

PORCELAIN

Michael Nevins

*Rose-colored cups and saucers
And flowery demitasses.
You lie beside the river
Where an armored column passes.
Winds from across the meadow
Sprinkle the banks with down;
A torn apple tree's shadow
Falls on the muddy path;
The ground everywhere is strewn
With bits of brittle froth—
Of all things broken and lost
Porcelain troubles me most.*



From *A LITTLE SONG ABOUT PORCELAIN* by Czesław Miłosz (1947)

“Most of all, I miss the porcelain.” That’s how Yale history professor Timothy Snyder began his Forward for a collection of essays gathered by Krzysztof Czyzewski for his book *Toward Xenopolis: Visions from the Borderland*. These same words from Czeslaw Milosz’s poem that was written shortly after the end of World War II, also are inscribed on the wall of a basement cafe in Krasnogruda, a tiny village in northeastern Poland where as a young man, the poet spent summers swimming in the lake and drinking from elegant teacups that were decorated with flowers. The cafe was a pension run by two of Milosz’s aunts until in September 1939, when the area was overrun by Soviet tanks and later ceded to Nazi Germany, they buried the precious dishes for safekeeping.

Professor Snyder suggested that Czeslaw Milosz’s poem “juxtaposes the timeless happiness of youth with the shocks that break time in two—into childhood and adulthood, peace and war, before and after. Pink swimsuits and flowered teacups are left by the riverbank, the one now crossed by the treads of a tank.” In effect, the broken dishes were shards from an earlier time, metaphors for lost civility and culture. Robert Pinsky, who translated the poem into English, noted “the poem is saying something much more drastic, because the porcelain, with the pastoral scenes on it, is the history of the European culture which maimed and destroyed itself.”

(From Pinsky, Walcott, Zagajewski: *Poetry and Empire*. Oct, 2004. Photos taken at the Milosz family’s former manor house in Krasnogruda. August 17, 2023)



Just when Poland was emerging from Soviet control in 1989, a caravan of about twenty young actors and their families in horse-drawn wagons was wandering through the hinterlands of northeastern Poland looking for a place to establish themselves. When they arrived in Sejny, a small town adjacent to the Lithuanian border and quite close to Belarus, they discovered an abandoned former synagogue that seemed ideal for a regional theater. During the Nazi occupation the building had been used as a stable; under communist rule as a fertilizer warehouse. Once Jews had constituted 70% of the local population, now there were none.

The theater group's leader was 31 year old Krzysztof Czyzewski who revered Czeslaw Milosz. One day that first autumn Czyzewski and his wife Malgorzata took a long walk in the countryside and on a forest path near the Milosz family's former estate about five miles from Sejny, they were shocked to pass the great man himself. They shyly greeted him but kept walking; however that same afternoon they ran into the Nobel laureate again and this time, the poet stopped them and said that he'd like to talk. That night they met in a nearby monastery and the young actors stammered out what they envisioned for their troupe.

At their discussion that evening in 1989, the idealistic young couple were thrilled to learn that the legendary poet was sympathetic with their dreams, but he counseled them to focus on practical matters, to pay attention to details. Milosz encouraged the troupe to establish what would soon become the Borderland Foundation. He became their mentor and staunchest supporter, and was instrumental in getting the Ford Foundation to sponsor the project whose headquarters was located in the old synagogue and also in a former Hebrew school in Sejny's abandoned Jewish quarter.

Then 78 years old, Czeslaw Milosz had recently returned to Poland after some forty years abroad — most of the time teaching in California. During the war, he'd been an unofficial member of the Resistance and although he had helped rescue Jews trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto, afterward Milosz suffered from survivor's guilt. His poem *Campo dei Fiori* described a spring night in 1943 when while standing on a balcony he looked down at a festive scene below — the flower-filled market square was adjacent to the ghetto wall and young girls riding on a carousel were laughing. Suddenly, "Standing on the balcony, we heard a chilling scream from the ghetto ...It was the cry of thousands of people being murdered. From the red glow of fires, under the indifferent stars, it flew through the silent spaces of the city into the gracious silence of the gardens..."

*At times wind from the burning
would drift dark kites along
and riders on the carousel
caught petals in midair.
That same hot wind
blew open the skirts of the girls
and the crowds were laughing
on that beautiful Warsaw Sunday.*

In this poem Miłosz discussed the absence of moral responsibility for the Holocaust by many Poles, a subject that had not been properly discussed in Soviet-controlled Poland where the official narrative was devoid of guilt, viewing themselves merely as victims. In 1989, some four decades after writing this poem, Miłosz was named by *Yad Vashem* as one of the Righteous Among the Nations for extending help to Jews hiding on the “Aryan side” of Warsaw.



Krzysztof Czyżewski (August 17, 2023)

Krzysztof Czyżewski once described Sejny as a place of “abundant traditions, at the end of the world.” The region had a complicated multicultural history; former inhabitants included Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Gypsies, Tatars, Byelorussians all living near each other in relative tolerance, if not harmony or appreciation. The Foundation’s mission was to spread a message of tolerance and to develop new forms of cultural, educational and artistic practice, especially for young people most of whom were ignorant of each others history and traditions.

Among the troupe’s first projects was to invite the local populace to sit together in a circle to share stories and sing songs. Later theatrical presentations featured stories that nearly were erased during the German and Soviet occupations and, in addition, they published materials that disputed the notion that Poles merely were victims of the war — notably in 2000, Jan Gross’s controversial book *Neighbors* about the previously suppressed massacre of Jews by Poles in 1941 in the village of Jedwabne where virtually every one of the town’s 1,600 Jewish residents was killed in a single day.

Before his death in 2004, Milosz arranged for his family’s refurbished manor house in Krasnogruda to be ceded to the Borderland Foundation which, in turn, opened an International Centre for Dialogue whose programs are based on humanity, inclusion and empathy. The name “borderland” suggests a shared common space where mutual understanding can flourish, where the mutual ethos turns “others” into “ours.”



The manor house at Krasnogruda

In Krzysztof Czyzewski's book *Toward Xenopolis* (2022), he explained that although the meaning of this word is difficult to capture in translation, it implies a multicultural, multiethnic community — xeno meaning alien or foreigner in Latin. The Foundation has been helping to house Ukrainian writers and artists in Sejny, with some also resident at the manor house in Krasnogruda, which lies on the border with Lithuania. In the past year they have published "Facing the War", a poetry series of ten books written by Ukrainian authors in translation by Polish poets, with proceeds going to the writers. Nowadays, guests from far and wide gather to consider how to coexist and in Krasnogruda's basement cafe the tables often are full — as Timothy Snyder wrote, "The Borderlanders found the porcelain."



