

PROMENADE ABROAD WITH BRUNO SCHULZ

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I wish here to share an excursion in the footsteps of Bruno Schulz, seen from abroad and 15 years of study that included *Muse & Messiah: The Life, Imagination and Legacy of Bruno Schulz* published by the Inkermen Press in England. He has been translated into 33 languages and counting, so interest is global in spite of the disappointing dissonance of rarely finding a Schulz section in bookshops here, a widespread trend of course in this marketing age. Today's route might have its signposts obscured by foliage and thorns: this discussion is fact-based observing not criticising, with a hope for debate.

Western historians, rightly or wrongly, consistently believe that Polish literary Modernism had its richest harvest during the 1930s with Witkacy (1885-1939), Bruno Schulz (1892-1942) and the younger Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969), a galloping troika of kindred spirits that was never actually a cohesive group or movement. Gombrowicz and Witkacy disliked each other when Schulz introduced them at Witkacy's Bracka Street apartment in Warsaw, but they shared a mutual strategy: recognition of Polish culture and its situation in a 'fluctuating borderland between Russia and western Europe' (as Joseph Conrad's once-famous father described it) within the developing European vanguard of artistic experimentation.

Added to this interest in this century is the narrative of Jewish historians, perhaps because of what Norman Finkelstein calls 'the holocaust industry' (the website of Prague's Kafka Society is sponsored by a Holocaust Foundation, though the German-speaking Austrian citizen died 15 years before the war). Perhaps it is nostalgia for a vanished life, the cosmos of the Ostjuden similar to what East Germans now call *ostalgie*. It is, however, noticeably selective in its choices, e.g. not Wat, Leśmian, Tuwim, which can isolate subjects from their Polish reality. All these forms of nostalgia – perhaps Poland too? – certainly involve a 'here' and 'somewhere else' simultaneously, and

Schulz embodied characteristics of the 'other' all his difficult life, in art, literature, and as a teacher.

This is also the background concerning the clandestine removal of Schulz's frescoes in Drohobycz at the start of this century, undertaken said Yad Vashem's statement because of the 'indifference of Poland and Ukraine' to be eventually displayed in Israel as by a Jewish, not Polish-Jewish, artist. This act is still debated and protested internationally, raising the fundamental question of self-identity during his lifetime. Sadly, it seems the circumstances of a tragic death motivate interest in the work – but less in the life that was lived – seeking to fit a theory backwards, so to speak. Lucian wrote 1900 years ago, 'History should be written [...] with truthfulness and hopes for the future rather than flattery to please today's recipients of praise' (Lucian 1982: 63) and this is valid today. Those who should be helping travellers – 'the public' – regain routes, have crumpled and transposed the map upside down for their own purposes: perhaps Schulz wrote it originally in invisible ink?

This raises an emotive point, a central axis involving the subject's world-view, what did he seek to achieve and how did he want to be seen and remembered: How Jewish was Schulz? According to *Jewish* criteria, it is questionable. It seems he did not undertake bar mitzvah or eat kosher, may possibly have crossed himself in Catholic churches with his students, was critical (memoirs say) of what he called the 'anachronism' of local Hasidic Jewry, posted a notice in the local press that he was no longer of the Judaic faith when trying to marry Józefina Szelińska (a convert from Judaism to Catholicism), and didn't attend the Orthodox Synagogue (his ex-students, and sister of his friend, told me) though his father did. He didn't speak Hebrew or Yiddish. All opinions are of course valid, but surely no agenda can hold more weight than facts and the imagination of the subject rather than the theorist's sheen and veneer polished with their own instruments.

As a respecter of faiths he may have visited the Progressive Synagogue of course, though this choice had tensions then. There is, however, no evidence at all that he spoke of Palestine: unlike Kafka, Bruno Schulz looked west for inspiration – like his country in its problematic geo-linguistic position – and dreamed of living in Paris or a western city according to his family. They named him in western style, as was their earlier choice of a German surname, after the Polish (but not Rome's) Catholic name day of Saint Bruno

of Querfurt, a martyred missionary working in Poland, Lithuania and Kiev Rus. His cultural choice for identity was Polish aided by German in the Austrian form like Kafka, and wide, even 'ecumenical' reading—ancient classics, mythology, Mickiewicz, Gide, Huxley, Aragon, Marx—but those who prefer to label a Judaic view as somehow primary are leaving far too much out of the equation. As my writings and lectures (Leuven, Berlin etc.) seek to show, there is far more European influence as with Witkacy or Gombrowicz's with France than that of Hasidic or Yiddish literature.

Out of the terrible debris came 29 stories, a few essays and reviews along with 160 letters so far in the public domain. For John Keats, who lived exactly half Schulz's span, 300 letters exist; Rilke wrote 10,000, the first edition of Proust's correspondence (he lived a year longer than Bruno) extends to 21 volumes; Chekhov lived several years less yet there are 8 volumes. Bruno Schulz's life-work has more loss and absence than presence, a mosaic composed of fragmented shards. We are stumbling among ruins with lighted torches hoping to find signs and even migration routes among later detritus. Terrible times, with so much lost. It is a fact that in the cultural melting-pot of Drohobycz, Lwów and Warsaw, after his mother read to him Goethe in the original (they spoke that language at home, as was on their sign on their shop), his principal literary lights all wrote in German: Rilke, Kafka and Thomas Mann. His inner world was a complex amalgam underpinned by Mann's *Magic Mountain* and *Joseph and His Brothers*, Kafka's *Trial* and *Metamorphosis*, and Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* with poetry based on his theory of Inwardness, i.e. the writer's creativity returning the things of the world back to it through art. Like them, he questioned the religions of their upbringings but not God, as every writer chooses a commonwealth of fellow-travellers reflecting their self-image.

The Austrian Habsburg Empire that annexed Schulz's region during his formative years, a regime that Karl Kraus called 'solitary confinement with permission to scream', collapsed in 1918. It may be significant that two of his favourite authors, Kafka and Rilke, both died not long after from illness, at the time Schulz turned to writing almost a decade before his debut book. It was also when a close-friend and literary collaborator, W. Riff, died young from the same illness, an event so traumatic that Schulz avoided talking of the subject in later correspondence. First an artist, it seems that he additionally turned to writing – away from exhibitions for example; he said

that he could only charge the rich not poor for his work – because it was a more private domain, safer within the covers of a book.

The deeply-Polish author read and respected the work of compatriots. Recent memoirs confirm that he met writers (in some cases memorised their work) as diverse as Wat, Wittlin, Jastrun and Zegadłowicz. (The latter's family showed us two of Schulz's drawings that they still retain). He telephoned Gombrowicz and they walked in Warsaw together, exchanged several telegrams a day about the manuscript of *Ferdydurke*, which Schulz illustrated. Zofia Nałkowska's *Journal* strongly suggests a far more intimate relationship of several months with Schulz than his first biographer discusses, before her marriage to a husband who, significantly, wouldn't allow the writer to meet her alone and burnt his gift of a special unique copy of his book. This relationship was undervalued by Jerzy Ficowski; when I interviewed him twice he refused to discuss it. Such subjects are surely of interest to readers wanting the most complete and vital portrait possible.

This tapestry includes Schulz's sporadic travels involving art studies, followed by promotion of his work, a crucial element of his life confirmed by a last surviving – though distant – relative, a grand-nephew, from the family's oral tradition. For reasons too many to discuss here, Ficowski preferred to ignore this and maintain only one visit to Vienna: Bruno Schulz's attendance at its art academy in 1917-18, exactly ten years after his earliest known artwork (survived many decades later in a suitcase). He stayed with relatives, who unlike Kafka's have eluded research, without a stipend from his local Jewish community which further points to an outsider status (Maurycy Gottlieb and others did receive assistance from Drohobycz).

But superb research by Paolo Caneppele in Vienna found that the artist was there *several* times. This was known by heirs but omitted by Polish biographers. At least four earlier visits than the school year, between November 1916 and August 1917, are recorded in Austrian visa documents. This strongly suggests he travelled south of Drohobycz (not via Warsaw), as the stated visa border town was in Hungary, now in east Slovakia. It's plausible that he was there for most or even all of the war because visa dates overlap. He may have passed Franz Kafka on a boulevard or station platform, where the Prague writer's friends, Milena Jesenska and Ernst Pollak, were discussing him in the famous cafés that were even advertised on Drohobycz's post-office documents. Rilke also did war service there. Such factors are

interesting, because it was the place and moment for Expressionism that shows partial reflection in his art, when the bohemian world was rocked by the funerals of Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele (their art was collected by oil-rich Jewish families in Drohobycz) and Frank Wedekind, a controversial competitor of Przybyszewski in most of Europe's capitals. Their plays, novels and art, I have observed, hold (more subtle) threads in his own work as a writer-artist very much of his epoch. Coinciding with his first-known visa was the funeral there of the Habsburg Emperor, Franz Joseph, also featured in Schulz's stories twenty years later.

A never-discussed personal possibility arises, which theoretically impacts in his prose. The time in Vienna may coincide with the unemployed student, if he travelled earlier, being away from home when his father died in 1915. The family also stayed there, e.g. his mother – six months after her husband's death, during what was traditionally a year-long mourning period. His brother, Izydor had three visas in the years 1915-1919 when he was an Austrian army officer, accompanied by his wife, present in the stories. (Bruno wasn't conscripted into the army because his school year wasn't called up). One of their children was also born in Vienna, in 1915. Oddly absent from the stories, Izydor was an entrepreneur and the only one in the close family who had a job, which saved the family from penury when their textile shop closed.

Jerzy Ficowski tells us that the shop was burned down in the war, without explanation. My research found a declassified government report about the circumstances, discussed in my book. The more general background is further confirmed in Stefan Zweig's (2013) autobiography *The World of Yesterday* when he visited at the time and discusses local Jewish trade and absence of war damage to the town centre. Bruno Schulz visited Vienna at least twice more in the 1920s during longer-period visas. We also know, from his earliest surviving letter of May 1921, that the 29-year old was at least in Warsaw looking for a job, armed with a portfolio of his art.

Scholars in Israel found a letter by Charlotte Richman, daughter of the writer's cousin on his mother's side, which is undated but said to be 1920-1921, stating that he visited them in Berlin with his *Idolatrous Booke* series, which reflects the decadence of Weimar Berlin and late Habsburg Vienna, then being discussed in cafés and periodicals there. He lived off Wilmersdorfer Strasse, in the newly-incorporated Charlottenburg city district, since

disappeared. *Muse & Messiah* discusses the culture and events he could have been exposed to (prior to becoming a teacher, where he'd been a pupil two decades earlier), as well as new information about his friends.

More frequented cultural centres were Lwów and Warsaw, rather than the Kraków of post-Romantic Young Poland that embraced Jungendstil/Art Nouveau. Visits were made to Witkacy in Zakopane, made famous for foreigners by Henryk Sienkiewicz in the 1890s and later Joseph Conrad. In the 30s he went to Paris and Stockholm to make contacts, as well as sending letters to an Italian editor and translators in Paris that included Joseph Roth, a mutual friend of the Lwów-based Wittlin, whose daughter's American-published memoirs describes a visit by Schulz.

Yet Drohobycz, with its neighbouring spa-resort of Truskawiec, formed the chromosomes of his blood, an internalised republic that could never be relinquished like Adam Mickiewicz's borderlands. It was needed like a drug or infusion, with creativity the one potent antidote against despair after temporary, dearly-won travels. Is not his mantra-like prose comparable to an induced trance-like state confessing an odyssey? Through the motifs of dusk, dawn, night, seasons, storms, sleep, dream and reverie, the transformation of people and nature in a realm of isolated introversion, their short-term effect fed the art of a cultural cosmopolitan as mytho-poesis: poetic interpretation of life and its events via symbol, metaphor, allegory and emblem. Mythology forms on an assumption that an event literally happened, in some reality (however obscure it may seem later), but because we cannot perceive the world's meaning, humans need to create it. This was also the stimulus for the similar contemporary European style of Magical Realism.

Bruno Schulz created as a heresiarch or demiurge, in Ficowski's wonderful terms, to counter the fracture between myth – life's interpretation – and presented reality within a space-time province called a Republic of Dreams, geographically north of the Carpathians in a self-created age of innocence. Like Kleist's 'backdoor of Paradise' (another space in which potential essence is tantalisingly just out of reach), a route was sought behind reality which seems somehow always just round the corner, over the fence, beyond the toll-gates that then marked the borderlines of place like those at Truskawiec. Schulz was less ill-at-ease in provincial life, like Gide, but worse in the nerve-wracking, crowded capital; he was not a ruralist like Léautaud, Francis Jammes, Ivan Franko, or Thomas Hardy.

He doesn't propose a philosophy for life, it isn't existential except in the sense of living his own authentic life: he rather portrays a psyche during and in the immediate aftermath of something as inexplicable as life itself. For that lover of mathematics it was a vector of overlapping spheres, not set in the restrictive nostalgia-template of the Romantics that Norwid questioned, but hidden enchantment kept alive awaiting 'maturity into childhood', like Proust's Times Past or Yeats' Isle of the Blessed concepts, and his thwarted love relationships resonate with Alain-Fournier's lost domain.

Schulz, who wrote a now-lost *Die Heimkehr* (*The Home-Coming*) in German, seems to see his region as a land of ancestors. His 'Fatherland' (rather than the Polish *macierz*, *motherland*) is not like the word's standard meaning, but the feelings of a traveller returning to a home-town; the title suggests the life he had once known was in the land of the father. The patriarch (the same Latin root as *homeland*, *patriot*) is a dividing line of life (and the other life) before and after his devastating demise, which may be a key to his tales, especially *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1937). There is an absence of the mother, who once briefly appears like a phantom yet pampered him, locals said. Is the imbalance of the father's presence among the family due to the author's guilt of absence from his last days, perhaps, or not fulfilling his commercial life like the brother?

Bruno Schulz's mindless murder by a Nazi, who was never caught, took place only 200 metres from the shop he was born above, across one plot from his childhood's courtyard. His world actually encompassed only a very small area of the town. From there to the school he attended and worked in, to where he painted frescoes to stay alive (situated on the same side of the road as his last home), were within barely 15 minutes walk. Only the famous Street of Crocodiles, the main shopping street (opposite their shop) next to the town's bazaar, was on the other side of the Square, near the (unmentioned) neo-Renaissance Great Synagogue. *His Drohobycz* was smaller than the map co-ordinates, just as his world was vaster than Galicia...

For readers, posthumous reputation is initially shaped by biographers of course – without their hard work it's debatable if there would be a scaffold let alone a structure – but the true primary witnesses are those who met the subject (Ficowski regrettably didn't meet Schulz but Artur Sandauer did, who he failed to interview along with other friends such as Nalkowska, Ola

Wat etc). These three interlocking elements – influences, personal contacts, biographers – are a confused, often unquestioned sequence by Schulz’s commentators today, but aren’t normally so regarding a creative life. The circumstances of Kafka and Brod, Norwid and Miriam, or Wat and Miłosz, are clear and without similar confusion.

Before this century and wider interest, the usual portal for non-Polish readers was translation. Jerzy Ficowski, who didn’t speak English, signed an agreement allowing (!) the first English translation of Schulz’s work. A re-issue of it by Penguin Books was one of the last business agreements by Schulz’s heir before copyright expired in 2012. These actions were unfortunate, because the English text is one of the worst possible! It is full of spelling errors, additions (e.g. a place name changed to Drohobycz; even the book’s title from *Cinnamon Shops* to *The Street of Crocodiles!*), and deletions (adjectives, nouns and lines) because the translator says in the Introduction that English cannot sustain the Polish original.

Not only are English readers not exactly reading Bruno Schulz, but it’s now possible that that false version will be used for other translations. In this age of Google translate, western publishers tell me they use spell-and-grammar-check instead of proof-readers – but techno-tools are as fallible as their loader, adding to the chaotic mess. Until this century and Yale Press, Gombrowicz was translated not from Polish but Spanish editions. Several years ago a new translation of Schulz was heralded loudly in the Polish national press, when the commissioned American translator wrote to me asking about Schulz because she said she didn’t know much about him and usually translated Holocaust studies. To date, no book has been published. A more faithful translation is on the web by John Curran Davis.

This is an era when major art by such as Żechowski and Beksiński are declined by museums because of ‘no space’ even when donated, and the fees for lending Schulz’s art are so high that Amsterdam and Barcelona can’t pay. The keepers and guardians of artistic culture seem to be confused about their role. The Mickiewicz Institute has never exhibited or published the very important Artur Sandauer Archive that was generously donated by his son Adam Sandauer, who most kindly showed me the contract of the 1980s. They also have a decorated lacquer box given to the family by the son of Schulz’s Nazi ‘protector’ Landau, but this has only been seen when donated.

A recent book by Agata Tuszyńska (2015), *Narzeczona Schulza* about Józefina Szelińska, surely breaks basic academic or even journalistic protocols. We do not know in the text when the subject or the writer is talking: the personal pronoun 'I' is used throughout, like in a novel, even when an educated teacher like the subject is (supposed to be) speaking. Why? Serious collectors of the subject tell me they expected more, so they don't put the quasi-novel into their Schulz section. Jerzy Ficowski was not allowed by her to use her name so he only used initials. Perhaps she was traumatised by the failure of marriage plans but also, I am guessing, because Schulz's publisher, Rój, would only publish their translation of Kafka under his more saleable name, an error continued by schools today; a Schulz letter says he helped correct the manuscript. Her family still does not allow the public to see Schulz's letters while their walls show his art including what may be only the second surviving example of his oil painting. The author ignores this rather odd situation, although it's a quarter of a century after the love of Schulz's life passed away in Gdańsk, unmarried and after more than one suicide attempt.

The public-funded Institute of Books in Kraków uses on its website a Chronology of Schulz that is in fact decades out of date. It is based on Ficowski, they told me, so ignores new *factual* discoveries (just as he sometimes did regarding Polish sources) by an Italian, Austrian, Ukrainian, Israeli, and Englishmen among others. The last time I looked, it ignores a great recent Polish find: a review of Schulz's debut in the daily Łódź newspaper 'Głos Poranny'. The www.culture.pl website, in their 20 facts section, says Schulz was 'thrown out' of the Jewish community (was that after he published a notice that he wasn't in it anyway?!). A few years ago a National Museum exhibition of Polish interwar art completely ignored Schulz, while 'Gazeta Wyborcza' championed another show's 'new drawing by Schulz' that wasn't one of his subjects or in any of his known styles. Perhaps it was by fellow-Drohobyczan E.Lilien but that's not news... Absurd false statements are common there: a pupil of the writer was 'his last surviving student' etc.

So both the Polish and foreign situations regarding Schulzology remain oddly at variance. Abroad, generally, a couple of other contemporaries have been noticed before, for example Wat and Leśmian in America in the 1960s, Stefan Grabinski and Stanisław Przybyszewski (as a German!!) more recently,

but national classics such as Tuwim and the Nobel laureates, Sienkiewicz and Reymont, elude wider research (Reymont's one American biography completely ignores his Paris period and novel based on it, *Wampir* 1911). Witkacy and Gombrowicz first established their reputations in France in the 1920s and 1960s respectively, while Schulz first entered the world pantheon at this later time due to a flurry of translations in England, America, then France, Germany, Japan, Israel, South America and Taiwan.

Some worldwide writers – as diverse as Bohumil Hrabal, Danilo Kiš, David Grossman, V.S. Pritchett and John Updike – have registered homage to the shy, hyper-sensitive teacher who attempted foreign recognition in his lifetime. This notice has its lowest point when Schulz's painstakingly beautiful short stories, more accurately prose poems, were cut up and re-pasted by Jonathan Foer (*Tree of Codes*, 2010), without respect for the original author's intentions and art. (It was a popular hobby for schoolgirls with *The Beatles'* books in 1968 too). He was proud, in an interview, that the book didn't take him long to do and was only a question of what words to leave out! There is a market for this nowadays, while I am told by Polish publishers who prefer books on bonsai trees or Nazis that there is no market for Bruno Schulz. One of Poland's leading publishers, S.K., officially wrote to me that there are too many foreign names in my book for Polish readers.

Present time, in cultural terms, seems to this author to have validity if it retains the lived past as its source, a natural mine shaft just as memory as experience is for living writers. Schulz's past was of course his family (that's why central new facts are in my book to be revealed, should a new edition be published) but also the borderland he inhabited. From the farthest eastern frontier of Poland and Europe, the reader is invited into the world of a Polish-European-Jewish-Galician witnessing the end of a way of life despatched from a far outpost. The vivid experience of the first artistic son in his genealogy, with attempts to comprehend it, is now of universal interest which transcends upbringing, creed and, ultimately, borders that were arbitrarily imposed without the agreement of those who were there.

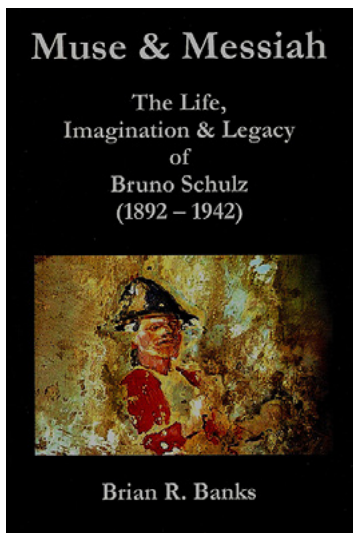
And so, by logical inference when remembering his region and work, this universality excludes nationalism, what Aldous Huxley called 'Moloch-theology' (Schulz reviewed him favourably) and Tolstoy dismissed as 'meaning nothing at all' regarding literature. Goethe said the same to Eckermann in 1827 and André Gide in his *Journal* in May 1912. A 'national icon' like

Mickiewicz is seen differently in Lithuania, and first discussed in France by Victor Hugo, Mérimée and Lautréamont as an internationalist before his fame in Poland. Status and approach is subjective, a re-drawn image that all too often ignores history or contexts, like a hologram presented to another viewer. Do lecturers boldly stating that Schulz was a masochist because of (some of) the art he did in the 1920s only (Gombrowicz spoke in his diary of Schulz's *artistic* character), or that he would have been a Zionist if Israel had existed during his lifetime, or that he was hiding a love of his racial background secretly in his texts – when Polish readers knew he was Jewish anyway! – really think they know his character? ‘This is a city of careerists [where] people don’t study for knowledge but for a position and celebrity, acquired through social contacts, women, parties... I know genuine scholars, even men of genius, brought to a sudden halt in their development, who have taken to giving lessons or writing popular articles which no one reads or, if they do, fail to understand’. Is this still true for the capital or Schulzology? When was it written? In 1890 – by Bolesław Prus in *Lalka* (1996: 627).

Everyone who met the bi-lingual cosmopolitan intellectual, including his students I interviewed, recall that international (including Polish) culture was his motivation and stimulus. Gombrowicz, who only missed the Nobel prize by one vote in spite of being supported by Sartre, wrote in his *Memories* for February 1961: ‘Among us [Schulz] was the most European writer, with the right to take his place amongst the greatest intellectual and artistic aristocracy of Europe’ (Gombrowicz 1997: 111). Is the trusting reader today, new to the subject, allowed to distinguish between fact and interpretation of his life-work which forms a cohesive unity, a carefully created personal philosophy?

It isn’t journalism or the latest sensation, nor is it bestowed for puerile cut-and-paste. Schulz, like Goethe in his way, was trying to understand or come to terms with living not dead forms, by exploring their worlds for truths applied to culture within social contexts, navigating with a compass that in his last years was no longer allowed to hold its magnetism. If you will pardon the unfashionable lyricism (although he himself said that the plaster-casts like fossils should be cast off), culture has never been historically about ownership of the plot but cultivating the seed so it may flourish in an organic way, a rich garden whose blooms are more interesting than the portal or fence around it while first ornamenting them there. All true art is timeless

after first grounded in its period and primary sources ‘over there’, which it transcends so to speak, to hopefully be an inspiration for wanderers and fellow-explorers today wherever they be. The legacy of Bruno Schulz has fulfilled his own dream.



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Promenade Abroad with Bruno Schulz

The article depicts ethnic, religious, as well as cultural and literary background of Bruno Schulz and his work. The author argues with some Schulz’s biographers and commentators in order to differentiate between facts and ‘myths’ or interpretations of writer’s life. Moreover, the author traces the main lines of Schulz’s foreign reception and addresses some critical remarks about translations of his work into English, as well as about the other examples of reading and popularizing Schulz’s legacy and heritage, especially in Anglophone cultural contexts.

Keywords: Bruno Schulz, heritage, literary criticism, translation