

political situation in Poland that is flattering to the present government. Members of the opposition are seldom invited to explain their views on state television; when they are, they are vastly outnumbered by commentators praising the government. In addition, television presenters display an obvious bias in favor of the ruling party. The Polish courts, where a number of former communist judges still maintain their positions, pass sentences on government critics and burden them with fines beyond their capacity to pay. Former dissident Adam Michnik and the powerful and monied press conglomerate Agora with which he is associated are singled out as particularly opprobrious. The Addendum lists the lawsuits that Michnik has initiated against those who criticized him and the Agora. There were thirteen such lawsuits between 2001 and 2008; the defendants included not only politicians but also respectable scholars such as Professor Andrzej Nowak of Jagiellonian University, Professor Andrzej Zybertowicz of the University of Toruń, and poet Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz. Some of these lawsuits are still ongoing, but those on which the court has ruled have invariably favored the plaintiff and imposed punitive fines on the defendants. (JB) ▲

## *Mitteleuropa* Blues, Perilous Remedies

Andrzej Stasiuk's Harsh World

Terrence O'Keeffe

### PART 2

(continued from the September 2011 issue)

By the late 1990s Stasiuk was willing to show his hand without benefit of fictional transformations. His survey of the broader region's pulse and life takes the form of a series of short essays called *FADO* published in an English translation by Bill Johnston in 2009. *FADO* records two types of journeys—one the repeated geographical forays to nowhere, which give rise to meditations on memory and loss, the other a quizzical to-and-fro interrogation of what might be labeled the “dialectical” relationship between technologically and economically advanced societies and the more backward regions of Europe, that is, the West and the East. In Stasiuk's view the field of these interactions constitutes an almost metaphysical map of reality, with the map shifting with each tremor of change that modernity brings. We from the West invade. They from the East absorb, deflect, or retreat, keeping some of the “old map” intact. In this game of back and forth, of exchange of opportunities and illusions, he has settled one matter in his mind—neither side has much of a spiritual advantage, though he would like to bestow just this on “Europe's losers” (the East).

Stasiuk begins his wanderings through the small towns and remote country and mountain regions of southeastern Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania (ah, mysterious, magical Transylvania! still contested by the latter two nations), Montenegro, Serbia, and Albania like a charged-up Polish Jack Kerouac. He's on the road again, like he was as a hitch-hiking teenager, driving like a demon through the dark, comfortably embraced by the night sky and immense blackness of invisible (yet imagined, even well known) landscapes. Such lonely trips take him back to the anxious joy of our distant ancestors prowling through the night, with their wonderment under the stars as they scan the horizon for the flickering fires of another human settlement, where comfort or death, enticement or dread, await men on the move.



Cover page of the *Report* on the freedom of speech in Poland.

At the beginning of the book's second essay the Kerouac comparison is made explicit, with Stasiuk calling his logs of numerous journeys a "Slavic *On the Road*". He begins with a whirlwind of almost pointless activity, driving for the sake of driving, stopping at small, dingy, isolated towns to soak up their limited daily rounds and the wise immobility of their sluggish inhabitants, whose dedication to existence for its own sake he admires. Some of these towns exhibit the skeletal remains of failed industries, usually abandoned mining centers where the extraction of wealth from the ground leaves behind nothing but desolation, economic hopelessness, big holes, and thick palls of mineral dust. Stasiuk notes that the local Gypsies find these surroundings perfectly acceptable; there will be more on Gypsies later. He ends his road trips in a very small, quiet place, the mind of a ten-year old boy, *his* mind retrieving the past. From Kerouac he has become transformed, most improbably, into a Slavic Proust, searching for lost time, the most cherished moments of his young life, when he spent summers with his grandparents on a farm on the outskirts of a sleepy Polish village. These passages are touching, lyrical, demonstrating his gifts as a prose poet.

He arrives there through a succession of steps. Each step is a short chapter in the book. There are some side excursions, into the region's literature, for example. All the time he is gradually circling in on himself. But we should begin where he does, with the broader picture of a region and its inhabitants. The place dearest to his heart is where he lives, in the mountains of a fictive nation he thinks of as "Carpathiana," which follows the long arc of that mountain range through several countries and half a dozen nationalities. He can drive six hundred miles through the chain and wind up sitting next to someone who smells exactly the same as his neighbors at home. The comforting scent is a mixture of cattle, cheese, sweat, tobacco, dirt, wood, and leather (and here I can imagine the West availing itself of another business opportunity, marketing a commercial cologne named "Shepherd's Brawn") and it pleases him greatly, as does the indifference of the various locals to nationality, their character and outlook being far more determined by vocation and the hard requirements of survival in poor places. To Stasiuk they are interchangeable "Carpathians" and almost interchangeable with their livestock, man-cow-goat-sheep hybrids.

But he raids the valleys and flatlands too. And a few cities. It is the cities that give rise to his reading of the nature of the ongoing exchanges between Europe's

East and West, returned to in several essays. Here is his summing up of life in Budva, a Montenegrin coastal resort town that comes across as a combination of gaudy carnival and flashy casino patronized by Western wannabes and men who imagine themselves as slick mobsters as depicted in cheap Italian films:

The whole place—the beach, the boardwalk, and the resort—everything is immersed in a solution of restless stroboscopic light and electronic pandemonium. This is how Budva imagines modernity and the big wide world.

The inhabitants and patrons of such places (there are enclaves like this in every large and small city in the region), especially their youth, have taken everything that is glitzy and meretricious from the fabled West—loud rock music, disco dance halls, adolescent male clothing styles, stiletto high heels, real and fake gold chains, "gangster style" *in toto*—and assume they have taken a step into "modernity." They are definitely not reading Proust, Joyce, Musil or Calvino (not even Gombrowicz or Kiš or Stasiuk), nor listening to Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Dvořák, Janaček, Górecki, et al., nor harboring a desire to see the Louvre, nor even visiting their own historic sites to sample the architecture and painting of the late medieval or Baroque periods. It's our trash they want, not our treasures, and they may be right in thinking that our trash represents the predominant trend of life over where we live as well. This fondness for our unworthiest detritus is pervasive—Stasiuk finds it not only in urban pockets of robotic nightlife but even in small towns, where teenagers disport their "Western parody" in whatever social space is left to them, be it ever so humble a venue as the illuminated parking lot of a local gas station, where they drink stale beer, engage in adolescent jive and gesticulation, and are harassed by cops. It's a grim scene.

You won't get a full picture of metropolitan life in Stasiuk (he moved from his home city of Warsaw to the Low Beskid mountains in southeastern Galicia, where he has lived for more than two decades). After all, Prague, Brno, Bratislava, Ljubljana, Budapest, Zagreb, and Kraków, just for starters, offer many charming and rewarding sights and sounds, "high culture" as well, and people (Slavs! Hungarians!) actually live, work, and dream productively in these cities and in their summer cottages in the countryside. This life is not alluded to; it is positively avoided. Stasiuk is more inclined to offer brief glimpses that emphasize the overlapping historical time zones that might still be encountered in the region's big cities,

especially in the Balkans—a horse-drawn cart with iron wheels and cheap junk dangling from its sides met among the streaking Mercedes on a road exiting a city, or a migrant field hand trudging through a downtown square in rubber boots, with a scythe over his shoulder, looking as if he stepped out of a Callot print, seemingly oblivious to the impressive sights of modernity. He walks out of the past, through the present, and right back into the past. Stasiuk is an impressionist of shiny steel and glass erupting through a mosaic of rust and decay. Romania is where he sees the most jarring simultaneities of historical time zones and their physical instancing in a jumble of domestic and commercial building styles, each apparently at home with, or indifferent to, its neighbors. To him this gives the country a special savor, as does its final piece of the Danube, an estuary of teeming flora and wildlife that strikes him as positively prehistoric.

Of course Romania is also home to a large, indigestible Gypsy population. Stasiuk's Gypsies are the paradigmatic "they" who move through our (European) time and space without coinhabiting it with us, a people indifferent to the charms, promises, and culture of Europe. Stasiuk finds this admirable because their own presumed ideas of time and space (properties that belong to no one, therefore everyone, and are there to be used as needed to get through the day) appeal to him—"existence for its own sake." They live on our castoffs and cleverly improvise their shantytowns from such discards, sheer junk—yet it is enough to keep them happy (or melancholic in a dramatic way), living in temporarily appropriated wastelands, committed to a way of life that believes, because property is theft, that theft is a perfectly respectable way of acquiring the little property they need to survive. Are they primitive Marxists, uncontaminated by theory but imbued with a dialectical relationship with Europe's trajectory toward a settled, dull, wasteful existence or, better, sophisticated anarchists? They seem to be something like this to Stasiuk. And they are highly emotional. Strong emotions, no matter how irrational or upsetting their consequences in action (a heroic drinking match, a brawl over a woman or an insult to one's ancestors) are the only thing left to eastern and central and southern Europeans (primarily Slavs) with which to counter what Stasiuk imagines will be the fate of the region's people: to become a cheap and shabby imitation of Western Europeans (in his argot, "old Europe's" citizens, whom he imagines as deracinated and unhappy, or happy for all the wrong reasons, in their present incarnation).

About those side excursions into literature, where we get away from small-town stranded souls and hardy, taciturn mountain men: Stasiuk does not hesitate to praise fulsomely those writers whom he admires above all, Danilo Kiš and Miodrag Bulatović. Kiš, whose mother was a Serb and whose father was a Hungarian Jew who "Magyarized" the family name of Kon (Kohn, Cohen, Cohn, etc.), is well known. Kiš was born in Subotica, in the northern Vojvodina region of old millennial Hungary. Before the rearrangements of 1918 the city was known as Szabadka, and a portrait of it in the late Habsburg years exists in the Hungarian Dezső Kosztolányi's odd and soulful novel *Skylark*. Bulatović (whose name is new to me), a Serb, hailed from a remote border district of northern Montenegro. These are Stasiuk's two poles of excellence. The historical melancholy of the one and the surrealistic frenzy of the other appeal to Stasiuk, who notes that Bulatović's intense, mannered "unreality"—that is, a sort of magic realism with an unrelenting poetry of violence—presents life as it is in this part of the world more accurately than Kiš's measured and formally constrained writing. Stasiuk's brief chapter on Bulatović quotes a passage that describes a vicious, maiming brawl among men who represent each of the broader region's nationalities (Czechs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Serbs, Albanians, Bulgarians, and others), and the level of violence and pitch of obscene curses outpaces what might be seen and heard in a film by Quentin Tarantino. As Stasiuk sees it, Bulatović's recurrent theme is homelessness, whether it be experienced in one's natal locale or in the diaspora of Serbian and other Eastern émigrés (often existential "thugs on the road"—shades of "Saint Genet" here) and the ceaseless yearning that goes with that condition. At a gloomy Kiš conference in Belgrade he observes that the security police have been activated to protect poets and literary critics from the prospective wrath of citizens offended by writing that does not confirm their most cherished beliefs—myths—about themselves and their homeland. Concerning these beloved legends of the collective self, in the essay "Parody as a Continent's Means for Survival," Stasiuk probes their origins, their utility as a response to the West, and their staying power:

Did London, for instance, allow itself to think that the hell of the Balkans was not an exotic tribal affair but a tragedy just as European as that of Coventry in 1940 and 1941?

These questions may sound like complaints, but they are not. They only speak of the West's provincialism that leads it to perceive the rest of the continent as a failed copy of itself. In the meantime the East takes from you only what it

needs. It takes appearance, mask, and costume. . . If the West was parochial, then we practiced something that might be called pathological cosmopolitanism. We lived in our cities and countries in appearance only, because for us they were fictitious entities. They did not exist in and of themselves. Real life happened elsewhere, in the West. Our world was unreal. We had to make it so because otherwise we would have had to despise it. Attempts to render our world more real resulted in sorry expeditions into an idealized past, or a hazy millenarianism that proclaimed the imminent arrival of a miraculous hybrid—the three-headed dragon of social equality, universal prosperity, and absolute freedom.

I note here that “real life happened elsewhere” is very close to the title of a 1973 Kundera novel, whose central character, a despicable state-approved poet and police informant, can achieve emotional satisfaction only in his daydream life as a comic-book style superhero who rescues alluring young women. (This novel, *Life Is Elsewhere*, is moreover one of Kundera’s most direct fictional assaults on the Czech tradition of poetry, conceived by him as the literary counterpart of adolescent male fantasies and strategies of avoiding social embarrassment and its attendant feelings of inadequacy, all leading to behavior and attitudes that are embodied in his concept of “lyricism.” In Kundera’s youth this led to “lyrical communism,” the enthusiastic collaboration of the poet with the hangman in the interest of making the New Man.)

Stasiuk is what we what we might call an anti-Kundera, the latter being a Slavic writer who left his home region and enjoyed the rare success of adapting to a foreign place and culture so thoroughly that he now writes in French, a true cosmopolitan who believes that literary fiction must aim high at a notional standard of “world literature.” (Like Čapek’s possible influence on Stasiuk, there may be a link between some of Kundera’s work and Čapek’s writing from the 1930s. Both *Life Is Elsewhere* and Kundera’s French novel *Identity*, deal with a question—what is the “self” that we so firmly believe in?—that was at the center of Čapek’s *Three Novels* alluded to above. Going forward in time, *Identity* may also be an unacknowledged source of inspiration for David Foster Wallace’s well-known “tricky” short story about the confusions of identity, “Oblivion.”)

Kundera’s migration is quite different from that of Poland’s Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, who became Joseph Conrad, once a boy who yearned for a life on the broad, deep oceans. To get there he had to go through the process of becoming a member of the nation that was acknowledged to be the mistress of the sea (Kundera himself may believe that France is still

the mistress of reason and writing). Writing about such a life in the partitioned Poland of Conrad’s era made little or no sense; the longed-for adventurous setting and all of its high-seas literary tropes had been taken over by England and America.

Kundera’s migration is quite different from Stasiuk’s prospects too. Stasiuk will not only not be bolting for Paris or London, but presumably also avoiding a return to residence in his home city of Warsaw, unless his commitment to life in the Carpathians wavers for reasons unknown. As we will see below, he’s veering into Germany on occasion, and someday he may make a raid on Russia—these being the two negatively-charged poles that his homeland is wedged between. And, against Kundera’s notion that communism created an artificial cleft between the West and Central and Eastern Europe, effectively removing a dozen or so nations from the European cultural map, Stasiuk, in a 2007 interview with a French newspaper made a point of refusing to

separate Europe from the ‘Europeanism’ of communism. After all, communism is a purely European reality. [This may surprise the Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Cubans, and Ethiopians, among others, in whose lands communism arrived as a weapon of nationalism and anticolonialism, then entrenched itself as a system of rule with local monarchic and imperial precedents. *T. OK.*] It is here that it was first conceived, and it was indeed here that it was put to the test. It cannot be said that ‘you had communism and we had Europe.’ This is one more iron curtain in the European consciousness—the belief that communism was elsewhere. It was here, with us in Europe, and in this sense it is part of the same national heritage as the Renaissance, the Baroque, the chateaux of the Loire Valley, etc.

My comments in brackets suggest a certain parochialism in Stasiuk’s pronouncements. That aside, I find it difficult to contest his observation, intuiting that Kundera’s proclamations on the matter are really in the nature of a mea culpa for the “lyrical” procommunist excesses of his own youth. He and many others chose a path that darkened rapidly, and they regretted it soon enough, but the path remains a European one nonetheless, just as communism was a European import into half-European, half-Asiatic Russia. Disowning communism from a nation’s history, making it into an exotic and alien disease introduced by foreigners, is pointless and dangerous.

This hypothetical argument between two Central European authors of different generations and experiences bears some discussion. It is not odd that Kundera and Stasiuk—who are writers, after all, not



politicians or diplomats—can be viewed as spokesmen for these opposing points of view, given that along with political and economic domination the USSR went to extremes to export an all-pervasive “Soviet culture” to its satellite states. The battles waged by intellectuals and artists in Czechoslovakia—and by people from all walks of life who favored jazz, rock-and-roll, and blue jeans—against the system during the years after the mid-1960s were referred to as “the politics of culture.” There is no doubt that the creation of the eastern bloc satellite states was accomplished through force and fraud and that it was designed to serve Stalin’s and the USSR’s needs. The situation is well summarized by Tony Judt in his panoptic period history, *Postwar*:

The effect of the Sovietization of eastern Europe was to draw it steadily away from the western half of the continent. Just as Western Europe was about to enter an era of dramatic transformation and unprecedented prosperity, eastern Europe was slipping into a coma: a winter of inertia and resignation, punctuated by cycles of protest and subjugation, that would last for nearly four decades. It is symptomatic and somehow appropriate that during the very years when the Marshall Plan injected some \$14 billion *into* Western Europe’s recovering economy, Stalin—through reparations, forced deliveries and the imposition of grossly disadvantageous trading distortions—extracted approximately the same amount *from* eastern Europe.

In this argument Kundera seems correct about the deliberate Soviet excision of its subordinates from Europe, while wrong about just how “alien” and non-European the whole phenomenon was. The ideological fiction advanced for this isolation was that it was to protect the new states from contamination of their socialist purity by the crass and aggressive West; the simple reality was the creation of a military buffer zone for the USSR. For there is also no doubt that that many European intellectuals—western, eastern and Mediterranean—joined or supported the Communist Party with the idea of playing a “leading role” in the utopian transformations of society that the Party alleged it would bring about; or that some factions of socialist and other workers’ parties willingly merged with *the* Party (many were, of course, dragooned into line).

Communism was a pan-European phenomenon capable of sending out tendrils into Latin America, Africa, and Asia, much as Europe had earlier sent out its agents of colonialism. Stasiuk sees this, the European roots and development of communism, in a clearer light. In the twentieth century’s era of violent political swings, a veritable ideological pressure cooker, strange turns of events happened—Czechoslovakia had

actually been the only functioning democracy in the region throughout the interwar era, and its cultural ties to the West were also strong, yet its population more or less voted the Party into power in 1948, enthusiastically enlisting in the collective effort to “build socialism.” A decade after its leaders established one of the most dogmatic and inflexible Stalinist regimes, the former enthusiasts began to have second thoughts. I also note that the communists’ political kinship with the several varieties of fascism that abounded in the region during the interwar years gives the lie to the idea that it was entirely an imposition by outsiders, as witnessed by the ready postwar transfer of specialists and security forces from the fascist/Nazi to the communist parties. This was not true of Poland, and the widespread sources of potential Polish resistance to Soviet rule probably accounted for more Russian concessions there concerning the Catholic Church and collectivized agriculture than elsewhere in Central Europe. In the interwar period politics within the European communist parties, including the small Western ones, had also been brutal and totalitarian, marching in lockstep down self-destructive pathways to the beat of Moscow’s trumpets and drums. This took place at a time when Stalin had no actual purchase on the continent and no leverage other than control of that versatile capitalist tool, Party funds that he used to subsidize European communist parties. Stasiuk acknowledges this history of local complicity, while Kundera limns it as the product of a totally forced estrangement from an idealized Europe in which east-west differences were insignificant or disappearing until the Red Army arrived on the scene in 1944–45.

The subtextual theme of this argument relates to the very old battle between Westernizers and Slavophiles, with its deep roots in both Russian history and literature. Turgenev and Dostoevsky are the most illustrious antiphonal voices of this debate that goes back to the time of Peter the Great. The pan-Slav movement of the nineteenth century in both Russia and the smaller Eastern Orthodox nations (Serbia, Bulgaria) also had advocates within the Slavic minorities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where it took on nuances qualified by local conditions. Those Czech nationalists who looked toward Russia as the nation with which they would federate or amalgamate in some vague manner (a minority opinion and desire) still tended to be political liberals whose pan-Slav enthusiasm was undermined by serious reservations about the social and political backwardness of tsarist society. Even Masaryk, with his strong pro-Western orientation,

played the pan-Slav, pro-Russian card briefly during 1917, but quickly withdrew it when he came face to face with conditions in Bolshevik Russia. In truth, “Russia” had been a rhetorical threat used to soften Austrian resistance to Czech autonomy, just as pan-Slav sentiments were a counterweight and response to the heady pan-Germanism of Germany and the Germans of Austria and its crown lands of Bohemia and Moravia. In Hungary the actual and rhetorical foe of pan-Slav sentiment was that nation’s program of Magyarization, its attempt, in its own mind, not to be swamped by a sea of Slavs. Looking in the opposite direction, Slavic writers in the Dual Monarchy were attracted to France as much by the idea of Paris as the “anti-Vienna” and “anti-Budapest” as they were by any magnetic appeal of French literature. For some, especially Serbs and Bulgarians, Moscow fulfilled the same role.

Like the preceding generation of Czech intellectuals (an exception being the Anglophile Čapek), Kundera represents the side of the argument that looked to the West in general and France in particular for political support as well as cultural models and influences. The French orientation had something to do with the fact that the Czechs (but not the Slovaks) shared a hereditary enemy, Germany, with France. Looking back from 1945 it was clear that France had lost its patronage credentials due to its role in the Munich settlement of 1938 (thus the abrupt turn toward Russia of many former Czech liberals in 1945; Anglophilia suffered the same fate for the same reason). This had been a two-way street, with Czech modernists and surrealists achieving considerable recognition in France during the 1930s. The Czech literature of dissent from the mid-1960s onward also found a welcome home away from home in France. Kundera found a literal home there (and is greatly resented by his old colleagues for “deserting” their cause and becoming a “cosmopolitan aesthete”—as an emblematic nationalistic Czech poem has it, if you leave your homeland, you, not your homeland will be the loser).

Pan-Slavism in Poland was almost non-existent, given the eastern half of that nation’s subjugation by Russia after the partitions of the eighteenth century. It was as unacceptable as pro-German sentiment, and far more unacceptable than pro-Habsburg sentiment in Austrian Galicia where the old Polish nobility, the active political class, had been ceded considerable autonomy. With Poland’s strong attachments to the “First Rome” as represented by the Catholic Church, the messianic “Third Rome” rhetoric of Russian Slavophiles held no attraction. It is also germane here

to mention the fact that before the eighteenth century Poland was a Great Power of northern Europe, an expansive multiethnic state that tiny Brandenburg-Prussia and disorganized Russia had reason to fear (just as they feared Sweden at the peak of its bellicosity), though the polarities of dominance-subordination have been reversed since then. The post-1790s realities led to an attendant altered Polish frame of mind—“the Polish complex”—a feeling that its inevitable fate is to be a beleaguered society trapped between two menacing giants; this is a status with cultural as well as political dimensions. Poland’s historical ties to France (once again as a counterweight to Prussia and Austria, then to a unified Germany) is one of many factors that placed it squarely in the Westernizing camp.

The foregoing historical digression is necessary because Central and Eastern European novelists have tended to write works strongly pervaded by an awareness of both ancient and recent history. And their particulars lead to the conclusion that, although Stasiuk may be some kind of Slavophile, his outlook departs considerably from the older meanings and implications of that term. Nonetheless his views on Slavic suffering (which allegedly induces a vibrant emotional life) echo those of many Russian pan-Slavs who thought of the Russian people as downtrodden but beautiful souls akin to the suffering Christ. This perspective is familiar to readers of Dostoevsky’s novels where “the little people” (serfs, peasants, urban workers, petty officials) display a beatific style of suffering and Christian humility that is allegedly *sui generis* to Russian society and that contrasts favorably with the rampant individualism and materialism ascribed to a corrupt West. Yet Stasiuk’s position does not really partake of this idea of the innate nobility of the poor and humble of the Slavic lands—for him that is a conceit exploded by history and by the penchant of the downtrodden to misbehave just like everyone else when given the opportunity. It is obviously a complicated position informed by contemporary conditions and *ad hoc* arguments that fulfill his own emotional needs. Perhaps we should just take him at his word—having once been one, he is fond of “losers” and he finds them heavily concentrated in his part of the world. Certainly Slavic peoples have suffered (as has the rest of humanity), but the wisdom that is to be taken from this is that suffering and decline are inevitable and natural aspects of life, something that, as Stasiuk intuits, the current consumerism borrowed from the West is at great pains to deny.

These old cultural controversies and rhetorical battles among intellectuals aside, if Stasiuk ever leaves his mountain lair, he might be enticed to settle on those undramatic plains of central Poland. The final chapter of *FADO* is titled "Tranquility." It is a loving picture of life on his grandparents' farm, where he spent the summers of his late childhood and early youth. It is a place where there is no trash, because nothing is wasted; the material world is wrung out and winnowed because everything can be adapted for survival, for use. The cleverness of these adaptations of worn-out objects is the soul of rural wit in action. Above all, the stillness and silence of the place impressed themselves upon his mind:

The world was composed of an infinite amount of time and material reality. It barely contained any people or events, ordered according to the rules of dramaturgy. In the shade, on long July days, in the silence, everything happened at the same time. Images were suspended in space, able to last forever. Sometimes they broke from the pressure of the air, but then they reassembled themselves. It seemed to me that I could easily return to what had been an hour or even a day or two before. And I believe I did so all the time. Perhaps I even found my former self, busy with what had been occupying me earlier?

Today I have the feeling that back then I was experiencing something like eternity. Exactly that. Grace had been conferred upon me. . . . I felt I was alone in the world, and this brought me joy. Beneath the dark night sky, amid the smell of cattle, somewhere at the end of the world, I was more aware of my own existence than ever before or ever again.

That is the quiet end of Stasiuk's journeys, for the moment. It illustrates his progress from poetry through jarring prose fiction to essay, a not uncommon path and one that in his case yields nonfiction writing charged by his poetic and fictional talents. What about the book's somewhat odd title, the name of a kind of Portuguese song? At some point Stasiuk is being driven along the Albanian border with Macedonia. The car is a battered, rusty taxicab, and its driver tunes his radio to a local station playing Fado, an incongruous music that induces in Stasiuk the thought that the Portuguese countryman and small town dweller are also living in a time warp similar to the one he encounters over and over during his peripatetic jaunts through the Carpathians and the Balkans. They must be, to his mind, otherwise why would they have such a music that is saturated with deep emotions, Gypsy conceits of betrayed love and vengeance, songs bemoaning one's miserable everyday plight? Without understanding the

song's words, Stasiuk and the driver are certain of the music's meaning, inherent in its tonalities, melodies and rhythms. It is "their kind of music," lamentational, entirely suited to Balkan notions about the fate of small, desperate people resigned to their condition as an inevitable and eternally recurrent form of existence.

*FADO* reads extremely well in English. There are no hitches, and when an oddly formal or rare word turns up in colloquial speech ("plafond," "helve," "misericord"), I assume it is there in the original. Therefore, all praise to the translator, Bill Johnston, described in a brief endnote as "the leading translator of Polish literature in the United States." If *Nine* and *FADO* are typical of his results, he has earned the encomium. And congratulations are also due to the Dalkey Archive Press who, with their usual intrepid and adventurous eclecticism, have supplied the reader with a compact, handsome, well made paperback that can go anywhere. These material qualities of the book make me laugh with derision over the pretensions and presumed portability and convenience of Kindle, i-Pad, and all other such "literary" grotesqueries. If this comment offends any juvenile reader—real or older, yet arrested developmentally—who consumes his or her literature and life through such an electronic device, well then, good, it is meant to. On this issue I am obviously a Luddite.

*White Raven* and *Nine*, especially the latter, belong to the approach known as "urban realism" (a term customarily preceded by "gritty"). Some Eastern and Central European critics and literary theorists acknowledge this manner of writing as capable of mounting a meaningful indirect critique (indirect because it was compelled to eschew overt political references) of both social reality and the dull utilitarian requirements of officially sanctioned writing in the old communist bloc. In the early transitional stage of "the changes" it was seen similarly as a vehicle for a cultural critique of the new system. But there are other critics who argue that this approach is irreparably flawed because it shares some of the fundamental formal presuppositions of the older sanctioned literature; on this account alone it is dismissed as not really "new writing." In this view, realism portrays society in a straightforward, consensual manner devoid of an ironical attitude toward writing itself. This presumption is no longer allowable in the minds of such critics. Just as bad, it often serves extraliterary purposes (e.g., the building of the state, the building of socialist man, the building of national consciousness, the advancement of reforms or of an ethical scheme). Novels written in

this older style can paint portraits of society and individuals either positively (optimistically, as desired by the political hierarchy) or negatively (pessimistically or skeptically, as detested and disciplined by that hierarchy), while their authors share with their political masters basic ideas about the social value of writing and the utility of conventional realism. Therefore much of the “literature of dissent” that deviated from and opposed the official perspective about existing social reality (which was highly fictional in itself, a situation that allowed a clever writer the opportunity to parody it by taking it at its literal word) presumably shared “epistemological principles” with that perspective even though it was hostile to and skeptical about the official version of what socialist society was and might be. Theory-oriented critics view this as a failure.

The way out of this is alleged to be postmodernism (or “metafiction”), freely available to all after the changes that began in 1989. Certain writers from the region are hailed as full or partial postmodernists, for example, the Czechs Jiří Kratochvíl and Jáchym Topol, the Slovaks Pavel Vilikovsky and Peter Pišťanek, and the Hungarians Péter Esterházy and László Krasznahorkai, among many others. Perhaps surprising to outsiders, even the smallest Slavic language communities, e.g., Slovakia and Slovenia, have critical factions that participate in fierce contemporary theoretical and polemical wars over postmodernism and its discontents. In fact, the real surprise would be if younger writers from the region did not avail themselves of postmodernist techniques (some of which revive elements of 1930s surrealism) in order to distinguish themselves from the preceding generation of writers. Tadeusz Konwicki’s *A Minor Apocalypse*, published quasi-legally in 1979, is certainly a Polish novel influenced by the theories and practices of postmodernism, lagging behind its Western counterparts by only a decade or so. It has a narrator as authorial voice who interjects social and artistic observations freely; seamless merging of gritty urban realism itself with surrealistic fantasy to create a satirical portrait of Poland’s dismal state; gallows humor; a hopeless ending that resolves nothing; meditations on the value and viability of writing; and so on. It may very well have been on Stasiuk’s mind at the start of his vocation (rather than “career”) as a writer. *Tales of Galicia* also incorporates some of these by-now standard postmodernist practices, but this is to be expected as part of the broader patterns that affect (and occasionally afflict) writers of literary fiction at the present time, though writers may be far less

dependent on rigorously honoring the conceits of postmodernism than critics and theorists are. On the other hand there are conspicuously theory-driven writers in all of Europe’s tongues. Placing Stasiuk or any other author into one or the other of these categories seems a nugatory academic exercise, often restricting criticism to taxonomy and acrobatics with specialized terminology while it skirts issues of comparative value and quality. Few readers, after all, take up a book in order to see if it fulfills the requirements of current critical theories.

Stasiuk is one of our most recent *Mittleuropa* novelists, a regional classification he seems to accept without objection. Unlike Kundera, he does not appear to yearn for a reincorporation of Eastern and Central European life and letters into an expanded, comprehensive “West,” because he considers their disparities as the necessary yin-and-yang embrace of a self-divided entity. He might also reject the illustrious Czech émigré’s exhortation to make all serious writing aspire to a standard demanded by the canons of an assumed “world literature.” He is much more modest in this respect, and he views East-West dissonances not as a temporary aberration but as a tension based on real differences grounded in history and in the longer survival of older, more natural ways of life in the backwaters of the east (with an idea of nature as lovely, violent, and unpredictable in a way that many humans find satisfying). From the point of view of producing writing that is descriptively and psychologically vivid, the “regional framing” of some of his tales does not really matter (*White Raven* could have taken place in numerous blighted pockets of Appalachia, and *Nine* in New York, Chicago, Liverpool, or Mexico City). His achievements rest upon the energy and subtlety of their telling. Turning fifty in 2010, he has a way to go on his path, and it seems that he has more than enough stamina to stake out new ground. More of his writing should be translated into English, especially those works that have resonated in contemporary Germany: *Dukla*, written in 1997 and translated as *Die Welt hinter Dukla* in 2002; a play from 2004, *Noc* (“Night,” with its intriguing subtitle “A Slavo-Germanic medical tragifarce”); and *Dojczland* (“Germany”), essays about his travels there published in 2007.

*Dukla*, in close proximity to the nameless village of *Tales of Galicia*, is the place of the just mentioned collection of essays of the same name. Its nearby military cemeteries are also scenes of contemplative nocturnal visits by Stasiuk in *FADO*. He is fond of cemeteries and their old religious day of honor, All



Souls' Day, for reasons that give an insight into his general feelings about life (a phrase I am sure he would prefer to *Weltanschauung*). As he put it in a piece published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2006:

This is an archaic, primitive public holiday. . . . Once a year we light small fires at the places where we have buried our dead so that they will exist forever and we can find them again. They are the best proof of our existence. What would mankind be without its ancestors? This is an absurd question. And so once a year we mark these places with light so that the black, empty, infinite universe knows that our little battle against it continues, against its nihilism and its indifference.

The origins of the graveyards near Dukla belong to the histories of the two world wars, in which substantial campaigns occurred in attempts to capture the Dukla Pass, the least difficult mountain passage from Galicia into Slovakia. Western readers are mostly unfamiliar with these now obscure battles, but they were on a scale and of a ferocity to deserve mention. They left behind legions of ghosts of many nationalities. The eastern fronts of the First World War (Germans and Austro-Hungarians against Russians to the east and northeast, and against Serbs and Romanians to the southeast) receive scant coverage in British, American, and French histories of the war. At the war's outset the tsarist army flooded Galicia (in the event overcoming the Austrian counterpart of Verdun, the supposedly impregnable fortress complex at Przemyśl), and was pushed out only after a period of three year's fighting that was every bit as attritional as the war on the western front. Complicating local feelings, Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks fought and died in both of the opposing armies, as did Croats and Serbs on the war's southern fronts (I point out in contradiction to the popular rumors of the day that Jews of all of these nationalities also served in the respective armies of the Central Powers and the Allies). Thirty years later similar events occurred. The battle of the Dukla Pass in the autumn of 1944 pitted an invading Russian army, with a small complement of Czechoslovakian army-in-exile troops, against a resolute German defense. The offensive was supposed to be coordinated with the Slovak National Uprising (crafted by a tenuous alliance of local communists and nationalists) against the Tiso government and its German overlords, but by the time of the battle the uprising had dissipated its force and its partisans were on the run in the mountains. The Germans threw five good divisions into the gap (half the number on duty in the Normandy sector on D-day), and the seven weeks' long battle resulted in more than 45,000 men

killed on both sides and double that wounded and missing. In the West we have to comb through specialized military histories replete with operational details of little interest to the general reader to find even a scant record of these events. One recent exception to this is Norman Davies's *No Simple Victory*, with its comparative charts and tables that show that in the European theater the Second World War was won and lost on the eastern front in a way hard to dispute. The battles loom large in local memory, though their graveyards, unlike those in the West, have fallen into decay.

Anyone who tries to pinpoint Dukla's location on the Web will soon encounter websites devoted to the 1944 battle's memorials in the mountain pass. And he or she will also encounter a host of websites that cover something of a lacuna in Stasiuk's portraits of Galicia—the missing former occupants of the sprawling network of towns and larger cities with heavy, even preponderantly Jewish populations, including Dukla, the whole splayed-out world of Jewish rural and urban life that vanished between 1939 and 1945, never to be restored.

The post-1945 adjustment of borders removed from Poland all but a few of the Ruthenians, Ukrainians and Belarusians who inhabited interwar eastern Galicia and its fringes in large numbers. Compensatory expansion to the west caused the flight and then the forced removal of the Germans of the old East Prussia (occupied by Russians), West Prussia (Pomerania), Poznań, Gdańsk, and Lower Silesia. Though now "missing" from the region, these people and the nearby Slovaks are mentioned in three of the four books discussed here. Prewar Polish Galicia's other group of "others," the missing Jews, are not, with one brief exception. In *White Raven* the fugitive gang spends a night with an old Ukrainian living in an isolated farmstead (his sick wife is not seen, only heard moaning as she sleeps in a room which is half a stable, her man perhaps considering her a species of livestock). The man reminisces about the Second World War years, referring to Hitler as a splendid Herod who scourged the Jews and praising the Germans as "real soldiers"—they wore beautiful uniforms and were paragons of organization and efficiency, unlike the Polish and then Russian troops who moved through the area. And the Jews? All murdered, but still cursed in his own mind, which entertains the fantasy that even their corpses and ghosts are capable of vile deeds, pulling innocent passersby into the graves he believes the victims so richly deserved and roaming the land at night to cause

mischievous. After one of the group walks over and silently slaps the man, they all ignore the event, resume their places, and go on drinking vodka.

Poland, the land with the most missing Jews, was also the land where “anti-Semitism without Jews” figured prominently in communist public life during the peak years of postwar Stalinism which disguised its motives and goals by the code-word “cosmopolitanism,” as has been described by, among others, Kiš in his essay “Variations on Central European Themes”. Anti-Semitism has been a working tool of national identity construction and chauvinism in this part of the world for at least two centuries, and the communist leadership took full advantage of this when trying to defray criticism of its own spectacular failures. There are some surprising exceptions to this form of forging a national identity, including, in interwar Poland, the ideal political schema of Marshal Piłsudski, who might be described plausibly as “an authoritarian of the left” favoring a multiethnic state based on civic loyalty, not unlike the ideal of the most progressive of the Habsburgs whom he had served at one time.

In a Polish writer of Stasiuk’s generation and provenance, the missing Jews must be only a pale apparition, something like a rumor of a lost era’s different way of life that included a different set of fears and hatreds. Like faded black-and-white photographs of people who are neither countrymen nor kinsmen, they no longer have an emotional purchase on the unlovely present or on the locals’ imagination that has its own heroes, victims, and villains from the war years and the long, dreary communist era. As the local Everyman might put it, “What’s all this fuss about the Jews—millions of us were killed and dispossessed by Hitler and Stalin too.” The last of the locals who either hounded Jews or protected them or who were willfully blind to or fatalistic about the era’s murderous events will soon be dead. A small village’s Greek Catholic church with its gloomy-radiant icons might be rebuilt, and might even become a scene of worship for Slavic neighbors from the east who drift through—truck drivers, tradesmen, immigrants. But not a synagogue. Who would attend its services?

As to the Germans and Russians who managed to make life hell more than once in this part of the world, Stasiuk’s oft-quoted remarks to the German newspaper *Die Welt* in March of 2007 express an attitude that will certainly damn him with any politically sensitive Nobel Prize judge (i.e., all of them) who might consider his work. As the English summary of the interview informs us:

In an interview with Gerhard Gnauck, Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk explains how Poles feel about Russians and Germans: “I fear the Germans and the Russians; I despise them and I admire them. Perhaps it is the fate of the Poles to obsess about their own position within Europe and the world. Being a Pole means living in complete isolation. Being a Pole means being the last person east of the Rhine. Because for Poles, Germans are like well-constructed machines, like robots, while Russians are somewhat like animals. Our proximity to southerly neighbors in Slovakia offers little consolation.”

Does this publicly declared animus (with its willful elision of those other unloved Slavic neighbors, the Czechs) mean that his favorable reception in Germany is part of that nation’s continuing self-criticism over the earlier Prussian role in the partitions of Poland (not likely) or the fresher, brutal events of 1939–1945? Masochism or reflective penitence? One hopes the latter, but perhaps neither. Perhaps it is evidence of a new German live-and-let-live outlook, or just as possible, the indulgence of a “wild, exotic creature from the East” by citizens of a staid and unadventurous country dedicated to material prosperity (just the kind of country that all of Germany’s twentieth-century enemies hoped it would become, so there is little sense in complaining about the historical and cultural outcome). Whatever its basis, Stasiuk may someday reciprocate the gesture of acceptance. Regarding political life in his own nation, a subject treated only through indirection in his fiction, his querulous fondness for the Kaczyński twins (now only one of them left) who dominated Poland’s political life during the last decade, shows his temper—to him they are “tired old babies” whose combinations of admirable, surrealistically comical, and vindictive traits express their inner conflicts and authentically represent his homeland as he sees it stumbling from one unsatisfactory way of life to another equally vexing one. He would not ask for anything more, or less.

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## Letters

### More Details about the Soviet Genocide of Poles in 1937–1938

I appreciated the article on Stalin's Genocide of Poles by Tomasz Sommer (*SR*, vol. 31, September 2011). Many horrible details were not mentioned in this article, and for the sake of historical memory I would like to record the following:

1. In 1937 my parents' acquaintances in Bielski Podlaski (Poland) received a letter from their relatives in Mohylev (USSR) containing the following words in broken Russian: "Ne pishite do nas tak chasto" [do not write to us that often]. This seemed puzzling, but today we know why they wrote this. It was their way of telling their relatives that they did not expect to live much longer.

2. In December 1944 my family and I lived in Ostrów Mazowiecki (Poland). The Soviet summer offensive was over, the front stopped at the river Narew. The winter was severe, and our small town was crowded with trucks and soldiers.

As usual in the evening, a voice from behind the door was heard: "Pozvol'te perenochevat!" [allow us spend the night here] It was an offer we could not refuse. After the first glass of vodka the Soviet officer said: "My name is Kochanowski, the same as that of your poet [Jan Kochanowski]. I was a Pole, but now I am a Soviet soldier and a Soviet patriot. When I was 17 I joined the Komsomol." From the emotional and disjoint sentences a tragic story emerged: "I did it to save my father. I fell on my knees before the 'Tsar' begging for my father's life." These words I remember with great accuracy. He said that it was then that he became a Soviet man.

Fifty years later, I learned what happened to his father. I read a book by Jewgenii Gorelik *Kuropyty. Polski ślad* (Kuropyty: the Polish trace) (Warsaw, 1996). It contained a list of people shot at Kuropyty. On page 231 I read the following:

"Kochanowski, Adolf, son of Onufry. Born in 1883 in Wołkowicze estate, the district of Minsk. Profession: engineer at the Minsk Telephone Station. On 28

November 1937, by decision of the NKVD Committee of the USSR and Prosecutor General of the USSR, sentenced to death for spying for Poland. Shot on 15 December 1937 in Minsk. Rehabilitated 24 December 1957."

Jerzy Mioduszeński  
University of Silesia at Katowice

### On Polish democracy, Wojciech Jaruzelski, and the Catholic Church

I am really glad that the April 2011 issue of *Sarmatian Review* included a review of *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (edited by M. B. B. Biskupski, James S. Pula, and myself, and issued by Ohio University Press in 2010). A history of democracy in Poland is a very important topic that deserves to be the subject of many books and serious discussion. I am disappointed, however, with the fact that the review, written in an unfriendly or even hostile tone, includes several untrue statements and is, in my opinion, unfair.

Let me support this opinion with several examples taken from the part of the review devoted to one of the chapters I contributed to the book: "In his [Wrobel's] balanced and well informed description of the most important political events in Poland between 1989 and 2004," writes the reviewer, Professor Andrzej Nowak, "there are striking mistakes such as calling Porozumienie Centrum 'Wałęsa's party' in the 1992 elections. Porozumienie Centrum was formed by the brothers Kaczyński and at that time, it was already in open conflict with Lech Wałęsa" (283). This is, of course, true, yet the problem is that, on page 283 I am writing about the 1991 parliamentary elections. This date appears clearly in the text and the entire section is subtitled "1991 Parliamentary Elections."

A similar situation occurs in the penultimate paragraph of the review. "It is hardly possible to analyze the real problems of Polish democracy after 1989," continues Professor Nowak, "without paying attention to the phenomenon of post-communism." This is true again, but why does the reviewer suggest that I have ignored this problem? On page 310, there is an entire section entitled "Post-Communism."

Finally, here is the way in which Professor Nowak deals with quotations. "Piotr Wrobel states the following: 'The Church was considerably strengthened . . . by the policies of General Jaruzelski who granted various favors to the Catholics'" (312). This is followed by Nowak's comments about falsification of history and similar sins. My original sentence, without omissions, runs as follows: "In the late 1970s and the