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The New York Review of Books

Late-Night Whispers from Poland

DECEMBER 22, 2011

Charles Simic

Sobbing Superpower: Selected Poems

by Tadeusz Różewicz, translated from the Polish by Joanna Trzeciak, with a foreword by Edward Hirsch
Norton, 364 pp., \$32.95

Here

by Wisława Szymborska, translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 85 pp., \$22.00

Unseen Hand

by Adam Zagajewski, translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 107 pp., \$23.00

It is truly remarkable how many fine poets Poland has given to the world in the last century. This is an extraordinary accomplishment for a country used as a short cut in two world wars by both German and Russian invading and retreating armies, who, in addition to redrawing its borders repeatedly and occupying it for years, slaughtered millions of its citizens and deported others. Perhaps, as Czesław Miłosz speculated back in 1965, in the preface to his much-admired anthology *Postwar Polish Poetry*, a poet crawling out from under the historical steamroller is better prepared to assume the tasks assigned to him than his colleagues in happier countries. For us, he said, “history is extremely real. It may not be to American poets, but for us it is very, very much a part of reality.”



Joanna Helander

Wisława Szymborska

This sounds plausible, although as Miłosz himself noted elsewhere, only a small percentage of human suffering ever gets into literature, while most of it disappears without a trace. Many nations that had undergone similar horrors have remained comparably mute afterward, so the vitality of Polish poetry must be due to many other factors besides its history. Nevertheless, even a cursory look at the lives of the three poets under review here leads one to the inescapable conclusion that the despair and moral outrage provoked by what happened to their nation were decisive for each of them.

In 1944, when Tadeusz Różewicz was twenty-three years old, already a member of the anti-Communist Home Army that had been fighting the Germans since 1941, his older brother was murdered by the Gestapo and his body, with those of many other resistance fighters, was carted through the streets while Różewicz stood watching. In an early poem, “Lament,” he describes his own state of mind and that of many other Poles:

*I am twenty
I am a murderer
I am a tool
as blind as a sword
in the hands of an executioner
I've murdered a man*

*Maimed I saw
neither sky nor rose
nor bird nor nest nor tree
nor Saint Francis
nor Achilles nor Hector
For six years
fumes of blood gushed from my nose
I don't believe in water turned to wine
I don't believe in the forgiveness of sins
I don't believe in the resurrection of the dead*

Wisława Szymborska, who was born in 1923, lived near the railroad station in Kraków during World War II. From 1943, she worked as a railroad employee in a country crisscrossed by trains carrying troops to the front, the wounded back from wherever they saw action, and civilians seeking refuge from the war or being

transported under guard to one of its notorious concentration camps. She saw and heard plenty:

*Write it down. Write it. With ordinary ink
on ordinary paper: they weren't given food,
they all died of hunger. All. How many?
It's a large meadow. How much grass
per head? Write down: I don't know.
History ...*

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