The Range
of Central European Literatures
Polish    Yiddish    German
Poetry    Short Story    Children’s

Warsaw in the eighteenth century.
From the Editor

In order to be noticed in American society, a common-interest group (we prefer this designation to the ideologized ‘minority’) has to be described in a language that incorporates the idiom of the day and remains comprehensible to the group in question. The Irish have described themselves abundantly, the central and eastern Europeans less so. The writers John Merchant has so aptly selected reveal some of the secrets of Polish American and other central and eastern European neighborhoods. There are more secrets to be revealed. The invisibility of central and eastern European ethnicities in American society results partly from the scarcity of writers who would give these groups a literary voice. It also stems from the reluctance of the ethnics to adopt Nietzschean and Hegelian ways, as expressed in Maya Angelou’s famous ‘I rise from my poverty and shame/ I rise to take my rightful place.’ If the ethnics ever rise, they will find a different way of asserting themselves, a way more congenial to their cultural characteristics.

Related to this issue is Professor Joseph Kotarba’s observation, in his excellent review of Adam Zamoyski’s book, that by comparison to their neighbors, Poles lack aggressiveness and militancy. Kotarba also perceptively observes that Poles often do not own the ‘means of production’ which profit from their labor. In the United States, professionals of central and eastern European background tend to be doctors, teachers, engineers etc., but not entrepreneurs, bankers, or corporate board members.

The Sarmatian Review is pleased to present Aleksandra Ziołkowska-Boehm’s interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer, a text never before published in English (beating our own drum, we would like to note that virtually every issue of SR contains materials that cannot be found elsewhere — a principal reason why SR continues to gain subscribers!). A seasoned and prolific writer herself, Ziołkowska-Boehm has interviewed dozens of famous and not-so-famous persons in Canada, Poland and the United States.

“The March Breezes,” a powerful Hemingwayesque story by the German writer Marie Luise Kaschnitz, was ably translated by Professor Hal Rennert. It deals with what is still insufficiently known and understood in German society: Nazi behavior toward both Polish peasants and Polish intellectuals in World War II.

Among the crop of excellent reviews, we would like to single out Mark Wegierski’s comments on the reminiscences of a Canadian Polish doctoral student about the fate of her peasant ancestors in Canada and in their native Ukraine (yes Virginia, in Europe national identity transcends borders). Wegierski rightly emphasizes the massive hardships which eastern European nationals underwent, as their homesteads were repeatedly destroyed by invaders from east and west. Somehow these tragedies have been shelved by America’s intellectuals as unimportant, while lesser tragedies became paradigmatic.

Last but not least, we are happy to publish Professor David Malcolm’s translation of one of our favorite childhood poems, “Cat Was Sick,” by an early nineteenth-century Polish children’s writer, Stanislaw Jachowicz.

One of our subscribers, Richard C. Prusinski, recently wrote us the following: “How dare you charge so little for such a great publication!” He dared us to tell you about the necessity of raising subscription prices. If it were not for the generosity of some of our subscribers who, in addition to the subscription price, also send us donations, we would have been unable to carry our enterprise forward. Even with higher subscription prices we will be far away from breaking even. Prices have to rise in April 1998 to $15.00 for individual subscribers and $21.00 for libraries and institutions (overseas prices will rise accordingly). THOSE WHO RENEW THEIR SUBSCRIPTIONS BEFORE APRIL 1998 WILL NOT BE AFFECTED, but new subscriptions and renewals after that date will. We are also cutting down on the number of complimentary copies we distribute. Incidentally, if you haven’t noticed, the current issue is four pages longer than the previous one.
**Sarmatian Review Index**

**Health**

Percentage decline in death from cardiovascular disease in Poland between 1992-97: 15 percent to 20 percent.
Source: Public health advocate Dr. Witold Zatorński, as reported by Kitty McKinsey in RFE/RL Daily Report, 2 July 1997.

Quality of St. Petersburg's drinking water supply: 500 times the acceptable levels of fenolam, 260 times the acceptable levels of chloroform, 700 times the acceptable levels of micro-organisms, from double to triple the maximum world standard levels of salts and heavy metals, and 200 times the acceptable levels of bacteria that cause dysentery. One in every 20 test-tubes extracted from St. Petersburg's drinking water supply contained hepatitis A.
Source: Moscow newspaper Kommersant Daily, as reported by Brian Whitmore in RFE/RL, 1 July 1997.

Number of drug addicts in Russia: 300,000.
Number of drug users in Russia: 2 million.
Source: Interior Ministry officials, as reported by Reuter (Moscow), 22 July 1997.

**Education**

Number of Spring 1997 applicants to Polish state colleges and universities: 293,000.
Number of openings in Polish state colleges and universities in Fall 1997: 213,000.
Percentage of 19-year-olds who attend colleges and universities in Fall 1997: 25 percent (100 percent increase over 1990).
Source: Michał Jankowski in Donosy, 2 July and 2 October 1997.

Note: figures for private colleges and universities are not available. It is estimated that the high-tuition private colleges have an additional 100,000 openings for freshmen.

**Demography**

Life expectancy in Poland in 1997: 68 years for men and 76.5 years for women.
Source: Donosy, 26 August 1997.

Suicide rate increase between August 1-18, 1997, in regions affected by catastrophic floods in Poland in July 1997: 46 percent (by comparison to 1996).
Source: Gazeta Wyborcza, 27 August 1997.

Percentage of American Jews who are of Eastern European origin: 95 percent.

Percentage of Jews in the U.S. population: 2 percent.

Percentage of Jews in the pre-World War II Polish population: 10.1 percent, or 3.3 million.
Percentage of Jews in the Polish state in the second half of the 18th century: 5.4 percent to 8.2 percent, or 600,000-900,000 (est.).

**Economy**

Damage in Poland caused by July 1997 floods: $3 billion, according to estimates by western insurance companies; $3.7 billion, according to Polish economics minister Wieslaw Kaczmarek.

Aid for victims distributed so far: $860 million, of which $40 million came from abroad.
Damage in the Czech Republic caused by July 1997 floods, according to the Czech environment minister Jiri Skalicky: $1.76 billion.
Source: Agence France-Presse, 28 August, 15 September and 3 October 1997.

President Boris Yeltsin’s net worth (as declared in May 1997): $200,000, with $42,000 in 1996 earnings.
Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin’s net worth (as declared on 10 July 1997): $46,000 (a country home outside Moscow valued by him at $27,000, and a 1997 Chevrolet Blazer valued by him at $19,000), with $8,000 in 1996 earnings.
Source: Reuter (Moscow), 10 July 1997.

Percentage of due taxes collected during the first nine months of 1997 in Russia: 52 percent.

Estimated percentage of the Russian economy controlled by organized crime: 66 percent.
Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies Report, as reported by Reuter, 29 September 1997.
Countries which overtook Russia in GDP size in the past seven years: Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Canada and South Korea.
Source: Andrei Ilarionov of Moscow’s Institute for Economic Analysis, as reported by Agence France-Presse, 16 September 1997.
Draft Russian budget for 1998, approved by the government on 21 August 1997: $58.6 billion, or 12.4 percent of the estimated GDP. Planned deficit: 4.8 percent of the GDP. Reuter-estimated deficit: 5.35 percent of the GDP.


The largest borrowers from the World Bank in the fiscal year ending June 1997: first, China; second, Russia ($1.7 billion); sixth, Ukraine ($989.6 million); ninth, Romania ($625 million).


Amount of money paid by the Turkish government official for Batyskaf, a Polish Arabian horse, during the yearly auction in Janów Podlaski in August 1997: $450,000.

Source: Donosy, 18 August 1997.

Direct foreign investment in Poland over the last five years: $16 billion.

Estimated further investment by companies which have already invested in Poland: $9.2 billion.

Breakdown of investors by area: 54.6 percent the European Union, 23.1 percent the United States, 4 percent Asia.

Percentage of foreign investors who reinvest their money in Poland: 85 percent.

Source: Agence France-Presse (Warsaw), 27 August 1997.

Amount of money Ukrainians spent in Poland in 1996: Zl. 1.2 billion ($463 million).

Rankings of Poland’s neighbors by the amount of money they spent in Poland in 1996: Germans, Ukrainians, Czechs, Slovaks, Belarusians.

Total amount of money spent by these neighbors in Poland in 1996: Zl. 8.8 billion.


Percentage decline in Russian farm output in 1997 since peak levels in the Soviet era: 40 percent.

Source: Lynnley Browning of Reuter (Moscow), 2 July 1997.

IMF forecast of GDP growth in central and eastern Europe in 1997: Ukraine, minus three percent; Croatia, 5.5 percent; Poland, 5.5 percent; Belarus, 5 percent; Slovakia, 4.5 percent.

Decrease in Russian exports in the first seven months of 1997 (as compared to 1996): 2.8 percent, with a total of $47.9 billion.

Increase in Russian trade surplus in the same period of time (as compared to 1996): $100 million, to $12.7 billion.


Percentage of foreign investment in Russia that comes from the US government-sponsored sources: one-third.

Source: US Vice President Albert Gore in Moscow on 23 September 1997, as reported by Agence France-Presse on the same day.

Value of Ukrainian exports to Russia in 1996: $5.4 billion, or 40 percent of Ukraine’s exports.

Value of Russian exports to Ukraine in 1996: $8.7 billion.


Percentage of apartments in Poland that are privately owned: 61 percent.


Culture

Subscriptions to all Russian newspapers and magazines in the second half of 1997: 7 million.


Military

Percentage of Russian army draftees in 1997 who have a criminal record: 20 percent.

Source: Agence France-Presse, 12 November 1997.

Number of generals in the Russian military as of July 1997: 2,865.

Planned number of generals by the year 2,000: 2,300.

Source: President Boris Yeltsin, as reported by the UPI, 2 July 1997.

Number of Russian military officers currently without housing: 97,000.


Republics v. empires

Percentage of Russians who believe that the best way to settle the Chechen problem is to let Chechnya secede: 41 percent.

Percentage of Russians who regard Chechnya as already independent: 35 percent.

Percentage of Russians who still see Chechnya as part of Russia: 31 percent.

Percentage of Russians who are pessimistic about the chances of normalizing relations with Chechnya: 56 percent.

Source: September 1997 Public Opinion Foundation survey of 1,500 Russians, as reported by Interfax and Agence France-Presse, 25 September 1997.
Recent Polish-American Fiction

John Merchant

There has always been a Polish-American voice in American literature, though it has not always been an English one and it has not been one generally heard beyond the Polish-American community. Czeslaw Milosz, a Polish-born author, who has published extensively in English and has reached a notable level of national and international fame as a Nobel laureate, is more associated with the upper strata of international intellectualism rather than with the millions of people who identify themselves as Polish-Americans. Other Polish-American writers have gone undetected or, like Nelson Algren, their Polishness is overlooked.

However, a new generation of Polish-American writers is emerging, a group of writers coming from the culturally assimilated third or fourth generations to whom their Polishness is alternately something to be explored, pondered and preserved. More experienced writers, such as Stuart Dybek (Childhood and Other Neighborhoods, 1986 and The Coast of Chicago, 1990) and Anthony Bukoski (Twelve Below Zero, 1986 and Children of Strangers, 1993), have received widespread national acclaim for their work extending over the past decade. Newer writers, like Susan Strempek-Shea (Selling the Lite of Heaven, 1994 and Hoopi Shoopi Donna, 1996), whose recent work has gotten national acclaim, and the relatively unknown Denise Dee (Certain Comfort, 1990 and Gobnascale: The House of the Storyteller, 1990), are making their presence known and adding to this emergence of a strong Polish-American voice in contemporary American fiction.

Stuart Dybek: the writer from ‘Zone-8’

Perhaps the most widely known of all the writers mentioned above, Stuart Dybek is probably less known as a Polish-American author than as a Chicago or urban one, falling in line behind the likes of Algren, Studs Terkel, and John Dos Passos. Dybek, who was born and raised in an ethnically mixed neighborhood (largely eastern European and Hispanic) on Chicago’s south side, filters his stories through the rich and diverse ethnic neighborhoods that rest anonymously in the shadow of downtown Chicago. It would be difficult to imagine Dybek stepping out of this environment and writing about, for example, Florida (as Algren did about Texas). In this regard, Thomas Gladsky is correct in asserting that Dybek’s characters ‘constantly assess themselves within the context of place’ (Princes and Peasants 256). Dybek’s characters, generally young boys or young men, roam through and explore the playgrounds of their own ethnicity; leaving the neighborhood is a form of emigration and, to these characters, a cultural loss.

What is left at the end of Dybek’s work is a new kind of ethnic identity.

One of the reasons why Dybek is not known as a Polish-American writer is the presence in his work of a variety of cultural signs and markers from the numerous ethnic groups which were wedged into Chicago’s east European neighborhoods. In this sense, Gladsky is quite correct when he says that ‘ethnicity is everywhere in his works.’ (“From Ethnicity to Multiculturalism...” 107) In and around the ‘natural’ fixtures of the neighborhood (the run-down street corners, the grease slick of a river, the rusting viaducts) Dybek notes that ‘...there was a constant sense of flux’ (“You Can’t Step into the Same Street Twice” 42). The migrating tribes in his case were largely eastern European and Hispanic, ‘...Poles and Czechs - were migrating out; the Hispanics were migrating in’ (“Can’t Step” 43). Just as a glacier scrapes and molds the earth as it passes, these two cultures cross over Dybek leaving deeply embedded cultural residue in their trail. In “Nighthawks,” Dybek contrasts the superstitious sleeping habits of a Ukrainian boy who sleeps with his arms forming a cross, and a Puerto Rican girl who prays at her bureau before a picture of the Virgin Mary. In “Hot Ice,” the prison is full of men with names like Milo Hermanski, Billy Gomez, and Benny Bedwell. Likewise, Dybek’s protagonists have friends with names like Eddie (Edek) Kapusta, Ziggy Zilinsky, and Stanley Rosado.

A unifying element among nearly all Dybek’s characters is a sense of loss or disconnection from their clumsily concealed ethnic identities...the middle stage of explanation and understanding between generations is missing.

While every story is enmeshed in ethnicity, the ‘Polishness’ of Dybek’s characters is less obvious. For the most part, his protagonists yield few clues, for they are either anonymous or have ethnically neutral names like David and Steve. With the exception of “Chopin in Winter,” “Blood Soup,” and “Sauerkraut Soup” which have more overtly Polish elements, in the rest of Dybek’s stories an ethnic panorama is built up from the characters’ perambulations around and adventures in the mysterious
Americans, yet they know the Palatski Man. It is not said whether John and Mary are Polish-Americans, yet they know the Palatski Man (a Palatski being a kind of wafer with honey sold only in that neighborhood) and other neighborhood boys with names like Leon Sisca and Denny Zmiga. The old woman in “The Cat Woman” is characterized in the opening line as an ‘old buzka’ (Childhood and Other Neighborhoods 21), one who, it is later made known, has a crazy son known as Swantek. This ‘buzka’ is differentiated from the Russian neighbor, who shares her cabbage soup with the ‘Catwoman’ and sits in silence listening to the Polka Hour on the radio. At the outset of the story, the anonymous narrator in “Neighborhood Drunk” briefly mentions hanging out on street corners with his own grandfather and meeting his friend Danny’s dziadzia.

Dybek’s protagonists are third generation Polish-Americans who look upon their Polishness as either something strange or mystifying. Gladsky suggests that they see older Polish people they meet as the ‘other,’ and goes so far as to say that ‘the more Polish the character, the more bizarre are Dybek’s stories.’ (Princes an Peasants 257). There are drunk, like Big Antek, and DPs [displaced persons] who are missing fingers from industrial accidents, strange Ragmen who mutter in foreign accents, and bizarre people like the Catwoman and Swantek who drown the excess neighborhood kittens in their washing machine. In “Blood Soup,” in his search to get the duck’s blood his Buzka needs to make czarnina, the narrator encounters Pan Gowumpe, a seventy-five year old DP who lives in an abandoned building and cares for pigeons, ducks, and parrots. However, it is in the more overtly ‘Polish’ stories mentioned earlier that the protagonists have significant experiences with their heritage. The narrator in “Blood Soup,” Steven, is called Stefush by his grandmother and is told usiądz when she wants to talk with him. In thinking of his grandmother, Steven feels ‘a kind of love that must have come from the Old Country - instinctive, unquestioning - like her strength, something foreign that he couldn’t find in himself.’ (Childhood 26). He also thinks of the holy pictures on the walls and of ‘arriving with colored hard-boiled eggs, ham, kraut, kielbasa, freshly grated horseradish’ for Easter (“Childhood” 27). Yet, it is not until he meets Pan Gowumpe that he learns more about his grandmother’s generation and himself. In a humorous exchange in which Pan Gowumpe asks Steven if he understands the word dupa, Steven responds with the literal definition, to which

Pan Gowumpe responds:

-See, thirteen years and you know ‘asshole.’
-Seventy-five years and what do I know?
-What?
-More dupa. (Childhood 44)

Silly as it may seem, by the end of his visit Steven learns about Pan Gowumpe’s, and other DPs’, experiences in the slaughterhouses, about the beliefs of this earlier, largely peasant, generation, and the truth about his grandmother’s imminent death.

Only in “Chopin in Winter” does Dybek really give what Gladsky calls a ‘paradigmatic ethnic tale’ about coming to grips with one’s Polishness. Again, it is not so much that the young narrator learns facts and dates of Polish history, rather by listening to his dziadzia’s stories and to the Chopin being played by his neighbor, he learns to feel his Polishness. It is while practicing the dulling task of penmanship that the narrator gets his true education; namely, his grandfather’s exploits in escaping the Prussian army and in working in various coal fields and, with the music of Chopin rumbling nightly overhead, the history behind Chopin and how to get a feel for the music. The grandfather, who is characterized as a shambling old ghost, helps his grandson draw connections between his American self (George Washington, Joe DiMaggio, and Walt Disney) and his Polish self (Paderewski and Chopin). Finally, when the music stops and his dziadzia lapses once again into silence, he leaves the boy with the ability to hear and feel the music everywhere.

It took time for the music to fade. I kept catching wisps of it in the air shaft, behind walls and ceilings, under bathwater... Mrs. Kubiac’s building seemed riddled with its secret passageways. And, when the music finally disappeared, its channels remained, conveying silence. (Coast 32)

Catholicism plays a huge role in Dybek’s work, both as physical landmarks (the numerous churches which dot the neighborhood, the bells) and as cultural/spiritual markers (rosaries, scapulars, holy pictures, people praying). Throughout both collections of stories, references to old women dressed in black and praying in churches are used as a mode of characterization and description. For example, when Mrs. Kubiac learns her daughter is having the child of a black man, she melts into the mass of women at church ‘wearing babuszkas and dressed in black like a sodality of widows, droning
endless mournful litanies before the side altar of the Black Virgin of Czestochowa’ (Coast 32). In “Hot Ice,” Eddie Kapusta remembers old women walking up the aisle of the church on their knees and that old women “ignoring the new liturgy, chanted a litany in Polish” (Coast 152). The mother of Sterndorf the drunk in “Neighborhood Drunk” is characterized merely as being from the ‘Old Country’ and exhibiting the same traits as the women, noted above. These religious references also display what has been lost to this younger generation. Dybek’s protagonists complete the rituals out of habit and are not able to comprehend the wordless spirituality of the old people. Just as the Ragmen appear as strange, magical beings, so too do the people from the ‘Old Country.’ The Faith has been lost to the younger generation which is left with street-smart mysticism and cautious superstition.

“Chopin in Winter” is a paradigmatic ethnic tale about coming to grips with one’s Polishness.

What is left at the end of Dybek’s work is a new kind of ethnic identity. As Dybek himself has said, ‘there was another tribe, one that in a way transcended nationality, a tribe of youth... a tribe intent on its own language, music, dress, food, rituals, and rules’ (“You Can’t Step into the Same River Twice” 43). It seems as if a unifying element among nearly all Dybek’s characters is this sense of loss or disconnection. However, as the protagonist in “Blight” notes, they are not even sure about what it is that they lost. As the two cultures flow together, the common denominators match up and the unique elements slowly disappear. Eddie Kapusta observes old Hispanic and Polish women praying in mourning clothes and cannot tell them apart. Meanwhile, Big Antek tells Steven in “Blood Soup” that they no longer sell duck’s blood on a regular basis at the butcher shop as the shop fills up with people speaking Spanish. Again, Eddie Kapusta is amazed at the Spanish word for ‘pigeon,’ while having no feel for his own first language, Polish, which he once knew. One of the biggest markers of the social and cultural changes taking place in the neighborhood, though, is the character of Stanley Rosado - known to his Polish mother as Stash and to others as Pepper. The close proximity of the two social groups results in new ethnicities and forms new ties. The young people, having no one to interpret the ‘mystical connections between... things’ (Childhood 138), move on and forge a new culture of their own, leaving the old and strange to linger in their mystery.

Anthony Bukoski: A surveyor of emotions

Both Stuart Dybek and Anthony Bukoski show the middle stage of explanation and understanding between generations to be missing; that is, they look at each other as strangers and do not understand why the other acts as he/she does. However, while the characters in Dybek’s stories tend to stumble upon remnants of their past to puzzle over, Bukoski focuses more on the actual transition that takes place between two generations. Furthermore, in Bukoski there is a much greater sense of urgency in the role he plays as the recorder of the death throes of the Polish community around the Duluth/ Superior area in northern Wisconsin. While the nostalgia Dybek has for his old neighborhood is somewhat akin to the longing one would feel for a ripple of water drifting to the other side of a pool (as the various ‘tribes’ of people drift over Chicago), Bukoski is confronting what would amount to the draining of the pool entirely (a theme which reverberates in his essay, “Water Plains,” and the story, “Mrs. Burbul”).

In “A Chance of Snow,” the introduction of a ‘foreigner’ from Poland changes the girl’s perspective on her own ethnicity, and she begins to see herself differently.

Unlike Dybek, Bukoski gives voice to the older, ‘strange’ generation which drifts in and out of Dybek’s fiction like phantoms. First of all, these people are alive and have thoughts and feelings about their past, as well as what will remain when they are gone. The title of Bukoski’s second book of fiction, Children of Strangers, carries the bulk of his work with Polish-American themes and hints in a twofold way at the problems he intends to address. In the title story, “Children of Strangers,” the older generation is left to sit and watch helplessly as ‘people without a heritage who draw public assistance [overtake them]’ (Children 83). If this sounds a bit defensive and skewed, that is because it is. The thoughts of Mrs. Josephine Slipkowski quoted above reflect the thoughts and fears of an entire generation in Superior who have seen their children grow up and move away, the town in which they toiled and sweated turn to rust, and the traces of their presence disappear from sight (churches, schools, clubs, etc.). In these stories, however, all is not yet lost; on the contrary, the older generation is alive and firmly holding on to their identities. There is still time for transfer to take place.

It is most fitting to begin with this most prototypical story, “Children of Strangers,” for like “Chopin in Winter” it serves almost as a paradigm, to use Gladsky’s word, for the Polish-American experience. The story chronicles the trip of an elderly couple on their way
Josephine worries that her children will not have the strength that the Sisters from the Old Country did to maintain tradition. While her husband, Ralph, spends his time looking at himself in mirrors, Josephine is ‘haunted by the past’ (84). However, when the solemn ceremony at Szkoła Wojciecha, in which the members of the class of ’34 (people from Poznań, Łódź, Warsaw, Białystok) sing “Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła” and “Joining Poland’s Sons and Daughters, We’ll be Poles Forever,” they are interrupted by two ‘invaders’ representing the children of strangers. Bukoski presents the callous intrusion by the two young boys drawn by the lights to play basketball as a historical parallel to the deeply patriotic and historic subject matter to the songs being sung. In witnessing this solemn moment, it is as if ‘the invaders discovered a forest clearing from which to observe horse soldiers gearing for the last, violent, fatal charge. In their one brief moment, the two witnesses for the first time their neighbors’ nobility’ (Children 88). However, they quickly are bored with a thousand years of Polish history, and, in a final act of brutality, they look right through Ralph Slipkowski and do not see him. The man who has continually been reaffirming his own existence in mirrors is slapped back to reality with the sudden realization that he is invisible. 

In telling stories of his grandfather’s watch, the flowers he planted in the garden, the violin he played as he wandered about the Polish countryside, and the pews and chairs he made while at the factory, Roza withholds a history of her own which she does not, or cannot, reveal to her grandson. Memories of her affair and the years of silence that fatally damaged her and her husband flow over her in a parallel history and mental dialogue with her dying husband, Antoni. However, as her grandson sits in her garden, ‘hidden in shadows of the corn rows, the dreams and memories intoxicate my grandson and make him a lover of the past.’ Roza longs to ‘destroy them’ and ‘treat the garden with salt.’ (96). Ultimately, her grandson is not capable of understanding Roza and times when things ‘could inhabit a mirror,’ and imparting only the superficial facts of her life, Roza blacks out her wardrobe mirror with paint so that ‘[a]ll memories will have vanished, all time will have stopped.’ (103)

The most positive stories showing connection between the older and younger generations are “A Chance of Snow” and “Old Customs” in the same collection. They feature young girls learning more about their heritage and themselves. In both stories the narrators attempt to make sense out of their Polishness by consulting dictionaries, learning of customs, and discovering life in Poland. In “Old Customs,” the narrator, Marta Davidowski, listens to her great aunt’s stories about special forests in Poland which make music when the wind blows; she reads to her aunt from a book on interpreting dreams. Marta represents the third, or fourth, generation trying to make sense out of the clues left behind for them. Seeing her aunt approaching death, she looks up words in Polish: ‘dream - (dri’m) rz. sen, marzenie; dreamer - marzyciel, próżniak ...’ (75). She despairs, running out of time to learn more about ‘the Old Country’ or do something for her aunt; all that is left for her is to witness the final custom of the washing of her aunt’s body.

Like Dybek, Bukoski makes religion an important part of the cultural and spiritual world of this community...yet their protagonists are not able to comprehend the wordless spirituality of the old people.

“A Chance of Snow” is a different story. It does
not center around the death of one generation and the beginning of another; rather, Bukoski shows the possibilities that exist for regeneration and rejuvenation in the Superior Polish community. In this case, it is the defection of a Polish sailor, in the 1980s presumably, and his brief stay with a family which changes a young girl’s life. Before his visit, the girl’s (Agnes’) Polish identity is superficial: she looks in the Polish dictionary only to find the word *gacie* to use as an insult for her little brother; when she wants to get rid of him, she slings his (their) last name at him as if it were an insult; and she is annoyed by the ‘racket’ her father and his friend make when they play polka music. The introduction of the ‘foreigner,’ however, changes her perspective on her own ethnicity and she begins to see herself differently. It begins almost as a tautological lesson from the sailor, Mr. Cedzynski, for as he is introduced to Agnes and Stevie, he renames them and restores them to their Polish roots. ‘Dad says, “This is my son.” “Yes, Stefan,” the sailor says. “And Agnes.” “Agieszka”’ (47). The imprecise foreignness of Mr. Cedzynski makes Agnes take a closer look at herself and her classmates (more American than Polish). She looks for that foreignness in the fading faces in photographs that grace the hallways of Szkola Wojciecha and, ultimately, wonders what it means to be foreign. In having the sailor return suddenly to Poland, after ‘trying to fit in,’ Bukoski succeeds in illustrating how a new seed can be planted for the next generation of Polish-Americans: ‘What was in the old country that was so special he’d return to it just because of the stones in the road?’ (63).

Like Dybek, Bukoski makes religion an important part of the cultural and spiritual world of this community. Gladsky suggests that the focal point, morally, and geographically, in Bukoski’s fiction is St. Adalbert’s, the parish church, and Szkola Wojciecha, the parochial school. (Gladsky 265). This is correct: the Slipkowskis and their children are educated by the Polish nuns, Mrs. Burbul is placated by the new Irish priest who does not understand or share her relationship to history, Edek Patulski skips mass and eats donuts at a coffee shop nearby. St. Adalbert’s is at once the embodiment of the Polish community’s religiosity and cultural identity, and a sign of a ‘petrified culture, frozen in time’ (Gladsky 266). Although it is not included in this collection of stories, the burning down of St. Adalbert’s, which Gladsky notes occurs in the story “A Concert of Minor Pieces,” is certainly imminent in stories such as “Children of Strangers.” When Mrs. Slipkowski worries about the imminent loss of Sister Bronislaw and the scattering of her children (no grandchildren to replenish the school/church), the future looks grim.

What was in the old country that was so special he’d return to it just because of the stones in the road?’

However, as noted above in discussing “A Chance of Snow,” Bukoski does hold out hope for positive change and growth for the Superior Polish community. Like Dybek’s alliance between Hispanics and Poles, Bukoski portrays the union of Poles with Native Americans, both in marriage and in death. In “The River of the Flowering Banks” in *Children of Strangers*, a wedding takes place between a Polish-American man and a Chippewa woman. Throughout the story, the two main characters, Warren, presumably a Polish-American boy, and his Native American friend, Gerald, serving as altar boys for the summer, witness the wedding and, soon after, the desecration of a Native American burial site by some workers for the State of Wisconsin. The situation at first tests the relationship of the two boys, as the remains are not buried in the Catholic cemetery, but their unified ethnicity of ‘otherness’ is restored when Father Nowak blesses the remains, saying ‘we’re your guests’ (180). Gladsky argues that, for Bukoski, such a union marks a shift toward an expanded understanding of ethnicity and ‘an awareness that all minorities are bearers of something’ (Gladsky 270). Perhaps it is like the holy water kept in Bukoski’s (“Water Plains”) and Mrs. Burbul’s (“Mrs. Burbul”) houses, which will someday be poured into the ancient waters that cannot drain from the wetlands around Superior because the clay is so compact; that is, the mixing of the waters will strengthen and bless the past as well as future generations.

Susan Strempek-Shea: family history as ethnic tale

While Stuart Dybek and Anthony Bukoski build their stories from a strong sense of place, Susan Strempek-Shea seems to craft her novels around the Polish-American family. In doing so, she does succeed in portraying life in the Polish-American community in and around Springfield, Massachusetts. Though she has written two novels, *Selling the Lute of Heaven* and *Hoopi Shoopi Donna*, only the latter will be used for the purposes of this essay. Strempek-Shea fills *Hoopi Shoopi Donna* from start to finish with ethnic references of all kinds, the most obvious being music. Of all the other cultural elements combined (language, religion, food, and family tradition), it is music which holds the most sway over the narrator, Donna.

The title refers to a polka song with the title ‘Hupaj, siupaj dana’, a favorite family polka song. Donna’s family, the Milewskis, live right across the street from Pulaski Park, ‘the place known to all as the Polka
Music is the aspect of her heritage which she embraces most ardently. Her father would play his polka records, mostly 78s as thick as dinnerplates and cared for as gently as Babcia kept her one precious set of china (26). Donna inherits his passion for music, just as he inherited his from his uncle, Jasiu. Strempek-Shea uses music to build the family bond with music (each family member had a song that the father, as DJ, would play upon request), as well as to characterize the patriotism and cultural activity of the Springfield Polish community. For example, in signing up for polka lessons Donna thinks that her town ‘had to have more people than Poland itself’ (14). During polka picnics, a deep sense of lasting Polish patriotism is tied to the music with the singing of “Boże coś Polskę.”

Knowing full well what was coming up, the crowd would begin the song ahead of the band, asking God to save the land that even those who’d never been there figured had to be wonderful - isn’t that where all this great music got its start? (32)

For Donna, polka music and her ability to play it symbolizes her ties to her ethnic heritage and her relationship with her father. In fact, it is only when her father stops listening to her practice her accordion and begins listening only to her sister play that she feels truly betrayed.

The father, in addition to his passion for polka music, is associated with the hard-working generation of Polish immigrants who are willing to work two jobs, seven days a week, to feed their families.

In addition to music, Strempek-Shea instills each member of the Milewski family with a different Polish-American cultural trait, or even, one could venture, stereotype. Babcia is strongly connected with food. When Donna’s adopted sister comes from Poland, ‘our table overnight turned into something out of a travel brochure, all covered with vats and trays and casseroles containing strange stuff I’d never seen before, and most coming complete with an old-country legend or some trick explained by Babcia.’ (49) The father, in addition to his passion for polka music, is associated with the hard-working generation of Polish immigrants who are willing to work two jobs, seven days a week, and sit with his daughter at the dinner table to help her with her studies. The mother, though not an immigrant like her husband, is similarly inclined to hard work, and is characterized by her skill at sewing.

We knew few people with what most people might consider to be regular names, ones many families in this country have...[t]hose without a ‘ski’ or a ‘icz,’ or Ls pronounced like Ws and Ws like Vs, Js like Ys and other Js like Is. (63)

Just as in Dybek, names are maps marking the changing face of a community. When Donna dates a boy named Sean Riley, she thinks of the Irish neighborhood near her old house and the small selection of corned beef Tenczar’s Market would carry in March, which they would label with names like Kerry, Kelly, and Christy but ‘that began with an O, then had an apostrophe interrupting the rest, like it was a contraction rather than somebody’s last name.’ (151)

What makes *Hoopi Shoopi Donna* different from most of Dybek and Bukoski’s fiction is the focus on family history and conflict. While Bukoski does touch on this in “Polkaholics,” a story in which the son and daughter of working class parents rebel against the constraints of their ethnicity, it is not as deeply developed as it is here. The
daughter in “Polkaholics” merely leaves the story, while in Strempek-Shea’s novel the reader is given much more of the psychological and emotional development of the conflict. Unlike in Dybek and, at times, Bukoski, Strempek-Shea decides to provide her protagonist with all the missing answers at the end of the story. The secret history that is not revealed in “Tango Bearers of the Dead” and “Mrs. Burbul” is all revealed to Donna by her Polish double, Aniela, who, like Donna, has suffered from her family’s secrets. Also, different from the other two writers, Strempek-Shea does not necessarily forge a new generation or expand her sense of ethnicity; rather, her protagonist, Donna, fulfills her childhood dream (to form an all-girl polka band) and attains a tangible feeling of happiness. For Donna, the problem is not so much a cultural or ethnic one as it is a personal one. Likewise, in Hoopi Shoopi Donna, Polish-American life is vibrant, though changing, and the key to its survival rests within the family.

Denise Dee: Irish-Polish-American stories

Denise Dee is probably unknown to most readers of contemporary fiction. Her two works discussed here, A Certain Comfort and Gobnascale: House of the Storyteller, were self-published and may have, at best, been distributed at alternative bookshops around the United States. What makes her work so intriguing, besides her diary style writing, is the mix of ethnicity which she herself embodies. With a father of Irish extraction and a mother coming from a Polish background, Dee’s work traipses back and forth from one aspect of her ethnic makeup to another. However, there are some telling areas in which Dee’s work coincides with that of the other three writers already discussed.

Like Dybek, Dee shows the need to get back to familiar territory, back to a place in which the buildings and the people are familiar. Paraphrasing Thomas Wolfe, she argues that you can go home again.

since the earthquake i had been walking around a little lost. i was looking forward to going east for comfort to reaffirm my connections. it was a foolish thing to cling to i thought the idea of a place that would make the tension leave me that once i was walking around there i would suddenly remember who i was but there was always something about cleveland and the people there that calmed me down. (Comfort 1)

This is reminiscent of the narrator in Dybek’s “Blight,” in which he feels the urge to go back to the old neighborhood ‘to think.’ In contrast to Dybek and Bukoski, especially, and to Strempek-Shea less so, the place to which Dee wants to return is not that of her parents and her youth. All that matters is that a certain level of ethnic ‘comfort’ is available, a certain degree of sympathy in the landscape. It is as if the neighborhood Dybek describes in his work has been internalized by Dee and is carried around with her. Once in familiar territory she feels she has reached someplace and can relax.

he lived in my favorite part of cleveland. an old slovak neighborhood under the bridge. it looked like my grandparents with houses that were dirty brick old and dark wood and banisters and baseboards and the sky and the mill and i felt better already (Comfort 5).

The idea of loss also is a theme in Dee’s work. In her native Pittsburgh, Dee regrets the destruction of the mill in which her grandfather once worked. As with Dybek and Bukoski, loss can take the form of physical structures (the mill) which act as institutions as it were, or it can take more cultural or traditional forms. Prompted by her mother making galunki, Dee thinks about the layers of loss that have passed from her grandmother’s ability to cook Polish dishes (‘her mom used to cut noodles out by hand on the kitchen table every saturday’), to her mother’s (‘i’m thinking about this as im sitting at my parents table eating the one thing my mother knows how to make that my grandmother did’), to that of her and her sister (‘i don’t know how to make them and im wondering if my sister does’) (Comfort 7). However, Dee finds some consolation for her feelings of personal and cultural loss in a bowl of her grandmother’s soup, as ‘the nights after i ate my grandmother’s soup i fell asleep with my hands crossed on my stomach and it was the one night i knew i wouldn’t have any nightmares’ (Comfort 7).

Dee’s dual ethnicity, Irish and Polish, is the focal point of her other work, Gobnascale: House of the Storyteller. Dee appears to get conflicting messages from her parents, her practical mother and her dreamer/storyteller father. In Irish or in Polish, Dee looks for words to express the feelings she contains deep inside.

I call my mother up and ask is there a word in Polish for happy and sad at the same time. She thinks awhile; not that I know melancholy bittersweet...I’ll ask your aunt, she says in a way I know she’s already forgotten and wish I would too (Storyteller 1).

Dee feels naturally drawn toward her father and his knack
for storytelling, though this ‘Irish’ trait, as presented here, does not always mesh with her mother’s Polishness.

_Bssch, you don’t believe that do you? my mother would say after I told her some fantastic Irish story I had heard. That didn’t happen she’d say... I just wanted to believe so I’d hide it away in me and dream later_ (Storyteller 3).

The conflict does not seem to reside so much in the personal realm (being put down by one’s mother), than it does as a comment from one ethnicity about another.

_Does as a comment from one ethnicity about another._

_It seemed that the only place it was acceptable to believe stories in Polish was the church. No matter how fantastic those stories were people believed them like they happened to one of their family members. If you questioned anything you’d get the same scorn they gave one of your non-religious stories... Or Jehziz gohani, my mother’s favorite cry of despair_ (Storyteller 3).

Ultimately, Dee follows in her father’s footsteps, taking up the role of ‘seanachie which means storyteller in some common uses it means saint’ (Storyteller 5). It is this same Irish belief in the power of stories and words in which Dee searches for a cure for her father’s illness, not in her mother’s pragmatism or faith. Stories and fables, what her father sees in her as ‘the ability to feel,’ are what her father passes on to her.

_Some final thoughts_

Though hardly a uniform group of writers, there are some common themes and elements to all the work of the four writers discussed above. Mystery, confusion, memory, and place are the over-arching elements evident to all four authors; all of which are triggered by associations and references to food, music, religion, language, and people. The landscape of Polish-American fiction is dotted with steaming bowls of cabbage soup, radios tuned into the local ‘Polka Hour,’ old women kneeling in churches, snippets of the Polish language, and people, some of whom are as old as this century, who carry around with them the deep waters of memory. Stuart Dybek, Anthony Bukoski, Susan Strempek-Shea, and Denise Dee all unfold psychological and emotional maps in writing of their ethnic identity as Polish-Americans (and, in Dee’s case, as a Polish/Irish-American). The contours and details of each differs somewhat, but most of the same points of reference are there. Of the four writers reviewed here, it is probably Denise Dee that embodies the link to the next generation of Polish-American writers. Voices that have yet to be heard. The question remains, though, what the next generation of Polish-American writers will make, or is making now, of the clues and guides that have been left for them. Taking into consideration the trend toward super-grouping of ethnic groups, along with the growing globalization of the United States and the world, the degree of control the next generation of Polish-American writers will have over their own identity will determine to what extent they will be able to preserve a distinct voice in American literature.

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Aleksandra Ziolkowska-Boehm

interviews

Isaac Bashevis Singer

Translated by Nina Michalak

Aleksandra Ziolkowska-Boehm: What is your message to the men and women of letters?

Isaac Bashevis Singer: That they meet three conditions. First, that they have a story to tell. Present-day literature is increasingly careless about that. We do not have to adhere to Aristotle’s rules for writers, but it is imperative for the storyteller to have a good story to tell. A consuming desire to get published makes writers forget that their mission is to describe human experience.

Second, have a passion, a need to tell this particular story as opposed to some other one. I remember a time when I had a good theme but no passion, so in the end I wrote nothing.

Third, it must be your story. You must be convinced that no one else is able to describe it so well. It is not easy to have such a conviction. It only comes to the greatest writers. It is important to write about what you are familiar with, what you know best. Have your own story, your own topic.

When you read the Bible, you do not know what somebody was thinking, but you always know what the person was doing... It is a heresy of our times to use our thoughts and moods as the yardsticks in appraising almost everything that is around us.

As for myself, what I know best are Jewish people, not those living in Sweden though, but those in Poland. We all have our limitations, our constraints. One should be able to realize that. I am not able to describe everything. It took me years to understand that. Initially, I wanted to imitate Knut Hamsun. I eventually learned that I was neither Tolstoy nor Hamsun, nor Gorky, that I must write about my milieu, one that has become my own and personal passion.

When I read Pan Tadeusz, I know that Adam Mickiewicz was perfectly familiar with what he was portraying. Joseph Conrad never wrote about Poland. He wrote in English and, in his books, the sea was the centerpiece and people played a secondary role. Had he been writing in Polish, his characters might have been more vivid, more authentic.

We should not cut ourselves off from our ancestral roots. A cosmopolitan person will never write anything exceptional. I learned Yiddish and I write in that language. I try to write about people I know best.

I know Hebrew, I learned Yiddish and I write in that language. Some people told me: ‘You write in a dead language for people who are dying off.’ But fortunately, due to translations, my books reach out everywhere. I put a lot of work and creativity into the English version.

At one time, in Poland, somebody wrote about me in Wiadomosci Literackie. ‘A no-nonsense writer, expressing himself in Yiddish.’ I write about Jews and about Poles. My characters, whether Jewish or Polish, may be thieves or prostitutes. I do not generalize. I could not care less for readers looking for generalizations in my books. I do not write for them.

It is important to write about people that one knows best, regardless of whether they are Jewish, Protestant, Turks or what have you. Writing about the most familiar things or people reveals our origins, as new or as incomplete as they may be. We should not cut ourselves off from our ancestral roots.

A writer should never abandon his mother tongue which is a veritable treasure house of idiomatic expressions. More than any other artist, a writer belongs to his countrymen, his language, history and culture.

I do not generalize. I could not care less for readers looking for generalizations in my books.

A true creator belongs to his people, to his community, regardless of whether he likes it or not. A cosmopolitan person will never write anything exceptional, since his work will be a generalization. Literature is intimately connected with one’s origins. Great masters’ roots are firmly embedded in their nation’s past. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol belong to the Russian nation. Dostoevsky dreamed of the world falling in love with Russia. Kafka was the only great writer without roots. What I can, however, say about him is that he was searching for them, was trying to discover them.

A writer must stay within themes that correspond to his passions, that spring up from the depths of his being. This is what makes a writer original and great. Leave it to a dilettante to take up any subject. It is not up to the artist to worry about creating principles. His role is to accentuate what is individualistic, to be interested in what is exceptional. A scientist, regardless of how much he admires the exceptional, tries to make it unexceptional. That is his job. Modern man is increasingly interested in the abstract and in the underlying principles. His mind works in a scientific way: it refuses to get acquainted with just one exceptional person. It wants to familiarize itself with characters and systemize their classification.

I believe that if a true writer wants to describe or a painter to paint an apple, it has to be an exceptionally vivid apple, worth the effort. The role of literature is to demonstrate the uniqueness of a life being lived. To present this reality in an interesting way is what I call the quintessence of talent.

It is important to show simultaneously the exceptional and the common, the national and the universal, the realistic and the mystical. The moment a writer attempts to generalize a problem and see it on an expansive scale, he stops being a writer. It is only after his literary endeavor is completed that he may go and make a speech in support of a candidate or a loved one. His novel, however, must not be a political dissertation. The role of literature is not to analyze ideas but to describe experiences. Frankly, mixing social and political issues with writing is not a very healthy practice: its outcome will
reside outside true literature.

True literature focuses on experiences and situations. When you read the Bible, you do not know what somebody was thinking, but you always know what the person was doing. People may sit and talk for hours about what they are thinking, but it is only through their action that we may judge their true colors. It is a heresy of our times that we use our thoughts and moods as the yardsticks in appraising almost everything that is around us.

Instead of searching for words, the contemporary art of writing consists of restricting them so much that they become cliches. I refer to such words as good, bad, decent, immoral, charming, ugly, noble, abstract, cunning, talented — those and many others which have been emasculated.

Talents are born; I do not believe talent can be achieved through hard work. Genes do not produce many talents, in every generation talent is a rarity. Talent is a freak of nature.

At the same time, it would only be fair to say that a talented person may write bad novels and bad stories.

**AZ-B:** How do you write?

**IBS:** In my early days, I wrote in the third person, now in the first, but I will go back to narrate in the third person. I write with a pen, then I type, but I find it more and more difficult to write by hand. I think I will soon switch over to a typewriter. I spend two hours everyday in the morning writing.

**Sometimes, I would blend my characters into one.** I would move the clock back for a couple of years and place an event in Poland; using a character whom I might have met recently on a holiday.

As I write, I realize how many traps lie in wait for a writer. The worst one is the premise that a writer must be a sociologist or a politician constantly tuning into the process of social development and change. Yet another danger is the desire to make a lot of money and get quick recognition. And finally, the need to be original by working under the illusion that rhetoric, fancy stylistic novelties and the game of silly symbols may be able to articulate the constantly changing nature of interpersonal relations, that the pretense of originality may shed light or explain complications arising from surroundings or heritage. This type of ‘experimental’ writing harmed a great deal of talents, destroyed a lot of contemporary poetry by making it obscure, unattractive.

As elucidated by Spinoza, imagination relates to ‘the natural order of things’ and not to ‘distortions.’ Literature is well able to describe the absurd, but it should not itself become absurd.

The first fifteen years are never lost for a writer, since literature wrestles with the past. My present life consists of describing my remembrances. The writer’s own life and the people he comes across are the best providers of the necessary raw material. Therefore, even when I write about other people, my personal recollections are part and parcel of the story being told. I do not invent my characters, I reminisce about people that I have met and see how they would be able to help me, how they would fit into my story. Sometimes, I would blend their personalties into one. I would move the clock back for a couple of years and place an event in Poland; using a character whom I might have met recently on a holiday. I always have a model. I think that all genuine painters use models. For I believe that nature has in store more surprises for us than our imagination can possibly think of.

What I try to keep in mind first and foremost is to write in my own mother tongue and about people I know best. By forgetting this principle, a writer is attempting to assimilate into a foreign tradition fails to enter that society since he absolutely does not belong to it.

**AZ-B:** What do you think about the modern world?

**IBS:** Modern man, especially a young person, is unhappy because he lacks religion. I am not necessarily referring to organized religion, but to a faith in higher, supernatural forces. For thousands of years, people believed in God or in the gods. They believed that the world did not just happen and that a supernatural power was their ultimate judge, rewarding the good and punishing the evil. Pagans, of course, did not have such faith. But the Jews had a profound faith in a supernatural power and in justice. They believed that God revealed Himself to some people, and that these people knew what they were doing.

But the philosophy glorifying humankind and centered purely on its interests and values destroyed whatever weak faith there was. Then came wars, revolutions and such people as Hitler and Stalin who considered themselves humanists, spoke in the name of humankind and referred to themselves as socialists. Wars and revolutions not only destroy people but also precious cultural roots, whereas peace makes these roots grow and provides them with nourishment.

Faith in God and His Providence are at the very heart of literature. They tell us that misery is but a mask on the face of fate.

Modern man feels as if he were a lottery player: he will either win or lose. He does not believe in any power that will take care of him and his affairs. A peculiar disillusionment prevails among people. I would venture to say that never before in the history of humankind have there been so many people disillusioned and doubtful as now. Suffering makes an intelligent person wiser. A person lacking wisdom may suffer a hundred years and die stupid. There are no set rules.

My brother, Israel Jehosua Singer, was also a writer [author of Josie Kałb, Warsaw 1934 and 1960, AZ-B.]. I often discussed with him this very topic of the
March Breezes

Marie Luise Kaschnitz

Translated with an introduction by Hal H. Rennert

Introduction

In standard histories of German literature, the post-World War II generation of German writers is said to include few women. One reason for this is the assumption that women should be excluded from the process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, or the coming-to-terms with the past. The presumption here is that women did not have to come to terms with the Nazi past because they were excluded from the Nazi political process. But were they?

Marie Luise Kaschnitz (1901-1974) was born into an aristocratic family in Karlsruhe in southwestern Germany. She was the author of several novels and radio plays, and she also wrote poetry. In 1955, she received the Georg Büchner Prize of the German Academy for Language and Literature.

"Märzwind" ("March Breezes") was written in 1952. The topic of the story is the hanging of a Polish forced laborer in a German village, but the broader theme can be described as the ‘everydayness’ of Nazism, or what Manfred Durzak has called, in connection with another story by Kaschnitz, the Wirklichkeitsvergiftung, or poisoning of reality, in Nazi Germany. The story can also be read as proto-feminist, in that it explores the lack of solidarity between the two women characters.

The German text can be be found in M.L.
The execution is supposed to set an example. That is why all Polish forced laborers have been ordered to the place of execution. From early in the morning on they gather in small groups, accompanied by their guards. They can see from far away that the hill is occupied by the troops and that the black limousines with small flags on their windows have already arrived. Therefore they believe that a mass execution awaits them, but then only two of them are chosen to execute one of their fellow countrymen. The others are supposed to pass in review, single file, looking up at the corpse, when it's finally over. Meanwhile they stand in a semi-circle among the bare trees, their pale faces turned to each other, shivering, whispering.

Because an example is to be set, the more spectators the better. For this reason, the participation of all children above the age of ten has been ordered; they are to bear witness to the sanctity of the racial laws. But the local farmers are not in agreement with this measure. They sent their children into the forest to collect branches, put them to bed or locked them up in the barn. There isn’t a single child on the hill at the edge of the forest. Of the adults only those who received a directive are present: the mayor, the clerk of the court, the policeman, the farm woman who had lodged the complaint with the authorities, Gruber, the miner, born in Bochum, in the Rhineland, who had immigrated only last year, his wife Martha, nee Pzycholl, who is originally from East Prussia and was the lover of the condemned man.

These people are standing around in small groups. They’d like to be far away, but they have been put in place by the polite police lieutenant and don’t dare move. They stand on the road at a point where it disappears into the forest. Between them and the spot where the gallows has been erected are several hefty tree trunks. It is foggy, so that later on, they will find it difficult to follow all the details of the procedure.

Martha Gruber, the mistress of the Pole, buttons her black, woolen gloves only to unbutton them again. She is wearing her dark blue dress with a jacket, off the rack, pre-war material, but still in good condition and a small hat, old-fashioned, but which in comparison to the church-going hats of the peasant women looks like the latest style from Paris. Her face is damp from sweat on her beautiful young face. He will sit across from her at the kitchen table, close enough for their knees to touch and he will devour her with his eyes while over the radio, news of victories and raucous marching bands can be heard.

The soldiers are now stirring. Something is being carried over to them, a board, a ladder or something like it. This, at last, sends a shock through Martha Gruber. She can no longer see Stanislaus, she doesn’t want to see him, luckily she is nearsighted and can’t make out anything except the uniforms of the soldiers and the uniforms of the prisoners, the lump trunks of the beech tree and the bright March sky above the forest. She, too, will pray for Stanislaus, but not now. She will see him before her the way she first met him, carrying the scythe on his shoulder, sun and sweat on his beautiful young face. He will sit across from her at the kitchen table, close enough for their knees to touch and he will devour her with his eyes when he looks at the woman from next door, this show-off, this cowardly bitch. There she stands with her goitered neck, her bulging stomach on which her fingers move the rosary with little clicks. She is contemptuous of the people who live here and who, in her eyes, are rich and humorless, dishonest and devious.

Martha Gruber casts a look at the woman from next door, this show-off, this cowardly bitch. There she stands with her goitered neck, her bulging stomach on which her fingers move the rosary with little clicks. A few weeks ago Martha Gruber would still have liked to choke her. But now she is content to note that her enemy trembles with fear, that her nose is red and that she will soon lose all of her teeth.

The soldiers are now stirring. Something is being carried over to them, a board, a ladder or something like it. This, at last, sends a shock through Martha Gruber. She can no longer see Stanislaus, she doesn’t want to see him, Luckily she is nearsighted and can’t make out anything except the uniforms of the soldiers and the uniforms of the prisoners, the lump trunks of the beech tree and the bright March sky above the forest. She, too, will pray for Stanislaus, but not here, not now. She will see him before her the way she first met him, carrying the scythe on his shoulder, sun and sweat on his beautiful young face. He will sit across from her at the kitchen table, close enough for their knees to touch and he will devour her with his eyes while over the radio, news of victories and raucous marching bands can be heard.

The farm woman sighs briefly. Her husband stands beside her. He is tall, almost a giant, but his back is bent, his arms dangling and in his eyes there is a fearful and hungry look. He is not nearsighted, he
can clearly see that everything has been prepared, the rope has been pulled through the hook, the ladder leaning against the tree. He stares at it, but he senses the presence of his wife beside him, and something contracts in his chest like a vulnerable animal. He is old and shabby, and his wife is in good health, terribly vibrant and powerful. In spite of this, for some time already, he hasn’t been able to stand her. He goes his own way, aware of the darkness and danger of this.

They are waiting for something, the miner Gruber says suddenly, just to break the silence which makes you freeze and feel miserable. Nobody answers, but from afar, from the depth of the forest, emerges a dull hum, the sound of a powerful car engine rapidly approaching.

Soon it will happen, the farm woman thinks, and her lips move with a sudden, involuntary vehemence, making a series of smacking noises. Holy Mary, Mother of God, have mercy on us. Martha Gruber, the miner’s wife, now stands right in front of her and the farm woman sees her curly hair under the crooked little hat. It’s her fault, the farm woman thinks. She wanted her pleasure, just like a girl, just like a young woman. She went into the city to have a permanent. She sat in broad daylight in front of her house with her hands in her lap. Blessed art Thou amongst women... The farm woman is so preoccupied with her thoughts that her mouth opens all by itself, and these words come out of her mouth, and can be heard, loud and clear.

The mayor spins around and looks to his left and right. Why don’t you be quiet, he says angrily. He addresses her by her first name, they all on a first name basis in this village; they are all related somehow. It’s unnecessary to pray aloud, especially there where he stands. A year ago he resigned his membership in the church, although he has neither the strength nor the independence of an atheist. But he has adopted the way of thinking and the way of expression of the party, and when he recalls a few of the party’s slogans he feels strengthened and uplifted.

Stop it, he says again, because he sees that the pale lips are beginning to move again. He has been angry with Ida, who is one of his nieces, ever since that evening in the fall when she came to tell him that there were crimes against the racial laws committed in the village, ever since that evening when he reached for the telephone receiver, thus tipping the mountain that would crush a human being.

Step back, the officer calls out with a muffled voice. He is a member of the Gestapo and his sole task is to exterminate people on the basis of their birth or convictions. But he has the pleasant demeanor of a mortician and his subordinates are very fond of him.

The black limousine careens around the corner and stops with a jolt. The mayor who also happens to be the local party boss and fuhrer of the peasants snaps to attention. He has gained considerable weight of late and his brown uniform is stretched tight over his stomach. He remains standing for a while with locked knees and an unblinking gaze. Then he is called over to the car where he gives his report.

Martha Gruber listens to him speak but doesn’t understand a word. It is impossible for her to make any connection between the events of the past and those of today. She thinks about the evening when her husband first brought Stanislaus home. Her husband went out, leaving her sitting there with the Pole. She spoke with him in the language of her childhood, pidgin-Polish, which he could understand fairly well. They talked and laughed. He had the smell of childhood about him, the open spaces of the East, the bright colors of the festivals, the tinkling sound of the sleighs, and the whitish dust clouds of the roads in hot August. She hadn’t done anything to draw him to her. Suddenly he was there, like a memory of something, a long forgotten word. She suddenly felt like the girl she had been at his age. They looked at each other with that dark desire — to be released for a moment from the oppressive, strange landscape, from the irrevocability of their fate... He isn’t the same, she thinks. The moment appears to her like a series of events unfolding on a screen, a frame from the terrible newsreels of the war to which one cannot relate in any way. The film rolls on, the mayor steps back, and the men who arrived in the car walk into the forest.

Ida has stopped praying. It isn’t my fault, she says suddenly; they all look at her with contempt. She doesn’t dare keep praying. She thinks, I didn’t want to have anyone die. I simply meant to give that Gruber woman the message that she too has to work the way we do. Ida starts crying and feels a certain relief in doing so. She doesn’t know that in this valley, not too long ago, another woman who refused to grow old was drowned in the mill creek with a stone tied around her neck.

In the forest someone begins to speak, reading something. He speaks loudly, but no one at the road can follow what he is saying because at this moment the miner has a coughing attack he is unable to control. He coughs in fits and his eyes begin to have a glassy look. He caught the cold yesterday at the drafty shed...
of the brick works when he fondled the little breasts and slender hips of twelve year old Anna with his coarse hands, blowing his warm breath into her face. He has been doing such things compulsively ever since last year. That is why he doesn’t want his wife to accompany him; that is why he must divert her attention. He doesn’t want to; he can’t help himself. Other men his age take up activities of their boyhood years, putting fruit seeds into the ground or collecting stamps. He too is taking up the activities of his boyhood. Only he never collected seeds and stamps, but instead he was creeping around little girls, in lustful silence.

The mayor tries to slap Gruber on his back, thinking he has something stuck in his throat. He doesn’t mind this coughing because it helps to pass the time, these terrible minutes until it’s all over. Soon they’ll walk home. Today the villagers will be excited, but by tomorrow they will start to forget. The mayor keeps slapping the round back of the miner as if he wants to beat him up. Then he suddenly notices that he himself is freezing and that his teeth are chattering like window shutters in a storm. The execution is taking place in the year 1942. There isn’t any reason yet for the mayor to have doubts about a German victory or to fear the revenge of the Poles. What is bothering him is a ghost rising in mysterious ways out of the conscience of his childhood and out of the thinking of those people that he fights and patronizes. Because of this ghost he sometimes slinks around like a beaten dog in spite of his official power. It is because of this ghost that he associates the life and death of the Pole Stanislaus in a crazy, contradictory way with the life and death of his only son.

With bulging eyes the mayor stares at what is now taking place in the forest. Everything is ready. The prisoners standing in a semi-circle, the soldiers facing them on the other side. In the center is the gallows — a horizontal beam nailed to two tree trunks. Against one of the trees the ladder leans, held by some prisoners. Flanked by two soldiers the young Pole now crosses the forest clearing with firm steps, his head raised.

No one can hear the steps of the condemned man because of the blowing wind and because the forest ground is wet and mossy. But to the mayor these steps are like hammers pounding at his heart.

Now, now, now, he thinks. It must be now that my son is dying out there in Russia. It is a crazy, childish idea. It is an intoxicating idea for someone who carries within him an image, an enormous, blurred image of millions of marching boots, shiny flags and stretched-out arms, of the surging flood of life swallowing up the sacred sacrifice.

Of that small group of people on the road the mayor is the only one who watches as the Pole Stanislaus is executed. The glasses of the fat city clerk are opaque with condensation; the miner’s eyes are full of tears from coughing; the neighbor woman is still fighting nausea and holds her handkerchief to her face. It would be good to tell about the woman who once was the lover of the Pole, it would be good to say that she screamed full of anguish, regret and compassion. But she doesn’t scream. She stands perfectly still, her eyes closed with a smile for her young lover.

And then it’s finally over and done with. The Poles walk past the gallows, slowly, stumbling and in silence. One after the other look up at the corpse as they have been ordered to do. Many of them are filled with thoughts of revenge, and some are whispering something like God have mercy on his soul. No one is thinking about the crime of disgracing the race but they all sense suddenly that the March breezes are gloriously flooding the valley and that they are men with blood in their veins and wind in their faces. I didn’t want this to happen, the miner thinks, as the many feet begin to move, as the cars start to roll and voices are raised. He sighs and starts to shuffle after his wife who arranges her little hat, getting ready to walk through the village full of spite and hatred for the people who, from their windows, will look at her as if she is a venomous animal.

I didn’t want this to happen, the mayor says to the city clerk whom he joins as they walk down the steep road. He raises his voice; he wants it heard and he wants it passed on. He wants it to be some kind of re-assurance, a small attempt at bargaining with destiny for the life of his son, of whom there is no news and who has, in fact, been dead for two weeks, lying in the icy waters of the Pripet swamps.

Smoke comes from all of the chimneys of the village, the people are eating lunch, they talk and commiserate. Up in the forest, the young Pole lies in his hurriedly dug grave, black loose forest soil on his beautiful, contorted face. He has lived twenty-two years, three years in this village in which he was now hanged. He worked for a peasant and sat with him at his table even though it was forbidden to feed the prisoners. He had given the wife of the peasant a hand and carved toys for the children for Christmas — green peacocks feeding at a trough and colorful fishes that moved like snakes.
His home town was a small village close to Cracow in Poland. I’ve been told that it has a long, wide village road with creeks on both sides, white-front houses and a wooden bell tower, that there is a river with high banks on each side, and that the forested river canyon is full of lilies-of-the-valley in the spring and mushrooms in the autumn. There are huge built-in brick stoves in the peasant homes with pictures of saints on the walls and the big marriage beds are piled high with embroidered pillows and blankets. But whether Stanislaus had these images before his eyes in his last hour I do not know. No different from the son of the mayor he was the hope of his parents, the pride of his teachers and the joy of the girls in his village. He was a small seed from the golden ears of grain, ground up among the most bitter millstones of the time. And we can imagine everything except the thoughts of the dying. 

BOOKS


This bilingual collection of speeches/sermons on just and unjust wars, godly and ungodly wisdom, justice and its relation to the wisdom of God throws light on the intellectual atmosphere in fifteenth-century Poland, and how the subsequent generations failed to appreciate and promote their medieval and Renaissance heritage. Stanislaus from Skarbimierz (1360-1431) was Rector of Jagiellonian University and co-author (with Pawel Wlodkovic) of the argument in favor of the rights of nations presented at the Council of Constance in 1414. His philosophical and theological speeches are commentaries on the Book of Wisdom: shockingly, they had never before been published.


A collection of papers by various authors, mainly those associated with the ‘Teachers’ College in Pułtusk. The papers examine various aspects of Polish exile literature and Polish borderlands, relating them to the struggle for independence which so affected gentry life in partitioned Poland. This scholarly book reads well; the subjects discussed range from studies of exiled Polish scholars such as Jan Badouin de Courtenay to the Polish Hassidic movement.


A scrapbook centered around Jerzy Giedroyc and the monthly Kultura which he co-founded and edited for over forty years. It contains an index of Kultura authors from 1947 to 1986. We were pleased to note that the Sarmatian Review contributor, Sally Boss, has published numerous articles in Kultura. The fans of Kultura — and there are many among the Polish intelligentsia — will treasure this book which provides a glimpse of daily labors and successes of the editor and his sympathizers.


A readable book about the sexual revolution which in Poland was delayed by the hardships of communism. A father of three children, Czachorowski (b. 1956) is a professor of philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin and a deputy chair of the Lublin chapter of the Society for Responsible Parenthood.

The book contains an exceptionally eloquent defense of human sexuality and a persuasive argument against pornography. It condemns the sexual revolution, arguing that in second- and third-world countries, it has becomes a tool of neocolonialism. The International Planned Parenthood Federation, the World Bank, the United Nations and the World Health Organization have occasionally engaged in what the author calls cultural imperialism, or forcing the poor countries to promote abortion. The horror of China’s ‘one child policy’ has been repeated in other countries, he says, but the publicity is lacking. A very strong book that should be of interest to parents and prospective parents, as well as to those involved with public policy.


This is the largest Polish-English dictionary ever compiled, providing English translations of some 200,000 Polish words (if nothing else, it demonstrates that Joyce’s Ulysses could have been composed in Polish). In addition to a painstaking translation of the Polish vocabulary, Pogonowski provides translations of geographical and personal names, a table of weights
and measures, and a number of other appendices, as well as a phonetic guide to Polish pronunciation. Unquestionably, an important work.

We have noticed some typos and misspellings in the Dictionary, as could be expected from the first edition of so massive a work prepared virtually single-handedly. Pogonowski is a truly remarkable American of Polish background, a genuine role model who combines Benedictine devotion to work, fidelity to the best ideals of Polish history, and an ability to achieve some success in American public life. A recipient of a recent Polish American Prize, Pogonowski is one of those ‘bright points of light’ which every ethnic community has to have to remain viable and to justify its existence in a broader spectrum of American society.


This delightful story for teenagers is a favorite of Polish children for generations. Originally published in 1937, it is a fairy tale about a small girl lost at a railway station. The book is guaranteed to raise the spirits of both the young and the old. A good paperback to use in the Polish-language schools in the United States.


A delightful children’s story about a bunny who follows Jesus through the events of the Holy Week and is the first living creature to witness the Risen Jesus. Jesus then bestows upon him the honor of bringing special treats to children on Easter Sunday. A remarkable attempt to redirect the tide of de-Christianization of Christian holidays such as Easter or Christmas, back to the spiritual origins of these holidays. A successful attempt to appropriate secular symbols such as the bunny rabbits and eggs for Christian symbolism.

**Other Books Received:**


A scholarly study of the Polish labor movement in the immigrant areas of the German Ruhr. A review to follow.


The story of a Polish cancer researcher’s struggle to persuade the American medical establishment of the validity of his discoveries. The author, a California journalist and Pulitzer Prize nominee, hints at the financial interests involved in opposing Dr. Stanislaw Burzyński’s pioneering contribution to cancer treatment.


An album of reproductions (the originals are mostly in Polish museums) of a nineteenth-century Polish painter who specialized in the painting of horses and in country scenes. Excellent paper and a professional commentary. A coffee-table book.


This little collection contains love stories by Karol Irzykowski, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Tadeusz Rittner, Zofia Nałkowska, Stanisław Dygat and Halina Poświatowska. Decidedly middlebrow.


We would have argued about the selections, but ‘darowanemu koniowi nie zagląda się w zęby.’

**The 1998 Polish Heritage Art Calendar**: Preface by Professor Jerzy Malinowski, captions by Janusz Wałek, Curator of European Art in Kraków’s Czartoryski Museum. New York. Hippocrene Books (171 Madison Avenue, NY, NY 10016, or http://www.netcom.com/~hippocre). 1997. The topic of this year’s Calendar is the city of Wilno (Vilnius) and the Polish artists associated with that city. Δ

**The Auschwitz Eyewitness: An Exhibit of the Artworks of Jan Komski**

A Polish Catholic Auschwitz Survivor will open January 15, 1998 at the Holocaust Museum Houston

5401 Caroline, Houston, Texas 77004, 713-942-8000
Europe
A History


Andrzej Nowak

Contemporary Western syntheses of European history have generally been flawed by deep-seated assumptions about the eastern half of the continent. The peoples living east of Germany and Italy have been edited out of European history as alien, inferior, and not interesting enough to merit attention in the enlightened literary circles of the ‘real,’ i.e., Western Europe. Russia alone, ever since she formed her aggressive empire, commanded more attention, critical at times but reverential most of the time. There exist individual studies of German, French, or even English authors dealing with matters of various eastern, or east central European countries with considerable knowledge, sophistication and historical objectivity, but their contributions have been almost completely neglected by the authors of the various German, French, and especially English and American textbooks of European history and civilization. In this respect, as in many others, the latest single-volume synthesis of the Old Continent’s history constitutes a real revolution. At last, the pasts of Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, Ukraine, Serbia, Bulgaria, and even Albania have been integrated into the big story of Europe. That Norman Davies is the author of this revolution is hardly a surprise. He made his name as a scholar writing two fascinating compendia of Polish history: God’s Playground (1982), and Heart of Europe (1984). These books are indispensable to anyone who wishes to get some idea about the meaning and flavor of the other half of Europe’s story. Davies’ first book was the monograph of the Polish-Soviet War, 1919-1920: White Eagle, Red Star.

In the early 1990s, shortly after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the last symbol of the division of Europe, Davies set for himself an ambitious task of ‘constructing a total history of all Europe.’ As a Professor of History at the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies at the University of London, he was well positioned to perform the task.

In his new book, Davies not only introduces a content that has been overlooked by many, but also uses certain formatting devices meant to give the readers an almost three-dimensional impression of his narration.
tempted to apply to the author of an ancient adage says, grateful to Norman Davies for his achievement. But, as titled virtues are present in this unusual literary-historical collage verdicts, illuminating observations; these and many other "Katyń," "Smolensk" and the Ukrainian "Harvest." famous "Noyades," form a capsule, and so do "Vorkuta," vision. Thus the killing of the Vendée prisoners, or the Europe in 1944-7, likewise remain within his field of his from abroad,' installed by Soviet force in east central of its eighteenth-century French model. The 'revolutions hide the cruelest side of either the Russian Revolution or 1941 (when he was forestalled by Hitler by only three weeks). launching a war against Europe not only in 1939, but also in Europe: A History, Davies' book has its anti-heroes as well. One of them is Russian imperialism. Davies depicts its history in terms of a pathological addiction to territorial conquest, born of gross inefficiency and traditional militarism. He calls this phenomenon bulimia politica (655) and incisively repudiates all rationalizations given to it by Russian historiography: 'the gathering of lands,' 'national tasks,' ‘filling security vacuums,’ and others. Davies rightly stresses the double standards of many Western history books when he depicts the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917-1918 and the parallel collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. Most of the national republics that broke free from Russian control at that time are not given by Western historians the same status as those which broke away from the Central Powers. 'Few historians seem to regard Soviet Russia's reconquest of Ukraine or of the Caucasus as anything other than an internal “Russian” event’ (932). Similarly, Davies observes the striking absence of the analyses of Soviet intentions in the historical debate about the origins of World War II. His intuition in this regard has been proven right after the publication of Europe: A History, when Russian archives ‘disgorged’ at last the primary sources to Stalin’s aggressive plans of launching a war against Europe not only in 1939, but also in 1941 (when he was forestalled by Hitler by only three weeks).

Davies’ synthesis of European history does not hide the cruelest side of either the Russian Revolution or of its eighteenth-century French model. The ‘revolutions from abroad,’ installed by Soviet force in east central Europe in 1944-7, likewise remain within his field of his vision. Thus the killing of the Vendée prisoners, or the famous “Noyades,” form a capsule, and so do “Vorkuta,” “Katyn,” “Smolensk” and the Ukrainian “Harvest.”

Genuine scholarly intuitions, bold historical verdicts, illuminating observations; these and many other virtues are present in this unusual literary-historical collage titled Europe: A History. We have to remain indisputably grateful to Norman Davies for his achievement. But, as an ancient adage says, Plato is a friend, but truth is a greater friend... Davies pays a considerable price for his achievement as a single narrator of such a complex plot. One is tempted to apply to the author of Europe: A History the same words he applies to Izaak Babel as the author of Konarmaïa: ‘He is quite content to burgle history, so long as the resulting haul is artistically satisfying.’ (936) So Davies’ great work contains a number of small errors and quite a few typographical errors which ‘burgle’ dates and figures. Most of these mistakes are trivial when taken in isolation from one another; however, a concatenation of them makes this work less useful as a reference volume than might otherwise be the case. In fairness, it should be said that the task of copy editors (whom such first-rate publishing houses as Oxford University Press presumably employ) is to catch and eliminate such minor mistakes, while proofreaders should have eliminated the rest. Someone at the Press was woefully inefficient in exercising his/her editorial duties. This volume seems not to have been copyedited or proofread by competent professionals.

Some examples of why revisions in subsequent editions seem necessary: in 1241, it was not Henry the Bearded (+1238) that led the Polish princes against the Mongol invasion at Legnica, but his son, Henry the Pious (364); it was not the Grand Marshal of the Crown, Stanislaw Lubomirski (1720-1783), who owned the largest latifundium in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but another Stanislaw Lubomirski (1704-1793) who was the voivoda of Kiev, and even his fortune was never close to ‘a million serfs’ claimed by Davies (585); the First Polish Army fought in Berlin not under Ivan Konev, but under Georgii Zhukov as the Commander of the First Belarusan Front (720); less than 40,000 Poles were sent to Siberia after the insurrection of 1863, and not 80,000 as Davies says (828); Aleksander Bocheński could not have published his History of Stupidity in Poland in 1842 because he was born in 1904 and his book deals with the 1863 Polish insurrection (860); the fortress of Przemyśl was captured by Russians in March 1915, after a 19-month-long siege, and not after an 18-month siege in the Summer of 1917 (903); Roman Dmowski’s Polish National Committee was established in Lausanne in August 1917, and not in Paris in August 1916 (914); Lwów is presently not the second largest city of independent Ukraine, but only the sixth, after Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipropterovsk, Doneck, and Odessa (920); Witkacy was not a mathematician (935); not all the western provinces of Poland were transformed by Hitler into the General Gouvernement: half of them were simply incorporated into the Reich (999); Katowice and the western part of Upper Silesia were not awarded to Poland by the Potsdam Conference in 1945, but belonged to Poland since 1921 (1049); in 1944, the Warsaw insurrectionists surrendered after 63 days, and not after 94, and on 2 October and not 4 October (1041); on the night of 13 December 1981, General Jaruzelski did not manage to arrest ‘in a few hours’ 40,000-50,000 Solidarity activists; the total number of the interned and arrested was about 5,000 (1108).

"It is not sufficient for the good historian merely to establish facts and to muster the evidence,’ writes Davies, ‘The other half of the task is to penetrate the readers’ minds, to do battle with all the distorting preceptors with which every consumer of history is equipped.’ Norman Davies has proved with his last book how wonderfully efficient he is in executing the second half of the historian’s task in particular. After the editorial revisions which will presumably be made after initial printings, the book will
become a classic for many decades.

For us, the peoples of the ‘other Europe,’ the book is a priceless gift. Davies went against the prejudices which still run deep in the corridors of academic power. In Davies’ book, the history of Europe has been presented by a Westerner without massive silencing of voices from Europe’s eastern half. Davies’ boldness has been a shocking offense and scandal to many. In spite of many minor mistakes, the book introduces a major correction to our attempts to understand Europe’s history.

Editor’s note: The seventh printing of the book, in May 1997, eliminated a good number of mistakes and typos present in the initial printings.

Marynia Don’t Cry: Memoirs of Two Polish-Canadian Families


Mark Wegierski

The so-called ethnic writing in Canada, unless it is done by currently fashionable minorities, is often relegated to the margins of literary and popular appreciation. This book, however, particularly Kojder’s section (“A Mother’s Legacy”) says something meaningful about the human condition in the twentieth century. Głogowska’s piece, “Three Generations,” is a short addendum to the main family story told by Kojder, and it deals with Polish suffering during World War II. Kojder recounts the extraordinary women of her family who managed to piece life together - often in the absence of men - after it was repeatedly shattered by war and hard times. The title of the book comes from some lines of comfort given from mother (Kojder’s great-grandmother) to daughter in 1926: ‘Marynia, don’t cry. As long as I’m alive I’ll help you. And maybe you’ll survive because nobody will bother you. And later your children will help you.’ (18)

The dissolution into banal, shallow, North American identifications of the majority of these persons of Polish descent... is also some kind of tragedy.

Kojder’s family history begins before World War I. The miseries of life under virtual serfdom in eastern Europe described in the book extended to about 70% of the population in that area. Only the strongest, healthiest, and most enterprising people could survive. Kojder recounts the extraordinary women of her family who managed to piece life together - often in the absence of men - after it was repeatedly shattered by war and hard times. The title of the book comes from some lines of comfort given from mother (Kojder’s great-grandmother) to daughter in 1926: ‘Marynia, don’t cry. As long as I’m alive I’ll help you. And maybe you’ll survive because nobody will bother you. And later your children will help you.’

What we are seeing in Canada today is the dominance of one, hyperliberal culture, combined with multiracialism, rather than a pluralism of true cultural diversities.

It seems that in Canada today, virtually every minority group is stridently crying about its past suffering and victimization, in order to assert its moral superiority over the majority and obtain appropriate entitlements and redress. Among the hidden casualties of a society consumed by victimology are those persons and nations that actually did suffer incredibly in the past, but whose histories are, for whatever reason, considered inappropriate or irrelevant to the current public debate. The sufferings of Poles in Nazi- and Soviet-occupied Poland during World War II clearly fall under this category. These two memoirs constitute an excellent reminder of those sufferings, and they also define more closely what true suffering, oppression, and victimization consist of.

Kojder’s family had achieved a relative degree of prosperity in eastern Poland by 1939, at least for poor peasants. But as a result of the Hitler-Stalin pact, eastern Poland was incorporated into the Soviet empire. In the winter of 1939-1940, the mass deportations of Poles to Siberia began. Persons were literally given an hour’s notice before being herded on cattle cars that traveled for several weeks before reaching Siberia. Thousands died just in this passage. Once there, they were conscripted into back-breaking forced labor. In a deft touch, Kojder notes the degrees of unfreedom in the Soviet Union: as simple peasants, her family was ‘only’ subject to forced labor, not to the horrors of political incarceration. Deaths under forced-labor, semi-starvation conditions abounded, of course. Those who could not meet the heavy work assignments were not fed even the meager food of regular laborers, and quickly passed away.

What Kojder’s narrative abundantly makes clear is that, even when the Soviet Union became an ally of the West as a result of Hitler’s invasion, and Poles were theoretically allowed to leave Soviet territory, absolutely no help was afforded in the evacuation process. Tens of thousands died of disease or starvation after the agreement reached by Stalin and the Polish government-in-exile in London.
When World War II ended, Poland’s boundaries were shifted by 200 miles westward, which meant there was no return possible for Kojder’s family. Kojder lists twenty relatives who had not survived the war. Among these were her father’s brother, Antek, who was executed by the Soviets in 1940, probably at Katyń. A further tragedy struck the family in late 1945, when her father’s cousin, Władysław Kojder, a prominent leader of the independent Polish Peasants’ Party in newly-liberated Poland, was murdered by the communist secret police. Kojder notes that the actual perpetrators remain unknown and unpunished to this very day. Many years after the fact, the family found out that Stanisław Pieczko, her father’s brother-in-law, had died in 1947, having refused Soviet citizenship, ‘in the gulag location of Oktsiubinsk, Kazakhstan, of hunger and poisoning from his job in a chemical factory.’ (99)

As opposed to all this misery, one would have thought Canada would offer a sunny contrast. However, by the standards of the engorged, post-1960s lifestyle most of us are accustomed to and vociferously demand as our ‘natural right,’ Canada also appears, in both Kojder’s and Głogowska’s pieces, as ‘no picnic.’ It is rather ironic that before the 1960s, eastern Europeans and white ethnics in general were seen as ‘too ethnic;’ while in the post-1960s period, they are seen as ‘not ethnic enough.’ For example, questions about ethnic origin in the Canadian census were not used as a basis for affirmative action initiatives, as is the case today with so-called ‘visible minorities.’ It could be argued that what we are seeing in Canada today is the dominance of one, hyperliberal culture, combined with multiracialism, rather than a pluralism of true cultural diversities.

Kojder lists twenty relatives who did not survive World War II.

Apolonja Kojder pointedly writes: ‘Sometimes I heard...that the natives wanted compensation for the land the white people had taken from them. And I’d wonder why nobody talked about the land that had been taken from my parents and grandmother by the Russians....’ (136)

The reviewer would recommend the reading of this book for those who want to find out what life in the earlier part of the twentieth century - and probably throughout most of human history - was really like. In the reviewer’s opinion, the book offers a highly valuable perspective especially for those who feel themselves so direly oppressed today. Comparing those earlier situations with today’s situations would allow the reader to get a feel for the extremities which characterize this century. Extending, for example, from the almost casually accepted mass murders of innocent persons under totalitarian regimes, to the unwillingness of current Western democracies to properly punish even the most heinous crimes or to uphold the sovereignty of their borders in the face of a burgeoning immigration tide.

It would be highly desirable for this book to appear in Polish translation. Apolonja Maria Kojder, who is currently working on her doctorate in Education at the University of Toronto, is one of only a few persons of the generation born in Canada, the offspring of the postwar immigrant wave ‘of a troubled time,’ who have maintained a significant degree of Polish heritage. Out of those tens of thousands of persons of Polish descent born in Canada between 1945 to 1965, only a handful have maintained a significant degree of identification with Polishness.

When the Soviet Union became an ally of the West as a result of Hitler’s invasion, and Poles were theoretically allowed to leave Soviet territory, absolutely no help was afforded in the evacuation process.

Further study is called for, as to why such a comparatively large generation melted almost completely into the North American mold. What can be immediately noticed is that this generation lived in an era of transition. At the beginning, assimilation was sharply demanded, and ‘ethnics’ were not especially popular, but afterwards the era of so-called multiculturalism began. After the introduction of multiculturalism policy in Canada in the late 1960s, when in fact the main ethnic groups in Canada were eastern and southern Europeans, it might have seemed that, finally, these groups would get their chance for ‘a place in the sun.’ But it turned out that the further evolution of multiculturalism in Canada entailed the mass immigration of visible minorities. It often happened that in the space of five or so years, there would arrive in Canada more persons from some visible minority group (e.g., to cite some of the latest examples, Somalis or Tamils), than there had arrived of representatives of some white ethnic group in the space of a century. Multicultural policy thus effectively turned out to be a policy of multiracialism, where the focus of concern was to be not the longstanding ‘white ethnic’ minorities, but the newly arrived visible minority groups.

The dissolution into banal, shallow, North American identifications of the majority of these persons of Polish descent (who could be termed, somewhat poetically, ‘the last generation of the Polish Second Republic’) is also some kind of tragedy.

Apolonja Kojder ends her book with a tribute to her father, who died much too early in a tragic accident on the railway, while trying to save the life of a fellow worker:

‘My father’s favorite quotation was a line from Adam Mickiewicz’s “Oda do młodości,” or “Ode to Youth;” ‘Without a heart, without a soul — man is but a skeleton....’ (138)

The endeavors and efforts of persons of this Polish-Canadian generation who, like Apolonja Maria Kojder, persevered in their Polishness, and in a patriotic outlook on Polish matters, should be especially cherished.
The Forgotten Few: The Polish Air Force in the Second World War

Joseph Kotarba

My educated guess is that most Polish-Americans' understanding of the role of the Polish military in World War II consists of grossly misleading accounts presented in the mass media. The most common accounts are those offered in thirty-second sound bites of late-night television documentaries on World War II combat. The typical bite begins with a film of Stuka dive bombers screaming towards and blasting away small groups of Polish cavalry - on horseback, no less! - with glistening swords raised high. The bite concludes with a wave of Panzer tanks roaring over the land to finish off the gallant if confused Polish officers. By means of such sound bites, Polish military efforts during the war come across as just another Polish joke.

The narrative makes it clear that militancy, of the kind practiced so often by Germans and Russians, is simply not a Polish feature.

Adam Zamoyski's readable history of the Polish Air Force does much to dispel the misconception of modern Polish military ineptitude. He tells a marvelous and often humorous adventure story, full of bravery, commitment, pride, and determination. The reader also gets bits of insight into the Polish character.

Zamoyski sets the tone for the book with his account of the birth of the Polish Air Force:

The first Polish operational flight took off on 5 November 1918 from Lewandowska airfield against Ukrainian nationalist forces attacking the city of Lwów. It was carried out by Janusz deBeaurain, the son of a doctor from Zakopane, and Stefan Bastyr, an officer in the Austro-Hungarian air service. They were piloting a contraption composed of salvaged parts of at least three different aircraft....The flying machine, proudly painted in the Polish colors of white and red, bumped along the grass runway and rose steadily into the air. It pattered over the Ukrainian lines and dropped two bombs, causing more astonishment than damage, and then returned safely to Lwów. The Polish Air Force was born. (6)

Like other young men smitten with the allure of flying, early Polish pilots were fun-loving and risk-taking barnstormers. They flew for the red and white in conflicts ranging from World War I to the Polish-Soviet war. They came from all social classes and regions in Poland. The Polish Air Force gained respectability through superb pilot training and ground support that was second to none.

It is a recurring feature of Polish history, and of the history of the Polish Air Force, that the Poles do not control the 'means of production' - in this case, production of airplanes. They only fly them, albeit exceedingly well.

When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, however, the 159 open-cockpit and slow Polish P-11 fighter planes were no match for the Luftwaffe's 2000 sleek and powerful Messerschmitts. The surrender of Poland a month later led to the exodus of Polish pilots who, for the most part, ended up in England. There, they joined the Allied war effort and accounted for themselves quite well. In all, the Polish Air Force in Britain consisted of 14 squadrons and 17,000 pilots and support personnel. They flew a total of 102,486 sorties, shot down 745 enemy planes, dropped thousands of bombs, and laid hundreds of mines. Almost 2,000 fliers were killed and almost as many were wounded. The Polish Air Force fought hard in spite of spotty support from the Allies, cultural differences with British pilots and civilians, debilitating confinement in Soviet gulags earlier in the war, a longing for home, and a host of other hardships. The Polish pilots fought with the hope that they would eventually return triumphantly to their homeland, a hope dashed by the Allied betrayal at Yalta.

Although Zamoyski's descriptions of battle activity is thrilling, the best material in the book is the personal stories of the heroic pilots. One of Zamoyski's stars is Jan "Johnny" Zumbach. Zumbach was Squadron Leader of the most famous Polish squadron, #303. He quickly built quite a reputation both as a fearless dogfighter, shooting down eight German planes during the Battle of Britain, and as a ladies' man. In December 1944, Zumbach met a shady entrepreneur in a bar in Wellington, and was soon helping him move uncut diamonds from London to Brussels in his Mustang fighter plane. After several years of short-term and unrewarding (i.e., land-based) jobs, Zumbach was asked in 1962 by Moise Tshombe to create an air force for Katanga, the rebel province in the Congo. Zumbach also fought in and survived the war in Biafra in 1967. He died a mysterious death in 1986.

One very obvious point Zamoyski makes throughout his book is that the Polish Air Force and its exploits were, and still are in the Western world, largely under-appreciated if not forgotten. After the war, the British did not want them to stay, and the Soviet-imposed government in Warsaw did not want them to return. I can
think of two issues discussed in Zamoyski’s book that go a long way in explaining this sad fate, one negative and one positive factor that together may also apply to the Polish experience more generally.

First, to borrow from Marxist terminology, the Polish Air Force did not control its means of production: a historically recurring problem for Poles and Polish-Americans. It was largely an air force without its own planes. The Polish pilots were dependent on the availability of British, French and American planes and supplies. They took their orders and pay from British officers and, consequently, they sometimes appear as underpaid and naively romantic mercenaries in Zamoyski’s book. I do not like this feature of our ethnic character.

Second, Zamoyski’s forgotten few provide additional evidence for a feature of the Polish character that should be obvious to everyone, but for some strange reason is not: Poles are not very mean or militant. Sure, Zamoyski’s pilots loved the adrenaline rush of a good dogfight, a crisply tailored uniform, a timely salute, and the adoring attention of the single girls in town. Zamoyski, however, provides no evidence that the pilots were in any way inclined to treat the enemy as an object to be hated and annihilated, the way the German and Russian troops did in accordance with their commitment to total warfare. Feliks Szyszka’s experience is illustrative:

Feliks Szyszka was shot down over Warsaw on the first day of the war, and as he hung on his parachute, his face and body badly burned, a German fighter flew back and forth shooting at him. He had seventeen bullet wounds on his legs alone when he landed, and spent four months in the hospital...In Britain he joined one of the Polish fighter squadrons, and in 1941, over France, bagged his first Messerschmitt. The German baled out, and Szyszka found himself tearing down on the parachuting pilot. ‘I really don’t know what was happening with me, but my finger was poised on the machine-gun button,’ he recalls. ‘I only needed to press it. But I had to see his face. So I bore down on him and held my fire. The German grew in my sights, twisting on the cords and waving his arms fanatically. In the end I saw his face clearly. It was terrible, but different, oh how different, from the face I had seen over Warsaw. It was crazed with fear. The German dropped his arms and hung there like a rag doll. But I could not shoot. I just couldn’t. I barked my Spitfire and passed a few meters from his face. For awhile I watched as the parachute drifted groundwards. Then I rejoined the squadron, and when I landed - I suddenly felt deep happiness.’ (117)

I am glad Feliks did not shoot the German pilot, and I am glad we are like Feliks.

When I finished reading this book, I imagined what a great story this would be for Americans besides those of Polish descent. If we had any meaningful influence on the mass media in the United States, Zamoyski’s story would be written into a screen play and produced as a film. The film would be built around the exploits of Johnny Zumbach, to be played by...let’s see...how about Tom Cruise? Yes, Tom Cruise would do a great job recreating the spirit of courage and cunning that marked the Polish Air Force pilots and crew, but which also marks who we are. Postmodern culture, dominated by the presence of the mass media, offers this strategy as an appropriate way for ethnic groups to successfully project their character to the world. Δ


Angela Brintlinger

The essay “Poetics” which opens the book is the most interesting and challenging of all. In it, Louis Allain rejects Mikhail Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoevskii’s characters, arguing that Bakhtin’s main mistake was in confusing the aesthetics of the novel with the aesthetics of the theater. Ultimately Allain concludes that Bakhtin ‘underestimated the ambitions of Dostoevskii the ideologue, Dostoevskii the thinker.’ (19) Emphasizing the illusionary nature of theatricality in the novel, Allain suggests that the characters are merely ‘marionettes’ in the hands of the author and not living people or theater actors with their own personalities, fates and world views. Dostoevskii never gives away his right to the word; his voice is audible within the voice of each of the other characters, especially those of secondary characters who are more likely to enunciate philosophical tirades for their author. This convincing anti-Bakhtinian stance seems to me a real contribution to Dostoevskii studies.

The first essay continues with an illuminating analysis of the ‘semiotics of the gesture and of speech’ in Dostoevskii. Drawing on most of the major novels and some of the minor ones (especially The Gambler), Allain argues that Dostoevskii’s own relationship to his body (perceived as weak and unreliable in contrast to the mind) shapes the physical descriptions and actions of his characters. Dostoevskii’s lack of the ‘gift of gesture’ (as opposed, we may assume, to the gift of loquaciousness) made him uncomfortable with others, and his characters inherit from him this discomfort and alienation. (22-23) An analysis of ‘the phrase’ in Dostoevskii focuses on the ‘snake-like’ logic often found in the speech of narrator and character alike; calling Dostoevskii psychologically indecisive, Allain suggests a Tiutchevian attitude toward the word in the great novelist, echoing Tiutchev’s ‘a thought spoken is a lie.’ This line of thought leads into the final section of the essay, one devoted to ‘the poetics of the unspoken’ in The Devils.
In the second essay, “World-sensation,” Allain plays with the idea of seeing versus sensing, experiencing the world, by not using the more familiar, and more translatable, concept of world view, Weltanschauung. Allain describes Dostoevskii’s search for coherence in the world, for a system by which man can operate, identifying that search as a struggle between the law of order and the law of accident. (82) The most fascinating section of this second essay addresses what Allain calls ‘Dostoevskii’s Bestiary.’ There are three main groupings of animals in Dostoevskii’s œuvre, Allain argues, ‘reptiles and wild animals, domesticated animals in the broad sense, and insects.’ (99) Allain discusses these animals type by type, animal by animal, focusing particularly on the use of animals to describe human beings through metaphor, simile, or association. The author finds that the horse is the most valued of animals for Dostoevskii, the bull is despised because it is too crude and violent (see Bykov in “Poor Folk”); the monkey is a particularly hated image in Dostoevskii (which stems, Allain suggests, from Dostoevskii’s attitude toward Darwin and Darwinists). Insects in general and the spider in particular, as any attentive reader of the great novels knows, is connected with sexual violence and sensuality, a connection Allain identifies through a poem by Schiller translated into the Russian by Tiutchev. This ordered scheme of animals and humans may indeed be Dostoevskii’s systematic way of perceiving the world around him.

The third essay, subtitled “Dostoevskii before God,” details the novelist’s search for belief, for Christ, for salvation and for God. Allain argues that Dostoevskii’s anthropomorphism ‘irresistibly aspires to egomorphism,’ (168) thus Dostoevskii takes any attacks on Christ personally, and indeed Christ becomes one of Dostoevskii’s own characters. (170) Allain ultimately concludes that Dostoevskii was able to find God by believing in himself and his art, and thus in the Russian people and their soul, which led him to Christ and from Christ to God. Thus the proof becomes circular: Allain asserts that Dostoevsky was able to perceive various reflections of the divine within himself (172) and it was precisely such evidence of the existence of God which he sought.

In all three essays, the incomprensiability of Dostoevskii’s characters constitutes a repeated theme. ‘Dostoevskii’s heroes,’ writes Allain, ‘are not fully clear not only to themselves but also to the author himself, not to mention the occasional bewildement of the reader.’ (85)

Having rejected the Bakhtinian reading of the relationship between characters and narrator, as well as between characters and author, Allain tries to find another route to understanding Dostoevskii. His approach is essentially biographical and psychological, treating material from The Diary of a Writer and Dostoevskii’s letters on an equal basis with the author’s fictional works. A slightly more problematic characteristic of Allain’s approach is its non-chronological nature, which gives one the sense that Dostoevskii’s literary works are being examined as if they had been written simultaneously. While each essay has its individual merits, the book remains essentially a disconnected collection; the essays do not seem to have been reedited to form a whole. One result is that occasionally, the same quotes are used to bolster arguments throughout the book with no acknowledgement of their earlier mention and no sense of building upon the author’s previous theses. The reader finds her/himself wishing for a bit more credit in assimilating the material and for a wider range of textual support drawn from Dostoevskii’s work.

The series in which F.M. Dostoevskii was published, titled Fates, Evaluations, Memoirs, represents an exciting development in the realm of interlinguistic scholarship. The links between France and Russia exemplified by this book offer a vision of cross-cultural conversation that is often lacking in the field. But this fact points to an additional frustration with this volume for the American audience: while the book demonstrates cultural connections forged by French and Russian scholars, Allain’s essays might have gained an extra dimension if such American scholars as Michael Holquist, Joseph Frank, David Bethea and Harriet Murav had been referenced. David Bethea’s theories of the horse in Idiot would offer interesting dialogue with Allain’s bestiary (The Shape of the Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction, Princeton 1989); Harriet Murav’s recent Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky’s Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique (Stanford 1992) could have shed more light on Dostoevskii’s God-seeking. However, while we continue to hope for more such interaction between scholars publishing in different languages, readers will enjoy meditating upon the abundant and rich quotations and reiterations of important themes and issues in Dostoevskii’s work to be found in these essays by the French scholar Louis Allain.

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Cat Was Sick
Chory kotek

Stanisław Jachowicz (1796-1867)
Translated by David Malcolm

Cat was sick and lay in bed.
The doctor came. “How’s things?” he said.
Cat held out his paw - “So bad, I need…”
He took his pulse - yes, sick indeed.

Surprised he snaps: “Too much guzzling, cat.
And what’s more, not mice, but ham and fat.
So bad...a fever! Oh cat, so bad,
You’ll stay in bed a long time, lad.
With nothing to eat - gruel at most -
No wurst, no cakes, by the Holy Ghost!”

“Maybe a mouse?” cat whispers scared.
“Or the tiny wee thighs of a tiny wee bird?”
“Good Lord, no! Leeches and diet severe,
Your recovery hangs on that, I fear.”
So cat rested - wurst and tripe
Untasted - and mice both plump and ripe.

See the effects of gluttony! Cat ignored the mean,
So the poor chap was punished, as we have seen.
Thus, too, with you children, may it be -
God shield you from the sin of gluttony!

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Feminist Corner

In 1988, Polish chess player Monika Bobrowska, age 10, came in second in the world chess competition for children. This year, she came in second in the competition for the best young (up to the age of 20) chess players in Europe. Three other Polish women took ranking places in the same competition in Tallin, Estonia. Marian Kester Coombs says that girls mature earlier than boys: ‘God’s way of bettering the survival odds for female children,’ and then boys overtake them. Monika seems to be a counterexample. Congrats Monika!