

**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

ensorship 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 Gomulka'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 Tuszynska, Antoni Libera, Jerzy Żurek 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 Stanislaw Dygat and his wife, the actress Kalina Jedrusik, 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.