



# Ruins and Flowers (1947)\*

Stefan Wolski

Someone called sentimentality an importunate beggar that one can hardly be rid of, the artist in particular. (I believe it was Conrad-Korzeniowski who said so). Indeed. There is no final parting between man and that strange note that lingers sometimes at the tip of the pen, sometimes at the peak of the heartbeat, and sometimes—who knows why—drifting around the most real “business”. For many, it is hard to believe. And yet, convincing one is not that difficult.

Hence, I invite the most advanced realists of Warsaw to take a short stroll. Let us simply take any street in Warsaw. I assure you! Surprisingly quickly, we will find my goal: f l o w e r s. Not blooming among the ruins. (Warsaw is by no means a garden); not the “flowers of sin”, as many a mildly malicious person would say with a sneer; not the flowers of “blooming girls”, in whose shade the thoughts of many Warsaw boys would gladly stray into intellectual, Proustian idylls.

None of that. It would simply be the most banal, most conventional flowers.

F l o w e r s! —modestly kneeling in gilded baskets, in bells, crystals, vases, urns, flasks: among moss and the green of fern.

F l o w e r s! —white, red, pink, lilac, yellow, purple, snowy, golden, flowers... flowers... flowers...

And above?

Above, there are simply r u i n s.

And next to it?

Next to it, the same—r u i n s.

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\* Originally published in: *Stolica*, vol. II, 1947, no. 11(20), 23-30 March: pp. 6-7; Stefan Wolski (1914-1992) was a lawyer, poet and prose writer, associated with the literary milieu of Lublin; collaborator of the *Stolica* magazine, among others; the author of the photograph is Jan Bulhak (1876-1950), one of the most eminent Polish photographers, co-ordinator of Polish pictorialism, photography theorist (author of e.g. the concept of homeland photography). After the war, Bulhak documented the damage caused by war (e.g. *Zburzona Warszawa [Destroyed Warsaw]*, 1945); *Stolica* was an illustrated weekly magazine founded in 1946 and initially published by the Supreme Council for the Reconstruction of the Capital City (until 1955). It was one of the first periodicals to be devoted exclusively to a single city. In its early years, the weekly covered the wartime destruction and, simultaneously, documented the efforts to rebuild the city and introduced the readers to upcoming projects. The weekly was published until the end of 1989; in 2006, it was reactivated as a monthly (<http://warszawa-stolica.pl>); reprinted after: [https://mbc.cyfrowemazowsze.pl/dlibra/publication/26/edition/22/content?format\\_id=1](https://mbc.cyfrowemazowsze.pl/dlibra/publication/26/edition/22/content?format_id=1) [public domain]; the original text and images can be found on pp. 20-21 of this issue.

Opposite—r u i n s as well.

Flowers and ruins... Ruins and flowers... This is Warsaw. Someone leans over me and whispers:... “Crazy Warsaw!”

Crazy Warsaw?

My memory takes a sudden turn:... machine-pistol series zing by in a curious, imaginary flight of needles. These are needles that do not sew life... And then, where blood used to be—flowers... Or a solid bronze sapper. Straight, strong; unbearably strong, as far as Germanic tastes go: a Polish sapper with his feet resting on the strange “PW” sign. So the green-uniformed policeman goes on patrol to prevent those hated a n c h o r symbols from growing at his feet. And yet... Some taunting hands found a moment to throw... f l o w e r s. Or the streets on whose crushed roadways flowers came to bloom... on graves.

Then, there were no flowers for a long time. There were only ruins and death, which was neither death nor lethargy;

Warsaw!

One of the first shops to push the ruins aside and rise from the ground was... Nowakowski’s flower shop on Marszałkowska Street... In the second or third month after liberation. Delicious, magnificent, luxuriant flowers, just like before the war.

Ruins and flowers.

Of course! There is probably no city in the world without flowers.

But r u i n s a n d f l o w e r s?

Again, someone whispers to me: “Warsaw is like an u n a t t r a c t i v e woman, yet full of charm.”

Flowers are like children’s faces. And a child is a symbol of the future and hope. But that’s not the only thing that comes to mind when you run through the streets of ruins and find so many flowers behind shop windows, on street corners, under the jagged silhouettes of tenement houses...

There is something elusive and enchanting about this spectacle of colour and warmth among the ruins; something that takes from the deepest essence of Warsaw. Yet it would be futile to look for it in external expressions. These are the unnamed melodies of inner life. There is something truly mysterious and enchanting about that paradox: r u i n s a n d f l o w e r s... and Warsaw...

Translated by Szymon Nowak