

The Escape from Yasnaya Polyana (Ucieczka z Jasnej Polany) and Shakespeare (Szekspir)

Author: Adolf Rudnicki

First Published: *Shakespeare* (1948, in the volume under the same title); *The Escape from Yasnaya Polyana* (1949, in the volume under the same title).

Translations: Czech (*Útěk z Jasné Poljany, Shakespeare*, in *Živé a mrtvé moře*, 1958); French (*La Fuite de Iasnaïa Poliana*, 1973); Italian (*Cronache del getto*, 1995).

About the Author: Adolf Rudnicki (1909–1990) was born as Aron Hirschhorn (also Hirschhorn) in Żabno near Tarnów. Many sources list a false date (1912) and place of birth, probably due to Rudnicki's own efforts to "[blur] the traces of biographical identification" (Wróbel, 2004, p. 18). In 1928 he joined the army, and in the 1930s he moved to Warsaw, where he joined bohemian circles. During the interwar period he published in numerous literary periodicals and made his literary debut in 1930 with the short story *The Death of the Operator* (*Śmierć operatora*), which he published under the pseudonym Rudnicki. Two years later, he published his first novel, *Rats* (*Szczury*). In 1939, he took part in the September campaign (the defensive war against the German invasion of Poland) and was taken prisoner, but managed to escape to Lviv, where he stayed until 1942. After leaving Lviv, he lived in Warsaw on the Aryan side of the city. As Piotr Kuncewicz recalls, Rudnicki spent a short time, by his own choice, in the ghetto (*Finezje literackie*, 1997, part I), where he was involved in a conspiracy and took part in the Warsaw Uprising. In 1944 he moved to Lublin, and later to Łódź, which was an important centre for literary and artistic life after the war.

Further Important Publications: *Szczury* (*Rats*, 1932; novel); *Niekochana* (*Unloved*, 1937; short story); *Doświadczenia* (*Experiences*, 1939; novel); *Wielkanoc* (*Easter*, 1947; short story); *Czysty nurt* (*The Crystal Stream*, 1948; short story); *Moja czarna broda* (*My Black Beard*, 1948; short story); *Kartka znaleziona pod murem straceń* (*A Card Found Under the Wall of Executions*, 1948; short story); *Żywe i martwe morze* (*Living and Dead Sea*, 1952; short stories); *Niebieskie kartki* (*Blue Cards*, 1956; feuilletons); *Kupiec łódzki* (*Merchant from Łódź*, 1963; short story); *Złote okna* (*The Golden Windows*, 1963; short stories).

Content and Interpretation

While such stories as *Ascension*, *The Crystal Stream*, and *A Card Found Under the Wall of Executions* may seem like more obvious choices in a collection of Holocaust literature, the two lesser known texts by Rudnicki chosen here, relate to more fundamental issues concerning the role of literature and art after the Holocaust, according to Theodor Adorno's famous statement about writing poems after Auschwitz, as well as other

more current discussions (Rosenfeld, 1988). *Shakespeare* traces the conversation between two writers who had competed for the favour of reviewers and readers before the war. The main character, Jakub Z., meets another writer, Maciej Lewicki, whose prewar career was an object of envy for Jakub, and who has had, as he claims, a significant role in his literary failures. Their meeting becomes a painful confrontation between their earlier beliefs and prejudices and the postwar reality. Old jealousies are replaced by compassion. The main character takes note of the misery of his prewar Jewish adversary, a misery that concerns not only Lewicki's inability to write, but also the sorry condition of his physical state, which seems to have nothing to do with the elegant and successful young artist he was before the war. In light of these observations their past animosities no longer seem to matter: "I felt close to this creature – so human, so clumsy, so much like me" (Rudnicki, 1948, p. 241). The tragedy of Lewicki, who goes by the ironic nickname "Shakespeare", is a creative inability based on his deep conviction concerning the insufficiency of words, and a deep-rooted fear caused by the disappearance of the world that existed before. The crisis of literature in the face of the atrocities committed during the war constitutes the main plot of the story, a crisis summed up by a rather sarcastic statement that appears in its opening paragraph: "literature has not sacrificed so much" (p. 221). A flourishing literature, however, would now serve only to hide the atrocities of the war, and all writers are aware too that their literary testimony must bear the burden and memory of its victims. "We are" – writes Rudnicki – "like overloaded sacks. But we have no longer strength to experience once again what we were looking at. We are burned out inside" (p. 221). According to Rudnicki, the title, referring to the great playwright, compels one to think about the "beautiful art of writing" – an art which, in the face of the atrocities, "did not fulfil its elementary duty to humanity" (Dąbrowska, 2015, p. 220). This leads him to the observation that "writers and poets like William Shakespeare did not prepare readers to live in the Age of the Ovens" (p. 220). Survivors in Rudnicki's discourse are often perceived also as Holocaust victims – as those who survived, and who now bear a significant burden of remorse and an obligation to commemorate those who died: "The writer had to face experiences not easy to express, in which the joy of saving his own life could not be separated from the most intense suffering for the same reason" (Wróbel, 2004, pp. 116–117).

The Escape from Yasnaya Polyana, from a collection published in 1949, is divided into three parts. The first one of these takes place "two years after the last war" in the "city of Z." (Rudnicki, 1949, p. 157) in Switzerland, where the congress of the PEN International is to take place. Everyone is curious about the German delegation, as well as the German writer Klaus Hofer, who will attend as a special guest of the congress. Hofer, who will be the main character of *The Escape from Yasnaya Polyana*, is "the great prosecutor of the German nation" (Rudnicki, 1949, p. 158), "the sum of all Germans" (p. 159), "the conscience of the nation, the conscience of the era" (p. 161), who "left [Germany] terrified of European deafness" (p. 160) and has been living in the United States for years. Rudnicki seems to have found inspiration for the character of

Hofer in Thomas Mann's biography. During the congress, the old writer meets his son Teodor and a friend from Germany, Oswald Hanemann. Both Teodor and Hanemann share a perspective on the role of the artist and of art in the life of the nation that is diametrically opposed to that of Hofer. The second part takes place two months later, when the writer's journey through Europe – especially to Poland, where “he wants to visit places of human martyrdom” (p. 168) – comes to an end. Father and son meet once more, and Teodor tries to convince the old writer to return to Germany, which Hofer refuses to do (p. 176). Teodor sees his father's trip to Poland as an insult to the Germans and points out the participation of Poles in the Holocaust (pp. 170–171), further describing his father's choice as the careless “act of a twelve-year-old boy” (p. 185) and the result of creative exhaustion. He judged the behaviour of his father as an “escape from Yasnaya Polyana”, in reference to the biography of Leo Tolstoy (Jaworski, 2014, p. 25). However, Hofer himself considers his decision as a matter of morality.

Main Topics and Problems

Both stories belong to the literary cycle *Age of the Ovens*, a term coined by Rudnicki which has since become standard in Holocaust discourse. The author had planned for the collections in which the stories were first published to be introductory volumes for a larger series, one unfortunately never completed by the author. The name of the cycle, an obvious reference to the Holocaust, draws as well from biblical symbolism connected with the theme of the fiery furnace.

The stories feature many of the themes typical of Rudnicki's postwar work, including a deep fear about the insufficiency of art, burdened as it is with moral responsibility; exhaustion and lack of creative force in the face of the Holocaust; the problem of preserving the memory of places, people, and times that were “wiped out” by the cataclysm of World War II; and the question of carrying responsibility for memory by means of literature. Helena Zaworska calls Rudnicki a “chronicler of drownings”. Writing on Rudnicki's postwar work, Józef Wróbel suggests that the literary process should be treated here as a “measure of suffering” (Wróbel, 2004, p. 9). The stories from both volumes were written between 1939–1948, and included much later in the collection *Living and Dead Sea*. Suspended between Polish and Jewish identities, Rudnicki tries to find a literary form for describing the mass extermination, led by his belief in the important role and value of art, as well as in the heroism and dignity of the human being. This propensity for the creation of literary heroes was criticised by Tadeusz Borowski (Wal, 2002, p. 122). But according to Anna Wal, his stories present “an optimistic testimony, as one can find there an assumption about indestructible human ability to resist evil and save elementary values even under pressure of the greatest fear and against the powerful forces of history” (Wal, 2002, p. 122). Rudnicki's postwar literary works, according to Kazimierz Wyka, performed the extremely important function of “solidary memory” (Wyka, 1948, p. XX). The works from this stage in Rudnicki's literary activity often overshadow those of his prewar work, as well as his

later achievements, and he is persistently classified as “the writer of the Holocaust” alongside such names as Zofia Nałkowska (→ *Medallions*), Tadeusz Borowski (→ *A Farewell to Maria*), and Ladislav Fuks (→ *Mr Theodore Mundstock*).

Cited Works

Dąbrowska, A. (2015). Politeja. *Pismo Wydziału Studiów Międzynarodowych i Politycznych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego*, 35, pp. 213–226. *Finezje literackie* – audycja Polskiego Radia. Available at: <https://ninateka.pl/audio/finezje-literackie-1997-adolf-rudnicki-odc-1> [Accessed: 01.11.2019]. Janik, G. (2018). Artysty (nie)łatwe początki. Z dziejów recepcji przedwojennej twórczości Adolfa Rudnickiego. *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Cultura*, 10(2), pp. 40–54. Jaworski, S. (1984). Między doświadczeniem a nadzieją. *Ruch Literacki*, (4), p. 270. Jaworski, M. (2014). Ucieczka z Jasnej Polany w literaturze polskiej. *Pamiętnik Literacki*, (1), pp. 25–44. Krowiranda, K. (2013). Formy „bardziej pojemne” Adolfa Rudnickiego. *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich*, 56(111), pp. 41–57. Rudnicki, A. (1948). *Szekspir*. Warszawa: Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza „Książka”. Rudnicki, A. (1949). *Ucieczka z Jasnej Polany*. Warszawa: Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza „Książka i Wiedza”. Sandauer, A. (1959). *Bez taryfy ulgowej*. Warszawa: Czytelnik. Wal, A. (2002). *Twórczość w cieniu menory. O prozie Adolfa Rudnickiego*. Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego. Wróbel, J. (2004). *Miara cierpienia. O pisarstwie Adolfa Rudnickiego*. Kraków: Universitas. Wróbel, J., ed. (2009). *Adolf Rudnicki. Opowiadania wybrane*. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich. Wyka, K. (1948). Funkcja solidarnej pamięci. In: K. Wyka, ed., *Pogranicze powieści*. Warszawa: Czytelnik. Zaworska, H. (1973). Od „Niekochanej” do „Pyłu miłosnego”. In: H. Zaworska, ed., *Spotkania. Szkice literackie*. Warszawa: Czytelnik. Zaworska-Trznadłowa, H. (1953). O powojennej twórczości Adolfa Rudnickiego. *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 44(3–4), pp. 151–189.

Futher References

Golebiowski, A. (2012). Adolf Rudnicki as a Spokesman of Polish Jewry. In: J. Holý, ed., *The Representation of the Shoah in Literature, Theatre and Film in Central Europe: 1950s and 1960s*. Praha: Akropolis, pp. 31–42. Rosenfeld, A. H. (1988). *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Schenfeld, R. (1991). *Adolf Rudnicki sofer bejn sznej damot*. Jerusaleim: Magnes. Wróbel, J. (1998). Jewish Martyrdom in the Works of Adolf Rudnicki. *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, 11, pp. 247–262.

UKN