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IGOR NEWERLY'S WORKSHOPS*

Workshops were always present in the life and works of Igor Newerly (1903-1987). In the early years spent in Białowieża forest workshops were present metaphorically, if we can treat the primordial forest as nature's laboratory, and it was in such a forest that the grandfather of Igor, a Czech forester, Josef Nevrlý, worked. This laboratory operated in a scientific manner, and its most spectacular experiment was the renewal of the Białowieża breed of *żubr* (bison) through inception of fresh blood from the Caucasus. Igor's grandfather had a study equipped with a professional library, with books in many different languages, hunters' trophies, decoys to lure animals, and a whole collection of ingenious equipment confiscated from poachers.

Białowieża forest became for the future writer a specific lesson in history: it was here that he saw the tsar's family at close range (in the correspondence of Nikolai II with his wife there are references to the death of the forester called Newerly), here he looked with sympathy at a sickly dauphin, who was later to be murdered with the whole family by Bolsheviks.

At the beginning of the Great War Igor Newerly, with his sister and mother—as a member of an officer's family—were evacuated to the town of Penza, where he went to the secondary school. In his memoirs he reported in a factual, sober manner about his education in a Russian provincial town during the war.

He mentioned in the first place “the practical aspect and lessons in biology, physics and chemistry in a well-equipped classroom”, and

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in the second the fact “that from 1915 handicrafts were introduced for educational purposes in the basement of the town’s secondary school and well equipped workshops were set up; we had the choice of book binding, iron-working or carpentry. All three workshops were run very well by a specialist, a Czech who was fortunately found in a prisoner of war camp and had been a teacher in a vocational school in Brno”. In a different fragment of Newerly’s book we read that this teacher could make anything: “a man of western mindset, as they said, technical intelligence and very good with his hands[...].”

The nationality of this teacher is not accidental here, not only from the perspective of Newerly’s own background, but also because of the historical moment. It happened that on 29 May 1918 Trotsky sent a telegram agreeing to a Czech legion march towards the Pacific Ocean, provided they would surrender their arms. On the very next day Newerly was to have a class in the workshop. At one moment his teacher was approached by his compatriot and whispered something to him. The teacher instantly took off his duster and said good bye to his students. On the same day the Czech legion marched through the town, disregarding the order to surrender their arms, and later Czechs joined the white army and helped them to take Siberia. In this way, in the school workshop in Penza Newerly was a witness to history once again.

The most interesting workshop in Newerly’s biography, but also the one which is the most difficult to describe, was this mysterious alchemic melting pot, in which from a baby born to a Czech woman and a Russian man, an officer in the tsar’s army, and from a boy brought up in pre-revolutionary, revolutionary and post-revolutionary Russia, who illegally came to Poland in 1924, with almost no command of Polish, there developed one of the best Polish writers. I think that two elements were crucial here: an unusual will power, and self-discipline, but also the attractive power of Polish culture. As a result, after two years of avid reading of Polish literature—of Żeromski, Berent, Brzozowski and Prus—Newerly was to shorthand difficult texts of Janusz Korczak and marshal Piłsudski. He also became an editor of *Mały Przegląd* (*Little Review*).

The editorial job ended at the beginning of WWII. However, in Warsaw, after all the bombing, there was a demand for glaziers. And Newerly set up a one man glazier workshop, walked from a house to house, and installed windows. He would later recall, half humorously, that at that time he put windows in all the houses in the district of Żoliborz, fulfilling the dreams of Żeromski of 'glass houses'.

At the same time he did not neglect another skill which he had learnt in Penza—that of carpentry. He made furniture for himself, and he insulated his flat well, fearing gas attacks.

He was arrested by the Gestapo on 8 January 1943 and was sent to a series of concentration camps: Majdanek, Oświęcim, Oranienburg, Bergen Belsen. He was liberated by the Canadian army on 15 April 1945. At that time he weighed only 38 kilos. Later he stayed in the displaced person's camp in Bardowick near Lüneburg. There he set up a carpenters' co-operative and was its manager for the next half a year. And then he returned to Poland. In a letter from Bardowick addressed to his wife dated 16 October 1945 he wrote: "In this newly created Polish estate we have schools, a cultural centre, theatre, sports club, workshops, etc. I have not been to a forest or a theatre yet. I have buried myself with machines. After years of the mindless work of a slave I have, at last, regained the dignity and bliss of free work".

This is an important statement. After more than two years of hell Newerly found himself in a little town in Germany, which was at Whitsun in 1945 overcome by Polish ex-prisoners and forced labourers. We know little more of Newerly's attitude to what happened in Bardowick during this 'Polish year', except for the reference to the fact that he did not go to the theatre. Being a man of culture, that says a lot. He chose to be alone in an attic over a carpentry shop, at a fireplace he built himself; evenings with a book ("You could hear the rustling of turned pages and the creaking of almost tamed mice"), and during the day he taught carpentry skills to his friends. A symbolic result of this period was a large suitcase made of wooden battens he made himself to his own design, on 11 November he wrote to his wife: "I was finishing my suitcase when my friends burst in telling me that I could

send a letter. I wrote it and now I am waiting: 'Will I go to you or will you come to me?' This was not a questions of lovers but a request for a joint decision about the future. The wife summoned him to Warsaw, and soon Newerly with this heavy wooden suitcase entered a Warsaw flat and started life in this changed, post-war Poland.

He started not as a writer, but as an organizer ... of a workshop on a very large scale.

This "grandest adventure of life" was told by Newerly in a short story "Opowieści z Dzikiego Zachodu" ("Tales from the Wild West"), included in the volume *Za Opiwardą, za siódmą rzeką* (*Beyond the Opiwarda, Beyond the Seventh River*) (1985). It is interesting is that he presented it through a comparison with literature. When, at his friend's request, he was drawing a blueprint for Instytut Produkcji Robotniczego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Dzieci (Manufacturing Institute of the Workers' Society of Children's Friends) and his wife asked him: "What are you writing?", he answered: "O, just a topical very short story..." The Workers' Society of Children's Friends was a social organization of socialist leanings founded in 1919. In December 1945 Newerly designed an institute which was to conceive of, and make for the use of children, different things connected with culture: toys, educational aids, clothes, furniture. In order to do so he had to organize "a mechanical workshop, toy workshop, ready-to-wear children's clothes workshop and carpenters' factory." But the idea went beyond this: it was about creating an economically independent co-operative. Newerly was not the only one with this mindset: the political organization Stowarzyszenie PAX had similar background, and was founded in 1947.

"Tales from the Wild West" owed its title from the similarities between journeys which he undertook in this period to the western part of Poland to look for machines left there by Germans to romantic expeditions to the American Wild West as described in books by James Fenimore Cooper and Karl May. Newerly was asked to create the Manufacturing Institute by Stanisław Żemis, a friend of his, who was the director of the Workers' Society of Children's Friends. Żemis knew about Newerly's passion for carpentry ("You have always been

close to children and youths, and you like carpentry [...]"). Newerly accepted the proposal because of the romantic nature of the whole venture. "The venture started looking very attractive—I have never done a thing like this, building from scratch in a de-cluttered place, an expedition to the Wild West ..."

But it is the comparison with adventure novels about the Wild West which shows differences. Newerly did not go there to fight with Indian (in this case German) survivors. On the contrary, when he met starving German children he came up with a programme of a new moral attitude towards German children, women and elderly people, the programme of a good gesture: "We have a chance of a good gesture of victors towards the children, women and elderly people of our enemy. Someone must be the first to make this human gesture after this war. And it would suit us quite well..."

The location of the Institute was quite interesting. Newerly describes how one day, following the noise of a circular saw, he found near Dworzec Gdański (Gdańsk Railway Station in Warsaw) a building without a roof or windows. He learnt that Germans had in this place "a provisional camp near the railway station for people caught in street round-ups, even with a gas chamber". His imagination, connected with a specific sense of humour, took off: "I even like this little gas chamber, so small that you would not squeeze more than twenty people in it, a primitive little workshop in comparison with Auschwitz's industry—I will turn it into a wood drying room [...]". Newerly, by showing the small size of the room, a little gas chamber, a little workshop, was in a way making this place tame, and at the same time he saw the symbolic aspect of the situation: "It would have a certain symbolic sense—a manufacturing institute of the Workers' Society of Children's Friends located in the building of a former Nazi camp for rounded up citizens of Warsaw!"

More research is needed to compare two locations: the one described by Newerly, which was north of the railway line leading to Dworzec Gdański, and the enigmatic Konzentrationslager Warschau, which was to be located south of Dworzec Gdański in the direction of Dworzec Zachodni (Western Railway Station).

When Newerly was finishing his work on the construction of the Manufacturing Institute he started writing a series of radio programmes which grew into a short book.

Chłopiec z Salskich Stepów (*A Boy from Salskie Steppes*) is based on a story he had heard in the German concentration camp from a Soviet medical doctor. In the concentration camps Newerly, usually in evenings, told stories. He was well trained in it as he had worked as a guardian in an orphanage.

So, I remembered books which I had read; I mixed it all, added ‘missing parts’, wove different fables, stories, reminiscences—whatever—as long as it was colourful, almost tactile, filled with adventures, so that the world was wide and free, and the man who walked it was brave and strong, and bright...

Such storytelling was therapeutic in the context of concentration camps, and at the same time it was a good recipe for an adventure story, a recipe Newerly also used (with some modifications) in his other books.

One day Newerly, depressed by lack of news from his wife and son, who lived in German occupied Warsaw, had no energy to tell a new story, and the roles changed: his most eager listener, a Russian medical doctor, started telling him about his life.

This is a very suggestive story, although while reading it we should remember that it is fiction, even though based on facts. In the afterword Newerly admitted making some changes, for example he modified his protagonist’s surname and the name of his father: “I changed Ilyich into Lukich, so that the name was different from Lenin’s”. So, when the protagonist of the novel named Diergaczow tells about his uncle: “He was rich, he knew a lot about herbs, he had a parrot and a wooden leg” we are not certain if all these attributes belong to the uncle of the Russian (or if he had had an uncle at all), or if the wooden leg, for example, was not autobiographical (Newerly lost one leg in childhood). Anyway, he is a likeable character, and this likeable uncle lectures his nephew on his theory of a book as a tool. He says:

Do you know what a book is? Look: I am making beehives. What am I making them with? Well, with a saw, and a jack-plane and a drill [...] Count how many of them there are on this shelf. Each tool for a different job. While a book, Vovka, is the best tool. Yet, watch out son, some tools are designed in a stupid way, or they old, or battered and should not be used any more. Waste time and you could mangle the whole job.

This is not the case, in spite of appearances, of the instrumental treatment of books; on the contrary, this is glorification of the role of books in cognitive processes, in opening new perspectives. This tool could be, as the final warning tells us, dangerous; on the whole however, if used skilfully, it is "the best". And we should use this perspective on the books written, or should we say made, by Igor Newerly.

In the same tale there appears a metal workshop in the orphanage in Rostov upon Don and its boss, an engineer called Dymil-Vanych, who has the features of a mythical character.

In the workshop at first one could see billows of smoke, than a pipe with a huge stem, and then there drove in the boss himself. I say "drove in" because Dymil-Vanych did not walk. He had been paralysed during the civil war and drove in a trolley of his own construction with a hand drive. His hands did not suffer during the war—they were huge, strong, red hands, so skilful with all mechanisms.

This picture, regardless of associations with Newerly himself, who was an avid smoker and a man who was forced to practice sports and hobbies requiring strong and efficient hands, such as canoeing or hunting, brings to mind mythical heroes, first of all, Hephaistos. But as the tale is told by a Russian, associations go elsewhere:

[...] if you looked at this athlete with a ruffled, greyish beard and intelligent gaze, you would be under the impression that he slept for thirty three years as Ilya Muromets, a legendary strong man of folk tales, that he would quickly stand up and with one kick would send a metal chair of wheels flying.

Newerly must have known a Russian folk tale about a strong man of weak legs from his youth spent in Russia (he also must have known a suggestive painting of Vazniecov (1914) showing a strong man on a galloping black horse with a lance and a knout in hand). In various variants of this folk tale there appears a period of powerlessness lasting thirty or thirty-three years. It is the latter period which appears in the Polish ballad of Antoni Lange entitled *Ilia Muromiec*, published in 1916: “Ilya lay powerless / For thirty and three years”. Newerly could have read there about Ilia, who “was not powerless out of powerlessness / But of too much power”, and in which his thoughts were running wild, when he was dreaming about what he could do, till “holy wandering cripples” (Jesus, saint Peter and saint Paul) visited him and told him to stand up. Newerly could also have read about how Ilia, after his heroic deeds, is imprisoned for his rebellion in the basement, and he reads *Apocalypse*, and when Russia would be attacked by a “scarlet Beast” leading “heretical tribes”. Our hero, with the help of the king of the North, will defeat the Beast. It is interesting that Lange’s book was given the approval of German censors as *geprüft und freigegeben*, “checked and passed” on 27 June 1916. The censor clearly did not see in the apocalyptic Beast which attacks Russia any allusions to Kaiser Wilhelm II!

But this is not all. Newerly was interested in technical innovations and inventions, particularly those connected with aviation. So he must have known about a bi-plane called “Ilya Muromets”, which was designed in Kiev in 1913 by an engineer with a Polish surname—Igor Sikorski. This plane was tested in Jabłonna, where young Igor lived at that time with his mother and stepfather. With the help of Sikorski’s memories and the book by Konstantin Finne we can reconstruct some facts and dates. And so, Sikorski’s planes appeared in Jabłonna in December 1914. In January 1915 Jabłonna training ground was visited by Grand Duke Alexander, in the spring by Grand Duchess Maria, and on 16 May by Grand Duke Cyril. “Ilya Muromets VI” crashed during a training flight over Jabłonna on 13 February 1915. On 4 March 1915 Sikorski reached the height of 2100 metres.

The example of the character of the manager of the metal workshop in Rostov on Don shows how dense Newerly's prose is, and how many different senses and associations it evokes.

The theme of the carpenter's work so well known to Newerly is important in the novel which established his reputation as a novelist *sensu stricte* – *Pamiętka z Celulozy* (*A Souvenir from the Cellulose Mill*). Descriptions of work with wood are very precise and professional. Many years later Melchior Wańkowicz, in *Karafka La Fontaine'a* (*La Fontaine's Carafe*), remarked: "How professional!"⁵⁴

During the 1950s Igor Newerly was a guardian for young writers in Związek Literatów Polskich (Polish Writers' Union). From the memories of his charges we know that he advised them not to hurry with writing, and to concentrate on collecting experiences, and also to authentic sources such as memoirs and letters. Newerly was a guiding force behind the publication of *Almanach Literacki* (*Literary Almanach*) (1954), which is an anthology of texts of young writers, with the programme introduction by Newerly. From today's perspective, what is striking is the fact that many of Newerly's charges later emigrated from Poland (Piotr Guzy, Marek Hłasko, Włodzimierz Odojewski). Others were at the same time writers and craftsmen (Jan Himilbach was a stone mason).

The most famous of Newerly's disciples from this period was Marek Hłasko, who later cherished memories of the older writer. He mentions Newerly's lessons and a typewriter borrowed from him in *Piękni dwudziestoletni* (*Pretty Twenty-Year-Old*), and in maybe the only poem which Hłasko wrote in his life there is the following stanza:

U Newerlego byłem – przyjął mnie owszem
Poklepał po plecach – powiedział że dobrze
Otuchy mi dodał że przyszłość mnie czeka
I powrót do pracy, znów wóz, ot żywot człowieka.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ M. Wańkowicz, *Karafka La Fontaine'a*, vol. 1, Kraków 1972, 543

⁵⁵ Quoted in A. Czyżewski, *Piękny dwudziestoletni*, Warszawa 1991, 94. The manuscript of the original is dated 9 July 1953. "I visited Newerly / He hosted

In the 1960s the workshop experiences of Polish writers had their testimony in the so-called *Memorial Newerlego* (*Newerly's Memorial*). This text was very critical and demanded the abolition of censorship in Poland. It remained unanswered and was published only in 2003. The lack of response to *Memoria* undoubtedly led to the radicalization of Newerly's political ideas and to his involvement on the side of Polish writers who were discriminated against for political reasons (Melchior Wańkowicz, Marek Nowakowski). He even employed Jacek Kuroń, who had lost his job for political reasons as his secretary. At the end of his life he published, with émigré and samizdat publishers, an autobiographical book *Zostało z uczty bogów* (*Leftovers After Gods' Feast*).

A title of his book about Korczak and Korczak's milieu—*Żywe wiązanie* (*Live Bindings*)—is taken from fruit-growing parlance, and it means a special type of seedling which allows, for example, the saving of a fruit tree which has grown wild. Newerly, in this way, following the advice of a distinguished fruit-growing specialist, Prof. Szczepan Pieniążek, saved a pear tree in the village of Zgon in the Masurian Lake District where, for thirty years, he spent the summer months. But the word 'binding' has also other meanings, one of which is connected with wooden architecture. A roof binding is a framework bearing the roof.

A key scene from the first meeting with Janusz Korczak on 2 November 1926—an event which, as Newerly confessed many times, changed his life—is described through a metaphor taken from wooden architecture. This is a difficult, enigmatic fragment. Newerly first tells of how he, without embarrassment, confessed to Korczak about the period of his homelessness in Warsaw and adds: "I have seen all the time the path I have travelled, these stairs and bars and a dimly lit corridor in an attic full of heavy things," against the concentrated face of Korczak:

me okay / Patted me on the back / Said it was fine / He cheered me up that there is the future ahead of me / And return to work, again driving, well, that's human fate".

[...] the picture acquired depth and some personal metaphor. Yes, there were these stairs and bars and the path towards something up there, to matters and issues with which so far I have only bumped into, things massive and wise, not to be rejected, yet, they were all missing something, they were not all from that time, some used, some not finished yet, and some were for feast days only. And there were so many of them that it was not cosy, dignified and tight all the way to the door. It seemed that the crammed door would never open to something that had to be behind it—new, dazzlingly beautiful, most important...They simply opened to goodness.

The goodness of Janusz Korczak as a magic key, opening the door leading to an attic, crammed with disorderly ideas and untried emotions—this is a metaphor in which Newerly locked the key moment in his life.

A similar picture would return in the late novel *Wzgórze błękitnego snu* (*A Hill of a Blue Dream*) (1986). Its penultimate chapter is entitled "W duszy mojej spoczywa skarb i klucz oddano tylko mnie" ("In My Soul There Rests a Treasure and the Key Was Given Only to Me"), which is a quotation from a poem by Alexander Blok entitled *Незнакомка*:

„В моей душе лежит сокровище, И ключ поручен только мне!”

In this novel, which is, in a sense, a Polish-Russian variant of the life of Robinson Crusoe, there also appears the motif of the building of a wooden house—on the foundations of an old building, and the motif of building an oven from Dutch ceramic tiles.

In the Afterword Newerly thanks his secretary, Beata Pogorzelska (later on, as Beata Stasińska, the editor in chief of a large Polish publishing company), and lists questions which she had to answer while they were working on this novel. I will quote just one of these questions: "In which year did the English manufacturers Richardson start making a double-barrelled shotgun called 'Paradox'?"

In this one question, like in a lens, the different workshop passions of Igor Newerly are accumulated. There is a recollection of a forest, the wind of history, respect for objects made by craftsmen and

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attention to details, there is need of authenticity and there is in the name of the shotgun this indispensable surplus, which makes Newerly's writings not only works of craftsmanship, but also works of art.

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