

A European from Drohobycz: Discoveries in the life of Bruno Schulz

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This year marks the anniversary of both the birth and death of **Bruno Schulz**, an inspirational Polish writer from Drohobycz. It is also the year in which his writing comes out of copyright and the right moment to answer some questions about the writer.

Historians today consistently accept that Polish, and to some extent Eastern European, literary modernism had its first and richest harvest during the 1930s with writers such as Stanisław Witkiewicz (Witkacy) (1885-1939), Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969), and Bruno Schulz (1892-1942). However, this was never a specific group or movement. Gombrowicz and Witkiewicz disliked each other when Schulz introduced them in Warsaw. It was only through Schulz, their mutual friend, that they shared a common strategy: the recognition of Polish culture within the new international vanguard of experimentation. This material is still being analysed in books and conferences worldwide from the “fluctuating borderland between Russia and western Europe”, as described by Joseph Conrad’s father (Conrad’s father was the Polish poet, playwright and political activist, Apollo Korzeniowski – editor’s note).

European pantheon

Schulz, Gombrowicz and Witkiewicz are the usual starting places for non-Polish readers via translation, although one or two other contemporaries have been recognised abroad: Aleksander Wat and Bolesław Leśmian in the 1960s, Stefan Grabiński and Stanisław Przybyszewski more recently, but national classics such as Julian Tuwim and the Nobel laureates Henryk Sienkiewicz and Władysław Stanisław

Reymont elude wider interest. Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz first established their reputations in France in the 1920s and 1960s respectively, while Schulz entered the European pantheon due to a flurry of European translations in the 1960s and later in Japan, Taiwan, Israel and South America. Some American writers have exploited his work but others as diverse as Bohumil Hrabal, Danilo Kiš, V.S. Pritchett, and John Updike have registered homage to this shy, hyper-sensitive teacher whose attempts at foreign recognition were thwarted in the interwar period.

Schulz, first an artist and later a writer, concentrated on the more private domain of short stories, or more accurately, prose poems, of which only two collections survived his tragic death in Drohobycz in 1942. It is notable that much of Schulz's literary influence comes from German writers, a language which he learned fluently in the Austrian-Habsburg Empire. Rainer Marie Rilke, Franz Kafka, and Thomas Mann all lived between 1875-1955, although the first two died in the mid-1920s around the time Schulz turned to writing. Like Schulz, Rilke and Kafka both publicly questioned the religions of their upbringing (but not God). However, Schulz's writing was more personal, in the failed hope of marrying a convert, Józefina Szelińska (her family still refuses to give any assistance to scholars, although visitors say their home displays Schulz's art). His inner world was a complex amalgam of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and *Joseph and His Brothers*, Kafka's *Trial* and *Metamorphosis* (*Transformation* would be a closer translation), and Rilke's poems and *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* based on *Inwardness*, the writer's creativity which returns the things of the world back to the world.

This is not to say that Schulz, being a deeply-Polish author, didn't read and respect the literature of his first language. Recent memoirs confirm that he met (and in some cases memorised the work of) Aleksander Wat, Józef Wittlin, Mieczysław Jastrun, and Emil Zegadłowicz (the latter's family still retain two of Schulz's drawings). Novelist, Zofia Nałkowska's *Diary* strongly suggests a much closer, intimate relationship of several months, but this was ignored by Schulz's first biographer, Jerzy Ficowski, in all of his texts, and Ficowski avoided the subject in interviews with me. Overlaid onto this canvas were Schulz's art studies, explored in sporadic travels across the border. We now know that these excursions happened more often than his biographer allowed, in spite of personal confirmation by Schulz's grand-nephew, his last direct relative.

Unhappy in the capital

In 1917-1918, exactly ten years after he created his earliest surviving piece of art, Bruno Schulz studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, staying with relatives who, less successful abroad than Kafka's family, have eluded research. Unlike

his brother, Bruno was not conscripted. Without a grant from his local Jewish community, the family's oral tradition relates that he was unhappy in the capital, despite the fact that Polish artists and writers had formed their own *Ognisko* club. Biographies say this was his only visit to Vienna, but Paolo Caneppele's research has revealed that the student-artist was there several times. This had always been known by Schulz's heirs, but oddly didn't find its way into Polish discourse. At least four earlier periods are recorded in Austrian visa documents, from November 1916 to August 1917, prior to the academic year. He travelled south from Drohobycz via Hungary, and it is plausible that Schulz was in Vienna for most or even all of the First World War because of the overlap in dates.

In this new light, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Schulz actually passed Franz Kafka on a boulevard or station platform where

Milena Jesenska and Ernst Pollak, friends of the Prague writer, were discussing him in Vienna's famous artistic cafés. Rilke also did his war service in Vienna. Importantly this was the zenith of place and moment for Expressionism that shows partial reflection in Schulz's art, at a time when the bohemian world had been rocked by the funerals of Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele (it is known that their art was being collected by oil-rich Jewish families in Drohobycz) and the controversial writer Frank Wedekind, a competitor of Stanisław Przybyszewski in most of the capitals of Europe.

A personal, never-discussed possibility also arises: this period may, in fact, coincide with the unemployed student being away from home when his father died in 1915, and which could (if true) have had a crucial impact on his later prose. Members of Schulz's family also spent some time in Vienna, including his mother (six months after her husband died) and his brother, Izydor, who had three visas between 1915 and 1919 when he was serving as an Austrian army officer, and accompanied by his wife (who appears in the stories). Izydor, oddly absent from his brother's stories, was an entrepreneur and the only member of the Drohobycz family to have a job. His earnings saved the family from impoverishment after the Schulz family closed their textile shop on the market square in the centre of Drohobycz, one of the few premises that boasted a German sign, as Martin Pollack revealed in his fascinating book *Galicia*.

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New finds

Jerzy Ficowski tells us that the shop burned down without explanation during the war. My research found a declassified British government report, dated April 1915, by an Englishman working in the local oil industry stating that the Austrian army retreated when confronted by 12,000 Russians and a Cossack advance guard,

taking the contents of the banks with them. A three-week blockade resulted in food being sold on the black-market and the looting of shops. Jews who hadn't fled (to Prague, for example, where they were met by Franz Kafka and Max Brod) were accused of "treachery" and spying by the Russians, and in retaliation, a number of Jewish-owned buildings were burnt, almost certainly including the Schulz's shop. Stefan Zweig visited Drohobycz at this time, although his autobiography, *The World of Yesterday* (1943), has no mention of war damage to the town.

Bruno Schulz revisited Vienna at least twice more in the 1920s. In May 1921 the earliest surviving letter shows that the 28 year-old was in Warsaw armed with a portfolio of his art looking for a job. Another new find, by a scholar in Israel, is a letter by Charlotte Richman, the daughter of Schulz's cousin from his mother's side. It is undated but says that the artist visited Berlin in 1920 or 1921 with his *Booke of Idolatry* series, which partly reflects the decadence of Weimar Berlin and late Habsburg Vienna. The family lived off Wilmersdorfer Strasse in the Charlottenburg district, newly incorporated into the city's boundaries in the autumn of 1920. In my new edition of *Muse and Messiah*, I discuss the culture and events Schulz was exposed to prior to becoming a teacher (where he had been a pupil two decades earlier). Also discussed in the book is the limited Judaism of Schulz named after the Polish (but not Roman) Catholic name of Saint Bruno of Querfurt, a martyred missionary working in Kievan Rus', Lithuania and Poland. Such elements are crucial for locating the identity of one who, like his country in its difficult geo-linguistic position, always looked West, not East for inspiration.

His nearest preferred cultural centres were Lviv and Warsaw, but not the Kraków of the post-romantic Young Poland movement which had embraced Jungendstil/Art Nouveau. Visits were often made to see Stanisław Witkiewicz in Zakopane, the southern mountain resort made famous by Henryk Sienkiewicz in the 1890s, as well as Joseph Conrad. In the late 1930s Schulz travelled to Paris and Stockholm in a quest to make contacts, as well as sending letters to an Italian editor and French translators. Yet Drohobycz and the neighbouring spa-resort of Truskawiec formed the chromosomes of his blood, an internal republic that could never be relinquished. Just like Adam Mickiewicz's borderlands of Lithuania and Poland, creativity there was the one potent antidote against despair after his temporary, dearly-won travels. His mantra-like prose is comparable to an induced trance-like state confessing an odyssey. Through the motifs of night, dusk, dawn, seasons, storms, sleep, dreams, transformation of people and nature in a territory of isolation, a domain of introversion, the short-term effect fed the art of this cosmopolitan of culture.

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Hidden enchantment

Bruno Schulz's method was mytho-poesis, a poetic interpretation of life and its events via symbol, metaphor, allegory and emblem. Mythology is formed on the assumption that an event literally happened, in some kind of reality (however obscure it may seem later), but we cannot perceive the world's meaning so we need to create it. For Schulz, a lover of mathematics, it was a vector of overlapping spheres, not based on the restrictive nostalgia of the Romantics, but hidden enchantment kept alive like a flame awaiting "maturity into childhood", similar to the concept of Marcel Proust's times' past or W.B. Yeats' Isle of the Blessed.

The concept of cultural geography called nationhood may be a sub-text. Germans prefer *vaterland* like the first Slavs of Bulgaria, the French *la mère patrie*, Dostoevsky's Mother Russia (*rodina*), and the *vlast/otčina* of the Czechs. The Jews called Poland "the place where one can lodge", while Latvians prefer the "place of birth", and the ancient Persians used both fatherland and motherland. Schulz, who wrote a now-lost *Die Heimkehr* (*The Homecoming*) in German, saw his region as the land of his ancestors. His separate story *Fatherland* (rather than the Polish *Macierz*, motherland) does not equate with the term's normal meaning but the feelings of a traveller returning to his hometown, thereby giving a new sense to that emotive word: the life he had once known was in the land of the father. The patriarch (sharing the same Latin root as homeland and patriot), with life before and after his devastating death, is a major key to his tales, especially in *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1937), wonderfully evoked in W.J. Has' classic film which won the Cannes Prize in 1973. Its "other life" reflects Drohobycz before and after his father's demise. Is the imbalance of the father (the mother only appears fleetingly) in his stories due to Schulz's guilt at being absent during the last days before his death?

Posthumous reputation

Bruno Schulz's senseless murder by a Nazi, who was never caught, took place only 200 metres from the building where he was born. His world encompassed only a very small area of the town behind the shop where he was born. From there to the school at which he later worked as a teacher, to where he painted frescoes to stay alive under Nazi occupation, literally on the same side of the road as his last home, were all within a 15 minute walk. Only the famous "street of crocodiles", the main shopping street next to the town's bazaar, was on the other side of the square, near the unmentioned neo-Renaissance Great Synagogue. Today, the latter's ruined frescoes resonate with Schulz's scenes that once decorated the bedroom of

two German children which later became a post-war Ukrainian kitchen. Twenty-nine stories, a few reviews and essays, a much-curtailed correspondence, one oil painting, and about 300 drawings, is the entire life-work which has so far been passed down to us from those terrible times.

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Every writer chooses a commonwealth of fellow creators who reflect their self-image. For readers, posthumous reputation is shaped by biographers, but the true first witnesses are those who met the subject. These three inter-locked factors: influences, personal contacts, and biographers, are a confused, unquestioned sequence by commentators today (a laudable exception was his friend Artur Sandauer), which is both surprising and regrettable (if not unique) since Bruno Schulz achieved recognition from UNESCO for his centenary in 1992, and was commemorated by a special stamp issued by Poland. Fortunately, Bruno Schulz's copyright ends this year because the English versions are one of the worst possible, with illegal deletions, additions and changes including the first book's title from *Cinnamon Shops* (1934) to *The Street of Crocodiles*. The removal of his last artworks from Drohobycz to Jerusalem raises further the question of identity during his life-time.

The present only has validity if it retains, and does not cut off the past. Memory is the core of experience and a natural mine-shaft for writers. Schulz's past was both his family and the borderland he inhabited. From the farthest eastern frontier of Poland and Europe, the reader is invited into the world of a Polish-Jewish-Galician European witnessing the end of a way of life. This vivid experience and attempt to comprehend it is of universal interest. It transcends nationality, upbringing, creed and, ultimately, borders that were arbitrarily imposed without the agreement of those who were there. Like all true art, the results are timeless yet very much part of their period, and thus an inspiration for fellow explorers today. 🏰

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