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Stefan Żeromski

The Coming Spring

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Stefan Żeromski

Translated by Bill Johnston

CEU PRESS

Central European University Press

Budapest • New York

First published in Polish as *Przedwiośnie* in 1924

Published in 2007 by

Central European University Press
An imprint of the
Central European University Share Company
Nádor utca 11, H-1051 Budapest, Hungary
Tel: +36-1-327-3138 or 327-3000
Fax: +36-1-327-3183
E-mail: ceupress@ceu.hu
Website: www.ceupress.com

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This translation was supported by a fellowship
from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

ISBN 978-963-7326-89-9
ISSN 1418-0162

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Zeromski, Stefan, 1864-1925.
[Przedwiosnie. English]
The Coming Spring / Stefan Zeromski ; translated by Bill Johnston. -- 1st ed.
p. cm. -- (Central European classics)
ISBN 978-9637326899 (pbk.)
I. Johnston, Bill. II. Title. III. Series.

PG7158.Z4P7913 2007
891.8'536--dc22
2007014657

Printed in Hungary by
Akadémiai Nyomda, Martonvásár

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Introduction

The Coming Spring was Stefan Żeromski's last novel. Finished in September 1924, it was published in the last days of that year (with a 1925 publication date); Żeromski died on November 20, 1925.

For most of his life Żeromski had been engaged in the cause of Polish independence and in issues of social justice. He was born in 1864 near Kielce in what is now central Poland and then was in the Russian-occupied partition of the country. His birth during the final throes of the failed January Uprising (1863–64) against the Russians has led to his being dubbed "the posthumous child" of that uprising. He devoted his first novels, *The Labors of Sisyphus* (Syzyfowe prace, 1897) and *The Homeless* (Ludzie bezdomni, 1900), to social issues such as poverty and to the political struggle for independence under the oppressive rule of the Russian Empire. The heroes and heroines of his novels and stories were often social activists. Subsequent historical novels such as *Ashes* (Popioły, 1904) and *The Faithful River* (Wierna rzeka, 1912) offered patriotic yet far from uncritical accounts of crucial moments in Polish history.

Independence for Poland finally came in 1919, in the aftermath of World War I. The very model of a com-

mitted public intellectual, Żeromski plunged himself into journalistic activity and into work for the newly independent country. By this time he was a nationwide celebrity, and the foremost living author of his time—"the national writer," as leading literary critic Wacław Borowy called him. Lionized by the new government, he was showered with honors, culminating in the National Literary Prize in 1922 and, in 1924, the gift of an apartment in the Royal Castle in Warsaw.

Yet despite his shining career, these years were not happy ones for Żeromski. The fledgling country faced vast and overwhelming tasks in every area of public life, from agriculture and industry to health care and social welfare; worse, there were signs that the necessary progress was not being made. It was this frustration that lies at the heart of *The Coming Spring*. Żeromski portrays the early years of the Polish state, not from the point of view of an aging insider like himself, but from that of a young man from the outside, who is able to see the situation with a fresh eye. Furthermore, Cezary Baryka, the hero of the novel, has communist sympathies, which have left him with a particular sensitivity to the position of the poor and downtrodden. The intellectual thrust of the novel draws its power from Baryka's dilemma—he is well aware of the horrors that communism can bring, having witnessed the Russian Revolution at first hand in Azerbaijan and in Russia itself; yet he cannot see a better way of introducing the massive changes that Poland needs.

Baryka's outsider status, and especially his experiences of revolution, offer Żeromski other possibilities too.

The central section of the novel, "Nawłoć," takes place in a country home belonging to a family of landed gentry, the Wielosławskis. This sort of territory was extremely familiar to Polish readers of the time—most notably from *Pan Tadeusz*, Adam Mickiewicz's masterful epic poem of 1834, which is a nostalgic paean to the delights of life in such a home. Yet Żeromski's manor house is infused with new and sinister themes. The chilling moment when Cezary grabs a sugar bowl and tries to warn his friend Hipolit that for this object alone, his servants could turn on their masters and murder them—such a moment would have been unthinkable in *Pan Tadeusz*, in which the thoughts and desires of the servants were rarely if ever present, and could never have been conceived of as hostile. In this, Żeromski provides a brilliant intertextual dialogue in which post-Marxian class consciousness, and the historical experience of the Russian Revolution, leads to a radically different rereading of a familiar literary trope in Polish Romantic literature.

Despite Żeromski's often rather Gothic turn of phrase and his dramatic imagery, *The Coming Spring* is to a significant extent a faithful portrait of Polish society in the early 1920's. The author was well informed about the new state, and drew on numerous documentary sources in presenting his picture. Żeromski had long been concerned with the plight of the poor and the destitute, as his earlier novels and short stories clearly show. In *The Coming Spring* we see up close the parlous condition of both urban and rural poor, in Parts Three and Two of the novel respectively. It is obvious that at one level, the

book was intended to alert the country to the immense suffering and hopelessness of those least capable of fending for themselves.

As a piece of literature, the novel is not by any means perfect. Many critics have complained that it is somewhat unstructured; some have even suggested that the relatively self-contained "Nawłoć" would function better as a separate novella. The first part of the book contains certain factual errors, and was largely set in a location (Baku, the present-day capital of Azerbaijan) that Żeromski had never visited. The third part, in turn, is journalistic at times. In addition to all this, the author inclined to over-writing, and his style can sound exalted to the present-day ear (as Czesław Miłosz put it in his *History of Polish Literature*, Żeromski was "rather too inclined toward poetry disguised as the narrative of novels"). Nevertheless, the author of *The Coming Spring* knows how to tell a story, and his sincerity, urgency, and eye for the telling detail, combine to produce a narrative that is compelling for all its shortcomings. There are episodes in the book that, even on repeated readings, take one's breath away.

Perhaps of as much interest as the novel's literary qualities is the story of its reception in Poland. The publication of *The Coming Spring* unleashed a massive controversy about the book and about Żeromski's reputation and standing. The author was accused of pro-communist sentiments, of depraving Polish youth, and of anti-Polishness. He came under particular attack by the right-wing Endecja or National Democrats, who were appalled at various aspects of the book, especially

its apparent revolutionary leanings. Żeromski was accused by many of having communist sympathies himself, and of being an apologist for terrorism and revolution. (This accusation was, of course, all the more harsh in light of the fact that only a couple of years earlier, Poland had been at war with the Soviet Union—as Żeromski describes at the beginning of Part Two of *The Coming Spring*.). Some even called for his National Literary Prize to be revoked. At the same time, certain extreme right-wing anti-Semites congratulated him on identifying the root of the issue as the "Jewish problem" (which was not at all the author's intention); others of the same camp berated him for not properly depicting the Jewish threat. As if these attacks and misrepresentations were not enough, Żeromski was sued for libel by Leon Kajdan, the chief of police mentioned by name in Part Three of the book and accused of torturing political prisoners.

Upon reflection, we should see that such reactions in fact ironically point to a richer understanding of the book. *The Coming Spring* is a great novel precisely because it is *not* communist propaganda (just as it is equally not an anti-Jewish diatribe). Żeromski was fully aware of the pitfalls of communism—surely no more evidence is needed of this than the wrenching descriptions of the October Revolution and the emerging Soviet system in Part One of the book. Yet he had the intellectual courage to ask himself: What might a young, disaffected individual—even one who had seen the horrors of revolution up close—find attractive about communism in present-day Poland? This novel provides an answer. It was a

hugely painful one for Żeromski and for those of his generation who had fought so hard for the country's independence. But Żeromski had the intellectual honesty and clarity to see that for a committed yet impatient young person like Baryka, the patriotic rhetoric of pre-independence Poland had little value when poverty, inequality, and injustice stared one in the face. The character of Gajowiec is often seen as a *porte-parole* for Żeromski himself; yet characteristically, if the author did indeed insert himself into the novel in such a way, he made it very clear that his own words and arguments were unconvincing to his hero, and often for good reason.

Is *The Coming Spring* ultimately an optimistic novel? The (ambiguous) answer to this question lies in its title. The Polish title, *Przedwiośnie*, is one word—a noun referring to the period of the year, usually in early March, when winter is clearly over yet the spring has not begun. (German has an equivalent—Vorfrühling—but English does not; an inelegant but accurate rendering might be "the pre-spring.") This would imply that, in fact, things will get better, and that the manifold problems described in the pages of the novel are but a passing phase. Yet the title might equally well be ironic. It seems to have been taken from the vocabulary of Gajowiec, or indeed of the communists, rather than of Żeromski's antagonist Cezary Baryka himself. In this regard, we must accept that the author does not make it clear to what extent he believes we should have grounds for hope.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the novel has a great deal to say to the contemporary world. The aftermath of 1989 was not unlike the upheavals following the

First World War—both periods saw the collapse of empires and the emergence of many new nation states from the rubble. In both cases, the euphoria of independence was soon followed by the realization that self-determination did little if anything to help solve profound social and political problems. This is nowhere more true than in Poland itself, where the postcommunist period has been marked by huge difficulties in such areas as employment, health care, and governmental oversight. It has also seen a proliferation of rhetorical posturing that obscures the true nature of the issues. As befits a novelist, Żeromski offers no easy solutions to these troubles; his contribution is to have had the courage to look beyond the rhetoric and to depict the life of a newly independent country as it really was.

Bill Johnston
Bloomington, Indiana
January 2007

This work is dedicated
to Mr. Konrad Czarnocki[1]
as a token of friendship

Stefan Żeromski

[1] An attaché at the Polish embassy in Sweden in the years 1919–1924, who took an active part in the attempts to nominate Żeromski for the Nobel Prize; he and Żeromski corresponded at length during this time.

A Genealogy

It's not a question here, dammit, of a coat of arms! Nor of a long line of ancestors with the backs of their heads shaved in the old noble style, sporting drooping Sarmatian[1] moustaches and curved swords; nor of coiffured great-grandmammas in low-cut dresses. A father and a mother—that was the entire genealogy, as it often is in our land in the stories of modern people without a past. One grandfather must be mentioned, and one sole great-grandfather ought to be noted. We wish to respect the aversion, saturated with a Semitic spirit and partiality, that modern people feel toward burdening their memory with the knowledge of which church or which cemetery a given forefather is buried in.

So then—the father bore the surname Baryka and the Christian name Seweryn, which out in the expanses of Russia did not grate overly upon the ear. "Severyan Grigorevich Baryka"—it attracted no attention and went unnoticed. The mother was invisible, alone unto herself—a very ordinary Jadwiga Dąbrowska from Siedlce.

[1] In the traditional Polish style.

She had spent almost her whole life in a slew of different provinces and districts of Russia, yet had never learned the Russian language well, and in her mind she continued to dwell not in the Urals or Baku, not in Symbirsk or even Tula, but back in Siedlce. It was in Siedlce alone—though her information came only from letters and newspapers—where things took place that were important and interesting, that were worthy objects for her emotions, her memory, and her longing. Everything else, aside from her husband and her son, was an incidental, temporary, transient combination of events and things that made her yearn all the more for her Siedlce. Once, in an exquisite town named Zykh, an oasis in the desert of oilfields that was Baku, on the bay of the Apsheron peninsula, fragrant with southern flowers and plants, where the limpid sea fills the shadowy groves of the coast with a soft murmur—Mrs. Baryka had nothing more pressing to say than to remark that in Sekuła near Siedlce there was "also" a very beautiful pond, and in addition in Rakowiec there were meadows that really were more beautiful than anything in the world, and that when the moonlight shone on the Muchawka and was reflected in the millpool. . . There followed the inevitable snuffling during a protracted recollection of the charms of some waterlogged meadows near Iganie, the Stoczek woods, and even the main road to Mordy, which—God help us!—as she remembered it, was replete not only with mud, dust, and permanent potholes, but also with enchantment.

Immediately upon her arrival in Russia, when she was newly married, Mrs. Jadwiga Baryka (née Dąbrowska)

had made a name for herself in the local Polish community by means of a conversation she had had with a coachman driving her across Moscow. As the carriage in which she was riding jolted unmercifully over the uneven pavement, the driver merely sitting there on his box, ceremonially and as it happens officially bulging in every direction, she berated the fellow in faulty Russian: "*You've an awful lot of pant-holes here!*" She repeated this rebuke once, twice, and a third time as she grew more and more impatient, until there came the catastrophic moment. The coachman kept looking round at her indignantly, till she repeated her complaint about the "pant-holes" one more time, at which point he stopped his gray horse and yelled:

"What do you keep going on about my pants for, ma'am! So they're full of holes! Damn it, woman! So they're full of holes. What the hell is it to you!"[2]

Another time, by now the wife of a highly placed executive, in seeking to do what she could to help her husband succeed and win promotion she put a veritable spoke in his wheel with her inadequate command of the finer points of the Russian tongue. It was at a public ball in a provincial capital in the foothills of the Urals. The occasion was graced by the presence of the governor of the province along with his teenage daughter. After one of the waltzes Mrs. Baryka had the good fortune to find herself next to this daughter and wished to engage in pleasant conversation with the future successor of the

[2] Italics indicate that the text is in Russian in the original.

local potentate. She hoped to take advantage of the moment and assist her husband by winning the favors of the governor's daughter. But she couldn't think how to begin the conversation; she kept hesitating, at a loss what to say.… At last something came to mind! Noticing a beautiful rose pinned to the delightful girl's bodice, Mrs. Baryka exclaimed in a transport of admiration and endless adoring smiles:

"What a lovely red nose you have!"

She was utterly astonished, nay, horrified, when the gubernatorial offspring started calling to her father in a languid, painful, fluty voice:

"Papa! Papa! I'm being insulted!"

How could Mrs. Jadwiga Baryka (née Dąbrowska) have known that one little letter could make such a difference!

As for her engagement and marriage to Seweryn Baryka, it had taken place in a most unusual way.

Already well-situated, healthy, and in the prime of life, the handsome "young man" had decided to marry, in his home country of course. He took a month's leave and in the time he had at his disposal, minus the traveling, he arranged everything: he found himself a life companion, wooed in the appropriate fashion, won the consent of her parents, "was reciprocated" (though the young lady wept bitterly for something or someone), got married, completed the return journey and was not one minute late in resuming his position in the foothills of the central Urals.

Seweryn Baryka had not had any special education in his youth and did not have a particular profession. When

the time had come for it, he had not much felt like occupying his head with learning, and subsequently things had fallen out in such a way that it was too late to undertake specific studies. For quite some time, then, he was that common sort of person who seeks any employment whatsoever. When he found something that was not quite right for him, on the quiet he would look around for something more profitable, in any field. He was concerned only with the size of his salary and with having an apartment, heating, lighting, dividends and suchlike supplements; what he did for those dividends was a matter of complete indifference to him. It should be added that Seweryn Baryka was a man of the most unalloyed honesty, and for the highest salary and the largest apartment he would not have done anything improper. But within the boundaries the middle-class eye sets up between good and evil in this world, he was prepared to undertake anything that his "elders and betters" instructed him to.

Pre-war Russia was an ideal arena for people of this type to make money, especially those who came from "the Kingdom."[3] The knowledge they had acquired in grammar school, their innate intelligence, which accompanies the seeker of a post along with his health and springs up at a moment's notice, unsown and untended; endurance, courage, cheerfulness and a hint of scorn for the "Russki" for whom one works, yet whom one nevertheless controls—all these things paved the way from

[3] I.e. the Congress Kingdom of Poland—an earlier name for the part of Poland that fell under the Russian partition.

lower to higher positions. It must be acknowledged that a not unimportant part in all this was played by connections—quiet, humble well-wishers leading one by the hand from lower-placed countrymen to those ever higher up, who had a foot or an elbow firmly planted on that Russian ladder.

Within a short time from the moment of the wedding in Siedlce, Seweryn Baryka was not only the father of a handsome child—who was christened Cezary Grzegorz—but was also a newly wealthy man with money in the bank. In fairness it must be said that he led a quiet life and did not spend his money on just anything. He scraped and saved, amassing if not actual currency in gold, then objects: furniture, carpets, jewelry, even paintings, even books—not necessarily to pore over them, but rather as valuables. Yet when the need arose to mingle in refined and well-read circles, there also arose the unavoidable necessity of reading those expensive Polish rarities in their sumptuous bindings. From these repeated readings, in turn, a certain spirit entered his life, hovering there like a faint, subtle, and indistinct aroma.

Among the volumes bound magnificently in gilded leather, stamped, and with inscribed titles, there was one small, inconspicuous tome that was looked after with especial solicitude, like the most valuable jewel in a treasury. It was a short memoir from the 1831 uprising,[4] written and published anonymously outside Poland and concerning General Józef Dwernicki's expedition to

[4] The November Uprising of 1830–1831 in the Russian partition.

Beresteczko and Radziwiłłów. Amid the endless vicissitudes, described in great detail and in a most confused manner, on page thirty-seven there appeared the information that among the fifteen citizens of Rus who joined the uprising and supported it with their entire estate, there was a certain Kalikst Grzegorz Baryka, owner of Sołowijówka and adjoining properties. This was Seweryn Baryka's grandfather in a direct line. Grandfather Kalikst had, as the saying goes, done terribly out of his involvement in the uprising. Following the Battle of Boremle on the Styr River, General Dwernicki had been under pressure from the superior forces of the Russian General Rüdiger and at Lulińce had been forced to cross the dry border into Austrian Galicia; the Russian government subsequently brought their unmitigated fury down upon all those who had supported the rebellion. Sołowijówka was confiscated; the family home was first thoroughly looted, then razed to the ground, and grandfather Kalikst had to leave on the last horse from his once-rich stables and enter a dark and drab world of post-uprising poverty—from being a master he became a pauper who had to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow in foreign lands.

The text containing this information—presented dryly and without sentimentality yet in some detail—had been bracketed on both sides of the page by the son of grandfather Kalikst and the father of Seweryn. For the latter two individuals, all that remained of the aforementioned Sołowijówka and adjoining properties was the version given in the slim little book and a legend passed down by word of mouth. Sołowijówka became a family

myth, a tale told in constantly changing ways, about something distant, illustrious, noble, and immense.

The legend alone, as is usually the case with legends, magnified grandfather's wealth, multiplied his possessions, and gave his deeds the rank of almost superhuman achievement. A dry note in an obscure memoir by a nameless author became a spindle on which was wound the slender, priceless, mysterious thread of faith of his scions. They believed that in some way they were superior, and this gave them pride. On the title page of the book Seweryn's father had written in large letters an instruction that may have been addressed to his only son, or perhaps to a whole series of descendants: "Guard this with your life!"

And indeed Seweryn Baryka guarded the book with his life. It traveled with him the length and breadth of Russia, lying quietly at the bottom of his trunk among his dirty shirts and used underwear, alongside unlovely socks and drafts of letters of application to various dignitaries, when the heir of that splendid and impulsive grandfather was poor as a church mouse. Later it was kept in the drawer of a small table along with his most important documents. It then found its way into the briefcase of a businessman, a secret compartment in a dignitary's desk, and finally into a glass-doored cabinet crammed with bronzes, costly antiques, rare editions and fine bindings.

It cannot be said that the contents of the little historical diary had any especially deep connection with Seweryn Baryka's spiritual life. Yet it was a distant, dreamlike, and alluring presence in that life. The book con-

tained something as if from a religion that one does not even profess or practice, yet which one respectfully tolerates. It contained something of the scent of a springtime flower, which a strong, practical person busy with his affairs does not notice even if he looks at it, but which all the same gazes at him faithfully from low down in the shade, and all the same pours out its fragrance in his direction. Furthermore, a certain family pride and secret ambition had grown up around the modest little book: they hadn't come from nowhere, hang it, like one of those people whom one encounters during one's career and to whom one has to bow down to the ground.

Moving from lower to higher posts, and dwelling in various cities in turn, Seweryn Baryka eventually found himself in Baku, in the oil "mines" as the Russians called them; by now he was a senior executive with a whole department under his control. His former humble quarters had been exchanged for a splendid apartment whose tiled floors were covered with Persian carpets. On the carpets stood furniture that was nothing artistic but was simply expensive, beneath costly Caucasian silks. Thick cloths lay on the tables, while the walls were decorated with genuine "hand-painted" oils by painters whose work cost as much in the furniture stores as the furniture itself. A multitude of gold and silver dishes were kept in oak and walnut cabinets as massive as castle ramparts.

Seweryn Baryka had continued through the years to lead a life of moderation, and had amassed savings of several hundred thousand roubles, set aside in the bank

for a rainy day. He was a highly regarded figure, a dependable individual who enjoyed the respect of all those in the world into which fate had thrown him. He had become a prominent member of the Polish community. His quiet wife, who constantly and ever more insistently sniveled for her home town, had such an influence on her husband that at times…occasionally…he toyed with the idea of returning to Poland, moving his hearth to the banks of the Vistula, and taking up some more permanent job there. But his excellent position in Baku, the money flowing into his coffers in a veritable stream—wellbeing, tranquility—and last but not least this land of milk and honey—all combined to keep him where he was. He had even begun to grow accustomed to his prosperity in this particular place. A warm climate, wonderful and extraordinarily cheap southern fruits, gorgeous silks to be had for a song, inexpensive labor, the opportunity of spending the hot season in Zykh, the comfort and opulence of his home life—all caused him to remain in this country. Unconsciously or subconsciously he was also kept in place by his attachment to the entire system of relations that existed, and to the tremendous might of tsarist Russia, upon which one sat like a fly on a harness that fitted tightly round the neck and sides of a wild, foreign steed.

And so from year to year, musing about a return to Poland and at the same time lining his nest with gold and silver feathers, Seweryn Baryka put all his heart and soul into his little son Cezary or Czaruś, a stout and healthy young fellow. From his earliest years the boy had the most expensive teachers of French, English, Ger-

man, and Polish, and the best and most costly private tutors when he went to grammar school. He was a very good student, and would have been outstanding if his adoring parents had not interfered, with their worries that he might work too much and exhaust himself. In the snug study with its carpet so soft that one's foot was swallowed up in it, as often as possible father and son spent delightful time alone together. When the lad was in first grade, he would lie on his father's breast, his head by his father's, and they would swing back and forth in the rocking chair and kiss their way through the multiplication table or a French fable that the strict French teacher had set for the next day; or they would repeat over and again some short rhyme in Polish so as not to forget the proper pronunciation of that difficult tongue. School had its own influence. Czaruś spoke Russian infinitely better than Polish. It made no difference that only Polish was used at home, nor that all the maids were Polish. The lady of the house quite obviously could not have contributed to her son's russification. Nor could his father; though he fully understood the necessity of knowing the language of the country and placed great importance on such knowledge, by this time he had already begun to have a yen for that delicate, soft, familiar something that came from a distant land. But life itself, imbued with the Russian spirit, took its course.

And thus Czaruś's days passed in the arms of his father and mother, on their laps, and before their adoring eyes.

PART ONE

Houses of Glass

Czaruś had just turned fourteen and graduated from the fourth class to the fifth when Seweryn Baryka was called up to serve as an officer in the reserve. War had broken out. Rapidly, in the space of a few days, the family idyll was shattered. Cezary found himself alone with his mother in a fatherless apartment. Accompanying his father to the troop ship leaving for Astrakhan, he had felt no sorrow whatsoever. It was a novelty! He was occupied by a thousand trifling details—dates, names, and figures, in connection with his father's donning the uniform of an officer. He packed his father's magnificent yellow leather suitcase with its metal fittings, stamped monogram, and abundance of mysterious compartments within. He neither shared nor understood his mother's desperate tears and sobbing, which lasted from morning till night. It was only when his father was on board in the company of other officers, and he was left alone on shore with his mother, and the gangway was pulled away with a clatter—only then was Czaruś overcome by a terror he had never in his life known before. Under the influence of this feeling he stretched out his arms and started shouting like a true child. But the reassuring gestures

that his father's white hands formed in the air calmed him as instantly as that youthful blind pain had struck. It would only be for a short time! Just for maneuvers! The war would be over soon. Just a few weeks. Maybe a month. Two at the most. The Russian steamroller would flatten the enemies' fields, crushing obstacles as if they were carrots or corn, and all would return to normal. That was what everyone was saying, and such an opinion Cezary too had inherited from his departing father.

Returning home from the port with his mother, who was truly as silent as the grave, Cezary was already in a cheerful mood. He was happy about various things, above all the prospect of freedom. His father never ever punished him nor even scolded him; he would tell him off half-jokingly, gently making fun of him. Yet he possessed an unbreakable iron power over his son. Despite his father's mild-mannered smile, despite his polite suggestions and respectful advice, and his good-natured requests made during blandishments and games—no resistance was possible. These were canons and clauses of the will, imposed with a smile amid caresses. It was a despotic rule and an autocracy so firm that nothing, literally nothing, could overcome it. Now that iron band had loosened and fallen away of its own accord. The fearful panic in his mother's eyes—"What will your father say?"—had disappeared. His father was gone from the apartment and from the world, and his absence said: "Do what you will!"

This freedom delighted Czaruś. It terrified his mother.

"What's going to happen now?" she kept whispering as she wrung her hands.

Cezary asked no such questions. He promised his mother he would be obedient, just as if his father were present in his study. He had decided to behave, and reassured his mother with a thousand tender caresses. But deep down, his soul and body were bursting to cut loose. What he couldn't obtain from his mother with willful caprices, he wheedled out of her by charm or by making a scene. Now he got his own way. He did what he felt like. He no longer perceived the boundaries that he had previously been forbidden to cross, and he threw himself left and right, backwards and forwards—so as to take a good look at everything that before had been proscribed. He spent entire days away from home getting up to mischief with his pals, playing games, having adventures and prowling about. When the vacation ended he "attended" grammar school and as before he had French and German, English and Polish lessons at home; but now it was little more than a series of arguments, sometimes even fights. He locked horns with every one of his schoolteachers, started quarrels and conducted endless judicial proceedings, for he constantly experienced "injustices" and "wrongs" that, as a person of honor, he had to avenge in a manner that was both appropriate and recognized as such by the competent authorities, that is to say, his "old" chums in the fifth class. Games—innocent ones, as it happens—gadding about and rascalry absorbed him like some element. In the company of a few old friends he skipped his lessons and roved the neighborhood; he even roamed at night

through the streets, the ravines, and the pathless tracts, among the remains of Zoroastrian temples and the ruins of old mosques.[1]

Once he had broken free of the paternal halter he could tolerate no restraint. His poor mother was at a complete loss; she swam in tears and faded away in her anxiety. At the sight of those bitter tears, which bothered him profoundly, Cezary would improve for a day, at the very most two. On the third he was already up to his tricks again. He would break the Tartars'[2] windows, or clamber onto the flat roofs of the apartment buildings and, unseen, fire his slingshot at the occupants. Elsewhere he drilled a hole in the back wall of a house so that he could spy on the "wives" of a Muslim millionaire as they walked about a treeless yard without their yashmaks or silk veils covering their faces. Another time he organized a caterwauling for a teacher he loathed. At night he would wander without purpose or sense along the unfinished boulevards of the new city, or like a stray dog would simply maunder about the alleyways and the steep, narrow streets of the old town; he would hang about the port or in the filth and fumes of the "black town," as the industrial area was known, or gad about among the geysers spewing salty mud. The need to roam, to career from place to place without rhyme or

[1] In fact there were no such remains and ruins in Baku. Żeromski had never been there and the information he had about Azerbaijan was not all accurate.

[2] Żeromski uses the word "Tartars" to refer to the Azeris; I have followed this practice in the translation.

reason, became a passion and a compulsion. He could not sit in one place. On top of that were games. He played ball, he played strips and pebbles, he played tip-cat, and he threw worn Georgian dice.

Yet Cezary's idle days were filled not just with any occupation whatsoever. He was learning his part in a theater of friends, for a drama of brigandage that was to be played out in secret among the remains of the old fortifications of Baku. There, with the others he constructed hiding places in the caves of the rock and in the labyrinth of old walls where they could conceal forbidden literature—obscene poems by Pushkin and other pornographers.[3] Here too was secreted an ancient revolver without ammunition, and a decorative Georgian kinjal or double-edged dagger, whose stabs "for the moment" were not intended for anyone in particular. Both the revolver and the dagger, folded in colored tissue paper and frequently rewrapped, patiently awaited their destiny. In the meantime, attacks on the bourgeoisie of both Tatar and Armenian persuasion were organized with weaponry of a less military nature—for breaking windows garden variety rocks sufficed.

Cezary's mother was incapable of confining her son at home, ordering him to change his dissolute ways, keeping an eye on him, or tracking down his hiding

[3] Żeromski got into all sorts of trouble because of this line. Mikhail Artsybashev, a Russian émigré writer living at that time in Poland, wrote an open letter to Żeromski protesting against his description of Pushkin as a "pornographer." In his reply Żeromski explained that the word, like much of the narration in the novel, belongs to the perspective of Cezary Baryka, not that of the author.

places. She spent almost all her time waiting for him to come home. Whenever he grabbed his cap and rushed from the apartment, something rose to her throat and took her voice away. She no longer had the strength to ask the rascal not to leave. At first he pretended to do what he was told: he would sit still, be nice to her, and beg her permission to go out and play. Later he grew bolder and more self-assured. In time he became impertinent, derisive, sarcastic, quarrelsome and aggressive. And in the end he began to ignore his mother completely. She gritted her teeth and was silent, worrying for hours on end about her only child.

This foreign city became for her even more foreign—alien, incomprehensible, dangerous, and ominous. After Seweryn left she became afraid of everything here. While her husband was still at home, he was a person, she merely the quiet and humble shadow of that person. Now the shadow had to become an active figure. The shadow had to acquire will, power, decision. How odious was that necessity, how onerous! She had to know everything, anticipate, prevent, give instructions. She lost herself in the confusion of her duties. She didn't know where to begin, where her path was or how she should follow it. She was ashamed and anxious. She experienced one of the harshest kinds of torture—the torture of action imposed on one who is powerless and passive. She was unable to cope, and she suffered because of it. Her concern for her son, who as if out of spite had turned against her, was the last straw. The only relief she found was in the night, when the boy was sound asleep. At such times she could hear his breathing and she knew

he was by her and was in no danger. She herself, however, did not sleep then. She suffered from insomnia. Yet she preferred the sleeplessness of nighttime to the anxiety of the day. Oh, how she loved to lie still on his bed, to curl into the corner and gaze at the boy's lovely head, swathed in a shock of wavy hair, and, as she gazed, to lose herself in reveries about him! How lovely, how adorable was that rascal, that scamp, that gadabout and good-for-nothing!

And what did he dream about—what was going on beneath that delightful straight forehead? What was being seen by those eyes, tight shut under their dark-lashed lids? Some passionate cry comes from his pulsing throat! Some furious, untamed spectacle is taking place before him, for his straight nose tautens like a bowstring; his nostrils quiver and his incomparable lips bare the dread and menace of his beautiful white teeth! What a wolf he is! What unbridled passion lies in that child's sleepy smile! And as she gazed at her only child's face, she fell deep in thought: Who on earth was this boy, in fact? An inscrutable mystery had conceived him within her. He had been small and helpless—a tiny scrap of flesh and blood, a being entirely reliant on her—a fragment of her whole, as if a new organ of her body, an arm or a leg… She had fed him, cared for him, brought him up. From year to year he grew in her arms, before her eyes, in her embrace. His every day depended on her, began from her and finished with her. She poured her strength into him, transferring her life force to him drop by drop. She gave direction to the ways of his blood and set them straight. She enabled him to speak, shout, sing. And now

he was becoming alien and sinister. He was turning against her. Something bad flowed from him toward her. Her boundless love for him was being transformed and diluted into wrongs committed upon her weak body and feeble spirit. If she had not loved him so boundlessly, what difference would it have made to her even if he had gone completely to the dogs and had gotten up to whatever mischief he felt like? But he was striking at her love, and buffeting her with that power with which the paltry remnants of her strength had endowed him.

Often, the day would be breaking by the time she fell into a shallow half-sleep, a brief oblivion in which she was still semi-vigilant. She was awakened by every one of the boy's movements, every time he snored or talked in his sleep. In such states of semi-consciousness she always took refuge from these foreign places "at home," in other words in Siedlce. She heard in the depths of her mind the rumble of a train's wheels and saw the immeasurable expanse of the fields, wildernesses, and pastures of this immense land—Russia—which was her prison. A secret, joyful, truly thievish dream suggested the details of the act: she would take Czaruś, pack a few things in a bundle and make a run for it. Escape from this exile! Run away! She knew each time she awoke that it was impossible and could never happen—that Seweryn would never consent to it. Would he not have the right to say that she had run away because Szymon Gajowiec was in Siedlce?

That name had a magic power for her. It conjured up long-ago spring mornings and summer days that were no more. Once again she was seventeen and had that joy

in her heart that was no more. Knowing perfectly well that it was absolutely ridiculous nonsense, she was once again herself, the young girl of long ago. Once again she loved Szymon Gajowiec in secret, furtively, utterly—just like then. Once again she was utterly loved by that slim, beautiful young man—just like then. She lived her wordless romance. Once again she waited for his declaration—long and longingly. But he never said a word to her! Not one sigh, not one syllable! It was only in his dark, deep eyes that love burned. Oh, it was not a romance, not a crush, not a blithe flirtation, but somber love. How could he be so bold as to declare his love for her, a "young lady of good family" in Siedlce, while he was a poor clerk in the provincial government, who came moreover from the peasantry or minor impoverished gentry somewhere in Podlasie?[4] And so he remained silent, till it was too late! Seweryn arrived and she was given away without discussion. Once again she recalled leaving with her husband for Russia. There she was, standing in the window of the train, a smiling, happy young wife. There were lots of people, all her friends and acquaintances—the whole town. Chatter, flowers, embraces, greetings, wishes. And at the end of the platform, far off, all alone, leaning on a windowsill—him. A moan rent her soul anew. She saw his eyes and his smile, filled with mortal anguish.

She recalled the long-ago magical moments when they would take walks together by the pond in Sekuła, the

[4] A region in the east of Poland.

pond covered with water lilies that was so fixed in her memory. She remembered every word of his from those times—their quiet conversation about the oppression of the Podlasie Uniates,[5] about the torture, the beatings, and the coercion. His soul contained as it were a chapel to the Uniate Church in Podlasie, and to that whole land filled with sorrow and mystery. He alone knew everything; he had read it all in the official files and government papers and in confidential reports. He alone stood over the roads of that land like a solitary cross. And it was to her alone that he entrusted his secrets. And then she betrayed him.…She recalled an outing to Drohiczyn, by rack wagon, in the company of a large group of young people. How merry it was, and how springtime filled their souls!

On the way they made a stop at a little old Uniat chapel, abandoned and marked for demolition. She recalled Gajowiec's eyes, raised toward the painting from the previous century at the far end of the chapel. Oh Lord, she had spurned that man, trampled him underfoot, put his soul to death!…For the thousandth time she recalled the agonizing letter he had written when the news spread that she was marrying Seweryn—a letter six pages long, imploring, begging, tear-stained, delirious. At the time she had torn it into shreds, but the words of that letter lived on in her soul. She read them in her soul, as she had then in the attic, when she had torn her hair out, swooning from despair. At the mention of the

[5] The Uniates of Podlasie were Greco-Catholics. In 1875 the tsarist authorities forced them to convert to the Eastern Orthodox church.

name of that man, whose hand she had never shaken, to whom she had never said an endearing word, the spring of her homeland blossomed in her soul. It was he who had been her teacher, her guide, her quiet master—oh, and her chosen one of all the people on earth! Everything had passed, and a great distance had opened up in time and in space; Czaruś had been born; but that man had not died in her soul. And even if he no longer existed on earth, she blessed his memory.…

Letters arrived with some frequency from her husband. He was at the front, somewhere in East Prussia,[6] near the Mazurian Lakes. His letters were unvarying, almost official in nature, dry; they always included the same expressions. Naturally she did not complain about her son to him—quite the opposite, she untruthfully praised him for virtues he did not display in the slightest. In his letters Cezary's father thanked him for his commendable behavior and for his progress at school. His mother read these passages out loud to the obdurate recidivist and for a short while obtained something along the lines of contrition and repentance for his sins. But the moment one of his pals, some Misha or Kolya, whistled beneath his window, that was the end of the contrition and the firm resolution to improve!

There was only one time when something got through to Cezary. By custom the local Catholic chapel would hold choral singing on Sundays. Cezary had a fine

[6] The region on the Baltic to the east of Gdańsk, around Königsberg (today Kaliningrad); at the time of the First World War it was part of Germany.

voice and had already sung solo several times, to the accompaniment of the harmonium. The priest, a Georgian brought up in the depths of Russia and ill-disposed toward Poles, did not willingly consent to this singing, but he tolerated it because of the large Polish community. One fall morning, during the choir session Cezary sang an old, standard hymn:

O Lord, who hold our human fate
In hand, hear this our prayer:
Take those who wait at heaven's gate
And keep them in your care.

As he sang away spiritedly on his own, something seized him by the heart. An inconceivable, hollow yearning for his father reached into the furthest depths of his soul. He felt that at any moment he would burst out weeping. His singing became moving and beautiful beyond words. The old, tired, drunken official on the harmonium, who had forgotten much of his Polish, was barely able to keep up with the accompaniment. His fingers trembling, he pounced on the notes so as not to lose anything, so as—God forbid!—not to spoil anything in this hymn, which had become a superhuman prophesy, a veritable prayer to the Lord. It seemed to the congregation that a heavenly angel had descended from one of the church paintings to stand by the clavichord and offer a hymn of entreaty for all sinners.

This church mood, however, left as quickly as it had come. Outside the walls of the chapel Czaruś was himself, or rather he was in the grip of a shared frenzy that

had overcome him and his friends. His longing for his father, profound and irresistible, ran up against the fear that he might return. The huge bubble of freedom would burst right away. Once again he'd have to lie doggo, act sanctimonious and well-behaved and hard-working, as if all he thought about was schoolwork and lessons. Then there'd be no question of his own will, of running wild wherever he felt like it, or of that insatiable intoxication with air that young people experience when they break loose of all restraint.

In fact, this breaking loose would often take on oddly commonplace forms. The friends would gather at the home of one of their fellow idlers and, as if in great secrecy, would sing the most hackneyed Russian songs. After the singing there followed cards. One or another of them was in love. Cezary was not yet one of these, but he knew that such a condition existed and that it was in fashion.

Seweryn Baryka did not defeat the Germans in the vicinity of the Mazurian Lakes. On the contrary—he bolted east with the rest of the army. For a long time there was no news from him, and when it finally came, it was from somewhere entirely different. He was in the Carpathians and was pushing into Hungary. From there he sent information that was just as dry and straightforward as before. Each letter began with questions about Cezary and finished with endless greetings to him. Not a word, not a mention of his return! Battles, sieges, marches, snows, valleys and mountains—mountains that Cezary looked for in vain in the atlas.

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The situation of Seweryn Baryka's wife and son was assured. His officer's salary alone, which was paid punctually, would have entirely sufficed. In addition, before leaving for the front Seweryn had removed from safe deposit in the bank a significant portion of his savings, converted it into gold and "just in case" had buried it in the cellar along with some jewelry and certain of their more valuable silver and gold objects. The money alone amounted to several hundred thousand roubles. At the burial ceremony, which took place at night with the appropriate planning and caution, Mrs. Baryka and Cezary had been present. The part of the capital that had remained in the bank, again "just in case," was for day-to-day use and could be disposed of in whatever way necessary. From it mother and son could take as much as they wished for their own needs, to pay for lessons in foreign languages, music, singing, dance, horse-riding, skating, rollerskating, motorcycling, bicycling, motorboating, flying, automobile driving, and absolutely any fad or whim that his only son could possibly dream of.

Cezary made sure that the "current account" did not molder in the bank. He tried everything that popped into his head. His mother acquiesced to it all, or rather she had to accept whatever he dictated. And so he rode on land and on sea, and even in the air. It could not be said that he did not study at all or even that he studied poorly. For instance, he liked music and played a great deal both during and outside his lessons. He read a multitude of various kinds of books. He graduated from one class to the next, one way or another making up for the lack of systematic and organized studies of the kind

he had pursued while his father was around and he had to put his nose to the grindstone day in, day out and do everything, "to the last accent" as the Russians said.

After a year, and two, and three, it was as if all trace had vanished of his father, who was indeed far away. Baryka was still in the army. He engaged in offensives and took part in defensive maneuvers, but he did not come home. Once he informed them he had been wounded and was in the hospital somewhere far away, on the borders of the Polish heartland. For a long time afterwards he did not write. When a letter finally arrived, it did not come through the army and was written at a different location.

At this time Cezary was growing into an independent and rather willful young pup. His father he had somehow forgotten. The thought of him meant the specter of outworn interdictions, a dark vale exhaling a curiously painful sensation that brought a lump to the throat; above all it was a feeling of sorrow and longing, yet at the same time, in some obscure way it was his own and was natural to him. Cezary did not like to think about his father. Yet there were times when he was seized in mid-stride, as if in an embrace, by a fierce specter, and in the middle of his fun unseen hands held him back. At times something drew him into a vortex of sadness and regret that suddenly opened up beneath his feet. At such moments he had to quell this feeling, which among his friends was known as "spleen," by exerting himself in a boat or on a bicycle, a motorcycle, or a wild cossack horse. In the course of those long wartime years Cezary's mother became for him something so pliant,

docile, useful, at his service, obedient to every desire and urge, that she was truly like one of his organs, an additional arm or leg. This is not by any means to say that Czaruś was a bad son, nor his mother a powerless slouch. But their two organisms had grown together to such an extent, and one belonged so much to the other, that they constituted one mental body. Slowly but surely Cezary was assuming Seweryn's role as the source of decisions, advice, plans, and long-term thinking, and also as the one in command. He did not occupy himself with the home or its affairs, but everything revolved around him. Everyone knew that Mrs. Baryka received and paid the money and carried out instructions, but that handsome Cezary was the one in charge.

In the richly decorated apartment everything remained as it had been at the moment when Seweryn Baryka left. Not one heavy piece of furniture had been repositioned in the living room; not one book had been moved on the desk in the study belonging to the master of the house. Everything was still in its place, as if that very day he had left for his work "at the mines." Here was the newspaper he had been reading the day before his departure; here his fine paper knife lay on the open pages of a book, seemingly still warm from his grip. The apartment, it could be said, was the image of a powerful country within whose borders one takes shelter. Here, as there, everything had been established by mighty labors and long ago brought under control.

Still the head of the household did not come back. In the third year of the war no news came from him for so long that his wife and even his devil-may-care son began

to despair. Information from the military authorities was confusing and unreliable. At one time they were told that Major "Severyan Grigorevich Baryka" had died. Another time it was explained that he had "probably" been taken prisoner by the Germans or the Austrians. In the end, their insistent questions were dismissed coldly, abruptly, and with a certain ironic wink of the official eye: they were informed that he had been swallowed up by the war, and all trace of him had vanished to such an extent that absolutely nothing was known about him. The poor woman's despair surpassed all bounds.

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But these were not the borders of despair; this was not yet even its realm. The realm of despair advanced, vast and ferocious, improbable and incomprehensible, like an invasion of Tartar horses out of the expanses of Russia and out of time. One day the news spread around the city of Baku at the speed of lightning: revolution! What this word meant in practice, no one was able to clarify, and if one of the wisest had been asked for an explanation he would without doubt have spoken differently from the previous expert, while the next would have had something else again to say. If anyone knew anything concrete about the essence of revolution, it was probably only Cezary Baryka himself, for he was the one who set it in motion. First of all, having heard long ago that there was a revolution somewhere, he stopped attending eighth class. He was joined by the more ardent adherents of his way of thinking and acting. Further-