

TWO POEMS



Adam Czerniawski

THE AGES SPEAK, OR WHAT'S NEW IN HISTORY?

(1) *In my school textbooks there were no multi-coloured illustrations or diagrams. In the badly printed monochrome pictures it was hard to distinguish monarchs, generals and statesmen from saints. The texts too were just as grey and involved and boring. The one thing that caught my attention and excited me were the maps of decisive battles. Rows of rectangles stood facing each other, with arrows indicating directions of advance and retreat. Our rectangles were always in a minority, and on the following plate depicting the final phase of battle the arrows showed the hardy Polacks being surrounded or dispersed.*

Meanwhile Mickiewicz, Sienkiewicz and a host of likeminded ideologues joyfully proclaim that even the greatest defeats were in reality a step towards the most splendid, if as yet unrealized, triumphs. Such was the seductive reading matter of millions!

Only nations that are triumphant, healthy, feeling well and pleased with themselves deserve history. History is the reward for success. But nations that are constantly subjugated, laid waste and partitioned, should treat each successive day as the day of creation.

(2) In February 1938 Henryk Elzenberg noted: "This war will reach deeper into life than the last. It will undercut *everything*, sweep *every* foundation from under our feet." But in wartime Leon Stroiński reacted more eloquently and more penetratingly: "That world has vanished. In any event it was so tiny it could have fallen into a crack in the floorboards."

Happy are they who do not remember those years. For those tainted with the consciousness of "other days"—Stroiński's words again—which "I seek in vain", biography falls into *before* and *after*. They are utterly incapable of fitting the disjointed pieces together. "That world" is perhaps a dream, perhaps the subsistence of Platonic souls prior to embodiment. They have a badly strained sense of personal identity, and this in turn sup-

ports their belief in the general randomness, rather than the regularity, of events.

(3) Messerschmitts flying low in a defenceless sky the torn seats of Pullman coaches on the Polish State Railways rows of Polish prisoners guarded by Soviet soldiers in muddy Dubno voices begging for matches and cigarettes in sealed transports in sidings at Równe and Łuck snow-covered crosses on graves on the stiff grass amidst the ruins of Warsaw.

So not even a global picture of the September campaign, but simply stray scenes rooted in the memory of a child. They are enough. And who would have thought that already at that age it is possible to shoulder the humiliation of an entire people.

1977-1981

INCIDENT IN HEAVEN

first of all he was beaten at home
his father an able book-keeper played the flute in the evening
his elder sister roamed the pubs
his mother's hazel eyes often brimmed with tears
then he joined the party
then was issued a uniform
then was placed in charge of a fenced compound
then marriage to a neurologist's daughter
then the transports began to pour in
then the child was born
then further transports arriving regularly
in December the first snow fell
honoured for his efficiency and diligence
he bought his son a rattle and a red locomotive
confessed his sins took his wife to Midnight Mass
in heaven 99 innocents rejoiced

Translated by Iain Higgins