

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

---

py The human core of the public realm : women pri  
py performed radio at the Majdanek concentration

Ripatti-Torniainen, Leena

2019-07-01

---

Ripatti-Torniainen , L & Stachyra , G 2019 , ' The human core of the public realm : women  
py prisoners performed radio at the Majdanek concentration camp ' , M  
py Society , vol. 41 , no. 5 , pp. 654 669 . <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719848584>

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/303704>

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719848584>

---

cc\_by\_nc

publishedVersion

---

*Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.*

*This is an electronic reprint of the original article.*

*This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.*

*Please cite the original version.*

# The human core of the public realm: women prisoners' performed 'radio' at the Majdanek concentration camp

Media, Culture &amp; Society

2019, Vol. 41(5) 654–669

© The Author(s) 2019



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0163443719848584

[journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs)**Leena Ripatti-Torniainen** 

University of Helsinki, Finland

**Grazyna Stachyra**

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland

## Abstract

The article elaborates Hannah Arendt's thought on the public realm to analyse the performed 'radio' that women prisoners 'produced' with their voice at the Majdanek concentration camp, Poland, in Spring 1943. The authors reconstruct the rationale that clarifies why an image of a radio was meaningful at a death camp. The documented memories reveal that the 'radio' created a resistant, harm-preventing and despair-relieving space. Mobilizing the meanings Arendt gives to the public realm as the shared reference and shared belonging, the authors show that the memories point towards the prisoners' efforts to break their exclusion by decisively continuing their belonging to the public world through their own performance. In Arendt's concepts, 'broadcasting' and listening to 'programmes' actualized prisoners' being and subjectivity, both of which were under constant assaults. Conceptualized through Arendt's thought, the performed 'radio' reveals amid the extreme exclusion, isolation and cruelty of the death camp how profoundly meaningful the public realm is to humans.

## Keywords

action, concentration camp, exclusion, Hannah Arendt, public realm, radio, resistance, social participation

---

## Corresponding author:

Leena Ripatti-Torniainen, University of Helsinki, Siltavuorenpenger 1–5, 10 / P.O. Box 9, FI-00014 Helsinki, Finland.

Email: [leena.ripatti-torniainen@helsinki.fi](mailto:leena.ripatti-torniainen@helsinki.fi)

## Introduction

On Saturday, 13 February 1943, Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk raised her voice on a bunk bed in the women's Barrack 3 at the Majdanek concentration and extermination camp in Lublin, Poland. 'Hello! Hello!' she said, 'This is Radio Majdanek' (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1968: 91). Her voice declared the beginning of the first 'programme' on the 'radio' that prisoners performed with their voice. In her remarks, Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk spoke about the reality of the camp and concluded by what she later described as giving something of her own to her imprisoned death camp victim mates: 'Good night, ladies. Tomorrow will be a better day' (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1968: 91–92).

In this article, we analyse the performed 'radio' at the Majdanek concentration camp through the meanings Hannah Arendt gives to the public realm. Founding the article on Arendt's thought is not a self-evident choice. In her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 2004 [1948]: 600–603), Arendt writes the totalitarian regime establishes an 'iron band' that isolates human beings from each other. Arendt (2004 [1948]) analyses the ways the dehumanization processes of concentration camps aim at systematically destroying individuality of inmates. Arendt's judgement on concentration camps would not seem to provide support for analysis of collaborative initiative and individual creativity such as performing 'radio programmes' amid the devastation of the camp.

However, instead of constituting a problem for our topic and analysis, we argue Hannah Arendt's writing provides a crucial starting point for understanding the meaningfulness of the women prisoners' performance at the Majdanek camp. Arendt (2004 [1948]: 571) argues that the concentration camps not only aim at destroying life but also the 'fact of existence itself'. By not only murdering prisoners but also destroying their identity as if they had never existed (Arendt, 2004 [1948]: 570–571), concentration camps destroy further 'the ability to remember and mourn' them (Aharony, 2015: 21).

Arendt therefore raises the question of what it means to exist as a human being, and in her book, *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1998 [1958]) brings the question and her answer into the field of the public realm scholarship. Arendt reserves foundational meanings for action in the public realm as the actualization of human existence and individual identity (Dossa, 2006: 3–4). In this article, we mobilize Arendt's understanding of the public realm to analyse the performed 'radio' in conditions in which human existence and individual identity were assaulted.

Daily 'programmes' were 'broadcast' by the Majdanek women's camp prisoners between 13 February and early May 1943 (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1968: 91; Kiedrzyńska and Murawska, 1972: 37–38; Mencil, 1991: 312–315). Although there are no recordings of the 'programmes', memories have been documented and archived. Krystyna Tarasiewicz (1948) was the first author to bring the 'radio' to public attention after the war in a short one-page article. Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk, who was one of the key figures of the 'radio', wrote notes about the 'broadcasts' at the camp with a small two-centimetre pencil that was easy to hide, on brown paper used to wrap glass wool (Fornal, 1995a). Those notes were smuggled out of the camp. Her brother wrote a diary that contained transcriptions of the original notes. Twenty-five years later, Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk (1968, 1969) included the transcriptions in her book *Niebo bez ptaków* (Sky without Birds). She also wrote about the 'radio' in her other book *Matylda* (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1970).

Furthermore, the journalists Zbigniew Stepek and Barbara Roztworowska reconstructed the first 'programme' for the Polish National Radio Lublin in 1966. Between 1958 and 1981, four survivors gave statements about the 'radio' for the State Museum at Majdanek Archives, among them Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk (1967) and Matylda Woliniewska (1958). The 'radio' had been Woliniewska's idea (Fornal, 1995b). Her memoirs were later published in an edited volume (Tarasiewicz, 1988). In 1995 and 1996, journalist Stanisław Fornal from the Polish National Radio Lublin interviewed five survivors, including Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk. Radio Lublin broadcast a series of programmes (Fornal 1995a, 1995b, 1996a, 1996b), the recordings of which are stored at the Radio Lublin Archives. In addition, 'Radio Majdanek' has been described by Kiedrzyńska (1965), Rosiak (1971), Kiedrzyńska and Murawska (1972), Fornal (1997) and Piwińska (1978). Our analysis, which is the first text of the topic in English and the first to draw on public sphere theory, is based on the entire corpus that we know does exist about Radio Majdanek. The documented memories have been translated for this article from Polish to English.

Concentration camp memories constitute delicate research material not only because of the time distance between the experiences and the moment of their documentation. In addition, the exceptional cruelty and exhaustion under which the experiences were lived has been considered as problematic for analyses. Aharony (2015: 72–81) writes about the hesitation, even indifference that prevailed among historians for several decades when addressing and analysing the concentration camps' survivor testimonies. Historians who emphasized the historical truth argued that survivor memories were too subjective and affective as well as incomplete or inaccurate and could therefore not cover the comprehensive account of what had occurred (Aharony, 2015: 72–76; Friedländer, 2010). Also, while belonging to authors who had early on broken the scholarly silence after the war and pursued vigorous philosophical analyses about totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt remained indifferent to the survivors' testimonies (Aharony, 2015: 67). The systematic documentation of concentration camp memories began as late as in the 1970s and 1980s (Aharony, 2015: 62–70).

Michal Aharony's (2015) extensive study about the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps survivors' memories shows clear convergences in memories and survivors' ways to describe their experiences. Aharony's (2015) results provide a dialogic and contextualizing comparison for our analysis of the Majdanek camp-related memories. Unlike Aharony, we mobilize Arendt's remarkable, but only faintly employed, non-media-centred concept of the public realm to understand the meaningfulness of a performed public realm in conditions of totalitarianism, political exclusion and social isolation. As the article unfolds, we explore, as the first research question, which rationale the documented memories do reveal for performing 'radio programmes' at the concentration camp. As the second research question, we analyse which meanings Hannah Arendt's concept of action in the public realm reveals in the prisoners' performance. The article initiates with contextualizing Radio Majdanek through an account of the conditions at the Majdanek concentration camp.

## **The disreputable Majdanek camp and the distortion of public and private**

Radio Majdanek is a story from one of the most disreputable Second World War camps in Europe. The Majdanek camp, positioned in the south-eastern outskirts of the city of

Lublin, was the second largest German Nazi concentration and extermination camp located within the territory of today's Poland and constructed on the orders of Heinrich Himmler, issued during his visit to Lublin in July 1941 (Kranz, 1994: 205–231). The camp was the destination for various groups and nationalities including Poles and was used as a war camp, a labour camp, a hostage and internment camp as well as a concentration camp (Mailänder, 2015: 23). Exhausted prisoners of other concentration camps could also be transferred to Majdanek (Mencel, 1991: 407–411).

Scholars have estimated that the exceptionally harsh camp conditions at Majdanek, including starvation, cruelty and epidemics caused more deaths than gassing and shooting (Kranz, 1994: 127–154; Mailänder, 2015: xi, 41). Mailänder (2015: 44) observes that research estimates of the numbers who succumbed at Majdanek have varied between 170,000 and 250,000, while research by the director of the State Museum at Majdanek Tomasz Kranz (2005: 7–53) gives a figure of 78,000 dead prisoners.

The living conditions (Murawska-Gryń and Gryń, 1972: 56–57, Mailänder, 2015: 40–42) illuminated the overwhelming humiliation of prisoners. The barracks had neither a sewage nor a water supply system, and no sanitary cleaning products were allowed. A perfunctory wash in the so-called bathhouses meant sprinkling disinfectant and then pouring cold water over the naked prisoners. A diet that consisted of a watery soup made from unwashed plants, rotten turnips and unsweetened ersatz coffee contributed to digestive ill health and severe malnutrition. The food was eaten from holey tins or bowls, without cutlery. At night, the prisoners were not allowed to leave the barracks and were forced to use wooden containers as substitute toilets. These overflowed quickly, exuding a strong stench. During the day, the prisoners could use pit latrines with no walls to shield them. (Murawska-Gryń and Gryń, 1972: 56–57) The prisoners had to occasionally work in primitive outdoor conditions in ballroom dresses and high heels or clothes that were deliberately too small, which, as Mailänder (2015: 42–43) writes, exposed them to injuries and death.

Transportations of women began to arrive in Majdanek on 1 October 1942 (Mailänder, 2015: 23, 30; Murawska-Gryń and Gryń, 1972: 39). The first-to-arrive prisoners were lodged in uncompleted wooden barracks with no glass in the windows (The State Museum at Majdanek Portal, 2018), the imminent winter accentuating the desperate conditions. Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk (1969) remembers the 'relentless wind' that caused such an 'intensification of pain' that she wondered whether she would break into 'screaming uncontrollably' (p. 114).

The body of prisoners worked across the functions of the camp from kitchens to gas chambers (Mailänder, 2015: 38–39), including nonsensical hard work (The State Museum at Majdanek Portal, 2018). Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk (1968, 1969) describes that the work could consist of destroying the results of previously performed tasks such as moving stones from one place to another, or running around the square with bricks, putting them down and coming back to fetch them after a while. Pointless activities done on the run, constant beatings and yelling, and hours of roll calls in sub-zero temperatures twice a day caused not only physical exhaustion but also psychological torment: 'We get up at five, sometimes at four in the morning [...] we line up and wait. An hour, two, three ...' (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1969: 71).

Mailänder (2015: 232–239, 255–257, 262–265) shows that brutal, extreme violence was an integral part of the daily life at Majdanek. The dead would be initially buried in mass graves, but later corpses would be burnt in the crematorium or on pyres. Ashes were mixed with topsoil and used as fertilizer (The State Museum at Majdanek Portal, 2018).

Majdanek 1943 was a camp of people burned half-alive and the warbling of a tractor that drowned the screams of children gassed to death [...] Majdanek with its lice, typhus, hunger, constant yelling of the SS-men – was a faithful image of hell. [...] We soon started to be afraid. We learnt fear, hunger, and envy. Our worst instincts were released, as we were now fighting for survival. (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1970: 20–21)

Unlike other concentration camps, Majdanek was located close to a city, without a forest zone or other natural barriers around the camp (Mailänder, 2015: 28). Isolated from the surroundings by the imprisonment, closely watched by guards, separated from their family members and loved ones, the prisoners could still watch life go on beyond the fence: ‘I come up to the window. I see the road in the distance. Cars and buses drive along it, someone cycles by at speed. How far away it all is, almost unreal. So, things really go on as normal’ (Tarasiewicz, 1988: 72–73). Krystyna Tarasiewicz (1988) writes the prisoners felt being ‘cast out from life and no longer counted among the living’ (p. 62).

The conditions at the Majdanek camp distort the often-repeated dichotomy between public and private that penetrates Western thought (Laursen, 1996; Weintraub, 1997). The prisoners’ access to the public world beyond the camp was forbidden. Inmates, living in the squeeze of the barrack literally side by side, were also deprived of privacy in the most cruel and humiliating ways (Mailänder, 2015). The public realm in the meaning of political liberty (Kant, 1996 [1784]); Mill, (2009 [1909]) was withheld from the prisoners whose rights were taken away, and alongside that any claims for political citizenship (Aharony, 2015: 91). References to critical rational public discourse that often characterize the definitions of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989 [1962]; Splichal, 2010) are inappropriate amid the extrajudiciality and devastation of a death camp. Finally, the meaning of the public realm as mediated visibility or audibility across space and time (Innis, 2008 [1951]) could not materialize beyond the barracks. The ‘radio programming’ was acted by mere human voice.

For all these reasons, Radio Majdanek could be interpreted as merely a coincidental public realm-related example of diverse resilience strategies that Aharony (2015) introduces in her study on the Auschwitz and Buchenwald survivors’ experiences. However, such interpretation would ignore the prospect that employing the image of the public realm was a conscious and therefore meaningful choice by prisoners. Our article proceeds now to explore this prospect in dialogue with the documented memories.

## **Rationale for the ‘radio’ and the content of ‘programmes’**

There is no detailed documentation of how the idea of a ‘radio’ developed. The interviews by Stanisław Fornal (1995a, 1995b, 1996a, 1996b) from The Polish National Radio Lublin as well as statements from the books by Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk (1968,

1969, 1970) show that the initiator was Matylda Woliniewska who, prior to her deportation to the concentration camp, had worked in the Central Organisation of Countryside Housewives Club and had been known for her social activism.

The first 'programme' was 'broadcast' on Saturday, 13 February 1943 (Marszałek, 1984: 151, Mencil, 1991: 312–315). The 'presenter', Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk (1969), documents her first 'radio address' as follows:

Hello! Hello! I stop, I catch my breath, and silence spreads all over the barracks. [...] 'This is Radio Majdanek', I go on, with my lips dry, voicing the prepared programme. I am perched uncomfortably on my bunk bed, with my head just under the ceiling. A sudden creaking of beds, some questions, some hushing, and silence again. My silence, all for me now. I speak about our newly-formed <radio>, about the character of the camp, about the organisation of SS and about what awaits us. As I speak, I am thinking intently about how to end the dry messages, to thank them for listening, to give something of mine, of my own feelings: Good night, ladies. Tomorrow will be a better day. (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1969: 95–96)

Tuesday, 16 February 1943 (Mencil, 1991: 314), saw the first 'broadcast' of 'a programme' that borrowed the name from a popular Polish radio programme *Teatime at the microphone*. The opening address by Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk is revealing and contains a description of the forthcoming rich cultural, intellectual and spiritual content of the 'radio':

Hello! Hello! This is the new radio station <Majdanek>. Good afternoon, ladies. [...] Please do not switch off your radios during the programme. Any creaks and imperfections during the broadcast will be caused by an unfavourable atmosphere. The temporary programming begins at five o'clock with a wake-up call and a prayer. We end with the evening news. We have opened a box for enquiries and complaints, please send in your contributions. The location of the box will be revealed shortly. Dear listeners, please contribute to the programming. Ladies, please dig out the wonderful Telefunken, Philipses and Capellos from your basements, under the ground, and other hiding places. We are now on a different planet called Majdanek and nothing worse can happen to us, and radio has been, remains, and will remain the most cultured entertainment of the twentieth century. (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1969: 95–96)

These remarks demonstrate that the women who had invented the idea of a radio understood that the image of a radio would bring forth special meanings. Matylda Woliniewska (1958) clarifies the issue in her statement to the State Museum at Majdanek:

You could ask why we chose the form of radio ... We considered it attractive, but primarily [chose it] because all Poles across the country had their radios taken away and were forbidden from listening to radio [...] that is how we demonstrated our independence of spirit. (Woliniewska, 1958: 5)

The explication of independence and resistance is repeatedly present in the memories about the content of the 'radio programmes'. Camp authorities were questioned, mocked, disdained and ridiculed (Piwińska, 1978: 16–19). Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk recalls in an interview how she illuminated Aristotle's analysis in the 'programme':

I would make a lofty reference to Aristotle, who distinguishes between slaves by law – war prisoners, and slaves by nature – the slaves of spirit. Well, we were not slaves by law – we were slaves by lawlessness, and so not [slaves] of spirit. As long as our spirits were free, we were not slaves. (Fornal, 1995b)

In a similar manner, Matylda Woliniewska (1958) describes the tone of the programmes as follows:

[T]he line was always the same: keep up the spirit and lift the morale, fight what was socially problematic, shape the public opinion. They say that whoever has radio, has power. Indeed, in some way the block known as the Pawiaczek's block had that power. I am thinking of power in the moral sense. (Woliniewska, 1958: 2)

Both secretly heard news and the content of smuggled newspapers were 'broadcast', as well as information from conversations with smugglers (Fornal, 1995b). When Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk was in the chambermaid work group from March to August 1943, she had a chance to listen to the BBC in the rooms of camp officers. All unauthorized listening incurred the risk of death (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1967: 10).

In addition to establishing an arena of resistance, memories of the content of the 'programmes' suggest that the 'broadcasting' aimed preventing harmful behaviour between prisoners. Turning inmates against each other was part of the concentration camps' strategy (Mailänder, 2015: 38–39, 42), with which Arendt's (2004 [1948]) writing about the 'iron band of terror' resonates (pp. 600–603). A statement by Matylda Woliniewska (1958: 3) according to which 'the barbarity of conditions started to bring about the barbarity of relations' suggests that the 'radio' may have been invented partly to prevent the escalation of relations between prisoners themselves:

We performed scenes from camp life, mocking the SS-men. This made us more resistant to the fear they instilled in us. Another target to be ridiculed was our negative traits such as selfishness, being untidy, using crude language, etc. These satirical representations of our behaviours had much influence on the shaping of our attitudes. (Woliniewska, 1958: 6)

In addition to the resistant and harm-preventing rationales, the documented memories show that the 'radio programmes' were performed to relieve the despair of exhausted prisoners. The 'radio' constituted a nurturing space in conditions in which the threat of violence was prevalent. The daily ritual of the 'programme' provided care and comfort, which blurred the nightmare of life at the camp, as the following memory demonstrates:

There came the moment of being painfully shaken from sleep, of return to the world of the camp, yelling, bunk beds being hit with bats, being hurried and sworn at. In our block, there was a different wake-up call. First, there was the loud call of the rooster, perfectly imitated by Helena Konca, who never overslept. Then, in an initially sleepy voice, Danusia Brzosko would say: 'Hello hello, this is Radio Majdanek. Good morning, ladies'. She would give the date, the weather, who was needed for which kommando, information on items lost, and so on. Then she would always announce it would be better tomorrow. Our block leader, the best



woman in the world Hanka Mierzejewska, would say prayers out loud. (Grzegorzewska-Nowosławska, 1981: 12)

The space that the image of a radio created allowed the display of the world beyond the cruelty and bleakness of the camp. The memories contain several references to art, such as singing on the ‘programme’, both in the form of listening to songs and singing together as a choir. The documented memories by two women (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1969: 54; Piwińska, 1978: 16) mention the daily listening to Schubert’s *Ave Maria*, performed by a pre-war singer Malina Bielicka: ‘After the slogan<tomorrow will be a better day>the beautiful, soothing voice could be heard singing<Ave Maria>that rocked us, tired and despondent, to a short, uneasy sleep’ (Piwińska, 1978: 16).

Poems by well-known poets and the women prisoners themselves were recited on the ‘programme’ (Grzegorzewska-Nowosławska, 1981: 12; Woliniewska, 1958: 6). Wiesława Grzegorzewska-Nowosławska defines that the imprisoned women found the beauty of songs and poems to be ‘an antidote to the ugliness that surrounded us, to the permanent fear and uncertainty of our fate’ (Tarasiewicz, 1988: 72–73). That antidote was occasionally deliberately organized by the women on a grander scale. Examples of these were holiday concerts that were prepared especially carefully in terms of programme and lookouts posted to ensure the event could securely go on undisturbed. Eugenia Piwińska (1978: 18) said it would be impossible to render the atmosphere of the holiday concerts, ‘nor show their impact and the significance the radio had in protecting us against the brutalisation that the camp regime sought to effect’.

The pre-war Polish Radio was one of the broadcast powers of contemporary Europe (Chomicz, 2005: 13). From the outset in 1925, the quality of the spoken word was a priority for the radio authorities. This is evidenced by numerous presenters’ competitions, lectures, rhetorical workshops and finally the establishment of the Polish Radio’s Read Council in 1927 (Chomicz, 2005). The programme *Teatime at the microphone*, which the ‘presenters’ of Radio Majdanek ‘played’ at the camp from memory, referred to the popular programme broadcasted since 1936 from the Bristol Hotel in Warsaw (The Polish Radio Portal, 2018). The programme, which contained a permanent arrangement of humorous messages, monologues, parodies and songs referring to Warsaw folklore, had by the Second World War created a specific sphere of radio audience, in which the broadcaster and recipients were included in the circle of initiation (Chomicz, 2005). Communication rules determined by the unchangeable layout of individual programmes and the way the presenter turned to the audience were later defined as ‘para-social interaction’ which was the ‘simulacrum of conversational give and take’ building the intimacy (Horton and Wohl, 1956: 220). The model of the programme was imprinted in the memory of the Majdanek prisoners. The ‘presenters’ of Radio Majdanek were able to call up a ritual (Rothenbuhler, 1998) that their listeners recognized:

Imagination transports us to our Warsaw. We see it as it used to be before the war: teeming with life, carefree, in the evening softly lit with the opal glow of streetlights [...] the capital, full of laughter and singing. The wings of our longing take us back to our homes. (Tarasiewicz, 1988: 25)

## **The performed 'radio' as decisiveness to belong to the world**

The quotations and discussion above have illuminated how deeply meaningful the 'radio programmes' were for the prisoners at Majdanek Barrack 3. The 'radio' established a collective-resistant, harm-preventing and despair-relieving nurturing space for prisoners whose strength to continue living was collapsing. These findings about Radio Majdanek resonate well with Michal Aharony's (2015) analysis. Aharony (2015: 126) argues that every conscious decision to continue living equates to resistance at a concentration camp. She introduces three overlapping categories of resistance at Auschwitz and Buchenwald: prisoners' attempts to maintain their dignity, acts of caring or concern for fellow prisoners and the life of the mind, by which Aharony refers to intellectual, cultural and religious as well as spiritual activities, including imagination (Aharony, 2015: 126–167). The documented memories above could be discussed within all three categories and therefore within the overall frame of resistance. However, we will highlight meanings that are revealed along with the finding that the women at Barrack 3 consciously employed in their performance the image of the public realm.

The quotations above have demonstrated that the 'radio' was an intentional effort to materialize the public realm (Laursen, 1996; Weintraub, 1997) within the high surveillance and constrained space of the death camp. Mailänder (2015: 34–40) suggests that the layered hierarchies and the complex administrative structure of the Majdanek camp may have created occasional opportunities to elude the cruel order (Mailänder, 2015: 38–39). If this was the fragile material condition for public action, the initiators of Radio Majdanek also succeeded in mobilizing the rather private activities of memory and imagination to create a state of mind in which resistant action was possible both in terms of opposing the camp authorities and in terms of nurturing the awareness of another reality.

The image of the public realm seems to have brought about significant assets. Regarding the resistant speech, the performance of a 'radio' enabled prisoners to introduce themselves as actors who argued for themselves and for their rights and made judgements about the oppressive conditions in front of others. Regarding the prevention of harmful behaviour between the inmates, the conflict-prone interpersonal communication between exhausted women could be transformed into imagined and performed mediated communication, which turned the difficult issues from the realm of vulnerable face-to-face communication into the more conventional and distant realm of public communication. A basic conceptual meaning of public is that public relates to issues that are discussable in non-personal terms (Cayton, 2008: 3–4; Laursen, 1996: 264; Weintraub, 1997: 7). Once considered as public topics, those topics transform from occurring between single individuals to collectively identified and discussed issues.

When a woman voice announced in a 'radio programme', 'Do not allow a jungle to happen! Fight foul language, promote kindness and politeness. Dear ladies, let's remember the words: please, thank you, sorry' (Pawińska, 1978: 16–19), she no longer spoke as one of the inmates. The image of a public medium allowed her to speak with a public

voice, with the institutional voice of a leading mass medium of that time and therefore about issues that were now identified to bear public relevance. That the image of a 'radio' was used in this way demonstrates genuine insightfulness in dealing with and healing the situation in the squeezed accommodation of the barracks.

Regarding the relieving of the despair of exhausted prisoners, the image of a 'radio' provided a bridge to the world beyond the concentration camp. A characteristic conceptual meaning of public is that public always extends beyond the life world of an individual (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 52; Laursen, 1996: 264). The concept of public therefore always illuminates a more extensive world than is within the reach of any of us in our sole being. Hannah Arendt (2005) writes that public refers to world that is more diverse than the experiences and views of a single individual and that 'living in a real world' means 'speaking with one other about it' (p. 129). The public realm, according to Arendt (1998 [1958]:199, 2005: 128), affirms the reality of the world. The public realm 'holds a sense of world together', as Arnett (2012: 67) formulates in his analysis on Arendt. The references that the documented memories above contain to resistant speech, harm-preventing social behaviour and despair-relieving poems, songs and memories illuminate the prisoners' decisive effort to continue their belonging to the world that the imprisonment at the concentration camp decisively aimed to destroy:

When, sick or tired, I oversleep the wake-up call, someone calls out: 'Block leader! The radio has overslept!' And so I realize that it's already 4 March, that Kazimieras need to be congratulated on their nameday, that people need to be reminded of the words 'thank you', 'please' and 'sorry', and they need to be encouraged to donate items to the self-help repository. (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1969: 115)

This disposition of deciding to belong to the world receives a foundational meaning at a camp where prisoners were isolated and kept expecting their deaths. The imagined presence and the performed display of the public world, that is, the world that extends beyond the current moment of the individual, appears as a source of comfort and life-sustaining power in moments when the strength of the individual is fading away. It is noteworthy that the 'production' of 'radio programmes' and the consequent display of the public world were dependent on the bodily performance of the prisoners. The exhausted female bodies produced the affirmation of and the belonging to the public world:

I am starving. This is no longer a sense of scarcity that I've been feeling for months. It's a painful cramp of the stomach, weakness, the shaking of hands, and an apathy that engulfs me. I would like to break out in tears, pitying my own fate, starvation, loneliness in this multitude of people and the days that await me. For I do not count my lifespan in this hell in years. [...] I open my mouth as if to take communion and swallow snowflakes. I silence the call for mercy, help, rescue, for whom do I ask? Thoughtless, sluggish, we look at each other without seeing each other. [...] I take a shovel into my hand, repeating: <All the best to Aunt Kazias ... Kazinkas> ... Is it going to be a better day tomorrow? I wonder, as I try to keep hold on the shovel that keeps slipping from my freezing hands and try to break free the frozen piece of excrement behind the barracks wall. (Brzosko-Mędryk, 1969: 119–121)

## Action in the public realm as the actualization of subjectivity

We culminate our article by discussing the meanings that are revealed when the women prisoners' initiative is considered within Hannah Arendt's (1998 [1958], 2005) concept of action in the public realm.

Action is one of the three activities that Arendt (1998 [1958]: 7–9, 79–247) distinguishes in her tripartite concept, the two others being labour and work. Arendt sees these three as human conditions that are constitutive to human's entire being. *Labour* refers to the biological processes of a human body, and thus corresponds to the human condition of 'life itself' (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 7) by assuring the survival of both the individual and the species. *Work*, as distinguished from 'the labour of our bodies' within the 'natural surroundings' of life, refers to 'products of our hands': artificial 'things' that human beings 'works upon' usually for some use (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 134, 136–137). Arendt (1998 [1958]: 7) argues that work corresponds to the human condition of 'wordliness', to a human's capacity to add objects and bring durability to the world (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 134, 136–137, 176). Compared with the necessity of labour and the utility and instrumentality of work, *action* refers to initiatives that reveal the unique distinctness of each human being. Action refers, therefore, to the appearance of the subjectivity of each person (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 177–181.) The key element for Arendt's argument is that this revelation requires the presence and response of others. Arendt therefore conceives action as the subjectivity of a human being, which can only appear in interaction with other human beings (Biesta, 2007: 753–757). For these reasons, action corresponds to the human condition of the 'plurality of unique beings' (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 176).

The characteristics of action are further clarified by the way Arendt joins action to birth and natality. Arendt (1998 [1958]: 8) writes that all three, that is, labour, work and action, relate to the 'most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality'. Action, however, is closest to natality and reflects the capacity of human beings to begin anew in the world (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 8–9). Arendt (1998 [1958]: 176–177) explains that the insertion and appearance of one's uniqueness among others is like a second birth. Action, as insertion and appearance of one's uniqueness, means therefore *not to begin something but to begin somebody* who only can appear in the presence of others (Arendt, 1998 [1958]). This insistence of the presence of others as the pre-condition for action locates Arendt's concept of action in the public realm. Action disappears unless there are others who hear and see and will remember (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 198–199). In this way, Arendt illuminates that action, while being considered by her as closest to natality of all human activities, is at the same time the most futile of them. Only the public realm, the speaking and acting together of human beings, provides 'organized remembrance' and reifies the otherwise futile actualizations of subjectivity (Arendt, 1998 [1958]).

By joining action and the public realm in this meaning of the actualization of one's being and the revelation of one's uniqueness, Arendt (1998 [1958]) reserves foundational and unusual meanings to the public realm beyond the conventional meanings that often interpret the public realm as the mediated public sphere. Arendt (1998 [1958]: 207–208) writes that without the public realm and the presence of others that the public realm

brings about, human beings would not need to appear at all and their subjectivity would not be revealed.

Arendt's (1998 [1958]) tripartite concept has powerful influence on the Majdanek concentration camp 'radio'. In terms of labour, conceptualized by Arendt (1998 [1958]: 7) as the biological processes of a human body, the concentration camp aimed at humiliating the women's bodies and decaying their life-sustaining biological processes. In terms of work, conceptualized by Arendt (1998 [1958]: 134–137) as the products that human hands work upon for some use and therefore bring durability to the world, the imprisoned women were forced to work until the endless and purposeless work collapsed their bodies as well as their minds. In terms of action, the cruelty of the concentration camp aimed at destroying what Arendt (1998 [1958]: 207–208) describes as the core of action: the actualization of one's being and the revelation of one's uniqueness in the presence of others. On the contrary, the concentration camp aimed at defacing any reference to the unique personality and identity of the prisoner (Aharony, 2015: 91–125). Instead of the revelation, in the presence of others of who one really is as a unique being, what prevailed at the death camp was humiliation, violence and murder in the presence of others, a nameless burial of remnants in a mass grave and, finally, the burning of the body into ashes (Mailänder, 2015; The State Museum at Majdanek Portal, 2018). To conclude, at the Majdanek concentration camp both labour and work provided for death and mortality instead of for life and natality, and the prospect of action was eliminated altogether.

In the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (2004: 600–603), Arendt writes about the 'iron band of terror' that binds human beings by isolating them and exterminates the plurality of unique beings. Our article has shown that this vocabulary had begun its terrifying development at the Majdanek concentration camp. Arendt's own vocabulary constitutes the conceptual framework in which Radio Majdanek emerges as an astonishing manifestation of action and a powerful moment of resistance. Arendt's (1998 [1958]) concept of action brings Radio Majdanek to the realm, in which human beings actualize their being and subjectivity in front of others who see, hear and will remember, and whose presence thus brings duration to their otherwise vulnerable being.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed the performed 'radio' at the Majdanek concentration camp through the meanings Hannah Arendt gives to the public realm and provided answers to two research questions. For the first research question, we explored what the documented memories reveal about the rationale of performing 'radio programmes' at the concentration camp. We found that the performing of 'programmes' created a resistant, harm-preventing and despair-relieving nurturing space. The references that the documented memories contain point towards the prisoners' efforts to break their exclusion and isolation by decisively continuing their belonging to the public world through their own performance. Prisoners performed as if they possessed rights to self-governance and used references to law, philosophy, religion, social norms and art to affirm the reality beyond the extrajudiciality of the camp. Through their performance, they affirmed their continuing involvement in that world.

This way, Radio Majdanek illuminates the definition Arendt (2005: 129) gives to the public realm as the shared frame of reference and shared belonging and which materializes whenever human beings speak together in meaningful ways. Instead of having been an internal survival strategy in the silence of a single mind, Radio Majdanek was a collective practice, a materialization of the shared and therefore public realm in the embodied action of a prisoner collective.

For the second research question, we proceeded to explore more precisely what Hannah Arendt's (1998 [1958]) concept of action suggests about the meanings of the performed public realm at the concentration camp. We introduced the relation Arendt (1998 [1958], 2005) establishes between action, public realm and subjectivity and showed that Arendt's concept enables us to see the 'radio' as actualization of women's being and subjectivity in conditions in which both were under constant assault. The performed public realm introduced the women in the presence of each other as actors who had capacity to bring about an unexpected change into the deprivation and despair of the camp.

Hannah Arendt (2004 [1948]) has therefore provided us, first and as the point of departure of this article, with the premises to understand that the concentration camps were total in their aim at destroying the most characteristic aspect of humanity in human beings: subjectivity. Second, Arendt (1998 [1958], 2005) has provided us with her insight about the ways the question of subjectivity is related to the public realm.

Conceptualized through Arendt's (1998 [1958], 2005) thought, Radio Majdanek reveals amid the extreme exclusion, isolation and cruelty of the death camp how profoundly meaningful the public realm is to humans beyond the conventional media-centred meanings. By providing a shared realm to which human beings can collectively refer, and by providing the presence of others, the public realm holds key to our being and subjectivity as human beings. According to Dossa (2006: 73, 137), this intensively human emphasis of the public realm is Arendt's most characteristic contribution.

Arendt's (1998 [1958], 2005) contribution deserves to be elaborated more widely in the study of the public realm. Our analysis on Radio Majdanek points towards a need to reflect upon the implicit assumptions that underlie established readings of action in the public realm. The public realm should not be considered as a realm in which we act only at our moment of strength and vigour. Arendt's (1998 [1958], 2005) insight of the public realm should rather be elaborated to explore the ways in which the public realm remains the collectively shared frame of reference also at our weakest hour, bringing meaning and duration to our vulnerable being. The public realm provides involvement in history, present and future of the human collective. This way, the public realm provides involvement in the living as a human being among others, also to those who are excluded from communities for political or social reasons, to those who are lonely and to those who live in isolation due to the withering away of physiological or psychological strength.

### **Authors' note**

Leena Ripatti-Tornainen is responsible for the theoretical frame and the theoretical discussion and Grażyna Stachyra for the empirical material of the article.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors extend their gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

## Dedication

The authors dedicate this article to the remembrance of women of Radio Majdanek. The ‘presenters’ of the ‘radio’ were Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk, Alina Pleszczyńska, Hanna Fularska, Wiesława Grzegorzewska, Romana Pawłowska and Stefania Błońska (Mencel, 1991: 314). According to the Institute of National Remembrance in Poland database (2017), Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk was evacuated from Majdanek in 1944 to the Buchenwald camp and then was transferred to the Leipzig commando. She worked at the Hasag factory until the end of the war (Grudzińska, 2011: 68). Alina Płaszczyńska was transferred from Majdanek to Ravensbrück in April 1944, and in August 1944 to Buchenwald. Hanna Fularska was transferred to Auschwitz in 1943. Romana Pawłowska was transported to Auschwitz in 1943, to Ravensbrück in 1944 and finally to Buchenwald. Wiesława Grzegorzewska was removed from the camp, along with Majdanek’s entire medical personnel in April 1944 and transported to Auschwitz, and then to Ravensbrück. She escaped when the last camp was being evacuated, and returned to Warsaw (Grudzińska, 2011: 143). Stefania Błońska was relocated from Majdanek to Ravensbrück. (The Institute of National Remembrance in Poland database, 2017.)

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and authorship. The Open Access publication of this article was paid by the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki.

## ORCID iD

Leena Ripatti-Torniainen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1742-411X>

## References

- Aharony M (2015) *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Total Domination: The Holocaust, Plurality, and Resistance*. New York: Routledge.
- Arendt H (2004 [1948]) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Arendt H (1998 [1958]) *Human Condition*, 5th edn. Chicago, IL: The Chicago University Press.
- Arendt H (2005) *The Promise of Politics*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Arnett RC (2012) *Communication Ethics in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt’s Rhetoric of Warning and Hope*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Biesta GJJ (2007) Education and the democratic person: towards a political understanding of democratic education. *Teachers College Record* 109(3): 740–769.
- Brzosko-Mędryk D (1968) *Niebo bez ptaków. Wydanie I* [Sky without birds, 1st edn]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej [Publications of the Ministry of National Defence].
- Brzosko-Mędryk D (1969) *Niebo bez ptaków. Wydanie II* [Sky without birds, 2nd edn]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej [Publications of the Ministry of National Defence].
- Brzosko-Mędryk D (1970) *Matylda*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej [Publications of the Ministry of National Defence].
- Cayton MK (2008) What is public culture? Agency and contested meaning in American Culture – an introduction. In: Shaffer MS (ed.) *Public Culture: Diversity, Democracy, and Community in the United States*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 1–25.
- Chomicz Z (2005) *80 lat Polskiego Radia – kalendarium: 1925-2005* [80 years of Polish radio – The calendar: 1925–2005]. Warsaw: Archiwum Polskiego Radia [Polish Radio Archives].

- Dossa S (2006) *The Public Realm and the Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Fornal S (1997) *Anteny nad Bystrzycą* [Antennas by the Bystrzyca River]. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Radia Lublin S.A. [Radio Lublin Publishing].
- Friedländer S (2010) An integrated history of the holocaust: possibilities and challenges. In: Betts P and Wiese C (eds) *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, pp. 21–30.
- Grudzińska M (ed.) (2011) *Przewodnik po zbiorze relacji i pamiętników znajdujących się w zasobie Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku* [Guide to the collection of accounts and memoirs in the collections of state Museum at Majdanek]. Lublin: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku [The State Museum at Majdanek].
- Habermas J (1989 [1962]) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Horton D and Wohl R (1956) Mass communication and para-social interaction: observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry* 19(3): 215–229.
- Innis H (2008 [1951]) *The Bias of Communication*, 2nd edn. Toronto, ON, Canada: Toronto University Press.
- Kant I (1996 [1784]) An answer to the question: what is enlightenment? In: Schmidt J (ed.) *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteen-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 47–51.
- Kiedrzyńska W (1965) *Ravensbrück – kobiety obóz koncentracyjny* [Ravensbrück – Women's concentration camp] Wyd. II. Warsaw: KIW.
- Kiedrzyńska W and Murawska Z (1972) *Kobieta w obozie koncentracyjnym* [The woman at the concentration camp]. Lublin: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku [The State Museum at Majdanek].
- Kranz T (1994) *Unsere Schicksal – eine Mahnung für Euch. Berichte und Erinnerungen der Häftlinge von Majdanek* [Our destiny – A reminder for you: Relations and memories of Majdanek prisoners]. Lublin: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku. Gegen Vergessen – Für Demokratie e.v [The State Museum at Majdanek. Against Forgetting, for Democracy].
- Kranz T (2005) Ewidencja zgonów i śmiertelność więźniów KL Lublin [Records of deaths and mortality of prisoners]. *Zeszyty Majdanek* 23: 7–53.
- Laursen JC (1996) The subversive Kant: the vocabulary of public and publicity. In: Schmidt J (ed.) *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteen-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 253–269.
- Mailänder E (2015) *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942-1944* (trans. P Szobar). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Marszałek J (1984) *Majdanek. Konzentrationslager Lublin* [Majdanek: The concentration camp in Lublin]. Warsaw: Interpress.
- Mencel T (ed.) (1991) *Majdanek 1941-1944*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie.
- Mill JS (2009 [1909]) *On Liberty*. Auckland: The Floating Press.
- Murawska-Gryń Z and Gryń E (1972) *Obóz koncentracyjny Majdanek* [Majdanek concentration camp]. Lublin: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku [The State Museum at Majdanek].
- Piwińska E (1978) *Ruch oporu na polu kobiecym na Majdanku: Akcja kulturalna– Radio Majdanek* [Resistance movement on the women's zone in Majdanek: Cultural action – Radio Majdanek]. Typescript. Lublin: Archives of the State Museum at Majdanek.
- Rosiak E (1971) Niektóre formy samoobrony psychicznej więźniów Majdanek [Selected forms of psychological self-defence in Majdanek prisoners]. *Zeszyty Majdanek* 5: 163–118.
- Rothenbuhler E (1998) *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*. London: Sage.



- Splichal S (2010) Eclipse of “the public”: from the public to the (transnational) public sphere: conceptual shifts in the twentieth century. In: Moe H and Gripsrud J (eds) *The Digital Public Sphere: Challenges for Media Policy*. Göteborg: Nordicom, pp. 23–38.
- Tarasiewicz K (1948) *Hallo – Hallo! Tu radio Majdanek!* [Hello – Hello! This is Radio Majdanek speaking!]. *Wolni Ludzie* Nr 4 [Free People No 4]. Warsaw: Polski Związek Byłych Więźniów Politycznych [Polish Association of the Former Political Prisoners ].
- Tarasiewicz K (ed.) (1988) *My z Majdanka. Wspomnienia byłych więźniarek* [We of Majdanek. Memoirs of former prisoners]. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie.
- Weintraub J (1997) The theory and politics of the public/private distinction. In: Weintraub J and Kumar K (eds) *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 1–42.

### **Analysed programmes from Polish Radio Lublin Archives:**

- Fornal S (1995a) Radio Planety Majdanek [Planet Majdanek Radio], performed by M. Woliniewska, D. Brzosko, S. Błońska, W. Grzegorzewska and J. Kozera-Wąs.
- Fornal S (1995b) Historia Radia Majdanek I [The History of Radio Majdanek I]; Historia Radia Majdanek II [The History of Radio Majdanek II], performed by M. Woliniewska, D. Brzosko-Mędryk, S. Błońska, W. Grzegorzewska-Nowosławska and J. Kozera-Wąs.
- Fornal S (1996a) Zawsze radio, wszędzie radio – Radio Planety Majdanek [Always Radio, Radio Everywhere – Planet Majdanek Radio], performed by S. Błońska, D. Brzosko, W. Grzegorzewska, J. Kozera-Wąs and M. Woliniewska.
- Fornal S (1996b) Radio Planety Majdanek [Planet Majdanek Radio], performed by D. Brzosko, S. Błońska, W. Grzegorzewska, J. Kozera-Wąs and M. Woliniewska.
- Stepek Z and Roztworowska B (1966) Tu rozgłośnia ‘Majdanek’ [This is Radio Majdanek], performed by M. Woliniewska, S. Młyńska. Reconstruction of the first ‘programme’ at the Majdanek concentration camp.

### **Analysed statements from the Archives of the State Museum at Majdanek:**

- Brzosko-Mędryk D (1967) APMM VII-135/160 [Archives of the State Museum at Majdanek].
- Grzegorzewska-Nowosławska W (1981) VII/M-476 [Archives of the State Museum at Majdanek].
- Piwińska E (1978) PMM VII/M 210 [Archives of the State Museum at Majdanek].
- Woliniewska M (1958) APMM VII/M-211 [Archives of the State Museum at Majdanek].

### **Online sources and databases:**

- The Institute of National Remembrance in Poland database (2017): [www.straty.pl](http://www.straty.pl) (accessed 16–17 November 2017).
- The Polish Radio Portal (2018): <https://www.polskieradio.pl/231/4402/Ksiazka/Rok1930/11> (accessed 20 September 2018).
- The State Museum at Majdanek Portal (2018): <http://www.majdanek.eu/en> (accessed 22 May 2018).