

EBRD Literature Prize 2021

Don't mention the war: Szczepan Twardoch's *The King of Warsaw*

It is 1937 in Warsaw – a city of not one but two populations, one Slav, one Jewish. Both go in for flamboyant Tarantino-type violence – whether it's gun-toting gangsters, corrupt politicians with uniformed stooges, the outwardly respectable family men who attack girls in brothel bedrooms, or angry socialists and nationalists clashing in the streets. But no one does violence more elegantly than heavyweight boxer Jakub Szapiro. Tattooed with the Hebrew word MAVET, meaning death, and a sword, he doubles up as a gangster. He wears silk shirts, drives a sleek car and has all the ladies sighing.

The first novel by author Szczepan Twardoch to be translated into English takes a subject that is strikingly unusual for an English-speaking readership. The history of the Jews of Poland dates back a millennium; Poland was the home of the biggest and most significant Jewish community in the world until the Nazis destroyed it and dealt a huge blow to its language, Yiddish. Although an English-language narrative of the Shoah has taken shape in the past generation, partly through movies like Schindler's List, this book is unusual in looking back beyond the dreadful ending and painting a fictional picture of how Jews and Slavs might have lived together in a city which itself no longer exists in its pre-1939 shape. In some ways, then, this is the story of the 20th century.

The King of Warsaw tells the story of that city, hurtling towards a new kind of violence so extreme it can't yet even be imagined – a future Holocaust, foreshadowed only by hallucinatory glimpses of a giant sperm whale, Litani, hovering overhead and singing songs of death.

The sweeping plot offers a panoramic view of Jakub Szapiro's world – his family, his gangster associates, his deals with power, and his plans for escape to Palestine if it all goes wrong - through the eyes of a skinny teenage Jewish boy whose father Szapiro has killed for non-payment of debt. Overwhelmed by the power Szapiro projects, the boy walks out on his own grieving family and goes to live with Szapiro's, to learn to be a boxer and a strongman like his hero.

Or is this really what is happening? Uncertainty is built in from the first page, when this boy says, "my name is Moyzesz Bernsztajn, I am seventeen, and I don't exist." We're told this is because he later became a general in modern Israel. It is only at the very end that the whole grand-opera pre-war story turns upside down, and a truth

emerges that is sadder than any solution the reader could have guessed at along the way.

As an admiring review in the *Irish Times* comments: “The book’s ingenuity stems from the way it uses point of view. We float like a butterfly around our central story...But arguably what’s most impressive about *The King of Warsaw* is the architecture of the words on the page...how do you read a story told by nobody? Twardoch is a deft writer. On this insecure foundation he lays a whole world. The reader goes along, despite all warning. Then Twardoch, somehow, collapses everything, leaving us to come to in a different story altogether, as though we’ve been struck a blow.”

Or, as Twardoch himself puts it: “I decided to have this unreliable narrator because for me it shows something quite interesting about the nature of human memory, the unreliability of human memory. Everything we remember is something of a hallucination, I think.”

Twardoch, a rising literary star, has been rewarded for his work with honours including the Brücke Berlin Preis, Le Prix du Livre Européen, and Nike Literary Award: Audience Award.

Yet, writing a story with such strong Jewish themes was a bold move for a non-Jewish author in a country where this history still resonates so strongly. The plot arose, Twardoch says, from a piece of research that didn’t make it into his previous novel, *Morphine*, which takes place in the first months of the German occupation of Warsaw. It was about a real-life character – about a boxer who later became a policeman in the Warsaw Ghetto – and the starting-point for Szapiro.

The search for authenticity dominated his writing process. Twardoch learned boxing. The book’s chapters are named with Hebrew letters. And many of the dialogues between Jewish characters are given in old Warsaw Yiddish. (Since Twardoch doesn’t know Yiddish himself, he wrote them in Polish and got them translated). “It was very important to me to show somehow this multilingual world of pre-war Warsaw, these two Warsaws which were meeting on various levels, in various ways, sometimes violent, sometimes amicable. Without the two languages, the setting of the novel wouldn’t have been so convincing.”

Translator Sean Gasper Bye also had his work cut out getting to grips with the book’s Yiddish elements. “It’s written in the original text with Polish phonetics, which I knew I would have to change for the English edition. So I also worked with a Yiddish consultant to make sure that the Warsaw dialect of Yiddish was preserved for the English edition. I know from my friends in Yiddish and Jewish studies here that that’s

something they have really appreciated about the book, seeing that cultural specificity represented on the page in a way that it usually is not.”

That was just one part of the challenge in creating an English-language version of the book, which involved a lot of research, he adds: “I’m not Polish or Jewish or a historian, so there were a lot of things I had maybe heard about but didn’t know much detail on. And Szczepan goes into so much detail. I understood right away that the authenticity of the setting and language and characters was a really key part of the book’s appeal. So I did my own research. I even pulled up a map of 1937 Warsaw, and I would follow the streets with my finger as I was translating, so I could understand exactly what was going on. It helps, you know. Many of the buildings in the text were real buildings, and you can find real pictures of them online, so when there were passages describing the particular look of a particular place I could make sure that I was finding the right English words and putting it the way I would put it in English.”

One important feature of the book is the gangster slang some characters use, adds Gasper Bye. “The characters are very specific in terms of class and educational background and even native language. I wanted it to sound like a gangster novel and tick all those *film noir* boxes for my English-language readers, so I was doing things like reading Raymond Chandler and watching *Chinatown* and trying to replicate the sounds of that kind of speech - making sure that the characters all sounded different from one another, because they do in Polish. They have very clearly defined voices. And I think the characters are one of the real strengths of this book - they had to work for the book to work.”

Really nailing the gangster talk was the way this translator chose to bring out for foreigners an underlying dynamic that he believes Polish readers would automatically be aware of. “There is a game of expectations being played. The image of this period in Polish history is very romanticised; as a Polish reader, you’re going to expect it to be presented in a particular way. But Szczepan has you looking at it through a Jewish cultural lens, and also through this distorted perspective of the narrator - so there’s this kind of push and pull between what you think the story’s going to be like and what it actually is.”

“I knew that for an English reader that calculus was going to be different, because they wouldn’t know the historical material or the background. I tried to recreate that dynamic by really leaning into the gangster aspect, the *noir* aspect, because that would be familiar. And so the expectations game could be around what you think a *noir* story is going to be like and then having it in this other setting, in this very culturally specific Jewish space.”

Yet what makes the book stand out most, he believes, is its commitment to showing the world the Holocaust grew out of. “The Holocaust plays such a huge role in collective memory in Poland and in the English-speaking world. Again there’s a whole set of expectations around how the Holocaust is presented in culture. In the English-speaking world there’s increasing interest in what Jewish life looked like before the Holocaust – not treating European Jewish history as just this story of tragedy and extermination, but seeing the Jewish people who lived in Europe before the war as fully rounded, three-dimensional characters rather than symbols of martyrdom. And so for me that was one of the things that was really important about this book: that it’s a really well researched, really well rounded and really compelling portrait of Jewish life - and I mean specifically of LIFE - in a way that I thought would be new for English-language readers, new in a way that would really be appreciated.”

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