuver. Did we kill in the camp? If necessary, we also executed fellow prisoners who had become a danger to others, yes! If I did it? That doesn't matter, it's all the same to you. [...] Is it possible that among us there are the ashes of a man whom I, whom we have condemned to death? Certainly! It is possible. It is even probable! He may come forward!³⁹

The narrator-Ivanji tries to give an answer with this voice to a question that has accompanied him throughout his life and seeks to answer in his books: who took him from the "Transport" to Auschwitz and sent him to the Niederorschel subcamp in the autumn of 1944. Someone saved his life by writing "bricklayer's apprentice" next to his name. Perhaps a "Semprún." As the narrator notes, Semprún was at the place where the life and death of the prisoners was decided. And this is what differentiates Semprún from the narrator-Ivanji:

Not only the six years that he is older, but that were contributory factors in this contrast. [...] For me Semprun was, Semprun is *one of them*. I am *one of the anonymous mass*. The prominent prisoners with functions were in the camp almost as far away from me - angels or devils, who are also only fallen angels - as the SS. They were even more dangerous because they had more direct influence on my little fate.⁴⁰

The narrator-Ivanji positions himself as part of the anonymous mass, distances himself from the prominent prisoners of Buchenwald, such as Jorge Semprún, and does not want to speak neither of guilt nor of morality. He only wants to state facts. And in doing so, he pays homage to the one who died for him in Auschwitz:

Without knowing who it was, I must at least erect a monument to him in words. In the air. [...] All my life I search for words to describe these facts without sounding pathetic. I must realize that it is impossible to find the right tone. As impossible as the resurrection of the ashes of the burned from the depth of the Ettersberg.⁴¹

Alongside the voice of the communist there are many other voices telling their stories, especially retelling their death. The idea of totality is embodied in the text through the necessary selection, which attends to the pluralization of memory. Among the voices presented are the voice of a child, of someone who died and was cremated in the *Typhusbaracke*, of someone who performed slave labor, and whose hatred has outlived his death. He saw in the grimace of his Nazi murderer the pleasure he took in killing him. There's also a priest who wants to announce love, and who died of an overdose of strophanthus; a Russian engineer who was twice cremated; two brothers, one a believer and the other not; a gypsy from Burgenland who was subjected to medical experiments: The principle explains to him that he

38. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 73-87.

39. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 112-113.

40. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 85.

41. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 87.



was vivisected (while alive, parts of his liver were cut out). He remembers the pain. Someone who was killed by the communists talks about the hierarchy among the prisoners in the camp and about the ways of killing prisoners by the other prisoners. A Danish policeman is asked why he did not fight and does not know how to answer. He only knows that he was against it, without ever having been for anything. The Jewish chicken seller. The Jehovah's Witness who prays in German and suffered a slow and cruel death. The bookseller in Prague who speaks German and Czech would have liked to write an anthology on death in German literature. A mathematics teacher from Kiev who talked to a Nazi captain about mathematics and another Nazi took revenge and sent him to Buchenwald. A gymnastics teacher from Lyon who speaks French and is in a good mood and laughs. He died of a heart attack in the Lager. A British secret agent. A Jewish professor from Dresden. A member of the *Swing-Jugend* (Swing Youth), from Hamburg, Aryan. Arrested by the Gestapo for listening to enemy radio stations, he forged his identity card and pretended to be older than he was in order to be admitted in bars. He was taken to the concentration camp and killed when he was 16 years old.⁴² At this point in the story, the narrator comments that they all become music: the sound of Hamburg night swing, Bach, Mozart, the Internationale, the Marseillaise, a Christian chorale, martial music. Despite the different types of music, it seems to sound harmonious. But not only the sounds unite them, but also the languages that each speaks, although diverse: German, Russian, Danish, Jiddish, Czech, Serbian, Hungarian, French, Italian, Greek, Polish and Spanish, as well as other languages and countless dialects.⁴³

Among the set of voices, there are some that do not quite fit for different reasons, although it can be stated that they do follow the principle of selection of representatives of the non-prominent dead, with one exception that confirms the rule. Voice number 16 corresponds to the dissonant voice of Goethe's valet, who died in old age more than 200 years ago. He is a part of them, although neither he nor the others know why, and he does not know what a crematorium is.⁴⁴ Another voice belongs to a dead German from the Soviet Special Camp No. 2 who died of pneumonia at the age of 15.⁴⁵ This voice raises fears in the Man of Ashes that an SS has slipped in.⁴⁶ But neither does he fit for chronological reasons, as the Soviet Special Camp No. 2 existed from 1945 to 1950, i.e. after the National Socialist dictatorship. By that time, the voices that make up the Man of Ashes had already died. They also discover a woman among them whom, despite being royal, has no voice and her story is told - based on what Eugen Kogon⁴⁷ wrote - in the third person: Princess Mafalda of Savoy, daughter of the Italian king and married to Philipp Prince of Hessen, who was liaison between Hitler and Mussolini. She is the exception that proves the rule, as the Man of Ashes is composed of male voices of the non-prominent dead.

At the end, Ivanji's impossible archive has a face which he has found in *Das letzte Gesicht* [The Last Face], a 1944 sculpture by Buchenwald survivor Bruno Apitz. It is here that literature and the visual arts

42. See Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 41-57, 137-138. Many of the stories seem to be taken from the permanent exhibition at the Buchenwald memorial "Ostracism and Violence 1937 to 1945": "Another aspect of the exhibition takes the form of six listening stations on inmates' lives and stories of persecution. The examples of 85 people illustrate the composition of the inmate community within the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. For the first time, all categories of victims persecuted on the basis of National Socialist ideology or in the wake of NS occupations are given a voice and a face, including the so-called 'asocials' and 'habitual criminals' persecuted on the basis of a socio-racist rationale". <https://www.buchenwald.de/en/besuch/ausstellungen/ausgrenzung-und-gewalt> This exhibition opened in 2016. For the exhibition "Leben - Terror - Geist", which opened in 1999, see Axel Doßmann, "Vereint in der Differenz. Zur Ausstellung 'Leben - Terror - Geist'. KZ Buchenwald: Porträts von Künstlern und Intellektuellen," ed. Gerald Echterhoff, & Martin Saar (Konstanz: UVK, 2002), 181-201.

43. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 57-58.

44. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 59-65.

45. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 122-123.

46. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 124.

47. Eugen Kogon describes in his book the special treatment of those who were isolated and under surveillance by SS guards in the *Isolierbaracke für Prominente* [Isolation barrack for prominent special prisoners], which was in the middle of the forest. Among the personalities imprisoned there was Princess Mafalda, whose arm was amputated after an air raid on 24 August 1944. The princess died a few days later in the brothel due to loss of blood. According to Kogon: "The naked corpse was taken to the crematorium together with the men's bodies of the day, where the section master, Father Joseph Thyl, pulled it out of the pile, covered it up and ensured that it was quickly cremated." Eugen Kogon, *Der SS-Staat. Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager* (München: Heyne, 1991), 212, 215. As stated in Ivanji's novel, there are contradictory versions about where she is buried. In Buchenwald she has a memorial plaque. See Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 140-145.

join hands to synthesise two tributes to the dead. *Das letzte Gesicht* is a sculpture made from the *Goethe-Eiche* (Goethe's oak)⁴⁸ from Buchenwald. Apitz was in the *Pathologie* and as a model for his sculpture he took plaster casts of dead prisoners held there, the faces of some people, whose flesh and skulls, cremated and turned to ash, are found, at least genetically, in the Man of Ashes.⁴⁹ Once the Man of Ashes is fully made, his first and only action described in the novel will be against a group of young people from Weimar, Caspar, Martin and Michael, right-wing radicals who climb the Ettersberg armed with a saw. When they begin to saw off the leg of the smallest figure on the monument to the liberated prisoners, *der Aschenmensch* concentrates and splits the saw.⁵⁰ This first action, which is based on a real event that happened in 1998, takes place in the symbolic place par excellence, as described on the memorial's website:

Visible from far and wide, the Buchenwald Memorial is the gravesite of almost 5,000 concentration camp inmates, and today it is the largest monument commemorating a NS concentration camp in Europe. The large-scale complex was constructed in 1958 on the southern slopes of Ettersberg Mountain as a national monument of the GDR.⁵¹

And the last word is written in literature, as the Man of Ashes avoids the misdeed perpetrated against the tribute to the dead of Buchenwald. In Ivanji's novel we witness the creation, formation, and evolution of the Man of Ashes, who will continue to appear in other novels such as *Buchstaben von Feuer* [Letters of Fire] (2011) or in *Corona in Buchenwald* (2021).

Buchenwald will not be repeated. But other atrocities, for everyone who experiences them, new. As it has always been, for all eternity.
Everything repeats itself.
Does everything repeat itself?⁵²

Ivan Ivanji's Impossible Archive: By way of a conclusion

Throughout these pages I have sought to record the efforts and the will to uproot the dead of wars and totalitarian systems from anonymity. If we focus on the dead of the National Socialist concentration camps, and Buchenwald in particular, we become aware of the work carried out in this respect by the memorial through the Books of the Dead, which can never be complete. Literature also reflects this arduous work of compilation, as Ivan Ivanji's novel *Der Aschenmensch von Buchenwald* [The Man of Ashes of Buchenwald] has shown. Inspired by the real event of the discovery of the urns, it has features that link it to Danilo Kiš's *The Encyclopedia of the Dead (A Whole Life)*, making it a fundamental substratum. Both texts move in the realm of the fantastic and present uncanny elements. In the case of Ivanji's novel the uncanny elements are given by National Socialism's own history of horrors. Both the content of Kiš's library and Ivanji's Man of Ashes focus on the anonymous individuals ignored and forgotten by the official records. In both cases it is the control of the archive that matters, for it implies gaining control over memory. And at least in literature, this memory distances itself from the prominent people and focuses on the non-prominent, giving them absolute protagonism. Thus, literature becomes a witness to the struggle for memory. It is the ground where the desire to keep the memory of the dead alive and to prevent them from being forgotten, and the impossibility of recording, the impossible archiving, go hand in hand.

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48. For further information on the *Goethe-Eiche*, see the text dedicated to it by Volkhard Knigge in Doßmann, *Geschichte als Verunsicherung*, 329-338.

49. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 128-130.

50. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 148-149.

51. "BUCHENWALD MEMORIAL/NATIONAL MONUMENT OF THE GDR." Accessed December 30, 2023. <https://www.buchenwald.de/en/geschichte/historischer-ort/gedenkstaette/mahnmal>.

52. Ivanji, *Der Aschenmensch*, 154.



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