

Introduction

Stanisław Kubicki – In transitu: on the borders of countries, languages and media

Lidia Głuchowska

At the end of the World War I over the already unstable borders of the European countries the general mood was pacifistic. Artists taking advantage of the explosive synergy of the word and image – the *conditio sine qua non* of avant garde magazines and posters – promoted their anti-establishment *épater le bourgeois* likewise stepped into the sphere of national, social and artistic taboos. In these circumstances, in Poznań which was mainly inhabited by Poles and Germans, a cultural magazine *Zdrój* was set up (1917–1922) and the artists and writers association Bunt was established (1918–1922).

The group's bilingual name was selected intentionally (in Polish it means "revolt" and in German it means "colorful", "vivid") and reflected the most crucial political-aesthetic aspects of the international program of expressionists. The spiritus rector of Bunt was Stanisław Kubicki who created a linocut manifesto entitled *The Tower of Babel* widely regarded as a summoning for an artistic and social revolution.

It was shown on the poster of the group's first exhibition and was published in both languages of the conflicted nations. This attack on the local status quo expressed the complex self-awareness of the artists, characteristic for those times, who were torn between the national ideology and the international spirit of the avant garde.

Why was that? Perhaps it is not obvious for all readers of the contemporary post-historic and post-national epoch. It is worth remembering that it was not without reason that the Dadaist *avant la lettre* – Alfred Jarry – set the plot of his famous play "Ubu Roi" [Ubu the King] in "Poland – that is to say, nowhere" meaning in an exterritorial reality – a mythical domain at a time of "purifying" changes. The picture of a country created by the playwright, the search for which on the map of Europe was futile, was well-grounded in facts.

Having been under the partition ruled by the Prussian-Russian-Austrian empires, Poland was not an independent country. Despite that fact – or maybe because of that – the patriotic consciousness and martyrdom mythology were meticulously nurtured in "Poland – that is to say, nowhere". They were cultivated in poetry and visual arts and were the expression of a long-lasting romantic tradition. The oeuvre of Stanisław Kubicki, a poet and an artist who also grew up in that spirit, is presented in this book in a particular layout. It shows both the culmination moment of his achievements between 1918–1921 as well as a breakthrough in the history of Polish statehood.

The actual political situation in the country which had been dreamt about for generations was far from the idealized vision of the national myth. The Poles who had been living in different conditions of three dissimilar state-administrative organisms were *de facto* foreigners to each other. Only in the Austro-Hungarian part of the country (Galicia) were they able to take advantage of national autonomy. In the Russian partition daily life was dominated by Russification practices and in the Prussian partition – by compulsory Germanization.

As a result of the repressions after the national uprisings of 1831 and 1863 the Polish nobility was majorly deprived of titles and property. They also did not have the possibility to study and hold higher rank positions within the area of their fatherland. Therefore there were many emigration bouts which lasted until the national independence was regained when the Polish "new country" was created at the end of the World War I.

Although the second Republic of Poland was officially ushered into existence on 11 November 1918, in the collective mind of the Poles the Great War did not at all end then because the battle for national liberation was still ongoing. Political facts bore skepticism as the newly regained independence in a completely new territorial shape was the result of self-determination and interference from the outside. Considering numerous armed conflicts with their neighbors, including Ukraine (1918–1919) and Soviet Russia (1919–1921) it has to be accepted that the process of shaping of Polish statehood lasted until 1922.

While the epoch of partition is regarded as a period of conspiratorial opposition against foreign rule, which was able to unite the citizens of the particular parts of the country over the enforced country borders, the Great War was a breakthrough moment of their national self-identification. The people were drafted by force into conflicted armies, they had to fight against one another and painfully experienced the consequences of militarism. Some of them became the opponents of imperialism identified by the cruelties of war and leaned towards the artistic utopia of avant garde internationalism. Kubicki was also one of these people: since he was born in Germany he was wounded as an officer of the German army and had to undergo a long period of hospitalization.

Under the conditions of the armed conflict, within the Bunt group some political divisions appeared which should be regarded as part of the program. The ambivalence and polarization of ideological spirits was typical for the representatives of radical modernism and avant garde representatives of that time.

Before the outbreak of the Great War Stanisław Kubicki wrote and published Polish patriotic poems, for example *Grunwald* which commemorated the legendary victory of the Jagiellonian Union in 1410 over the Teutonic Order identified with Germans. However when at the end of 1918 part of his friends from the Bunt group (and his family) participated in the Greater Poland Uprising and later in the Polish-Soviet war, he as the leader of its radical wing, supported the Spartacus uprising in Germany.

Being a follower of anarchism, he was opposed to any party politics – whether they be Soviet, nationalist-socialist or German fascism. He also thought that most national ideologies were too tight and dangerous. While some of his friends from Bunt and the Poznań circle of *Zdrój* – in particular the magazine's publisher Jerzy Hulewicz – expressed verbal support for uniting Poland in the spirit of the Jagiellonian Union under the leadership of Józef Piłsudski, Kubicki refrained himself from expressing which form of authoritarian power he preferred.

At the end of 1918, he went to Berlin which had been taken over by the artistic and political revolution, to look there for a way to implement a utopia free from hierarchy – a trans-national "new community". He became disillusioned with the great economic crisis and Hitler's taking power which paralyzed the artistic life of Berlin which until then had been thriving. That is when – in the opposition to the growing power of Soviet and Fascist totalitarianism – Kubicki also became the supporter of the cult of Piłsudski. Between 1935–1939 he designed a monument

commemorating the victorious Marshal and his legionnaires which was erected in Kobylepole (today it is within the Poznań city limits) under his supervision. This type of tensions and seeming contradictions in his political leanings was a particular sign of the times amongst the Bunt members.

In the time of the next armed conflict Kubicki's anti-totalitarianism and patriotism were revealed once more. During World War II he joined the Polish resistance and became the courier of the National Army to the embassies of the neutral countries in Berlin. He was captured by the Gestapo and was tortured to death in Warsaw in 1942. It was in this way that the declared internationalist and anarchist became a part of the immortal national legend. That is another seeming paradox of his tense trans-border biography.

The bilingual poetry of Stanisław Kubicki included in this book, similar to his entire oeuvre, bear witness to the risky balance of the artist not only between the two countries his fate bound him to but between the two languages and artistic media he expressed himself in. Independent of their weighty character, his poems which are a reckoning with the end of the World War I and the revolution, are also interesting material for linguistic comparative studies.

In the groundbreaking years of Kubicki's biography and national history, the bilingualism of his literary achievements should be specified as being in line with the ideological program. Since he was pursuing a more effective popularization of his artistic ideas, he not only used the visual language which is international by nature and in particular with the linocut popularized in art magazines, but he also wanted to break up the localism of (national) literature. His Gesamtkunstwerk created in these two countries, media and languages is a contribution symptomatic for those times into the implementation of the utopian "International spirit".

The area of supra-national and trans-border activity of the classic avant garde and artistic aristocracy resembled (which is odd) the existence of the national identity of Poland during the times of partition. It was – in the sense specified in Alfred Jarry's play "Ubu Roi" – exterritorial. Acting on the border of these two – outwardly mutually exclusive – ideologies, Kubicki managed to provide exquisite proof of the artistic-political utopia of his times which was regarded with ambivalence.