
New books
FROM POLAND

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ZYGMUNT HAUPT

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MICHAŁ WITKOWSKI

ELŻBIETA CHEREZIŃSKA

WŁODZIMIERZ KOWALEWSKI

ZOŚKA PAPUŻANKA

WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA

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ZIEMOWIT SZCZEREK

WACŁAW HOLEWIŃSKI

JOANNA OLCZAK-RONIKIER

DAWID SIERAKOWIAK

ARTUR DOMOSŁAWSKI

CEZARY ŁAZAREWICZ

NEW BOOKS FROM POLAND

FALL 2016

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Tomasz Pindel, Agata Picheta

Books presented in the Catalogue were
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Artur Nowaczski, Justyna Sobolewska

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ON THE POLISH NOVEL

The literature of a given language is the tale of a community that uses this language on a day-to-day basis. The task of those assigned to select the most important works in a given literature is to point out those texts which might help a foreign-language reader discover the most about this literature, and what this literature says about the community. These should be representative works, though not necessarily bestsellers. They should be works that might be said to speak powerfully and stridently about Poland: about important themes and issues, but also about styles, or about what narratives are currently in use.

This year we are recalling the somewhat neglected work of Zygmunt Haupt (born in 1907), who only published a small collection of short stories through Paris's Literary Institute during his lifetime. We are presenting *Basque Devil*, a collection of remarkable historically and stylistically dense tales by a man whose life was set in regions ranging from the Polish-Ukrainian border to the United States.

We are also presenting the unusually precise and laconic, yet humorous and lively, accounts of works read by Polish Nobel-Prize winner Wisława Szymborska.

We also encourage you to have a look at **Wacław HOLEWIŃSKI's** *Honour Will Not Permit Me*, which helps readers understand the remarkably complex fates of Poles after World War Two. Holewiński has been documenting a reality that was passed over in silence even after 1989: the fates, history, and viewpoints of the Polish soldiers of the Underground State who would not put down their guns when Poland was conquered by the Soviets after World War Two, and who kept fighting not only for survival, but also for dignity.

This slice of history also provides material for a young writer, poet, and essayist - Przemysław Dakowicz. *Polish Aphasia* is a remarkable essay, which, like few texts in the Polish language, delves into the spiritual reality of contemporary Poland, its problems, idiosyncrasies, dramas, and whimsies. This year's program also includes Poland's most popular author of historical prose: Elżbieta Cherezińska. She weaves

the tale of *Headstrong* around the fascinating female figure of Świętosława - the daughter of Prince Mieszko I, a princess of the Piast Dynasty, and an English and Scandinavian Queen. It is well worth dipping into this early medieval world of Northern and Eastern Europe.

As every year, the Polish *specialite de la maison* is reportage: we are presenting a book about a journey on foot down Highway 816 by Michał Książek; recollections of Krakow after the end of World War Two by Joanna Olczak-Ronikier; the (somewhat interventional) reportage of Cezary Łazarewicz about the communist police's murder of secondary school student Grzegorz Przemysław in the spring of 1983; a tale of Ukraine during time of Euro-maidan by Ziemowit Szczerek; and reportage about those who are overlooked in the official narratives by Artur Domosławski.

We are also spotlighting Dawid Sierakowiak's remarkable *Diary*: five notebooks written between 1939 and 1943, whose author died of starvation at nineteen in the Łódź ghetto. The text reveals the enormity and terror of the tragedy of the Polish Jews.

We also recommend looking into our prose: a new novel by Michał Witkowski (the author of *Lovetown* is in top form!); a collection of short stories by Włodzimierz Kowalewski; the splendidly-received debut novel by Maciej Płaza; and the second novel (reputedly the greatest challenge for any novelist) by Zofia Papużanka.

We hope that these Polish tales will stimulate plenty of thoughts, emotions, and curiosity. We believe that Poles have something to tell the world, and we hope that you listen to our voices.

Dariusz Jaworski
Director of the Polish Book Institute

Prof. Krzysztof Koehler
Vice Director of the Polish Book Institute

THE POLISH BOOK INSTITUTE. ORIGINAL SINCE 2003

In 2003, the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage founded the Book Institute, the aim of which is to promote Polish literature, its heritage, as well as the Polish language in general. It does so by supporting the editing and publishing of books both in Poland and abroad. The Institute has also been tasked with implementing the Polish National Readership Development Program, and it does so in concert with the Ministry of Culture through a variety of initiatives, including by having a presence at literary events and cultural festivals, and supporting libraries. The Book Institute is headquartered in Krakow and operates throughout the country, as well as internationally.

The Book Institute maintains a bilingual (Polish/English) website, featuring basic information on Polish literature, authors, translations, the book market, as well as the various institutions in Poland and abroad that provide financial support for literary endeavors. The website contains short biographies of 200 authors and over one thousand reviews. Every year our site is visited by over 300,000 people.

The Book Institute supports readership through the following programs and events:

The Translator's College is a Book Institute program that hosts a group of translators in Krakow every year, providing them an environment for working on translations, as well as meeting with authors and experts. The college has been operating since 2006. By 2015, eighty-four translators from thirty-four countries had come to Krakow to participate.

The college's **Albrecht Lempp Scholarship** aims to further the art of translation and writing by supporting writers from Poland and Germany, and Polish translators of German-language literature.

Workshops for translators aim to improve practical skills by providing the opportunity to work with experienced mentors. They also offer the possibility of learning more about Polish literature and the book market in a given country. The Book Institute has a particular focus on countries where there is very little Polish literature in translation.

The World Congress of Translators of Polish Literature, which is organized every four years, is the largest event of its kind. To date, there have been three Congresses, each attended by around two hundred and fifty translators from every continent. Over the course of several days, there are meetings with writers, critics, scholars, and various other experts. This truly unique event offers a wonderful opportunity for leading professionals to exchange information, ideas, and opinions.

Sample Translations @Poland is a program that allows translators to prepare a sample translation of up to twenty

pages of a given book, which he or she can then submit to potential publishers. The program has been running since 2007 and by the end of 2015 it had funded 430 such projects.

The Found in Translation Award is given to the translator(s) of the finest book-length translation of Polish literature into English. The winner receives a prize of 16,000 zloty and a three-month, sponsored residency in Krakow. We have been presenting this award on an annual basis since 2008.

The Transatlantyk Award is presented every year by the Book Institute to an outstanding ambassador of Polish literature abroad. The winner might be a translator, a publisher, a critic, or someone who organizes cultural events. The award was first presented in 2005 during the Congress of Translators of Polish Literature. The winner receives 10,000 euros, a commemorative diploma, and a statuette crafted by Łukasz Kieferling.

The @Poland Translation Program is aimed at foreign publishers planning to release a book by a Polish author. The publisher can receive co-financing for the translation, the copyrights of a given piece, and, for illustrated children's books, money to cover part of the printing costs. The program has been operating since the Book Institute was created, and has co-financed a total of 1,822 book-length translations into forty-seven languages.

International Book Fairs are an important element of the work we do at the Book Institute. We regularly participate in the fairs in Frankfurt, London, Bologna, Paris, Leipzig, Chicago, Beijing, New York, Moscow, Guadalajara, Lviv, Jerusalem, and New Delhi. Our presence allows us to make direct contact with foreign publishers and institutions that promote literature. For these fairs, the Book Institute prepares a catalog – *New Books from Poland*, which is printed in four languages and presents a selection of the most interesting recent publications.

Seminars for Foreign Publishers – for the past five years the Book Institute has been inviting groups of publishers from various countries to Krakow in order to show them what Polish literature has to offer. We arrange meetings with writers, publishers, and critics – encouraging our guests to publish Polish literature. Five seminars have been held to date.

Travel Grants for Polish Writers – the Book Institute co-organizes trips so authors can attend festivals, book fairs, and promotional meetings. In so doing, we work with a variety of institutions around the world, including diplomatic missions, cultural organizations, and publishers.

For more information, please visit www.bookinstitute.pl

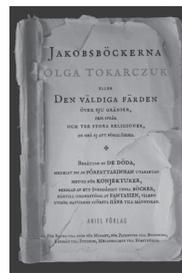
RECENTLY PUBLISHED BOOKS SUPPORTED BY THE ©POLAND TRANSLATION PROGRAM



MORPHINE

SZCZEPAN TWARDOCH

Translated into Hungarian
by Körner Gábor
Budapest: Typotex



THE BOOKS OF JACOB

OLGA TOKARCZUK

Translated into Swedish
by Jan Henrik Swahn
Linderöd: Ariel förlag



THE FINAL DEAL

WIESŁAW MYŚLIWSKI

Translated into Dutch
by Karol Lesman
Amsterdam: Em. Querido's



THE CAPTIVE MIND

CZESŁAW MIŁOŚZ

Translated into Spanish
by Xavier Farré
Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg



SHORT STORIES

MAREK HŁASKO

Translated into Estonian
by Hendrik Lindepuu
Tartu: Hendrik Lindepuu
Kirjastus



THE HANGED MAN'S LOVER

RAFAŁ WOJACZEK

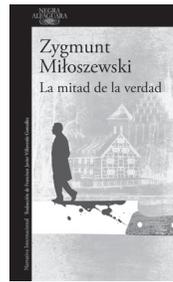
Translated into Hebrew
by Jonathan Barkai
Ra'anana: Even Hosen
Publishing House



NOW IS ELSEWHERE

KRZYSZTOF SIWCZYK

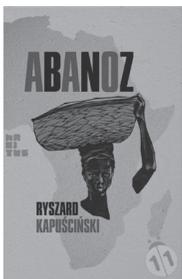
Translated into French
by Isabelle Macor
Paris: Editions Grezes



A GRAIN OF TRUTH

ZYGMUNT MIŁOSZEWSKI

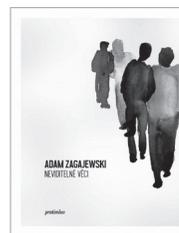
Translated into Spanish
by Francisco Javier
Villaverde González
Madrid: Negra Alfaguara



THE SHADOW OF THE SUN

RYSZARD KAPUŚCIŃSKI

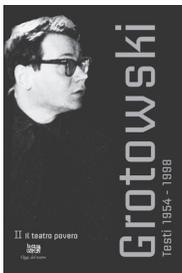
Translated into Turkish
by Gül Çağalı Güven
Stambul: Habitus Kitap



THE RETURN

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI

Translated into Czech
by Michael Alexa
Ostrava: Protimluv



**TEXTS FROM 1954-1998,
PART III**

JERZY GROTOWSKI

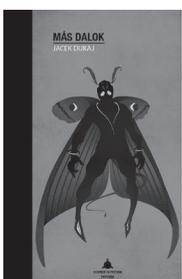
Translated into Italian
by Carla Pollastrelli
Lucca: Volo Publisher\
La casa Usher



THE IMPATIENTS

ZOFIA NAŁKOWSKA

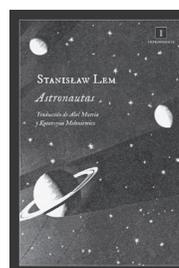
Translated into French
by Frédérique Laurent
Strasbourg: Circé



OTHER SONGS

JACEK DUKAJ

Translated into Hungarian
by Zsuzsa Mihályi
Budapest: Typotex



ASTRONAUTS

STANISŁAW LEM

Translated into Spanish
by Abel Murcia,
Katarzyna Mołoniewicz
Madrid: Impedimenta



THE LITTLE FOXES

JUSTYNA BARGIELSKA

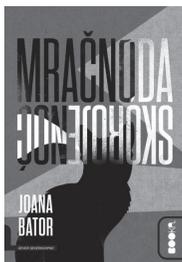
Translated into French
by Agnieszka Żuk
Montreal: Les Allusifs



SELECTED POEMS

EWA LIPSKA

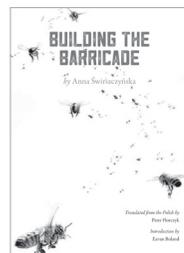
Translated into Icelandic
by Áslaug Agnarsdóttir, Bragi Ólafsson, Magnús Sigurdsson,
Olga Hołownia, Oskar Arni Óskarsson
Reykjavik: Dimma



DARK, ALMOST NIGHT

JOANNA BATOR

Translated into Serbian
by Jelena Jović
Belgrad: Korektura Booka



BUILDING THE BARRICADE

ANNA ŚWIRSZCZYŃSKA

Translated into English
by Piotr Florczyk
Portland: Tavern Books



**THE ASSASSIN
FROM APRICOT CITY**

WITOLD SZABLÓWSKI

Translated into Czech
by Barbara Gregorova
Prague: Dokořán



THE NIGHT WANDERERS

WOJCIECH JAGIELSKI

Translated into Slovak
by Juraj Koudela
Krasno nad Kysucou: Absynt



TIME INVERTED

WŁODZIMIERZ ODOJEWSKI

Translated into German
by Barbara Schaefer
Munich: DTV



WHITE FEVER

JACEK HUGO-BADER

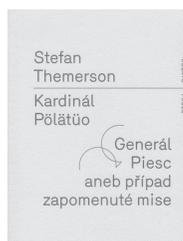
Translated into Spanish
by Ernesto Rubio, Marta Słyk
Madrid: Editorial Dioptrias



**MAREK ŚWIDA'S
GENERATION**

ANDRZEJ STRUG

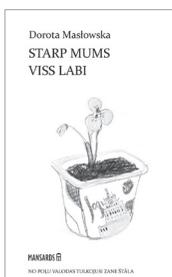
Translated into Spanish
by Joanna Szypowska
Madrid: Circulo d'Escritores



**CARDINAL PÖLÄTÜO
AND GENERAL PIEŚC**

STEFAN THEMERSON

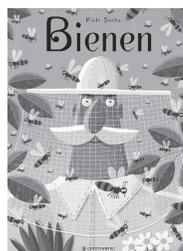
Translated into Czech
by Joanna Derdowska
Prague: Rubato



**NO MATTER HOW
HARD WE TRIED**

DOROTA MASŁOWSKA

Translated into Latvian
by Zane Štala
Riga: Mansards



BEEES

PIOTR SOCHA

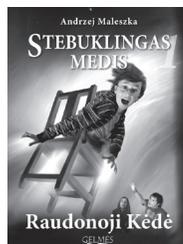
Translated into German
by Thomas Weiler
Hildesheim: Gerstenberg



ALL TUNED UP

ANNA CZERWIŃSKA-RYDEL

Translated into French
by Lydia Waleryszak
Wrocław: Éditions Format



**THE MAGIC TREE:
THE RED CHAIR**

ANDRZEJ MALESZKA

Translated into Lithuanian
by Ryte Janauskaite
Vilnius: Gelmės



SMILE FOR A FROG

PRZEMYSŁAW WECHTEROWICZ

Translated into Italian
by Aneta Kobylańska
Rome: Sinnos



FRANCISZKA

ANNA PIWKOWSKA

Translated by Kazys Uscila
Vilnius: Nieko rimto

ZYGMUNT HAUPT

BASQUE DEVIL



*Zygmunt Haupt (1907–1975) was a writer, translator, and painter. He fought in World War II, first in Poland, then later with the Polish Army in the West. He moved to the United States in 1946. He published in Paris's *Kultura* and London's *Wiadomości*; he also edited the monthly journal *Ameryka*. In 1963, he received the *Kultura* Literary Prize, and in 1971 the *Kościelski* Award.*

Zygmunt Haupt (1907–1975) is a remarkable writer, perhaps one of a kind, and, as sometimes is the fate of writers, is still waiting to be discovered by the public at large. In his lifetime he published only a single book, the short-story collection *Band of Paper* (Instytut Literacki, Paris 1963), but his oeuvre, scattered through journals and collected in the writer's archive, is significantly larger. The bulk of it – short stories and a bit of reportage – has been collected by Aleksander Madyda in *Basque Devil*, which, with the companion volume *From Red Ruthenia: Sketches, Stories, Reviews, Variants* (worked on by the same editor, featuring smaller pieces and reportage, as well as a selection of Haupt's drawings), might be basically treated as Haupt's collected works.

This year's edition of *Basque Devil* is the second, and substantially corrected edition of the collection, providing another chance to become acquainted with Zygmunt Haupt's prose.

The autobiographical *gawęda* [a kind of raconteur tale] is a natural mode of expression for this author born in Ułazkowiec, Podole (on the eastern borderlands of the old Republic). I use the term *gawęda* because the trademark of Haupt's narrative is a surrender to the flow of living speech, with all its awkwardness and rough spots, and a direct address to the reader, before whose eyes the author searches his memory for the right word or detail. Nonetheless, we should stress that these are a special brand of story. Naturally, Haupt recalls various episodes from his life (which was undoubtedly adventurous: a childhood and youth in a cultural melting pot of different religions, languages, and customs, a sojourn in Paris, time spent in Lwów's bohemian circles, and two world wars – in the defensive war of 1939 Haupt fought in the artillery, and then served in the Polish armed forces in the West, spending the rest of his life as an émigré in the USA), but we might search in vain for a linear autobiography in his prose, or a systematic account of what he experienced. On the contrary – he seems to be forever falling into another digression, changing the point of view in kaleidoscopic fashion. There are no clear conclusions – more important than a tight anecdote

finished with a clear message seems to be the isolated and remarkably intense recollection of a detail from language, nature, or behavior – a landscape, or his mental state from years past. Most of Haupt’s stories depict events distant in time, to which the author returns, often more than once, to apprehend them in different ways and from different perspectives, and to patiently delve into the existential meaning of old encounters, loves, life decisions, and incidents. And finally, he does this to explore the mechanisms and meanderings of memory. Haupt achieves all this through an exquisite use of language, fluctuating between registers and rhythms, with a vast vocabulary and the sensibility of a painter. Often – as if yearning to delve deeper into a reality crowded with words, colors, and objects – the writer takes to his penchant for listing things, enumerating the various details of the world he portrays, though generally it exists only in his memory.

All this makes the stories of Zygmunt Haupt the kind of prose which one can reread for all one’s life, always finding new aspects, tracing the threads that wind through the various texts, trying to understand the intricate structure of the stories as they come. It is not by chance that some critics describe Haupt’s writing as profoundly poetic, comparing it to a great, digressive epic poem. One thing is certain – whoever spends time with the prose of Zygmunt Haupt will never mistake it for anyone else’s.

Marcin Sendeki



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COUP DE GRÂCE

BASQUE DEVIL

I was once told part of a certain affair which was most unnerving in its tragedy and futility. This was a tale of a close mutual acquaintance, which I heard narrated with a sigh of compassion; it was told to me as one spins a yarn, though it could well be stretched to the limits of credibility. And so, we have a married couple, probably early on in life - I can imagine them, perhaps they were teachers, or maybe he was an excise officer, perhaps a deputy prosecutor, and her I can imagine as well, probably an average sort of Polish woman: gray hair and sculpted cheekbones, a dress of some kind, and given the times, maybe a feather boa and a hat with a large pin and darned gloves. He must have been young, with a well-trimmed mustache and honest eyes, maybe he had a "brush cut"; and they had baggage, a "Gladstone" suitcase and a basket with hinges and a cane hasp that closes with a padlock, and on top of that a coat, a bit of Austrian lace stitched onto the lapels of a frock coat, a watch on a chain, cuff-links in the shape of horseshoes, and they were traveling in that wartime period for some private reason: maybe to the wife's family, maybe there were other issues, they had set off, on the spur of the moment, in the rented coach of one Mr. Salewicz: a pair of nags with protruding pelvic bones in burlap harnesses, a cart clattering on the clods of the road, the quaking boards of the rack and the straw for makeshift seats, which slumped down over the long hours of riding, the straw covered with canvas. There is a fatigue from the hours of travel, when each and every muscle can be felt aching from the shake of the carriage. When all you see in front of you is the hunch of the coachman and his reddish coat, the whip, and the clip-clop of horses' hooves, the telegraph poles lining the road, the crumbling roadside huts, the desolation of the wartime road. The low sky with clouds, the puddles in the fields like another sky scattered into bits, the damp of the clinging willow branches, the faraway crows in the fields - a landscape neither inviting, nor uninviting.

Then they stopped somewhere - this was perhaps a small-town inn, maybe a wayside inn, a small hotel, or perhaps just a little store where they needed to gather some provisions. And there, to their dismay, they stumbled across some soldiers - maybe Don Cossacks, maybe Cherkesses, perhaps an official Hussar patrol, either stocking up on feed, or a splinter group, or simply a band of marauders. This is not our concern. Our concern is that these were people swept by war from their place on earth to the edge of the world, probably equally young, torn from the instinct to sit still and the dignity of holding onto a single place by the tide of war, they were, like shells, boiled out of that feeling.

What could have happened there? Presumably filled with contempt, with fear and contempt for the invaded peoples, the invaders had come to sound out the travelers – the invaders, or in other words, the party bearing arms, was thus able to exert their violence upon the defenseless in their hatred for others, primitively confusing the right to wartime interrogation with the right to respect one's fellow man or his possessions, to such a degree that they found themselves brutally tearing the watch from around the lady's neck, catching it on the strap of her blouse, and when the gentleman fumbled to intervene, he was struck in the face.

One man strikes another man in the face. In certain times and circumstances, in certain social contexts, this is a highly symbolic and extremely stigmatizing departure from accepted forms of morality and honor – in the southern climes of Italy or France it is very impulsive, and serves to settle more intricate forms of physical satisfaction in a conflict. A French woman will slap her child when it misbehaves, which seems to us a tad excessive, though they find it reasonable. And I recall that in the Russian army it had a different meaning – the slapping sergeant and the slapped infantryman both regarded this act as an accepted corrective measure. In this particular event it had another significance. It had a multiplied significance. The slapping cavalier, prim and debonair in his riding boots chaffed from stirrup straps, and with his crop dangling from his wrist, sporting the weary jowls and consternation of a man in wartime, sought the same tension he felt riding in the saddle under a hail of machine-gun fire – to his mind it was probably a swift, unfussy, and masculine way of settling things, this striking a man in the face, a man from a defeated country, thus instilling a *blagonadyozhnost'* for the whole invaded structure with the instructive shorthand of a slap in the face.

The man who had been struck in the face had quite different feelings. Apart from the untrifling matter of the physical pain, a slap in the face is also painful in terms of the acute mental shock; it is a slap in the presence of a woman one loves, there is the powerlessness of an unarmed man faced with a powerful opponent in a tense environment; in addition, he also had to digest, and swiftly digest, the enormous problem of encountering things never before encountered. It was not his habit to be on the receiving end of physical pain, it was no everyday event, no daily incident this being slapped in the face – it was something that crept up out of the crevices of the world, and from this slap practically everything crumbles, disintegrates, and turns to rubble. Imagine: One slap in the face!

Then they rode on their way in the same carriage. It was evening. She might have said to him: "Stach, it's nothing Stach, Staaach... I'll pray for God to take it from us, for us to forget, Stach..." He said nothing. Maybe they stared into the evening gloom – a pair of unfortunates chosen to live out their fates. Maybe they held hands, but there was nothing that could have toppled the wall that grew between them that day when there was the two of them, and the moment came which could have been altered by someone else – it could have missed them, there was every chance of missing it, but no! They were to have a part in it, and thus this dire wall: these bygones would not be bygones! Maybe she drifted into a restless slumber, dreaming dreams miles from all this, and he surely sat there crooked as a hornbeam, once bent and now nothing could straighten him out, he surely sat there struck dumb by the pain of his exhaustion. And the coachman probably slept in his tattered cloak, curled up

by the hitch, for when the road gently inclined at the railway crossing, where the remains of the inoperative boom gate stuck out, a little manoeuvring locomotive quickly approached in a cloud of cold steam, and with one terrifying blow it swept up the poor carriage and the weary nags at the drawbar, and the gaunt driver, and this occurred in the blink of an eye, and thus, with this *coup de grâce*, fate concluded this autumn day tragedy. This happened during the time of the war.

Translated by Soren Gauger

MACIEJ PŁAZA

SLUGGY



Maciej Płaza (born 1976) is a prose writer, literary theorist and translator of English literature. His translation of a selection of short stories by H.P. Lovecraft earned him the Literatura na Świecie Award in the New Faces category. His debut book, *Sluggo*, won him this year's GDYNIA Literary Prize and Kościelski Prize, which has been awarded to young writers since 1962 by the Kościelski Foundation. He is also a finalist for this year's Nike Literary Award.

When writers of the so-called peasant school – authors such as Wiesław Myśliwski, Edward Redliński, Julian Kawalec, or Marian Pilot – began to publish in Poland in the 1960's and 1970's, the Polish village still existed. It was, though, a rather peculiar kind of existence – on the one hand deeply conscious of its own inevitable decline, on the other overlooked and largely absent. In a state constituted by a union of workers and peasants, in the verbal realm at least the emphasis was decidedly on the former; peasants were basically supposed to be peasants only temporarily, in a shameful kind of way, up to the moment when they'd finally put on worker's overalls and leave their cottages to take the bus to the factory. As a consolation, the powers that be left the modernizing villages folklore: a soulless artificial mishmash of costumes, leaping, and singing, imposed from above. That may have been why the cruel realism of Redliński or Myśliwski's narrative eloquence, his *skaz* drawn from the living spring of folk story-telling, came as such a shock to the literary public in Poland. They unexpectedly conjured up all that had been banished from the collective memory: centuries of feudal servitude, an almost sexual relation to the earth, a shallow veneer of religiosity superimposed on age-old fatalism and a fondness for vendettas. There was, however, one topic that this literature did not dare to raise, one which the majority of its urban readers would in fact have found unacceptable – the fact that almost all of us originate from there, from the country.

A cultural readiness to talk about this fact has emerged only among the generation of the grandchildren of the aforementioned writers. Except that it's an entirely different kind of discussion – one that takes place over the grave. Because the Polish village is by now undeniably dead. As it happens, talking about the dead is somehow easier; still though, the deceased is often idealized. Hence recent attempts in Polish literature to mythologize the Polish village, to portray it as

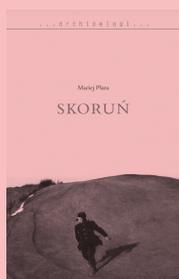
its own autonomous cosmos – including linguistically – to which the outside world has no real access.

This can be observed in Maciej Płaza's writing too, but he has pursued a rather different concept in his outstanding debut. *Sluggy* is a collection of interwoven, possibly autobiographical stories set in the Polish provinces in the 1980's, during the last decade of communism. Politics, however, rarely puts in an appearance here. True, the narrator's father is interned for his trade union activism in 1982, after the imposition of martial law. But we are not given any further details; the father disappears, then one day he simply shows up again. This literary device – the narrator as an adult trying to see the past through the eyes of a child – serves to underline the (for the moment) unbroken isolation of the villages surrounding the small town of Wierzbinięc on the Vistula.

Sluggy is a warm and colourful story about a young boy growing up – the Polish title, *Skoruń*, a dialect word meaning a wastrel or idler, is what the nameless narrator is called by his family. Yet the most interesting characters in Płaza's stories are the hero's parents: his reserved, religiously-minded, timid, yet also gentle and affectionate mother; and his father, domineering and filled with anger, a megalomaniac and a workaholic with a mission. This father is an interesting sociological type: a first-generation intellectual who has returned to the country, though not in the fullest sense of the term: he has taken a job as a teacher in the nearby town. In the figure of this tireless reformer prepared to improve the world at the cost of all those in it, Płaza offers a grand metaphor for a modernization that brings both wellbeing and destruction.

The author is a theorist of literature and a professional translator; perhaps because of this he is aware that in writing, moderation works better than exaggeration. *Sluggy* is marked by a discreet stylization of language that reminds us of the separateness of the literary world without creating an insurmountable barrier between it and the reader; it refrains from linguistic kitsch, and at the same time locates its stories in a universal context.

Piotr Kořta



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The way he

SLUGGY

disappeared was odd. One icy Sunday, early in the morning, when I was still pulling the eiderdown over my head and waiting for mother to light the stove, I heard a commotion in the next room. Father had gotten mad and mother was speaking in a woebegone voice, trying unsuccessfully to calm him. To begin with I wasn't the least surprised - nothing was less surprising than my father getting mad. But it usually happened in summertime or in the spring or fall. It would be brought on by his work, by a sudden rain that washed off what he'd just sprayed on the plants, by a ground frost in May that blighted the buds on the apricots, or a hailstorm that had damaged the apple crop. Now it was winter, for the moment we weren't even preparing the apples for sale, so it was a time when father wasn't going to school, he was just clearing the snow from in front of the house, smoking, staring out of the window, doing the crossword puzzle, rustling the newspaper and cursing under his breath, and also going into town on business that he didn't even tell mother about. I knew there'd been unrest at the piston works, I suspected my father was behind it - who was better at that kind of thing than him? But what it was about I had no idea. I got up quietly, my teeth chattering from the cold, and listened closely, but there was just a slamming of the door, then my mother burst out sobbing. A moment later the engine of our Fiat rasped into life. I went into the kitchen. Mother looked at me like I was a ghost.

"Where've you been?" she asked out of the blue.

"Where's father?"

"He's gone."

"Where?"

"To Uncle's."

"To Bogdan's? To drink vodka?"

Dear Lord, dear sweet frozen wintertime Lord, what a stupid, stupid thing to say, but I was scared and also riled by all those secrets. That was the end of the conversation, because I got a smack in the face so powerful it sent me staggering against the wall. Mother yelled at me, and her yell was dry as broken glass, without a single tear. I gritted my teeth. I remembered the hiding I received when I'd gotten lost in the town; like then I wanted to speak up in my own defence, and like then I couldn't, though this time it was for a different reason. Because now that bizarre something inside me that made me do dumb things, it didn't push words into my mouth, but quite the opposite - it shook me like a shiver, it wanted to answer mother's yell, though not with another yell or with tears - because me, Sluggy, I never ever cried, except maybe that one time when I was three and the Grębowieces' rooster pecked me; no, it wanted to answer with a story, a complicated and baffling story. "What do

I want to say to her?" I asked myself quickly. And it might have been then that I thought of telling her about my dream, the one I'd blurted out to the old man with the soda water cart, to say that father had gone away because he was dead, that maybe when he fell off the tractor he'd only been given a temporary reprieve, and now we really would have to bury him in the orchard.

But I wasn't able to say anything more to mother, because that glassy yell of hers suddenly glistened and rang melodiously somehow – and I realized she was praying. It was strange, different from the way she'd rattle off prayers in church; it was chaotic, breathless, in tiny pieces, like a stained-glass window shattered by a rock. And again I was struck in the face once and twice, though this time by questions that were harder than a hand: why, why, why is he always doing this to me, why is he always causing trouble. I didn't say anything else. Father didn't return that day or the next, nor the day after; mother's anger turned into trembling despair. Whenever I'd try and ask anything, mother would start shouting that father had gone away. After that, the strange days limped on all the way till Christmas, because from the time father had disappeared the school had suddenly shut down. It seemed to me that the two things must be related: father taught at the school, so since he'd vanished, school had been cancelled. I stayed at home and at first I wasn't worried, because I'd somehow forgotten the dream about the burial. I sat there, plunged in the bitter winter, in the absence of my father, which was like winter – white and still and harsh; and in the sorrow of my mother, which was nothing unusual, since my mother would lapse into despair for any reason at all, she was made of nothing but despair and agitation, just as father was made of anger and force. I caught myself doing what father did in winter-time: I tried to sweep the snow in front of the gate, I looked out the window, I stared at the crossword, which I couldn't make head or tail of, or at old newspapers, since new ones stopped coming. Mother would turn on the television in the evening, or listen to the radio, but she'd send me out of the room, so I didn't hear much. In fact it didn't really interest me; father's disappearance seemed a matter between him and me, I didn't think I could learn anything about it from the television. And the time passed till Christmas, when, to my mind, father would have to come back, since at Christmas everything tries to be different than usual, though it doesn't always succeed.

But only Uncle Bogdan came. As always at Christmas, he'd slaughtered a hog, and on the day before Christmas Eve he brought us ham, pork neck, sausages, bacon, back fat, liver sausage, blood sausage, along with a hare – all kinds of treasures. But he'd brought them not in an apple crate lined with newspaper as he usually did, but in a slop barrel. It disgusted me to touch any of it, though the sausages smelled so good it made your head spin.

"This is your share," he said as he rolled the barrel into the hall. He stamped the snow from his boots. "What are you staring at, Sluggo? Go hang it all up in the attic."

I was looking at the barrel.

"Don't worry, I scalded it clean," he growled. "I brought it in a barrel so the damn soldiers wouldn't confiscate it."

"Are they around here?" mother said in a shrill, tearful voice.

"By the bridge. I was praying they wouldn't look in the barrel, because they'd been drinking, their tongues were loosened, and they were hungry. If they'd seen what I had with me you'd be eating eggs and curd cheese for Christmas.

It's really too bad for you, Rita," he said to mother, "that your man likes playing at partisans."

I picked up some loops of sausage; they had a light covering of frost, but there was a strong smell of garlic, pepper, fat. Mother whimpered.

"They won't let him out," she said.

"Don't talk crap."

"I know what I know. He was organizing meetings at the school. Going to the works, kicking up a fuss. There was a strike. He was the only one from the whole village that they took, they won't let him out. They'll keep him as an example to the others."

"You're as big of a fool as he is. Hang on, kid." I froze with the sausages looped over my arm. Uncle stood up, still in his sheepskin coat; he took off his cap, straightened his hair at the front, and smoothed his moustache. He looked from mother to me and back. "Don't take it to the attic. Put it back in there. You're not going to spend Christmas in an empty house."

"What if he comes back?"

"Woman, are you worried about him coming back or not coming back? I'll bring you home right after the holiday."

So we went to Bogdan's. A white, smokey stillness hung over the houses and the fields. We skirted the town and took the Kamieniec road toward the Vistula. A short ways further a chimney jutted out of the snow; the hunched factory stood by the school, both buildings black and still. For a moment a pale shadow – a wisp of smoke or steam, or maybe a ghost – flashed against the blackness. By the bridge there was a truck with chains on its tires; three soldiers were warming themselves at a brazier, while a fourth jumped down from the cabin with a bottle of rye vodka. They evidently recognized my uncle's van, because the guy with the vodka was about to pull us over, but then he waved us on. Once we were on the bridge Bogdan breathed a sigh of relief.

"The heck is the army there for?" I asked.

"It's because of the cold weather," uncle said abruptly. "Natural disaster. They're delivering fuel to everyone."

"We didn't get any."

"You will."

"That's not what they said on television."

"Don't believe what they say on television."

"Father said the same thing," I murmured, but quietly, just to myself.

I didn't ask any more questions.

It would have been better if we'd stayed home. Eating that ham at uncle's, it felt like we were at a wake. Uncle and aunt sat around in the kitchen, smoking, drinking uncle's moonshine in a dull kind of way, and talking on and on with mother about father's absence; but I didn't pay any attention because I didn't understand a thing, and also because I knew some things myself – or rather, I didn't know them, but I preferred my own ignorance to somebody else's. It was then that I started thinking about how I needed to take father's place. Not in the house, because I couldn't do that – I was just a chit – and not for my mother, no one could even calm her down properly; rather, to take his place with myself, for myself. When mother sent me back to school after the New Year, my whirling guesses stopped making any sense. For a moment I thought that since the school was open again, father would come back. But he didn't. Then I remembered the old soda water seller and my dream about the burial.

MICHAŁ WITKOWSKI

FYNF UND CWANCYŚ



Michał Witkowski (born 1975) is a prose writer and columnist (he has worked with *Wprost* and *Polityka*). His 2005 novel *Lovetown* brought him fame and made him a literary star. It is now considered a cult classic and has been translated into over a dozen languages. *Fynf und cwancyś* is his eighth book.

In the early nineties of the last century, practically anyone who travelled from Poland to the West experienced something like a journey of initiation – an initiation that involved not so much getting to know the life-ways of the welfare state and its innovations in technology and personal hygiene, as becoming aware of one’s own more or less inferior place in the world. It is well known that nothing excites people so much as comparing their own status with that of others – and in this case, the comparison proved devastating: People who were well off in the East found themselves barely making do in the West, while those of middling means basically had nothing at all, their monthly salaries being just enough to cover three candy bars and a can of Fanta at a German gas station. “Yes, I have no money; neither have you. Nor has he... So... we have just enough, just exactly enough to start quite a big factory” – as the Nobel Prize laureate Władysław Reymont wrote in *The Promised Land*, his renowned 1899 novel that described the blossoming of capitalism in the Polish lands. While the teen-aged Polish, Slovak, and Czech protagonists of Michał Witkowski’s novel *Fynf und cwancyś* have no plans to start a factory, they do have another idea for making money. With their own young bodies serving as capital, they travel to the West to sell themselves, for cash, to ageing admirers of the graces of youth. In a certain sense the Germany, Austria, and Switzerland of Witkowski’s novel is a kind promised land, especially when you can count on such irrefutable arguments as the novel’s narrator does: The “fynf und cwancyś” of the title – a calque of the German “fünfundzwanzig”, i.e. twenty-five – refers to the impressive size of his member, in centimetres.

The idea of describing the meeting of West and East from the perspective of a male prostitute possesses extraordinary metaphoric potential. In the collective memory of East European societies, the 1990s were a time of gluttony, of getting drunk on the West – a bender after which, like after any other bender, the inevitable hangover set in. In this case it was the bitter realization that we had been bought for a handful of beads and a few meters of percale. Witkowski, however, is not interested in big ideas; what interests him are people:

the languages they speak, the way they look, their behaviour and eccentricities, how they respond to stress, their desires and weaknesses. In a certain sense, *Fynfund cwancyś* can be considered an anthropological novel, perhaps even an ethnographic one.

Witkowski artfully cloaks such literary attentiveness behind his twin masks of gossipmonger and humourist, and he has taken this approach consistently ever since his high-profile debut, the 2004 novel *Lubiewo* (published as *Lovetown* by Portobello Books). This was one of the most important (and funniest) books written in Poland after 1989, an exploration of the secret customs of the gay underground in Communist Poland. Witkowski's career – it is hard to pigeonhole him as an LGBTQ writer, because he tends to ironize the movement – has had its ups and downs, but *Fynfund cwancyś* unquestionably represents a return to what he has always done best: providing readers with his intelligent observations of the world framed by his own sarcastic, often perversely amoral commentary.

The successive love conquests and defeats of the protagonists – Milan, from the Slovak capital Bratislava, and Fynfundcwancyś, from the Polish village Konin – although they play out in the public toilets, train stations, and trashy dives where young *Stricher* (male prostitutes) and their well-heeled clients hang out, are narrated with the aplomb of an absurd picaresque novel. Somewhere in the background Witkowski spins another story as well, about the past and future of Europe, about the collision of excitement and ennui, about the cold, sterile, narcissistic loneliness at the heart of prosperity, whether Austrian or Swiss. The book contains not a trace of the pornographic, although sex is talked about on practically every page – and this is because Witkowski exaggerates the erotic and freights it with the grotesque, whether he is describing the German obsession with order and cleanliness or the shame and embarrassment-inducing perversions of old men who were never cuddled as children. *Fynfund cwancyś* is, in fact, a comedy, a highly indecent one. But this indecency is born of a deep understanding of the ambivalence that happens when people who have nothing encounter those who have it all.

Piotr Kořta



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In that city

FYNF UND CWANCYŚ

where everyone was interested only in slimming and abstaining, lean years had come for Dianka. Special offer! Special deal! Now every low-fat soup comes with free appetite suppressants! On top of that, the bank machine had accepted Diana's card - she was sure she had like ten francs left on it - only to imperiously inform her that it was being retained. Danke schoen very much. The flap shut like a curtain, and no amount of pounding her little fists against the machine would help.

Di was broke, and broke people aren't welcome in Switzerland. They're unwelcome in Apollo Sauna, unwelcome at Carrousel, unwelcome in Café Odeon, and unwelcome in Barfüsser... No more porcelain smiles and cheery "Grüezis" (Swiss for "hello!"). The discourse of chocolates dropped like a deflating balloon and trailed along behind Dianka on the cobblestones, snagging on whatever it could. The lights, the carousels had all shut down, the chocolate cows on Bahnhofstrasse disappeared as if to spite her, and even the nicest clients, the ones who always smiled, would listen when she met them to her tale of woe then simply excuse themselves, they had somewhere to be, and wish her the very best. All those people who had been so nice just yesterday were acting so mean now, like when Di ran into a Swiss queen she knew and started up in English with her, and that one responded in German and finally was like: "Yu ahr olredi enaf long time heer to lehrn jehrman. Eef yu vant to leef here, yu mahst lehrn jehrman..."

As if Di didn't have bigger problems on her mind. She knew that a convertible full of the smell of Asian food and gospel music wouldn't be coming her way any time soon, since Thai Dragon never came to her anyway, seeing as she was so poorly endowed and all they were after was horse meat.

Di had this one nice, regular client. He must have been thirty-eight, slim, rich, freckled, and there was something a little boyish about him, too (though Di didn't realize how carefully studied his boyishness was): His gestures gave off a certain "helplessness", his hair was deliberately dishevelled, he always wore a good shirt with good cufflinks... He was always so nice and punctual, like out of a commercial. He was a banker, of course. And then there was his studied, disarming demeanour, like out of a brochure, which consisted of a dash of boisterousness and a dash of impishness, combined with the confidence that once anyone entered his orbit, their worries would disappear... And now, of course, who should her waifishness run into at the train station, just walking along, like an advertisement for the station itself, bearing a little box of Merci chocolates (as if he were

going to give them to a traveller). As if he had arranged to meet Di here on a date, he noticed her, cracked a smile from ear to ear, his artificial teeth beaming (Diana knew they all went to Poland to have them done there because it was cheaper), then started in with being nice to her... Di even succeeded in getting him to have coffee and cake with her; she knew he wouldn't say no, since those things were part and parcel of "being nice"... His eyes welled up with an understanding as deep as Lake Zurich for Dianka's problems, and for all the world's other problems, too; he was all concern, but there was a certain distance about him. He ordered her coffee, ice cream, and Di had a feeling of déjà vu, because when she arrived here from Munich over a year before, she immediately met some guy who took her to the same cafe for coffee, ice cream...

So Di, misled by his niceness, started recounting her trials and tribulations, intending to ask him at the end for a small loan, something to cover some new togs and cosmetics, a hotel room, to help her get back on her moneymaking feet. He was drinking a hot chocolate (boyish, no?), and when she paused for a moment to roll a cigarette, he started in with how bad things were going for him, too.

"Things are bad, it's getting worse and worse! Not just for you, it's the same problem all over Switzerland. I mean, the Switzerland you came to doesn't exist anymore. Did you see what just happened in Bern and Basel?" Di hadn't seen anything because her little abode, the train station, had no television in it. "Exactly. Everything is getting so expensive, you have to have three jobs just to pay the upkeep for the garden! And then it turns out your dog is gluten-intolerant and you have to buy special, gluten-free dog food..."

So Di had her troubles, he had his. Biting into the biscuit that came with the ice cream, Di told him how she wanted to trim her fingernails. Taking a sip of his Perrier, he told her how he wanted to sell his boat, because who can afford to keep a yacht these days. Somehow they actually managed to be on the same wavelength.

And then a miracle happened, and in the end Di succeeded in pressuring him into inviting her to his place. Now. Right now. He wanted sex. She was happy to oblige, as long as she could take a bath. He was so nice he wouldn't dream of refusing her. And moments later Di was in the underground parking lot, getting into his big, streamlined rig. They drove along the familiar road up the Zürichberg, heatwave outside the window; Zurich in summer was like a Mediterranean city. Inside the car it smelled of vanilla and money, and he was wearing dark sunglasses, while Di dug into the skin between her fingers only to see something breeding in there. Again they drove into his driveway, into the yard and the underground garage, then took the elevator up to the living room; and there in the bathroom were five washbasins in a row, as if the world were paying Di back in spades for what it had deprived her of over the past days... She opened the taps of all five sinks at once, recklessly, wastefully. Wastefully she let the water flow into the bathtub, poured sumptuous oils into the bath and salts and soaked herself... After an hour, fragrant with Ceruti 1881 and Chanel Pour Monsieur and Dior Fahrenheit, attired in a white terry bathrobe, Di walked out into the garden, where there was a swimming pool and a golden blond sunning himself, a glass of orange juice beside him. The blond flashed Di a typically artificial smile, genteelness of the upper class, and there Di was, lying on a beach chair in the very same garden whose upkeep was so expensive these days, the gluten-intolerant dog rubbing up against

her legs, gnawing on his gluten-free bone... And then she was called to go upstairs, where the guy who'd invited her over was lying naked on a white bed stroking himself, unaware of the pubic lice he was about to catch. Di would have given a lot - and since what chattels she had were hardly impressive, she would have given everything - for that moment to last a whole night, including a night's lodging; but unfortunately it was still only early afternoon. Following intercourse, it was politely suggested to her that she leave, a hundred-franc note stuffed into her palm. (One hundred francs! If she hadn't needed it, he would have given her five hundred!) I'm sorry we can't give you a lift back, but we'll call you a cab (and there goes half the hundred...!). "Bye bye! Tschüss!" Hookers like you always manage somehow, little sluts like you always land on all fours...

Dianka slept at the train station, Dianka slept in the gutter, she didn't brush her teeth, although she was living in the Kingdom of Elmex toothpaste, but she dreamed of the air-freshened air of her clients, bankers who sat on the loo with their Ralph Lauren drawers around their ankles, bankers who read the newspaper on the loo, with their shaven genitalia, their rashes and razor burn. In every stall a forty-something banker was sitting, reading the exchange rates, enthusiastically holding forth about chocolate, chocolate cows, chocolate army knives, and the Swiss multivitamin Supradyn... To be honest, those bankers' willies were all shrinkage, pale, made of gooseflesh, like feathered chickens. But they didn't care, once those daddies took out their contact lenses and stored them in their special fluid, they couldn't see a thing anyway... They and their shoe stretchers. They and their complicated coat racks and garment bags. They and their trips to Poland, specially arranged so they could have all their healthy, but slightly yellowing and crooked teeth knocked out and replaced with pearls so white they were even a little grey. They and their duty-free shopping trips to the Republic of San Marino. They and their fucking wine cellars, their horizontally reclining bottles.

They and their Mont Blanc fountain pens.

You and your massive goblets with just a splash of wine at the bottoms.

You and your too-sharp knives in their special racks.

They were all just sitting there in their stalls, shitting out their expensive lunches and reading the newspaper. Their shaved toddlers in need of a good coat of the Swiss ointment Bepanthen.

A naked granddad with a gherkin proclaiming a hymn to Swiss punctuality.

And Di woke up to a train announcement. She woke up in the train station, but she wasn't going anywhere, although she no doubt wanted to.

Translated by W. Martin

ELŻBIETA CHEREZIŃSKA

HEADSTRONG



Elżbieta Cherezińska (born 1972) is an author of historical bestsellers. She has written novels about medieval Central Europe and the Polish Piast Dynasty (*Playing Dice and Crown of Snow and Blood*). She adores the Scandinavian Middle Ages, which became the subject of the popular Northern Road series. She also writes about contemporary history, e.g. her novel *The Legion*, which presents the story of a partisan division during World War Two.

The vividness of this novel, the liveliness of its narrative, the wonderful dialogues, the interesting social background: all of this means that reading *Headstrong* is a highly pleasurable experience, not only stimulating the reader's inquisitiveness – the book is about little-known events taking place 1050 years ago in North-East Europe during the process of Christianisation – but also thrilling them with the breadth and scope of the vision of the world at that time. Everything in *Headstrong* seems very real, very distinct, fascinating in its very nature: politics and war and love.

Elżbieta Cherezińska has written a book about the beginnings of the Polish state and its first rulers: Mieszko I and Bolesław I the Brave. But first and foremost this book is about Świętosława, the fascinating daughter of the first of the two men, who was also the sister of the second. This woman, exceptional in every respect – a Piast princess and a Scandinavian queen, has finally found a place worthy of her in literature. And with her come her numerous female relatives and cousins. If history says anything at all about them, it is only in the footnotes.

Świętosława – in Scandinavia known as Sigrid Storrada or Gunhild, Queen of Sweden, Denmark and Norway, and, for a short period of time, also England – is not often mentioned in historical sources, and the sparse extant information is often contradictory, opening it up to speculation, thus allowing the imagination to run free. In her earlier books, and particularly in *Crown of snow and blood*, the author of *Headstrong* has proven that she can be imaginative, yet at the same time remain within the boundaries of myths and legends. She does not transport her characters into the realm of fairy tales. Cherezińska's new novel is crafted upon a strong historical foundation.

Even though historians often see Świętosława as a stern, or even cruel, ruler, Cherezińska presents her as an awe-inspiring figure. She was her father's true daughter; the interests of the community, the public, not to mention the state,

were more important to her than her own personal happiness. And at the same time she wasn't the one to easily forget a grievance, much less someone's contempt. The Mother of Kings, wife of Eric the Victorious and mother of Saint Olaf, was a proud and courageous woman, and an independent one even by contemporary standards. She was simply exceptional.

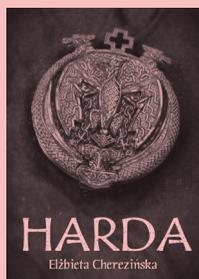
Elżbieta Cherezińska often says, half jokingly, that she has "got the hots for the Piasts". And this is indeed the case. Her first novel about the Piast dynasty, published in 2010, was *Bone game*. In this book she has described the relations between the Poland of Bolesław I the Brave and Otto III's Holy Roman Empire, highlighting the details of the Congress of Gniezno. Two years later she published the bestseller *Crown of snow and blood*, which takes place in 13th century Poland, during the time of the fragmentation of the Polish state. *Invisible crown* was published in 2014 and is a novel linked to *Crown of snow and blood*, which shows Władysław I the Elbow-high's attempts at taking over the Polish throne.

"I will always love the Piasts," the writer declared in my interview with her, "because it was our first Royal dynasty and in Poland there were only two great dynasties: the Piasts and the Jagiellons. The Piasts were the first and they appeared quite unexpectedly on the historical stage. We had nothing then - there were just forests around and suddenly...! They were there and already by the second generation they started playing an important role in these parts. These were exceptionally forceful people; they combined natural intelligence with, I would say, intuition, an instinct for power, with tremendous energy and strength. There was something highly sensual about them..."

Within just a few years Elżbieta Cherezińska has become one of the most widely read authors in Poland. And when it comes to historical fiction she is in a league of her own. It's worth adding that she is not just focussed on one theme, which is confirmed by the successes of *Legion*, which tells a truly sensational story of the Holy Cross Mountains Brigade, and you also have *Tournament of shadows*, which takes place in the 19th century during the conflict between Russia and England over their influence in Afghanistan and the future dominance of Asia.

It is apparent, however, that Cherezińska is very happy to return to the Piasts, which is confirmed by the exceptional scope of *Headstrong*. This huge, 600-page volume only describes the Świętosława's early years. The follow-up will be *The Queen*. Those who enjoy delving into vast stories, who savour subplots and putting themselves into full-blooded characters' shoes - living out their problems and dramas, will surely be very happy with this book.

Krzysztof Masłoń



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HARDA
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Eric arrived

HEADSTRONG

the following evening. A moment before the welcoming horns at the gate sounded, Świętosława again heard something that Dusza hadn't. Though she couldn't even name the sound, something simply quivered in the air. She understood that regardless of her loving Eric or not, some invisible link connected them. Dobrawa could also sense the arrival of Świętosława's father in advance.

She had enough time to get ready to receive her husband. He was travelling from the south and he first stopped by the shrine and the grove to offer sacrifices to his sombre gods. She already knew that these were thanksgiving offerings, as the messengers with good news travelled ahead.

So it is a *quid pro quo*, she thought. He has fulfilled his first marital promise and I have given him a son.

She put on her most expensive gown made of thick, red silk hemmed with a wide, gold ribbon. Her maids braided her hair into a crown and fastened it high above her forehead, securing it with a gold-threaded hairband. They put rings on her fingers.

"Dusza, my lynx!" She extended her hand for the fur, ready to receive her husband.

"And the baby!" Thora reminded her of the most important thing.

The maid brought the cup filled with blood and Świętosława marked her son's cheeks. She washed her fingers with water.

She stood on an elevated platform in the large hall with the lynx fur on her back and the child in her arms. In the light of the torches, surrounded by the triumphant music of the horns, she watched from above as her master and husband, King Eric, walked towards her. He was bald, bearded, broad-shouldered. Huge and heavy, and at the same time agile. The personification of strength, like the boar that adorned his shield - his sign. With the polar bear fur flung over his back, he seemed twice as big as usual. His dark eyes shimmered. His belt clinked against the metal of his mail armour. He walked, staring at her. At her or the little bundle she held in her arms. Behind him walked his lords, commanders, and finally steersmen and unit leaders. Jarl Birger, walking on his right, sent her a reassuring smile.

"Queen Sigrid!" the master and husband said loudly when he stopped in front of her.

"King Eric," she replied.

"What awaits me at home?" he asked.

"The royal son! What do you bring for the Queen?"

"Victory, my lady! The fields of Fyrisvellir were awash with the blood of our enemies. My nephew Styrbjorn is dead. We didn't take any captives."

Triumphant shouts filled the hall.

What is more precious to him, she asked herself, his son or defeating his nephew?

She gave him the baby. He unwrapped him, checking if nothing was missing. He even counted the fingers and toes.

"His back is hairy like yours, my lord," she told him.

He checked it. He liked it. He lifted the boy high in the air and presented him to his subjects.

"My son!" he roared loudly. "My son and successor!"

The baby started crying, which made all of those gathered in the hall even happier.

"He's got a voice!"

"Strong boy!"

"He's saying hello to us!"

"My king, have you chosen a name for him?" Świątosława asked taking the baby from Eric.

He held her hands, pulled her towards him and said: "This is our firstborn. You made me happy, my lady." His eyes glistened like when he took her to his bed.

"Such an uproar here!" She smiled at him. "Please repeat what you've just said, as I haven't heard you."

"You have made me happy by giving me a son!" he shouted, and the hall went quiet.

"As you did with your victory," she replied.

They drank to her, to the king and to the baby. They drank to the victory, to his happy return home and to the prompt healing of wounds. The maids struggled with keeping the pitchers full. The laughter, shouting and merriness of women reunited with their husbands drowned out the isolated sobbing of those whose close ones were left on the fields of Fyrisvellir.

Thora, Birger's wife, the first among the ladies and the one who had helped bring Eric's son smoothly into this world, was invited to sit next to the king as the guest of honour. Świątosława asked Jarl Birger to sit next to her to honour his courage on the battlefield.

The skald had put together verses about the victory over Styrbjorn. He rhymed the green fields of Fyrisvellir with the blue of the river, which had turned red with the blood of the dead.

When the skald took a break, Birger summed up the battle for her: "Three days of killing."

He left it to the poet to praise the dance of swords, the whirr of deadly arrows, the lethal flight of spears and the wall of shields. The skald glorified the bravery of the Joms-vikings who supported Styrbjorn:

*Their courage shimmered, But they fought for the wrong side.
They died bravely, Didn't ask to be spared...*

The poet called Styrbjorn an "unworthy nephew" and acknowledged his death with one single rhyme, instead focusing his talent on praising "Eric the Victorious".

*Segersäll. This is the name from now on
for the most stout-hearted of kings!*

"What name are you going to give your son?" Świątosława heard Thora's question between the verses of the song.

"Perhaps Bjorn, like my father?" Her husband took a swig from a large, silver-plated horn. "Or perhaps not..."

"Has Styrbjorn's father, my husband's brother, been popular in the country? Are there still any of his supporters left?" Świątosława could talk to Birger in her own language.

"There are always some left, my lady. Your husband took

a great risk by announcing that the successor will be the son you were carrying. That was a challenge! If you would have had a daughter, many would doubt the sense of Styrbjorn's death. But you, my lady, you bring good luck. You are a real queen."

"Was it difficult to make Styrbjorn declare war against Eric?"

"No." Birger laughed. "Young men are like dry conifer needles. A spark is all that is needed for the fire to consume them."

She made a gesture to silence him, because there was something in the skald's song she didn't understand.

"What king's wedding is he singing about?"

Birger was ill at ease.

"Ask your husband, my lady. Let him tell you. And I..." He checked if Eric was still talking to Thora and added quickly: "My lady, there will be a grand ceremony for the naming of your son. As part of it his father will sprinkle him with water. I wouldn't suggest it to anybody else but we share the same faith. Pray over this water in secret from the king and let it be a makeshift baptism for your son... I'm sure one day he will be able to receive the sacrament but..."

"Thank you, Jarl," she said not looking at him because she trembled inside.

Only Birger could know how worried she was that her child might die unchristened. Children often die.

The skald has finished the song about the battle and started a new, unknown one.

Taciturn and reflective

the Royal son is supposed to be.

Brave in battle,

unyielding in commands...

"My king," she turned to Eric. "If you haven't decided on a name for your son, let me advise you."

"Woman's advice is cold!" Eric merrily hummed under his nose, but she wasn't concerned, because she knew these words came from his skald's favourite song. She heard it often.

"Name your son Olof, my husband."

"What?" His eyes glimmered dangerously.

"Your deceased brother's name was Olof. Styrbjorn was his son. You have denied Styrbjorn's claim to power, but if you name your firstborn Olof, you will show that you respect your brother's memory and that you defeated your nephew in a good fight. Those who support them in private won't be able to prove you harboured any ill will."

Translated by Anna Hyde

WŁODZIMIERZ KOWALEWSKI

THE UGLY MAN AND OTHER STORIES



Włodzimierz Kowalewski (born 1956) is a writer and columnist. He also writes screenplays and radio plays (with Polish Radio in Olsztyn). He has published two collections of poems and several short story collections. He has been nominated for the NIKE Literary Award three times.

Six of the eleven stories in this book were first published thirteen years ago in a collection called *Light and Fear*. But they cannot simply be described as old work being revived, and that's because Włodzimierz Kowalewski tries to set his fiction outside time, in a double sense. Firstly, he pointedly prefers an old-school literary style and wants to be provocatively unfashionable. Suffice it to say that his collection published in 2003 was sub-titled *Antiquated Stories*. Secondly, Kowalewski freely moves about between eras, consciously blurring the borders between what we call the present day and what we think of as the past. In the process he makes it clear to us that the only thing that counts is a neatly told story, while the fictional substance of these tales and the world to which they allude are of secondary importance.

This offers an extremely wide range of opportunities. The opening story, "An Evening with the Author", is a striking fictional account of a visit by Thomas Mann to Olsztyn – at the time, Allenstein – on the eve of his Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded in 1929. In the next story, "A Frenzy of Emotions", we have a realistic setting, and we're still in Olsztyn, a city where the writer has close associations, as he has spent most of his life there. Then comes "Light and Fear", which is set in the mid-nineteenth century and refers to real events from the life story of the Romantic poet Zygmunt Krasiński. In "The Death of Ostrogski" we see a decadent member of the Young Poland movement feeling bored in Sicily, while in "Śmiechowicz" the author escorts us about prewar Toruń, and in "And the Moon Drowned in the Pond..." he shows us the Wilno (Vilnius) area of the same period. "The Ugly Man", which contains the germ of the later novel *The Excentrics* (2007), brings us forward in time to the late 1950s, and so do the stories "Władysław" and "Dengler's House". The book ends with two reminiscences; they really are about the author's personal experiences, but they also have their origins, so to speak, in his persistent questioning of history and his love of things that have disappeared into the past forever. And so here we have a story about old cars, "The Cars of My Life", and a story about an adventure that happened in the late 1960s, featuring an autobiographical central character – "The Monument".

While place plays an essential role here – for instance, Olsztyn matters to Kowalewski, as does nearby Olsztynek, and two of the stories feature Toruń, where he was a student – by contrast, time is only a bit-player. In a note from the author on the back of the book we find an invitation that typifies his approach: “I bid the reader to come with me to a place where I wanted to spend a while”. This is the basis for a sort of fictional universe – on one single plane he places his own experiences, stories he has heard and themes he has found in old books. What interests him? All sorts of subtle features of spiritual life, and above all what mystery, and sometimes even the uncanny, reveals about itself. Here methodically realistic depiction always has a disturbing flip side that eludes rationality.

The stories in *The Ugly Man...* involve various literary connections and associations. In some cases they are obvious and direct – e.g. “An Evening with the Author” should be read in tandem with Olga Tokarczuk’s story of the same title (which describes the same visit by Thomas Mann to Olsztyn, but from the female protagonist’s point of view); in others they are veiled – as in “Dengler’s House”, where Kowalewski holds a dialogue with the early fiction of Paweł Huelle. At the same time I should stress that this is not a case of literary recycling. That would be impossible, because this prose arises from an immense and unshakable faith in literature as such – endlessly capable of arousing our curiosity about the fates and experiences of others.

Dariusz Nowacki



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THE UGLY MAN AND OTHER STORIES

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the tumult of big cities. He felt as if he were melting inside them, taking on another persona, although he definitely remained himself. After the official banquets, speeches, and compliments from the distinguished company he would disappear into the back streets. He would forget about Wagner, the philosophers, plot constructions and the intricacies of his characters' souls. He would dive inside cabarets glowing with purple light, listen to the orgiastic sounds of jazz and large peroxide blondes singing in masculine voices. He liked to tittle on gin until dawn with impudent young whelps with painted fingernails and the worst possible reputation. Not long ago in Amsterdam, at night, in a district of debauchery, he had been accosted by... a fortune teller. She was sitting in the style of the local prostitutes at an open window, under a garish sign. "You are a conductor, a poet or a priest - in any case you are in command of the emotions!" she had exclaimed at the sight of him. On hearing this, without a second thought he went inside. She was badly withered, probably no longer able to conduct the same profession as her neighbour. For a few marks she told his fortune from some greasy cards: "There is wonderful news in store for you, and cash, a lot of cash. Then you will go very far away, never to return. But do not be alarmed - you will live a long life, and you'll be happy." Somehow he couldn't just dismiss this stupid formula, which she probably recited to every client.

He gave it some thought, trying to decipher it. Good news, money... It must be that Fischer, as sluggish as every publisher, would finally decide on a high print-run edition of his *Collected Works*. Or maybe sales in America would take off at last? A journey... Probably the trip to Palestine, planned for next year, in connection with *Joseph and His Brothers*. Will the Orient attract me so much that I will never mentally return to Europe? Who knows... Who knows... For surely it couldn't be about the journey to Allenstein? He was going to this city beyond two borders not so much for the exoticism of East Prussia, as for his own inability to refuse insistent requests; a character fault that he had endeavoured to combat for decades, but in vain. Minister von Kanitz, who came from somewhere in the vicinity, had pestered him with so many phone calls and letters that finally he had given way.

"This is territory entirely cut off from the main stem of German culture. If great men such as you, your brother Heinrich or Toller, or at least Bergengruen do not display an interest in it, the empty field will be cultivated by you know who. I am highly concerned. You can see for yourself what is happening in the Republic!", the voice down the receiver had hoarsely reasoned.

So he had agreed to go to Allenstein and deliver his lecture, "Nietzsche and Music: Love and Hate", and then to spend a few more days at Tungen, von Kanitz's property near Wormditt, in order, as the minister put it: "To do nothing, to muse and at most chat".

The train had now gone beyond the forests, growing so densely on either side of the track that for quite a time a green twilight had reigned in the carriage; emerging on the sun-drenched tongue of land between two lakes, it passed a suburban halt and only slowed its pace on the high viaducts, from which a panorama of the city was visible. A castle of brown brick, a pseudo Gothic church with a curious tower topped with two pointed spires, the roofs of houses banked up on a hill, below them streets barely visible beneath the crowns of trees – all of it slowly sailed past his eyes like the pictures in a Kaiserpanorama.

The scene at the station was as he had expected. Through the half-open carriage door he saw a cluster of gymnasium pupils, out-of-breath officials in formal attire running up at the last moment, dripping with sweat, and a young person with a bouquet of flowers, his hair combed flat and shining with brilliantine.

He was not falsely modest – he liked these gestures. He believed that in the civilised world there should be formal ways of showing respect to eminent people. He buttoned up his jacket and descended onto the platform, straight into a cloud of steam that burst from under the locomotive. He was instantly recognised. The flash of a monocle, the press of a hand schooled in official greetings.

"My dear Sir, allow me to present myself – Zühl, mayor of Allenstein. The lord mayor begs your forgiveness for being unable to come in person. He will be at the lecture. And this is Doctor Trotz, headmaster of our gymnasium."

A smell of camphor and mild tobacco, a bow, too obsequious, but the squeeze of the hand was strong and determined.

"My most heartfelt greetings, Herr Mann. I have read everything you have written. I am delighted. And this is Professor Kokoschka, who very much wanted to meet you in person."

Well indeed, there was bound to be plenty of this here, too. A uniform the colour of a cesspool, a belt with a shoulder strap, riding boots like mirrors. The shape of those rounded hats always reminded him of the spittoon which the servants at the sanatorium in Davos used to carry out each morning on long handles from the rooms of tubercular patients. Instead of a handshake, an impressive click of the heels against the asphalt.

"My pleasure. What do you teach?"

"The classical languages!" boomed the thunderous reply.

"Ah, yes..."

An ovation from the gymnasium pupils, flowers from the pallid young person, apparently a local lyric poet, a copy of *The Magic Mountain* blatantly proffered for signature by a mother with two children, which the uniformed teacher regarded as tactless, passing comment in the form of muttered curses. Remarks on the climate in East Prussia, on the weather and the journey, the summoning of a porter.

"My dear Sir, if you please, the car is waiting."

"If I may, I'd prefer to go by droshky. I would like to take in some..."

At this point he broke off. In the distance, by the wall of the station building, something had abruptly seized his attention. Someone's gaze. Like a sudden, unexpected flash, sending a spasm through his entire body and making him catch his breath.

Under a restaurant sign, against some advertisements for the local Waldschlösschen brewery and the *Stadt- und Kreissparkasse* stood a tall woman in a grey suit. A veil flowed from the brim of her hat, blurring her facial features, but failing to conceal her eyes. They were like two harsh lights cutting through the mist. They were nailing him to the spot, paralysing him, and forming the brightest point in his surroundings.

"Is there something wrong, Herr Mann?" someone asked anxiously.

"No... I wanted to say let's go by droshky, I am eager to take in some fresh air."

The vehicle rolled smoothly over the granite cobbles. The mayor sat beside him and tried to conduct a conversation. He spoke of how the visit of such a famous person was a great honour for the authorities and the citizens; no well-known author had ever lived in Allenstein, except for Herr Funke, who recorded the history of the town. He wasn't listening, he gave curt and thoughtless replies, bordering on discourtesy. That woman? Here? How, by what means? And why? Yet he was in no doubt, he believed his visual memory, it had never misled him. In manuscripts thousands of pages long he could infallibly find specific sentences or passages without reading, guided merely by the look of deletions or the shade of ink. In any case, those eyes. A distinguishing feature, undeniably. A feeble poet would have written: "eyes like stars". He would say they were more like little sheets of ice emanating cold and natural superiority, analysing, atomising everything that came within their reach. Once, when he had gazed into them at close range, he had seen the blue sheen of hoarfrost. That was unforgettable.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

ZOŚKA PAPUŻANKA

HIM



Zośka Papużanka (born 1978) is a writer and theater scholar who works as a Polish language teacher. Her 2013 debut, titled *A Domestic Charade*, was nominated for the Nike Literary Award and the Polityka Passport. *Him* is her second book.

Zośka Papużanka made her debut as a novelist in 2012 with *A Domestic Charade*, which was very well received by critics and readers alike. This exquisitely written novel tells the tragic-comic tale of a dysfunctional family and the psychological misery its members bring upon themselves. In her new novel, *Him*, Papużanka develops this formula to a major extent. Once again she writes about problems within a family, focusing on a central character who is “uh-oh”, in other words a loser, and once again she weaves a complex narrative, from a variety of viewpoints and using different styles, where tragedy is combined with bitter humour. Except that in *Him* she places the emphasis differently from in *A Domestic Charade*, and tells her story on a smaller scale. If *A Domestic Charade* can be defined as a “disjointed” family saga, *Him* could be called a piecemeal psychodrama about the relationship between a mother and her son.

The main axis of the plot of this novel is the story of the difficult relationship between Śpik (a regional word for snot) and his mother. Śpik, the “He” of the title, was born physically able, but with distinct mental and intellectual defects. He started to speak late, and even then he didn’t say much. He had learning difficulties, failing to absorb knowledge at all, and at school he was victimized and made into a scapegoat. The only thing that ever really interested him was urban transport, in particular trams – he knew everything there was to know about them, and could quote the timetable by heart. Śpik’s mother soon realized that her first-born son was not like other children and that he would never meet the traditional expectations, neither hers nor anybody else’s – he would never be a sweet, pretty, clever child. Nevertheless she loved him, and did her best to understand him and help him in life. But her love was underpinned by resignation. The less she expected of her son, the more she confirmed her belief that he would never be able to manage without her care, and the more dependent she made him. But she also made herself dependent on him. Śpik and his mother were tied together by a toxic bond, which neither of them was able to break. The mother quashed her son’s attempt to become self-reliant when he found a job as a tram driver, and he yielded to her will. They were stuck in an emotional

stalemate, sinking deeper and deeper into eccentricities bordering on madness – both doomed to failure.

Papuzanka never says exactly what is wrong with Śpik. He probably had a low IQ, and to some extent showed symptoms of Asperger's or autism. I think this is a deliberate strategy. Above all, she has firmly planted her central character in the reality of a Polish school in the late communist era, and has peppered her novel with anecdotes from that era. At the same time she has aimed to create some stereotypes – Śpik's working-class family is typical, with a factory-worker father who's permanently absent (both physically and spiritually), the big bad school is also typical, a place where the indistinguishable head teachers rule over an indistinguishable crowd of pupils in navy-blue tunics. The narrator, a girl in Śpik's class, perceives herself and her contemporaries like this: "We were all, regardless whether we were believers or not, this applies to everyone, an element in the collective and common features of the collective". Only Śpik did not fit into any collective, and as a result acquired the role of an outsider, in reality as well as emblematically, someone inconceivable and unacceptable both for those in closest proximity to him and for the people who only had incidental contact with him. Śpik was always the one on the sidelines, whom it was better not to notice, to avoid having to contend with otherness that defies comprehension. Nor could the mother really see her son, but rather just an agonizing projection of her own fears and frustration.

As I've already said, in this novel Papuzanka has devoted a lot of space to depicting everyday life in Poland at the end of the communist era, presenting details of the 1980s with detachment, underlined by irony and humour, and by pinpointing the absurdities of those days. In fact she writes the same sort of things about it and in the same way as other novelists born in the 1970s, such as Mariusz Sieniewicz or Michał Witkowski did at the start of their literary careers. Yet the real value of Papuzanka's new novel does not lie in the social, but the psychological sphere. In the past few decades many Polish authors have tackled the topic of dysfunctional families, but perhaps none of them has dared to go quite so far in their description of the painful areas within the relationships between family members, or go ahead with such a thorough vivisection of their main characters' psychological deformities and complications as Papuzanka has. And nobody has ever done it with such a refined style before.

Robert Ostaszewski

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Sorry I'm late,

HIM

Snot's mum said quietly. Miss Frost followed her with her spotlight gaze all the way to the back row. Snot's mum timidly sat down and pulled out her notebook and pen. Thirty-five laying hens were already seated on the neighbouring perches; they had all unwittingly laid an egg, warmed it with their bodies, watched it hatch and grow, and now had to put up with Miss Frost, a geography revision, obscenities scribbled on desks lined with chewing gum and the planning of a school trip. Money for the PTA, Snot's mum wrote, a gala celebration in two weeks in honour of the woman the school's named after, must buy wide-ruled writing paper, who would like to go on the trip as a minder, Mrs Kowalska and Mrs Kowalska, thank you for volunteering, now let's move on to the organisation of the trip, although I'm not sure we should go at all, since the class doesn't really deserve a break from their lessons.

The hens were shouting over each other, pecking the desks with their beaks, puffing out their chicken-stock breasts, and Snot's mum had stopped listening. Proud Żeromski gazed down at her from the wall, alongside the gloomy woman the school was named after, in her helmet of grey hair, Sienkiewicz the Nobel Prize winner, the handsome Słowacki in a half-opened shirt, the statuesque bard with sideburns named Mikołaj Rej who had ordered the nation to stop clucking like geese and speak their own tongue, and Jan Kochanowski, the father of the Polish language, who had lost his child, what's that mean, to lose a child, and who wrote nineteen of the most beautiful poems in Polish, so beautiful that nobody believed him, that's normal, Snot's mum thought, that nobody believed him, nobody is prepared to open up to such pain and believe it, nobody wants to identify with the literary hero, everyone wants to keep their distance from Jan Kochanowski and his lime tree in Czarnolas, his olive seedling, his void, his pathetic garments, how much money would it take to buy wisdom, to understand. Snot's mum was snatched out of her reverie about Jan Kochanowski - who had sowed his child in the sad earth - by a harsh, difficult word picked out by a tired ear: shame. What a shame. Shame, Old Arabella said, shame, confirmed Mrs Mozart, and also Kowalski's mum, and Grey's mum, what a shame, admitted Miss Frost, shame, Jan Kochanowski lowered his eyes, I feel for you, said Precel's mum, who had already managed to sleep off those broken nights and cover up with powder the bruise on her arm, I feel for you.

Jan Kochanowski nodded. Miss Frost nodded, and Snot's mum snapped out of her parents' night stupor and realised that they were talking to her. She looked up. All around, heads were nodding like those mechanical angels in church

at Christmastime, insert a coin and we'll sympathise with you, yes yes, you poor thing, pity you have to be Snot's mum, one can only sympathise. After all, who has lowered the class average with his string of failing grades, who scrawled dirty verses about carnal love in the toilets, who got sent to the headmistress's office eighteen times this month, who doesn't pay any money into the School Savings Club and doesn't borrow any books from the library, who has the police sent after him by Old Arabella, who is responsible for catastrophes and for his mother's weeping, who has made of his house a void, who instead of having all the buttons properly sewn on his uniform and his white collar kept white displays pathetic garments and pitiful attire - it's he who's the cause of all laments and Heraclitus's tears, it's all because of him, your son, unfortunate mother, yes yes, one can only sympathise. It's because of him that the class won't go on a trip, he who has withered before blooming, really, why bring someone like that to school, the hens were clucking, a millstone for him, and our sympathy for you, mother dear, because it's not your fault, it's just the way it goes.

The mother of the rotten egg looked carefully at the powdered-over bruise on Mrs Precel's arm, at Old Arabella's tightly pressed lips, concealing behind the painted-on smile a Gestapo officer's spit, at Mozart's mum, whose husband had left her for a younger woman only three weeks earlier but who had already learned to sympathise beautifully and earnestly, at Blacha's mum, who was trying to figure out how to run away from home so that the rest of the Blachas wouldn't notice. All the hens were nodding their heads, full of understanding, warmth and slippery politeness proffered from their comfortable perches. Snot's mum waited for a hail of stones to descend on her. It didn't. She felt only two stones growing in her clenched fists.

Shame, what a shame, Snot's mum was thinking, I gave birth, I breastfed and I have to be ashamed. I have to take responsibility for shame. If my shame doesn't understand physics and doesn't do his homework, shame must be controlled. Since my shame doesn't read the assigned readings and doesn't want to identify with the heroes, I have to overcome shame. If my shame has bad grades in maths, I must stop being ashamed of shame. Since my shame doesn't have any shame, maybe there is no shame.

Snot's mum slammed the door. Out of the bag she tossed into the corner spilled a wallet, a pack of tissues and half a kilo of uncertainty which Snot's mum always carried around with her, to be certain. To be certain that you're not supposed to feel certain, that you should always explain yourself, feel embarrassed and anxious, cast your eyes about, that that's how a human functions. This is me. What crap, Snot's mum thought. Crap. No more shame. I have to cook some pasta for the soup. Or some rice. Pasta, and no more of these uncertainties. I'm a mum and I have the right to decide. That's right, you don't get pregnant by chance; it's on purpose. From wanting to be. And if you wanted it once, you have to keep on wanting, with the same intensity. I wanted and I want now. And nobody can do anything to me, because it's me who is Snot's mum. I'm not some Mrs Kowalska, I'm Snot's mum, I wanted to and I am, no more shame, I'll do my son's homework for him and it's not unfair to the other children, because there are no other children. There are no other children at all, there's only my son Snot, who is the way he is, and I am Snot's mum and I want him the way he is. I want him to be Snot, I like being the mother of the worst, I love listening to complaints at parents' nights, I love swimming among reproachful and sympathetic

glances, look how you've raised him, but what do you expect, I love how they stare at me and end the conversation when I try to join in, I adore the feeling of being excluded, I've never wanted to be part of a group, I'm tickled by the uncertainty of whether the meat counter woman bellows good morning at me because that's how she greets everyone or because she wants to demonstrate how beautifully and flawlessly she practices tolerance. I want him to be Snot, to spite the meat counter woman, to spite Miss Frost, to spite the other children, who don't exist.

"Mum," Snot said. Of course it's him, he has the right to call me that, I'm not Mrs Kowalska to him. Motherhood must be deserved. It's a privilege, not an obligation, parenting manuals say, really, it's so simple. I'm proud of my children. "Mum. I don't want pasta. I don't like pasta in soup. I prefer rice."

And that moment when they pull it out of you, when you don't know yet if it's a boy or a girl, if it's thin or fat, if it looks like you or like grandpa, if you like it, if you're going to like it, if it's going to be as easy to like as in parenting manuals, if it has dark or light hair or maybe is as bald as an egg, and that moment when you turn around and see him standing in the doorway to the kitchen and you want to tell him that you can make rice, of course, that you would give your life for him, without hesitation, if that life were required, what's rice or pasta, it doesn't matter at all, you're my child and I love you, and I will tell you that at every possible moment, important or unimportant, like in foreign films, you take your child to school and say I love you, you pick your child up from school and say I love you, the child asks if he can go to the playground, and you say yes and you add I love you, and it's not clear whether you can go because I love you or I love you because you're going. Let's eat soup with rice, of course, no problem, because I've always wanted you, even when I didn't know if you'd prefer rice or pasta, yes, what can it matter, since I love you as you are and as you will be, this is how I've always wanted you, you're my dream child, the best and the most beautiful, a snotty moron with no future, a pimply troll doomed to celibacy, a complete idiot, my beloved little boy with greasy hair and huge hands that are not capable of doing anything except losing and breaking, everybody laughs at you, they're having you on, and you grin and let them mock you, thinking that everything's fine, you're a clown, a caricature of a child, and I have to be a caricature of a mother, I love you, my beautiful ugly son, and it's all untrue. It's all nonsense. Every word of it.

Translated by Eliza Marciniak

WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA

NON-REQUIRED READING (COMPLETE COLLECTION)



Wisława Szymborska (1923–2012) was a poet, essayist, and columnist. She won the Nobel Prize in 1996 and has been translated into over forty languages. She published thirteen volumes of poetry, almost all of which are considered to be masterpieces.

“Homo Ludens with a book is free. At least as free as he’s capable of being. He himself makes up the rules of the game, which are subject only to his own curiosity. He’s permitted to read intelligent books, from which he will benefit, as well as stupid ones, from which he may also learn something,” wrote Wisława Szymborska in her introductory note to *Non-Required Reading*. In fact, *Non-Required Reading (Complete Collection)* – a collection of short prose pieces inspired by books of ‘various’ kinds – is a declaration of freedom. Freedom of choice, freedom of opinion. It’s also an expression of the allure of reading and talent for it.

Among the books Szymborska writes about there are biographies, guidebooks, handbooks, monographs and books on history and nature. In describing her impressions, Wisława Szymborska shares with us her delight, her sense of humour – she increases our sensitivity to beauty and absurdity, just as she does in her poems. She sketches an intellectual and emotional portrait of herself, a map of her interests. She fuels in us the capacity to be surprised, and she also develops a critical sense – having, herself, a capacity for autodidacticism, she also shows us the backroads of information: “Besides priests, usually cardinals, demons, prison officers and one director of a mental asylum sing in bass voices. The above observations do not lead to any conclusion,” she writes in her prose piece on Józef Kański’s *Opera Guide*. She teaches how to create order out of information, and shows the practical dimension of that which is poetic – such as in her prose piece about the book *Mexican Cuisine: A Non-Cookbook* by Susana Osorio-Mrozek (translated into Polish by Maria Raczkiewicz): “There are ingredients which can’t be cultivated in Poland, and it’s impossible for any ship or plane to transport them here. For how would it be possible to transport the climate, the landscape, the stars?” Wisława Szymborska’s highly optimistic faith in the reader is expressed in her piece on Marcello Mastroianni’s memoir (*I Remember*, translated into Polish by Magdalena Gronczewska): “He doesn’t kick anyone’s ass, he doesn’t settle accounts with anyone, he doesn’t give himself angel wings and he avoids scandalous confessions. There is an overall belief that such memoirs won’t sell well. However, I believe in

the reader who expects something more from his author – reflections on the life which has been bestowed upon him. And this is present in Mastroianni’s writings.”

Szyborska’s observations, like those she wrote after reading the book *Relaxation (101 Essential Tips)* (translated from English) – “A dog is a faithful companion, natural lighting brightens up a room, [...] make sure to throw away rotten food. Sound advice, but why translate all of this from English?” – confirm the opinion that “it’s better to get lost in wise company than to find one’s way in the company of fools.” In this handbook devoted to relaxation, as Wisława Szymborska remarks, a book is recommended only in two cases – as a sedative and as an antidote for boredom while travelling. And so, I would recommend *Non-Required Reading* as an ideal book for intelligent relaxation – it improves one’s mood, it’s like a sincere embrace from a wise, friendly person, and it’s a secular blessing. Reading it is a great pleasure comparable to a good conversation. That’s what this book also is in essence – a conversation with the author, a conversation in which we can take part by reading these same books, reflecting on them and polishing our own sense of humour. Here is one of the excellent examples of Szymborska’s sense of humour, which is simultaneously an anthropological study (the prose piece about *Cuisine of the Far East* by Ewa Szczęsna, in which Wisława Szymborska takes on the role of an editor and addresses the book’s author): “Dear lady, what do bamboo shoots really taste like? More or less like a turnip? That’s great, we’ll add ‘turnip’ in brackets, and if not ‘turnip,’ then maybe ‘carrot.’ And what do these Chinese mushrooms smell like? We grow mushrooms here in Poland – maybe they’re the same, roughly speaking? And instead of ginkgo nuts, shouldn’t one propose new potatoes? When it comes to tofu, the matter isn’t so hopeless, either – aren’t our yellow cheeses just as tasty, and perhaps even tastier?”

Agnieszka Drotkiewicz



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A COW AS AN EXAMPLE TO FOLLOW IN LIFE

NON-REQUIRED READING (COMPLETE COLLECTION)

Dale Carnegie, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*,
English translation by Paweł Cichawa, Studio Emka,
Warsaw 1995

Giving good advice has become a psychological cottage industry. It's something nearly all of us practise when we're in contact with friends and acquaintances. Usually it's given in good faith and altogether unselfishly. It doesn't occur to everyone, however, to write down and publish this advice. It occurred to Mr Carnegie – and thus we have a handbook telling us how to deal with the worries that plague us which, quite frankly, damage our health, disturb our sleep and poison our well-being. Advice is reasonably well-intentioned. Some people, in specific circumstances, to some extent and for a certain amount of time, can even find it helpful. But the author's vocabulary does not contain such words as “maybe”, “partially”, “sometimes” or “if”. His optimism is seemingly unshakeable and from time to time assumes orgiastic forms. This kind of belief immediately increases my scepticism and inclines me to think that a lack of worries would be even worse than having worries. It would indicate a lack of imagination and sensitivity as well as spiritual coarseness. The direct motivation which inspired the author to write this book was a visit to the public library on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street. He discovered that in the library there are only 22 books filed under the keyword “Worry”, while the keyword “Earthworm” brings up 89! Unfortunately, he was rummaging in the wrong shelves. If he had peeked into the literature section, he would have found that hundreds of thousands of works have been written about worries. Nearly all of literature, beginning with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Antigone* and *The Book of Job*, has been the description of the most diverse kinds of worries. I won't list any other works, for it would be endless; I'll merely suggest taking a look at *Hamlet* from this point of view. Besides the deeply distressed protagonist, all of the other characters, including the Ghost, are also plagued by worries – each for a slightly different reason. Fortinbras is the only one who gives the impression of a carefree person, but we must consider that he appears only at the last moment and confides very little. Besides, we can be sure that as soon as he has seated himself comfortably on the throne, troubles will begin to buzz around him like flies. Of course, literature also depicts characters who don't worry about anything at all. But they are, as a rule, either vacuous simpletons or sage-thinkers rustling papers. As a matter of fact, I should leave this handbook alone, wishing it at least some level of success among readers who find it easier to keep a straight face. I found it hard. Especially when reading

the “examples from life” with which the author seasons his arguments. A certain man, for example, worried so much about his wife’s illness that six of his teeth became decayed. He evidently needs to stay cheerful for the good of his jaws. Another man did badly on the stock market for as long as he worried about it. When he stopped worrying, he immediately earned a huge fortune. Next, as a beautiful example to be followed by wives with unfaithful husbands, Carnegie offers the cow – for a cow “doesn’t develop a fever merely because a bull becomes interested in another cow”... Overall, the examples cited by the author vividly remind me of reports by the Temperance Association in *The Pickwick Papers*. Please check for yourselves – Volume II, Chapter 4. As for the possibility of someone not having *The Pickwick Papers* at home, I don’t even want to hear about it.

Barbara Kuźnicka and Maria Dziak, *Medicinal Herbs – History, Harvesting and Therapeutic Use*, Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, Warsaw 1970

Herbology is as old as humanity, and in fact even older, since animals are capable of using herbs therapeutically. Throughout many centuries, the precise number of which would be difficult to determine, the gathering and use of herbs was done by women. The Polish language has even preserved, like a fly in amber, the word “wiedźma” [witch] which proudly originates from the word “wiedzieć” [to know].

Witches are remembered, above all, for mouse paws in honey, pancakes fried in the fat of a bat and incantations muttered beneath a hooked nose. This casts a disproportionately long shadow over these experienced ladies’ genuine knowledge of herbs – knowledge which present-day pharmacology is gradually rehabilitating. I’m contentedly outlining that the art of gathering herbs is also, today, surrounded by rules: it’s important when certain herbs are picked and in what kind of conditions they are dried. If Baba Yaga had read *Medicinal Herbs – History, Harvesting and Therapeutic Use*, she wouldn’t have been surprised by anything in it. Naturally, she knew the effects of all of these pimpinellas, St. John’s worts, valerians, yarrows, wheatgrasses, colts-foot and thymes. She also knew many herbs which the book doesn’t mention and many ways of using them, particularly in the realm of inhibiting an undesirable birth rate, which the book does not discuss, either. She would certainly deem the rules for gathering herbs as not precise enough: it’s important to know not only the season but also the time of day and the precise weather. And whether it’s before or after the appearance of dew, during a new moon or beneath a full moon. Present-day herbalism doesn’t appreciate this yet as much as it should, but it will appreciate it – it will. I recommend this book about herbs as holiday reading. Of course not for those who sizzle in the sun for hours on end, turning from their stomachs to their backs and vice versa. I’m speaking to those who take walks through meadows and forests, “immersing themselves in greenery”, as our great national poet would say. I’m going to immerse myself in a bit of witchery – in other words, knowledge.

A QUESTION WITHOUT AN ANSWER

Władysław Kopaliński. *Stories About Ordinary Things*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warsaw 1994

Kopaliński’s books are read, liked, treasured and placed on shelves next to various encyclopaedias and, naturally, not lent out to anyone. This one is devoted to things we use

every day, not always realising what an interesting history they have. I intended to enumerate all of these things one after another, but I suddenly stopped at the chapter about coffee and tea, overcome by profound amazement. There was a time when these blessed drinks were unknown – how did literature cope with this? How were great works written then? What did Plato refresh himself with when he woke up in the morning with a heavy head? What did Ecclesiastes do when the atmospheric pressure dropped? How did various people who suffer when the atmospheric pressure is low, including, perhaps, Theocritus, Horace and Tacitus, save themselves? What did they drink in order to invigorate flagging inspiration? Wine? Wine is a drink that first stimulates conversation, then choral singing and finally sleep. It doesn’t create good conditions for solitary work. Beer? Beer makes the head wobble, as we all know. Some kind of stronger beverages? Even worse. Perhaps many good works have been written under the influence of a terrible hangover, but only because when one is hungover, one drinks a lot of coffee. Mead? No way. None of the above-mentioned types of alcohol jolts the mental faculties so swiftly. And so perhaps some kind of narcotic herbs? Nothing is known about this. Besides, the price one must pay for brief narcotic stimulation of the imagination is a much longer stupor, which is something that writers can’t allow themselves who write works that are planned and refined over many years. We’ll have to accept the fact that when drowsiness overcame them while working, Thucydides, Aristotle and Virgil poured cold water over their heads, after which, sputtering, they resumed their work. Strange and inconceivable... Of course I exclude the Chinese from this group, who have been drinking tea from time immemorial. The creators of European culture weren’t as fortunate, for a long time to come. The Muses were no longer helping Saint Augustine, and Lipton was not helping him yet. Let’s commiserate with Dante, who sometimes, while wandering through the circles of Hell, must have been overcome by a disheartening weariness but was unable even to dream of a devilishly strong cup of coffee. Let us think of the manuscript of *Laments*, upon which not a single drop of tea fell – not even oolong... Let us think about *Don Quixote* being written without a sip of coffee, even chicory coffee... But then, later, finally, finally, came times more comprehensible to us, in other words the era of coffee, tea and – let’s add it for the sake of accuracy – tobacco. *La Comédie Humaine* sailed on a sea of coffee. *The Pickwick Papers* on a lake of tea. *Pan Tadeusz*, *Heart of Darkness* and *The Magic Mountain* came into being in a suspension of tobacco smoke... This is all the more reason to admire the earlier writers who had to do without all of this while achieving equally good results. Servants (if they could be afforded) had a difficult life with them, perhaps, but into the scope of their duties entered the endless grinding of coffee beans, the boiling of water in kettles and the emptying of overflowing ashtrays. I’ll end on that note, not having reached any conclusion.

Translated by Scotia Gilroy

MICHAŁ KSIĄŻEK

ROUTE 816



Michał Książek (born 1978) is a forest ranger and cultural theorist, as well as a Siberian guide. He spent several years in Yakutsk, the subject of his first book of reportage – *Yakutsk: A Dictionary of a Location* (2013). In 2014, he published his poetry debut, *Lessons on Birds*, for which he was nominated for the Nike Literary Award and the Wrocław Silesius Poetry Award (in the debut of the year category). *Highway 816* brought him this year's GDYNIA Literary Award.

For Europeans, the East always begins somewhere else. For West Germans it's on the Elbe, for Germans from the former GDR on the Oder, for Poles on the Bug, for Ukrainians from Lviv - beyond the eastern border of the former Austria-Hungary. Where is that subtle frontier where the familiar turns into the foreign, or the familiar becomes a little different? The German writer Wolfgang Büscher once travelled on foot from Berlin to Moscow. Michał Książek also travels on foot, but along Poland's eastern border. He approaches it, but does not cross. The eponymous Route 816 runs from south to north along the Bug, right at the Ukrainian border. It's the outer frontier of the European Union, the former limit of the Soviet Union. An encounter of two worlds from two sides of the mirror. A deeply embedded cultural frontier, where Catholicism and the Orthodox faith interpenetrate. This is why the otherness perceived here is so literal - different shapes of cemetery crosses, even a different alphabet.

A writer can only benefit from a journey on foot, tread their way to their own style - their prose may gain both conciseness and distance. Because walkers see more. They have more time, march in defiance of a civilisation that imposes speed and fragmentariness, deluges them with images and sensations that are difficult to put in order. To have an adventure, walkers do not need exotic countries - for them, a journey can start right around the corner. Michał Książek's *Route 816* is not typical reportage or travel literature: it's dense, succinct, sententious prose in which a naturalist bent accompanies a poetic sensibility. One could say it extends its sensitive antennae, sniffs people, animals, plants, and landscapes, succumbs to the rhythm of the march, opens up to birdsong and catches differences in the melody of the local language. With every sentence, every paragraph, it tells us: face the world. Be, experience more intensely.

What world does the walker encounter when struggling through the Polish winter on the side of Route 816? Along with

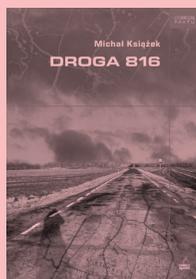
the author, we roam the local towns and villages, experience the richness of their flora and fauna. There is an impression of being in a corner of the continent that is lost in the past, in an ecological niche where time has come to a standstill. The interplay of temperatures, colours, and changes of weather is important. They overlap with the author's memories and associations; his childhood coincided with the decline of communism. His knowledge of nature also makes itself known, permeating descriptions with the presence of animals, the flavour of names. The world of the local people is mainly that – local. Unhurried. Settled. Rooted in the landscape, in the regional history that is full of painful wounds. It is a world on the edge, bisected with a border and perched on one, hence more tangible, yet still mysterious, resisting recognition.

The American historian Timothy Snyder called Central Europe “the bloodlands”, for in the twentieth century it was within range of both the Nazi and Stalinist totalitarian regimes. The author encounters a trace of that era: the concentration camp in Sobibór which claimed two hundred and fifty thousand lives. “Without Jews, Włodawa makes no sense. A city of three cultures, of which really only one has survived. (...) It looked as if its modern history could not begin”, writes Książek. Before World War II, Ukrainian culture was also declining on the west bank of the Bug. It is an unhealed wound, visible in the landscape, too: hundreds of Orthodox churches have disappeared, destroyed by Poland. But on the other bank of the river, in Volhynia, tens of thousands of Poles were murdered by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. There, in turn, traces of Polish culture recall the remains of drowned Atlantis.

The book's clear format makes reading it easy – it is divided into miniatures, none longer than a few pages, all of them structurally self-contained. This is not a chaotic catalogue of impressions from the road, but a meditative contemplation which approximates the essence of the places described. It must be said that Michał Książek's historical descriptions are always linked to the concrete reality he encounters. The author reads this land through nature, architecture, the symbols present in situ, without imposing a predetermined network of ideas. This is why this book is a lesson in sensitivity, offers a fresh perspective on an unknown land that is falling into oblivion – the country seen from the side of Route 816.

Artur Nowaczewski

Translated by Marta Dziurosz



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A WHOLE

ROUTE 816

Hitchhiking, the trek from Łochów to Terespol was like wandering through different kinds of reality. Every car was a reality unto itself. The reality of the Citroen is unlike the reality of the Renault, and different again is the microcosm of the Volkswagen. And then the van barreling toward Belarus was pure Orient. It was all Russian music and the smell of sausage and beer. Only Maxim could defy European regulations and stop on a busy bypass with its cacophony, rigs, and solid white line. Breaking the rules together is a bonding experience, just like eating and sleeping together. My memories of that road will be a polyphonic schizophrenia. A source of uncertainty: did it really happen, and where – in Poland or in Russia? Only the end of that journey was vivid and ripe. That was at the roundabout outside Terespol, at the crossroads of the 816 and the 698.

Nothing much happens where two roads meet. On the one side there were meadows, on the other a pine forest, to the east the willows of the Bug River, to the west a few common buzzards. And inside the roundabout, three circles arranged so that the smallest central one stood the highest. Right in the center, high up, was a four-way lamp, one light beaming toward each of the four corners of the world. Hard to say if this was meant to signify the center, the end, the beginning, or all these things at once. I looked for something concrete, a medium, a golden fleece, something like that. Maybe a discarded newspaper, a book, a rare species of plant or bird. But nothing was happening. Unless we count the photosynthesis, the division of cells, and growth of plants and the ants scouting around.

I glanced toward Poland, and there I saw “Construction Materials”, “Plumbing Supply Store”, and “Furniture Made to Measure”. What could remain from the epoch prior to the roundabout? From the times before the old road with a single name was Christened with two different numbers? Maybe a breeding ground for the *Saxicola rubetra*, the whinchat, which I heard warbling from the nearby aspen? Maybe the field chamomile, which crosses with the stinking and yellow chamomile plants to create roadside hybrids? Or the elderly and distinguished *Senecio Vulgaris* with its yellow wisps and hard leaves? There was nothing there to describe.

It is hard to leave a place with which you make a perfect whole. A departure is a minor catastrophe. It creates a phantom pain. It means you're not there. So you keep coming back to investigate that bush, that bottle, to see why that decorative plinth is crumbling. The Russian bottle cap. The cockchafer and the absinthe wormwood. As if you were hoping to discover a secret of that road. Or about road-making?

And we go on by foot, hitchhiking, and by bus, from the reality of the Audi to that of the Autosan, from Kodeń to Włodawa. From book to book, as it were, from storyline to storyline. The 816 receded, shrank as in a zoom lens. A strip that once took three days could now be covered in three hours. Crosses and names popped into view. The former tempted me to cross my myself, the latter called: get out of the car, have a look around, stay a while.

ROUTE 816

Crawling into another person's car you sometimes have to shift identities. It hurts – physically. You can't show yourself to be sharper than the all-wise farmer because it's dark out there. You cannot quarrel with the Jewnivoracious businessman when the sleet is lashing outside. You worm your way out, changing the subject, you lie and cheat. As long as you get your ride. You suffer. That's your payment. When you get out, sometimes your benefactor appears to want some money, but your face tells him: "You've gouged me enough already."

This time I could hold onto my identity. The Volkswagen owner had built this road in the 1970s and was looking for someone to tell about it. He recalled the 816 back when it was still gravel and when he laid the asphalt in 1971. He felt safe and secure taking those turns in his memory and passing these familiar places. He drove fast. He spoke of the road with compassion, as if it were too small for the duties a provincial artery had to serve. It was even too narrow for a dividing line. You see – it's only got white lines on the edges, and nothing down the middle. In some places you wouldn't even say it's got a shoulder. And they made it a provincial route. It's a narrow old road for horse-drawn carts, it should stay a local road.

As he perorated thusly, I noticed that the meadows were moving, with one of those four types of movement described by a certain Greek. They were phasing: they were phasing from a warm winter brown to a May green. On the one hand they weren't going anywhere, yet even the phraseology implied that the Greek was correct. That in the change in colors was a certain potential for movement of a different sort. Something like the way color bleeds through a blade of grass with every passing day. Thus was this movement of the meadows, *pratense*.

What else can be of the meadow? Among birds, the Montagu's harrier and the meadow pipit. Among plants, the devil's-bit, the marsh angelica, the Jack-go-to-bed-at-noon, and the meadow horsetail. Among insects, the early bumblebee, the black-backed meadow ant, and the (meadow) ladybug. But there is also the four-spot orb weaver, a large spider. All meadow creatures, *pratense, pratensis, pratorum*.

In Małoziemce we passed a wooden hut insulated with hay and leaves on the windowsills. In a bare window, one of the old kinds divided into four panes, I caught a flash of a male face and a hand with a cigarette over the neck of a bottle or an oil lamp. No, that was no illusion, I could still see the hut in the rear-view mirror a few seconds later. And in the yard, a horse-drawn cart hitched to a Golf. That was no hallucination either, that was a Golf, a red mechanized horse. We saw it for a few more seconds in the mirror. And this road worker spoke as though this road were only meant for such contraptions.

In the sky over Hnieszów, where Christ and the chestnut trees suffered in the winter, there circled a lesser spotted eagle. I was unable to pick out a single distinguishing

feature of the bird that had told me it was an *Aquila Pomarina*. Not two or three hints. I just saw the bird and the name somehow popped into my head. Effortlessly, on its own. It was a thought I had to say out loud, much to the driver's astonishment. It was a bit atavistic – it was the speed with which animals recognize one another.

So this was a "lesser spotted eagle", and at once I provided a flood of information, data, and recollections: wingspan of one meter seventy centimeters, when gliding the wings arc downward, bright-colored covert feather on the wings. Some three thousand pairs still in existence. Nimble on their feet, which is rare in predatory fowl. When it drops on its prey it folds its almost two meters to the size of a smallish drop and strikes like a missile. It is easily confused with the rare greater spotted eagle, but the covert feathers under the latter's wings are darker than the flight feathers, the tops don't have those two sickle-shaped light spots, nor are there bright patches near the base of the first row of flight feathers. But when had I managed to see all that, given that I only had a single glance? But my memories – I did have memories after all.

A storm was brewing in the depths behind the tiny eagle. The clouds seemed to foreshadow the end of the world. A heavy rain started to fall and the view was over. The very chance to look, the world of the mind and its creations, it all came to an end. The comfort of remaining in motionless contemplation also ceased – I had to get out of the car. I had to find shelter, to take flight, for the elements were raging. This state of things was a bit like intoxication, a bit like being lost in your thoughts or wandering for a long period. It was all joined by a shared element of momentary absentness, even non-being. I stood there in a shop, dripping, having even forgotten to bid farewell to the driver.

Translated by Soren Gauger

PRZEMYSŁAW **DAKOWICZ**

POLISH **APHASIA**



Przemysław Dakowicz (born 1977) is a poet, essayist, literary critic, and literary historian. He is a regular contributor to *Topos* and *Pobocza*. His work has been translated into English, French, Czech, Serbian, and Slovenian.

Polish Aphasia by Przemysław Dakowicz (born 1977) represents the genre of literary testimonies of post-remembrance created, for example, by descendants of Holocaust survivors. This series of essays is rooted in a need to confront events one may not have participated in, but which still exert an influence on one's life. Hence the two kinds of narrative present in the book – a documentary and an imaginative one – and two perspectives: individual and collective. Dakowicz locates historical resources, notes and press materials, while simultaneously – thanks to the work of his imagination – attempting to reveal a bygone reality to us by presenting himself as an active participant in it. Like the descendants of the victims of Shoah, he refers to traumatic events – difficult to speak of, yet impossible to be silent about.

Reading the essays – reminiscent of black-and-white short films – we will follow not only the author's family history, but also the fate of lecturers from the Jagiellonian University, arrested and deported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. We will observe not only Dakowicz's ancestors, but also the death of poet Józef Czechowicz during the bombing of Lublin and the suicide of painter and playwright Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz on the eve of war. We will see the last mayor of prewar Warsaw, the Soviet army entering Lviv, and a series of images showing the construction of the Communist regime in Poland after 1945.

Is it not the case, then, that Dakowicz writes about what we already know, that he recalls things we remember anyway? Answers to those and other similar questions form the book's third and most important narrative. *Polish Aphasia* portrays not only past events, but also ways of forgetting them. It brilliantly analyses the politics of memory conducted in Poland during the time of the Partitions as well as after 1945. The author recalls its most terrifying stages during the Second World War, when both the Nazis and Communists intended to physically destroy the Polish intelligentsia. He reconstructs the rules of the politics of memory in the era of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", but also unearths the shamefully suppressed mechanisms of controlling memory after 1989. What emerges from his

essays is Poland without touch-ups – with its complex collective unconscious, its raw wounds and unprocessed trauma. Few books have been published in recent years about Poland as it is, not as we wish it to be. And this is why I consider *Polish Aphasia* to be important.

Wojciech Kudyba



PRZEMYSŁAW DAKOWICZ
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The arena of the camp

POLISH APHASIA

on which the events take place is strongly reminiscent of the simultaneous staging of medieval mystery plays, which were comprised of many distinct sites of performance, something that theatrologists call mansions.

Reader, let us now wander from mansion to mansion, let us march from scene to scene, from event to event.

The spectacle we will watch together resembles a mystery play on many levels and dimensions. Firstly, it is a **historical drama**, but the events and characters therein are treated symbolically and allegorically, i.e. the spectator must discover and understand their **deep, hidden meaning**. Secondly, the Sachsenhausen mystery play, like its medieval equivalent, wants to **tell us the whole story**. To this end we choose scenes and characters capable of carrying a great metaphor, ones which make us realise that this is exactly what the world looks like, that certain laws govern the human fate. Thirdly, **tragic and solemn scenes alternate with farce**, ghoulish humour is the constant companion of death, tears and sweat.

Furthermore, we cannot forget that everything we are watching and participating in was devised and staged by the Germans. The *spectaculum* reveals many characteristics of their culture, their perception and understanding of the language of drama. In the first volume of Allardyce Nicoll's *World Drama*, in a chapter entitled "Religious and secular plays in medieval times", we read: "Those plays emphasised diverse elements in various European countries, although the main features were the same. Germans relished the grotesque, liked nightmarish scenes with devils, were prone to anti-Semitism and enjoyed a certain type of primitive realistic satire". Although these words characterise the medieval mystery play, they are also perfectly applicable to the story I want to tell.

MANSION 1. REVEILLE

The stage is murky. It's still completely dark – after all, it's the winter of 1939/1940. At 5:30 black bulbs are turned on and start oozing a muted glow. A shiver runs through the bodies on the pallets. Some men are in the habit of getting up early to avoid the crowd in the washroom. Blankets already folded, they are ready for their ablutions. They are wearing trousers and overshirts, in the day room they put on shoes, but only for a moment, because they must undress before entering the washroom. Others don't get up until a little while later. Members of the "late-washers club" rise from the pallets last. It's quite cold in the lavatory and "bathroom" in the middle of the barracks, almost as cold as outside. The taps are left running overnight, for

fear that the water will freeze. On the washroom floor – the stiff bodies of those who were removed from the communal room due to diarrhoea. Two fountains of oil-finished metal sheeting, shaped like huge basins, in the middle. The temperature of the water spurting from the chrome cylinders is barely above freezing. At the taps a crowd of prisoners, huddled up, barefoot, naked, snorting.

We leave them behind, walk a few steps and arrive at another stage.

MANSION 2. ROLL CALL

Barrack square. Three roll calls every day – morning, noon and evening. All activities (leaving the barracks, readying the block, roll call, return) usually last no longer than 45 minutes. But not always. When a prisoner is discovered to be missing, others must stay on the square until he is found. There are also other reasons for prolonging a roll call.

It's 18 January 1940, morning. Prisoners (professors from Kraków among them) are lined up in thin camp uniforms, arranged in rings. The SS men are choosing people for work. It's 25-30 degrees below zero. The roll call is protracted. Professor Stanisław Urbańczyk writes: "It started at 7, and 10 o'clock found us still on the square". This was not necessary – after all, the prisoners could have been selected in the blocks, instead of being kept outside in the freezing cold. Survival requires movement, albeit discreet. Toes and heels above all – they are most susceptible to frostbite. People shuffle their feet, those in the back rows snuggle against their companions in the front to preserve some warmth.

"Leichenträger!" screams one of the guards. After a while the "corpse carriers" appear. They move the bodies of those who have fallen and are unresponsive to outside the *Revier* – the infirmary. There's more and more work for them.

Of the 800 people on the square 70 fall dead during roll call. Another group of 69 prisoners dies that night, and – writes Urbańczyk – 430 during the following few days.

MANSION 3. TALKS

"They wanted us blunted and annihilated intellectually, we were to perish mentally first", says Professor Stanisław Pigoń in his *Reminiscences of the Sachsenhausen Camp*. In order to save themselves from being reduced to the role of living corpses, the academics organise talks [...]. They also debate when they're taking part in the so-called *Stehkommando*, that is when they are forced to stand in the day room of the barracks for several hours. [...] This is how the Open Camp University works.

It is Pigoń who talks about the limits of incomprehensibility in Norwid's poetry. "He who deprecates the darkness of my words, has he ever lit a candle on his own?"... The Norwid group recedes, now we find ourselves in the crossfire of a discussion about the history of the peasantry – the ones arguing are Stanisław Szczotka, a junior lecturer, and Professor Władysław Semkowicz, an active member of the Polish Academy of Learning. Close by Władysław Konopczyński pontificates about the Confederates of Bar, Wiktor Ormicki, later killed in Dachau, presents a programme of economic development for Poland. Naturalist and philosopher Tadeusz Garbowski gives a lecture about idealism, Ignacy Chrzanowski talks about Sienkiewicz, and Michał Siedlecki – two-time chancellor of the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius – about Wyspiański. They have no way of knowing that within a few weeks coffins with their bodies will arrive at the camp's crematorium.

[...]

MANSION 4. ROLLEN

"Laufschritt marsch!" – shouts "Iron" Gustav, the terror of Sachsenhausen. Professor Jachimecki (history and music theory), Dean Heydel (political economics), Assistant Professors Piwowarski and Lepszy (Polish history), Assistant Professor Milewski (Slavic and Indo-European linguistics), tasked with carrying the cooking cauldrons, start trotting around the kitchen. "Hinlegen!" – screams the SS man. They drop into the mud-streaked snow. "Rollen! Rollen!" – they roll about, crawl across the patch. Snow gets under their shirts, into their trousers. "Kniebeugen!" – they freeze in a squatting position, their hands outstretched. After a few minutes their legs go numb from the cold, the wet clothes stick to their bodies. And again: "Laufschritt marsch! Hinlegen! Rollen! Kniebeugen! Rollen!" They're hit, kicked, tripped up.

[...]

MANSION 6. JOY

A Sachsenhausen prisoner who does not rejoice in his situation, who is unable to show his enthusiasm for German order, is not wholly worthy. The camp authorities, however, spare no effort to effectively rehabilitate those who have doubts. On all the warmer Sundays (10 degrees below zero is considered "warm" here), after evening roll call, a wooden platform is carried into the square. One of the prisoners, a conductor by profession, climbs onto it to lead the crowd of men in striped uniforms in song. German marches are usually performed, most frequently "Sauerland" and "Säng-ergruss".

Look, the choir leader has already taken his place. He raises his hands and a song issues forth from all the mouths: "Wilkommen frohe Sänger, seid gegrüsst für tausend mal" [Welcome, you merry singers, welcome many a thousand times].

Bolewski and Mikulski hold up the dying Stefan Bednarski, a Russian tutor from the Jagiellonian University, who – like everyone still alive – has had to report to roll call. Bednarski, suffering from pneumonia and pleurisy, has a high fever. "Let's celebrate today and let us sing our merry rhymes", wail thousands of throats. An SS man in an immaculate uniform leans over the half-conscious Professor Feliks Rogoziński – a specialist in animal physiology and nutrition, whose friends have just brought him to the hospital – and kicks him in the stomach and head with a hobnailed boot. "Trala la, trala la, trala la", the crowds sing. Stanisław Urbańczyk and Mieczysław Brożek are carrying a casket with the corpse of Leon Sternbach, professor of classical philology. The casket has been given a lick of black paint. They carry it into a shed serving as a morgue and put it on the very top of the mountain of caskets. "Trala la, trala la..."

The conductor waves his hands about. The *Raportführer* is strolling around the square, so we choir members, dressed in thin striped uniforms, inhale the icy air and roar: "Im Schatten grüner Bäume/lasst uns singen, fröhlich sein/beim vollen Becher Weine/unsere Freundschaftsbund erneu'n!" [Under those trees' green branches/let us sing and pass the time/Let us renew our friendship/with our beakers filled with wine.]

The lights go out gradually.

The curtain of dusk.

Translated by Marta Dziurosz

ZIEMOWIT SZCZEREK

TATTOO WITH A TRIDENT



Ziemowit Szczerek (born 1978) is a journalist, writer, and translator. His books include *Mordor Will Come and Devour Us*, a cross between road novel and gonzo reportage, for which he received the *Polityka Passport* in 2013. Published in 2015, *The Number Seven* brought him a nomination for the *Angelus Central European Literary Award*. His latest book, *A Trident Tattoo*, has made it to the final round for the *Nike Literary Award* in 2016.

Tattoo with a Trident was published on the second anniversary of the outbreak of the Ukrainian revolution, known as “Euromaidan”. In only one of the thirteen texts in this book does the author make a direct reference to the dramatic events of February 2014, when the president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, was overthrown after three months of continuous protests that increased in intensity and finally led to bloody street battles. In the days preceding the eventual downfall of the detested leader, Ziemowit Szczerek was in Lviv, observing the more subdued events occurring in Independence Square. Finally, influenced by the disturbing information that reached him from Kiev, he headed to the Ukrainian capital. He saw there – as he writes – “a post-apocalypse from Mad Max, a Mad Max-esque version of a Cossack Sich,” where “companies of men were marching in military columns, armed with whatever they could find. Those from Lviv looked like hipsters in comparison to them. Barrels were reeking, in which fires had been lit. It stank of smoke, of burning tires [...] The tents [...] looked like witches’ hovels: something was bubbling in them, some kind of black smoke was rising from them. Molotov cocktails, among other things, were being made there.” And a bit later, as a concluding remark: “I looked at this nation taking shape and I couldn’t believe that it was all happening right in front of my eyes” (from the text “Tiempo santo”).

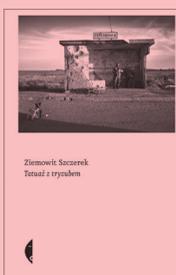
As he, himself, states in the author’s note on the book’s cover: “This is not just another book about the Euromaidan or the war in the Donbass region of Ukraine. This is a journey through a country in the midst of self-formation.” This is indeed the case – Szczerek is fascinated by the extraordinary process in which a nation and a renewed, post-revolutionary Ukrainian statehood are emerging. He doesn’t reach the front-line either in Donbass or Luhansk Oblast, and if he does show up in the areas of Eastern Ukraine dominated by pro-Russian separatists, it is solely in places where battles have already ended or were waged a great distance away. He’s certainly not

a war reporter. It's not easy to determine precisely what kind of reportage we're dealing with here; one could even pose the question of whether the texts collected in *Tattoo with a Trident* can be considered, generally speaking, reportage. Perhaps they more closely resemble trip notes combined with research – mildly speaking – in the field of sociology and, at times, political science.

Szczerek's expeditions to the East have two fundamental aims. First of all, as was already mentioned above, the author wishes to take a first-hand look at something that rarely happens in the contemporary world, and even more rarely in Europe – the formation of a state and a nation of people. Secondly, Szczerek visits places where he has been before; he returns because it's very important to him to spot and describe the transformations – in the physical space and in the mentality of the people, above all. It's worth recalling that his previous journeys, which took place more or less a decade earlier, led to the writing of his book *Mordor's Coming to Eat Us Up, or a Secret History of the Slavs* (Kraków 2013). The social and cultural transformations seem objectively positive, though Szczerek isn't satisfied by them. For example, he maliciously calls Truskawiec, a popular health spa in Ukraine, "Dubai-spa" ("the mega-hotels were lit up like ocean liners teleported between the Carpathian hills"). An acquaintance from Truskawiec invites him out for a beer. Szczerek remarks: "I was in the mood for some kind of grubby dive where it would be possible to get wasted on vodka with herring and smoke like a chimney, but Andriy couldn't find any place like this nearby. Not these days, he said, looking at me with slight pity" ("The West"). Changes occurred even in Dnipropetrovsk, where Szczerek had earlier taken delight in sights that appealed to his aesthetic sensibilities: "The area around the bus station looked like a scene from a cyberpunk anti-utopia where, in the midst of crushed concrete and nomads' tents, people were selling off the remaining scraps of civilization." And today what does he see? "The lofty towers of castles belonging to the new nobility, new princes: made of glass and chrome, with automatic doors and warriors from security companies in black uniforms" (both excerpts are from the text "Dnieper").

Szczerek has a more difficult time capturing the current mood of the population, even though he lets the people he encounters speak at every possible occasion – his Ukrainian acquaintances, travellers like him, and even taxi drivers. Actually, nothing concrete results from these statements – except, perhaps, one thing: an increasing disappointment in the "revolution of honour" (this is apparently the revolutionaries' favourite term). It's also possible to sense the impatience of citizens who see that the basic problems of their country – extreme corruption, the omnipotence of oligarchs, general contempt for the law – are far from being resolved or – even worse – are being swept under the carpet by the new leader. But the Ukrainians with whom Szczerek speaks are not even in complete agreement on this matter, either. For the author of *Tattoo with a Trident* does not, even for a moment, lose sight of important differences, especially those resulting from – accordingly – pro-Western and pro-Eastern sympathies. Although Szczerek calls the entire area of Ukraine a post-Soviet land, he points out differences in Ukrainian identity at every step – one minute it is, as he writes, "the Galician type," and the next minute it's "Soviet, closer to Russian." Then there's also the Ukrainian identity forged in Kiev, which is, of course, closer to that of Galicia, although it is not completely identical to the Galician type. All of these issues genuinely concern the narrator of *Tattoo with a Trident*. He speaks to us with eloquence, often cleverly and ironically, making us want to listen to him and ask for more.

Dariusz Nowacki



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In general it was

TATTOO WITH A TRIDENT

hard for me to imagine a revolution in Lviv. In Lviv? Here people just spread rumours in cafés, they don't start revolutions. That's the stereotype. That there's nothing but cafés, coffee, beer in the evening, some vodka, dinner. Theatre, concerts. Culture, not war. What theatre? What concert? What cinema? There are hardly any cinemas, and even fewer films. There's some kind of cinema in the centre of the city, moreover in the very same building as the military headquarters, and so immediately after walking through the door, our eyes are struck by a photo of the president and commanders-in-chief of the armed forces, all of them have very serious expressions on their faces, in their eyes they bear the burden of responsibility for the country, and you start to feel foolish for wanting to go watch some silly film and waste time while they're hanging here so seriously with the national coat of arms next to them, and some kind of draped fabric like at a school ceremony since national imagery can't do without draped fabric, what kind of serious nation is it without draped fabric.

Another cinema, advertised as an art-house cinema "lost in the tangle of narrow Old Town streets", is just a typical, commercial cinema in the King Cross shopping centre in the suburbs. You go there at night, yes, through the black, Ukrainian night, and you enter the shopping centre through a glass door, you join this circulation of global capitalism, for in this shopping centre, of course, it's the same as in all of the other shopping centres throughout Europe, and surely also throughout the world. One day, you think, in the future, tourists will visit old shopping centres in the same way that we visit old cities now, since it's exactly the same, after all, but you wonder what they're going to look at in these shopping centres. Perhaps the information boards: "shoe boutique, early 21st century", mannequins posed as customers, dressed in folk clothes like those worn in Eastern Europe at the turn of the millennium. That is to say, tracksuits for men, some kind of loafers, a leather jacket and leather cap (well, alright, both fake leather), an evening gown for women, since the creators of this heritage museum in the future will confuse a shopping centre with an art gallery and they'll get everything mixed up, and they won't know what's what, and not wanting to experience "certain fiascos", they won't take any risks and will dress the woman, just in case, in an evening gown, so that there won't be any screw-ups or fiascos. What else, you think to yourself, could be in such a shopping centre - a sushi restaurant, second half of the 21st century. On the info board it would be written that during these times in Eastern Europe there was a post-apocalypse and a total lack of belief

that Eastern Europeans are capable of inventing something sensible themselves, and so they turned to other, clearly-formed cultures in order to draw models from them and, at least for a moment and while eating sushi in a simulation of a Japanese restaurant, feel that they are experiencing something that has a shape and doesn't embarrass them. And so, Lviv's cinemas are in places like this. In other words, nothing special, like everywhere.

*

And so, in Lviv everyone always said: no, nothing will happen here, people hang out in cafés here and don't run around in the streets burning cars. People hang out here, and at the moment when it all began, they were also hanging out.

*

It looked amazing. The cafes and bars were full, people were sitting with beers and staring at televisions hanging on walls which showed Kiev's Independence Square burning. Live. And we could feel in the air that it was already heading towards Lviv. That something was about to happen. Skinny shitheads were running between the full cafés and bars in the centre of town and through the cold, empty streets outside of the Old Town, wearing bicycle helmets and masks with skulls on the faces. They had rucksacks on their backs, from which were jutting sticks of various kinds: from baseball bats to heavy wires tied onto handles with strings. On their legs - knee-pads. They looked like bad kids from songs by the Misfits. Like punk troublemakers. But it wasn't about this here: it was Independence Square style. And these boys from Lviv were dressing in their own way. Not like some kind of American rappers or hipsters: that season, the most awesome fashion was coming out of Ukraine. The Independence Square style was the coolest. There's nothing more stylish than a revolution.

I walked through the streets and they passed me, racing on bicycles, hurrying somewhere, their eyes flickering mysteriously above scarves. And the militia was nowhere to be seen in the streets. Not a single cop. Nothing.

*

Lviv's Independence Square was on Prospekt Svobody, speeches were being given constantly, and when for a moment the slogans that were being tossed around stopped, when everyone had grown bored of shouting "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!" and singing the national anthem, there was a live transmission from Kiev. Revolutionary tires burned on the screen with an orange glow. This orange hue was invading the wintry, Eastern European cold, dark blue.

And then it began for real. A rumour began to circulate that they were burning the building of a branch office of the Ministry of the Interior and immediately a healthy segment broke away from the crowd's body and moved along Akademika Hnatiuka Street. The commotion and shouting were audible from far off. Boys in masks with skulls carried tires up to the door of the Ministry's building and set them on fire. They battered at the side door. They tried to rip the bars off the windows. The crowd, spellbound, looked at the fire and listened to the repetitive thudding sounds. It was easy to zone out here. The fire and the trance of the blows - bang, bang, bang. It resembled a shamanic ceremony. Mobile phone screens were glowing: some people were filming, others were taking photos. Some little boy climbed up the front of the building and began to kick at the camera hanging over the entrance. Someone in the crowd burst into laughter.

"Brave lad!" he shouted.

"Brave lad!" someone else joined in.

A moment later, the entire crowd was chanting: "Brave lad! Brave lad!"

The camera fell and hung on its cable like a head that hadn't been thoroughly severed. The crowd howled.

I looked around for cops. There weren't any. I mean - they were there, but they pretended not to be. Here and there were some guys in civilian clothes standing with their legs far apart. They were listening attentively and whispering something into old mobile phones, covering their mouths with their hands.

"No, it's not obvious he's a cop at all," some guy snorted into my ear, pointing at one of the whispering men. "Not goddam obvious at all. Perfect fucking camouflage."

Girls were positioning their boyfriends for photos against the backdrop of burning tires and broken windows.

*

And apart from this - everything seemed normal. Bars and cafés were open, people were hanging out, waiters were taking orders. That's how this lawless night was in Lviv. Even cars were being driven normally, despite the fact that the traffic police had locked themselves up inside their houses and, biting their fingernails, were watching the revolution on TV, hoping that everyone would forget about them. Patrols of men wielding sticks were walking through the streets, supposedly keeping order. They were wearing masks on their faces, but their brows were furrowed: dignity, pride. Overall - it's serious business, a revolution. They wandered about the streets in tight groups.

The militia was nowhere to be seen - and nothing happened. Nobody was smashing windows, nobody was even breaking traffic rules much more than usual. Once again it turned out that this country was taking care of itself on its own. That it was functioning - not thanks to its government, but rather despite it.

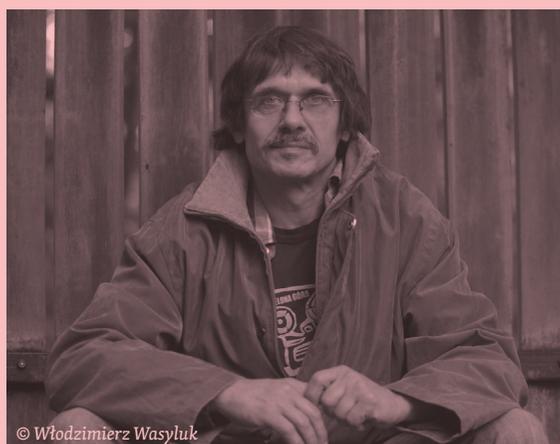
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We drank vodka in Bukowski and went out to where they were burning and smashing, and then went back to Bukowski again. In Bukowski they were serving drinks in jars. That was their style. It was possible to smoke because the owner, an old Ukrainian from Canada, had never given a crap about the nation-wide smoking ban in public places. We drank and smoked, some guy told me that he had grown up in Poland but didn't know Poland at all because he had been raised on a Soviet military base in Borne Sulnowo and hadn't been allowed to go out and mingle with Poles. He told me it was a very strange place because they had their own Soviet school there, Soviet blocks of flats, Soviet shops, a Soviet world - not a huge, wide one like the real USSR, but a miniature one, a few kilometres in one direction, a few kilometres in the other and that was it. Like a city orbiting in outer space. He told me that he once escaped, he got through the gate somehow and entered Poland, he even went up to some kind of buildings and Polish children looked at him as if he were an alien and threw stones at him, then Soviet soldiers came and took him back, and at home he got the belt from his father - an officer. And all of this - the guy pointed at Independence Square burning on the screen - all of this in order to no longer be a fucking Soviet monster from behind barbed wire with stones thrown at him.

Translated by Scotia Gilroy

WACŁAW HOLEWIŃSKI

HONOUR WILL NOT PERMIT ME



Waclaw Holewiński (born 1956) is a writer. He was a political prisoner during the communist era. He has written many books on the “renounced soldiers,” including *Let Me Tell You About Freedom*, for which he received the *Józef Mackiewicz Award* in 2013, given for work of outstanding literary merit that deals with culturally, socially, or politically vital themes.

The name Stanisław Ostwind – the protagonist of Waclaw Holewiński’s book *Honour Will Not Permit Me* – is relatively unknown at present, but will one day be mentioned in the same breath along with Witold Pilecki, Emil Fieldorf, Zygmunt Szendzielarz or Mieczysław Dziemieszkiewicz. These were the war heroes killed by the imposed communist regime and, for many long years, had been stripped of their good names. The Doomed Soldiers.

Stanisław Ostwind, a prewar police officer, legionary and participant of the Polish-Bolshevik war, was a converted Jew. During the occupation after the September 1939 campaign, he remained in hiding in Podlasie where he joined the resistance movement, the National Armed Forces to be precise. He became a Major and was the highest ranking officer of Jewish origins in the entire Polish resistance, not just in the National Armed Forces, which was perceived as anti-Semitic. At the beginning of 1945, in supposedly liberated Poland, he was arrested by the secret police – the Department of Security.

Secret police workers tried to persuade him to collaborate, playing the nationality card at first. He refused. His honour and the promise given to God and Fatherland would not let him do that. A colonel in a Red Army uniform tried to convince him that “the Soviet government and the Soviet Army needed the support of all patriotic Polish forces, all of those who wanted to build a new democratic Polish state free of Fascist and Sanation elements”. “Do you understand,” he was asked. “I nodded. What was there to understand? They wanted to introduce their criminal order, nothing more. What’s the point of getting Poland involved in that?”

When Ostwind categorically refused, the investigation became more and more cruel. During an interrogation an NKVD officer, also of Jewish descent, tried to soften him by saying: “If we didn’t come here, he said, sooner or later you would get caught. And end up in a gas chamber. We will never be safe. So it’s better to go with the stronger ones. More of a chance to survive. You know full well that the Poles didn’t want you here, they collaborated with the Nazis.” To this Ostwind

said: “No.” And he repeats: “I am a Pole, I am a Polish officer”. And he gets punished for this. “They beat me in turns. One wouldn’t be enough. It’s an exhausting job. At some point you know already that you will tell them everything they want to hear. That I have murdered Jews, that I have murdered Soviets, that I have collaborated with the Germans. There you are. If they asked I would readily swear that I was Hitler. Or that I was his mother, father, whatever or whomever else”.

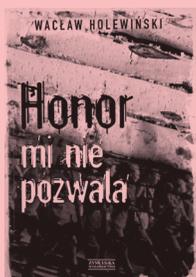
The arrested survived the most sophisticated torture, he didn’t reveal any names and after a travesty of a court trial – the hearing lasted 15 (!) minutes – he was sentenced to death and executed. In writing about him, Holewiński makes use of surviving investigation records. He mentions the real names of Ostwind’s oppressors, including his executioner.

The author tells the story of his protagonist’s life without grand words, in a kind of low voice, as if worried that he might say too much where bare facts speak volumes. He wrote a beautiful book about a beautiful man. It is an epistolary novel, comprised of letters written by Stanisław Ostwind to his wife, only in his head, of course, as he wasn’t allowed to write in prison. Facing the inevitable end of his existence, he recapitulated his life and shared his thoughts on loyalty and religion, patriotism and national identity.

The story of the life and martyrdom of Major Ostwind is but one of Waclaw Holewiński’s many literary achievements. He has authored four novels and three screenplays devoted to the Doomed Soldiers, including important works such as *Babylon Lamentation* (2002) about another relatively unknown hero of Underground Poland, Colonel Tadeusz Danilewicz, as well as *Let Me Tell You About Freedom* (2012), which won the Józef Mackiewicz Prize. The latter novel is about two women active in the resistance movement – Maria Nachtman and Walentyna Stempkowska – who both ended up in the same communist prison in Rawicz, though they took different paths to get there: one coming from a secret police torture cell and the other via a Nazi concentration camp.

Honour Will Not Permit Me puts the history of the Doomed Soldiers straight. Even more importantly, it also corrects the history of the National Armed Forces, which is still often accused of having been anti-Semitic. After a particularly brutal interrogation Major Ostwind wonders about the identity of his oppressor and the source of his hatred: “He says that I am a Fascist. What does he know about people like me? About those for whom during the war there was only place to be – in some pit with a bullet in his head or in Auschwitz or Majdanek. [...] They will equate us with nationalists with Fascists. They will force this kind of thinking into the heads of those standing next to them. And some might believe. I think, my darling, that this is worse than death. Yes, a lie can be worse than death”.

Krzysztof Masłoń



WACLAW HOLEWIŃSKI
HONOR MI NIE POZWALA
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THURSDAY, 4 JANUARY 1945, OTWOCK

HONOUR WILL NOT PERMIT ME

My love!

I didn't sleep much last night. I could hear steps in the corridor every now and then and moaning coming from several cells. It seems that they have decided to lock up, to arrest and kill all of Poland. Apart from me they shoved nine more men into our basement. Can you imagine? Ten men on those three, no more than four, square metres. And two of them can't even get up. A young boy had his face mangled. As if somebody dragged him over barbed wire. He came to and then collapsed into some kind of stupor, and he constantly called his mother. The other one complained about his right leg being broken. He was purple with pain and asked for a doctor. The guard only grunted that the doctor would come when he had time.

Somebody knocked the bucket down and the guy sitting closest to it got sprayed with urine. They switched the light on in the morning. They gave us some chicory coffee and one slice of black, gooey bread each.

Zabużny whispered to me that the guy sitting by the door must be a priest.

"Look, he's got a dog collar," he said and started pushing through towards him.

Indeed, I could see a white collar on his neck. But I wasn't sure. It might as well have been a white shirt under the collar of that coat.

I had a bellyache. It might have been the nerves. Or maybe the coffee.

I was deep in thought. I fired shots at people many times, I hit and was hit many times. I thought back to us pursuing Stawarczyk and Mejluda in 1934. Do you remember? You must remember. That was a notorious case. Stawarczyk was the boss. Unscrupulous. He extorted money from the poor. Never from those who had more, always from those who didn't have enough. They terrorized a big part of the city. The glazier, tailor, shopkeeper, junk dealer, street girls - they were all good for them. And any amount was good for them. You had two złoty, give it to us. Five, even better. Both he and his men assaulted people. He walked around with a large knife, but he also used a gun to scare people. One time some young apprentice stood up to him, a kid really, 16 years old. What was his name? Czebryda? You see, so many years have passed and I still remember. He shot him in cold blood. The medical examiner took six bullets out of his body. Crowds came to the funeral, perhaps even a thousand people. We hunted this guy for a long time and he always managed to slip away. Finally the commissioner summoned me.

"Do you have anybody?" he asked.

He was smoking a cigarette and I knew that somebody high up must have pressured him about this. The case was

too notorious. Everybody wrote about it, from left to right. From *Robotnik* and *Gazeta Warszawska* to *Kurjer Polski* and *Tajny Detektyw*. They all demanded the capture of those bandits.

I had many informants; each officer in a municipal police station must have some. Forget the municipal station, each constable must have informants. We both knew that you could twist people's arms. Some more, some less. One will utter a word and another a whole sentence. But in this case everything was falling apart. We organized some twenty set-ups. And the guy always got out of it in a cunning way. And you can't surround all of Warsaw.

"You have to find him." Commissioner opened the drawer and took a wad of banknotes out. He counted 10 hundred *złoty* and handed them to me. "If you run out, come back to me. If there is any left over, bring it back. Take whoever you want and get me those outlaws."

Easier said than done.

"That's the priest from Kobyłka." Zabużny sat next to me. "He heard confessions from several forest people. How was he supposed to say no? They came to him, so he listened to their confessions. They were taking him to a dying man, so he went with them."

At first I didn't know who he was talking about. I took my slice of bread and bit into some gunge. And then I realised he was talking about the older grey-haired man with the dog collar who was holding the hand of some young boy leaning over his ear. He was probably hearing his confession, too.

Zabużny had a long, pockmarked face, disproportionate even for somebody his height. Too long. And he had dense facial hair. He probably needed to shave twice a day.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" he asked.

"What is there to say?" I shrugged.

"I know them."

"Who?" Again I wasn't sure who he was talking about.

He rubbed his forehead. He had a big cut there from the night before.

"The Bolsheviks. They won't let us out of here. Once they get their paws on somebody, they won't let go. They'll hang us," he moaned. "Or send us to the polar bears."

"What are you talking about? You will be home for Three Kings Day," I tried to console him, even though I didn't believe my own words. "For Easter at the latest."

There was this boy at the other police station. He knew half of the city. But he misbehaved and instead of being on the street he ended up behind a desk. They even took his gun away. I talked to his supervisor; we knew each other from the officers' school. I asked him to let me have the boy. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Go on, take him. And don't send him back," he said. "Just be careful. He's got sticky hands."

I told him to change into civilian clothes and sent him into town. I went, too. People weren't keen to say anything. They were scared. Money didn't work either. Highly unusual. I went around the city and, you know, every house I passed I felt as if I knew its history, as if I'd been inside, as if I could see the faces of its residents in my own movie.

Police rarely have completely clean hands. It's that kind of a service. You treat somebody lightly, you trade a smaller evil for the bigger one, you let somebody go in the hope that they will understand. Sometimes they help you, sometimes you help them. This boy of mine, Prykiert, got in touch with me after a week to let me know that he had found something.

"He sees this woman in Wola," he announced.

"A street girl?"

"Don't think so. A young widow of a sand bargeman who drowned in the Vistula a year ago."

"He goes there on his own?"

"Sometimes on his own, sometimes with one of his people. He leaves him outside. But he doesn't go there very often. They must have a place somewhere in town. This..." he checked his notebook, "Sabina Bratecka doesn't often come home for the night."

They took us upstairs to go to the loo, three at a time. Three holes in a line. And a stink. I had the runs but I felt better. Five minutes, wipe your ass and back to the cell. Next round. I asked the guard for water.

"What do you need water for?" he asked back.

"Want to clean myself."

He burst out laughing.

"Wait and see, you will get more water than you bargained for."

We went back to the cell. The priest told us all to lean against each other. He was right, it was warmer this way.

So we spent a day and then another standing near the house in Wola, but neither did Stawarczyk come to see her, nor Bratecka go to see him.

I asked around and slowly things started falling into place. I interviewed some crook who sometimes accompanied them. He didn't know much. But he confirmed his description. Tall, dark-haired, 28 years old, quick hands, ruthless. And vodka didn't affect him. He had a strong head. And also, most importantly, he liked gambling and boxing.

I got this thief out of the lock-up. Luckily neither the prosecutor nor the examining judge interviewed him by then. That's why I said that police don't always have clean hands.

I let him go but I knew where to find him. He could have gone to the other one and told him I was looking for him. That would have been it, he would have vanished into thin air. But it was obvious that I would get my crook sooner or later and then he wouldn't want to live anymore. He was supposed to get away and earn his freedom fair and square. He found me three days later.

"Chief, you know much about boxing?" he asked.

As you know I liked boxing. Sometimes, when still in the Legions, we boxed a bit. So I nodded.

"So you know Szapsel Rotholc?"

I nodded again. He was such a flea. Fifty kilos. With a terrific left jab. Somebody told me that he was in the Jewish police in the Ghetto. But he was famous at the time. He won the bronze medal in Budapest. The guy didn't need to say anything else. I knew that Rotholc was to fight some German and Stawarczyk would show his face there. But how to find him in the crowd? Moreover, how to arrest him?

It worked. Prykiert followed Bratecka. She went into Jutrzenka. I left people in places where they could see each other. About a thousand people, all shouting. Maybe even more? Stawarczyk was already inside. I couldn't arrest him there. If he started shooting, it would be a horrible mess.

Rotholc fought well. He hit the German, jumped away, hit and jumped away. In the third round he landed a whole series of punches and the referee had to stop the fight. Stawarczyk, for some reason, wasn't happy – he must have bet a lot of money on the loser. I saw him angrily chucking a long piece of paper into the seats. And soon after he decided to leave. His lady followed him, as did some young boy. Later I found out that that was Mejluda.

JOANNA **OLCZAK-RONIKIER**

BACK THEN: LIFE IN POST-WAR KRAKOW



© Daniel Malak

Joanna Olczak-Ronikier (born 1934) writes books and screenplays, and is a co-founder of the cabaret *Piwnica pod Baranami*. Her work includes the bestselling non-fiction novel *In the Garden of Memory*, for which she received the Nike Literary Award in 2012. Her work has been translated into many languages.

Joanna Olczak-Ronikier's memoirs are a tale without a happy ending, despite starting in 1945 when the war was finally over. Here she tells the story of her childhood, without sentimentality or nostalgia, but with a fair dose of acrimony.

This book picks up the thread that was broken off at the end of the war in Olczak-Ronikier's previous family memoir, *In the Garden of Memory*. And so in 1945 we rediscover the author's grandmother, Janina Mortkowicz, and her daughter (the author's mother) Hanna Mortkowicz-Olczak living in a small room on Krupnicza Street in Kraków, within a house occupied by writers and other literary figures. The youngest member of the family, Joasia (as the author was called in childhood), is not there; since being placed in the care of nuns in 1942, she has gone missing in the upheaval of war, not to be found until June 1945. They do their best to rebuild their lives, and to add some style to their existence, although it falls a long way short of pre-war conditions. Once Joasia joins them, all three of them live in the little room, but her grandmother refuses to cook in it, insisting instead on keeping their cooker in the bathroom. Whenever guests appear, they have to hide away their clothing and clear the papers from the table, because in an intellectual household it is important to maintain the correct form, even within the restrictions of a tiny studio flat.

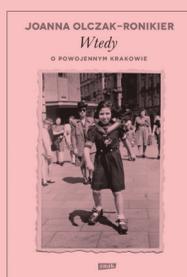
Back Then is an account that sets our knowledge of the past straight, describing the total social breakdown that followed the war, the birth of the new political system with a new culture to match, the fear, mourning and despair. Olczak-Ronikier shows that our idea of the past is naïve, because the post-war period was not typified by joy, but by anxiety, wariness, and painful memories that nobody was eager to divulge. Meanwhile, official silence was maintained by the state and its system of censorship. Anyone who wrote about a wartime death did it in a roundabout way, such as: "died in 1942", or "died in 1943", when what they meant was "starved to death in the ghetto" or "deported to Treblinka". Alongside the silence imposed by the authorities there was another kind of silence, at grass-roots level, not openly agreed upon

but universal: it came from a desire to preserve one's dignity, not to be maudlin about the tragedy of war, and also from a psychological need to restrain the nightmare and limit it to the confines of the war years. The authorities rarely brought up wartime suffering and score-settling, only doing so when it was useful in a political sense – immediately after the war people were encouraged to fill in questionnaires recording their wartime losses, the aim being to obtain compensation from Germany. Losses caused by the Soviet Union were not included, nor were “enemies of the people” or residents of the Recovered Territories (the parts of prewar Germany that had now become parts of Poland) allowed to express their views.

The past is recalled here on the basis of memories, but also from Janina Mortkowicz and Halina Mortkowicz-Olczak's letters, and various notes and documents that were preserved in the family home. This is an important perspective, because Olczak-Ronikier rarely applies the lyricism of childhood memory, which allows her to avoid simplifications. But she often employs the dramatic device of confronting memories that recur in the mind of a child with the historical truth, as told in conversations between the adults that were far removed from the nursery. In time, her understanding of the past changes: she describes various scenes that she witnessed, including her grandmother's encounter with Princess Radziwiłł, to whom she delivered some family documents from their lost palace at Nagłowice, which had been converted into a residential home for the creative arts. The countess is full of pride, and refuses to talk to Janina Mortkowicz as an equal; instead she offers her some money, which offends Janina, who had been expecting friendliness and gratitude. Olczak-Ronikier passes present-day comment on this situation: “I have grown wiser, and only now do I understand the tragic side of the situation.... Fate has set up a two-way mirror between me and us. We could see nothing but our own reflections.”

Back Then could also be read as a book about Kraków, by picking out themes relevant to the city and the names of people born there, or who sought refuge there after the war. It is also a history of the building that became the writers' commune, the only address of its kind in Poland, where Wisława Szymborska, Tadeusz Różewicz, Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński and Sławomir Mrożek all lived under one roof. We could also read it as an account of wartime losses and the era of post-war transformation, when the old system was gradually disappearing into the past but the new reality had not yet taken its place (this account ends at the turn of 1948 and 1949). Here one can find a reckoning of wartime losses suffered by the community of Polish Jews, who were persecuted by blackmailers, forced to sell off their flats and libraries and to change their names. Other themes include the change of ideology, childhood in the shadow of war, how unresolved traumas constantly return, and how impossible it is to throw away wartime documents. This is also a fascinating historical story, set in the aftermath of war, making it an excellent accompaniment to Magdalena Grzebałkowska's recently published book of reportage, *1945: War and Peace*, as well as to Magdalena Tulli's 2014 novel *Noise*. In all three books the same issues and similar conclusions recur, and cultural memory takes shape in a similar way.

Paulina Małochleb



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The apartment

BACK THEN: LIFE IN POST-WAR KRAKOW

house at 22 Krupnicza Street, built in 1911 to a design by Henryk Lamensdorf, had three floors, two annexes and a dramatic past, which in 1945 no one knew about, or else they preferred to ignore it. Before the war it had belonged to a lawyer called Adolf Liebeskind and his wife Helena, née Hochstim. The rooms to rent here were of a perfectly decent but not luxury standard. On each floor, in an alcove opposite the wooden staircase there was a huge crystal mirror with an upholstered bench to rest on beneath it. On either side of the staircase there were two apartments, with elaborately moulded doors leading into them. Each apartment had a similar layout: a long corridor down the middle, on one side of which there were three connecting rooms with windows overlooking the street. Directly opposite the entrance there was a single room with its own tiny bathroom. On the other side there was a kitchen and a second, large bathroom with windows overlooking the courtyard. On the ground floor there were some shops, including a small café, where they sold very good cream puffs.

The owners of the house had lived on Sare Street, while renting space in the house on Krupnicza to their relatives, including a Dr Liebeskindowa, who had her paediatric consultancy there, and a Dr Salo Liebeskind, who treated women's ailments. His telephone number was 143-91.

In September 1939, after the German invasion of Poland, Kraków became the capital of the General Government. In the prettiest, western part of the city they established a German residential district, including Krupnicza Street, which was renamed Albrechtstrasse. The Poles were forced to move out. In the first phase of their persecution the Jews were condemned to be deported from Kraków, and later on those who remained were made to go and live in the ghetto in Podgórze. Jewish companies and property were appropriated by a German trust.

This was the fate of the house at number 22. In 1942 the Germans requisitioned it and changed it into a hotel for employees of a petroleum office. The apartments were divided into separate "hotel rooms", and the kitchens were removed to gain extra space. The shops on the ground floor were joined into one long stretch to create a narrow dining room for the hotel guests. Dark wood panelling, heavy tables, oak booths and benches against the walls created the climate of a Bavarian Bierstube.

In 1945, as soon as they entered Kraków the Russians quartered a regiment of soldiers in the building, now abandoned by the Germans. Thanks to the quick thinking and energy of a young writer called Tadeusz Kwiatkowski, as well as to the efforts of literary critic Kazimierz Czachowski and poet Adam Ważyk (who was then a political officer in

the First Polish Army), as a “Jewish property” the house was requisitioned to be the seat of the Kraków branch of the Polish Writers Union. When the Russian soldiers went off to Berlin, the organizers immediately moved into the vacated house, thanks to which they managed to save items that were then priceless from looters, including the furniture and the canteen fittings. And so it became a place of refuge for homeless writers from all over Poland. Nobody investigated the fate of the pre-war owners.

There were several dozen rooms available, equipped with basic hotel furniture: divan beds, tables, chairs and wardrobes. There was plenty of coal in the cellars, enough to heat the tile stoves. The lack of kitchens upstairs was not a problem, because the canteen had been re-established downstairs, and it soon became the focal point for the tenants’ social life. On the first floor an administrative office was set up for the Writers Union. It included the secretariat, the president’s study, a library and a guest room. The president was Kazimierz Czachowski and the secretaries were Tadeusz Kwiatkowski and Maria Bielicka. Acting as a sort of quartermaster was Zygmunt Fijas, a talented satirist gifted with unusual organisational skills, who managed to obtain shoes, medicines and financial aid for the new arrivals.

Every day some more or less well-known person would appear in the office, asking to be rescued. There were far more people needing a roof over their heads than places to put them. Kwiatkowski and Fijas doubled and trebled their efforts to find space for everyone. It was a back-breaking task. Split up by the Germans, the apartments may have been suitable for a hotel, but not for long-term habitation. Polish intellectuals found the idea of the Soviet *komunalka*, or communal flat, highly distasteful. But there was no alternative. People even gratefully accepted the service cubicles with no WC in the annexes, which doomed them to knocking on other people’s doors to ask the embarrassing question of whether they could use the toilet. Connecting rooms were assigned to families who were acquainted, which put their friendship sorely to the test.

It was to this house that on Friday 16 March 1945 my mother came wandering. She was asked to sit down, and was surely treated to a cup of tea. Human warmth, the heat of the tile stove, a sense of relief that she was no longer doomed to rely on her own resources – all this was a joy. Who was the first person she spoke to? Tadeusz Kwiatkowski was twenty-five, but he was already a fanatical book lover, and had written a novel called *Lunapark* [*The Funfair*], which was soon to be published; during the occupation he had issued an underground literary journal, and had been jailed by the Germans in Montelupich Prison for his part in Kraków’s cultural life. He knew of the Mortkowicz publishing house and was pleased that the publisher’s wife and daughter had survived. He heard out their account of how after the Warsaw Uprising they had ended up in a village outside Kraków, and about the child lost during their wartime misadventures, in other words, me.

Or perhaps she told someone else about her experiences? The office space was always full of people. They would drop in to request a signature on some document, to complain about the rats infesting the courtyard, or to ask how to obtain an extra pillow. Or simply to chat. It wasn’t unlikely that on that particular Friday Jerzy Andrzejewski may have been there, or Stefan Otwinowski, also refugees from Warsaw who were living at 22 Krupnicza Street. Both were members of the board. Or maybe the president himself, Kazimierz Czachowski was there?

Everyone agreed that they had to find the space for my grandmother, my mother and me. Nobody was in any doubt that sooner or later I’d be found. They started to investigate the possibility of flat number six on the first floor, opposite the office. The two front rooms on the left hand side of the corridor were occupied by Józefa Rusinkowa, with her daughters Basia and Magdusia. They were waiting for their husband and father, Michał Rusinek, to return; he had been a popular writer before the war, author of novels such as *Burza nad brukiem* [*Storm over the Cobblestones*], *Człowiek z bramy* [*The Man from the Gateway*], *Pluton z dzikiej łąki* [*The Platoon from the Wild Meadow*] and *Ziemia miodem płynąca* [*Land Flowing with Honey*]. Rusinek had taken part in the Warsaw Uprising, and had subsequently been deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp, and from there to other camps. They knew he was alive and was coming home. He later described his fortunes during the uprising and in the camps in a book called *Z barykady w dolinę głodu* [*From the Barricade into a Vale of Hunger*].

Another front room, the least comfortable, because it had no exit onto the corridor, which forced the residents to pass through other people’s rooms, was occupied by poet Janina Brzostowska and her son Witek, who is now called Witold Brostow and is a professor at the University of North Texas. They too had lived through the uprising in Warsaw.

The large bathroom soon lost its luxurious look because the residents set up household scales and small electric cookers in there, and never stopped cooking, which made it hard to use the room’s other facilities. The pre-war kitchen had been converted into a small room with a view onto the courtyard and the dustbins, which were always overflowing with heaps of stinking refuse. Tadeusz Peiper, who founded the group of writers known as the “Kraków Avant-garde” was housed in there. In 1939, in danger of repression because of his Jewish origins, he had escaped from Kraków to the East, and had spent the war years in Russia. When he came back to Kraków, his family’s house in Podgórze had long since been in other hands, and he was suffering from persecution mania. He gave the bathroom a wide berth, because he was convinced that his oppressors were blowing poison into pipes leading into the old Junkers gas stove. He felt safer in the office toilet.

How was it that the best room in the entire apartment, with its own bathroom, was assigned to my mother? Was it empty and just waiting for her? That’s impossible. There must have been some sort of reshuffling, someone must have been transferred to another room. It was thanks to somebody’s good will that this place became our new home.

The tenants were assigned the furniture and other equipment left in the room by the Germans. A receipt listing them has survived. It came from a German laundry, located in the basement of the house during the occupation. On one side of the slip of paper there is a printed list of clothing accepted for laundering:

Oberhemden (Shirts)
Taghemden (Vests)
Nachthemden (Nightshirts)
Schlafanzuge (Pyjamas)
Unterhosen (Underpants)
Schlupfer (Knickers)...

On the other – as in those days paper was worth its weight in gold – the objects found in the room are itemized.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

DAWID **SIERAKOWIAK**

THE DIARY. FIVE NOTEBOOKS FROM THE ŁÓDŹ GHETTO



*Sierakowiak in a group class photo from the ghetto;
from the collections of Konrad Turowski*

Dawid Sierakowiak (1924–1943) was a Polish Jew and a prisoner in the Łódź ghetto. He wrote a diary documenting his time in the ghetto, which was published after the war. His notes have been published in several languages and are included in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s permanent exhibition.

The scale of violence in the Holocaust is impossible to imagine for people living in the normal world. It was also unimaginable for European Jews, before the extermination process began. Even the most pessimistic predictions of the Nazis’ intentions were proven inadequate.

Since the scale of suffering in the Holocaust is unimaginable, all original testimony made during its long duration is precious.

They read like letters from hell.

Reports from the Warsaw Ghetto by Perec Opoczyński and *Writings from the Warsaw Ghetto* by Rachela Auerbach ought to be added to the list of exceptionally important documents from that period published in Poland in recent years.

Dawid Sierakowiak’s Diary is a unique document of this kind: five notebooks of entries, composed nearly daily from 28 June 1939 to 15 April 1943, when the author wrote his final sentence: “We truly have no escape.” Four months later, he starved to death in the Łódź Ghetto.

His first entries begin just before the war, on a vacation in the mountains. The fifteen-year-old’s enthusiastic account is interrupted by comments on the unsettling news from Germany. Yet Dawid’s most ambitious dreams have to do with his education. He also has well-developed political views – he considers himself a “socialist Zionist”, and is preparing to write a treatise titled *The Semite*, in which he aims to expound a program of accord and cooperation with the Arab inhabitants of Eretz-Israel.

Two months later, his entries of day-to-day life take on a dramatic pace. The war begins. There are air raids and chaos. Hurried entries from September 1939 reveal the boy’s level of awareness at the time and what was going on around him, wanting to believe the UK and France would immediately come to Poland’s defence and attack Nazi Germany.

Persecution begins. Right from the start, the Jewish population is treated more harshly, even at that point just in the form of a longer curfew. On September 13, five days after Łódź was taken by the Germans, an order is given closing the Synagogue and requiring stores to open on Rosh Hashanah. On

November 7, the order goes out to wear a patch bearing the word “Jude”, and prohibiting decorative items such as shiny buttons. As each week goes by, the situation gets worse: Jews can no longer sit in the front car of the tram, expensive Jewish homes are taken over by Germans, and ordinary soldiers plunder Jewish apartments.

What historians call “the very worst kind of tragedy” is gathering speed.

In Sierakowiak’s entries, details of further oppression are interspersed with information he reads and learns, despite being expelled from his classes because he can’t afford to pay tuition. *The Diary* gives a precise look at the persecution as it grows day by day. A symbolic example of this is the Great Synagogue on Spacerowa Street in Łódź, which the Nazis first close, then set on fire, and finally blow up.

A long-term methodically introduced system of torment, humiliation, starvation, and physical compulsion into forced labour, destroyed the lives of the 250,000 Jews in Łódź. The four hundred pages of Sierakowiak’s account evocatively illustrate this process. His “hunger diaries” are a detailed account of the daily struggle against hunger, cold, scabies, and lice, but at the same time heroic attempts to continue studying and to earn money tutoring, so as to help his family scrape out a living in the Ghetto. He describes this closed district and the Jews brought there from all over Europe – whether Czechoslovakia, Luxembourg, or Austria.

The author’s changing writing style reveals his worsening physical and psychological exhaustion – the effects of starvation are imprinted in the narration. As the book goes on, he rarely has the strength to write or study. But we also witness his unrelenting will to fight on. In his entries, Sierakowiak does his utmost not to overlook any information, or rather speculation, that might give him even a shred of hope. *The Diary* cuts off when Sierakowiak died of starvation at the age of 19. His entire family perished. His journal survived. It was discovered after the war in a pile of kindling lying beside a stove.

Sierakowiak’s work is an extraordinarily valuable document of Holocaust literature, in terms of its scale, the period it covers, and its scrupulous records – but also the stylistic quality of the entries, which take an individual perspective, are matter-of-fact and precise, and nearly bereft of subjective commentary. The entries’ literary minimalism makes space for their painful factual material. The simplicity of the narration collides with unimaginable, long-term suffering.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag wrote, “Remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself.”

In Dawid Sierakowiak’s book, every word matters. It does not make for comfortable reading.

Urszula Glensk
Translated by Sean Bye



DAWID SIERAKOWIAK
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Wednesday, September 6, 1939. Łódź.

THE DIARY. FIVE NOTEBOOKS FROM THE ŁÓDŹ GHETTO

God, what's going on! Panic, mass exodus, defeatism. The city, deserted by the police and all other state institutions, is waiting in terror for the anticipated arrival of the German troops. What happened? People run from one place to another, finding no comfort; they move their worn bits of furniture around in terror and confusion, without any real purpose. (...)

At home I meet our neighbor, Mr. Grabiński, who has come back from downtown and tells about the great panic and anxiety which has taken hold of the people there. Crowds of residents are leaving their homes and setting off on a danger-filled trek into an unknown future. In the streets crying, sobbing, wailing.

I go to sleep, but a loud conversation wakes me at five in the morning. A neighbor, Grodzeński, is sitting there with his crying wife, telling us to leave. Where? Go where? Why? Nobody knows. To flee, flee farther and farther, trek, wade, cry, forget, run away ... just run away as far as possible from the danger. (...) Father loses his head; he doesn't know what to do. Other Jewish neighbors come for a meeting. (...)

Father rushes to my uncle, and my uncle back to Father, but each time the decision is the same: not to flee, to stay put. (...)

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 1939. ŁÓDŹ. (...)

At five I listened to Hitler's speech. After an enthusiastic greeting and welcome he spoke from *Die befreite Stadt Danzig* [German; the liberated city of Gdańsk]. The speech, however, wasn't worth the name of this otherwise great statesman. He raged, quibbled, got excited, insulted, begged, coaxed, and above all, he lied and lied ... He lied by saying that Poland started the war; he lied by speaking about the oppression of Germans in Poland ("*Barbaren!*"); he lied by speaking of his always good, peaceful intentions, and so on. After that he served up series of insults against Polish authorities, Churchill, Cooper (Duff), and Eden. He spoke about his desire for an accord with the English and French peoples, and he still talked about the injustice of the Versailles Treaty, at which point he announced that Poland will never exist within the borders established by this treaty (!). Finally, he announced that English efforts to overthrow the ruling regime in Germany will never succeed, which proves the existence and seriousness of such movements. At the end Hitler discussed his good relations with Russia (?) and the impossibility of a German - Russian conflict breaking out. After a few pathetic remarks about Gdańsk, he finished his speech.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 1942. ŁÓDŹ.

My most Sacred, beloved, worn-out, blessed, cherished Mother has fallen victim to the bloodthirsty German Nazi beast!!! And totally innocently, solely because of the evil hearts of two Czech Jews, the doctors who came to examine us. From early morning on the City was anxious: the news spread like a thunderbolt that at night they had taken the children and elderly to the empty hospitals from which they will be deported (3,000 persons a day!) beginning on Monday.

I, too, felt somewhat uneasy from early in the morning, chased by foreboding and unable to stay home because of heat and humidity. After two, after we had thrown together a dinner soup, cars and wagons pulled in with the medical examiners, policemen, firemen, and nurses, who started the roundup. The house across from us (8 Spacerowa Street) was sealed off, and after an hour and a half three children were brought out of it. The screams, struggling, cries of the mothers and of everyone on the street were indescribable. Parents of the children who were taken away actually went insane.

While all that was going on, two doctors, two nurses, several firemen, and policemen entered our building completely unexpectedly. They had lists with the names of the tenants in every apartment. A frantic, unexpected examination began. The doctors (old, mean, and sour deportees from Prague), despite policemen's and nurses' objections, started an extremely thorough examination of every tenant, and fished out a great many of the "sick and unable to work," and the ones whom they described as "*fragliche Reserve*" [German; "questionable reserve"]. My unfortunate dearest mother was among the latter, but it's little consolation for me, since all have been taken to the hospital at 34 Łagiewnicka. What hurts most is the fact that they didn't search at all for those tenants who weren't in their homes, and that although there were over a dozen children in our apartment building, they didn't take even one of them. Our Cousin hid with the children behind the bed, her family scattered, and everyone came out safe and sound. Meanwhile, my beloved mother has fallen a victim! Our neighbor, old Miller, a seventy-year-old man, uncle of the ghetto's chief doctor, has been left untouched, and my healthy (though emaciated) mother has been taken in his place! ... The shabby old doctor who examined her searched and searched and was very surprised that he couldn't find any disease in her. Nevertheless, he kept shaking his head, saying to his comrade in Czech: "Very weak, very weak." And despite the opposition and intervention from the police and nurses present at the examination, he added these two unfortunate words to our family's record.

These doctors apparently didn't realize at all what they were doing because they also took our neighbor's son, Dawid Hammer, a young lad of twenty-four, who never had had anything to do with any sickness or doctor in his entire life. Later on, however, through the connections of his cousin, a commissioner, he was examined for a second time and was released in the evening. And what difference does it make to me that as a result of the above case those two doctors have been dismissed by the president and haven't been allowed to continue examining other people? What difference does it make to me that the entire hospital, its entire personnel, are indignant!? My mother has been caught, and I doubt very much that anything will save her.

After the doctors announced the verdict, and when Mom, unfortunate Mom! was running like mad around the house, begging the doctors to spare her life, Father was eating soup that had been left on the stove by the relatives hiding in our apartment, and he was taking sugar out of their bag! True, he was kind of confused, questioned the policemen and doctors, but he didn't run out anywhere in the city; he didn't go to any friends' connections to ask for protection. In a word, he was glad to be rid of a wife with whom life had been becoming harder and harder, thus pushing Mom into her grave.

I swear on this human life that's holy to me that if I only knew that my mother wouldn't have to die, that she'd survive the war despite the deportation, I could accept what has happened. Dear Mother, my tiny, emaciated mother who has gone through so many misfortunes in her life, whose entire life was one of sacrifice for others, relatives and strangers, who might not have been taken away because of her exhaustion had it not been for Father and Nadzia robbing her of food here in the ghetto. My poor mother, who always accepted everything so willingly and who invariably continued to believe in God, showed them, in spite of extreme nervousness, complete presence of mind. With a fatalism and with heartbreaking, maddening logic, she spoke to us about her fate. She kind of admitted that I was right when I told her that she had given her life by lending and giving away provisions, but she admitted it with such a bitter smile that I could see she didn't regret her conduct at all, and, although she loved her life so greatly, for her there are values even more important than life, like God, family, etc. She kissed each one of us good-bye, took a bag with her bread and a few potatoes that I forced on her, and left quickly to her horrible fate. I couldn't muster the willpower to look through the window after her or to cry. I walked around, talked, and finally sat as though I had turned to stone. Every other moment, nervous spasms took hold of my heart, hands, mouth, and throat, so that I thought my heart was breaking. It didn't break, though, and it let me eat, think, speak, and go to sleep. (...)

The excerpts come from The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak. Five Notebooks from the Łódź Ghetto, ed. Alan Adelson, translated from the original Polish by Kamil Turowski. Copyright © 1996 by the Jewish Heritage Project and Kamil Turowski. Published by Oxford University Press, Inc. and Bloomsbury www.sierakowiak.org

ARTUR **DOMOSŁAWSKI**

THE EXCLUDED



Artur Domosławski (born 1967) is one of Poland's most outstanding contemporary reporters. From 1991 to 2011 he wrote for *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Since 2011, he has been working for *Polityka*. His highly regarded books include *Latin American Fever* (2004), *America in Revolt* (2007) and the much-hyped biography *Kapuściński: Non-fiction* (2010), which has been translated into English, French, Spanish, and Italian, among other languages.

Artur Domosławski's new book, *The Excluded*, devotes more than five hundred pages to people whom we'd rather not think about. We know they're out there, often very close by, but we prefer to forget about their presence (and their proximity). We'd rather not ask ourselves questions – and not because the answers would be difficult to accept. On the contrary, we know them already, or at the very least we can guess what they are. Our reluctance stems from something else: it's that once we've taken the answers on board, we'll feel obliged to do something about them, to acquiesce, or else protest, to seek out our own guilt or clear ourselves of responsibility, to summon up empathy or release anger. Or else deal with it in a different way – by making an effort not to let any of these emotions have their say. Indifference requires action too.

But this is the whole purpose of reportage – to throw us off balance. That's probably the only thing one can do by writing: to place a topic or a person and his life story before the readers, and force them to look him in the eyes.

In his new book, which is a sort of summation of twenty years of travelling in the countries of the South, Domosławski tries to draw as broad a portrait as possible of those “whom nobody will speak up for and nobody will miss”. That may be the most concise definition of the collective character central to this book (though Domosławski himself describes them as “the co-authors of this account”). Yet he does try to go deeper too, because the exclusion of the title affects such a large part of the world's population that any attempt to condense the description would be incomplete. Of course Domosławski also narrows the range of his quest – or rather the ranges of exclusion. But he does that purely to show how much they differ from the precariat class of our times. His *homo sacer* – the damned, are “men, women and children who live in poverty, without prospects, often on the edge of the abyss, deprived of rights – political, civic or economic, and sometimes all at once.”

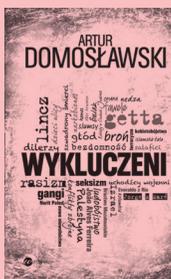
And yes, Domosławski brings us face to face with them and forces us to look them in the eyes: the mothers, wives

and daughters of the men from Soacha in Colombia killed by the army, their deaths later “legalized” as the elimination of guerrillas – in exchange for cash bonuses. Or the relatives of the women of Ciudad Juárez in Mexico who were put to death merely because they could be; the culprits remain unpunished. Or the economic migrants and refugees, demonstrating at the same time the total inadequacy of those terms, how the words have changed their meaning and lost their precise capacity to describe certain phenomena. Or the families of children killed on the orders of petty shopkeepers in Brazil, because as “street scum” the former prevent the latter from running their businesses. Domosławski also shows how badly poverty destroys solidarity – how hard it is not just for us to deal with it, but also for those whom it directly affects; he cites questions that illustrate the indifference that comes with suffering: “As my life is worthless, how much can yours be worth to me?”

But it’s not just the excluded who are given the floor in this book – those who feel responsible for them get to speak out too. Domosławski also reminds us that it’s impossible to talk about the marginalized without introducing the people who do the excluding. As he demonstrates here, the division between these two groups is an inherent part of world history. There’s a phrase borrowed from Sven Lindqvist that recurs in *The Excluded* like a refrain: “We want genocide to have begun and ended with Nazism. That is what is most comforting.” In this book it is not a closing remark designed to shatter our illusions, but on the contrary, more of a starting line, a point of departure. Of course, the division of the world into those who “have”, whom “someone speaks up for”, and those who are refused even the basic right to exist is inscribed in the nature of the world, yet the scale of the disproportion and distance that divides them is exceptional. Nor is there any justification for abandoning efforts aimed at shortening this distance.

The Excluded is socially committed reportage; without actually entering the realm of opinion journalism, it employs tools characteristic of the genre. It takes a comprehensive approach to the topic of exclusion (based on a wealth of documentation), goes back to themes from years ago, and attempts to show it from many perspectives – from the level of the boat from which “peoples of the South will embark and knock at the gate”, but also from brochures advertising trips to war zones; from a chat over a cup of coffee somewhere deep in the interior, the reports of international organizations, and court transcripts; and from conversations with people whose answers nobody has ever been interested in before, such as Rana Ahmed from Pakistan, who wanted to get to Poland and work there, the mothers from Gaza, the Bedouin from the Jerusalem area, or Miriam from El Salvador, who “knew what it’s like to stab a man with a knife”, but managed to break free of the gang – all this and many other themes combine to form a book that chafes.

Magdalena Kicińska



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... whom nobody will miss
Soacha – Bogota, 2011

THE EXCLUDED

The first to disappear was Alex Arenas on 2 January 2008. In December, the day before Christmas Eve, after the end of the working day he told his pals at the building site that he'd got himself a great job on the side and was off on a trip – later on he'd get them in on it too. He told his older sister Cecilia that he was going to bring home some extra cash for their ailing mother. He was her only breadwinner. He was helping his sister too, because her husband was seriously ill and jobless. Cecilia says he was their mainstay. He was thirty-three years old.

Jaime Castillo told his brother that he was going to work on the land – he'd finally got a good offer. He was a street pedlar selling soap and jam, earning next to nothing. He tried to persuade his brother to go with him, but the brother refused. Jaime didn't mention it again. On 10 August he vanished without trace. He was forty-two.

Diego Tamayo, aged twenty-five, left his mother a note on the fridge to say: "Take care of yourself, I'll be back on Monday." Then he'd added: "Look after the rabbit." Diego loved animals and dreamed of being a vet – but how could he, a boy from Soacha, even think of going to college? He took on all sorts of work, painting houses and driving trucks to deliver bricks. On Saturday 23 August his mother wanted to take him to his cousin's birthday party, but he said he'd rather stay at home, so she went alone. On his way out at two in the morning, Diego had a quick chat with the caretaker of their block. He said he was going on a long journey, but he couldn't say with whom because it was a secret.

Andres Palacio told his mother he might be going on a trip in a few days' time – apparently some friends had invited him to the coast. Mind you take care, she'd said in reply – we don't have any friends on the coast. And she told him that if she saw him hanging about with strangers, she'd call the police. What if they were guerrillas, or other bandits?

His mother's fears weren't imaginary. Soacha, a poor suburb of Bogota, home to several hundred thousand people, is at the epicentre of all Colombia's miseries. You could call it the capital city of hopelessness. Poverty, muggings, theft – it's a recruiting ground for illegal guerrillas and gangs. A large number of the people are exiles from the interior – victims of the many long years of armed conflict. Most are addicted to alcohol and drugs. It's a major source of the cheapest workforce. And a hotbed of domestic violence towards the women and children.

Andres Palacio's mother was on the alert, because years earlier one of the political gangs had killed her older son. But how can you keep a twenty-two-year-old boy in check? Andres disappeared on 23 August, the very same day as Diego Tamayo. She found out later from her son's friends that

he had told them he was going away to do a job. They said he was planning to buy her a house with the money he'd earn.

On 23 August, without a word, yet another young man disappeared, whose name was Victor Gómez.

None of them – plus eleven more from Soacha and three from the nearby slums known as Ciudad Bolívar, who disappeared between January and August 2008 – knew each other.

Stories about the men who had vanished without a trace finally began to reach Fernando Escobar, the local ombudsman; in Colombia many local districts have their own spokesman for citizen's rights. From May 2008 the mothers, brothers and sisters of men who had disappeared started coming to his office. He instructed them to take information, including photographs, to the missing persons bureau.

At meetings of the local authorities, police and military representatives, Escobar began to flag up the fact that something disturbing was happening in Soacha. He thought the young men were being kidnapped or recruited by the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas) – the oldest, originally communist, guerrilla organization in Colombia. Or the paramilitaries – the private troops of the landowners and cocaine dealers. But the politicians and military took the ombudsman's warning about the missing men as a criticism, as if they weren't doing anything, while chaos and danger prevailed in Soacha. Their response was to shout at him: "Mind your own business, don't go meddling in politics!"

The ombudsman had no solid facts to offer, just the reports made by the families of the missing men and his own speculation. He decided to keep asking around – and to wait. One day at a bar he told an acquaintance about the three men who had disappeared on the same day, 23 August. Quite unexpectedly, the man responded by telling him about six others who had gone missing a little earlier. He also gave him their family names and addresses. In Soacha, as in all of Colombia, missing persons often aren't reported to any of the authorities, so the ombudsman wasn't at all surprised by this. But there was something else that made him wonder – the large number of disappearances from the same suburb in such a short space of time.

The breakthrough came in the final days of August. A family relative called Diego Tamayo's mother and told her that apparently her son had been killed in a skirmish between the army and the guerrillas, in a remote region of Colombia, at a place called Ocaña, more than six hundred kilometres north-west of Bogotá. This information had appeared in the on-line edition of one of the local papers. The news item suggested that Diego had died because he belonged to the guerrillas.

On 1 September, exactly a week after her son's disappearance, Diego's mother received confirmation of the news of his death. His body had turned up at the Medicina Legal (Legal Medicine) facility in Ocaña.

Medicina Legal has departments all over the country and keeps a register of those who die in unnatural circumstances – the victims of accidents, attacks, or armed conflict. Their DNA and fingerprints are collected, and photographs of them are taken. If the victim has ID on him, the family are informed. If he has no ID, the body is buried as unidentified. Thanks to a system for comparing data from Medicina Legal and information at the missing persons bureaux, it is often possible, even after a long time, to establish the identity of unidentified victims.

Diego's mother found out that on the same day as her son disappeared from Soacha, so did two other boys: Victor

Gómez and Andres Palacio. Palacio's mother had gone to the ombudsman, who helped her to confirm the dreadful news. It spread quickly, and the relatives of other men who had gone missing in January, February and months that followed began to check whether any news had come in anywhere about their sons and brothers – if only conjecture, a clue, or circumstantial evidence. That was how Mauricio Castillo found information about his murdered brother Jaime. Some of them were called by employees of the Medicina Legal facility after comparing pictures of the missing men with photographs of the corpses in their archive. They realized that some of the missing men bore a striking resemblance to the victims.

The bodies of eighteen missing men from Soacha and Ciudad Bolívar – with the exception of Alex Arenas, whose body "surfaced" in a different region of Colombia – were found in mass graves in Ocaña. Most had been buried as unidentified. Information on all the deceased had been reported to the local Medicina Legal facility by military personnel from the 15th Flying Squad, as having been killed in skirmishes they had fought with the guerrillas.

There was a fuss in the media. Why had the bodies of all the men who went missing from Soacha at the same time been found some fifteen hours' journey away to the north, and all in the same place?

The ombudsman, who had initially accepted the idea that the men had let themselves be recruited by the guerrillas – in Colombia there's nothing sensational about that – began to doubt if it was actually true. His doubts were prompted by the proximity of the dates of their disappearances and the dates on which the army had informed Medicina Legal about their death in armed skirmishes.

Diego Tamayo, Andres Palacio and Victor Gómez all disappeared on 23 August, and were killed on 25 August. Jaime Castillo disappeared on 10 August and was killed on 12 August. It was the same with the others. Elkin Verano disappeared on 13 January and was killed on 15 January. Jaime Valencia and Daniel Martinez disappeared on 6 February and were killed on 8 February. With one exception, they had all died within forty-eight hours of their disappearance from home. The journey to the north, more than six hundred kilometres from Soacha to Ocaña, takes at least fifteen hours to drive along poor quality roads. So where was the time for training as guerrillas? When did they learn to handle a rifle, or how to shoot?

When there started to be a fuss about the matter on television and in the papers, President Alvaro Uribe spoke up: "These boys hadn't gone off to pick coffee. They'd gone to break the law."

His words were seconded by the Minister of Defence, Juan Manuel Santos, who assured the viewers, listeners and readers that the young men from Soacha and Ciudad Bolívar belonged to illegal armed groups and had been killed in skirmishes with the army. Finally he added: "Army command and the ministry do not tolerate the violation of human rights."

This final remark was food for thought for a human rights activist who is well-known in Colombia. The men from Soacha had been killed in armed combat, as guerrillas. What did Minister Santos know about their disappearance and death for him to be in such a hurry to give assurances, without being asked, that no violation of human rights had taken place?

CEZARY ŁAZAREWICZ

SO THERE'LL BE NO TRACES



Cezary Łazarewicz (born 1966) is a journalist, reporter, and columnist. He has published in the leading Polish newspapers and magazines, including *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Przekrój*, and *Polityka*. His collected volumes include *A Cup of Coffee with Mrozek: Pomeranian Reportage* (2012), *Six Floors of Luxury: The Interrupted Story of the House of the Jablkowski Brothers* (2013), and *The Suave Murderer* (2015).

We have a pretty clear picture of why the Communist regime in Poland collapsed in the late 1980s. It broke down under the weight of growing debt and permanent economic crisis. Repeated political upheavals destabilized the Soviet Union's domination over its satellite states. Many prominent party functionaries came to choose pragmatism over ideology, and the benefits that could be gained from reaching an agreement with the democratic opposition allowed officials to entertain hopes for the future, while enormous costs came to be associated with maintaining their leadership. But there was of course another important reason for this collapse: the Communist Party lost legitimacy in the eyes of society. Gradually it looked as if Communist governments owed their existence only to the principle of inertia. This development was all about psychological effect – governing politicians were completely compromised, the falsity of their propaganda was grotesque and they committed disastrous mistakes as they teetered between arrogance and desperation.

Disregarding martial law, during which the threat of Soviet intervention might have allowed the authorities to pull the wool over the eyes of the Polish people, there were three final nails in the coffin of the communist regime in Poland: the fatal beating of Grzegorz Przemyk (1983), the political murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko (1984) and the explosion in the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl (1986). In each of these dramatic situations, the authorities' catastrophic reactions shattered any remaining illusions regarding their moral standards.

First came the case of Przemyk. On 12 May 1983, a militia patrol in Warsaw's Old Town arrested the nineteen-year-old while he was celebrating his school-leaving exams with friends. At the local police station, the officers decided to teach the young man a lesson because he had refused to show his ID card. They beat him unconscious making sure that there would be "no traces", but they damaged his internal organs. Two days later Grzegorz Przemyk died.

This whole affair would probably have been swept under the carpet if the boy hadn't turned out to be the son of Barbara Sadowska, a poet associated with the opposition. The communist secret police had already threatened that her son would come to harm. What is more, there was an eyewitness to the beating, Cezary F., who had been taken to the station along with Przemek. The regime's functionaries panicked and decided to respond with absolute denial.

Cezary Łazarewicz's excellent reportage is basically a work of activism. Written almost thirty years after the events, it offers the first detailed account of the circumstances of Przemek's murder and its aftermath. It is hard to say why this issue hadn't ever been tackled before. Was it because Grzegorz Przemek was quickly turned an anti-communist martyr? Or because Barbara Sadowska, an eccentric artist with hippie leanings and a weakness for younger men, did not fit with the patriotic narrative, grief-stricken though she was? Or was it because the crime never led to any convictions - not even in democratic Poland - and the individuals who had lied, spied, and fabricated evidence continued to fare as well as before?

Łazarewicz's book is both condemnatory and compassionate. It has three threads. The first is an insightful reconstruction of the events after Przemek's death - a terrifying account of a cynical power apparatus that is guided solely by its own short-term gain. This narrative is a testimony to the government's methods of disinformation and intimidation, as well as a portrait of its influence over the administration of justice. Przemek's story offers a perfect case study of this sort of practice. The second thread describes the families of individuals involved in or manipulated into the affair. These complex portraits offer a glimpse into the stifling and depressing atmosphere of that era. The third thread is basically a courtroom drama: a study of the failure of democracy in the face of totalitarian manipulation. Ironically, the individuals who were responsible for the crime could not be sentenced after 1989 precisely because they were given a fair trial under the rule of law.

Piotr Kořta



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THURSDAY, 12 MAY

SO THERE'LL BE NO TRACES

[...]

They leave the flat around 3 p.m. In the Wiech Passage by the block of flats they run into Piotrek Kadłčik, who used to teach Grzesiek the guitar. He's wandering around aimlessly, waiting for the screening of *The She-Wolf* [Wilczyca], a Polish horror film, at the nearby Atlantic cinema. It doesn't take much to persuade him to come along to the Old Town. Why there? Grzesiek says that's where his classmates are celebrating their secondary school-leaving exams.

On the way he talks about his plans for the summer holidays – a trip to Dębki by the sea. It won't come to be, as Private Ireniusz Kościuk from the 13th Operational Company of the ZOMO has already reported for service in the Old Town. During the briefing at the headquarters he'd been told that this is the anniversary of Marshal Józef Piłsudski's death and that activists of the now illegal Solidarity trade union might use it to draw attention to themselves. They might shout hostile slogans, such as "Solidarity is alive" or "WRON will soon be dead and gone". That's why the ZOMO men must be vigilant today. Kościuk is to patrol the area around the Castle Square and arrest anyone who acts in a disruptive manner.

They take the bus to St. Anne's Church. The place is swarming with policemen in plain clothes and in uniform. They cross the Castle Square, down Świętojańska Street past St. John's Cathedral and onto the Old Town Market. There's no sign of Grzesiek's classmates, so they meander through the little streets with no particular aim. On their way back, near the entrance to the Castle Square, Grzesiek jumps on Czarek's back. It's a ridiculous sight, Czarek, unsteady on his thin legs, carrying that beanpole on his back. In the end he trips, loses his balance and falls. He's down on the ground, with Grzesiek next to him. This is when the ZOMO man comes running towards them – private Ireniusz Kościuk, not much older than Grzesiek. He's yanking him by the sleeve and demanding to see his identity card. "I don't have it!" the boy says, laughing, while behind him a militia van is already approaching. Then the action accelerates. Kościuk pushes Grzesiek towards the militia's Nysa, and when Grzesiek braces his arms against the ledge of the door, Kościuk draws his baton and thwacks him on the back until Grzesiek tumbles in. Just before the van drives off, Czarek manages to get in as well. A moment later the vehicle disappears around the corner.

Kuba packs up his friend's leather flip-flops, which were left behind on the square; Piotrek, meanwhile, runs to find Barbara, to tell her that the ZOMO had just arrested her son. From the Castle Square Kuba goes to the police station, just

around the corner on Jezuicka Street. He stands in the yard and listens. He can hear Grzesiek's bloodcurdling screams. "They're beating him," he thinks. He's afraid that if he enters now, he'll get it in the neck, too. So he waits until the screams subside, and then pushes open the station's heavy timber doors. There he sees Grzesiek, curled up on the floor. His eyes are shut and he's whimpering in pain. Kuba asks the officer on duty to release his friend. "He didn't do anything bad. He only wanted to celebrate that he passed his exams," he explains. "It would be good if his mother showed up here, before the ambulance comes to get him," the officer replies.

The ambulance arrives at the station around 5 p.m. "He's a lunatic," the angry militia men tell the driver, who looks at the delicate brown-haired boy in civilian clothes standing among the uniformed ZOMO men. They meekly stand by, their batons idle, while the boy is giving them a real mouthful. "Why are they putting up with that," the driver wonders. The ambulance's dispatch card says "psychotic". This brown-haired boy really doesn't look sane. No one in their right mind would dare to slag militia men off like this. But the sergeant on duty points to another boy. Curled up on a chair, barefoot, his trousers torn over the knees, his shirt dishevelled. The driver notices him only now. His hair is tangled, his face covered in dust. He has absent eyes, it's impossible to connect with him. He doesn't answer any questions, he's just hugging his stomach and rocking on his chair. "There were fear and horror in his eyes," the driver, Michał Wysocki, recalls. According to the sergeant, the boy is a drug addict, but when Wysocki turns up his shirtsleeves he doesn't see any track marks.

The boy is unable to stand up by himself, and he cannot walk. Wysocki puts his arm around his own neck, holds his side and slowly, step by step, takes him out of the station. Grzesiek is barely dragging his feet. The driver and the paramedic, Jacek Szyzdek, make him sit him in the back seat of the ambulance. The trip to the A&E department on Hoża Street only takes six minutes and four seconds (according to a later test run). During the whole trip the boy only stammers one incoherent sentence: "I've been to Hoża." On the way he also tries to grab the paramedic by the hair. Wysocki stops the ambulance, grips his hands and pins him down to make him come to his senses; now the boy finally calms down.

They park the ambulance right by the steps. The patient is unresponsive - they must lift him out of the vehicle. Szyzdek and Wysocki grab him under the shoulders, carry him into the entrance hall, take the elevator up to the first floor, then they drag him to the door of the psychiatric office number 108. They lay him down on the floor and set out to look for the doctor. The psychiatrist, Paweł Willmann, is annoyed that they've brought him another unconscious patient. The three of them place Grzesiek on a chair in the doctor's office. He sits bending over, hanging his head and clutching his stomach. Suddenly Czarek comes flying into the room, panting. He says that his friend was just beaten up by the militia, but Willmann pretends not to hear. He wants to send his patient on to the psychiatric ward of the hospital on Nowowiejska Street. "They'll do a gastric lavage and he'll be alright," he tells Czarek, who protests in vain that a stomach pumping won't help, given that it's not a case of poisoning but of beating.

Grzesiek mutters that he needs the toilet. Czarek takes him to the ground floor and tries to talk him into running away. They could disappear through the little window in

the toilet while no one's looking. But Grzesiek is too weak to even stand on his own two feet - climbing up to the window is out of question. He collapses. Czarek and a paramedic sit him down on a wheelchair and take him to the waiting room on the ground floor, from where he is to be taken to the psychiatric ward.

When his mother arrives, Grzesiek is already vomiting blood. She tries to talk to him, but her son isn't responding. He only moans, with his arms crossed in front of his stomach. As if he didn't even recognize her. Willmann, in his white coat, enters and hands the mother a referral to the hospital. "He was rolling around on the Castle Square and refused to follow the militia's orders," Barbara reads. She insists that instead of the hospital, she'll take her son home. Finally Willmann gives in. "I know how the mentally ill are dealt with and what treatments they're subjected to," Barbara later explains. "If my ill-treated son had been subjected to such treatments, that would've had irreversible effects. I thought that at home he'd recover from the beating and then he'd be able to sit his remaining exams, which would be impossible had he been placed in a psychiatric hospital."

Around 7 p.m. an ambulance takes the inert Grzesiek home, to the flat on Hibner Street (now Zgoda Street). The paramedics cannot take him up to the eleventh floor on the stretcher - the elevator isn't large enough. They must bring down a chair from the flat. They lay him down in the same bed from which he got up that morning. There he regains consciousness for a moment. He asks for a warm bath to soothe the pain in his abdomen. Then he falls asleep.

At 3 a.m. Grzesiek awakens from his stupor. He tells his mother about the beating. He has difficulty speaking, but remembers that before passing out he heard one militia man say to the other: "Hit him in the stomach so there'll be no traces." Barbara stays up all night by her son's bedside. She places cold towels on his aching stomach. It seems to help a little, as Grzesiek stops moaning for a little after every change. Czarek keeps her company that night. "Barbara doesn't say much. She's like someone who got whacked over the head," he recalls. [...]

THURSDAY, 26 MAY

The militia take into account the four most likely versions of the events: he was beaten up at the station, in the ambulance or at the A&E department, at home, or by his friend Czarek F. These narratives are examined by a special unit at the militia headquarters, the KGMO. The Chief Commander is General Józef Beim. Although the most likely of the four versions is the one involving the militia, no one looks into it. Indeed, as a preventive measure the militia do everything to ensure this version could not be confirmed.

Inspector Jerzy Kulczycki is tasked with proving that the deadly blow was delivered inside the ambulance. It's only logical - after all, it was the paramedics who laid the blame on themselves by writing, in their dispatch card, about the patient's aggressiveness and use of force. Kulczycki retrieves the cream-coloured Fiat estate car (WAX-147K) in which Przemysław had been taken to hospital. He puts a body double on the stretcher and tries to hit him from the driver's seat. "It's impossible," he reports to Lieutenant Kazimierz Otłowski, the director of the investigative bureau at the KGMO. Otłowski is furious and holds Kulczycki accountable. "You can't prove it?" he asks.

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