

Summary

On February 8, 1945, a poet Kazimierz Wierzyński, once member of the prominent poetic group *Skamander* and, at that time, on exile in America, writes *Na rozwiązanie Armii Krajowej* (*On Dissolution of the Home Army*). The poem serves as a response to the decision to disband the largest underground army in Nazi-occupied Europe. With dismay, Wierzyński harbingers the possible fate awaiting the Home Army's combatants at the hands of the Soviet-sponsored regime in Poland: for their commitment, blood shed in battle, for the ultimate price paid by insurgents during the Warsaw Uprising, they are to be rewarded with imprisonment, torture and, eventually, death. In the final verses of his poem, Wierzyński, like a commander-in-chief, issues one last order:

*Lower the flag, men. Crape bands for those gone for good,
Of divisions of Rataj, Okrzeja, of Traugutt.
Cut the flag into pieces. Pass each around 'mong the lads,
On their way to take. Let it warm their hearts.*

Zbigniew Kabata, whereas highly regarding Wierzyński's poems and sharing many of his views, would not have agreed to 'cut the flag into pieces'. The story of his life, though, shows Wierzyński's prophesies proved right. Kabata avoids imprisonment. Still, he pays his price having to leave Poland. Emigrating, he takes with him a shred of the Home Army's standard to cherish its legacy and pass it on to the future generations. This he believes his duty as a former soldier of *AK*, which he will later call in a poem, *Army Proud*. Kabata has devoted himself to writing poetry to both praise the glory of the Home Army and express his certainty the idea of independent Poland must be never subdued. Not even one piece of his poetry, therefore, mentions the dissolution of the famous formation; none describes the poignant act of shredding the banner. He stays forever loyal to the ideals he believed in when younger. Apart from the Home Army's legacy, he carried abroad yet another item of inheritance – his memories. They will provide the main source of Kabata's poetry. The memory stores the images of the fallen brothers-in-arms, former acquaintances, hard to forget events of the wartime past, such as the execution of a Nazi informer (about which he writes in his *Szkic biograficzny*), numerous skirmishes with the enemy. Those facts evoke anguish, on one hand, and, on the other – melancholy, since they all happened in his youth, which is now gone. In his poetry, time of youth and time of death, time when love and friendship are born and time to say farewell overlap to make up a coherent whole. Such entwinement of counter values results in dramatic

experiencing of one's self as well as the outside world. Having lived through the war stigmatises a person with an indelible brand on one's perception. Such testimony bears Zbigniew Kabata's writing. Yet his is definitely not *graveyard poetry*. The thorough reading of the verses ensures Kabata is always, even in his elegies, on the side of life and the living. The living who were demanded to endear and relish life, to make it worthwhile.

Kabata has also remained faithful to his native Poland. Even though the writer has lived in Canada for years now, he never fails to stay in touch with his compatriots, not excluding those of the younger generation. Owing to his having had to emigrate, Kabata has been accompanied by the feeling of anguish, but not a word has ever been uttered about anger or hatred, there is no desire for retribution; as if he has eventually come to terms with the inevitable tragic fate of the post-war Poland. His poetry, beautifully uncomplicated and touching through its simplicity as well as subtlety of the means of expression, constitutes Kabata's spiritual journey. The poems have become a link to bridge Poland and Canada, youth and maturity, an inexperienced cadet and a renowned scientist. Thus Kabata's literary work bears out a vital function poetry performs in man's life – by exercising it, one avoids atrophy of the personality and is enabled to sustain communication with the outside world. Through poetry one settles down within oneself and the idea of a native land is imbibed. This may also be possible thanks to Kabata's being close to the Polish Romantic literary tradition, the awareness of which allows depicting the biographical track of himself and his generation. His resembles the lot of the previous great Polish Romantics, with the exception that Kabata challenges fate, which is evident in the outcome of his professional life. Successful in his career, Kabata has never regarded writing the main pursuit in life. Indeed, he reacts reluctantly at the notion of being called a poet, yet valuing his verses as a record of time and life. Kabata also finds his inspirations in works by 20th-century Polish writers, Tuwim or Wierzyński. To confirm his being deeply rooted in the Polish tradition, he says: (...) *I have got a bookcase full of poetry volumes by various authors and I will browse through them whenever a certain mood sets in*. So the bond between the refugee and his homeland has not been severed, and reading and writing poetry in the mother tongue makes Kabata speak a beautiful old-fashioned Polish language, retaining many now obsolete or seldom used words or phrases. The extensive range of reference to tradition places his works within the so called poetry of the culture and, at the same time, serving as a record of its time.

His poems also carry out a cathartic function; an expression of thought and sentiment sublimates anguish of emotional wounds, assists in coming to terms with one's self and the world. Kabata presents a rather ironic approach to himself, which saves his poems from too much of the grandiloquent. Neither does he consider himself as someone in any sense extraordinary, humbly admitting, '*I am just a soldier, I didn't do everything I could.*' Such modesty brings him close towards a Franciscan view of life, understood as awareness of the limitations of human condition in the universe.

Kabata's poems help fully understand the meaning of friendship, and the significance of fellow men, who, rather than limiting, inspire to discover the emotional depth within ourselves. His verses let us comprehend the import of history, which often tends to be our enemy. In his poetry nations do not exist, but men do – good or evil, wise or foolish. Only in one poem will Kabata write on the disparate fate of Poles: namely, xxx, written on 31 December, 1989. The poem incorporates excerpts of Kipling's *The Way Through the Woods*, translated by Kabata himself.

*They shut the road through the woods
Seventy years ago.
Weather and rain have undone it again,
And now you would never know
There was once a road through the woods
Before they planted the trees. (...)*

*Yet, if you enter the woods
Of a summer evening late, (...)
You will hear the beat of a horse's feet,
And the swish of a skirt in the dew, (...)*

The Polish poet comments on this:

*English words surge over the page,
The blunt blade cuts.
My sorrow won't go away.
Happy you are, sons and daughters
of Albion, to find in your writers'
words tender, stars brighter,*

and the swish of a skirt in the dew.

Woodlands in Poland preserve entirely different images, sounds, memories of different events: the forest bed, ploughed with shrapnel, echoes moans of a wounded partisan and the thump of pieces of soil scattered against the lid of a coffin. The poem ends with a plea:

*Kipling, the British bard,
share these your visions
with a less happy band.
Give peace to my divisions.
Make me dream harder
of a peaceful land.*

Constructed upon the motif of a forest, the poem juxtaposes two realities: both characterised by mystery and terror, their source being different, though. The English forest seems to be peopled with characters and events derived from legends and the author's own imagination; whereas the Polish one bears traces of history merely recorded by the poet. The principle here being the accuracy in relating the facts rather than artistic creation. There is a wish in Kabata's plea that Polish forests would never have to witness tragic events befalling the nation, and be home to ghostly figures only, however frightening they might be. So the poem reveals a dream of a Poland happy and peaceful, not only in her poetry but also in reality. Such was the poet's desire when he took up arms, and such it remains after the war is over. The emotional consequences of the war, however, linger on in Kabata's consciousness: unrealised plans, the loss of friends, poignant memories and "a hole where there was once the heart."

I began this work with an excerpt from Czesław Miłosz's *Moral Treatise*, where the idea it is man who shapes history, and not vice versa, is argued. The story of Kabata's life rendered in his oeuvre seems to corroborate this very thesis. The poet answered the call of his times in accordance with his generation's destiny; he took up arms, because, as he says, "*The good was on our side, the evil – on theirs. The good needed to be assisted, the evil – destroyed.*" The reality then looked axiologically unambiguous. Later, after 1945, Kabata would not have let the new political order victimise him. Hence the decision to go on exile. Then a bid to fulfil the dream of becoming a seaman followed; finally, a career

in the field of science and – international fame. It could be declared, therefore, the poet conquered history. Or did he? Does he not remain its victim? The war has shaped his life once and for all. The war through its consequences had made him flee Poland in the end.

Praised be the one who says ‘no’ to the world – it is their victory. Repeating after Albert Camus, a struggle to reach out for the summit suffices to experience happiness. Struggle is a means to justify one’s existence in the mysterious and unfathomable universe, which eludes human comprehension and seems immune to people’s suffering, doubts, joy. Zbigniew Kabata’s life testifies he took up this struggle. And so does his poetry, which is able to “shun the stream of time.”

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