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"A Production Center": A Model of Creative Work in Tadeusz Konwicki's Early Prose

SUMMARY

The aim of this article is to outline the issues related to the specificity of the image of the writer and his role in society created in Tadeusz Konwicki's early works. This stage in the writer's life opens with the first short story that Konwicki published, namely "Kapral Koziołek i ja" from 1947, after which the initial model of his writing is subject to gradual erosion and ends between 1954 and 1955 with the novel titled *Z oblężonego miasta*. Investigating the motif of the creative work house on the basis of *Z oblężonego miasta* is a pretext for reflection on the category of the writer's work. The article traces the motifs of the professional category of the writer, through analysing the constructions on which Konwicki's narratives are based. At the same time, due to the analysis of social discourse in which the author participated, the article outlines the social functions he performed at a given time.

Keywords
Tadeusz Konwicki, writer, socialist realism, total institution, creative work house

Tadeusz Konwicki constantly challenged his image of a professional writer and he did not aspire to the position of a recognised professional at all. He kept on being ironic: "Of course (…) I was the venerable, majestic writer who quarrels with God and history, goes for walks in a straw hat, and then, spread out in his chair, sprawled in an armchair, perorates in a resounding

voice about poetry."[1] Imagining a "special train of our literature," he placed himself behind third-class literary wagons and behind passenger and freight wagons: "I saw my pale body at the end of the mixed train, beside the toilet."[2] Essentially at every stage of his literary career – though more categorically in his late works – he tried to distance himself from belonging to his professional environment, from dealing with subjects considered "worthy" of professional literature, as well as from the practices of private and public life associated with being a writer.

The aim of this article is to outline the issues related to the specificity of the image of the writer and his role in society created in the early works by Konwicki. This stage opens with the first short story that Konwicki published, namely "Kapral Koziołek i ja" [Corporal Koziołek and I] from 1947, after which the initial literary model gradually erodes and closes at the end of 1954 and the beginning of 1955 with the novel titled *Z oblężonego miasta* [From the Besieged City]. The article also undertakes to trace the threads concerning the category of a professional penman through analysing the constructions on which the author's narratives are based. In addition, the social functions performed by the author at that time will be outlined while exploring social discourse[3] in which the author participated.

It seems to be a problematic issue to analyse the transformation of the writer's profession against the background of concrete social structures, firstly due to the difficulty in defining the category of the profession itself and, secondly, because of the difficulty in determining the extent to which the writer's activity is professional and at what point it can be considered as such. Adopting – after Andrzej Siciński – the basic sociological criteria, such as the function (a person who writes) and the recipient (a writer has readers), one may look at the transformations of this profession, conditioned by the "product" itself and external factors.[4] The historical approach shows some established patterns of authorship and the writing profession, patterns closely related to the social structure of the given epoch.[5]

An analysis of the motif of the creative work house based on *Z oblężonego miasta* is a pretext for a reflection on the category of the writer's work. These findings are put in the context of cultural history of the Creative Work House in Obory so as to look, on the one hand, at Konwicki's attitude towards this institution and, on the other, to take into account the perspective of how functioning within its official structures influenced his work and literary condition. What is important here is the space itself, which can be placed

[1] Tadeusz Konwicki, *Wschody i zachody księżyca* (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza INTERIM, 1990), 160–161. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish.]

[2] Tadeusz Konwicki, *Kalendarz i klepsydra* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1989), 168.

[3] Stefan Żółkiewski, *Kultura literacka (1918–1932)* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1973), 6.

[4] Andrzej Siciński, *Literaci polscy. Przemiany zawodu na tle przemian kultury współczesnej*, (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1971), 14.

[5] Ian Watt, "Literatura i społeczeństwo," in *W kręgu socjologii literatury. Antologia tekstów zagranicznych*, introduction, selection and editon by Andrzej Mencwel, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1980), 65.

in the perspective of the geography of literary circles: from this perspective, it becomes a creative space which allows for literary activity.[6] The creative work house is the place for sanctioning the creative profession. The position of the given person is established by the right to go there and be in that environment, the way in which one functions there. The uneven rhythm of Konwicki's stays in Obory may interestingly correspond with his status in the official cultural life.

Avant-garde heritage

Before Konwicki began to renounce his professional position, he took his writing vocation seriously as one of the representatives of the young generation. Shortly after the war, he became involved in the construction of the "new" Poland: his literary path began in the preparatory period (1944–1948) and developed at the time when the Stalinist model of society was introduced and its rules were established (1948–1950). Jerzy Smulski presents this process in two aspects: the perspective of literary life and the level of literary phenomena themselves.[7] He sees symptoms of the Stalinisation of literary life in 1947, a period of violent political change, and the climax – in March 1950, when *Kuźnica* and *Odrodzenie* were liquidated and when *Nowa Kultura* was established in their place.[8] Needless to say, Konwicki was at the scene of these events and was entangled in them.

It was the engineer that became a real artist in accordance with the conviction prevalent at that time that, as Wojciech Tomasik puts it in his analyses, "great works of art will be born not in the comfort of artistic studios, but on hectic construction sites."[9] This reformulated the role of the writer, who was socially engaged and conveyed an ideological message, becoming an "engineer of human souls," designing a "new person" and a "new" social structure. The writer was supposed to organise their "workshop" following the example of an engineer, to break with the institution of the author, which elevated and isolated the artist from the rest of the society, to move away from the concept of "creativity" related to individualistic creation: "In the questioned cultural paradigm, 'creativity' and 'work' ('production') are a pair of mutually exclusive concepts: the former means talent, the play of imagination, absolute freedom of action; the latter entails knowledge of production rules, organisation, discipline, subordination to others."[10]

According to Wojciech Tomasik, breaking with this distinction has important consequences. First of all, the artist appeared to be a social order contractor ("a producer of poems"), his social role was still quite prestigious, but it was subject to democratisation. Secondly, the earlier "creation" of

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[6] Elżbieta Rybicka, *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich* (Krakow: Universitas, 2014), 36.

[7] Jerzy Smulski, *Od Szczecina do… Października. Studia o literaturze polskiej lat pięćdziesiątych* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2002), 13.

[8] Smulski, *Od Szczecina do…*, 55.

[9] Wojciech Tomasik, *Inżynieria dusz. Literatura realizmu socjalistycznego w planie „propagandy monumentalnej"* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 1999), 7.

[10] Tomasik, *Inżynieria dusz…*, 28.

works of art shifted to related activities, the so-called applied arts, or – in extreme cases – "to all activities which in one sense or another are considered henceforth 'production.'"[11] The aim was to mix different styles and materials in one artistic undertaking, to achieve a kind of "correspondence of arts" and, finally, to implement the idea of integrating art with other areas of social practice, a directive of "bridging the gap between the order of art and the matter of life, subjecting the widest possible areas of social practice to the principles of aesthetics."[12]

Tomasik poses questions concerning the approach of the Stalinist culture to tradition and he points to its relationship with avant-garde movements. Whereas this issue is rarely raised in studies devoted to literature, it often appears in the history of art. Tomasik is rather reserved about the most radical theses (such as those put forward by Wojciech Włodarczyk, who argued that "socialist realism focused and polarised the issue of the avant-garde which was of key importance for the 20th century"[13]), perceiving the approach in question "as an adaptation and reprocessing of certain principles and slogans while negating the stylistic and compositional devices which they exploit."[14] It is striking that with the declared reluctance of the socialist authorities to the avant-garde, socialist realism took over some of the mental attitudes that were common to the representatives of numerous avant-garde movements from the early 20th century, including the subordination of art to life, "progressiveness" and leaning into the future, the postulate of activity, the slogan of the democratisation of art denoting, among other things, bringing the creator closer to the recipient and changing the social status of the artist–producer.

It is worth paying attention to the avant-garde legacy, since it can be linked to the idea of the institution of the creative work house, tracing it back to the Soviet concepts of the avant-garde of the 1920s.[15] Needless to say, the continuity between pre-war art and post-war socialist realism is marked mainly on the level of general theoretical assumptions which refer to the blurring of the boundary between artistic activity and the sphere of life practice, the juxtaposition of activity and passivity or the introduction of scientific organisation of work. Not resolving the dispute concerning the extent to which the avant-garde slogans were continued and how much they were appropriated and destroyed by the Stalinist culture, it is worth analysing the ideas which contributed to the establishment of the institution of creative work houses; to return to the utopia about a collectivist, peaceful society and the tradition of the utopia of art as a tool to shape the reality.

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[11] Tomasik, *Inżynieria dusz…*, 29.

[12] Tomasik, *Inżynieria dusz…*, 38.

[13] Wojciech Włodarczyk, *Socrealizm. Sztuka polska w latach 1950*–1954 (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1991), 146.

[14] Tomasik, *Inżynieria dusz…*, 20.

[15] Marek Zaleski, "Obory, czyli o nowej pastoralności," in Marek Zaleski, *Echa Idylli w literaturze polskiej doby nowoczesności i późnej nowoczesności* (Krakow: Universitas, 2007), 193. First print: "Obory, czyli o nowej pastoralności," *Res Publica Nowa*, no. 1/2 (1999), 12–22. English version: Between Utopy and Parody. A Home for Creative Work in Framing the Polish Home. Postwar Cultural Construction of Hearth, Nation and Self, edited by Bożena Shallcross, Ohio University Press, Athens 2002.

Piotr Piotrowski points to the year 1945 as the moment when it could have seemed that a revival of the utopia was possible; the role of art in shaping the "modern" reality was revived in the circles of modern artists, also in Poland, but the researcher immediately stresses that the authorities succeeded in dissuading artists from that idea already in the late 1940s.[16] As Tomasik argues: "(…) the further we move away from (…) the theoretical foundations, getting closer to artistic techniques and solutions, the more clearly we see the differences."[17]

"A close-knit, strong, task-conscious collective"

In his first text, Konwicki accounted for his intellectual provenance, affirmed the new political order and "activated" himself. He moved to Warsaw in 1947 together with the editorial staff of several people from the weekly magazine *Odrodzenie*. He had already debuted as a writer of reportage and an illustrator, and he was soon to begin publishing reviews and try his hand at journalistic writing. He published his first short story, "Kapral Koziołek i ja" in November 1947, together with which, as researchers tend to stress, "Konwicki the writer was born,"[18] followed by another short story titled "Ogródek z nasturcją" [A Garden with a Nasturtium].

The main protagonist and first-person narrator of his early stories is a young, isolated individual, each time – albeit to a varying degree – confronted with a group and compromised in the eyes of the reader. As Tadeusz Lubelski points out, the principle of the opposition "the protagonist – the others," in accordance with which Konwicki constructed his early plots, is valued differently by him: in his debut story, the protagonist-intellectual is admittedly nicknamed a "knucklehead" and a "tramp," but it is the "others" that are inauthentic; in the other early short story, the opposite happens: what is not authentic are the intellectual and military roots of the protagonist who has to overcome his passivity.[19] "I was lying on a bunk alone with heavy and chaotic thoughts. I had always suffered from unproductivity,"[20] the protagonist confesses as the story opens, still looking with derisive eyes at the work of his companions. They are trying to convince him: "Stop messing with that. You have to forget and to start the new."[21] Work is a remedy for their war experiences; it is a key element in the process of overcoming the state of apathy, and it fulfills their need of belonging through the inclusive, community activity.

Przy budowie [During Construction] from 1950 was the first book that Konwicki managed to publish (the real debut, *Rojsty*, was not published

[16] Cf. Piotr Piotrowski, "Sztuka w czasie końca utopii," in Piotr Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki. Od Melancholii do Pasji* (Kraków: Universitas, 2007).

[17] Tomasik, *Inżynieria dusz*…, 196.

[18] Tadeusz Lubelski, "Introduction," in Tadeusz Konwicki, *Wiatr i pył*, Warsaw 2009, 5–7.

[19] Tadeusz Lubelski, *Poetyka powieści i filmów Tadeusza Konwickiego (na podstawie analiz utworów z lat 1947–65)* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1984), 31.

[20] Tadeusz Konwicki, "Ogródek z nasturcją. Opowiadanie brata z prowincji," in Tadeusz Konwicki, *Wiatr i pył*…, 38. First print: *Odrodzenie*, no. 37 (1947).

[21] Konwicki, "Ogródek z nasturcją…," 31.

until in 1956 for censorship reasons). As researchers indicate, this production novel has a special place in the writer's "biographical legend" since Konwicki wrote it after his experience of working on the construction site of Nowa Huta, a district of Krakow.[22] In the novel, he focused both on physical as well as "educational and awareness-raising" work which was to prepare the team ideologically. The action develops dynamically from the very beginning ("You have to be active, don't you think? There'll be a lot of work to be done here."[23]) to the triumphant end of the battle for the new man ("A close-knit, strong, task-conscious collective"[24]). This process is presented by the narrator who is no longer personal, as it is the case in *Rojsty*, but all-knowing and omnipresent, clearly defining the order of proper ideological evolution.

"Production Centre"

The outlined findings concerning literary life and cultural transformations are essential in the context of the idea of establishing creative work houses. Such a house was supposed to be a place where the opposition between art and life was abolished and creation and production were equal. Its space was supposed to shape "a close-knit, strong, task-conscious" collective of writers and it was referred to as a "production centre"[25] by Konwicki himself. The concept of the creative work house, which was to use socialist working conditions and methods of work production, became an element of planned policy. The aim was, beyond any doubt, to stimulate writers' activity and production of specific literary forms, and then to control the results of their work.

The project of creative work houses includes organisation of numerous gatherings, meetings and assemblies that defined the form, structure and order of official political life:

> To live in this world is to remain in some kind of community, to participate in one form or another of a meeting, in a group venture of one kind or another as there is no individual in this world – there is the collective, there are no individual thoughts – there is a team meeting, there are no individual actions – there is mass participation. In other words: this is the world in which the basic way of functioning – apart from work, of course – is participation in meetings, the world in which one lives from one plenary to another, from convention to convention.[26]

[22] Cf. Marcin Gołąb, "«Patrz ojcze, jak ciężko jeszcze pracują ludzie». Konwicki, «Władza» i robotnicy," in *Ułamek błękitu i chmur. Warszawa Tadeusza Konwickiego*, edited by Agnieszka Karpowicz, Piotr Kubkowski, Włodzimierz Karol Pessel, Igor Piotrowski (Warsaw: Lampa i Iskra Boża, 2017), 71–93.

[23] Tadeusz Konwicki, *Przy budowie* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1954), 17.

[24] Konwicki, *Przy budowie*, 90.

[25] Tadeusz Konwicki, "Jak napisać pierwsze opowiadanie," in Tadeusz Konwicki, *Wiatr i pył…*, 95. First print: *Nowa Kultura*, no. 7, 1953.

[26] Mariusz Zawodniak, *Zjazdy, narady, konferencje literackie*, in *Słownik realizmu socjalistycznego*, edited by Zdzisław Łapiński, Wojciech Tomasik (Krakow: Universitas, 2004), 404.

The motif of a meeting, plenary or convention – not devoid of some humorous elements – appears in Konwicki's early works. When the characters of the production novel titled *Przy budowie* prepare a report for the Headquarters, they stress that: "Do write (…) that he doesn't do anything whatsoever, that he doesn't hold any meetings. It will hurt them most. Meetings are the most important for them."[27]

The spatial, time and thematic framework of literary meetings was strictly defined: a concrete topic on Marxist criticism, working time separated from leisure time, closed space. The organisation of literary life under the supervision of the authorities openly assumes shaping of "a new human being." And it immediately raises the question of the behaviour of "the new human being," a participant – usually a male – of a meeting; about private and behind-the-scenes discussions, which tend to stretch and extend: on the one hand, they offer an opportunity to expand the boundaries of one's own freedom but, on the other, they may be controlled by the authorities. The tension between these extremes was also visible in the case of the institution of creative work houses, and the question concerning "using" this house remains open.

The first creative work house in post-war Poland was opened in Obory in 1948. It immediately began to play an important role on the map of literary life in the country. Beside Astoria, a holiday home transformed into Stefan Żeromski Creative Work House in 1952, it was the most important holiday destination for writers, with all the mythology built around it, feeding the collective imagination. Before staying in a creative work house became an attribute of the urban lifestyle, it had been included in the model of state leisure organisation, which assumed a strong relationship between models of leisure and work. As Paweł Sowiński notes, "[in] the Stalinist period, any investment in tourism or, more broadly speaking, services for the population was perceived with regard to their usefulness for the development of industry, and therefore the system of work."[28] In the period of the People's Republic of Poland, this idea took on characteristic forms, leaving behind its terminology, such as creative work houses.

Located near Warsaw and surrounded by nature, the house in Obory provided suitable working conditions. At the same time, it represented a way of organising life, which was supposed to meet the postulates of socialist realism, being in line with the party's scenario: it made it possible to play a kind of spectacle using the semiotics of propaganda. The authorities prepared a place for creating art in accordance with the officially conducted narrative.

It should be remembered, however, that the concept of establishing creative work houses was also a response to the authentic financial needs of writers; the house in Obory functioned as a real shelter, particularly in the context of post-war housing problems. The memories of Julia Hartwig, who returned from Paris in 1950, are symptomatic in this respect: "I got off the plane in Warsaw on a wet, cold, March evening: sleet, slush, puddles, tired

[27] Konwicki, *Przy budowie…*, 39.

[28] Paweł Sowiński, *Wakacje w Polsce Ludowej. Polityka władz i ruch turystyczny (1945–1989)* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Wydawnictwo TRIO, 2005), 65.

people, gloomy moods."[29] While waiting for her flat, she first stayed in a flat that belonged to Joanna Guze, a friend of hers, and then lived in Obory: "(…) I moved for long months to Obory, where I became a permanent resident for some time. The outbuilding was not yet rebuilt, and I occupied a room on the second floor of the palace."[30] The fact that she found shelter there is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the house in Obory was an important place for her to go for the rest of her life.

A similar emotional load can be found in "Notatnik oborski" [Obory Notebook] by Aleksander Wat, who wrote the following lines in Obory in 1953: "In a word, it was an island/an enchanting island!/An isle of escapism/(for God's sake, don't tell anyone!)/filled to the brim/of heaven with the smile/of people the goodness/beauty of trees/breaths of summer/sweetness and light"[31]). The poet found in Obory a substitute for a real home and spoke about it with sentiment. It is a type of narration that characterises some of the statements made by visitors to Obory, shaping a specific myth concerning both the institution and the space itself. Therefore, Obory can be interpreted as a bucolic world, as Marek Zaleski proposes,[32] seeing in it an idyllic corner where it is possible to reconcile what is private with what is public. The vision of a modern, urban idyll, genealogically rooted in the cultural tradition, contrasts with the perils of Stalinist postulates with regard to the organisation of creative work. It is a good idea to juxtapose these perspectives, look for tensions rather than blur them.

Obory debut

Konwicki made his "debut" in Obory in the winter of 1954 and 1955, writing *Z oblężonego miasta* there. The book, being one of his "juvenile" works, announces to some extent Polish October: as Przemysław Kaniecki argues, "the message about the human right to make one's own choices is this time completely clear."[33] The researcher interprets this work in the context of the then ongoing discussions around the choices of Roman Palester, Andrzej Panufnik and Czesław Miłosz.

The novel has the form of a monologue by the main character, Bolesław Porejko, asking the officials of an undefined country for asylum. Porejko relates his life, but despite speaking in the first person singular, he speaks as if everything that happened to him happened beyond him: he becomes involved by accident or someone makes a decision for him. He disgraced himself during the war, and after the war he establishes first contacts with the communists and feels "an irresistible desire to join in these events,"[34] but apart from curiosity, he also feels fear: being torn apart emotionally, he is

[29] Julia Hartwig, *Dziennik*, vol. 1 (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011), 38.

[30] Hartwig, *Dziennik*.

[31] Aleksander Wat, *Poezje zebrane*, edited by Anna Micińska, Jan Zieliński (Krakow: Znak, 1992), 224.

[32] Zaleski, "Obory, czyli o nowej pastoralności…".

[33] Przemysław Kaniecki, *Wniebowstąpienia Konwickiego* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Sub Lupa, 2013), 57.

[34] Tadeusz Konwicki, *Z oblężonego miasta* (Warsaw: Iskry, 1956), 109.

unable to make a final decision. His mental construction is unstable – completely empty on one occasion ("And I succumbed to these ecstasies, since I was empty and this emptiness tormented me"[35]), and on another it turns out that he is full of hope and great expectations with regard to the good future.

Loneliness in the "besieged city" is normally associated with an empty aesthetic pose and as such is mocked:

> Once again the predilection for conscious solitude returned. I analysed it carefully, enjoying every element of it. I aroused in myself the receptivity to artistic impulses. I stood for hours in front of a church painting, sometimes a poor one, searching for what was inside me. These practices provided me with a lot of pleasant anguish.[36]

At the same time the protagonist is aware of the fact that "pure" loneliness, total isolation and individualism are not possible to achieve:

> It is difficult for a person to stay in seclusion. Even loneliness requires someone's complicity, which makes us realise that we demonstrate to someone rather than to indifferent, dead emptiness (…). However, deep down, I expect that this community of human affairs, the ability to perceive them with affection, in error and victory, determines the rank of man.[37]

It is difficult not to get the impression that many elements of the world presented in this novel are related to the place of its creation. Focusing on the issue of being among others – the desire to belong to a community, interrupted by a reflex to escape from people – seems by no means accidental during the stay in Obory. In general, the "palace games," which are mentioned in the work, bring to mind the way of acting and communicating in the creative work house.

For some time Porejko strives to cut himself off from his intellectual and artistic roots: "I want to build houses. I don't write poems,"[38] he declares. On announcing this, he is supposed to prepare a project of a housing estate together with Gałecki, a friend of his. The initial enthusiasm is associated with the very act of deciding to act, with the very idea of overcoming his passivity. The plan of creating a new housing system, arranging people's living space and mapping out their daily existence inspires optimism in him; the potentiality of these new constructions and his own role in giving them form fills Porejko with joy: "The lifestyle of these several thousand people depends on our creativity."[39]

Eventually, the plan begins to overwhelm him. The eponymous "besieged city" seems to be connected, first of all, with the vision of organising

[35] Ibid., 83.
[36] Ibid., 84.
[37] Ibid., 80.
[38] Ibid., 124.
[39] Ibid., 136.

space and shaping the closest human environment and, consequently, forming relations between people and, as a result, building a new society. Porejko notices the agency of space, the possibility of shaping individuals who are in it, and begins to associate this with increasing control and manipulation. The institution of the "besieged city" becomes total.

Walls, entanglements and banks

Porejko, longing for independence and caring for his own privacy, opposes any interference of the authorities in his life, including the way the author's life is organised. The metaphor of the "besieged city" embraces the whole world presented in the work, but it can also be read as a reference to the place where the book was written, and the accusation expressed by the protagonist: "Yes, you live there like in a besieged city"[40] directed to residents of the Creative Work House in Obory. Does the house become a total institution in the eyes of the writer?

Total institutions which Erving Goffman mentions include such factories or establishments "in which activity of a particular kind regularly goes on,"[41] which take control over the time and interests of the members of the institution and provide "something of a world for them."[42] Their main feature involves "handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organization of whole blocks of people-whether or not this is a necessary or effective means of social organization in the circumstances."[43] Each of the different types of total institutions seeks to limit the number of people staying in it. Their limiting, total character is often symbolised by physical barriers that prevent contact with the outside world: "high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors."[44]

Another fundamental feature of total institutions consists in breaking down the barriers between places for sleeping, playing and working. The three areas of life, usually separated in modern societies, happen in one and the same place where the whole life of its inhabitants concentrates and is subject to the same single authority. Residents are treated equally and have to work together and do the same things. Time is strictly planned, individual activities take place at specific hours of the day, the schedule of which is set forth by formal regulations. The activities are compulsory and form part of one overall plan, the purpose of which is to carry out the official tasks of the given institution.

The schedule of the day and its organisation is supervised by personnel employed in the institution. The supervisors' "work, and hence their world, have uniquely to do with people,"[45] and the "processing" of people comparable to the processing of things: "As material upon which to work, people can take

[40] Konwicki, *Z oblężonego miasta*, 206.

[41] Erving Goffman, "On the Characteristics of Mental Institutions," in *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 3.

[42] Goffman, "On the Characteristics of Mental Institutions," 4.

[43] Ibid., 6.

[44] Ibid., 4.

[45] Ibid., 74.

on somewhat the same characteristics as inanimate objects."[46] Goffman defines total institutions as "the forcing houses for changing persons," in which the authorities "each is a natural experiment on what can be done to the self."[47]

Goffman explains the essence of the total system in the following way: "The privilege system consists of a relatively few components, put together with some rational intent relatively small number of privileges with a specific, rationally justified purpose."[48] The institution members are constantly remined of the relationship between these elements: "The over-all consequence is that co-operativeness is obtained from persons who often have cause to be uncooperative."[49] Members of the institution must subordinate themselves to it: on the one hand, the institution creates a network of coercion and judgment around them and, on the other, it allows for a certain degree of separation, giving a sense of freedom and reducing the risk of resistance or rebellion against the rigour of the institution.

Although calling the creative work house in Obory a total institution would certainly be a simplification, the similarities between these projects illustrate the "besiegement" which Konwicki experienced and point to the reasons for the turnaround in his work as well as changes in his perception of his function as a writer. When Porejko screams: "I've had enough of all this! Enough of correcting the world, enough of regulating the life of others. Let no one interfere in my affairs, in my fate!,"[50] it becomes apparent that Konwicki clearly crosses a certain boundary.

Z oblężonego miasta can be seen as a transitional book, closing the "juvenile" period and announcing later works devoid of the "hard" structure of the presented world or clearly outlined and valued paths of plot development. Konwicki gradually freed himself from the doctrines of socialist realism, at the same time abandoning, as it seems, a deepened commitment to collective life in favour of concentrating on himself. The simplest expression of this can be found in the "besieged city": "I want to be alone. Goodbye."[51]

Having considered both the metaphorical space of the "besieged city" and the specific institution of the creative work house as total, Konwicki decided to turn to his inner life. This turn is also important in the context of his perception of the model of creative work. Constructions of Konwicki's early short stories, contrary to the individualized model of the writer, refer to collectivity and the community dimension of action. They suggest the necessity to build solidarity between representatives of different professions and the creators themselves. The institution of the creative work house should be an extension of this idea, or even its materialisation as the house space has specific functions, sensitive to the forms of social being together, shaping a community of writers in solidarity. Konwicki's turn is significant: responding to the unsatisfactory realisation of the idea of the creative work

[46] Ibid., 74.
[47] Ibid., 12.
[48] Ibid., 52.
[49] Ibid., 52.
[50] Konwicki, *Z oblężonego miasta*, 209.
[51] Ibid., 76.

house after the war and totalitarianism of the reality surrounding him, the author objects to any interference of the institution in the lives of people, in this case of writers. His works become metaphorical, departing from the material concreteness and focusing on the "I" of the author.

The first disillusionment, followed by fear of another commitment or choice, becomes a characteristic feature of Konwicki's protagonist; it weakens his construction. The protagonist of the "besieged city" tries to be faithful to himself, but this faithfulness is associated with a betrayal of values and people and, as a result, with an eternal sense of guilt. The feeling of being a "foreigner" or a stranger who is nowhere at home is beginning to dominate. "When the alienation of the surrounding world is growing, escape seems to be Bolek's only way out,"[52] as Lubelski argues. This escape can be real or imaginary. This is how the future foundations of Konwicki's poetics spring to life: places where the protagonist feels a stranger turn into the familiar land of childhood. In his imagination, space takes on the form of a Vilnius valley: "There is a motif in the novel of 'strange holidays' during which Bolek – remaining in reality in Zarzecze – lives in a state of constant dreams, he is mentally 'somewhere else.'"[53]

Punching the world

Although the criticism of socialist realism included in the "besieged city" is rather shy – or, as Lubelski puts it, "scared by its own boldness"[54] – it was clear that the novel could not be published before 1956. It was published, ironically, in October 1956. Writing it, let us recall, between 1954 and 1955, Konwicki gradually lost his confidence in general: as a man who believed in the new world of socialist realism, as an activist who was involved in the creation of this world and as a writer who constructed this world in his works.

A turn in the poetics of Konwicki's works (slow "punching" of his world) and the character of his professional life was parallel to the October breakthrough and changes in the party's internal policy. The writer broke down due to a sudden change in the attitudes of people around him:

> Those who somehow tried to shape me ideologically, who instructed me, who used some kind of pedagogy towards me, who embarrassed me because of my inappropriate biography, who somehow blackmailed me with regard to my worldview, those circles that introduced me to the party – very diverse circles, ranging from friends, acquaintances to certain social and literary groups – one day all these people suddenly told me: 'Did you believe all that, you sucker? Were you really so naive?' Of course, this influenced me in such a way that I said to myself that I could trust and rely only on myself.[55]

[52] Lubelski, *Poetyka…*, 87.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., 83.

[55] Tadeusz Konwicki, *Cień obcych wojsk*, written down by Małgorzata Ołdakowska, in Tadeusz Konwicki, *Wiatr i pył…*, 419. First print: *Polityka*, no. 16 (1992) (*Kultura* supplement, no. 4).

Nowa Kultura ceased to be the organ of the Polish Writers' Union in 1956, and Wiktor Woroszylski became the editor-in-chief. Disillusioned and gaining distance to the social and literary circles, Konwicki dealt with the magazine's artistic matters, including the graphic layout. Kaniecki highlights this but not so much to emphasise the versatility of the artist as to interpret this movement in the context of the need to find asylum in his work.

After the publication of *Z oblężonego miasta,* Konwicki did not print any book until 1959. Three years of silence was a relatively long time, considering how much Konwicki published. He was believed to have kept a diary at that time, but it was intended for his own needs – "cathartic needs" as Kaniecki puts it[56] – and not for publication. He continued to work as an editor, but the nature of his activity clearly changed. In the early 1950s, Konwicki outlined the role that a writer should play in the society in the following way: "Writers who are conscious fighters for socialism and peace, use in their daily struggle every weapon available to them: a novel, a poem, a newspaper column or journalism. Cooperation with a newspaper is a consequence of their political attitude, their ideological activity."[57]

Konwicki was both a fighter and an agitator as well as a writer or, to be more precise, a reporter and an expert who knew the area that he wrote about.[58] Once he began to doubt the validity of his "political attitude" and "ideological activity," his editorial choices became significant: for example, he accepted for print "Pamiętnik uczennicy' [A Diary of a Student] published in *Nowa Kultura* at the end of 1953 and wrote a high-profile introduction to it. It is also important, as Przemysław Kaniecki argues, to remember about his journalistic activity: as the editor of the "Abroad" section, Konwicki published, among other things, reports on discussions of Soviet artists, thus reporting on the symptoms of changes.[59] Therefore, although in his later statements Konwicki expressed his distrust of the changes connected with Polish October, he undoubtedly took part in shaping the new atmosphere of literary life.[60]

He interrupted his writing silence, also journalistic, only exceptionally: he reacted to the review in which Julian Przyboś criticised Mieczysław Piotrowski's drawings, furthermore, he wrote short, intervention texts, for example, concerning the failure to grant Bohdan Tomaszewski accreditation for the Olympic Games in Melbourne or the closure of a street gate at Nowy Świat 35.[61] As Kaniecki stresses, it was not a coincidence that his first reviews after Polish October concerned works of his close colleagues: Konwicki wrote a review of *Gorzki smak czekolady Lucullus* [The Bitter Taste of Lucullus Chocolate] by Leopold Tyrmand and discussed the book titled *Halo, halo, tu mikrofony Polskiego Radia w Melbourne* [Hello, Hello, These Are the Microphones of the Polish Radio in Melbourne] by Bohdan Tomaszewski.

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[56] Kaniecki, *Wniebowstąpienia Konwickiego*, 20.

[57] Tadeusz Konwicki, "Literat w gazecie," *Nowa Kultura*, no. 6 (1952), 3.

[58] Lubelski, *Poetyka…*, 67.

[59] Kaniecki, *Wniebowstąpienia Konwickiego*, 55.

[60] Jerzy Smulski, "Trzy redakcje „Władzy" Tadeusza Konwickiego: przyczynek do dziejów realizmu socjalistycznego w Polsce," *Pamiętnik Literacki*, no. 7 (1997), 179.

[61] Kaniecki, *Wniebowstąpienia Konwickiego*, 21.

It seems that the author began to narrow down his circle of friends and limit the space in which he functioned. It should be remembered that in 1956 he moved to a new apartment on Górskiego Street in the centre of Warsaw. Moving house was a very important event for many reasons. First of all, it eased his housing problems, giving him a sense of security and stability; in any case, Konwicki did not move from that apartment until the end of his life. Secondly, it is an important fact in the context of the position of the writer at that time and his concerns over his problems of living; although Konwicki refused to accept that position, he benefited from it. Thirdly, a local, rather hermetic world slowly formed around the new place of residence, within which Konwicki organised his private workshop (niche) as well as professional and social life (cafés).

Konwicki moves from the position of a committed writer-activist who participates in official cultural life, including stays in Obory, through the process of distancing himself from the official poetics and the way of organising creative work to the strategy of withdrawing, working in a small circle of friends and meetings in an intimate circle.

Karlsbad policy

Having resigned from his job in *Nowa Kultura* in 1957, Konwicki began to work on his own film. Looking for a new language of expression, he filmed *Ostatni dzień lata* [The Last Day of Summer]. "I wrote my last book between 1954 and 1955. Then I did not write anything for three years. I just made a film to purge myself somehow,"[62] he recalled. Firstly, he reached for visual rather than literary form. Secondly, changing the poetics was supposed to be purging: an ascetic, restrained means of expression. Thirdly, he worked in an intimate group, without professional film equipment, in an almost amateurish atmosphere. In his later interviews, Konwicki is extremely eager to recall the circumstances of working on that film; relationships of friendship and elements of randomness are the sources of elaborate narratives, for example concerning the composition of the small crew:

> At that time I was friends with Mieczysław Piotrowski, an excellent graphic designer and writer; he was married to Irena Laskowska, a young, beautiful actress, in whom I sensed great dramatic possibilities (…). And it just so happened that she came from the grand Laskowski clan. Her brother, Janek Laskowski, was an extremely talented and technically capable cameraman. And there was also another brother, Jurek, or – as they called him at home – Mietek Laskowski, who admittedly worked in a completely different industry, but he had all the makings of a great manager (…). And the most important and the most powerful figure of the clan was Laskowska mother, who came from the region of Maladzyechna – as the whole clan was from the Vilnius Region – and was the quintessence of Eastern Borderlands.

[62] Stanisław Bereś, pseud. Stanisław Nowicki, *Pół wieku czyśćca. Rozmowy z Tadeuszem Konwicki* (London: Aneks, 1986), 75.

> She became the moral patron of our team, as well as material one, since she fed us for some time.[63]

Jan Machulski joined the team and took his wife and three-year-old son to the seaside film set:

> We managed to hunker down in a forester's house which was called Szklana Huta; the Laskowskis clan, me and Machulski with his family. Then some volunteers joined in. From his backyard in Łódź, Janek Laskowski brought a very nice lad who was an athlete and helped him to carry the equipment. And Małgosia Jaworska, now an outstanding sound engineer, happened to be on holiday nearby. She may have been sixteen at the time and she was a secondary school student; She was fascinated by our ordeals and she helped us a lot.[64]

It seems that Konwicki additionally emphasised the spontaneity and freedom of action while filming *Ostatni dzień lata* so as to contrast them with his earlier descriptions of work in the Stalinist system. Also the non-literary, "technical" character of the script for this film can be interpreted as the essence of Polish October in Konwicki's work. According to Jan Walc, from that moment on, the narration in his work begins to disintegrate while in the opinion of Przemysław Kaniecki it is when the auto-polemic strategy appeared. The author refrained from making any final, direct comments, and started to withdraw from the positions taken in his earlier works or even undermine them:

> I have adopted a policy of going to the waters, to Karlsbad from time to time. I went there in order to purge myself by making a film. My friends were even slightly indignant of this. They said, for example, that while filming *Salto* I annulled some values included in *Sennik współczesny*. And perhaps it was true that when I was in Karlsbad I entered into polemics with myself.[65]

Konwicki referred to the act of immersion in water and its symbolism of purification and renewal primarily in the context of his film activity, which developed from 1956, when he became the literary director of the *Kadr* Film Studio. This activity allowed him to make some kind of self-commentary on the rest of his work. The holiday, spa character of film activity is also interesting, not only while making a film as it was the case with *Ostatni dzień lata* on the beach between Białogóra and Łeba, but also during the preparation of the scripts and scenarios. Konwicki tried to work on the material for his

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[63] Tadeusz Lubelski, "Zacząć na nowo. Rozmowa z Tadeuszem Konwickim," in *Nasze histerie, nasze nadzieje. Spotkania z Tadeuszem Konwickim*, selected and edited by Przemysław Kaniecki (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Iskry, 2013), 323–324. First print: *Debiuty polskiego kina*, vol. I, ed. Marek Hendrykowski, Konin 1998.

[64] Lubelski, "Zacząć na nowo. Rozmowa z Tadeuszem Konwickim," 327.

[65] Ibid., 335.

films precisely in the Creative Work House in Obory: these are, however, the only traces of time he spent there "creatively." Discouraged by this "production centre" after experiencing a worldview and professional crisis, Konwicki ceased to treat it as a place for writing his books. While constructing his story about that period, he stressed the act of "breaking up with everything" — both with the social and professional environment as well as with the literary language. He maintained that *Z oblężonego miasta* was the only work that he wrote in the Creative Work House in Obory and he never tried to write in it again.

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