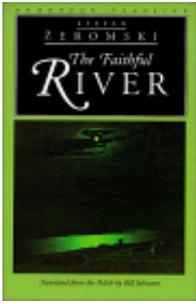

The Faithful River - by *Stefan Żeromski* - translated by *Bill Johnston* (1999), 180 pages.



This excellent writer (1864-1925) had less luck with English-speaking readers than his contemporaries such as Henryk Sienkiewicz (*Quo Vadis*), Bolesław Prus (especially his popular novel *The Doll*), or Władysław Reymont (*Peasants*).

Without doubt, he is their equal. In fact, his admirers still maintain that the 1924 Nobel Prize should have been his, not Reymont's. In Polish literature, the author is a towering figure, frequently controversial due to social views, subject to adoration or scorn, but always highly regarded for his beautiful language. His friends would say, "Only Żeromski writes like this." He is an unmistakable Neo-Romantic who captivates us with his dramatic narrative. This short novel is a fine example of Żeromski's styles. It was written 50 years after the disastrous 1863 insurrection against the Tsarist regime which was primarily caused by Russian plans to forcibly draft thousands of young Poles who faced the prospect of 25 years of military service. It is really a war love story, but we do not want to give away the plot as the book is worth your time to read, particularly in this superb translation.

We can state that the story takes place in the Kielce Province of Russian Poland, just ten miles from the Strawczyn village where Żeromski was born. Here near the town of Małogoszcz a fierce battle took place in February 1863 and the modest forces of Anthony Jeziorański were soundly defeated and had to retreat leaving many wounded behind. The hero, Joseph Odrowąż, miraculously survives but is badly wounded. Joseph experiences a nightmare, with phantoms. The forest shudders and groans. The long wooden arms of shaggy spruces reach out and urge in hollow voices to run from here. The author constantly connects human emotions with nature.

Żeromski never hides his deeply felt social views. Born on the country estate managed by his struggling father, he lost both parents at an early age and went through a difficult childhood and a very trying youth. However, these tribulations helped him to acquire a profound knowledge of all strata of Polish society and formed his determination to expose the miseries of the human condition around him. Of course he had an immense writing talent. In this novel he maintains that the peasants actually abhorred the insurrection and were quite ready to report any insurgent to the nearest Russian police station. The sad fact was that they did not expect any relief from their condition from either side. Actually, social changes did take place but some years later. As to our heroine's travails, they seem to us today a bit Victorian but then this novel is a period piece similar to works by Dickens or Victor Hugo.

Throughout the novel the symbolic meaning, of the "faithful river" prevails. It is actually a stream called Łososina, and our hero owes his life to it as it salves his wounds in the middle of the winter night and then guides him towards the village and his rescuers; the same river carries off secret documents of an insurrection leader who is suddenly confronted by an enemy patrol; and finally the river is a repository of the gold coins held by Miss Salomea.

We have this novel in both languages. Reading them side by side is a marvelous opportunity to see how the rich and often difficult vocabulary of Żeromski becomes equally impressive when so competently translated into English. Both editions are now accompanied by very detailed maps of the Kielce region where the action takes place. Specific sites mentioned in the novel are clearly highlighted.

George Suboczewski