

John Z. Guzłowski, Echoes of Tattered Tongues: Memory Unfolded. Los Angeles: Aquila Polonica, 2015. 150 pp. ISBN 978-1607-72021-8.

“When the war started, we didn’t know what war meant.”--Tekla Guzłowski

Czesław Miłosz once observed that there was a gulf of experience that separated a person from the hell on the “other side of the tracks” in Eastern Europe, and a person who grew up in the innocent calm of the American Midwest. John Z. Guzłowski’s collection of poetry and prose, Echoes of Tattered Tongues: Memory Unfolded, bridges that gulf in the lives of real people who, after enduring the dual traumas of war and immigration, came to live, work, and die all around us.

The stories that Guzłowski recounts in this collection presents an intensely personal and visceral experience of Polish life as it was lived by his parents, his sister, and himself from 1939 onward. As Guzłowski observes in the essay “Where I’m Coming From,” these were stories he felt compelled to tell, because these are the people “whose stories were never told, whose voices got lost somewhere in the great cemetery of the 20th century.”^a What is apparent from reading Echoes of Tattered Tongues is that there is a huge difference between reading about history and actually living it. “When you read about history in the history books,” Guzłowski observes, “it’s all so clear [. . .] It all seems neat and clean, but it isn’t really.”^b

The structure of Echoes of Tattered Tongues takes a reverse look at the lives of Guzłowski’s parents, taking as its point of departure the physical and emotional burdens his

^a p. xvii

^b p. 91

parents endured in old age and peeling back layer after layer of experience in each successive chapter to recount their experiences as refugees and victims of the war. In the poem “My Mother Talks About the War,” Guzlowski makes the simple observation that the history he is recounting is unknown, because “nobody makes movies of such lives.”^c Coming from simple peasant backgrounds, Guzlowski captures his parents’ fragility and strength in their old age as they try to make sense of their lives. They alternate between distant, idyllic memories of their youth and the hard truths of the lives they had lived. These are lives in which God’s only gift is suffering, the best you can hope for is not to be killed, and a half-century of marriage is not a testament to love and affection, but a meeting of equals in which “only a man worthless as mud/worthless as a broken dog, would suffer/with her through all her sorrow.”^d

Book Two recounts what is perhaps the most interesting chapter in his parents’ lives, recalling the difficult and often painful transition they made from being prisoners in a German labor camp to “Displaced Persons” in the Humboldt Park neighborhood in Chicago. Guzlowski not only captures the challenges his parents faced in finding work, coping with the cultural adjustments of moving from war-torn Europe to the seeming lightness of life in America, but also the growing divide that developed between them and their children. As Guzlowski points out in poems such as “The Happy Times and Places,” “My Father’s First Day in America,” “Fussy Eaters,” and “Chores,” the relationship he and his sister have with their parents and their parents’ past is often tangled in the traumatic experiences of emigration, assimilation, and language. How can a child who wants to eat American food or does not want to do chores

^c p. 18

^d p. 21

understand a father who drinks to forget the horrors he has seen in the war or a mother who sums up the wisdom of her life experience as “if they give you bread/eat it/if they beat you/run”?^e The world of difference Guzłowski’s parents feel as refugees from Europe’s bloodlands naturally filters down to the author and his sister. More than once in the collection Guzłowski remarks about his inability, even as a professor of literature and student of history, to make sense of this experience and how, in a strange way, he lives in “a world that speaks/a language I’ll never master.”^f What remains are the stories, the nightmares, the silences, and the scars, which puzzle Guzłowski and his sister long until their parents approach old age and death.

What emerges in Book Three is the story or history that Guzłowski’s parents were unable to put into words for much of their lives. This is not to say that it is understandable or clear. On the contrary, by following his parents’ lives back through the twentieth century it is evident that such personal history is not easily measured or contained by facts and dates. Memories of the deaths of their loved ones, hunger and what a person was willing to do to overcome it, and the daily price of enslavement underscore that this was not merely history, but rather the pain and nightmares that became his parents’ belongings for the rest of their lives. As the world today again tries to cope with the trauma of large-scale violence and the mass displacement of people, it is worth remembering the experience of people for whom, to paraphrase Guzłowski’s mother, “God doesn’t do any favors.” Guzłowski’s concern for history’s “Polacks,” the voiceless refugees and survivors of war, clearly elevates this collection of poetry and prose above personal

^e p. 69

^f p. 81

memoir and makes it a valuable contemplation of lives lived in the unforgiving crucible of history.

John Merchant

Loyola University, Chicago