

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
Tuesday, October 4, 2011

Location: Home of Jeffrey and Norma Glazer, 4 Country Lane, Pepper Pike

Hosts: Jeffrey and Norma Glazer

Novel: *The Street of Crocodiles* [aka *The Cinnamon Shops*], by Bruno Schulz

After enjoying the lovely opening refreshments provided by the Glazers, members assembled for the first meeting of the club's 116th season. President Clyde Henry began with a review of the year's slate of officers, as previously announced in Annual Meeting minutes. He also announced news was received that former member Lou McCreary has died. This evening's guests were introduced and welcomed. Minutes for the June meeting were read and accepted.

Nick Ogan presented the biographical paper on this month's author.

Bruno Schulz was born in 1892 Drohobycz, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, later part of Poland, the Soviet Union, and occupied by Nazi Germany. Drohobycz now is in Ukraine; Schulz spent most of his life there. His parents were Jewish; his father was a cloth merchant, and became a major character in Bruno's writings. Bruno was weak and sickly, and as he grew up developed masochistic tendencies. Despite problems, he did well in school and passed with distinction to attend university. Though Bruno's primary interest was in art, he went off to Lwow Polytechnic to study architecture. His studies were interrupted by ill health, perhaps heart trouble, in 1911. In 1913 Bruno returned to the study of architecture in Lwow; then tried art; and then returned to Drohobycz, depressed. Schulz's father died in 1915, and the cloth shop was burned by the military. Bruno briefly studied architecture in Vienna in 1917. Finally he became an art teacher at his own old school in Drohobycz. The drudgery of the teaching job interfered with his creativity, but was his only source of income as he supported his mother, sister, and some cousins. An exhibit of his art works was attended by a local bigwig, who called it "hideous pornography" and wanted it closed—but local officials did not comply.

Schulz wrote and painted in the time he could spare from his academic duties. In 1934, *The Street of Crocodiles* was published. In 1936 he got a promotion in title though without much improvement of income. In 1939, he said he had dreamt of retiring from teaching at 40% salary, but could not support his

family on that. At one point he took a trip to Paris instead of buying a couch for the family. He was engaged in 1935 but the engagement was later broken off. By 1939 Schulz was clinically depressed. When Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, the Nazis soon handed Drohobycz over to Russia, so Schulz found himself teaching in a Soviet school. He was arrested—though not convicted—for making a painting in Ukrainian national colors. Persecution of Polish Jews was endemic in that period. Bruno Schulz became friends with Felix Landau, a German Gestapo member, who protected him in return for paintings, which Landau liked. Before his death, Schulz gave some of his works to friends for safekeeping, but these were never recovered. On November 19, 1942 Schulz was shot on the street by a Gestapo officer who was a rival of Landau, Schulz's German protector. He was buried in a Jewish cemetery, but his grave has never been located.

George Weimer presented the critical paper.

The Street of Crocodiles presents a strange and beautiful display of metaphor. It is short but captivating, Kafka-esque, surreal and macabre. The narrator pursues a search for lost time, as the story moves from one improbability or impossibility to the next. Adela seems to do everything in the house, like a character out of ancient mythology or history. The family's apartment is a seemingly huge jumble of Dostoyevskian rooms. Everywhere the narrator goes is a mixture of the mundane and magical. Nothing is merely as it would look in a photograph. In each scene we see into the heart of ontology. Cockroaches invoke Kafka in various ways. The father's descent into madness is presented as a creative "demi-urge." Schulz's images are hard to forget, perhaps most of all those from the chapter on the birds—father's ornithological menagerie—which are described in array of colors, so that the reader feels that it is a painter writing. The father seems to be "defending the lost cause of poetry" against the boredom of the city. Father's "lectures" make him sound like a serious philosopher—but while he thinks like a philosopher, he seems to act like a fool. The image of Adela stretching out her foot during the lectures is particularly striking. Commenting on a book of Schulz's drawings circulating around the room, George noted that one can see why the government visitor might have wanted to close down Schulz's rather suggestive art show.

Throughout the novel there is a search for the mythical in the ordinary. The content could keep an analyst busy for a long time. The chapter called "The Street of Crocodiles" rotates around what might be called "Walmart town"—a place at once boring and degraded—as sterile and pointless as the study of pornography—a concession of the city to modernity. Schulz's indebtedness to

Kafka is apparent in many aspects of the novel, including its mixture of macabre, impossible, and mundane events with somewhat malicious humor. The author is clearly familiar with ancient history and philosophy and mythology. The book suggests that civilization has reduced us to economics, but the Father refuses to go along with this. His family ignores him, but his son recognizes him as a genius. Generally, the characters are less characters than Jungian archetypes—there is no significant character development, and few words are spoken. Yet the dynamics of the book rely on language—the words themselves and their ability to seek, find, and demonstrate the ever-present force of mythology in life in “dazzling” prose. Leon Gabinet noted that the book is even more beautiful read in the original Polish.

Discussion ranged over a set of eight questions provided by George as well as others raised by readers.

The character of Father was seen as simultaneously insane, eccentric, a poet, and a genius—not a philosopher but more of a surreal spirit or allegorical figure. Readers invoked the spirits of Nietzsche, Dionysus, and Prospero in connection with this character. One wondered if he was related to the Golem of Jewish literature, but another noted that Golem was defined as more of a benign protective mythic figure than the sort of “strange flame” of this Father character.

The absence of typical novel characteristics (such as coherent plot, theme, and character development) raised the question of whether the book really is a novel. Readers noted it has affinity with visual arts (related to Chagall), and may seem more like an extended prose poem (reminiscent of Dylan Thomas’s *A Child’s Christmas in Wales*). But others felt comfortable with the novel classification. Perhaps it presents a sort of novelistic minimalism, focusing on the single feature of imagery rather than combining that with plot, theme, and character development. Its general sense of alienation from the Jewish community and also from the mainstream Polish culture was noted.

The character of Adela was called antithetical to Father and reminiscent of various strong forces out of Greek tragedy and mythology. Other characters were seen as perhaps reminiscent of a Fellini film, strangely unconnected, but perhaps with each loner presenting a self-contained min-plot. Readers agreed that the cockroaches reminded them of Kafka, though some thought otherwise there were also hints of Faulkner, Garcia Marquez, or Alice in Wonderland.

While some readers found the style irritatingly flowery rather than beautiful, and the lack of plot coherence frustrating rather than fascinatingly

expressionistic, there seemed to be consensus that the book was eminently discussable.

The meeting closed at 10:05, with conversation carrying on out into the warm early-fall evening.