KINDERSZENEN

JAROSŁAW
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RYMKIEWICZ

KINDERSZENEN

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Introduction by
ART GRABOV

SLANT
BOOKS

KINDERSZENEN

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Introduction
In Search of a Lost Child

Art Grabov

AT FIRST GLANCE, this book presents us with a portrait of the author's childhood. However, it is not a mere record of facts, such as one might use to compose a family album complete with photographs, nor is it a coming-of-age story drawn from emotional memories. It is, without question, the artist's autobiography—the autobiography of an original poet and creator of an exceptional genre of prose, one that unites the historical essay with allegorical parable and drama, at once formally innovative and rooted in tradition. All the same, the artist presents himself to the reader in his immaturity: the child, the protagonist of this narrative, is at first simply a child—and therefore, each one of us.

With time we lose sight of our shared humanity, as it gets obscured by our particular role in society, our mask, which we assume so as to play our own part in the interpersonal drama of life. But as that life draws to a close, as we slowly begin to make our exit from the stage, we begin to feel both the desire for and the capacity to return to our beginnings. In that moment, we rediscover ourselves in a narrative as if we were an "other"—and that other, a fuller person. If we were to agree with this conviction, it would be necessary for us to acknowledge (along with the Romantics, the works of whom Professor Rymkiewicz especially concerned himself) that every person is

born an artist. In his case, a writer who lives through various phases of his development: a poet in childhood, a narrator in adolescence, a dramatist in maturity, and finally, a chronicler in his old age. Our personhood contains within itself the embryo of our human essence, our identity fulfilled, which is *homo creator*—both created and creative.

Rymkiewicz studies the manner in which human beings—created in the image and likeness of the creator—are shaped by history, or, in other words, the circumstances generated by our forebears and neighbors, in order to become the forebears of our descendants—the creators of a world for other people. The narrative of the artist's childhood, set against the background of a significant political and historical event, thus becomes, in the eyes of his reader, a statement on the theme of civilization. In this case, it is a civilization of ever-expanding rings: Polish, European, Western, and finally, human.

When the German army entered the city of Warsaw in September of 1939, the author of this book was four years old. He was fated, as a little child, to grow up in a totalitarian state, which treated the local population as slaves, reduced to the level of tools to serve other people, acting as proof of the racial superiority of those "other" people over all the peoples of the earth. Then, in August 1944, when an armed uprising broke out in Warsaw on behalf of that trampled human dignity, he was to look upon it all through the eyes of a nine-year-old boy. And at last, when the Germans were driven out of the Polish capital by the Red Army, the boy suddenly found himself in another totalitarian state—this time one governed by an occupier who subjected the local populace to servitude for another forty-five years, transforming once again the human community into a labor camp of slaves and subjects of unconditional ideological indoctrination.

The story of these events is, therefore, the story of a man formed by history in the poetic phase of his own adolescence and who, like it or not, was to shape the environment in which his own children would mature. At the same time, it is the autobiography of a writer—poet, essayist, dramatist, literary scholar—something we ought to read as a chronicle, an epic, and finally, a drama—both a tragedy and a morality play. In other words, to read it as both lesson and warning.

The central figure of this book is, of course, its author—the one who writes of himself as he remembers himself most intimately, or who creates, as narrator, using the material of remembered events, images, and emotions. But the book has other heroes as well—perhaps not protagonists of the drama, but certainly central figures. They include beasts (or subhumans) and Germans (or Übermenschen). In the middle of them all, we find the Child—that original and essential human—Everyman, for whose soul the body and the mind are locked in a struggle. Somewhere in the background, we see the Mother—that caretaker so full of graces. God, however, is absent from this morality play, for his competencies have been taken over by History, which here represents the creator hidden in his work. In this autobiographical story, with its descriptions of small, individual episodes, Rymkiewicz follows the process of transformation of the Child-Soul—and so each of us—into the Narrative Mind.

The stage is set in Warsaw during wartime, but could it not just as well have been set in the salons of the Parisian bourgeoisie a long while before the war in question erupted in Europe? After the manner of Marcel Proust, that French master of prose both intimate and "meta," it seems as if the Polish writer were using his chronicle-like memoir to suggest that we live in a world made up of the worlds we create by narrating them to ourselves, composing these narratives from the tatters of our memories. Proust taught us that each of us is his own novel. Rymkiewicz adds to this that each of us is also the author of novels for others. Both writers analyze their own emotions in detail, as if they gripped them with the delicate pincers of the senses and, through precise language, relished their meaning, in the belief that, in this way, they would be capable of noting down the ciphertext of reality.

But whereas Proust brings his long narrative to its end with the death of the author (who expires in exemplary fashion, bent over his final sentence), Rymkiewicz composes the recorded episodes not only for his own satisfaction but also with the intention of leaving behind a witness to history. The former author is innocent, eagerly lurking for the reader's delight; the latter narrator consciously undertakes

the risk of readers' approbation or condemnation, or even more: he assumes the risk of acting as the reader's guide through the city. We are not responsible for what will occur to us, but we must assume responsibility for how we speak of it to those for whom the story will become myth, epic, tragedy. For the author not only reminisces and describes, but he also has the courage to analyze and come to conclusions—delivering verdicts. His book records, researches, and evaluates. Even more—it lays blame.

Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz was born on 13 July 1935, the son of a Polish writer of German extraction, the author of many (rather weak) historical novels. His mother, on the other hand, who was descended from a German aristocratic family, was a physician. Rymkiewicz liked to say of himself: "I don't have a drop of Polish blood in my veins, not a single fragment of a Polish gene in my cells. Polishness is neither biological nor genetic. It is not a matter of blood, nor even—as can be seen in my case—is it a matter of descent. Polishness is a fierce spiritual force which we do not choose, for we cannot choose anything—it chooses us."

Poland—Polish culture, the Polish spirit, the Polish state, that land wretched at the time and enslaved—most clearly seduced those two Germans. During the German occupation, Jarosław's parents could easily have become so-called Volksdeutch; that is, as people of German descent and most likely speaking German, they might have accepted the citizenship of the Third Reich. Yet this they did not do. Polishness, identification with the victims, turned out to be more attractive to them than Germanness, identification with the "superhuman" conquerors. After the war, the young alumnus of the University of Warsaw, a promising young literary scholar, joined the Communist Party, of which he was to remain an active member until the 1970s. However, with time, the poet and essayist began to understand that his youthful idealism had found for itself an improper form of realization.

From the early 1980s, and so, from the rise of Solidarity—that mass movement of opposition to the Communist régime and Russian dominance in Poland—he found himself drawn to the milieu of the

dissident intelligentsia in opposition to the Communist government. In the 1990s, when the group of Solidarity dissidents became polarized into two camps—into the patriotic-conservative group and that of the progressives, whose loyalty was directed towards the European Left—Rymkiewicz unequivocally associated himself with the former. Without interrupting his career as an author and literary historian, he began to be an active publicist, winning for himself both devoted enthusiasts and fierce enemies. At the beginning of the new millennium, he was universally acknowledged as an authority who often shocked others with his Nietzschean attitude towards social problems, remaining one of the brightest stars of the Polish literary firmament until his death in 2022.

As a literary scholar and professor of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (PAN), Rymkiewicz created an original form of historical-fictive narration, of which he made use when writing about the most renowned Polish writers of the Romantic period: Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Aleksander Fredro. It might be said that he was a scholar who had the courage to humanize his métier through creative writing. In his books—based upon scrupulously thorough archival research—the author narrates the biographies of the poets with an unusual fluidity, with an eloquence that reminds the reader of the characteristic style of seventeenth-century authors, who manifested their own, local originality against the background of the trends of European prose. His essays, composed around the biographies of the poets most important for the formation of Polish spirituality, are supplemented by a series of books devoted to the key moments of Polish political history, chiefly from the turn of the eighteenth century. At this time, the Polish-Lithuanian state, known as the Republic of Both Nations, was the largest political territory in Europe. Furthermore, it was an exemplary democracy with Europe's largest number of enfranchised citizens. At the time when France was conquered by its Revolution, the Polish state was literally cut into pieces by its neighbors, with the silent approbation of all of contemporary Europe under the direction of the tolerant minds of the Enlightenment philosophers.

To take just one example: in the bold and provocatively composed essay entitled "Wieszanie" [Hanging],[1] the author describes the events related to the first Polish uprising against the authoritative Russian Empire, the uprising led by Tadeusz Kościuszko (later a hero of the American Revolution). Composed of unusually suggestive scenes, the panorama of Warsaw riven by street demonstrations and the tussles of its citizens with the invading army, this book reminds one more of a reportage written by a contemporary war reporter. This narrative, basically a historical text, is interwoven with images of Warsaw from the beginning of the third millennium as well as grotesque scenes seemingly taken from an eighteenth-century Gothic novel. In his description of the ostensibly marginal events taking place in a Central European city, the author speaks of the essence of Europe, of Western civilization, of modern man entangled in the quarrel of mind and heart. At the same time, he creates a reliable historical document, a convincing report of political events, an adventure novel, and a philosophical parable.

When, on the other hand, his interest wanders into the twentieth century, in such books as *Umschlagplatz*[2] (on the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto by the Germans), or indeed *Kinderszenen*, the author was to create a literary form which is thoroughly original, uniting a Baroque-style monologue with a philosophical narrative similar to Enlightenment writing, as well as a contemporary Bildungsroman, and so: a work that makes use of forms simultaneously traditional and innovative, typically Polish and deeply European. Similar generic and stylistic hybrids may be found in Rymkiewicz's poetry and dramatic writing. His poems have the resonance of contemporary stylizations of Baroque or Romantic verse, while his dramas are indebted to Calderon, Shakespeare, or Molière. In a word: products of the mind of an erudite and sensitive poet.

Let us return, however, to the story of the child amidst the flames, of the person maturing to manhood in inhuman times. The central

1. For an English version: J.M. Rymkiewicz, *The Hangings*, trans. Mateusz Julecki (Point Pleasant, NJ: Hussar Publishing, 2022).

2. Translated into English as *The Final Station* by Nina Taylor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

motive of this composition, divided into short fragments, is a seemingly insignificant episode from the Warsaw Uprising: the explosion of a booby-trapped tank in a crowd of curious citizens gathered around it. In order to understand the sense of this event, we must first remind ourselves of a few facts. Between August and October 1944, units of the Polish Home Army [Armia Krajowa—AK], the most numerous underground military formation in the history of world conflict, was doing battle with the army of the German occupier, which latter army was supported by units from Lithuania, Latvia, and Ukraine. The numerical advantage enjoyed by the Germans was gigantic. And yet the poorly-equipped Polish insurgents bravely held their ground against tanks and air power. Meanwhile, halted on the far shore of the Wisła [Vistula], which river flows through the center of Warsaw, the Soviet Army was content to look upon the slaughter from afar as the Polish forces were being bled to death. Their only reason for wishing to do so was to have the glory of taking back their city by themselves, establishing themselves as the government of their own nation. Hence the reason for the Russian prudence and hesitation. The uprising was quashed, at last, after two months of battling street by street. The Polish insurgents were recognized as regular soldiers and transported to P.O.W. camps; the civilians were herded out of the city, the great majority of whom were also imprisoned in camps. Two hundred thousand Poles had lost their lives. The Germans then flattened the buildings in the city, leaving Warsaw in utter ruin. Four months later, the Red Army entered the city, along with the units of the Communist Polish Army they had formed and who were to assume the government of Poland following the war.

On 14 August 1944—and so, two weeks after the Uprising broke out—the Germans abandoned a little tank in the general area of one of the insurgent barricades. The Varsovians took this event as something of a miraculous spoil of war granted them by fate. A group of Polish soldiers and a small crowd of civilians gathered around the tank. At a certain moment, the vehicle exploded, tearing several dozen people, literally, into shreds. Bloody body parts were hanging from area balconies and shattered windows. The child-hero of the narrative did not

witness this event, but, after all, the hero of the account is each and every child, each child-soul of each person who remembers the thing they saw. Rymkiewicz will return to this episode several times in the course of his narrative. He returns to it obsessively, as if he were trying to dig down to the significant core of the scene. Thanks to these compositional returns—and so, on account of the formal structure of the piece—the event swells to the rank of a symbol. But this is not a symbol of the struggle, not a symbol of someone's victory or defeat, but rather, the symbol of pure and groundless cruelty. This is the cruelty of war per se, but—as the author suggests—of a war initiated not by the inhabitants of the Polish city but rather by the occupiers of that city. The child, who is as yet unable to differentiate good from evil, is contrasted here by the author with a German soldier, who has now lost that ability.

It is for this reason that the significance of the events that took place in Warsaw in the summer months of 1944 will be, for Rymkiewicz, universal injustice and even, as Hannah Arendt would say, the "banality of evil." Both sides had the same motivation to fight in this Uprising: vengeance. The Poles were taking revenge on the Germans for the years of terror, slavery, and life under ceaseless terror and the sense of degradation that they had experienced since 1939; the Germans were taking revenge upon the Poles because these "subhumans" had dared to raise their hand against the "supermen" and because these "primitive Slavs" hated the "cultured Aryans" more than they feared them. Rymkiewicz presents hatred as the source of the ineluctable degradation of humanity and as the only manner in which human dignity might be reacquired—simultaneously and reciprocally.

The author builds his story not only upon episodes but also upon concentric circles of space-time. There is the circle of the German occupation of Warsaw, lasting five years and more; there is the circle of the two months of battle carried out chiefly in the center of the city; there is the circle of people gathered around the little armored vehicle, the explosion of which caused the massacre. But there is also the circle of intimacy, the family circle of the small Polish

boy, who, in the very eye of the history in which he is surrounded, has to set in order the experience of his childhood in order to become an adult—a writer, a Pole, a European—himself amongst his brethren.

At this earliest stage of his formational journey through life, the little boy is made to experience, above all, the suffering of victims and the cruelty of their tormentors. This takes on different aspects, not only killing—the killing of people by people, the killing of animals by people—but also cruelties that arise in seemingly ordinary phenomena, glanced at through the window every day, even in times of peace: phenomena like crates full of living crayfish at a street market, or the impersonal instructions read in a newspaper of how to raise turtles. In the eyes of that boy, growing up in German-occupied Warsaw, all of this becomes a representation of death, as a matter of course. And yet, paradoxically, the childish imagination is imbued with images which, for adults, had to have been signs of life at the time, for one had to constantly fight for survival each and every day. The quotidian reality of war becomes apparent, therefore, as something inescapably unequivocal: in order to venture out onto the ice in a park skating rink, the boy is going to have to pass through a street roundup; in order to understand the suffering of his parents in the future, he will first have to witness the suffering of household cats.

If such a child simultaneously experiences the touch of a mother's hand and the touch of the eyes of a Gestapo agent or gendarme trained upon him, he will inexorably associate these two touches in one experience, and he will never again be able to separate them. The lessons that this child will derive from his memories—for it is only in this way and in no other that we learn how to live—will be a conviction of the immanent contamination of human nature by the inclination to cause suffering to others. When the boy matures, he will write books or legislate laws, he will become a physician or an instructor. The world he builds for his children will be a world evoked from scenes remembered from his own childhood.

Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz has written a sad, bitter book, a book that, perhaps, will be difficult to accept for many contemporary readers. But he wrote it as a warning.

From the Author

THE TITLE OF MY BOOK is taken from the splendid cycle of miniatures for the piano by Robert Schumann, the title of which is *Kinderszenen*. Schumann composed his cycle in Leipzig, in the year 1838, at which time he was twenty-eight years old. Schumann's *Kinderszenen* are known, in all probability, even to those who haven't the slightest idea that anyone by the name of Robert Schumann ever existed, who have never heard of German Romanticism or of Clara Wieck. At the very least, they recognize the seventh miniature in the cycle, the wonderful *Dreaming* or *Träumerei*, one of the most famous (and certainly sweetest) works of European music. Whoever hears it once will never forget it, even if he'll never come to like that German sweetness, if it seems to him somewhat sweetly suspicious. Schumann's idea—the musical portraiture of the dreams and events that take place in a child's room—was taken up by numerous later European composers, chief among whom are Piotr Tchaikovsky and Claude Debussy. The cycle of this last-named artist, composed in 1908 and nearly as famous as Schumann's own, was entitled by its author *Children's Corner*. My *Children's Corner* (which is just as good a title for me because even though the war was going on, I lived in just such a corner) or my *Kinderszenen*, are, of course, somewhat different from the works of these great composers. The difference may be found, above all, in the degree of sweetness. According to the dictates of destiny, the *Träumereien* dreamed by a Polish boy in his childhood corner in the forties of the last century were full of blood and terror.

This story of mine (like all my stories) is vestigial. It is made up of pieces, fragments, shards, such as are scattered by the force of an explosion. If this narrative has a theme and some sort of hero, that hero is most certainly not the boy that I was then, and the theme is not constructed of his wartime experiences. I will be grateful to my readers for kindly keeping that in mind. The theme and hero of this narrative is, perhaps, the fate that set me (like all of my Polish peers of the same age) at the very edge of life and death but decided that I should survive. Those others, the ones who did not survive, were lain—as the novelist Hanna Malewska relates it—in pieces at the foot of the wall along Kiliński St. Why it turned out like this, who knows? But that's what fate is like—nobody knows what it is or what it does with us. I was a child at the time—seven, eight, nine years old—and understood precious little of what was going on. Even now, I reckon, after the passage of nearly seventy years, I don't understand much more of it.

According to universal custom, I enclose all *noms de guerre* in quotation marks (Captain "Ognisty," Major "Okoń"), which is something I'm not very fond of, because the inverted commas get in the reader's way. And yet it seems the proper thing to do, as it facilitates the differentiation of pseudonym from a person's actual last name. I do make one exception to this general rule, however—also in accord with almost universal usage. I do not write the commander-in-chief's name "Bór" Komorowski, but rather Bór Komorowski.

All citations from the *Journal* and speeches of Hans Frank are given in the translation of their Polish publisher, Stanisław Piotrowski, following the second edition of the *Journal* (1957).

At my request, my publisher has agreed to set all citations from foreign languages (there are only a few, or a few dozen such, in German) in the same typeface as the rest of the book. Usually, in such cases, they're formatted in italics. This is a petty matter, but it was important to me that it be done like this, as it has a connection of sorts with the character of my wartime experiences. These experiences constitute a sort of whole, and the individual elements thereof

that might be called “German” were for me, at the time, something obvious and not in the slightest way different from the rest.

In the case of my earlier books, I encouraged the reader to begin reading wherever he or she pleased—from the beginning or the end or from somewhere in between. As for this book, please: read it in order, from start to finish. In that way, the sense of the story will become more readily apparent.

MY IDENTITY CARD

MY OLD, GREEN, PRL[1] identity card (a booklet rather, with a stiff green cover) is forty-one years old, yet it's still in good shape, not bad at all. Some of the rubber stamps have faded somewhat, but the entries are fairly legible if I use a magnifying glass. The PRL, surprisingly, produced decent, long-lasting ink. Perhaps this was in accordance with the demands of the State Security officers and the requirements of the snitches they handled, whose stoolie reports needed to be clear, legible, permanent, and unsmudged. The Militia precinct in my neighborhood Warszawa-Żoliborz produced my ID booklet on 12 May 1967. The photo glued onto the front page shows a young person (one might even go out on a limb somewhat and call him a youngster) wearing a checkered vest and a tweed blazer. The youngster is sporting a buzz cut. As I remember it, the blazer was gray with a little blue in it. The vest had a small, checkered pattern of green and blue with some red to it as well. In the space for "registration of Residence," the first entry informs us that this youngster had been registered as "perm. resd't. 26 V 1966" in Warsaw at 3 Żeromski St., Apt. 21. That was a sad block of flats constructed of concrete slabs and situated on the border of Żoliborz and Bielany. Our flat, which was on the highest floor, was a studio apartment a few dozen meters square with a little kitchen. It was our first Warsaw apartment of our own. From the annotations and rubber stamp, of course, it's clear that this was not my first ID. There had been an earlier one,

1. PRL: Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa ("Polish People's Republic") was the official name of the Polish state following World War II and lasting until 1989, when the country was ruled by the Communist Party, at the behest of Moscow.

produced by the militia in Łódź, which I'd either handed in during some general exchange of IDs (if there had ever been such a thing) or simply lost somewhere. I might also have torn it up and swallowed the pieces. I had such unpleasant destructive tendencies at the time. Much more interesting than that first militia annotation from Żoliborz is the next one. It informs us that on "23.IX.1969," I was registered as a permanent resident at 1 Kiliński St., Apt. 4. And lower down, in the space for "Deregistration," there is another note supplementing that information. On "8 Nov. 1973," some militia lady deregistered me "from perm. res." at 1 Kiliński St. And then, on the subsequent pages, there are various other rubber stamps and entries, the majority of which are most likely interesting to no one but me. On page 9, in the rubric "Annotations of Employment," there are three little seals, all of them stamped there by secretaries of the Personnel Department of the Institute of Literary Research (IBL). The first of these declares that I had been accepted into employment there on "1.XI.65." The second adds that I had been let go on "31.10.85," while the third testifies that I'd been taken back on "1.V.89." And then, on the last four pages, there are big seals and little ones, none of them interesting. The great, red seal that takes up the entirety of p. 11 informs one and all that I possess the right to cross the "border of the PRL" and take myself off "to the People's Republic of Bulgaria," and a few other such geographical inventions of Russian Communism. Two pages later, the little seal of the Institute of Literary Research says that on "1.03.82," I had been presented with "two provision inserts," which is a bit unclear to me, not only grammatically speaking, but also because I don't recall what those sort of inserts were for. Maybe they had something to do with meat or sugar rations and proved that the bearer was entitled to ration cards? But all of that, inserts for meat and eventually sugar, stamps testifying to hard currency bank accounts, the IBL stamps, the People's Republic of Bulgaria, or even the whole PRL with all its militia officers, Security Police agents, secret informers and the excellent inks produced for their convenience—all of this is completely useless now, having no sort of meaning, deprived of even the smallest scintilla of sense, having been

effectively and radically invalidated, introduced to a state of non-existence, reset and annulled, ever since the lady who works at the Borough Office in Milanówek handed over to me a pink plastic card as proof of my being a citizen of the Republic, meanwhile stamping on each page of the PRL ID booklet a large, rectangular seal with just such a radical legend: "annulled." O how pleasant that was. But something that is still valid and shall ever remain so—to the end of one's life—cannot be annulled. For example, those two violet stamps that say that for four years, and even four years and a bit, Ewa and I lived at 1 Kiliński St. And now it seems to me that those two stamps, those four years and some, have changed—in some hidden, secret, silent, invisible manner, so that I knew nothing about it, never even suspected it at the time—my entire life, secretly, hush-hush, without letting me in on it, changing me entirely—forever. Although when those seals were stamped into my PRL ID booklet, I had no idea what they meant, what's hiding beneath them, and what they will mean for me—when a few years later, their hidden meaning will suddenly reveal itself to me, and it penetrates my consciousness, what it means—to live in Warsaw at 1 Kiliński St. What sort of content those words have, what sort of chasm yawns beneath this phrase. But of course, it wasn't like I didn't know, back in September 1969, where it was we were moving to. In that block of flats on Żeromski St., there at the border of Żoliborz and Bielany, it wasn't hard or unpleasant to live on account of the fact that it was unbearably sunlit up there on the highest floor, or that our whole flat measured some fifteen or seventeen meters square. The unpleasantness of that building lay in the fact that it was placed beyond history, was excerpted from history; as a matter of fact, it belonged to no history whatsoever. Should anyone stubbornly insist on setting it in some sort of history, that could only be the history of the PRL—which itself contained a fair admixture of fiction, played out fictively, and was filled with fictional events, which that fictional political creation invented in its own mind—no less fictional—for its own benefit. The entire PRL, with all its apparatus and its entire population (as I thought at the time—today I see things somewhat differently) lay somewhere beyond the history of

Poland, being something excerpted therefrom and belonging somewhere else—some historically empty fragment, a shard of the vacuum, which someday will collapse into its own nothingness to disappear, just as if it had never been. It was a pause in the history of Poland—managed by its Russian occupiers. Or a hole in that history, a hole torn there and overseen by collaborators, that is to say, those who betrayed that history. But, as I say, these days, I have some rather different thoughts in my head about all that. In any event, from the perspective of that fictional block of flats on Żeromski St., its history, its important events, its real fragments, lay somewhere else, farther afield, on Plac Wilsona [Wilson Square][2], in the Bielany Forest, in the neighborhood of the Citadel. Moving into Stare Miasto—the Old Town—I was also (as I sensed at the time) moving into history. I also knew, though not with total clarity, that something had happened there, in that building on Kiliński into which we were to live, and that it had been something terrible. Anyway, this is why the Old Town is so pleasant, so nice to live in. From age on age, so many horrible things have taken place there (hangings, beheadings, killings, and so forth) that strolling over the Rynek [Market Square] or between the two Dunajs [Danube Streets], one is strolling among all these atrocities, kind of taking part in them and kind of not. It is this partial participation (which avoids the worst consequences) which is pleasant. But at the time, all that, all those Old Town atrocities, didn't interest me all that much, as I was translating Calderon's *Life Is a Dream* and thinking whether, once I'd got done with that work—and I was just about to finish it—I should set myself to the translation of St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul.* Was the *Dark Night* something that I'd be able to recreate in Polish? That is the great question of my life. At the time, the following options were before me: either St. John of the Cross and his *Dark Night* or Góngora and his sonnets. Now, as far as the Warsaw Uprising was concerned, much more than

2. We use Polish place names throughout the book. In the first instance of introducing a name, the English equivalent is given in brackets, thereafter not. There are a few exceptions to this: "Old Town" is one, to preserve a better flow to the English narrative. Streets and locations named for persons—such as Kiliński and Żeromski Sts.—are not translated.

all the various horrible things that had played out in the Old Town and its environs, I was interested in something that touched upon my life more directly, to wit: what had happened in Śródmieście [Central City], near the building in which I lived throughout the entire war—that is, near the corner of Marszałkowska and Koszykowa, not far from the Hala na Koszykach [Koszyka Market] on Pius St., near the Plac Zbawiciela [Savior's Square]. What I wanted to find out (and this I still don't know) was whether the apartment building on Koszykowa, nr. 38, the second one past the corner of Marszałkowska, had been bombed by the Germans during the Uprising, or if it had been destroyed by them after the Uprising. Now, if I had known then what I know now, if we really had known it back then, or if Ewa had known—would we have looked for somewhere else to live, deciding not to move into the place on Kiliński St.? That doesn't seem very probable. The apartment on Kiliński that was allotted to us (this was an apartment in an ownership-cooperative, and we paid no small sum for it, but that's the way it was expressed in the jargon of the day—We're allotting you, Citizen, a flat; You've received, Citizen, a flat) and so that apartment on Kiliński St. was, for many reasons, unusually attractive. First of all, because of its beauty and its convenient location—it was close to everything. Ewa could make her way to the National Theatre on foot. Same with me: on my way to the Staszic Palace, I'd have a nice stroll down Krakowskie Przedmieście [Kraków Suburbs Boulevard]. The building in which it was located had just been finished. Set between other buildings reconstructed after the war—in other words, buildings just twenty years old or so—it was, for those times, splendidly built. It was constructed of brick, which was a great rarity at the time, for almost everything was made of huge concrete slabs. Our flat, on the first floor, was, although not large, very pleasant and pleasantly situated. In the center of our largest room (we had two rooms there and a blind kitchen) stood a large column—one of the building supports. It looked a little as if the building, squeezed in between two other structures, one from the Podwale [Embankment St.] side and the other from Miodowa [Honey St.], sort of plastered onto them, was a kind of bridge hung on that

pier. Well, as a matter of fact, it was a bridge in my life—I passed over it on my way to something else, which at the time did not exist in my life. Should I go for pathos here and speak of this exactly as I feel? All right, then. But I won't write out the phrase. You can make your own conjectures. We considered the column in the middle of the room something droll because there was something playful and funny about it—living with such a rotund column in the middle of the room was like living in some sort of little palace. Back then, it was droll, really, and only now do I understand (that is, back then, I didn't give it a thought; I didn't probe it) the destiny and significance of our palace column. The building was hung like a bridge on that support pier, doubtlessly because they didn't want to set the foundations too deep. And why was it that they gave up on deep foundations? Because (in 1969) they didn't want to dig too deeply. And why was it that they didn't want to dig too deeply? Good question. Let me tell you. They didn't want to find out what was lying there—deeper. Right beneath our windows, there was a place on the ground floor of the building which was shortly to come in quite handy for us. This too, after all, was a testimony to the quality of the building because, back then, they generally put up buildings economically, modestly, you might even say skin-flintedly, and such spaces as I'm speaking of here were rather not included in newly-built apartment blocks. It was a little storage space for bicycles and prams. You accessed the stairwell from the rear, the yard, or rather the passage along which, by turning right, you found yourself off Kiliński and Podwale, or by turning left, to the rear of the buildings along Miodowa. At the time, there was a music school located there—there probably still is—exactly to the rear of Miodowa, and when we'd open our windows in spring and summer, we'd hear the pupils practicing on violins, trombones, trumpets, and clarinets. Sometimes we'd also hear drums, which were quite appropriate to the location. You'd see the pupils go through the yard: beautiful little girls and jolly boys carrying their instruments in their black cases. All of this was very pleasant indeed. Now, whoever decides to take up residence in a large city (it doesn't matter what city, in what country, what part of the world) must resign himself to the fact that

he'll be living in a place that's kind of a cemetery. He'll be walking about a cemetery, driving over a cemetery, sleeping in a cemetery. I'm not speaking metaphorically here. In every major city, under the ground, under the streets and pavements, under the supermarkets and the churches, under the buildings and under the basements, there are—literally—anything but metaphorical ruins, cinders, ash, skulls, and bones. Whoever walks about a great city, lives in a great city, is an inhabitant of a city—has to stroll about over all of this. There's no other option. The death of houses, people, and animals are the foundation of the great city. Every great city is built on death. There is, however, a great difference between those two situations, and they are two situations which simply cannot be compared at all, which have absolutely nothing in common with one another: living in a great city built upon death, in close quarters with bones and skulls, is something completely different from living in Warsaw at 1 Kiliński St. Now, had I known that blood had been splashed upon the walls here to the height of the third floor, would I have been able to sit there in my little room translating Calderón? Would I have been able to drift off to sleep thinking about St. John of the Cross? So why were Ewa and I living there? I don't know. Perhaps it was so that those two lovely rooms with the blind kitchen, with the music of horns and clarinets just past our windows, might change our entire lives—secretly, not asking our opinion of the matter, not letting us in on it, keeping mum. On 11 August 1971 (so we'd been living there for nearly two years by then), we woke up earlier than usual, probably even before sunrise—at five, maybe even four o'clock. But it was high time. Sometime around six, we left the apartment and, turning onto Podwale, we ran—that is, I ran, Ewa walked on behind slowly—towards the Plac Zamkowy [Palace Square] because that's where you could grab a taxi. I remember that brilliantly beautiful early August morning very well indeed. Of course, it would be strange and a little inappropriate if I didn't remember it. There wasn't a cloud in the sky above our heads. If anything white was sailing there, it was very far away, on the other side of the Wisła [Vistula River], past the bridges, beyond Praga. The August light flowed down over the roofs, over the

walls of the apartment blocks, over the crosses on the churches, over the statue of Kiliński. I was toting a large traveling bag in which we'd packed the things needed for a hospital stay—bathrobe, slippers, a little transistor radio of Lithuanian production, with which you could catch Radio Free Europe. Ewa was dressed in a bright celadon-colored dress that reached down to her ankles, with white sandals on her feet. I seem to remember her wearing sunglasses, for the glare bothered her eyes, but of that I'm not entirely certain. She was toting her large belly in front of her, which contained Wawrzek, who was to be born on that very day. There, where Podwale joins Senatorska and gives onto Plac Zamkowy, I hailed a cab and told the driver that we wanted to go to the hospital on Lindley. And it was exactly (or nearly exactly) on this spot where, two days later and twenty-seven years earlier, on 13 August 1944, two German Tiger Tanks pulled up from Krakowskie Przedmieście and, without driving up to Zygmunt's Column, turned left, toward the insurgents' barricade that cut off access to Podwale from the east. Behind them came another tank. Actually, it wasn't a tank at all, but that's what they called it at the time and sometimes still do. General Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski, who looked down upon it from the second floor of the former Ministry of Justice building (where the Headquarters of the AK [Home Army] were located at the time—moved there, in fact, on that very day, 13 August, from nearby Barokowa St.), recognized in it an armored ammunition carrier. That's what he wrote later, too, in his beautiful book *The Underground Army*. The building of the former Ministry of Justice, in other words, the Raczyński Palace (burnt during the uprising—today a replica stands in its place, which houses the Central Archives of Historical Records), was located on the corner of Kiliński and Długa [Long] Sts., not far from 1 Kiliński St., nearly opposite it, in fact, and Bór-Komorowski was looking on with the eye of a soldier, so it's doubtful that he would be mistaken. If that vehicle wasn't an ammunition carrier, it had to be something quite like one. So, let's accept the nomenclature used by the Commander in Chief to describe the tank trap. The General wanted to holler down for no one to approach that ammunition carrier, but it was too late because the

window at which he was standing suddenly ceased to exist. Just like the wall in which the window had been set. I opened the taxi door and somehow got Ewa inside (which was no easy doing). Oh my God, I thought, how beautiful she is with that huge belly of hers in that long bright celadon-colored dress and white sandals. I don't deserve her. Not at all. She was more beautiful than that brilliantly beautiful August day, more beautiful than that white and blue August light above Podwale, above the Cathedral of St. John, above the Wisła.