

Sylvia Majdosz

„I come from Krochmalna Street"... About Bogdan Wojdowski's work

Bogdan Wojdowski (born in 1930 in Warsaw, died there in 1994) is one of the greatest Polish writers of Jewish descent, the author of the world famous autobiographical novel about the Holocaust in Warsaw ghetto, entitled *Chleb rzucony umarłym* (1971) and other prose works, such as: *Wakacje Hioba* (1962), *Konotop* (1966), *Mały człowieczek, nieme ptaszę, klatka i świat. Opowiadania zza muru* (1975), *Krzywe drogi* (1987). His novel *Po tamtej stronie* was published posthumously (1997).

In my research considerations, Wojdowski seems to be the writer of one place - Warsaw and a predominant issue of the Holocaust of Polish Jews. His prose works are characterized by a collision of the carefully and critically depicted realities of the life in war and post-war Poland with the ubiquitous topic of death. It is a prose affected by pessimism of a person miraculously saved from the Holocaust, whose life was marked by the mission of giving a testimony about it to future generations. Wojdowski's prose is characterised like the work of his contemporary Henryk Grynberg, by the sense of responsibility in documenting the Holocaust, and tells the story of survivors of the former Central European Jewish diaspora scattered around Poland and the whole world, their everyday difficult struggles with life, especially in traumatized, often anti-Semitic Polish society.

Wojdowski creates "bitter pamphlets" on Polish society of the Polish People's Republic period. In my dissertation, I pay attention to his realistic-satirical images of the life of the Polish province at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, which are distinguished by a distinctness of the subject matter from the main issue of this writer's work, which is the Holocaust. They prove that Wojdowski was an ethos writer, aware of the great significance that art, especially literature, had in Poland.

Wojdowski's literary creativity has survived to this day one monograph. It is the book of dr Alina Molisak from the University of Warsaw entitled *Judaizm jako los. Rzecz o Bogdanie Wojdowskim* (Warsaw 2004). The researcher characterized the writer's literary output in it.. She paid particular attention to his most famous works on biblical, historical and ghetto themes and the ones representing the post-war realism from the period of "little stabilization". This work contributes a lot to the research on the representation of the Holocaust. The author does not, however, discuss Wojdowski's other writings achievements in more detail like : literary criticism, reportage, essay writing and autobiography (above all so far unpublished diaries).

The premise of my dissertation is to analyse the whole Wojdowski's literary output, and especially to fill the existing gaps and omissions in the writer's pioneering monograph. In addition, twelve years after the publication of dr. Molisak's book, Wojdowski's work can also be viewed through the prism of research methods other than those which she applied.

Therefore, I have made use of the *geopoetics* and *phenomenology* of the place understood as *genius loci*, which is Warsaw for Wojdowski, being the place of action and the background of most of his works. This makes him a "Warsaw writer" alongside with such authors as: Bolesław Prus, Izaak Bashevis Singer, Leopold Tyrmand, Tadeusz Konwicki, Marek Hłasko, Marek Nowakowski, Jan

As I have mentioned, the research on literary texts on the representation of the Holocaust since the publication of Dr. Molisak's work has expanded significantly, and the new approaches to this issue have also appeared, which makes it possible to extend the existing interpretations of Wojdowski's texts with new aspects. The starting point for my considerations in the first chapter of my dissertation, which I devoted to the war and the experience of the Holocaust in the works of Bogdan Wojdowski, was edited by Sławomir Buryła, Dorota Krawczyńska and Jacek Leociak. The monograph *Polish literature on the Holocaust (1939- 1968) Literatura polska wobec Zagłady (1939–1968)*, where in the chapter *Proza* the authors suggested the order of topics around which Polish literature focuses on the Holocaust.

They are: "exclusion – existence and topography" (ghetto, camp, Aryan side) "objectification and the limits of humanity"; living in hiding" (Polish-Jewish relations, plunder of property, denunciation, help); "dilemmas of survivors" (the sense of uprooting, questions about identity, the sense of guilt); "questions posed to literature" (the problems of representation, adequacy and inadequacy of the traditional means of expression); "the mission of literature" – literature as a testimony; questions posed to culture (art and culture criticism); "reflection on anti-semitism"; "questions about God"; "the reflection on the essence of the Holocaust"; "narrative strategies" (dual perspective: child / adult, a fragment and small narrative, autobiography, the types of document); "dilemmas of memory" (Polish and Jewish memory of the Holocaust, the uniqueness of Jewish experience, being a Jew after the Holocaust. I have also taken into account the suggestions to extend the theme of the Holocaust to other topics indicated by Sławomir Buryła in his latest publications. They are the following: "Jewish gold" and Jewish property, Janusz Korczak, "the quarrel with God", "Aryan papers", "good surname", "good look", "wall", dichotomy of "this and that side".

Almost all of the issues and problems mentioned by the researchers appear in Wojdowski's prose work on the subject of the Holocaust – in the stories: *Naga ziemia*, *Pascha*, *Krzywe drogi*, *Stary Doktor*, *Mały człowieczek*, *nieme ptaszę*, *klatka i świat*; in the novels *Chleb rzucony umarłym*, *Tamta strona*, in the essays *Judaizm jako los* and *List do pisarzy pokolenia Shoah*, and they return many times on the pages of the intimate writer's diary.

This part of my dissertation focuses on the most important issues of Wojdowski's writing, whose interpretation is expanded to include the context of the most representative literary works of the writers dealing with the war and holocaust theme (e.g. Tadeusz Borowski, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Henryk Grynberg). Wojdowski in his war stories forms part of the trend initiated by Tadeusz Konwicki in the novel *Rojsty*, which exposes the heroism of war, known for its romantic traditions. I interpret Wojdowski's war-related works as a multi-voice narrative revealing the cruelty of war and depicting the fate of an individual pushed into its abyss, condemned to losing the fight for their survival, which turns out to be only the apparent existence in the world of devalued values. A part of the chapter ("*Chleb rzucony umarłym*" – *literacki powrót na ulicę Krochmalną*") is devoted to Wojdowski's *magnum opus*, that is the novel *Chleb rzucony umarłym*. In my research assumptions which I have made, along with cultural and anthropological methods (experience category), there also appear, as I have mentioned, geopoetics. It is helpful to me in analyzing the space of the Warsaw Ghetto and the whole Warsaw - the "city after the Holocaust", a place mutilated and marked by "emptiness" after the murder of Jewish inhabitants. Geopoetics enables me to study a literary text through the category of city identity, while the capital of Poland and Warsaw ghetto occupy an important place in the traditions of contemporary literature.

I make the research hypothesis that the space in Wojdowski's literary works is not universal. The writer was strongly attached to his hometown, which he did not leave until his death. The ghetto, which he described in his works, is a concrete place in Warsaw, inscribed in the local topography. It was also the space with which he identified himself as a human. Alina Molisak quotes sentences from his diary several times in her notes about the writer: "I was born on another street. Last year I found in documents [...] that the German authorities decided to burn Krochmalna Street, because Krochmalna Street was the largest concentration of typhus and misery". In an interview in Polish Radio, the researcher said: "Bogdan Wojdowski writes many times in his diary that he is from Krochmalna Street, i.e. the street where they lived during their stay in the Warsaw Ghetto. Not from the ambience of writers and artists [...] but from Krochmalna Street. And this is extremely important to him."

In second chapter of my dissertation, entitled „Gorzki pamflet. Proza Bogdana Wojdowskiego wobec rzeczywistości PRL-u”, (*Bitter pamphlet. In the face of the reality*) I present Wojdowski's literary output related to rural-suburban themes, rooted in the tradition of "small realism", characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s prose.

Although Wojdowski, in his readers' consciousness, primarily exists as the author of the texts on the Holocaust, he occupies an important and separate place among Polish realists of that period, next to Marek Nowakowski, Kazimierz Orłoś and Kornel Filipowicz. Wojdowski, as I have mentioned, took the writer's social responsibilities seriously, which he also meant as exposing the flaws and the vices of the society in which he lived every day. The works such as *Konotop*, *Maniuś Bany* and part of the debut short story collection and *Wakacje Hioba* are a literary guide around Poland of real socialism. In this part of my work, I interpret this collection of works in the context of the literary prose tradition of "little stabilization". It is an attempt to include it in the trend of realism, which was popular in the generation of „Współczesności” ("Contemporary"), about the reporting genealogy of the times of socialist realism, when the literary writing of many of them began. Wojdowski's journalistic juvenilia, which he published in the press of those Times (*Wieś, Przegląd Kulturalny, Życie Literackie*) is a kind of writing laboratory and the source of later inspiration (journalistic experience has a significant impact on the genesis of the work entitled *Konotop*, which by means of its title, refers to Wojdowski's early article on so-called "field work").

Another issue that I discuss in the fifth chapter of my work (*Critic, journalist and editor of "Masada"*) is essay writing, criticism and Wojdowski's editorial activity. Despite the publication of two collections of his essay texts and reviews (*Próba bez kostiumu* issued in 1966 and the *Mit Szigalewa* from 1982), they have not been discussed so far (except for the program essay-manifesto *Judaizm jako los*, which Alina Molisak, Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany and Anna M. Szczepan-Wojnarska wrote about Wojdowski was involved in various forms and genres of cultural journalism and critical literary writing since the beginning of his work, for example because of his work in editing several magazines (including *Wieś, Przegląd Kulturalny, Życie Literackie* and *Współczesność*). Essay writing, literary and theater reviews were also, along with short prose forms, genres of writing which he most willingly and most often wrote.

They deserve to be described, analysed and evaluated. In this chapter I have also presented the characteristics of the foundation and the magazine called *Masada*, founded in the late 80s of the XX century by Wojdowski. This pioneering undertaking was supposed to be a place of presentation and promotion of the broadly understood Jewish culture. His

mission was also to unite the Jewish community living in Poland, Israel and other countries. *Masada* was expected to be a forum for a discussion on contemporary phenomena of the Jewish culture in the world. The initiator's intention was also to overcome mutual Polish and Jewish stereotypes and to commemorate Holocaust victims. The first issue of *Masada*, which appeared in 1991, was unfortunately its the only one, relevant to a wider understanding of this important episode of creative biography.

Wojdowski for many years wrote, although with long breaks and irregularly, a diary that has not been widely discussed yet. It did not appear in print, despite repeated announcements. It is an extensive manuscript, worth a thorough analysis. Due to the specific material form (Wojdowski handwrote it in separate notebooks), it requires the use of appropriate methods typical of text genetics and writing anthropology. Thanks to the courtesy of Alina Molisak and Wiesław Uchański I have got three notebooks with Wojdowski's manuscripts and fragments of the journal in an electronic form. Many valuable discoveries about the writer's daily life, his views on the political situation in Europe and in the world, the backstage of literary and artistic life which he shared with leading writers of his generation (including Marek Nowakowski, Kazimierz Orłoś, Józef Duriasz, Stanisław Brejdygant) provided me with systematic queries at the National Library in Warsaw, where the Bogdan Wojdowski Archive is currently kept in deposit. In chapter four of the work I have described the fragments of Wojdowski's diary made available to me. I discussed and analyzed its content, which, I hope, could help to deepen the characteristics of the writer's complicated personality, reveal his everyday life, private life and characterize his internal activity (rhythm of feelings and course of thoughts).

My dissertation, devoted to the work of Bogdan Wojdowski, aims to show the author's entire literary output and the impact of his personal experiences on his writing. This could be supplemented by the literary discourse concerning the achievements of this outstanding writer, without whose work Polish literature would be poorer after 1945.

As well as European and American holocaust literature, whose scope and research are international, without the voice of Bogdan Wojdowski expressed in *Chleb rzucony umarłym*, it would be deprived not only of another masterpiece, but also of a valid testimony of the Survivor. My dissertation is designed to show Wojdowski as one of the greatest people of culture, whose influence on the current shape of literature cannot be overestimated. His work has not been shown yet in the literary discourse taking into account Wojdowski's literary output together with the writers with similar biographical and literary experience. The work of

the author of *Konotop* also requires re-discussing and interpreting with the use of Jewish studies.

Review, 13.05.2020 Majdon