

Stanisław Śreniowski

From the Book of Madness and Atrocity

This text was written by Stanisław Śreniowski, born on 16 May 1912 in Stryj, died tragically on 11 August 1957 in Ustka. He graduated from Jan Kazimierz University in Lvov, where he studied law, economics and administration. During 1937–1939 he worked as a trainee at the General Public Prosecutor's Office in Cracow. He received his doctor's degree in law in 1939 at the Jagiellonian University, having defended his dissertation "The Organisation of the Halicz Diet", supervised by Professor Stanisław Kutrzeba, who was later a prisoner of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. When the war broke out, Śreniowski was in Soviet-occupied Lvov, where he taught history of law at the Ukrainian Ivan Franko University. During 1943–1944 he was in Warsaw, co-operating with the secret Silesian University. He then prepared *The History of the Silesian System*, published in 1948. Being of Jewish decent, he was hiding together with his wife Krystyna in German-occupied Warsaw on "the Aryan side". After the war he settled in Łódź and worked at the University of Łódź, where he received his post-doctoral degree based on his dissertation on peasant fugitives in ancient Poland (second edition published in 1977). In 1949 he became associate professor, and one year later he became chair of the Department of History of the Polish State and Law, which he headed until he died. During 1948–1950 he was the rector of the State Pedagogical High School, and from 1953 he also worked at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He published in scholarly journals as well as in *Kuźnica*, *Mysł Współczesna* and *Wieś*. His research interests concentrated on three areas: 1) historical and legal issues, 2) history of the peasantry from the point of view of law, structure and sociology, 3) history of historiography.¹

The title of this text, *From the Book of Madness and Atrocity*, published here for the first time, indicates its generic and stylistic specificity, its fragmentary, incomplete character. It suggests that this text is part of a greater whole, still incomplete, or one that cannot be grasped. In this sense Śreniowski refers to the topos of inexpressibility of the Holocaust experience. The text is reflective in character, full of metaphor, and its modernist style does not shun pathos. Thus we have here meditations emanating a poetic aura, not a report or an account of events. The author empha-

¹ On the basis of biographical entries in: M. Prosińska-Jacki, E. Fonkowicz, eds, *Słownik historyków polskich* (Warsaw, 1994); J. Kita, R. Stobiecki, *Słownik biograficzny historyków łódzkich* (Łódź: 2000).

sises the desperate loneliness of the dying, their solitude, the incommensurability of the ghetto experience and that of the occupation, and the lack of a common fate of the Jews and the Poles (“A Deserted Town in a Living Capital”; “A Town within a Town”; “And the Capital? A Capital, in which the town of a death is dying . . . ? Well, the Capital is living a normal life. Under the occupation, indeed . . .”).

From the Book of Madness and Atrocity ought to be read against the background of the testimonies of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising texts. Among diaristic testimonies one should mention the occupation-time diaries of Zofia Nałkowska and Maria Dąbrowska, Aurelia Wyleżyńska’s diarist’s notes from 1942–1943 (published in fragments in *Biuletyn ŻIH* 1963 No. 45–46), or the unpublished diaries of Franciszek Wyszyński (Biblioteka Narodowa, Dział Rękopisów), Stanisław Srokowski (Polish Academy of Sciences Archive), Józef Dąbrowa-Sierzputowski (State Archive of the Capital City of Warsaw), and Ewa Kołaczowska (Biblioteka Narodowa, Dział Rękopisów). Maria Kann’s *Na oczach świata* (For the World to See) has the form of a report, and was published by the Information and Propaganda Bureau of the Warsaw district of the Home Army (*Biuro Informacji i Propagandy Okręgu Warszawskiego AK*) in October 1943. An extensive selection of underground press articles by different political milieus can be found in the anthology *Wojna żydowsko-niemiecka. Polska prasa konspiracyjna 1943–1944 o powstaniu w getcie warszawskim* (selected and edited by P. Szapiro, London 1992). Among the literary testimonies of the uprising one should mention in the first place the two poetic masterpieces by Czesław Miłosz *Campo di Fiori* and *Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto*, Jerzy Andrzejewski’s prose *Wielki Tydzień*, and Zofia Nałkowska’s *Kobieta cmentarna*.

All those testimonies were written on “the Aryan side”. They represent different ways of habituating the situation of being on the outside of the events described: from the most distanced and unemotional (Srokowski, Wyszyński), through the subdued that present the “culinary-social” externality notes of Dąbrowska, to Maria Kann’s report, which is an attempt to eliminate the distance. Nałkowska’s notes are Aesopean, but are uniquely expressive and full of the authenticity of the experience, which is transformed into existential expression and, in a way, externalises the horror of the uprising. It seems that Śreniowski’s text resembles most closely the aura (the reflective not the stylistic aura!) of Nałkowska’s testimony. To use Dominic Le Capra’s formula, we might say that Śreniowski “acts out” the trauma of the uprising within himself, which, as he writes, “is happening again inside me, happening all the time in a silent picture of horror, despair and power.”

One more aspect of this testimony is worth mentioning here, i.e. [the fact that] it is important due to the issue of the carousel in Krasiński Square, being another link in a chain of documentary texts that confirm the poetic image of Miłosz’s *Campo di Fiori*. Śreniowski writes: “In Krasiński Square – the ghetto wall nearby – carousels in motion. A march is played on the public address system, gondolas disappear in the smoke coming from the wall; the crowd shouting; fantastic fun.” Recently a discussion on this issue has heated up (incl. Ryszard Matuszewski’s voice [*Plus-Minus* of 10–11 May 2003], Tomasz Szarota’s article [*Plus-Minus* of 28–29 February 2004], and Natan Gross’ in the Tel-Aviv *Kontury* of 2005). Śreniowski’s testimony is one of those that not only indicate that there were two carousels, but, what is rare, they

differentiate between the carousel and the swings (e.g. Miron Białoszewski in his *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* indicates that there were swings in Krasieński Square; so does Feliks Tych in *Gazeta Wyborcza's* supplement on the 60th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising). Significantly, there is one detail all testimonies known to me are silent about. Śreniowski writes that the swings had gondola shape, which can be seen on one of the surviving photographs, the one which shows a woman in the foreground with a coat over her shoulder, looking at the crowd having a good time in the square. In the background we see a row of swings on wooden supports, which are shaped like boats – or, precisely, those “gondolas”. Behind them there is the “crown” of the carousel, obscured in part by the woman’s head.

Remarks on the text

Stanisław Śreniowski’s text consists of 6 handwritten pages. Fairly frequent crossing-out and a few insertions show the author’s editorial precision. The manuscript is titled but unsigned. According to a note by his wife, Krystyna, it was written in 1945. Internal critique of the source leads to a similar conclusion: the text was most likely written shortly after the ghetto uprising, perhaps on its second anniversary. Thus the temporal distance is relatively short and consistently blurred by the author.

The spelling and punctuation have been updated, crossed-out parts have not been included, parts difficult to decipher have been reconstructed hypothetically and marked by an asterisk [*]. All emphasis in the manuscript has been retained.

I wish to thank Professor Marcin Kula, who drew my attention to this text and gave me, on behalf of the author’s widow, a photocopy of the manuscript together with a typed transcription of the text. I made a few corrections to the transcription. I am very grateful to the author’s widow, Professor Krystyna Śreniowska, for her kind permission to publish it.

Prepared for publication and introduction
by *Jacek Leociak*

Stanisław Śreniowski

From the Book of Madness and Atrocity

The Ghetto is fighting! Words escape the imagination. The perfect void of consciousness overflows and sparkles, where it immediately becomes nil, and indifferent fuel for the mechanism, an ordinary element of abstract and ultimate form. But this did happen.

And in a sudden attack, over the determination to live, which has eliminated to save nothing, only to survive, to be able to carry on – it is still happening inside me, still happening in a silent picture of horror, despair and power.

The colours . . . ? They do have the power to last. What other power here . . . ? The power of defeat? The power of obvious events? After all, not the power of loneliness and desertion by everyone! On the smouldering ruins of their Town within the Capital, they were alone, the last ones, unneeded, and still alien, how alien! And amidst the destruction and death, even more repugnant, black, shabby, distant. Yes, distant.

From the capital they were separated by a wall, a circular* bitter wall, glittering straight into the eyes with the bloody thorns of glass, where perhaps a wild beast, mad with pain might get stuck, when it manages to break free from under the steel protection of boots and helmets, atomisers of death and regulations It will then remain there, high over the cobblestones, in shreds, helpless and no longer terrifying, between two towns, a latter, not even a number, only a rifle bullet worth – if there is enough time? Tempo! Above all tempo! In dense columns to the slaughter.

Dog catcher's vans, cattle trucks, incomprehensible tiny barracks, [it is] tighter, stuffier, then the brick building,. . . . Why? I don't want . . . no, no, no . . . ! And the last known in an erroneous calculation. But only we can image all this, only we, who haven't been there. The burning of corpses? Romantic – metaphysical, great They were not there. Stunning freedom. A town of bones. The Capital of Bones. A Metropolis of bones And then, surreptitiously, with a vicious smile the Great Reckoning sneaks in, a meagre, slight sense: the bones are ground Perhaps you hear the hum of this grisly Mill of Life. . . . Carts are filled with the white, good powder, transport it to remote fields, to be distributed by drills. In the summer, new grain will have grown, [as] the fields will have been made fertile with bone nitrogen fertiliser Fret not ye mystics: these bones will not breed avengers!²

² An inversion of a famous passage from Virgil's Aeneid: "Exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor" (May an avenger rise from our bones). These words are spoken by Dido, the daughter of the king of Tyre, founder of Carthage, at the news of Aeneas' escape, whom she loves unrequitedly. These words were often paraphrased by Polish romantic poets, e.g. in "Wajdelota's song" from Adam Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod*.

I flee from that picture, from the motion picture. Be it into the worse. I am afraid of the presence of it. I do not want it! I know that the dimensions of its moral tragedy are merely handfuls of words meant to drown it. But they won't. After all, it is loud, and its loudness grows in silence. It is.

Blocks - once apartment blocks, rubble - not yet houses, burnt out eye sockets of windows, bizarre* bowels of the balconies. A grey mass of waste. And amidst, for a split second, grey as everything - motion. A cap, a head stuck out, a hand thrown out, revolver bang, out of the window onto the street - a Jew? Limitless silence, piercing silence of the final call! The silence of the final going-on!

An enormous layer of dark grey smoke over the Dead Town within the living Capital, by the weight of its matter upholds the reality of fiction, which is a void: a Town within a City, a Town that is no more. A Town of three hundred thousand, a Town of five hundred thousand, a Town of thirty thousand, and a Town of a mere several dozen. . . . A Town of madness. A Town of a savage digit. A town conquered!

The glow is the firmament. A pillar of smoke prods with its horned head the bloody throne of the Lord.

Motionless, dull helmets. Ruins and carcasses. And only one hour earlier this was the front line. The third front. Before the second one had been mounted against them on the Atlantic. Week by week, day by day they would send tank after tank to this children's playground. Teutonic assault companies, in steel armour, went in not to come back. The tanks burnt like dry twigs. Hellish bomb explosions dropped just over the rooftops meant that the Town was still there. Until they smothered it with fire.

And the Capital? The Capital, inside which the Town of Death is dying . . . ? No, the Capital carries on as usual, under occupation, true In Krasiński Square - the ghetto wall nearby - carousels in motion. A march is played on the public address system, gondolas disappear in the smoke coming from the wall; the crowd shouting; fantastic fun.

A shot rings out behind the wall - a warning shot, stay away! The SS helmets keep guard

The boys in the street would give the suffocating survivors bottles of water over the wall, at two hundred zlotys for half a litre. Mothers would buy them for their dying children.