Annihilation (Zagłada)

Author: Piotr Szewc

First Published: 1987

Translations: French (*L'évanescence des choses*, 1990); Italian (*La distruzione*, 1991); English (*Annihilation*, 1993); German (*Vernichtung*, 1993; *Das Buch eines Tages. Zamość, Juli 1934*, 2011); Hungarian (*Pasztulás*, 1994); Norwegian (*Byens øye*, 1994); Croatian (*Uništenje*, 2002).

Theatre Adaptation: Teatr Współczesny w Szczecinie and Hebbel-Theater, Berlin (1995, in cooperation; adapted and directed by Klaus-Rüdiger Mai).

About the Author: Piotr Szewc was born in 1961 in Zamość. He studied Polish philology at the Catholic University of Lublin. His debut was a 1983 volume of poetry *Testimony* (Świadectwo) which was an underground publication. His first novel was *Annihilation*, which, together with his subsequent novels *Sunsets and Daybreaks* and *Storks over the District*, is part of the Zamość trilogy. A writer of poetry and prose, he is also a literary critic. Since 1996, he has been the editor of the monthly modern Polish literature column in the *Nowe Książki*. *Annihilation* is one of the author's two works referring – even if indirectly – to the Holocaust. The other, which foreshadows some of the themes of his novel, is the essay entitled *Our Towns Are on Fire*, published in 1983.

Further Important Publications: *Palą się nasze miasta* (1983, Our Towns Are on Fire; essay); *Zmierzchy i poranki* (2000, Sunsets and Daybreaks, 2002; novel); *Bociany nad powiatem* (2005, Storks over the District; novel).

Content and Interpretation

The novel's plot unfolds over one day in July of 1934, between early morning and late evening, in an unnamed Polish town (which is quite obviously modeled on Zamość). The location is both the background against which the plot is set, as well as being the novel's main protagonist, since none of the numerous locals depicted in the novel (mainly Poles and Jews) stand out in particular. The most prominent person in the town is Walenty Danilowski who is a lawyer. Some of the others are a teacher named Mariusz Mroz, Antoni Wrzosek and Tomasz Romanowic who are both police officers. Then there are, Kazimiera M., a prostitute, Hershe Baum, a mercer, as well as his wife, Zelda, and their five children. Others are Rosenzweig, the owner of a pub, Wasyl Czehyra, who is a Ukrainian, also Roza, a Gypsy, as well as the nameless customers and patrons, Hasidic Jews, and a carter. They each show a different side of life in the town.

On the one hand they are all shown performing their mundane daily chores. On the other hand, the story's narrative is rather unconventional. At some points, the

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narrator uses the pronouns "you" (in the singular) and "we" referring only to characters within the story. At other times the pronoun "we" is referring to the narrator within the story as well as addressing the reader of the story, for whom the past is being reconstructed via photographs that the narrator had taken around the town one day in July of 1934. The narrator attempts to include the reader in the story so they would become part of it, and experience it. By showing the town's "Book of the Day" (Szewc, 1993, p. 107) to the reader, the narrator is also a carrier of collective memory.

The author prefers description over storytelling, while the past tense gives way to the present, which suggests the enduring character and continued relevance of the world presented in the story. *Annihilation* begins and ends with the same sentence: "We are on Listopadowa [street] " (pp. 3, 107). The account of a beautiful, sunny day in 1934 may be, following the author's suggestion, revisited time and time again. The day filled with commonplace trivialities is elevated to the status of a ritual (the remarks concerning the position of the Sun in the sky play a significant part in the narrative). Meanwhile, the town, which serves as "the model of the universe" (p. 8) and "the true center" (p. 11) for the locals, is imbued with mythical qualities. The world of the novel is ordered, constant, and safe, resembling Arcadia.

Main Topics and Problems

Through detailed description, Szewc tries to revive remnants of the past which do not normally fit into the narratives of historians – the remnants which are "seemingly insignificant, yet important and interesting" (p. 6). He juxtaposes privacy, ordinariness, and "insignificance" with the "significance" of political history, which is insensitive to local worlds.

The title of the novel may lend itself to a two-fold explanation. First, it means the disintegration of a myth: the novel's protagonist is a mythologised town presented as the Cosmos, simultaneously being eroded away by time. Secondly, it refers to the annihilation of a particular world – the effects of World War II and the Holocaust – and to the obliteration of the past world in the collective memory. Annihilation in the sense of the Holocaust is not presented in the novel directly. However, this meaning is implied on a number of occasions. The word "annihilation" is sometimes used with reference to natural phenomena, such as heavy rain, drought, or fire. The siskins being hunted by people are described by the narrator as follows: "They perch quietly, chilled – perhaps in anticipation of the impending annihilation" (p. 53). Objects that are personified stand out in a telling manner: "The death of houses and market stalls follows its own rhythm established through the years. For the present they are still alive" (p. 97). One of the novel's motifs which shatters the "arcadia" is the description of how lawyer Danilowski tortures a bee. Cruelty is also present in Hershe Baum's nightmares, as he sees a flood, with the heads "of half the people in town" floating around (p. 5). Equally telling ("prophetic") is a painting which hangs in the pub, which depicts fire devouring people hovering in the air. Another sign "presaging" or even initiating the annihilation is the meteorite which falls near the town: "In the dis-

tance, where the meteorite fell into a field of grain, a rushing, rumbling train stops. The trail of sparks shoots up, hissing, into the darkness" (p. 106). Anxiety then turns into terror: "A distant train rumbles. [...] Sparks are shooting up as if someone were sharpening a knife" (p. 96). Another passage later in the story reads, "That trail of sparks irretrievably vanishing in our eyes, will shoot up again many more times, though at another place, at another hour, over another train" (pp. 106–107). The anxiety of Mrs. Baum is also ominous, as she raises her eyes from a stove where she lights the fire and asks, "But where are our boys?" (p. 82). The Jewish boys are playing nearby and will be home in the evening. Toward the story's end, their father is immersed in reading: "Over the *Talmud* the yellow flame explodes in front of his face" (p. 103). It may be an ordinary flame, or the glow from the Book (a reference to *Sefer ha-Zohar*), or alternatively the fire consuming the Jewish holy books. 1934 is not a random date for the story, as one year before, Adolf Hitler, the instigator and perpetrator of the Shoah came to power in Germany. However, the residents of the town are unaware of the impending misery. But the reader and the narrator are aware, the latter saying, "Nothing can be stopped" (p. 56).

The nearest context for *Annihilation* are the few books concerning the Holocaust, including Julian Stryjkowski's *The Inn* (Austeria, 1966) and Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939* (Badenheim, 'ir nofesh, 1975), where historical events – the extermination of the Jews in particular – are not so much depicted as implied. Evoking the Holocaust, Szewc applies it to everybody: not just Jews, but also to other nations and ethnicities present in the book (and in history books): Poles, Ukrainians (Wasyl Czehyra), and Gypsies (Roza). The author writes about the annihilation of a heterogeneous, pluralistic world of perfect concord (which, without a doubt, he nostalgically idealises). *Annihilation* is the memorialisation of a world that is gone for good. At the same time, it calls on the reader to search for the (metaphysical) order in the world, to recognise the value of cultural heterogeneity, and to nourish the notion of tolerance.

Subsequent editions of the book, reprinted with corrections, were published in 1993 (with a foreword by Julian Stryjkowski) and in 2003.

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