



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.

Once in a while there is the incredibly amazing opportunity to experience how literary landscapes are created. Sometimes they are hidden treasures that are artistically alienated and hardly ever recognised as the departure point of a poem. Sometimes they are real events and landscapes that play such an important role that they become one of the main characters of a novel.

Poland is the landscape of extreme historical drama, the landscape of the major European upheavals in the 20th century. Partition, a brief independence from 1918 to 1939 and occupations by the two major powers, Germany and the Soviet Union, mark Poland's traumatic historical experience. This included the displacement of millions of Poles due to new borders, designed by the winning powers of World War II. As historian Timothy Snyder wrote, Poland became the 'bloodlands' of a Europe between Hitler and Stalin. The real post war period in Poland only ended after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The consequences for Poland were devastating, more than six million Poles lost their lives. Most of them civilians that had been deported, killed and wasted. The Red Army liberated the country from its German occupiers but went on killing and deporting those who could challenge their power. Millions of Poles from the eastern parts of Poland were settled to the very west as the Soviet Union claimed the eastern parts for itself and offered Poland the eastern part of the former German realm for its inhabitants. Victor's justice displaced millions of people in central Europe and resulted in a completely new landscape and, in a creation of countries based on nationality rather than citizenship, irretrievably changed the concepts of the 'old' Europe with their multi-ethnic societies.

The idea of a nation living in its own territory became the driving political force in many European countries and has finally lead some of the countries back on a right-wing track today.

After 1989, Poland succeeded in transforming from socialism to liberalism. A peaceful transformation without civil war, without politically oppressing the former

communists. People experienced a free market, were able to make business and Poland became a flourishing country, and has remained so even during the most recent economic crisis.

In October 2016, the shift from the neoliberal and pro-European government to the right wing, anti-European and pro-Catholic one, took place. Half of the people allowed to vote seemed already tired of the democratic system that had been fought for so hard and refused to vote. Voters from small towns and villages, unable to find themselves in the new economic reality, voted for those who promised them a step back to the past: more help from the government and better social aid to the poor population that was left behind. PiS party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* means 'Law and Justice') won only 37,58% of the votes – but it was enough to win the majority in parliament. Those voting for the PiS, dream of a Poland for the Polish that should be free of all 'modernist' threats of our times.

In May, I spent two weeks on a research trip with Chilean writer, Enrique Winter to gather information about both of our family's histories, of which a crucial part happened in Poland, namely in Lodz and Warsaw. It was a trip to the heart of a changing country and its diverse history.

Today, Lodz is a rather bleak city facing unemployment and decay. It once was the industrial motor of Poland for a long time, inextricably linked to the textile industry. There are still the extraordinarily sumptuous mansions of the former industrialists, the old red brick factories and spinning mills that are being transformed into apartments or cultural institutions. Before the German occupation in 1939, Lodz was a multi-ethnic city often called the 'City of Four Cultures', namely Polish, Jewish, Russian and German people living and working together.

Nothing of the old Lodz is left apart from some cultural institutions that take up the idea of cultural pluralism and diversity. The most important Polish film school is based in Lodz and many famous filmmakers have studied there. Coming from South Africa and Germany, it is striking how homogenous the Polish population is, how few foreigners



Central market in Warsaw

you meet. The complete opposite of the city that Enrique's relatives had experienced before the war.

My grandmother came from Riga in 1939 and spent five years in Lodz after being resettled in Hitler's mad plan to offer *Lebensraum* for the Germans in Eastern Europe. By then, the old Lodz was already destroyed by its Nazi occupiers, who deported and killed the Jewish and Polish population. One cannot imagine how Enrique's German family, having lived together with their neighbours in Lodz for centuries, must have felt during this tragic time. My grandmother never felt at home and she could hardly forget that the flat that she was offered had belonged to a Jewish librarian who had been forced into the infamous Ghetto of Lodz. My mother was born in Lodz shortly before the family fled from the rapidly advancing Red Army in 1945. Lodz, an intermediate so deeply linked to German aggression and guilt, has always been a cruel memory for my family. The first displacement before the final destination – a tiny, narrow-minded village in Westfalia, where my grandmother with her cosmopolitan attitude never felt at home.

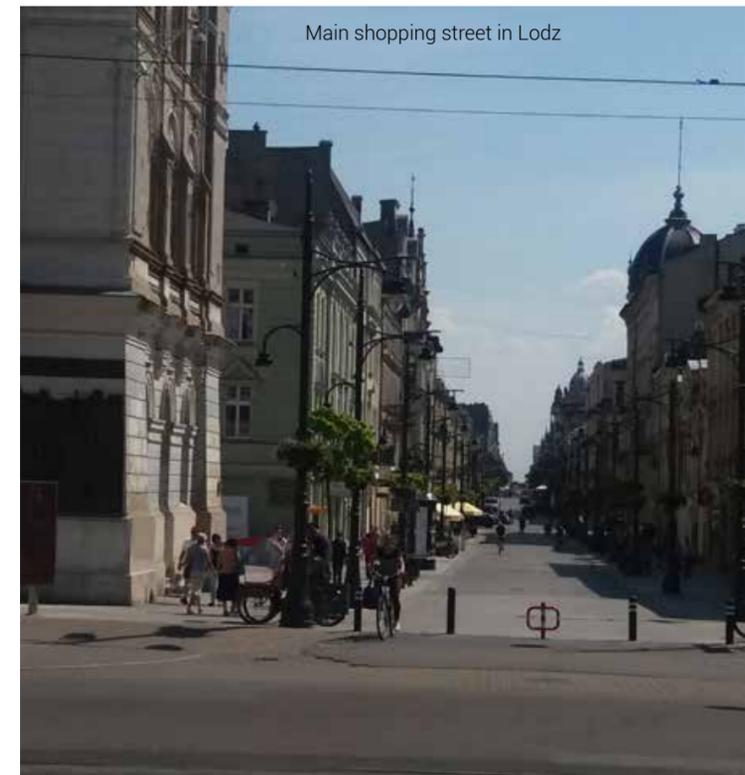
Enrique's father married a Polish girl and, with his brother's family, they fled to Salzburg in 1945 and emigrated to Santiago de Chile in 1948. A home lost, a chapter closed and reopened far away, under completely different circumstances, in a very foreign place.

All of the traumatic layers of history and war map a country and its family's psychologies, long after the war and post-war period; the psychologies of those families who remained in Poland and of those who left it behind.

In the next Literary Landscapes I will speak more about how Polish intellectuals deal with the new government and the country's shift to the right; and how writers and artists respond to this challenge. **CF**



(from left to right) Polish poet Marta Eloy Cichocka, Polish composer and musician Marcin Olés, Indra Wussow and Enrique Winter



Main shopping street in Lodz