Volume 07

Cross-Roads.

Polish Studies in Culture, Literary Theory, and History

Edited by Ryszard Nycz and Teresa Walas

Włodzimierz Bolecki

A World Apart by Gustaw Herling

PL ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Gustaw Herling's *A World Apart* is one of the most important books about Soviet camps and communist ideology in the Stalinist period. First published in English in 1951 and translated into many languages, it was relatively unknown till Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* in the 1970s. However, the narrative of the author's experience in the Jertsevo gulag was highly appreciated by Bertrand Russell, Albert Camus, Jorge Semprun and others. In this first monograph on Herling's fascinating life, Bolecki discusses hitherto unknown documents from the writer's archive in Naples. His insight into the subject and poetics of Herling's book and the account of its remarkable reception offer readers an intriguing profile of one of the most compelling witnesses of the 20th century.

Włodzimierz Bolecki is professor at the Institute of Literary Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw. An expert in literary criticism and history, he focuses primarily on modern fiction and the poetics and methodology of literary studies. He is the chief editor of Gustaw Herling's collected works and the author of publications on Miłosz, Witkacy, Gombrowicz and other Polish writers.

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Introduction

A World Apart by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński became essential reading in Poland shortly after the political transformations of 1989 and after the abolition of censorship in April 1990. But even when the first official edition (1989) was being prepared for publication in Poland, it was hardly unknown. In a 1981 poll in the monthly *Res Publica* it was voted among the most important Polish books of the twentieth century, enormously influential in shaping attitudes among the Polish intelligentsia, and throughout the 1980s it was printed and reprinted by a large variety of underground presses. In spite of this, the first official print runs reached several hundred thousand copies, making *A World Apart* not only one of the most important works of modern Polish literature, but also a bestseller.

The present book, written in 1993 and later expanded, has only one goal: to assist teachers and students in their reading of *A World Apart* as a work of literature and as historical testimony, with attention to both its literary and historical aspects, as well as to Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's life, closely bound up as it is with the book's subject matter.

In view of this aim, I decided, despite the nature of this book, which is that of a mini-monograph, not to include any in-depth editorial, biographical, textual or historical analysis or detailed interpretation, which I shall leave for another occasion.

Chapter I
Gustaw Herling-Grudziński: A Short Biography

1. Childhood

We know very little about Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's childhood and early years. All the references to his early life in his many autobiographical writings, memoirs and reminiscences are full of gaps and things passed over in silence; again and again, when we try to reconstruct this period of his life, we come up against unanswered questions. There is still much archival research to be done. One of the things we know least about is the question of Herling's Jewish roots, tackled for the first time only very recently by Irena Furnal.[1]

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński was born on May 20th, 1919, the youngest of four children of Józef and Dorota Bryczkowska.

> The event took place in the hamlet of Daleszyce on July 17th, 1919, at 1 pm. Jakób-Josek Herling, aka Grudziński, 47 years of age, a merchant temporarily residing in the village of Skrzelczyce, in the Szczecno district, and a permanent resident of the city of Kielce, came to us in person, and in the presence of witnesses Chaim Miodecki, a clerk in the Jewish community's board of administration, 49 years of age, and Dawid Nawarski, shopkeeper, 50 years of age, both residing in the hamlet of Daleszyce, registered a male child, declaring it to have been born in the village of Skrzelczyce, in the Szczecno district, on May 20th of that year, at 7 am, to his wife Dobrysia, née Bryczkowska, 39 years of age. During the religious ceremony the child was given the name of Gecel, aka Gustaw.[2]

Herling himself, however, always insisted that he was born in Kielce. This is also the version given in 1991 by his sister Łucja in a conversation with Furnal, who

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1 I. Furnal, "Skrzelczyce czy Kielce", in: *Teraz. Świętokrzyski Miesięcznik Kulturalny* 2009 no. 5 (65).

2 Gustaw Herling's birth certificate, an abbreviated version of which is quoted in I. Furnal, op.cit. It was Irena Furnal who found the birth certificate. I quote here from document no. 30 in the 1919 archives of the Registry of Marriages, Births and Deaths of the Jewish Community of the Daleszyn District. This is a copy, made by the Kielce district governor on January 17th, 1925, of 47 birth certificates registered in 1919. I am grateful to Mirosław Wójcik for helping me to obtain access to this document.

considers the "family legend" more likely to be true than the official version from the public records office.

The latter, however, also tallies with local legend. By all accounts, Jakób-Josek Herling ran the farm while his wife Dorota lived in Kielce with the children; according to local lore, Mrs Herling and the children spent their summers in Skrzelczyce, and Gustaw was born there in the summer of 1919.

But the legend is dismissed as false by Herling's sister Łucja Utnik, who says that her mother "never came to Skrzelczyce; she was very much a city person, she didn't like the country".[3] Herling's father put down Skrzelczyce as Gustaw's birthplace because that was officially his temporary place of residence (which the birth certificate confirms). His mother was at this time busy raising the children and "sending them off to school one by one" (Eugenia finished school in 1920 and Maurice in 1921, while Łucja started high school in 1923).

We have very little choice but to accept this "family legend", but there is much that remains unclear. Mrs Herling may not have run the farm in Skrzelczyce with her husband, but it is surely not inconceivable that she sometimes came down with the children from Kielce, especially in the summer. Moreover – as Furnal points out in her article – the Herlings' eldest son, Maurice, often came down to Skrzelczyce to help his father on the farm, so his elder sister Eugenia must surely also have visited from time to time. And it is hard to believe that Łucja, who was four when Gustaw was born, was never taken there.

The farm in Skrzelczyce was known in the family as "the land of plenty"; Gustaw's father cannot have been the sole source of such tales – the farm must have been familiar to the whole family. According to various accounts, the Herlings did indeed spend their summers together there.[4] This does not mean that they lived or stayed there at other times of the year, but Gustaw's birth in Skrzelczyce in May 1919 cannot be ruled out.

Apart from the fact that the official "Daleszyn" version is the local legend, the explanation it provides seems simple and coherent. The village of Skrzelczyce is about 15 km away from the hamlet of Daleszyce (today a town). And in 1919, it was the closest Jewish community for the inhabitants of Skrzelczyce.[5]

If Gustaw had been born in Kielce, why would his father have travelled to the registry in Daleszyce (about 20 km away from Kielce) to register his birth? The Jewish community's registry in Kielce would have been the natural place to

3 Quoted in Furnal, op. cit.

4 See: *Wspomnienia Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego. Chłopiec z Kielecczyzny*. Collected and edited by Z. Kudelski. The text is unauthorized. *Rzeczpospolita*, July 27, 2002.

5 The Jewish community in Daleszyce dates from 1869; after WWI it comprised about 300 people and encompassed the town of Szczecno, of which Skrzelczyce was a part.

register the birth of a child born in Kielce – a child whose father, according to the birth certificate, was a "permanent resident" there.

On the other hand, if we accept the "Daleszyn" version, we must also accept that in 1919 the family's departure from Kielce to Skrzelczyce "for the summer" took place rather early for a summer holiday: in the middle of spring. The lapse of time between the two dates given in the birth certificate – May 20th, when Gustaw was born, and July 17th, when his birth was registered in Daleszyce – is puzzling. Why did Jakób-Josek Herling aka Grudziński wait two whole months before registering the birth of his child? We do not know.

This fact may, of course, incline us towards the "family legend", which holds that Gustaw was born in Kielce, the family left to "spend the summer" at the farm in Skrzelczyce a few weeks afterwards, and it was only then, on July 17th, that Gustaw's father got around to registering his birth. And since the Jewish community of Daleszyce included Skrzelczyce and was closest to it, he went to Daleszyce.

In any event, we have two possible birthplaces for Gustaw Herling and two different accounts: the "official version", according to which he was born in Daleszyn, and the "family legend", which claims it was Kielce. We shall probably never know which of these is the truth.

The birth certificate concludes: "This document was read out to the registering party and the witnesses and signed by them and by us. [signed by] Roman Kapuściński, Registry Office archivist, the registering party being illit[erate], [and by] witnesses Chaim Miodecki, Dawid Nawarski."[6]

It would appear, then, that the "registering party", i.e. Jakób-Josek Herling aka Grudziński, was illiterate, which is why the registry official Roman Kapuściński, who was secretary to the Jewish community's board of administration at the time and who made out the certificate, had to sign on his behalf. He was, incidentally, the grandfather of another future writer, Ryszard Kapuściński.

Gustaw's mother Dorota (1880-1932) was Polish. Her family, the Bryczkowskis, probably came from the eastern Borderlands, in the vicinity of Grodno (today in Belarus).

According to Herling, his family, though Jewish, was entirely assimilated and did not observe any of the customs or religious or linguistic traditions of Polish Jews. They were thoroughly polonized and very patriotic.[7]

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6 Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's birth certificate is now in the Daleszyce Town Registry, but was originally registered with the Jewish Community Registry in Daleszyce. See also Z. Kudelski, "Herling-Grudziński – wątek żydowski", *Rzeczpospolita*, 5-6 July, 2003 ("Rzecz o książkach" no. 7).

7 See: G. Herling-Grudziński, *A Note About My Family*, in: Z. Kudelski, "Herling-Grudziński: wątek żydowski" [Herling-Grudziński: the Jewish question], in *Rzeczpospolita*, 5-6 July,

"The second half of my surname, Grudziński, was – according to family lore – due to the fact that my great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather was [i.e. fought] in Czachowski's divisions in the forests around Kielce during the January [1863] Uprising, and that was where he was given this second name. But I have never found any traces of, or evidence for, this claim, so I must treat it as a legend, a sort of family myth."[8]

The manor house in Skrzelczyce (today in the Pierzchnica district) must have been bought by Jakób's parents – Gustaw's grandparents – from Polish owners who had, like many other farmers in the region, fallen on hard times after the 1863 Uprising. These farms had once belonged to the Maleszycki demesne around Maleszów – a place of historical importance and rich in tradition (the great--grandson of Franciszka Krasińska, who was born there, was Victor Emmanuel II, the first king of united Italy).[9]

The manor house and farm formed a large and richly stocked estate, encompassing fish ponds, a garden, a larch forest and meadows. Nearby was a village and some farm labourers' houses.

"As a child I would hear stories about [the farm in Skrzelczyce] as a place of extraordinary plenty and abundance. Everything about it was described as being vast, rich, huge, amazing. Mushrooms so big you couldn't walk or even leap across them, fish that weighed several kilos. It was a legend, and these stories of the extraordinary abundance and richness of the little estate in Skrzelczyce were told and retold."[10] Furnal's research reveals that about 60 people lived or worked on the farm, and of those who worked there, 11 were Jewish. People remembered them as Orthodox, some with *yarmulkes* or *peyos* (side curls), and they also recalled that Mr "Erlich" (Herling) spoke to them in Yiddish.

In 1921 the farm was sold and from then on the Herling-Grudziński family lived in Kielce and Suchedniów (about 70 km from Kielce), where Jakub Herling--Grudziński bought a great, imposing, modern mill, powered by water turbines, built in 1879-1891 by Nahman, a German settler. He also bought a house nearby, where he lived year round while his wife and family continued, as before, to live

2003 ("Rzecz o książkach", no. 7). Herling-Grudziński rejected a question about his Jewish roots, saying that he did not have any: "There was no such tradition in my family, which was entirely assimilated. (…) – "Do you feel no connection at all to your Jewish roots?" – "No. My roots are Polish. That is what I feel and that's just the way it is." (Excerpt from an unpublished conversation with Herling-Grudziński by A. Bikont and J. Szczęsna, which the authors made available to me.) See also my analysis of Herling-Grudziński's short story, "Death-knell for a Knell-Ringer" in: W. Bolecki, *Ciemna miłość: szkice do portretu Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, Kraków 2004.

8 *Wspomnienia*, op. cit.

9 Furnal, op. cit.

10 *Wspomnienia*, op. cit.

in Kielce. This explains why Gustaw had no memory of the farm in Skrzelczyce – he was too young – and remembered only Suchedniów and Kielce.

The house and mill in Suchedniów came with hectares of land and a large pond surrounded by a dyke. At the end of the 1930s, just before the war, Jakub Herling-Grudziński added a small sawmill. The property was, as Jan Pacławski writes, "historically connected to the Old Polish Industrial Region" and still bore its old name of "Berez Family Forge and Foundry".[11] The part of Suchedniów where the Grudziński estate used to be is still known as Berezowo today.

After World War II, the estate was nationalized and the mill was taken over by the local Supply and Sales Cooperative, which used it as a warehouse. When the Cooperative was dissolved, the mill in Suchedniów stood abandoned, falling into increasing disrepair, until 2010, when a new owner restored it, retaining the old structure, and converted it into a hotel. Of the old surroundings, not much remains. The pond is gone, as is the dyke; the historic system of canals by the mill has also disappeared. Most importantly, the Grudziński family house, which used to be next to the mill and the sawmill, is gone.

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński has always maintained that his family was polonized, but his birth certificate and Irena Furnal's research both indicate otherwise: they show that in the Skrzelczyce period the Herling-Grudziński family was still cultivating Jewish traditions (we do not know whether Herling's father officially belonged to the Jewish community, although he spoke Yiddish).[12] All the children must have been given Jewish names, though we know only of three: after Eugenia, the eldest, there was Avram Moshe (known as Mork), aka Maurice, Sara Miriam (known as Lunia), aka Łucja, and the youngest, Gecel, aka Gustaw, who

11 J. Pacławski, "Gustaw Herling-Grudziński w Kielcach", in: *O Gustawie Herlingu-Grudzińskim. Materiały z sesji*, eds I. Furnal, J. Pacławski, Kielce 1992, p. 7. Unless otherwise indicated, all biographical information about Herling-Grudziński is from the following sources: J. Kudelski "Szkic do biogramu Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego", *Kresy* 1991, no 6; reprinted in: J. Kudelski, *Pielgrzym Świętokrzyski. Szkice o Herlingu-Grudzińskim*, Lublin 1991 and *Studia o Herlingu-Grudzińskim. Twórczość. Recepcja. Biografia*, Lublin 1998; W. Bolecki, "Szkic do portretu Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego", in: *Ciemny Staw. Trzy szkice do portretu Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, Warsaw 1991; *Ciemna miłość*, Kraków 2004; *Współcześni polscy pisarze i badacze literatury. Słownik biobibliograficzny*, eds J. Czachowska, A. Szałagan, Warsaw 1994; G.Herling-Grudziński, W. Bolecki, *Conversations in Dragonea* (recorded 1995, published 1997) and *Conversations in Naples* (2000).

12 In the Jewish community of Chmielnik, a town in the Świętokrzyski region, there was a merchant called Herling Szlama Drugnia. And in Wąchock there was a baker called F. Herling. They may have been relatives of Jakub's.

was given his Jewish names "during a religious ceremony".[13] We might suppose, in light of what we know today, that Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's denial of any links with Jewish tradition in his family concerned religious traditions specifically. This is plausible, especially considering that the children were brought up by their mother. It seems, however – if we are to believe some undocumented local sources – that young Gustaw attended a Jewish school in Kielce near his house for two years before going to the local high school.[14] And when his mother died of typhus in 1932, she was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Bodzentyn (about 30 km from Kielce).[15]

After the death of his mother, Herling-Grudziński moved into lodgings on the ground floor of the same house, at 52 Sienkiewicza street in Kielce. A plaque, unveiled on the 90th anniversary of his birth, on May 20th, 2009, commemorates his years there.

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13 Gustaw's elder sister, Eugenia, studied Polish literature at Warsaw University, but she did not complete her course of study. After the war she worked in the elementary and high schools administration in Warsaw. Gustaw's elder brother Maurice (1903-1966) was a lawyer in Warsaw before the war. During the war he was active in the Organization of Aid to the Jews known as "Żegota" and was in charge of its largest cell, called "Felicja" (after his wife), where he was responsible for 600 Jews, many of them children, whom he hid, among other places, in the cellars of his house in Boernerowo (known as Bemowo today, it is part of the Wola district of Warsaw) – a fact which was not revealed until 1976 (Gunnar S. Paulsson, *Secret City, The Hidden Jews of Warsaw 1940-1945*, 2002). Maurice also took part in the Warsaw Uprising and was wounded. After the Uprising he ended up in a POW camp in Germany. He returned to Warsaw after the war and continued to work as a lawyer, specializing in family law. He joined the [Communist] Party and was appointed to the Supreme Court. Gustaw's younger sister Łucja (1915-1994) studied law but did not complete her studies. Until 1939, she worked as a secretary in her brother Maurice's legal practice. During the war she survived the ghetto and fought in the Warsaw Uprising. When the war ended, she worked as a typist in the Polish embassy in London, where she met her future husband, colonel Marian Utnik. They returned to Poland as husband and wife in 1949 (Gustaw was an emigré in London at the time). Utnik was arrested by the communist authorities and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in the trial of General Tatar, as it was called. He was released after 8 years. Łucja spent a year in prison, without a charge or a sentence. The Utniks lived in the same house in Bemowo in which Maurice had lived during the war. Gustaw Herling stayed with them when he visited Warsaw in 1991, 1994 and 1997.

14 The source of this information is a local Kielce historian, Miriosław Wójcik. Nb. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński was christened and received into the Catholic Church in 1944 in Nocera, in southern Italy, where he was in hospital at the time (see p. 49).

15 The cemetery dates from 1867. The last burial there took place in 1942. It was destroyed by the Germans during the war and restored in 2008 by the local Roman Catholic parish. Gustaw's father, Jakub Herling-Grudziński (1872-1943), died in his house in Suchedniów.

1. Dorota Herling-Grudzińska, née Bryczkowa, Gustaw's mother

2. Jakub Herling-Grudziński, Gustaw's father

2. High School: Herling's Debut as an Author

On June 27th, 1929, after passing the entrance exam, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński was accepted to the Mikołaj Rej Boys' High School (renamed the Stefan Żeromski High School the following year). Herling-Grudziński rarely mentions this period in his later work, but in one excerpt from his *Diary* he writes:

> I took the train to school in K[ielce]; in spring I left the house at dawn, which would begin to break as I walked through the forest, and burst into light as I ran panting into the station, with the smoke from the train already visible over the hill in the direction of R. When I got back to S[uchedniow] it was dark and I went straight to bed, waking after midnight to do my homework. The house was plunged into darkness, isolated from the world; beyond the pond, beyond the river, you could hear the dogs barking… (*Diary*…, 23.7.1974)[16]

16 Quotations from Herling's *Diary Written at Night* will henceforth be referenced in this shortened form, the date replacing page and volume numbers. Quotations from Herling's other works will be referenced with the title and page number in brackets. Detailed bibliographical information can be found in the bibliography at the end of this book.

At school Herling "did not distinguish himself in anything in particular – except in Polish language classes," recalls an old school friend, Franciszek Zyguła. "Not one of the top-of-the-class goody-goodies, but a good pupil, never at risk of having to repeat a year." Like almost all his friends, he hated maths and physics, was bored by geography and afraid of being tested in Latin; he liked botany and history and was undistinguished in physical education.

> In his dress he was modest and clean. He was frugal; he spent his money on books and theatre. (…) He didn't smoke and he wasn't particularly keen on alcohol. He didn't go in for cards, though at the time the game of 21, played for 2 groszy, was fashionable among schoolboys. (…) But he had one great passion, even then. He never missed a new play at the theatre, and when it was announced that "Reduta" was coming from Warsaw, with Jarossy and other famous actors, he awaited it as one awaits some great festive occasion.[17]

Herling-Grudziński himself says about his schooldays:

> We knew from our teachers that the school archives had Żeromski's end-of-year and midterm school reports; we searched the surfaces of the old Russian desks, scored with countless initials in hearts shot through with arrows, for traces of the letters S.Ż. We pestered the white-haired Mr Słoń, the old janitor who went around with his little gold bell, with questions about young Stefan; (…) we often went to Saint Catherine's to gaze at the small shrine with the crooked letters, preserved under glass, that said: "Stefan Żeromski, 2nd grade"; (…) in Żeromski's native village, Ciekoty, at the foot of Bukowa mountain, we talked to the ninety-year-old Jędrzej Gala, who had taken Żeromski on his first hunting expeditions and got so scandalously drunk, making the poor inexperienced boy listen for the mating calls of grouse.[18]

As a schoolboy Herling loved the novels of Ignazio Silone ("the favourite author of the Polish left", *Diary*…, 28.7.1978),[19] of which several, such as *Fontamara* and *Bread and Wine*, had been translated into Polish. He went through "a youthful phase of fascination with communism which ended with a police search of the

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17 F. Zyguła, "Dwa pożegnania Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego z Kielcami", in: *O Gustawie Herlingu-Grudzińskim*, op. cit., pp. 160-161. Fryderyk Jarossy (1890-1960) – a famous Polish emcee, actor, and director of revues and cabarets ("Qui Pro Quo", "Banda", "Rex", "Cyganeria", "Stara Banda", "Cyrulik Warszawski"), an Austrian citizen of Hungarian origin. He was fluent in Polish and had worked in Poland since 1924.

18 G. Herling-Grudziński, "Żeromski i Hitler. Nieznany epizod z życia pisarza", *Wiadomości* 1949, no. 48, reprinted in: G. Herling-Grudziński, *Wyjścia z milczenia*, ed. Z. Kudelski, Warsaw 1993, p. 161. In 1997, Herling-Grudziński visited the Żeromski Museum in Nałęczów. In May 2000, when Herling was visiting Warsaw, film director Filip Bajon offered him the role of Żeromski in his adaptation of Żeromski's novel *Przedwiośnie*, which he was then filming, but Herling declined, pleading poor health.

19 Silone played an important role in Herling's life and work. He is often mentioned in the *Diary Written at Night.* See also W. Bolecki, ed., *Wiek biblijny i śmierć*, Kraków 2007.

lodgings at Sienkiewicza 52, expulsion from the premises and a narrow escape from having to repeat seventh grade." This is how he recalls the episode:

> In Kielce I was a member of the school communist circle, which I think was loosely affiliated (through a certain student in Warsaw) to the Party. We met once a week to plough our way, in a collective effort, through the intricacies of the "sacred texts", and on Sundays, if the weather was fine, went on trips out of town to hold discussions in the open air. The police had presumably been keeping an eye on us from the beginning; at any rate I felt the immobile gaze of a police spy on me whenever I went to the kiosk on Sienkiewicza street for my supply of the legal "subversive" journals. The raid took place when I was on my first ever visit to Warsaw, at my brother's invitation. They broke the furniture, ripped off the chair covers and poked spikes into the mattress. They failed to find the only *corpus delicti*: the *Communist Manifesto*, which I had hidden in a German edition of the complete works of Shakespeare. (*Diary*…, 17.7.1972)

Herling-Grudziński made his debut as an author when he was in sixth grade, with a piece about the Świętokrzyskie Mountains in one of the last editions of the Warsaw journal *Kuźnia Młodych* ("Świętokrzyżczyzna", *Kuźnia Młodych*, 15.7.1935), a weekly for high-school pupils which ceased publication the following year. There was an earlier piece, a novella entitled *Rozrachunek* ("A Settling of Accounts") – which, however, had been rejected with the comment: "Excellent structure but content weak and unoriginal".[20] The journal was financed by the government of the Second Republic of Poland, and its ambition was to become the centre of intellectual life for high-school students. After it closed down in 1936, Herling-Grudziński served on the editorial board of the journal which replaced it, *Nowa Kuźnia*. Kazimierz Kott and Kazimierz Koźniewski were among its contributors. He was friends at the time with Jerzy Głowania, with whom he wrote a dialogue about Zofia Nałkowska's *Granica*, which, however, was deemed too abstruse by the other editors of *Nowa Kuźnia*.[21]

20 In 1997, in the house of Czesław Bielecki and his wife Maria Twardowska in Bartoszówka, near Warsaw, Herling met Father Jan Twardowski, who had published poems in the journal at the time – one of many distinguished writers to have done so. Herling reminded him of the story of his failed "debut", but Father Twardowski did not remember it. Herling reviewed a volume of Jan Twardowski's poetry, *Powrót Andersena* (Warsaw 1937), in the journal *Przemiany*, 1937, no. 3.

21 See G. Herling-Grudziński, *Najkrótszy przewodnik po sobie samym*, Kraków 2000.

3. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński in the 1930s

3. University: First Steps in Literary Criticism

On May 13th, 1937, after eight years of high school, Herling passed his baccalaureate and that same year entered Józef Piłsudski University in Warsaw as a student in the Department of Polish Literature. He rented rooms

> … at number 36 Pańska street, then at number 34 on Żelazna street, near the corner of Sienna. (…) To earn money I laboured at writing love letters for illiterate cooks, tarts and thieves; at the peak of my business I had a clientele that stretched all the way to Wronia, Chłodna and Ogrodowa streets. (…) On my way back from the university or from the library on Koszykowa street, I always paused in an entryway about halfway down Sienna street to smoke a cigarette in the company of an ugly prostitute, Miss Władzia, who would be waiting there patiently; it may have been at number 29, and Miss Władzia may have received her initial instruction from Mrs Kopiejka, like Aretino's Pippa, trained as a courtesan by La Nanna. One thing is sure: she was one of the most talkative, sensible and sensitive people I met in Warsaw. (*Wyjścia z milczenia,* p. 245)

Herling attended lectures by, among others, Zofia Szmydtowa, Zdzisław Skwarczyński, Wacław Borowy, Julian Krzyżanowski and Tadeusz Kotarbiński.

In November of that first year, Herling became the editor of the literature desk of the bi-weekly *Przemiany*, where he published his articles and reviews. In 1938 he became director of the literature desk in the weekly *Orka na Ugorze*, where he published several important articles. Both journals were organs of the Union of Democratic Polish Youth. Herling's sympathies at the time lay with the Piłsudski-ite young intelligentsia, left-wing and pro-independence, politically not far removed from the Polish Socialist Party and the Social Democrats. People from this milieu met at the Parabumba club, located in a French patisserie on Miodowa street in Warsaw. Every Wednesday there was a sort of literary cabaret at which the guests were young poets, critics and prose writers, among them Jan Twardowski, Tadeusz Zelenay, Jerzy Kamil Weintraub, Jan Kott, Ryszard Matuszewski, Adolf Sowiński, Józef Stachowski, Witold Gombrowicz and Jan Brzękowski.

Herling also published in the journals *Ateneum*, *Pion* and *Nasz Wyraz*. During this period he wrote, among other things, on Maria Dąbrowska, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Witold Gombrowicz, Czesław Miłosz, Stanisław Piętak, Jerzy Zagórski and Andrzej Struga. In addition to reviews he also wrote essays about literature, in which he talked about the changes in contemporary literature and the direction in which it seemed to him to be heading.

He was an active member of the Warsaw Polish Literature Circle, and on January 29th, 1939, he gave a lecture there about the work of Czesław Miłosz. "His *Trzy Zimy*", he recalled years later, "was for us an experience incomparably greater than the youthful, shallow and befuddled fascination with the Avant-Garde in which we had indulged on the wave of the 'revolt' against the Skamandrists" (*Diary*, 27.6.1975).

At that time Herling's epitome of a literary critic was Ludwik Fryde, who sparked his interest in, among other things, non-academic criticism. Among Fryde's students were Leonard Sobierajski, Stefan Lichański and Jerzy Pleśniarowicz, and Herling introduced one more into this circle, a friend from Kielce, the critic and journalist Jan Aleksander Król.

> The year was 1938. I was studying Polish literature in Warsaw. I also belonged to Ludwik Fryde's "school of literary criticism". The school's official "policy" regarding the journal *Skamander* and the more recent examples of its influence was to view it with disfavour. This was evident in the *Anthology of Contemporary Polish Poetry* which Fryde himself edited, with the help of Antoni Andrzejewski (the most brilliant student of the school, he disappeared without trace after the September campaign, probably killed in Russia). Fryde's favourite among the poets outside Skamander's sphere of influence was Józef Czechowicz; he also thought highly of Anna Świrczyńska. At his suggestion, the Polish Literature Circle organized a series of Sunday poetry mornings, for which six poets were picked: Gałczyński, Przyboś, Czechowicz, Miłosz, Świrczyńska and Piętak. I chose Miłosz. (…) At the time, two years after the publication of his collection of poems *Trzy Zimy*, he was a sort of a poetic meteor. (…)

> "Little Warsaw" felt alien to him; he was attracted to the "pleasant city". He sat in the first row, "beautiful, twenty-eight", slightly prickly and mistrustful, as if scenting some sort of assault in the praise being heaped upon him, in the whole celebration of his poetry, a premature and suspicious attempt to mummify him, or perhaps to lure him, in clouds of incense, into some particular coterie, despite his preference for following his own solitary, individual and independent path. (*Diary*…, 10.10.1980)

Of authors in whom Fryde wanted to interest his students, the Polish author who made the greatest impression on Herling was Stanisław Brzozowski; of foreign authors, Benedetto Croce and Jacques Maritain, whose Thomist theory of art Herling had encountered just before the war.

> Ludwik was above all a great teacher. He was good at sniffing out the hidden potential in everyone, ruthlessly lopped off shoots which would not bear fruit, demanded great concentration and hard study. (…) He helped us in many ways, not just in the ordinary way a teacher helps a student nearing the end of his course of study; he was always there whenever our miserable student life got itself tied into intractable knots. Ludwik had only friends. (*Żywi i umarli*, pp. 28, 30)[22]

4. The Literary Critic (before 1939)

The bi-monthly journal *Orka na Ugorze* (initially *Orka*) occupies a special place in Herling's biography as a writer. Few people remember it now, for its life in interwar Poland was brief, but during its two-year existence it made its mark with vigorous debates and polemics about the most important literary issues of the late 1930s. Apart from Herling, Jerzy Drewnowski, Kazimierz Koźniewski, Zofia Leśniewska, Jan Lipiński, Andrzej Kunat (Andrzej Miłosz), Julian Rogoziński, Jan Strzelecki, Jan A. Król, Jerzy Putrament and Józef Maśliński were among its contributors.

One of the most important debates played out in its pages concerned Czesław Miłosz's article "Kłamstwo dzisiejszej poezji". Herling, Król, Putrament and Maśliński were among those who took part in it. A polemical piece about Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* (published in *Arka* 1938, no. 2) was further testimony to Herling's independence as a critic.[23]

He was also interested – as were all those in the Polish Literature Circle, whose president was the aforementioned Antoni Andrzejewski – in the changes taking place in the national culture. Philosophically and politically he was interested

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22 G. Herling-Grudziński, *Żywi i umarli; Szkice literackie (1945)*, Lublin 1991. Herling also reminisces about Ludwik Fryde in *Przysięga na świecie*, 1955 and *Wyjścia z milczenia*, 1961, reprinted in: *Wyjścia z milczenia*, op. cit.

23 I discuss this subject in more detail in my book *Poetycki model w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym*, Kraków 1996.

in the connections between culture and democracy; his sociological interest was in the social conditions for participation in culture: questions about its content, creation and reception. He devoted particular attention to folk (i.e. peasant) culture, inspired by Karol Ludwik Koniński's book on the subject, *Pisarze ludowi; Wybór pism i studium o literaturze ludowej* (Lvov 1938) and by a (then still unpublished) book by Józef Chałasiński, *Młode pokolenie chłopów*.

Herling wrote a long piece (in *Pion*, 1939, no. 17) about Koniński's book and folk literature. He did not perceive the latter as an ethnographic phenomenon, but rather as testimony to the cultural aspirations of what was at the time Poland's largest social group. He was in favour of treating the norms and values of this culture as autonomous, in other words, he was against applying external criteria in judging it. In this he differed from Komiński's "pedagogical study", which separated culture into high (nobility and bourgeoisie) and low (peasantry), the latter being seen in terms of cultural advancement, whereas Herling thought that different spheres of the national culture should be treated as part of the same phenomenon. Culture was for him an arrangement of diverse and multi--directional phenomena which could not be judged by a single, unifying system. He did not view it as a hierarchical arrangement; it interested him as a dynamic system whose elements (such as peasant culture, bourgeois culture and the culture of the nobility) are parallel and complement each other.

Of the many approaches available at the time (descriptive, systematic, normative), he adopted that of trying to isolate and analyse currents which might transform culture in future. In August 1939, he prepared a long article about this for the journal *Wiedza i Życie*, but the outbreak of war prevented its publication. For a twenty-year-old student he was extremely well read in the literature on the subject: he knew the work of Moszyński, Twardowski, Bystroń, Pigoń and Łempicki; he had read commentaries on the famous study by Thomas and Znaniecki. In the last months before the war, he kept up a lively correspondence with Ludwik Koniński about the sociology of culture.[24]

> On August 31 that strange last letter arrived. It began with a few academic remarks and concluded with the unforgettable words: "I think the time has now come to lay down our pens. My best wishes in these turbulent times." This, I must confess to my shame, was my first inkling of war. Yes: time to lay down our pens. It was so simple, so obvious.[25]

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24 See the very thorough study of this aspect of Herling's literary criticism by A. Fitas, "Nieznana rozprawa Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego", in *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 2003, volume 3, pp. 167-192.

25 G. Herling-Grudziński, "Wspomnienie o K.L. Konińskim" (July 1944), in: *Żywi i umarli*, op. cit., p. 22.

5. "The Time of Pens Laid Down": The Road to the Gulag

When war broke out Herling was not called up. He tried to join the army when the order came from colonel Umiastowski for all unmobilized men to leave Warsaw and head east, but the unit he managed to join only existed for a few hours: it was dissolved immediately upon its creation.

After the fall of Warsaw, Herling and his brother Maurice left for Suchedniów. But two weeks later Herling was back in Warsaw, where on October 15th, 1939, he co-founded an underground group called the Polish People's Independence Action (Polska Ludowa Akcja Niepodległościowa, or PLAN; the name was dreamt up by Herling), which met in Jerzy Drewnowski's apartment. Drewnowski became its commanding officer, and among others involved were Kazimierz Kott and Kazimierz Koźniewski, both closely connected to *Orka na Ugorze*. Herling was chief of staff. At the same time he co-founded the journal *Biuletyn Polski*, which came out in Warsaw in the last days of October 1939, with a print run of a few hundred copies (according to Kazimierz Koźniewski, there were 600 to 700 single-page copies). All we know about it today is what its editors have related.

The founders of PLAN intended to expand their contacts. They needed someone to provide liaison with the West (England and France having declared war on the Third Reich), and they also decided to set up an organization similar to PLAN in Lvov. These tasks fell to Herling, and they came at a time when the catastrophic failure of the attempt to wage a defensive war in 1939 was already a fact. After talking it over with Drewnowski, Herling decided to make his way to the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic, since September 17th occupied by the Soviet Army, and from there into western Europe by way of Lithuania or Romania.

Near the end of October 1939 Herling visited his native Kielce for the last time and then, like many refugees from central Poland, went east. He crossed the Bug river, the German–Soviet demarcation line, beyond Małkinia. Then, in December, he spent a few days in Soviet-occupied Białystok. Lack of funds prevented him from going north through Kovno, the then-capital of the Lithuanian Republic which continued to exist until 1940. So he chose Lvov.

> Lvov, winter 1939. I was engaged in some underground work [namely PLAN (W.B.)] and lived in a state of permanent tension, constantly moving, trying never to stay for too long in any one place. One day fate engineered an encounter with Lidia Ciołkoszowa, who was staying with friends together with her ten-year-old son Andrzej. It was the day before their departure for Lida and from there on to Kovno and further west (Adam was already in Romania).[26] I remember a conversation in a large group of people while

26 Adam Ciołkosz (1901-1978), Lidia's husband, a distinguished activist in the independence-minded section of the Polish Socialist Party. After the war, he emigrated and settled in London. For Herling he was a great authority, the model of an independence activist.

> Andrzej played under the table; I also remember fainting, for the only time in my life (from exhaustion). Lvov was corroded by the cancer of fear; everyone was terrified of everyone else. The literary menagerie was being trained by Borejsza and Putrament. From early morning we all sat around in the Szkocka café, which was well heated; around noon the poet Ważyk would stride in, looking stern and majestic, and his rounds of the tables hushed the chit-chat, which until then had been fairly free and relaxed. The only person who did not fall silent was Przyboś, who at the time could not stop talking, *ad nauseam*, about his "poetic project", namely his plan to go to Crimea and write a new version of the [Mickiewicz's] *Crimean Sonnets*. (*Diary*…, 19.2.1977)

> The atmosphere in Lvov at the time was one of nervousness bordering on hysteria. People would glance around warily with every word they uttered and move frequently from place to place; friends whispered among each other, reluctant to disclose their ephemeral addresses. (*Godzina cieni*…, Kraków, 1996, p. 8)

> Lvov under Soviet occupation was like a testing ground of sorts for what Poland might be like after the war: intellectuals (with a very few exceptions) in the grip of uncontrolled fear, stupidity and depravity. (*Diary*…, 5.1.1977)

After a few weeks, with the help of writers Ostap Ortwin, Maria Dąbrowska and Juliusz Kleiner, Herling found an apartment and obtained, from Teodor Parnicki, a document declaring him to be a member of the Polish Union of Writers, as a sort of *laissez-passer* to present to the Soviet authorities. But when he failed to find work in Lvov, he decided to go back, and set off in the direction of Wołyń.

He travelled through Łuck, Łuniniec, Horyń and Lida, spending the night mostly at railway stations. Eventually he stopped in Grodno, where he found work as an assistant carpenter in a puppet theatre run by Maria and Józef Jarema. For the first month he lived with Edward Boyé (a translator of Italian literature), then moved to cheaper rooms near Niemno. In mid-March 1940 the person he was sharing rooms with warned him that he was at risk of arrest by the NKVD. Herling left Grodno and hid for a week in a village called Sokółka.

> M. let me stay in her attic. She was a schoolteacher. At dawn she would bring me up a mug of hot milk, then she would wake and dress her five-year-old son. He stayed there alone, in the room or in the kitchen downstairs, until she came back; sometimes he ran out of the house and played in the snowdrifts. He wasn't told about me; we were afraid he might give me away to the neighbour, a woman whom M. had asked to look in on him occasionally, or, worse still, to the Soviet soldiers who sometimes stopped by the fence to watch him playing in the snow. At night, when he was asleep, I would come down to sit by the stove and sleep there until dawn. During the day I lay under a pile of sheepskin coats by the frost-covered window in the attic. I slept, read a little and looked out at the street through the frost-free circle I had cleared on the windowpane with my

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Herling made friends with the whole family; he dedicated one of his last stories, "Zima w zaświatach; opowieść londyńska", to Lidia. See W. Bolecki and G. Herling Grudziński, *Conversations in Naples*, op. cit.

> breath. When he was playing outside, the little boy would often look up at the attic window and gaze at it for a long time. It was a gaze of heart-wrenching sadness. There was something terrible in that child's eyes; it was because of them that I decided to look for another hiding place. I moved in with some friends on the outskirts of Grodno, although the time had not yet come for my planned crossing from Grodno to Lithuania. M. and her son were killed when the Germans occupied Sokółka. (*Diary*…, 5.12.1973)[27]

During this period Herling got the chance to observe the so-called elections which the occupying Soviet forces organized in these territories. Three years later, in a questionnaire he had to fill out for the Polish army, he wrote down what he had seen:

> Regarding the elections that took place on March 24th, 1940 on Polish territories occupied by Soviet forces. To observers abroad, they looked like free elections; seen from here, from the point of view of the residents of the Eastern Territories, they were a formality, with no option other than an official vote in favour of the Soviet Union. The voters were dragged by force to the polling stations (it will be enough of an indication of the nature of this process to say that the Red Army took part in it) and openly threatened with the severest penalties for failing to vote. Once there, they were handed printed forms: those deposited in the voting urns with no markings were votes in favour, while those which were torn, crossed through or otherwise defaced were votes against. Since the voting was in principle secret, there were booths in the polling stations into which one could go in order to mark (or otherwise) one's form. But since the urns very soon – already by early morning – contained a large number of forms that had been torn or crossed through, or even bore slogans such as "Long live Poland!" or "Down with the Soviet occupiers!", the following "democratic" steps were taken to deal with the problem: in Białystok, at around 10am, the "secrecy booths" were taken away, while in Grodno, at about 10.30am, they were surrounded by a solid wall of Red Army soldiers brought in especially for the purpose. So voters who arrived after this time, delivered to the polling stations like cattle, in trucks, were simply passed from hand to hand, like parcels in a game of pass-the-parcel, until they deposited their pristine forms in the urns. And quite a few of them must have been surprised to be told that their vote had already been cast for them (this is what happened in Lvov). The rest of the world learnt about these elections from Soviet communiqués, which declared that 97% and sometimes 99% of "the population of western Ukraine and western Belorussia" had voted for the Soviet Union. In fact, they were a depressing, cynical farce without parallel in the history of electoral procedure.[28]

> Eventually, after borrowing some money, I found two smugglers prepared to take me into Lithuania. One of them was called Mickiewicz. These were the auspices under which my journey to Russia began. Our cart passed the Grodno tollgates at midnight and went only ten kilometres farther before a police car caught up with it –

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27 M. was probably Maria Treszczan[owa]. There is a letter from her in Herling's archives, written in Sokółka on March 3rd, 1941 and sent to him when he was in the camp in Yertsevo, mentioning that she had also sent him a care package. See photo on p. 29.

28 Response to a questionnaire, manuscript, March 27th, 1943, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archives in Naples (excerpt). The remainder is quoted in the following sub-chapter.

> in the middle of an empty field, where no one would normally have noticed us. My Mickiewicz was working for the NKVD.[29] (*Godzina cieni*…, p. 12)

Imprisoned and interrogated in Grodno, Herling was accused of spying for German intelligence (the proof of this was his German-sounding name) and hostile intentions against the USSR, and sentenced to five years in prison. He spent the summer of 1940, from June onwards, in a prison cell in Vitebsk, where, he was to recall years later,

> … the majority of the four hundred prisoners, packed together like sardines in a tin, were Poles. [The NKVD colonel] – a huge fat pig of a man, covered in powder and liberally sprinkled with "adecologne" – announced: "Just as a pig can never see its ears, so you, prisoners, will never see an independent Poland again". Irrespective of the merits of this prophecy, I wondered at the time, and still wonder now, why four-legged animals should find it harder than two-legged ones to see their own ears. (Diary…, 23.3.1975)[30]

In November 1940 Herling was moved to a prison in Leningrad and from there to Vologda.

6. The Gulag

From Vologda Herling was transported to a labour camp in Yertsevo, near Archangelsk.

> By 1940 Yertsevo was already an important centre of the Kargopol timber industry, with its own sawmill, two branch lines from the railway, its own food supply centre, and a separate village beyond the camp zone for the free administrative staff. All this had been built by the prisoners. (*A World Apart*, p. 22)[31]

Yertsevo was considered by the prisoners to be the lightest *Lagpunkt* in the Kargopol region. The others – especially the second Alexeyevka – invariably meant a slow death. Herling began in the porters' brigade in the food supply centre:

> … I knew from Dimka what to expect from the work of a porter at the food supply centre. The work itself was hard, for an average twelve-hour working day meant carrying twenty-five tons of flour in sacks, or eighteen tons of rye without sacks, over a distance of thirty yards from the truck to the store: as the number of trucks on the siding was greater than usual, we sometimes had to work for twenty hours at a stretch. On the other hand, the supply centre was beyond the camp zone, and it was possible to steal food there. (…) Working at the centre, we had many opportunities of stealing a piece of salted fish, a little flour or a few potatoes. (*A World Apart*, pp. 25-26, 41-42)

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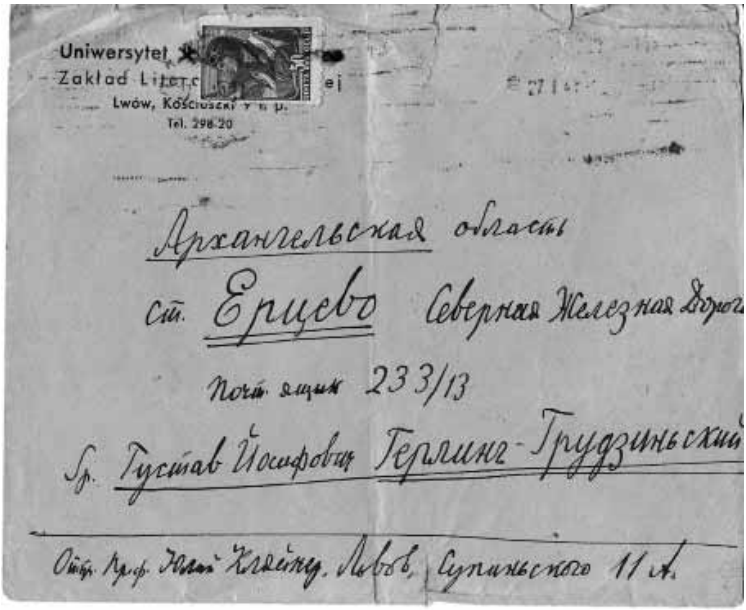
29 Herling was later to come across him again in General Anders's army.

30 Source unknown, most likely the *Diary Written at Night* (W.B.).

31 All page references are to the Penguin edition of *A World Apart*, 1996, English translation by Andrzej Ciołkosz. For further information about this book see chapter II and bibliography.

On June 29th, 1941, a week after the outbreak of war between Germany and the USSR, Herling, together with all other non-Russians, was transferred from the supply base to a different brigade: brigade no. 57, specially created for the purpose. In summer he worked at haymaking in parts of the forest which had been cleared; in autumn and winter, at the nearby sawmill and logging in the forest, where brigade no. 57 was being sent to assist.

In February 1941 he spent two weeks in the camp hospital with a bad case of flu.



4. Letter from Juliusz Kleiner, September 25th, 1941

He had the right to write one letter a month, and he exercised it without fail. He received letters from family, friends and acquaintances, who, aware of what conditions in the camps must be like, also sent him books, newspapers, money and food. Herling's archive contains a dozen or so surviving letters from this period, among them one from Prof. Juliusz Kleiner, which ends with the words: "With my warmest regards, in friendship and respect." [32]

32 Sent from Lvov and dated September 25th, 1941. See Herling's remarks about this in *Conversations in Dragonea*.

Of particular interest are the letters Herling received from his family, especially those from his cousin Adam Borzęcki.[33] Since they are my only source of detailed information about Herling's family during this period, I quote them almost in full:

> My dearest Gustaw,
>
> I got your card sent on 18.1 [1941][34] the day before yesterday. I have been sick with worry, and have been waiting impatiently for the post every morning. But now that I know there are no restrictions on the number of letters I can send you, I shall write regularly once a week, without waiting for your reply. Please write as often as you can and tell me as much as you can about how you are. This is how matters stand with the parcel (I know how important it must be for you): when we had collected everything we wanted to send you, we were felled by the discovery that the only things we could send from Lvov were books and papers. I wrote at once to Treszczanowa[35] to ask her to put together a food parcel, and told her I would get the things to her somehow. Gutek, in your situation you can't be worrying about who you can or cannot accept parcels from; for her it might be a small inconvenience, but for you – well, I needn't tell you what it means for you. I've already sent you money, notebooks, paper, pencils and books, and soon I shall send more books and money. And Niura has finally found some means of sending our care package from the provinces, so perhaps that, too, will go off in a day or two.
>
> I can't tell you what the first sign of life from you meant to me. Or what I felt upon learning that you were in a forced labour camp in the Union of Soviets! I am not much good at writing, and it's hard for me to put my thoughts down on paper, but you know that, and I know you understand. And soon the time will come when we'll be able to talk in person again. In your first card, or rather your first letter – so very *yours* that it was only after reading it that I realized how well I know and love you – only one point was clear to me: your request for paper and books. This was what reassured me that you were holding up, that the terrible things you have gone through have not broken you, and that when we meet again you will be stronger, older and more mature, but still the same Gustaw. Just hang tight and get through this; we will do everything we can to help you. The Lawyers' Council in Białystok is going to try to get your sentence reduced. Remember we are all thinking about you – Niura and myself, and so many of your friends, and your family. I don't need to tell you what you represent – what values. You have always known that. Even I, an ordinary man in the street, know that as well as you do. Let me know at once if there's anything you need for your work. Tell me what books you want, exactly which ones, with titles, and whether you want newspapers, etc. Is there anyone you want to get in touch with, like Kott, for example, or someone else? I know how hard it is after a long day of hard work, in living conditions I can only imagine, but I'd like to supply everything you want, so I

33 These are not certain attributions: on the basis of the letters' content and signature – they are signed merely "Ad." – Borzęcki seems the likeliest author.

34 The date is wrong, since this letter was written on January 5th.

35 Most likely this is the name of the woman who appears as "M. from Sokółka" in the *Diary Written at Night.*

must ask, and I can't always tell if my questions will offend you somehow. But you mustn't conclude from this that I'm unable to understand your situation and that the present radically different circumstances of our lives have driven us so far apart that I can only see things through the prism of my own warm room and full stomach.

I'll try now to answer all your questions, one by one, and tell you about our everyday life. So, first of all: Krysia.[36] So far she hasn't written to anyone. I'm still in regular contact with her parents. They are optimistic and expect news any day. I gave them the address of the Moscow institution where you can ask about the whereabouts of people who have been sent to the camps. Of course I'll let you know at once the minute I hear anything. Don't you think that perhaps I should write to your people to let them know, gently, where you are? Lunia [?] has been begging for news; they're convinced you're dead and they say any news would be better than this uncertainty. They've been asking about you in Kielce, and the Rzędowskis have been asking for news as well. And now some good news from Sala: Lunia has got married. They hadn't said anything about her husband or even who he is; I've just written to ask. They are all in Suchedniów and getting along fairly well. But the news from Warsaw is bad. The Jews have been herded together, tightly packed, in the "ghetto". My people in Kielce are well. Maniek is studying. Everyone is asking about you. The news about the Rzędowskis is that Maniek is in Warsaw, Ignac has a job near Baranowicze, and Leoś and Franka were transported out to the Vologda *oblast* when they were dealing with the refugee problem. They're working in the forest. They're getting by. Niura: we've grown very much apart. She has taken up with someone I don't think you know. It was a bit hard for me at first, but it gets better with time. I'm entirely absorbed in my studies now. I study and I read a lot.

Back to you now. I'd like to know everything, in detail, about your life and living conditions. Where you live, what the people are like, what you eat, what clothes you have. How can you write that you're in hospital without saying why?! Is it just a mild case of frostbite, like those I've been hearing about, or, God forbid, something more serious? We got a card from Andrzej. Since you don't ask about him, I assume you're in touch. The number after the slash after 233, is that the number of your barracks, or what?[37] And now something v. important. Kott gave me the name of a cousin of his who is a doctor in Yertsevo (unless he's been transported somewhere else by now), and it must be in the same hospital, because the address is also 233/8. His name is Józef Grinhaut. Kott said he would write to him about you. You must find him and make contact with him; a connection like that could mean a lot. Let me know if you've received the money and the books, and write and tell me more about yourself. I won't wait for your reply; I'll

36 Krystyna Broniatowska, a girlfriend of Herling's from his student days. Herling reminisces about her in *Conversations in Naples*.

37 "Postal addresses for camps consisted of two parts: the first was like a business address (e.g., "Archangelsk Oblast, g. Kargopol"), while the second served as a sort of postcode – the so-called *pochtovyi yashchik*, like a P.O. box – and at first consisted only of numbers. (…) But the postal address might have been fictitious, a mere formality; the real location of the camp administration could be somewhere entirely different. Postal codes and addresses were used for open correspondence, which included letters from the prisoners' family and friends." *Łagry. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, N. Ochotin and A. Roginski, eds, translated by R. Niedzielko, Warsaw 1998, pp. 79-80.

write again in a week. Are you getting newspapers, and which ones? Remember: write, write! I await every letter from you with impatience. Be well. Be healthy and strong. With all my love. Please convey my greetings to Andrzej. I will write to him too.[38]

My dear Gutek, I got your letter, but didn't reply at once, as I was hoping I'd be able to send you at least some of the things you asked for at the same time. But it turns out that at the moment we can't send anything at all. (…) We will probably be able to send things again some time at the end of March. You can imagine how disappointed I was, everything waiting there ready… It all involves a lot of organizing and running about, too, because you can't send anything at all from Sokółka, you have to take it to another [word illegible], it's a long way and it all takes time, there and back. We can't go at all; no one will give us the time off. I wanted to find someone who was going anyway and ask them to take my parcel along with theirs. And everything would have been fine, except that they've stopped all parcels to Archangelsk. But don't worry, I'll try to do whatever I can. Just as soon as they open up the route again, I'll send you parcels more often. Just write and tell me what you need. Maybe something we could buy here and you could exchange over there for food? Dear Gutek, you must stay hopeful; I'm thinking of you. Please write more often. (…) I'm sending you 30 rubles; please don't be angry that it is so little, I'll try to send more next time. When the parcel reaches you, it should contain: 1 pair trousers (?), 1 shirt, 1 pair underwear, 1 toothbrush, 2 crayons [word illegible], 10 packets tobacco, 1 pair woollen socks, 2 pairs socks, 2 handkerchiefs, and some other small things.[39]

5. Letter from Maria Treszczanowa, March 3rd, 1941

38 Letter from Lvov, January 5th, 1941.

39 Letter from Maria Treszczanowa, March 3rd, 1941, sent from Sokółka.

My dearest Gustaw, once again: I got both your cards. It's a pity you're not allowed to write more than once a month; but we will try to write as often as we can. I hope you received the money and the books; there have been several parcels by now. About the books: I thought I'd go mad with worry and anxiety at the thought of the Platonic dialogue I sent you. Of course it was all due to my not being sufficiently well read. I didn't know it was all about death. But Gustaw, you are too wise to let something like that depress you. We believe that you have your whole life ahead of you and that we will soon see each other again. I've already told you that the Lawyers' Council is going to try and get your sentence reduced. Time, even in the conditions in which you have to live, passes quickly, and soon you will be with us again. When you write again, think and write more about yourself. Why are you in hospital? What was it? What is it like there, is it all right? Did you get in touch with Doctor Grinhaut? What can you buy, and what have you bought, with the money we sent you? Tell me what books you would like. I'll send you another parcel of books soon. And there's hope that we might be able to send you a parcel with clothes and food. Not much hope as yet, but some. I'll also try to get *Nowe Widnokręgi* for you. Przyboś is an important figure in the Writers' Union. But now on to another matter: you really have to let me write to your people in Suchedniów about you. It can be done gently: Morek, Gienia and Lunia[40] can conceal some of it from your father or dress it up to look less bad. But you must understand: I keep getting desperate letters from them. They think you're dead. You can't do this to them. I'm enclosing their last letter.[41] I don't know who told them you were in hospital. May this letter from your family and the love for you that shines through it give you the strength to get through this. You don't just have something to live for; you have someone to live for, too. Since they write nothing about themselves, here is some news from Kielce. They are actually not doing badly, rather than "not too badly". In material terms they're doing quite well; they're not suffering from hunger, which over there on that side, especially in the big cities, is the rule rather than the exception.[42] And of course they enjoy relative freedom there. In summer Maniuś and Krzyś Trojecki came to visit. From what they were saying, they seem to have spent their time in the same way we used to. In winter they ski. They're all well. But they're very worried about you. So you really must sit down and write. In her last letter Lunia wrote that any news would be better than this dreadful uncertainty, and that they fear the worst. I have no idea who told them that you're in hospital somewhere. Of course there can't be any connection with your being in hospital now: the letter is dated 26.12.[19]40. I've already told you about Lunia's marriage. I still don't know anything about her husband. They just say – in a letter they sent me from Kielce – that they're v[ery] happy. As for Krysia,[43] there is some relatively good news, in that in her last letter to me Mrs Broniatowska writes: "We know where she has been sent, but we haven't been

40 Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's siblings, see p. 10.

41 Letter from Lunia to Adam Borzęcki, 29th December, 1940.

42 "On that side" probably refers to the territories occupied by Germany. The author of the letter was at the time of writing in Lvov, which was occupied by the USSR.

43 Krystyna Broniatowska.

> able to make contact with her directly". So I think it's a matter of days before we hear from her. I'm checking for news with Kott and Axer. As for Lvov, it's the same old thing: I spend my time at the polytechnic, which is like an island, cut off from everything else, and I can't see beyond it. I don't care as much as I used to about anything that happens outside. Well, we can't all be like Niura,[44] who takes even the slightest thing – sad and depressing things, admittedly, but very slight ones – so much to heart, in the way only she can. I meant to write this letter a few days ago and now I'm snowed under, but I don't want to delay any longer. So – especially since I'm sending you a letter from home, and I know how much that means to you, as well as Niura's letter – I will end now, but I promise to write at greater length in a few days. Just one thing: since you are only allowed to write once a week, write only to me. If you want to write to someone else, for instance to Treszczanowa, enclose the other letters with mine and I will send them on. Otherwise I will only get a letter from you once every few months! All my love and very best wishes, and greetings from everyone who knows you or has heard of you. Write and tell me your news![45]

In November 1941, four months after the announcement of the so-called amnesty for Poles imprisoned in the USSR, Herling, together with a few other prisoners, began a hunger strike in protest at his continued imprisonment in Yertsevo. A prisoners' revolt in the Gulag archipelago was a thing almost unheard of. "I remember our Polish hunger strike in November 1941," Herling recalled years later; "everyone was terrified; people avoided us like the plague" (*Diary*…, 6.4.1976). The camp administration gave way in the face of their determination, and on January 19th, 1941, Herling was released from the Yertsevo forced labour camp.[46]

He travelled by way of Vologda and the Bouy railway station to Sverdlovsk (formerly Yekaterinburg), where he arrived on January 30th. Here, after a long break, he began to think of writing again, and to make notes.

It was here, too, that he told the Polish authorities about the USSR's curious way of honouring the Sikorski-Majski agreement, which provided for the release of all Polish citizens from prisons and camps:

> Since the treatment of Poles was more or less standard throughout Soviet prisons and concentration camps, from the Black Sea to the White Sea and from Brest to Vladivostok, it will probably be noted by many responding to this questionnaire. So I will touch on only two matters here, which are not so well known and therefore more worthy of attention – for I imagine that the purpose of the present questionnaire is not

44 Niura sent a letter to Yertsevo on January 7th, 1941.

45 Letter written on March 3rd, 1941.

46 See the photo of Herling's release form on p. 34.

6. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, photos from the Yertsevo camp

only to *verify* certain facts about Soviet policy towards Poles and Poland, but also to *provide new details* about it (…).[47]

The second matter concerns the approach to implementing the Soviet–Polish agreement of August 1st, 1941, which provided for an amnesty for Polish prisoners. Three weeks after this agreement had been ratified by the "Supreme Soviet", the camp I was in (Kargopol, on the White Sea, in the Archangelsk *oblast*) began releasing prisoners. That's when the second farce started. Here were people who since September 1939 had not for a moment ceased to believe that the Polish cause would ultimately triumph, people who had withstood even the harshest trials, and now they were forced to sit there and watch with heavy hearts as hordes of hysterical adolescent communists were amnestied, youths whose behaviour in Soviet prisons and camps had been beneath contempt. Half a year they waited for their release; and those six months did more to devastate us psychologically than a [word illegible] and a half in prisons and camps. Half a year of helplessly [word illegible].

47 Italics mine (W.B.). The missing excerpt, indicated by ellipsis, is quoted in its entirety in the previous sub-chapter.

In December 1941, together with a few friends, I began a hunger strike of the first degree (refusing water). I was told that I would be brought before a military tribunal on a charge of sabotage and put in solitary confinement. After eight days, during which our hunger strike continued, we were allowed to cable the Public Prosecutor General of the USSR and the Polish Ambassador in Kuibyshev. At the same time, I received an official notice from the Prosecutor of the Kargopol camp, which read as follows: "You will remain in the camp pending special orders about your case from the NKVD, according to recommendations from Moscow". So I broke off my hunger strike, convinced that this was all I could achieve for the time being and barely alive from exhaustion after enduring the inhuman conditions in solitary confinement (a hut about the size of a dog kennel). It was now also brought home to me very plainly that the Soviet authorities were brazenly conducting their own policy towards the Poles regardless of the amnesty agreement, which was quite clear and unequivocal in its provisions; and that by releasing Poles from its prisons and camps according to their own whim ("special orders about your case") they were, firstly, creating a precedent for interference in Polish affairs and, secondly, through their refusal to release people they deemed inconvenient, ensuring advantageous conditions for themselves in anticipation of the final battle for the eastern borders.

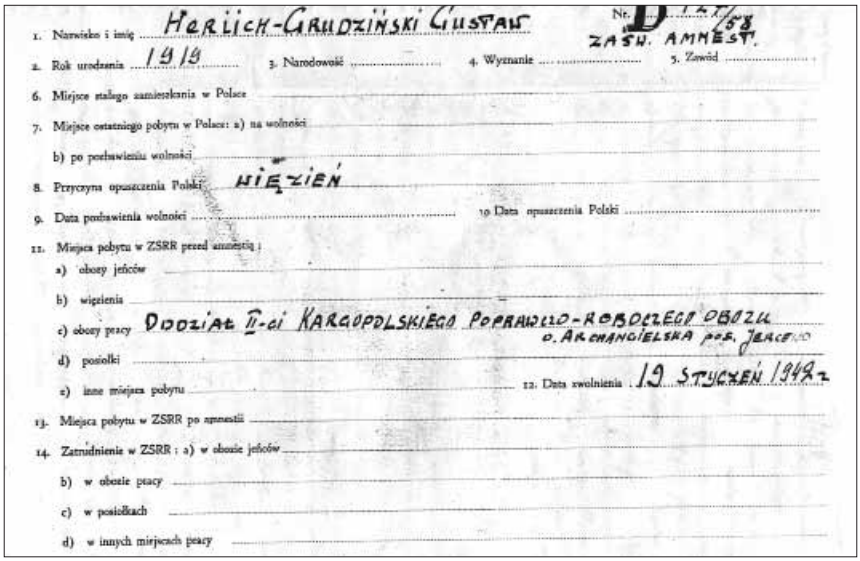
I was released from the camp on January 20th, 1942, plainly as a result of someone's intervention.

The accuracy of the above can be confirmed by: Olga Mironowiczowa, an office clerk in Lvov; platoon leader Ryszard Król; platoon leader Alojzy Tomala of the border patrol; lieutenant Jan Urbaniec, director of the post office in Borszczów; engineer Eugeniusz Mücke, head of the Davyd-Haradok line of the Radziwiłł family entail; lieutenant Bolesław Czubak, teacher at Nadvirna high school; Dr Gry[Czy?]niewski, a physician from Lvov; and in part Father Marek Maszkiewicz, chaplain.

I also consider it my duty to stress that I reported all the above to representatives of our military authorities in Sverdlovsk, who, with an entirely unjustified enthusiasm for the implementation of the Polish–Soviet agreement when their attitude should have been one of cautious prudence, maintained a far-reaching reserve towards the information I supplied.

Can[onier] Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, student at Józef Piłsudski University in Warsaw, 3 K.P.A.L., 2nd Division. 27.3.1943[48]

48 G. Herling-Grudziński's reply to questionnaire, March 27th, 1943, manuscript, op. cit.



1. Nazwisko i imię HERLICH-GRUDZIŃSKI GUSTAW Nr. D 127/58
ZASW. AMNEST.
2. Rok urodzenia 1918 3. Narodowość 4. Wyznanie 5. Zawód
6. Miejsce stałego zamieszkania w Polsce
7. Miejsce ostatniego pobytu w Polsce: a) na wolności
b) po pozbawieniu wolności
8. Przyczyna opuszczenia Polski WIĘZIEŃ
9. Data pozbawienia wolności 10. Data opuszczenia Polski
11. Miejsca pobytu w ZSRR przed amnestią:
a) obozy jeńców
b) więzienia
c) obozy pracy DOWÓDZTWO II-ci KARPOPOLSKIEGO POPRAWCZO-ROBOCZEGO OBOZU O. ARCHANGIELSKA POS. JEACEVO
d) posiołki
e) inne miejsca pobytu 12. Data zwolnienia 19 STYCZEŃ 1942
13. Miejsca pobytu w ZSRR po amnestii
14. Zatrudnienie w ZSRR: a) w obozie jeńców
b) w obozie pracy
c) w posiołkach
d) w innych miejscach pracy

7. Document confirming Herling's release from the Yertsevo camp, January 19th(20th?), 1942

From Yekaterinburg Herling proceeded to Chelyabinsk, site of the nearest military liaison mission of the Polish Army of General Władysław Anders. He left Chelyabinsk at the beginning of February and on March 9th, 1942, by way of Orsk, Orenburg, Aktubinsk, Aralsk, Kyzyl, Orda, Arys, Shykment, Dzizak, Samarkand and Dzhambul, reached Lugovoye in Kazakhstan. He later recalled his arrival there in a conversation with Józef Czapski:

> I reached Lugovoye in Kazakhstan, where the 10th Division was in the process of being formed, at the beginning of March 1941, a month and a half after my release from a camp on the White Sea. I was exhausted, still in my camp rags, hungry and covered in sores. I was directed to a tent with a few soldiers in it, also ex-prisoners or deportees, somewhat recovered by then from their ordeals. The next morning I was excused from reveille and allowed to stay on my mattress. When we rummage in our memories we should not be ashamed of any sentimentality we find there: when I heard singing in Polish I thanked God I was alone in the tent. Perhaps all these half-dead wandering souls who made it there from labour camps and places of exile also wept when they awoke on their first morning in the Polish army? We were an army of prisoners led by a prisoner and formed with the grudging consent of our jailers.[49]

49 See H.L. Kandulski [Z. Kudelski], "O Herlingu-Grudzińskim", *Arka* 1987, no. 18, p. 31.

8. Commemorative photo of radio-telegraph operators on their training course. Encircled: Gustaw Herling-Grudziński (left) and Jerzy Giedroyć, 1942

7. The Road to Monte Cassino

On March 12th Herling-Grudziński was enlisted in the 10th Infantry Division. They left on March 26th, making their way through Dzhambul, Arys, Tashkent, Dzizak, Samarkand, Bokhara, Dzardzan and Ashkhabad to Krasnovodsk on the Caspian Sea. On March 30th the 10th Division sailed for Persia (Iran) and reached Pahlevi on April 10th. In his travel diary Herling remarks of his departure from the USSR that he was leaving a place where "it is possible to cease to believe in man, and in the purpose of the struggle to improve his lot on earth" (*A World Apart*, p. 241).

9. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński in Iraq

From there Herling went on with General Anders's army to Iraq, and then, through Palestine and Egypt, to Italy. His unit landed in the port of Taranto in December 1943. Herling was ill, and was taken to a British army hospital in Nocera, where he spent over three months "in a typhus-induced fever".[50] It was in the Nocera hospital that on March 10th, 1944 he was christened and received into the Roman Catholic faith. When he had recovered he was sent to Sorrento to convalesce. Near the end of March 1944 he first met the man who was to become one of the great intellectual inspirations of his youth, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce. He began to frequent Croce's villa, where he engaged in discussions about the past and the future of Italy. It was then, too, that he met Lidia Croce, who years later was to become his wife.

In May 1944, Herling fought in the battle of Monte Cassino as a radio operator in the artillery unit of the 3rd Division of Carpathian Artillery. His heroism in battle earned him the Virtuti Militari cross.

50 It was typhus that killed Herling's mother in Kielce in 1932.


LEGITYMACJA
Nr. 4666
upoważniająca do noszenia
KRZYŻA PAMIĄTKOWEGO
MONTE CASSINO
wydana na podstawie
Dekretu Naczelnego Wodza
L. dz. 3504/Pers 44
z dnia 26 Lipca 1944
Rozkazem Dtwa 3. D.S.K.
Nr. 40 z dnia 15. II. 1945.
został nadany bomb. pchor.
(stopień)
Grudziński-Herling Gust.
(nazwisko i imię)
3. K.P.A.L.
(oddział)
KRZYŻ PAMIĄTKOWY
MONTE CASSINO
Nr. 4666
W polu, dnia 9. III. 1945
3. K.P.A.L.
(nazwa D-twa)
pieczęć
podpis D-cy

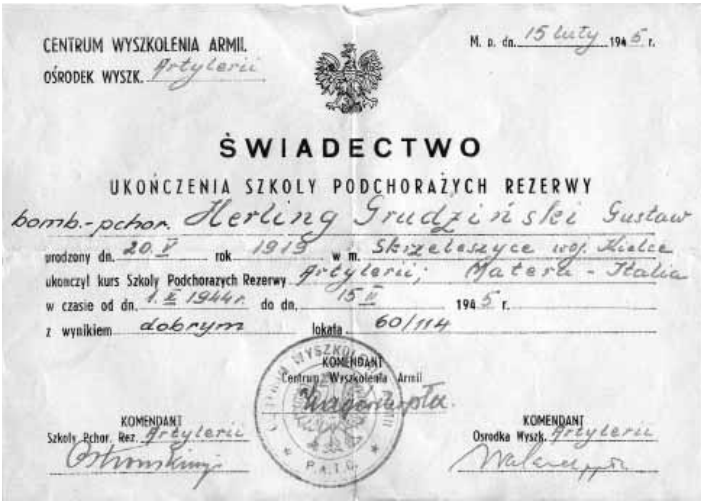
10. Document confirming the award of the Monte Cassino Memorial Cross

On the twentieth anniversary of the battle of Monte Cassino he wrote:

> Scraps of memory, fragmented and chaotic. No memory of how we got up to 593 on the night of May 16th, in boots wrapped in sacking – a black void until the moment when the Germans suspended a rocket in the sky and transformed the night into bright daylight, and our patrol into a scene of carnage. How did we get up there in spite of this, the artillery observer and me with the radio set on my back, up to just below the peak of the hillside, infantrymen falling all around us? How did we maintain artillery fire throughout May 17th from that shallow cleft in the rock, within direct firing range of German pillboxes? (…) It was a great battle, no doubt about it. We had longed for it, lived for it, been fortified by the thought of it in Palestine, in Egypt and in Iraq, training in the desert and listening for news from Poland. It's easy to say now that five months after Teheran it was politically unnecessary. It's equally easy to make a similar judgement, perhaps even more categorical, about the Warsaw Uprising. There are processes which, once set in motion and constantly fed, cannot be halted or reversed, not even by one step, without the risk of spiritual capitulation for years to come. (…) For many years I have lived near the site of that battleground, and I sometimes show it to friends and acquaintances who pass through. I once said to someone that it is the last cemetery of the Polish Republic.[51]

51 G. Herling-Grudziński, "Ostatni rozdział. Zamiast posłowia", in: *Godzina Cieni. Eseje,* Kraków 1991, pp. 363-364.

Not long after the battle of Monte Cassino Herling fought in the battle of Ancona and in the battle of Rimini. Later he was seconded to the Artillery Officer Cadet School in Matera, where he attained the rank of corporal.



CENTRUM WYSZKOLENIA ARMII.
OŚRODEK WYSZK. Artylerii

M. p. dn. 15 lutego 1945 r.

ŚWIADECTWO
UKOŃCZENIA SZKOŁY PODCHORĄŻYCH REZERWY

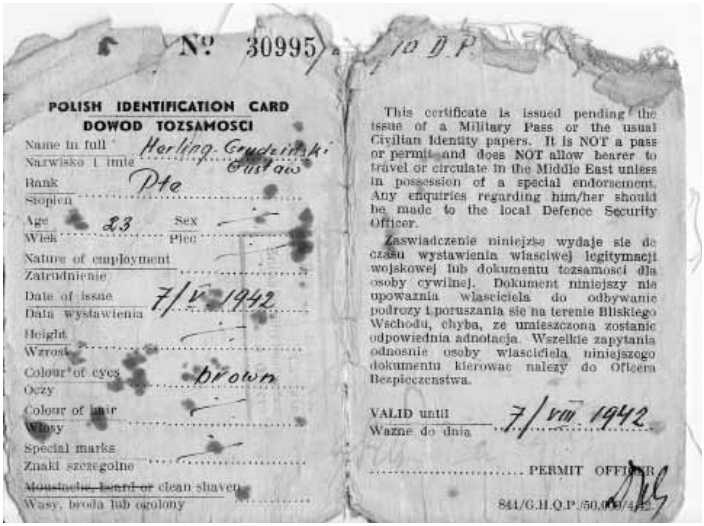
bomb.-pchor. Herling Grudziński Gustaw
urodzony dn. 20.V rok 1913 w m. Skrzeleszyce woj. Kielce
ukończył kurs Szkoły Podchorążych Rezerwy artylerii; Matera - Italia
w czasie od dn. 1.X 1944 r. do dn. 15.II 1945 r.
z wynikiem dobrym lokata 60/114

KOMENDANT Centrum Wyszkolenia Armii

KOMENDANT Szkoły Pchor. Rez. Artylerii

KOMENDANT Ośrodka Wyszk. Artylerii

11. Certificate of completion of training as a reserve officer cadet, February 15th, 1945



No 30995 / 10 D P

POLISH IDENTIFICATION CARD
DOWÓD TOŻSAMOŚCI

Name in full / Nazwisko i imię: Herling-Grudziński Gustaw
Rank / Stopień: Plt
Age / Wiek: 23 Sex / Płeć:
Nature of employment / Zatrudnienie:
Date of issue / Data wystawienia: 7/V 1942
Height / Wzrost:
Colour of eyes / Oczy: brown
Colour of hair / Włosy:
Special marks / Znaki szczególne:
~~Moustache, beard~~ or clean shaven / Wąsy, broda lub ogolony

This certificate is issued pending the issue of a Military Pass or the usual Civilian Identity papers. It is NOT a pass or permit and does NOT allow bearer to travel or circulate in the Middle East unless in possession of a special endorsement. Any enquiries regarding him/her should be made to the local Defence Security Officer.

Zaświadczenie niniejsze wydaje się do czasu wystawienia właściwej legitymacji wojskowej lub dokumentu tożsamości dla osoby cywilnej. Dokument niniejszy nie upoważnia właściciela do odbywanie podróży i poruszania się na terenie Bliskiego Wschodu, chyba, że umieszczona zostanie odpowiednia adnotacja. Wszelkie zapytania odnośnie osoby właściciela niniejszego dokumentu kierować należy do Oficera Bezpieczeństwa.

VALID until / Ważne do dnia 7/VIII 1942

..... PERMIT OFFICER

841/G.H.Q.P./50,000/4/42.

12. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's temporary Polish ID card

8. Taking Up the Pen Again

When he donned his soldier's uniform, Herling also returned to the writer's path from which he had strayed. In taking up his rifle, he also took up his pen.

He was already engaged in journalism in 1942. A comment on one of his articles survives in a letter, at times difficult to decipher, whose author writes:

> I have received your article. It is interesting and important. But there can be no question of its appearing here. Palestinian censorship in matters concerning relations with Russia is particularly harsh.[52]

From 1943 onwards Herling's articles appeared in *Kurier Polski* in Baghdad, in the Jerusalem monthly *W drodze*, in *Dziennik Żołnierza AWP*, in *Ochotniczka*, and most often in *Orzeł Biały*, the weekly of the 2nd Army Corps.

> Iraq, Palestine, Italy – that was the golden age of *Orzeł Biały*. I remember how impatiently we awaited each issue in our units, how it was passed from hand to hand in the tents, how we discussed the more important features. It was a lively journal, pugnacious and independent. The list of its contributors was long: Piestrzyński, Racięski, Józef Poniatowski, Szułdrzyński, Adolf Bocheński, Gerat, Strzetelski, Ulatowski, the reporters Wańkowicz, Bialatowicz, Mieroszewski (yes, he was a reporter then) and Domański, Czapski on art, the poets Olechowski, Broncel, Obertyńska, Broniewski, Kobrzyński and Międzyrzecki. On May 30th an article entitled "The case of Michajłowicz" appeared with big blanks: British military censorship had made its presence felt for the first time. From then on blank spaces became a permanent feature in *Orzeł Biały*, with the superscription "confiscated". The confiscated material consisted of course entirely of critical comments about our powerful ally, and included an article about children evacuated from the USSR.[53]

13, 14. Photos taken by Herling-Grudziński in the desert in Iraq

52 Stanisław [name illegible], letter from Tel Aviv, September 12th, 1942. Herling-Grudziński's archive.

53 From: H.L. Kandulski [Z. Kudelski], "O Herlingu Grudzińskim", op. cit.

15. Herling-Grudziński, second from left

16. Photo taken by Herling-Grudziński in Palestine

17, 18. Photos taken by Herling-Grudziński in the Middle East

19, 20. Photos taken by Herling-Grudziński in the Middle East

21. Photo taken by Herling-Grudziński in the Middle East

9. *The Living and the Dead*

The fruit of Herling's activity as a journalist and essayist was a slim but very important volume called *The Living and the Dead*, with a preface by Józef Czapski, published in Rome in 1945. It comprised essays from 1943 until 1945, mainly reminiscences about writers who had died during the war, among them Karol Ludwik Koniński, Karol Irzykowski and Wacław Berent. They were a sort of epitaph for the intellectual milieu of the 1930s with which Herling had been most closely associated and which had been destroyed by the war.

At about the same time (1945-1947), Herling contributed an introduction to Adam Mickiewicz's *Księgi pielgrzymstwa i narodu polskiego*, to Stanisław Brzozowski's *Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego* and to an anthology of war stories. These essays showed that he was already searching for the intellectual foundations of a programme for the new emigration.

There were two intellectual currents to which Herling was hostile at that time: the tradition of revolutionary radicalism (fascism, communism and Nazism),

whose sources he saw in the situation created by the First World War, and the tradition of Polish messianism as an interpretation of Poland's existence in history as a nation.

Herling thought that the messianism of the Romantics imposed four main "yokes" on Poland: "a false understanding of national unity, national megalomania, the exalted religion of patriotism" – though Herling appreciated what this last could do to foster patriotic feeling, as he grasped the power of the idea of the "pilgrimage for freedom" – and above all the cult of the past and the cult of suffering, which both led, in his view, to attitudes that were too passive. In his search for new foundations for the post-war national consciousness, Herling came close to the ideas which were shortly to find their fullest expression in the writings of Witold Gombrowicz; however, Herling's own thoughts on the subject were inspired by Stanisław Brzozowski. And in his critique of the pro-Soviet stance of the West and his propensity to quote Mickiewicz's prayer for "a universal war for the freedom of all peoples", he came close to a view which found its clearest and fullest expression in the writings of another émigré novelist – Józef Mackiewicz. The most important consequence of the Second World War for the nations of Eastern Europe was, in Herling's view, not so much the experience of mass slaughter on the battlefields (for we had seen that already in the Great War) as the loss of freedom, which made nonsense of the purpose of the sacrifice made by those who had lost their lives and of the idea of peace (post-Yalta). At the same time, Herling resented the one-sidedness of the way the war was presented in literature, with no mention of Soviet concentration camps.

22. Krystyna Domańska and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński

10. Emigration

After the war Herling decided not to return to Poland, and in 1945 became an émigré by choice. Emigration was for him, as it was for those of his friends connected with *Kultura*, a kind of calling: a mission to fulfil, a continuation of the struggle for Poland's independence and a way of serving its society. It was also, seen in another light, a personal tragedy. From the very beginning Herling was among the most active and prolific of émigré intellectuals.

At the end of the Italian campaign he moved to Rome, where he joined the editorial board of *Orzeł Biały*. He continued as editor-in-chief of its literary pages until 1946. During this period he also joined the directors' board of the Rome section of the Polish PEN club, and married the painter Krystyna Domańska (Stojanowska by previous marriage).

He remained in Rome when the 2nd Corps was evacuated to England and began to organize the Literary Institute "Kultura", being one of its founders, as well as the *Kultura* monthly: the first issue appeared in June 1947. Jerzy Giedroyć was editor-in-chief from its inception; he was joined on the editorial board by Zofia and Zygmunt Hertz and Józef Czapski. But Herling decided against accompanying the editors of *Kultura* to France, where, after a spell in Paris, they eventually settled down in Maisons-Laffitte. Instead, he travelled with his wife to London, where he took rooms in the Polish Writers' House and entered into a close collaboration with the weekly *Wiadomości*, edited by Mieczysław Grydzewski.

23. Krystyna Domańska's ID card


Nr. 64704

POLSKIE SIŁY ZBROJNE

ZAŚWIADCZENIE
O ZAKOŃCZENIU SŁUŻBY

Stwierdzam, że 2304/42 Kapral pchor.
Nr ew. P. S. Zbr. Stopień

GUSTAW HERLING-GRUDZIŃSKI
Imiona i nazwisko

służył w POLSKICH SIŁACH ZBROJNYCH pozostających pod DOWÓDZTWEM BRYTYJSKIM do dnia .. 17./9./ 1947.r.

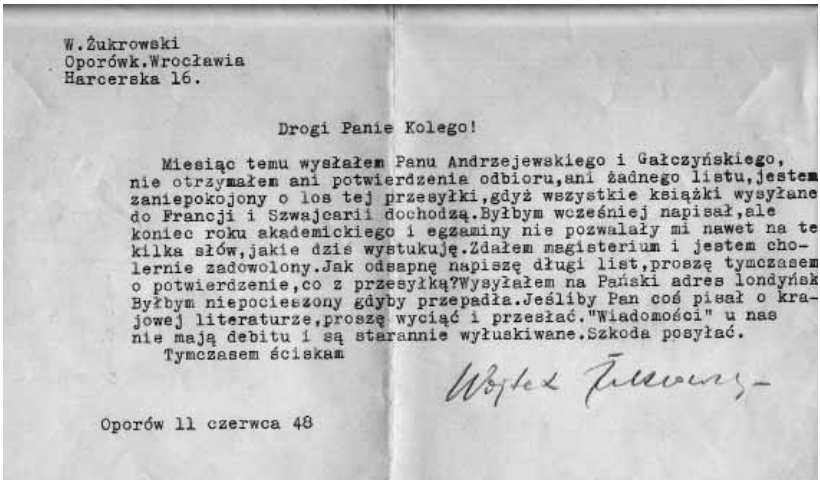
Londyn dnia 13./2./1948 Zastępca Głównej Komisji Likwidacyjnej Polskich Sił Zbrojnych

C.S.H. 14224 - Wz. 26019 - Dd. 4498 - 100,000 - 9/47

24. Certificate of completion of army service in the Polish Armed Forces, issued to Gustaw Herling-Grudziński on September 17th, 1947

This was one of his most prolific periods as a writer. He published dozens of newspaper articles and reviews and conducted a lively correspondence with a large number of writers, both émigrés and those who had remained in Poland. Maria Dąbrowska was among his correspondents, but his most voluminous exchanges were with Wojciech Żukrowski.

25, 26. Letter from Maria Dąbrowska, September 21st, 1949



W.Żukrowski
Oporówk.Wrocławia
Harcerska 16.

Drogi Panie Kolego!

Miesiąc temu wysłałem Panu Andrzejewskiego i Gałczyńskiego, nie otrzymałem ani potwierdzenia odbioru,ani żadnego listu,jestem zaniepokojony o los tej przesyłki,gdyż wszystkie książki wysyłane do Francji i Szwajcarii dochodzą.Byłbym wcześniej napisał,ale koniec roku akademickiego i egzaminy nie pozwalały mi nawet na te kilka słów,jakie dziś wystukuję.Zdałem magisterium i jestem cholernie zadowolony.Jak odsapnę napiszę długi list,proszę tymczasem o potwierdzenie,co z przesyłką?Wysyłałem na Pański adres londyński Byłbym niepocieszony gdyby przepadła.Jeśliby Pan coś pisał o krajowej literaturze,proszę wyciąć i przesłać."Wiadomości" u nas nie mają debitu i są starannie wyłuskiwane.Szkoda posyłać.
Tymczasem ściskam

Wojtek Żukrowski

Oporów 11 czerwca 48

27. Letter from Wojciech Żukrowski, June 11th, 1948

Near the end of 1952, after the suicide of his wife Krystyna, Herling moved to Munich, where he began to work in the Polish section of Radio Free Europe as director of the cultural desk. He was responsible for presenting an overview of publications in Poland and also had a regular programme called "List do komunisty" ("Letter to a Communist"), which he broadcast under a pseudonym. (Jan Nowak, the then director of the Polish section, had initially offered the programme to Czesław Miłosz, who had declined.)

Herling looks back on this period reluctantly as a "bad time", a time of personal tragedy.[54]

In 1955 he renewed his acquaintance with Lidia Croce, the daughter of Benedetto, whom he had met at the Villa Tritone in Sorrento in 1944, and they soon married. In November that year, the newlyweds moved permanently to Naples, where they took up residence in a villa given to the Croce family by the Italian government. They lived in a duplex apartment on the ground floor with their children, Benedetto and Marta.

In 1955, Ignazio Silone and Nicola Chiaromonte invited Herling to become a regular contributor to the journal *Tempo Presente*, where he continued to write until 1968. He also wrote for *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Elsinore*, *L'Espresso*, *La Fiera Letteraria*, *Settanta* and *Il Giornale*. In 1956, after a ten-year break, he resumed his collaboration with *Kultura*, where five years later, in 1961, he was to formulate his *credo* as an émigré writer as follows:

54 See *Conversations in Naples*.

> I live in Naples, cut off (…) from the larger Polish émigré communities. (…) Of the foreign languages I have encountered in my wanderings through the world, Italian is the first with which I have a more personal connection – a deeper feel for it, beyond the mere ability to speak it fluently and correctly. Its charm grows greater with every day that passes. I sometimes write small bits and pieces for Italian journals, and I see that they do not require much in the way of correction before they go to press. And yet when I write in Italian, which I do sporadically and for money, I have the sensation of touching that language as if through a thick glove. It is not a sensation I have with my mother tongue, whose touch I feel more directly, through the thin and sensitive skin of my bare hands. (…) A writer may be metaphorically compared to a sculptor: if he has succeeded in taking away with him from his native land a block of raw linguistic material, he can chisel away at it for the rest of his life, even if he spends that life abroad. Indeed, being away is often beneficial for him: his fingers, made sensitive by experience, discover in the raw material of his mother tongue shapes and forms which he might never have found under the constant pressure of the living language; his sharpened eye and more acute ear allow him to detect timbres and inflections in words and sentences which perhaps can be heard only in isolation and silence. The rest is a question of imagination, intellectual sensitivity, intelligence, experience, observation, reflection, dreams and the search for a style of one's own – problems which belong to the realm of literature, not language. (*Kultura* 1961, no. 6)

28. Benedetto Croce with his daughters Alda and Lidia (right) in the Villa Tritone, where Herling-Grudziński met Lidia

Years later, in an interview with Bronisław Wildstein, Herling admitted:

> Most important for me are my Polish texts and how they are received by Polish readers. (…) I have lived in Italy for thirty years and know Italian well, but I would never dare to write anything serious, anything major, in Italian. There was a time when I was a journalist in Italy and wrote for various dailies, weeklies and monthlies; the day of the

deadline was torture for me. Joy, even if it comes at great cost, can come only from writing in your mother tongue.[55]

In 1962 Herling applied for a visa to Poland, but was refused. The archives of the Institute of National Memory (henceforth IPN) in Warsaw contain a dozen or so documents relating to his visa application.[56] On March 3rd he sent this letter to his sister, Łucja Utnikowa:

My dearest, I applied for a visa yesterday in Rome. I'd like to come on June 1st and stay for three months, as the correspondent for a socialist daily called *La Giustizia*. I attached a letter from the editor to my visa application, accrediting me as a special correspondent for three months. In my conversation with the consul I stressed that I could only come on June 1st and for at least three months. I was very kindly, even warmly, received, but of course they said the decision was out of their hands, it would come from Warsaw. It would be a blow for me if they refused.

But in the meantime I'm hopeful, and I've a few questions to ask you, to which I'd like you to reply *by return of post*. I intend to travel quite a lot, but I shall be based in Warsaw, especially throughout June. So one question: do you think I could stay with the Morkows when I am in Warsaw? You don't come into it, I think, since you only have one room – though I see from your letter that I could stay at your place during the first half of your holiday, and spend the second half of June being solitary in Bohomolca street. Of course I have no idea if this would even be possible, so please let me know exactly what I can hope for from my family in the way of lodgings. Since my plans involve quite a bit of travel, I shall also need quite a bit of money. I'll get Alda[57] to give me something authorizing me to draw my fee for the second edition of *Zarys estetyki*. But that won't be enough, at least not for more than a month. I'm told the best thing to do is to transfer money from here through the PKO [Polish bank (ed.)]; their exchange rate is 74 złoty to the dollar. There's no PKO in Italy, but I could do it through their Paris branch. Would you have any objections if I had them send (through the Paris PKO) 300 dollars to your address before I leave? And should I address it to you or to myself, giving my address?

I think I'll come by plane. There's a LOT flight twice a week, departing at 9am from Rome and arriving at Okęcie airport at around 5pm. All the operations I've described will probably take some time, so I'll have to borrow a bit of money from you to tide me over until the transfers come through. Will that be all right? And if all goes well, I might bring Lidia over for the last two weeks of my stay (the second half of August). She's dying to see Poland.

So I await your answer – by return of post. I should know about my visa by the end of May; if it's granted, I'll cable you the date and arrival time of my flight. I hope one of you will be able to meet me at the airport, as I won't have a penny on me. Much love. Fingers crossed![58]

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55 "*Joy can come only from writing in your mother tongue*: interview with Herling-Grudziński" by Bronisław Wildstein, *Kontakt* 1985, nos. 7-8.

56 File reference no. BU01218/24934.

57 Alda Croce, daughter of Benedetto and sister of Lidia, Herling's wife.

58 Manuscript.

Rome, April 24th, 1962

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Department of Cultural and Scientific Co-operation
Deputy Director J. Daniłowicz
Warsaw

A few days ago I received a telephone call from Herling-Grudziński, who wanted to know if he would be able to visit Poland, for two to three weeks, in order to "see what it is really like" and perhaps also to write some articles for the émigré press. I told him that it was hard for me to say, but that he was surely aware that our experiences with reporters'"feature articles" about Poland published in journals like *Kultura* were hardly encouraging. He agreed and declared that it was precisely the lack of serious and reliable information about Poland in the émigré press that had prompted his decision.

He added that he was interested not so much in the intellectual and artistic *milieu* as in the countryside and agricultural communities, the development of industry, the way the masses lived etc.

He has not yet taken Italian citizenship, but he would do so if his trip to Poland turned out to be possible, in order to ensure that he would be allowed to re-enter Italy.

It is difficult for the Embassy to judge whether Herling-Grudziński's declarations are sincere; in the circumstances, therefore, we are unable to guarantee that any benefit would accrue from his trip, or even that it would do no harm.

Andrzej Wasilewski, First Secretary, Polish Embassy

On May 11th, 1962, the head of Section VII of Department II of the Interior Ministry (henceforth MSW) was informed that Łucja Utnikowa had received a document from "an unknown sender in Italy". A copy of this document was passed on to the Ministry with instructions to establish the identity of the sender and put him under surveillance the moment he arrived in Poland.[59] On May 12th, Major St. Szabla filed the following report:

G. Herling-Grudziński is not known to section VII of Dept II. Section IV of the Dept has information concerning him and his professional and political activity which establishes that he is an enemy of socialism and that his interests go far beyond the journalistic and literary. Information of a similar nature is held by Dept III, Section IV and Dept I. The question of G. Herling-Grudziński's trip to Poland has been looked into by Dept III, which decided that his presence in Poland would not be desirable. But the final decision in the matter belongs to comrade Wojtasik, head of section in Dept I.

Comrade Wojtasik has confirmed that the visa is to be <u>denied</u>.[60]

On May 18th, 1962, a report was filed in the MSW of the results of the identity check on "Górzyńska-Utnik Łucja, file ref. BDO no. DG 111662". The report

59 The document in question was Herling's letter to Łucja Utnikowa, quoted above. Herling had not signed it, probably through carelessness rather than deliberately.

60 Manuscript. Underlining in the original.

stated that Łucja Herling-Grudzińska had gone by the name of Górzyńska during the Occupation "in order to escape persecution by the occupier". She served in the Polish Army from 1944 to 1950, and in 1950 lodged an application for an official change of her family name to Górzyńska. In 1960 she married Marian Utnik.[61]

On the same day the head of Section III of the Foreigners' Registration Bureau in the MSW, in reply to a letter from the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, announced that permission for Herling-Grudziński to enter the Polish People's Republic was denied.

A month later, on June 18th, 1962, Department III informed the Foreigners' Registration Bureau of an order from T. Borowczak from Dept III to "maintain the decision to deny entry".

A week later, on June 25th, the head of Section I of the Foreigners' Registration Bureau in the MSW, captain E. Tomaszczyk, rejected Herling-Grudziński's visa application.

> Top Secret!
> Correspondence extract no. 10380 from Rome, 13.7.1962
>
> Comrade Willmann, in despatch no. 454 of the 12th inst., reports:
>
> Wasilewski has been approached by Alberto Moravia with a request to grant Herling-Grudziński his visa. He stressed that he personally could guarantee the honesty of Herling's intentions.
>
> Given Moravia's importance and status here the Embassy requests that the matter be reviewed. Section VII, Dept II, MSW.[62]

On August 12th, 1962, it was reported that Radio Free Europe had disseminated the information that Herling-Grudziński had been refused an entry visa to Poland.

On May 7th, 1964, the MSW requested information on Herling-Grudziński and his "foreigner's file". On July 1st, 1964, it was reported that he had published an article in the journal *Na antenie* about the activity of the censor's office in the Polish People's Republic. The piece had also been broadcast on Radio Free Europe.

On February 20th, 1967, the question was raised whether Herling-Grudziński's continued presence on the list of undesirables in the Polish People's Republic was deliberate.

> Top Secret!
> Correspondence extract no. 12597 from Rome, 25.8.1962
>
> Comrade Wielgosz, in despatch no. 578 of 23.8.62, reports: Your 10089.
>
> Herling applied for a visa at the end of April. Wasilewski sent a report of their conversation to Daniłowicz (no. 567/88/62, April 24th, 1962). On May 22nd the reply came by courier that the visa had been denied. When Herling presented himself,

61 The report is unsigned and unaddressed.

62 The report is addressed to comrades Birecki and Roszak.

> Wasilewski told him of the decision not to grant his application. Herling asked whether his case could be reconsidered in view of the fact that Saragat attached considerable importance to his trip and would certainly not allow the denial of a visa to a correspondent of *La Giustizia* to pass without public comment. On July 12th he telephoned Wasilewski about the matter, which we reported in despatch 454. Wasilewski replied that, exceptionally, his case would be reconsidered.
>
> On July 26th Herling telephoned Wasilewski to ask if there was any news and was told that, as promised, we had asked for his case to be reviewed but that there was no reply as yet. The following day an article appeared in *La Giustizia* (press report 480 of 27.7) and a small item in *Popolo*. On 30.7 Silone sent a letter, which in accordance with your 9447 was returned to him. On 6.8 a provocative item about the embassy appeared in *Espresso* (press report 501). It is our opinion that the matter is played-out and there is no point in raising it again, either in the press or in conversation.
>
> /-/ Wielgosz[63]

On March 20th, 1962, colonel A. Malik of Department II in the MSW requested that Herling-Grudziński's name remain on the list of undesirables. On March 22nd it was confirmed that Herling – who had invited Utnik to Italy – was on the list of undesirables in the Polish People's Republic.

In 1970 a review was conducted of the list of undesirables, and the question of Herling-Grudziński's presence on it was raised by Gen. E. Dostojewski, Director of Border Control in Department III. On July 3rd, 1970, Department III issued a decision maintaining Herling's name on the list.

On March 9th, 1968, Marian Utnik and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński were both investigated in connection with the former's intention to travel to Italy on the invitation of the latter.[64]

On March 17th, 1976, in reply to a despatch of 28.2.1976, the deputy director of Department II of the MSW, colonel W. Młynarski, wrote to the deputy director of the Passport Office at the MSW with a request that the names of nineteen foreigners, including Herling-Grudziński, "be registered as undesirable persons in the Polish People's Republic until further notice."[65] Apart from Herling's, the names on this index included Jerzy Giedroyć, Konstanty A. Jeleński, Andrzej Stypułkowski, Jerzy Drewnowski, Józef Lewandowski, Juliusz Mieroszewski, Zygmunt Hertz, Leopold

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63 This letter is addressed to Comrade Wiśniewski.

64 Marian Utnik succeeded in obtaining an Italian visa, and on his arrival immediately told Herling that the MSW had demanded that he write a report about Herling and his life in Italy when he got back. When colonel Utnik wanted to discuss any matters of a political nature with his brother-in-law, he suggested they go outside – even when they were at the summer house in Dragonea – because he feared that the Polish Security Services had installed bugging devices. Herling told me this story several times. See *Conversations in Dragonea* in the present volume.

65 Next to Herling-Grudziński's name colonel Młynarski noted: "nationality – Jewish, citizenship – Italian".

Unger, Tymon Terlecki and Czesław Miłosz. The decision was upheld on October 9th, 1979 by the head of Section V of the Passport Office at the MSW, a certain Janiszewska.

On July 6th, 1981, captain Anna Bogusz reported that Dept I of the MSW requested that Herling-Grudziński's name remain on the index. On September 18th, 1984, inspector E. Kudelski asked that Herling's name remain on the index until further notice.

On December 8th, 1987, the deputy director of Section III of the Passport Office at the MSW requested information about Herling-Grudziński. He was informed that Herling's name was on the index of undesirables and that his file reference was N-0939730.[66]

On January 16th, 1988, lt. col. Aleksander Makowski, head of Section XI of Department I in the MSW, replied that "GHG remains on the list of undesirables as a result of a deliberate decision".

On January 20th, 1988, the deputy director of Section III of the MSW Passport Office, lt .col. A. Szymański, requested – in connection with another review of the index of undesirables – that Herling-Grudziński's name remain on the index until further notice.

On May 5th, 1989, lt. col. A. Szymański asked for confirmation that the continued presence on the index of undesirables of the names of, among others, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Irena Lasota and Józef Lebenbaum was the result of a deliberate decision.

On May 11th, 1989, major W. Bednarz, head of section in Department XI of the MSW, requested that the name of Herling-Grudziński be removed from the index (and at the same time that the names of Irena Lasota and Józef Lebenbaum remain on it). On May 16th, 1989, his request was referred for review to colonel R. Popowski, deputy director of the Passport Office at the MSW. He decided to remove Herling's name from the index. On this basis the decision to remove Herling-Grudziński from the index of undesirables was implemented on May 19th, 1989.[67]

Surviving documents indicate that the MSW had a file on Herling-Grudziński which remained classified until May 19th, 1989. I have been unable to access it, or any other documents relating to Herling-Grudziński, because by the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal of May 11th, 2007 (published on May 15th, 2007 in the *Journal of Laws*, no. 85, item 571) I was denied further access to the archives of the IPN as I was preparing this book for print.[68]

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66 Another document mentions that a comrade Wróblewicz was consulted on the matter.

67 Head of Section V of the MSW Passport Office, Janiszewska.

68 According to information received from the IPN on July 6th, 2007. It is worth noting that, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, "Everyone is guaranteed the freedom (…) to obtain and disseminate information" (article 54) and "Everyone is

11. Return to Poland

Herling-Grudziński's work had no place in the official cultural life of the Polish People's Republic and was ignored for over a quarter of a century. State publishers published none of his books and literary journals could print nothing about them: a total ban on reviewing his work was imposed. As a collaborator of the Literary Institute *Kultura*, Herling was considered an implacable enemy of the Polish People's Republic (hence the refusal to grant him a visa in 1962, discussed in the previous section). This was not surprising, since Herling had supported all forms of protest against the communist authorities and assisted the democratic opposition, especially in the sphere of independent culture and underground publishing.

Herling-Grudziński's work, banned in state-sanctioned press, had no official existence until 1988. The very mention of his name, or of a title of any of his books, was forbidden in the literary press. And it was not until the 1980s that underground presses began publishing some of his books. It was the emergence of the independent ("underground") press that broke through that information ban. Then came a relaxation of censorship which allowed excerpts from Herling's work, reviews of his books and interviews with him to appear in the Catholic press.

In the years 1956-1989 Herling, who, until 1996, continued to work closely with the editors of the monthly *Kultura*, made the journey from Naples to Maisons-Laffitte every two months, but a heart attack in 1989 forced him to abandon these trips.

The victory of "Solidarity" in the 1989 elections and the abolition of censorship a few months later for the first time allowed Polish readers unrestricted access to Herling's work, and to that of other émigré writers. For him it was a comeback; for most of his readers, their first astonished encounter with the extraordinary beauty of his prose.

There has as yet been no in-depth scholarly study of Herling-Grudziński's *oeuvre*. A number of eminent writers and intellectuals have analysed his books, among them Bertrand Russell, Ignazio Silone, Józef Wittlin, Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Stempowski, Jan Lechoń, and, from a younger Polish generation, Wojciech Karpiński and Krzysztof Pomian, and many articles and short analytical studies of his work have appeared (see the bibliography at the end of this book); but no scholarly study will be possible until such time as all the material in his archives has received scholarly treatment and his dispersed writings have been collected together.

All those who have written about Herling-Grudziński's work have been struck by both its artistic and its intellectual qualities. Wojciech Karpiński, in a review of Herling's prose, put it well: "His work as a whole is hard to categorise; it moves

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guaranteed the freedom of artistic expression and the freedom to conduct scholarly research and to publish its results" (article 73).

in various directions and contains several different visions of man's place in the modern world. It is also hard to place on the literary map, being covertly modern while overtly and determinedly harking back to classic literary genres".[69]

In Poland, fascination with Herling as a writer grew steadily from the end of the 1970s onwards; by the 1980s it was undoubtedly one of the most interesting cases of the reception of émigré literature. In the world of official Polish publishing, Herling first emerged as the author of short stories, then of *A World Apart*, and only later as the author of the *Diary Written at Night*.[70]

Herling's literature transcended generational gaps. Unlike the work of such émigré writers as Witold Gombrowicz, Józef Mackiewicz or Czesław Miłosz, it drew both older readers and high-school pupils, both the literary and well read and those who haphazardly picked up anything that was popular in the literary marketplace. The value of his work was indisputable and no one questioned it. Even Czesław Miłosz had never enjoyed such an extraordinarily unanimous reception in Poland. One may suspect that such universal acceptance might be merely the result of passing fashion, but the discovery of Herling's work in Poland was not accompanied by years of publicity (as it was in the case of Gombrowicz), nor by a politically attractive intellectual anti-communism (as in the case of Mackiewicz), nor, finally, by the international prestige of a Nobel Prize. Herling's entry into the Polish market was different: his work crept in slowly, with no fanfare, one might almost say by stealth, but it made steady progress and continued to find new readership.

Herling's Polish "comeback" coincided with the discovery of his work in France, where *A World Apart* (published by Denöel and awarded the Freedom Prize of the French PEN club in 1986) became a bestseller – having waited thirty years for a publisher because French intellectuals disliked its anti-Soviet tone. It was followed by a good-sized selection from the *Diary Written at Night*, spanning the years 1970-1987, published by L'Arpenteur in a translation by Thérèse Dzieduszycka (Douchy).

In May 1991, after fifty-two years as an émigré, Herling came to Poland. The Senate of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań awarded him an honorary doctorate, and he ended his speech at the ceremony with the words: "I am no longer an émigré writer; I have become a Polish writer who lives in Naples" (see *Wyjścia z milczenia*, op. cit., p. 384).

Herling visited Poland four times after the fall of communism (in 1991, 1994, 1997 and 2000) and was awarded three honorary doctorates (by universities in Poznań, Lublin and Kraków). He also visited Prague (in 1995) and Budapest (in 1998).

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69 W. Karpiński, "Proza Herlinga-Grudzińskiego", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1981, no. 29, reprinted in: W. Karpiński, *Książki zbójeckie*, London, 1988.

70 The *Diary Written at Night* was published by Res Publica (vols 1-3), and by Plejada (vol. 4).

By the 1990s he was contributing to a variety of Polish publications, and the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* was reprinting excerpts of his *Diary Written at Night* from *Kultura*, where it was serialized as he wrote it. *A World Apart* appeared on school reading lists, and Herling lived to see the publication of his collected works.[71] He became one of the most widely read and highly esteemed writers in Poland.

At the same time, his harsh and unequivocal criticism of the post-communist political elites, and of the alliance which a large number of politicians from the "Solidarity" movement entered into with them, drew increasingly hostile comment from the media. Herling was presented as hard and implacable, a man incapable of forgiving the communists their past, a blind moralist unable to grasp that the post-communists and the old opposition had come to a "historic understanding".[72] It was partly for these reasons that Herling broke with both *Kultura* and *Tygodnik Powszechny* at the end of 1996 (both Jerzy Giedroyć and Jerzy Turowicz had refused to publish the next section of the *Diary Written at Night*, which contained a passage called "Dialogue" criticizing the political elites of the time).[73]

From 1997 until his death Herling published short stories and further *Diary* entries only in Poland, in *Plus-Minus*, the weekend supplement to the daily *Rzeczpospolita*.

Near the end of his life, in 2000, Herling wrote briefly about his family:

> Of the family Gustaw [Herling, referring to himself in third person (ed.)] alone is still alive. He is now 81 years old. My mother died young, of typhus, in Kielce, before the war. My father died during the war on his little estate in Suchedniów – mill, pond, a bit of land. The eldest son, Maurice, a lawyer, practised law in Warsaw before the war. During the war he was very active in the Żegota organization and saved many Jewish children, whom he hid in the cellar of his house in Boernerowo (known as Bemowo today). He took part in the Warsaw Uprising and was wounded. After the war he returned to Warsaw from a German prisoner-of-war camp. He joined the Party and served in the Supreme Court, specializing in family law. My older sister Eugenia studied Polish literature in Warsaw but did not complete her course and did not get a degree. After the war she worked in the Warsaw schools department. My younger

71 G. Herling-Grudziński, *Pisma zebrane*, vols I-XII, edited by Z. Kudelski, S.W. Czytelnik, Warsaw 1995-2000; see Bibliography, p. 261.

72 A good example is an article by M. Stępień entitled "Pułapki widzenia Polski z oddalenia. Glosy do *Dziennika pisanego nocą* Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego", in: *O Gustawie Herlingu-Grudzińskim*, vol. 3, edited by J. Pacławski, Kielce 1999, pp. 29-42.

73 The entry was published in the daily *Rzeczpospolita* and reprinted in his collected works: *Dzieła zebrane*, vol. 10 (*Dziennik pisany nocą 1993-1996*), Warsaw 1999, pp. 478-485. Herling talks about some of his reasons in an interview with Elżbieta Sawicka, published in her book *Widok z wieży. Rozmowy z Gustawem Herlingiem-Grudzińskim*, Warsaw 1997, pp. 121-134.

sister Łucja studied law but also failed to obtain a degree and took a job as secretary in my brother's Chambers. After the war she married col. Marian Utnik and returned with him to Poland from London (where she had worked as a typist in the embassy of the Polish People's Republic). Her husband was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in the so-called "Tatar" trial. She herself spent a year in prison with no indictment. Her husband was released after 8 years and they settled in a house in Bemowo. After his wife's death Utnik, by now almost a hundred years old, moved to a home for army officers in Bemowo, where he continues to live to this day.[74]

* * *

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński died in Naples on July 4th, 2000, from a brain haemorrhage. He was still at the peak of his literary powers. Over the previous decade he had been more prolific than ever, producing a torrent of writing: not only successive volumes of the *Diary Written at Night*, but – or perhaps especially – his short stories. These lifted the veil on a hitherto unknown side to him, a more private side; here, more than in any of his previous works, he ventured into the sphere of his own life. But the stories also revealed how strongly all his work was connected with his experiences during the war. More than half a century after the war, the events of 1939-1945 and the things he had lived through in those years were for him still the most important of his life's experiences. He wrote about many issues not directly connected with his war ordeal, but even these, like all his work, were part of a constant, ceaseless effort to reflect on the twentieth century as a century of ideology and totalitarianism. He ripened slowly as a writer; the literary maturity that produced his last works, which were of a much greater openness than before, was long coming. But when it did come, it enabled him to weave a subtle and intricate fabric in which were mingled the experiences of his own life and the human condition in the twentieth century.

His life, as a writer and as a man, was lived in the long shadow of the Gulag. He was convinced that what happened in the camps – whether Nazi or bolshevik – had left an indelible, dark imprint on human history. He often stressed that it was an experience one could never forget. Hence his fierce opposition to attempts to disregard or in any way belittle the consequences of the Second World War and of both totalitarianisms. His opposition was not political; it was borne of the conviction that our memory of the past will determine what kind of people we will become: what future generations will become and how they will fare when forced to confront the immeasurable cruelties of the twentieth century. Cruelties which did not just come from nowhere, but were planned and implemented by particular institutions and particular people.[75]

74 G. Herling-Grudziński, *Notatka o rodzinie*, from: Z. Kudelski, op. cit.

75 See more on this subject in W. Bolecki, *Ciemna miłość*, op. cit.

Chapter II
Habent sua fata libelli…[1]

Herling began considering possible literary approaches to his Gulag (or, more broadly, wartime) experiences from the moment he was released from the camp at Yertsevo. Ten days after his release, on January 30th, 1942, in Sverdlovsk, he spent his last kopeks on the purchase of a small notebook and pencil and began to make notes, which he would later call a "diary".[2] Years later, the *Diary Written at Night* would be its continuation. That day, January 30th, 1942, was also a symbolic date for him: it was the end of the time of "laying down his pen". Two years later, in his reminiscences of Ludwik Koniński, Herling wrote:

> "Time to lay down one's pen". This simplest of injunctions to obey the writer's strict – or, in the idiom of Norwid, beautiful – moral code accompanied me (…) everywhere throughout all my years of wandering. It gave me strength in Russian prisons and joy from a sense of fulfilment when, by the grace of providence, I became a free soldier in a Polish army reborn on foreign soil. For I had always dreamt that one day, one sunny day like that one [August 31st, 1939 – W.B.], years on, another letter would come and find me among the rubble of our childhood homes, a letter beginning with the words, "time to pick up our pens again", and our old conversation, so abruptly curtailed, would resume. As if nothing had happened; as if it was the tragic destiny of Poles, had been our destiny for centuries, from time immemorial, to lay down our pens from time to time and pick them up again once the clash of weapons had ceased and the smoke cleared after the fires. Today I know for certain that this dream will never come true.[3]

And seven years later he added:

> When I left Russia in 1942 as a soldier in the Polish army in the East, I had an almost unshakeable conviction that I would never be able to write of the things I had seen and experienced. And yet even then, in times when guns seemed more important than pens, I began, slowly at first, as if convalescing after a long illness, to write again. In military tents in Iraq, in Egypt, in Palestine, in bivouacs and army encampments, even

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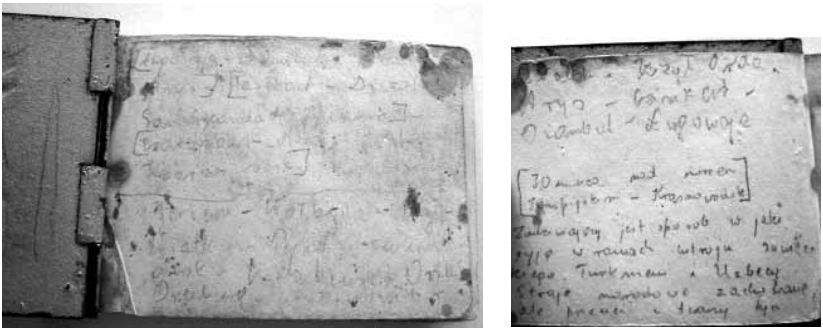
1 *Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli…* (Terence): "The destiny of books depends on the capacities of the reader".

2 See photos on p. 61.

3 G. Herling-Grudziński, "Wspomnienie o K.L. Konińskim", op. cit., p. 22.

– as I wrote in a footnote to one of my first wartime pieces – "when under fire in the artillery at Monte Cassino".[4]



29. Pages from the notebook Herling-Grudziński bought in Sverdlovsk, about 5 cm by 7 cm, with a metal binding

When he wrote this, Herling was thinking of his early work for the press of the 2nd Corps in 1943 in Iraq.

In retrospect, however, it is clear that the path of Herling's life exemplified a somewhat different sense of Koniński's dictum than that intended by its author. He did not, in fact, lay down his pen in September 1939: scarcely two weeks after the outbreak of war, he had founded and was editing the journal *Biuletyn Polski*. And when he once again reached for his pen on January 30th, 1942, he saw it as "a sign of [his] rapid return to health" (*A World Apart*, p. 234). Thus the period during which he did not write – i.e. the time he spent in Soviet prisons and in the Gulag – was for him not so much a time when he had laid down his pen as a period when that pen had been forcibly prised from his hand.

In September 1939 laying down his pen meant, for Herling, not literally ceasing to write but rather a change of subject, from the literary, aesthetic and cultural to the political: the threat to his country's existence. The "pen of reflection and contemplation" became – when the times required it – the "pen of struggle". But when, on January 30th, 1942, Herling once again reached for his pen – which had been not so much laid down as knocked out of his hand and withheld for a year and a half – the problems that confronted him were very different from those he had explored as a journalist and essayist in September 1939. They were the

4 G. Herling-Grudziński, "Literatura wolna i upaństwowiona", *Wiadomości*, 1951, no. 38, reprinted in: *Wyjścia z milczenia*, op. cit., pp. 181-182.

intellectual, moral, literary and even linguistic problems of how to write about the nightmare of the Gulag.

His reflections on this bore fruit first in the form of an anthology of war stories by various writers, to which he contributed an introduction. A few years later they bore further fruit in the form of what was to become his most famous book, *A World Apart*.

One possible literary model for Herling was Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*. Another was Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, introduced to him by his friend Tadeusz Potworowski. His first attempts to find a literary form for his experiences date from this period. At the same time he was preparing a collection called *Chłód serca*, which was to consist of eight novellas; but he burnt all of them.[5]

30. Letter from Józef Wittlin, August 12th, 1947

Herling was to return again and again to the themes and characters of these early writings. He published what he then thought of as the beginning of his memoirs, a chapter entitled *Zabójca Stalina* ("Stalin's Murderer"), in the London journal *Wiadomości* (no. 37) in 1947. It was just a first draft, but it was noticed by Józef Wittlin, who wrote: "I recently read your *Zabójca Stalina*, which made a great

5 See G. Herling-Grudziński, "Wojna bez powieści", in *Orzeł Biały*, 1946, no. 10; Z. Kudelski, *Pielgrzym Świętokrzyski*, op. cit., p. 32. A notebook in which Herling wrote two passages later included in *A World Apart* has survived with this title on the cover. See photo on p. 71.

impression on me. I feel awe at someone who has experienced such terrible things."[6]

Almost all the literary and political criticism which Herling published after his release from Yertsevo was a preparation for the intellectual and artistic problems which he later tackled, in different form, in *A World Apart*. Among them: "Wojna bez powieści" (*Orzeł Biały*, 1946, no. 10), "Proza czasu wojny" (*Wiadomości*, 1947, no. 7), "U kresu nocy" (reprinted here, see Appendix I), "O łagrach" (*Wiadomości*, 1949, no. 42), and *W oczach pisarzy*, a collection of war stories published in Rome in 1947.

Herling settled down to steady work on the book which was to become *A World Apart* in 1949. In July of that year friends of his invited him to Rugby, where he spent a month, in the course of which he completed five chapters about his experiences in Yertsevo. These were published in *Wiadomości* and later incorporated into the book. The chapters were "Vitebsk-Leningrad-Vologda" (a footnote said this was part of a book entitled *Martwi za Życia* – "The Living Dead"), "Nocne łowy", "Głód", "Drei Kameraden" and "Partia Szachów".[7] It is hard to say, however, whether Herling already had a clear idea of the book at that time. The order in which he published successive chapters, as well as the working title ("Notes from the Soviet Union"), which testified to the genre he thought they belonged to, seem to indicate that he might initially have intended no more than a series of reminiscences, with no intention of making them into a coherent, book--length whole.

These chapters were translated into English from the manuscript by Andrzej Ciołkosz and offered to Heinemann, under the title *The Living Dead*, by Witold Czerwiński. Heinemann asked Malcolm Muggeridge – whose memoirs Herling held in great regard – to review them, and it was thanks to his positive opinion that they agreed to publish them and gave Herling an advance on royalties, which enabled him to finish the book in 1950. Strictly speaking, *A World Apart* was written between July 1949 and July 1950.

The resulting book, under the new title, *A World Apart*, was published in English in 1951, in an excellent – in the view of the author and other readers – translation by Joseph Mark (the pen name of Andrzej Ciołkosz) and with a brief preface by Bertrand Russell. This seems to have been on the initiative of Russell himself, or perhaps it was Heinemann's; at any rate, Russell wrote to Herling,[8] saying:

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6 Letter from New York, August 12th, 1947. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archive.

7 Each chapter was preceded by the title: *Zapiski sowieckie* ("Notes from the Soviet Union") – the subtitle to the Polish edition of *A World Apart*. They appeared, sequentially, in *Wiadomości* nos 40, 44, 46, 48 and 50.

8 Letter of May 29th, 1951. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archive.

Dear Mr Herling-Grudzinski,

I have read your book *A World Apart* and have been very much moved by it. I enclose a short preface which I hope may help to sell the book.

What I think of the book I have said in the enclosed preface. I read it all with passionate interest. No doubt a person who has never suffered torture cannot read it with full psychological understanding, but I have done my best.

Yours sincerely,
Bertrand Russell

Several months later he wrote thanking Herling for a copy of the book:[9]

Thank you for your book and your kind letter.

I am most willing that my preface should be translated and reprinted wherever it suits you.

Yours sincerely,
Bertrand Russell

The English edition of *A World Apart* was a great success. It was followed by two American editions in New York, in 1951 and 1952.

New York Times

'Tell Them the Truth About Us'

A WORLD APART. By Gustav Herling. With a preface by Bertrand Russell. Translated from Polish by Joseph Marek. 262 pp. Illustrated. New York: Roy Publishers. $3.50.

By MIKHAIL KORIAKOV

IN 1939, when Dostoevsky wrote "Memoirs from the House of the Dead," a record of his penal servitude in Siberia, critics greeted him as "a new Dante who had descended into Hell, the more terrible as it existed not in the writer's imagination but in reality." Gustav Herling, a young Polish writer, arrested by the Russians in 1940 and sent to a labor camp near Lake Onega, says that Russia is still "a house of the dead" as if "time has stood still between Dostoevsky's hard labor and our own."

Like Dostoevsky, Mr. Herling found that "a writer who wishes to describe a Soviet labor camp objectively must descend to the depths of Hell where he should not seek human motives behind inhuman deeds. It is from there that the faces of the dead and perhaps still living friends look up at him, and their lips, blue with hunger and frost, whisper: 'Tell them the truth about us, tell them what we were brought to!'"

Mr. Herling has fulfilled his fellow-prisoners' request, and he has done it magnificently. Hundreds of eyewitness accounts of life in Soviet labor camps have been written, but Mr. Herling's "A World Apart" is the only one that might be called a twentieth-century counterpart to Dostoevsky's nineteenth-century classic.

The young author (he was born in 1919) possesses a tremendous gift for straightforward narrative. His descriptions of the bulk-hut, or a concert given by the convicts for their comrades, of the day of rest, have the Dostoevskian quality. He draws at least ten full-length portraits of sharply contrasting characters: the Don Cossack Pantelov, the unfrocked priest Dunka, the sadist Vasyukov, the old Bolshevik Sadovsky who, having gone out of his mind "pissed a lake in the middle of the barrack, sat down behind it as if at a desk and shouting out a string of strange foreign names, he added to each, with frightening monotony and fury, the command: 'This is a revolution! The firing squad to you! To the wall with him! To the wall!'"

Of the portraits, the best is that of Mikhail Alexeyevich Kostyrev, an engineer, who one day forgot himself in a discussion with his friends and shouted: "Liberate the West! From what?" Kostyrev was denounced and condemned, but he swore: "I shall never work for them again." And in end his usefulness to his captors he turned his arms.

WHAT is still more important is that Mr. Herling describes life in a Soviet labor camp as it affects the spirit of the prisoner. He tries to see what is going on under the surface, and his book is—as Bertrand Russell points out—"of profound psychological interest."

In the courts times penal servitude was intended simply to punish the criminal. Dostoevsky related that convicts received rather good food. Their only torture was captivity; he symbolized the prisoners' longing for freedom in the scene with a wounded eagle. In the Soviet Union the system of forced labor is intended not only to exploit the prisoner economically but to transform him physiologically, which means to kill his capacity to think and long for freedom. This system breaks a man first with tortures applied at hearings, secondly with hunger in the camp.

Mr. Herling shows how a prisoner's personality is dismantled into its component parts: his "thoughts and emotions become loosened in their original positions and suffer against each other like the parts of a broken-down machine." Then the prisoner undergoes the Great Change: "the whole world suddenly shrinks to the limits of the camp," and he "begins to dread the prospect of having again to live at liberty," because "at the very depth of human degradation there occur moments when every possibility of change, even change for the better, appears risky and dangerous."

No person who seeks to understand Soviet Russia today can afford to miss this book.

31. Mikhail Koriakov, "Tell them the truth about us", The New York Times

Herling received many letters of congratulation, both from individuals (among them Graham Greene, Arthur Koestler, Isaac Deutscher, Manes Sperber and Fitzroy MacLean) and from publishers, all deeply moved by his book. The writer Olof Lagercrantz, editor-in-chief of the Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter*, published

9 Letter of September 25th, 1951. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archive.

a lengthy review and wrote to Herling proposing that he write an article for the paper under the title "House of the Dead", because Swedish readers would like to know what a survivor of a Soviet concentration camp thought of Dostoyevski's novel.[10] Many of those who had read *A World Apart* in English went out of their way to help in the book's publicity campaign, trying to drum up interest among foreign publishers. A good example was Irena Szymowicz, whose letter describes her efforts in Sweden on behalf of the book:[11]

> I have delayed replying in order to be able to write with some specific and positive news. Ture Nerman (a writer and senator, a very popular figure here) took your book and promised to go in person to the Tiden publishing house to discuss it, but the next day he suddenly fell ill and had to be taken to hospital for an operation. Because of this two weeks were wasted. After his return from hospital, Nerman talked with Tiden and learnt that they already had the book, having received it the previous autumn from their representative in London, but had decided that conditions were not favourable for its publication in Sweden at this time. Sheer nonsense, in my view – now is precisely the time: after all these espionage scandals, interest in Russia has increased tremendously.
>
> So I took back the copy and will try elsewhere. Today I saw the head of the literature desk at *Dagens Nyheter* (Lagercrantz). It's the best and most readable newspaper in Sweden (liberals), and Lagercrantz is very well known as a writer and literary critic. If he were to write a review, it would be a great help in getting Swedish publishers interested. I gave him the book and the copies of English reviews that you sent. He promised he would get down to it tonight. But all promises have to be taken *cum grano salis* and we must be patient, patient, patient. The most important thing about Lagercrantz is that his own books as well as *Dagens Nyheter* are published by the biggest Swedish publishing house, Bonnier.

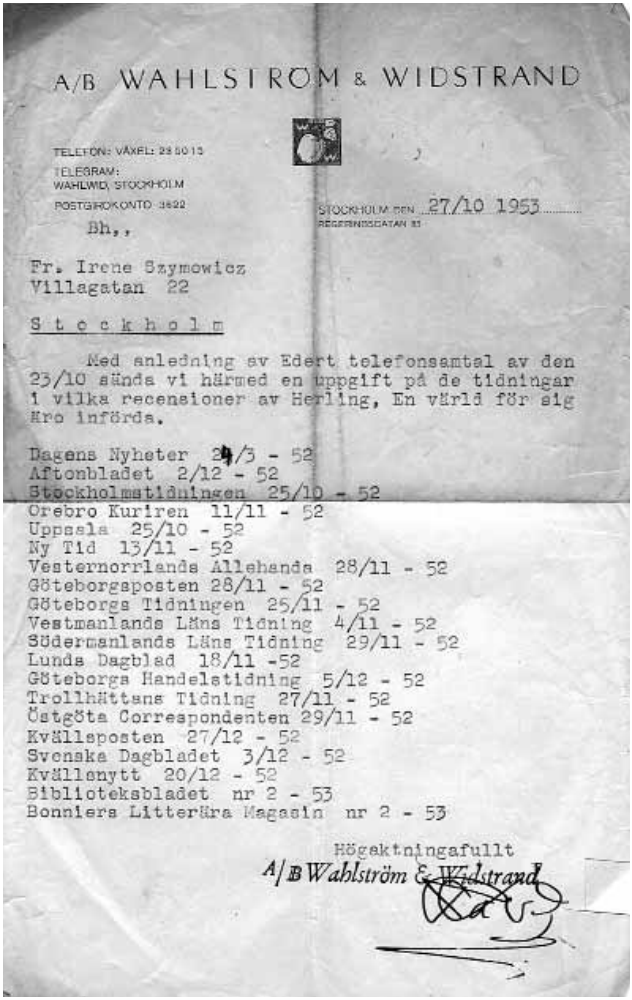
A few days later she wrote again:

> I'm so glad to have some good news for you. I've just had a phone call from Olof Lagercrantz, who said your book made a tremendous impression on him, that he thought it truly extraordinary and that he was very grateful to me for giving it to him to read. There will be a lengthy article about it in *Dagens Nyheter* in a few days' time; he has already started working on it. He also said that there would certainly be a Swedish edition.
>
> I will send you his article as soon as it appears, along with a translation. And I will discuss with him what further practical steps to take, i.e. the choice of Swedish publisher. Basically, it comes down to two: Bonniers (the biggest in Sweden, along with Norstedt) and Natur and Kultur, which specializes in this kind of literature. It's

10 Letter of March 6th, 1952. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archive.

11 Letter of March 3rd, 1952. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archive. Similar efforts were undertaken by Zofia Cybulska, the wife of Weissberg-Cybulski; it was she who put Herling in touch with Arthur Koestler (letter from Cybulska to Herling of August 30th, 1950, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archive).

quite possible that one of them will get in touch with you independently after reading Lagercrantz's review.[12]



A/B WAHLSTRÖM & WIDSTRAND

TELEFON: VÄXEL: 23 50 15
TELEGRAM:
WAHLWID, STOCKHOLM
POSTGIROKONTO 3622

STOCKHOLM DEN 27/10 1953
REGERINGSGATAN 81

Bh,,

Fr. Irene Szymowicz
Villagatan 22

S t o c k h o l m

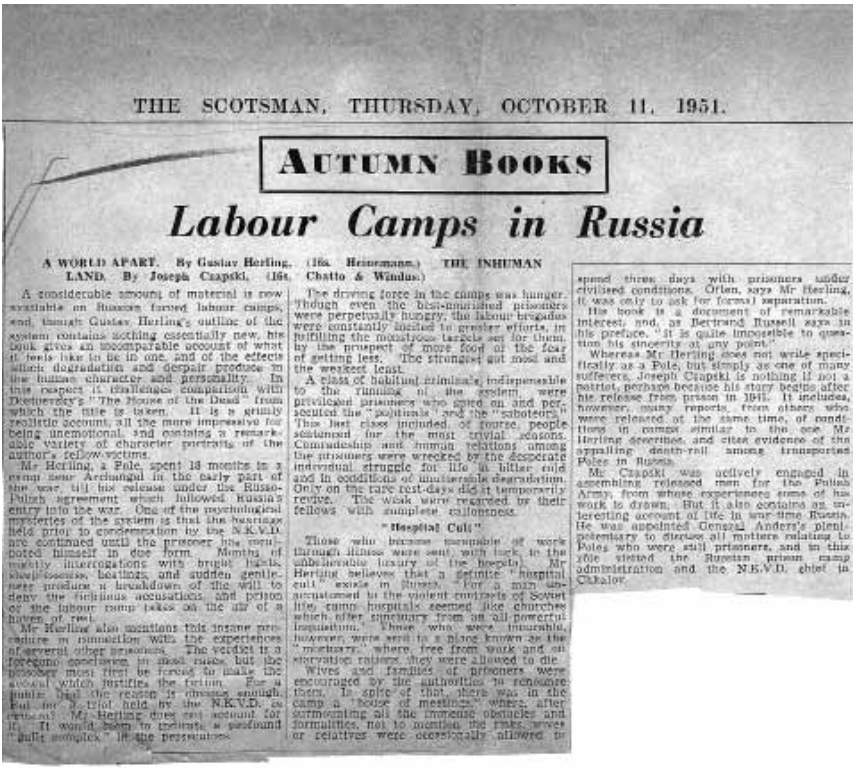
Med anledning av Edert telefonsamtal av den 23/10 sända vi härmed en uppgift på de tidningar i vilka recensioner av Herling, En värld för sig kro införda.

Dagens Nyheter 24/3 - 52
Aftonbladet 2/12 - 52
Stockholmstidningen 25/10 - 52
Örebro Kuriren 11/11 - 52
Uppsala 25/10 - 52
Ny Tid 13/11 - 52
Vesternorrlands Allehanda 28/11 - 52
Göteborgsposten 28/11 - 52
Göteborgs Tidningen 25/11 - 52
Vestmanlands Läns Tidning 4/11 - 52
Södermanlands Läns Tidning 29/11 - 52
Lunds Dagblad 18/11 -52
Göteborgs Handelstidning 5/12 - 52
Trollhättans Tidning 27/11 - 52
Östgöta Correspondenten 29/11 - 52
Kvälleposten 27/12 - 52
Svenska Dagbladet 3/12 - 52
Kvällsnytt 20/12 - 52
Biblioteksbladet nr 2 - 53
Bonniers Litterära Magasin nr 2 - 53

Högaktningsfullt
A/B Wahlström & Widstrand

32. Letter from the A/B Wahlström & Widstrand publishing house to Irena Szymowicz, October 27th, 1953

12 Letter of March 7th, 1952, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archive. The Swedish edition of *A World Apart*, *En värld för sig*, was published in Stockholm in 1952, in a translation (from the English) by N. Jacobsson.



THE SCOTSMAN, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1951.

AUTUMN BOOKS

Labour Camps in Russia

A WORLD APART. By Gustaw Herling. (16s. Heinemann.) **THE INHUMAN LAND.** By Joseph Czapski. (16s. Chatto & Windus.)

A considerable amount of material is now available on Russian forced labour camps, and, though Gustaw Herling's outline of the system contains nothing essentially new, his book gives an incomparable account of what it feels like to be in one, and of the effects which degradation and despair produce in the human character and personality. In this respect it challenges comparison with Dostoevsky's "The House of the Dead" from which the title is taken. It is a grimly realistic account, all the more impressive for being unemotional, and containing a remarkable variety of character portraits of the author's fellow-victims.

Mr Herling, a Pole, spent 18 months in a camp near Archangel in the early part of the war, till his release under the Russo-Polish agreement which followed Russia's entry into the war. One of the psychological mysteries of the system is that the barrage held prior to condemnation by the N.K.V.D. are continued until the prisoner has vegetated himself in due form. Months of nightly interrogations with bright lights, sleeplessness, beatings, and sudden gentleness produce a breakdown of the will to deny the fictitious accusations, and prison or the labour camp pass on the air of a haven of rest.

Mr Herling also mentions this insane procedure in connection with the experiences of several other prisoners. The verdict is a foregone conclusion in most cases, but the prisoner must first be forced to make the avowal which justifies the fiction. For a while, that the reason is obscure enough. But one is held by the N.K.V.D. to pettiness. Mr Herling does not account for it. It would seem to indicate a profound "guilt complex" in the persecutors.

The driving force in the camps was hunger. Though even the best-nourished prisoners were perpetually hungry, the labour brigades were constantly incited to greater efforts, in fulfilling the monstrous targets set for them, by the prospect of more food or the fear of getting less. The strongest got most and the weakest least.

A class of habitual criminals, indispensable to the running of the system, were privileged prisoners who spied on and persecuted the "politicals" and the "saboteurs." This last class included, of course, people sentenced for the most trivial reasons. Comradeship and human relations among the prisoners were wrecked by the desperate individual struggle for life in bitter cold and in conditions of unbearable degradation. Only on the rare rest-days did it temporarily revive. The weak were reserved by their fellows with complete callousness.

"Hospital Cult"

Those who became incapable of work through illness were sent with luck to the unbelievable luxury of the hospital. Mr Herling believes that a definite "hospital cult" exists in Russia. "For a man unaccustomed to the violent contrasts of Soviet life, camp hospitals seemed like churches which, after supplicatory fears on all powerful Inquisition." Those who were incurable, however, were sent to a place known as the "mortuary," where, free from work and on starvation rations, they were allowed to die.

Wives and families of prisoners were encouraged by the authorities to renounce them. In spite of that, there was in the camp a "house of meetings" where, after surmounting all the immense obstacles and formalities, not to mention the risks, wives or relatives were occasionally allowed to spend three days with prisoners under civilised conditions. Orlen, says Mr Herling, it was only to ask for formal separation.

His book is a document of remarkable interest, and, as Bertrand Russell says in his preface, "it is quite impossible to question his sincerity at any point."

Whereas Mr Herling does not write specifically as a Pole, but simply as one of many sufferers, Joseph Czapski is nothing if not a patriot, perhaps because his story begins after his release from prison in 1941. It includes, however, many reports, from others who were released at the same time, of conditions in camps similar to the one Mr Herling describes, and cites evidence of the appalling death-toll among transported Poles in Russia.

Mr Czapski was actively engaged in assembling released men for the Polish Army, from whose experiences some of his work is drawn. But it also contains an interesting account of life in war-time Russia. He was appointed General Anders's plenipotentiary to discuss all matters relating to Poles who were still prisoners, and in this rôle visited the Russian prison camp administration and the N.K.V.D. chief in Chkalov.

33. "Labour camps in Russia", a review of A World Apart *in* The Scotsman*, October 11th, 1951*

* * *

The first Polish edition of *A World Apart*, also with Russell's preface, was published in London in 1953 by Gryf. The next, a revised version with a new preface, appeared in France in 1965, under the imprint of the Paris Literary Institute.[13]

The Polish edition probably appeared at the instigation of Stanisław Baliński, who proposed the book for publication in a letter to the Polish Writers' Association:

> I should like to submit a proposal to publish Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's book on Russia. It is ready for press. Excerpts from it have been published in *Wiadomości*. The book is impressive. It is a shattering account of things that should shake the conscience

13 This edition went through several reprints: in 1972, 1979, 1982 (a miniature edition), 1985 and 1989.

> of the world; but it is also a piece of marvellous prose, and most highly deserving of publication. It is an extremely interesting book, quite unique in its treatment of this tragic subject matter, and most highly deserving of publication.[14]

The book's reception among Polish readers (Alex Weissberg-Cybulski and his wife Zofia, Melchior Wańkowicz, Zofia and Marta Erdman, Kazimierz Wierzyński, Krystyna Marek, Maria Uniłowska, Kazimierz Zamorski, Włodzimierz Kozłowski and many others) was equally enthusiastic. Kazimierz Wierzyński wrote: "please congratulate Herling on [Russell's] preface. I'm as sure of this book as I am of anything. A few more like this and I shall start thinking there is some meaning to our émigré existence."[15]

The English- and Polish-language editions of *A World Apart* established Herling's position among Polish émigré authors. He was esteemed not only for his prose but also for his essays and penetrating literary criticism. In another letter, Wierzyński wrote: "Herling-Grudziński's comments are very incisive; taken together with what he wrote on Spender, his must be the most penetrating analysis of the European '*demi-siècle*' of all. There is nothing like it outside the pages of your journal. I am astonished by his perspicacity and excited by the vigour with which he expresses his (well-founded) ideas. As you know, nothing pleases me more than a new talent and the development of a writer. Though it doesn't strictly apply here, since in Grudziński's case there's no question of development: everything in him is fully developed, polished and perfectly formed. I'm glad he's been rewarded at last."[16]

In Poland the first editions of *A World Apart* began appearing in the 1980s, in a variety of underground presses: first (in 1980) the NOWA publishing house, then (in 1981) Łódź Historical Publishing, then (in 1986) the publishing arm of Klub Myśli Robotniczej "Baza", then (1987) the Lublin publisher BIN, and finally the Warsaw publishers Akces and Antyk (both also in 1987). Probably no fewer than eight such unofficial editions emerged during this period. Official literary life, however, continued to ignore Herling. There was a total ban on reviewing *A World Apart* or any of his other books in the official press. *Książka zapisów i zaleceń cenzury*, the official Polish censor's handbook, smuggled into Sweden in 1977 by an ex-censor, Tomasz Strzyżewski, lists 58 émigré writers, including Herling-Grudziński, who were subject to an "absolute ban on any mention of their names or of their work, except critically, in the press, radio

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14 Stanisław Baliński, motion of February 23rd, 1951, put before the Polish Writers' Association. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archive.

15 Kazimierz Wierzyński, excerpt from a letter. It is undated and the name of the recipient is missing. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archive.

16 Kazimierz Wierzyński, from a letter to Mieczysław Grydzewski, 18.9. (no year supplied). Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's archive.

or television, or in any non-scholarly works (literature, journalistic writing and criticism, essays).” In practice this meant that newspapers could make a reference to Herling-Grudziński only as a “traitor”, and to his book only as an “anachronistic instrument of the cold war” that was “poor literature”. As late as 1987, the censor had removed the title *A World Apart* from an interview with Herling published in the magazine *Przegląd Powszechny*. There could naturally be no trace of any information about Herling’s book or its author in school textbooks.

The first official Polish edition of *A World Apart* was published by Czytelnik (Warsaw) in 1989, with a new preface by the author. To date it has been reissued several times, with a total print run of several hundred thousand.[17]

The official Polish edition was preceded by translations into a number of languages, among them Swedish (1952), German (1953), Italian (1958, and a new edition in 1965 with a preface by Ignazio Silone), Spanish (1953), Japanese, Arabic (1953) and Chinese (Hong Kong, 1953).

But no French edition. It was over a quarter of a century later that one at last appeared. And yet a French translation was finished and ready for publication by Plon shortly after the first English edition, on which it was based. Excerpts from it were published in *Le Figaro Littéraire*, the weekly supplement to the daily *Le Figaro*, starting June 28th, 1952. The translation was by Hélène Claireau, the illustrations by Etienne Mirini and the preface by Rémy Roure. The book was eventually published in 1985, under the imprint of Denöel and with a preface by Jorge Semprun. Thirty-four years had passed since the first English edition. On the French edition of *A World Apart* Herling had this to say:

> “How is it,” asked the nice man who was literary director for Denöel, “that the French edition is only coming out now, over thirty years after the book was written?”
>
> Which was as good an opportunity as any to look back: without bitterness, merely for didactic purposes.
>
> Almost immediately after the English edition, at the beginning of the 1950s, Plon signed a contract for a French translation (on the recommendation of Gabriel Marcel). They went eagerly to work, printing some long extracts in the *Le Figaro Littéraire* as pre-publication publicity. About a year later they announced they were withdrawing from the project, on the advice of “a new team of readers”. I sent a copy of the English edition to Camus at Gallimard. I have before me his letter, dated June 25th, 1956: “I liked your book very much and have spoken of it enthusiastically. But the final decision – I suspect chiefly motivated by commercial considerations – was negative. I felt personally deeply disappointed by this and would at least like you to know that in

17 In 2007, the then Minister of Education, Roman Giertych, attempted to remove *A World Apart* from school reading lists. In the face of protests from public opinion, the Minister of Culture, the Speaker of Parliament and the Prime Minister, he backed down.

LE FIGARO LITTERAIRE — SAMEDI 28 JUIN 1952

LES CAMPS DE CONCENTRATION SOVIÉTIQUES

(SUITE DE LA SEPTIEME PAGE)

Un camp de
non un roman s

34. [Rémy Roure?] "Les camps de concentration soviétiques", a review of A World Apart *in* Le Figaro*, June 28th, 1952*

my view your book should be published and read everywhere, both because of what it is and because of what it is about. With your permission, I shall try to look into the possibility of publishing it elsewhere."

Camus's efforts with other publishers bore no fruit. After his death in 1960 further efforts were made, but these also failed. And then suddenly in 1980 the Spanish writer Jorge Semprun wrote about his discovery of *A World Apart* (in English) in his book *Quel beau dimanche!* I didn't know him then, and did not know that, in addition to writing about it in his book, he had also recommended it warmly to Denöel, my current French publisher. I met Semprun six months ago at a tea party given for the Wajdas [Andrzej Wajda, Polish film director, and his wife, Krystyna Zachwatowicz (ed.)] at Kot Jeleński's house.[18] By then the translation was ready, but – since the negotiations between Denöel and my London publisher, Heinemann, had gone on behind my back – it was based not on the original but on the excellent English translation by the late Andrzej Ciołkosz. All I could do was insist on the publisher's allowing Kot to check the French translation against the Polish original, and to this they agreed.

So what happened? Why the "new team of readers" at *Plon*? What hidden meaning lurked between the lines of Camus's sentence about suspected "commercial

18 Konstanty A. Jeleński (1922-1987), known at Kot to his friends, a brilliant literary critic and translator living in Paris who did much to promote Polish literature in France.

> considerations"? I am surely not mistaken in saying that the history of the French cultural establishment has two separate chapters: pre-Solzhenitsyn and post-Solzhenitsyn. In England, where *A World Apart* was well reviewed and well received by the public, one of the reviews (a favourable one) ended with the warning: "But we must not forget that this book was written by a Pole, and we know what Russia is and was Under Polish Eyes." (*Diary*…, 29.XI.1984)

The French edition was something of an event in France. Herling was awarded the prize of the French PEN club (1986) and the Prix Gutenberg. He also appeared on Bernard Pivot's highly prestigious television show "Apostrophes". "An appearance on Pivot's 'Apostrophes'," wrote Wojciech Karpiński, "is in itself a kind of literary prize. Pivot is sparing with his compliments. He expressed the greatest admiration about Herling's book."[19]

The book's success in France encouraged English-language publishers to bring out new editions: a paperback edition in New York and London (at Heinemann) in 1986, and an Oxford University Press edition in 1987. These were soon followed by the first Russian-language editions, first in London in 1989, published by the Overseas Publications Exchange, and then in Moscow, at Progress Press. Both were translated by Natalia Gorbanyevska. Then came a Czech edition and a reprint of the Italian, the first edition never having been properly distributed to bookshops. The reason for this was the same that had so delayed the book's publication in France, namely a reluctance on the part of the cultural establishment to tolerate any criticism of the USSR; and within the sphere of Soviet influence the subject of the Gulag was still a taboo at the time.

Herling's situation in Italy during this period was

> …very unpleasant. Dreadful, even. I recently discussed it with Czesław Miłosz over the phone, and compared my situation in those years of communist influence to that of a leper. To which Miłosz replied: "Well, I was a leper in France". It's true; he was. (…) No one wanted to listen to us; they preferred to ignore us. And not only in my case or Miłosz's; that was the standard treatment of all East European writers living in the West.[20]
>
> I think that anyone writing a history of the French cultural establishment, or more generally, of the post-war French intelligentsia, will have to take account of that

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19 W. Karpiński, "Lustro *Innego świata*", *Zeszyty Literackie*, 1986, no. 13, reprinted in: Karpiński, *Książki zbójeckie*, op. cit.

20 "*Dawni Mistrzowie*, a conversation with Gustaw Herling-Grudziński", in: Z. Kudelski, *Pielgrzym Świętokrzyski*, op. cit., p. 142. See also Herling's comments in *Conversations in Dragonea* in the present volume. After Herling's death, Roberto Salvadori, in an article entitled "Herling i Włosi" in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (22.06.2002, translated by J. Mikołajewski), attempted to make light of Herling's experiences with the Italian communists, which provoked polemical articles from, among others, Mauro Martini, Marcello Flores and Czesław Miłosz (all in *Gazeta Wyborcza* on that day or on subsequent days).

caesura: pre-Solzhenitsyn and post-Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn started a revolution throughout the world – or a counter-revolution, if you prefer. After reading Solzhenitsyn, the whole French academic intelligentsia, as well as journalists and writers, came to see things from a different perspective. (…) An important factor was that he was Russian, so there was a feeling that he was less likely to be speaking from prejudice.[21]

35. Cover of the notebook containing the first version of the story "Chłód Serca" ["Coldness of the Heart"], 1945

21 "Radość daje pisanie…", conversation with B. Wildstein, op. cit.

36. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński in Naples

Chapter III
A Brief History of the Subject

1. Historical Contexts

Considered from the point of view of its subject matter alone, *A World Apart* is just one of many accounts about Soviet concentration camps provided by Poles who left the USSR with General Anders's army. Of those which predate Herling's book, among the best known are *W domu niewoli* by Marta Rudzka (Beata Obertyńska), 1946; *Wspomnienia starobielskie* and *Na nieludzkiej ziemi* by Józef Czapski, 1944 and 1949; *Dzieje rodziny Korzeniewskich* by Melchior Wańkowicz, 1942; *Za winy niepopełnione* by Irena Wasilewska, 1945; *Tułacze dzieci* by Weronika Hort (Maria Anna Tyszkiewiczowa, aka Hanna Ordonówna), 1948; *Między sierpem a młotem* by Wacław Grubiński, 1948; *Książka o Kołymie* by Anatol Krakowiecki, 1950; *Diabeł w Raju* by Tadeusz Wittlin; and *Ludzie sponiewierani* by Herminia Naglerowa, 1946. There are also dozens of reminiscences, memoirs and accounts which appeared in the Polish press during the war and shortly after it. But *A World Apart* is more than just another Polish account of Soviet labour camps; the context which surrounds and bears upon it is much broader.

There is, first of all, the broad political context, which was common to all accounts of the Gulag. From the time of the first talks between Stalin and the Allies (which took place immediately after Nazi Germany's attack on the USSR in June 1941), the subject of the Gulag, like that of Soviet war crimes, was carefully censored by the Allies. Since the USSR had allied itself with the West against Hitler (after previously allying itself with Hitler against the West, from 23.8.1939 to 22.6.1941), Allied censorship made sure that there was nothing in the image of its new ally to shock public opinion. The first clampdown on information concerned the massacre [of tens of thousands Polish military officers (ed.)] carried out by the NKVD at Katyń. It was followed by censorship in a variety of other areas, including the subject of the existence of Soviet concentration camps. For the same reason, all accounts of these by Poles were treated as exaggerated or sometimes simply unreliable, born of anti-Russian prejudice and written with the aim of "deliberately discrediting the USSR".

Then there is the historical context, which concerns the connection between the Gulag and the ideology of Soviet communism – or rather the practice of it

by the Bolsheviks after they took power in 1917. This context harks back even further, in that it inevitably evokes comparisons between the Soviet camps and exile to Siberia at the time of the tsars.

The third layer of context within which *A World Apart* is embedded is all the information about Soviet camps which was or could have been known before the books's publication. In other words, the context of literature on the Gulag in general.

Last, but by no means least, is the fourth context, a purely literary one: how to write about the camps, what information to include and how best to convey what they were like, as well as one's own experiences in the Gulag.

These contexts were the artistic dilemmas which Herling had to confront when he sat down to write *A World Apart*.

By 1949 Herling was, naturally, familiar with what published material there was that lifted a little corner of the veil on the USSR (for instance, General Victor Kravchenko's book *I Chose Freedom*, famous at the time) and with a variety of Polish memoirs about the USSR. He was also well acquainted with accounts by prisoners in Nazi concentration camps – such as Tadeusz Borowski's stories from Auschwitz. He did not, however, know any pre-war books about the Gulag, or anything about the history of the Gulag, which was among the most highly guarded state secrets in the USSR. Information about it began to trickle through in literature and in the press after Khrushchev's accession to power in 1956, but was not systematically revealed until quite recently, mostly thanks to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's books.

So when Herling sat down to write his memoir of the Gulag in 1949, its composition was a kind of challenge – intellectual, literary and moral. He had to find a way of writing a personal account of a reality that far exceeded both ordinary imaginings about what could befall people in the twentieth century and the ordinary limitations of literary expression.

> Nadezhda Mandelstam, widow of the poet Osip Mandelstam, who was hounded to death by the Soviet authorities, and author of two magnificent volumes of memoirs, called the Soviet system a "prison civilization". After my book appeared in Italy, the well-known Italian critic Paolo Milano defined it as a *Bildungsroman*.[1] I hope that one day *A World Apart* will be read as a *Bildungsroman* of the distant, bygone era of Soviet prison civilization. (*Diary*…, 10.3.1985)

Let us take a brief look at the history and prehistory of this "civilization".

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1 The *Bildunsroman*, also known as the *Entiwcklungsroman*, literally "novel of development": a novel about the evolution of the protagonist's character. The model for this type of novel is Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.

2. Exile to Siberia

Exile to Siberia was used as a punishment in Russia from the sixteenth century onwards; from the seventeenth century exile was an official sentence, sometimes pronounced as a merciful alternative to the death penalty.[2] At first, exiles to Siberia were criminal and political offenders (for crimes against the State) and prisoners of war; from the mid-seventeenth century they included runaway women and boys. The punishment was just being in Siberia – a place unimaginably remote from wherever the prisoner lived. Initially it was a punishment camp with no borders ("the world's biggest prison without a roof"): prisoners were simply dumped wherever labour was needed (the biggest prison colony was around Tobolsk). It was, in other words, a place of forced colonization. As the number of prisoners and the Russian government's investment in Siberia grew, so did demand for labour; to meet it, forced labour became increasingly widespread. This form of penal servitude – exile to a place of forced hard labour in Siberia – came to be referred to in Russian as *katorga* ("ordeal") and this became a synonym for Siberia. One could be sentenced to *katorga* either for a definite term (in which case one's family was allowed to visit) or indefinitely (when it was an alternative to the death penalty). There is no doubt that the Russian colonization of Siberia was made possible in large measure by the forced labour of prisoners, and in this way differed from other forms of colonization, such as, for example, the colonization of the Wild West in America. Elżbieta Kaczyńska writes:

> In addition, Siberia was a safety valve: it was a place where you could send rebels, beggars and members of other marginal or dangerous groups to get rid of them. It was possibly a cheaper, and certainly an easier and quicker way, to dispose of them than by building prisons. (p. 27)

Exile and forced labour were an invention of Russia's political rather than her legal system: the fate of those sent there could be decided by a court or simply by some organ of the State administration, with no official indictment or sentence. Exile was a form of punishment practised by every country that had colonies: prisoners were sent from Spain to America, from Portugal to Mozambique, from Denmark to Greenland. England sent her prisoners to Australia; France, in the second half of the nineteenth century, sent hers to colonize New Caledonia. But as the countries of Western Europe gradually abandoned exile as a form of punishment in the nineteenth century, Russia maintained it, in the face of all criticism that it was outdated. Not only that: Russia exiled far greater numbers of prisoners than France or England ever did.

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2 All information in this sub-chapter is taken from *Syberia: największe więzienie świata, 1815-1914* by E. Kaczyńska, Warsaw 1991.

Exile to Siberia became part of the political history of Russians. But not only Russians: people of other nationalities were also sent there. The majority were Poles, who were being exiled to Siberia as early as the eighteenth century, as prisoners of war or victims of repression after successive failed national uprisings or conspiracies. Penal servitude in Siberia was much harsher for political than for criminal offenders.

In addition to its political history, exile to Siberia also has its human, social history. It always left its mark on the local population, affecting its morals, its religion, its language, its attitudes to other people and to the law. The fiercest criticism of *katorga* found its expression in the works of two great nineteenth-century Russian writers, Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead* and Chekhov's *Sakhalin*. *Katorga* also occupies an important place in Polish literature and art (Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, Apollo Korzeniowski, Artur Grottger, Jacek Malczewski), where it was one of the most visible and frequent political subjects of the nineteenth century.

When tsarist rule came to an end in 1917, one might have expected that Siberia would cease to be a place of exile and penal servitude: after all, power was now in the hands of people who had quite recently themselves been confined there for political reasons and whose ideology and writings were extremely hostile to the tsarist apparatus of repression. Indeed, before the fall of the tsars, during World War I, exile and penal servitude ceased to be a penalty imposed by the State. Political exiles were released and criminal offenders had their sentences reduced. "Regardless of the war between the Reds and the Whites and the unrest on the Siberian-Chinese border," writes Elżbieta Kaczyńska, "there was hope that Siberia might be freed from the stigma of being a land of exile and penal servitude". But as soon as the Bolsheviks seized power, it turned out that even the bleakest and most sinister places of exile and *katorga* in tsarist Russia paled in comparison to the horror inspired, from the very first months of the October Revolution, by the improved version invented by the Bolsheviks: the concentration camp.

3. Colonial Concentration Camps

The first concentration camps were established by a Spanish general of Prussian origin, Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau, who in 1896 arrived in Cuba, then part of the Kingdom of Spain, as its governor.[3] He had been tasked with quelling a Cuban

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all information in this sub-chapter is taken from *Koszmar niewolnictwa. Obozy koncentracyjne od 1896 do dziś. Analiza*, A.J. Kamiński, translated by H. Zarychta, Warsaw 1990, and *The World of Concentration Camps and Soviet Literature*, M. Heller, London, Overseas Publications Exchange 1974 (Russian edition).

revolt against Spanish rule, and one of the ways in which he proposed to achieve this was to "concentrate" all those who did not wish to be considered rebels in "fortified camps". We know that he "concentrated" about 400,000 women, children and old people in these *campos de concentracion*; we do not know how many of them died. The Americans labelled him a "butcher", but did not scruple to make use of his invention when an uprising against American rule broke out in the Philippines, under the leadership of Emil Aguinaldo. In 1900, having quashed the uprising, the Americans established concentration camps on the island of Mindanao with the alleged aim of protecting the "civilian population".

That same year the British made use of General Weyler's "invention" during the Boer War in South Africa. When the defeated Boers began forming themselves into partisan units, the British applied a scorched earth policy, as a result of which thousands of Boer families were left homeless. The elderly, women and children were confined in tents and barracks called concentration camps. A combination of abysmal sanitary conditions, bad weather, inadequate food and overcrowding led to 20,000 deaths during the South African winter of 1901, out of a total number of between 120,000 and 160,000 detainees. The pressure of public opinion, outraged by an account of the camps by the philanthropist Emily Hobhouse, forced the British – Neville Chamberlain and Alfred Milner – to take steps to improve conditions in the camps. On January 26th, 1901, Emily Hobhouse wrote:

> It can never be wiped out of people's memories. It presses hardest on the children. They droop in the terrible heat, and with the insufficient, unsuitable food (…) Thousands, physically unfit, are placed in living conditions which they have not the strength to endure. In front of them is blank ruin (…) To keep these Camps going is murder to the children.[4]

4. The Creation and Evolution of Soviet Concentration Camps

Soviet concentration camps were created personally by Lenin, Dzierżyński and Trotsky; the doctrine that "justified" their creation was bolshevik (communist) ideology.

The term "concentration camp" is first instantiated in Soviet Russia in an order issued by Trotsky on June 4th, 1918, to confine in "concentration camps" those Czechs who had refused to hand over their weapons. Shortly afterwards,

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Page references are to the Polish edition. The English translation is also from the Polish edition.

4 Emily Hobhouse, *Report of a Visit to the Camps of Women and Children in the Cape and Orange River Colonies*, London 1901. Cited in A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., pp. 34-35.

in a memo of June 26th to the Sovnarkom, the Council of People's Commissars, Trotsky proposed the creation of a system of forced labour for "parasitical elements" – with the hardest labour imposed on the "bourgeoisie", composed, according to Trotsky at the time, of former tsarist officers who refused to serve in the Red Army. Even before the revolution, Lenin had threatened that when he seized power he would impose forced labour on the "bourgeois", "parasites" and "idlers". Trotsky, making good use of the example of the British in the Boer War, proposed the creation of "concentration camps" for them. Soon afterwards he added a further category of those who were to be confined there: the wives and children of officers who had been drafted into the Red Army. Their families were to be held hostage: without such a measure, Trotsky claimed, "the revolution would fail".

On 8th August 1918, Trotsky wrote in an order to the Red Army that an officer nominated by him "has ordered the creation of concentration camps in Murom, Arzamas and Sviyazhsk, for the confinement of suspected agitators, counter-revolutionary officers, saboteurs, parasites and speculators."

On 9th August 1918, Lenin sent a telegram to Yevgenia Bosch, the Sovnarkom representative in Penza, demanding the implementation of a policy of "merciless mass terror towards kulaks, orthodox priests and White Guardists" and the "incarceration in concentration camps" of "suspect persons". That same day, in a telegram to deputies in Nizhny Novogrod, he ordered the "immediate application of mass terror; prostitutes who encourage drunkenness among soldiers, former officers etc., must be shot or deported out of the city." In addition to shooting, Lenin also recommended – for instance, in the Decree of People's Commissars of September 5th, 1918 – that "the Soviet Republic protect itself against class enemies by isolating them in concentration camps."

In those first days of August 1918 the term "concentration camp" was already well known in bolshevik Russia and "widely understood, not only within the narrow leadership circle. The concentration camp had become a universal instrument of terror."[5] "Although there are no reliable figures for numbers of prisoners," writes Anne Applebaum in *Gulag*, "by the end of 1919 there were 21 registered camps in Russia. At the end of 1920 there were 107, five times as many."[6]

Commenting on the Bolsheviks' measures against rebels in the Tambov province in 1921, Marshal Tukhachevsky, as he was later to become, wrote:

> It was decided to organize large-scale deportations of bandit families. Huge concentration camps were organized for their provisional confinement.[7]

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5 M. Heller, op. cit., p. 49.

6 A. Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, Penguin, London 2003, part I, chapter 1, p. 9.

7 "War and Revolution", 1926, vols. 7-8, p. 10. In A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 71.

And Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes in *The Gulag Archipelago*:

> Throughout the province concentration camps were set up for the families of peasants who had taken part in the revolts. Tracts of open field were enclosed with barbed wire strung on posts, and for three weeks every family of a suspected rebel was confined there.[8]

From the first months of the bolshevik revolution, every year, and sometimes every month, saw more concentration camps in Soviet Russia. Thus the Gulag archipelago, as Solzhenitsyn called it, developed in the USSR concurrently with the consolidation of bolshevik power.[9]

The Bolsheviks built the first "model" concentration camp in 1923, in an old monastery complex on the Solovetsky Islands on the White Sea. Initially about 4,000 prisoners were brought here; by 1930 there were 30,000. There were over 650,000 prisoners in camps on the mainland, of whom scarcely 20% were criminal offenders.

> In the survivors' folklore, Solovetsky was forever after remembered as the "first camp of the Gulag". Although scholars have more recently pointed out that a wide range of other camps and prisons also existed at this time, Solovetsky clearly played a special role not only in survivors' memories, but also in the memory of the Soviet secret police. Solovetsky may not have been the only prison in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, but it was *their* prison, the OGPU's prison, where the OGPU first learned how to use slave labour for profit. In a 1945 lecture on the history of the camp system, Comrade Nasedkin, then the system's chief administrator, claimed not only that the camp system originated in Solovetsky in 1920, but also that the entire Soviet system of "forced labour as a method of re-education" began there in 1926.[10]

From the first months of the revolution the Bolsheviks continued to expand the circle of those marked out for incarceration in concentration camps. At first it comprised "elements alien to the working class" (according to the decree of February 17th, 1919), but soon came to include "elements hostile to the working class" (decree of 15th April, 1919), and within a few months of the bolshevik seizure of power all the candidates for incarceration in camps had become "class enemies" – with, however, no involvement in "counter-revolutionary activities" (those who had any such involvement were simply shot).

> Lenin and his comrades initially found themselves embroiled in a merciless "class war", in which political and ideological adversaries, as well as the more recalcitrant members of the general public, were branded as enemies and marked for destruction.

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8 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago. 1918-1956*, translated by Thomas Whitney, Harper & Row, 1974, volume I, p. 33.

9 The full name of this institution, of which GULAG is the acronym, is: Glavnoye Upravleniye Ispravitel'no-trudovykh Lagerey (Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps).

10 Anne Applebaum, op. cit., part I, chapter 2, p. 20.

> The Bolsheviks had decided to eliminate, by legal and physical means, any challenge or resistance, even if passive, to their absolute power. This strategy applied not only to groups with opposing political views, but also to such social groups as the nobility, the middle class, the intelligentsia, and the clergy, as well as professional groups such as military officers and the police. Sometimes the Bolsheviks subjected these people to genocide. The policy of "de-Cossackization" begun in 1920 corresponds largely to our definition of genocide: a population group firmly established in a particular territory, the Cossacks as such were exterminated, the men shot, the women, children, and the elderly deported, and the villages razed or handed over to new, non-Cossack occupants.[11]

In 1918 the Bolsheviks created a secret police with special powers to suppress "counter-revolution", called the All-Russian Supreme Commission for the Suppression of Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (initially called "Cheka" and "Cherezvychaika", but later commonly referred to simply as "the organs") and headed by a Pole, Feliks Dzierżyński, who remained its director until his death in 1926. The Cheka (later the GPU, the OGPU, the NKVD and the KGB) became the main instrument of terror.[12]

Michael Heller writes:

> Thus was established, scarcely a year after the revolution, an administrative organ endowed with an extraordinarily broad range of prerogatives, its power extending over the entire country and allowing it to arrest, isolate in a concentration camp or shoot whomever it chose. In addition, this organ – the Cheka – enjoyed the presumption of infallibility: all criticism of its actions was forbidden. It was accountable to no one and subject to no control of any kind. This, together with the power it enjoyed, gave it privileged status in the State system. It became the chief instrument whereby the dictatorship of the proletariat was to be achieved. And so the process began (…) of transforming a political dictatorship into a police one.[13]

5. The Ideological Sources of the Gulag

"The fact that it was Trotsky who first used the term 'concentration camp' in writing should not," writes Andrzej Józef Kamiński, "lead us to infer that Lenin was simply copying his idea. Orders to 'isolate', 'shoot' or 'incarcerate in a concentration camp' issued from the Kremlin at a brisk pace from the very first months of the revolution. The idea of introducing concentration camps as a way of establishing and securing Soviet power did not spring from the individual ideas

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11 *The Black Book of Communism*, Stéphane Courtois, Nicolas Werth et al., translated by Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer, Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 8-9.

12 Every December 20th in Russia is celebrated as the anniversary of these organs. President Vladimir Putin decreed that it be commemorated with particular pomp.

13 M. Heller, op. cit., p. 53. See also E. Kaczyńska, op. cit., p. 290 and following.

of Trotsky, Lenin, Dzierżyński or later, Stalin; it was an organic, inherent part of the bolshevik ideology. The fact that Trotsky was the first of the bolshevik leaders to use the term in writing was almost certainly pure chance."[14]

Lenin's press article of December 1917, entitled "How to Organize Competition" and written a mere two weeks after the Bolsheviks came to power, is a good illustration of how this idea worked:

> The unity of essentials, of fundamentals, of the substance, is not disturbed but ensured by variety in details, in specific local features, in methods of approach, in methods of exercising control, in ways of exterminating and rendering harmless the parasites (the rich and the rogues, slovenly and hysterical intellectuals, etc., etc.) (…) not a single rogue (including those who shirk their work) to be allowed to be at liberty, but kept in prison, or serve his sentence of compulsory labour of the hardest kind; not a single rich man who violates the laws and regulations of socialism to be allowed to escape the fate of the rogue, which should, in justice, be the fate of the rich man. (…) Thousands of practical forms and methods of accounting and controlling the rich, the rogues and the idlers must be devised and put to a practical test by the communes themselves, by small units in town and country. Variety is a guarantee of effectiveness here, a pledge of success in achieving the single common aim – to clean the land of Russia of all vermin, of fleas – the rogues, of bugs – the rich, and so on and so forth. In one place half a score of rich, a dozen rogues, half a dozen workers who shirk their work (in the manner of rowdies, the manner in which many compositors in Petrograd, particularly in the Party printing-shops, shirk their work) will be put in prison. In another place they will be put to cleaning latrines. In a third place they will be provided with "yellow tickets" after they have served their time, so that everyone shall keep an eye on them, as harmful persons, until they reform. In a fourth place, one out of every ten idlers will be shot on the spot.[15]

Shortly before his death, Lenin wrote to Victor Bede, a Hungarian priest who was a friend of his from Paris, arguing:

> The Soviets must employ the most radical means to extirpate from the nation all elements hostile to their programme. You cannot talk to them reasonably, just as you cannot talk reasonably to an adder who will bite you; you kill it. Those who oppose the bolsheviks must be exterminated.[16]

As we can see, Lenin's conception of the means of cleansing Soviet Russia of its enemies from the start included complete freedom to decide who those enemies were ("parasite", "the rich man", "rogues", "hysterical intellectuals"), and therefore

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14 A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 71 and following. Michael Heller holds the same view.

15 Written December 24-27th, 1917. First published in *Pravda*, January 20th, 1929. In: *Lenin, Collected Works*, vol. 26, p. 404-15, Progress Publishers, transl. Yuri Sdobnikov and George Hanna. The translator of the present volume used the online edition: marx.org 1997. Cited in: A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 73.

16 Cited in A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 76.

also to decide who would live and who must die; purely administrative sentencing to forced labour, with no indictment (which meant, in effect, slave labour); and – as an indirect means of "cleansing" society, in addition to the physical extermination of designated groups within the population – the re-education of prisoners.

Thus in the bolshevik programme concentration camps were patently, from the very beginning, the means to an ideological end.

The ideological grounds of this conception were further elaborated by Trotsky and Dzierżyński. Trotsky expressed them in the form of 24 theses, which were published in *Pravda* on December 17th, 1918. He made the principle "who does not work, does not eat" into law – it is enshrined in the first Soviet Constitution – and rejected the concept of "free labour". He wrote:

> Man by nature avoids effort. He is not zealous by nature; he must be driven to zealotry by economic pressure and education. (…) From the point of view of history, all forms of social organization are forms of the organization of labour. (…) In the past society adhered to the principle of forcibly organized labour for the majority for the benefit of a minority. (…) Now, for the first time in history, we are attempting to organize the process of labour in the interests of the working majority. This does not of course exclude the use of force, which will play a significant role in the course of what will be a long historical era.[17]

In other words, Trotsky associated the future of communism with forced labour – for in his view, without the introduction of forced labour "we can forget about socialism". For Trotsky, the dictatorship of the proletariat entailed the militarization of labour.

The 9th Congress of the Bolshevik Party, which accepted Trotsky's theses, resolved that:

> Because large numbers of workers (…) leave their workplaces without asking permission and move from one place to another, and as a result production suffers even more, as does the situation of the working class a whole, the Congress considers it one of the most urgent tasks before the Soviet leadership to wage a planned, systematic, unyielding and relentless struggle against deserters from the field of battle for production – most importantly by means of publishing lists of wanted persons with the names of deserters, forming deserters into penal labour units, and isolating them in concentration camps.

Dzierżyński, for his part, on February 17th, 1919 delivered a speech at a Cheka meeting in which he moved that sentencing and "decisions concerning deportation to concentration camps" should, along with verdicts, remain within the remit of the Cheka. He justified this motion as follows:

> I suggest that these concentration camps be maintained as a place where the labour of the prisoners will be put to good use; where the gentlemen who apparently lived

17 Cited in: M. Heller, op. cit., p. 63. See also: A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 74.

> without any occupation, or those who are unable to work without some form of coercion, can be put to work. And – take, for instance, our Soviet institutions – this penalty can also be applied in cases of negligence and insufficient industry, laziness, tardiness etc. By this means we can also improve the efficiency of our own workers. I therefore move that we create a work school.[18]

Dzierżyński's motion was carried and the Cheka voted itself the right to "incarcerate [people] in concentration camps". In other words, sentencing to the Gulag without benefit of a court hearing, along with similarly extrajudicial sentences to death by shooting, became law in Soviet Russia.

6. The Birth of Genocide

At first – in 1918 – the Bolsheviks used the camps to incarcerate representatives of the old ruling class, real or merely potential political opponents, and so-called hostages. But the first months of 1919 saw the beginning of a new stage in the evolution of Soviet concentration camps, in that one more group was added to these categories of candidates for detention in the Gulag: that of workers. The camps, until now used as places of exile, isolation or incarceration, had acquired an additional and very important function: they became places of labour organized by the communist state.

There were economic reasons: frequent strikes by workers protesting against the bolshevik authorities – such as the uprisings in Izhevsk, Votkinsk or Astrakhan – and a sharp fall in productivity. Thus the Bolsheviks sought a way of imposing "self-organization" and "coercing the working masses to self-discipline".[19] From 1919 onwards they issued a spate of laws, orders, decrees and proscriptions concerning the mobilization of the workforce, the universal duty to work, the militarization of factories and institutions, the prohibition of leaving one's workplace, the introduction of workplace registration cards, etc., etc. – in other words, legislation intended to enclose work within a framework of administrative terror. In this way, writes Michael Heller, 1919 in Soviet Russia saw the beginning of a process which would transform all work into forced labour and in which concentration camps were to be used as a means of coercion. The distinction between "military service" and "work service" also disappeared.

Faced with a diminished workforce, a fall in productivity, the ruin of the country's industry, food shortages and escalating economic chaos, the Bolsheviks came to the conclusion that the only remedy was to militarize the economy and transform the population of Soviet Russia into a "work army". The working masses

18 Cited in: M. Heller, op. cit., p. 56. See also: A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 75.

19 The words are Bukharin's, cited in: M. Heller, op. cit., p. 55.

thus became soldiers, punished for leaving their places of work as a soldier would be punished for desertion. By the beginning of 1920, concentration camps became an important means of coercion to be used against the working class.

The expressions "concentration camps" and "forced labour camps" were already cropping up in Soviet State documents of the time. In Michael Heller's view, the difference between them lay in the fact that, "concentration camps were the exclusive remit of the Cheka and used mainly for the incarceration of opponents of the Bolshevik Party, whereas those incarcerated in forced labour camps were sent there after sentencing by various institutions of the bolshevik State, for instance revolutionary tribunals and people's courts, and the camps themselves were within the control of local government administrations". One of the characteristics of labour camps, says Heller, was that there were no limits on their numbers or constraint on their location: they could be organized anywhere.[20] Paragraph 31 of the instructions issued by the NKVD's Central Administration of Forced Labour concerning the creation of forced labour camps in individual provinces specified that:

> all detainees are to be sent to work immediately upon their arrival at the camp and are to be engaged in physical labour throughout their time in the camp. The nature of their labour will be decided by the administration of the camp.[21]

The expression "concentration camp", Heller goes on, appears like a refrain in all administrative resolutions issued in the era of war communism (i.e. the post-revolutionary period during the Civil War). In 1920 there were 84 camps in Soviet Russia, with a total of about 50,000 prisoners; by 1923 there were 355, in which a total of about 70,000 people were incarcerated.

> However, the most disturbing and, from the historical point of view, important characteristic of the Lenin terror was not the quantity of the victims but the principle on which they were selected. Within a few months of seizing power, Lenin had abandoned the notion of individual guilt, and with it the whole Judeo-Chrstian ethic of personal responsibility. He was ceasing to be interested in *what* a man did or had done – let alone *why* he had done it – and was first encouraging, then commanding, his repressive apparatus to hunt down people, and destroy them, not on the basis of crimes, real or imaginary, but on the basis of generalization, hearsay, rumours. First came the condemned categories: "prostitutes", "work-shirkers", "bagmen", "speculators", "hoarders", all of whom might vaguely be described as criminal. Following quickly, however, came entire occupational groups.[22]

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20 Ibid., p. 57.

21 Ibid., p. 59.

22 Paul Johnson, *A History of the Modern World, from 1917 to the 1980s*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1984, p. 70.

In this way – later described by Solzhenitsyn – death sentence was passed on landowners, proprietors of apartment buildings, high-school teachers, clergy, members of parish councils, monks and nuns, trade union activists and all others deemed to be "former people". Lenin's decree of January 1918 was *de facto* the legalization of mass murder as a way of exterminating whole social classes. Lenin expressed this as follows:

> The extraordinary Commission is neither an investigating commission nor a tribunal. It is an organ of struggle, acting on the home front of a civil war. It does not judge the enemy; it strikes him. (…) We are not carrying out war against individuals. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. We are not looking for evidence or witnesses to reveal deeds or words against the Soviet power. The first question we ask is – to what class does he belong, what are his origins, upbringing, education or profession? These questions define the fate of the accused. This is the essence of the Red Terror.[23]

Extermination decrees soon encompassed whole classes, groups and strata of the population. When the concept of individual responsibility was rejected and the extermination of whole social groups got under way on the sole basis of social origins or profession, the principle guiding the selection of individual victims ceased to have any meaning.

> Once Lenin had abolished the idea of personal guilt, and had started to "exterminate" (a word he frequently employed) whole classes, merely on account of occupation or parentage, there was no limit to which this deadly principle might be carried. Might not entire categories of people be classified as "enemies" and condemned to imprisonment or slaughter merely on account of the colour of their skin, or their racial origins or, indeed, their nationality? There is no essential moral difference between class-warfare and race-warfare, between destroying a class and destroying a race. Thus the modern practice of genocide was born.[24]

The Bolsheviks were not interested in whether someone really had committed a crime; gossip, speculation and denunciations sufficed. At the beginning of the 1920s the concepts of "crime" and "punishment" disappeared from the penal code. A "crime" was no longer an infringement of the law but anything that fell under the vague definition of a "socially dangerous act". "Every conversation," writes Michael Heller, "indeed every thought, which contained something that could be described as an 'attack on the achievements of the proletarian revolution' was considered to be a 'crime'."[25] To be guilty of a crime was henceforth to belong to a "socially dangerous" group.

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23 Ibid., p. 71. Paul Johnson is quoting "the most important Cheka official next to Dzierżyński himself", the Latvian M.Y. Latsis. In this statement "he came nearest," Paul Johnson writes, "to giving the Lenin terror its true definition".

24 Ibid., p. 71.

25 M. Heller, op. cit., p. 79.

By the middle of the 1920s a two-tiered system of institutions of repression had become established: administrative and policing – in other words, judicial and extrajudicial. At the same time, the expression "forced labour" was supplanted by the idea of "corrective labour". Thus, incarceration was now to be seen not as a punishment but as a second chance for the offender; the principal goal of the camp was supposedly to re-educate. However, since crime was considered to be a social illness resulting from the conditions obtaining under the old system, a labour camp, free of those conditions, could be a model of the new Soviet society.

In describing the history of the Soviet camps, how they were created, how they grew and were subsequently filled with prisoners – in other words, in describing the emergence of the Gulag archipelago – Solzhenitsyn draws our attention to the way in which new prisoners would come in "waves", "torrents", "streams" or "rivulets", depending on Soviet Russia's internal and foreign policy at any given time: the war against counter-revolution, the Polish-Bolshevik war, strikes, collectivization, the war against kulaks, the war against the Church, the Russo-Finnish war – all these swelled the ranks of the Gulag with waves of new inmates. As Elżbieta Kaczyńska writes, "The OGPU became the biggest employer in the world."[26]

The year 1929, with the new economic policy (NEP) and a new five-year plan (which would, it was decided, be fulfilled in four years), marked a caesura in the evolution of the Gulag. The plan envisaged a 20% increase in industrial output; at the same time the pace of collectivization had accelerated sharply. Needless to say, the plan could not be fulfilled; strikes and hunger were the only results of an attempt to implement it. To these the Bolsheviks responded with a huge wave of arrests, especially among the peasant population. At the same time, the penal code was once again made harsher.[27]

One of the largest waves of prisoners sent to the Gulag occurred during the so-called Great Purge in 1937-1939. Shortly afterwards there was another, associated with the outbreak of war in 1939.

A decisive event for the period covered in *A World Apart* was the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact – the pact between Hitler and Stalin signed on August 23rd, 1939, in which the Nazis and the Soviets agreed to divide Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence. Initially the border between these more or less followed the San, Vistula and Narev rivers; after an adjustment made on September 28th, 1939, it lay along the Bug river. In a secret codicil to the Pact both sides promised to quash all patriotic activity and prevent the establishment of a Polish state at any time in the future. Shortly after the outbreak of war the Gestapo and the NKVD entered into a close collaboration to carry out the provisions of the German Soviet

26 E. Kaczyńska, op. cit., p. 292.

27 A. Applebaum, op .cit., pp. 44-46.

pact. After occupying the eastern territories of Poland on September 17th, 1939, the Soviets began organizing mass deportations to the Gulag. These encompassed Polish citizens of almost every occupational group: government functionaries, policemen, soldiers, officers and the intelligentsia. Between the winter of 1940 and the middle of 1941, the Soviet authorities carried out four mass deportations (altogether fourteen deportations, on a larger or smaller scale, took place during this period), deporting over 1.2 million Polish citizens to the camps. In twenty months of Soviet occupation, from September 1939 to June 1941, at least 1.7 million Polish citizens were deported. Hundreds of thousands of them died of starvation, exhaustion and insanitary conditions; tens of thousands were shot. The exact numbers are still hard to establish; some estimates put them much higher. As a result of the waves of deportations and arrests in 1940-41, at least 880,000 Poles, 700,000 Germans, 295,000 Hungarians, 67,000 Estonians, 38,000 Lithuanians and 34,000 Latvians, as well as large numbers of Italians, Spaniards, French, Chinese, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Turks and Ukrainians (between 7 and 10 million of whom had been starved to death by the Bolsheviks in 1932-33) were incarcerated in Soviet labour camps.

The German and Soviet repressions against Polish citizens took place simultaneously. This fact, taken together with the ideological declarations made by the Nazi and bolshevik leadership and the collaboration of the NKVD and the Gestapo in joint commissions, indicates the existence of a common Nazi-Soviet plan for the extermination of Polish society, particularly the intelligentsia. The formal groundwork for this plan was contained in the secret codicil to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union declared that they would together, on the basis of a "friendly cooperation", resolve once and for all the matter of a Polish state – a matter in which the Nazis and the Soviet communists were in complete agreement. In a speech of September 31st, 1939 about the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Molotov, who was the Soviet foreign minister, explained that the Polish state had always been a "bastard child of the Versailles Treaty" and announced its annihilation as a result of the joint attack by the Red Army and the Third Reich. Hitler used a similar expression at least twice. In a speech in Gdańsk on 19th September 1939 he declared that "Poland will never again exist in the form set down by the Treaty of Versailles. Both Russia and Germany guarantee this." And in a speech at the Reichstag on October 6th, 1939 he said: "In this way one of the unhealthiest creatures spawned by Versailles has been eliminated." These were undoubtedly echoes of previous agreements between Hitler and Stalin, and they were the harbinger of further action intended to bring about the definitive destruction of the Second Polish Republic. An additional classified protocol of September 28th, 1939 laid down that "neither side will tolerate on

its territory the dissemination of any Polish propaganda that might spill over into the territory of the other side. Each side will quash any such agitation on its territory and will inform the other about all steps taken to this end." The events of the next few months were to provide an interpretation of these words.

The extermination of over 20,000 Polish army officers interned in camps in Kozielsk, Ostaszków and Starobielsk and murdered in Katyń, Mednoye, Kharkhov, Bykivnia and a number of other unknown places (known collectively as the Katyń massacre) was almost coterminous with the Nazi extermination action in Palmyra in the spring of 1940. The Nazis and the Bolsheviks launched a simultaneous action to murder the elite of the Polish intelligentsia (in the so-called A-B Aktion of 1940, the Nazis exterminated Polish scholars and academics).

In starting with the mass deportation, murder and imprisonment in concentration camps of Polish government officials, scholars and artists – in short, the intelligentsia – the Bolsheviks were using the same strategy as that with which they began the revolution of 1917, when they murdered a large part of the Russian intelligentsia. Soon afterwards came the turn of other social groups, occupational or national.

> Here, the genocide of a "class" may well be tantamount to the genocide of a "race" – the deliberate starvation of a child of a Ukrainian kulak as a result of the famine caused by Stalin's regime "is equal to" the starvation of a Jewish child in the Warsaw ghetto as a result of the famine caused by the Nazi regime. Such arguments in no way detract from the unique nature of Auschwitz – the mobilization of leading--edge technological resources and their use in an "industrial process" involving the construction of an "extermination factory," the use of gas, and cremation. However, this argument highlights one particular feature of many Communist regimes – their systematic use of famine as a weapon. The regime aimed to control the total available food supply and, with immense ingenuity, to distribute food purely on the basis of "merits" and "demerits" earned by individuals. This policy was a recipe for creating famine on a massive scale. Remember that in the period after 1918, only Communist countries experienced such famines, which led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands, and in some cases millions, of people. And again in the 1980s, two African countries that claimed to be Marxist-Leninist, Ethiopia and Mozambique, were the only such countries to suffer these deadly famines.
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> A preliminary global accounting of the crimes committed by Communist regimes shows the following:
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> - The execution of tens of thousands of hostages and prisoners without trial, and the murder of hundreds of thousands of rebellious workers and peasants from 1918 to 1922
> - The famine of 1922, which caused the deaths of 5 million people
> - The extermination and deportation of the Don Cossacks in 1920
> - The murder of tens of thousands in concentration camps from 1918 to 1930
> - The liquidation of almost 690,000 people in the Great Purge of 1937-38

- The deportation of 2 million kulaks (and so-called kulaks) in 1930-1932
- The destruction of 4 million Ukrainians and 2 million others by means of an artificial and systematically perpetuated famine in 1932-33
- The deportation of hundreds of thousands of Poles, Ukrainians, Balts, Moldovans, and Bessarabians from 1939 to 1941, and again in 1944-45
- The deportation of the Volga Germans in 1941
- The wholesale deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1943
- The wholesale deportation of the Chechens in 1944
- The wholesale deportation of the Ingush in 1944
- The deportation and extermination of the urban population in Cambodia from 1975 to 1978
- The slow destruction of the Tibetans by the Chinese since 1950.[28]

7. Communist and Nazi Concentration Camps

The idea of Soviet concentration camps was a consequence of the Bolsheviks' attitude towards the law and its fundamental concepts (crime, responsibility, punishment etc.). Viewed from this perspective, the Gulag archipelago, enlarged by Stalin until it assumed monstrous proportions, was simply, according to Kamiński, "an immense executive decree" following upon the ideas, theses, instructions and orders issued by Lenin, Trotsky or Dzierżyński. In his view, the Bolsheviks' decrees,

> published for the most part in the 1920s, and the practical steps they entiled, were used by the Nazis as a model for their own concentration camps and generally for the establishment of their own dictatorship. The fundamental principle at work was the Trotskyist-Leninist one whereby any category of people which at any time and for any reason became uncongenial to the authorities, or was considered by them as such, could by simple decree be deprived of all rights, including the right to life. It could, for all practical purposes, be removed beyond the protection of the law.[29]

These ideas, and the ways in which they were implemented, were, Kamiński maintains, swiftly taken up in Germany. As early as March 13th, 1921, then little known Adolf Hitler wrote in his party's newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*: "We must prevent the Jews from undermining our nation, if need be by locking away the perpetrators safely in concentration camps."[30]

Hitler returned to the idea of concentration camps in his speech to the National Club in Berlin on December 8th, 1921: he announced that he would establish them as soon as he came to power in Germany.

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28 Stéphane Courtois, "The crimes of communism", in: *The Black Book of Communism*, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

29 A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 77.

30 Ibid., p. 81.

It is interesting, Kamiński notes, that the Nazis were already planning not only to create concentration camps in Germany, but also to use existing Soviet camps for the same purpose. The protagonist of Otto Autenrieth's novel *Bismarck II: A Novel about the German Future*, plans to "use trains hundreds of kilometres long to deport the entire male population of Poland to concentration camps in eastern Siberia." Kamiński remarks that,

> by 1921 the idea of "concentration camps" was as familiar in German nationalist circles as it had been in bolshevik circles in Russia five years previously. There was already talk at the time of deporting entire nations to "concentration camps". For the authors of such ideas and for their readers, deporting Jews or Poles to concentration camps was tantamount to disposing of them so as to render them harmless or even of sweeping the given nation off the face of the earth.[31]

The common feature of these Nazi and bolshevik plans was the idea of purging society, the state and the nation of certain people and entire social groups, initially defined as enemies and soon thereafter as non-humans. The Bolsheviks' "rich men", "parasites" and "hysterics" are the equivalent of the Nazi nationalists' "Jews", "Poles", "Czechs" and "Gypsies": all ceased to be human beings and became "vermin", which the new regime had not merely the right, but the duty to extirpate. The Bolsheviks were guided by "revolutionary legal feeling", the Nazis by "healthy national feeling". Both saw their political opponents as something to be dealt with by a series of "hygienic" measures. Himmler was unequivocal in expressing this view at a meeting of SS leaders in Kharkov in 1943:

> Antisemitism is just like de-lousing. How you get rid of lice is not a question of worldview. It's a question of hygiene. (…) We shall soon be fully de-loused. We have only 20 thousand lice left; soon all Germany will be free of them.[32]

Such language was common to Nazis and the Bolsheviks. In Germany it was Martin Luther who created the canon of the vilest antisemitic insults in his pamphlets against the Jews, such as *On the Jews and their Lies*, *Warning Against the Jews*, *Vom Schem Hamphoras* or *Letter to a Good Friend: Against the Sabbatarians*, where he called Jews vermin and filth, "a base, whoring people" who "wallow like swine" in the "excrement of the devil", etc., and called for their expulsion and possibly also their extermination ("Their house must be destroyed").[33]

Almost identical language was used by nationalists as early as the nineteenth century. In 1857, Constantin Rössler wrote about the "national vermin"; the

31 Ibid., p. 81.

32 Cited in A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 84.

33 Martin Luther, *On the Jews and their Lies*, 1543, *Vom Schem Hamphoras*, 1543, *Letter to a Good Friend: Against the Sabbatarians*, 1538. Cited in F. de Fontette, *Histoire de l'Antisémitisme*, PUF, Paris 1982, and R.A. Haasler, *Zbrodnie w imieniu Chrystusa*, Dom Wydawniczy Forum Sztuk, pp. 257-260.

writer and theologian Paul de Lagarde, in his work on Jews and Indo-Germans, referred to Jews as "trichinella and bacilli" which must be destroyed "quickly and thoroughly". The Nazis constantly used this kind of terminology. Hitler in *Mein Kampf* called the leaders of the German Social Democrats "vermin which must be extirpated": he considered them to be Jews. In 1943 he said to Horthy, the regent of Hungary, that Jews were "parasites" who should be treated like "tuberculosis bacilli".[34] Some historians believe that such violent anti-Judaism would not have survived past the Middle Ages without Luther's help. It is worth remembering that when Julius Streicher, editor of *Der Stürmer*, testified before the International Tribunal in Nuremberg, he justified Hitler's "final solution of the Jewish question" by reference to Luther's writings about the Jews.

There are a number of strange and eerie links between these first German-African labour camps and those built in Nazi Germany three decades later. It was thanks to these southern African labour colonies, for example, that the word *Konzentrationslager* first appeared in the German language, in 1905. The first imperial commissioner of German South-West Africa was one Dr Heinrich Goering, the father of Hermann, who set up the first Nazi camps in 1933. It was also in these African camps that the first German medical experiments were conducted on humans: two of Joseph Mengele's teachers, Theodor Mollison and Eugen Fischer, carried out research on the Herero, the latter in an attempt to prove his theories about the superiority of the white race. But they were not unusual in their beliefs. In 1912, a best-selling German book, *German Thought in the World*, claimed that

> nothing can convince reasonable people that the preservation of a tribe of South African kaffirs is more important for the future of humanity than the expansion of the great European nations and the white race in general. (…) it is only when the indigenous peoples have learned to produce something of value in the service of the superior race (…) that they can be said to have a moral right to exist.

While this theory was rarely put so clearly, similar sentiments often lay just beneath the surface of colonial practice. Certainly some forms of colonialism both reinforced the myth of white racial superiority and legitimized the use of violence by one race against another. It can be argued, therefore, that the corrupting experiences of some European colonists helped pave the way for the European totalitarianism of the twentieth century. And not only European: Indonesia is an example of a post-colonial state whose rulers initially imprisoned their critics in concentration camps, just as their colonial masters had.

The Russian Empire, which had quite successfully vanquished its own native peoples in its march eastwards, was no exception. During one of the dinner parties that takes place in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Anna's husband – who has some official responsibilities for 'Native Tribes' – holds forth on the need for superior cultures to absorb inferior ones. At some level, the Bolsheviks, like all educated Russians, would have been aware of the Russian Empire's subjugation of the Kirgiz, Buryats,

34 Ibid., p. 83.

> Tungus, Chukchis and others. The fact that it didn't particularly concern them – they, who were otherwise so interested in the fate of the downtrodden – itself indicates something about their unspoken assumptions.[35]

The creation of concentration camps in Europe was not much influenced by events in South Africa or the eastern extremity of Siberia; the view that some races or categories of people were superior to others was sufficiently widespread at the beginning of the twentieth century. And it was here that lay the deepest connection between the Soviet Gulag and the Nazi concentration camps. Both regimes found partial justification for their existence in the creation of the categories of "enemies" or "sub-humans" who could be sentenced and exterminated on a mass scale in the name of the law.

In Nazi Germany the physically and mentally handicapped and the mentally ill were first in the line of fire. Then came Gypsies and homosexuals, but above all Jews. In the Soviet Union it was "former people" – members of the expropriated elite – who were the first victims, and after them "enemies of the people". This wonderfully vague definition encompassed not only enemies of the regime but also various ethnic and national groups deemed – on equally vague premises – a threat to the Soviet State and to Stalin's rule. "At different times Stalin conducted mass arrests of Poles, Balts, Chechens, Tartars and – on the eve of his death – Jews."[36]

In Soviet Russia the initial period of concentration camps was from 1918 to 1923; the analogous period in the Third Reich was 1933 to 1934. In both cases our information about the camps of that time is very scant. "To us today," writes Solzhenitsyn, "the early forced labour camps are something elusive. It is as if the people imprisoned there had never said anything about them. Testimony is lacking."[37] As for the first concentration camps of the Third Reich, Rudolf Diels maintained that they were initially "wild", local and uncontrolled, but were soon transformed into institutions of terror under centralized control. The first accurate data on Soviet camps (and on the Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps in the USSR (Gulag), run by the OGPU) was collected in 1932 by the intelligence arm of the Polish Border Protection Corps on the basis of accounts by Polish prisoners exchanged by the Bolsheviks for Soviet citizens who had been prisoners in Poland.[38]

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35 Anne Applebaum, op. cit., Introduction, pp. xxxiv-xxxv. On this subject see also E. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Ct., 2000.

36 Anne Applebaum, op. cit., Introduction, p.xxxvi.

37 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, op. cit.

38 *Obozy koncentracyjne OGPU w ZSRR. Źródła do historii Polski XX wieku – ze zbiorów Centralnego Archiwum Ministerstwa Spraw Wewnętrznych*, eds B. Gronek, G. Jakubowski, I. Marczak, Warsaw 1992.

According to David Dallin, quoted in Kamiński's book, German documents which found their way into Allied hands bear witness to the great interest shown by the German government in the Soviet system of forced labour. Joachim Günther, also quoted by Kamiński, wrote that "it has recently been shown that Himmler (…) was one of the earliest and most informed connoisseurs of the system of Soviet labour camps. He recommended that Soviet institutions, little known in Germany at the time, be carefully studied and copied in many respects."[39] And *A Novel in Time* by Herbert Blank, published in 1930, contains the following vision:

> The German Reichswehr under the command of General von Langermantel and the Russian corps began by a pincer attack on Poland. After a brief campaign, in the course of which Warsaw was razed to the ground, the entire population of Poland was evacuated to Siberia, in order that this parasite and disturber of the European peace should be weeded out once and for all, and the territory was divided between Russia and Germany.[40]

A decree issued in 1934 by the Minister of the Interior of the Third Reich, giving the Gestapo administrative (i.e. extrajudicial) powers of arrest and deportation to concentration camps, was based entirely on analogous Soviet decrees giving similar powers to the Cheka. When in 1937 Third Reich prisoners were put to work building the concentration camp in Buchenwald, concentration camps had already existed in Soviet Russia for 20 years. Elżbieta Kaczyńska writes: "The essential nature of Soviet and Nazi concentration camps was the same. Both were set up in the name of ideology."[41] Survivors of the Soviet camps in the far north called them "white crematoria", or simply "the white Auschwitz".[42]

> From the 1920s to the 1940s, Communism set a standard for terror to which fascist regimes could aspire. A glance at the figures for these regimes shows that a comparison may not be as straightforward as it would first appear. Italian Fascism, the first regime of its kind and the first that openly claimed to be "totalitarian," undoubtedly imprisoned and regularly mistreated its political opponents. Although incarceration seldom led to death, during the 1930s Italy had a few hundred political prisoners and several hundred *confinati*, placed under house arrest on the country's coastal islands. In addition, of course, there were tens of thousands of political exiles.
>
> Before World War II, Nazi terror targeted several groups. Opponents of the Nazi regime, consisting mostly of Communists, Socialists, anarchists, and trade union activists, were incarcerated in prisons and invariably interned in concentration camps, where they were subjected to extreme brutality. All told, from 1933 to 1939

39 A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 91.

40 Quoted in A.J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 82.

41 E. Kaczyńska, op. cit., p. 309.

42 This is how the Russian writer Shalamov (1907-1982), author of *Kolyma Tales*, referred to Kolyma. Similarly Anatol Krakowiecki, author of *Książka o Kołymie* (London 1949 and 1987, French edition: *Kolyma, le bagne de l'or, Les Iles d'Or*, 1952).

about 20,000 left-wing militants were killed after trial or without trial in the camps and prisons. These figures do not include the slaughter of other Nazis to settle old scores, as in "The Night of the Long Knives" in June 1934. Another category of victims doomed to die were Germans who did not meet the proper racial criteria of "tall blond Aryans," such as those who were old or mentally or physically defective. As a result of the war, Hitler forged ahead with a euthanasia program – 70,000 Germans were gassed between the end of 1939 and the beginning of 1941, when churches began to demand that this programme be stopped. The gassing methods devised for this euthanasia program were applied to the third group of victims, the Jews.

Before World War II, crackdowns against the Jews were widespread; persecution reached its peak during *Kristallnacht*, with several hundred deaths and 35,000 rounded up for internment in concentration camps. These figures apply only to the period before the invasion of the Soviet Union. Thereafter the full terror of the Nazis was unleashed, producing the following body count – 15 million civilians killed in occupied countries, 6 million Jews, 3.3 million Soviet prisoners of war, 1.1 million deportees who died in the camps, and several hundred thousand Gypsies. We should add another 8 million who succumbed to the ravages of forced labor and 1.6 million surviving inmates of the concentration camps.

The Nazi terror captures the imagination for three reasons. First, it touched the lives of Europeans so closely. Second, because the Nazis were vanquished and their leaders prosecuted at Nuremberg, their crimes have been officially exposed and categorized as crimes. And finally, the revelation of the genocide carried out against the Jews outraged the conscience of humanity by its irrationality, racism, and unprecedented bloodthirstiness.

(…)

Efforts to draw parallels between Nazism and Communism on the basis of their respective extermination tactics may give offense to some people. However, we should recall how in *Forever Flowing* Vasily Grossman, whose mother was killed by the Nazis in the Berdychiv ghetto, who authored the first work on Treblinka, and who was one of the editors of the *Black Book* on the extermination of Soviet Jews, has one of his characters describe the famine in Ukraine: "writers kept writing… Stalin himself, too: the kulaks are parasites; they are burning grain; they are killing children. And it was openly proclaimed 'that the rage and wrath of the masses must be inflamed against them, they must be destroyed as a class, because they are accursed.'" He adds: "To massacre them, it was necessary to proclaim that kulaks are not human beings, just as the Germans proclaimed that Jews are not human beings. Thus did Lenin and Stalin say: kulaks are not human beings." In conclusion, Grossman says of the children of the kulaks: "That is exactly how the Nazis put the Jewish children into the Nazi gas chambers: 'You are not allowed to live, you are all Jews!'"[43]

43 S. Courtois, op. cit., pp. 14-16.

8. Accounts of the Gulag before *A World Apart*

In Poland in the interwar period very little was published about the existence of Soviet camps and the conditions there. There were far more publications about exile and forced labour in tsarist Russia.

The earliest years of the Soviet camps' existence are described in an anthology of prisoners' accounts titled *Za kratami więzień i drutami obozów. Wspomnienia i notatki więźniów ideowych z lat 1914-1921*, eds Wacław Lipiński, Roman Śliwa and Bolesław Kusiński, Warsaw 1927-1928; Mieczysław Lenartowicz's *Pamiętnik z Sokółek*, Warsaw 1930; the memoirs of the Belarusian writer Franciszek Olechnowicz (Aljachovic), *Prawda o Sowietach. Wrażenia z siedmioletniego pobytu w więzieniach sowieckich, 1927-1933*, Warsaw 1937; and – considered the best among these – an account by Ivan Sołoniewicz, who fled the USSR, *Rosja w obozie koncentracyjnym* (German and Russian edition, 1933, reissued 1937/38; Polish edition: Lwów 1938, transl. Stanisław Dębicki). But none of these books were well known and most Polish readers were not aware of them.

Things changed dramatically in September 1939, when, as a result of the Hitler-Stalin pact the Red Army began its occupation of Poland's eastern territories.

As a result of a watertight Soviet-German information blockade in the first stages of the war, no information at all about the Soviet camps trickled through into the public domain. It was not until the outbreak of war between the Third Reich and the USSR on June 6th, 1941, that Nazi propaganda allowed the publication of Polish accounts of the Gulag. They appeared in the Nazi Polish-language press: in Vilnius, for example, in *Goniec Codzienny*; in Warsaw and in Kraków in such papers as *Nowy Kurier Warszawski* or *Goniec Krakowski*. The Nazi authorities also allowed the publication of books, such as Kajetan Klug's account of Soviet camps, *Największe niewolnictwo w historii świata. Sprawozdanie z rzeczywistych przeżyć w obozach karnych GPU*, ed. Karl Neuscheler, Warsaw 1943. Although these publications disseminated the truth about the existence of the Gulag and the Katyń massacre (often they were simply accounts by former prisoners), they were part of Nazi antisemitic propaganda: the Nazis portrayed the Soviet camps (and the communist authorities of the USSR) as the consequence of a Jewish conspiracy. This propaganda (its object being to draw attention away form Nazi concentration camps and the extermination of the Jews being then carried out by the Nazis) meant that none of the information about the Soviet camps published in the Nazi press was considered reliable, however true it was.[44]

Ordinary people gave no credence to Nazi publications. This was especially the case within the territories of the General Government, where no one knew

44 W. Bolecki, *Ptasznik z Wilna. O Józefie Mackiewiczu (zarys monograficzny)*, Kraków 2013 (1st ed. 1991, 2nd ed. 2007), p. 155-202.

(and some did not wish to know) what the Soviet occupation in eastern Poland was really like. The information blockade – the result of the fear that information would be manipulated by Nazi propaganda – was to have its effects after the war, both in Poland and in Western Europe, where many politicians and intellectuals (for instance, Sartre or Merleau-Ponty) first denied the existence of Soviet concentration camps and then – when the Russians themselves (Solzhenitsyn, for one) admitted it – refused to condemn them, and particularly to allow any comparison with Nazi camps.

The most important work about the Soviet camps to appear immediately after the war was a book titled *Sprawiedliwość sowiecka* ("Soviet Justice"), written by Kazimierz Zamorski and Stanisław Starzewski and published in Rome in 1945, under the pseudonyms Sylvester Mora and Piotr Zwierniak. The co-authors were officers of the 2nd Corps, and their book was based both on their own experience of the camps and the system of "Soviet justice" and on numerous accounts by other prisoners. Its great merit, and its enduring value, lay in the fact that it systematically arranged the ways in which criminal "law" was applied in the USSR as well as the various aspects of life in the camps, listing methods of arrest, types of prisons, categories of prisoner, methods of interrogation, the way the camps were organized, working and living conditions in the camps, etc. The book was soon translated into French and Italian, but in spite of excellent reviews never achieved wider international recognition. It was first published in Poland in the underground press in 1989 (Baza press), and the first official Polish edition appeared in 1994 (Alfa press). Herling-Grudziński knew both authors and thought very highly of their book, which he had read in Rome in 1945. (Kazimierz Zamorski was among the first reviewers of the English edition of *A World Apart*.[45])

The subject of Soviet camps remained taboo (as did any comparison between the two totalitarianisms, Nazi and bolshevik, in ideology and practice) until nearly the end of the 1980s – in other words, until the end of the Soviet Union. Herling's novel, despite all the obstacles and difficulties put in its way, played a vital role in informing Western readers and making them aware of this. The Spanish writer Jorge Semprun, ex-communist, Buchenwald survivor and author of the preface to the Spanish edition of *A World Apart*, was one of those who wrote about it.

Herling wrote in *A World Apart*:

> I think with horror and shame of a Europe divided in two parts by the line of the Bug, on one side of which millions of Soviet slaves prayed for liberation by the armies of Hitler, while on the other millions of victims of German concentration camps awaited deliverance by the Red Army as their last hope. (p. 174)

And half a century later he wrote:

45 K. Zamorski, "A Book Apart", *Eastern Quarterly*, vol. V, no. 1/2, 1952, pp. 70-71.

> No one who really wants to understand our century (…) can escape the searchlight of Kolyma directed at Buchenwald.

Here is a historian's comment on the subject:

> The absolute denial of access to archives in Communist countries, the total control of the print and other media as well as of border crossings, the propaganda trumpeting the regime's "successes," and the entire apparatus for keeping information under lock and key were designed primarily to ensure that the awful truth would never see the light of day.
>
> Not satisfied with the concealment of their misdeeds, the tyrants systematically attacked all who dared to expose their crimes. After World War II this became starkly clear on two occasions in France. From January to April 1949, the "trial" of Victor Kravchenko – a former senior official who wrote *I Chose Freedom*, in which he described Stalin's dictatorship – was conducted in Paris in the pages of the communist magazine *Les Lettres Françaises*, which was managed by Louis Aragon and which heaped abuse on Kravchenko. From November 1950 to January 1951, again in Paris, *Les Lettres Françaises* held another "trial" – of David Rousset, an intellectual and former Trotskyite who was deported to Germany by the Nazis and who in 1946 received the Renaudot Prize for his book *The World of Concentration Camps*. On 12 November 1949 Rousset urged all former Nazi camp deportees to form a commission of enquiry into the Soviet camp system and was savagely attacked by the Communist press, which denied the existence of such camps. Following Rousset's call, Margaret Buber-Neumann recounted her experience of being twice deported to concentration camps – once to a Nazi camp and once to a Soviet camp – in an article published on 25 February 1950 in *Le Figaro Littéraire,* "An Inquiry on Soviet Camps: Who is Worse, Satan or Beelzebub?"
>
> Despite these efforts to enlighten humankind, the tyrants continued to wheel out heavy artillery to silence all those who stood in their way anywhere in the world. The Communist assassins set out to incapacitate, discredit, and intimidate their adversaries. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Bukovsky, Aleksandr Zinoviev, and Leonid Plyushch were expelled from their own country; Andrei Sakharov was exiled to Gorky; General Petro Hryhorenko was thrown into a psychiatric hospital; and Georgi Markov was assassinated with an umbrella that fired pellets filled with poison.
>
> In the face of such incessant intimidation and cover-ups, the victims grew reluctant to speak out and were effectively prevented from reentering mainstream society, where their accusers and torturers were ever-present. Vasily Grossman eloquently describes their despair. In contrast to the Jewish Holocaust, which the international Jewish community has actively commemorated, it has been impossible for victims of Communism and their legal advocates to keep the memory of the tragedy alive, and any requests for commemoration or demands for reparation are brushed aside.[46]

46 S. Courtois, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

Chapter IV
How to Write: Between Memoir and Treatise

Herling began working on the memoir of his imprisonment in Yertsevo already during the war. The sense of urgency which accompanied him, the conviction that his experiences there must be recorded, makes itself felt throughout his writings in this period. Writing down what he remembered was for him a kind of moral duty, something he owed his fellow prisoners who remained behind in the Gulag, some of whom would stay there forever.

> I think that until the infamy of this modern form of slavery is wiped off the face of the earth, every writer who touches upon it and is able to unveil it in all its horror before his readers will not just be doing a great service to humanity, but also honouring the best literary traditions. For while many have tried to define what literature is, they have so far succeeded in defining with complete certainty only what it is not: namely that it is not, and can never be, indifferent to anything that is human.
>
> And what is there today, after the liberation of Europe from the horrors of Nazi slavery, that is more human and more worthy of the greatest literary efforts than liberating it from the spectre of communist slavery? As long as just one free and honest writer remains with the strength to pick up his pen, he must use it ruthlessly to hammer at the Katyń massacre, the dungeons of the Lubyanka and the horror of the camps, remembering that in every fraction of a second, every time he writes just one word on a blank sheet of paper, hundreds of people, human shadows barely able to stand from exhaustion, are bearing witness to its truth with their lives on the white plains of Siberia and Kolyma. Where else can a writer worthy of the name find a simpler and more human goal for his writing in our times, these times of contempt?[1]

This literary programme and "honouring the best literary traditions" had its place within the broad framework of "literature as testimony" – testimony to the historical experiences of nations and individuals.

Thus Herling's problem as a writer was not the question of why to write, or whether it is possible to write after Auschwitz and Kolyma – the tradition of literature-as-testimony answered these questions in the affirmative – but rather how to write: what kind of language and what kind of narrative to employ in

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1 G. Herling-Grudziński, "Literatura wolna i upaństwowiona", *Wiadomości* 1951, no. 38, reprinted in: *Wyjścia z milczenia*, op. cit., pp. 180-181.

conveying the reality of concentration camps, and what they taught us about the nature of man.

As he sat down to compose his memoirs, Herling also turned to the work of other writers for the answer to these questions – writers who, like him, had experienced war not only on the battlefield but also, or even principally, the organized system of human degradation and extermination in concentration camps.

At least two types of narrative immediately came to mind as obvious points of reference, laying the ground for comparison and reflection about the communist Gulag archipelago. These were, first, accounts of Nazi concentration camps and second, accounts of the extermination of Jews in the ghettos set up throughout Eastern Europe. In addition to the mechanism of planned extermination, ghettos and concentration camps had one thing in common: in both systems people were exterminated in a closed, isolated place, carefully cut off from normal life outside.

In 1948, after the publication of *Stalin's Murderer*, an early and brief first account of his experiences in the Gulag, Herling, as he was studying the literature about the Holocaust, made a number of observations in which we can already glimpse the rough outlines of how he would go about portraying his "world apart".

Confronted with horrors beyond human imagining, the writer naturally "seeks the simplest solution: escape into realism". He thinks that if he "looks straight down into the abyss without blinking (…), he will penetrate it and see through to the bottom, where the bones are piled, bleached white," Herling wrote. But this is where the greatest danger lies, for the "realism of bare facts" has lost its power: it has been defeated by statistics. Moreover, it can provide no more than the bare facts – facts which speak of total devastation. And even the most faithful and perfectly objective account of the facts leaves no room for the personal: the writer and his attitude to those facts. Which may lead to a kind of "psychological numbness" and "moral hardening" in the face of their "inconceivable horror". Therefore, Herling concludes, the courage to tell the whole truth – the "statistical" truth, the "bare" truth" – cannot by itself be considered the writer's main virtue. "It often occurred to me," he wrote, "that realism was too impersonal for a subject that requires an outlet for the emotions and complete relaxation of the faculties."[2]

Thus, Herling's initial thoughts about the literature that dealt with the Holocaust and mass extermination were directed not so much towards the "bare facts" as to the method of description, and therefore also to the writer who was doing the describing. The crime, he implied, casts its shadow not just on the victims and the executioners, but also on the witnesses.

In purely literary terms, the question came down to the choice of narrative, style and attitude taken by the narrator.

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2 G.H.-G., "Ściana płaczu", *Wiadomości* 1948, no. 28, reprinted ibid., p. 118.

Herling considered the same question in his analysis of the two greatest and best-known Polish works about the occupation and Nazi concentration camps, Zofia Nałkowska's *Medaliony* and Tadeusz Borowski's so-called tales from Auschwitz. Here, too, the thrust of his critique was directed towards the role of the narrator.

His objection to Nałkowska was that in her writing "reflections on the human lot [are] so deeply – almost aesthetically – contemplative that they resemble a connoisseur's inspection of museum exhibits." In other words, narrative restraint, in Herling's view, conceals indifference: "The pages of *Medaliony* give off such an icy chill that you almost have to force yourself to separate the 'bare facts' from the narration in order to be able to feel some kind of shock and horror."[3] And he denounced Borowski's narrator for not going beyond the "animal level of camp existence, vegetating" and remaining paralyzed there. Thus,

> not a single one of Borowski's stories touches on the moral crisis of our times (…) In one hundred and fifty pages of spare, elastic and pitilessly perceptive prose there is not one word about those basest animal instincts which the system of organized cruelty unleashed in both torturers and their victims. (…) His writer's eye is sharp and incisive, true. But it is a mistake to imagine that a writer can attain such a perfect state of objectivity that his personal attitude to the things he is describing is utterly erased from his writing. To have no attitude is tantamount, in literature, to indifference or nihilism."[4]

As we can see, Herling's requirement of stylistic concision in prose that deals with wartime experiences did not entail neutralizing the narrator's stance – the kind of stance found, for instance, in naturalistic or behaviouristic accounts. Stylistic concision did not mean that the narrator should vanish. On the contrary: its primary function was that of a tool which could reveal and express truths about human nature, psychology and moral sensitivity and resilience. The art of stylistic restraint and the search for truths about human nature were two aspects of narrative prose which already in the 1940s were emerging as important literary values for Herling:

> In a novel, only a Conradian analysis "raised almost to the level of art" has any point, in suggesting objective truths about human nature. If a writer is incapable of transforming his psychological observations into something universal (…), he will very soon be nothing but a soulless watchmaker, taking apart the mechanism of life into its smallest component parts but never putting it back together again.[5]

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3 G.H.-G., "'Medaliony' Nałkowskiej", *Wiadomości* 1947, no. 31, reprinted ibid., p. 80.

4 G.H.-G., "U kresu nocy", *Wiadomości* 1948, nos. 51-52, reprinted ibid., pp. 134-137. Herling's interpretation of Borowski's attitude continues to arouse vigorous debate to this day.

5 G.H.-G., "Bezdroża powieści", *Wiadomości* 1947, no. 50, reprinted ibid., p. 101.

When he sat down to write his account of the "stony world" of Soviet concentration camps, Herling was fully aware of the artistic difficulties, pitfalls and complexities associated with the choice of a narrative form. He was also aware of the fundamental difference between a literary work and an account which simply documented the facts about the Gulag. But he was also certain that describing a "system of organized cruelty" was more than just a challenge to the writer as artist or to literature. And that certainty was expressed unequivocally in his press articles from the 1940s: concentration camps, ghettos, mass extermination – all these elements of the "system of organized cruelty" were a challenge to our assumptions about human nature, our knowledge, in other words, of morality, psychology, character, philosophy and all the other invisible dimensions of the human soul, as they used to be called. Hence any literary account of the camps must, in Herling's view, do more than just tell the truth about them; it must also tell the truth about human nature. And this truth would be an answer to the question, "What are human beings capable of?"

By the 1940s Herling was not just fully aware of the philosophical and artistic challenges which portraying the "system of organized cruelty" posed for the writer. He was also fully aware of what his own narrative strategy must be. "What I most enjoy," he told the weekly *Wiadomości*, "is reconstructing the picture of someone's life from small traces and minute fragments."[6] In this confession was contained, condensed and concentrated into pill form the definition of his own writing.

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Owing to its nature, *A World Apart* for the most part deals with events chronologically; but it is not a dry, journal-like reconstruction. As I have previously mentioned, Herling took as his narrative model Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1772) – a novel, written in autobiographical form, which documented in precise detail the story of a man who had survived the 1665 plague epidemic in London. Herling refers to it directly in Part II of *A World Apart*.

In 1975 Herling wrote:

> Immediately after the war I considered what form would be most suitable for the period of the occupation. I was convinced that any description of it must take the form of a chronicle, either pure chronicle or combined with a diary. The lesson I had learnt [from *A Journal of the Plague Year*] was that certain chapters of the "dark history of humanity" – cataclysms, plagues, exterminations, barbaric invasions, genocides

6 Questionnaire entitled "Intellectual Profiles of Polish Writers", *Wiadomości* 1950, no. 14.

> – can be reconstructed and brought to life if they are related by a totally impersonal chronicler.[7]

As a work of literature, *A World Apart* is undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of Polish prose. There are the echoes of Dostoevsky: the style of narration, subtle and restrained but at the same time rich in metaphor; the singular composition of the whole. But its uniqueness as a work of literature is also due to its complex, multi-layered structure: to the superstructure of three narrative perspectives – biographical, psychological and philosophical (or moralistic) – built as a meta-level of commentary over the chronological narrative. It is this superstructure that transforms the historical, political and sociological truth about the camps into a literary truth about human experience.

These three perspectives, which always arise from some concrete event – an anecdote someone has recounted or an observed fact – will soon become a permanent characteristic and indeed the most salient feature of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's entire *oeuvre*.

Let us now take a closer look at the poetics and themes of *A World Apart*.

7 *Diary Written at Night*, 1973-1979, vol. IV, p. 136; Herling was quoting himself from a review of Ludwik Landau's *Kronika lat wojny i okupacji* – see his chapter "Narracja kronikarska", p. 144.

Chapter V
The Poetics

1. Questions of Genre

In terms of genre, *A World Apart* has been classified in a number of different ways. Herling himself spoke of it as "notes". Critics have variously seen it as a piece of reportage, a story, a novella, a collection of tales or stories, a memoir, an account, a diary, an essay, an autobiography or a novel, in turn belonging to one of a variety of genres, traditions or types – for instance, a *Bildungsroman*.

It will be obvious by now that *A World Apart* eludes classification of this sort. Each of these labels covers only one dimension of the book; it cannot be squeezed into one well-defined category, classified as this or that genre. Indeed, few books can: contemporary prose has been multi-genre for decades, as authors have intended it to be. And the fact that a novel can be a composite of different genres, and indeed of different types, has long been recognized by literary historians as one of its fundamental structural features, its salient characteristic and part of its distinctness, indeed, part of its beauty. It is a natural right and privilege of contemporary literature to be composite in type and genre.

Herling avails himself of this privilege. *A World Apart* passes effortlessly from memoir to reportage, from novel to essay, from autobiography to sketch, and so on. But this multiplicity of forms has at least one distinct and recognisable feature: Herling does not treat it as a set of literary conventions. It is not merely indulged in, as a game played for amusement; it is a literary tool, used to communicate something to the reader. It is not an end in itself; it is a writer's approach to analysing the problem of the "world apart".

It is significant then that in *A World Apart* the predominating forms of expression are those traditionally employed to convey empirically verifiable truths: concrete information about the world. Both historically and in terms of their function, all these forms of expression developed in opposition to the various conventions of literary fiction. A piece of reportage, a biography, memoir or account were more informative and more literal than literary in the sense of being fictional or deliberately complex and having a multi-layered meaning. But Herling weaves these forms into a new whole in which each remains unique but does not dominate the others, so the resulting piece cannot be said to belong to

one specific genre as opposed to another. In spite of this, *A World Apart* is a tightly constructed and homogeneous whole.

However, it is not homogeneous either stylistically or even with regard to the narrative and sequence of events, any more than it is homogeneous as to genre. Its homogeneity is associated with the function of the narrator and his perspective of observer and judge, his role in the text and the world he portrays.

Let us look at this more closely.

2. The Narrator

Everything we read about in *A World Apart* is subordinated to the perspective of the author and narrator. The author is both a subject and a protagonist, known to us by name from the beginning and thus attesting to the truth of what he is telling us. The narrator-protagonist can be identified with certainty as Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, since nowhere in the text does the author cast doubt on his own identity as the narrator; there is nothing in *A World Apart* to suggest that Herling-Grudziński is resorting to literary ambiguity or narrative camouflage of any sort, as Gombrowicz, for instance, did in his novels (and even in his *Diary*), where he appeared as the author, Witold Gombrowicz, but had in fact created a fictional narrator who played the role of author: in other words, he was playing himself.

The choice of a narrative voice that the reader could trust, know for certain to be the voice of the real author, not a fictional literary persona, was very important for the poetics and subject matter of *A World Apart*. Let us take a closer look at this narrative choice.

Most importantly, Herling-Grudziński eschewed the literary convention of a fictional narrator, and this was neither a natural nor a random decision. Dostoevsky, for instance, whose *The House of the Dead* may be considered to have served as the model for *A World Apart*, used a fictional narrator-protagonist, Aleksandr Petrovich Goryanchikov, to describe the "world apart" of the *katorga* in tsarist Russia. The novel's principal narrator stumbles upon Aleksandr Goryanchikov's papers, which contain his memoirs of *katorga*, and proceeds to publish them as the memoirs of a former *katorzhnik* Goryanchikov. All this is of course a novelist's technique for weaving fiction: the memoirs are in fact Dostoevsky's own reminiscences of his time in Omsk, where he spent four years from 1850 to 1854 after being sentenced to *katorga* for his involvement in the so-called Petrashevsky revolutionary circle. Nonetheless, though we know this for a fact, we cannot treat Goryanchikov's narration as an account of the real Fyodor Dostoevsky, the author of Dostoevsky's letters or memoirs or anything else. In other words, Dostoevsky embraced the old literary convention of the manuscript happened upon by chance, which allowed

him to present his own experiences as fiction. Thus, regardless of the degree to which it reflected the truth about real events, the book was intended as a novel. And of course we cannot assume that all the events recounted in it reflected real events or ascribe all Goryanchikov's thoughts to the author, Fyodor Dostoevsky.

A further example is provided by the other book Herling mentions as having been a model for *A World Apart*: *A Journal of the Plague Year*. This, too, is a novel written in a certain literary convention – that of a chronicle, recorded by a fictional narrator-protagonist.

But *A World Apart* is different. In choosing the author as narrator, Herling rejected the possibility of applying a ready-made literary form (that of a novel, for instance) for describing his experiences in the gulag. This was the first indication of his scepticism regarding literature's ability to convey all the dimensions of the world of concentration camps. It was also a decision which determined the most important aspects of the book's poetics.

Herling voices these doubts several times in *A World Apart*. For example:

> I hesitate before describing the four nights which I spent in Vologda, for I do not believe that literature could sink so low without losing some of its character as the artistic expression of things commonly known and experienced. (p. 229)

But – one might ask – if not literature, then what? What is the right linguistic form in which to express the reality of this "world apart"?

The authorial narrative was one option. It is personal; it does not involve ready-made literary conventions of any sort; its narrator is no literary fiction but clearly a real person with a real biography, real problems and experiences; and above all, this narrator does not avoid expressing his own views and judgements.

This choice of narrator had far-reaching consequences. The principal among them was the problem of finding an equally attractive substitute for literary convention, which had served Dostoevsky so well as a protective umbrella. One might say that this substitute consists of all the elements of *A World Apart*, its structure, its subject matter and its poetics – in short, its entire make-up, which can never be exhaustively described. But the voice of the author-narrator is the central element of the poetics of *A World Apart*. Its main features, briefly listed, are: (1) an outside perspective; (2) honesty in talking about oneself, expressed through the role of anti-hero which the author assumes; and (3) the broaching of difficult, indeed horrific, topics. Let us briefly examine each of these in turn.

The outside perspective is manifested in the fact that throughout the book the narrator-Herling's reactions, as he sees, describes, analyses and judges the "world apart", are those of someone who is not part of that world but viewing it from outside. This means that he is not only an observer and chronicler of events, but also a thinking being, endowed with the memory of freedom, knowledge of the future, the ability to make comparisons, imagination and the capacity of

judgement. The artistic and intellectual consequences of this external perspective assumed by Herling on the world of the Gulag become clearly evident when we juxtapose *A World Apart* with Tadeusz Borowski's tales from Auschwitz, where the reactions of the fictional narrator, Vorarbeiter Tadek, are bound up with the camp, an internal element of it; his is an inside perspective.

The role of anti-hero is manifested in all of Herling's self-comments. For example, he taunts that during his interrogations in Grodno his behaviour was far from exemplary: "I did not behave heroically". He often admits to his weaknesses, his moments of hopelessness, his feelings of utter physical and psychological degradation. In short, he stresses at every turn that he was no different from any other prisoner and survived only through chance: a happy concatenation of circumstances.

As for the horrific nature of the subject matter, it can be seen in, among other things, Herling's reporting of the physical consequences of the conditions in the Gulag, in his stories of prostitution within the camp, his detailed accounts of fights between prisoners, and so on.

3. Structure

A World Apart is composed of two sections of eleven chapters each – rather like Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*. In the first chapters ("Vitebsk-Leningrad-Vologda") the author-narrator describes his time in Soviet prisons and his deportation to the Kargopol concentration camp in Yertsevo, near Archangelsk.

In the following chapters he analyzes the mechanisms which governed the functioning of this camp and the living conditions there. He also talks about some of his co-detainees and tells us what happened to them.

The books's last two chapters, "In the Urals, 1942" and "Epilogue", tell the story of the author's release from the camp, his journey to join General Anders's Polish army and his journey to Iran in March 1942.

The book's coda is Herling's account of his encounter with a co-detainee from Vitebsk in Rome, in June 1945 – an account which harks back to the events in the first chapter and acts as a sort of narrative hinge enclosing the whole book. Thus, the book's message is contained in its very structure (see "Epilogue" on pp. 239-242).

The structure of the chapters is the same throughout. The book's narrator and protagonist is its author, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, who (1) recounts some of the events in the life of the camp, (2) reconstructs the Gulag as a system and analyses its organization, its institutions, customs, language, etc., (3) tells the stories of the people he met in the camp and what happened to them, and (4) reveals various things about himself.

4. Style and Psychology in the Novel

As soon as Herling began to write again, the "pen of the impersonal chronicler" loomed as a fundamental problem in his writing. The first question was that of style.

Herling did not consider the contemporary Polish literary tradition as a possible model for his own writing. The greatest achievements of interwar Polish prose – the works of Witkacy, Schulz, Gombrowicz or Kaden – departed from realism to adopt various kinds of expressive, metaphorical or grotesque style. Even the great master of Herling's youth, Żeromski, now put him off by his pathos and purple prose. But the principal difficulty was that pre-war Polish prose did not have to deal with experiences of such extremity and magnitude as those brought by the war – with devastation and human degradation on such an enormous scale. Pre-war writers had sought the essence of reality beyond it, not in it: in linguistic constructions, social form, inexpressibility, mystery, even in the commonplace; but for Herling as a writer the problem from the beginning was the concentrated cruelty of the Gulag and its effects on human nature. For this reason, already in 1945, Herling rejected the pre-war narrative prose styles as unsuitable: they seemed inadequate to express the world of the camps, and above all not suited to the task of reconstructing human psychology – the psychology of the victims of this world. In the past, wrote Herling,

> "Kadenism" was the art of using the flexibility of language to make it reflect the mutability and constant movement of reality. But now it is no more than the helpless observation, from beneath half-closed eyelids, of human suffering, which on its Soviet edge was just a step away from the border that separates the last vestiges of humanity from the first signs of utter debasement and madness.[1]

The best examples of Polish realist prose, such as the work of Maria Dąbrowska, were also useless, being far removed in their subject matter from anything remotely comparable to the nightmarish experience of the camps. The Polish literature Herling knew described a world of ordinary experience; it could be the world of the peasantry, the landed gentry or the working class, a world that was idyllic or full of injustice and cruelty, but never the system of the "world apart". It never dealt with the empirical facts of the world of concentration camps as they were seen, experienced and lived through in all their horror. This world had no reflection in Polish literature. This was of course equally true for Soviet and Nazi concentration camps. Herling was an attentive reader of publications about both, a fact he mentions in his 1947 anthology of stories and accounts about the war, *W oczach pisarzy. Wybór opowieści wojennych (1939-1945)*.

1 G. Herling-Grudziński, "Na krawędzi człowieczeństwa", *Orzeł Biały*, 1945, no. 49, reprinted in: *Wyjścia z milczenia*, op. cit., pp. 26-35.

As he settled down to composing his memoirs, and then *The Living Dead*, Herling was fully aware that the principal problem in any attempt at a literary description of the world of concentration camps was one of style. In 1950, he wrote in answer to a questionnaire sent by the weekly *Wiadomości*:

> … good prose depends on the ability to combine inner honesty with a high level of culture, intellectual integrity and a measure of restraint. This last seems to me particularly important. Żeromski ended up burnt at the stake of his own spiritual dissatisfaction and his insatiable need to wallow in his "experience" of things, but such things do not repeat themselves; the flames which consumed him so strikingly left Polish literature swathed in a thick smoke which lingers to this day in the form – as Witkacy would have said – of the tendency to indiscriminate exhibitionism manifested by some of our contemporary writers.
>
> One should read English writers in order to grasp that to produce literature it is not enough just to wallow in one's experiences, to pay for them in one's own blood sincerely shed, to be moved, to fail to move others, to weep, to howl with pain, to rend one's clothes, to fling oneself down and writhe on the threshold, to rip open one's scars, overgrown with the membrane of vileness, to swear, to curse, to seethe with righteous indignation, to tear out one's hair. One also has to observe carefully, to think, to compare one's own conclusions with those of others and to be as suspicious of "first reactions" as one is of those "first inspired words." [2]

Several of the qualities listed in this passage were to become fundamental to Herling's idea of the narrative style to adopt in *A World Apart*. They are: sincerity, honesty, intellectual integrity, restraint, careful observation and the ability to listen to others.

On a few occasions after the publication of *A World Apart* Herling returned, generally in the context of other writers he had been reading at the time – Defoe, Stendhal, Babel – to his ideal of narrative prose style. His own words, in a 1962 passage about Babel, convey it best:

> In his best stories, even the Odessa ones, passages which one might take for extravagant flights of fancy are in reality just a poetic transfiguration of events either recently witnessed with his own eyes or recounted by someone else and engraved on his memory. It is they that set in play an imagination firmly embedded in the real world and held in check – incredible as it may seem – by the reins of an extremely conscious and "cold" artistic process. In one respect he was like Maupassant: when an event struck him as persuasive and right for his needs and he decided to work it in, he would subject it to countless reductions and fine-tuning until he reached its hard, indissoluble core which was not amenable to any further reducing; and he worked at this as if each time he hoped to confine the reflection of the whole world within a drop of water. It was only then that the process of polishing began.[3]

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2 G. Herling-Grudziński, "Izaak Babel", in: G.H.-G., *Upiory rewolucji*, ed. Z. Kudelski, Lublin 1992.

3 Ibid.

Thus Herling's stylistic ideal combined restraint, precision and succinctness in portraying reality. But stylistic conciseness and restraint were not enough; by themselves they could guarantee neither artistic nor, more importantly, cognitive success. There was, in addition to these, and to the precise and detailed reconstruction of the reality being described, another requirement: the ability to discover truths about the psychology of people who had lived through the experience of war.

This requirement of combining conciseness with psychological insight is restated forcefully in Herling's review of Zofia Nałkowska's *Medaliony*. While he praises the book's "incomparable mastery of language", Herling at the same time points out that her aim

> remains unaccomplished because of an irritating absence: there is none of the richness of detail we are entitled to expect, and psychological motivations can only be guessed at. The intended simplicity becomes unintended simplification. (…) Are we perhaps beginning to experience a crisis of literature reduced to mere linguistic virtuosity?[4]

All these remarks are clearly connected with Herling's own stylistic ideal. Let us now look at the consequences of this ideal in *A World Apart*.

5. Narrative Perspectives

A characteristic feature of the authorial narrative in *A World Apart* is its threefold way of looking at life in the Gulag: three different points of view complementing each other. The first is full of detail: it is that of the chronicler; the second is universalizing; the third is psychological. In the first, Herling tries to set down all the details of life in Yertsevo with as much accuracy as possible. In the second, his observations are general. Everything Herling describes has these two dimensions.

The first two are different ways of presenting the facts about the Gulag; the third is part of an attempt to gain literary insight into all that is human and unexpressed: emotions, experiences, suffering. I discuss this third dimension in greater detail in the sub-chapter "Biographical Anecdotes" (see pp. 122-130), and will confine myself here to the first two.

The narrator's observations in *A World Apart* are multi-layered and very wide-ranging, encompassing everything from the individual (events, situations, the fates of individual people) to the historical, sociological, moral, political, and even literary. Characteristically, Herling gives equal weight to all these narrative perspectives; he never concentrates on just one aspect of camp life. Because

4 G. Herling-Grudziński, "'Medaliony' Nałkowskiej", *Wiadomości* 1947, no. 31; reprinted in: *Wyjścia z milczenia*, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

of this *A World Apart* goes beyond the framework of any one genre, such as memoir or biography. It is a book in which no one perspective overshadows or distorts the others; literary questions coexist with sociological ones, the moral with the political, the political with the religious, and so on. This multiplicity of perspectives and problems *A World Apart* deals with is undoubtedly owing to the openness with which Herling viewed the phenomenon of Soviet labour camps. In describing life in the camp, he never assumes anything or adopts a dogmatic stance; his point of view emerges from the sum of the individual things he describes and the stories he recounts. Because of this his narrative sometimes reads like an essay, sometimes more like an autobiography, and at other times like a novel. This diversity is testimony to his search for a language in which to express his experience of the Gulag.

Thus Herling neither privileges one perspective over any other nor confines himself to a single dimension in recounting what he observed. As the narrator of *A World Apart* he is at once biographer and autobiographer, charting his own fate as well as that of others, sociologist, political commentator, historian and chronicler. But above all, he is a writer.

The considerable amount of space Herling devotes in *A World Apart* to documenting events and sociological commentary was the result of the task he had set himself as narrator and observer. In describing his own fate he also wanted to relate basic information about the world he had encountered in the Soviet Union. And the more that world differed from the free world, the more those differences required careful definition and description. At the time Herling was writing his memoirs in London, information about the world of Soviet concentration camps was largely confined to those who had experienced it for themselves.

6. The Narrative as Chronicle

In his review of Ludwik Landau's *Kronika lat wojny i okupacji*, mentioned earlier (see p. 103), Herling reflected on the task of the narrator as chronicler:

> Anonymous, almost medieval in his scrupulously methodical approach, absolutely impersonal, his voice even, dispassionate and free of "subtones" or sentimentality of any kind, meticulous to the point of pedantry, uniform to such an extent that he seems less a person of flesh and blood than a hand moved about by a crowd, or the needle on a seismograph. (…) Perhaps [Landau] realized that the source of the English writer's [Defoe's] power lay in the strict detachment with which, day by day, he listed the streets touched by the plague and the number of corpses taken out to be buried in mass graves, a detachment maintained until the final page, where at last he allows himself one single sentence with a personal ring to it, a sentence that has the air of being carelessly thrown in, about the "endurance of human nature". (*Wyjścia z milczenia*, p. 248)

In *A World Apart* the narrator is often just such a chronicler as this. Let us now try to define a few features of this type of narrative.

One characteristic of the narrative as chronicle (i.e. the detailed narrative) is noting down the vocabulary of the concentration camp. Thus the pages of *A World Apart* contain dozens of words referring to camp institutions, its customs, categories of people etc. Among those that crop up most often are: *khleboriezka*, *slabosilka*, *aktirovka*, *trupyarnya*, *lesoruby*, *rozvodchik*, *wokhra*, *stryelok*, *normirovshchytsy*, *pridurky*, *bytovnitsy*, *natsmenyi*, *oboz pyeryesilnyi*, *lesopoval*, *dom svidanyi*, *sanobrabotka*, *primbluda*, *tufta*, *lazaret*, *pyeryevospitannyi*, *lagyerna dacha*, *spyetslarok*, *rabotyaga*, *dokhodyaga.*

All these elements of camp vocabulary are ostensibly neutral: they are just names. But the very process of explaining their meaning draws the reader into the inferno of camp life. This rich compilation of vocabulary pertaining to every area of camp life is not merely a form of documentation; it is also the simplest and most succinct way of giving literary expression to the world of the Gulag.

Numbers can be a similarly succinct form of documentation, and Herling meticulously notes down and measures every dimension – in the literal sense of the word – of camp life. Everything that can be counted or measured is there: the daily bread ration (in grammes, but also in numbers of slices), the quantity of soup (in grammes) for every prisoner, the percentage of the work quota fulfilled, the distances between barracks and between the zone and the areas where the brigades worked, the number of prisoners in the brigades, the number of workdays, the number of hours worked and minutes spent resting, the number of days off for holidays, sickness, etc.

Descriptions of the camp and its surroundings are also part of the narrative--as-chronicle which concentrates on details: Herling provides a careful description of the shape of the camp, its various parts (treating them like regions), the place where the brigades worked and the road to it. These three types of narrative – lexicographical, numerical and geographical – are three variants of the narrative--as-chronicle.

7. The Narrative as Treatise

In *A World Apart* the narrative-as-chronicle, with its focus on details, particular events or even the stories of individuals, coexists with the narrative-as-treatise, which takes place on a more general level and is concerned with synthesis and analysis. Its original source, like that of the narrative-as-chronicle, lay in the

> extent to which every experienced prisoner has developed his powers of observation. Every cell possesses at least one statistician, a scientific investigator of prison life,

> engrossed day and night in assembling a complicated jigsaw puzzle of stories, scraps of conversation overheard in corridors, old newspapers found in the latrine, administrative orders, movements of vehicles in the courtyards, and even the sound of advancing and receding footsteps in front of the gate. (p. 9)

The narrator of *A World Apart* is quite often such a statistician, and more often still, a scientific investigator of prison life. Many passages resemble a treatise, an essay or a miniature study of some subject, such as, for example, the passages on the history of the Gulag, especially in the years of the Great Purge, 1937-1939 (in part I, chapter 2), on the distinctive features of the various nationalities among the prisoners deported to concentration camps after 1939 (in part I, chapter 4), on the political consequences of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of August 23rd, 1939, on hunger, death, the right to visits from family and relatives (in part I, chapter 6), and many other topics.

8. The Narrative as Commentary

A World Apart contains one other type of narrative: the commentary, which gives the reader some insight into the author's own views about what he is describing.

There are various kinds of commentary. Some openly present the author's views and take the form of straight judgements; some resemble aphorisms; others are metaphorical and take the form of comparisons (see the following sub-chapter).

Just as often, however, there will be no direct comment from the author: he will confine himself to giving a straightforward account, proffering no judgement and falling silent when the account is finished, leaving the reader to form his own opinion.

This does not mean that such accounts, ostensibly straightforward and refraining from judgement, do not shape the reader's judgement in more subtle ways. The commentary is there, but is to be sought on another, higher level: not the level of narrative but the level on which the reader asks why this story rather than some other was chosen, why events were ordered in one way rather than another, how a given question is defined, or how the author indicates his detachment from the narrative (see the "Epilogue" in *A World Apart*).

9. Comparisons

Herling makes considerable use of the literary device of simile to comment on events, people and situations in *A World Apart*. In these cases the narrator avoids

expressing an opinion directly, instead making his view known through his use of style, in the comparisons he makes. Here is one example:

> From the gates of the camp black crocodiles of men – stooping, shivering with cold and dragging their legs – dispersed in all directions and disappeared on the horizon after a few minutes like scattered lines of letters, gathered with one pull of the hand from a white sheet of paper. (p. 38)

Note the concision and expressive power of this simile. The fate of the prisoners dragging their legs through the snow is as uncertain and impermanent as the existence of letters on paper: at any moment some anonymous external force could wipe them out. There are many layers to this comparison, because we think of letters printed on paper as something fairly permanent, difficult to erase or wipe out; similarly, we might say that human life, too, has its permanence and weight – it leaves an imprint, a trace of itself. But Herling, in this one brief comparison, manages to show its fragility in the "world apart": we see long lines of prisoners, but at any instant they could be wiped off the face of the earth. (In his later work Herling was to make frequent use of the metaphor of the Unknown Hand which can decide one's fate.) Here is another example:

> A prisoner is considered to have been sufficiently prepared for the final achievement of the signature only when his personality has been thoroughly dismantled into its component parts. Gaps appear in the logical association of ideas; thoughts and emotions become loosened in their original positions and rattle against each other like the parts of a broken-down machine; the driving belts connecting the past with the present slip off their wheels and fall sloppily to the bottom of the mind; all the weights and levers of mind and willpower become jammed and refuse to function; the indicators of the pressure gauges jump as if possessed from zero to maximum and back again. The machine still runs in larger revolutions, but it does not work as it did – all that had a moment before appeared absurd now becomes probable even though still not true, emotions lose their colour, willpower its capacity. (pp. 65-66)

Here man is compared to a machine, but – characteristically – he is not reified, treated as a thing or an automaton; he remains a human being. If we look at this comparison more carefully, we can see a subtle layering of two different perspectives. From the point of view of the investigator, the person in front of him is just an automaton, a robot which the investigation is intended to dismantle and reprogramme as a new machine, one which will henceforth be absolutely obedient to the authorities' orders. But from the author's point of view that person remains a human being, one whose humanity puts up a desperate resistance to the mechanistic violence of the investigation. Here, too, the comparison is a concise form of commentary.

Almost every such comparison, offered by the narrator as a sort of concise commentary, couched in metaphorical form, comes as the coda to a story. The

narrator completes it, multiplies its meanings and endows concrete situations with symbolic and universal significance. Sometimes he transforms the description of a psychological situation into a mini-fable; sometimes it will be a metaphorical mini-novel, consisting of one sentence, in which every element adds its own rich associations. It can be an excellent and fruitful exercise, when reading *A World Apart* as a literary text, to analyse the semantics of these comparisons, their stylistic construction and the role they play in the passage in which they appear.

Here are a few more examples:

> Like a phantom ship pursued by death, our barrack floated out into the moonless sea of darkness, carrying in its hold the sleeping crew of galley slaves. (p. 151)
>
> We came out into the corridor and joined the crowd of sweat-drenched, steaming, sleepy bodies, crouched fearfully against the walls, like the rags of human misery in a city sewer. (p. 17)
>
> When a few days later, I left the cell to join a transport, the old shoe-maker was still rocking on his bunk like a stunned parrot on its perch. (p. 7)
>
> He was like a bird who flies into a cage with much flapping of wings, with eyes veiled by a white cataract, and a half-open sharply hooked beak, and grips the wooden perch with determination. (pp. 242-243)
>
> I watched him as he walked out of the hotel, tripped across the road like a bird with a broken wing, and disappeared in the crowd without looking back. (p. 248)

These comparisons, always connected as they are to a particular situation, do not form any kind of coherent whole. Remarkably apt, succinct and carefully tailored to their subject, they contain, in condensed form, meanings which would otherwise require lengthy passages to express.

We can see from the above examples, however, that Herling favours comparisons with animals. Some other examples: “He looked like a huge sewer rat covered with slime, caught suddenly in a beam of light” (p. 55); or “Walking along tortuous paths we looked like the legs of some enormous black caterpillar, whose head, pierced in the zone by the four blades of the searchlights, bared the teeth of gleaming barrack windows at the sky” (p. 44).

At this point we must turn to the semantic functions of these rhetorical devices, in other words to the meaning that emerges from these comparisons of people to animals.

Such comparisons are frequent both in literature and in everyday speech: we commonly say of people that they behave like animals, fall upon their food like ravening beasts, set upon someone like a pack of wolves, follow someone like a flock of sheep etc. And we might, on the face of it, expect to see this type of comparison in Herling’s narrative, for it is often found in works about Soviet and Nazi concentration camps, as well as in descriptions of the suffering of individuals

and nations during World War II. Such comparisons crop up almost inevitably in accounts of cruelty (typically on the part of camp guards, Gestapo officers or NKVD interrogators) during the war. Borowski, for example, wrote in *Pożegnanie z Marią*: "Hunger is real when one human being sees another as something to be eaten. I have known such hunger."

But from Herling's narrative – and this is highly characteristic – comparisons of this type are entirely absent. And where an animalistic analogy is made – such as, for instance, "where the logical brain of man can no longer control the animal reflexes of his body" (p. 187) – its function is not comparative; on the contrary, its purpose is to distinguish the human from the animal in a human being. The animal sphere is confined to the level of the most basic physical instincts and emerges only in situations of extreme exhaustion, when we are no longer able to control it.

Herling's animalistic comparisons never depreciate the people or phenomena they describe; on the contrary, they stress the human and extract the spiritual side of existence. This is so in all cases in *A World Apart* where the narrator's own attitude regarding various dimensions of human existence is visible in his choice of vocabulary and style. It is always reflective and compassionate, and treats people's extreme reactions in extreme situations as anomalies rather than as the norm.

10. Dealing with Shameful Things

One such theme is the human body and its reactions and mechanisms – which for concentration camp prisoners were always associated with humiliation, suffering and shame; they exceeded the normal bounds of human coexistence and human interaction. The body has always been a difficult subject to treat in literature, and the challenges involved were different from those encountered in writing about cruelty or physical violence. The source of this particular difficulty lies in our feeling of distaste and embarrassment when, in writing about human physiology, we find ourselves going beyond the limits of what is conventionally considered shameful. But bodily concerns and problems were painful and ever-present for prisoners in the camps, and Herling not only refuses to avoid tackling them, he confronts them head on in the very first, introductory chapter of *A World Apart*. Here is the second paragraph of chapter 1:

> Half-naked, we would get up from the cement floor – the supper signal had put an end to our afternoon nap. While waiting with clay bowls in our hands for the liquid mess which was to be our supper, we took the opportunity to relieve ourselves of the liquid mess which had been our lunch. Six or eight streams of urine crossed in the air like the jets of a fountain, and met in a miniature whirlpool at the bottom of a high pail before us, raising the level of foam along its sides. Before buttoning up our trousers, some of

> us would look curiously at our shaved flesh: it was like seeing a tree, bent by the wind, standing solitary on the barren slopes of a field. (p. 1)

And a few pages later:

> … he walked to the latrine on our daily visit there, tripping along with little steps; when his turn came, he stood awkwardly over the hole and let down his trousers, then carefully lifted the long tail of his shirt, and, half-standing, puffed and reddened with the effort. (p. 5)

And again:

> In the small, hastily erected closet, with only a few planks in place of a door, I suffered the worst physical torments of my life, as the stone-hard turd, which my thirsting organism had sucked dry of all its juices during eight days of hunger, forced its way through my guts, wounding and tearing them until the blood flowed. I must have been a sorry sight, crouching over a frozen plank, my jerkin blowing in the wind, looking out at the snowstorm which blew over the plain, with eyes full of tears of pain and pride. (p. 209)

The great artistic value of Herling's book lies not only in the way it portrays political truth and the truth about what happened in the camps (these things were acknowledged immediately), but also in his descriptions of the various embarrassing and humiliating physical aspects of camp existence, descriptions which he raised to the level of art.

But in addition to the artistic value there is also a philosophical dimension here. At every step in the camps, the prisoner found himself in situations where he was reduced to his most basic physiological instincts, a purely biological organism with no control over his reactions – which was the aim and the philosophy of both Soviet and Nazi concentration camps. It was Borowski who, in Herling's view, provided the best literary illustration of this:

> There remained the basic struggle which the solitary, degraded prisoner fought for his survival, a struggle waged against the equally degraded SS-guard and the terrible violence of the camp. (…) In the camp we did not fight for the idea of our Motherland or for the internal reconstruction of man; we fought for a bowl of soup, for a place to sleep, for women, for gold and for watches from the transports.[5]

Herling often mentions similar situations in the Soviet camps, but he always denies this debasement, even though it is clearly visible. The body and its functions are a particularly good example of Herling's refusal to accept the state of degradation to which the prisoner is reduced and to portray it as such, for the temptation to acknowledge the sphere of physicality as one where human existence has been entirely subordinated to its biological dimension is very hard to resist.

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5 T. Borowski, introduction to *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu,* cited in: G. Herling-Grudziński, *Wyjścia z milczenia*, op. cit., p. 134.

The body and its functions are a frequent theme in *A World Apart* because the detainees wage a constant struggle against it. But the narrator refuses to see them as organisms reduced to their purely biological functions and does not allow us to see them in this way either. He does not portray them as animals even when, in a state of utter physical degradation, they can no longer control their physical reactions.

Even in a concentration camp, Herling seems to be saying, physiology had a human dimension. In painful conditions it was painful to bear. It could be comic or tragic, but it was always human, part of the human lot.

11. Descriptions of Nature

A careful examination of the style of *A World Apart* will unearth many other examples of the narrator's external perspective when talking about the "civilization" of the camps. What interests us at present is of course the way in which this externality functions as an artistic device, part of the book's poetics; not the narrator's explicit judgements, but the hidden meanings and functions of particular elements of his extraordinary prose. Further examples of this, in addition to those mentioned above, can be found in his descriptions of nature.

Before *A World Apart*, it had been conventional in concentration camp literature to portray nature as part of the nightmarish world of the camps (or, more broadly, of the experience of war). Depictions of nature were similar in tone to depictions of life in the camps, so that nature itself, within this convention, or rather perhaps in its stereotypes, became an integral part of the mechanism of human extermination. Hopelessness and suffering in the camps, or under the Occupation, were illustrated by appropriately dark and gloomy natural scenes, whose lugubriousness was intended to intensify the atmosphere of horror that was being portrayed. One example of this is a 1942 short story by Jerzy Andrzejewski called *Apel* ("Roll-Call"). The final scene of this story takes place in a concentration camp at night, during a roll-call, when the SS guards, seized by "a mass fury, a blind madness," begin murdering the prisoners. "It seemed," the narrator says, "as if all the human hatred and cruelty of the world came together that night in that place, crazed and insatiate, and that no one would come out of that hell alive." Later on he adds, although by then dawn has broken: "The darkness covered the earth for a long time."

In narration of this kind, nature was a sort of theatrical prop, a stage decoration which provided a suitably gloomy background to underscore the horror of the events portrayed. Darkness (always thickening), stars (always faint), clouds

(always black) and wind (always howling) were the invariable background to scenes of human sadism and brutality.

This way of portraying nature was not of course invented by authors writing about World War II; it had been a familiar literary convention for a very long time. Countless romantic descriptions of nature have rendered it as no less cruelly and mysteriously tangled than history; and in Henryk Sienkiewicz's *By Fire and Sword* changes in nature are meant to indicate the horror of imminent events.

Herling's writing is the exact opposite of this literary convention and its stereotypes, and *A World Apart* demonstrates this particularly well. His sketches of nature are such that if one took them out of the context in which they are embedded, one would not suspect that they formed part of a background to life in a concentration camp. Here are a few examples:

> Toward evening the air became cooler, woolly clouds sailed across the sky, and the first stars gleamed faintly. The rust-coloured wall opposite our window would burst briefly into a reddish flame, which was then suddenly extinguished by the sunset. (p. 2)

> It was late when we walked to the station, and the town was almost empty. The streets, washed down by rain, gleamed in the dark light of the evening, like long narrow sheets of mica. The air was close and muggy and it was difficult to breathe. The Dzvina river, dangerously swollen, rumbled threateningly under the sagging planks of the wooden bridge. (p. 7)

> The moon was fading gently, frozen in the icy sky like a slice of lemon in a jelly, and the last stars still twinkled. (p. 36)

> When we marched out at dawn we could see the last stars twinkling dimly in the opal sky, and the whole zone was grey. After an hour's walk the sky began to take on the colour of a pearly shell, pink and blue at the edges and white in the middle. (…) During the afternoon the sky – crystal-clear at dawn and inflated like a full sail at evening – wrinkles and shimmers in the heated air like the ashes of tinfoil held over the flame of a candle. (p. 184)

Nature in Herling's prose is autonomous, and it presents a rich variety of colours and shades, shapes and smells. The narrator of *A World Apart* describes it with unconcealed fascination and delight. His descriptions are sensuous and often ingenious. But what is most singular is his utter refusal to acknowledge that this is nature seen through the eyes of a prisoner in a concentration camp. He observes nature and delights in it as if he were free, drawing on his feeling of inner freedom to paint a world untainted by the experience of imprisonment. For in Herling's eyes nature represents a world whose order is inaccessible to us. Man can destroy nature, but no ideology can change its colours or smells or – most importantly – affect the mystery of its beauty. The ability to perceive the beauty of nature in all its dimensions is for him a proof of his own spiritual autonomy. But it is proof, too, of the existence of a phenomenon whose source is metaphysical, beyond

human reach; it confirms his conviction that there is a natural – neither political nor ideological – order in the world, and denounces the world of the concentration camps as artificial – a world "apart", a pathological aberration, an anomaly rather than the norm. Nature proves that somewhere beyond the concentration camp there is a free world, which is the real world, and testifies to its existence.

In the chapter entitled "Haymaking", Herling describes a violent autumn storm from which prisoners and guards shelter in a rotting shed that stood in the field:

> Drenched to our shirts, we stood under the rotting roof on which the hail bounced loudly, while the warm autumn storm raged outside, and the shutters banged in the wind and turned with a screech on rusty hinges, giving us glimpses of the green clearing, the bent tops of trees and the sky dappled with pink streaks of lightning. I poked in the ashes with a stick and felt that tears were mingled with the drops of rain which streamed down my cheeks and into my mouth. It was sufficient to turn one's back on the two figures with guns to feel oneself quite at liberty. (p. 185)

This is the most succinct metaphorical expression of the narrator's attitude to the "civilization of the camps" – the belief that one need only to turn one's back in order to feel free.

Although nature and its descriptions have autonomous value in *A World Apart*, they also make up part of Herling's experience of the Gulag. Such descriptions are not, after all, devoid of a context, and the context in which they appear is generally that of the narrator's stories or reflections about the "civilization of the camps". But even then, nature and the world of the camps are two distinct and very different realities:

> The sky was pale from the frost and the last stars still flickered. It seemed to me that they would go out any minute and then the dark, thick night would emerge from the still forest and swallow up the shimmering sky and the pale dawn concealed in the cold flames of the fires. But, round the first bend of the road, I could see on the horizon the silhouettes of four crow's nests placed high on wooden stilts and surrounded by barbed wire. Lights gleamed in barrack windows and well-chains could be heard slipping on their frozen capstans. (p. 19)

> The sombre ceiling of the sky closed upon us from above, and the still invisible barbed wire separated us from the outer world which was beginning to go about its business by the light of electric lamps. (p. 35)

Herling observes both these worlds, and the way in which the beauty of nature coexisted with the nightmarish civilization of the camps. On the face of it, the first of these had no practical effects on the prisoner's life, except of course for the freedom felt in experiencing it. But – and this is clear from the way in which nature is rendered in *A World Apart* – the beauty of nature emphasized the (artificial, man--made) boundary between the camp and freedom. The guards' guns, the barbed wire, the towers around the camp – for the narrator of *A World Apart* all these

things prove the existence of a real, physical boundary beyond which a normal world still exists. It is a world which sometimes lies behind the prisoner's back, as it were, and sometimes within his range of vision; but sometimes it exists only in his memory or his stubborn conviction that the "world apart" will continue to be considered as such for as long as one continues to believe in the existence of a normal world beyond it.

This idea, variously expressed, is a leitmotif that runs through the book; and descriptions of nature, always rich in detail and often embedded in accounts of extreme situations, run through all of Herling's later work. Later, recalling what Camus had once said about the role of such interludes in his work, Herling was to call them "healing by landscape".

12. Biographical Anecdotes

The narrator's most important form of contact with other people in *A World Apart* is conversation. Conversation might seem the most obvious and natural form of contact between people and there is ostensibly nothing extraordinary about its presence here, or at least no more extraordinary than in any other book. But its role in *A World Apart* is less obvious and more complex than it might seem.

In *A World Apart*, all forms of oral communication – conversations, exchanges of views, stories and anecdotes – play a fundamental structural and artistic role. The first thing that needs to be said is that, in the "world apart" which is reconstructed here, "conversations" between prisoners were extremely rare; they were not the normal form of communication. This is not surprising when we recall that the rules of the Gulag (and of the Soviet system as a whole) were intended among other things to destroy normal human communication, above all verbal communication of a direct and personal kind. Thus it was silence, or silent observation, rather than verbal expression, that was the norm in the "world apart". As Herling is marching in a column of prisoners, he notes that:

> … groups of people passed us in silence, without turning their heads in our direction, looking straight in front of them or down at the ground. (…) I would have given much that day to see a group of people standing idly and gaily talking together. (pp. 7-8)

Secondly, in order for a conversation to take place, the interlocutors must have a minimum of respect for each other. But in the camps, the divisions between prisoners and administration as well as between particular groups of prisoners were based not on respect but on hostility and hatred. This was a carefully organized element of Gulag education, supported by communist ideology. In addition to

hostility and hatred, there was also mistrust and fear. When prisoners from two different convoys meet in a prison, they:

> … stopped dead, held back by an impulse of fear. The group which had been advancing towards us also stopped and retreated a few steps. We stood face to face, our heads bowed – two worlds, joined by the same fate, yet divided by a barrier of fear and uncertainty. (p. 9)

It is noteworthy that what prevents conversations in the world of the Gulag is not falsehood but truth: the threat of truth. For the truth about a prisoner – any truth, even regarding quite neutral or trivial matters – could, in the hands of an informer, lead to another sentence and as a result cost that prisoner his life. Thus fear of conversation was in fact a fear of denunciation, and its function in the regulations which governed life in the camps was to make the prisoners fear the truth and teach them never to reveal it – about themselves or about others, or indeed about the camp itself.

The Gulag "civilization of death" meant the death of conversation; in other words, the death of human contact.

Such contact was made impossible not just by the conditions of life in the camps, but also by a variety of camp regulations, among them those which governed visits from families:

> When the relative, usually the prisoner's wife or mother, at last finds herself in the Third Section office of the particular camp, she must sign a declaration, promising not to disclose by even one word, after her return home, what she has seen of the camp through the barbed wire; the privileged prisoner signs a similar declaration, undertaking – this time under pain of heavy punishment, even of death – not to mention in conversation his and his fellow-prisoners' life and conditions in the camp. One can imagine how difficult this regulation makes any direct or intimate contact between two people who, after many years of separation, meet for the first time in these unusual surroundings; what is left of a relationship between two people if an exchange of mutual experiences is excluded from it? The prisoner is forbidden to say, and the visitor forbidden to ask, what he has gone through since the day of his arrest. If he has changed beyond recognition, if he has become painfully thin, if his hair has turned grey and he has aged prematurely, if he looks like a walking skeleton, he is allowed only to remark casually that "he hasn't been feeling too well, for the climate of this part of Russia does not suit him". (pp. 88-89)

Paradoxically, then, in the "world apart" a free person was not a possible interlocutor for a prisoner. The masquerade (see *A World Apart*, pp. 86-89) of relations between the world of freedom and the world of the camps also precluded any kind of communication between the two; it precluded the transmission of truth.

Unable to talk about himself with people from the free world, the prisoner had a choice: forgo conversation entirely, or take the risk of talking to another prisoner. And such a conversation between two prisoners was the only opportunity

of normal human contact in the Gulag: direct, personal contact which allowed two prisoners to express trust, interest, sympathy – all the normal feelings which the Gulag did its best to stamp out. As a way of communicating, conversation – in the broadest sense of the term – was the only vestige in the Gulag of that most basic form of human contact which takes place between free people. Listening and talking gave the prisoners in the "world apart" the feeling that they were once again, for a moment, part of the free world, in an atmosphere of freedom, human kindness and sympathy, sometimes even friendship:

> We lay on the bunks closer to each other than usual, listening to someone's story or talking in the atmosphere of intimacy which common imprisonment creates when the daily struggle for existence does not put barriers of distrust and instinctive hostility between the prisoners. (p. 123)

The varied functions of conversation in the "world apart" are clear when we look at the structure of *A World Apart* as a literary work. Conversation, and above all the telling of stories, is a fundamental narrative form. Time and again the narrator mentions that the account he is setting down was related by someone else, that it is a shortened version of something he had heard, that it is a story another prisoner had told him, etc. Thus we read: "one prisoner told me" (p. 193), "after the evening roll-call he told me his story" (p. 6), "veteran prisoners told me" (p. 8), etc. In the chapter "The Mortuary" in the second half of the book there is even a whole story singled out as "B's story".

Thus other people's stories, together with the narrator's own, are part of the basic structure of *A World Apart*. They can be split into stories about particular events (for instance, the story of how the Yertsevo camp evolved, told to Herling by the agricultural engineer Polenko and the telephone engineer Karboński on pp. 21-22) and stories about people, among which the most prevalent are biographical accounts. Thus biographical novellas, consisting of portraits of the narrator's fellow prisoners and their lives and constructed from their own and other prisoners' accounts, are an important element of the book.

Based on these accounts, the prisoners' lives turn out to be both richer and more unlikely and fantastic than anything found in literature (conversations about which were banned in the camps). The biographical novellas which make up so much of the book include elements of various literary genres: the love story (in the chapter "Resurrection"), the adventure story (the escape from the camp, in the chapter "The Day of Rest"), the vignette or the sensational account (the story about Gortsev in the chapter "Work").

All the themes of *A World Apart* are subordinated to the viewpoint of the observer who learns from them and extracts from each some fundamental insight about human nature and the nature of Soviet communism (as reflected and experienced in the "world apart"). These insights appear in the form of

generalizations; the facts observed by the author are transposed into the sphere of moral reflection about human nature, and every story ends with Herling's discovery of a spark of "the essence of the human". Herling is fascinated by the human condition: the lives, feelings, behaviour, attitudes, values, motivations and choices of particular people in extraordinary circumstances. Out of all these elements he builds stories about the people he has met, observed, listened to and heard about. Listening to their life stories, he literally "brings them out of the realm of silence" – not just by bearing witness through the story he tells, but also by creating them through that story, which becomes a sort of photographic plate preserving an image of things which are invisible and often inaudible. He recreates the hidden dramas of people's lives and feelings, their unexpressed moral conflicts, unextinguished passions and attacks of rage, in the belief that somewhere within people's secret silences lurks that indestructible element of human beings – their inner freedom:

> I have learnt, and it is a lesson I always remember, that you can't judge people according to their behaviour when they are silent. When people are silent, there is always some kind of process going on inside them which, when the imposed silence is broken, can reveal very unexpected things. That's why I don't believe a person can be completely re-made.[6]

It is in the sphere of human experience which Herling alludes to here that the literary and creative side of *A World Apart* is most clearly visible: through its psychological sketches and portraits of people, and through its insights into things which are unexpressed. In this respect *A World Apart* may be analyzed as a collection of fascinating biographical novellas, whose protagonists exhibit a whole gamut of sometimes extreme behaviours, provoked not only by conditions in the camp but also by the memory of their previous lives: their work, their upbringing, their views. Let us take a closer look at some of these.

Here is a passage from the chapter "Work" about an NKVD functionary, Gortsev, who murdered and viciously tortured prisoners:

> For hundreds of thousands of Gorcevs bolshevism is the only religion and the only possible attitude to the world, for it has been thoroughly instilled into them during childhood and youth. Older men like Zinoviev, Kamenev or Bukharin may have looked upon their "ideological deviation" as a great personal defeat which suddenly robbed their lives of meaning, they may have suffered and considered themselves to have been betrayed, they may even have broken down completely – but despite everything they must still have retained enough of their critical faculty to enable them to consider what was being done to them and around them with historical detachment in their sober moments. But for the Gorcevs the breakdown of their faith in communism, the only faith which has directed their lives, would mean the loss of the five basic senses,

6 "Radość daje pisanie…", interview with B. Wildstein, op. cit.

> which recognize, define and appraise the surrounding reality. Even imprisonment cannot goad them into breaking their priestly vows, for they treat it as temporary isolation for a breach of monastic discipline, and wait for the day of release with even greater acquiescence and humility in their hearts. The fact that their period of seclusion and meditation has to be spent in hell does not prove anything for them, or rather it proves only that hell really does exist, and woe to those who suffer expulsion from paradise for sins against the doctrines of the Almighty. (p. 46)

The prisoners took a cruel revenge on Gortsev, torturing him in various ways until he died. One of them remarked: "Once they used to throw slaves to the lions, now it is the lions who are thrown to the slaves" (p. 50).

A policeman sentenced to seven years for accidentally letting off his gun at a portrait of the *gensek*[7] appears to have come to believe that he really did kill Stalin; but it is this insane belief that allows him to salvage what remains of his "extinguished existence" (p. 50).

Engineer Mikhail Kostylev, a young communist and student at a naval school, fell in love with nineteenth-century French literature, in which he discovered a true world apart, undreamt of before: "If I have ever known, even for a short time, what freedom is," he says, "then it was while I was reading those old French books" (p. 73). From then on he no longer felt at home in the Soviet paradise. Accused of espionage, he was brutally tortured by the NKVD and then sentenced to ten years in a labour camp. Here at first he

> … lived in better conditions than the others and his work was comparatively light. He gave most of his own bread away, carried soup tickets to the mortuary, took advantage of the fact that he was allowed to go beyond the zone without an escort to bring back an occasional scrap of fat or vegetables for the sick. (p. 79)

But then he was denounced for reporting the quotas fulfilled by the prisoners in his brigade as higher than their real output and punished by being transferred to a brigade of foresters. And there

> … physical labour crushed and degraded him to such a degree that he would have stopped at nothing to get an additional scrap of bread. He hated his fellow-prisoners, and from that time looked upon them as his natural, greatest enemies. (p. 81)

He was saved from the "greatest crime a man can commit in the camp," the crime of "spying and denunciation" by a stroke of pure luck: he came across one of the books he had read when he was still at liberty.

> He read it again in the camp, crying like a child who has found his mother's hand in the dark. And for the second time he realized that he had been cheated. (p. 80)

From then on, in order to be able to read books and "never again work for them" – i.e. the communists – he would burn his hand every day, putting it into the fire.

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7 Short for *gyeneralnyi sekretyar* – General Secretary of the Party, i.e. Stalin.

About to be put on a transport to Kolyma, he "poured a bucked of boiling water over himself in the bath house". He did not regain consciousness and died "in protracted agony" (p. 84).

The actor Mikhail Styepanovich believed so profoundly in Soviet justice that he considered his own and others' sentencing to the camps as something entirely deserved (he had been sentenced to several years of forced labour for playing a tsarist boyar with "excessive nobility"):

> … [He] looked upon everything that he had suffered since the moment of his arrest as a completely natural sequence of events. (…) He was convinced that the highest distinction which an honest man can attain is approval in the eyes of the authorities, and the greatest shame the dissatisfaction of his superiors. (…) His brain could not conceive of a situation where an innocent man is deprived of his freedom. Gradually he came to believe in his own guilt… (pp. 104-105)

There was the German S., an engineer accused of espionage, who suffered from pellagra and regarded his fellow prisoners with undisguised hatred and contempt (pp. 105-106). Eugenia Fyodorovna, a nurse, who was "resurrected" in the camp through her love for a young prisoner and died in childbirth (pp. 110-112). The old Cossack Pamfilov, "full of contempt for the Soviet regime", whose son Sasha disowned him in the name of communist ideology. And when Sasha himself ended up in the Yertsevo camp, the camp which had estranged father from son would become the instrument of their reconciliation (pp. 119-123). The Finn Rusto Karinen, who in the winter of 1940 attempted to escape from Yertsevo, but lost his sense of direction and after a week of trudging through snowdrifts ended up back where he had come from, in a village only a few kilometres away from the camp; he was found unconscious by some local peasants and driven back by them into the camp, where

> … the guards took him to the internal prison, where, still unconscious, he was beaten so cruelly that for three months he was near death, and even after his life had been saved had to remain in hospital for another two months. "You can't escape from the camp," he used to say; "freedom isn't for us." ("The Day of Rest", pp. 123-129)

There were Finnish and German communists, who, after risking their lives to make their way to the USSR, their promised land, risked them again in an exodus in the other direction. German Jews who attempted to resist after being caught were handed over to the Gestapo ("Drei Kameraden"). And there was a whole portrait gallery of people whose pasts we know little about but whose destinies crossed with Herling's at the camp. Among them were Professor Boris Lazarovich N., a lecturer in French literature at the Bryusov Institute ("I still look upon him as one of the masters of my youth," Herling writes), who suffered terribly from hunger, and after his transfer to another camp sent a message saying: "Please tell Gustav Yosifovich that at last I can understand what an excellent social-realist Knut

Hamsun was" ("Hunger", pp. 138-142). And a Warsaw barber, the communist Zelik Leyman, suspected of being an informer and hated by the other prisoners. He had estranged himself from his "bitter co-religionists" and decided to start life afresh in the camp as an "obedient and humble prisoner". But when he played his violin, which he did beautifully, he

> … glorified himself and then suddenly relapsed into humility, he was afire with vengeance like a burning bush, (…) he prayed zealously with his face turned towards that quarter of the world where, on the ruins of Jerusalem, the Promised Land was to flourish again with olive groves: he sang his own fate and that of his nation, a fate which drew no distinction between love and hatred." (*The House of the Dead*, pp. 166-172)

There was Dimka, the Russian Orthodox priest who chopped off his foot in an act of rebellion against God. And engineer Sadowski, who until his last breath retained his "hatred for human beings and his belief in the abstract system built by human ingenuity" and who in the moments of insanity into which his irrational rationalism plunged him even accepted the logic of his arrest and his sentencing to hard labour. In his final madness, when he lay dying in the barrack called the mortuary, in the grip of the illusion that he was a member of a revolutionary tribunal, he pronounced death sentences, and his whole life seemed contained in his terrible cry: *Pod Styenku!* ("Against the wall!"). And M., a pre-war official at the Polish Ministry of Agriculture, who could not break himself of his smoking habit, suffered terrible headaches and found relief only in prayer – "for everyone" with the exception of prison guards, whom he did not regard as people. And B., a high-school teacher and a reserve officer in the Polish Army, who was not shot by the NKVD because he did not confess to the charges made against him, and after going through several other camps "returned to Yertsevo as if he were coming home" ("The Mortuary"). And finally, a young Jewish communist who saved his own life by falsely accusing (and causing the death of) four prisoners he did not know ("Epilogue").

Each of these stories contains several hidden layers and unexpected twists and turns, bringing into relief the complexity of human fates and feelings; each has material enough for a good-sized novel.

Herling tells the stories of people sentenced by the Soviet authorities to a slow death, people who, in the inhuman conditions in which they find themselves, either sink beneath the "lowest threshold of humanity" or attempt to salvage its most basic elements. Thus they describe the descent into unimaginable savagery and degradation, but also the heroic search for inner freedom and hope, love and friendship – feelings the camp was supposed to destroy.

The biographical accounts in *A World Apart* are also a form of testimony about people and conditions in the Soviet camps. The narrator, in committing them to

paper, was fulfilling a duty towards his fellow prisoners, who had entreated him to "Tell the whole truth: what we once were and what they reduced us to."

Herling's way of telling these stories can make one feel one is reading a palimpsest: he gradually untangles the various psychological and biographical layers until he reaches a kernel of feeling which cannot be reduced any further, and this is the kernel which contains the mystery of the human. It is a method he will develop in his later work, which also deals with the tragedies and mysteries of human experience, emotion and destiny.

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In Polish literature the term "biographical tales" is most closely associated with the work of Wacław Berent (1872-1940), who used this title for his series of historical works about the "1795 generation". There is ostensibly no resemblance between Berent and Herling, and comparing *A World Apart* to Berent's *Nurt* (1934) might seem absurd. Nonetheless, although there is of course no similarity in their subject matter, some resemblance can be found on the deeper and not immediately obvious level of their philosophical attitudes to their work as men of letters. This is not an idea drawn from the realm of pure critical literary theory, for in a certain sense Herling himself suggested it. Herling's first book, *The Living and the Dead*, contains a 1945 essay about Berent's *Nurt*; the second part of this essay had been one of the first books published by "Biblioteka Orła Białego", the series published in the weekly newspaper of the 2nd Army Corps. Soldiers of the 2nd Corps stationed in Italy saw their own destinies prefigured on those of the Dąbrowski Legions: the destinies of wandering soldiers who once again, half a century later, found themselves on an armed pilgrimage from Italy to Poland.

But in addition to these historical analogies, Herling discerned in Berent's work a method and philosophy that were soon to become distinguishing features of his own writing. This was the narrative creation of "living people": people recalled to life from the abyss of the past and given a voice through a narrative which reconstructs their inner lives and embeds their experiences in a historical context. Herling carries out an incisive analysis of Berent's poetics in his biographical tales, which at times may be seen as his (unintended) commentary on his own biographical stories in *A World Apart* as well as his later work. For what he discerned in Berent's tales was "a struggle with the recalcitrant matter of facts and long-forgotten emotions" and a narrative search for "human fullness in historical man":

> Berent's protagonists do not develop as the story progresses, but rather constantly reveal new facets of their long-extinguished lives. They do not illustrate problems, for they themselves are the problems. They have no independent lives, for their stories

> come from beyond the grave. But stronger than the voice of history is (…) the present disquieting silence of historical neglect. Berent has written a fierce monologue in the name of those who are silent.[8]

All these observations can be applied, in the most literal way, to the biographical tales in *A World Apart*.

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There are many biographical stories in *A World Apart* besides those I have mentioned, and they are of course more complex than their brief summaries might suggest. All are examples of the best contemporary psychological prose (that is, prose which tries to discover the truth about human motivations). The genre to which they belong is indisputably that of the literary portrait – a form created in antiquity by Theophrastus and developing in modern literature since at least the eighteenth century. It also has a rich and long tradition in painting. (This, too, is an area in which Herling is knowledgeable: he has devoted many pages to the analysis of portraits by the Old Masters.) The development of the literary portrait was furthered by a burgeoning interest in psychology, the individual, human personality and the complexities of human emotion; it was a trend that revolutionalized literature in the twentieth century, for the literary penetration of human psychology was accompanied by experiments with form (for instance, the stream of consciousness). Herling is a traditionalist, however, and his literary portraits remain within the tradition of realistic narrative.

The literary portrait was also firmly embedded in Polish literature of the "Młoda Polska" ("Young Poland") period and the interwar years. It was inspired on the one hand by translations of eighteenth-century French writers, who combined the genre of literary portrait with penetrating moral reflection, and on the other by the modernist fascination with the inner life, the relation between reality and consciousness, illusions, and the various masks which the human psyche assumes. At the turn of the century these concerns are evident in the work of Dostoevsky, Pirandello, Irzykowski, Brzozowski, Nietzsche, Freud, Proust and countless others. In Poland the tradition of the literary portrait was taken up by Zofia Nałkowska, principally in her collection *Charaktery* (1922), but it was popularized as a narrative form in the work of other writers as well, for instance Berent, Iwaszkiewicz, Andrzejewski or Kuncewiczowa. The literary portrait blossomed in the 1930s, when literature and literary discussions were much taken up with moral and psychological problems. Herling took an active part in such debates and he, too, must to some extent have been shaped by that era.

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8 G. Herling-Grudziński, *Żywi i umarli. Szkice literackie*, op. cit., p. 50.

13. Mottoes, Titles and Reading: Herling and Dostoevsky

As his motto for *A World Apart*, Herling chose a quotation from Dostoevsky (*The House of the Dead*) about the "world apart, unlike everything else" of Russian forced labour camps. The title and subtitle ("Notes" – a genre also familiar from Turgenev) hark back to Dostoevsky as a literary prototype.

The critical reception of *A World Apart* strongly emphasized this connection with Dostoevsky. The book was treated almost like a continuation of the earlier novel, one that described the same reality in the same way, several decades later. But this is a gross oversimplification, and not only because *katorga* and deportation in tsarist Russia were very different from later, Soviet concentration camps; the differences go deeper, and have to do with the two writers' attitudes towards their work.

There are seven direct references in *A World Apart* to Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*. Five of them take the form of a motto – to the whole book and to particular chapters – and two are embedded in the text itself, in the form of chapter titles: "Day After Day" and "In the House of the Dead".

What is the role of these allusions and references to Dostoevsky in *A World Apart*?

The mottoes and the quotation used for the chapter title "Day After Day" broadly indicate the similarities between the "apartness" of the two worlds. Some of the expressions Dostoevsky uses to describe it (a "world apart" or "the house of the dead") reappear as names of the phenomena Herling investigates. But in the chapter entitled "The House of the Dead" something quite different is at play. Let us take a closer look at it.

In this chapter Herling talks about the barrack known as the "barrack of self-taught activities", where the camp authorities used to put on film screenings and theatrical performances for the prisoners. One day, after the screening of an American film, Natalia Lvovna, who is serving her fifth year of forced labour, starts to cry. The narrator thinks she is crying because she is moved, in a way that is characteristic for camp inmates, by a story about free people. But she tells him it is because she has understood that "the whole of Russia has always been, and is still, a house of the dead, that time has stood still between Dostoevsky's hard labour and our own" (p. 163). And in order to explain her reaction ("for centuries we have been living in the same house of the dead") she brings him Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*, swearing him to secrecy, for "it is banned these days – especially here" (p. 160). Herling reads it through twice and it makes a tremendous impression on him: "from the moment when I read the first few pages of the book until I closed it for the second and last time (…) I lived in a state of trance, as if I had woken from a long mortal sleep" (p. 161).

Let us begin with the impression the book made on Natalia Lvovna. She says the book changed her inner life, because thanks to it she was able to rediscover hope. What was the nature of this hope?

> There is always room for hope when life becomes so utterly hopeless that nobody can touch us, we belong to ourselves… Do you understand? We become absolute masters of our lives… When there is no hope of rescue in sight, not the slightest breach in the surrounding wall, when we can't raise our hand against fate just because it is our fate, there is only one thing left to us – to turn that hand against ourselves. You probably can't understand the happiness which I found in the discovery that eventually one belongs only to oneself – at least so far that one can choose the method and the time of one's own death… . That is what Dostoevsky has taught me. In 1936, when I first found myself in prison, I suffered greatly, for I believed that I had been deprived of freedom because I had in some way deserved it. But now I know that the whole of Russia has always been, and is still, a house of the dead, that time has stood still between Dostoevsky's hard labour and our own, and now I am free, completely free! We died so long ago, though we still won't admit it. Just think: I lose hope when the desire for life awakens within me; but I regain it whenever the longing for death comes upon me. (pp. 163-164)

The prisoner Herling-Grudziński's reading of Dostoevsky is quite different; his response is ambivalent. There is fascination, but a far stronger reaction is an impulse to revolt against it:

> The thing about the book was not Dostoevsky's ability to describe inhuman suffering as if it were a natural part of human destiny, but (…) that there was not the slightest break between his fate and ours. (…) I read the book at night under cover of my jerkin, and in the daytime concealed it in the safest place on the bunk, under a loose plank near the head. I hated it and loved it, as a victim can become attached to the instrument of his torture. (…) I subconsciously longed for it to disappear without return, that I might be free once and for all from this nightmare of life without hope. I did not know then that a mental condition of full consciousness is more dangerous in slavery than hunger and physical death. (…) Dostoevsky, with his modest and rather slow story in which every day of hard labour drags on as if for whole years, swept me along with the tide of a black river of despair making its way through subterranean channels into eternal darkness. In vain I tried to swim against the overpowering current. (…) The greatest torment of my state of half-sleep was the inexplicable fact that the laws of time ceased to apply to it – between the engulfment of our predecessors and our own struggles there was no pause, the stream was continuous. That is why it assumed the character of something inevitable – of destiny. (…) The most trivial details repeated themselves with nightmarish accuracy. (…) I could not have gone on living in the camp for long with this feeling of endless fate haunting me. The deeper I drank of the poisoned source of *The House of the Dead*, the greater consolation did I find in the thought which first came to me that year: the idea of escape by suicide. (…) I regretted having to give up this book, for it had opened my eyes to the reality of the camp, even though what I now saw had every appearance of death; at the same time I was secretly

> glad at the thought of release from the strange and destructive spell of that prose, so full of despair that life in it had become merely the shadow of an interminable agony of daily death. (pp. 161-162)

For Natalia Lvovna, the discovery of a continuity between Dostoevsky's *katorga* and the Soviet camps was a kind of release, bringing a feeling of freedom and relief: it turned out that the world had always been, and would always be, a nightmare, a *katorga*, deportation and a slow death in the camps.

But for Herling such a reading of *The House of the Dead* was "an instrument of torture", a "torment", a "poisoned source", the road to "eternal darkness".

Natalia Lvovna discovers with joy that there has never been any other life beyond the world of *katorga* and the camps. The world in which she felt guilty was unbearable for her, because the feeling of guilt entailed the possibility of innocence, and the existence of any such possibility, any other possibility at all, in turn suggested the existence of free will and the possibility of resistance against the surrounding reality. But this is precisely what horrifies the narrator of *A World Apart*; Dostoevsky's account of *katorga* may well reflect the world of the Soviet camps with perfect accuracy, but it takes away any hope of change for the better, any prospect of release.

For Herling, Dostoevsky's vision of the "house of the dead" has about it a fatalism that he cannot accept. It tells him that there is a curse hanging over him, a sentence of doom, and he feels that giving way to this fatalism would utterly destroy his will to live, for it would mean accepting not only the verdict of the Soviet "court" but also, even more importantly, that Fate, or Destiny, or some omnipotent Providence, unfathomable in its workings, had sentenced him to life in a labour camp, with no reprieve and no prospect of release. For Herling, such fatalistic resignation would be tantamount to accepting both the camp itself and the sentences pronounced by the NKVD as symbols of human destiny. It would mean renouncing not only all hope for any change for the better, but also all faith in history as the domain of free agents.

Paradoxically, then, the message contained in *The House of the Dead* when read in the camp was exactly the same as the message inherent in the communist system of slave labour in the camps. It is best summed up in Dante's words: "Abandon all faith ye who enter here".

Both prisoner and reader were supposed to accept the hopelessness of their predicament and resign themselves to it with relief; both were supposed to renounce any hope that another world, a free world, existed beyond the gates of the camp. For Natalia Lvovna this fatalism opened up such a dark and pessimistic vision of the world that suicide seemed an attractive option, as the only act of free will still available to her. Herling, for his part, saw it as a great threat, not just to himself but above all to the possibility of keeping alive the belief that the order of

the world is different from that of the camps. Natalia Lvovna reasoned logically, but for Herling her logic was the logic of self-destruction:

> I looked at her with astonishment. Somewhere in the corners of her large, unhealthily swollen eyes lurked a hardly perceptible gleam of madness. (p. 163)

A few weeks after their exchange about Dostoevsky, Natalia Lvovna attempted suicide, the narrator tells us. They managed to save her. But she and Herling never spoke again. "There are secrets which unite people, but there are also secrets which, in case of failure, separate them" (p. 173).

The differences between *The House of the Dead* and *A World Apart* go deeper than this; they concern the philosophy of suffering and the conception of a human being deported to the camps. But this need not concern us now.[9] What is important in Herling's book is not *The House of the Dead* itself, but its two interpretations in the camp.

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Thus *A World Apart* contains two mutually exclusive interpretations of Dostoevsky's novel: two radically different philosophies of man and history. The whole Dostoevsky episode in the chapter "The House of the Dead" is much more significant than it might, on the face of it, seem; much more is at stake than merely the description of the events and exchanges of opinion about Dostoevsky's book after Natalia Lvovna lends it to Herling. In fact, the conclusion reached by Natalia Lvovna after reading *The House of the Dead* is part of a major philosophical problem in *A World Apart*, and one which continued to preoccupy Herling throughout his later career.

The same conclusion is reached (this time without the help of Dostoevsky) by the old Chechen farmer whose story comprises one of the novellas in *A World Apart*. He seemed like

> … a man who was dead although he still continued to breathe, who knew that he had been dead for a long time although his shrivelled heart continued to beat in the empty sack of his body. I saw in those eyes not the active despair of a man helpless before approaching death, but the passive hopelessness of one who, despite everything, continues to live. Those who still expect something of the future are free to talk about hope; but how are you to breathe hope into a man who is too weak even to put an end to his own suffering? (…) In the lives of some prisoners there is something inexplicable,

9 For a good analysis of these differences see J. Stempowski's article "Polacy w powieściach Dostojewskiego" (1931), reprinted in: J. Stempowski, *Eseje*, ed. W. Karpiński, Kraków 1984. See also A.S. Kowalczyk, "Dni naszej śmierci… O 'Innym świecie' Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego", *Polonistyka*, 1991, no. 2.

> some unsuspected revelation; their final hope seems to be that they will eventually be killed by their own hopelessness, and the silent torment of their lives comforts them with momentary happiness which the thought of death gives them. Their Christianity is not a belief in the mystical redemption of souls wearied with earthly wandering, but only gratitude to a religion which promises eternal rest. They are religious suicides, worshippers of death for whom the release of the grave is the ultimate end, not the means to a life after death. Perhaps the deeply emotional nature of their vision of death explains their hatred of life. They hate themselves and others, if only because, despite their hopes and most fervent dreams, they are still alive. (pp. 145-146)

The Chechen farmer differs from Natalia Lvovna in his attitude not to death, which is the last hope for them both, but to the form it should take, i.e. to suicide. Natalia Lvovna sees suicide as her last chance of salvaging her humanity; but the Chechen has lost all hope, even in the possibility of suicide. All he can do is wait, in passive resignation.

The problem represented through the attitudes of Natalia Lvovna and the Chechen was to return, unchanged, in one of Herling's most famous short stories, *Wieża*. In this story there are two men, and the narrator is confronted with the mystery of their different attitudes. The first man notes down from a work by Kierkegaard the thought that:

> When death is the greatest danger, one hopes for life; but when one becomes acquainted with an even more dreadful danger, one hopes for death. So when the danger is so great that death has become one's hope, despair is the disconsolateness of not being able to die.[10]

The second man, when asked how he can live without hope and faith, replies: "Because I am unable to die". Both have their prototypes in *A World Apart*.

But in what sense can we say that the questions Herling raises concern not only the attitudes of particular people – Natalia Lvovna, the Chechen, the protagonists of *Wieża* – but also the general moral problem Europe faced when confronted with the bolshevik and Nazi ideas of the extermination of nations and social and professional groups as well as individuals?

In his article about the Holocaust[11] Herling reflects on the phenomenon of "the perfect passivity of the victims, that psychological paralysis which was almost a kind of fatalism and which drove Jews to the crematoria and the gas chambers more effectively than Nazi bayonets". He then goes on to examine a few basic attitudes towards life that were common within the walls of the Jewish ghetto. The first of these was incurable optimism:

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10 Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, quoted in: G. Herling-Grudziński, *Opowiadania zebrane*, ed. Z. Kudelski, Poznań 1991, p. 23.

11 G. Herling-Grudziński, *Ściana płaczu*, op. cit.

> It might seem incredible to someone who has not known fear, but the Jews, even as they went to their deaths, were still, until the very end, hoping for a miracle. (…) Optimism in the ghetto sprang from the human instinct for life, which was distorted when its natural outlet was blocked. (…) The typical prisoner of the ghetto put his faith in death. Walled in alive, he did everything to avoid irritating death by his despair and to propitiate it by his hope. (…) The instinct for self-preservation caused Jews in the ghettos to keep many of their illusions about death, for it robbed them very quickly of all their illusions about life.

Herling examines this problem on a more general level, and finds that it marks a turning point in the history of European culture. He concludes:

> We must realize that from the moment the first Jews were driven inside the walls of the ghettos, contemporary culture found itself at the crossroads of two opposing processes: extermination and self-defence. After the war Poland became a ghetto; today, Polish émigrés are a ghetto; and the morality of the ghetto has penetrated into Western Europe. As in leper colonies, all the passions seethe *intra muros*, while all hopes lie *extra muros*. This presents a singular image of societies and nations waiting for salvation from their own gravediggers. Thus it was that in "cities under siege" the morality of survival supplanted the morality of life.[12]

14. The Title

Barbara Skarga analyzed the meaning of Herling's title as follows:

> What does it mean to talk of a world "apart"? What does its "apartness" consist in? (…) The world apart is the world of the Ten Commandments turned upside down. It is a world of values turned upside down, a world without hope, without compassion, a world where one lives within a carapace of indifference. That is what its apartness consist in.[13]

To this Herling added his own comment:

> Can we say that this "apartness" belongs to a past that is gone for ever? It is here, alongside us, weakened or asleep, but still alive, and liable at any moment to wake and turn the Ten Commandments upside down once again. Better that we should remember the threat of the "world apart" every day, better that we should walk on the earth (in accordance with Conrad's direction) as if it were a thin shell of freshly hardened lava, than that we should befuddle minds and confuse eyes turned towards the future with visions of a rational human Ruler of the Universe… (*Diary*, 9.3.1986)

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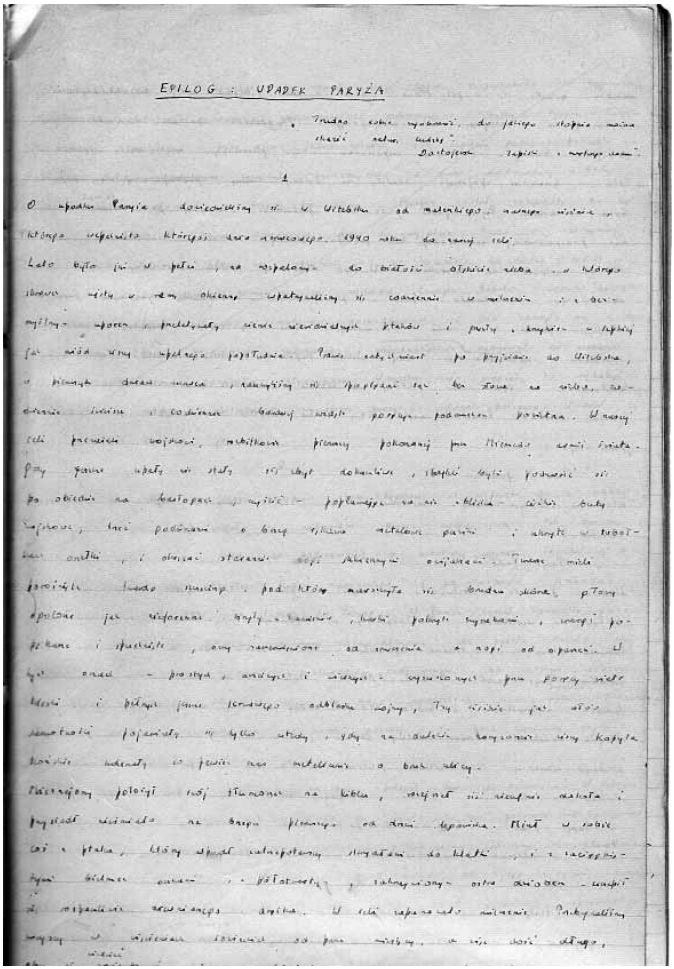
12 Ibid.

13 B. Skarga, "*Świadectwo* 'Innego świata' (1983)", *Kultura Niezależna*, 1986, no. 17. See Appendix.

15. The Epilogue


EPILOG : UPADEK PARYŻA

37. Manuscript of the epilogue to A World Apart

"Epilogue: The Fall of Paris" is the title Herling gave to the last chapter of *A World Apart*. But can a volume of memoirs or reminiscences, a diary or a chronicle, have an epilogue? Of course not. One can have an epilogue only when the work is constructed in such a way that its meaning depends upon its being read as a closed

whole. An epilogue is an addition to something that has ended, a kind of postface in which things left untold can be explained or the protagonists' later lives briefly summarized. When we see the title "Epilogue" at the end of a book, we know that what we are reading is a clearly structured and well thought-out whole, to which the author had appended something more. In this sense, an epilogue is the author's last word about his work, perhaps commenting on or explaining its meaning and purpose.

Accordingly, in *A World Apart* the last chapter is both a formal epilogue, an ending to the book as a literary construction, and the author's last word, which contains his message to the reader.

It is significant that Herling uses the title "The Fall of Paris" at the end of the book, at the point when the war is coming to a close and the reader knows that it will end with Europe's liberation from Nazi occupation. In this way the word "fall"acquires additional, metaphorical layers of meaning, which are much clearer than they would have been if it had appeared earlier in the book – as it might naturally have done, as the time of the "fall of Paris" corresponds exactly to the period during which the events related in chapter 1 of *A World Apart* take place (June 1940).

The epilogue, independently of its function as a coda for the work as a whole, has its own internal structure. Formally it is a triptych, but in terms of the period of time it covers it is rather a diptych: part one takes place in the Vitebsk prison in June 1940, part two in June 1945 in Rome after its liberation by the Allies. Thus the epilogue's internal time and narrative structure are a sort of condensed structure of the whole book: in two narrative flashes the author illuminates the "world apart" of the summer of 1940 and the summer of 1945.

The internal structure of the epilogue also reveals the internal structure of the work, for it continues a story which the narrator had begun to relate at the very beginning of the book.

Let us now look at the poetics of this story.

> … One day a dark Jew from Grodno joined us in the cell, and weeping bitterly announced that Paris had fallen. From that moment the patriotic whisperings and the political discussions on the palliasses came to an end. (p. 2)

At this point the narrator breaks off his story of the "fall of Paris", although at the time of writing (1950) he of course knew what later happened to the protagonist. This breaking off in chapter 1 and taking up the story again in the epilogue is a typical feature of literary narrative. The narrator, in not telling the reader everything, in holding something back, is behaving like a typical narrator in a novel. But what is the point of this literary manoeuvre?

Strictly speaking, what Herling does in his epilogue is not so much continue a story he had broken off earlier but retell it from the beginning from an entirely

different perspective. In chapter 1 he tells it from the viewpoint of a prisoner in a cell in the Vitebsk prison, but this prisoner, the protagonist and narrator, is not an individual but a collective construct: "we prisoners", he says. The first part of the "Epilogue" reflects this, but in part two the narrator continues the story in his own name. In part one the subject is the fall of Paris, which in 1940 was for all the prisoners "the death of their last hope, a defeat more irrevocable even than the surrender of Warsaw" (p. 243). In part two the subject is the story of an unnamed man, told to only one person: the narrator of *A World Apart*, or rather its protagonist, for by then the narrator has left the "world apart". In other words, the events recounted in the "Epilogue" are part of the interplay between the perspective of the collective fate of the prisoners and that of their individual fates.

The unnamed man reveals his secret when Herling the narrator meets him again in Rome in 1945: in 1942, when he worked as a foreman in the building brigade, an NKVD officer tried to persuade him to give false testimony against four Germans working with him. "I had to choose between my own death and that of those four," he says. "I chose. (…) I wanted to live. I testified. Two days later they were shot beyond the zone" (p. 247).

He asks Herling, as a former fellow prisoner, for some sign of his understanding of what he had done, given the knowledge of "what they drove us to": "Say only that you understand," he pleads.

> I might have been able to pronounce the word that was asked of me on the day after my release from the camp. I might have done… In 1945 I already had three years of freedom behind me, three years of military wandering and battles, of normal feelings, love, friendship and sympathy… The days of our life are not like the days of our death. I had come back among people, with human standards and conceptions, and was I now to escape from them, abandon them, voluntarily betray them? (…) No, I could not say it. (pp. 247-248)

There is a clear symbolic subtext to this scene. The man's plea for just two small words – "I understand" – harks back to the symbolism of the Christian liturgy, where the words of the Gospels can cleanse sinners of their sins. The man's sin was that of bearing false witness, and it was a sin for which others paid with their lives. One of the prayers of the Eucharist during Holy Communion contains the plea: "Say but the word and my soul shall be healed". It is a plea directed to Christ; one should not expect it to be granted by man.

The crucial word in the man's plea is the word "us", which for Herling signified a return to the "world apart". But what is crucial in the absence of a reply from Herling is just that: his silence. Not a refusal or a condemnation, just silence.

The narrator adds: "Rome was free, Brussels was free, Oslo was free, Paris was free. Paris, Paris, Paris…" (p. 248). The moral and literary structure of the

"Epilogue" and the problems it raises stand within the framework of those two news items: Paris has fallen and Paris is free. It is also the framework of the book as a whole.

38. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, 1945

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The epilogue recounts an event which ostensibly has no connection to the narrator's earlier stories about the "world apart". The narrator's commentary, too, is so subtle and discreet that one might think it concerns a problem which emerged after his odyssey through the camps. But this is misleading. The secret which the prisoner from Vitebsk vouchsafes to Herling in Rome in 1945 is intimately connected to the problems which Herling the protagonist of *A World Apart* constantly encounters and which Herling the narrator of *A World Apart* constantly comments on. From this point of view, the epilogue is a condensed summary of the most important problems that emerge in *A World Apart*.

Two examples: the secret of the man from the Vitebsk prison cell is his false testimony against four of his workmates, and *A World Apart* is full of stories about informers and denunciations. The chapter "In the Rear of the War for the Fatherland", which bears a motto from Dostoevsky, is devoted to the subject in its entirety. One such denunciation, made by engineer Makhapetian, could have decided Herling's fate. And earlier on in the book, Herling names the "greatest crime a man worthy of the name can commit in the camp: the crime of spying and denunciation" (p. 80).

The man asks Herling for a word of understanding for what he had done: saved his own life at the price of causing four other prisoners to be shot. This, too, is a theme that appears earlier on, for example in the chapter "Martyrdom for the Faith" and its story of the shooting of four Hungarian nuns for their hunger strike, which they had undertaken knowing that it was punishable by death.

Another example could be Herling's own experience in the camp, when he offered to take engineer Kostylev's place in a transport to Kolyma, knowing that it meant certain death (p. 84). The "fall of Paris" in the epilogue constantly echoes one of the most dramatic themes of *A World Apart*: that of martyrdom.

16. The Moral Treatise

There is always a temptation when trying to describe a book to look for the one neat, graceful and succinct phrase that would accurately sum it up: it is a book about love, about history, about war, about people's ordinary lives, etc. This temptation is even stronger in the case of non-fiction, where the book's main subject can often be adequately described with one word or phrase.

There is a similar temptation in the case of *A World Apart*, which tends to be classified as a labour camp memoir. But – as I have frequently stressed – Herling's literary conception of that book went far beyond that of a simple memoir or reminiscences of a Soviet concentration camp. In his review of Józef Czapski's memoirs of Starobielsk, Herling wrote:

> The Soviet problem has shifted in the European consciousness from an intellectual to a moral one. It is no longer about the extent to which Lenin's and Stalin's experiments were grounded in Marx's teaching; it has become a question about the moral foundations of human coexistence: about man's value in the face of God and among other men, and his value when the mass of other men set out mercilessly to destroy him.[14]

14 G. Herling-Grudziński, *Żywi i umarli*, op. cit., pp. 44-45.

A World Apart develops this thought. The events Herling recounts and interprets for us are not recounted and analysed merely in order to enhance our database about the Gulag. From his reflections about all aspects of life in the camp – about hunger, informants and denunciations, prostitution, work, etc. – a fundamental question about man always emerges. Almost every section of the book contains the author's musings about the human condition, man's humanity, his values and moral attitudes, the limits of his behaviour, the logic of his thought, his ability to judge his own acts and those of others – in short, about morality.

So *A World Apart* can be read as, among other things, a sort of moral treatise: as a collection of a writer's reflections about man and humanity in inhuman conditions, and about how the existence of concentration camps has affected our knowledge of human beings as moral agents.

39. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński in Rome, 1946

Chapter VI
Subject Matter

The main topic of *A World Apart* is the (anti-)civilization of Soviet labour camps: the *tyuryemnaya tsyvilizatsya*, as Nadezhda Mandelstam called it. This general subject had many aspects and encompasses many particular themes. Among them are: the system of slave labour; the daily life of prisoners; typical situations in the camp; hunger, sexuality and prostitution, and how they were experienced and dealt with in the camp; the mechanisms of investigations and interrogations; the practice of camp "law"; and many others. All these subjects are dealt with in Anne Applebaum's magisterial book *Gulag*, whose second part, about life and work in the camps, describes in detail the same things which over half a century earlier Herling (frequently cited by Applebaum) had touched on in his brief and brilliant summary: arrest, prison, transport, arrival, selection, life and work in the camp, punishments and rewards, prisoners and guards, women and children, the dying, strategies for survival, rebellion and escape.[1]

Reflections on human nature and behaviour in the extreme and inhuman circumstances of the labour camp are an integral part of Herling-Grudziński's approach to all those subjects.

1. The Organization and Functions of Slave Labour

Almost every chapter of *A World Apart* contains some new detail about the organizing principles of slave labour. Chief among these was that the prisoners should work as much as possible while being fed as little as possible, which in practice meant a slow death.

Work in the Gulag was part of the rhythm of the State's normal production; thus every Soviet labour camp was simply a kind of large, state-owned industrial company, in which prisoners were the workers. They made up the cheapest possible labour force, compelled to work and doing so under the threat of death. The "Gulag company" had production plans, quotas to be fulfilled, a system of work brigades, bureaucratic financial regulations and a typically communist

1 A. Applebaum, op. cit., Part II.

system of financial reporting, a division of the day into work time and free time, even a "health service" and "retirement" arrangements for prisoners who had been worked to death, in the form of the barrack known as the mortuary, where they spent their last days before expiring.

This singular company worked neither only for itself nor in co-operation with other, similar camps; it was a link in the production chain of the "normal" economy of the Soviet Union. But it was a very particular kind of link, for the workers who laboured in this company were prisoners serving sentences of forced labour in conditions horrific beyond imagining. In other words, they were slaves. "This selection of slaves was sometimes similar, even in the smallest 'artistic' details, to images familiar from the illustrations in books about black slavery," Herling writes, recounting how the camp doctor "with a smile of satisfaction felt the biceps, shoulders and backs of the new arrivals" (p. 41).

Work is a topic that comes up and is commented on throughout, in one context or another: there is a whole chapter about it in the first part of the book. Herling-Grudziński isolates and defines a number of its functions in the camp. He enumerates them. First of all, work was a form of physical and psychological torture:

> What our work was, or rather what it could be in the hands of those who choose to use it as an instrument of torture, is best shown by this example of a man who, in the winter of 1941, was murdered with work in one of the forest brigades, by a method which was completely legal and only slightly infringed the code of the camp. ("Thrown to the Wolves", p. 45)

Secondly, work was a method of exploiting the prisoner and his physical capacities in such a way as to change him into a creature without its own will, submitting resignedly to everything that befell it.

Thirdly, it was a means of degrading the prisoners, of robbing them of their dignity. Herling writes of Kostylev: "physical labour crushed and degraded him to such a degree that he would have stopped at nothing to get an additional scrap of bread" (p. 81). Elsewhere the narrator realizes that slave labour was also a way of crushing the prisoners' solidarity: "There was in all this something inhuman, mercilessly breaking the only natural bond between prisoners – their solidarity in face of their persecutors" (p. 37).

Fourthly, this work had no value; there was no sense or hope in it. "We passed each other without a word, like the inhabitants of a plague-infested town. (…) Day by day, for weeks, for months, for years, with no joy, no hope, no life" (p. 45).

Finally, forced labour in the camp was also simply a method of murder: the prisoner was slowly worked to death – a process Herling describes in the chapter "Stalin's Murderer".

It is significant that Herling compares Soviet to Nazi murder methods in concentration camps: a transfer to Kolyma was in Soviet labour camps, he says, the equivalent of the German "selection for the gas-chamber" (p. 83). Similarly, the expression "to put through the forest" (p. 41) – forest work, writes Herling, was considered one of the hardest forms of labour – echoes the expression "to put through the chimney" used in Nazi death camps. In both cases people were exterminated; only the method varied.

In every case Herling stresses the inhuman nature of "Soviet work": those who were unable to get to the workzone or back to the camp on their own, for their feet could no longer carry them, were killed or just left there. In winter they froze to death within a matter of minutes.

Soviet labour camps also had an ideological purpose: they were meant to "transform" and "educate" the prisoner, who – if he survived – was supposed to emerge from this process convinced of the pointlessness of resistance in any form (struggle, rebellion or even desire for change) and become an entirely passive instrument and executor of the authorities' orders. The purpose of the camp regime of terror by work was to force the prisoners to forget what freedom was like, so that even after serving their sentence they would prefer working in the camp as administrators to a life as free people in their old home towns.

> After many years of life in the camp the average prisoner becomes so unaccustomed to the idea of liberty that he begins to dread the prospect of having again to live – "at liberty" – in a state of unceasing watchfulness. (…) The years behind barbed wire have blunted his imagination, and his conception of freedom is based not so much on his native Kiev or Leningrad, but simply on the open plain beyond the zone and the small village where lights gleam in the evenings and children play in the snow during the day. (p. 107)

It was a sort of contract between the persecuted and their former persecutors: the prisoner was no longer part of the chain, but he agreed to live and work for institutions of his old prison, now no longer as a prisoner but as a free person.

For the other prisoners, a former fellow prisoner turned camp official was supposed to serve as a model: "every prisoner can see one of his former companions being rewarded for years of hard work with freedom and the status of a full citizen of the Soviet Union" (p. 108). The presence of such people in the camp "was a painful reminder that there was no escape from it at any time. The whole world suddenly shrank to the limits of the camp" (p. 108).

As well as defining the general functions of work in the camp, the narrator outlines in detail the way in which it was organized, its "technology", and above all the prisoners who formed the work brigades. In chapter 3 he describes the working day, how work in each brigade was organized, the soldiers who escorted the brigade, the relationship between the prisoners and the brigade foreman, and

the relationships among the prisoners themselves when they were at work. In short, he describes the "socialist division of labour and competitiveness in labour" in its most monstrous form.

There is a good description of the production mechanisms of Soviet concentration camps, in the period Herling became acquainted with them, in the encyclopaedic guide to the camps referred to earlier (*Łagry. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*; see footnote 36, p. 28):

> In June 1938 the central apparatus of the GULAG was composed of 42 sections (administrations and divisions) and an archive. Seven were concerned exclusively with production: the Administration of the Timber Industry, the Administration of Agricultural Camps, the First Railway Construction Division (for the Far East), the Second Railway Construction Division, the Hydrotechnical Construction Division, the Naval Construction Division, the Fuel Industry Division, the Metallurgy Division for Coloured Metals, the Cellulose and Paper Industry Division. Altogether there were 1,562 positions, of which 581 were in the production structures themselves. By January 1st, 1940, the number of positions in the GULAG administration had risen to 2,040. (…) All these reorganizations testify to the crisis caused by a sharp rise in the number of prisoners in the years 1937-1938, which swept through the camp system and the NKVD as a whole in 1938-1940. The sharp rise in industrial construction and the extraction industry necessitated the modernization both of the camps themselves (by dividing them into areas of specialization and making them smaller) and of the way they were administered, by strengthening the financial, engineering and technical base (through better preparation of documents related to cost projections and more efficient technical and engineering assistance). This in turn led to a huge increase of administrators in the central GULAG apparatus and to a more complex structure.[2]

2. Categories of Prisoners

In the camp all prisoners were equal – in theory. In practice, in turned out that some were more equal than others. The division ran between those who had a chance of survival and those who did not; those who were sent to one of the 'lighter' camps and those who were sent to a camp from which almost no one returned.

Herling, with characteristic perspicacity, distinguishes several categories and sub-categories of prisoners; some had slightly different privileges, some were characterized by slightly different kinds of behaviour. The main division in the camp was of course between prisoners and free people – those employed in the Gulag. Among the latter were doctors, engineers, administrators and technicians. Among the prisoners themselves, Herling distinguishes a number of different groups, such as professional criminals (known as *urkas*), prisoners from the Central

2 *Łagry. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, op. cit., pp. 42-43.

Asian republics or the "homeless" – feral children who had roamed the streets. He distinguishes those who received new clothes from those who patched up their old clothes themselves, and those who were always first in the soup queue from those who were second or third. Similar distinctions could be observed among the brigades, whose rank in the camp hierarchy depended among other things on the order in which they were marched off to work.

3. *Ecce Homo*: Daily Life

In addition to the hierarchy among prisoners and brigades and the principles on which work was organized, Herling also describes the habits, customs and moral codes of daily life: the sharp distinction between criminal and political prisoners, the status of women (who were always treated like prostitutes), hunting for women (i.e. group rapes while the other prisoners watched), lynching, relations between prisoners and camp administrators (the model for these being that of master-slave or executioner-victim), informers and denunciations, brutality on the part of the administrators and guards, family visits, how prisoners spent their free time (in the library, watching films), the "day of rest" (mending clothes, writing letters), frequent illnesses (scurvy, night blindness, pellagra, diarrhoea), visits inmates paid one another, new arrivals and – that rarest of things – departures. He also touches on food and the rituals around it (watery soup, hard bread), hunting for scraps (potato peelings, rotten vegetables) in the garbage, sudden deaths and slow, long-drawn-out dying.

4. Camp Institutions

The narrator also tackles the institutions of camp life, such as the "mortuary", the "house of meetings" and the hospital. Particular attention is paid to this last, as in every camp the hospital (like the "house of meetings") was a place set apart from the rest. Herling devotes considerable space to an analysis of the function, both real and symbolic, of the of the hospital in a Soviet labour camp, for in it the rules of the "world apart" were turned upside down, and it was a place where it was possible, for as long as one stayed there, to live once again among at least some of the basic vestiges of normal life. It enabled the prisoner to recover his sense of dignity, return to a world of humanity and imagine himself a free person in a normal world.

What were these special features of the hospital that made it resemble "normal" life? There was a kind nurse who cared for the prisoners and a doctor who was

polite. In the camp such values as kindness, care and politeness did not exist. The narrator weaves into his discussion of the hospital a moral tale about how people had always thought that the source of the unhampered progress of humanity lay in the search for absolute values – for example, beauty. In the camp, however, Progress was supplanted by dreams of Return to the Past, and absolute values by normality: what people sought, and dreamt of, were the most basic features of ordinary life beyond the barbed wire. Thus the future, for the prisoners, means only the past: their life as free people, before their imprisonment. So that it was not the future but the past that was the "forbidden fruit of the present" in the camp. And a "better world" meant not some future utopia (the camps themselves were an extreme but logical realization of that utopia), but simply the free world beyond the barbed wire. It could even be in the USSR, as long as it was not in the camp. It was in this sense that the hospital offered an escape from the world of the camp. It also changed the normal meaning of illness. In its ordinary sense, illness is a bad thing, a threat to the organism which must be fought against; but in the camp, an illness that rated a stay in hospital was a longed-for luxury and relief. It was an opportunity; it meant freedom and hope. For the prisoners, the hospital was a lifeboat.

5. The Masquerade

Yertsevo was a forced labour camp. The combination of these two concepts, "camp" and "labour", and the way in which it was realized, are a matter of constant study, analysis and observation for the narrator of *A World Apart:*

> … all forced labour camps throughout Soviet Russia (…) had a common aim (…): they strive at all costs to maintain, before free Soviet citizens, the appearance of normal industrial enterprises which differ from other sections of the general industrial plan only by their employment of prisoners instead of ordinary workers, prisoners who are quite understandably paid slightly less and treated slightly worse than if they were working of their own free will. (p. 90)

One of the fundamental features of the Gulag as an element of Soviet reality was what Herling calls the masquerade: the façade which the camp presented to the world outside. This (conveyed through Soviet propaganda) was something radically different from the reality. The regulations governing visits in the so-called "house of meetings" were one example of such a masquerade within the camp itself:

> When the visit was over, the prisoner had to submit all that he had received from his relatives to an inspection at the guard-house, then he went straight to the clothing store to shed his disguise and take up his true skin once more. These regulations were

> always very strictly enforced, though even here there were glaring contradictions which could at once destroy the whole effect of this comedy staged for the benefit of free citizens of the Soviet Union. (…) This revolting masquerade was sometimes comic despite its tragic implication (p. 91).

More often than not, however, it was tragic rather than comical. Many aspects of camp life, mostly in the production area, were governed by exactly the same regulations that the Soviet administration had created for free people, or very similar. But in the labour camp every one of them became part of the masquerade, a fiction in which the prisoners were at the mercy of the camp authorities.

> The demands made on the camps by GULAG and by the industrial trusts which placed orders with it according to the intake of slave labour were so high that they turned all regulations for the administration of the camp into so much waste-paper. (p. 113)

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At the time Herling was working on *A World Apart*, scarcely anything was known about Soviet labour camps, nor – apart from what ex-prisoners had reported – about Nazi camps. Nor, needless to say, had anyone undertaken an analysis of totalitarianism as a variant of twentieth-century utopia. So the information contained in *A World Apart* must elicit surprise and admiration for the young author's perspicacity (he was 31 years old when the book was finished), and for the sociological, economic, political and psychological insights whose truth was validated years later in scientific and historical works. Even though it was not the book's ambition to be exhaustive, it can still today be regarded as a mini--encyclopaedia of the Gulag.

Typical of the book's style is the cool, detached and methodical way in which it describes the mechanisms of Soviet concentration camps. Herling succeeded in portraying the totalitarianism of the "world apart" without pathos or hysteria. He revealed the shocking ordinariness that characterized the methodical, bureaucratic planning of its mechanisms and routines – the "banality of evil", as Hannah Arendt was to call it in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Herling's morphology of evil thus marked a rupture with the romantic and expressionist style in which it had until then typically been portrayed. In this sense, *A World Apart* was also a break with the earlier Polish narrative tradition. And as a work of literature it was surely an unexpected development of the 1930s literary preoccupation with psychological and moral questions.

So *A World Apart* was in many ways a very original work which broke new literary ground, and which to this day remains unsurpassed.

6. "Rogue Books"

Literature which clings to the principle of strict realism and makes a point of avoiding fiction of any kind is difficult to analyse by the methods applied to works of fiction. The difficulty lies generally with the reader, who willingly believes that the author is describing things that really did happen and applied no literary filter to his memoirs. The "terror of truth" is at work here – a terror which makes us reject as not only unimportant, but indeed somehow inappropriate, all questions concerning the mechanics of the work's composition. In this way "truth" in non-fiction becomes a convention, one within which it is agreed between author and reader (or accepted by the reader in the case of this particular literary genre) that the author is telling the truth and nothing but the truth.

But the fact that a literary piece belongs to the genre of "non-fiction" need not, and indeed should not, mean that the alert reader must see it as devoid of any literary devices whatsoever. Such devices – ranging from the stylistic to matters of plot to the repetition of certain motifs – are present in every written text (which of course does not mean that every written text is a work of literature).

The case of *A World Apart* is exceptional, because although it is non-fiction, every reader was perfectly well aware, from the moment it was published, that its strength lies not only in its presentation of the truth but also in the way this truth is presented. It lies, in other words, in the author's literary skills and the artistic devices he employs. I have already identified many of them. Let us now take a look at one more: the motif which I shall call the motif of "rogue books".

The phrase is Mickiewicz's. In Part IV of *Dziady* (*The Forefathers' Eve*) the Hermit, addressing the Priest, pronounces the famous words:

> Wszakże lubisz książki świeckie?…
> Ach, to te książki zbójeckie!
> Młodości mojej niebo i tortury!
> One zwichnęły osadę mych skrzydeł…
> (IV, 154-157)

> "But you like secular books, do you not?
> Ah, those rogue books!
> The heaven and torment of my youth!
> They broke my wings…"

The Hermit was referring to books about romantic love, but the phrase soon took on a more general meaning and came to refer to great books which can influence the reader's life or even change it utterly. It was in this sense that it became a frequent literary motif, particularly popular in romantic literature (though present in literature since antiquity). In European literature Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* are among the best-known examples of rogue books in this sense.

Both protagonists, Don Quixote and Madame Bovary, are quite literally victims, or emanations, of their own reading: books which on the one hand opened their eyes to reality and, on the other, completely concealed that reality. What is the difference between reality and illusion, truth and fiction? Where is the line between fiction and reality? Does literature help us understand reality or does it conceal it from us, or even in some sense create it? And if it does, what kind of reality does it create? Where are people richer, happier, freer, more cultivated and fulfilled – in literature or in real life? And what is the price that must be paid for choosing one of these options? These were some of the questions posed by Cervantes and Flaubert.

The motif of rogue books recurs several times in *A World Apart*, most forcefully in the story about engineer Kostylev, who ended up in the camp because of his love of French romantic literature. Kostylev is both Don Quixote and Madame Bovary. But it also appears in the story about Natalia Lvovna, for whom *The House of the Dead* is a source of hope for the possibility of suicide; in the narrator's story about his own reading of that book in Yertsevo; in the story about N., lecturer in French literature, whom the torments of hunger led to the discovery of "what an excellent social-realist Knut Hamsun was"; in the story of Cossack Pamfilov, who died a broken man after receiving the letter from his son; in the stories about the artistic performances in the *kaveche* barrack; even – on a more metaphorical plane – the story of the three nuns who chose "martyrdom for the faith". But the theme of rogue books also runs throughout as a constant point of reference in a variety of situations: for instance, when Otto, a German prisoner, in reply to Herling's question about Nazi versus Soviet concentration camps, says: "*Du has eine Lust zu philosophieren*" – an allusion to Goethe's "*Lust zu fabulieren*".[3] There are similar echoes in the deputy camp director's reply to Herling's request to be allowed to take Kostylev's place on the transport to Kolyma: "the camp is not a sentimental novel".

When we read *A World Apart* keeping a careful eye out for the theme of rogue books – one of the oldest motifs in the history of culture – we find it almost everywhere: for the protagonists of *A World Apart*, every book, letter and artistic performance has great significance and plays a decisive role. And that role is always the role of a higher power deciding something of great importance. Sometimes it shows the prisoner a spark of humanity that has not yet been entirely extinguished; at other times it dismisses it as fiction (a "sentimental novel").

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3 "*Du hast eine Lust zu philosophieren*" – "You have a liking for philosophizing"; "*Lust zu fabulieren*" – a liking for telling stories.

How does this motif enrich the book? What additional depths of meaning does it reveal?

Every particular instance of its appearance naturally requires a separate interpretation, but taken as a whole, as a theme running through the book, those singular appearances do contain a common message. For every appearance of the motif of rogue books signifies stepping outside the reality of the "world apart" and leaving it behind. And this stepping outside is all the more unconstrained in that it takes place in the imagination, in prisoners' emotions, thoughts and moral choices; no outside force can control it. Rogue books are also a link with the past, a kind of counterpoint to the present, strengthening the hope that another reality does exist beyond the borders of the camp. They symbolize the cultural values which have survived, which the "world apart" of concentration camps has not managed to destroy. In other words, every allusion to rogue books always signifies a flash of awareness, an understanding of one's own situation and that of others and the capacity accurately to define and asses what one sees in the surrounding reality of the camp. The narrator summarises this neatly after reading *The House of the Dead*, when he realizes that "a mental condition of full consciousness is more dangerous in slavery than hunger and physical death" (p. 161). This "full consciousness" is precisely what is meant by the "heaven and torment" of rogue books.

Chapter VII
The "Apartness" of the World Apart

Polish memoirs about the Gulag were above all, as commentators have often pointed out, "testimony of what happened to Poles in Soviet Russia". In Polish literature their collective epigram, so to speak, was a quote from Part III of Mickewicz's *The Forefathers' Eve*, where Jan Sobolewski, a prisoner in a tsarist prison, speaking of Poles deported to Siberia, exclaims: "If I forget them, may You, God in Heaven, forget me!" For those Poles who survived and managed to leave the Soviet Union, this pledge expressed a deeply felt duty. All Polish accounts from the Gulag attest to this.

But here, too, the difference between these accounts and Herling's book becomes immediately apparent. The Gulag was not a national experience; the prisoners in Soviet concentration camps represented all the nationalities within the Soviet Union, as well as others from various parts of the world, and most were Russian. The victims of the communist ideology of the Gulag archipelago were not nations but people.

When the guard of Herling's haymaking brigade says to him, "Well, my boy, now we'll fight the Germans together," Herling comments:

> This sudden reconciliation did not please me for two reasons: first, a prisoner can never forgive his warder, and second, it turned against me my fellow-prisoners, both Russian and foreign, who were not fortunate enough to have been born Poles, and to many of whom I had become attached more deeply than to any of my own compatriots. After the amnesty other prisoners became hostile towards the Poles, regarding them from that time as potential allies in the hated task of defending Soviet prisons and labour camps. (p. 178)

The protagonists of *A World Apart* are not Poles in Soviet Russia, even though the narrator is a Pole, but simply people caught up in the system of Soviet totalitarianism. Herling avoids the Polonocentric point of view; he is interested in people, regardless of their nationality. He frequently mentions Russians with whom he made good friends in the camp and who, just like him, were victims of the Soviet system. His solidarity with all the prisoners is unwavering, and his criteria for judging their behaviour are always the same, whether or not they happen to be Poles. For example:

> … among the Poles there was a certain priest who disguised his pastoral dignity under a prisoner's rags, whose fixed price for confession and absolution was 200 grammes of bread (100 grammes less than the old Uzbek who read fortunes from hands), and who lived among his parishioners in an aura of sanctity. (p. 133)

There is also the sarcastic coda to the book's penultimate chapter, which describes how Herling was admitted to the ranks of the 10th regiment of light artillery in Lugovoye. He runs into Captain K., whom he "used to drag from his bunk to the bucket in the Vitebsk prison when he could no longer walk there himself". Now he accidentally knocks into him on a muddy slope:

> He looked at me fiercely, dusted his beautifully cut breeches, and threatened me with "disciplinary action" the moment I was in uniform. I knew then that I was really in the Army, that I was at last among my compatriots, who after all that they had gone through during the past two years were rapidly returning to normal. (p. 241)

In an interview in 1988, Herling said:

> My time in the camp was very important to me. It wasn't a Polish camp. I had Russian friends there – very close friends. It irritated me that some of the Polish prisoners treated the Russians like some totally different species. Their attitude was, if they're suffering, fine, let them suffer, it's their country.[1]

A World Apart stands out sharply from the great majority of Polish concentration camp literature, where the victim-executioner relation tends to be one between different nationalities (Germans versus Poles or Russians versus Poles). Such literature generally concentrates on the martyrdom of the Polish nation. Herling's universal, supra-national perspective allows him to grasp the essence of communist totalitarianism: that what it destroyed were not nations but people, and what it set out to destroy in them was their essential humanity. In his preface to the 1965 edition of *A World Apart*, Herling wrote:

> The spectres of the past will not be exorcized by silence. If anything can bring Russians and Poles closer together, it is their awareness of their common suffering and the voicing of that awareness. It is precisely their common suffering – the suffering of all the prisoners in the Stalinist concentration camp empire – that is the source of *A World Apart*. Shared suffering gives rise to shared hope.[2]

And in his preface to the 1980 Polish samizdat edition, published by NOWA, he added:

> The Polish wave of tales of the Gulag preceded the Russian one by such a considerable margin for the simple reason that, being outside the borders of the USSR and its totalitarian police, we were able to start writing that much earlier.

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1 "Między cudem a wulkanem", an interview with Herling Grudziński by R. Gorczyńska, *Aneks*, 1988, no. 51/52, p. 39.

2 G. Herling-Grudziński, *Inny świat,* Paris 1965, p. 11.

With all our differences – differences in experience, differences of emphasis, and of course different degrees of talent – we all viewed and portrayed the "prison civilization" [as] an integral element of communism, just as concentration camps and gas chambers were an integral part of Nazism. I hope readers of this Polish edition of *A World Apart* will view it in just that way, without looking for specifically Russian undertones, despite the echoes of Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*. I do not believe in absolutely immutable "national predispositions", but I do believe in the operation of history and in our ability to shape it, at least within certain limits.

Chapter VIII
The Polemic with Tadeusz Borowski

Many literary critics of *A World Apart* devote considerable space to a comparison between the way Herling and Borowski (in his stories from Auschwitz, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*) view people and the world. The comparison seemed obvious, since both wrote about their experiences in concentration camps, respectively Soviet and Nazi. But it became possible only after the abolition of censorship in Poland, for until then any juxtaposition of Nazi and Soviet concentration camps had been considered unacceptable by the authorities and was strictly forbidden. For this reason the earliest studies of Borowski's work did not contain any references to that other great Polish literary work on concentration camps, *A World Apart*.

But the comparisons not only confirm the need – historical and literary – to continue this process today; they also show how much still remains to be done in this domain and, above all, how inadequately, still today, Herling's work is known – unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that it remained practically unknown to the public and literary critics alike in Poland for almost half a century.

Literary critics have approached Herling and Borowski as if they were two writers who just happened to be focusing on the same, or a very similar, topic while being entirely unaware of each other's existence. Although this has proved a very fruitful strategy, producing some acute commentary and useful insights, it fails to capture the essential differences which should emerge from such a comparison.

For the point is not that both writers, independently of each other – one in Poland, the other an émigré – dealt with the same topic. The point is that *A World Apart* was from the beginning intended as a sharp public polemic with the narrative structure of Borowski's short stories. It was a literary response to Borowski, and this aspect of the book is just as real, just as intentional and just as much an integral part of the book as the references and allusions to Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*.

Thus any useful comparison between Herling and Borowski cannot simply be the result of associations that arise from the similarity of the subject matter – the Soviet Gulag and the Nazi *Lager* – nor can it confine itself to these; it must take account of the fact that Herling himself both suggested such a comparison and defined the areas of disagreement.

We must therefore distinguish two aspects of the question that must be taken account of in any such comparison. The first is the polemic which Herling conducted publicly with Borowski, and which criticises both intellectual and artistic aspects of his short story collection. The second is their common subject matter: the world of the concentration camp.

The latter has received a thorough analysis in the works listed in the bibliography at the end of this book. It will be useful, however, to go over the salient points of the former.

In 1948, in the December issue of the weekly *Wiadomości*, Herling published a review of Borowski's collection of short stories (*Pożegnanie z Marią*) where, while acknowledging the author's talent ("a mercilessly acute eye"), as he had already done in an article a year before ("a raptor-like talent"), he subjected certain aspects of the Auschwitz stories to some rather sharp criticism. His attack was aimed not so much at Borowski's book itself as at his approach to a number of general literary questions and his attitude to the reality he was portraying.[1] It is worth mentioning that a year earlier Herling described Borowski as having a "predatory talent".[2]

Herling complained that not a single one of Borowski's stories so much as mentions "the moral crisis of our times", and accused him of accepting, indeed affirming, "with natural cynicism", the moral nihilism which was a consequence of the war. Borowski's voice was for Herling "the voice of deliberate moral provocation" – a provocation whose literary ancestry was to be found in Céline and his novel *Journey to the End of the Night*. But while Céline's provocation, in Herling's view, found its target (namely "twittering on about our jolly war"), demystified it and showed it up for what it was – a myth that had been constructed about the Great War – Borowski has nothing to demystify (there is no "twittering on" about concentration camps) and "attempts needlessly to demystify something that merely wanted faithful describing". His technique in *Pożegnanie z Marią*,

> astonishing in the maturity and confidence with which he makes use of rhetorical devices, consists in talking about the inhuman as if it were entirely human, normal and natural. By eschewing any analysis of human motivation and any commentary on the things he describes, Borowski manages to dehumanize people and reduce them to creatures governed by purely biological mechanisms. No doubt [concentrating exclusively on] the level of the animal, vegetative state [to which people were reduced] in the camps was the only way to achieve a quality of detachment and matter-of--factness in his prose. But it is a mistake to imagine that a writer can achieve so perfect a state of objectivity that his personal attitude about the things he is describing is utterly erased from his writing. To have no attitude, to cultivate a "colour blindness

1 See "U kresu nocy" (*At the End of the Night*) in Appendix I.

2 "Bezdroża powieści", op. cit.

> to human values" in accordance with Jünger's prescription, is to take up – openly, and in some sense "programmatically" – a position on the shifting sands of nihilism. In Borowski's case the matter is more complicated, for he is both the author and the protagonist of *Pożegnanie z Marią*. As a prisoner he behaves like a hunted animal: he concentrates his mind entirely on the hunt and what he must do in order to survive. The first commandment in the camp catechism [as he presents it] is contempt for weakness and the cult of outwitting your enemy – an affirmation of animal cunning. And the question arises to what extent this portrayal of people in the camps became, in time, his view of people in general, so that the governing principles of life inside the barbed wire fence became the commandments governing life outside it as well. The line marking the passage from a unique, extreme situation to "philosophical" generalization is very blurred and easy to cross here. Borowski, morally aggressive and arrogant in wanting to apply concentration camp measures to the world as a whole, prompts one to think of Camus's sentence from his *Letter to a German Friend*: "You thought there was no morality, neither human nor divine, that the only values which govern the world are those which govern the animal world – violence and cunning."[3]

Herling was to return to Borowski's stories a number of times in later years in his *Diary Written at Night*. "Borowski," he wrote in 1978, "writes about Auschwitz with a hint of diabolical and desperate laughter in which nihilism (as Miłosz rightly points out) is the result of ethical passion; it is an unrequited love for people and the world" (*Diary*…, 23.2.1978). Herling's opinion of Borowski's short stories from Auschwitz seems to have been similar to his view of Rudnicki's stories about the Holocaust, which he had reviewed six months earlier: "This mature book," he wrote, "does not inspire hope for the author's future work. For it was written by someone who is burnt out – someone who will never again see beauty in the world or find joy in life".[4]

A World Apart – written somewhat later, in 1949-1950 – conveys a very different message. It conveys Herling's conviction that despite the experience of concentration camps, immutable moral laws do exist in the free world, and they are laws which no human experience can abolish. "The days of our life," he wrote, "are not like the days of our death; and the laws of our life are not the laws of our death". This conviction, and Herling's refusal to accept Borowski's view of man and civilization – where the world is presented as bereft of moral laws, while the pathological behaviour of concentration camp inmates is accepted as universal and typical of twentieth-century man – is apparent in every aspect of *A World Apart*: in its style, its choice of topics and events, its manner of recounting them;

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3 Grudziński's revision of his review of *Pożegnanie z Marią* ("U kresu nocy") reprinted here in full in Appendix I. The present version is from the *Diary Written at Night*, 3.2.1976, Warsaw 1995, pp. 184-185.

4 G. Herling-Grudziński, *Ściana płaczu*, op. cit.

not just in the narrator's commentary on what he relates, but in the character of the narrator himself and the nature of the narrative voice.

Thus for Herling, Borowski's 1945 collection is an example of a work infected by the nihilist sickness; a work bereft of values or any belief in them, for the author's experiences of a concentration camp have destroyed them. It reveals the author as corroded by "absolute nihilism"; and it shows his suicidal passage from the "nihilism of the weak" to the "nihilism of the strong". Herling saw Borowski's death by suicide in 1951 not as an act of martyrdom, which was how his friends in Poland viewed it, but as a desperate act of liberation; and as proof of what Borowski had denied: that "human values" do exist, and that casting them away is not so simple.

Whether or not Herling was right in his interpretation of Borowski is a fascinating but separate question. In most of the studies of Borowski published in Poland until now, commentators have viewed his poetics as the product of his moral passion, whereas Herling saw something quite the opposite in his work. His polemic with Borowski, little known in Poland and generally ignored until now,[5] should prompt us to examine it afresh; but this very necessary task of re-interpretation, whatever its outcome, still remains to be undertaken.

The polemic between Herling and Borowski fizzled out in 1948: Herling's work was unknown in Poland, as was émigré literature in general. A similar fate befell a number of other polemics which Herling conducted with both Polish and émigré writers while himself an émigré. An assessment of these, too, is a task that still awaits Polish literary criticism.

5 Z. Kudelski mentions it in his book *Pielgrzym Świętokrzyski*, op. cit., pp. 42-50.

Chapter IX
From *A World Apart* to a "Russia Apart"

In his later work Herling returned again and again to the issues raised in his polemic with Borowski, above all to the question of nihilism. One good example of this is an entry he made in the *Diary Written at Night* after reading Wiktoria Kraśniewska's (Barbara Skarga's) reminiscences of the Gulag, *Po wyzwoleniu* ("After the Liberation"). She writes:

> And so we slowly lose our souls. Day after day, with hunger, with work beyond the limits of exhaustion, with the hopelessness of time, indifference to evil seeps into us. We have no strength left for outrage; now we just shrug our shoulders. It is when we come across an honest person, a reliable person, that we are surprised. Every day brings with it the dismal threat of Soviet *perevospitanye* (re-education).[1]

And here is Herling's comment:

> Liberation from Soviet *perevospitanye* means – as in Chekhov's story – purging ourselves of the poison of slavery which has destroyed our souls, squeezing it out of ourselves drop by drop. (*Diary*..., 25.7.1985)

There is another frequent motif in *A World Apart* to which Herling returns again and again in his later work, and that is Russia and Russian culture and literature. This is a topic on which Herling wrote a number of essays, later collected in a volume called *Upiory rewolucji* ("Spectres of the Revolution").

Herling came away from Yertsevo with the conviction that a faint flame of human normality still flickered beneath the monstrous carapace of Soviet communism (the system and its supporting ideology): that goodness, truth, love, beauty, friendship, courage and disinterested kindness were not entirely extinguished, and that the belief in their indestructibility was the best, the most powerful protection against the Sovietization of human beings – against *perekovka*, the remoulding of the soul.

But through his studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature Herling discovered another Russia – a "Russia apart", which neither the bolshevik revolution nor the Stalinist terror nor communist newspeak could destroy. He

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1 W. Kraśniewska (Barbara Skarga), *Po wyzwoleniu... (1944-1956)*, Instytut Literacki, Paris 1988, reprinted in Poznań in 1990. The author spent ten years in Soviet concentration camps and two years in exile in Siberia. See Appendix III.

found this other Russia in the tradition of nineteenth-century liberal Russian thought (represented by such figures as Herzen, and later Razumnik, Mandelstam and Bulgakov), which was grounded in the premise that the freedom, dignity and sovereignty of the individual were the highest cultural values. In *Spectres of the Revolution* Herling follows the evolution of this idea, finding it in the rebirth of religion, in works about the nature of Soviet communism (Solzhenitsyn, for instance), and in the attitudes of some non-conformist Russian intellectuals (who were numerous after the Sinyavsky-Daniel trial in 1966).

In Herling's view, post-Stalinist Russia saw the beginnings of a revolt on the part of the young intelligentsia which showed that Soviet society could evolve. He did not predict exactly when this evolution would result in society's rejection of communism, but his conviction that such a moment would come shines through in all his writings about Russia. In this, Herling's analyzes of the processes of change in the USSR anticipated by decades those of Western sovietologists and political scientists, not to mention politicians.

Herling's views about the evolution of Russian society were comparable to those of Bukovsky or Solzhenitsyn; he diverged from Alexandr Zinoviev, whose writings, more pessimistically, tended to concentrate on the creation of the new "Soviet man" – what he called *Homo sovieticus*.

Zinoviev's view of Soviet society is a good point of reference in any attempt to understand Herling's philosophical view of man's place in the totalitarian system – above all, but not only, the Soviet one. Zinoviev argues that the Soviet system, by destroying the historical concept of civilization, created an anti-civilization. And the product of this anti-civilization was Soviet man – *Homo sovieticus*, a creature made to conform to the image of the Soviet ideal. In other words, the Soviet system not only created this "new man" but also determined his nature and characteristics in every detail.

Herling, on the other hand, believes that Zinoviev's analysis holds only to a limited extent ("there are people like that"), and that it does not apply to all "Soviet people". He thinks that logically it is tantamount simply to a negative acceptance of the communists' oldest ambition: to create a new kind of man. In other words, Zinoviev, in Herling's view, simply acknowledged that the communists' totalitarian goals ("new man", "re-moulding the soul" and so on) had been achieved and that this process was irreversible.

In this sense Herling's polemic with Zinoviev and his *Homo sovieticus* can be seen as a continuation of his polemic with Borowski; and the issues it raises are among the most important problems dealt with in *A World Apart*.

Herling's philosophical opposition to Zinoviev flows from his belief in human nature: for him humanity, in its deepest dimension, is not a function of civilization but the core of the metaphysical essence of man. The totalitarian anti-civilizations

of the twentieth century, communism and Nazism, succeeded to some extent in deforming that core, but they could not destroy it, however long they lasted, however vast their empires and the number of victims who succumbed to the ideological poison of their anti-values. For Herling, the belief in humanity and the civilization which rests upon it comes down to a belief in the inviolability and indestructibility of good as a value that is fundamental, irreducible and timeless. To put it in theological terms, Herling believes in the metaphysical immortality of the soul. Consequently, he has always been convinced that however great the pressures exerted on Russian society by the "normality" of Soviet totalitarianism, "somewhere deep down under the 'horrifying normality' there is another reality, stifled and violated, which waits, patiently and in silence…" (*Diary…*, 26.6.1978).

Because of the way in which they express this hope – for that is what it must be called – and because of the determined belief in the permanence of culture and its values which suffuses them, Herling's writings on Russia stand out as extraordinarily lucid, balanced, penetrating and full of foresight. Few others have been able to discern another Russia in the "world apart" or insist on the indestructibility of values in a system based on concentration camps and dedicated to their destruction. It is a measure of Herling's stature as a writer that he was able to give shape to this hope in the form of a great literary work.

Appendix I
Gustaw Herling-Grudziński
At the End of the Night

Of the five stories which make up Tadeusz Borowski's collection,[1] two ("Dzień na Harmenzach" and "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen") were initially published in a collective volume of memoirs entitled *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu*. That volume, published a year after the war ended, with an Auschwitz-striped cover, bore the dedication: "The authors and publishers dedicate this book to the 7th American Army, who liberated us from the Dachau-Allach concentration camp." *Pożegnanie z Marią*, out in Poland now, three years after the war, ends with a savage sketch of life in Dachau after the camp's "liberation" by the 7th Army, where the Americans are portrayed as a new incarnation of the Gestapo. It is therefore not immediately clear, today, to guess who the following words in the preface to the volume refer to: "They burnt down our house, murdered our friends and destroyed the country. But that's not what hurts. What really hurts is that this world which was supposed to liberate us adheres to the same rules we despised so much in the camp: robbery, theft and dishonesty."

For Borowski, however, these things are of no significance. More than that: they define what his prose is not. Despite the ostensible promise of what is to come, seemingly conveyed in the quotation above, not one of Borowski's stories touches on the moral crisis of our times. On the contrary: with a kind of hearty cynicism that seems almost natural, Borowski describes the moral devastation which the war wrought on thousands of young people of his generation as if it were just a question of listing the differences between a "European education" of 1939-1945 and a "Verdun education" of 1914-1918. "The camps, poverty, torture and death in the gas chamber," he writes in his introduction to *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu*, "are not heroic. They have no value at all. They are just consequences of the stupidity of those who got caught. Almost from the start, the struggle was devoid of ideological content. It was just a struggle: the basic struggle which the solitary, degraded prisoner waged for his survival, a struggle waged against the equally

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1 *Pożegnanie z Marią: Opowiadania*, Warsaw 1948. The volume of collective memoirs is: *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* by J. Nel Siedlecki, K. Olszewski and T. Borowski, Munich 1946, reprinted Warsaw 1958.

degraded SS-guard and the terrible violence of the camp. I stress this very strongly, for the subject will give rise to myths and legends on both sides. In the camp we did not fight for the idea of our Motherland or for the internal reconstruction of man; we fought for a bowl of soup, for a place to sleep, for women, for gold and for watches from the transports." Who does this voice remind us of? What is the literary genealogy of this "naked truth" about the war, deliberately clothed in the trappings of moral provocation, wiping off the lipstick and the oily layer of patriotic cant to reveal a face distorted by blind hatred and animal fear? Yes, it is the voice of Céline; this is a new "journey to the end of the night".

But the difference between Borowski and Céline is at least as profound as the difference between the First and the Second World Wars. Céline's moral provocation found its target; it deliberately exaggerated the falsehoods and patriotic myth-making in the conventional narrative about the "heroic little soldier", painting it in garish colours and carefully ignoring anything in it that could have contained an element of truth. A writer who strips bare the lies and shows up the disingenuousness of the pompous exalters of heroism on the battlefield, the smoothly patriotic pious phrases of politicians waxing eloquent about the romance of life at the front, the hysterical young women garlanding their "darling little soldiers" with flowers and showering them with kisses – such a writer is undeniably to some extent right. But a writer who at the same time fails to recognize real heroism, the spirit of sacrifice, the courage and determination of a soldier defending the right cause – such a writer is sharp-sighted in one eye and blind in the other. It is an undeniable truth that alongside cowardice, cursing, pettiness, discouragement and revulsion at the thought of dying for one's country there are also moments of genuine beauty in war, moments one will never forget. Céline's provocation found its target because he flung his harsh words, his brutal words, in the face of people who had been accustomed for years to twittering on about the "jolly little war". But what he wrote was true only in part, and like every half-truth, it found as many enemies as it did supporters.

Borowski's situation is somewhat different. Four of the short stories in this volume are devoted to portraying the horror of life and death in Nazi concentration camps. In one hundred and fifty pages of spare, elastic and pitilessly perceptive prose there is not one word about those basest animal instincts which the system of organized cruelty unleashed in both torturers and their victims. But his tone, that tone of Céline-style provocation, often cynical and nonchalant, seems to miss its target completely here. Borowski cannot rid himself of the suspicion that the subject of Nazi concentration camps will "give rise to myths and legends on both sides". What myths and legends? Does anyone write songs about "the heroic boys of Auschwitz"? Do statesmen make speeches about "the pride of our nation, who for five years heroically fought an unequal battle against an eternal enemy"?

Did young girls dream at night of emaciated young men standing gracefully to attention at the evening roll-call in perfectly ironed striped prison pyjamas with sharp creases? We may not have foreseen the extent and the horror of the things Borowski now describes, but we also were under no illusion that Auschwitz, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen and Mauthausen would give rise to legends and myths. Thus Borowski superfluously attempts to demystify something that merely wanted faithful describing, and in this he slightly resembles the *enfant terrible* who behaves scandalously at a dinner table where guests are used to things much worse than loud hiccups or seeing someone clean their teeth with a fork. Céline tore down from the walls of French houses the insipid pictures with their colourful battle scenes and defaced their bourgeois hangings with horrible scrawls in which the soldiers look like two-legged beasts and the battlefield like a cesspool, full of mud, blood and excrement. Borowski had nothing to demystify. The image of the concentration camp is engraved forever in the memories of at least one member of every Polish family.

There are other dangers lurking in Borowski's prose, the results of his programmatic cynicism and his programmatic aggressiveness. His technique in *Pożegnanie z Marią*, astonishing in the maturity and confidence with which he makes use of rhetorical devices, consists in talking about the inhuman as if it were entirely human, normal and natural. By eschewing any analysis of human motivation and any commentary on the things he describes, Borowski manages to dehumanize people and reduce them to creatures governed by purely biological mechanisms. No doubt [concentrating exclusively on] the level of the animal, vegetative state [to which people were reduced] in the camps was the only way to achieve a quality of detachment and matter-of-factness in his prose. But it is a mistake to imagine that a writer can achieve so perfect a state of objectivity that his personal attitude about the things he is describing is utterly erased from his writing. To have no attitude is tantamount, in literature, to indifference or nihilism.

In Borowski's case the matter is more complicated, for he is both the author and the protagonist of *Pożegnanie z Marią*. As a prisoner he behaves like a hunted animal: he concentrates his mind entirely on the hunt and what he must do in order to survive. No doubt, over time, a certain convergence of views emerged between victims and persecutors in Nazi concentration camps on the value, endurance and devious ways of the human body. Prisoner and persecutor reasoned similarly, with the single difference that the former devoted his "experience in matters human" to his own survival, not the killing of others. The first commandment in the camp catechism is contempt for weakness and the cult of outwitting your enemy – an affirmation of animal cunning. And the question arises to what extent his view of what people could endure in the camps became, in time, his view of the value of human beings in general, so that the governing principles of life inside the

barbed wire became the commandments governing life outside it as well. The line marking the passage from a unique situation to "philosophical" generalization is very blurred and easy to cross here. So whenever Borowski, yielding to his youthful moral aggression and arrogance, treats his own concentration camp experiences and observations as if they were instructive material for the future, I recall, with horror, Camus's sentence from his *Letter to a German Friend*: "You thought there was no morality, neither human nor divine, that the only values which govern the world are those which govern the animal world – violence and cunning."

But whatever we think of Borowski's harrowing book, we must remember that the charges against it are first and foremost a curse on the times and the systems which gave rise to it.

G. Herling-Grudziński, "U kresu nocy", *Wiadomości* 1948, no. 51-52, reprinted in: *Wyjścia z milczenia*, op. cit.

Appendix II
The First Reviews

Kazimierz Wierzyński

One might imagine that Herling's book is simply a report, one of many to have appeared recently in the West. But it is not; it is something else. And I think that is the secret of its success. It has everything one would expect from such a report; it contains a great deal of information and documentary data; it describes the camp in detail and there is no reason to doubt its accuracy. But it has more than this. It is filled with the human.

Everything that went on in those human skeletons forced to do hard labour Herling understood and gave expression to. So we know not only what these people look like – blue from cold, wrapped in rags, sleeping with open mouths and crying out in the night; we also know what they think and feel. We see them yield to the most deep-seated instincts, to hunger, degradation, spying and betrayal, as well as compassion, friendship and faith – or doubt – that one day they will regain their freedom. Living people emerge from this book, remnants of their strength fading, people who are horrifying and full of hatred, savage in their struggle for survival and helpless in their slow agony, people who have sunk beneath all that is human and yet – strangest of all – people to whom we feel as close as brothers.

At one point Herling says that people can act like human beings only in conditions fit for human beings, and must not be judged according to how they act when they cease to be themselves. It is surely to this sound principle that his book owes its humanity and compassion; it is what makes his description of that hell on earth a moving book of suffering, a great work that will endure.

Herling depicts his fellow inmates in concise sketches or separate stories which stand alone, like novellas. All are brilliantly written. A long, unforgettable gallery of people passes before us, and each of their stories unveils some aspect of the terrifying world of the USSR and the horror of Soviet life.

But most extraordinary is what the author tells us about himself. None of the feelings which inhabit the other prisoners is alien to him; he is subject to the same inevitable rules of dehumanization. He details his own depressive states and moments of resurrection with no trace of sentimentality or self-pity, and this lends an air of dispassionate objectivity even to his most personal and intimate avowals,

as if he were observing someone else. His is gradually losing strength, he has scurvy and suffers from stomach problems, and old hands in the camp predict that even if he survives the winter, he has no more than six months to live.

And something else torments him: news arrives of the amnesty for Poles, but the months pass and Herling is not released. It is the torment of hope. The thought of freedom gives him strength, but if his hopes turn out to have been illusory, their loss, and the resulting despair, could kill him.

After four months of waiting, tormented by such doubts, he makes a decision born of despair: together with six other Poles who are still alive (out of 200), he begins a hunger strike and refuses to work. Both these acts are among the worst infringements of camp discipline and are severely punished; offenders are often shot. But he risks it in the hope that it will remind the authorities of his existence and of the illegality of his continuing imprisonment.

Together with six others, he is thrown into the camp prison, and here his horrific life-or-death trial begins. It is the culmination of his story. His description of the torture to which he voluntarily subjected himself, of those eight days in a freezing cell one step wide, with no windows and snow blowing in, where every day the strikers were brought a portion of bread, which none of them touched, is among the most magnificent passages in this magnificent book.

The reader closes the book full of admiration for the maturity and gravity of its young author, for his artistic achievement, the lucidity of his thought, the clarity of his prose, his courage and his ability to maintain his moral stance through all his horrific experiences. Such qualities are found only in a masterpiece. (…)

Herling's style appears to owe much to English literature. He uses words to express his meaning as concisely as possible, with no unnecessary additions – none of that dancing around an idea which has done so much harm to our own prose. Just as his narrative proceeds from one fact to another, so his sentences advance from one thought to the next. There is constantly something new to catch the reader's attention, and the suspense constantly grows. Of course this kind of writing can only work if the author has something to say; and Herling has a great deal to say.

Wiadomości, London 1952, no. 30

Józef Wittlin

I always feel a little embarrassed at the idea of speaking publicly about books that have as their subject the suffering, not of fictional characters, but of the author himself and the real people he has known. But since I would like to praise

this book – and there is much to praise – let me quote from one of the great authorities in the field of campology, namely Rousset, the author of *Les jours de notre mort* and *L'univers concentrationnaire*. He says that "suffering that is too great evokes not compassion but revulsion and hatred." And indeed, the tourists who come to see concentration camps sometimes react with revulsion at the sight of the victims – victims seen after their liberation. But Herling's book rebuts this claim. He reached down into the abyss of human suffering, the depths of degradation, and yet he was able to evoke compassion for his fellow inmates, even the most debased of them. This was because his work is not depressing in the way that Dostoevsky is depressing, and because he had the skill to describe his own suffering and that of others with great, almost classical, moderation and detachment.

Wiadomości, London 1952, no. 30

Wacław Solski

As I was reading this book, I thought about how real literature – what we call *belles lettres* – illuminates the future, and illuminates it much better and more clearly than a political book.

Dostoevsky's *Devils* was a prophetic book for Russia; more recently, Céline's, written between the two world wars, gave us a foretaste of what was to happen in France in 1939 and in those sad days of the summer of 1940; Hans Fallada's *Wolf Among Wolves* could be read as foretelling events in Germany which were still to come. Herling's book to a great extent blurs the difference between the literary novel and reportage; it allows the reader to look into the future. That is where its significance and its profundity lie.

Wiadomości, London 1952, no. 30

Jan Lechoń

This is a book which analyses the mental life of a prisoner in a concentration camp. It does so superbly and in the minutest detail. I do not hesitate to make the comparison with Proust: what Proust did for people who were not only free but lived lives of great plenty, painstakingly vivisectioning their souls, Herling did for people pushed down into the lowest depths of degradation and suffering. This might sound paradoxical, but we all remember the story Czapski wrote about

reading Proust in the Griazov camp. Herling's gift for analysis is one of the things that make him a great writer.

Wiadomości, London 1952, no. 30

Tymon Terlecki

In the Stalin era, Poles, apart from a handful of traitors, could live in Russia only as inmates of concentration camps – camps of industrialized death. Herling's book is the story of a former inmate of such a camp.

Not much preceded, for Herling, the world described in this book. Some happy and richly filled fermenting in his native land while it was still free, a little admiration for La Pasionaria and Maritain, the first friendships, the first attempts at writing. Then September, some underground activity (this being Polish instinctive behaviour) and, almost directly after leaving the lecture halls of Warsaw University, Herling-Grudziński woke up one day to find himself on a bunk in a Soviet prison and then in a Soviet concentration camp. That is where he came of age. Those two years on the White Sea were his youth – spent in the darkest depths of degradation, lice-infested and festering from scurvy.

Herling describes these experiences in a way which makes this book both an important piece of reportage and an ambitious work of literature. Its strength lies in Herling's fresh, youthful sensitivity to the details of the world around him, his observant curiosity, his passion for analysis and weaving together the strands of that world to make a complex picture. "One of the most astonishing and admirable features of the starved intellectual life of inmates in these 'houses of the dead'," he writes, "is the extent to which every experienced prisoner has developed his powers of observation. Every cell possesses at least one statistician, a scientific investigator of prison life…"

Herling-Grudziński himself, because of his interest in social questions, became one of those involuntary investigators of this horrific subject. When I first met him as a student, he was fired with enthusiasm for Komiński's book *Pisarze ludowi*. As an émigré he continued to follow these interests and produced a thoughtfully edited, abridged version of *Pamiętniki chłopów*.[1] Who knows, perhaps it was

1 Terlecki is thinking of Józef Chałasiński's book *Młode pokolenie chłopów. Procesy i zagadnienia kształtowania się warstwy chłopskiej w Polsce*, with an introduction by F. Znaniecki, vols 1-4, Warsaw 1938. In 1946, the Polish branch of the YMCA in Rome published an abridged version of this book, with a slightly abridged title, in two volumes. Herling-Grudziński edited this abridged version and wrote an introduction.

his intellectual curiosity, his insistence on delving into the furthest reaches of suffering, that – as well as his youth and natural energy – saved him from death.

A World Apart contains many scrupulously amassed facts and accurately remembered psychological observations. It is characterized by a merciless, sometimes painful, honesty: "from the deep waters of Lethe," he writes somewhere, "the faces of my dead and possibly still living fellow inmates look out at me, their features distorted into the savage snarls of hunted animals, and with lips blue from cold and suffering they whisper: 'Tell the whole truth, what we were and what they made us into'." The author of this horrifying testimony reserves the right to claim intellectual superiority over his fellow inmates, but this is the only thing in which he distinguishes himself from them: in everything else he assumes no special role, strikes no attitudes and is careful not to stand out. He denies the possibility of heroism at the extreme level of methodical degradation that is practised in a Soviet concentration camp; he even doubts in the chance of compassion. "There is no lower limit to the instinctive endurance and devious ways of the human body, the limit beyond which we used to rely on strength of character or the conscious operation of spiritual values. In other words, there is nothing a human being will not do from hunger or pain," Herling writes. Here is another quote, equally bitter: "In the camp human emotions tend to be awakened most often when compassion satisfies the requirements of what remains of one's self-regard."

Betrayed by a man he had considered a friend, racked by hunger, despair and scurvy, Herling-Grudziński experienced two gestures of human solidarity: "(…) our whole Christmas dinner was to consist of a piece of bread and a mugful of hot water. The sight of that small group of people, sitting round an empty table and crying with longing for their distant country, must have commanded the unwilling respect of the mortuary's other inhabitants, who gravely observed us from their bunks (…)."

It is difficult to classify *A World Apart* in terms of genre. It is a report woven through with commentary or a collection of reminiscences woven through with intellectual musings. But whatever the balance of the elements which make it up, it is undeniably a work of great and conscious literary ambition.

Two authors influenced the shape of this young writer's second book: Dostoevsky and Koestler. He himself admits that *The House of the Dead* was the only book he read twice, starting again from the beginning immediately after finishing it, during his two years in the Gulag. And he translated a book of Koestler's after his release. These two writers helped him organize his material, and their influence can be felt especially in the analytical parts of the book. The descriptive passages, sometimes very vivid and powerful, may owe something to Żeromski, but they are very restrained. Here are two examples – descriptions of a morning

and an evening: "The mood was fading slowly, frozen on the gelid surface of the sky like a slice of lemon in jelly". And: "The brigades flowed towards the camp like funeral processions of ghosts who carried their own corpses on their backs."

But the greatest and most auspicious achievement of *A World Apart* is its control: the author's mastery over the whole, his ability to maintain the literary form in a work of such scope, with such material. This is the writer's first victory over his terrible subject.

Wiadomości, London 1952, no. 30

Maria Danilewicz-Zielińska: *Suffering is not Ennobling*

A World Apart undermines the reader's belief in the truth of the saying that suffering is ennobling. Like Tadeusz Borowski in his stories from Auschwitz, it describes – even more forcefully than Dostoevsky – human degradation: how human beings sink "below the lowest level of humanity". The prisoner struggles against it, tries to fight it with his strength of character, with the instinctive reactions inbred by school, tradition or upbringing; he seeks escape in work, even in exhaustion, until at last he is worn down, and his loneliness in the crowd, his inability to find a common language with those around him, kill the last vestige of his humanity: his compassion. The few who have been able to resist this degradation seek escape in the thought of death, which they understand literally as "eternal rest".

Herling's *A World Apart* is a work of art, a multi-layered book which, in addition to its testimony, its value as a document, also has a sociological layer in its gallery of fellow prisoners and camp inmates. With a few exceptions, they were all Russians, most of them ideologically committed communists. Or, more precisely, ideologically committed communists who concealed the truth from themselves – the truth about their great disenchantment.

Liberation. At last it came, after long months of waiting, a suicidal hunger strike, a serious illness and the loss of hope. For Dostoevsky at the end of *The House of the Dead* it meant a "great moment", "freedom, resurrection". Herling looks back into the past rather than forward into the future: "Dante did not know," he wrote, "that there is no suffering in this world greater than to experience happiness before the unhappy, to eat in front of the hungry." He values freedom but he knows its price. That is why he can find no words of absolution for those who obtained freedom at the cost of giving in to weakness.

Szkice o literaturze emigracyjnej (1975), Wrocław 1992, p. 90

Appendix III
Barbara Skarga:
The Testimony of *A World Apart*

My subject is a book to which, of all the post-war memoirs, I feel a particular attachment. Herling-Grudziński's *A World Apart* is a magnificent book, in my view the best book there is about the camps – and there are many today – and the most accurate in its analysis. It is difficult for me, when writing about it, to maintain the critical detachment required of a reviewer. But since the organizers of this seminar have appointed me the expert on concentration camps, I will try not to disappoint them.

I would like to begin with an observation. In all discussions about reminiscences and memoirs, people seem to be divided into two camps: some think that good literature is what makes a good document, while others prefer a bare, chronicle-like report, neutral and unemotional, and composed in language as dry as possible. What they want is facts, not interpretation; and they believe, in addition, that to make facts into literature is a kind of profanation. There is some truth in this. Literature takes over: it touches everything, even those things which cause pain when touched. We know literature should deal with difficult things; that it should bear witness, keep alive the memory of human suffering, honour it by not allowing it to be forgotten. But in talking about difficult matters and human suffering, it elevates them into a different dimension. To feel hunger is not the same thing as to read about hunger. This disproportion between facts and their literary presentation can sometimes give rise to a feeling of embarrassment: why is the writer showing us experiences which were perhaps meant to remain hidden from human eyes? Why is he shamelessly exploiting those experiences, treating them as mere material to be transformed for his artistic ends? Perhaps this is why so many former prisoners prefer dry reports, as laconic as possible.

So the anti-literature camp objects to the literariness of Herling's book. Its language, rich and expressive, does indeed go beyond that of a report which merely conveys information. But there are also many arguments in favour of "literariness" in a memoir. In discussing them I encroach on the domain of literary theory, which is not my own, but the problem is an important one, both for the writers of memoirs and for their readers, and I feel I must broach it. How should

one write in order to make other people's experiences – alien, remote, impossible to imagine – at least partly comprehensible? How can one transmit experiences that lie so far outside anything in the ordinary life of society in a way that conveys their true, pitiless sense? I am profoundly convinced that the anti-chronicle camp is right: how can one restrict language in its means of expression if language is the only thing that can take the reader into an unknown landscape? The choice of those means of expression will depend on the author's talent; I think that in the case of Herling-Grudziński, literary language is able to tell us more than a dry report. As Merleau-Ponty once said, a report comprising accurately set down facts often seems impoverished; indeed, it fails to give us the truth, for those facts, presented from an external viewpoint, lack feeling. Mere facts cannot show us people's reactions, their despair, how they experience things. The context is lost; and reality is filled with context. An artist arranges his facts in a certain way, contrasting them with others, conveying the mood, atmosphere and experiences through his choice of words, tone and nuance; by distorting events in a certain way he can perhaps even tease out from them a deeper and more significant sense.

Here is an example. Herling writes: "You could be certain that a drowning prisoner who not only made no movement but, on the contrary, in his hunger--induced madness weighed himself down with a useless ballast of hot water, would one night sink like a stone, and the dawn would spew out his swollen, monstrously bloated corpse on to the shoals of his bunk." What a wealth of information that sentence contains, and how superbly it has been put together! Herling is speaking about the dangers of giving up, but also, quite literally, of the dangers of immobility for a body exhausted by hunger, and of the risks of drinking liquids: drinking was a way of cheating hunger, but resulted only in a more rapid physical deterioration, oedema and death. But at the same time we also see these desperate people, maddened by hunger and driven to senseless acts, no longer able to resist, and we experience fear – fear of a death without dignity, a terrible death which comes at night unnoticed by anyone. One could give a lecture or write a dissertation on the subject; it would be shocking, for the subject is a shocking one. But what horror radiates from this one condensed sentence which contains so much.

So I want to defend literariness in memoirs, because, *pace* defenders of the chronicle, it permits a more veridical rendering of reality. Events come in a variety of shades, which is why they require paint, not just a pencil for drawing. It is only then that their outlines and background acquire depth. When I read Herling--Grudziński, I can see how carefully and with what talent he has painted his dismal frescoes, trying to bring out something that was never within the range of the reader's experience.

But here a doubt creeps in. Even if we admit that literary memoirs make better documents than the matter-of-fact chronicle, assuming, of course, that they

are well written, that still does not mean that everyone will be able to grasp their meaning. Is it possible to represent something that the reader has never known, to make present something that had never been present? I am not concerned here with problems of interpretation or transmission of meaning, which belong to the discipline of semantics or hermeneutics; I think that given the same cultural context, even the meaning of ancient texts can be to a great extent deciphered. But in this case we are dealing with a world apart. I would maintain that it is easier to understand the memoirs of someone in antiquity than the reality of Herling's world. Conversations with readers of his books show that some of the things he describes simply do not get through to them; this emerges when they are asked to explain the specifics of some of the descriptions and they turn out to be completely misguided. This is not the fault of the book but the result of ignorance, perhaps even lack of imagination, especially in younger readers. Many examples come to mind, even tiny things like the episode about the Stolypin carriage, Szkłowski sitting stiffly on the bench, the *urkas* and the card game. An old prison hand familiar with Stolypin carriages can imagine this scene more vividly and in greater detail than someone who never rode in one. One reader even said to me: "Why didn't Szkłowski call the guard?" A reader might be intelligent and sensitive to nuance, but his ignorance of basic facts about the world Herling describes will always be in the way. Because it really is a world apart, with different rules, different everyday realities and different objects: a world of *parashas* [prison toilets] and *tumbochkas* [prisoners' night tables], *valenki* [felt boots] and wooden spoons, padded trousers, picks and shovels; a world of *zapryetkas* [the strip of ploughed-over earth around the camp] and watch systems, torn work gloves, *garbushkas* [the heel of a loaf of bread] and thin *balaga* [thistle soup], *koikas* [bunks] and mattresses stuffed with metal filings. An impoverished world, poor in objects, poor in its accessories, infinitely dreary and monotonous. A world from which the ordinary, everyday objects of our lives have disappeared: not just razors and knives, but also needles and mirrors, paper and pencils, spectacles, books, photographs of the people we love. And the rules which govern this world have nothing in common with ours.

I would now like to pass from these general remarks to considering the book itself. As an "expert" I must begin by pointing out that camps differed from each other in all sorts of ways, and they also changed over time. Two neighbouring camps might differ in many ways. And my experiences differ from Herling-Grudziński's because he was in the Gulag during the war, while I was there later; some of the details are different because some things changed over time. But they really are only details. The general picture Herling presents is remarkably faithful. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the truth.

So how do our observations differ? Let me give you a few examples. Herling-Grudziński writes that you hardly ever saw underage criminals in the camps. In

my experience, alas, you saw them all too often, and they were a plague there just as much as they were in the prisons. Every underage hoodlum wanted to outdo the old *urkas* in cunning, cruelty and brutality. God help you if you tangled with them. In his chapter about hunting by night, Herling supposes that the word *proizvol* ["the regime enforced by the *urkas* within the wired-off camp zone between late evening and dawn"] is now probably unknown to most Soviet prisoners, and that "the reign of the *proizvol* in the majority of Russian labour camps began in 1937 and was suppressed towards the end of 1940." Yes, in some labour camps it was partly suppressed, but such camps were exceptional – and even there all the manifestations of *proizvol* that Herling describes occurred from time to time. In smaller camps, and especially in transit camps, its reign was total and absolute. Things only changed after 1948, when political prisoners – those sentenced on the basis of the notorious article 58 of the criminal code – were separated from the criminals.

On p. 37 Herling writes that every brigade had its own permanent escorting soldier. The camp administrators must have learnt from experience: in my day they knew that the escort had to be changed from time to time, because even the most hardened soldiers eventually became friendly with the prisoners. They began to exchange services, which made life for both sides that little bit easier. So in my day a different soldier was on escort duty every week. And they had more guards with them, too: at least five or six soldiers, plus a dog.

As you can see, there is no point in enumerating these little details. It really makes no difference whether some camp had permanent escorts or not, or whether in some other camp former prisoners were hostile or friendly towards the *zeks*. There are no hard and fast rules here. But the reason for these differences of detail is worth noting. Rules and regulations could not take account of all the local conditions. So what life in the camp was like depended in large measure on the conditions and on the administration. Sometimes a new commandant could utterly transform life in a camp. Ultimately, so much always depended on people.

But there are things in *A World Apart* with which I cannot agree. Herling claims that women found it much harder to deal with hunger and sexual deprivation. I am sure this is not true; women's biological endurance was much greater. The great majority of those who went mad with hunger – "goners", as they were called – were men, very seldom women. Hence the saying that women are like cats: you can't finish them off even with a club. The healthier and stronger among them might still feel sexual hunger, which in the case of exhausted men disappeared entirely. But it is not true that you could have any woman you liked for a hunk of bread. I lived among those women and I know how bravely, how admirably they held up. Not because they were not hungry, but because of their moral principles, in turn drawn from their cultural background. It cannot be a coincidence that it was Russian women from primitive backgrounds who most easily yielded to

prostitution. The Poles, whether they were peasant women or city girls, as well as Lithuanians, Estonians and women from Western Ukraine, behaved admirably.

Another general comment worried me. It is true that many informers were to be found among the so-called *pridurki* [stupid people]. But this does not mean that every *pridurek* was an informer. You have to remember that every camp was a labour camp that produced something, and the administration wanted to fulfil the production plan. To this end they wanted to have the appropriate specialists in the camp. They also selected engineers, economists, craftsmen from the transports, as well as doctors – anyone who could be useful – and these in their turn tried to help the others. I think Herling may not have encountered this economic aspect of the camp; he was also ignorant of the conflicts that could arise between the camp director and the political officer – the *oper*. Sometimes the *oper* would try to blackmail a prisoner into becoming an informer and the director would try to protect the prisoner. I mention this because I met many decent and honest people among the *pridurki* and I would not want Herling's opinion of them to tarnish their reputation. And I myself was a *pridurka* for a time.

One can also argue about why people of different nationalities behaved differently in the camps and during their investigations. The subject is a huge one and Herling scarcely broaches it, but it is worth thinking about. Why was psychological resistance to violence and injustice greater among European prisoners? We could never understand how one could inform against one's fellow prisoners, or how one could sink so low as to confess to things one had not done. Herling-Grudziński describes how interrogations shattered a prisoner's sense of who he was and rewired him differently, and he adds that this process did not apply to Poles whose interrogations were "chaotic and rushed", without the benefit of a qualified supervisor. No doubt that is how it was during the war, but in 1944 and 1945 Poles, like everyone else, endured interrogations that lasted for months, with much suffering, and yet they did not break. So the reason lay not in the way the interrogation was conducted but in something else; perhaps in the prisoners' cultural background. Or perhaps it is just harder to broach this issue in the case of one's fellow countrymen? I leave the question unanswered. But I would not want my doubts to suggest any hostility on my part to our neighbours and their culture. You met all sorts of people in the camps, not just Makhapetians and Gortsevs, but also Kostylevs and professors like Boris Lazarevich – wonderful people.

Everything I have said so far in no way changes my opinion of Herling's book. So let us finally move on to what I think is most important about it. I want to start by drawing attention to its title. Why "a world apart"? What does it mean to talk of a world "apart"? What does its "apartness" consist in? There is no space in this brief speech for me to comment on the author's own suggestions in this regard. I will consider only three of them, those I believe to be the most important.

But first I would like to stress that one would be wrong to imagine that what is being alluded to here is imprisonment, isolation, harsh conditions, hard labour etc. It is none of these things; these things exist at every geographical latitude. It is something much more important.

Let us take a careful look at the book's epilogue. It is June 1945 and the war has just ended. We are in Rome. The city is still full of soldiers, but the heat, the "lazy crowd" that moved along the streets, the bottle of wine, the blinds on the windows of his hotel room, the wallpaper – all these things are part of "our" world, coming slowly back to life. Herling-Grudziński encounters a former fellow camp inmate, a Pole, an old communist, who has come to Rome especially to see him. This man cannot endure his life because once, in order to save his own skin, he gave false evidence against four Germans, who were shot as a result. So he has come to seek understanding, and he begs Herling for just two words: "I understand". He wants absolution, and who else could give it but someone who has been there and knows what life in a labour camp is like?

But Herling could not give him what he wanted. For to acquiesce, it would be in some sense to return to that world, to recognize its right to exist, to justify something that has no justification. And also to step outside the real life he was coming back to, somehow to deny it. "The days of our life," he writes, "are not like the days of our death".

There can be no absolution for a world in which everything is turned inside out: values, standards of behaviour, the ordinary and normal and the strange and exceptional. In that world betrayal is part of daily life, honesty is seldom found, degradation lurks at every turn, death is the daily bread and bread is a rare and precious treasure. In that world no one condemns those who kill, steal, commit adultery, bear false witness and hate their neighbour, for how could they live otherwise? It is the world of the Ten Commandments turned upside down. That is what its apartness consists in.

And another thing, no less important. As the reader follows the narrative, he begins to realize that in that world, the world of the camps, if the natural physical instinct to survive no longer operated, the desire to survive was also extinguished, for the camps extinguished the thing that keeps us alive: hope. Herling-Grudziński's description of that loss of hope is penetrating: those newly arrived prisoners whom the experienced old lags treat like idiots because they still expect something and go on struggling for something; that aversion to hope because it tempts fate, goes against the rules of the camp and exposes not only those who uphold it, but also others, to "the terrible danger of disappointment". The camps extinguished hope in brutal ways. You had to be prepared for the worst: for the worst camp, the worst kind of work, oblivion, hunger and death. It was reckless to hope; it was tempting

fate. “Oh, what a bloody life!” – that was the only thing a prisoner could say to express his despair without tempting fate.

And a third thing. What can become of a person in such conditions? Herling-Grudziński observed prisoners who had been in the camps for five or six years. His diagnosis was sombre. It is not only hunger, illness, hard labour and the pain of longing that sap one’s physical and moral strength; above all it is despair. To this I would add the way time stretches out like chewing gum, as the camp saying has it: the days stretch out ahead, day after day of the same endless suffering, with no prospect that anything will ever change; the thought of those days, months and years, long years, stretching endlessly ahead, leads to despair; one cannot imagine surviving them. So the *zek* has only one weapon left with which to defend himself in order to endure: to maintain his equilibrium within a carapace of indifference. No feelings, no affection, no needless pity. And this is how the slow process of dehumanization takes place, for how can one live without pity? Is one still a human being if, instead of feeling compassion for the suffering of others, one feels only revulsion and contempt? How can a prisoner “help the night-blind, when every day he sees them being jolted with rifle-butts because they are delaying the brigade’s return to work, and then impatiently pushed off the paths by prisoners hurrying to the kitchen for their soup; how to visit the mortuary and brave the constant darkness and the stench of excrement; how share his bread with a hungry madman who on the very next day would greet him in the barrack with a demanding, persistent stare?” (p. 68). Thus the prisoner’s re-education is complete. He has ceased to be a human being; he is transformed into a pathetic, abject rag or a pitiless monster.

But there is something about this picture I would like to correct. It is too pessimistic. Not all prisoners “derive comfort from the despair of others,” as Herling put it. The gift of magnanimity is the more precious for being rare. There were those who were able to retain their dignity and never gave up the struggle to preserve it; there were also those who were capable of compassion and tokens of friendship even when those could cost them their lives. And these were not isolated cases. It is true that solidarity among prisoners was seen only in exceptional situations, but it did occur and its existence cannot be entirely denied. The picture Herling paints is so black that one expects him, too, to be engulfed by it, melting into the background of despair, hatred and baseness. But his longing for liberty and his will to go on struggling for it are never extinguished – his hunger strike, undertaken when his sick and exhausted body was in a critical condition, is proof of that. He admits that he was on the brink of death, and yet he continued to think, to feel, to have desires. Thus he was, together with his fellow hunger strikers, a white blot on a black picture – as were the nuns who were shot, Olga, Natalia Lvovna and no doubt many others.

This bleak picture does a disservice to the memory of those who tried to survive the camps with their dignity and humanity intact. Not everyone sank. I want to stress this, out of respect for many of my own fellow camp inmates.

This, then, is the world apart: a world of human values turned upside down, a world without hope or pity, a world of human rags and informers, exploiters and dying men deranged from hunger – the dregs of humanity; a world in which the threads linking people to what was human in them have snapped.

I must end on a somewhat bitter note. Why did a book which describes this world so faithfully and so wisely enjoy such a cool reception? Why was Herling not believed? Was it because he was a Pole? Or because he spoke the truth too soon? Perhaps; it can be convenient sometimes not to know and to preserve a clear conscience. *Mundus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur*.[1]

"Świadectwo 'Innego Świata'" (1983), *Kultura Niezależna*, 1986, no. 17

40. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński with his wife Lidia in the 1990s

1 The world wants to be deceived, so let it be deceived.

Appendix IV
Author's Epilogue in the *Diary Written at Night*

October 5th, 1994

The epilogue to *A World Apart* is entitled "The Fall of Paris". From now on I will include a second epilogue, entitled "The Fall of the World Apart". It will comprise a letter (reprinted in full, retaining the author's spelling) sent from the Solovetsky Islands on August 23rd and received by me on September 29th. The sender was Mariusz Wilk, co-author of *Konspira*, a well-known book in its day and one that I read with fascination.

> Dear Mr Gustaw, I am writing from the Solovetsky Islands, which according to Solzhenitsyn are the cradle of the Gulag Archipelago. Two years ago I bought a house by the sea here and now live here permanently, as in a cell: I never leave it. I write a little, I put out fishing nets to catch herring, I grow potatoes.
>
> I am writing to you about Yertsevo. You may remember my telephone call from Moscow in the spring of 1992. I was fresh out of the Kargopol zones then. On January 19th, 1992, exactly half a century after your release from Yertsevo, I left the Moscow – Archangelsk train at Yerstevo station. I remember the date because it is my birthday.
>
> I came to Yertsevo from Vologda, where I had been attending the commemoration ceremony for Shalamov which takes place every year on the anniversary of his death and where I discovered that Yerstevo is a "closed" deportation centre: the camp in which you were a prisoner is still functioning. I was told this by a girl from the Shalamov museum in Shalamov's house. She was born in Yertsevo; her mother had been a prisoner there. She told me how to get from the station to the meetings barrack without getting caught.
>
> I was the only passenger to leave the train at Yertsevo station. "From the top of a hill near the station you could see the camp laid out in the palm of your hand. Pillars of smoke rose from the barracks, there were lights in the windows, and if it had not been for the outlines of the four 'crows' nests', which split the darkness with the scissors of their beams, Yerstevo might have been taken for a quiet sawmill" [an excerpt from *A World Apart*]. The line dividing the world you described in *A World Apart* from that world as it was half a century later was not visible here. You could sometimes see a small crack if you looked closely at the details: a crack, as in Shalamov, between the fact and its current incarnation. The paradox of that moment lay in the fact that in Vologda I had read about Shalamov's post-realism, and when I found myself in Yertsevo I felt as if I were in the middle of a post-realist landscape. If, of course, we assume that *A World Apart* is in the realist tradition.

In other words, the function of some of the zones had changed. Ostrovnoye is now a summer camp for pioneers. Others – like Drugaya Aleksyevka, for example, where major Gusyev took me – are overgrown with grass and wild redcurrants. Major Gusyev is an enthusiastic hunter. On the way there he told me that he enjoys hunting for escaped *zeks* best of all, as they are intelligent creatures, and often armed. We waded our way to Drugaya Aleksyevka through deep snow on wide northern skis. Gusyev had read *A World Apart* – I had brought a few copies with me to Yertsevo – and kept up a lively commentary on it. The gist of what he said was more or less as follows: how could they have known anything about the zone, locked up as they were like rabbits in a cage; they couldn't take a step back to see it with detachment, with an outsider's eye, which is what you need in order to grasp the whole complex mechanism of administering people. Kruglitsa and Mostovitsa, together with the zone at Yertsevo itself, are other camps which have not changed at all in the past half--century.

That January I took advantage of a momentary relaxation of vigilance on the part of the startled camp administration and was able to take a quick look at your file: very bulky, number 1872. Unfortunately, they would not let me photograph it. It wasn't until May, after a journey of several months through the corridors of the Ministry of the Interior, that I got permission to copy your file on to microfilm and to enter the zone. The file was photographed by the grandson of Boris Pasternak, and I went to the zone, for the second time, during the white nights.

This time my visit was preceded by a telephone call from Moscow, from the office of General Strielkov, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich, to alert them of my arrival; when I got off the train at Yertsevo station, there was an official jeep waiting for me, and after that I got anything I wanted. We made our way along the tracks on a dreisine through all the smaller camps, almost up to Kargopol, including the punishment camps, where in the fifties they kept the worst bandits from the Vor criminal gangs. They showed me the workzone, the kitchens, the canteen; I tried some thistle soup – quite tasty. I saw the solitary cell, the house of meetings, the hospital and the "cultural" barrack used for artistic performances. I talked with some Vors, with the directors and the administrative staff. Colonel Kuzyenkov, the head of the camp directorate, asked me home to supper. The supper was what I would call sumptuous: moose stewed in cloudberry leaves, trout baked in pastry, roast grouse, red fish roe, black fish roe, salted mushrooms, pickled mushrooms. And all sorts of *nastoyka*, home-made spirits infused with birch blossom, blackberry and golden root. With every bottle Colonel Kuzyenkov insisted more and more loudly that he would privatize the zone and make money by taking on work for individual clients. The *zeks* work at hewing wood for dachas and making furniture, so the temptation to privatize the zone could prove irresistible.

By a happy coincidence – the hand of Providence, in a way – I met Franek. Franek had fought as a partisan in the forests around Vilnius, where he was known by his alias Żbik. He was caught in the barn where they slept after the actions. They brought him to Yertsevo in forty three. He did ten years, and after that he stayed on, as he had nowhere else to go. He spent thirty years working in the same zone where he had done hard labour as a Polish subversive. He worked as an electrician. He doesn't remember much Polish. He lives with a Russian woman, a thief who was released at the same

time as he. They built themselves a small house, just beyond the wooden boundary of the zone, and they live in its shadow quite contentedly.

There is much more to tell about Yertsevo, but no one has written anything about the camps today. I thought maybe a film; I even got permission to film within the zone. But that was two years ago, and unfortunately the people who wanted to make the film with me have been unable to get funding.

I myself, in the meantime, have settled down in the North. I write about the North and I view the world from the North. Recently I was tidying the drawers of my desk and came across the microfilms of your file. I wondered what I should do with them. I'm sure the quarterly *Karta* would be happy to have them. So would the Eastern Archives. But perhaps you have some suggestions about what you'd like done with them? Or would you like me to send them to you? With best wishes, Mariusz Wilk.

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, "Diary Written at Night",
Kultura 1994, no. 12, pp. 36-39

October 4-10th, 1996

Thanks to Basil [Kerski], who I think was no less surprised than I at the discovery, I found the political and biographical profile of the German translator of *A World Apart*, Count von Einsiedel.

"Who translated *A World Apart* into German?" asked Basil one day, and when I replied, "Graf von Einsiedel" he looked astonished, as if he had just heard some sensational piece of news. And in a way it was sensational, as I was to discover.

I still remember that autumn day in London in 1951. It was the morning after the publication of *A World Apart* by Heinemann. I was living in Finchley. The doorbell rang; on the doorstep stood a tall, handsome man, more or less my age. He was well dressed and had the bearing of a military man, constantly straightening his back and clicking his heels ("banging his hooves together", we used to call it when I was a soldier). My housekeeper, the poet Tadeusz Sułkowski, came to get me in my study. The two of us sat in the lounge of the Polish Writers' House. He introduced himself: "Graf von Einsiedel". We spoke English. He had sat up all night reading my book, he said, and would like to translate it into German. At that time, at the beginning of my "career as a writer", the idea of translating a book written in Polish from English into German did not seem absurd; I was in a hurry, I wanted it done. Graf had a good publisher in mind and had come to get the author's permission. I agreed unhesitatingly. The book was published by Kiepenheuer in 1953, under the title *Welt ohne Erbarmen* and without the translator's name. Did he translate it and then for some reason prefer not to sign it? Or did he only start the job, and someone else finished it? In any case, everyone said the translation was awful. So awful that when Karl Dedecius was putting together his anthology

of contemporary Polish prose and wanted to include a chapter, he preferred to translate it himself.

"Do you know who Count Einsiedel is?"

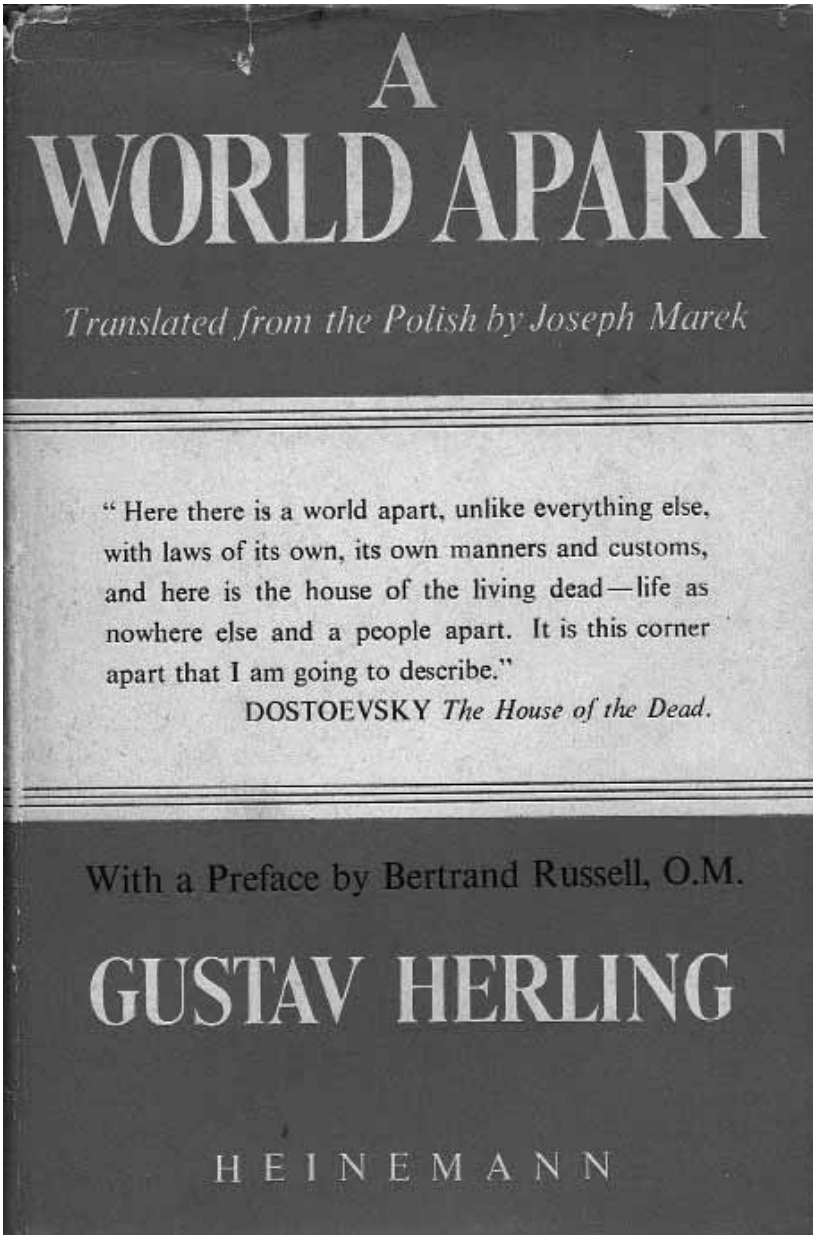
"All he told me was that he was an anti-Nazi émigré in London, which automatically disposed me well towards him and made me inclined to trust him."

"Tomorrow I'll bring you a photocopy of his entry in the German parliamentary *Who's Who*, *Deutscher Bundestag*." Basil's face was still frozen in astonishment.

A writer. Lives in Munich. Born in Potsdam. A wife and two sons. A fighter pilot from 1939. On the Russian front from 1941 to 1942. In November 1942 joins an anti-fascist group of officers in a Soviet prisoner-of-war camp. Co-founder of the National Committee for a Free Germany and the German officers' union. In 1947 returns to Germany after his release from the USSR and edits the newspaper of the Soviet army directorate. In December 1948 escapes from the Soviet zone. Translator, historical essayist. 1947-1948 member of the SED. 1957-1992 member of the SPD. From 1994 MP (from Saxony) in the Bundestag.

What was he doing in London in 1951? Why did he fall in love with *A World Apart* and how long did his love for it last? He is one of three post-communist MPs in the Bundestag and lives in West Germany. That is all I know about him at present.

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, "A short trip to Berlin",
Kultura 1996, no. 1-2, pp. 40-41.



41. Cover of the first English edition of A World Apart*, 1951*

42. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński (right) with Giovanni Spadolini, acting President of Italy, 1992

Appendix V
Conversations in Dragonea: ***A World Apart***
1995

Włodzimierz Bolecki
Gustaw Herling-Grudziński

Włodzimierz Bolecki: The first thing you did after your release from the Yertsevo camp was buy a notebook to write it all down. Was this a sudden impulse, or had you already decided beforehand that you would write a memoir of your time in the Gulag?

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński: No, I hadn't thought about it before. It was an impulse. I spent the few kopeks I still had on a notebook – it had a metal cover; I kept it as a souvenir – and tried to write. You could say it was then that the writer in me was born. I think I began writing in Chelyabinsk, but that was just a few sentences, because I saw at once that there was no point in trying to go on: you can't spend two years in a camp and then just sit down to write about it immediately, as soon as you come out. So I abandoned the attempt. But I kept the notebook.

W.B. Those first notes, were they the beginning of what was to become the *Diary Written at Night* or *A World Apart*?

G.H.-G. I don't know. I had no plan yet. I just wanted to write, to get it all down. Especially since the friends I was leaving behind – though they didn't know then that I would turn out to be a writer – kept saying: "you must write it down, all of it, everything we've been through; everything we've been through together". I describe those scenes in *A World Apart*. So… their words just kept echoing in my head. But that first attempt came to an end after those few sentences.

Then we moved to the Middle East and I fell ill. It was the same illness that afflicted all those in the army who had been through the camps: the silence sickness. Except that in my case it was more acute. I was silent with a vengeance. I spoke rarely and only when I had to, about specifics, practical, concrete things that needed attention. Physically I was in very bad shape, as was everyone who had been through the camps. Our various wounds, the lesions on our legs from

scurvy, would open in the sun and suppurate in the heat. We were eating normally by then, but we still had a lot of catching up to do. I was weak, that's all; I felt exhausted. Our army training was a reflection of how we felt; you might call it training in inverted commas. We would go out for short periods and very early in the day, especially in Iraq, where the heat was unbearable, and very soon we'd be back in our tents to lie down and rest.

W.B. So the training was more to build up your strength and get you healthy and fit than real army training, drills and so forth?

G.H.-G. Yes. Our commanding officers knew that it would take a long time, so they didn't pressure us; they knew not to stretch us to breaking point. Well, of course they knew! They'd been prisoners themselves not that long before. General Anders's Polish army was mostly composed of prisoners, and had been formed by a prisoner.

I thought constantly of what I had lived through and I did something I know some writers do but which I never did again, namely, I would work out in my head what I wanted to write.

One Polish writer who worked that way was Jerzy Stempowski. He used to walk around Bern and only sat down at his typewriter when he had everything written out in his head. Of great foreign writers, Tomasi di Lampedusa was also like that: he spent twenty years composing *The Leopard* in his head before sitting down to write it. And once he'd started, he wrote it all at once, from start to finish, in final draft, with no emendations. I saw one of his notebooks once. There are perhaps two or three things crossed out. The whole thing was already there in his memory; all he had to do was write it down, and the writing itself didn't take much time. In a sense it was like that for me, too. When I was in England and was able to get down to writing *A World Apart* – I was living in Rugby at the time, with friends of the Ciołkosz family who had invited me down to stay for a month – the writing went very quickly.

W.B. But before you began, when you were still in Persia, and surely by the time you got to Rome, you must have come across a large number of memoirs and reminiscences by other prisoners. You must have read them. Were your own ideas about how to write *A World Apart* somehow filtered through this reading? It was, after all, connected with your own experiences.

G.H.-G. I think so, yes. Though that kind of process is hard to notice and to define. But I think they must have been. I read a lot of that literature, and as the editor of the literary section of *Orzeł Biały* I published some of it as well. I published articles by Herminia Naglerowa, for instance.

But I remember very clearly that none of these reminiscences made much impression on me: I carried my own truth about my camp experiences within me

and was reluctant to be influenced by other people's reminiscences. These were things that were talked about. And there were great waves of these reminiscences, because our army was composed of former concentration camp prisoners from gulags all over Soviet Russia. So we had plenty to reminisce about. It wasn't until we were in Palestine that we met up with the Carpathian Brigade – Jerzy Giedroyć and Juliusz Mieroszewski were among those in it. But that was a brigade; we were the corps.

Most of us were so-called Easterners – former camp inmates with various fixations. But our main fixation was one common to all concentration camp prisoners, especially simple people, namely the fear that there would be no bread tomorrow. So the former Gulag prisoners would buy up enormous amounts of bread and store it under their mattresses. Eventually they relaxed and came to trust that there would be bread every day, but at the beginning – I remember it very clearly – it was different. And the ones we used to call the "lords" of the Carpathian Brigade were amused by this behaviour and observed our bread shopping with ironic smiles. They laughed at us, and it was quite a while before they stopped. At any rate, I used to listen to accounts by the other prisoners, if they talked at all – not all of them were inclined to talk about their time in the Gulag.

W.B. What about writing – were they inclined to do that?

G.H.-G. They wrote reports. Rather like the reports Solzhenitsyn collected in the *Gulag Archipelago*, I suppose. His book was based on several hundred such reports. But, as I said, none of it made much impression on me. I already had the shape of my book in my mind.

W.B. You already had it then? In Palestine?

G.H.-G. Yes, I already had it then. Not its final shape, I couldn't honestly say that. But it was beginning to take shape in my mind.

W.B. You knew you wanted to say something that no one else had said?

G.H.-G. I knew I had something of my own to say. And I knew it when I sat down in London to write. I had known quite clearly for a long time what I was going to write.

W.B. But you were writing other things too at that time, before you sat down to write *A World Apart*?

G.H.-G. Yes.

W.B. So you unblocked yourself quite early on?

G.H.-G. Yes. I came to London in 1947. Before that I'd worked at *Kultura*, and in London I earned money by writing for *Wiadomości*. So I was already writing.

W.B. That's something of an understatement. While you were still in Rome, you published your book *Żywi i umarli* ("The Living and the Dead") in the *Orzeł Biały* series.

G.H.-G. A tiny little book. But yes, that's true. So when I arrived in London with the first chapters after a month in Rugby with my friends, I showed them to Grydzewski, who was very excited by them and began serializing them in *Wiadomości*.

W.B. But at that time, when you were beginning to write it, your idea for the book was different from what it later became. Those chapters you serialized in *Wiadomości* had a different title.

G.H.-G. "The Living Dead", yes. But when Andrzej Ciołkosz had translated the first few chapters and showed them to Heinemann, I was told that that title had already been used. So I had to find another.

I later found out that Malcolm Muggeridge had been Heinemann's reviewer for those first chapters, and that he had immediately recommended the book for publication and suggested that Heinemann help me finish it. It was an amazing thing to have done in those circumstances, and I should think it's very rare in general for a publisher to take such pains with a young writer. On the basis of those chapters Heinemann gave me an advance, which allowed me to go on writing. The writing went more slowly now that I was in London, but that was just because of the pressures of daily life. Our émigré life was very difficult then; I couldn't write as fast as I had in Rugby.

W.B. In your various published comments on *A World Apart* you say that you wrote it in 1949-1950.

G.H.-G. That's the date at the end of the book.

W.B. But you only wrote a few chapters of it in Rugby.

G.H.-G. Yes. Six.

W.B. Did you write them in the same order in which they appear in the book?

G.H.-G. No, no.

W.B. So your decision about its final structure came later?

G.H.-G. Yes. Those chapters were all very different: I just wrote what I felt I wanted to write at any given moment.

W.B. Did all the chapters you wrote then go into the book, or were there any that you later left out?

G.H.-G. No, all six of them went in.

W.B. Did you rework them later in light of your conception of the whole book?

G.H.-G. You may find this hard to believe, but I didn't rework the book at all. I think back on it the way men think of the first woman they loved: never again did writing come so easily to me. I don't have that kind of ease now: writing is hard, and I revise a lot. If anyone looked at my manuscripts they would see corrections upon corrections, multi-storied. But the manuscript of this book is exceptional, unique. Hardly any corrections. Incredibly clean and pure. Like first love.

W.B. At first sight?

G.H.-G. Yes – at the first attempt.

W.B. But you waited almost eight years for that first attempt – it came almost eight years after your release from Yertsevo.

G.H.-G. I was released in 1942 and began to write in 1949, that's true. But the material for the book was already taking shape in my head when I was in the Middle East and in Italy.

W.B. Was your decision to write down your reminiscences the result of your own inner conviction, or did anyone urge you to do it? And was the Rugby visit your idea?

G.H.-G. Yes, people did urge me to do it. But I'd been wanting to do it for a long time. As I told you, it was my intention from the first moment, as soon as I came out. But post-war circumstances, so called, got in the way. Life was very hard for us. But when my friends discovered I was thinking about it, they encouraged me very warmly. Lidia Ciołkoszowa helped me a great deal by sending me to these friends in Rugby and arranging financial help for me from the Club run by Witold Czerwiński – Lidia was a figure of some influence in London then. When the book was out and I got the rest of my advance on royalties, I paid it all back, since it had been a sort of loan. Officially it came from Czerwiński, who was very much at home in London and spoke excellent English. He also negotiated with Heinemann on my behalf.

W.B. Why was *A World Apart* published in English before it appeared in Polish, by Gryf, a Polish publishing house in London?

G.H.-G. The thing was that I had sold part of the book to Heinemann. Those six chapters they accepted and on the basis of which I got an advance – they basically bought the book sight-unseen. Andrzej got down to translating it very quickly. I wanted to pay back the money I'd received, and I also wanted to get some decent royalties as soon as possible.

The first chapters in Polish were published in *Wiadomości*, and since by then I had severed relations with Giedroyć's *Kultura*, after the book came out in English

I published the Polish version with Gryf. Some people still remember that edition, with its red cover. Gryf typeset it in tiny print and a horrible font. Later, when I was back on good terms with *Kultura*, it was serialized there, and since then the "Kultura" Literary Institute has reissued it countless times; there was a new print run whenever the previous one was exhausted.

W.B. Wait, is there something missing from my bibliography? Do you mean to say that there was no Polish edition at all between Gryf in 1953 and the Literary Institute in 1965? Is that possible?

G.H.-G. No, there's nothing missing from your bibliography. There was no other edition between those.

W.B. Was there really no interest in the book at all? No Polish publisher manifested any interest in it?

G.H.-G. That's not the point. First of all, that first Polish edition didn't sell out as quickly as you seem to imagine. Sales were slow, just a trickle at first, then a little stream. And the book didn't attract attention because it was ugly and badly printed. It was only with Giedroyć's 1965 edition that things speeded up and the Polish career of *A World Apart* took off, so to speak.

W.B. That's astonishing, especially given that translations into other languages – into Swedish, into German, into Italian in 1958 – followed so swiftly upon the Polish and English editions – though of course the English one was more important from that point of view. There was a French edition in preparation. Could you say something about those editions? The story of the Italian one must be the most mysterious of all.

G.H.-G. And the French one. I'll start with the story of the French one, because it's both mysterious and telling. The French Catholic publishing house Plon, very well known and highly respected, took it at once, as soon as the English edition was out. It had been recommended to them by the late Gabriel Marcel, the Christian philosopher, who was one of their reviewers. They not only took it, they immediately published excerpts, two or three chapters, in the literary supplement to *Le Figaro – Le Figaro Littéraire*. And then one fine day I get a letter from them saying that although the translation was finished, there had been changes on the editorial board and the new board had decided, after lengthy deliberations, not to go ahead with the publication. They gave no reason. But they were willing, they said, as a kind of compensation, to give me the manuscript of the translation. I suppose I could have taken them to court, but I had neither the money nor the desire to do so. I have absolutely no doubt that the reasons for their about-turn were political. The new editorial board was composed of people from the Catholic

Left – progressive Catholics. And they decided that *A World Apart* should not see the light of day in France.

Something similar happened a few years later with another French publisher. I sent the book to Gallimard, where the reviewer was Albert Camus. Camus read the book and sent me a very nice letter (later published in Polish translation in *Puls*), in which he said that he liked the book very much, that he thought it should come out in as many languages as possible, and so forth. But the publisher decided against it. For "economic reasons". And that was the end of my attempts in the fifties to publish *A World Apart* in France.

So I duly got the manuscript of the French translation from Plon, in compensation, and for a time I continued to take it round various publishers. The kind and good-natured Zygmunt Hertz often did this for me. But none of it did any good, and after a few such attempts I decided to throw in the towel. The manuscript of the translation was consigned to the basement of Maisons-Laffitte, where it disappeared without trace. Fortunately, I should say. Because Kot Jeleński, who had seen it, said that in his opinion it was, frankly, a very bad translation. So when, thanks to Semprun, Denoël took the book, they had a new translation done, by a very good translator. But this new translation had one defect: it was done from the English, not from the Polish edition. But it was done superbly.

W.B. Did anyone ever check it?

G.H.-G. I went over it myself. By the time I found out about the whole thing it was too late to do much about it, but I rebelled and insisted on checking.

W.B. Very odd.

G.H.-G. Quite incomprehensible. Why not use the original Polish version? In 1958 there were many excellent translators who could have done it. But, as I say, by the time I found out, the translation from the English was almost finished. And indeed Kot Jeleński thought well of it. At any rate, when it arrived the two of us set to work polishing it up a bit and checking it against the original. There's a note thanking him for his help in that edition. So the translation is a very faithful one, and a good one, too, according to reviewers. Thirty years had to pass before that French edition with Denoël – and that was brought about by the distinguished Spanish writer Jorge Semprun (he was minister of culture in the Gonzalez government), who recommended it to them. He read it in English. It had been recommended to him by a Polish friend in the United States, and also by Józef Czapski, another friend of his. He was very moved by it and urged Denoël to publish it.

W.B. Semprun talks about it in his book *Quel beau dimanche!*

G.H.-G. He even has a whole chapter about it, and about how he discovered it. And when the book finally came out in France, it was very well received and very successful. I was even invited to Bernard Pivot's prestigious television show "Apostrophes", together with Kot Jeleński, to talk about it – a huge honour, and the mark of a book's success. Kot acted as translator for me on the show, and at one point, when I was recounting the book's vicissitudes with French publishers, Pivot – I remember this very well – was so appalled that he cried: "It's a disgrace! A disgrace for us!"

W.B. In France, *A World Apart* was awarded two prizes: the French PEN club prize and the Prix Gutenberg. The success of the French edition led to a new wave of interest. In 1986 it was re-issued in New York, and other editions soon followed.

G.H.-G. The French edition was so successful partly because the weekly *L'Express* bought it for its book club, which had an enormous impact on sales and distribution. At any rate, that was when the book was given a new lease of life in France.

W.B. And in Italy?

G.H.-G. The Italian adventures of *A World Apart* were extraordinary and are still being talked about: there was a violent debate about it all quite recently. When I settled down in Italy there weren't as many translators from Polish as there are now, and the book was translated into Italian by my wife, together with a friend of hers. They translated from the English edition, not the Polish one. We offered the book to the great Bari publisher Vito Laterza who was Croce's publisher, and they published it in 1958. But soon after its publication, as I was wandering round the bookshops – wandering around bookshops being an activity I am very fond of – I found, to my astonishment, that it was nowhere to be seen. It just didn't exist on the Italian market. It wasn't a bestseller: it couldn't have sold out already. I'm convinced that Vito Laterza published a tiny print run, just for good form: he gave me a few copies, a few to Lidia's family, maybe sent a few more here and there, and that's it. At any rate that was an unpublished publication, as Orwell might have put it.

There were only two reviews, both very positive; later I even made friends with their authors. One of them was the late literary critic Paolo Milano, who used to write for *L'Expresso*. The other was the very distinguished historian and writer Leo Valiani. But the book didn't exist in Italy.

W.B. What about the violent debate you mentioned?

G.H.-G. Recently, when I was, so to speak, resurrected in Italy as a writer, I made this accusation in public, in a series of interviews with a journalist from *Il Mattino*.

To which the director of *Il Mattino*, who was none other than Vittorio Laterza, responded by categorically denying it. He said it was a web of lies and accused me of slander. To which I replied by repeating my accusation. Our exchange of letters was very sharp and I decided to include them in the volume of interviews with the journalist from *Il Mattino*. Later *A World Apart* was reprinted by the Milan publisher Rizzoli in a semi-pocket edition, but it didn't sell. I think the Italians must simply not have been very interested in these things.

W.B. Do you mean the 1965 edition with the introduction by Silone?

G.H.-G. Yes, of course, that one. Apparently the book failed to sell more than a thousand copies.

W.B. Were there any reviews?

G.H.-G. Not many. Clearly the Italians had no interest whatsoever in the subject at the time. The career of *A World Apart* in Italy only took off with the Feltrinelli edition, and also thanks to the prize the book was awarded then: when the reprint came out, it had "Premio Viareggio" in big letters on a slip around the cover.

W.B. You said you were resurrected in Italy as a writer. How had you been treated before?

G.H.-G. As a leper. Quite simply. For thirty years. The only comfort was that it wasn't just me. In those days it was general. I once complained about it to Miłosz and used the word "leper", and he said he was treated in exactly the same way in France before he went to America.

W.B. Here is an excerpt from what you wrote about it: "I recently discussed it with Czesław Miłosz over the phone, and compared my situation in those years of communist influence to that of a leper. To which Miłosz replied: 'Well, I was a leper in France'. No one wanted to listen to us; they preferred to ignore us. And not only in my case or Miłosz's; that was the standard treatment of all East European writers living in the West".

What did this treatment of you as if you were political lepers consist in? Was it just that you were ignored, not invited to conferences, your books not talked about?

G.H.-G. No, unfortunately it was more than that. For instance, after 1956 and the so-called "opening", when the Polish government was flirting with the West, a large number of Poles, Polish writers, started travelling to the United States. I'd always been very interested in America and I wanted to see it for myself. But it turned out that in my case this would not be possible. I wanted very much to go to a summer school at Harvard directed by Henry Kissinger. In his reply to me he said it was impossible because I was a "rootless exile".

W.B. Kissinger, himself an émigré from Germany, said that?!

G.H.-G. Yes, indeed. Kissinger, the German émigré, said that. And Jacek Woźniakowski from Kraków took my place. There were many similar incidents. That's just how things were for us then.

Here's a story that is a good illustration of the way we were treated. I was living in Italy by then and was known as a writer, but I was never invited to any television programmes about Poland (which actually I didn't mind, because I dislike television). And suddenly one day a secretary from Italian television rang to say that they were having a "round table" discussion about the 1970 incidents in Poland on the Baltic Coast, chaired by a well-known Italian journalist.

W.B. Was that the first time anyone from television called you?

G.H.-G. Yes! I was amazed. I asked this secretary – she turned out to be quite witty – what had made them suddenly come to me. And she says: "I'll tell you the truth. We were going to send a television crew to the Baltic Coast, but the Polish authorities refused them visas. So we decided to take revenge." Whereupon I said: "Aha! So I'm to be the instrument of your revenge?" And she laughed and said: "Exactly." That was the only time I ever appeared on Italian television. Well, they filmed me once, when they were filming the Viareggio Prize ceremony, but that was my only other appearance.

W.B. You were awarded the Premio Viareggio for *A World Apart*?

G.H.-G. For my work as a whole, but that was singled out particularly, yes. It's an international as well as an Italian prize: it's awarded to Italians for poetry, prose and the essay, but there's also a non-Italian category in which one prize can be awarded.

W.B. So in a sense the Premio Viareggio was "compensation" for *A World Apart* in the way that the Prix Gutenberg or the French PEN club prize had been?

G.H.-G. Well, it was more than that, because it's a more prestigious prize. But I'll tell you something funny. The prize was awarded by a jury of twenty people. At the prize ceremony all twenty jurors sat at a table and all the prizewinners had to come up and shake their hands, one by one. Well, I can tell you that there were at least eight among them who just a few years before would have refused to shake my hand.

W.B. Yes, that does seem to have been a sign of the times. But there's one thing you haven't mentioned. I know that at one point an Italian journal – I think it was the organ of the Communist Party – demanded your removal from Italy.

G.H.-G. Yes, that's true. It was *Paese Sera*, and it was a communist evening paper. The article was written by Gianni Toti.

W.B. When was this and what was the reason?

G.H.-G. I don't remember the exact date and the reason was not specified. It was just an expression of the Italian communists' attitude towards me: there's this anti-communist Pole hanging around here, causing trouble. They saw me as a visceral anti-communist. Which shows that I was fairly well known here as a journalist by then: I had worked for a few years for *Tempo Presente*, the magazine of Silone and Chiaromonte, where for four years I published articles about Eastern Europe. And so here were these Italian communists writing in their evening paper that the sensible thing would be to kick me out of the country. Espulsione, exile, deportation, removal or however you want to call it.

W.B. Deportation. They wanted to deal with you in exactly the same way that the Soviets were later to deal with Solzhenitsyn.

G.H.-G. Exactly. But it was a ridiculous idea, because they would never have been able to achieve it, because of my family ties in Italy if nothing else.

W.B. Did you meet anyone who had read *A World Apart* before it was published by Feltrinelli?

G.H.-G. Yes, mostly people who had read it in English and said it had made a huge impression on them. Alberto Moravia was one such. Nicola Chiaromonte had also read it in English. So yes, there were some Italians who had read it.

W.B. Did Moravia write anything about it?

G.H.-G. No, never. And in his public appearances he behaved as if he had never heard of it. Like Sartre in France. The attitude was: "Well, it may be true, but we shouldn't speak of it, so as not to turn the working class against the mother of the world proletariat".

My book was seen in the first place as testimony. It was only when it came out at Feltrinelli, and to some extent also after it was published by Rizzoli, that critics noticed that while it did indeed document the truth, it was also simply a work of literature.

W.B. What did the Italian critics have to say about the fact that they only noticed the book after its third Italian edition – the Feltrinelli edition? Bernard Pivot was very ashamed, you said.

G.H.-G. The Italians claimed they were ashamed, too, but I think they were only pretending – in their charming way. Pivot's outburst was very sincere; it came from the heart. There was genuine anger in his cry "It's a disgrace!" But I think the Italians – for whom I have a weakness – were pretending because they are what I call "transformists". Well, such were the times and there's no point in talking about them any more. Now, fortunately, the times have changed. For example,

A World Apart was reviewed in Italy in the literary supplement to the communist paper *L'Unita*, and not once but three times, on the first page, enthusiastically and with lamentations about how they could have overlooked such a magnificent book.

But the Italians don't like the subject in general. They just don't like reading about the diseases of our times. When Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* was published here, thanks to prior publicity, I did a sort of survey among my friends and acquaintances who I knew had bought it. And you won't believe this: none of them got beyond the first fifty pages. Why? "Well, why should I read about such terrible things?" they would say. Well then, why did they buy it? Because it was a book that should have its place on their shelves. In other words, they bought it for the same reason that fifty thousand people in Poland bought Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example. The Italians quite simply knew nothing about the Gulag; it's only now that, very slowly, they are learning about it and getting used to talking about it. Perhaps my book in the Feltrinelli edition did its bit to help that along, too.

W.B. Were there any reviews that told you something new about the book?

G.H.-G. The reviews talked about – to use an expression of Conrad's – seeing justice done. I liked that. People still ring me, often from provincial towns, to ask a question or just talk to me. In those days it was a battle for the right to say certain things.

W.B. Let's go back for a moment to that first French edition which never saw the light of day. The book was ready for the press: translated in its entirety by Hélène Claireau, illustrated by Etienne Morini and with an introduction by Rémy Roure. Did you read his introduction?

G.H.-G. Yes. It was reprinted in *Le Figaro Littéraire*, along with a few excerpts from the book. It was just a factual introduction. Roure was a very well known figure and the publisher wanted his name. He had a glorious past in the French resistance.

W.B. What about the translation you waited longest for, or in any case most impatiently? I mean the translation into Russian by Natalia Gorbanyevska, which first appeared in London in 1989.

G.H.-G. I was very anxious for a Russian edition, and it came about thanks to the émigré Russian publishing house Overseas Publications. I was very pleased, and Natalia Gorbanyevska's translation is well thought of. But that edition, like all émigré editions, had a limited audience. It was my greatest dream for the book to be published in Russia. I thought it would never be fulfilled and that a Russian edition of *A World Apart* was still far in the future, but I was wrong. The USSR

collapsed sooner than anyone expected. Even I did not expect it to happen so quickly, though I was sure that one day it would.

So one day Natalia Gorbanyevska's translation appeared legally in Moscow. It was published by Progress and I'm told the print run sold out very quickly. I suppose it wasn't a huge print run by Soviet standards, "only" fifty thousand copies, but still…

W.B. Assuming that figure is correct.

G.H.-G. Yes, of course, assuming that it's correct. But I do know, from people who went to Moscow and Leningrad, that bookshops there were selling a second edition.

W.B. So it was a quantifiable success, achieved by you and Gorbanyevska?

G.H.-G. Well, not really quantifiable. The ironic thing about it is that we don't have normal relations with the Russian book market, so neither I nor the translator were paid any royalties or fees.

W.B. Did the Russian edition have any kind of preface, introductory remarks, an interview?

G.H.-G. There was my own very brief and personal preface. I wrote that I had been so much hoping that I would live to see a Russian edition and here, at last, it was. I quoted excerpts from Bertrand Russell's preface to the English edition and Silone's to the Italian one, but my most important remark was a repetition of what I had written in a preface to one of the Polish *Kultura* editions, namely that we should speak out on Polish-Russian issues because that is the only way we can ever hope to achieve any kind of Polish-Russian reconciliation, and that this was how I viewed the book. And there were some people who read it that way. These weren't empty words: as you know, the book is very well-disposed and sympathetic towards the Russian prisoners. In fact, to digress for a moment, there were Polish émigré readers who held this against me. Some of them – I'm amused when I think of it today – even reproached me for it. Józef Czapski was reproached for the same thing. That was what brought us together as friends, Czapski and me: we held identical views on the subject. As of course did Giedroyć as well.

W.B. Did you ever see any evidence of the book's reception in Russian journals, or hear from any readers?

G.H.-G. Unfortunately I don't have a dossier on that, though I was told there were many reviews. But the Russian book market is like the Wild West. The publisher didn't even send me any reviews. But they did do one thing that touched me: they invited me to Moscow at their expense. Unfortunately I couldn't go because of my health. But some readers did get in touch with me. Sometimes their comments

were very sad. For instance, one woman from Moscow wrote to say that she recognized her mother in one of the characters in *A World Apart*.

W.B. Can you say which?

G.H.-G. It was Yevgenia Federovna. She was the one who had the love affair with the doctor, Yegorov. The problem was that I couldn't write and tell this woman who had written to me that I had made up all the names, and the surnames, and the patronymics, so as not to harm the people I was describing. "Yevgenia Fedorovna" is not the real name of the woman I described in *A World Apart*. But this woman thought it must be her mother because the description fit and because her real mother's name, as it happens, was Yevgenia Fedorovna.

W.B. Was that a coincidence?

G.H.-G. Yes, I think so. I think the person I described was not her mother.

W.B. But does that mean that the things you described in the chapter entitled "Resurrection" would not permit of an identification?

G.H.-G. That's the whole trouble. This woman didn't know anything about those things I described because, as she told me, when her mother returned from the camps she never told her daughter anything about what had happened to her there. She wrote in her letter to me: "It wasn't until I read your book that I found out about my mother's life there". She thought she had discovered her mother in my book because the name and the patronymic both fit, and because her mother, too, had been a beautiful woman. So she was thrilled, and wrote me many letters thanking me for giving her back her mother, who did not want to talk about any of it. But I don't think it was her mother. I think it was just a coincidence that the name was the same.

She had been living in Moscow, this woman, but lately her letters – she began writing to me quite often – have been coming from Lvov, where she moved with her family.

W.B. Well, in any event, it's a triumph of fiction over life.

G.H.-G. In some sense, yes.

W.B. Did you ever hear from any of your fellow prisoners?

G.H.-G. Yes, from some of the Polish ones. Some of their reactions were very touching. I heard from the ones I had been on the hunger strike with. Mostly they got in touch through someone else, not directly. For instance, the woman who participated in the hunger strike sent a message through a friend who happened to be going to Paris, where she was going to work on Polish archives – she was working on the history of the Home Army in Vilnius. She asked this friend to

convey greetings and to tell me how moved she was when she read *A World Apart*, having managed – by some miracle – to obtain a copy.

W.B. Has anyone else survived of those who participated in the hunger strike which led to your release?

G.H.-G. I'm sure some must have. One of them was the forester and engineer Eugeniusz Mikke. He's dead now, so I can reveal his name. A wonderful man. I sought him out in London after the war and went to visit him. He was completely burnt out, a very unhappy man, because his only loves had been his country and his wife. His country was enslaved and his wife was dead. So he was quite alone. He lived in a tiny flat in Camdem Town. When I went to see him there, I realized that there was no longer any point to our meeting. He actually seemed pleased to see me go. He embraced me warmly, but he had become so hardened in his solitary life that he clearly didn't want the visit to go on too long.

W.B. Let's move on now to the negative reactions to *A World Apart*. You mentioned that some Polish readers reproached you with being too pro-Russian. But your attitude towards Russia and other nations is one of the most important things in the book and crucial for an understanding of it.

G.H.-G. The reactions varied. I remember one episode which still strikes me as quite funny. I don't recall the exact year, but it was very soon after 1968. Giedroyć had the idea of getting General Anders to speak on Radio Free Europe in a programme directed at NCOs in the Polish People's Army, because we had heard rumours that they were meting out very brutal treatment to participants in the Polish incidents of March 1968 who, as punishment, had been drafted into the army. Giedroyć thought – and I think he was right – that an appeal by General Anders might have some effect. So he asked me to go and see Anders in London. I went and he agreed to see me. He was very nice to me and received me very warmly, because he had just read my book.

As you may remember, in the epilogue to *A World Apart* I tell the story of my meeting with a Polish officer whom, when we were in the camp, I would drag from his bunk to the toilet so that he could have a pee, but who, when I joined the army after my release, behaved as if he didn't know me and reprimanded me for not standing to attention and saluting him. But I couldn't have done this even if I had wanted to. I described this meeting, and at the end I added a sentence that Kot Jeleński thought was wonderful: "I knew then that I was really in the Army, that I was at last among my compatriots, who after all that they had gone through during the past two years were rapidly returning to normal." In other words, I knew I was back in my country… Anders felt very strongly about this sentence and held it against me. And he said to me, using an expression one hears time and time again in all sorts of situations, "Yes, all right, it may be true, but why bring it up?"

W.B. And did no one reproach you for writing about the Polish priest who took a "fee" for performing his pastoral duties?

G.H.-G. I'm sure there must have been people who held that against me, but none of them dared to reproach me with it publicly. There were all sorts of reproaches and accusations, most of them about my – and Czapski's – attitude to Russia. It was awful; I will never forget it. Our army left Russia with the conviction – which hurt me terribly – that communism was the right regime for the Russians but not for us; that they deserved it. So why harp on the past and feel sorry for them?

W.B. That was precisely the accusation against Józef Mackiewicz, who all his life had tried to debunk the claim that Russia or Eastern Europe had some sort of predisposition to communism. The most violent critical reactions to him were about that.

G.H.-G. Yes, that's true. The thing about Mackiewicz was simply that he had been raised among Russians and he liked them. And his liking for them went very deep. As did my own, and Józef Czapski's. But I was in Russia for only a short time and I didn't have all the ties with the Russian intelligentsia, with writers and so on, that both Mackiewicz and Czapski, and indeed Giedroyć, who was born in Moscow, had there. In short, the accusation of Russophilia cropped up very frequently. And the reason for it was that stupid phrase about its not being our problem that we left the land of slavery under the leadership of General Anders like the Jews led out of Egypt by Moses, and that the Russians would remain what they were because that was their destiny. A load of terrible nonsense. I've fought against it all my life.

W.B. In other words, some are destined for eternal hellfire and others for the Promised Land?

G.H.-G. Something like that.

W.B. When we talk about these things today, in 1995, we naturally touch on the interpretation of your attitude to your fellow prisoners, and it seems very clear, indeed obvious. But back then, when you were writing and didn't yet know that you would be attacked for writing about them in the way that you did, was your adoption of so clearly polemical a tone with respect to Polish martyrology the result of a conscious choice?

G.H.-G. Yes, it was a conscious decision. I simply had a lot of Russian friends and I wanted to be loyal to those friendships. They were the people who asked me, upon my release from Yertsevo, to tell the world what was happening to them, what went on in the camps. So my book was the fulfilment of a moral duty, and it would have been disgraceful for me to say: I won't write about them because they're Russians and I'm a Pole.

W.B. Was it this, too, that made you feel that your truth was different from the truth of other Polish prisoners?

G.H.-G. Among other things, yes. In most Polish memoirs about the war you can feel a certain reserve towards Russians, Ukrainians and all the other nationalities. But what contributes to the sense of chaos and confusion is the fact that glorifying the supposedly exceptional behaviour of Poles – I won't, of course, mention any names or specific books – is just perpetuating a myth, a falsehood. I had some very close Polish friends in the camp and they were wonderful people, but I also encountered very bad behaviour among Poles there, dreadful behaviour. So exceptional behaviour in such circumstances is not some kind of Polish national characteristic. We shouldn't whitewash ourselves. Poles in the camps weren't exceptionally virtuous or pure as snow. But the Poles liked that stereotype. People used to say to authors: did you write about how beautiful our nation is?

W.B. It's characteristic that you get basically the same thing in descriptions of Nazi camps. The stereotype was that the victim was always noble.

G.H.-G. Yes, yes. But in fact it was individuals, not nationalities, that differed in their behaviour. Stereotypes are born from generalizations: Poles are like this, Russians or Ukrainians are like that, and so on. But I encountered all sorts of Poles in the camp: some were magnificent, some were just ordinary and some were vile. Always mindful of the engineer Eugeniusz Mikke, who had the bunk next to mine, I agree with Shalamov that those who managed to survive the camps with their dignity intact were few and far between. They made up perhaps one percent of the prisoners. And most of them were religious. I remember how Mikke was always praying to remain pure, not to succumb. He was a magnificent figure, a forester on the other side of the Bug river.

W.B. In the chapter "Martyrdom for the Faith", you tell the story of four nuns and how heroically they behaved.

G.H.-G. But that story is mostly hearsay. We were in solitary by then, the so-called "isolator", so only echoes of it reached us. And you have to remember that if a nun or a priest or an orthodox priest arrived in the camp, it was a very long time until we knew who they were; they melted into the crowd of prisoners.

W.B. Did you know anything about the Gulag before you ended up there? Had you read anything about it in the interwar years?

G.H.-G. I knew a little. A few books about it were published before the war and I had read those. For instance, a book by a disillusioned Romanian communist, Panait Istrati. Then there was a fairly well-known book by Sołoniewicz about the prison on the Solovetsky Islands. There were just small crumbs of information about the Gulag, but they were there. But you have to remember one thing – and

I have to say mea culpa as I remind you of this: people whose views were left-wing, as mine were for a time, were generally sceptical of such information. For instance, in own my circle of acquaintances at the time, people were very wary and mistrustful of anti-communists – people like Ryszard Wraga, for example. They thought he was a hired propagandist and that all these extraordinary stories about Soviet Russia he went around telling were just made up. A similar mechanism operated in the West. You label an author before you have even read him – where he's from, what his opinions are, what he represents – and only then do you form an opinion of his work.

W.B. But was the subject of the Soviet Gulag something that interested you before the war?

G.H.-G. Only very superficially, like an interest in something exotic.

W.B. Did you ever re-read any of those books after your release from the camp?

G.H.-G. No. The only book on my desk was one I had bought in a Russian bookshop in London: Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*. It's amazing that people don't understand [what my point was when I wrote about it] and accuse me of making unjustified comparisons. If that's the way someone reads my book, then I'm afraid it's not a very intelligent way. I can't be comparing the Gulag to *katorga* because I know perfectly well that there was only one terrible thing in *katorga* – the chains that bound your wrists and ankles when you were working. But those people did not suffer hunger, and they could read if they wanted. So the conditions were not that inhuman. I needed Dostoevsky not in order to compare conditions that were not comparable, but in order to identify and define the common fate which makes it possible to compare the tsarist katorzhnik and the Soviet Gulag inmate. I once wrote an essay called *Yegor and Ivan Denisovich* – it was not long after Solzhenitsyn's book *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* appeared – in which I compared Solzhenitsyn's Ivan to Yegor, a character in Chekhov's book *Sakhalin*, in a chapter called "Yegor's Story". Yegor was a peasant who didn't think much about the family he had left behind somewhere far away, and didn't much mind being sentenced to exile because his stomach was always full. Every evening he would say: "A very good end to the day, because I ate better than yesterday." While Ivan Denisovich, after the day in the Gulag which Solzhenitsyn describes, lies down on his bunk with a feeling of something almost like happiness and says: "That was a good day, because I ate better" – or something like that. That's what interested me, not comparisons between tsarist and Soviet conditions for prisoners.

While we're on the subject, Solzhenitsyn's reaction to that essay of mine, his allegation that it showed the Pole in me rearing his head, because I was comparing

things as different as the Gulag and *katorga* – was utter nonsense. Solzhenitsyn had simply misunderstood me.

The Gulag and *katorga* are not comparable experiences. I mentioned that although *katorga* prisoners experienced various kinds of hardship, of which the worst, as we can see in Dostoevsky, were to do with the chains that bound them, they weren't starved and worked to death the way Soviet prisoners were. They worked, but not to such ruinous extremes of exhaustion. It is also important to remember that the katorzhniks in Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead* were people who had committed crimes and had genuine sins on their conscience: the murder of a wife, the murder of a rich merchant on the highway and so forth. But Soviet prisoners were sentenced and sent to the camps for crimes that were generally imaginary, invented by their interrogators.

W.B. But later on political prisoners were sent to do *katorga* too.

G.H.-G. Yes, of course, but they were political prisoners in the sense that they wanted to overthrow the tsarist regime in some way. But the crimes people in Soviet camps had been accused of and sentenced for were entirely fictitious. In any case, the confusion of crimes actually committed and crimes that were entirely imaginary is characteristic of Soviet camps. My aim was to capture the nature of "prison civilization", as Nadezhda Mandelstam called it in her memoirs, many years after my book was published; to counteract the tendency to see this world apart as something separate and isolated from the civilization it had grown out of. Solzhenitsyn was outraged by my comparison of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* with *Sakhalin* because he hadn't understood what I was doing; he thought that I was comparing the Sakhalin katorzhniks with Gulag inmates, treating them as similar, whereas in fact I was talking about the civilization that Nadezhda Mandelstam called "prison civilization". In other words, I wanted to draw attention to the fact that here was a society in which prison or labour camp, exile or *katorga* were an immanent part of people's existence. I think that's the most important thing. And it's something that people would do well to consider when they think about Russia's future, because this is something that still exists there. In a different form, perhaps, but it exists. So my aim was to juxtapose those two phenomena of Russia's prison civilization.

The episode in *A World Apart* about *The House of the Dead* is important. I had been given the book by Natalia Lvovna, who found it terrifying. Now there's a classic example of someone who compares things which can't be compared: Natalia Lvovna did compare katorzhniks to Gulag inmates. She simply felt that nothing would ever change, that the Gulag existence was somehow outside time. And that was what was so dreadful for her.

W.B. Dostoevsky appears in *A World Apart* in two different guises. The first is Natalia Lvovna's interpretation – her radically pessimistic reading of *The House of the Dead*. Natalia Lvovna reinterprets Dostoevsky in such a way that the reality he describes not only becomes her own reality but is immutable. And the second is your own approach, the approach of the narrator, who rejects her reading and rebels against her conclusions.

G.H.-G. Of course. My refusal is a consequence of the fact that unlike Natalia Lvovna I don't think that suffering is purifying. I am not one of those who see it as simply cathartic. Suffering can be purifying, but those cases are exceptional. As a rule it isn't. In any case, I don't think suffering is a trial we undergo with beneficial effects on our character. But that was what Natalia Lvovna thought – a very sweet woman, I should add, very unhappy and very ill. All she took away from Dostoevsky's novel was a confirmation of eternal continuity, of the immutability and endlessness of suffering. And of course this helped her, because it was thanks to this interpretation that she was able to understand her own life, her place in the endless continuity of Russian suffering.

W.B. So reading Dostoevsky's novel was for her a kind of relief, but at the same time enabled her to understand her own situation.

G.H.-G. With the proviso that she still did not understand why she had been sent to the gulag! Naturally, she was there because of some nonsense they had made up about crimes she had committed, and that was how, according to her interpretation, she found herself participating in this continuity of Russian suffering. And thanks to Dostoevsky she also found herself alongside the tsarist katorzhniks, who were well fed, who were allowed to read books, who were not as maltreated and worked to exhaustion as her fellow inmates in the Soviet Gulag.

W.B. She hadn't noticed that the *katorga* Dostoevsky describes was not in any sense a death camp?

G.H.-G. Many people fail to notice this, though it is the fundamental difference between the two. The Soviets did not declare publicly that everyone sent to the Gulag was destined for death; that was not part of their official policy, as it was in the case of the Nazis. But they made sure the conditions were so terrible that death was in fact the only escape. I always stress that Soviet camps did not kill prisoners as a matter of policy. They were not like Nazi death camps, where the prisoners were sent to the gas chambers once the last remnants of their strength had been squeezed out of them. A prisoner could theoretically survive for many years in the Gulag. We know that Shalamov survived twenty [G.H.-G.'s mistake, in fact it was seventeen years (ed.)] years in Kolyma.

W.B. But Shalamov is hardly a typical example!

G.H.-G. That's true. What I mean is that the prisoners' fate was not sealed when they were sent to the Gulag; death was not a foregone conclusion – despite the profound and unconcealed desire of the camp policemen and NKVD men that we should rot there for all eternity. For them it was natural, because according to the bolshevik theory on which they had been raised, we were "enemies of the people". For them every prisoner was an "enemy of the people" and as such could be exploited as long as he could still stand and had enough strength for slave labour, and after that he could be left to rot and die, because in their eyes an "enemy of the people" did not deserve to live.

W.B. So if you were in the Gulag, you were guilty by definition?

G.H.-G. That's what they thought. For them every prisoner was guilty because, since he was a prisoner, he must be an enemy of the communist system, of Stalin, of the USSR and so on. But it's significant that the camps were called "reform labour camps". They were supposed to re-educate, reform and re-mould the prisoner and transform him into a different person. In other words, *peryekovka* – the engineering of souls.

W.B. It's characteristic that concentration camps in Asia today, in Cambodia and North Vietnam, hark back to that idea of *peryekovka* and call themselves re-education camps.

G.H.-G. The difference being, however, that in Asian camps they used methods unknown in my day. We know today that communists in Asia used narcotics of various kinds on the prisoners, injections and so on, which turned them into completely different people. This was the case with some American prisoners after their release from camps in Korea. The drugs they were given were so powerful that the prisoners even praised their gaolers. Well, there are plenty of pharmacological options now that weren't around in my day. Thankfully.

To go back to Shalamov. Yesterday I read an abridged version of an article he'd written that was very critical of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. I can understand his bitterness. I called him the saint of that system and I consider him to be the best writer in that concentration universe created by the bolsheviks, incomparably greater than Solzhenitsyn. But his article saddened me because all it was was Shalamov pouring out his bitterness. What he says about Solzhenitsyn is unfair. Solzhenitsyn played an immense role – his *Gulag Archipelago* changed Europe. One can like him or not, that's not the question. But one can't dismiss the enormous impact of his book in the West. It was a revolution. I am prepared to state categorically that anyone who writes a book on France in that period and devotes a chapter to French intellectuals will have to write about Solzhenitsyn's book, because its publication in Paris really was a revolution. French universities, 90% of which were composed of communists or communist sympathisers, were

transformed by that book – so much that you would have had to go round with a candle peering in corners to find a communist. And the French read Solzhenitsyn very thoroughly, unlike the Italians, whose failure to do so is something I always reproach them with. That's why I think Solzhenitsyn deserves great credit. So when I read things about him today that are almost abusive, especially now that he has gone back to Russia, I am really very dismayed. After all that his books achieved in the West, and especially in France, Shalamov is very unfair to him.

W.B. But when Shalamov was in the gulag he didn't know about Solzhenitsyn's influence on the French intelligentsia…

G.H.-G. That's true. But on the other hand, you have to retain some sense of proportion. I often found myself the object of excessive compliments from Poles, which always irritated me. "Oh, Solzhenitsyn is nothing compared to your *A World Apart*", they would say, in letters or in conversation. I always replied that it wasn't true, that it was a terrible exaggeration and that I valued Solzhenitsyn very highly. Doubtless my book was conceived as a more literary work than his; his is an encyclopaedia of the Gulag. But when I hear such "national" compliments I reject them without considering the speaker's intentions or feeling. You have to have a sense of proportion and Shalamov, too, could have found a way to be fairer to Solzhenitsyn if he had tried. I wouldn't be surprised if he said that he valued his own stories more and saw the world of concentration camps differently from Solzhenitsyn, but there was no need to denigrate him so terribly.

W.B. Change of subject. When you began writing *A World Apart*, what made you decide to arrange it in the way you did rather than in some other way? Because it's clear that a lot of thought went into the way it is arranged, and I'm thinking particularly of the framework: the epilogue which sends the reader back to events described in the beginning.

G.H.-G. As I said, I didn't write these reminiscences in any particular order, chapter by chapter, but in the order dictated by my memory.

W.B. So that's why the first chapters printed in *Wiadomości* were "Stalin's Murderer" and "Haymaking", which appear later in the book?

G.H.-G. Yes, but there was one thing I stuck to from beginning to end, and that was the idea of these reminiscences as something more than just testimony based on facts. The book was supposed to be what the Italian critic Paolo Milano, in one of the very few Italian reviews of it that appeared, rightly called it: a *Bildungsroman*.

Some critics, in reviews in Italy and in France, have called *A World Apart* a novel. It is not a novel; it is a story, because the people I write about are observed by the author, and the story itself unfolds according to its own rules. The author does not adhere to the principle that such-and-such an event must be described in

detail, because in reality it could have happened somewhat differently. The reader should be able to sense that this is a book written by someone with a certain goal in mind, not someone who is just telling a conventional story.

W.B. In my book about *A World Apart* I talk about the role which biographical novellas play in it, and I mention your review of the biographical stories of Wacław Berent, in which you discuss ways of writing about people who are dead. I think the various stories mentioned in *A World Apart* are important, because many of the things you describe were stories you heard from others.

Could you say something about the mechanisms of memory which allowed you to remember these stories people told you after eight years? How did you collect them in your mind? You must have had some method of filtering them and sifting through them before they appeared in your book.

G.H.-G. Yes, that was a very important element in *A World Apart*. Sometimes the things I describe are indeed other people's stories, and I stress this in the book. But sometimes they were the result of my observation of certain people throughout my entire time in Yertsevo, until my release. The most important lesson I took away from the Gulag, without which I would never have written this book, was not just that the Soviets went out of their way to humiliate and degrade and torment us as much as possible; above all it was the feeling of living in a certain kind of human society.

W.B. You went around for eight years with "voices from the dark" in your head?

G.H.-G. They really were "voices from the dark", voices from another world. If I had reacted like most other Polish prisoners – they tormented us, they wanted to kill us, General Anders saved us, and that was that – I would never have written this book. I carried those people, those voices from the dark, around with me all the time. They lived in me.

A prisoner would tell me about his life and I would remember it for years. I would remain friends with him and continue to observe him. That engineer, for instance, whom I called engineer Sadowski in the book – his real name was Białkowski, he was Polish by birth and a communist – he had even been a deputy minister of something or other, industry, I think, in Lenin's first revolutionary government. His stories were the most instructive of all for me. For example, he taught me how to follow the progress of the war between Russia and Germany and what conclusions to draw from the communiqués. I let him persuade me that the Soviet Union had not been and would not be defeated by the Third Reich. I would repeat this in conversations, which of course the camp authorities knew all about from informants, and as a result they attributed all kinds of extraordinary powers and qualities to me. My opinions awakened their suspicions, so that, for instance, at one point they said I was a collaborator of Beck – because I was supposedly

so knowledgeable about politics. But Białkowski's (Sadowski's) reasoning was very simple. He told me, for example, that in following the development of events and the progress of the war from our perspective within the camp we must pay attention to how the Soviet army was withdrawing: in an orderly and organized way or chaotically. He explained to me why: behind the army were ranged the enormous forces of the NKVD, with all its weapons units. If the Soviet army began to withdraw quickly and in disarray, he said, the NKVD would enter the fray to prevent it, but then the army would turn against the NKVD, and that would be the end. But he claimed, on the basis of communiqués from the front, which he followed closely, that everything was fine and proceeding in an orderly manner. The withdrawal was very hard, catastrophic for the army, but a basic degree of order was being maintained. In the first weeks there was a pogrom of Soviet forces, he said, and I had no doubt this was true, for it was precisely in those first weeks that Stalin lost his head: his "brothers and sisters" speech was not broadcast until a week into the war.

Engineer Sadowski remained a communist to the end; he died a communist. At the end he lost all his wits and went insane. I have an image of him engraved on my memory – the last image I remember before my release – as he roots around in the garbage, fishing out disgusting rotten scraps, because he cannot contain his hunger. Białkowski is constantly before my eyes.

I also remember a married couple from Poland. Both were from Łódź. The wife remained in my camp, while the husband was transported somewhere else. He was the one who wrote me that letter; in my book it is addressed to his wife, but it wasn't. He wrote: "Tell Gustaw that I now understand Knut Hamsun's book better". I met him in the bathhouse, where they made us go from time to time to get us clean. He had found out that I was Polish and at one point he asked me: "Did you know Tuwim?" It turned out both of them were friends of Tuwim. I followed their fates, too.

Those are the stories I retained in my memory. And when I started thinking about writing a book, I wasn't planning something full of examples of the terrible cruelty and brutality and vileness that was camp life. I simply saw these people's faces in my mind's eye. There was also this beautiful young Polish girl I described at the beginning of the book, in the chapter "Hunting by Night". I met her later in Palestine. By then she was a grown woman and completely shattered by her experience.

W.B. Did she remember you from the camp?

G.H.-G. Yes, and she was very embarrassed when we met, so I said my goodbyes very quickly. Her camp experiences had destroyed her life. But I don't want to go into that. I still remember her real name.

W.B. Is she still alive?

G.H.-G. I don't know. So that's how the book emerged. Each character has his story. I think the book owes its vitality to the fact that the narrative is based on the stories of real people. In creating a character – for it is a creative act – you can't bother about minor details. For example, when I describe someone like Białkowski as a heavy smoker, I can't worry that he might later claim that he didn't smoke that much. Because I remember him perfectly, sitting next to me on the bunk, very thin, very sick-looking, not yet very old. And how he was always reaching for something with shaking hands. I have this image of him as he reaches for a bit of tobacco, which he kept in a little pouch, to roll a cigarette. When I was sketching a character and some detail was wrong in the sense that in reality it had been a bit different, but for my portrayal of this character I needed it to be as I remembered it, I didn't stick too closely to the principle of accuracy.

W.B. Some of the stories in *A World Apart* are more detailed than others – so detailed that they testify to a phenomenal memory. But you, unlike Solzhenitsyn, did not collect documentation.

G.H.-G. No.

W.B. So your only form of documentation was what you remembered from your own experience or from what people told you? For example, the story of engineer Mikhail Kostylev is very detailed.

G.H.-G. In his case it was something more than just observation from a distance; he was a very close friend of mine. I had good friends in Yertsevo. Kostylev is not his real name. In the book I had to change all the names in order to protect people. The only person whose real name I gave – but that was a form of revenge on my part – was Makhapetian, the Armenian, who was a friend and then turned out to be an informer. I used to go to the barrack in which he lived, a special technical one where the conditions were better because it was mostly for engineers, prisoners who were technical specialists of one kind or another and were needed for various kinds of work in the camp.

W.B. Makhapetian is the only real name in the whole book?

G.H.-G. Yes, the only one. With the exception of the names of free people, of course. Like the camp director, Samsonov.

W.B. What about the Finn, Karinen?

G.H.-G. That was a name I made up.

W.B. Cossack Pamfilov?

G.H.-G. That too.

W.B. And the married couple from Łódź?

G.H.-G. In the book I call them Z.

W.B. But wait a minute: in the book, it's professor Boris Lazarovich N., a lecturer in French literature at the Briusov Institute, who says those words about Hamsun, and he says them in Russian: "Please tell Gustav Yosifovich that at last I can understand what an excellent social-realist Knut Hamsun was". That is how the story "Hunger" ends.

G.H.-G. Well, he *was* a lecturer in literature at the Briusov Institute.

W.B. But was he from Łódź?

G.H.-G. He came to Russia from Łódź as a young man. He was a so-called literature specialist and he had a university career. I can tell you his real name now – I still remember it after all these years: Zundelewicz. Years later, in Paris, at Olga Szerer's house, Andrzej Walicki was telling stories about Russia – he travelled to Moscow quite often, to academic conferences – and he mentioned the name Zundelewicz. He spoke of "the Zundelewiczes". I displayed no reaction to this. You have to remember that people who were in the Soviet Gulag were simply afraid, for many years afterwards. In *A World Apart* I describe how an old man gives me a postcard to send to his family after my release, as that way it would have a better chance of actually getting there. It's hard to say this, because it was a terrible thing to do: I never posted that postcard. It lay on my desk in London as I was writing the book. You may find this hard to believe, but I was afraid to approach the pillar-box.

W.B. Do you still have that postcard?

G.H.-G. It's still somewhere among my papers, in the attic at the Ciołkoszes' house. It was a dreadful thing to do, dreadful. I read it. There was nothing particularly important in it. He wrote about his health and so on. But when I think of him waiting and not getting a reply to a postcard he had specially sent in such a way as to make certain it got there – it's a nightmare for me. But that's what happened.

Why am I telling you about it? After all those years I could have exclaimed, on hearing Walicki's story, "But how amazing, I know both the Zudelewiczes!" But I didn't. Why didn't I? It was just fear, plain fear. It was a gut reaction. You're the first person I've told about this. I imagine – I'm sure – that they're both dead now.

W.B. And what about that wonderful violinist, the communist Zelik Leyman? Is that a made-up name too?

G.H.-G. Yes, it's also made up. Entirely made-up and fictitious. I don't know what happened to him, whether he survived. There's someone else I also remember very well: the "Belorussian", a tragic figure, who worked in the kitchens and was there only because he had said he was Belorussian while in reality he was Polish. So he was not freed in the Soviet amnesty for Polish citizens. I still remember his terrible anger and sorrow at this. There were all sorts of dramas connected to issues of citizenship. This Pole who pretended to be Belorussian had been a Polish citizen until September 17th, 1939. Many people were forced to change their citizenship. I also met some old Poles from Ukraine. I remember one of them because he became a friend. His name was Podwysocki. He had been raised in Ukraine and didn't speak Polish; he just knew a few words. Well, these people clung to the hope that the amnesty for Poles would apply to them, too. But when this proved to have been a delusion on their part, they all – including Podwysocki – began to hate us. Podwysocki changed utterly in his demeanour towards me. It was understandable on the human level, I suppose, but I was terribly hurt. He held it against me that the Polish government had forgotten them, had failed to mention the old Poles from Ukraine. There were a dozen or so of them in the camp, but Podwysocki was the one I knew best – he was also in my work brigade. He was a short, stocky man, physically very strong. At the beginning he even helped me a little: it took me a while to learn how to do a porter's job.

W.B. Some of your characters have names that consist only of an initial. B., for instance, whose story comes in the second part of the book.

G.H.-G. It was simply that I was afraid he would be recognized, but on the other hand I wanted him to be able to recognize himself. B. stood for Bolesław Czubak – that was his real name. I called him Bolek. He was a teacher from Stanisławów. He survived the camp and we corresponded for a while. After the war he ended up in Canada. And then we stopped writing. I don't even know if he's still alive.

W.B. And M., the pre-war official from the Ministry of Agriculture?

G.H.-G. That was engineer Mikke, the one I was telling you about. If I can still remember a few real names after all these years, they must really have engraved themselves on my memory.

W.B. You don't spare your fellow countrymen in your book if they behaved badly; you simply describe their behaviour as it was, with no patriotic indulgence. But you also don't spare yourself. There are a few passages where – it's very subtle, but there's nothing like it in any other memoir I know – the narrator, the book's protagonist, is portrayed as a person who, like the others, has also been shattered by his experience of the Gulag.

G.H.-G. That was an entirely conscious decision. When they sent me to what we called the mortuary, I was absolutely certain I wouldn't come out alive. I kept two letters on my bunk then. One was from my cousin, a teacher in Sokółka, to whom I wrote – we were allowed to write letters from time to time.

W.B. I think she appears in your *Diary* under the initial M.?

G.H.-G. Yes. And the other was a letter from professor Kleiner.

W.B. You have never mentioned that anywhere!

G.H.-G. When I was in Lwów, Kleiner helped me a great deal, and I wrote to him from the camp. He wrote back – I don't, of course, now remember exactly what he said, but it was a wonderful letter. It helped me keep my spirits up.

W.B. So professor Kleiner knew you were in a camp. But did he know any details about what had happened to you? Presumably you couldn't tell him any specifics because of the camp censorship?

G.H.-G. He must have known it was a Soviet labour camp, because it was written on the return address: *trudovoy lagyer*. That spoke for itself.

W.B. Could you try to reconstruct what he said in his letter?

G.H.-G. I'm afraid not. I wept over it, it was such a wonderful letter, so uplifting, written in such beautiful Polish. It spent a while in the censor's office before it reached me: the NKVD had to check what was in it before they could hand it over. I'm still grateful to Kleiner for that reply of his – I had only written him a postcard, with not much in it except conventional greetings and thanks for his help in Lwów. In Lwów I had no credentials that would have allowed me to become a member of any writers' union, neither the Soviet one nor Ortwin's union, as it was called, which was the decent, honest one. Teodor Parnicki was its secretary. But until the Soviet authorities caught on to the difference between the Ukrainian, communist union, whose director was some commissar from Kiev, and a union that had Ostap Ortwin as its president, members could get *udostovyerenya*, as they were called – papers which certified that they were members of the writers' union – and these made life much easier in all sorts of ways. They were a sort of *laissez-passer*. So I did all I could to get one. But since I had not yet published any books and so had no automatic right to one, I needed godparents – recommendations from known writers. Ortwin not only told me this but helped me achieve it. So I got Kleiner and Maria Dąbrowska. They signed recommendations for me and Ortwin gave me my piece of paper. So I was very grateful to him. For a while he even considered whether it might not be possible to get a job for me – I had nothing to live on – in the Ossolineum, in the library. But the Ossolineum's director at the time was Jerzy Borejsza.

W.B. So that would not perhaps have been an outcome to be desired…

G.H.-G. Wait – my intuition saved me. I didn't go to see him; I sent my cousin instead. He was studying chemistry in Lwów and I was living in his room in the Technicians' House. I shudder when I think back on it – he was white as a corpse when he came home that evening from the Ossolineum. It turned out that Borejsza remembered me! He had an excellent memory. Even though I'd only written a few small articles.

W.B. You mean he remembered you as the author of those texts?!

G.H.-G. Yes. There weren't many – I was only twenty when war broke out. And he started to interrogate my cousin in a very threatening way: where, how, etc. My cousin came back from this so terrified that we never mentioned it again. And he asked me to leave there and then, even though by then it was the middle of the night. So I went to the railway station to sleep there.

W.B. Was that when you decided you had to leave Lwów?

G.H.-G. I simply left, and kept going until I got to Grodno.

W.B. Was it common knowledge in Lwów at the time that Jerzy Borejsza worked for the NKVD?

G.H.-G. Yes, absolutely. Similarly with Putrament, whom I had helped out financially before the war, at Ludwik Fryde's request. He was simply a fellow student of Polish literature then. Putrament wrote his doctoral thesis under Manfred Kridl; it was about the novels of Bolesław Prus. He was living in Vilnius at the time, in great poverty. So Kridl said to me, you know, it's true that Putrament has communist views, but that's his affair, and you could help him if you could get his articles published occasionally. So I did. Which is why Putrament published his articles in the literary section of *Orka na Ugorze*. It paid a little.

When Putrament saw me in Lwów in 1939 – I hadn't gone to see him, it was just a chance encounter – he addressed me in threatening tones, like a policeman. Not an iota of simple gratitude for what I had done for him before the war. That's the sort of person he was.

W.B. This may be a good opportunity for you to describe how you got back at him years later.

G.H.-G. When the Polish communist authorities were conducting a feverish search for the author of some novels published with Giedroyć under the pen name Stasiński, a certain well-known person, whom we knew to be connected to the security services, arrived at *Kultura*. He tried all sorts of ruses to get me to tell him who the author was, because he was "such a magnificent writer", etc. I was evasive, but in the end, after lengthy insistence on his part, I made it clear that

I would tell him, but on one condition: that the information I gave him would never be passed on. And of course I knew who I was dealing with. And I told him Putrament's name. Actually, it wouldn't have sounded improbable, because Putrament was writing a novel called *Rzeczywistość* ("Reality") at the time. It was set in Vilnius and it also featured a "view from above", as in the title of Stasiński's novel. Not long afterwards I learned that when Putrament went on a fishing holiday to the Mazury region – he was an enthusiastic fisherman – the police searched his house.

W.B. So you caught two fish with one rod. To get back to *A World Apart*: at the time you were writing it, had you read a book called *Soviet Justice*, co-authored by Kazimierz Zamorski? It's an edited collection of various accounts – a sort of earlier version of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, although of course Solzhenitsyn did it on a vastly larger scale. It's a book that classifies aspects of life in the Gulag into categories, and in this it resembles some aspects of your own book.

G.H.-G. That book appeared in Italy in 1945. I read it at the time, but I didn't have it to hand when I was writing *A World Apart*. But I knew it and I thought highly of it. In fact, there was a terrible to-do in Rome connected with that book. What happened was that Zdzisław Stahl, the director of the Documents Bureau of the 2nd Corps – a dreadful man – ordered the book. And at some point he convinced himself that he was its author and not the two people who had really written it, namely Kazimierz Zamorski, who at the time was writing under the pen name Sylwester Mora, and his friend Stanisław Starzewski, who was a well-known journalist from Lwów. In other words, he wanted to take the book's authorship away from them.

W.B. Did you see the book in the 2nd Corps?

G.H.-G. No, no, I wasn't in that section. It was Stahl's office. I only ever got to see works of literature. Similarly with the "Orzeł Biały" series, where all kinds of things appeared. There were a lot of articles by Ryszard Wraga. But I was there to assess works of literature for publication – for instance, a volume of poetry by Artur Międzyrzecki.

Of course I also read everything by Czapski. In fact that was how our friendship began: the similarity of our views on all those dark and twisted byways of matters Russian brought us together.

So I read all kinds of things, but I tried to stay detached and not think about them too much, as I didn't want to infect myself with someone else's way of looking at things. I tried to protect the literary project that was germinating in my head.

In any case I didn't think much of most of them. Naglerowa wrote novellas which in my view weren't worth much – too sentimental. Tadeusz Litwin's book

was rubbish, completely worthless. The most interesting book for me was Beata Obertyńska's *W domu niewoli*.

W.B. I asked you about the narrator's comments on his own behaviour, the way he tells the simple truth about his own part in the events he describes and never tries to make himself out to be pure as the driven snow. At the beginning of the book there's a slightly puzzling sentence about your behaviour during the investigation of your case. You write: "I did not behave heroically during those hearings, far from it!" You end the sentence with an exclamation mark, which is very rare for you. So what was all that about?

G.H.-G. It isn't some sort of attempt at camouflage; there's nothing I did that I am ashamed of. It was simply that there were times during my interrogations when I felt weak – when they shouted at me, or when they hit me…

W.B. But you don't describe or even mention that – the fact that you were beaten.

G.H.-G. I don't describe it because I didn't want to describe it. I felt myself weakening during the interrogations but I didn't weaken, I didn't break, I didn't betray anyone. I have nothing to be ashamed of. So what's the point of describing how a few times they punched me in the face or that I was choking from fear because I was just a boy and terrified by it all? I wasn't the twenty-year-old hero who looks danger bravely in the eye, and in that sense I was not a fit subject to create a myth around – the myth of the brave young Pole. Hence the exclamation mark. People could be broken by a few punches in the face.

I also remember very well how dreadfully I suffered during my three days in solitary in the Grodno prison. It was very tough to endure. I really was close to breaking then. There was a Polish policeman in our cell called Olszewski who was a very heavy smoker, and would sometimes beg the guards to leave him a cigarette-end. And then, after a time, we noticed that from time to time he would tap on the door of the cell and, when the guard came, pronounce the ritual words: "Grazhdanin nachalnik, ya imeyu k'vam vopros", which was the accepted formula when you wanted to talk to them. We all knew what it meant, because they brought you out into the corridor. In short, this Polish policeman, our friend, sank so low that he was prepared to be an informer for one cigarette, or even just for the stub of a cigarette. I found out about this during my interrogations, because my interrogator quoted things I had said that only Olszewski could have repeated to the guards; we talked about all kinds of things in the cell. Once they had revealed something like this to you, they usually transferred you to another cell, but after that interrogation they returned me to my old cell. And then I – how should I put this – I simply beat him up. Quite badly. And that was why I was sent to solitary for three days. The solitary cell is a horrific experience, at least it was

in the Grodno prison: it's filled with water up to its (high) threshold. So you're standing in water more or less up to your knees.

W.B. How high was the cell?

G.H.-G. That I don't remember, but the threshold, at any rate, was high enough that you had to step across it and then step into the water. The water came up to your knees and was full of rats. And the walls were sloping, so you couldn't lean against them; you couldn't rest or sleep even for a moment. Three days of that – enduring that – it really required great effort. The trick was not to faint, because if you fainted you fell into the water, and if you lost consciousness you could drown.

W.B. Were there solitary cells like this in every Soviet prison?

G.H.-G. I don't know. That's what I remember from the Grodno prison.

W.B. What about things you may have heard from other prisoners?

G.H.-G. Apparently every prison had them. They were a terrible punishment. But I don't know if they were all constructed on the same principles as in Grodno. That was really something horrific – a truly sadistic method of punishment. I was amazed that the Polish State allowed this solitary cell to remain there for twenty years, because if it was something they inherited from the Russians, they ought to have got rid of it. I don't mean they ought to have done away entirely with the institution of solitary as a form of punishment in prisons; I mean they should have done away with the horrific, inhuman conditions prisoners had to suffer there. My strength lay in my youth; anyone much older would have fainted in the end and drowned in that water full of rats. Dreadful. Especially those walls. There's something monstrous about not being able to lean against a wall because it slopes too much. I was very near breaking then. I don't know what I would have told them if they had subjected me to an interrogation immediately after three days of that. So that's what my exclamation mark was supposed to mean. There are things you just can't endure, and you can break someone very quickly if you know where their weak point is. Thinking about it later, I concluded that they would have broken me at once if they had drilled my teeth, for example – they used that sometimes as a form of torture, with old tooth-drilling apparatus. I couldn't have borne that.

W.B. But what could you have told the NKVD that they would want to know? Given them the names of the members of the Warsaw Polish Literature Students' Circle? The editorial board of *Orka na Ugorze*? The titles of the books you had reviewed?

G.H.-G. They were convinced I had buried some weapons somewhere, because in the cell I had talked about how some Polish army units would bury their weapons

– something I knew about from the September campaign. And this policeman passed all this on to get his cigarette and curry favour with them, and he told them I had buried some weapons. So the NKVD wanted to know where I had buried it.

W.B. Was that one of the charges against you?

G.H.-G. No, no. The main charge was an attempt to cross the border illegally. I tried to explain that I wanted to cross the Soviet border in order to fight the Germans. That was when the interrogator punched me in the face. Just to let me know I shouldn't try to be a wise guy.

W.B. "We don't need allies like that"?

G.H.-G. Yes, it was like that. So the reason for my outburst in the Grodno prison was that I had quite simply reached the limits of my endurance. I knew I wouldn't be able to endure everything they did to me.

W.B. In your *Diary Written at Night* you often return to incidents that could well have made their way into *A World Apart*. Did you feel, after writing *A World Apart*, that there were still things, people or events, you would like to write about?

G.H.-G. Readers have often asked me that, and sometimes even encouraged me to write another book, a continuation of this one. There must certainly be incidents that I didn't mention in it because they didn't fit with the way I had constructed the book as a whole. But I wouldn't want to go back to them. I think of *A World Apart* as finished and closed, a book which should not have any continuation. It would be too forced.

W.B. From the reviews you wrote at the end of the 1940s one could reconstruct a whole long list of the books that were sent over from Poland. Among the books you read before writing *A World Apart* were works by Zofia Nałkowska, Adolf Rudnicki and, most importantly, Tadeusz Borowski, whose book, which you reviewed, is frequently invoked as a reference point in interpreting *A World Apart*. How did all these books influence your idea of what *A World Apart* should be?

G.H.-G. Of course, like all émigrés, I knew from hearsay about various Nazi atrocities. So I felt that the totalitarian system existed on both sides of the border. But I was always against conflating the two totalitarianisms, because in many ways they were not comparable, even though in other ways there were also great similarities between them. The main difference between them was that the Russians did not intend to kill us as a matter of policy, whereas the Nazis did.

W.B. It was part of the Nazi doctrine: the Slavs were *Untermenschen* to them, and Jews and Gypsies something lower still, sub-human, not human at all.

G.H.-G. Yes. Whereas the Russians just wanted to create conditions in which we would work for them with all the strength that remained in us while they starved

us. It was slave labour, not even rewarded in sufficient food to regenerate our strength. It was an absurd plan. Because if they wanted to get as much work as possible out of a slave, they should at least feed him properly so that he would have the strength to work. But they wanted a labour force that would cost them nothing at all, not even in food. And they knew that when we died from hunger and exhaustion, they could send new prisoners who would take over. But it wasn't a deliberate policy of extermination the way the Nazi programme was.

W.B. Let's go back to Borowski. To what extent was *A World Apart* a polemical response to his book?

G.H.-G. It wasn't an entirely conscious response, although there was something in his books that struck me immediately – I wrote about in in my review in *Wiadomości* in 1948 – and that was that Borowski left Auschwitz a cynical and burnt-out man. That was why his later fate didn't surprise me. The only thing that surprised me was how far he went in his cynicism. There was a wild vehemence in those famous Stalinist columns he wrote; it was political fanaticism of the worst kind. I wasn't even surprised when he committed suicide. And of the books you mentioned, the one I valued most highly was Nałkowska's *Medaliony.* And also some of Adolf Rudnicki's stories.

W.B. That doesn't satisfy me as an answer. *A World Apart* is, as a work of literature, both in its construction and in its conclusions, so different from Borowski's book and his way of understanding people, why they behaved as they did, that it's hard not to ask you how you viewed those differences at the time.

G.H.-G. On my release from the camp I was physically a ruin, and very seriously injured both physically and psychologically. The lesions were not just on my legs, they were also in my soul. But I left Yertsevo with a spark of hope still flickering in me, and Borowski did not have that spark when he left Auschwitz. That, basically, was the difference between us. It was simply that, unlike Borowski, I had not quite lost all hope in basic human values. That might sound sentimental or banal, but it's really the essence of the difference between us.

There is a sentence in *A World Apart* that you quote in your book about it: that it makes no sense to judge people by how they behave in inhuman conditions. In a way it's the crucial sentence in the book. Why is that? Because in the camp I saw people who, while admittedly no angels, managed to behave in a way that displayed the noblest human characteristics. Which is why I am so firmly opposed to the concept of the *Homo sovieticus*. But I've already talked about that.

W.B. You said that you left with a spark of hope and with the certainty that, despite all you had seen in the camp, the Soviet system would not triumph and would not succeed in destroying fundamental human values. In your articles about the critics

and writers of the interwar period you talk a lot about the intellectual and moral climate which shaped you before the war. Have you considered the connection between your thoughts on your release from Yertsevo, and while you were writing *A World Apart*, and the climate which influenced you when you were young?

G.H.-G. No! But I think that's exactly why my book is about another world. I spent two years in another world. Of course I remembered my previous world, the interwar world, I remembered the things I read and the writers who wrote them, but all that was like something from another planet for me then.

W.B. Still, in order to discern the ways in which that world was different, was a world apart, you had to have some points of reference that you carried within you.

G.H.-G. Yes, I always had them.

W.B. Well, I'd like to ask you about those.

G.H.-G. You're right. By the time I was twenty I was more or less fully formed as a person. I wasn't a child when I found myself in the Gulag. Before the war I had lived in a world of comprehensible rules, norms and laws, and I had been conscious of that. Now I was thrown into a completely different world. And that pre-war world remained with me only in the form of memories. Sometimes, lying on my bunk, I would think about books I had read or people I had met before the war and about how they were so different from all that surrounded me in Yertsevo. Russian prisoners also thought and talked about their lives before the Gulag.

W.B. Which were the books you thought about?

G.H.-G. The ones I liked best, first of all. I'm proud of my literary tastes then; after all, I was only nineteen when I wrote essays about Miłosz's poetry and Gombrowicz's book. In the case of Miłosz, it was a choice: when we had the literary mornings in Warsaw, I was asked who my choice was, and I chose Miłosz's poetry. After reading *Trzy zimy* ("Three Winters") I thought he was a great poet. I also thought very highly of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*. When I was thinking of the future I thought I would be a literary critic, and up until September 1939 everything seemed to point that way.

W.B. Writers who allowed themselves to be, so to speak, slotted into the workings of Soviet culture in Poland after 1945 often resorted, in an attempt to justify this, to the argument that the interwar period had not prepared them for the horror of the Occupation and all that came after it. Would you say that you, too, were unprepared? What you said just now seems to suggest the contrary. Did the 1930s prepare you for the encounter with Soviet totalitarianism?

G.H.-G. On the one hand, no, they didn't, just because it was not something I had conceived of then. But on the other hand, yes, they did, because the 1930s made

me realize that the whole interwar period, from 1918 to 1939, was an exceptional time, both in positive and in negative ways. We achieved a great deal during those twenty years, even though great wrongs were committed, too. I saw the new generation of Poles, I grew up with it and I felt its uniqueness. I differed from many of my friends in my political views, but that was not unusual; we all felt that together we were building a new Poland. This was, after all, a generation whose most horrific trials came during the war, in the army and the Warsaw Uprising. That's the first thing. And secondly, if we're talking about literature, I think the interwar years were a period of extraordinary richness in Polish literature. When I think of the quantity of important books published, the PRL period [Polish People's Republic (ed.)] pales in comparison. I mean in the quantity of books which have endured. Poland had a number of sins on its conscience in the interwar years, but for a country which had regained its independence after a century and a half of non-existence, its achievements were phenomenal, and we have every right to be proud of them.

W.B. That climate of cultural blossoming and spiritual evolution which you felt around you throughout the 1930s, your reading of Maritain and Croce, the discussions at Fryde's, and so on – did all that bear fruit later, after the war?

G.H.-G. Certainly it did. I'll give you the example I used in my lecture at Poznań University when they awarded me my honorary doctorate. I mentioned my memory of reading Croce's *History of Europe*, where he spoke in somewhat hushed tones of the dangers of communism. I remembered that.

W.B. And later you were able to confront his warning with the reality, and see for yourself what it meant.

G.H.-G. Alas, yes. But at first, for example, I didn't believe there was really cannibalism in Ukraine during the 1932 famine; it seemed implausible, exaggerated. It was only later that I discovered it was true. I once talked about it with Jerzy Giedroyć, who was very good at sniffing out exaggeration in the horrors recounted by others. At any rate, by the outbreak of war I was intellectually fairly mature for my age.

So when I was thrown into the "world apart", it was not from some idyllic childhood. This other world was a reality for which I was in some sense prepared. And I suppose my brain's "receiving apparatus" was sufficiently mature to enable me to engrave it all in my memory.

W.B. You wanted to testify to experiences which were common to all prisoners. But at the same time you knew exactly how you did not want to write. The problem of how to write comes up in almost all your articles from the 1940s, and concerns two things above all: the concept of realism and the concept of style. In other

words, the question of what language is best for describing the experience of war. You touch on this problem in every one of your reviews of books about the war: works by Nałkowska, Borowski, Rudnicki and others.

G.H.-G. As far as the literary aspect of my book is concerned, yes, of course. I wouldn't have written a book at all if it was just going to be a document, a straightforward report about my time in the labour camp. I didn't think you could portray Soviet camps in a dry, matter-of-fact way. A report doesn't have the same effect as a literary account. *A World Apart* is a literary account in the sense that, although all the facts described in it are real facts, they are sometimes slightly worked over or supplemented, in order to make them read like literature – like a story. And it's only thanks to this that the book has any life. The fact that it has been resurrected after all this time is proof that my approach was the right one. No one today ever mentions the 1947 book by David Dallin and Boris Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labour in Soviet Russia*, an excellent and very informative, but entirely matter-of-fact, scholarly account of the camps. That kind of account is something entirely different. Which is why I was so pleased that all the reviewers, first the British, then the French and all the others, mentioned the literary character of *A World Apart*. There was one review that gave me particular pleasure: it was by Edward Crankshaw, an eminent British specialist on Russia and the Soviet Union, who wrote that my book would live on long after the institutions it describes were gone. That sentence would fill every author with pride, and it does make me proud, which is why I am throwing modesty to the wind and mentioning it here. That is exactly the effect I hoped for when I plumped for a literary form. Dostoevsky's book lives on in the same way, even though the tsarist *katorga* and exile are long gone, replaced by something quite different. And it's a book people rightly mention as being among Dostoevsky's best. In fact, it was his first great book; it is an explosion of his extraordinary creative potential. There were certain things that he taught himself, came to understand by himself. He came to understand the nature of Russian crimes and the soul of the Russian who commits them. That same mechanism was later described in his novels: *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Devils*.

W.B. There are a number of reasons I consider the literary aspect of your book to be so important. One is very general: in making use of literary devices and deciding that the best way of getting at the essence of the world apart was through art, you indirectly answered Adorno's claim that writing poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric. Adorno later came to regard this view as mistaken, but that thought has a life of its own now and people remember it. If we forget about Adorno and consider the claim itself, in isolation, the question of whether literature is possible

"after Auschwitz" strikes us as absurd today, since the greatest works about the Holocaust and the Second World War have been works of literature.

G.H.-G. Of course. I would claim not only that literature *can* exist after Auschwitz but that it *must*. What remains of all the writing about Auschwitz and the Holocaust will not be the hundreds of books that have been written about it, some of them very good, but the literary works about it. For instance, to take Polish literature, Nałkowska's *Medaliony.* Or Borowski's book. I would go even further: that little girl, Anne Frank, whose diary had such a spectacular international career and who is so loved by readers, experienced neither camps nor prison; she experienced hiding from Nazi persecution. And her small truth, written down in a school notebook as though it were an exercise in prose composition that she had been set, was preserved in the most extraordinary way. No one else managed it. Only literature can achieve that – though Anne Frank did not set out to create literature. She simply wrote.

Let's return for a moment to Shalamov. Shalamov's greatness lies in his ability to convey the most extraordinary things in short stories. I know he said that he wanted each of his stories to be a punch in the face for Stalin, a spitting in his face. What he produced instead were these astonishing stories, so wonderfully concise and linguistically rich. I mention this because people usually regard his stories as very simple works. When we wanted to publish Shalamov in Polish at the Literary Institute, all our efforts came to naught; we couldn't do it. Even Jerzy Pomianowski, an excellent translator, couldn't do it: despite their apparent simplicity, they just wouldn't work. In the end we found someone who could do it – not for us, but for the Wydawnictwo Gdańskie publishing house in Gdańsk. He wasn't a writer, but he had spent ten years in the camps. When someone brought us excerpts to look at from Gdańsk, which I think is where he lives, I saw at once that here was someone who had found exactly the right tone, the right mode of expression.

To return to my memoirs as an educational novel: the most important thing is the tone. And my question to you is the following: is that tone maintained from the first page to the last?

W.B. Yes. From the first page to the last.

G.H.-G. That was my intention, though perhaps not everyone agrees with you. Of course someone can always object that this or that did not happen in exactly that way, that something was slightly different from the way I describe it, but that doesn't mean anything. Those who seek only the precision of a pharmacist should read different books. There are hundreds of very precise books on the subject.

W.B. Literary works about the war were attempts to give literary form to experiences which had never before been described in literature. In your articles

from the 1940s and 1950s you often criticize – if that's the right word – works which failed in this attempt because of a misguided literariness which missed its target because – in most cases – it tried to imitate an impersonal report about the bare facts. Your criticism concerned the following things. First, you claimed there was no such thing as a bare fact. Second, you claimed it was mistaken to imagine that a literary imitation of a straightforward report, purporting to be a document and consisting of a collection of horrifying facts, can convey the horror of what is being described. Finally, you claimed that a writer's greatest achievement, and the most important proof of his talent, is to go beyond this kind of dry narrative and portray reality in such a way as to give the impression that it is not his only point of reference.

G.H.-G. I have frequently insisted, and I take the opportunity to stress this again now, that there is no such thing as the dry, bare fact. Every fact implies certain things, entails certain things, is connected to certain things, and the writer's art consists in tying all these things together, knotting them together. Those who confine themselves to describing so-called bare facts will never be writers. I don't mean to dismiss the importance of so-called bare facts: they are extremely important, but in a quite different sphere.

In 1950, coincidentally at more or less the same time as *A World Apart*, a book was published in Zurich by the German (or perhaps Swiss) communist Elinor Lipper, entitled *Elf Jahre in sowjetischen Gefängnissen und Lagern* ("Eleven Years in Soviet Prisons and Concentration Camps"). It's a very interesting and solidly written account, but as a book it's a miserable failure. And it is now completely forgotten. Lipper lifted the veil on a fragment of the totalitarian reality, but she was unable to go beyond what she had seen in it.

W.B. But you're not just criticizing descriptions of bare facts here; you're saying something more than that. You don't simply mean that a writer can describe facts in ways that are more or less neutral, and can be criticized or praised for the degree to which his descriptions are true to reality. Your claim is that a writer filters, selects and in some sense, through the literary structure of his work, even creates his facts, and that the facts he selects are symbols of the reality he is describing. *A World Apart* is not a pane of glass through which we can look at the world of the Soviet concentration camp. It is a complex literary construction which draws the reader's attention to those facts which the writer has deliberately selected as symbols, reminders or testimony of human behaviour.

G.H.-G. Yes. There is no such thing as the bare fact. I am always dismayed when *A World Apart* is categorized as "literature of fact". It is not literature of fact! You cannot understand this book if you do not understand that literary devices are

there to extract something more from facts, something extraordinary that simply cannot be seen in the "bare facts".

I remember when Wańkowicz first read *A World Apart* and was greatly struck by the episode where, on my way back to the zone after work, I cover a woman's breasts with dough made from stolen flour, so as to smuggle it through more easily. The episode alludes to the connection between physical and sexual hunger, which I often saw combined in the camp. I have written somewhere that all this appeared in my dreams. But if I had not created that episode – an episode that immediately drew the attention of a writer like Wańkowicz – I would not have been able to reconstruct those dreams and desires. The point is that, if you are writing a work of literature, it is not enough to say that prisoners' dreams in the camp were often brought on by physical hunger and sexual hunger. It is characteristic that my description of being in the latrine after our successful hunger strike should have evoked such outrage among the Polish community in London. One of the excerpts from *A World Apart* published in *Wiadomości* contained that scene in the latrine: how I strain, in dreadful pain and with tears streaming down my face, to pass a stool which had hardened to stone during my hunger strike.

W.B. "In the small, hastily erected closet, with only a few planks in place of a door, I suffered the worst physical torments of my life, as the stone-hard turd, which my thirsting organism had sucked dry of all its juices during eight days of hunger, forced its way through my guts, wounding and tearing them until the blood flowed. I must have been a sorry sight, crouching over a frozen plank, my jerkin blowing in the wind, looking out at the snowstorm which blew over the plain, with eyes full of tears of pain and pride."

G.H.-G. Grydzewski showed me the letters of protest that the editors of *Wiadomości* had received after this excerpt was published. "Why describe something like this?" and so forth in a similar vein. As he handed them to me, he said it was one of the greatest scenes in the whole book. I think it has great pathos, though some people might think it vulgar.

W.B. It's certainly not vulgar.

G.H.-G. As you say in your book about *A World Apart*, I wanted to give my experiences a literary character. The same thing can be said of my descriptions of love – let's call it that – and the forms it took in the camp. Here, too, I tread very carefully. Someone writing "literature of fact" would not write about such things at all; he would just gloss over them, summarizing, and it would be his right to do so. I don't want to go on about this at too great length here, as I have already written about it elsewhere. What I was trying to do was to transfer my experiences to a different level – the literary level. And I think it must have been mainly thanks

to this that my book lives on, even though forty-five years have passed since it was written.

W.B. Your book is not only about the concrete details of life in the camp, or about its functioning. Some of the so-called facts that you describe would never have made it into a factual description in a scholarly study or in "literature of fact".

G.H.-G. In the chapter entitled "Work" I described some very concrete details: for instance, the distance from the store to the truck from which the goods were unloaded, what the path we took was like, and so on.

W.B. I called this a "chronicle narrative". But it represents only one small thread in your book.

G.H.-G. It had to be included, but as a small part submerged in the whole.

W.B. There are a lot of themes in your book that would not appear in a purely documentary report. Among other things it's a book about dreams, longings, desires, imaginings – about a whole range of emotions and experiences, unnamed and unnameable. One has the impression that when you sat down to write it, you felt, perhaps instinctively, that conveying the "human dimension" of the camp entailed broaching topics which only literature can cope with.

G.H.-G. Yes, that's how it was. With no disrespect to documentary reports – I don't want to set up any kind of hierarchy here – I deliberately wrote a literary book. A document has different aims; as you said, it filters reality in a different way.

As an example, I can cite a very good book, *Po Wyzwoleniu, 1944-1956* ("After the Liberation, 1944-1956"), written by professor Barbara Skarga under the pen name Wiktoria Kraśniewska. I read it in manuscript and recommended it very warmly to Giedroyć, who published it. In one chapter, Kraśniewska, in discussing sex in the camps, often refers to my book and sometimes disagrees with it, saying that something was not quite the way I had described it. But these are two different spheres of writing. I describe my own experiences, while she summarizes her experience in, you could say, a typically scholarly way and remarks that this or that in my descriptions is not entirely accurate. But that's just the difference between us. Kraśniewska had no literary ambitions in writing her book; she produced an excellent document, which had been her goal.

W.B. There's not just the book, but also an article, or rather a lecture professor Skarga gave, entitled "The Testimony of *A World Apart*", where she speaks with great admiration of your book's literary values, but also disagrees with some of your claims. I will list some of the main points of disagreement.

First, she says: "Even if we admit that literary memoirs make better documents than the matter-of-fact chronicle, assuming, of course, that they are well written,

that still does not mean that everyone will be able to grasp their meaning." Skarga distinguishes the two genres very clearly and claims that literature is not in itself more valuable than the document.

She goes on: "Is it possible to represent something that the reader has never known, to make present something that had never been present? I am not concerned here with problems of interpretation or transmission of meaning, which belong to the discipline of semantics or hermeneutics; I think that given the same cultural context, even the meaning of ancient texts can be to a great extent deciphered. But in this case we are dealing with a world apart. I would maintain that it is easier to understand the memoirs of someone in antiquity than the reality of Herling's world. Conversations with readers of his books show that some of the things he describes simply do not get through to them; this emerges when they are asked to explain the specifics of some of the descriptions and they turn out to be completely misguided."

In short, Skarga wants to maintain that the reader who has not experienced a Soviet labour camp will have difficulty understanding the things described. But this is a well-known problem which crops us very often: you're reading a book about the life of Indians in South America, but if you've never been outside Europe…

G.H.-G. Yes. A literary treatment is simply a question of the way you look at things. Some readers accept it, others find it quite alien and closed to them. Just as Kraśniewska wrote. She was writing about readers who completely failed to grasp some of the things in my book. I'm sure there have been such readers. But I have also met readers who understood all of it.

W.B. Skarga also writes: "The general picture Herling presents is remarkably faithful. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the truth." You can't complain.

G.H.-G. I value her opinion very much. She spent much more time in the camps than I did.

W.B. Skarga's objections concern the details. For example, she writes: "Herling-Grudziński writes that you hardly ever saw underage criminals in the camps. In my experience, alas, you saw them all too often, and they were a plague there just as much as they were in the prisons. Every underage hoodlum wanted to outdo the old *urkas* in cunning, cruelty and brutality. God help you if you tangled with them. In his chapter about hunting by night, Herling supposes that the word *proizvol* ['the regime enforced by the *urkas* within the wired-off camp zone between late evening and dawn'] is now probably unknown to most Soviet prisoners, and that 'the reign of the *proizvol* in the majority of Russian labour camps began in 1937 and was suppressed towards the end of 1940.' Yes, in some labour camps it was partly suppressed, but such camps were exceptional – and even there all the

manifestations of *proizvol* that Herling describes occurred from time to time. In smaller camps, and especially in transit camps, its reign was total and absolute. Things only changed after 1948, when political prisoners – those sentenced on the basis of the notorious article 58 of the criminal code – were separated from the criminals."

G.H.-G. I take note of her comments with the greatest respect, and I'm sure she's right. But there's one thing I want to say concerning her first point – that the camps were not all the same in all aspects. For instance, in my camp there really were no underage criminals. I met and observed them mainly in prison. I don't know what they did with them after that. But I was just describing the camp I knew – Yertsevo. Perhaps underage criminals were a plague that infested the camp professor Skarga was in. I'm sure it's true that, as she writes, they tried to outdo the grown-ups in brutality and that they were cruel. I readily accept what she says, because I saw the way they behaved in prison.

W.B. So, as Dante and Solzhenitsyn might say, they were simply in different "circles".

G.H.-G. Of the same inferno. I have high regard for Skarga's book, for its precision and its truthfulness; our experiences diverged somewhat because we were in different camps, and at different times.

I'd like now to turn to the main object of dispute, namely the question of sexual hunger in women. Prof. Skarga found my treatment of it almost painful to read. But my experience was different from hers, and in my experience – I am truly sorry to say this, and it was a dreadful thing to witness – women found sexual hunger more difficult to endure than men. I suppose the reasons are simply physiological. Men gradually ceased to feel it, as a result of malnutrition and hard labour; after a time it surfaced only in their dreams and daydreams, and in conversation. But these really are very difficult things to talk about.

W.B. But it seems to follow from what you say that professor Skarga's argument about women's purely biological capacity for endurance is an argument in favour of your thesis. You both agree that it was precisely this capacity for endurance which gave them strength.

G.H.-G. In a sense that's true, because in men the sex drive completely disappeared as a result of hunger and exhaustion. In fact, during interrogations the investigating judges would say to male prisoners: you might survive, but you won't have any strength left for sex any more. All of them did this.

W.B. Skarga's second objection reads: "Another general comment worried me. It is true that many informers were to be found among the so-called *pridurki* [stupid people]. But this does not mean that every *pridurek* was an informer. You have

to remember that every camp was a labour camp that produced something, and the administration wanted to fulfil the production plan. To this end they wanted to have the appropriate specialists in the camp. They also selected engineers, economists, craftsmen from the transports, as well as doctors – anyone who could be useful – and these in their turn tried to help the others. I think Herling may not have encountered this economic aspect of the camp; he was also ignorant of the conflicts that could arise between the camp director and the political officer – the *oper*. Sometimes the *oper* would try to blackmail a prisoner into becoming an informer and the director would try to protect the prisoner. I mention this because I met many decent and honest people among the *pridurki* and I would not want Herling's opinion of them to tarnish their reputation. And I myself was a *pridurka* for a time."

G.H.-G. That's a typical example of the different experiences I could have in different camps. I maintain what I said. I was a frequent visitor in the special barracks for *pridurkas* – the engineers and technical specialists – who enjoyed better conditions, special food of their own and so on. The particular danger they faced, which seems not to have existed in Skarga's camp, was that they would cling on desperately to their positions as specialists, because that gave them a chance of survival: they could eat better, they had a bit of heating, the work they did was light. An engineer who came to inspect a construction site did not work as hard as a prisoner who was marched out six kilometres to the forest to chop wood. So they did all they could to hold on to their jobs, which was why, in my view, they were vulnerable to pressure, and might agree to do something that a normal person would not do in order to preserve their position. Women were similarly vulnerable – a problem talked about earlier. If they were pretty and not very strong, and had the misfortune to draw the attention of a man of influence in the camp, whether a prisoner or one of the administrative staff, they were vulnerable to pressure and could be broken in this way. Furthermore, camps evolved, and certain things in them changed with time.

W.B. In that sense the camps were part of the social life in the Soviet Union.

G.H.-G. Of course. And the best proof of that is that there came a time in the life of the camps when the prisoners, for whom in my day any kind of rebellion was unthinkable, began to rebel. The first revolt in a Soviet labour camp was described by the German prisoner Joseph Scholmer in an excellent book, published in 1954, entitled *Die Toten kehren zurück. Bericht eines Arztes aus Workuta*. It tells the story of the revolt in Vorkuta. Later on Solzhenitsyn, too, described such revolts. In my time, as I say, it was unthinkable. When our little group of Poles announced that we were going on a hunger strike in Yertsevo, the other prisoners were terrified;

our decision was incomprehensible to them. They would avoid us after that, so that no one could later accuse them of having any kind of contact with us.

W.B. The third and final point. Skarga writes: "One can also argue about why people of different nationalities behaved differently in the camps and during their investigations. The subject is a huge one and Herling scarcely broaches it, but it is worth thinking about. Why was psychological resistance to violence and injustice greater among European prisoners? We could never understand how one could inform against one's fellow prisoners, or how one could sink so low as to confess to things one had not done. Herling-Grudziński describes how interrogations shattered a prisoner's sense of who he was and rewired him differently, and he adds that this process did not apply to Poles whose interrogations were 'chaotic and rushed', without the benefit of a qualified supervisor. No doubt that is how it was during the war, but in 1944 and 1945 Poles, like everyone else, endured interrogations that lasted for months, with much suffering, and yet they did not break. So the reason lay not in the way the interrogation was conducted but in something else; perhaps in the prisoners' cultural backgrounds. Or perhaps it is just harder to broach this issue in the case of one's fellow countrymen? I leave the question unanswered. But I would not want my doubts to suggest any hostility on my part to our neighbours and their culture. You met all sorts of people in the camps, not just Makhapetians and Gortsevs, but also Kostylevs and professors like Boris Lazarevich – wonderful people. Everything I have said so far in no way changes my opinion of Herling's book."

G.H.-G. The main difference between us here arises from the fact that at the beginning of the war the investigations of Poles after their arrest were hurried and rather chaotic, and cannot be compared to what happened in later years, when pressure was applied in sadistic ways to Russians during their interrogations. As for the claim that some nationalities behaved better than others, I cannot agree. It varied. There is no basis for dividing people by nationalities in that way. Skarga's testimony about the admirable behaviour of her own countrymen is a little hasty. I saw Poles behave differently – sometimes quite horribly. And I saw admirable behaviour among people of other nationalities. Once again, I want to stress that on this subject it is a great mistake to generalize.

W.B. I'd like to say something here about the role of literature in portraying the Gulag archipelago – that inferno which was the world apart. When Barbara Skarga says that she remembers certain things, certain details, differently from the way you describe them, I have the feeling she views the truth of her account differently from the way you view the truth of *A World Apart*: namely, that for her truth means a direct connection between the facts as she knows and remembers them and the reality that is being described. Her truth, in other words, is empirical and

in some sense statistical. This means that she will simply not write about things she did not herself experience or observe. Whereas for you truth is something different. A good example is the story of the Polish woman who was raped by a group of prisoners – actually handed over to them by her lover to be raped – which you describe near the beginning of *A World Apart*. You speak there of truths which straddle the thin line between events as they happened in fact and their literary description in more general terms. And you speak of two kinds of truth: one is the concrete event, and the other is the story about something universally human that is derived from it. Your story, both about informers and about Polish women forced into prostitution, was not written with statistical truth in mind. It was written with all human beings in mind, for it is a story about what can happen to any human being. Regardless of how many such incidents there were. I think this is where the difference between your book and professor Skarga's comments lies, and also between you and the authors of other memoirs about the camps.

G.H.-G. Yes, this is a fundamental difference, but I'd like to stress again that I have great respect for her account. When I read it in manuscript I was delighted that something like this had been written. But her way of thinking is undoubtedly a little different from mine. She is a scholar, a distinguished historian of philosophy, and her approach to these things is somewhat different. So yes, certainly on a number of matters we disagree. But the fact that she remembers certain things differently in no way undermines my truth as a writer. I selected certain things, whereas she approached them almost as if they were objects of scientific research. That was not my way. For me, when I was writing, a person I remembered from the camp, whatever his nationality, was simply a character in my book who I thought should have a place in it. A literary character, in other words, though of course a real person, too. It was in writing *A World Apart* that I was born as a writer.

W.B. In trying to describe things in detail, were you also looking for the universal in the details?

G.H.-G. Of course. That's part of what a writer does. He starts from the detail and from it tries to get at what is universal. But the task of someone who is interested only in the facts of a certain reality, who collects and counts up and classifies all the elements of that reality, circumscribing them within strict limits, is entirely different. Once again: *A World Apart* is a work of literature, not a document.

W.B. There is only one reference to Dante in *A World Apart*. It comes in one of the last chapters, "In the Urals", where you recount how you were released and how, on January 19th, 1942, your friends Olga and Dimka saw you off at the guardhouse. You write: "Dante did not know that there is no suffering in this world greater than to experience happiness before the unhappy, to eat in front of

the hungry". But your later work contains very many references to Dante; he is a constant point of reference.

G.H.-G. I want to make a digression here. I once said to our mutual friend Francesco Cataluccio that I couldn't understand Gombrowicz's essay on Dante. Gombrowicz himself had often written that one of the main sources of literature is pain – an observation I am in complete agreement with. So his attitude to Dante seems very odd. *The Divine Comedy* is a great poem about pain; Gombrowicz ought to love it. And yet he wrote an essay about Dante which had many people up in arms. I suspect he simply chose two or three tercets and didn't read the whole thing. He wanted to provoke – he was a writer who loved to provoke, and he usually succeeded magnificently. Why do I mention this? Because for a writer who thinks that one of the main sources of literature is pain, and that is what I think, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is a great work about pain.

W.B. Let's talk about some purely literary aspects of *A World Apart*. For instance, metaphors and descriptions of nature. Let's start with the latter. *A World Apart* stands out among other concentration camp memoirs owing to the extraordinary vividness and sensuousness of its descriptions of nature. Nature is described in your book with such intense delight that one could forget you were in a camp. When you were describing nature, its colours, shapes, scents and sounds, were you following a natural inclination, or was this a conscious literary device?

G.H.-G. Nature was one of the things that allowed me to survive in the camp. I stress this very clearly in the chapter entitled "Haymaking". It was haymaking that gave me the respite I needed when I was very close to death by exhaustion. Perhaps that's why my descriptions of nature are so intense and tender. But it wasn't just that. Nature also made me remember scenes from my past life, from home, from Poland. I would leave the camp, the barracks, that dreadful zone with its barbed wire fence, and walk out into fields and forests. Once, on our way to haymaking, we came across a bear's lair that was still warm. That was a true respite – like a deep, reviving breath. Nature affected me very intensely – I felt a little like someone who had not experienced sexual love for many years and was now describing the love he had found there.

W.B. Would you agree with my commentary on your descriptions of nature in my book about *A World Apart*? I wrote: "Herling observes both these worlds, and the way in which the beauty of nature coexisted with the nightmarish civilization of the camps. On the face of it, the first of these had no practical effects on the prisoner's life, except of course for the freedom felt in experiencing it. But – and this is clear from the way in which nature is rendered in *A World Apart* – the beauty of nature emphasized the (artificial, man-made) boundary between the camp and freedom. The guards' guns, the barbed wire, the towers around the

camp – for the narrator of *A World Apart* all these things prove the existence of a real, physical boundary beyond which a normal world still exists. It is a world which sometimes lies behind the prisoner's back, as it were, and sometimes within his range of vision; but sometimes it exists only in his memory or his stubborn conviction that the "world apart" will continue to be considered as such for as long as one continues to believe in the existence of a normal world beyond it. This idea, variously expressed, is a leitmotif that runs through the book; and descriptions of nature, always rich in detail and often embedded in accounts of extreme situations, run through all of Herling's later work. Later, recalling what Camus had once said about the role of such interludes in his work, Herling was to call them 'healing by landscape'."

G.H.-G. When I was writing the book I was not familiar with the phrase Camus used, but later, when I encountered it, my first reaction was to think, yes, of course, that's exactly what I did: I healed myself through landscape! So did my fellow prisoners. Your commentary is absolutely right, every word of it.

They wanted us to get used to the idea that the world was circumscribed within the zone – that was the principle in every concentration camp. And gradually they succeeded, in the sense that all we would see, day after day, were the barracks and the barbed wire. And we gradually got used to the idea that there was nothing else, no other reality apart from this – no normal world. Leaving the zone for work in the summer and seeing the normal world, the landscape lying open all around us reminded us that there was a normal world outside, not just our closed world behind the barbed wire. The title of my book is taken from Dostoevsky, and I have used a wonderful excerpt from his book as my motto: "Here was revealed a different world that was unlike anything else. (…) It is this forgotten little corner that I want to describe here". They really did want to accustom us to this different world. And since this went on day after day, and for many prisoners for years, year after year, we came very close to believing it; some, especially those who spent many years in the camp, did really come to believe it. They came to accept that the world within the barbed wire, governed by the special laws that obtained there, was the only world that existed. That's why seeing a bit of nature was like the breath of life. Sometimes, when the weather changed, you could stand close to the barbed wire and see something of the world outside: ordinary people's houses, women on their way to the shop, but also parts of the landscape. That was extremely important; it strengthened our belief that there was another world out there, even though we were excluded from it. Prisoners were broken when their belief in the existence of a normal world beyond the camp was undermined. Some prisoners who had been broken in this way could no longer leave the world of the camp even in their imagination, even after they had been released: they literally could not leave, and stayed on there for ever – on the other side of the

barbed wire now, but the important thing was that the barbed wire had become part of them, part of their image of the world. Mariusz Wilk recently described one such case to me in a letter from the Solovetsky Islands: he told me about a Pole from the Vilnius region, a man who had been in the AK, the Home Army, who after ten years in a labour camp chose to remain there. He married a woman who had served a sentence in the camp for stealing. They succeeded in persuading him that no other world existed save that of the camps. In his case the process of re-education was successful. All of which is to explain why my descriptions of nature are so important.

W.B. An important theme in your book, its constant undercurrent, is the gradual way in which, step by step, prisoners are deprived of everything, including their soul. First their passport is taken away, then their clothes and personal effects, then their memory, their sight, and finally hope.

G.H.-G. Exactly. That's why Shalamov's story is so important to me, the one where he says to his interrogator that he will never give him his soul. The interrogator wants to get at the core of his being: at something the prisoner knows is his and his alone. And he says: no, this is mine and I will never give it up. That was the basis of survival, and in Shalamov's case it also explains how he was able to survive so many years in unimaginably horrific conditions: he refused to give up his soul. But people protected their souls in different ways. That, among other things, is what I tried to describe. Some tinkered with things, because tinkering was how they had passed their time before, in their previous life; others read or chatted on their bunks. One of the things I describe is the camp shop – a quite extraordinary phenomenon, it seemed to me, and many readers also saw it that way. There was nothing in it, but the prisoners created an atmosphere around it that was just like that of a real shop. It was like a shadow play. Perhaps it was an attempt to evoke the normal world. So there were many ways in which people tried to protect their souls from the world of the camps. But in some cases, rare ones, they failed. Those who had come to accept the camp and the barbed wire as the only world and had become attached to it thought of it as their world even after they were released, and stayed on; they felt at home there. They lived in a nearby town, among other administrative staff of the camp, but they remained attached to the barbed wire. They didn't want to leave. Maybe they were afraid to. They felt afraid that they might no longer be able to live in the normal world, and then that fear turned into a refusal to leave and return to normal life. All they had was this other world, the "different world that was unlike anything else" that Dostoevsky described.

W.B. Does that mean that the ability to perceive the boundary between the camp and nature was connected to the ability to feel free, to look at the world through the eyes of one's mind?

G.H.-G. Yes, and that's why people who had had a rich inner life before either broke very quickly – and there were such cases – or managed to survive for much longer than others, thanks to their reserves of spiritual strength: they had something to fall back on in their loneliness. But some capitulated and broke, very suddenly. It's a very strange thing, the imagination of people who have a rich inner life. For instance, when I wrote about the battle at Monte Cassino, I said that people with imagination were much more afraid than simple people with no imagination; their courage lay in their ability to overcome their fear, to go on in spite of it. Simple people didn't have that problem. It was as if they were going off to harvest grain. They were fearless in war because they could not imagine death. They simply lacked the imagination.

W.B. Your narrative voice uses two different styles: one is full of metaphors and similes while the other, which you call Conradian, and which you use in describing people's characters, is precise and matter-of-fact. They are very different, but they have one thing in common: they describe things which are elusive, invisible to the eye. They penetrate layers of reality and the human psyche which the writer must create, for he cannot observe them.

G.H.-G. It was a conscious choice to mix styles in that way. One can argue about whether all those metaphors which are incorporated into the narrative are apt, but that's not for me to decide. But they are absolutely essential. It's a question of the literary meanings that language can convey. I didn't want to write this book in the language of ordinary speech, of everyday communication. That being so, I had to look around for another style. One can ask whether I succeeded in finding the right one, whether it was suited to the task, but that, again, is not for me to decide. I think I succeeded, and that the style I found is what gives the book its specific flavour, the calm that pervades it from start to finish: even though it is so full of pain and suffering, its tone is never exalted, and it never raises its voice. That is something all readers noticed. And it is an achievement I am very proud of. That calmness of tone is owing in great measure to my choice of language, of style.

W.B. It's very clear from your newspaper articles from the 1940s that you did not like the ways in which the literature of the interwar period described the world, so – since there was nothing in that tradition that you wanted to draw on – you felt you were on your own. You also felt that succumbing to the influence of those interwar stylistic stereotypes could be just as much of an obstacle in writing *A World Apart* as an inability to filter, select and transform events.

G.H.-G. There is a fundamental difference between what we call 'elegant writing' in Polish, something that Maria Dąbrowska, for instance, was undeniably good at, and using language to create a complicated tool whose workings are invisible to the reader. [Bruno (ed.)] Schulz did this, which is why I feel an affinity with him.

Before the war, everyone found his style almost intolerable, it was so overloaded with metaphors. But his use of language fascinated me: he always tried to mould it to his aim, which was to portray a different world and unveil some of its mystery. We must bow before Dąbrowska in admiration of her style, for her Polish is elegant, clear and correct, and we read her with pleasure. But she did not succeed in everything. Her masterpiece, for me, is not *Noce i dnie* ("Nights and Days"), but a short story from 1932 called *Szkiełko*. Its protagonist, Marcin Śniadowski, who was modelled on Stanisław Stempowski, is in prison in Kiev, in tsarist Russia. The story has a magnificent ending: there are "many signs of freedom: standards, gold crests, eagles, griffons and lions. (…) But sometimes all there is is a sharp distorting lens." I find that full of pathos. But that's just my literary taste. Similarly, what I value in Solzhenitsyn's work is not his many-volumed novels but his short story *Matryona's Place*. In any event, my tastes in pre-war literature inclined towards writers who tried to make language into a tool. I have mentioned Schulz; I should also mention Gombrowicz and Józef Wittlin, the author of the beautiful symbolic novel *Sól ziemi* ("Salt of the Earth").

W.B. What was the connection between your two roles: that of a writer searching for a voice and that of a critic? For you have always been a critic, despite a break in your critical writing – though a critic whose approach was somewhat different from that of most others.

G.H.-G. When I began writing works of literature, I gradually began moving away from the review and towards the essay in my literary criticism: towards a portrait of the writer, which is artistically much more complicated than a straight review. Straight reviewing – pointing out mistakes or praising the merits of a work – began to bore me. Of course I continued to review books quite often back in those days, as I needed the money, but what really interested me was the essay, which is something more than and different from the review. That's why I collected essays rather than reviews in my volume *Drugie Przyjście* ("Second Coming"). The essays most important to me are those in which I sketched portraits of writers or of their era.

W.B. Was it the meeting of writer and essayist that produced the *Diary Written at Night*?

G.H.-G. Yes, undoubtedly.

W.B. The most important passages in *A World Apart*, its defining passages, come in the epilogue. This last part of your book has been enthusiastically praised by some – for instance, by professor Skarga – but condemned by others who thought your attitude unacceptable. Some of them felt very deeply about it.

G.H.-G. To some of them it was even more than unacceptable, it was shocking: they felt shocked that a writer who had provided so many instances of his sensitivity throughout the book proved, at the end, to be so brutal and thick-skinned. That is more or less how people phrased it. But it's quite untrue. The epilogue is genuine; it isn't made up. But it's not just that. The epilogue was in large measure conceived in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* (as one Italian reviewer noticed). *A World Apart* is an educational novel, and I wanted the educational aspect to come through clearly in the epilogue; I wanted to stress that I really had returned to the free world, the normal world, the world I had longed for in the camp, the world we talked about in connection with my descriptions of nature – a world governed by entirely different rules. The most terrible aspect of the camps, and of the whole communist system, was that they wanted to make us forget normal rules and principles. Perhaps someone in a camp, who had spent many years there and found himself in the situation I describe in the epilogue, would behave quite differently: in a camp he might look on my interlocutor's request as something perfectly normal, ordinary and natural. But outside the camp, in the free, normal world, a normal person couldn't do so, couldn't accede to it. Not even to avoid the pain inflicted by his refusal – which is also an important aspect of my epilogue. My interlocutor makes his request and, not waiting for an answer, leaves like a wounded bird – "a bird with a broken wing".

That really is an important aspect of the scene for me. I have some Polish high-school pupils' essays on *A World Apart*, sent to me by their teachers, and they often express shock at my treatment of someone who had merely asked for a word of understanding. Just "I understand", no more than that. Such a small thing. But there are some things that a serious writer, which is how I would like to think of myself, has to insist on, things where no compromise is possible. That scene was genuine. I don't try to explain it. Just because what I describe happened in exactly the way I describe. I didn't make it up. I know the name of the man, I know where he lives today.

W.B. Did you ever meet him again? Has he read *A World Apart*, do you know?

G.H.-G. No, I don't know. But the book had to end that way. That epilogue was important to me, and not only because it had really happened that way. I wanted the book to have exactly that ending. If someone doesn't grasp this and accuses me of insensitivity because of it, it means he simply hasn't understood the fundamental sense of the book.

W.B. What seems characteristic in the charges people have made against the narrator is that one very important fact is always overlooked, namely the fact that the narrator does not refuse anything to his interlocutor. He doesn't say, "I won't say anything", "I won't forgive you", "Go away", or anything like that. He

simply remains silent. And I think his silence is significant, because it is so utterly different from anything he could have said.

G.H.-G. That's quite true. In addition, people don't seem to notice that this interlocutor appears in the first chapter. He was someone very dear to me. We would talk for hours on the floor of the Vitebsk prison, and he would tell me about Paris, about his studies there, about his life there. In Rome he came up to me only because we were friends, or had been friends. People see my reaction as proof of my coldness, but it isn't proof of my coldness at all. That ending is not about me! It's the ending of the book: a coda that gives it meaning and explains what it is. That's the great difference between me and Borowski. My book, in the epilogue, has that spark of hope, however cruel and painful, which is missing from his. In other words, to put it very crudely, if Borowski had had such a scene in one of his stories, shortly after his release from the camp, his narrator would have patted the man on the arm and said, "Well, you know, we were both there, we know how these things go, I understand". That's the difference between us. It's characteristic that those readers who object to my epilogue seem to accept and understand (so, at least, they imagine) Borowski's view of Auschwitz. They are people whom war and totalitarianism have taught to believe something terrible: that the world is cruel just because it is made that way. This is something we must unlearn. We must not believe that the world is cruel because it is made that way. And my aim in the epilogue was to counter this belief by suggesting something else: that it is we, by our behaviour, who contribute to the cruelty of the world. The war and our wartime experience of totalitarianism left us crippled, so that we accept the belief that the world is infinitely cruel because that's just how it is. But in fact this is a view which accepts anything as normal: it justifies everything. Which is why it is not a view I can accept.

W.B. The prisoner who approaches you asking for a word of understanding is in fact proposing a kind of pact: a devil's pact with a diabolical reality. By his request he is asking you to agree that everything that happened in that reality was understandable. By saying "I understand", you would be expressing your acceptance of that reality. But the narrator's unexplained silence is a refusal to accept and understand that reality. By the same token, it is a recognition that there exists some higher authority in the name of which the narrator remains silent and rejects the reality of the camp.

G.H.-G. Yes. There was a book by the French writer Vercors called *The Silence of the Sea* which used to be very well known. I remember a dreadful review of it by Arthur Koestler, who simply ridiculed it as a novel. He claimed that a situation in which someone maintains an unbroken silence towards the tenants living in his house (who were Germans; the novel was written in 1942) was simply

unimaginable. But silence was an instinctive and perfectly normal reaction to what was happening then. Vercors was the first to articulate the problem, and I consider his book tremendously important. It was stupid of Koestler to ridicule it. I admire him as a writer, but that was just stupid.

43. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński (left) with Ryszard Kapuściński, 1990s

Appendix VI
The Last Conversation about *A World Apart*

Włodzimierz Bolecki
Gustaw Herling-Grudziński

W.B. You have spoken at length about both the composition and the reception of *A World Apart* in *Conversations in Dragonea*. Many interpretations, critiques and analyses of it have been published. So now I'd like to talk about your book from a different angle: to ask how you see it and what it means today, at the end of the twentieth century. You have often stressed that *A World Apart* is your *Bildungsroman*: a book about a young man's initiation into twentieth-century totalitarianism. Could you comment on this again today?

G.H.-G. *A World Apart* is my basic argument in support of a view I have often expressed, namely that the twentieth century was a cursed century – the century of totalitarian ideologies. Many people disagree with this. Especially those who see totalitarianism as a local Italo-Germano-Russian island in a sea of universal happiness. This island, according to them, briefly emerged from the sea of progress after the First World War and swiftly disappeared again after the Second World War. I disagree with this. My view of the twentieth century is totally different. The clouds which caused the terrible storm of totalitarianism throughout the world were already beginning to gather over Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. In Europe it all began with the Russian Revolution of 1917; then totalitarian ideas made their way with lightning speed into Italy and Germany. In my view, the consequences of the Russian Revolution were far more catastrophic, in duration and in the number of victims, than Nazism in Germany or Italian fascism. What do I mean when I say that *A World Apart* was my *Bildungsroman*? I mean that as a twenty-year-old boy I found myself in the very centre of the totalitarian century, and it was a Soviet labour camp that opened my eyes to the "new morality" that the ideologists of totalitarianism wanted to implement and showed me what it meant in practice. So I learnt the lesson the hard way, first-hand. I learnt the principles of totalitarianism and how it caught people in its web, its ruses and traps, and what its dangers were.

I came out sufficiently intact to find my place again in the free world and write this book, but I was released only because the circumstances of world politics happened to work in my favour. If it hadn't been for the so-called Sikorski-Majski Pact of 1941, in which Stalin promised to release Polish citizens from Soviet camps, I would have died there, in Yertsevo, in a camp near Archangelsk. Just before my release I was quite literally on the verge of death. I lay in the barrack called the "mortuary" and I was one of the dying. It's rare, when you are twenty, to look death in the eye and also to peer into the heart of darkness of an entire century. This is what I thought of on my release and the thought of it never left me; as soon as I found myself in General Anders's army I knew I wanted to write a book about it.

I began writing it in England in 1949 and finished it the following year. The experiences I described in it are still with me. I would like young people – people the age I was when I experienced the camps – to understand what Hannah Arendt is saying in her book *The Roots of Totalitarianism*: that we are not safe from another totalitarian nightmare. Arendt goes so far as to suggest that the development of technology might make a repetition of that nightmare easier, for it makes the implementation of totalitarian ideas easier. In "my day" that was quite hard, for lack of "technology". The Germans displayed extraordinary "skill" in creating gas chambers, but the Soviets displayed similarly innovative skills. For instance, carrying out the plan of deporting millions of people presented huge logistical problems. As did the creation of hundreds of gulags, which, however primitive they were, still required the building of barracks, putting up a barbed wire fence and then organizing transport for a constant stream of prisoners. The economic foundations of the Soviet plan amounted to getting as much work as possible out of the Gulag prisoners, ultimately working them to death. The Soviets quickly realized that you cannot get productive work out of slaves, so they replaced [the goal of maximizing] individual productivity with [that of maximizing] quantity and increased the number of prisoners sentenced to hard labour in the camps.

Not long after September 1939, when I was still a boy, I found myself in the heart of darkness of this century. Today, when I am over eighty years old, I am witnessing the end of totalitarianism and the birth of a faith in new possibilities, such as a united Europe. I am not a pessimist, but I am aware that there is still a danger, in spite of these changes for the better. To claim, today, that we are witnessing the end of history, as Fukuyama does, is naïve, to put it mildly. One need only remember the war in the Balkans which broke out shortly after his prophecy – a war which was a classic manifestation of totalitarianism in post--communist form. Totalitarian rulers of every hue are usurping the power do do what they like with people and whole nations. Milosevic's ethnic cleansing is a classic example of totalitarianism, and was practised earlier by both the Russians

and the Germans. It is one of the standard things totalitarian regimes do. Similarly in other parts of the world, for example in Africa. It is important for young people, who believe in the progress of humanity, to be mindful of these dangers. Bertrand Russell put it well in a tribute to Conrad in his *Portraits from Memory*: we must remember, he said, that we are walking on thin ice, and that it could crack at any moment. Conrad, too, remembered this in his work.

W.B. You belong to the first generation of Poles born in independent Poland, the Second Polish Republic. Before 1939 your generation believed that the times of partition, the age when great powers could abolish states and their independence, had come to a definitive end with World War II. At the same time you believed in democracy, progress and the ceaseless effort of improvement of state institutions so that people could live lives of dignity, with a sense of security and justice, and social systems that genuinely served their needs. You were an avid reader of Ignazio Silone and of the utopias of Stefan Żeromski; that was the source of your interest in communist ideals when you were still at school. And suddenly you found yourself, with your communist ideals, flung into the very centre of the Soviet system. Did you feel in any way prepared for it?

G.H.-G. No, I wasn't in the least prepared. It was like being thrown into an abyss. I did have an obscure sense, a few years before the war, that things were going in the wrong direction. I was surprised that people older than me hadn't noticed this. I started feeling like this when I was about 15 or 16, and from then on the feeling became stronger. As a young man I believed that Poland was evolving, growing and getting stronger; I looked into the future with optimism. The twenty--year period between the wars was of course far from perfect. It was full of black stains, disgraceful episodes that should not be passed over in silence: Brześć, Bereza, Zaolzie, the treatment of national minorities and so on. These things must be talked about. But we must not dismiss the other side of the interwar period either: it was a recovery of independence after years of servitude, and it went to our heads. Some, in a state of patriotic euphoria, devoted themselves to working for their country – you don't see that nowadays. Others, especially if they had so-called State positions, sometimes behaved scandalously. However, despite my negative attitude to Piłsudski's Sanation regime, I would fully applaud minister Beck's famous 1939 speech in the Polish Parliament. But to get back to your question: my first contact with the Soviet system was a shock.

W.B. When did you first feel that you were falling into "an abyss"? In Lwów in 1939? In 1940, when the NKVD arrested you in Grodno? Later? Earlier?

G.H.-G. In Lwów, in the autumn of 1939. That was when I came to understand the nature of the Soviet system. I was very young, I had already grasped that the representatives of Soviet power had made Lwów into their military testing

ground, on which they were testing the endurance of the Polish intelligentsia. And they reached the conclusion that the Polish intelligentsia could be subjugated and enslaved. Which they proceeded to do immediately after they entered Poland in 1944. And – as we know – they finally achieved their goal in the fifties.

W.B. When you were in Lwów in 1939, did you already know about the existence of the Soviet Gulag?

G.H.-G. Yes, I did. I also knew about the Moscow trials, because I had read about them in the papers before the war. Just before the war two books came out in Poland which provided a "foretaste" of what the Gulag was. The first was by the disillusioned communist Istrati Panait, the second by Sołoniewicz. Anyone could have read them if they had wanted to, though many people thought they were just propaganda, or plain lies. It got to the point where people didn't even believe the newspaper reports about famine in Ukraine in 1923-1933, written by Ryszard Wraga, a great expert on Russia. People thought he was making it up.

W.B. In mid-1940 you found yourself in the Gulag. What did the Gulag mean for you then, how did you think of it?

G.H.-G. It was an instrument the Soviet authorities used against people they deemed inconvenient. It was an instrument of genocide, which was carried out for a number of reasons: class reasons, political reasons, ideological reasons and so on. The first time Shalamov was sent to the Gulag, for instance, it was for speaking the truth about the so-called testament of Lenin. He was sentenced to three years. But just a few years later, any reference to this "testament" had become so great a crime in Stalin's eyes that it was an "offence" for which people were shot. So when I ended up in the Gulag in 1940, it suddenly struck me that it was in fact used to imprison people who were destined for death. In German death camps the prisoners were taken to the gas chambers almost immediately upon their arrival and gassed to death. In the Soviet camps the road to death was slow; it could take years, sometimes ten or more. The Soviets wanted to get as much work as possible out of the Gulag labour force. The prisoners in the camps were meant to die, but not before they had worked for the State – worked without wages, as slaves. That was the difference. When I say that Communism and Nazism were "totalitarian twins", people reply: "But why? There were no gas chambers in the USSR!" It's true, there weren't, but Shalamov, who survived seventeen years in Kolyma, called Soviet camps "white crematoria". And that's precisely what I mean.

W.B. When the Bolsheviks created the communist system, they claimed they were creating a "new society" and "new people". But from the earliest hours of this system's existence a monstrous system of slavery was being created on an unprecedented scale. The Bolsheviks established the first labour camps in 1918.

G.H.-G. Yes, of course. All that talk about "equality" and "justice" and so on was just propaganda. Immediately after the Revolution a "new exploiting class" – as Milovan Djilas called it – emerged in the Soviet system, replacing the aristocracy. In those days people were full of enthusiasm at the thought of creating a new world, and they believed that it would be created by socialism. The Russian writer Andrei Platonov described their dreams very well. But those dreams very quickly turned into a terrible disillusionment. We mustn't forget that people were unhappy under the tsars, and that this naturally led them to put their faith in revolution as a way of making a better world. But it turned out that instead of making the world better, or making a better new world, the Bolsheviks set about organizing a bloodbath. The cure turned out to be worse than the sickness.

W.B. The Russian historians Heller and Nekrich entitled their book *Utopia in Power.*

G.H.-G. An excellent title! From the end of the nineteenth century, the belief in utopia was the source and the engine of revolution.

W.B. But that belief did not presuppose the victory of bolshevism.

G.H.-G. No, of course not. The only thing it presupposed was that the tsarist regime was rotten and had to be replaced. The belief in a new world, the faith that the old world would be overthrown, was shared by a number of very different parties. The biggest revolutionary party in Russia was the party of the socialist revolutionists, the so-called SRs, not the bolsheviks. The bolsheviks, thanks to a concatenation of the most unlikely circumstances, simply seized power; and when they had established themselves, they began murdering their political opponents – rivals for power. The SRs were first in line. That is characteristic of all totalitarian parties. What did Hitler do after coming to power? He killed off the leaders of the SA, whom he saw as dangerous rivals.

W.B. When you were in the Gulag you found that it was an institution in which normal values had been turned upside-down. You saw a world that was a contradiction of the world in which you had been raised. What was the confrontation of these two worlds like?

G.H.-G. The process of my "re-education" had two stages. The first was a feeling of terror. During the second I gradually accustomed myself to this new world I had been thrown into. That is how totalitarian systems work. First, they club you on the head, hard, and then they work on those who survived to accustom them to their cruelties, day by day. Shalamov did a fantastic job of describing how this works. You would meet people who had absorbed this world into themselves, it had seeped into them, so that they would repeat platitudes like "You can't chop wood without chips flying". In Yertsevo I made friends with engineer Białowski, who

had been a deputy minister in one of the Soviet governments and who continued, up to the end, up to the moment hunger drove him mad, to repeat that "camps are a historical necessity". I included him in *A World Apart*.

W.B. But in order to describe that world you had to remain outside it mentally; you had to resist the pull of its insane logic.

G.H.-G. That was the most important thing. I used to watch Russians succumb to resignation; by their behaviour they suggested that there was nothing anyone could do about it, that this was just how this dreadful world was. But of course not all of them thought that way; Shalamov, for instance, remained stalwart and unbowed in the camps, as did Solzhenitsyn. The situation of the Poles was different, in that they were by definition not only against communism but also quite simply against those who had put us in the camps, occupied our country and, in an alliance with Hitler, taken away Poland's independence. In that sense it was easier for us in the camp than for the Russians, because we had been rebelling against it all from the start. But I suspect that if it had gone on for longer, the Poles would have got used to the Gulag just like everyone else.

W.B. For you the Gulag was where you saw for yourself how unimportant national differences were in the face of common suffering.

G.H.-G. For me – yes. But not for all my fellow countrymen.

W.B. Was there an "international" of victims?

G.H.-G. I felt solidarity with all the prisoners, even those who had been communists and discreetly expressed their belief that this was a phase of communism that had to be gone through, and that the next one would be better. I had the feeling of experiencing the common suffering of the human race. It was a feeling of community with all those who were being made to suffer, regardless of why they had ended up in the camp. And also a metaphysical feeling – one might call it "existential" – that there was terrible evil all around me, evil which I had never seen at such intensity or on such a scale; a sense of terrible, organized evil. I hadn't known it could exist. That is what my book is fundamentally about.

W.B. Did you have the sense that it was a kind of "demonic" evil, or did you rather think of it as banal, like Hannah Arendt?

G.H.-G. It wasn't until much later that I discovered the banality of evil. In Yertsevo I sensed that it was demonic – evil there was no protection against. The basic attitude of a prisoner in the Soviet Gulag was one of waiting for inevitable death from exhaustion. It could come earlier at the hands of the guards, but typically in the camps you died from being worked to death. You were exploited until the very end. One is tempted to say: "like slaves", but although the analogy naturally

comes to mind, it is not entirely apt, because slaves have to be well looked after if they are to work well. We, on the other hand, were slowly killed by hunger and work. No one cared about keeping labour camp prisoners alive; the aim was to kill them by the conditions in which they were forced to live.

W.B. The ending of *A World Apart* expresses your philosophy of man and is integral to the structure and meaning of the whole book. Its meaning should be self-evident to readers, both logically and morally. And yet some readers have complained about it, and consider that the ending shows an inexplicable harshness on your part: a terrible coldness and indifference towards a man who had been a fellow prisoner and a friend, and who now, in Rome, confesses to you how he informed on four other prisoners and asks you for just two words: "I understand". And you are silent. Since these complaints about your ending crop up regularly, I'd like to hear your response.

G.H.-G. If readers haven't understood the ending, they haven't understood the book or the main point I wanted to make about the world apart which I describe. It's sad, and rather surprising.

W.B. What is your reaction to such complaints from readers?

G.H.-G. Surprise, mostly. Especially since they mostly come from seemingly intelligent readers. But their criticism of my ending trivializes it, reduces it, for reasons I find unfathomable, to a dreadful kind of banality. Near the end of the book I show the differences between freedom and slavery quite clearly, and earlier on I discuss them directly and equally clearly. What else do they need? The laws which govern the free world are simply different from those which obtain in conditions of slavery, and at the end of the book I explain that I refuse to accept the laws of slavery now that I am free. To put it even more simply: if I had discovered back in the camp what this prisoner had done and if he had asked me for a word of understanding then, I might have given it to him. Not because I really understood him and accepted what he had done, but because there, in that other place, in the world apart, I would, so to speak, have "swallowed" his request – accepted it as part of that world. But when I was free and once again a normal person with normal human feelings, capable of love and friendship, in a world with normal values, a world in which there was good and evil and truth and falsity and these things were distinguished – in that world I could not say the words he wanted to hear. I simply couldn't do it. Not because I didn't want to; I liked the man, after all, and in the Grodno prison he had been a good friend. I couldn't do it because it would seem like a betrayal of the values and principles of the world to which I had returned. And since I was now once again living in the free world, I could not act according to the laws and principles of the "world apart". So my attitude at the end of the book is simply a defence of the free world and its meaning.

When these complaints about the book's ending first came to my attention, I began to ask myself whether these readers' reactions would have been the same if the victims of my friend's actions – the four men he had informed on and who had been shot as a result – had not been Germans. If they had been Jews, for instance, or Spaniards, or Russians, or Poles? Would they still have criticized the ending? Or would they have said that my silence was understandable because the man was a vile creature who had informed on their fellow countrymen? I had occasion to witness such hardening of the heart in people after the war. They would say: "What does it matter that he informed on four Germans? It was because of them, after all, that he ended up in the Gulag, because it was the Germans who started the war." My own sister said something similar: "Why wouldn't you forgive him?" she asked me. Of course she didn't then go on to say that "after all, it was Germans he denounced, people who murdered and persecuted us", because that was not an argument you could make outright, it was simply unsayable; but at that time, immediately after the war, I felt its presence between the lines. The thought that these weren't people, but "just four Krauts". But it is beyond my comprehension how people can say such things today. I thought that fifty years after the war Polish attitudes towards the Germans had fundamentally changed.

W.B. Of course they have, but maybe there's something else at work here? Maybe it's attitudes to informing on people that have also changed? For you, in *A World Apart*, informing on someone is the worst crime one can commit, the worst thing one human being can do to another. But today people say, "Oh, he wasn't really an informant, it was just a moment of weakness."

G.H.-G. You're quite right, that's so, alas. Informing on a fellow prisoner was considered by all of us in the camp to be a terrible crime. But what you've just said confirms my belief that though the totalitarian world may have been defeated, it left its mark on people; its influence went very deep. That's why I wrote in the *Diary Written at Night* that the experience of the Soviet system, the experience of evil, is something you have to go on squeezing out of yourself day after day to be rid of its influence. Fifty years of it is a terrible burden to bear, though it may be invisible. I can only hope that the new generation of young people growing up in a free world won't be crippled by that burden; I hope they will be different people. I hope, in short, that their value system will be a normal one, allowing them to make a moral judgement about informing without relativizing it. Moral relativism is where the greatest danger lies: the Soviet regime, like all totalitarian systems, wanted to imbue people with the belief that all values, including the fundamental values which allow us to consider ourselves human beings, are relative. Of course, when my friend informed on those four innocent people and thereby sentenced them to death, he didn't do so without a reason. He was fulfilling his side of a

bargain with the camp authorities, who had promised him his life in exchange for theirs. Although this may explain what he did, it doesn't make it any less of a crime; it isn't a mitigating circumstance, it doesn't in any way exculpate him. But the Bolsheviks' so-called "revolutionary morality" could justify anything – the most horrific crimes, the most barbaric acts – as long as it could be said to "further the cause of the revolution" or was done in its name. In other words, the total absence of morality became "revolutionary morality" and was imposed upon people as part of a belief system they were forced to accept. A very dangerous thing to do. That was one of the most poisonous sources of totalitarianism.

W.B. This is one of the main themes of *A World Apart*, but it is also a crucial problem in our world today. If educated people at the close of the twentieth century are unable to grasp a point you made very clearly fifty years ago, what kind of judgement can we pronounce upon that century?

G.H.-G. Yes, that was my point, that was what I wanted to say, and that is the reason I wrote the epilogue. As I said, it's a true story; yet my post-war critics – the allegedly "sympathetic" ones – couldn't understand why I had written it. They kept saying that I needn't have done, that I could just have passed over the incident in silence. I'm sure they would have understood if I had written: "after hearing my friend's confession, I embraced him with understanding and we went off together to have a drink". Believe me, I wasted so much time trying to explain to people, including my sister, why I wrote that epilogue.

W.B. Immediately after the war, I suppose one could say it was understandable.

G.H.-G. And my attitude towards it at the time was understanding. I didn't try to excuse it or justify it, but I understood it. But today I don't understand it at all. Especially since the people criticizing me today are not my contemporaries, who remember the horrors of war, but young people born after the war, so nonchalant about things which for us, morally, were matters of life and death. So nonchalant as they enter the new century.

W.B. What do you mean?

G.H.-G. I mean that they ought to be aware of how heavily the burden of the twentieth century weighs on us all. Because if people don't understand the point of that epilogue today, at the turn of the century, that means they haven't understood anything about what happened in the twentieth century. Which tends to confirm my fears that the worst events of that totalitarian, ideological century could happen again. Let me repeat how apt I consider the phrase in Hannah Arendt's subtitle, the "banality of evil". That is the strongest warning.

W.B. In your *Diary Written at Night* you also wrote about the banality of good.

G.H.-G. I used the phrase in connection with a book of that title by an Italian journalist. It tells the extraordinary and astonishing story of an Italian fascist, a member of the Fascist Party, who saved three thousand Jews in Budapest. He simply thought the Nazi idea of murdering Jews was absurd. After the war he returned to his native Padua and couldn't understand why people thought what he had done was so extraordinary. For him it was the most natural thing in the world; he saw it as his duty. So I'm echoing him when I say that there is also such a thing as the banality of good. But you have to have a natural disposition towards it.

W.B. It was a long time before *A World Apart* saw the light of day.

G.H.-G. That's true. There was the English edition, which was a great success, but publishers on the continent were reluctant to publish it for a long time. Especially the French – which was why Bernard Pivot said on his television show in 1985 that it was a disgrace that after 35 years it had still not been published in France. Similarly in Italy. Why? Because at that time many Western publishers were communist and Soviet "sympathisers". They didn't deny the facts I described, but they discouraged talking about them. It was terribly hypocritical. But never mind about them; the greatest responsibility doesn't lie with the particular publishers who behaved in this way, but with the Western intelligentsia in general, whose social role was supposed to consist in telling the truth and judging reality in accordance with it. They behaved abominably. Either they pretended they didn't know, or they knew and avoided the topic, or they knew but insisted that everything was fine. I don't want to name names, but I could name some luminaries of our culture, literary and philosophical figures of great eminence, who in the fifties, after reading *A World Apart*, called it a work of extraordinary literary imagination. Could you imagine someone in Poland calling Borowski's stories about Auschwitz a work of literary imagination? But you could say that about the Soviet Gulag. It seems unbelievable today.

W.B. There is a concept in international law called "Holocaust denial": if you deny the existence of Nazi death camps, gas chambers, genocide in Auschwitz, the Holocaust, and so on, you have committed a crime and can be charged with it. But at the same time no one, since the end of the war, seems to have had any problem tolerating "Kolyma denial", as we might call it. You can claim publicly with complete impunity that there were never any concentration camps in the USSR; on that subject there are no laws or courts of justice to stop you saying what you like.

G.H.-G. Yes, that is so, unfortunately. No one cares. Or take the example of a supposedly eminent philosopher, a friend of Miłosz's, who once wrote that those stupid Poles should have their romantic notions beaten out of them with the butts of Soviet rifles. If he had said that about Nazis, people would be disgusted at the very

sound of his name, but since the rifles were Soviet, Juliusz Kroński is considered a distinguished intellectual. I don't want to question his work as a philosopher, I'm quite prepared to believe it was very good, but it makes it all the more horrifying for me, because people like him played a huge role in disseminating lies about the Gulag, or rather preventing the truth about it from getting out. That was why Ignazio Silone, a great Italian writer, was justified in saying, at the International PEN club congress in Basel in 1947, that the intelligentsia had failed in its duty, had not played the role it was supposed to play. For years it went on living a monstrous lie. So the fact that *A World Apart* is regularly re-issued and translated into more and more languages is proof, for me, that it's still important, still needed, that people want to know the truth about our terrible century.

W.B. But you had to wait a long time for that recognition.

G.H.-G. A very long time. And I'm perfectly well aware of the reason. When the book appeared in English, one reviewer, after singing its praises, wrote a sentence which made a lot of things clear to me. He said: "I am not sure whether we can entirely believe the author of this book, as he is a Pole, and the Poles do not like the Russians". I understood then that unless a similar book by a Russian is published about the Russian Gulag, we Poles, with all our knowledge about concentration camps in Russia, will never succeed in getting through to Western readers. And I was right: my book only began to be noticed after the publication of Solzhenitsyn's magnificent *Gulag Archipelago* – even though it had been published in English thirty years earlier! Solzhenitsyn's historic achievement is that the *Gulag Archipelago* forced Western readers to acknowledge the truth about the true nature of Soviet communism.

W.B. But they can't have taken that lesson very deeply to heart, since the publishers rejected the interview with you that was to serve as a preface to Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*?

G.H.-G. No, I suppose not. That was a characteristic episode in the annals of knowledge about the "world apart" at the end of the twentieth century. It was the idea of "totalitarian twins", the comparison of Communism and Nazism, that the Italian publisher Einaudi couldn't accept in what I said about Shalamov. By now, at the end of the twentieth century, the truth about Soviet concentration camps has been recognized, but there remains very strong resistance to comparing communist and Nazi crimes. Einaudi used to be a very left-wing publishing house – so much so that its recently deceased owner had intended to issue a luxury edition of the writings of Zhdhanov. It didn't happen, but it tells you something about the mentality of Italian intellectuals. I have the impression that some of them still don't understand what communism was and still haven't drawn any conclusions from the fact that it was rejected in Western Europe, even in Russia.

W.B. What do you think of the *White Book of Communism*, where historians catalogue the crimes of the communist system – the crimes you wrote about half a century ago in *A World Apart*?

G.H.-G. I think its publication was an extremely important event, and I think it can play a role similar to that of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. The main thing, the crucial thing, is that historians have documented the crimes of communism, described them objectively and systematically, on the basis of documents. After the publication of this book it will no longer be possible to deny what we experienced in the USSR and the criminal nature of that system. It is also an important book for me because it proves that I was right in talking about the "totalitarian twins" of communism and Nazism, the two systems which in the twentieth century accomplished the greatest genocide in the history of mankind. A century of ideology and totalitarianism: that was the twentieth century. As we enter the twenty-first century, it's important that people remember what the previous century was really like.

W.B. Of all the books about communism, two stand out as having played a tremendously important role in Poland, so much so that their titles entered the language as familiar phrases. One was *A World Apart*. The other was Czesław Miłosz's *The Captive Mind*. Two books which describe the same thing from different perspectives. In your *Diary Written at Night* you criticize Miłosz's book quite strongly. Do you think that today you would be able to view it from a different perspective, namely that of *A World Apart*? What would you say today about *The Captive Mind* viewed from the perspective of your book?

G.H.-G. As soon as it came out, I had no doubt that it was a great book. It is beautifully written, a masterpiece of prose, and its success was and remains entirely deserved. But I also wrote at the time that in my view – the view of someone who has experienced the Soviet Gulag – Miłosz's book does not speak the truth about the nature of communism. Where it is wrong, I think, is in its attribution to communism of certain ideas, a certain content, that real communism quite simply did not have and does not deserve to have attributed to it. The result is a little as if he were justifying it, indirectly. Those who criticized my book all at some point in their polemics invoked *The Captive Mind* and said: you write about communist crimes, but Miłosz shows the psychological complexity of it all. Undoubtedly there were complex psychological aspects of communism, but in my view they were marginal and with no significance in a description of the nature of communism as a system. Both Miłosz himself and the people he talked about in *The Captive Mind* knew perfectly well what was going on in the Soviet Union. It might seem immodest to say so, but I think my book and similar ones like *Gulag Archipelago* or *Kolyma Tales* achieved something very important

by rendering that pseudo-philosophical excuse for communism impossible to maintain. When *The Captive Mind* came out many people invoked it precisely as a kind of excuse for communism, claiming that I was simplifying things when I claimed that support for communism was connected with fear of terror, prison and persecution, with opportunism and material benefits, with ambition or simpy with vanity. Miłosz supplied arguments – magnificently written – purporting to show that this "communizing" was the result of profound and subtle psychological processes.

Professor Andrzej Walicki expressed a similar view in his *Encounters with Miłosz*. But I maintain that the mechanism of communism was a very primitive one. The people I knew and was friends with in the Stalinist period rarely invoked Miłosz's arguments, although of course some of them did. The great majority of them said things like, "I have a family to feed", or "I have to do something or they will destroy me", or "you can't win with them" – that kind of thing. In short, for me, knowing from my own bitter experience what the Soviet world apart was like, Miłosz's book, for all its merits, simply does not tell the truth. And I'm surprised that Miłosz, who is a great writer, still insists today, after all that has been revealed about the monstrous scale of Soviet crimes, on his idea of the "captive mind", with its "Murti Bing's pills", its practices of "Ketman", its "new faiths" and so on. In his interviews with Renata Gorczyńska he appears at one point to acknowledge that I am right, but then goes on to stress that the kind of people he describes in *The Captive Mind* really did exist. Well, of course they existed, I have never denied that; but the point is that the mechanism of their acceptance of Stalinism was more practical than he admits; it wasn't all subtle philosophizing about historical necessity. Those intellectuals simply made a choice: they understood that if they wanted to be a part of the cultural life of the time, they had to identify with the Communist Party. It was an arrangement that exacted a price. Today, whenever Miłosz defends his theory of half a century ago, I have the impression that the only arguments he invokes to support it are the declarations of Professor Walicki, whose biography is supposed to serve as sufficient confirmation of it. Miłosz appears to believe that if such an eminent scholar admits that he himself practised "Ketman", then surely what he, Miłosz, described in *The Captive Mind* must be true and there is no reason to revise what he wrote there.

I read your interview with Miłosz about *The Captive Mind* in your book *Lekcja Literatury* ("Literature Lesson"), where at one point Miłosz brings up our disagreement in the 1950s and remarks that I must have succumbed to "London" influence of some kind. Which is nonsense, because by then I was living in Naples and writing for *Kultura*. And besides, there were intelligent people to be found in London too, people who thought exactly as I did – not because they belonged to the world of the so-called London émigrés, but because their views about

communism were simply different from Miłosz's. There's nothing compromising for a Pole in having lived in London after the war. Once again: Miłosz's book is an important book and it is magnificently written, but both history and individual experience show that its portrayal of "Ketman" is false – it's an invention, not a truth about the world apart.

W.B. Is there nothing in Miłosz's book that is true?

G.H.-G. Of course there are some things, particular observations, which are true. It's his vision of communism as a whole that I reject.

W.B. But Miłosz says explicitly in our interview that the mechanism whereby minds were made captive, the mechanism he described through metaphors like "Murti Bing's pills" or "Ketman", applied only to a tiny group of people, intellectuals whom he knew, while the rest of society had a completely different attitude to communism.

G.H.-G. That I concede. But I must add that those intellectuals needed those metaphors he invented like a cripple needs an artificial limb: they allowed them to go around explaining that becoming a part of the communist cultural establishment in order to publish their books and draw profit from their public support of Stalin involved profound psychological trauma and subtle philosophical reflection. I have always rejected that and still reject it. You asked how I viewed *The Captive Mind* from the perspective of *A World Apart*. In my view, the "world apart" degraded people, whereas the "captive mind" ennobled them – in the sense that it made them out to be more noble than they were.

You could see that in the way our books were received in the West. Miłosz's book enjoyed considerable success. In *The Captive Mind*, Western left-wing intellectuals, who were waiting for an explanation of what was happening in the East, an explanation of how it was that the great majority of intellectuals in communist countries were supporting Stalin, found an intelligent, beautifully written and satisfying answer. This was what they had been waiting for, and they placed their trust in Miłosz. I understood this when Ignazio Silone said to me about Miłosz's book that it "seems credible".

They had all read Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. Then they read *The Captive Mind*, and it all seemed to make sense. *A World Apart* cruelly shattered their delusions. But most Western intellectuals just couldn't bear to have their delusions shattered. Which is why, for instance, it took thirty-five years before the French published my book. That thirty-five years is indicative of something.

W.B. So there's a significant difference in the attitude to communism between you as the author of *A World Apart* and Miłosz as the author of *The Captive Mind*, and that difference flows from your different experiences. You experienced both communism as a system and the Soviet Gulag. But Miłosz did not experience

the Soviet system in the way you did. Moreover, his experience of Stalinism in Poland was very brief: he left for the USA at the beginning of the Stalinist period in Poland, after that he was in Poland very briefly, and then he went abroad again, this time for good. So his description of the Soviet system is not a description of what he himself experienced; the system did not mark him as the camp marked you. The description of communism in *The Captive Mind* is the construct of an intellectual who views communism more from a philosophical, psychological and historiosophical perspective than as a victim of it. But you see it from the point of view of a victim who miraculously escaped death at the last minute. That's the fundamental difference between you.

G.H.-G. That's true. When Miłosz describes his conversations with Juliusz Kroński, what you have is a dialogue between two intellectuals, one trying to persuade the other of the merits of Marxism and the communist system. So in that sense the claim of *The Captive Mind* is true, because there was a time when Miłosz was philosophically convinced of the inevitability of what happened in Europe – of its so-called "historical necessity". To that extent *The Captive Mind* undoubtedly spoke the truth. But it was a very small extent.

But one chapter of *The Captive Mind*, the chapter about Tadeusz Borowski, does seem to me to be very close to the truth. Borowski left Auschwitz burnt out, eroded inside. Communism was for him a way of reacting to what had happened to him, and it was justified by what he had experienced. That is not the case with the other protagonists of *The Captive Mind*, but in Borowski's case Miłosz's explanation fits, it rings true. Miłosz describes him as "history's unrequited lover" and that is undoubtedly right. Well, we know how this "unrequited lover" met his end: he committed suicide.

W.B. When you were in Russia, in the camp, did you ever meet the kind of people Miłosz describes in *The Captive Mind* – "history's unrequited lovers"?

G.H.-G. No, never. I only met communists who had a problem parting from communism. Some of them, predictably, bleated on about how "chips fly when you're chopping wood" or about their great "disenchantment with the dream of their youth", and so forth.

Wat [Aleksander Wat (ed.)], who knew Russia and whom I once asked what he thought of Miłosz's book, made it very clear that he had great reservations about it. And yet he himself might very well have seen Miłosz's interpretation as fitting him! But he didn't accept it. Wat's past made him vulnerable: he had been a communist sympathiser before the war, and during the war he experienced the fear of Soviet terror and spent time in Soviet prisons. In 1939 as well as after the war he made certain "concessions", but because he was a very clever man, he had enough nous to know what was really going on. I've seen some photos of

him where he is standing there smiling with, in the background, various Soviet apparatchiks in charge of Polish culture or universities, one of them taken during the 1948 congress establishing "unity" between the PPR [Polish Workers' Party (ed.)] and the PPS [Polish Socialist Party (ed.)], and I thought to myself that here was a man who knew perfectly well what it was all about, and he was simply fighting for his life.

W.B. Did Wat read *A World Apart*?

G.H.-G. Yes! He even made a special trip to Naples to talk to me about it. He was in Sicily at the time and he wrote to me. That was the first contact of any kind between us; I didn't know him before the war. He wrote to say that he had just finished *A World Apart* and very much wanted to talk to me. So he came. I liked him from the start, and that first meeting developed into a long friendship. It went through a variety of stages, but I always had great respect for his intelligence and tremendous erudition. Wat had no illusions about what communism was, and that was why he understood perfectly what my book was trying to say. I don't know if he talked to Miłosz about *The Captive Mind*; I only know what his reaction was when I asked him about it. He just smiled and shrugged. People who had themselves experienced the world apart, to their great cost, had the same attitude as Wat towards *The Captive Mind*. Or they had simply experienced daily life under communism – like that "simple teacher" Miłosz told Gorczyńska about and who, after 1956, purportedly said to some friends of Miłosz's in Paris: "Such an intelligent man, and he fell for it so completely." That was *vox populi*.

W.B. To come back to Wat: he could dismiss *The Captive Mind* with a shrug because he knew communism from Lvov in 1939 and from Soviet prisons, but it was also a book about people in the 1920s and 1930s who had sympathized with communism, as he had done when he was a "non-Party Bolshevik".

G.H.-G. That's what I meant. He shook off those years and cured himself, and he was left with a feeling of guilt, even of disgrace – a sort of complex. He often said to me: "I shall never forgive myself for having been so stupid."

W.B. Did you talk to Polish writers about *A World Apart*?

G.H.-G. Well, many of them said things like, "Your book made a tremendous impression on me", or "I couldn't put it down all night", but I never really had a serious conversation about it with any of them. I had the feeling that those who claimed to have read it were disinclined to talk about what they had learnt from it. The most polite of them tried to be elegant about it, to keep the conversation on a purely literary level, which irritated me, because I knew it was a way of passing over in silence what was most important about it – what it was actually about. I know that Miłosz came round to it in the end, because he wrote and told me so,

and I also know he spoke about it publicly, but he never engaged with the issues. So, to answer your question – the question about the image of communism that emerges from our respective books – we never had a serious conversation about it. For instance, I don't think Miłosz ever wrote anything about Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, and that book is surely a crucial test of the interpretations he puts forward in *The Captive Mind*. But I can see why he never wrote anything about it. Today, after the publication of all those books, *The Black Book of Communism* foremost among them, there can be no doubt in anyone's mind that communism was a criminal system, and no amount of philosophical debate can change the fact that the existence of Soviet concentration camps was proof of its immanent evil. There can be no relativizing here. The communist system brought forth monsters: the camps, the Gulag archipelago.

W.B. You said that you saw a terrible concentration of evil in the camp. How did that influence your writing?

G.H.-G. In fundamental ways. In my speech at the award ceremony of my honorary doctorate in Lublin, I even said that it was in the camp that I was born as a writer: it was as if the camp had given me new eyes to see reality with. For a few years after my release I was writing a book in my mind about what I had seen in Russia. That's why I was later able to write it so quickly and with virtually no revisions: one clean first draft. As for my later work, certainly everything I experienced in the camp is there, *in nuce*, in my stories and in the *Diary Written at Night*. It crops up constantly in our conversations – sometimes to my own surprise. The experience of a concentration camp stays with you all your life, whoever you are; you don't have to be a writer. Borowski, Shalamov, Primo Levi or Jorge Semprun are examples. It's thanks to Semprun's efforts that my book was published in France in 1985. He had been a prisoner in a German concentration camp, and when he read *A World Apart* in English, he was shocked to find so many similarities between the Nazi and Soviet camps. That was the subject of my public conversation with him a few years ago in Naples, at the French Institute – there, on the other side of the street, exactly opposite this house. The public listened in silence while we discussed the overt and hidden similarities between Nazi and communist camps. Semprun had a special perspective on the Nazi concentration camp, because he was there as a communist.

W.B. Your familiarity with that "other world" which was the Soviet system, the Soviet "world apart", seems to have marked you in another important way, which can be seen in what you have written about the "other Russia".

G.H.-G. Yes, that's quite right. I became a defender of that "other Russia" as a result of my time in the camp. It was thanks to my friendship with a few Russians there, and because I knew what the Russians themselves had suffered at the hands

of the Bolsheviks, that I discovered the existence, in the Soviet sea, of this tiny island which was the other Russia. And, encouraged by Giedroyć, I began writing about Russians in *Kultura*. After about a dozen years there was enough for a thick volume, which was published, and has since been reissued several times, under the title *Upiory rewolucji* ("Spectres of the Revolution").

W.B. Were there any reactions from Russia after *A World Apart* was published there in Natalia Gorbanyevska's translation?

G.H.-G. In that respect Russia is still a place "apart" from European countries: the publisher told me nothing and sent me no reviews. All I know is that the book has gone through two printings in Russia and that the rights to it were bought from its first publisher by the Memorial association, which is a source of great pride for me. Of course *A World Apart* was known to the Russian émigrés in Paris. I talked about it with Maximov, Nekrasov [Vladimir Maximow, Viktor Nekrasov (W.B.)] and other eminent figures of that exile community. And of course with Gorbanyevska herself. She produced an excellent translation. It was really a happy moment for me when, thanks to her efforts, half a century after my release from the Gulag, *A World Apart* was published in Russian.

44. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's study in Naples, 2007. Photo by Włodzimierz Bolecki

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