

II. Young Poland

Introduction

Historical Background

The political situation in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century was relatively stable. It was, however, a period of an “armed peace,” which allowed the continental powers to replenish their arsenals and steel themselves for belligerence. During that belle époque, Russia, Prussia, and Austria manifested their imperial solidarity by continuous suppression of the Polish people.

And yet the Poles resisted the sustained campaign of the Prussian *Kulturkampf* and the punitive measures carried out by Russian governors and secret police. In the 1890s, they formed several clandestine national and revolutionary parties, which embraced the whole political spectrum, among them the Polish Socialist Party, Social Democratic Party, National Democratic Party, and Polish Peasants’ Party. In 1904, when the Japanese attacked Russian forces in Manchuria, the Poles rebelled against their oppressors. Over a million workers took part in strikes and demonstrations, the largest in the industrial centers of Warsaw, Łódź, and Częstochowa, where many were arrested and hundreds lost their lives. The revolutionary movement of 1905–06 was eventually suppressed, but the Poles found a brilliant leader in Józef Piłsudski, one of the founders of the Polish Socialist Party, who openly set forth a program of Polish independence, formed battle squads, and engaged in a massive armed struggle against the Russian administration, police, and their collaborators.

This campaign intensified in 1914 when war turned Poland into a battleground between Russia and the Central Powers of Germany and Austria, drawing close to two million Polish soldiers into a fratricidal struggle in which 450,000 people lost their lives. And yet in spite of this bloodshed and the terrible devastation of the country, its economy and agriculture, the Poles did not give up. Under the leadership of Piłsudski, whose Legions formed the nucleus of an army, and of other politicians and parties, they took control of large parts of their land and established numerous state organizations ready to assume power in expectation of the Allies’ victory over Germany.

They were encouraged in their battle by slowly changing international opinion, now giving support to Poland’s claim of independence. In 1918, Woodrow Wilson, advised by Ignacy Paderewski, a famous pianist and indefatigable champion of the Polish cause, called for an “independent and autonomous Poland.” This statement was repeated in the joint guarantee of Britain, France, Italy, and the United States on June 3, 1918, and confirmed in the post-war treaties. After the defeat of Germany, Piłsudski was released from Magdeburg Castle on November 10, 1918, and on November 11, the day

Figure 22. *The Strange Garden* by Józef Mehoffer

when the Western Armistice was signed, he took office as Commander-in-Chief in Warsaw.

Thus ended the 123-year period of captivity, during which the Poles formed legions, fought all over Europe, engaged in diplomacy, rose in armed resistance in 1830 and 1863, carried out “organic” work, preserved the unity of their culture and historic tradition, and fought again, until the simultaneous collapse of Prussia, Russia, and Austria led to their country’s rebirth in 1918.

Cultural Background

In spite of unfavorable political and economic conditions, Polish scientists continued their work. The Museum of Agriculture and Industry in Warsaw, founded in 1875, sponsored publications, organized courses, and supported research laboratories. The Mianowski Fund, established in 1881, published handbooks, monographs, dissertations, and journals. Among its most important publications were the fifteen-volume *Geographical Dictionary of the Polish Kingdom and Other Polish Territories* (1879–1902) and the eight-volume *Dictionary of the Polish Language* (1900–36) by Jan Karłowicz, Adam Kryński, and Władysław Niedźwiedzki. The clandestine Flying University, organized in 1885, and its successor the Society of Scientific Courses provided between 1905–18 a university level education for more than 25,000 students, the majority of them women. The most outstanding among them was Maria Skłodowska (1867–1934), who after taking clandestine courses and working in physics laboratories in Warsaw from 1890–91, left for France, where she distinguished herself, together with her husband Pierre Curie, as the discoverer of radioactivity and two new elements, polonium and radium.

The best conditions for the development of Polish science and culture remained in Galicia. The liberal Austrian administration did not interfere with the autonomy of Polish institutions. The most prestigious among them were the Jagiellonian University in Cracow and the University of Lwów, the Academy of Learning, and the Society of the Friends of Arts. Zygmunt Olszewski and Karol Wróblewski of the Jagiellonian University were the first scientists in the world to liquefy oxygen and hydrogen (1883–84). Marian Smoluchowski, professor of physics at the University of Lwów and later at the Jagiellonian University, contributed to the development of the atomic theory. In the humanities, Karol Estreicher laid the foundation of the monumental *Polish Bibliography*, while Józef Szujski and Michał Bobrzyński reexamined the history of Poland, concentrating in their books on the causes of the country’s downfall. Leon Petrażycki distinguished himself in his work on the evolution and philosophical nature of law, Aleksander Brückner contributed to the development of Slavic studies, and Jan Baudouin de Courtenay to linguistics, especially phonology.

Figure 23. Maria Skłodowska-Curie

Architecture, especially in Cracow, was modeled on the style of *art nouveau*, mainly on the *Sezessionstil*, popular in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was characterized by elegant ornamentation of lines, circles, and flowers, which were made of stone, stucco, or tiles. The buildings were crowned with curved contours, and window openings had novel shapes, while oriels, balconies, and bays were arranged in asymmetrical patterns. The Palace of the Society of the Friends of Arts (1901) was built by Franciszek Mączyński and decorated with allegorical figures designed by Jacek Malczewski. Mączyński was also a designer of a new Jesuit church with sculpted decorations by Xawery Dunikowski and, with Tadeusz Stryjeński, of the Old Theater (1905), which was adorned with a frieze of leaves and crowned with a raised parapet.

The Secession style was also popular along Piotrkowska Street in Łódź and in Poznań. The more advanced style of functionalism was on display in Warsaw, where Franciszek Lilpop and Karol Jankowski built the Jabłkowski Brothers Department Store with girders of reinforced concrete (1911), Stefan Szyller designed the Zachęta Gallery (1900), and Czesław Przybylski the Polish Theater (1912). In the mountain region of Zakopane, Stanisław Witkiewicz popularized the folk style of wood architecture, exemplified best in his *Villa Under the Firs* (1897), and built by local craftsmen.

Impressionism and modernism dominated in sculpture. Waclaw Szymanowski (1859–1930) sculpted *Improvisation of Mickiewicz* (1898) and the statues of *Grottger* (1899) and *Chopin* (1906), while Konstanty Laszczka (1865–1956), who studied in Paris and was influenced by Rodin, created *Winter* (1895), *Infinity* (1897), and numerous nudes, busts, and heads, most notably of *Tadeusz Żuk Skarszewski* (1901). The most outstanding sculptor of the period was Laszczka's student Xawery Dunikowski (1875–1964), who was influenced in his long career by impressionism, symbolism, expressionism, and cubism, without ever losing his distinctive style, exemplified best in his early sculptures of painter *Henryk Szczygliński* (1898), *Pregnant Women* (1906–08), *Bolesław the Bold* (1912), and *American Women* (1918).

In 1897, the leading painters formed the Society of Polish Artists “Sztuka” (“Art”) and exhibited their works in the Cloth Hall of Cracow. The group members declared their commitment to modern art and to the development of artistic life in Poland. Among them, Leon Wyczółkowski (1852–1936), who began his career as a painter of historical pictures, came under the influence of impressionism in the 1890s. His paintings from the regions of Polesie and the Ukraine depicted scenes from the lives of fishermen and peasants, e.g., *Wading Fishermen* (1891), *Ploughing in the Ukraine* (1892), and *Beet-picking* (1893). After 1900, he used mainly pastels and watercolors to paint portraits, flowers, and Tatra landscapes, among them several views of Lake Morskie Oko. His contemporary Julian Fałat (1853–1929) distinguished himself as an outstanding watercolorist, who excelled in scenes of hunting, snow-covered forests, marshes of Polesie, and wooden churches, e.g., *Return From the Bear Hunt* (1892), *Stream in Snow* (1908), and *The Church in Osiek* (1906).

The most prominent artist of the period was Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907). A painter, poet, playwright, reformer of the theater, and designer, Wyspiański grew up and spent most of his short life in his beloved Cracow, whose history, legends, monuments, and people he immortalized in numerous pictures and plays. He also found inspiration in antiquity and in native folklore. Between 1891 and 1894, he studied in Paris, where he developed a modernistic, vibrant style, characterized by swift, sinuous lines. His most outstanding works include the stained-glass windows *Blessed Salomea* and *Saint Francis* (1897–1902) in the Franciscan Church, numerous studies of children, portraits, self-portraits, the symbolic *Motherhood*, and seventeen impressionistic views of the Kościuszko Mound as seen from his studio (1904–05).

Józef Mehoffer (1869–1946) and Jacek Malczewski (1854–1929) were two other Cracow painters, both students of Matejko. Mehoffer, who studied in Paris and was influenced by impressionism, excelled as a designer of stained-glass windows, for example, in St. Nicholas' Church in Fribourg in Switzerland (1895) and in the Cracow Cathedral (1905). He also painted symbolic scenes of the haunting *Gorge* (1897), the *Strange Garden* (1903), and the fairy-tale *Dreaming Queen* (1905). Malczewski combined a realistic style with patriotic symbolism, as he depicted Poland's martyrology, especially in his cycle of paintings showing exiles on their long road to Siberia and in the penal colony, e.g., *Sunday in a Mine* (1882), *Death of Ellenai* (1883), inspired by Słowacki's *Anhelli*, and *Death on the Road* (1891). His visions of Polish history, haunted by fighters and martyrs, found their best expressions in *Melancholy* (1890–04) and *Vicious Circle* (1895–97). Malczewski also depicted Death, who frequently appeared in his paintings as a soothing angel with the features of a beautiful woman, e.g., *Thanatos I* (1898), *Thanatos II* (1899), and *Death* (1902), as well as self-portraits and mysterious landscapes with mythological fauns, satyrs, and sirens, e.g., *Self-portrait With Fauns* (1906) and *My Soul* (1917). Józef Pankiewicz (1866–1940) and Olga Boznańska (1865–1940), who were influenced by French impressionism and colorism, as well as Vlastimil Hoffman (1881–1970), disciple of Malczewski and painter of village Madonnas, and the portraitist and symbolist Wojciech Weiss (1875–1950), were other distinguished painters of the period.

The musical life of Young Poland was nurtured by a group of gifted composers and conductors. Mieczysław Karłowicz (1876–1909), who was educated in Heidelberg, Berlin, and Leipzig, wrote the symphony *Renaissance*, a violin concerto, and symphonic poems, among them *Three Eternal Songs*, *Stanisław and Anna Oświęcim*, and *A Sad Tale*, in which he expressed his moods of mystical contemplation. His songs written to poems by Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer are suffused with melancholy and sorrow, characteristic of the period. His promising career was cut short, when he died under an avalanche of snow in his beloved Tatra Mountains. Ludomir Różycki (1884–1953), who also studied in Berlin, composed operas, e.g., *Bolesław the Bold* and *Beatrice Cenci*, and symphonic poems, also inspired by Polish history and literature, e.g., *Varsovienne* and *Anhelli*. His most popular works were the

comic opera *Casanova* and the ballet *Pan Twardowski*, which was based on a well known legend and contained elements of folk music.

Two world-renowned artists, Karol Szymanowski (1882–1937) and Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860–1941), made their debuts as composers at the turn of the century. The Philharmonic Orchestra, established in Warsaw in 1901, was led by two eminent composers and conductors, Emil Młynarski (1870–1935) and Grzegorz Fitelberg (1879–1953).

Literary Background

Modernism in Europe, which was associated with such artistic trends as art nouveau, Secession, decadentism, impressionism, symbolism or art for art's sake, assumed the local names of Young Germany, Young Scandinavia, and Young Poland. It was influenced by the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, especially by his theses of the senselessness of life, human suffering, and the redeeming power of art, and of Friedrich Nietzsche, who questioned contemporary morality and culture, and claimed absolute freedom for exceptional individuals.

In literature, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Jean-Arthur Rimbaud provided inspiration for Polish poets, especially with their notions of metaphysical despair, spleen, and revolt against the world approaching the end of the century. Many of these anti-realistic ideas were propagated by Zenon Przesmycki-Miriam (1861–1944), a critic, poet, translator, and editor of two influential Warsaw periodicals, *Życie* (1887–91) and *Chimera* (1901–07), and by Artur Górski, editor of the Cracow *Życie* (1897–1900), who published a series of articles entitled “Young Poland” (1898). These notions were forcefully advanced in 1899, when Stanisław Przybyszewski arrived in Cracow and published his manifestoes *Confiteor* and *For the “New” Art*.

Przybyszewski made his literary debut in Berlin, where he became acquainted with August Strindberg, Edvard Munch, and other luminaries of modernism. His spirited calls for the primacy of the artist and “art for art's sake,” for recreating the life of the soul, and for recognizing the power of the unfathomable consciousness and erotic impulses provoked extensive polemics. The eminent literary critic Ignacy Matuszewski (1858–1919) defended the importance of pure art in his article “Art and Society” (1899), while Ludwik Krzywicki criticized the modernists' limitations in his study “On Art and Non-Art” (1899). Stanisław Brzozowski, a critic and novelist, dealt with this issue in a series of articles published in the periodical *Głos* (1900–05) and later in his book *The Legend of Young Poland*, in which he attacked the followers of the movement for detaching the issues of culture from everyday life, especially in its social and economic aspects. Karol Irzykowski (1873–1944), another novelist and literary critic, wrote in “Two Revolutions” (1908) that the literature of Young Poland failed to keep pace with the revolutionary events of 1905, taking instead a Neo-Romantic turn.

Figure 24. *Henryk Szczygliński* by Xawery Dunikowski

Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, a poet and literary critic who participated in the literary life of Cracow, left behind his satirical *Little Words*, the memoir *Do You Know This Land*, and the poetic anthology *Young Poland*, which constitute a vivid chronicle of this colorful epoch.

The most representative poet of the period was Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, whose pessimistic view of the human condition permeated his early writings. Tetmajer's cult of art found expression in poems on ancient themes, while his interest in the philosophy of the Far East was manifested in *Hymn to Nirvana*, in which he revealed yearnings for the kingdom of oblivion. Tetmajer's erotic lyrics and melancholy reflections contrasted with his poems and stories in which he described his beloved Tatras and the mountain folk. Written in the local dialect, the collection *In the Rocky Highlands* (1903–10) became a veritable compendium of the mountaineers' splendid world and culture.

Pain and suffering as social issues dominated the early poetry of Jan Kasprowicz, especially in a series of 40 sonnets, *From the Cottage*. Kasprowicz, who believed that peasants constituted the backbone of the nation, deplored their misery and identified with his abused compatriots. With time, his naturalistic approach extended into a symbolic dimension. In his 1898 volume *A Wild Rose Bush*, Kasprowicz found that nature, manifested in the majestic Tatra mountains, provided an ideal setting for philosophical reflections on life and death, joy and suffering. With his next collection of poems, *To the Perishing World*, he entered a metaphysical sphere. In the hymns from this volume, he combined his concern for the suffering poor with catastrophic visions of God's wrath and the Day of Judgment, but at the end he bowed his head in humble prayer for God's love. His final volumes, *The Book of the Poor* and *My World*, were addressed to the common people and glorified life in the joyful, Franciscan spirit of love for all living creatures.

Tadeusz Miciński's collection of lyrics *In the Darkness of the Stars* revealed the symbolic and expressionistic character of his poetry, in which he showed the chaos of the world, manifested in catastrophic images and metaphors that illustrated opposing forces of good and evil, light and dark, divine and satanic. In his novels and dramas, Miciński expressed the fears and agonies of modern man, magnified by his internal struggle in the hostile universe, using experimental techniques and mixing realism with fantasy and the grotesque.

Leopold Staff began his poetic career in 1901 with the volume *Dreams of Power* and continued writing and translating until the 1950s. A poet of the second generation of Young Poland, he abandoned the decadent tone of the fin-de-siècle and called for heroic activity. In his next volumes, especially *To the Celestial Birds* (1905) and *The Blossoming Bough* (1908), Staff affirmed the dramatic richness of the world and searched for manifold manifestations of its essential value and harmony. He found them in recollections of his serene childhood, in the joyful progress of a pilgrim, and in the Franciscan acceptance of a simple and loving life. He also found confirmation for his poetic vision in ancient philosophy, classical art, and the Christian religion.

Bolesław Leśmian also belonged to the second generation of Young Poland poets. He made his debut with the collection *Crossroads Orchard* in 1912. Fascinated by mythology and folklore, Leśmian depicted a dreamy atmosphere in which fleeting images of forests, streams, and animals attracted man to seek a symbolic communion with nature. His fear of omnipresent death was mitigated by erotic pleasures and the joys of sublime love, expressed boldly in his volumes *Meadow* and *Shadowy Potion*. His original tale of the eerie universe was enriched by abounding patterns of rhythms and rhymes and embellished with archaic and dialectal words as well as with striking neologisms.

Theater life flourished, especially under the direction of Tadeusz Pawlikowski in Cracow (1893–99) and in Lwów (1900–06). He directed the classics of Polish drama, among them Niemcewicz, Zabłocki, and Fredro, staged the dramas of Mickiewicz and Słowacki, some of them for the first time, introduced theater-goers to the works of leading European dramatists, for example, Ibsen, Strindberg, Maeterlinck, Chekhov, and Wilde, and supported the works of young Polish playwrights, among them Leopold Staff, Lucjan Rydel (1870–1918), Tadeusz Rittner (1873–1921), and Włodzimierz Perzyński (1877–1930). Józef Kotarbiński, Pawlikowski's successor in Cracow (1899–1905) worked closely with Wyspiański, who envisioned a national stage that would emerge out of the deep roots of Polish history on Wawel Hill in Cracow and of the grand tradition of Greek drama. His *Varsovienne*, a story of the November 1830 Uprising, was followed by a cycle of plays about Polish history, e.g., *Bolesław the Bold*, *November Night*, and *The Legion*, followed in turn by a cycle inspired by Greek drama, among them *Meleager* and *The Return of Odysseus*. However, his most important theatrical achievements were the plays that dealt with political issues of the day, of which the most sensitive were Poland's loss of independence and the soul-stirring desire of regaining it. In *Liberation*, Konrad, the hero of the play, revolted against Genius, the symbol of the cult of Romantic poetry, as he rejected his countrymen's obsessive preoccupation with martyrdom, calling instead for heroic deeds. But it was *The Wedding*, a three-act drama staged in 1901 that dealt most directly with the major political issues of the day. Wyspiański used the wedding of the poet Lucjan Rydel with Jadwiga Mikołajczyk, a peasant woman from Bronowice, to bring on stage representatives of the Cracow intelligentsia (a poet, a painter, and a journalist), local peasants (hosts, farm hands, and an old beggar) as well as other characters (a village priest, an old Jew, and his daughter Rachel). It quickly became evident that the two social groups failed to find a common language and agree on national goals. Gradually, the wedding cottage became submerged in a dreamy mist and haunted by symbolic visions of the past that reminded the revelers of historical conflicts and tragedies. When a fantastic Straw-man from the adjacent orchard took over as the master of ceremonies and a young peasant who was sent to call people to arms lost the golden horn, a symbol of national cause and struggle for independence, the wedding guests were drawn into a somnambulant circle dance, symbolizing desperate helplessness.

Among prose writers, Waclaw Berent addressed in his erudite and stylistically elaborate novels the major artistic and political issues of his times. His novel *Rotten Wood*, written in an impressionistic style, told a story of international Bohemians fascinated by the figure of Nietzsche's superman, and of their decadent lives. Another novel, *Winter Corn*, described a demoralized Polish society before the Revolution of 1905, while *Living Stones*, a splendid vision of medieval Europe, showed the rejuvenating power of art. Andrzej Strug (1873–1937) was another novelist who wrote about the underground struggle of students and workers against the Russian administration, whereas Władysław Orkan (1875–1930), a novelist, playwright, and poet, depicted the village life of his native Tatra Highlands.

Stefan Żeromski and Władysław Reymont were the leading writers of the period. Żeromski explored two major themes: historical tradition and social conditions in villages and towns, often intertwining these strands. As a historical writer, Żeromski glorified the heroes of national uprisings in his short stories, e.g., *Ravens and Crows Will Peck Us to Pieces*, *Forest Echoes*, and *Dream of a Rapier*, in his play *Sułkowski*, and in his novels *Ashes*, an epic of the Napoleonic wars, and *The Faithful River*. His novel *Sisyphian Labors* described a young man's resistance during his school years in the Russian partition, while *Homeless People* and the drama *A Story of Sin* dealt with the issues of social injustice and revolutionary movements. In his last major novel, *Early Spring*, Żeromski extended his analysis of society to the tumultuous conditions in the period after Poland regained freedom. Like Sienkiewicz before him, Żeromski derived his moral authority not only from his writings, but also from his efforts to win Poland's independence.

The issues of the lot of the peasants and of the urban proletariat became the main topics of Władysław Reymont's short stories and novels. Reymont's novel *The Promised Land* described the growth of the textile city of Łódź, built by the masses of uprooted peasants from nearby villages flowing into the urban jungle in search of work. In the four-volume epic of rural life, *The Peasants*, Reymont depicted the village community they had left behind. He showed that the lives of the villagers were determined by the biological rhythms of the seasons, which imposed upon them the natural order of ploughing, sowing, harvesting, and other essential activities. Their lives were also regulated by the sacral order of the year, marked by church holidays and associated rituals and customs. Against this background, Reymont presented a dramatic battle between Boryna and his son Antek for a woman and land, compiled a veritable encyclopedia of peasants' lore, and adorned many chapters with poetic descriptions of nature in all its splendid manifestations.

The 1924 Nobel Prize for literature awarded to Reymont, with Stefan Żeromski nominated as another candidate, attested to the high quality of Polish literature and its international appeal.

Figure 25. Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer