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Fighting for the Rosenbergs : The Polish staging of Leon Kruczkowski's play "Julius and Ethel"

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The fault lines that demark guilt and innocence are often not so discernible as they should be; nor is the relationship between the committal of a crime and the punishment which it warrants. And few cases in history have posed so many questions of the legal system in the United States and elsewhere as the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, citizens of the United States of Jewish ethnicity, painfully plain thirty-somethings, father and mother to two small boys, and ardent and committed communists.

In the summer of 1950, Julius Rosenberg and his brother-in-law David Greenglass were arrested and accused of passing atomic secrets to the Soviets. Their guilt was clearly established as Soviet venona cables had exposed their roles beyond a shadow of a doubt (Haynes, 1999: 250–286). However, opting to keep these transcripts hidden so as not to expose how they had come by, the federal government chose to prosecute Rosenberg by way of both character assassination and the testimony of Greenglass, who had cut a deal with the prosecutors, which involved fingering not only his brother-in-law, but also his sister Ethel: an act more egregious for the fact that Greenglass's wife, Ruth, had been an active co-conspirator in the plot. Although, initially, the indictment against Ethel was intended to be used as leverage to pressure Julius into revealing the names of the others involved in his espionage ring, when he didn't budge, the indictment against his wife stood (Anders, 1978: 388–400).

The Rosenbergs were convicted on March 29, 1951, and on April 5 were sentenced to death by Judge Irving Kaufman under the Espionage Act of 1917, which prohibits the transmitting, or attempting to transmit to a foreign government, information “relating to the national defense.” In imposing the death penalty, Kaufman noted that he held the guilty parties responsible not only for espionage and treason most high, but also for the emboldening of the communist forces on the Korean peninsula (Clune, 2016: 30–33).

Throughout the appeal process, and indeed right up to their final moments, the US government had offered to spare the Rosenbergs' lives on condition that they exposed their Soviet spy network. But the Rosenbergs chose silence and proclaimed their innocence to the end. The couple was executed in Sing Sing Correctional Facility, New York, on June 19, 1953. They were the only two American civilians to be executed for espionage-related activity during the Cold War.

Described by Jean Paul Sartre as a “legal lynching” (Garber & Walkowitz, 2013: 145), the execution polarized US society, which throughout the lengthy appeal process had debated the legality and morality of the trial and punishments that the Rosenbergs were facing. Once the death penalty had been imposed, the question of guilt or innocence played second fiddle to the notion that the sentences had been out of kilter with other sentences issued to past conspirators or spies. Many countries had made direct appeals to the US for clemency, whereas here in Poland the government went further and offered the Rosenbergs political asylum, having communicated the offer to the American Embassy in Warsaw. However, this offer was treated by the CIA as little more than a propagandistic gesture and was dismissed out of hand (Clune, 2016: 112).

But this episode made Poland a part of the Rosenbergs' story, one which would soon be told in a Polish language play, which recounted the macabre final hours of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The author of the play was Leon Kruczkowski, a member of the same government that had attempted to save the Rosenbergs, and someone who had distinguished himself as an ally and friend of Polish Jews, although he may have preferred to have his friendship described as being part of the struggle for the great cause of humanity, one

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where hopes rested with the victory of the Proletariat over the Imperialist system.

Kruczkowski was born in Cracow in 1900. Though an industrial chemist by education, and later a pedagogue by profession, in the early 1930s Kruczkowski threw himself into a fictional and journalistic writing career which was both left-leaning and socially engaged. An early indication of his revolutionary convictions came with the publication of his first and only poetry collection *Młoty nad światem* [*Hammers over the World*] (1928), which was Marxist in tenor, though elevated by its strong referencing of Polish Romanticism, a dialogue which would soon continue into his prose fiction. At this time, Kruczkowski came to prominence as a key member of a communist literary circle centred around the journal *Miesięcznik Literacki* [Literary Monthly], which had been established by the acting editor Aleksander Wat, a Polish Jew who had attempted to launch Futurism at the end of 1918, and who, together with Władysław Broniewski had gone on to be a vanguard Communist poet and writer of fiction. Hailed as a major literary event by the Left, Kruczkowski's first novel *Kordian i cham* [*Kordian and the Boor*] (1932) looked to reinterpret the Romanticism of Poland's 19th century rebellions from the ordinary man's perspective, and there is much to suggest that he was influenced in the formulation of his ideas by the Polish-Jewish feuillitonist and poet, Antoni Słonimski, who in 1918 had written the pacifist-themed poem, *Czarna Wiosna* [*The Black Spring*], which asked why the working classes had always been so willing to serve as cannon-fodder in senseless wars (Keane, 2004: 63). Like Słonimski, Kruczkowski called for a rejection of a Romantic martyrology, which served the machinations of warmongers and profiteers. In what was a complex reading of the Polish peasantry as featured in the epic poems of Romantic poets Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, they were no longer simply one dimensional actors, who filled out the background whilst the patricians enjoyed the historical spoils. Instead, Kruczkowski looked to portray what he saw as the awakening of a working-class consciousness.

In 1935 Kruczkowski was a signatory to an appeal entitled 'Za porozumieniem' ['For Concord'] (Venclova, 1996: 127), which proposed a tactical alliance between Stalinist doctrinarians, a camp to which Kruczkowski belonged, and social democrats and leftist groups, which aimed at promoting freedom of speech and writers' independence so that a defense of progress, peace and culture could be mounted against the looming threats of fascism, which were becoming more discernible in Poland. The death of Piłsudski, in that same year of 1935, caused little alteration to the country's power structure, although many anti-Semitic policies were adopted. Such policies advocated, for example, the eventual forced emigration of Poland's Jewish population and in the intervening period their total exclusion from national institutions. Perhaps the most pronounced Jewish responses to the perceived injustices and outrages of the age came from Julian Tuwim with his poems 'To a Simple Man' ['Do prostego człowieka'] (1929), and *Bal w operze* [*A Ball in the Opera*] (1936), both of which decried the militarism and wrong-headedness of the Polish state. For these and other similarly themed writings, Tuwim was branded as unpatriotic and defeatist, and such criticisms were almost always accompanied by anti-Semitic epithets. Some of Tuwim's more clamorous nemeses even cast aspersions on the correctness of Tuwim's Polish, saying that his work was alien to Polish art (see Aberbach, 2013: 97). One writer, Jerzy Pietrkiewicz called for the ceremonial burning of the works of Słonimski and Tuwim, and even went so far as to recommend that they be hanged for their

unpatriotic views. This kind of strident language reached a critical point just before the war when an article penned by Stefania Zdebska (a pseudonym and attributed to Pietrkiewicz) entitled, 'Pacyfistyczna mafia' ['The Pacifist Mafia'] claimed to uncover the communist sympathies behind Tuwim and Słonimski's support for pacifism (Kuciel-Frydryszak, 2012: 155–156)

Leftist commentators attempted to push back against these attacks, but such appeals for humanity, solidarity and reason were drowned out like solitary cries in a thunderstorm. However, Kruczkowski, more than any other protesting voice at the time, appealed to the national conscience by his publication of the article 'Cultural Anti-Semitism' (1937) (Segel, 1997: 326–328), which attacked Polish writers of the right, who had chosen to obscure their third-rate talents with invectives that decried the Jewification of Polish cultural life. Kruczkowski cast the net of denunciation further and laid the blame at the door of soul-poisoning Capitalism, whose principles had encouraged mercenary, publicistic-journalistic writers, deriving their subsistence from the law of the market, to adopt anti-Semitic attitudes so as to gain an advantage over their artistically more able Jewish rivals, writers such as his pre-eminent literary peers: Tuwim, Słonimski and Wat. Kruczkowski went on in this article to point out that the true greats of Polish literature, such as Mickiewicz and Stefan Żeromski had celebrated the priceless contributions of Polish Jews to the culture and identity of the Polish nation state. Having summoned up the best defense of Polish Jewish writers that his penmanship could produce, Kruczkowski fell silent on the issue, and it would be a World War and a reoccupation before he did so again; albeit the circumstances of the expressed outrage were entirely different, as too were his motivations.

Kruczkowski fought with distinction as an officer in the defense of Poland, but was captured and ended up spending the entirety of the war as a prisoner of war. Following his liberation he became one of the leading cultural lights of the new Communist Order, and served as deputy minister for culture (Shore, 2006: 264–265). He soon became what one may term as the point man for writers looking to curry favour with the new regime, and the man to appeal to if one found oneself in a scrape. His activities in reestablishing cultural life in Poland are entirely deserving of praise, however, he was also something of a Robespierre-like enforcer of Stalinist doctrine. Kruczkowski brought Poland's main theatres under governmental control, which ensured that professional theatre companies were well funded. But of course, this generosity came with a catch. The government reserved the right to interfere in theatre repertoires and budgets. Also that year, the Professional Association of Polish Writers launched a competition to encourage dramatists to produce social realist drama which would reflect contemporary Polish life, and in the months that followed the best adjudged plays were distributed amongst Polish Theatre directors, who had to grit their teeth and stage them (Marczak-Oborski, 1985: 234–236). One of the most outspoken detractors of social realism was Kruczkowski's old friend Aleksander Wat, who criticised the futility of proscribed art, and proclaimed to all who would listen a preference for unfettered creative work. Wat decided to withdraw from public life with the protective excuse that he was working on an anti-Nazi novel, which he hoped would prove to be some sort of loyalty certificate. However, the threat to his safety was made by Kruczkowski, who said publicly: "let him write his novel, and then we'll see" (Venclova, 1996: 183). Ironically, Kruczkowski was also working on a Nazi play, which theme was far from the socially engaged doctrine which he himself proscribed for the dramatists of

his generation. Kruczkowski's play was entitled, *Niemcy* [*The Germans*] (1949), although it did have the earlier title of *Niemcy są ludźmi* [*The Germans are People*]. (One can understand why the Soviet authorities refused to publish the play!) In brief, the play, set in 1943, tells the story of Dr. Sonnenbruch, a university professor who is determined to maintain an apolitical outlook. However, his son joins the ss, and towards the end of the play Sonnenbruch comes to understand the consequences of his passivity in allowing Fascism to triumph. In response to this bitter epiphany, Sonnenbruch passes over to Berlin's Soviet Zone of Occupation, where such moral dilemmas can be cast aside and a noble cause embraced. *The Germans* had its premiere in 1949, in Warsaw's Teatr Współczesny [Contemporary Theatre], an occasion which also happened to mark the inaugural performance of the same theatre. The director of the play, Erwin Axer, was also the founder and managing director of the theatre, and by its selecting, he may have been looking to smooth the path into the future by staging a play by someone who held such sway over Poland's cultural life. *The Germans* would end up playing for all of four months, and enjoyed particular success elsewhere in East Germany. Not every director managed to be so successful as Axer at blindsiding Russification policies, however. One year later, for example, the Contemporary Theatre would enjoy great commercial and critical success with the staging of G.B. Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1894), but the director of the play, Wilam Horzyca was unable to bask in this success for long. Before the play had even completed its run, Horzyca began rehearsing Alexander Ostrovsky's *The Forest* (1871) for Warsaw's Polish Theatre. However, Horzyca's mystical interpretation did not sit well with the new managers of the theatre, Bohdan Korzeniewski and Marian Meller, who had been tasked with implementing the principles of social realism. Korzeniewski and Meller sat in on the rehearsals and offered suggestions that were little more than couched warnings. Horzyca tried to dismiss such interference and thought he could brazen things out. However, when Korzeniewski and Meller moved against him, no quarter was shown. Korzeniewski fired Horzyca just weeks before the opening of the play, and took over the directorial reins. To add insult to injury, Horzyca's name was removed from the poster (see Keane, 2016: 96–97). Less than a few months after the end of the play's run, the same Polish Theatre would stage Kruczkowski's new play *Juliusz and Ethel* on its small Chamber Stage.

An indication of the deep interest, which Kruczkowski took in the Rosenberg case, can be seen by the fact that he had been collecting newspaper cuttings of the case pretty much since the time of the arrest of Julius Rosenberg. This act of collecting was in keeping with his work as a prose writer in the 1930's, wherein he regarded newspaper cuttings as widening the possibility of having ordinary people as fictional characters. And so, these cuttings would provide the source material for the writing of the play, together with letters written by the Rosenbergs in prison, which had been subsequently published. Perhaps his own personal identification with the Rosenbergs was heightened by the fact that six months after their execution, he received news that he had been awarded the Prize of Stalin for securing peace between nations, an award which he felt should have been bestowed upon the executed couple (Iwaszkiewicz, 1954). On Kruczkowski's return to Warsaw from Moscow, where he had received the prize, the writer was greeted to a civil reception, attended by dignitaries and a rapturous crowd who had literally invaded the proceedings. Kruczkowski, having spent the entire occasion batting all thought of self-congratulation, took the opportunity to announce the completion of

his new play about the Rosenbergs, whose fate had been an act of “judicial murder” [“sądowe morderstwo”] (Kruczkowski, 1954).

Kruczkowski’s play, *Juliusz i Ethel* [*Julius and Ethel*] is a 6-act play, one act for every hour that remains to them, from the time the prosecutor visits Ethel in her cell at the beginning of the play to announce that all the appeals have failed and that their execution is imminent. The play focuses principally on the time which Julius and Ethel spend together, and is intended to be a study of bravery in the most extreme of circumstances. A key motif of the play is the presence of a phone, which they may pick up any time and confess to their deeds, an act which would effectively save their lives. Particularly affecting are the scenes where Ethel writes letters to her children, who appear briefly at the end of the third scene; and moving also are the impassioned pleas by Ethel’s mother with her daughter to cooperate with the authorities, and so live for her children.

Interestingly, Kruczkowski chose not to mention the Jewishness of the Rosenbergs at all in his play, possibly for the reason that he wished to present the case of two communist heroes from a non-ethnic perspective (Niziołek, 2013: 206–207). Reviewers didn’t mention the Jewishness of the Rosenbergs, either. However, the production itself was defined almost by the involvement of Jewish people. The Polish Theatre was managed by Arnold Szyfman, a Polish Jew who had founded the theatre in 1913, and who in 1939, had courageously chosen to stage Shaw’s *Geneva*, which lampooned Hitler, and which proved to be particularly popular with the city’s Jewish population. Only the bombardment of Warsaw would bring the curtain down on the play. The director of the play was Aleksander Bardini, also a Polish Jew, who as a director was best known in the theatre world for foregrounding the central performances of the actors. He had been residing America just as the arrests and arraignments of the Rosenbergs were taking place, but returned to Poland soon after. What is more, the play also had a parallel performance in Łódź’s Jewish Theatre, which premiered a day later than the Warsaw production. This particular production was performed in Yiddish, and directed by Ida Kamińska, who had also translated the play.

For the production in the Polish Theatre Ethel Rosenbergs was played by Halina Mikołajska and Julius by Tadeusz Kondrat. Mikołajska played the final hours of Ethel as someone in a state of exaltation, and her performance was frequently compared to a celebrated performance Maria Malicka, who in 1924, had played Saint Joan in G.B. Shaw’s play of the same name. Kondrat, in turn, played Julius as a man whose spoken words were calm and almost monotone, which indicated that not only was he resigned to his fate, but certain of the decisions that he had taken. Also delivering celebrated performances were those actors playing the judge and the prosecutorial teams, so described by reviewers of the play as murderers of justice (Szczepański 1954; Szczawiej, 1954)

An interesting reaction to the play, which took place in the theatre, did not find its way into reports on the plays premiere performance, but it was recounted decades later by Aleksander Wat in *My Century* (1977). Wat attended the play’s opening night and, following the first act, witnessed an inebriated Broniewski shouting out in the lobby, “Now they are turning spies into heroes. I was in Lubyanka and nobody’s making a hero out of me” (2003: 14). Perhaps others had held the same opinion as that of Broniewski, but had not been so far gone enough to say so publicly.

The play ends with Julius and Ethel bathed in light walking toward the front of the stage and declaring, “We leave you our names. Don’t forget

them. When you build a better world let them bloom in the hearts of happy boys and girls, with their bright faces bathed in the thickets of life” [my trans]. This moment was greeted by a standing ovation, and was described by reviewers such as Roman Szydłowski and Stanisław Szarzyński (1954), as a protest against death, an affirmation of life, and a recognition of people who had been building a better life, convinced their cause would one day be victorious.

It is all too easy to point to the irony that the show trial of the Rosenbergs compared almost favourably to the show-trials, extra-judicial arrests and executions which were a part of life in the Soviet Union and those countries living under Soviet occupation. But even if this reality was clear to Kruczkowski, his idealism was bound up with his loyalty. Strangely, the play, regarded wrongly as a relic of social realist drama, after its short theatrical run, was never performed again in Poland. Today it is a largely forgotten play. That said, the play did have something of a colourful after-life and was translated into Chinese, Arabian, and Finnish, but not English. The Kamińska manuscript of the play in Yiddish is to be found in the Rosenberg archive of David and Emily Alman, together with the correspondence of the Rosenbergs and the myriad of related legal documents, reportage and press commentary on the case (Sandrow, 1996: 361).

Perhaps most importantly, the play *Julius and Ethel* serves as a pithy reminder that the Rosenbergs were less alone in their final hours than the American press at the time had wished to have their readers believe. However, soon Kruczkowski’s part in the age – and his part played in the imposition of social realism – would, like the Rosenberg episode, become an uncomfortable memory from a recent past. In 1956, Poland, under the leadership of Władysław Gomułka managed to wrest meaningful autonomy from Moscow, and within a short space of time the country transformed from a minion to an independent state being run along one-party socialist grounds, which, in turn, was henceforth free to carry out its affairs within the ever-watchful sphere of Soviet influence. This landmark achievement is often referred to as the October Thaw, and almost immediately Poland’s cultural life began to look to the West – albeit for many the most important aspect of this political sea-change was that Party regalia disappeared from the streets, more music was played on the radio, and people’s social and cultural life improved greatly. One illustration of this can be gauged by the fact that Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz’s literary journal *Twórczość* [*Creativity*] gave over its November issue to French contemporary literature, publishing a declaration that had been formulated by writers gathered in Warsaw’s Pen Club on 23 October, and which read: ‘After years of lies and hurt, a time of hope has come’ (cited in Drewnowski, 2004: 324). This pronouncement was then openly supported by Iwaszkiewicz, who boldly asserted the following, “Yes, socialism, but our own socialism, yes, friendship with the Soviet Union, but on the basis of equality.” Kruczkowski was left decrying the irresponsibility and duplicity of these new dissenters, who had betrayed their vocation and loyalties. He reserved his ire in particular for Słonimski, who had so described social realism as the art of firing squads (Fik, 1989: 232–233). Sadly for Kruczkowski, he was better at defending others with the pen of reason than defending himself with the bluster of the indignant. Indeed, he would live to see social realism abandoned to the past, and his play *Julius and Ethel* confined to memory.

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