

Ashes

**From heroism to betrayal
– a passionate story about
people in post-war Poland**

The plot of *Ashes* takes place in the 1940s and '50s in post-war Poland. It's a passionate story about the toil of millions of Polish people whose lives have been shattered by the war, people who sometimes go in for dodgy deals with the new Communist authorities, yet are heroic at other times. Just how difficult and complex those decisions, attitudes, and motives were is shown by the story of Stanisław Jarosz, the pivotal character in the novel's progress. He's a sort of Everyman – a lawyer who becomes the chairman of the Warsaw court and has to face up to a series of everyday temptations, challenges, and inner contentions. One of the other characters is Stanisław Mikołajczyk, the wartime prime minister of the Polish government-in-exile who attempts to play a political game with the Communists. With the precision of a surgeon's scalpel and profound respect for the people of Poland, Piotr Zaremba tries to find an answer to the question of how far the compromises could go, of where the red line lay beyond which all you could get was just humiliation. In *Ashes* we have everything from heroism to betrayal.



And between them a hundred thousand other behaviours, because that's what Poland was like in the 1940s and '50s. For all that, Zaremba's book is very Polish. His aim is to give the reader an insight into all those icons of the Polish Peasants' Party [Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe] and those Doomed Soldiers, but also a picture of the grey, sometimes nasty, run-of-the-mill guys. His characters aren't cut out for the Hollywood clapperboard, they're true to life. *Ashes* is a tribute to the people of Poland and their attitudes in the face of a burgeoning Communist Hydra. *Ashes* delivers its tough lesson to every one of its readers, regardless of how much or how little he knows about Polish history. But it isn't a boring academic lecture. Zaremba's highly precise recall of the atmosphere of those times, together with a wickedly fascinating storyline and its fine language blend together to create a gripping drama. For anyone who wants to understand Polish post-war reality *Ashes* is a must-read.

Marcin Fijołek, translated by Teresa Baluk-Ulewiczowa

As the car drove up to the Party building Mikołajczyk felt more unease than ever before. The security men stayed in the vehicle – they must have felt what was up, or maybe they had orders. He hadn't attended a single cabinet meeting since the election.

There was a lot of hustle and bustle around the gate – people were coming in for the session of the Supreme Council. A small group stood by at the side.

“PSL, the Lackeys' Party! Lackey, lackey, back to London!” they burst out shouting. Someone threw a snowball, but it missed him.

“Scoundrels,” Hulewiczowa made a clichéd remark to sum up the way he was being treated, and he felt embarrassed at the triteness of her words. He went inside briskly.

“There aren't even eighty people here,” Witold Kulerski, secretary of the Council and faithful companion of Mikołajczyk's predicament through good times and bad in London informed him as he reached his office. “People have been phoning in from the provinces since the morning with news of arrests. Some were rounded up from their homes, presumably they'll release them, but after the weekend.”

Kulerski, Mikołajczyk, Hulewiczowa, and perhaps a few others from London sometimes used words like “weekend.” It reminded them of the grand world outside which had afforded them sanctuary and then spat them out.

“One-third have not arrived, but Wycech's men have surely been released.” Trying to hide his confusion, the Deputy Prime Minister spoke sharply, with his head held high. “Who knows, maybe I'll lose in the vote. People are tired.”

“You won't lose. There's still something called justice.”

“Actually, Marysia, there's not much of it left at all.”

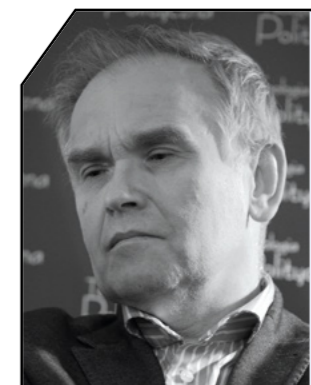
(...) And then Mikołajczyk read out his speech for two whole hours, hoarsely and with a lot of effort. He argued that they had taken the right path. It was just that the election had been conducted from start to finish by the Security Service, Minister Radkiewicz's subordinates.

He produced examples: in Mińsk Mazowiecki people were being intimidated with stories that personal identity documents were going to be exchanged, and only those who voted for the Block would be issued new ones. In Kielce representatives of the local intelligentsia and shopkeepers were crossed off the

voters' register, and anyone who wanted their name put back on the list of voters was advised to declare their support for the Block. A voter in Leszno was told he had no right to check the register to see if his name was on it, and when he insisted he was locked up in the cellar of the local Security Office. (...) “There's no sense in holding a boycott, we have to be part of the new parliament to tell the whole truth about the abuses practised by the Block, about the rigged elections, in order to stop them from getting their own way with the Small Constitution. Perhaps we've chosen a path full of thorns, but one that leads to ultimate victory, and the effort we make to win it will make it all the more precious.”

The response he got was applause, but not as enthusiastic as in October. Those who had come looked at one another, trying to find an answer in other people's faces, since they could find none in their own hearts.

Excerpt translated by Teresa Baluk-Ulewiczowa



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**PIOTR
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Born 1963

Zgliszcza [Ashes]

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Novels published

Plama na suficie, 2004

Romans licealny, 2009

Piotr Zaremba has also written several non-fiction books, including extended interviews with prominent Polish politicians and two books on American history. He has been published in many newspapers and magazines.

Awards

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2017) – nomination