An Introduction to Marek Hłasko

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Every generation of Polish writers that had to live and create under the communist regime can be described as a “lost generation.” But the generation born in the 1930s was probably the most ill-fated of them all. It was a profoundly tragic generation that also happens to be one of the least well known to Western audiences.

Members of this generation, of which Marek Hłasko was to become the most celebrated icon, lived through World War II as children. They witnessed the unprecedented eruption of evil, experienced fear and brutalization of human relations, from the perspective of passive, helpless victims. Having survived this nightmare, they grew up and made their first attempts at adult life in the stifling, menacing years of Stalinism. Unlike their older colleagues—the generations of Czesław Miłosz, Tadeusz Różewicz, Zbigniew Herbert, or Wisława Szymborska—they lacked any memory of a different reality, knowledge of a different culture capable of sustaining a semblance of faith in history and in humanity. As Hłasko reminisces in *Beautiful Twentysomethings*, during their school years Soviet propaganda and socialist realist drivel were the only reading available and Western authors were practically unknown.

The relative and short-lived liberalization of political and cultural life after Stalin's death seemed to open new opportunities for this generation. The few years in the mid-1950s that constituted the Polish version of Khrushchev's "thaw" did witness a series of brilliant literary debuts. Apart from Marek Hłasko, the group included such names as poets Andrzej Bursa, Stanisław Grochowiak, Jerzy Harasymowicz, and Halina Poświatowska, short story writer Marek Nowakowski, and dramatist Ireneusz Iredyński, to be followed by slightly younger adepts of literary lost-ness, such as the poet, prose writer, and lyricist Edward Stachura and the poet Rafał Wojaczek.

The second half of the 1950s was also a heyday of literary cabarets and politically progressive theater—places like the Students' Satirical Theater (STS) in Warsaw, the Cellar under the Rams in Kraków, or Little Theater Bim-Bom in Gdańsk, led by another generational icon, actor Zbigniew Cybulski. It was a time when jazz came to Poland in a big way, mostly influenced by American "cool," with the leader of the Polish jazz scene Krzysztof Komeda giving it a distinctively local character. New ideas were also transforming Polish cinema, although the creators of what later became known as the "Polish School" of cinematic art—Andrzej Wajda, Kazimierz Kutz, Andrzej Munk, Jerzy Kawalerowicz, and others—belonged to a slightly older generation. Hłasko's contemporaries in film, such as directors Roman Polański or Jerzy Skolimowski, had to wait for their screen debuts until the 1960s.

Many of these people knew one other and collaborated artistically, forming a new bohemian community that also included a fair number of "characters," eccentrics known less for their own artistic creativity than for their wit, unconventional lifestyles, and usually dark, slightly menacing charm, like the rich playboy and aspiring actor Wojciech Frykowski, who would die in Roman Polański's villa at the hands of the Manson gang; the mysterious stonecutter, amateur actor, and prose writer Jan Himilbach; or Jerzy Kosiński, whose literary career would take off only in America.

There was quite a bit of playacting, mystification, and showmanship that characterized both the lives and the work of many members of this generation. They liked to embellish their biographies with invented heroic or scandalous incidents, style their clothes and

demeanor after Western cultural icons (Hłasko's famous photo with ruffled hair and a cigarette dangling from his lips is pure James Dean), and stage little real-life performances to provoke or confuse innocent bystanders. But there was also something dark and extreme in much of their artistic production—a fascination with ugliness and violence, a proclivity to depict the seemingly inevitable debasement of everything noble and lofty in what they saw as a thoroughly corrupt and degraded world. Perhaps prevented from clearly articulating the source of their anger, they lashed out against everything that smacked of normality, convention, and decorum. The setting of their stories is often the milieu of big-city riffraff, the impoverished, perennially drunk, semicriminal world, the last, sad expression of “real life” surviving in the crevices of the socialist Potemkin village. Ireneusz Iredyński spoke for many of his colleagues when he said: “I’m interested in extremes. They are the best reflection of the main tendencies of our time. A certain world is dying right in front of our eyes, our future is obscured.”

The turbulence, brutality, and degradation they depicted in their work often spilled into their lives, as if in order to remain creative and true to themselves they had to imitate the existence of their forlorn protagonists. They wasted themselves in drunkenness, drugs, sexual excess, and run-ins with the law, and there were an unusual number of untimely, tragic, and mysterious deaths among this small group of friends and companions.

Against this backdrop, Marek Hłasko's life looks like a perfect example of his generation's promises, triumphs, and failures. He was born in 1934—the only child of a civil servant father and a mother with artistic and intellectual ambitions. His parents divorced when he was three, and his father died in 1939, a few days after the outbreak of World War II. During the German occupation his mother supported herself and her son by running a food stall in Warsaw, until they lost everything in the failed Warsaw Uprising of 1944. Forced to leave the city with the rest of its civilian population, they moved to Czystochowa, where they witnessed the brutal “liberation” of their country by the Red Army. Later, Hłasko would say that the hunger and terror of the war accounted for what he called “the intellectual

poverty” of his stories. “I simply cannot make up a story that wouldn’t end in death, a catastrophe, a suicide, or prison.”

After typical postwar peregrinations, Hłasko’s mother, her new life companion, and Marek settled down in Wrocław. Undisciplined and aggressive, he was expelled from one school after another, first in Wrocław, and later in Warsaw. For a while he studied at the Warsaw High School of Theater Arts, which trained future backstage professionals but also offered acting workshops and other “creative” subjects. He ended his formal education at sixteen and started earning his living as a truck driver, although he was unable to keep any job for more than a few months.

It appears that from his early years Marek kept some sort of a diary and displayed a writing talent. It is hard to tell, however, what pushed this unruly and poorly educated young man to try his hand as a “professional” writer. But he started writing in earnest in 1951, around the same time he was recruited as a “people’s reporter” for the Communist Party organ *Trybuna Ludu*. He was working on a novel about the tough Warsaw neighborhood of Marymont and sent fragments of his work to Polish writer Bohdan Czeszko. Encouraged by his response and advice, Marek decided to turn the material into several short stories. In 1953, thanks to another writer and a family friend, he received a three-month literary stipend that allowed him to leave his job and spend some time finishing his first pieces. His stories started appearing in Polish newspapers in 1954. His true debut, however, was a collection of short stories, *Pierwszy krok w chmurach* (*A First Step in the Clouds*). Published in 1956, it established both Hłasko’s style and his favorite themes. Written in economic, understated language with minimalist descriptions and terse dialogue, the stories treated seemingly tough and jaded but in fact sensitive, predominantly male, young outsiders trapped in the circle of hopelessness and despair of their gray, disadvantaged existence. They harbor vague dreams of something beautiful and liberating that seems within their reach—usually represented by romantic love for a woman. But the degraded, claustrophobic reality inevitably frustrates those dreams, leaving them even more hopeless and cynical. The title story of the collection tells about an attempt at tender lovemaking by a young couple

in a public park, brutally interrupted by the vulgar jeering of drunken gawkers. At the end, the story leaves the humiliated and disgusted lovers and focuses on their tormentors, who seem in equal measure satisfied and saddened by the lesson of “real life”—the only one they know—they had just taught the young romantics.

This pessimistic picture of the life of the Polish working class, which Hłasko claimed to know from experience, was in direct contradiction to the official communist propaganda. Some critics pointed out that Hłasko exploited the conventions of socialist realist fiction by putting them on their head—that he simply replaced one facile formula with another. While in proscribed socialist realist writing everything was to be good and uplifting, in Hłasko’s world everything had to be bad, relentlessly bad, and discouraging. But after the years of Stalinist cant, this reversal of signs seemed fresh and revelatory, and expressed some form of truth that all suspected but were afraid to call by its name.

In 1955–57, in the heyday of the Polish “liberalization,” Hłasko quickly became a literary celebrity and a symbol of his ascending, rebellious generation. He became a prose editor and columnist in an important political and cultural magazine, *Po Prostu* (*Simply Speaking*), which tried to carry the banner of post-Stalinist “renewal.” A trio of graduating students of the Polish Film Academy in Łódź produced the film *Koniec nocy* (*Night’s End*) based on Hłasko’s screenplay, with Zbigniew Cybulski and Roman Polański playing the main roles. His novella *Ósmy dzień tygodnia* (published in English as *The Eighth Day of the Week*), about a young woman who deliberately destroys her love for a former political prisoner (played, again, by Cybulski), was being adapted for the screen by director Aleksander Ford in an ambitious Polish–West German coproduction with an eye on international distribution. Another novella, *Następny do raju* (available in English as *Next Stop—Paradise*), and a story “Pętla” (“The Noose”) were also being put on screen. Hłasko was treated with fatherly indulgence by political rulers, celebrated by critics as the most talented Polish prose writer, and idolized by the masses for his bohemian, rebellious lifestyle. He was making good money, mainly from his movie contracts, although he continued to live like a poor bohemian artist.

His disheveled good looks made him the object of desire of many women and quite a few men in Polish cultural circles.

But the political skies soon started to darken, and censorship started to tighten again. Publishers, so enthusiastic not long ago, were reluctant to publish his new work, especially *Next Stop—Paradise*, the story of a group of former criminals hauling timber in the mountains on rickety, unsafe rigs (its film version, *Baza ludzi umarłych—The Depot of the Dead*—was given a more optimistic meaning against Hłasko's protests), and *Cmentarze* (available in English as *The Graveyard*), a Kafkaesque story of a loyal Communist Party member who through a series of mishaps ends up expelled from the party and blacklisted, losing his job and his family. *The Eighth Day of the Week* was still in production, but Hłasko hated Ford's prettified version (which would not save the film from a twenty-five-year-long ban in Poland). The signs were clear enough: Hłasko's career, as well as the fate of his whole generation, was again in the hands of political puppet masters. The period of relative creative freedom was coming to an end.

In 1958, still enjoying the support of his colleagues in the Polish Writers' Union, the author received a literary stipend to travel to Paris with a group of Polish writers that included the future Nobel Prize winner Wisława Szymborska. He always claimed that he had every intention of returning to Poland, but he made contact with the Literary Institute in Maisons-Laffitte near Paris, a respected Polish émigré publishing house, and offered it his *Graveyard* and *Next Stop—Paradise* for publication. That almost instantly made him *persona non grata* in Poland. He kept trying to extend his passport, but was rebuked by Polish authorities. He had to return to Poland immediately, facing the prospect of never traveling abroad from then on, or stay abroad with little chance of seeing his country again.

In the meantime, his literary reputation in Poland and his political problems at home attracted the attention of Western publishers and the media. Several of his books were translated and published throughout Europe, and there was talk about new movie deals. Throughout the storm of his first years in the West, Hłasko remained close to the Literary Institute; he published in its periodical, *Kultura*,

and even lived for a while in Maisons-Laffitte. But the attempts by the institute's head, Jerzy Giedroyc to "manage" Hłasko's career in the West proved futile. The Polish author behaved like the public celebrity he believed he was, gave interviews to disreputable publications, hung out with the wrong crowd, drank to excess, got into fights, and wasted money. He quickly antagonized many of his friends and burned a lot of bridges.

In Paris, Hłasko established an unfortunate self-destructive pattern. Having spent his early career navigating the difficult waters of cultural life under communist rule, he was completely unprepared, and also probably unwilling, to navigate the very different but equally treacherous waters of literary life in the West. He believed in his star power and expected to achieve success—by which he meant not only literary recognition, but also money and fame—on the strength of his talent and charisma, without much effort. He refused to master the art of marketing, publicity, and image building. Failing to receive what he thought was his due, he grew angry and contemptuous, eventually ending up marginalized and alone.

Hłasko continued writing and publishing short stories and novellas, but his life, already marked by depression and alcoholism, was clearly falling apart. Its details were also becoming increasingly murky and often contradictory, with much of the gossip probably perpetuated by the author himself. He had to support himself doing menial work. He apparently was imprisoned for disorderly conduct, spent some time in mental institutions, and attempted to commit suicide twice. He traveled to West Germany and Italy, and spent a year in Israel, where he worked, again, as a laborer. His four novellas and several short stories set in Israel, including *Brudne czyny* (*Dirty Deeds*), *Wszyscy byli odwrócen* (*All Backs Were Turned*), *Drugie zabicie psa* (*Killing the Second Dog*), *Nawrócony w Jaffie* (*Converted in Jaffa*), "Opowiem wam o Esther" ("Let Me Tell You about Esther"), and "W dzień śmierci Jego" ("The Day of His Death"), are considered some of his best, and also darkest, among his prose works. (*All Backs Were Turned* and *Killing the Second Dog* are also available in English.) He settled for a while in West Germany, marrying a popular German actress, Sonja Ziemann, who played the heroine of *The Eighth Day of the*

Week, and he entertained some prospects of working on a German movie, but a romantic scandal ended both his marriage and his German artistic plans.

In 1966 he went to America on the invitation of Roman Polański, who was just working on his *Rosemary's Baby*. His acquaintance with Polański and with Krzysztof Komeda, who was composing music to Polański's films, gave him access to Hollywood studios, but the expected new break in his career never materialized. He tried his hand as a Hollywood screenwriter but was discouraged by the lack of production offers. He was approached by CBS, which wanted to try him as a TV series writer, but he apparently failed to follow up on the offer. He continued writing in Polish, and *Kultura* published his series of articles "Letters from America." He was also taking flying lessons and working on his "American" novel about a mysterious pilot from behind the Iron Curtain, published posthumously in 1985 as *Palcie ryż każdego dnia* (*Rice Burners*). But, as before, he had to support himself by hard manual labor and in his free time was visiting Los Angeles bars with his Polish pals Krzysztof Komeda, Wojciech Frykowski, and Polish-born Hollywood photographer Marek Niziński.

In December 1968, Hłasko went with Komeda for a late night walk in the Hollywood hills. They were both seriously drunk, and neither of them was later able, or willing, to explain what really happened. But Komeda ended up unconscious with a bleeding head, at the bottom of a ditch. Hłasko tried to carry him out, but dropped him and tumbled down himself, probably aggravating Komeda's injuries. He eventually managed to get his friend to a hospital, and Komeda quickly recovered. But a few months later he fell ill and went into a coma. A blood clot was discovered in his brain, which might have been related to his fall. Running out of money, Komeda's wife took him back to Poland, where the composer died in April 1969.

Komeda's death devastated Hłasko. It is possible he blamed himself for it. "If Krzysio goes, I will go with him," a friend remembers him saying during Komeda's final illness. He left America for West Germany, talking about plans to start a movie collaboration with his estranged wife. On June 14, 1969, at age thirty-five, he was found dead in his apartment in Wiesbaden with a deadly mixture of alcohol

and sleeping pills in his blood. It is not certain whether it was suicide or an accidental overdose.

Beautiful Twentysomethings, written before Hłasko's American trip and published in 1966 by the Literary Institute, has often been described as the author's attempt at autobiography, as his life credo, as his political and cultural commentary about life under communism, and also as a kind of manifesto of his whole generation. In a sense it is all of the above, but its main value consists in its unique portrayal of the writer's tormented psyche—his dreams, hopes, disappointments, his anger, his particular mixture of self-aggrandizement and self-depreciation. Despite its tone of a picaresque adventure story—with a strong dose of posturing and machismo—it is also a sad tale of decline and failure, of helplessness and loss shared by Hłasko with so many brilliant people of his generation.

Attempting to grasp the factors that shaped him, the narrator moves back and forth between his life in Poland, as a young rebel chafing under the ideological yoke, and his years in the West, as a down-and-out "free man." He reaches back to his horrifying wartime childhood and to his often frustrating literary beginnings. His invariably vitriolic portraits of Polish cultural personalities of the late 1950s—his literary mentors and artistic collaborators—are often unfair but always witty and perceptive. He declares his love for Dostoevsky and for American pulp fiction; he writes about his disappointment with the seemingly liberal *Po Prostu* and about his surprisingly positive reception in the party organ *Trybuna Ludu*. He also comments on the main political event of his generation, a series of protests in 1956 known as the "Polish October," which ushered in a seemingly more liberal communist regime. He declares his conviction that "books are only worth writing after you cross the outermost boundary of shame," and he tells, often in bragging terms, about his drunken escapades and his conflicts with the law in France, West Germany, and Israel. (His claim that he sometimes earned his living as a pimp and a gigolo should probably be taken with a grain of salt.) He notes bitterly that only prominent communist apparatchiks defecting to the West were greeted with open arms, book contracts, and teaching positions, while average, decent defectors were "greeted by years of misery, humiliation,

waiting on a visa: years of emptiness and despair.” He skewers both East Europeans, for their shameless peddling of their victimhood, and gullible Westerners, for their endless reservoirs of compassion, especially when it does not require any sacrifice on their part.

Most importantly, however, *Beautiful Twentysomethings* captures the fundamental paradox of Hłasko’s generation. Tormented and oppressed by the political environment of their youth, they were also, in a sense, its product and its expression. They could not function outside its confines as creative individuals. The world into which they were born both destroyed and inspired them. Those who chose emigration lost not only their favorite subject, but sometimes also the very locus of their existence. They grew silent and resentful, or tried to recreate and relive the familiar oppressiveness, squalor, and paranoia in Paris, New York, Jaffa, or Hollywood. The exercise proved often more deadly than when they were facing communist censorship and secret police.

Hłasko and his generation continue to fascinate just as the period they lived in and described is receding into history. In his native Poland, Hłasko has experienced several posthumous returns, and one seems to be going on right now. The author may be right when he says that “there weren’t any masterpieces made” in his time. His own literary output, as well as the output of many of his colleagues, is often uneven, and there is something sadly fragmentary and unfinished about it. But as Hłasko puts it in *Beautiful Twentysomethings*, they gave “evidence of the powerlessness of a person living in a nightmare who doesn’t have the inner strength to recognize it as such.” They were the first to challenge the monster and carried the scars of combat throughout their short or long lives. Brought up in an all-encompassing lie, they were desperately searching for “truth” and “authenticity” in the darkest, most dangerous regions of experience. Their somber vision and rough poetics purified Polish literary language and imagination, preparing the ground for future generations and future battles.