

Identity Forming Aspects of Dialoguing with the Other: A Literary Version of Polish-German Relations in 20th Century Polish Prose

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to discuss fictional versions of the problematic of identity-formation of literary characters in situations of contact and conflict with the Other regarded as Enemy. Such a theme is quite prominent in 20th century narratives dealing with Polish-German relations. My focus will be on two characteristic works, whose action takes place soon after World War II, but which, written forty years apart, represent two very different approaches to the topic. In Tadeusz Nowakowski's novel *Obóz Wszystkich Świętych* (*All Saints' Camp*, 1957) an attempt to establish a dialogue between a Pole and a German in the immediately postwar period proves more than difficult, since it ends in a multifaceted failure. Not so in Stefan Chwin's novel *Krótką historią pewnego żartu* (*A Short History of a Certain Joke*, 1991), in which the child-protagonist tries to reinterpret for his own sake the history of Polish-German relations, demonstrating in the process the extent to which that history is made up of multiple local narratives, both Polish and German, which in their sum form a far from straightforward overall story in the nature of a palimpsest. The paper will demonstrate how the two novels, by making use of local memory, try to overcome the stereotypes and consequences of the traumatic events of the war, which lie heavily on 20th century Polish-German neighborly relations. More specifically: what type of argument is deployed to redefine what immediately after World War II and long thereafter made the Polish attitude to the Germans particularly difficult.

Key words Polish-German relations; identity; Other; 20th century Polish fiction

The problematics of Polish-German relations, marked in the 20th century by the traumatic experiences of the Second World War is a vast topic, so as an illustration of one of its aspects, the one which had the greatest influence on the formation of Polish identity relative to the Other/Enemy I will choose two prose texts, which were written

in the space of forty years by two very different authors — Tadeusz Nowakowski (1917-1996), who after the War lived in exile, and the much younger Stefan Chwin, who was born already after the war.

Nowakowski, author of the novel *Obóz Wszystkich Świętych* [*The Camp of All Saints*], which was published in 1957 in Paris, spent the years from February 1940 until the end of the war in German prisons and camps, and after the liberation by American forces moved to a camp for refugees in Holland, where he taught in a Polish secondary school and devoted himself to literary activity. In the autumn of 1946 he went to Italy, and subsequently, in 1947, to Britain; he eventually settled in Germany in the early 1950s.

Nowakowski thus had a feel for the places, observed the people's behavior and had a direct experience of the events which find their replicas in his novel. Through the prism of individual biography he depicted the socio-historical processes which in the language of today's anthropology are described as the formation of identity relative to the Other, and he did so in the context of the disintegration of grand narratives and their replacement with micro-tales, which last only as long as the local community remembers them (in this case it is the memory of the prewar community of Bydgoszcz, a city in which the Germans and Poles were neighbors).

Stefan Chwin was born after the war, in 1949 in Gdańsk, in a city which until 1939 had, as was decided by the Treaty of Versailles, the status of a free city inhabited both by the Poles and the Germans. Hence he knows about the pre-war days and the occupation only on the basis of narratives (official, family). He can thus observe from a distance how they became recorded in human memory. His novel *Krótką historią pewnego żartu* [*A Short History of a Certain Joke*, 1991] is a return to the time of childhood, marked by the memory of Stalin's rule and what he has learnt at school and at home about Hitler's time. The novel is an attempt to reconstruct places and events of Gdańsk, which with time acquire the character of a literary myth. Memories of wounds, traumas and enchantments come back, revealing fascinations with strange otherness and the closeness of the Polish-German lives.

In this partly autobiographical work skepticism about the official version of some aspects of Polish-German relations emerges from simple questions which the child puts to itself. These questions tend to undermine all kinds of truths considered by the grown-ups as self-evident: to mention only the idea of historical necessity. The young boy's doubts touch upon fundamental questions, they concern the interpretation of reality put forward immediately after the war by the new rulers, who in their own ideological way defined good and evil, and presented the development of events in terms of their irreversibility. Chwin, in recreating the view of the child, in fact uncovers the sequence of time's layers, which form the Gdańsk palimpsest. They

were made up of different cultures, different confessions, and esthetics (stalinist, nazi, middle class). Discovering that mosaic, deciphering its obscured meanings and revealing their value in the process of identity-forming of today's inhabitants of Gdańsk constitutes Chwin's contribution to the story of the difficult Polish-German neighborly relations.

The action of Nowakowski's novel also takes place after the war. Its protagonist, a young Pole, sublieutenant Stefan Grzegorzcyk, while staying in a camp for displaced persons, marries a German woman, the daughter of an ex-mistress of his father, whose existence reminds him — despite all kinds of painful overtones — of his native, prewar Bydgoszcz. He transgresses with his behavior a number of fundamental rules of life of the Polish camp community — as a Pole he becomes close with a German, as a Pole he distances himself from the patriotic façade, which the camp authorities have created. In short, he transgresses against the stereotype of a Polish patriot, breaks with the Polish community, but he feels a stranger in the new community, which he has entered thanks to his marriage, and in the end, defeated by the double dose of alienation, returns to the camp, bitter and humiliated.

This problematic of the work highlights the problem of the relation between the I and the Other, and the question of the construction of individual identity in the difficult space of the disintegration of a number of orders: historical, geopolitical, psychosocial, ethical and moral — concentrating on the challenges of the stereotypical understanding of such categories as patriotism, Polishness and Germanness.

That he is perhaps not that much different from his compatriots in his attitude towards all Germans, the protagonist discovers when he himself attacks one of them (i.e. a German) unable to accept the fact that the German has a Polish scout's cross pinned down to his hat.

He almost choked. It must have been plundered in Poland [...] You wait — he swallowed bitter saliva. Hatred almost blinded him. He felt the drumming of blood in his ears, he clenched his fists in his pockets. That horrible murderous adjective “ours, ours, ours”! [...] He beat up a man. As a protest against cruelty. He behaved like a Nazi [...] The incurable Polish beast has awakened in me. There is no getting away from it. [...] It waits for you everywhere and it will find you wherever you are, that greedy, jealous and vengeful fatherland of yours, that “collective obligation,” “essence of morality” [...]¹ (423) — thinks Grzegorzcyk.

The impossibility, understandable in the immediate postwar period, of breaking the barrier between the Polish I and the hateful German Other reveals itself in Nowakowski's novel not only on the level of the behaviour of the main character, but

also in the attitude of the narrator, who does not describe the German in the hat with a Polish badge in a neutral way, but right away gives him negative characteristics.

Bauer, bored with singing, detached himself from the group. Trotting like a dachshund he crossed the square of the station [...]. Grzegorzcyk run after him (421). [...] Give it back! — he said in a choking voice. The owner of the green hat blinked his white eyelashes. *It's mine. I bought it.* The eyes behind the white eyelashes moved anxiously. Were you in Poland? No, I wasn't. (422)

The protagonist's failure in his relations with the Other becomes even more pronounced, given the fact that earlier on he suffers nightmares at the memory of the first day of liberation, when the enraged crowd of emaciated pows, forced labourers and prisoners freed from the camps mete out summary justice to the captured Germans, murdering and raping them.

Tadeusz Nowakowski's novel was the first to pose the question, which may be found in the work of the other Polish writers: Witold Gombrowicz, Henryk Grynberg and much later ones: Janusz Rudnicki, Paweł Huelle, Stefan Chwin, namely the question on what conditions does one belong to a community, and that question becomes a question about otherness and its boundaries.

The protagonist of *Obóz Wszystkich Świętych* himself becomes, as it were, the Other, and when he gains the consciousness of his role, he acts before both Polish and German communities in the character of a theatrical person, who is constantly watched. His situation and his milieu compel Grzegorzcyk, viewed as the Other by both the Poles and the Germans, to adopt certain rules of the game, which he initially rejected, and reject those which define his individuality. The sublieutenant ceases to be the Other, but Becomes a Nobody. In his case the acceptance of the superficial, stereotyped image of being a Pole or a German amounts to the obliteration of the features of his individual identity. In Nowakowski's novel the protagonist experiences as a result of his dialoguing with both the Polish and the German communities a sense of defeat.

The war and occupation experiences of Stefan Grzegorzcyk on the one hand strongly bond him emotionally with his local (lost) space of childhood and years of early youth, and on the other, compel him to revalue some highly fundamental questions (cutting him off at the same time from the axiological space in which he grew up). Polish patriotic upbringing, which he received before the war in his home, subjected to the test of September 1939 and the distress of the occupation and life in the postwar camp, does not give him a sufficient basis on which to build a future, considering that the young sublieutenant asks himself the following question: "did

this Fatherland of theirs (that is, of Poles who lost their lives during World War II) deserve to be offered as a gift that one and only life, which a human being has, this irreplaceable, unrepeatable biological existence?" (32). And he reaches the conclusion, which even half a century later sounds timely, saying:

Mr. Raczka, M.A. in his white-and-red tunic (editor of the ultra-patriotic camp newsletter — H.G.) may not like the fact that there are Germans in the world, the sturbanführer SS with the skull and crossbones may not like that there are Poles. I do not want to be either a Raczka, or an SS-man, I want to be a human being. (380)

Biological existence and the human being free of the label of nationality these are the categories, which are left to Nowakowski's protagonist, since they survived the pressure of history understood by him as a set of determinants resulting from the final loss of contact with a hidden order of the universe and entailing a sense of disintegration of both the order of reality as well as of a monistically-substantial vision of the subject. Though the author tries to imbue Grzegorzcyk with an identity-forming memory of the past, and makes the main motive of his behavior being faithful to the patriotic tradition embodied in the murder by the Nazis in September 1939 of a group of Bydgoszcz middle class inhabitants, yet at the same time the entire thrust of the main idea of the novel's narration, which assumes the shape of a discourse on the subject of broadly understood war trauma, casts doubt on the question of whether such a bond can continue to play a role in the construction of the subject of our times.

It is worth noting that the memory of the past has in this case all the characteristics of local memory, preserving the charms of a provincial city, the pre-war Bydgoszcz, in which one used to have both Polish and German neighbors. And the paradigms of tradition established in history of which Grzegorzcyk often thinks, in various ways reveal the interpretive character of history. What Nowakowski seems to be saying is that in light of the cancelled orders, the broken tablets of the Decalogue, only the local community, which ably husbands its own space, can be the creator and guardian of values upholding the anthropocentric paradigm of reality

The existential concrete detail is captured in his novel sensuously, for instance through smell: "one needed only to sniff to know all there was to know: at Tepper's today it's pea-soup with an 'addition,' at Fronck's it is 'pig slaughtering' with the grodzisk beer, at Kocerka's — cinaders, and at Berent's they serve tripe and 'eise beins'" (108).

As one can see the cooking is tasty both at the German and Polish neighbors', and the entire paradigm of orderly, harmonious pre-war Bydgoszcz reality, upholding

its own hierarchy of importance of things and people is presented in terms of the sensual aesthetic of images encapsulated in visual memory. Nowakowski's protagonist preserves his knowledge of the past, which has already become history and has proved to be a local knowledge capable of being supplemented with other "local knowledge." To become conscious of its matrix, he proposes a detailed description and makes an attempt to categorize something, which until now did not undergo such an "ordering." The way the Bydgoszcz middle class take walks on Sundays, the set of ordinary concrete props which define in Bydgoszcz social status, the décor of the interiors of apartments, become in his handling elements of the "pattern" of the order of the pre-war provincial city with traditions. Here is a characteristic example:

The walk after church of families of merchants and artisans takes place in a well established pattern. In front, holding hands, trot the smallest children, behind them slightly older offspring, still behind them marches the maturing youth [...] There then follow ladies in their finery — these are the wives, and at the very end of the family procession walk ... men [...] in bowler hats with their hands clasped in dignity on their kidneys. (116-117)

A contemporary anthropologist would note that such an attempt to find in history traces of order and stability was meant to be a remedy for the feeling of loss of the lasting foundations of reality, for the loss of conviction about the existence of some objective truth, the essence of things, and clear indicators of the good and evil.

One is struck in *Obóz Wszystkich Świętych* of how sensitive the novel is to the interpretative character of history as a grand spectacle of a game, in which the victors are not those who "were right" but those, who were conscious of the rules of the staging of the whole spectacle. The writer's awareness of the staging-interpretive character of human collective behavior which later becomes arranged into so-called historical events is perhaps best represented by that fragment of the novel devoted to the mass celebrated for the ex-prisoners of the camps, which was conducted in the stadium belonging to the hitlerjugend by priests of four denominations in chapels brought on cars.

The priests — we read — blessed the throng. A powerful voice cried on a record: "my god...mon dieu...hospody pomyluj...Boże nasze...mio dio." And from the roof of the nearby dais a group of photographers was filming this quite unique collective scene. (223)

Nowakowski, through the mouths of the many characters of the novel and in various

other ways grasps the paradox of the irony of historical change, which reveals the inadequacy of the existing “languages” with their lexicons for the description of reality in the stage in which the paradigm is undergoing a transformation. He asserts above all else that no wars are ever victorious, and he also believes that the victors of the last war have not changed the world for the better.

The negative poetics of the novel shows freedom as a form of new yet old enslavement. He subjects the individual who rebels against this to a difficult test of humiliation, and in fact of annihilation of individuality. Sublieutenant Grzegorzcyk, though he fruitlessly tries to break with his behavior all kinds of stereotypes, and to redefine that which is the most difficult to redefine so soon after the war, Polish attitude to the Germans, becomes in the end a Nobody, drifting alone toward the images-signs of the local Bydgoszcz past, which no one understands except him.

The presentation of the problem of a Pole’s attitude to the German/Other, as well as of the feeling of alienation from one’s own community, of the limits of this alienation and its effect on the sense of individual identity, and additionally, of the negotiated, non-final meanings of history, perhaps most tentative when they concern sensitive, painful questions, makes *Obóz Wszystkich Świętych* [*The Camp of All Saints*] in a way akin to *Krótką historia pewnego żartu*, [*A Short History of a Certain Joke*] written forty years later.

Stefan Chwin makes the protagonist-narrator of his novel undertake an effort to examine what determined the relations between Poles and their western and eastern neighbors in the last half-a-century. He talks about the cultural differences between his Polish and German characters and the history dividing the two nations in various ways, for instance by way of a description of (old) German and new (Polish) gardens:

Old gardens spread around themselves the impression of stable permanence, they spoke of a kind of strange, calm self-assurance, indifferent to everything else, which one almost never sensed about the new gardens [...], in which the very way of cultivating the greenery betrayed the anxiety of people who had come here from far away, bringing with them a fear of time, the sadness of impermanence of life and the hidden bitterness of exile. ² (80)

The protagonist of the novel does not participate in events in the conventional sense of the term, does not accumulate objects, to own them, does not conquer space like a traveler or wanderer but “deciphers” happenings, fragments of space, objects as “un-phrase-able” (that is, not expressed in the frame of some final interpretation, impossible to articulate with the help of the current communication code). He becomes a reader of events and things as of that which precedes the generally

accepted representation, as if he thought that history, which had stabilized some meanings of the elements of his reality amounted to no more than a kind of “esthetics” arbitrarily disseminating meanings, and not an objective global knowledge. For him history is local history. Such a history, that constructs and defines that, which later the given community considers as “universal” and “natural” truths.

In *Krótką historia...* the attitude to all universalisations and totalizations is highly skeptical; instead the focus is on the specifics of the local historical and cultural context. The reader has to realize in reading this book that she is looking at the past through the prism of cultural constructs of contemporary time. This contemporaneity has behind it the experience of twentieth century history, which in its brutality issued a challenge to realistic literary representation, and by the same token suggested that history is neither progressive nor rational, and hence that when dealing with history it is impossible to create a coherent narrative on the subject of some universal truth.

For a small boy, who does not hide his connection with the mature author of the work, history is textual and discursive. He stops believing in “the only correct/objective truth of history,” when he admires the Gothic vault of Oliva cathedral. He confesses then:

Freedom which I did not suspect in myself, still fragile, still barely outlined, filled my heart with disquiet, though I knew, that I am crossing some invisible, painful boundary — in enjoying the beauty of the golden inscription (in German “szwabacha” — H.G.) against dark-olive background, I did not sin against Grandma, whose house “those” (Nazis — H.G.) burnt in Mokotów. [...] I was stepping outside the closed circle, although someone was paying for this with a hurt. (44)

In the identity-forming discourse of the protagonist there takes place a confrontation between that which until now was familiar and that which is new. The result of this confrontation will be a horizon which will make it possible to understand the difficult Polish/German past of Gdańsk and in general of Polish/German neighborliness: it is within this horizon that the life of the protagonist-narrator-author of the novel takes place. What is significant, this confrontation is existential and not intellectual. The initiation, which he has undergone, could be formulated as follows: “fact” is an abstract concept: “factuality.” “Polish-German past,” “What happened” are what they are primarily from the perspective of somebody’s life, it is that life which decides ultimately about their meaning and does so in a constantly new way, since life that is open to the future not so much is as is becoming, and hence its dimension of factuality (including past factuality) is never fully completed, closed.

The literary characters in the examples here discussed of Polish works having as their background the Polish-German past belong more properly to the plane of discourse than of narrative. Their role in the “action” of the novels, the meaning of their actions, is not as important as the role of the *exemplum* in the dialogue concerning the past, or of the indicator of the hiatus of the habitus of contemporaneity underpinned with history or of the investigator who revises historical conclusions.

The protagonist-narrator of Stefan Chwin’s novel becomes immersed in the past depicted in the form of a text arranged in a linear fashion, which — as its construction suggests — has not been read to the full, and actually more than that, such a final reading does not even seem possible. This work takes into account in its presentation of the relation between its characters and Polish-German history a semiotic perspective. In the semiotic perspective the historical process is presented as a process of communication, in which the constant flow of new information conditions the reaction on the part of its social addressee. A special role in the construction of the protagonist is played not only by his predisposition to “textualize” the events and objects of reality, but also the ability to conduct discourse on the level of meta-history. He is the discoverer and observer of the traces of a new paradigm in the thinking of an individual about the Polish-German past. A paradigm in which the concept of “structure” has been replaced by that of “process”; a paradigm in which one gives up the attempt to view the reality in an objectifying manner and instead views it in an epistemic way. It is recognized that cognizing processes are not neutral in relation to the process of cognition, and hence they should be part of the description of phenomena. The observer’s consciousness participates in the construction of the investigative process, and what is more, it becomes part of the whole. The concepts which describe human cognition and knowledge in general (including the knowledge of the past) have changed, something that sublieutenant Grzegorzczyk seems to have intuitively felt in Nowakowski’s novel.

In Chwin’s work written towards the end of the 20th century one no longer speaks of a “building” but rather of a “net.” “Building” presupposes the existence of a lasting base, on which one can rest the search for further solutions, while the tendency now is to abandon the concept of “absolute truth” and use instead that of “approximate description.”

The characters of *Krótką historią pewnego żartu* have been so situated in the represented world of the work, that they seem to argue that in interpreting historical facts (including those most difficult ones, such as the Polish-German conflicts) or discovering their historical context, what the commentator expresses are his convictions (that which he believes), ways of thinking, prejudices, while attempts by individuals who observe the rules of traditional historicism, in order to construct

a unified vision of reality, which supposedly occurs in a society, are reductionist illusions. Human culture constitutes a net of conflicting discourses, which cannot be reduced to a single point of view or a set of ideas arranged in a linear fashion.

The construction, the situating in a novel's world and the fates of the characters of more traditional prose works with contemporary history as their background (at first sight, in a superficial reading, one could categorize *Obóz Wszystkich Świętych* as just such a novel) facilitated for the reader the understanding of the chain of causes and effects of historical events which affected them (the literary characters). They provided the possibility (the illusion) of knowing the actual causes of certain processes and phenomena.

In the works of Nowakowski and Chwin, which I have treated here as *exempla*, the sense of the attitude of the protagonist towards the contemporary world and Polish-German history seems to point to Nietzsche's myth of eternal return and his *Genealogy of Morals*, in which he proposed the abandoning of sets of abstractions and concentrating on the processes of hidden pain and suffering that generate values, which with great force influence the shape of reality.

Such a literary character refers with its construct to the real existence of man immersed in the difficult reality of the turn of the century; of an individual who undertook the effort to create out of "a world in which it is almost impossible to live" (the term is Agata Bielik-Robson's) his relatively secure *Lebenswelt*, as if taking for the motto of his own actions Nietzsche's aphorism: "What does not kill me, strengthens me."

Notes

1. Nowakowski, Tadeusz. *Obóz Wszystkich Świętych* [*All Saints' Camp*]. Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Pokolenie, 1989. References for the quotations from this edition are located in the text.
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3. Bielik-Robson, Agata. *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości* [*A Different Modernity. Questions on the Contemporary Form of Spirituality*]. (Kraków: Universitas, 2000)10.

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