

9 JUNE 1962

RFE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION DEPARTMENT

Background Report

Polish Unit

(afd)

CENTRALIZED LITERARY PRIZES IN POLAND

"This year, on July 22, prizes will be awarded for the first time by the Ministry (of Culture and Art) for achievements in the field of literature, cinema, music and art."

This statement came from a most well-informed source, the Minister of Culture and Art, Tadeusz Galinski, (Radio WARSAW interview of 29 May 1962), and it means a complete centralization of rewards for cultural achievements.

The report to follow is concerned with only one area of cultural prizes, namely the prizes for literature.

It arises from the above-mentioned radio interview with Minister Galinski, that there were virtually no literary prizes awarded last year and that this year only the newly-created ministerial prizes will be awarded. It arises from Galinski's statement that all the earlier prizes distributed by voivodships, cities, districts and various associations and publications have been eliminated. As the minister said: "unfortunately, the criteria guiding the awards were sometimes so varied as to result only in misunderstandings".

In order to avoid such misunderstandings, Galinski does not exclude the possibility of distributing, besides the prizes of the Ministry of Culture and Art, "renewed state prizes", as well. He also admits that "chief administration organizations, voivodship national councils, trade unions and all creative organizations may submit concrete proposals", but these proposals will be decided upon by a jury created by the ministry.

Thus, today, six years after October, the problem of literary prizes is in a worse situation than it was in pre-October years.

As a rule in the "past period" there were three grades of state prizes, awarded on July 22 of every year for outstanding achievements in all areas of national life, including also the

field of literature.

There was also, since 1948, a Pietrzak Prize awarded annually by "Pax".

Long before the 20th Congress the death of Stalin introduced new life and a certain amount of freedom with respect to awards. City literary prizes began to be reintroduced.

Without attempting to make up a complete list, a good example was the Prize of the City of Cracow, which was reactivated in 1954 and was awarded annually until 1961. Similarly in 1954 (or in 1955 retroactively for 1954) awards of the cities of Poznan, Warsaw and Lodz (the latter gave the Tuwim Prize) were made. It appears that most of these prizes were reactivated in 1954.

Apart from these prizes in the pre-October period, there was an award of the PEN-Club, distributed regularly (at least since 1952) for the best foreign translation and a literary prize of the PEN-Club first awarded in 1954.

The change of atmosphere could be felt not only in the creation of "faits accomplis" and their tacit acceptance by the regime. In March 1955, the increase of the number of literary prizes obtained the blessing of the most official of publications, "Trybuna Ludu". Roman Szydlowski lightly criticized State Literary Prizes, suggesting that a public discussion of the proposed candidatures should be held. At the same time he widely praised the city prizes and called on other Polish towns to initiate prizes of their own. Also, recalling pre-war literary prizes of "Wiadomosci Literackie" and the post war "Odrodzenie" prize, he suggested that publications such as "Nowa Kultura", "Przegląd Kulturalny" and "Zycie Literackie" award prizes of their own ("Trybuna Ludu", 27 March 1955).

The "thaw" brought a wealth of literary prizes. The number of city and voivodship prizes began to rise after 1955, but the literary weeklies waited another two years before taking up Szydlowski's suggestion. Various organizations and two of the weeklies, "Nowa Kultura" and "Przegląd Kulturalny", created their prizes in 1957, while "Zycie Literackie" joined them in 1958 and the atheist weekly "Argumenty" in 1960.

Some of the prizes were not long-lived. We know, for instance, of only one prize for a literary debut, awarded in 1958 for the year 1957 by the Polish Booksellers Association. Also, the Polish Publishers Association awarded a single prize in 1957. They awarded it to Marek Hlasko and the scandal following the decision of the jury probably resulted in the prize being thereafter



abandoned.

Also the literary weeklies sometimes awarded their prizes rather daringly. For instance, "Nowa Kultura" in 1957 gave its award to Aleksander Wat, who was in disgrace before October, but there was no fuss with the "Krzywe Kolo Club" ("Crooked Circle") prize awarded in 1961 for 1960 to Pawel Jasienica.

While literary prizes awarded by various groups were prospering, there was a decline of state prizes. They were awarded for the last time in 1956. There was an exceptional award of a state prize in October 1957 (i.e., not on the July 22 holiday), but this was given to an outstanding architect, not a writer.

All other prizes were regularly awarded until 1960. In 1961 things got complicated and they require a special analysis.

The statement of the journalist interviewing Minister Galinski -- "as we know, no literary prizes were awarded last year, as was the custom even of various national councils" -- is not quite correct. However, the number of prizes awarded by city or provincial self-government organizations did decrease seriously. Prizes were awarded in 1961 by: a) cities -- Warsaw (in January for the year 1960 and in November for 1961), Poznan (in February for 1960), Wroclaw (in May), Cracow (in June), Gdynia (in July) and Lodz (in July); b) voivodship national councils -- Bydgoszcz (February for 1960), Poznan (July for 1960) and Rzeszow (in July).

Literary prizes were not awarded in 1961 by cities or voivodships such as Lublin, Szczecin and Katowice, among others, although prizes for other achievements were awarded and although literary prizes have been awarded there in previous years.

It would appear from the above, that self-government organizations awarded their prizes up to July 1961 only and that an instruction forbidding the distribution of such prizes must have come out about then. The only exception to the contrary is the Warsaw award in November. Or is it an exception proving the rule?

The problem of prizes awarded by literary publications is more complicated. "Przegląd Kulturalny" in its November 16, November 30 and December 7 issues wrote about the meetings of the literary jury, enumerated the works of candidates suggested by the readers and promised that soon the jury's verdict would be published. "Zycie Literackie" on December 10 reported that "the 'Zycie Literac-

kie' prizes will be awarded as usual for achievements in reporting and literary criticism ... The decision of the jury will be published in two weeks". A week earlier, on December 3, "Nowa Kultura" published similar information: "in one of the coming issues we shall award the traditional literary prize of 'Nowa Kultura'". It was said that Jacek Bochenski's book "The Divine Caesar" had been proposed for that prize and that Alicja Lisiecka, deputy editor-in-chief and member of the jury, strongly supported this candidacy.

None of the prizes were awarded. The editors must have been informed of the official decision about December 10. That day the last information about future prizes appeared in "Zycie Literackie" and at the same time "Nowa Kultura" published an enthusiastic review by Lisiecka of Bochenski's book. Lisiecka wrote: "this is one of the best Polish books in 1961". Such a phrase would be quite inappropriate for a member of a literary jury, but most appropriate for a former member.

As far as the third group of prizes offered by organizations and unions was concerned, the "Pax" Pietrzak Prize was awarded as usual in November 1961.

Of other prizes, an All-National Young Poetry Prize was awarded in February 1961 for the year 1960, in April 1961 the literary prize of ZAIKS (Union of Artists and Composers) was awarded, while the ZAIKS prize for drama and reviews was awarded in October 1961.

The whole idea of eliminating "non-bureaucratic" prizes seems to be a fairly new one. As recently as the beginning of 1960, Andrzej Ziemiński called for an increase in special awards, suggesting among other things that "Polityka" should offer a prize for a political novel and the Ministry of National Defense for a war novel ("Zycie Warszawy", 17 January 1960). Until recently the Ministry of Culture and Arts seemed totally disinterested in literary awards. A journalist who tried to find out from the Ministry "what are the contemporary Polish prizes for literary, musical and artistic achievements", learned that the Ministry does not collect such data (Beata Sowinska in "Zycie Warszawy", 11 September 1960). There was a scandal and the director of the ministerial cabinet immediately called a conference where it was decided to collect such information. "This will be one of the elements presenting the aspects of current artistic creation in the whole country." ("Zycie Warszawy", 16 September 1960.)

The simple conclusion that the Ministry, learning of the "current artistic creation in the whole country" panicked



and decided to liquidate all prizes, seems unjustified. If until September 1960 the Ministry totally disregarded the matter, it was also probably because it had no influence on the subject. The influence, the decisions and also the information-gathering should have been concentrated in the Central Committee. But even there it is difficult to suspect the reasonable Ochab or the tactful Krasko of such a drastic decision. The only remaining possibility is a personal intervention by Gomulka, perhaps led on by Ryszard Strzelecki. It is worth recalling that only since the nomination of Strzelecki to a cultural post in the Politburo (of which he is not yet a member, incidentally) had the liquidation of literary prizes been formally defined and expressed in regulations.

It would be interesting to see whether such specific prizes as the one given by "Pax" or those awarded by ZAISK and the PEN-Club will manage to survive.

But even without waiting for the latest information in "Pax" or PEN-Club prizes, we can state that by liquidating literary prizes awarded by self-government organizations, Poland has receded not just to pre-October days but to the year 1953, the period of darkest Stalinist reaction.

End