

# 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 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Gaspar Bye



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Born 1948

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### 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)