

Third Prizewinner

## **BANKRUPT**

**Grzegorz Szydłowski**

The iron door closed behind me with a loud bang – reminding me, as always, that we're in an unusual place, in prison. A cell like any other – I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary at first glance: apart from two people playing cards at the table, the rest were watching TV. They reminded me of lions in the zoo, serving for a long time and particularly lazy. The long period of time is probably the reason that the lions do not react to new companions in misery, or the passing viewers, even if the latter throw candy wrappers at them or shot with seeds. What meaning would it have for their fate? None. Savannah, on the other hand, is different, even the rustle of grass has meaning, so it makes them alert. Out of that lot, I paid particular attention to one guy, usually lying down with his book in a blue cover. Once again my tendency to look at others worked. I must admit it has always brought me a lot of joy and here in prison it became even stronger. And so I began to observe him – as you say, to screen the man. The blue book he spent so much time with turned out to be the Bible. But it wasn't as surprising as the inside of the book..., underlines in various colours, exclamation marks, various signs, brackets, his own notes on the margin, on almost every page! I like it, myself I don't borrow books from the library, I read only my own ones and underline too. And every book I've read is for me a faithful friend with whom I can always talk.

In order to listen to the Holy Mass, he borrowed a radio, put on headphones and for a while he went to a different place, outside the cell. One day he called me and gave me the headphones, saying: "Listen". I was surprised: classical music... "That's what you listen to?" I asked. "A little, selected pieces, but this is exquisite Emilio de Cavalieri, tasting death". "What??" I was totally stunned. "You can call it like that," he answered.

Dear reader! You'd have to be here to understand that men like him happen very rarely or never, and friendship of such a person is like a family heirloom – priceless. I wasn't wrong. And by sharing this memory of my friend I want to pay the debt. Finally the day came – I heard: "Everything started here, school started here... and theatre, and priesthood..." Instant association: John Paul II is dead... Looking death into the eyes, especially when it's the death of somebody close, is cruel, because it makes you realize your helplessness and brings pain, but

maybe also brings to light things that were hidden before – it was like that with me, and the thoughts that appeared then are still with me.

For a prisoner, every day in the cell is like an enemy he has to face and defeat. For most, the only weapon they know in this fight is the creation of the ruling civilization of the image – the TV, called by a small group of people, diminishing every day – “the thief of time”. For those people the period of mourning which had changed, unfortunately for a short time, the content of TV messages, was a torment. A typical image of a lion facing starvation. And who knows, when an antelope would appear on his track? My space here is limited so I won’t describe what was happening to those people then, how they trashed around the cell, couldn’t find a place, and with the skills I possess, an attempt to describe that hell using the words I know would end in a defeat. What barbarians, I thought then... and even though I took into account the place I was in, the inadequacy of comparing it with the healthy part of the society, I was surprised with their behaviour. It made me think in more general terms, not only about prisoners – has the world around me changed so much and I didn’t even notice it, busy with my own things? This thought became rooted in my brain and started to develop questions about the meaning of life, about values.

After many reflections, observations and conversations with my friend I answered that unfortunately, yes.

What are those changes?

A change of the human mind into a thing incapable of thinking and evaluating the surrounding reality – that’s the goal of television. We’re very close to achieving it, thanks to the everyday huge dose of poisonous mixtures of complex thrillers, sci-fi movies, erotic reality shows and soap operas. Even the titles, like *The Sinner* or *The Angel of Desire* prove that watching them will be an intellectual feast. This was confirmed by the faces of the viewers I observed – focused and intense, sometimes with mouths open. The ranking of those sensual poisons is based on the amount of violence. Under the cover of freedom, they began to trample, spit on and usually ridicule all the rules and traditions observed and respected for ages.

Feminism is yet another front of the fight with normalcy conducted by masters in searching for discrimination. Recently, like a pack of hounds with their noses close to the ground and tails raised, they found abnormalities among the most beautiful fairy tales of my childhood – to many male heroes, and so imbalance. There is a crime, so punishment must follow. It will probably mean the end of the Little Prince, Koziołek Matołek, Eeyore and many other favourites of our children, obviously the male ones, a tear in my eye.

Once, when I returned to the cell, the bed of my friend was empty. Where are you? I asked. I saw smiles that should be properly described as “roguish” – transferred, incompatibility... and a burst of laughter.

A few days later I was in the corridor. In the corner, a man in civil clothes stood and was reading a poster about a literary contest. Suddenly he said aloud: “A man in prison stops to be a ... Oh, sorry, doesn’t stop to be a man,” and he laughed loudly, although it’s not nice to laugh at your own jokes. He must not have known that and I thought then that both in prison and outside, people must now try to be people, despite new ideologies created but those who want to once again prove they can create paradise on earth. That they can change human fate for the better, because they will change the world into a world without God, how will it end? Another bankruptcy.

All those reflections I have ineptly put into words are sad. In my journey called life they will tread next to me like a faithful dog till the very end, when all that remains is to close the grave, behind myself and a piece of the old world the memory of which seems so beautiful to me.