

Here is my diagnosis of the illness to which *Tygodnik Powszechny* succumbed: this periodical has gradually lost its sense of purpose as it increasingly tried to please its “outside friends.” As a result, it has reached the state of total barrenness. My impression is that those external friends became friends on the condition that *TP* distanced itself not only from the conservative *Radio Maryja*, but also from the Catholic mainstream as defined by authoritative statements by John Paul II or Benedict XVI in the past, and today by authoritative statements of the Conference of the Polish Episcopacy and its president Bishop Stanisław Gądecki. *Tygodnik* people seem to compete with one another in ingratiating themselves to their external friends and they miss no opportunity to demonstrate their openness to ideas. As a result, the periodical has not only become politically correct, but it has also ceased to have any discernible internal leadership. In the various debates about moral and Church-related issues (recently the problem of so-called partnership unions, or the entertainer Nergal tearing up the Bible, or Pope Francis), one knows in advance what the *Tygodnik* stance will be. It will be identical to that of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, wrapped up in some Church-related packaging. *Tygodnik* continues to be an intelligentsia periodical, but one wonders whether it follows Emmanuel Mounier’s recommendation that it should serve the people who have the courage to think independently.

Tygodnik’s attempt to walk a thin line between being and not being in the Church has always been debatable, but it was also a source of its strength. “Peregrinations in the wilderness,” to use Fr. Józef Tischner’s expression, can be fruitful; those who walk in the wilderness often ask interesting questions. But it also can be fruitless if these questions are answered only in such a way as to please the contemporary world. *Tygodnik* used to be fruitful when the deepest inspiration of its writers was Catholic doctrine and when the goal was to articulate a Catholic perspective on the challenges of modernity. My impression is that this Catholic perspective has been abandoned and an open perspective adopted instead. Δ

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Past Continuous A Novel

Bronisław Wildstein

Editor’s Note: Bronisław Wildstein is a contemporary Polish novelist and journalist. A former dissident engaged with the Solidarity labor movement, he is the recipient of many prizes including the highest award of the Republic of Poland: the Order of the White Eagle (2016). The opening pages of his novel *Past Continuous* (*Czas niedokonany*, 2011) initiate the major plot lines of the novel, a work that is autobiographical yet at the same time expresses better than any other work of fiction the societal dilemmas of late communism and postcommunism. *Past Continuous*, presently being translated into English is a grand narrative that brings to mind Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* and Vasilii Grossman’s *Forever Flowing*.

The flickering index numbers on Roman Brok’s monitor were taking a nosedive, apparently in free-fall. It seemed as though the computer had gone mad and wanted to throw off the virtual entities oppressing it. The screen filled with red. Roman instinctively glanced over at his neighbors’ computer screens, visible behind the flimsy, purely symbolic partitions that separated them, and had the impression he was in a hall of mirrors. At vertiginous speeds, in the grip of some nameless impulse, the machines were devaluing the transactions encoded in their bowels. The brokers’ faces, as they turned to exchange incredulous glances before turning back to their screens, all displayed the same astonishment, now tinged with panic.

It occurred to Roman suddenly that the computer screen was merely a thin sheet of glass. Beyond it, beyond the plunging index numbers next to the names of the corporations that moved swiftly across the tenuous surface, each accompanied by a little red triangle pointing downward—beyond that abstract world of numbers and letters and symbols, he saw unfinished buildings crashing to

the ground, scaffolding collapsing, conveyor belts grinding to a standstill, shops closing, job centre's filling up, lights going out, darkness descending on people and cities. Then everything went quiet; he found himself enclosed in a bubble of silence, all the more astonishing because the stock exchange floor was a perpetual roar of debilitating noise. The illusion lasted a fraction of a second. The roar returned with redoubled intensity. In the stock exchange all hell had broken loose. People were screaming at each other and into phones, or in many cases just screaming, at no one in particular. The floor was an image of chaos. Can we contain this chaos? Roman thought. How did we keep it in check before? Or have we ever been in control of anything? Perhaps we were just riding time's turbulence, deluding ourselves that we were steering the waves?

He may not have been alone in asking such questions: it was unusually quiet in "The Whaler." Somewhere in the back someone was shouting, someone else was laughing hysterically, but instead of the usual buzz a heavy silence filled the restaurant.

"Why are we surprised? Why the hell are we surprised?!" Christina Lopez burst out at one point, expressing what everyone was feeling at that moment. "We've known for months it all had to come crashing down. It was a bubble, it had to burst, it couldn't go on forever! But we went on believing we could snatch a bit more, make a bit more – make money out of something that doesn't exist! We should be surprised it didn't go belly-up until now!"

No one contradicted her.

And yet it really did take us unawares, mused Roman as he left the restaurant after a few drinks and hailed a taxi. We're more than surprised: we're in shock. Shocked that something that was clearly going to happen, was bound to happen, finally has happened. He was still thinking about this as he let himself into his apartment and fished out a letter from Poland from among the litter of leaflets and junk mail in the hall. An express delivery. The apartment was almost sterile – not like the apartment in Poland, he thought as he extracted it from the post office packaging. Nancy had cleaned up before she left. She didn't live with him, only stayed from time to time, but it was becoming increasingly clear that she was waiting

for him to propose they move in together. Roman was in no hurry. He liked Nancy and they got along well, but there was something about the finality of the decision to live together that put him off. Still, sooner or later he would have to make up his mind. Nancy was going to present him with an ultimatum, that was clear. It was also clear that in the end he would do what she wanted. The benefits far outweighed the costs. But Roman continued to put off the decision.

The letter was from his father. Roman plopped three ice cubes into a glass of pure malt, added water from a long-necked bottle, flung himself into a black leather armchair and switched on the television. As he flicked through the channels, every one of them was showing the scene he had participated in a few hours ago. The commentators, sounding very unsure of themselves, were all repeating the same warnings, couched in phrases cocooned in layers of conditionals and dripping with caveats: that the markets may continue to fall and that a further downward trend might have grave consequences for the world economy. Beyond the windows, the lights of Manhattan continued to glimmer. Roman ripped open the envelope.

"I've decided to write to you, though I feel uncomfortable in doing so. But you can't say I'm badgering you – this is my first letter to you, after all. From time to time I sent you postcards; sometimes you answered them. We both know perfectly well the reasons for your bitterness – if that's what your profound antipathy towards me can be called. A justified one, from your point of view. But in general? Except is there an "in general"? All my life I've ridiculed supposedly objective and impartial points of view. The only points of view here are yours and mine, mine and your mother's. And from my point of view... Well, I've paid. But it's absurd to waffle on like this. There's no point, and it's not why I'm writing to you. I'm writing because I'd like to see you. So I'd be glad if you could come to Poland, even for just a short visit. I can pay for your flight and cover the costs of your stay. I know you have money, you have a career after all, but if it would help... In any case I'm anxious to see you, as soon as possible. In the eight years since you moved to the States I've only seen you a few times, and very

briefly. The last time you were in Poland was four years ago. No, I exaggerate: almost four years ago. On that visit you spent 23 minutes with me. I know because I checked my watch and made a mental note of it. You were in a great hurry to get to some important meeting, or maybe just one that held some attraction for you. That's not a reproach. You might reply that before you left we didn't see each other that often either. That's true. It's been that way ever since I moved out twenty-three years ago and left you, you and your mother. But I didn't want to be separated from you. It was your mother who didn't want you to spend too much time with me. I can understand that – which doesn't mean I agree with her. But until you were fourteen we used to spend quite a lot of time together. Remember? After that... it was up to you. Your decision. Yours and your mother's. It was a question of emotions and politics. A volatile mixture. But no point in theorizing. I just wanted to remind you of the facts. And maybe justify myself a little. That probably sounds pathetic. But I don't want to start crossing out and polishing and rewriting everything. I'm tempted to – I am a journalist, after all. A columnist. But I decided to write to you the way I would talk. To talk to you on paper, if that's the only way.

You know I don't like to make a big drama out of things. But I'm asking you to come because I want to see you one more time. Maybe things aren't quite as bad as all that, but you never know. I'm seventy years old. My father died when he was my age. I feel my time is approaching. Of course I'd like more, but no one is going to ask me what I'd like. What more is there to say? I know you understand.

I'm waiting.

Your father"

Manhattan was lit up; it was like any other day. On television they were talking of a financial crisis. It was September 2008.

But that is not when this story begins. Perhaps it began a hundred years earlier. In a place called Kurow, not far from Pinsk, on the broad, forested flatlands, which at the time belonged to Russia (before that these lands had belonged to Poland, a

country erased from the map over a hundred years earlier), there lived a Jew by the name of Baruch Brok with his wife Doba and five children.

All sorts of people lived there then: Russians, Poles and Jews. Jewish Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Catholic. They did not always know who they were. They only knew they were from there. They knew which Catholic or Russian Orthodox Church they frequented and who celebrated the services there. They lived alongside one another; sometimes they lived together. But the Jews were different. They knew who they were, and their neighbors' knew they were different. They all lived under the same wide sky, which spread its brightness over them in daytime and twinkled with lights at night. Sometimes it clouded over or disappeared in fog, but the locals knew that it was there and would be back, that they only had to wait and it would reappear, as always, in all its splendor.

The Brok family was not badly off. They had a nice house with a neat, well-tended garden, a horse-drawn cart and a horse. Doba looked after two cows and a fair assortment of poultry. They lived on the edge of the village. Baruch was a merchant, trading in leather. But that was not his main occupation. He was a *tzaddik*; they called him a miracle-worker. He would disappear from home for hours at a time, sometimes for half a day or more. When Doba asked questions, he just smiled. Sometimes people saw him standing in the fields, or in the forest, looking up at the sky. They said he talked to God.

Matwiej saw Baruch one summer day around noon. The Jew was leaning against a tree, looking straight at the sun. He stood there, quite motionless, for so long that Matwiej fled, seized by an obscure anxiety he could not explain. "Anyone else, it would have burned out their eyes," he said later, "but not him. He looked at me and smiled. His pupils were shining, as if the sun had come to live in them and decided to stay for good."

Piotr saw him in the little lake on the other side of the forest, about three hours' walk from Kurow. It was spring. The leaves were a deep green and the flowers had bloomed, but the mornings were still chilly. Baruch was standing in the water up to his armpits, looking up at the clouds. Morning mist was rising off the water. Piotr actually stopped to

ask if he needed anything, but then Baruch looked at him with his smile and he said nothing.

Zosia saw him in a clearing in the forest. It had just rained and everything was glistening; the world seemed newly born. Baruch was walking around in circles, his arms up in the air, his fingers snatching at the sun's rays. "Like he was dancing," Zosia reported in an unsure voice, looking around at those present.

Leon told them how he'd seen Baruch standing in a field just by the forest when a wolf ran up to him. "He stopped less than a yard away, and then he lay down on his belly like a dog. I thought it was a dog at first, I even came a bit closer, but it was a wolf, for sure. I swear. He leaped up, turned to me and snorted. And then he disappeared into the forest. I swear," Leon insisted.

But the strangest reports came from some peasants who were on their way back from the horse fair through the first snows of the year, which had just fallen. In the distance, under the grey sky, on a hill, they saw a man get down from his cart and leap into a snow bank. He rolled around in the snow like an animal. Then he was still. His horse stood there waiting patiently. They didn't realize who it was at first; they drove up because they thought something had happened to him. Then they came closer and saw it was Baruch, lying there in the snow, looking up at the sky and smiling. And next to him was a crow. Just standing there. Baruch turned and they looked at each other: him and the crow. Man and bird. The peasants didn't move. They waited, astonished. It went on for a long time. No one spoke. There was only their breath and the steam that rose off them, humans and animals, up into the cold, darkening air, and the creaking of the wagons shafts as the horses strained against them. Then the crow cawed and flew up into the air. Baruch followed it with his eyes for a moment, but then he saw them and his face changed, grew serious. He went on looking at them for a long time and they started to feel ill at ease. Suddenly he picked himself up, greeted them, brushed the snow off himself, got into his cart and drove off.

He healed both people and animals. He could set bones, ease sprains, dress wounds. He knew how to help ears that were failing and eyes that were losing their sight. He could advise on the treatment of chronic illnesses, cure boils and

carbuncles, drain abscesses, ease pain. He stroked old Kuzma's hair until the pain that had been driving her out of her wits just went away. He helped Szydluk with his back pain, which had left him scarcely able to move. They brought him a young girl from the next village who had lost her mind, was frightened of her family and tormented by evil spirits. Baruch just held her. She thrashed and struggled and tried to break free, but he went on holding her until she calmed down. She stopped moving and they sat there for a long time, quite still, until Baruch kissed her on the forehead and let her go, whereupon she ran to embrace her family. She was cured.

One night the miller brought him his son. He had fallen ill a few days previously and was delirious, with a high fever. Nothing had helped: not prayers or old mother Yevodka's incantations, not herbs or nettle brews or concoctions from birch bark. He kept getting worse, and that night he started drifting in and out of consciousness. The family gathered around him to pray. That was when the miller decided to take him to Baruch. The Jew looked at the boy for a long time. Finally he came and sat down beside him. He put his hands on the boy and went on sitting there. Beyond the window the autumn night flowed by. You could hear the river. By morning the boy was better. He recovered.

Sometimes Baruch just shook his head sadly, to show there was nothing he could do. On those occasions he wouldn't even try, and you couldn't persuade him.

He helped everyone, not just his own. But Jews journeyed from far away to see him. They came to talk and to ask advice. The locals thought of him as their own. He never asked for payment. They gave him whatever they had. Sometimes it was money, but more often food: eggs, milk, cheese, flat bread, occasionally vegetables or fruit. Or things they had made at home: cloths, blankets, bed linen. Sometimes he wouldn't take anything. "I have what I need," he would say; "you need it more."

Far away, out in the distant world beyond, the revolution was fizzling out. The losers were a strange bunch. They had wanted to depose the Tsar, our dear father the Tsar, and establish

common ownership of property, women and children. The Russian Orthodox, who were the majority in the district, remembered others like them. They had called themselves the true Orthodox, claiming that only they truly loved God and therefore could not recognize any divisions into what's yours and what's mine. But they didn't want to impose anything on anyone, not by force. When people laughed at them and hurled insults, they ran away.

The revolutionaries wanted to remake the world. People listened to stories about them with wonder and fear, but sometimes they laughed. Well, of course you could kill the Tsar, they knew that, he was human, after all, and such terrible things have happened before. But to live without the Tsar? The Tsar, who kept order, was the keeper of God's order on earth? That seemed not only a terrible thing to want but stupid as well. No wonder the army and the police had put down this revolution. How could people have lost their wits to this extent? Though you kept hearing, more and more often, that it wasn't people, it was the Jews. That was what they were saying in the taverns and inns: it was a Jewish conspiracy, because the Jews wanted to rule the world. Wise people even knew about a book that had been stolen from the Jews where it was all written down, how they planned to take over the world. When people looked at Itzhak or Tevya, who had lived among them even since they could remember, they found this hard to believe. But when they heard about Jews being Christ-killers, they began to believe it, and anger bubbled up inside them. The word went round, from market to market, fair to fair, inn to inn.

Reports began to arrive that people were rising up against the Jews. Assaulting them, beating them up and destroying their goods. Silly to destroy perfectly good things, but you couldn't take them – that would be no better than stealing. This way they got their punishment fair and square. Though they say some people did take things, because, after all, taking from a Jew – well, you wouldn't really call it stealing, would you?

The violence increased, and the reports of it also became more violent in tone. There was anger and shouting and rage. And then there was blood. Flames from burning houses lit up the sky. More and more blood. They started killing Jews. In

Bialystok, in Siedlce, the earth around their houses turned into blood-soaked mud. Naked bodies, half-stuck in the muddy ground, were strewn around the skeletons of houses. Feathers from ripped bedding flew up into the air together with the soot and the cries of the murdered.

But all that was still far away. True, some peasants at the market in Konskie had beaten up some Jews, gone at them with their whips, and in Luckowice they dragged out the innkeeper from behind his counter and beat him unconscious, and gave his wife a good hiding, too, when she came running to help him, and by the time they'd finished there was nothing left of the inn but a heap of stones, but that did not yet make a pogrom. But there was a feeling of unease in the air. It was still cold; the first rains had not yet come and the earth was hard. Everyone was worried about the harvest. The sky was heavy and the clouds, rainless, scudded swiftly across it. The light that came from behind them was dim and alien.

How could it have happened? It was a question many later asked themselves, but were afraid to voice. Some men had come over from Stryczkow, a nearby town; they had made friends at the market with some of our people. In Kurow they went on drinking at the inn and stood rounds for the locals. Trade that day had gone well, they said. But then they started to talk about the Jews. Saying that something had to be done about them. Finally one of them shouted, "You've got one of them right here, that you're friendly with. Pretending he's a decent man like you, the sly, slimy toad! That kind are the worst! He needs putting in his place."

"But he's a good soul, even though he's a Jew," one of the locals protested.

"You're defending a Jew?!" the man shouted. "What's he done, befuddled your wits, or what? Or maybe he's bewitched you? They say he knows magic."

One by one the others in the group from Stryczkow began nodding their assent. The locals started to feel ashamed of defending a Jew.

How did it come about that they left the inn in a group, armed with heavy sticks – thick, knobbed lengths of wood – and went to the Broks' house, guided there by one of the locals? They shouted as

they walked, as if they needed to screw up their courage, though they were a large group. They called for others to join them. "We're going to put the kikes in their place," they cried. One or two people ran out after them; one or two more joined the group. The others locked themselves in their houses. Darkness was falling.

They stopped in front of the Broks' plot. The dog was barking insanely. They smashed the gate, shouting. And then Baruch came out of the house. He walked halfway across the courtyard and stopped a pace away from the man who had guided them there and who was now standing immobile, a heavy stick in his hand, as if at a loss as to what to do next.

"Quiet, Blackie!" Baruch said to the dog, which hunched low on the ground and began to whine. "What do you want, people?" he asked, and they all heard him, though he spoke in a low voice. "Why have you come here?"

"You... Jew!" the one standing in front of him finally shouted, almost spitting out the words. He made as if to raise his stick, but only lifted it up off the ground and repeated, "Jew!"

"Yes, I am a Jew," Baruch answered calmly. "You know me. I've always lived among you. My parents lived here and my grandparents before them. And there was always peace between us, even though we pray differently. And you?" he asked, shifting his body as if intending to move closer to the stranger, who looked as though he would have liked to step back when Baruch's gaze bored into him. "I don't know you. I haven't done you any harm. It was anger that brought you here, that brought all of you. But we are not to blame. We have done nothing to deserve your anger. Think about it. Nothing has happened yet. Go away. Tomorrow you'll be relieved you did."

No one spoke. You could hear their breathing and the intermittent whining of the dog. It was getting dark, but they could still see each other.

"Get the Jews! Beat them to a pulp!" cried one of the strangers in the crowd. Another, standing just behind him, his gaze locked on Baruch's, took a step forwards, lifting his stick slightly, clearly intending to sidle round behind him. Baruch turned towards him and he stopped. And then someone else in the crowd, it may have been a woman because the voice was thin and high-

pitched like a woman's, yelled, "Get him, let's finish him off, the Christ-killer Jew! Kill him!" A clod of hard earth hit the window and there was the sound of broken glass. For a moment longer no one moved. But then the door of the house opened and Brok's wife appeared, a child in her arms, and stumbled out screaming, desperately shouting his name: "Baaaruch!"

Brok turned abruptly. "Doba, go back!" he managed to cry before the one who had tried to circle him lifted up his wooden truncheon and with both hands brought it crashing down on the Jew's forehead. In the sudden silence there was a soft sticky smacking sound. Baruch had not yet had time to fall to the ground before the man in front of him smashed another one into his face, then leaped up to stamp with both booted feet on his body as it lay thrashing on the ground. The others crowded round, trying to reach him with their sticks or their boots. They were finishing him off the way you finish off a dog chained to his kennel and trying to break free as the blows rain down on him. Screams filled the courtyard. Doba was screaming as she ran to her husband, there was the scream of the little girl, who had run out of the house behind her mother, but they were drowned out by the deafening shouts of "Beat the Jews!" and in the background the terrible howling of the dog.

The sticks were beating Baruch's lifeless body into the ground. One of the crowd aimed a vicious kick at the place where his head had been. "Much good it did you, talking to God, eh?" he snarled.

Doba didn't make it to her husband. She was brought down by blows from the sticks, which also hit the infant in her arms. Her broken hands could not hold him. When they were finishing her off, the child was thrashing around on the ground, and its screaming drowned out the shouts of the attackers until it fell silent, squashed under more boots and more blows. The little girl fell several times under the hail of blows, but managed to get up and was trying to hobble away, whining pitifully. More blows brought her down again, but she was still alive and now crawled around on the ground, moaning. For a moment her moans were all that could be heard: the howling of the dog, now mashed into a shapeless pulp, had ceased, and the attackers' throats were sore from their

shouting. They stood over her, panting, as she tried feebly to crawl out from between their legs.

“We should finish her off. So she doesn’t suffer,” someone said. Someone else aimed a kick at her back with a heavy, metal-capped boot. There was a crack like a dry twig snapping. The girl stopped moaning and was still.

Now once again there was silence, the only sound the panting of the men. One of them ran into the house; a few others followed, shouting. There was the sound of breaking glass. Various household items and furniture flew out through the broken windows. But the excitement was wearing off. Someone ran outside with an oil lamp, smashed it against the corner of the house and was about to set the oil alight when one of the locals knocked the lighted match from his hand. “You want to burn down the whole of Kurow?!” he yelled. The wind was rising. “Beat up the Jews! Where’s the next lot? Let’s go get them!” one of the strangers cried. But there was only silence. They dispersed without speaking and each went his own way in the night.

The next day Abram, Baruch’s younger brother, arrived in Kurow. In the forest he found eleven year-old Jacob, frozen to the bone, with his two younger brothers – Joseph, nine, and Adam, three – whom he had managed to get out of the house. Apparently their father, when he realized what was happening, had told his wife and son to take the whole family out into the forest. Someone had warned him, some people said. But Baruch himself would not go. He just told Doba to run away and hide and not come back until it was safe. Doba took the children into the forest, but when she heard the shouting she turned back. She told the children again that they must hide and entrusted Jacob with their care. But as she was running back towards the house, six year-old Golda broke away from Jacob and ran after her.

Abram drove his nephews to the neighboring town and left them with a family he knew. Then he came back with two helpers. He spent some time walking around the house and grounds as though he wanted to register everything in some mental inventory. He looked at the bodies beaten into the earth and his face was expressionless. He did not pray. He personally placed the bodies in the cart. He had the corpse of the dog buried.

He organized the funeral of Baruch, Doba and the two children in a neighboring town. He had their house repaired and renovated so that it was unrecognizable. Some time later he sold it. The people who moved in did not wonder what had happened to the previous inhabitants.

A group of Jews came to the funeral. Even the old tzaddik from out by Baranowicze came. After the funeral he came up to Abram and made to embrace him, but Abram, a great strong hulk of a man, gently plucked the old man’s hands from his arms, as if they were the hands of a child.

“Don’t say anything, rebbe. I know what happened and what you want to say to me. I know it’s always been like this and always will be. I don’t want comfort.”

The tzaddik shook his head.

“It’s always been like this, but I have a feeling that now it will be different.” He raised his hand towards the grey sky. “Bad times are coming. The Lord is turning away from us and we understand less and less.”

Two of his students took him by the arms and they moved away together. Abram turned his expressionless face to the sky.

He had left Kurow a dozen or so years earlier, when he was only eighteen. He started trading at the same time as his brother, but quickly overtook him. He bought leather all over the district and sold it far away, for big money, it was said. He moved to Pinsk, where they say he bought a two-storey house, and then a store on the main street. But it wasn’t enough for him. Nothing could ever satisfy him. He began traveling to Kiev, and then to Warsaw. He traded with Berlin. He set up shops and exchange houses in more and more cities. He traded in leather, but later also in gold and precious stones. But he made his real money in the weapons trade. Some said he did more than trade. That he was involved in huge, illegal financial operations, and even that he did deals with bandits, as a fence, selling on their loot for them. Others, or maybe the same ones, said he was a wizard who had sold his soul to the devil in exchange for magical powers. Though what would the devil want with a damned Jewish soul?

Abram Brok adopted his nephews as his own. He never married. And he never went back to Kurow.

The day he came to take away the bodies of his brother and his family was his last visit to the town.

In Kurow they didn't talk about it. They weren't even sure which of them had joined the group of strangers, whom they continued to bump into at the Stryczkow market, at the Orthodox church, and in other places. The locals went on trading and drinking with them, but no one wanted to speak of those events. In private, within their own four walls, people in Kurow said that some of those he had cured, even those whose life he had saved, had taken part in his killing. Leon, whose horse Brok had saved; the blacksmith's son, whose chronic ulcers he had cured; his neighbor Stach, whom he had taught to walk again. But which of them had really been there and seen the sticks crashing down on Brok and his family?

A few years later a policeman from Stryczkow, drinking at the inn with some passing travelers, let slip while in his cups that a few days before the events in Kurow he had had a visit from his superior, the district police commander, who had told him to go and put the fear of God into Brok. "Why him?" asked the policeman, whose niece Baruch had cured. "He's a good Jew, no connection with the revolution." The commander lost his temper, shouted: "The authorities know what they're doing!" and closed the interview, having put his subordinate in his place. But a little later he went on: "It's the ones everyone likes who are the most dangerous. People trust them, and they wait for years, hatching their plans, biding their time, until one day they start stirring up discontent, setting the locals against the authorities. Maybe he is a decent man," the police commander added, "but he comes from a poisonous tribe. He's got to be made to see that he can't hide from the authorities. And everyone has to be made to see that a Jew is a Jew."

The policeman even got some money for the task entrusted to him. So he met with the cleverest and sliest of his narks, whose trade in stolen goods and other shady dealings he overlooked in exchange for information, and explained the job to him: he was to give Baruch and all who had dealings with him a good fright. Anatoly just kept nodding. The policeman never dreamed how it might end. Afterwards even Anatoly looked a bit frightened.

But the affair was soon forgotten. No one wanted to speak of it. Only the local Russian Orthodox priest said something once during a sermon about innocent blood calling out to the heavens for vengeance, and that the guilty, and all those who had stood by and looked on, would one day pay. He made no reference to anyone or anything in particular, but everyone understood.

That year spring would not come. The light couldn't break through the clouds; snowstorms continued up to the end of April. The sun refused to make an appearance. The hungry gap stretched out: a long, lean time. The sky disappeared out of sight.

It was not until the doors slid open and Roman Brok emerged into the arrivals hall that he realized how much the airport had changed after the construction of the new terminal. His last visit to Poland had been over three years ago. He stumbled along, a little befuddled after the night flight, peering at strange faces, watching people as they fell into each other's arms and hearing their cries of joy at being reunited. Something inside him kept repeating that he was there to say goodbye to his dying father and then to make the funeral arrangements. He tried to drive the thought away, but to no avail; it only grew stronger and seemed to take firmer root. He had a feeling of coming back. For eight years, without thinking about it, he had been growing further and further away from this country. His visits only confirmed the facts: Poland was becoming an increasingly faint and distant memory. Now it surrounded him again.

On the plane he had woken up when the other passengers were still asleep and raised the window blind. A stream of sharp, blinding sunlight had poured in. The masses of clouds below sculpted themselves into mountain ranges, hidden cities or fantastic buildings that dissolved as the light hit them and transformed themselves into different shapes. On his first long-haul flights Roman spent hours looking at the clouds, the sun, the sky. But soon he got used to it and stopped noticing what was beyond the window. Now, as he gazed out at the clouds, it was a few minutes before he realized, with surprise, how absorbed he was by the sight – as if he were seeing it all for the first time. Over the Atlantic the sun was showing the

way towards the old world. The sky was widening. Someone was guiding him back. He felt tense, and concentrated on the changing shapes outside.

The strange feeling was still there when the plane landed in Warsaw. In the chaos of the arrivals hall Roman tried to impose some order on his impressions. Someone was observing him, but it wasn't any of the strangers in the crowd, whose gaze only slid over him and then passed on. He realized he was returning to the past, a past he thought he had left behind for good. It lurked even here, under the new airport terminal.

He recalled his conversation with Taggart. "It's actually perfect, works out very well, you know? We were thinking of proposing that you go out there anyway. We appreciate what you did in Russia. It didn't work, the deal fell through, but you did well. We want to get into the Polish television market. Not just Polish, actually, but Poland is interesting, and its potential is underestimated. Germany and France have stopped developing, nothing new will ever happen there. Europe as a whole..." Taggart dismissed Europe as a whole with a disparaging downward sweep of his hand. "But the periphery, the outskirts of Europe, now that's a different story. Worth taking a closer look at. And Poland – anything could happen in Poland. Besides, television nowadays is a lot more than just television. Not many people understand that. Television is about ideas. And ideas," Taggart mused out loud as he looked out at New York through the glass walls, "ideas are the biggest business there is. It's about what's important, what's fundamental. Take ecology. It's important to fight pollution, to live in a clean world. But you have to explain it to people, you have to make them see it." Taggart was growing increasingly serious, but somewhere in his voice you could hear a gleeful giggle bubbling up. Later, when events forced him to think back on it, Roman would recall this conversation, or maybe just imagine what it must have been. "If we could get a piece of the new energy markets... Now that would really be good business. A time of crisis is a good time for serious initiatives. We've looked at the market. There's a television called WTV. Good reputation, well known, and they've cornered the market, but they over-invested and now they're desperately looking for capital. It's a good opportunity. We've done some initial

research and reconnaissance. Everything looks good. The changeover to digital opens up new possibilities. So? Shall we sign an initial contract? We'll cover your expenses, and you'll be paid on a percentage of profits basis. That means more risk for you, but also more money if you do well. Well? Shall we hammer out the terms?"

He walked slowly through the hall, past strangers who might be people he had once known. His gaze slid over the face of an elderly woman who was laughing, laughing aloud with happiness. Roman had half-turned away but she was already running towards him, with a bounding, almost youthful step, and it was only as she drew closer that he recognized his mother. When he felt her thin arms around him and held her frail body, bending down to receive her kisses on his forehead and cheeks, the images, sounds and smells of the past came flooding back to him. In his mind he saw her, a beautiful young woman, striding through a sunny field, a happy two year-old by her side, holding her by the hand. He looked at the old woman before him and his throat tightened. A smell he could not pin down reminded him of home.

His huge suitcase would not fit in the boot of the old, rusted Opel Corsa, which was strewn with packages of some kind. Finally they managed to get it onto the back seat. The inside of the car looked no better than the outside. During his last visit he had offered to send her money for a new one. She was offended. "As a gift," he had said, trying to convince her. "In that case you can present it to me tied with a red ribbon. Otherwise I won't take it. And if you try to send it to me, I'll send it back at your expense." She delivered herself of this declaration in her typical tone of voice, which could mean she was joking or deadly serious; you never knew. The Corsa had looked a lot better then. Sending a car over was too complicated. He had stopped thinking about it.

"So. Tell me everything," she demanded, turning the key in the ignition and lighting a cigarette. He realized suddenly that the car reeked of smoke. The smell was overpowering, stronger even than the reek of petrol, and was mingled with the smell of her scent.

"I forgot you don't smoke," she said, glancing at him and rolling down the window, with some difficulty. "Just a few more puffs and I'll throw it

away,” she assured him, a note of almost childish regret in her voice.

“It doesn’t matter, don’t worry about it,” he said. His head was spinning from the smoke, but he decided to suffer heroically. His mother inhaled with relief.

“Well, so how are things with you?”

“With me... Well, you know... Everything’s changing. It’s like an earthquake. I don’t know if I’ll stay at the stock exchange. I’ve had a few offers. One of them in Poland. For the moment I’m taking a long holiday. Father couldn’t make it?” As he asked the question he realized it was too soon. But it was done. His mother’s face assumed its usual pinched look, the look it had had for the past twenty-three years. He had counted and reconstructed those years much later, but he remembered perfectly the first time he had seen that look on her face. She almost never talked to him then; all he got was a muttered word or two, tossed out to get rid of him. Her long periods of apathy alternated with effusive demonstrations of tenderness, embarrassing for a ten year-old. It was from then on that the very sound of his father’s name, the mention of him in even the most casual conversation, always brought the same pinched look to his mother’s face. Roman knew that now there would be a pause in the conversation, a brief respite which his mother needed before she could go on.

“Your father...? I don’t really know. I think he’s in hospital.” After a moment she added, “I hope it’s nothing serious. He was never a hypochondriac, I’ll give him that.” This last sentence was said in a tone edged with malicious irony.

She might have got over it by now, Roman thought. He had thought this at every meeting with his mother, for years. If she couldn’t forget, she could at least come to terms with it somehow, face what had happened. No one was asking her to forgive, but she should stop this constant dwelling on it. With bat-like sensitivity she would seize on anything that evoked even the most remote association with her ex-husband and concentrate on it, rehashing everything in exquisite detail, worrying at it as if it were a thorn burrowed deep under her skin and contemplating her suffering. Her face would harden into an

immobile mask of bitterness and pain. Now she lit another cigarette.

“Your father could always fall on his feet. Let’s hope he still can.”

She’s being unfair, Roman thought. She may have cause for bitterness, but here she’s being unfair. Or perhaps that’s just what I’d like to think, he wondered as she nervously changed lanes, provoking a furious burst of the horn from a car that was advancing on them with dangerous speed. Maybe I just want to defend my image of my father, and there’s so little left to defend?

“What about you? Are you still working at the same weekly, “Renaissance”, wasn’t it?” he asked, though he knew the answer.

“Are you asking if it still exists? Yes, it does. I’m surprised myself. The weekly is still there; I’m still there. Of course it’s not like your father’s “Republic”. That became the paper of the intellectual elite, the leading light of the trendy literati. Whereas we... We paid a monstrous price for that police informer, Stawicki, and then we were ostracized, and since then... Well, never mind. You don’t understand. Our little quarrels don’t interest you. From the American point of view... “ She switched tack and tried to make her irony a little less bitter, her voice a little warmer. “I don’t want to bore you. I only want to tell you about the things that really interest you. A lot has changed in Poland since you were last here. Though on the other hand, who knows? Maybe nothing has changed. Maybe it all just seethed and bubbled for a bit and then went back to the way it had been. Back to the same stagnant filthy pond. And I – we – we’ve been shunted out to the periphery. An increasingly remote periphery. We’re being pushed further and further out. Time is pushing us out, too. And soon it will push us out definitively – out to the cemetery.” She laughed drily and threw a challenging glance at her son.

When the idea came to him, it seemed as obvious as it was sudden. Roman felt ashamed he hadn’t thought of it before. He should have done it years ago. He could afford it, and easily. In Florence recently on a week’s holiday in Italy he had recalled his mother’s fascination with the Uffizi gallery. He had been looking at the Cellini statue in the gallery opposite the museum: Perseus with

the head of Medusa. A beautiful, lithe young boy contemplating his trophy, the severed head of the woman monster, held aloft in his hand, his arm outstretched. His mother had heard about the sculpture from her father, his grandfather. He was on his deathbed, talking about his unrealized dreams, the things and places he would have liked to see, the trips he would have liked to take. He must have been not much older than Roman was now. As he gazed at the sculpture he had started telling Nancy the story, but although she listened patiently, she didn't seem particularly interested.

"Mother! Here's an offer. One you can't refuse. As soon as I've seen dad, seen how things are... talked to him... well, as soon as I've done that, I'll take you to Tuscany. To Florence. You've always dreamed of visiting the Uffizi, seeing Cellini's Perseus. And there are some other interesting places to see in Tuscany. Like Siena. I was there just a while ago. Passing through. I'll take you on a week's holiday. One week. I won't take no for an answer."

His mother turned to him and smiled, and for a moment her face, the face of an old woman, was lit up by the smile of a young girl, evoking memories of her as she had been decades ago.

"That's so sweet of you. I'm really very touched. That you thought of me. But you know I won't come. I've seen everything in Florence. I could lead guided tours around the Uffizi. I could write an essay about Cellini's Perseus."

"You know it's not the same."

"Of course it's not the same. And that's why I know it's too late. Everything has its proper time. That seems so obvious to me, it's hard to explain. If you haven't done something when the time was right for it, it's too late: you can never do it. People who rush to realize their unfulfilled dreams – I think they're pathetic, ludicrous. I'm too old to go running around building a store of memories. I will never go to Florence. I'll stay here. Δ



Moved by the Spirit

An Anthology of Polish Religious Poetry

Edited by Adam Czerniawski. Belfast: Lapwing, 2010. ISBN 978-1-907276-51-4. 156 pages. £15.00.

David Craig

For readers unfamiliar with Polish poetry and who thirst for the sacramental, this book is a huge find. A far cry from American Puritanically based poetry—*The Oxford Book of American Poetry* comes to mind—Czerniawski's collection offers a continuously alien (Catholic) spiritual point of view. For Poland, the "good but disordered" Catholic perspective always underscores the innate "God-carrying" value of creation, of people, of the unconscious. Even while our editor tries in some way to emphasize poems that are only nominally or secularly religious, his enterprise fails beautifully. There are no depraved sons of Adam here. Each poet struggles through his "place of passage," to lift from John Paul II, in a wonderful selection of poems that reveal each time what it means to be both Polish and Catholic.

There is one other point worth making before we dig into the poems themselves. One cannot help but note a skewed time line. After offering one sixteenth-century poet and two nineteenth-century poets, the editor then offers nine poets born between 1921 and 1936. While that may seem suspicious, upon closer scrutiny it makes great sense. All nine of those poets experienced both Hitler and Stalin; in fact, the editor, Czerniawski may be the last significant Polish poet who can say that. The idea is a good one since who has experienced the cross like these people. We see that reflected in the poetry, overtly religious or not. True, the divine person of Jesus can become a little more distant during Modernist times of intense suffering, but that is how things always are in our dark nights, whatever our personal situation.