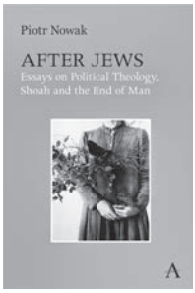

ABOUT THE NEW POSSIBILITIES OF ANOTHER MASSACRE: BARBARA SCHABOWSKA TALKS WITH PIOTR NOWAK[1]

[Piotr Nowak, *After Jews. Essays on Political Theology, Shoah and the End of Man*, Anthem Press, New York–London 2022.]

Barbara Schabowska: You readily draw on the ancients, Shakespeare, Arendt, Strauss, Nietzsche, or Kojève. It is as if you were talking to ghosts. Aren't the living more interesting?

Piotr Nowak: Living creatures are curious, no doubt. But we are used to neglecting dead people, we don't pay attention to them, we ignore what they are saying to us. I can't handle this.

But let's first talk about the living.

In 2006, I published *The War of Generations*, a book that probably had more reviews than any of my other published works. I just indulged myself with being obsessed about one topic: passing time, the war between young people and the old. I claimed that all differences in society – whether of a political or an economic nature – have at the end of the day a generational background. Using the language of Shakespeare as an illustration, I tried to describe this phenomenon. The language of intergenerational quarrel is, after

[1] This conversation took place at the 2023 Taipei International Book Exhibition, Taiwan.

all, the language of conflict. The category of time, which is so fundamental to human existence, is understood differently by different generations. The young have a lot of time and get bored to death from its excess, while old people suffer from a lack of it.

The war of generations led me to the political dimension of philosophical texts and pushed me to reflect on politics from a completely different angle than my peers, who were one hundred times more mature and more intelligent than I. They read nineteenth- and twentieth-century conservative writers, they organized themselves into clubs, they debated, they advised important politicians. In contrast to them, I saw nothing apart from Shakespeare, Heidegger, Arendt. The world had not reached me yet. I was obsessed mostly with continental philosophy and literature. I knew nothing about politics.

In the same year as *The War of Generations*, I published an intellectual biography on Alexandre Kojève, a French, or rather Russian, Hegelian, a great intellectual hypnotist, who in the 1930s seduced French intellectuals in Paris. Inevitably, I also came to count him among my first spiritual guides.

That's how I started my philosophical life.

BS: Leszek Kołakowski, the great Polish philosopher of the twentieth century, could give a mini-lecture on big issues. He also pondered on "Questions from Great Philosophers," answering them in a series of once-popular TV programs in Poland. You too, like Kołakowski, insist on the presence of philosophy in the public space. What for? The world today is very complicated; it seems that we need experts in various fields to be able to understand the processes going on around us. Why do we need philosophy for this?
PN: To be happy. Kołakowski, when asked why he studied philosophy, replied that it was for the money. Well, if they allow you to think and still pay you for it, then this is a dream come true. But is it happiness? Even if we assume that each person experiences happiness differently, what makes people happy is still completely unknown. It is not known why some people are satisfied with food, television, and a full wallet, while others have to read Arendt or Plato to become satisfied, to become happy. It seems to me that we call too many things at once happiness. My happiness is entirely fulfilled when I can work for Plato, for Shakespeare, for Rozanov.

In 2008, when I got the Andrew Melon Scholarship at the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna, Wawrzyniec Rymkiewicz called me and asked if I could help him a little with organizing the philosophical quarterly *Kronos*. That's how our cooperation began, then grew. We've also been able to release really great stuff in the *Kronos* library. I will show you the covers. We were discussing things that were completely unknown, at least in Poland.

Look at them, the covers are really interesting, as is what's inside: look at the *Left Hegelianism* issue.

BS: Is there a book of which you are particularly proud?
PN: I'm going to mention just one book that seems to me increasingly important – Jacob Taubes's *Apocalypse and Politics*. I first learned about Taubes from my German friends. They urged me to read it. As they told me, he wants to be saved, too.

Taubes's favorite literary form was the essay. Apart from his dissertation (which we translated and published in 2015), Taubes did not publish any books during his lifetime. So I collected his texts, written in four languages, into a more or less coherent product and published them through KRONOS Publishing House in 2012. In 2017, the Germans did the same – under the same title and with more or less the same selection. Of course, they did not even mention the earlier Polish edition.

BS: And what are your questions? What does Piotr Nowak the philosopher ask us?
PN: Well, today, everyone asks about Russia, everyone wants to know something about it.

I want to confess that Russian writers have a prominent place in my work. Why them? Because in their works you can meet God. Russians – I found this out reading their literature and spending a lot of time in Russia – really have nothing to say about politics. They don't know anything about politics. They are like children in that respect. Even when I read Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, I realized that they seemed to be more interested in making a revolution than in analyzing it as an infernal phenomenon.

A revolution is an instrument of world destruction. But destroying the world obviously can't be politics. Destruction is the domain of infernal forces; politics, on the contrary, is a human activity.

So yes: the Russians satisfy my religious hunger. Dostoevsky is not just another writer for me. He's the fifth evangelist. When I don't know what to do, what to think about life, about salvation, about love, I read Dostoevsky. I have not found a cleaner message anywhere. Maybe Mickiewicz. But that's a slightly different kettle of fish.

BS: But today, I don't think Russia can be considered a source of religious inspiration or literary rapture. There is war. Have you not noticed? How do you perceive Russia today – after the Bucza massacre and the complete destruction of Mariupol?
PN: Today we Poles, Ukrainians, and the whole civilized world have a common goal – to defeat Russia without destroying it. However, we must also do everything to be sure that Russia will not threaten us ever again, or at least not for a long time. But what does that actually mean?

There are voices calling for a freeze in cultural relations with Russia. Although I understand this perspective from the standpoint of current political practice, a decision to boycott Russian cultural goods seems to me wrong and counterproductive. Culture – any culture – needs to be known because ignorance is a sign of weakness. Russian culture, on the other hand, should be taken away from the Russians themselves, who have proven en masse that they do not understand it. They do not understand Pushkin, the freethinker, somehow the meaning of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* escapes them, and they don't realize that Shostakovich is not only the author of the powerful Leningrad Symphony but also of the Fourteenth Symphony, full of thinking about death and passing, built on a dialogue with the greatest European poets, such as Rilke, Apollinaire, Lorca.

Russians do not remember that they killed and tortured their own, their most outstanding: Gumilev, Mandelstam, Shpet, Akhmatova; that the great Tsvetaeva took her life not in Czechia, not in France, but in the Soviet Union; that KGB officers went abroad

to murder Alexander Galich; that the exiled Nabokov, Bunin, Brodsky never returned to their homeland. It is necessary to explain to Russians that the music, painting, and literature created by them is also directly connected with everyday life, that the limits of their language, resulting from insufficient knowledge, are also limits of the world they live in.

I have heard so many times, even from educated Russians, that Gulag prose is nothing but fiction!

By the way, we published a very exiting issue about the Russian-Soviet philosopher Gustav Shpet in collaboration with our Russian – I can say this from this historical moment – ex-friends.

BS: In your book published by Anthem Press, *After Jews: Essays on Political Theology, Shoah and the End of Man*, you use the language of political theology to talk about the Holocaust. Is this an attempt to reckon with Polish guilt?

PN: How do you understand the concept of Polish guilt in relation to the Shoah? Did we build the concentration camps on our land or did the Germans? Did we organize the crime industry?

In Poland, helping Jews was punished – and the one who helped them and was caught was killed together with his family.

You could say that in Western Europe Jews had more chances to survive because their neighbors were more friendly and open toward them then here in Poland. First, not always and not everywhere. France is a good or rather a bad example. Second, assimilated Jews, who often looked just like you and me, were helped. The Jews in Poland were 90 percent unassimilated and dressed in a very bizarre way, could barely speak Polish; they simply could not ask for help in Polish. There were towns, shtetls, and villages that were 100 percent occupied by Jews. How can 3 million human beings of a completely different culture be hidden? These were the Ostjuden, and even Western Jews wanted nothing to do with them.

Jews had lived with us for a thousand years. Then they were killed. Why? I claim that the Shoah could only happen under the conditions of late capitalism rather than in the atmosphere of primitive, violent pogroms of Jews in their Anatevkas. An important point of reference for me was the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. They were the first who drew attention to the criminal character of instrumental reason. But they looked for the causes of the Shoah in the wrong places: either in the "authoritarian personality" or in the so-called unresolved "social question." However, in order to understand what happened to the Jews in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1940s, one must resort to a completely different language from that of psychological, social, economic, or political discourse. We must get back to the forgotten language of theology, especially political theology. It is there that the right interpretative tools can be found; it does not belong to the realm of superstition but is our last chance to understand what happened to the world yesterday and what is happening today.

"It was the devil!" writes Alain Besançon, a witness to those times.

The devil, Antichrist, is not just a metaphor or a creature with a limp in the left leg and charred wings; it is rather the atmosphere we live in, manifesting itself in turning

traditional values inside out, in replacing respect with tolerance, charity with dubious philanthropy, love with sex, family with any social organization, religion with science, freedom with safety, and so on. Examples abound.

BS: Is it fair to say that these are essays on the apocalypse?
PN: In order to better understand the condition of the contemporary world, I propose renewing the sense of such theological concepts as eternity, salvation, the idea of chosenness, apocalypse, radical hope, and others. I also want to understand the increasingly aggressive attitude toward people of strong faith, which appears to fill us with anxiety and make us think of the recurrence of the Shoah.

Yes, this is what I want to say. Jews had to die because they were religious, and there is no room for religious people in this world.

There are no more Jews in Poland. They were murdered by the German Nazis, and those who survived were expelled by the Polish communists after the war. We live in a world "after Jews." Now we must tell ourselves what this means to us. I would say the answer is important for them as well as for us.