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A Polish radical and a Nazi shared a cell for 255 days. Their conversations are astounding

Kazimierz Moczarski recorded all the shocking monologues of his SS inmate, newly republished here

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SS Commander Jürgen Stroop (centre) watching housing blocks burning during the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 Credit: Universal History Archive/Getty

**Frances Wilson**[Show biography](#) ✓

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In 1945, Kazimierz Moczarski, a former officer of the Polish Resistance, was captured by Stalin's secret police and sentenced, as an enemy of the state, to 11 years in Warsaw's Mokotów prison. Here he endured 49 different types of torture, one of which was to share a cell between March 2 and November 11 1949 with two Nazis.

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The older man, who wore prison trousers, clogs and had several missing teeth, was Gustav Schielke, a low-level archive worker for the security police. The younger, who wore a crimson jacket, a handkerchief knotted at his throat and leather boots polished to the highest shine, was SS Commander Jürgen Stroop, an architect of the Holocaust and liquidator of the Warsaw Ghetto, now awaiting execution.

Having once tried to assassinate Stroop, Moczarski was determined to use this opportunity to extract as much information as he could. "If I am with war criminals," he later wrote in *Conversations with an Executioner*, his account of these 255 days, "then let me get to know them, try to break down the threads of their life stories and personalities". Moczarski's aim was to uncover "what historical, psychological, sociological mechanism led some Germans to come together into a gang of mass murderers who governed the Reich".

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The result is an astonishing account of the narcissism of Nazism. Stroop, who liked nothing better than the sound of his own voice, proved himself an excellent source of research, and what Moczarski calls “conversations”, here recounted largely in full, were closer to boastful monologues. Unrepentant to the end, Stroop rhapsodised over his love of German forests, the breasts of the “dirty and savage” Carpathian-Romanian highland women, and the Ukrainian estates he would have owned had he won the war: “A footman would prepare the table for dinner... The distant rumble of Soviet motors pumping water into the watermelon fields.”

Hannah Arendt coined the phrase “the banality of evil” to describe “the phenomenon that stared one in the face” at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. Moczarski captures such ludicrousness in Stroop, who sported a monocle despite having perfect eyesight. Comparing his prison deprivations to the privileges allowed in Dachau, where “everyone was guaranteed a toothbrush, soap, toilet paper...”, he sometimes broke into song; at other times, he demonstrated how to ride, rocking back and forth on bent legs, “first at a walk, then a canter, and finally a gallop. He shouted,

made kissing noises, whipped an imaginary steed, and snorted and whinnied like a horse.”



Kazimierz Moczarski, a former officer of the Polish Resistance, spent 11 years in Warsaw's Mokotów prison

Because he was not allowed notebooks in prison, Moczarski first composed *Confessions of an Executioner* in his mind, visualising each page as he “wrote” on it, and mentally marking-up passages for revision. “I found myself in a state of exceptional – I would say even phenomenal – concentration,” he explained. Moczarski calls the resulting book a “report” (“literary embellishments seem to me unsuitable”), but *Conversations with*

an Executioner is more elegant and stylised than this. Composed largely of dialogue, it reads like a play; equally, though, it could serve as a biography of Stroop.

“The ideal biographer must have broken bread with his subject,” said Dr Samuel Johnson, and Moczarski shared more than 600 meals with his cellmate – although sharing is not the right term because Stroop, in recognition of his status, was allowed double portions of food. He ate slowly, Moczarski notes, and then let out his trousers, “fastening them on one of the extra buttons at the waist that he’s sewed on for a ‘medium’ or ‘large’ full belly”. There, in a stroke, we have the man: Boswell could not have done it better.



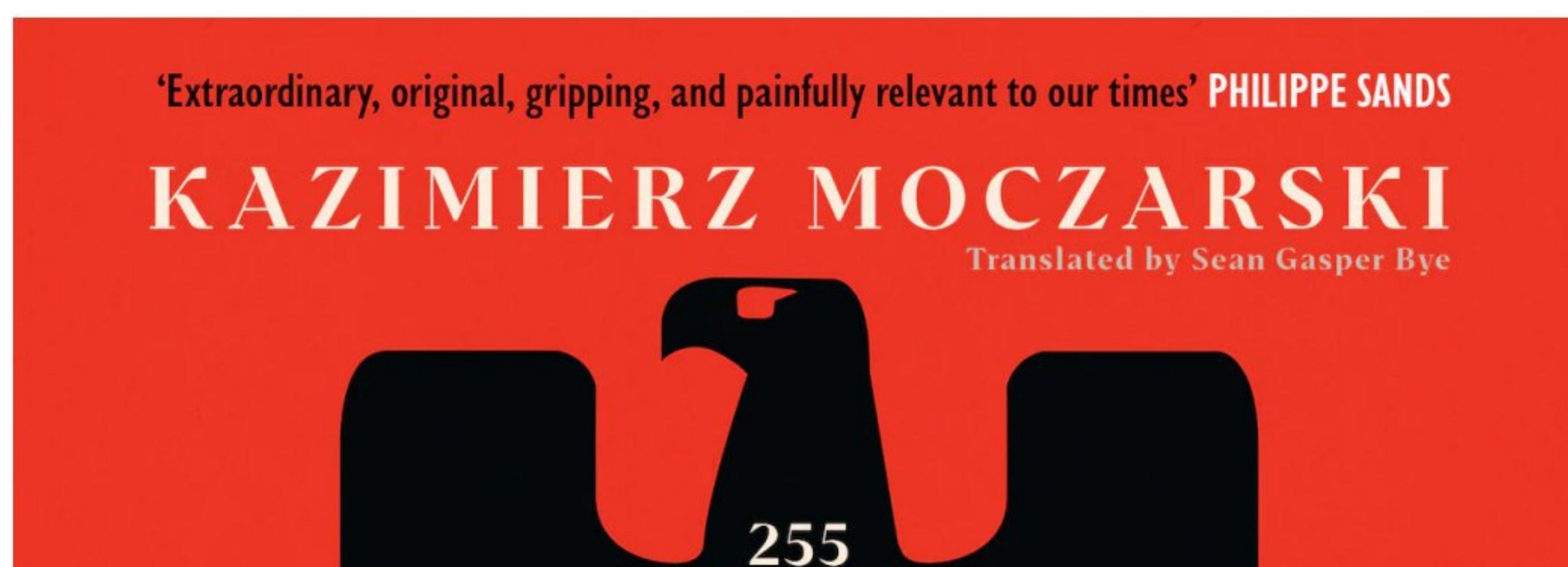


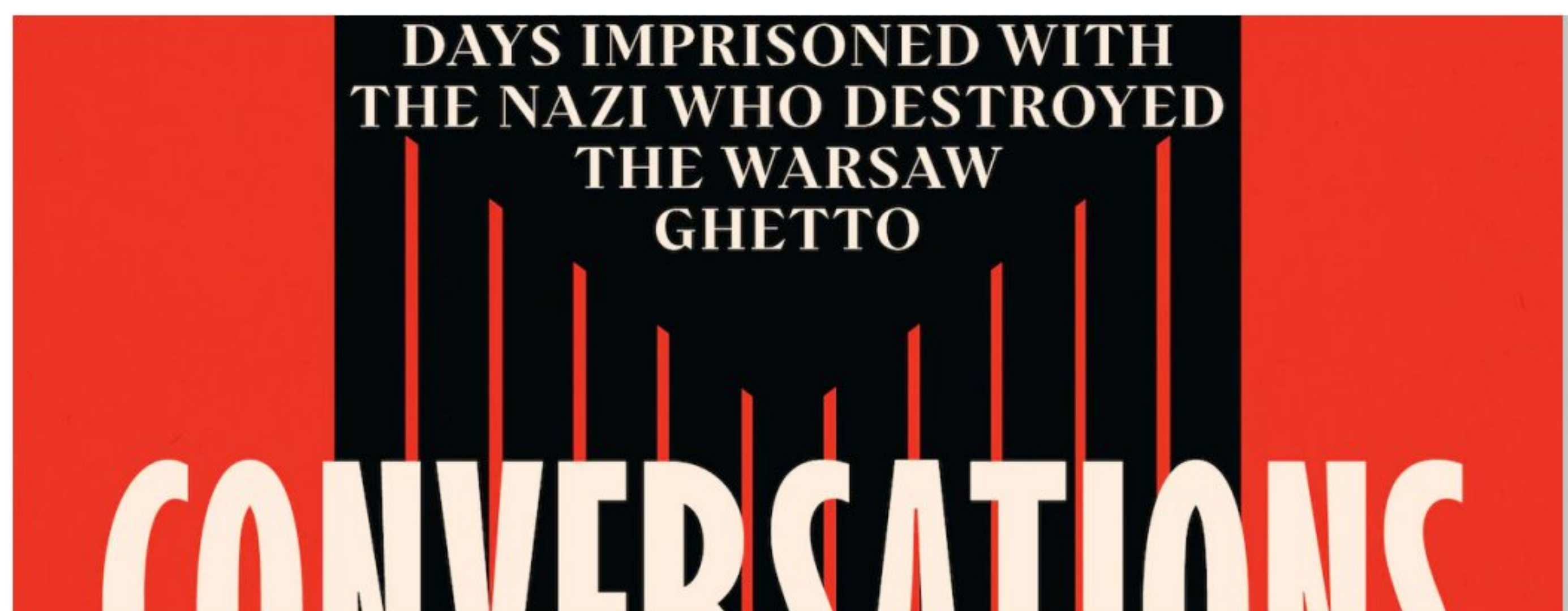
Stroop pictured for the Dachau International Military Tribunal Credit: TNN Multimedia Library

Stroop's defining character trait was his regard for hierarchy. This included the pecking order in the cell: Moczarski, he insisted, must have the only bed, because "you are a member of the ruling nation here, the victorious one, and so the master race." His creed was "faithfulness, faithfulness, faithfulness", and the simplistic understanding of the world he gleaned at primary school was refined by propaganda: "the French are scoundrels and *métèques*... Anarchists and snobs... Frenchwomen are generally whores."

It took six months for Stroop to be sufficiently relaxed with Moczarski to share his recollections of the “Great Operation”, or the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto, a 3.3km area of the city, which took place between April 19 and May 16 1943. Having demanded that the ghetto’s remaining 50,000 Jews be deported to the gas chambers of Majdanek and Treblinka, Stroop and his soldiers were met with the war’s largest armed revolt by Jews against the Nazis. Shocked that these Jews, as *untermenschen*, were such fierce fighters, Stroop ordered the burning of the ghetto, street by street, house by house.

Recalling how the families who jumped from the windows of their blazing homes were shot down by SS men, Stroop mimed taking aim from a double-barrelled shotgun at flying ducks; after a day of murder and deportation, he went home, he said, to a “lovely dinner”. The only time Moczarski was forced to interrupt Stroop’s “sublime rhapsody” was when he described a semi-conscious mother being dragged from the rubble of the home where her baby had been left behind. “That’s enough, be quiet,” Moczarski ordered. “We didn’t speak again that day.”





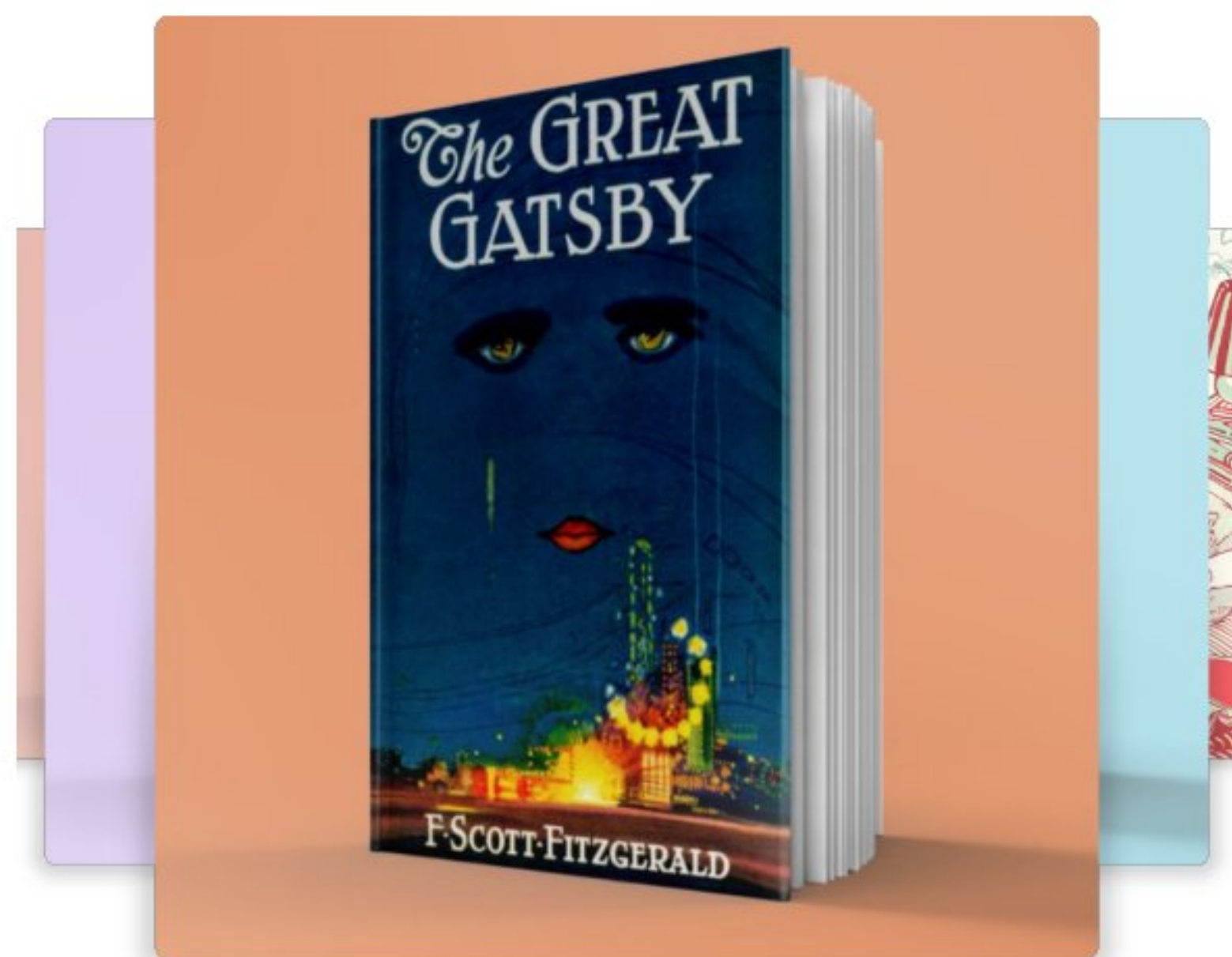
It was not until he was pardoned and released in 1956 that Moczarski was able to unburden his mind and commit the dialogues to paper. But the veracity of his material was soon questioned. Incarceration, Moczarski argued, had allowed him to train his memory to an extraordinary degree. Stroop's own powers of recollection were similarly superhuman. "It's as if my report on the Warsaw Ghetto liquidation were printed inside my mind," he told Moczarski. "I can just see it, page by page." When Moczarski fact-checked what he had been told by Stroop against the evidence in his war files, he discovered that there were hardly any errors.

No publisher in Communist Poland would touch *Conversations with an Executioner*, which was eventually serialised by the monthly magazine *Odra* between 1972 to 1974. Two years after Moczarski died, aged 68, in 1975, his book appeared in a censored edition; the complete, uncensored version would not be published until 1992, when it became a bestseller.

Now superbly translated by Sean Gasper Bye, this latest edition confirms Moczarski's "report" as a masterpiece of 20th-century literature.

Conversations with an Executioner is published by Duckworth at £25. To order your copy, call 0330 173 0523 or visit [Telegraph Books](#)

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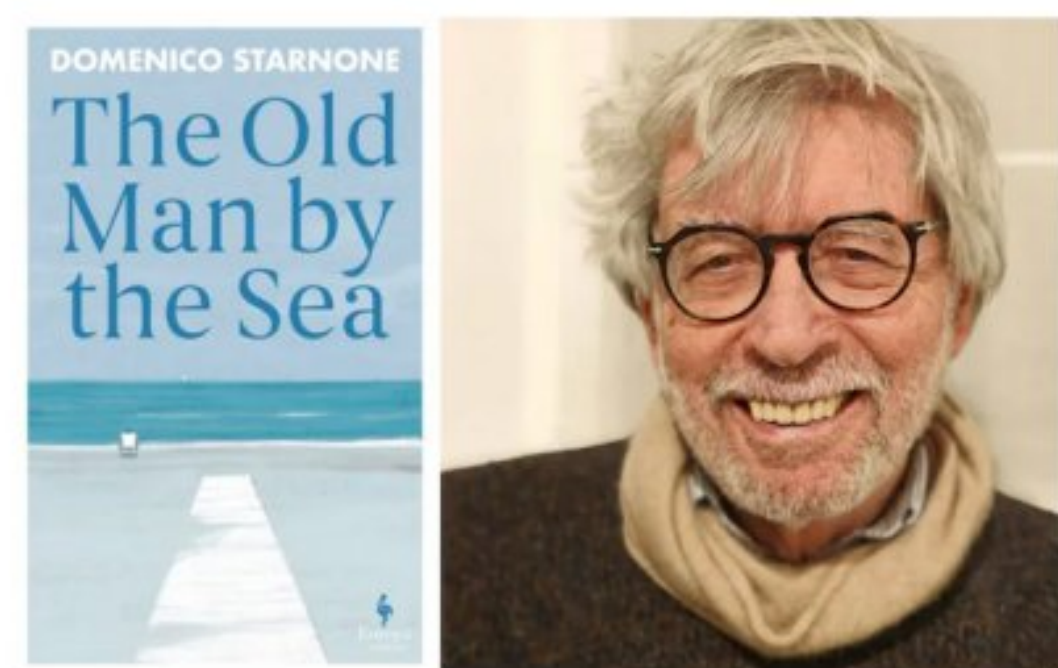
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