CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Marek Hłasko

Beautiful twentysomethings

Piękni dwudziestoletni

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Beautiful Twentysomethings is an autobiographical story by Marek Hłasko, which also serves as a literary portrait of a young generation of Poles coming of age during the Stalinist era and the political “thaw” of 1955-1956. The book blends memoir, autobiography, essay, and literary self-fashioning. Hłasko recounts his own path toward becoming a writer, his experiences with gainful employment, his initial literary successes, his interactions with artistic circles, and his conflict with the communist power apparatus. Yet, this is not merely a story of the writer’s personal adolescence; the author paints a broad picture of a society in which political ideology, censorship, propaganda, and state control invade people's privacy.

Hłasko describes post-war Warsaw, the various jobs he held, the working-class environment and the people he encountered during his travels as a reporter. He gradually recounts the beginnings of his literary career, his interactions with editorial offices, other writers and the atmosphere of cultural life in Poland during the 1950s. A significant place is given to the circle surrounding the weekly ‘Po Prostu’, which, during the “thaw” became one of the most important centres for political and social criticism. Hłasko portrays the young intellectuals, artists and journalists who sought to reclaim independent thought following years of Stalinism. A crucial part of the narrative concerns the author’s experiences with the security apparatus including attempts to exert pressure on independent creators. Hłasko also reflects on his conflicts with the censors, the difficulties he faced in getting his work published, and his ultimate disillusionment with the political promises of the “thaw”.

The last part of the book is about the author's emigration. In 1958, Hłasko left Poland, at first not thinking that he would stay abroad forever. However, his conflict with the government and the fact that he could not return forced him to live in exile. He describes life abroad, his disappointment with the West, loneliness and difficulties adapting to a new reality. The writer still feels connected to Poland but political circumstances make it impossible for him to return.

Beautiful Twentysomethings can be read as a political novel because Hłasko's autobiography becomes a story about how an authoritarian system works and how it affects individuals. Communism influences everyday choices, relationships, artistic work and the ability to make one's own life decisions. Hłasko's experiences show how the government uses fear and destroys trust between people. Censorship and control over publishing show that literature can be seen as a political threat by the authorities. A writer who refuses to follow the official ideology risks losing the chance to publish, being pushed out of professional life and even being forced to leave the country. The book is also a record of the political hopes and disappointments of the generation that

experienced the political changes of 1956. Young intellectuals and artists believed that after Stalin's death, it would be possible to create a more open society, where criticising the government and being an independent artist would not be treated as crimes. However, the closure of the magazine ‘Po Prostu’ by the government in 1957 showed that these changes were limited. The political meaning of the book is also connected with its opposition to socialist realism. Hłasko rejects the propaganda image of society where a worker is always a hero, work is a source of happiness and the state represents the interests of all citizens. Instead of showing an ideal world he describes people struggling with poverty, violence, alcoholism, frustration and social inequality. Hłasko's work can also be understood in the wider context of anti-totalitarian literature and autobiographical stories about life in Central and Eastern Europe. Beautiful Twentysomethings is not only a story about Poland in the 1950s, but also about the universal conflict between individual freedom and authoritarian power.

The book has had 15 Polish editions and reprints. It has also been translated into seven languages: German (Die schönen Zwanzigjährigen, 2000), Italian (Bei ventenni, 2009), Croatian (Lijepi dvadesetogodišnjaci, 2012), French (La belle jeunesse, 2012), English (Beautiful Twentysomethings, 2013), Ukrainian (Krasivì dvadcâtilìtnì, 2017), Swedish (Vackra tjugoåringar, 2023)

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: