

Krzysztof Czyzewski

COME DOWN TO THE HEART OF A CITY

*the past of a dead city was becoming similar
to a very young bride, who at dusk,
with a flush of shame in her cheeks, in rose-scented bed linen,
for the very first time unwraps her nakedness before
a restless lover.*

Stefan Chwin, *Hanemann*

Thinking at the turn of this millennium about the growing number of people living in the cities all around the world, about the cities as magnets and magnifiers, I decided to write about how difficult is to inhabit the city today, in other words – how to live at the center of the city, not in the slums or outskirts. My story is based on inner conversations I had with some writers and their books rooted in the post-holocaust, post-communist and post-modern landscape of Central Europe.

A Trip To Gdańsk

Targ Rybny (The Fish Market) in Gdansk was the place where I had made an appointment with the author of the famous novel *Weiser Dawidek*, Pawel Huelle. I set off from Suwalki to Warsaw, and then straight to Gdansk. Although the map seemed to indicate otherwise, that was faster and more comfortable. One could say "straight from Suwalki to Warsaw", one could say "straight from Warsaw to Gdansk", but anyone who says "straight from Suwałki to Gdansk" runs into risk of ironic remarks of those who have already experienced the trip.

The train from Warsaw hurried like a wind as if it had remembered the old beaten track running along the river Vistula, which certain political surrealists had tried to cut across with barriers, as Giorgio de Chirco had cut across his paintings with shadows.

In Gdańsk it turned out to be difficult to find Targ Rybny. I asked passing women the way since I was sure they had been doing their shopping there for years. They heard something, they knew it was somewhere here, in the center, but they could not remember. The young shrugged their shoulders. Finally an old man, whom my question made happy, almost walked me to the very place. The asphalted square on a bank of the Motława river was covered with cars. There were no booths, no fishing boats sailing towards the bank, no life. Only the dead river, dead buildings on the other bank - some remnants of old mills, old workshops... On this side of the river there was a small pub we decided to have coffee in. "This city's backbone is broken, says Pawel, and just like a convalescent - it is alive, but unable to get back on its feet."

I knew Gdansk from the books: at first by Günter Grass, later on by Pawel Huelle and Stefan Chwin. There was of course still another Gdansk, the one of holidays at the sea and the one from the period of "Solidarity". That was however too little to unravel the mystery of the city itself, which seemed to be alien and unintelligible. It was the books that have rediscovered Gdansk for me, that have made the city become part of me. The books, full of German street names, German surnames, Jewish eccentrics, Eastern deportees, Ukrainians, Lithuanians... - it was those books that have got me, a Pole living at the beginning of the 21st century, to feel

indigenous to this city, to feel this city is one of the organs of that homeland that I can perceive as mine.

It also seemed to me that since books like that mature, together with me, that must be the fruit of a certain growing up and maturation of the whole organism of our homeland. I imagined Gdansk getting wealthy, getting thick inside and absorbing its content, I thought about Erich Schultz from Stefan Chwin's novel who once lived at 14 Lessingstrasse, who while fleeing from "the eastern beasts" at the end of the Second World War in fury set to destroying all the wealth of his home: "he opened the cupboard by the window to chuck out the plates and bowls, fragile china was crushed under his heels, (...) he was upsetting the chairs, cutting the armchairs' backs, (...) he was crushing the mahogany ornaments over the dresser's glass, he was smashing the crystal decorations of the stand, was breaking the little columns at the front of the chest of drawers. (...) "We are going to leave them nothing, nothing!" - and he was trampling his shirts made of white cloth, scattered around the chiffonier, as if he had wanted to squash some invisible vermin, which - he could already see it - was breeding in the stitches of the wristbands and collars."

But still, the very fact of the books' existence does not influence directly the reality of the city, the meetings of the municipal council, or the day-to-day life of the modern inhabitants of Gdansk. From lifeless Targ Rybny we went to a bookshop to look for Pawel's latest book. Young girls, shop assistants in the bookshop, did not have the slightest idea who the man who was asking for the books by a famous Gdansk writer is. I started to worry that I would find no link connecting my books and my Gdansk initiation with the daily life of the city.

That afternoon, in Krystyna and Stefan Chwins' home we talked about the echoes of *Hanemann* in Gdansk. I learned about people who, keeping the book in hand, looked for Hanemann's house in modern Grottger Street (former Lessingstrasse); I also learned about teachers who prepared special Gdansk lessons based on *Hanemann*, or about a family influenced by the book, digging their garden in search of old things. For Stefan, one discovery was of special symbolic significance: an old Gdansk ink bottle, sealed, with ink you can still write with inside. There is some fermentation, then. You can call it nothing, but this is how long run processes start.

There are still some more impressions I have preserved in my memory from the trip: in Pawel Huelle's home library, the most prominent piece is Francis Joseph's photograph; at the Chwins place we talked about Bosnia, about a trip to Sarajevo, which we would maybe undertake together; I met some Ukrainians, who represent a new scent here. (I remembered from Stefan Chwin's novel how all that had changed since into the house at 17 Grottger St., Hanka, a Ukrainian, moved..."On the hanger's pegs by the dresser, there appeared a plait of garlic and a bunch of herbs of gray-bluish leaves, and by the window a bunch of brown seeds."). One may also trace the footsteps of Alexander Jurewicz, another important writer living in Gdansk, who as a child after being forced out of Lida today in Belarus, wandered with his parents in Silesia before they all had settled here; or the footsteps of Selim Chazbijewicz, a descendant of Lithuanian Tatars, born here soon after his parents left Vilnius... These two cities seem to share similar history, on the basis of which modern Lithuanians, Poles, Germans, Jews could explain a lot to one another.

I could as well start our talk with the description of a trip to Ivano-Frankivsk in Ukraine, or rather to Stanislavov, as Jurij Andruhovich keeps calling his city, being unable to get accustomed to the change introduced in the 60s. It is also a city with a broken backbone, "it almost does not exist", however, it was right there where the famous literary-artistic group Bu-Ba-Bu was established and operated, it is right there where two periodicals of young Ukrainian avant-garde

are currently published. Just think, a small town, where "the main characters of Joseph Roth used to stop on their way to New York to have another housemaid." It seems to me that the story of the trip to Gdansk after having been completed with the trip to Stanislavov, contains many traces characteristic of our Central European character, which it is worthwhile to ponder upon.

A New Heritage

Among new trends taking nowadays their birth in Central European artists' studios, a change of attitude towards cultural heritage constitutes a very important one. Maybe the most important is not the fact that the attitude itself is changing, that it becomes different. We should rather speak about a new heritage, about its new sources, which are currently discovered and recovered after having been completely forgotten. It is not the reference to the Soviet period, to the times of the small stabilization, to the Second World War, to the independence between the wars that is becoming most important. What is important is getting closer to still thicker layers of the past time we have not experienced ourselves, getting closer - let us use a notion by Polish essayist born in today Ukraine Jerzy Stempowski - to the "old civilization" that had existed before Gavrilo Princip fired his gun in Sarajevo in 1914. Naturally, the end of that civilization did not come about in a day, especially in the places situated far away from the centers of new state organisms, in the borderlands, where civilization survived for some time. Andruhovich has signaled out 1939 as the date of Stanislavov's apocalypse. Gdansk's apocalypse in Chwin's story took place in 1945. Nowadays it is still possible to find lone wolves, who, once raised in the circle of the old civilization, are not able to find a place for themselves at all in the world designed anew according to the principles of nationalist and communist ideologies.

What is taking place is coming deep down. Although Pawel Huelle's *Weiser Dawidek* was a trip to the world of childhood and the very first initiations, Stefan Chwin's *Hanemann* is actually the exploration of the world which was present in our childhood through incomprehensible mysteries, guarded by different social and political taboos. This world was completely ignored, placed down in the cellar, up in the attic, translated into whispers of adults exchanged aside, in order for the children and spies not to be able to overhear them, the world buried in a garden. It is however not that kind of discovery that Stefan Chwin writes about. In *Hanemann* the things dug out in a garden or found in an attic still exist as if in their natural environment, in the wardrobes of Gdansk townsmen, in full splendor, fragrant and as if living their own lives on touching them. The mystery that was tempting us in childhood is unraveled here. It is however not a return to the idealized world of the past, nor an escape into Utopian myths of Arcadia. All that machinery employed in analyzing the works being an escape into the idealized world of the past is of no use here. It is not the return of an old man to his childhood. The lid has jumped up and through the slit one can see objects shining with the glitter of their existence, people immersed in that and stories penetrating all around. This is not, however, the end of our perception. We are stuck at this slit and we can feel that this is the last glow since apocalypse is near. And it has really come. There is a fire, a panicky runaway, the rip of fabric, the rattle of glass and the bang of barbarians' boots already on the stairs and in the doorway of all the tenements, manor-houses, monasteries, salons, libraries. It has happened. But our story is still continued, we do not close the book. We are at the mysteries of our childhood and our maturation. All of a sudden, in a different way, we start to perceive all that has surrounded us and that we have been living in. It is costly, it requires a change in our attitudes and revaluations. "The hatred for Germans was confronted with the intimate initiation into the Gothic and the world of the things that had remained there after the Germans in Gdansk. Those things were sometimes very beautiful" - said Stefan Chwin in an interview. Andruhovich stated: "Settling there was the easiest, forcing one's way into secession villas, into luxurious, decent constructivist tenements, into one-stored eclectic houses. It was

easiest to grab the furniture, china, dressing rooms covered with walnut, together with night-gowns and slippers, phonographs and records, watches, incomprehensible books... The newcomers did not, however, consider the fact that taking the houses over meant taking responsibility for them."

That is how we start to open our eyes wide, and our story continues. Thus, we are here in modern times, in democracy, in market economy, in the process of European integration... But to be honest, we have found ourselves on the debris of a forgotten civilization which occupies its outskirts and constitutes its subcultures. We can perceive that "we have still got slits in the walls, devastated roofs, trees growing out of the staircases, some remnants of stained-glass windows and marble panels under our feet" (Andruhovich). As we remember Pawel Huelle spoke about a city with a broken backbone. In 1991 Jurij Andruhovich wrote: "Ukraine is not yet living in its own cities." Several years later he added: "Today my expectations are much more pessimistic, and I really doubt the children of my children will be the inhabitants of Ukrainian cities." This is our story, the story of the generation who, on the one hand, is too young to inherit national-communist phobias of our century, but on the other hand, at the moment of the turning-point it was too mature to surrender to the return of those phobias, and also too mature to surrender to the postmodernist erosion and the influence of the market.

This is a story that reaches deeper than our childhood, down to prenatal memory, down to the world of the old civilization, which is, however, a great mystery of our childhood and maturation. That is why we always seek for connections with it, in the same way as we seek for reality. The story stops today, at the suspended question about our identity, at the expression of a sense of lack, which makes us uneasy. Thus, Emperor Francis Joseph in Pawel Huelle's library, the Archduke Ferdinand traveling through Stanislavov on his last way to Sarajevo, recollected with a hand "lazily resting on a cabriolet's door", the treasuries of things, flannel, fabric, silk in a tenement in Lessingstrasse, at present Grottger Street, the history of Weiser Dawidek, a boy who did not go to religion classes and got lost under mysterious circumstances when the Polish People's Republic was passing on to the Gomulka epoch... - all of those are not mere memories, escapes into ideal worlds or longing for the past. This story is an entanglement of vital tensions between the apparently remote past and the present, the story stops halfway, we have not understood everything yet. "The only thing I can do is to continue the story" - the voice of Huelle's book answers himself when he admits that he does not understand, that he is helpless in the face of the mystery. The book itself leaves us with the disentangled mystery.

This story must be continued, its vector apparently points to the past, in fact we need the story to find the way to ourselves in the present, to have prospects for the future. When the lid goes up and we look through the slit into the depths of the old civilization, we look for ourselves for the supportive philosophy. We have found ourselves in the outskirts, among the ruins and the abandoned buildings which once served as an ideal place for our childhood games. And the same mystery is tempting us, we are still the participants of the same journey, when we ask today who we are, when more and more clearly we realize where the keys are and how we can open the gates of our city in order to enter inside and come down to the heart of it.