

A Mass for Arras

Msza za miasto Arras

Presented by: Gerard Ronge

A Mass for Arras is one of the classic Polish parabolic novels, which uses historical events to construct a sharp political commentary on contemporary affairs in such a way as to bypass the restrictions of the then-prevailing censorship.

The novel is written as the confession of Jan, who, already after his escape to Bruges, reconstructs the fate of the city of Arras: from the plague and famine that struck the city in 1458 to the wave of religiously motivated trials and pogroms three years later, known as the “Vauderie d’Arras” (1461).

The antisemitic campaign begins with the arrest and interrogation of Celus, a Jew accused of casting a curse on the house of one of Arras’s residents, as a result of which he loses his horse. Celus’s trial is a clear parody of the show trials that took place in the Polish People’s Republic.

After the Celus case, other members of Arras’s Jewish population fall victim to absurd charges, and later also other residents of the city, including representatives of the elite. The Jews are also blamed for the plague that took place three years earlier. These accusations, fanned by Father Albert, who acts as the city’s spiritual leader, become a pretext for a full-scale pogrom, the novel’s climactic point.

The novel’s finale is the intervention of David of Burgundy, the Bishop of Utrecht, who, during the hours-long Mass, annuls all the trials and grants the city “absolution”; his famous formula: “What happened did not happen, and what was was not!” theatrically washes away responsibility from the perpetrators and witnesses of the pogrom. Jan then leaves Arras, which closes the novel’s compositional frame and brings out the problem of the co-responsibility of the passive witness, one who is not an executioner, but through his passivity legitimizes someone else’s violence.

A Mass for Arras is a political parable clearly legible to a Polish reader, referring to the events that took place in March 1968: on 8 March 1968 the militia and “workers’ activists” crushed the protest at the University of Warsaw, and the state launched an “anti-Zionist” campaign (in fact antisemitic) with mass hate rallies, purges at universities and institutions, thousands of detentions (about 2,700 people), and above all with the forced emigration of about 13,000 citizens of Jewish origin, who were deprived of Polish citizenship and issued one-way “travel documents” (to Israel) in place of passports.

The March campaign aimed to neutralize the liberalizing intelligentsia and the student opposition and to strengthen, within the Polish United Workers’ Party, the camp of the so-called “partisans” of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Mieczysław Moczar. The anti-Israeli rhetoric after the Six-Day War turned into an anti-Jewish personnel-and-politics policy (purges, demotions, dismissals). The ground for this wave of antisemitism was prepared by Władysław Gomułka in a series of speeches

in 1967 and 1968, in which he explicitly named the enemy (calling Jews living in Poland a “fifth column” after the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, and subsequently repeatedly stigmatizing “Zionists”), thus creating a language of official exclusion.

Placed in this context, *A Mass for Arras* is not only a study of symbolic violence, but also a precise description of how the institutional mechanism of violence works: it shows how a sermon turns into a resolution, a resolution into a verdict, and a verdict becomes fuel for the crowd; how the language of law and religious cliché confer upon violence the status of “virtue” and “purification.”

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: