



## My Century

*Aleksander Wat , Richard Lourie (Translator) , Czesław Miłosz (Foreword)*

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**My Century** Aleksander Wat , Richard Lourie (Translator) , Czesław Miłosz (Foreword)

In *My Century* the great Polish poet Aleksander Wat provides a spellbinding account of life in Eastern Europe in the midst of the terrible twentieth century. Based on interviews with Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz, *My Century* describes the artistic, sexual, and political experimentation --in which Wat was a major participant-- that followed the end of World War I: an explosion of talent and ideas which, he argues, in some ways helped to open the door to the destruction that the Nazis and Bolsheviks soon visited upon the world. But Wat's book is at heart a story of spiritual struggle and conversion. He tells of his separation during World War II from his wife and young son, of his confinement in the Soviet prison system, of the night when the sound of far-off laughter brought on a vision of "the devil in history." "It was then," Wat writes, "that I began to be a believer."

## My Century Details

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## From Reader Review My Century for online ebook

### Andrew Davis says

Masterpiece of life under Russian communism experienced by Poles who found themselves in the eastern Poland when it was partitioned by Stalin following Ribbentrop-Molotov pact signed in August 1939. In truly Kafka'esque manner shows the life ruled by NKVD arrests, forced settlement in the east of Russia, enforced take-up of Russian citizenship. All this presented in a series of discussions between Aleksander Wat and Czeslaw Milosz, Noble Prize laureate in literature, another refugee from Communist Poland. Shares light on the members of Polish Communist Party who left for Russia in 30's and following its disbandment by Stalin were sent to camps or executed. A lot of material about Hempel, Broniewski, Bruno Jasienski, Stande and Stern.

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### Adam Dupaski says

Amazing.

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### J.W. Dionysius Nicolello says

"Apart from his immense acuity and the intuition of a born poet, Pasternak had a certain mental ceiling; there was something almost retarded about him."

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### PhiloLogos says

Puncte forte:

+ uimitoarea memorie, care dezgroap? o galerie foarte stufoas? de personaje, bine conturate, cu ?tiin?a detaliului definitoriu;

+ exemplaritatea traseului existen?ial, pornit sub auspiciile nihilismului avangardist, continuat pe post de tovar?? de drum al comuni?tilor, ?i terminat, dup? experien?a ?nchisorilor comuniste, cu convertirea la catolicism.

Puncte piano:

- ultradetalierea lumii artistice poloneze din anii avangardelor ?i de dup?, de sc?zut interes pentru un tr?itor ?n alte spa?ii.

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### Buck says

There's no way I can confine myself to a capsule review, so if you just want the glib, soundbite version, I'll say this: *My Century* makes most autobiographies, and most novels for that matter, seem hopelessly lightweight - mere bundles of vanity and fatuousness. Okay, that's a tad unfair, maybe, but still, the book is just that profound; it puts you off lesser things for a while.

By rights, *My Century* shouldn't exist, since its author had no business living long enough to tell his story. In the Eastern Europe of the early 1940's, Aleksander Wat had the phenomenally bad luck to be at once a Pole, a Jew and an ex-communist: a sort of infernal trifecta, given the circumstances. Throw in the fact that he was also an avant-garde writer, and by the time the NKVD got around to picking him up, his life expectancy would have been measured in months.

Miraculously, he survived his stints in various Soviet prisons and emerged from the Stalinist meat grinder more or less intact. Decades later, he sat down to a series of informal interviews with Czeslaw Milosz, over the course of which he produced what amounts to an oral autobiography.

So what is it about Wat that makes him such an exemplary witness to 'his' century? First, there's the fact that he was also such an exemplary victim, in that his story is really the story, in little, of twentieth-century humanity. His second qualification is a keen literary intelligence, which underlies not only the off-hand eloquence of his deposition, but also the graceful shuttling between narrative and exposition, personal and historical, specific and general. (On the subject of Wat's literary conscience, there's an interesting exchange with Milosz early on, where Wat calls into question the very possibility of autobiography; Milosz seems impatient with this line of speculation, but a few pages later Wat is at it again, this time decrying the infiltration of historiography by autobiography. Ironically enough.)

But more important than either of these things, I'd say - and at the risk of sounding very unhip - is Wat's moral authority, his moral grandeur, even. I mean, my God, what a man! One point he keeps coming back to is that prison, for all its brutality, made him a complete human being. A system designed to undo him (physically and otherwise), to grind him down, instead granted him the very integrity he'd always lacked. He went into prison, he tells us, a cynic, a sophisticate, a dabbler in cafe nihilism; he came out a man of faith, with a renewed belief in people's capacity for heroism and nobility.

I realize I'm making him out to be a modern saint, a Lear of Lubyanka, but Wat's persona doesn't come across that way at all. You get the impression he was just too modest, too ironic, and finally too chastened by life to have any such pretensions himself.

Well, there's a lot more I could say about *My Century*, but I see my review has already ballooned into a low-rent NYRB type-thing. Just read the book already. You'll like it - assuming you have any interest in history, politics, philosophy or, you know, the human condition.

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## **Cynthia says**

Ik dacht dat het een moeilijk boek zou zijn om te lezen, maar uiteindelijk bleek het uitermate fascinerend te zijn om te lezen over de parallele wereld van verbannen Polen in Rusland gedurende de tweede wereldoorlog en hoe iemands geestelijke toestand is wanneer hij jaren wordt opgesloten in de gevangenis. Het personenregister en de voetnoten hielpen erg bij het begrijpen van het boek. Echter zonder enige kennis van de Poolse geschiedenis is dit geen eenvoudig boek om te lezen

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## **Steven says**

This is a wonderful memoir about Aleksander Wat's time in prison during both the soviet and the nazi occupation of Poland in the forties. It is vivid and wonderful, it reads like a story even though the author seems to have an aversion to story telling. He often will get to the point of conflict only to skip the conflict.

## John Gaynard says

My Century is a memoir based on lengthy warts-and-all tape-recorded conversations between Aleksander Wat and Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish Poet, in Berkeley and Paris in 1964-1965 towards the end of Wat's life.

Wat was the founder of the communist leaning "Literary Journal" in Poland at the end of the 1920s. As Milosz says in his foreword, "there are many heroes in this book" and while talking about his own experiences Wat pays tribute to them all. Wat began life in a genteel assimilated, intellectual environment in Warsaw, the descendant of an old and distinguished Jewish family. In "My Century" he describes how many of his intellectual friends from Warsaw were ground down and destroyed by Stalinism. He tells the story of how the Polish communist party was eliminated, and why, and how he himself became an anti-communist and converted to Christianity, after a night in prison in which he was convinced he had seen the devil. The book contains some memorable, terrible descriptions of wartime prisons: Zamarstynow in Lwow, the Lubyanka in Moscow, Saratov... He also recounts his many meetings; with the "Old Communists" who had helped bring Lenin to power and who had fallen victim to the great purge in 1937; and the "Urks", the common criminals who could make life hell for the intellectuals and political prisoners. Wat never goes in for anti-Russian sentiment and in fact mentions the acts of kindness he received from ordinary Russian guards and even NKVD interrogators.

Wat, unfortunately, did not have the time to finish telling the story of his life to Milosz. The final chapter in the book is written by Wat's wife, Ola. In it she describes how Wat was befriended, and most probably saved, by an "Urk" into whose cell he was thrown when he was leading Polish (mostly exiled Polish-Jewish) resistance against the NKVD "passportization" campaign, in Kazakhstan in 1943, during which the aim was to force Poles to switch to Soviet Russian citizenship.

The last paragraph of Aleksander Wat's section of the book ends, "If it hadn't been for the kindness, the warmth that those people, those Orthodox Jews (in Kazakhstan), showed to me, a "meches", a converted Jew.... They didn't know whether I had been baptized or not. I never talked about it. But I wore a cross. Later on, when we were in revolt (against accepting Soviet passports) and were under arrest together, it was so hot that I took off my shirt. And yet I was the leader of those pious Jews in prison, me, a Jew with a cross around my neck."

In the years immediately after WWII, Wat's poetry became very influential among the younger Poles.

I place the book right up there, with Grossman's Life and Fate.

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## Tomasz says

Poeta futurystyczny, krytyk literacki, wydawca, polski Żyd, ateista, katolik, komunista i lewicowy antykomunista. Z pewnościami nie był konformistą i przemiany jego poglądów szły na przekór modom i fałom politycznym. Bardzo szczegółowa analiza dylematów i przemian światopoglądowych, osobistej odwagi wobec zewnętrznych nacisków i stalinowskiego terroru.

Mamy tu świetne opisy polskiego społeczeństwa, życia literackiego, portrety czołowych postaci wraz z różnymi strategiami radzenia sobie z polityką, wojną, stalinizmem.

Jeśli kogoś nie interesuje życie literackie, może przeskoczyć do rozdziałów o Lwowie pod sowiecką okupacją, oraz wdrówki autora przez więzienia (m.in. Żubianka), podróż do Kazachstanu i pracę w ród

Polaków uwolnionych po uk?adzie Sikorski-Majski. Tu równie? uwag? zwracaj? opisy wspó?wi??niów i ?ycia wi?ziennego.

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### **Maurizio Manco says**

"Mi ero immischiato nella storia, e purtroppo una delle sciagurate leggi del mio destino è l'anacronismo. Perché in fondo sono stato tutto quello che si doveva essere, solo che mai al momento giusto: sono stato un politico quando bisognava essere un poeta, e sono stato poeta quando bisognava essere un politico. Sono stato comunista quando la gente perbene era anticomunista e sono diventato anticomunista quando le persone ragionevoli si avvicinavano al comunismo. [...] Mai al momento giusto. Anche la libertà, la cosiddetta libertà, non l'ho scelta al momento giusto. [...] Una storia enorme, una macchina possente, e io lì a farle lo sgambetto." (pp. 199, 200)

"La mia vita è stata l'incessante ricerca di un sogno immenso, nel quale stessero fra loro in un'armonia prestabilita il mio prossimo e gli animali, le piante e le chimere, le stelle e i minerali, un sogno che si è dimenticato perché lo si doveva dimenticare, e lo si ricerca disperatamente, ma capita solo sporadicamente di ritrovarne dei tragici frammenti nell'affetto di qualcuno, in una situazione particolare, in uno sguardo, certamente anche in un ricordo, in un dolore speciale, in un momento, nella pelle – e io l'ho amata, sì, l'ho amata appassionatamente quell'armonia, nelle voci, nelle voci... Ma invece dell'armonia non c'era che lacerazione, tutto a brandelli. Forse questo, e solo questo, è esser poeta?" (p. 397)

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### **Dan says**

Recommended only for readers interested in the subject: the experience of a Polish Jewish intellectual dealing with the nightmare of his country overrun from the west by Hitler, then from east by Stalin. Wat headed east and, in Soviet hands, by luck and pluck escaped death and torture (except for near-starvation) but not some brutal incarcerations and separation from his wife and son, about whose circumstances he greatly feared but was generally unable to learn.

Wat gained interesting insights into Stalin's system. For example, he recognized that the significance of the millions in slave labor camps rested not so much in the unfortunate ones in the camps but rather in the masses not (yet) sent there: every citizen had a close relative or friend, probably innocent, inside a camp, and so was cowed by personal and daily reminders of Stalin's arbitrary and unlimited grip.

Wat is arrested about 1/3 of the way into the book and is in one or another prison for most of the rest. This part of the above blurb: "... artistic, sexual, and political experimentation --in which Wat was a major participant-- that followed the end of World War I: an explosion of talent and ideas which, he argues, in some ways helped to open the door to the destruction that the Nazis and Bolsheviks soon visited upon the world" smacks of sales pitch.

Wat's bravery and his intelligence, optimism and honesty in grave circumstances and in the telling of them, save his story from being oppressive.

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