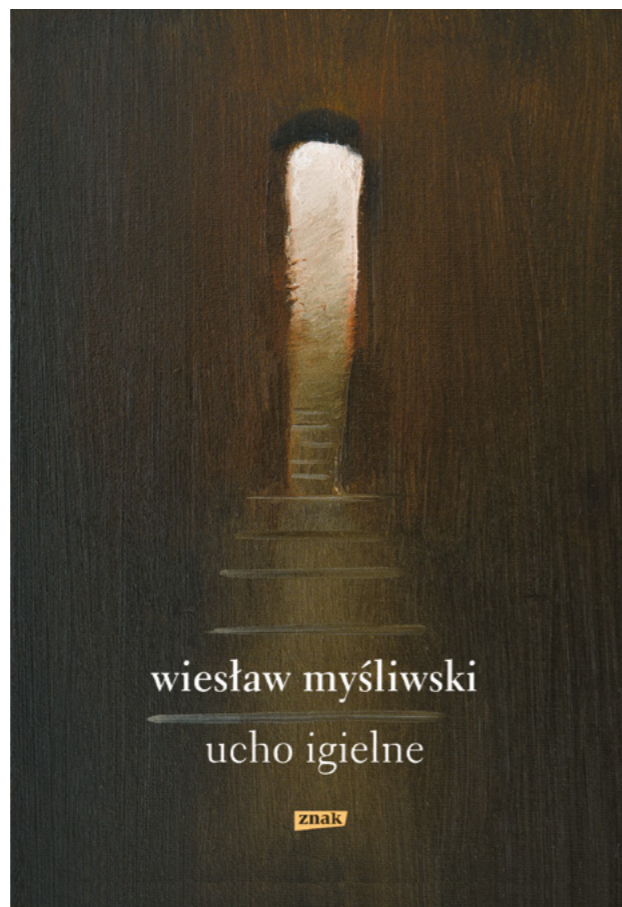


# The Needle's Eye

A new novel by the master of Polish prose



## AWARD-WINNING & BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A gripping novel that asks fundamental questions about human existence. The story begins with an enigmatic meeting between two men on a steep stairway leading to a “wild old green valley,” in a defile known as the Needle’s Eye. A tragic incident triggers the action. Who are the men and what is their relationship? Who is the mysterious girl in the photograph that one of them carries with him? In this masterfully constructed book nothing happens by chance; each scene has its significance, like a step on a stairway. Gradually we learn the story of the central character: his childhood in a small town during the war, his youth spent under communism, and finally old age in present-day Poland. We’re with him in his family home, on walks with the girl, in rooming houses, rented apartments; we see him as a schoolboy, a college student, and finally as a history teacher. From time to time we go back with him to visit his parents, with

whom he is close, painfully watching them grow old and moving “toward silence.” History leaves its stamp on the lives of the protagonists, including on those parts that remain unspoken.

The novel, constructed as a series of interwoven retrospectives, uncovers the work of memory, and at the same time poses questions about its nature. It tells of the past and simultaneously inquires into what the past actually is. A kind of probe serving this inquiry is the repeated motif of the encounter between youth and old age. What is human identity based on? What enables us to say of ourselves that we are who we are? This magnificent book contains everything: a relish for detail, the pithiness of spoken language, and the heft of symbol. With each new reading it reveals a different dimension of itself to the reader.

Małgorzata Szczurek, translated by Bill Johnston

One afternoon I was on my way to second shift at two o'clock when all of a sudden I heard something like whining, or a child crying. I stopped for a moment. To the left of the road was an empty lot with piles of bricks, stones, planks, beams, beyond all of which, at the far end there was a cottage. I left the road and went out onto the lot. It was only then that I spotted a pit of slaked lime, and in it a child drowning. All you could see was his little head. A moment later and he would go under. I ran across, lay down at the edge of the pit, plunged my hands up to the elbows in the lime, hooked the child under the arms and tried to lift him, but my muscles wouldn't work. More by an effort of will than anything else, I kept the boy's head above the surface. My heart was pounding, my mind racing. I had to hurry, because slaked lime burns, and it drags you in like a swamp. Plus, it could have drawn me in too, because there was no way I was letting go of the kid, yet only half my body, more or less to the waist, was lying on the bank. The other half, with my arms stretched out holding onto the child, was hanging over the lime. I don't know, maybe I just imagined I could see the little tear-stained face, the blue eyes frozen in fear. I must have brought my own head close to the child's, as if I was cradling him.

Then, somewhere in the distance I heard a cry that sounded like it was being torn from someone's innards: “Mother of God!” Thudding of footsteps, shouts, curses. The mother, father, grandfather were running from the cottage. Someone's strong hands took me by the ankles, and a powerful male voice, the father's as it turned out, yelled over my head:

“Hold on to him! I'll pull you back!”

He snatched the child from my arms and ran to the well with him. He pulled up a bucketful of water and poured it over the boy, who started crying even louder than when he'd been drowning in lime. The mother ran back to the cottage and a moment later hurried out with an armful of rags, not so much crying as keening, “Dear Lord, Dear Lord!” Meanwhile the grandfather tottered around the lime pit, shaking his head and repeating over and over:

“I said cover it, cover it up I said. I said cover it up. . .”

Evidently these lamentations weren't enough for him, because he stood at the edge of the pit at the place where the boy had fallen in and began whacking his walking stick against the bank, sending up clouds of dust.

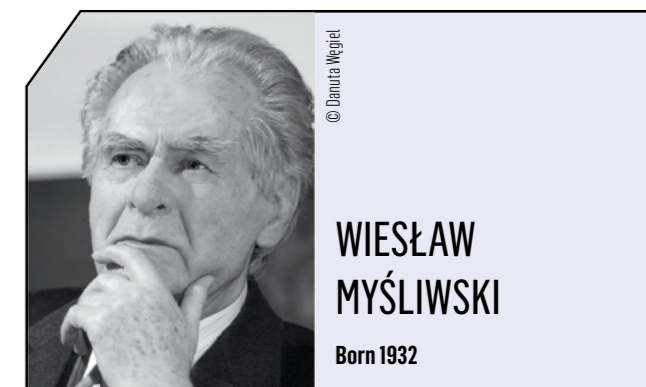
“You monster! Damn you! Take that!”

“Father-in-law, have you gone mad?” The boy's father

grabbed the walking stick out of his hand, making the older man stagger till he almost fell in the pit himself. “You're knocking earth into the lime!”

They were slaking the lime for the construction of a new house. It was going to be brick built, with a cellar, a steep roof, a tall attic, big windows, a glassed-in porch. And it was going to stand by the road, in front of the lime pit, it'd be separated from the roadway only by a little flower garden. No lilac or jasmine, so as not to block the view of the road. It's more cheerful when you can see who's walking or driving by, windows ought to have some life in them.

Excerpt translated by Bill Johnston



WIESŁAW  
MYŚLIWSKI

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*Ucho igielne* [Needle's Eye]

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### Novels published

*Nagi sad*, 1967

*Patac*, 1970

*Kamień na kamieniu* [Stone upon Stone], 1984

*Widnokrąg* [The Horizon], 1996

*Traktat o tuskaniu fasoli* [A Treatise on Shelling Beans], 2006

– over 100,000 copies sold

*Ostatnie rozdanie*, 2013

### Foreign language translations

USA, UK, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Netherlands, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Russia, Israel, Turkey, Iraq

### Selected awards

Nike Literary Award (1997 and 2007)

Gdynia Literary Prize (2007)

Grand Prix Littéraire de Saint-Émilien (2011)

Three Percent's Best Translated Book Prize (2012)

Prix Jean Monnet de Littérature Européenne (2011) – nomination

Angelus Central European Literature Award (2013) – nomination