

Teksty Drugie 2013, 2, s. 166-181  
Special Issue – English Edition



# **Savoir-vivre: Ironic Strategies in Calek Perechodnik's “Confession”.**

Tomasz Żukowski

Przeł. Benjamin Koschalka

## Tomasz ŻUKOWSKI

### *Savoir-vivre*: Ironic Strategies in Calek Perechodnik's *Confession*<sup>1</sup>

Until recently, the Shoah was mostly discussed in categories of inexpressibility and trauma. It is true that the enormity of the crime took away the voices of victims, witnesses, and interpreters. Writers have long been interested in the subject of the experience of suffering and grief,<sup>2</sup> but Polish culture also has another problem to solve: enunciating and comprehending what happened on the boundary that divided Polish society into the Aryan and Jewish sides. Yet the poetics of inexpressibility is insufficient for describing social mechanisms. Polish Jews know about these all too well, as they were excluded and consigned to the position of a minority, were and continuing to be subject to enormous pressure.

---

<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: *Confession* is the literal translation of *Sporowiedź* – the short title of the unabridged 2004 edition of Calek Perechodnik's memoirs referred to in the original version of this article (*Sporowiedź. Dzieje rodziny Żydowskiej podczas okupacji hitlerowskiej w Polsce*, ed. David Engel, Warszawa: Karta, 2004). I have used quotations from *Am I a Murderer?*, Frank Fox's English translation of the earlier edition. However, this version is sometimes lacking in elements and even whole sentences and passages from the unabridged version. Therefore, where necessary I have added my own translations, marked by italics and square brackets. Page numbers refer to *Am I a Murderer?* except where the whole quotation is my translation, in which case they refer to *Sporowiedź*.

<sup>2</sup> Just to mention Władysław Broniewski's "Ballads and Romances," Wisława Szymborska's "Still," Tadeusz Różewicz's poems such as "Pigtail," Chaskiel and "The Old Jewish Cemetery in Lesko," and from more recent literature Paweł Huelle's *Who Was David Weiser?* or Marek Biernczyk's *Tworzył*.

Among them, Calek Perechodnik was a remarkable author. His insight, observational mind, and competences as a participant in Polish culture are immeasurable. He chose an exceptional tool: irony. His ironic temperament gives his position an added acuteness, revealing the discursive mechanisms that organize the space in which Polish Jews move. It is these that are responsible for the construction of facts, ordering of reality and its interpretation. And it is in this way that the image in which Polish society sees itself is formed. Jews exist in this in a way accepted by the majority, and the reactions to what their Polish fellow citizens have in store for them must fit within a specified framework. They themselves are forced to participate in the rituals of agreement for the discursive – and not only – norms established by the dominant group. Violation of taboos proves to be tantamount to rejection and collective damnation of somebody who risks such a step.

Perechodnik's irony is levelled at the cultural mechanisms measured in this way. It unveils and brings to a halt the machine that produces series of appropriate responses and images. To achieve this task, it cannot be limited to the meaning of individual sentences. As a larger-scale strategy, it involves contrasting juxtapositions of facts in extensive passages of text. It often uses a punchline, which turns on its head a statement that appears wholly innocent, conforming to the accepted norms. This is irony aimed not only at the content of sentences, but at the social practices of using them.

### Irony against ritual

At the beginning of his *Confession*, Perechodnik writes the following about his experiences in inter-war Poland: "Because, I want it clearly understood that I personally did not come in contact with [practical] anti-Semitism. It's true that I could not study at Warsaw University, but because of that, I had an opportunity to go to France [Toulouse] for graduate studies."<sup>3</sup>

Even at first glance, this sentence seems odd. What is "practical anti-Semitism" in pre-war Poland, and how does it differ from plain anti-Semitism? Why does Perechodnik assure the reader that he has not encountered anti-Semitism, but then immediately note that he "could not study at Warsaw University," known for anti-Semitic wrangles, ghetto benches and the *numerus clausus* for young Jews?

If he had made it to a Polish university, he would have become acquainted with a whole range of anti-Semitic behavior, from invective to physical attack. He no doubt knew this, because everyone did know about the anti-Semitic brawls organized by the student population. He must also have realized that his going to France to study was nothing other than the result of discrimination against Jews at Polish universities, especially Warsaw. Since the beginning of the 1930s, anti-Semitic incidents had been a regular occurrence, often leading to the university being closed during the academic year. When young Polish Jews went abroad to study, this was a direct consequence of

<sup>3</sup> Perechodnik, Calek, *Am I a Murderer? Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman* (trans. Frank Fox), Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996, xxii.

anti-Semitism at domestic universities and the related policy of reducing the number of Jewish students in Poland.<sup>4</sup>

Perechodnik therefore contradicts himself. He assures the reader that he has not encountered anti-Semitism, but his account shows that he did on many occasions. This contrast becomes a vehicle of irony: losing the opportunity to become acquainted with the batons of the National Radical Camp party is “rewarded” by the necessity to study abroad. This subject returns several times over the next two pages. The discord between the first declaration and facts and experience becomes ever clearer.

First we read:

I was placed in category A, but because Poland was such a mighty power, possessed of such a strong military and of so many educated and commissioned engineers-officers, I was obviously superfluous! Anyway – why beat about the bush? – they gave me a supernumerary status. They did it with me, my brother (also an engineer), and all of our Jewish friends who had a high school education or higher. They just did not want to have Jewish officers in the Polish army. (xxiii)

And further, on his wife’s family, all on the next page of text: “They wanted to build another movie house in Otwock, but the mayor would not permit it. He’d rather there was no movie house...than for a Jew to be an owner of one. But never mind that” (xxix). One paragraph later: “As for me, I was certain that I could get another ten degrees, and I still wouldn’t be given a government position in Poland” (12).

There are enough examples to show that Perechodnik came across anti-Semitism in interwar Poland many times and in person. So why does he claim otherwise?

Such declarations are recurrent and characteristic. Even today, one continues to hear them. They form a series of appropriate responses generated by the discursive norm, constituting part of the ritual cultivated by those who live under pressure of being accused of otherness. Here is a sample. In the book *Między Panem a Plebanem* (“Between the Lord and the Vicar”), Adam Michnik speaks of Jacek Kuroń’s “red scouting: “And why did I recall this with sentiment?” he explains, “Because it was the only period in my life when I had no fear of someone saying ‘Jew’ to me and having to defend myself from it.” Two pages later, asked by Jacek Żakowski about anti-Semitism, he answers, “I didn’t come across it either in school or at university. That all came out in 1968, when the government started to incite.”<sup>5</sup>

The members of a discriminated group ritually avoid making direct accusations to the majority. As a rule, discrimination happens to other people, not those who happen to be speaking. Violence is something distant, and has nothing to do with the personal experience of the speaker. It is usually someone from outside who is guilty,

<sup>4</sup> See: Natkowska, Monika, *Numerus clausus, getto ławkowe, numerus nullus, “paragraf aryjski.” Antysemityzm na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1931–1939*. Warszawa: IH, 1999. The book’s final chapter is devoted to the phenomenon of Polish Jews going abroad to study and difficulties with gaining official recognition of their degrees.

<sup>5</sup> Michnik, Adam, Tischner, Józef and Żakowski, Jacek, *Między Panem a Plebanem*, Kraków: Znak, 1995, 56 and 59.

who cannot be identified with the dominant group (with Michnik it is the communist rule that is to blame; a psychoanalyst would no doubt have something to say about the word “incite” – *judzić* in Polish, possibly etymologically linked to “Judas,” and even if not, then sounding alike – which appears in this context as an additional, unconscious sign of subordination). Although a direct question about anti-Semitism usually brings a ritual reaction in keeping with the expected norm in such cases, when the pressure is less, uncensored experience comes out, almost incidentally.

Perechodnik’s irony, then – the anti-Semitism at Warsaw University that forced him to go to France saved him from ordeals with anti-Semites – is not limited to adding caveats to the sentence “I personally did not come in contact with anti-Semitism.” The quotation marks encompass the ritual of creating before the eyes of the majority a supposed enclave in which there is allegedly no anti-Semitism and establishing a phantasmic “healthy core of the nation” with no connection with evil. Perechodnik seems to tamely respect the way of speaking imposed on the majority: he fulfils the requirement, distances the problem and absolves his interlocutor, because since a Polish Jew telling his story has never encountered anti-Semitism, then the problem does not concern those to whom he is speaking. And yet the ironic temperament prevails in *Confession*.

The contradiction that goes unnoticed in other authors becomes a method of revealing the ritual itself here. Owing to this contrast – whether built consciously or not – we are unable to naively treat ritualized assurances as a description of reality. When the automatism created by social norms disappears, we face the question of the function of sentences which are clearly not a description of reality. The comical and internally contradictory reasoning points to the mechanism that creates it. By saying “I could not study at Warsaw University, but because of that, I had an opportunity to go to France for graduate studies,” Perechodnik mocks the labels imposed by the dominant ones on the discriminated minority, and the irony reveals the presence and rules of the ritual.<sup>6</sup>

A similar ironic strategy appears many times in *Confession*. Let us look at some more distinct examples.

## Mass theft and a clear conscience

After completing his account of events in Otwock, Perechodnik devotes several pages of his *Confession* to “the attitudes of Poles towards Jews and, in general, towards the acts of extermination of Jews” (97-101). This passage, dripping in biting irony, is extremely

---

<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Lawit acknowledges this ritual in “Ballada o czterech muszkieterach” (“The Ballad of the Four Musketeers”): “When you need to, you find a way/ When they spit, I say it looks like rain/ And I have never seen/ The words Jews – off to the gas.” The song is a conversation between four friends from Krakow’s Kazimierz district, meeting again years later. The last of them decided to settle in Poland. Polish lyrics taken down from a recording made available by Anna Zawadzka. The two-disc *Album rodzinny – ballady Gabrysia* (“Family album – Gabe’s ballads”) was released by the author in 2000. Gabriel Lawit lives in Ballerup near Copenhagen, having emigrated from Poland in 1972.

important for understanding his strategy. It contains a summary of the observations made so far and experiences which suggest that for Polish society the Shoah is above all an opportunity to pillage Jewish property on a mass scale. Yet proves to be really interesting is something else: the Polish sense of innocence and the mechanisms used to create it and then maintain it. From this point of view, Perechodnik is a remarkable expert on the Polish consciousness and discursive practice. Let us try to compile a catalogue of the major mechanisms he finds.

1. "It's not us, it's the Germans," Perechodnik writes:

The lower classes of the townspeople as well as the peasants oriented themselves to whichever way the wind was blowing. They understood that they had an opportunity to enrich themselves, one that came only in a great while. One could pillage without penalty, steal, kill people, so that many using the slogan "now or never" got to work. [*In the naivety of their spirit they think that they will never be punished.*] After all, [*there is a "responsible editor."*] the Germans...[*if necessary everything will be put down to the Germans anyway.*]

On the first level, the irony of this passage entails speaking in someone else's voice – that of the Polish majority – which is at the same time unmasked as the voice of hypocrites. But this is not just about an inelegant or morally dubious "taking what was left behind for yourself." The meaning of Perechodnik's irony becomes clear only after revelation of the context in which he sets the Polish "if necessary everything will be put down to the Germans anyway." This context is the hunting for Jews described in the next paragraph:

In every town where there was an *Aktion*, the ghetto was surrounded by a mob that participated in a formal hunt on Jews, a hunt according to all the rules of hunting – with beaters. Did many Jews perish at their hands? Countless ones! In the best case, the beaters took money from Jews, resigned to lead them only to the gendarmes. It was in any case a sentence of death. What could the Jew do without money? He could go to the gendarme himself and ask for a bullet... Just to make things clear, Perechodnik adds "The mob acted in unison, the nameless mob" (97).

The image is completed by a remark on Polish intellectuals, or in fact the whole society, with no division into the mob and the upper echelons:

It's a peculiar thing: Jews did not even dream that the order to kill Jews would apply to all Jews, while the Poles realized right away that no Jew would survive the war. [*Are we to take this as proof of their remarkable wisdom and political farsightedness, or might this wisdom have resulted from a proverb: all people draws the conclusions about the future that suit them – this is not hard to answer.*] (98)

It therefore turns out it is not only sole responsibility for appropriation of things that falls the way of the Germans, as "responsible editor." In Perechodnik's take, between the occupier and the Polish population, irrespective of social class, a tacit understanding exists: the robbing, if not "leading them to the gendarmes," makes it impossible for Jews to escape to Polish districts, and largely contributes to the success of the German plan of extermination. In return, the Nazis allow people to engorge themselves at the cost of the Jews, assuring them that none of those robbed will be back to demand his property, regardless of the result of the war. Only with this silent conspiracy comes the

irony. Perechodnik brings it to the fore and mocks the connected hypocrisy. At the same time, he breaks the pact of silence. He shows that in the phrase “it’s not us, it’s the Germans” the reference is to the Polish part in the Holocaust and to its avoiding becoming a subject of discussion.

2. Obedient Pole – Obedient Jew. In order to maintain the sense of innocence, the fact of silent complicity in the extermination of the Jews must be concealed as deeply as possible. This was particularly important for well-cultivated people with more delicate consciences. Perechodnik has a fair amount to say about representatives of the Polish intelligentsia, with whom his own education and position brought him into contact:

Indeed, it happened that a Pole had a Jewish friend who gave him things for safekeeping. If he then obligingly went to Treblinka, the matter was finished. Possessions increased: the conscience was clear – *tout va très bien*. It was worse when a Jew appeared to be “bothersome,” wanted to live and remind them of his possessions. Then there was something to talk about to others. Indeed, the Jew will not survive the war anyway, and so he will not be able to repay the favor after the war. He will not be able to lodge charges before a court, will not cast a shadow on an unblemished name. To give anything back to him is simply a sin. If we give things back to him, others will come and take things away. (98)

The above passage can be understood when we look at it in the context of complicity in the extermination. The Jew “without things” loses the chance to survive (exceptions occur, but statistics are implacable). Refusal to give up money or objects that have been put away means a sentence. But this is not the point here. Perechodnik’s irony is guided more by a demand made of the Jews themselves: they should “obediently” play the role assigned to them, and in such a way as not to bother the Polish conscience. They should disappear, discretely leaving their things for their Polish “friends” and the guilt to the Germans.

A caricature of this “obedient” appropriation is Miss Lusia. Perechodnik is particularly scathing when writing about her:

Janek appealed to Miss Lusi [*sic*] to return four hundred zloty and the things she had taken from my aunt Czerna. I found out that the money was in the hands of Lusi’s friend. Salted bacon that had been bought for that sum had to be resold. This product had now fallen in value, so it was necessary to wait. In addition, Lusi would take everything to my aunt, and in a little while she would bring her from Kolbiel to her place. Janek was barely able to get a negligible portion of the things she had and one hundred zloty. The rest Lusi was to return personally to my aunt. She even began to write a letter to Kolbiel: “I will shortly come to you, my lady, but in the meantime don’t send me Janek or Calek.” Surely she would have arrived; it’s just that earlier they had deported Jews from Kolbiel to Treblinka. It seems to have been foreordained for Lusi to receive a trousseau gratis from my aunt. After six weeks, when I told her of the death of my aunt, the poor girl broke into tears. Crocodile tears flowed. Well, the ordinary sort of morality... but with the crazed pretense of being a decent person. (95-96)

We will return to the question of Perechodnik’s silence in such situations. More important now is the feeling of guilt *per se*. Miss Lusia takes the things as a friend and – whether consciously or not – arranges the situation in a way that allows her to maintain this status.

The ironic “It seems to have been foreordained for Lusi to receive a trousseau gratis from my aunt” shows the mechanism of transferring responsibility for perpetrating an unspecified fate with which one has nothing to do, and at the same time determining the right to inheritance based on friendship, good relations and a lack of any other heirs. Miss Lusia feels that the kindness she has shown to Czerna entitles her to acquire her things.

A model example of this mechanism can be found in another passage:

I know a Pole, our former tenant [*Bujalski*], who considers himself 100 percent patriot and a decent man. And, indeed, he is a decent man. I can trust him absolutely. He is probably the only tenant in 1943 in all of Poland's territory paying rent to his Jewish landlord. This man, in a conversation with my father, could express himself in the following manner: “I traded with that Jew for so many years, and think about it, he gave me nothing for safekeeping. They took him to Treblinka – and what did he get from that?! If only had had left me his goods. (99)

Even someone like this Bujalski seems convinced that his conduct towards Jews is a kind of excessive goodness going beyond the limits or moral obligation. The conclusion that arises from this is that the Jew's duty is gratitude, that he has a debt to pay. The tacitly assumed norm proves to be discrimination from which somebody has magnanimously made an exception. In the manner of thinking represented by Bujalski, there is no room for reflection on the connection of this norm with the German Holocaust machine. The death of Jews also does not bring any change to the norm or in the way in which it is seen and carried out. Making an exception is something so significant and momentous that neglecting the most material expressions of gratitude is in fact the fault of the Jew, even if it was *in articulo mortis* that he permitted this neglect. As we see, attempts to escape from transportation are not a sufficient excuse.

3. Justifications. We come therefore to the matter of the justifications of the Holocaust with which Polish society reacted to it. “But let us put aside the material questions,” writes Perechodnik, “these are dirty matters. It was reasoned plainly. From where did the Jews get such wealth? Wasn't it from the Polish soil? The time had come for them to repay their debt to Poles...*pecunia non olet*” (99). Again, the irony is a double one. On the one hand, it is clearly someone else's speech being quoted: for those who do not have to fight for their lives, money is not the most important thing. They can look upon it as a mundane thing, not worth the attention of a decent fellow. Yet when the question “From where did the Jews get such wealth?” is asked, it turns out that Jews should not talk about money, because of the supposed harm they have done to Poles and the associated guilt. Grievances over being robbed would be extremely inappropriate here. The discrete silence that surrounds the material aspect of the Holocaust is therefore kept out of respect to the Jews themselves, and as a noble gesture reinforces the Polish sense of guilt.

Elsewhere, Perechodnik speaks with bitterness, but this time without irony, of this attitude:

Three months after the start of the *Aktion*, in October 1942, an article discussing the deportation of Jews appeared in *Biuletyn Informacyjny* [Information Bulletin]. It emphasized the barbarism of the Germans, expressed compassion for the Jews, but in the end came to the following



conclusion: the best class of Jews were those who before the war did not want to be a parasite on a foreign organism and immigrated to Palestine. They were destined to live; the remainder of the nation perished. (100)

There are various types of this kind of awareness. It is evident that there is a kind of template at work that produces sets of similar statements. Take this example. Perechodnik gives an account of a visit to Miss Lidia, a dentist:

“You see, Mr. Calek, the reason that your sister [*Rachela*] perished was because she testified against me falsely in court. It’s a deserved punishment from God that she finally met up with.” I open my eyes wide. I feel as if I have broken out in a cold sweat. Finally I have an answer as to why my sister perished: It was for having been a witness for the opposite side in a case concerning ten or twenty *złoty* of a monthly rental. [*For this, she had to die, a deserved punishment from God...And I heard her out in silence.*] (127)

As we see, the belief in the guilt of the Jews as a group and of specific Jews as individuals is so strong that it remains unshaken even in the face of a massacre. Yet even more important is the relationship that the belief in Jewish guilt forms between Poles and Jews helping each other. Kindness, it turns out, is an act of magnanimity confirming the moral superiority of those who suffered harm at the hands of Jews.

4. Live corpses. Exclusion is shown in the specific attitude towards Jews – both living and deceased ones. What got stuck in Perechodnik’s memory from the liquidation of the Otwock ghetto was the image of Poles looting the ravaged homes:

At times the looters come across murdered Jews, but what does it matter? They argue and fight among the not-yet-cold bodies; one tears out of the hands of the other a pillow or a suit of clothes. And the Jewish corpse? Like a corpse, it lies quietly, does not speak, does not bother anyone; it will not even appear to anyone in their sleep. After all, the Poles have a clear conscience...“We didn’t kill them, and in any case, if we don’t take it, the Germans will!” (57)

The body of a dead person, usually the object of respect, in the case of a Jewish corpse becomes an insignificant object. No attention is paid to it, its presence does not cause any changes to collective actions and does not cause any guilty consciences.

It soon becomes evident that those who have managed to survive the liquidation of the ghetto acquire a similar status to the dead. Not only are they seen as only temporarily alive, but they are also treated like corpses in the ghetto. This approach has many hues. Let us start from the mildest. During his visit to Miss Lidia, Perechodnik hears the following remarks: “Indeed, I do have to get along with you. Your father is already old, he will probably not last too long, after the war you will be the landlord. So I have to get along with you” (127). Miss Lidia comes to terms with the death of his sister similarly easily – after all, like his father, she was at fault in respect to her. Jewish guilt means that a just sentence is just a matter of time.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This is an old model of Polish culture. Co-existence with the Jews as an exceptional state and annihilation and punishment as a natural order of things is discussed by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir in her article “Żydzi u Kolberga,” *Res Publica Nowa* 1999 no. 7-8.

Others too passed this sentence off all too lightly. Perechodnik notes that “almost all my colleagues had things and money stored at Polish friends’ houses, and later it turned out that 90 percent of it was gone” (158). The explanation for this state of affairs is brutal. Referring to the matter of Alchimowicz, captain of the Polish armies and bailiff of the Magistrates’ Court, who took some of the stored items for himself, he comments: “Apparently the human soul reacts differently in the presence of a live person and differently when it has to do with live corpses.” Alchimowicz retains a distinct sense of superiority to his former Jewish acquaintances, whom he treats like bothersome suplicants. Perechodnik advises his father, not to tell Alchimowicz about this [a missing fur lining] because this great “gentleman” would feel insulted and in general would not want to talk to him...But nothing helped. When my father returned to recover his things, Alchimowicz did not deny that he had the fur, but said that he would return it in the spring because his wife would wear it in the winter, and in general “he does not have a cloakroom.” I am certain that he knew very well that my father would not dare come to Otwock in the spring.<sup>8</sup> (136)

This motif – of such delaying tactics in the hope that it is a matter of time till what must happen will happen – recurs many times in *Confession*.

What is especially important, however, is that both Alchimowicz and the Perechodnik are very much aware of the relationship of power that has evolved between them. The former knows that he can actually get away with anything, and that if he does not throw the Jews out on the street, he will moreover be seen as a most honest and gracious man; Perechodnik knows that he has no rights, and must put up with everything in silence and feign gratitude.

Once the premise has been established that sooner or later what lies in wait for Jews is death, loyalty to the “live corpse” turns out to be nonsense. Let us return to the ironic words quoted earlier: “To give anything back to him is simply a sin. If we give things back to him, others will come and take things away” (98). The norm whose application is felt by all the participants in the events absolves them from responsibility – after all, the Germans are always guilty. At the same time, the Polish conviction that nobody shall be spared makes the Nazis’ task easier, and is one of the factors that tightens the walls. The Jews, treated as “live corpses,” in fact become this. Systematically robbed, they lose their chance of survival, but something more happens. They become invisible and insignificant, like corpses from the Otwock ghetto.

5. “One must not generalize.” In the Polish collective consciousness, Jews are treated as a group that is actually monolithic. The belief in the existence of a uniform national character and collective responsibility unchanged for generations is a foundation of the justifications cited above. Polish society is also a nation, but one spoken of in different terms. The actions that cloud the image of the society are

---

<sup>8</sup> Perechodnik adds: “How could this man tell my father that there was ‘no cloakroom’ in his place when all the furniture in his apartment was either mine or my father’s? I will add that some time ago he asked my father if he would give them to him for safekeeping” (136-137).

only marginal. Those who commit evil cannot be identified with Polishness. This is the root of the interminable debates rumbling on even today of whether or not the crimes or indecencies of Poles towards their Jewish fellow citizens are a burden on the nation. The crowning argument in these disputes is the idea that “one must not generalize.” This suggests that individual cases do not entitle us to pass judgment on an entire nation (whatever that might be).

Perechodnik is familiar with this mechanism. In the passage intended to – as he puts it – “characterize the attitudes of Poles towards Jews,” he acknowledges it with an ironic comment. After describing looting and catching ghetto escapees, he says:

Thinking of the base ones should not lead one to draw conclusions touching on all. Does the statistic of good and bad deeds have any meaning? No, this is not important. God on Highest took a position on this matter. In the Old Testament it is written that if one finds in a town ten righteous people, that place will not be destroyed. Probably in Warsaw and in every other city one can also find ten righteous people. [*The Polish people can therefore sleep soundly at night, as they face no threat, and those who robbed them have and will continue to have.*] (101)

The ironic leap from abstract moral contemplations to mercantile issues demonstrates the role of the prohibition on generalizations: looting is to remain in the shadows, where it cannot be problematized and spoken of. The existence of “righteous” people brings the consideration to an end before anybody can even ask the first question. If facts were to see the light of day, the “righteous” would prove to be a miraculous weapon of the community. Invoking them automatically solves the problem. The nation has a phantasm with which to identify itself,<sup>9</sup> and behind which it can hide itself. It reacts to accusations – as has often happened – with moral indignation.

A variation of the same idea is casting the responsibility on the so-called “mob.” The description of the incidents during the liquidation is furnished with a comment: “it is only the mob, but the fact that in Poland half the people belong to these lower classes, that’s another matter” (98). Perechodnik realizes that the disparaging term “mob” is intended above all to remove the perpetrators from the nation. He also knows that it is not the victims (i.e., Jews) that count in all this, but the image of the Polish nation, which is to remain immaculate so that what has happened cannot be examined and named. This is why he ironically notes that the “mob” is not worthy of discussion. The real numbers and proportions do not play a role, and neither do the real attitudes of social groups. During the occupation, Perechodnik encountered representatives of all classes, and he often states that someone’s attitude towards Jews does not depend on his position in the social hierarchy.

Since generalization is not allowed, and the Holocaust is thus viewed in terms of the “moral approach of the nation,” we cannot ask the question about the rules of social behaviors, and therefore the characteristic features of Polish culture. Perechodnik does not use the phrases “culture” or “cultural model,” as of course he did not know them in the

<sup>9</sup> A phantasm, because in social reality “the righteous” are often the object of persecution. One only has to look at the stories described in Anna Bikont’s *My z Jedwabnego* (“We from Jedwabne”) (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2004).

sense given to them by 20<sup>th</sup>-century social sciences. He only mentions twice “climatological conditions” (106). This probably refers to a calque from the French expression “*l’air du pays*” (since he studied in France), meaning the type of air breathed in the country, its climate, but also its atmosphere. According to Perechodnik, it was these conditions – the rules of social life rooted in a culture – that allowed the Nazis to do something in Poland that seemed unthinkable.

A commentary on the text of *Confession* has been added by life, or actually the dynamic of the Polish discourse on the Holocaust. The prohibition of generalization applies, and moreover, has acquired legal sanction. Art. 55a of the Law of 18 October 2006 on exposure of information on the documents of state security bodies from 1944-1990 and the contents of these documents reads “Anybody who accuses the Polish Nation of participation in, organization of or responsibility for the communist or Nazi crimes is subject to imprisonment for 3 years (Dz.U.

[Journal of Laws] 2006, no. 218, item 1592).

### “I have learnt to be silent”

The expression “I have learnt to be silent” is used repeatedly in *Confession*. This is the way in which Perechodnik acknowledges statements which use Polish outlines of perceiving the Holocaust. Silence is part of the ritual. This means a dual consent: for what is happening, and how it is spoken of. It confirms participation in a game whose rules have been imposed by the majority.

Let us take this image, in which the dentist’s assistant is wearing a sweater belonging to Perechodnik’s sister:

[Miss Lidia] would ask if she had made it herself... The girl blushed deeply, but inside she was probably laughing at us. “You’re making fun of me,” she might say to herself, “but I know that I am dressed well. Why should one get upset if these were things stolen from Jews? The owners will not rise from their graves, and those who live must be silent.” (127)

Perechodnik says nothing, and Miss Lidia goes no further than gibes and allusions. The discursive rituals exercise real pressure on the participants. They create a community of consented silence. Since events cannot be named, and one’s position towards them must remain concealed, the facts are cultivated by the obligatory way of talking about Jews and the Holocaust (it is Miss Lidia who explains Perechodnik’s sister’s death by the testimony which she gave against her in the wrangle over the rent). The community of consent to the rules of linguistic games is in fact invisible for the Aryan participants. For Jews, it is another matter. The need to be silent, and therefore the de facto declaration “I am one of you, we belong to one world which I accept” is torture for Perechodnik. If he refuses obedience he will place himself outside of the Polish community (most of which in any case views him as foreign), which is tantamount to either a death sentence or a much-reduced chance of survival. A Jew cannot say what he thinks of Miss Lidia, or even more so of young Miss Stańczak. Silence only puts him on their side. For Perechodnik, the mimicry imposed on him feels like disloyalty

to the victims, especially those closest to him, who have died so recently. Yet to survive he must be unfaithful to himself.

The unbearable falseness of the situation is seen clearly in the passage on the Arbeitsamt official who takes the Perechodnik's books away. As he is a man of culture, he enters a discussion on literature:

I am afraid to insult him, but I would happily thrown him out of the door...For four long hours I endure his presence as the worst of tortures...I would like to see him another time and settle scores. In his mind he hasn't done any harm. On the contrary, he recognizes me as an intelligent person and wants to discuss with me a theme as important as literature. What of it if shots are heard in the street? Indeed, they only kill a few Jews. (95)

Owing to discursive rituals, in Polish company Perechodnik must don a mask. He pretends not to remember the brand with which he is marked. Yet at the same time he takes part in games which are a constant reminder that he is branded, and that exclusion associated with the brand of Jewishness remains a norm that is suspended only for a moment, as an exception – one that is a kind of trial. The Jew feels the eyes of his Polish interlocutors on him, checking whether he is conforming to the rules of the ritual. The conditional consent to the bond is a constant examination in subordination. He is not permitted to speak in his own voice, or to express what he is experiencing. He is to remain a perfect confirmation of the image that the dominant group has established on the subject of him and itself. Perechodnik senses the need for mimicry as one more kind of violence. This time this violence is specifically Polish.

Maria Janion argues that what was at stake for Perechodnik when he wrote his *Confession* was visibility. He managed to pierce the Nazi extermination plan, transforming the victims into passive puppets controlled by, as he put it, the “German Satan,” unconscious of the meaning of their acts or the end in store for them. Recognizing the Holocaust as a tragedy in which ironic fate mocks the participants in events means that one can recover oneself in the act of tragic self-awareness. Only on this condition can one proceed to mourning rites. The text becomes almost a headstone for his deceased wife:

Describing how this plan [the German plan of extermination] was realized, and using his journal to erect a visible grave to his wife, Perechodnik refuted the invisibility, transparency, insubstantiality of the *Figuren* [this was how the Nazis told prisoners working on cremations to describe the bodies of murder victims]. He restored the name. This was what he understood by immortality.<sup>10</sup>

This is made possible by invoking and making use of Polish Romantic tradition, especially that of the tragic irony of Juliusz Słowacki's song *Lilla Weneda*. Perechodnik was an insightful reader of Polish Romanticism, somebody who contemplated and internalized the narrative models and understandings of existence, history and grief.

The idea of “I have learnt to be silent” is also about visibility. The de-personifying perfidy of the Nazi plan of extermination is accompanied by Polish cultural models,

<sup>10</sup> Janion, Maria, “Ironia Calka Perechodnika, in: *Bohater, spisek, śmierć. Wykłady żydowskie*, Warszawa: W.A.B., 2009, 278.

which also – albeit in a different way and by different rules – make victims faceless and their experience invisible. Yet Perechodnik recognizes these mechanisms and is able to face up to them. He turns out to be not only a competent participant in Polish culture, reaching for Romantic tradition, but also an astute critic of it, especially concerning the ideas of the innocence of the nation and the associated social rituals that are established in Romantic poetry. Irony brings out symbolic violence.<sup>11</sup> It is no longer Poles looking at a Jew, seeing him through his subordination in the way that they want to see him, and seeing themselves in a picture that suits them – now it is they who are being watched. They must face up to the truth about them spoken from the perspective of the Polish collective that is not in power. From being an involuntary tool serving to allow the dominant group to reassurance in its feeling of innocence over the “live corpse” that “says nothing, bothers no one and no one dreams of,” Perechodnik becomes a partner. He enters into the debate with Polish culture as an equal participant in it.

The text of *Confession* and Perechodnik's ironic strategies allow us to understand the experiences of the survivors who lived under the pressure of the Polish majority. An example and emblem of their fate might be Marianna Ramotowska, one of few to have survived the pogrom in Radziłów. The portrait of her from Anna Bikont's book *My z Jedwabnego* (“We from Jedwabne”) is striking. Ramotowska is without doubt one of the most important interviewees, and yet also gives the impression of a figure who retreats and hides away, or in fact disappears. She renounces her own voice. Her story is told by her husband, who rescued her when she was still Rachela Finkelsztejn. She herself barely speaks. She asks people not to talk too much. She does not hear questions, because they make her fearful, does not recognize people whom she certainly once knew, does not stay in touch with family members, does not want to remember Jewish customs or speak of them, although her husband recalls that for several years after the war they secretly observed kosher, but she made him swear never to mention it. Bikont tells, “When I asked Ramatowska various questions, she replied with the same few issues which she repeated right to the end of the meeting, like a mantra, at the same time weeping. One of these sentences was ‘Mother Stasinka must have been sure I was worth something’” (Bikont 2004: 62). After the war, Marianna Ramotowska testified on behalf of the murderers in court. Her husband explains how they managed to survive the 1950s, the time of civil war in the Łomża region. “That was why no one was sentenced, because we had to protect them” (64). When, during an argument, he spoke aloud of what had happened in Radziłów, the answer that came back was “Perhaps better not speak up with that truth” (63).

---

<sup>11</sup> I use the term “symbolic violence” as understood by Pierre Bourdieu. For him, the discriminators and those discriminated against are connected by the same ideas and practices, in which they remain immersed to the extent that comprehending their own situation from an external perspective is inaccessible. As a result, the victims of discrimination also participate in the reproduction of discrimination and its conditions. By gathering distance and irony, Perechodnik breaks this monopoly. See Bourdieu, Pierre, *Masculine Domination* (trans. Richard Nice), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

## The obligation of gratitude and its paradox

The passage quoted earlier about Miss Lidia, the dentist who treated Perechodnik for free, contains the characteristic sentence “I feel a deep gratitude to Miss Lidia that she received me so kindly, but I cannot forget a few facts testifying to her character.” In *Confession*, gratitude often comes with this type of reservation, qualified in a certain way.

The attitude of Jews hiding out to those who helped them is an extremely difficult one from a psychological point of view. The sense of gratitude, pressure of discriminatory cultural models, its rituals and anti-Semitic stereotypes, and finally the complications that are an inseparable part of interpersonal relations – all of this overlaps, forming a knot that is hard to unravel. This is something that Perechodnik tries to analyse and discuss.

In a late entry addressed to his wife Anka, he declares:

You see, life is made up of small everyday episodes. You can't remember the whole time that someone is saving your life, but you also have to remember the little things they do to bother you. After a while, after you leave that person, you forget about the bothering, and are just left with a sense of profound gratitude for saving your life. The best proof is Sewek. I erased the portrait of Franek's wife based on his description. When I read it to him today he's outraged, saying that it's not true. He says that Franek's wife is a truly decent woman, explaining that the bothering came from the fact that she was scared herself, but basically she's the best woman in the world. And anyway, she didn't poison his life at all, she's a lovely woman. And Sewek is right to say that. It is thanks to her that he's alive, only thanks to her help. He's forgotten about the little episodes and remembers the main event: she saved his life, his and other Jews. (260)

And who was Franek's wife, and what image emerged from Sewek's account after leaving her home?

Daily, she told the people who were in hiding about the coming blockades of houses, pitied them, and whined that they would have to go out into the street, where they would surely be killed right away. Determined, she knelt before the holy picture, loudly recited her prayer, and struck the floor with her forehead. After finishing her prayers she said, “Let it happen what may happen. It can't be helped! Please stay here one more day”...She repeated this story every day. [At night she woke them up and told them to get dressed quickly and be on the alert, as she thought the gendarmes were in the yard. She kept them there dressed until she her eyelids started shutting and she fell asleep, and then the Jews could go back to bed too.] (161)

The description is longer, and rich in such scenes. “Of course, these were stage-managed scenes,” Perechodnik acknowledges (211). He also tells of when Sewek left Franek's wife and how he overpaid for her services. He could not protest, for fear of burning bridges: every Polish home which might offer him protection could save his life.

It is obvious that hiding Jews had a cost. That the hosts took risks. That life under one roof must have caused conflicts. But something more comes out of Perechodnik's account. Hostile behavior and what we class as help form a continuum for him. Although compared with rescue, everything else is immaterial, and this is spoken of many times in *Confession*, in certain situations this fundamental difference seems to be blurred. The pressure of the norm that is exclusion of Jews can be so strong that it is hard to tell the “righteous” and the “unrighteous” apart. Franek's wife saves Sewek, but simultaneously

robs him. Admittedly only partially, and not of everything, which the context might suggest to be a favor, but still.<sup>12</sup> Her behavior is dangerously close to that of the people whom Perechodnik sums up with the ironic statement: “They took all the Jews’ money and valuables, but they left the Jews themselves on the square...they could have led them to the gendarmerie, but they set them free. What decent people” (142). Many times, he mentions the hosts who conceal escapees for as long as they can make money out of them.<sup>13</sup>

The situation is further complicated by the fact that help is given by people who often see the excluding stereotypes as the norm. Examples might be Miss Lidia or Bujalski. Help therefore comes together with a set of discriminatory behaviors. The gulf dividing the righteous from the hostile environment is reduced this time, which increases the sense that anti-Semitism is the norm from which for unclear reasons an exception has been made. The mixture of fury and gratitude of rescued Jews, who encounter the instincts of human goodness set against hostility and often bestiality, is depicted by the event from the liquidation in Otwock described by Perechodnik.

Around the ghetto there gathered a crowd:

*[By the fence stands Zygmunt Wolfowicz. He has an aching heart.]* The Germans took his family away; then the Poles took all of his property. Is he saying this? Is this from his own lips? “You wait! I will live to see the end of you, bandits. Yes, I will see it as I will see the end of the Germans!” He is yelling at those hyenas, jackals, waiting patiently all day in order to rob even the corpses. Finally Wolfowicz walks away, but the mob is dissatisfied. A Jew has abused them, told them “a falsehood” to their faces; it is necessary to find an earthly justice that would punish them. Just then two German soldiers approach; one of them even understands Polish. The mob, indignant over the impudence, turns to them for justice. A Jew dares to say that he will live to see the end of their Germans, or their end, the end of such decent people. “Hand over this Jews!” I approach just then. Everyone is pointing their hands at me. “That’s the one who said it!” The soldier takes out the pistol. “Did you say it, or didn’t you?” My solemn oath that someone else said that doesn’t help. The German does not believe me at all, his eyes glint with malice, he will shoot me momentarily... Just then some poor woman speaks out. This is not the one; the other one did not have glasses and was taller. Others contradict her...He lets me live...I don’t know whether to thank God or that old woman who saved me or whether to curse those who knowingly wanted to have me killed. (57-58)

In spite of everything, Sewek defends Franek’s wife and sees her portrait as damaging. Perechodnik himself excuses her, saying that years later bad memories will give way to “profound gratitude for saving a life.” And yet he meticulously describes what he has experienced, observed and felt. His lack of acceptance of the pact of silence imposed by the majority means that he does not want to stay quiet even when he himself feels that he is coming close to disloyalty. He is determined to state everything until the end.

<sup>12</sup> Perechodnik found himself in a similar situation at the home of Miss Hela, who in addition to collecting rent, also made money buying food (*Am I a Murderer?*, 201-202).

<sup>13</sup> And it is not only he who does. Such cases are referred to by many testimonies, from Henryk Grynberg to Jan T. Gross.



The subordination rituals that come out of *Confession* cast a shadow on the loyalty instincts of those who are saved. They appropriate them and change their meaning, using them as one more element of blackmail that is meant to enforce obedience. In Poland the tendency is to look at the fates of the Jews from the point of view of how they bear testimony to Polish society and whether this might not be harmful. If the words of a Jew betray ingratitude, the social norm dictates that they be put down to his Jewishness and used to discredit what he says. The ungrateful Jew who left nothing for safekeeping can easily become the ungrateful Jew who defames the innocent or even good-doers. And all this so that Polish culture can retain a conviction of the nation's innocence and authority over the discriminated minority.

In this too, Perechodnik swears obedience. The "local climate" was something to which he could not agree. Polish culture dictated terms to Jews. Participation in the community proved to be a privilege that stuck in the throat.

*Translation: Benjamin Koschalka*