



## The Polish Complex

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The Polish Complex takes place on Christmas Eve, from early morning until late in the evening, as a line of people (including the narrator, whose name is Konwicki) stand and wait in front of a jewelry store in Warsaw. Through the narrator we are told of what happens among those standing in line outside this store, what happens as the narrator's mind thinks and rants about the current state of Poland, and what happens as he imagines the failed Polish rebellion of 1863. The novel's form allows Konwicki (both character and author) to roam around and through Poland's past and present, and to range freely through whatever comes to his attention. By turns comic, lyrical, despairing, and liberating, The Polish Complex stands as one of the most important novels to have come out of Poland since World War II.

## **The Polish Complex Details**

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Author : Tadeusz Konwicki

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## From Reader Review The Polish Complex for online ebook

### Gonzalo Oyanedel says

Partiendo de una resignada fila que aguarda frente a una joyería, Tadeusz Konwicki intenta trazar el perfil de la Polonia que vio en su tiempo, con personajes que buscan resumir los anhelos, temores y dudas de años grises. Un ejercicio que a menudo se extravía en reflexiones y recuerdos, pero gana en honestidad.

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### Shawn says

I read this when I was in college, and it really blew my socks off. It came in a boxed set with Kundera (Laughable Loves) and Bruno Schultz (This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen). Not only did it (and the other two) open up to me a whole world of (and way of) writing under censorship, but also literally a whole world (the Soviet satellites) and a whole history that was more or less dry and side-barred in school. This was also my introduction to Tadeusz Konwicki who is now a staple of my reading.

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### [P] says

Dear aliens,

It is Christmas day, and I write this while at my parents' house. A few moments ago, I was sitting by the window, which I had opened in an effort to tempt a Bengal kitten into joining the forces of evil, when above me I saw a bright light, and I thought of you. Or should I say, I thought of you in the hope that you would think of me. Which means that I, and this is typical of our species, acknowledged your potential existence only in so much as I would like you to acknowledge my actual existence. In short, I wondered what you would make of me, of us, down here. Normally, I write these reviews for my fellow human beings, and it is often the case that I will start with an anecdote, one that relates to me and my life or past life; and I think that more often than not I give the impression of being haunted by the experiences I relive. Which is not really the case. I am simply trying to understand myself.

When I was a kid I did not identify myself as working class, or northern, or even English. I was, I thought, a child of the world, not of one small part of it. I considered myself wonderfully cosmopolitan. And then I moved away from the north, away from a true working class environment, first to university and then into various jobs, and I realised that I am absolutely, terminally all those things that I thought I was not. Let me provide you with an example. While I was at college I won an award for something I wrote, a little piece, and the award was to be presented to me by some semi-famous poet. But I didn't go. And the reason I didn't go, although I wasn't consciously aware of it at the time, is because people like me don't pick up awards, they don't go schmoozing and smiling at award ceremonies.

And the thing is, no one really understands that, unless they too are one of my kind; they don't see how it would have been impossible to go. How silly! I hear that a lot. You are being silly. Usually, it is my girlfriends who say this to me, lovely lighthearted, upper middle-class women. They cannot comprehend why I find it uncomfortable to sit around a table for family meals, either. Or why if someone buys me something, or pays for something for me, I can barely speak for shame. My being is as alien to them as it

probably is to you, my intergalactic peeping toms.

I've written before that one of the joys of reading literature is that it makes the world seem simultaneously smaller and larger. This is another reason why I share my experiences, in order to be part of this phenomena. Anyway, I recently read *The Polish Complex* by Tadeusz Konwicki, and I was again so pleasantly surprised that I was able to find myself in a book that, one would think, would have nothing to do with me, for it is ostensibly about Poland and being Polish. Yes, the action takes place on Christmas Eve, in line at a jewellery store, and, sure, there are many people who can relate to an experience like that. But that isn't what I am referring to. What I found surprising, and engaging, about *The Polish Complex* is what the narrator, who is essentially Konwicki [the narrator is called Tadeusz Konwicki and shares many biographical details with the author], says about the way that he is perceived.

Konwicki states that he always attempted to steer himself towards universalities in his work, that he would actively avoid criticising other nations. And, yet, despite this approach, this literary liberalism, he found that he was always described as a Polish writer, as, in fact, the most Polish of Polish writers. He found, like I have done, that he cannot escape who he is, that it infects everything he does, even when he believes himself to be turning away from it and opening his arms to humanity-at-large. Moreover, it is telling that he, as I am also doing here, is writing for aliens, for you. He claims that this is because he is bored with 'communication with my fellow men', and that might be true, but what is at the heart of this boredom is that he considers himself to be, or others consider him to be, incomprehensible to them. They – readers, critics, etc. – cannot understand him unless they have had his experiences, unless, specifically, they are Polish. Indeed, Konwicki shares an anecdote too, about being in New York and meeting there a 'sickly old man with heartbreakingly eyes', a Polish man, who was unable to die at home in Long Island, because he was 'constantly thinking of his distant Poland' and the war in which the author also participated.

"I no longer strive to be understood. I no longer depend on your approval, your sympathy. Now I write only because I must. I do not believe that anyone will read what I write and understand it as fully as I did while struggling with the resistant, constricted, ephemeral words. I write because some strange sense of duty impels me to this paper, which in ten years will turn to dust. I write because in my subconscious there stirs a spark of hope that there is something, that something endures somewhere, that, in my last instant, Great Meaning will take notice of me and save me from a universe without meaning."

So, *The Polish Complex* is about identity and communication, about the essential, regrettable differences between people, between nations. Yes, most countries have their own language, which makes communication problematic, but for Konwicki it goes deeper than that, it is about the difficulty of communicating 'in the sphere of experience and the consciousness that comes from experience.' In this way, writing the book for aliens is a kind of grim joke. If the majority of his fellow men and women don't or can't understand Konwicki, then of course you, my goggle-eyed, grey-skinned friends, sure won't be able to. Indeed, it is amusing, and ironic, that almost every review of *The Polish Complex* that I have read has stated how alienating parts of it are, how these parts won't mean anything to a potential reader unless they are Polish themselves or are a scholar or expert on Polish history. Yet, it is necessary to point out that the author is lamenting all this, this distance between us; he wants to be part of a brotherhood of man, so to speak, he wants us to commune with each other, to be able to relate to each other appropriately and fully.

In terms of communication it is, of course, significant that Konwicki is a writer. I am sure that people write for many reasons, quite often for money it seems, but certainly when I think about the act of writing what it

suggests to me is a desire to communicate, to reach out to people. Therefore, the book itself is almost another joke, one Konwicki played upon himself, i.e. he is attempting to communicate with a world that he knows, in the main, finds him incomprehensible. Throughout *The Polish Complex* the narrator references his work, or other characters do, and on each occasion these comments are critical. His writing, he is told by Kojran, is ‘more poison than passion.’ It is bitter, defeatist, sad, sarcastic. Kojran also asks why Konwicki doesn’t write something to give the Polish people strength, rather than make them sadder than they already are. Kojran is an interesting character because he is, in a sense, Konwicki’s conscience, in fact, most of the characters play this role in the text. Their function is to allow the author to explore his feelings, and what he thinks are the public’s feelings, about his books. Of course, you might label this rather self-indulgent or egotistical, but it is clear to me that Konwicki took his responsibility, as someone for whom the rest of the world might view as representative of Poles-in-general, seriously.

[A queue in Poland, a common sight in the shortage economy in the 1970s and 1980s]

The Polish coat of arms features a white eagle on a red background. Apparently, this is because the founder of the country saw a white eagle’s nest and decided to settle in that place. However, the eagle is or has become also representative of freedom, and certainly this, the notion of freedom, plays an important role in the book and, in fact, in the history of Poland. First of all, when Konwicki states that he no longer wishes to be understood he is appealing to just that, the freedom to do as he likes and not worry about other people’s reactions; to be creative one has to feel free. More importantly, Poland was for a long time under the control of Russia. There were, during this period, attempts to gain independence, including The January Uprising of 1863, to which Konwicki devotes around forty pages of *The Polish Complex*. After WW2 Poland was forced to join the Eastern Bloc, to become a kind of Soviet satellite state, under the control of Joseph Stalin. It wasn’t until 1989, years after this book was published, that Soviet control over Poland ceased. Therefore, it is no surprise that, as previously mentioned, Konwicki gives over so many pages of his book to The January Uprising, because the fight, or the desire, for freedom or independence is, of course, part of the Polish identity, or was in 1977 at least. It is also no surprise that he takes frequent, and not so subtle, digs at the Russians, or the Russian presence in Poland, most notably when, instead of jewellery, it is samovars that are delivered to the store. Indeed, one lucky person wins a trip to Russia with his purchase.

As with many novels written by earth men of a certain generation, the worst aspect of *The Polish Complex* is the ludicrous sex scene that takes place between the narrator and a much younger [they are always much younger!] woman. I don’t know how you would feel about it, my space pals, but I had a hard time getting on board with the inter-generational nookie. It just seemed incongruous, or out of place, in a novel so impassioned and intelligent. I do not want an author to be making my chest beat with sardonic rants about national identity one moment, and then waffling on about nipples the next. This is not to say, however, that this scene cannot be justified. One must bear in mind that Konwicki the narrator is old, very ill, and eager to die, and that he has admitted to feeling a kind of sentimentality for his homeland and for his youth. So, this young woman is, in a sense, a kind of memory, a living memory, is a last taste of his own youth or of the purest joys that life can throw up. Moreover, as noted, the action takes place on Christmas Eve, a time of miracles [Konwicki openly declares that he is looking for a miracle], and, taking that into account, one might even doubt whether the liaison is even meant to have actually taken place; or, if it did, then the author is at least acknowledging that it is a unlikely, miraculous event.

And...well, that’s it. Oh sure, I could write more, it is always possible to write more, but I feel as though it is unnecessary. I am done. I hope this has been instructional, or entertaining, my bulb-headed amigos. Certainly, I feel better. Because, that’s the thing, even if someone doesn’t understand you, it is still good to get things off your chest, to at least try to make sense of yourself and to at least try to make a connection, no

matter how tenuous or doomed to failure it is.

Yours sincerely,

[P]

P.s.

Merry Christmas. Or Alienmas. Or whatever.

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### **Beata Eaton says**

Had to quit about 3/4 in because of this protracted, unspeakably ugly sex scene between the narrator and another character. Konwicki had me for a bit, I'll admit. I enjoyed the narrative, especially the reflective parts that introduce the book and the narrator. That said, that one scene ruined the book and the author for me. To know that a man could come up with such a cringy way to describe sex just completely ruins anything else he may have to say in my eyes.

No, seriously, I'm still at a loss as to what the purpose of that whole segment was. Surely the author didn't except me as the reader to be filled with repulsion, so what was he aiming for?

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### **Aleksandra says**

Not my cup of tea.

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### **Mieczyslaw Kasprzyk says**

There are parts of this book that are so essentially black and white, grainy film. The Communist era is so well-caught.... Excellent!

By the way, I object to its being called "American Literature" - this is a Polish book!

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### **Jonfaith says**

Wicked powerful. There is nothing brittle nor forced about this bolt from the blue. The queue and the empty shelf have become symbols of something, but not the archaic. Our relative surfeit doesn't obscure the ghosts of our misdeeds.

Konwicki glances sidelong at the prism of identity. Somewhere Fernand Braudel sighs.

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### **Dov Zeller says**

"The Polish Complex" is the kind of existential comedy I aspire to write. A teaspoon of Beckett here, a pinch of Kafka there, an inexact and mesmerizing touch of Lispector.

The book reads in many ways like a play. I felt like I was reading or watching a play through much of the book, and at the same time, it really did transport me to a certain time and place so that I, too, was outside in the cold, and then inside, and then outside again. And then there were those strange interludes, one about Zygmunt Mineyko and one Romuald Traugutt, both fighters in the January Uprising, 1863.

This is also one of those novels that verges on sly and questionable autobiography. It is something of an essay, something of a philosophical text, something of a rant against not just one nation's insidious, toxic, destructive regime-in-power, but against a world of people becoming accustomed to oppressive and controlling governments and less and less willing to fight for liberty.

But then again, what the hell is liberty? The Konwicki who narrates this novel doesn't know, and to some degree he doesn't care, because humans are mostly self-serving scoundrels anyway (though at least in the past there were some noble souls who risked their lives for justice, no? There were heroes in those good old days! Weren't there? Or maybe they were just idiots hastening the inevitable and for what?) And so unfolds the comedy and the tragedy of this novel, with a narrator who is something of a *shlemeil*, or at least self-deprecating in his humor, and also, of course, an aging writer who gets to sleep with a young beautiful woman (he is not wholly un-Rothian, this Konwicki) directly after having a heart attack. Or so it seems. But I do wonder, even within the context of the story, how much of this is fantasy, or even a touch of magical realism.

The basic premise of this novel? Well, there are people standing in line to buy things on Christmas eve day (afternoon, evening). They want to buy gifts I suppose. Though Konwicki wants to buy gold rings as a way to sort of invest his money "safely." He has a bunch of money in his pocket. At least in the beginning of the novel he does. (Plot spoiler: there is no plot. But the money does disappear.)

In watching the slow activity of this line of folks trying to get into a store that has not yet received its shipment of goods, we see unfold the drama of life in Poland in the 1970s. Moreover, we see something perhaps equally absurd and at least a little more surreal than the troubles of Soviet-dominated Poland. Konwicki of the novel happens to be in line next to the guy who had, in the 1950s, been given the job of assassinating him (though clearly he didn't succeed). And, tagging along with the would-be assassin, Kojran, is the police officer, Duszek, who tortured Kojran after his arrest and now follows him around, yearning for absolution.

Below is a quote from the NYRB review of this book, written in '82 by Richard Lourie:

"As the people [in line] gradually reveal their life stories—with Konwicki as their medium, their confessor, as well as an offstage commenting voice—it becomes clear that their failures and frustrations have deeper roots than the everyday hardships and humiliations of postwar Polish life. Most of them, like the narrator, Konwicki himself, are tormented by a real or irrational sense of guilt, by feelings of utter degradation and the wish for death.

"Listen to what happened to me, Konwa," says Kojran. "I was once the boy from the fairy tale. I was Janek the musician, the sorcerer's apprentice, a young Byron. How did I hit the skids? What was the mix-up that left me a primitive old codger? Must have been a lack of training. My consciousness, my perception system, my sensibility, the tendons of my soul, the lenses of my clairvoyance, they all remained dormant. I never practiced or perfected or encouraged any of it. And that's why it withered away and died in me before I was

even dead myself. I condemned myself to an animal existence. Or could that have been fate?"

Something went wrong in the lives of these people—a long time ago or just recently—something involving not only individuals but the Polish community. An act of betrayal was committed—Konwicki muses—yet no one wanted to be a betrayer. A destiny was sabotaged, yet no one was clear what the destiny was. What, then, is the real source of the agony of Konwicki's characters?

The answer can be found in the historical sections of the novel, as well as in the author's personal reflections which occur throughout the book in a seemingly random way."

So yes, the people in this novel struggle to feel that their lives matter, that their souls are indeed transcendent and resplendent, that their suffering happens for a reason, that they belong to a culture, can make claims to cultural richness, that there is some rich cultural cloth that they can wrap themselves in, that will hold them in their humanity and in their desire for a purpose beyond a kind of coarse and plain animal survival.

But is there anything more than this animal life for any of us?

The truth is a perhaps a worrisome thing. But the insistence of these people in line, their forming a community even as they wait, near abjection, in the cold, for goods that will never arrive, even as they lose all hope that whatever might have arrived at the store could save them from the something that is leaving them with a sense of material or spiritual unfulfillment, their creation of a sort of holy space in all of this misery is what makes this book sweet and strange and interesting. On one hand they wait for a providence that will not arrive. On the other hand, they create a providence of sacred, unholy connection.

One of my favorite parts of this novel (which I loved. I really loved this novel though it is very flawed) was a letter written to Konwicki by his friend Seweryn P. It goes on for about ten pages, and the voice is very similar to Konwicki's, but Seweryn is writing from a medical facility where he is being treated by a renowned, "non-party proctologist", who helps deliver Seweryn's letter into the world (when a proctologist becomes a kind of literary midwife to a letter from the narrator's ass-troubled doppelgänger...) It's too long to post here, and I can't find an excerpt I want to post, but look out for it! And if you've read it, I'd be very curious to hear your thoughts on it.

The element of magical realism in this novel is hard for me to put my finger on, but I did think of *The Trial*. I wondered at times whether this line of people was really outside of an earthly store, or whether they were all waiting for entrance to a more magical or heavenly kingdom. Like Josef K., they never do arrive. But the ending is differently bleak.

I am not sure how to end this review. So, for now I will end it here. I will try to add some quotes in the next few days.

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### **PatrickThunderjet says**

Former resistance fighters, police agents, and radicals stand in a line waiting for something that may never arrive--and they aren't sure if they even want whatever it might be. Stories of Polish and Lithuanian resistance are woven into the thoughts of the lead (a Rothian version of the author). Each one stokes the inextinguishable fire for freedom; each one ends in failure. All seek absolution, though there is no meaningful interrogation of the Polish nation's own sins. Communist-era crimes against the resistance and

ordinary population are in clear view, but it is a shame that a book with so much music and insight could not take a closer look at Polish and Lithuanian victimhood alongside victimization of others. Even so, the artistic qualities of Konwicki's surreal and haunting depictions of 1970s Warsaw make this a worthy read that should not be forgotten.

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### **Tyson says**

I love books about Poland. This isn't anywhere near as interesting as "A Minor Apocalypsis" but an interesting character study of Poles in communist Poland and the Polish resistance in both World War II and back into the 19th century.

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### **Jennifer says**

A complex story, very brave for its day, sexist and dark in places, loved the descriptions of the forest and the tragic farce of the 1863 Uprising which was a taboo subject when Konwicki wrote his book. Also appreciated the awful dilemma that people from the Polish Borderlands, the Kresy went through when they were obliged to settle in what was for them a foreign country with a repressive and oppressive regime, another taboo subject then and not much touched on now.

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### **Aharon says**

Intermittently brilliant, overwhelmingly foggy.

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### **Ronald Morton says**

A fantastic little book, and my first experience with Konwicki. At once a novel about spending Christmas Eve waiting in line at a jeweler store, hoping that a shipment of some value will arrive, it is also a book interspersed with meditations on sin, slavery, subjugation, rebellion, (lack of) understanding, communication, identity, and the like. All of this is tied up with the identity of not only Poland in a historical sense, but Poland specifically as it existed as a part of the Soviet Bloc.

How did it happen that I am an author of Polish books, good or bad, but Polish? Why did I accept the role which I had renounced forever? Who turned me, a European, no, a citizen of the world, an Esperantist, a cosmopolitan, an agent of universalism, who turned me, as in some wicked fairy tale, into a stubborn, ignorant, furious Pole?

Through the first half of the book Konwicki repeatedly asserts that he is looking for a miracle – eventually he specifically discloses that he is looking for the miracle of understanding (the Other). Like so much of the literature created under Soviet regimes – especially the literature that was produced through private presses, unsanctioned by the Party – there is a persistent presence of isolation, an inability to connect or understand one's fellow man, even when one is a part of a group.

"If nature gave you such talent, it wasn't for nihilism or slovenliness. Write something that will lift our spirits, goddammit."

As noted, the book alternates between the events of a single day, and varies interludes – philosophical and historical – where Konwicki explores a number of themes. The most affecting of all of these is where Konwicki compares life in Poland to the scene in a movie where an intruder has a gun on a homeowner when a guest arrives. The intruder hides unseen when the guest is admitted, and only the homeowner is aware of his presence, and the lingering threat and potential for violence within him. Konwicki ironically longs for the days when slavery and subjugation was unhidden. At least in those days the slave could cry out – not only were the citizens of Poland trapped in the bonds of slavery to the Party, they were forbidden their voice, forbidden from giving cry to their anguish or from letting loose a "howl to God for help against inevitable doom." The passage is bleak, darkly humorous, and deadly serious.

An excellent book. I must seek out more of his stuff (the small amount of it that has actually been translated).

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### **Nate D says**

Tadeusz Konwicki is fantastic, and no one is reading him these days. To the point where his works that have never been translated out of Polish seem to far out-number those that have. I've written about a few others here (the hit) and here (my favorite) and here (the ostensible-but-not-really kids adventure story).

This one, notoriously, is about waiting in line all day for a shipment to a government jewelry store which may or may not ever arrive. Even so, it's an odyssey of sorts through modern Poland and Konwicki's obsessions -- Konwicki, playing himself as in *A Minor Apocalypse*, finds time for his usual ranted resignation and ultra-dry observation, but seems this time to be addressing ghosts and aliens, and finds opportunity for historical drama, romance, letters from lost friends, brushes with death. And even the most mundane bits become suffused with Konwicki's sense of the surreal, of the sheer strangeness of a modern landscape which seems to turn all its occupants into refugees and prisoners just by context.

I'm giving it three stars cause they can't all get 4 and 5, but jeez, he's not really made any missteps in these significant four I've read.

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Incidentally, here's a list of still-untranslated Konwicki novels from the era since his falling out with the state-mandated socialist-realist writing (ie his first, the almost parodically socialist-realist-sounding *Construction Site* which even characters within this book complain about being bored to tears by in school and Konwicki himself renounces):

Ascension (1967): "a grim, poignant, menacing, surreal image of the metropolitan reality. The protagonist of the novel finds himself under a tram viaduct, most likely the victim of some accident, with a large hole the back of the head, and his hair is stuck together with blood. Unable to remember anything, haunting nocturnal Warsaw, meeting people from the margins: pimps, drunks, prostitutes and swindlers, visiting mysterious premises, taking part in a bank robbery, etc."

Nothing or Never (1971): still looking for an intelligible synopsis for this, but it sounds like it might concern WWII partisans and maybe vampires?!

Chronicles of Love (1974): First love and nostalgia in the 1939 Lithuania of Konwicki's youth.

Underground River or maybe "Underground river, underground birds" (1984): Seems to be another novel based on war recollections.

Czytad?o (1992)

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### **Dana Jerman says**

This book reminds me of a very controlled Dhalgren. It is achingly beautiful and irreverent as a streaker. Launching you with its exquisite imagery of the sacred right back into the human wasteland of the profane. Quotable passages emerge as if from a philosophy text. This book is hard to read, and it isn't. It is a text that is teachable and not talked about enough.

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