

The Suitcase (Walizka)

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Translations: French (*La valise de Pantofelnik*, 2009); English (*The Suitcase*, 2011); Czech (*Kufr*, 2012); Romanian (*Valiza*, 2011); German (*Der Koffer*, 2015); Russian (*Če-modan*, 2015); Slovak (*Kufor*, 2012); Slovenian (*Kovocek*, 2015).

Theatre Adaptations: Polish Theatre in Poznań (2009); Jewish Theatre in Warsaw (2011); Rainbow Stage in Warsaw (2014).

Radio Adaptation: Polish Radio Theatre, 2nd Programme of Polish Radio (audioplay, 2008).

About the Author: Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk (1964) spent the first years of her life in Moscow, where she finished secondary school and started journalistic studies at Lomonosov University. She is a graduate of the Faculty of Journalism, political science and gender studies at the University of Warsaw, as well as the Screenwriting School at the Lodz Film School. She writes plays, film scripts, opera librettos, and musicals. The texts of her plays have been translated into many languages.

Further Important Publications: *Szajba* (The Crazy, 2006; play); *Śmierć Człowieka-Wiewiórki* (The Death of Squirrel-Man, 2007; play); *Burmistrz* (The Mayor, 2009; play); *Zaginiona Czechosłowacja* (The Lost Czechoslovakia, 2009; play).

Content and Interpretation

The Suitcase is based on the true story, described in the newspapers, of a French Jew who survived the war as a small child. François, the main character of the play, has never met his father, Leo Pantofelnik, a French Jew who was deported during the war to Auschwitz where he died in the gas chamber. Only a few years old, his son survived, but he has never seen a photograph of his father and his name has been changed. Already as an adult, he feels an acute and inescapable emptiness. He tries writing letters to his father, to engage him in dialogue, but there is nowhere to send them: "Where are you? Please come back immediately – writes the main character in one of the letters. – Tell me all the stories I've been deprived of. Please, also connect me to this pipe that pumps water from the source of our national culture" (Sikorska-Miszczuk, 2011, p. 102).

François was brought up by a loving stepfather who gave him his new name but was unable to fill the gap. A breakthrough comes when, at the instigation of his wife, François goes to the Holocaust Museum, where he discovers a suitcase on loan from

the museum in Auschwitz signed with his father's name Jewish property. This unambiguous trace of Leo Pantofelnik's existence gives a new direction to François' life, allowing him to understand who he is and begin to overcome the feeling that he is living a "deceived life".

The play is narrated by a character named simply "Narrator", assisted by his beloved Jacqueline, François' answering machine. Young, unconventional characters bring the story closer to the contemporary viewer, filling it with irony and a sense of the absurd, with dynamic shifts of tone and, in particular, black humour. At the beginning, Narrator warns the audience that though the story is intended as a serious gesture, it will be disrupted at times by humour, not to mention singing, at the most unexpected moments. Both Narrator and Jacqueline describe the Holocaust Museum as a marketing scheme, which might be construed as an ironic allusion to the stereotype of the huckster Jew. "What's *not* here! – they shout. – This is a museum of surprises" (p. 99), continuing in a sarcastic tone, "When the patron of the museum, the Holocaust, appears in the form of a suitcase, a shoe or a pair of broken glasses, then it is the safest form of 'surviving' the kind of Holocaust which is not in the Museum" (p. 99).

The path that François traverses is a metaphorical journey to his own identity, given in an expressionist, sometimes lyrical form that was favourably received by theatre critics and audiences.

François manages finally to free himself from the overwhelming emptiness when he decides to open the suitcase, filled as it is with memories of the past, and – for a brief moment, metaphorically – meet his father. He also meets himself as a whole person for the first time, with the prospect of continuing his life in its completeness, and no longer as "half a life". "I'm here, – he says. – My name is François Pantofelnik" (p. 107). However, the final scene is nothing like a happy ending. While getting to the truth about the past turns out to be a godsend for François, for other characters of the play the memory of the Holocaust is too heavy a burden. François' mother, appearing only in his narration, is not able to face the destructive memories and chooses to escape. Similarly, a "desperate guide" in the Holocaust Museum quits her job because constant contact with the belongings of the victims gives her a nervous breakdown. It is from her perspective that Sikorska-Miszczuk questions the role of museums dedicated to the Holocaust, which tend to preserve suffering in thousands of material exhibits – shoes, suitcases, glasses. "The bishop was right when he said: To forgive, one must forget," she blurts out. "Let's throw away everything in this museum! Bury and burn it [...] Let's stop remembering" (p. 107). "It is unbearable," she exclaims countless times. Paradoxically, the discovery of Pantofelnik's suitcase brings relief also to the desperate guide, because she can finally get rid of this item – one more thing not to remember –, and she hopes one day the other exhibition items will disappear in a similar fashion, releasing everybody from an unbearable situation. This though suggests a way for everyone to fulfil their destinies: if they opened their own suitcase of memories, perhaps everyone could live fuller lives.

Main Topics and Problems

The play takes up the current problems of the psychological difficulties faced by second generation Holocaust survivors. As the Narrator claims, “The collapse is still going on, despite the fact that successive generations say that it is over and gone, and no longer concerns them” (p. 103). The play poses questions – but no clear answers – about how to memorialise the Holocaust, and how to deal with the feeling of emptiness. What are the consequences of avoiding the source of trauma? What are the consequences of facing it? As Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczyk herself commented:

The Suitcase is a play about the process of healing the baggage of memories, often unwanted but existing and living in us whether we like it or not, of healing everything we have inside. We can carry our suitcases without opening them, and so live in a kind of “half-life” and in incompleteness. *The Suitcase* is a story of a single man who cuts himself off from part of himself, although it is a part of his own identity. This play also concerns the topic of social memory. We do not want to discover the truth, to open suitcases full of painful facts. *The Suitcase* is about faith in the healing power of truth. (Dąbek, 2019)

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Further References

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