

# The Wanderer ‘with heart left in a cage named Poland’<sup>1</sup> — literacy returns of Jacek Bierezin to his homeland

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Jacek Berezin is one of the post-war poets whose tragic biography was marked by living in difficult times of communism, the struggle for the right to freedom of expression, political activities, and finally emigration. Although he was one of the leading poets of the new wave little is written about him. What is missing is both his detailed biography and a thorough analysis of his poetry.

Berezin was a poet connected with the generation of March 68 as far as community experience is concerned. He studied Polish Philology and Ethnography at the University of Lodz. He was a novelist, essayist, co-founder and one of the editors of magazine ‘*Puls*’. He made his debut in the catholic journal ‘*Więź*’ in 1967. Four years later the first collection of his poetry was released: ‘*Lekcja Liryki*’. Another volume ‘*Wam!*’ did not gain the benevolence of the censorship. After this rejection Berezin decided to submit the volume to the Parisian Literary Institute and published it under his own name. It is considered as a real act of courage and determination of the young artist. This step led to a total ban on printing of his works in Poland. The communist authorities, however, had more reason to show their reluctance towards Bierezin and observed carefully all his actions. As Berezin was also a member of the Strike Committee of Lodz’s University, cooperator of Workers’ Defense Committee, and later the Committee for Social Self-defense (KOR). Because of the activities for the opposition he was exposed to vast amount of repressions. He was

1 Bierezin J., *Fioletowe kwiaty jacarandy*, [in:] Bierezin J., *Tyle rzeczy*, Paris 1990, p. 33.

expelled from the university twice, and in 1971 he was sentenced for one and a half year in prison, suspended for two years. He took part in a hunger strike against the processes in Czechoslovakia held in the Church of Holy Cross in Warsaw. After the implementation of the martial law he was interned in a camp in Jaworz and then in Darłówek. Jacek Berezin could not and did not want to accept Polish reality in which he was forced to spend his youth. Going abroad for many years was impossible as the PRL authorities refused him consistently the permission to leave the country. Therefore, before the poet has become a real immigrant he decided to emigrate spiritually. Experiences related to the helplessness of that moment has been reflected in the poem *Emigracja* in which the resigned author confesses:

Teraz spieszyłem się, żeby zdążyć na statek pijany  
który odchodzi z dworca wschodniego o 6.40  
choć wiedziałem że nie ma już żadnych statków pijanych  
że pewne podróże są jak zawsze niemożliwe

Podróż od kresu nocy i milczenia miała smak krwi  
a jednak z kątów wylaziła ciągle nędza codzienności  
Nadal nie mogłem zrozumieć chociaż wiele wiedziałem  
Torturowane pióro uparcie odmawiało zeznań<sup>2</sup>

After nearly ten years of effort for a passport in 1982 Berezin is permitted to leave the country as the guardian of an ill person. This is the beginning of his long emigration. With this step the doors of homeland closed for him and the gates of the world opened. He journeyed many times of which testimony can be found in his poetry but mostly he traveled in his thoughts and these trips have only one goal — Poland.

The story of his life came to an end on May 26, 1993, in Paris, when he was hit by a car. He got up walked a few steps with raised his hands and he fell under the truck. To this day, it is uncertain whether Berezin's death was an accident or whether it was a conscious decision of a human tired of existence, teetering on the verge of life for many years. How difficult and complex was life and emotional situation of Berezin is evidenced by its self-ironic poem *Wielomiesięczne kryzysy* which can be perceived as a summary of his life. The narrator appears as a permanently lost man who wonders when his chosen way led him astray. Between the lines he asks the question why he does not match the environment in which he exists. What is more the poem manifests his great need for attention, acceptance and recognition:

2 Bierzyn J., *Linia życia*, Cracow 1999, pp. 43–44.

Wielomiesięczne kryzysy. Ja wiem, ja się ich wstydzę,  
od lat poniżej poziomu: co za honor mieć w biografii  
rozwód, dewiacje, zboczenia, parę większych nałogów,  
złamany nos, kurację psychiatryczną, burzliwe romanse,  
pełnokrwiste podcięcie żył; jakieś tęczowe skandale  
zamiast szarych gaf: chandry trwające pół roku,

zamiast żeby z szacunkiem szeptano: „B. został  
profesorem w Harvardzie”, ciągle dzwonenie po nocy  
do przyjaciół z żądaniem wysłuchania nowego wiersza,  
pożyczki na zapłacenie mandatu, znalezienia w ich życiu  
miejsca na mnie, całego; tak wiele – listy z okrzykiem  
„Pomocy”, bez eufemizmów typu: „Ostatnio jestem w złej formie”.

Ja wiem, to jest materiał na mit, kult, legendę,  
film z Robertem De Niro, Mickym Rourke, *marines*, ringiem  
i tłuczeniem szkła. W którym momencie zszedłem, nieuleczalny  
chuligan, na tę złą drogę? Skąd ten chorobliwy przymus  
imponowania, uprawiania sportów, ciągłego niszczenia  
barier i makietek<sup>3</sup>

Jacek Berezin can be described as an island drifting between waves of everyday life. Rebellious nature, intransigence and inability to adjust to the circumstances meant that the poet never fully established himself in Paris. His friends recall that after years spent on the emigration he have not mastered the language well enough to buy himself a pack of cigarettes<sup>4</sup>. His thoughts still swirled around his homeland which he could not forget even while staying in the farthest places in the world. Despite of the charm of many beautiful foreign cities he always traveled back to Poland in his poetry. As he wrote, staying in Sydney:

Z głową jeszcze nie ostyglą po Europie  
chodzę wśród fioletowych kwiatów jacarandy  
tęskniących za liśćmi które przyjdą po nich  
Z sercem zostawionym w klatce Polski  
Oglądam wiecznie zielone araukarie

After leaving Poland his poetry changes its form. It becomes more reflective. It is a source of loneliness and confusion. Berezin-emigrant discusses such topics as: travel, existence and love in his work. His latest book of poems *Tyle rzeczy* contains a lot of compositions that provide a view on a commitment of the poet-wanderer towards his homeland. Berezin while wandering the streets of different cities of the world could not free himself from constant

3 Berezin J., *Tyle rzeczy*, op cit., pp. 52–53.

4 Bratkowski P., *Ostatni przeklęty*, [online], [access: 01.04.2013], [http://www.tygielkultury.eu/4\\_6\\_2005/aktual/2ram.htm](http://www.tygielkultury.eu/4_6_2005/aktual/2ram.htm).

returns to Poland. The narrator of his poems suffers from the situation in his country. It appears to have a very strongly highlighted emigrational plot particularly visible in the poem *Wiadomości z kraju*. The narrator describes here his traumatic reading of the letters from his friends residing in Poland:

Listy z kraju są jak listy z więzienia  
Trzeba czytać je trzy razy  
głównie między wierszami  
Czuje się lepiej  
(znaczy że było źle)  
Ale potrzebuje nowych lekarstw  
(znaczy *Zeszytów Historycznych*)  
[...]  
Paczka od ciebie doszła  
cytryny się nie popsuly  
(znaczy nie było rewizji na granicy)  
[...]  
Gołębie z kraju są gorsze niż listy  
Nie używają poetyckich przenośni  
Trzaskają dziobami  
Poruszają wnętrzości<sup>5</sup>

The very first verse makes clear to the reader how the narrator perceives his homeland. Comparing her to a jail is a very bold statement containing the essence of the way in which the poet sees her. The closed borders and constant surveillance of the citizens by the state as well as living in the constant fear of arrest cannot give other associations. Exchange of letters between the cage in which Poles live and their friends in Western Europe can only succeed with the appropriate code which will allow them to transfer hidden information and meaning that do not fit to the party information policy. Westerners should not know how sad the reality of the inhabitants of the Soviet Poland is. Pigeons are perceived here as the symbol of Poland who are striking their beaks like a guilty conscience do not allow the emigrants to forget the unbearable truth how hard is the life of their relatives in Poland. The pigeons which are linked with the homeland do not allow the refugees to forget about the plight of those who remained in it. Those who stayed do not need passive sympathy but a specific help and assistance. Berezin writes later in this poem: *Pigeons* 'They demand the impossible / and spoil the taste of Sunday afternoon.' This ending is a sad reflection that although Polish problems still move those who left they are reported from a distance. The emigrants built a new, safe world abroad. Conscience, however, does not allow them to achieve peace of mind.

5 Berezin J., *Tyle rzeczy*, op cit., p. 42.

The poet-emigrant often returns to the difficult issue his country. In the poem *W naszych czasach* the narrator asks a question: who will be able to describe the era in which he lived because of the hypocrisy all around and where the concept of truth has been lost. Here comes a bitter reference to the process of the killers of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko in which the boundary 'if it was the process of the murderers or victim'<sup>6</sup> has been blurred. In the light of these events the poet submerges in reflections that art itself is not enough. Testament of the poetry is still not enough to do justice to the memory of those difficult days. At the end of the poem the narrator confesses:

Oddalony o czas  
pokonywanie dużych przestrzeni  
modłę się by po naszych czasach  
nie pozostali tylko katastroficzni poeci  
i miasta umierające w wierszach  
Modłę się o kamień do ręki  
o celność dla oka  
o nienawiść  
prostą jak tragedia grecka  
czystą jak miłość  
o nienawiść  
która przecież także kiedyś umiera  
by dać świadectwo czasom<sup>7</sup>

The speaker in that poem wanted revenge very much. Not the poetic revenge which he could let it happen in his poetry but real, bloody, tangible one. Hate is paired here with love it should be: honest, pure, all-embracing. We can see from the poem that Poland cannot remain as a country of catastrophic poets. There is a need for action and change. The need for 'a stone in your hand'. Berezin is a poet of rebellion that is why discord and revenge are crying out to us from his poetry.

The author of *Tyle rzeczy* dreamt so much about different Poland throughout all his life that even the distance from it did not prevent him from being a literary missionary of that the most important purpose. The poet raised in an ideologically enslaved country knowing how dangerous communism is to the modern world. That is why in the poem *Kiedy przyjdzie miatr* he raises the alarm presenting an apocalyptic vision to the reader which can realize with the advent of the red, eastern breeze. Using a strategy of enumeration the narrator shows the reader very vividly that all the things and places to which he/she is attached may be annihilated:

6 The truth about the death of the priest was falsified by the authorities. The sentences for perpetrators were reduced absurdly by the court twice.

7 Ibidem, pp. 27–28.

Kiedy przyjdzie wiatr ze wschodu  
niczego naprawdę może nie być  
ani katedry w Chartres i winnic Burgundii  
ani kruczowłosej wróżki z Saint-Cloud  
która przepowiedziała mi długą podróż  
ani dentysty z ulicy Vaugirard  
ani żadnej rzeczy, która nasza jest<sup>8</sup>

Using of the phrase ‘or anything that is ours’ by the narrator immediately brings to our mind the Tenth Commandment of Moses. This strategy is used to expose the values which are important for the narrator. That is both the cultural goods and the small things of everyday life that make our life as it is. In this poem hammer and sickle crossed together have only one association — ‘crossed arms of swastika.’ This comparison shows how destructive force was the political system in which the poet had to spend years of his youth. The narrator warns that at the time of apparent peace we should not forget what communism is and as it can always, like a blow of wind, move its influence to another place where people who do not know the reality of totalitarianism will not understand the dangers that it brings.

As it was mentioned above the longing for the country and the people who live in it still accompanies Bierzyn, as when he creates more poems he immediately grabs the phone receiver to dial the area code for Poland and reads his poetry to a few friends. With people who live in the country Bierzyn want to share his creativity. The Polish readers/listeners are the most important for him. Memories of such telephone readings the poet preserved in the poem entitled *Niekiedy nad ranem dzwonię do przyjaciół*:

Ja w nadmiarze, płynny  
duch dziwnie wędrujący  
teraz tu zatrzymany...  
niekiedy nad ranem  
dzwonię do przyjaciół.  
Mówisz: nie ma problemu,  
czytaj te nowe wiersze.  
ważne, że piszesz.  
Odbieram Ci pół godziny snu  
przed całodzienną pracą.  
Dobrze, że są  
niektórzy ludzie  
w miejscach  
blisko nas<sup>9</sup>

8 Ibidem, pp. 23–24.

9 Ibidem, p. 73.

'I' from the poem makes clear how important it is for him to feel a sense of community with the intimates. This poem is a tribute to them because of the fact that no matter what time of day it is or the amount of their fatigue they want to be his audience. It is a literary monument from the poet to his intimates whom he owes so much — time. Time for him and his poetry. The end of the poem shows how the narrator understands space. 'People close to us,' are the people from Poland living hundreds of kilometers away but for lonely Berezin his intimates. For the narrator the most important distance is spiritual not physical. From this perspective, it often seems that Berezin mentally never left Poland.

From the telephone calls another reminder remains of the poet's legacy: *List otwarty* which is a slightly humorous, extremely sincere and personal confession:

Szanowny Panie Ministrze  
Poczta została stworzona po to  
żeby ludzie się ze sobą komunikowali  
Ponieważ z powodów nostalgicznych  
zdarzyło mi się upić w miesiącu maju  
czytałem przez pół nocy  
przyjaciółom na całym świecie  
swoje nowe wiersze przez telefon  
I niestety przyszedł rachunek  
Który absolutnie przekracza  
moje możliwości płatnicze  
w związku z czym proszę  
o anulowanie go i pozwolenie  
na dalszą telekomunikację  
w mniejszym wymiarze godzin  
w imię żywotnej sprawy istnienia  
telefonicznych więzów międzyludzkich<sup>10</sup>

Poetry of Jack Berezin like the poem *List otwarty* showed the reality from the perspective of his subjective view marked with a strong emotional relationship and commitment. It is the poetry of personal experience and the experience inspired by everyday life very authentic. This is a picture of his longing, alienation, homeland and intimate sensations. This is the story of an emigrant written in simple language without gaudy metaphors and probably that is the reason why it is so moving.

To the last moments of his life Berezin remained as lost man unable to find his place in another country. This long-term emigrant changed the

10 Ibidem, p. 44.

cage of the homeland into the cage of loneliness and never was able to get out. His sense of mismatch was very well expressed in a short poem:

Nie widziałem nigdy tego dnia  
Nie zamieszkałem nigdy w tej nocy  
Ten brak Ta samotność Ta grań  
Oczywiście są jeszcze nieśmiertelniki<sup>11</sup>

Berezin — rebel and outsider, forever balancing on the edge — preserved in his poetry both his masters and friends dedicating them a lot of poems. On the pages of his poetry he wrote his autobiography. He passed away as he had lived embedded in mystery. We still do not know whether at the morning in May 1993, occurred an accident or Berezin's ultimate escape — escape of a man suffering from nostalgia, loneliness and Poland.

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11 [\*\*\* *Nie widziałem nigdy tego dnia*], [in:] *ibidem*, p.46.