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MICHAL GLOWINSKI

Czarne sezony [Black Seasons] (Warsaw: OPEN, 1998). pp. 182.

Czarne sezony [Black Seasons] is a compelling first-person narrative about how a Jewish boy who turned five years old in 1939 survived the Nazi occupation of Poland during World War II. That boy, Michal Glowinski (hereafter, G), went on to become one of Poland's leading literary scholars and is currently a professor at the Polish Academy of Sciences' Institute of Literary Studies in Warsaw. It would be vague, but not wrong, to place G in post-war Poland's 'liberal intelligentsia'. In addition to his scholarly work, G has frequently published essays for the non-academic reader in Cracow's *Tygodnik powszechny* (where some portions of this book first appeared) and various literary periodicals, including those of the 'alternative' press (*drugiego obiegu*). These are promising credentials for an author contributing to the crowded genre of memoirs from World War II Poland, and G does not disappoint.

The narrator of *Black Seasons* is unabashedly solipsistic. The historical realities of the period are filtered through the experiences of a child growing up in a perverted world. Those in control of this world wish to kill him for no reason other than his genetic background, and if he makes a mistake or is betrayed, he will die. While contributing to a larger discourse on historical, social, psychological, and philosophical questions emanating from the Holocaust, G rarely engages such questions directly here, except to marvel at how from his perspective so much seemed to be due to pure chance. (An alternative, divine intervention, is a notion which one suspects is alien to G's *Weltanschauung*.) Related is the question which haunts so many survivors, including G: why did I survive, while others did not? Did I deserve it more than the others? Absent a notion of divine grace, the answer to this question is brutally simple: you didn't deserve it more than they did, you were just lucky. The first chapter ends with what could be taken as the credo of this memoirist (p. 20; here and below, all translations are mine):

We survived, my parents survived, I survived. I don't really understand how that happened, I can't fathom how chance worked to benefit us in particular. I am surprised, I am surprised at everything. I am surprised that I am alive ... but I AM alive, I AM, I exist ... And I remember.

Black Seasons consists of twenty free-standing autobiographical fragments or vignettes (the author himself describes them with the formalist term *fabula*), written at different times and for different purposes. Underlying the narration of the book are the following events, reconstructed here from their non-chronological presentation:

- G is born in Pruszków (a suburb of Warsaw about 10 miles to the southwest) in 1934 into a family of culturally-assimilated Jews, the third generation of his family to live in this town.
- G spends September 1939, the month during which the Nazis defeat the Polish army, in Warsaw. After the Nazi occupation takes hold, G's family is confined to a small ghetto district in Pruszków, and then is relocated to the Warsaw ghetto.
- The transports to the Treblinka death camp begin on July 22, 1942. At one point later that summer G's family is brought to the Umschlagplatz and 'selected' for deportation, but they are able to escape at virtually the last minute because G's father secures the help of an acquaintance who is serving in the Jewish police participating in the deportation.
- The family escapes the ghetto (to the 'Aryan side') in January 1943 in a planned (and presumably paid-for) operation. G's father soon goes off to live separately, first in

Warsaw and then to Kielce to find work. In Kielce he is arrested in a random street round-up (*lapanka*) and sent to Germany to a labor camp.

- After several brief stays in various places around Warsaw, G and his mother arrive at a safe haven they had arranged for just after it has burnt down to cinders, leaving them on the street with no prospects. G's mother tells him that they cannot remain together. She finds a job under cover in Otwock (15 miles southeast of Warsaw) working as a housemaid. After further peregrinations in and around Warsaw by himself, G is placed in the beginning of 1944 at an orphanage run by Catholic nuns in Turkowice, far from Warsaw in eastern Poland, near today's border with Ukraine.
- After the war, G's mother comes to Turkowice to retrieve him. Largely as a gesture of gratitude for the shelter provided him by the Catholic orphanage, she lets G be baptised, which he takes as a completely formal act without spiritual significance.
- G and his mother return to Warsaw, where they are eventually joined by G's father on his return from Germany.

Black Seasons begins with G ruminating on his perception as a child of the word 'ghetto', which he overheard as the adults around him discussed 'Will they lock us up in the *ghetto* or not?'. The subtitle of this section 'The word' echos, of course, G's religious training in the orphanage ('In the beginning was the word'). The ghetto of G's imagination was a multi-levelled vehicle with many windows and drawn by horses, which would be fun to ride in while you clambered up and down the stairs from level to level, as it takes you through an unknown world. The irony of this vision is compounded when the adult narrator notes that its model was undoubtedly the horse-drawn hearses the youth had seen in his home town. Then there is a virtual camera pan of the ghetto, described as a colorless chaos (as in Genesis I:2: 'In the beginning the earth was a formless void', rendered in Greek translation as *xaos*). The narration moves forward through several episodes to the family's escape from the ghetto, where a Biblical frame of reference is made explicit: G toys with using the Polish word *exodus* but ends up with *wyjście* [exit, a way out], permitting a play on words: '[we didn't want] to land in a situation with no way out, even though it would in fact be precisely the result of us having made our way out' (p. 42). That is, if the ghetto could be likened to Pharaoh's Egypt, the Aryan side was no Judea.

Those who lived illicitly outside the ghetto were faced with the constant threat of blackmail. At any point, someone, be it a neighbor, a co-worker, or a complete stranger, could announce that he knows you are a Jew and he will turn you in. Perhaps the height of G's feeling of vulnerability was when a stranger knocked on their garret apartment door (while they were on the Aryan side) and announced that he knew they were Jews and would report them unless he *was* paid. This is a key episode in the book: G, along with his mother and aunt, were sure that they would soon be dead (the title of the book is derived from the title of this chapter, *Czarna godzina* [Black hour], an idiom meaning a difficult time of bad fortune and suffering). The extortioner was to wait in their apartment and keep G and his mother as hostages, while his aunt went out to retrieve some valuables to pay him off. At one point, when G was fumbling absent-mindedly with a chess set, the 'visitor' suggested that they play. Their chess game was interrupted by his aunt's return, and the man was successfully silenced. G sees this episode as a metaphoric encounter with death incarnate, in this case represented not by a skeleton with a scythe, but rather by a young elegantly-dressed man with a roguishly trimmed moustache. This time, G is able to avoid the ultimate checkmate.

A recurring theme is G's relationship with his mother, natural enough for a child that age. During the occupation, G. was alternately cared for by his mother and separated from her, several

times being placed in orphanages. There is a poignant scene in which G takes temporary refuge in a convent in Otwock, the town in which his mother was living and working. He did not know she was there; she heard that he had been placed there, but could not acknowledge her relationship to him, because she had arranged that he be documented as an orphan. By chance (!) the nuns took their charges on a recreational outing to the house where G's mother was working, presumably because it was a scenic manor on the edge of town. G's mother made sure she could see him during the visit, while remaining concealed herself, because surely a spontaneous reaction on his part would give him away. The story becomes all the more moving when we hear that, as was typical of survivors, G's mother spoke of the war years with reluctance, and he heard only many years later of her pain in not being able to approach him during this period of separation.

G comments at several points on the importance of one's *wyglad* [physiognomy, facial features]. Your crime is your very existence; look no further. It is a perverted game: you can plead 'innocent' by denying you are Jewish, but then you have accepted the rules of that game and are debating whether they apply to you. Then there are those *whose* physical features rule out denial: with the nose, the eyes, the curly hair, deny who you are and we all know you are lying. In this scenario the game is legitimized as well. In one vignette, G is brought into Warsaw from Otwock by his aunt Maria, who

had what were at that time called 'good features', which was not only a privilege, but a veritable gift from the heavens. Maria had wonderful features, [she was] an attractive blonde who came across as having descended upon the world not into a Jewish merchant family, but into a household of Polish nobility [*szlachecki dworek*]. Unless you knew her well, you would never guess what origin lay behind that impeccable Slavic beauty (pp. 91-92).

In order to make a phone call (not a trivial task), Aunt Maria had to leave G in a bakery for fifteen minutes. As the boy waited, he realized that he had become the center of attention of those working there. 'A Jew' (*Zydek*), said one, 'definitely a Jew'. 'Not her, for sure, but he's a Jew', replied another. 'She dumped him on us', said a third. The discussion intensified and the deliberations extended to more and more people. 'We have to tell the police', the boy began to hear more and more frequently. G is not one to see atavistic anti-Semitism everywhere, and notes the complexity of the position of these women: what if they are caught with him, what to do if he was simply abandoned there? Harboring or rendering aid to Jews in occupied Poland was, of course, punishable by death. These women had their own families to care for, and there was little distinction between helping Jews and being suspected of helping them. They began to ask G questions, to which he gave monosyllabic answers as his mind raced to ensure that he did not give himself away. Suddenly Aunt Maria returned, quickly realized the situation, and to everyone's relief ushered him out into the street.

The book ends with three chapters: 'It was I who killed Jesus Christ', 'Books I didn't read when I was young', and 'Germans are people too'. Three Polish brothers beat up G (this was AFTER the war), justifying it as the result of his having 'killed Jesus Christ'. G links this not with some anti-Semitism endemic to the Polish people, Polish culture or the Catholic Church, but with the message of a particular local priest. He cites approvingly the words of Józef Tischner, a well-known priest and intellectual in Cracow: 'I have never in my life met *anyone* who lost his faith after reading Marx and Lenin, but I have met many who have lost it after meeting their parish priest' (p. 155). When asked by 'a well-known Cracow literary periodical' as part of a cycle to comment on his favorite reading as a youth, he had to decline, and here this national figure of letters describes how his youth was wasted in a virtual intellectual stupor and in mental

‘vegetation’. He could not call himself a normal reader of books until he was 15, when he began to use the local library in Pruszków with some regularity. *Black Seasons* ends with G writing about his feelings toward the German people. It is difficult for him, even as a lover of Bach and of much German literature, not to see the German as an inexorable executioner who wants to kill him on sight for no reason. G notes that his attitude may have been complicated by the anti-German propaganda which saturated the Polish People's Republic. The reader doubts that this distaste toward Germans (based on a primordial fear) is an attitude that G is proud of, but he does not disown it either. What is sad, of course, is that a Gresham's law of morality prevails. In G's dehumanizing the German in the way the German dehumanized him, bad morals drive out the good. Of course Germans are people too, G concludes, ‘but just like everybody else, and genuinely so? I still cannot but have my doubts.’ (p. 182).

The narrator of *Black Seasons* is an openly self-conscious one. G observes in a jacket note that he could not sit down to write of his experiences for a half-century: he was prepared neither psychologically nor as a writer to do so. And he remains very much *an* object as well as a subject of the text which eventually resulted. His perceptions, and the struggle facing him in doing his job, are sometimes made explicit, as in the following introduction to a vignette (p. 21):

It is exceedingly difficult for me to begin this story. Not only because doing so reawakens terrors which I would prefer not to come back to, although it is impossible NOT to come back to them. Most of all [it is difficult] because the period of the ghetto – at least up to when the transports began, and thus what had earlier seemed to be the worst imaginable turned into something even worse than THAT, so incredibly bad that there are no words to describe it – is for me a single block of time. I cannot differentiate moments within that period, I can't get a hold on it.

Names and details on time sequence can remain vague, and details are often replaced by ‘I don't know’, ‘I don't recall’, or ‘I will never know’. There is a striking intertextual association here with Miron Białoszewski's *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* [Diary from the Warsaw Uprising] (1970), also replete with such confessions of faulty memory or knowledge. But there is an essential difference. While Białoszewski was quite deliberately trying to deromanticize the 1944 uprising, strip it of its constructed historical aura, and undermine any authoritativeness (although not the veracity) of his own account, G's frequent protestations of ignorance serve to emphasize that events of life-and-death importance for him and his family unfolded before them beyond their knowledge or control. While G's purpose is less political than Białoszewski's, they both shun any association with the heroic.

Black Seasons often comes across as a drama driven by the powerful and ubiquitous tension facing G between life and death (*zycie i smierc*). There is constant reference to his vulnerability. Death could strike not only in a small bakery on the street, but at the *hands* of a neatly turned out man who shows up at the apartment door without cause or warning. And yet we hardly see anyone actually die. And G. himself manages, of course, to elude his pursuer time and time again.

For this reader, there are two particularly haunting images which play on the dialectic dualism of life and death by showing that the extremes intermingle. One image is a passing one early in the book, from the description of the ghetto. A violinist rumored to have *played* in the Warsaw Philharmonic before the war is reduced to begging on the street while playing a fragment of Mendelssohn's (!) Concerto for Violin. Our child narrator sees the emaciated figure in an oversized coat as a skeleton playing the violin, reminiscent of the medieval Christian image of death, only fully clothed and with a violin instead of a scythe (cf. its more presentable incarnation which plays chess). The other image is drawn in a chapter entitled *Misjudeja*, which describes a

woman coming back to Pruszków after the war looking for information about whether anyone in her family had survived. G notes that although she was not that old, she ‘came across as an old woman, destroyed, resembling a witch’, ‘wrinkled and ugly’ but with traces of a ‘Semitic beauty’. The child interpreted ‘Misjudeja’ as the kind of unfamiliar non-Slavic woman's name he had become accustomed to among the nuns (Prudencja, Anuncjata, Petronela, Leontyna, ...). The reader recalls his innocent misinterpretation of the word ‘ghetto’ which began the book. In fact, the woman had been a beauty queen before the war, a winner of the title Miss Judea (parallel to the Miss Polonia contests); her beautiful Jewish features had become her curse.

We have seen the pictures of corpses, the lists of names, the piles of hair and gold teeth, but somehow these figures, still clinging to life, in a sense *defeated*, in a sense not, are more eloquent. Sometimes a chess game with death ends in a draw.

Black Seasons awaits its translator.

GILBERT C. RAPPAPORT
The University of Texas at Austin