

A Translator's Note

I FIRST BECAME ACQUAINTED with Stefan Żeromski's writing in the 1990s, on a day when my Polish travel agent and I were driving out in Warsaw for lunch. As we passed the mid-city bookstore named for the great Bolesław Prus, the car stopped. I was informed that it would not move again until I had run into the store and bought Żeromski's *Popioły* (*Ashes*), a two-volume masterpiece about the Napoleonic wars.

I was hungry. The driver was adamant. I bought the book.

As I crawled through sentences whose author expected an incredible level of general awareness from his audience, it struck me that Żeromski was not the most reader-friendly of novelists. But in *Ashes*, as in *The Homeless*, his passion was incandescent, blazing through the barrier of language. He ruthlessly dissected the very souls of his characters. He abhorred platitudes, loved surprises, and posed enigmas fearlessly. Yet the position of his narrative in relation to the great questions was always clear.

Is war an evil, or a plow that prepares a moribund world for new life? That was the great question in *Ashes*. In *The Homeless*, Żeromski demanded:

Is health an amenity for the fortunate, or do all have a right to it?

What responsibility does each of us bear for the evils that happen to other people?

How do we relate to our families when we cannot accept their way of living, but we cannot forget or replace the sense of origin we share with them?

His answers, as they emerged word by word from the Polish, were often oblique, sometimes cryptic, never trite.

As a lexical exercise, translating *The Homeless* was neither very easy nor extremely difficult. At first both my modern dictionaries and much older

ones offered me definitions that seemed an eighth of a tone off, but when I came across the *Dictionary of the Polish Language* edited by Witold Doroszewski (1958-1969), I found definitions that in most cases fit and illuminated Żeromski's text.

A larger difficulty was the author's refusal to disrupt his narrative with explanations, even when parts of his text were bound to be baffling, especially for readers from other times and places. For example, there were two rather puzzling mentions of fabric. In one, a man delivering a packet of corduroy for a suit to a friend was referred to as a "smuggler." In the other, the hero's sister-in-law, packing for a journey out of Poland, cut her best dresses apart at the seams to sidestep a law against bringing silk garments into Germany. Some research helped to connect and clarify these vignettes with a little information about the highly competitive European textile industry of the time and its tariffs—information not provided by the author.

A letter to the heroine from an unnamed country, written by her brother, opened a more perplexing information gap. The letter writer excitedly described taking a journey by reindeer-drawn sledge through a snowy landscape in deadly cold. Evidently he was in Siberia, but whether voluntarily or as punishment for some crime—and if so, what crime—was left unexplained in the novel. References to Siberia had to be veiled at the time Żeromski was writing because Russia occupied a part of Poland, and Russian censorship forbade mention of exile to the remote penal colonies. What other effects on the novel—what ambiguities, oblique references, or omissions—may have resulted from state-imposed censorship, or self-censorship as a secondary effect of it, are not fully known.

It is a special privilege to translate a novel written under such conditions. Even its gaps have their own eloquence. And the COVID epidemic, which set in not long before I started on the book, put its own stamp on the experience of translating the narrative. As I was working through Dr. Judym's fight with moneyed interests that refused to protect farm workers from malaria, news services were reporting that our meat packing companies would not adjust conditions in their plants to protect employees from the virus. In some quarters, physicians trying to control the epidemic were ignored, their warnings rationalized away, just as Dr. Judym's warnings were waved aside. Żeromski, it seemed, offered a penetrating view of the axes of human behavior—not only greed but nepotism, complacency, and class loyalty among the powerful—that cause history to repeat itself.

Contemporary reality resonated powerfully with the text, reinforcing its meaning and affirming its enduring value.

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