

AUGUST 2024 #9

A~ZYN





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EDITORIAL

MARCIN 'ALQUA' KŁAK

Many times I have heard that the first step is the most difficult one. It may be true. Or at least sometimes it is true but it's not always the case. I have a feeling that preparing the second special issue of *A~Zyn* was more challenging than the first one. Yet, if you are reading those words, it means that I succeed in completing it.

After the publication of the seventh issue, I got beautiful LOCs from John Hertz and Joseph Nicholas. I considered adding the LOC column this time but thought it may work better to keep it for the next issue when, hopefully, I'll get some comments on this one as well. I hope you won't mind that.

In this issue, I wanted to present Polish fandom to the world audience. It is the same approach that I had in issue no 7.¹ Yet, I didn't

want it to be a copy of the previous English edition. There are many similarities but there are also differences. I hope that *A~Zyn* 7 and 9 complement themselves and together they bring more value. This will be for the readers to judge.

It is possible that you got this fanzine during Glasgow 2024, *A Worldcon for Our Futures*. If that is the case, for sure you are very busy. Maybe you will find the time to read it during the convention, or it will need to wait until you are back home. Whatever is the case, I hope that it will make an interesting read. Should you wish to comment on it, I will be pleased to read what you think. Please direct your LOCs to ksf@ksf.org.pl

The first thing that you can see is the cover art by Czarno Widzę.² I approached the creator as I saw some of his works in a discussion group on Facebook. When he agreed to create a cover, I asked for it to be somehow related to Kraków, or Poland and SFF. And I got a dragon and a city. I consider this to be a Wawel Dragon from the legend. I must admit that I am enchanted by this piece and I want to thank the author once again!

In my previous editorial, I mentioned that we are a gaming nation. This time you won't find only the game but also a long piece about the history of RPGs in Poland. For the latter, I want to thank Tomasz Kreczmar (whose book on this subject will be soon published, alas in Polish). When it comes to the game, my gratitude goes towards Łukasz Kołodziej, who designed the "Questfest" with the speed of light. It is designed to be played by a group of players and a GM. I hope that you will enjoy

¹ You can download it here: <https://efanzines.com/A~Zyn/A~Zyn-07.pdf> [Accessed: 25-06-2024].

² Please visit his website here: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100080463123738> [Accessed: 25-06-2024].

the possibility of playing a group of adventurers at a convention held in a fantasy world.

Last year I asked my international friends to write about their encounter with the Polish fandom. This time I thought that the opposite may be interesting. That is why you will be able to find a few short pieces by Polish fans who talked about their Worldcon experiences. I am grateful for the time you all spent to recall and write about your memories.

In the interview section, you will be able to read answers from Paweł Majka – a Polish writer and fan. I think it allows you to get a glimpse into Polish fandom through yet another pair of eyes.

And lastly, there are two pieces by myself. The longer one describes the history of Polish natcon – Polcon. At least it touches the surface. For sure, the topic deserves a longer text. I may only hope that one day it will be created.

I cannot promise I will do that, but I also cannot exclude such possibility. Yet for now, you can check what has happened with our natcon over the course of the last 40 years. The final piece is not “Polish” in any sense other than me being the author. A book I read this year made such a strong impact on me that I decided that some of the thoughts may be worth sharing. Hopefully, you won't mind it.

This issue would not have appeared if not for the support of other people who I haven't yet listed above. So I also want to thank Olga Furman-Szczotkowska, Krzysztof Kietzman, Katarzyna Ophelia Koćma, Filip Cyrus Madej, and everyone else who somehow contributed to the creation of this issue.

I won't be stopping you further. I wish you a pleasant time with this issue of *A-Zyn!*



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THE SHORT HISTORY OF THE FIRST YEARS OF RPG IN POLAND

TOMEK KRECZMAR

Nowadays, few people realize how huge was the change that took place over the last 30-40 years in Poland. When the first mentions of RPGs or modern board games reached our country, we lived in the Polish People's Republic. Poles had economic problems, access to goods was limited, censorship was common, and the economy was failing. Traveling abroad required special permission, and from the "West", we were bringing laundry detergent or clothes rather than expensive games. They were doubly expensive, considering the fact that the zloty was not fully convertible, and Poles in the 1980s earned on average from 15 to 40 dollars. Monthly. In Polish zlotys.

At those times, there were clubs for SFF lovers, "third-circulation publications" (so-called "klubówki" or "club books"), and magazines in which mentions of games could be found. In a world of limited access to everything, where there was a special institution that even decided on the printing of wedding or birthday invitations, publishing anything was difficult. Yet games with SFF elements began to appear.

¹ Due to the low availability of officially published SFF, Polish SFF clubs used to publish texts translated from English. They had low circulation and usually were printed without permission or even knowledge of the authors [editor's note].

The beginnings

In Poland, we did not create nor simply translate the narrative role-playing games. Rather, we recreated them, based on the limited information that reached behind the Iron Curtain in the 1980s. However, there are many similarities between our market and the American one. We also had pioneers who were the first to write about games. Word of mouth worked as well, attracting more people to the hobby. The popularity of fantasy in the form of literature (Tolkien, club releases of books by Howard and Moorcock) and film (VHS hits from "Conan" with Arnold Schwarzenegger to kitsch like "Hawk the Slayer") was of great importance as well. We also copied and photocopied everything we could entire textbooks, single pages, articles from magazines...

When it comes to the market of miniature games enthusiasts, it was not huge in the times of the Polish People's Republic. Of course, we played with various toy soldiers produced on our side of the Iron Curtain, and sometimes obtained from the West. Yet apart from local, "backyard" rules or enthusiasts of recreating historical battles, there was no community experimenting with the idea as in the United States.

As a result, in Poland in the 1980s, when awareness of a new type of game was emerging, it was created on the basis of board games and gamebooks. The fantasy aspect of the games was important to us. Its importance increased as a result of the first edition of "A Wizard of Earthsea" by Ursula K. Le Guin (1983) and the second Polish edition of "The Lord of the Rings" (1981), thanks to which Tolkien's work final-

ly became more widely available.² The popularity of fantasy was noticed even by the editors of the *Fantastyka* magazine, which was then focused more on classic SF. Issues 23, 24 (1984), and 28 (1985) of the magazine were devoted to this genre, publishing, among others works by Robert E. Howard, Andre Norton, and Anne McCaffrey.

It is also worth mentioning the “E.T.” film, which was released on Polish screens in December 1984 and which featured an RPG gameplay scene. For several people, the appearance of an unusual game on the screen was a reason to look for information about it.

Important boardgames

The board game market changed slowly because it was affected by the typical economic problems of the Polish People's Republic, i.e. lack of raw materials, lack of foreign exchange, lack of paper, and lack of printing houses. All this made production difficult because games were technically more demanding than books or comics. Tokens meant cardboard of appropriate quality and different printing technology, while plastic elements or large boards packed in boxes were a real production challenge... although such games were published too. There was “Bitwa morska” [Naval Battle] (1982/1983), which delighted players with plastic models of ships, including an aircraft carrier with planes. Novelties from behind the Iron Curtain were slowly reaching us. For example, we got “Mastermind” (1972). Then we got numerous clones of the famous “Monopoly”. A great, hard-to-find hit was “Manewry morskie” [Naval Ma-

noeuvres] (1979), reprinted several times in huge editions reaching several dozen thousand. It was a not entirely legal modification and at the same time a pirated version of the famous “Stratego” game from 1946.

Illegal and unofficial clones of “Monopoly” or “Stratego” were not uncommon. At that time, Poland was under the influence of the USSR, which meant that copyright was treated with little respect. As a result, various clones appeared on the market, for example, “Detektyw” [Detective], published in 1986 in 5,000 copies, was actually “Cluedo” from the 1940s. In 1987 we got the Polish version of the game “Globbo!”, originally published by Steve Jackson Games in 1983. In our country, it was published under the title “Bulwa” [Tuber].

For many of us, the first encounter with fantasy board games was “Labirynt śmierci” [A Labyrinth of Death]. Released in 1984, the game contained a lot of tokens and was a significant breakthrough in many aspects. Few people knew then that “Labirynt śmierci” was a Polish clone of “The Citadel of Blood” – a game by Simulations Publications, Inc. from 1980.

Then we received “Bitwa na Polach Pellenoru” [A Battle of Pellenor Fields] – a copy of the SPI board game “Gondor: The Siege of Minas Tirith” from 1977. The Polish rulebook included, for example, a black and white drawing depicting Eowyn fighting the Nazgul by the famous Frank Frazetta. This board game could be combined with “Wojna o Pierścień”, published in 1991, which was a copy of “War of the Ring” from 1977.

“Labirynt śmierci” was the first fantasy game in the Polish People's Republic,

² The first LOTR edition from 1961–1963 was already a rarity in the 1980s.

and “Bitwa na Polach Pelennoru” was one of the first strategy games, and certainly the first strategic fantasy game in Poland. Both stimulated the imagination and encouraged players to create their own game variants. For example, in our backyard, we modified the “Battle of Pellenor Fields” to recreate the “Battle of Helm’s Deep”.

Even more important articles

In August 1984, the *Razem* [Together] magazine published Jacek Ciesielski’s game “Władca Podziemi” [Dungeon master], which had several very important features typical of role-playing games. The first part brought to mind a kind of variant of the “Labirynt śmierci”, as the gameplay consisted of wandering through a labyrinth full of surprises. The character formation had a huge impact on the combat mechanics. The system included attributes such as strength, magical abilities, and gold pieces to purchase equipment. At the end of the maze, the team had to face a Balrog, which confirmed that the entire game took place in Moria.

The second edition³ of “Władca Podziemi” did not change much of the gameplay style, which resembled typical pioneering adventures created by Gygas and Arneson, although it introduced advanced rules: ‘A storyteller, a man with unbridled imagination, runs the game. He conjures up an underground world of labyrinths and the amazing creatures that inhabit them. He, the Game Master, controls the monsters and decides the outcome of duels. The other participants of the game play the role of members of a team wandering through un-

derground nooks and crannies, looking for adventures and treasures”.

A little later, the most important magazine for SFF lovers at that time, *Fantasyka*, in the October 1984 issue, published an article titled “The First Entry into Role Playing Games”. The author, compared the rules of the “*Labirynt śmierci*” to RPGs, and explained the idea of the latter a bit. That article was the first source of information about the existence of this type of entertainment for many of us.

Perhaps the creation of the Association of Role-Playing Game Fans: SMGF⁴ should be considered as the beginning of the spread of awareness about RPGs. It had its origins in 1985 when the first game took place in the SF and Fantasy club ‘Avalon’. It was called “Couple’s Island” and it was based on Andre Norton’s *Witch World*. Subsequent sessions were no longer limited to fantasy setting, but explored also science fiction, historical setting, thrillers, etc. Not long later, there was a split in SMGF which divided into two groups. The first played the games created by themselves while the other explored AD&D.

Until the first issues of *Magia i Miecz* [Sword and Sorcery] – a magazine dedicated to RPGs, published in 1993 – access to information about RPGs was scarce. Residents of larger cities had more opportunities, but almost all of them were limited to scraps of information scattered in official magazines and fanzines with a small circulation. The lucky ones who joined the SFF clubs had access to photocopied manuals, sometimes to originals. Most often those were games

3 This time it was published separately as a boxed game.

4 Polish: Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Gier Fabularnych.

created by the members of the club. What was important, however, that they could play. The rest of the hobby enthusiasts had to rely on recreating the game based on very limited information.

In 1986, Jacek Ciesielski started a series of articles in the *Razem Magazine* under the common title "Game of Fantasy". In subsequent installments, the author introduced various RPG systems and described the specifics of the gameplay. Ciesielski realized that he was writing to a mass audience who had no chance of obtaining the originals. He also knew that in Western countries it was a big market, while in Poland there was just a wee bit of information. Considering the above, he focused on presenting the history of the RPGs and the general idea of the gameplay and game world.

In the first article, Ciesielski presented some historical background, focusing on Gygax and Arneson, and introduced a concept that is still with us today: "Dungeons & Dragons gave rise to a new family of games. The Americans called them "role-playing games" (RPG for short)". The article included a lot of information about the specificity of RPGs, i.e. it described how to play them. Then, *Razem* readers received longer descriptions of several systems – (A) D&D, MERP and Runequest. Other games like "Thieves' World" or Stormbringer had shorter mentions. Finally, Ciesielski emphasized the difference between role-playing games and board games, mentioning Encore's "adaptations of Western games." The article closure featured an example of gameplay.

In subsequent articles published every 2-3 months until 1989 in *Magazyn Razem*, Ciesielski presented specific systems: Trav-

eler, Ghostbusters, The Atlantean Trilogy, Warhammer, Call of Cthulhu, and finally Paranoia. For many people, it was their first contact with the idea of games "which resemble feature film and where no one needs to move pieces on the board".

Articles devoted to games also appeared in another issue of *Fantastyka* magazine. In 1988, issue 72 was released, in which the editorial team published several game-related texts. This issue also featured a gallery with photos of game miniatures. Most of the articles focused on Games Workshop productions and were based on the copies of the *White Dwarf* received by the editorial office.

Readers of the first article learned that there were three main types of games, namely board games, book games, and role-playing games, "invented" several years ago in the community of SFF fans who are the main group of players. The second article began with a slightly fictionalized introduction: "Firstly I chose new identity. From behind the desk and the typewriter, I was transported into a world that (although similar to many fantasy worlds I knew well) was governed by rules that were not completely known to me." The author mentioned beautiful figurines, printed plans, and instructions available only to a game master.

For many years, these were the only mentions of RPGs in the most important SFF magazine in Poland. They were, however, more bits of information that fans of unusual gameplay tried to gather to recreate a new type of game.

Recreation of RPGs

It is easy to point out two trends in recreating RPGs in Poland. The first one was based on officially and unofficially published information. The second one was the result of short access to the original manuals, and word of mouth on specific games, somewhat reminiscent of what happened in 1974-1975 with D&D. Most of the emerging groups had no contact with other players. The exception was the few clubs of SFF lovers, which also had the first RPG players as members. It is worth emphasizing that not all people involved in the games knew about the articles from *Razem*.

There were people in Poland who heard about games that didn't use a board, but they did not know what they really were or how to play them. Many of those people read the available articles multiple times, but still could not understand the idea of RPGs. Others imagined RPGs as more sophisticated board games because playing without this element seemed unlikely to be possible.

Of course, not all people fascinated by these unusual games had access to all of the mentioned sources. Despite the huge circulation of officially published magazines, it was difficult to buy them. There were no publicly accessible photocopiers, so some fragments were copied by those who were more involved in the concept. Others gave up, many faced failure.

Tomasz Z. Majkowski, translator, author, and head of the gaming research center at the Jagiellonian University, tried to recreate an RPG based on articles in *Razem*. As he recalls, however, they came up with something very board game-like, because

they were unable to understand, based on Ciesielski's texts, what the game really was about. Simply put, as Łukasz Wiśniewski wrote years later: "based on the above-mentioned articles, one could at best develop a general idea of what an RPG is". This does not change the fact that the bravest pioneers of that time had already started to create their own gaming systems using articles as a framework.

One of such people was Piotr Narloch, who tried to get out as much as possible from the articles in *Razem*. Almost immediately he started creating his own system. He didn't fully understand RPG, so there was no character creation, only a choice of professions, and very rudimentary rules. Most games focus on storytelling, without rules, character sheets, or specific heroes. Then came the extremely detailed rules, which over time the group rejected as making the game difficult and returned to a more narrative gameplay.

Also Maciek Nowak-Kreyer, later one of the creators of "Wiedźmin: Gra Wyobraźni RPG" [The Witcher: A Game of Imagination], was stunned by the idea of moving from the gray and boring reality of the Polish People's Republic to fantastic worlds immediately after reading the articles tried to somehow recreate the described systems. "It was the only opportunity to even play something like this." Rafał Gałecki, the first editorial secretary of *Magia i Miecz*, followed a similar path, creating his own game and testing it with his friends.

Narloch adds that for him the article devoted to the "Call of Cthulhu", which presented a fragment of the gameplay, was a breakthrough. The second significant point was the material about WFRP, on the occasion

of which Ciesielski reprinted the stats of the black orc. From this short set of numbers, Narloch and his colleagues tried to interpret the values and their diversity.

Piotr Gnyp, one of the founding members of Lublin's games society, and his friends from the block having no mechanics, started telling each other stories, figuring out how such games could work at all.

One of the people recreating the RPG was Michał Oracz, later creator of "Neuroshima Hex" board game. Together with a group of friends, he started playing in Bydgoszcz almost immediately after the first articles in *Razem*. Over time, they incorporated the "Labirynt śmierci" and gamebook mechanics into the game. "I even kept a catalogue of my own 'monsters' for the "Labirynt śmierci", a thick notebook with descriptions and drawings that I used for "meetings in the Dungeons". Of course, all this was years before RPGs were known."

It was nothing unusual. My friends and I used the "Labirynt śmierci" to create story-driven adventures about wandering through dungeons. Many other people had a similar introduction to RPGs.

Without a doubt, the first fantasy games created the market for advanced board games. Reviews and previews often referred to them as role-playing games, but in fact they were board games with a story element.

The "Labirynt śmierci" therefore provided mechanics, and Ciesielski's articles offered some vision of what could be achieved beyond wandering around the dungeon. Perhaps the most important thing in those articles were the sample gameplay fragments. My colleagues and I were mainly inspired

by "The Lord of the Rings" and "Conan". We created various fights and journeys through abandoned mines and cities. Our rules, however, were extremely fluid and we never wrote them down. In turn, Oracz and his colleagues created entire handwritten textbooks devoted to magic but also to more ordinary actions like sailing.

Andrzej Palka, one of the important personalities of Wrocław's fandom of the 90s, who learned about RPGs from *Razem* and, like many of us, read fantasy literature, also used the "Labirynt śmierci", which showed what simple combat and advancement mechanics can look like in practice. Since rulebooks were not accessible, in order to play he had to develop the game with a friend. They came up with their own simple Tolkien-inspired RPG called "The World of Middle-earth". The game rules were around 30 pages typed on a typewriter.

For many roleplayers, a big problem was "breaking out" from the shackles of dungeons, or rather maps, that allowed them to better master the gameplay. Because in most cases, the first "adventures" did not have a script, but were only based on dungeon plans drawn on paper. The sheer freedom of moving around the world was surprising – even to ourselves. My friends and I started telling each other more stories. However, one cannot say that those were detailed scenarios.

Dungeon games were easier for us. One person described what was happening based on a drawn plan with various markings of traps, monsters, and sometimes even puzzles. In our case, the presentations were quite dry, based on gameplay examples from *Razem*. Players used those descriptions to draw a map of the location.

In a conversation with me, Oracz recalled playing in similar manner: “We drew as we thought a 30-meter long corridor, a large intersection here, a small one there, and a descent to a lower level over there...”.

The mechanics – taken from the “*Labirynt śmierci*”, from gamebooks, or developed independently were very often modified. Sometimes the changes were the results of a given situation in the game, less often a result of deep considerations. Everyone based mechanics on six-sided dice, because few people thought of any other dice. As Oracz recalls, tinkering with the mechanics also led to a slightly different approach, a more detailed description of the characters’ actions: for example, to avoid a trap in the door, one talked about opening it carefully.

Articles in *Razem* were not the only source for recreating RPGs in Poland. As I mentioned earlier, information about something like role-playing games also reached our country by word of mouth. Sergiusz Nowak, one of the “early RPG adopters” from the 90s, and his friends recreated RPGs because one of them had seen such games in the United States. Having no rulebooks or dice, they created the system from scratch. The said player only mentioned that there were such and such “types” of characters, and then everyone invented their own heroes. The mechanics were developed on an ongoing basis, depending on the needs and situations. There was no formal world, only plot threads inspired by Tolkien and Howard. Only later did Nowak’s group manage to obtain the first dice and rulebooks from abroad.

Similarly, after returning to Warsaw, Michał Bukowski’s friend talked so pas-

sionately about the AD&D adventures he had experienced during the holidays that they decided to recreate the game, inviting more people. First, they wrote down what this lucky person remembered, but it turned out, of course, that the RPG built this way had a lot of holes and inconsistencies. Two weeks of playing was enough to remember the classes and stats. However, limiting the attributes to 18, for example, seemed strange, so they decided that 20 would be better. The lack of spell descriptions made the spellcasting classes unplayable. The handful of rules memorized were, of course, supplemented depending on the events during the session. The group did not feel any need to use a predefined setting. Instead, they created their own setting based on various inspirations, primarily Tolkien and Howard. Each player had their hand-drawn character sheet.

The above examples are reminiscent of D&D variants emerging in the US in the 1970s. Those were also created based on indirect knowledge of the game coming from gameplay. Just like in the United States a decade earlier, single pages from original rulebooks became food for imagination. Sometimes said pages were photocopied, but more often copied by hand or typewriter.

At last official publication came

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, in the early 1990s, RPGs slowly reached the awareness of a growing group of fans. Just as Western comics and books were finally easily accessible, they were becoming an important element of the new reality of SFF fans. Clubs and conventions were of great importance. It was thanks to them that the

rulebooks were copied by hand and later mostly photocopied. They provided access to knowledge. Many of us were ready to travel halfway across Poland to find new games. Going to the West was still pricey, and rulebooks were outrageously expensive for Poles.

The first officially released role-playing game in Poland was written by Andrzej Sapkowski. It was a short article in the *Fenix* magazine (issue 3 from 1990). It is worth noting that this took place at a time when the creator of “The Witcher” was still an author gaining popularity. However, Sapkowski’s system was not developed at that time, as the magazine’s editors were not players and did not know how to deal with this topic.

It was only three years later that RPGs in Poland became a phenomenon known to a larger audience. In 1993, the first issue of the *Magia i Miecz* magazine was published. It was the first magazine devoted entirely to games, primarily RPGs. And this periodical changed the lives of many people. In 1994 the first official rulebook hit shops – translation of WFRP. Next year Polish players got a bunch of other games, like “Call of Cthulhu” and “Cyberpunk 2020”, and “Zły Cień” [Evil Shadow], ‘Aphalon’. This is how the market was born.



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The banner features a stylized blue and white background with yellow starbursts. On the left, a cartoon character with a backpack and a red shirt is walking. A QR code is located at the bottom center. The text is arranged in a structured layout with various fonts and colors.

WORLDCON THROUGH THE POLISH EYES

The idea for this piece evolved over time. Initially, I wanted my friends to write memories from their first Worldcon. The goal was to present what impact first Worldcons made on Poles travelling there. What I got however was not always exactly that. Some fans decided to write about more than one Worldcon, for some, it was not their first. Still while browsing through those submissions I decided it is better that way. Forcing my initial vision may not have worked as well. So I decided to be more flexible. Let me invite you to those few short pieces showing Worldcon memories as seen by the “Polish eyes”.

P.S. I hope you won't mind me sharing my own anecdote as well.

MARCIN 'ALQUA' KŁAK

Piotr W. Cholewa

BRIGHTON 1987

Our first Worldcon happened almost forty years ago – Conspiracy '87 in Brighton. The main site was the Metropole Hotel – in the process of redecorating some floors, plus (allegedly) an unfriendly manager – and the Brighton Conference Centre. I have heard a lot of complaints about the site, but for us, it was simply a great convention. We were coming from – still – a “communist” country, so we knew that things could go wrong.

I remember spending a whole day in a small local cinema, watching all Hugo-nominated movies (not shown in Po-

land at that time). I remember meeting the Strugatsky brothers (first and last time) – Guests of Honour of Conspiracy. The Best Novel Hugo Award went to Orson Scott Card (“Speaker for the Dead”) – a thing that made me aware of Ender's cycle (“Wow, he's got two Hugos in a row and I haven't read this...”).

This was also a time when we were stunned by the Dealers' Room – so many books we had heard about... Brighton Worldcon is noted in fandom history for the “Scientology Scandal” – members of the Church paid for their supporting membership and voted for Ron Hubbard's novel, resulting in the nomination. They (through New Era publishers and other subsidiaries) shamelessly promoted their founder as the top SF writer. The funny thing is, we never noticed. In those happy times, we didn't know much (if anything) about Scientology and the Church, and Hubbard was not published in Poland. We didn't realize there was something not right. We were “innocents abroad”, as Peter Nicholls put it (after Twain, of course). And we were happy just to be there, in the great world of international fandom. It was easy for us to overlook any mishaps – and we did.

It was by far the largest convention we had attended until then – more than 5000 attendees. And it certainly was a source of my enchantment by Worldcons, an emotion still burning in me after 37 years.

THE HAGUE, 1990

Second Worldcon – the one voted for in Brighton – happened in the Hague, in the Netherlands. This time our Polish group was bigger, with a few dozen people. We hired a coach, arrived together, and found

a place at the Hague camping site. The tents were cheap, and the weather was perfect. On the first day, Bridget Wilkinson asked if we were interested in volunteering. We were – and went to work in the Green Room. Oh, great times. We met so many interesting people, program participants, and writers...

The Hugo ceremony had a special guest – the US ambassador to the Netherlands. The war was fought in former Yugoslavia, and the ambassador arrived with his bodyguards. We were watching them from the audience, and they were watching us from under the stage, and both groups were slightly bewildered. Two worlds seldom meet each other. To be fair, the ambassador himself was a great guy, witty and keen, a Trekkie in his youth.

The novelty for us was the use of ribbons (and for the rest of conventioneers – their mass use; there were such mysterious ribbons as e.g. “Usher” or, “People Mover”). Each and every con function had a special coloured ribbon that you could stick to your convention badge. We wore dark green “Green Room” ribbons, as well as Volunteer or People Mover (quite mysterious). There were ribbons for the Guest of Honour, Programme Participants, and many more. As expected, people started collecting them (sometimes it was difficult to stick them all on the badge). The winner, who had the most ribbons (rightfully obtained) was Tim Illingworth, if I remember correctly, who constructed a special frame to fit them all. This tradition of “ribbonisation” has survived to present Worldcons, although now they are designed in a horizontal format so you can stick them one below the other, forming sort of a long sash.

Trying to remember not quite typical things, one cannot miss a “bouncy castle” very popular, standing by the convention site (I am not sure if this was the concom’s great idea or an independent enterprise, probably the former). Anyway, a fan coming from the castle assessed it in immortal words, “Sex is fun, SF is fun, but this is the Real Thing”.

Another memorable experience was watching fireworks (some sort of Fireworks Championships) from the beach. Wonderful. Great convention, great Worldcon.

Radostław Kot

Going to Worldcon in The Hague in 1990 was a unique experience. Not only because it was the first Worldcon for me, but because of the time in which it took place. And this time could be felt, it was even tangibly present. We went there in a group, in two cars, first having to cross the expanses of the GDR, which basically no longer existed. Or was it in a dual state? It was all around, clearly visible, but also the changes were visible, for example, in the Berlin ring, which was undergoing extensive renovation with movement restrictions. Further on we met even more restrictions, so we didn’t reach our destination until the evening and had to spend the night in Arnhem.

The hotel was easy to find, but not the bridge, which we really wanted to see. First, we went a bridge too far (I won’t say who was holding the map and didn’t want to give it back). But we turned back and the bridge was there. Earlier, however, we crossed the Border Between Worlds – the former strip of “no man’s land” separating two German states. A road winding between fortifications and posts, but after so many stormy

ConFiction 1990 in the Hague. In the center of the picture there is Harry Harrison and Radosław Kot. Picture by Grażyna "GaPa" Pawłowska



decades, all of them were empty and unoccupied. This sight was returning throughout the whole convention, for the very first time with so many fans from behind the crumbled Iron Curtain attending.

As I remember, the convention participants coming from the Other Side were also impressed by the historical moment, including guests. Yes, it was quite a stunner. What kind of whisky does Harry Harrison want? He named it, he got it (we were also there on business, it was the time of getting fuel for our publishing house, CIA Books). Silverberg asks, on receiving our leaflet in the language, why am I not here, among your listed authors? That's why we are here, I answer. We catch up at the restaurant with Joe Haldeman, but still he is happy to hear that we ask about a lesser-known book he wrote with his brother. Brian Aldiss walks into the convention bar with an EU flag and the Ninth Symphony on his lips (but no choir nor timpani). Anne McCaffrey, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, one of whose novels I had already translated, and Terry Pratch-

ett, whom we briefly met. Ian Watson autographed "The Book of the River", I asked him for an autograph in the second volume, "The Book of Stars", at Worldcon in London many years later. Both books stand next to each other on my bookshelf now.

We also spent a lot of time on the lower level, where there were bookstores. It was good that we had a transportation home and some guilders to spend, we collected several boxes of books, mostly second-hand paperbacks, so we took them by the armful.

On Monday after the convention, we drove by the side of the convention centre where the Con was held over the weekend, Nissan had already hung out its flags there. Then there was The Hague to visit (and shrimp stands everywhere!) and a little bit of Amsterdam. The hot ending of August over Western and Central Europe. Europe after the rain.

Marta Mar

As surprising as it seems to me, when I write this text, the first Worldcon I attended was 19 years ago in Glasgow. The Worldcon trip was my 18th birthday gift from my Dad, and although I travelled to conventions in Poland before (and small cons in the Czech Republic) I wasn't sure what to expect. I had no courage to be a gopher, and I spend most of my time on panels, at the art show, and in queues for autographs. The thing I remember the most is not a specific situation, although I recall glimpses that will stay with me, but an overall feeling of belonging to the fan community, that is at its core the same anywhere you go, and you can appreciate it at Worldcons. It is strange to visit Glasgow again, this time without the person who introduced me to the Fandom, but with many friends, hoping to meet more.

Marcin "Alqua" Kłak

My first Worldcon was Loncon 3 in 2014. Although I visited many conventions before, this one was somehow overwhelming. Maybe I felt the pressure of history or there was another reason. Yet I had a great time – so great that I knew that I would like to come again and involve myself a bit more. Still, one memory from that year is something I treasure especially strongly.

I volunteered to help with the room preparation for the Hugo Awards ceremony. I felt a bit shy and lost in this big room. There was no reason for that but it is how I felt. There was not enough equipment for everyone (torches and high-vis vests) and when it was divided, a person I didn't know came to me. She clearly saw my shyness and of-

fered me the other part of the equipment. I don't remember which one it was. Thanks to that I felt more confident. This also has shown me what kind of place fandom is (or should be as we know it is not always like that). Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to thank her. I managed, however, to catch her name and the country she was from. And years later in Dublin in 2019 I met someone with the same name and coming from the same country and it was my benefactor. After waiting for five years, I finally had the chance to thank Maree for her gesture. And here I want to thank you again. It may have been a small thing for you but it mattered a lot to me.

Magdalena "Serathe" Grajcar

Once upon a time, in 2014, being in the Polish fandom for just a short couple of years, I dared to shyly venture for one day to Worldcon in London. I liked what I saw, but decided it doesn't count as my first Worldcon.

And then came the Worldcon 75 in Helsinki in 2017, when I was fully ready to experience everything, from a fascinating country and the demon-summoning language, through the brilliant con organization, to the honour of being in the small Polish fandom representation to give the Fancast Hugo Award to the lucky winners. As that happened on my birthday, my sneaky colleagues made it all the more brilliant and terrifying for me by singing me Happy Birthday on the Hugo stage, which created a root memory for the Worldcons to come. The Hugo Losers party that year was also a great finish to the best birthday I've had so far.

As then I decided to attend at least the European cons, later came the Worldcon of 2019 in Dublin, and now I am counting days to the Glasgow one.

But my first Worldcon in Helsinki was not where my Finnish adventure ended. I have lived in Finland for almost 4 years now, here to stay, this event being the first seed planted in my head that eventually grew into the decision to move where the great memories were once made.

Agata Koc

HELSINKI 2017

Arriving at the main train station in Helsinki in August 2017, I was greeted by an electronic screen displaying a poster about the upcoming Worldcon. The city welcomed us with pleasant weather and a friendly atmosphere.

Planning my days in advance was made easier by the early release of the programme schedule, allowing me to select various literary panels, particularly those focusing on Asian science-fiction & fantasy like Chinese and Japanese literature, including the presentation of books nominated for Seiun Award, as well as in scientific panels on Bullets in Space and with experts from NASA.

Worldcon was popular among local fans, leading to packed program sessions and long queues. Despite the crowds, I managed to attend all the sessions I was interested in, including panels with renowned authors like Walter Jon Williams, Robin Hobb, Ken Liu, Aliette de Bodard, and even engaging in conversations with Cixin Liu at the book signing.



Worldcon 75 in Helsinki (2017). Cake at the Hugo Losers Party.
Picture by Marcin "Alqua" Ktak

The presence of a sizable group of Polish fans in Helsinki made it easy to connect with fellow enthusiasts. The Polish fan stand served as a hub for sharing experiences, discussing lectures, and interacting not only with Polish fans but also with others from different countries. Group meetings organized by various fan clubs including those bidding for future Worldcons, added to the sense of community and camaraderie at the event.

One of the unique aspects of the convention was the ribbons attached to members' badges. These ribbons, with various designs and quotes, not only added a fun element but also sparked friendly competition among attendees to collect as many as

possible. I must admit leaving the con with a sizable collection of them as well :)

Opting to volunteer during the convention turned out to be a rewarding decision. Volunteering allowed me to interact with a diverse group of people, learn more about the inner workings of the convention, and contribute to the smooth running of the event. Assigned to the Green Room staff, I juggled various tasks but also enjoyed meaningful conversations with fellow volunteer participants in between, some of whom I keep in contact with now and look forward to meeting at future Worldcons.

Radek “Rynvord” Polański

When Guinness Stout Meets Dutch Stroopwafels

I always wanted to visit Dublin. Ireland had been eluding me for a long time, even though I had the opportunity to live in Scotland and explore the wider world. So, I was thrilled to learn that one of the Worldcons would be held in the city none other than Dublin. Moreover, participating in a Worldcon has been long on my bucket list. Worldcon offers a uniquely intense experience, distinct from the typical SFF conventions I’m accustomed to. It requires thorough preparation for what lies ahead. How does one succinctly summarize such an event, knowing how packed it will be?

So much happened since then, especially considering it was before the pandemic swept across the globe. However, I do have a few vivid memories from Dublin, and interestingly, they all revolve around the social aspects of Worldcon and the people I encountered along the way. While I recall attending panels and various program items vaguely, what remains crystal clear

are the evenings spent socializing and the post-Hugo ceremony gatherings.

On the night of August 15th, after the retro Hugo ceremony had concluded and become history, a few of us gathered at the hotel bar. Among the group were the hosts of the ceremony, American writers Ellen Klages and Dave Rudden, the latter being a current resident of Dublin. As we engaged in conversation, we delved into our Worldcon experiences, discussed their books, and reflected on the ceremony itself. With several of us hailing from Poland, we also shared insights about our Polish SFF fandom, exploring the similarities and differences it holds compared to others.

Amidst our discussion, we enjoyed pints of Guinness beer and various snacks, including a pack of mini stroopwafels I had brought from Amsterdam. Our conversation naturally transitioned into topics of culture, including culinary delights, symbolized by both Irish stout beer and the sweet, crunchy syrupy treat from the Dutch nation. This led us to ponder whether these two culinary symbols of their respective nations could complement each other harmoniously.

Therefore, we concluded that the only way to settle the matter was to try dipping stroopwafels into dark Guinness beer. Despite the initial absurdity of the idea, we proceeded without hesitation and embarked on our experiment, laughing uproariously throughout the process. Knowing some of the historical quarrels between Ireland and the Netherlands, such as the 17th-century Battle of the Boyne, we couldn’t help but wonder if our culinary experiment might offend any Irish or Dutch individuals present in the room. Never-

theless, there we were – a group of Americans and Poles – uniting Irish and Dutch cultures through a unique culinary fusion. And if you're curious, the idea worked, and it was absolutely delicious!

Marcin “Seji” Segit

Worldcon. Connecting People with Cardboard and Birdies

Conventions allow you to meet people. That's a truism. Conventions allow you to meet interesting people. That's also obvious. Conventions allow you to meet people who know interesting people. This, too, isn't extraordinary – at least until we start thinking about whom we've met and how.

At Dublin Worldcon in 2019, Alqua introduced me to an American, Geri Sullivan. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Geri first bought me a beer and then persuaded me to play a game of Ghoodminton. I was handed a piece of cardboard, and soon a LED-lit shuttlecock was darting between the tables set up in the convention bar. After a few minutes, I was both breathless and inexplicably happy.

Ghoodminton was invented by Walt Willis, a pillar of Irish fandom. As Fancyclopedia states: “The game of heroes. It is played indoors on whatever table you have that is capable of bearing a ping-pong net across the middle and the shock of hurtling bodies. [...] Only equipment beyond table and net: a badminton bird, some sort of rectangular device (to strike the bird with), and a lofty contempt for human life”. We didn't have a net, and the tables were all occupied, but I think that we showed enough contempt for human life and mugs of beer around us.

Thus, I, a fan from Poland, touched something that another fan – an Irishman from Belfast – had invented 70 years earlier, to the delight of himself and his friends. It survived in fan consciousness for decades and, through Minneapolis, finally reached Krakow, all thanks to a meeting in Dublin. Of course, this is just the surface. Underneath the piece of cardboard and the glowing birdie lies something more: intercultural and interfannish contact that might never have happened without Worldcon. Each fandom has its traditions and games, and it's impossible to learn about all of them, though sometimes you can catch a glimpse of things past and present. However, probably only at Worldcon, where fans from all over the world can interact on a such grand scale, there is the greatest chance that someone you just met will hand you a piece of cardboard and say: “Come, I'll show you a cool game.” A game steeped in more fan history and interaction than you can imagine.



Art by Joanna "Szyszka" P-R

Questfest

ROLEPLAYING GAME ABOUT AN ADVENTURER CONVENTION



1. Section for the players

You're a team of intrepid adventurers who traversed the world and bested beasts and evil-doers alike. You arrive at Questfest to meet up with other scoundrels, purchase magic trinkets, enjoy exotic delicacies, and rest before adventuring forth. Draw one archetype and one hobby each.

2. Archetypes

Define your character's best and preferred method of solving problems:

1. **Wizard** – casts fireballs, levitates, and turns others into frogs.
2. **Cleric** – heals, converts, and wards off evil.
3. **Bard** – sings, seduces, and bluffs.
4. **Rogue** – breaks locks, pickpockets, and sneaks.
5. **Ranger** – tracks, sets traps, and fights with a bow.
6. **Warrior** – lifts heavy objects, threatens, and smashes with an axe.

3. Hobby

Define your character's preferred way of spending time at the festival.

1. Cosplaying an individual from song or legend.
2. Playing a board game designed by dragons.
3. Collecting figurines of iconic monsters.
4. Listening to talks given by great sages.
5. Trying out exotic delicacies and elixirs.
6. Taking part in knowledge and skill competitions.

4. Section for everyone

When a character intends to do something that the narrator considers to be hard, risky, or complication-prone, the player and the narrator each roll 2d6 and compare the results.

- The player's result is larger – success. The player describes the outcome.
- The results are equal – success, but at a cost. The player and narrator decide together on the complications.
- The narrator's result is higher – failure. The narrator describes the outcome.

When the action is tied to the character archetype, the player rolls twice and selects the preferred result.

When the action is tied to the character's hobby, the narrator rolls twice and selects the preferred result.

When the action is tied to both the hobby and the archetype of the character, both sides roll twice and each selects their preferred result.

5. Section for the narrator

You are the players' guide to the game world, the advocate of its inhabitants, and an observer of the ensuing events. Describe to the team a fantastical festival, full of colorful figures and amazing attractions. Each time the players attempt to achieve something important for their characters, introduce a new individual with a new, unique problem that only the players' characters will be able to solve. If you run out of ideas, consult the following table of abstracts.

If you don't have an idea on how to start, draw from the below list:

- Bustling organizer leaves you with a bunch of leaflets to hand out among the crowd.
- Two cosplayers brusquely demand a judgment on whose cosplay is better.
- Older dwarven writer is drunk as a skunk and keeps insulting his readers.
- Fans of a mermaid influencer get into a fight over water from the ocean in which the mermaid took a bath.
- A huge, mad, fire-breathing dragon tries to cut in line to get to the festival.
- Several-year-old hobgoblin lost its parents but found a bottle of alchemist's fire.

Set pieces	Props	Characters	Something is...
1. Line	1. Magic rope	1. Ogre organizer	1. Late
2. Grub-carts	2. Instant soup	2. Goblin helper	2. Lost
3. Stalls	3. Collector's figurine	3. Elven cosplayer	3. Broken
4. Scene	4. Rare card	4. Dwarven battle influencer	4. Burning
5. Hall	5. Festival shirt	5. Known gnomish writer	5. Tearing down
6. Back of house	6. VIP pass	6. Orcish player	6. Mad

INTERVIEW WITH A FAN: PAWEŁ “AGRAFEK” MAJKA

Paweł Majka – Polish writer and active member of the fandom. Since his popular debut novel, he conquered the Polish market. An active convention-goer, he helps new authors and comments on the literary and fannish reality. In the time span of just a few months, he received two Polish awards for fans: the Krzysztof “Papier” Papierkowski Award and the Śląkfa.

Alqua: How and when did you encounter the fandom?

Paweł Majka: Not as long ago as it could seem. I became a member of the fandom quite late via the internet and specifically message boards, where I started participating in discussions on sci-fi and fantasy-related stuff and literature in particular. It began with the forum of one of the most popular Polish daily newspapers, where someone created a sub-forum for the *Fantastyka* journal. Soon after I read there that *Nowa Fantastyka*¹ launched its own message boards and I immediately moved over there. A community formed, to which I felt attached. Not only did we organize meetups of forum members, but also our own writing contests. Thanks to contacts with people from the NF forum, I attended my first con, Polcon 2007 in Warsaw. So quite recently. My fandom engagement is shy of 20 years.

A: You received two fan awards in the span of several months. First, in December 2022, together with Cezary Zbierchowski you received the Krzysztof “Papier” Papierkowski



Picture by KUKLOK

Award, and half a year later – the Śląkfa. What did you feel on these occasions?

P: It's always a great pleasure when someone appreciates you. When it comes to “Papier” Award, I had a somewhat less joyful reflection. After all, together with Cezary, we received the reward for creating and holding the CzaPa Kulturalna podcast, which isn't all that popular, the main goal of which is to promote good Polish short stories. So while it's very nice to be appreciated, it was hard not to ponder on how similar initiatives are rare here, given that the award fell to us of all people. Or perhaps we received it in part because we chose such a niche area? More people write or speak about novels and series, about movies or games. Short stories seem to be neglected, which is a shame because a lot of interesting things are happening in recent years in this area. Authors of short stories do not have to make as many compromises, and consider the commercial side of their work. They are – as I believe – more courageous, both in terms of form and content.

In turn, I approached the Śląkfa with pure enthusiasm, as it was tied to the operations

¹ After the transformation of the 1990 the *Fantastyka* magazine had to be rebranded and it acquired the name of *Nowa Fantastyka* [New Fantastyka] (editor's comment).

of our club and the Literary Section of the SFF Network of Kraków, in which I am particularly involved. In the Section, we strive to not only develop our own texts and writing assignments but also invite experienced authors to talk about their work. These are not only people who publish novels or short stories, but also e.g. video game writers. Plenty of people have come and gone through Section, some have debuted, but there are also those with multiple published novels to their name. It is also thanks to them that I can observe how contemporary Polish genre fiction changes, not just learn writing, but also gain a diverse outlook on the world and literature alike. And I make no secret of the fact that these folks make a great group to just meet socially and talk about writing and reading.

Such fandom-related awards are a marvelous thing. They help us remember that we are a certain community, tied by more than just fascination with a specific genre(s). They remind us that the community is not just a merry, albeit somewhat chaotic rabble of fans, who meet up during conventions, but not an insignificant group of people, who create something together, work with one another, and contribute significantly to the whole.

A: You were awarded the Śląkfa for creating and holding the Literary Section in the SFF Network of Kraków. How did it begin and what does it look like today?

P: Truth be told, I don't consider myself to be neither the creator nor the leader. Actually, you were the one who created the Section. You once asked me whether I'd like to hold such a thing. And I did oversee it for about a year in the sense that I was the first to speak, I discussed the short stories and performed the role of a de-facto moderator within the group. I did notice, however, that when I ini-

tiate a discussion, most of the members usually just say "I agree with Paweł," so I decided to move myself into the shadows and be the last to voice my opinion. At first, people had to be encouraged to speak, but now they do so voluntarily and you could say my presence is almost unnecessary. And just as well. I would gladly be invisible. It's not my goal to exert undue influence on people, to create "disciples" (ugh!). It's not that I don't participate, share my experience, etc. But I like the fact that people no longer wait for me to initiate discussions.

The group did change over time, of course. Plenty of people came and went, some remained, and others moved on. That's how these groups are. Two years ago, we started publishing our own zine, *Horizont Zderzeń Fantastycznych*² (published annually). We also published three somewhat more official Section-related short story anthologies and two somewhat less official ones (of which one was created for my birthday). We visit conventions and hold Section-related presentations and discussion panels. It's going quite well, could be even better.

A: However, apart from the Section itself, you're also a professional writer. Is this a good combination or is it hard to reconcile one with the other?

P: I'm not sure if it can be said that I'm a professional writer, as I don't make a living as a writer. I have a full-time position with the local government. In other words, apart from daily life, fannish activities, and actual professional work, writing is just another type of activity for me. But true, one which allows me to sometimes earn a bit of money. I would not say that participation in the Section in any way

² Horizon of Fantastic Collisions in the literal sense, but the title is also an untranslatable play on the words "Event Horizon" (translator's note).

interferes with my writing. I do have to devote some time to it, but this is time devoted to the craft of writing either way. Recently, I've been publishing fewer novels, but this is due to shakeups in the Polish publishing industry, not due to contributing to the Section as such.

A: In turn, the “Papier” Award was given to you in recognition of your podcast. How did it come about? What motivates you to continue?

P: It was born out of another internet meeting! We were holding one of our Facebook discussions and someone said that they miss such discussions in the fandom, albeit not in the form of fleeting conversations on social media, but more permanent conversations on a specific topic. Such a comment inspired us, especially given that I was missing genre-related content as well, including interesting conversations. And because Cezary and I both love radio and I even worked for several radio stations, I came up with the idea of an audio-only podcast and he enthusiastically agreed. From the onset, we decided we wouldn't whine about people and texts, though this usually makes things more popular, but that the distinguishing feature of our podcast will rest in a positive approach and the promotion of good literature. Our second idea was to focus on short literary forms, as they are often of good quality and almost nobody talks nor writes about them. And that's extremely sad, as short stories have a shorter shelf life than novels. I'm extremely saddened by the fact that so many amazing short stories appear in the pages of magazines, anthologies, or zines, only to reach a small number of readers in our extremely fragmented market and then fall into oblivion. It's a bummer. I hope that thanks to CzaPa Kulturalna, these stories will gain an afterlife.

A: Over the years, you took part in many fan-ish initiatives. Which ones were the most memorable and why?

P: People tend to remember their first experiences the most and the strongest, so no wonder that in this context, I have to mention the *Nowa Fantastyka* message boards, where I held plenty of great discussions, participated in writing contests and mini-conventions in the form of our meetups. All initiatives on this message board were accompanied by unbounded creative joy. It was an example of laying down groundwork, resulting from being enthusiastic about our favorite convention. We did not arrive at a specific organizational form, but everything worked just the same. The message boards disappeared like most of them, giving way to social media, but a considerable number of their members remained in the SFF fandom as writers, editors, translators, and employees of publishing houses, or cultural institutions.

A: You regularly attend conventions – what do you like about them?

P: Egoistically speaking, they allow me to recharge my batteries. Conventions are a carnival time when the rules of the world become reversed. Perhaps now, following the triumph of the nerds in pop culture, this isn't as visible as before. However, on a daily basis, conversations with our friends and colleagues (e.g. in the workplace) on genre fiction, comic books, or theories of space engines are still something out of the ordinary. When you spend your daily life dressed as an outlandish character, you are usually not treated as someone normal. The carnival, the historical “festival of fools,” reverses these values. In its course, it is conversations about “serious” topics which are out of place and dressing normally seems weirder than dressing up in a costume. To the

degree that when during one of the Pyrkon, Wit Szostak (an amazing writer, who at one point wrote genre fiction) arrived, as was his habit, dressed in elegant clothes, that is, a tweed suit topped with a bow tie, as far as I remember, a fan called to him: “great Doctor Who cosplay!”. That was what Wit wore daily, but the carnival warps our perception of reality. I think that from time to time, we all need such a carnival. They cleanse our minds and souls. Conventions are always a great time to meet long-lost friends, catch up with old acquaintances, and meet new people. Many new projects and ideas were born during conventions.

A: Let’s come back to your writing – how did your writing adventure begin?

P: From learning words. Seriously, I made up and told stories to my parents and grandparents since early childhood. And of course, I would eagerly listen to their own tales. My grandpa particularly was a great talker (and an avid reader). I started writing my own stories the moment I learned the alphabet. Naturally, it took me some time to publish them, specifically given that I waited for a long time before sending them to anyone. I did not consider myself to be good enough. It’s a mistake, by the way. One should not linger for so long, regardless of how humble you are. When at a certain point local Polish genre fiction blew up, I read several new novels and decided that I have nothing to be ashamed of, so I sent a different short story to each magazine and portal in existence. One did not respond at all, another rejected the text, but the remainder accepted the stories for publication. And it was easier from then on, though I had to wait a bit longer to publish my first novel. Because I waited so long, I hit a time when publishers stopped being as enthusiastic about debut novels.

A: Do you have a specific dream as a writer? Something you’d like to create, but didn’t get the chance to do so?

P: I’d simply like to write and publish everything that’s in the back of my head. All of those started or at least outlined stories. I don’t have much time to write and I’m still coming up with new ideas. For example, since I published a historical novel without fantastical elements, set in 18th-century Poland, I have a ton of notes and novel ideas from this period and three ideas for genre fiction novels from this epoch. I have to hurry up with them as long as I still remember all of the details from preparing to write the historical novel. And other projects and gigs are already smiling at me. For example, in recent years, I wrote short stories for three calendars, two from Slavic mythology and one from Celtic mythology. Right now, I’m working with a certain startup on a quite interesting idea for an audiobook. And the demons of my own projects are breathing down my neck. So what I’m dreaming of in the context of my writing is to have a lot of free time to write.

A: To conclude, I have a challenging question for you – what do you cherish the fandom for?

P: For building the feeling of community and for actually helping those, who take their first steps. For its friendliness. I often said during conventions that without the fandom, I’d be in an entirely different place (not necessarily a better one), that I was always welcomed with hospitality and I was always offered help and support. I think I now have a debt to pay to all those, who took me in with such generosity when I was a newcomer from nowhere.

A: It was nice speaking with you!



A BRIEF HISTORY OF POLCON

MARCIN 'ALQUA' KŁAK

Polcon is a Polish national convention and has been held yearly since the 1980s. Every year another city (and another SFF club) undertakes the task to prepare and hold the fannish celebration. Over the years there were some crises and some amazing achievements. A full history of the convention with details on each edition would be way too long. What is more, I haven't been in fandom for most of its history, so I don't (yet) have enough information to write such an article. To a large extent in the below text is based on the information from the Programme Books and the internet.¹ The drawback is that so far I haven't managed to collect all of the programme books but hopefully, this will change. I believe that the history of our natcon deserves a thorough publication. In the meantime, however, I would like to share some of the insights into the almost 40 years of Polcon.

The first Polcon wasn't the first Polcon

Upon checking the details one can easily see that the first Polcon was held in 1985. Yet, this is only partially true. The first convention with the name of Polcon took place in

Dzierżoniów in 1983.² It was organised by PSMF (Polskie Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Fantastyki = Polish Speculative Fiction Lovers Association) in collaboration with the first Polish SFF magazine *Fantastyka*. It was not the National Convention and the later Polcons are not directly connected to this one.

The first "real" Polcon was held in 1985 in Błażejewko³ near Poznań. The convention was held by the Orbita SFF Club from Poznań. Internet mentions about two Guest of Honour – Poul and Karen Anderson. Yet the Programme Book lists only the first of them but adds also Kir Bułyczow, John Brunner, James Gunn, Frederick Pohl, and Karel Thole. Unfortunately from this great lineup of international guests, only Poul and Karen were present at the convention.

The programme of the first Polcon was not as literary as one may think. Most of it was devoted to movie screenings and video games. Worth noting is also the fact that at the convention the Polish Fandom Award "Sfinks" was awarded to Janusz. A Zajdel for his novel "Paradyzja". Unfortunately, the author died before the convention and could not receive the award. Later it was renamed to commemorate him and is now known as

1 The most important source was an invaluable history of Polcons from the old Polcon website: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150414083517/http://polcon.fandom.art.pl/historia.shtml> [Accessed: 20.04.2024]. Yet, I was not limiting myself to this one source and I also used reports published elsewhere including but not limited to: <https://www.esensja.pl>, <https://polter.pl>, and <http://interkom.vecnost.cz/@archiv.htm> [Accessed: 24.06.2024].

2 At least this is the first notion I managed to find so far. On the other hand in the Programme Book of Polcon 1985 author of one of the articles mentions "We survived a few Polcons" which may suggest that there were some held before 1983. Programme Book of 2015 anniversary Polcons mentions that before 1985 some conventions were unofficially called "Polcons" by their organisers or even by the fans who visited them.

3 It may look like Polish fans tried to make sure the early annals of Polish fandom would be incomprehensible to non-Polish speakers. Yet it is rather a pure coincidence and further Polcons were held in towns with names that are way easier to pronounce.

Janusz A. Zajdel Award of Polish Fandom. The Award is closely tight to Polcon and has been given yearly ever since.

Programme Book of 1985 Polcon looks promising. There is no illustration but the “Polcon 85” inscription is nicely stylized. It is followed by motivational text: “Fan, to the extent of his strengths and capabilities, should contribute to the comprehensive development of his fandom.” I would love to say that the convention was a great realization of the said principle. Yet, it would not be the truth. In the Programme Book, we can read about grievances that the concomm held towards other people in fandom – including those who promised help and didn’t provide it in the end. Still despite those grievances and their public exhibition the idea of Polcon survived and the convention continues to this day.

The second half of the 1980s

The remaining of the 1980s saw another four Polcons:

- Katowice in 1986
- Warszawa in 1987
- Katowice⁴ in 1988
- Gdańsk in 1989

What can be observed is that the convention increased its programme. Although gaming and movie screenings were still important there were more talks and discussions. It seems that also exhibitions and slideshows were added. Surprisingly each of the Programme Books shows the divisions and grievances in Polish fandom of the era. At the same time, they listed Polish SF clubs and allowed them to describe themselves

4 In fact, it was held in Chorzów – a city just next to Katowice. They are close enough that it is possible to change the city without noticing it.



A cover of the programme book of first Polcon in 1985

which nowadays may be very valuable for fan historians.

It is worth noting that in most of the said Programme Books organisers were listing who was invited to attend the convention even though many of the invitees refused. As a matter of fact, in some of the booklets, the refusal letters were published. From what I managed to find out some of the confirmed international guests of Polcons 1985 – 1989 didn’t manage to come in the end.

The Polcon 1987 in Warszawa was the biggest of the ones held in the 1980s decade and had around 1000 members. Unfortunately, the list of convention participants lists less than 700 of those. Compared to nowadays Polcons this number may not seem impressive but it was a record that has not been beaten for many years.

Folding of Polcon?

The next decade was not an easy time for Polish society and Polcon. While the last four Polcons of the 80s had 500–1000 members, Polcon 1990 in Waplewo was visited by only ~200 fans. Subsequent years had various degrees of popularity and we had to wait till 1999 for Polcon to again reach almost 1000 members. Polcon 1990 was attributed with the success of inviting Andrzej Sapkowski who afterwards started to attend fannish conventions.

The year 1991 was both a success and a failure. Polcon was for the first (but not the last) time coupled with Eurocon. It was also a World Science Fiction Meeting. Unfortunately, so far I haven't managed to find more details about this event and its history. As per the foreword in the Programme Book, some organisers had an idea to bring even Worldcon to Poland but their enthusiasm was quickly stopped by one of them – Wiktor Bukato. The convention was held in Kraków and was named Cracon. It was visited by around 600 members.

The word of a mouth in Poland states it was a total disaster. Some of the opinions from foreign visitors support this statement, while others mention that they had a good time. The Programme Book/Souvenir Book had two volumes. It seems that the third volume with information about films was possible to order after the con, yet I am not sure whether it was published in the end. The big issue with the first two volumes is that they were in Polish only – this may pose a challenge for international guests. Another challenge (for all members) was the fact that the convention was spread across multiple locations in Kraków and although



A pin from the Cracon 1991 in Kraków

they were described in the first volume of Programme Book there was no map...

Among important facts related to Cracon '91, we must mention Janusz A. Zajdel Award. It was in Kraków when the winners were for the first time selected by all members of the convention.⁵ In previous years, voting was in the hands of SFF clubs. Also here Award took the form of statuettes⁶ cast in bronze.

The following two Polcons were small – only around 200 members each. The 1992 event in Białystok was well received (at least by some of the fans). In the history of Polcons listed once on the official website there is a short remark “In terms of organisation it was one of the best events.” It also seems that fans

⁵ To be more precise, all members could vote.

⁶ I absolutely adore its form, however, it is waaaay too heavy.

from Białystok managed to collaborate well with clubs in other cities and thanks to that this Polcon was created by a common effort of multiple Polish SFF clubs. The programme book of this Polcon doesn't contain a lot of information about the convention itself though. To a large extent, it is full of advertisements which is interesting from the historical point of view but doesn't give a lot of insights into the convention itself.

A year later Polcon was for the second time held in a Waplewo village. The online chronicle mentions it was a nicely organised event although the collaboration with other clubs in Poland didn't work this time. An important notion is that it was at this convention where two important writers appeared – Jacek Dukaj and Marek S. Huberath. Both won Janusz. A Zajdel Award more than once in their later careers.

In 1994 for the first time, Polcon visited Lublin. The event attracted around 500 fans and judging from the time distance looked interesting. The things that especially caught my attention when going through the Programme Book were invaluable historical attractions. Firstly in the programme, there was four hour long programme slot for videos from previous conventions. Secondly among a few planned exhibitions, two were of fan historical importance. The first was devoted to Polish fanzines and the second to badges and pins from conventions. Polcon '94 was also the first of Polcons which tried to treat RPGs as an equally important part of the broad SFF field.

Polcon '95 was coupled with Nordcon – a convention of Polish SFF clubs. It is known as PiN – an acronym for Polcon i [and] Nordcon. It seems that the convention somehow mixed regular Polcon with a way more

relaxed Nordcon. The latter was (and remains to this day) a relaxacon held by the seaside in winter.

The year 1996 was not a good one for Polcon. It was the first time when Polcon was not held at all. The Janusz A. Zajdel Award was given (as per its constitution of the time) at “a nearest Polish country-wide convention”. It was again Nordcon.

In 1997 Polcon went back to Katowice. A short report from the event was written by Bridget Wilkinson.⁷ It is an interesting read and shows a bit of the convention flavour – including a large presence of RPG. It also shows that there was an Art Show – a part of the convention that now is usually not present at Polcons (or Polish cons in general). That year is important for one new invention (which may have been inspired by the Intersection Worldcon in Glasgow in 1995). Namely, a name for volunteers supporting the convention was introduced together with the unique t-shirt that they could have obtained. The name is “gźdacz” (plural: gźdacze). It is a term derived from a children's book “Bromba i inni” (“Bromba and the Others”) by Maciej Wojtyszko. The author agreed to the usage of the term for convention volunteers. It is still widely used right now.

A year later Polcon moved again to the north-east – namely to Białystok. It seems that what was mostly emphasised at the time was the presence of Terry Pratchett who was a Guest of Honour.

The last 199x Polcon took place in Warsaw and it was for the second time in the convention's history that it had around 1000

⁷ <http://www.concatenation.org/conrev/polcon.html>
[Accessed: 20.04.2024].

members. I consider this a big success but according to Czech fan Jiří Pilch⁸, organizers expected 1200-1500 people to attend. Jiří also mentions that there were only two foreign members – himself and Pavel Weigel. It is a big contrast to Katowice in 1997, where there were multiple fans from the Czech Republic and at least one person from Lithuania. Warsaw Polcon had a big media presence and a great set of sponsors that included Plus GSM (one of the biggest mobile telephony providers in Poland), Motorola, Games Workshop, and other companies.

The last Polcon of the millennium was at the same time as Eurocon. It was held in Gdynia between 2nd and 6th August 2000. Compared to previous Polish Eurocon, it was organized in a way better way. It is mentioned by Jim Walker in his short report.⁹ Having said that there were of course some issues with the convention. Many members bought their membership at the door which resulted in programme rooms being overcrowded (in total there were close to 800 members). Also, it seems that one of the venues was confirmed just two days before the convention but everyone received an appropriate note in the pocket programme.

Entering the new millennium

First Polcon of the New Millennium took place in Katowice in the middle of September 2001. Programme Book lists only one international guest – Ian Watson who managed to attend as he came to Katowice a few days early. On the old Polcon website (mentioned in the first footnote) it is written that

guests from the USA didn't manage to come because of the terrorists' attacks of September 11th. Organizers prepared an exhibition to commemorate the 80th birthday of Stanisław Lem. Śląski Klub Fantastyki (Silesian SFF Club) who was hosting the convention was also celebrating its 20th anniversary. From what I was able to find there was no exhibition devoted to that but part of the convention booklet was describing ŚKF.

In 2002 Polcon came back to Kraków. While reading the convention reports, I have the impression that it was well (although not uncritically) received. The main issue raised was the fact that the convention was held in two buildings. Another was the fact that because of some issues convention didn't have access to the third building. This resulted in the cancellation of the movie programme. It seems that the strongest (or at least the most remarkable) point of the convention was screening (or rather screenings) of "The Cathedral" animated film. It is a short film created by Tomasz Bagiński based on Jacek Dukaj's short story. It may be known to some of the readers as back in the day it was nominated for the Oscar.

I didn't attend this Polcon (My first one was in 2010) but nevertheless, I have two memories somehow related to it. The first one comes from the Janusz A. Zajdel Award ceremony. Many pictures were taken during it and some of those survived in the "fannish annals". Two of the fans were dressed and painted as Zajdel statuettes. I don't recall when I saw the picture for the first time. For sure I didn't know which convention those were from nevertheless the scene was known to me. Also, all con reports I read mentioned this part of the ceremony. Another memory comes from 20 years later when at the next

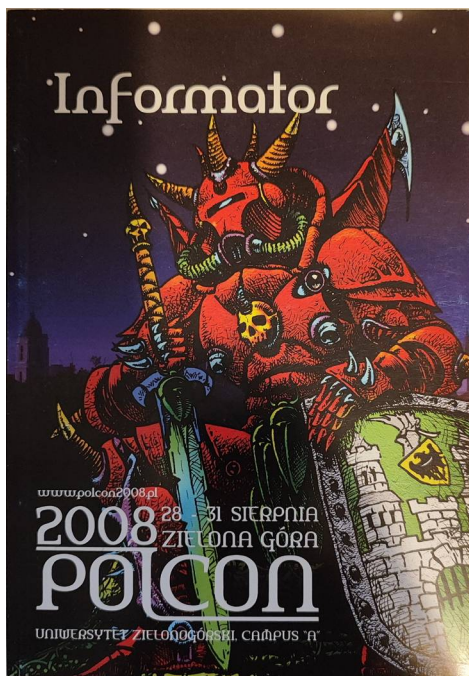
8 <http://interkom.vecnost.cz/1999/19991052.htm>
[Accessed: 20.04.2024].

9 <http://www.concatenation.org/conrev/eurocon00.html>
[Accessed: 20.04.2024].

Polcon in Kraków we had some old t-shirts from Polcon 2002. It seems that they caused some trauma in fandom as one of the fans remembering the con explained to me that they were terrible and that after laundry all the clothes received the green colour of the said t-shirt.

A year later, Polcon was for the first time held in Elbląg in northern Poland. The convention was rather smaller in scale (around 350 members) than before. From what I was able to find there was an issue with the programme. Apparently organizers didn't pay enough attention to how to structure it. As a result, similar programme items were held at the same time. Reviewers were pointing out the lack of enough organizers and volunteers to run the con. Polcon 2003 was also unlucky as two of its Guests of Honour didn't manage to arrive. Two aspects caught my attention. Firstly, in the hall, there were big-scale models of ships from "Star Wars". Secondly, during the con amateur theatre stage a play based on "The Tombs of Athuan" by Ursula K. Le Guin. Opinions about Elbląg's Polcon vary a bit but it seems it was an "okay convention" with no spectacular successes nor failures.

To me, the biggest surprise of Polcon 2004 is the fact that it was the first time it was held in Zielona Góra. The reason I find it surprising is that one of the oldest Polish SFF clubs – Ad Astra is located there. I would consider it natural for them to hold the Polcon before. Yet, it didn't happen until 2004. Reading through some convention reports I found the information that organizers prepared a few computers with internet access that allowed members to check their e-mails and e.g. trains back home. It was clearly appreciated by the members.



A cover of the programme book of Polcon 2008 in Zielona Góra. Cover picture by Igor Myszkievich

The year 2005 was the 20th anniversary of Polcon. The convention was held in the same place as in 1985. It was ran by the Druga Era SFF Club from Poznań. The convention was a bit nostalgic to those remembering the beginnings. The anniversary was also somehow present in the programme. It was also the year 2005 when the fannish yearly anthology of works nominated for Janusz A. Zajdel Award was started. The first anthology was published by the Silesian SFF Club. Since then, each year ZSFP¹⁰ has asked copyright holders for the works nominated for the Award to allow for publication. The book usually contains nominated short stories

¹⁰ Związek Stowarzyszeń Fandom Polski [Association of Societies Polish Fandom] – an umbrella organisation connecting multiple SFF clubs. They protect the mark of Polcon and Janusz A. Zajdel Award.

and excerpts from the novels. The anthology is given for free to a certain number of fans pre-registering for Polcon in the given year.

In 2006, Polcon visited Lublin for the second time. It started with a bit of an issue as around a month before the convention the venue had to be changed. Yet, organisers managed to do so. I was surprised and happy to read¹¹ that members of the convention were receiving a special issue of the local fanzine *Czas Efemerydy* [Ephemeris Time]. It seems however that there were multiple issues with programme items that were moved or cancelled.

Polcon 2007 in Warsaw, was certainly a groundbreaking event. I didn't participate in it, so I cannot judge myself but upon reading opinions, it is clear that the team running it managed to achieve things that were impossible before. Attracting over 2000 visitors was one of those, yet probably not the most important. The venue itself (Conferencing Centre of the Gromada Hotel) was a new quality appreciated by many. However, the amount of sponsors and media coverage was impressive. One of the accommodation options was students' dorms but they were located relatively far away. To solve potential issues coming from that organisers made sure there will be special free buses transporting fans between the venue and the dorm. I won't be listing all the sponsors here, but I want to mention that one company producing antivirus software offered their product to programme participants. Some reviewers were expressing how superb the convention was, while others were pointing to certain issues. Yet, even the biggest critics (at least among the

reviews I read) were agreeing that the convention was good.

After just four years, Polcon returned to Zielona Góra in 2008. Generally, opinions about that year are good. It seems that the convention was comparable to the Warsaw one which can be considered a feat in itself. The main complaints were related to many changes in the programme schedule and to the condition of the dorms that were offered to the members.

Polcon 2009 was held in Łódź and is quite infamous. Yet, the more one looks into details the less justified this critique seems to be. Among the issues, reviewers kept mentioning the long queue for the registration and lack of interesting prizes for the quizzes held on Sunday. It seems however that more problems were internal to concom. Or to be more precise some concom members became frustrated and started to publicly criticize the convention. Some even wear t-shirts with a slogan that can be roughly translated as "I cannot help you, I'm from concom". Having said that most of the members seem to have a positive opinion about the convention. It was certainly not the best Polcon but for members, it was not a disaster.

2010 was a very special year. Polcon was Eurocon for the fourth time. And for the first time, it was connected with Parcon – a national convention of Czech and Slovakian fans. The con was named Tricon as it connected Eurocon, Parcon, and Polcon. It was held in two countries at the same time. We all met in Cieszyn and Český Těšín. For me the convention was important for one additional reason – it was my first Polcon. It became my measure for "how the Polcon should look like". The convention was pre-

¹¹ <https://www.esensja.pl/varia/publicystyka/tekst.html?id=3533> [Accessed: 12.05.2024].

pared very well. Members (at least from Poland) received a Polish anthology of short stories about dragons. The one thing that truly disappointed me was the lack of Andrzej Sapkowski at the ESFS Award ceremony. He received the Grandmaster Award that evening and was not there (despite attending the convention).

The “prepandemic decade”

The next decade began with Polcon held in Poznań. The venue where it was held was quite unusual for us. The con took place at Poznań International Fair. It was the second convention held there (after Pyrkon a few months earlier). From today’s perspective, when Pyrkon takes over the whole area of Poznań International Fair, it may seem small but at the time it was quite impressive. Fans got access to three buildings and a nearby school. The convention was good but compared to the previous year, it lacked something. Still, after many years its atmosphere is quite memorable.

In 2012 for the first time Polcon visited Wrocław. Even before the convention a large controversy spread among fandom. Organisers decided to invite Erich von Däniken. Many fans felt that inviting him as a scientist was showing fandom in a bad light. Unfortunately, there were also other issues with the con – related to how the voting cards for Janusz A. Zajdel Award were distributed, and how the convention was organised in a broader sense. Still, from a member perspective, I quite enjoyed the con. In my eyes, it was not as good as Tricon but not a bad con either.

Polcon 2013 was supposed to be held in Toruń. Yet the club that had to host it dismantled and it became impossible to have Polcon

there. Avangarda Association from Warsaw came to the rescue and offered to host Polcon. They paid a big price for this decision. The club initially planned to bid for 2015 but because of some issues in 2013, they didn’t receive the right to hold the con then¹². The most memorable part of 2013 Polcon was the queue. Due to an issue with a piece of computer equipment, the registration was delayed. Heavily delayed. No one decided to move to the paper registration or any other working backup solution. As a result, I spent around six or seven hours in the queue. It was frustrating at the time but now I have some great memories from that event. Socializing with fellow fans waiting to be admitted to the venue remains a good memory. Some of the fans also managed to play RPG sessions in the queue. There were also some other issues at the 2013 Polcon but overall it was a good convention. One thing is especially worth mentioning. One of the buildings was open to the general public. It featured dealer’s hall and three programme rooms devoted to “The Days of Science” – a series of pop science talks and panels.

In 2014, Polcon travelled to southern Poland and was held in Bielsko-Biała. Before the convention, many fans were concerned as it seemed that the con was not ready. Yet, when we came to Bielsko-Biała everything changed. Most of the people with whom I talked enjoyed the convention. Initial concerns were not necessary and we received a good Polcon with a very friendly atmosphere. Unfortunately, the club running it didn’t survive and it was dismantled after

¹² Of course, it is possible that even should Polcon 2013 would be perfect they would still not win the bidding. Having said that some fans believe that the issues in 2013 prevented Avangarda Association from running the Polcon 2015.

the convention. For sure, general negativity and critique of the con before it even took place added a lot to this decision. I regret that as a fandom we didn't offer support to the organisers.

As mentioned above, Avangarda Association from Warszawa wanted to host Polcon in 2015 (it was the 30th Polcon), yet because of their issues in 2013 another bid arose and won the site selection. It was a bid to host Polcon in Poznań and instead of a single organising club, it was created as a joint effort of multiple SFF clubs in Poland. The opinions about the bid were mixed. Some felt that bidding was unfair towards Avangarda who saved Polcon in 2013 but the fact was that the bid won site selection. Even the critics agree that it was a good convention. Some people state that it was even great. Personally, I cannot judge, as despite helping to run it I was not able to attend. It is worth mentioning that because of the 30th jubilee, there was a special jubilee programme stream that was devoted to Polcons and fandom in a broader sense.

In 2016, Wrocław hosted Polcon for the second time. This time the venue was a UNESCO-listed building – Centennial Hall. This is a feat in itself. Organisers also used a conferencing centre located next door. Polcon became part of the European Capital of Culture activities. The team was also bidding to be a Eurocon but this honour went to Barcelona. Still Wrocław's Polcon was Euroconference. Convention was visited by around 4500 members which may seem a lot but organisers planned to have way more visitors. The question of the Polcon quality is a difficult one. In the online reviews, people mostly expressed enthusiasm. Yet, most fans deeply invested in fandom are criticis-

ing Polcon 2016. There were many issues at the con. Many things were visible “from the inside” but it seems that all of that did not stop fans from enjoying themselves and the con.

The same cannot be said of the next Polcon that took place in Lublin. On that year, even for most attendees, it was clearly visible that the convention was not properly prepared. Some people didn't like the fact that a kind of “local fair” was added to a convention. Yet the big problem was chaos. Programme participants were informed too late that their applications were accepted. As a result, many items had to be cancelled. I was also very disappointed that the cabaret that was invited for the opening ceremony had sexist and homophobic jokes. So was the con awfully bad? Of course not. Despite issues, one was able to attend some interesting programme items. I also enjoyed the exhibition about the history of Polcons.

Five years after the first time Polcon was supposed to be held in Toruń, it finally arrived in that city. It was held by another club – Thorn. Each year they run Copernicon in the old city centre but for Polcon they selected a university campus a bit further away. They were quite unlucky as the convention was spread across a few buildings, the weather was terrible, and it was raining for a large part of the con. It became a meme in itself and someone created a FB fan page called “Is it raining at Polcon 2018?”. One unusual thing has to be mentioned in regards to this Polcon. Instead customary August date organisers decided to hold it in the beginning of July. Some fans were a bit concerned pre-con as Thorn was planning to hold Copernicon in their usual time – September. Making two big conventions

Just before the Janusz A. Zajdel Award ceremony during Polcon 2018 in Toruń. Second and third from the left are Magdalena Kucenty and Paweł Majka – nominees in the Best Shorter Work and Best Novel categories.
Picture by Marcin "Alqua" Kłak



within two months is quite a challenge. I believe that the organisers succeeded though. Probably both events suffered a bit but overall Polcon was rather fine.

The Polcon in 2019 was definitely not the best one. That year it came back to Białystok. There were some internal frictions within local fandom around the event. If it was the only problem, it wouldn't be that bad. The first big issue arose in Toruń in 2018. As per the constitution a year in advance Polcon proposes the Guests of Honour who get accepted by the Fandom Forum (in fact a Business Meeting). It was the first time in my memory that one of the GoHs was rejected by the Fandom Forum. The reason for that was his previous words against the Polcon and the Janusz A. Zajdel Award. I did not manage to attend the con myself but the word of mouth said it was not properly organised. Some fans were invited at a late stage to help running it as the help was certainly needed. Should they be asked earlier maybe the whole con would look better.

And the last year of the decade, Polcon was not held. Yet, we cannot put full blame on the pandemic. The fact is that in 2018 we didn't manage to select the organiser of Polcon 2020. In 2019 it was decided that the group running Opolcon in Opole would be holding a "convention in the rank of Polcon".

At that point in time, it was clear that as a fandom we have issues with Polcon. In order to solve the issues and "save" the convention late in 2019 and early 2020 we organised two "Polklawes". Those meetings were supposed to find a solution to the problem. And we proposed a solution that was later accepted.

For many years Polcon's constitution had a paragraph about what should happen if there be no Polcon. It introduced a "Convention in the rank of Polcon". In fact, it was a statement that should there be no Polcon, we will hold Janusz A. Zajdel Award at another convention willing to do so and deemed "worthy". The issue with it was that this approach made it "not a Polcon" and something "worse" than "normal" Polcon. It

was just a fallback option should no one be willing to run the con itself.

Yet, why there were no clubs ready to host the Polcon? The answer is, of course ,complicated but one can limit it to a few short points:

1. Most clubs had their own conventions and cancelling their con in order to run Polcon didn't make sense. Holding two big events in a year was of course too challenging for the majority of organisations.
2. Hosting Polcon required a lot of work and the convention was usually criticized for every mistake. The pressure coming from it was not helping to find new organisers.
3. The expectations for Polcon were very high and smaller clubs were not ready (or were not feeling ready) to take over this event.
4. It was observable that after the Polcon club that ran it had internal issues or even got dismantled.

The proposed solution was to make a standalone Polcon and the one attached to a local con equally worthy. Now the constitution states that Polcon held jointly with another con is still a "full Polcon". As a matter of fact, it was not such a new idea. For example 1986 con was connected with Silcon and in 1995 it was Polcon and Nordcon.¹³ We also prepared some supporting materials for would-be organisers and we worked to make it clear that Polcon doesn't have to be a very big event. Clubs don't need to strive to break the records. Having natcon for 500 members is as good as preparing it for 5000 attendees.

And then the pandemic struck and there was no Polcon whatsoever in 2020. The Janusz A. Zajdel Award ceremony and voting were held online. Paradoxically this break may have been a good thing. It gave us all the time to acknowledge new rules. Clubs had the opportunity to discuss them,

¹³ I must point out, however, that those were before the constitution received the paragraph about "Convention in the rank of Polcon".

to make plans, and to propose their bids for subsequent years.

The post(?)-pandemic decade

The first "new Polcon" was held in 2021 in Zielona Góra. It was attached to their *Bachanalia Fantastyczne*. In fact, it was there when the Fandom Forum was able to vote on the new rules and accept them. One may make the point that as the rules were not in place when the con started we cannot call it Polcon. Possibly organisers thought so as in the convention materials they didn't use the name of Polcon. Instead on their website, they used the term "Convention in the rank of Polcon". Still, I believe that we should consider them to be a full-blown Polcon.

The year 2022 was very important to me. It was the first time in my fannish career that I was able to visit Polcon in my home city – Kraków. For years we have been considering inviting this event here but it seemed too big of a challenge. The new rules allowed us to connect Polcon and Imladris. I don't know whether it was easier to run than a standalone convention but for sure it was less intimidating – and to me, this proved that the solutions created at Polklawe worked. As an organiser, I won't comment on the quality of the con. What I can comment on, however, is the feeling. To me, it was both a Polcon and Imladris. Both conventions had their atmosphere present. I was extremely happy that in all our materials it was visible that both cons are important parts of the event. I also loved how the second "I" in Imladris name was changed to the shape of Janusz A. Zajdel Award statuette.

And the last (so far!) Polcon took place in Łódź in 2023. Again, it was coupled with the

Front and back cover of Imladris
Polcon in 2022.
Cover picture by Kaja Blajn
Sztajnykier



local con – Kapitularz. The beginning was a bit challenging due to a long queue for registration but in the end, it was a minor issue and fans had a lot of fun at “Kapitularz Polconem” (as it was officially called). I can only speak for myself but it was the con I needed at the time and I have very good memories of it. One of the ideas for Polcon¹⁴ is to give fans the opportunity to taste the flavour of the local fandom. And Kapitularz did this very well.¹⁵ We had a Polcon with everything that should be there but we also learned what the conventions in Łódź look like and what one may expect there.

This year our natcon will travel again to Toruń but unlike in 2018, it will be joined with Copernicon. Both events should benefit from it, and at last, Polcon will be held within the old city of Toruń which is one of the most beautiful cities in Poland.

¹⁴ Probably not everyone would agree but I am not the only one who believes in that.

¹⁵ As a matter of fact, we also got to taste it literally as they held a customary free breakfast for fans who were willing to join it.

40 years of history

Over the course of the last 40 years, Polcon had its good and bad moments. Sometimes it was superb and in other years not really. Yet the idea survived. The love for SFF and fandom survived. Janusz A. Zajdel Award of Polish Fandom survived. This means a lot to me but it also proves that those are important things. At least important to a group of people large enough to make it all worth continuing.

Above you can see some complaining and critique of what has happened in a given year. Don't be fooled by it. Polish fandom benefited from all those conventions. Even in the worst years, there were multiple people willing to put a lot of effort into organising Polcon for all of us. They all should be thanked for that. So let me thank all of the organisers who over the past 40 years continued this big adventure called Polcon.



ON LETTERS AND FANZINES

MARCIN 'ALQUA' KŁAK

I read a book. A good one. It is called "Tsubaki bungu-ter" but I read it in Polish where it is known under the title "Kameliowy sklep papierniczy". It was, unfortunately, not translated into English but the title would be "Camellia Stationery Store". Upon reading it, I understood that I'll have to write about this novel.

It is a work of Ogawa Ito and it is not related to science fiction or fantasy. As far as I can see, there are even no traces of magical realism in it. The book tells the story of Hatoko – a young woman who inherited a stationery store from her teacher. It is almost an ordinary shop. One can buy there pencils, notebooks, erasers, and so on. The one thing that is not common (at least in Poland) is that they also offer a service. What one can order is for the owner to write a letter for them. Those may be simple stuff like occasional postcards ordered by a company or some more personal ones. The main character receives some interesting commissions – a letter to refuse a money loan, one to cut off all of the bonds between two people, and more. And this is the main idea of the book – letters. The whole plot circles around the letter writing and relationships Hatoko establishes with her customers, neighbours, and sometimes also other people.

I was absolutely enchanted by how the book describes the process of writing a letter. The protagonist does not think only about words. Don't understand me wrong. The words are extremely important. She pays a lot of attention to communicating clearly and in the style of her customers. Sometimes getting the wording right is a tough thing. Yet she also

deliberates on other parts of the letter. We can follow her train of thoughts as to what paper to choose, and what pen would be the correct one to convey the message. She also considers the appropriate type of ink to use and when she doesn't have the perfect one she explains what to do to make it. This is not the end. Even the selection of a post stamp is an important step for her. I won't say that her letters are perfect. What I can say is that they are the best she can manage and each part of the letter is well thought-through.

Upon reading this novel I kept thinking about fandom and especially about fanzines. It brought to me a memory of Geri Sullivan's TAFF trip in 2019. When she visited Kraków, we had a "formal" meeting with the local SFF club. She talked about her trip and fandom and she shared copies of *A TAFF Guide to Beer*. When handing them out, she mentioned that some were printed on the usual white paper and some on the old blueish paper she liked. I don't remember the details – I just recall that Geri provided talked more about it. So when I read about Hatoko deciding which paper to use, this memory flashed back. I was not in fandom in its early days, not even in the middle days. I never used a mimeograph or a spirit duplicator. I didn't have my favourite paper nor the best correction fluid etc. After reading "Camellia Stationery Store", I regret it even more.

I am not writing this article to only mention this one memory that struck me upon reading. There was more to the book that made me want to write about it. Or to be more precise, to write about the thoughts it evoked. The main character is engaging in an activity that is dying out. From my understanding letter writing is in way better shape in Japan than it is in Poland. At least it is easier to buy a letter paper there. In fact, upon looking for

a letter paper here in Poland I found out that interesting ones are coming from Japan and Italy. Nevertheless, I think that even in Japan letters are not as popular as they used to be. And I think this is the case everywhere in the world. Of course we (fortunately) can still write traditional letters but it is not anymore the main means of communication.

And letters are important to fandom. Well, at least they were important back in the day. They were also crucial for fanzines. We switched the media now. Instead of sending fanzine via post, many of us distribute PDFs. Also, Letter of Comment is easier (and cheaper) to deliver via e-mail, instead of using traditional post. For years now, both forms co-exist. We didn't have to switch completely. Some fanzines are exclusively digital but others exist in both physical and electronic realms. Yet how many fannish letters are still being sent?

I consider myself lucky to be able to still indulge in the tradition. I came back to letter writing and I am back into fanzines. *A-Zyn* was primarily created as a printed zine. Now it is also available digitally but I love the printed copies. It is both frustrating and cool to pack it into envelopes, paste the stamps, and go to the post office with a bag full of fanzines. I treasure even more the moments when I am finding a fanzine in my mailbox. It is not common – happens a few times a year but still makes me happy. There is something magical to it.

There is, however, more to fanzines and letters. We don't only use post to send the copies and LOCs. We are also similarly endangered. On Fancyclopedia the Fanzine article reads:¹ “They were, for many years, the principal communications medium among fen.” When did the fanzines stop being the main com-

munication channel? Years ago. I recall from discussions with other fans that while in the past years, fanzines were considered the core of fandom they are not near the core anymore. There is one fanzine convention I am aware of – Corflu. It has a long history – this year it was held for the 41st time. How big it is? Rather small – below 100 members.

I am not writing this to diminish the field or its importance. There are still plenty of things ongoing in the fanzines. I am not able to follow and read everything that is being published. I am even sure I am not aware of everything. Yet, my impression is that fanzines, similarly to paper letters, are the things of the past. There are still some of us who cultivate the tradition. The form is even developing and we embraced the new world and started to use it. I believe that fanzines will still be a thing in ten years. I am not sure about 50 though. It saddens me. There is so much to fanzines. They are fun to create and cool to read. They allow us to meet each other and exchange our thoughts. Many of the articles published in zines over the years would not find a place in “official” magazines. Losing this medium would be very, very sad.

I am not sure about the future but I have some hopes. From time to time, here in Poland, I am seeing people “reinventing the wheel”. It is not common but I think that at least twice someone started to create a fanzine without the knowledge of the word. Will it be a continuation of the tradition? Rather not but maybe the need to communicate in such a way will remain and even in 50 years we will see some fannish magazines getting published on paper or as virtual magazines in some crazy realistic VR game. Or maybe we will even employ a new technology till then? Maybe some form of fanzines will become a thing of the future?

¹ <https://fancyclopedia.org/Fanzine>.

For now, I will keep making fanzines. I will try to share this joy with others and hopefully, in the future, I will be still able to participate in the active field. Fanzines may not be the core of fandom anymore but they may remain the important thing. And maybe, just maybe one day someone will write a great story about fanzine writing – one that like “Camellia Stationery Store” will reach many readers and will make them wish to join the activity.



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