

FORGIVE ME CHILDREN⁴²

"PRZEPRASZAM WAS DZIECI"

"You were supposed not to teach us any more" — from the back row the voice of Adam, in the same grade for the second year.

The teacher said nothing, only looked at Adam. "And that new teacher, won't he teach us?"

The teacher said nothing, straightened his eyeglasses.

It was very quiet in the classroom. Zosia was thinking:

"That Adam's got nerve. How can he behave like that?"

Many children must have thought that the teacher was bound to feel hurt. Interesting things had been happening.

There had been three new teachers. One just before the vacations, then one more and again another. All young. That second one had talked with them most.

Wacek had just been playing with the ball. And that teacher:

"Hey you, fighter, where's your school?"

Not "boy" — he said — but "fighter."

"Let me have the ball!"

And when he kicked — he merely drew back a little — and the ball went straight up. Wacek thought that was the end of it — it was out of sight.

Immediately a crowd gathered. They had guessed — a new teacher.

And he, as if he has been here long. Joking, asking questions, jolly amusing. The river, the mushrooms in the wood, who can swim? Jump?

"You must have been in the war, teacher?"

"Sure, I was, my friend. If need be, I'll go again." "And will you teach us?" — Pietrek ventured. "That remains to be seen."

⁴² First published October 1924.

He had stood in front of the school for a while. Asked whether the girls or the boys could sing better. And he sang something himself. Then he went in to have a talk with the principal, went over the school, said: "So long kids," and was gone.

He did not come back.

And now the children were waiting for the old teacher to explain. Not a word. He told them to say prayers. Murmurs of disappointment here and there.

"You may sit down."

But he did not sit down himself — stood — and now looked through the window, no longer at Adam. Once they had been glad when he looked through the window, for whoever was called to the blackboard could get away with a wrong answer because the teacher wasn't even listening. Now they felt troubled. They would like to know.

The teacher took off his glasses, wiped them unnecessarily and put them on again. Now surely he will say something. If only Adam will keep his mouth shut. Now, he'll begin.

"Quiet, don't talk."

Now.

"Well. ... What was I going to say?"

The children guessed correctly. He began.

"Come over here, Adam."

Adam hesitated.

"Go, Adam, go! The teacher is calling you." "That's how it is, my boy, it'll still be me teaching you."

That other said: "Hero, fighter."

"Yes, I'll go on. You must wait a little longer. You must be patient for another year. Our school is not to the liking of those young gentlemen. They find it too poor, too small, cramped and sad. There were five of them."

"Three."

"You saw only three because two didn't even come in. Probably there were still more of them. And I taught your fathers in this school. You remember. I was telling you ..."

"You expect us not to remember?"

The teacher started to tell them what they already knew, but a bit differently this time.

He said nothing about the whole of Poland, about Warsaw, Vilno, Poznan and Lithuania but only about the school. That it was old and so was he. That the school would die soon like an old, tired and sick grandfather.

"` Not long, now. There will be a brick building like the one in the town, in the market place. A playground by the school. Large classrooms and high windows. Beautiful pictures on the walls. Physical training, marches with a band, a school flag. All sorts of performances, amusements, games with a big ball, probably target practice."

"And a swing?"

"Surely, a swing. Moving pictures on the wall, the people in the pictures moving about — just like real. But it must be dark in the room, so the windows will have blinds. And they said in the paper that there is a new kind of telegraph so that when someone tells a story in Warsaw it can be heard through electricity any other place. Everything will be there. I know that you are cramped, have to sit uncomfortably, and there are better benches elsewhere. But it all costs a lot. And we are still poor. And if the mother hasn't got the money, she can't buy it for her child no matter how she may want to, and how many bitter tears she'll shed over it. That's how it is. No one wants to buy tears, no good to anyone.

"God alone counts the tears of fathers and mothers and of old teachers like myself, and out of those tears He builds.

"He gave us the Polish school⁴³ and that was harder, much harder work. Now we shall have a new school, a fine one. They will come to pull down this old shack, throw away the rubble and the rotten boards. They will put together stacks of new doors and windows, bring bricks to the site, and nothing but a memory will remain of this school.

"And you will have boots to go to school in winter and summer. You'll have lots of well-illustrated books. Young teachers to teach and play with you. But, as things are, they don't want to; they say: `What, in this old shack?'

"Forgive me children, and you, Adam, my dear boy, forgive me that we are still poor like a family where the father has been sick a long time, and now looks around bewildered at having escaped death, tries to get his bearings. He has just gotten up for the first time, but he is so weak that everything seems to spin round him, he cannot stand alone yet, and must lean on his son's arm...."

⁴³ Reference is to the Polish school during Russian occupation prior to World War I.

The old teacher put his hand on Adam's shoulder. The boy drew near and straightened up.

"And I want you children to forgive me that you have no new teacher yet, a young and gay one. I will go on teaching you. Be patient. It's not for long." Tears ran down under his glasses.

In the complete quiet of the classroom, Zosia's whisper could be heard.

"You see, Adam, what you've done!"

And the teacher looked straight into Adam's eyes and asked:

"Are you annoyed with me?"

"Why should I be annoyed? Far from it. You're O.K. by us, sir."

That is how the new school year began in a poor rural school.