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The Vistula, Overgrown Shrubs, and Untended Gardens in the Literature of Postwar, Communist Warsaw

*There is no straight line in nature,
It is a human artificial invention.
Let us learn chaos, chaos
By looking at entangled weeds.*

(Julian Tuwim, *Spostrzeżenie*)

*What is this queue for? For greyness, for greyness,
for greyness*

(author – Ernest Bryll, 1980,
singer – Krystyna Prońko)

Green wild shrubs amidst the greyness of communism—a recurrent motif in the writings of Hłasko and Konwicki, and the greyness portrayed in *Queuers' Psalm* (written by Ernest Bryll, sung by Krystyna Prońko)—penetrate the paltry, hopeless, and bleak reality of communist Poland. It is by the river (the Vistula River), in the overgrown allotments and in the bushes that the real life of social “outcasts,” “parasites,” and “losers,” fugitives from the system, happens. It unfolds on the margins of this artificial reality imposed by those in power. These are sites of amorous trysts, places of refuge from the political and disciplinary regime, and places of unordinary meetings and conversations. However, oftentimes, these places of surprising biological vitality and abhorring putridity of transience rip open painful memory, that of the individual as well as the collective. Perhaps because of the chaotic accumulation of life and death, these patches of unstructured urban greenery—these spaces of neglect—become flickering vantage points from which only life in all its human-inhuman extensiveness and vulnerability overshadowed by Warsaw’s wartime traumas can be plainly seen.

From afar, these places naturally spur existential questions during the time of slowdown under communism and allow for a different, more intimate conspiracy, while vividly revealing their biological character and speaking in the timeless language of various crises, in which the political and the ecological have long been intertwined, though not been fully deciphered as part of the

environmental history and memory of Warsaw. The overgrown yet resurgent memory that has accumulated in them echoes through the historic fabric of the city every now and then, and unleashes boundless fears, dirty secrets and longings to this day. Teeming with natural life, these places grow larger in the narratives of characters who are estranged and lost in the reality of communist Poland; they fill the urban space, which has been emptied of meaning, and spring up unsuspectingly in the very center of communist Warsaw. This is how Konwicki, who finds this wild vegetation invading the capital city deeply unsettling, describes the autumn bushes in the vicinity of the Palace of Culture in *Ascension*:

I leapt into the dense bushes still laden with fleshy leaves and giant juicy berries. I waded through the thick bushes similar to riverside shrubbery. An awakened bird was twittering somewhere. Something darted from under my feet, something like a field mouse. The branches were clutching my wet hair, my hands, my feet in shoes full of water. The smell of ripped bark, of crushed berries, the scent of the sun was invading my lungs, choking my breath. A worm is sleeping on a leaf, insects cloaked in chitinous armor are clambering up the dark stalk, a little spider is dropping down a thread coated with minute dewdrops. Everything is grey all around, as if powdered with autumn dust, while only yesterday it was golden, red, vibrantly green, the color of old glass. (1982: 230–231)

Modern Warsaw still harbors the remnants of unmanaged spaces from the communist era, which stand as a reminder of the ecologically significant role of wild natural “wastelands.” In the People’s Republic of Poland, there was no aggressive revitalization and urbanized, organized management of green spaces (while today we witness old, healthy trees being cut down, meadows and lush lawns being mowed, leaves and nests being taken away from hedgehogs and small rodents, and exhausting and noisy machinery being used for this groundskeeping work). The article *Life after Revitalization* says that:

this uncontrolled vegetation (at the time, fortunately, no one wanted to manage it), on the one hand, created the unique aesthetics of Polish cities and towns, while on the other hand, it formed the basis of the unique social life of the communist years. Ecologically speaking, it protected cities and towns from the heat island effect, which today is

not only felt in Warsaw, Krakow or Poznan, but also in the smallest Polish towns. (2018: 20)

But this was not understood at the time, whereas today overgrown lots are being redefined and recultivated (Rybicka 2021).

I am interested in those fissures in the landscape that emerge from the tangle of rogue, defunct greenery, derelict plots of land and old trees: not because I am looking for the pioneers of protection of wild vegetation in communist times, but because the environmental history of Warsaw cannot be told without us immersing ourselves in the communist reality of war-scarred natural micronarratives. Białoszewski and the researchers following in his footsteps (Siwicka, Zielińska 1993; Korczyńska-Partyka 2019) observed the less obvious dimensions or “clumps” of memory entwined with the overgrowing “wild” and “affective” nature in Warsaw after the war. Politically oppressed, postwar Warsaw is a material landscape, a grim landscape filled with air that is gray from pollution, emblazoned with the gray Palace of Culture (which was originally light-sand colored) and the gray, steel and cold ribbon of the Vistula River.

The river itself—what is a city without a river?—always leads outside the city, even if, like the Vistula, this natural alternative to the Palace of Culture constitutes its topographical center. For male writers, like Miłosz and Konwicki, the river generally was the idealized site of (pre-war) erotic initiations and projections. Later—especially in the summer of 1939 and after the war—it became unnaturally distorted and its hydrotissue merged with the river of corpses and death, as in Baczyński’s aquapoetic imagination (cf., e.g. Pukalska 2013; Piotrowiak 2016). It became a river of materialized decay, of which the garbage floating in it has been a constant reminder.

The memory of the clean, living Vistula, the river of carefree youth, is represented by the generation of the summer of 1939 of *The Waspish Old Lady* in Dorota Masłowska’s drama *It’s All Right Between Us* (2008). She remembers the Vistula as a robust and vital river, with a current that was “thick, clean, punctuated by sunshine,” in which one caught nimble minnows, in which one could swim, and by which one could sunbathe and walk barefoot on the sand (2008: 7–8). The Old Lady’s Vistula bears no resemblance to the “slurry” of the contemporary generation of the Little Metal Girl. On the contrary, it projects an opposite, mocking image. Instead of fish, people catch used, “rotten condoms,” for fun, which, as if alive, escape and wriggle out of their hands (2008: 8). And although bathing in the littered Vistula is a “timeless pleasure,” it is nevertheless used not for relaxation, but to get an exemption from school:

I also love to swim in the Vistula, it's a timeless pleasure. Whenever I step out of the water, gleefully sputtering with gasoline, I get measles, typhoid fever and cadmium poisoning, and I'm dead, so I get a sick leave and don't have to go to school anymore. (2008: 8)

The memory of the Vistula River on the eve of the war is echoed in the Girl's sarcastic comment about her grandmother, behind whom muskrat root, old condoms, sanitary pads and a soggy plastic bag melancholically trailed behind (Masłowska 2008: 76). Little Metal Girl does not understand the myth of the summer of 1939, the most beautiful summer, because it was the last one before the war. The rift between her grandmother's and her granddaughter's generations is bridged by a remnant of communism: disregard for the natural life of rivers and their historical and material heritage. In the Old Woman's memory, a clean river does not just represent a time of tragically lost carefree life, but also of ecological concerns. The memory of the summer of 1939 has been buried under a swamp of garbage.

The image of the poisoned river, whose origins lie in the dirty industry and agriculture of communist Poland (which Masłowska associates with the toxic cadmium in the water, used in metallurgy, as well as in the production of fertilizers), surfaced in the writings of postwar writers two generations older than Masłowska: Kornel Filipowicz and Tadeusz Konwicki. Shortly after the war, in 1946, Filipowicz writes: "I am sitting by fishless water, silenced by grenades and poisoned by lime and carbol" (1978: 24). The Vistula seems "dead and empty" (1978: 58), fishless, lifeless, and affected by the war in its own riverine way. The urban landscape undergoes another distortion in Konwicki's work. Under the cloak of unbridled, wild nature, he opens sites of memory that still remind us of the subversive semantics of greyness, which, for the first time in the reality of communism, was cleaved into the ecological and political, and which has so far escaped the reading of communist literature due to the focus on the "Stalinocene" (Gajewski 2018: 138–139).

Gray rather than green was the color of communist uniformity, the color of propaganda that equated outstanding individuals with the working collective; the color of communist justice against the colorful, frivolous, anti-social and avaricious reality of capitalism represented by pop culture America. Even Stalin wore gray proudly and was seen in gray clothes. In a song by Russian bard Alexander Vertinsky, he "stands in humble gray, shimmering silver like a poplar tree as he receives his parade" (*World Piero – Alexander Vertinsky* 2021). So it is not the grayness promoted by communist ideology that I am concerned with, but one that has become woven into individual psychogeographies of

writers: the grayness that seeped into dissident minds and took on an ecological meaning for us today.

In literature, the cultural memory of urban, natural wastelands is reminiscent of those places that did not succumb to communization. They became etched into the fabric of the city, penetrated the reality of the regime and formed a new map, chaotic and haphazard, but integrating closer what is outside with what is inside the story. This style of narrative, found in 19th-century geographers and travelers, resembles literary psychogeography (Peraldo, ed. 2016) or psychotopography (Nelson 2001).

Marek Hłasko, who was born in Warsaw, returned to it several times before emigrating from Poland permanently. He published his *First Step in the Clouds* in 1956, while still living in Warsaw's Ochota district. He somberly portrayed the so-called "observers of life," who, he wrote, were impossible to meet in the city's festive, drunken center. One could encounter them "only in the suburbs" (1988: 64). The term "observer" is ironic. It refers to boorish voyeurs, dissatisfied with their own lives, with their "greyness and boredom" (1988: 65), to people who were looking for any sort of entertainment, so they would peep into the lives of others. This short story, with one climactic scene, takes place at dusk one "hot and torturous" day in Warsaw's Marymont. In the 1950s and 1960s, Marymont, before the multi-story blocks of flats were built under Edward Gierek, was not only a neighborhood of the poor, but also an area of more or less feral vegetation. According to one researcher of Warsaw history, it was the first such wild-nature suburb in the city, divided by Potocka Street from the intelligentsia-oriented Żoliborz (Majewski 2012). Hłasko captured the marginalized feel of this working-class neighborhood, the spaces of allotment gardens and wild bushes where one could drink, roam, and where the authorities did not look. However, as a writer of intellectual background, he did not know this neighborhood in a literal sense, or reconstruct its realities, but rather regarded it as an antitopographical metaphor (Karpowicz 2016: 20). Hłasko's Marymont is a psychogeographical text, which serves to convey certain emotions.

In simple and piercing prose, the short story *First Step in the Clouds* creates emotional tension. Three neighbors from Marymont, typical "observers of life," accost a boy and a girl, tucked away in grassy allotments. As it turns out, the couple has hidden themselves to take their "first step in the clouds": which is how they call their first sexual encounter. The scene of the intrusion is disturbing, and ends in a brawl and insults to the girl ("whore" and "slut"). The prying men are unable to restrain their aggression. Hatred towards would-be lovers is revenge for the men's, as it turns out, similarly painful experiences from their youth. There is no refuge in the allotment bushes for this ill-fated attempt at

budding love. Nature in the city offers an uninhabited place, a place of seclusion, but not impermeable and safe enough (in addition, there is unbearable heat) for fragile and immature love to succeed in a rotten, hate-hardened adult setting. Simultaneously, it is also a place outside the panopticon of power and morality, where the most vulnerable thing in adults comes to light: the uncultivated space of love.

Nature and weather in the notes that Konwicki took when walking around the capital reveal a vast psychotopography of Warsaw: a city of decline and permanently concealed disaster. These environmental contexts are not considered even in recent publications on catastrophism and apocalyptic motifs in Konwicki's writings (Zynis 2003). His novels, however, demand revisiting the questions of resilience in a time that degrades human freedom and creativity, but also in a transitional, uncertain time, which is similar to ours in many respects, and which writers such as Konwicki observed with penetrating insight.

When writing about the nocturnal and sombre landscape of Warsaw in Konwicki's work, Zgoła takes note of the changing environmental realities. She tentatively notes that "Konwicki's capital has hostile meteorological conditions" (2017: 130). The cold wind, dust and smog, according to many scholars and researchers of Konwicki's work, underscore the "claustrophobic" atmosphere of the city (Zgoła 2017: 131), the psychotopography of communism, but not one that is intertwined with the history and environmental memory of the city. It is hardly revealing to note that Konwicki describes and reads Warsaw like a map, yet it may be revealing for us to look at how he does this in a new, dissident and mature way. To trace this map, a key to charting the natural undeveloped environment of the city, it is worth looking at three of his novels: *Little Apocalypse*, *Underground River*, *Underground Birds* and *Ascension*.

In a monograph published in the popular "Czytani dzisiaj" series, Czaplinski explores those contexts that attracted successive generations of Konwicki's readers after the fall of communism. These were the political, autobiographical and literary contexts of a world that was always related to the war, i.e. the reality of the post-war period. For example, he makes a reference to the "derelict purgatory" of *Little Apocalypse*, as "this world is in a state of chronic agony, permanent decay, indefinite death" (Czaplinski 1994: 151). The context of environmentalism and critical environmental reading would have been fit to develop this commentary and link it to Konwicki's work, but for readers searching for a political identity after 1989, it was not the self-sufficient topic that it is for us today.

Though published in 1979, *Little Apocalypse* was furnished with environmental references. Some explicitly criticize the anti-environmental policies of the communist government, while others require a link to the map of

Warsaw's untended nature, which was slipping out of control and in which dissident ideas found an outlet. As already observed by Zgoła regarding weather phenomena that are "unfriendly" to Konwicki's characters, the protagonist of *Little Apocalypse* wakes up on a cloudy, "hopeless autumn day" (1995: 5). "Outside the window, my city is under a cloud, like old, blackened wallpaper" (1995: 9), he says. This is what communist Poland is like, with "the monotony of life without any hope, it's crumbling historic cities, it's provinces turning to deserts and poisoned rivers" (1995: 46). In the midst of all this, the Vistula "carries burly, muddy, flood waters," and "over the wilting jungle of the zoo, a neon sign lights up and goes out: We have built socialism!" (1995: 47). The unsightly river, however, has the therapeutic power of dismissing intrusive thoughts like the Kupala festival that cleanses one from evil and suffering (1995: 47). The still vibrant, albeit polluted, current of the Vistula helps one escape the absurd reality of communism. And although everything around is getting uglier, the cityscape is becoming overgrown with more and more measly vegetation, the relationship with the river ensconced in this drab landscape is something familiar and real, something that is comforting and can be preserved in cultural memory:

I was looking toward the Vistula and saw the blackened peaks of the houses in Powiśle, I saw the toxic lagoon of the river, the beaches of Praga and the mangled, jaundiced vegetation of Grochów and Goławek, a vast fraying meadow that would not capitulate. Dwarfing slowly, it encroached on the crowded city every year. This crippled landscape, ugly yet beautiful, because it was the only one we had left, this somber view, lashed by gale, battered by hail every quarter of an hour, gave me comfort all the same. (Konwicki 1995: 109)

Urban landscaping, with propaganda slogans set up in flowerbeds in honor of the communist regime, was part of building socialism. Konwicki thus peeks into the places of a nature that is disordered, independent and growing in spite of plans to communize people and non-people, and thus opens up another political context. For the system of totalitarian control does not extend to intimate places, and its power over urban space is limited: it is impossible to socialize everything. This is especially clear when wild shrubbery becomes a garden of love, an enclave of life in a landfill of ruins overgrown with weeds:

Surprisingly lush vegetation entwined these junkyards of concrete, stones of bricks and dunes of weathered lime. The slanting light of the sun was glowing up the profiles of the giant blackish burdock trees,

gilding the stately ferns, blazing up the wolfberry bushes. Even autumn asters were sneaking into this magic exuberant garden on the trash heap. (Konwicki 1995: 173)

The site of the protagonist's odd meeting with all his ex-girlfriends and lovers—in the allotment gardens—has an aura of secrecy as well. By the evening campfire, this microgarden with microbeds and trees seems like an unreal site on the verge of reality and dream. Behind the scenes of official life, the allotments offer yet another kind of refuge. In the city where citizens are occasionally asked to show their IDs, this is where the communist police do not ever go. From the perspective of small patches of greenery, which are concealed from the regime, even the Palace of Culture no longer looms menacingly over Warsaw, although it can always be seen on the horizon of the urban space (Konwicki 1995: 205–209). Garden allotments, riverside bushes and weeds are the lush natural zone of the conspiratorial map of communist Warsaw.

In *Underground River*, *Underground Birds* from 1984, nature, vividly silent, returns in memory and intertwines with the life of Konwicki's protagonist. The memory of the borderland river, full of biological life, which lures you into its depths and claims the lives of those who drown, is supplemented by the figure of God hiding in the riverside bushes from the vexing socialist world (1989: 31). Communism has historically encroached on the ahistorical and natural cycle of life and death. Similarly, in the city, when all manifestations of non-socialist order are being eradicated by the new "empire of oil paint" (1989: 39), disaster-stricken and seemingly imperishable, timeless Warsaw dies out like one of the critically endangered biological species. It becomes "a city dead from a new war" (1989: 78). The tragedy has to do with the material memory of the city, in whose tissues previous wars still pulsate, but the artificial red of communism drowns out the blood of those fallen both long ago and recently. This is why the Vistula with its entire basin seems like some "a black hole of our planet... similar to the black holes in the cosmos. An implosion of intellectual and moral matter. Total silence. [...] Conjugated death steadfastly ready for the explosion of life" (1989: 158). It is no longer a river of memory, but a vein of deadly history, which evokes helpless anger in this apathetic, cadaverous city of unfinished construction sites.

The Vistula is also the center of *Ascension's* 1967 psychogeographical map. Written, like the rest of the novel, from a Peripatetic perspective (Konwicki himself also used to stroll in Warsaw along the well-known Nowy Świat—Frascati—Czytelnik route). Here, the protagonist reaches forgotten buildings or desolate places, which again include the overgrown banks of the Vistula River,

allotment gardens and wild thickets. He observes how the landscape of postwar Warsaw has blended with nature to the point where it is difficult to distinguish one from the other: “the green barrels of centuries-old cannons or rather the mossy trunks of trees and decaying planes darkened from old age or fossilized birds” (1982: 6). In this novel, the relationship between life and death is fluid, with death predominating: if the protagonist takes notice of greenery, it is the kind that is dying (1982: 9). Allotment gardens near Okęcie are full of “blackened sunflowers... worms, rotting apples and spools of Indian summer clinging to dead branches” (1982: 17); they are full of life, of “greedy weeds” (1982: 18), when the dying process is in progress. Alongside an alley reeking of “hot metal and debris” from cars (1982: 29), the allotment gardens, which are overgrown because nobody uses them, are filled with degenerate nature: a “thicket of life” marked by death (1982: 30). Vegetation in Warsaw is overshadowed by hopeless communism, all the more chilling when the Cold War fear of nuclear war lingers in the background. Absurd monstrous planes (1982: 28) stir our imagination like “catfish” and reveal the ambivalent use of technology. “Travel only by airplane,” exclaims an urban neon sign (1982: 50). The busy avenue is again filled with “acres” of cars, and another preposterous neon sign lights up on the street: “love flowers” (1982: 32). In such a distorted urban landscape, it is difficult to spot nature that is undistorted by people whether now or in the past.

“We forget more than we build” (1982: 41), writes Konwicki about forgetting, also forgetting about nature, which has given way to the city with its sprawling apartment buildings:

The forests are dying. First they go bald from the moss, then the grass thins out, exposing the soil that is as powdery as ash, then the trampled bushes die, and finally the trees recede and a barren wasteland invades the land between the sparse trunks, punctuated by gigantic pyramids of concrete anthills. (1982: 56–7)

Under the onslaught of new construction, we no longer remember that forests once “provided shelter for humans fleeing from other humans” (1982: 57), that they were an intrinsic part of the landscape of war. In the new urban landscape, degenerate nature is either unsightly or out of place, devoid of its own past, like the wild ducks the author spotted on the Vistula: “I could not comprehend the presence of these skittish birds in the middle of a city of a million people.” (1982: 124)

Konwicki revisits the Vistula a number of times in *Ascension*. He searches in the river for memory, while walking through the city of oblivion. The

echoes of war disturbingly overlay the image of an unpolluted river, the river of childhood, a place of children's games and later of first erotic experiences (1982: 133–135). Couples apparently still take refuge in the Vistula shrubs because “there is something about the river” (1982: 223), but when it floods, it violently brings back memories of the “distant” war and “the cries of desperate crowds” (1982: 134). The Vistula is a river of stratified memory. The voices of the traumatic past mingle with impossible attempts to revive the biological river. Human harm reverberates through the Vistula and aligns with ecological harm: it is impossible to talk about the river without reference to its damaged natural fabric: “Rivers are dying. I mean they lose any semblance of life. They become a dead gutter, a barren sewer, a cloacal ditch pretending to be perpetual motion” (1982: 135). The trees along the Vistula River are also dying (1982: 196). The entire landscape of Warsaw looks gray, as if from beneath the traumatic memory covered by the absurd reality of communism, of which the large concrete housing estates and grotesque slogans of the neon signs remind us every now and then. Here, nature lives by dying; hence so many passages that speak of its rotten and decayed biological tissue. Likewise, memory decays into unremembrance.

Ascension is told from the perspective of a character who is dead, though he does not yet know it. Nature in Warsaw is marked with a similar stigma, on the verge of life and death, as it flows in a city where the abject reality of communist Poland has covered the traces of corpses. Maybe they are now crawling out of the city's decaying, death-soaked soil, where overgrown gardens, weeds and bushes and the river are still a living vehicle for these vestiges. Perhaps, as Konwicki wrote in *Underground River*, “Mourning and silence. Stillness and apathy. A crouching million people. A whole nation in hiding” they crawl out hidden from sight, inconspicuously to the society of a de-realized system (1989: 157).

The protagonists of *Ascension*, the living-dead, thieves and prostitutes navigate a map that is invisible to others. And only another war (even a nuclear war) could change something in this oppressive grayness, since “everyone” is waiting for it (1982: 206). Greenery is no match for the city of the dead, as it is “lifeless” and bursts it from within along with the “slowly dying trees and withering shrubs” (1982: 241). It is as if there cannot be regular soil in this city, there is only the soil contaminated from “the wounds on the body of the city, the lacerations of the warehouse barracks, the ulcers of the vast excavations, the scars of the empty spaces waiting to be built up” (1982: 241). And there is that strange river with “pale” beaches, which can be seen from the thirtieth floor of the Palace of Culture, and the illusory greenery behind it (on the Praga side).

This green no longer symbolizes hope and rebirth. It is the green of dark chaos, the inhuman energy of the city in the process of forgetting, which has nothing in common with the green of nature and chlorophyll. In Konwicki's novels, Warsaw is mostly gray, monotonously gray. And only the memory of youth, which, unlike in Hłasko's works, can be protected and idealized, as the Old Lady in Masłowska does, can disperse this grayness. This is why Konwicki records his youth in the present tense and renders it everlasting, to extract it from history and from other panopticons:

returning from school, you lie down on the edge of the forest, light your first ever cigarette. Beneath the sky, the same clouds are rushing by over and over again, shedding the white threads of Indian summer. You look for familiar animal shapes or objects in these clouds traveling through the centuries from west to east. (1982: 224)

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On the one hand, the reality of communist Poland seemed to be bleak and hopeless, the intellectual atmosphere was contaminated, and the landscape itself was gray from pollution. We know today how badly nature, air and water were poisoned. Nature, as property of the state, was really nobody's property. It was a wasteland that was supposed to be socially engaged in the human-non-human success of the working people, in the collective struggle against the bourgeoisie; to be incorporated into the communist project of total reform as Stalin wanted. This was only achieved up to a point, with the hyper-industrialization of production and agriculture, although on a much less tragic scale in Poland than in the former USSR. On the other hand, the grayness of the communist landscape, the fumes of factories, and the contamination of water and air was accompanied by a grayness of daily life that echoed the restricted movement of individuals. The endless smoke of cigarettes dissipated into smog, which was not officially present in communist Poland. It was a smoky time, which the Warsaw fog reminds us of today. Smog or fog? I do not check.

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| Abstract

ANNA BARCZ

The Vistula, Overgrown Shrubs, and Untended Gardens in the Literature of Postwar, Communist Warsaw

The article offers to combine the environmental history and memory of Warsaw on the example of analyses of literary works relating mainly to the post-1939-war and communist periods. These references involve specific places, such as the Vistula River, wastelands and abandoned allotments. In addition to brief exemplifications from Marek Hłasko and Dorota Masłowska, the psychogeographical interpretation of the environmental realities of post-war Warsaw in the People's Republic of Poland was developed in the more detailed analysis of three novels by Tadeusz Konwicki: *A Minor Apocalypse*, *Underground River*, *Underground Birds* and *Ascension*. It turned out that the traumatic history of the city, which has not been recognized so clearly in the environmental sense, is applicable in the analysis of these novels and by greening the undeveloped wastelands.

Keywords: environmental history of Warsaw, environmental memory of Warsaw, the Vistula, wastelands, Polish People Republic's literature, psychogeography

| Bio

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