

Selected Poetry (Poezje wybrane)

Author: Władysław Broniewski

First Published: 1943

Translations: Mongolian (*Ench tajvy toloo!*, 1951); Russian (*Pečal i pesnja*, 1951; *Izbrannoe*, 1961; *Izbrannaja lirika*, 1968; *Stichi*, 1968; *Stichi*, 1986); German (*Hoffnung*, 1953); Hungarian (*Válogatott versei*, 1954); Czech (*Nepokořená píseň*, 1955; *První motýlek*, 1956; *Naděje*, 1973); Romanian (*Versuri alese*, 1960); Belorussian (*Darogaj dzën. Veršy i paemy*, 1961); Bulgarian (*Lirika*, 1961); English (*Ballads and Romances*, 1964); Moldavian (*Poezii și poeme*, 1971); Estonian (*Kevadest ja surmast*, 1972); Slovak (*Dve krídla verša*, 1973; *Červený kalich*, 1976); Spanish (*Poemas y versos*, 1979); Ukrainian (*Poezii*, 1983); Vietnamese (*Tho*, 1984).

About the Author: Broniewski (1897–1962) came from a family of intellectuals and patriots. He was a poet, translator, essayist, diarist, revolutionary, Stalinist prisoner, and soldier on the fronts of World War I and II. Early in his life, Broniewski was a member of local shooting teams, earning him the nickname “Orlik”, and at the age of seventeen he dropped out of school to join Piłsudski’s Legions, where he would remain fighting in their ranks for two years. At the end of 1918, he returned to the army, leaving the university career he had just begun. As an officer of the Legions, he took part in the Polish-Bolshevik war. In April 1942, as a member of the Polish Army in the USSR, Broniewski deployed to the Middle East, working at the Polish Information Centre in Jerusalem and for the magazine *On the Road*. In Jerusalem, he listened avidly to news of the Holocaust and closely followed the Warsaw Uprising. One could even make the claim that he was the first Polish poet to write about the gas chambers (Tramer, 2015, p. 19). In 1945, after a short stay in London, he returned to Poland, living first in Lodz then Warsaw, where he would spend the rest of his life.

Further Important Publications: *Bagnet na broń* (Fix Bayonets, 1943; poems); *Drzewo rozpaczające* (The Despairing Tree, 1945; poems); *Nadzieja* (Hope, 1951; poems), *Anka* (lamentations written after the tragic death of poet’s daughter; 1956; poems).

Content and Interpretation

This edition of Broniewski’s selected output includes only those poems closely related to the Holocaust, starting with the collection *Fix Bayonets* (1943): *Wailing Wall* (*Ściana płaczu*, 1943), *Via Dolorosa* (1943), *To Polish Jews* (*Żydom polskim*, 1943), which is dedicated to the memory of Szmul Zygielbojm, *Bodies* (*Ciała*, 1945), *Ballads and Romances* (*Ballady i romanse*, 1945), *My Darling* (*Moja miła*, 1946), *Auschwitz Stories* (*Opowiadania Oświęcimskie*, 1949), *Auschwitz* (*Oświęcim*, 1949), *To My Grandson* (*Wnukowi*, written in 1951, published 1961), and *Song About the Holy Land* (*Pieśń o*

Ziemi Świętej, 1967). Poems about war and occupation in the broader sense have been omitted. It is the poems from another collection, *The Despairing Tree*, that most directly convey Broniewski's reflections on the mass extermination of Jews. Unlike *Fix Bayonets*, which was an example of "appellative poetry in which [...] the poet carried out 'patriotism for the reluctant' according to romantic duties" (Piotrowiak, 2009, p. 49), the title of *The Despairing Tree* is a reference to the poet's mental condition. The poetic language might be described here as "woody", consisting in false information about death, imprisonment in Auschwitz on charges of helping Jews, references to the poet's beloved wife Maria Zarebińska, and a growing feeling of estrangement in Palestine among non-Polish Jews. In each of these collections, one finds a poetic masterpiece concerning the Holocaust: To Polish Jews in *Fix Bayonets*, and Ballads and Romances in *The Despairing Tree*. The first, written in the Homeric hexameter, has been described as a "beautiful psalm", a tribute to "the Warsaw defenders of the ghetto", and a "poetic commentary on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising" (Tramer, 2010, p. 233). The poem speaks of the loneliness of those dying during the Ghetto Uprising, written in June 1943, when most people had no idea about the existence of the gas chambers. This explains the poet's allusions to the Sons of the Maccabees, which is to say, to the desperate fight for a dignified death. Broniewski locates the Jewish struggle in Polish martyrological history (September 1939), which can be understood as a poetic gesture against the symbolic/semiotic isolation of the Jewish Uprising in the Polish narrative (pp. 233–239). It is worth adding that the suicide of Szmul Zygielbojm (1895–1943) was a turning point in the (un)awareness of the Holocaust in Europe: a Bund Party member, who was also a councillor of interwar Warsaw and Lodz and member of the Judenrat in the Warsaw Ghetto, managed to escape to Belgium and then to England, where he became a representative within the London Government of the Jewish population. Broniewski's essay *Stones for Earthwork: On the Third Anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising*, first published in the literary weekly *Kuźnica* (1946), should be seen as a complement to the poet's dedication and homage to Zygielbojm in his poem To Polish Jew. It begins with the words "The criminal and frantic theory of Nazi racism from the beginning has threatened all nations of the world; its blade, however, was directed against the Jewish nation the most" (Broniewski, 2015, p. 313).

The poem Ballads and Romances was written on 8 October 1945 and refers to the "canon of canons", that is, to the ballad Romanticism that opens Adam Mickiewicz's first collection of poetry and that establishes the Polish romantic paradigm. As in Romanticism, Broniewski's poem begins with the chiasmic incipit "Listen, she doesn't listen", which – unlike in Mickiewicz's poem – appears once more at the end (Tramer, 2010, p. 242). Karusia becomes Ryfka, whose death is echoed by that of Christ-as-Jew. The poem thus features two qualities characteristic of Messianic Polish culture: one connected to the figure of Christ, the other to the romantic tradition, which come together in Broniewski's lamentation over the red-haired orphan Ryfka and her lonely death in the ruins of the ghetto. In Romanticism as in To Polish Jews we find a very Polish reaction to – and paradigm for poetic reflection on – the Holocaust, based on

unreserved empathy. The title of a two-volume anthology of poetry from Auschwitz, *Auschwitz Was on My Land* (Na mojej ziemi był Oświęcim) is a quotation of Broniewski, as is Mordechaj Canin's *Through Ruins and Ashes* (Przez ruiny i zgłiszczca, posthumously 2018), taken from Broniewski's poem *The Polish Soldier* (Żołnierz polski).

Main Topics and Problems

The story of Ballades and Romances is a literary representation of the martyrdom of Polish Jews. The role of the girl from Mickiewicz's poem is taken over by "naked, red-haired Ryfka, a thirteen-year-old child." Her insanity is completely different from the insanity of the heroine of Mickiewicz's Romanticism. Broniewski replaces the fantastic plot of Mickiewicz's ballad with a realistic sketch of the reality of occupation, which at the end of the poem transforms into a symbolic scene – though one saturated with the reality of occupation – depicting the shooting of Ryfka and Christ. (Bujnicki, 2014, pp. XCIX-C)

Broniewski thus violates the generic form of the ballad (according to Mickiewicz's model) in two ways: "in the construction of the poetic image and in the apocryphal nature of its structure" (p. C). In the two collections of Broniewski's poems mentioned here, we find biblical topics – Wailing Wall and Via Dolorosa, the Passion of Christ as the archetype of all suffering, and the Maccabees as model of heroism –, as well as poems about the Holocaust (in *statu nascendi!*) as in poems about the image of the ghetto and Auschwitz (as *pars pro toto* camp). To Polish Jews can be read both as a metonymic epitaph of the exterminated community (based on the dedication In Memory of Szmul Zygielbojm), and as a symbolic combination of two messianisms – Polish and Jewish – which had to this point remained mutually estranged.

Cited Works

Broniewski, W. (2015). Kamienie na szaniec. W trzecią rocznicę powstania w Getcie. In: W. Broniewski, *Publicystyka*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, pp. 313–316. Bujnicki, T. (2014). Wstęp. In: W. Broniewski, *Wybór wierszy*. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, pp. XCIII–CII. Piotrowiak, M. (2009). Do jakiego gatunku należy „Drzewo rozpaczające”? Próba poetyckiej dendrologii. In: M. Tramer, M. Piotrowiak, M. Jochemczyk, eds., *Nasz Broniewski. Prelekcje warszawskie*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Ex Machina, pp. 47–80. Tramer, M. (2010). *Brudnopis in blanco. Rzecz o poezji Broniewskiego*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego. Tramer, M. (2015). Wstęp. In: W. Broniewski, *Publicystyka*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, p. 19.

Further References

Canin, M. (2018). *Przez ruiny i zgłiszczca. Podróż po stu zgładzonych gminach żydowskich w Polsce*. Trans. M. Adamczyk-Garbowska. Warszawa: Nisza & Żydowski Instytut Historyczny. Woroszyński, W. (1995). O Władysławie Broniewskim. In: W. Broniewski,

Poezje 1923–1961. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, pp. 5–46. Zych, A. (1987, 1993). *Na mojej ziemi był Oświęcim...Oświęcim w poezji współczesnej. I–II*. Oświęcim: Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu.

KKK