

**NEW
BOOKS**

DIRECTLY

**FROM
POLAND**

IK

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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
- » the Four Seasons of the Book seasonal literary festival
- » 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 at Polish 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 FOUR SEASONS OF THE BOOK FESTIVAL is the biggest Polish literary festival and takes place in several Polish cities simultaneously. The festival has four parts: Poetry Season (February), POPLIT (April), Prose Season (October), and Non-Fiction Season (November). Foreign guests have included Jonathan Carroll, Eduardo Mendoza, Boris Akunin, Alexandra Marinina, Michel Faber, Dubravka Ugrešić, Paulo Lins, Neil Gaiman, Etgar Keret, Jeffery Deaver and many others.

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 800 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 800 books, extracts from them, critical essays and publishers' addresses – everything there is to know about Polish books in Polish, English, German and Hebrew.

©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

"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 and Biserka Rajčić.

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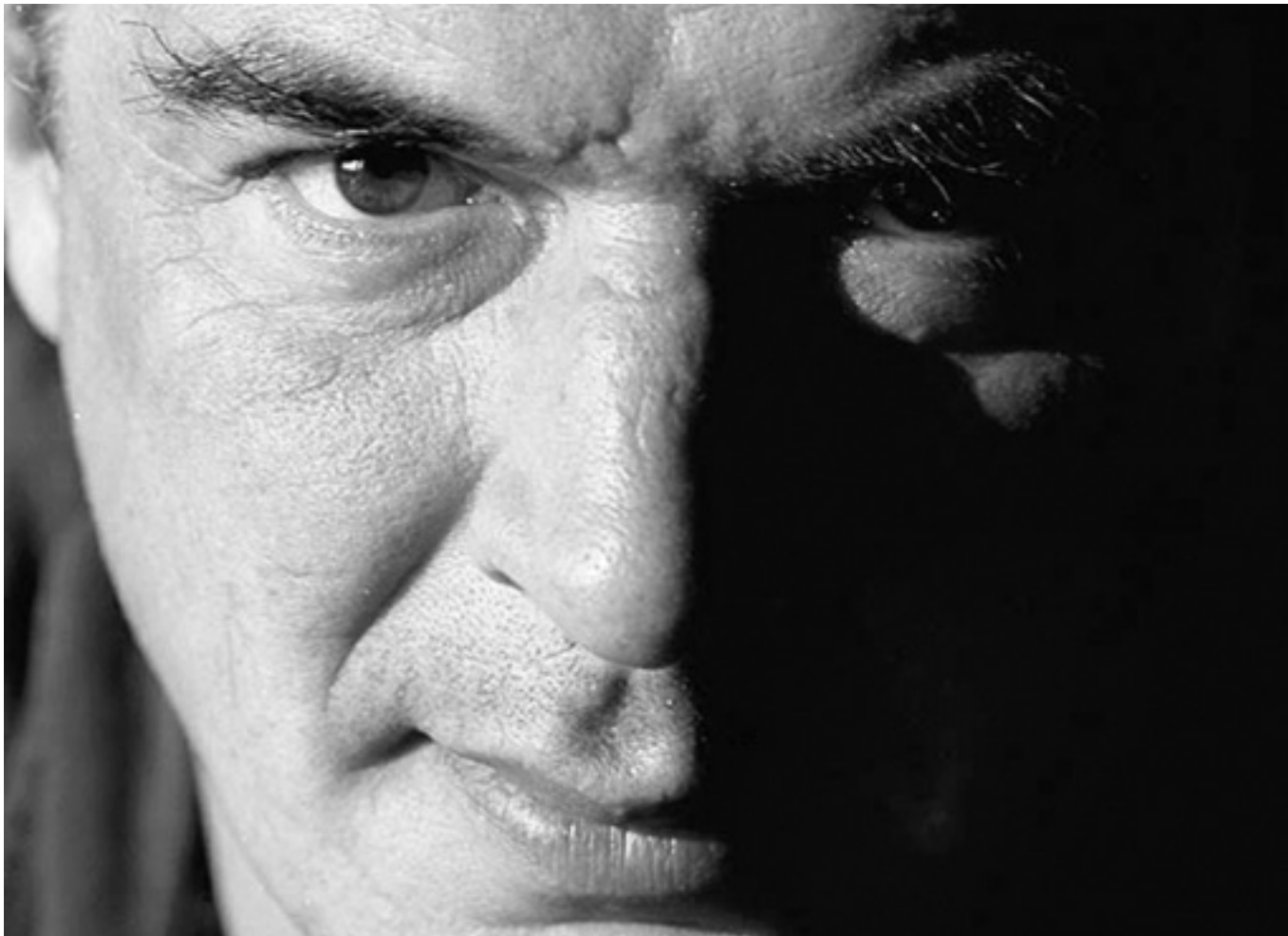


Photo: Piotr Janowski/AG

Andrzej Stasiuk (born 1960) one of the most successful and internationally ac-claimed contemporary Polish writers. He is best known for his poetic travelogues, filled with descriptions of the God forsaken corners of Eastern Europe.

In his latest novel Andrzej Stasiuk tells a tale of a very last phase of capitalism. His two main heroes – Paweł, a marketeer who circulates among the bazaars of European provinces, and Włodek, his driver – suffer a symbolic and actual defeat in their encounter with the new force. Up till this moment they'd always managed to come out on top. Paweł in particular is like a knight errant of the first phase of capitalism in these parts. This phase – which involved the distribution of cut-price imitations of name-brand goods – lasted from the end of the 1980's till the present day. Its masters were precisely folk like Paweł – self-appointed merchants, nomads of market routes, sailors who unerringly caught the winds of opportunity. They were the ones who crammed their battered automobiles with fourth-grade merchandise and drove it to the suburbs of Bucharest, Budapest, Prague, or Berlin. Society in those days resembled a starving vacuum cleaner that sucked up everything: socks, jackets, shoes, handbags, cosmetics, auto parts, housewares – all bearing stickers that said Paris-London-New York. But now the next stage has come along – dirt-cheap goods from China. In place of the cheap stuff sold till now, which lasted two or three seasons, come low-grade goods that anyone can afford and that are essentially disposable. The traveling salesmen of yesterday are relegated to the level of clerks at other people's stalls, yesterday's culture of short-lived products becomes a culture of one-time use. Asia invades Europe, not with an army, but with trade. It floods the continent with knockoffs of knockoffs, in other words merchandise the Chi-

nese copied from Central European products that were themselves copies of Western items.

If someone has the impression that Stasiuk has created a contemporary version of the story of how "the yellow race overcomes the white race," they will only partly be right. Stasiuk is less interested in portraying the victors in this capitalist duel of deceptions, more in showing us the losers – that is to say, the pariahs of Europe, inhabitants of its poorest regions, people condemned to a worse life because they live in a worse place. These people acquire the cheapest goods, but they themselves, especially the women, are also turned into merchandise. The only thing Western Europe exports to Central Europe is its trash, its used objects, the detritus of its development, while from there it imports male bodies for its harsher jobs and female bodies for its entertainment. In this way the strength of money and the weakness of the provinces cause the ideal of Europe to enter liquidation. And since history driven by money has no brakes, it is a liquidation that cannot be reversed.

Przemysław Czapliński

THE wind was blowing from over the plain, stronger and stronger. The sound of bells drifted from the village. The monks had fallen silent. The red sun was dropping toward the west. The shadows were already long and black. I could smell wood smoke and manure.

Then I saw her. She was walking along, huge and black, leading her young. The other people had spotted her too; they froze, then began to move to the side. I'd never see one that big. She was trotting along with her snout to the ground, nosing about. From time to time she paused, raised her head and smelled the wind like a hunting dog. She was leading six piglets. They ran about in every direction, mobile and fat, like balls of black mercury. Their snouts touched the ground like their mother's. They jogged onto the square with the cheap Chinese goods. The old one stayed on the main aisle between the stalls. The piglets, which were no bigger than medium-sized dogs, behaved like children. They were testing to see how much they could get away with. The mother was squealing, and it seemed they had her permission to go wherever they wanted so long as they could still hear her. They sniffed at the piles of knockoff clothing, pressing their noses among the heaps of jeans and jackets. They snorted and squeaked in their high children's voices. The people selling the Chinese clothing stood without moving and watched ever more closely. There were three men and one woman. Vietnamese more likely than Chinese. Who can tell them apart. But there was a time I had a lot of dealings with both of them, and the Vietnamese had more delicate faces. In any case they looked more like white people than the Chinese did. Though I could be wrong. They stood there and watched. They'd come west, to the edge of the Great Hungarian Plain, from the East, just like the Hungarians themselves a thousand years ago. The Hungarians had needed grass for their horses; these folk were looking for new markets for mass-produced clothes made in China. One of the piglets grabbed a jacket from the pile in its teeth and dragged it along the ground. Its brother or sister immediately joined in the game. From thirty yards away I heard the sound of ripping material. At that point one of the traders set off toward the animals, reached them and started doling out kicks. He was wearing a dark blue jacket like the one being mistreated, jeans, and white sports shoes. The young piglets began a piggy lament. Their sharp high-pitched squeals rose over the square. At this moment the mother moved into action. I saw her out of the corner of my eye. She pushed a couple of onlookers out of the way and gathered speed like a small warmed-up machine. As she drew closer to her target her strides got longer and longer. Finally she leapt into the air and knocked the Vietnamese guy off his feet. The two of them fell to the ground several feet away. The man was completely immobilized beneath the sow's huge black body. He disappeared from view. All I could see were his white Chinese shoes. They kicked once or twice, then the heels dug into the dirt and stopped moving. The mother pig had stomped him into the ground and ripped his throat open. Now it was lapping at the place and making smacking noises. The piglets ran up and stood in a tight circle. At this point not even the sports shoes could be seen. We were in a second ring of gawkers, which was gradually closing in. The animals were eating noisily with soft, warm, whimpering sounds, and all of a sudden the woman began howling in a voice like no one there had ever heard before. She moved forward with her fists pressed to her ears and approached the family of pigs as her voice rose higher and higher, the kind of voice they say can break glass.

The mother pig raised her soiled snout. The woman was still walking and howling. The animal moved a couple of steps away from the man and started to observe her, then took a step back and tensed, evidently unafraid of anything. We were all breathless from fear. We wanted the pig to stop looking about and go back to what it had begun. Twenty or thirty men and almost as many women were thinking: Keep eating the slant-eyes and leave us alone.

But the pig couldn't make up its mind. It looked at the diminutive woman with her fists at her temples and stepped back as if preparing for another attack. Finally it set off and started to gather speed like an illustration of some law of kinetics. We were all standing fifteen yards away. And then there came a whistle. Long and piercing, as if someone were pulling a thread between your ears. The sow dug its trotters into the dirt and came to a stop. The whistle had come

from the leader, the guy Wlodek had shaken hands with. The animal moved its head, looked at the woman once again, then turned round and headed back, headed for where it had come from.

The man who'd whistled was standing not far off in his black suit and his hat. He watched the pig family go. He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked across the plain into the sun.

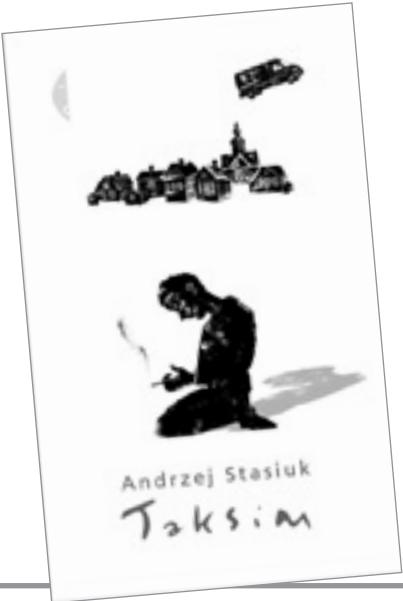
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We didn't say a word. I drove as fast as I could. We'd left right away. We were afraid of cops. We didn't want to get involved in any questioning. I kept the left wheel on the center line. You could have said we were running away. Some of them were probably still standing there staring into the dark. In Nyíregyháza we took a wrong turn, but he muttered that there was no point in backtracking, we could get back this way too, it would just take a bit longer. The road narrowed. Almost all the signposts began with "Tisza" – Tisza this, tiszta that. Muggy air came in through the open window. It smelled of marsh. You could tell there was a river. We crossed a bridge. We came into Tokay, but we bypassed the downtown. Everywhere they were black-painted barrels with billboards and signs: Bor, wine, Wein, vin, wino and so on, even in Japanese and Arabic – why not. People were sitting in gardens under umbrellas. I could see them lifting their glasses. Thirty-five miles away a black pig had ripped open a man's throat, and they were sitting drinking white wine. Coaches and automobiles lined the roadsides. We drove onto a viaduct. The highway buzzed down below. But it all ended right away. The buzz, and the movement, and the lights. The road became bumpy. The sky was still a shade lighter than the night, and it formed a backdrop for the outline of the hills. We passed a village. A few lights showed up yellow in the gloom and were extinguished. I turned on the full beams. The road climbed in gentle bends through woods. I shifted into third and glanced at the temperature gauge.

"We didn't come this way," I said.

"No. But it makes no difference," he answered. "Twelve miles through the mountains, and then it'll be on the flat and we'll almost be in Slovakia."

Translated by Bill Johnston



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Photo: Elżbieta Lempp

Jerzy Sosnowski (born 1962) is a novelist and newspaper, radio and television journalist who has written five works of fiction and two books of essays.....

Idzi's Installation is a contemporary psychological novel covering a wide range of social issues. It has the virtues of the so-called novel of ideas, and could also be called a Catholic novel, in that it presents the dilemmas of the modern-day Catholic and assesses the condition of Polish Catholicism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The story is set in contemporary Warsaw, mainly in the world of journalists. The plot centres on a simple situation: the main character, an experienced middle-aged journalist discovers out of the blue that he has a grown-up son – the Idzi of the title. Idzi's mother asks him to intervene, because her son has got into a very strange mess – he is suffering from religious mania and has become a sort of self-proclaimed prophet. What has happened to Idzi and why? Is he really the journalist's son? However, seeking the answers to these and related questions is clearly not the main point in this novel. In terms of knowledge and ideas the background elements seem more important. It is behind the scenes that a multidimensional, lively and extremely interesting "duel of ideas" takes place, reaching a confrontation between different ethical attitudes and conflicts of conscience. The central issue is, so to speak, the trouble with being a Catholic, especially when you are a well educated middle-class person operating in the post-modern world. Sosnowski has captured the dilemmas and paradoxes of the Catholic identity in a shrewd way, and is evidently highly familiar with this issue. There are various areas of conflict, including quandaries involving Catholic sexual ethics, where exactly the "free-thinking believers" fit in, and

tensions between conservative and liberal trends within the Church. *Idzi's Installation* is an intellectually commendable novel, inspiring as well as superbly and thoughtfully written.

Dariusz Nowacki

WALDEK went into the “Cross-roads” café and took a seat in the corner next to a glass screen. From here he could see the entire room, and out of the corner of his eye some trees, already touched with autumnal yellow, with the outline of Ujazdowski Castle emerging hazily behind them. It may have been the conversation with Robert that made him look at the people around him differently than before. The pallid waitress with clenched lips who brought his toast and coffee seemed on the point of having a rabid fit. Two old ladies chatting over microscopic glasses of liqueur were clearly yielding to the pleasure of bitching about their relatives. One of them started whooping with laughter that sounded like a deep, phlegmy cough. A sweaty fat guy was making advances to a long-haired brunette – he was giving her lustful looks, while she was responding with a cynical expression, as if reckoning how much she could extract from him. The entire place reminded Waldek of an aquarium full of monsters: bug-eyed idiots, sneering fools grinning stupidly, smarmy hypocrites and chronic traitresses wearing masks of foundation and lipstick. And behind his back, in the cars moving along the canal of Łazienkowska Highway, came a two-way flow of arseholes making dishonest fortunes, slanderers persecuting each other and conmen thinking up wicked schemes, all in the middle of their dark dealings. And perverts, loads of perverts obsessed with the idea of copulating with corpses, animals or children. And there he was among them – from the standpoint of Absolute Justice, in which he did occasionally believe, also not looking his best – waiting to see his first love again many years on.

Waldek checked his inbox twice a day, after breakfast and in the evening, mainly to delete the spam that was always flooding it, and also to check what latest problem had once again prevented the producer of *Art-chitecture* from inviting him to join a panel of guests (how many of them were child molesters? how many were thieves?). He had almost deleted that message the day before yesterday, because he had no patience for e-mails without a subject, but he had failed to hit the “Trash” icon with the cursor, and as at work he had learned a few superstitions, he took it as a sign and dutifully opened the message.

“Waldek, I’m taking the liberty of addressing you by your first name as I’m sure you will remember me. The nice lady at the editorial office refused to give me your phone number, and of course I have no cause for complaint, especially as you’ll probably see this message within the next twenty-four hours anyway. Twenty years ago we were close friends – sorry to bring it up, but I remember what a wonderful guy you are, and I’m sure you won’t refuse my request. Because it is has to do with what happened then. I NEED YOUR HELP!!! I haven’t bothered you in all these years, but now I really have no alternative. Please call me as soon as possible. You cannot imagine how important it is. I’ll be expecting you. My mobile number is 0699996999. Please, please don’t let me down. Jola Janik.”

Jola Janik. Ah, Jola Janik. They had met at the very start of college, in a post-August heatwave, at a student’s union meeting. A year older than him, as the representative for the economics and management faculty she had thrilled him with the charming way she imposed her views on everyone. She gave the impression of a girl who knows exactly what she wants. They had soon become inseparable, but at the same time there had been something toxic about their relationship from the very start. Whenever she shone in company, he felt pride, but also envy, because it seemed to him likely that one fine day she would go out with someone else – and he wasn’t reassured when after a while it became obvious that among her male friends she was seen as a mate on equal terms rather than a mouth-watering beauty. Whenever he gave in to her on all sorts of matters, which is mainly what happened, he felt angry that after escaping his parents’ control he had once again fallen into the hands of someone who always knew better (in those remote times the difference of a year made her seem to him much older and more experienced). And there was also his Catholic upbringing, the subject of endless difficulties. Jola didn’t understand Waldek’s complications that you should wait until you got married, that if you really love each other, you don’t want to treat the other person like an object,

and a kiss is not a sin only provided you keep your thoughts in check. Since the eighth class at primary school Waldek had been an altar boy, and had very often heard how boys forced their girlfriends to “prove” their love, but nothing had prepared him for the reverse situation, where he would have to explain why in the double room they happened to get during a student touring club trip he lay on his bed like a log instead of moving across to the other one. He had never heard anyone laugh like that before – sanely, and yet it seemed to him mockingly. Soon he began to shift the borders of what he was allowed to do (as if under pressure, but willingly enough), and got himself tangled in multi-storey labyrinths of justifications and excuses, ever more perfect, and yet useless as soon as he went to church on Sunday morning and felt unworthy to receive Communion. What he found oddest was that, like in fact most of his friends in the Solidarity era and during martial law, Jola declared herself to be a Catholic too. Finally, unable to bear oscillating more and more rapidly between heaven and hell, acquiescence and damnation, under the influence of Saint Augustine he decided to let it all go to hell and become a priest. They were in the Karkonosze mountains at the time (by now Waldek’s parents had stopped making a fuss about the trips they took alone together, and just saw their son off with a protracted stare as he hurriedly tossed his rucksack on his back and rushed off). Jola could see something was happening to him, and he had even burst into tears in her presence like a child; finally he had confessed that he felt drawn to something different, that he had to think about himself and so on – he hadn’t been able to utter the word “seminary”. She had guessed for herself; she had called him a snotty little brat, wished him “fun among the eunuchs” (he hadn’t forgotten that), packed that very same day and gone to the bus stop. When he had offered to take her there, she had curtly told him to bugger off. He had never seen her again. He heard she had taken a year off, and then that she had moved out of Warsaw. In the context of these memories, the epithet she used in her message, describing him as a “wonderful guy”, seemed rather suspicious.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Photo: Elżbieta Lempp

Zbigniew Kruszyński (born 1957) is a prize-winning author, very popular with readers and critics alike. He lectures at Uppsala and Stockholm universities.

The main character in Zbigniew Kruszyński’s latest novel is a past-master at using language to describe the world. When the reign of communism is in its decline in Poland he makes himself useful to the secret police, for whom in exchange for a passport and certain advantages that will make life easier he reports on his meetings with people. He starts his career as a collaborator in quite a cynical way, but in time he gets more deeply involved in working for the opposition and becomes a double agent of unclear identity. During martial law he goes away to Switzerland, where he organizes fund raising for the underground wing of Solidarity. He returns to Poland as a hero of the opposition and goes into hiding. Fed up with the prolonged conspiracy, he denounces another underground activist in hiding to the security service, himself falls victim to denunciation, is arrested and spends several years in prison. After the changes of 1989 he does not try for a high position, but simply leaves for Stockholm as a diplomat. Apart from that he remains an outsider.

The sharp end of the novel does not actually spike and expose the main character, despite his cynicism and moral indifference, because it is impossible to define who he is: a traitor or a fighter for a just cause, because he is not the typical coward or traitor, but rather a narcissist and hedonist. If there is something off-putting about him, it is his smug self-satisfaction, or his tendency to exploit the women with whom he has affairs. In his affairs he prefers the “love triangle”, and has a similar

arrangement in his relationship with the secret police and the opposition, and so in this book every commitment immediately seeks for itself an antithesis.

First and foremost the main character is a writer, in other words someone who records events. For him, the actual writing process involves a special, affected ritual. Moreover, Kruszyński stresses that the style is the man, i.e. his hero fulfils himself chiefly in language and in his ability to describe the world. But in his style we cannot fail to recognize Kruszyński’s own style. So is the author simply saying: “I could have been like this too if my life had developed differently”? Or maybe: “There is a particular cruelty and moral ambiguity in the very process of recording life”? Or more simply: “A record of events is always literature, in which it’s no use seeking the objective truth”?

Jerzy Jarzębski

“YOU have a gift for observation” – it all started from that remark. I do have a gift for observation, and so let’s describe the setting sun, in detail. When it hides behind the beavertail tiles on the Jesuits’ roof, it continues to shine on the spire of the old Piarist college.

“You have a gift for observation, so please do some observing,” said the officer, putting down a passport, a dark-blue booklet, valid for all countries, said the stamp rather prematurely, because you would never go anywhere without a green card for crossing the border, a small piece of cardboard, which the officer was still holding in his hand, toying with it like an ace or a king. “We don’t want much,” he said. Just for me to keep my eyes open. Even so it’d be hard for me to close them and fall asleep. Going to the West, there’s no denying it, involves a visual shock. We’ll be thrilled by everything, the shops, the rubbish. You can touch it all and sniff it all.

We’ll be amazed to find that the cans of beer really do contain the beer described on them and not just air. The shampoos are full of shampoo, the wines of wine. The vodka is just as strong but five times dearer. We’ll carry around bottles we’ve smuggled in and try to off-load them on mean restaurateurs. In the pharmacy we’ll surrender to the scent samples, creating new combinations with Slavonic sweat. We’ll walk about hungry and thirsty. Dissolve soup powder in cold tap water because hot water has to be boiled somewhere. To go with our subsidised Parisian baguette we’ll gnaw on a Krakowska sausage that’s already going off, a delicacy that deserved better treatment.

We’ll get a passport, with a green card – the officer finally tossed it on the desk. “We?” I said in surprise, glancing sideways. Yes, am I planning to drop my lady friend? No, I wasn’t. We’ll also get a hard currency allowance, a hundred and thirty dollars – we’ll see how far that goes, what the market determines and the insane, totally unrestrained price war. It’s not hard to manufacture at the devil of a rate, and then sell at an undue profit. In about fifteen hours for the national average. How much harder it is to be restrained, develop a range and plan demand.

They’re not expecting much, just casual observations. Who earnestly studies the old masters in the Louvre. Who spends the third month selling pancakes, or having a drop of Grand Marnier towards the end of the working day. Who goes to bed with the girl whose grant ran out ages ago. Why is the old professor, who gets full board and lodging at our research centre on rue Laurisson, always turning up among the students at the canteen on rue Mabillon, reeking of plonk, to exploit the plebeian right to a free extra portion of pommes frites. Won’t the cheap, heavy oil enliven his dormant yet active gallstones, which are waiting for what, a battle cry? Is it really possible to take up a strategic position on one of the arches above the murky Seine from where at dusk you can see an orange balloon getting impaled on the Eiffel tower without bursting?

As I ran out of the police station I could feel the passport stamping an ardent rectangle on my chest. It was late spring and life in the park above the moat was transforming itself before my very eyes, clothing itself in something, in a sort of train or veil. The group of mates roused from their long hibernation were drinking apple wine left over from autumn. The grannies had unwrapped their headscarves. and their sallow wrinkled skin resented not being smooth and tanned. A pair of starlings crossed paths with a pair of mallards, creating a wobbly, diamond-shaped chessboard over the water. A pair of sleepy policemen were resting on a dilapidated bench, and their caps laid on either side of them looked like a tribute to those fallen in service – the only things missing were a coffin and a pall.

The world, which only that morning seemed to have gone unbearably wrong – the blunt razor blade had left a half-inch swelling, there had been a stink of gas, the rubbish had instantly spilled itself onto the landing, and as he left the summons to the police station the postman had scrutinised me with a look of pity, his extremely curious pupils scanning me from under his peaked cap – the world which was a chaos of things to get done: fetch the bedding from the laundry, with an overdose of starch again, so it’s like sleeping on a tablecloth; buy calcium and whatever vitamin they had at the pharmacy; take my shoes to the cobbler who inhales the glue; ex-

haust the shopping list at the grocery by the tram loop as much as possible with items to go with the bread already bought earlier at the bakery; buy alcohol and orange juice for vouchers at the hotel where you don’t have to be staying in order to get drunk; ask in the bookshop if they still don’t have a novel by the author of *The Fields*, because we’re starting to doubt he ever wrote it; go to the university library and hand in the slip for a banned book with a note from the permissions department allowing me access, and then read it bit by bit under the watchful eye of the librarian, a peroxide blonde with a gaze as leaden as type, storing whatever’s allowed in my head, because maybe descriptions of the sunrise in Radom aren’t forbidden; call my mother from the payphone under the Arcades, which was jammed so it didn’t rush you, reassure her that everything’s fine, yes, I’m all right, feeding myself and digesting, please don’t send any parcels, I don’t need anything, except perhaps for the meaning of it all, but that they won’t accept at the post office in the window with a view of the steel scales.

Everything that only a few hours ago had seemed to be falling apart, dissipating entirely, never to be made whole again despite increased doses of starch and glue, after coming out of the police station onto the solid granite steps flooded in sunlight, above the closed ring of the moat – so what if it was festering, coated in tiny duckweed – suddenly gained unity and splendour.

I wanted to run ahead, I wanted to be part of the unity. Observations bombarded me from all sides, and after only a few dozen yards I had already earned enough for the passport and at least one document. In a corner of the lock cut off from the world I discovered a pair of young lovers; harder, harder, demanded her red fingernails, in vain, because he had long since let go, but the surface of the water hadn’t even shuddered, the duckweed hadn’t blinked. A little further on, in the passage between the car park and the back of the Opera I came upon a friend from my group – all starting with the letter K, the curse of overpopulated subjects – pissing out a beer with an admixture of other fluids. Hardly had he made space in his bladder than he instantly suggested another one. I didn’t refuse, so we went into the beer tent at Teatralny Square, from where I had an entire panorama, and a cacophony of voices all around me.

Swearwords cut through the air. Someone – over here – would do it, but not at that price. Someone else would do it – here, right here – but not by that deadline. For a moment I thought I could organise it, match up the prices and deadlines. Complete the entire agenda and range of orders. I made notes. “Here!” But I needed a notebook. A Moleskine would have been useful, I thought immoderately, a black one that fitted in my hand and my pocket, as used by Beckett, Hemingway too.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Photo: Kasia Kobel

Michał Witkowski (born 1975) is a writer, columnist and journalist. His novel *Lubiewo* has been translated into eleven languages.

Michał Witkowski's literary tour de force was *Lubiewo*, a novel about the homosexual underground in communist Poland and the beginnings of gay culture in today's Poland. In this and the books that followed Witkowski has shown himself to be a superb observer of social behaviour, gifted with humour and an excellent ear for language, the chronicler of an era of great change, in which stereotyping and fixed identities have come to an end, and less obvious things have finally had their day. The mixed fortunes of his characters, mainly arising from their alternative sexual orientation, can be regarded as a metaphor for the changes that have undermined things that once seemed certain and universal. It is no accident that the epigraph opening his latest novel is the first line from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "Of bodies changed to various forms I sing". It is a story about Poland, and thus about a part of Europe that is undergoing a violent change of form, affecting people's beliefs, habits, criteria for making judgements, needs and predilections. The Margot of the title is an unpredictable woman endowed with a large sexual appetite and a very male profession: she is a trucker, driving a refrigerated lorry on international routes. The other main character is Waldek Tangerine, a village lad who has made a name for himself on *Big Brother* and is a rising star of stage and television. They meet unexpectedly at the parish house of a businessman-priest who has established a media-entertainment empire, and whom Margot meets through her friend from a big Mafioso's money-laundering hotel. These two and a whole gallery of marginal charac-

ters – Asia, a new Polish saint who talks on the radio; Greta, the epitome of macho who drives a German truck and has been given a woman's nickname; Waldek's lover, who is known as the Star Growing Old Gracefully; and a small crowd of people from television and show business who now embody the new elite – all feature in Witkowski's wonderful book.

Marek Zaleski

“WATCH your driving, you filthy little prick! Trying to push past me, dickhead?

Can't you see I'm carrying a dangerous load? Dangerous for you! What's the matter? Doesn't Mommy love you? You wanna cause a smash? Do we have a weather situation here? We sure do. Road conditions as you see them? It's been pissing down for a week. The traction ain't exactly shit-hot! It's pretty crap weather, really shitty. A depression, they're saying on the radio, a depression from over Scandinavia! Welcome to the July of the century. Run over my head, why don't you?! You creep! You're a bit fucked, aren't you, boy? Kiss my ass! Fuck you, motherfucker! Over and out!"

Until finally I stick my head out of the rolled-down window so my gesture has a better chance of penetrating his thick skull. Then he sounds his horn and drives onto the hard shoulder. He makes various lecherous faces and gestures to show what he'd like to do to me. Ha, in your dreams, daddy-O! Get lost, pal. Have a nice day now. Your crankshaft's too small for me, man, ha ha ha! They think if there's a chick driving they're gonna have to drag along. Honour won't let him drive behind a woman, so he's gotta overtake. Even if there's a junction. But I'm already going at breakneck speed anyway, because I'm getting fu... but shush. And straight up he's got lecherous thoughts. All because he saw a chick! The road is a chickless desert. Zero babes per kilometre. Then he says to me on the CB:

"Hey, Margot." That's all he's capable of saying. "Hey, Margot, pull over, let's have a chat! Bye now. Out."

"That's the kind of deal you only get from T-mobile. No way, asshole, fuck you! Over and out. Go find some low bridges."

"Same to you, sister!"

"Same to me? You creep! Can't you see I'm a reefer? And you're a PKS right? From the state trucking corp. Know your place, sleazeball. And what the fuck are you giving me those signs with all your lights for? Want the bears to bite you? The boys are right here with their hair drier at the ready!" He's got "Kazek" written on his front window. A real little jerk with a moustache and a baseball cap marked HBO. "Go get fucked, Kazek, pal, we're just coming up to Whoresville, so maybe you'll get one Black Greta's finished with! You'll get the Cripple, ha ha ha! I've gotta watch the road now. Bye now, watch your width!"

"Traction."

"Width."

"Traction."

"Width, I said, goddammit, I know traction's important. But it's a sacred custom to say 'watch your width', and you're not gonna suddenly up and change the traditions of the road! Traction, sure, but in winter."

"So like, where's this hotel? They got chicks, right? Out."

"Left, left and left again," I shout, while turning fast to the right, right and right again. You're hit, fuck you, and sunk!"

"Hey, officer, what for? What? Well, there's no speedometer...But I was making a stop, Titz can be my witness. I've only been going for an hour. My speedometer's had it, and I've got to transport this meat or it'll go off.

"You ask my boss. It's a real old banger. They just don't make the MANs like they used to. But I like it. It's so, well...so... so big! I talk to it like a woman, or rather an animal, I call it 'Ugly Bessie'. Ugly Bessie - it's a cow's name, like Buttercup or Daisy - but for an ugly, lazy, clumsy one. But if you treat her right, she gives pretty good milk. A fine of fifteen thousand? Mister Officer! Big vehicle, big fine? Ha, ha, ha, that's an old one, pity it's not funny. Well, all right, here's the company address, Mariola Freight Limited, send it to the boss, Radarowa Street, Warsaw, you ask there, they'll all tell you. You've got a knife right there, just go ahead and finish me off. The boss'll go crazy on the spot. You what? Pressure not topped up? I did top it up. How much?" Fucking bears! A guy and a chick - there are lady bears now! "I've got to pull in at the nearest parking lot? I'm out of here! Hope I never see you again, officer." Screw you, and screw you, bear babe! What a thankless job it is to be a pig - all cops are wankers, da di da all cops are wankers, all cops are waaaaankers....

They may not be pumped up all the way, but no sweat, I make it to the Nevada Center. This is America, though in a bit of a built

in a field state. First of all I pump up the bloody tires. That's it. I'm bushed. Then I fill it up with go-go juice and as a reward I get a meal voucher worth fifteen zees. I take off my gloves, throw them on the seat, switch off the heating, grab my purse, touch up my lipstick in a side mirror the size of a dinner plate, lock the cab and go to the john. The men's, because there isn't any other. This isn't a chicks' world. I take out a marker pen and write on the wall:

I'm a babe

With real boobs

My whole life's

Gone down the tubes

because sometimes something just tugs at my heartstrings and I've got to write poetry in the little boys' room. I take out a fancy gold mirror and tart myself up. I make myself my own mini Paris, kinda spoiled by the godawful stink and the noises from the next cabin. They eat all those hot dogs and pies, burgers and fries they sell here, the whole lot dripping with fat, and that's the result. I'll just add a satirical cartoon of Greta and we'll sign it Herman Transport - that should get her moving. Someone's been here before me with a pink marker pen and drawn a princess with stars in her eyes, a magic wand, enormous boobs and a CB radio pressed to her ear, and it's signed: "Asia, the Patron Saint of Truckers". So what! I've gone and done a portrait of myself too next to the poem, sharpening up my burger-bloated figure a good deal, and I tidy my hair a bit, because I got up at five today in a parking lot and I've been on the road for two days now.

Freshened up, I go to McDonald's. I chow down at the "best table" where the Russkies sit, because I'm a reefer - I drive a refrigerator truck, and that's the aristocracy. Right next to the aquarium. Because at the Nevada there's a strict hierarchy - there are three diners, of which McDonald's is numero uno, and inside it there's a fish tank that only the big fat fish can sit next to, that means the reefers: me, Greta, Zbyszek, Ilaj and the rest, and the Russkies in the fur hats who never stop arguing about who got from Amsterdam to Moscow in how much time. They even count the minutes. It's a sort of game. (Sure, you got home, got the vehicle up on a jack and left your wheels spinning!) Outside McDonald's the parking lot boss has even built a menagerie - there are peacocks wandering about and cages with rabbits inside.

So I take my tray over to the best table. Right now the guys are playing cards. After reefers in the hierarchy come tanker trucks (they eat in their cabs), because they've always got a lot of goods left "on the walls" that dribbles - my pal Baldie transports chocolate, and for every trip he pours about forty litres of chocolate out of the walls into these ordinary plastic mineral water bottles, then he strengthens it, and it's dee-licious! I just love those bottles! You strip off the plastic with a knife and you've got a perfect cast of a soda bottle - they're like chocolate Santas, but with a filling. Lowest in the hierarchy are the transporters, the state PKS truckers and the guys who take trailer homes to Germany - we all know what those trailers are like, great big empty things, I ask you. They eat out of the bowls they've brought along or whip something up on a gas stove next to the truck. When they ask on the ferry what nationality you are so the Poles won't get confused with other nations, they ask a PKS guy "Are you a Polak?" and he replies, "No, a PKS". Ha ha ha! And they've gotta know who's who to make sure the reefers don't get put in a single cabin with, say, three transporter drivers, because that's an insult.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Photo: Elżbieta Lempp

Michał Komar (born 1946) is a doctor of humanities, novelist, essayist and author of numerous film scripts, theatre plays and television screenplays.

Once in a while surprising, unusual books appear that do not fit the norms of current literary output in any way. This is undoubtedly true of Michał Komar’s *Initiations*, a book as intriguing as it is flamboyant. In fact it is hard to define where exactly this book is located on the literary map, because it borders on the genres of fiction, essay, philosophical treatise and... cookery book, as Komar makes smooth transitions from describing Poland’s tangled fortunes in the past few centuries to detailed analyses of Sophocles’ *Antigone* or Jan Potocki’s *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, from subtle reflections on philosophical ideas to descriptions of sophisticated dishes and their ingredients. The main characters are Mrs E. and her servant (who is also the narrator). The elderly Mrs E., who comes from a good family with centuries of tradition, is well read and intelligent, as well as being gifted with a wisdom about life arising from a wide range of experiences. In Mrs E.’s house (or rather houses) the servant takes care of just about everything, though his main fulfilment is in the role of chef, a specialist in dishes that you would seek in vain on the menus of even the very best restaurants, and a connoisseur of top quality alcohol. He is also the object of his employer’s passion for teaching – Mrs E. considers it her duty to educate “the lower orders”. The narrator describes the last few months of Mrs E.’s life, mainly focusing on the breakfast, lunch and dinner parties at which she and her guests (including a popular actor and a not widely read yet interesting writer) sit at

a sumptuous table having conversations full of digressions. In brief, these are real orgies of the intellect and taste. In his new book Komar has gone for a remarkable combination of solid intellectual discourse and a sort of burlesque, evident not least in the comedy and irony that permeate the relationship between Mrs E. and her servant. As a result, this is a book that makes the reader think without ever boring him at all. It has been put together like a perfectly assembled meal (the culinary comparison is highly appropriate here) – offering a seductive abundance of flavours, it is satisfying and at the same time easy to digest.

Robert Ostaszewski

MRS E. once told me that during puberty her younger sister, the Belle de Jour mentioned earlier, treated snails with disgust, if not sheer hatred, urinating on them, stamping on them, coating them in paraffin and setting them alight – all for reasons of morality, to wit that snails were associated in her mind with the sinful inner secrets of the female sex, which Father Wincenty had readily warned her against. The obsession subsided once Belle de Jour began to suspect that where the pervasion of the essence of sin was concerned, repulsion should not be her only counsel. In this instance a touch of practical curiosity also comes in handy.

As for me, although plucking them is rather a bore, I regard thrushes as a dish worthy of attention. It is simplest to stew them in thinly cut slices of bacon, adding butter, salt and pepper, then put then in the oven for a few minutes to go brown. Alternatively one can also cut off the breasts with the breastbone, stew the rest of the meat including the stomach and liver, to which one can add two or three chicken livers, with shallots and pork fat; then chop it all up finely and blend it with butter, pepper, salt, possibly also some herbs according to preference, though I would avoid juniper, and two egg yolks. Spread this mince thickly on rounds of French bread, place the thrush breasts on top of the mince, cover them tightly with strips of bacon and put them in the oven. When the bacon starts to go brown, one must discard it, and coat the thrushes with butter. Out of respect for the order of nature, I would wish the thrush to be surrounded by snails coated in breadcrumbs and fried in butter. I note from experience that thrushes are covered by a total protection order, with the exception of those covered by seasonal protection, the fieldfare and the mistle thrush, which are succulent if care is taken. In my dreams, I would serve a Hermitage with the birds, or maybe a Saint-Joseph, in both of which, apart from the dominant Syrah, there is a touch of Marsanne or Roussanne. Perhaps also a Barolo from Silvio Grasso.

At this point I must add that K. the writer's deep descent into silence was not a one-off act. I would say it was more like a series of events. First our guest sank into an armchair by the fireplace, and his face assumed a dark purple shade.

"Is there something troubling you?" asked Mrs E.
"I heard the voice of the Lord," he replied and closed his left eye, while the right stared fixedly at Mrs E., malevolently and challengingly, for such are the appearances produced by immobile stares.

To which Mrs E. averted her gaze from the eye of K. the writer and, continuing her conversation about the work of Sophocles, she said: "Let us remember that in the very first instance the order to cast the corpse of Polyneices to the dogs and vultures as prey did not meet with the clear objection of Theban public opinion as represented by the Chorus of old men. Let us speak rather of acceptance. Of acceptance not free of discomposure. Because it is an apparently appropriate, apparently just order, issued by a man of strict principles with regard to the remains of a traitor, as a warning to others, in other words useful in an educational way, but on the other hand rather excessive. Moreover, an objection might anger Creon and bring painful punitive consequences down on the Chorus, including the death penalty. Would it be worth taking the risk? Who would be so foolish as to stick their neck out? One has to act prudently. And so, by acknowledging the ruler's right to decide what to do with the corpse of the city's enemy, the Chorus Leader is also making it plain that he would prefer to keep his distance from this matter. It is not improbable, he says, that Creon is free to apply the law both to the living and to the dead, so let the body be cast to the dogs, but on condition that we do not participate. Let the young men do it! Sophocles was a perceptive man, so he realised that pure, naive Youth is willing to perform rash deeds, though they often lead to misfortune. Old age by contrast dons the festive robes of sagacity to conceal the fact that it feels all right about this foolishness, which also ends unhappily, for can anyone be happy who feels all right about foolishness?"

Just then K. the writer opened his left eye and closed the right one.

"Yes, yes, foolishness! There's no need to pretend!" screamed Mrs E. "Do you remember the moment when the Guard brings

Creon the news that Polyneices' corpse has been buried by an unknown perpetrator? What does the Chorus Leader do then? My dear Sir, the Chorus Leader starts scheming! Why? Because he can see that opposing an order of Creon's carries the risk of the death penalty, yet someone has come forward and taken this fatal risk. Who, for God's sake? Who could be that foolish? Or maybe not foolish? Maybe just pretending to be foolish?

"The first commandment of old age, the one that keeps it alive, is to cling onto life tightly. At any cost and for the sake of comfort. Thus the prudence of old age, evolved from experience, bids one to think that if a daredevil has come along and broken Creon's ban, there must be some power behind him. What sort of power? Strong enough to forsake allegiance to Creon, in other words considerable power. And the fact that it is anonymous? The people of Thebes have never seen such miracles before! So would it not be prudent to mollify this power in advance somehow, but without falling into Creon's disfavour in the process? And that is why the Chorus Leader starts jabbering at Creon about reason, which suggests to him that the gods may have taken part in the act of burying Polyneices' remains... Reason? But surely that is the last thing one might expect from the Chorus. Creon knows that, because he shrugs off the Chorus Leader's words, saying: '...stop gabbling before you turn out to be old and foolish.

"And how does Antigone respond to that?"
"In Antigone's eyes the Chorus are a bunch of old men whose fear has deprived them of decency. They are old and foolish! Ever ready to ruminate on man in general, reflecting that although he's so mighty, so terribly ingenious – for he knows how to sail, plough the land using subjugated oxen, build houses and blend medicines – even so fate will sting him, the mortal, for there's no escaping Hades. Christ, how solemn that is! How ponderous! But when the time comes to deal not with man in general, but someone alive and suffering, like the woman standing before Creon, the old men in the Chorus can do no more than state that instead of remaining obstinate, the girl should yield to misfortune, or else she will bring woe on herself, just like her father Oedipus. For this matter is too hard for her, both mentally and morally! To put it in a nutshell, one has to die young, with a pure and naive soul. If one fails to do so, then in old age one should beware of both senile sagacity and youthful ecstasy. And don't strike up friendships with members of the Chorus!"

At this K. the writer closed his left eye and opened the right. The purple on his cheeks set about mixing with pallor, just like sour cherry sauce at the moment when you add the cream to it. I mention sour cherry sauce because I know from my junior colleagues that in schools of *nouvelle cuisine* they serve wild fowl with it, as if they had forgotten about hawthorn sauce. They must have forgotten. Take a glass of hawthorn fruits, clean them of hairs and seeds, boil, and once they are soft, rub them through a sieve. Mix with a roux of butter and flour, a glass of red wine, a clove and some stock, simmer for half an hour, strain, and add the sauce to the roasted birds. In my childhood hawthorn sauce also accompanied roast wild boar – in those days a few puréed juniper berries were added to it.

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Photo: Włodzimierz Wasyluk

Jacek Bocheński (born 1926) is an eminent essayist and journalist, as well as a novelist and translator from German and Latin. From 1997–99 he was president of the Polish PEN Club.

This novel about Tiberius completes Jacek Bocheński's Roman trilogy. The first part, *Divine Julius* (1961) and the second, *Naso the Poet* (1967), were read as examples of "Aesopian" literature, which escapes into the language of allusion and the metaphor of historical costume as a way of smuggling unprintable truths past the censor. In the character of Julius Caesar the figure of Joseph Stalin could be seen, and the novel about Ovid seemed to be describing the fate of the exiled poet Joseph Brodsky. *Tiberius Caesar* bids us look at those novels in a new light. In telling the story of a great ruler, a man who wanted to change the world but was ill-starred and had the historians against him, Bocheński writes about age-old human passions, fears and desires, terror and courage, the nature of power, and the role of necessity and chance in our life. He also considers what is historical truth, what is cruelty and what is sexuality, and asks the question: "what does it mean to be oneself?" Like the earlier ones, this novel too teaches the lesson that human nature never changes. But thanks to this message this novel about Tiberius, which Bocheński started writing in 1970 and abandoned for several decades when even his friends found his descriptions of Roman decadence too extreme and sexually bold, is also about our modern era. As the narrator of his novel Bocheński has a tour guide (in *Divine Julius* it was an antiquarian, and in *Naso the Poet* it was a compère and an investigator). Timescales mix, so do the voices of ancient historians and characters in the novel, and also those of the people taking part in the tourist trip. Bocheński's narrator conducts a po-

lemic with the ancient and modern Italian Marxists who ended up as the spiritual mentors of the Red Brigades (Bocheński is also the author of *Blood-Red Italian Sweetmeats*, an excellent book about terrorism). This expedition to ancient Rome and its provinces is a journey deep into the soul of modern-day man, the heir to Tiberius and his equal.

Marek Zaleski

COME ON, hurry up! The accelerated pace of the world. The new comedy of life. But of course, applause is essential. Right now, from the very start. Ladies and gentlemen, you are invited to a session of the Senate in Rome. A murmur runs through the public of some two thousand – that’s who you are. The session is being held at the Curia, a historical building on the Forum, recently restored by Julius Caesar, and carefully completed by Augustus. As I conduct you inside, note the high walls and the long, rectangular nave – in the middle, please, on either side there are parallel rows of seats. Please find yourself a place. Excellent acoustics. Today’s agenda includes only one item, well, all right, two items: the first citizen’s statement and a debate. *What first citizen? Who appointed him? By what right?* A murmur among the opposition. *It’s a put-up job! Manipulation! Provocation! Who appointed Tiberius as first citizen?* In the city of Nola, straight after the death of Augustus, it was announced that Tiberius had assumed power. Applause. *Maybe Livia appointed him?* Murmurs, applause. *He is her son, that’s all. But that does not authorise her to declare Tiberius first citizen.* All right, I, the tour guide... applause... please pay attention. I am authorised to announce... *Authorised by whom?* By Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book One, paragraph seven. Whistles, applause. I am authorised to announce that at the present time Tiberius is not yet performing the function of first citizen. Whistles. *Not yet?* He has not summoned this session as first citizen. *Illegally! Illegally!* Hubbub among the opposition. He has summoned this session legally by force of the tribune’s entitlements that are his right and by no other... *Caesar! Caesar!* An ovation.... and by no other... *Caesar! Caesar!* My words are lost in the tumult. Suddenly a lone voice cries: *Who killed Agrippa Postumus?* Please do not disrupt... *Postumus! Postumus! Postumus!* *Agrippa Postumus! Where is Agrippa Postumus?* There is no such item on today’s agenda. *Who killed him?* Please be quiet. The agenda includes the son’s statement about honouring his late father. *And a debate.* And a debate.

Once again I insist that you please be quiet. The announcements will be read out. The consuls of the current term have sworn an oath of loyalty to the first citizen. *What first citizen? The first citizen is dead.* All right, the son of the deceased. *The dead man never wanted that son. It’s usurpation!* Voice: *But he adopted him.* Voice: *Because he had to.* The second announcement will be read out. Applause. The sworn-in consuls have already administered further oaths themselves... Tacitus: *As if the old republican regime still existed.* They administered the oath to Seius Strabo, prefect of the Praetorian Guard (information for those in the know: Seius is the father of Sejanus, the future prefect of the Guard, whose final fortunes will one day be announced by light signals on Capreae). Public security... applause... is guaranteed. Applause. They have administered the oath to the head of the supply programme... Applause. Provisioning the population... Voice: *Who killed Agrippa?*

Ladies and gentlemen, I am authorised to announce that the prisoner Agrippa Postumus, mentally disturbed, condemned by decree of the Senate to remain in a place of isolation, was indeed in those days executed. *By whom?* By a centurion who did, perhaps, abuse... *On whose orders?* Gentlemen, I am authorised to announce that the first, I am sorry, the son of the late Augustus Caesar, Tiberius Caesar, did not give the order and will not pass comment on it. A murmur among the people. Tacitus: *Simulabat iussa patris. He faked his father’s order.* Tacitus’ inscrutable words.

But this matter is not on today’s agenda. Behind the scenes people are saying it was going to be, and by decision of Tiberius the centurion who killed him was supposed to testify before the Senate, but the matter was taken off the agenda when Sallustius Crispus intervened with Livia. Who is Sallustius Crispus? The head of the political cabinet. Of what? The cabinet? We have never heard of such a thing. What sort of cabinet? A secret one. Naturally, but whose? The first citizen’s cabinet. Meaning whose? The new one or the old one? It’s always the same cabinet. Aha, aha. And this head, or whatever he is... Sallustius Crispus, intervened with Livia, not Tiberius? They say he’s her man. He intervened so that Tiberius would not present all the matters to the Senate to examine that apparently he wanted to. There are certain matters, state secrets, the friendly sug-

gestions of advisors, the operations of services that must be subject to one-man control – that is a condition of responsible governing. That is how Sallustius Crispus put it. Tacitus: *For fear that he would be responsible himself.*

But please come into the hall. In a moment the first citizen will enter, in other words the son of the Divine Augustus, to address the gathering of father-senators. The son is coming with a military escort and is accompanied by his own son, Drusus. He is woebegone and distressed, in mourning for the Divine One, whose body he has not left for the past few days, as he put it in his edict convoking the Senate. He repeats these words.

“Senators, I have taken the liberty of calling you together for one single purpose, that we might confer on how to honour my father. I intend to give him a ceremonial funeral and pay him all due homage. Only so far do I claim for myself the right to take public action – I have no aspirations beyond that.”

He has a speech written out in praise of the deceased, and starts to read it, but his voice falters. He cannot control his agitation, his excessive emotion and pain, no one knows exactly what his feelings are. No one understands the meaning of his declaration that he has no aspirations. Is he in such terrible despair because of his father’s death? Is he an actor? Or a hypocrite?

“I have lost my voice,” he says. “I would rather lose my life than my voice at this moment.”

He asks his son Drusus to read his speech to the end. So in his father’s name Drusus reads a tribute to his grandfather, the Divine Augustus. Tiberius is still unable to pull himself together. Thank you for being willing, despite a colossal difference in eras and cultures, to adapt to this atmosphere. The Senate are silent as they concentrate on mourning. Please maintain this solemn mood for a while longer. The vestal virgins will now enter the hall.

The vestal virgins bring in the dead man’s will. It will be read out. Tiberius tells his secretary to do this, a freed man, an anonymous person fulfilling a purely technical role, more or less what a record player does for you at home. Please take no notice of the freed man, but listen to the will. There is no amplification, no cameras, microphones or screens, because they didn’t exist. But there is a will.

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Photo: Elżbieta Lempp

Andrzej Bart (born 1951) is a novelist, scriptwriter and documentary film producer. Most recently he has published the novels *Don Juan Rides Again* and *The Flypaper Factory*.

The Reverse: A Film Novella is the author's literary version of his own script which was made into a feature film under the same title by director Borys Lankosz. The plot is deceptively simple. The action takes place mainly in the Warsaw of 1952-53, but there are also a few contemporary scenes. Sabina, who is almost thirty and works as a poetry editor at one of Warsaw's major publishing houses, lives with her mother and grandmother in a cramped flat full of mementos of pre-war grandeur. In communist Poland Sabina's family has been relegated to the margins of society. As representatives of "the former bourgeoisie," they have been condemned to menial jobs, a life of poverty and other insults. Some of them – such as Sabina's younger brother, a socialist-realist painter and utter conformist – have tried to adapt to the new environment, while others – such as Sabina's mother – have let themselves be intimidated and browbeaten. Sabina's recipe for surviving the worst post-war years has been the simplest: in order to preserve her dignity, she has done her best to be a decent person. However, it is not politics or any public issues that are central to the plot of *The Reverse*. The protagonist's main problem is an entirely personal matter, namely, her spinsterhood. New suitors are always knocking at her door, but the one she has chosen for herself turns out to be – in the book's pivotal, superbly executed scene – an out-and-out villain. It is not even that he is a secret police agent who proposes to marry Sabina in return for informing on her boss, whom she worships and firmly believes to be the noblest man in the world. A despicable

monster who pretends to love and preys on womanly devotion and sensitivity, the agent must die – with the whole-hearted approval of two other female characters and the blessing of Sabina's brother. The murder, just as arguably everything else in *The Reverse*, must be seen as a symbolic event. Bart's aim is to present a story that is different – both in terms of poetics and on the ideological and moral plain – about the worst years in the history of communist Poland, an era marked by terror and crime. However, he does not mean to invalidate the martyrological aspect of the Stalinist era, but rather to ask what we as a community do with it today, how we use and transform it.

Dariusz Nowacki

SABINA is so excited she can't sleep half the night. It is always like this when she has a meeting with Mr Barski.

As she walks down the long corridor towards his office, she can feel her knees trembling. Medically, it might seem odd that despite the trembling, she is walking faster than usual. Krystyna at the reception desk reveals the secret of her knitting. The beige wool cardigan Sabina commissioned a month ago is now ready. With a dark brown collar and cuffs. The colour scheme was suggested by her grandmother, who had a jumper like this when she was a school girl, also made by a woman named Krystyna.

"It's the simplest thing, Sabina. Purl seven, knit six. With hem-stitch along the edges."

Krystyna is everyone's friend, even though, so rumour has it, she has problems with her husband who has apparently been interrogated twice already for no reason.

"It must take such incredible patience..." Sabina is trying to look interested, though right now all she cares about is what Lidia will say. Lidia is Barski's other secretary, who went into his office a while back and still hasn't come out.

"Nonsense, who could be more patient than an editor like you? Poring over books all the time."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Oh, Sabina, don't even mention it. As if you haven't been such a great help with the medicine. I just hope you like it."

"Sorry, but I can't accept it. You've worked hard on it, you must let me pay." Sabina sounds sure about it, and has her wallet in her hands.

Lidia appears in the office doorway. She is one of the prettiest girls in Warsaw and Sabina feels a pang of jealousy whenever she sees her. If she could take her pick, though, she would rather have Lidia's self-assurance than her beauty. Lidia is afraid of nothing – she can even laugh out loud in the director's presence.

"He's on the phone, but you can come in. He's in a good mood today." She let Sabina pass and shuts the door behind her. "Beige is so perfect for her, poor thing. Perhaps only grey would suit her even better," she says about the sweater, which Krystyna is wrapping in paper.

"Better concern yourself about your garish lipstick", Krystyna would gladly reply, but keeps the remark to herself.

The office is large and it takes a bit of a walk to get to the desk. Sabina was once here as a little girl, with her father. She can no longer remember why her father brought her along to see his friend, the president of a land bank. She has never forgotten the taste of a chocolate truffle and the aroma of the cognac the two men drank. Of her subsequent visits to the office, she remembers not only Barski's every word, but even the slightest change in his countenance.

The desk is standing just where it stood before the war. The sofa and the armchairs are now closer to the window. There are definitely more books, and there are different portraits on the walls. The portrait of Piłsudski she remembers as having been a poor likeness, since the Marshal looked very fierce in it, while in fact he was not like that at all. She prefers not to think about the portraits hanging here now. The conference table is a new feature. She is sure it was not there in July.

"Do not let me down, comrade. We don't need a plane to transport a few pieces of furniture." Still talking on the phone, Barski smiles at Sabina and points to one of the armchairs.

Sabina sits down and gazes at a lamp on the desk, a barely covered bronze lady holding up a glass globe. From behind the lamp she has a good view of the man who will always be obeyed, even if he speaks in a whisper.

"It's a matter of policy, and I don't mean just cultural policy. Do you understand what I have in mind? Yes, I'm looking forward to your confirmation... What an idiot!" He utters the last remark after putting down the receiver. Only now does he look at her and smile his special smile.

"What is it, Sabina?"

He gets up from behind the desk and sits in the armchair facing hers. He is not a tall man, but he is one that attracts attention. That is what she imagines Napoleon must have been like, the only dif-

ference being that Barski doesn't pout or hold his arm against his chest. In his crumpled jacket and a shirt with a buttoned-down collar, today he looks like the writer Somerset Maugham, whose photo she keeps on her desk.

"Nothing important, really. The head of human resources decided that we should take part in the coming parade dressed in sports kit..."

"That, in fact, is an order from above. Healthy body in a healthy mind, or maybe it's the other way around. We, the champions of education, must demonstrate our ability to engage in physical activities. It is rather ridiculous, but still within the norm, wouldn't you agree?"

"It's just that we poetry editors are supposed to be figure skaters..."

"My own suggestion, I'll admit. What is poetry, if not gliding gracefully on clouds? I thought you'd like that. You're young, you have a good figure, you will simply blossom in a short skirt."

"But I can't skate, sir." Sabina can feel she is about to blush, and her intuition is not wrong. Also, she knows she has started the conversation badly, because this is not what she has come to see him about.

"So what? That won't be a problem. You'll have the skates hanging around your neck."

"I used to run a bit, though. Perhaps my running spikes would be enough?"

Barski leans towards her and strokes her cheek with a look of incredulity.

"My dear child, if only we could be honest in everything we do... Who understands metaphor better than you do? All parades are theatre, in a sense." He hesitates after these words, and it occurs to Sabina that he looks good even when he's hesitating. "Of course, a theatre where we play our roles for a just cause. You will just play the part of a girl who likes sports and I'll play the wise man up in the stand, I promise. Do I look like a wise man to you?"

"Yes. And you are wise." She has rarely spoken with such conviction.

"I'm glad you think so." Barski gets up and starts to pace the office. She doesn't know how, but she is certain he is now going to ask her about the thing that really brought her here. "And what about our great poet? Does he already know we can't publish him unless he agrees to a small edit? No, please, don't get up, I like pacing. It's a habit from my prison days."

"He's supposed to be coming tomorrow to hear your decision."

"Sabina, if I could really decide about everything, I would consider signing up a poet like him our biggest success. But the international situation being what it is, there are enemies lurking everywhere..." He does not say it with conviction, but even so he is convincing.

Translated by Agnieszka Pokojaska

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Photo: Łukasz Bursa

Marta Syrwid (born 1986) studied ethnology and cinema at the Jagiellonian University and has been a student at the Krakow Screenplay School since 2008. She has been published in the young literary press and has also written a novella called *Hiccups*.

Twenty-something Klara Wiśniewska is anorexic. She knows all of her measurements and can tell you the calorie content of all food products. She eats mainly green beans, carrots, rice, and sweetener, though she sometimes alters her diet in order to see what gives her the best effect. She could do a doctoral dissertation based on her observations of alterations in her organism and skin. The heroine of Marta Syrwid's novel is rarely aware of how hunger impacts her mind, but this is precisely what she decides to do something about. She decides to face herself, really splitting into two Klaras: the Klara that is sick and the Klara that sees the degree to which the illness has advanced and tries to understand what caused it. To weigh all the psychological baggage she's carrying. To shed some light on the infrastructure.

Syndromes featuring anorexia are well-known. The author concentrates on one concrete instance, which she analyzes in detail. She carefully describes Klara's family situation. She examines the relationship between the heroine's parents, focusing on the figure of her father, who is not only incapable of displaying affection but who also psychologically and physically torments Klara and, later, her little brother.

Little better is his stance toward his wife, although she is not a push-over either, and as she stands up to him, fights break out at home just about every day. Unable to influence this domestic hell in any way or to run away from it, Klara hopes to attain control over what she can – over her appearance. Syrwid's diagnosis is clear: the girl's illness is the result of living

in a toxic family, not the result of an unquestioning acceptance of models of beauty in today's media.

The psychologically perceptive account of the Wiśniewski family, firmly grounded in socio-economic realities, is the most original element of this novel. The description of the struggles of hunger are also noteworthy. This is mostly thanks to the poetic – though never overwrought – style that Syrwid employs. The highly artistic language and unusual feature of the split personality, used consistently throughout the narrative, testify to the maturity of this young author. Syrwid already has a lot to say, and she knows how to say it.

Marta Mizuro

SOMETIMES

there are wonderful days. When Dad isn't there. We look forward to those. I eat the condensed milk that is bad for you, Mom takes the day off. She lets me stay home from preschool, from school. A couple of years later she holds Olek on her lap and plays Monopoly with me. We eat popcorn and watch cartoons on tape. We go to sleep late. When Dad comes back, it gets quiet and scary. It's stuffy inside my mouth. Like we're all hiding from a monster in the cabinet. And trying not to breathe so he won't know we're there.

I'm afraid of Dad when I sit at the table with him. I'm a couple of years old.

Not anymore. Not anymore because I don't see him. We haven't spoken in a long time. I haven't see him in over a week. He lives in the room next door. He and I have an unwritten agreement. When Dad hears that I'm in the kitchen or the hallway, he doesn't come out of his room. So he doesn't see me. It's bad when someone calls. We run into each other at the phone.

You're asking if I want to turn you against him? That that's a negative trait. That I'm venting. You know what I'm going to say. Right? Talk, Klara, quietly, Dad will notice you're sitting here at the table. He'll chase you off and hit me for bringing strangers home. By the way. Do you want me to bring you something from outside? You sit there all by yourself in that store. Don't you?

The Maggi packaging crackles. He's done eating.

"Come on, eat it!" He talks like he's yelling.

I hate soup. Mom knows. But she poured my portion and put it on the table. As soon as Dad came back. He yelled.

"Helka, the soup!"

He washed his hands and splashed water on his face, using Mom's towel to dry off. They always argue because Dad can't remember which towel is his.

If Mom gave only him the soup and came to my room with me. We would make Dad suspicious. He would start knocking on the door. He would snarl at us. That we'd better admit it. What was going on?

Mom would repeat that nothing was going on.

He wouldn't believe her.

Both of them would explode.

Mom would cry.

That's why I got soup too and am sitting over my bowl opposite Dad.

He stands up. He stands over me. He puts his hand on my head. He takes up my hair in his fist. He doesn't pet me. I am shivering. I can tell he catches on. To the fact that I am disgusted by him. With every ounce of my being.

I look at Dad, from below. I don't lift up my head very high. I wait.

His mouth is moving. He doesn't open it. He clenches his lips together and moves them left to right. Licks them. Turns around. Goes.

I have goosebumps on the inside.

The same goosebumps as when Dad makes me flush his spit-covered cigarettes down the toilet. Out of the heavy, navy-blue glass ashtray. I'll carry it in my open palm. Shaking. Trying not to touch the brim. He spits on the cigarette he's just put out. Mom will not be home. The spit will start to sizzle on the cigarette butt as it goes out. I throw up my breakfast. On the couch. I'll get hit in the face. Slapped. I'll get hit on the head. I'll fall over on the carpet. I'll get hit in the butt. Covered in puke and tears. I'll feel cold because I'll know he'll do something else, too. He'll strike me. He'll break the ashtray over my head. But he'll just tell me to stop crying. He'll tell me to shut my face. Push me one more time.

"I don't want to have to see you, you little sleazeball. Wash your hands and your face and don't bellow like an animal. You pig, look what you did, everything is covered in puke, now you're going to have to wash it. You'll clean it up, you'll lick it up with your own tongue."

I will run to the bathroom, lock the door. Clench my fist and put it up against my mouth. I'll bite until I stop crying. As quiet as I can. I'll hear buses passing by the window. And the buzzer a few

years later, half a minute later, Mom running late. Dad won't be able to hurt me now.

I'll let Mom into the bathroom. She'll see me sitting between the washing machine and the trash can. With my fist between my teeth. I'll smell like puke. Mom will pet my hair, lick her lips and clench her teeth.

"Oh my God, baby."

She'll squat down beside me. With one hand she will take my fist out of my mouth. With the other she'll start straightening up my hair. She'll give me a kiss on the forehead like she's checking if I have a fever. Her mouth will still be soft and moist.

I don't eat the soup. I stand up quietly from the table. I will run to Mom. She is watching from the window of the dark kitchen. She's been observing me and Dad the whole time through those dirty curtains. I nestle against her legs. She smells. Like warmth and sweat.

Dad has noticed I can't stand him. The air between us is seething.

...

I'm not quite eight years old. I'm with Dad in the apartment. He pours the soup. Krupnik. I hate krupnik. Cooked meat, groats, brown, yellowish, repulsive. Floating celery and potatoes. I know I can't. Just not eat it. Dad gives me bread to go with the krupnik. Old bread.

"There you go, for dipping."

He took that bread from the cloth bag. Mom puts leftover bread in there for the swans. In the park near us. I eat the cooked potatoes out of the soup. I can't do any more.

Mom doesn't come back.

Dad comes back into the kitchen after years of my swinging my legs underneath the table. After hours of blowing at little crumbs, left to right. Bread untouched. Soup the same except for the potatoes.

"I just ate the potatoes because I can't eat the soup."

"Eat it, now. You better eat it. I'm in charge now, you're not moving from here. Till you eat that!"

His nose, eyes, ears, hair, everything about him matches what he says, the tone is exactly the same. All the softness filed off.

He sits down next to me. I don't eat. I know it won't stay quiet. The bomb will go off.

"You're not going to eat it?"

"I can't..."

"Well then I'll help you. Right now. You better eat the whole thing, all of it, you little cow!"

He grabs my spoon and fills it with soup. His hand is shaking. He shoves the soup in between my gums.

No, no! I'm not going to let him feed me by force. So he can smile after? With those teeth. Sickening, yellow. From coffee and cigarettes. So he can show how pleased he is, and strong. Because he can force me. No, no.

Translated by Jennifer Croft



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Photo: Elżbieta Lempp

Janusz Rudnicki (born 1956) is a political émigré who has lived in Hamburg since 1983, although he regularly publishes in Poland. *The Death of the Czech Dog* is his seventh volume of fiction.

Now and then I ask myself what it is that continues to draw me to Janusz Rudnicki’s work, when for years on end he has gone on writing in just the same way (mainly in a satirical vein) about exactly the same thing (largely about himself), though I’m not really all that fond of repetitive books... In my case, the main attraction is not so much his exquisite style, though he undoubtedly knows how to turn a phrase, is quite at ease in all sorts of registers of the Polish language and has an artful way of mixing sophisticated metaphors and crude expressions. Instead, what I like best is that he knows how to use the basic elements of his writing (satire, irony, humour, detachment and provocation) to create perfectly structured texts where every T is neatly crossed. To put it another way, there are no superfluous words or sentences, no waffle, as confirmed by his new collection of vignettes and short stories, *The Death of the Czech Dog*. The book is in two parts, entitled “First Texts” and “Second Texts”, and this division marks Rudnicki’s two main areas of interest, as revealed in earlier books – firstly, he reworks his own experiences as a “Pole abroad”, suspended somewhere between Germany and Poland, into satirical, sometimes iconoclastic stories, and secondly he provides his own special commentary on tales about famous literary or cultural figures and their works in unique biographical and inter-textual alternative versions. In the first part he once again quarrels with Poland and Germany (in the title story, for example) and makes fun of all sorts of national vices, while not sparing

himself the mockery, ironically dubbing himself “the greatest Polish writer still alive”. Though to my mind the second half of the book is far more interesting, including a fabulous story about the weaknesses and eccentricities of Hans Christian Andersen (“Andersen, Andersen”), and another one debunking the myth of the Writer, about some famous authors who are past-masters at swindling people out of loans they will never repay (“The Book of Complaints and Grievances”). In his texts Rudnicki spares no one and nothing. Is he an iconoclast? Or a provocateur? Both, but above all he is a writer who has an occasional go at giving literature an airing and posing his readers some uncomfortable questions.

Robert Ostaszewski

ON THE BARRICADE

Poles prefer to give their blood to Germans. In the centre of Görlitz a German company buys blood. Half the donors are Poles from just across the border. They earn money for holidays, clothes, and beer. ... The most you can get for giving blood or plasma in Poland is six bars of chocolate. In Germany you can earn money for it. The company has all its branches in the eastern part of Germany. A few months ago it invested a million Euros in its fifteenth branch, in Görlitz, which is only separated from the Polish town of Zgorzelec by the River Neisse. (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2007.)

“Bloody hell and damnation, can anybody hear me? Hello? Send reinforcements! I can’t hold the barricade alone, there are too many of them!”

In front of me are our lot, coming at me from all directions. Behind me, in a building at the very heart of the city, is an army of German soldiers dressed in white, all holding syringes!

I’m a special government agent. My area of expertise is trouble spots – whenever they flare up dangerously and get hard to extinguish, I’m the one who puts them out, the special operations guy. You want examples? Remember the white squall in Mazuria? I was the so-called clairvoyant who found its final victim. It was thanks to me that no foreign army went into Tbilisi, and that there was no change of power in Georgia. It was I who made the breakthrough in the search for Nicolas Copernicus’ grave. And if I’d been in that car with Professor Geremek, he’d never have fallen asleep at the wheel. And if the Czechs keep putting off the erection of bilingual notices in the disputed Zaolzie region, one fine day they’re going to be mighty surprised. And if I don’t die first and the parties can’t reach agreement, I’ll be the one who solves the Baltic pipeline problem, because it’ll be me, not gas, that emerges from it at the German end. Will that do?

The city of Zgorzelec had become a trouble spot: a hundred of our lot a week had started donating blood on the other side of the Neisse. If you could sell nothing but blood, the whole problem would have died a natural death, because you can only donate it four times a year (for twenty Euros per donation), but the fly in the ointment is in the wretched plasma! It’s cheaper than blood (only fifteen Euros per donation), but you can give it thirty-six times in a year. Annual income? Plus blood? Well, there you have it. A hundred of our lot each week, I repeat, and those were old figures. Now the situation had got so inflamed that there was no alternative – I had to step into the arena of events in Zgorzelec.

As I throw the parachute off my head I see a catastrophic scene – people everywhere looking like the victims of vampires, pale, white, and blue, only just trailing along the streets. After apologising in a feeble voice for not being able to get up from his chair to greet me, the mayor reports that I am to avenge our blood, because that lot across the river, to whom we are condemned, have been taking more than a pint per person. And paying for just the pint. And that half the citizens are off to give blood, and the ones who aren’t, are not because they’ve already been. And that the penniless people go, who’ve been made to live in containers after being evicted from communal flats for not paying the rent, and that people from the neighbouring villages go too, because the peasants have always given blood. And that no one knows who has donated how many times running, because the police are noticing an extreme rise in the number of stolen or faked identity cards. And in the number of illegal abortions, because everyone knows that when you’re pregnant...

The mayor hasn’t finished, but I’m already out there, right by the border – bloody hell, there really are masses of people here, the nearer I get to the bridge, the bigger the crowd! Because some are coming back, while others are on the way there. Stop! I cry from a military jeep, through a megaphone, stop, you riff-raff! They’re cheating you, they’re draining you dry like pigs at the abattoir! And whose lives are you saving like that, you donor-vendors? Hey, you bovine Polish men! Hey, you swinish Polish women! Why theirs? Why their lives? For fuck’s sake, don’t we have any casualties of our own, living at accident spots, because where else can they hope to get blood?

There’s no response – the Polish pilgrims simply don’t react, they just keep walking past me as if I were invisible! Here you have the first result of removing the border: the Germans donate bottles in exchange for a deposit on our side, and we donate blood on theirs.

So I set up some barbed-wire entanglements on the bridge – they get lacerated, but they get across.

In the centre of Görlitz, on the square where the Institute is, I let off tear gas, bangers and smoke bombs. That helps a bit – they retreat, but not for long.

“Bloody hell and damnation, can anybody hear me? Hello? Send reinforcements! I can’t hold the barricade alone, there are too many of them!”

They can’t hear me, I’ve got no connection to base in all this smoke and thunder. I won’t be able to manage on my own. I lie across the threshold, and they walk over me, they trample me – I’m going to look like a tablecloth after a wedding. A country wedding. I’m going to tear up my own shirt, it comes to the same thing, I’ll freeze to death too – who can hold out for long in January bare-chested?

Tough. I’m going to tear myself apart. I’m going to blow myself up, there’s no alternative. I’ll run into the Institute and blow myself up. And I’ll take the whole lot of them with me. With this entire Red Devil headquarters of theirs too. And they’re all going to hell, while I will go down in the history books. And my organs, if they’re any use, will go into some other, non-foreign bodies.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Photo: Emilian Snarski

Jacek Dehnel (born 1980) is a poet, translator, novelist and painter. His novel *Lala* was already published in Germany, Israel and Slovakia, and other translations are forthcoming.

In *Photoplasticon* Jacek Dehnel practises the art of ekphrasis, which means describing works of art in words. The works of art in question are old photographs or postcards from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though there are also a few taken after the Second World War. Dehnel arranges the pictures in pairs, related by theme, in order to create a stereoscopic effect, like in a real peep-show. But what exactly is the purpose of the descriptions that accompany the reproduced photographs?

Ekphrasis is a singular art, at first glance rather unnecessary – why on earth describe what we can see anyway? But the person using the words must by necessity assume the role of an interpreter of the scene, someone who steps outside the frame of the picture, reconstructs the context and, to the single moment in the lives of people and objects that the camera has recorded, adds their earlier and later history. The observer also becomes a sociologist and psychologist, trying to fathom what motivated the pose and behaviour of the people being photographed, and reconstructing the social environment they lived in and that shaped their image. He also considers and describes what isn't in the picture, or what appears in it indirectly, like the hidden revolver in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. He deciphers the messages written on the backs of the photos and also carefully reads the contexts of a different kind created by the background the photographers have arranged, and against which the characters appear.

Dehnel is fascinated by what is past and gone; this fascination is at the root of the extremely rich vocabulary he uses to describe the objects that appear in the photographs. But there is also another reason why the picture described in words becomes something more than the original: the photograph captures people and things in their individual, unique nature – while words by necessity generalise, synthesise, and fit objects into an "image of the era". Thus Dehnel's book is not just a description of some photographs, but also an emotional attempt to read the past; its main character is time as an extra dimension that is only added to our perception of the pictures by the descriptions, which lend them a historical context and bitter awareness of approaching events, of which the people being photographed still had no idea at the moment when the magnesium flashed and the shutter fell.

Jerzy Jarzębski

SPARKING RUBY-RED FLASHES WITH HER SPLENDID DIADEM

Of course the most important thing is not obvious: it's not the naked breasts, the disdainful, femme fatale expression, or the macabre display of black-and-white blood on a black-and-white block, but the light. That's what the little man is concerned about as he darts around the studio with his sleeves rolled up, arranging the props, instructing the photographer, checking if the rose has been brought from the florist's and finally sending his assistant to fetch the janitor who has agreed to be the body of John.



"Now?" asks the janitor from the doorway. As he removes his top, he takes a good look at everything: the easel, the boxes full of paints, the large roll of canvas, and most of all the hefty girl from the baker's shop who has agreed to pose as Salome; wrapped in a rug for now, she is sitting on a small paint-stained stool, smoking a cigarette.

As she stands up, they tell him to lie down with his head pushed behind the stove, which at this time of year is completely cold; so he cannot see the exposed breasts, or the broad behind under the muslin petticoat. She is standing erect,

with the tray borrowed from the neighbours resting on her hip, trying to hold up the big head of cabbage that's lying on it. "With disgust, look at the head with disgust mixed with love, it's lust, lust," mutters the little man, examining the light, as it pours in through the tall windows and envelops her: lays itself on her milky-pink skin, hair, diadem made of a watch chain, bracelets made of tin foil, grubby petticoat and Turkish slippers. On the petals of the rose she is holding in her bent-back hand. "Now," he hisses, and a second later the magnesium hisses.

When they finally allow the janitor to raise his head, the girl from the bakery is once again wrapped in the rug; she is tearing the tinfoil bracelets off her arms and pulling the watch chain made of Austrian kreutzers from her hair. On Herr and Frau Schmidt's tray lie a cabbage and a rose. The janitor puts on his top, is given a coin and leaves; he will be free to come here in a month when the picture will be ready – only then will he find out what beauty passed him by as he lay with his head tucked up against the cold surface of the cast-iron stove. (Warsaw, 22 May 2008)

ESSENTIAL, NON-ESSENTIAL

The things people do with photographs! How much it of all there is knocking about in boxes at the flea market: scratched-off husbands, crossed-out sisters, torn photographs stuck together with brown tape, pieces of cardboard cut in half with scissors, any old how, crookedly, as long as they'll fit into a smaller album or a wrong-sized frame, scrawled on with coloured pencils by late grandsons, covered in teacup rings because someone used them as a mat under their glass, trodden into the ground and picked up, extracted from the rubble, or partly burned. Essential scraps and non-essential shreds,



the most important bits saved: the face of a beloved brother torn from a class photo; a fiancée, folded in four and kept safe in prison through every search.

But who are these four people standing over the coffin of – well, quite – their mother, grandmother, mother-in-law and wife? So it would emerge from a simple – pardon the word – decomposition of the family, as itemised in death

announcements: "Mourned in deep sorrow by her husband, daughter, son-in-law and grand-daughter. Or maybe son and daughter-in-law?

And to which group do they belong: to the important ones or the ones who have been left out? Is this the rejected piece, the superfluous relatives standing over the late lamented as she lay in her open coffin in the album with her nearest and dearest? And evoked a sigh from them every time the album was opened right at this special page? Or on the contrary, is this a dear cousin with his father, wife and child, preserved in loving memory, all of whom had to bear the chimera of a nightmare mother, who was one day expelled from the album in a fit of fury? Who tore this picture in half and why?

They are standing by the brick wall of a house – in late autumn or early spring, because the vine has no leaves, and a gusty wind is tugging at the candle flames, geranium and pelargonium shoots, and flowing over the corners and mouldings on the coffin lid. They are so restrained in their grief; they have their eyes lowered as if they cannot tear them from the coffin. As if that was what divided these five people, as if it was these four who removed the bottom of the picture, and she the top. (Warsaw, 18 November 2008)

INDYANS

Did they come with their own lasso, their own bow and their own holster? No, the costumes must have been part of the studio's equipment, along with the painted background (the cabin and the tree)



and the rustic set made of logs and brushwood, which served not only as the little house on the prairie (scene No 8) but also as a cosy hamlet (scene No 11, complete with a shepherdess' costume and a stuffed ewe). Everyone, Greek or Jew, or at least goy or Jew, could bring along their goyish or Jewish little bundles of joy, and then dress them up in a rather floppy headdress and an ordinary men's hat acting as a Stetson. The Marlboro advert didn't exist yet, nor were there even any Marlboro cigarettes, but on the West Coast in the hot sun of California sweaty

guys with cameras had been running around for a good few years now, as had bank tellers in green eyeshades, Swedish-language set builders, actresses discarding boas and coats from Poirer to dress up as submissive stage-coach passengers, squeezed into flowery dresses and bonnets tied under their chins with muslin ribbons; actors substituting well-cut dinner jackets (last night they were out until six in the morning with Harry and Jamie, playing with the Mexican hostesses amid fumes of opium and Bourbon) for sweat-soaked coats made of worn-out leather; and finally a couple of little Jewish glove makers from Warsaw who were running the whole show.

Dear Daddy
On the ocasion of your aproching name-day we send you our very best wishes and may you live to be a hundred.
Your Loving Children
A. and O. Michalski
Antos is dressed up as an indyian and Chaim as someone that catches wild cows on the steps.
Dear Grandpa, may you live to be a hundred.

It is all make-believe: the painted background, the coats from Poirer and the sweet opium smoke, California, the cactuses, Mexican hostesses, cowboys and Indians, living to be a hundred, miles of celluloid, tableaux vivants – the stream of light shot through with black streaks. All that remains are A. and O. Michalski, their spelling, their two sons with the naughty look, and the bow made of sticks against a loaded weapon. (Train from Warsaw to Katowice, 28 February 2007)

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

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Photo: Elżbieta Lempp

Hanna Krall (born 1937) is one of Poland’s leading reporters...Her books regularly feature on the bestseller lists and have been translated into many languages.

At first glance, it could be said that Hanna Krall’s new book was written by others. By her relatives and acquaintances, who wrote her letters, postcards, and the notes you left on people’s doors when they weren’t at home over a period of fifty years. She has also added written reports by her guardian angels, i.e. excerpts from the secret service archives, as well as correspondence with publishers explaining that they cannot publish her books.

A second glance, however, reveals a difference between the material that was sent and that which was heard and noted down by the author herself. Even if the publisher hasn’t used italics to differentiate the two kinds of narration, the sound of a story reconstructed from memory can’t be confused with any other. This is the sound of a tale told in Krall’s characteristic style.

The writer has never mentioned the fact that at public readings, she asks her audience to tell stories themselves. She has doubtlessly made use of strangers’ tales on more than one occasion, but this is the first book in which she reveals them in their ‘raw’ version. These are not finished but rather kernels of stories; potential topics for development. In presenting their outlines, Krall provokes readers to ask themselves numerous questions. Why didn’t the writer take up these ideas? Could they be expanded and taken further? And, finally: shouldn’t some of these stories just be left in peace?

We find a partial answer to these questions in the book. It is difficult to do anything much with postcards from one’s small

daughter or notes from one’s husband. On the other hand, placed in chronological order, they suddenly form a full-blooded story. Family history set against a historical background. Ordering the notes according by date sketches in the scenery. This clarifies the idea behind the composition, but there is still a sense of something missing. Do a few notes (for some years just one) really reflect the zeitgeist of the time? Or was that all the author remembered, or did she decide that was all that was worthy of citation from a given period?

If viewed in this way, *Pink Ostrich Feathers* turns out to be a book full of riddles. All of which could be said to lead to one question: where does literature start?

Marta Mizuro

1975
FRANCISZKA S., PENSIONER
ON MODERN ART

...They took him to the still unfinished building. He liked it and went inside, asked for a ladder and took a black pencil from his pocket. He drew a mermaid¹. On the wall. Everyone was very happy and thanked him. And then they went away, and the mermaid stayed. They assigned the flat to a railway worker. He looked around, and said that firstly it was inadequate and secondly he had small children, and she had bare breasts. So he didn't take it, and they called me. I didn't have any children or any points – the only thing I could have scored on was my activity in the food cooperative, but I wasn't even a member of it, so when they said there was a flat, I rushed over there.

They told me to sit down. You see – the director said – this isn't an ordinary apartment, it's one with a mermaid. Fine, I said. And you see, this apartment must be kept clean, because visitors might come by. I'll keep it clean, I promised; got the keys, opened the door...

My dear madam, what can I say?
It was a Picasso.

It was huge, my God was it huge. Her bosom was like two balloons, the eyes were triangular, at the end of her long, oddly long arm she held a hammer; and she had a short, tapering tail at the back.

We only had a sofa bed and a table. The table stood in the middle of the room and the sofa bed against the wall, with the hammer hanging over our heads. When we woke up, we saw her eyes, even odder than her arm and the tail.

A group from China was the first to arrive. They were visiting Polish workers' housing estates. After the Chinese came the miners, festive in their plumed hats. Then came the textile workers, they were labour heroes. I was polite – I knew I was representing our capital city – but inside I seethed. Especially when I looked at their boots and calculated how much muck I would have to take out that day.

The parliamentary speaker came to see us – tell me, comrades, aren't you afraid to be with her, alone as it were? – he asked in the hallway. The president came and looked, but didn't say a word. The gentlemen from the ministry came, took measurements and exchanged opinions. Maybe we could take it off together with the plaster? Aw, come on, it's too delicate. Put it behind glass? Aw, come on, the frame wouldn't hold up...

They got on our nerves. We hired a painter. The painter brought a bucket and soap.

It was only when he died and they started talking about the quarrels between his children that we thought: perhaps it wasn't such a good idea...? We were motivated by public interest, for the mermaid was state owned, and we would have got nothing out of it. Like our tattered couch, for which were weren't given a single cent in compensation.

The people from the ministry came again. They brought machines with them and x-rayed the wall. Gentlemen, don't trouble yourselves, I said. It was a good, pre-war workman and good, ordinary soap.

1976
JERZY SZ.
ON TEMPORARY DIFFICULTIES,
(A NOTE LEFT ON THE TABLE)

My precious wife, don't be dispirited. We have survived far worse – we survived TB, Wawelska Street and the loss of our tulip bulbs. Your book will be published some day, I promise you. For now, I'm going out to pay for the little one's horse lessons and buy the third volume of the encyclopaedia. It's true that your book² is further away, but for that your family is closer, and maybe that's not so bad.

KATARZYNA SZ.
FROM VACATION

She's in Krakow, staying at a camping site. Krzys and Skucio, acquaintances from the Hala Gąsienicowa in the Tatra mountains, had exams at the university. Krzys passed maths with top marks and took them out for an ice-cream at the Jama Michalika café. In the evening, they went to Gombrowicz' Iwona at the theatre ...

JAN C, FORMER LANDOWNER
ON TWO OR THREE DAYS

...They took away the palace during the agricultural reform, but we managed to bury the silver. It was 'post- landed property' and belonged to the state treasury; but I knew where my non-property was, whereas the current owner – the state treasury – didn't have the faintest idea.

I went to see a lawyer. I said I'd point out the place if I could keep some of it, and the rest could go to the castle. The lawyer went to the Ministry of Culture. A few weeks later, three buses set off from Warsaw, with the gentlemen from the ministry, policemen, workers, shovels, pickaxes and a large chest. They stood in front of the palace (now a vocational school complex) , and the gentlemen from the ministry said: ah, Corrazi style. I said: we need to mark two intersecting lines, one from the window in the cellar and the other from the arch above the vault. They marked the intersections and began to dig.

Everything was taken to the museum and laid out on tables. Art historians took vases, bowls, candelabras, jugs, cutlery and serving trays in their hands... They said: late Radke. Or: early Werner. Or: square base, nineteen by nineteen. I didn't approach them. I leant against the wall and tried to remember where this candlestick had stood and when I had last eaten with that cutlery. I was a bit uneasy, because what with the trip and the museums, I was behind at the workshop. I make Christmas tree baubles and ladies' jewellery: pendants with pictures of stars like Niemen, or Lieutenant Columbo; metal necklaces; and crosses made from Czech imitation diamonds.

My old acquaintances are extremely interested in the whole story. They visit me and ask about the lawyer. Someone asked how my peasants behaved after the agricultural reform. They behaved as you'd expect: they came and wanted to know why their crop yields were worse than mine had been. I explained to them: plough deeper, boys, don't spare the horses; that land wants deep ploughing. And they returned home and made their furrows deeper, and wrote to say thank you, everything was growing better. And we talked about hunting. Someone talked about partridges, which surprised me: my dear sir, do you really shoot? And immediately afterwards I remembered my last hunt, in '38, in Polesie. I shot a lynx, his hide is hanging up on the wall behind you. The watercolour next to the hide is our palace.

Only another two, perhaps three days. I just have to divide up the silver between the children, and then I'll be done. I'll go back to the baubles, to the ladies' jewellery, to my real life. Just another two or three days.

Translated by Katya Andrusz

¹ Warsaw's official city emblem is a mermaid
² The book in question was *The Happiness of Marianna Glaz*, whose contents were destroyed on the recommendation of the political authorities



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Photo: Elżbieta Lempp

Ewa Kuryluk (born 1946) is a painter, graphic designer, installation artist, art historian and writer. She lives in Paris.

Frascati is a street in a beautiful area of Warsaw that survived the ravages of the war, after which people connected with the new, communist regime came to live there. However, this book of memoirs by Ewa Kuryluk, a writer and painter who for many years has lived in Paris and New York, is about far more than just her private homeland, family place and closest relatives, or a paradise destroyed by “history let off its chain” (as a Polish essayist once defined the twentieth century). In this book the childhood idyll is permeated with an incomprehensible sense of threat. Gradually the private codes of the household members on Frascati Street become comprehensible to the reader (as they did in the past to the author). She tells the story of her own mother, Miriam Kohany, who adored the poetry of Trakl; she was a Polish-German Jew who escaped from the ghetto in Lwów and was saved by her future husband, the author’s father. Miriam only betrayed the secret of her origin to her daughter when she (Ewa) was forty years old. She never became free of fear, and was tormented throughout her life by recurring psychoses – it is Miriam who is the real heroine of this book. But there are others too: Ewa’s father, Karol Kuryluk, was an unusual man, a left-wing editor from Lwów and organiser of the 1936 anti-fascist Congress in Defence of Culture. He was an underground activist during the occupation, and after the war he was cultural attaché in Vienna, then minister of culture, but he soon fell into disfavour. Another leading character is Ewa’s brother, Piotr, a wunderkind blighted by schizophrenia who spent almost his entire adult life

in hospitals and institutions for the mentally ill. The book also features friends, real ones and false ones, and a panorama of human fates, records of encounters with Polish anti-Semitism and Polish everyday life, in the past and nowadays, seen not just from the viewpoint of a flat on Frascati Street. We have a pilgrimage to modern-day Lwów – Lviv in Ukraine – in her parents’ footsteps, and to Israel in search of newly discovered relatives.

Kuryluk’s book is the record of recovered but traumatised memory, an unending labour of mourning for her deceased parents and brother, a chapter in the history of a new Herodotus; it has the dimension of a post-modern tragedy, the only history of humanity possible these days, viewed “from the inside” and from the perspective of the victims. This superbly literary book is a historical record and an excellent example of personal documentary literature. It arouses sympathy and alarm, and leads to understanding.

Marek Zaleski

“SOMEONE

should write a post-war history from the inside. About the effects of shock and psychological polarisation,” Mama drawled slowly, as if guessing my thoughts, “about excessive empathy and total lack of empathy. Horror either sensitises one to evil, or leads to desensitisation. What does it depend on? A predisposition? A world outlook? Faith? Morality? Or the place where fate has washed us up?” She scratched her head.

“On all of them to some extent, Mama, but mainly on character.”

“Good character means little fear, lots of empathy and faith in oneself,” she stated with conviction.

“A rare combination.”

“Very rare! The war brings the worst characteristics out of rotten characters and the best ones out of good characters,” she claimed.

“It’s a fascinating subject, isn’t it, Mama?”

“I wanted to write about it, but I wasn’t up to it – it’s something for you,” she said, taking me by the hand.

“I don’t know much about the war.”

“You know a thing or two about the marks it leaves on the psyche,” she muttered knowingly. “Without too many details you’ll get to the heart of the matter more easily.”

“*Frascati osculati*,” she crooned after a longish pause, “*hier ist meine zweite Heimat*. Frascati is a tasty morsel,” she said, changing voice. “That terrible spring” – that’s what she called March 1968 – “they were lying in wait for our flat. They knew it had nothing but virtues. Three rooms in a pre-war tenement, quiet, with a balcony, the ideal layout, a residential area” – she counted on her fingers – “a grand piano, a secretaire, a music cabinet, a complete set of the periodical “*Sygnal*” in a pre-war binding. In the larder an assortment of jars of my own home-made preserves,” – she smacked her lips – “compote, mousse, jam and candied nuts. How much of it I cooked up after coming back from Vienna – do you remember? They wouldn’t give Karol a job, so I made some supplies. When he died they set Western diplomats on us working for the intelligence service. They tried persuading you to emigrate in every possible way.”

“No, Mama,” I muttered, “a few friends offered us help in case we left the country. They knew who Łapka was.”

“They *knew*!” she intoned ominously. “There’s the catch, *meine Kleine*,” she said, stroking my face as if I were a child, “they *knew*, but you didn’t. They *knew* because they had us wired from floor to ceiling,” – she raised her eyes – “they installed bugs in the phone, the radio and the television. They *knew* we were sitting there quiet as mice. They *knew* how to set a trap for a widow and her fatherless children” – she rolled her eyes. “They *knew* how to subject us to fear.”

“But Mama, no one did us...”

“Don’t play the fool!” she interrupted me. “You’re over fifty! They were rubbing their hands together with glee at the idea that we’d ask to emigrate *voluntarily* out of fear,” she stressed. “Over my dead body!” – she gnashed her teeth – “*Voluntarily* and for nothing! I gave myself a partisan’s word of honour” – she raised two fingers – “not for anything would we go whimpering for mercy like a kicked dog,” she whimpered. “If your mouths are watering at the thought of our Frascati, just break the door down with your rifle butts” – she shuddered. “Take away our documents” – she tossed a newspaper on the floor. “Take all our possessions” – she stroked the couch. “Confiscate our property!” – she waved the key to the bedside cupboard. “*Los!* Break your way in to a widow who’s not all there” – she tapped herself on the forehead. “*Los!* The Gestapo! Come in the night for *meine Kleinen!* Deport sick, underage children in cattle trucks with no water.”

“We weren’t underage, Mama.”

“Piotruś wasn’t eighteen yet,” she scolded me with her look. “He spent day and night on guard by the door to the stairwell, he and the dog, waiting for a father who was buried at Powązki, and gearing up to emigrate to the Moon. And why?” She looked at me. “Out of fear that he’d be stuck in a barbarian country with no one but a crazy mother and an asthmatic sister,” she answered herself. “Once a week an ambulance came and put you under an oxygen tent, or have you forgotten?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“I knew you wouldn’t survive emigration” – she sighed. “I had to remain on Frascati Street” – she coughed. “How many thousands of people were frightened into emigrating?” She glanced at me.

“I don’t know exactly, Mama.”

“But they didn’t frighten us,” she boasted. “I made an oath that we wouldn’t give up Frascati *voluntarily*,” – she ran her gaze across the walls – “so I made up my mind.”

“To do what, Mama?”

“In March I played the madwoman to save Frascati.”

“You *played*...?” I stammered in shock.

“There was nothing else for it,” she muttered. “I worked out that they would never move a madwoman.”

“Was that why you used to scream?”

“I bawled the whole house down, so everyone would know” – she nodded. “I used to wind myself up to fall into a trance,” she added, “and I stopped taking the medicine prescribed by the junior professor.”

“Did you simulate the paranoia?”

“Mightily,” she replied. “I was terribly punished for it, I lured a beast out of myself. It was lurking inside me, and after two years one fine morning out it leaped. I very nearly committed murder” – she hid her face in her hands.

“So it was true?” “*She was standing over me with a kitchen knife*,” I heard my brother’s voice on the phone to Cambridge, “*I had to call an ambulance*” – he had made a great effort to be calm – “*it took her off to the asylum*”.

Mama nestled into a corner of the couch and closed her eyes. “That terrible spring” she didn’t wash, never took off her stinking dressing gown and never left the house. At night she would prowl about the flat with her ear to the wall, packing and unpacking suitcases, and tearing up letters and photographs. At dawn she would lie down on the sofa, and on waking she would plod into the kitchen. She’d drink water from the tap, fill a bucket and carry it into the room where the grand piano stood, with a string bag full of whatever she found in the larder: bread, preserves, onions, sugar cubes. She’d lock herself in and hide under the piano. “*Los!* The Gestapo!” she would scream until she lost her voice. Or, to our dog Zaza’s horror, she’d howl, whine and gnash her teeth. And what did I do? I cursed Mama, I reproached Łapka for not divorcing this mad old woman long ago, I almost choked coughing and planned my “final exit”.

“I dozed off for a moment, dear,” said Mama, wiping her eyes.

“That’s good.”

“I dreamed Karol and I were out for a walk to the Embankment.”

“What a nice dream.”

“Extraordinary,” she said and smiled at me charmingly. “I was whistling as loud as I could” – she started to whistle – “*Frascati osculati*”.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Photo: Andrzej Wróbel

Marek Edelman (born 1922) the legendary leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, cardiologist, and political and social activist.

Marek Edelman is the last living leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. After the war he was a distinguished cardiologist in Łódź and a member of the democratic opposition. Awarded Poland’s highest decoration – the Order of the White Eagle – he is already known to many foreign readers from Hanna Krall’s *Shielding the Flame* (1977), which has been translated into a number of languages.

And There Was Love, Too, in the Ghetto was conceived in close collaboration with Paula Sawicka, who listened to the author’s accounts and noted them down. The book includes Edelman’s descriptions of his childhood and schooldays, of his pre-war activities in the Jewish labour union Bund, of the ghetto hospital, of the resistance movement and the Ghetto Uprising in April 1943, and of the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944. The events and episodes that comprise the title theme are narrated in a lively though brusque language. The initial motivation for writing the book was Edelman’s wish for a film to be made about love in the ghetto. He approached several directors, but all of them refused, saying that it was too complex a topic. Participants and witnesses of the events themselves have also tended to avoid the subject. “But that isn’t the whole truth – there were people even there who had their moments of happiness. Isn’t that wonderful? In those inhuman conditions, marvellous things happened. It depends entirely on the individual. In those times, people became very attached to each other, because the loneliness was hard to bear. Love overwhelms people; we can’t live without it. That only becomes clear in extreme situations,”

said Edelman at a book promotion in Warsaw. Why hadn’t he spoken of it before? Because nobody had ever asked him. That, at least, is what Paula Sawicka says.

Marek Zaleski

AND so Deda – that was the name of Mrs Tenenbaum’s daughter – got her mother’s ‘life number’. Such a shy girl, and now she was all alone. And suddenly she fell in love with some boy. She must have had a bit of money, because the boy organised them an apartment on the Aryan side¹. She really blossomed with that love. She lived in bliss with that boy for three months in the apartment on the Aryan side. That was all you could see on her face: love. Everyone who saw her then, without exception, said she radiated with happiness. She told Marysia, who visited her, that they were the happiest months of her life. The boy’s warmth towards her made her forget about the ghetto. Her happiness lasted three months. Then the owners – perhaps the money had run out – turned her and her boyfriend in to the Nazis.

Between the January operation and April, we always returned from our bakery missions via the fifth floor of an enormous tenement building with enormous apartments (every baker had to give us 40 loaves of bread, and that usually happened after baking had finished in the morning). All the apartment doors were open, including those onto the stairwell, to make it easier to pass through (you entered by the front door, went through the entire apartment, and left by the servants’ entrance, and from there you went through to the next apartment). Beds were set up in the corridors and hallways.

I saw Żłotogórski there. He was a huge fellow. I don’t know why it’s his huge, tanned torso I still see in my mind’s eye (seeing as it wasn’t summer yet and so he hadn’t had any opportunity to sunbathe). A blonde, seventeen-year-old girl was resting on his shoulder. She slept nestled against him, her face lit up by a blissful smile that radiated peace. They were both caught a few days later in some special raid and deported to Treblinka.

She was a doctor who was nearing forty; her husband was a medic, too, an airforce officer. He went missing during the war; she didn’t know what had happened to him. Later it turned out that he’d died at Katyn. She came to the hospital for her shift on the second day of the war and didn’t leave anymore. She was very lonely. She felt dreadful. A romance sprang up between her and a boy fifteen years younger than her. The lad had fallen ill very suddenly, and she’d taken him into her own bed and by some miracle saved him. She slept in the same bed as him for several days.

She said afterwards that it was the first time in all that loneliness that she had found someone and been with him, and she would always try to be with someone from that moment on.

During the Warsaw Uprising, she found herself alone again. She had a flask with 4 grammes (a colossal dose!) of morphine in it. She drank those 4 grammes of morphine and was already beginning to stagger, when someone came and forced a mug of soapy water down her throat. She vomited and woke up in the middle of the night, fully conscious.

And it was then that a great love arose between her and a boy twenty years her junior. She spent a few happy months with him from the end of the uprising until November, when she was evacuated from Żoliborz, a joyful, smiling woman willing to help anyone. After the war she went to live in Łódź. One day someone went to visit her. The door was open, and he thought the apartment was empty. As it turned out, though, Madam Doctor was lying under a blanket in the kitchen, with her head wrapped up in the blanket. Perhaps she was asleep; perhaps she was just dozing. Suddenly she sat up and said: “I’m not going to stay here alone anymore.” And that from a person as brave as she was. “I’m frightened, I have to escape from here.”

Nobody knows how it was she got to Australia. She was alone there, too. A great specialist in her field. Then came a ship with Jewish children on it that had been sailing around the Pacific; no country wanted to admit them. It lay in the roadstead, twelve miles from the shore. The inhabitants sailed out to the ship on boats and each took a few of the children with them. My doctor went down to the shore as well. She took two boys and a girl home with her. One of the boys became an architect in Shanghai and the other a professor of shipbuilding, and the girl became an outstandingly qualified lab technician. She fell in love with one of the sons when he grew up, and they spent many happy years together. She once wrote in

a letter that although she already knew what had happened to her husband, of whom she had been very fond, it was love that had kept her alive. Love and the warmth of her son, who later became her lover. She was over 90 when she died.

The girl’s mother fell ill. She was left with her twin sister. They were afraid to stay at home alone with their sick mama. A young boy began visiting them, a rickshaw driver. When the mama was feeling very bad, he stayed the night, and she, afraid that something terrible was going to happen, snuggled up to him. She slept with him in her cambric nightdress. She snuggled up against him and fell asleep peacefully at his side. They probably began to love each other. It’s not certain whether they made love, or even if they knew how it’s done; but his presence brought her peace. The mama’s health began to improve, and she went out to work. One day there was a raid on Karmelicka Street. When the girl heard about it, she ran home, but the mama was already gone. A huge crowd, a few thousand people, had been driven to the Umschlagplatz². Her friend turned up by chance with his rickshaw. They caught up with the procession and began to search among the crowd of thousands for the mama. They saw her just before the Umschlagplatz. She got off the rickshaw; he remained on the kerb of the pavement. She told him: “I’m afraid our paths must part here, mama can’t make a journey like that by herself.” And she joined her mother in the train wagon. What happened to her sister, nobody knows.

It was Christmas Eve. Two of our liaison girls lived on Miodowa Street in the building that now houses the Theatre Academy. They returned home at dusk and began to unpack their shopping. They were just taking out the food when someone knocked at the door. It was an older man with a long beard. A Jew who had succeeded half an hour earlier in escaping from the police station where he’d been held. Whether they knew each other already is difficult to say. Perhaps they did and that’s why he’d turned up there. He stayed. Some more girls came by, ostensibly to celebrate Christmas Eve, and four or five remained for the night. They slept on the floor. One of our liaison girls made love to him the whole night, in front of everyone. It seemed perhaps this girl was bisexual, because until then she’d been very close to an older lady doctor, who was caught during a raid on the Aryan side and deported to Auschwitz. And the old Jew with the long, greying beard stayed. He fell in love with our liaison girl, and they lived together until the Warsaw Uprising. Their love was so great that they gave up all attempt at safety measures and simply walked through the city, holding hands. They looked so happy that they were able to walk the streets, holding hands, without feeling any fear. They were parted by the Warsaw Uprising. He said at the time: “I don’t have anyone anymore, I’m all alone and nobody will ever help me out ever again.” He survived four weeks of the uprising sitting on some steps in the Old Town. She worked as a nurse in some hospital in another district. They met in the centre of town, where they spent a week together. Both of them again began to thrive, and their fear left them again.

Translated by Katya Andrusz

¹ On the other side of the ghetto wall, where the non-Jewish Poles lived.
² The place where Jews were assembled by the Nazis for deportation to concentration camp.



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Photo: Andrzej Bernat

Małgorzata Szejnert (born 1936) is a journalist and reporter. Her last book, *The Black Garden*, won the prestigious Cogito Mass Media Award 2008.

“The only justification for historical reportage is that it has a contemporary life too,” according to Małgorzata Szejnert in a recent interview. This “contemporary life” is today’s multi-national, multicultural face of America. The country’s presiding spirit originated on Ellis Island, the place where for almost a century decisions were made on who could and who could not become an American citizen. Millions of people passed through the island as the point of entry for immigrants, and about six percent of them had to go back to their place of origin. Although Szejnert’s inspiration for this book were letters written by Polish immigrants, they are not its main heroes; instead the leading characters are the people who received the new arrivals or, for various reasons, turned them away. Thus *Key Island* presents the history of successive commissioners of the island, interpreters, doctors, so-called matrons – social workers who took care of the women – and the legendary photographer Augustus Sherman. Most of the people on the staff were aware that they were taking part in events of historical importance, and so they left behind a vast amount of evidence, now collected in the library on Ellis Island. Szejnert has used these documents, among others, as her sources, and quotes from them extensively in her account. But her view of events is an original one. It is she who decides which episodes or props (such as hooks for doing up buttons) to focus on. It is she who selects the secondary and more minor characters, following not just the fates of Annie Moore, the Irish girl who was the first person to be cleared for immigration on the island,

but also the history of the mildly handicapped Paula, who was conditionally accepted and then made to account for progress in her development for some years. Paula’s story features as part of the more broadly described issue of how the criteria for acceptance and ways of assessing the capability and suitability of candidate Americans were established. If someone from a large family did not fulfill the criteria, they could be separated from the rest, and thus the selection process sometimes led to enormous tragedies. In focusing on the theme of acceptance and rejection, Szejnert makes an excellent selection from material that is hard to embrace fully. In this fairly concise book every sentence carries weight, and every element takes on the status of a symbol. However, this refinement does not burden *Key Island* with the solemnity typical of works on great subjects. The features that determine its high quality are the lightness of Szejnert’s style, her sense of humor and her sensitivity. Małgorzata Szejnert is more than just a reporter, she is a master of the art of reportage.

Marta Mizuro

THE first immigrants to enter the huge building with countless windows, a steeply sloping roof and pointed turrets, looking more like a sea-side casino than an inspection point for poor people, feel the same thing underfoot as they have for the past few weeks on the decks of their ships – solid wooden boards. Using timber imported from North Carolina and Georgia, the floor is made of deresinated pine, and the walls are resinous, made of pine and spruce, so all the new arrivals from villages and small towns can smell the familiar scents of the forest and of home. A company called Sheridan & Byrne was meant to cover the inside walls with rustproof metal, but whether they actually did is unknown. In view of the accidents that would soon occur, it seems doubtful.

The building is four hundred feet long and one hundred and fifty feet wide. It has central heating powered by steam, it has electricity and is equipped with modern sanitation. As it says in *Harpers Weekly*, it can receive ten thousand immigrants a day. Later that will turn out to be an exaggeration. Five thousand a day arriving at Ellis Island is divine retribution. But even so it is probably still the biggest caravanserai in the world. From the moment he was nominated commissioner, Colonel Weber has been carefully assembling the personnel for the island. He started with a visit to Castle Garden. He went there unannounced and mixed in with the crowd. He saw terrified people being pushed around by charlatans and conmen. He made a close study of the immigration service and established contact with a man who inspired his confidence. Soon he had three lists. Good: the honest employees; indifferent: employees of whose moral qualifications not much was known; and bad: employees who should not be entrusted with duties on Ellis Island....

One of the employees on the good list at Castle Garden is Peter McDonald. For twenty years he has taken care of the luggage. He can tell at first glance which country the people are from. He knows more about their origin than his own.

At the time when a new luggage office is opened, capable of accommodating the bundles, suitcases and trunks of twelve thousand passengers, Peter Mac, as they call him here, is forty-three years old. He knows the date of his birth – 1849, but he doesn't know where he was born – in Ireland, New York or Fall River, Massachusetts. Nor does he know if the people who brought him up were his actual parents, or friends of theirs who took on the task when his mother died.

Peter Mac the luggage attendant in his round official cap, white shirt and pants held up with suspenders (the job is a good one, and Peter has developed a bit of a belly) controls the traffic of possessions imported from various parts of the world. Some of the things he sees are obvious, and others continue to surprise him. He has grown accustomed, for example, to the fact that each nation ties the string on its bundles in a different way – and he knows which knots and loops were tied in his beloved Ireland, which in Sweden, which in Italy and which in Switzerland.

The luggage of Danes, Swedes and Norwegians is crammed the most full. According to Peter, these people take more with them than any other race: mattresses, beds, feather beds, drawers, kitchen chairs, and even if it has been explained to them that they will pay a fortune to transport it all to their destination, they'd sooner part with their lives. The suitcases of the English and French are in better condition than others and are definitely the most modern. The Greeks and Arabs have bundles as high as mountains – they gather up five hundred or six hundred pounds of all sorts of things, squash them all together and roll them up in carpets or cloths. Sometimes it takes six men to carry one such item.

Peter, who stands guard over the cases and bundles, and claims, despite the theory of probability, that he has never lost a thing, is amazed by the behavior of the Poles. In their travel documents they're actually recorded as Russians, Austrians or Germans, but after so many years working at Castle Garden Peter Mac can distinguish the sound of various languages. So he knows that the people who talk in Polish do not like to hand in their luggage for safekeeping and lug it after them everywhere they go. They attach the greatest importance to their quilts. They quite often carry them on their heads or shoulders, holding them up with one hand, while using the other to drag along a trunk with children tied to it.

The stream of people and things is also being closely examined by Dr Victor Safford, who has been offered the job of doctor on Ellis Island. He has sailed across for an interview, but he has some extra time, so he's watching. He is a very careful observer. He finds the scene on Ellis Island so fascinating that he's ready to accept a far lower salary than he has at present, just to get better acquainted with this unusual place. He predicts that it will provide him with some professional challenges. And he admits to himself that he is very willing to don the outfit of an immigration service doctor, which looks like a naval officer's uniform. Like Peter Mac, he too is struck by the fact that the immigrants refuse to part with their possessions, and as befits a surgeon, he attends to the dangerous effects of this insistence. The most minor problem occurs when the person is rammed by a wicker basket, because wicker does yield and won't break the ribs. Worse things happen when large boxes and packages that are evidently full of metal objects chafe the person. He also has to watch out for huge bundles on the shoulders of strong Slavonic girls. These bales

look soft and fluffy, but as well as one or two quilts they probably contain a few gridirons, cast-iron kettles or pots and various other East European Lares and Penates of basic practical significance.

If the girl makes a sudden turn, anyone who has the misfortune to be close by, will feel the energy the cargo has amassed while overturning. Yet in Dr Safford's opinion, the most malevolent of all are the smart trunks of the English that Peter Mac rates so highly – they're not just hard, but also have metal fittings on the corners, so they inflict wounds. Victor Safford has literary talent and imagination – he sees the metal hidden in the eiderdowns and envisages the force of a blow from what looks like feathers.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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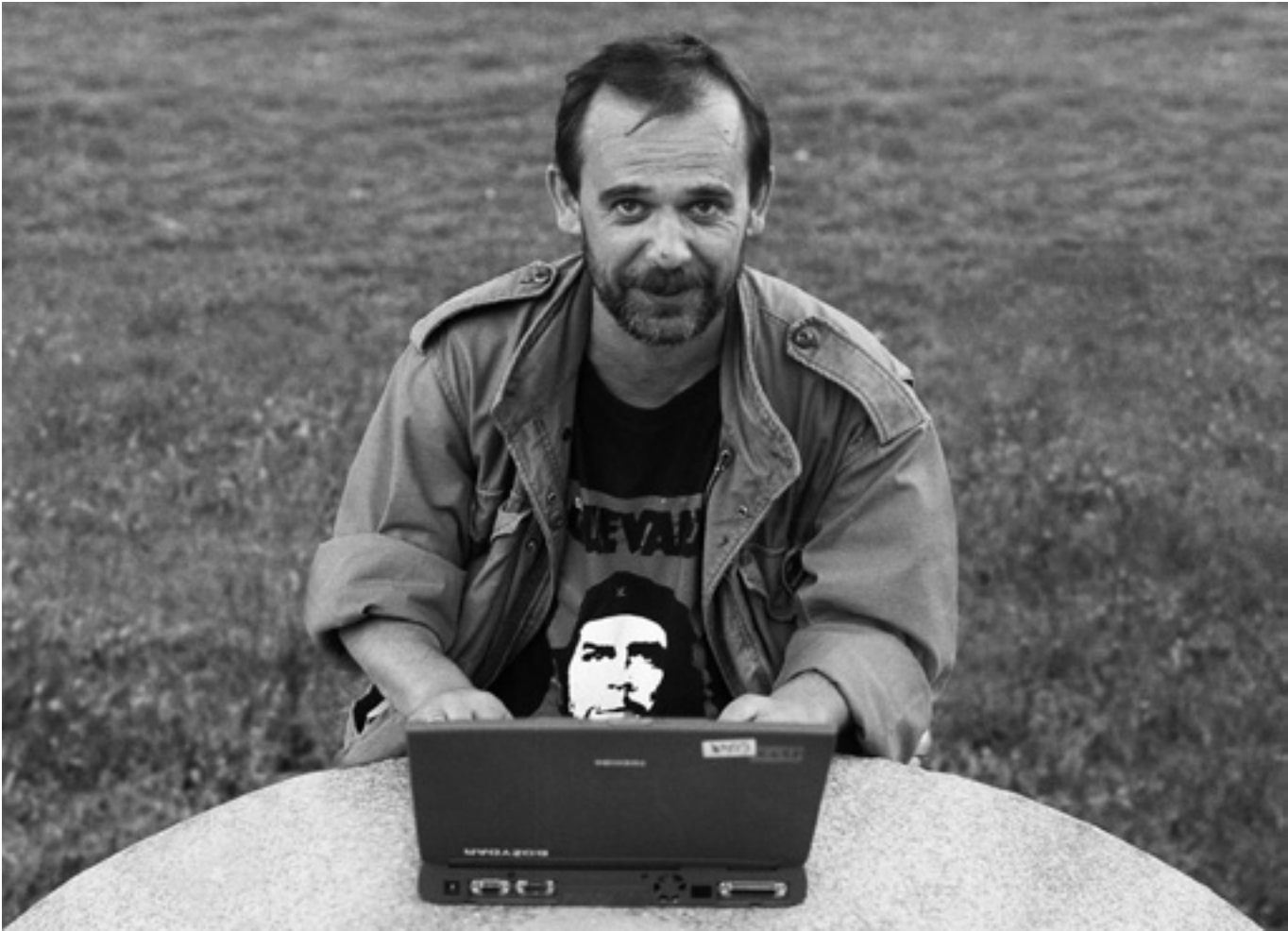


Photo: Krzysztof Miller/Agencia Gazeta

Wojciech Jagielski (born 1960) is a journalist and reportage writer. He is an expert on Africa, Central Asia, Transcaucasia and the Caucasus, and has reported on major political events worldwide at the turn of the century.

In books past, Wojciech Jagielski has written about the Caucasus, Chechnya, and Afghanistan, but in his latest offering he takes readers on a harrowing journey through Africa, specifically Uganda. Jagielski has described many bloody armed conflicts, conflicts in which both sides have vied to outdo each other in cruelty, and he has often expressed astonishment at the vastness of human bestiality (the author of *A Good Place to Die* often discards the role of the unbiased and objective observer, revealing his emotions, doubts or quandaries), but this time he has come face to face with the phenomenon of inconceivable evil. For centuries Uganda has been wallowing in a destructive civil war, and the country has been ruled by ruthless dictators – such as the infamous Idi Amin Dada – for whom human life has no value. There is currently relative peace, though bloody conflicts are still underway in one province of Uganda. The havoc is being wreaked by the guerilla forces of God’s Army, led by the possessed prophet Joseph Kony, but this is an army such as the world has never seen before: it is mainly composed of children kidnapped from their villages, who are transformed into merciless killing machines. Jagielski somewhat modifies the classic form of reportage (the main protagonists of *Nocturnal Wanderers* are not real figures, but – as the writer states in his brief introduction – ‘have been created from a few real people for the purposes of the tale’), in his attempt to describes God’s Army and comprehend the nature of life in Uganda. In the town of Gulu, somewhere in the countryside where the struggles are underway, the re-

porter arrives at a center where children who have managed to escape from the guerilla forces or have been captured by the government army are reeducated and ‘cured.’ There he meets thirteen-year-old Samuel. Jagielski’s relations with the boy are difficult, the reporter – much like the others – doesn’t entirely know how to approach the child, who is both a victim of the war and a war criminal, having dozens of deaths on his conscience. The author of *Nocturnal Wanderers* also tries to uncover why this country, which should be a kind of paradise on earth, is constantly mired in fratricidal conflict. This is not at all simple, because ordinary, rational explanations (such as the seizure of power, money, or inter-tribal war) are mixed up with magical ones, owing to the Ugandans’ powerful belief in the influence of the world of spirits on reality (Kony himself claims that his deeds are governed by the Holy Spirit). Jagielski’s new book is bitter and moving. It prompts hard questions, what is man capable of? What are the limits of humanity?

Robert Ostaszewski

I HAD never felt awkward around people who had killed or had ordered killings. With soldiers, guerillas, their commanders, political leaders who had started wars with the absolute conviction that they were the only means of bringing in justice, the only possible salvation.

They seldom saw themselves as having committed crimes. They sought justification, extenuating circumstances, they downplayed their wrongdoing, blamed others. Conversations with them were just duels of cleverness and competence, sparring matches where the aim was to trick, and where outwitting your opponent meant victory.

Talking with war victims, who were generally the only witnesses, was harder. In sharing their tales of woe with journalists they were counting on gaining help or turning the tides of fortune. They saw the abuses they suffered as the greatest and most unjust, it was the one thing of value they had left. They had little doubt that the world would not remain indifferent when it learned of their misfortunes. And when nothing changed, they suffered bitterness and an even greater sense of mistreatment.

They didn't want to say what they'd seen and been through, guarding the remains of the treasure that was their memory. They didn't want to say, because they were afraid of the pain, the grief and the sense of guilt. Why didn't I run away earlier? Why did I open the door? Insofar as conversations with those who killed had resembled an interrogation, meeting with their victims was a confession that brought neither penance nor absolution. There was no comfort, nor even relief.

Moreover, to make the story as good – or as real – as possible, they had to divulge the maximum amount. Asking about details, nuances, matters that would seem absurd or irrelevant. What time *exactly* did the guerillas enter the village? Was it sunny out? What did you do then? Was there a radio playing? You don't recall, by any chance, at what hour the bomb dropped on your house? And the one who shot your husband, what did he look like? Can you recall his face? How he was dressed? How many times he fired? What it was like? Please speak, please tell me everything.

The difficulty in speaking with Samuel was that he was simultaneously the victim and the executioner. I wanted to get to know him in both roles, to understand how he went from one to the other, and then back to the first one again, back to where he started.

I kept putting off the interview, though I knew it had to be done. And that I wanted to do it. When I went to the center in the morning I scanned the children in the courtyard, looking for Samuel. I smiled and waved when my eyes alighted upon him, and he turned his head. He greeted me in return, but didn't approach me, and I didn't call out to him.

I sat on the bench waiting for Nora, and when she came Samuel immediately appeared as well. Sometimes he climbed awkwardly onto her lap like a small child, paying no attention to her protests and anguished complaints.

'Sam! What are you doing?! Get off me right this instant,' she said, rubbing her hurt thighs. 'You're too heavy, you'll crush me. What kind of guerilla are you?'

The boy playfully teased her, elbowing her in the leg.

When he saw Nora he generally started playing near the bench. He would keep glancing our way, eavesdropping on conversations he couldn't understand.

Though he looked ten, he was really thirteen. But there was something in him, maybe in those eternally serious eyes, that made him seem older than he was. He had a large shaved head, veiny, scar-covered hands and rough feet that were as big as an adult's. He looked no different from the other children in the center, and his story was by no means more dramatic or unusual. Nora chose him from among the others. And maybe he made my choice for me? In sticking by Nora, he also became my companion.

'Sam, show us how you caught a viper in the bush,' said Nora, and the boy played out a hunting scene for us. 'Can you imagine? He crept up behind the snake, grabbed it with his bare hands and threw it into a pot of boiling water.' 'It was tasty, huh?'

Samuel nodded and gave us a toothy grin.

'And tell us how you got lost in the night. Tell us how they gave you a machine gun.'

He didn't know many words in English, which meant that his stories were simple and to the point. He spoke slowly, clearly, carefully choosing his words, like a student who is well prepared for his lesson answering his teacher's quiz. Nora listened attentively. He stared at her, and a nod of her head was praise and encouragement.

'The important thing is to ask the right questions. He has to know what I'm asking about. If he doesn't understand he gets scared and closes up,' said Nora. 'Right, Sam? You'll close up and be quiet as a mouse. Or you'll cry like a little squirt.'

'Nora's a squirt,' he cried out, smiling and pointing at the girl. 'Nora's a squirt! Nora's a little squirt!'

'Samuel! You'll regret it!' she warned. 'Ask him about school.'

I asked him about his favorite subjects at school and his teachers, and about the soccer teams, whose names and colors he knew from television.

'I like drawing and I like Nora,' he said with a serious look.

'And math? I didn't like math.'

'I don't like math either.'

'And gym? You like gym class? Because I liked it.'

'I like gym class. And I like nature.'

'I like nature too.'

One day after class the three of us sat on the hard cement steps in front of the day room. We watched the other kids playing, running around the dirty courtyard, playing soccer. The phone rang in the office.

'Nora!' someone shouted. 'It's for you!'

Nora got up heavily and vanished through the door.

That was the first time I was left one-on-one with Samuel. Nora had always been with us. Sam only showed up when she was around. Her presence was the condition for my meeting with the boy, and also an obstacle.

Samuel and I sat beside each other and watched the boys kick the ball around. The silence became uncomfortable, then unbearable. Nora's laughter traveled through the half-closed door.

'You play soccer?' I grunted, glancing at Samuel.

'Yeah,' he replied. 'But now I'm talking to you.'

'Right,' I agreed.

Samuel drew a circle in the sand with one of his toes. 'Who's your favorite player?' Sam rubbed out the sand circle.

'Ronaldo, from Brazil,' he said.

I imagine he figured out what I really wanted to talk about. There had been a lot of reporters in Gulu before me, and all of them had wanted Samuel and his friends to talk about how the guerillas had kidnapped them from their villages and taken them into the bush, and about how, with no other choice before them, they had joined the rebellion and had become killers themselves. Sometimes it seemed that Samuel was waiting for me to finally ask him about it. But he didn't look surprised or disappointed when I didn't ask.

I preferred to speak about Samuel with Nora, his teacher, caretaker, confessor and healer. She knew all there was to know about the boy.

Translated by Soren Gauger



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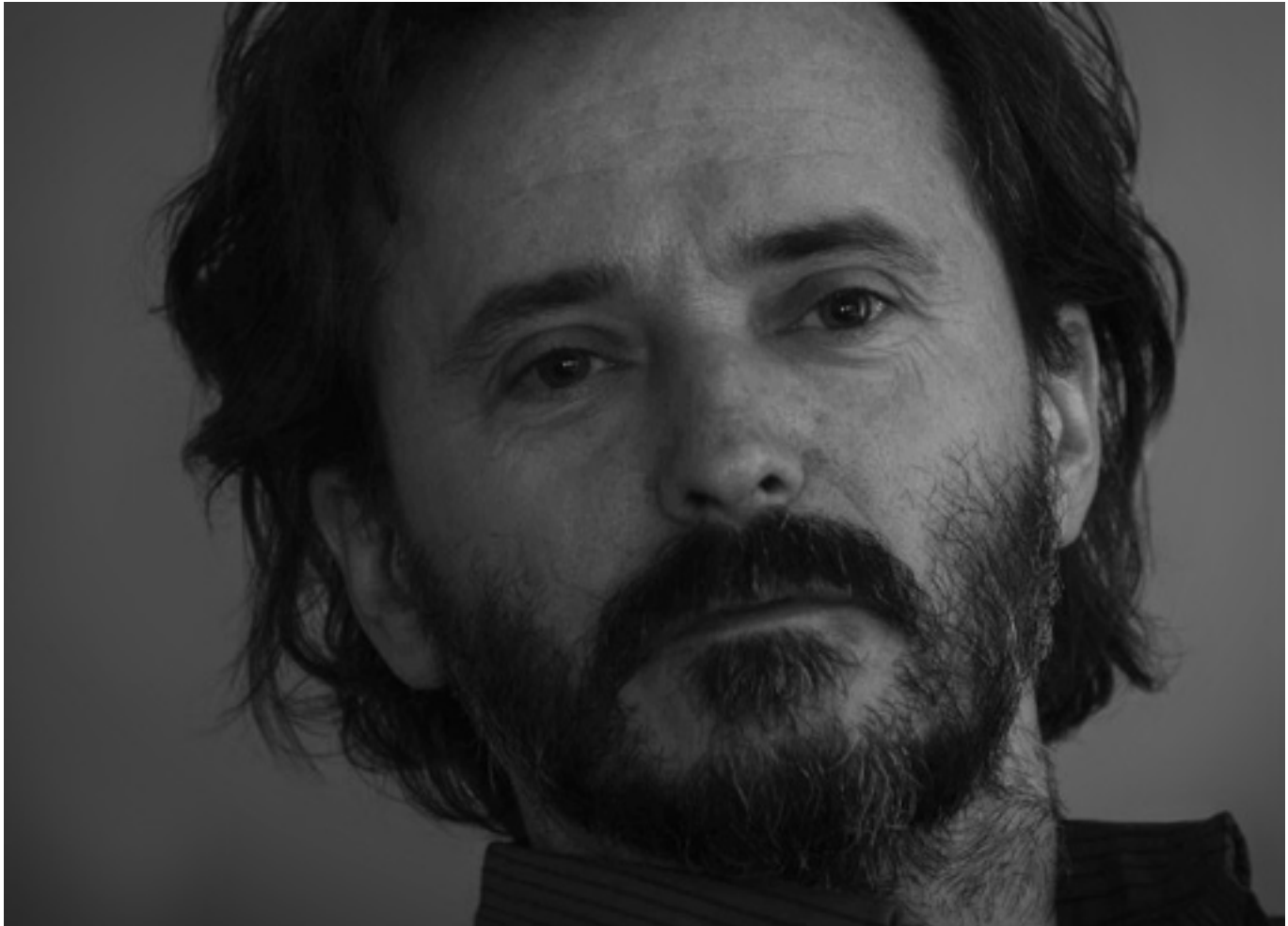


Photo: Tomasz Kamiński

Włodzimierz Nowak (born 1958) is a well known reporter and journalist. His main interests include Polish-German relations and the situation in Belarus.

In this new collection of reportage, Włodzimierz Nowak takes a closer look – as he puts it in the closing item, “Solidarity escapes by bike” – at “Non-Warsaw Poland”, also known as Poland B, the towns and villages that have gained relatively little from the economic and political transition that began in 1989, or have even lost out on it. The book is made up of feature articles published from 1998 to 2009 in the daily paper *Gazeta Wyborcza*. As in his previous book (*Circumference of the Head*, 2007), here too Nowak aims to present the issues that concern him through the life stories of individuals – occasionally these stories are absurd, but more often they are complicated, not to say dramatic. Nowak devotes a lot of attention to people who have been unable to find their place in a changing world, or have paid a high price for their efforts to keep their heads above water – people who by reason of poverty or infirmity have ended up on the margins of society. Once again he writes about the castaways who are stuck in the ruins of “PGR culture”, the world of the once great State Agricultural Farms, and live in extreme poverty, going from one casual job to another with no hope of improving their lot. He also writes about mining families, for whom the closure of the mines means not just practical problems, but also the end of the traditional model for the Silesian family. Another story concerns a young man who wanted to keep his job at a confectionery plant, so he let himself get chained to virtual slavery and was finally killed in an accident. In a piece entitled “The Master of Squats and Lunges” Nowak describes people who

risk their life and health to secure a reasonably comfortable life as dealers in illegal steroids, and in “All Poland Smashes” he writes about people who specialise in “smashing” cars, in other words deliberately arranging road accidents in order to swindle insurance firms. Typically for interventionist reportage, the articles in this book include a lot of sombre moods and gloomy atmospheres. However, as a sort of special contrast Nowak has included a report full of warmth and hope, about a disabled woman who through great suffering and sacrifice has managed to get the better of her handicap and establish a happy family, but who also devotes all her spare time to helping other disabled people, quite often saving their lives (“Life is Vertical”).

Robert Ostaszewski

SAINT BARBARA,
“KOŁOCZ” CAKES, AND A TRIP TO WARSAW

On 11 September Joanna was worried about her husband again. He and the lads from the “Bolesław” mine had gone to a demonstration in the capital, thirty busloads of them. “They said on the radio that the miners are fighting the police. They’re setting Warsaw on fire and demolishing it. I gave Mum a tranquilliser. Later he told me they were walking along, mine by mine. They didn’t have any sticks or bottles. Suddenly some guys with sticks and those cocktails jumped out – no one knows where they were from, because there were only ‘Bolesław the Bold’ miners in the vicinity.”

A few days later, the women from the “Bolesław” mine set off for the capital to see Jolanta Kwaśniewska, the President’s wife. The trip was organised by a planner called Barbara Kisielewicz, who sent a fax to the presidential palace. At the Szary patisserie, two doors down from Mrs Krawczyk and the Miguła, they ordered some “kołocz” – yeast cakes with crumble on top, and a filling made of cheese, poppy seed or apple. They took a sculpture of Saint Barbara carved out of coal and two days’ leave each. They clubbed together to buy petrol. All the way from Łaziska Mrs Kisielewicz mugged up a speech for Mrs Kwaśniewska. “As the mothers, wives and daughters of miners, we wish to express our regret and sorrow that matters have reached such a drastic state, but this time we are not going to let our men to be cast as bandits.”

There was no need to make any speeches to Mrs Kwaśniewska. “Come along, girls,” she said, inviting them into the palace. (The security men took a look inside the cake.) She had asked Minister Piechota to come too, so they explained to the minister that “Bolesław” was already connected to a power station by a special conveyor belt and a modern coal enrichment plant, apparently the only one of its kind in Europe. All for hundreds of millions, and that the miners’ bonuses had gone on it. And suddenly somebody had changed his mind. Not to link it up but to close it down. If they closed the “Bolesław” mine, there would be ninety percent unemployment in Łaziska. They went straight from Mrs Kwaśniewska to Cardinal Glemp, left a “kołocz” cake and made an appointment to see him. Then they went to see the Pope. They lit candles everywhere and prayed for the threatened mines.

Half-joking, Professor Marek Szczepański of the Silesian University says the latest strikes have been called by the miners’ wives. “All they have to do is threaten: ‘If they sack you from the pit, I’ll take the kids and go back to mother’. Nowadays the miner’s wife is the manager and finance minister within the family. She sees the family income falling, that there are no more miner’s bonuses, and that the ‘mining family’ firm is threatened with bankruptcy. So on the one hand, she bullies her miner the same old way: ‘What are these pennies you’re bringing me?’, but on the other as the manager she knows her miner isn’t educated and can’t do much besides mining – he’s got nowhere else to go. Out of a hundred miners, sixteen have basic education plus a few courses, and only four have higher education. So the woman takes the initiative. I have friends who are a mining family, he’s a coal-face combine operator, and now she’d gone to work in the grey sector, cleaning flats for foreigners.”

Statistically, these days the miner’s wife is better educated than her husband. She has higher aspirations than she used to, she wants to earn money and study. A noticeable change came in 1989 when the miners’ wives marched off to work. Before then, out of every hundred miners’ wives only twenty-nine had jobs, but now it’s as many as fifty-one. Even the poorest mining families are having their children educated. Research shows that out of a hundred miners who have daughters, seventy-five are concerned about their education. That is a few percent more than the number who care about their sons’ education. “I can see the role of providential wives in this – it’s like thinking about a dowry. A diploma as a dowry,” says Professor Szczepański. “We have frequently suggested to the reform-makers that in restructuring mining they should take the miners’ wives into consideration, the domestic managers who are now wringing their hands over the fate of their traditional benefactor. Because the mine is like a church, it’s the focal point for a fixed set of values and a whole way of life. It was the wives who walked to Deputy Prime Minister Hausner’s house and stood outside the Coal Company building, and they went to see Mrs Kwaśniewska.”

Malicious tongues will say the old girls are fighting for their own cause, because the coal-face miners will still get work, while the greatest threat is to “the surface”. That’s where the women work. It used to be men who reigned on “the surface”. “There were only a few women in the reckoning, mostly unmarried, because the wives stayed at home with the children,” remembers Leokadia “Lala” Supryn, head of the Polish Women’s League at the “Bolesław” mine. “They started taking women on at the office, because they couldn’t deal with all the favouritism. A bloke would get drunk and not come into work, then he’d go and see his mate from the office with a bottle to get him to record that he was on leave.”

“Those bloody tarts, they don’t do a thing, they just spend all day drinking coffee”, cursed the lads down below, when women started ruling on the surface. ...

FELLA DOWN THE PIT, OLD GIRL AT HOME

Granny Aniela remembers her husband: “Frydek was good, but in those days more blokes were in charge. The woman had work to do at home, it was full of kids. But if the fella drank, sometimes he whacked her.”

“And in my day they already used to say the husband’s the head of the family, but the wife is the neck that turns him,” adds Mrs Krawczyk. “The husband used to put his wage packet and payslip on the table and his part was done. It was the housewife’s job to make it last. While the husband was at the mine, the woman didn’t dare leave the house. ‘Fella down the pit, old girl at home’, they used to say. ...

Whenever she starts a new loaf, Joanna Miguła makes a cross with the knife, and when the first slice falls, she picks it up and kisses it. The children have been taught to do the same. Joanna has a school certificate, a job, a driving licence (she’s the first woman in the family to get one) and a Ford Mondeo that she co-owns with her husband. They take it in turn to work. They have been on holiday to Croatia. She and her husband play tennis, or ride bikes thirty kilometres to Tychy, on Lake Paprocańskie. ...

At the mine they refer to their wives the same way as in Foreman Krawczyk and coal cutter Piątek’s day: “my old girl” or “my bird”, and once they have children, they say “mother”. “Down the pit every one of them’s smart, but as soon as he comes home he’s this small,” laughs Joanna. “Now the women rule the roost. I haven’t got a single girlfriend who doesn’t work. There are domestic partnerships now. I leave for work early, so Marek fixes the children’s breakfast. Nowadays, any woman who still has a lord and master at home will never admit it, for the shame. ...

The Miguła have two children – Jordan, who is in the fourth year at elementary school, is an altar boy and wants to be a footballer; and Weronika, who is in the first year at high school in Mikołów and has a gift for languages. Grandma Regina and great-grandma Aniela are proud. “The lassie’s going to go and study, maybe the law. She’ll go far. As long as she has her health and its all quiet in the country, but there’s revolution in the air here. Who’d have foreseen they’d suddenly close it all down, the mines, the steelworks and the health service?”

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI

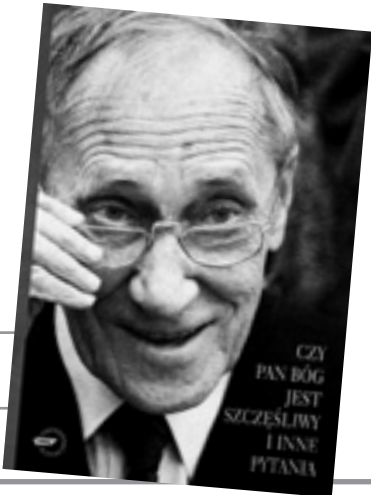
IS THE LORD GOD HAPPY AND OTHER QUESTIONS

Leszek Kołakowski (1927-2009) was world famous as a philosopher, writer and great intellectual. He wrote several dozen books which were translated into many languages.

Is the Lord God happy, and what in fact is happiness? Are people good by nature? What do we need human rights for? Does the concept of right – and indeed Truth – still have a future? In the final years of his life Professor Leszek Kołakowski attempted to answer these and other questions. The essays he wrote about them have now been collected into a single volume by Zbigniew Mentzel. Although the book was published posthumously, at the time of his death Kołakowski had already approved the selection and suggested the title. The thirty-six essays of varying length included in the book offer a fascinating journey through the history of human thought on some fundamental issues. What Kołakowski found particularly interesting in his final years was the condition of the contemporary mind which, after going through a wide variety of historical experiences that it had tried to cope with in all sorts of ways, had ended up in a situation where it had ceased to understand itself. Vacillating between belief and doubt, wanting to find certainties and growing accustomed to the wilderness, nowadays this mind is returning to questions that have been posed for centuries. Despite the efforts of many thinkers, the problem of God has never yet been “settled”: He is still a challenge for them and prompts heated polemic. “I could boast,” writes Kołakowski in the foreword, “that this is a book about everything: about belief and disbelief, happiness and unhappiness, good and evil, God and Satan, reason and lack of reason, the anxieties of our times, the truth and many other things.” Yet he is aware that each of the topics addressed is first and foremost a long journey into the depths of tradition and involves exploration of various resolutions. Thus Kołakowski is winking at the reader when he says: “I am

incapable of reaching any ultimate conclusions on the most important issues and am always tripping over complications that can only be avoided with the awkward, escapist phrase ‘on the one hand..., but on the other...’. Perhaps this is an affliction, or rather a weakness of the author’s mind, but maybe – to flatter myself again – it is an affliction of existence.”

Wojciech Bonowicz



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PRZEMYSŁAW CZAPLIŃSKI

POLAND FOR EXCHANGE

POLAND FOR EXCHANGE

PRZEMYSŁAW CZAPLIŃSKI

Przemysław Czapliński (born 1962) is one of Poland’s most influential literary critics. He is a professor of philology and runs the Lit Crit Workshop at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

What are stories about a society like when great narratives suffer a crisis? Can something that used to bond a nation help to create new ties in the postmodern reality? What is the scope of individual and of collective freedom? These are the key issues addressed by Przemysław Czapliński in his latest book, *Poland for Exchange: Late Modernity and Our Great Narratives*. As a Polish authoress once said, there is no book on earth that Czapliński hasn’t read. He belongs to the dying race of book-worms, but he is also one of Poland’s most highly acclaimed literary critics, one of the very few who can make the twists and turns of literary history accessible. In this book, Professor Czapliński focuses on Polish literature written between 1986 and 2008, assuming the role of not only a literary historian, but also that of an insightful sociologist who passionately examines the most recent phenomena in Polish society and then seeks their reflections in literature. He suggests that the ideas explored predominantly in the Polish literature of the last twenty years are the three classic ideas of modernity, i.e. liberty, equality and fraternity. These three concepts form the structure of his book, with a chapter devoted to each. The argument consists not only in the analysis of literary texts but, first and foremost, of the contemporary Pole’s state of mind. Czapliński puts forward bold ideas, forcing the reader to revisit his own. In academic language, but in a wholly accessible manner he presents truths that chafe at some point, identifies some national shortcomings and exposes stereotypes of thought, showing how they function in the most famous Polish novels of the last two decades. The books he examines include *Low Meadows* by Piotr Siemion, *Snow White and Russian Red*

by Dorota Maśłowska and *Lubiewo* by Michał Witkowski. One might think there can be nothing new to say about these novels, but Czapliński is capable of surprising us, putting them in a fresh critical perspective. *Poland for Exchange* is not a guide to the Polish literature of the last twenty years: the novels are only a pretext. Czapliński treats us generously to a fascinating story about Polish history and politics, as well as the condition of Polish society. It is a story of contemporary Poles struggling to find their way in an all-too-rapidly changing world.

Magdalena Wołowicz
www.gpunkt.pl



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TOMASZ LEM

ADVENTURES IN THE FIELD OF UNIVERSAL GRAVITATION

Tomasz Lem (born 1968) is the son of Poland’s best loved science fiction writer, Stanisław Lem. He is a graduate of Princeton University where he studied physics. He works as a translator.

Tomasz Lem was a late child of Stanisław Lem, so he has no memory of his father as a young man. *Adventures* is his portrait of his famous parent. Written after the writer’s death, it is not encumbered with any ambition to compete with specialist texts on his work. Tomasz Lem does not devote much space to his father’s writing, but focuses instead on sketching a colourful portrait of him, characterised by lots of eccentricities and peculiarities. He largely portrays him through family stories and anecdotes, because his memory does not go back to the war or the Stalinist era. He also makes use of the writer’s own recollections and those of his friends, as recorded in letters and interviews. From this the story of Lem the man emerges: his wartime adventures are described in brief, as are the various flats and houses where he lived, his foreign travels and longer visits to West Berlin and Vienna, the accounts of his friends and intellectual partners, and also his private passions and weaknesses, mainly a disastrous passion for sweets. Accompanying the writer, always in his shadow, but as an extremely important person, is his wife Barbara – his partner and carer through all the years of their marriage. More interestingly, from a wider perspective than the family one, this is the portrait of a unique personality in the days when the totalitarian regime was in power, which was also an era when the world was divided, information was rationed, goods were generally in short supply and services were inefficient in the socialist camp. The struggles with these inconveniences of such a stubborn man as Stanisław Lem, his moments

of defiance, despair and discouragement are on the one hand an excuse to show the gloomy truth about communism, and on the other a topic for endless satirical anecdotes. Towards the end of the book his maturing son, Tomasz, starts to play an increasing role, living in the aura created by his dominating, often tyrannical father, who did however combine a tendency to be bossy with a truly child-like love of fun and games, resulting in a special, good relationship with his son. However, Tomasz chose a different path in life from the career as a physicist that his father wanted him to have. We shall not learn from this account why Lem had such a great mind, but we will get to know him in everyday situations and against the background of the era, which makes this book extremely interesting reading matter for all the writer’s fans.

Jerzy Jarzębski

In my childhood my father showered me in toys. And there might not have been anything strange about that, if it weren't for the fact that he had already been buying toys for many years before I was born. On a trip to Russia in the 1960s, for example, he bought a model aeroplane, assembled it in his hotel room, but then found he couldn't get it out of the room because of its huge dimensions, so he instantly presented it to a writer friend with whom he was sharing the room, and who was going to stay on in Moscow a little longer. When I grew up he complained that his son didn't want to play with the toys he bought any more. From then on he bought far fewer of them, but whenever he came across a particularly beautiful model of a ship or a steam engine, he couldn't stop himself.

Whenever I paid my father a visit, I always began with the sacramental question: "Have you got time, Dad?" For me he usually had. We had an interest in geophysics – my father used to draw volcanoes, we looked at anatomy or astronomy books together, and there was a lot of talk about the planets, whose names I was able to recite before I started school. My father did not criticise my suggestion that the rings of Saturn are turning more and more slowly, although keeping silent in response to a view that so blasphemously violated the fundamental laws of mechanics must have cost him a lot. Specially for my use he designed a vehicle powered by dogs and cats (instead of an engine). His more advanced model was equipped with an extra dog and cat for reverse gear. Naturally, both vehicles remained at the drawing-board stage, whereas the measure of his devotion to his son was a crankshaft-propelled model of the railway up Kasprowy mountain that he designed, and which for some time ran diagonally across his study between the bedside table and the bookshelf, almost immediately above his desk.

Sharing out his sweets – chocolate-coated marzipan, which my father called "marzipan bread" – had its own special ritual. My father would open the cupboard, take out a pair of scissors, wipe the blade on his handkerchief, and then, quiet and focused, he would unwrap a piece of marzipan and cut off two portions – one for me and one for him. After a moment of blissful, contemplative silence, with a brisk sweep of his hand my father would tip the crumbs into the gap under the desk flap – over time quite a lot of them collected in there. These marzipan feasts had a conspiratorial atmosphere because – though it was never mentioned – we were both aware that my mother would not have approved of our way of disposing of the crumbs, and the way the scissors were cleaned could also have prompted doubts.

Among my father's construction successes I should include the hand-made electric engine, complete with coil; to wind it up he built a special, crank-driven mechanism. As far as a seven-year-old's safety was concerned, it wasn't the ideal construction. The engine really did work, yet many of its exposed parts had 110 volts of live electricity running through them. As a dutiful chronicler I should add that from the initial stage of building this engine, my father was so absorbed in his creative construction work that he forgot all about my presence.

As a small boy I often kept my father company while he performed his morning toilet. As he shaved with an electric Remington, a scent of Old Spice Pre-Electric cologne filled the air, and so did various pieces of music. Despite the declarations he used to make in interviews that he was "deaf as a post", he not only often sang, but he liked serious music, especially Beethoven's symphonies, jazz – particularly duets with Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald, and the "Old Men's Cabaret" (singing a song called *I'll Swallow You*) – and also some of the songs from the Beatles film, *Yellow Submarine*.

The repertoire he used to sing while shaving included some funny Ukrainian ballads – there was one about a girl who spat at her beloved because he didn't look at her the right way, another about a lover who didn't catch cholera, although it struck down the entire village, and one about another girl who dug her beloved up from his grave to give him a proper scrubbing before burying him again. The tune for the song about cleaning up the dead chap was surprisingly jaunty and jolly.

Soviet songs, such as "I know not of any other land where man can breathe so freely", supplemented songs from Lvov, sung in a gentle baritone, with a Lvov accent. ...

Another highly rated song was a comic ditty about Makary ("There once was a peasant Makary, He was incredibly greedy"), who refused to help a poor widow and her child and burst from overeating. My father used to perform this piece with great gusto, often punctuated by laughter.

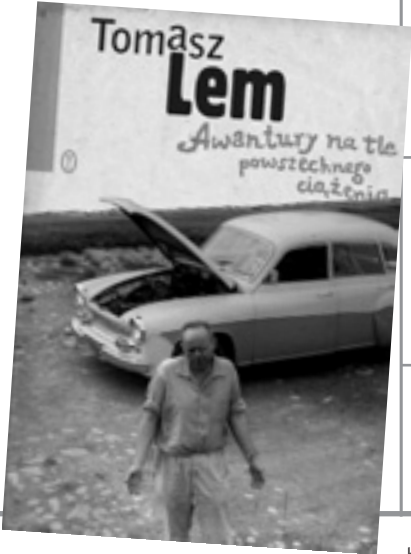
In the song about the Uhlans, without interrupting his shaving, he used to sing the girl's part, "If he thinks I'm sweet, I shan't put up a fight, Let him take me, take me", in a soprano voice.

The morning favourites also included a song about Miss Franciszka who, along with the candidate rejected as her suitor by his would-be parents-in-law, committed suicide, by means of a sausage "laced with strychnine", of which there must have been plenty to hand because the girl's father was a butcher.

The French and English songs seemed to be straight from the jazz canon. For a long time I was convinced these were "standards" of the 1950s and 1960s, which for unknown reasons were never played on the radio. But in fact at least one of those tunes was probably my father's own composition to the words of Robert Burns' poem, "A Fond Kiss". ...

After his morning toilet-cum-concert, we sometimes played with an artificial fly with a hidden metal plate inside; you put it on a sheet of paper and brought it to life by holding a magnet under it. You could also scatter iron filings on the paper and watch them "come to life" when you put the magnet underneath, or examine the lines of the magnetic field affected by a longer magnetic bar. Almost every day we checked with a compass to see if north was where it had been the day before, and then we verified the result with the help of another compass. Once cleared of all his manuscripts and books, the green cloth on his desk was ideal for a game of tiddlywinks, which didn't involve just ordinary playing, but tactically complicated military operations, demanding an ingenious strategy.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Photo: Mirosław Kasprzyk / Ambermedia

Professor Maria Poprzęcka (born 1942) is an art historian and author of some highly popular books on the subject. She is director of the Art History Institute at Warsaw University. For *Other Pictures* she won the prestigious Gdynia literary prize.

"I'm curious about anything that is hazy, uncertain and out of focus," Maria Poprzęcka tells us in the foreword. A picture behind fog, a picture reflected in glass, faded in garish sunlight or hidden in darkness. Or a picture viewed only "with the eyes of the soul", both by the artist and the spectator – a spectator on whom, following Marcel Duchamp, Poprzęcka confers the status of co-creator. *Other Pictures* brings together the history of changing conventions and the history of how art is received. However, Poprzęcka does not keep chronological order or try to track down or organise all the breakthrough developments. She sets herself the goal of combining the history of art and philosophy centring on the issue of "perceiving the world" and interpreting the meaning of what is blatant and what is hidden, obscured, deformed by the light or as a result of being viewed from a particular angle. Angle in two senses of the word: literally and symbolically, because Poprzęcka compares the eye with the intellect. For this same reason she examines the artists' own notes as well as those of their interpreters, prose writers and poets (who in her view make the best audience). Thus she mentions studies on art and also ekphrasis (when one medium of art describes another). The main protagonists in these essays are equally the artists themselves (including Odilon Redon, Francis Bacon, William Turner, Andrzej Bielawski, Leon Tarasewicz and Marcel Duchamp as creator of "The Large Glass"), painting techniques, trends in art (especially impressionism and symbolism) and in philosophy, including the very latest. All these elements

have been mixed together here, but the shift from one to another does not cause the reader any problems. Although they have great erudition behind them, these essays are marked by an extremely lucid style. Poprzęcka explains that this is not just another book telling us "how to look at works of art", but it surely helps us to perceive their richness, including the conceptual work that went into creating them. Perhaps the greatest virtue of *Other Pictures* is that from "the history of the eye" it chooses the essential ingredient, combining synthesis with original analysis of the phenomena it describes.

Marta Mizuro

Bacon said he liked
looking at his paintings through glass

he even likes Rembrandt
behind glass
and is not bothered by chance viewers
reflected in the glass
who blur the image
and pass
I
hate pictures behind glass
I see myself there I remember once
noticing some Japanese
imposed on Mona Lisa's smile
they were very animated
Gioconda became fixed
in a glass coffin
after that encounter
I've never been to The Louvre

An extract from "Francis Bacon or Diego Velázquez in a dentist's chair" by Tadeusz Różewicz, from They Came to See a Poet, selected poems, introduced and translated by Adam Czerniawski (Anvil Press Poetry, 2004)

Francis Bacon's fondness for pictures behind glass is rather an isolated case. Most spectators seem to share the feelings of Tadeusz Różewicz, author of the poem quoted above, even if they do not all react quite so categorically and do in fact go back to the Louvre and other museums from time to time, though they know they might encounter pictures behind glass in there. Although it is gradually being eliminated as a leftover from outdated ways of exhibiting art, the glass is sometimes necessary for conservation or protection from the craziest threats on the part of the public. Hence the armoured glass in front of the world's most famous pictures. Treated as a necessary evil, it appears to go unnoticed. And yet, as at least the quotation above implies, the glass on the surface of the picture is not just an irritating obstacle to viewing it.

Glass is transparent. However, when laid upon a non-transparent surface it becomes reflective. The picture – a canvas, board, piece of card or paper – performs an amalgamating function, thanks to which the glass coated with it changes into a mirror. Standing before a picture behind glass, in it we see a reflection of everything situated in front of it: the adjacent surroundings, other pictures and spectators, and finally ourselves. Added to this are the reflections of lights, the glare of lamps and the sheen of surfaces. It would be hard to find a better example of cognitive dissonance. The thing we are supposed to be looking at is disrupted by something we shouldn't be looking at. In this situation, we usually do our best to eliminate everything that has invaded the area of the picture, we strive to ignore it, to bracket off anything that does not belong in the picture, but it has been disturbed, or rather we have disturbed it ourselves, by standing opposite it and being reflected in the glass. We attempt to restore the picture to its flawless state, like a conservator cleaning an old canvas of accumulated layers of things painted on top and varnishes, to get to the original, authentic work underneath. We make this effort because of our fundamental view in relating to art that the picture has an autonomous existence and that the proper way to receive it should be in a contemplative mood. And so everything that destroys this autonomy and disrupts this contemplation should be removed from our perception. The picture behind glass poses a particular challenge for professional competence and the audience's self-control, for their ability to abstract the real message out of the visual interference.

But on the other hand we might notice that everything that appears on the surface of the glazed picture may be visually very attractive. The picture is motionless ("Gioconda became fixed in a glass coffin"), while the reflection laid on top of it can move (the Japanese "were very animated"). It moves, so it is alive, whereas the picture hidden under the glass is dead. It never changes, whereas the life happening on its surface is always changing. Fluid, immaterial, random and unexpected shapes and lights go moving across the frozen,

substantial painter's groundwork. Although inviolable in its subcutaneous stratum, the picture goes through endless metamorphoses, like a screen passively accepting the scenes projected onto it. Moreover, what the reflection looks like largely depends on us, because it changes with our every move. Paradoxically, in trying to eliminate this unwanted outside influence, we change position, which makes the picture become even more dynamic and intriguing. And when at last we get rid of the reflection, we lose sight of the actual picture too, or at least in a form that is not misshapen by extreme foreshortening. Because we determine the very existence or non-existence of the reflected image. It disappears when we move beyond the reach of the reflections (that is usually the sort of spot we look for). Once again, it is just like in a mirror, where the underlay made of an amalgamation is permanent, while the images appearing on the glass surface are transitory, dependent on our presence and our gaze. Reflected lights, which make it hardest to inspect the picture under the glass, create an otherwise extremely eye-catching game of flickering flashes and gleams. They ruin the picture, but they tempt the eye. And most importantly, there in the glass we see "the most interesting surface in the world" – our own face.

Visual interference because of glass appearing between the object being inspected and the viewer is not exclusive to museums. We may not always be aware of it, but we live among reflections without noticing many of the ambiguities they present. ...

Standing in front of a shop window in which the street, the passers-by and we ourselves are reflected, if we wish to be rid of the unwanted image, we virtually have to press our noses against the window pane, using our hands as a shield to keep out the light that is creating the undesirable reflection. In galleries, where such behaviour is inadmissible, all we can do is to seek a viewpoint from which the reflection is relatively weakest, and we have the best view of what is behind the glass. Sometimes, with proper lighting, the viewer can look at the reflection or at the picture, as he so chooses, without moving.

"But what are we actually doing when we decide to look at one thing at the cost of eliminating something else?" asks Jonathan Miller, curator of an exhibition devoted to the mysteries of reflection at London's National Gallery, which examines the phenomenon through the example of shop windows. How is this decision made? This question is close to an issue which in experimental psychology has been defined as "the cocktail party problem". In a crowded room full of chattering guests, we are trying to listen to the person who is speaking to us directly. Suddenly we hear a scrap of more interesting conversation from somewhere else. At this point we can either switch off and catch the remote conversation, or do the opposite – cut ourselves off from the voices coming from further away and concentrate on our nearest interlocutor. But we cannot do both things at once. Acoustic alternation is analogous to optical. In both cases psychology sees the effect of the will and the mind at work here, not movement of the body. If we make the effort, we can listen to a remote conversation without even turning our heads towards it. So too, without moving our heads, we can decide whether to look at the contents of a shop window display or the traffic in the street.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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WOJCIECH ZAJĄCZKOWSKI RUSSIA AND THE NATIONS

Wojciech Zajączkowski (born 1963) is a diplomat and historian who has held posts at the Polish embassies in Moscow, Kiev and Ashgabat, and is now Poland's ambassador to Romania.

For a history of Russia 250 pages isn't much. And yet in a book of this size Zajączkowski has succeeded in combining two features of the historical essay that are hard to reconcile, namely a broad range and cohesion. He recounts the history of Russia from its birth to the collapse of the USSR in a competent and fascinating way. He has not omitted any of the important historical moments, but at the same time he has not drowned his central idea in a sea of facts, dates or names. This book looks at Russia's past and future from a new angle.

The main concept of the book is that Russia's history represents a whole, and thus we should not separate the history of the tsars from that of the Soviet Union. Secondly, its history has consistently involved methods of exercising power that would ensure the unity of the empire despite its ethnic diversity. Regardless of whether Russia, and later the USSR, included a dozen or several dozen different cultures, the authorities have always sought a government system that would keep the ethnic elements under the control of the top – in other words Russian – supremacy. The failure of this method led to the fall of tsarist Russia, and its modernisation led to the creation of the Soviet Union.

Perceiving the history of Russia in this way allows us to recognise how greatly the USSR was indebted to the tsarist administrators who had struggled with such a multitude of nations. The basic legacy that Stalin inherited was the dogma of "the unity and indivisibility of Russia". However, he used new methods to implement it. While tsarist Russia had treated the

non-Russian nationalities with contempt and deprived them of sovereignty, Stalin began with maximum sovereignty, and only over the next decade or so developed conditions where the Russian language and culture would dominate all the others.

So how did such an efficiently run Leviathan finally fall apart? The usual answer is that the USSR imploded because of economic collapse, or else that it caved in under the pressure of its republics' aspirations for independence. Here too Zajączkowski takes an original approach, saying that while those factors did indeed play a significant part, the most important one was actually the nationalistic egoism of the Russians, who regarded the republics as an economic burden for Russia, and believed that the only way to overcome the crisis was to get rid of their multi-ethnic load.

Przemysław Czapliński

LIKE every great empire, Russia arouses our interest first and foremost because of its huge size and power to affect the history of the world. In a natural way questions arise about the sources of its strength and greatness. Academic thought on this topic is almost two hundred years old, if we regard the works of Nikolai Karamzin as the starting point, but it cannot be said that in these considerations we have ever come closer to a single point of view than the nineteenth-century scholars. The problem is not just the complexity of the matter, but also the fact that Russia is the last of the great empires, and is at the same time our modern contemporary, a country that is still developing and that every so often shows us a new face. Rome, the Mongols, the colonial empires of the French, Spanish and British all belong to the past, but Russia does not. It is hard to find anything as astounding in world historiography as the range of books devoted to this country. Their fundamental oddity involves regarding the birth and collapse of the Soviet Union as a total caesura determining the whole of reality, and dividing Russia's past into two parts that are almost entirely alien to each other. Russia before and after 1917 is seen as two different countries, two different worlds. Sometimes we are given the impression that they are on different continents, in different climates, and that there was no connection between the peoples who inhabited them. A second paradox emerges from the fact that by the history of Russia we understand the history of the Russians, whereas Russia as an empire was a multi-national state, whose ethnic relations were among the most complex in the world. Moreover, from the sixteenth century, with the passage of time, the percentage of Russians has systematically decreased, reaching a critical point – fifty percent – before growing and then diminishing to again to a level of half the citizens of the state. Appropriately, 1917 and 1991 were both moments when ethnic relations underwent dramatic adjustment. If we want to understand what the connection is between the ethnic composition of the empire and its great political shocks, first of all we must reject the thesis that the two Russias are totally incongruous. Of course they were different, but at the same time it was one country, one society. What very largely determined the way Russia developed, especially up to the end of the nineteenth century, as well as all the forms of state that preceded it, were the geographical, climatic and natural conditions prevalent in Eastern Europe and Northern Asia. The point here is not to pay tribute to geographical determinism, as it was not only natural factors that decided the developmental direction of this part of the world – economic and military considerations were no less important. However, it is hard to ignore the similarity between all the state structures that have arisen in this region over the past two thousand years. The empires of the Turks, Khazars, Mongols, and finally the Russians have developed within more or less the same region, and have run up against similar problems: how do you guarantee the security of lands that are not defended by any major natural obstacles? How do you feed yourself in such a severe climate? What rules should you apply to organise the internal life of a multi-ethnic society, scattered about an area that covers thousands of kilometres?

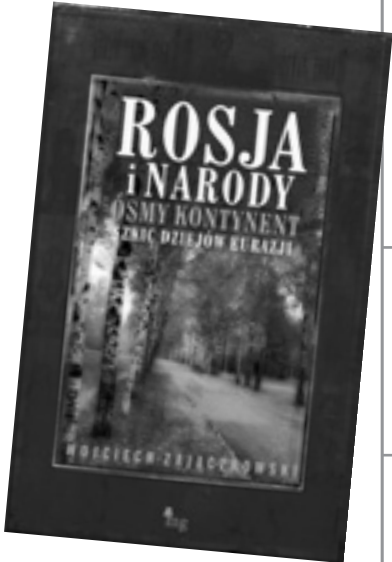
Thinking about the history of Russia in these categories is not a twenty-first century invention. In Russia's intellectual life in the first half of the twentieth century it took on the form of a Eurasian trend, placing emphasis on the historical and geographical unity of the region that stretches from the Pacific Ocean to the Carpathians, including Northern Asia and Eastern Europe. ... The conviction that these lands have a separate identity led to them being calling Eurasia. ... Both Eurasian geopolitics and thinking experienced a renaissance in Russia in the 1990s, though in many cases interest in them arose for political reasons and was aimed first and foremost at ideological justification for the unity of the post-Soviet region.

... The history of Russia, both before and after 1917, has been understood as the history of the Russians. It is hard to believe it, but serious research on the significance of multi-ethnicity for the Russian state only began in the 1990s, as every self-respecting scholar, commentator and politician tried their best to understand the causes of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reasons for the dominance of decentralist tendencies in the Russian Federation. This sudden turnaround in Russian academic debate, forced by po-

litical circumstances, resulted in a large number of works on the history of ethnic relations within the Russian state. In turn, research on national history was also undertaken within the independent republics, which on the one hand has made it possible to fill in some of the blanks in history, but on the other has quite often led to the conclusions being subordinated to the ideological and propaganda needs of the new states. Despite the enormous amount of work that has been done since 1991, the problem of consolidating the histories of the Russians and the non-Russians still remains. The history of the empire is still to a large extent “free” of the presence of half its citizens. ...

This book was born from a sense that the view of Russia's and the USSR's past that prevailed until recently is inadequate, and in many instances encumbers our understanding of the nature of the country's historical evolution. It is not, however, a synthesis of Russia's history, nor is it an academic work, but a historical essay, aiming to show the non-Russian dimension of Russia's history and the continuity of the historical processes that have occurred and are occurring within it. It is not intended to be a full description and analysis of the nationality issues within Russia and their connections with geographical conditions and cultural development, but only indicates the main problems involved. Perhaps this outline will give our way of looking at Russia's past a multidimensional aspect and greater depth.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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AGNIESZKA MIRAHINA "Radioghost"

PIOTR SOMMER "Days and Nights"

MARIUSZ GRZEBALSKI "Nonsongs"

DARIUSZ SOŚNICKI "Mr and Mrs P."

MARCIN SENDECKI "22"

TADEUSZ PIÓRO "ABC"

Without doubt, a debut collection called *Radiowidmo* ("Radioghost") and a broadsheet called *Wszystkie radiostacje związku radzieckiego* ("All the radio stations in the soviet union"), both by Agnieszka Mirahina, add a pure tone to Poland's "poetry orchestra", like the sound of a trumpet playing the lead. And it's a good thing too, because lately there has been quite a lack of the distinctive tones, stirring grace notes and touch of syncopated improvisation that Mirahina has to offer. We shall see how her work develops, but at least we have something to look forward to, because judging from these two publications we'll be enjoying some tasty treats in the future. But the poet who has played the lead theme lately is Piotr Sommer, with an extremely important book, *Dni i noce* ("Days and Nights"), his first volume of new poetry since *Piosenka Pasterska* ("Shepherd's Song", 1999). And it is first-rate poetry. These excellent poems include several of my favourites, such as the very beautiful *Druga połowa* ("Second Half") or *Podloty* ("Fledglings"). But as Sommer's books always consist of nothing but powerful poems, and once you get inside them, that is, once they come through to you, you start to live with his phrases, just as day follows night. Can we find a way to reach an understanding with his poems? I think we can, and that it might be the sort of "reaching an understanding" that lasts a lifetime. Sommer's voice is important for another reason too – within a whole flood of mediocre "poetic" tunes, it simply sounds like real, crystal-clear music, and that's what matters. You can also see in these poems that "they have been through a lot", as Sommer himself says, and have mellowed with age. Those who have pointed out that in his new poems time has become important are right, but it is the time of language in action rather than the painfully repetitive calendar kind. For the same reason these poems have a very festive atmosphere, not in the sense of cheap decorations, Christmas trees and painted eggs, but in the sense of encountering a different, personal and affectionate language. And it occurs to me that this poet, our greatest revolutionary poet since Różewicz, manages to affect us simply by the fact that he is going to reach an understand-

ing, even though he says: *Shame, you could perhaps / help each other, / if only a bit. But as you / talk so sloppily, / nothing comes of it, you keep / not knowing. Shame, // it looked as if turning into / some understanding – but there you have it!*

Stan skupienia ("State of Concentration") is one of the important poems included in the collection *Niepiosenki* ("Nonsongs") by Mariusz Grzebalski, and there are lots of reasons for this. Above all it initiates the most important features of Grzebalski's new poetics – concentration, and the quality of being "non-song-like": concentration on a smooth passage from image to image, concentration on discarding everything non-essential from the poem. As I was virtually present at the creation of this book (Mariusz sent me each poem as was written), I saw it crystallizing and emerging. And all that effort for the sake of reduction, as if Grzebalski were motivated by one single idea: *the simpler the better*. And in this case, ascetic simplicity and a departure from stylistic figurations in favour of – it has to be said – some full-bodied chords, have produced simply fabulous effects. This language sounds like the purest madrigal, without a single superfluous note. There might appear to be a sort of nihilistic streak in this collection – *negativity, non-song-ness* – but that's good, because in this orchestra known as Polish poetry we do need a sober, Cioran-style clarinet. Grzebalski has always had a separate, distinctive voice, but now it has gained some unique tones. Minimalism suits Grzebalski, because he is a poet who knows from experience with language how to abstract the most important elements and arrange them into a new whole, as he does in the poem *Co robisz, morze?* ("What are you doing, sea?"), in which the division between object and subject quite simply vanishes in an almost Buddhist way. Is it a Buddhist song? Yes, but not at the level of empty proclamations, but the virtually physical materialisation of the poem. And this is what determines the gravity of this poetry.

Dariusz Sośnicki's collection, *Państwo P.* ("Mr and Mrs P.") has been a surprise for some, but not for others. Much has already been written about the correlations between this book

and Zbigniew Herbert’s Mr Cogito. In Sośnicki’s offering, the “poetry of roles” is used for the first time. And let us immediately say that as usual in his work it is precisely conceived, and entirely logically and perfectly constructed. Some people might find something “unsettling” about this idea, but Sośnicki’s books usually have the initial effect on first reading of being unsettling and off-putting, but also attractive. In fact it is impossible for an author of this class to have produced a bad book, and he hasn’t. I’d like to tell anyone who thinks *Mr and Mrs P* is weaker than Sośnicki’s other books that they are highly mistaken. It is undoubtedly different, but definitely not weaker.

For those who love full-bodied, avant garde pieces in the style of Nikos Skalkottas (he was a Greek twentieth-century avant-garde composer) and for those who like Polish futurism of the 1920s and 1930s, I hasten to inform you that Marcin Senddecki has given us a lovely surprise and a fine present in the shape of his new collection, *22*. There is something of the spirit of dodecaphony in these octostichs, which not only bow to tradition but above all to their own unrestricted freedom, because a poem doesn’t have to be a suitcase we use to smuggle in some sort of meaning, it can be purely and simply a suitcase, beautiful and worthwhile in itself. And so I always recommend Marcin Senddecki’s poetry, because despite what the conspiracy theorists believe, it isn’t just esoteric stuff, or an introduction to Rosicrucian theory rewritten in verse. This is the pure joy of writing. And even if some people see this poetry as playing games with ordinary life, imposing a seal, or showing a tendency towards Masonic ritual, then once again I say: they are wrong. It is melodic, but these are not mawkish little tunes – this is serious music.

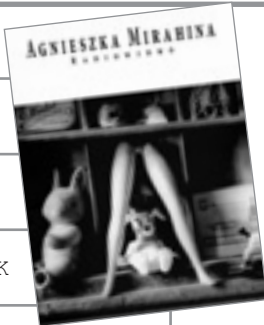
More evidence of the fact that life is altogether pleasant and good in our poetic orchestra is provided by Tadeusz Pióro’s latest collection, *Abecadło* (“ABC”). All that can be said about the poetry of Tadeusz Pióro is to be found in the poetry of Tadeusz Pióro. It has to be read, because this is required reading. As usual, Pióro amuses and teaches – here is a quote to give you a taster: *You have no business here, madame. The animals govern themselves, fall looks like spring, composers keep composing unreflectively. When he’s not dancing, the Caucasian male has to put on airs like a head of state in a scarecrow museum. All right, have it your way – like a Bolshevik at a frontier wedding. We’re still far from gender. But everything else is a matter of choice. / We’ll put on airs like a nudist who’s lost his way on the beach. (Farsala).*

We can only rejoice that Pióro is on such great form – it looks like we’re going to have plenty more pleasures from reading his poems.

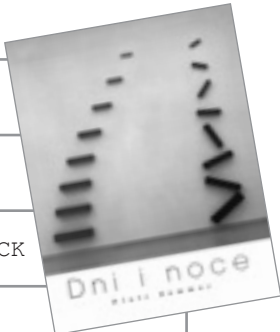
Finally I must add that of course this is a subjective selection. As you know, there are lots of instruments in an orchestra, some so important that they simply don’t get mentioned, others so trivial that it’s simply not worth it, such as the instrument called a slapstick. Once upon a time it was a whip, which produced a dry, snapping noise. Nowadays instead of a whip it consists of two small boards, which imitate its sound. Having said that I will leave all this for your consideration.

Edward Pasewicz

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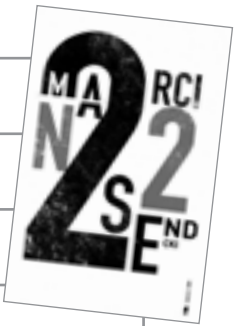
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