



Appraiser of Pawns

By: Janusz Korczak

It happened during that brief period in my life when I was fervently searching everywhere for subjects, events, and characters for my astounding stories and my incredible psychological studies.

A beggar—a magnificent type; a drunkard—an astonishingly interesting case; the owner of a cheap eatery and his dining hall—a fascinating setting.

At that time, I had left a keepsake watch, a ring no less dear to me, and a coat that had no special memories attached to it in a pawnshop. I decided to write a particularly brilliant story based on the relationships within a pawnshop.

Luckily for me, and probably also for my readers, I rarely began writing such stories and, in most cases, never finished them.

Be that as it may, I am now selling for a few kopecks the notes I have kept from my youth...

The pawnshop owner was an old man, with graying hair and a bald patch, wrinkled and always smiling good-naturedly.

“Dear sir,” I once addressed him, “your business must be dreadfully dull and monotonous. It offers no moral satisfaction, as a pawnshop is considered one of the lowest and most despised enterprises. Tell me, sir, in your great kindness, how is it that you appear to be a man completely at peace with his life? How is it that you perform your degrading work with such composure, with such calmness—I would even say with enthusiasm?”

He smiled his pleasant and serene smile and said:

“You are right, sir. I appraise out of vocation, I appraise by the grace of God. The business that you, sir, call lowly—I would not trade it for any other; I would not exchange it for a minister’s chair. You are surprised, aren’t you?”

Indeed, I was astonished by his words.

“You claim, sir, that the public has a negative opinion of the pawnshop? I am aware of that. But it is a mistaken view. The pawnshop is an institution that educates the people; it teaches two important truths: first—that there are objects of great value and others that are utterly worthless; second—that it is very easy to borrow money but extremely difficult to repay it. The fact that people do not know how to benefit from the education the pawnshop - the Pedagogue, the educator provides—that is not our fault. What is a ring, a brooch, an earring, after all? Patagonian Glittering ornaments. And what are a drawing room, a beautiful and foolish woman, a muslin dress, a mood-poet, an orchid? Precious and hollow decorations. People acquire these things at great cost, flaunt them, and become attached to them—until the day comes when they bring them here, only to realize that, in the end, they were mere trinkets, and that life is actually easier without them. The same applies to fame, prestige, honor, social connections, medals, and decorations. Displays of admiration, bows, and distinguished matches. And you, sir, who have already pawned two golden baubles—why do you now come with a coat? Why deceive yourself into thinking that you will be able to redeem it? Why didn’t you arrange your life in such a way that you wouldn’t have to pawn items you truly need? Expenses and credit—wise ones—therein lie the wealth and future of a nation.”

He offered me a cigarette and continued:

“A pawnshop is a way of life, dear sir. What you pawn once, you will never be able to redeem. Every young person has a whole treasure trove of ideals, and he pawns them, pawns them, pawns them—gradually—just to get by. He begins with ideals he is not particularly attached



to, which are not a precious inheritance for him, and then... In exchange for comfort, momentary thrills, small joys, and office victories, he pawns honesty, good virtues, honor, prestige—everything. At first, he manages to keep up with the interest payments, then he starts falling behind—until eventually, the pledge is put up for public auction. And who purchases this prestige? Some usurer who can afford it. Civic courage is bought by a speculator banker, and the whole cycle repeats itself again and again... And the people mortgage their ideals... A pawnshop is an extraordinary social observation point.”

He glanced at his notebook, went into the adjoining room, and brought back two small items.

“You see, sir, That little cross? The first time it was brought in by a weeping woman in mourning. She redeemed it. Twenty years later, a young man pawned it and didn’t even make the first payment. We sold the cross. Six years later, a very sad young girl brought it again, holding a baby in her arms...Do you see this signet ring, sir? We have pawned it twice as well—first the father, then the son. In a week, there will be an auction, someone will buy it again, and then someone else will bring it back... Are you surprised, sir, that I remember the stories of these two objects? That is precisely the point: everything interests me, intrigues me, fascinates me—because I am an appraiser, a thinking being, not a lifeless machine, because I am an appraiser-artist... I know every person who enters my shop, I know what they bring, why they are pawning it, how many interest payments they will make, how they came to own that object, what will happen to it—I know everything, and everything interests me. That is why my life is not monotonous, and my profession is never boring.

I had forgotten that the pawnshop appraiser was supposed to be the protagonist of my novel. I listened in amazement.

“Every person is a pawnshop appraiser,” he continued, “only some appraise poorly while others appraise well. Do you not appraise people, situations? Do you not assess the moral and intellectual value of each person? Do you not judge their worth to society and to yourself? We evaluate beauty, talent, emotions, efforts, ideals, laws, ambitions—everything, absolutely everything. Every person should spend a few years as a pawnshop appraiser; appraisal should be a profession taught in school—without it, one cannot be a wise or useful person... If I were not an old bachelor, and if I had children, I would instill in them such passion for my profession that they would all become pawnshop appraisers.” Are you surprised, sir, that I am content with my fate and that I always smile? My dear sir, I know the value of life and of human beings, and I know how to forgive them for their mistakes, how to love their efforts. So many times, someone comes in with an interest payment, and I think to myself: ‘Poor fellow, why are you deceiving yourself, for what purpose? You will never redeem your pawn.’ You, too, sir, will not redeem your watch, which you received on some festive occasion in your life, nor the keepsake—your ring—and you will leave much, very much of your life at the pawnshop. After all, you are a Pole.”

“And how do you know all this, sir?” I asked in utter astonishment.

He smiled gently.

Someone entered. He extended his hand to me in farewell...

I should mention now, intentionally, that at the time I was living in Paris, and from that, it follows—the appraiser was French.

I returned to my homeland.

I saw many technicians, lawyers, doctors, teachers, merchants, and writers—almost all of them cursed their professions, complained, grumbled, protested, and suffered.

At first, I ignored this strange phenomenon. But after some time, I began to compare them with the pawnshop appraiser in Paris.





These so-called free professionals, people whose work spanned broad domains—could not ignite even a spark of enthusiasm for their professions within themselves. Lifeless machines that, in return for payment, did not dispense a box of candies like automatons, but rather a prescription, a book, legal advice, a blueprint for a house. And not a hint of inspiration, pfft! Not even a little enthusiasm, pfft! Not even honest enjoyment, pfft! Not even professional integrity!... Oh, have I gone too far? Provoking the whole world relentlessly and turning many people into my enemies. I have already pawned my life at the pawnshop, though I am still managing to make the interest payments—perhaps one day, I will redeem it.

I do not wish to claim that progress in our country moves at the speed of a train on the Vistula railway, simply because we lack love for our professions or even a will to work—for I have already pawned all absolute statements at the pawnshop of life. One way or another, I regard with suspicion the many workers who speak with a heavy sigh about their jobs. Although this doesn't obligate anyone to anything.

By the way—I know a newspaper delivery man who is in love with his profession: he is happy. I would prefer to be him, rather than myself.

