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The Voices from the House of the Dead

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The Jewish theme has for a long time the right of citizenship in Polish literature which brought to respect the presence of "the elder brother Israel," as Mickiewicz put it, in the multinational culture of the Polish Republic at the time when nationalisms were raging around Europe. It happened so in the domain of literary culture, especially of creative writing, and not necessarily in political journalism, where the triumph belonged to the destructive dialectics of the "our" and the "alien" fed on ill feelings of the society deprived of its national existence and threatend in its national identity.

This positive tradition is predominant in the best works of Polish writers, beginning with Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* up to Vincenz's multivolumed epic *Na wysokiej poloninie* (*On a High Pasture*). It may be added here, without any risk, that only in the atmosphere prepared by Mickiewicz's ideals of the mutual acceptance of both Jewish literature written in Polish and Polish literature written in Jewish, as Jan Błoński has put it recently in his essay "Autoportret żydowski" (A Jewish Self-Portrait) published in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Julian Strykowski's writings and the phenomenon of his popularity could come into being.

In the 19th-century novel and short story it was stressed that the Jews were different, but not alien. Nevertheless, as Aleksander Hertz wrote in his fundamental work *Żydzi w kulturze polskiej* (*The Jews in Polish Culture*, Paris 1961) and as Henryk Grynberg has recently reminded in his collection of essays *Prawda nieartystyczna* (*Non-Artistic Truth*, Berlin 1984), the Jewish presence shown as an element of Polish spiritual and physical environment was not regarded as an autonomus value, a part of the organism of national culture,

but it was judged as an exotic peculiarity and most often from the point of view of the Jewish minority and its contribution to Polish cultural and political life. This might have been a consequence of the predominance of the national perspective in Polish literature, and also of the program created by the positivists who postulated the equality of rights for the Jews through polonization—gaining them for Polish culture through bringing them over to the Polish side—and not through mutual assimilation and exchange. Attempts to penetrate the Jewish community were practically non-existent (and the other way round). As a consequence, in literature the portrait of the Jew abstracted from the realities of his family, religious and communal life was one-dimensional, though often presented with warm feelings. Thus the stereotyped, non-descript approach dominated in letters. But, as Hertz stresses, this does not apply only to literature, but also to the common image of the Jew. There were also hardly any testimonies coming from within the Jewish community that could be accessible for the Polish public in original. However, there arises a question whether such testimonies were awaited at all. Both the anachronic model of Polish society with its relatively closed, hierarchical, class character and the caste system of the Jewish community with its inclination to isolation in ghettos, the inclination intensified by differences in religion and customs and, finally, by the four-thousand-year-old memories of defeats and persecutions. The chosen nation, says Old Tag, the hero of Strykowski's *Austeria*, "can be compared with a mouse in constant search for a shelter." The existence of the barrier of mutual cultural strangeness, the accumulation of injustices, resentments and prejudice inevitably result in either voluntary or forced isolation. "The belfry clock started to strike hours. Father taught him not to count these church hours; a Jew oughtn't to do this. Thier time shouldn't be confused with ours," we read in Strykowski's novel *Sen Azrila (The Dream of Azril)*. Similarly, in Strykowski's earlier novel, *Głosy w ciemności (Voices in Darkness)*, the sheepish trips of little Aron out of his father's world, the world of the orthodox Jewish religion, eventually make the boy gain the family nickname of "a foe of the Jewish nation." His adult sister's attempts to escape from this world are sealed by her father's curse which equals the banishment from her community, the drama of uprooting.

The distinctness, dissimilarity of the worlds which existed on the periphery of the 20th century was characteristic of pre-war Europe. But this turned into estrangement and enmity in the face of the growing awareness of aggressive nationalisms, the triumphs of radical political ideologies propagating the necessity of setting the world to the rights. New hostility was often demonstrated in the street, in shops, offices and universities and it contributed to the rise of the wall of prejudice, hatred and, at best, indifference. The opportunities created by the natural coexistence of the two cultures were ruined. In the short story *Lato* (*Summer*, 1938), Adolf Rudnicki shows "the triumph of the ghetto" where "prodigal sons" come back from Poland and thus escape antisemitism which was very strong in the twenties. This new, ominous perspective turned out to be surprisingly vital. It survived even the shock of the greatest war in the history of mankind, the war which changed political, moral and social reality in Europe and all over the world. The tragedy of "the rejected" was to be the central issue of the post-war writing of Henryk Grynberg. He was born in 1936 and survived the war and occupation concealed from the Germans by Polish peasants. He left Poland in 1967, that is, a year before the tragic antisemitic campaign in Poland, which made the rest of the Jews who had escaped the holocaust leave Poland.

The moral consequences of "the mass destruction and mass enslavement organized legally by the state and therefore unpunished," as Stanisław Vincenz wrote about the holocaust in his reminiscences about Jews from Kołomyja, create doubt about the correctness of historical caesuras admitted after the final, as it would seem, events. "The holocaust was the beginning of an era, and not its end—the era of disruptions, convulsion, folly and unreason, the era of Auschwitz. Now we are in the 29th year of this era," wrote Aleksander Donat in 1970. The present day proves that the above statement contains a worrying grain of truth: the holocaust was not the last homicide sanctioned by the state.

Jewish experience could not find an appropriate expression in post-war Polish literature for a long time. This was caused by complicated and painful mechanisms of cultural assimilation, shameful injuries and finally, what is probably the worst, by difficulties connected with living in the century in which antisemitism was the

most poisonous “ism” among many other “isms.” “Otherness” was not without consequences. After the nightmare of the war the very existence of differences among people seems highly dangerous and ominous to the hero of *Żywe i martwe morze* (*The Alive and the Dead Sea*) by Adolf Rudnicki.

And why are you starting with this US and THEM? After all, this is the “us” who should be interested in bringing our sufferings to an end. Each US and THEM will end up in the way we had already seen. After what we went through this is the “us” who should do everything to overthrow barriers between people, this is the “us” who should always and everywhere act against everything that divides people and act for that which brings them together [...] US and THEM! These are dead words at the moment and thanks God they are dead. These are the words with the coating of ages upon them, but thanks God that their time is coming to an end, because what was the use of all these differences?

This attitude (which leads the hero to Communism) can be understood when it comes from a person who was a victim during the war because of his origin, nose or conviction, although today the naïveté of this reasoning can be surprising. It is rather difficult to classify it otherwise than as a result of neurotic eschatology—the belief in the mythical happiness of universal brotherhood. Culture, however, has its basis in the right for dissimilarity.

“For Polish culture,” wrote Aleksander Hertz, “it would be much better if its creators of Jewish origin brought with them more specifically Jewish values [...] Examples of such a process can be observed in American culture where a Jewish contribution is more original and very strongly tied with Jewish tradition—thanks to this Jewish contribution is much more enriching.” The last issue was also dealt with in Adolf Rudnicki’s short story, “Wielki Stefan Konecki” (*The Great S. K.*) published in the volume *Szekspir* (*Shakespeare*). During a discussion with the writer Stefan Konecki (Ostap Ortwin) who is hiding from the Germans, the narrator and the main hero of the story says:

It’s impossible that you don’t know the result of writing under pseudonyms, the result of these endeavours to be more Polish than the Poles themselves. You should have been writing about us, first of all about us. You should have had no mercy for yourself. You should have lived at the price of saying and not at the price of silence. You would’ve won as a writer and perhaps we would’ve won as people. Our beloved would be dying now in a different way. Not in the mud, spittle and despise.

It might seem that after the holocaust the possibility of a creative cooperation was lost forever. Poland, the country which had 3 million citizens declaring their ties with the Jewish language and religion, the country in which there had existed a very specific, unique Jewish culture, both sacral and secular, became practically a country without Jews after the Nazi action. Out of 200 thousand of those who survived or returned from the Soviet Union, after several waves of emigration from the country which had become the cemetery of their nation, there were only several thousand Jews left and they were entirely absorbed into Polish culture.

Despite these dramatic changes, we deal here with "the most atrocious paradox," as Jan Błoński put it in his essay (see above). "The Jewish presence in the Polish novel (and perhaps in Polish literature in general) has never been more visible than after the holocaust," he writes. What is more, "conditions for creating 'Jewish school' in literature were gathered. Polish became the language of inner life, but life was marked, in an unexpectedly strong way, by the sense of Jewish distinctness."

Before we consider this Jewish experience in post-war Polish literature, we have to demonstrate the reasons for the change of perspective. What is more, it may be argued that these reasons reflect certain deeper processes in Polish literary culture after 1945. We shall also try to answer in what these subjects appear in Polish prose and what we learn from them about ourselves.

A lot of Polish writers became also Jewish writers as a result of tragic war experience. This experience helped them find their own voice and made them choose the subject of moral responsibility for history and for all sufferings of the Jewish nation, for the memory about the victims of the war crime. This issue was expected and demanded from writers, and this need was met by Julian Strykowski, Stanisław Wygodzki, Adolf Rudnicki, Kalman Segal, Artur Sandauer—to mention only those who wrote about it most extensively.

The compulsion to write about Jewish experience worked somehow differently in the case of the younger writers Bogdan Wojdowski (born 1930) and Henryk Grynberg (see above). Here the need to give a testimony already coexisted with the necessity to defend the memory about victims, with the desperate fear that the world is slowly

forgetting about what happened, what is more, that the world prefers not to remember.

My relatives were rather young. At family reunions there used to be up to 90 people. Today I walk around and look for vestiges among graves in the fields, at all execution sites. They filled up all gas chambers, all mass graves, they made the holes of gun barrels lock at them to avert them from me. There was not enough time and space. I was only 6 and it was possible not to notice me.

writes Grynberg in the short story "Ekipa Antygona" (Antigone Team). In another work of Grynberg's, the novel *Życie ideologiczne* (*Ideological Life*), the hero and narrator says: "Somebody should be on guard and watch even over this void."

In addition to all the above factors determining the presence of Jewish themes in post-war literature some less subjective ones should be mentioned here. Jerzy Jedlicki in his excellent work "Dzieje doświadczone i dzieje zaświadczone" (History Experienced and History Documented) published in the monthly *Twórczość* in 1977 was the first to pay attention to such factors. Our "historical" knowledge about the holocaust became more or less complete in the 1960s. From time to time (but not very often) new documents were discovered and (more and more) new monographs were published. But, as a matter of fact, they did not change the overall image of the holocaust considerably. The mechanisms of forgetting and selection started to operate. On the one hand, the massive character of this death made the popular knowledge about the holocaust become more and more abstract. On the other hand, this tragic adventure of mankind acquired alarmingly particular aspects becoming the history of the Poles, Jews, Russians, Germans, etc. The divisions and labelings were growing more and more detailed and the general image blurred. The problem of memory, or rather the lack of it, appeared in a new shape in literature, which is, after all, by its very nature, a communion of the dead with the alive. This challenging problem proved the superiority of literature over purely documentary relations, purely matter-of-fact reports and historical sources. Literature, as a branch of art, realized the need, or rather the necessity of the transposition of this more and more "objective," petrified knowledge into the universal reality of art. Only literature (art) could turn this testimony and historical know-

ledge into a metaphorical figure; the figure of human fate. And only literature could avoid depriving this knowledge of its individual burden which is capable of moving the reader's imagination.

It is worth mentioning that time played its role here also in another way. Some authors needed more time to take up the subject. Krystyna Żywulska, for example, the author of the famous book *Przeżyłam Oświęcim (I Survived Auschwitz)* which appeared just after the war, published the autobiographical novel *Pusta woda (Empty Water)* only in 1964. In the latter work she decided to reveal her origin and to delineate both the ghetto and the "aryan" side from the point of view of teenagers who, in search for food for themselves and their families, undertook risky trips out of the ghetto, or tried to find there a shelter and save their lives, which they sometimes managed to do.

All the above conditions (one has to remember that they worked simultaneously) do not make up a complete list of reasons for which Jewish themes found such an original and authentic expression in post-war prose. This "mine field," as Kazimierz Wierzyński in his poem "Lekcja konwersacji" (The Conversation Lesson) described the touchily experienced history of coexistence in the multinational Polish Republic, called for disarmament both in the name of historical truth and of psychological hygiene. Aleksander Hertz juxtaposed "the Jewish question" in Poland with "the Negro question" in the American South. This latter issue was analyzed by Gunnar Myrdal primarily as "the problem of the whites," as Grynberg reminds in his essays.

The history of Jewish experience, which used to be beshfully camouflaged and distorted, can be read as a record of ill feelings, feat and fascinations, frustrations and complexes and of the attempts to relax all the above tensions. This traumatic experience very often found drastic rendering in fiction. Although a similar phenomenon is known in psychotherapy, a lot of critics could not understand this mechanism and tried to solve the problem of "objectivity" of judgement by consulting authors' birth certificates.

The drastic character of the literature which justifies the above argument is even stronger and more startling because these were mainly confessions of people who (as in the case of Wygodzki or Grynberg) belonged to Polish post-war intelligentsia, were deeply

rooted in Polish culture and entirely identified with it only to learn one day that they are strangers, that they have no chance for public life in the future. The above controversies shaped editorial policies and often influenced lives of authors.

Obviously, all this was very harmful for Polish culture and literature. "From the history of those mutual days, the Poles can learn a lot of important and useful things about themselves, and this knowledge can turn out to be much less threatening than the lack of it," remarks Grynberg in his essay "Holocaust w literaturze polskiej" (The Holocaust in Polish Literature).

The last factor contributing to the osmosis of Polish and Jewish experience, but also of Polish-White Russian, Czech, Ukrainian and German experience, was the turn to the past very strong in the Polish literature of the 1960s and 1970s. This turn did not originate just from the interest in historical exoticism and it was not dictated by the need to escape the present. Thus the attempts to bring to life the murdered world of Jewish towns in Strykowski's work are not only to commemorate victims, but also to save the recollections of the dead world we shared not so long ago. This strong preoccupation with the past, with the world which used to be governed by vivid traditions, is also a strong reaction against those processes in modern societies that lead to the situation in which, as Czesław Miłosz writes in his commentary upon Vincenz's work, "people long for motherlands, but are granted with states instead." Looking back to the past is thus both an expression of nostalgia for old Europe in which people of different races, cultures and religions lived in quarrelsome agreement, and also an attempt to revive the tradition of cultural tolerance and dialogue—dramatic search for the roots in the century in which, as Margaret Mead pointed out in her *Culture and Commitment. A Study of Generation Gap*, because the world and the face of civilization have changed so much all people born before World War II are today expatriates from the soul.

The message of Strykowski's, Buczkowski's or Vincenz's prose is even more complex. Their novels record a modern reflection upon the fate of an individual in history, upon the presence of a logic in historical processes. Again and again the writers try to show that the last word on the subject of human values does not belong

to history. In this respect the Jewish experience depicted in Polish literature contributes to the above task probably more than anybody else's. "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man," warned Jeremiah a long time ago (17: 5), but humanism has not avoided this error. Post-war, post-Auschwitz humanism should be based upon a distrust of man [and, by the same token, of history-- *M. Z.*]. We the Jews, used to bear grudges against God, and we still often accuse him of letting us down, but certainly, it is much better to trust God than to trust man. Especially now, when it is so easy to bring about a holocaust involving all mankind," Henryk Grynberg says in his essay "Mój temat" (My Subject).

Transl. by *Zofia Lesińska*