

New Books from Poland

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The Kingdom

The reality Twardoch has created is a vortex of dark urges, a world full of violence and cruelty



A BESTSELLER BY ONE OF THE MOST TRANSLATED POLISH AUTHORS

The *Kingdom* is a narrative and thematic continuation of 2016's *The King*. Twardoch's previous novel took place in pre-war Warsaw, and its main character was the titular king of that period's criminal underworld, the Jewish boxer and killer Jakub Szapiro. The plot of *The Kingdom* picks up where these pre-war gangsters' first episode left off, that is, in August 1937. In the new novel, we learn Szapiro has in fact abandoned his desire to depart for Palestine, remained in Warsaw, and shared the cruel fate of the Jewish community under the Nazi occupation. *The Kingdom* covers events from 1937 to 1945.

Unlike his wife and two sons, Szapiro has managed to escape from the Warsaw ghetto. He's gone into hiding, remaining under the care of his former lover, Ryfka Kij. Jakub is a shadow of his former self – he exists in numbness and apathy, and in fact doesn't speak. The author therefore has bequeathed the role of one of his two narrators to Ryfka herself. The second storyteller

is one of Jakub's sons, Dawid, who has managed to escape from a transport of Jews headed for a death camp. The story is developed as the interwoven accounts of these two characters.

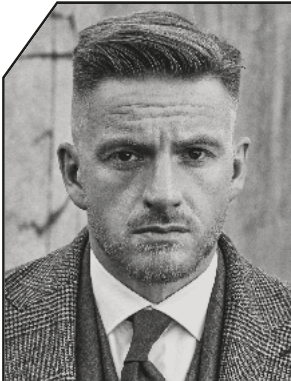
We must be aware that Twardoch's work is not a typical historical novel on the condition of Polish Jews during the Holocaust. Of course, the author has included a large amount of historical information, and has fairly faithfully reconstructed the period's atmospheres and situations. However, he is fundamentally interested in the human condition in its broader dimension. Twardoch presents himself as a radical pessimist attached to a nihilistic view of the world. The reality he has created – both in *The King* and *The Kingdom* – is a vortex of dark urges, a world full of violence and cruelty. The conditions of the occupation only reinforce that black vision, but do not in the least determine it.

Dariusz Nowacki, translated by Sean Gaspar Bye

In cold, in darkness, in unceasing terror.
In cold, in darkness, in unceasing terror
– I, a night animal.
Through the dark days I'm curled up in my burrow, grey as the walls of the hollows concealing me, in dark night I go out for my prey, scrape what's left of the meat from the skeleton of the dead city, gnaw at its frozen carcass. I flit between concrete rocks, down canyons of streets, I dash lightly across piles of rubble, not leaving a trace, nearly invisible, noiseless and grey, I have a stinger in my pocket, I hunt, and then I return and like a mother I feed the one I loved, I curl up in my burrow, I merge with the walls, with the rags, I curl up beside him, I warm him with what's left of the heat I still have in my body, I warm him like a mother.
My whole life I've loved a bad man.
I warm him and feed him, then I go out again, and he stays, in the dark.
I remember back now and I remember back then, in cold, darkness, terror, how he sat at my place, he sits, a few years earlier, in another world, still in my brothel on the corner of Pius XI and Koszykowa Streets, after not in fact going to Palestine in 1937, he and that wife of his. After coming back. After the plane turned around.
So he sat at my place, I remember, he sits naked, he sat on the bed, he rested his elbow on his knee, his head on his hands. At first he said nothing. Then he drank. He drinks. Then he cried. Then he bashed his fist into the wall until he broke the bones in his right hand, bloodied the wall, but kept bashing away, too drunk to feel the pain of bones broken not for the first time nor the last, since everything hurt except his body, I don't know whether to call it the heart, the soul, after all humans don't have souls, and the heart is only a muscle, but there's something inside, something that's not the body but is human, or belongs to a human, or a human belongs to what's inside, and that's what was hurting him, and to drown out that pain he broke his metacarpus bashing the wall, I called a doctor, the doctor came, examined his hand, he had to go to the hospital, the doctor x-rayed it, set it, put it in a cast, did everything necessary and before long Jakub went back and went on drinking, with his hand in a cast, and then lost consciousness and lay in bed, naked and unconscious of anything.
I love a bad man, I thought then, looking at his body, at his navy-blue tattoos and muscle thickly overgrown with fat, I loved.
Was this how Mrs. Goebbels thought about her husband, for instance, that she loved a bad man? And did she love him? What is love if you love someone so bad? I'm a bad person too, but he doesn't love me. That's our set-up, two bad people, me bad, him bad, I love him, but he doesn't love anyone, he doesn't even love himself, so maybe that makes me somehow better, that in all my immorality, the whole filth of this non-soul of mine, I still love him, so maybe I'm not completely bad,

maybe something human has remained inside me, but not in him anymore, because he doesn't love anybody. He used to love himself, he loved all those little toys of his, the little pistols, switchblades, and suits, he loved the little expensive leather shoes and the automobiles he decked himself out in, because he wanted to be something more than yet another little Warsaw Jew, a Jewish nobody, shit, human manure, and he didn't have a not-heart and not-soul inside him to give for some idea, like his brother had given himself for Palestine and wanted to die for it, and he died not for Palestine, but for nothing, and also because of Jakub, so maybe for Jakub, maybe it was for him he gave his life?

Excerpt translated by Sean Gaspar Bye



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SZCZEPAN
TWARDOCH

Born 1979

The Kingdom [Królestwo]

Publisher: Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2018
ISBN: 978-83-08-06801-4
Translation rights: Wydawnictwo Literackie,
j.dabrowska@wydawnictwoliterackie.pl

Sales numbers

70,000 copies sold

Selected novels

Morfina, 2012 – **over 100 000 copies sold; film rights sold**
Drach, 2014 – **over 50,000 copies sold**
Król, 2016 – **over 100 000 copies sold; TV series rights sold to Canal+**

Twardoch is also the author of short story collections, essays, and journals.

Foreign language translations

Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Germany Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, The Netherlands, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Ukraine, UK & USA (World English)

Selected awards

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2009 – nomination; 2011 – distinction); Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2008 – distinction; 2011 – nomination); Angelus Central European Literary Award (2012) – shortlisted; Gdynia Literary Prize (2012, 2013) – nominations Nike Literary Award (2013 – Readers' Choice; 2014 – nomination) Polityka's Passport Award (2012); Le Prix du Livre Européé/ European Book Prize (2015); Brücke Berlin Literatur und Übersetzerpreis (2016) – with the translator Olaf Kühn

Nobody's Coming

Matecki doesn't force the reader to get emotional while allowing for it



Jakub Matecki has left the niche of speculative fiction literature for good and with every subsequent book, he becomes more and more rooted in mainstream prose, in contemporary realistic writing which above all is based on psychological vivisection.

In *Nobody's Coming*, Matecki develops two separate plots, but from the beginning we feel that sooner or later they will intertwine. The first takes place in the 1990s. A young couple – Marzena and Antek – has just had a son, but we soon find out that Klemens is not like other children. He focuses too much of his attention on spoons and a carpet which he keeps touching for hours, and too little on toys unlike his peers. Is it Asperger's? Is he mentally handicapped? Matecki doesn't explain, he doesn't provide a lot of details. The other protagonists, apart from Antek, Marzena and Klemens, are Igor and Olga. It's 2017. The latter two just can't seem to pair up due to misunderstandings and misapprehensions, even though we sense that love's in the air.

The author creates a psychological and social portrait of a group of inhabitants in post-transformation

Warsaw. The story's background is filled with scenes and characters straight out of magical realism: a boy with a backpack filled with colourful balloons; his father, a pilot, who dies in a fighter plane crash; a girl who leaves her job in a corporation to bake cakes.

A large part of the novel is spun around Japanese motifs. The Far East is also a source of formal inspiration for Matecki. He sketches his sentences with fine lines, in a minimalist style without any superfluous words. He refines them as if they were haiku poems, read with such passion by Olga and Igor. Each scene and narrative get intertwined at some point, creating a complex structure. And even though the novel is open ended, we are in fact not left with many question marks.

Most importantly, Matecki is not afraid to talk about feelings, but he is not an emotional blackmailer. He skilfully dodges the shoals of kitsch by means of meticulously constructed psychological portraits. He doesn't force the reader to get emotional while allowing for it.

Marcin Kube, translated by Anna Błasiak

She leaned her head against the windowpane and, squinting her eyes, she listened to the rustling names of consecutive tram stops while trying not to look at the title of the book read by the woman opposite. This was one of the most difficult challenges on the tram. She looked out the window, she moved her toes in her soaked shoe and for the first time saw this man, this boy, this child – this combination of all three.

He stood cowering next to the stop, huge and wet. He was wearing wide trousers and two unbuttoned jackets with a vest visible underneath. He had a checkered scarf, shoes with untied laces and a hat with a green pompom. His plump hand was clenched on the handle of a stuffed framed rucksack. He looked at the rucksack, then at the tram, then at the rucksack again. A woman in a red hat standing next to him adjusted the bag on her shoulder and said something without turning her head, as if she knew that the boy-man had not moved from his spot, had not left, so she didn't have to check if he was there.

They got on the tram, filling almost all of the empty space. He pressed the rucksack against his body and looked around, while she, slightly absentmindedly, patted him on his back, which he could not possibly feel through so many layers of clothing.

Olga detached her head from the windowpane and, while looking at the boy-man, she heard the name of her stop, as if she were underwater. She jumped up, wobbled, and moved towards the door. Passing by the tall rucksack, she turned her head: the top flap was torn off, she could see inflated, colourful balloons inside. She got off at the last minute, squeezing through the crowd of passengers with a quiet "Excuse me". She then got home, climbed the stairs, took her jacket off, but when dropping onto the mountain of cushions on the sofa, she didn't remember any of this.

She kept thinking about him for several days. She thought about him when pouring milk over her cinnamon cereal at half past four, at six, when she stopped on the doorstep of the Wypiekarnia backroom, taking in the smell of baguettes and coffee, and around midday, on the patio, having her one-a-day cigarette with Aleks. She thought of him under the concrete ceiling of the subway in the centre, queuing at the market, in her own bed, lying on her side and looking at the spine of one of savagely well-thumbed Steinbeck's novels. Soon he started slowly dissolving in her memory. A week later she couldn't remember his face.

She was wondering how old he was, where he lived, and if he had ever kissed a girl. What his name was, what he liked eating and what his longest journey was. Why he wore so many layers of clothing, why this backpack with balloons. She realised that all the knowledge she had about differently abled people came from some old TV series. She even had long forgotten its title.

When she watched this series, the world hadn't yet sprawled beyond the boundaries of the home and

garden in Kalisz, the centre of the world was still a Sunday cake, the grand piano, the upper terrace and Mr. Felicjan on the upper terrace. Days then consisted of watching TV, chasing Rysio, sitting under the kitchen table and, above all, waiting. She waited for dad to come back from work, for the moment when he sat at the piano and she could scramble into his lap. She slid under his open jacket and he covered her with his tie. And she sat there just like that, bent over, in the safest place in the world. Dad was tall and skinny, he had a scar under his right eye and long, bony fingers. He worked at the Calisia piano factory and he was a pianist himself. At that time he still played: he would sit in front of the grand piano for a long while, take his time getting ready in silence, with his eyes closed and then he would drop his hands from on high onto the keys and suddenly the whole house would be filled with sounds. Several years later he stopped playing – nobody knew why. He ignored and dismissed all the questions.

Excerpt translated by Anna Błasiak



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JAKUB
MAŁECKI
Born 1982

Nikt nie idzie [Nobody's Coming]

Publisher: Sine Qua Non, Kraków 2018

ISBN: 978-83-8129-112-5

Translation rights: Andrew Nurnberg Associates,
anna.rucinska@nurnberg.pl

Novels published

- Błędy*, 2008
- Przemysł cudu*, 2008
- Zaksięgowani*, 2009
- Dżozef*, 2011
- W odbiciu*, 2011
- Odwrotniak*, 2013
- Dygot*, 2015
- Ślady*, 2016
- Rdza*, 2017

Foreign language translations

Russia

Selected awards

- Nike Literary Award (2017) – nomination
- Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2011) – nomination

On the River Zbruch

In Helak's novel, the Borderlands becomes an emanation of Polish identity



JÓZEF MACKIEWICZ LITERARY PRIZE

The novel takes place at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, covering events from the final years of the Partitions of Poland to the beginnings of the Second World War. Its main character is Konstanty – a young artist, aesthete, and aficionado of painting, who after finishing school in Vienna returns to his family home on the Zbruch River in Podolia – a region now within the borders of Ukraine and Moldova, but previously under Polish rule. Despite a sense of nostalgia for this place where he spent his childhood, the young man wishes to travel, spend time among people with broad intellectual horizons, and above all explore the collections of the world's museums and marvel at their works of art. Ultimately this desire leads him to the Viennese court and into the service of Emperor Franz Joseph, during which time he renounces his Polish identity. Yet after personal turmoil, he returns to the estate of his birth and changes his point of view, understanding that he has “Polish obligations.”

Yet Konstanty is not the most important character in the book – rather, it is the manorial estate. It is precisely the ethos of an estate in Poland's former eastern Borderlands, a particular way of life irretrievably lost, that seems to interest Helak the most. One of its most important elements was respect and attachment to

tradition. It is Konstanty's father who advocates for this most strongly, doing his utmost to ensure his son remembers what is most important. This manifests in all sorts of ways, starting with drilling his son and making sure he can handle a sword well; through studying the family's heirlooms, history, and lands; up to instilling respect for service. It is not for nothing one of the watchwords that guided the lord of the manor was “Harmony and humility.” Helak manages to capture wonderfully this two-way correlation – often forgotten today when speaking of the Polish gentry – based on work and mutual kindness between the owner of the estate, the rest of the household, and the servants. His father, whose admonitions Konstanty often resists, also pays careful attention to purely symbolic gestures, such as dressing for important events in the old costume of the Polish nobility, treated almost like a holy relic.

In Helak's novel, the Borderlands – or more precisely, Podolia – in some way becomes an emanation of Polishness. So we receive a series of reflections, thanks to which it is possible to recreate the atmosphere of a former time and a feeling of longing for a world now gone.

Anna Czartoryska-Sziler, translated by Sean Gaspar Bye

They passed through the gate and from this distance could already make out mother waiting for them by the entrance. Everything around the manor house glistened with purity, the carefully tended grass on the flowerbed, the trimmed roses, and also the small gazebo and the evenly-raked gravel on the drive were testament to the fact that mother kept order here with an iron fist. Not even leaves or fallen acorns spoiled the lawn under the expansive old oak. The ladder by the portico over the door was gone because the plasterer had finished his work, and the repaired motto crowning the triangular pediment now glowed white in the last rays of the sun peeking through the park: *I Am a Polish Manor Fighting Valiantly and Guarding Faithfully*. To Konstanty, these words, too, were like a childish transformation of reality, and on deeper reflection, sounded like a pang of conscience from the days of the Partitions and of independence lost through no fault but their own. And why fight? That was the past now, he thought, these days we had take our proper place among the peoples of Europe under the scepter of His Majesty Emperor Franz Joseph, because that was where power and a source of culture were found—the museums, sculptures and paintings he so adored. All that remained of that old world were his mother’s love of order and prayer, and her black dress, which he never liked. (...)

The next day, after Mass and a morning ride, during a fencing lesson with his father, a boy came running to the lord of the manor with a letter. They did not stop the match, so the messenger waited obediently until the lord asked him to approach at the proper moment. The noble steel rang gently and the fencers’ movements grew more fluid, and today it seemed the son was able to hold off his opponent’s attacks. He was parrying attacks to the chest, the head, the cheek, and knew he couldn’t let himself be broken, couldn’t give up, since his father wouldn’t forgive him a second time. Meanwhile in his heart he could think only of how to break free of this vicious circle of discipline and submission. His father was now attacking harder, as though he’d read those desires hidden in the depths of his soul, and right then the saber quickened, and their steps became even nimbler, and again the blades were in constant motion—a fierce alternating attack against an attempted feint. And Konstanty could only retreat and backed up against the wall, and suddenly his father’s attack stopped just at his head. Closer than last time. And he felt the chill of death in his heart. He could tell he was too weak to break free. His father bowed in the prescribed posture and slowly slid the black saber into its scabbard.

“A fight with this distinguished saber, my son, obliterates all sorrow and any pain from the gut. . . It takes away dangerous melancholy, as well as destructive conceit.”

Only then did he raise his hand, and the messenger ran up to him, handing him a letter on a tray, which the lord read in silence. Then he raised his eyes, pondered for a moment, and said:

“Father Marek writes to me he has suddenly fallen ill. You’ll go to Husiatyn and fetch his niece. Have Ivashko prepare a carriage. . .” He considered another matter, then he finished his thought: “I won’t send the coachman himself, you’ll have to greet the young lady with proper respect, this is the priest’s family after all.”

He looked at his son as if to say this time he didn’t care to regret his decision.

Excerpt translated by Sean Gasper Bye



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WIESŁAW
HEŁAK

Born 1948

On the River Zbruch [Nad Zbruczem]

Publisher: Wydawnictwo Arcana, Kraków 2017

ISBN: 978-83-653-5028-2

Translation rights: Wydawnictwo Arcana,
arcana@poczta.internetdsl.pl

Books published

Lwowska noc, 2012

Scenariusze syberyjskie, 2013

Tryhubowa, 2014

Tchnienie, 2015

Wiesław Helak is also a film director and a screenwriter.

Selected awards

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2018)

Things I Didn't Throw Out

A one of a kind meditation on the loss of loved ones

Marcin
Wicha
Rzeczy,
których
nie
wyrzuciłem

Karakter

AWARD-WINNING & BESTSELLING BOOK

Marcin Wicha's compact book is in part an autobiographical novel and in part a meditation on the loss of loved ones, on the formation of Polish-Jewish identity and on the complex mechanism of remembering. The narrator of *Things...* goes through objects left behind by his deceased mother. At the same time, using very sparse, carefully calculated words, he creates a profound portrait of a person wounded by history and national prejudices, an ironic and sharp analysis of familial relations, as well as an interesting description of post-war Poland. The mother, the main protagonist of the book, personifies uncontrolled vitality and expressiveness, a permanent state of readiness to fight for one's own opinions, sarcastic resistance to the impact of one's surroundings and, at the same time, feeling the fragility of life, not being rooted in the social fabric and the presence of fear just under the skin. Manifestations of her explosive temperament, dramatisations of everyday life and skilful mixing of irony with directness together not only mask sensitivity, but also proffer a demanding lesson in truthfulness. The mother, the torturer constantly challenging her loved ones, turns out to be an irreplaceable teacher of caution needed in relations with people and with objects.

For objects carry the memory of people who have passed away. "We won't disappear without a trace. And even when we do, our things will remain, dusty barricades." Books play a special role here because they say most about us and specifically about who we tried to become, to no avail. But other objects also register snippets of human experiences, for example a gold coin which, during the war, could serve as a pass to avoid the Jewish fate.

This elegy on a mother's passing and on the formation of the Polish-Jewish intelligentsia in its entirety is brilliantly written. On one hand there is melancholy, on the other – it is aphoristic, colourful and restrained; it is serious, with a fine sprinkling of invigorating humour. The author uses counterpoint and contradiction with splendid results. He switches between the general and detailed perspective, and interlaces the high nostalgic register with refreshing anecdotes.

This book is similar to numerous records of inherited memory of the 20th century tragic history and at the same time, due to the quality of the writer's eye and style, is one of a kind.

Piotr Śliwiński, translated by Anna Błasiak

My mother adored shopping. In the happiest years of her life she'd set off to the shops every afternoon. "Let's go into town," she'd say. She and my father would buy small unnecessary objects. Teapots. Penknives. Lamps. Mechanical pencils. Torches. Inflatable headrests, capacious toiletry bags and various clever gadgets which could be useful when travelling. This was strange, as they never went anywhere. They would trek halfway across town in search of their favourite kind of tea or a new Martin Amis novel. They had their favourite bookshops. Favourite toyshops. Favourite repair shops. They struck up friendships with various – always very, very nice – people. The second-hand bookshop lady. The penknife man. The sturgeon man. The lapsang souchong couple. Every purchase was a ritual. They noticed some extraordinary specimen – in a shop with second-hand lamps, where the lamp man held court, a very nice chap, to use my father's jaunty word. They looked at something. Asked about the price. Decided they couldn't afford it. Went home. Suffered. Sighed. Shook their heads. Promised themselves that once they had money to spare, which should happen soon, they really must... For the next few days they would talk about the unattainable lamp. They wondered where to put it. They reminded each other it's too expensive. The lamp lived with them. It became a part of the household. Dad talked about its remarkable features. He sketched it on a napkin (he had an excellent visual memory), pointing out how original certain solutions were. He stressed that the cable had textile insulation, barely worn. He praised the Bakelite switch (I could already see him taking it apart with one of his screwdrivers). Sometimes they'd go to visit it. Have a look. I suspect it never occurred to them to bargain at the same time. In the end they'd make the purchase. They were perfect customers. Kind-hearted. Politely interested in new merchandise. Then Dad tried the green Frugo soft drink and had a heart attack in a shopping centre. We had time to joke about it. Even the doctor at the A&E thought it was funny. A thin trickle was all that was left. The TV remote. The medication box. The vomit bowl. Things that nobody touches turn matt. They fade. The meanders of a river, swamps, mud. Drawers full of chargers for old phones, broken pens, shop business cards. Old newspapers. A broken thermometer. A garlic press, a grater, and a, what's it called, we laughed at that word, it featured in recipes so often, a spatula. A spatula. The objects already knew. They felt they'd be moved soon. Shifted into wrong places. Touched by strangers' hands. They'd gather dust. They'd smash. Crack. Break at the unfamiliar touch. Soon nobody will remember what was bought at

the Hungarian centre. Or at the second-hand shop. The regional crafts shop. The antique shop, in times of prosperity. Later, for a good few years, trilingual greeting cards would come, always with a photo of some plated trinket. Eventually this stopped. Maybe the shop owner lost hope of further purchases. Maybe they closed up shop. Nobody will remember. Nobody will say that this teacup needs to be glued together. That the cable needs to be replaced (where to find another one like this?). Graters, blenders and sieves will turn into rubbish. They'll stay in the estate. But the objects were getting ready for a fight. They intended to resist. My mother was getting ready for a fight. "What are you going to do with all this?" Many people ask this. We won't disappear without a trace. And even when we do, our things will remain, dusty barricades.

Excerpt translated by Marta Dziurosz
Extended English sample available: anna.rucinska@nurnberg.pl



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**MARCIN
WICHA**
Born 1972

Rzeczy, których nie wyrzuciłem (Things I Didn't Throw Out)

Publisher: Karakter, Kraków 2017
ISBN: 978-83-08-65271-38-9
Translation rights: Andrew Nurnberg Associates,
anna.rucinska@nurnberg.pl

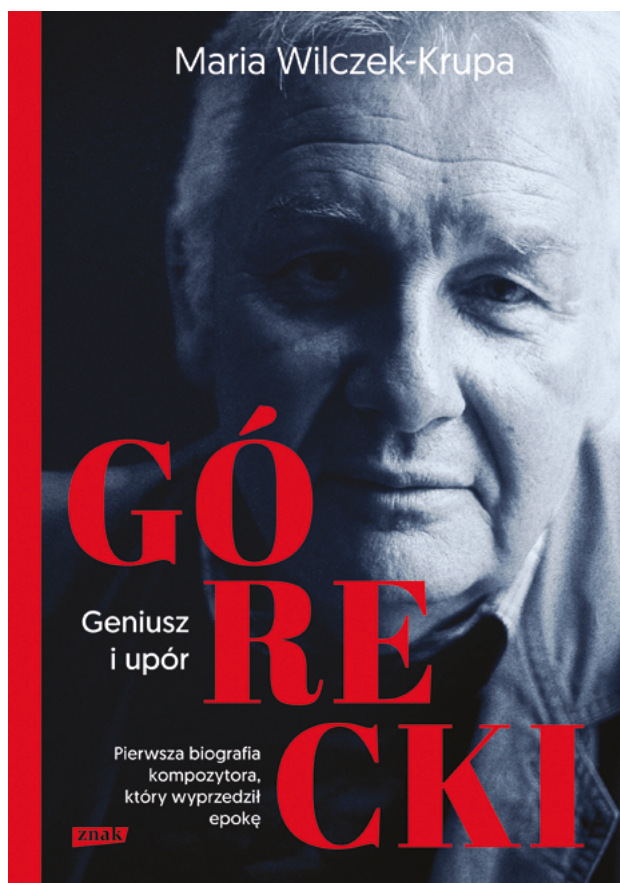
Sales numbers
50,000 copies sold

Selected work
Jak przestałem kochać design, 2015
Marcin Wicha is a graphic designer, author of book covers, posters and graphic signs. His texts and cartoons have been published in various magazines. He has also written several books for children.

Foreign language translations
Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia, Russia, Spain

Selected awards
Polityka' Passport (2018)
Nike Literary Award & Readers' Choice Award (2018)
Gdynia Literary Prize (2018) – nomination
Witold Gombrowicz Literary Prize (2018)

Górecki. A Stubborn Genius



Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* passed Sting, Madonna and Nirvana in British and American music charts

Górecki: *A Stubborn Genius* is a biography covering the entire lifespan of the composer, who died in 2010 and whose *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* passed Sting, Madonna and Nirvana in British and American music charts and was used in twenty films; its recording has sold a million copies. Henryk Mikołaj Górecki and his music figure most significantly in this book, but the author also describes the political background (especially the realities of socialist Poland), which heavily influenced the life of the protagonist. The atmosphere of places where the composer lived is brilliantly conveyed, especially that of Silesia, where he hailed from. The reader discovers much about the musical circles Górecki moved in – about his teachers, friends, pupils and important music festivals.

Maria Wilczek-Krupa has succeeded in describing the complexity of the composer's personality. On the one hand, we are presented with evidence of Górecki's (titular) improbable stubbornness, manifesting itself in his drive to pursue his goals despite numerous

obstacles. We find out that it is true – although quite unbelievable – that young Górecki was forbidden to touch the piano and he only learned to play it when he was eighteen. He gave up his teaching job to study music composition at the age of 22, despite gaps in his musical education. Moreover, he struggled with various illnesses all his life. On the other hand, we get examples of the composer's difficult, fiery temperament. He was easily set off, he liked to offend people and was able to sever years-long acquaintances.

Even if Henryk Mikołaj Górecki didn't achieve commercial success, this biography still serves as an example of a life fulfilled and evidence of his uncompromising fealty to his art. To her account, the author has previously published a well-received biography of yet another composer, Wojciech Kilar. I am thus convinced that this book is also bound to succeed.

Andrzej Mirek, translated by Anna Błasiak

It all started when David Drew, the then director responsible for expanding the catalogue of London publishing house Boosey & Hawkes, met Henryk at the Warsaw Autumn Festival during the first performance of “Lerchenmusik” in 1985. He went back to London intrigued with the unusual personality and immense charisma of this supposedly simple guy from Silesia. He took home a small pile of music scores from PWM (Polish Music Publishing House). He began studying them. The first was a copy of *Symphony No. 3 (Symphony of Sorrowful Songs)* opus 36.

One page, then another. Very low double basses, then cellos, then violas... A dark canon being built up by the strings. And suddenly – a penetrating soprano. David Drew jumped up and ran to see his boss.

Tony Fell, the then head of the publishing house, listened to the agitated soliloquy about the discovery David Drew made in Poland.

“This is a revelation! It’s magic, it’s an absolute force!” Drew was persuading him. “This’ll be a sensation, this guy’s a volcano! And barely anybody knows him in his own country...”

Indeed, there was still an embargo on Górecki’s music in Poland. The National Philharmonics’ musicians were still resentful. *Symphony No. 3* had been in fact released on a longplay in Poland, but it wasn’t easy to find the recording by Jerzy Katlewicz and Stefania Woytowicz. In a word, Górecki didn’t exist in his own country.

David Drew had a good intuition. A dog’s olfactory sense – Szabelcio might phrase it that way, he who also prided himself in having the same talent. Tony Fell sensed good business.

He immediately got in touch with the heads of PWM Muzyczne in Kraków. Then with Górecki himself, who was nonetheless sceptical. Once a publisher from the West was interested in him in the 1970s. The composer got very excited because Schott had a reputation of being the main and oldest publisher in the world, together with Breitkopf & Härtel. But it all resulted in just a few editions of his works and that was that. The end.

But this time it was meant to be different.

The final agreement between Górecki, PWM and Boosey & Hawkes was signed in 1988. They signed a co-edition contract for 10 years. During this period the copyright was supposed to remain with PWM and the Polish publisher was to take care of the distribution of Henryk’s scores in the Eastern Bloc, while Boosey was to promote his music in the West.

At around the same time, the British pianist Paul Crossley thought back on *Symphony No. 3*. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, he was the artistic director of the London Sinfonietta. Crossley first heard Henryk’s piece in 1983 in Berlin, when he entered a music shop and saw his record. He was mesmerised. With flushed cheeks he played the recording to

his friends in London: to the Sinfonietta’s director Michael Vyner, and to the conductor and co-founder of the group, David Atherton. They wanted to start playing Górecki in the UK. (...)

Atherton conducted *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* for the first time in the 1987-88 concert season. He persuaded the Australian soprano Margaret Field to collaborate, as well as two well-known British symphony orchestras: the BBC Radio Orchestra and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. *Symphony No. 3* began its career in England. (...)

Meanwhile David Drew got cracking. *Symphony No. 3*, with his vigorous support, travelled from hand to hand. Even before Boosey signed the official agreement with Górecki, it had found its way into the hands of the rock legend David Bowie. In June 1987, the British singer played the *Third Symphony*’s extensive fragments during a break at his London concert at Wembley. Bowie’s fans, hypnotised with Górecki’s music, listened. Pretty much no one among the seventy thousand people in the audience left the room.

John Sherba, a Kronos Quartet violinist from California, was in the audience that day. This is how he described the impression made by *Symphony No. 3* written by the unknown composer from Poland: “Yes, during the intermission this incredible music came on... (...) And everybody’s reaction, including my own, was – what is this? It was the *Third Symphony*! David Bowie knew the piece very early... It made a great impact on lots of people...”.

Excerpt translated by Anna Błasiak



Author's archive

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