

Danuta Jackiewicz

"Za bramą wielkiej ciszy. 200 lat dziejów Powązek", Jerzy Waldorff, Warszawa 1990 : [recenzja]

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Jerzy Waldorff: *Za bramą wielkiej ciszy. Dwieście lat dziejów Powązek /Beyond the Gate of Great Silence. Two Centuries of the Powązki Cemetery/*, Warszawa 1990.

The Old Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw, laid out in 1790 and recognized today as the first national cemetery in the Polish Republic, has existed for 200 years. Its bicentenary was celebrated under the spiritual patronage of Pope John Paul II. The organizer of the celebrations was the Committee for Protection of Old Powązki.¹ For the last 16 years the Committee has been engaged in undertakings oriented on preservation of the monuments of the Cemetery. The results attained in that work are imposing.² The Committee - whose moving spirit is the indefatigable Jerzy Waldorff - also pays considerable attention to activities in the area of publishing. It was on the initiative of that civic body, and with its active cooperation, that several publications have appeared drawing attention of the general public to the history of the Powązki Cemetery and consolidating its importance as „the national necropolis, as a mausoleum of two hundred years of Warsaw’s history” and, finally, as an „independent exhibition of Polish sculpture.”³

The first comprehensive history of the Powązki Cemetery was written by Kazimierz Władysław Wójcicki.⁴ The successive volumes were published in the years 1855, 1856 and 1858. That pioneer work contains archival materials on laying out of cemeteries outside the city walls and

¹ The Committee for Protection of the Monuments of Old Powązki was formed in the year 1974 by Jerzy Waldorff, encouraged - as he repeatedly said - by Professor Stanisław Lorentz.

² In that period conservation was carried out of some 700 sepulchral monuments. This work is done by graduates of the Department of Conservation, Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw.

³ E.g. *Cmentarz Powązkowski w Warszawie* (The Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw), Warszawa 1984. Collective work.

⁴ Kazimierz Władysław Wójcicki (1807-1879), historian and writer, archivist and librarian, editor of *Biblioteka Warszawska* (Warsaw Library) and coeditor of *Orgelbrand Encyclopaedia*.

an outline history of both the village of Powązki and Cemetery there. The main part of the book consists of biographical notes on the people of various professions and backgrounds who are buried here. It is worth mentioning that already at that time difficulties were encountered in establishing many facts concerning the Cemetery because no relevant records had been kept before the year 1836. Now, in view of the fact that all the archives of the Powązki Cemetery were destroyed during the Second World War, Wójcicki's work - carefully edited and adorned with dozens of litographs of tombstones and sepulchral monuments - is today a most valuable source for the study of the history of that necropolis.

In the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th - until Poland regained her independence in 1918, not much was written about Powązki. Some information about the Cemetery in that period is to be found in illustrated weeklies. The published appeals to society for contributions towards the erection of monuments over the tombs of eminent people, such as Stanisław Moniuszko, Stanisław Jachowicz or Antoni Malczewski, gave descriptions and photographs of woodcuts of newly erected sepulchral monuments of outstanding artistic value.

More attention used to be paid to the Cemetery on the occasion of All Souls' Day, when series of photographs were published of the most beautiful sculptures and sights in Powązki. It is worth mentioning that the tombstones and sepulchral monuments were, at the time, the only ones to commemorate the Poles who had made an outstanding contribution towards the cause of their country. In those difficult times when Poland was still under subjugation by the Partitioning Powers, churches and cemeteries were the only places where the memory of national heroes could be revered. Yet, the censorship by the invader penetrated to the cemeteries as well, as shown by the case of the grave of the five demonstrators shot by tsarist gendarmes.⁵

Even though the 19th century was a period of a vigorous development of monumental sculpture, the Poles managed to effect unveiling in War-

⁵ Jerzy Waldorff, *op. cit.* p.15.

saw of but three monuments in the whole of that century, an obelisk called Monument to Labour, carved by Paweł Maliński⁶ and raised in 1823 to mark completion of the Warsaw-Brześć Road, the Monument to Nicolaus Copernicus carved by Bertel Thorvaldsen in 1830,⁷ and that to Adam Mickiewicz, by Cyprian Godebski, in 1898.⁸ It was Wacław Jeziorowski who wanted to be a continuator of Wójcicki's work. He had prepared for print and published, in 1915, the first part of *Album Powązek* (Album of Powązki), meant to consist of many volumes. Its print was completed on August 5, 1915, at the moment the German armed forces were entering Warsaw. And, as the author himself put it: "publication of the present album was accompanied by gun-fire and difficulties due to the hostilities." The following volumes of that highly promising work have never been issued. Nevertheless, Jeziorowski's book is a very valuable item in the bibliography of the Powązki Cemetery, since it contains 103 photographs, figures and also designs of monuments, most interesting in the author's opinion, as well as biographical notes on people buried there, among whom „like in all national pantheons, persons of lesser fame lie in their graves next to the illustrious dead." The said first volume contains a long list of neglected graves and an appeal for protection of „the tombs holding the mortal remains of those who had been heroes in spirit and deed."

...In the twenty years between the two World Wars, Powązki often made a topic of small guide-books to Warsaw cemeteries. It was also mentioned in the guide-books to Warsaw. But a major work devoted to the Powązki Cemetery was taken up but during the Second World War by Marian Kielarski, opera singer in Lvov who was also an ardent lover of the history of old Warsaw. His monograph entitled: *Powązki miasto umarłych* (Powązki the City of the Dead) written in the years 1943-1944

⁶ Dariusz Kaczmarczyk, "Labour Monument in Warsaw", *Kronika Warszawy* (Warsaw Chronicle), No 3-4, pp. 107-132.

⁷ Hanna Kotkowska, *Monument to Nicolaus Copernicus*, Warsaw 1973.

⁸ Jadwiga Jarnuszkiewiczowa, *Pomnik Mickiewicza* (Monument to Adam Mickiewicz), Warszawa, 1975.

was not completed due to the author's untimely death. What was preserved, however, was the typescript comprising, apart from biographical notes on the deceased, also 250 valuable photographs showing the condition of the monuments in the Powązki Cemetery and the degree of the destruction it suffered during the War.

Kazimierz Władysław Wójcicki, the monographer of Powązki, said in 1852: „The chronicle of the Powązki Cemetery is like an open book. The author is beginning to write its first pages. Later on, it shall be written by time and by another hand.”⁹ This hope for continuation of the work on the history of Powązki was fulfilled by Stanisław Szenic after the lapse of 125 years. The three volumes of his book: *Cmentarz Powązkowski 1790-1918. Zmarli i ich rodziny*. (The Powązki Cemetery 1790-1918. The Deceased and Their Families) were published successively in 1979, 1981 and 1983. It is a collection of biographies of the people buried here, of the famous as well as those less known who rendered outstanding service to their homeland and of the ones making but characters in colourful anecdotes. That material is complemented with 433 illustrations showing tombs, chapels and some portrait-medallions. The author tells us stories of the people buried here and their descendants. And like Wójcicki, the first chronicler of Powązki, Szenic - describing the people he had „learned to know” during his many years' walks in the city of the dead - depicts the Cemetery's history conceived as a chronicle of the deceased, whom he brings back to memory in consonance with the sentiment expressed by the motto of book which says: „the nations who do not remember their dead cease to live.”

The year 1990, marking the bicentenary of Powązki saw publication of an album devoted to the two hundred-years' history of the Cemetery - *Za bramą wielkiej ciszy. Dwieście lat dziejów Powązek* (Beyond the Gate of Great Silence. Two Centuries of the Powązki Cemetery). The book was also published in English under the title: *The Rest is Silence*.

⁹ Kazimierz Władysław Wójcicki, *Cmentarz Powązkowski pod Warszawą*, (The Powązki Cemetery near Warsaw), Warszawa 1855, T.T, p.7.

Prepared specially for the anniversary, the album consists of the text by Jerzy Waldorff and illustrations borrowed from 19th-century publications, 152 black-and-white photographs and 50 colour photographs by eleven artists. The book differs notably from the others dealing with the same subject. First of all, it is not a chronicle of the dead, a collection of detached biographies, but a well-told story about Warsaw, the city which - repeatedly destroyed - has survived, though in an entirely different shape. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century city can be found, however, just beyond the gate of the Cemetery, "the gate to the realm of great silence", a symbolic boundary between two opposite realities. We enter through it "the pantheon of two hundred years of the glory of the town" and "the richest museum of Warsaw". The author complements his story with numerous anecdotes and most interesting digressions which, nevertheless, make us always revert to the main topic, that is, to the Powązki Cemetery. The detailed descriptions of the funerals of the five demonstrators shot by tsarist gendarmes in 1861, of Stanisław Moniuszko /1872/, Józefina Kronenberg née Reszke /1891/ and of Władysław Reymont /1925/ make essential elements of the framework of that story. The first two funerals turned into great patriotic manifestations, the third was an example of a sumptuous though sombre ceremony in consonance with the custom of the upper classes of the Warsaw society and, finally, the fourth was the first manifestation, of both state and national character, held in the restored Polish Republic. The space between the descriptions of those four monumental events has been filled by the author with accounts on funeral customs, with references to many politicians, artists, writers, poets, musicians and actors buried here and to the inscriptions extolling them. The inscriptions not infrequently made an evidence of the tragic fortunes of the Polish nation.

Jerzy Waldorff also points to the essential significance of the Powązki Cemetery to research on the history of customs and material culture. The realistic sculptures, portrait-medallions and photographs are an inexhaustible source of information about the dresses and coiffures of the time, or to put it shortly, about the fashion of the day. The author also

describes the amazing careers of the families of Warsaw neophytes - the Kronenbergs, Fraenkels, Rawicz, Lessers and Blochs. And, finally, the truly fascinated reader is led by the author along the avenues of the Cemetery like museum halls and made to pay attention to the most valuable sculptures and chapels by outstanding artists, to the most original and decorative motives, wrought-iron monuments and, last but not least, to the famous Avenue of Illustrious Dead beginning with the grave of Władysław Reymont. The last chapter of the story is devoted to reconstruction of the Powązki Cemetery after the devastation it suffered during the last War, to formation of the Committee for Protection of the Monuments of Old Powązki, to the activities of the Committee and its achievements therein and also to celebrations of the bicentenary of laying out of the Cemetery. The author concludes with an important message that „in taking up struggle for the future of the nation, we must look backward to its graves.”

The second part of the book consists of photographs, each of which is provided with a caption commenting on its subject. The illustrations show the Powązki Cemetery in all seasons of the year. There are to be seen general views, photographs of monuments, of sculptural and architectural details, numerous portraits - busts, medallions, statues, bas-reliefs with representations of angels, mourners, madonnas and also sarcophagi and chapels. In other words, many motives of the sepulchral art, invariable for centuries, except for occasional differences in costume. A large part of the photographs were taken by artists - specialists in conservation of historical monuments, in the course of restoration of the respective tombstones and monuments. Hence the possibility of noting what they looked like before conservation and after completion of the whole cycle of the work involved, consisting in cleaning of the given object, its reconstruction and reinforcement of the structure of stone. The photographs show the Powązki Cemetery as an oasis of calm, undisturbed by lonely figures walking along its paths or by a conservator absorbed in his work. The album also includes illustrations rendering an entirely different atmosphere prevailing there on the All Souls' Day when

the Cemetery is visited by crowds of the faithful and ranks of selfless persons - with the indefatigable Jerzy Waldorff - collecting contributions intended for restoration of the monuments in the Old Powązki Cemetery. It is also worth mentioning that some of the photographs make an evidence that in the non-distant past, it was only in Powązki that one could secretly revere the heroes of, and victims to, World War II and the difficult years that followed. This applies even to the eighties, yet so close to us.

An essential item of the album are also the notes included in the list of illustrations. They give information on the author of the monument, the year in which it was raised and - for the first time - also the name of the artist who carried out its conservation.

The gate of the Cemetery - that actual and metaphorical boundary between the two worlds - is not a symbol of death to the author of the book under review. On the contrary, it is rather to be treated as a sign of the victory over it. And so let us leave it open.¹⁰

The Reader is herewith invited symbolically to pass through that Gate, that is, to read the book about Old Powązki and to visit that great Warsaw Cemetery.

rev. by *Danuta Jackiewicz*
trans. by *Teresa Świąch*.

¹⁰ Jan Białostocki, "Symbolika drzwi w sepulkralnej sztuce baroku" (Door Symbolics in the Sepulchral Art of the Baroque), In: *Sarmatia Artistica. Book in Commemoration of Professor Władysław Tomkiewicz*, Warszawa 1968, pp. 107-120.