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THE JEWS AND THE MESSIANIC ETHOS
OF THE SECOND POLISH REPUBLIC.
STANISŁAW REMBEK'S INTERWAR LITERARY WRITINGS

Despite the unequivocally foreboding political developments, the faith in the exceptionality of the Polish nation and the invincibility of the miraculously reconstituted sovereign Poland persisted until the very outbreak of World War II. From October 1938 to January 1939, the literary supplement of the daily *Polska Zbrojna* [Armed Poland] published responses of notable writers to a survey on the topic "Literatura a żołnierz" [Literature and the Soldier].

Stanisław Rembek (1901–1985), a well-known popular writer, and a veteran of the 1920 Polish-Bolshevik War argued:

Polish society is military in the best sense of the word. Every Pole feels, first and foremost, that he is a soldier. [...] As represented by our Leader, our army plays a determining role in all aspects of our political, social, economic, and intellectual life. [...] Yet nobody can claim that the army has been politicized. Our officers are modest, well behaved, tactful, and knowledgeable. [...] Our soldiers are enthusiastic to serve and are ready for every sacrifice. Our reservists are dedicated to their units and would cheerfully answer every call. Should such a need arise, the whole nation will become a reliable, powerful, and forbidding instrument in the Leader's hands. Yet we are not aggressive toward our neighbors, and we do not cultivate any ideological, ethnic, or racist hatred. [...] In this sense, we can serve as an example to other nations, as we have many times in history.

Alluding to the nineteenth-century great romantic poets such as Adam Mickiewicz and Julian Słowacki, Rembek asserted:

We owe our exemplary character primarily to literature which instilled in us the virtue of chivalry and created a special type of a soldier – a fighter for a sacred matter – thus placing the military profession on a magnificent pedestal. Our values are personal and national honor, readiness for battle and sacrifices in the name of ideals, the ability to give up the individual self for the sake of collective action. [...] "Duty" is the most beautiful term in our rich language.¹

Rembek's ideological position was by no means unique; in fact, he was expressing the interwar Poland's triumphalist *Weltanschauung*. The national ethos of unconditional patriotism, uncommon chivalry, and superior moral standing that typified the ideological self-image of the country in the interwar period intensified even further with the increasing probability of a European war in the late 1930s.

¹ *Polska Zbrojna* no. 45, November 13, 1938.

The Poles were sure that their superior military force would easily fend off any potential attack. Thus, at the time of survey in 1938, Rembek's response represented the widespread conviction among the Poles of their exceptional moral and military virtues. Poland's superior moral standing in the Christian world was informed by the vision of Romantic poets and thinkers, and predicated upon the chivalry and idealism of Polish military power. Rembek considered the European stance of appeasement detrimental to world politics and emphasized that Poland had made many political gains in the international arena, while preventing any "cultivation of ideological, ethnic, and racist hatred,"² such as demonstrated as early as 1933, with the persecutions of Jews in Germany and the Soviet Union. By referring to Jewish persecutions in other countries, Rembek alluded to Poland's tolerance toward its Jewish minority. To perpetuate the myth of Poland's moral superiority, he chose to ignore the powerful fascist parties and their virulent anti-Semitic platform. Contrary to undeniable evidence, Rembek insisted that Poland's external politics of balancing power and peace went hand-in-hand with its internal politics of tolerance. Prophetic literature shaped the military and religious identity of the nation as a community of citizen-soldiers. Indeed, Rembek's vision of Poland echoed Mickiewicz's concept of the "democratic messianism of the nation," which imparted an obligation to shape Poland's political life "in accordance with the idea of Christian morality."³

Rembek's formative self-identification as a patriotic Pole was shaped by the romantic tradition of the 1831 and the 1863 insurrections that conceptualized the suffering of the Polish nation in terms of Christ's Passion, and attributed a messianic destiny to the Polish people. His military service in the rank of lieutenant in the 1920 Polish-Bolshevik War fortified his faith in Poland's military and moral superiority.

As his literary biography shows, Rembek was preoccupied with the theme of war, and his interwar novels gained him the reputation of the best battlefield novelist since Sienkiewicz and Żeromski. Maria Dąbrowska, who in 1938 nominated Rembek's *W polu* [In the field] for the Literary Prize of the publication *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary News], observed in her nomination letter that Rembek's novel "in many ways seems better than Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*," and praised him for "having avoided the reportage 'style' and the pretense of formal simplicity."⁴

Rembek attributed his predilection for military subjects to his family's long military tradition. He claimed a military lineage, which, according to him, originated with his great-great-grandfather who took part in the French Revolution, continued with his great-grandfather who fought in the 1831 Polish insurrection, and was followed by his grandfather who fought in the insurrection of 1863.⁵ Rembek emulated the military model of his ancestors. He quit high school to enlist in the Polish army. After his demobilization at the beginning of 1921, Rembek studied history and journalism at the University of Warsaw, where he took courses with the eminent Jewish historian Marcei Handelsman, whose scholarly work focused

² Ibidem.

³ Maria Janion, Maria Żmigrodzka, *Romantyzm i historia* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1978), 52.

⁴ Janina Siedlecka, *Wypominki* (Łódź: ABC, 1996), 200.

⁵ Stanisław Rembek in interview with Zbigniew Irzyk, *Kierunki*, May 11, 1978.

on Christological and messianic motifs in Polish national self-perception in history.⁶ As Handelsman saw it, the Polish national narrative was modeled on Christ's story, whereby the country's long history of suffering and patriotic struggle, which culminated in the rebirth of the state, was seen as reenactment of the Passion and Resurrection. Such a mythic perception of history determined the sacred obligation of the nation to spread the Christian message of moral redemption.⁷ This self-perception as a nation bearing a sacred message pervaded the collective consciousness of the Poles.

In view of Rembek's family roots, his ideological convictions, and his educational pursuits, it is important to study the particular place that Jews occupied in Rembek's prewar complete faith in Polish messianic chosenness. The following discussion will show that, unlike the present-day prevalent perception of Jews as a detrimental element which undermined the ethos of the messianic destiny of the Polish nation and should be get rid of, Rembek affirmed the indispensability of Jews to the national identity of the Catholic Pole [Polak katolik]. While it is true that in his diary of the interwar period, Rembek displayed considerable anti-Semitic prejudices, in his interwar fiction, he portrayed the Jews as patriotic officers fighting for Poland. Their selfless love for the motherland qualified them as comrades-in-arms. Seemingly, such characterizations of the Jews highlighted Poland's democratic open-mindedness toward its Jewish citizens. But a closer look at Rembek's fictional representations of Jews shows that the Jewish origins of these soldiers prevented their full integration into the Polish society; as Jews they were excluded from the nation's Christian-messianic destiny. Thus, from the theological perspective, Jewish presence was necessary for the fulfillment of Poland's special position among the nations: the Jew, who, despite his desire to become a Catholic, was barred from Grace, sanctioned the Polish claim to a messianic calling as an affirming witness.

*DZIENNIKI: ROK 1920 I OKOLICE [DIARIES: 1920 AND THEREABOUTS]*⁸

Rembek's interwar *Dzienniki* cover the period of his military service in the 1920 campaign, his Warsaw studies, constant search for work, and his efforts to write and publish. Following his demobilization, the entries become increasingly

⁶ Marcei Hendelsman (1882–1945), *Rozwój narodowości nowoczesnej*, ed. Tadeusz Lepkowski (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1973). During World War I, Handelsman was connected with Piłsudski's Legions, and fought in the 1920 Bolshevik War. Rembek does not mention this fact, nor does he mention anywhere that during the war Hedelsman was in hiding in Milanówek (where Rembek lived with his family) from July 1942 to June 1944, where he collaborated with the Polish underground. He was denounced to the Gestapo and deported to the concentration camp Gross-Rosen and eventually to Dora-Nordhausen, where he died in March 1945.

⁷ Handelsman's conceived nation as a family of individuals united by territory, the sense of shared destiny, the same language, common culture, and the common ethnic origins. In Polish nationalism Handelsman detected the emphasis on the uniqueness of the Polish nation, whose struggle for independence was also a "redemptive revolution for the world" which marked its calling as "Christ-like redeemer of humanity" (Hendelsman, *Rozwój*, 26, 37).

⁸ (Warszawa: Agawa, 1997).

sporadic, frequently registering bouts of depression, illnesses, and various medical treatments. The diary concludes with the publication of *Nagan* [Revolver] in 1928, followed by a brief description of his stay in Algiers and a few entries from 1937.

The first comment about Jews in *Dzienniki: rok 1920...* sheds light on Rembek's formative ambivalence toward Jews. On November 29, 1918, Rembek notes, "Koziulewski [his teacher of Polish] spent the whole period talking about the Jews. He hates them very much and considers them the worst enemies of Poland. He convinced me to some extent, but not completely. I believe that no person, let alone a whole nation, can be entirely bad." Significantly, Koziulewski's anti-Jewish indoctrination took place only a few weeks after the declaration of the statehood of Poland on November 11. In view of the past one hundred and twenty three years of Poland's subjugation to the empires, which tore the country apart by inflicting endless suffering and disastrous devastation, Koziulewski's instigation of hatred for the Jewish minority as Poland's worst enemy made no sense. Perhaps even more disturbing was the formative impact of the teacher's anti-Semitic propaganda on his student. Even though Rembek knew that the aspersions the teacher cast on the Jews were motivated by hatred and that his slanderous generalizations about Jews would not have withstood any rational examination, he admitted to have found Koziulewski's view of the Jews plausible.

During his military service, however, Rembek forged a relationship with a Jew who was by no means an enemy. Bombardier Szejnbach, a comrade-in-arms, came from his town, Piotrków, and had the same teachers in the school they both attended. When Szejnbach died unexpectedly of typhoid fever, Rembek remembered him with sorrow, recalling their interesting conversations with affection and describing his funeral in detail. Later on, he commemorated Szejnbach in *Nagan* by naming one of his Jewish characters after him. Nevertheless, the friendship with Szejnbach did not change Rembek's mind about other Jews. Thus, he had no qualms about bullying another Jewish soldier Wasserman for being shy and fearful, or derogatively describing an officer as "a Jew from Galicia, an exceptional coward, and a bluffer, who had no idea about artillery." And so it is not surprising that he "gladly accepted" his dismissal.

Later on in civilian life, Rembek was sometimes friendly toward Jews. In his diary entry of May 24, 1922, he mentioned that he did not like working for the newspaper *Kurier gnieziński* because it sided too much with Endecja,⁹ then proudly noted to have spoken twice in defense of a woman colleague who wrote an article which "presented a favorable view of the Jews."

Finally, in the single undated entry of 1923, Rembek presents a list of his friends in Warsaw, which included a Jew, Maksymilian Tejchner. Rembek's characterization of Tejchner highlights his divided mind about Jews:

Tejchner, a Jew from Sosnowiec, has just passed his MD exams. He is a hard-working, highly cultured man, but so absorbed in gynecology that he sees everything through his professional perspective. His principles are completely materialistic, and therefore Bolshevik. He is a seducer of a demonic appearance. Apart from that, he possesses the flaws of his race: he is dirty, cowardly and greedy.

⁹ Narodowa Demokracja, a nationalist, fascist and extremely anti-Semitic movement.

The incongruities of this portrait – Tejchner was a dirty doctor, a greedy Bolshevik, a cultured medical specialist, and a sex demon practicing gynecology – evince Rembek’s thoughtless integration of the stereotypical view of the Jew. Yet his anti-Semitic prejudices notwithstanding, Rembek considered Tejchner a friend. The ambivalent attitude of *Dzienniki* toward Jews disappears in the interwar fiction. Here, the special destiny of the Poles and their chosenness must be affirmed with the consciousness of the presence of equally patriotic, but Graceless Jews, who are conscious of their lost destiny as the Chosen People.

INTERWAR FICTION: THE POLISH MESSIANIC DESTINY
AND THE AFFIRMING JEWISH WITNESS

The presence of Jews in Rembek’s fiction is indispensable to the theological fundamentals of his nationalist ideology. A devout Catholic Rembek adhered to the vision of Poland’s Christ-like destiny propounded by the nineteenth-century romantic poets with its obligation to “spread the idea of Christian morality among the nations.” As Rembek’s prewar response, the survey “Literature and the Soldier” shows, in his ideological schema, that the messianic promise of the Polish people was ineluctably intertwined with the national mission of chivalric military struggle for independence.

The Jews in Rembek’s interwar literature are active participants in the military life of Poland while serving as witnesses who corroborate Poland’s special religious destiny. As ardent patriots, these Jewish soldiers fight for the independence of Poland on a par with their Polish comrades; as Jews, however, they are unable to internalize the messianic destiny of the Christian Poles. The perennially frustrated yearnings of these Jews to integrate into the Polish life of faith affirm the superior position of the Christian Poles.

In his interwar fiction, the novella *Dojrzałe kłosa* [Ripe spikes] and the novel *Nagan*, polonized Jewish characters – both named Szwarc, both officer cadets – fight fearlessly in defense of independent Poland against the Bolshevik invader. Their patriotic valor demonstrates their indubitable love for the Polish motherland; it also signifies unfulfilled aspiration to find faith in Christian Providence. Having abandoned their Jewish origins – though, as the narrator makes clear, they still look and behave like stereotypical Jews – both Szwarcs are aware of their inability to embrace the Christian religion. Excluded from Christ’s grace, they find themselves in an existential limbo. The theological no-man’s-land of the Jewish soldiers is of fundamental importance to Rembek’s national-religious *Weltanschauung*. Both the desire of these Jewish characters to access Christian faith and their consciousness of their exclusion testify to the messianic promise of the Poles, who in Rembek’s view are all Christian soldiers.

The officer cadet Szwarc in *Dojrzałe kłosa* was proud to serve in a fighting unit which “protected him from objections to his Jewish origins.”¹⁰ Wishing to

¹⁰ Stanisław Rembek, *Dojrzałe kłosa*, in idem, *Cygaro Churchilla* [Churchill’s cigar], ed. Maryla Łatuszyńska (Warsaw: Agawa, 2004), 105.

prove his loyalty and courage, he undertakes to lead a dangerous military operation, which he quickly realizes is doomed to failure. Indeed, the mission fails and Szwarc and his soldiers face inevitable death. What preoccupies Szwarc at this critical moment is his inability to find faith in divine providence: “Having rejected his native faith, he never stopped believing in God [...] and searched for the Truth to the point of exhaustion.”¹¹ While he believes in the existence of God, he is unable to put trust in divine mercy and the grace of salvation.

When the situation on the battlefield gets desperate, a mysterious figure wearing the badge of a paramedic appears. But the man does not attend to the maimed bodies; rather, in an awe-inspiring manner, he sets out to save souls by demanding the dying soldiers to confess their sins and affirm their faith in God. Finally, he engages in a theological exchange with Szwarc. In response to Szwarc’s demand for evidence of a merciful God, the priest postulates that God has already showed his love and mercy when he revealed himself to humanity in the man Jesus. Eventually, just before his death, Szwarc relinquishes his doubts and experiences in a redeeming epiphany: “Everything became clear and there was nothing more to discuss and he believed in everything this stranger was telling him.” Having been granted the love of Jesus, he enters a state of grace and is baptized at the very moment of death:

Suddenly he saw the priest above him. He was moving his hand above him speaking something solemnly. The cadet officer felt drops of water on his face though the sky was brightening [...]. “Are you Elijah?” he said with last breath.¹²

Szwarc’s acknowledgment of Elijah, to whom both Jesus and John the Baptist are compared in the New Testament, attests to his baptism. He remains on the battlefield, dead but with his eyes wide open to finally see the Truth.

Like his namesake in *Dojrzałe kłosa* Szwarc in *Nagan*, “even though from Jewish origins, had a hot and generous Polish heart.”¹³ Yet despite his loyalty and readiness for patriotic self-sacrifice, he was considered less chivalrous and more cowardly than a Polish-born soldier. Szwarc was quite aware of this biased opinion. “Had I been a Catholic Pole,” he complains to his Polish friend, “I could have deserted from the army, instead of fighting so many years for Poland. I could have been the worst coward and crook and nobody would have blamed me for anything.”¹⁴ When his friend suggests conversion, Szwarc does not protest the unfairness of such a solution. Instead, he confesses a theological predicament:

I would have liked to convert. Not in order to attain a higher social standing – it would have rather held me back socially – but only because I like your faith. I have studied it. But I cannot believe it. I lack something. Perhaps something your priests call sacrificial grace [...]. It is different to see the beauty of a faith from putting one’s trust in it. In the meantime, I don’t believe in anything. I am still searching.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibidem, 110.

¹² Ibidem, 130.

¹³ Stanisław Rembek, *Nagan* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1990), 176.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 178.

¹⁵ Ibidem, 179.

The Jew's perception of his origins as a fate which precludes grace affirms the Christian Pole's inherent state of grace, which enables faith in salvation that is unattainable to the Jews. In Rembek's theological view, the Jew may admire the beauty of Christian virtues and appreciate Christian dogma, but he cannot accept the Christian message, nor can he surrender to its attraction and make it internally his own. Szwarc's frustrated aspiration to espouse Catholicism serves to affirm the superiority of the Polish nation. From a theological perspective, the recognition that the Jew, who was the descendant of the first Chosen People, has no access to Divine Grace, which now belongs to the Polish people, is quintessential to the Polish messianic mission. Unlike the typical rationalization of anti-Semitism as a response to the Jewish refusal to receive Christ the Redeemer, in Rembek's fiction the Jew desires Christian redemption from which he is ineluctably excluded (at least in his lifetime, as is shown in the case of the first Szwarc). This is an important distinction, because it implies Rembek's consideration of the Jew, especially a Jewish soldier-patriot, as an indispensable witness validating the Poles' special Christian destiny.

It behooves me to conclude this discussion of Rembek's interwar vision of the Jew as an indispensable witness, who attests to Polish unquestionable courage, heroism, chivalry, and a special messianic destiny with a reference to his post-war 1947 novel, *Wyroki Franciszka Kłosa* [The sentence of Franciszek Kłos]. The post-war novel illuminates the seriousness of Rembek's interwar conviction of the presence of the Jews as witnesses of Polish messianic destiny. The novel focuses on the general moral disintegration of the Poles under the occupation, and especially with regard to Jews. The deliberate engagement of the Poles in hunting Jews, denouncing them to the Gestapo, and murdering them in cold blood exerted the tremendous cost of the loss of Polish chosenness. The collaboration with the German enemy in the implementation of the Final Solution stripped the Polish people of their special position among the nations. Their willing participation in the murder of the Jewish witness decreed their unequivocal and irredeemable fall from Grace.

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Summary

Rembek's conviction of Polish "chosenness" is expressed in the characterizations of the Jewish protagonists in his fiction. While Rembek's diaristic writing reveals his anti-Semitic prejudices, in his novella *Dojrzałe kłosa* [Ripe spikes], and novel *Nagan* [Revolver] he portrays the Jews as patriotic officers fighting for Poland. These characterizations of the Jews highlighted Poland's democratic open-mindedness toward its Jewish citizens. Nonetheless, as Jews they were excluded from the nation's Christian destiny. Time and again, the Jewish officers in Rembek's fiction articulate their despondency over their failure to accept Christ despite their irresistible attraction to the Christian faith. The failure points to their inability to achieve grace. Their sense of religious inadequacy elucidates a theological perspective which posits that a Jewish presence was indispensable to Poland's redemptive destiny; the Jew as an affirming witness sanctioned the Polish claim to a messianic calling. To achieve legitimacy, the Polish national messianic mission needed to be acknowledged by Jews. The perspective in Rembek's fiction illuminates an important facet in the complexity of the Polish-Jewish relationships in reborn Poland.

Adj. Izabela Ślusarek