

Reportage stories about history

Monika Wiszniowska

ORCID: 0000-0002-3018-0466

History has always been – and probably will always be – present in reportage prose. It is difficult to point out a literary reportage whose authors would not refer to the past, although they do it in various ways. Marian Brandys has been considered a master of historical reportage for years. In his two-volume cycle *Kozietulski i inni*¹ [Kozietulski and others], published in the late 1960s, he managed to recreate not only the psychology and personality of his protagonists, but also the whole social climate of the Napoleonic Era. He created a peculiar type of “a reportage from the past” – as he recalled after years: “at some point it became increasingly more difficult to write national reportages, so I invented a historical reportage”².

Ryszard Kapuściński looked back differently; he often stressed that what he found the most fascinating about working as a reporter was the opportunity to witness history happening first-hand. He would say that “every journalist is a historian. Their work is studying, investigating, describing history at the very moment it is created”³. Indeed, he watched historical transformations unfolding in Africa, South America, Russia in this way. Doubtlessly he taught next generations of reporters that knowledge of the past helps understand the present day. Intertwining narratives about the present day with digressions about the past of the discussed region has become a standard practice for reporters who write mostly about foreign countries, such as Wojciech

¹ Marian Brandys, *Kozietulski i inni* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1967).

² “Pan Marian od szwoleżerów. Z Marianem Brandysem rozmawiają Anna Bikont i Joanna Szczęsna” [Mr. Marian from cavalry. An interview with Marian Brandys by Anna Bikont and Joanna Szczęsna], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 23.12.1994.

³ “Ismaeli continua a navigare. Z Ryszardem Kapuścińskim rozmawia Maria Nadotti” [An interview with Ryszard Kapuściński by Maria Nadotti], in: *Ryszard Kapuściński, Il cinico non è adatto a questo mestiere. Conversazioni sul buon giornalismo*, edited by Maria Nadotti, Roma: E/O, 2002; fragments translated by Jarosław Mikołajewski cited from: *Ryszard Kapuściński, Rwący nurt historii. Zapiski o XX i XXI wieku* [In the Whirlpools of History: Jottings on the 20th and the 21st Centuries] (Kraków: Znak, 2007).

Jagielski, Wojciech Górecki or Jacek Hugo-Bader. But history – especially recent – is also of interest to reporters who focus on Polish affairs. There have been a lot of such books published in Poland in recent years. Some of them (e.g. *My z Jedwabnego* [Us from Jedwabne] by Anna Bikont⁴ or *Płuczki* [Washers] by Paweł Piotr Reszka⁵) discuss difficult, painful topics from our recent past, constituting an important counterpoint for historical policy becoming increasingly more uniform, preventing it from being treated as a closed chapter. The already mentioned books, as well as works by Hanna Krall, Małgorzata Szejnert, Cezary Łazarewicz, Włodzimierz Nowak and Paweł Smoleński (among others) rediscover what has been pushed into social oblivion, a type of memory – as aptly defined by Jacek Żakowski – unsaid, or even silenced⁶.

At this point, I would like to examine another role that history plays in reportage: as a reflection or counterpoint to contemporary reality.. As convincingly argued by Ewa Domańska, history is always the history of the present in the sense that “a historian necessarily imposes on the people and phenomena they study ways of thinking peculiar to their time and culture”⁷. This concerns historians, authors of historical fiction, and reportages. However, it would seem that while for historians the starting point, the impulse to look back results from their interest in the past, for reporters it is the present, as exemplified by books by Małgorzata Szejnert, Anna Bikont, Cezary Łazarewicz, Paweł Smoleński, which are often dubbed “historical reportages”, implying that they are about some little known or completely unknown stories from the past, whereas in fact, books by those authors are usually about historical events which have been rather well described by professional historians. What motivates those authors to look back? Paradoxically, it is their interest in the present that pushes them towards studying the past – to answer important questions of the present day by providing a historical context.

There is no doubt that Kapuściński’s *The Emperor* played a pivotal role in presenting history as a universal narrative.. Beata Nowacka wrote: “Kapuściński meticulously erases traces of geographical and historical references, distancing his picture from the described reality – his 1970s Ethiopia resembles a fairytale land rather than a real state”⁸. Nowacka points out that for this reason the book is subject to numerous interpretations (evanescence, attitudes towards the world, the absurdity of human existence); it is generally considered a parable of power⁹.

We have yet to see a masterpiece that would match *The Emperor*, however, in recent years – apart from the already mentioned reporters – there have been a number of books which use history to explain present-day phenomena, especially Polish, in such a way as to turn readers’ attention to the permanence and universality of certain phenomena. However, contrary to Kapuściński, who could only hope that the question of authoritarian power would be clear not just for Poles, but also to most European societies, today’s reporters do not use history for constructing some national identity. Historian Maciej Serwański concluded:

⁴ Anna Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015).

⁵ Paweł Piotr Reszka, *Płuczki. Poszukiwacze żydowskiego złota* [In search of Jewish gold] (Warszawa: Agora, 2019).

⁶ See Jacek Żakowski, *Rewanż pamięci* [Memory’s revenge] (Warszawa: Sic!, 2002), 15–16.

⁷ Ewa Domańska, *Historia egzystencjalna* [Existential history] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2012), 19.

⁸ Beata Nowacka, “Wstęp” [Introduction], in: Ryszard Kapuściński, *Cesarz* [The Emperor] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2012), CXXII.

⁹ Nowacka.

There is no single history. For every individual the future is drawn in a different dimension. Every generation has a different perspective on the past and rewrites history. [...] Of course, the way we look at past events and processes depends on our perspective, which results from various social, national, and cultural circumstances of the person looking back, their political views, knowledge, current needs [...]¹⁰.

Literary reportages are the type of books where deeper layers of narrative are easy to come by, where a private, individual vision of the world and humanity is revealed. Reporters evaluate the past, although they avoid passing judgments; the qualification appears in the choice of the subject, selection of facts, determining their significance. The authors already mentioned here are aware of the multiplicity of visions of the past, and by choosing one interpretation over others, they create a certain concept of reality, co-creating the historical discourse¹¹. At the same time, they refer to the world of values represented by their readers rather than their knowledge of history. Therefore, a reportage builds a community of concerned, like-minded individuals.

There are three ways in which reporters use historical material in order to explain the present. The first one is mythologization, whose representatives (Małgorzata Szejnert, *Czarny ogród* [Black garden]¹²; Filip Springer, *Miedzianka. Historia znikania* [Miedzianka. The story of disappearing]¹³) are not just concerned with creating a myth, but also with the choice of values and turning readers' attention to those values which feel deficient in today's world. Those stories result from disappointment with the present. They are about a foregone world, but the authors' goal goes beyond "embalming time"¹⁴ – they try to present a certain emptiness, a haunting lack. Another way of talking about the present is by demythologizing it (e.g. Małgorzata Szejnert, *Wyspa Węży* [Isle of Snakes]¹⁵; Małgorzata Szejnert, *Wyspa klucz* [Key-Island]¹⁶; Bartłomiej Kuraś, Paweł Smoleński, *Krzyżyk niespodziany. Czas Goralenvolk* [Swastika. The time of Goralenvolk]¹⁷; Paweł Smoleński, *Syrop z piołunu. Wygnani z akcji "Wisła"* [Wormwood syrup. Exiled after operation "Vistula"]¹⁸; Paweł Smoleński, *Pochówek dla rezuna* [A Ukrainian's funeral]¹⁹). Yet again, this is not about describing some "uncharted territories" of our past; such books are meant to draw attention to the consequences of our national vices, and more importantly to the fact that certain Polish phenomena may not have emerged if we

¹⁰Maciej Serwański, "Przedmowa" [Foreword], in: Tomasz Schramm, *Historia powszechna. Wiek XX* [World history. 20th century] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1999), V.

¹¹For a discussion about historical discourse see Frank Ankersmit, *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii* [Narration, representation, experience. Studies in historiography], translated into Polish by Ewa Domańska (Kraków: Universitas, 2004).

¹²Małgorzata Szejnert, *Czarny ogród* (Kraków: Znak, 2007).

¹³Filip Springer, *Miedzianka. Historia znikania* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015). Henceforth all quotes from this book are marked as MI with page number.

¹⁴This term is used by Zofia Rydet, author of *Zapis socjologiczny* [Sociological record], a collection of photographs of the Polish countryside taken from 1978 to 1988. In a rare comment about her work, Rydet wrote: "My *Zapis* was supposed to embalm time, it is supposed to preserve what is changing and although it remains a real reality, it ceases to exist and soon can be difficult to imagine". *Korespondencje. Sztuka nowoczesna i uniwersalizm* [Correspondence. Modern art and universalism], edited by Jarosław Lubiak, Małgorzata Ludwisiak (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2012), 712–713.

¹⁵Małgorzata Szejnert, *Wyspa Węży* (Kraków: Znak, 2018). Henceforth all quotes from this book are marked WW with page number.

¹⁶Szejnert, *Czarny ogród*.

¹⁷Bartłomiej Kuraś, Paweł Smoleński, *Krzyżyk niespodziany. Czas Goralenvolk* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2017).

¹⁸Paweł Smoleński, *Syrop z piołunu. Wygnani w akcji „Wisła”* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2017).

¹⁹Paweł Smoleński, *Pochówek dla rezuna* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2011).

were able to learn from the past. The third way of using the past is “history as a costume” (e.g. Cezary Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów. Sprawa Grzegorza Przemyska* [Leave no traces. The case of Grzegorz Przymyk]²⁰; Cezary Łazarewicz, *Nic osobistego. Sprawa Janusza Walusia* [Nothing personal. The case of Janusz Waluś]²¹; Wojciech Jagielski, *Wypalanie traw* [Grass burning]²²). Here the story being told – e.g. the murder of Chris Hani by Janusz Waluś, fatal beating of Grzegorz Przymyk, or the South African revolution – is a type of synecdoche aimed to identify and outline the anatomy of universal mechanisms, such as dividing people and taking advantage of their gullibility, such as lies, propaganda, or problems with regained freedom.

Three representative reportages have been selected to illustrate those three ways of using the past: *Miedzianka. Historia znikania* by Filip Springer (mythologization), *Wyspa Węży* by Małgorzata Szejnert (demythologizing), and *Żeby nie było śladów. Historia Grzegorza Przemyska* by Cezary Łazarewicz (history as a costume).

Mythologization

Miedzianka. Historia znikania is Filip Springer’s two-hundred-page long reportage debut, in which he presents the historiography of a mining town in south-western Poland from its settlement in 14th century to the present day. Kupferberg – Miedzianka, a small town near Jelenia Góra – is no more. Among other things, Springer tells the story of how Kupferberg used to be a mining town, about its brief period as a tourist attraction and a sanatorium, and about Franzki’s brewery, which no longer exists, and which used to be locally famous for its beer.

It is a peculiar, meticulously recorded chronicle of a small town, from first mentions about it in 14th-century chronicles when “a village then known as Cuprifodina was sold by one of Albert’s descendants – Heinrich Bavarus – to Clerus Bolcze, a knight at the court of duke of Świdnica-Jaworze” (MI 6), up to when “it all disappeared, destroyed, ploughed-up, sunken” (MI 247). The town’s story is rooted in over three hundred years of Polish-German history and relations. Springer tells the story of a culturally mixed community subjected to subsequent historical trials, living in an area of moving borders, where different national traditions – especially Polish and German – produce a string of intertwined human experiences. The network of events taking place in time and space, accompanied by minor episodes, comprises a dense tissue of a story about the past.

Springer’s book resembles the excellent *Czarny ogród* [Black garden]²³ by Małgorzata Szejnert. Similarly to Szejnert, Springer skillfully balances between a factual chronicle and myth. He relies

²⁰Cezary Łazarewicz, *Żeby nie było śladów. Sprawa Grzegorza Przemyska* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2017). Dalej cytaty z tej książki będę oznaczała skrótem SP ze wskazaniem właściwej strony.

²¹Cezary Łazarewicz, *Nic osobistego. Sprawa Janusza Walusia* (Katowice: Post Factum, 2019).

²²Wojciech Jagielski, *Wypalanie traw* (Kraków: Znak, 2012).

²³I do not use *Czarny ogród* by Małgorzata Szejnert as an example for mythologization, because I have already written about it in my paper “Między mitem, pamięcią i historią. Literacki obraz Śląska w «Czarnym ogrodzie» Małgorzaty Szejnert” [Between myth, memory and history. A literary image of Silesia in «Czarny ogród» by Małgorzata Szejnert], *Anthropos?* 22 (2014): 25–33, and in the book: Aleksandra Dębska-Kossakowska, Beata Gontarz, Monika Wiszniowska, *Literackie reprezentacje historii* [Literary representations of history] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013).

on the same methodology, studying archives, talking to witnesses, even the construction of the plot is similar – the narrative focuses on several people, families, and photographs. Moreover, he treats the cultural landscape as a “palimpsest in which different layers of the past overlap”²⁴.

In Miedzianka, there are three clashing realities – a German reality, from better, pre-war days, still remembered by one of my protagonists, Karl Heinz, who leaves his “little fatherland”. A post-war reality, which ties together German and Polish stories, such as the one of the Gliszczyński family, who stay and believe they will manage to get along with Polish people, but eventually leave. And finally, the saddest reality – Polish, the downfall of Miedzianka...²⁵

In Miedzianka, mythologization concerns both the organization of time and space, and a “synthetic and harmonious experience of the world in which all life forms are connected”²⁶. Thanks to mythologizing devices, Miedzianka gains singularity without losing its historical and geographic substance, it reveals its *genius loci*. From the very beginning the reader is introduced to the world of fables and legends: “the superstitious would say that it all happened because in Kupferberg one brother killed another years ago” (MI 5). There is a reason why Springer states in one interview that “Originally I meant to write a parallel fairy tale about Miedzianka – about an evil queen who cursed the town. And to write it I read various fairy tales”²⁷. Springer (re)creates the atmosphere of a lost world in such a way as to inspire awe and nostalgia through telling the story about the quiet and affluent life of its inhabitants with empathy on one hand, and on another – through idyllic images:

Even the biggest malcontent would love the view from here. Far down you can see the main road to Waltersdorf, and when you look slightly up you see the panorama of the Sokoliki. It would be difficult to find a more charming place in the area, even though there are plenty of beautiful spots there (MI 59–60).

The past which Springer talks about is a closed enclave, a separate world full of internal order: “[...] Kupferberg is almost self-sufficient. There is a plumber, electrician, tinsmith and stove-maker. Whatever merchants cannot supply is produced locally” (MI 44). And although “dark clouds are gathering” (MI 49), in his story about pre-war years, full of descriptions of local customs and mentality, Springer paints a detailed picture of the past, positively charged axiologically. It is thanks to “myths” that we can refer to the past as “building blocks of a world of values”²⁸ which have survived despite the irreversibility of events. For Springer, those “building blocks” are the perseverance of the home as the center of family life, everyday life of a hard-working community for whom honoring traditions is of utmost importance. Mytholo-

²⁴Robert Traba, *Przeszłość w teraźniejszości. Polskie spory o historię na początku XXI wieku* [The past in the present. Polish disputes about history at the beginning of 21st century] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2009), 103.

²⁵“Nieodrobiona lekcja historii. Z Filipem Springerem rozmawia Katarzyna Kazimierowska” [Unfinished history lesson. An interview with Filip Springer by Katarzyna Kazimierowska], *Rzeczpospolita* 10.11.2011.

²⁶See Bogumiła Kaniewska, “O sposobach i funkcjach mityzacji: Nowak – Myśliński – Redliński” [On ways and functions of mythization: Nowak – Myśliński – Redliński], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 3 (1990).

²⁷“Przestrzeń trzeba przeżyć. Z Filipem Springerem rozmawia Agnieszka Sowińska” [Spaces need to be experienced. An interview with Filip Springer by Agnieszka Sowińska], *Dwutygodnik* 96 (2012), date of access: 10.01.2014.

²⁸See W. Burszta, *Czytanie kultury. Pięć szkiców* [Reading culture. Five essays], IEiAK, Łódź 1996, especially *Nostalgia i mit albo o mechanizmie powrotu* [Nostalgia and myth, or on the return mechanism].

gizing Miedzianka reveals values which are tied to identity, the power of being rooted, generational durability. But have those “building blocks” – according to Springer, so significant for building a community – actually survived? The very title, as well as the symbolic repetition of the word “memento” on numerous pages (MI 5, 17, 28, 48, 55, 64, 69, 72, 76...) foreshadowing the sinking of the ground, disappearance of animals, people, their deaths would – it would all suggest otherwise.

Springer declared that he “wanted to show how the year 1945 disrupted Miedzianka’s continuity. [...] Following 1945 we have had different inhabitants, a different picture, the beginning of an end”²⁹. People of Miedzianka have witnessed or experienced wars, relocations, displacement. The world from Springer’s story has changed its skin. This is an important moment of the story, in which Springer shares his very modern anxiety: changes can be enforced, but at a cost of damaged foundations.

There is one more significant aspect of mythologization in *Miedzianka*. Springer manages to present “a nostalgic community”: Germans miss their lost land, and Poles miss the same land as well. By clearly showing that Poles are strangers to this land – although not through their own fault – Springer not only revises the traditional understanding of national history, but also – by mythologizing the past – he creates “bipartisan” history, therefore adding an important chapter to constructing its transnational version³⁰.

Demythologization

In one of his final books, *Retrotopia*³¹, Zygmunt Bauman considers the significance and consequences of the conservative turn which he observed in modern societies. He writes about the return to the communal context, deeply rooted in values which we search for in the past rather than – as usual, heretofore – in the future. According to Bauman, the eponymous retrotopia is a past-oriented type of utopia; a type of longing for, idealizing, and, hence mythologizing the past. Additionally, this “return to the womb” is also connected to a “return to tribes”, i.e. producing a vision of a clearly defined community in opposition to the chaos of the modern world. Therefore, we escape to the past, hoping that it offers a solution to today’s problems in shared myths, constructing shared memory³².

It seems that Bauman’s observations largely point out to the reasons behind the shape of modern historical policy or construction of collective memory based on “one homogenic memory

²⁹“Nieodrobiona lekcja historii. Z Filipem Springerem rozmawia Katarzyna Kazimierowska”.

³⁰See Marcin Kula, *Historia narodowa w ponadnarodowej perspektywie* [National history from an international perspective], conference presentation at Wspólna Polsko-Niemiecka Komisja Podręcznikowa Historyków i Geografów [Common Polish-German Textbook Committee of Historians and Geographers], Łódź 4–6.06.2009. Cited from: Traba, 37–38.

³¹Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia. Jak rządzi nami przeszłość*, translated into Polish by Karolina Lebek (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018).

³²See Bauman. This fragment is a partial repetition of my observations from my paper “Demytologizacja polskiej historii w reportażach Pawła Smoleńskiego” [Demythologization of the Polish history in Paweł Smoleński’s reportages], *Prace Literackie* 58 (2018): 165–174.

of «all Poles», defined as a monolithic nation³³. We are facing the threat of an oversimplified history of Poland³⁴ – realized not only by historians, but also by reporters, including Małgorzata Szejnert. One day, Szejnert – a custodian of family memorabilia – was organizing her family archive when she noticed “the strange absence of uncle Raczkowski” (WW 12), i.e. Ignacy “Rak” Raczkowski, a soldier in the Tsarist artillery, was never spoken of at home following 1939. Intrigued, Szejnert discovered that he was buried at a cemetery in Rothesay on the Isle of Bute off the coast of Scotland. Her research revealed that her family’s silence was caused by Raczkowski’s inglorious World War 2 episode: he was forcibly sent to the Isle of Bute, with several hundred other Sanation officers, accused of disloyalty by Władysław Sikorski. Stefan Mękariski, one of the most important and frequently cited protagonists of Szejnert’s book, summarizes this practice:

Sometimes it seems to me that in the history of Polish tortures it is not the Kolyma, not the White Sea, not Komi, Starobielsk, gulags in Siberia, not Dachau, Oranienburg or Auschwitz concentration camps: instead, it is Rothesay that will be considered the place of the most grim doom of several hundred Polish intelligentsia representatives (WW 93).

The book was inspired by a family mystery, but for a skilled reporter like Szejnert this story turned into perfect material for not only completing some hidden chapters in history, but also reevaluating, demythologizing the idealized history of both the Second Polish Republic and Poles’ participation in World War 2, by revealing an inglorious page in the history of the Polish Armed Forces in the West.

In *Wyspa Węży* Szejnert debunks two of the many myths about the Second Polish Republic. The first one concerns the Polish army; every history textbook features heartwarming photographs of beautiful uhlans or generals’ uniforms. (Czesław Miłosz later wrote: “Uhlans danced in a parade”, adding that “they turned what could be glory into encomium”³⁵). Although the soldiers sent to the Isle of Bute “have an upright bearing in their uniforms” (WW90), although they feed on the myth³⁶, they do not fight – they only keep busy by organizing their own everyday life.

Szejnert successfully deconstructs another myth: about the political unity of the Polish elites in the face of the growing threat from two powerful and hostile neighbors from both west and east, one of founding myths of the Second Republic of Poland³⁷. The image of the Polish elites emerging from *Wyspa Węży* is depressing; they are presented as constantly quarreling, not only about issues crucial for the state, but also about minor problems. They write reports and

³³Traba, 77.

³⁴Traba, 79.

³⁵Czesław Miłosz, “W praojcach swoich pogrzebani” [Buried in their forefathers], in: Światło dzienne [Daylight] (Paryż: Instytut Literacki, 1953).

³⁶Tadeusz Alf-Tarczyński, a protagonist of *Wyspa Węży*, wrote in his memoir: “the Polish soldier has left history books, poetry, novels, he has stepped off the theater stage where he dwelled for a brief moment between lifting and dropping the curtain – he has left Grottger’s prints, Matejko’s, Rosen’s, Wyspiański’s, Malczewski’s, Kossak’s, Tetmajer’s paintings in order to be made flesh” (WW 231).

³⁷See Andrzej Garlicki, *Siedem mitów Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej* [Seven myths about the Second Polish Republic] (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 2013).

denouncing letters about each other, such as: “Certain individuals claim that Kościałkowski has been summoned by a «certain group of people» to London...” (WW 237).

For Szejnert, demythologization is not an end in itself. *Wyspa Węży* is not only a historical reportage, but first and foremost a book resulting from a very modern anxiety about the Polish inability to learn from past mistakes. Moreover, our national shortcomings are eternal:

Sikorski condemns Rydz for his escape from Poland, whereas he himself abandoned his troops in France once it ceased to be an ally. Rydz’s followers explain that he left Poland to fight for it, Sikorski’s – that he had to abandon his army to prepare for its stay in Great Britain. But both groups refused to listen to each other. Any presumption of innocence and goodwill was out of the question. **There is a high demand for somebody else’s fault** [emphasis mine, MW] – cowardice, short-sightedness, conceit, bungling (WW 76). Only one side was supposed to be blamed for all that (WW 60).

Additionally, Szejnert writes extensively about Polish antisemitism and mutual lack of trust. Citing journals, formal reports and bulletins, and contemporary press, she demonstrates that destructive divisions remain an issue. Her diagnosis of the “sick Polish soul” is negative:

“The sick Polish soul and the resulting moral decay is the biggest and most significant reason behind our military failure in 1939. [...] The sanatia-legion “elites” were notorious for their hatred for all things spiritually Polish and catholic, which made them shocking and incomprehensible... for any true Pole. [...] By opposing the state to the Nation and the Church, the government did everything in their power to destroy the State by destroying the only foundations on which the Nation’s Greatness and its organizational greatness can grow, i.e. the State; they mocked faith in God, fought with the Church and Polish patriotism, which they rejected as “nationalism” (WW 62).

Although Szejnert does not comment on it, clearly we are dealing with a remarkable historical continuity; as Paweł Goźliński wrote in his review “One would like to say – where do we get it from?”³⁸. A similar comment could be made about the words cited by Adrian Carton de Wiart:

“I realized that there is always some political crisis at hand. I had a lot of sympathy and admiration for Poles, but I cannot deny that they fed on crises, producing them readily and unprovoked” (WW 206).

History as a costume

In *Żeby nie było śladów. Sprawa Grzegorza Przemyka*, awarded with Nike, Cezary Łazarewicz explores more recent history than that presented in books by Małgorzata Szejnert and Filip Springer. Łazarewicz’s book tells the story of one of the most notorious political murders of the People’s Republic of Poland, commonly known and widely discussed after 1989. Grzegorz

³⁸Paweł Goźliński, “Szejnert na Wyspie Węży. Paweł Goźliński o warsztacie królowej reportażu” [Szejnert on Snake Island. Paweł Goźliński on the work of the queen of reportage], *Książki* 1 (2018).

Przemyk, son of the poet Barbara Sadowska, supporter of the underground “Solidarność” was attacked by the police. Although assaults by so-called “person or persons unknown” were not uncommon at the time, in Przemyk’s case it was clear from the start who his attackers were. The book makes it obvious from its first pages. In an interview for “Gazeta Wyborcza”, Hanna Krall says to Łazarewicz:

The case was clear, a healthy boy entered a police station, and a fatally beaten one left it. I had been a reporter for 30 years, I was not naive, and yet I was surprised. How can one lie so much?³⁹.

Since readers also know this, they can focus on the mechanisms functioning in Poland at the time of the crime rather than on solving the mystery.

Łazarewicz skillfully captures the dark atmosphere of the 1980s Warsaw, convincingly demonstrating how oppressive the People’s Republic of Poland was – a state where *de facto* any citizen could fall prey to authorities who broke people’s lives. Grzegorz Przemyk was a victim of an authoritarian regime, whose officials not only broke the law, but were also protected by their superiors. The authorities did not hesitate to destroy the lives of innocent citizens. *Żeby nie było śladów* also tells the story of resisting the system. The protagonists – Grzegorz Przemyk, his mother and friends – have become symbols of resistance. They know in advance that they stand no chance against the totalitarian regime, but they try to resist it nonetheless. Although not the first book on that topic, due to Łazarewicz’s meticulousness in finding sources, his tenacity in extracting knowledge from witnesses, *Żeby nie było śladów* demonstrates how little we know about the famous case.

For Łazarewicz, the murder of a senior high school student, similarly to the already cited reportages, is only an excuse for telling a more interesting story. Although he does not have the same ambition as Ryszard Kapuściński, who revealed the universal dimension of power in *The Emperor*, by using an event from our recent history Łazarewicz incisively presents the mechanisms of an authoritarian regime. Therefore, his book is first and foremost a story about a lie overwhelming the political reality. Hence the motto from *Struktura kłamstwa* [The structure of a lie] by Piotr Wierzbicki:

Lies do not walk alone.
they walk in packs.
Organized packs.
Lies organize into a system (SP 7).

The case of Grzegorz Przemyk is used to present the gigantic machine of manipulation of power founded on an unprecedented lie, whose structure Łazarewicz analyses. The book shocks with the number of people and institutions involved in covering up the crime – not only the police, doctors, state authorities, propagandists, but even scientists who issued fraudulent documents and opinions – as well as how easy it is to fall prey to manipulation. Łazarewicz

³⁹“Była jak wilczyca. Z Hanną Krall rozmawia Cezary Łazarewicz” [She was like a she-wolf. An interview with Hanna Krall by Cezary Łazarewicz], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 6.10.2016.

demonstrates the role played by “creating an adequate story” (Jerzy Urban, the government spokesman at the time, was instrumental in it); he gives an account of consultations with propaganda experts, including Prof. Włodzimierz Szewczuk – a sociologist from the Jagiellonian University who proposed to present “the enemy” in the darkest way possible, as well as to improve the image of the police and security service: “A year was enough to destroy the credibility of key witnesses, confuse the case, obliterate the traces and find porters who confessed to a crime they had not commit” (SP 240).

Accepting the Nike Award in 2017, Łazarewicz said that a lie can still be presented as the truth⁴⁰, and in his laudation Tomasz Fiałkowski clearly highlighted the universal character of Łazarewicz’s book:

This is a story from over three decades ago, from a closed chapter in our history, but the mechanisms it describes can always happen again. [...] It is a credible testament of those times, but also a warning against what can happen when the justice system loses its independence and becomes a political tool. [...] The author warns modern readers against wishing to return to strong, authoritarian power, which always equals lawlessness and injustice⁴¹.

This is a key message from Łazarewicz’s reportage – a cautionary tale.

In 2009 Robert Traba attempted to name and identify two different ways of talking about history today: national homogeneity and heroization of history *versus* renegotiations and expanding the perspective⁴². The reporters discussed in the present paper represent the latter, anthropological history – as Karol Modzelewski put it – which “helps to notice the world’s cultural heterogeneity and traces of the past still present in today’s reality, sometimes very distant and surprisingly long-lasting. This may help us [and this is the dimension I observe in the reporters cited here – MW] in recognizing dangerous traps and obstacles with which, despite apparent uniformization, the present abounds⁴³”.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

⁴⁰Cezary Łazarewicz’s speech, cited from: Emilia Dłużewska, “Nike 2017 – relacja z gali” [Nike 2017 – gala report], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 1.10.2017.

⁴¹Tomasz Fiałkowski, “Nike 2017. Laudacja: «Żeby nie było śladów» jest świadectwem i przestrożą” [Nike 2017. Laudation: «Żeby nie było śladów» is both a testament and a warning], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 1.10.2017.

⁴²Traba, 34.

⁴³Karol Modzelewski, “Trzy modele historiografii” [Three models of historiography], *Nauka* 2 (2009): 21.

References

- Ankersmit, Frank. *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii* [Narration, representation, experience. Studies in historiography]. Translated into Polish by Ewa Domańska. Kraków: Universitas, 2004.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Jak rządzi nami przeszłość*. Translated by Karolina Lebek. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018.
- Bikont, Anna. *My z Jedwabnego* [Us from Jedwabne]. Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015.
- Brandys, Marian. *Kozietulski i inni* [Kozietulski and others]. Warszawa: Iskry, 1967.
- “Była jak wilczyca. Z Hanną Krall rozmawia Cezary Łazarewicz” [She was like a she-wolf. An interview with Hanna Krall by Cezary Łazarewicz]. *Gazeta Wyborcza* 6.10.2016.
- Dębska-Kossakowska, Aleksandra, Beata Gontarz, Monika Wiszniowska. *Literackie reprezentacje historii* [Literary representations of history]. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013.
- Dłużewska, Emilia. “Nike 2017 – relacja z gali” [Nike 2017 – gala report]. *Gazeta Wyborcza* 1.10.2017.
- Domańska, Ewa. *Historia egzystencjalna*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2012.
- Fiałkowski, Tomasz. “Nike 2017. Laudacja: «Żeby nie było śladów» jest świadectwem i przestrożą” [Nike 2017. Laudation: «Żeby nie było śladów» is both a testament and a warning]. *Gazeta Wyborcza* 1.10.2017.
- Garlicki, Andrzej. *Siedem mitów Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej* [Seven myths about the Second Polish Republic]. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 2013.
- Goźliński, Paweł. “Szejnert na Wyspie Węży. Paweł Goźliński o warsztacie królowej reportażu” [Szejnert on Snake Island. Paweł Goźliński on the work of the queen of reportage]. “Gazeta Wyborcza” *Magazyn Książki* 1 (2018): <https://wyborcza.pl/ksiazki/7,154165,23018619,szejnert-na-wyspie-wezy-pawel-gozlinski-o-warsztacie.html> [date of access: 30.01.2020].
- “Ismaeli continua a navigare. Z Ryszardem Kapuścińskim rozmawia Maria Nadotti” [An interview with Ryszard Kapuściński by Maria Nadotti]. In: Ryszard Kapuściński, *Il cinico non è adatto a questo mestiere. Conversazioni sul buon giornalismo*, edited by Maria Nadotti, Roma: E/O, 2002; fragments translated into Polish by Jarosław Miłojajewskiego. [Cited from:] R. Kapuściński, *Rwący nurt historii. Zapiski o XX i XXI wieku* [In the Whirlpools of History: Jottings on the 20th and the 21st Centuries]. Znak. Kraków 2007, p. 204.
- Jagielski, Wojciech. *Wypalanie traw* [Grass burning]. Kraków: Znak, 2017.
- Kaniewska, Bogumiła. “O sposobach i funkcjach mityzacji: Nowak – Myśliński – Redliński” [On ways and functions of mythization: Nowak – Myśliński – Redliński]. *Pamiętnik Literacki* 3 (1990): 91–113.
- Kapuściński, Ryszard. *Rwący nurt historii. Zapiski o XX i XXI wieku* [In the Whirlpools of History: Jottings on the 20th and the 21st Centuries]. Kraków: Znak, 2007.
- Korespondencje. Sztuka nowoczesna i uniwersalizm* [Correspondence. Modern art and universalism]. Edited by Jarosław Lubiak, Małgorzata Ludwisiak. Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2012.
- Kula, Marcin. *Historia narodowa w ponadnarodowej perspektywie* [National history from an international perspective]. Conference presentation at Wspólna Polsko-Niemiecka Komisji Podręcznikowej Historyków i Geografów [Common Polish-German Textbook Committee of Historians and Geographers]. Łódź 4–6.06.2009.
- Kuraś, Bartłomiej, Paweł Smoleński. *Krzyżak niespodziany. Czas Goralenvolk* [Swastika. The time of Goralenvolk]. Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2017.
- Łazarewicz, Cezary. *Nic osobistego. Sprawa Janusza Walusia* [Nothing personal. The case of Janusz Waluś]. Katowice: Post Factum, 2019.
- – –. *Żeby nie było śladów. Sprawa Grzegorza Przemyska* [Leave no traces. The case of Grzegorz Przemyski]. Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2017.
- Miłosz, Czesław. “W praojcach swoich pogrzebani” [Buried in their forefathers]. In Miłosz: *Światło dzienne* [Daylight], p. 14.

- Paryż: Instytut Literacki, 1953.
- Modzelewski, Karol. "Trzy modele historiografii" [Three models of historiography]. *Nauka* 2 (2009): 15–21.
- "Nieodrobiona lekcja historii. Z Flipem Springerem rozmawia Katarzyna Kazmierowska" [Unfinished history lesson. An interview with Filip Springer by Katarzyna Kazmierowska]. *Rzeczpospolita* 10.11.2011.
- Nowacka, Beata. "Wstęp" [Introduction]. In: Ryszard Kapuściński, *Cesarz* [Emperor], V-CXXVIII Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2012.
- "Pan Marian od szwoleżerów. Z Marianem Brandysem rozmawiają Anna Bikont i Joanna Szczęśna" [Marian from cavalry. An interview with Marian Brandys by Anna Bikont and Joanna Szczęśna]. *Gazeta Wyborcza* 23.12.1994.
- "Przestrzenie trzeba przeżyć. Z Filipem Springerem rozmawia Agnieszka Sowińska" [Spaces need to be experienced. An interview with Filip Springer by Agnieszka Sowińska]. *Dwutygodnik* 96 (2012). Date of access: 10.01.2014.
- Reszka, Paweł Piotr. *Płuczki. Poszukiwacze żydowskiego złota* [In search of Jewish gold]. Warszawa: Agora, 2019.
- Serwański, Maciej. "Przedmowa" [Foreword]. In: Tomasz Schramm, *Historia powszechna. Wiek XX* [World history. 20th century], p. V-X. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1999.
- Smoleński, Paweł. *Pochówek dla rezuna* [A Ukrainian's funeral]. Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2011.
- – –. *Syrop z piołunu. Wygnani w akcji "Wisła"* [Wormwood syrup. Exiled after operation "Vistula"]. Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2017.
- Springer, Filip. *Miedzianka. Historia znikania* [Miedzianka. The story of disappearing]. Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015.
- Szejnert, Małgorzata. *Czarny ogród* [Black garden]. Kraków: Znak, 2007.
- – –. *Wyspa Węży* [Isle of Snakes]. Kraków: Znak, 2018.
- Traba, Robert. *Przeszłość w teraźniejszości. Polskie spory o historię na początku XXI wieku* [The past in the present. Polish disputes about history at the beginning of 21st century]. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2009.
- Wiszniowska, Monika. "Demitologizacja polskiej historii w reportażach Pawła Smoleńskiego" [Demythologization of the Polish history in Paweł Smoleński's reportages]. *Prace Literackie* 58 (2018): 165–174.
- – –. "Między mitem, pamięcią i historią. Literacki obraz Śląska w «Czarnym ogrodzie» Małgorzaty Szejnert" [Between myth, memory and history. A literary image of Silesia in «Czarny ogród» by Małgorzata Szejnert]. *Anthropos?* 22 (2014): 25–33.
- Żakowski, Jacek. *Rewanż pamięci* [Memory's revenge]. Warszawa: Sic!, 2002.

KEYWORDS

reportage

ABSTRACT:

History has always been and will always be present in the Polish reportage, as showcased by such names as Ksawery Pruszyński and Melchior Wańkowicz, who wrote about recent history being aware that they lived in historically significant times. Ryszard Kapuściński repeatedly stressed that in a way, a reporter is also a historian, that explaining the present with the past is always worthwhile. Today history also plays a different role in reportages; in recent years there have been a number of so-called “historical reportages”, e.g. by Anna Bikont, Cezary Łazarewicz and Paweł Smoleński, which may suggest discovering some “uncharted territories” from the past. However, this is not the case; these reporters usually write about episodes from our history which have already been scrutinized by professional historians. In their books history works as a key to explaining the present. By mythologizing – or, conversely, demythologizing – our past, or by framing narratives within a historical context, they create models and outlines of human existence to draw attention to contemporary issues.

HISTORY

d e m y t h o l o g i z a t i o n

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Monika Wiszniowska – dr hab., professor at the University of Silesia, Institute of Culture Studies. Literary scholar specializing in non-fiction literature. Author of: *Stańczyk Polski Ludowej. Rzecz o Stefanie Kisielewskim* [Stańczyk of Polish People's Republic. On Stefan Kisielewski] (2004), *Sztuka felietonu Stefana Kisielewskiego* [Stefan Kisielewski's art of the column] (2013), *Literackie reprezentacje historii: świadectwa – mediatyzacje – eksploracje* [Literary representations of the history of the world: testaments – mediatizations – explorations] (2013, co-author), *Zobaczyć – opisać – zrozumieć. Polskie reportaże literackie o rosyjskim imperium* [To see – to describe – to understand. Polish literary reportages on the Russian Empire] (2017). |