FOUCAULT IN WARSAW

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FOUCAULT IN WARSAW

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OPEN LETTER
LITERARY TRANSLATIONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

In the stubborn, bright sun of Polish liberty.

History of Madness

THE HERO OF THIS BOOK IS MICHEL FOUCAULT.

But not only him. It's Warsaw, too.

And also the boys whose company Foucault enjoyed most.

The linguistic gender mixing—"girls," "sisters," "her"—comes from the subcultural slang that these men often use to address one another, and to speak about themselves.

"Husband" refers to a homosexual partner. And "straight" means a heterosexual man, whom at times one might desire.

URBAN LEGEND

Michel Foucault came to Poland in October 1958.

He took a position as the first director of the newly-founded Center for French Culture at the University of Warsaw.

It was in Warsaw that he finished his doctoral thesis, later published as *History of Madness*.

Yet in mid-1959, he was forced to leave Poland.

The reason was a certain boy.

Jurek.

No one ever figured out who this boy really was.

IN SEARCH OF MICHEL FOUCAULT

The Institute of National Remembrance was the first place I turned to when seeking traces of Michel Foucault in Poland.

I was not the first to look at the Institute (commonly known by its Polish acronym IPN). Others had made repeated attempts to locate information about Foucault. It went without saying that the first director of the Center for French Culture in communist-era Warsaw would have been under surveillance.

There were definitely files on him.

The IPN: "In response to your Application for access to documents for the purpose of conducting academic research, submitted as per art. 36, sec. 1, pt. 2 of the Institute of National Remembrance/Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes Against the Polish Nation Act of December 18, 1998 (Journal of Laws 2007, No. 63, item 424 [amended]), we hereby inform you that a preliminary survey of materials regarding Michel Foucault, b. 10/15/1926, conducted for the query titled: *Michel Foucault in Warsaw (1958–1959)*, has returned no results. The Divisional Office for the Access and Archiving of IPN Documents in Warsaw has concluded its execution of this application."

I realized the lack of information at the IPN didn't mean that there was none, but rather it hadn't been discovered yet. So I wrote out the appropriate applications and started searching for Michel Foucault on my own.

Everywhere I turned, I got the same result.

The University of Warsaw's documentation has no information about Michel Foucault's time at the philosophy department from 1958 to 1959.

Nor did I have any luck with my searches at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków or the University of Gdańsk, where, according to biographical information, Foucault guest-lectured. There was nothing at the Polish Academy of Sciences. A survey of files in the University of Warsaw's philosophy department and the Institute of Romance Languages from later years also turned up nothing.

At the Center for French Culture, Foucault's archives were unavailable. The Institut Français in Warsaw and Kraków knew nothing, except that Foucault had, in fact, been in Poland. The French Embassy sent general information about French–Polish cooperation from that period, but there was no mention at all of Foucault.

There are no archives from Orbis, the government travel agency that might have had information about the Hotel Bristol where Foucault's biographical records say he lived for some time. In the Okęcie Airport archives, there is no data on Foucault's possible flights. Museums, cultural institutions, the Polish Press Agency, the magazines *Życie Warszawy* and *Przekrój*, and the Palace of Culture and Science have no information. Nor are there any records at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum or at the famous psychiatric hospital in Tworki.

The archives of the Capital City of Warsaw and the Museum of Literature contain no trace of the name Foucault.

There seemed to be no witnesses to his time here.

No memoirs, letters, documents, not a single photograph.

Michel Foucault's time in Poland seemed to be the stuff of legends.

THE RIGHT CATALOGUE NUMBER

I searched for information about Michel Foucault for over a year.

I went back to the Institute of National Remembrance many times.

Hundreds of musty-smelling files.

Papers, notes, photos, reports, denunciations, classified information, instructions and orders, conversation transcripts, and secret collaborators' observations.

Keywords: necrophilia, pathology, fetish.

Dirty hands.

Dust.

Stickiness.

Obsession.

I looked through the archives from every possible angle. I pored through catalogues, exhausting the search engines with different combinations of queries and synonyms. No one knew what the key was. So I typed in:

Michel Foucault

just Foucault

just Michel

Paul Foucault (which was his real name).

Nothing.

I started looking for information in the files of people I suspected knew Foucault.

I searched people connected with France, embassy employees, people from the cultural world, artists.

I looked through the archives of prominent novelists, poets, and critics from that era: Jerzy Andrzejewski, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Miron Białoszewski, Zygmunt Mycielski, Paweł Hertz, Jerzy Waldorff, Edward Stachura, Marek Hłasko, and Ireneusz Iredyński. I learned many interesting things about this period and these people, where they spent their time, what they ate, whom they socialized with, what kinds of cars they drove, what tea they bought, whether they drank coffee, how late they came home and with whom. From wiretap records, I learned about their fears and desires.

But I still couldn't get my hands on any information about Foucault himself.

Finally I typed into the search engine of one of the computers in the Institute's reading room the most obvious word in the context of Michel Foucault's time in Warsaw.

I got one hit.

I filled out a request form.

After a two-week wait, the clerk handling my case called and said:

"Mr. Ryziński, you found the right catalogue number."

The world of melancholy is damp, heavy, and cold,
while the world of mania is dry and ardent
made of both violence and fragility.
History of Madness

THE BOYS

Meeting

Waldek put on his best pants, brushed his hair, rubbed some of his father's aftershave on his cheeks, and left the house. It took him and the boys nearly an hour to drive from Saska Kępa, on Warsaw's right bank, to Okęcie Airport. It was evening—warm, because it was summer.

Foucault was waiting in the arrivals hall. Waldek smiled and held out his hand.

Waldek wanted very much to go to France. And what an opportunity: a man who came from there!

Waldek was nineteen and looked like a kid. He was just discovering the city and himself. But it was happening so fast—like an avalanche, as he puts it.

He hung out in the cafés. He had a boyfriend—Stefan—and a few close companions.

That summer evening, Waldek, Stefan, Jurek, and Mirek went to Okęcie. Later, they were joined by Henryk, whom

they called "the Countess." They went from the airport back to the city center, straight to Rutkowski Street (now known as Chmielna). They threw a party. Wine, vodka, and some snacks to go with it.

This was the setup. Foucault played the host. Waldek was with Stefan. Mirek was in love with Stefan. And Jurek was single, always in high spirits, and the real soul of the group. Henryk, for his part, acted mainly as an interpreter. All he cared about was looking at and spending time with young men, that was enough to keep him happy.

Waldek and Michel gazed at each other and exchanged a few words.

Nothing happened.

Waldek's lover, Stefan, was the obstacle. So was the lack of a common language and Waldek's modesty.

Some time had to pass before finally—one balmy night—Waldek stayed over at Foucault's.

That was how it went.

Like an avalanche.

Inquisitive

In the year Foucault came to Poland, Henryk Tyrakowski, an employee of the secret police, was studying to become a major in Legionowo, outside Warsaw. He had a C in philosophy and a B in sociology. He also had a wife and three sons. His boys were sickly and his wife belligerent. Their marital conflict was suppressed "in accordance with the Party line."

Harmony was demanded and so harmony there was.

During the war, Henryk was deported along with his brother and his mother to a forced labor camp in Kolberg (today's Kołobrzeg). He worked at a bakery on a manor estate, then on the railroad. According to other Poles engaged at the Otto Werke company, it was "torture due to the brutal treatment." In a report from Tyrakowski's activities during the war—confirmed by those who'd survived—it was stated that seventeen-year-old Henryk "was very well disposed toward the Poles, but he hated the Germans, for which he was repeatedly beaten."

His patriotic convictions and friendly attitude served him in good stead for the future.

Henryk filed his first denunciation against his own brother. Describing the case, he emphasized that "any crime my aforementioned brother might potentially commit would not be motivated by hostility to the current political conditions in Poland because he is not an enemy, yet he might be taken advantage of and commit a crime due to his vices and addiction to vodka." This addiction led the brother to sell clothes and objects stolen from his family home. His behavior wore down his mother and she fell ill. This is why Henryk considered it his duty to file the denunciation. Yet his report didn't make the best impression on his superiors. They considered it to be motivated by "fear and a desire to shield himself" from the potential consequences of his brother's actions.

Still, Henryk had been noticed.

He was eager to join the secret police. In 1946 he wrote a brief note: "Please accept me as an employee of the Ministry of Public Security." And he attached an autobiographical sketch: "I come from a working-class family. My father worked in the

Żyrardów Factories as a weaver. As a young child I was given up to a children's home; I didn't enjoy a high standard of living because, as we know, conditions for workers in Poland before September '39 were appalling. The turmoil unleashed by the Teutonic invader brought an end to my studies. Then came the awful days of slavery, life under fear and terror, forced marches for a handful of kasha—all to survive. In 1940, seized by Nazi secret agents, I was deported to Germany for labor, where I remained until 1945 with my eyes cast eastward, awaiting my much anticipated liberation. In April 1945, I returned to my beloved homeland, beloved all the more for being socialist and democratic."

He considered service in the secret police his "sacred civic duty" and, without hesitation, signed a statement of commitment. He declared his loyalty to Free, Democratic, and Independent Poland and committed to the struggle against hostile elements. He wished to work with dedication and diligence, not letting slip any official secrets. He would never betray any information, whisper a word, give anything away.

Well, except in his reports, which were not betrayal, but a source of pride.

In Henryk's home, a sense of obligation toward the socialist homeland prevailed. His wife was committed to the system, their children were raised loyal to the party, without religion, and with a sense of pride and duty toward the Polish people's government.

In 1952, out of a sense of duty although without particular conviction, Henryk changed his last name and became Terakowski. He changed it to match a misspelling on his birth certificate—real life had to line up with the paperwork. In this

period he also changed his handwriting. Previously, his documents had been written in tiny, elegant letters with fanciful embellishments, loops, flourishes, and dots like little circles. His reports written for the secret police lost all their embellishments and the letters became large and tilted, energetic, as if carved with a knife.

At first his assessors didn't view his work positively, and his grades were mixed at best. For discipline: C+, though he got As for political interest and quality of Polish. He had difficulty recruiting collaborators. Terakowski's network of contacts was considered weak. At the same time, he was engaged, politically conscious, and—according to some—even nationalistic. He always had a loyal attitude toward the people's democratic government. Furthermore, he was: "morally suitable, intellectual, intelligent, eager to learn. Respectful of individual rank, ideological and polite, truthful, free of addictions. Sophisticated company."

He just had no luck finding informants.

His colleagues were recruiting well-known names and influential people, while all Terakowski could get were poor little wretches.

But finally, luck smiled upon him.

He started throwing himself into his assignments and made sure to continue his education, which opened a career path for him. On July 12, 1959, he graduated from the Ministry of Internal Affairs secret police school with high marks overall. His evaluations grew more positive. He was waiting for an assignment that could show off his skills. Partly by chance and partly sensing an opportunity, he started infiltrating Warsaw's gay community.

He felt no revulsion.

He maintained his distance, of course, but he had no problem talking to young men from the city.

He had his methods.

In April 1962, he took on an operation codenamed "Patek." And at the same time, he made operational contact with Waldek, who was given the codename "Drill."

At the time Henryk was thirty-nine. Waldek was twenty-two.

And he was the first to tell Terakowski about Michel Foucault.

Saska Kępa

A narrow side street leads to Waldek's old apartment in Saska Kępa. Cars are parked on both sides. There are a few houses and apartment buildings here, built of the white stone used in wealthy neighborhoods. On the front of his building are windows and small balconies, while the entrance doors are on the side facing the courtyard, which is broad and open on all sides.

Tall poplars, locusts, Douglas firs, and arborvitaes grow here. Evergreen shrubs stand near two carpet hangers. Beneath one of the small trees in the center of the courtyard stands a small bench, cobbled together from something that wasn't a bench before (Bookshelves? Jam cupboards? No—two stools joined by a wooden plank). In good weather, this is where elderly women and men, Waldek's old friends, sit and feed the pigeons, reminiscing about the old days, how *it was better before, believe you me*.