

In October 2019, *What she lost* - a book by Melissa W. Hunter - was published in the United States¹. The publisher reserves already on the reverse of the title page: „This is a fictionalized account of true events. The author re-created events, locales, and conversations from the narrator's memories of them, as related to the author. To maintain their anonymity, in some instances, the author has changed the names of individuals and places, and she may have changed some identifying characteristics and details, such as physical properties, occupations, and places of residence.” The following comments ignore this publisher's reservation and should therefore be seen only as an opinion on the historical image of Olkusz presented in the Melissa W. Hunter's book.

The book starts very personally. Melissa and her father go to the hospital where her grandmother is staying. She knows that after her grandfather's death, grandma fell into a deep depression, which causes Melissa's younger brother to avoid meeting her. But Melissa remembers from her childhood another grandmother who created for her a real, warm grandparents' home. A visit to a nursing home, showing the complete helplessness of the family in contact with grandmother, introduces at the same time the figure of Estera, about which neither Melissa nor her father have no idea, because her grandmother mentally returned to her family home in Olkusz.

From the very beginning of the narrative, we know that the story is placed at a specific time and place, whether in pre-war and later occupied Poland or in the United States. The author herself already in the first chapter clearly indicates the time and place of action: „Olkusz, Poland, spring 1938”. We learn about ill Esther, her sister and main narrator of the book Sarah – author's grandmother, their brothers Jacob, Sam, Isaac and five years old twins David and Majer. We read about parents, although their names will be known only later (mother Brocha and father Leibish). We should therefore have no doubt that the novel of Melissa W. Hunter concerns her Olkusz family from the register of residents below:

Miejscowość Olkusz ulica Żuradzka										Nr. domu 3 Nr. miesz. Komisarjat P. P.									
a) Nazwisko b) Imię i nazwisko c) Data urodzenia d) Data śmierci e) Data wyjazdu f) Data powrotu g) Data wyjazdu h) Data powrotu i) Data wyjazdu j) Data powrotu										1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10									
1. Waldman	Berek i Lejbus	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882
2. Waldman	Estera Laja	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882
3. Waldman	Lejbus i Brucha	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882
4. Waldman	Lejbus i Brucha	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882
5. Waldman	Lejbus i Brucha	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882
6. Waldman	Lejbus i Brucha	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882
7. Waldman	Lejbus i Brucha	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882
8. Waldman	Lejbus i Brucha	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882
9. Waldman	Lejbus i Brucha	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882
10. Waldman	Lejbus i Brucha	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882	11.11.1882

Family of Lejbus and Ruchla, nee Glazer, Waldman/Waltman (Register of Olkusz residents, t. XIV, archive of Firefighting Museum in Olkusz)

Although this identification, as we read the novel, presents major or minor problems, the fundamental correspondence of data on family members is convincing, especially confirmed by the official note in the register about the death of the eldest Waldman/Waltman daughter – Estera Laja.

Soon we also get to know the narrator's aunt Leah and uncle Abraham, living upstairs with two children: Gutcha and Daniel. And here the doubts begin to be significant, especially since the narrator's cousin will grow into one of the novel's heroines. Well, on Żuradzka 3, apart from the author's grandmother's family, there are four aunt and uncle's families, but none of her aunts name is Lea. Indeed we have uncle Abram, younger brother of narrator's father, but her wife is Gitla, not Lea and although they have two children, a daughter and a son, it is not only their names - Estera (Gutcha in book) and Berek (Daniel in book) that are troublesome, but mainly

¹ I thank Michał Ostrowski for sharing the book.

their age: Estera is seven years younger than narrator, so it is difficult to imagine her as school friend from the same bench, since she is two years younger than twins, narrator's brothers, who in the novel will remain children requiring motherly care. In general there is a problem with this school, because we do not know exactly which school the heroes of the book attend and some of them, as Estera Laja (she is 26 years old when dies in 1938), Jankiel, Szaja or narrator her-self are already out of school age, and certainly after the primary school stage.

The image shows a page from a handwritten register of residents from Olkusz. The page is divided into two main sections. The left section contains personal data for several individuals, including names, birth dates, and family details. The right section contains administrative information, including house numbers, street names, and official stamps. The entries are written in Polish and include names like 'Waltman', 'Szwimer', and 'Gitla'. There are also some handwritten notes and dates, such as '1931' and '1938'.

Family of Abram and Gitla, nee Szwimer, Waltman (*Register of Olkusz residents, t. XIV*)

It is similar with military service. In general, this is an interesting situation showing the attitude of the Jewish community, whose younger generation feels (probably mainly due to universal state education) integrated with the Polish state, but the older one has doubts whether it is definitely their war. This repeatedly raised in Poland today, usually anti-Semitic in motivation, topic of avoiding military service by Polish Jews is waiting for its author, but only need just to look at the official journals of the Kielce Voivode (e.g. ordinance of Kielce Voivode dated 7 March 1934 r. on prosecution of people evading military duty published in Kielce Voivodeship Journal no. 13 od 26 May 1934), to get rid of the myths about the over-representation of the Jewish element or the under-representation of the Polish element in this area.

Apart of narrator's and uncle Abram's families, before the war the families of three other Waltmans brothers lived at the same address: Jakób Perec (born in 1890) with his wife Chana Bajla and their five children (Lejbuś, Tauba, Abram Mendel, Sura Gitla and Brajna), Moszek Machel (born in 1894) with his wife Chendla Bina, nee Sonenberg, and their four children (Chaim Lejzor, Prywa, Majer and Berek) and Herszel (born in 1897) with his wife Małką, nee Szerman, and their son Berek. The brothers' mother Mindla Waltman, nee Waldman, born 18 April 1862 r. in Pilica lived there until her death on 9 January 1937. Other tenants, sub-tenants, extended family members and servants also lived there. All five brothers, similar to their mother, had house owners status, but this is Lejbuś –narrator's father – was „baker-bakery owner” while four other brothers were „workers-bakers”.

These complications in the description of such a vast family will appear as you read quite a few: a call to the army for the narrator's brother Jakub comes to the address Sławkowska 42 (p. 48), Abram's son, Daniel in the book, is taken to the Olkusz market place during the pacification action known as „Bloody Wednesday”, although he was actually born in 1931 r., and six years older twins narrator's brothers stay at home (p. 75), finally in the ghetto at Sikorka the narrator's family is accommodated with the family of one of the uncles, father's brother Berisz and his wife Towa because they have no children (p. 92), although in fact all the narrator's uncles have offspring.

Unfortunately we have also in the Hunter's book descriptions inconsistent with the reality known even from photos and accounts. The German soldiers are omnipresent, while in reality they stayed in Olkusz at most during hostilities periods, but author/narrator calls so members of different German police formations. We find description of the Bloody Wednesday with dead tall over which bodies the rabbi is praying (s. 83), it is also place to mark Olkusz Jews with the David star armbands (p. 81). The Melcer's story on their tragically ended escape told in *What she lost* is surprising (p. 85) – we know that Melcers were Waldman/Waltman neighbours from Rynek 8, and their backyards were interconnected, but we know too, that with three children we find them on the preserved deportation list from the Olkusz ghetto², and four of their children survived the war in camps. We meet one of neighbours, wealthy Mr. Geller as head of wartime Judenrat (p. 87) – we know nothing about such historical person, however we don't know the full composition of the Olkusz Jewish Council. We find surprising picture of moving to ghetto in a column surrounded by the German army (p. 88-89). Finally the lack of Jewish militia is astonishing, while this formation was the main executor of the German orders in the Olkusz ghetto.

² See Krzysztof Kocjan, *Zagłada olkuskich Żydów*, 2nd ed., Bukowno 2017, s. 137, fig. 171, nos. 609-613.

Also in the second part of the book, describing post-Olkusz life of heroine, we have surprising situations like the one where her brother says: „Do you think the Poles will stay out of Reichenbach? They were displaced as well. This was their home before Germans took over. The factories and farms – it was all their property. If they come back, we may have to defend what we’ve taken as our own. We won’t be welcome here forever.” (p. 232). Maybe it wouldn't be strange if it wasn't for today's Dzierżoniów, a German city for centuries remaining far beyond the borders of pre-war Poland. Hunter also incorrectly locates the Klettendorf labor camp in East Prussia, while it is about a village being today within the borders of Wrocław. Describing wartime fate of the wife and son of his future grandfather she suggests that they were deported from Katowice to extermination, but Germans removed Jews from this town already in the first months of the occupation to the General Gouvernement area, and remaining rest was completely deported in May/June 1940 to Chrzanów, Szczakowa, and maybe to Olkusz too.

Although the author describes deportation to labor camps as stages of emptying the Olkusz ghetto, in the case of the narrator we are lucky to have a document related to her deportation to the camp. Chaja Waltman is on the list of Jewish women taken from Olkusz for forced labor on 12 March 1942³. Thanks to this, we also know the address of the family in the ghetto - Rabensteiner 8, on the southern side of today's junction of Jasna and Parcze streets⁴. We know also that two cousins: Gitla and Priva lived in the other place of the ghetto: Wolbromer 24. Describing separation from the family and deportation – following brothers Jankiel, Szaja and Izaak – to the forced labor camp, the narrator says she came there with her cousin Gutcha, so we know that it is one of them, but no one after all is a daughter of uncle Abram: Sura Gitla is daughter of Jakób Perec and Prywa is Moszek Machel's one. We note that the heroine on the list has a date of birth a year later, which confirms that the declared age already had significance in the adopted survival strategy. No wonder then that in the Hunter's book the heroine claims that she was taken to the camp at the age of sixteen (s. 178), while in fact she was twenty two years old. All three women survived the war, but Prywa does not appear from the name in the book (only once the author mentions grandmother's cousins living in Israel in the plural – p. 308). And this is Prywa who on the beginning of 1946 claimed for return of the family property in Olkusz at then Daszyński street 11⁵. On 7 October 1946 r. Prywa was noted on the list of the Landsmanschaft of Jews former residents of the town Olkusz, she was then in Wałbrzych, so quite close to the narrator's whereabouts⁶.

There is also another surprising Olkusz motif in the Hunter's book. Describing the narrator's struggle with his overprotective brother, the author introduces the character of Sophie. The brother confesses that they met in Reichenbach and have been meeting for some time. On the author's grandparents wedding on 17 August 1945 Sophie appears as a Sam's fiancée, there is also her sister Ruth, who – working at the secretariat of the local militia station – will play a significant role in the final plot, quite naive story of escaping from the Polish militia custody, and finally from Poland to the American occupation zone with the Soviet officer Rubin in the lead role. Sophie with Sam open a shop in w Reichenbach, as the narrator mentions, „Sophie had worked in her parents' own store before the war” (p. 285). Well, these sisters are Zysła Laja and Rejla Ejbuszyc (Ajbuszyc) from Olkusz, Marchal Piłsudski square 21 (earlier Górnica 24), Zysła was noted on the post-war list of persons registered in Olkusz, there are narrator's cousins Prywa and Gitla and her brother Szaja too⁷. Zysła Laja is only eleven days older than narrator, so surprising is that they give an impression of earlier strangers.

It is fascinating experience to read a book on my home town published on the other side of the globe. It is fascinating to be at a position to verify a picture presented in this book with available historical documents. And there is nothing extraordinary that these pictures often don't overlap. The book of Melissa W. Hunter, although her action takes place in geographical and historical realities, is also a book about memory, about its intergenerational transmission with all its deficiencies. We see author's huge desire to recreate a world she did not get to know, had no opportunity to experience, like most of us, although we were born in this city, but not at that time. As she says: „I based my story on an interview I had with my grandmother. During that interview, she told me the names of places I knew little to nothing about—Olkusz, Reichenbach, and the camps she was in. She even had photos in her possession that I thought only belonged to our family. When I was researching Olkusz, the town where she grew up, I discovered not only those same photos online but others as well. Those photos became inspiration for one of my chapters. Discoveries like these were true gems. Also, when I discovered that the satellite camp she had been in (Peterswaldau) was a subcamp of Gross Rosen, which

³ See K. Kocjan, *Zagłada olkuskich Żydów*, p. 98, fig. 123, no. 106.

⁴ I thank Mr. Marek Piotrowski for his help to identify the place.

⁵ State Archive in Katowice, ref. 1343, hand-over list no. 2 of the Town Court in from years 1945-1950, p. 177 (Co 3/46) & 213 (Co 40/46).

⁶ K. Kocjan, *Zagłada olkuskich Żydów*, p. 166, fig. 187, no. 63.

⁷ K. Kocjan, *Zagłada olkuskich Żydów*, p. 163, fig. 184, no. 3 and p. 164, fig. 185, no. 113, 114 & 121.

neighbored the town of Reichenbach where she resettled—this was like successfully fitting pieces of a puzzle together.”⁸

Reading Melissa W. Hunter's book is finally a good reason to think about our own memory, the memory of our own experiences, but also that passed down by previous generations. Memory, deficiency of which we feel more and more over the course of our lives, a memory of questions not asked and therefore missed. Memory, which, when not verified, quickly becomes its denial - an idealized untruth.

And there is also in this memory the moral dimension of history, which should be a teacher of life and not become – like in Osiecka's poem Orszaki, dworaki – cheap strumpet and even voracious myth. As Hunter says: „*What She Lost* was a hard book to write, but the scenes that involved Sarah's mother—where she had to watch helplessly what was happening to her children—were the hardest. I began writing this novel when I was in my twenties. I had just married and didn't have children. I definitely struggled to infuse the manuscript with the emotion I was hoping to capture. I've said this book was meant to be written now, twenty years later, because it took being a mom myself truly to understand what these characters experienced. I shed a lot of tears during the writing of this book, but hopefully I was able to portray depth of emotion as a result.”⁹ It seems to me that I understand what Hunter talks about, because I experienced similar as young father reading terrifying account of Dawid Nassan from Skala near Olkusz¹⁰. And despite of all geography, living in other place, with a dramatically different generational heritage separating me from the author of *What She Lost*, this is an experience which - although it did not touch my family as personally as the family of the author – unites us.

The heroine of the book by Melissa W. Hunter, her grandmother, Chaja Sura Waltman passed away on 13 February this year in the United States as Sala Werthaiser, nee Waldmann, at the age of 96¹¹. According to her Olkusz story of life, on 15 March she would be 100 years old.

⁸ <http://booksbywomen.org/an-interview-with-melissa-w-hunter/>.

⁹ <http://booksbywomen.org/an-interview-with-melissa-w-hunter/>.

¹⁰ *Olkusz: Zagłada i pamięć. Dyskusja o ofiarach wojny i świadectwa ocalałych Żydów*, edited by Ireneusz Cieślík, Olgerd Dziechciarz and Krzysztof Kocjan, Olkusz 2007, p. 306-309 (available on-line at: <https://olkuscyzydzi.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Olkusz-Zaglada-i-pamiec.pdf>).

¹¹ <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/cincinnati/obituary.aspx?pid=195398074>.