

## The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt War Through a Woman's Eyes, 1939–1940

By Rulka Langer. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Los Angeles, CA and Crowborough, Sussex, UK: Aquila Polonica ([www.AquilaPolonica.com](http://www.AquilaPolonica.com)), 2009. 485 pages. Illustrations. ISBN 978-1-60772-003-3. Hardcover.

### Brian Domitrovic

“You know. . . I always thought that the trouble with me was that I had led a too-protected life. Home, school, the university, [my job at] the bank, well, all that is not what people call real life. I used to crave for some real experience. I certainly have it now. If you only knew what I’ve seen. . . I can’t tell you. . . it’s too atrocious, but. . . I didn’t know human bodies contained so much blood.” These words were spoken to Rulka Langer by her friend and co-worker Tomek Małachowski in Warsaw in late September 1939. Four weeks before, at the beginning of September, the two friends were at work at a bank when news came that the children of one of their office mates had been killed, and his wife maimed, by a German bomb. The most the two friends could do was shake hands with this gentleman. Between these two occurrences at the beginning and end of September 1939, as Germany attacked Poland, there was only more of the same across Warsaw and the nation at large: bombs, fires, building collapses, panic baptisms in tent-city maternity wards, want, death, dismemberment, mania. And it was, of course, only the beginning of Poland’s troubles.

In 1942, a remarkable book was published in the United States, in English, by the first-hand witness to these events, Rulka Langer. In *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt* Langer chronicled her experiences in the Warsaw maelstrom, from August 1939 until her departure in early 1940 for the United States, where her husband was on diplomatic assignment. Last year *Mermaid* was republished by Aquila Polonica, the publishing house dedicated to resurrecting rich but forgotten memoirs of the extreme Polish experience of 1939–1945.

It is impossible to read *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt* without two thoughts coming to mind.

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First, Poland had built up quite a tidy civilization for itself by 1939. Rulka Langer was one of those engaging personalities particular to the high days of urbanization and modernization. This book makes plain that those days had indeed come to Poland in the two decades since its independence in 1918. Langer's profession was the iconic one of twentieth-century *chic*—advertising—and the bearing Langer and her colleagues maintained on the job was the stuff of easy urbanity. The witticisms they relate to each other are funny, the tastes they have for the finer things in life are appealing, and the work ethic they display bespeaks a society gaining momentum. It has been said many times that Warsaw was one of the most attractive cities in Europe before 1939. Given Langer's beguiling *moderne* personality, one even feels a certain fondness for the blocky skyscraper that goes up in town, a Prudential building. Over the first 100 pages of *Mermaid* one gains a similar sense as when reading John Lukacs's *Budapest 1900*: something very winning and very civilized is going on here.

And then, of course, the place gets bombed to smithereens. Sated as we are today with images of the "Nazi juggernaut," we are apt to forget that Varsovians believed in early September 1939 that the invaders would meet their match. After all, in the "Miracle on the Vistula" nineteen years prior, the Red Army was routed. In this instance, the victorious powers of the Great War—Britain and France—had made a pledge of hellfire on Germany should the frontier with Poland be crossed. In the first week or so of the German attack, Langer and everyone else she describes thus made tactical adjustments to their routines, expecting to pick up their normal, glorious Varsovian life in relatively short order.

By the second week, however, a brute conclusion was rapidly becoming inescapable. The Germans were bombing the city with abandon. The explosives just started crashing in everywhere. There were shelters, but these could be caved in by structures above, as in one case Langer describes where seventy-six persons were left alive, but unable to be rescued because of the rubble. These individuals surely all wasted away to death in that space. As for Polish defenses, the army was out in the pitch of battle, leaving anti-aircraft fire the only recourse against the bombs in the city. But as the people of Warsaw quickly ascertained, most bombs were dropped from planes flying higher than the reach of anti-aircraft fire. When the odd dive bomber appeared, it was such a screaming moving target that

counterfire was almost always fruitless. So the bombs kept coming and coming.

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Occasionally the Germans would amuse themselves, given the ease with which their plan was being executed. The photograph Varsovians rallied around in these weeks was of a girl of ten kneeling over the blood-stained corpse of her sixteen-year old sister, a winsome lass who had just skipped onto a field to pick potatoes. She had been strafed with gunfire by one of the bombers. In the photo, the younger girl's hands are at a loss as to how to cradle the head and hair of the dead girl. And yet what these hands were eerily framing was the question why.

*Why* is the second question, the pounding question, that haunts the reader of this book. Langer herself does not address it. She is too normal, too enthusiastic about the challenges and opportunities of each new day (though psychological stress did hit Warsaw; there are suicides in this book), too bored by the untoward. But of course the reader pages through this book building to a crescendo of horror, outrage, and anger. *Why* is the question that demands to be addressed after 400 some pages of text, plus a new epilogue by George Langer, Rulka's little boy who endured the invasion with pluck and amusement and today lives in Colorado.

The old standby explanations of World War II really do not have the ring of truth anymore, and future volumes from Aquila Polonica will only further destabilize received wisdom. The Freudians and the Frankfurt School hung it on psychological factors—over-rapid modernization in the context of limited political reform led people over the cliff. Such explanations ring with bizarre irrelevance on digesting works such as *Mermaid*. The Germans had territorial claims and wanted to punish the thieves of Versailles. What, then, were they doing on a vector through Stalingrad? Who were they going to meet out there way past the Volga, on their "journey to the east"? Prestor John?

It is high time to take seriously the argument introduced some years ago by historian Stephen J. Tonsor, an argument that has considerable currency through independent origin in Poland—that recourse to the diabolical, the "demonic" in Tonsor's phrase, is necessary to make sense of World War II. The two

regimes that attacked Poland were vicious agents of paganism and atheism. The Nazis made little secret of their goal of undoing the historical processes of civilization and religion. By driving into the east, really far into the east, to the proverbial origin, the “oriental point” of culture, the processes of civilizational and sacred history would be metaphorically undone. They would be practically undone too, in that what was to follow the smash to the east was a trail of complete destruction and perfidious crime (Stephen J. Tonsor, “*Liebe Hitler*,” *Modern Age*, 40, no. 4, Fall 1998, 406–410).

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As for the “Bolsheviks” (Langer’s preferred term), they wanted to regain the old czarist lands in the west so as to build some shred of legitimacy as a government back home among the Russians. But as Lenin had always made plain, the real goal was western Europe—the Miracle on the Vistula being the only evidence needed to support this view. Poland and Lithuania had for centuries rallied themselves to be the *antemurale christianitatis* that would prevent the center of western Christian civilization from being overrun by ruffians from the East. Thus World War II was a double assault on the stoutest defenses of Christendom. There was a possessed outsider ramming the walls once again, this time assisted by a possessed insider wrecking havoc on those walls from the other side. When it was all over Mephistopheles would just leave, as the swine in the Gospel of Mark and Dostoevsky’s *Possessed*. The pitiable human agents who had been occupied would be left to wither after such an experience.

The question remains of why Poland. Why would *Poland* attract no less than the greatest exertions of—the devil? Here *Mermaid* helps us out quite a bit. There is only a little religion in the book—heroic priests here and there, Masses packed to the gills. Langer herself was a fairly diffident believer, at one point even questioning the communion of the saints. However, the portrait she offers of Polish life at the juncture of the invasions shows that Poland was very dangerous to anyone uninterested in true human progress. Poland was effectively demonstrating that religion and modernity could surge together hand-in-hand. This indeed is the civilizational message of the icons of Polish modernity including the skier-Pope. The radical Enlightenment had insisted that modernity must be a solvent of tradition and religion. Poland, ever more

luminously as time went on to 1939, showed that all these things can coalesce together.

Those determined to vanquish tradition and religion, given modernity were therefore beset with quite a puzzle, quite a challenge, in Poland. It soon came about that Poland’s challenge would be effaced via brutality. But in the course of events Poland reverted to the role of mustard seed, and mountains were moved. Germany, on defeat, rediscovered religion, fixed itself to the Rhine, and in a few decades Jürgen Habermas was paying obeisance to Joseph Ratzinger. Russia is the sadder case, its populace the vehicle abandoned by Mephistopheles, reeling in a brutalized and used state with life expectancy under sixty, the birth-rate far below replacement, and horrid addictions to drink, corruption, and abortion.

Perhaps a new large chapter in Polish history is opening up. The *antemurale christianitatis* may be becoming an obsolete notion. What Russia needs today is the balm of charity, hope, and revivification. Perhaps now is the time for a new vector to power into the east. Over the past several decades, Poland has husbanded considerable resources of holiness, piety, and cheerfulness toward modernity. This is good as far as it goes. We are at a moment in which these resources could be leveraged enormously by dedication to Christian evangelization of the heirs of those seized to perpetrate Katyń. Sacred history, as St. Augustine taught, is necessarily progressive. A very big onus of responsibility may well have recently passed to modern Poland, described so felicitously as on the edge of fulfillment by Rulka Langer seven decades ago. ♦

## Polish Literature from 1918 to 2000

### An Anthology

By Michael J. Mikoś. Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2008. xiv + 490 pages. Bibliography, photographs. ISBN 978-0-89357-352-2. Hardcover. \$44.95.

### Bożena Karwowska

This volume completes Michael J. Mikoś’s project of a six-volume history and anthology of Polish literature from its beginnings to the end of the second millennium. The tome under review consists of two parts: the first presents the interwar literature (1918–