
New books **FROM POLAND**

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60.

JACEK DUKAJ

SZCZEPAN TWARDOCH

JACEK DEHNEL

JULIA FIEDORCZUK

ZIEMOWIT SZCZEREK

MACIEJ HEN

WERONIKA MUREK

JAKUB ŻULCZYK

ŁUKASZ ORBITOWSKI

MALGORZATA SZEJNERT

WOJCIECH JAGIELSKI

MAGDALENA GRZEBALKOWSKA

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ROBERT RIENT

EWA WINNICKA

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NEW BOOKS FROM POLAND

FALL 2015

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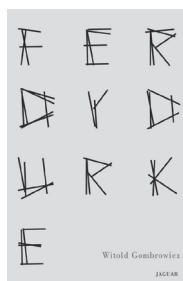
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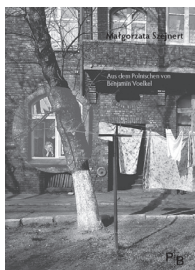
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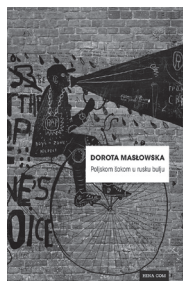
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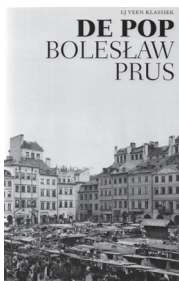
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WITOLD SZABŁOWSKI

Translated by Hendrik Lindepuu
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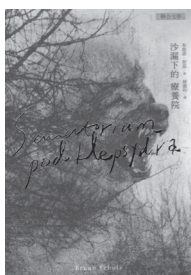
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Guangdong: Flower City Publishing House



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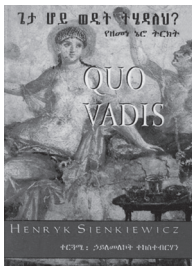
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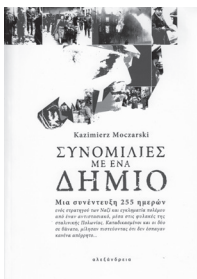
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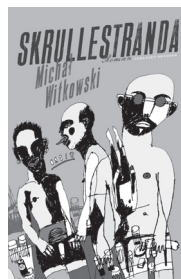
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Gaotan Culture



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Athens: Alexandria Publisher



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DROGA PANI SZUBERT...
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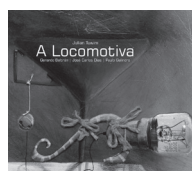
AUTO
JAN BAJTLIK

Translated by Lydia Waleryszak
Geneva: Editions La Joie de livre



PULPET I PRUDENCJA
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Paris: Flammarion



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Oeiras: Qual Albatroz

JACEK DUKAJ

THE OLD AXOLOTL: HARDWARE DREAMS



Jacek Dukaj (born 1974) is a writer and essayist. He has written over a dozen novels and several collections of short stories and is one of Poland's most highly regarded authors of fantasy fiction. His novel *Ice* won the prestigious Kościelski Foundation Award and the European Union Prize for Literature. He has won the Janusz A. Zajdel Prize for best fantasy writing six times. So far his books have been translated into English, German, Russian, Italian, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak.

Jacek Dukaj's latest novel is exclusively available as an e-book. It has been published by Poland's biggest internet e-commerce platform, which is billing it as a chance to get to know "a new dimension in literature" and to gain "new reader experience". Of course these are just advertising gimmicks and in fact *The Old Axolotl* is a classic of the cyberpunk genre, expanded – in a purely functional way – with the addition of some technological gadgets, which appear in the form of graphics and hypertextual notes.

Contrary to its innovative, progressive "packaging", Dukaj's micro-novel is typically traditional, at the level of the plot as well as the issues it raises. Ultimately it is one of many post-apocalyptic, and at the same time post-human visions of the future – in this particular work, a not very distant future. The premise is that the Earth has been struck by catastrophe in the form of cosmic radiation ("not a single organic compound survived"), except that before every single existing form of biological life had died out entirely, some people had managed to make copies of their own minds, and had prudently transferred them onto computers hooked up to the internet. Most of the handful of survivors are seasoned programmers and experienced computer game players. One of them is Bartek, who works in the IT department at a nameless corporation. As all the nation states and other familiar forms of public order have collapsed instantly, the virtual world, PostApoc, has been taken over by associations of internet gamers (guilds) and higher-ranking organisations (alliances). There is a permanent war going on between the post-human beings for access to the few active servers and sources of electricity. Thanks to advanced automated systems, the internet is still working in the PostApoc world, and Bartek and the other transformers have unlimited access to vast archives of knowledge. On this basis, they start to consider the chances of recreating civilisation as it was before the global catastrophe and, more broadly, of causing a new species to emerge as a substitute

for mankind. This is where the title metaphor of the axolotl comes in, in other words a life form that never reaches maturity, but remains, like this rare amphibian, at the larval stage. Dukaj's thinking seems to be tending in this direction: the end of all biological life, including mankind as we know it, marks the start of another life that we usually call virtual, but at the same time this new standard cannot be regarded as the ultimate, fully adult form. In this way Dukaj goes beyond the horizons of the traditional cyberpunk story – he is less interested in the PostApoc reality, and more in what might emerge from it; within the confines of literary fantasy, of course, which is pretty well rendered here.

Like every worthwhile cyberpunk tale, *The Old Axolotl* is driven by current anxieties that aren't in the least imaginary, among which the fear that thinking machines and self-conscious computer programmes are just a step away from emancipation and world domination doesn't seem the most important. For at the centre of Dukaj's micro-novel we find the main character, Bartek, his moods, and especially his sadness or acute depression. Bartek experiences the end of the world –described here, perhaps not accidentally, as *Zagłada*, which means “extermination”, but is also the Polish word used for the Holocaust – in an extremely personal, almost intimate way. The manner of his survival sounds disturbingly familiar – he has incarnated himself in a humanoid robot and begun to wander through spaces created by programmers or earlier visionaries, with the authors of *Blade Runner* leading the way. Just like many of our contemporaries, seeking survival in worlds that don't exist, but that somehow we imagine to be better than the ones within reach.

Dariusz Nowacki

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



JACEK DUKAJ
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“MELANCHOLY’S KING.”

THE OLD AXOLOTL: HARDWARE DREAMS

“Manga blues, baby, manga blues.”

Manga blues - they sit on the terrace of the Kyōbashi Tower with a view of night-time Ginza. Every tenth advertisement and every twentieth screen glows bright. The screen above their terrace plays the scene from *Blade Runner* with Rutger Hauer dripping with rain and neon melancholy in an ironic loop. Meanwhile, they - sad robots - sit, stand, and trundle about, engaging in a misshapen parody of coffee talk.

“Another vodka?”

“Hit me.”

Steel fingers grip the delicate glass with surgical precision. There are special programs to support the motor skills required for vodka drinking.

Of course, they cannot really drink vodka, and the drinks are mere mock-ups. They cannot drink anything, they cannot eat anything - quarter-ton mechs in the Chūō Akachōchin bar. All they can do is perform these gestures of life, laboriously repeating the customs of bygone biology.

A barman in the shell of a mechanized barman pours out the Smirnoff. His three-jointed arm brushes against the polymer mitt of a transformer playing bar customer with the same desperation. The grating sound is audible even under Hauer’s monologue.

That’s the real curse, thinks Bart. Metal on metal, heart on heart, and every awkward moment multiplies the pathos of loneliness a thousand times. As if under a microscope. As if projected on a hundred-hectare screen.

We are monstrous shadows and scrapheaps of human beings, the molybdenum despair of empty hearts.

Manga blues - they sit on the Chūō Akachōchin terrace, under the last red lanterns, sad robots regaling one another with legends.

The first legend is about man.

“It had wings like a butterfly’s dream,” says Dagenskyoll, his shoulder speaker crackling slightly on the sibilant consonants. “Propellers that whirled into light blue rainbows. Dawntreader XII, all nanofibers and carbon fiber, an angel stingray cross,” he continues, his chest screen displaying sketches and schematic diagrams of the plane ripped from Google caches. “Wingspan: 78 meters. Mass: 1.64 tons. It had just been serviced; they kept it in a hangar at the airport in Dallas. When the Death Ray hit the other hemisphere, they had enough time to load their families, some provisions, and equipment. They took off with a several hour head start on the Meridian. The Earth rotates at a speed of 1,674 kilometers an hour - but that’s at the equator. The Dawntreader couldn’t go faster than 300 kilometers an hour, so in

order to keep ahead of the Death Meridian, they had to stay above the eightieth parallel. Of all the solar aircraft, only the Dawntreader could manage it." Dagenskyoll displays the structure of the photoelectric cells that cover the wings and fuselage of the plane. In the pictures they really do shimmer like butterflies in the sun. "By their second circuit they were flying above an Earth roasted clean of all its organic life. Only machines answered their radio calls: the automatic systems of airports and armies. When the Ray died out after one hundred and seventy-seven hours, they could only reach this conclusion from the information being transmitted by machines from the other hemisphere. They made no contact with any transformers; they did not go online. They flew on. Votes were held on board the Dawntreader: to land or not to land? Should they land for a short while, stock up on provisions and then fly on, or wait and find out whether the Ray had really died out? In the end they split up. After two weeks, some of them had had enough, so they touched down somewhere in the north of Greenland, on a runway near an ice settlement, stocked up on water and food, offloaded the unwilling, and took off again." Dagenskyoll raises one of his four skeletal-mosaic arms and points to the zenith of the starless sky over Tokyo. "They're still up there, flying, circling above us on the transoceanic heights."

Now everybody is sure that it's a legend.

Bartek has seated himself on the edge of the terrace, clutching the sentimental prop of a beer can, a Budweiser covered with gaudy katakana characters. If you were to set it upright on a tabletop, it would begin to sway and gyrate like a hula-hoop dancer. Bartek holds the can motionless in the kilojoule grip of a Star Trooper.

We're all gadgets, he thinks. In the distance, forty floors up, the wind sways a loose cable, sprinkling occasional fountains of electric sparks down on a darkened Tokyo. For a moment Bartek wonders how much electricity leaks out of the Royalist power plant like this. Then he thinks about fireworks and Hollywood special effects. The wind is cold, but metal cannot feel the wind. Metal cannot feel anything.

So this is how he spends his evenings.

A stranger in a strange land. Even stranger since there is not a single Japanese transformer. The whole of Japan was fried instantly the moment the Ray hit. Asia was in the hemisphere of death at Zero Hour.

"Anyhow."

The second legend is about paradise.

"They pulled it off. They did it. On the servers of one of the big studios in California they used ready-made scans to set up a whole world on the other side of the Uncanny Valley. Or at least a house, a garden, and some bodies. They created a foolproof filter, so that finally you could connect to the net – mind-to-mech and even mind-to-mind – without any risk of malware unstitching your memory or infecting your consciousness. So they log in, and there, on the other side, they have soft, warm, moist bodies again, miraculously fleshy to the touch. They can touch, smell, and taste again." Dagenskyoll speeds up, and the hulking robots bunched around him in a spellbound circle press even closer, leaning in, sticking out microphone tongues and scanner tendrils. "They can drink and eat and drink." He raises his glass of vodka and a long metallic grating sound rings out, kr-rshaaahrrr: the screeching interference of speakers and microphones, or maybe even the sighing of embarrassed machinery. "They drink, drink and sleep, even if they can't dream, and they walk on the grass and bathe in the sunshine—" (...)

A black medico mech roars from a distorted speaker straight into Dagenskyoll's front display:

"BUT WHERE! WHERE IS IT?!"

"California. The House of the Rising Sun."

A legend. A legend too beautiful to be true.

Meanwhile, Johnny sits down next to Bartek. Johnny has smashed up his showpiece Terminator mech, so now he's in the same sexbot as most of the other transformers in Japan: female model, assembly-line face, Geisha V or VI.

"Someone's looking for you."

"Who?"

Johnny displays a photograph of a robot painted in black and yellow stripes with enormous shoulder girdles.

"Never seen him before. Some kind of makeshift from salvage?" asks Bartek. (...)

Almost all of the alliances are based in Japan. Only here do they have such an abundance of humanoid robots at their disposal. In them, the transformers can feel alive in a living world again – at least a little bit; at least in quotation marks and metal. (...)

The third legend is of the Evil God.

"... and then he hit RESET, and everything alive began to die..."

Bart touches the can with the tip of his finger-gripper and watches the Budweiser rock to and fro in front of him. A mech can freeze motionless like no living organism; motion is what gives it life. A robot that does not work is a pile of scrap metal and nothing more. Frozen into stony stillness, Bart and Johnny watch the dancing can. On the big screen above them, millions of lights glow in *Blade Runner's* nocturnal city – a festival of luminosity shimmering against the gloomy backdrop of PostApoc Tokyo.

As if to the rhythm of the lurching can, the hulking masses of two sexbots rock and writhe as they perform a grotesque parody of a human sex act on a podium at the back of the bar. Geisha on Geisha, two female mechs on unknown transformers simulate lesbian kisses with the precision and tenderness of tempered steel, caresses of breasts and buttocks, armored fingers on armored loins, machines turning the dance of animal desire monstrous in a cold ritual stroboscopically lit by laser light and set to the deafening bass of militant striptease music. Bartek stares and stares, emoting a cringe of embarrassment. How many levels of artifice? How many layers of quotation marks? He soon loses count. They cannot get drunk; they do not even have the programs to simulate being drunk. They cannot have sex; they do not have the programs for sexual chemistry or arousal. All they have left is this clinical performance of sex by robots originally constructed for the erotic servicing of real, organic people. Rooted to the spot, like a statue, Bartek watches for two hundred and eighty-seven seconds before he cannot take any more of it. He gets up with a screech of metallic sinews. The cup of Tokyo bitterness has overflowed.

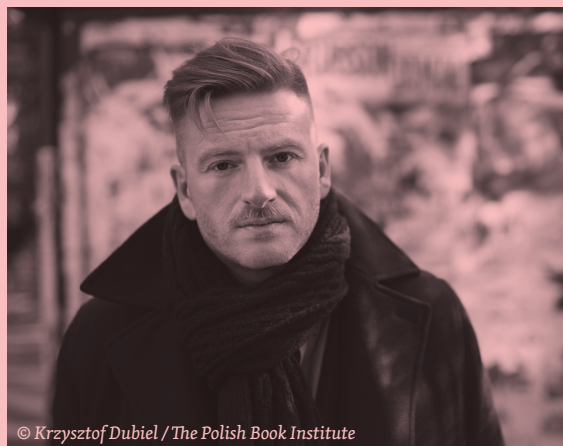
"Melancholy's king, melancholy's the Mikado..."

Translated by Stanley Bill

This extract is from the English-language edition of the novel and appears by kind permission of the publisher.

SZCZEPAN TWARDOCH

DRACH



Szczepan Twardoch (born 1979) is a writer and journalist. The themes of his novels and short stories are often to do with the culture and identity of Silesia. In 2013 he won the news weekly *Polityka*'s Passport prize for his novel *Morphine*. His most recent novel, *Drach*, is shortlisted for the 2015 Nike Literary Prize and won him this year's Kościelski Prize, which has been awarded to young writers since 1962 by the Kościelski Foundation.

Szczepan Twardoch has written more than just a typical war novel set against the history of Silesia. The reader flies through more than three hundred pages of war, sex and madness, but is ultimately left with an image of Silesia as a place where the threads of many languages and life stories connect, and converge.

The book's first protagonist is Silesia itself in the twentieth century. The story is set within a small area between several localities in Upper Silesia.

But just as important as Silesia is the earth. In the first scene, the author has us stand in a muddy puddle in the yard. The voice that relates the entire scene does not come from the sky, but from underneath. It is the earth speaking, or rather the spirit of the earth – *Drach* (an Upper Silesian dialect word) – is the narrator, who follows the fortunes of two Silesian families, the Magnors and the Gemanders, through the twentieth century.

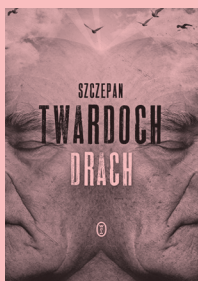
Drach is close to being an adventure story, but this view from the earth's perspective gives it a sinister, mysterious quality, even if cut to the measure of an adventure story. Chapter by chapter, we descend deeper and deeper below the surface, and then look at the world from down there. We watch people running across the earth, and those who dig in it. We are aware of people who bore into it for coal, and those digging trenches in it.

From this point of view, the history of Silesia no longer has to do with shifting borders on a map or public comment in the newspapers, but is played out through primal human passions – in the dark. The central characters, Josef, Valeska, Nikodem and Caroline, are pulled this way and that by hatred and delight, and sometimes by both at the same time. In *Drach* we can see the literary skill that Twardoch has acquired in the course of his previous novels. He sketches portraits and events with a swift and decisive pen. He even allows foreign languages – German, and an archaic Silesian dialect called "Wasserpolski" – to go without footnotes or translation. He goes straight to the

crux of the matter, without feeling the need to build up his narrative with excessive detail, or to fill in missing years with explanation. Instead he concentrates the fortunes of Silesia by focusing on moments of violence or pathos in the lives of successive generations of the Magnor and Gemandor families (such as times of betrayal, weddings, or departure for war). Each of these incidents, shown in a flash, in cinematic images, serves to summarise many years in the characters' lives.

This natural history of a region at the crossroads between Polish and German culture moves between extremes of naivety and cruelty. On the one hand, it has some of the features of a boyhood dream about war and romance. It is full of shiny toys for boys – cars, tanks, and weapons depicted in minute detail – not to mention women's bodies that prompt terror and fascination in the male characters. On the other hand, this dream soon changes into a nightmare that agonises a series of generations. The guns never stop firing, missing, or hitting their mark. Passion gives rise to violence. And page after page, the Silesian earth moves before the reader's eyes with the beat of the night between Josef and the teenage Caroline, but also with the roar of engines and the clatter of rifle fire. This is compelling reading.

Tomasz Surdykowski



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DRACH
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The girl eludes

DRACH

Nikodem. She's like a small animal, a female of the human species, thinks Nikodem, and he finds it a beautiful metaphor. But I know it's not a metaphor, because both she and Nikodem are like small animals and like stones, and like grass, and like water.

The girl is beautiful and awkward. She has a thin body that she doesn't know how to carry,; small breasts as Cranach might have painted them if she had posed naked for him, and not for photographers contemporary to her; she has long limbs, as if El Greco had painted her, if she had posed for him, and not the photographers contemporary to her, and in fact her long, thin white arms and legs remind Nikodem of the limbs of a foal more than the white body of Christ from *The Resurrection*. The girl laces her arms and legs as she sits down. She walks with a stoop, and doesn't know what to do with her hands. She doesn't swing her hips, she doesn't set one foot before the other in a straight line, she doesn't sit in seductive poses. Nikodem is in love with those long legs and arms, the stooped shoulders, and the long fingers; he's falling in love with this awkwardness so fast that he doesn't even know it's happening to him, he's losing his virile strength and going limp inside.

A wild foal on anti-depressants, thinks the limp Nikodem Gemander to himself. Nikodem Gemander is the great-grandson of Josef Magnor, but that is of no significance.

They're sitting by the hotel pool, Nikodem and the girl. There are palm trees growing next to it. Nikodem is sitting on a recliner, the girl is nearby with her feet in the water. Her slim, beautiful body in an expensive, skimpy bikini. Small breasts. Wet hair. She's had a swim. Nikodem likes her in this bikini, long legged. Nikodem thinks other men envy him because of her.

Nikodem orders a bottle of wine. On his iPad, he's drawing a conceptual sketch for a small, neo-modernist house, which two years from now will rise out of almost nothing on the slope of a mountain in the Silesian Beskid range. The house will cost almost six million zloty, although it's meant to cost only four-and-a-half. Nikodem will get two hundred thousand zloty for the design, and the cover of *Architecture Monthly*. For now he's sketching the initial concepts on his iPad, and thinking about the two hundred thousand agreed upon by contract. First he draws on the white screen. Then on the photos of the site that he took before leaving. Then on the white screen again.

The girl is playing with a five-year-old French girl by the pool. The French child's mother, enjoying a moment's rest, is reading a glossy magazine. The girl who will elude Nikodem is lying on a towel. The little French girl lies opposite

her, in the same position, repeating her gestures. They're conversing in a language that doesn't exist. Nikodem looks up from his iPad. He watches the girl and the French child. The girl gives the little girl her bracelet. The little French girl runs to ask her mother if she can accept the gift. Her mother agrees.

"I could have a daughter like that," says the girl to Nikodem, as she sits on the recliner next to him.

Nikodem doesn't answer.

People are divided into types, thinks Nikodem, but he doesn't know that the girl who eludes him is the Caroline Ebersbach type, or that she had been an important person in the life of his great-grandfather, Josef Magnor. People usually miscalculate the degree of importance in their lives of the people close to them, but in the case of Josef Magnor and Caroline Ebersbach, their importance to each other was just as evident to them as it is to me.

The wild foal on anti-depressants is distantly related to Caroline Ebersbach, though that is of no significance: Caroline's cousin, Anna-Marie Ochmann, was one of sixteen people whose sperm and egg cells in the fourth generation would produce the girl now eluding Nikodem, the girl doesn't even know her grandmothers' maiden names and has no idea that Anna-Marie Ochmann ever existed. And there's a sort of refinement in this ignorance.

Nobody has the faintest idea any more that such a person as Anna-Marie Ochmann ever existed. She is remembered by large reference books lying in archives in Katowice and Gliwice, but nobody reads her name in them. [...]

And only I remember that Anna-Marie Ochmann existed, lived and did everything you do when alive, because I'm the one who sees clearly. So she existed only in order to return to me.

Nikodem goes into a café in Gliwice, the café is on Wiczorek Street, which was once called Klosterstrasse, Convent Street, because it led from the Butcher's Market to the Franciscan monastery, and many times they walked along Klosterstrasse to the court, which to begin with was called the Königliches Landsgericht, and later the Regional Court, which of course is of no significance. They also went to church, or for walks – all of them: Otto Magnor of Schönwald, Wilhelm Magnor of Deutsch Zernitz, Josef Magnor of Deutsch Zernitz, Ernst Magnor partly of Nieborowitz and partly Preiswitz, Stanisław Gemander of Przyszowice and Nikodem Gemander of Gliwice, and Caroline Ebersbach, and for instance Nikodem's sister Ewa, who lives nearby, on Freundstrasse, now Sobieski Street, and the girl who eludes Nikodem, they have all walked along this street, there and back, they have scraped their soles against the cobbles, and the cobbles against their soles. They have all adhered to Wiczorek Street, once called Convent.

Some time ago Nikodem almost bought a flat on Wiczorek Street, almost, because the bank politely refused him a loan. In those days he hadn't yet made a success of himself, but now Nikodem is standing at the bar in a café in Gliwice. I can feel the antlike weight of his brawny body. For Nikodem's body is brawny by human standards, brawny and lumbering, it weighs as much as two foal-like girls, but there are bodies bigger than Nikodem's, even human ones, and there are even bigger animal bodies, even bigger trees and shells, in which people hide like hermit crabs. Men in particular have grown fond of the shells of cars that merge with their bodies like a second, stronger skin, like armour, and like armour it strengthens them, protects them from the world – thanks to their four wheels, men become as if

four-legged again. They're like their remote ancestors, they think about their bodies not as being vertical, but horizontal, just as a wild boar or a bull senses its body.

Nikodem likes his armour too, but now he is stripped of it. As he shifts his weight from one leg to the other, he places his feet on me in suede brogues, and thinks about the girl in words that he has thought up specially for her. My little animal, he thinks, my wild foal on anti-depressants, grown-up child of an alcoholic, my borderline little woman, my little female, with whom men fall in love as quickly as they fall out of it, though he has not fallen out of love. And she does not exist beyond men, because it's through them that she defines herself.

She is apparently a journalist for the Katowice supplement to *Gazeta Wyborcza* – that's what she tells Nikodem, for the world demands of her that she should be someone. So apparently she is a journalist, and it comes to her with natural ease, because it doesn't matter to her at all. She knows nothing about the world and nothing interests her apart from herself. Being a journalist doesn't interest her either, nor does work, or the fashion magazines that she reads idly, or the clever books that she reads just as idly and unaffectedly as the fashion magazines. She's not interested in the expensive handbags that she pretends to find exciting, or the expensive clothes that she wears carelessly, and that successive men have bought for her – she wasn't all that interested in them either. She moves past the successive men in her life the way a river flows past stones.

"You are the love of my life," she tells Nikodem, as she sits beside him on the recliner under the palm trees, and Nikodem thinks it isn't true, but it is true in the sense that the girl believes what she's saying. So she's not lying, though Nikodem is convinced that she is.

She's very wise, with the innate wisdom of Buddhist enlightenment, thinks Nikodem, but he doesn't know, the fool, that it is my wisdom, not that of any sage. No sage could have this wisdom. It's my wisdom. The indifferent wisdom of migrating birds. The wisdom of eels swimming to the Sargasso Sea. The wisdom of trout and gulls. Unconscious wisdom, the wisdom of the green-and-white god of glaciers, the animal wisdom of a girl who has calmly adopted herself as the limits of her world. She is not vain, she is simply alive. Not many are capable of living like this, a pure life, pure femininity, without an aim, not searching for meaning, simply living, but she can do it, though she suffers often and greatly. Despite the oblong tablets that she swallows each morning, and that slowly release a substance that's meant to reduce this suffering, just as underarm deodorant is meant to stifle the natural smell of human animals.

So she suffers, and I couldn't care less. They all suffer, I alone do not suffer. I can sense their suffering, just as I can sense their smell, their weight and the gentle touch of their feet.

I can sense the feet of Josef Magnor. I can sense the feet and hands of Josef Magnor's son, as they scratch and tease me, and as they swell, growing up. I can sense the feet of Josef Magnor's grandson and Josef Magnor's great-grandson, the feet of Josef Magnor's great-grandson shod in his nice leather shoes, stripped of his armour, at the bar in a café in Gliwice.

Something connects them, a thread that runs through me, inside me, is me.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

JACEK DEHNEL

MOTHER MAKRYNA



Jacek Dehnel (born 1980) is a poet, novelist, translator and columnist. His published works include poetry collections, novels and short stories. He has won a number of literary prizes, including the Kościelski Foundation Award (2005) and the Polityka Passport (2006). His novels have been translated into more than a dozen languages. *Mother Makryna* is shortlisted for the 2015 Central European Angelus Literary Prize and the 2015 Nike Literary Prize.

Jacek Dehnel has dusted off and returned to the cultural fold the real historical figure of Makryna Mieczysławska, who perpetrated one of the greatest hoaxes of the nineteenth century, and on a European scale too. The story of the fake nun, who was not exposed until fifty years after her death, provides the material for a thrilling plot. In September 1845 a middle-aged woman turns up in Paris, claiming to have been the Mother Superior at a convent of Sisters of the Order of Saint Basil in Minsk, which was closed down eleven years earlier by the Russian authorities. In Paris Makryna is taken up by some eminent representatives of the so-called Great Migration of Poles who have fled from the empires that have engulfed their country, first and foremost Prince Adam Czartoryski. They are extremely willing to listen to her made-up stories about martyrdom for the Catholic faith and for being Polish. For Makryna maintains that she and the other nuns were kept prisoner for years on end, cruelly tortured, starved and forced to do hard labour, all because she had refused to convert to the Russian Orthodox church. Curiously, not just Polish émigrés are fooled by her shocking stories but so is the European general public – the French and British press report widely on her sufferings and the cruelty of the Russians, the bishops refer to her martyrdom in their pastoral letters, and finally she is received by Pope Gregory XVI; his successor, Pius IX, also has a soft spot for her.

Clearly fascinated by this unusual swindler, Dehnel's main question concerns what determined the success of her incredible hoax; he explains why Makryna's lies were useful, in the political sense. In any case, her more perceptive listeners quite soon realised that she was a fraud and a liar, but the need to maintain the image of a holy martyr took the upper hand. What triumphed was not so much naivety, as plain cynicism.

The story develops through two interwoven monologues narrated by the title character. The first, as it were official line,

is a literary rendition of the testimonies to her martyrdom for her faith and motherland that Makryna gave in Poznań, Paris and Rome, in other words contemporary documentary evidence. The second, which is more like a religious confession than anything else, reveals the true story of Makryna, and this is the one that has the greater effect on the reader's imagination and emotions. What we get is the story of Irena Wińczowa, a poor Jewish girl from Wilno, who was forced to adopt a series of false identities as the only way to survive in a cruel world.

As a convert obsessed with the Catholic faith, she dreamed of entering a holy order, but became a servant instead. As the pretty Julia (previously known as Jutta), she attracted a Russian officer called Wińcz, and then became Irena, in exchange for two betrayals – her religious conversion (this time to the Orthodox church) and her liaison with the Russian, and thus with a representative of the hateful partitioning power. At first he doted on her, but when it turned out that she couldn't have children, he became a ruthless wife-beater. The countless wounds on her body, which she showed in Paris and Rome as proof of the cruelty of the Russkies, were inflicted by her sadistic alcoholic husband. After his death she wound up destitute – he had drunk away everything they owned. She managed to latch on to one of the Wilno convents as a charwoman, and that was where she came across the Basilian nuns who had been driven out of Minsk. Embellishing the stories she heard from them, she took on a new identity, becoming Mother Makryna.

Dehnel tells the story in a way that leads us to sympathise with the central character, and even to feel fond of her; he persuades us that her fabricated martyrdom was not at all far from the genuine suffering she endured. As she sets off to conquer the world as a fake nun, she describes herself as: "One, a widow. Two, a pauper. Three, no longer young. Four, a woman. Five, a Jewish convert. Six, ugly. With lots of old scars on her face, and a few more entirely new ones, wrinkled and hunchbacked, with swollen legs, panting as she goes up steps." Despite such negative assets, she did extremely well for herself, living to a great age as a guest at a convent in Rome, surrounded to the end of her days by the cult of a holy martyr.

Dariusz Nowacki



JACEK DEHNEL
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In the name

MOTHER MAKRYNA

of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, I shall write the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God in heaven and all the saints, amen. Scarcely had I entered the presence of Archbishop Przyłuski in Poznań, scarcely had I fallen at his feet, when I raised my weeping eyes to him and said:

“This is the tale of Makryna Mieczysławska, Mother Superior of the Basilian Sisters of Minsk, and of their seven years of persecution for their faith. As I recall the scene today, I could see Siemaszko as clearly as I can see the fringes on the Episcopal throne, as clearly as the tassels on the curtains; I had him within arm’s reach, as he stood there and said: ‘Just you wait – with the lash I shall strip you of the skin in which you were born! By the time a new one grows, you’ll be singing a different tune’ – those were his exact words, and no other, as he stood in the convent with his hired assassins, like the assassins that took Our Lord Jesus Christ captive in Gethsemane, though those men came on a cold spring night, in March, or April, before Holy Week, and these came to us in mid-summer, at break of day. So Siemaszko addressed us, while there I stood in my robes of Prioress of the Basilian convent, with my ring and my crosier, and my sisters around me: Krystyna Huwaldówna, Nepomucena Grotkowska, and lastly Euzebia Wawrzecka – she with whom I later ran from Muscovite bondage, having broken our chains; that was the last I saw of her, for we scattered in all directions, calling on God to help us evade pursuit, like the Holy Family pursued by Herod’s henchmen. So there stood Siemaszko, setting foot on the door, forced open by those Muscovite ruffians, until the iron staples and hinges snapped like kindling wood; he was savouring his might, his satanic power, as if he were the Lord Jesus Christ Himself at the gates of hell – yet he had done wrong, for he had invaded the Holy Church and was maltreating us, the handmaidens of the Lord, threatening us. By then it was high summer, and the red, well-fed snout of the civilian governor Ushakov, all decked in his braided uniform, was bathed in beads of sweat; but Siemaszko was dry, dry as the very devil, dried by the desert winds of hell. He screamed at us, the handmaidens of God, he screamed at me, ‘You, Polish sow, you Warsaw sow’ – for he knew me to be of high birth, and that in my youth I had frequented our, Mieszko’s, Mieczysław’s old Polish capital – ‘sow,’ therefore, ‘Warsaw sow,’ he shouted, ‘I shall rip your tongue from your throat, I shall tug, yank, and grip so hard that my very grasp shall cause the blood to spurt, and I shall toss it to the ravening hounds’ – until dry, bitter froth appeared in the corners of his mouth, so close was my view as he leaned over me, every word like a bitter wind blowing in my face. ‘Ha’,

thought I, *‘Mieczysław became the Bold, so Mieczysławska shall be the stone from David’s sling: let him just try to fight a woman’.*

The day was dawning; on our way to the chancel for meditation, we had been torn from prayer as from a mother’s womb. As the bell struck five, I implored the governor to let us enter the confines of the church, where for so many years we had served God. Siemaszko was all but casting sparks from his eyes; I merely gazed at the apostate, waiting for his cassock to burst into sulphurous flames upon him. When I instructed our dearest, fresh-faced sisters Irena Pomarnacka and Liberata Korminówna to fetch from the treasury our silver cross, set with precious stones and the relics of Saint Basil himself, at once it was seized by sacrilegious hands, causing the blood to flow from Sister Liberata’s fingers, as if a portent of the day to come when they would tear her limb from limb; she merely gave a gentle moan and yielded to the care of Providence. Fortunately, the Muscovite was greedy for precious metal and stones; thus he was desirous of riches, not the cross – and took much plunder from the treasury, the precious robes, and the altars, including my entire dowry, twice one hundred thousand Polish zlotys with which I had entered the convent, and which I had wholly invested in its embellishment. Never mind the riches snapped up by those ruffians – our souls are what matters. We were allowed to take a simple cross, of wood, for under this symbol we would go to our martyrdom. That it would indeed be martyrdom had been made plain to us by then; therefore I took hold of the hard, sharp-edged cross, and laid it on my left shoulder, with Sister Pomarnacka like Simon of Cyrene to help me, and sometimes other sisters too, though if any tried to give me aid, a soldier would strike her with the flat of his sword or prick her with his bayonet.

Thus began our Golgotha – as soon as we left the convent, coming through the gate, which I had seen so often from the window of my cell, I looked about for the wagons that would convey us into exile; but at once I realized that, ringed by a band of armed men, we were going to their brigands’ lair on foot. At this point we heard the cries of children. For our convent was not merely dedicated to praising God, but also to serving the people. And day by day many paupers and beggars came to us, with suppurating wounds, with legs or arms missing... a hand torn off by grape shot in the wars, or severed by a Muscovite broadsword; a man whose legs had been trampled by a horse, another who was lame from birth, or with a face so crooked as to be painful to behold; a woman riddled with monstrous worms, another covered in weeping boils – every second person was itching, scabious, or louse-ridden, with matted locks one cubit long, or two. All these people came to us as to the purest spring, in which we would wash, feed and water them. And as if that were too little for our feeble arms to bear, there were the children, the orphans, of whom we had six times ten to nurture. As in the paintings, where Herod’s henchman raises a heavy iron gauntlet to a child, so too the soldiers dispersed and threatened the innocents. The babes were crying and screaming; I can still see them today, gazing out of a small square window, divided in a cross, one child’s head in each pane, in terror and in tears, the younger ones below, the older above; some opened the windows, stretched out their little arms and cried: *‘Our mothers are captured, our mothers are captured!’* Others ran down the stairs, their small feet pattering as they ran towards us, but when they clung to the hem of our habits, the butts of the Muscovite rifles pushed them aside; as if their lives were at stake they watched, until the soldiers glanced the other way, and then at once

they sprang to our sides again. The oldest children, the wisest, just as they had often entered the orchard for sour apples, now scrambled over the wall, for the Muscovites were guarding the gate; they went and ran throughout the town, banging on doors, and loudly shouting: *‘Our mothers are captured, our mothers are captured!’* At this cry the whole town awoke, people leaped from their beds, this man flew from his house in nothing but his shirt, that man’s wife threw a cape on his back, yet another grabbed a club, and they all rushed to join us; but they only caught up with us at the inn called the Convenience, a quarter of a mile from town, so nobody saw how the Muscovite assassins drove us through the convent gates, never to enter them again. I with the cross at the fore, like the Lord Jesus, with Sister Pomarnacka like Simon of Cyrene at my side, thinking only of our Lord’s torment as I glanced at my own shoulder – He must have had the self same wound on the shoulder that bore the cross; three bared bones protruded from it, but contemplating agony not my own, but that of Christ, succoured me on our march. Others among us, especially the older sisters whose health was failing, tumbled to the ground, whereupon the henchmen jabbed and beat them with their rifles, heedless of the blood that came bursting from their mouths, their noses, and their feet. Then at the Convenience, the tavern – perhaps so named in derision, for there we suffered the greatest inconvenience – Siemaszko halted our conduct.

Three days had passed since his previous visit; he no longer rode in an open gig that bounced on every stone and exposed him to a cloud of dust; sometimes he had come in a fine, lacquered Berlin, newly bought for imperial roubles, at others, if with a distinguished guest, he had come lounging on cushions in a comfortable vis-à-vis; lately he had gained flesh, fattened on Muscovite victuals, grown red, florid and satisfied. Indeed he had been most willing to travel to Saint Petersburg, and at the Tsar’s court church to enter the schismatic faith with the title of archiereus, and then propose a plan to convert all Uniates by force and to turn his endeavours against us. On the first day of our martyrdom, when he and the governor assailed us, he had come in the vis-à-vis. He bid the carriage stop, stood up as if in a pulpit, as if to address us, but merely watched; he waved a hand, beckoned to one of the soldiers and whispered in his ear. At once there was a commotion, the assassins dashed into the courtyard of the inn, where coffers had been placed in advance. One by one they hauled them into the road, then raised the lids, and there inside were fetters, with which they bound us, chaining us to one another, in pairs. We were made to set our feet, then our hands on a block, and the hammers thumped, while the blood splashed on shattered faces and beaten backs, and soaked into the ground. *‘They’re putting our mothers in chains, they’re putting our mothers in chains!’* wept the children; the people wept too, as now and then a woman who had known kindness from us, an old beggar or a godly citizen emerged from the crowd to beg us for a blessing, each from the sister he knew and held dearest; but the soldiery kept pitilessly warding them off with their rifle butts and bayonets. At last the final hammer fell silent, the final pair of sisters was manacled in chains, the weeping crowd was scattered to the four winds and we set off, impelled at a great rate, now across frozen ground, now mud, all but barefoot, all the way to Vitebsk.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

JULIA **FIEDORCZUK**

WEIGHTLESSNESS



Julia Fiedorczuk (born 1975) is a poet, writer, translator and lecturer specialising in twentieth-century American literature. She has written several collections of poetry, a set of short stories and two novels. She is a winner of Austria's Hubert Burda award. her poetry has been translated into many languages including Icelandic, Welsh and Japanese.

Weightlessness is one of the best women's novels in recent years: it's universal, it opens itself up to many different interpretations, it's complex and rich in meaning. Like in Fiedorczuk's earlier collections of stories, women are the main characters in this novel. We observe her three heroines from their childhood in a small town near Warsaw, into adulthood in the big city. Each of them – which is a common motif in Fiedorczuk's works – comes from a different social group, but they are all linked by a feminine sensitivity, in the ways in which they perceive the world, and by their similar relations with their surroundings. Each of them clashes with her own body, with her parents' indifference, with male violence. Zuzanna is the daughter of a professor, who sent her to art classes. Now an adult, Zuzanna is a wealthy, well-educated and sophisticated woman. She's a typical representative of the middle class: single, self-absorbed, in constant pursuit of some kind of better version of herself. Her childhood friend, Helena, is different – she's the daughter of a tailor, and she herself does physical work: she works as a maid in a hotel, raises her two children, and visits her mother in a hospital, who is dying of cancer. Their school friend, Ewka, is the diametrical opposite. Born to Maria, a hobo who rummages through trash, she is sent to a special school in Warsaw. As an adult, she's homeless, living on the streets, with all of her energy consumed by her search for the next drop of alcohol and a warm place to sleep.

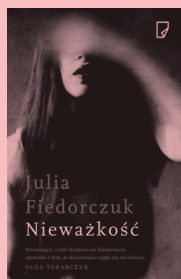
Weightlessness is a sociological novel which demonstrates how women are unable to go beyond the restrictions which have been imposed upon them by their social class. Their intelligence, ambition, sensitivity and interests make no difference – they're destined to reproduce the fates of their own mothers.

In this novel, Julia Fiedorczuk gives us decidedly more, for the weightlessness of the title also has a metaphysical meaning, connected to the inability to become rooted in one's own life. Each of these women tries, in some way, to tame her own body, her fate, and the place where she has ended up living.

Her body, however, remains unknown, her own biography appears to be foreign and incomprehensible, and her family – strangers. Thus, the entire everyday effort is bound to the taming of surroundings and the confirmation of one's own existence.

The greatest value of Fiedorczuk's novel lies in this clash between sociological observation and metaphysical order, and in fact a new quality is created here. The author thus manages to create a story from paradoxes, to reveal the complications of a seemingly simple life, and to present a woman as a human being, without any rose-tinted, sentimental embellishments. In *Weightlessness*, a battle with dust assumes the proportions of a philosophical act (leaving a trace of oneself in the world), and a search for the self takes place in alcoholic hallucinations. Fiedorczuk draws portraits of girls as creatures that are simultaneously sensitive and extremely cruel, reproducing in their world the kind of relationships they see between adults. Zuzanna says to her doll, "Stop wailing," and Ewka beats a dog that nuzzles her. As adult women, they also turn out to be equivocal: they hate male domination, but they submit to it and take advantage of it, and they don't speak out about the violence they experience.

Paulina Małochleb
Translated by Scotia Gilroy



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Ewka didn't

WEIGHTLESSNESS

need a watch to warn her that they would be shutting the allotment gardens soon. She could tell from the angle of the sun. Or maybe not even from that, but from colours themselves. The sky paled, everything else becoming darkened, in sharper relief. This was the moment Ewka would have to try slipping into the allotments without being spotted by the caretaker.

The gate squeaked slightly. Ewka closed it behind her carefully, and looked around. Nothing. Not a soul. She started walking, slowly, yet assertively, clutching under her arm a carrier bag with the word *Triumph* emblazoned across it. Instinct led her on. That, and the vision of an empty little house on one of the allotments. The dream of comfortable rest. It had been a long day, long enough for her to get drunk twice and sober up twice. The unoccupied cottage was a bright spot on the map of the city, a map Ewka had etched into a place more permanent even than memory, a pulsating brightness, calling her onwards.

She turned into another lane between the parcelled-off allotments. Round a corner, she could hear the sounds of a group of friends, entertaining each other round a barbecue. The smell of roasting sausage was torture, but this made no impression on Ewka, who was used to torture. She straightened her spine and walked on, as if nothing, as if she too had every right to stroll this evening time down Cat Alley between lilac bushes. She looked ahead, the sounds of conversations over the barbecue fading, only to then explode in a final salvo of laughter. She swore under her breath, but without conviction, feeling too tired to curse even. The empty cottage had to be near, and the thought gave her new strength. Led on by this invisible lighthouse, she turned again, this time into a slightly wider alley, which intersected the allotments from one end to the other. The setting sun was right up ahead. And against its bright disc, a fair way off still, she saw the form of the allotment caretaker riding along on his bike.

It was one of the few moments when she displayed any sort of reflex action. Turning on a heel, she instantly double-backed into Cat Alley. This time the murmuring around the barbecue didn't dim. She stopped by a gate opposite, placed her bag on the ground and pretended to fiddle with the lock. A woman's voice called out "Eh, we'll have to finally change that padlock one day..." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the caretaker cycle past and vanish from sight. She returned to the main alley, glanced around with greater care, spotting no sign of him. The light on the map inside her head was glowing steadily. Maybe... there and there, Ewka thought. There. Behind

the jasmine, on the right. She felt terribly tired, but the awareness that her destination was so close gave her an added boost. This time, before turning another corner, she stuck her head out from behind the fencing to check if the coast was clear. And clear it was. Not a soul to be seen down the darkening alley.

She turned into it. This part of the allotment gardens was less well-kept, overgrown with old trees and bushes. Some of the lawns hadn't been mowed in ages. In this sea of greenery, in the shade, Ewka suddenly felt the cold. A shiver shook her, but she was close. The light inside her intensified. Maybe there, she thought. One more corner to turn. Following the setting sun. The process of imagining how comfortable she would be in just a moment almost hurt. Even if someone had shat in there again. And so what. And-sowhat andsowhat andsowhat.

And that was when, without warning, a woman holding a giant bunch of lilacs appeared right at her feet. Ewka first saw the cloud of white flowers, thick and heavy. The smell alone was enough to crush her, but her own stinking firewall stopped any other smells from getting through. The woman had emerged out of one of the more overgrown allotments and was closing the gate behind her. She had appeared next to Ewka, as if out of nowhere. And suddenly, and close enough for the two to make eye contact, Ewka and the strange woman, even though no one had ever before made a point of noticing, of staring into her eyes. The woman, an elderly lady in a thin, light-coloured raincoat covering a rotund body, topped off with a bright red hairdo of carefully considered proportions, stopped dead in her tracks. Ewka instantly knew playtime was over. Over and out. Over and done with. For a moment they both stood there, staring and staring back, Ewka and the woman, until the latter uttered:

"But you're not... allowed here."

"Why the fuck ain't I?" Ewka was aware enough to snap back. "It was open, so I walked in."

"How can you speak to me like..." the woman countered. "Why such language?"

Ewka shrugged her arms. The light inside her died like an extinguished match, the cold around them moving closer in. A shiver ran through her.

"We close up for the night," the older woman went on. "Right now, only the owners can..." She closed her gate, taking up position in the centre of the narrow alleyway, barring Ewka's progress. "We all have to keep some sort of order around here," she went on explaining, as if expecting to be understood. But Ewka was in no mood to be understanding. Quite the opposite, in fact. She started walking again, in a sudden burst of willpower. With no direction in mind but onwards. Straight at this bloody keeper of public peace. And her vast shield of white lilacs.

"What are you doing?" the woman protested, but she had to move aside, Ewka moving forward with unstoppable determination. She walked on, without looking back. The older woman cried out, "Security! Security!"

Ewka kept on walking. Only a few more steps and she would be turning, right into the path of the setting sun, the last corner to turn, for beyond it, only a few plots further, there was a wooden palace waiting for Queen Ewka, her bed all laid out in wait for her royal highness.

"Guard!" the woman screamed. Only a few more steps. Just a couple.

"What's going on here?" asked a hoarse, male voice. Ewka heard the sound of a slowing bicycle. She kept on walking.

"She almost knocked me over," the woman kept on with her lamentations.

"Hey!" the man called out. "Where do you think you're going?"

"She almost had me down," the woman repeated.

Ewka was still walking. Slowly, proud, erect, towards her palace. She reached the crossroads. And turned. The last corner. The sky filled with an orange glow, drawing her onwards. Just a little further. Just a little...

"Stop!" the guard hollered. But Ewka kept up her momentum. A second later, she once again heard the bicycle's brakes, only this time inches from her back. Someone tugged at her shoulder. "Oi, get the hell out of here! No sleeping on my watch."

She finally stopped. The sun was vast, loaded, burning into her eyes. A shiver shook her again.

"Go on, get," the man said, slightly more softly. The woman came running with her lilacs.

"You can't talk to people like that," she countered.

"But you're the one who called for help! So what do you want me to do now?"

"Yes, but... she's still a human being. Miss?" the woman turned to the now finally motionless Ewka. "Perhaps you could go find a shelter? You know, I see such places on TV all the time..."

"Now they're going to get all pally," the guard mumbled. Ewka took a step forward. "Oi!" he yelled, "The way out is that way. And if I see you round here again, I'll call the law on you."

"I'll walk you to the gate," the woman offered.

"Once more and I will, I'll call the cops," the guard repeated.

Ewka closed her eyes. The sun really was burning brightly now, a warning red. All that was missing was fiery warmth. But maybe that was the shade. Maybe the cold blowing in from the woods. Maybe the damp from the earth. "Let's go, come on," the woman implored.

Ewka turned and, without waiting for her companion, headed back the way she came. It felt as if someone was re-winding a dream. And the watching of it, going backwards, was torture, though again Ewka wasn't too... fussed, considering she was so used to tortures. Sunlight now pressed against her back. She felt terribly tired, though she knew she wouldn't rest, not until she'd had a drink, no fucking way.

The woman kept following. She was smaller than Ewka and took tiny steps. To keep up, she had to trot.

"Maybe some kind of hostel? And why are you out on the street? Why won't you get a job?"

Ewka walked on. They had arrived at the main alleyway, only now they were walking away from the sun, the bloody disc now starting to dip behind the trees anyway. Ewka couldn't see it, could only sense the superficial warmth it had been giving off. She felt even colder than before.

Ewka turned into Cat's Alley. The smell of grilled sausage assailed her with even greater cruelty than before. The people around the barbecue seemed to be having a jolly old time. A kid was screaming, but no one was paying it any attention. Nor did they notice the two women marching slowly past.

Translated by Marek Kazmierski

*This translation was supported by the Sample Translations
©Poland program. A longer extract is available*

ZIEMOWIT **SZCZEREK**

ROUTE S7



Ziemowit Szczerek (born 1978) is a writer, journalist and expert on Central and Eastern Europe. Winner of the 2013 Polityka Passport for Mor-dor's Coming To Eat Us Up, or A Secret History of the Slavs, a book which combines the structure of a road novel with gonzo-style journalism. He contributes to journals including the news weekly Polityka, the cultural magazine Ha!art, and Nowa Europa Wschodnia. *Route S7* is shortlisted for the 2015 Angelus prize.

Route S7, the book's title, is Highway No. 7, a road which runs from Gdańsk in the north to Poland's border with Slovakia, in the south – one of Poland's major roads. Paweł, the protagonist of Ziemowit Szczerek's novel, travels this route in the opposite direction: he's driving from Krakow, where he lives and works as a journalist, and is headed north, towards Warsaw, because he's got "a very important meeting" there. He sets out on this fantastical, adventure-filled trip on the 1st of November, the Day of the Dead – as the author writes, "the prettiest Polish holiday," "aesthetically well-suited to this period of gloom that lasts half a year." It's such a thoroughly Polish holiday that it's surprising it hasn't yet been declared a national holiday. Everything here, in general – including *Route S7*, the "queen of Polish highways" – is extremely Polish. It is, of course, a caricature-like depiction of Polishness, since this is about the Poland which Polish liberals truly despise – ugly and trashy Poland, populated by louts who protect themselves against modernity, dimwits asphyxiated by their own history. The worst version of Polishness can be found, of course, in the countryside, in the villages and small towns the protagonist of this novel passes through. This "worstness" is inherent in the ugly architecture as well as the unbearable mentality of the people living there.

Paweł points out "the seven wonders of *Route S7*," hellish places which, in his opinion, best represent the local flavor and which symbolically express present-day aspirations and dreams. One of them is a building made of plaster and concrete blocks called the Old Polish Fortress. It's the fulfilment of a sick dream of power of a local businessman, a great patriot in love with Sarmatism. The Akropol Restaurant near the exit to Radom is also a bizarre product of provincial design – with one wing stylized as a Greek temple and the other like an aristocratic manor house. Szczerek's protagonist catalogues with masochistic passion not only the most diverse, monstrous structures in the Polish landscape, but also the various types

of people he encounters during his trip: thugs and hipsters, thick-skulled xenophobes and Korwin-supporters, village mystics and truck drivers, and even a Lithuanian and a German who speak Polish.

Route S7 is a spectacular fantasy, full of demonic signs and figures derived from a few different spheres, but predominantly those belonging to the pop-culture imaginarium (with Hollywood films playing a primary role). Most of the novel's events have a fantastical aspect; we quickly lose our bearings as a result of hallucination or a narcotic trance (the protagonist is constantly sipping on mysterious elixirs), and it's not completely clear what "really" happens to Paweł. But all the same, the most significant thing remains that which deals with the collective unconscious and makes up the sum of Polish fears and aspirations. In this last aspect, Szczerek's novel makes an extremely relevant statement. It suffices to say that echoes of the most recent anxieties appear in the book – about war with Russia. The author of *Route S7* goes even further – in the final sections of the book, the protagonist attempts to imagine how his country will be under Russian rule and how guerilla warfare will be organized "skinheads, metalheads and a few hipsters with stolen rifles will wander through forests in sweatshirts from shopping malls, in hiking boots, in puffy winter jackets and will shoot down Russian drones flying over the trees").

Paweł doesn't manage to reach the "seventh wonder of Route S7" (Hotel Lordzisko in Warsaw). If he reached the capital, he would have to treat it as critically as the towns and villages he had previously passed. After all, Warsaw is the "Radom of Europe," the largest city of the "Catholic Taliban and Tartary," the capital of "a country which will never accept itself." It's worth finishing the quotation: "...not because it has high demands, but only because it isn't what it would like to be – namely, just a normal country like all the rest."

Dariusz Nowacki



ZIEMOWIT SZCZEREK
SIÓDEMKA
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ASMODEUS

ROUTE S7

And so, Paweł, you're sitting in your Opel Vectra, you're sitting and driving through hungover, exhausted Kraków, you're also hungover and exhausted, you're leaving Kraków, you're driving to Warsaw and you're crawling along in a traffic jam headed towards Route S7, the queen of Polish highways, tomorrow morning you've got an important meeting in Warsaw, so you have to be there, nothing can be done about it.

You pass Rakowicki Cemetery, ah, how you love Rakowicki Cemetery, it's the quintessence of Kraków, on every grave, before every surname, there's a title – this master, this councilman, this doctor, this lawyer – and if they had no idea what to put down, there's "Citizen of the City of Krakow," and that's also fine. You sniff and catch a whiff of stearin, and you see the glow of grave candles over the cemetery, and with delight, Paweł, you draw it in through your nostrils because you like the smell of stearin wafting over the cemetery, in general you like the Day of the Dead, for today is the Day of the Dead. Ghosts and spirits of ancestors creep out of their holes, they leave their planes of existence and take possession of Poland for half a year.

Wooooo-hooooooo.

Personally, Paweł, you like this gloom and ghastly dampness, this time when bedraggled Slavic gods and haggard Slavic demons are the closest to the earth, and Poland, your homeland, is, you will admit, incapable of taming the gloom and dampness. "The fucking riff-raff squelches in perpetual darkness," to quote someone who's nearly a classic. For Poland has never managed to tame itself. It has never, you think to yourself, managed to give itself any kind of shape or form.

And that's why, Paweł, you like the Polish Day of the Dead, for it's one of the very few products of Polish culture that's aesthetically well-suited to this period of gloom that lasts half a year, and which has now just begun in Poland. The prettiest Polish holiday.

Meanwhile you open your window in order to breathe in the smell of stearin more deeply, and a news broadcast comes over the radio. The announcer speaks in a frantic voice about how Russia is gathering troops on the Polish border, in Kaliningrad Oblast, and you look at your reflection in the rear-view mirror, you see your hungover eyes, because if today is the Day of the Dead, then yesterday was Hallowe'en, and all of Krakow – where you live, because you hid yourself there from Poland, because Krakow is one of the few places in Poland where one can hide from Poland – went out to get wasted. There was a good occasion for it: Hallowe'en. Jack-o'-lanterns, horror movies on TV, *Soul*

Dracula heard in every bar, and *Dziady* performed in every theater in ever new arrangements. But generally everyone just drinks. Not that Kraków needed a special occasion to get wasted, but it happened.

*

And so you're sitting behind the steering wheel, tapping your fingers on it, tap, tap, your Vectra is stuck in traffic, and you go over in your mind what happened yesterday for Hallowe'en, because you went out with your colleagues from work, from the web portal Worldpol.pl where you work as an editor and for which you edit the homepage and think up clickable headlines. So that a unique user will click, so that it'll score, so that there's clickability (Lat. *clicalitas*). There are, let's say, Polish-German NATO maneuvers near Szczecin and soldiers are being drilled on how to cross the river, and you, the editors, think up a headline: *The German Army Has Crossed the Oder River on Floating Bridges*. Straight onto the homepage. It scores. Or there's news that some totally unknown member of parliament belonging to a nearly-dead political party took a piss while drunk beneath a statue of Adam Mickiewicz, and you rub your hands together and declare: *A Famous Politician Urinated on a Great Pole*. How it scores! How many clicks! *Clicalitas* explodes! Incidentally, if some headline contains the words "famous politician," "famous actor" or "famous musician," this politician, musician or actor isn't famous at all, because if he really were famous, then his name would be mentioned on the homepage, his full name. Grzegorz, let's say, Schetyna was caught on film slipping precious tableware into his pocket during a dinner at the Elysée Palace. Jarosław, let's say, Kaczyński, totally sloshed, was hopping on car roofs like a mountain gorilla on Nowowiejska Street in Warsaw. That's how it would be. Or let's say it's a national holiday in the Czech Republic and there's a military parade – take it, man, peddle it like it's news. *The Czech Republic: A Military Parade on the National Holiday?* Forget it, there would be two clicks, two pathetic, measly clicks, but you spring into action – and a headline: *Armed Soldiers on the Streets of Prague*. A commotion, it scores, it gets lapped up voraciously. And it's also important to note that it's not clear whether it's Prague, the Czech city, or perhaps the one closer to home, the "Praga" district of Warsaw, and so the unique user will be more inclined to click in order to check. If the government collapses in Slovakia, you don't write that the government collapsed in Slovakia but rather *Poland's Neighbor on the Brink*, because if you wrote that this neighbor is Slovakia, not a soul would be interested, because what's happening in Slovakia is interesting solely for students of Slovak Studies and some Czechophiles whose Czechophilia extends to Slovakia. But *Poland's Neighbor* – there you go! Maybe it's Germany? wonders the unique user. My oh my, Krautland in distress, such a nice country, heh, those even streets, everything so nicely painted, what a shame. Or maybe it's Russia? thinks the unique user. Well well, the Russkis have come to a bad end, they got what was coming to them. Or maybe the Czech Republic? the user continues to wonder. That wouldn't be bad, either, stuck-up Czechs, give back the lands beyond the Olza River instead of drinking foamy beer in taverns.

Oh, it's very delicate and nuanced work, thinking up these headlines.

Of course what sells best is the apocalypse, annihilation, the end of the world with particular focus on Poland, oh, the end of Poland is heaven for *clicalitas*, of course, asteroids

hurtling towards Poland score, all types of plagues score, Godzillas score, when Mars attacks it's a score, viruses, Putin – they score.

Putin scores, particularly in recent times. It's not even necessary to twist the headlines very dramatically. Just a little bit – it never hurts.

Russia Threatens Poland: If You Don't Give Back the Corridor, We'll

Dangerous Russian Rockets on Poland's Border

Putin Rants: Poland Needs to Calm Down, Otherwise...

Surprise Russian Maneuvers Right Next to the Polish Border Shocking Reports From a NATO Interview: Russia Is Ready-ing Itself Against Poland....

Those were, for example, the headlines from the past few days.

*

So yesterday evening it was Hallowe'en.

Some sort of drifters were wandering around the city painted with skulls and crossbones, dressed up as vampires and demonic witches, goths and emos could finally emerge from their homes in full glory and nobody looked at them like they were freaks. A lot of black metal fans came out with black-and-white faces painted in evil-looking make-up. A lot of normal metalheads also came out, the common ones, just manes, typical faces, badges. You met some of them outside the Asmodeus bar on Starowiślna Street, they were standing in a circle tossing their long manes of hair like windmills, and on the ground between them lay a small mp3 player with a portable speaker which was roaring like a bear.

– *The city of Warsaw at war*, it roared.

– *Voices from underground*, roared the metalheads. *Whispers of freedom!*

– *Nineteen-forty-four...*

– *Help that never came!*

Then they broke into a hysterical scream verging on falsetto:

– *Warsaw, fiiiiiiiiight!!!*

They had tattoos on their hands. Iron Maiden and Sepultura patches were mixed with badges of the cursed soldiers and the Polish Underground State.

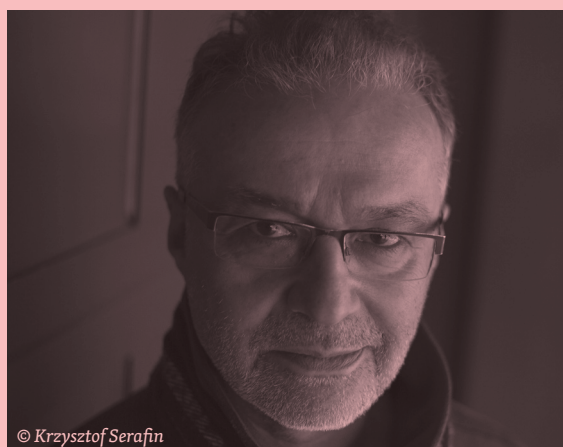
Some variants of Addams Family members were trudging around the city, and at the corner where Szewska Street meets the Planty stood a madman holding a cross with a face that resembled a Fiat Multipla – which apparently sometimes happens. There was a crossed-out jack-o'-lantern attached to his crucifix and he was yelling at people that they shouldn't worship jack-o'-lanterns and American culture, that Satan dwells in these jack-o'-lanterns, that Satan lurks in Harry Potter too, but more so in jack-o'-lanterns, and how it was necessary to stop immediately because one must cultivate one's own traditions rather than copy foreign ones. Some guy dressed up as a werewolf was walking down Szewska Street: he was wearing a wolf's mask that covered the upper part of his face and a fur coat that looked like it probably belonged to his grandmother, and he had pinned a fox stole (with the head, paws and so forth) onto his backside as a tail. He was wearing slippers on his feet to resemble dog paws. He was very drunk. He went up to the madman with the cross, looked him in the face and said:

– *You've got a mug like a Fiat Multipla.*

Translated by Scotia Gilroy

MACIEJ HEN

SOLFATARA



Maciej Hen (born 1955) is a writer, translator and journalist. He graduated from the cinematography department at Łódź Film School, and has worked as a cameraman, a director of documentary films, a screenwriter and an actor. In 2004, under the pseudonym Maciej Nawariak he published his first work of literature, a novel called *According to Her*.

Solfatara by Maciej Hen is an excellent historical novel, entirely unaffected by any modern trends or ideological debates. This is superb literature, graceful and cohesive, a great pleasure to read. Its cultural roots go deep into the past, to the time when the tradition of the secular adventure story was born, in other words, the era of Lazarillo de Tormes, Cervantes or Defoe. Thus *Solfatara* is rather a bold undertaking, a sort of treatise on writing the seventeenth-century novel, but a practical one, because the result is simply the finished text of a novel of this kind, without any footnotes or commentary. There's no post-modern irony, quotation marks or brackets, and no winking at the reader – if there are any, then they're outside the actual narrative, cleverly placed in a definition of the situation where we have a seventeenth-century Italian novel written by a Polish author born in 1955.

The book is set in 1647 in Naples, where a popular uprising breaks out. Triggered by high taxes and customs tariffs imposed by the Spaniards then ruling the city, the revolt soon changes into chaotic street fighting, aimed not just at the Spaniards but also at the local aristocracy. A local fisherman, Tommaso Aniello, known as Masaniello, spontaneously emerges as leader of the rebellion. The career of this commander – to some a righteous hero, to others a cruel madman – only lasts for ten days, and then, as the result of yet another intrigue, he loses his head too. The action of *Solfatara* covers these ten days, as presented to us by the central character and narrator, Fortunato Petrelli, an elderly local news reporter, who keeps updating his notes as events unfold. In the typical manner of a character in an adventure story, Petrelli gets into all sorts of difficulties – he tries to establish the identity of a rather charming prostitute who usually succumbs to him in the dark, and he saves the life of a beautiful noblewoman, only to find out that she has been lying in her grave for the past six years. But Hen makes excellent use of one of the best trump cards of old-fashioned literature – the “nested story”. Now and then we are sent off into a colourful flashback from Petrelli's life, or we move into the life story of each

new character we meet, and also into stories within stories. As – naturally, *toutes proportions gardées* – in *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* by Jan Potocki, this entire, erudite, compound structure forms a proper narrative, which in this case is about friendship, jealousy, betrayal and artistic ambitions. The language used in *Solfatara* is also notable – simple but sophisticated, rendered archaic in an elegant way, but without affectation or unnecessary frills. This is Polish of the highest quality, rich and beautiful.

Solfatara not only pulsates with literary force, but also with the energy of the Neapolitan street. The city of Naples has been a continuous settlement for over three thousand years – it is not afraid of revolutions, taxes, mafias or wars. The only thing it might possibly fear is the volcano in whose shadow it lies.

Piotr Kořta



MACIEJ HEN
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Sunday
7 July 1647

SOLFATARA

Shall I emerge from this mayhem with my life? I must try to hope for the best, though in truth there can be no certainty. It would not surprise me to find that all this chaos marks the end of Naples. As every man knows, nothing on this Earth lasts for ever. But we would wish there to be some trace of us left.

Thus I implore you, whoever you are that holds these pages, before you hurl them into the fire, please endeavour to read these blindly scrawled notes of mine, as I place in your hands the memory of my own existence, and of all those whom I manage to fit into these pages in the time to be granted me.

In fact one could surely make do without the particulars of my person, since I, Fortunato Petrelli, am nobody special, nor do I play a role in today's tempestuous events. Yet perhaps, knowing who is addressing you, you will find it easier to judge to what extent my report is credible. Know therefore, that for thirty years and more it has been my daily occupation to describe everything that happens in our city on the pages of the *Neapolitan News*, a gazette familiar to all. Thus I have taken a close view of every sort of crime, executions, brawls among the common folk, family feuds and fires – I was even at the foot of Vesuvius during the great eruption of sixteen years ago – and yet an incident of the kind that is now occurring may never yet have been witnessed in these parts before. [...]

Profiting from a moment of quiet outside, I shall now attempt to explain to you, Reader, what is happening around us. To this purpose I must go back several weeks, to the end of May, when news of local unrest first came from Palermo. On each occasion in this period when, in my habitual way, I joined the rabble pressing in all directions along the streets of our city and, curious where it would lead me, allowed myself to be carried along freely by the human wave, in the voices and gestures of the people passing by I sensed a morbid excitement. My immediate thought was that I was suffering from an overtaxed brain, in view of the heat, which often makes the entire world seem strange and alien, as in a bad dream, and to sober myself I doused my head with a pail of water or two from the well; and yet – whether the squabbles of lazars (as we are wont to call the idlers who sit from dawn to dusk outside the Hospital of Saint Lazarus), or the shouts of market traders, snatches of song, the guitar chords, laughter and loud conversations flowing in the evenings from tables and benches set outside the trattorias – all these seemed to sound a different note than usual, and to be running to a different metre, ever faster, as if passing from a trot to a gallop. At times, when from this hubbub

individual words reached me, or even several words at once, I began to wonder if I myself had been the unwitting cause of this mental agitation, by providing information in my gazette about the ongoing unrest in Sicily. For on several occasions I chanced upon small groups of vagabonds gathered around one or another agitator who, making constant errors and stumbling over the more difficult words, was reading aloud to them, sentence by sentence, from a frayed copy of the News.

In recent days, I felt particular anxiety as I watched preparations for the approaching feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and as it soon came to light, my instincts were not deceiving me. There is a custom in Naples that every year in the square outside the Carmelite basilica the people build a large castle out of rotten planks, old papers and rags, and then on the day of the festival, there is a great battle fought with sticks, which some use to defend the stronghold, and others to storm it. There are always more volunteers who enlist on the side of the attackers, surely because in any case the fortress must be captured, and few would wish to fight in a cause that is lost from the very start. Furthermore, the Neapolitans love masquerades, and the attacking army always appears dressed up in turbans and fezzes, their faces made black with soot, or rust-red with brick dust. Since time immemorial these bizarre warriors have been called "the Alarbs", which surely derives from the Arabs, although to what events this custom refers and what it is meant to signify I have never succeeded in divining, despite having lived in Naples for nigh on four-and-thirty years. This year, enlistment for the Alarb army began several days ago, and thus a long way in advance, for the festival is only due to fall on the sixteenth of July. On Friday afternoon, I made my way to the piazza del Carmine, where this beggars' army holds its manoeuvres, in the hope of coming upon something there that would amuse the readers of my gazette. On the neighbouring piazza del Mercato, or to be precise, in the part of it free of stalls, where on Tuesdays and Thursdays there is a horse market, before the church of Sant Eligio a marble plinth has been erected, on which stands a platform of mighty beams; above it there rises a gallows, from which the stinking carcasses of malefactors usually dangle. They are rarely cleared away, for in this district the stench of the corpses is in any case lost amid the general fetor of waste lying scattered everywhere from the fishmonger's and butcher's stalls, dragged about by dogs and cats. (Things were different, so I have heard, in the days of the famous viceroy Don Pedro de Toledo, when ten condemned men were hung each day, each on a fresh string, thanks to which the rope makers were guaranteed constant demand for their goods.) But this time both hooks on the crossbeam of the gallows were free. Arriving at the square, I saw the "Moors" marching to and fro across their parade ground, dressed in motley, vigorously waving their sticks and rhythmically stamping their feet shod in bast shoes, causing dust to rise from the dried-out mud. I must admit that they did show some flair for the craft of war, as one watched them briskly march at every nod of the commander, now to the left, now to the right; then at an agreed signal, without breaking their serried rank, they rushed headlong into a successful attack on the gallows, now with their sticks held out before them like rapiers, now raised overhead like sabres. And yet I wondered why, if this was only to be a church festival performance, they were exercising so strenuously until sweat gushed from them in all directions, like water from a dog that shakes itself on

emerging from a pond. Could the dishevelled youth with the large flaxen moustaches in command of these men have decided to eclipse all the Alarb storms ever enacted in human memory? And what might he gain from that?

I thought I had seen this man somewhere before. I stopped at a kiosk selling hot chocolate, ordered a cup of it and sat down on a bench, where I entered into conversation with others delighting in the fragrant nectar. On the first excuse, I steered the conversation towards the leader of the Alarbs, and in this way I learned his name. As soon as he announced to his subordinates a short interval in their exercises, I went up to him and, tipping my hat politely, asked if I had the pleasure of addressing Master Tommaso Aniello d'Amalfi.

"What is it?" he barked in reply, without even honouring me with a glance.

But when I introduced myself by Christian name and surname, adding that I am the publisher of the News, and asked at once how preparations for the storm were proceeding, he brightened; baring his rotten teeth at me, he raised a hand and waved it briskly.

"Why indeed!" he cried. "I didn't immediately recognise you, Don Fortunato, I bow before you! Oh, my good sir" – he sighed with laughter – "the Lord God must have deprived me of my wits for me to have taken such trouble upon myself again. Last year it went rather well, and so they reapointed me. And, fool that I am, I was tempted to do it even more prettily this year. At home there's misery, the children screaming, there's nothing to put in their mouths, the old woman fumes in a fury like a swarm of wasps, while I am here, sir, playing at war."

"Does that mean you are not a military man?" I asked, feigning surprise.

"I, sir?" He laughed, but at once puffing up with pride, he began to beat his scrawny chest with both hands.

"I am a fisherman! A genuine Neapolitan fisherman, like my father and grandfather before me!"

"Ah, indeed? I thought you were from Amalfi."

"Not at all, that's just my father's nickname. I have never even been there. I am a local, everyone knows me here! Masaniello, the fisherman from vico Rotto." But at once he grew downcast; he spat, and staring at the ground, admitted gloomily: "In truth, what sort of a fisherman am I nowadays? I had to sell the boat I'd inherited from my forefathers, and that for a paltry couple of carlini, because it was already falling apart. Now I do a bit of dealing in old paper for wrapping fish. But," he added, brashly twirling his huge moustache, "once I manage to set some money aside, I'll buy myself a new boat and return to fishing."

After these words, I remembered that in fact I did indeed know him by sight. From time to time he had appeared at my gazette's printing house, where he begged or bought for literally two cavalli the waste paper that we were intending to throw away. Now suddenly he smiled broadly, showing all the holes in his teeth.

"May a means of dealing with these thieves be found, and I shall live like a king!" he added, pointing his beard at the booth occupied by the customs officers, who in keeping with the law charge a fee for all goods sold at the market.

At the time, it never entered my head that behind these words of the dealer in paper for wrapping fish, something more than wishful thinking might lie hidden.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

WERONIKA MUREK

GROWING SOUTHERN PLANTS THE MICHURIN WAY



Weronika Murek (born 1989) is the author of one of the year's most well received first books. Winner of the Gdynia Dramaturgy Award, which is Poland's top prize for playwrights, and the Polish version of the European flash fiction competition. She is a graduate of the Law and Administration Faculty at the Silesian University and lives in Katowice.

Ivan Michurin was a Russian geneticist who crossed plants in order to create species that prove resistant to hostile climates. He does not feature in any of the stories in Weronika Murek's first collection but his words - "We can't wait for nature's favour. Our aim is to seize it from her ourselves" - serve as an epigraph to her book. The short stories in *Growing Southern Plants the Michurin Way* are, indeed, an experiment in narration. The author crosses, among others, two perspectives - the very distant and the immediate. Her details are highly polished yet her narration is located in a space which is unreal, in the clouds (often literally, as both a religious thread and the 'other world' as place of action are important in her stories).

The author animates devotional objects, makes use of folklore and frequently places the sacred within a concrete, carnal framework. For example, an angel annoyed by another angel crunching on a sugar-dipped rhubarb stalk, or Our Lady, who carries butter biscuits in the pocket of her dressing-gown and "puts one in her mouth, smacking her lips".

By colliding styles, Murek creates a mosaic of children's, folk and reporters' stories: at times full of cruelty, at others poetic, and still at others full of absurdity - each time quickly lowering her voice as though running away from the reader. Murek's stories are a demanding read, something like a charade. The reader has to concentrate hard in order to keep up with the narrator.

This juxtaposition of various styles provokes surprise which is the key to Murek's sense of humour. In one of the stories, while preparing a New Year's party for neurotics, the hostess announces a lottery: "Every draw wins. There's a box of shoes in the cellar. [...] They don't fit us. Can be passed on to the sick".

Weronika Murek says of her priorities and literary techniques: "If I walk down Stawowa Street in Katowice and walk down this same Stawowa Street in Katowice every day, I don't feel like walking down the same street in my writing. If I don't think that there is anything interesting happening

there, I provide it with little access doors and crannies which open up to yet a different atmosphere on the street – not another reality but an atmosphere”. Her debut collection is precisely such a field sport, opening up a different atmosphere.

Agnieszka Drotkiewicz



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IT'S ALL GOING

GROWING SOUTHERN PLANTS THE MICHURIN WAY

to be like this now and no more, she thought as she crossed to the other side of the street and peered into her letter-box. Nobody had written. If it's true what people say, she said to herself, that's how it's going to be and I've got to start accepting it: moment after moment increasingly transparent, lightly, needlessly, circulating time towards days ahead, weeks ahead, hurled by momentum, weight of habit, and nothing else – that's how it was going to be from now.

"Don't go in, please," she heard behind her.

The front door of the apartment was wide open; the smell of dish-cloths and lemon detergents drifted all around.

"There's been a death in this place, I've only just washed it. Everything's still wet."

"No, no," replied Maria, "I'm not going in, only taking a peek."

She broke off for a moment.

"It's my apartment, you know? Maybe I'll take my shoes off, just go in my socks."

She bent over and started to untie her shoelaces.

"Was it from you they phoned?"

"What?"

She tread on the heel of her shoe and slipped the foot out, then kicked the shoe away a little towards the wall and bent over again.

"For the disinfection," said the other.

"No," replied Maria. "Nobody phoned from me."

"They must have phoned but you don't know about it. You have to look after your affairs, you know. I'm coming with the water now so don't come in. Do you hear? It's too bad, you have to wait. You come in now and you'll leave marks. You have to wait a bit."

"Alright, alright," said Maria. "A minute makes no difference."

The woman slowly walked away. Before disappearing around the turn of the stairs, she turned and threw Maria a suspicious glance.

So fast, thought Maria, so fast in disinfecting it, as though wiping the traces away.

Suddenly, she was overcome with anger, powerful and brief as though a bubble of air was bursting in her head. She put on her shoes, tied them carefully, and with great satisfaction entered the apartment. The net curtains and drapes had been pulled down and, suddenly, the apartment had become far more spacious than she remembered. The folding couch had been moved to the wall and plastic sacks thrown on it, the wardrobe had been emptied and the books removed from the shelves to the floor.

"So," said the woman, standing in the door right behind her. "You went in after all, there are traces."

"So what," replied Maria. "It's not the end of the world."

She walked up to the couch and peered into one of the sacks.

"My things," she said. "My green dress. Surely you've no right?"

"Disinfected," said the woman. "It's all got to be disinfected."

A moment later:

"P'haps we should open the windows, make a draught, would dry quicker."

"Disinfected," repeated Maria. "But I was clean."

"Apartment's going up for sale," replied the woman.

She approached the windows, opened one, then the other. Now, in the brighter room, she appeared younger to Maria; her face was, indeed, wrinkled but her hair was surprisingly thick and dense, shiny, gathered at the back in a loose bun. From the hairline right up to the sphere of hair over her nape, she had pulled a thin, well-matched plait which stood out from the smooth, gleaming dome like a fresh, diagonally sutured scar.

She reached into her semi-circular pocket, extracted a piece of paper, folded it several times and deftly slipped it under the embrasure.

"Whether somebody was clean or not hasn't got anything to do with it. The apartment's going up for sale and it's got to be disinfected, it's normal. There are regulations."

"But look, I'm still alive."

"Aha," replied the other with no interest, walked up to the sacks and started tying them. "Good. You don't have to explain yourself to me. Why should you? You're an adult, and you felt like it. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

Pieces of paper lay scattered over the desk. Maria quickly looked through them: somebody had got to her e-mail, printed out her mail, and then read it, tracing a wavy line under the more intimate fragments. Somebody had also found her diary and left it open on March 2000. Somebody had written her account and I.D. numbers diagonally across the page with a pink felt-tip pen.

"Somebody's broken into my e-mail," said Maria. "Somebody's read my notes."

"Maybe they thought they'd find something interesting," replied the woman, bent over and started to pack the books into a box. In rhythm with her movements, a golden streak of light moved over her hair.

Just next to the pieces of paper and notebook, lay a colourful duster; next to it someone had stood a bottle of some green concoction and Maria, so as to gather her thoughts and not have to reply, reached for it and pretended to read the label: 'Thanks to us' - the writing assured - 'damp cellars and apartments are soon dry'.

What a life, she thought, suddenly feeling angry, to get up like that every day and plait your hair. Get up early so as to have time to calmly plait your hair, plait it carefully, even though the rest of your day is going to be small-time, to bend over a bucket, use detergents thanks to which damp apartments are dry again, and, above all, to accept that probably nobody is going notice, or if they do they'll soon pass over that unusual excess - which was the plait - and shake off the brief moment wasted for nothing. And the woman doesn't worry about anything, Maria continued to think angrily, she gets up in the morning and plaits her hair; that nattiness, which Maria never had, wakes her, that faithfulness to feminine diligence. And if Maria had lived

like that, maybe she wouldn't have died, but if she had died, then it wouldn't have been now or like this but at a more appropriate time and in a better way.

Footsteps reverberated on the stairs, the floor squeaked; you could hear that whoever had come had stopped at the threshold and was now taking off their shoes. This lasted a moment; an elderly man entered, carrying a pot wrapped in a towel.

"Dinner," he said. "Soup's still hot."

"Good," replied the woman. "The lady from the death has come."

"Because it's my apartment," answered Maria. "Because I'm still alive."

"Aha," said the man, standing the pot on the table.

He unwrapped the towel and opened the lid.

"Good. It's still hot."

"Everybody's read them, haven't they?" said Maria indicating her desk, "Have you read them, too?"

"Uhm," replied the woman. "We've read them, too. Hear that, old man, we've read them, haven't we?"

"We always do," said the man. "What if they're a laugh?"

"But mainly the family. They were more interested."

"We only glanced through them. Don't have that much time anymore, have to look for my glasses, don't feel like it so much nowadays. Sometimes though, for a change. Who could bear doing nothing but work, cleaning empty rooms? For a change, I tell you," he nodded at Maria and added: "Have you seen the bed? The dark stain? What do you do with something like that? How can you get rid of it?"

He broke off, turned to the woman:

"Eat, eat, love, it'll get cold."

"What do you mean?" replied Maria. "They say it was in the bath."

"No," replied the woman. "Not in the bath. They clearly said in bed."

"We have our instructions, and work accordingly," said the man, going through to the small room. "Put some things aside, give some to the poor, burn some."

"I'll take it all with me," said Maria, following him.

"Oh, I don't know about that, rules are rules," he said. "See the stain?"

She stood by the bed. The sheets and blanket had already been removed; all that remained was a brown mattress with a dark, narrow stain which looked like a locust's husk.

"Facing the wall," said the woman from the other room, her mouth full.

"The window," he replied.

"The wall."

"One's already seen a fair share of things like this," he said. "It's incredible, how people die so much."

"But I don't want to," replied Maria, and took a few steps back. "I don't want to, simply don't want to."

"Come here," the woman called. "We could eat together."

"You don't want to what?" he asked. "You made a decision, now you have to go through with it."

"But I'm still alive."

"Come here, while it's hot," called the woman. "Oooh, some boiled beef. Have you got a knife?"

"I didn't kill myself. It was an accident. Besides, I'm still alive."

Translated by Danusia Stok

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JAKUB ŻULCZYK

IN BLINDING LIGHTS



Jakub Żulczyk (born 1983) is a writer and newspaper columnist, regarded as one of the best Polish authors of the younger generation. His first novel, *Do Me Some Wrong*, was published in 2006. Since then he has produced five more novels, co-presented television shows, and written for magazines including *Elle* and *Przekrój*. For some years he has been living in Warsaw, and in fact his latest book is all about the capital.

Nothing makes the market happier than the customers' uninhibited ambitions to climb, climb and climb. To feel better than the others. Apart from tons of stuff- clothes, watches, cars and apartments, - the market offers something else as well to treat this universal fever. It's cocaine, the white powder offering cynical clarity for one's desires and aims. It can turn you into a superhuman for a brief while. This social and socially beneficial powder promises to associate you with the elite.

Cocaine - this peculiar type of gold which cannot be owned - plays an important role in Jakub Żulczyk's *In Blinding Lights*, one of the best novels from last year. Żulczyk is a young writer (born 1983) but already with a considerable output. He has tried many different popular literary genres: young adult fiction, horror, fantasy. This time he has turned to writing noir. *In Blinding Lights* might have not been designed as an urban noir crime novel, but it fulfils all the genre's criteria and also offers something else: poignant vision of Warsaw as a burning hell filled to the brim with sinners.

Jacek, a drug dealer who specialises in cocaine, plays the role of Virgil. Jacek - at least in his own eyes - is not some shady dealer working for the mafia, but a proper businessman. He is proud of being hardworking and professional; he is a perfectionist. Never mind the fact that he has never been caught by the law. Something else seems more important: Jacek runs an honest business, he doesn't wallow in the filth which pulls in his desperate clients, he doesn't share their status ambitions, doesn't fall victim to their spectacular defeats. Like hundreds of thousands of inhabitants of contemporary Warsaw, he comes from the backwoods, but he doesn't throw himself into the whirlwind of metropolitan life; he remains a detached observer.

However, the ironclad rules of the plot are relentless - this kind of illusion cannot be sustained. And won't be sustained. The axis of Żulczyk's novel is the story of the narrator slumping into the abyss. Essentially we know from the beginning

that the city has to devour him, has to break his back. The only thing we don't know is when and how this is going to happen. The author deals with it by constructing an efficient and suggestive criminal plot, yet it never takes the limelight. The mafia turf war (Jacek is only the ever oblivious pawn in this war) takes place somewhere in the background.

Żulczyk feels very comfortable in the world of noir aesthetics – his dialogues sparkle with ironic bon mots, female portraits oscillate between images of street girls and saints, policemen are tired and criminals unruly. Pathos tends to be toned down with unexpected grotesqueness, but the night pretty much never ends. And anyway, the whole story takes place in a wintry, freezing, inhospitable landscape due in large part to nightmares one cannot wake up from.

Still, *In Blinding Lights* is not art for art's sake, it is a sophisticated novel about various alternatives to happiness. In this time and place, in this city, amongst these people, happiness is unachievable, but if one has a thick wallet, one can try to find its substitutes. Some find it in compulsive eating and drinking, others in sex, and others still make cocaine lines all the way to the horizon. And then there are some, like Jacek, who only want to be in control. All of them will be sacrificed to the insatiable dragon, Warsaw.

Piotr Kořta



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IN BLINDING LIGHTS

It's true about those bars with Chinese grub. They sit there non-stop, from morning till evening, taking shifts. That's all they eat, as if their stomachs were only able to digest soggy rice and stinky old meat swimming in sweet sauce. This particular bar is located not far from the Marymont metro station, at the back of the covered market, squeezed between blocks of flats. No bigger than a small room. White panelling on the wall. XIANG BAO in self-adhesive letters. A calendar with an Asian tiger and some vases from a Chinese supermarket. Enough to launder money made on heroin, mephedrone, whorehouses, arms trade and what not. It stinks inside; I have to cover my nose. It stinks of grease and sugar, old and congealed, covering the walls with thick coating. He sits inside, eating spring rolls. Smacks his lips. Outwardly he doesn't look like a pig. Bearded, wearing a hoodie, a cap and colourful tracksuit bottoms – he looks like an alimony payer dressed up as a slightly mouldy teenager. He might as well be a TV cameraman. He eats slowly. He drinks coke. The stench doesn't bother him, but guys from the police, especially from the criminal police, are generally immune to bad smells.

"Sit down," he says.

They always command, even when it is not needed. It's in their blood. They can't say anything that is not imperative.

He is 40 years old. His name is Marek. He lives not far from here, at Stary Żoliborz. He married well; his wife comes from a doctor family. He works in the crime division, he is an Assistant Commissioner and that is probably it for him. He met a glass ceiling. He's got two kids. He drives a 10-year-old Volvo. He smokes a lot and drinks a lot, more than he tells his wife, less than an average pig. I know practically everything about him. Otherwise I would never speak to him.

Our arrangement is simple. He knows certain things and he needs cash. He has his little secret hobby and this hobby requires alternative sources of financing. He likes to play roulette and the slot machines. So much so that he is in the red with some boys already and they are not afraid to make a late-night courtesy phone call. He tries his best to keep it away from his children and wife. If she found out, she would probably kick his things out the door within five minutes.

And anyway he's not stupid. He likes his booze, but still drinks less than his colleagues from work. He stays in the shadows, he's careful. That's probably why he doesn't try fighting the glass ceiling. He knows he would most likely have his head cut off if he attempted to break through.

"You eating?" he asks.

He mops the rest of the spring roll sauce off his plate. I shake my head.

"What's up?" he asks again.

"My client has a problem. I need to know to what extent it is also my problem," I reply.

He bursts out laughing. He wipes his mouth thoroughly with a tissue. He looks at me, amused in an infuriating way, like a footballer who realises the ball is all his and there is only a goalkeeper between him and the net.

"How are the kids?" I ask.

"Well," he replies. "Very well. We had a problem with our boy a couple of weeks ago. Hospital, fever, septicaemia suspected. But everything went back to normal. Thanks for asking."

"That's good," I respond.

"You don't look well," he points out.

"I'm not sleeping," I say and add: "It smells in here."

"It doesn't smell, it reeks of shit," he comes back.

He takes a swig of coke, sucking up the liquid into his mouth. He smacks his lips. A young, thin Vietnamese woman approaches him and grabs his plate. He keeps smacking his lips quietly, as if on purpose, to annoy me. He wipes his nose. He looks at me attentively.

"I can't tell you much," he says. I put my hand in my pocket and he adds: "This is the moment when you give me a gift. I will thank you for it. But that doesn't mean I will tell you much more, you understand?"

"Septicaemia, did you say? That's very serious, isn't it?" I observe. I put ten grand on the table and push it towards him. He clears his throat, puts it in the pocket of his hoodie, trying not to look at the money.

"I told you it's all good," he replies.

Funny test that was. He seems to think of himself as even more intelligent and funnier than he really is, but that's understandable since he operates amongst people suffering from spongy brains. He needs to manage them; he needs to listen to their commands. Drink vodka with them. And type out incoherent reports on a computer much older than his own kids.

Nobody knows I'm talking to him.

"Let's go to my car," he says.

I nod. We get up, leave, go to the parking lot. He keeps his hand in his hoodie pocket, on the money. He lights a cigarette. We get into the car. He smokes inside too and you can tell. The car stinks even worse than that shithole we were in. And it's a pigsty. Leatherette upholstery. Radio with a tape player. Empty cans of energy drinks everywhere, McDonald's food wrappings, folders. A dirty pink child seat in the back, strapped with a seat belt.

"We spend all our lives in our cars, don't we?" he announces.

"Don't talk about us in the plural," I reply.

"Come on. We're in it together. We roll about in the same vehicle. People above me and people above you have been acquaintances for years, they're like buddies from the same street," he says. "They come to each other's kid's weddings."

I don't know why he's saying that at all. I'm getting impatient. I'm starting to suspect that he'll blab such trivialities for an hour and finally tell me something I already know.

"The problems start when a drought comes. There's no rain for a month or two," he goes on, chain smoking. "Somebody needs to be sacrificed. A virgin."

"I paid you for something," I remind him.

"Don't think I treat us like a partnership," he replies.

"But we help each other, there's no doubt about it."

"Then help me," I demand.

He puts the music on, some ruddy old rock like Red Hot Chili Peppers. He turns his phone off.

I watch him carefully.

"I'm on this case," he says. "Many guys are on this case, for obvious reasons. A camera likes a crowd. I don't know what he agreed to, I don't know what his lawyer offered. These are not the questions for me. I know that the goods were in our custody and I know that they will at least pretend to try to find out who took it."

"I want to know if he grassed me up," I say.

"You want to know if he knows where to look for you?"

I nod.

"From what I can see, you're smart," he says. "And if you're smart, nothing you own is in your name."

"Indeed, not in my name," I reply, truthfully.

I'm registered in Olsztyn, in my Nan's flat, where my cousin on my mother's side actually lives. I'm officially unemployed. I live in a flat I bought for cash; it's owned by a person who doesn't exist. The poky place where I keep my goods is in Pazina's sister's name. The car I drive is leased by my wholesaler's company, which sells mobile phone accessories over the Internet. All my phones have prepaid cards. I have several different IDs, several different national ID numbers. Nobody knows my real name, because my real name doesn't mean anything anymore. It got lost, diluted. Money can displace you. If you want, money can erase you. I have invested a lot into it and this was the best possible investment.

"They will need a bit of time to find you," he says.

"So they've already started looking for me?" I want to know.

"Aren't you going away somewhere?" he comes back with another question.

I nod.

"Stay there twice as long as you were planning to," he says. "The sacrifice will be necessary. God wants blood. And I can tell you that this star of yours is very well connected. Now it may seem that everybody is turning away from him, but they are only doing it for the cameras. He's got friends whom he helped immensely. They will return the favour."

"So he tried ratting on me already?" I ask.

"Nobody will search further than you. Nobody will look higher than your head," he says. "Nobody will be interested. You know how it is. For your average Tom, Dick or Harry in front of the TV, you are the one who produced the goods, distributed them and then forced everybody to buy from you. This is not a criminal matter at all, remember that. This is fodder for television."

"Is that it?" I want to know.

"After all you have shitloads of money," he says. "Stay where you're going, I'm telling you."

Two uniformed bobbies come into the bar we have just left. They breathe heavily, move slowly as if carrying invisible backpacks full of bricks. They don't even look in our direction. The sun breaks through the clouds. It lights up what was hidden before and what is the main ingredient of reality: the greyish slush, which is inside and outside everything, covering the paving, rotten grass and stacks of rubbish.

Translated by Anna Hyde

ŁUKASZ ORBITOWSKI

THE SOUL OF ANOTHER



Lukasz Orbitowski (born 1977) is an author and journalist, best known as one of Poland's top writers of horror. His published work includes a large number of stories and over a dozen novels. He has been shortlisted for a number of prestigious awards, including the Janusz A. Zajdel Prize and the Jerzy Żulawski Literary Award. His novel *Land of Happiness* was shortlisted for the *Polityka Passport* and longlisted for the *Nike Literary Prize*. Apart from writing fiction, he regularly contributes to the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* and to *Nowa Fantastyka* magazine.

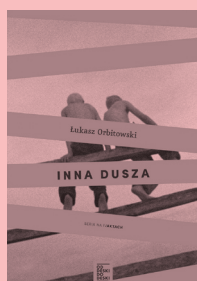
If I were to write that Łukasz Orbitowski's superlative novel, *The Soul of Another*, has opened a fresh chapter in his oeuvre I would very much need to qualify this statement. For things are somewhat more complex. We ought to begin with the genesis of the book: the "Na F/Aktach" [On F/Acts] series, of which *The Soul of Another* is one of the first titles. According to the publishers, the series publishes "fictionalized stories of highly publicized crimes committed over the course of the past decades (...) based on documents, judicial reports, and press articles." Orbitowski has taken this premise as an artistic challenge – and has come out on top. *The Soul of Another* tells the story of a young murderer, a boy from a decent home who was meant to be a pastry chef; in the mid 1990s, in dreary Bydgoszcz, he murdered a cousin, and several years later, a young female neighbor. He committed these murders with no clear motive – Orbitowski stresses that this was decisive in his choosing this case. In one of the statements by the killer, who is named "Jędrek" in the novel, he claimed that he was consumed by "the soul of another," and that he had to do what he did.

The action of Orbitowski's novel stretches over several years, but is entirely written in the present tense – a brilliant stylistic maneuver that invigorates the story and saturates it with suspense. This is no easy feat, as there is no criminal investigation, we know who the killer is, and the culprit has been sitting a jail term for many long years. Because the motives of Jędrek's actions are a mystery, Orbitowski reconstructs their circumstances, background, topography, the presumed family life of the killer, and the mental landscape of those years in a grim neighborhood of a grim town. He does this, I believe, in a masterful way, rendering a picture of an ordinary hopeless life out of which a crime is born, for no conceivable reason. Reading Orbitowski we wonder – this

too adds suspense to the book – which events are based on fact, and which the author has invented. One of the book's narrators, Krzysiek, is probably a creation; he is Jędrek's close friend, who puts the pieces together to figure out who committed the crime. Another invention is probably his appalling family, in which the father, an alcoholic and a pathological liar, rendered in life-like detail, plays first fiddle. Once again Orbitowski takes on his major theme: this is a story of young boys growing up, coming of age in early capitalist Poland. And – we repeat – he does it in superlative fashion.

I believe that *The Soul of Another* is an outstanding book, and one that lingers in the memory long afterward. I also believe that it is another piece of evidence that Łukasz Orbitowski's writerly craft is only growing stronger.

Marcin Sendeki



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Malwina's ghost

THE SOUL OF ANOTHER

evaporates well before ten o'clock, leaving a different sort of ghoul in its wake – tedium. Even Jędrek doesn't sit on the monitor, he flops himself down cross-legged and sifts through the trash on the floor, he scoops up the discs, the binders, the broken pens and dumps them in a heap next to the wall. Darek had chosen right, but for a different reason. This place is dead. We get onto the first bus, our jackets hiked up to our noses. There's no heating in the house, the windows give a draft, it'll only get worse. I ask Jędrek how he knew about the woman strangled with the iron cable.

"They talk about it, that's all." Jędrek had found some bubble-wrap and was popping it between his fingers. I would have asked him to give me a piece, but I felt stupid. "People say all kinds of things when they're bored. I heard it went a bit different, that the girl just vanished. Her boyfriend said that she ran off with someone, but in fact he bumped her off with the cord and then walled her up in the basement. After that the ghost drove him nuts. And he's in no jail, he was packed off to Świecie in a straightjacket."

He slides onto the next bit of floor, toward the tangle of cords. He takes them out one after another. I ask him if he's serious or if he's just trying to give me the creeps. He doesn't answer me right away. I repeat the question. Jędrek lays aside the cables and stares at the floor. Every word is an effort:

"I'm too stupid for these things. I'm not saying I'm stupid as such, I'm just no good at thinking about such *things*. There's no way there are ghosts walking around cemeteries. Somebody would have filmed them, right? But maybe there are other ghosts, you know, ones that live in a person, next to our regular souls. And they want something. Some are quiet, others loud. They holler and make a ruckus. It's more than you can bear. I mean, it's got to be really hard to live with a ghost like that inside of you, especially if it wants something you're not interested in."

He comes back to his trash. Now he looks like a man going through the possessions of a loved one who's recently died. I want to ask him if vodka is a ghost like that. Jędrek violently jerks forward. He's holding a steel rod half a meter long. Probably part of a fence. Before I know what's going on, Jędrek is on his feet and barreling toward the door with the padlock. He returns only to get his backpack.

I go past the smashed padlock as if avoiding a bad smell and follow Jędrek into the locked room. It's stuffy but clean. There's a desk with a lamp by the window, nearby there's an accumulator and a swivel chair. The bookshelves are bare, not counting a few photo albums so high up that I would

have had to stand on my toes to reach them. A fold-up couch has a blanket and a pillow without a case. The walls smell fresh.

I light a lamp, Jędrek slides over to the loggia, wrestling the door. When it gives he paces the room, trying to figure out what it's for. In a desk drawer I find a file of papers with a loan contract on top. The Fortuna loan agency entrusts seven thousand zloty to one Wacław Korczyński and explains the payment conditions in a row of long paragraphs. They make mafia threats look like a love letter. Meanwhile, Jędrek is scoping out the loggia. He leans on a column and stares out into the night. He seems strangely frail, as if he could dissolve into the air.

I replace the contract. Otherwise the drawers are bare. The floor around the bed is scattered with tissue wrappers, there's a whole mass of them in the wastebasket, old and gluey. Under the blanket, down in a crack, there's some aloe oil in a soft plastic bottle. I can't figure out what to do with it, I call Jędrek, he doesn't even twitch. All that's left are the photo albums. I take one down and open it. This time Jędrek comes running.

Boys. Our age, often younger, crammed in under the plastic. Half-naked for PE class or in the bath. Clipped out of Western newspapers. At the end I find a lone photograph taken with a Polaroid camera in the mountains. My classmate is there lying on some pillows, wrapped in colorful sheets. His eyes are the color of drain water, his smile is taut. That's the last page. Jędrek takes the album, sits down on the couch, and flips through it. He gets his face up close to the pictures and narrows his eyes as if wanting to soak in every detail: the protruding ribs and the little abdominal hairs. The room begins to spin, soon the walls will be pressing in on me. There are footsteps on the stairs.

I would swear it was a giant. Those steps. I make for the balcony door. Jędrek lazily lifts his head. He puts the album on the couch. He picks up the backpack and rummages about. He's standing with his back to me, so I can't know what he's taken out – I mean, I do know, but I would prefer not to. I rush to the loggia and judge its height. Bushes down below. The footsteps grow louder. Whoever's here has come to the first floor and in a moment he'll see the door to his lair is wide open. I hiss at Jędrek. I whistle for us to get a move on, to make tracks, he stays stock still. I'm not about to leave the guy. But I don't want to see what comes next.

I dash into the room and tug Jędrek by the sleeve. He makes a sharp turn. He bares his teeth, for a second he looks like he doesn't recognize me. He hefts his backpack, straps it on, and then together we jump off the balcony, just when a guy in a leather jacket appears in the doorway with a cigarette and a bulging plastic bag. I leap straight into the undergrowth without looking back, Jędrek takes off for the gate. I'm hot on his heels. I almost fly over the fence. Not until I hit the road do I let myself look over my shoulder. Mr. Korczyński has dropped his bag. His fingers clutch at the loggia railing, he's shaking his other fist in helpless rage, but his face remains invisible, melting into the haunted house.

We don't stop running even when we hit the bus loop, only when we get a few kilometers further. The foliage affords us some shelter. I grab a trunk, I'm short of breath, Jędrek is panting as well. I don't know what to say, so I just start talking. Get to the police right away. Let them deal with it. Jędrek doesn't even want to talk, he just shakes his head, spits, bends over, propping himself up on his thighs. We spend a few minutes that way, our breaths

forming condensation. We hear the hum of an engine, car lights flash on the road. Whoever is driving by is going easy on the gas pedal. We plaster ourselves to the ground, the lights pass slowly overhead. I can't make out the driver, I don't recognize the make of car. Then we spend long minutes squatting there, shielded behind trees, until Jędrek gives the signal to go. He doesn't even look back.

We head toward Bydgoszcz in darkness and silence. Whenever we hear a car we duck in some bushes or into a courtyard. We swap glances, we listen to our breathing. I'd like to hide behind Jędrek. I'd vanish behind his mass, but I'd defend him if it came down to that. At first Jędrek is walking all hunched, his legs are soft. When the glow of the city scatters into a swarm of points of light, into night buses, gas stations, and the windows of all-night markets, Jędrek gets some spring in his step. There'll be no more hiding on roadsides; Jędrek is strong, and there's no strength that could knock him off the road.

It's going on three a.m. Jędrek says goodbye, hops off the night bus and hustles off through Fordon, not looking where he's stepping. The silence of the haunted house has reached even here. Jędrek drops his head and walks even faster. He gets to Fordon at a trot, only to crash on a bench. He sets his gaze on the window to his room. Buttons up his jacket. He tries to pull the collar up over his frozen ears, but that just bares his stomach. He tucks his shirt into his pants.

Instead of going up to his room Jędrek takes the stairs down to the basement. He's blocked from going in by some steel doors that he can't open. He yanks at the handle. Then he sits in the entrance way under a tall window. He sets the alarm on his electronic watch for seven o'clock. He rests his head on one hand and immediately falls asleep.

All I think about is sleep, but Daddy's got other dreams. He's sitting on the bedside, barefoot, in jeans, buckling his belt. He's not at all surprised to see me, on the contrary, he's glad I came. He tells me to sit down for a talk. I tell him I'm really very tired, and start unfolding the sofa bed. My father thinks five minutes won't hurt me. He says we've been growing further apart, that what with my studies and my friends we barely see each other. I'm always out somewhere, leaving him to take care of all the problems. How is mother supposed to deal with it all? Mommy makes off for the kitchen, looking not the slightest bit oppressed by her duties.

I've got nothing to say to him. I tell him I want to sleep it off, I'm a bit afraid that Daddy might ask why I came back in the middle of the night, that Jędrek's folks said something about me. But Daddy evidently doesn't give a you-know-what, he just sits there staring at his bottle with an astonished look on his face, as if the contents vanished in an instant, all on their own. Anyway, that's how I find him when I come out of the bathroom.

Translated by Soren Gauger

MAŁGORZATA SZEJNERT

RAISING MOUNTAINS: TRUE LIFE STORIES FROM POLESIE



© Tadeusz Poźniak / Reporter

Małgorzata Szejnert (born 1936) is a reporter, author and co-author of over a dozen works of non-fiction. She was one of the co-founders of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland's leading daily newspaper, where for fifteen years she headed the reportage section. Her work has previously been shortlisted for the Nike Literary Prize, the Gdynia Literary Award and the Central European Angelus Literary Prize.

The sub-title of Małgorzata Szejnert's latest book gives a good idea of the form and nature of this enterprise. *Raising Mountains* is not a historical and political monograph on Polesie, nor does it provide a comprehensive study of the history and culture of the region, but rather it is a varied collection of true stories and tales about the land that stretches along the river Pripyat. And they are extremely interesting, as a source of both research material and anecdote.

Polesie has fascinated travellers and ethnographers for centuries. Here at the very heart of Europe, to put it in terms of geography, we find a vast lowland, covered in a dense network of lakes and rivers, famous for its impenetrable marshes and ancient wilderness, teasing the civilised West with its cultural backwardness. American millionairess and Arctic explorer Louise Boyd wanted to get in touch with the archaic, "savage" nature of Polesie, and it is with an account of her 1934 expedition that Szejnert opens her book. But she soon moves on to the issue of identity, which is definitely the dominant theme of this book. The basic question is this: who until recently were and who today are the inhabitants of Polesie? For whole centuries they were presented as an ethnic mixture (including Poles, Belarusians, Lithuanians and Jews), but the most interesting people seem to have been those who did not fit into any particular category, and defied straightforward definition. They were the "locals", sometimes, though wrongly, called Polishchuks. Wrongly, because they were never a large ethnic group; the cornerstone of their identity was the local dialect, which was often limited in range to a few villages and hamlets.

Szejnert's anthropological outlook dovetails with historical reflection. A specific feature of the land she guides us through is political instability and a failure to remain rooted for any length of time. Polesie has belonged in turn to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, interwar Poland, the USSR, and now for almost twenty-five years, to independent Belarus. Thus it is

a region that has been marked by conflicts of a social, cultural, and also religious nature. On the topic of religion, one of the things that Szejnert explains in a fascinating way is how the Pentecostal movement came to be the third largest religious denomination in modern Belarus. In general, her accounts of modern Belarus are extremely interesting, and along the way she shows the Polish readers how very little they really know about the neighbouring country, exposed as they are on an everyday basis to the effects of Polish propaganda, the sharp end of which is aimed at the dictatorial regime of Alexander Lukashenko. But that is not the only mistake that Szejnert corrects on the pages of this impressive book. She also encourages us to take a new look at the myth of the “lost land”, and suggests that we should finally drop the fantasy of a “borderlands paradise”, where ethnicities and religions are supposed to have shared a benign co-existence. She also tries, in a discreet and reasonable way, to instil some postcolonial sensitivity in us, by making critical reference to past activities aimed at polonising Polesie.

Małgorzata Szejnert is invariably interested in the fates of individuals – in fact she tells her “true life stories from Polesie” purely from this perspective. As she does so, she consistently sustains an unusually inquiring mind. What prompted British general Adrian Carton de Wiart to go and live in the Polesie outback? Why did Fiodor Klimchuk take it upon himself to translate the Bible into the language of his native village? The same, almost detective-like approach is also applied to the fates of prominent figures who are somehow connected with Polesie, such as Napoleon Orda, a Belarusian graphic artist who single-handedly recorded the beauty of the landscape and architecture of the old borderlands.

It is hard to single out any one of the seventeen chapters in this book. Some of them, while sticking faithfully to the truth, read like thrillers, such as the story of the Polish river flotilla that was born, as we read, “out of a great yearning for the sea, when we didn’t have a scrap of coastline” (in the first few years of the Second Republic). The title of the book is also a reference to longing for something that’s missing. In one of his poems, making use of a Welsh legend, a young Ukrainian poet called Uładz Lankiewicz wrote about “the raising of a mountain”: some British cartographers had arrived at a low-lying village in Wales, where they refused to recognise the local hummock as a mountain, which mobilised the villagers to set to work with their spades. The poet claims that, metaphorically speaking, this is the task facing today’s Belarusians; of course it’s not about a mountain, but about national pride. There is still a great deal of “raising” to be done.

Dariusz Nowacki

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Louise Arner Boyd,

RAISING MOUNTAINS: TRUE LIFE STORIES FROM POLESIE

dubbed “The Ice Queen” and “Arctic Diana” by American reporters, is setting off for Polesie in a Packard with a private chauffeur. She collects the vehicle and her driver Percy Cameron, who has worked for her for twenty years, from the family residence near San Francisco. The year is 1934.

Did Louise Boyd know what lay ahead of them?

I went to the Travellers’ Shop in Warsaw to buy historical maps of the Polesie region. They showed Cameron didn’t have many options. Dr Michał Marczak’s guide published in 1935 confirms this: there were 710 kilometres of metalled roads in the Polesie administrative region with none at all in the three eastern districts – Pinsk, Luninets and Stolin. The authors of a report prepared for the Society for the Development of the Eastern Territories warned that, if the rate of investment in roads were maintained at the existing level, the Polesie region would have to wait 140 years to achieve the same density of metalled routes that central Poland already had.

Louise Boyd wants to set up her base in Pinsk. It’s a good plan! The guidebook I mentioned informs us there were thirteen hotels and five commercial enterprises letting furnished rooms there. The English Hotel at no. 2 Kościuszko Street, the Warsaw Hotel at no. 35 Kościuszko Street and the Venice Hotel at no. 62 Nabrzeżna Street were worth considering. We know from other sources the English Hotel had bathtubs. The water would definitely have been carried in from a well.

What would happen if Percy damaged the Packard driving over rough terrain?

In Pinsk it could be towed to the naval workshops. In Pruzhany the locksmith and mechanic Stanisław Mączyński could undertake the repairs (he has a metal-welding device) and in Byaroza-Kartuzskaya one should turn to Mr Kalman, on Rynkowy Alley.

*

Much has been written about Louise Boyd. Some articles were given a feminist slant.

In San Rafael near San Francisco a museum has been set up in the Boyd Gate House, which was once part of her family’s estate; the museum willingly responds to emails. Objects which once belonged to Miss Boyd have been arranged in a wonderful display: black field binoculars lie next to opera glasses encrusted with gold and mother-of-pearl, and a heavy travelling chest stands next to a silver picnic set engraved with a monogram.

A copy of her book *Polish Countrysides: Photographs and Narrative* published in 1937 by the New York American Geographical Society has been preserved by the National

Library in Warsaw. The book contains: a description of her journey, about 500 photographs, a Topical Key and a Locational Key to the photographs, maps and an index. It has never been published in its entirety in Poland; it is a rarity in libraries and antiquarian bookshops.

*

I gathered information about Louise Boyd and read more and more about Polesie in the mid-1930s, the period when she visited. After a while, I started to order copies of printed material, manuscripts and documents which interested me from libraries and archives: some going further back in time and some quite recent. I photographed newspapers stored on microfilm even though the images were distorted by the microfilm reader's slanted screen. The information I was looking at no longer had any connection with Boyd's expedition.

Experts with local knowledge and a fascination for Polesie exhorted tourists to visit, for example, Ovid's grave. The ill-fated poet who had been exiled from Rome was supposedly laid to rest in a burial mound at the point where the river Tsna joins the river Pripyat, near Kozshan-Gorodok, although numerous historical sources tell us he was buried in Tomis, now known as Constantza, on the Black Sea. A memorial has been erected for him there too. The legend about Ovid's burial place by the river Tsna recurred so persistently, it made me wonder whether perhaps Polesie wished to offer the exile and tyrant's victim a peaceful resting place of the sort which had not been the lot of many of its own inhabitants who were exiled, killed in action, murdered or went missing.

According to local experts Herodotus was supposed to have written about the Polesie sea and listed the peoples living by its waters: the Budini, the Getae and the Neuri. I managed to find those references in *The Histories*. The Budinians had piercingly blue eyes and fiery hair. They used wood to construct buildings. Getae believed in immortality of the soul, but let themselves be easily subjugated by the powerful Persian king. The Neuri had magical powers. Each of them would become a wolf for a few days once a year and then return to their previous form. 'I do not believe these fairy tales of theirs,' Herodotus assures us, 'nevertheless that is what they claim and they swear to it.'

*

[...]

My attention had initially been focused on Louise Boyd, but was now becoming more and more diffused. However since I started with the American, let's follow her to Kudriczi.

Louise Boyd was ambitious, brave and even reckless, but she definitely wasn't sentimental. The most tender photograph she took in Polesie is from Kudriczi and shows a loaf of bread baked on a cabbage leaf. The underside of the loaf is indented with small veins and cartilage. The hands holding it with appropriate respect are heavysset and work-worn.

Kudriczi village lies twenty-five kilometres away from Pinsk in an area which, before the war, was covered by a vast expanse of marshland, where the only viable form of transport was by water.

In his guidebook Dr Marczak quotes the words of the distinguished expert on Polish flora Professor Stanisław Kulczyński. 'To the south-east of Pinsk, in the very heart of the Polesie region, where the rivers Pripyat, Pina, Styr and Yaselda meet, lies one of the largest swamps in the Polesie, known as the "Pinsk Sea". This vast plain

covering approximately 250 thousand hectares is intersected by a complicated tangle of rivers and streams and only experienced local fishermen are able to find their way in the area. In springtime the flooded rivers cover the plain with a single sheet of water; in the summer an unimaginably vast meadow of reeds and rushes appears on the "Pinsk Sea". The unchanging landscape and its sheer scale combined with the insurmountable physical difficulties facing a traveller attempting to force his way through this tangle of tall grasses and rushes dotted with quagmires provoke an appreciation of its beauty, but also of the potentially severe danger.

The post-war scheme to drain swamps covering more than 1.5 million hectares of the 3 million hectares of swamps in Belarus means that – according to a current map – you can reach Kudriczi on wheels.

To the north of the village twists the river Yaselda forming countless bows and small loops; the rivers Styr and Pripyat have similarly meandering courses. The current map doesn't show any bridges or fords as if the world ended just beyond the Yaselda.

*

We are driving along in Wital Jaütuchowicz's old car; he knows the terrain like the back of his hand. He drives me from time to time. He is caring and interesting, but he has his own business to see to on our expeditions – monitoring the fields and agricultural work. He knows which land has potential. If a kolkhoz tractor happens to be ploughing at the time we pass, then Wital will return a few days later to inspect the furrows. He shows me his finds readily.

We pass waterlogged meadows full of yellow flowers, round tussocks and colourful grasses. I thought we were slowing down to take a look, but in fact it was Wital's vehicle refusing to co-operate. It might come to a complete halt shortly and the road is empty with nobody to tow us back.

In 1934 Louise Boyd did a rough-and-ready traffic survey in Polesie. On the busy road between Ruzhany and Pruzhany in one hour (between 1pm and 2pm) she counted fifty-two pedestrians, eighty-two carts and five bicycles. For the next hour she checked the traffic on a further section of the route to the north-west of Pruzhany. She counted fifty-seven pedestrians, sixty-six carts, sixteen bicycles, one motor car and one motorcycle.

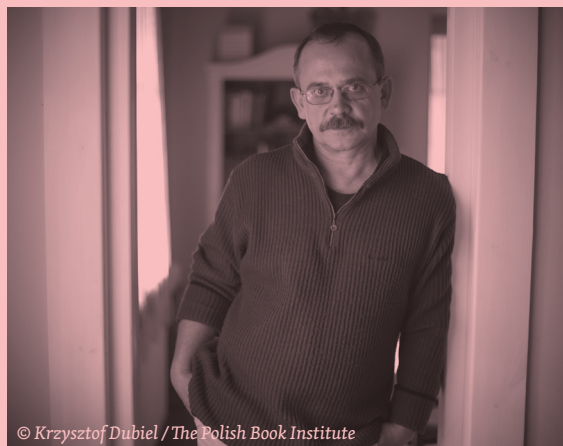
Percy drove carefully, but the very sight of the Packard startled both people and horses, the more so the further away they were from the towns. Initially people were scared, but then they crowded round in curiosity. The horses would shy off the road into the fields, pulling the carts behind them, or they would rear up over the bonnet. After her return to America, Louise Boyd made a note of the following statistics: in 1935, Poland had seven-tenths of a motor car per thousand inhabitants, Sweden had more than twenty-two, Germany almost twelve, Czechoslovakia nearly seven-and-a-half and Romania just under two.

On Polesie's roads she felt as if she were in the United States at the turn of the century. It was quite pleasant really.

Translated by Kasia Beresford

WOJCIECH JAGIELSKI

ALL LARA'S WARS



© Krzysztof Dubiel / The Polish Book Institute

Wojciech Jagielski (born 1960) is a journalist and foreign correspondent specialising in Africa, Central Asia and the Caucasus. For many years he reported for Poland's leading newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and now works for the Polish Press Agency. He has written on the collapse of the Russian empire, the breakdown of apartheid in South Africa, the unification of Hong Kong and China, wars, coups and the downfall of dictators in Africa and Asia. He has won numerous journalism and literary prizes. His books have been translated into English, Spanish, Dutch and Italian.

There's a sense of doom hanging over this story. It hangs over Lara, the heroine of Wojciech Jagielski's new book, and over those whom she tries to save from it. Because, as Lara puts it, "tribes condemned to one hundred years of solitude have no second chance on this earth".

The tribe Lara comes from are the Kists, Caucasian highlanders from the Pankisi Gorge in eastern Georgia, known as "people from the land of the gateway", though in fact they are not entirely familiar with the portal in whose shadow they happen to live. They speak a language that is close to Chechen, they believe in Islam, and some of them are Sufis, though they sometimes pray at the Orthodox church too. They have lived in their borderland for centuries, far from the events affecting the outside world, including the wars. But here, too, doom finally found its way in, changing the gorge and its inhabitants forever.

This time it was not Wojciech Jagielski, seasoned war correspondent and author of several books of reportage, who went to war. Lara was the one who went, "neither a girl nor an old woman", who grew up in a village in the Pankisi Gorge, and left for the big city (in this case Grozny, the capital of Chechnya) hoping to become a teacher or an actress. But her life took an unexpected turn – she became a wife, and then mother of two sons, Shamil and Rashid; a little later, when war finally caught up with the Kists too, a refugee in search of shelter from it.

Jagielski describes Lara's life, weaving in the history of the Pankisi Gorge, and also the fortunes – ancient and modern – of the Georgians and Chechens, caught up in wars, and of those who declared those wars and lived for them. In Lara's narrative, war takes on an entirely different dimension; hers is a tale about fear for her loved ones, and the strength prompted by this fear. That was what forced Lara to make a journey

from her native village all the way to the ruins of Aleppo and the worst humanitarian disaster of recent years – the war in Syria.

She went there to save Shamil, her first-born son. Following the outbreak of the first Chechen war, she took her sons away from Grozny and returned to the Pankisi Gorge. But when freedom fighters fleeing the conflict took refuge there, she realized that among men of war and the all-pervading tension, she would never be able to protect her children, and that they too would want to go and fight. So she sent them to Western Europe, where she expected them to find a better life, the peace and normality that she so badly wanted them to have. During her Skype conversations with her sons she would hear them say “in our place, in Europe”, which made her think they had settled down; but in time she began to be alarmed by the fact that increasingly often, instead of “us” they were saying “them”. And repeating verses from the Koran, while their beards grew longer and longer.

So Lara had to set off for the war, the “holy war” for which both her sons had enlisted as mujahidin, to say to them “You must live, not die” – the concept she believed to be the most vital, the most important commandment of all, which they had broken, although that was not how she had raised them. They should be obedient, says Lara, they should have a better life than she did, and they should appreciate it, not reject it. And certainly not in order to fight – it was war she’d been trying to protect them from, so now she was waging her own war against it.

All Lara’s Wars is a book that eludes strict classification. Though close to a novel in structure, centring on the title heroine’s narrative, it does not avoid factual information. But rather than just a starting point for the story, the facts are its building blocks, consistently cited and forming the content that sustains it. From the Caucasian village, it takes us into the rubble of the Syrian war, showing how very close to each other the two places are. Jagielski extends the limits of reportage – or rather enriches it – by proposing his own, intimate account of another person’s fate. A painfully authentic account, told with sensitivity and literary artistry.

Magdalena Kicińska



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THE NEXT DAY,

ALL LARA'S WARS

when the guide came to fetch her, Lara was sitting on the mattress, long since dressed, packed and ready to continue her journey. She longed so badly for that moment to arrive that she couldn't even feel the heat that set in as soon as the sun rose. She didn't feel tired or in need of more sleep. She kept promising herself she'd be patient and strong, but the prolonged anticipation was beyond her strength. She was afraid she was wasting time, and every second of delay meant a danger that things could go wrong, and that something would hold her up again.

They went down a floor to the computer room, where she'd waited the day before. From early morning it was full of people, and the Arab mujahidin were registering new arrivals. Once again she couldn't help feeling she'd been through this whole experience before. And that it would keep recurring into infinity, she'd never get out of this time loop, never see Shamil, fail to save him from death, and nobody would ever find her either, she'd remain here forever.

"*Shishani, shishani,*" she heard. She turned her head. An Arab in a ragged tunic pointed out some young men waiting in the corridor for their turn to register at the computer terminals. Immersed in her own fears and vacillations she hadn't noticed that the young men – there were five of them, and they looked like teenagers – were glancing at her as if they wanted to talk to her, but weren't bold enough and were waiting for a prompt from her.

"Are you from our part of the world?" she asked in Chechen.

They readily said yes. They took it as an invitation, and came up to her, looking at her with unconcealed curiosity.

"We're from Gudermes," explained the smallest, who looked older than the others. "Is it true you're the mother of Abu Mohammed?" he immediately asked.

"Do you know my son?" she replied, surprised by the question.

"Abu Mohammed? Who doesn't know him!" said the Chechen, amazed. They knew Shamil from the videos the mujahidin posted on their websites, in which the fighters spoke about the war in Syria, encouraging volunteers to come and enlist in their army. Other mujahidin shielded their faces while talking about the war, for fear of being recognized. Abu Mohammed was one of the few who spoke openly, without hiding from anyone.

"My Shamil?" She couldn't believe it.

"Abu Mohammed," the Chechen hesitantly corrected her. "We didn't trust the others, but we believed every word of Abu Mohammed."

They were curious to know if she really was on her way to Syria to visit her son, and when she confirmed it, they nodded with approval.

"But I'm not going for a visit, just to take him home, away from the war," she said.

They burst into laughter, as if she had said something funny. It made her lose her temper.

"What about you? What are you looking for out there?" she asked angrily. "Do your mothers and fathers know you're here?"

They laughed again. The smallest and oldest, who had already spoken to her, replied that he'd told his parents he was going to Turkey to look for work. They'd believed him. He was twenty, and without asking his opinion, they had arranged for him to marry a girl from the next village. It hadn't even occurred to his father that he might be acting against the boy's wishes. The boy had been talking to his friends for ages about enlisting for the war in Syria. Plenty of Chechen boys had gone already – they knew from them what to expect out there.

He said he didn't want to speak for the others, but he knew many of them had gone to Syria guided by their faith. Of course it was a good thing to serve a rightful cause, but in his case, by his own honest admission, he had come to gain an important experience in life, but also in the hope of making money. He had heard that at the war in Syria the fighters were allowed to take plunder, and many of them were doing so. Then they were exporting the goods to Turkey, selling them, and going home to the Caucasus with hard cash, or sending the money home. ...

Another of the Chechens, a younger boy, had told his parents that he needed money to go and study in Europe. They had borrowed dollars from within the family, and he'd used them to buy a ticket to Istanbul. He hadn't told them the truth, because they'd have tried to stop him, they'd have taken away his passport, but he believed that for a Muslim participating in a war like the one in Syria was a sacred duty. That was what her son Abu Mohammed said on the recruiting videos. He wanted to fight on the side of his Muslim brothers and sisters against the godless Bashar Assad from Damascus and his army.

"Did any of you think of your mothers?" she said, hearing a latent, pleading note in her own voice, and that angered her. "They brought you into the world. You owe obedience to them, not the emirs. God will punish you for the wrongs you are doing them. Your sacrifice won't please Him at all."

She wanted to add that the Koran forbade treating your mother like that, but stopped herself in time. They probably knew the Holy Scripture thoroughly, definitely better than she did. So all she said was that not obeying your mother was a cardinal sin, and then the conversation broke off, because the Arabs sitting at the computers summoned the Chechens over. The young men went and sat down at tables to fill in forms, and then stood with the mujahidin for photographs as proof of a successful enlistment. Later on, she found out that for each photograph with a new conscript the recruiters received a payment. One of the Arabs came up to Lara, and without saying a word, handed her a telephone.

"It's Shamil. They're going to bring you to me right away," she heard her son's voice in the receiver.

The Arab mujahidin collected Lara and the five Chechens and escorted them outside, where a minibus and its driver were waiting for them. They told them to take all their things with them. After a half-hour drive they stopped and the Arabs told them to transfer to two passenger cars.

Another fifteen minutes, maybe more, and they stopped again. This time they were told to get out and take their luggage with them.

"This is the border," said one of the Chechens quietly.

They were led to a low barrack. Outside it they were divided up. The Chechens were told to get into another car, which immediately drove off. A dark-skinned man came up to Lara, and instructed her to go inside the barrack and wait until he came for her. Once again she was alone, and her fear and uncertainty returned. As they got out of the car, the Chechens had pointed at a chicken wire fence visible in the distance. Only that far to go now, just those few hundred metres separated her from the place where Shamil was waiting for her.

The barrack was in semi-darkness, but she spotted a wooden bench against the wall and a woman sitting on it. She looked like a Chechen. She was wearing a flowery headscarf tied just as the Caucasian village women usually tie theirs.

"Going to your son?" asked the woman in Russian.

"Yes, my son," sighed Lara.

"They'll let you in?"

"I think so, he called to say he's waiting."

"Then you're lucky. Mine refuses to see me. I've been waiting here for nine days, but every day he calls to tell them not to let me through."

The dark-skinned Arab appeared in the doorway. He nodded to Lara and pointed to tell her to continue on her own, straight ahead.

"Go, go, before yours changes his mind too," said the woman.

Lugging her heavy bags, Lara trailed towards the Syrian border, ever nearer and more visible. Now she could see not just the chicken wire fence but some people standing behind it too. And a heavy iron gate, through which the road led into Syria. There was just one, final frontier post separating her from it, where uniformed men were checking travel documents. She handed over her passport, and the soldier slowly turned the pages. He looked up and asked her a question. She couldn't understand. He repeated it, impatiently this time.

"*Shishani, shishani*," she automatically mumbled.

He barked something else at her, waving her passport under her nose.

"No visa," he hissed, and tossed the passport to the floor.

She picked it up and obligingly handed it to him again. Again he hurled the booklet to the floor and showed Lara that she had to leave, that he wasn't letting her through the gate into Syria.

She fell on her knees before him, begging, sobbing, and trying to grasp his hand. Her lament changed into howling, a wail of despair.

"Help me!" she pleaded. "Does anyone here speak Chechen? Or Russian? Somebody please help me!"

There was confusion, and some soldiers came running. Soon one of them approached her with a mobile phone.

"What do you need, woman?" someone asked down the phone in Russian with an Arab accent.

"My son! I'm going to my son, but they won't let me through. His name is Abu Mohammed! *Shishani*!" she cried into the receiver.

"Don't worry, everything's going to be fine."

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

MAGDALENA GRZEBĄŁKOWSKA

1945. WAR AND PEACE



© Renata Dąbrowska / Agencja Gazeta

Magdalena Grzebałkowska (born 1972) is one of Poland's most highly regarded authors of non-fiction - mainly biographies and history books. The *Beksińskis*, a Double Portrait, her best-selling biography of father and son Zdzisław and Tomasz Beksiński, won her public acclaim. She has been a long-time contributor to the leading daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and is a past winner of the Grand Press prize. She lives in Sopot.

Magdalena Grzebałkowska's 1945. *War and Peace* is a wonderfully written piece of reportage about the end of the war in Poland. The book comprises twelve stories, each one devoted to the various problems connected with the end of armed operations in the country, from resettlements, exhumations and reconstruction, to the government takeover by the Communists, the determination of new borders, and provision of care to war orphans. It is also a story about people who, in their fight to survive and build a better life for themselves and their families, resorted to looting and trading goods, armed themselves and joined militias, entrusted their children to the care of strangers and changed their names. The protagonists in Grzebałkowska's reportage are settlers who were forced from the Lwów area to Wrocław and Szczecin, people returning from forced labour camps in the Reich, smallholders, men forcibly detained by the authorities, mothers in search of their sons' bodies after the Warsaw Uprising, and homeless children whose parents returned to Warsaw when the war ended.

With her highly disciplined composition skills, Grzebałkowska manages to shield herself from the inevitable chaos that such a vast topic brings. By ordering each chapter chronologically by month, she manages to cover the wide range of events which took place throughout 1945. The inclusion of classified ads from newspaper clippings illustrates the societal changes taking place in the months after the war, the problems which plagued the civilian population and the attempts to rebuild the country's institutions.

Grzebałkowska had intended her reportage to be an optimistic story about the end of a specific period of suffering, a happy end to a terrible war. But the characters in her reportage took an entirely different view of that period - they remember it as a never-ending wave of fresh calamities, a time of retribution and new battles: "You ask me if I experienced any happiness in 1945. Well, I'll tell you: I was happy that nobody in my family died that year". The war ended gradually, and the void left by the retreating Nazis was instantly filled

by new conflicts: the Russians were appointing the new government, the Poles were setting up camps for German prisoners, the war with Ukraine was intensifying, epidemics were rife, there was a shortage of fuel but an abundance of weapons.

It is the multidimensionality of this picture which seems to be of most value – none of the stories in this reportage is obvious. Given how much has been written about the war over the past 70 years, it becomes difficult to say anything new about the period. But Grzebałkowska manages to do just that – by presenting the events of 1945 as pictures which are familiar, yet entirely new; as stories which are Polish, yet universal. This flawless transition from Polish narrative to universal narrative is something of a speciality in Polish reportage, and Grzebałkowska has a keen grasp of the technique – always striving to find a first-hand account, to record the experiences of individuals who took part in an event. While large numbers and names of institutions are mentioned now and then, greater importance is given to personal accounts: the escape across the frozen Vistula Lagoon, the mother who packed loaves of bread before escaping, the terrified young deserter confronted by a train conductor, hiding for days on end in the dust and between caged animals at the train station. It is Grzebałkowska's extraordinary talent and ability to marshal facts and paint vivid pictures which make *1945. War and Peace* such an interesting read. The multidimensionality, vividness, attention to detail and intimacy of this work set it apart from the large number of war books published in Poland in recent years.

Paulina Małochleb



MAGDALENA GRZEBĄŁKOWSKA
1945. WOJNA I POKÓJ
AGORA, WARSZAWA 2015
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One hot

1945. WAR AND PEACE

afternoon in late June 1945, forty-nine-year-old Wanda Melcer climbed into the back of a lorry in Warsaw. Melcer was a prominent pre-war poet, writer and left-wing journalist. The 1936 publication of “The Black Land – Warsaw” (*Czarny ląd – Warszawa*), a piece of reportage about the life of Jewish society in the capital, made Melcer a household name, as did her marriage to renowned wrestler, Teodor Sztekker. They were the celebrity couple of their day.

She was joined in the lorry by seven men: journalists and various representatives from the association of artists, the association of writers and repatriation organizations.

Their journey would take them through the unfamiliar towns and villages of the southern parts of East Prussia, Western Pomerania, Brandenburg (following the Oder-Neisse line) and Silesia. Until recently, these regions had belonged to Germany; they would now become Polish Warmia, Masuria, Pomerania, Lubusz Land and Silesia.

The group’s transport and passes had been organised by the Central Association for Resettlement. They had been given explicit instructions: to travel around the country and encourage Poles to relocate to the severely depleted cities.

They had no idea what lay ahead; they weren’t even sure if they would get anything to eat when they arrived. For this reason, they brought along a basket of eggs as a precaution. They returned to Warsaw three weeks later with an implacable hatred of omelettes.

Shortly afterwards, Wanda Melcer’s “An Expedition to the Recovered Territories” (*Wyprawa na Ziemie Odzyskane. Reportaż*) appeared in bookshops. The slim book cost twenty zlotys and was published by Biblioteka Społeczno-Naukowa.

One cloudy morning in August 2014, I set off on a journey to the Recovered Territories, retracing the route taken by the group of journalists almost seventy years earlier. To keep my spirits up, I brought along my husband, Robert, and my seven-year-old daughter, Tosia. Over the years we have enjoyed travelling together – even Tosia’s *are-we-nearly-there-yets*, repeated hundreds of times along the way, make us laugh afterwards.

We are the descendants of settlers. After the war, Robert’s grandparents travelled from Łęczycza and the region around Kielce to the town of Jasień, near Zielona Góra. My own grandparents were migrants from Warsaw and from the Lwów area. I was born in the Recovered Territories twenty-seven years after the war. The houses in my town used to belong to the Germans; so did the armchairs in my grandma’s bedroom, the *landszaff* hanging next to her table and the crystal decanter. The taps in our flat in Sopot were marked *kalt* and *warm*. In the old Evangelical cemetery,

our relatives were buried among gravestones inscribed in Schwabacher. In fact, it was from a gravestone that I learned my first German word: *Fleischermeister* (master butcher).

As a child I often worried that if something was “formerly German”, it could easily become “formerly Polish” at some point. Subconsciously, genetically, I had inherited the same fear as my migrant forebears: the fear that the place in which I lived was given to us but for a short while.

As I travelled through the Recovered Territories, I assumed I would meet people who, like my grandparents, had had to begin a new life in a strange town. I wondered whether the places they had come to were still foreign to them. Whether they had left their hearts behind in the place of their birth. And if they did feel at home now, when did that happen? What about their descendants? Did they still feel that fear which has plagued me after all these years?

FINDING A LITTLE GIRL IN CANDIEN (OR KANIGOWO)

“Where the hell is Hańkowo?” I growled irritably, poring over a map of Poland. That was the first stop on the route for Wanda Melcer and her companions. It was a short distance from Mława, four kilometres from the former border with East Prussia. It’s not as though a “large and thriving village”, as Melcer described it, could simply have vanished into thin air. But there was nothing to be seen. I consulted a report written by a journalist from “*Życie Warszawy*” who was travelling on the same lorry as Melcer. Well, he writes about a village called Kanigowo, where, he says, eighty settlers had arrived just weeks earlier.

I was going to have problems with the names of villages and towns for the remainder of my trip. Place-name pandemonium reigned in 1945. According to one settler: “When we got there, we’d change the names of the villages to Polish ones. Kleefeld, for example, was renamed Klementów, after the village leader, Klemeński. It was later officially renamed Trzcina Góra. The Commission for the Determination of Place Names had just been established at the Department of Public Administration. Some places were given their old Slavic names back (Breslau – Wrocław), others received their old polonised names (Zoppot – Sopot). Some were given newly polonised names (Hirschberg – Jelenia Góra) and others still got completely new names (Drengfurth – Srokowo, in honour of Prof. Stanisław Srokowski, a member of the Commission).”

This meant that I wouldn’t always be able to figure out which village or town the journalists meant. But now Fortune was on my side. I ran a finger over the map, from Mława towards Olsztyn. I guessed that Wanda Melcer and her team might have stopped off at Kanigowo (Candien, in German), near the town of Nidzica. And so that’s where we decided to make our first stop.

[...] They only stopped when the entire village came running up to their lorry. The villagers only wanted one thing from the Warsaw reporters: confirmation that they would definitely be allowed to remain there. “They cautiously asked us if we thought things might change again. If there would be another war, more attacks, more resettlements and more expulsions,” wrote Melcer. So they told the settlers nothing would change, even though the Potsdam Conference hadn’t begun yet.

They were served freshly baked bread, potatoes and milk. Jan Nowicki (a carriage builder) and his wife had invited the journalists into their home all those years ago. They had owned eight morgens (approximately two hectares) of land

in Kuklin; they received forty hectares when they arrived in Kanigowo. Their home in Kuklin was raised to the ground and one of their children, just seven weeks old, had been shot dead in her crib by the Germans.

Wanda Melcer found their farm charming: “Yes, it’s a house, a large house. Not at all like the ramshackle dwellings we are used to seeing in the dilapidated villages of our overcrowded counties. It is a brick house with a red roof, large double-glazed windows, a sturdy door and a stone porch”. A small dog on a thick chain stood guard in the courtyard and a German woman helped out in the farmyard.

In the kitchen, the Germans had left behind pots and plates, meat mallets and sieves – even an embroidered tea towel extolling the virtues of rising early. There were German eiderdowns and pillows in the bedrooms, farmer’s tools in the shed, a machine for cleaning troughs and a concrete floor in the barn.

I managed to find the Nowickis’ house without any difficulty, as the locals in the village gave me directions. All I had to do was go straight along the cobbled road, pass the old German Evangelical church, where the 407 inhabitants of Candien would worship every Sunday before the war (the population of Kanigowo in 2010 was 281), and turn left. The house stood on the corner. A brick house with a red roof, just as Wanda Melcer had described it. But now a new, smaller house had been tacked on to the side. Beyond the concrete fence I could see the swept cobbled courtyard and a trampoline in the garden. A sign that children lived here.

In 1945, the Nowickis had a five-year-old daughter. Wanda Melcer wrote: “How I love to stroke your hair, little Marianna. How brave you are, such courage in your dark eyes [...] how happy you are here, my little settler”.

Someone in the new house must have spotted me through the window. A young woman carrying a Yorkshire terrier came out onto the porch, and she was quickly joined by another, slightly older, woman in an apron. They were happy to talk to me; it turned out they were related to the late Mr and Mrs Nowicki. But when it came to the fate of their ancestors who had settled here, they were unable to tell me anything.

“What about Marianna?” I asked. “The little girl who was born in 1940? Her sister was killed by the Germans. Do you know anything about her?”

“Auntie Maria!” they cried in unison, like seasoned choral singers. “She lives in town, not far from here.”

I switched on my mobile phone and we dialled the number. She answered straight away. She turned down my offer to meet. I did my best to persuade her, telling her I’d come to her place, that it would only take half an hour – fifteen minutes, even. I told her how incredibly fortunate I was as a journalist to be able to meet that brave little girl from Melcer’s reportage, to be able to listen to her, to find out what she remembered of those first few days in Kanigowo. I told her that her generation of settlers was fast disappearing, that people wanted to read about these important memories. But she asked me to leave her be.

For a while I stood there in the courtyard, looking at the house which had so impressed the journalists some seventy years earlier. I felt like a child who had had its lollipop taken away.

“Those settlers in Hańkowo are hardy people and I’m sure they’ll do just fine,” wrote Wanda Melcer. She left Kanigowo feeling much better than I did.

Translated by Garry Malloy

ANNA **JANKO**

A MINOR HOLOCAUST



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Anna Janko (born 1957) is a writer, poet, columnist and literary critic. Her work has been listed for a number of prestigious literary awards including the Nike Literary Prize and the Angelus. She regularly contributes to several journals and to Polish Radio. Her most recent book is autobiographical.

The village was called Sochy. It was in the Zamość region. The girl was called Renia. She had a mama and a papa, a sister and a brother. And the war happened. They came, burned down the village, killed the parents. All right before her eyes. Many years after Renia gave birth to a daughter. But she herself remained a girl.

Her daughter's name is Anna Janko. She is now a grown woman. A poet, novelist, and newspaper columnist. She is a success. She has published such books as *The Matchbox Girl* and *The Passion according to Saint Hanka*, she has received awards and distinctions. Only now, at the age of fifty-seven, has she decided to write about what happened to her mother. Or in fact – what happened to *herself*.

It's important to mention from the start that *A Minor Holocaust* is mainly a descriptive account of Janko's experiences, more so than a literary text. Beginning with the story of her own family, in *A Minor Holocaust* the author tackles the issue of trauma passed down to the surviving generation. This book is important for the gravity of its topic – anyone who believes that the war ended long ago and that it is no concern of ours is wrong.

It was the 1st of June 1943. This date appears on about 200 gravestones in the Sochy cemetery – from infants to the elderly. The 1st of June – Children's Day? The holiday had not yet been established, but it would be hard to think of a more symbolic date. Janko writes as follows: "There should not be any children during wartime. They should spend the war in a twenty-four-hour preschool, behind candy-colored wire, behind a wall of fairy-tale thickness, or better yet, on another planet. And wait there. When it is all over they could be gradually picked up...".

Earlier she writes of how she had two mothers, as it were. One was the adult woman whom she missed when the woman went out shopping, a woman who scared her when she flew into a rage. But this woman had also remained a terrified nine-year-old who could cry all day long, from morning till evening. Growing up under the care of a woman in this state had to leave a mark on the child's psyche, as it inevitably meant a role reversal of sorts.

We ought to recall that the children of the generation born immediately after the war were always frightened by it. Janko recalls how she opened the wardrobe and made an escape plan. She wondered what she would have to take with her, and what she could do without. She made calculations: Would it be better to have a daughter or a son? They rape daughters, but sons are conscripted to the army. She wanted to be ready when the inevitable broke out. And like her entire generation, she heard almost every day that she had no idea what hunger, cold, and deprivation were... Hard to imagine that she did not share this disquiet with her children. The real number of the victims of World War Two remains unknown – too many of them were born decades after the conflict ceased.

Małgorzata I. Niemczyńska



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I'd known

A MINOR HOLOCAUST

it all before, first from the stories you told... You gave birth to me in the fifty-seventh year (the house in Sochy was number fifty-seven...). Our apartment in Rybnik was your first home – after the one that burned to the ground. You had a family again, a whole new one. Like in the story of Job, you got back what you lost, just in another form and a different configuration: now you were the mother, not the child. Strange kind of fate. Hard to adjust to it at first. Seems strange and impermanent.

Whenever I read the Book of Job I got the feeling that Job only faked being happy with his new life; after all, he got nothing back in the literal sense... New house, new children... How much time would he need to grow into them? Could they ever replace the dead ones? Could the gulf of despair be somehow sealed shut? It was like yanking the earth out from someone's feet, dragging him through hell, then setting him down on the moon and saying: Have a good time, nothing's changed. But everything had changed! The earthly Job had died, and the lunar one was born. The lunar Job looked like he was over the moon. He actually wore a funereal mask for his own self.

When God gave you a new home you were twenty-two, but you were still a nine-year-old at heart. You might have written that as a fraction, or with a slash, like this: 22/9. Twenty-two over nine when you took a husband, after having known Dad for three months, lightning fast. Then 23/9, twenty-three over nine when I was born to you, on 27 (that was the number of our building in Rybnik...) August. When you were thirty-three over nine you had a hemorrhage and they operated on you in the hospital in Warsaw (your dad died at the age of thirty-three). Before the operation you combed your hair into two braids, because if something went wrong you wanted to go into the next world as a girl. Always the same denominator. The passing years boiled down to that denominator, number nine. What was over the line changed, responded to the calendar, the various events, the emotions at hand. What was under the line was still.

When I appeared in your life I was a solution, I came out of you. You could have pulled me down under the line and talked to me, one little girl to another. I was an extension of you. Who endured by some miracle, on the Moon.

You survived. All survivors had to give testimony. Abandoned between worlds, in the crevice between the old life and the new one, they build a bridge out of words, a lunar highway... And there they live; even if they have another, more steady address, a telephone number, work and family ties, they remain in-between, with no support. You gave me your testimony. And when you were thirty-three, almost

a quarter-century after the pacification, you came out of the operation all right, unraveled your braids, and began writing poems about everything that had happened.

And me? It was like I had two mothers. The first one was the adult woman I missed when she went out to the shop, whom I feared when she flew into a rage, whom I was proud of, because no one in the courtyard had a prettier lady for a mother. And I had a second mother: a little girl who had lost her parents in the war, still terrified and alone, who had gone hungry and had had to work for her evil aunt, one who beat her and made her carry buckets of water uphill. For her it was, paradoxically enough, a stroke of luck being sent to an orphanage after the war. It was this little girl mother who sometimes lay down on the couch at midday and began crying for no conceivable cause.

Imagine the child watching. The child is watching her mother, who can't stop crying. She's totally absorbed, she sees nothing, she hears nothing, because she is totally absorbed with her crying. Her face is dark and wet, her eyes puffy, she does not speak like one child to another, but as if to an adult: "Tell me, tell me, what am I to do? What?" Or she apologizes: "I'm sick, I'm so sick, but it will pass..." Or she turns to face the wall, and then the child is all alone in the world.

Something always hurt. You got tired quickly, every shop was stuffy, you bought whatever was the quickest, and I despaired that it wasn't the dress I wanted, the pair of shoes, there was another, higher up on the shelves... But the money was already spent, we were on our way out, you could not bear a second longer, there was no ventilation. I couldn't stand those clothes, those things we bought, those little-girl disappointments of mine. I was fifteen when I learned to use a sewing machine, and then the aesthetic torments were over...

Until your heart got sick, and then at least we knew there was a concrete reason why you felt so bad – it was the heart. Although the doctor said the sickness was of "unknown etiology"... At home we knew that the etiology was Sochy, the first of June. That's where your heart stopped, and when it moved after that, it was healthy no more. My little mama, that's how I sometimes thought of you. At times I was my mother's mother. I often felt you needed special care. Remember how I vowed that when I grew up I would find that evil aunt who made you carry buckets of water uphill, I'd find her and set fire to her skirt? I hated the Germans more than you did, I was ready to fight. When we played, I was always the knight with the long ruler for a sword, the partisan with the stick-rifle, the Indian with the bow made from a clothes-hanger. I was excited by valor. I promised I would one day write a book titled *Our Mother the Orphan*, so that all the children could find out. Those were the emotions you could see. But underneath there was something you couldn't, something that flowed in the opposite direction and caused friction, stoppage, resistance. I didn't understand that, I didn't know about psychological conflict and self-contradiction. I was my mother's little girl, I had to listen to her, and at the same time I mothered her and could be bigger than her. I always felt like I was going uphill in that love. "A lullaby only goes one way," I wrote in a poem back in high school, when I was just getting the hang of writing, when my mind's eye began performing self-analyses...

After all, how can a child cuddle the child in her mother? How is she supposed to arrange herself for this scene, where to put her arms, what thoughts should she address? Imagine a child watching her mother who can't stop crying... I knelt

by the bed, right near your damp face, which suddenly seemed so much bigger, I awkwardly stroked your hair, I said: "Hey, don't cry, no more crying now," sorry that you weren't a doll, how much simpler it would have been with a doll! Mama was alive, but somehow strange, her tears unfathomable and dense like mercury. And heavy. The tears of a mother are too heavy for a child. Children should never see them if we want them to feel secure. What the child feels is unnatural, unpleasant, shameful, it causes existential nausea and cold fear. A lullaby only goes one way.

Sometimes I feel you in my body. After all, genes are like a deposit passed from one generation to the next. My body might be new, but the stitches, the lining, and the inside pockets are "the old ones." I can be my own mother, I can be you, in the mirror, when I dash past it; out of the corner of my eye, I see your frame, your gaze. I freeze for a split-second, because your existence cuts through me like a shudder. Small wonder that that nine-year-old Renata who still lives in you is the orphan we share.

You Didn't Want to Go Back There...

You didn't want to go back there, so we never visited our grandparents' graves like normal people did. You couldn't just get on the train and go to Sochy on All Saints' Day. Go there and get down to cleaning the graves, pulling out the weeds, cleaning the cross... I can't even imagine you bending over with a rag to wash the stone, to clean the nameplates, before straightening up to look in the sky, into the small November sun, shining as pale as if seen through a stocking. And then bending over once more to work. I can't imagine it. All I see is the little girl you were back when your parents died, one after the other, with you watching. And then you took your younger brother and your younger sister into your arms, and you said: "We're orphans now." With those words it was like you ended the fairy tale that life had been telling you. Now you had to start a new story, about someone else. Orphanhood is a defined social status that is felt quite deeply in the countryside. The orphan's lot. Sadness, hunger, hard work, and a vast, inconceivable loneliness. That's what you got. You were in shock, you didn't even look back at your mother lying in the grainfields. You took the younger children down the road where your father lay. You would have had to go past him. He was lying face-up, in his new fishbone blazer. It was a chilly May, the wind was blowing, he had dressed at dawn and had bundled up, just in case. There was a little hole on one side of the blazer where the bullet had gone in. You took a quick glance. His eyes were shut. His Adam's apple was moving, as if he were trying to swallow. But you had to get moving. There was no force on earth that could stop you. This was non-world and non-life. You had to cross the road, to where Grandpa, your uncles and your cousins lived, you had to tell them that Mama and Papa were dead.

Translated by Soren Gauger

MAGDALENA KICIŃSKA

MISS STEFA



Magdalena Kicińska (born 1987) is a reporter. Her articles have been published in anthologies of reportage and she writes regularly for several highly regarded journals including the news and culture weeklies *Polityka*, *Przekrój* and *Wysokie Obcasy*. She has been shortlisted for the *Teresa Torńska Prize* and for the *Ryszard Kapuściński scholarship*. *Miss Stefa* is her first book.

"I often found myself wondering how she always knew where to be at the right time. Whenever I got up to mischief, she was the first to know about it. And as soon as any of the children started to feel sad, she would instantly ask what was wrong. She'd produce their lost item from a pocket, and a handkerchief too, to wipe away the tears ... The way she lived, we knew very little about her, she was so... so... non-existent. There's nothing left of her, as if she were never here."

Stefania Wilczyńska was born in 1886 in Warsaw, into an assimilated, well-to-do Jewish family. From 1906 to 1908 she studied the natural sciences and medicine in Geneva and Liège. She also took courses inspired by the German pedagogue Friedrich Fröbel, designed to train future kindergarten teachers. In 1909 she returned to Warsaw, where she asked for "an unpaid position" at the refuge for Jewish children situated at 2 Franciszkańska Street. There she met Dr Henryk Goldschmidt, who often called in, and who had an interest in various educational methods. At the time he was working as a paediatrician at the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital, and had started to publish under the pseudonym Janusz Korczak.

Wilczyńska and Korczak had similar views on bringing up children, who they believed deserved respect, trust and freedom, as long as no harm was caused to anybody else. At the children's home that they ran, there was a set of rules in force which included a code of laws and duties for the staff as well as the children. There was a self-governing body and a court in operation too. Wilczyńska was in charge of keeping order – it was she who made sure the several dozen children had clean clothes without holes in them, were fed a healthy diet, got up early enough to wash and have breakfast before going to school, and then do their lessons, etc.

Those who grew up in her care remember Stefania Wilczyńska as a silent, austere person, always dressed in black, with short black hair and an inseparable bunch of keys. As Samuel Gogol remembered: "I don't think she was cold. The children's home couldn't have existed without this extraordinary lady with the serious face. She took an interest in every

little detail. The doctor wasn't interested in things like our clothes, or whether our hands were clean and we were tidy. I think she substituted as a mother and a father for us, because somebody had to guide us with a firm hand. In my memories the home was Miss Stefa, and Miss Stefa was the home."

She lived in Korczak's shadow, and that is where she has remained. Many streets, children's homes and schools have been named after him, and many monuments have been erected to him. They all show him at the head of a procession of children, apparently on their way to the Umschlagplatz, from where they would be forced into cattle trucks that would take them to the death camp where they would die in a gas chamber. Stefania Wilczyńska is not there with them, though everyone knows that she was. In May 1978, on the grounds of the former camp at Treblinka a stone was ceremonially unveiled to commemorate Janusz Korczak and the children. Among the 17,000 stones that comprise the monument there, it is the only one to have a name carved on it. Why couldn't they find room to remember Stefania Wilczyńska there too? It's a mystery.

Katarzyna Zimmerer



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The word

MISS STEFA

“pleasure” doesn’t come up when they talk about Stefania Wilczyńska. Pleasure would prompt a smile, and they don’t think that suits her.

“Not that she never smiled,” explains Szlojme. “She did smile occasionally, and she laughed too. But that laughter wasn’t at home with her. In Stefa’s case it was like a guest who’s come from far away and doesn’t know what to do with himself.”

It was strange to see her laugh.

It was good to see her laugh.

“Don’t get us wrong: she had large, deep set eyes, a big nose, wrinkled cheeks, short wisps of hair bordering her face, a little black mole, and a furrowed brow. Tall, stocky, in a black dress. She was always holding that bunch of keys, heavy and jangling.”

Hardly the setting for “pleasure”. But one day Szlojme calls, clearly overjoyed.

“There was something! The microscopes I told you about. One night I saw her taking one upstairs to her room. She gave me an embarrassed look, and from then on we shared a secret.”

She also enjoys offering the children botany textbooks to read with large charts. She likes telling them about Darwin’s discoveries. In 1921 when the “Rosebud” summer camp is set up at Gocławek (then outside Warsaw), she can take the children for walks, show them the meadow, and say: “In the daytime cows graze here” (one little girl by the unusual surname “Krowa”, meaning a cow, is offended: “I’ll take you to court!” she says). So she goes on to explain what a cow is, a river, a forest. Some of them have never seen this many trees before.

Apparently she also likes talking in French, and when she gets upset, she mumbles to herself in it, so the children won’t understand.

(Is that when she’s planning expenses, and can see the funding from the Town Hall dwindling?)

In the early 1920s the “Aid for Orphans” Society asks the city authorities for help; it doesn’t want to keep going on nothing but donations and the good will of the donors. It is looking for new ways to raise money. Other institutions will pay to make use of the summer camp. On an extra piece of hired ground they found an agricultural farm. A few years later a boarding house will be established there for children waiting for a place at the Home, and for those who are behind with their studies, and in 1928 a pre-school too (which will be run by boarding house resident Ida Merzan).

(Does Wilczyńska add reminders to her plan for the day, saying: pre-school inspection, answering young employees’

questions, time to send hundreds of children to “Rosebud” in the summer, divide them into groups, equip and travel with them?)

At first the children cannot cope, away from Krochmalna Street. As Icek Cukierman, brought up at the Orphans’ Home, and later transferred to Gocławek, remembered: “The only thing that connected us with the Orphans’ Home were Miss Stefa’s weekly visits, which I looked forward to impatiently.”

*

According to Szlojme: “She demanded a lot of everyone, and the most of all of herself.”

Sara Kramer, another Orphans’ Home foster child, remembered: “I missed my mum very badly. I went to visit her on Saturdays, and it was very hard for me to go back to the Home afterwards. My mum was always my mum, but if I had stayed with her, my life would have been very different. I wouldn’t have got from her what I got from Stefa.”

Hanna Dembińska lived in the Home too. “Whatever she did for me, she wasn’t my mother. I think she envied her,” she said of Stefa.

According to Seweryn Nutkiewicz: “Korczak and Stefa were less than parents, and more than parents. They were our foster parents. [...] A father views his child subjectively, [...] a foster father does it objectively. They guided us, not from the start and not to the end. In the family a child comes up against real life on a daily basis. The Home on Krochmalna Street was a closed world.”

An anonymous memory: “Korczak appears briefly, and the children run to him with their concerns, they drag him into their games, and he doesn’t refuse. Stefa was the mother of the home, often strict by necessity, and it’s not hard to understand that out of 107 children in her care, some might have grudges towards her. She was tough, and sometimes she punished someone for nothing. They gave us warmth, but it was a foster parent’s warmth, only a foster parent’s. But anyone can be a father or mother. Only very few are capable of raising other people’s children.”

As Ida Merżan remembered: “Once I was asked how many children Miss Stefa had, so I said for a joke: fifty girls, fifty boys, twenty at the boarding school, and one older child, the most difficult of all, because he’s independent – Korczak.”

Jochewed Cuk: “Korczak was the kind dad, and Stefa was the tough mother, always there, twenty-four hours a day.”

Samuel Gogol: “I don’t think she was cold. The Home couldn’t have existed without this extraordinary lady with the serious face. She took an interest in every detail. The doctor wasn’t interested in things like our clothes, or whether our hands were clean and we were tidy. I think she substituted as a mother and a father for us, because somebody had to guide us with a firm hand. In my memories the home was Miss Stefa, and Miss Stefa was the home. ... As for financial matters, it was mainly she who took care of them. The person who made sure I had a pair of trousers and put on my slippers was Miss Stefa. Nobody ever talked about it – it was self-evident.”

*

In Ada Poznańska-Hagari’s anonymous questionnaire of the 1980s they also said:

“She was like a mother, but the kind that holds you tight.”

“She could shout at a child so sternly he was terrified.”

“As a child I thought the Doctor was better, but looking back I think Stefa’s part in my upbringing was no less important.”

“The Doctor was more sensitive and affectionate. She had to be tough.”

“Korczak was like a mother, and Stefa was the father.”

“When she was cross with me, she wouldn’t talk to me or answer me. I realized she was cross, but I didn’t know why.”

“When the girls started having periods, she took special care of them. She let them have an extra bath. She would have a talk with them. I was embarrassed. She explained to me exactly what was happening.”

“There were children she didn’t like. She threw me out of the Home for nothing.”

“Why did she love me so much? I was awful.”

“When I turned seven, she held a birthday party for me, although there was no such custom at the Home. She asked who I liked, and invited those children. There were snacks and songs. I had a wonderful birthday.”

“We’d been ill and we were lying in our beds. Korczak examined us and confirmed that we were better now. We stayed in bed, waiting for Miss Stefa to come back and say we could get up.”

“I was meeting a boy in secret. Stefa came in and put on the light. Afterwards she came in every night to check that I was in bed. If Stefa was like a mother, then why didn’t she trust me?”

“She said: ‘I know there’s something wrong with this method. Direct communication with a child is better.’ But she didn’t change it.”

“Once she slapped my cheek, I can’t remember why. We were on our own. I said: ‘I’ve got hands too and I can slap you back.’ She stared in amazement and – hugged me. She didn’t apologise, but she hugged me, knowing she’d made a mistake.”

“There was no arguing with her.”

“I didn’t like her.”

“I loved her.”

*

[...]

This is a letter dating from the late 1930s, which Wilczyńska wrote to a former, now adult foster child (whose surname has not survived):

“My dearest child, I won’t try to console you or reason with you. The fact that Julek shares your feelings and that others sympathise won’t be any help to you either. Nobody and nothing can provide comfort in a situation like this. Only time and work will do their job. We can see this all around us in the example of other people who have been through similar losses. I know it from my own experience of escorting various loved ones to the graveyard.

Other people can’t help at all. Each of us is alone with our own pain. Nobody can take it away for us, nobody can provide comfort, not even the most loving person.

What I’m telling you is tough, my dearest child, but it’s the truth. Not even the thought that one day you’ll have another child, not even that will be any consolation for you right now.

The one good thing is that you have a man like Julek by your side, and he has you.

I’m longing to see you, but I don’t really know when that will be. ...

I hug you and kiss you, just like when you were a little girl and something had upset you.”

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

BEATA CHOMĄTOWSKA

THE PALACE: AN INTIMATE BIOGRAPHY



Beata Chomątowska (born 1976) is a writer, journalist and social worker. She has a fascinating way of writing about Warsaw, where she lives. Her work includes the very well received *Muranów Station* and a biography, *Lachert and Szanajca*, *Architects of the Avant Garde*. She is a contributor to the cultural weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, the leading daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* and to the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

The Palace: An Intimate Biography is the latest wonderful book by Beata Chomątowska. Chomątowska teaches us how to read a city, sensitizing us to its architectural characteristics and historical, political, anthropological and social context, as well as the emotional fabric of a city – the history of the people, animals, plants and objects connected to it. She has a gift for combining a breadth of knowledge with a light touch, a literary sensibility, a fluent style, and a talent for stirring emotions as well.

This intimate biography of Warsaw's Palace of Culture skyscraper is a gift on the building's 60th birthday – a gift for those who know it and are fascinated by it, but also for anyone who's seen the Palace, even just on a postcard. It's very rare to read a book "for everyone" like *The Palace* – one which such a wide range of people will find interesting. This is because Chomątowska paints a portrait of this palace, this phenomenon, from a diversity of perspectives. We learn the genesis of the Soviet palace-monuments; we watch the development of this area of Warsaw over the last twenty years; we wander the corridors of the Palace with the great and the good; we discover what the Palace construction workers ate and how they lived; we learn the stories the Palace's chronicler, Hanna Szczubelek, has recorded; we read letters sent to the palace (with requests for accommodation, intervention in disputes with neighbors or for work); we also hear stories of people committing suicide by jumping off the observation deck.

Chomątowska looks close-up – we touch the stones used on the Palace's interior – and from afar – we gaze at the Palace's location from above, and hear anthropologists' analysis: "The Palace, in keeping with its creators' intentions, fit the model of the 'sacred column' [...]. It was no ordinary building, but a 'place which would become the starting point of a new, ideal city,' a model capital for a socialist country. It was a sort of secular cathedral symbolizing new ideas as well as a model of beauty." The Palace is built on a square plan (representing the order of the Earth), while a circle (the Congress Hall)

is also inscribed in its design, symbolizing the order of the heavens. Chomańska quotes “the architect Jan Minorski, a leading ideologue of Socialist Realism, who wrote plainly: ‘The greatest demand [...] we make of architecture is that it express the essence of our ambitions. Understood that way, the architecture of Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches is very successful. We would like the Palace to be the same.’ Although there was a proposal to situate the palace on the opposite bank of the Vistula River, it was erected “‘on a carved-out sacred grove,’ meaning the cleared remains of a nineteenth-century city which it was supposed to oppose. [...] ‘If tenement apartments represented the privatization of bourgeois life – its parceling out into minor, little personal matters hidden behind ornamental façades – the Palace announced the elimination of everything private” (as the historian Adam Leszczyński says in the book).

Chomańska’s view of the Palace is full of sensitivity – one especially moving chapter is on the cats living in the Palace of Culture, and Elżbieta Michalska, who has cared for them for years. Chomańska has a reserved sense of humor, too – for instance, she quotes the words of Gustaw Morcinek, for whom the Palace’s silhouette resembled “an apparition [...], Nike in the Louvre in Paris.”

The Palace: An Intimate Biography is composed carefully and beautifully, “appropriate to its need” – like a constructivist work of art. The passion put into its writing infects the reader, and reading it is enormously pleasurable. Beata Chomańska’s hard work, talent and perspicacity lead us to conclude any subject she takes on will turn into a fascinating book.

Agnieszka Drotkiewicz



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WHEN THEY

THE PALACE: AN INTIMATE BIOGRAPHY

announced the competition to design the Palace of the Soviets, the organizers described it dryly: “an administrative and congress center for the Central Committee of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.” It became clear they had a building of an entirely new caliber in mind when, during the Council of Soviets of the USSR in December 1922, the distinguished Bolshevik activist Sergey Kirov inspired the attendees with a proposal to erect a magnificent building to outshine the mansions of the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, while accommodating delegates from all the republics of their growing country.

“The Palace of the Soviets should have nothing in common, even externally, with the parliamentary buildings of yesterday’s world. It should be the revenge of a government of the spurned, of the once-backward workers and peasants over the bourgeois West; a building our enemies could not imagine in their wildest dreams. This building should become a visible symbol of our future power, the triumph of Communism both here and in the West. We must build the Palace of the Soviets so the final republic is inscribed indelibly in the fabric of the Soviet Union!” he exclaimed in elation, and the comrades answered him with tremendous applause. There was no argument over where to build the palace. Everyone agreed the most symbolically appropriate place was Chertolye Square, next to the Kremlin, with its gigantic church – the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which Tsar Alexander I had ordered built in thanksgiving for Russia’s preservation from Napoleon. Now, at Stalin’s will, the spiritual center of tsarist Russia, sneeringly called “the giant samovar,” would have to give way to the Palace of the Soviets, the center of the proletarian state. The church, with décor by Russia’s most talented artists, had taken forty-four years to build. It was blown sky-high in less than twenty seconds, though it didn’t give up without a fight – its thick walls, which had been stripped of anything valuable, only crumbled after the second blast. Clearing the bricks took nearly a year.

The Soviet government did all it could to spread word of the contest around the world and make sure it met with a fitting response. Grzegorz Sigalin, a popular architect in Warsaw but completely unknown abroad, must have known he had his work cut out for him. His rival contenders for the Palace wouldn’t be just his friends from the prestigious Architecture Department of Warsaw Polytechnic – they’d be leading international artists. None of them minded they might contribute to the global triumph of Communism. Grzegorz wasn’t too troubled either. In 1920, when he was eighteen, he’d wanted to beat the Reds, so he and his

brother had volunteered for an anti-aircraft defense battalion. The battalion waited for the Bolsheviks on Mokotów Field in Warsaw, but the invaders never made it to the city. As an adult he sympathized with the left, like many of the capital's avant-garde who were fascinated by modernism.

THE TROIKA

Sigalin didn't take on the palace alone: there were three architects on the project, working under the name "Troika" and the French flag.

The flag was close to the heart of their colleague Henryk Blum, one of Sigalin's competitors in Warsaw, who designed luxury apartment buildings for affluent investors in a joint venture with the architect Lucjan Korngold. For this kind of commission, though, it was worth joining forces and forgetting their rivalry on the domestic market.

The third member, Bertold Lubetkin, was the leader of the whole enterprise. Before he'd started erecting buildings for humans, he'd made a name for himself as the designer of a building for animals: under the patronage of Sir Julian Huxley, Aldous's brother, he was entrusted with designing the gorilla house at the London Zoo. The structure was built in the shape of a wheel – Lubetkin, though he idolized the simple lines advocated by the unsurpassed Le Corbusier, adored round shapes. He was an Eastern European who'd prepared for a career in the West. By the time he was thirty he already had his own architectural studio in London; he could boast an apprenticeship with Auguste Perret himself, as well as the acquaintance of Wilhelm Worringer, the influential historian who was regarded as Corbu's main mentor. It was most likely one of these patrons who had encouraged the young artist to join the competition in Moscow – even if he didn't win, he would be able to prove himself by competing against renowned architects.

Born in Tiflis (today's Tbilisi) into an assimilated, affluent Jewish family, Lubetkin had easily found a common language with his contemporary and fellow Jew Grzegorz Jakub Aaron Sigalin, whose mother was an enterprising woman from the Caucasus named Klaudia. They'd known one another since they were students: during his peregrinations around European schools and studios, Bertold had spent two years at Warsaw Polytechnic. He also considered himself a Communist. He believed strongly a building's design should be an instrument of social reform, a way to create a country where – as the Bolsheviks' American advisor Bill Haywood had put it – "nothing is too good for ordinary people."

AMONG THE STARS

Foreign architects submitted twenty-four proposals for the Palace, out of 160. Stalin could be pleased – big names like Walter Gropius, Auguste Perret, Erich Mendelsohn and Hans Poelzig were taking part.

Le Corbusier was so sure he'd win that he put on a real show to present his idea: a pair of his collaborators, dancing and leaping, unveiled the table with the model on it while he, a music-lover, accompanied them on the double bass. Corbu, although he didn't believe in Communism, had gone through a period of fascination with the Soviet Union and its capital, which he'd written about as "a factory of plans, a Promised Land for engineers." He was the sole Western architect the Soviets had ever invited to Moscow, to oversee the construction of the Centrosoyuz building he'd designed. The Soviets had asked the Master's views on completely rebuilding the city. A front-page headline in *Pravda*

announced Le Corbusier's arrival ("the most talented representative of advanced architectural thought in Europe has arrived"). Crowds were dying to get into the lecture he gave. It all nicely tickled the vanity of the Swiss architect, who had only recently had to swallow a bitter pill: the competition jury for the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva had rejected his proposal in favor of a more conservative choice. "My work has broken through the blockade," he wrote triumphantly in his journal. "I am famous, I am popular!" He was shaking officials' hands, fraternizing with local architects and touring Moscow and the nearby region – accompanied by his hosts, of course.

The musical and theatrical performance resonated widely. No winner was named in the first stage of the competition, but his supporters informed Corbu that his project had made a tremendous impression on everyone. Its gigantic scale – without hesitation, Le Corbusier proposed demolishing half the neighborhood – matched the ambitions of the Soviet empire. It had a main auditorium seating 15,000, a smaller one for 6,500 and an outdoor plaza for 50,000. The acoustics were designed to perfection. The two most important aspects, shown in miniature on the model, evoked burst-open string instruments: the plaza encircled by a parabolic curve serving as a pedestrian ramp, with bars like strings coming off it to support the roof. There were no steps! Le Corbusier accepted the news of their admiration as something entirely obvious and already envisioned himself in the second round – if not as the winner, then at least among the finalists.

When the results were announced on December 28, 1932, he must have been convinced there was some mistake, especially since the decision sounded like the one made in the competition for the League of Nations building. The jury – formally presided over by a distinguished Bolshevik of Polish descent named Gleb Krzhizhanovsky, although everyone knew the most important member of the committee was "Dictator Stalin," as *Time* magazine called him – hadn't chosen the single best proposal, but instead selected the highest-rated projects by three architects: Boris Mikhailovich Iofan, Ivan Zholtovsky and Hector Hamilton, a twenty-eight-year-old British architect living in New Jersey, who was no less shocked by the jury's verdict than Corbu. All the projects were traditional in their expression – classical, like the golden age of long-ago Tsarist Russia. The next step was easy to imagine – either a third round or state intervention, some compromise with a recommendation of the least-controversial plan. In other words, mediocrity would prevail, just like in Geneva.

Le Corbusier was offended by Moscow, but it didn't need him anymore.

Translated by Sean Gasper Bye

ROBERT RIENT

WITNESS



Robert Rient (born 1980) is a writer, journalist and personal trainer. His work has appeared in journals including *Charaktery*, *Coaching*, *Przekrój*, *Wysokie Obcasy* and others. His first publication was a novel, *It Was About Love* (2013). His latest book is autobiographical reportage about growing up in a religious sect and being excluded from it.

They knock at the door. “Good morning. We’ve come to talk about the state of the world today,” they say when we open it. They’re clutching leaflets that promise to provide the answers to questions that have vexed humanity for centuries. We all know them – the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Except that their reality is actually remote – we don’t know much about them, and after this greeting we usually shut the door on them. As a book written by a former member of this religious group, Robert Rient’s *Witness* brings its closed community into focus.

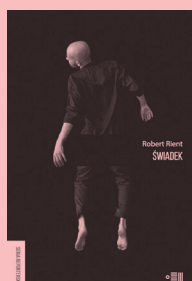
Or rather, it does that up to a point, because – as it’s worth stressing from the start – that is not its main theme. “How do you leave your family, your environment, and the values instilled in you in childhood without going mad?” writes Mariusz Szczygieł on the cover. Indeed, the main topic of *Witness* is actually a fight for personal freedom. It involves a problem that’s typical of the modern world – how do you create yourself, form your own identity, despite what you are told to believe in, which is part of various ideologies imposed from above? To some degree we all struggle with this, but there are reasons why the hero of *Witness* has a harder time than most. Not only must he create his own “self” but he also has some very specific ingredients to choose from: some of them he tries to accept, and others to reject. Being a Witness, in other words everything to do with belonging to the church, is something he longs to cast off, but on the other hand he wants to accept his own homosexuality, which he is only just discovering.

The story of life among the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which in Poland is regarded as a dubious sect, combined with the author’s problems relating to his sexual orientation makes for a strong mixture. One might even suspect the author of cheap sensation – but this is not that sort of book. Robert Rient succeeds in preserving sincerity and authenticity, and the most admirable element of all is his courage. For *Witness* is his own life story – he has made himself the central character in the book, and describes his own fortunes, doing it in a way that makes *Witness* hard to classify by genre – it is not exactly a memoir, and not quite personal reportage.

In fact there are two main characters, but they are just one person: Łukasz and Robert, before and after his transformation. Łukasz believes in Armageddon and resurrection, and refuses blood transfusions. He doesn't recognise flags, emblems or any other state symbols. Every day he goes from door to door delivering the good news. He takes part in the life of the congregation and goes to church retreats. He loves Jehovah. Robert rejects the old teaching, though he doesn't find it easy to do that, because "the void behind a lack of faith is more terrifying than death". He has suicidal thoughts, and also discovers his own homosexual tendencies. He tries drugs, completes a degree, starts to live on his own terms, and does his best to cope with the rejection of his family, who cannot forgive him for leaving the community.

Luckily Robert survives. As the author and hero of the book, conscious of the change that has occurred, he manages to produce a convincing account of his difficult fight for his own identity.

Patrycja Pustkowiak



ROBERT RIENT
ŚWIADEK
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WARSZAWA 2015
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I was born

WITNESS

on the first day of the last month of 1980. I was meant to be a girl, Marta, or at least a dog, which is what my older brother wanted.

*

That evening in the bathroom I rehearse. I bring my right hand up to my face, and use my thumb and index finger to block my nose. With my left hand I grip my right forearm. I close my eyes and gently lean backwards. I can't wait. I've been ready for a whole year. During this time I've been to meetings with the church elders who have asked me several hundred questions:

"Who is the true God?

When do you find time to pray?

How can we protect ourselves against the influences of Satan and the demons? What is sin? How did we all become sinners?

What is death?

Who will not be resurrected, and why?

What is the only Scriptural basis for divorce that frees one to remarry?

As a Christian, what local food products or medical practices will you henceforth avoid?

What stand should a Christian take if he is told that in order to save his own life or the life of a loved one a blood transfusion would be needed?

In what way do you demonstrate that you love Jehovah with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength?

What is the Christian view of drunkenness?

What does the Bible say about fornication, adultery, sexual relations with another person of the same sex (homosexuality) and other unlawful sexual conduct?

What pressures or enticements have you had to resist in order to come into a good relationship with Jehovah and maintain it?

In God's arrangement of things, who is the head of the married woman?

Why should you be willing to preach the good news to all kinds of people in your assigned territory?"

All these questions come from a book designed for the internal use of Jehovah's Witnesses, *Organized to Accomplish Our Ministry*, published in 1990. Each answer has to be justified with a verse from the Bible. Examinations of faith are difficult, especially when your dad and granddad are the ones testing your knowledge. The only church elders in this city. I'm becoming proficient at ignoring embarrassment. We meet every few weeks for several hours. I want to tell them about the thorn in my body, Satan's angel, but this desire is short-lived and it vanishes, taking away the fear it prompted.

I turn around, squint as I'm dazzled by the summer sun, and scan each sector of the stadium in search of my parents. I can see a yellow parasol. I stand up for the songs, then bow my head to pray. About two hundred people do the same beside me. Soon we are all going to be baptised. It doesn't go the way I'd been hoping.

There are more than ten thousand brothers sitting in the sectors. They're sheltering from the blazing sunshine under garden tents, sunshades and parasols. Once a year we meet up in about a dozen large Polish cities for a three-day assembly. The baptism is a regular feature. It's mainly the children of Jehovah's Witnesses who get baptised, other members of the family and people who are suffering from pain or illness, sometimes injuries, or addiction problems. People who need a system or instructions on what to do to achieve happiness.

The discourse begins. The brother prays for us and reminds us that in a short time we'll have a clean slate with Jehovah, but at the same moment Satan will discover our existence.

I'm not afraid of Satan, maybe just a little. I'm so excited, so pleased about the clean slate I'll have to write on that I can't stand still on the baking hot turf of the stadium. This is the most important day of my life. I am one of the youngest waiting in line for the round garden swimming pool set up in the middle of the stadium. The women and girls in bathing costumes are queuing up for a second pool. Each person has a towel with them. I scan the sectors, gazing at the witnesses of my baptism. I descend the small ladder into the pool, the water comes up to my neck, and I adopt the position I've practiced. I think about John the Baptist and Jesus, and about how the heavens opened when he stepped out of the River Jordan. The brother elder supports my back with one hand, and grips my arm with the other. With a swift movement he tips me backwards, and a moment later he pulls me out of the water.

"We welcome our new brother."

The heavens do not open, and I feel nothing, except for happiness and pride. I know, I'm fully aware that no miracle is meant to happen, and that it's just a symbol, but I was counting on more than happiness and pride. I want to feel the clean slate, I want to feel Jehovah removing everything that's bad, removing the thorn.

Soon there are arms embracing me. My family, cousins, several dozen people, brothers and sisters. Congratulations, pats on the back. I'm important, the disappointment vanishes. I am important. From now on I belong to Jehovah. ...

I was baptised on 2 July 1994 at the City Stadium in Wałbrzych, when I was almost fourteen. I was quick. My brother wasn't baptised until he was eighteen. I'd inherited my haste from my parents, that pair of love birds, who had expressed their dislike of idlers in their love letters years ago when my father was in prison. To this day wherever she goes, my mother runs.

*

On 12 May 1989 the Jehovah's Witnesses were officially registered as the Religious Union of Jehovah's Witnesses in Poland, represented by the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. Their activity became legal.

The first Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses was established on an allotment next to a gutted house. Inside there was flooring, chairs bought from a cinema, a podium, a lectern, flowers, and on the wall a single Bible quote, changed each year. No pictures or symbols, no altar, no incense. According to the commandment: "You shall have no other gods

before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." (Exodus 20:3-4). The hall was built by volunteers who came from all over Poland.

For many years in Szklarska Poręba there was just one church elder (Łukasz's dad) – a role comparable with that of a parish priest in the Catholic church. There were no more than fifty believers in the congregation. They were called brothers and sisters. The whole city could see who walked the streets carrying copies of *The Watchtower*. They called them a dubious sect. To this day they still gather at the Kingdom Hall, originally twice and now three times a week for their assembly. Entry is free – as well as the regular believers anyone who is interested can come along. [...]

Jehovah's Witnesses live inside their own dictionary.

"The truth" is their religion, but it's also their way of life. People live "in the truth" or "outside the truth". This word is used so often, with such natural ease, that after several years in the organization asking about the truth ceases to be necessary. On the other hand there is "the world", meaning everyone who is outside the truth. There isn't any no-man's land.

The truth is God's, and the world belongs to Satan. In the word live "apostates", "disfellowshipped persons", and people of all other denominations. Your work colleagues or neighbours might be nice people, but they will always be "worldly" and "philistine", persons with whom the "brothers" and "sisters" should not associate. "The Philistines were sworn enemies of the people of Jehovah and today's Satanic world has adopted a similar attitude. But the Philistines were annihilated as a race, and in the same way Jehovah will soon release his destructive anger on this world and its religious, political and commercial systems."

The quote is from *The Watchtower*, 1 July 1995, in other words "literature". That is the term for all publications issued by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, founded by Pastor Russell. Literature also includes *Awake!*, a monthly magazine on topics to do with nature, the environment and the economy, and which contains curious facts from the world of science and biblical enigmas.

The May 2015 edition of the monthly publication *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom* was published in a print run of 52,946,000 copies in 231 languages, and in the same month *Awake!* had a print run of 51,788,000 copies in 101 languages. On top of this there is a separate edition of *The Watchtower* for believers (the study edition), books, brochures, tracts, thematic journals and the Bible published in millions of copies. As a rule, *The Watchtower* has a print run of over forty-two million, which makes it the periodical with the largest circulation on earth. In second place is *Awake!*, with an average print run of forty-one million.

Jehovah's Witnesses are supposed to satisfy their need for reading matter with their own literature. There is an informal list of banned books, which includes the book you are reading, any publication that makes negative statements about the Jehovah's Witnesses and all those written by former believers. Admitting to reading them carries the threat of a "pastoral visit", a rebuke, and in extreme situations, "disfellowship".

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

EWA **WINNICKA**

BRITS



Ewa Winnicka is a journalist and reporter, and has also been the co-author of documentary films. For many years she has been associated with the news weekly *Polityka*, the cultural weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s weekly reportage supplement *Duży Format* and the Italian news magazine *Internazionale*. She is a two-time winner of the Grand Press prize for articles on social topics. Her last book, *Brits*, won the Gryfia Literary Award and was also longlisted for the 2015 Nike Literary Prize.

Łukasz and László meet on the number 83 bus. The former is a Pole, the latter a Hungarian. Both have been living in London for the past few years. Every day they travel about a dozen stops together, a journey that takes twenty-five minutes. It's long enough for them to become friends and even to think up a business plan. László has recorded a song with his British girlfriend. He's been honing it for two years now – he's a perfectionist. Łukasz likes it, and wants to post it on the internet, to help promote it. Here we have a performer and a producer. From now on they read to each other in the bus about the world-famous stars who started their careers on MySpace. This continues for about six months, but then Łukasz changes his route to work because his job has moved, and László goes back to Hungary to do a grinding and polishing course.

"We had a sort of dream incubator," says Łukasz in Ewa Winnicka's book of reportage, *Brits*. His tale summarises the story of economic migrants in miniature, their hopes and disappointments.

We all know the numbers. We've seen them in graphs on our television screens, heard about them on the radio, and read about them in the papers. They vary, but they've always been too large to get our heads around. At least several hundred thousand, perhaps as many as two million Poles have migrated to Great Britain in the past ten years. This is a fact that's impossible to ignore. Following on from her acclaimed book *Londoners*, in this new book Winnicka moves away from statistics, and draws her picture of the whole situation through details instead, by picking a few individuals out of the crowd.

You start reading with a sense of curiosity, and you keep going out of fascination. As we discover, some people actually do very well, and achieve success, though they are a bit homesick, sometimes feel alien, and are amazed by the cultural differences. For instance, when the members of a British family

give each other presents at Christmas, as soon as everyone has undone the shiny ribbons and torn off the colourful wrapping paper, they deliver the verdict: yes or no. If the present's not right, you have to take it back and exchange it without batting an eyelid. And there's nothing odd about it, it's quite normal. Each country has its own habits, and that's all.

It's hard to say when you first get hit in the face, but it happens more than once. Maybe it's when you read about the boy who was abused at school for being different, or maybe when you read about the woman who was cruelly bullied at work. Or perhaps it's when you read about the guy who was wrongly convicted for rape. Or about his compatriot who set up a Polish funeral service, and now specialises in transporting the bodies of migrants who have committed suicide back to Poland. Or the girlfriend of another young Pole who was "psychologically abused by her brother". "She told him the brother had got her to swear an oath on her little finger that she wouldn't tell their mother what he was up to," admits Kamil. "But she did say something to their mother. Then in a quite casual way, apparently, the brother said: 'But you promised!' And, with her consent, he went and got a hammer and whacked her finger with it."

This is very significant too. Speaking metaphorically, more than one of Winnicka's characters has allowed their finger to be given a whack.

In her book, Winnicka gives them all a voice. Each chapter is an individual story. She avoids simple generalisations and leaves you to draw your own conclusions. And you might even bring yourself to do it, once your eyes stop glazing over as you read. However, your conclusions are unlikely to be sociological or culturally related, but existential instead, because this book turns out to be a surprisingly universal tale about the innate human longing for a place where somehow all our problems will magically solve themselves. And about the misery we feel when it turns out there's no such place.

Małgorzata I. Niemczyńska
Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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THE INVADERS SPEAK OUT

BRITS

Ladies and Gentlemen. Throughout its history, this land has seen only one invasion like it. In the eleventh century, William the Conqueror arrived and, following the fateful Battle of Hastings in 1066, Britain was flooded with Normans.

After that, we had relative peace; the fifty thousand Huguenots that arrived from 1670 onwards, or the hundred thousand or so Russian Jews that settled here between 1881 and 1914, are hardly worth mentioning. The twentieth century was a challenge for us, though. The Scots and the Irish began to arrive, but since they had been part of Britain for so many years already, they mostly knew how to behave; they were just colourful strangers from the far corners of the empire. Our fondness for civil liberties was world-famous and could be enjoyed by all.

But all this was nothing compared to the alleged two million Poles – and the handful of Lithuanians, Russians and Ukrainians thrown in for good measure – who have been floating around here, there and everywhere since 2004. We're told they've contributed two billion pounds to our economy and that they've filled the holes in our jobs market. Nonetheless, on the streets of traditionally respectable towns in Lancashire or Lincolnshire, it's getting harder to hear a word of English spoken. You could fall into the river and scream for help, and you can't be sure anyone will understand you. There's absolutely no doubt whatsoever that this torrent, guided as it is by EU directives, is changing the face of Britain. What will our country look like following this invasion? What will be left of it?

[...]

LORD OF THE FLIES

Rafał, 30 years old, Edinburgh

Colin Thubron, the novelist and travel writer, recently told me that the greatest feeling of loneliness and fear he ever experienced occurred when his rich parents sent him to a prestigious boarding school. Nothing could ever compare to the awfulness of that period – not even those long and lonely journeys across Siberia without knowing a word of Russian. That is why I wanted to speak to Rafał, who spent his high-school years at a boarding school and had to learn how the indigenous inhabitants from the highest echelons of society lived.

(...) It was my mum's idea, but I happily agreed. After completing third grade at a secondary school in Krakow, I passed the exams and my mum took out a loan. Unfortunately, my dad had passed away. A smiling Dean introduced me to two teachers who would be taking my class of ten pupils, and then encouraged me to choose from among thirty

wide-ranging extracurricular classes, which included horse riding, computer science, military science, baseball and polo. School would begin in September. Mum and I travelled there in an old Ford we had borrowed from an aunt in Edinburgh. I pulled my backpack out of the boot and quickly realised that something wasn't quite right. The Brits arrived in convertibles with large trunks resting on the back seats; they looked like pirate treasure chests, the kind that require at least two people for lifting. By people, I mean servants. Since I didn't have a trunk, my new school chums could see they'd be studying with some alien from another world. And then I opened my mouth and they heard my accent. The game was up (...). At school the boys were conditioned to believe they represented the very highest class of society. Foreigners and Brits who hadn't attended a similar school belonged to the lesser classes of society; you were to steer clear of them as much as possible, for your own sake. I don't remember the exact moment it began to remind me of the film *Lord of the Flies*, about a group of boys – mere children – who create a cruel society. They eliminate the weakest and torment those who stand out. From the outside, everything looks so refined and pleasant.

I had a self-contained room. A week after I arrived at the school, I returned to my room after class to find it completely empty. All my furniture, clothes and books were in the corridor. My English schoolmates had found a way to have some fun with the new boy. Just so he wouldn't feel too sure of himself, and so he wouldn't know what to expect come evening. To check whether or not he'd tell the teacher or not. To make him give up and leave.

Then there were the classes, and these were a real eye-opener. They were taught by real teachers, often as not two to a class. They would wait for us to ask questions, eager to follow our line of thought and comprehension. Then they'd hand out books, check to make sure we understood and tailor their explanations to each pupil. I wanted to sign up for "social studies". It was either that or "military science". I thought that social studies may prove extremely useful to those rich boys, for they might finally learn something about the society in which they live. But only girls signed up for social studies, not boys. The boys said that social studies was for poofers. So I attended military science classes, which were taught by the geography master. Every week we would don uniforms, march around and simulate manoeuvres. We would get into real cars and travel to real shooting ranges. We held parades in the courtyard and each of us had to attend a military camp at least once. That was an experience: we wore our uniforms and simulated war, chasing terrorists around the nearby forests. The geography master enjoyed watching the boys practising their drill. Sports were the apple of the headmaster's eye. You had to go in for several sports, and it was obligatory that two of these sports were British – for example, rugby, cricket or hockey. I chose cricket, even though I never really managed to figure out the rules of that peculiarly British game. I also played rugby. Every week, following each successive attack on the field, I felt as though I were about to be run over by a tank. And I couldn't escape. I wanted to sign up for sailing, but they told me that sailing was for poofers. So I chose basketball instead. We were forever calling each other poofers. I had a feeling there were several gay boys at school, but none of them admitted it, for fear of receiving endless beatings. Everyone bragged about how many girls they had managed to screw during the holidays, or in the toilets. I don't know how genuine those boasts were; as a foreigner, I was

invisible to the English girls. They showed no interest in me whatsoever. From overheard conversations I concluded that some of them had travelled widely. They talked to each other about the various coloureds freaks they had met in other countries. When I enrolled at the school, the dean told me the school was extremely liberal. Liberal because they took in a few girls and a handful of foreigners. No coloureds, though – things hadn't gone that far. (...)

At seven o'clock every evening, the teachers would summon all the pupils in the school, from the youngest mites to the oldest coots (who were nearly eighteen). During these assemblies, the eldest pupils would take it in turns to check attendance. It was a different boy each day. Finally, the day came when it was my turn. I read the list, and after each name I could hear peals of laughter. A hundred peals of laughter. But I couldn't stop reading. They were laughing at my accent. It didn't matter; nobody spoke to me, anyway.

I have a Polish friend who was well liked at another boarding school. Admittedly, his was perhaps less snobbish than mine. His English classmate's parents took him on holiday with them to their house in Jamaica. They treated him like a charity case, so they'd have something to brag about in company.

"Oh, by the way, Barbara dear, we had a Pole to stay in July."

"Ooh, really? He didn't bite, did he?"

Translated by Garry Malloy

*This translation was supported by the Sample Translations
©Poland program. A longer extract is available*

MAREK BIEŃCZYK

OLGA'S APPLE, DAVID'S FEET



Marek Bieńczyk (born 1956) is a writer, essayist, translator, and historian of literature at the Polish Academy's Institute for Literary Research. To date he has published two novels, *Terminal* and *Tworci*, and seven collections of essays. For Face Book he won the 2012 Nike Literary Prize. His books have been translated into English, Bulgarian, French, Spanish and German.

"An Album of Radical Delights" – this is what I would call Marek Bieńczyk's new book. These are essays on taste, beauty, the affirming role of art. Marek Bieńczyk concerns himself not only with the reading of texts, but also of images, flavors, gestures, the body. In these essays, the essential thing is synthesis – when, for example, he refers to Proust's descriptions of listening to music, or else when he writes about the popularity of Edward Hopper, about the multiple ways that writers have reimagined his paintings: "I saw firsthand that in Hopper the literary crowd had found their painter, who allowed them to drag on a metaphor as on a joint, to draw out boundless meditations on solitude, time, melancholy, itself plunged in voids, transparencies, and whatever else." One reviewer has noted that "the essay has become quite indispensable for us these days, for in times of informational excess and useless knowledge, it is precisely the essay that can connect our lives with all the quotations circling around us, from literature and philosophy, from songs and movies." Indeed, Marek Bieńczyk's book offers the reader space, a space in which he can both relax and work out at the same time, so that the reading offers a pleasant and worthwhile sense of emotional and intellectual repose and, at the same time, motivation.

Among the treasures the author pours out before us one finds: "unintelligent calves," an expression that the editor of Bieńczyk's translation of Milan Kundera did not wish to acknowledge; Johnny Cash's "bourbon baritone," Zbigniew Herbert's poem about Dalida (whom the author describes as having been the promise of luxury in People's Poland, similar to a martini glass or olive oil), as well as his words on the French cartoonist Sempé: "he has the temperament of a writer, not a caricaturist. He's the king of ellipsis – that is, he gives us a chance."

In fact, the essay on Jean-Jacques Sempé, titled "Disconsolate and Cheerful," is the real pearl of this collection; in it, Marek Bieńczyk succeeds in expressing himself not only sensually, but often in words that at first glance appear contradictory: joy and melancholy, excitation and concentration. In the

French cartoonist's universe, Marek Bieńczyk finds a telling of the human lot: "Sempé is a poet of gesture, a fantastic observer of bodies, of what's sort of building up within them, wants to break free, into happiness, into love, into infinitude, into angelification, forward. [...] Nothing is happening in [these drawings], nothing in the least extraordinary, some guy on a beach pretending to be an airplane, someone else staring at the boundlessness of the sea and tipping his hat with respect." Noting these points of existence, illuminating them, making a space around them – this is Marek Bieńczyk's great talent.

A Proustian sensitivity runs through this entire volume like a watermark. One of the essays, "The Yellow Wall," is dedicated to Proust, to his techniques, to his vision of the total work of art, to his optics, yet Proust is present at every moment in the spirit of Marek Bieńczyk's writing. The meditative-poetic attention to detail, the reserved sense of humor, the rhythm – these broaden the reader's field of perception. Both Proust and Bieńczyk gift the reader with a greater measure of "life within life." Literature, sport, the body, food, painting, drawings – the subjects that Marek Bieńczyk chooses are essential, but even more essential, it seems to me, is the technique he employs to get closer to them. A technique that is typified by grace, demands a higher agility, and is born of regular and diligent training.

Agnieszka Drotkiewicz



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Everybody knows

OLGA'S APPLE, DAVID'S FEET

about the broomstick, but witches have magic wands as well. We'd been waiting over an hour and a half in the New Year's rain, moving at a tortoise's pace down a narrow lane bordered by thin metal railings; it was cold, and we plodded along wearing grim expressions. I looked with disbelief at the people coming out of the Hôtel de Ville, where this long line was headed. They were a different race, a smile stretching their lips from ear to ear, their gait jovial and brisk. You bet, a miraculous transformation was being accomplished within, the transformation of the grim into the satisfied and benevolent. No, it wasn't that the then-mayor Jacques Chirac was treating them to champagne; the Paris City Hall had a better idea: to exhibit Sempé in its chambers. I thought I was dreaming: turns out, man may become angel after all.

2.

With Sempé it's like how it is with football or the weather: you can't really write about him (and so, in fact, hardly anyone does), since everyone already knows what's what. All the French and a slice of the globe; here in Poland, barely two catalogues of his work have appeared. I don't know whether they make people laugh as much as they do by the Seine, where he's considered a master: sometimes you have to catch the cultural contexts. It's easiest with the adventures of Young Nicholas, to which he owes his fame; the school that Nicholas attends doesn't exist anywhere, so it connects everyone; everyone (everyone whom it delights) would want to be a pupil there, because that's how the world should be: mischievous, comical, somewhat dim-witted, somewhat clever, but ultimately sweet. The text is Goscinny's, and Sempé actually only seconds it with his drawings, which is a pity, because he possessed a gift for storytelling. I'm not a big fan of these books, but I love the hero's name. It was Sempé who came up with it, riding the metro and looking at ads for Nicolas Wines. He took the name – he already had his wines, having gotten them from Bordeaux, where in his youth he'd made a living as a supplier.

Sometime ago he had a stroke, and he couldn't pull through for a good while; one day he started drawing, and afterwards he was shocked; he brought his life back not with words, but lines; something similar happened to Goya following his accident. In Sempé's latest, or at least the most recently printed interview (with Marc Lecarpentier), he speaks mainly and fantastically about his Bordeaux childhood. One clearly sees it's worth talking about. They discuss one of his drawings: a man is running along the beach

and pretending to be an airplane. Perhaps he's already even flying, because the arms of his wings, or the wings of his arms, are skewed. Sempé explains to his interlocutor: this is my pathological tendency to run away. Always, since I was a child. Dozens of times running away from school, from home.

Most often from home, which his hard stepfather turned repeatedly into a psychological torture chamber; that he drank goes without saying. Sempé would bumble around, traipse down the streets, pretend to be going for a walk, or pretend, like Tom Sawyer painting the fence, that he'd found some great game, let's say, counting benches in the park. I love his reminiscence about how a certain grownup he knew led the little Sempé to a store and said, "Alright, boy, choose whatever you want." He suggested some bicycle, a good, new model. But Sempé slipped out of this one, too: he chose a large box of rubber bands; to this day, he says, he feels off-kilter unless he has a couple of rubber bands in his pocket. Which might always come in handy; no point in asking what for, because you wouldn't get it anyway.

So I've been looking at a lot of Sempé, because I've always been drawn to crackpot types, the unserious kinds who move to a different drum from everyone else's, those who stick rubber bands in their pockets. Those who maintain mysterious bridges linking them to their childhoods, vagabonds by nature, deserters of their own posts. And even of themselves. Because, as one of Sempé's characters says to another at some reception, most likely in Paris, but it doesn't really matter, "Everyone keeps repeating, 'You have to be yourself.' Family friends, my analyst, 'You have to be yourself.' It really gets me down, such lack of ambition!"

To this day, it's best not to place him in refined company, he's sure to make fun of something, professional jester that he is. You won't get a serious word out of him, right away it's a dodge, *poof*, voices on the wind. Or else one serious word, just one, and the very next will be a direct contradiction, the way Lech Wałęsa talks – we're still running away from school. Or work. Or a holiday party. His drawings show a lot of grownups messing up: they forget who they are and how old; you get the sense that these are their best moments. They forget, they behave not as they are, they have an unusual glint in the eye, or else they run off crazily flapping their arms, they release paper airplanes with the funny intensity of a surgeon, they're like children – they are children. Children, in turn (he draws lots of them, rowdy or sad), frequently flee from being children, they have an extraordinary gift for verbally intimidating their elders, twisting their bodies into the poses of larger bodies. Sempé's protagonists, big and small, are frequently in flight, in the no man's land bordering their existence, shifted, carried beyond their own limit, maybe a bit funny, but for the moment satisfied.

Whether on Paris side streets or on beaches by the Atlantic, the silhouettes, one senses, are often about to take flight, they want something more. Sempé is a poet of gesture, a fantastic observer of bodies, of what's sort of building up within them, wants to break free, into happiness, into love, into infinitude, into angelification, to move forward. A slight movement of the hand, a cocking of the head, an insignificant shift of silhouette. It's all insignificant, because Sempé never bangs his fist, and he doesn't giggle loudly – maybe that's why he sticks in the memory, or at least in the history of drawing, more than so many other incorrigible humorists; he draws a line, two, he barely suggests, and the rest is conjecture, he has the temperament of

a writer, not a caricaturist. He's the king of ellipsis – that is, he gives us a chance. Because that's what we have gestures for: when we lack courage, opportunity, or possibility, to express the impossible, to fly forth from ourselves, not to be ourselves for a while, or to be in spite of ourselves. Sempé shows that while there's something funny and the slightest bit pitiable in us – the sudden reverie, the sudden hankering for something, the spreading of the arms or the lifting of the head toward the horizon – it's somehow lovely at the same time, even innocent. A giggle and acceptance in one, irony and goodwill, mockery and simultaneously something that undercuts it, that has a hint of universal kindness. The miracle of pleasantness. That's precisely what he says, literally, in an interview, the miracle of pleasantness, the miracle of sudden elation, it's the only thing that matters. The spirit of Rabelais, the spirit of the West in its best form, at its most generous and tolerant. There's no such thing as holiness, but in existence itself there's something holy.

3.

Maybe that's why the drawings of Sempé's I love most are perhaps those without captions. Others can put me in stitches, give me a good case of giggles, but the wordless ones can get to you. Nothing is happening in them, nothing in the least extraordinary, some guy on a beach pretending to be an airplane, someone else staring at the boundlessness of the sea and tipping his hat with respect. Another person is kneeling on a meadow and, with utmost attentiveness and a smoke in his maw, observing thousands of ants, and his entire less-than-graceful physique expresses fascination and amazement. Yet another person is anxiously, curiously peering into a dark lane of trees bound overhead in a tangled mass of branches – Gombrowicz's Józio in a tiny Wonderland. Someone's simply walking down the street and breathing, just to smell it, with his whole chest, with sudden pleasure. Often the person's walking along, and that's literally it; he exists, but this being has something irresistible and vital. Someone is riding a bike and joyfully greeting the sky with his hand, a Tati-esque scene – Tati, who had equal admiration for Sempé, since he noticed that the one drew what the other filmed: Monsieur Hulot on holiday, and other adventures of the common man who doesn't quite understand the logic of the world around him.

We have "Mrozek-esque" scenes; those who know Sempé's collections have "Sempé-esque" scenes, which has already entered the language as well. Only the great ones have succeeded in leaving so characteristic a stamp: "Kafka-esque," "Gombrowicz-esque." The person who knows Sempé's work won't walk through the French countryside, and Paris especially, without spotting "Sempé-esque" images and people everywhere around him. The countryside mellows, the city seen as "Sempé-esque" returns to its old groove, recovers its charm, is devised anew. It had been losing its character for so long now, it had been disappearing into all-leveling anonymity, and then of course the soldiers everywhere with their carbines, and now it seems you can see individual people again in the standard Paris haunts.

Translated by Benjamin Paloff

MAREK BEYLIN

FERVOUR: THE LIFE OF ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW



Marek Beylin (born 1957) is an art historian by training and works as a journalist and critic for the daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*. He writes on politics, social issues and culture. His previous books include *The Poles' Adventures with Democracy* and *Calm Down, It's Only A Revolution*.

Fervour, the biography of the great sculptor Alina Szapocznikow, combines the ardour and passion of the title with a harmonious narrative pace. Marek Beylin's style is first-rate, elegant and serene – all the right qualities for a good portrait. Broad knowledge of history, art history, philosophy and politics, and a talent for choosing what to include have enabled the author to infuse his book with the right amount of information – providing details that intrigue but do not overwhelm, and offering the reader not just a calendar of events in literary form (as sometimes happens in biographies), but an entire framework for understanding the artist – as for example when he traces the influence of Szapocznikow's intellectual and spiritual maturation in the Paris of the late 1940s, when it was immersed in existentialism, on the meaning of her later work, and on her understanding of “the self”.

By looking at a series of philosophical, social and political processes from the right perspective, Beylin provides the breathing space needed for reading about the experiences of such a sensitive artist in such intense times, and in places that are the focus of so many ideas and events. He takes us on a journey – from Kalisz, where in 1926 Alina Szapocznikow was born into an intellectual, assimilated Jewish family, via Pabianice, then the Pabianice and Łódź ghettos (the latter run by Chaim Rumkowski), Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Theresienstadt, post-war Prague, Paris, Warsaw, a series of places she travelled to (including Moscow, where a plane with a government delegation was waiting for her, but she arrived late because of her preoccupation with shopping, or the Côte d'Azur, where she invited herself to dinner with Picasso and borrowed money from him), via successive Warsaw and Paris flats and studios, all the way to the Montparnasse Cemetery, where she was buried on 6 March 1973 (she died early of cancer, which was in fact one of the themes of her work).

Detail plays an essential role in Beylin's account – he pinpoints things on the map, provides coordinates, and allows the reader to taste, touch and smell the context. This is crucial, because the senses were incredibly important in Alina Szapocznikow's life and work. Beylin quotes her love letters, as he explains, not for the shock effect of intimacy, but to show her

approach to the body, to touch – so crucial in her love life and her work; he describes her attitude to her own appearance, to her clothing and make-up, and to eating (“coffee with cream is miraculous”, she wrote in a letter from Holland), and her ability to celebrate the festival of life at any moment (“Life in the ghetto prompted an emotional intensity, enjoyment of the moment, because at the very next it could all be over. But in Alina’s conduct there was something else as well – a strength and voracity for life that prompted her to take advantage of every opportunity, to devote herself to joy and pleasure. Even in the ghetto. She never abandoned the thought of a different life to come, she had hope, desires, and the will to live. At the time, aged almost seventeen, she noted in a little yellow book: ‘The apple trees are in bloom. Oh! How beautiful I am. Oh! How unhappy I am, how happy I am, imprisoned, depressed, how I long for freedom! How badly I want to get out of here’.” Some of the other details relate to the situation of Polish emigres in Paris (there’s an extremely interesting description of the regulars at a canteen subsidized by the Polish Embassy on rue Racine), and to sculpting techniques and the arcana of sculpting materials.

At times Beylin shares his own thoughts and interpretations, and he also quotes the many people whom he has interviewed, and cites other works. But above all he lets Alina Szapocznikow’s voice be heard, closing his account with a quote from her will, which she wrote a few months before her death and inserted in a copy of Bruno Schulz’s fiction: “Very Important: I want you to remember that every fluttering leaf you can see, every bit of rubbish you can touch, every taste or smell, or sigh of the wind is more important than any work of art or any artistic ‘success’.”

Agnieszka Drotkiewicz



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Alina Szapocznikow's

FERVOUR: THE LIFE OF ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW

studio outside Paris, 1968. Szapocznikow and her son Piotr are casting stomachs. They're pouring polyurethane, synthetic resin, out of heavy buckets. For her work on the large sculptures Szapocznikow did not use moulds, but modelled the material quickly, under great pressure. Together they made about fifty stomachs; they were capable of making three a day, recalls Piotr, then an adolescent youth.

They also made casts of Alina's own stomach. She regularly made use of her own face, lips, breasts and legs in her art. She regarded her body as the best intermediary between what she wanted to convey and the world. These stomachs form a series of works, *Ventres - Expansion* ("Stomachs - Expansion"). During their joint work they experimented with dyes: in some cases the material expanded along with the freon like dough, while others neutralised the freon and didn't expand at all, like unrisen bread. The arduous physical work and the excitement of experimenting were accompanied by joy. Together too they bought chemicals and talked to chemists from Rhône Poulenc, who produced synthetic resin for Szapocznikow.

Synthetic resins, such as polyurethane and polyester, harden quickly, so the sculptures have to be moulded at lightning speed. Szapocznikow liked this rapid work, combining conception and intuition, although she always wanted to maintain full control of the material. She amused herself in the process, and she amused others. She would invite her loved ones to take part in the creative process as it happened. She treated it like a performance, an independent work of art. And a field for experiment: it was impossible to be entirely sure what would result from this work. For Szapocznikow was an unyielding experimenter, always searching for something new.

By taking part in his mother's work, Piotr was discovering a secret world. As a child he had often tried to get into the studio, but Szapocznikow would be reluctant to open the door until she had concealed the works in progress. Not just from him, but from everyone. Though sometimes she allowed him to watch her at work. He remembered being fascinated as a child whenever she cast sculptures using lead. But he gained his greatest initiation a few years later, towards the end of her life, when he became her model. Alina knew she was dying, but Piotr's memories and the pictures taken during the work imply that it was a time of exhilarating fun. They're laughing and fooling around. As the mother smears her son's naked body with plaster they're also finding this moral transgression amusing. The prevalent mood involves a celebration of life, not the threat of an imminent death.

Warsaw, 1956. Alina Szapocznikow and her husband, Ryszard Stanisławski, go to the home of their friends Danuta and Jan Styczyński for supper. Jan has been taking pictures of Szapocznikow's studio since 1956, and soon, in the 1960s, he will win acclaim as a photographer. Danuta worked at a publishing house. It's one of many parties – social life is booming, and people often meet up, generally at home. But the hostess never forgot this particular supper party. When Alina entered their flat, the hosts' six-year-old daughter folded her hands as if to pray and exclaimed: "How beautiful you are, like the Madonna!" From then on the little girl associated Szapocznikow with the Virgin Mary. The guests brought good French wine, and the hostess prepared a lavish dinner. They had a great time, and Alina, as usual, was witty and brilliant, adept in quickfire repartee. She sang the praises of the wine, declaring that the joy of life was encapsulated in grapes. She flirted. She was famous for it. The evening was a fabulous success. But that's not the entire truth. Because this pleasant gathering had another bottom line: the things that weren't said.

Just over a decade earlier, Szapocznikow had survived the Holocaust; as a teenager she had lived through the ghetto, the transports and the death camps. She never mentioned what had happened to her, and so of course she didn't talk about it at this supper party either. Straight after the war Stanisławski had fled illegally from Poland to Paris, and had later managed to recover the legal status of a Polish citizen. But throughout the Stalinist period, when the terror was at its height, he may well have been afraid this deed would come to light, this time as a crime against the regime. People were no longer condemned for things like that, but even after destalinisation it was better to keep quiet, as somebody might try to exploit this sort of stain on one's record.

The hosts were hiding secrets too. During the occupation Jan Styczyński had worked for Home Army Intelligence, a top secret cell whose tasks included exposing communists. After the war, for fear of prison, torture and a death sentence, he had taken refuge in a mental hospital. He had simulated amnesia, and took in the doctors too, so he had undergone an entire course of treatment, including electric shock therapy. It had ruined his health, but it had definitely saved his life. The secret police harassed him throughout the Stalinist period, but respected the official medical diagnosis that he had lost his memory. The fact that he had been in underground intelligence was something he never even told his wife. She only found out from one of his colleagues in the resistance after his death, in the 1980s.

Danuta too had something to hide, not in fact from her husband, but from the rest of the world. In 1939 she had seen off her father, an officer in the September campaign who had subsequently been arrested by the Soviets, when he was taken away in a convoy of prisoners of war. The final stop on this journey was Katyń, where the NKVD shot thousands of Polish officers taken captive when, as Hitler's ally, the Soviet Union invaded Poland. In the Polish People's Republic (or PRL – communist Poland) it was not appropriate to mention Katyń. According to the official version the Germans had carried out the massacre at Katyń, and although many Stalinist crimes were revealed once destalinisation began, this fact did not change. Katyń was too inconvenient for the leaders in the Kremlin, as well as for the Polish communists. Of course most Poles knew what had really happened, but even among friends it was rarely talked about. Such conversations were only held in trusted company.

The PRL relied on loss of memory, both organised and spontaneous. There were many things people never talked about, including their own past. Not just Home Army members kept quiet about their fortunes, but also Silesians, Kashubians, Masurians, Ukrainians, and those repatriated from former eastern territory of Poland that had been incorporated into the Soviet Union, who felt like outsiders for years in their new places of residence. The victims of the 1939-1940 Stalinist deportations and camps, and the prisoners of Polish Stalinism kept quiet too. The soldiers who fought for the Polish armed forces in the West were in no hurry to tell their life stories after returning to Poland, especially those recruited for the Polish army from Soviet camps and places of exile. The same went for people with origins among the landed gentry or the rich bourgeoisie, social classes regarded as enemies. In short, anyone whose life did not fit the canonical communist image of history did their best to keep quiet. Obviously, from 1955 the Stalinist terror in Poland had ruptured, and there was no more threat of prison for being too talkative, just trouble at work, or a more difficult career instead. But why invite trouble? Moreover, everyone had Stalinism in their bloodstream by now – fear of the regime and its agencies did not disappear until the communist era was over.

This loss of memory enforced by the system affected millions of people. To some extent it also included Poles of Jewish origin, because the attitude of the PRL to the Jews was ambiguous and variable, or to be more precise the intensity of anti-Jewish feeling was variable. Anti-Semitism had existed within the Party apparatus, the army, and the militia from the start of the PRL, just as it was a piece of the mental equipment of a large part of society. This did not encourage the small number of surviving Poles of Jewish origin, such as Alina Szapocznikow, to make a show of their genealogy.

As well as these self-imposed memory blockades, people also erased their memories spontaneously. For many, the German occupation, and especially the camps, had been such a nightmare that remembering them meant a risk of making life intolerable. And so those who had survived, leaving numerous deaths among their family, friends and acquaintances behind them, rarely mentioned it. I remember this from home. During the occupation, my father, a Pole of Jewish origin who was the same age as Szapocznikow, had first of all hidden on "Aryan papers", and later, when threatened with denunciation, was sent to do labour in Germany. There he survived, though when threatened again he escaped into the forest with a group of other forced labourers. They wandered for several weeks, but were finally liberated by the Americans. The aunts who brought him up survived the entire occupation by hiding on false papers, and one of them took part in clandestine teaching. They all acted bravely, and for them this phase in history had a happy end. And yet they were unwilling to talk about this part of their lives; the most you could ever expect to get out of them was just short anecdotal stories, stripped of the threat and terror. In the same spirit, in the 1950s Alina told a friend, the Belgian writer and philosopher Françoise Collin, about the camps: "I have very good memories of the camp. I was a child then and all the adults fed me, they gave me their rations. I was spoiled by the adults."

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

MARCIN WICHA

HOW I STOPPED LOVING DESIGN



Marcin Wicha (born 1972) is a graphic designer. His design work includes book covers, posters and logos. Occasionally he writes. His articles have appeared in journals including the quarterly *Autoportret* (on issues to do with public space), the literary monthly *Literatura na Świecie* and the cultural weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*. He works regularly for the daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Charaktery*, a monthly magazine on psychology. He has published several children's books. *How I Stopped Loving Design* looks at modern design from an extremely interesting angle.

The author of the book *How I Stopped Loving Design* isn't nostalgic for communist-era Poland, though in his childhood he undoubtedly loved design more than he does today. He was a child when he first encountered and began to revere his father's copies of *Ty i ja*. Terminated in 1974, this legendary magazine 'presented, in fifty columns, global culture, fashion and design, and marked the summit of intellectual aspirations and needs'. Marcin Wicha, today a graphic artist and writer, tells the story of his initiation, the central figure of which was his father – an architect, a 'secular Jew' and the family chaplain of design. The boy discovered the entire universe in the slightly tattered issues of *Ty i ja*, like in the 'Book' featured in the prose of Bruno Schulz. His mother (like Schulz's earthy character Adela!), admittedly, cut out recipes, but 'apart from that there was everything. Stills from American films, covers by Cieśliewicz, poems by Khlebnikov, fashion designed by Grażyna Hase, the Polish Poster School in all versions and incarnations'. The Wicha family's apartment, full of drawing boards, a tableware set they acquired for free after it had been rejected for export, and traces of great ideas that were never realized (such as a design for a movable wall), was a temple to taste, a 'visually Amish' household besieged by the ugliness that prevailed outside.

The book is far from being made up of snapshots of memories; instead, it is based on solid, material items. The things described by the author are felt-tip pens, posters and shoes, but also communist-era sacks of hardened cement carelessly hidden in the shrubbery. Or a brilliantly designed, but poorly executed homemade bookshelf. Or a wonderful dog leash which his father loved but the dog didn't appreciate. Things from the past – post-German, Jewish, post-Jewish, modern and post-modern things. Each has its own significance and

style, even the tasteless, common trash which came in a huge wave after the collapse of the system. Marcin Wicha has written a book that is competent – he knows about objects and understands them well – but also ironically philosophical, at times even poetic. This collection of short, almost aphoristic tales begins with *The Urn* – a record of details about his father's burial. A sense of loss and a discreet, almost silent meditation on mourning hidden between the lines is permeated by affectionate mockery of his father's aesthetic terrorism. It's a story about the aesthetic fates of the generation of today's 40 and 50-year-olds, a biography of objects and styles which has found many grateful readers. They include those who, like Wicha father and son, can have half a day ruined as a result of an electrical plug being the wrong colour. There are also those who have become lost among the obstacles and traps of today's 'designer' objects and need a lesson in ironic distance.

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The Urn

HOW I STOPPED LOVING DESIGN

– Please dial an extension number or wait to be connected to the secretary, and then in the telephone receiver Louis Armstrong's voice rang out:

*And I think to myself,
What a wonderful world!*

I wonder who chose this song. The crematorium's director? The answering machine sales representative ('I've got something appropriate for your type of business')? It isn't entirely inconceivable that the bitter-sweet standard is number one on some kind of funeral playlist, the most frequently chosen musical backdrop for cremation ceremonies.

In American comedies, this theme often appears. Ashes in a handbag, in a box, in a cookie tin. Earthly remains in a vase over a fireplace, in a kitchen cupboard, on a windowsill. 'What do you keep in this?' 'Granny'. And thus begins a whole series of hilarious adventures. More gags erupt. The cat knocks over the urn. A drunk partygoer mistakes the ashes for cocaine. And finally the climax: an ash-scattering ceremony, always in windy weather, so that a playful breeze can blow the grey ash cloud straight into the mourners' faces. Then – an orgy of sneezes, coughs and brushing off clothes.

We watched a lot of stupid films together.

I went to the house where he no longer was. My mother's friends were gathering, and a general commotion prevailed.

– *In the Warsaw or national section of the newspaper?*

– *Can I keep the photo from his ID?*

– *Might there be a bit of cream? It can be regular milk, if you don't have any.*

The cemetery's directors. The crematorium. Life was divided into a series of tasks that needed to be completed. A feeling of helplessness struck me several days later at the funeral home, when I looked at a shiny catalogue full of urns.

All of the models looked like a cross between a Greek vase and a Chinese thermos. They shimmered with glitter. They sparkled with chrome. They were gold, white-gold, malachite and black. They had ornamental handles. Some looked like old-fashioned canning jars with a wire fastener. Others resembled Winnie-the-Pooh's little barrel-shaped honey jars. Artificial materials predominated, but natural stone was also on offer (clearly even nature has worse days).

And of course there were crosses. Etched. Painted. Glued to the sides. Sticking out at the top (like a miniature version of Mount Giewont). Of course there had to be a crown of thorns, the Virgin Mary in three-quarter profile and a Pensive Christ. My poor father. A secular Jew, completely

uninterested in religious questions, was outside of the target group.

An alternative was a small flower – a white lily or a withered rose. According to the funeral trade, Poland was inhabited by two types of people: Christians and members of a cult of florists.

I flipped through the pages. The director of the funeral home began to grow impatient. Under her gaze, I finally chose a design. It was a bit less ornamental with a slightly simpler shape, and even the white rose looked rather modest.

Later, for a few hours I tricked myself into thinking that everything was ok. But it wasn't. My father would never have agreed to such a vessel. It's cruel to disregard someone's aesthetic feelings simply because he's dead.

For many years, my father's taste defined our life. His verdicts were severe and final. We lived in an aesthetic minefield. Over time I learned to avoid being ambushed, and as I tread safe routes, there grew in me a feeling of partnership. We became comrades-in-arms in this war against the entire world.

And so my father never allowed ugliness to cross our threshold.

When it came to visual matters, we lived like the Amish, besieged by the world. We had a political system against us. An economy. A climate. One centimetre beyond our door began a dado in oil-based paint and terrazzo flooring. An elevator waited with buttons, an apartment block, a landscape of late socialism.

Whenever we talk about people whom we have loved, laconic diagnoses are out of place. That which concerns those close to us should be complicated and unique. But in fact, it was simple and typical. Quite simply there are people for whom the incorrect colour of an electrical plug can ruin half their day. Who prefer to stay at home than have a holiday in a seaside pension where the carpets are a hideous colour. Poor wretches tormented by billboards advertising plaster.

Yes, yes, I know. Taste is a class category. It establishes hierarchies and divisions. It reflects our aspirations and fears. It allows people to give themselves airs, delude themselves, fool themselves. And so forth.

At least in the matter of the urn, I put my foot down. In an orphaned calendar I found the telephone number of a sculptor with whom my father had once collaborated. I called. I explained the problem. There were only two days until the funeral. The artist listened to me without surprise. He thought for a moment.

– I made flower pots for a church in Ursynów. The legs just need to be removed, and then it'll be perfect...

And so I buried my father's ashes in a black cube made of granite. His first and last names were engraved on one of the sides. The typeface – Futura. Upper case letters. Five letters twice, elegantly aligned, just how he liked. I was bursting with pride. The urn was beautiful. The problem was that the only person who could have appreciated it, the only person whose opinion mattered to me, was no longer alive.

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT DESIGN WITHOUT LEAVING HOME

Clogs

There was an embargo on:

living-room suites,
glasses on saucers, especially those in small, decorative,
metal baskets.

Now, while writing about this, I've recalled that there existed two kinds of glasses: those that were more convex (dodgy) and those that were angular, in the shape of a trapezoid, which could obtain a stamp of approval from the family rabbinat.

In a German centre, it was possible to obtain glass cups which showed a distant affinity to Bauhaus. In the same place, GDR blues records were sold. I doubt that the ruling authorities in democratic Germany concerned themselves with copyright laws, and so it's possible that we pirated Muddy Waters even before the Internet was invented.

Our household's black list also included:

bookcases (the word itself seems off-putting to me),
wall units (see above),
ottomans (see above),
house slippers (see above),
and walking in socks.

These last two bans created a rather complicated situation. Luckily, in the 1970s the Polish shoe industry manufactured clogs with wooden soles. With labels in English stuck to them (the Swedish flag quickly wore off as a result of friction from the heel), they were exported to somewhere in Western Europe. There must have been a bit of an economic slump or a temporary tightening of quality control, for some batches of these clogs entered the domestic market as 'export rejects'.

Imperfect shoes, enamelled pots with a spelling mistake in the word SALT, slightly discoloured shelves of IVAR furniture systems not good enough to be sent to foreign IKEA shops – these rejects were highly-desired goods in Polish shops.

Victor Papanek, in his book *Design for the Real World*, praised 'trätofflor – clogs which are still produced in the Swedish town of Ängelholm, and which are an excellent example of rational local design'.

The photo on page 282 raises no doubt. It's them! The design was local, but the production became global (and this was before we learned to spell the word 'globalisation').

Near the end of the Edward Giersek era, my family was tapping our heels like a bunch of merry Dutch (or Scandinavian) villagers. It turned our neighbours' lives into a living hell and there wasn't a single week when the guy living downstairs from us, who could have been played by Louis de Funès if this had been a film, didn't kick up a row. A thin ceiling and a dialogue conducted in Morse code: the provocative drumming of our heels was answered by communiqés tapped out by broomsticks.

In that apartment, I learned many truths about design and life. For example, that fidelity to one's aesthetic preferences – dislike of slippers, sneakers and thongs – can lead us into a serious conflict with society.

Towards the end of his life, my father had an affection for plastic crocs. Someone brought him a pair from Israel, before colourful turbo-slippers appeared in every shopping mall. This Middle-Eastern invention ensured permanent peace between us and our neighbours (in which it's possible to notice a certain paradox).

Translated by Scotia Gilroy

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