

## SUMMARY

Stanisław Vincenz's (1888–1971) literary oeuvre comprises an epic tetralogy of the Hutsul people *Na wysokiej poloninie* (*On the High Uplands. Sagas, songs, tales and legends of the Carpathians*, translated from the Polish by Henry Charles Stevens, London & New York 1955, commonly referred to as *Polonina – The High Uplands*), which he commenced in the 1930s and continued almost until his death, several volumes of essays, the autobiographical *Dialogi z Sowietami* (*Dialogues with the Soviets*) devoted to the years 1939–1945, an unfinished novel *Powojenne perypetie Sokratesa* (*The Post-war Adventures of Socrates*), short works in prose, a few poems, translations, notes, and an extensive correspondence. Short-stories, taken mainly from *Polonina*, together with selected essays, make up a collection entitled *Tematy żydowskie* (*Jewish Themes*), published posthumously in London in 1977.

Vincenz was a “humanist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”: he addressed the most important issues of modern times (folk culture, tradition and identity, dialogue, myth and religiousness, propaganda, totalitarianism, Holocaust, violence, Ghandi) while constantly drawing on the heritage of European culture (Homer, Plato, the Bible, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe). As a writer he was rooted in the borderlands of the Eastern Carpathians, where Poles, Ukrainians, Jews and Armenians lived alongside, where languages and religions mingled, and traditions and forms of spirituality merged. As an émigré (from 1940 in Hungary and after the end of World War II in France, then Switzerland) he occupied a central position in the debate on fundamental European values conducted by publicists centred around the Paris-based émigré periodical “Kultura”, and maintained an ongoing dialogue with Swiss, Jewish and German intellectuals, the clergy of the Greek Catholic Church, the Ukrainian Diaspora.

Vincenz's writing and outlook are unique in their profound interest in the religion, philosophy, tradition and culture of the Jewish people, and especially the spirituality of the Hasidim (it was in the Eastern Carpathians that Baal Shem Tov in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had embarked on his mission). Some three and a half million Jews lived in multi-ethnic Poland before World War II; as citizens enjoying full rights they either participated in social, economic, scientific and cultural life, thus contributing to the rebirth of the country after it regained independence, or else isolated themselves in the hermetic world of their own tradition. Amid the complexity of Polish-Jewish relations Vincenz, called the friend of the Jews, was a proponent of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. During the Holocaust he saved Jewish lives, for which he was posthumously awarded the medal of the Righteous Among the Nations; and after the war he devoted his attention mainly to Jewish topics.

This study sets out to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Jewish theme in Stanisław Vincenz's work, focusing on the key role played by motifs of Jewish mysticism in articulating the core message of the tetralogy. It discusses the collective portrait of the Jews to be found in his essays and memoirs and, on the basis of surviving documents and letters, and collates these Jewish themes with his biography. The structural composition of the book is based on a quotation from the pre-war letter of the rabbi in Kolomyia on Jewish theology: the three main parts are thus entitled: "Robe", "Body" and "Soul".

Part I – "Robe" symbolises the most outer frame of the human soul – presents Vincenz's Jewish connections, introducing his pre-war and wartime friends, and his subsequent contacts with citizens of the newly established state of Israel. The profile that emerges from his letters, memoirs and public pronouncements is of unvarying affability and openness towards his interlocutors and correspondents, and of genuine interest both in their culture and the current political issues affecting their lives. A new aspect comes to the fore in the post-war years – the duty to preserve the memory of the annihilated world of Polish Jewry. Initially an expression of his ethnographic interests, and a purely folkloric element in his literary narrative, Vincenz's interest in Jewish culture and religion would in due course become a moral diagnosis of recent history.

Part II – "Body" – analyses Vincenz's anthropological and ethnographic depiction of Jews in his essays, where he introduces the people he met in the Eastern Carpathians and the towns of Galicia: the Jewish intelligentsia of Lvov, *habitués* of that city's intellectual salons; the small-town community of Kolomyia, and the poet Nuchim Bomse, hailing from Sasiv, a Jewish town of weavers. In the essays there are also direct references to the Holocaust.

In discussing *Polonina* the focus is on Vincenz's descriptions of his fictitious 19<sup>th</sup> century characters – the Hasidim from the villages and small towns of the Eastern Carpathians, the way they perceive themselves and their religiousness – and on the range of alternative viewpoints – from the legendary Hutsul bandits to their neighbours, ordinary East Carpathians highlanders, and the Polish landowners. In the world of *Polonina* the main meeting-point for the protagonists is the Jewish inn of Chaim Weiser which, reminiscent of Plato's symposium, takes on a symbolic significance as a space for the unfettered interchange of ideas both mundane and metaphysical, a sanctuary for a broadly conceived religion of humanity. Their debate also touches on the question of anti-Semitism. Vincenz does not eschew the subject, even though it disrupts the idealised vision of peaceful coexistence between various nations and communities that he constructs.

Part III – entitled "Soul" – addresses Jewish folklore and the mystical texts referred to in *Polonina*. Integrated in the Hutsul epic, these virtually autonomous pieces contribute substantially to some key scenes. Drawing on his studies of Hasidism, his perusal of scholarly works and conversations with his Jewish neighbours in the mountains, Vincenz wrote seven Hasidic short-stories. Their analysis reveals that he was not only well versed in the Lurianic Kabbalah and the tradition of Baal Shem Tov, but also fully conversant with crucial debates, such as the philosophical dispute on the human nature

of the golem, or the origin of evil in a world created by God. Vincenz felt so comfortable in this field that he allowed himself to modify the traditional stories handed down from previous generations, without distorting their deeper sense, but engaging in a subtle polemic with some of the interpretations. He also created collages from fragments of Hasidic legends, in which the authentic voice of the Hasidim narrator comes over both in terms of literary style, and his specific sense of humour.

Vincenz is one of the few non-Jewish Polish writers to undertake Jewish themes in his work. In his selection of topics, and his composition of scenes and dialogues, he watered down or even sidestepped dramatic episodes of conflict between Jews and other ethnic groups that interfered with the image of harmonious coexistence he projects.

When confronted with the catastrophe of World War II, the idyllic picture of coexistence between Jews, Hutsuls and Poles presented in *Na wysokiej połoninie*, and the harmony of the Polish-Jewish intelligentsia in *Dialogi lwowskie (Lvov Dialogues)*, inevitably raises a number of questions about the selective nature of Vincenz's memory. The author of the present study concludes that his lapses into silence were a form of self-defence; not seeking to conceal the acts of Polish anti-Semites during the war, but wishing to identify with the victims of the Holocaust. Silence was the response to his sense of infinite pain and disillusionment with a world that had rejected all values. In this context Vincenz's work becomes an attempt to exorcise reality and enshrine a happier age.

The author concludes that his sense of moral duty towards his fellow human beings, and his fear that the memory of Poland's murdered Jewry also faced extinction, caused Vincenz consciously to adopt the role of custodian of their memory.

*Translated by Bartłomiej Madejski*