The Absence: the Jews in Some of the Best Polish Prose Today

Henryk Grynberg

Wiesław Myśliwski’s Stone Upon Stone (Kamień na kamieniu, Warsaw 1984) - the winner of 2012 Best Translated Book Award and of the 2012 American PEN translation prize - is a grand epic dealing with Poland during World War Two and with its postwar experience, but with one outstanding omission: the fate of the Jewish population or ten percent of the landscape, fifty percent of the country’s human losses. The narrator, who is an activist in the countryside and a guerrilla leader, does not mention even a single encounter with Jews. People are subject to mass execution in the forest and the surrounding areas, but none of them are Jewish. There is not a single Jew in hiding. Yes, there had been a Jewish inn-keeper, but not a word about his disappearance.

Myśliwski’s post-communist epic, Widnokrąg (‘The Horizon’, Warsaw, 1996), seemed to be an improvement in that it contains a short side-episode depicting the deportation of a Jewish family. Therefore, reading his subsequent long epic covering Polish wartime and postwar period, Traktat o łuskaniu fasoli (or ‘Treatise on Shelling Beans,’ Krakow 2010), I waited and waited until finally, on page 392 of the 400-page narrative, from under a woman’s sleeve, ‘there appeared a few numbers written on her skin...’ ‘O, this is from childhood’, she said ashamed or disconcerted.’ ‘I shouldn’t have noticed it, for there are things one should not notice, especially if it is a man looking at a woman [...] things are less painful, when they remain unnoticed, wouldn’t you agree?’ rhetorically asks the narrator.

Well, I do not agree one can so quickly and easily fill this big black hole. This first-person narrative is a slow stream of memory. The subject is life, a medley of the experiences of an Everyman, who has been a labourer, an electrician, a musician, a self-made philosopher and a child of war, the sole survivor of a ‘pacified’ (annihilated) village. I always oppose assertions about the ‘inseparable ties’ between Jewish and non-Jewish Polish culture in the past. From my personal experience I know how distant those cultures were and how they both consistently kept that distance. Those illustrious individuals of Jewish descent who played an important part in Polish arts, literature or scholarship did not represent Jewish culture, which they simply abandoned when crossing over and joining the culture of the dominant majority. I do not know any cases of crossing over in the opposite direction. Undeniable however were the existential ties of the two societies put to an end by the unimaginable bloody cut-off, an amputation that never ceases to hurt.

The genocidal pacification of the village, a mass murder comparable to the Holocaust, was a sporadic event which – by the narrator’s own admission – was provoked by the partisan activity, while the annihilation of Jewish inhabitants of all the towns and villages of Poland was a rule with no exception or provocation. The old man who seems to remember everything should know this. Especially since he lives at the edge of the ‘partisan forest,’ where the Jews must have sought shelter during the infamous hunt for them (see Jan Grabowski, Judenjagd: Hunting the Jews in 1942-1945), and who serves as a self-appointed caretaker of the nearby graves - or the memory - conscientiously repainting the names of the victims of pacification. The absence of Jewish victims or graves is one more proof of the inherent separation of memory, history and culture. Both Myśliwski and I are children of wartime Polish countryside. Four years my senior, he saw, heard and understood much more than I. Why doesn’t he want to testify? Does the amputation hurt him so much less?
In Myśliwski’s latest book, *Ostatnie rozdanie* (‘The last Card-Deal’, Kraków 2013), the Jewish population of a little Polish town seems to have had no more than two Jewish inhabitants: Chaim Mucha from whom a local cobbler had learned his trade, and Samuel Zyskin, ‘a wise Jew’ who ‘had a premonition’ and so in 1938, he sold his sawmill, his furniture factory and his house, and left for Palestine. Beside that, there is a slight hint at a hidden Jew: a woman with ‘a southern apparition, black hair, black eyes, dark complexion, and slightly crooked nose’, who is ‘mellow and shy as if hiding inside herself from the world.’ This does not mean that the author ignores history as seems fashionable in today’s literature. Or that he avoids writing about martyrdom. There is a man ‘killed as a hostage’ and another man wounded and maimed as a partisan; an aunt killed in the uprising; a brother who volunteered in 1939 and had fallen in the war; a husband ‘martyrized in the camp’; a little boy who had fled from home in order to take part in the uprising, and afterwards ‘did not want to go to school but loitered in the ruins’; a ‘wartime photograph’ that shows ‘a row of hanged men’. Yes, there is an episode about naked female corpses being taken to the crematorium (pp. 285-390). The corpses must have been mostly Jewish for no other women were murdered on such a mass scale, but in this story they are an abstract subject for a discussion on universal questions of life, death, love and even art, with an emphatic conclusion that those ‘last acts were painted by the war which nobody can match’ (p. 416). An added explanation: ‘You watch television, so you must have seen for they repeat it from time to time, a bulldozer pushing a pile of dead acts into a pit’ (417) inadvertently confirms that those ‘acts’ were the result not of the war, but of the Holocaust which truly no art can ‘match’. Yet in Myśliwski’s epic this elephant remains invisible.

The opposite is true in Andrzej Stasiuk’s latest novel *Wschód* (‘The East’, Wydawnictwo Czarne 2014). This also takes the form of a stream of consciousness, but of a very sensitive consciousness. The author sees and hears the past, including that preceding his lifetime. He can even smell it. We both came from the same countryside east of Vistula, and often our memories move in the same direction: Mińsk Mazowiecki, Kaluszyn, Liw, Węgrów, Sokółw, ‘the wooden, one-story town… still Jewish, not quite yet colonized by the Poles who have occupied the houses and tried to live there as if nothing had happened’ (p. 276). I would add that their attempts proved successful. In his case, ‘the closest ghetto was 20 kilometers to the west, and Treblinka over 30 kilometers more to the north’. From our place, it was about the same distance to the north east. In his area, ‘the exhausted Jews who knocked on the doors were from the ghetto of Sokółw;’ in mine, from the ghettos of Mińsk Mazowiecki and nearby Stanisławów.

Though a whole generation younger, his memory reaches as far as mine, including the time when human bodies were burned in Belżec and Treblinka and their ‘fat oil blurred the windows in the houses five kilometers away’ (p. 89). ‘I would have stood in front of that black, iron gate and looked in the darkness. I would stood there and listened to the train, and smelled the air’ (ibid) - the conditional mood is here purely rhetorical, because the narrator seems quite transported into that past and is aware of ‘the parallel worlds that run next to everyday reality… in the deep, as hidden veins by which flows the dark blood of old-time events,’ or things that ‘have past but not left’ (p. 78). In Lublin, he looks ‘at the black gap down below, the dark canyon in the middle of the town,’ or the absence ‘of the town that had been swallowed by fire’ (p. 79). He sees there what others prefer not to see, and his empathy is not just passive: ‘This is what you come for to the town of Lublin – to look at Sobibór and at Belżec, and to scent the air brought in by the wind’ (p. 82); to look ‘at houses saturated by death, objects saturated by oily smoke…, to slip your body into the space left after their bodies’ (p. 88). This is more than empathy: ‘We looked through somebody else’s windows, thinking it was our view, with no clue
what it was hiding. It was hiding millions of somebody else’s glances, which had been charred and their invisible ash has fallen down on our days’ (ibid). I do not know better post-Holocaust poetry.

‘When tens of thousands bodies are burned some thirty kilometers away, one should smell it,’ insists the author, and admits, ‘I do not remember anyone mentioning Treblinka in the evenings at kerosene lamp… One talked about everything: life, death, ghosts, but not about the Jewish ghosts carried by the wind over the roofs’ (p. 107). Was it a psychological self-defense? Stasiuk does not explain, because good literature does not do this. He merely adds a laconic rationalization: ‘They were so absent, as if they never had been’ (p. 110) – a perfect picture of collective memory or collective amnesia. ‘And even if there was a soul, it was a different, not like ours’ (p. 111) – a poignant hint at the alienation from human family (mostly by the soul workers: the priests). Such alienation facilitates sifting the Jewish ashes in search for gold, but does not prevent some unavoidable consequences: ‘Whispers, half-words, black shadows of memory, envy, fear that they may come at night and take it back. For once the gold shines, it never stops. It glitters through the walls, the floor… over a whole village and the future…’ (ibid). More so, the sin is hereditary: ‘I imagine that I would come from a wealthier home, and would be different thanks to that Jewish gold, and I would live with a swallowed poison, not knowing when it would take its effect’ (pp. 111-112). No other writer that I know has imagined it so well.