

# **A Polish Voice from the Depths of an International Conflict: Wartime Writings by Witold Hulewicz**

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**Abstract:** Although Poland was geographically not a secondary theatre of war, the position of the Poles bore a strong resemblance to the position of people's in secondary theatres of war. The nation was divided, with Polish nationals serving in German, Austrian, Russian, and French armies, which occasionally led to tragic instances of fratricidal combat. Consequently, Poles resorted to literary strategies of indirect approach, and Witold Hulewicz's early modernist poetry might be interpreted in these terms.

**Key words:** First World War, Witold Hulewicz, Poland, modernism

The inconceivable scale of the First World War, a conflict that was originally planned for six weeks in the Schlieffen Plan and ended only after four years, left its mark on millions of lives. The war engaged inhabitants of all continents, and the battlefields saw encounters not only between Germans, Frenchmen, and Britishers, but also between Afrikaners, Hindus, Maoris, and, among many other nationalities, Poles. Because Poland was not an independent country, Poles fought on both Western and Eastern Fronts in German, Austrian, and Russian armies.

To cope with traumatic experiences of the war, its main actors resorted to writing letters, poems, and prose. Wartime experience was a challenge for millions of writers, including the famous ones, such as Ernest Hemingway, Jaroslav Hašek or Erich Maria Remarque. Examples of literary struggle against the tragic images of the war can be found in Polish literature as well.

The Polish literature of the First World War poses a difficulty for historical research. Although the literary production between 1914 and 1918 has been thoroughly analyzed in numerous publications (e.g. Kielak 2001, Lalak 1998,

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Łoch and Stępnik 1999, Olszewska 2004), it is still absent in a basic course of Polish literary history, and importantly absent from the memory of the general reading public in Poland. This is because Polish wartime literature has an ambiguous status in Polish literary history. Texts written by Polish authors during the conflict are allotted, on the one hand, to the transition period between the Young Poland and the interwar period, but on the other hand, they are described as modernist texts, as responses to the international experience of modernity. The confusing difference consists in applying the local Polish system of literary periods, and inscribing wartime texts to the international current of modernism at the same time.

Additionally, the literary record of the Polish experience in the First World War was overshadowed by the Polish literary responses to the trauma of the Second World War and the Holocaust. There is an incomparable disparity between research activities and critical outputs related to the two World Wars in Polish literary history. The Great War, and the poetry and prose related to it, was effectively eclipsed by the Second World War, the poetry written by the generation who fought in it, and the literary responses to captivity in German and Soviet camps. The Polish cult of the Second World War, marked by an extensive annual cycle of official celebrations, results in a dangerous erosion of interest in the First World War, which was the first total conflict in history, and which also involved the Polish nation.

This general ignorance is not only a result of contemporary politics of collective memory in Poland, but reflects the geopolitical situation of Poland in 1914. When the war broke out, Poland did not exist as a state, as it had been partitioned in 1795 between three adjacent powers, Russia, Austria, and Prussia. Obviously, regaining national independence was the most important political goal for Poles in 1914. The global conflict, engaging the most powerful countries of the world, gave hope for a redefinition of the power-balance in Europe, and thus for possible independence of Poland. This is why the First World War was perceived by Poles mainly as a chance for statehood. Consequently, the fighting on the distant Western Front was of secondary importance for Poles. As Tomasz Burek argues (1995, 463–467), “the Polish wartime experience was markedly different from that of European nations which had a stable political status and statehood”.

However, the news of the Western Front were not entirely ignored in Poland. Especially in the Prussian Partition, the Polish territory controlled by Germany, many men were conscripted into the German army and sent

to Belgium and France, so the interest in the global conflict was strong there; inhabitants of Poznan or Torun were mentally closer to Berlin than to Warsaw.<sup>12</sup> Differences in political views, and cultural differences reinforced by long years of political dependence, were reflected in literary works written in the German-controlled Polish territory.

Even a brief thematic analysis of work by Polish prose writers and poets from the First World War demonstrates that Polish literature was highly heterogeneous then. Two main currents can be distinguished: the dominant one was related to fighting on the Eastern Front, and often referred to the Romantic tradition of heroic patriotism exemplified by descriptions in poetry by Adam Mickiewicz. For instance, Edward Slonski's poem written in 1915, "To My Son" (generally known in Poland as "The Dream of a Sabre"), was a traditional, Romantic poem with a patriotic theme:

Oh, my son, on all fronts,  
From the gray Vistula to the Rhine,  
Standing by lighted fuses,  
We dream our dream of Poland.

The fragment presents a Polish patriot who, like many others, is fighting on one of European fronts, but only thinks about the dream of restoration of Polish independence. However, there was another current in Polish wartime literature, a current which had a more dynamic thematic dimension, and was directly inspired by experience of the Western Front. Fighting in the West was markedly different, and its literary representation quickly lost the patriotic element that could give meaning to mechanized carnage, as Poles had no independent homeland to defend. There were also instances of fratricidal battles between Poles conscripted into opposing armies. The tone of texts in the second current is dominated by bitterness and conviction that the long war was pointless. Often there was a strongly subjective reflection on dehu-

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<sup>12</sup> This can be inferred even from a brief analysis of content in important local newspapers of the time, *Dziennik Poznański* and *Gazeta Toruńska*. Wartime issues focus on news from the Western Front, from Germany and from German-controlled Poland, and pay less attention to events in Galicia and later in Warsaw.

manization of fighting soldiers. In a poem by Jozef Wittlin, "To the Enemy", the conflict is represented by means of drastic imagery, and the poem expresses doubts whether a fighting man can retain his humanity in the war:

(...) We hurl stones of abuse at each other  
 And sputter venomous saliva –  
 (...)  
 In the mad fight – intoxicated  
 By smell of meat and smell of blood:  
 We do not even see the enemy,  
 Because he has closed his face behind a visor.

In this kind of Polish wartime poetry, especially towards the end of the war, the cruelty of the conflict provokes strong protest, expressed through the pacifist voice of a lyrical I calling for the end of the war.

Pacifism became the key category for Katarzyna Szewczyk-Haake in her study (2014) of Polish literature of the First World War. The critic introduced a division, an opposition between Polish patriotism and pacifism, and divided wartime texts by Poles accordingly. Although Szewczyk-Haake focuses exclusively on texts published in *Zdrój*, a modernist journal published in Poznan, her division is applicable to all Polish literature written between 1914 and 1918, a literature torn between Western pacifism and Polish patriotism, associated with the Romantic longing for independence. The division proposed by Szewczyk-Haake, rather than a coherent categorization, should be treated as an indication of a problem. For many texts, the categorization is problematic, and further complicated by biographies of their authors. Such is the case of wartime writings by Witold Hulewicz, a writer, translator, and radio publicist, an important figure in Polish cultural life between the wars.

Witold Hulewicz was born in a patriotic Polish family: his parents, Leon and Helena, were landed gentry owning a manor in Koscianki, where they tried to preserve Polish traditions and historical memory. Koscianki became a regional center of Polish culture in Wielkopolska, a section of Poland under German control in the 19th century. The Hulewicz family organized poetry readings and lessons for Polish for local children. The patriotic activities of the family were recognized by famous Polish writers, including Władysław Reymont (Nobel laureate in 1924) and Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, who both visited

Koscianki (Karaś 2003, 9). The children of the family were patriotically educated by Helena Hulewicz, who also instilled the literary passion to her sons, as one of them mentioned in his journal: “all brothers were impassioned artists and writers, hovering in the clouds with the Pegasus” (Hulewicz 1917).

Witold was the youngest son, and he had the closest relationship with the mother, so at the age of 19, when he was conscripted into the German army and sent to the Western Front, he experienced strong feelings of anguish and longing. The mother and son maintained avid correspondence during his frontline service. Witold regularly wrote letters about his nostalgia for home and for the pre-war world, as well as about his fascination with the new circumstances of military life. Hulewicz’s letters were printed, from 1915 to 1917, in Wielkopolska’s local newspapers: *Kurier Poznański* and *Dziennik Poznański*, in cycles called “Letters from Belgium”, “Letters from the Somme”, and “Letters from the Battlefield”.

Hulewicz’s letters to his mother, when published in newspapers, were presented both as private correspondence and as short press reports, news from the war. Everyday life on the front is described in a highly detailed, objective mode by Hulewicz in his letters. The author uses short sentences and provides specific information: “Before 9 am we arrived in X, our destination. No civilians, of course. Many ruined houses, a lot of holes in the ground” . Lidia Głuchowska (2014, 291) points to the factual value of the letters, describing them as “Documents of service in trench warfare”. The form and content of the letters were probably modified by newspaper editors before publication, but it was desirable, in terms of readers’ expectations, to maintain an unquestionable credibility of the letters as direct and real testimony of the war. Some of the letters include, apart from objective descriptions, personal comments by the author, who divulges his feelings about the described events: “On our way we stopped in a village obliterated by artillery fire, where there was not a single human being, apart from a small detachment of soldiers living in primitive makeshift shanties. The village made a very sad impression on me” (Hulewicz 2015).

In the German army, Hulewicz served in a signals unit, and his duties included mending broken cables and radio transmitters. This work involved a lot of traveling along the front, which Hulewicz treated as a sort of tourism: “The small town of X is 3 kilometres away from the French trenches, and is daily bombarded by French light and heavy guns. For a long time I have

dreamed about going there, and many soldiers envied me this trip” (Hulewicz 1915).

The harsh realities of military life did not stifle Hulewicz’s youthful curiosity of the world, which was a common sentiment among soldiers: for many of the young men, frontline deployment was their first foreign travel. This attitude is evident in descriptions of Belgian towns in German texts, e.g. Stefan Zweig, in his biography of Emile Verhaeren, described Ostend mainly as a seaside resort, and Bruges as a historical tourist attraction.<sup>13</sup> Sightseeing by German soldiers around battlefields is also mentioned by Ernst Stadler, a passionate connoisseur of European culture, who dies in the First Battle of Ypers in 1914: “It’s a beautiful evening. Panoramic view of the French mountains. I greet France almost with the same trepidation as I did when I saw Paris for the first time seven years ago. I’m hardly remembering that we are still at war. I greet you, sweet soil of France”.<sup>14</sup> Esthetic ruptures over war landscapes were described by civilians, too, e.g. by Carola Oman in “In the Ypress Sector”. Oman was a British nurse in the Voluntary Aid Detachment, and she describes the beauty of the Belgian landscape, ruined by exchange of artillery fire:

“In the Ypres Sector”  
 You have left beauty here in everything,  
 And it is we that are both deaf and blind.  
 By coarse grass mounds here the small crosses rise  
 Sunk sideways in the ditch, or low inclined  
 Over some little stream where waters sing  
 By shell holes blue with beauty from the skies.  
 Even the railway cutting has kind shade

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<sup>13</sup> Ostend was advertised as “Rialto van het Noorden” (Rialto of the North), and Ghent and Brugge as places where tourists can experience a real Medieval atmosphere (Zweig 1910, 18).

<sup>14</sup> “It’s a beautiful evening. Panoramic view of the French mountains. I greet France almost with the same trepidation as I did when I saw Paris for the first time seven years ago. I’m hardly remembering that we are still at war. I greet you, sweet soil of France”. (Stadler, Ernst. 1995. *Diaries*, (first edition 1983, written 1914); in: Andrzej Lam (ed.), *Ernst Stadler. Marching off*. (Translated and edited by Andrzej Lam.). Warszawa: Unia Wydawnicza „Verum”, Warszawa 1995].

And colour, where the rust wire is laid  
Round the soft tracks. Because you knew them thus  
The dark mouthed dug-outs hold a light for us.  
And here each name rings rich upon our ears  
Which first we learnt with sorrow and with tears

Although there are no direct expressions of delight in landscape in the poem, the reader has an impression that Oman, like the other authors, is trying to find positive aspects in their terrible situation. For Hulewicz, the persona of a nostalgic but sober observer might have been a consciously adopted method of representing reality in letters to his mother, to make her less worried. He described daily life in the trenches, the typical schedule, sleeping and eating. Helena received a historical record of her son's service on the front in Belgium and France, only occasionally augmented by his personal opinions. Many wartime correspondents wrote in the same way, which was perhaps a sort of survival strategy in a hostile and maddening environment. The intensive production of letters, journals, and memoirs during the war is probably related to the rise of non-fiction in twentieth-century literature.

However, it seems that Hulewicz's real feelings about the war were hidden in letters, and expressed only in his wartime poetry, collected in 1921 as *Fire in Hand*. The collection is divided into four sections, of which the first two directly refer to his war experience. The first section collects poems written by Hulewicz on the front, and published separately in *Zdrój*, a biweekly artistic magazine issued in Poznań.

The founder of the magazine was Witold Hulewicz's eldest brother, Jerzy, who invited a number of Polish authors to publish in the magazine, as part of the effort to protect Polish cultural life in German-occupied Wielkopolska. One of the initial contributors was Stanisław Przybyszewski, an important pioneer of modernism in Poland. *Zdrój* was designed as a contact platform for Polish artists from all sections of the country, and as an instrument for development of Polish national culture. Jerzy Hulewicz wrote about his plans in a letter to Emil Zegadłowicz: "I wish this work not to be limited to only one section, but to combine various kindred groups, who can complement one another's efforts" (Wójcik 2008, 33).

Przybyszewski remarked on the importance of Hulewicz's effort even before the first issue of *Zdrój* was published: "Now is the time when Poznań

can prove that its fifty years of slumber, its indifference to the matters of Polish spiritual life in its highest and noblest incarnation, in Art, that the indifference was not a downfall, only a rest after enormous spiritual exertions which Poznań made over twenty years. (...) Not is the time [for Poles in Wielkopolska—ed.] to think about another, greater and nobler mission: to sustain and strengthen the life of the Polish soul, as our fathers did of yore" (Przybyszewski 1916, 3). Witold Hulewicz was also involved in creation and editing of *Zdrój*, and strongly supported his brother's efforts. For Witold, the possibility of publishing his work in *Zdrój* was very important: regular writing helped him to cope with horrible images of the war, which he could not share with his wife in letters. Analyzing his poetic prose pieces, such as "Furioso", "Whispers", or "Behind a Violet Glass", the reader can have an impression that the writer was beset by feeling of helplessness, overwhelmed by the apocalyptic reality of the war. The imagery of these texts constitutes a terrible vision:

An enormous abyss opened in the earth—through this wound,  
fire shot up from all hell, wide as the universe, high as the sky.  
The fire is bulging, sizzling, lurching, babbling, and spitting with  
blaze, rages and bristles with bloody manes (Olwid 1921, 14-17).

A church is showing:

a scalped and naked apse and grins into the blue sky with badly  
chipped teeth of stained glass. Under the outline of the altar there  
is a carcass of a cradle, scattered on the dust. The blessed babes  
fed here, before the altar, guzzled on blood from tens of kindred  
hearts, and are lying now as skeletons, gripping their beloved  
guns with bony fingers. And the altar, wet with beer and blood,  
smeared with manure, cuddles away from the cold under the apse  
(Olwid 1918, 185).

Using terrifying epithets, Hulewicz introduces a disquieting personification of the church, and adds a demonic quality to the landscape. There are frequent descriptions of pangs of conscience, compared to physical pain, which Katarzyna Szewczyk-Haake interprets as expression of Hulewicz's protest against the war (2014, 326).



In subsequent sections of the collection, the pacifistic attitude is abandoned in favor of an open and direct manifestation of hope for Polish independence. This change is striking when the collection is read in its entirety, as the author seems to have been torn between contradicting ideological impulses. He was entangled between the ideological contradiction between the pacifism of German expressionism, which he valued as an artist, and the patriotism instilled in him in infancy. *Fire in Hand*, thus, is a record not only of wartime experience, but also of an aesthetic and ideological inner conflict provoked by the war.

As Mieczysław Szerer (1915, 74) observed in his contemporary sociological study of the First World War, "the war is an exceptional phenomenon, and as such it provokes exceptional social response". Witold Hulewicz was undoubtedly conscious of the exceptional quality of the war, and the experience strongly influenced his sensitivity, including the patriotic sentiment he received at home. Hulewicz's foreign travels to the front were, in his case, journeys to the outer limits of humanity. In many ways, the poet tried to cope with his traumatic experience. Writing the letters to his mother, he kept his descriptions in a very objective and neutral tone. In poetry, he expressed the strongest emotions directly: his chronic fear, feelings of despair and futility were described in the poetical prose, published pseudonymously as "Olwid". Hulewicz's wartime poetry is a good example of the incoherent attitude expressed in Polish literature during the First World War, but it is rather not deeply rooted in the nature and quality of that war.

The memory of wartime authors, and consequently the memory of wartime readers, was determined by images. As Eksteins observed (1989, 292), the reader of a poem or novel does not confront an image of the war, but a vision of the war created by the author. It is impossible to capture the full image of the Great War, not only because of the subjective point of view in most post-war works, but mainly because of the exceptional quality of the events. The First World War, and the associated emotions, belongs to the sphere of experience that cannot be expressed in words. The essence of the Great War could not be captured and understood, and the dimensions of sacrifice, consequence, waste and destruction could be expressed neither in simplest nor in most elaborate messages. Literary texts about the war are but a collection, for all its diversity, of doomed attempts to express the inexpressible. The events of the war could not be ignored, but neither could

they be expressed. There is no objective truth about the war; there is only a sum total of private histories of its participants, descriptions of their condition.

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