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Myths, truths and post-truths – adjustments to the portrait of a Prison Service officer

Abstract: The post-truth era is a time of questioning basic values such as truth, honesty, integrity or journalistic ethics. Post-truth is a situation in which public opinion is influenced by the emotions and personal beliefs of individuals (it is important to refer to emotions and personal views), and not by facts, which are less important. The specific image of socio-political life, created by the media and the political class, is the result of dynamically developing populism. Post-truth is a state in which substantive discourse is removed from public discourse and replaced by playing on the emotions of the public and cheap sensationalism. The term is used to disguise the fact that, in reality, we are dealing with an outright lie. The myths and stereotypes that have surrounded the Prison Service for years live their own life in the public consciousness. They are the basis for new alternative facts, half-truths, and lies, created and fueled from time to time by the media looking for sensation. In this way, every now and then, “jailers” are given new labels. The profession of a Prison Service officer has always been shrouded in mystery and legends. Prisons and detention centers were – and still are – places that arouse fear and, at the same time, human curiosity as to what the world behind high walls looks like and what happens in the corridors behind metal gates. Reluctance and lack of trust is linked to the fear and ignorance of people who still perceive the world on the other side of the wall as mysterious and terrifying. It is difficult to have daily contact with an officer who disappears from sight as soon as they go through the prison gate. The public has no knowledge of the people who protect order and security. Its understanding of the Prison Service is poor, based on the literature and media reports, which often exaggerate events and take them out of a broader context. The scientific curiosity inherent in a researcher and the desire to tame the prison space, to dispel the

myths functioning in the social consciousness and the stereotypical way of thinking about the profession of a prison guard led the authors to design research with elements of social and educational intervention, the subject of which became the social group of Prison Service officers. Scientific and research, as well as animation projects, carried out within the framework of the Intersectoral Partnership PANOPTIKUM established in 2017, make it possible to show the splendors and shadows of this occupation, to present portraits of officers, their passions, dreams and dilemmas, to report life stories embedded in the histories of places as extraordinary as the officers themselves.

Key words: social role, Prison Service officer, role trivialization in the media, post-truth, social communication, social exclusion, social trust.

Post-truths and myths – things imagined *versus* things seen

Man learns to understand the world all his life. He does so through his own and other people's experience, both in the course of formal, informal and non-formal education. The starting point of this paper is the statement by Roman Schulz (2007) that consciousness is acquired through the use of language used to record, transmit, and apply knowledge in the pre-theoretical and theoretical layer. The former uses languages in two varieties: natural and quasi-natural. Natural languages describe experiences of the informal education system and include: private colloquial language, home-family language, public colloquial language, language of public opinion, public discourse, language of art (literature, film), language of law. Quasi-natural (specialist) languages, on the other hand, describe the experience of the formal (institutionalized) education system and here we have: the language of professional teachers, the so-called pedagogical jargon and the language of methodologists or education organizers (education, law and educational policy administration). Transmission in theoretical language is the second distinguished form understood as the entirety of theoretical forms of cognition and knowledge about the world. It includes only discursive forms of consciousness being the effect of theoretical rather than practical reason. Its outcomes are expressed by researchers and recorded in pedagogical ideologies and doctrines, philosophical concepts, monographic publications, scientific theories, research reports.

There is a whole spectrum of sources of knowledge about the world and man, and these are our own experiences preserved in memory, as well as recorded and sometimes published experiences of others (diaries, journals). These can be works of fiction, experiences expressed in artistic code, but also journalistic (press) descriptions of individual events. Sources of knowledge can also be found in scientific descriptions of customs, norms and views on natural education and generalizations of colloquial experiences contained, for example, in proverbs. It is introduced to man both by dictionary definitions of terms, as well as by the

results of studies on the understanding of reality by ordinary people or theoretical papers on the sociology of everyday life.

This text focuses the reader's attention on the colloquial optics, the optics of common sense, the optics of natural, modal educational ideas. *Colloquial* simply means common, frequently occurring, commonly used, everyday, or ordinary. We use similar terms such as popular, unofficial, non-textbook, expressed in non-specialist language. Thus, most often we are dealing either with domestic colloquiality, the product of which are images, ideas, judgments articulated in the discourse specific to social microstructures and using private language, or with public colloquiality, in which the content is articulated in the discourse of social macrostructures and with the use of public media (media of popular and artistic culture).

Promoting knowledge about man and the world serves not only to better understand the meaning of human behavior, improve relationships with other people, but also to understand oneself. Knowing and being aware of the existence of errors in thinking or acting makes it easier to accept them both in oneself and in others. This awareness and reflexivity promotes tolerance, counteracts schematization and perception of the surrounding world in black and white. Hanna Brycz emphasizes that "social knowledge and perception are the tools needed to maintain order, create expectations and premises for meaningful actions (...) One of the key human needs is to strive for knowledge about oneself and the world, to learn about the social environment and one's own person, the need for one's own narration of reality, collecting facts, finding reasons, creating loops of associations and conclusions, as well as a constant search for the truth about the world – these are the driving forces in our lives" (2012, p. 21–23).

On the other extreme of social perception, in opposition to truth and knowledge (about oneself and the surrounding world), is post-truth, based not on facts, but on opinions, speculations and beliefs not supported by reliable sources. The test of veracity is no longer rational argumentation, but the attractiveness and sensationality of the content appearing in public space, following the slogan "Down with the truth, long live emotions!". Society comes to terms with living in a post-truth world. There is no need to confront information with facts, because post-truth knowledge is easier to understand, tames what is feared, and does not require intellectual effort¹. Ralph Keyes, an American lecturer and writer, describes

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¹ The term *post-truth* first appeared in the pages of *The Nation* magazine in the article entitled *Government of Lies* penned by Steve Tesich – an American playwright of Serbian origin. Tesich put forward a thesis that American society began to deliberately run away from the truth, allowing politicians to mislead it. The author explains that the behavior of American society is a result of the trauma that Americans experienced after the lies of politicians involved in the Watergate scandal were revealed. The events connected with making the deceptions of politicians public caused citizens to resign from the rights they were entitled to, they stopped confronting information with facts because for many it is too complicated a process, arousing fear and anxiety that they want to avoid. As a result, politicians

the phenomenon of post-truth as not only an effect of political events, but most of all a consequence of cultural, intellectual and technological changes. He states that the dynamically changing world has modified people's attitude towards the lie. The society has become much more tolerant towards insincerity and deceit in everyday life. What is more, in the post-truth world ethical behavior remains only in the realm of declarations, which do not translate into practice (2017).

Łukasz Pawłowski (2017, p. 10–11) explains the phenomenon and ubiquity of post-truth claiming that it is the effect of the increasing prevalence of lies, half-truths, various types of manipulation that lead primarily to “the erosion of trust – not only in direct contacts with other people, but also trust in authorities and experts. The ultimate consequence of these processes is the conclusion that it is impossible to establish any objective truth on any issue. As a result, feelings and beliefs about what is or is not true play an increasingly important role in the process of perceiving the world. (...) The paradox of our time is that we live in an age when these «objective facts» are available to all of us literally at our fingertips. Nearly everyone carries in their pocket a device that allows access to knowledge unreachable by our ancestors. And yet, information plays a smaller and smaller role in our lives. Its place in the process of making decisions and forming opinions is being replaced by personal preferences («I like this man, so I believe him»), a sense of group affiliation («He is a politician from ‘my’ party, and therefore more credible than the representative of the opposition»), and even the desire to hear a better story («This version of events may be less credible, but it is certainly more attractive»)". Traditionally understood truth is losing its meaning in the post-truth world. The idea is based on keeping up the appearance of truth, on creative manipulation with facts. What is more, it is happening with social consent. Made-up and colored information transports the recipient into the world of narrative truth. Post-truth builds parallel worlds, which are de facto results of human fantasy, products of imagination. Ralph Keyes concludes that we are dealing with a specific kind of “mirror morality, in which mundane fidelity to fact is considered a lower degree of truthfulness than lyrical fictionalism. From this perspective, myths and legends may convey deeper truths than the facts themselves” (Keyes 2017, p. 159).

However, the information reaching the public, even if detached from reality, is not constructed freely. This is because post-truth is governed by a specific logic. Despite the fact that it openly diverges from reality, it is created in such a way that the statement forms a coherent whole. The perception of manipulated information appeals to emotions and faith, to the feelings and beliefs of the recipients of the message. The greater the emotional involvement, the easier it is to consider information that contradicts the facts to be true. The public wants to be assured

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do not have to conceal their lies, as in the new post-truth era everyone lies because they have social consent to do so.

that what they are told is the truth. In the post-truth era, the imaginary is mixed with the factual, and the real with the unreal. In the literature, this phenomenon is referred to as *truthiness* – perceived truth, based on intuition and beliefs that have no close connection with facts. It is not verified so as not to expose the individual to emotional “disintegration”.

In the post-truth era, ethical standards have changed and the notions of honesty and reliability have become nuanced, and are no longer judged in a zero-one system. The source and, at the same time, the consequence of post-truth is the weakening or even erosion of human bonds. Lack of a sense of connection with others makes it easier to lie to them, which in turn also hampers the establishment of deeper relationships. Łukasz Pawłowski (2017, p. 56–57) notes that “naked selfishness breaks free from the leash of ever weaker community ties. Manipulating the truth seems more permissible or at least less condemnable. This does not mean that members of small communities do not act from selfish motives, but a sense of duty to other members of those communities keeps that selfishness in check”.

Mass media are a common and permanent element of the reality that surrounds us. Due to the enormous power of the message and its wide reach, it is a convenient form of exerting influence on people. According to Denis McQuail (2007), the media are supposed to inform about events and the situation in the country, explain, interpret and comment on the meaning of these events, as well as to support established norms, build authority (the so-called correlation), express also the dominant culture and subcultures, help to maintain a community of values (the so-called continuation), or organize entertainment, reduce social tension, and finally mobilize by conducting public campaigns in various fields.

Media messages contain an interpretation of the world, and over time, a general society experience accumulates in the recipient. There is no such category as a pure message without codes, evaluation or judgment. The media define behavioral and cultural patterns and increasingly often usurp the right to make – in their opinion – legitimate judgments of various phenomena, at the same time becoming less and less objective in these interpretations. One might get the impression that in the pursuit of sensation and scandal it is being attempted to speed up evolutionary processes, to edit them according to the tendencies of conflict escalation, with no regard for the destructive effects occurring in communities.

The media thus have the power to shape the world. Finding one’s way in this media environment depends primarily on preparing a person to be able to think for themselves. Being unprepared for contact with the media makes a person dependent on them and leads to harmful conformity to activities that distort the image of the world, of man, and of basic values. Hence the importance of preparing an individual for the proper reception of media messages. Education also prepares one for such tasks, and its prerequisite is knowledge and theoretical

language, which is a counterbalance to the message in home or media language. The authors of this text share their knowledge and research experience gained in an environment that is specific, because closed and unknown for most of the society – the environment of prison guards. This paper is an attempt to portray the role of a Prison Service officer through the prism of its presence in social consciousness, with the myths, truths and post-truths encoded in it, and the focus of our many years of work and research is precisely the social role of a Prison Service officer.

Trivialization of the role and social exclusion of prison guards by the media

The organizational culture of the Prison Service, its hermetic nature (understandable given the specifics of the profession), translates into a lack of social trust towards this formation. For years PS officers have been missing from lists in reports on professions of social trust. The first place on the list is occupied by firefighters, followed by the army and the police, and there is no mention of prison guards. Unawareness, fear, stereotypes, general misunderstanding of this role, lack of knowledge of the rights, duties or expectations of the officers, contributes to the marginalization of this professional group. The officers themselves are not always willing and able to talk openly about themselves and their work, being distrustful of the stigmatizing society. Untruth becomes a source of profit, and common knowledge, often unverified, which “borrows” prestigious and flagship slogans (e.g. patriotism, democracy, truth) becomes a tool for manipulation, is used for promotional and propaganda purposes. It is a dangerous phenomenon of relativizing the truth which fosters the idea that post-truth “isn’t bad”. The consent to its existence entails serious consequences for society, which lowers its moral requirements, weakens the critical judgment of media messages and harms individuals or groups that those messages stigmatize (Mały leksykon postprawdy 2018, p. 76).

Defense against the dictate of alternative facts is the acquisition of critical thinking skills, searching and checking information in various sources. The basis for this is reliable knowledge about this formation, which is quite poor among the average citizen of our country. The profession is known mainly from media broadcasts, films, and paradocumentaries, which often exaggerate the events happening behind the prison gates, taking them out of the broader context. The Prison Service does not have good press, reports are full of examples of the trivialization of the role of its officers, and opinions about it are often hurtful and offensive. Populism simplifies reality, misrepresents inconvenient facts, and press narratives appeal more to readers’ emotions and personal beliefs. Truth matters little because it requires reflection, and reflection is hard to come by in the media-

created world dominated by post-truth. Social communication tends to address sporadic and individual cases of negative phenomena occurring in the prison environment.

Thus, the public awareness of the profession of a prison guard is usually based on alternative facts, fake news, post-truths, and slogans served up in the media by unreliable journalists, anonymous online “experts,” and film directors who tend to color the image of a prison guard in their works. It is in vain in the post-truth world to search for information about the real situation of prison guards. The average citizen therefore knows little about the nature of work behind prison walls, the dilemmas and problems inherent in the role of a prison guard. Few media reports inform the public about the current situation of this social group. Most often they are limited to brief information about unpaid overtime, strikes, or changes to their entitlements. The officers themselves are not always willing and able to talk openly about themselves, their profession, since they are distrustful of the society that stigmatizes them. The statements of the prison guards who participated in the 2014–2018 research provide an assessment of the public’s perception of the formation and confirm the current state of affairs²: “They referred to us as common thugs, blaming us for everything. What’s wrong is us, not those behind bars. This is also the fault of poor media coverage of our hard work. We’re only mentioned when it’s bad, and they don’t talk about what our job is, how important this role is. How much we have to have in our heads, what we have to do to make it work all day long. How much persistence, experience and knowledge we have to have, first and foremost, when encountering human problems on a daily basis. This social odium was terrible. Everyone shunned me when they learned where I worked”³.

The media coverage of irregularities or abuse in this environment grow to enormous proportions and result in the stigmatization of the entire formation as “the exception that proves the rule”. When the emotions subside and the media reports are clarified and verified, one can hardly find any explanations or apologies for the publication of these isolated facts. The public space has for years reproduced myths about merciless “jailers” pushing inmates down the stairs, exploiting and harassing them, taking bribes, and collaborating with convicts⁴.

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² The issue of the social role of a prison officer is more extensively discussed in the following publications of the authors: Urlinska, Urlinska 2014, 2015, 2019.

³ The research conducted by the authors within one of the projects of the Research Station of the Intersectoral Partnership PANOPTIKUM (the project entitled “PRISON OFFICER – WHAT WE DO NOT SEE” was carried out between May 2017 and September 2018) involved 36 retired officers with whom focus group interviews were conducted on the fulfillment of the social role of a prison guard.

⁴ The Internet is full of media reports that stigmatize the group. This labelling in language is evident, for example, in the titles of media reports: *Prison Service sick with jailer flu (Pol. Służba Więzienna choruje na gadzią grypę)* (onet.pl 10.11.2018); *This time jailer flu decimates Prison Service (Pol. Tym razem gadzia grypa dziesiątkuje Służbę Więzienną)* (reprints of news on the protest of PS officers and mass sick leaves published by Onet.pl on 10.11.2018 appeared, i.a., in “Gazeta Wrocławska”,

Confirmation of this can be found, i.a., in the analysis of press reports from 1998–2001, on the basis of which Leszek Urbanowicz draws the conclusion that journalists often try to transfer decades-old social stereotypes to the penitentiary institutions, at the same time disregarding the broader context of the activity of the Prison Service (Urbanowicz 2004, p. 255–261). The repetition of heard (and unconfirmed) rumors, falsified generalizations, is only aimed at arousing the interest of the audience, and thus increasing the profits made by the writers. “Havoc in custody”, “Female guard having affair with detainee in custody”, “Prison officers melted down treasures”, “Inspector’s treasures. Gold and Silver in custody”, “Treasure escaped from jail”, “Living on a roll”, are just a few quoted media headlines⁵. They show that sensational information about unusual events behind prison walls “sells” much better than the truth, in line with the saying: “the worse, the better”. Journalistic integrity and the truth about the multitude of people working behind high walls is lost in the chase for sensation. As the author of this study concludes about the media narratives: “(...) surprise, punch line, excitement, iron consistency of argumentation without any room for interjections, digressions or showing somebody else’s version of events are the basic objectives of mass media. All in order to achieve the largest, most measurable success in the form of financial gain, popularity, prestige, the power to influence the widest possible range of society” Urbanowicz 2004, p. 255.

The media image of the Prison Service has been repeatedly discussed at industry congresses, conferences or academic symposia and has not lost its relevance. The perception of the Prison Service is built both by the prison staff, the justice system, law enforcement authorities, prison chaplains, the inmates themselves, their families, the local community, as well as the mass media. The latter, as the “fourth estate”, plays a significant role in shaping the public perception of this professional group.

In many cases journalists rely on post-truth instead of facts, and with insufficient knowledge of the realities of prisons and the specifics of the profession, they “fill in the information gap with sensationalism, which is a well-selling commodity. Rarely do publications search for a deeper sense of the relationship between crime and punishment. (...) The carelessly created media image of the prison system

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“Gazeta Krakowska”, “Dziennik Zachodni”, “PolskaTimes”, “Gazeta Pomorska”, “Nowa Trybuna Opolska”), *Should the jailer be a butler and an animator nowadays? (Pol. Czy klawisz ma być dzisiaj lokajem i kaowcem?)* (“Dziennik Zachodni” 20.02.2017; “Gazeta Lubuska Plus” 22.02.2017), *Jailers – whipping boys (Pol. Klawisze – chłopcy do bicia)* (“Tygodnik Przegląd” 19.11.2015), *Former prisoner about sex with jailers: you do it somewhere in kitchen. Then pregnancy and you’re off to Grudziądz (Pol. Była więźniarka o seksie z klawiszami: to się załatwia gdzieś na kuchni. Potem ciąża i do Grudziądza)* (na-temat.pl 27.03.2015).

⁵ Headlines from newspapers from 1998–2001, including “Wieczór Wyrbeża” (19.05.1998; 11.12.1998; 30.12.1998; 2.01.1999; 7.12.2002) and “Dziennik Bałtycki” (8.12.1998; 11.12.1998); cf. Urbanowicz 2004, p. 255–261.

is the basis for often unjust judgments about prison officers and the essence of serving of imprisonment and pre-trial detention sentences”⁶. As a result of this type of media narration, the world behind the prison wall is presented in a situational context (depending on what the media want to prove), stripped of its broader context. The pretext for the production of post-truth media messages are negative events or irregularities occurring in prison, such as escapes, suicides, hunger strikes, or uprisings among inmates. The media do not discuss the source of the problem, the reason for it, but only who is to blame and who should be punished.

In the media, information about the work of prison guards is often taken out of the broader context, lacks a reflective approach, a reflection on the condition of the Polish prison system, the accumulating problems and the optimal, systemic solutions. The result is reproducing schematic, stereotypical images, reinforcing common opinions about prison guards, creating a distorted image of the prison system. Such unverified information produces common knowledge about the work on the other side of the prison wall. When asked about stereotypes, myths and post-truths associated with their profession, the interviewed PS officers themselves said that they most often encountered opinions that the profession of a prison guard is a lucrative business, stable employment, guaranteed annual pay raises, prizes and promotion bonuses, that an officer receives a housing allowance, vacation subsidies, psychological assistance, and guaranteed retirement after fifteen years of service⁷.

One of the reasons for the existence in the public space of popular opinions about PS officers is the widespread lack of knowledge about the nature of work or activity of people working behind prison walls. The media do not mention current statistics on the Prison Service, which indicate that now more than 60% of prison guards hold a university degree⁸. Little attention is also given in the media space to information on social participation or voluntary activity of prison staff. When this type of information appears, its main source is the Prison Service itself, or its active and retired officers. In our research, prison guards often said that society often judges them unfairly and treats with distrust. Social misunderstanding of the job is detrimental to the officers, and their accounts of their work sound bitter: “We do not impose a prison sentence, this is done by the court and we only make sure that it is carried out, it is a thankless job, no one today wants to guard pathology for such money”, “the families of inmates often treat us like dogs who have the audacity to search them, they do not see that we care about the safety of the thief himself, as well as his fellow inmates”, “in this profession

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⁶ Statement by Lt. Col. (ret.) Zygmunt Lizak, retired director of the District Inspectorate of Prison Service in Kraków, former spokesman of the DIPS; Lizak 2001, p. 528.

⁷ To verify the previously conducted narrative interviews, a focus group study was conducted (4–6.06.2018) centered on the issue of perception of the social role of the PS officer. The interviews involved 36 people.

⁸ Cf. statistics from recent years are available on the PS website – <https://sw.gov.pl/dzial/statystyka>

it is impossible to turn off your emotions”, “what happens behind the gate has nothing to do with a cushy state position, it is an insecure job”, “this is not a job that little boys dream of”⁹.

The officers are aware that the place of their work is shrouded in an aura of mystery, as the average citizen has no connection with prison staff. Despite the opening of this group to the society, social campaigns and actions, prison guards are still not given social recognition. It is also in vain to look for their profession among the professions of public trust. In the course of the research (in both narrative and group interviews), there were numerous statements by officers that confirmed the fact of the existence of a social odium associated with the profession of prison officer. Prison guards themselves, in conversations with friends, often avoided and still avoid the topic of their place of employment and their role behind the wall. Our analysis shows that this professional group is currently marginalized, repeatedly overlooked in educational and research efforts, often left without institutional and social support. This is a result of failure to recognize and understand their expectations and needs. Their social role is perceived mainly through the prism of their duties, whilst their rights are overlooked. The asymmetry of information and knowledge combined with the lack of social solidarity become a source of tension for people performing this role. Unawareness of the requirements imposed on PS officers, the specifics of the profession, rights and obligations arising from the role, results in the fact that members of society often lack key competencies that enable them to evenly transform the information they possess into knowledge about the prison guard profession.

The stigmatization of the occupation is lined with social fear underpinned by myths and lies accumulated over the years, and post-truths functioning in the social consciousness, based on emotions rather than facts. Prison guards resent the media for discussing their service only in the context of negative events. It is difficult to find any mentions of social action, of grassroots initiatives taken by officers. There is still a shortage of social communication campaigns involving prison guards. There are occasional promotional or information campaigns launched by the Prison Service itself, but this is not a sufficient form of social communication. In-depth analyses provide evidence that the Prison Service is the least well paid among the uniformed services, as the basic salary of a prison guard is minimally higher than the national average, that allowances are discretionary, and that opportunities for further education are limited (due to staff shortages and shift work). It is true that one can retire after 15 years of work, but with a salary equal to 40% of the basic wage; in addition, one cannot take up any gainful employment for a year (Markowski 2018).

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⁹ The statements featured in this text are taken from interviews with retired PS employees conducted by the authors as part of their 2016–2018 research under the educational project “*COOL LIFE OF RETIREES. Educational and therapeutic aspects of writing about oneself*”.

Instead, we have noted the low prestige of the profession and the lack of public recognition for the work performed by PS officers. This is a fact that has to be “worked on” and needs a change in the social awareness. This could be accomplished by spreading the knowledge about the social involvement of the representatives of this formation. This is because the knowledge about the off-duty activity of officers does not reach social awareness, while they are willing to initiate social actions themselves, actively engage in numerous voluntary efforts for the benefit of the local community, other professional groups or people in need of help¹⁰. However, one rarely hears about this type of activities in the media.

Prison workers do not demand recognition for this hard and stressful work, they do not seek society’s acceptance by force. They treat their duties as a task, out of a sense of responsibility for the safety of others, and the help provided to those in need is driven by social responsibility, is an expression of empathy of prison guards. Their voluntary work improves the quality of their lives, gives them satisfaction and a sense of being needed. They do not boast about their social activities, do not use them to promote the formation. And yet, in order to disenchant the profession, prison guards themselves must open up to the outside world to become ambassadors for their own cause. For this to happen they need to show their role, talk about the dilemmas and difficulties it entails. But above all, they must learn to speak about themselves and to themselves, to signal their own needs, to assert their rights. And here, with our research and the educational initiatives undertaken, is where we reach out to meet these needs.

The prison guard we do not see – building bridges over walls

The world behind the ‘high wall’ is full of opinions and emotions, meanings, stimuli, impulses and inspirations. While observing the social and educational activities involving Prison Service officers, one can notice a certain asymmetry – these processes tend to overlook the officers themselves, treating them merely as executors of social rehabilitation activities. Usually it is the inmates who are the subject of studies, rarely is anyone concerned with PS officers, no one asks them

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¹⁰ Active and retired PS officers have for years been supporting the efforts of the Foundation Against Leukemia www.leukemia.pl (accessed on: May 30, 2020), are honorary blood donors (during just one campaign – “*Helping is in our blood* (Pol. *Pomaganie mamy we krwi*)” – they donated 700 liters of blood), organize assistance to health care, support residents of nursing homes, organize support for homeless animals (as part of the campaign #*MinistryofJusticeHelps* (Pol. #*ResortSprawiedli-wościPomaga*), for years they have been regularly collaborating with the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity, selflessly devote their free time and energy to support children from poor families, for over 25 years they have been regularly organizing fund-raisers so that children and their parents could go on summer holidays.

about their training for the role, about their dilemmas, difficulties or facilitations in fulfilling their social role, no one is interested in the expectations that the prison guards themselves have of their role partners or what needs they have. The problems of prison guards are marginalized in research, while entire volumes are devoted to their partners in the social role, the inmates, describing their needs and problems that need to be solved. This disproportionality causes dissatisfaction and opposition among officers.

Recognition of this situation gave rise to our interest in this occupational group. This was spurred by the publication about the Detention Centre in Toruń, which was then celebrating the 150th anniversary of its establishment, that we prepared in 2014. In our opinion, this monograph had to include information on the subject that is the PS officer. This prompted us to conduct research in a group of retirees from the Toruń field unit. The study used the phenomenological method, which consists of telling the life stories by the officers (who are now retired). This approach to research allows the scholars to gain information about how a person understands themselves, what situations and events influenced the shaping of their personality, what significant others influenced their actions and decisions. The analysis focused on individual ways of functioning in the role of a Prison Service employee.

In our research, we also decided to apply the phenomenographic method, using narrative interview and group interview techniques. They allow us to describe and analyze everyday life, social reality and the self-reflections of the participants. Human beings not only exist, but also have a certain relation to their existence, making themselves the object of self-reflection. The interviews provided us with knowledge about various ways officers understand, perceive, and experience the phenomena and aspects of prison reality, as well as allowed to get an insight into their experiences related to the role. They shared with us their stories and recalled many interesting fragments of their professional lives, so we had the opportunity to have a look behind those metal doors and see the Prison Service through the eyes of the officers themselves.

The qualitative research allowed us to gain knowledge about the life and work of the officers. This was possible thanks to the committed attitude of the very community of prison guards, who were willing to reveal some secrets about their profession. The results of the research were published as a book (Urlińska, Urlińska 2014, pp. 185–236) and in pedagogical journals (Urlińska, Urlińska 2015, pp. 125–141), they are also disseminated at scientific conferences, such as the anniversary symposium organized by the University of Opole with the participation of a large number of Prison Service officers¹¹. This conference marks the

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¹¹ The conference: *Prison officers for society (standards-competence-mission)* (Pol. *Funkcjonariusze służby więziennej na rzecz społeczeństwa [standardy-kompetencje-misja]*) held on 11 September 2015 in Opole by the Institute of Educational Studies at Opole University on the 20th anniversary of

beginning of our cooperation with active and retired officers. Since then there has been a number of educational projects based on our diagnosis of the needs, opportunities and expectations of this occupational group in terms of the realization of their social role by PS officers¹². Many years of fruitful cooperation with the community of prison guards has made this social group our partners in joint scientific and research undertakings.

Our study confirms that the work on the ‘other side of the wall’ is demanding and carries a high level of stress. Working with “difficult clients”, in unfavorable conditions and under time pressure are borderline experiences that make prison guards acquire, in the course of their service, competencies and skills that are, in fact, desired by employers these days. Professionalism, responsibility, dutifulness, reliability, honesty, discipline, ability to work under pressure, resistance to stress, composure, decisiveness, assertiveness, consistency, logical thinking, good organization of work, optimism and sense of humor, patience, empathy, tact, tolerance, carefulness, self-awareness, are just some of the qualities of PS officers and assets that are highly valued in the job market nowadays. In theory, prison guards should be able to easily re-enter the job market after retirement. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and there are usually two options available for an officer-senior (45+ !!): the insurance market or protection of persons and property.

The results of our research indicate that this occupational group is socially marginalized, threatened with exclusion from social life and the labor market¹³. Despite the fact that prison officers have considerable personal and professional potential, they belong to the group of increased risk. In everyday professional life they are affected by the process of (individual and group) marginalization, which is often beyond their control. The stigmatization of the profession, inequality of

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the establishment of the Independent Labor Union of Employees and Officers of the Prison Service (Pol. *NSZZ Funkcjonariuszy i Pracowników Więziennictwa*) – it was the forum where the authors gave a speech on the trivialization of the social role of prison officers.

¹² The projects are implemented within the framework of measures undertaken by the Research Station of the Intersectoral Partnership PANOPTIKUM organized by the authors and include: (RE) GENERATION – a mentoring program focused on social and professional activation of retired prison officers (comprehensive support, equipping with competence potential, active learning constitute an element of ‘education towards old age’); DIALOGUE IN UNIFORM – a program engaging retired officers in working with students of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków (conducting lectures, workshops and trainings); COOL LIFE OF RETIREES and PRISON OFFICER – WHAT WE DO NOT SEE – focus on biographical and narrative learning for adults. The projects are implemented under partnership agreements signed between the academic community (Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń), the community of active and retired prison guards (National Union of Prison Service Pensioners and Retirees [Pol. *Krajowy Związek Emerytów i Rencistów Służby Więziennej*], Prison Officers Association [Pol. *Stowarzyszenie Oficerów Więziennictwa*]) and the private sector (brokerage company Mentor S.A. and IL-PROJEKT).

¹³ Diagnosis of the prison guard community based on our several years of research (in-depth interviews, focus groups and analysis of collected source materials)

privileges, lack of institutional or social support, low prestige of the occupation, social resentment, stereotypes, mutual misunderstanding of social roles, lack of appropriate qualifications and competences that would help to fit into new roles and situations, low effectiveness and insufficient number of programs supporting officers – all this translates into their everyday functioning in the society, both during and after their service. These factors all point to the fact that prison guards may soon become another socially excluded group. Symptomatic factors of exclusion include: health factors (health condition, susceptibility to addictions), social and random factors (crisis, family), competence and educational factors (deficiencies in education related to the inability to reconcile shift work and improving one's qualifications while on duty), economic factors (low pay, withdrawal of privileges, lack of possibilities for extra work), physical factors (retirement at the age of 45+), normative factors (nepotism, discrimination, social stigmatization of the profession) or institutional factors (inadequate systemic solutions adopted in policies, methods and forms of functioning).

However, the PS organization has an extraordinary social potential, the total human capital in the form of knowledge, experience and skills of its officers. This is an added value that pays off in daily work 'behind high walls'. The active prison officers themselves support and help their younger colleagues. This support is not limited to the years of service, because officers are also associated in local groups of the National Union of Prison Service Pensioners and Retirees after retirement and they actively participate in the initiatives of associations, groups and foundations connected with the formation. This constitutes a great potential. For years voluntary work for the benefit of local communities and participation in community programs has been translating into increased quality of life of retired officers, giving them a sense of empowerment and having a real impact on creating the organizational culture of this professional group. Hence, our – the academic community's – idea to channel this effort into educational and training support through which retired officers can gain subjectivity, discover their own potential, get answers to questions about their own needs or spheres of physical, intellectual, emotional and social development.

For more than four years, we have been cooperating with the community of active (Prison Officers Association) and retired prison guards (National Union of Prison Service Pensioners and Retirees)¹⁴. Systematic consultations carried out

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¹⁴ The cooperation between academics and prison guards began in 2014 with the work on the publication celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Detention Centre in Toruń, and was formalized on 7.11.2016 by signing a partnership agreement between the Faculty of Education Sciences at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and the National Union of Prison Service Pensioners and Retirees and the Prison Service Officers Association, aimed at establishing close cooperation and coordination of joint educational and scientific-research activities. The agreement was successively expanded, on 22.04.2017 the company Mentor S.A. joined the consortium. The synergy of social and educational activities led to the creation on 13.11.2017 of the Intersectoral Partnership PANOPTIKUM (IPP), which

over this period have translated into specific scientific and research and animation projects, implemented within the framework of the Intersectoral Partnership *Panoptikum* established in 2017¹⁵. From our point of view, involving retired PS officers in scientific and educational activities is a key element building bridging capital. Senior prison officers have naturally become ambassadors of the PS formation. They actively participate in conferences and seminars, are also involved in conducting workshops for students, initiate national training events, while being subjects of educational activities themselves – attending training courses and workshops, during which they acquire new competencies and skills useful in their private and professional lives.

The cooperation of academia and the prison service (organization of conferences and scientific research, working out common solutions, developing programs related to social prevention, compensation, revitalization or environmental animation) is stimulating for the officers themselves, while giving us knowledge about the life and work of this group of professionals. The recognition and utilization of the social potential of PS officers, demonstrating good practices and the grassroots efforts they undertake, serves to integrate the formation with society and build an atmosphere of trust, which – as indicated by public opinion surveys – there is still a lack. Participation in social life also allows the PS to open up to the society.

We began our implementation efforts by encouraging officers to tell us their own stories. The fact that the book is published in print and features a diverse range of materials obtained from former PS officers gives it special exemplification value¹⁶. Writing one's own biography has become, on the one hand, a way for

combines three sectors: science, business and NGO. On 17.04.2018 the partnership was established with the Faculty of Education of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków and the company IL-PROJEKT.

¹⁵ The consortium, strengthened by new members, has for several years been successfully implementing new educational as well as scientific and research projects involving retired Prison Service officers (the synergy of activities includes, i. a. organizing joint conferences, scientific symposia, open lectures, activities popularizing the issues of the prison system and retired officers, joint development and implementation of mentoring programs, preparing a series of scientific publications). The main goals and tasks of the IPP are: to recognize and exploit the potential of the community of prison guards, to present good practices (the presence of officers in the public space), to socially and professionally activate prison guards (to prepare them to return to the job market after leaving the service, to equip them with key competencies), to counteract the marginalization of prison guards as an occupational group (activities popularizing the issues related to the community of prison guards, educational activities as an element of “education towards old age”), to change the community and its organizational environment through the efforts of the community itself (supporting and promoting grassroots initiatives of prison guards-seniors).

¹⁶ The results of the research and implemented projects are discussed in the book: Urlińska, Urlińska 2018. The publication contains a record of the various layers of everyday experiences and is a documentation of the (un)usual life of prison officers. The stories of retired officers, penned on the pages of chronicles, captured in the frame of a photograph, memories in the form of poems and graphics, notes, books, articles, open letters or petitions – they all paint a unique, mosaic landscape of the everyday life of this community, with all its colors and shades. The landscapes of (un)usual reality were

prison guards to reflect on their profession and their own lives, and on the other hand an opportunity for them to disenchant this community. Knowledge about people and awareness of the specifics of working on the other side of the prison wall is the best weapon against stereotypes, myths, alternative facts, and post-truths. Showing good practices related to the life and role of a prison officer is not solely a PR move. It also gives an opportunity to demonstrate that prison guards are present in the public space, that they feel part of the society, have a lot to offer and want to feel needed and appreciated for their demanding and difficult work.

Undertaking joint initiatives by both active and retired officers together with the scientific community is a reflection of the expectations and needs of the prison service community itself. The Prison Service is not a faceless institution, but an organization based on social ties. Voluntary undertaking of grassroots activities and the ability of self-organization in order to achieve the set and pragmatic goals of the group to achieve success and to make optimal use of the social potential inherent in the community. The energy of prisoners, their talent, enthusiasm, experience, knowledge and skills become the basis for building the formation's social capital (bonding capital, connecting local communities as well as bridging capital, bringing together activists, other formations or institutions). The intention of us – the initiators – is to build bridges over the walls, which in the long run enables more effective activity, because it helps build social trust, of which there is still not enough towards the formation of prison guards, and allows to dispel myths and post-truths functioning in the social consciousness.

Social dialogue as an opportunity to change the perception of the Prison Service

Shaking up the schematic way of thinking causes a redefinition of the role of a Prison Service officer and changes in the expectations towards people guarding security. What is familiar no longer evokes fear, but rather curiosity, which does not have to lead to nosiness. Recognizing the problems and dilemmas associated with the role of prison guard, and discussing them in a wider group, is a step towards preventing further marginalization of this group of professionals. It is possible to achieve social revitalization by diagnosing the needs and explaining

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“painted” with reports on: mythologies of the ‘jailer’, gardens and thickets of (non)memory, portraits of “positively crazy” people, micro-worlds and micro-spaces of seniors, places of and in memory, on community animation as a source of inspiration and activation of the potential of seniors, on the leisure time of retirees, on this synergy of efforts of people actively transforming the living environment, and on the ‘lining’ of unusuality that gives meaning to this endeavor. In the context of individual stories and experiences, the presented reports have been inserted into a sequence of ‘historicity’, which allows one to understand both the past, the present and the upcoming future.

to a wider audience the social problems and behaviors typical of the prison officer community. Grassroots initiatives launched by active and retired officers, supporting the environment of the prison guards themselves as well as the local community, prove that officers want to be a part of society and feel co-responsible for building social bonds necessary for normal functioning.

Thus prepared, the platform of social discourse is the starting point for the social dialogue about the needs, expectations, rights and duties, and the place of the Prison Service officer in the social structure. Attention to the accuracy of information and critical analysis of media messages is the way to combat the stereotypical perception of prison guards, debunk myths and post-truths that exist in the public space. Looking back, the experience of meetings with active and retired officers strengthens our conviction that they are extraordinary, inspiring individuals who are open to the world and to people, full of passion and plans, with a reflective view of their social role. Each time the contacts with officers unveil a bit of a mystery, allowing us to peek behind the curtain of the prison staff's world, get to know the scenarios of their roles, and in this way the arcana of the profession of a Prison Service officer. We are convinced that these ideas, whether spoken out loud or put on paper, have the power to make a difference.

Raising issues related to the social role and situation of prison guards contributes to a broader public debate. We hope that this will play a role in the disenchantment of places such as detention centers and prisons, in dispelling myths that have accumulated over the years, in putting an end to stereotypical thinking about the profession of a prison officer, and in interpreting the prison reality from the perspective not only of the inmates, but also of those who guard them behind prison walls. The retired PS officers we work with are remarkable people who crave attention and recognition for their work. When our projects give them a voice, they feel empowered, responsible, and involved in the work for the formation to which they have dedicated their professional lives. Now it is the retirees who work “for the sake of the idea” to disenchant places “behind the high wall” and to make the profession of their younger colleagues – active officers who watch over the safety of others – more respectful.

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