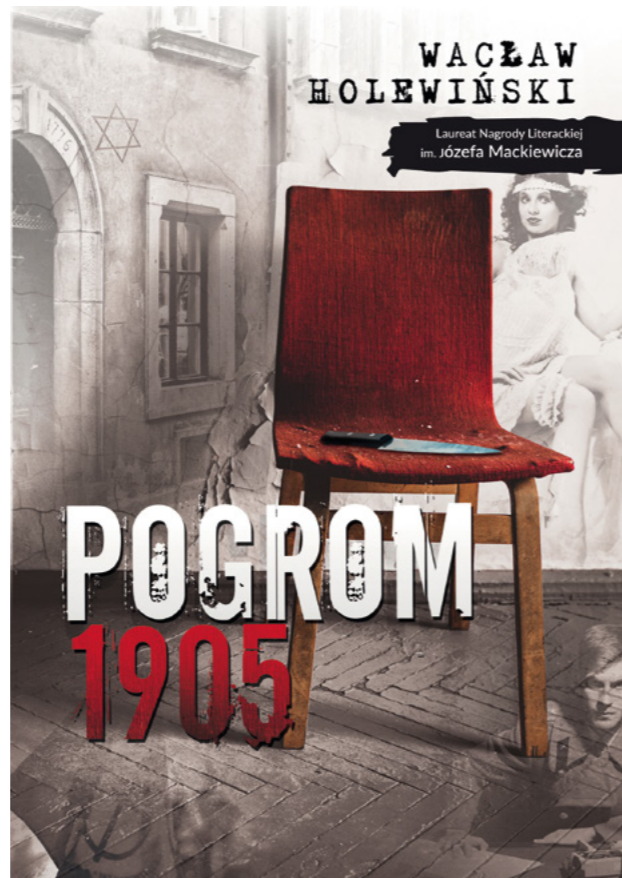


Pogrom 1905

Holewiński makes human sexuality the key to the epoch he describes



BY THE JÓZEF MACKIEWICZ LITERARY PRIZE WINNER

In the fascinating historical novel by Wacław Holewiński, several dozen figures of different social status are thrown together by fate during the authentic street tumult that led to the lynching of several pimps and prostitutes in Warsaw in 1905. Was it a spontaneous pogrom caused by anti-Semitic sentiments? Was it carried out by Jews in their own community? Or maybe it was a Russian provocation inspired by the tsarist service? Many characters stand for a collective hero, but this is only part of the truth, because the most important hero of *Pogrom 1905* is the Warsaw of the beginning of the 20th century – a vibrant metropolis of extremes. Modern, and at the same time dirty and repulsive. Disgustingly rich and frighteningly poor. Frivolous and at the same time spiritual. Diverse but also full of class-ethnic tensions between Poles, the Jewish minority, and the elites of the Russian invader. Not necessarily the “Paris of the North”, but rather a rapidly modernising Moloch, controlled only nominally by the Russians, because in fact chaos rules.

Historical novelists often search for new perspectives to tell about the past in a refreshing way. They choose as heroes criminals, outcasts, the excluded, and all kinds of “others” that the great narratives have hitherto ignored. In turn, Wacław Holewiński makes human sexuality the key to the epoch he describes. He portrays women prostituting themselves, teenagers forced to sell their bodies, men overwhelmed by lust – both lustful youths and old lechers, and even a doctor specialising in venereal diseases. Everything in *Pogrom 1905* revolves around carnality, but the writer does not reach for it like a pornographer. He does not want to arouse excitement, but rather has the ambition of telling the story in a new, bold, and broad-minded way.

Marcin Kube, translated by Katarzyna Popowicz

Konstantin Andrievich Yurin was forty-one and all he dreamed about was his bed and peace and quiet. Especially on a day like today, with his head exploding into a million pieces after yesterday’s drinking session at the rooms of Lieutenant Rex, Commissioner of District no. 4 – Bielany.

He heard a knock at the door and a moment later saw Klachkin’s huge head. Yurin looked up at him. “Gavrotsky has arrived,” he reported. “Shall I let him in?”

For a long while he had to think who the intruder was. He evoked the face of the nark, his piercing blue eyes. And his hands. Some machine had half cut off two of the fingers on his left hand. After years of work, he sometimes observed in astonishment that there was an apparatus installed in his head, which after pushing a button, brought to mind the faces of criminals, agents, lovers, the people he had sent to penal servitude and the ones who had refused him loans. In short – everybody.

Yurin didn’t have the strength to talk to him.

“Says it’s important,” Klachkin said, not giving up, although no doubt after serving Yurin for six years and three months he must have known that the captain’s stubborn efforts to focus on a single point was evidence of his intense experience the night before.

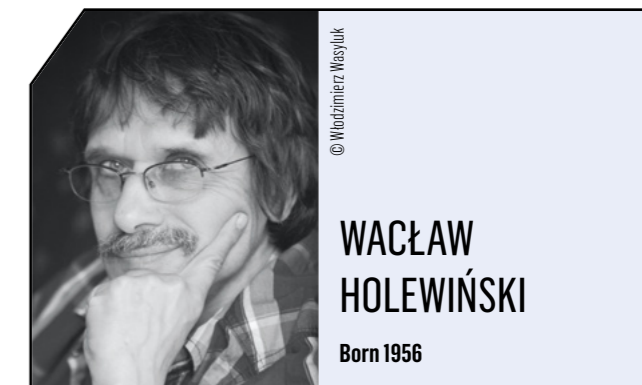
“Let him wait,” he waved a hand and before the door had closed had reached out for a carafe standing on the left-hand side of the desk. He picked it up and looked at it but decided not to pour any water from it into a glass standing on a wooden coaster.

He ought to go to a doctor, request leave, get out of Warsaw, that was certain. But instead, he spent every day in his office. District no. 7 was his curse ... If they would only post him somewhere else. And ideally send him back to Russia, to Piter. To Alyosha, his childhood friend, who had done very well for himself and was a rich man. They had seen each barely a year before. Alyosha had laughed at his uniform and offered him a position in one of his numerous haulage companies. Yurin had turned it down then, although Nastasiya Philipovna took a deep breath at the thought she might be returning to her mother.

He didn’t like the city or its inhabitants. He didn’t like them nor understand them. He spoke Polish – without an accent, he believed. But so what? The women were attractive there, his flat comfortable, he enjoyed the local alcohol, but the fact that the newly appointed Governor-General of Warsaw, Constantin Claudievich Maximovich, kept having to flee to the fortress in Zegrze in fear of his life didn’t fill him with optimism. There had been attempts on the general’s life, they might also try to assassinate an ordinary captain. Why not? They were able to shoot at Captain Rastagayev on Żelazna St.? How lucky he’d been, it had seemed. The bullet passed through his neck and into his chin, where it had lodged. He’d been discharged barely two

months ago from the Hospital of the Infant Jesus, and a week later it turned out he had a nervous collapse. *They’ll shoot at me sooner or later*, thought Yurin. Thoughts about the gallows were often hatching in Konstantin Andrievich’s head. For what else did those bastards deserve? They wanted to kill, kill and kill again. He didn’t understand those new-fangled efforts, those socialists, “going to the people”, education for all, and those bombs which, let’s face it, killed completely random passers-by and children. Neither did he understand showing those murderers mercy. He cared for order, he was its guardian, because that was the way things were, because somebody had to take on that lousy responsibility. Shoot, shoot at them like in January? Did a hundred die? A thousand could for all he was concerned. Whoever got in the way of bullets deserved them.

Excerpt translated by David French



Pogrom 1905

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Novels published

Lament nad Babilonem, 2003

Za późno na modlitwę, 2003

Przeżyłem wszystkich poetów, 2004

Choćbym mówił językiem ludzi i aniołów, 2005

Druga do Putte, 2007

Opowiem ci o walności, 2012

Szwy, 2013

Honor mi nie pozwala, 2015

Foreign language translations

Hungary

Selected awards

Warsaw Literary Premiere Award (2003, 2004, 2007)

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2013; distinction in 2004)