

# NEW BOOKS FROM POLAND

MAGDALENA TULLI

MICHAŁ WITKOWSKI

HANNA KRALL

JÓZEF HEN

EWA ANDRZEJEWSKA

SZCZEPAN TWARDOCH

JOANNA BATOR

MARIUSZ SZCZYGIEŁ

LIDIA OSTAŁOWSKA

FILIP SPRINGER

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI

MAŁGORZATA BARANOWSKA

STANISŁAW LEM

SŁAWOMIR MROŻEK

KRYSTYNA CZERNI

RENATA LIS

ZYGMUNT MIŁOSZEWSKI

WIKTOR HAGEN

POETRY 2010

# THE POLISH BOOK INSTITUTE

**The Polish Book Institute** is a national cultural institution established by the Polish Ministry of Culture. It has been in operation in Kraków since January 2004. In 2006 the Warsaw section of the Institute came into being. The basic aims of the Institute's activities are to encourage reading and popularise books in Poland, and also to promote Polish literature worldwide. These aims are achieved by:

- » publicising the best Polish books and their authors
- » organising educational events focusing on the advantages to be gained from the habit of reading books
- » the Translators' Collegium
- » the © POLAND Translation Programme
- » seminars for publishers
- » presenting Polish literature abroad
- » an information centre for children's books
- » providing foreign audiences with access to information on Polish books and the Polish publishing market
- » running **www.bookinstitute.pl**, the biggest Internet site dedicated to information on Polish literature

The Polish Book Institute organises literary programmes for Polish presentations and international book fairs, appearances by Polish writers at literary festivals and, as part of its work to promote Polish culture worldwide, issues catalogues on the latest publications entitled **New Books from Poland**, runs study and training events, organises meetings and seminars for translators of Polish literature, awards the annual **Transatlantic Prize** for the best promoter of Polish literature abroad, and maintains regular contact with translators.

The aim of the © **POLAND Translation Programme** is to support Polish literature in translation into foreign languages and to increase its presence on foreign book markets. The Programme has been running since 1999, and to date it has awarded over 1 300 grants. In particular it covers belles-lettres and essays, works of what is broadly described as the humanities (with a special focus on books about Polish history, culture and literature), books for children and young people, and non-fiction. The grants cover the cost of translation from Polish into the relevant foreign language and the purchase of foreign rights.

**www.bookinstitute.pl** is a source of information on current literary events in Poland and more, presenting new and forthcoming titles and providing regular reviews. It also includes biographical information on over 100 contemporary Polish authors, information on over 1 000 books, extracts from them, critical essays and publishers' addresses – everything there is to know about Polish books in Polish, English, German, Russian and Hebrew.

INSTYTUT KSIĄŻKI



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# **SELECTED BOOK**

# **INSTITUTE PROGRAMMES**

## **©POLAND TRANSLATION PROGRAMME**

The Programme was established in 1999 and was modelled on similar programmes in other countries. Its aim is to increase the number of foreign translations of Polish literature by providing financial support to foreign publishers to pay for translation costs. The Programme is administered by the Kraków-based Book Institute.

Preference is given to works fiction and non-fiction that fall within the humanities category.

The Programme may cover:

- Up to 100 % of the costs of a translation from Polish into a foreign language
- Up to 100 % of the costs of purchasing the publishing rights

## **SAMPLE TRANSLATIONS ©POLAND**

Financing is given for 20 pages of a translation (1,800 characters per page). The translator submits an application, including: the motivation for choosing the applicable book, the plan of action, his/her bibliography, information concerning the translation costs.

Full information on the ©POLAND Translation Programme and Sample Translations ©POLAND, including a list of grants awarded to date and a funding application form can be found on the Polish Book Institute's website, [www.bookinstitute.pl](http://www.bookinstitute.pl)

## **"KOLEGIUM TŁUMACZY" TRANSLATORS' PROGRAMME**

Based in Kraków, this programme provides study visits for translators of Polish literature and is run jointly with the Jagiellonian University and the Villa Decius. During three- or one-month stays, the translators are provided with suitable conditions for their work and assistance with their translations. They also conduct some classes for students at the Jagiellonian University. Eight candidates are accepted each year, from March to May and from September to November.

## **THE TRANSATLANTIC PRIZE**

The Transatlantic prize is awarded by the Polish Book Institute to outstanding ambassadors of Polish literature abroad. Its aim is to promote Polish literature on the world market and to provide a focal point for translators of Polish literature and its promoters (literary critics, scholars and organisers of cultural events). The prize is awarded annually and is worth € 10,000. The winner is chosen by a special committee including leading literary scholars, organisers of cultural events, translators and the head of the Book Institute. The winners from 2005 were Henryk Berezka, Anders Bodegård, Albrecht Lempp, Ksenia Starosielska, Biserka Rajčić and Vlasta Dvořáčková.

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# CZESLAW MILOSZ YEAR

2011 marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Czeslaw Milosz. Born in Szetejnie, in the heart of the Lithuanian wilderness, he was driven away by the tragic events of the 20th century, living consecutively in Warsaw, Krakow, Paris, and the United States, to return to Poland at the turn of the millennium. He was not only a poet, prose writer, a translator and an essayist read all over the world, but also an extraordinarily insightful observer and witness to the epoch.

The Milosz Year program is made up of new book publications, conferences, discussions, and exhibitions devoted to the poet, organized in Poland and abroad – from Krasnojarsk through Vilnius, Krasnogruda, Krakow, and Paris, to New York and San Francisco. Its culminating point was the second edition of the **Milosz Festival** (May 9th-15th 2011).

To bring the poet one step closer to an international public and inform them of the approaching Milosz Year events, the Book Institute, coordinator of the Milosz Year in Poland, set the **[www.milosz365.eu](http://www.milosz365.eu)** web site in English and Russian. This is where you can come for all sorts of information about the planned events and the initiatives for Milosz Year, as well as plenty of information about the Nobel-Prize winner himself – his biography and timeline, a bibliography of his works and their translations, a selection of writing, interpretations of his work, and many interesting photographs from various periods of his life.

We seek to make the Milosz Year an occasion to recall the work of the great poet, and also a chance to reflect more deeply upon the way his literature and biography are entangled with the 20th century. The year when Poland assumes leadership in the European Union will adopt a catch-phrase drawn from Milosz himself: "Native Europe."



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**MAGDALENA TULLI (BORN 1955) WRITER AND TRANSLATOR (OF MARCEL PROUST AND ITALO CALVINO, AMONG OTHERS). HER BOOKS HAVE BEEN TRANSATED INTO ELEVEN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES.**

Photo: private

## Italian Pumps

Childhood, to which our memory lends a golden sheen in later years, usually manifests itself as a land of lost happiness. Not in Magdalena Tulli's prose. Here it is a nightmare. The narrator of Tulli's stories shares the fate of the children of Holocaust victims. Her case is that of the narrator of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: just as he was the involuntary victim of his father, who had been saved from the annihilation, she too is the victim of her own mother, a former inmate of Auschwitz. It is only from conversations with her dying mother, ever more absent, progressively prey to Alzheimer's, that years later she learns about her family's past.

These moving stories, written with a chill, elegant precision, are the fruit of their conversations. They are an act of mourning for Tulli's mother, but even more, for the childhood she was denied. They constitute an attempt to confront an inherited trauma, to cope with fears that become new idiosyncracies. Irony appears here as a medication applied to oneself so as to pass safely through the minefield of a wounded memory. The narrator, a mother of two growing sons, turns out to be the hostage of the little girl from long ago. She stands by her, though today she cannot help her; she can, however, help herself. Once again we hear the old truth that declares the child to be father to the man.

In Tulli's prose we encounter the logic arising from the isolation of the little girl, left to her own resources by an Italian father who spends his time between Warsaw and Milan, and a mother whose emotions were left behind the fence of a concentration camp. With her troublesome bilingualism, her

strange, un-Polish last name, her better-quality but unkempt clothes, her inability to make friends and her lack of self-confidence, she becomes an easy target for other children. The image of school in this book is that of a totalitarian institution, an image that serves as a metaphor for Polish society in the Cold War. And as always in Tulli's work, metaphor carries the value of a realistic argument.

*Marek Zaleski*



**The** children who lived on the first floor rarely played outside. Only when the weather was nice, if they happened not to be in pre-school or on a family vacation. But even when they were there we couldn't hear them if the balcony door was closed. One day, though, we were taking our afternoon tea on a warm day and the balcony door was ajar.

"Can you close it? I'm not big on children," my mother admitted mildly. "They make such a lot of noise when they play. Nothing tires me like too much laughter."

The tea had to be steaming hot, it had to burn the lips, only then could my mother be sure she was really drinking it. The cousin she had spoken to was no longer capable of answering in person. In her name I nodded. I knew that in all this I myself counted the least. I had appeared in her life only very recently, as a domestic help who in case of need was able to take on additional roles. All I had to do was figure out who I was on any given afternoon. I would pay careful attention to the situation, attempt to slip into it smoothly; I would test the ground, leaning on personal experience, it's true, but doing so in a casual way, and as discreetly as I could.

"Yes, children can be tiring."

"You had a tough time when they were little. With two it's even harder."

She knew what she was talking about. After all, she'd been unable to cope with just one, from the very beginning. When children are small, life is never easy. But on the other hand it passes quickly, hurtling madly from old troubles to new. At that time my boys were already big. They were both studying history. The older one was thinking of getting married.

"Boys?" My mother broke off, confused. She could have sworn they were. . . She fell silent and studied me closely. It must have occurred to her that my memory too might have undergone an earthquake. Perhaps its contents, tossed onto similar piles, were wasting away in the same fog? Otherwise, how could I have made such a mistake about my own little girls?

"But when they brought you to the camp—" she began a moment later.

If she had flung the hot tea in my face I could not have been more shocked, distressed, thrown off balance. I hadn't been brought to the camp! She'd thrown me in there herself, in passing, as if by accident; and she wasn't the least bit sorry.

The part I'd been assigned that day was too difficult. I would have preferred to flee into the wings, but there were no wings; we were sitting at the table on a summer's afternoon, just the two of us, drinking tea. And after all, I wasn't the only one who'd ended up in a camp. I ought to be glad I'd come out of it alive. True, my past had to stretch quite a bit to include the camp, because I'd been there a long time ago, long before she had met my father. From a bird's-eye view I would have been a tiny speck in an anonymous crowd stripped of its privacy, in which life and death depends on the whim of some arrogant fellow in uniform—let's say, a handsome music lover who when he gets off duty writes letters to his mother. Afterwards, shoes and suitcases are placed in public view, without asking for permission, since there's no longer anyone to ask.

No, I didn't want to be a victim. I'd never had a blot of that kind on my personal history. True, I'd been humiliated. But not to that extent. I was brought up in a country where humiliating the citizens was the authorities' main means of communicating with them, in schools, workplaces, government offices, on the street. I couldn't have taken any more humiliation. If despite everything I felt that my life deserved respect, it was probably thanks to the fact that it didn't depend on the whim of that arrogant guy in uniform. If I'd had to go through that too, I would have been no one. And I don't know what I would have had to do to become someone again. Clench my fists? Twist my mouth into a sneer? The one and the other are both traps, in essence you hate yourself, despise yourself. That's how it ends.

"Which camp?" I interrupted her. I ought rather to have demanded that she release me from it at once. But that wasn't within her power. She wasn't the one who oversaw the arrival of the transports. She didn't even belong to the work teams. She had no rights there, none. Besides, my demand would have been simply absurd. Behind the barb wire fence there are ten thousand people, none of them any worse than me, just as innocent, and the rules are the same for everyone. You can't leave through the gate, only through the chimney. Or you can throw yourself against the fence. The electric current brings quick, clean freedom, though at the immediate cost of your life. I was prepared to do anything.

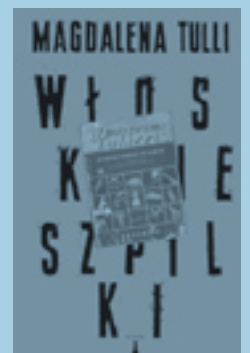
"I was never brought to any camp. How could they bring me to the camp? I was born after the war!"

By her calculations I must have been about five years older than her. My raised voice did not make me sound more convincing. The more so because recently I'd been all kinds of different characters, almost all of whom. . .

But this time my mother looked at me quite without ill will. The idea of denying what was obvious seemed familiar to her. Yes indeed, she understood perfectly why nothing was left for me but to dig my heels in. And the nonsense I had just dared to spout did have a certain panache. My audacity almost equaled that of a cousin of her friends, a woman who moved to Australia after the war and lived there under an English last name, passing herself off as fifteen years younger than she actually was.

"Ha, ha," she said. And gave a shake of her head.

*Translated by Bill Johnston*



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MICHAŁ WITKOWSKI (BORN 1975) IS A NOVELIST WITH FOUR NOVELS AND TWO COLLECTIONS OF SHORT STORIES TO HIS NAME. HIS BOOKS HAVE BEEN TRANSLATED INTO ELEVEN LANGUAGES.

Photo: Kasia Kobel

## The Lumberjack

Recently Polish writers have been keen to try their hand at the crime genre, and to take advantage of the ever improving status of this form of fiction. Some of them take a serious approach to the crime novel, while others add a large pinch of salt to it, as does Michał Witkowski in his latest book. *The Lumberjack* is a very loose variation on the crime novel, and takes the writer's point of view. In late autumn, the main character and narrator, Michał Witkowski (who else?), goes to a forestry lodge situated near the popular seaside resort of Międzyzdroje, to write a crime novel there in peace and quiet. The book is meant to bring him fame and money, but the writing goes badly, because most of his attention is focused on his host, an eccentric, mysterious man. Michał hits upon the trail of a sinister affair from years ago, which changed the life not only of the owner of the forestry lodge, but also other people whom Michał has met (as in fact he is a regular visitor to this resort), inhabitants of Międzyzdroje. This is the start of an investigation, conducted in a manner that is not so much eccentric, as simply bizarre and apparently nonsensical...

However, the crime plot is not actually the most important thing in this book, but just a sort of catalyst for the story, a trigger for the narrative. Witkowski's new novel can be regarded as a sort of anthology of themes and motifs typical of this author, who wrote the best seller *Lovetown*. And so in *The Lumberjack* there is gay fiction (in the sub-plot about the narrator's obsession with a local 'grunt', a common bloke in a shellsuit), and there is an element of social comment (the juxtaposition of 'beautiful' Poland, i.e.

Międzyzdroje in the summer season, and 'ugly' Poland, i.e. exactly the same place in the autumn). The novel also includes some reminders of the dreary, but in their own way picturesque days of communist Poland. Is this just tired old stuff? Far from it! Witkowski has given a face lift to topics he has often covered before, re-mastering them, turning up the volume and adding a touch of (rather special) crime fiction, as well as a large dose of humour, and then dousing the whole thing in a thick layer of camp. Witkowski has confirmed (finally, perhaps) that he is better than any other Polish novelist at telling a story and casting a spell with his narrative. Not to mention the crime-story verisimilitude!

Robert Ostaszewski



# Finally

the semi-conscious lumberjack opened the door to me, wearing a tatty, checked flannel shirt and long johns. He clearly didn't hold with pyjamas, but followed the example of the heroes of Soviet dramas, and slept in his undies. What a contrast with his motley pseudo-elegance during the holiday season! Now he was decidedly more real. He had white, week-old stubble and ruffled eyebrows. There was hair peeping out of his nose and ears – he plainly had no use for a trimmer. Unlike during the season, now no one would have believed his claim to be forty-five. Well over fifty!

From the room came the sound of pre-war Polish hits. In the summer he had already mentioned he had rather retro taste; that was how we got acquainted, in as much as you could call it an acquaintance. You'll never be able to fathom a guy who lives in a small cottage. At the pub, by some miracle, the pre-war singer Ordonka was being played. He was sitting at the bar, staring into his beer, and I was trying to tell my fortune from the dregs of my dregless coffee. 'Great,' he remarked.

'Yeah,' I replied, 'I like retro too.' I like it. User Michał likes it. From one word to another, the conversation began to develop. I wasn't lying – I did like those old songs, the old poses and facial expressions and all that mannered stuff. Though it was easy to overdose on it and get bored, get stifled by it. But I was from the Facebook generation, I could download, or be made to click on a link to something retro, I'll look at it and forget it. Or maybe not – maybe all that stuff actually stays inside us, the anthology keeps getting bigger and bursting at the seams? Maybe we remember every single link, every stupid song?

So here I was, standing in the doorway with a suitcase, and he was gawping as if he'd seen a ghost, although he had been warned of my arrival. I had brought him an original ebonite record of Zarah Leander singing in Swedish, recorded before Hitler carried out his purges at the German film studio, Universum, and they had to do their recruitment in the colonies. That was when Zarah was brought to Nazi Germany to be the top diva, who had her own castles and travelled with suitcases full of money (she didn't approve of banks). Powerful stuff, such as you'll never find on youtube.

Instinctively he looked out at the garden, or rather clearing, behind my back. He put out the light above the door and the clearing vanished. He hurriedly padlocked a grille behind me, and then a solid, anti-burglary door as well, to stop the cold from getting in. With three locks. I felt imprisoned.

He had evidently made the entrance hall into a refrigerator – it was cold in there, and smelled of damp, old gateways and food. The crowning feature of it was a hare hanging on the wall. (My immediate thoughts were: a shotgun, hunting, poaching, is he armed? I'm not touching that carcass for anything in the world. No one's suggesting you have to. Are there wolves around here? I've got a knife, I'll have to charge up my Taser!) It was hanging upside down, strung up like a bunch of herbs, and its little pink tongue was sticking out of its open snout. Like a dried-up leaf.

Without a word he took the record, turned his back on me, told me to take off my shoes and jacket and leave them in the entrance hall, and then went into the main room, from where the sound of the pre-war song was coming; I cast a final glance at the hare with its little tongue lolling, shut the door tight, picked up my mud-stained suitcase and followed him into the room.

It was belting hot, about fifteen degrees warmer than in the entrance hall. Inside it was another world. I felt as if I were in a miniature manor house. It was like a manor house, but a bit like in the period between the wars, which isn't an impossible combination, of course. Like in the period between the wars, and yet a bit like in an antique shop, because there were old cups from Ćmielów and porcelain figurines carefully arranged behind the glass in some old cabinets. There were modernist lamps in the Bauhaus style, an evidently original wind-up gramophone, there were rugs hanging everywhere, and above it all, up on the wall hung a Turkish sabre! Some sort of sword, at any rate. And, unfortunately, a cuckoo clock – all of a sudden, amid all this good taste, something so... German, or even Swiss, as a battery-powered cuckoo clock! The fire had gone out in the stove. There was no television, no computer, and no telephone. But there was a case with a golden trumpet! And the smell! Did you know fire could have such a strong smell? Those of you who are lumberjacks at heart are perfectly aware of it. Being a lumberjack is not a profession, it's a state of mind. You know the smell of heated stones in a sauna. A nasal bass complained that

*as the orchestra strikes up a heart-breaking tango  
this man and that asks the hostess to dance,  
poor girl, I must dance with this phalanx of fools,  
and hear all their pressing demands...*

So that's the sort of problem we have in this home! But anyway, how fag-goty the interwar period was, if guys like Faliszewski sang in the feminine gender about being hostesses and having to dance with fools...

So that was the first cat out of the bag, but beyond that there were plenty more black cats to come. I felt awkward as I sat at the table and started to drink the coffee that was placed in front of me, saying things like: 'Far out! There's such a good smell in here, of fire, old furniture and something else. How cosy it is in here.' But he didn't say a thing, and his silence was getting more and more pointed. So I shut up, to stop looking like an idiot. And we were both silent. Finally he asked if I wouldn't mind if he went upstairs to lie down for a while.

But before going to bed, he put some more twigs into the dying stove, tore up some newspapers and pornographic magazines (he was shut up here all on his own, with his lumberjack's sexuality too), threw them on top and asked me to keep an eye on it, because he didn't like to sleep with the fire burning but unsupervised.

'I don't think anyone likes that,' I said through a yawn, because by now I had realised no one was going to demand any complex sentences, flowery language or eloquence from me here. No one would want to listen to me here, so I should rein in the ego. I'm just the stoker, I work here in the boiler room. And that's all right. My duties include lighting the kitchen stove, switching on the soot-blackened boiler and burning porn mags full of naked ladies on the fire.

Outside a pig was being slaughtered. Robert muttered that it was pheasants – they've been making a racket for an exceptionally long time this year. But the deer are worse. Because there's a clearing near here (where is there not a clearing near here?), and those bastards have turned it into a rutting ground. It's enough to drive you mad. It's an auditory Armageddon. They must once have had a rutting ground in the clearing which now passes as his garden. You have to use the ear plugs which he left on the little table by my bed under the stairs, along with a clean towel. And I'd actually thought it was a lovely thing – so people generally assume, that deer at their rutting ground is all kitsch and lovely. I'll judge that for myself. The ear plugs turned out to be a sort of putty wrapped like a condom, rather plasticiney.

But he hadn't got all the way upstairs before I was fast asleep on my little ottoman under the stairs. I didn't mean to nod off, but I flopped in my clothes, just for a moment, to let the stresses of Warsaw flow off me, the long, almost ten-hour journey, the student taking his muscles exam in prison, the 365 Sudoku puzzles, the crows outside the window flying off to cold countries, the request stops, and Golden Hits Radio. It was rather stupid to arrive at someone's house and promise to tend the stove, only to fall asleep. But I couldn't have that thought until I'd woken up again.

*Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones*



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# 10 / HANNA KRALL

**HANNA KRALL (BORN 1937) IS ONE OF POLAND'S LEADING REPORTERS. HER WORK HAS BEEN TRANSLATED INTO MORE THAN A DOZEN LANGUAGES, AND EVERY NEW BOOK SHE PUBLISHES SOON FEATURES ON THE BESTSELLER LIST.**



Photo: Elżbieta Lempp

## White Maria

In the 1970s Hanna Krall presented a story to the film-making duo, director Krzysztof Kieślowski and screenwriter Krzysztof Piesiewicz, and they made it into a film. Thirty years later, Krall tells what the director changed and what was actually true. She tells the story on behalf of the main characters. Or else: she tells it the way they might have told it if someone had given them a voice.

Anyone who has seen Part Eight of Kieślowski's *The Decalogue* knows the story: during the war a Polish woman has promised to become godmother to a little Jewish girl. The woman backs out of her promise at the last minute, because as a Christian believer she cannot bear false witness before God. The mother and daughter walk out into the street, occupied by the Germans...

Instead of the straightforward film version, Hanna Krall constructs a narrative which is organised according to proximity: each of the people who came into direct contact with the little girl and her mother is presented individually, gaining the right to be heard. Sometimes they speak in their own name, and sometimes the narrator reconstructs their history in a purely hypothetical way, relating how it might have been. The narrative jumps, passes from character to character, and changes era (the war, communist Poland, the present day) and place (Warsaw, Dęblin, Osmolice). If anything really links it all together – Jews and Poles, small village and big city, the famous Rosenthal 'White Maria' porcelain dinner service, and Marion, the German aristocrat who lives somewhere in the Polish provinces after the war – it is a growing absence: those who were betrayed and exterminated are gone,

and those who betrayed them or helped them are also gone. All that is left are the graveyards of the past, where the remains of a former life have piled up: objects left behind by the Jews collected in museums, lists of people's names, things scattered about houses. There is also human memory left, but as people die, it goes too.

So perhaps this book is about various stages of dispersal, about the rising intensity of disappearance: instead of complete sets of souvenirs only the remains are left; instead of a well-organised story we have a tangle of fates told out of order; and instead of authentic voices we have the narrator's hypotheses.

*Przemysław Czapliński*

## 1. THE MOTHER

Have you got a faked certificate, perhaps? you asked. (You liked to ask that sort of question. Have you got an upper-class communist? What about a magician? And have you got an anti-communist too?)

This time it was about the commandments. The eighth, you added. You're not going to say...

And of course I had one. Just the thing for your film.

About a woman and a man, who were standing at the head of a table...

No. About a mother who was standing opposite them, some way off, because it was a long table.

Not that either. About a little girl, whom the mother is holding by the hand.

But it is about the woman and the man. Polite, friendly, middle-aged, the woman had a highland shawl around her shoulders, a flowery one, edged with tassels.

The table was covered with something white, some sort of tablecloth.

The mother refused to sit down. She gazed hesitantly at the hosts, at the couple behind the table, but it was obvious, ever more plain to see they weren't going anywhere in a hurry.

As you know, the woman began, we are believers.

(The mother nodded. Seriously, respectfully.)

But we'd have to tell a lie.

And where, in church. Before the Lord God.

You should...

She plaited and unplaited the ends of the tassels.

You should understand us.

Her surname (a wave towards the little girl).

Her first name (another wave).

Why is she so big, why is it so late, and what about the father? What if the priest asks what about the father?

It's all made up, all of it, and where, in church...

She was talking more and more incoherently, more and more nervously, you should...

She didn't have to repeat it, the mother understood the first time. They were believers, they couldn't tell a lie, there wasn't going to be any baptismal certificate.

She said goodbye.

They went down the steps.

They stood in the street.

They stood and stood.

How long can you stand in the middle of the street? With hair that the mother had bleached that morning extremely carefully, strand after strand, and which in the light of a summer's day was even more, even more awfully yellow than ever. Not to mention the eyes, how much can you... Come on, whispered the girl. Come on. Well, come on then.

Maybe?

Of course, you were pleased. But... you stopped talking, you took off your glasses and reached for a cigarette.

But...?

There was something else there too.

Really? What was it?

I don't know.

There wasn't anything else.

You started to insist: there was, it's just that we don't know what.

And you added the Gestapo – you and your screenwriter. Just in case. And the Home Army – the host was in the sabotage unit. The people to whom she was meant to go with that certificate were working for the Gestapo, the godparents could have been caught, and worse yet, so could the entire Home Army underground. (The information was false, no one was working for the Gestapo, but that came out too late.)

It all became clear to you.

You wrote the screenplay.

As well as the Gestapo, you added a guardian, and he was the one holding the little girl by the hand. You dispensed with the mother. You decided – you and the co-author of the screenplay – that it was evening. 'It's evening, it's cold and the little girl is freezing.'

It wasn't evening, it was daytime. There were trams, rickshaws, lots of passers-by, and that yellow hair.

There wasn't any tea either, but never mind, you wanted tea, so let there be tea. You put the cups on the table (they were made of good porcelain, you added, though each one was different.) Drink up, the hostess encouraged the little girl.

They showed *The Decalogue* again, part eight. At rather a good time, straight after a concert on the beach in Rio de Janeiro.

Once again I was surprised. That God – didn't you believe? The little girl did. I know – I knew that little girl rather well.

## 2. THE GODPARENTS

Read aloud.

*Quid petis ab eccl... ecclesia...* That's the priest. And we say: Faith. In Polish.

What about faith?

That it's being requested. Because his question means what is one asking of the Church of God.

Who is doing the asking?

She is, because she's going to be baptised. *Fides quid...* that's the priest. What faith gives you.

What does it give you?

Eternal life. That's us.

So the priest only talks to her?

She's going to be baptised, so yes, to her.

If he talks to her, let her answer him.

She can't. Up to seven years old the godparents do the talking, as for a baby. And if the parents are dead, the godparents do the whole thing.

The whole thing?

Care, upbringing. Everything. The priest said so.

Couldn't it be read from the page?

From memory, the priest requested. But the sacristan will prompt if there's any need.

So the sacristan will be there too?

He has to be. Now he'll ask her about Satan. Do you renounce the evil spirit. I do renounce him. Repeat.

I do renounce him.

And all his works?

I do renounce him.

And all his pomps? Then he baptises her. And he'll give us candles and...

Wait a moment. What's he like?

Who?

The sacristan. Did he ask any questions?

Why so late. Why are you only baptising her now? he wondered. I explained that the father was godless, but what about the grandfather, he asked, was he godless too? Couldn't the mother and the grandmother have seen to the baptism?

Is that what he asked?

*Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones*



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**JÓZEF HEN (BORN 1923) WRITES FICTION, ESSAYS, REPORTAGE AND SCREENPLAYS. ONE OF THE MOST ACCLAIMED POLISH AUTHORS OF THE OLDER GENERATION.**



Photo: Magdalena Skysz

## **Nowolipie and The Finest Years**

For many years Józef Hen has deservedly won acclaim as an excellent novelist and writer who often describes extremely dramatic events or episodes from the past with zest, verve and humour. So he has done once again. *Nowolipie* and *The Finest Years* are both autobiographical stories. Here he describes growing up in Nowolipie, a Jewish quarter of pre-war Warsaw, the brief defence of Warsaw against the German invasion in September 1939, and his own wartime experience of wandering as an exile in the Soviet Union. In his wonderful, colourful anecdotes, the childhood and adolescence of a Jewish boy, son of the owner of a plumbing business from Solna Street, taking root in the Polish world – which was multicultural, friendly and attractive – seems almost idyllic. And only the elegiac endings of the autobiographical episodes, from which we discover the later fates either of members of the large family, or of teachers, neighbours, contemporaries, girlfriends, first loves and other friends, holiday playmates and companions in youthful initiations into eagerly awaited adolescence – fates which are tragic, or lost in the darkness of the unknown, boding the worst – change Hen's cheerful account into an epitaph, and the Polish-Jewish world, irrevocably vanished into the past, becomes a metaphor for the fates of city dwellers in this part of Europe.

The title of the second story turns out to be misleading, but free of bitter irony; the finest years are the ones spent as a refugee, a time full of adventure while drifting as an exile during the war. This is a life full of dangers, but also enchantments and thrills, which he lived in occupied Lwów and

its vicinity, and later in communist Russia as it waged a deadly war against the Germans, first as a survivor of the Holocaust, then a student at a Soviet school, then a collective-farm worker, and finally a Red Army soldier. Hen writes with philosophical humour about growing up to the level of his own knowledge, and about tilling his own small plot in hard and tragic times, but in the process he never slips into misanthropy. On the contrary – hostile to stereotypes and narrated with gusto, imbued with social and sensory details and full of delicious digressions, his stories tell us about the triumph and beauty of life.

*Marek Zaleski*

# And

now about Spencer Tracy. As I've already said, I met him right at the start, when it was still spring. I was standing on the highway, winding its way among the folds of black earth, with two heavy metal bars crushing my shoulder. I tried signalling to the lorries that kept clattering and wobbling past me, but not one of them would stop. They were always in a hurry, the bastards. So off I went, with the bars on my shoulder, worrying about my Warsaw shoes, which were getting worn out on the stony road. And just then, as I was thinking to myself how ruthless and unfriendly the world is, and that being the way I am I will never be able to cope with it, just then an old ZiS truck stopped beside me, putting on the brakes without any rasping or squealing, and out of the cabin Spencer Tracy stuck his golden head. It was a good, manly face, with strong, coarse features that inspired trust, grey eyes with fair lashes and brows, and an inquiring look which, despite a smile, was also slightly concerned. It was him! It really was him! Here, on this road! Of course it's impossible, I know that. But what if, eh? ... Maybe it was a new role, a new incarnation? Never, what an idea! I realised it was an ordinary driver, the man who leaned out to me, a Russian, and yet, although I was just me, he invited me into his cab, and suddenly I felt safe, I was wrapped in calm and the sort of confidence that Spencer Tracy exuded. He drove his three-ton lorry cautiously, carefully avoiding the potholes which his speeding colleagues usually failed to notice, smashing up the undercarriage as well as their own kidneys. He was called Khokholov, which he pronounced 'Khaa-khlov'.

'Zakurit' jest? – Got a smoke?' asked Spencer Tracy in the husky voice of Spencer Tracy, so the fact that he spoke in Russian was irrelevant.

I told him I didn't smoke, and I was sorry. To which he said *nichevo* – never mind, (*it's all right* – Spencer Tracy would have said), *pravilno* – you're right not to. Quite different from the young fellow with the snub nose yesterday who before inviting me to board his lorry, asked the same thing: 'Zakurit' jest?' and when I said I didn't smoke, he shouted: 'So what the hell are you alive on this earth for?' And so in passing I discovered – a person will always learn something in the Land of Soviets – what one is alive on this earth for, or at least what he was alive for.

If someone who had read up the leaders were to hammer away at a driver that he was alive to build socialism, he'd look like a fool. On this road you never heard any of that empty talk, no one used any fancy propaganda, there was no competition or any of that stuff; just occasionally, when something got destroyed or when Engineer Brzozowski, the skinny stickler who was as stiff as a poker, reported that they'd pinched something again, our section head, Vasil Lakhov, a Komsomol stripling in a green traditional Russian shirt, would get flushed cheeks and shout that it was '*bezobraziye*' – an outrage, and that they should be punished for destroying Soviet property. The word 'Soviet' had no ideological shade of meaning – it just meant pro-state, public property. The road was built of stones, sand and tar – not out of words.

The next day, or maybe two days later, Khokholov happened to stop beside me of his own accord as I was walking along the verge with more metal bars on my shoulder. He opened the door wide and asked: 'Shall we go?' He remembered me, because although a lot of folks drifted along the highway, I was the only one who paraded about in a dark-blue high-school uniform. How could I explain his liking for me? Maybe it was that he sensed something in me, in my attitude towards him. It radiates between people, not just between man and woman; the war had taught me that disinterested male friendships can arise, with loyalty, devotion, usually with admiration. ... Friendship with Khokholov did not demand any conversation, he was not effusive, more like the silent type, well, like an Anglo-Saxon, or maybe a reserved inhabitant of the taiga – no, I don't even know where he was from, whether a Siberian or from the Ukraine; these drivers ('the motorised column' as they were officially called) were a hotchpotch from all over the Union, generally Russians and Ukrainians. They lived in barracks at the base, some were quartered in Jewish apartments in Busk or in Yarychev, they lived there for as long as they were needed on the building site, then along with all the lorries which had survived the hurricane driving over the potholes, they were tossed to some other end of the vast Union, and so they wandered from one section of road to another, from billet to billet. They had nothing of their own, apart from a balalaika or sometimes an accordion. Some of them had to make do with a mouth organ. I don't know if my Spencer Tracy had a family, perhaps he did, I don't know if he drank, perhaps sometimes he did, and I don't know what he thought about it all, because although we did occasionally exchange war bulletins (the

Germans are in Denmark and Norway, the battle of Narvik, the Germans are in Belgium and Holland, the Germans are in Paris), we made these comments guardedly, in monosyllables.

Now, years on, I could have embellished a little, thought up some catchy dialogue, but somehow I don't feel the need. Of course, I told him this and that about myself, although that doesn't mean he asked any questions; whether from Texas or the taiga this sort of taciturn guy is happy to listen, and nods understandingly, but doesn't poke his nose into other people's business. I did mention my parents (saying that they had stayed behind in Warsaw), and talked about the high-school uniform: what the dark-red stripe meant (that I was in the upper school already), and a little about how things were at home. I finally summoned up the courage to tell him there was an American actor, an "*artiste*" as they say in Russian, called Spencer Tracy who looked very like him. He responded with a smile – Spencer Tracy's smile. He may not have believed me at first – maybe he reckoned no great actor, especially an American one, could have a Khaa-khlov-style mug. After a while he asked: "A good *artiste*?" "Very good." That was all right. If he was good, there was no problem. One day he went back to it. He was curious to know what sort of roles did my... how do you say? Spencer Tracy, I prompted him. Well then, this Spencer, what does he play? I mentioned a few films: *Captain's Courageous*, based on Kipling – he played a fisherman, *Boys Town* – he played a priest, *Fury*, the classic film by Fritz Lang. And there's a comedy, I added – *Taxi Talks*, in which Spencer Tracy plays a taxi-driver. '*Shafior?* – a driver?' he said in amazement. 'Yes, *shafior*,' I confirmed. Khokholov laughed his nice, Spencer-Tracy laugh.

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**EWA ANDRZEJEWSKA (BORN 1947) IS AN ARCHITECT. IN THE 1970s SHE MOVED FROM THE SEASIDE TO THE TOWN, SOMEWHERE IN THE EAST OF POLAND, ABOUT WHICH SHE RECENTLY WROTE HER FIRST BOOK.**



Photo: Małgorzata Lipińska

## **Alongside Another Time: The Town and Jakub**

Ewa Andrzejewska arrived in the town called the Town, somewhere in the east of Poland, between Lviv and Lublin, in the '70's. She was curious about the world, young and brave. But envoys of fear – bad dreams, things that kept vanishing, a sense of someone else's presence – moved into her new apartment along with her. When she began to seek explanations, she discovered an urban ghost: the Town of the past.

Based on photographs, prewar maps, official records, and other people's stories, Andrzejewska began to reconstruct that ghost – the prewar Polish-Jewish town with a labyrinth of streets, hundreds of little shops and workshops, better and worse neighborhoods. Her guide through the nonexistent Town was Jakub M., a Polish Jew who emigrated to Sweden in 1969. He had been coming to the Town regularly for years, renovating cemeteries and synagogues, and helping others find their dead. But mostly he would walk around and tell stories, restoring narrative – and therefore temporary – existence to buildings, alleys, and people.

What arises from his stories is the Town, where everything existed close to everything else, interweaving and interpenetrating: Poles and Jews sold their wares at the market, Poles frequented Jewish shops and workshops,

Catholic holidays came on the heels of Jewish holidays, the religious and the everyday blended together. The ethnic composition of apartment buildings and streets was mixed together, shared problems multiplied, and shared solutions were found.

And then came the war.

True, the Jewish cemetery was saved, and the synagogue was rebuilt, but the disappearance of the Jews left a hole in the Town that would be filled by no one but ghosts. In the post-war topography of the Town, which gradually covered up its prewar counterpart, there was no place left for the absent.

Andrzejewska's interesting book, a piece of ghost-reportage in the traditional oral vein of Polish literature, introduces into Holocaust discourse a single word, a single preposition of place: "alongside." This word evokes a world that exists alongside this world and shows that everything left behind by Jewish culture – objects, mementoes, graves – exists not in the life of the Town, but parallel to it, like an immaterial ghost that can't touch reality.

*Przemysław Czapliński*

**In** the beginning I could never get to my street from the main road. All the little side streets were diagonal, and I kept on getting mixed up.

Then I started to be able to recognize it by the puffs of steam coming out of the vents at the bakery in the corner building. All night the bell above the door would ring. The baker would stand at the entrance and bid everyone good night until the last croissant.

In the winter the bakery's sweat trickled down windows scored by frost. You could hear songs through the open vents and smell warm bread. By the side entrance, where they would set the carts with the flour, the sidewalk was always sprinkled with powder. It was always white there.

The baker died.

After his death, the State Health Inspectors began to hound the bakery, its life hanging by the thread of various receipts and protocols. One day in May, the bread oven was demolished. It had been enormous, made of cracked white tiles. In the final year it baked its first rolls with crosses for Ash Wednesday. But that hadn't saved it.

Windows onto the main street were opened. In the din of the hammers and the dust, all the souls and the remains of the souls of once-baked loaves, croissants, and Challah rolls flew out those windows. Strips of burnt cabbage leaves from flatbreads fluttered down the street. Those prewar two-kilo breads were the first to be carried up to the heavens,

Round and long,

Pretzels that were better than the Krakow variants,

Rolls, croissants, and cheesecakes,

Water rolls, which were plunged into hot water before being baked,

They called them waser bagels,

Sweet, filled rolls and pretzels,

And after them, the things that were once called brojt, bilkelech, zempl, ro-galech...

"You see, before the war there were loads of bakeries in town," says Jakub M. "Only Szymon K baked at home, but he had his Shop on Kazimierzowska Street, and that was where he sold his stuff. His cheesecakes were the best. He had a stall with different kinds of things, you could even get coffee there. There was a baker woman, Złata, who had a bakery on Wąska Street. She died with her husband. And the baker lady Cywet had a bakery on Pijarska. The best baker had a Hasidic bakery in the home of the chief rabbi. There was also a bakery on Wałowa Street, and at Gleb's on Kazimierzowska Street they baked matzah."

"They're gone. Don't cry over an old oven," says Jakub M., and then he adds, "My mom baked braided Challah for Shabbat. That you didn't buy. The women made it themselves." ...

There had always been a bakery on the corner of Lwowska and Poprzeczna. That house was there at the beginning of the twentieth century. Back then, the oven heated up the side wall so much that even the chimney started to bulge and lean. In the 1920's the bakers wrote to the town hall: in the name of the food workers' trade union, they could not accept that this head baker did not know his stuff, and that the oven needed pointing.

The building was bought by Chana G. in 1934 and continued to house a bakery. The new baker rebuilt the door into the entryway so you could drive in with the flour. He took the mezuzah down from the doorframe. But he couldn't just work with no protection, so on the wall above the enormous oven, he removed a brick and put up a tiny figure of the Virgin Mary.

When I moved to what had been Poprzeczna, various things started disappearing. In the middle of the day. A thing would be there, and then suddenly not be. It would appear and disappear. Then I figured out that they were taking them. Or moving them to somewhere else.

I had been living in Piekło for years when someone finally brought me the papers for the building, which had once stood within the Town's ghetto. I found a photograph of some other house amongst those papers. In that picture, a woman with a child is standing at the door of a shop. You can see bottles in the window. The picture was attached to an application for authorization to post a sign in the window. The application was dated 1941, and it was written in Polish, but the answer to it was in German. I took the picture off; the paper clip had left traces of rust on it. I ran to the other side of the square to make a copy. I returned without the picture. I immediately ran back. I went back and forth several times. Back and forth. I searched the floor of the copy shop. Everyone looked for it. A little later that same day, the copy disappeared, too.

I found the building from the picture. The shop had closed down long ago, grass had grown over the steps. The woman from the picture could have just gone on standing there and staring, no one was stopping her.

But at some point she quit standing. She came my way.

That happened while I was wrestling with the rusty paper clip. But with whom had she left her child?

I think the woman didn't want to just stand and stare anymore.

I think she was glad to take the picture from me. In 1941, she might have been furious that someone had to send that picture with an application for a sign to the Stadtbauamt.

In the old part of the Town, the buildings still had real attics. But the freedom of attic spaces was coming to an end. They were being converted into apartments. Soon the word "attic" would go out of use. The dark spaces underneath the roofs were disappearing, the roofing tiles were being smashed, the idle chimneys dismantled.

In that house with the little shop, where the woman with the child had stood, they were also rebuilding the attic space. They were destroying chimney after chimney. While they were working, the workmen had found two brown pictures. There might have been something else in the chimney, the pictures might have been wrapped up in something else. We don't know. The pictures were of a couple. The woman was dark, with enormous eyes, her hair combed with a center parting. The corners of the pictures had been gnawed off.

The owner of the building had already gotten new windows and doors, and now she was tidying up the basements and the attics.

"The dust has to be cleaned out," she said.

She'd hang the picture in the kitchen, or in the room with a view of the green that replaced their cemetery.

In November, the wind forced its way in through all the cracks, even getting into my computer. The sky was the color of pumpkin preserves. The moon swayed against it like a lamp. The mountains behind the houses arched their backs further and held the town in a tighter embrace. Birds whirled in flocks over Piekło, and the wind carried off the pigeon coops. An old man was selling potatoes at the ad-hoc market and prophesying the end of the world.

My computer resigned from the job, moved at snail's pace and then froze.

But it wasn't going to be the end of the world, although someone called and said if that was how it looked, then let it happen.

"What do you mean," wrote Jakub M., "what do you mean you didn't know what a shtetl was? You live in a shtetl. Piekło is a shtetl, and I am going to tell you the whole story."

For a year now, there has been a new, automated bakery in Piekło. It's clean, there's no heat coming through the walls. It used to be that the oven ruled everything, but not anymore. The songs have moved out of the bakery. Now you can only smell the bread in the courtyard. The entryway is closed. There are no carts of flour, no flour tracks by the side door. The Virgin Mary has been transferred into the production hall. She has a place by the oven, which comes on automatically. And the mezuzah has been lost. They say it was taken to Warsaw for the scroll that was inside it to be translated, and never returned.

*Translated by Jennifer Croft*



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**SZCZEPAN TWARDUCH (BORN 1979). WRITER OF PROSE AND JOURNALIST, HIS LAST BOOK WAS THE CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED NOVEL *ETERNAL GRUNWALD* (2010). HE IS AN EXPERT IN SILESIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AND IN WEAPONS.**



Photo: Magda Kryjak

## It's Good Like That

This collection contains six psychological tales of manners with contemporary themes. The overriding theme here is the essential defeat, the existential catastrophe, that befalls ordinary characters. Characters like Gerd Piontek from the story that opens the collection. Gerd is a Silesian who, in his early youth, was in Hitler's army. After many years spent in Soviet captivity, he returns home a man hollowed to his very core. This living corpse, who once did terrible things on the front, committed one additional "crime": he fathered a child. But because he was a man in whom all feelings had died, he made his son into an emotional cripple.

The longer story "Masara" deserves special attention. The title is a Silesian nickname given to fat, ugly children. Paulina, with severe obesity, is one of these, and soon enough she goes through hell at her Gliwice school, finally taking her own form of revenge not only on her classmates, but on youth in general. Both here, and in the other stories in this book, Twardoch is enormously sensitive to the problem of the lack of acceptance, whether of one's own body or by society, analytically and perceptively describing the fear of being hurt, humiliated, mocked, and, most of all, the fear of being ridiculed. "Ridicule," we read in one of the stories, "is worse than death. A person dies most when ridiculed." Twardoch also takes up the problem of non-authenticity, of the mask. This question is best expressed in the story "Hit Me," in which the central character suffers from multiple personality disorder, like a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde figure. The advantage of this story about the collapse of a personality is that it is based on contemporary reality,

being peopled by figures out of a television show. This is a general quality of this prose: the characters and the events of the plot seem stealthily observed and overheard, as though ripped right out of reality. Twardoch's stories are also wonderfully constructed, based on suspense and narrative scissor kicks. The best story in terms of this is one called "Włodzimierz Kurczyk's Two Transformations."

*Dariusz Nowacki*



**His** job he hated, like everything else. He never worked up the courage to send his resume to another company. He was convinced he was incapable of getting a job himself. His position at H&T had been arranged by his mother, an old acquaintance of Halski, who had even come to her funeral three months ago. Because of her, not because of her son, who he never even noticed at work, like Kurczyk was invisible. There wasn't anything to scold the young accountant for, and Halski wasn't in the habit of giving praise, so in the course of six years of working at H&T, Kurczyk had spoken with his boss only three times, if you didn't count the polite formality of "Good morning, Mr. President," which Halski demanded unconditionally. He never responded to these greetings.

Włodzimierz had been taught politeness by his mother. By his Mommy – that was the only way he was allowed to refer to her in conversations with other people. And that was the only way he could address her, naturally in the third person. How much sugar would Mommy like in her coffee? He still had her picture in his wallet, he couldn't get that black and white card out from under its clear film pocket. She looked at him whenever he opened his wallet, watched him with her dark eyes. She pursed her narrow lips with their delicate row of dark hair above the upper one. That mouth, in its barely visible grimace, contained all the rage of the world. She was forty-seven years old when she had her only child. She was unmarried. And she remained unmarried to her death.

He squeezed onto the tram, which was hideously crowded, as usual at this time. He was repulsed by people, especially their smells: old clothes, cheap cigarettes, unbrushed teeth, digested alcohol. Mommy had taught him hygiene. Hygiene and abstinence. A healthy lifestyle. Brushing your teeth after every meal, washing your hands at every opportunity. Intimate hygiene, too. Using talcum powder, and being careful and systematic about these operations. And she never let him learn how to drive, although she had a car herself. He couldn't even wash that car. It was beneath the dignity of a boy from a respectable home. One paid men of a worse sort to wash one's car.

In the eighties Mommy had a yellow Polonez, which later fell apart one election Sunday in September of 1993, when Mommy crashed it into a lamp post in front of the school where they had gone to vote. Then the Polonez was only good for scrap. Mommy was furious. Two days later she had a long talk with someone over the telephone. He didn't know who it was, because she told him to stay in his room until she called for him. That evening a young man he didn't know was sitting at the kitchen table in their apartment. They signed some papers, and he left Mommy the keys to a navy blue Renault 25. The car was eight years old, but big, comfortable, and luxurious. It even had brown leather upholstery and electric windows. It also had air conditioning, although Mommy never turned it on, saying it was unhealthy. She didn't allow Włodzimierz to sit in the front seat, and he never once occupied that comfortable front position, not even while the car was parked. He had tried to imagine how amazing it must be to ride in the front, to look out at the road through the wide windshield, with all the switches on the dashboard within reach.

He was fourteen then, and he had been in eighth grade for a couple of weeks. The other boys would have been impressed by that elegant limousine, but they only paid Włodek any notice at all when they wanted to torment him, and they had been tormenting him since early elementary.

In sixth grade their enthusiasm for persecuting waned a bit, and they stopped chasing down the weird kid who didn't go to either religious or physical education. By eighth grade they administered only small, habitual unpleasantnesses: they would whack him on the head with a book, throw his file out the window, and trip him when he broke into a run to save his satchel – leather, with two clasps, itself reason enough for mockery. He asked Mommy to buy him a rip-stop nylon backpack that would zip shut, but she said no. She said that only with a satchel did a pupil look like a pupil. That was the same reason why he would put on a school uniform, even though uniforms hadn't been required for a long time, and he was the only one to wear that slippery navy shirt with the white collar and the school badge sewn onto it.

She gave up on it only when he got to high school, at the express, very polite request of his grade teacher, who somehow knew his mom. Everybody knew her somehow. His teacher wanted to shield the boy from taunts, although in the first few days of school a lot of people had already seen him in that uniform. Besides, the older boys from his elementary school went to the same high school, so he didn't really need to earn his reputation for being a weird kid. Everyone already knew him as a weird kid.

So Mommy gave up on the uniform. In its stead came navy-blue sweaters, white shirts, and navy-blue pants, sad as the funeral of a mean old man. In lieu of his satchel, a leather briefcase.

There were also beatings in high school. The first one was brought on by a first-year student from another class, whose name he never learned, that was how it worked out. She was pretty, with green eyes and fiery red hair. He heard the older boys saying she was a virgin but that she was happy to put it about in other ways. He didn't understand at the time what that meant. One time he accidentally jostled this red-headed beauty at the school shop – he had always been clumsy – and the girl spilled her tea. Red liquid went streaming down the white cotton of her camisole, spilling all over her proud breasts. The redhead cried out in pain. Włodek didn't say he was sorry, because he couldn't get a single word out. He only tried to brush off the tea leaves, but Ginger pushed him away with disgust.

They fell on him at the next break. It was a very long break. They dragged him into the least-frequented men's restroom. Ginger was already in there, waiting, grave, cruel. Her friends, third-years, were very entertained, having a great time. They prodded him, took his glasses, and struck him a few times across the face. He stood still as if he wasn't there: he said nothing, didn't try to defend himself, didn't beg, didn't cry. Disappointed by his passivity, they thrust his head into the toilet and flushed it, pulled his pants down his flabby rump, and then the boldest of them kicked him in the balls. And that was how they left him: half-blind, in his underwear, in a fetal position from the pain on the urine-soaked tiles underneath the urinals. And she stood there. She must have felt the full force of her femininity. Of being able to incline four strong, young men to punish that clumsy cockroach that had burned her. That carcass of a kid, that human mulch, the kind of insect that since the dawn of history has had to grovel at the feet of all the world's red-headed beauties and strong men.

*Translated by Jennifer Croft*



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JOANNA BATOR (BORN 1968) IS A UNIVERSITY LECTURER, NOVELIST AND JOURNALIST. SHE IS THE AUTHOR OF TWO EXCEPTIONALLY POPULAR NOVELS, *SANDY HILL* AND *CLOUDALIA*.

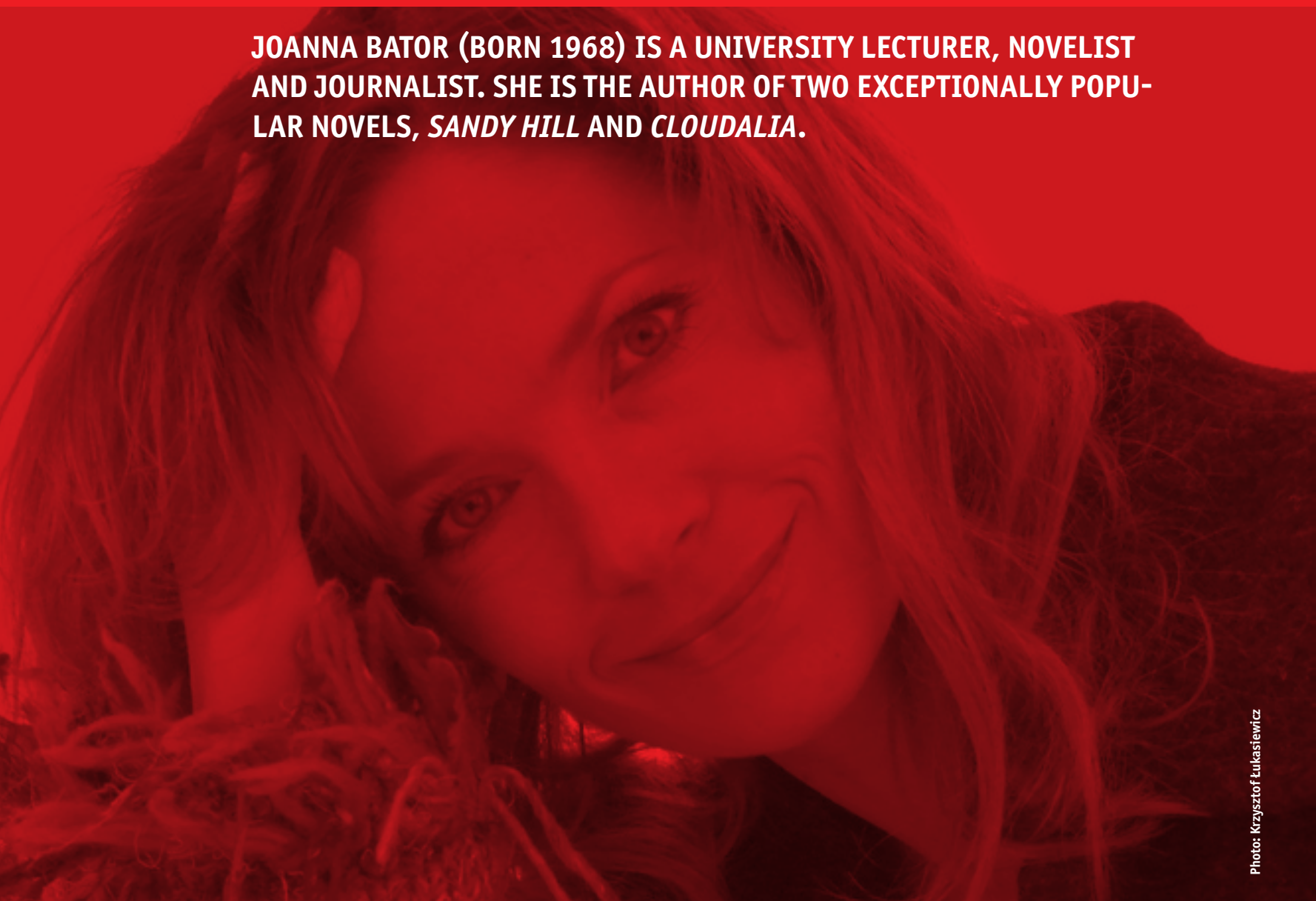


Photo: Krzysztof Lukaszewicz

## Japanese Fan: Returns

Anyone planning to go to Japan should read this book. Anyone not planning to go to Japan, all the more so.

When Joanna Bator received a fellowship in 2001 to go to Tokyo, she found herself in a country she had as much of an idea about as most Europeans – which is to say a very hazy one. She didn't know the language, the customs, or what it was going to be like there. But from the first moment she treated her new surroundings not like something foreign she had to get superficially accustomed to, but rather as a chance to work out a different form of interacting with the world and with herself. To understand Japan, she had to invent a way to communicate. And she opted for narrative.

She wrote out notes every day, studied books, learned more and more. When it came time to shape the materials she had gathered into a narrative, her story started to just shape itself. It was the shape of getting to know the world through the senses. What features in her story, then, is first of all the visible – letters of the alphabet, ads, signs, street layouts, architecture, outfits. In inverse proportion to the impenetrability of the labyrinth of the writing system and the map of Tokyo was the increasing accessibility of urban aesthetics, Japanese facial expressions, the fickle fashions. This was how the world paid Joanna Bator back for her patience and her refusal to succumb to the temptation of trying to quickly find a skeleton key that would work on her new surroundings.

In the first chapters of her book, then, we learn about visible Japan. In the chapters that follow, about Japan as a world of sounds, noises, echoes;

then, smells. Until finally, in tune with the formal way in which the Japanese accept visitors, the author uncovers the secret heart of Japanese culture, a language of communication that goes beyond spoken language: taste. Bator experiments from the start, trying new dishes, fighting her European prejudices and habits, testing out the Japanese combination of cheesecake with beans and pastry made of fish. Meanwhile, she is allowed to join in at Japanese tables, invited to try the *fugu* fish, initiated into the mysteries of dishes and spices. Both of these processes end up meaning that it isn't Joanna Bator getting into Japan, but Japan – as a tangle of tastes and symbols, longings and desires – getting into her body.

Her record of this encounter has given rise to an exceptional book. It is nostalgic and rich with concrete information; geared to the description of an exotic culture, but at the same time talking about the transformative nature of the learning process itself.

Przemysław Czapliński



# People

say Japanese is the most polite language in the world. I don't have sufficient information to be able to compare the degree of politeness in Japanese with that of other languages, but there's probably some truth to that belief. It's unlikely that any other language would go so well with endless bowing.

Reid cites the notice that appeared on what remained of the door to a shop that was destroyed by the earthquake that devastated the city of Kobe in 1995; "This is a terrible and unforgiveable inconvenience for our respected clients, but due to the earthquake we are forced to close our humble Store." The bounteous stream of words that issues from the mouths of Japanese elevator girls, secretaries, and stewardesses, whose requests that passengers fasten their seatbelts take a suspiciously long time, flows so abundantly precisely because of polite turns of phrase. In a literal translation into not-so-polite languages like English or Polish, it would sound patently absurd. "We courteously ask the forgiveness of the respected travelers for the unforgiveable inconvenience of waiting for take-off in our humble airplane. We request our respected travelers to forgive us for committing the discourtesy of interrupting their conversations and meekly requesting the fastening of these humble seatbelts," says the stewardess on the plane; the instructions on a packet of instant pudding ask the "esteemed client" to pour milk into "venerable vessel," and to then kindly mix this "humble dessert" in it; "Please forgive me for impolitely interrupting, daring to enter into the venerable office where such a respected person must be occupied with uncommonly important matters, but a venerable package with venerable books for the greatly respected professor has just been delivered," said a young student on entering the seminar room where I was sitting with Satoru, a.k.a. the "greatly respected professor." "She brought a package of books," said Satoru, before explaining the meaning of all the courtesies the student had just uttered in the Japanese variant of that information.

The vertiginous stratagems of politeness, the proliferation of euphemisms, and lack of immediacy are characteristic of the Japanese way of communication. From my own experience, I would add also the gradation of information, because if you don't ask them directly, the Japanese will rarely tell foreigners about things that he would find highly practical for the beginning of his stay in this foreign country. By explaining to me what I needed to do to use the internet at Bon Hour, Chizuko would be acknowledging my ignorance, and that's something you can't do to a superior. A much more serious problem, however, is their refined variant of blowing smoke in your face. There are quite a few anecdotes about the great antipathy nurtured by the Japanese toward the straightforward "no", and in contact with foreigners, this characteristic of the Japanese language is the cause of many misunderstandings. To give a relatively innocuous example, a shopkeeper will not tell you, "We don't carry size twelve shoes," but will instead state, "Respected client, that will be a little bit difficult." It's worse when there are more important matters at stake. When former president Bill Clinton – not realizing that the microphone was on – warned Boris Yeltsin at a summit to be careful of the Japanese premier, because when he said "yes," he was thinking "no," it provoked an international scandal. The Japanese felt accused of deceitfulness and were accordingly wounded. But in some ways, Clinton was right. The Japanese don't really lie more than other nationalities, but they definitely say "no" a lot less often. Instead of simple negation, they use euphemisms so polite that they allow the poor Gaijin to interpret them optimistically; in the Japanese case, it's not so much smoke-blowing as issuing an ever so delicate puff of something like mist. So "We will be positively considering your grant application as soon as possible" means "no"; "when the situation is favorable we will be able to comply with your request for a better scanner in your office" also means "no." Sometimes "yes," as Clinton warned Yeltsin, also means "no." The sound "ng," an intake of air through the teeth accompanied by head-scratching indicating perplexity, often ought to be similarly interpreted. The antipathy toward "no" is so strong that *hai*, the word for "yes," opens even sentences that are in reality negative responses to our questions. *Hai* in that case is not assent, but simply a proof that your interlocutor is listening. When, for example, you want to find out if there are any vegetarian dishes on the menu, the water will most likely reply, "Yes. There is only meat or fish." The correct response to the question "Do you understand?" is "*Hai, vakarimasen*," or "Yes, I don't understand." Chizuko, unable to respond "no," would often say "maybe," which in the beginning I took to mean possibility, naïve Gaijin that I was; we then worked out a method that enabled Chizuko to permit herself "no"s that flew in the face of the rules of her own language: "I am now speaking in the Western way," she would note, before

saying anything else. To this day I am not sure whether or not this practice overly distorted her Japanese identity. The closest things to our direct "no" are two Japanese gestures of refusal: the first is a fanning movement of the hand, raised to the level of the chin; the second is crossing the forearms over the chest. The Japanese resort to this method when the Gaijin is utterly unable to comprehend the more subtle methods of refusal.

Names are reserved for family relations and very close friends. It would likely be some twenty years before I would begin to employ the name of Mariko, for example – a woman of similar social status and age – and at that point I could even use the diminutive version of her name, but I would never attain that level of intimacy with her husband.

*Translated by Jennifer Croft*



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MARIUSZ SZCZYGIEŁ (BORN 1966) IS A REPORTER AND AUTHOR OF FIVE BOOKS, TWO OF WHICH ARE ABOUT THE CZECHS. HE WON THE 2009 EUROPEAN BOOK PRIZE FOR *GOTTLAND*. HE IS A CO-FOUNDER OF THE POLISH REPORTAGE INSTITUTE.



Photo: Petr Halousek

## The Sunday That Happened On A Wednesday

Since publishing his book on the Czechs, *Gottland* (2006), Mariusz Szczygieł has been recognised as one of the best Polish reportage writers of the middle generation. But in fact he was already writing excellent features much earlier, so it is no surprise that his publisher has decided to re-issue his first collection, *The Sunday That Happened on a Wednesday*, which originally came out in 1996. This book contains articles that form a mosaic picture of Poland in the post-1989 era of social, cultural and political transformation. As for any mosaic, the pieces in it are extremely varied, and of different degrees of seriousness. Among other things, Szczygieł writes about the tragedies of people from closed-down factories (the title report is about this), problems with finding one's place in the new reality (*A radio for you*), the extraordinary popularity of disco-polo (*The lips are always hot*), and how the transformations manifest themselves in a different attitude to crime (*The Polish murder*), sex (*Polish onanism*) or language (*Show your tongue*). In these early reports the characteristic features of Szczygieł's writing are already apparent: great inventiveness (for example, an article called *Poland in small ads* takes the form of an analysis of announcements issued in the press by his compatriots at the time) and carefully chosen language, which is free of unnecessary frills, and as a result is precise and lucid (which is not always a feature of Polish reportage). Interestingly, the reports in this book have not aged at all, despite the fact

that many years have gone by since they were written. Why is that? There are at least two reasons – firstly, the reliable technique of a top-class reporter, and secondly, the fact that Szczygieł has a perfect sense of the dynamics of change in modern Poland. To put it another way, on the surface, *The Sunday That...* now seems to be nothing but a testimony to the past (not a very remote one either), and yet, on more careful reading, this book shows that being reminded who the Poles were not long ago helps us to understand who they are now – and it can help potential foreign readers too.

Robert Ostaszewski

### **1993: Poland in small ads**

#### **Earn a million in a minute, Stargard, PO Box...**

I pick up my advice on how to earn a million zloty in a minute at the post office, packed in a grey envelope. But before I can get my hands on it, I have to pay for it, and the post office will deliver the money to the sender.

Here's the advice: 'You need to have the right sum of money, which you deposit in a bank at a percentage that will earn you interest of a million per minute. How much should it be? You'll have to work it out for yourself. Lucyna from Stargard.'

We pay Lucyna 42,000 zloty for her advice, cash on delivery.

#### **Please help a single mother in financial difficulties. Ola, Drohiczyn**

She is twenty-eight years old and has two little angels, Maciek and Elwira. Her husband died two years ago, he was a heavy drinker. Her benefit plus the family allowance come to just over a million. She received three letters: one to be paid for – the 'million a minute', and two free ones, from women. They wrote that she shouldn't be under the illusion that people would help her. They were both in a similar position and no one had given them a hand.

'No one will give you anything either,' the first one consoled her.

Did anything nice happen to Ola as a result of this ad? 'Yes,' she says, 'those two women weren't entirely indifferent to my fate.'

#### **Attractive young man seeks work as a turner or as a male escort**

'My name is Krzysztof Łokietek, I am twenty-two years old and I am a turner by profession. After military service I was on benefits, because here, in Mińsk Mazowiecki, the labour exchange didn't give me a single offer. I placed the ad, and it brought your letter, which appears to contain nothing but journalistic curiosity. In your life, this incident is just another experience, but for me it's a letter that won't change my fortune. The ad did not bring me anything remarkable, except that I lost hope, and with it the desire to go on living.'

#### **Attractive unemployed female, age 25, seeks work**

The 'attractive female' is tall, with greying hair and a moustache. 'She' is a man who lives in Kędzierzyn-Koźle. He published several ads such as: 'Thirty-five-year-old guy, reliable, with driving licence...', but he never got any interesting work. He wanted to test what he was losing by not being an attractive girl.

And so he was losing:

- a) 'Posing naked in Germany', from 350 to 700 marks a session. The offer came from a man in the Kwilcz district in the county of Poznań, who is expecting to receive twenty-four nude photos;
- b) 'A carefree life of luxury' – marriage to a rich German;
- c) A job as a barmaid in Belgium, 'but', warns the man making the offer from Lublin, 'no one forces anyone to do anything, and every barmaid does everything of her own free will';
- d) A job as a masseuse in Poznań – 'a typical whole body massage with emphasis on certain areas, going all the way, twelve hours every third day';
- e) Work at an escort agency in Holland: '24 million zloty in the very first month, and once the girl gets used to the job, she earns twice as much. Right now we have several Polish and Hungarian girls working for us, but we need more. There is a limitation in force: the candidate must be from eighteen to twenty-five years old. Once she's over twenty-six she's no longer quite so desirable. It is entirely legal and gives the woman job satisfaction.'

#### **I have suffered a financial crash, I will do anything for money**

The man who has suffered a crash is fit and good-looking, with fair hair. He is twenty-five years old and has two achievements: once he escaped from prison in Racibor, and once he crossed the border illegally. He has seven sentences behind him. In autumn 1992 he was released, but his family told him to find somewhere else to live; the labour exchange wouldn't give him a chance, but the social security gave him 500,000 zloty. He knew he had to think in a modern way, so he published the ad.

'Nothing came of it,' he wrote, 'I'm a recidivist and only a sprinter – I could never be either a salesman or a bodyguard. Please believe me, there's no future in sight for me. But it doesn't matter that nothing came of it. The greatest thing about the ad was looking forward to becoming a normal person again. The day you wrote to me, at 5.40 p.m. I was arrested again in Karpacz for stealing a gold ring.'

#### **There's money all around you. I'll tell you how to find it**

This advice comes from a female librarian at the Central Agricultural Library.

She sends the following instructions: (1) 'Technical and financial guidelines for the home production of a coffee-table set: a runner and eight napkins' (the colours that sell best in the provinces are sky-blue and green, beige is too much of a cliché); (2) 'Make a lampshade in a simple way and sell it'; (3) 'How to earn money by reading the small ads'.

The librarian collects 45,000 zloty for her advice, cash on delivery. ('Please try to guess what a librarian's salary is like,' she complains.)

The librarian's bits of advice are superhuman. To raise the money, which she says is all around us, by producing a coffee-table runner, for example, we'd have to learn how to build a weaving frame, how to use an oilcan, how to thin the varnish correctly so it doesn't glue the threads together, and other such things. She herself graduated in geography and likes to travel. She gets about twenty replies to one ad. It is mainly unemployed people who write, who have run out of ideas how to make a living. 'I know they're on the edge,' she says.

No, the librarian does not think that by sending out such unsatisfying advice she is cheating those poor people. 'I am helping them. In my life,' she stresses, 'I have known a lot of kindness from people, and now I'm doing a good deed in return.'

#### **I'll tell you an honest way to improve your financial situation. K.A., Sokołów Podlaski**

'I am eagerly looking forward to this unusual advice,' I wrote.

'Dear Sir,' replied K.A. 'Please say what advice you are hoping to receive from me. I place a large number of ads making various offers and I can't tell which one you mean.'

*Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones*





LIDIA OSTAŁOWSKA (BORN 1954) IS A JOURNALIST FOR *GAZETA WYBORCZA*. SHE IS THE AUTHOR OF FEATURES ABOUT PEOPLE WHO HAVE A TOUGHER TIME IN LIFE: NATIONAL AND ETHNIC MINORITIES, WOMEN, DISENCHANTED YOUTH, AND THOSE EXCLUDED FROM SOCIETY.

Photo: Piotr Wójcik

## Watercolors

*Watercolors* is a many-layered work of historical reportage based on a biographical tale whose heroine is Dina Gottliebowa-Babbitt (1923-2009). The world learned of this Czech-American artist of Jewish ancestry, who was a prisoner at Auschwitz, in the late '90's. That was when Gottliebowa undertook her latest attempt to get back the art she had done in the concentration camp, which had since become the property of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. The dispute with the Museum became an international scandal, with the American Department of State and the Polish government getting involved.

This central issue branches off in many directions. On the one hand, Ostałowska reconstructs the fate of her heroine (particularly focusing on Gottliebowa's time in the camp), while on the other she strives to grasp more general problems concerning history, memory, trauma, racism, and the relationship between the torturer and the victim. In this case, S.S. Doctor Josef Mengele took an interest in the little painter's talent. He commissioned her to paint the portraits (using the watercolors of the title) of Roma prisoners at Auschwitz, and because she performed these duties so well, this war criminal often showed her special kindnesses. Mengele himself is, in fact, one of the many supporting characters of *Watercolors* – the overriding biographical narrative subsumes other life stories, too. This ends up creating a dense network of events and trajectories encompassing almost 60 years. Ostałowska draws on hundreds of studies on and accounts of the hell of the camps, frequently weaving citations and summaries into her own text. It is worth asking, then, what *Watercolors* has to add to the conversation, what

sets it apart. And the answer seems to be all the efforts that tend toward metaphor and parable – in other words, toward the territory of literature. Such, for example, is the function of the Disney story. Before she started working for Mengele, Gottliebowa had decorated the children's barracks with the image of Snow White, and years later she would marry Art Babbitt, the man behind many of the best-known cartoon characters in America, and she herself wound up working for the biggest animation studios in the United States, where she eventually settled.

Dariusz Nowacki

# Dina

was well over seventy years old. At that age, you tend to recollect.

The Americans wore clean, pressed uniforms, but they were drunks. Right after them the Russians came to the camp. Dirty, because they had just come from fighting, Mongolians. Her friend Leša joked that they were Dina's brothers. They bantered. The Soviet officers offered wine to Leša, to Dina and her mom. They wanted to celebrate.

But first they got out from behind those wires.

Dina: "I found this bicycle and started riding it, straight ahead. I felt terribly free. To one side there was the forest, all the tree trunks were black from the fighting, no branches at all, they must have all been burned. Suddenly I saw a white horse, trotting along. I got off the bike.

"The horse was too tall for me to mount it."

More often than not, Dina's memory took her to the Ziegeunerlager. Celine in a sky-blue kerchief, mourning her child. A girl had a kid who was crawling tied to her leg so it didn't disappear. Fire-breathers were blowing out plumes of flames, entertaining the S.S. officers.

Now Dina was still thinking about the watercolors she painted in the camp. They were probably rotting away in some storage facility, expendable. But it was only thanks to them that her mom lived to be 82 years old, and that she had children and grandchildren. She complained to her daughters that she couldn't sleep. It was because of those paintings. If she got them back, there'd be no more insomnia.

The cold war was over. The post-communists were imitating the West. Dina had no doubt about it. Totalitarian Poland had retained the portraits, and free Poland would give them back.

But the museum was deaf to her demands. Around and around the same thing. The watercolors – acquired as anonymous, legally and in good faith – had to stay at Auschwitz. They were a part of the camp's heritage, documentation of Doctor Mengele's crimes.

This was inconceivable. Had Poland really changed its political system?

Dina didn't give up, and arranged for some American journalists to report in their newspapers and on their websites that the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum was holding stolen art. When the robbed woman tried to ask by what right, the heads of the museum talked about the priority of the public good over private property. Stalinist stereotypes: people don't matter, what matters is the state.

What was going on with them? During the recent commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation, President Lech Wałęsa couldn't cough up the word "Holocaust." There was no time allotted in the program for a prayer for the murdered Jews. Which was why at the lunch break some of the Jewish participants went over to Birkenau. At the ruins of the crematory, Elie Wiesel, Szewach Weiss, and Jean Kahn said the Kaddish. The German President Roman Herzog listened in.

The Poles don't give anyone the chance to change their minds about them.

The media were quick to rattle their sabers. Poland – whether it wanted it or not – was now part of the western world. Under capitalism property is respected. If the post-communists wanted to get into NATO, then let them first return the watercolors.

Dina had allies. The West had long since recognized the dignity of those who survived. They weren't accusing them of being cowards now, weren't giving them uncomfortable pangs of conscience; conversations didn't become hushed when the subject came up. War memoirs sold. Borowski, Levi, Wiesel, and Kertész hadn't exhausted the topic. Publishers were buying new autobiographies, studios fresh screenplays, and documentary filmmakers were interviewing witnesses.

Such was the fashion. Pop culture had been on the side of the persecuted since the American television channel NBC had broadcast the show "Holocaust" starring Meryl Streep over four consecutive January evenings in 1978. The episodes (totaling over ten hours) told the story of the Weiss family, who were assimilated German Jews.

The critics had lambasted the show, were still doing so. Unrealistic and trivial, full of historical errors, offensive to the survivors. On top of all that, the station had interrupted the program with commercials. Was that ethical, making money out of tragedy?

Professor Jeffrey Goldfarb, American sociologist: "A crappy show, almost a soap opera, taught 120 million Americans more about the Holocaust in a couple of days than they had found out in decades. It brought about real political change, aesthetics were secondary."

Goldfarb has taught at the New School for Social Research for years. The New School was founded in 1919 by a group of intellectuals protesting against an infringement of academic freedom (Columbia University had required research for the army). When Hitler came to power, the New School became a haven for 170 European academics fleeing from fascism. Hannah Arendt, Erich Fromm, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Maritain, and Roman Jakobson, to name a few, taught at the University in Exile.

New times, new challenges. For at least twenty years, the States, Europe, South America, and Africa had been settling accounts. Hence the imperative to record a difficult past.

Amy Sodaro, a PhD student at the New School, is interested in memorialization. And she's serious about it: she wants to know how memorials of atrocities and museums shape what we remember. She's checked out a few institutions, including the Holocaust Museum in D.C. It puzzled her that the American government would spend money on it, given that the Holocaust happened in Europe.

Amy Sodaro: "The reasons were purely political. Jimmy Carter, the Democratic candidate for President, was losing the support of the Jewish electorate. Which is why he came up with the idea of commemorating the Holocaust."

The American public wasn't sure. "Yeah, we fought in World War II, but the Holocaust wasn't our deal," people said.

Jeffrey Goldfarb: "The mini-series on NBC marked the moment when the Holocaust stopped being exclusively part of Jewish memory in the U.S."

Amy Sodaro: "The exhibit begins and ends with the information that it was Americans who liberated the concentration camps in Germany. Quite a bit of space is taken up by Jewish immigration to the U.S. after the war. It's a way of Americanizing the Holocaust."

The exhibition's lay-out complies with all the conventions of a movie. The birth of Hitler's state: bad. The fight and liberation by the Americans: good. Along the way: dramatic slides, all of which illustrate things that are contrary to American values.

Amy: "The message is clear. American pluralism and freedom of the press is our weapon against the threat of another genocide. After a visit to the museum, the public, morally transformed, full of emotions, is supposed to cry out loud, "Let us defend democracy!"

That institution just off the National Mall is one of America's most visited museums. Dina remarked to art critic Dora Apel that her daughter and granddaughter were never going to see the watercolors because they were never going to go to Poland. Washington would be closer.

*Translated by Jennifer Croft*





**FILIP SPRINGER (BORN 1982) STUDIED ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY. A SELF-TAUGHT JOURNALIST, HE HAS BEEN WORKING AS A REPORTER AND PHOTOGRAPHER SINCE 2006. *MIEDZIANKA. THE STORY OF DISAPPEARANCE* IS HIS FIRST BOOK OF REPORTAGE.**

Photo: private

# **Miedzianka.**

# **The Story of Disappearance**

In this collection of reportage, Filip Springer, a journalist and photographer, calls up the ghosts from the past of a small town that completely disappeared, as though all traces of it had had to be wiped off the face of the earth. The little town of Miedzianka, which means “Copperhead” in Polish, or Kupferberg according to its previous, German name, appears to be a place of exceptionally bad luck, a town visited by misfortune after misfortune. Writing the history of the town and its inhabitants, Springer writes about the “beast” that awakens every so often (wars, fires), using the idea of an eternal, irremovable evil, and introducing, too, the foundation myth of fratricide. But – fortunately – he doesn’t stop at these facile explanations, which would allow the human aspect to be overlooked.

Miedzianka is located in Silesia, and throughout this region’s history, no generalizations have held true. Springer has managed to show the complexity of the history of the twentieth century. This is a book about land that through its own richness brought misfortune upon itself. Several centuries of exploiting mineral deposits were bound to end badly, in the era of the most rapid technological development, which was also the era of totalitarian regimes and predatory exploitation. So it was stupidity, greed, and cruelty that led to the annihilation of a place that could have lasted – if managed more wisely – a long time. Springer does not write about the great wars from the perspective of an old-fashioned archivist attempting

to be objective, and he isn’t interested in major processes or great names. He concentrates on individual events, houses that have been annihilated and the people who were wronged. He has managed to call up portraits of people who were “from Miedzianka,” until stronger people arrived who assigned them a nationality and forced them to leave. For the expulsion of the Germans there is no terminology yet in Polish literature, so Springer has told the story of the expulsion of people. He has made people remember Miedzianka; he has shown how violence was perpetrated on this land and its inhabitants.

Springer introduces unease with his book, unsettles, and insists upon reclaiming talking about this part of the world that is stamped with shame. Miedzianka is a world where too many atrocities were allowed to happen for anyone to want to remember it. *Miedzianka* restores the memory of that world – and that may well be the best a reporter can do.

*Anna Marchewka*

**If** Karl Heinz Friebe had burst into tears, standing in the middle of a meadow peppered with cow pats that had once been the main square of his beloved little town, it might have been a bit melodramatic. Karl Heinz could have been furious, disappointed, sad, choked with hate. All of those things would have been explainable somehow. But there was none of that – Karl Heinz stood in the nettles and placidly pointed with his umbrella:

“That was Breuer’s restaurant, that was Haenisch’s pharmacy. Here, where we’re standing, was my grandmother’s living room, it led out that way into the vestibule and then further on, outside, under a pretty apple tree. Kupferberg was pretty and green back then.”

Now it’s just green.

Even before the iron curtain fell, Karl Heinz Friebe had been able to come to Poland without any trouble. A man had fallen into the ground of Miedzianka. His name was Zbigniew Antoni Sieroń, and he was an electrician. This was late autumn, beginning of the eighties. Of the little town at the top of the hill there remained not a trace; in a few cottages scattered around its environs there lived just a handful of its most enduring residents. Only along the road to Janowice did the workshops of Jelenia Góra’s SIMET industrial resistors corporation function in a tin building. Here there worked a dozen or so people brought in expressly from Jelenia Góra. One evening, Zbigniew Antoni Sieroń had set out from there to Janowice, to fix the former miner and then brewery worker Władek Trepa’s television. On his way back late that night he was in a bit of a hurry, so he opted for a shortcut. But he never made it to the workshops.

When it got really late, someone at the plant noticed Sieroń was missing. They started looking for him – in the darkness and the mist that enveloped the hill as it did every autumn. They finally found him. He was lying down at the bottom of a great gully along with sections of the fence, groaning. This rift had opened up right by the road that led to the plant. They tried to get him out, but there was no ladder long enough anywhere nearby to reach him. So they tied some ropes together and got down to the bottom that way. Sieroń was bruised and scared, but he was in one piece. It was hard getting him back up to the surface. When he came to his senses, he told everyone excitedly that the ground had tried to swallow him alive. They laughed about it for a long time after, saying he must have done something to deserve it.

Yes, the ground under Miedzianka was always reminding you it was there. After just about every heavy downpour would open up gullies and ditches in the fields that the folks had to spend whole weeks filling back up with earth after. Since the eighties mineshafts had been collapsing more and more, at this point nobody in their right mind went in there, although there were still people in the vicinity who knew where each adit was and how to get to it. Bogdan Markowski knew, too. He was a good friend of Bogdan Spiż; in the 1980’s he worked at the dairy in Janowice. He decided at that time to use the labyrinth underneath Miedzianka as a storehouse for whey, the use of which was constantly causing problems at the dairy. So Markowski and a couple of his coworkers took a tank full of it and went right to the edge of Mniszków. That was where one of the mine entrances was located. They didn’t even look inside, they just pumped the whey into the hillside and went away happy. The whole thing blew up a few days later, when fourteen kilometers from Mniszków the water in Bóbr turned white and fetid.

“That’s when I realized what was really down there under that hill,” recounts Markowski.

But if you look through the newspapers from the seventies and the eighties, it turns out that there was no uranium mine at Miedzianka at all.

“In fact from 1948-1952 attempts were made to resume the mining work and assess the profitability of extraction, but after the discovery of deposits in Lublin, they had to shut them down for good and all,” wrote *Wierchy*.

Other newspapers threw in their two cents. *Karkonosze* added that the mining industry in Miedzianka had already collapsed by 1945. *Nowiny* said that since the war nothing had been found under the ground there, so the industry had died a natural death. Then Miedzianka sank into oblivion, and no journalist was interested in it anymore.

Once the borders had opened up, more and more Germans began to come, wanting to see if they could still recognize their ancestral parts. One day a strapping gentleman with truly aristocratic manners appeared in the office

of the director of the Wielkie Janowice Health Center. He introduced himself as Eberhardt Stolberg zu Wernigerode, a descendant of Christian Stolberg, the last count of Miedzianka, Janowice, and Trzcińsk. The Stolberg property also included the mansion where the Janowice clinic was currently housed. The director was suspicious: he had already seen a few German jokers by the name of Stolberg, but none convincing enough to let in.

“And how am I supposed to know, Sir, that you are who you say you are?” he asked.

“By the fact, Sir, that if you haven’t had the door of your office replaced, I still have the key to it!” said Stolberg; there followed the appropriate demonstration.

Irena Kamieńska-Siuta was watching this scene. She had forgotten her political activism for good, and now worked as a tour guide for Germans visiting the area.

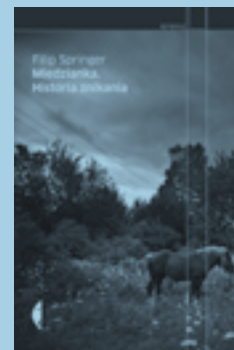
“In his interactions with the Poles, Stolberg tended to be a bit haughty, quite stiff at times, never displaying any emotions, but never straying, either, from his politeness and good upbringing,” she recalled. “He took in the ruins of Miedzianka, and especially the place where their manor house had been, and where there was nothing now, in gloomy silence. We went back to Jelenia Góra without saying a word. Then we started to fall out of touch.”

Karl Heinz Friebe returned to Miedzianka in 1989. When he saw what had become of it, his heart just about broke. He decided never to come back again. He came back a year later with his wife. And he keeps coming back to this day. At first he would park near the place where his house had been and sleep there. Then he started touring all his old haunts, living like a homeless person in places where there had once been homes. One day he saw some children walking along the road to Janowice.

“When I was leaving after the war, I was just a kid, but I had this feeling that it was all a misunderstanding that needed to be cleared up. I felt that for many years, I wanted to turn it all back. When I saw those children I realized that the way it is now is the way it’s always going to be.”

In 1999, Karl Heinz Friebe decided to build a small obelisk to mark that there had once been a town here. He convinced other old inhabitants of Kupferberg now scattered all over Germany. They passed the hat around; they chose a spot. At first the stone pillar was going to be by the Catholic church that is still standing. But the Janowice parish priest wouldn’t allow it. Karl Heinz Friebe didn’t ask him why.

*Translated by Jennifer Croft*



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ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI (BORN 1945) IS ONE OF POLAND'S MOST FAMOUS POETS, WHOSE WORK HAS BEEN WIDELY PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH AND A NUMBER OF OTHER LANGUAGES. HE HAS ALSO WRITTEN SEVERAL COLLECTIONS OF ESSAYS AND IS A FACULTY MEMBER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, WHERE HE TEACHES A CLASS ON CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ.

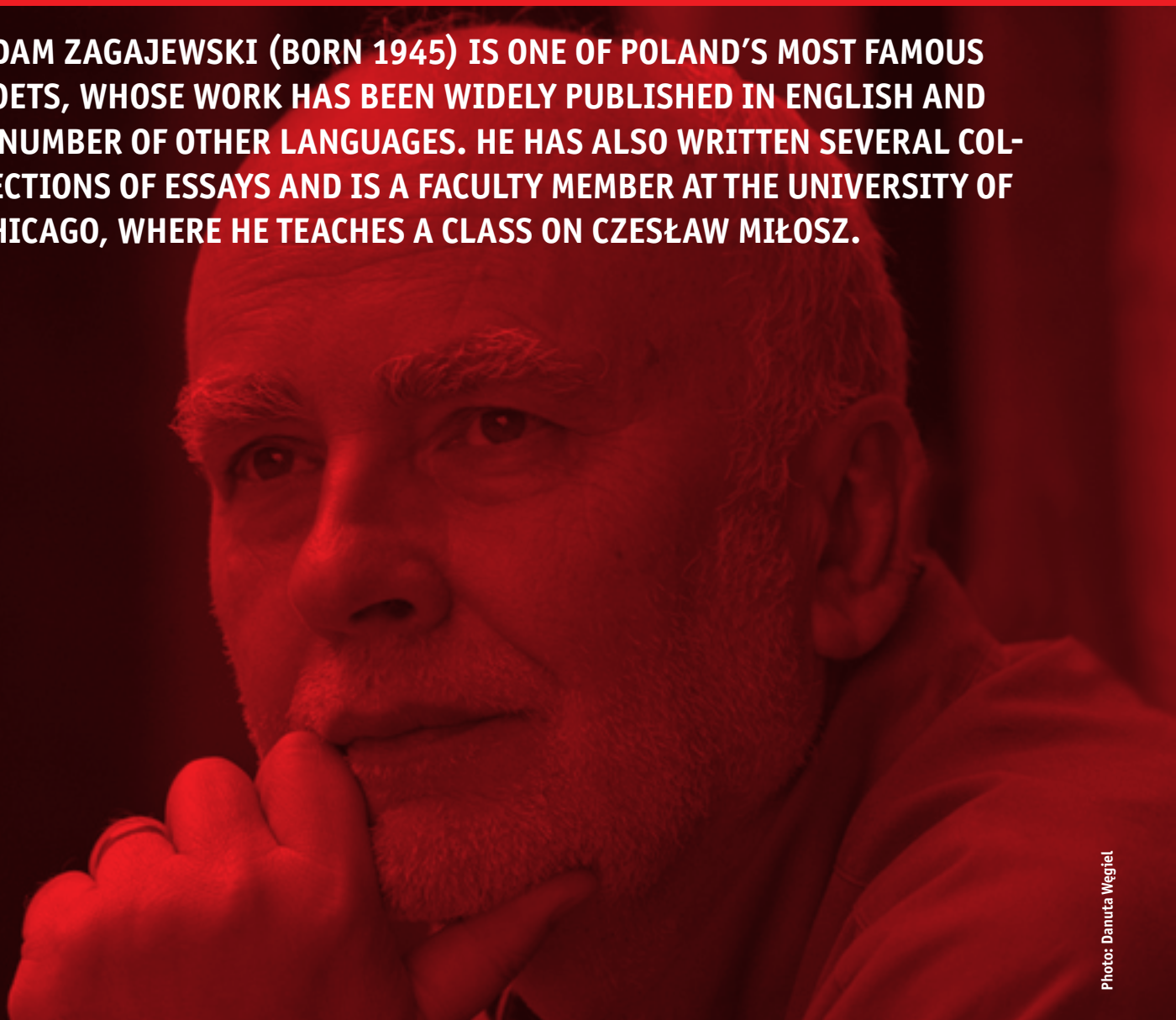


Photo: Danuta Węgiel

## A Slight Exaggeration

Adam Zagajewski's latest book of essays analyses the condition of a refugee, someone for whom there can be no place in this world, and also the offspring of refugees, who is obliged to cope with this increasingly common inheritance of loss. And so Zagajewski returns to Lwów, where he was born, and to his home streets in Gliwice, to where his family was moved, and in the other cities where he has had occasion to live. In *A Slight Exaggeration* he grapples with his legacy from his father, a former polytechnic professor, whose body is still bearing up, although it has been abandoned by his strong, scientific mind. His son, Adam Zagajewski, chose a different language, and using this language, he fills in the shape of his unbelievably pure, perfect father. The son became a poet with a penchant for lengthy essays dealing with the concepts of goodness and beauty. Summoned up from the past, the professorial father figure uses razor-sharp language to burst the balloon of solemnity formed by his son's creative work. The poet-son must shoulder the burden of exile, but is able to deal with it, and to change it into an extraordinary gift. For Zagajewski, conversation with his living-but-not-alive father is a chance to defend not so much homelessness, as the capacity to build oneself a nest outside the material world. The sphere of poetry, and more – of art, saves the exile's offspring, and lets him gain another citizenship besides the local one. Zagajewski ardently defends the republic of highbrow culture, although he sometimes comments on phenomena from the sphere of popular culture too, but these tales are so remote, so foggy and unremarkable, that they soon disappear from sight. *A Slight Exaggeration* is a declaration of pos-

sible, though exaggerated solemnity. Poetic exaggeration, poetical solemnity allows Zagajewski to sort out his own and other people's life stories. As he quarrels with his father, who tacitly approved of his son's dissimilarity, Zagajewski beds down in a land which he raises above freedom-limiting society.

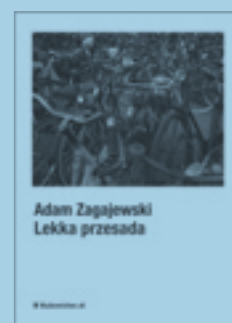
Anna Marchewka

**For** many years my father has been sick, growing weaker, departing this life; for months on end he has been practically in another world. He is gradually dying, although all the main organs of his indefatigable body – he is now ninety-seven – are in good condition. But he has completely lost his memory and no longer gets out of bed. He doesn't recognise anyone. He has to be fed and washed. I think about the man he used to be, obliging, kind and amusing. I don't know why, but now I am reminded of the reply he gave about ten years ago to a journalist who interviewed him for the monthly *Śląsk*. The main topic of the conversation were his memories of moving (of being deported) from Lwów to Silesia – his own deportation, but also that of other people who worked at the Polytechnic, who in those days were forced to exchange their Baroque city of hills, Orthodox and Catholic churches for the Prussian brick walls of Gliwice or Wrocław. At the time of the conversation, my father was already one of the last living veterans of that great, unwanted move, the journey of the displaced. However, at the moment when that journey took place, he was one of the youngest – the people who migrated with him were professors and associate professors, whereas he had only just started on his academic path. The emissary from *Śląsk* magazine must have been quite well clued up on my books too, because at one point he asked my father what he thought of a particular passage from my sketch *Two Cities*. And he quoted a few sentences from my piece – about how people can be divided into the settled, the émigrés and the homeless, and about which of them love painting, and which love music, the most portable of all the arts. (Literally: 'Music was created for homeless people, because of all the arts it is the one least tied to a place... Painting is the art of settled people, who like to contemplate their homeland. Portraits confirm settled people in the belief that they really are alive...') My father never liked language in which metaphors appeared. He was – I am using the past tense because his mind has already gone – an engineer, a man of empirical knowledge; he was definitely in favour of the demands of positivist philosophy, and the strict requirements of the Vienna Circle – he wanted everything that was talked about to be precisely measurable. He was a sober engineer, who was fond of reading historical books, and who was also very fond of painting. He liked painting, he loved (he himself would never have used that word, as he was never even capable of telling his own children that he loved them) pictures by the Impressionists, showing flowering meadows and quiet towns outside Paris. But with my passion for writing poetry and essays that did not shun poetical tropes, I must have caused him worries: because like a large part of humanity, he thought that slightly richer language, imbued with similes, was often the language of liars, or at any rate could become it. Anyone who steeped his language in figures of speech, anyone who showed his emotions, anyone who introduced elements born of invention or improvisation into his language, anyone who set language rocking, just as a tree can be made to sway, came dangerously close to lying. My father was an honest man, totally honest. He was the embodiment of integrity – that is how he was seen at the Gliwice Polytechnic too, that is how his countless students remember him. He read a great deal, mainly memoirs – tons of memoirs, by generals and engineers, bankers and ministers – but also numerous history books and a lot of novels. Yet I am convinced that the pages of which the authors were proudest, those poetic pages swarming with hyperbole and similes, synecdoche and litotes, pages which were a declaration of faith by the novelist, were the ones my father simply omitted, or just quickly scanned, waiting for the author to calm down and go back to his more usual story-telling mode. I imagine the journalist's question, which to top it all contained a quotation from a sketch written by his son, must have caused him a fair degree of embarrassment. After all, he couldn't simply reject words written by his own son. He knew that what he said would be noted down, and that in a while it would appear in print. We were on the best possible terms; the fact that I found myself among those who – sometimes – used metaphors was no obstacle to him at all on a day-to-day basis. I even think that in a certain way peculiar to him, that is, in a very discreet way, it gave him pleasure. However, his son's 'social position' was one thing, while the sentences he was now being told to comment on were quite another. I am sure he went quiet, there was a silence, and that the journalist waited for my father to formulate his answer; he may even have switched off his tape recorder for a while, and he may have already lost hope of an answer emerging. Finally, probably in a slightly hoarse voice, as ever when he was confused, my father said: 'That is a slight exaggeration.' A slight exaggeration. When I read that, I burst out laughing, so very well, so perfectly did it express his views on poetry, on, on that whole strange world in which his

son had disappeared. A slight exaggeration. That is how engineers think about poetry. There is nothing wrong with it, think the engineers, in principle poetry does not have to – though it might – lead to lying, to pretentiousness, to effeminacy, but above all you can accuse it of being an exaggeration. A slight exaggeration. It is an exaggeration, it needlessly thickens the strokes and lines of reality, it causes reality to come down with a fever.

A slight exaggeration – that is actually a very good definition of poetry. A perfect definition of poetry for cold, misty days, days when the morning gets up late and promises the presence of the sun in vain. It is a slight exaggeration, until we come to feel at home in it. Then it becomes the truth. And after that, when we re-emerge from it – for no one is capable of settling inside it forever – it becomes a slight exaggeration again.

*Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones*



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# MAŁGORZATA BARANOWSKA

**MAŁGORZATA BARANOWSKA (BORN 1945) IS A POET AND ESSAYIST. AS A HISTORIAN OF LITERATURE HER TOPICS HAVE INCLUDED SUR-REALIST POETRY AND THE WORK OF WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA. SHE HAS WRITTEN MORE THAN A DOZEN BOOKS.**

## This Is Your Life: Being Yourself With a Chronic Illness

Małgorzata Baranowska's book is not a self-help manual. It is an extraordinary testament, a personal narrative bordering on an essay about something extremely private and painful; after all, it is impossible to share illness, just as it is impossible to share pain. But although the experience of suffering cannot be transmitted – in any case, as Baranowska says, each person experiences illness in a way that is determined by his or her own nature – it is possible to share information about what it is like to live with suffering, and this sort of information can be helpful to others. In her professional life Baranowska is a superb poet and essayist. Here she presents her most private point of view and does it in a fascinating way, though in this instance the word fascinating seems inappropriate, if not indecent, considering the fact that she is writing about years and years of battling with lupus, an illness which attacks in a complex way, gradually destroying the organism, causing chest pain every time you take a deeper breath, ulceration of the mucous membrane in the nose and mouth, hypersensitivity to sunlight, anaemia, hair loss, muscle pain, arthritis, swelling of the lymph nodes, kidney damage, headaches, chronic fever and constant fatigue. And yet it is hard to put this book down, probably because it is not in fact a chronicle of suffering. Baranowska regards her life – and her illness – as an adventure. "Maybe there is no point asking why I am ill. Maybe the real question is why should I be healthy? After all, it's a miracle that some people are actually healthy. When I was struck down by illness, I realised I had to fight it, and that nothing in my previous experience was of any use to me at all. Lupus attacks a person's mental state as well. We sick people are entirely on our own, we are naked, body and soul. The threat does not come from the outside. It is something that is inside us and that attacks us from within. To fight this illness, you have to put up a defence against yourself." Baranowska tells the

story of her battle with illness as the tale of how she structured her own life to allow her to live as fully as possible, without giving up the things that matter to everyone: close relationships with people, being in contact with art and with your own creativity – in order to remain yourself and, even when chained to a hospital bed, still be in control of an infinite expanse, as one of Baranowska's friends puts it. Małgorzata Baranowska is now writing a book about happiness.

*Marek Zaleski*



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**In** fact, however, people do not live mechanically and mathematically, only, how should we put it? Let us say, *people live approximately*. They advance to some extent by feeling their way. As they do not know their fate in advance, they set themselves one goal after another, and do their best to maintain as good a position as they can with regard to life. They usually only do things like indulging in something on a daily basis when extreme circumstances force them to. People may be predictable in body and soul, but only in the broadest terms. In fact they are *incalculable and unique*. That really is beautiful. They do not let themselves be interpreted purely by numbers. ...

Man's unique nature, including his physical uniqueness, is a feature that is wonderful, and also rather dangerous, which becomes evident with an illness such as LED (short for *lupus erythematosus disseminatus*). That is to say, with lupus the organism behaves in a highly individual manner, making it difficult to treat. In turn, the body's reaction to hormonal treatment also comes out differently in each person. Both doctor and patient have to demonstrate extremely advanced flexibility in how they think about this illness, and in how they react to it. This does not mean no formulae have been developed for treating it. There are some, and they work, but they require a degree of imagination in the way they are used.

Imagination is an essential factor for the doctor's interpretation, as well as for yours or mine. We all use our imagination to enrich our previous experience, by evaluating the situation and anticipating the effects of our actions. But the imagination can also play nasty tricks on us, by suggesting images of probable misfortunes and filling us with fear. It attaches ominous meanings to names that are familiar to us, as well as ones we are hearing for the very first time.

You all know very well that from the first moment when the doctor discovered "everything" about your condition, almost all of you knew it too, sometimes without a clue how, because he certainly didn't tell it to you straight; sometimes you understood all too well what he said, even though he thought he hadn't explained it fully, and sometimes you guessed from some of the family's gestures or whispers. Often you were only given a diagnosis in Latin that didn't seem to tell you anything, and sometimes it was explained precisely.

On the basis of my own non-expert observations over many years, it looks as if only patients with some sort of severe personality disorder could truly fail to know what was happening to them. Everyone else works it out perfectly, regardless of education or attitude to medicine. But usually after the first encounter with the magic of numbers (meaning the various tests), they often get caught in the magic circle of names, in the labyrinths of taboo. They play a game of appearances with the doctors, who tend to do the same thing, with their families, who are also prone to playing this game, and with Fate (at least Fate keeps quiet).

Why does this happen? This is a matter of imagination too. The patients are perfectly good at imagining a threat. They are familiar with the surprises Fate can spring on them. And yet, for example, they instinctively believe that anything which hasn't been named does not exist. Since taboos probably showed up at the same time as man appeared on earth, and still exist to this day, perhaps they simply have to be recognised as an inevitable part of human life. Taboos are as much part of fear and ignorance as of defence, and also of knowledge which the person who knows is hiding from himself.

Many of you may have met someone suffering from cancer who never uses the word "cancer" and will never provide a precise diagnosis, which in any case might not entirely prevent him from carefully carrying out the doctor's orders. Sick people refer to their illness as "this horrid thing", "it", or "my friend for life" (as a result of the doctor's encouragement to "love your chronic illness") – they use various terms. I once heard someone call cancer "the little red fish that walks backwards". This definition apparently comes from a debate with the author of an eighteenth-century classification of the natural world. That was the definition the author had given to an innocent crayfish – which in Polish, is literally called a "river crab"; Polish also happens to use the same word for "cancer" and "crab". An adversary had pointed out that the definition seemed apt, apart from the fact that a crayfish (a "river crab/cancer") is not a small fish, nor is it red, and nor does it walk backwards.

Of course, the encyclopaedist did not mean to hide anything behind his definition of the river creature – quite the opposite of the sick person, or allegedly sick person (because he used this phrase before being diagnosed), who was clearly trying to find a way to domesticate the dangerous potential of the

diagnosis. Maybe he wanted to deny it all, because he knew the whole story, including the debate invalidating the definition of a crayfish (or "river crab") as a small, red fish that walks backwards. I know he was familiar with the entire anecdote because he quoted it to me himself.

As for me, only nowadays am I capable of admitting it, though I knew what was going on from the very start. Indeed, I think it was early February 1980 when I was given a referral to the hospital, written out by a clearly horrified specialist in internal diseases who, as he didn't know what was going on, wrote just in case that he suspected multiple sclerosis and myasthenia all at once. It was polyneuropathy in the course of lupus, but no one thought of lupus until a couple of months later.

With this referral, combined with a very limited capacity to move my arms and legs (fortunately the attack had abated a little on its own), how could I not know I had paresis? I couldn't fail to know. I knew all too well. My father had been partially paralysed for a long time (thanks to two haemorrhages or embolisms, I don't remember which). He went about, or rather was pushed by Mum, in a wheelchair, and had suffered various kinds of aphasia which had not entirely gone away. So here I was, not able to move much, and with severe sensory malfunction (not to mention pain). Not bad, I thought to myself. Bloody hell, has it happened to me too? Maybe I'm dreaming?

And do you know what happened? I did everything I possibly could to get cured. I was always a disciplined patient, except that I never used a certain name. After the first attack of polyneuropathy (polyneuritis), combined of course with lots of other inflammations, my illness was more to do with lupus of the joints, kidneys, and I forget what else. But from some point in 1982 I have had recurring attacks of paresis of very varied strength, first more rarely, then more often. They do recede, but every time they leave something behind, if only a very small trace of damage. It is amazing that a human being has the capacity for so many adventures.

*Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones*

# STANISŁAW LEM

# SŁAWOMIR MROŻEK

**STANISŁAW LEM AND SŁAWOMIR MROŻEK WERE FRIENDS FOR MANY YEARS, BEGINNING IN 1956, WHEN MROŻEK WROTE LEM HIS FIRST LETTER. THIS CORRESPONDENCE IS UNUSUALLY INTERESTING AND APPEALING.**

## Letters

Stanisław Lem and Sławomir Mrożek were friends for many years, beginning in 1956, when Mrożek wrote Lem his first letter. This correspondence is unusually interesting and appealing: at first the writers outdo one another in linguistic farce, which the absurdities of the internal policies of the communist regime, mentioned *en passant*, are conducive to, as are the nasty critiques of their writer colleagues, but then they calm down a little, and they begin to focus on the problematics of their creative work. They both read each other's new pieces, approaching them critically, but often with enthusiasm. They don't always understand one another (Lem doesn't like Mrożek's *Tango*, and Mrożek doesn't like Lem's *Summa technologiae!*), and so they enter into often long and fascinating clarifications in further letters. Particularly excellent at this is Mrożek, who soon emigrates to the West, settling permanently in Chiavari, Italy. Living in Italy ensures him freedom, and freedom of speech, but it also escalates his depressive moods and inclines him to write very long letters; today, these letters are a priceless commentary on his work and the gloom that accompanied that work. Lem seems to be more emotionally balanced, though he does complain about the inevitable problems of being a resident of the "socialist camp": he can't find parts for the car Mrożek has managed to get him. Today this juxtaposition of serious problems (both of them are experiencing a golden age in their work in the 1960's) with the prosaic burdens of daily life in "real socialism" sounds a bit absurd. But censors are monitoring everything they write, they believe, which means that their liberty to say what they want in their letters is limited. In fact, politics is a kind of demon that torments them, and particularly Mrożek complains about Western leftist intellectuals, whose political naiveté disgusts him. So he can only communicate fully with his compatriots, and sometimes only with those closest to him, who make

up a kind of exclusive clan of the initiated, whom both writers can trust. This is an extraordinary book: it shows the greatness and the miseries of Polish intellectuals after Stalin's death, when life was full of burdens and humiliations, but when at the same time awe-inspiring things were happening in art and literature, in terms of the width and breadth of creative horizons. How this happened we can find out by reading the letters of Stanisław Lem and Sławomir Mrożek.

Jerzy Jarzębski  
Translated by Jennifer Croft



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# KRYSTYNA CZERNI

**JERZY NOWOSIELSKI (1923-2011) WAS ONE OF THE MOST ORIGINAL PAINTERS IN POLAND IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, AND IS ALSO RECOGNIZED AS ONE OF THE MOST OUTSTANDING CONTEMPORARY ICON PAINTERS.**

## A Bat in the Temple: A Biography of Jerzy Nowosielski

Jerzy Nowosielski was one of the most original painters in Poland in the second half of the twentieth century, and he lived in immensely interesting and tempestuous times. This rich biography shows his life story – and the story of his works – in many different ways. Nowosielski was, as he said himself, a man of three cultures and national traditions: Ukrainian, Polish, and Russian, and with this went triple religious rites: Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. But these traditions didn't cause inner conflicts, instead working together to create something new. While a deeply religious man, Nowosielski was very far from any type of religious dogmatism, and as an eminent expert in theology, he was inclined toward free thinking, close to heresy, but full of uncommon, extraordinary ideas, and his painting followed on from these ideas – it was very decidedly influenced by his religious experiences. He was, after all, fond of painting icons and both Orthodox and Catholic wall-paintings. Most interestingly, this painter-theologian was part of the avant-garde in Krakow in his youth, belonging to the circle of innovative artists who ushered into Poland such movements as cubism, surrealism, tachisme, and other forms of abstract art. Under Stalinism, fidelity to the principles of the avant-garde demanded quite a bit of courage and non-conformism. Nowosielski was never among the artists who made political pronouncements, but he simply could not submit to the rules of socialist realism. When in the end he became a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, he made a very powerful impact on his students; he was less concerned about instructing them in painting technique, and more eager to try to help them develop spiritually and shape their perception of the world.

Krystyna Czerni's book, full of unique material, is not only a fascinating, moving personal history of a distinguished painter. It is also the account of an extraordinarily interesting group of artists and the ways of life and crea-

tive activity they had to develop during the difficult times of the German occupation and, later, of the communist regime in Poland. Czerni allows her readers to understand the problems of the whole artistic milieu in Poland in the second half of the twentieth century.

*Jerzy Jarzębski*  
*Translated by Jennifer Croft*



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TRANSLATION RIGHTS: ZNAK

**RENATA LIS (BORN 1970) IS A LITERARY CRITIC, TRANSLATOR, EDITOR, AND PUBLISHER; SHE AUTHORED ENTRIES ON THE POLISH RECEPTION OF FLAUBERT IN THE *DICTIONNAIRE GUSTAVE FLAUBERT*, WHICH WILL APPEAR IN 2012 IN FRANCE.**

Photos: ECZ ©SICI

## **Flaubert's Hand**

Renata Lis' book is the biography of the distinguished French novelist, free from the constraints of any of the current fads in methodology, focused instead on the more or less enigmatic aspects of Flaubert's life, sometimes the stories of minor details that might illuminate his work and also bring up all sorts of difficult questions. Lis' point of departure is the intimate relationship Flaubert had with death – through the work of his father, a doctor, and his boyhood home's connection with the hospital, as well as premature deaths among his family members and friends. Most important, however, is the illness, possibly a form of epilepsy, that brought Flaubert "close to death" on a number of occasions. Thus the book begins with traumatic events, including the event of the title: in an attempt to cure his illness, his hand was burned, leaving a noticeable scar. This event appears not to play any further role in the rest of the narrative, but it remains a kind of hidden stain, a painful stigma on the body of the book's protagonist, to which he soon begins to add others. Lis places Flaubert against the backdrop of the environs of Rouen, in the company of members of his family, friends and lovers, and within the setting of his travels to the East. But more than anything here she is trying to get to the bottom of his secrets, both in terms of physical secrets (his remarkable transformation from slender ephebe to hefty man) and in terms of professional secrets. The secrets of his work remain enigmatic: Lis lets us see Flaubert endlessly chiseling the style of his novels, and then "bellowing out" excerpts aloud to get the rhythm right, while she considers to what extent this programmatic "writer without a biography" actually saturated his works with biography, appropriately processed, of

course. It is unclear whether the enigmas of Flaubert's workshop have been fully worked out here. Nevertheless, the portrait of the artist is striking, full of life and humor, though not free from quirks and eccentricities, but painted with great skill and calling attention to Lis' expert knowledge of the epoch, and the literary, cultural, and political contexts, of the remarkable hero of her biography. It is a book that is difficult to put down.

*Jerzy Jarzębski*



**In** early April, 1858, “M. Flaubert, Gustave, writer traveling to Tunis,” received a passport issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “in the name of the Emperor of the French.” This passport was a folio made up of a single sheet of paper; besides a decorative vignette, an official stamp, and Flaubert’s signature, it also contained a description of the man in possession of it: “36 years old, 1 meter 80 centimeters in height, chestnut hair, exposed forehead, brown brows, bulging eyes, average-sized nose, average-sized mouth, chestnut beard, round chin, oval face, swarthy complexion, distinguishing feature: burn on his right hand.”

The story of Flaubert’s burned right hand – and of course we are talking about the right hand of a right-handed writer – began in his youth, in 1844, a critical year for the twenty-two-year-old Gustave, who was then a student of law at the École de Droit in Paris. His friend Maxime Du Camp recalled: “In January of 1844, Gustave suddenly ceased to write to me. I didn’t know what to make of his silence, until I received a letter from Mme. Flaubert informing me that her son had injured his hand, and that it would bring him pleasure if I came to visit. I spent February with him. He was living with his family at that time, in Rouen, on rue Lecat, in a house with a garden that was part of the Hotel-Dieu. The apartment was gloomy and uncomfortable: everyone got in everyone’s way. I found Gustave very pained, his arm was bandaged as a consequence of a serious burn on his right hand that left him scarred for the rest of his life. The other members of the household were depressed about it and in a state of constant readiness. They almost never left him alone.”

Flaubert had not attempted suicide, as might be imagined by the tenseness of the atmosphere that surrounded him. He had not, but shortly before the arrival of Du Camp, at the end of January, 1844, he had in fact had a brush with death. It happened completely unexpectedly, on the road home from Pont-l’Évêque, which he was traveling late one evening with his brother in a covered carriage. He was driving; they were rushing to catch the last ferry, which was leaving Honfleur shortly. If they hadn’t made it, they would have had some eighty kilometers to travel that night, maybe even more, I don’t know exactly, because I don’t know what exactly the road from Honfleur to Rouen was like, exactly what bends it made as it weaved around the hills of Normandy. You could check old maps, of course, but I have serious doubts about the accuracy of those old maps. Maybe because I know today’s maps so well, like the amazing Michelin maps of France – absolute staples for anyone who wishes to travel Flaubert’s country not by highway, as fast as possible, but unhurriedly, through pastures and fields, sleepy towns made of stone, stopping wherever and eating with the people at auberges or just buying *produits du terroir* right from the farmer: a bottle of cider, cheese, fresh butter, milk.

Because even the Michelin maps, known for their precision and updated every year, turn out to be misleading when it comes to the intricate web of roads and little roads and even littler roads of provincial France. They miss this little town here, that little intersection there, this one of hundreds of bigger or smaller roundabouts. Something that was supposed to be on the right side unexpectedly appears on the left, and what was supposedly on the left, just around the corner, isn’t there at all, in the end. And although during my travels in Northern France these inconsistencies were a real pain in the neck, I obviously don’t hold it against the French cartographers. Such is simply the nature – tangled, misty, deceptive – of reality, or perhaps human perception, which is basically the same thing, anyway, since we can’t exactly look at the world with any eyes other than human. Seen through such an instrument, reality appears slightly altered every time, enmeshed in our thoughts and feelings, a bit dislocated, muddled. Like Emma Bovary’s eyes, now blue, now black again. And so that night at the end of January, 1844, they were leaving Pont-l’Évêque, were on an elevation, in total darkness, when with a hellish clatter a four-horse carriage passed them, Gustave suddenly gave out an ear-splitting cry, and slumped over on his seat. He lost consciousness for a good ten minutes. His brother took him for dead. This was the first episode of Flaubert’s mysterious illness – an episode that so resembles a meeting with destiny that we may be unsurprised by its long-term results: as a consequence of the episode, Gustave was given permission by his father to abort his study of law – permission previously unattainable – and was able to dedicate himself wholly to writing. Despite this, the episode would be repeated – with a different intensity, true, but always accompanied by the same agonizing fear. “I feel as though I’ve died many times already,” Flaubert wrote about his strange illness to his lover Louise Colet.

His burned hand clearly belongs to the same constellation of events whose epicenter was that crisis of January, 1844. From the few mentions made of the healing process, we can infer that Flaubert had an open wound on his right hand, a vast, deep, third-degree burn, damaged tendons and destroyed nerves. When and how did he get this burn? The French scholar Pierre-Marc de Biasi dates it to the beginning of 1844 and suggests that he got it during a prophylactic bloodletting that Doctor Flaubert performed upon his son after that first episode. De Biasi imagines it like this: Achilles-Cleophas was sitting by Gustave’s bed, squeezing his arm so that the blood would come out better; the blood wasn’t coming; Doctor Flaubert was very nervous; in his distractedness he grabbed the pot of hot water that had by this time begun to boil, although he didn’t realize that; in order to improve his son’s circulation, he poured the boiling water over his hand; a cry rang out like the howl of an animal being slaughtered...

It might have been that, or it might have been something else – something slightly different or something completely different. I think it was completely different (because life normally goes differently than we expect), but I don’t know what happened, because there were no witnesses. The only thing that is known for sure is that between the end of January and the beginning of February, 1844, a mysterious wound appeared on Flaubert’s right hand that deprived him for many weeks of all feeling in that hand and that left a life-long scar, that “distinguishing characteristic” mentioned on his passport.

*Translated by Jennifer Croft*



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ZYGMUNT MIŁOSZEWSKI (BORN 1976) IS A JOURNALIST AND NOVELIST. HIS FIRST NOVEL, *THE INTERCOM*, WAS PUBLISHED IN 2005 TO HIGH ACCLAIM. HE IS NOW WORKING ON THE FINAL INSTALMENT OF HIS PLANNED TRILOGY FEATURING PROSECUTOR TEODOR SZACKI.



Photos: private

## A Grain of Truth

Zygmunt Miłoszewski's first crime novel, *Entanglement*, was a big success, acclaimed by the literary critics as well as the readers. It won the prestigious High Calibre Award for the best Polish crime novel, and a film was made based on it, with a star-studded cast, by Polish standards. The second book in the series about the adventures of Prosecutor Teodor Szacki confirms that this success was not just accidental.

In *A Grain of Truth*, Miłoszewski builds on the classic model of the custodian of the law who has been through the mill. Recently divorced, at his own request Szacki is transferred from Warsaw to Sandomierz, where he wants to set up a new life for himself. He soon realises he has made a mistake. He is finding the sleepy, provincial town where nothing ever happens more and more boring and frustrating until – of course – along comes a case that lives up to his expectations and ambitions. At short intervals the following people are murdered: a local social benefactress, her politician husband, and a local businessman who holds patently right-wing views. The killer's modus operandi implies ritual murder, which in a city where historical relations between the Poles and the Jews were extremely painful and complicated is a highly sensitive issue. For a long time the prosecutor lets himself be deceived by the murderer, who lays false trails for his pursuers, but in the end he catches him, and the motives for the crimes become banally obvious.

Miłoszewski succeeds in creating an interesting central character, and keeps a steady hand on a complex crime plot that has us in suspense to the final page. He adds something extra to his novels, which makes them more than just ordinary crime fiction. What exactly is it? Some thoughts about issues

that Polish society is still struggling with – in vain. In *Entanglement* it was the issue of 'lustration' – the exposure of those who collaborated with the authorities in People's Poland – and squaring accounts with the communist past, and in *A Grain of Truth* it is anti-Semitism and scores that remain to be settled between Poles and Jews.

To put it in a nutshell, Miłoszewski not only provides the reader with an entertaining read, but also makes him pause for thought. And only true masters of the fiction genre are able to do that.

*Robert Ostaszewski*

**The** courthouse was ugly. Its solid bulk may have looked modern when it was built in the 1990s, but now it looked like a Gypsy palace converted into a public service building. Its steps, chrome railings, green stone and irregular surfaces didn't suit the surrounding architecture, or even the building itself; there was something apologetic about its green colour, as if it were trying to hide its own ugliness against the cemetery trees. The

courtroom consistently developed the style of the whole block, and the most eye-catching item in this space, which looked like the conference room at a second-rate corporation, were the green, hospital-style vertical blinds.

Scowling and disgusted, Szacki was mentally bemoaning his surroundings, even once he had put on his gown and sat down in the seat reserved for the prosecution. On the other side he had the defendant and his counsel. Hubert Huby was a nice old boy of seventy. He had thick, still greying hair, horn-rimmed spectacles and a charming, modest smile. The defence counsel, probably a public service lawyer, was the picture of misery and despair. His gown was not done up, his hair was unwashed, his shoes weren't polished and his moustache hadn't been trimmed – he prompted the suspicion that he probably smelled bad. Just like the whole case, thought Szacki with rising irritation, but finishing off all his predecessor's cases had been a condition for getting the job in Sandomierz.

Finally the judge appeared. She was a young lass who looked as if she'd only just graduated from high school, but at least the trial had started.

'Mr Prosecutor?' said the judge, giving him a nice smile after completing the formalities; no judge in Warsaw ever smiled, and if he did, it was out of malice, when he caught someone in ignorance of the regulations.

Teodor Szacki stood up and automatically adjusted his gown.

'Your Honour, the Prosecution upholds the arguments proposed in the indictment, the defendant has confessed to all the charges, and there is no doubt about his guilt in the light of his own statements and those of the injured parties. I do not wish to prolong the case, I am filing for acknowledgement that the defendant is guilty, that by means of deceit he repeatedly led other individuals to submit to various sexual acts, which covers all the characteristics of the crime described in Article 197 Paragraph 2 of the Penal Code, and I am filing for the court to impose a punishment of six months' imprisonment which, I stress, is the bottom limit of the punishment stipulated by the legislator.'

Szacki sat down. It was an open-and-shut case, and he just wanted it to be over. He had deliberately demanded the lowest possible sentence and had no wish to discuss it. In his thoughts he was endlessly composing a plan for his interrogation of Budnik, juggling with topics and questions, changing their order and trying to envisage scenarios for the conversation, to be ready for all the variants. He already knew Budnik was lying about the final evening he had spent with his wife. But then everyone tells lies – it doesn't automatically make them into murderers. Perhaps he had a lover, maybe they'd had an argument, maybe they'd had a quiet few days, or maybe he'd been drinking with his mates. Back a bit – he should cross out the lover, because if Sobieraj and Wilczur were telling the truth, he was the most infatuated husband on earth. Back again – he couldn't cross anything out, in case it was a small-town, thick-as-thieves conspiracy, God knows who, why and for what reason he was being told anything. Wilczur did not inspire trust, and Sobieraj was a friend of the family.

'Mr Prosecutor,' the judge's strident voice shook him out of his lethargy, and he realised he had only heard every third word of the defence counsel's speech.

He stood up.

'Yes, Your Honour?'

'Could you take a stance on the position of the defence?'

Bloody hell, he hadn't the slightest idea what the position of the defence was. In Warsaw, apart from exceptional circumstances, the judge never asked for an opinion, he just got bored listening to both sides, withdrew, passed sentence, all done, next please.

In Sandomierz the judge was merciful.

'To change the classification of the crime to Article 217, Paragraph one?'

The content of the regulation flashed before Szacki's eyes. He looked at the defence counsel as if he were a madman.

'I take the position that this has to be a joke. The counsel for the defence should familiarise himself with the basic interpretations and jurisdiction. Article 217 concerns assault and battery, and is properly only applied to minor

fight or when one politician slaps another one on the face. Of course I understand the defence's intentions, assault and battery is a privately prosecuted indictment, subject to a punishment of one year at most. There is no comparison with sexual abuse, for which the penalty is from six to eight months. But that is what your client has done, Sir.'

The defence counsel stood up. He gave the judge an inquiring look, and she nodded.

'I would also like to remind the court that as a result of mediation almost all the injured parties have forgiven my client, which should result in a remission of the sentence.'

Szacki did not wait for permission.

'Once again I say: please read the Code, Sir,' he growled. 'Firstly, "almost" makes a big difference, and secondly, remission as a result of mediation only applies to crimes subject to up to three years' imprisonment. The most you can petition for is extraordinary commutation of the sentence, which in any case is ridiculously low, considering your client's exploits.'

The lawyer smiled and spread his hands in a gesture of surprise. Too many films, too little professional reading, Szacki thought to himself.

'But has anyone been harmed? Did anyone suffer any unpleasantness? Human affairs, involving adults...'

A red curtain fell before Szacki's eyes. He silently counted to three to calm himself down. He took a deep breath, stood up straight and looked at the judge. She nodded, her curiosity aroused.

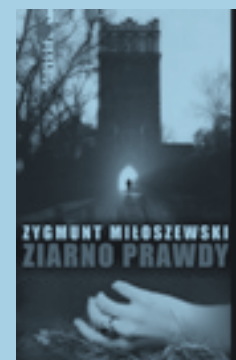
'Counsel for the defence, the prosecution is amazed both at your ignorance of the law and of civilised behaviour. I would remind you that for many months the defendant Huby went about houses in Sandomierz county kitted out with a white gown and a medical bag, passing himself off as a doctor. That in itself is a felony. He passed himself off as a specialist in, I quote: "palpation mammography" and suggested prophylactic examination, with the aim of causing the women to bare their chests and give him access to their charms. Which comes under the definition of rape. And I would also like to remind you that he assured most of his "patients" that their bosoms were in good health, which might not have been true and could have led them to abandon their plans for prophylactic tests, and thus to serious health problems. In any case, that is the main reason why one of the injured parties refused to agree to mediation.'

'But in two of the ladies he felt a lump and prompted them to get treatment, which as a consequence saved their lives,' retorted the defence counsel emphatically.

'Then let those ladies fund a reward for him and send parcels.' ...

He could see that the judge was having to stop herself from snorting with laughter.

*Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones*



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WIKTOR HAGEN IS A JOURNALIST WHO ALSO WRITES CRIME FICTION. HE SPENT MANY YEARS LIVING IN FRANCE AND POLAND BY TURNS, STUDYING ANTHROPOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND ALSO HELPING TO RUN A RESTAURANT IN PARIS.



## The Long Weekend

Among the many writers who have tried their hand at crime fiction in the last few years, Wiktor Hagen is undoubtedly one of the most promising. In his debut novel, *Dark Blue Blood* (2010) he showed himself to be a very mature writer. His new crime novel, *The Long Weekend*, confirms that he is not just a one-hit wonder. I would even venture to say that Hagen's talent is on a par with Marek Krajewski's, although of course he writes a completely different kind of crime fiction than Krajewski, who created the acclaimed series featuring Eberhard Mock, the police inspector from Breslau.

For his series of novels about a Warsaw police superintendent called Robert Nemhauser, Hagen chose from the start to focus on modern crime with a clearly emphasised social dimension. The action of *Dark Blue Blood* is firmly set in the Polish "here and now". In the new novel, the crime plot is developed around the topic of issues to do with motorway construction and some dodgy ecological organisations whose real priority is not to protect nature at all, but to make money. But in this book, the depiction of Nemhauser's everyday life, his close friends and family, and his colleagues at work is just as important as solving the riddle of the crime. And the superintendent himself is no ordinary character. Hagen has rejected the idea of creating the stereotypical main character that is often a feature of crime fiction – the drunken tough guy who has been through the mill and is battling with various traumas. Nemhauser is educated, and has a loving wife and twin boys of pre-school age called Cyryl and Metody, who are very good at wearing him out. The source of his troubles is not so much the specific difficulties of po-

lice work, as the so-called prosaic side of life – lack of time and money, constant tiredness and complications resulting from having to combine work and family obligations. And on top of that, to make ends meet, Nemhauser works part-time as... a chef at a trendy restaurant. However he doesn't really cook because he has to, he just loves doing it, and has a talent for it. The well-developed social background in Hagen's novel is never dull, because it is served up lightly, with wit and detachment. As too is the description of Warsaw, which is also very important to the setting of this series. Here we have a true master of the genre of social and city crime fiction, an interesting and original writer.

*Robert Ostaszewski*



**A small** stream of guests attracted by the restaurant review flowed in non-stop throughout the evening.

At one point Nemhauser thought they wouldn't be able to manage, and was going to ask Jasiu to close the restaurant. The orders were still coming in one after another, but Ania, who had caught her second wind and was performing miracles, could not possibly make that many pierogi at once; he had run out of stuffing and in a state of panic had started preparing a new lot. At the same time some orders came in for soup; he remembered in horror that he hadn't crossed the soup off the menu, but there wasn't any to serve.

He hastily saved the situation by making a small pan of mushroom soup, which could be done the quickest, but he felt like the captain of a ship abandoned by its crew, who was thrashing about with a bucket, trying to bail out the water that was coming in through more and more holes, but even so the ship was sinking faster and faster, and the most his efforts could achieve would be a minor delay to the inevitable end.

To his shock and amazement, he found that now the guests really had eaten everything they had prepared, and that if any more of them appeared, he would probably have to make them sandwiches. He was hoping it wouldn't come to that, but Jasiu announced yet another group, evidently on their way home from an event.

'What do mean, there's no food?' Jasiu stared at him, wide-eyed.

'Just that.' Nemhauser took off his apron and threw it to the floor. He was worn out, he could feel streams of sweat running down his back and it looked to him as if the pots and pans on the shelves were spinning slightly.

'So what now?'

'Now we'll show them me and my brother-in-law did quite different things,' said Nemhauser, smiling.

Jasiu glanced at him as if he suspected that, like Ania, Nemhauser had a bottle hidden somewhere too, and was taking furtive slugs at it.

'Don't you remember? Years ago there was a Młeczko cartoon. There's a guy pointing at a pyramid and saying: "Me and my brother-in-law did quite different things when we were on the piss". So here's what we'll do: go and tell them the kitchen has finished for the night, but can still serve...' He thought for a moment. 'Savoury slices.'

'What?'

'Don't you remember reading the book about Tuscany where the hero drops in at a bistro late at night and it turns out everything has already been eaten? But the owner's worried the guest will turn away hungry, so she makes him spaghetti aglio, olio e peperoncino. In fact, that's an idea. We can give them spaghetti aglio, olio e peperoncino. I can make it in minutes out of nothing. Off you go.'

Jasiu raced into the dining room, while Nemhauser put a pot on the stove. 'Cut some bread,' he asked Ania.

'Consider it done.' She smiled.

He wondered how she kept up the pace. She must have been fifteen or twenty years older than he was, but she was racing about, while his legs were going numb and he was afraid of collapsing.

'Eight spaghettis and eight savoury slices, as much as you can make. They seem to be very hungry. They were at a concert, and wanted a bite to eat, but everything's closed,' announced Jasiu.

'So let's change into Italians,' decided Nemhauser. 'Instead of Black Tadek it'll be Taddeo Nero, or something like that.'

He tossed some black olives, some cloves of garlic, a whole onion, some herbs, peperoncino and the remains of the basil into the blender. He tried it, added some olive oil and a drop of wine, and switched the blender on for a moment.

'Ania, spread this on the bread,' he ordered.

Meanwhile he threw some spaghetti into the boiling water and some crushed, chopped cloves of garlic and whole hot chillies into a frying pan. It was starting to smell good, and he felt peckish himself.

'If we're going to have an Italian restaurant, let's go the whole hog,' he said to Jasiu. 'We'll chuck all the spaghetti in a single bowl and they can help themselves to as much as they like. The same goes for the bread.'

Jasiu flew to and fro in delight, occasionally giving reports from the dining room.

'More bread slices, they're stuffing themselves as if they haven't had anything to eat for a week. When's the spaghetti coming? They can smell it and they want it now.'

Once all the portions had finally been served and eaten, and Jasiu had switched off the lights, he found the time to glance at his mobile display. Eight unanswered calls from Mario and three from Paula. All right.

'Robert, as they were leaving they asked if they could come back again at closing time for something that's not on the menu,' said Jasiu, catching him on the way out.

'Sure, the pleasure is all mine,' he muttered, trying to call Mario back.

'Robert, do you know how much I charged them? For that big bowl of spaghetti I raked in a hundred, and they were surprised it was so cheap. And just look – it hardly costs a thing. A bit of garlic, a few chillies and some olive oil. Maybe we should put it on the menu, what do you think?'

'You've got to have a brilliant chef too,' smiled Nemhauser. 'Do you think they often served spaghetti aglio, olio e peperoncino in a pre-war restaurant?'

'We could give it some sort of pre-war name,' said Jasiu thoughtfully. 'What about "hot and spicy noodles with garlic"? What do you say?'

'Well, I don't know.' Nemhauser frowned a little. 'What about the slices? "Yummy doorsteps with olive oil",' Jasiu went on. 'I asked ten zlotys per slice and they said that was cheap too.'

'You know, you ought to write poetry.' Nemhauser clapped him on the arm. 'Your talents are being wasted.'

'Then that's arranged,' said Jasiu, making a note in his pocketbook. 'Usual time tomorrow?'

'Jasiu! Tomorrow I'm working at the police, Paula's coming back tomorrow.'

'Well, yes, I'm just wondering if she'll be here at the usual time,' said Jasiu indignantly. 'And there are some more people coming to be interviewed. One of them said he wants to be the manager.'

'What do you need a manager for?' said Nemhauser in surprise.

'I asked that too. He said that as I'm asking, I obviously don't know, but he'll show me. I'm very curious. But some sous-chefs are also going to come by.'

'Let's hope.' Nemhauser waved goodbye and left.

He walked quietly up the stairs, cursing because he slipped and bruised his knee. He gently opened the door, expecting to find Mario asleep on the sofa. He had been cursing himself for ages for not looking at his watch. Although even if he had, it wouldn't have changed much. He called Mario a few times, but this time it was Mario who wasn't answering.

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# POETRY 2010

**2010 WAS WITHOUT A DOUBT A YEAR OF WOMEN POETS. EWA LIPSKA WON THE GDYNIA LITERARY PRIZE FOR 2011 FOR HER BOOK *REVERBERATION*. URSZULA KOZIOŁ WON THE SILESIUS 2011 WROCŁAW POETRY PRIZE FOR HER *WHOLE BODY OF WORK*. THE JURY ALSO LOVED KIRA PIETREK'S *THE LANGUAGE OF BENEFITS*, WHICH IT CONSIDERED THE BEST DEBUT OF THE YEAR.**

In Ewa Lipska's *Reverberation* we are still dealing with the avant-garde search for refreshing language to give expression to the metamorphosis of consciousness in a post-technological world; *Reverberation* includes, in addition to its mechanical rhetoric, full of surprising compounds, nostalgic poems, too, that uphold the self's unwillingness to allow life to retreat into oblivion. In *Horrendum* Urszula Kozioł has also captured a mood of recollecting, a nostalgic turning toward the past and toward the dead. The real event, however, was Kira Pietrek's book, *The Language of Benefits*. Pietrek avoids all the language typical of the articulation of the feminine self: there is no trauma, no melancholy, no aggression, no rage in the tone of these poems. In brief, Kira Pietrek has found a way of expressing the world that magnifies its brutality – a world of discrimination and exclusion (economic, racial, gender-based) as well as, most importantly, a world of apparent discrimination, the gray area of things passed over in silence and motivations altogether other than what is nowadays acceptable. But Pietrek does not represent things in a drastic manner in order to scrutinize the hysterical and sadomasochistic ego, but rather in order to make the public sphere more active, drawing into it the greatest possible number of actors.

These are not the only female poets to have published significant and interesting books this year. Renata Senktas' book *Very*, a debut collection of lyrical miniatures, ought also to be mentioned. Their subject unfolds in everyday sequences, minute events. It is particularly sensitive to the "auratic" aspect of the world, seeing in it the tiniest changes, "quiverings," shifts. Thanks to such an "awakened" poetics, Senktas can show with extraordinary force, but also with subtlety, elements of reality that are usually overlooked. *Larch Corolla* by Bianka Rolando is, meanwhile, a very horizontally structured book, being a kind of personal odyssey into the female soul. It appears in different guises, struggles for each incarnation with the forces of nature, divinities, and its own ancestors, and we travel with it through different times, spaces, and events.

The emotional landscape of the poems of Joanna Mueller is built upon a melancholy feeling of loss. In *Ecdyses* melancholy has been tinted by the fleeting joy of the "facticity" of life, for the proto-neologism of the title allows Mueller primarily to describe the phenomenon of motherhood. In *Backtracking* by Joanna Lech, what "backtracks" above all are articulations of subjective alienation, the trauma of experiencing a world that is always lying in wait for the subject in these poems, attempting to annihilate it. An interesting change by contrast is *Frangibility* by Agnieszka Mirahina. Still confessional, sustaining the manner of divulgence, but operating under a different kind of play on words, Mirahina's title relates to linguistic correctness, norms, and "purity" in a much less meek way. It achieves all the more for this, with respect to the force of the communiqué: it draws in regions of speech that contain some waste, some flaw, some surplus element, often excised from the field of vision. Completely different is the linguistic strategy of Agnieszka Wolna-Hamkało in her book *Nikon and Leica*. This is more about the pleasure of reading and the erotic arousal of language, and the majority of the scenes between the protagonists in this book take place around love stories. The theme of love also dominates Anna Janko's *Poems with a Shadow. The Eye* by Ewa Elżbieta Nowakowska is a book that is focused on metaphors of looking – a sensual, perceptual approach to the world is the subject of these poems. Most often this sensuousness is founded in a metaphysical perspective. Similarly conceived is the world in the latest collection by Adriana Szymańska, *Then-Today*, warmed by images of the union of death, memory, and life.

Tomasz Różycki's traditional, magic, and causative title *The Book of Rotations* has to do with a real and oneiric trip around America. Resuscitated here is the concept of a magical alliance between people and things, between organic and inorganic matter – of romantic relationships, counterparts in friendship, guardians of souls, and of the rational ordering of human life.

Paweł Kozioł's book *Heavy Metals* might convince us that images of the world can still be perceptually surprising. While subscribing to neo-avant-garde constructions of the urban, Kozioł supplements this with the most pressing of problems: pollution, ecological catastrophe, the contamination of the environment. This is the first book of Polish poetry to invoke a whole assortment of literary means to talk about what is not detectible by the senses but what is killing us (as Wolfgang Iser would say, referring to our situation after Chernobyl) – that is, the accumulation of the toxic metals of the title of the book in the air, water, and ground. Specific experiments with the senses are also proposed by Krzysztof Siwczyk in *Concentrate*. They revolve around the visualization of an increasingly dematerialized world that has not been altogether annihilated, because it passes all the while into other states of "being." The world of *Concentrate* is filled with hybrid figures, ghost and lunatic "micro-creatures." After the end of man there is an interesting phase awaiting us, when life will be organized anew, and established within a different space module, Siwczyk seems to be saying, which is why *Concentrate*, by pushing the issue of the end of all the traditional parameters we use in order to talk about our world, is not a catastrophic book, just a futurological one.

The collections of Robert Rybicki and Andrzej Sosnowski are definitely situated on the border between many worlds. They share a kind of linguistic frenzy, a Dadaism of poetics. Rybicki's *A Gram of the Brain* is a reckoning with the myth of the Word and Logos, an apologia for monstrous, warped forms, driven out of the ordered, Cartesian world. Rybicki's succinct title is a challenge to lyric and reflexive poetry; it is simultaneously an attempt to resist the images that impede the subject's consciousness in these poems. Sosnowski's *Poems*, with its central long poem *dr caligari resets the world* returns to the tradition of speech, voice, and presence, turning that tradition on its head and setting it in apocalyptic registers. We come upon similar registers in Marcin Senddecki's *Half*. Its combinatorial constructions of "bisected" and halved language, in restricting the communicative power of the poem, broaden its emotional dimension. For Senddecki, expression gains force thanks to the reduced, compressed forms of poetry. *Half* conveys above all the state of bewilderment that the subject experiences. Not wanting to set this experience in language that would favor its rationalization and perhaps trivialization, he tries to convey it in a language of leftovers, of ruins, alien to the "broad form." Bohdan Zadura's poems, meanwhile, strive for a "sociable," dialogue form in *Nightlife*. They are on the one hand a well-aimed critique of contemporary culture, and on the other – a special kind of diary, a chronicle-like notes on his different meetings with people. The title poem is a long piece one registering selected scenes from a journey to Belarus, the United States, Ukraine, and Dęblin. It is a very unusual trip, immobilizing the subject in certain events, fixing him in defined "frames," but not at all nostalgic – not an attack upon the present.

Finally, noteworthy, too, are Edward Pasewicz's collection *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, as well as Miłosz Biedrzycki's *Equatorial Life*, and Grzegorz Wróblewski's compendium *Hotel Cats: Selected Poems from 1980-2010*. These books also contain new, previously unpublished texts, opening up the syntheses performed by the process of selection to new perspectives.

Anna Kałuża

Translated by Jennifer Croft

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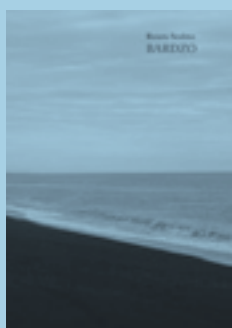
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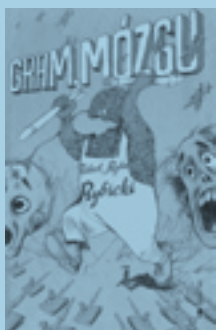
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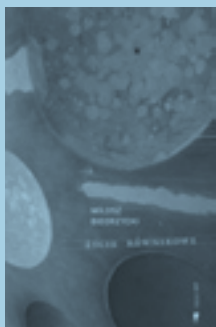
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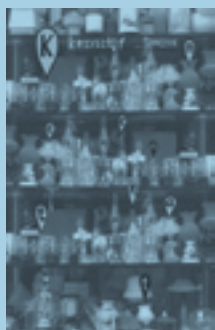
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