

## History of Polish independent literature

### Polish Literature of the Eighties by Leszek Żuliński

Translated by Leslie Shyman

The decade of the eighties provided numerous instances of revision in the appraisal of Polish poetry.

First of all, the two continuums were fractured: the generational one; and that one which we may define as of "PPR" (Polish Peoples' Republic).

Many poets who for me, and my contemporaries represented the pinnacles of success and were creators of poetic canons departed through the natural process of attrition, among them: Zbigniew Herbert, Artur Miedzyrzecki, Wiktor Woroszyński, Jerzy Harasymowicz, Zbigniew Bienkowski, Stanisław Swen Czachorowski, Stanisław Czycz, Małgorzata Hillar, Marian Piechal, Aleksander Rymkiewicz, Włodzimierz Słobodnik, Tadeusz Słowiak.

The powerful waves of the River Styx carried away the old poets, day in day. A blank space was placed on the roster of so called contemporary classics.

Were those empty spaces filled up automatically? Not necessarily. The process of the changing of the guard was disrupted by the demiurges returning from exile.

Czesław Miłosz, who for thirty years did not exist in the school books or other easily available sources nor in our consciousness, suddenly returned to reign as a once dethroned monarch.

The effect of that grandiose momentous event did not diminish with time on the contrary, it became even more powerful. Today, Polish poetry is Miłosz-

centered. As a matter of fact, although a few disciples, he has become a kind of literary national hero; an augur, the authority and the point of reference.

Next to Milosz stand Wislawa Szymborska and the beloved priest Jan Twardowski.

With this statement alone, it would be possible to conclude a lecture on contemporary Polish poetry.

Those named above, are no doubt, the magnificent poets. However, the art of peddling introduced fully to our "market of poetry" in the last years of the Twentieth Century, almost totally, pushed off the shelves, the work of the other poets. We should not expect from the mass consumers the discriminating knowledge of such esoteric art as poetry and these customers are well pleased and satisfied with the products of the Great Three.

The shape of the modern literature was formed mainly by the two phenomena of the political and social transformation. The first one happened when the people and culture took up barricades. The second segued when during the long nineties, the culture descended from "engineering souls" to a market economy, where it was obvious that poetry was just another form of merchandise.

However, we have to admit that those three greats we had mentioned uniquely combined the artistic values with the commercial ones something which is quite unusual in our profession.

But let us return to the subject of emigration. Talking about literature as a whole, thus not only about poetry; we have witnessed the great come back of many authors and their works. Some of the well known are at the top of "index censorum", some of them less known and less forbidden.

On the whole the literature represented by the three great centers of émigré writing are the Parisian "Kultura"; and "Wiadomosci Literackie", plus "Oficyna

Malarzy i Poetow" (Poets and Painters Press), both of London; returned to "Fatherland".

Thus the poetry of émigré poets, amongst them; Czeslaw Bednarczyk, Andrzej Bobkowski, Marian Czuchniowski, Waclaw Iwaniuk, Aleksander Janta-Polczynski, Jerzy Pieterkiewicz, Tadeusz Sulkowski became known in their native country.

Ergo, we had to recreate the picture of the post war Polish Literature by putting in the "new" names and mentioning the phenomena previously omitted. But was that, looking retrospectively, a revolutionary change of the literary landscape?

Should we; in the first turn, consider the "discovery" of works by Czeslaw Milosz and that of Witold Gombrowicz; and in the second turn, those of Stanislaw Vincenz, Aleksander Wat, Gustaw Herling Grudzinski and Konstanty Jelenski. The answer would be yes.

However, should we look at émigré literature from the perspective of distance, and especially evaluate its poetry; we must declare that the poetry of "PPR" was not its inferior. We can even say that the great lyrical poets of Poland, with the exception of Milosz, did remain in their country.

However, the knowledge of the émigré literature in a side effect, showed us Polish Jewish literature, and that Jewish Sone of Polish correlation, about which we had but a little idea.

The problem of the return of the emigrants had been complicated by its reverse. There was a new immigration which roughly speaking started during the period of state of war. Therefore, we have a new generation of émigré poets headed by Stanislaw Baranczak and Adam Zagajewski. But was that really a new formation? Obviously, not! And speaking generally the definition of writers in exile, lost most of it previous meaning, rationale and ethos.

Probably, today we do not have émigré writers but only expatriate ones. The progress of globalization and integration of states will soon eliminate the idea of émigré writers altogether.

Now let us have look at the situation in Poland. Some writers have passed away, some have emigrated, some have returned to their native country where the literary infrastructure suddenly collapsed. The publishing houses and literary periodicals supported and controlled by PPR succumbed. One after another, the periodicals which were sustaining the literary life succumbed.

Their place was quickly but not successfully taken by the new publishers and periodicals. There were reasons for these specific phenomena, namely, the societal opposition of the creators of so called secondary circulation, those of outside censorship; and the opposition of the literary dissidents and the opportunism or functioning in agreement with the state. Those opposition functions had changed into the opposition of the victorious post-Solidarity, and of the defeated post communism.

That was expressed in the new system of periodicals and publishing houses. The government or Party support of literature disappeared. Its place was taken by lobbying of new political type based on the viewing of the recent past.

"Underground" had changed to "overground" and vice versa.

Unfortunately, it was accompanied by violation of literary values. The classic example is the case of Jerzy Harasymowicz, the unique and outstanding poet who had never declared himself as a dissident, and today the rightist critics and those of the "post solidarity" try to depreciate him, and that is not the only instance.

In summary, the former followers of "Social Realism" who revolted against the Communist regime in

1968/1976, later became the authorities. Their contemporaries, the leftist (post-communists), and socialists received the mark of inferiority and the place at the back row of Literature. And in the space around them appeared litterateurs of post solidarity period.

Consequently, almost all of the poetry of the sixties was lost; especially that of the most numerous and important variations of "Poetic Orientation Hybrydy". Those poets stressed universalism and esthetic phenomenon of lyricism. They wanted to express through symbols and metaphors the transitory beauty of life, and its metaphysical paradoxes, and the existential sense of life.

At the end of sixties and the beginning of seventies came the New Wave which defined the poetry of Orientation as a waste of time, superesthetism, and intellectual opportunism. The New Wave wanted the anti-lyrical polemics take up the barricades. They did not wish to explode the existential fate, but the mechanism of social and political life. Their enemy was the world of newspaper not absurd and paradox existence.

Of course, it was the return to utilitarian political literature, this time on the side of the opposition. That return had its roots in the political and social reality which became more and more oppressive and led to the anti-socialist revolution

The New Wave made careers of Stanislaw Baranczak, Adam Zagajewski, Krzysztof Karasek, Julian Konhaser and Ryszard Krynicki. Their excomrades, who became too passive, for instance, Stanislaw Stabro, were coldly isolated,. The representatives of the alternative programs such as "Tylicz" the group emphasizing the landscape or the group "Wspolnosc" (Community) once famed for their program of New Selfness became completely forgotten.

The greatest problem for the opponents of Orientation is simply that: Krzysztof Gasiorowski, Jerzy Gorzanski, Zbigniew Jerzyna, Bohdan Justynowicz, Wojciech Kawinski, Tadeusz Kijonka, Krystyna Milobedzka, Wincenty Rozanski, Janusz Syczne, Roman Sliwonik, Andrzej K. Waskiewicz, Marek Wawrzekiewicz, Janusz Zermicki; are in many cases better poets, just better, than the luminaries of New Wave. But they were silenced. Yes, they could publish, and they did publish, but the present fashion in literature is directed by the mechanism of applicable political correctness. That correctness is often connected to the interest of great publishing and press concerns which put financial profit over other values.

However, in that literary landscape of nineties there was space left for the young ones, and that was well utilized. There appeared a number of magazines connected with the young literature: "Akant", "bruLion", "Czas Kultury", "Fa-art", "Fraza", "Fronda", "Nowa Okolica Poetow", "Nowy Nurt", "Przegląd Artystyczno-Literacki", "Pracownia", "Topos", "Tygiel Kultury". And in addition so called "art-zins" "fazins", small publications made on duplicators, which are models of new "underground" which now is associated to freedom of "hippies" style not to the revolt against PPR. There were so many of those magazines that a good number of the ceased publications.

That youthful revolt corresponded but weekly, to the real problem of grown up society. The political dangers of past disappeared, and the cultural life were polarized and pluralized. So what could be the alternative? The struggle against the bourgeoisie mentality and utilitarianism, and the rules of societal games. But that phenomena survived the revolution. Would not therefore the philosophy of 'samozdats', of childish showing of tongue, of total anarchy; should as

well experience the revolution? However, to destroy the social orthography, first of all we must have it.

Perhaps the young people, who debuted after the political transformation, did not have their own "orthography". That was the code of older generations while the young one, did not have their place under the sun. Some "post communism" fought with some "post Solidarity", arguing with some foggy arguments about esoteric matters - and the youngsters felt that that was not their world.

Today, they are the generation with no history, the younger brothers and sisters of ex-combatants of students' strikes and clubs. Presently that Student Culture, once great one creative, disintegrated. So what we have in its place is - the new subcultures.

The revolution started for the youngest people in the last decade.

## Leszek Żuliński



*The Young Angry Men of Poland 50 Years Ago*

**An Interview**

**with Dr. Leszek Szymanski - the legendary founder of small literary magazine of 50 thousand circulation**

**by Danuta Błaszak**

In literature often we have a group of men who initiate breakthrough from then obligatory conventions; be they artistic or political ones. If such a breach is incremental we know their names chiefly as individuals, the main actors of certain literary current or period. It is unique that of a group becomes synonymous with the term describing a movement or generation. Such a phenomenon took commenced in Warsaw in October 1956. Let us remember that was the time of the bloody Hungarian Uprising, and the so called Polish Revolution, the time of perennial changes which led to "Solidarity", breaking of the Soviet Block, and present Polish independence. Those were also times of the Cold War when the Iron Curtain was shut tightly.

\*\*\*

**Leszek Szymański:**

Let's talk about the first independent magazine "Współczesność". My friends and I were children of war. Too young to participate, but also old enough to remember a little pre-war times, and most importantly to read the Western and pre-war Polish literature, in time when socialistic realism was gradually introduced in Poland.

In 1956, when we were mature enough to write ourselves, "soc-realism" was an obligatory doctrine. To simplify - a writer was an employee of propaganda machine.

For the people of present times it is difficult to comprehend in what a sort of Orwellian society we were living. In 1956, everything was under control. The

government required even duplicators had to be registered and there was a talk of registering typewriters.

The borders were closed. To visit the neighboring socialistic countries was difficult. To travel to the West was almost impossible.

**D.B.:** Indeed. In today's world of free travel and countless little magazines, it is hard to imagine that. But if the party i.e. censorship was permeating cultural life how was it possible to print an independent literary journal?

**L.Sz.:**

As a matter of fact it was impossible. After the death of Stalin in 1953, there started internecine struggle ion ruling the communist party. Boleslaw Bierut, Stalin's henchman died suspiciously in Moscow. Wladyslaw Gomulka an ex-First Secretary, who was in disgrace and even imprisoned for his "Titoism", was coming back to power.

Meanwhile in Polish politics and literature there was a semi-chaos. At the same time in the Soviet literature started so called "Thaw" from the title of Ilya Ehrenburg's book. First books by Soleznicyn and Dudincev appeared.

A lot of writers and party activists found that they were betrayed by Stalin.

It was a right moment to start such a group so Roman Sliwonik and I did so basing the membership mainly on the members of the circle of young writers at the Union of Litterateurs. We approached the Minister of Culture Karol Kuryluk, and got from him a little money and a letter of recommendation to the Main Censorship office. The Censorship (i.e. someone in the Central Committee) allowed us to publish the magazine. We were young; practically *carte blanche*, and probably

Gomulka wanted to use us somehow. But before we printed the first number so called Poznan events (Uprising) took place, and our permit was withdrawn before we even printed the first copy.

But that time I regained the permit with no great trouble and the first number of "Współczesność" was printed in the beginning of October, 1956. There was nothing special about it, except that there was only private literary magazine behind the Iron Curtain.

**D.B.:** I know it was something unique but what about the substructure, editorial office, money for printing, paper, wages and royalties?

**L.Sz.:**

We had none. But now a lot of people generally young ones, but some elder writers too knew about us and some helped while others tried to hurt us.

So what was your main difficulty?

Our main difficulty was lack of the allotment of printing paper. Here Andrzej Korczak, a young journalist from "Express Wieczorny" became our savior. He found us a printing house ready to give us credit, and found some "free market" paper. Korczak also gave us a professional polish.

**D.B.:** What was your credo or ideology?

**L.Sz.:**

There could not be much originality about there. The official ideology of non-religious papers was Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet edition. No paper could avoid paying it lip service. Or iconoclasm consisted in observing that on the beautiful face of Socialism there were nevertheless so warts, and perhaps sometime a cross eye.

My invention was the title of the magazine "The Contemporary". On the whole the contemporaneity

was supposed to be rosy. Thus photographing warts we helped to beautify Socialism. At the same time we showed the Western literature as that was also a part of world reality.

So we were realistic writers but not according to formulas of soc-realism. Poetry was a separate entity. Thus our "manifesto" concerned mainly prose writers. By the way editor of department of poetry was Roman Sliwonik then as famous in poetry as Marek Hlasko was in prose. Marek Hlasko became the classic of Polish literature.

**D.B.:** His writing is popular even now. Was he a member of your group?

**L.Sz.:**

No, he was only a member of our generation. He supported and helped us but he was a phenomenon on his own. We had amongst many writers as talented as him. But luckily for himself somehow he became known not only nationally but internationally as well.

**D.B.:** I hear that the circulation of the second number was over fifty thousand copies. A phenomenon unique for any literary journal in the whole world!

**L.Sz.:**

That's true. There was nothing to be ashamed about that second number. We sold about ten thousand in Warsaw herself, on the corners of the streets, in cafes and restaurants, in the parks.

But in that triumph of ours thunder stroke us. The Censorship closed us. No explanation but I learnt that the reason was Roman Sliwonik's poem printed on the first page "To Our Hungarian Brothers".

Gomulka was afraid of the Soviet armed intervention and the poem made him furious. This time all my efforts to get permit back were in vain. By the way that director

of printing house from Smolna Street was sent to the province, and some people on Mysia Street (Censors) lost their jobs.

**D.B.:** Tell me about your legendary meeting with Gomulka.

**L.Sz.:**

There was neither anything legendary nor heroic about that. On the mass meeting "wiece" in the Palace of Culture, I was able to approach Gomulka and request return of our permit.

Gomulka was first furious and shouted that the old writers will not govern Poland, and the young one wanted the Russian tanks in Warsaw. I joined him in complains about the old writers (most of them aparatchiks and politruks), and assure that printing of Sliwonik's poem was my personal oversight, as someone took it out from the rejected file.

Gomulka calmed and wrote the instruction to comrade Starr of the central Committee to allow us publication again. The condition was that we were not permitted even to touch political subjects, and had to find money and printing paper on our own.

Retrospectively I think, that Gomulka thought we would go bankrupt, and that in the last moment he would save us and substitute us for "Po Prostu" an organ of ex young Party members who helped his comeback, but now they were becoming a political liability with their demands for various political and social reforms.

**D.B.:** How did you survive? Did you stop photographing warts?

**L.Sz.:**

Somehow we gained a broad readership. Besides we borrowed money from the temporary patrons, I remember amongst them a poetical group "Helikon". We

printed translations from the western literature, we were criticizing the regime but never directly, always in disguise of curing the evil. We paid royalties only to those who were in dire need of money as poet Marian Osniowski who needed new shoes.

Suddenly we became the national movement of the young creators, and political power. The party could not tolerate such situation.

**D.B.:** Did they liquidate you?

**L.Sz.:**

They adopted us. One day I was called to the Central Committee and comrade Bebenek told we that we would either closed for good or had to become the part of the government publishing apparatus.

I had to agree. We got the editorial office, salaries, secretaries and allotment of the printing paper, and the deputy chief editor in the person of the ex-First Secretary of the Union of Youth (kindergarten for the party).

I remember that Lenart once told me that first the hair will grown on his palm before i hall publish independent magazine. Now with his hair palm he became de facto chief editor. There were gradual and mild change in the profile of the journal. Eventually, I was given to understand that I would have to join the party, not only me but the members of the group. In such a case even the illusion of independence would be gone as the Party members had to abide to the "Leninist" discipline.

About that time I won Teodor Parnicki's prize and went to India. from there i decided to emigrate to Australia and my career as an emigre writer commenced.

"Wspolczesnosc" eventually became an important and Party directed literary journal. After many years and political changes it faded. But it left its name to the whole generation of the Polish writers and the important phase in the country's literature.

A short article by Jan Zdzisław Brudnicki about sense of humor that is characteristic for Polish literature as the meanings between lines. (D.B.)

**Jan Zdzisław Brudnicki**  
**Humor in Essays**

Essay became the main kind of expression, and columnists became kings of journalism. In movies, humor ruled from the very beginning. Sketch, burlesque, and later comedy were the most watched films. Theater always had an inclusion of some kind of cabaret. Starting with Shakespeare, it became a rule. Radio and TV programming, more and more employ obvious or camouflaged comedy. This is only a short step from Pop Culture. Pop Culture either town or country always used humor. But now it is supported by almighty commercialism. Bandstand and stage became its center. Białoszewski, for example, used in his "Cabaret Kici-Kici" bohemian humor encountered on the streets or subways. Politicians adopted this trend and took it to parliament and other high offices. Sociologists say that only small part of jokesters and internet calumnies escape the scrutiny. But media notice this, and just before yesterday, I read : "Keep it this way, Mr. Romek, and it will be even funnier around you." (...)

The money, influence and fame in humor are too big not to become institutionalized into acting departments, theaters, journalism, talk-shows, books (whole libraries of studies, memoirs, press clippings), breaks for laughs even in Church homilies.

**Translated by Barbara Voit**

## Weronika Girys-Czagowiec

University of Zielona Góra

In essence, Rembek's soul is immortal.  
Stanisław Grochowiak, *Dokładne opisanie Rembeka*

Stanisław Rembek – the unwanted writer<sup>1</sup>

Stanisław Grochowiak called Stanisław Rembek a tragically forgotten writer who had the misfortune of writing about the armed conflict in 1920. His two novels, *Nagan* (1928) and *W polu* (1937) were based on experiences he gathered during the Polish – Soviet war, while he was fighting at the Daugava river, Warsaw and Zamość as an artilleryman in the 1<sup>st</sup> gun battery of the 10<sup>th</sup> Polish “Kaniów”<sup>2</sup> field artillery regiment.

It is worth noticing that his works were appreciated until the People's Republic of Poland made him sink into oblivion. His literary awards are proof enough. In March 1939 his novel *W polu* received an award for the best novel of the last five years, given by the Literary Bank with finances from the Franciszek Salezy Lewental fund; the award itself being established by Henryk Sienkiewicz<sup>3</sup>. Later on, in August, Rembek was awarded the Adam Asnyk Literary Award of the city Kalisz, while in 1945, he was given the award of the Ministry of Culture and Art<sup>4</sup>. The aforementioned novel was acclaimed by literary critics as a masterpiece of military prose. It was highly valued by Karol Irzykowski, Stefan Kołaczkowski, Julian Krzyżanowski, and Kazimierz Wyka<sup>5</sup>, who wrote: The fact of using a collective protagonist allows to

---

<sup>1</sup> Initially published in: *"Nie należy dopuszczać do publikacji". Cenzura w PRL*, published by UMK in Toruń.

<sup>2</sup> Kaniów (Kaniw, Ukr: Канів) is a city in Ukraine, where in 1918 a battle took place between Polish and German forces. Even though Polish soldiers lost the battle, thanks to their bravery and steadfastness, the regiment that reformed after the battle received was named after this city.

<sup>3</sup> T. Burek, *Rembek*, [in:] *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, book 31, part 1, Wrocław 1988, p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 76-77.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 76.

see this novel as part of social realism; psychological deepening and untypical nature of particular characters' behaviour however are in favour of psychological realism. This novel of superb military scenes depicts (what seems to be untypical, concerning the time of its creation) not the final period of victorious struggles, but preceding defeats and retreats. The whole company dies, entangled in an absurdly irrational issue of guilt and punishment<sup>6</sup>.

Maria Dąbrowska, who announced Rembek's candidacy for the "Wiadomości Literackie" award, considered Rembek's works to be in some cases better than those of Erich Remarque<sup>7</sup>:

*W polu* seems to be in many respects better than Remarque. Luckily, Rembek managed to avoid the reportage "style" and artificial, formal simplicity. Through experiences of one company, he painted a shocking image of the war, and I highly recommend it to the attention, hearts and minds of judges<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> After: G. Moskalska, *Stanisław Rembek (1901-1985)*, „Miesięcznik Prowincjonalny” 2008, no. 1, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noticing that because of this comparison with Remarque's works, Rembek's work was interpreted this way. He himself in one of his letters tried to prove how illogical such comparison is, and fought the "curse of this legend". In the letter to "Tygodnik Powszechny" in 1955, he wrote: „So, my first novel was published seven months before the first publication of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. (...) Taking chronology into account – one could discuss, at most, my influence on Remarque, if only he understood Polish and read "Robotnik" for instance". After: G. Moskalska, *op. cit.*, p. 32. cf. „It was said many times that Rembek painted a picture of war which was far different than naivety of pacifists like Remarque, but also different than glorification of war in the image of Jünger or, even worse, its »western« trivialisation.” – M. Urbanowski, *Historia Rembeka*, [in:] *idem, Oczyszczenie. Szkice o literaturze polskiej XX wieku*, Kraków 2002, p. 178. In terms of reportage style, vide E. Ławecka, *Reporterskie widzenie świata w prozie wojennej Stanisława Rembeka*, [in:] *Mistrzowie literatury czy dziennikarstwa?*, eds K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, W. Furman, J. Snopek, Warszawa 2011.

<sup>8</sup> After: G. Moskalska, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

The writer was also faced with accusations concerning the reality he described in his novels depicting the war of 1920. Unfavourable reviewers would rather that a talented, novice writer showed an idealistic image of a legionnaire<sup>9</sup>. While the “dirty reality of war” was seen as a disadvantage by unfavourable critics, friendly critics acclaimed it as a proof of value of Rembek’s novels. He himself, years later during an interview with Zbigniew Irzyk said: “My war is what it is in reality”<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, due to the fact that his novel *Nagan* was initially published in the „Robotnik” newspaper, Rembek was accused of pro-Bolshevik tendencies. These accusations were made, among others, by Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski, who saw him as a rival in the area of military literature<sup>11</sup>. Rembek commented on it bitterly: „I was accused of “pro-Bolshevik” sympathising just because I impartially described events from the years 1919-1920”<sup>12</sup>. As Joanna Siedlecka points out, the after-war success of the writer was practically partial<sup>13</sup>.

After 1945, Stanisław Rembek was virtually absent in Polish literature. Or rather, like Maciej Urbanowski puts it, “ill-present”<sup>14</sup>. The scholar noticed that all literature regarding the war of 1920 was erased from minds of Poles for decades. One might have an impression that it was not a topic of literary works, although the truth is different, which proves an anthology *Szlakiem zwycięstwa. Relacje literatów z wojny 1920*<sup>15</sup> published in 2012. This book proves that this war was a vital experience for Polish writers, as illustrated in their works. The struggle with Bolsheviks did not bring Polish literature to a halt.

Many artists like Józef Czechowicz, Józef Czapski, brothers Stanisław and Józef Mackiewicz, Julian Przyboś and

---

<sup>9</sup> Vide *ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Z. Irzyk, *Rozmowy z pisarzami. Stanisław Rembek*, „Kierunki” 1978, no. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Vide J. Siedlecka, *Pech Stanisława Rembeka*, [in:] *eadem*, *Wypominki*, Warszawa, p. 224.

<sup>12</sup> After: G. Moskalska, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> J. Siedlecka, *Pech Stanisława Rembeka*, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

<sup>14</sup> M. Urbanowski, *Historia Rembeka*, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> *Szlakiem zwycięstwa. Relacje literatów z wojny 1920*, Łomianki 2012.

Władysław Broniewski set off to fight. As Maciej Urbanowski puts it, on 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 1920 the Mobilisation Committee of unions of artists and writers issued an appeal in which it encouraged artists to act: "It is time, the walls of our house are shaking. We need to lift the spirits of our soldiers, who are supporting these shaking walls with their bleeding shoulders. (...) To the front!"<sup>16</sup>. It is such writers as Stefan Żeromski, Karol Irzykowski or Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki who created superb reportages depicting anti-Bolshevism of Polish soldiers, the damage caused by Bolsheviks and horror-stricken Poles observing how atheistic communists despise religion<sup>17</sup>. Żeromski saw a chance in winning against Bolsheviks, a chance for Poland to break these eternal shackles, to force the world to acknowledge the truth that ideas, in the name of which Polish soldiers died fighting the Red Army,

were standing a hundred times higher than laws coined in a tight group of oligarchs from Moscow which wanted to force these laws upon us. (...) Once defeated on the battlefield, Bolshevism needs to be defeated in the core of its ideology. On its place, higher rules need to be put, ideas more just, wiser and better<sup>18</sup>.

Aforementioned texts are a proof of that time, they describe days when not only the fate of Poland was at stake, but the fate of the whole Europe. As Janusz Cisek points out, the war of 1920 passed generally unnoticed by the world, it was merely a marginal conflict. It needs to be said, that by winning at Warsaw, Poland not only saved itself and its independence, but also a significant part of Europe<sup>19</sup>. The meaning of this victorious battle was also emphasized by, among others, Edgar d'Abernon, who, despite being aware of the threat that Bolshevism posed on the western civilisation,

---

<sup>16</sup> M. Urbanowski, *Postowie*, [in:] *Szlakiem zwycięstwa. Relacje literatów z wojny 1920*, Łomianki 2012, p. 193.

<sup>17</sup> Vide *ibidem*, p. 194-195.

<sup>18</sup> S. Żeromski, *Na probostwie w Wyszku*, [in:] *Szlakiem zwycięstwa, op. cit.*, p. 189-190.

<sup>19</sup> *Cudu nie było – Warszawę obronił żołnierz*, „Rzeczpospolita” 6 Aug. 2010. A conversation with Piotr Zychowicz.

called the Battle of Warsaw the 18<sup>th</sup> most important battle in the history of the world<sup>20</sup>.

Maciej Urbanowski is right in saying that the works of Stanisław Rembek, Józef Mackiewicz, stories of Eugeniusz Małaczewski, reportages of Stefan Żeromski, Karol Irzykowski or Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki should be required reading. However, that was not the case. As Karol Stępniewski, Rembek's son-in-law mentions, the Polish-Soviet war was a huge success, which was later a forbidden topic in conversations and writing. Marxism and Leninism textbooks which were used in universities called the 1920 war an invasion of the Polish lordship. Karol Stępniewski says:

My generation (...) was brought up in the atmosphere of paranoia. On one hand we knew of many facts, we were asking people like Rembek, but it was only among us, as it wasn't allowed to talk or write about it. That would lead to a schizophrenia-like situation. We were used to it though, we knew when and with whom to talk. It was an inner circle<sup>21</sup>.

The years after the war were quite dramatic for Stanisław Rembek. In 1947 he managed to publish a book *Wyrok na Franciszka Kłosa* thanks to a private publishing house of Eugeniusz Kuthan. The book was not accepted favourably, as it was a study of treason – it showed a Blue Policeman<sup>22</sup> (2) collaborating with Germans. According to Marek Nowakowski, it is the best literary work of Rembek<sup>23</sup>, while Leopold Tyrmand called it one of the best books about occupation<sup>24</sup>. For a long time it was not possible to make a film adaptation. As Maria<sup>25</sup> and Karol Stępniewski<sup>26</sup> recollect,

---

<sup>20</sup> E. d' Abernon, *Osiemnasta decydująca bitwa w dziejach świata pod Warszawą 1920 roku*, Warszawa 1990.

<sup>21</sup> K. Stępniewski, *Krąg wtajemniczonych*, [in:] *Dusza czyścowa*, oprac. A. Romaniuk, Warszawa 2010, p. 268.

<sup>22</sup> Blue Police was a common name of Polish police forces existing during the Second World War in General Government – a German-occupied area in Poland.

<sup>23</sup> Vide J. Siedlecka, *Pech Stanisława Rembeka*, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 229.

<sup>25</sup> Maria Stępniewska, maiden name Dehnel, the daughter of the first marriage of Maria Rembek.

it was the Germans who wanted to shoot a film based on *Wyrok...*, however Rembek signed an agreement with the director Stanisław Lenartowicz. Although it seemed that this undertaking would be seen through, in the end the movie was not shot. Leopold Tyrmand writes:

(...) from the point of current criteria, there was nothing against the book, it's just anti-German, in a Polish way, and the Blue Policeman is described without any sympathy. Oh well, rubbish! Politruks responsible for remembering were still remembering after 18 years that Rembek isn't "theirs" or "ours" - which was enough to erase him from the living, even if he wrote a masterpiece<sup>27</sup>.

And so it happened - Rembek was "erased", his novels about the Polish-Soviet war were removed from libraries for being "anti-Soviet", and the writer could only dream of reissues. As Konrad Rokicki puts it, being a writer in the People's Republic was only a "free" trade by definition. The literary environment was subject to overt and secret control. It was steered using artistic groups, national institutions and party authorities<sup>28</sup>. Literary works, just like any public activity, were used as political tools. Cultural politics became the country's domain, which was in reality controlled by the Polish United Workers' Party. Rembek, who after 1945 promised never to cooperate with the regime, would not act according to fads and circumstances and kept away from literary salons, was condemned to being forgotten and living on the verge of poverty. The writer could not and

---

<sup>26</sup> W. Girys-Czagowiec, a conversation with M. and K. Stępniewski, 18<sup>th</sup> of April, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> After J. Siedlecka, *Pech Stanisława Rembeka*, op. cit., p. 230.

<sup>28</sup> K. Rokicki, *Literaci. Relacje między literatami a władzami PRL w latach 1956-1970*, Warszawa 2011, p. 41. Vide U. Urban, *Władza ludowa a literaci. Polityka władz wobec środowiska Związku Zawodowego Literatów Polskich 1947-1950*, Warszawa 2006; *Twórczość obca nam klasowo. Aparat represji wobec środowiska literackiego 1956-1990*, ed. A. Chojnowski, S. Ligarski, Warszawa 2009; J. Siedlecka, *Oblawa. Losy pisarzy represjonowanych*, Warszawa 2005; eadem, *Kryptonim Liryka. Bezpieka wobec literatów*, Warszawa 2008.

would not take up topics that could be approved by the government.

Maciej Urbanowski emphasises that Rembek, the author of the most remarkable works regarding the Polish-Soviet war, quickly became one of the biggest recluses and outsiders of the Polish post-war literature. According to the scholar, it was so due to the fact that Rembek could masterfully analyse the phenomenon of treason and collaboration, he was able to show the grim role which Russia and Russians played in Poland of the past 200 years. Also he would obsessively take up the topic of Poles fighting for their independence<sup>29</sup>. This made the writer's life in communist Poland really difficult. He was arrested many times, once he was even locked in an insane asylum for two months<sup>30</sup>. Rembek himself, in a letter to Jerzy Giedroyc wrote:

I don't feel and I am not sane. At the very sight of a sleazy and arrogant gob of a red revolution-borne jerk, my fists itch so badly that I often can't control myself.<sup>31</sup>.

During the thaw, Rembek managed to publish a book named *Ballada o wzgardliwym wisielcu oraz dwie gawędy styczniowe* (1956), however the „aura around Rembek has already managed to solidify. Some particularly ceremonial vespers were held and afterwards the candles lit for his works died again”<sup>32</sup>. The same misfortune followed shooting the movie based on two stories from the *Ballad...: Przekazana sztafeta* and *Igła wojewody*. Juliusz Machulski read the book for the first time in 1977 and he was so touched by it, that – as he remembers – he knew immediately that a film adaptation needs to be made<sup>33</sup>:

---

<sup>29</sup> M. Urbanowski, *Historia Rembeka*, *op. cit.*, p. 184-185.

<sup>30</sup> M. Urbanowski, *Posłowie*, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>31</sup> After: M. Urbanowski, *Posłowie*, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

<sup>32</sup> S. Grochowiak, after: J. Siedlecka, *Pech Stanisława Rembeka*, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>33</sup> J. Machulski, *Kilka słów na temat Ballady o wzgardliwym wisielcu Stanisława Rembeka*, [in:] S. Rembek. *Ballada o wzgardliwym wisielcu i dwie gawędy styczniowe*, Warszawa cop. 2001, p. 321.

I've never read better historical prose than the stories *Przekazana sztafeta* and *Igła wojewody*. I saw two extraordinary movies in them, but first of all, I was mesmerised by the perspective Rembek assumed while looking at one of the most painful and, honestly, one of the least known uprisings of ours. The January Uprising, seen through the eyes of an officer of a pacifying czar's army! A young Russian, who not only understands his enemies but also commiserates with them – I wanted to see such heroes on the big screen, those who go against well worn habits, and I was looking for them in historical movies. At that point I was already done with my third year of directing at the university in Łódź and I realised that it'll be a long time before I shoot the movie myself. However I knew that if no one forestalls me, I'll do everything to shoot it<sup>34</sup>.

In spring, 1981, „during the time of solidarity fever and freedom”<sup>35</sup>, a proposal made by Machulski in the KADR Film Group of Jerzy Kawalerowicz was accepted without any reservations, however the outbreak of the martial law in Poland delayed the undertaking, and it seemed that it would be delayed forever. The director returned to it in 1989 and finished it in 1992, after Rembek's death. *Szwadron*, however, was not favourably accepted either by the jury of the Film Festival in Gdynia, which almost did not notice it, and also by the public and journalists, who essentially ignored the movie.

It is worth mentioning that Rembek dedicated the *Ballad...* to “Bolesław Piasecki, as a poor token of appreciation for persistent help given to me in the direst time of my life”. It was Piasecki who gave Rembek support during Stalin's reign. The writer was hired as an internal reviewer in the Pax Publishing Institute<sup>36</sup>. He also printed his essays and articles in “Kierunki”, which could not be printed before 1956 because

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 321-322.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 322.

<sup>36</sup> Readings works of young writers given to him, Rembek met Stanisław Grochowiak, and he reviewed Grochowiak's *Ballada rycerska* very favourably. Future friendship of both writers lasted till Grochowiak's death.

of his name and topics he was writing about<sup>37</sup>. It allowed Rembek to survive Stalinism.

It seemed after October, that the situation of the writer and his family might change. Rembek was given an apartment at Marszałkowska street, even the Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz granted him pension for distinguished people in times of the People's Republic of Poland<sup>38</sup>. As Karol Stępniewski recalls, it was due to the fact that his family were receiving food parcels from the West, which helped in surviving day after day<sup>39</sup>. The "Czytelnik" Publishing House was also considering a reissue of the novel *W polu*. Rembek signed a contract and was paid in advance. However, the book was never reissued. "Sooner pigs will fly than I reissue Rembek" - said Helena Zatorska from the Central Office of Publishing Houses, later on the president of the Publishing Houses Department of the Ministry of Culture and Art, "the main policewoman of literature issues"<sup>40</sup>, also called "Stalinist offspring"<sup>41</sup> by Rembek.

In 1958 Rembek published *W polu* in the Literary Institute of Jerzy Giedroyc in Paris, which permanently shattered his chances of publishing in Poland. Many of his friends turned away from him too. Rembek himself was only keeping in touch with few people, crossing out those who decided to cooperate with the regime. People who remained close with Rembek were Stanisław Grochowiak, Władysław Grabski, Jan Nepomucen Miller, Jerzy Mieczysław Rytard, Tadeusz Dehnel.

Despite plans to write, which Rembek mentioned of to Irzyk in a interview in "Kierunki"<sup>42</sup>, he did not publish

<sup>37</sup> K. Stępniewski, *op. cit.*, p 266.

<sup>38</sup> The notification of 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1961 regarding granting pension from the Prime Minister, Citizen Józef Cyrankiewicz, amounting to 1600zł per month is located in the National Library in Warsaw, the Department of Manuscripts, signature. 17415 (Biographical materials).

<sup>39</sup> W. Girys-Czagowiec, a conversation with M. and K. Stępniewski, 18<sup>th</sup> of April, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> W. Wodecki, *Odkrycie Rembeka*, „Robotnicza Gazeta Wrocławska” no. 36 from 12<sup>th</sup> of February, 1999.

<sup>41</sup> J. Siedlecka, *Kryptonim Liryka*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>42</sup> Z. Irzyk, *op. cit.*

anything new until his death. He did start several writing several books, he signed contracts, sometimes even was paid in advance, which is confirmed by documents collected in the Department of Manuscripts of the National Library in Warsaw<sup>43</sup>, however nothing was finished. *Dzienniki. Rok 1920 i okolice* were not published until 1997, while *Dziennik okupacyjny* was published in 2000. In 200, *Przemoc i szabla*, a novel about Józef Wybicki was released, while in 2004 *Cygaro Churchilla* was published, which contains texts concerning the 1920 war which were supposed to be a part of a novel planned by Rembek, a story *Wrzesień* which is a report of the invasion of Poland in 1939, occupation-related stories as well as fragments of an unfinished novel about the Warsaw Uprising, *Ostatnia porażka*. To this day, *Wianek Malwiny*<sup>44</sup> – an unfinished novel about the November Uprising – still exists in manuscript form.

In time, Rembek stopped writing, knowing that he will not be able to publish anything. As Karol Stępniewski says, writing for one's own pleasure seemed pointless, that is why he stopped doing it.<sup>45</sup> Maria Stępniewska remembers that in time, Rembek became bitter, broke down and started drinking<sup>46</sup>. Afflicted by health issues and depression, Rembek died forgotten and poor. In 1967, Tyrmand wrote an article about Rembek's novel *Wyrok na Franciszka Kłosa* in Parisian "Kultura" and in the article, he commented on the writer's situation:

Who knows about it today? Nobody does. People know about Andrzejewski, Rudnicki or Brandys, because they're "ours", because they fit it fixed hierarchies despite all deviations and family issues, because they were drinking Stalinist filth together and choking on it, then spitting and being disgusted with themselves<sup>47</sup>.

---

<sup>43</sup> Signature. 12622 (Correspondence regarding publishing matters).

<sup>44</sup> The Department of Manuscripts of the National Library of Warsaw, signature 012604.

<sup>45</sup> K. Stępniewski, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

<sup>46</sup> J. Siedlecka, *Pech Stanisława Rembeka*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

<sup>47</sup> After *ibidem*, p. 228.

Asked in 1978 by Irzyk, what he would want to say to his readers, what truth to save in their books, the writer replied: "The need to serve the homeland with all honesty, the need to live their life with all honesty. There's nothing more terrifying and more disgraceful for me than treason"<sup>48</sup>. Rembek stayed true to his values and paid a very high price for it – both as a writer and as a person.

---

<sup>48</sup> Z. Irzyk, *op. cit.*

