

Lech Sokół

Daniel Charles Gerould
(1928–2012)
In Memoriam

In Honour of his Life and Work¹

I know exactly when I became acquainted with Daniel Gerould and I have an appropriate document to prove this. This is the first published volume of his English translation of Witkacy's plays and it contains the following dedication: "To Mr. Sokół, in appreciation and great pleasure at sharing our mutual enthusiasm for Witkacy – Daniel Gerould May 8th 1969." The book was published in 1968. When the dedication was written in this book, Daniel was 41 years old; I had not yet reached thirty and was preparing to complete a doctorate on Witkacy which I was to finish in 1973. At that time the presence in Warsaw of an American professor, translator and publisher of Witkacy in the United States was an unthinkable event and belonged almost to the realm of fantasy. This volume and subsequent translations, as well as his publications about Witkacy, at once became the decisive turning

¹ A longer version of this recollection was first published in Polish in *Dialog* 2012, no 5 (May), and was translated and edited by Kevin Anthony Hayes.

point in the reception of Witkacy's work outside Poland. It is impossible to overestimate the value and the significance of Daniel's work. I should like to say that we were connected by a relationship which I would call true friendship. It was a relationship between that of a master and a student. The student obtained much from this and remains indebted to the master. I recollect this at once because I wanted to underline the tone of my recollections: recollections of a man immeasurably dedicated to Polish culture, a person of great amiability in relation to others, endowed with a sense of humour, with immense knowledge and sensitivity in the realm of literature, theatre and art, a person of great value who played an enormous part in my life.

We met together in Daniel's office in the English department of Warsaw University in a tightly packed complex of buildings on Krakowskie Przedmieście which was where he was based at that time. The weather was beautiful and the conversation about Witkacy was conducted in English but it frequently moved to Polish which was good for both of us. Yet at that time I was pleased to talk about the apparent particular influence of Edgar Allan Poe on the early dramas of Witkacy and the inheritance of Young Poland. We very frequently returned to the presence of his poetry and prose in the work of Witkacy, in Poland, in France and in Europe. We were interested in French culture and literature, at that time in particular the symbolist art movement which also connected us both then and indeed to the end of our friendship. Fascinated by Witkacy, he at once began to learn Polish and set about work on translations.

I would argue that if Witkacy almost conquered the world, it happened to a great extent because of the translations and work of Daniel Gerould. This assertion doesn't undervalue and doesn't detract from the work of other Witkacologists who took his works to audiences and made it available in more than 30 languages. The vast majority of performances were in fact stagings of Daniel's translations or translations into different languages of his translations. In the early months of 1981 his book, *Witkacy – Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz as an Imaginative Writer*, was published. The book was also published in Polish by the State Publishing House (P.I.W.) in November of 1981. The publications were in effect prepared in parallel using a Xerox copy of the manuscript sent both to the American publisher and to the Polish publisher and translator. The creative work of Daniel Gerould was extremely diverse as it embraced not only Witkacy and academic work. He was also the author of several plays; one of them was translated into Polish by Grzegorz Sinko and published in *Dialog*. Witkacy belongs nonetheless to one of the most important authors which interested him through a very long period of time. After all it was he who brought about the international revolution in Witkacology and introduced the work

of the author of *The Shoemakers* into the wider cultural space of the English speaking world. Daniel Gerould created a research programme of an interdisciplinary character which he developed and continued to the end of his life. There are many remaining tasks for the programme and there is still much to be done. As opposed to us so suffering internally from the Polish inferiority complex, Daniel had a natural way of seeing the universal in Witkacy and the culture of so called Central Eastern Europe. In relation to Witkacy he took a point of view that which would be difficult for us to embrace and maybe not even to achieve. He perceived things and matters unimaginable for us. Like every foreigner he taught us native Poles something new. He was an original thinker and was possessed of great imagination: this is something which ranks very highly in my system of values. Regardless of many fundamental issues he had introduced our consciousness to, he woke up the imagination of his readers and provoked them to think. His books about Witkacy and his numerous excellent studies and articles maintain that strength even up until his last text about Witkacy which was presented at the conference in Washington in May of 2010. I have this article in my computer and of course I've read it and it bears the impressive title: *Witkacy and Conspiracy Theories* and it addresses themes which have only been touched upon superficially and occasionally by researchers. To conclude a complicated matter succinctly, I would like to state the obvious: to write about Witkacy without mentioning the accomplishments of Daniel Gerould is totally impossible: such Witkacology would be markedly deficient.

It is essential to mention, albeit briefly, his other literary output. This of course cannot be an exhaustive list. I have had some of his work with me for many years and I have learnt a great deal from it. This is true above all from the work which I recollect. Among his literary output Daniel had much editorial work of great worth. Usually, his work took the form of an ingenious translation, commentary and authors introduction to such work. Through 25 years he was the publisher and author of the journal *Slavic and East European Performance*. The last official letter that he sent to subscribers was dated December 2011 and it was signed from 'The Director of Publications and Academic Affairs.'

It is also necessary to mention another book alongside those concerned with Witkacy which Daniel Gerould had published in Polish, which unfortunately met with little response. In English it bore the title: *The Guillotine - Its Legend and Lore*, 1992. It is the author's excursion into the field of cultural history. The history of the guillotine has intertwined itself and its reflection in literature and art, from the serious to the popular. I was a chance witness of the birth of his interest in the theme of the book. In 1989 I was in New York for three months on scholarship provided by the

Kościuszko Foundation and we went together to an exhibition dedicated to the French Revolution of 1789, in which the main exhibit along with the documents of the epoch was the original guillotine. At that time Daniel already had a considerable knowledge concerning this terrible invention.

It is not possible to understand Daniel without his wife Jadwiga Kosicka, translator of Polish literature into English and the author of interesting dissertations, commentaries and introductions to translated texts of literary experts and many other personal manifestations. When I think of Daniel I normally see them together, although I became acquainted with Jadwiga rather one or two years after I had met Daniel. To complete their particular type of partnership was the excellent cat Tomek; this is a wonderful example of the extent to which the presence of a cat becomes nature's true reflection of people's true dignity. All three should really be shown against the backdrop of their own specific scenery. In order to know Daniel more closely it was necessary to meet him in his own backwoods, or rather both in New York City as well as in the town of Woodstock in the State of New York about two and half hours away by car. In the late 1980's Daniel spent normally half a week in Woodstock and Jadwiga was there for a longer time period and remained in their houses which were about 6 km from the town. The houses there were set out quite a long distance apart from each other, hidden in the woods, and normally invisible behind the greenery. The forest allotments were quite extensive and protected from noise and intrusion. Animals and birds were not fenced in and felt safe. On their land it was possible to see various birds and animals and I managed to almost befriend a family of wild turkeys. For me, to see them indolently take off was such an exotic sight.

Next to the house, arranged in levels slowly rising up the hill, Jadwiga's 'Polish' garden could be found: tomatoes, carrots, parsley, and flowers arranged in an irregular semicircles bordered by stones. In a very comfortable and well planned library, computers and a music centre could be found. Guests had a separate little house for themselves. Here once again there was an enormous quantity of books in several languages, and comfortable sleeping accommodation. The books interfered with sleep because there were so many and they were so unusual. All around there was wonderful and endless peace. In the morning, though not too early, Jadwiga would call me for breakfast from the doorway. To be a guest in such a household was extraordinarily pleasant. Their hospitality was excellent but – which also bears witness to their excellence – immeasurably discreet caring and feeling without the least pressure or, as we might say today, domination. They always had enormous empathy, delicacy and sensitivity. We made some very memorable visits to the town centre when Daniel was free. My one and only short stay in Woodstock belongs to the

most marvelous American memory; of all my enjoyable stays in the United States it was extraordinarily enjoyable and successful. For sure it is not easy to give a full picture of these recollections and although to some degree I managed to repay the debt of hospitality. In Woodstock, their extraordinary relationship with people was made apparent. It revealed discretion, goodwill, and warmth and willingness to help in whatever need. I am grateful for his inspiration which introduced me to the spirit of American culture, and indeed both New York and at the same time European culture too. I know that they helped many others too; including Konstanty Puzyna, a brilliant theatre critic and Witkacy specialist, who was able to go to New York to work on his doctorate. He also helped my son who undertook his doctoral studies there and now works at the New School for Social Research in New York City. The list of the grateful is very long.

The 1990's did not really help our personal contact. Through almost 6 years I lived and worked in Norway and I didn't participate in any Witkacy conferences and I couldn't meet with Daniel and Jadwiga during their stays in Poland. However, I met her two or three times in Warsaw. I saw Daniel only after a gap of many years during a memorable stay in Chicago in 1998. Several times we planned a meeting, but it never came about.

During the winter of 2011–2012 Daniel had taken ill several times, but then recovered and felt much better, and it seemed as if the difficult times had passed. He passed away in the night between the 12th and 13th of February in 2012 in New York. We were going to meet in June of 2012, of course, in New York...