

## Poems Choose the Language A Meeting With a Poet

[*Dziennik Zwiqzkowy*, November 27, 2015]

**Krystyna Cygielska: Next to Joseph Conrad, you are one of the few Polish writers, who came to an English-speaking country and write creatively in that language. Which was first, your interest in Conrad or writing in English?**

**Joanna Kurowska:** I started writing in Poland and then continued in the USA. After coming here I discovered aspects of the new reality and published articles about it in Polish-language magazines in the USA. As an exercise in English, I also tried to translate. Conrad came later.

**Did you intend to stay in the US for good or had other plans?**

Basically, I came for adventure, to learn the language and computers, and to get to know the country. I did not exclude the possibility of staying, especially considering that I came with my seven-year-old son.

**What was your level of proficiency in English at that time?**

Miniscule. Shortly before my departure my father, who knew English, came in the evenings to teach me the basics of English grammar. It was November; I remember his hands were freezing for he suffered frostbite during his childhood deportation to Siberia. I absorbed then about 400 words. Already in the US I read English language sources; building vocabulary. In order to use English every day, I did not live in a Polish neighborhood. I remember, to set up my own phone I called a phone company, the machine said “first dial ‘one’ then the number” but I was frustrated because I could not understand it. It took me half a day, until I started to listen carefully and realized that I had not dialed 1 before the number. Such were the beginnings.

**When did you start writing poetry in English?**

In 1991 I took courses in early education at Oakton Community College. Among the assignments was watching children and then describing them, on dozens of pages. My professors maintained that I had a talent as a writer—while I thought my English was in its infancy! In 1994 I began to study literature at UIC. I wrote papers on various topics, from the sixteenth century Socinians to literary theory. I also continued to write poems in Polish. Many of them reflected my experiences as an emigrant. My Polish poetry books appeared in print. *Dziennik Zwiqzkowy* published articles about them, written by Ewa Bierezin. In 1998, while already teaching at the University of Chicago, I started to work on my doctorate on Conrad. Because I read and wrote in English, at some point the poems started to emerge in the language.

**Most of your poems are in two versions, Polish and English. Which are the originals and which are translations?**

Poems “write themselves” in one language or another. Almost from the beginning I tried to translate my Polish poems into English; but writing in a language and translating are two completely different things. Now my poems “write themselves” in English and I translate them into Polish—which is and will remain my first language. At some point I discarded the translations and re-wrote the Polish poems in English. To an extent friends helped me with the idiom, for example my husband John Brownell, my academic advisor Don Marshall, and

Jennifer Day—who, alas, passed away but her voice still lives in a few beautiful expressions in “The Wall & Beyond.”

**What has been published in Polish so far?**

Two books, “Ściana” and “Obok”. My poems appeared also in Polish language magazines, such as “Kultura” (Paris), “Fraza”, “Pisarze”, “Zeszyty Poetyckie”. The critic Andrew Gałowicz wrote several essays about my poetry. Unfortunately, the publishing houses keep numb; I suspect it is a matter of money. I hear even well known authors in Poland have to cover the costs of publishing. I would love to get my poems published in Polish and will do so when it is possible.

**Your poems have been also translated into other languages, even Persian.**

Yes, Olimpia Iacob translated many of them into Romanian. Recently, poet Saeed Yousef, who teaches Persian at the University of Chicago, translated several of my poems and posted them on the website of the Iranian Writers’ Association in Exile.

**In your poetry you talk about important things—relationship with God, others, oneself. You ask questions but provide few answers.**

A person, who has all the answers, terrifies me. My path as a scholar, writer, and immigrant has been of ceaseless wonder. As if I were standing in a train window, watching in amazement the things that I pass. And poetry allows me to ask questions.

**The outstanding covers of your books are noticeable.**

Paweł Młynarczyk, my son, is an artist photographer. The covers are his work; sometimes a combination of his and my creativity.

**Thank you for the conversation.  
Krystyna Cygielska**

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*Joanna Kurowska studied Polish philology and theology in Poland, then Slavic studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where in 2006 she received a doctorate for her comparative thesis on Joseph Conrad’s European identity. She taught for many years at Indiana University and the University of Chicago. Since 2010, she’s been working as an independent writer, translator, and scholar. Her critically acclaimed books include two poetry collections in Polish, “Ściana” [The Wall] (1997) and “Obok” [Near] (1999); and five in English, “The Wall & Beyond” (2013), “Inclusions” (2014), “The Butterfly Choice” (2015), “Intricacies” (forthcoming), and “Stained Glass” (forthcoming). Joanna’s work has appeared in numerous publications in the USA, Poland, Great Britain, India, France, and Canada.*