

## The Boarding House (Pensjonat)

**Author:** Piotr Paziński

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**Translations:** Czech (*Letní byt*, 2012), German (*Die Pension*, 2013), Serbian (*Pansion*, 2013), Croatian (*Pansion*, 2014), French (*Pension de famille*, 2016), Slovenian (*Penzion*, 2016), Hungarian (*Panzió*, 2016), Italian (*La pensione*, 2016), Bulgarian (*Pansion'it*, 2016), English (*The Boarding House*, 2018)

**About the author:** Piotr Paziński, born in 1973 in Warsaw, holder of a PhD degree in Literature Studies, is one of the main contemporary representatives of the so-called third generation of Jews in Poland. Since 2000, he is the editor-in-chief of the Jewish monthly *Midrasz*. Besides, he writes for *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s culture and literature feature pages, appears as co-author of numerous publications of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and works as translator from Hebrew. For his book *Pensjonat*, he received international attention after awarding the European Union Prize for Literature in 2012.

**Further publications:** *Ptasie ulice* (2013, The Bird Streets, in Czech *Ptačí ulice*, 2016; short stories); *Rzeczywistość poprzecierana* (2015, The Washed-Out Reality, anthology), *Jerozolima: Książka do pisania* (2018, Jerusalem: A book to be written; anthology)

**Content and interpretation:** The idea of writing *Pensjonat* was inspired by a longing for his childhood memories when he visited the guesthouse during the summer holidays. Paziński started making first notes when a friend of his grandmother had died. Inspired by the friend's destiny, he created the character of Misses Tecia in the novella. The act of writing corresponds to the will of witnessing in order to rebuild places that were once centres of the Jewish life and now seem to be offside in geographical sense and offside in terms of commemoration. The story is about a short stay of an adult male with Jewish origins in the guesthouse in Śródborowianka near Otwock, a city located in the southeast of Warsaw, where a few Jewish pensioners are spending not only holidays today, but their evening of life. The narrator's flashbacks to his childhood show that the nowadays old-fashioned and unprofitable guesthouse used to be a vibrant and popular holiday destination for Jews from the whole country. The narrator's character is never described more precisely and the pensioners are sceptical about his intentions at the beginning. Additionally, the young man puts himself into an observing and outstanding position by his extremely silent and reserved behaviour. On the one hand, his presence signifies

for the elderly a new raise of interest in the Jewish history of Poland. The younger generation is looking for a kind of back-to-the-roots-experience. On the other hand, the pensioners completely lost their believe in a Jewish future in this country and consider the narrator's growing interest to be effectless.

The narrator faces an emotionally challenging stay. He is overwhelmed by the impressions of the pensioners' stories about the past, which he likes to enhance by his own imaginative power. At the same time, the trenchant discussions about Jewish religion lead by Mister Abram and the complicated Polish-Jewish history after 1945, and more precisely the political crisis from 1968, show a gap of experiences the young man only knows from hearsay. At a certain point, the narrator's mood changes. After having observed silently the daily life in the guesthouse for two days, he feels uncomfortable and wants to leave. His way back to the train station turn into an oneiric situation: Summoned by Mister Jakub, all the passed away and still alive Jews who the narrator got to know by the pensioners' stories before appear on a clearing in the near woods. At the very ending, the narrator unexpectedly cries out his will to stay and to be part of the eternal Jewish community.

### **Main topics and problems**

*Pensjonat* can be understood as a typical postmemory narration that explores the syllable "post" not only terms of time, but also in terms of a distance to the generation of witnesses. The narrator takes delight in listening to the elderly. Their stories enable him to enter the unknown world of his ancestors, since the absence of the parents' generation signifies a break in the family's narration. The narrator tries to fill this gap by attending lessons in history and figuring out stories of the past motivated by objects like photographies, postcards, new newspapers, bills that the elderly, e.g. Pani Teczka, have been collecting for almost a century. Similar to other postmemory narrations as of Pawel Huelle *Opowiadania na czas przeprowadzki*, the presence of objects means access to the past in a palpable way. The exclusive circle of the pensioners in this hardly accessible countryside guesthouse – which is a metaphor of not belonging to Poland – reminds of a modern Noa's Ark.

The book raises questions about how former Jewish places undergo a change of meaning, or how they can be reconstructed, or defended. Paziński's work can be examined in terms of spatial aspects and how space and narration correspond to each other. The location of Jews in periphery makes the reader understand the loss of meaning and social status of Jewish citizens. The aspect of the city and countryside dyad is deepened in Paziński's second book → *Ptasie Ulice*. The motif of the guesthouse or retirement home appears also in Zyta Rudzka's → *Ślicznotka doktora*

*Josefa* and Stanislaw Benskis → *Tanajważniejsza Cząsteczka*. Józef Wróbel explains this motif with the aura of wisdom and experience the elderly want to share. However, in Paziński's case, the stress is put on the generational gap and the problems connected with that: Storytelling helps connecting the broken generational chain and give the individual an idea of its cultural origins. Nevertheless, they are not able to replace identity, since only a very abstract part of the narrator's personality becomes clearer. Additionally, the absence of the parents' generation makes it hard to the third Generation to get in contact with Jewish traditions and lifestyle. *Pensjonat* serves as an example for the definition of Jewishness in 21<sup>st</sup> century Poland. (see also: Mikołaj Grynberg's → *Oskarżam Auschwitz*) The focus is not on the Holocaust itself, but on the Jewish-Polish relations before and after Second World War. It is more about a feeling of being Jewish and the question how Jewish origins influence someone's personality. An identification with religious beliefs is secondary. This attitude demands not only a conscious remembrance of the genocide of the Jews in Europe but first of all the construction of positive references for Jewishness. In *Pensjonat*, the narrator's childhood memories support the positive identity building processes. Therefore, more attention is paid to inventing and idealizing the past. At the same time, the focus on the past also denies options for the future. The omnipresence of Jewish traces and the high number of historical allusions going back to biblical parables only have an illustrative character and show a world that cannot be restored. Additionally, the narrator seems to be overextended by the denseness of historical references, which lead to an escape into fantasy and to a play between the ontological text levels.

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