

## Letter to Miłosz

Raymond Gawronski, SJ

24 December 2010  
Crestone, Colorado

A dense fog covered the high desert this morning, stunted pines standing out from the fog as I have seen them do in the places that were native to you. I have just read your poem “From the Rising of the Sun” and I found myself back in that world from which you came, for half of my ancestors were also from ancient Litwa. When we met in Berkeley in the early 1980s, you knew the name of their town, and you lit up—briefly—at the memory because you had once been there.

The names used for the places today do not correspond with the realities of the soul that you inhaled from your native realm. You are the writer who would understand those things. I do not think you understood or cared to understand the world of Greenpoint or Passaic or Chicago: you were spared those places, and moved from Paris to Washington to Berkeley. But we did link up in Berkeley, for I studied there and was adopted by a professor there, and it too became my home.

But who can understand the people we came from (if from different spheres)? Your writing is largely a search for this identity and I understand it. My parents’ marriage was the Union of Lublin reenacted in Brooklyn, my father’s people (Stanisław) from the ancient Polish heartland, my mother’s people (Kazimierz, Witold) from another place, more Polish than the Polish because her parents “still spoke Lithuanian.” They also spoke a jargon that is something like Belarusan, and had learned to write Russian in school (and learned to write Polish in Minnesota). In our family, as perhaps in history, the dark eyes of the Polish overwhelmed the pale blue eyes of the northern forest. “Stamm’ aus Lituaen – bin echt deutsch.” How could Eliot have known? And they were mostly from that peculiar, lost class who were not simply peasants, of the earth, though they lived in a village and were of the earth, nor yet did they have manor houses and French tutors. Our collection of log houses is called Bojary—indeed, *Wielkie—Bol’shie, Duże Bojary*—to distinguish it from

the smaller collection of log houses across the marshy meadow (*Mate Bojary*). The name, the copy of Mickiewicz in my grandfather’s house and his picture of Piłsudski, my mother’s tribal memories of the Teutonic Knights raiding the forests for slaves, even as their spiritual progeny would take her west in 1941—these speak of that other world. My cousin Kazimierz in Oxford has a photo of his grandfather raking hay: he could be a twin of my own grandfather, a distinctive look that is unlike people from anywhere else. Bojars are a dying breed, especially those from the village.

I met you at your office at the University of California; my school of theology was on “Holy Hill” up the way. A Polish friend who served as your assistant suggested we meet—she said you were lonely and needed a friend. We referred to you as the *niedźwiedź* [bear] because of your bushy eyebrows, and she told me that when one goes “to meet the great man” one brings vodka, which I did. You were cordial, moved by our shared roots—we are, after all, *Landsleute*—and later met my “surrogate father,” a professor at Berkeley, and his wife. You were interested in this Jesuit because you had theological questions. You suggested we write.

That summer—1984—I traveled to the ancient homeland for the first time. I had been to Poland before, but I had never been “there”—that word said with a gesture east. And what should we call that place? Russia? The Soviet Union? No longer Polska, long since not Litwa. Belarus least of all. I went “there.” Brezhnev was reigning. I later went there many times, and I came to see that this piece of “Russia” was not Russia (as I imagined it) at all but a nightmare, the hell of the Soviet Union. Ancient *Rus’* in some sense perhaps, relics of Byzantine chapels at the edges of civilization. And then Gedimin’s fortress and base in Lida, our big town. Nearer there were the small palaces, the local “families” were Tyzenhausen and Radziwiłł, and the large neoclassical churches with their windows made in Wilno. For that was the capital, Wilno, and then Kowno, Nowogródek. Those regions of Mickiewicz.

I came to know and love what it all meant as I came to see the contrast with everything the Soviets had done, which was to destroy anything of beauty: it showed in the horrors of the architecture, as if the Orcs had indeed taken over the Shire. The remains of the Polish gentry, the gracious homes, the ancient villages, had a loveliness to them that spoke of human centuries and

the Catholic faith, while the Soviets built monstrosities that one could only call subhuman. I do not dare write of the Gulag, nor even approach it. All I saw of that hell were the public bathrooms where you would wade in human excrement ankle deep to get to your hole. The whole place had been turned into a hole. That world only saw the dark face of modernity. *Cloaca mundi*.

You had moved on when that all began; your way did not lead to the partisans in the forest nor the German camp to which my mother was sent (after she refused marriage to the Polish collaborator who ran the Lida jail), and I do not know what you did in Warsaw, though you are clearly troubled by that. She also returned to dwell in its rubble, for she had fought with those heroic, romantic fools you gladly sent to do the battle you were too smart to fight. I understand why you do well to apologize for riding the ferris wheel while the Ghetto burned—but why did you never apologize to those like my mother, who were themselves in camps at the time, bearing the letter “P,” a letter you would not bear? Though you did take up and bear the cross of the language, the language of the vanquished.

Yet she survived as well, and what that took I can only guess. She survived to go back through the new border, spending only one night in her village after four years in Germany, having been warned on arrival that she could either escape back into Poland and “the West” or go to Siberia at the command of Comrade Stalin. She fled back the next morning, but did not take her American-born younger sister who wanted to come because she did not think they could both make it. And she was right, for she was caught crossing, and escaped only by grabbing and hurling a kerosene lamp inside the border post where she was taken. Her sister went on to become a “Hero of Soviet Labor” watching the cows in the meadow and forest at the end of the village, praying endless rosaries there—who knows, saving all our souls.

It is memory of which you write, looking with a gaze “blank and pitiless as the sun” it sometimes seems. I can see why you are so drawn to Robinson Jeffers, for your eye for the “beauty of things” is insatiable, yet you were too Christian to write—as he did—that “things are the god.” How you got from the ruins of Warsaw to Paris and Berkeley perhaps cost you your soul, and you have the decency to admit it, like Jeffers’ hawk “too proud for pity”—though you cannot sup-

press the compassion that at times peeks through. You love to flirt with heresy, but you are a Catholic.

In 1984 I discovered Poland too, my first time there as a Jesuit, and so I came now as a son of that culture that had been saved for the Catholic faith by my spiritual ancestors. I fell in love with Poland, and a few years later, after another visit to Poland, I wrote to you a letter from Assisi. It was glowing, because I had discovered a love. You did not know the humiliations of our people [the Poles] in this country; you were safely distanced from them. The Embassy in Washington was very far from the stockyards of the Midwest and the coalmines of Pennsylvania, and then Berkeley—the promised land of California—was a continent away from their struggles. We had been assigned the place of the vanquished, as you recognized in writing in the language of the vanquished, and I will not begrudge you your status. But was it so hard for you to understand the joy of discovering that we were not, after all, a race of hopeless Neanderthals, a subhuman mongrel group of proles with nothing but drunkenness and anti-Semitism to commend them? Was it so foolish to have Chopin in our ears as our eyes were lifted to oil refineries, and not to the San Francisco Bay?

And when the mouthpieces of the rich West proclaimed for all the world to hear the stupidity of our Catholic nation that never submitted to the religion of Marx, you joined your voice to theirs and were quick to throw stones.

You did not answer my letter.

I left California for Rome. I know you continued to meet my surrogate parents at Berkeley for some years, but I never met you again. I was translating at a Synod of Bishops—German into Russian—when a Polish bishop approached me with a gift. It was your book, *Rok myśliwego*. And there I found the answer to my letter. You wrote of a young American Jesuit of Polish ancestry who had just been there, and described a Poland of golden grain fields and cherubic altar boys. Flatteringly, you placed me in the company of John Paul II and Cyprian Norwid, though God knows I make an unlikely companion to them. A specimen of that Polish something you so despised. Romanticism—what St. Augustine would have called “that lethal sweetness,” rooted in sensual love. Romantic, dreamy at worst, yet in their cases at least something other, something simply good at the heart.

But I was the romantic, and I thank you for your purifying words, and for your purifying vision. Twenty years later I stand corrected, if not entirely purified. That romanticism can be a deadly sickness, yet is the answer to highlight only the twisted and the perverted, the odd creations of monstrous human fate that fascinate you as a jaded Mandarin, the fallen priests that hold center stage? Bonzais are beautiful because they are tortured. Must we surrender heart and deny the hope of simple goodness, the beauty yes of children with their garlands for Our Lady, the dead son raised and returned to his widowed mother? Must all our spiritual lives be focused on getting Judas into Heaven?

I think of the last of our Bojary, those Polish-speaking Lithuanians whose hero was Piłsudski, who in the 1980s were singing songs of Piłsudski's Legion when the Soviet village doctor was not around. The last son of that race greeted me in my grandfather's home when I was last there. A handsome blonde youth—his family had the features of Kościuszko, the high upper lip, the turned-up nose—he would sit at the huge cross at the village's edge—you know them well, or at least remember them—and ask Jesus why his three best friends were killed in Afghanistan. He was a good soldier, *pije pije i płacze*, not *ruski* at all in the end, but a *poljak* from a noble race, ground into the dust by history. *Ostatni Mazur, ostatni Bojar*. . . Buried at our church whose belfry the Swedes burnt, near the road where Napoleon's Grande Armée passed on its way to winter.

And so I too hope for that apokatastasis you believe in, when all the forms are restored, those forms you so beautifully articulate. I love your understanding of Robinson Jeffers, and though you would never quite admit it (why do you have to be such a tough guy?) your love for your native land. *Gute Nacht, Gute Nacht, bis Alles wacht*. . .

But I am puzzled that you should have begrudged a child of the shattered immigrant East Coast the profound joy of discovering that he was also the grandchild of that same ancestral world you carried in your bosom across half the planet. I look forward to meeting you on that morning when “the fog rises early.” I will not demand any explanation, and we will not need vodka (though you might apologize to my mother for riding that ferris wheel while she was standing at Appell). Meanwhile, I remember you at the altar *quia laetificat juventutem meam*. ▲

## The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy

Edited by **M. B. B. Biskupski, James S. Pula, and Piotr J. Wrobel** (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010). xvii + 351 pages. ISBN 13-978-0-8314-1892-5. Index, bibliography. Paper.

### Andrzej Nowak

Poland is not infrequently identified as a “new democracy” in American and Western European publications. Is democracy in Poland after 1989 really a *creatio ex nihilo* or a purely imported good? Is it “new” in comparison to the period of communist rule (1944–1989), or a new phenomenon in Polish history in general? Any serious publication answering these questions seems to be worth both praise and attention: praise for dealing with a subject so vital and important to both Poland and Europe, and attention to the way it deals with the subject.

*The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* is this kind of publication. A collection of essays written by the prominent Polish and American historians is announced by the publisher as “the only single-volume English-language history of modern democratic thought and parliamentary systems [in Poland].” Actually, it continues the historical narrative of Polish democratic thought presented in an earlier volume, *Polish Democratic Thought from the Renaissance to the Great Emigration*, published twenty years earlier and edited by the same scholars who prepared *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy*: M. B. B. Biskupski and James S. Pula. The new volume, with a change in its title (as compared with the first one), suggests not just a chronological continuation, but also a slightly different perspective. The origins of modern Polish democracy obviously are not formed exclusively by Polish democratic thought, but also by practices (and sometimes malpractices) of modern political systems from 1863 till 2005. Are they covered with equal attention in the new volume? We shall return to this question later. First, it is necessary to comment in some detail on the contributions to the volume.

A systematic narrative of the volume begins with chapters 2–4 that present the formative years of modern Polish politics, still during the partitions, between 1863 and 1918. Both Stanislaus Blejwas who authored chapter 2 on “A Transition toward Popular Participation in Politics, 1863–90” and Robert Blobaum, the author