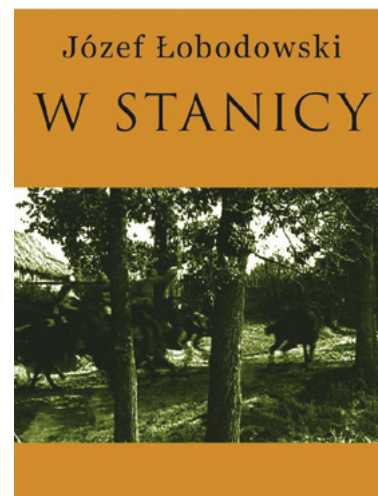
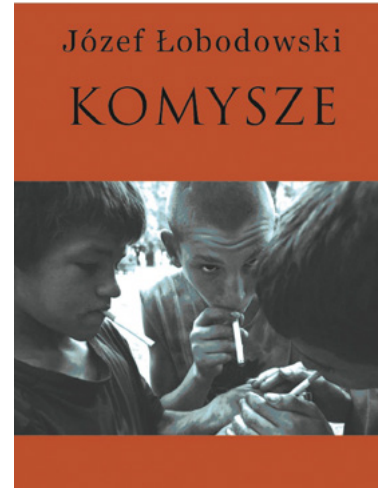
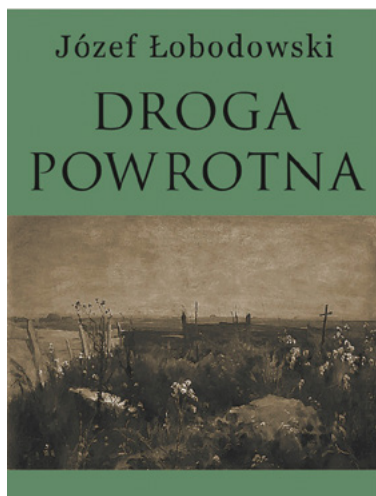


# Ukrainian Trilogy: Thickets, The Settlement, The Way Back



## By an eulogist of Ukraine, fascinated by the East

The work of Józef Łobodowski (1909-1988) – a remarkable poet, prose writer, and translator, who spent most of his life in exile – is slowly being revived in Poland. Łobodowski's brilliant three-volume novel, composed on an epic scale, concerns the fate of families and orphans unmoored by the Bolshevik Revolution and civil war and scattered across the stretches of the former Russian empire. The plot frequently involves a teenager who is working to support his entire family. He hawks homemade rotgut and cigarettes, robs and steals, and gets into fights with police officers and Chekists alike. His companions do not fear death, only the *Dziędom* – the orphanage in which sadistic caretakers exact their charges' obedience through ruthless psychological and physical terror.

The novel's hero (almost a stand-in for the author) is a Pole named Staś Majewski, who attaches himself to a group of young thugs when legal methods of earning a living start to dry up. The novel's action proceeds at

breakneck speed across Russia – from Yeysk on the Sea of Azov to Rostov-on-Don. After Tukhachevsky's defeat at Warsaw, the Red Terror escalates and Staś must flee – first to the titular thickets on the marshlands, then to the steppes, then to the Cossack settlements. There, he finds some vestiges of freedom, along with friends of Staś's father, who are able to repay him for earlier deeds. A crucial thread of the novel, replete with bold eroticism, is an unsuccessful attempt to reconstruct – referencing Cossack history – a free Zaporozhian Republic. An idyllic stay with the Cossacks ends in a life-and-death battle with Communists; the struggle on both sides constitutes the most significant part of the trilogy. If, after escaping the besieged settlement, Staś had not been late boarding the ship of repatriates, everything would have turned out differently. Once you start this novel, you won't be able to tear yourself away.

Jerzy Gizella, translated by Megan Thomas

The speaker broke off, tossed an unruly lock of hair from his forehead, and again raised his arm toward the crowd.

“Comrades, the victorious Revolution has no wish to restrict Cossack freedoms. Let them stay in their settlements as their fathers and grandfathers did before them. But they must share their excess grain with the city to help the starving poor! The blood that's been spilled will be avenged. Tomorrow, over the coffins of our comrades, we will offer up an unbreakable, iron Bolshevik vow to do our utmost to ensure that, from this spilled blood, a new dawn of universal freedom, equality, and brotherhood will rise...”

“Gennari,” whispered Staś, nudging Aszwajanc. “What a pretty little song he sings. He's already forgotten how he licked Markov's boots so his officers wouldn't put him up against the wall... Your father just barely saved him...”

“Comrades!” the speaker thundered on, “We will not allow these hundreds of thousands of victims, tortured to death, crushed by penal servitude, massacred at the front of imperialistic wars, these victims who perished at the hands of white counterrevolutionaries, to have died in vain. Our answer to the last gasp of the mortally wounded general scum is the answer we learned from the leaders and creators of the Revolution, Karl Marx, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and Leon Trotsky. Down with the international bourgeoisie! Down with imperialist intervention! Down with generals, bankers, and industrialists! Down with White Poles! (...)”

The *Internationale* once again blared from the windows of the Executive Committee building. Another speaker stepped forward to address the swaying audience.

The heavens were ablaze with constellations as the two friends elbowed their way through the thinning crowd in the direction of Taganrogskaya Street. Suddenly, someone called Staś's name. The odor of vodka wafted into his face. Professor Wasiliew clamped a hand on his shoulder and, leaning in, rasped,

“Tell Piotr Zdzisławowicz that the Bolsheviks were defeated near Warsaw. Understand, this comes from a reliable source. Most people don't know yet. But it's true. Kamieniew, Tukhachevsky, Budyonny, they've all been crushed. The Polish counteroffensive, backed up by French tanks and black divisions from Senegal. The Red bastard throws down his weapon and flees the front. Now Piłsudski will join forces with Wrangel. We're back on our feet in Okhtyrka. The settlements are rising up. It's the end of the Bolsheviks. (...)”

Wasiliew reeled and bellowed,

“Long live freedom! Long live free Poland!”

One of the men passing by stopped.

“His Poland's already been liberated. He's drunk and talking nonsense. They've been in Warsaw two weeks and haven't taken her yet.”

Staś arranged to meet Aszwajanc the next and dashed toward home. (...) At his violent banging on the shutters, his terrified mother darted to the door.

He rushed into the room and, trying to catch his breath, triumphantly managed to squeeze out,

“Warsaw is free! The entire Bolshevik front is beaten!”

Excerpt translated by Megan Thomas



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**JÓZEF  
ŁOBODOWSKI**  
(1909-1988)

*Komysze, W stancicy, Droga powrotna*  
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Józef Łobodowski published 19 volumes of poems and 7 volumes of prose.

A translator of Spanish, Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian poetry, Łobodowski was also a controversial and passionate publicist.

As a young man, he was inclined towards communist views, but became a fervent anti-communist over the years.

In his youth he led the avant-garde poets, winning the prestigious Young Writer's Award of the Polish Academy of Literature. He led the life of a rebel and scandaliser. One of his volumes of poems was suppressed by censorship, and he was sent down from university in 1931. He fought in the Second World War, but did not return to Poland afterwards, settling instead in Madrid, where he collaborated with the radio station Radio Nacional de España. Łobodowski was an avid proponent of Polish-Ukrainian dialogue.