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Stanisław Lem, Holocaust Survivor

Agnieszka Gajewska. *Zagląda i gwiazdy: przeszłość w prozie Stanisława Lema* [The Holocaust and the Stars: The Past in Stanisław Lem's Fiction]. Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz UP, 2016. 242 pp. 30 PLN pbk.

Wojciech Orliński. *Lem: życie nie z tej ziemi* [Lem: Life From Another Planet]. Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne and Wydawnictwo Agora, 2017. 440 pp. 49.90 PLN hc, 39.90 PLN ebook.

Until recently, in the eyes of his readers Stanisław Lem was a writer without a biography, not only in the sense of a book presenting a full account of his life, but also in the sense of actually having a life story of his own. He was certainly a vivid personality, with clearly defined views, a man with a unique appearance and timbre of voice, well known from photographs and tv interviews. His personal life, however, even the image of his own childhood evoked in *Highcastle* (first published in Poland in 1966, English edition 1995), remained strangely vague or, rather, tangible and concrete only within the limits set out by the author himself. The same selectivity in unveiling his past seems characteristic of Lem's interviews, which he gave willingly, especially towards the end of his life. Two of them grew into thick books: Stanisław Beres's *Tako rzecze... Lem* [Thus Spoke... Lem, (1987, 2002)] and Tomasz Fiałkowski's *Świat na krawędzi* [The World on the Edge, 2000].¹ Even Lem's surname contributed to his evasiveness as a living being in the popular imaginary, for it sounds like the pseudonym or nickname of some sf character and is devoid of any national connotations. Numerous puns involving his name can be found in Lem's writing, for instance, suggesting that "LEM" is simply the Lunar Excursion Model from the Apollo program or identifying "Lem" as "Golem." Furthermore, the writer detested traveling, thus limiting his personal contacts with readers and even translators. Last but not least, he composed his books using many different literary genres and navigated with seeming effortless vast expanses of science and philosophy. This was intimidating for many critics and prompted Philip K. Dick to send his famous denunciation to the FBI, claiming that "LEM" was not an individual person but the cryptonym of a writers' collective—all of them communist agents (Orlinski 341). These elements contributed to Lem's transformation into some sort of powerful "electrobrain," disguised in the humble body of a bespectacled man with a childlike face, a high forehead, and a boyish voice.

It is therefore high time to bring Lem back down to earth, to give him—as a man of flesh and blood—history, ethnicity, and a life, particularly in his native country. Paradoxically, until recently German and American readers could learn more about Lem's life than Polish ones, thanks to his

autobiographical essay “Chance and Order” published in 1984 in *The New Yorker*.² Nearly half of the text is devoted to the writer’s Jewish origin, and to how he managed to survive the Second World War, as well as to more general reflections on the Holocaust. Lem never openly discussed this in Poland, at least from a personal perspective. The second part of the essay does not provide any information on his private life, as if nothing truly significant happened after the war. The biographical gaps about the first half of Lem’s life, so important to the writer himself, are the subject of two recent books published in Poland.

Agnieszka Gajewska, a literary scholar from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, was the first to make these important discoveries about Lem’s early life, although she and Wojciech Orliński, a journalist for *Gazeta Wyborcza* [Electoral Newspaper] and author of the screenplay of a recently released Polish television documentary about Lem, were working on their books almost simultaneously and even shared parts of their manuscripts with one another.³ Gajewska’s book is not, strictly speaking, a biography, but concentrates on a reading of the writer’s works through the prism of the first twenty-five years of his life, which were, according to the scholar, absolutely crucial for the understanding of what Lem wrote about and how he did it. Thanks to research in Polish and Ukrainian archives, visits to Lem’s native town Lviv, and conversations with his family, Gajewska manages to reconstruct the writer’s formative past in great detail.⁴ Orliński follows her path in his book, yet he does not refer to archival materials as often as to published memoirs, letters, diaries, and conversations with people who used to know Lem.

Due to the efforts of both biographers, we are provided with a portrait of the extensive Jewish Lehm family, related to the Hescheseles and the Wollners. The multicultural Lviv (then officially Lemberg, and Lwów for the Polish-speaking citizens) of the turn of the twentieth century was ruled by German-speaking Austrians. There the writer’s father, prosperous doctor Samuel Lehm, chose to assimilate into Polish culture by polonizing his own surname and the choice of his son’s name. Stanisław “was the declaration of Polishness,” claims Orliński, (18); the boy’s second name, however, was Germanic—Herman. At the same time doctor Lehm/Lem was “an active member of the Jewish community” (Gajewska 141), and his son, until his secondary school final exams, attended Judaism classes, obtaining very good grades.⁵ This stands in stark contrast to Lem’s own claim: “I knew that my ancestors were Jews, but I knew nothing of the Mosaic faith and, regrettably, nothing at all of Jewish culture” (“Reflections” 4). As Gajewska notes, a father figure is a “constant point of reference in Lem’s reflection on the past, medicine, and ethics” (137), a role model for the characters of old wise doctors and scholars, while his father’s library is an archetype of all old-fashioned libraries in Lem’s writing. The photograph of nine-year-old Stanisław taken by Samuel Lem, whose figure is reflected in the metal button of his son’s school coat, is reproduced in both books under consideration, although only Gajewska pays attention to its symbolic potential.

We learn about Lem's childhood in *Highcastle* where, however, it is meticulously distorted: "The more distant a relative or acquaintance was from Stanisław Lem, the more precisely was he or she described" (Orliński 15). Consequently, we learn the schoolteachers' surnames (Polish, Jewish, and Ukrainian), yet even distant family members have only first names, often in diminutive or incomplete forms, while the parents remain completely nameless. "Throughout most of his life, Lem was unwilling to talk about his parents, most likely because any mention of the simplest of facts, such as his father's first name, would lead him to the discussion of his Jewish roots. And for Stanisław Lem this very subject was an absolute taboo. He never discussed it in public, and actually in private he did not, either" (Orliński 30). Most of his extensive family perished in the Holocaust. Except for Lem and his parents, only his cousin Marian Hemar (Hescheles), a well-known Polish poet, survived (through emigration), as well as Hemar's niece Janka (Janina) Hescheles (Altman), the author of a shocking account of the annihilation of Jews from Lviv, *Oczyma dwunastoletniej dziewczyny* [Through the Eyes of a 12-year-old Girl, 1946], who later became an Israeli chemist and writer. Another relative of Lem's, Seweryn Kahane, survived the war but died in 1946 as one of the first victims of the Kielce pogrom in Poland.

During the German occupation, Stanisław Lem stayed for some time in the ghetto and, like other Lviv Jews, had to wear a white armband with a blue Star of David (Gajewska 112);⁶ later he went into hiding with false documents, fearing every day for his life and witnessing the deaths of others. Although he was a victim of the Holocaust and one of the few survivors (very few Jews survived in Lviv and the Eastern Galicia region), Lem never gave an open testimony about his experience. Similarly to many people of Jewish origin in post-war Poland, including other writers, he decided to adopt the strategy of mimicry and thus to obliterate his past by avoiding any confrontation with his origins and much of his wartime experience.

In reference to Lem's published reminiscences about his childhood and early youth, Orliński suggests that "the writer conceals rather than reveals. What is missing in these recollections is more significant than what is actually mentioned" (15). It is more significant from the perspective of Lem's private life, forever haunted by the trauma of the Holocaust: he was, for instance, tormented by claustrophobia and insomnia, and reluctant about the idea of having a child. And it is also more significant in his writing, which alludes to these gaps in various ways. Gajewska analyzes the latter aspect with particular attention and from various perspectives. She considers almost all of Lem's prose to be a substitute narrative that reveals indirectly what he could not openly discuss for psychological reasons or for fear of a hostile reaction. A further reason was certainly institutionalized censorship in communist Poland, which restricted information about Lviv's past Polishness once the city was incorporated into the Soviet Union after the Second World War, and about the annihilation of Jews, since authentic stories were hardly compatible with the official interpretation of the Holocaust. "What appears in the biographies of the protagonists of his sf works is a veiled reference to the human experience

under the Nazi occupation. This was a significant artistic strategy of Lem's, allowing him to play with censorship, but also providing a way of voicing the overwhelming fear and apprehension haunting someone who was a victim of persecutions and also one of the few surviving witnesses of the crime" (Gajewska 10).

First, however, Lem attempted to depict the war experience realistically. Yet already in his *Hospital of the Transfiguration* (written in 1948, Polish edition 1955, English edition 1988) he uses a mask, disguising the "final solution to the Jewish question" as the Nazi "euthanasia" of the insane, the ghetto as the psychiatric hospital, and disguising Lem, the medical student, as a Polish doctor, Stefan Trzyniecki. Lem claimed that the sequels of this novel, namely *Wśród umarłych* [Among the Dead] and *Powrót* [Return], which followed the guidelines of socialist realism, had been written for the sole purpose of convincing the editors and censors to allow the publication of *Hospital of the Transfiguration*—all three novels were published jointly under the optimistic title *Czas nieutracony* [Time not Lost] in 1955. From the 1960s on, the author never agreed to have the two added books published again, considering them to be worthless. According to Lem's biographers, however, the real reason might have been different; as Orliński laconically suggests, "he unveiled himself too much in the second volume [Among the Dead]" (69). In it, Stefan Trzyniecki is still an ethnic Pole, yet because of his appearance, he is mistaken for a Jew in the street and, having endured the passers-by's passive hostility, he is later betrayed to the Germans and arrested. Humiliated and beaten, he ends up in a death camp where, miraculously, and against all historical likelihood, he becomes the only survivor from the group with whom he arrived. As a result, "Stefan becomes ... a witness not only to mass murder but also to the process of production, involving the use of human bodies and the transformation of scraps [of victims' clothes, hair, teeth] into useful objects. The voice of the murdered haunts Lem's fiction, as the disembodied wail of the dying lasts much longer than their slow death" (Gajewska 102). This wail, or a voice very much like it, is heard by the protagonists of "Terminus" from the *Tales of Pirx the Pilot* (1968, English ed. 1979), *Return from the Stars* (1961, 1980) and in other sf by Lem.

Fortunately, Stanisław Lem was never sent to a camp, although the odds were very high, and he could simply have been shot in the streets of Lviv. Another character from *Czas nieutracony* works in a German company, the Rohstofffassung, where Lem himself had been employed for a time. In his interviews, the writer claimed that it "retrieved recyclable materials" (Bereś 26). According to other accounts, however, the recycled objects belonged mostly to the victims of the Nazis, and the company owner, Viktor Kremin, a Lviv counterpart of Oskar Schindler, though somewhat more greedy, protected his employees who were mostly Jewish.

It is worth emphasizing that the persecution of the Jews in this region was particularly brutal and that the Nazi occupation here was preceded and followed by the almost equally ruthless Soviet one, a historical context Orliński meticulously reconstructs.⁷ Both he and Gajewska consider Lem's experience

of the pogroms organized by Ukrainian nationalists and Nazi authorities in June and July of 1941—after the Russians were driven out of Lviv and replaced by the Germans—to be of fundamental significance in the writer's life. Before the evacuation of Lviv, Soviet guards shot hundreds of political prisoners—Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews. Afterwards, Brygidki, the central prison, was set on fire. When the Germans first entered the city, more than a thousand Jews were rounded up, taken to the prison, and, having been forced to carry out decomposing bodies, eventually murdered. The Germans brought a camera crew who recorded the events, and then stopped the pogrom.⁸ This decision saved the life of Stanisław Lem who, together with other Lviv Jews, for many hours carried out corpses and witnessed brutality and murder. "The stench of his clothes was so horrible that they had to be burned" (Tomasz Lem 12). Years later, Lem attributed this experience to a fictional character of his, Doctor Rappaport in *His Master's Voice* (1968, English ed. 1983). Both Gajewska and Orliński trace echoes of the massacre in Lviv to scenes in *Eden* (1959, English ed. 1989)—piles of decomposing bodies of the planet's inhabitants—and in *The Invincible* (1964, English ed. 1973)—removing the bodies of the crew from the "Condor" spaceship. Gajewska claims that this way of including one's own traumatic experiences in the narrative in the form of isolated episodes, reminiscent of nightmares and not directly related to the plot, is characteristic of Lem's works.

Echoes of Lem's wartime experience are numerous in his writing, reverberating in key aspects of his work. These include his philosophy of chance and his way of conceptualizing the body, along with the recurring motif of physical deformations; his empathic attitude to thinking machines—those second-class citizens of the cosmic era; his scenes of selection of "useless" robots; the motif of hiding one's true identity or of the mirror that exposes the "bad" look of one's face; and the irrational feeling of guilt in protagonists who were unable to help dying people. All these elements are rooted, according to the authors of the books under consideration, in the writer's personal life, particularly his experience during the Second World War and immediately afterwards, when Lem left Lviv, knowing that he would lose his home town forever, but also later, in the times of political indoctrination, the hypocrisy pervading public life and the surveillance by the communist regime.⁹

Most of Orliński's book, however, concentrates on the reconstruction of Lem's life in Poland after the war. He starts by verifying the date of the writer's family's arrival in Cracow, after repatriation from Lviv (in the summer of 1945, and not 1946, as had been stated in older sources). Orliński describes Lem's medical studies, which he did not enjoy (he agreed to study medicine at the request of his father, who also supported his literary activity) and his participation in Dr. Mieczysław Choynowski's seminar on the philosophy of science. Orliński claims Choynowski to be a model for many mad scientists in Lem's works.¹⁰ He also explores Lem, a staunch atheist, and his contacts with progressive Catholic intellectuals from the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* [Universal Weekly]; the pulp fiction that Lem wrote for money in the 1940s; and the anti-Stalinist satires he read aloud at meetings with friends.

Also important is Orliński's narrative of the difficulties with publishing the ambitious *Hospital of the Transfiguration*, which in turn led to the writing of his first socialist sf novel *Astronaucci* [The Astronauts, 1951], commissioned by the publisher. Lem, who had just married, took the opportunity to earn money by writing short stories and another novel, *Obłok Magellana* [The Magellanic Cloud, 1955], where he created "something like the Internet" and smartphones (Orliński 126). Another major focus of the biography is "the epic entitled 'film adaptations of Lem's works,' which, as we learned over the years, was mostly the source of dissatisfaction for the writer," although it brought him substantial profits (146). One of the problems was that, in socialist economic reality, the royalties from foreign film-makers and publishers had to be collected abroad in person and spent there.¹¹ The necessity to take trips to Prague or Bratislava led to the birth of Stanisław Lem the keen motorist and (irresponsible) driver. The writer spent most of his income from royalties on kits for amateur scientific experiments, mechanical toys, sound systems, and parts for his constantly breaking cars; this is why Lem's life after the war can be described as a "history of unhappy, unrequited love to various machines" (77).

In the post-war decades, Lem and his family regularly went hiking or skiing in Zakopane in the Tatra Mountains (reminding us of the robot-climbers in *Tales of Pírx the Pilot*). The town soon became Lem's favorite writing spot. There, during the late 1950s and the early 1960s, he produced his best works at incredible speed in several week-long writing marathons. (Lem had signed too many contracts with publishers and could barely keep up the pace.) Reading Orliński's reconstruction of Lem's work on *Solaris* (English ed. 1970), *Return from the Stars*, and *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (English ed. 1973), all written in 1960, when Lem was simultaneously having his house built—a difficult task in socialist Poland—it is hard to believe that anything so good could come out of it.

Lem's friendship with other intellectuals is also an important element of Orliński's book ("he was fortunate to meet good authority figures and good friends" [112]). Playwright Sławomir Mrożek, writers such as Jan Józef Szczepański and Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski, as well as Jan Błoński, a literary critic and Jagiellonian University professor, were Lem's interlocutors and recipients of his letters (some were his neighbors, too). These letters and his friends' diaries are an invaluable source of information on his life and opinions. Lem's letters to his most important translators and publishers (Franz Rottensteiner, Michael Kandel, Wolfgang Thadewald, Virgilijus Čepaitis), partly accessible in print today, also constitute a significant source.¹² Orliński uses these materials extensively, constructing an image of a man who loved buffoonery in his writing and in his private life, an individual of very sober political views, exceptionally insightful in his prognoses for the future of science and civilization, and at the same time cautious and thrifty, deftly weaving among the limitations of censorship and requirements of practical life.¹³ Although he tried to live according to an American lifestyle, with his own house and a decent car in the driveway, he thrived in socialist Poland. He traveled to western countries reluctantly, with the exception of his longer stays

in Germany and Austria in the 1980s, a sort of quasi-emigration. During the period of the Khrushchev Thaw, he went enthusiastically on tours to the Soviet Union, where “he was treated like a rock star” (Orliński 222). There, in the company of Russian writers, scientists, and cosmonauts, he felt truly understood as an artist and intellectual. Millions of copies of Lem’s books have been published in Russian, levels not reached anywhere else.

When Orliński’s narrative enters the 1970s, its mood is darker. Lem’s health weakened, he encountered serious problems with censorship, and he became increasingly disappointed with the conventions of sf (“in fact, he sucked everything out of science fiction,” Błoński writes in his letter to Mrozek (qtd. in Orliński 286). His only joy seems to have been his son Tomasz, born in 1968. At that time, however, after the Six-Day War in the Middle East, Poland and other East European countries witnessed a violent upsurge of anti-Semitism and Lem’s trauma of the Holocaust resurfaced again. In the following years, the writer cautiously supported the actions of the growing democratic opposition, but he was never really involved. After General Jaruzelski declared martial law in Poland in 1981, Lem went to Vienna for a few years with his family (one of Tomasz’s teachers there was Jonathan Carroll); they returned home in the late 1980s. The fall of communism did not boost Lem’s optimism because he could foresee the threats of the West to which Poland was now exposed.

At the end of the book Orliński recalls his interview with Lem from the late 1990s. Asked his opinion on the development of computer technology, the writer pointed with precision to several potential dangers and concluded that “I am not against progress, I only note that people use it mainly to do terrible things” (391). Indubitably, Lem thus voiced the bitter wisdom of the survivor of a modern, industrialized extermination program, as someone who had also witnessed many other excesses of the twentieth century. Perceiving Lem as a pessimist, however, we should not ignore the writer’s self-description (which, I believe, contains a veiled allusion to his origin as well): “I am not an extreme pessimist. I am an optisemist, which means a bit of an optimist and a bit of a pessimist” (Janowska and Mucharski 73).

The books discussed here are certainly not free of imperfections. Gajewska’s interpretation of all of Lem’s works from the perspective of his Holocaust experience is, while illuminating, also biased, and sometimes her arguments seem a bit far-fetched (e.g., her reading of the *Memoirs Found in a Bathub* as a story of a Jew hiding in a Nazi-occupied country). Moreover, she largely ignores the state of research on Lem’s writing (her approach is based generally on Holocaust and trauma studies). Most importantly, she fails to provide a theoretical framework that would justify her move from the reconstruction of Lem’s life to the interpretation of his works (some kind of psychoanalytic criticism would do). As a result, Gajewska’s reader is sometimes left with the impression that she jumps to conclusions or over-interprets Lem’s texts. In turn, Orliński’s book seems too egocentric, a sort of gonzo biography, where the author every now and then makes references to his own childhood years in the Polish People’s Republic, quoting his mother,

a retired physician, as an expert on diseases troubling Lem, and including extensive passages informing the reader about the biographer's cultural preferences, exposing his knowledge of the history of motorization, and so on.

Despite these reservations, both books are highly informative and perfectly complementary. The fascinating portrait of a new Lem they offer compensates for the few shortcomings I have mentioned.

NOTES

1. A German translation of the Bereś book, *Lem über Lem. Gespräche*, was released in 1986, before the Polish edition, and there is also a Russian edition (2006). The first Polish edition, released in 1987, before Communism had collapsed in Poland, was censored. The second edition, in 2002, was not censored.

2. In the same year, it was published under the title "Reflections on My Life" in Lem's collection of essays *Microworlds* (1984). This is the edition I quote. A Polish translation has never been published in print but appears on the internet as "Pzypadek ład" [Chance and Order], translated from the German by Tomasz Lem. In German, the title was "Mein Leben" [My Life].

3. *Autor Solaris* [The Author of Solaris], directed by Borys Lankosz (2016). Orliński published an earlier book on Lem, *Co to są sepulki?: Wszystko o Lemie* [What are Lem's sepulcas/scripts?: All you need to know about Lem] (2007).

4. Lem's wife Barbara died ten years after he did, in 2016.

5. Gajewska found official copies of his school certificates.

6. Gajewska's research challenges Lem's claim that "We [he and his parents] succeeded in evading imprisonment in the ghetto, however" ("Reflections" 4).

7. See Snyder for a comprehensive analysis.

8. Borys Lankosz uses excerpts from these propaganda films in his *Autor Solaris*.

9. Gajewska discovered that Lem was a target of the operation under the code name "Astronaut" (56).

10. "Thanks to participation in the seminar, Lem understood how science worked and this knowledge made him different from other sf writers, contributing to the creation of such masterpieces as *Solaris* or *His Master's Voice*" (Orliński 107).

11. Orliński describes the absurd system leading to the situation. Philip K. Dick could not understand when Lem wrote to explain that Dick would have to come to Poland to collect his royalties for *Ubik* (1969; Polish ed. 1975).

12. See especially Lem's *Selected Letters to Michael Kandel* (2014).

13. Already in *Dialogi* [Dialogs, 1957], a dialogical essay on cybernetics, Lem foresaw that no totalitarian regime could be sustained in the long run because there would be no positive feedback from society.

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