

# P R E F A C E

## Where I'm Coming From

I never set out to write about my parents and their experiences in the concentration camps in Germany and what it was like for us as immigrants here in America. When I was growing up, I wanted to get as far as possible away from them and that world.

When we landed at Ellis Island, we were unmistakably foreign. We didn't speak English. We dressed in black and brown wool that had been given to us by a UN relief agency. My mother wore a babushka on her head, my father a woolen cloth cap with a broken brim. They both wore their best shoes, leather boots that came to their knees. My mother's brother had stitched and hammered those boots by hand. All our belongings were gathered together in a small steamer trunk my dad had built.

We eventually settled in an immigrant neighborhood around Humboldt Park in Chicago. There I met Jewish hardware-store clerks with Auschwitz tattoos on their wrists, Polish cavalry officers who still mourned for their dead horses, and women who had walked from Siberia to Iran to escape the Russians.

It was a tough neighborhood, where I grew up, and our lives were hard: America then—like now—didn't much want to see a lot of immigrants coming over and taking American jobs, sharing apartments with two or three other immigrant families, getting into the kinds of trouble immigrants get into. We were regarded as Polacks—dirty, dumb, lazy, dishonest, immoral, licentious, drunken Polacks.

I felt hobbled by being a Polack and a DP, a Displaced Person. It was hard karma.

I started running away from my otherness as soon as I could, and for much of my life I continued to run. As I started moving into my

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early teens, I didn't want anything to do with my Polish parents and their past. I thought of it all as that "Polack" or immigrant past. It was so old world, so old-fashioned. I had parents who couldn't speak English, couldn't talk about baseball or movies, didn't know anything about Elvis Presley or Marilyn Monroe or James Dean, couldn't spend a night without arguing with each other in Polish, the language of misery, poverty, and alienation. I wanted to spend as little time as possible thinking about my parents and their Polishness and what my mother sometimes called "that camp shit."

I moved away from them, physically and psychologically and emotionally and culturally and intellectually. I stopped going to church, I left home, I didn't maintain my Polishness, I stopped speaking Polish, I stopped eating Polish food, I went to grad school, I immersed myself in American culture. I studied Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Dickinson, Eliot, John Dos Passos, Eugene O'Neill, Fitzgerald, and on and on.

I became the person my parents didn't want me to be. They wanted me to be a good Polish boy, going to church, living at home, dreaming of returning to Poland like my dad.

I guess I did what some immigrant kids always do. I said, your world is not my world.

And then it all changed: I started writing about my parents when I was in grad school. Maybe it was because I had finally gotten far enough away from them. Maybe not.

I realized very quickly that even if people don't want to read what I write, I had to write my poems about my parents just to make sure someone could. Really, there just aren't a lot of people writing about people like my parents and the other DPs. And if I don't write, who will? Imagine all of those hundreds of thousands of survivors who came to this country as DPs. They couldn't write for themselves.

At some level, I am writing for all the people who've sought refuge in America, whose stories were never told, whose voices got lost somewhere in the great cemetery of the 20th century—I feel that I

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have an obligation to listen to those voices and give them a place to be heard, to tell the stories they would write themselves if they could. For the last forty years, while I have been writing about my parents' lives, I am writing not only about their lives, but also about the lives of all those forgotten, voiceless refugees, DPs, and survivors that the last century produced, no matter where they came from.

All of history's "Polacks."

John Guzlowski

Lynchburg, Virginia, September 2015

## **My People**

My people were all poor people,  
the ones who survived to look  
in my eyes and touch my fingers  
and those who didn't, dying instead

of fever, hunger, or even a bullet  
in the face, dying maybe thinking  
of how their deaths were balanced  
by my birth or one of the other

stories the poor tell themselves  
to give themselves the strength  
to crawl out of their own graves.

Not all of them had this strength  
but enough did, so that I'm here  
and you're here reading this poem  
about them. What kept them going?

Maybe something in the souls  
of people who start with nothing  
and end with nothing, and in between  
live from one handful of nothing  
to the next handful of nothing.

They keep going—through the terror  
in the snow and the misery  
in the rain—till some guy pierces  
their stomachs with a bayonet

or some sickness grips them, and still  
they keep going, even when there  
aren't any rungs on the ladder,  
even when there aren't any ladders.