

SCHULZ – A TRAGIC GENIUS OF MAGICAL REALISM

The artistic creations of **Bruno Schulz**, especially his drawings and short stories, became the subject of extensive international research and various critical interpretations, and the icon of a sentimental world of Jews of Eastern Europe.

Bruno was born on July 12, 1892, in Drohobycz – a little town south of Lwów (at that time a part of the partitioned Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth occupied by Austria). He was the third out of wedlock child of a Polish-Jewish merchant Jakub Schulz and Henrietta Kuhmärker – the daughter of a Polish-Jewish lumber trader.

After the birth of Bruno his parents decided to get married. They belonged to a Jewish community but at home they spoke Polish. Their home with a textile store on the main floor was located at the corner of the town square in Drohobycz. There, Bruno grew up observing the simple life of his family and his father's shop became an imaginary center of the world described in his later literary works.

From 1902 to 1910, he was a student at Emperor Frantz Joseph Gymnasium in Drohobycz. After graduation with honors from that school, he started studies at the Lwów Polytechnic but because of his heart and lung ailments he had to take a break after a year of studies.

Unfortunately, his father also became sick, so Bruno's family went through financial struggles. They sold the store, and moved to Bruno's older sister's house. His older brother also financially supported his parents and other siblings.

In 1913, Bruno continued his studies at the Polytechnic but after a year, with the outbreak of WWI, he had to give up his studies again. His parents moved to Vienna where Bruno attended a local polytechnic for a couple of months and took some classes at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts.



Spotkanie (Meeting, 1920)

During his lifetime he never graduated from any college or university.

In 1915, the Schulz family returned to Drohobycz, where Bruno's father soon died, but he became an inspiration for the creation of the major character of Bruno's short stories – the magical patriarch of the symbolic world.

In the early 1920s Bruno tried to earn money drawing portraits, but without success. The graphic works from his portfolio *Xsięga Bałwochwalcza (The Book of Idolatry)* were presented in exhibitions in Warsaw, Lwów, and Wilno. It caused a controversy among critics with interpretations of the work as explicit sadomasochism or even pornography. In fact it was a series of grotesque scenes depicting the domination of women, demonic in their sexuality over male "beasts." On the other hand, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz was a strong supporter of the artistic values of Schulz's drawings.

In 1924, when Schulz became a teacher at the secondary school in Drohobycz, his financial situation improved. Around 1925 he began writing

drafts of his first short stories. In 1928, he wrote *Noc Lipcowa (July's Night)* but his efforts to find a publisher for his literary works, even with the help of professor Stefan Szuman or writer Debora Vogel to whom he sent his short stories and who really admired them, didn't result in getting them published.

In 1933, thanks to one of his colleagues, he got an opportunity to deliver his literary works to Zofia Nałkowska, who highly prized them, and found a publisher. *Sklepy cynamonowe (The Cinnamon Shops)* – known in a later English edition

under a different title as *The Street of Crocodiles*, consisting of 15 short stories, brought recognition to Schulz. It was prized by critics for language innovation (reminding them of poetry) and the metaphysical dimension of simple situations describing the life of people in a little town. One of the main figures of those stories, written in a magical atmosphere, is the Father living almost on the rim of the real and fantastic world. Adela – a servant girl – represents the domination of women over men's desire. A narrator – Józef – is the author's alter ego.

In 1933, Schulz met the love of his life – Józefina Szelińska – a doctor of philosophy working as a teacher in Drohobycz. She translated into Polish the novel *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, but it was published as a translation by Bruno Schulz. Plans of marriage were never fulfilled; even though Schulz left his Jewish faith to be able to marry Józefina in accordance with the Catholic requirements of the time.

In 1937, Schulz's second collection of short stories was published under the title *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą (The Sanatorium at the Sign of the Hourglass)*. It is a dream-like convention of stories inspired by the narrative of Frantz Kafka's *The Trial*, bringing back the figure of the Father but this time after his business was liquidated. He appears in various forms, as wallpaper, a piece of clothing, or an insect. In 1938, Schulz was honored for his



literary works with the Golden Laurel of the Polish Academy of Literature.

With the outbreak of WWII in 1939, Drohobycz was occupied by the Soviet Union and Schulz tried to earn a living by working on a propaganda project run by local Soviet authorities. Around that time he was writing his novel *The Messiah*, but the manuscript was lost.

After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Schulz as well as other Jews from Drohobycz were forced into a ghetto. For a year Schulz survived because Gestapo

officer Felix Landau wanted him to paint murals in his private villa.

Zofia Nałkowska sent Schulz a falsified ID to help him escape to Warsaw, but one day before the planned action, on November 19, 1942, he was shot dead on the street near his family home by a Gestapo officer. His body was left on the street and the next day buried together with other Jews killed in Drohobycz.

In 1975, a collection of Schulz's letters was published in Polish as *Księga listów (Book of Letters)* comprising just a small portion of his letters which survived the war.

The legacy of Bruno Schulz is the subject of extensive work of literary critics all over the world. In Poland, his short stories inspired Wojciech Hass to make a movie *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* (1973). The animated movie by the brothers Stephen and Timothy Quay under a title *Streets of Crocodiles* taken from one of Schulz's short stories, was selected by director Terry Gilliam as one of the ten best animated films of all time.

There is a museum of Bruno Schulz's works in Drohobycz in Ukraine located in a school where Schulz was a teacher. A collection of his drawings is also presented in the Museum of Literature in Warsaw.

The most important works by Bruno Schulz are available for English readers online at www.schulzian.net