

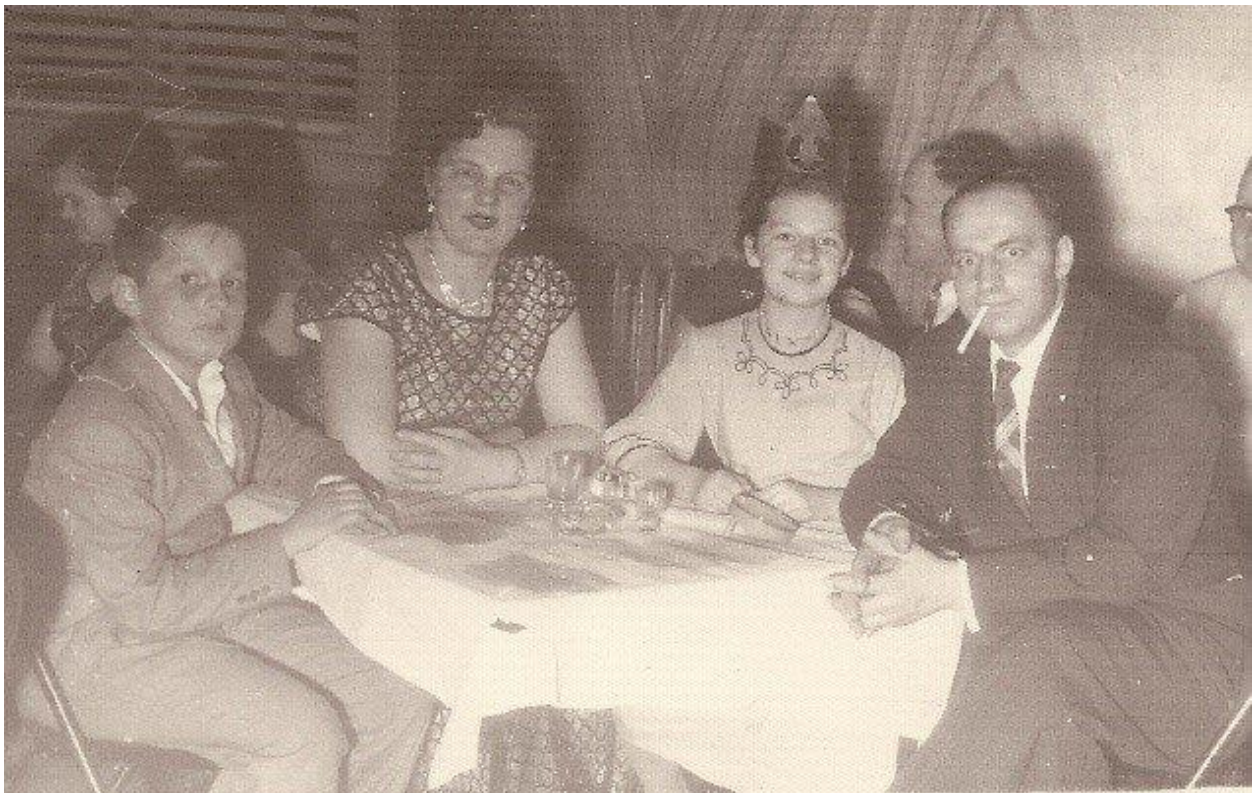


## THE WARSAW INSTITUTE REVIEW

Date: 4 November 2019 Author: Daniel Pogorzelski

### Tell us who you are.

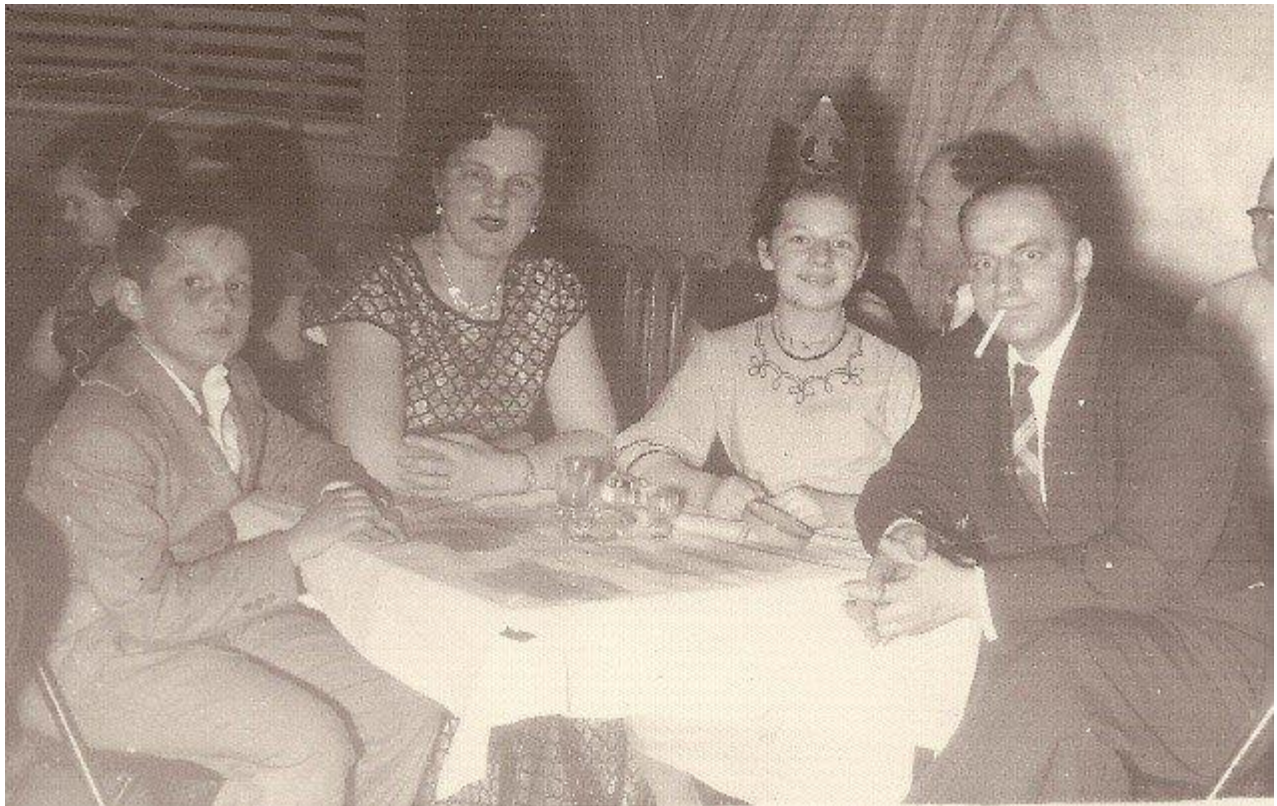
*Renowned Polish-American author and poet John Guzlowski shares with us his struggles and ultimate reconciliation with his Polish identity in this interview with Daniel Pogorzelski, a writer and editor at [ForgottenChicago.com](http://ForgottenChicago.com).*



Everything I can ever say about who I am always has to go back to my parents. They were both Polish Catholic farm kids when the Germans invaded Poland. My dad lived in a small village north of Poznań, and he was captured by the Germans in a roundup in 1940, and my mom—who lived west of Lviv—was captured in 1942 after seeing the women in her family raped and murdered by the German soldiers and Ukrainian militiamen. They were both taken to Germany as slave laborers and were there at the time of liberation. For the next 6 years they were Displaced Persons, or DPs, living in a refugee camp. That’s where my sister and I were born.

We came to the US in 1951 and settled in Chicago.

I grew up there, went to school there, and finally left Chicago to go to Graduate School at Purdue University, West Lafayette, where I received a Doctorate in American Literature. Moreover, I taught at Eastern Illinois University from 1980 to 2015. Beginning even before that, however, since the late 1970s, I have been writing about my parents and their experiences as slave laborers and DPs. My most recent book about them is titled *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*. It won both the Eric Hoffer/Montaigne Award and the Ben Franklin Award in 2017. Furthermore, I recently have also started writing a column for *Dziennik Zwiqzkowy*, the oldest Polish daily newspaper in America, and finally, I am also currently writing a series of mystery novels set in the Polish neighborhoods in Chicago, where many Polish immigrants and DPs settled. The series is called "The Hank and Marvin Mysteries."



*My family came to America in 1951 after 6 years in a DP camp in Germany. We settled in Chicago. This photo was taken there in 1959. My parents, sister and I are at a wedding reception. © Ze zbioru prywatnych zdjęć Johna Guzłowskiego*

### **How does World War II and its aftermath fit into your work?**

My parents used to say that the war had no beginning and no end; that it was with them every day. I feel this way too. Almost everything I have written as an adult in some way is concerned with the war. When I was primarily a university professor, I wrote scholarly work about writers who wrote about what Poland was like before and during and after the war. When I started writing poetry and fiction, it centered thematically almost exclusively on the war and the way it affected my parents and other people, both Polish and non-Polish.

If it weren't for the war and how it affected people like my parents, I don't think I would be a writer.

### **Who were the “Displaced Persons” you so often write about?**

The DPs? They were the people who originally were taken to Germany by the Germans to work as slave laborers there. Estimates vary, but most historians now agree that there were about 12 million slave laborers in Germany at the end of the war. I think that about 1.5 million of them were Poles.

At the end of the war, some of them returned to their home countries, but some did not. My parents were afraid to go back because of the Communists who had taken over the country. Why were they afraid? When my dad tried to go back, he was shot at by the Reds. As my uncle was finally returning back to Poland on a UN sponsored train after 3 years in a concentration camp in Germany, the Russians arrested him and sent him to Siberia where he died.

DPs who did not or could not return to their own countries had to wait for some other country to say, “You can come here.” However, most countries didn't want to take DPs. The US finally agreed to take 275,000. My family was one of the families that was allowed in. To come to the US, we had to find someone to sponsor our passage over, and then we had to work for a year for that person to pay off our passage. An Italian-American farmer outside of Buffalo, New York, paid for our passage. We all worked for him for one year. My parents worked for him, and so did my sister and I. She was 5 years old, I was 3. My mother tells me that I begged her to go back to the DP camps in Germany because the life in America was too hard. My mother replied, “This is America, and here's where we stay.”

One of the other things that made being a DP in America arduous was that we were treated like people who Americans didn't want to see in their country. We were told that the letters DP stood for “dirty Polack,” “dumb Polack,” and “drunk Polack.” When I was a kid growing up in

America, people would frequently tell “dumb Polack” jokes. You’d hear them on the street and on TV and the radio. The jokes were told to make us feel like we were stupid, subhuman. They reminded my father of the way he was treated by the Germans in the slave labor camps.

America has never been a country that welcomes immigrants.

**You devote a significant part of your work to describing the neighborhoods in which you grew up. Give our readers a sense of what this community was like.**

After our first year in America, my parents decided to move to Chicago. They were told that it had a large Polish population and that there were plenty of good paying factory jobs there.

The people who told us that were right on both counts. We moved into an area called the Polish Triangle in Chicago. There were Polish schools, stores, churches, and people. Everywhere you went in that area, there were signs saying, “We Speak Polish.” My parents loved this. In many ways, it was like being back home in Poland.

And there were jobs; plenty of jobs—good paying jobs. Within 3 years of coming to America, my parents were able to afford to buy an apartment building consisting of 5 units. It wasn’t a great place, but it was *their* home and they owned it.

**How does Poland and ‘Polishness’ fit into your writing?**

For a long time, I didn’t want to have anything to do with Poland and Polishness. To me, Poland was solely about the war and the suffering my parents endured in the war. I didn’t want to have anything to do with that. I wanted to be an American kid focused on American stuff: music, movies, books.

It wasn’t until I was in my early 30s and completely divorced from my Polishness that I started to realize that I could not escape it, and in fact, I came to realize that my parents’ Polishness was something to cherish and write about.

**How do Americans without any knowledge of Poland and Polish culture approach your work?**

They haven’t a clue. I do about a dozen presentations every year, all over the country, and the reaction is always the same. People don’t know a thing about what happened in Poland during the war and after the war. A lot of people assume I’m Jewish because I’m writing and speaking about the way Germans killed and abused millions. When I tell people my parents were Roman

Catholics and that millions of Poles suffered and died in the war, they are surprised, shocked. I've even had people come up to me after my presentation to ask me if I was in fact telling the truth about Poland in the war!

I feel that part of my responsibility as a writer is to tell people about what happened to Poland. In fact, one time when I was scheduled to do a poetry reading, I called my mom up and told her I was going to do a reading, and I wanted her to tell me what she wanted me to tell the people in the audience. She was very forthright. She said, "Tell them we weren't the only Poles who suffered in the war." She knew that people didn't know about what had happened in Poland, and she felt it was my duty to tell them.



*This photo was taken at an amusement park in Chicago. My sister Donna and I are sitting on a crescent moon. My mom is standing behind, protecting us from everything. © Ze zbioru prywatnych zdjęć Johna Guzłowskiego*

**Nobel Laureate Czesław Miłosz, in a review of the bilingual edition of your collection of Poems, *Language of Mules*, wrote that your work “astonished” him and revealed an “enormous ability for grasping reality.” Did you ever meet Milosz?**

I never met Czesław Miłosz. He wrote the review late in his life, after he returned to Poland. I did write to him to thank him for his kind review, and he sent me a nice email back.

I hate to have to say this, but what’s especially ironic is that for a long time I didn’t want anything to do with his poetry or his other writings. Miłosz represented for me something I wanted to get away from, Poland and my own Polishness. Growing up in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, I felt that my Polishness was in some ways a curse. I was frequently called a dumb Polack and had to listen to innumerable Polack jokes that were meant to make me feel stupid, inferior, subhuman almost. I responded to this by trying to get as far away from my Polishness as I could. In my early 20s, I left Chicago, went to grad school, worked on a PhD in American Literature.

And then a funny thing happened.

I got homesick for Poland and my Polishness. I developed this need, a hunger to know about Poland. I had gotten so far away from it that it was becoming unreal to me. I lived among people who for the most part didn’t know where it was, or what it was, or what it had suffered in the war. I remember one day introducing myself to a new class and having a student ask me if my name was Italian or Spanish. When I said it was Polish, he seemed confused as if I had said I was a parrot or a prairie dog.

I think a lot of this hunger was also fueled by who my parents were. If my parents had been Illinois farm people raising soybeans and corn, or if they had been Italian gelato sellers, I don’t think I would be writing about them. I would be like so many other poets in America: writing about the weather or what it’s like being driving a big car west or east along the I-80. Instead, my parents were Polish people who had been struck dumb and quivering by history, by the Second World War, by their lives in the labor and DP camps.

And to write about their lives, I had to know about their lives. That’s when I started reading Miłosz’s poetry and Reymont’s *Chłopi* Tetralogy and Isaac Bashevis Singer’s novels and Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Trilogy* and Ryszard Kapuściński’s journalistic writings.

Of course, I could never know the Poland my parents knew and had to leave, but I could know the Poland of words and literature, the Poland of sounds and images. And these writers and so

many other excellent Polish writers gave that to me—especially Miłosz with his rich sense of recent Polish history, the war, the years under communism, his life as an émigré trying to make sense of a world that he was not born into, a language he never imagined as a small boy growing up.

It's hard to talk specifically in prose of how much Miłosz has meant to me so I would now like to share a poem I wrote about him.

*Miłosz  
He has stood  
At the end of time  
And heard the wind  
Moving the snow  
Hard and cold  
cold and hard  
And this is what  
He learned:  
There are voices  
In the wind  
There are voices  
In the snow  
They know poetry  
Is only a bit of wood  
But the shore  
Is a long way off*

**What Polish and Polish-American authors are you friends with, and how do they help you become a better writer?**

After I started reading Miłosz and other great Polish writers, I began wondering if there were Polish Americans writing about their experiences, experiences similar to mine.

This was in the late 1970s and early 1980s, long before the internet. Today I would just Google “Polish-American writers,” and I would immediately have a list of at least 100 writers. Back then it wasn't so easy. It was a matter of slowly discovering these writers. I would find one, and then he or she would lead me to another. What was most interesting for me about this journey was that I discovered there were other Polish-American writers on the same journey.

## **Who did I find?**

Initially, there was Stuart Dybek, John Minczeski, Leslie Pietrzyk, Oriana Ivy, Anthony Bukoski, Leonard Kress, Phil Boiarski, Helen Degen Cohen, Mark Pawlak, and Linda Nemec Foster.

For me the most amazing thing about encountering these writers is that I felt almost immediately a sense of connection with them and with their writing. One of my first writing teachers was Paul Carroll, a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He always told his students that all writers were brothers and sisters. And this is exactly what I felt with these Polish American writers. I felt they were my family, and they encouraged my writing as I encouraged theirs—as though we were all family.