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## JAN OKOPIEŃ, WITH THE CONTRIBUTION OF JOANNA CZARKOWSKA, *KSIĄŻKA WYZWOLONA 1918-1950*

[The Book Liberated 1918–1950], Inicjał “Andrzej Palacz”, Warszawa 2015.

The interwar years were exceptionally meaningful and unique for the Polish book. On the one hand, this was a period of new opportunities and perspectives which opened up before Polish cultural life as soon as the country regained its independence, but on the other, it would come to an end only twenty years later with the brutality of the war and the Nazi occupation. Yet, as the subheading indicates, the actual cut-off date for the Liberated Book was 1950, when the communist authorities of the People’s Republic of Poland put an end to the activity of private publishers, subjugating the entire book sector to a centrally controlled policy subjected to official ideology. All private publishing projects would disappear for many years, giving way to large enterprises with an inventory pre-established on a top-down basis.<sup>1</sup> This destroyed the outstanding diversity that had emerged over the relatively short interwar period despite numerous adverse circumstances. The question of whether the conditions of the publishing market after 1989 have enabled it to restore this lost plurality will remain open in this paper.

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1 As emphasised by Piotr Kitrasiewicz and Łukasz Gołębiewski, even in 1945 book production by private publishing houses represented 55% of the total publishing market, while this figure dropped to 23% in 1949 and to only 8% in the following year – P. Kitrasiewicz, Ł. Gołębiewski, *Rynek Książki w Polsce 1944–1989* [The Book Market in Poland 1944–1989], Warszawa 2005, p. 24.

The book by Jan Okopień portrays 29 publishers, editors, bibliophiles and booksellers (usually combined in one person) as well as publishing houses established after 1918 in chronological order, according to the date when they launched their activity. However, no publishing houses active before that date, such as Gebethner & Wolff from Warsaw or Ossolineum from Lviv, were taken into account. All of the sketches provide much detailed information on particular publishing houses, their history and inventory, as well as on the people who ran them, often devoting all their efforts and even personal assets to this activity. The fact that the author focuses mainly on biographies is undoubtedly a great asset of this book, as the histories of a publisher and of their publishing house were often closely intertwined. The overview is supplemented by numerous images: photographs of people, extracts from the press, printer's devices and posters of the publishers along with, last but not least, covers of the books they printed. Much is said about the cultural life going on around the authors, publishers and books, about events such as literary soirées, talks on bibliology and meetings of bibliophiles.

In this way, we obtain a comprehensive, or rather representative<sup>2</sup> picture of the Polish publishing landscape of 1918–1950, portraying both large publishers such as Książnica-Atlas from Lviv and niche editorial initiatives such as bibliophile editions released by book lovers' societies. The latter were active in Warsaw, Cracow and Lviv, greatly contributing to the development of book culture in Poland. The book also outlines profiles of publishing houses that were run by research institutes (such as the Baltic or the Silesian Institute) as well as ones closely connected with political parties (such as Książka i Tom in Warsaw). In the latter case, we also learn about meddling on the part of the authorities, who could suspend their activities or even completely shut them down, or confiscate a newly published book title. This could happen not only for political reasons, but also due to moral concerns, as illustrated by the seizure of *Zmory* [Nightmares] by Emil Zegadłowicz, printed by the Warsaw publisher Marian Sztajnberg in Ferdynand Hoesick's publishing house.

Most of the publishers presented in the book no longer exist; however, there are exceptions such as Nasza Księgarnia, founded in 1921 as the publishing house of the Polish Teachers' Society (back then known as the Society of the Polish Common School Teachers [Związek Polskiego

2 According to Halina Chamera, in 1935 there were ca. 500 publishing companies in Poland, see B. Bienkowska, H. Chamera, *Zarys dziejów książki* [An Outline of the History of the Book], Warszawa 1987, p. 342. Naturally, considering this number, 29 portraits seems to be small in number.

Nauczycielstwa Szkół Powszechnych]) launched essentially to print textbooks. Unification of the educational system, which involved providing suitable textbooks to the pupils, was one of the most urgent tasks of the Second Polish Republic authorities, since its territory used to be governed by three different partitioning states only a few years prior. In the inter-war period, printing textbooks was an important part of the activity for several publishing houses, such as the State Publishing House for Textbooks (Państwowe Wydawnictwo Książek Szkolnych [PWKS]) in Lviv. It was established in 1921 and, as the author points out, may be considered the “ancestor” (p. 123)<sup>3</sup> of the modern School and Pedagogical Publishers (Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne S. A. [WSiP]).<sup>4</sup> *The Book Liberated* also sheds light on the history of well-known, unique editorial series such as *Cuda Polski* [The Marvels of Poland] tourist books issued by Rudolf Wegner’s Wydawnictwo Polskie [Polish Publishers] in Poznań or Biblioteka Narodowa [The National Library], initiated by Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza [Cracow Publishing Company] as early as in 1919, and taken over by Ossolineum in the 1930s, where it is continued up to this day.<sup>5</sup> The book tells us about series and editions destined for a broader audience (such as the “95-cent Books” and “3-zloty Series” published by the Rój publishing society) as well as unique, luxury ones such as the album *Stanisław Wyspiański. Dzieła malarskie* [Stanisław Wyspiański. Paintings] which came out in 1925 in Władysław August Kościelski’s publishing house called Biblioteka Polska [Polish Library]. The author also carefully outlines the profile of Jan Kuglin, printer and printing technician, an important figure in the history of the Polish book, focusing on a number of titles he scrupulously printed in small circulations, often at his own expense. The book also portrays certain authors who appeared in the book market at that time and have often been forgotten by now, as well as the community that emerged in connection with the Rój publishing society in Warsaw, one of the leading literary publishers of that period, where the names of young, novice authors who rose to fame in later years appear,

3 All quotations from the book here discussed are marked with the appropriate page number in brackets.

4 Interestingly, WSiP themselves date their origin to 1945, when Państwowe Zakłady Wydawnictw Szkolnych (PZWS) [The State Company for School Publishers] was founded ([www.wsip.pl/o-firmie/historia/](http://www.wsip.pl/o-firmie/historia/), accessed on 15/09/2015). Okopień notes that the PZWS founding team largely consisted of people connected with Ossolineum and PWKS itself before the war (pp. 127–128).

5 The Publishing House of the National Ossoliński Institute strongly identify themselves as the successors of the pre-war Biblioteka Narodowa (<http://ossolineum.pl/index.php/wydawnictwo/biblioteka-narodowa/>, accessed on 15/09/2015).

such as Jerzy Andrzejewski, Pola Gojawiczyńska, Witold Gombrowicz or Bruno Schulz. We also get to know various business activity models: publishing houses often evolved from a pre-existing bookshop, sometimes also an antiquarian bookshop or a library were launched, as in the case of Stanisław Lewicki-Rogała's enterprise, the first one portrayed in the book.

All of the facts and phenomenons discussed show that the Polish publishing movement in the interwar period was thriving, both in terms of the contents and the aesthetics of the books that were coming out. Okopień is right to emphasise that this was only made possible by exceptional individuals – book lovers and enthusiasts, or simply skilful businessmen. We learn about their lives, which were often off the beaten track. This was the case of Jan Jachowski who, despite only three years of formal education in a rural primary school, became a publisher of research and academic books, as he owned the University Book Shop in Poznań. The Cracow publisher Wojciech Maurycy Henryk Meisels – who made his mark in the field of Italian literature in Poland as the owner of the Italica publishing house and author of a popular Polish-Italian dictionary, which is still available in the market – also followed an atypical path to the book sector.<sup>6</sup> He owed his fascination with Italy to the fact that he was taken captive in this country during World War I as a soldier of the Austro-Hungarian army.

As mentioned above, after the short initial boom, the second half of the period discussed in the book was tremendously difficult for Polish publishers. The economic crisis of the early 1930s followed by years of war and occupation as well as the hardships of the early post-war period erased all traces of that vivid and colourful publishing movement. Financial difficulties wiped out the Cracow Publishing Company (Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza), so prosperous before; similar troubles brought Kościelski to suicide in 1933. Naturally, World War II also had disastrous consequences for the Polish publishing market, as many of its most prominent figures were killed or left the country. It is commonplace to mention that warehouses, machines and editions of many publications were burnt during the war or the Warsaw Uprising, or otherwise were intentionally annihilated by the occupiers along with many other artefacts of cultural heritage, including libraries and books. Okopień finds it ironic that it was in the cellars of F. Hoesick's bookshop that the Gestapo stored confiscated

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6 W. Meisels, *Podręczny słownik polsko-włoski* [Practical Polish-Italian Dictionary], 8th ed., Warszawa 2008.

Polish books destined for destruction. However, with vigorous efforts and shrewd use of legal loopholes, sometimes a large quantity of books could be saved, as in the case of PWKS and Ossolineum which remained active for a certain period under bogus but legitimate company names. Many people from the publishing community became underground activists, such as Stefan Kamiński, book seller and publisher from Cracow, in whose office the failed attempt to assassinate of governor Hans Frank was planned. Underground publications such as school textbooks also came out. The post-war fate of certain Polish publishers was as dramatic, since many of them zealously tried to resume their pre-war activity despite the losses sustained. Władysław Trzaska, from the renowned publishing house Trzaska, Evert & Michalski, is a good example. He was the only one of the three partners to survive the war, and reactivated his publishing house in the devastated city of Warsaw to publish ca. 100 titles after 1945; he even celebrated the 50th anniversary of his book selling and publishing work in 1949, before being forced by the new authorities to discontinue this activity. The story of the Cracow publisher Tadeusz Zapior was similar, to mention one more example of the many listed by Okopień.

The way in which the author presents the publishers and publishing houses was accurately characterised by Barbara Bieńkowska in a review of his previous work, which also concerned the history of the Polish publishing movement, namely *Pionierzy czarnej sztuki 1473-1600* [Pioneers of the Black Art 1473-1600] – the first volume of the projected series called *Poczet wydawców książki polskiej 1473-1950* [Overview of the Polish Book Publishers 1473-1950], of which *The Book Liberated 1918-1950* is the fifth part, as will be discussed below. To quote the review by Bieńkowska: “Perfectly familiar with the reality of those times and skilfully evoking their atmosphere, the author gently guides us through the world of his protagonists, visually picturing their fortunes and woes, their ups and downs. This is done in an informed manner as well as with plenty of human tolerance, empathy and, most importantly, recognition for this entire community and its particular members who greatly contributed to the building and spreading of the Polish writing culture.”<sup>7</sup> This opinion seems quite accurate, as in his work Okopień often points to the historical and social context of publishing life in the interwar period, which is backed by a highly informative introduction co-written by Joanna Czarkowska. It is here that the authors outline the conditions of that period, such as

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7 B. Bieńkowska, “Historia drukarstwa bez koturnów” [History of Printing without Pomposity], *Bibliotekarz*, 2003, issue 9 (642), p. 20.

the diversity of the cultural, educational and worldly life in the three divisions of the newly created Republic of Poland (which had been previously governed by three different partitioning states, with different levels of illiteracy and readership in each), the library landscape, and the most significant urban centres from the perspective of the Polish book. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that Okopień's book focuses on important personalities of the publishing movement and shows great recognition of their merits, as they deserve all due respect, considering the numerous adverse circumstances they had to face. Finally, Bieńkowska's observation regarding the "gentleness" of Okopień's style is apt, although it appears that sometimes the narrative drifts too far away from the publishing and book-related matters towards less significant details. For example, in the case of Marian Sztajnsberg's portrait, the lengthy passage on his physical appeal and marriage to actress Mieczysława Ćwiklińska seems to be superfluous.

The volume is closed by an index of names and a short thematic bibliography. These are undoubtedly useful, however, the reader may wish to obtain more information or indications of additional materials such as museum or archive holdings, probably also used by the author. Erroneous references in the index (e.g. the name of Jan Jachowski appears on page 84, not 83) appear to be due to negligence.

While this mistake may be negligible, what can be striking to the reader is the number of language and content-related errors which should have never occurred in such a publication, addressed as it is to book enthusiasts. For instance, the Ossolineum foundation is associated with Lviv rather than Vilnius (p. 11), writer Gabriela Zapolska should be qualified as a "naturalist" rather than a "naturist" (p. 24), it was Thomas Mann and not his brother Heinrich who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (p. 181), and Svend Dahl, the author of the famous *History of the Book*, was Danish, not Finnish (p. 261). It is also irritating that in the portrait of Rudolf Wegner two different dates of his death are quoted, 1942 (p. 154) and 13/07/1941 (p. 165), with no explanation whatsoever. Greater diligence should be expected from the editors also when it comes to the following issue: the same people or even events are sometimes discussed in various places, such as the collaboration between Kuglin and Jachowski (p. 84 and p. 108) or Stefan Kamiński's contribution to the activity of the Book Lovers' Society (Towarzystwo Miłośników Książek) in Cracow (pp. 192, 198, 253 and 258), the information being either repetitive or fully provided only in the second instance. With mutual references included in the text, the book could have been much more coherent and therefore

reader-friendly. A similar effect could have been achieved by giving up research-paper-like references (such as “op. cit.”) since firstly, these are not always correctly used, secondly, they are not very helpful since they never provide the page that the quotation comes from, and thirdly, due to the book’s nature they are simply needless.

It is not meant to be an encyclopaedia, but a publication aimed towards general knowledge about editing and publishing, a little known area of cultural life, as the author stated in the preface to *Pionierzy czarnej sztuki 1473–1600* [Pioneers of the Black Art...] (the opening volume that was intended to present an overview of the Polish book publishers in the years 1473–1950), where he defined its general objectives and purposes.<sup>8</sup> However, as many as thirteen years elapsed between the publication of the first and the last volume, *The Book Liberated 1918–1950* (designed as the fifth and final part of the series). This was probably due to Jan Okopień’s death in 2003. However, the publisher, Andrzej Palacz, notes that the volume on the interwar publishers was for the most part finished while the author was still alive. It was based on a series of Okopień’s articles on pre-war publishers printed in the journal *Wydawca* (p. 18) where he formed part of the editing team. Palacz also suggests that with the present volume “work on the series is being resumed,” which probably means that the three missing volumes from between may come out in the near future. Joanna Czarkowska, the book’s co-author, also mentioned that work on those volumes was progressing back in 2003, pointing out that the sources for them had already been compiled.<sup>9</sup>

Let us hope that we will not have to wait so long for the following volumes, as it can be reasonably expected that they will significantly complement our understanding of the Polish publishing history as well. This is also the reason why *The Book Liberated*, despite the defects listed above, is a valuable title, finely edited and, most of all, interesting to read. It would be regrettable if the work already carried out in this field were to remain uncompleted.

8 J. Okopień, *Od autora* [Author’s Preface], in J. Okopień, J. Czarkowska, *Pionierzy czarnej sztuki 1473–1600* [Pioneers of the Black Art 1473–1600], Warszawa 2002, p. 10.

9 J. Czarkowska, “Sylwetki. Ludzie polskiej książki – pożegnania. Jan Okopień” [Profiles. Important People for the Polish Book. Jan Okopień], *Wydawca. Miesięcznik informacyjny*, 2003, issue 3, p. 26.