

Italian High Heels (Włoskie szpilki)

Author: Magdalena Tulli

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About the Author: Magdalena Tulli (1955) is a Polish writer and translator of French and Italian literature, including such authors as Marcel Proust and Italo Calvino. Her father was Italian, and her mother came from a Polish-Jewish family. Tulli made her literary debut in 1995 with the novel *Dreams and Stones* (Sny i kamienie).

Content and Interpretation

Italian High Heels is a collection of seven autobiographical stories about traumatic adolescence in postwar Poland. The main plot follows the daughter's dysfunctional relationship with her compassionless mother, whose experience of the Shoah has rendered her incapable of empathy. Tulli is primarily interested in the topic of human subjectivity, and with characters who believe themselves to be masters of their own fate – a belief that can only ever be an illusion since their lives are shaped to a great extent by their backgrounds as well as their parents' past. The girl's mother, a Polish Jew and survivor of Auschwitz who now works as a sociologist, struggles in silence with the trauma of the Holocaust, isolating herself from her past experiences in the camps. Maintaining a chin-up attitude at all costs, concealing the traumatic memories behind a façade of normality, she believes she has found a way to keep the past from affecting the present, to keep her experiences from impacting the child. Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, the mother unknowingly transmits her postwar trauma to her daughter, where it grows into contempt and hatred – an infinite recursion between one individual and another, usually weaker, individual. The mother does not realise that the main source of her child's problems is her own unprocessed, unspoken past. When the girl begins to suffer from the typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including insomnia, sleep disorders, and recurring nightmares, she finds that she is perpetually tired and has difficulty concentrating. Eventually, overcome by the endless feelings of exhaustion and powerlessness, she begins to display antisocial behaviour. Her inability to deal with her emotions results in outbursts of rage.

The effects of past trauma are also reflected in the language of the narration. Tulli's prose has been dubbed linguistic literature: a technique by which, with the aid of numerous metaphors and symbolism, the author presents the drama of Jewish origins as a flaw, and otherness as a dead weight, a secret of the past that conveys its burden of suffering to the present. As she writes, "the past weighs most, it lies in the body heavy like a boulder" (Tulli, 2003, p. 32). This notion of the burden which weighs on

the body runs as a motif throughout Tulli's literature. Born into a post-Holocaust reality, the protagonist finds she is already "burdened", and that, even if her mother carries the greatest weight, it is a weight – a "considerable burden" (Tulli, 2014, p. 27) – the mother has inadvertently placed on her shoulders:

The main character in the story wishes the war finally ended for her, too. But once begun, the war has no end. [...] The story's main character [...] did not know any battle in her part of the inheritance. Instead of battles, it contained something much more troublesome. Let's say, a locked casket, not too large, but weighing, say, a couple of tons. With no key – it got lost somewhere. Maybe it was thrown away out of compassion, in order to lift at least a few grams off her burden? Great compassion, thank you very much. If it were me, I'd know that I would be spared nothing, that I had to find a way to break the casket open this way or another – and see my legacy. (pp. 64–65)

The unwanted "casket" she has inherited is unimaginably heavy, as heavy as the girl's fate, even heavier than the perpetrators' crimes. Considerations regarding the oppressors and their victims likewise follow the opposition of heavy and light. Tulli asks: "isn't it better to inherit from the extras who used to wander about the square and crack their canes against the legs of their boots? The heaviest crime seems lighter than such a casket with no key" (p. 75).

The writer's style reflects moreover the chaos and confusion of the story she is telling. The short, often unfinished sentences depict the disorder in the girl's life:

I marshalled the words according to their sound only. This was usually enough. Sometimes, I had to insert in a sentence a word I wasn't certain of, and I waited anxiously for what would happen. [...] Even the most shameless word doesn't reveal too much if it is taken from the right box. That is why so much depended on the order. In the meantime, I gained new words, and new sources of confusion appeared. Wrong words came into sentences time and time again. (p. 80)

The atypical family situation has marked the girl's school years with the trauma of alienation from the group of her peers. Her childhood is filled with humiliation. She is a laughing stock. She is late for school almost every day, and experiences a lack of understanding, a coldness and rejection, a complete lack of empathy – not only at home, but also from her teachers, who often resort to corporal punishment. They humiliate the girl, instil in her a sense of guilt and accuse her of misdeeds she has nothing to do with, thus ridiculing her in front of the whole class. The girl's problems at school are additionally augmented by her difficulties with reading and writing. Tulli shows the loneliness and powerlessness of a child confronted with a hostile world, against which she fights heroically for her own subjectivity.

Main Topics and Problems

Italian High Heels is the author's tale not only of herself, but also of a damaged society which continues to struggle with the pain rooted in the Shoah. This pain has to be concealed, since allowing it to show amounts to showing one's weakness. Weakness in turn is something inappropriate, something to be ashamed of, because the narrator of

Italian High Heels keeps repeating over and over again “you have to be tough, not soft.”

The girl is troubled by a “black cloud” (Tulli, 2014, p. 140), a metaphor of her family’s unsaid traumatic past. A great number of families can identify with that black cloud and see their own story in the image painted by Tulli: the parents’ silence and coldness, the hidden aggression. This is how Tulli depicts the Polish trauma, which is still far from resolution.

Tulli’s writing shows Shoah’s direct impact on the generation brought up by the survivors, illustrating how detachment and maladjustment are an inherent element of the second generation’s post-catastrophic existence. Living in the shadow of their parents’ grief and suffering over the loss of loved ones, in the shadow of mounting fears, mutual grievances, and above all a lack of intimacy and empathy, has caused the children as much as their parents to be unable to free themselves from the Shoah. The second generation shares many characteristics with the first “descendants” of the Shoah. The legacy of Auschwitz is thus depicted as a curse, but also as the most profound building block of the second generation’s identity.

In Tulli’s novel, it is not only biological traits that are passed down from parents to children, but everything that existed before their birth: “with a strange expression on her face, the girl ... asked me during the first break who I inherited those black eyes from” (p. 137). The children inherit not only the trauma of the war, but also the interpretation of those “black eyes”, a social and cultural perception of a physiognomy that cannot be refuted.

In *Italian High Heels*, Tulli borrows from the notion of postmemory defined by American literary historian Marianne Hirsch, presenting a story that shows how the postwar generation inherits their parents’ trauma. Like others deformed by the Shoah, Tulli speaks up too late: it is only after her mother’s death that she is able to revisit her post-traumatic childhood. The return to difficult and ambivalent experiences is accompanied by anger towards her parents’ generation with the result that she loses a part of her own life. This anger, however, is intertwined with compassion. Although the protagonist of Tulli’s novel is aware that her suffering is disproportionate to that of her mother’s, as the latter was hurt more profoundly, the need to comprehend becomes too great a burden to lift. Other literary testimonies touching upon the subject of postmemory include *A Family History of Fear: A Memoir* (Rodzinna historia lęku, 2005) by Agata Tuszyńska, → *A Piece about Mother and Fatherland* by Bożena Keff, → *Frascati* by Ewa Kuryluk, *Confession* (Wyznanie, 2012) by Roman Gren, *Noise* (Szum, 2014) by Magdalena Tulli, and the collection of interviews *I Accuse Auschwitz* by Mikołaj Grynberg.

Yes, we died. This is why I live but at half-steam, every minute questioning the ground under my feet, the clouds, the grass, and everything else. Hence the concealed reluctance to make long-term plans. Hence the irony – the last resort. Hence the wariness of reality, which – as it can turn out at the least expected moment – appears to be solid yet is made of flammable cardboard. The

thing that disturbs me most is the lack of sufficient faith that the world exists. It's a disease which is transmitted to one's progeny by looks, by sighs, and by touch. (p. 73)

Italian High Heels also confronts the events of March 1968 and the antisemitic repressions initiated by the Communist authorities, as well as the anti-Jewish campaign of the late 1960s. When the protagonist discovers that Jews, dubbed “double-dealers” by the ruling Communist Party, intend to sell the country to the enemies, she has a hard time imagining what such a transaction might look like: “With all of us included? Yes, with all of us and all our possessions, with banners and placards, with factories where state-owned industry products were manufactured, with dingy staircases and windowless kitchens. With notebooks made of class V paper, with pencil cases” (p. 132).

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