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Special Issue: Memory, Identity, Belonging: Narratives of Eastern and Central European Presence in North America

Looking Backward, Looking Forward: An Interview with John Z. Guzlowski

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Full text

1 John Z. Guzlowski is a Polish American poet and fiction writer, whose writing has appeared in *Rattle*, *Ontario Review*, *North American Review*, and other journals in the US and abroad. His recent memoir *Echoes of Tattered Tongues: Memory Unfolded* (2016), which won the Eric Hoffer Award for most thought-provoking book in 2017, comprises poems and personal essays about his parents' experiences as slave laborers in Nazi Germany. He is also the author of the Hank and Marvin mystery novels and a columnist for the *Dziennik Zwiazkowy*, the oldest Polish newspaper in the USA. Guzlowski's most recent books of poems are *Small Talk* (2022), *Mad Monk Ikkyu* (2021), and *True Confessions* (2019). His novel *Retreat: A Love Story* (2021) is an account of two German lovers separated by war.

2 John Guzlowski sat down with Izabella Kimak to talk about his literary career and the impact that his experience as a 1.5-generation immigrant has had on his writing. Guzlowski was brought to the United States in 1951 by his Displaced Persons parents and grew up in the area of Humboldt Park in Chicago, the setting of his Hank and Marvin mystery novels.

3 Izabella Kimak: I want to start with the basics, that is your self-identification. In many minority literatures there have been discussions about how authors identify themselves or how they *should* identify themselves. Do you consider yourself a Polish American writer, an American writer, or perhaps just a writer?

John Guzlowski: It's an interesting question. I have a friend who lives in Vancouver, Canada, and I sent him a piece this morning that I had written for somebody else about being a Polish American writer. He asked why I consider myself a Polish American writer. Why shouldn't I just consider myself an American writer? And I've been thinking about it this morning. I never started out to be a Polish American writer. When I first started thinking about writing and wanting to write, what I



wanted to write was what everybody else was writing. I wanted to write like other people and I wanted to be published in all of those places where everybody was being published. My great dream when I first started writing was to write science fiction. Writing science fiction at that time, in the 1960s, there was no sense of any kind of ethnicity in any of the writers. Everybody who was writing science fiction was simply writing science fiction and, as I said, there was no sense of ethnicity at all. And that was my dream. It changed somewhat as I got older and older. I think when I was in graduate school, I started writing poems about my parents. At that time, I had been living away from them and from the Polish community in Chicago for about nine years. I felt I had completely broken away from all sense of myself as being a Polish American. I didn't see myself that way. And then suddenly I started writing these poems about my parents and in writing about my parents, who were Polish [laughs], I found myself going back to my Polishness and identifying with my Polishness and thinking more and more about it. As I said, I had stepped away from my Polishness and suddenly I was back. I was writing about my parents, I was reading Polish literature, I was reading Miłosz and Reymont's *Peasants*, and Sienkiewicz. I was reading things like that and returning to my Polishness. Since returning to my Polishness, I don't think I've ever stepped away from it. I wrote about my parents and about their experiences and since then much of what I've written has some sense of Polishness about it. And some sense of my Polish identity. So do I consider myself a Polish American writer? I think I'm going to say yes.

- 4 IK: Do you see any connection between your own work as a writer and that of other Polish American authors? Would you say you consider yourself as belonging to a certain group of writers with similar thematic concerns?

JG: You know, for 4 or 5 years I had a blog called *Writing the Polish Diaspora*, and what I would do when I encountered Polish American writers or Polish writers from other countries, I would read their material and I would post a blog about them and talk about them. And what I discovered in doing that was that there was no single sense of what a Polish American writer was, which I found really interesting. I feel that I started out wanting to be a science fiction writer, then I turned from wanting to write science fiction to wanting to write like Jack Kerouac, and then I became interested in postmodernism and postmodern writing, and then I started writing about my parents. I mean, my own writing has such a diversity to it. When I encountered these Polish American writers what I discovered was that there were so many varieties of Polish American writing. I don't see it as being any one type of writing.

- 5 IK: Or any coherent community?

JG: [laughs] I think it is a community of writers for I feel close to Polish writers. I've had relationships with them. John Minczeski and I have been friends for a long time. He's a Polish American writer living in Minneapolis. Anthony Bukoski, who lives in Superior, Wisconsin, and Leslie Pietrzyk, who lives in Washington DC. I feel close to them. And I feel a sense of community with all of these writers. But I don't feel it's the sense of community where we are writing the same kind of material or we're looking at our Polishness in the same way. If you ask me about other Polish American writers from Chicago, Sharon Mesmer identified at one point in her career as a Polish American writer. But when I started to think whether there is anything about the Polish American community in her writing, honestly, I couldn't think of anything, even though she was brought up in a Polish community in Chicago.

- 6 IK: Did you ever write and publish any of those narratives that you wished to write as a young writer, such as science fiction or Jack Kerouac-style texts?

JG: The first thing I ever published was a science fiction short story in what was then called a fanzine but would now be called a magazine or journal. God, I wrote that story like 50 years ago and I can't remember what it is about [laughs]. It's about some kind of strange creature that is on a quest. It was the first thing I published and the fanzine was a very popular one called *Spa-Fon*. If you Google it, I think the entire magazine is available online. It had a lot of very important science fiction artists in it, Mike Kaluta and Bernie Wrightson and others. The fellow who illustrated my short story was Randy Broker. He's gone on to illustrate a lot of science fiction. Another of the people that I was involved with at that time was Don Glut, who went on to Hollywood. He wrote the novelization of one of the *Star Wars* films. It was that kind of writing that I was doing and that I wanted to do. And some of it



was published in small magazines. But then when I went to graduate school in 1973, I pretty much left all of that behind. I no longer thought of myself as a guy who wanted to be a science fiction writer like Robert Heinlein or a Beat writer like Kerouac, but I thought of myself as a future academic, a potential professor who would only be doing academic writing, literary criticism.

7 IK: And you did, right? After all, you worked as a professor for many years.

JG: For a long time. My primary focus from 1973—when I started graduate school—until I retired from teaching in 2006, was on academic writing. I wrote about postmodernism and about Isaac Bashevis Singer. I became very interested in him, and I wrote a lot about him. In fact, the last academic writing I was doing was a book on Isaac Bashevis Singer. I spent 10 years on it. I got about two-thirds of the way through the book, and when I retired I just abandoned all that stuff.

8 IK: Are you saying that it was too difficult to combine research and teaching with your creative work?

JG: At the university where I was, questions of tenure, questions of promotion, questions of getting grant money relied more on academic writing than creative writing. I was publishing a little bit of creative stuff. I started writing poems about my parents in 1979 and I developed a lot of them, but it was a slow process. I was sending stuff out to creative writing journals but it was very little. It wasn't until much later in my academic career that my focus began to turn from academic writing.

9 IK: How about your crime novels? Did you write them when you were already retired?

JG: Yes. When I retired in 2006 I put away all of my academic writing and I have a story about why I didn't feel bad about doing that. When I published my first poem—it was in 1989 or something like that and it was a poem about living in Illinois—someone got in touch with me and told me how much they were touched emotionally by the poem. That was one poem. At that point I had been doing academic writing for about twelve years, sending stuff out, reading papers at conferences, getting stuff published. No one ever got in touch with me. Once in a while I would go to a conference and somebody would talk to me there, but no one ever talked about being emotionally touched by my academic writing. That was an important moment for me when that happened. When I retired in 2006, I abandoned all of my academic writing. I had done a small chapbook of poems called *Language of Mules* in 1999. It contained about 20 poems about my parents and then I started adding more poems that I had written about my parents. In 2007, a year after retiring, I published the first book about my parents, the first real, big book called *Lightning and Ashes*. By that time, like I said, I had put aside academic writing entirely. I felt good about writing the *Lightning and Ashes* book and I started working on a novel very shortly after that. The novel is *Retreat*, which is about a German soldier on the Eastern front in the Second World War. It started out as a poem about my mother and what happened the day the Germans came to her house. I wanted to write a sonnet about them coming to the house from their point of view. Coming to the door of the house and then pushing the door open and doing the terrible things they did to my mother's family. I wrote a sonnet about that and I got to the end of the poem where they push open the door and I started thinking what happened next. My question led to the novel *Retreat*. The first chapter is about the German soldier Hans entering the house and there is this old Russian woman in the house. And the old Russian woman is based on my mother's mother. The chapter is about what Hans and this old Russian woman talk about. The novel becomes very different from my mother's story but it started out as an attempt to tell more about my mother's story, to see my mother's story in terms of a novel rather than a poem.

10 IK: Can you elaborate on this diversity that you mentioned earlier? When one reads your poems and your crime novels, they are so different. Was it a conscious decision on your part that you would in a way reserve your poetry for those very intimate depictions of your family's history and then use the crime genre as a more neutral literary terrain, so to speak?

JG: When I do public readings of my poems about my parents, it's always for me a very emotional experience because I'm telling their stories again. From my perspective, the best of my poems are the ones that have some of the things my parents were saying in the poems. I'm hearing my parents' voices when I read those poems and I'm with them again as I read those poems. That's a good experience for me. I've done several readings of my crime novels in public places and I never feel that kind of emotional connection to them. But there is still something of my parents' story in the crime



novels because Hank is a veteran of the war. The war has just never left him, he thinks about it often. I've just finished writing the fifth of these Hank and Marvin novels. It's a prequel, it's set in 1948. And it starts with Hank's first day on the job as a police officer in Chicago. He's a uniform police officer at that time. It's 1948 and he meets his partner Marvin for the first time. One of the things that is still in the novel, perhaps even more so, is Hank's memories of the war and how the war has affected him. For me, that's one of the connections between the mystery novels and the poems about my parents. Hank, a fictional character, and my parents went through similar experiences. In the new Hank and Marvin novel, the prequel that I've just finished writing, he talks about entering one of the slave labor camps and being involved in the liberation of some prisoners. What I'm fictionalizing are some memories my parents told me about their experiences in the camps.

11 IK: Speaking of that, I am really moved by the text at the end of your *Echoes of Tattered Tongues* titled "The Story Behind the Poems," in which you write about how you learned about the memories of your parents. You mention your mother's reluctance to speak of the horrors she witnessed during the war. And a change of heart that she had after she read your poems in Polish translation.

JG: My mother was very hesitant throughout most of her life to talk about any of her experiences, but you couldn't really stop my father. He would have a drink and he would start telling stories, terrible stories. My mother would beg him to stop telling these stories. He wouldn't, he couldn't stop himself and she would walk out of the room when he started telling these stories. My mother for a long, long time was very hesitant about sharing or listening to the stories about the war. I remembered when I published my first poem about her and my dad, at that time it was called "Dreams of Warsaw." It's early in the *Echoes* book and it's a poem where I am thinking about what my parents are thinking about the war. I remember telling my mother that I had had the poem published in a journal and my mother shrugged and said she wasn't interested in the fact that I was writing these things. She only became interested in the poems that I was writing about her and my dad when *Language of Mules and Other Poems* came out in its Polish translation by Bohdan Zadura as *Język mułów i inne wiersze*. When I showed her a copy of the book, she opened it up and started reading the poems, that's when she became really conscious of the fact that I was writing poems about her and my dad. That changed not only the way she felt about me as a writer but it also changed the way in which we interacted about her past. She became much more interested in talking when she realized that people were reading these things and hearing about her experiences. And not only her experiences. I told her one time that I was doing a poetry reading at a university in Illinois, this would have been in the early 2000s, and she said to me: "Tell them that we weren't the only ones in the camps." She thought that people would hear my stories about my mother and father and think that they were just two people being punished by the Germans. And my mother wanted others to know that there were a lot of people who suffered in the war. She had a sense that other people were listening to these stories and that the stories she was telling were the stories of many people in her generation. She recognized that it was important to get those stories out. I'm with her on this. It amazes me how soon people forget this stuff. I administrate a Facebook page called *Your Polish Story* and I have about 15 thousand people who follow this page. I posted something about St. Adalbert Cemetery, a Polish cemetery in Chicago, and the DPs who were buried there. One of the people who read this post, a woman who has family there at St. Adalbert Cemetery, said to me: "You mention DPs. What's a DP?" She didn't know what a DP was. The point I'm making is that people very quickly forget. She was born in this country but her parents were Displaced Persons, and she doesn't know what a DP is. This information is just being lost. My mother felt and I feel that there is a point in telling these stories so that all of this stuff won't get lost.

12 IK: Since you mention Chicago, could you reflect on your relationship with the city, which seems to play a prominent role for Polish Americans. It's been years since you moved away from Chicago. What is it about the Windy City that keeps you writing about it as the setting of your books?

JG: That's a good question. I haven't lived in Chicago since 1973. That's when I went off to graduate school to work on my PhD. I haven't visited Chicago since 2016, when I did a series of readings there after my book *Echoes of Tattered Tongues* came out. One of the things I really like about the Hank and Marvin books is that they're about Chicago. They are about my memories of Chicago. When Hank talks about Chicago, he's talking about my Chicago. I just enjoy writing about Hank because so



often he talks about Chicago. One of the criticisms the book has received—you know, I read my Amazon reviews [laughs]—is that there is too much about Chicago in these mystery novels. I don't feel that way at all. When Hank stands on a street corner at night and thinks about what it's like being in Chicago and thinks about what's around Chicago, that's important for me. I mean even Hank describing the traffic on Cermak Road in Chicago—I enjoy doing that and doing research about Chicago. All of that brings Chicago back to me. I haven't lived in Chicago for a long, long time but doing research for the Hank and Marvin mysteries brings all of it back. In *The Return of Suitcase Charlie*—not the last book I wrote but one before that that hasn't come out yet—there is a description of the Pilsen area of Chicago that the writer Stuart Dybek comes from. I was in that area a few times, growing up in Chicago, but not that often. I had to do research about the Pilsen area and about Polonia in the Pilsen area and it was really a pleasure to do that, to write the section and to do the research.

13 IK: All of these books are set in the past, you said the last one is set in 1948?

JG: Yes. The most recently written, *The Adventures of Hank and Marvin*, is set in 1948. The first novel I wrote, *Suitcase Charlie*, is set in the 1950s, the next one *Little Altar Boys* in the 60s, the third one *Murdertown* that will be coming out next spring is set in the 70s, *The Return of Suitcase Charlie* is set in the 80s. So my mysteries trace the careers of these two detectives from 1948 to 1980, when they're working on their last case. I like the fact that the books evolve with the characters and grow with the characters.

14 IK: It's not only that your mystery books are about Chicago, but they give the readers a chance to visit certain places that are gone, like the area you grew up in. It's no longer a Polish American neighborhood.

JG: It's completely changed. There's a Polish American historian, his name is Daniel Pogorzelski, who's now a politician in Chicago. In 2016, when I was there for a book tour, he took me to my old neighborhood. He wanted to see how I would react to it. He took YouTube videos of me talking about the old neighborhood. We did four of them, they are very short because he filmed them with his iPhone. It starts at the corner where *Suitcase Charlie* begins, where they find the dead child in the suitcase, and we walk down my street and we talk about how the neighborhood's changed. Boy, it really has radically changed. It's now a very sort of ritzy area. My parents had an apartment building in Chicago, the first building they bought three years after coming to the United States as Displaced Persons, and this building was a wreck. It had no central heating, it had no air conditioning. It was a brick building, three stories high, with three apartments, each of the apartments was tiny. I think they paid 10 thousand dollars for it in 1956. I just saw that it's now for sale for \$700,000. This is what the neighborhood has become. These are still tiny apartments, it's a house with three 4-room apartments and it's selling for \$700,000. Who has that kind of money? The neighborhood has changed in that way.

15 IK: So in a way your narratives—and those of other Polish American writers from Chicago, like Stuart Dybek or Elizabeth Kern—are chronicling those Polish American neighborhoods that are no longer there. And to my knowledge there are no Polish American neighborhoods that have replaced them.

JG: One of the subjects I focus on in *Murdertown* is about how that happened. It's about what the gangs and the crooked politicians did in order to get the Poles out of their neighborhoods so that they could take over the neighborhood and make more money. It's about Poles leaving the neighborhood. In the fourth book, *The Return of Suitcase Charlie*, that's set in the 1980s, the neighborhood is no longer Polish American. For me as a writer it was odd to be writing a book about my neighborhood that had been Polish American but was no longer Polish American. It was a strange feeling writing it. I didn't feel that I was connecting as much with the city in this book as I had been in the previous books.

16 IK: One more thing that I would like to ask you about is your depiction of the Roman Catholic church. For many people, the Catholic church is one of the pillars of the Polish American community, and you're complicating this picture in your books with slippery priests, abusive nuns, and so forth. Again, was it a conscious decision to problematize the image and role of the Catholic church for the Polish community?



JG: I no longer consider myself a practicing Catholic. I probably stopped going to church when I was in my early twenties when I stopped feeling that I was in fact a Catholic. I understand the importance of Catholicism to Poles and I see that in Poles. I spend too much time on Facebook [laughs]. As I said, I run that Facebook page *Your Polish Story* and there is another page I like a lot called *I Love My Polish Heritage*. I occasionally post something about the church, memories of the church. Last week I posted on *I Love My Polish Heritage* the piece on St. Adalbert Cemetery and the fact that it is a Polish cemetery. It's right outside of Chicago and Poles have been buried there for a hundred years. My mother and father are buried there. I had like 400 people responding, lots and lots of comments, and people have a very positive reaction to Catholicism, St. Adalbert, and the church, and all of this. I realize that Catholicism is very important for a lot of Poles. It's not important for me. When Pope Benedict died and there was a lot of very positive talk on these sites about his connection with John Paul II, I could feel the connection that people had, that the church was somehow an intrinsic part of their Polishness. My father was a firm believer in Catholicism and he saw Catholicism as a part of his Polishness. My mother was a complete opposite. I remember when my father was dying, he asked to see a priest. My father's English was always terrible. He was living in Arizona when he died, there were no Polish priests around but he would even see an English-speaking priest just so he could be with a priest when he was at the end. When my mother was in a hospice and I asked her when she was dying if she wanted me to find a priest for her last rites, she said to me: "No priest has ever come back from heaven to tell us what is really there." She refused to take a priest. This duality of my own sense of Catholicism comes in part from my parents. My father had a child's faith in religion. He was like a 5-year-old when he talked about religion and he believed sincerely, never questioned it. And my mother was always not only not believing but she was always questioning it.

17 IK: One final question about your future as a writer. You've said you just finished the fifth Hank and Marvin book. Will there be more?

JG: The last two books I've published were books of poetry. The first is about a Zen Buddhist monk named Ikkyu. He was a real Buddhist monk living in Japan in the 1600s. It's a book of poems about him that came out a year and a half ago. And my most recent book of poems is called *Small Talk: Poems About God and Writing and Me*. Is there anything Polish in these books? I think there is. Ikkyu reminds me in some ways of my father. He was a man who lived through terrible experiences but like Ikkyu he still loved life and enjoyed living. I feel some of this also in my *Small Talk* book. Will there be any more of the Hank and Marvin mysteries? When I wrote the fourth Hank and Marvin novel, I was going to stop with that one. But then I decided to do one more so I don't know whether there is going to be another one of those. The only book I'm working on right now is one based on the columns I've written for the Polish newspaper in Chicago *Dziennik Zwiqzkowy*. I've been writing a semi-weekly column for four years, and most of it is about being Polish and living in Chicago. I'm thinking about collecting a group of those articles I wrote and putting them in a book. I've enjoyed writing those things. Most of them are part of my own personal story, my own and my parents' history. I think the first one I wrote was about what happened to our Green Cards. I've written about our first day in America, I've written about our first year in America, I've written about our first Christmas in America, a lot of that kind of stuff. Other writing? I'm involved now in a number of projects. One of the things I'm doing now is going through my old file cabinets. I'm a very disorganized person. I have old file cabinets and some of them contain my notes of conversations I had with my parents, and some of them contain old stories I wrote and things like that. I'm going back through these files to see if there is anything I can pull out and make use of. But in terms of a novel, I have an idea for another Hank and Marvin but I don't know if I'll go in that direction. I've been thinking about it for a couple of weeks. I may do that, I may not. I don't know.

18 IK: Thank you so much for this conversation.

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