

Lost Time: Lectures on Proust in a Soviet Prison Camp (New York Review Books Classics)

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The first translation of painter and writer Józef Czapski's inspiring lectures on Proust, first delivered in a prison camp in the Soviet Union during World War II.

During the Second World War, as a prisoner of war in a Soviet camp, and with nothing but memory to go on, the Polish artist and soldier Józef Czapski brought Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* to life for an audience of prison inmates. In a series of lectures, Czapski described the arc and import of Proust's masterpiece, sketched major and minor characters in striking detail, and movingly evoked the work's originality, depth, and beauty. Eric Karpeles has translated this brilliant and altogether unparalleled feat of the critical imagination into English for the first time, and in a thoughtful introduction he brings out how, in reckoning with Proust's great meditation on memory, Czapski helped his fellow officers to remember that there was a world apart from the world of the camp. Proust had staked the art of the novelist against the losses of a lifetime and the imminence of death. Recalling that triumphant wager, unfolding, like Sheherazade, the intricacies of Proust's world night after night, Czapski showed to men at the end of their tether that the past remained present and there was a future in which to hope.

Józef Czapski (1896-1993), a painter and writer, and an eyewitness to the turbulent history of the twentieth century, was born into an aristocratic family in Prague and grew up in Poland under czarist domination. After receiving his baccalaureate in Saint Petersburg, he went on to study law at Imperial University and was present during the February Revolution of 1917. Briefly a cavalry officer in World War I, decorated for bravery in the Polish-Soviet War, Czapski went on to attend the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków and then moved to Paris to paint. He spent seven years in Paris, moving in social circles that included friends of Proust and Bonnard, and it was only in 1931 that he returned to Warsaw, and began exhibiting his work and writing art criticism. When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, Czapski sought active duty as a reserve officer. Captured by the Germans, he was handed over to the Soviets as a prisoner of war, though for reasons that remain mysterious he was not among the twenty-two thousand Polish officers who were summarily executed by the Soviet secret police. Czapski described his experiences in the Soviet Union in two books: *Memories of Starobielsk* (forthcoming from NYRB) and *Inhuman Land* (available from NYRB), the latter of which describes his continuing efforts to find out what had happened to his missing and murdered colleagues. Unwilling to live in postwar communist Poland, Czapski set up a studio outside of Paris. His essays appeared in *Kultura*, the leading intellectual journal of the Polish emigration that he helped establish; his painting underwent a great final flowering in the 1980s. Czapski died, nearly blind, at ninety-six.

Eric Karpeles, painter, writer and translator, is the author of *Almost Nothing: The 20th Century Art and Life of Józef Czapski*. His comprehensive guide, *Paintings in Proust*, considers the intersection of literary and visual aesthetics in the work of the great French novelist. He has written about the paintings of poet Elizabeth Bishop and about the end of life as seen through the works of Emily Dickinson, Gustav Mahler and Mark Rothko. Painter of the Sanctuary and the Mary and Laurance Rockefeller Chapel, he has also translated Lorenza Foschini's *Proust's Overcoat*. He lives in Northern California. "This gentle, tenacious, adamant figure has been far too little known in the West-until now. New York Review Books recently published a moving and strikingly original biography by Eric Karpeles, *Almost Nothing: The 20th-Century Art and Life of Józef Czapski*; a new translation by

Antonia Lloyd-Jones of *Inhuman Land: Searching for the Truth in Soviet Russia, 1941-42*; and Mr. Karpeles's translation of Czapski's *Lost Time: Lectures on Proust in a Soviet Prison Camp*. Together these books document Czapski's physical and spiritual survival during a nightmare era, but, more than that, they re-create an overlooked life, one marked by an exemplary measure of modesty, moral clarity and artistic richness. Moreover, Mr. Karpeles, a California-based painter and art critic, has ignited international interest in Czapski's artwork." -Cynthia Haven, *The Wall Street Journal*

"Lost Time is one of the most remarkable and inspiring texts to have emerged from the experience of surviving and resisting 20th-century barbaris." -John Gray, *New Statesman*

"The Polish painter and writer Jozef Czapski lived through almost the entire twentieth century as an exception to the rule. A pacifist who became a Polish army officer being deported to a Soviet prison camp in 1939, he was one of very few to survive the Katyn massacre perpetrated by Stalin's secret police the following year....He was both a patriot and a European in the deepest sense, with friends and family connections across the continent. In this year's centenary of independence regained, a new generation of Poles in a country at the crossroads must decide whether Czapski's vision will also be theirs." -Stanley Bill, *Times Literary Supplement*

"To think of these radiant, incisive reflections delivered in the stinking cold of a Soviet prisoner-of-war mess hall beggars imagination. A remnant of the Polish officer class done to death en masse by Stalin, Czapski was-without benefit of books or notes-among the greatest Proustians. Long may his name live." -Benjamin Taylor

"Czapski sometimes speaks of himself-but always in terms of the ceaseless battle he wages for clear vision, for full use of his gifts, the battle to imbue his life with maximal meaning." -Adam Zagajewski

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