

More Books

Laboratorium, by Anna Frajlich. Graphics by Janusz Kapusta. Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Forma (www.forma.eu), 2010. 89 pages. ISBN 978-83-60881-61-3. Paper. In Polish.

This tiny book consists of vignettes of life in Soviet-controlled Warsaw and in New York in the 1960s and 70s (the author moved to New York in 1969). Perhaps following Witold Gombrowicz's lead, she frequently uses her own name while referring to the first-person heroine of her miniature stories. One should, however, distinguish between the author and her heroine.

Albert Camus once said that a work of fiction contains much more than the author consciously and intentionally put into it. Frajlich's vignettes are no exception. What struck me in her Warsaw stories was the background of indescribable poverty she alludes to. Even in today's Poland where people suffer from a lack of security (in Poland capital accumulation in families and institutions amounted to zero during the lifespan of two generations), this kind of want is not typical. Yet except for the nomenklatura and the communist-approved elites in big cities, this is how the Polish population lived. In a story titled "Doormat" ("Wycieraczka"), after much consideration the heroine buys a doormat for her newly acquired apartment. To her intense sorrow, the doormat disappears the very next day after being lovingly laid out in front of her apartment door. As she learns later, all doormats in that particular section of the apartment building were stolen by a thief who made his way from the top floor down, taking every single doormat.

What kind of impoverishment does it take to notice the existence of doormats to begin with, and steal used doormats from state housing? This kind of poverty is similar to that encountered in the photographs of homeless children rummaging through garbage piles in India or Africa. Perhaps the most significant problem the author refers to in her characteristically lyrical way is the peculiarity of the destitution that communism generated. Few understand the communist crime of literally forcing the population into penury by denying people the right to build their own homes (even if they would be shacks) or start their own businesses (even if they would amount to selling parsley on street corners). The communist mania to control and interpret made people into virtual quadriplegics dependent on the state for food, shelter, and opinion, and unable to move in any direction without permission. Seeking better fortunes abroad was not an option—it was a privilege to get a passport or permit to emigrate. The communist

"laboratorium" Anna Frajlich describes should not be allowed to fade from memory, for without a memory of communist realities the present state of Poland would remain incomprehensible.(SB)

About the Authors

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Seminaria lucieńskie 2006–2007 and *Seminaria lucieńskie 2008–2009* (2 vols.), sponsored by the president of Poland Lech Kaczyński. Edited by Lena Dąbkowska-Cichocka, Katarzyna Janaszek, and Jerzy Urbański. Warsaw: Chancery of the President of Poland. Photographs of participants and reproductions of sixteenth-century Polish drawings. 197 pages and 167 pages. Softcover. In Polish.

These two volumes record the famous Lucień Seminars sponsored by Lech Kaczyński and involving the best humanistic minds in Poland on the left (Aleksander Smolar, Paweł Śpiewak, and Moscow's voice in Poland Andrzej de Lazari) and the right (Andrzej Nowak, Zdzisław Krasnodębski, Ryszard Legutko). Altogether, several dozen scholars presented papers and discussed issues in the spirit of the Polish sixteenth-century debates on political and religious matters. Virtually all participants had distinguished scholarly careers and taught at Polish and foreign universities.

It is characteristic of the Polish Right (as represented by the late President Kaczyński) that it is open to points of view that are very much unlike its own. The neosarmatian tolerance of a broad spectrum of views characterized these Lucień debates. These volumes will probably become bibliographical rarities: published on fine paper and beautifully edited, they represent the spirit of Polish debates on Europe's heritage, democracy, European identity, the Fourth Estate, and Poland's neighbors Russia and Germany. One would imagine that every Polish family would want to have these books in their library. They embody Polish intellectual life at its best.

LII Rocznik Polskiego Towarzystwa Naukowego na Obczyźnie (2008/2009), edited by **Krzysztof Rowiński**. London: PTNO (238-246 King Street, 027-620. Photographs. Paper.

As usual, this yearly publication contains scholarly articles on a range of topics, information about members, and a list of members. Among the articles one should mention the survey of assistance that Polish organizations abroad extended to Poles in Soviet-occupied Poland and an article on Ukrainian society from the standpoint of the psychology of politics.