

**Stanisław Pajka**

*Ostrołęka*

## THE KURPIE REGION WAS THE CENTRE OF THE WORLD FOR HENRYK SYSKA (1920–2000)

### KURPIE BYŁY CENTRUM ŚWIATA DLA HENRYKA SYSKI (1920–2000)

Certainly, after every human being, even if only in the closest family circle, remain some traces of memory. In the case of such people as Henryk Syska though, it can be legitimately repeated after Horace: “not all of me will die”. He left a huge creative output. Several years ago I published a rather extensive monograph on his life and output<sup>1</sup>. He made his mark on the history of nationwide culture, and especially in the literature of his small Kurpian Homeland – the White and Green Forest. Before I turn to the subject mentioned in the title, first of all a few facts from the writer’s life.

#### **Family**

Henryk Syska was born on 4 March 1920 in the settlement of freeholders of Damięty (Goworowo commune), in the southern part of Ostrołęka County, where his parents moved at the end of the First World War. He grew up in a large peasant family with nine children, three of whom died. The Syska family had only 5 morgens of land. Therefore, it was not easy to provide food and clothes for such a large family. At the time of the countryside overpopulation, there were frequent problems with finding work. It was often necessary to cut back on bread. Recalling childhood in one of his stories, the author confesses: “We didn’t have a cow because there wasn’t enough money to buy one. This situation humiliated me. They, friends of mine, have cows, horses, they’re rich, they drink fresh milk every day (at least this is what I imagined). It’s evening, it’s time for supper. If only we had at least a quarter of milk for six people. Even if it was milk without cream”<sup>2</sup>.

There was not much warmth and affection in this hard family life. Neither did the family atmosphere create incentives to shape broader mental horizons. His parents were practically illiterate. In one of the interviews, the author would say: “my father hated the printed word, pursuant to the common in the village at that time rule saying that reading would not bring any bread, and my mother would

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<sup>1</sup> S. Pajka, *Koleinami życia i twórczości Henryka Syski*. Ostrołęka 1985.

<sup>2</sup> H. Syska, *Dwie mile od Różana*. Warszawa 1955, p. 29.

limit her reading to the prayer book”<sup>3</sup>. The conditions of contemporary development created by the closest social background did not foretell the artistic path. It was possible to foretell the future author different career paths, but in no way literary. And yet it happened otherwise. The development of a child from a poor family took place as if contrary to all that resulted from his origin.

### Education

For the first 4 years he studied in a small one-class school in his native village – in Damięty. It was where he heard about Adam Chętnik for the first time. He also found out about the past of Kurpians, about Polish highlanders, Zakopane and Sabała, Janosik and the Tatra rocks. Then, he attended a 6-grade General School in Borawe, located 5 km from his native village. The subject he liked the most was history. He eagerly read historical books. The basic reading was *Dzieje ojczyzste* by Maria Dzierżanowska, *Wieczory pod lipą* by Lucjan Siemieński, *Dzieje Polski w 24 obrazach* by Władysław Anczyc. He listened attentively to the fragments of *Potop*, *Krzyżacy*, *Pan Wołodyjowski*, *Szyfowe prace* which were read in the classroom. Little Henryk was particularly impressed by Anczyc’s book called *24 obrazki* for short. From this book the pupil remembered two images: the death of Władysław Warneńczyk and the struggle of Kurpian peasants with Swedes. Perhaps it is these images which triggered his love for the past of the Narew River Land?

It is worth noting that already in general school he tried to read as much as possible about Kurpie. This is what he writes about it: “I have not missed any opportunity, giving me a book, a book reader, or even the most precious note from the life of Kurpie living by the Narew river. It is a pity though that apart from popular brochures by Chętnik, other works were practically unavailable at the time”<sup>4</sup>. And it was difficult to satisfy the pupils’ interest in reading then: “Several dozen books of dubious value changed hands, when exchanging books during lessons, the teacher often had nothing to give us” – claims the author in one of his stories<sup>5</sup>. In addition, already at that time, his talent for writing came to light. He sends his first correspondence to “Płomyk” and “Przegląd Łomżyński”.

Having finished the 6-grade school in Borawe, in 1933, Henryk Syska had to give up education for a long time. The plight of peons’ child forced him to earn a living. At first he dealt with pasturing. Not on his father’s field but on strangers’ one. Then, for the whole year, he was apprenticed in shoemaking industry. He got better and better at this “craft”. However, his interests were different. Already at that time, the thought of his own fate was a far cry from the family’s plans. It is hard to be surprised. Nobody believed that a peasant child could “come over as toffs”. Could it be any different in the poor and large Syska family? The son’s

<sup>3</sup> Erem, *Henryk Syska i jego twórczość*. Nasza Wieś 1973, No. 21, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> H. Syska, *Dwie mile od Różana...*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

interests became the cause of many family arguments, but Henryk, despite all of this “went his way” There was more of intuition, a kind of defiance rather than a clear view of his future fate. But perhaps it was this desire to clash with adversities, not yielding under pressure from the outside that was the beginning of entering into the path of creativity.

An important “driving force” for the development of the future Writer’s personality were also other facts. Among other things, the village and its surrounding area were the centre of radical peasant thought before the war. As an adolescent, he came into contact with the Communist Party of Poland activists, with several issues of “Czerwony Sztandar”. The relations with Jan Reiff, the chairman of the County Peoples’ Youth Union also had a serious impact on shaping the future writer’s opinions. The author of *O czarne wody Narwi* after many years will write about him: “You were murdered, along with many other martyrs, by the Nazi executioners. You had given comfort to many during your lifetime. It was you who could not be helped at the end of the world journey. It is also you – the advocate of the youth, the historic Ostrołęka Land, whom I owe getting away from a jerkwater settlement to the wide world. To the bright, clear, vast world of science and knowledge”<sup>6</sup>.

The fact that he belonged to the Peoples’ Youth Union Club which he joined at the age of 15 also left an imprint on him. It was not just a formal membership. He got others involved in the organization. In his village he was the secretary of the club. This is what he writes about this period: “I read plenty of newspapers. Quite a lot of them came to the club room. There was «Siewca», «Młoda Wieś», «Wici», «Gazeta Grudziądzka» and many others. I took part in shows put on in the summer time in empty barns. Several times a year there were stage plays, such as *Krewniak z Ameryki*, *Zasadzka*, *Dziewięty Pawilon*, *Karpaccy górale*. There was a lot of talk about Kurpie fighting, about Stach Konwa. I participated in congresses and courses organized by the County Board. There is a whole litany of them... Kruszewo by the Narew river, Kadzidło, Ostrołęka, Goworowo, Olszewka”<sup>7</sup>.

At the beginning of 1938, thanks to a scholarship received from the People’s Youth Union, he started studying at one-year Agricultural School in Krzyżewo, in the former Łapy County. At school he was interested not only in vocational skills, but also in reading fiction, historical books. He also sent his correspondence to “Przysposobienie Rolnicze” and “Młoda Wieś”.

Having finished school in Krzyżewo, as a lucky scholar of the State Agricultural Bank, he became a pupil of the State Garden Gymnasium in Ursynów near Warsaw. And that is when the war broke out – the year 1939.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 49

<sup>7</sup> H. Syska, *Skrzypią wrota*. Warszawa 1974, p. 221.

### Occupation

Despite difficult occupation days, Henryk thought about continuing his education. An opportunity to do so appeared. The authorities of the General Governorship allowed running vocational schools with narrow curricula. By virtue of this decree, the school in Ursynów was re-opened. The former students returned to it. Among them there was also Henryk Syska. It was a school steeped in patriotic spirit. Many outstanding teachers taught there, mainly the professors from the Horticultural College in Poznań. After graduating from the Garden Gymnasium in Ursynów, he worked as a lab assistant at the Warsaw Agricultural Chamber until the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising. It was an important period in shaping his interests and personality as a writer. He met there, among others, several outstanding people, such as Prof. Jan Wilczyński of the University of Vilnius, Prof. Jan Żabiński – for many years the director of the Warsaw Zoological Garden. Besides, he read a lot. In one of his books he confesses: “I read a lot, certainly chaotically and without much choice. But also it was very difficult to actually have a choice. Both in Damięty settlement and later during the occupation. You chose what was close at hand. It has its weakness, but also some advantages. First of all, you absorb as much information and facts as possible, and then you select and put it all in order”<sup>8</sup>.

He was a frequent visitor to second-hand bookshops. In those difficult times he collected a large home library. He owned, among others, *Historia demokracji polskiej* by Bolesław Limanowski, *Pamiętniki* by Jan Słomka, *Żywot chłopca – działacza* by Franciszek Magryś, *Pisma i mowy* and *Okruszyny z Gręboszowa* by Jakub Bojko, *Mroki średniowiecza* by Józef Putek, *Pisma i mowy* by Wincenty Witos, *Na drogach i manowcach kultury ludowej* by Stanisław Pigoń, *Historia chłopów polskich* by Aleksander Świętochowski.

He also actively joined the resistance movement. He belonged to “Miecz i Pług” (‘Sword and Plough’ Movement was a conspiratorial military organization – translator’s note) and AK (Home Army). He acted under the name Porebski. This conspiratorial pseudonym, as can be easily noted, was in honour of one of his favourite writers, a social activist and a regionalist – Władysław Orkan. The practice field was the surroundings of Komorowo near Warsaw. He dealt with the distribution of “Chłopski Bój” – a paper issued by the organization headed by Jan Józef Nosek, a former peasant activist and an MP. During the conspiratorial activity – near Łukowo – he met Witold Zalewski and Roman Bratny. Also Henryk’s flat, located at 1 Freta Street, was used for conspiratorial purposes. Several training sessions of People’s Guard took place there. Also, soldiers from the Peasant Battalions from Radzymin district, for example Władysław Rydel and Marian Gotowiec, came around. Henryk was in the vicinity of Grójec during the uprising. At the beginning of February 1945, with the intention of pursuing higher studies, he left for Lublin.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 79.

## Lublin

First he served as the secretary of the Voivodeship Board of the Peasant Party, and then he was the secretary of the Voivodeship Board of the Rural Youth Union of the Republic of Poland “Wici”. He also served as the head of the Voivodeship Office for the Control of the Press, Publications and Public Performances. He was a member of the Voivodeship National Council. He often took trips in the field – he gave speeches, persuaded. He was a speaker at rallies. He did without a sheet of paper. He was able to get people interested. At the same time, he studied Polish at the University of Lublin. He read a lot, visited archival resources. He was fascinated by leaders and peasants’ movement activists, such as Wincenty Witos, Tomasz Nocznicki, Jakub Bojko, Błażej Stolarski, Michał Kajka, Teofil Kurczak. He admired their knowledge based on self-study, which, after all, was often broader than that of many scientifically-titled intellectuals. And besides, he was charmed with their patriotism and the wisdom of life.

It was also in Lublin where he became known as a promising journalist and publicist. He edited, among others, “Chłopski Zew”, in which he debuted with his poem entitled *Rosną nasze sztandary ludowe*.

Initially he had varied interests, neither as a journalist yet, nor a writer, as he describes himself in an autobiographical book *Skrzypią wrota*. Here are some publication titles from this period: *Zawitał maj*, *Karabin*, *plug i pióro*, *Lubelszczyzna – kolebka zdrowej myśli ludowej*, *Na święto ludowe*, *Ksiądz Piotr Ściegienny i jego złota księżeczka*, *Jan Rak – pańszczyźniany poeta*. Polish literary bibliography for the year 1944/1945 noted five publications by Henryk Syska, and for the year 1946 – eight. He published his articles in various magazines and newspapers, e.g. “Zdrój”, “Światło”, “Gazeta Lubelska”, “Sztandar Ludu”, “Wieś”, “Zielony Sztandar”, “Wolna Wiciowa Gromada”, “Dziennik Ludowy”. The published articles raise important issues and engage considerable interest. For example, a radical activist, long-time editor of “Zorza” and “Zaranie” – Maksymilian Malinowski kindly responded to an essay *Zaniarskim plugiem* published in “Myśl Chłopska” (1947, No. 1)<sup>9</sup>.

Henryk Syska – as a journalist – wrote simply, vividly and - most importantly - from the heart. In his article *Zawitał maj*, on the occasion of the victory over Germans, he wrote: “The hymn of victory echoes all over the Polish lands. And vast, flowery and rich they are. They covered all areas of the Piast dynasties in their range. From the lowlands of the Bug river, Białowieża forests... From the Carpathian forests, the Tatra mountains... to the Oder, Nysa rivers, the ancient settlements of Lusatians, Polabians, Pomeranians... to Szczecin, Kołobrzeg, over there – to grey-blue waves of the Baltic Sea”<sup>10</sup>.

It was also in Lublin, in 1946, where he, together with Anna Kamińska, published his first book *Chata mazurska*. An impulse for the creation of this

<sup>9</sup> Cf M. Malinowski, *Historycyzm w Polsce Ludowej*. Myśl Chłopska 1947, No. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Chłopski Zew 1948, No. 2.

brochure publication, whose main heroes were Bogumił Labusz and Michał Kajka, was a student camp in Smolajny near Lidzbark Warmiński. The future writer was fascinated by the landscape and history of this land. In addition, this first, minor publication – was a debut in Warmia and Masuria issues. Most probably, as a 26-year-old young man, he did not realize then that this subject would take such a prominent place in his work.

At that time the young activist and journalist understood well the new historical situation of the People's Republic of Poland after the Second World War. In the half of 1946 he wrote: "Poland is squeezed between two buffer nations which have powerful dynamics, military and economic capabilities: Soviet Russia and Germany. Our competitiveness in the mentioned aspects is very poor"<sup>11</sup>. Henryk Syska met ranks of friendly people in Lublin. In his autobiographical novel he will write warm words about this period: "In Lublin I was fortunate to meet understanding souls of exceptional kindness. Such were the times. Without dignitary-like degeneration which results from the glut of power, the sense of impunity, with the classic lack of culture"<sup>12</sup>.

In autumn 1947, he left Lublin and moved to Warsaw.

### Warsaw

At first he worked at the United People's Party National Committee Library. Later he became the editor-in-chief deputy of the social-cultural weekly "Wici" and then he worked for "Zielony Sztandar", "Tygodnik Kulturalny". At the same time he undertook studying at the University of Warsaw. He also spent a lot of time in archives and libraries. He was intensively preparing for the publication of his first books. And so in 1949, as many as 3 books were published: *Od "Kmiotka" do "Zarania"*, *Przez walkę do zwycięstwa* and *Tomasz Nocznicki – radykalny działacz chłopski*. At the same time, already as a writer of three books, a man totally involved, appointed a political writer, he found himself out of work and encountered a number of perturbations. Without going into detailed clarification of this issue, let us just say that difficult years began for Syska. However, they were not lost years. During this period, i.e. 1950–1956, so within 7 years, 13 books and 1 editorial work were published. Among the positions created during this period, there are – using the words of the Writer – book-bastions, the most important in his whole output. They include *Od "Kmiotka" do "Zarania"*, *Czerwony kasztelan* and *Nad błękitną moją Narwią*. Those publications determined the main currents of the writer's interests: radical peasants' movement, progressive national and social traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and regional issues. It was at that time when shaped the fields of interest to which he remained faithful until the end of his life.

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<sup>11</sup> Dziennik Ludowy 1946, No. 19.

<sup>12</sup> H. Syska, *Skrzypią wrota...*, p. 70

At the same time, in those years of specific isolation, Syska develops a strong interest in his native region – the Kurpie region. The results of these interests are such titles as *Na ziemi Kurpiów*, *Obleciałem Kurpie-Gocie*, *Dwie mile od Różana*, *Od Pułtuska do Myszynca*. Also at that time, *Nad błękitną moją Narwią* was published – one of the best books that the Writer himself calls “the bastion”. This fascination with the native region and making it the basis of his output, is – taking into account the situation at the time – a peculiar phenomenon. It should be noted that the 1950s were not gracious for regional writing.

It was only in 1956 when the so called “October transformations” opened new ways in front of Syska. And again, as in the old days in Lublin, he felt the desire to be actively involved. In 1956, he took up a position as the chairman of the Warsaw Voivodeship Committee of the Front of National Unity. He is a member of the Voivodeship National Council in Warsaw, of the Voivodeship Plenum and of the United People’s Party National Committee; he also becomes a member of the Supervisory Board of People’s Cooperative Publishing. He is active in a number of areas again, not neglecting writing.

The year 1959 proved to be very satisfying. On the 15th anniversary of the People’s Republic of Poland, he received the Warsaw Voivodeship literary prize. This is what we can read in the award declaration: “To the writer of Mazovia Land, a man with all feelings and fondness, heart and thought attached to Mazovia, and especially to the Kurpie region, to which he devoted many novels, short stories and literary sketches”<sup>13</sup>. Despite such significant artistic success, in early 1962 he moved to Olsztyn.

### Olsztyn

Written work in the city on the Łyna river brought good results. One can certainly say that it was a period of hard work. During this period he published numerous books devoted to Warmia and Masuria. It was already after three years of his stay in Olsztyn when *Mazurskie spotkania* was published, which was a debut in describing – using the words of the Writer – Prussian Mazovia. And then he presented the readers *Sosny mazurskiej cień*, *Okruchy zdarzeń*, *Scalone pogranicze* and other publications. He also remained loyal to the Kurpie region. While living in Olsztyn, he kept writing about “his Kurpie”. Such titles as: *Zamodrzała puszcza świtem*, *Adam Chętnik*, *O czarne wody Narwi*, *Skrzypią wrota* can be mentioned here. He worked constantly. His wife – Zosia and daughter – Kasia supported him in his creative work. Certainly these harmonious family relations greatly assisted creativity. He worked continuously. Only a few months before his death, seriously ill, he stopped his creative work after 60 years. Almost every year he published one book or another. The last book, *Muzyka ojczystych drzew*, was published after the Writer’s death. In total, he published nearly 80 works. This is an impressive output for one life and for one person. His extensive works covered various subjects,

<sup>13</sup> Zielony Sztandar 1959, No. 34.

about prominent peasant movement activists, descriptions of various events and ordinary people from Mazovia, Podlasie as well as Warmia and Masuria. Taking into consideration this huge creative output, it can be reasonably concluded that: he was a bard of the Kurpie region.

Perhaps in his work he devoted the most attention to places, people and events from the areas by the Narew, Orzyc, Orz and Rozoga rivers. What implies that are the titles of his books, e.g.: *Nad błękitną moją Narwią*, *Kurpik siedzi w lesie*, *Na ziemi Kurpiów*, *Od Pułtuska do Myszynca*, *Dwie mile od Różana*, *Obleciałem Kurpie-Gocie*, *A w Zielonej*, *w Myszynieckiej*, *Skrzypią wrota*, *W dolinie Orza*, *Zamodrzala puszcza świtem*, *Przez Puszcze Zieloną*, *Kęs rodzinnego zaścianka*.

When reading the books mentioned above, it is easy to notice that their author is not only a skilled writer, but also a documentarian-historian. It can be said that his work – like Adam Chętnik’s – constitute an individualistic compendium of regional history – both distant and contemporary. It is impossible to understand the history of the Kurpie region without knowing those books. It is therefore safe to say that Syska has joined the circle of the greatest writers and historians of the Narew River Land.

Of course, it is possible to wonder whether this constant “sticking” to Kurpie turned out to be good for the Writer. After all, his development could have gone in another direction. He could, for example, have contented himself with one or two works devoted to the Narew River Land. He did not, however. From the very beginning of his creative career until the end of his days, he remained faithful to the Kurpie region. And it is good that he followed that path. Thanks to that, Kurpie have their great bard.

Other regions had already had their writers. For example, Świętokrzyskie Land had Stefan Żeromski, Rocky Podhale – Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer and Władysław Orkan, Zakopane – Tytus Chałubiński and Stanisław Witkiewicz, Kujawy – Jan Kasprówicz, and Kurpie have Henryk Syska.

Certainly Kurpie would be spiritually poorer if there had not been any books by the Writer from near Ostrołęka. This is to a large extent thanks to them that the inhabitants of the former Kurpie Forests of the whole Narew River Land can get to know more about their origins, better determine their historical identity. Today, in the age of blurring regional differences, progressing unification of culture, reading such books is becoming particularly useful. They may stimulate to learn about the history of the family land, to reflect on one’s own origins, to teach regional pride. In addition, they may encourage initiating socio-cultural movement, strengthen interpersonal relationships, teach to keep local traditions alive.

Henryk Syska was certainly a great expert on the history of Kurpie. He studied this issue for over 60 years. His home library, amounting to several thousand volumes, was a special archive of the knowledge about the region. It is interesting to note that the author of *Nad błękitną moją Narwią*, despite having such an extensive knowledge of the Kurpie region past, was aware of the need for its continuous deepening. In one of his last works, *Przez Puszcze Zieloną*, he made a

remarkable statement: “Not everything has yet congealed on the lips of historical continuity, many of the gold filings of familiarity scattered over the Kurpie Forest await the persistent seekers”<sup>14</sup>. This thought can be regarded as an important challenge for contemporary researchers of the history of Kurpie. Also, the following question may be posed: why, over so many years, did he constantly come back to describing the Narew River Land? Certainly the love for his family region played an important role. In one of the conversations he confessed with regret: “For my books I acquired the material from the three generally vast since recently voivodeships: Białystok, Olsztyn and Warsaw. If I had followed only the interests of the political and administrative authorities of these lands, if I had expected acknowledgement from the county authorities managing the Green or White Forest, I would not have created a single work about them”<sup>15</sup>. And yet he wrote affectionately and kindly about his family land. On the pages of the book *Skrzypią wrota* (p. 39), he made a remarkable and moving confession: “Strange is the power of the family land. It causes suffering, repulses with sharpness, and attracts and nurses – like the fondest mother”.

A few years ago Leszek Kołakowski, a countryman from Radom, one of the greatest contemporary philosophers in Europe and in the world, described a small homeland as “the centre of the world”<sup>16</sup>. Certainly, Kurpie was such a centre of the world for Syska. This love for the family nest gave him strength and creative impulses. But not only. He also understood well the essence of regionalism. In the introduction to the book *Ułomek rodzinnego chleba* he will write the significant words: “In fact, there are not any colourless places or towns, devoid of romance and history, deprived of people who look further and sharper. The heroes of a village, a community or a town, who together as a group or each one individually, impinge on the environmental progress, and at the same also the nationwide progress”. In another place he emphasizes: “...because it is not great, statuesque individuals but ordinary people who make history and pave the way for progress. These inconspicuous heroes of a village, a town create the most life-giving soil for the development of our culture”. He realized – using the words of a poet priest and a thinker Jan Twardowski, that “all the best values of our culture came from the provinces”<sup>17</sup>. A clear illustration of this are such great names as: Jan Kochanowski, Władysław Syrokomla, Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki czy Cyprian Kamil Norwid.

Encompassing Henryk Syska’s entire writing output, it can be stated that he was – so far – the greatest writer and historian of Kurpie. Although many researchers, writers, historians, etc. have long been interested in this region, none

<sup>14</sup> H. Syska, *Przez Puszczy Zieloną*. Warszawa 1993, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> S. Pajka, *Sięgać do pnia macierzystego*. Tygodnik Ostrołęcki 1987, No. 37.

<sup>16</sup> As cited in: S. Starczewski, *Małe ojczyzny – tradycje dla przyszłości*. Warszawa 2000.

<sup>17</sup> *Nie uciekać od zdumienia światem*. An interview with Fr. Jan Twardowski. Sycyna 1995, No. 719.

of them left as many pages and descriptions of the Narew River Land as Henryk Syska. If one was tempted to some analogy, he can at most be compared in a sense with Adam Chętnik – also the Kurpie region countryman, who studied and described its history and culture for over 60 years. He also left an impressive output. Syska, however, was first and foremost a writer, and often a consummate essayist, who in a vivid and fluent language can brilliantly convey to the Reader the remote past and present of Kurpie.

It is in this sense exactly that the author of *W dolinie Orza* is a great individuality. Several years ago a scholar of this class – a humanist – prof. Aleksander Gieysztor, a long-time president of the Polish Academy of Sciences, wrote about the author of *Nad błękitną moją Narwią*, the significant words: “...he is an author whose themes include Northeastern Mazovia in order to draw knowledge about people and Poland from there, to make clear what was and is happening by the Narew and Orz rivers to those by the Vistula and the Oder”<sup>18</sup>.

Thinking of the output of *Skrzypią wrota* writer, it is important to be aware that the greatest writers often recalled their “little homelands” on the pages of their books. For example, Stefan Żeromski devoted his last work *Puszcza jodłowa* to his family land. Nowadays, in the times of pervasive mass culture, the problem of people “getting lost” in the crowd is becoming more and more important and perceived. The recently deceased Fr. prof. Janusz Stanisław Pasierb – an insightful scholar – a humanist, an ardent Kaszuby region patriot – wrote the significant words: “Small homelands enrich the big homeland and also enrich the huge symphony of the world. We would be lost in it if it were not for the key that we take from home”<sup>19</sup>. And Henryk Syska remained faithful to this current of thought throughout his life and the greatest value of his writing is probably in this loyalty.

For his long-standing social activity he received the Knight’s (1957), Officer’s (1970) and Commodore’s Crosses of the Order Polonia Restituta (1984) as well as many badges, e.g. the Distinguished Cultural Service Award (1973), the Distinguished for Warmia and Masuria Award (1970), the Distinguished for Ostrołęka Voivodeship Award (1996). He was also awarded with numerous prizes, among others the Committee for Tourism, the Presidium of the Voivodeship National Council in Warsaw (1959), Polish Historical Society (1978), Ostrołęka Voivode (1985), Zygmunt Gloger Prize (1983), Tomasz Nocznicki Prize (1985), Ignacy Krasicki Prize (1990), Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński Prize (1983), Mikołaj Kopernik Prize (1990). He also received a number of medals, such as: the 600th anniversary of Ostrołęka (1973), the 550th anniversary of Przasnysz (1985), People’s Cooperative Publishing (1985). He is listed in the Book of People of Merit for Olsztyn City (1983), Honorary Member of Adam Chętnik Scientific Association in Ostrołęka (1993), Honorary Citizen of Goworowo (1995).

<sup>18</sup> A. Gieysztor, *W trosce o kulturę Polski i regionu*. Kontakty 1984, No. 1.

<sup>19</sup> J. Pasierb, *W perspektywie kultury*. Wrocław 1994, p. 30.

He died on 18 February 2000. He rests at the Municipal Cemetery in Olsztyn – in the Representative Quarters: KW-3B-1-2. Family: wife Zofia née Kościńska, retired, MSc Eng in Agriculture, lives in Olsztyn; daughter: Katarzyna – MA in German philology and journalism, married, lives in Warsaw, one grandchild.

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## SUMMARY

The work refers to Henryk Syska – perhaps the most prominent writer of Kurpie Land. It can be repeated after Leszek Kołakowski that every “small Homeland” becomes to a man, and even more to a writer, a kind of “the center of the world”. The author of the article, presenting the output of Syska, shows that, in essence, “the core” of the writer’s work was the Kurpie region.

## STRESZCZENIE

Praca odnosi się do postaci chyba najwybitniejszego pisarza ziemi kurpiowskiej Henryka Syski. Za Leszkiem Kołakowskim można powtórzyć, że każda „mała Ojczyzna” staje się dla człowieka, a tym bardziej pisarza, swoistym „centrum świata”. Autor artykułu, przybliżając dorobek Syski, wykazuje, że w gruncie rzeczy „jądrem” twórczości pisarza była właśnie Kurpiowszczyzna.

**Key words:** Henryk Syska, writer, the Kurpie region

**Słowa kluczowe:** Henryk Syska, pisarz, Kurpiowszczyzna