

Polish Hero Roman Rodziewicz

Fate of a Hubal Soldier in Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Postwar England

By Aleksandra Ziółkowska-Boehm. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield (Lexington Books), 2013. xviii + 138 pages. Photographs. ISBN 978-0-7391-8535-3. Cloth.

Patricia A. Gajda

The author does, indeed, write about the Polish military hero Roman Rodziewicz in this volume, but his wartime service is not its sole focus. She wishes to show the whole man and examine his entire life as it unfolds in his memoir as well as in his retelling. She had the good fortune to meet with Rodziewicz on multiple occasions, as the photo display between pages 62 and 63 shows. She is pictured in the summer of 1974 in Warsaw at the table in the home of Melchior Wańkowicz, the widely read Polish *raconteur*, who sadly passed away within a fortnight of this visit. She is seated between Wańkowicz and Rodziewicz. The book was somewhat difficult to understand at first, owing to the front matter preceding its thirty-seven chapters. I found myself rereading the foreword, the acknowledgments, and the preface in order to discern whose voice and perspective I was hearing in each. The first was that of Matt DeLaMater of the Military History Press, the short acknowledgments were written by the author herself, and the preface by the late Dr. Marcus Leuchter of Houston's Holocaust Museum, which beautifully frames the story that ensues.

Leuchter puts the present volume into context, recounting Poland's fate in autumn 1939, invaded from the West by Germany on September 1 and, in little more than a fortnight, invaded by the Soviets from the East. Leuchter states that it was Wańkowicz, who had written a book entitled *Hubalczycy* (The Hubal Partisans) that made a romantic hero of Major Henryk "Hubal" Dobrzański, who disobeyed orders when Polish forces could fight no longer and

were ordered to stand down or, if they wished further to pursue the fight, to leave the country and continue the fight alongside European allies on behalf of the Polish homeland and the Allied cause. As a result of these orders many Polish pilots joined the British Royal Air Force, earning the thanks and respect of much of the British public, some of whom still remember the young men who came to fight for Britain. But "Hubal" and his independent detachment fought on, as did other irregular forces, to keep the Polish cause of independence alive.

Here is the story in detail. In late September 1939 Roman's unit reached the Lithuanian frontier. Nine of them, including Roman, turned back and sought out Col. Jerzy Dąbrowski whom they found seriously ill. At a scheduled briefing he disbanded the regiment. At this point, Major Henryk Dobrzański announced that he was assuming command. To protect their families, most members of the group assumed a *nom de guerre*. The major became "Hubal," Capt. Józef Grabiński became "Pomian," Ensign Zygmunt Morawski became "Bem," Capt. Maciej Kalenkiewicz became "Kotwicz," Lt. Modest Iljin became "Klin." Sgt. Józef Alicki kept his own name, as did Roman. Even readers who have a facility with Polish names can be thrown off course when the aliases are mixed with genuine names. Roman's journal records that "The Major [Dobrzański] leaves for Warsaw, to make contact with the commanders of the Home Army." He returns to a warm welcome from his men and promises surprises for a Christmas feast. Roman captures a bit of Hubal's charisma and optimism in the notes he commits to his journal.

We learn that although Roman was born on his family estate, Ławski Bród, in the eastern borderlands of Poland that would ultimately be annexed by the Soviets, he spent the first ten years of his life in Manchuria. His father, Antoni, a graduate of the Polytechnic University at Riga, taught at a technical college in Wilno. Because he covertly taught lessons in Polish history to his students he was exiled to Siberia, the fate of many who were perceived as political dissidents in tsarist times. One is awed when reading about Roman's memories of life in exile

as well as in his later years. The writing is crisp, precise, and evocative.

Roman remembers his father taking a pepper infusion that helped him survive his first bout of cholera during an epidemic. We see his mother Natalia returning home to Poland for the summer, sometimes with her children (one of them being Roman) in tow. We see vivid images of the effects of the 1917 Spanish influenza on their small Manchurian town: schools closed, people wearing masks that reeked of camphor. In one scene we learn that Antoni won the sympathy and gratitude of his Chinese workers after publicly showing them respect while in the presence of a visiting group of critical inspectors. Antoni became an engineer in the construction of the Trans-Baikal Railway, and later the Chief Engineer of the Roundhouse.

Far from Poland, the Rodziewicz children were brought up with Polish lore and came to long for the day that they would see Poland for themselves. Roman had a special fondness for his paternal uncle Leon, especially after the unexpected death of both of his parents. Leon loved bees and had a library devoted to the subject on his estate.

When the time came to consider military service Roman wanted to enlist in the Navy, but because of the surfeit of volunteers for that service he was assigned to the Second Mazovian Light Cavalry Regiment. He loved horses and rode them well. As an enlistee, he had a choice and decided to accept the appointment in the cavalry. The chapters dealing with his journal show that his ultimate ambition was to become a gentleman farmer. In fact, several chapters provide very detailed explanations about beekeeping; another chapter considers the rearing of special Polish breeds of dairy cattle and hogs. Like millions' of other Poles, Roman's wishes in that regard were never fulfilled.

Accounts of the war years reveal Roman's ability to keep his wits about him in the most difficult situations. When his cache of underground newspapers was discovered, he feigned no knowledge of them. When he was threatened with execution he laughed and persuaded the German shooter that he wanted to

be executed; the shooter then promptly refused to accommodate his wishes. Roman's fate included imprisonment at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. As the author demonstrates, Roman Rodziewicz retained his honor and humanity in the German death camps. The threat of beatings did not frighten him, but the threat of torture terrified him. He feared that he might not bear up under it and betray his friends and family.

Roman's train arrived at Auschwitz at 7:00 a.m. in late October 1943. Here is how he describes this in his memoir. He soon learned that minimal provisions were distributed to the prisoners. "I can kill you, I can break your bones. I can do whatever I please with you. And for all this, I get a *Zulage* (extra portion of bread and sausage) from the authorities." This was part of his orientation at Auschwitz. The prisoners' beds, no more than planks, were grossly overcrowded. Mortality was rampant. The dead prisoners' bunkmates did not reveal the death, hoping to be able to claim the dead man's portion of food. Bread became the coin of the realm in prison. It could buy anything: cigarettes, alcohol, even money. New prisoners were kept in quarantine for three months. Chapter 25 is titled "Numbered for Life" and recounts the tattooing of the number "165642" on Roman's forearm. When it was done, he was told to rub sand on the spot so the ink could penetrate more deeply and the number would become more legible. He was clever enough to quickly learn the "system" in each camp and how he might benefit from it in order to survive. At one point he was assigned to build barracks on a site called "Mexico." When a veteran prisoner came in search of a dozen volunteers to "get the soup," Roman was eager to volunteer, knowing that getting the soup meant there might be an opportunity to get extra portions. By then Roman weighed just short of 95 pounds, and extra soup was high on his agenda.

Then he was transferred from one death camp to another. The train ride from Auschwitz to Buchenwald took four days. Everyone received a loaf of bread. Buchenwald was just as overcrowded and filthy as Auschwitz, but Roman thought it was less of a nightmare. Germans spared their own territory but did not

care about ruining Polish areas. In Buchenwald Roman volunteered to work on a bomb disposal team. The work was dangerous but not hard, and the Germans did not force them to hurry in their tasks. They received food in better portions and taste than at Auschwitz. As they repaired destroyed train tracks, they found abandoned warm clothing and food and took it for themselves: the police turned a blind eye to this appropriation. Roman also witnessed the American bombing raids toward the end of the war. Eventually he and other Polish prisoners were sent to Dresden, a city in ruins, to clear the rubble and the tracks.

Roman survived the war and settled to civilian life in England rather than returning to Soviet-occupied Poland. He married Patricia Dismoor, an English officer's daughter, on Christmas Day 1952. In 1959 their son Leon was born, named for his grand uncle. Roman's friends and family in England knew nothing of his wartime escapades, but when the film "*Hubal*" was shown in London he became a celebrity among them. He received a special invitation to the film's viewing and met the Polish Consul Mieczysław Hara. He was also featured in *The Observer* and in a television interview. As the Soviet grip on Poland lessened, Roman returned to his homeland on several occasions, visiting his family, Wańkowicz, and his "*Hubal*" friends. In January 2013 he reached his hundredth birthday. His friends organized a celebration that featured flowers and champagne---and a special letter from Polish President Bronisław Komorowski. His children and friends came from Utah, Australia, and Warsaw. This chatty book records all of these events in an appealing way. Δ

Translating Cyprian Kamil Norwid's *Generalities* A Case Study of Cooperation

(continued from September 2014 issue)

22 July 2014

Agata Brajerska-Mazur to Patrick John
Corness:

I totally agree with your point that "Norwid's poetry carries many associations, connotations,

and allusions to his own works and to Polish literature and world culture in general." I also agree that a translator cannot always let readers know about such intertextuality by means of a commentary or a footnote. Nevertheless, intertextual or cultural allusions shouldn't be eliminated just because of this inability. The translator should know, recognize, and render all allusions that are present in the original, even if they are very unlikely to be grasped by readers. This task results from the first and most important translation rule (you have written about it yourself), that is from the translator's duty to give readers "a similar range of opportunities for interpretation of the work as enjoyed by readers of the original."

As for your rendition of Norwid's maxim—it is *not* the same as the original. Yours means half of what Norwid's line stands for. It has no connection to the human condition in it. In your version, only the association with reality and truth is preserved. You only convey the basic meaning of the maxim (the *mot juste* postulate).

I am fully aware that "Polish and English have different versification systems and that English verse is not based on syllable count in the same way as Polish." That is precisely the reason why I always recommend shortening Polish lines in English translations. The specificity of the longer words in Polish and the shorter words in English requires this solution: make Polish verses shorter in English in order to sound natural and to avoid padding. This rule is important especially when the Polish original is deliberately short ("*Ogólniki*" falls in this category). In such a case the translation should retain the conciseness of the original. This can only be done by reducing the number of syllables rather than by multiplying them. Padding only "dilutes" the poem. Even if the number of syllables in the original and in the translation is the same, in the English version there are words and phrases that do not exist in the Polish text. This dilutes the translation; the "perception of the reader" has nothing to do with this simple fact.

Thus your translation is simpler than Norwid's poem because it offers readers only one interpretation of a complex, multilayered Polish