AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

by Artur Międzyrzecki

Fragments from a notebook.

◈ No notes, no clippings, no folders filled with manuscripts. All of that has remained in Warsaw, Marszałkowska Street, in my room piled with books. Despair and relief. To be honest, I was not capable of reading those pages, so densely covered with writing, that no longer interest me—and for a reason. Once again the earth had trembled under our feet, and once again one had to start from scratch.

◈ My arm is still wooden. Since December 1981 I have not, until now, written a single sentence of prose. For months I could not even read a book. Letter writing was a form of torture. This had nothing to do with my feelings toward the addressees. It was simply a physical incapacity, a numbness, a feeling I had known in other difficult periods of my life.

◈ From the brains. To shake something out of the brains.

I recall that this is how one of my notes begins in the yellow notebook, which lies under the glass paperweight.

I must have been exhausted by the stacks of papers which had been hemming me in, by that necropolis of words and memories.

And I am in a hurry. The glass paperweight is a remembrance of Antoni Słonimski, the poet; but I mention it reluctantly, for I would like to limit myself to the essentials.

◈ My first volume of poetry appeared 40 years ago, during World War II. At that time, I was an artilleryman in the II Polish Corps of the British Eighth Army, and I took part in the Italian campaign. I think about those times as my own prehistory, since the main events in my biography came later and can be identified chronologically with the history of postwar Poland. During the second half of the 1950s, my principal volumes of poetry, prose, and essays began to appear. At the same time began my participation in public life: on the board of the Writers' Union and in the Polish PEN Club, as well as in international associations of people of my profession. In 1980, I was invited by Solidarity in Warsaw to become one of its advisers on literary and cultural matters. I mention all of this with the American readers of these fragments in mind. The need for self-introduction is one of the unpleasant aspects of a foreign stay. In one's own country, this need does not exist; one is qualified once and for all from the moment when one pronounces one's

meaningful "yes" or one's equally meaningful "no."

I realize that there is little left that I can change in my public image. Of course, I am the one who has shaped it but—today, years later—it is my image that exercises invisible control over every one of my moves. Indeed, many centuries are looking at us, as Napoleon reminded his soldiers in Egypt. But the most imperious of those looks comes from our own past. This applies not only to me. Every one of my friends acts within a similar crossfire of moral considerations and norms of behavior coded generations ago, with their conscious or instinctive limitations and tendencies.

This is not to say that none of them has encountered as well the gaze of the Grand Inquisitor and experienced anxiety because of it, or even—in more than one case—the unpleasant consequences of this threatening interest in their persons. It simply means that the traditions inherent in their position as intellectuals and writers, the moral pressures of their milieu and its social credibility, are sufficiently strong to mold attitudes—though promising nothing in return, apart from poetic justice, which in this case means no happy-ending melodrama but fulfillment of one's own often tired and embittered spirit.

The word "spirit" is not in fashion these days in political science and has gone out of circulation in literary criticism. But what else has been invented, what new infatuation, that is superior to the spiritual values of old European humanism with its natural tolerance, its universal fraternity, its recognition of the need for freedom in life and art? The usually vicious attacks on the Polish intelligentsia have been caused by the fact that the intelligentsia has always been and remains the social personification of such values. Its influence on public opinion, its support for democratic pluralism, its moralistic message—all of this gives the intelligentsia powerful enemies, especially in bad times.

◈ In its reference to 19th-century post-partition Poland, the *Larousse* encyclopedia sums up the situation laconically: The partitioning powers sought to destroy or reduce the influence of both the church and the Polish intelligentsia.

This should come as no surprise.

Polish literature would at such times serve as a substitute for the political institutions that no longer existed. A poem by Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) became the motto adopted by the insurgents of 1830. The theatrical writings of Mickiewicz, along with those of Juliusz Sło-

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wacki and Zygmunt Krasiński, became the stage for public debate and dramatized Poland's historical chronicles. Earlier, veterans of the Napoleonic Wars, philosophers, and reformers founded the Society of the Friends of Learning, the future Academy of Sciences. In every age and in every discipline, representatives of the leading intellectual groups in Poland ensured the continuity and vitality of spiritual life and the nation's cultural identity.

It should be noted that in the tradition of the Polish intelligentsia, a distinction has always been made between patriotism and fanaticism, between the desire for sovereignty and nationalistic excess. This tradition is naturally democratic and naturally antitotalitarian. Its respect for the past is not motivated by anachronistic nostalgia, but is rather an expression of the fear that a nation that loses its memory ceases to exist. The Polish intelligentsia, as a social group, is in a way memory incarnate.

I think that this has been determined by historical circumstances, and that one ought not to exaggerate the innate particularity of the place. The intellectual in any country would, in circumstances such as ours have been, describe his role in like fashion. This would not inevitably lead, as it does not lead in this case, to chauvinism. A nation is not a sect, warned Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821–1883), a precursor of our modern poetry. The banners of 19th-century Polish insurrections bore the slogan: "For our freedom and yours." No motto reflects Polish thinking more than this one. It is often, and correctly so, linked with the heritage of Romanticism. Yet, earlier, our Enlightenment also had its own legions of volunteers, ready to work their way across frontiers, to give active support to the ideals considered universal, to sacrifice their lives for those ideals. Enlightened officers in General Dąbrowski's Polish legions, who fought in Italy in Napoleon's army, had the motto "All free men are brothers" sewn onto their uniforms.

◈ This same period gave birth to three legendary moments that, taken up later, and to which Romantic poetry added luster, would persist up to the present time as powerful stimuli to the collective imagination. These are the Polish legions in Italy (1797–1801), the Four-Year Sejm, or Parliament (1788–1792), and the adoption of the May 3 Constitution (1791).

The first of these events symbolizes participation in struggles for freedom, wherever they might occur. Seen in this perspective, the presence of Tadeusz Kościuszko at Saratoga and West Point appears as natural as the presence of Polish divisions alongside the Allies during World War II.

The Four-Year Sejm and the May 3 Constitution remain to this day symbols of the nation's past, the most venerated moments of which are still identified with the parliamentary tradition and the democratic spirit. What is more, the historic circumstances that accompanied the Constitution—the foreign intervention that prevented its implementation, the treacherous internal forces set in motion by that intervention, and the intervention's rhetoric of appearances—all of this turned into a

political knowledge coded in the minds of generations and continually confirmed by the experiences of one's own life.

◈ Sixteenth-century Poland under the Jagiellon kings is also deeply impressed upon the collective memory. It was the Golden Age, when the state's might combined with freedom of thought, exemplary tolerance, and the growth of learning; the era of Copernicus the astronomer (1473–1543) and of Jan Kochanowski (1530–1584), perhaps the greatest of Polish poets. One should also mention this period because the spiritual families that make up Polish culture have together created a single chain of traditions, including political traditions. Foreshadowed by basic patterns of intellectual activity in the era of the Enlightenment, and beginning in the second half of the 19th century, the collective history of the Polish intelligentsia, in its role as the group that molds public opinion and voices the nation's aspirations, became part of them.

The intelligentsia's respect for the past, deep-seated as it is, hardly weakens the emotional force of its messages today. Voices from centuries long gone sometimes prove to be nearer to our own sensibilities than it might at first appear. Even today, the most popular Polish child is Urszula, the prematurely dead daughter of Kochanowski, to whom he devoted his *Laments*.

Yet the *Laments*, recognized as one of the outstanding poetic works of the European Renaissance, along with the rest of Kochanowski's writings, and the renown of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, the work of Copernicus, and the correspondence of the Polish King with Erasmus—all of this belongs both to the history of Poland and to the history of Europe. Like his contemporaries in other countries, the Polish Renaissance humanist, with his solid and multifaceted knowledge, was simultaneously a protagonist on the national stage and *l'uomo universale*. The equally natural coexistence of national and universal perspectives concerns all other historical periods. People resemble their fathers but also their contemporaries, as someone once said. Kościuszko was a hero of two nations, and his specific Polish character by no means prevented the poets of Germany and France from tying his person to the universal ideals of freedom. The free spirits of those times gathered in the Warsaw of the Four-Year Sejm with ardent hopes and curiosity just as did the foreign reporters who converged on Poland in 1956 and 1980.

The interweaving of the native and the universal is especially characteristic of Polish Romanticism as typified in the poems of Mickiewicz or the music of Chopin. The separateness of Romanticism in Poland is often cited, yet it was not only a literary phenomenon and an artistic novelty but also, if not above all, a political movement, a spiritual mission in the cause of national independence. Its messianic message linked Poland to the rest of the world and the rest of the world to Poland. The issue of Polish independence took on not only international but also metaphysical dimensions.

To the Romantics, freedom was indivisible, a political school of fraternity, an ecstatic flight of the independent spirit into the sky of the

The poet Antoni Słonimski (far right) and two fellow poets of the group called Skamander at the Ziemianska Café with General Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski, a popular figure in Warsaw literary circles after World War I.

impossible. The fates of nations were identified with the fate of this nation. The future of all free peoples was being decided in every confrontation with every tyranny, with no matter which of its demons and local acolytes. Polish Romanticism became a movement of spiritual energy which, like every other movement, could suffer defeat and failure, but which, unlike other movements, could not be stopped. The torrent went underground at times, but it did not cease to flow.

◈ A special role in the formation of the Polish intelligentsia's attitudes was played by the dramas of Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907) and the writings of Stefan Żeromski (1864–1925). Without Mickiewicz, Wyspiański, and Żeromski, as one Polish poet has recently written, there would be no Poland. This statement needs no explanation in Poland, where the word retains its myth-making power and where the history of political ideas helps to create national reality to a no lesser —and sometimes to a much greater—degree than the history of political institutions. The constancy of national aspirations and the vitality of the public role played by the Polish intellectual yesterday and today would be inconceivable were this not so.

Wyspiański, one of the great innovators in modern theater—Gordon Craig counted him in the pantheon of European playwrights of that era—brought into being the monumental national drama aspired to by Mickiewicz, which on its enormous stage was to unite poetry with debate on current problems and with historical imagery. Żeromski, five years Wyspiański's senior, was a one-man moral institution. His novels educated at least three Polish generations in sensitivity to every man-

ifestation of national misery and social injustice.

Żeromski's protagonists, in revolt against such wrongs, usually stood alone and relied on their own spiritual reserves, not hesitating to sacrifice career or personal life or love. Some of them, such as Dr. Judym, hero of *The Homeless People,* became symbols of this sacrifice for service to society and points of reference not only in literary essays. One talked about them as if one knew them. Their fictional stories seemed to be the real biographies of our predecessors, their real lives. If Mickiewicz created the model of the Polish poet for 150 years, Żeromski, for his part, created the model of the Polish intellectual with his sense of obligatory responsibility for himself and for others.

◈ His writing is also an example of the particularly close association between Poland's political and literary history. The history of our literature is impregnated with politics because the long period of time in which Poland was deprived of a sovereign existence forced literature to take on social and political obligations, obligations that literature did not have in happier countries where, at most, one might wonder occasionally—as in post–World War II France—about the philosophical meaning of *engagement.* By the same token, the political history of our country is impregnated with literature. One would hardly have any idea about some of its periods without taking into account the role of books, of theater, or even of literary cafés (which were involved in the uprisings of 1830 and 1863).

In times closer to our own, it is not only books that serve as historical testimony but also open letters that concern matters of public importance, signed by representatives of culture and learning. So do the histories of films and of theatrical performances and of the literary cabaret, in its professional or student versions. The banning of Mickiewicz's *Forefather's Eve* in 1968 was the direct cause of that year's political and social events. The films of Andrzej Wajda have played not only an artistic but also a public role, and they have often drawn on literary sources. And it was on the stage of a literary cabaret that the song "Let Poland be Poland" was born, the song that was soon to become a slogan for the young generation who lived through the August miracle of 1980.

◈ *Ab urbe condita.* From the founding of the city in its contemporary form, the Polish intellectual has been the go-between in the contacts of his own society with other cultures. These contacts, like the internalizing of history—that is, a view of history as communal biography, into which one's own life is written—belong to the configuration of Polish culture. Simply put: They amount to accepted custom. Its nonobservance in any area—for instance, the absence at newsstands of the foreign press—as a rule testifies to bad times in cultural life. The Western character of Polish culture is not a matter of style; it is a fact that results both from religious inspirations—the presence of a Polish pope in the Vatican confirms their longevity and significance—and from humanistic traditions. These traditions, beginning with the Golden Age of the

Renaissance kingdom and continuing up to the aspirations of the last few years, display their specific traits related to the history and the place on earth of this nation. But they are far from local particularism and monothematic exaggeration.

There are reasons enough—Norman Davies has collected them recently in his book, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*—to justify even bitter exaggeration. But the people of this plain over which invaders' armies have so often rolled kept their faith in the sense of universal moral values in human actions. It is sometimes said that cynicism is more interesting in society and more useful in professional life. Perhaps. But it is an ally of enslavement. There is nothing that the world can do for us, but there is at least one thing we can do for the world: Tell it about our sacred naiveté and our unshakable belief in the freedom of choice. Even when the sense of life and the authenticity of everyday norms of behavior are upset, when, as a result of war or catastrophe, everything suddenly collapses and when people are deprived of the churches and institutions to which they are accustomed, the book collections, personal customs, people to talk to and work with, friends, they are still left with one last thing: a choice. Though taken out of public life, in physical danger, dependent on their inner spiritual resources, they can still choose between the cry of the jungle and their responsibility for themselves and the world.

◈ Some will say: Yes, but this concerns the more general issues of generations and the longevity of culture. What does this have to do with your own life and writing?

In the introduction I used the words "once again the earth had trembled under our feet." This is a travesty of a sentence written by Pascal when he described the earth tremor that shook his contemporaries, occasioned by popularization of the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo. Our planet ceased to be the center of the cosmos, and this fact went hand in hand with a transformation of the European consciousness, a study of which has been written by Paul Hazard. It was the end of the world, one of many. And this is precisely what I had in mind, the end of the world with all its drama and grotesquery.

But why did I not dwell on this theme? It was probably a kind of self-censorship, unwittingly committed and which I, as a Polish writer, will not disown. There is already so much distress in the lives of my readers that it seems unworthy to add my own lament. Czesław Miłosz wrote in one of his poems:

> You could scream
> Because mankind is mad,
> But you, of all people, should not.

So, is it writing "to comfort the hearts"? This 19th-century device is indeed present in my thoughts. It must not be all that anachronistic or all that native, since it was adopted by William Faulkner. In any case, I do not emphasize the ends of the world that have been experienced by me, along with my generation, and perhaps this unconscious

impulse is limiting in my writing.

What is more, I feel it is my duty to defend every form of expression, even the most hermetic, regardless of any personal tastes. The defense of literature as a whole may condemn one to eclecticism, not to be expressed in one's own work but in the way one looks at cultural questions; an eclecticism that is related to the more general demands of pluralism and tolerance, to a feeling that authentic culture is a whole in which all of its spiritual families must function, be they close or distant to one's heart.

One might say: Polish Romantics, with all their political specificity, did indeed fight the Classicists ardently. But there were exceptions to this rule, and Adam Mickiewicz in his lectures at the Collège de France did not leave out the role played by his Classicist forerunners in shaping the views of his generation. One might also mention the syncretism of today's reflections on the history of culture. We have inherited all of its messages, and the poet Antoni Słonimski, for instance, in his writing, was an heir both to Romantic traditions and to the Rationalist trust of the Warsaw positivists of the 1870s. This alliance of Romanticism and Rationalism in time became the source not of a spiritual split but of the spiritual force that flowed from this type of interrelation. Remembering after many years the Declaration of Human Rights, which he had co-authored, and the text of which had been sent to wartime Poland, Słonimski asked himself: "Was it a naive move to send these pious hopes to a country suffering the most cruel bondage?"

And he replied: "I think that something from our desires will, in some tiny quantity, find for itself a place in the future. I have learned to believe in the purposefulness of opposing lies, demagogy, and hypocrisy."

For me, this attitude is represented in the endeavors of the Polish intelligentsia in the past few decades. Not based on illusions, but originating in a feeling for history so natural that it evokes live persons and authentic voices, not shadows or echoes, it is a trust combined with a sense of reality, a trust confident of its rights.

◈ As for the great earth tremors, the first one I experienced, along with my contemporaries, came in September 1939. The world in which we had grown up and which seemed to us as solid as rock suddenly collapsed. One had to begin a new life, underground, or in the Polish armed forces abroad, or in exile.

When I think about it today, I am struck by the naturalness of the impulse that made the then-young generation return to the traditions of the 19th-century uprisings and the conspiracies for independence that followed them. These boys had their first taste of battle right after high school, and they did not see themselves as volunteers, which they were in reality. They were simply fulfilling an obligation coded in their minds. The Polish army of that time, dominated by reserve officers from the intelligentsia, also recalled its historic forerunners. It was a wandering Poland, with a press network and school system, with social institutions that watched over civilian exiles, with its own theaters, and with quite an intensive—considering the situation—cultural life.

My first volume of poetry was printed in the Middle East and I received the first copy on the Italian front. Our wartime officers' school terminated in the toast: "To moral courage."

From wartime, I have preserved in my memory another sentence worth mentioning. It was delivered at some difficult moment by a British general and, as it turns out, I adopted it for life: "Gentlemen: The situation is hopeless, but we are too stupid to lose this war."

◈ The currents and actors within the intellectual traditions I have attempted to describe: How do they affect my everyday life and those of my friends? I believe that they are reality itself, not only a symbolic reality, and that they sometimes decide the course of our biographies.

I have mentioned the events of 1968. The protest launched by a group of Warsaw writers against the banning of *Forefather's Eve* influenced their personal fates in the years to come. The Polish PEN Club was founded by Żeromski, and this to a great extent determined the moral posture and the social role of this association to which, in recent years, I have given much of my time and energies. Over the years, my friends have turned quite naturally to the works of Wyspiański and Żeromski: Antoni Słonimski wrote a screenplay based on Żeromski's *Before the Spring*; Andrzej Wajda created a film version of Żeromski's *Ashes*; Andrej Kijowski adapted Wyspiański's *The Wedding* for another Wajda film. One can hardly list all such ties and continuities that belong to the pulsating reality of life and art.

In everyday life, this reality has comprised the shared hopes and warm relationships that have connected past and present. Antoni Słonimski, the former poet of the Skamander group, and his wife were frequently our guests. Together with Antoni, a whole world of reminiscences would walk into our home, a world that lived in his stories and anecdotes and in his very presence. Antoni's apartment in Aleja Róż was for decades a meeting place for the elite of Warsaw's intelligentsia. Its seniors were professor Edward Lipiński, the distinguished economist whose public activities began during the 1905 revolution and ended with his close collaboration with the independent workers' movement of the 1970s and '80s; and professor Stanisław Lorentz, the eminent director since 1936 of the National Museum, a rare example of this kind of continuity in Polish history. The youngest habitués were angry young men, whose names were to become well known over the years and whose fates currently cause anxiety. Among the other frequent guests were Monika Żeromska, the writer's daughter, and Karol Estreicher from Kraków, the last representative of several generations of professors at the Jagiellonian University.

At least three generations of Poland's intelligentsia were represented in this one place. Their common presence together with their common activities served in the postwar years as evidence of the continuity of spiritual life.

I write these words at a time when this life, after a new earthquake, begins a new period, and no one can yet know what forms of survival it will find.