Book Review


The Gladskys, both at Eastern Illinois University, have brought together and edited a very interesting collection of 12 biographies and analytical essays on 16 Polish women writers, followed by brief excerpts from their relevant literature. The volume is introduced by the senior editor and by historian Thaddeus Radzilowski.

Noting that Polish and Polish American women authors are generally ignored in American literature, the editors have decided that they must include the work of: Christians and Jews, the religious and secular communities, naturalized and American born; and that “literature” should in this case embrace fiction, poetry, memoirs, socio-history, children’s and popular literature...as long as they spoke directly or tangentially to questions of ethnicity and gender (5).

The collection is interesting due to the great variation among the authors and the analysts and due to the depth and breadth of the literature. The authors’ lives vary by the kind of Poland, in terms of time and place, from which they came, remember or learned from families, the kind of America they experienced and by their personal identities. Poland was under foreign occupation by Russians, Prussians and Austrians when some Poles escaped to America, under Nazi or Communist rule when others lived there, and a free republic during the years when a few were young. North America was seen as a mosaic offering romanticized opportunities but also self-negating stereotypes and obstacles to the creation of satisfying identities. In most cases these identities were not hyphenated but bicultural for those who had spent their youth in Poland and barely ethnic for those with Polish descent and a life-time in America.

The title of the volume comes “from Victoria Janda’s message to America fifty years ago” (Gladsky, 10) in response to the domination of English lore and to being treated as an outsider, the “other” about whose culture Americans were ignorant and stereotyping.

As we know from the experience of other groups, immigrants face many problems, the most important being the need to construct new identities and a whole new world, as well as the difficulty of expressing all these complexities in an unfamiliar language. Radzilowski explains that:
...at the heart of the immigrant experience is the destruction of home and the end of a personal universe with a coherent center. It brings with it a deep longing to recreate a home and a personal universe in the new place...To be “at home” again each immigrant must re-imagine herself, recast stories that will give meaning and boundaries to a new center for the universe and tie it to the old one (11-12).

For these Polish and Polish American women the reconstruction of the self was done through writing. Gittenstein says of Eva Hoffman, who wrote Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language that “This is a person who becomes herself as she writes herself (264).” Hoffman had to combine her Jewishness, Polishness, womanness and developing Americaness, with the help of psychological therapy. She became a mosaic of self “a professional New York woman and a member of the postwar international new class...one of a new breed, born of the jet age and the counter-culture, and middle-class ambitions and American grit” (Hoffman, Lost 170).

The response to being suddenly embedded in a land with a strange language and people varied among the women writers themselves and among the women about whom they wrote in poems and stories. Helen Bristol showed her immigrant parents’s fear of life in the non-understood world in Let the Blackbird Sing, a fictionalized autobiography. The young daughter became the connecting link between her parents and that world of whom the mother was terrified. This is a common experience among immigrants, beautifully narrated by the author.

On the one hand, the actress Modjewska, already famous in Poland before coming to America in the late 1800s, worked very hard, with the help of a tutor, to learn English and became “The leading Shakespearian actress of the era in the United States (Lyra, 32).” On the other hand, Shae’s heroine in Selling the Lite of Heaven is fully Americanized, second generation, using incorrect Polish grammar (for example, Cioci Wanda instead of Cioci Wandzi and Cioci Wanda instead of Ciocia Wandzia) in a family Christmas scene blending Polish and American customs.

Some of these Polish writers had horrifying experiences in Poland and Russia during World War II. This is especially true of Helen Degen Cohen from a town outside of Warsaw whose family escaped a concentration camp while she was hidden by a Polish woman. They were later imprisoned and lucky to finally leave the country. It took Cohen until over the age of 40 to write, holding back memories. She was one of several women who went back to Poland, some with homesickness, others to better understand what life was like in their youth. A child asks in one poem “Where are we now? Who am I?”

Maria Kuncewicz, who had been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, felt very strongly the stereotyping by Americans, ethnicity as invented “a National costume one is expected to wear as a member of a specific group, in contrast to the