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THEAFTERWORD



Open Book: Copernicus Avenue, by Andrew J. Borkowski

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Philip Marchand Apr 15, 2011 – 2:00 PM ET | Last Updated: Apr 15, 2011 2:49 PM ET

The shadow of the old Soviet Union looming over Eastern Europe looms over the Spring 2011 Canadian fiction list. So far this book season has featured Antanas Sileika's story of postwar Lithuanian resistance to the Russians in his novel *Underground*, and David Bezmozgis's portrayal of refugees from Soviet Latvia in *The Free World*. Now it's the turn of Polish refugees in Andrew J. Borkowski's collection of linked stories, *Copernicus Avenue*.

The first story in the collection, "The Trees of Kleinsaltz," sets the tone. We are introduced to the Mienkiewicz family, grandees of the Polish village of Baranica, most of whom are slaughtered by the invading German army. After the war, in accordance with the terms of a postwar settlement hammered out at Yalta, the remaining villagers of Baranica — now part of the Soviet Union — are shipped west to



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a town named Kleinsaltz, once part of Germany, now part of Poland. The German inhabitants have been resettled in East Germany, leaving the abandoned fields of Kleinsaltz to be divided up by the Polish newcomers.

Stefan Mienkiewicz, a supreme survivor, devotes himself to tending a seemingly healthy apple tree in his garden that won't bear fruit. Stefan tries every known remedy, with no results. Then one day the former German owner drops by. Moved by the man's obvious sorrow over losing his farm, Stefan invites him to stay overnight and serves him "as fine a meal as anyone on the street had eaten since before the war." The two men seem to understand each other, and the German promises to write down a remedy for the barren tree. "My people worked this land for two hundred years," he says. "We know all the tricks."

The next morning Stefan rises to find the guest's bed has not been slept in. On the kitchen table is a note, containing the promised remedy. It reads: "When my sons return to Kleinsaltz and hang your sons from the branches of the apple tree in my garden, then it will bear fruit."

This may be the best story in the collection. The prose is austere, free from some of the more laboured metaphors in other stories, and chilling in its unexpected yet somehow inevitable ending. There is an almost Biblical echo of trees that bear no fruit and the blood of the slaughtered crying out from the earth.

In the early decades of the 21st century we seem to be making progress in pacifying that outcry, at least in Eastern Europe, but *Copernicus Avenue* is a reminder of novelist Peter Carey's remark: "History is like a bloodstain that keeps on showing on the wall no matter how many new owners take possession, no matter how many times we paint over it." It takes a few generations to make sure no one goes insane living with that stain.

Thadeus Mienkiewicz, another survivor, marries a Canadian woman after the war and settles down in the Toronto neighbourhood of Copernicus Avenue, modelled after Roncesvalles Avenue, heavily populated to this day by the sons and daughters of Polish immigrants. Thadeus is determined to assimilate — "maybe even learn to like hockey," Borkowski writes, although his hero is startled by the game's brutality. Other Polish immigrants are not so keen, however, and refuse to leave the past alone. They include the Polish patriot Ignacy Poniatowski who "sees Communists under every carpet," and a half-deranged bag lady who invades a catechism class to make sure the children learn to say the Our Father in Polish. "I must help to remember them Polish way," she informs the Irish priest in her broken English.

Inseparable from these individuals and their stories is the neighbourhood, still one of the most odd and interesting corners of Toronto. Thadeus thinks of it as a "nameless buffer zone," distinguished by faux Greek temples and Gothic churches and French chateaux. Thadeus views this architectural hodge-podge as symptomatic of "a city's stubborn ignorance of itself, its refusal to be." What does it say about Torontonians that they rarely, in Thadeus's experience, look about them and notice their idiosyncratic buildings? The alternative to awareness is sleepwalking, and that is a habit, survivors know, that can be very dangerous.

The psychological danger faced by the generations of Poles who come and go in Toronto is a different form of sleepwalking, an almost pleasurable nursing of pain. "Defeat is inevitable," a paranoiac piano teacher tells Alex, Thadeus's son. "But hear the great things we make of it!" Thadeus warns the bag lady "not to make a religion of her disappointments," but the bag lady does not understand. Even an intellectual named Lech delights in failure. He admits an artistic movement he founded "accomplished exactly nothing," but proclaims, "that was a great, great success!"

Thadeus's two sons respond in different ways to the burden of family and national history. Alex, not enamoured of romantic pessimism, becomes a successful businessman, while his brother Blaise, a would-be artist, succumbs to drugs and

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alcohol. Both feel aggrieved at their emotional inheritance, the stoic response of Thadeus to the insupportable knowledge that his family in Poland had been virtually wiped out, while he had escaped to England. "This is what he was protecting us from with his silence," Blaise realizes, after a trip to the killing ground of Baranica. While Blaise as a child had responded to his father's silence with feigned indifference — "I realize what an effort all that non-caring had been," he now admits — his brother Alex took a different approach. "I spent my life compensating for my father's losses," the hard-working, sober Alex states.

This is now history shared by all of us. It is not just wartime trauma. Borkowski writes about such phenomena as "Rosary Hour" at the CNE Grandstand in 1950, a spectacle of nurses from St. Michael's Hospital in red sashes, and various religious orders and other participants. (Antanas Sileika has written about a similar event he attended as a youth with his Lithuanian compatriots.) Eastern European Catholics were heavily involved in these events, and their influence marked the end of the old Toronto Catholic Church run by Scots and Irish. It's all part of our collective story.

As fiction, these stories suffer from certain limitations. In the absence of high conflict, such as the story of the apple tree, or a gripping episode of a bomber trying to land in bad weather, the narrative goes slack, characters fail to come to life, and dialogue, especially male banter, feels forced. Nevertheless, Borkowski's feeling for history is not thrown away. When literary topographers put together a map of Toronto in fiction, *Copernicus Avenue* will provide invaluable information and insight.

Posted in: Afterword, Book Reviews Tags: Andrew J. Borkowski, Book Reviews, Copernicus Avenue, Open Book, Philip Marchand, Short Stories, Toronto

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ALLDERBLOB

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1:30 PM on April 15, 2011

You've written a good review I think, although I'm not sure if your comments about the dialogue between the male characters falling flat is accurate. Your metaphor of a "literary topography" hints at what's really going on--the hills and valleys of Borkowski's stories hold a more subtle rise and fall, akin to the small changes that mark a walk across Toronto.



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