

I raise my face toward the late-autumn, post-war sky. I am twenty-seven and I feel ancient. I've been through a great deal. I am twenty-seven years old, five foot nine, I am thin, my uniform hangs on me like a sack pulled in at the waist. I am clean shaven, though I haven't been to the barber in a long time; my salt-and-pepper hair is ruffled and old blood still makes it clump into unpleasant tufts, and I have lice, too. I try to put on my officer's cap, it barely fits over the bandage on my head, so I remove the bandage and feel the back of my head growing damp; a little blood continues to seep from my still-unhealed wound, making my hair stick together even more. It's nothing. It's nothing.

On the corner of Wrangelstrasse stands an old, moustachioed veteran, with no right arm and no insignia on his grey uniform. At the front, the regiment numbers sewn on to epaulettes have long since been covered by grey sheaths, but this man has completely unstitched his epaulettes, along with the stripes on his collar. On his cap, instead of the imperial black, white, and red cockade, he has pinned on a red ribbon, as if someone had shot him through his forehead. Like me, he has no coat – I can see he must be as cold as I am, and I am very cold. I approach and greet him, but he only snaps something in response, though he can see perfectly well I'm in an officer's uniform. I should be surprised, but I'm not. Hanging from his one remaining forearm is a ring of the cheapest sausages, which contain practically no pig's meat, but which still look mouth-watering; I'd gladly buy a few, I'm hungry, but I remember that I literally haven't got a *pfennig* in my pocket. Nothing. I remember how back in 1917, when I was on my final leave in Berlin and when the scar left by the continental blockade on our economy was both terrible and visible to the common people, even in those days traders would set out street stalls with sausages. I remember one young man in particular who stood not far from the hotel I was staying in, on Friedrichstrasse. He was as strongly built as a militia grenadier, he wore a bowler hat, a monocle, and a little waxed and black-dyed moustache curled straight up, with a white apron over his dark clothes and a tin pot marked "*Wurst*" hanging around his neck and resting on his belly, and from this pot he sold steamed sausages, less fatty than before the war and much more expensive, but he sold them, and I could afford them and I bought one every time I went past; I'd stand next to him and eat, much happier at being able to buy a frank than at the frank itself, which tasted awful.

Now I can't even afford the cold, ersatz franks this one-armed veteran is selling, I can't afford anything.

I haven't been this poor since I started earning money tutoring during my last year of prep school. I learned well the value of money, every mark, every *pfennig*,

I know how hard my papa and little brothers worked for their pay. And I always wanted more. More money, more of what I could buy with it. I didn't want to save every *pfennig*, conserve matches by snapping them in two, smoke the cheapest tobacco, I didn't want to do everything my father did because he had to.

Excerpt translated by Sean Gasper Bye



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**SZCZEPAN  
TWARDOCH**

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#### Selected novels

*Królestwo*, 2018

*Król* [The King of Warsaw], 2016 – over 100 000 copies sold; TV series on Canal+

*Morfina*, 2012 – over 100 000 copies sold; film rights sold

*Drach*, 2014 – over 50,000 copies sold

Twardoch is also the author of short story collections, essays and journals.

#### Foreign language translations

Twardoch's works have been published in Bulgaria, China, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, Netherlands, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, and USA.

Rights to *Humbel* have been sold to Germany (Rowohlt) and Netherlands (Nieuw Amsterdam).

#### Selected awards

Nike Literary Award (2013 – Readers' Choice; 2014 and 2019 – nominations)

Brücke Berlin Literatur und Übersetzerpreis (2016) – with the translator Olaf Kühn

Le Prix du Livre Européen/European Book Prize (2015)

Angelus Central European Literary Award (2012) – shortlisted  
Polityka's Passport Award (2012)

Gdynia Literary Prize (2012, 2013) – nominations

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2009 – nomination; 2011 – distinction)

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2008 – distinction; 2011 – nomination)