

# Mitteleuropa Blues, Perilous Remedies

## Andrzej Stasiuk's Harsh World

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### PART 1

Andrzej Stasiuk, born in Warsaw in 1960, is a prolific and talented writer well known in the West. "Well known" is a relative term, because the readership of European fiction in translation may be large in the case of prominent figures (including those whose prominence depends as much on scandal as on any perceived literary merit, e.g., Michel Houellebecq), or quite small in the case of writers whose native lands and languages seem too far out of the mainstream to unadventurous readers. Polish literature straddles this divide, with its literary eminences and stars who have international reputations and its bevy of writers respected in their homeland but little known abroad. As of 2010 three of Stasiuk's novels and a thematic collection of essays have been translated into English; these and other of his books, including poetry, plays, and essays, have received translations into several European tongues, most prominently German.

A rebellious character by nature, his sharp opinions on the late communist and the incipient "free market" eras of his native land converge on the judgment that both systems have been equally hard on his countrymen (as well as on the broader region's peoples), leading to a kind of spiritual malaise. His own lifetime has been concurrent with a period in his native land during which a general demoralization conducive to apathy and cynicism has been spiked by bouts of political and cultural turbulence, producing cycles of enthusiasm followed by disappointment. In Poland his is an authentic voice of the murky stream of modern history and its unsatisfactory resolutions of very old problems. In the revered tradition of Central and Eastern European literature, he is prophet and scold, though popular reverence for such figures seems fast vanishing. Like everyone else Poles read less serious literature and spend more time playing with their electronic toys as they climb the greasy pole toward prosperity, a sign of their participation in a worldwide consumer economy that, like a tidal wave, is unstoppable, arriving to submerge everything, then settling into normality as it alters the terrain. While many of the region's

inhabitants, including artists, question the further utility of the distinctions "Eastern" or "Central Europe" (*versus*, as usual, the West and Russia), Stasiuk himself has burrowed into what he believes to be the last recesses of local cultures either fighting to survive or ignored by modernity. The inevitable exchanges between these and the outside are a recurring object of contemplation and commentary in both his fiction and non-fiction.

Because neither his first book, *Mury Hebronu* (The Walls of Hebron), stories that recreate his year and a half in prison, nor his next one, a collection of poetry, have been translated into English, we start our journey with *White Raven* (*Biały kruka*), a novel that sows the seeds of a harvest of misery and its exaltations to come. And then soldier on through the territories of his other three works that have come over from Polish into English via several talented translators: off to a derelict collective farm village on the edge of southern Poland's mountainous border, back to the mean streets and dives of Warsaw, and then on to a series of road trips through "Carpathiana" and the Balkans, Stasiuk's privileged realms of Slavic hardiness and folly (Romanians, Gypsies, Hungarians, and Albanians are conscripted as honorary Slavs here). In these precincts we will encounter adaptations to the varieties of modern despair and the farcical and dispiriting clash between ideas of East and West, a process that starts out as the arrival of the rubes at a country fair or urban kiosk displaying cheap and colorful marvels and ends with the discoveries that the path to their acquisition is hardly worth the effort and that the customer is being fleeced, eagerly yet not fully aware of the nature of the transaction. The customer is always fleeced, regardless of the salesman's ideology: communism sold one set of illusions, capitalism sells another.

*White Raven* is an adventure story—a rough boy's tale if you will, with Hemingway's ghost looming somewhere in the literary ether some writers still breathe—that entails tightly circumscribed mayhem and murder, but that's merely its armature of meditation. We meet a band of five men, or five hypertrophied adolescents, depending on your ideas about what the correct response to general hopelessness might be. One is the story's anonymous first-person narrator, an early instance of Stasiuk's fictional alter egos (the author was an unruly young man who deserted the army, served time in jail, then fled Warsaw for the mountains and literature). Two have nicknames only—Goosy and Shorty (a tall, immense, powerful man). And two get the benefit of full names—Vasyl Bandurko

and Kostek Górka. The latter two are variations on the theme of purposeful escape taken to its extreme, self-annihilation. Vasyl, a furtive homosexual and a pampered young Red prince whose mother was a respected member of the Party establishment, seeks an escape from himself, a way out of the unattractive limitations imposed on him during his youth, thus joins the original gang of three who are rebellious working class boys in Warsaw. His spacious private home (no doubt confiscated by the Party and assigned to his mother) astonishes the others by its solidity and appointments; it also elicits their contempt—scorning what you'll never have makes your own life more bearable. Kostek, from Łódź and of obscure independent means, arrives late on their scene and becomes an ironic commentator on the margins of the group, a man with a maturing plan who slowly brings the four to question the nature of their futile rebellion, manifested in drinking binges, self-enforced idleness, quick and dirty sex, and the obvious desire never to join the world of their elders, the world of late Communism and early Capitalism (the “transitional period”) in Poland. Kostek, in Nietzschean fashion, formulates theories that will justify his desire to escape humanity by dehumanizing himself. Once an aspiring writer who concludes that such a vocation is pointless, he comes as a savior, infiltrating the minds of the others. He experiences a calling that will lead to self-destruction during his thirty-third year of life, 1993, and believes himself to be a prophet scorned in his own land. Unlike the possibly implied Christian savior whose teachings counseled faith, hope, and charity, Kostek understands his own mission to be an entirely nihilistic one (reminiscent in this respect of Dostoevsky's Stavrogin). In a way he is mad, but the group's final adventure, a winter waltz in the remote woods of the Carpathian mountains, brings about a failure of nerve on his part (he forsakes his deliberate madness in the interest of survival); yet his goal is achieved.

The gang's world incarnates Hobbes' description of life as short, brutal, and nasty. This characterization is personalized by the narrator's qualification that such a life may be desirable, the only kind of life worth leading, in fact psychologically necessary to one's self-esteem, given the alternatives. The comfortable, prosperous, imitation-of-the-West life does not entice Stasiuk—it's too self-satisfied, predictable, and dull, starving the imagination that runs riot in his favorite purlieus that teem with marginal men. In reminiscing about their glory days of nonstop intoxication, dreary and opportunistic copulations, petty theft, listening to

jazz (that odd Eastern European addiction, due to its classification by the old communist authorities as forbidden fruit), brawling and pub-crawling through Warsaw's most run-down dens (where the booze is cheaper and more toxic), the members of the group return several times to the fate of their acquaintance Regres, who takes his final leave from their scene with the valediction, “Fuck it. I'm off. You can all kiss my ass.” And off he is, by ferry to Sweden, where he deliberately drinks himself unconscious and freezes to death on a park bench. He is their *beau ideal* of true commitment to their way of life—he has balls, and then he has nothing, *is* nothing, the final solution to the unacceptability of life.

Stasiuk's delight in describing the vast variety of alcoholic beverages consumed by his gang rivals the lyricism of his nature hymns to the severe beauties of the mountains in winter. There are numerous brands of vodka, sometimes used as a solvent for other substances (coffee, sugar), home-brews, cheap fortified sweet wines, and beer, which in winter is consumed hot with dissolved sugar (or again, coffee). During hangovers, while preparing oneself for the day's menial job, or loafing, the hair of the dog that bit you provides some of life's sweetest moments of repose or a brilliant surge of mental clarity. But the way of life depicted is beginning to get tiresome, stale, as the men approach their thirties. They're losing their certainty about the desirability of following the path of their deceased friend Regres. At this point in their lives they become receptive to a vague plan hatched by Vasyl and ornamented by Kostek's improvisations. It's not clear who the leader is, but Kostek, with his studious silences, ironic detachment, and existential glosses on reality seems to have the upper hand at the outset of their adventure. The fact that he can hold as much liquor as the rest of them while remaining alert, self-contained, and lucid adds to his luster in their eyes.

Vasyl has spent the previous two summers and fall scouting out remote locations in the mountains of southeastern Poland. He has a mental map of the terrain and the routes one must follow in order to avoid people in general and border police in particular. When they get there, there being an abandoned shepherd's cabin, they'll figure out what to do next. Perhaps they'll look for cached weapons and play at being guerillas (in an ironic way they are fond of Commandante Castro's exhortation of “Socialism or Death!”). Something that might add piquancy to their little Scout's trip will suggest itself after they take the first step into isolation under extremely harsh conditions: late winter blizzards,

limited food supplies, no communication with the outside world. Taking the first step is the important thing. Kostek, as usual, joins the group late, on his own schedule. The narrator must hike out during a severe storm to meet him and lead him back to their hideaway. Kostek loses no time in supplying the event meant to galvanize their trip—a policeman stops the two to check their papers on an isolated road. With no particular provocation Kostek kills the man, or at least leaves him to die. They take the police car on a joyride through the blizzard to a small town, where they abandon it and strike out through the woods. The rest of the tale is that of pursuit by the authorities (which proves to be an illusion) and escape. It ends in Vasyl's and Kostek's deaths by each other's hand. The narrator wonders if the events are any more meaningful than a dream, just one more memory of wasted lives that is blending into a larger gray vortex of nothingness that is the futility of consciousness. The latter dispiriting conclusion aside, there is a resemblance between the narrative of *White Raven* and James Dickey's popular "backwoods existential adventure" novel, *Deliverance*. And, like that story, one can see cinematic possibilities in Stasiuk's tale, with the proviso that only Poles, including the author, should be involved in order to avoid the ludicrous conceits and compromises of a typical Hollywood production.

The novel's translator, Wiesiek Powaga, uses an English that we have to assume reflects the author's various stylistic shifts—blunt and coarse at times, lyrical at other times and, through its allusions to regional history and literature, even contemplative at times. The latter quality informs two elements of the story—presented as authorial meditations placed in the mind of its narrator—that Stasiuk embellishes and reconsiders in his later writing. First, the imperturbable presence and meaning of the Gypsies (here referred to as a band of "Romanians" encountered in a small town railroad station):

Their faces were empty. They were masks, part of a weatherproof traveling kit, protection against foreign climes, against the fear and traps of unknown lands. They looked like a little tribe, a chip off that huge tribe of nations which set out in search of food, land, freedom, pornography and hamburgers—depending on the times. They won't be stopped by hostile climates or oceans. Nothing can stop them.

And then there is the fraught relationship between Europe's East and West, a constant exchange of illusions that grows in importance in Stasiuk's mind

over time. Vasyl's lonely life, communist middle class (to the extent of playing classical piano music) and at more than one remove from the gang's experience, is emblematic of the two worlds:

He never acted with premeditation. . . . He was sitting in that world hurriedly assembled from crumbs, knowing how fragile and false it was, being merely an answer, a pale reflection of our worlds, the hopeless constructions of fear and abandonment.

What are those once attractive, now moldy crumbs from a vanished Polish past that admired and imitated the West? And what new scraps from the same source have replaced them? In a scene set in a remote hostel where the fugitives break their flight for a night's rest, a self-intoxicated poetic youth comments on Goosy's guitar-playing and singing of American tunes (Goosy's real objective is not the collective conviviality brought on by music, but bedding a woman who shows an interest in his soulful performance):

C'mon, young man, give us something in Russian! You blue-jeans king of the ballad. They have betrayed us. Instead of sending us jackets soaked through with the sweat of blacks and apostles, they've built factories of jackets. You got what you wanted. The factories churn out soulless rags that have as much in common with blue sky as . . . Oh, words fail me.

The sweat of blacks? The music and accoutrements of the fellow oppressed across the sea, no doubt. Apostles? The starry-eyed, feverish rebels of the Ginsberg-Kerouac generation and their heir apparent, Bob Dylan as drifter minstrel. But that's all ancient history now, deader than a doornail in the imaginary land of its former existence, Amerika, which deflects and then absorbs its critics and marginal men by enriching them, just one of its many vast assimilative powers. The "they", the betrayers and deluders? The shiny, new, contemporary, voracious West. The eager entrants into the false consumer paradise? Stasiuk's "we," the East. The polarity is real, alive and kicking (or, as Stasiuk sees it, the placid, tolerant, omnivorous senility of the one impregnates the expectant womb of the other, and a malformed cretin is hatched). The infinite blue sky of freedom will never be attained. No happy prospects for either side, there. And the significance of the book's title? It alludes to two brief sightings of a large and powerful mutant raven. Surprised that it has not been pecked to death by the other members of its flock, the narrator can only conclude that it lives by virtue of its strength and aggressiveness. Should we apply that lesson to

humanity? The answer is not given, but the bird's ability to survive is admirable.

What's a man to do in such sorry circumstances? Continue the journey, perhaps find a safe haven. English-language readers, having to settle for the next of his translated efforts, can pick up his novel woven of miniature portraits, *Tales of Galicia (Opowieści galicyjskie)*, beautifully translated by Margarita Nafpaktitis. The Polish texts of *White Raven* and *Tales* were both published in 1995, their English translations in 2000 and 2003, respectively. The men and women of *Tales* inhabit a nameless village associated with a defunct collective farm once known by its acronym, the PGR. It is somewhere west of Dukla in southeastern Galicia, under the mountainous border with Slovakia, the area of the Low Beskids, a part of the overall Carpathian range situated roughly halfway between the High Tatras and the Ukraine. The capital city from which the anti-heroes of *White Raven* fled is only marginally present here, a distant memory of warrens of shabby back streets, bars, and whores in the minds of a few townsmen who have visited or worked there briefly. In the PGR life is hemmed in by the mountains to the south, by often impassable side roads, by weather, by mud, by the inbred notion that this place must somehow be the center of an eternal world. From the nearby forested hills and mountains boars raid potato patches and wolves keep an eye out for stray calves. The center of social life, such as it is, is the Border Pub, a scene of long silences, stewing feuds that erupt into an occasional brawl or murder, muttered conversations with oneself, chain-smoking, and killing the day with cheap wine, vodka, and beer. Men leave to work at slovenly encampments, logging or construction sites. Their women expect no explanation for prolonged absences and shoulder the burdens of farming, gardening, haying, and taking care of the livestock. The only residue of the area's former non-Polish population—Ruthenians, Ukrainians—is a rectangular patch of nettles where the Greek Catholic church once stood, disassembled and hauled away for restoration by cultured city people. Violence of an almost ritualistic, at times penitential, nature happens and is absorbed like stormy weather as it comes and goes: a knifing over a flirtation with a man's wife, an accidental but perhaps willful self-drowning in a state of deep inebriation, a walk into the mountains' woods in search of a place to sleep and then freeze to death. And then there is the violence of nature: extremes of cold and heat, overpowering snowstorms, flooding rains, and incinerations of wooden hovels by lightning strikes.

Parsing any one of these tales, each a condensed biography, gives the reader a good idea of the whole, and the book's opening story, "Józek," will suffice for this task. Józek leaves the family farmstead often, driving his ancient caterpillar tractor from town to town (always stopping at local pubs on the way), or into the mountains in pursuit of odd-jobs of hauling timber or anything else. If his tractor tips over in the mud he might even take a nap in it—the solution to his problem will come sooner or later anyway. The next thing always happens. He has a limited stock of words and phrases, but this is sufficient to produce loquacity when he is under the influence of vodka. He's an easy-come, easy-go kind of man, assuming that all of life's events and rhythms—family, work, food, and shelter—follow a natural pattern of feast then famine; why resist it? Working in spurts is necessary and, because violence sleeps lightly everywhere, vigilance even more so:

Once on the way to the pub, I asked why he had that handy crowbar up his sleeve. "I don't know everyone there. I don't know who's one of us and who's an enemy."

The initial "I" is the first indicator that the tales are being told by an anonymous narrator about whom we are told nothing. He is the cool observer, the reader's surrogate eye that takes in and describes the quality and cadence of local life. We have to assume that he is Stasiuk's alter ego without worrying about the totality of that equation. What is it about the minds of the region's people that captures the narrator's interest and obvious, grudging respect? For the minds he meets are truly limited by ignorance, that is, by lack of any meaningful formal education that extends itself to lack of interest in the broader world beyond the village. Here is the narrator's answer to that question:

And so, he was completely faithful to his senses and to wariness, to rapid reasoning for the moment's advantage. "When you're eating, then eat. When you're drinking, then drink." Those are the kind of instructions Zen masters give to adepts. In all likelihood, they would make Józek burst into hearty laughter. Masters waste so much time on the discovery of basic truths. But even he would engage in reflection, if it could bring him solace.

And, to generalize from this:

There is no doubt that uncomplicated minds are much better suited to the task of interpreting reality. The PGR *civitas* had been founded on the principles of collectivity. Availing himself of Ockham's razor, Józek learned the ultimate lesson from the formula "to each according to his needs, from each according to his abilities." For all intents

and purposes this postulate did not set any limits. Because, after all, a person's abilities were hard to qualify. They presented themselves as the circumstances required and reason demanded. Not to mention a person's needs, with roots embedded in the dark and irrational will.

What we perceive as the limitations of ignorance actually sharpen the intellect for dealing with the problems immediately at hand. Self-sufficiency, cleverness of adaptation, and fatalism are the results. Irrational acts based on strong emotions are inevitable. Noting that the approved philosophy of the communist state had "disinherited and liberated [the villagers] from the harsh dictates of morality, religion and memory," it doesn't surprise the narrator that their self-serving impulsivity, coupled with the logic of acquisition, made the system implode. Józek himself is a casualty of fatalism and impulsivity—after a sweltering day's work he drinks poisonous water from a stagnant puddle and dies at the age of forty: "When the doctors in the hospital looked at his body, they claimed he looked at least a hundred years old."

But no place is truly timeless and, though pockets of resistance linger, change comes to the village. The style of modernity associated with the "transitional stage" from communism to capitalism is imported by Władek and his family. Władek and his wife and twelve children are the most hapless of villagers, he the laziest and worst farmer, she the fertile beast of burden who scours the forest like a hunter-gatherer of old in order to supplement the family's meager larder. Viewing a kiosk in a nearby town, he discovers the possibilities of trade and selling, becoming the village's first vendor of the new items of consumption. The whole family joins the business, expanding their holdings from a beat-up sedan to two newer cars and a van. They sell produce, the supply of which expands with private marketing opportunities, and all the fabulous household trinkets and cheap, gaudy clothing that rush into the communist-created consumer vacuum. They, or rather their wares, change minds:

And so there was Władek, the proprietor of this altar before which the May-decorated church became but a distant reflection: its pastel, ethereal and transitory colors were wilting like flowers and fraying like ribbons. . . . Forty years of waiting, of hibernation in a state of poverty, only to transform in two years into a messenger and herald of a new worldwide religion which would eliminate the opposition, do away with controversies and fulfill desires. . . . Children and women, young and old, moved away from the display. It was hard to guess their thoughts, but it was not in their thinking that the transformations were taking

place. They took hold of feelings, touched the places where wonder and enchantment are conceived.

This is the change—the neoconservative fantasy of "free markets" conquering all sources of human strife and dissatisfaction—much on Stasiuk's mind after 1990, leading him to a calculus of losses and gains with no clear net winner and the suggestion that everyone in the East remains a loser, even those who are "making it" under the new system; perhaps they have lost their souls, certainly they are losing their way and their independence of spirit. While prescient of a preoccupation of Stasiuk's later work, the contemplation of the ungainly East-West embrace is still a muted polemic in *Tales*. It is incidental and marginal to a narrative path that does not begin to emerge until the book's midpoint, where a new metaphysical direction is indicated by the footsteps of a character once alive, now dead. The living body of Kościejny murdered a man in the pub and met its end when it walked into the woods to freeze to death during a three-day leave from prison. Its very earthy mind now inhabits Kościejny's ghost and has hardly changed its former outlook on life, as restless and yearning for peace now as it was then (Kafka's lost and wandering deceased hunter, Gracchus, comes to mind here). The ghost is visible and audible only to the village's police sergeant, importuning him for intervention with the local priest and dropping hints that it might impart what really happened in the case of another murder for which the wrong man has been imprisoned. Apparently, in the right circumstances, dead men do tell tales. There is a sort of closure for Kościejny's unhappy soul—the police sergeant herds the town's population, including its barflies (one of whom can play the organ), into the village's small church so that an improvised funeral mass for the deceased can be performed. Afterward everyone one else, baffled by their experience as mourners, must carry on the daily struggle.

The ghost's visitations tie together the earlier individual portraits, and the reader learns the details of how the lives of the village's cast of characters (Lewandowski, Janek, Grandma, Maryśka, Gacek, Edek) are tightly interlocked in ways not hitherto suspected. But then this is a place so small that everyone knows everyone else. Their fates, girdled by geography, history, and social mores are bound to be interlocked. The world of the village is encased in a concave lens, as it were, so all of life's forces are centripetal, resulting in collisions. There is a certain grim comedy tinged with melancholy in the tales' incomplete resolutions, suggesting the possible

influence of a source that may strike readers as highly unlikely, the urbane Karel Čapek. The illustrious Czech's bemused and often philosophical policemen who inhabit his *Tales from Two Pockets* could well be the literary ancestors of Stasiuk's red-haired police sergeant. And Kościejny alive might very well be one of their mentally opaque rural murderers, while Kościejny dead could come straight from Čapek's *Apocryphal Tales*. This is Slavic magic realism (perhaps mystical naturalism is a better term) with a long genealogy, its grandest offspring being Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, where spirits from across the ages bestride grimy and gloomy Russian venues and interact with the common man. The inner murkiness, emotional confusion, and distress of rural souls is the pith of Čapek's novel *Hordubal*, whose central character of that name may or may not have been murdered by his wife and her Gypsy lover—with the final decision about what really happened to be made by another policeman as philosopher who will also decide what constitutes justice in a tangled reality where both saints and sinners deserve mercy. *Hordubal* is the first story in a trilogy published as *Three Novels* (*Meteor* and *An Ordinary Life* are the other two of the set). For the reader only familiar with Čapek as an early "science fiction" writer (based on the broad success of *R.U.R* and *War With the Newts*), the narrative and literary qualities of this trilogy, as well as the differing authorial voices and tones spread across the three short novels, will probably come as quite a surprise. *Three Novels* is a work built upon a grand theme: an epistemology of the self, with its firm illusions scarcely contained within fluid boundaries, concerns not unlike those we meet in *Tales of Galicia*. Perhaps my suggestion here is off the mark with respect to its tracing of literary influences; if so, the parallels remain, striking in themselves.

*Tales of Galicia* is a little gem that displays Stasiuk's powers as a poet using prose to capture a world as far removed from poetry as possible, a harsh, unforgiving, rural workaday world comparable to the desperate milieu of urban anomie depicted in *White Raven* and also in the novel *Nine*. At the book's end there is a short and useful set of explanatory notes regarding local Polish events, things, and terminology. The translator, Margarita Nafpaktitis, has also supplied a set of analytical notes that strike me as odd beyond compare, its writing contrasting to that in the *Tales* in a manner that takes the unwary reader by surprise and might make his or her head spin from the heady vapors of its seminar-room language. It induced the same result in

me as the remark about Zen masters would in Józek. Two snippets should suffice to show you what I mean: "[T]his peripheral setting offers a prime vantage point from which to view the effects of transition spreading out from the center. Stasiuk also uses this setting to activate a diachronic awareness of the region as a centuries-old palimpsest created by a succession of migrating (or invading) cultures." And "Testing implicit lines of demarcation plays out on several structural levels as well. For example, Stasiuk problematizes the narrative persona of *Tales*." There is much more of this, even worse and more cluttered, the opacity of which makes the village's turbid fictional mindset seem limpid by comparison. All such passages can be translated down into much plainer English, but then they seem so much less grand, since they become unmoored from the inflated language of that postmodern whip and stigmata, "theory." The excellent and moving translation of the work itself is more than sufficient penance for such venial interpretive sins. The paperback edition published by Twisted Spoon Press is handsome beyond compare, from its sturdy cover through its paper and typography and, given its price as shown by internet searches, seems to have already become something of a collector's item. You can read the rest of Stasiuk in English on the cheap, but not *Tales*.

Four years later, in 2007, came the Bill Johnston translation of the novel *Nine* (*Dziewięć*) into English. By this time Stasiuk had made a splash in Germany with both *White Raven* and *Dukla*, and his writing in the present decade shows a growing engagement with German themes, though Germany is marginal in *Nine* which was published in Poland in 1999. With respect to this it is sensible to remember the centuries-long fact that, politically and culturally, Poland is trapped between those powerful pincers, Germany and Russia. The lesson of just yesterday was, heed the words of Hitler "Woe to the weak!" and acknowledge the superior weakling-bashing performance of his victor Stalin. Today's lesson may be a commercial variant thereof. Stasiuk's favorite haunt, the old Austrian portion of partitioned Poland, Galicia and its margins, benefited from somewhat more enlightened, certainly less punitive, administration. Joseph Roth captured this in his repeated character: the sympathetic, tolerant, often eccentric Polish nobleman who admires the Habsburg dynasty as a protector of the Empire's diverse nationalities and their ways of life. In Stasiuk's writing the nationalities interpenetrate fluidly in the Carpathians, since their core identity is not an ethnic one, but that of "mountain men," relicts of a vanishing

past. Some of this barren, bracing territory has been covered before, for example, by Gregor von Rezzori, but his point of view is that of declassed individuals from the former Habsburg upper middle class rather than that of Stasiuk's fictional protagonists, raw urban child-men and country isolates who seethe and grieve beneath their placid exteriors.

The see-sawing tides of the Second World War allowed both Germans and Russians to kick the limp body of the nation they had wounded grievously, but those events are now on the verge of extinction as living memories. The near-corpse was resuscitated in the wrathful-godly image of Stalin that persisted for almost half a century. Russian domination and Poland's satellite status (including the dry-rot and decline of a cynical communism) was the context of Stasiuk's youth and that of his characters.

*Nine* puts us back in Stasiuk's starting place, Warsaw, here the veritable "belly of the beast." (Stasiuk's metaphysics of the place and time are not unlike the obsessions of our own deceased brawler, Norman Mailer, for whom television and plastic were cultural forms of cancer, invasive pathogens akin to Stasiuk's cheap junk from the West. Mailer's literary protégé, the jailbird Jack Abbott, of *In the Belly of the Beast* fame, endeared himself to his patron, while his overly wary prison mentality led him to an unprovoked murder soon after his release, a sort of Stasiuk character in the flesh.) "Memories of Underdevelopment," both material and spiritual, would be an apt *aperçu* of the book, though the phrase has been pre-empted by earlier use. An alternate title of "Down and Out in Warsaw" would also be perfectly appropriate to describe its tenor. (In 1960, when Stasiuk was born, Warsaw had not yet removed all the rubble left from 1939–45, and the city was being rebuilt in two fashions: restoration of its central Old Town gothic and baroque buildings of note—some based on surviving plans, others on the cityscape paintings of Canaletto's nephew, Bernardo Bellotto—and the surrounding metastasis of industrial sites and gray concrete housing blocks, that instantiation of socialist equality as the lowest and cheapest common denominator. Practically speaking, due to the ravages of the war a large number of people had to be housed rapidly, so the shoddy result may have been inevitable.

But this is not the down-and-out of willful bohemians or fanciful bourgeois youths suffering from *nostalgie de la boue*, but of men and women born into a gray world with few options and innumerable sources of resignation and despair. In *Nine* half a dozen lives

intersect, chiefly Paweł's, Jacek's, and Bolek's. Their female companions, casual sexual partners and hangers-on (one a meek, harmless employee of Paweł's shop), suffer from the collateral damage of the men's collisions. A forty-eight hour period in which betrayals, mishaps, escapes, and pursuits occur brings the three men together in a fashion common to novels in which individual skeins trace paths that seem fated to tie themselves up in a neat, though nasty, knot. The men are all working-class lads born circa 1960 who have rejected the factory clock-punching and rancid two-room apartment family life of their fathers and mothers. They have gravitated into the world of binge drinking, drug use, drug selling, loan-sharking, and shady business deals involving products and commodities that strike the reader as ridiculous when they are not meretricious (but such is the stuff of dreams, of barter and exchange, of "moving on up" through the communist-era black market and then legally in the post-1989 "transitional stage" of crony capitalism and criminal entrepreneurship). Stasiuk repeatedly itemizes the cheap and gaudy baubles that his countrymen hanker after, and the sheer volume of bad taste and pointless consumption continues to astonish and demoralize him.

There's a developing crisis: Paweł, Jacek and Bolek all know each other from their earlier years of street life as dissolute and rebellious adolescents. Bolek is now muscle for a mobster or, more properly speaking, he is the foreman of a muscle crew. The crew's most prominent member is a nameless, fit, blond specimen who wears a purple track suit (in Stasiuk's world the satiny, brightly-colored track suit with stripes is emblematic of idlers and petty hoodlums, more junk from the West and a signifier that modern men are turning into perpetual adolescents). He is a thug who enjoys tormenting his victims, though he values cooperation and orderly compliance in principle; he's also something of an automaton of Nietzschean perfection among the occasionally nostalgic and sentimental low-lives who improvise rather than plan. No one in the game questions the rightness of an amoral thug to prosper. Under the right circumstances—a business opportunity, a deal—they would be happy to share a beer and cigarettes with him. Bolek has to run down Jacek for the latter's transgressions in a petty drug deal, while Paweł seeks help from both men in his effort to escape the minions of another money lender. Fate is most unkind to the most innocent and fragile of all, Paweł's employee Zosia, who meets her

end at Bolek's hands as he drives recklessly through the city and inadvertently runs her over.

The violent end anticipated by the reader for Jacek and Paweł, in flight together, never comes. They sit out the tail-end of their exhausting two days of hustling, importuning, and eluding their pursuers on the roof of an apartment building in a cold April thundershower. The storm briefly washes the city clean of its funk of decay, but not of its or their desperation. Here Stasiuk punctuates their story with a brief interpolation of an unrelated episode: the death of a man in an automobile crash as he drives his father into the country to settle an estate—his last thoughts are that he has not been sufficiently kind to and respectful of his father; his father, who survives the crash, feels he has nothing left to live for. You can almost hear the cinematic voice-over: “The naked city has two million stories, this has been one of them.” The interpolation is one of many such vignettes and is not there by chance. They are a structural feature of the novel.

Stasiuk has been compared to Kerouac, but *Nine* recreates a desolate urban milieu that is far closer to the Brooklyn tales of Kerouac's contemporary, Hubert Selby. And *Nine* is also similar to *Last Exit to Brooklyn* in the means used—interweaving lives played out against an unattractive and hopeless setting. This is a vision of the twentieth century's mass man as mass victim, of himself and others, of cupidity, of ignorance, and of the unpalatability of every possible choice. And this is where the interpolations play their role. The protagonists, casing their surroundings or studying an escape route, let their eyes alight for a moment on a passing pedestrian or the occupant of a tram, bus, or car. A brief description of that anonymous man's or woman's current trajectory through space and time, its vector in the small arena of his or her life, is given. The trajectory normally leads to dull routine, a dreaded encounter, or an unpromising attempt to enliven one's dreary existence. Such is the stream of Polish small town life, modern life, in which the active characters are bounced around like all the other little pebbles in a fatalistic torrent that we glimpse as in five-second jump-cuts in a film. The interpolations are leitmotifs that echo the stream's funeral themes for the principal players.

This is done with a certain style and humor. As to style, every vivid metaphor of the gristle and throb of hoodlum life, and every entropic one of Jacek's and Paweł's lives serves the story well, pointing to a murky, pervasive social reality, as in “Daybreak came in over the windowsill and went slowly across the floor like dishwater. It rose higher, submerging them [two

sleeping fugitives], then reached the tabletop and finally the ceiling.” That's what a flood of light filling a room is, more aqueous than you had imagined the moment before you read it, and not heavenly blue or sunrise golden but dishwater in hue, light as the revealer of dullness, disorganization, and decay. As to humor, consider the conversation between Jacek's girlfriend, Beata, and Paweł, whom she instructs with New Age dietary advice:

“Brussel sprouts without salt are good for the upper loins, and blocking the energy there makes a person worry too much about material things. The right kind of massage could also work. . .”

“The problem is, I borrowed money and now I have to pay it back. But I don't have it. Brussels sprouts won't help.”

“If you started right you never would have ended up in a situation like this. Me, I divided my body into seven zones, and every day I nourish myself with vegetables from one of the seven groups. In this way I live in total harmony. I mean, we're cosmic beings, aren't we?”

“Gagarin?”

“What?”

“The cosmonaut.”

“Oh, you mean those fascist technocrats. You know what Lao-tzu said?”

“Yeah, you can't jump higher than your prick.”

“What?”

Or the terse existential patter of guys on the lam, Paweł and Jacek, scrounging for money, drugs, or hiding places:

“I was here yesterday. Remember Bogna?”

“Not really.”

“She didn't have anything either.”

“Does anyone have anything?”

“I already tried the people who do, and they don't have anything either.”

Or that of Jacek's pursuers, a pair of hoodlums shooting pool in a bar:

“Tell him to put something on,” said the one who had lost.

“He'll only put on fag music,” said the other.

“Whatever. Just so it's not quiet.”

“Quiet bothers you?”

“When it's quiet, something can happen.”

“And when the music's on, it can't?”

“It can, but you don't have to wait.”

“Shut up and play, Waldek.”

Regarding both pursuers and pursued, Stasiuk writes: “In their veins not blood, but images of actions. They were actors in a reality they had made up, because the time when sons repeated the gestures of their fathers

was over.” For the latest incarnation of the New Man, life under early capitalism is following the script of a bad Hollywood adventure film. The props of this new life are presented in contrasting inventories of stuff. Here is a partial list from the older world, that of local marketplaces in small town and rural economies that survived even under communism:

Heart-shaped cheeses, eggs, pickled cucumbers. . . . live birds in shit-stained cages, carrots, parsnips, cream in metal cans, black rapeseed oil in old vodka bottles . . . pigs’ heads, cows’ udders, flies, the stink of burnt feathers, the dry smell of burlap sacks, old women’s armpits, honey in bottles.

Suddenly, magically, this cornucopia of the real and the edible is replaced by

Beatle boots with stacked heels and turned-up tips, plexiglas cuff links with naked women inside, neckties on elastic bands pre-tied and labeled ‘de Paris,’ gold chains, crimson lipstick, Dacron, nylon raincoats with silver buttons, Cossack boots with zippers . . . all made of bright psychedelic polymers as in a child’s kaleidoscope.

More important, here is the pivot point of moving from a system of want to a system of plenty:

From the reek of cabbage you entered a world of glistening, sterile color, everyone did, those too who had hardly anything, who had seen these manmade hues only in their churches during May services. And that was the real revolution, because it took place in their hearts and eyes, and from that time they were destined and nothing could stop them in their march.

You will note the colors of the May religious services that also appeared in *Tales*, formerly encountered rarely and then under conditions of piety or reverence, now constantly visible, bright bait for the unwary. The want and need of essentials have been replaced by an addictive craving for a plenitude of inessentials.

This is a version of the decline and fall of communism in Poland without reference to Solidarity, the role of the Catholic Church, or the Polish Pope as engines of old-fashioned nationhood, or the economic and diplomatic vises squeezing Poland’s Soviet patron and its failed tightrope-walker, Gorbachev. In fact, it is a kind of superfortified “dialectical materialism” that has produced the change, if we grant that “materialism” in its coarsest form—sheer stuff—has a grim power over spirit. The move from dreams of useful, earthy goods rendered in earth tones to the new toys of life that come in unearthly hues is clear, the pathway irresistible, and the result both laughable and sad—it is all a futile process that drives the lives of the new

“businessmen” and their customers. *Nine* leaves its characters splayed out and limp like ragdolls soaking in a puddle of stale beer and its readers equally battered. Is there a way out of this mess? How exemplary can Stasiuk’s personal response, flight to the mountains and participation in an older, “timeless” rural economy, be? How exemplary should it be? And just how widespread and structural is the mess, anyway? We would have to go other Polish writers to see if Stasiuk’s lamentations are part of a collective refrain, or if any of his peers see a glimmer of light anywhere. With an exception noted below, I have not yet undertaken the suggested comparison.

(To be continued in the next issue)

## Hollywood’s War with Poland, 1939–1945

By **M. B. B. Biskupski**. Lexington, KY: Kentucky University Press ([www.kentuckypress.com](http://www.kentuckypress.com)), 2010. xii + 362 pages. ISBN 978-0-8131-2559-6. Hardcover.

### Raymond T. Gawronski, SJ

The day I gave the valedictory at my New England college, my father, an honorably discharged veteran of the “greatest American generation,” took me aside and said: “I know what this country is like: I will understand if you change your name.” We have all understood why, and many of us have disappeared into an “Anglo” identity. But why should one deny the heritage that gave us a John Paul II?

There are plenty of good reasons, at least in America, and M. B. B. Biskupski digs deeply into one very important, indeed crucial, time and period of American life to investigate how the American film industry consistently ignored, belittled, and demonized Poland and the Poles, whether in Europe or America. More: he demonstrates how an image was created that had no relation to reality. Professor Biskupski’s book is exhaustive in its study of the films and serials that Hollywood produced during the war years. The documentation could hardly be more painstaking: almost one-third of the book is given to notes.

The study is rich and nuanced, leaving a reviewer sorely tempted to simply rehearse much of the book. A few main points will have to suffice here. For example, though Poland had the strongest underground in Europe, lasting throughout the war, it was totally