BOOK REPORT

All the Languages in the World

by Zbigniew Mentzel

Basic facts

This is a most entertaining short novel (34,000 words), written in Polish and to be published in May 2005 by ZNAK Publishers (Kraków).
In 21 short chapters it describes a day in the life of the middle-aged narrator, with frequent flashbacks to his childhood and early adulthood, focusing on his relationship with his parents and how it has affected his life. The story is set against the background of life in communist Poland and also in the new Poland that has emerged since independence. However, the main themes of the novel are universal. It is essentially a comedy, but is as poignant and telling about human nature as it is funny. With a simple plot where not much actually happens, it is packed with the sort of small incidents that are the fabric of everyday life and mean something to all of us. The flashback material provides a rich diversity of amusing sub-plots and minor characters.

This is Zbigniew Mentzel's first novel, although he is well-known in Poland as a newspaper columnist and has published three books of short stories and articles on Polish culture. He has also edited the collected papers of Poland's leading philosopher, Leszek Kołakowski, and is an expert on his work. During the communist era, he first worked as a journalist writing about the arts for a leading newspaper and later for an émigré periodical and publishing house that worked in defiance of the communist censorship. Broadly speaking, his writing belongs to the Polish literary trend that includes Jerzy Pilch and Pawel Huelle, combining realism with ironical humour and humanity, and an excellent style.

Synopsis

The main action takes place in Warsaw over a twelve-hour period on 17 January 1997, almost ten years after the collapse of communism in Poland. 17 January is the narrator's parents' wedding anniversary, and also the anniversary of the "liberation" of Warsaw by the Red Army following its destruction by the Germans after the failure of the 1944 Uprising.

Zbigniew Hintz, the narrator and main character, is in his mid-forties. He describes what happened to him that day and why he regards it as the most important day of his whole life to date. His narrative is full of episodic flashbacks to his childhood and youth, in which he fails to fulfil the hopes invested in him by his mother, who herself is an unfulfilled poet and pianist, as well as being dissatisfied with life in general, including her husband, a horrible lodger, her son's teachers, a foreign visitor – just about everyone and everything upsets her. She has never forgiven fate for the tragic death of her fiancé in the war. The great artistic career her son was supposed to achieve – first all over Poland, and then worldwide – is nothing but wishful thinking on her part, and each successive attempt he makes to be successful in the existing reality of communist Poland is more ridiculous than the last.

Ostensibly, what happens on 17 January 1997 is that Hintz's now widowed father, at one time a professional soldier but for the past fifty years a hospital pharmacist, is going to work for the last time ever at a major Warsaw hospital, so Hintz will help him take some cakes there for a modest leaving do. The father sets great store by this event and is a stickler for punctuality and efficiency. However, Hintz has other things on his mind as well. Wishing to correct the imbalance in his life, Hintz – the "eternal student", the self-taught amateur – has learned to play the stock market. That same day, a crucially important session is due to take place at the Warsaw Stock Exchange, which has every chance of ending a persistent fall in prices and reversing the business climate. The day before, Hintz has used all his savings to buy shares and is waiting for their value to rise. Playing the stock market interests him not only as a source of income. He is also curious to know if price changes on the market are accidental and random, or if there is some sort of regular pattern to be found in them.

Hintz is also obsessed with language, and with man's most incredible function, speech. Both are thematic throughout the book. Another of his main occupations is to gather material for books he never manages to write, most of which are connected with the mysterious powers of language and speech. On 17 January 1997 he finds the answer to a question that has been tormenting him for a long time: why, despite studying several foreign languages for years on end, is he incapable of speaking any of them? Will the solution to this enigma unblock his mind and help him to become a writer? As he recalls his family's tangled history, he thinks about his closest relatives who are no longer alive and cannot help feeling that none of the things they managed to say while alive were actually important, but that the most essential thing, the key to the most profound truth about them, remained unsaid, and that probably no one would ever get to the bottom of this mystery. Breaking a promise he made to his mother, that day he decides to listen to the message she left for him on his answerphone two days before she died…

Assessment

This book has universal appeal. Beautifully written and very readable, it is funny and moving. It has several distinct qualities that make it stand out among modern Polish fiction, and also give it an international value.

The way in which the author describes his interactions with his parents, both as a child and as an adult, will strike a chord with any of us, as we recognise *typical moments in family life that we thought were just true of our family*. These small, but poignant details and human foibles are described in a subtle way. For example, when Hintz's father calls to make sure he will be on time to take him to his leaving do at work, the phone he is using doesn't work properly; even though the son has bought the father two new phones, the old man refuses to replace the old one. Another feature that this book conveys very movingly is the *universal human feeling that often in life the most important things never get said*, even – perhaps especially – among the people who are closest to each other, such as parents and their children.

The book is often very funny, presenting ordinary, everyday incidents in a comical way. Despite focusing on his own failure to live up to his demanding mother's expectations, the narrator has an ironical attitude to himself. For example, in Chapter 8, he describes how as a small boy he took great pains one Christmas to present his entire family with a "tableau vivant", something he had learned about at school. However, for his special performance he chooses an embarrassing incident from the family's past that his mother has often told him about as a moral lesson. Needless to say, his father is scandalised, though his uncle is highly entertained. The jokes often have a sting in the tail – the uncle himself is a black sheep because he failed to make use of his talents as a painter and wasted his life.

Much of the humour involves the absurdity of life in communist Poland.
Without ever complaining directly about the difficulties of life in the "Polish People's Republic", the book tells us a great deal about that era in an incidental way. This is the version we are rarely told – how living in a communist country actually affected everyday life. The author manages to convey not only the dispiriting nature of the Polish People's Republic, but also its ludicrous side. The unpleasant, unfair side of life under communism is well illustrated too, not least by Hintz's mother's running feud with the coarse sub-tenant whom the local authorities oblige the family to house. This theme has a tragi-comic tone as well.

The setting is an extra attraction of the book. Without feeling at all lost in a foreign country, the non-Polish reader will gain fascinating insight into life in Poland, and especially Warsaw. Although some of the details and jokes are topical, a translator with good knowledge of the context will be able to convey them to the non-Polish reader. Not just the old socialist Poland, but also modern Poland comes across as a comic place. The book also features the little absurdities and comic encounters that are true of life anywhere, involving noisy workmen, peculiar neighbours, unreliable machinery, traffic jams, shopkeepers, etc.

Thanks to the frequent flashbacks, the book is full of episodes and changing scenes. The many stories about Hintz that we are told along the way include (to mention just a few): his childhood loathing of an affected piano teacher; his experiences of learning languages from ludicrous communist textbooks; his fishing holidays with his father; his purchase of a Warsaw flat in exchange for an antique watch; his adventures working illegally in London and chatting up girls there; the workings of the Warsaw stock market; and a 19th-century great-grandmother's tragic diary recording life in Warsaw under Russian occupation.

Altogether this is a truly amusing novel with a profound message, entertaining, moving and absorbing on every page.

EXCERPTS IN ENGLISH

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CHAPTER ONE

Awakening

It was a terrible dream.

At first I couldn't find my bearings in it – I didn't know what I was actually dreaming about, what I felt afraid of, or what those big chunks of raw meat were supposed to be; despite being beaten to a bloody pulp, they were still showing signs of life.

Only a while later, when an image loomed out of the confusion, moved towards me and came into sharp focus did I catch sight of an infinite multitude of human tongues, torn from the living or the dead, tongues that somebody's invisible hands were using to erect a huge pyramid-shaped building, or else a sky-high sacrificial pyre.

I watched in horror as more and more tongues kept appearing: brown, livid blue, or almost black, and it looked to me as if thousands, millions of mouths still had power over them, for even as they joined up, lumped together and turned into the shapeless mass that was serving as a building material, never for a moment did they come to a standstill – they just kept on moving in feverish convulsions, as if the whole of mankind, cruelly mutilated, as if the whole world – our world – were… crying for help? asking a question? cursing? praying? begging for mercy?

I was surprised I hadn't woken up with a scream of alarm, bathed in a fearful sweat. Why did I wake up without the slightest sense of fear? I simply opened my eyes and found myself lying in bed, breathing deeply and evenly; my congenital heart defect wasn't making itself apparent, and altogether my return to reality was calm, extremely calm.

Here I was at home in Warsaw, in my flat on the first floor of a low-rise house on Henryk Siemiradzki Street, named after the artist who a hundred years ago painted the pictures on an enormous canvas, the biggest theatre curtain in Europe.

The winter's day was taking its time to get up. Darkness still reigned, and I could only read the titles of the books on the shelves surrounding me from memory. I raised my head to check the time on the Sony tower. The digital clock said six, so it was five; I hadn't yet reset the clock since the time change that autumn, so it was running an hour fast.

I spent a while trying to remember the name of the winter time we'd moved to: was it eastern, western, or central European? I thought it must be eastern, but I had some doubts. Maybe in fact it was western? Anyway, it made no difference. Ever since the Spirit had come down and renewed the face of the earth – this earth, ever since the communists had given up power, ever since the wall had come tumbling down and the Empire had collapsed, the time changes announced each year no longer had the symbolic political meanings I used to bestow on them with such childish naivety.

It was five. Five-o-three.

I knew that not long now, as soon as the final hour of nocturnal silence was over, the concrete mixer would roar into life under the old tenement building opposite, where mansard apartments were being built in the spacious attic for the employees of an American bank; the goods lift would also start rasping to and fro in its steel shaft, summoned by shouts of:

"Uuuuuup!"

"Doooown!"

"Uuuuuup!"

"Doooown!"

"Uuuuuup!"

"Doooown!"

I should have slept for at least two more hours, but I wasn't drowsy. I lay there with my eyes open, listening to my heart beat, and for the first time in ages I couldn't feel the slightest irregularity, as I wondered what the newly breaking day would bring me.

That day my eighty-two-year-old father was going to work for the last time ever, and I had promised to help him take in a cake and some pastries that he planned to offer his guests at a modest farewell party.

As a graduate of the Cadet Corps and a Second Lieutenant of Infantry, in September 1939 he was taken prisoner by the Germans, and spent five years in a POW camp at Woldenberg before returning to Poland – the new Poland, where he said goodbye to his uniform, got married, became a pharmacist and started work at his father-in-law's – my grandfather's – pharmacy. Soon after, when the communists took all the pharmacies away from their private owners he went to work for the state and tried to make ends meet.

At the city isolation hospital, which before the war had belonged to the Bauman family, my father was never once late for work and never missed a single day. He just worked and worked, doing the best he could, and after twenty-five years on Labour Day – the First of May – he was given a Bronze Service Cross and an imitation pigskin briefcase. To mark the occasion, the health service workers' trade union newspaper published an article about him, with a photo.

My father regarded the final sentence of the article as scandalous, and angrily hid his copy of *Health Care* away. We had to spend a long time asking him to show it to us. When my mother finally got hold of it and saw the headline to the piece about my father, she burst into hysterical laughter.

"FROM THE BAYONET TO THE TABLET", it said, and at first I thought it very funny too.

"Well, I never… What an idea! 'From the bayonet to the tablet'?" said my mother, shaking her head in disbelief and, laughing though tears, she read the article aloud.

"The field-marshal's baton may even have lain in his knapsack, but Rudolf Hintz was destined for another responsible post in the service of his motherland, the Polish People's Republic", she read the final sentence, froze with her mouth open, as if struck dumb in mid-word, then furiously threw the newspaper to the floor and began to trample it underfoot. I watched as the photo of my father in his white coat was ripped to shreds.

"What a dreadful rag! What a dreadful rag!" screamed my mother. "I've never read such nonsense in all my life. Why didn't they say how much he earned and how he was supposed to keep a family on it?"

I knew something awful was just about to happen. My father was staring at my mother, clenching his teeth, and trying to fold up the ragged newspaper.

For as long as I can remember, my parents never lived in harmony.

(…)

CHAPTER THREE

The typewriter

I bought my flat – a single room plus kitchen, twenty-four square metres – in exchange for our most valuable family heirloom, a gold watch with a black relief on the cover, a memorial watch commissioned by my great-grandmother after the defeat of the January Uprising.

My mother gave me the watch three months after the communists imposed martial law in Poland. That year I had reached the age of thirty and was asking myself more and more often whether or not my life was finally going to take on the deeper meaning that so far had eluded it.

At the time I was still living with my parents. To supplement my father's pension, my mother ran a private kindergarten. Day in, day out, from early morning ten children used to romp about on the floor in my room, shrieking as they wrenched from each other's grip a pair of cymbals, a drum, some lead soldiers, a steam train, a wooden clown, some building bricks, a stuffed monkey who had lost both his lower limbs, and lots of other broken toys that had passed down from generation to generation in our family.

At three in the afternoon Mrs Kuś, the helping hand hired by my mother, finished work, and at that point I took on care of the children. In an effort to curb the clamorous horde, I used to scare them with the typewriter, an old German Rheinmetall that they all regarded with superstitious fear ever since four-year-old Kuba had almost lost a finger in it by pressing on the tabulator.

The last children were collected at around five and, like Gulliver in Lilliput, suddenly deserted by its citizens, I was left alone in the room amid the miniature plywood chairs and tables, tossed about higgledy-piggledy. I'd gather them up, put them in a box with the toys, and take the whole show out onto the balcony, then air the room and unfold the table-top that served me as a typing desk, in order to sit down and finally get on with my work.

The old German typewriter, bought for my mother before the war as a twentieth birthday present, was an object that had fascinated me for as long as I could remember, while also making me feel downcast in a quite specific way. There was something unusually

dismal, something sepulchral about its large, solid shape. Huge and heavy, fitted with shining silver handles and grips, it had the company name Rheinmetall inscribed on a disk in Gothic lettering and looked like an ornate sarcophagus, or some other, equally fanciful eternal resting place; like the raised hood of a droshky its black, creaking cover added even more to its funereal majesty.

For many years, right up to his death, my grandfather kept the typewriter in perfect working order, devoting a few hours each year to giving it a careful inspection and cleaning. I used to watch with bated breath as he drew off the cover, raised the spools, checked the tape, rubbed the roller with a rag dipped in alcohol, then smeared olive oil on the carriage rails and spent ages cleaning each of the keys with an old toothbrush, the hairs of which had been cut to half-length specially for this purpose.

In the past, my mother had learned to touch-type, and was happy to show me the level of proficiency she had reached after a couple of weeks' intensive training. She rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter, put it straight, then set the correct margin width, while I tied a purple scarf over her eyes and made sure she couldn't see anything.

"Ready?" she asked, raising her hands over the keyboard, like a pianist preparing to play his opening bars.

"Ready!" I replied, and that very second the keys began to strike the roller with their familiar rattle:

marriage college porridge
budget margin fidget
passenger messenger stranger
jungle tingle mangle

wrote my mother at lightning speed, and after the word "mangle" she unveiled her eyes.

"Not a single mistake," she showed me triumphantly. "You see!"

Amazed how nimble her fingers were, I read out each of the words in turn; they sounded like a children's rhyme or an incomprehensible poem by an avant garde poet.

In her youth my mother used to write poetry herself, and apparently Kazimierz Wierzyński, for whom of all the Polish poets living at the time she had the highest regard, couldn't praise her enough.

"He read my poems," she used to tell the story. "He read them and he kissed my hand *three times*… 'Miss Mierzejewska,' he said, quite ecstatic with delight, 'Miss Mierzejewska, you have talent, and you mustn't waste a talent like that – with a talent like yours you could reach great heights'."

Sometimes I thought my mother still wrote poetry on the quiet, which explained why she so often shut herself in the dining room with her typewriter. But when I sneaked a look into all the nooks and crannies where she kept her papers, instead of poetry I found the official correspondence she'd carried on for years with the Housing Department: applications, appeals, numerous copies, an endless stream of shame in the form of complaints levelled at the sub-tenant who was imposed on us and whom we tried in vain to get rid of. I can still remember those desperate letters by heart:

On 4 December of this year Citizen Wanda Olczak brought two unknown persons to our flat (probably a married couple) and showed them round the premises. In response to my enquiry concerning the nature of their visit, the strange man arrogantly informed me that once Citizen Olczak had vacated one of the rooms, he was going to occupy it. In view of Citizen Olczak's uncouth behaviour throughout the entire duration of her tenancy, in view of the constant scenes that have caused my mother, an old lady, to lose her health and have reduced me to a state of severe nervous collapse, I would humbly request that the Housing Department allow us to make our own choice of sub-tenant. The person whom we would like to move in is currently residing in temporary accommodation and is a white-collar worker. Her quiet disposition and innate good breeding provide a full guarantee of harmonious co-existence… (Signed)

After many harrowing years during which Citizen Wanda Olczak has offended the entire household by frequently repeating that in her place she will move in "some guys who will sort us out", we are very much hoping that once she has left we shall finally enjoy the peace and quiet we so greatly need. I feel I should mention that during his incarceration in the officers' prisoner-of-war camp at Woldenberg my husband was brutally beaten by a German guard (receiving an extremely heavy blow to the head inflicted with a rifle butt), since when he has permanently suffered from nervous excitability and migraines, and is tormented by anxiety and insomnia. In view of these facts, I beg to implore the Housing Department to assign my husband some extra living space, and not to allocate accommodation in our flat to any persons recommended by Citizen Olczak… (Signed)

Although as a child I was not allowed even to touch the typewriter without my parents' knowledge, I often broke the rule and reached cautiously under the cover. Wanting

to hear the sound of the keys crashing against the roller, I would hit one of them at random. One day, my mother caught me standing over the typewriter, twiddling my fingers in the air and pretending to write. This comical sight unexpectedly moved her to tears.

I had moved up into the second class at primary school when *The Little Flame*, a weekly for older children and youth, announced a competition entitled "Describe your motherland". Anyone who wished could send in a short, pithy description that the Soviet cosmonauts would take in a sealed capsule to Mars, Venus or some other planet; according to the rules it could not be longer than one side of paper. So I wrote my essay by hand, and then, using two fingers only, I printed it out on the typewriter, which only at the eleventh attempt did I manage to do without making any mistakes.

Although I didn't win a prize or even a mention ("Thank God," said my father, "or he might have ended up writing for the *People's Tribune*"), my mother agreed that I had made a step in the right direction, and from then on they allowed me to use the typewriter whenever I wished.

One day I found an old typing manual at home, and resolved to work my way through the exercises until I'd learned to type with all ten fingers, just like my mother.

The TASS press agency issues interesting reports, I tapped out on the Rheinmetall keys. Following the recommendation of the manual's authors I repeated the exercise three times:

The TASS press agency issues interesting reports.
The TASS press agency issues interesting reports.
The TASS press agency issues interesting reports.

The workers' great effort has not been made in vain.
The workers' great effort has not been made in vain.
The workers' great effort has not been made in vain.

The hop fields are blooming in Lublin county district.
The hop fields are blooming in Lublin county district.
The hop fields are blooming in Lublin county district.

Once I'd got through more or less half the exercises, something went wrong with the typewriter. Every once in a while, when I hit the key for the most commonly used vowel, "a", I heard the nasty muffled sound that's usually made by a dead key; the carriage wouldn't

shift automatically onto the next symbol, and to stop the next letter from being printed on top of the last one I had to give it a gentle nudge.

Not long after, the tape-winding mechanism started causing trouble, and the tape (which because of its non-standard width of fourteen millimetres couldn't be replaced by the kind sold in the stationery shops) was so worn out that it had holes in it and kept getting hooked on the type guide, making marks on the paper.

Towards the end of the 1970s, when my mother only retained the shadow of a hope that I was a gifted child, and that of all our family members I was the one who would go furthest in life, the typewriter was urgently in need of major repairs. But for lack of cash, from month to month we kept putting off the decision to take it to one of the workshops on Wilcza Street.

As I was using the typewriter on a daily basis, I tried to anticipate the moment when something inside it would refuse to obey, but even when I focused my attention to the utmost, at least half the time I had set aside for my work was taken up with fixing faults, washing my hands and correcting mistakes.

I'd roll paper into the typewriter, press home the crumbling bail rollers, wash my hands, write the first sentence, unhook the tape that was caught on the type guide, wash my hands, write the second sentence, nudging the carriage every time the "a" key got jammed, and when for the umpteenth time the tape got caught on the type guide, I took off the spools and inspected them under the light, staring into the faded black ribbon, as if trying to interpret the signs stamped on it by millions of letters over many long years as the forecast of a better future for myself.

Evening was falling. Next door in the dining room my mother was laying the table for supper, and my father was trying to listen to Radio Free Europe. Annoyed by the infernal noise of the jamming, he kept turning the radio in every possible direction and begging the ferrite aerial to bring him the most crucial broadcast of the day, "Facts, events and opinions".

"I saw it all coming, I saw it all coming…" he kept saying, as his favourite Radio Free Europe presenter, Józef Ptaczek, announced the latest news in a low, graveyard voice.

"Oh, yes," my mother cut in sarcastically. "You've always seen ahead. It's just a pity you didn't see in advance how much you were going to earn. Pity you didn't tell me about it before I married you. Pity you didn't…"

My father turned the dial until he'd set the radio to full volume, so my mother's final words were jammed by the voice of Józef Ptaczek being jammed by the jammer. I thumped my fist on the wall and shouted: "Quiet! I can't work! Quiet! Quieet! Quieeet!"

(…)

CHAPTER SIX

Are you still talking? Yes, I am still talking!

The digital watch on my Sony tower said nine twenty, so it was an hour earlier – high time to top up my potassium levels. Because of my congenital heart defect I had to take medicine every day, namely Lanoxin, with potassium ions. Potassium was very important, because whenever its level in my system dropped, my heart reacted with an irregular beat. Over the years I'd managed to get used to its frequent one-off spasms, which though unpleasant, no longer scared me. I was only terrified when there were several spasms, sometimes more than a dozen, and when they came in quick succession, running together in a chain, what the cardiologists call a *salvo*.

I went into the kitchen for some water to take my medicine, and took a look at the spider that had set up home there in the autumn. One day, just before the switch from summer to winter time, I'd found its newly made web in the kitchen, draped between the ceiling and the window sill. Shining silver in the sunlight, the web was so artfully spun I thought it would be an act of barbarism to destroy such a wonder of nature.

I once read that a spider's thread is far more durable than a steel fibre of the same thickness, and although extremely light, it can support a spider weighing four thousand times as much. Apparently spiders that haven't caught any prey for a long time eat their own webs out of hunger; eventually they make a new one, but it's a bit smaller.

My spider had been driven by hunger to eat his own web lots of times. There weren't any flies at all in winter, and he left the crumbs of wholemeal bread I tried to feed him with untouched.

"The spider cast a net into the void to catch the shadow of its shadow", I thought, remembering a line of poetry. Just at that moment the spider, who at first sight looked dead, started twitching, spun a long thread and lowered himself at lightning speed, as if descending a rope.

"Uuuuuup! Uuuuuup!" I could hear from outside.

The man working on the roof of the building opposite had stuck his head out of the red roof tiles and kept shouting over and over again: "Uuuuuup! Uuuuuup!"

I looked downwards. A sleepy lad in a woolly hat with a coloured pompom had forgotten to shift the lever in the goods lift, and was busy staring at the lady concierge, who was saying something to the workman running the concrete mixer while furiously gesturing towards a statue of the Virgin Mary, which stood with its back to me. I soon worked out what the concierge was on about. She must have noticed that the concrete mixer was standing so near the statue that whenever it was switched on, it spattered the Virgin Mary in cement.

The workman laid his spade on the ground, stepped over the fence round the statue, climbed onto the grey stone plinth, looked the Virgin Mary straight in the face and started wiping her with his sleeve.

"Stop that! Don't touch!" shrieked the concierge, grabbed the workman by the legs and pulled him off the plinth.

"Take off your hat!" she commanded him. "You don't seem to realise whose presence you're in."

The workman took a step backwards, picked up his spade and shielded himself from the concierge with the handle. He couldn't take off his hat because he wasn't wearing one; in black overalls and a black balaclava helmet with only his mouth, nose and eyes showing, he looked like the devil out of an illustration in a children's book.

In the main room the phone rang. I hesitated, wondering whether or not to answer. At that time of day it was usually a wrong number, but it could also be my father calling. I waited a moment, then on the fourth ring I picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"It's me," I heard. "Can you hear me?"

The voice was faint, as if my father were calling from Vladivostok.

"I can, but you're very faint."

"Should I try calling again?"

"No need, Dad. I can hear you. Go ahead."

"Wait a minute, I'll just fix the cable. Something's not connected properly…"

Some shrill crackling noises came booming down the receiver. For months on end my father's home phone had been broken, and even though I'd brought round two new ones, he hadn't made up his mind to swap it for either of them. Nor was he willing to call in a repairman to fix the fault.

"Hello?" I heard. "Is that better? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can. Go ahead, Dad. What's up?"

"Ooh, it's not worth mentioning. I had a dreadful night."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I couldn't go to sleep. I didn't get a wink before five. It was dawn before I dozed off for a while."

"Easy does it, Dad," I said, not knowing what to say to calm him down.

"Dad, Dad," he said fretfully. "How many times have I told you not to call me 'Dad'? You know I can't stand it."

"What am I supposed to call you? 'Father'? I always called my mother Mum."

"Call me what you like. It's all the same to me now."

Silence.

Silence.

Whenever my father took me on a worker's holiday, year after year to the same place on the River Vistula (upstream, five hundred and sixty-six kilometres from the source), every few days we went to the post office at Goławin to order an inter-city call to Warsaw.

Although the post office was only about forty kilometres away from our house, we used to wait an awfully long time for the connection. The post office clerk would turn the phone handle to connect with the exchange and give the required number. An hour later, if there were no faults on the line, my father would enter one of the phone booths, unhook the receiver and start talking to my mother. Sometimes they both fell silent, upon which the operator, who was evidently keeping an eye on the connection the whole time somewhere at the exchange, would shout down the receiver: "Are you still talking? Are you still talking?"

"Yes, I am! Please don't cut us off!" my father would say crossly, but the operator's voice would soon be heard in the receiver again, sounding just as importunate as before.

"Are you still talking? Are you still talking?"

"Yes, I am still talking!" my father would scream, purple with rage. "I'm still talking! talking! talking!"

"Hello?" I heard him say. "Are you there?"

"Yes, I am. Go ahead, Dad, I'm listening."

"I've got a favour to ask you."

"What is it?"

"I know it means nothing to you," he said, as usual not coming straight to the point, "but other people attach importance to this sort of thing."

"What's your point, Dad?"

"What's my point? The point is you should give your shoes a good clean before you leave the house. And you mustn't be late."

"All right," I said. "I'll be with you at twelve on the dot."

Cleaning shoes, packing suitcases… In all my life I've never met anyone who could pack a suitcase better than my father. The first principle, he would explain to my mother, wherever you're going, is to take as few things with you as possible. My mother had no intention of complying with any such principle. Every time she went to the sanatorium where she took cures for her upper airways, she got so many things ready to take with her that they looked impossible to fit in a single case.

"Is that everything?" my father would ask, staring at the pile of clothes towering next to the suitcase lying open on the floor.

"Yes," said my mother, tossing another blouse onto the heap.

"Now leave me on my own for a while," my father would say, and as if wanting to conduct some mysterious ritual on his own, he'd shut himself in the room.

Half an hour later he'd open the door and show us the suitcase, all packed, but so heavy that the station porter had to carry it to the train on his back.

Packing suitcases, cleaning shoes… It was a long time before I stopped thinking those were the only things that went well for my father in life.

Two pairs of shoes, one black and one oxblood, served him for fifty years. Soled and heeled with metal strips to infinity, they sat supported by shoe-trees under a stool and were always polished to a shine.

My mother used to claim that if only my grandfather had managed to sell his two recipes for failsafe bootblacking – "regular" and "instant shine" – to the right person at the right time, we'd have made a fortune.

Regular bootblacking

1.5 kg bone-black

9 kg soot

1 kg finely chopped gutta-percha

0.5 kg stearin

2 kg gum Arabic

nitro-benzene

Instant shine bootblacking

1 kg refined shellac

1 kg spirit

1.5 kg Venetian turpentine

camphor oil

My father never used bootblacking. In fact, he never even used Kiwi shoe polish. He cleaned his two pairs of shoes with nothing but plain milk, and drank a glass of it morning and evening for his health.

As I gazed at his shining, milk-imbued shoes standing in the hall, increasingly often it occurred to me that when my father died the black pair would go with him to the grave, while the oxblood pair and their shoe-trees would be left under the stool, and I'd never know what to do with them.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

Zbigniew Mentzel

Biographical note

Zbigniew Mentzel was born on 20 April 1951 in Warsaw.

His father was an officer in the Polish Army who went into the reserves immediately after the war, and worked for almost fifty years as a pharmacist in children's hospitals. His mother was a pianist and poetess manqué.

After graduating from the Adam Mickiewicz Secondary School, Mentzel spent a year working as a gofer for the bi-weekly journal *Teatr* ["Theatre"] before beginning his studies in the Polish philology department at Warsaw University, which he completed in 1975 with a distinction. He then became an assistant researcher within the Polish Culture Faculty at Warsaw University, but was sacked for writing an article on "Literature in the face of war and occupation", in which supposedly he expressed views that were "unacceptable" for the Faculty administrators of the time.

In 1977 Mentzel became editor of the culture section of the weekly newspaper *Polityka* ["Politics"], but left with a group of other journalists on 13 December 1981, when the communist government declared martial law in Poland. For three months he worked as press spokesman for the Polish Anti-Nicotine Association (years later he was awarded a Gold Badge of Honour for "services on behalf of the health of the nation"), and then joined the staff of the émigré periodical and publishing house Puls (based in London).

After the fall of communism and the lifting of censorship Mentzel became Puls's national representative when the company assumed legal activity in Poland, publishing to date several dozen major works of literature and the humanities in a total print-run of over two million copies.

Mentzel has written three books to date: a satirical chronicle of cultural life in communist Poland (*Pod kreską. Ostatnie kwartały PRL* ["Drawing an underline: the final quarters of the Polish People's Republic"], London 1989) and two collections of short prose pieces (*Laufer* ["The Roving Footman"], London-Warsaw 1998, and *Niebezpieczne narzędzie w ustach* ["Mouthing a Dangerous Instrument"], Gdańsk 2001).

He has published articles in most of Poland's leading periodicals and is a regular columnist for the weekly journals *Tygodnik Powszechny* and *Przekrój*. He is currently working on a book about the life and work of Leszek Kołakowski, whose dispersed papers he has collected, edited and published in several volumes (*Pochwała niekonsekwencji* ["In Praise of Inconsistency"], Vols. I-III, London-Warsaw 1989; second, expanded edition, 2002; *Wśród znajomych. O różnych ludziach mądrych, zacnych, interesujących i o tym, jak czasy swoje urabiali* ["Among Friends: on various wise, worthy, and interesting people and how they shaped their times"], Kraków 2004).

For the past ten years Mentzel has been investing on the stock market, which is his main source of income. In 1995 he won a prize awarded by the Warsaw Academy for Stock Market Investment.

His wife, Dorota Jovanka Ćirlić-Mentzel, is half-Polish and half-Serbian, and translates literature from the Balkan countries into Polish.

EXTRACTS FROM REVIEWS
OF *ALL THE LANGUAGES IN THE WORLD*
BY ZBIGNIEW MENTZEL

Marcin Wilk in *Dziennik Polski*

In the tradition of the best models and styles of Polish and world literature, Zbigniew Mentzel has written a profound, elaborate novel. The plot is a dense literary fabric. It all starts and finishes with a dream, because the entire action takes place in the course of a single day. … Heralded a few years ago, this book by a well-known, popular columnist who is also a keen stock market enthusiast, is undoubtedly an important event on the literary market and a successful attempt at the difficult theme of a journey inside oneself.

Krzysztof Masłoń in *Rzeczpospolita*

Here at last is the Polish novel we've been waiting for. Perverse, intelligent, moving, funny, ironical (and self-ironical) – that's *All the Languages in the World*, which Zbigniew Mentzel has finally written. I use the word "finally" on purpose. The former *Polityka* writer, later a manager of the publishing house Puls and author of a sporadic, but eagerly anticipated column in *Tygodnik Powszechny* is the classic example of the literary laggard. Writers divide into Stakhanovites and those like Mentzel, who, in the words of his hero, ask themselves: "Why couldn't I write? Why did I regard every page I laboured over with distaste, feeling that it wasn't what it should be?" *All the Languages in the World* is undoubtedly what it should be. The story of the Hintz family, set in the reality of communist Poland, includes a mystery (which is perhaps the weakest plotline in the book) and some wonderful episodes from the past (as I drive across the Śląsko-Dąbrowski bridge every day, do I really pass over the remains of men who fought for freedom and Polish independence, walled into the piers of the bridge?). The main hero and narrator's parents are real masterpieces. The author's rendition of the 1960s is most unusual: everything is exactly the way it really was, even though in our collective memory that era no longer exists…

Review and interview by Katarzyna Kubisiowska in *Gazeta Wyborcza*

…Every aspiring young author should keep this book on the bedside table as a reminder that thorough polishing of the shortest forms of writing can lead to literary craftsmanship and success. Zbigniew Mentzel's late debut as a novelist is charmingly simple, finely written and sensual, proving that he has not neglected his gift of speech or his gift of passion. Here, in the most elegant language, he speaks out in a full and powerful voice.

Interview

KK: *All the Languages in the World* is extremely autobiographical fiction.
Zbigniew Mentzel: What makes you so sure of that?
KK: Because the hero of the novel is called Hintz. It's hard to resist the association with your own surname.
ZM: I have a German name – hardly anyone can pronounce it or spell it properly. All my life I've had to keep repeating: "Mentzel with a t-z." I wanted my hero to suffer from the same complaint.
KK: Just like you, Hintz has a degree in Polish studies, lives in the Warsaw district of Żoliborz, collects newspaper cuttings and gambles on the stock market, and there are plenty more similarities besides.

ZM: Quite so, but there are just as many dissimilarities too. My book is not a diary or a memoir – it's a novel, it's literary fiction. The similarities in many aspects of the author's and the main character's lives are of little significance – they're just the by-product of an autobiographical tendency, which I don't in any case deny. But their essence is much more profound. I do identify with Hintz, because he has an ethical attitude to his life, not an anecdotal one. He's always looking for the hidden agenda, the spiritual continuity of his life story, something that among its scattered episodes will be the "bonding magic", as Irzykowski called it.
KK: It all sounds extremely serious.
ZM: If you want to talk to someone who thinks of writing as a joke, you've got the wrong man. I take my writing very seriously. It annoys me when people say that literature just involves telling an interesting story, and nothing more. What else does it involve? A heightening of our spiritual life, finding and conferring meanings. It's a vocation, a gift, it's a restoration of the certainty and autonomy of existence… Now that sounds serious, doesn't it?
KK: In *All the Languages in the World* you depict an unhappy marriage that complicates all other family relationships. This topic has become a basic theme in Polish fiction in the past few years. How do you explain this need to come to terms with one's own heritage?
ZM: Everyone, except God, has parents. The genes we inherit from our father and mother, and through them from our ancestors further and further back in time, carry the mystery of human destiny, which is a crucial element in literature. The temptation to fathom that mystery is stronger in me than any need to "settle scores", or set forth the moral evidence. Hintz is not his parents' judge, and he never accuses them of anything, though a psychologist would be sure to try and unearth the numerous errors they made in his upbringing. Sympathy and respect, that's how I'd define the hero's attitude.
KK: You've got it in for the matriarchal type of family – in the Hintz household it's the woman who's boss, endlessly abusing her husband and her son.
ZM: I think it's more that she tries to shake them out of their apathy and infect them with some creative angst. The mother's enemy is the "sacred peace" the father longs for. Anyway, in spite of all their marriage lasts, the Hintzes don't divorce. On every wedding anniversary the frequently humiliated husband gives his wife violets, a symbol of marriage eternal. With his old soldier's mentality, he would regard leaving home as desertion. It's a shocking prospect: the wedding vows are more important than having a fulfilled life. Now I expect you want me to say if I'm for or against divorce? Everyone has to decide that to the satisfaction of his own conscience.
KK: Why are there hardly any women in the book, apart from the not too lovable mother?
ZM: The lack of romance in the hero's life completely invalidates your theory about his supposed identification with the author. Seriously though, women matter too much to me to give them a sub-plot in a novel on a different theme. Conscious elimination.
KK: And is the fact that Hintz doesn't take his girlfriends seriously, but treats them like objects, an equally deliberate ploy?
ZM: I don't think there's any evidence to say that he does. To me, Hintz is a failure – he goes on living with his parents until he's thirty, he's indecisive, and he keeps trying in vain to write a novel. In vain? Actually, he does write it in the end – the narrative we're reading here is his work. His inability to express himself is overcome at last. The man who can't speak finally finds his voice. My novel's the "story of an awakening", as the publisher called it. But before that, far more important than what's happening in Hintz's life is what it lacks. Being aware that there's something missing, having a sense of emptiness is really crushing. Very many works of art show people in this way – Tadeusz Kantor's theatrical masterpieces are

very dear to me, for example. Hintz is the typical Polish intellectual who's stifled by the communist system. Or rather, I should say that about his parents. Hintz's father, a cadet corps pupil who was made an officer in September 1939, came back from a German POW camp, cast off his uniform and resigned from a career in the Sovietised army to become a pharmacist and live a hand to mouth existence working for the national health service. The mother, who comes from a rich bourgeois family, has been deprived of everything it once owned (in 1951, the year Hintz was born, the communists confiscated his grandfather's pharmacy) and sells off what's left of her more valuable heirlooms. What about Hintz himself? After a ludicrous education in communist Poland he doesn't blame the communist system for his failures at all, but states categorically that it's not the censorship that paralyses his potential as a writer. I tried not to blame the system outright in the book, at most indirectly. And I don't think you can doubt that the communist state made boors of its citizens.

KK: There are lots of symbolic objects in your book. Can you explain this fondness for things?

ZM: I wrote *All the Languages in the World* soon after my father died, when my sister and I had just cleared our parents' flat. My God, what an Aladdin's cave it was! My father took the same briefcase to work for forty years, and he mended its handle with wire countless times. Eventually the briefcase had almost entirely disintegrated, and with an aching heart my father got himself a new one, but to throw the old one out would have been sacrilege. In that house nothing was ever thrown away. I have a childhood memory of the annual ritual of cleaning out the storage cupboard in the attic – all sorts of wonderful things would appear: an ice-cream machine, a collection of opera glasses, a flute in a silk-lined case… These objects were more than just lifeless matter – they had souls. I've always been impressed by the idea that some old people, sensing their imminent death, ask their loved ones to put something in their coffin with them – the pagan custom of equipping the dead with amulets. I've dreamed of those coffins. I've also dreamed of sealed caches filled with various keepsakes walled into the foundations of buildings – bridges, churches and palaces.

KK: What is the point of the brand names of the objects that you are so keen to mention in the book? Naomi Klein, who wrote "No logo", would call you a slave to the major corporates.

ZM: It's enough to make the cat laugh! What on earth does the story of a nineteenth-century Patek watch have to do with the evils of the major corporates? Incidentally, don't you ever wonder why Naomi Klein professes her theories under her own name? She should sign herself with three exclamation marks instead – No logo, no name… But to return to brand names. I have a clear memory of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Gomułka's plebeian socialism was changed into Gierek's "socialism in a tailcoat". At the time my contemporaries used to collect beer cans and old copies of Playboy as emblems of the West – a better world. Before then this sort of icon came from Czechoslovakia or East Germany. The career of the Ruhl watch… The hero of Antoni Libera's novel, *Madame*, feels humiliated when he is given a Ruhl watch as a prize, because to him it symbolises communist trash. But, shame to say, I was impressed by the Ruhl's luminous hands. And to outdo my friends who wore them, without asking permission I took my mother's gold and diamond watch, pinned it to my jeans on a chain and paraded about the school with it. I still shudder at the thought that I could have lost it.

KK: *All the Languages in the World* features a failure to communicate in the broad sense of the word. People talk to each other, but their conversations don't serve to communicate. Are words inadequate to express the most essential things?

ZM: Of course it's possible to communicate without using words. With those closest to us we can communicate through a mutually agreed code – sometimes in a surreal way, as for example Gombrowicz spoke with his mother. But to my mind, speech has a much greater value than silence. It requires an effort, it involves risk, but it's a risk worth taking. I don't like Wittgenstein's famous remark that "anything that can't be said should be kept silent." Why should we decide in advance that some experiences cannot be expressed? Extending the range of speech is a writer's moral obligation.

Review and interview in *Newsweek*

Extracts from review by Piotr Bratkowski

All the Languages in the World by Zbigniew Mentzel is a novel about how we've lost the gift of speech: the ability to talk about ourselves or to hold conversations with others. That much? some readers might wonder, as they pick up this modest volume….But in the end Zbigniew Hintz does speak. In a dream triggered by a heart complaint he imagines himself, though speaking in Polish, yet finally able to speak all the languages in the world, about everything all at once, important and unimportant, worldly and exalted matters – and about himself. Does he still have this vital gift, the gift of speech, when he wakes up? We never even know if he does wake up. Mentzel just offers the hope that we shall learn to speak again, to converse with each other – but no certainty.

Interview by Magdalena Łukasiewicz

Too clever by half, an overbearing know-it-all – that's the first impression you get of Zbigniew Mentzel, a 54-year-old writer, book lover, columnist for *Tygodnik Powszechny* and stock market gambler. In a voice that brooks no argument he tries to establish what an article about him should be like, when it would be best to issue it and what it absolutely must include. He doesn't seem to accept that he writes books, not articles about himself. Admittedly, books full of autobiographical material, which must explain his eagerness to control his own biography.

But soon after, once we start talking about his latest publication, *All the Languages in the World*, his self-confidence completely vanishes. "Literature and the stock market both demand great humility," he explains. His first literary work, *Gone broke*, appeared in 1990, and three years later when he first played the stock market, he also ended up going broke. Apparently, he only invested a small amount, but lost it all the very next day. "I started off the same way as many excellent gamblers. At first I lost, but later on it just got better and better," he recalls. He admits that just writing books – he has published four so far – and columns in *Tygodnik Powszechny* wouldn't give him a decent standard of living. Thanks to twelve years of stock market gambling Mentzel has a comfortable life, drives a smart car and doesn't have to worry about making ends meet. But he doesn't regard the stock market as merely a money-making machine.

"To me it's a continuous mental exercise. Playing the stock market is not roulette. Nothing just happens at random there. And despite appearances, stock market investment does have a connection with literature. Philosophical and psychological knowledge are essential for both disciplines," he says, then adds with a smile, "If I devoted all my time to the stock market, I'm sure I'd have a lot of success. But I have other occupations too that I'm just as passionate about."

Apart from writing columns and books and investing on the stock market he also works as an editor for the publishing house, Puls. He is fascinated by bridges, especially the ones linking the left and right banks of the river Vistula in Warsaw. He has also worked for

an organisation dedicated to combating nicotine addiction. He buys lots of books and spends a lot of time reading them. I asked him to give me a tour of the places where he buys them most often, so he invited me to visit him at home in the Warsaw district of Żoliborz where, like the hero of his novel, he has lived for many years.

"This is my stamping ground. There's everything here that any book lover needs," he asserted, once we were sitting in a local bar called Kareta. He noticed my surprise at the choice of location. "What's up? This is an important point on our journey. You see that book case?" he said, pointing to a corner of the room. "Soon it'll be stocked with books by authors from Żoliborz – Jerzy Ficowski, Agata Tuszyńska, Antoni Libera, Jerzy Źurek and my humble self." It feels as if he could go on spinning his yarn about the district, its intellectual climate, its peace and quiet and its creative juices ad infinitum. "Let's move on," he suddenly commands.

We get into his "fab" black Mitsubishi Charisma. "If I didn't play the stock market I'd have nothing to buy all the books with. But I enjoy acquiring several a day," he says. His extensive library includes several thousand volumes. He bought many of them in Żoliborz, in new and second-hand bookshops, from street stalls and even from winos who rescue books from rubbish heaps. In the winter, while out on his daily walk about the local streets, he noticed two suspicious-looking characters with large packs on their backs. "I knew at once they were carrying books. I bought them without a second thought. I didn't even look inside," he says. "And that was how I quite accidentally came to possess the library of the writer Stanisław Dygat and his wife, the actress Kalina Jędrusik, which had been thrown in the rubbish. In the life of a book lover times like that are the best," he sighs dreamily.

So what's best in a writer's life? "The process of writing itself, and then confronting the readers," says Mentzel. He admits that when he's writing he sets aside the cold calculation and speculation he has learned for the demands of the stock market. "Of course there's the devil of a temptation to write something just to suit the readers. But I soon drive the idea away," he says. "I'm not bound by any contract and I have no obligation to produce two books a year."

At the end of the 1970s he announced that he was going to write a novel in which the hero would come to terms with his own life. His friends tell a story about how he threatened to write a book that would bring them all to their knees. He denies this categorically. "That's nonsense. I only got down to writing this book in 2000." After undergoing major open-heart surgery he wrote a few chapters and stopped. "The publisher was pushing me, but I couldn't write. Only last year did something start to stir again. We set a deadline of 10 December for delivery of the completed manuscript, and I did it," he recalls.

The publisher gave the book the provisional title "The story of an awakening". The hero, Zbigniew Hintz, wakes up one day at 5am and spends the next twelve hours reflecting on his life. He analyses his childhood and youth, and his relationship with his parents, and explains his creative impotence – every day for more than ten years he has sat down at the typewriter, intending to write a book. He also tries to understand why he has never managed to learn a foreign language, neither English, German or French. His life to date has been full of failures, but Hintz does not regard himself as a loser. He still has hopes, and believes the moment will come when everything will change, and he'll wake up from his lethargy.

When I ask Mentzel about the autobiographical content, at first he grimaces, claiming that it has no significance for the reader, then finally he admits that the book

includes lots of elements drawn from his own life. "But I'm not an exhibitionist. A fictional creation has great significance too," he insists. Just like his hero, Mentzel grew up in Warsaw's Praga district. In the 1970s he graduated in Polish studies from Warsaw University, and later, until martial law was declared, he worked for the weekly paper *Polityka*.

"From month to month I wrote fewer and fewer articles. I had quite simply realised I wasn't suited to it [*writing for a state-owned, communist newspaper – Translator*]," he explains. That was when he moved to Żoliborz. Despite the legal imperative to work, throughout the 1980s he never had a job. "Whenever the police checked up on me I showed them a medical certificate proving that I had a serious heart condition and they left me in peace," he says. In this era he worked for the London-based Polish publishing house Puls, which published in defiance of the censorship. He is still involved with Puls to this day.

Both Mentzel and Hintz play the stock market. They even share the same harmless obsession: both are passionate collectors of press cuttings on a wide variety of topics. However, there is one fundamental difference between them. Despite hopes for a better future and that he'll write a novel one day, the character in the book appears to be the sort of person who will never be able to cope with life, and will never get it in order. Mentzel on the other hand has his feet firmly on the ground. He's busy checking the stock market listings and making plans for an author's appearance to promote his new novel, and he's already working on his next book. And although it will be all about the philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, we can be sure Mentzel will manage to squeeze in a bit of autobiography. Now there's a chance for the new book to come into being more easily – thanks to the special self-help therapy that writing *All the Languages in the World* must have been. In it Mentzel explains to himself and his readers that the creative or practical impotence that sometimes afflicts us is an inevitable feature of our existence, so there's no point in endlessly condemning ourselves for it.

Antoni Libera in *Rzeczpospolita*

Zbigniew Mentzel prefaced his first volume of literary miniatures (*The Running Footman*, 1998) with the following aphorism from James Joyce: "If you remember so much, all you have to do is join it up". He used Joyce's advice in that book to come up with a clever way of structuring it, grouping the texts by series and arranging them to create a mosaic of higher, independent significance. He did something similar a few years later when he published his next volume of short pieces (*Mouthing a Dangerous Instrument*, 2001).

All the Languages in the World, which has now been published by Znak, is a novel, and thus a fundamentally different genre, though here too we are dealing with a treatment of the Joycean "joining", except that in this case it relies on something different – gaining control of the diffuse material of memories, thoughts and past experiences by means of a particular blending principle; and establishing a unique gravitational system. Except that this system has special proportions: the focussing force of the book, i.e. the action, is disproportionately small in relation to the rest, which is made up of flash-backs and digressions. Suffice it to say that of the 21 chapters in this novel, at most six, and then not entirely, are devoted to the "current" plot, while the rest involve themes and events from the past. Moreover, this vestigial action is, superficially at least, incredibly simple and really rather banal, while the lengthy digressions and flash-backs are complex and multi-layered, as well as vivid and funny. … Musically constructed, full of artful refrains, transformations and repetitions, the book is shaped like a coil. It starts and ends in the same place, but at a higher level on the spiral. And the minor tone of the experiences it depicts shifts into the contrasting major tone of the narrative, which sparkles with wit and humour.

This is mature, sophisticated fiction, sublime reading matter.

Przemysław Czapliński in *Ozon*

Zbigniew Mentzel has written a novel about the quiet demise of the Polish intelligentsia. *All the Languages in the World* is by turns a warm, satirical and dramatic tale with some biographical elements. It's about not being able to put one's own life into words. However, the drama does not stem from the fact that the narrator doesn't know how to express himself, but that he isn't sure it's worth it. There's something odd about this confession, because the hero of the novel was born into an intelligentsia family with traditions (and mild pretensions), and grew up in a household where intellectual development was nurtured and books took precedence over all other objects. … Incidentally, Mentzel describes the paradoxes of communist Poland. Not just because there are already quite enough maudlin memoirs of the Gierek era, but also because Mentzel is aware of the painful truth: it was communist Poland that defeated at least two generations of the intelligentsia. The instrument used to subdue them was poverty. The intelligentsia could defend themselves either by selling off their family heirlooms, or by escaping into cunning and wheeler-dealing, in which case they were unintentionally fulfilling the programme of universal demoralisation instituted in each successive socialist five-year plan. Mentzel does not hide the wickedness that pervaded the communist state. Here and there he mentions its absurdities and its official abuse, but he sets it all on the margins of his story. Not a single major date in Polish history appears in the book (such as 1956, 1968 or 1970), and rightly so, because the story of most normal families was not automatically changed by them.

Nor does he mention that he has worked with the émigré publishing house Puls and edited and prefaced a three-volume collection of articles by Leszek Kołakowski. Nor does he puff up his chest in the hope of some medals for overthrowing communism, nor does he play the old warrior's card, maybe because he has something else to say – that the humiliations the communist state inflicted on its citizens were one thing, while descending into frustration and taking out your malice on your nearest and dearest is something else. Unfortunately, this is just what happens in the Hintz family, where the mother never misses an opportunity to remind the father of his inadequate income or to complain about their undesirable lodger. And this is really the full set of standard accessories for the intellectual – the inheritance he carries into adult life, with a basket full of misfortunes, the source of the self-expression block the hero suffers from. Here there is wishful encouragement to "be great" and a Hamlet-like reluctance towards any activity, an ability to make do with small things and the conviction that poverty is humiliating, the lesson of great words learned from world literature and a sense of the paucity of the words belonging to one's own life. Carrying a burden like that one can only lead to trouble.

Małgorzata Terlikowska in *Nowe Państwo*

All the Languages in the World is a fascinating story about growing up in the communist era, about tangled family relationships and the convoluted fortunes of the Polish intelligentsia. Sometimes very witty and amusing, it also prompts us to reflect on the nature of the human lot and the essence of language. … In the course of a few hours spent analysing the past the hero matures and finally becomes a man. On the surface nothing has changed. His life will surely continue to revolve around stock market listings and newspaper cuttings, but from now on it'll be a different life – one that's expressed.

Teresa Dras in *Kurier Lubelski*
Here is yet another excellent book from Znak – *All the Languages in the World* by Zbigniew Mentzel. A beautiful novel with an autobiographical background. … Out of despair and a lack of faith in one's own potential comes one of the most interesting modern Polish novels, wise, elegant and heartbreaking.

Andrzej Rostocki *in Dziennik Łódzki*
A very interesting, intelligent novel.