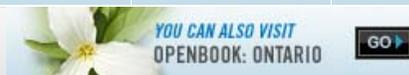


[HOME](#)[ABOUT](#)[FEATURES](#)[NEWS](#)[EVENTS](#)[THE MAGAZINE](#)[WRITER IN RESIDENCE](#)[AUTHOR BLOGS](#)[LINKS](#)[ARCHIVES](#)

HOME / ARTICLES

[ADVANCED SEARCH](#)

60

EVA STACHNIAK IN CONVERSATION WITH ANDREW J. BORKOWSKI.

Submitted by clelia on March 17, 2011 - 12:22pm



0



Confirm

This interview was first published in *Gazeta*. The launch for *Copernicus Avenue* (Cormorant Books) is on April 4th. See Open Book's [Events page](#) for details.

Andrew J. Borkowski was born and raised in Toronto's Roncesvalles Village. He studied Journalism and English Literature at Carleton University. As a freelance journalist, he has published articles in the *Globe and Mail*, the *Canadian Forum*, *Quill & Quire*, *TV Guide* and the *Los Angeles Times*. His short fiction has appeared in *Grain*, *The New Quarterly* and in *Storyteller* magazine. His short story "Twelve Versions of Lech," which appears in *Copernicus Avenue*, was nominated for the 2007 Writer's Trust/McClelland and Stewart Journey Prize and published in *Journey Prize Stories 19*.



In April of 2011, Cormorant Books will publish *Copernicus Avenue*, Andrew Borkowski's debut collection of short stories. In the publisher's words:

Set primarily in the neighbourhood of fictional Copernicus Avenue ... is a daring, modern take on life in Toronto's Polish community in the years following World War II. Featuring a cast of young and old, artists and soldiers, visionaries and madmen, the forgotten and the unforgettable, *Copernicus Avenue* captures, with bold and striking prose, the spirit of a people who have travelled to a new land, not to escape old grudges and atrocities, but to conquer them.

Andrew Borkowski's richly textured stories take us through the streets and backalleys of Toronto's Little Poland into the hearts of characters caught between the memories of the European bloodlands and the temptations of the Canadian Dream. Passionate, intelligent, and impeccably crafted, *Copernicus Avenue* is — in its essence — a Toronto book.

ES:

You grew up in Roncesvalles Village in the '50s and '60s. What kind of neighbourhood was it then?

AJB:

Roncesvalles in those days was a hard-working neighbourhood for hard-working people. Older downtown neighbourhoods were out of fashion, so its large houses made it a popular destination for Polish immigrants, first as rooming houses, then as homes that immigrants could buy and use to rent rooms to others. At one time the semi-detached house I grew up in housed three families, one on each floor, all sharing a single bathroom. You still had milk men and bread trucks making their deliveries. We had a coal furnace until 1968 so you had coal men coming. There was even an ice truck bringing big blocks of ice to some of the older people who still had ice boxes instead of refrigerators. I can also just recall what must have been the last of the city's Jewish rag-and-bone men, with sidelocks and a long beard, making his rounds on a horse-drawn wagon.

Outwardly, the area looked less Polish than it does now. For a long time, there was only one place where you could by decent rye bread and good kielbasa: Stella's delicatessen, run, I think, by Ukrainians in the block between Galley and Pearson. In my memory, the Sir Nicholas Tavern became the first Polish restaurant on the street, in the late sixties. The Café Polonaise and the others didn't come along until the seventies. Inwardly, Roncesvalles was much more Polish than it is now. The street I grew up on was probably 80 percent Polish and the English Canadian population consisted largely of older people whose children were already grown. The blocks south of Howard Park still had vestiges of the pre-war German community: the Revue Cinema showed German films, Hanover music (now a bike shop) sold German records, the Café May (now The Local) was a German restaurant.

It was a very self-contained neighbourhood, very functional, like a true village. You could do all your shopping without leaving the street. My mother would walk the length Roncesvalles two or three times a week with her bundle buggy, checking prices at the butcher shops and green grocers on the way up, and making her purchases on the way down. It was a very environmentally friendly way to live! Shoe stores, men's and women's wear stores, several good hardware stores. There was very little reason to leave the street. But there was very little in the way of cafés and restaurants, and no book stores.

Also the baby boom was on, so there were kids everywhere, playing in the streets and laneways.

ES:

You are a child of dual cultural heritage: a son of a Polish immigrant father and a Canadian mother. Can you tell me more about your parents?

AJB:

My father was born in Polesie near Pinsk during the First World War. The area is now part of Belarus. He served with the Polish cavalry in the September campaign of 1939. He escaped to France and then Britain where he transferred to the Polish Air Force and was sent for training at the Polish Navigator's School at Malton, Ont. He finished the war as a navigator with Bomber Command and returned to Canada when (a) Stalin's regime made it very dangerous for servicemen to return to Poland from the West, and (b) he learned that most of his family had been murdered by the Nazis. He served as a farm labourer in the Maritimes for a short period and eventually found work in middle management at Ontario Hydro in Toronto. My mother was born in Weston, Ont. to parents from Yorkshire, England. Her father was a machinist who emigrated to Toronto before WWI. During WWII she served with the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force. They met, like

the Mienkiewiczzes in *Copernicus Avenue*, at an Air Force Association Square Dance.

ES:

How was it to grow up in between their two worlds?

AJB:

It put my sister and I in an interesting position. We grew up in the heart of the Polish community and slightly outside it at the same time. Language was the main barrier. My mother had valiantly tried to learn Polish when my parents were first married but found it too difficult. As a result we spoke English in the home. My father began life in Canada believing that his children should be Canadians (he was an avid Canadian: a CBC listener and viewer, devoured books by Farley Mowat, Pierre Berton, and Peter C. Newman) and did not force us to go to Polish school. I think later, as he recognized that one never completely assimilates into an adopted culture, he regretted it, and it is certainly the greatest regret of my life that I haven't become fluent in Polish. He tried to home school us and I learned enough so that, with the help of sign language, I can communicate with my family in Poland when I visit. But my lack of fluency kept me out of Polish Scouts and other youth activities. We attended St. Casimir's church, but always the 10 o'clock mass in English, usually spoken by a priest fresh from Poland who was practising his English, so it left you feeling out of the mainstream as far as the community was concerned. But we were proud of our Polish heritage, observed Polish traditions at Christmas and Easter, stayed in good contact with the family in Poland, and eagerly consumed what we could of Polish art and culture.

My father was very active in the Polish community and there were times when it put a strain on the relationship. In *Copernicus Avenue*, I develop the idea of a "war without end" in the Polish expatriate community. Most knew and accepted that they'd never return to Poland but, I think, on some level, many Polish veterans never stopped seeing themselves as soldiers, continuing the fight both by aiding Poland in whatever way they could, and by working in the community here to ensure that their fellow veterans could live a life of dignity — that in itself was an act of resistance, a kind of defiance of the powers that had deprived them of their homeland. Poles fighting in the West had got through the war constantly feeling they had to show the British and the Americans what they were made of: by taking on the toughest assignments and outperforming their allies at Monte Cassino, at Arnhem and Falaise, and in the Battle of Britain. The immigrant ethos in the post-war community was, I think, very much an extension of that.

There were times when we felt as if we were in competition with that "soldier's calling" when we were growing up. It wasn't the done thing in the community for Polish ex-servicemen to marry outside the community in the 1950s, and my mother did not always feel welcome at some gatherings where people spoke only Polish. Nevertheless they had a great many Polish friends with whom my mother felt very comfortable and very close.

I think my mother's Canadian experience helped temper some of the intensity of the Polish experience. Living in Northern England in the 1980s made me appreciate how much of my own character sprang from her Yorkshire roots: in particular her "English wit," a love of language and literature, a fascination with the peculiarities of human nature, and — yes — British reserve, all of which play a large part in the Canadian character generally. From the Polish side, I think I take a certain romanticism and idealism, a passion for causes, no matter how impractical (like the cause of a literary life in Canada!). It can be a deadly mix at times.

Ironically, I feel I became more Polish, the further I got from Roncesvalles. Out in the broader world at university and beyond, I found that people used my last name to project more "Polishness" on me than I actually felt I possessed. I was the first person to be asked for an opinion on John Paul II or Solidarnosc, and I found myself only too happy to play the part of Polish Representative.

ES:

Your fictional alter ego Alexei/Alex watches the characters of his childhood with a mixture of awe and exasperation. What is the hardest for him to come to terms with?

AJB:

Alex feels exasperated with his elders in exact proportion to his bewilderment, but I would say it's the exasperation that's hardest, his disappointment with father figures such as the artist Lech, or his commanding officer in Air Cadets, who are incarnations of his own father. These are men whose self-dissatisfaction make it impossible for them to bestow approval on others, even on others such as Alex who hold them in such esteem. In his father's case, this self-dissatisfaction is a consequence of the refugee experience, in which nothing and no one can ever measure up to that which has been lost.

By the way, Alex and his brother Blaise are my alter egos in equal proportions. I could have been either one of those guys if I had toed the immigrant-success line (as in Alex's case) or played the rebel to an extreme (as in Blaise's case).

ES:

At the end of "Twelve Versions of Lech," Yola Skarpinski, the owner of the bookstore says that she and other immigrants made a vow that, "...nothing will ever make us prisoners again, not even a memory." I find it extremely poignant, maybe because my mother would fully endorse her sentiments. Can you comment on the characters in this story?

AJB:

If there's one character in *Copernicus Avenue* I'd like to do more with, it's Yola Skarpinski. She's cagey, smart, a woman of mystery — and it's interesting that my publisher chose this quote to describe the book in their catalogue. What Yola is driving at is what I perceived as the war generation's determination to put memories of terror and humiliation behind them, a refusal to be enslaved forever by what they had endured. Forgetting was a kind of Victory. There was also a belief that memories of occupation, of the Holocaust, and the indignities of war were things that their children needed to be protected from, and the best way to do that was not to tell the stories. This was common, I think, among veterans and refugees of all nationalities in the post-war period. To the first generation born in Canada, this could be misinterpreted as a kind of withholding, an unwillingness of our parents to share. Our generation has seen the triumph of psychotherapy and the belief that it's important to explore one's past, share one's experience, to "talk it all through," and our parents tended to regard this as self-indulgence. Of course, this changed as the war generation grew older, achieved what they had set out to achieve in the New World, and tacitly accepted the ways in which war had marked them forever.

Lech, to me is an interesting case. He represents a generation whose consciousness was shaped in reaction to the regime in post-war Poland. This in itself makes him a suspect character on *Copernicus Avenue*. My sense, at least of the mainstream in the Polish community as I grew up, was of a cultural schism between the war generation and all that took place in Poland after the war. I was encouraged to read Sienkiewicz and Mickiewicz, to play and listen to Chopin. I was shown reproductions of paintings by Matejko and Kossak. So as I reached my teens, I saw Poland as a stuffy, old-fashioned kind of place. I had no idea that the country was a world leader in avant-garde literature and art. I first heard of Witkacy when I was cast in one of his plays at university in Ottawa and first read Gombrowicz at around the same time. I've only recently

become aware of the work of Bruno Schulz.

So a figure like Lech would have been very exotic to young “spiritual expeditionists” like Alex and Blaise on Copernicus Avenue. What they find in Lech however, are barriers similar the ones that frustrate them in their father, except that Lech’s aloofness is dressed up in the language of conceptualism and abstraction, born of an artistic culture that made straightforward artistic impression politically impossible.

ES:

The first story in *Copernicus Avenue* does not take place in Toronto, but in the so called “Regained Territories” Stalin’s gift to Communist Poland. Why did you choose this story to open the collection? What is its significance?

AJB:

The decision to begin with “The Trees of Kleinsaltz” was threefold. First, I wanted to establish a linear timeline beginning just after the Second World War and leading up to the present day. Events in Poland during and immediately after the war are the mainspring for everything that follows on Copernicus Avenue. Secondly, the story of the deportation to the “Regained Territories” was my own family’s experience in Poland and so it has personal resonance. Thirdly, while the Nazi and Soviet occupations were horrific for Polish citizens in all regions, the story of the deportees seemed, on a thematic level, to sum up most keenly the terrible shock, the cleavage and displacement in history that Poland’s wartime and post-war experience symbolize — particularly the loss of the Eastern Marshes, a loss that was more than geopolitical; the region, as its pre-war inhabitants knew it, has virtually been wiped off the face of the earth. As you’ve captured so well in your own writing, the aftershocks of that trauma still have a particular and haunting resonance in centres such as Wroclaw and other areas in the “Regained Territories.”

ES:

One more question, to help me clarify my own bewilderment. When I came to Canada in 1981 — Canada that was proudly multicultural — I found a glaring lack of stories written by the children of Polish immigrants. There was Janice Kulyk-Keefer (half Polish, half Ukrainian) but no one else. The immigrants themselves wrote, mostly in Polish, but their children were silent. Why? Where have you been all these years???

AJB:

That’s a very good question. I don’t know how fair it is to single out the Polish community in this regard. Thinking back to 1981, how much multicultural writing had actually infiltrated Canadian literature at the time? The mainstream itself, of Anglo-Celtic and a few Jewish authors (Atwood, Munro, Davies, Laurence, Richler), had really only broken through to popular acceptance in the sixties and seventies. Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* appeared in 1981, representing Japanese Canadians (she had been active since the late 1960s). J K-K’s first poetry collection appeared in 1986. Nino Ricci, the literary voice of Canada’s Italian community, didn’t appear until the 1990s. The same goes for Wayson Choy and the Chinese community. Anthony De Sa’s writing about the Portuguese community has only just come to the forefront.

I’d also observe that the first flowering of official multi-culturalism (arguably born on Roncesvalles, with its MP, Dr. Stanley Haidasz, as the first Secretary of State for Multiculturalism) was somewhat limited in scope, rather backward looking and promoting traditional cultural expressions such as dance and folk music.

A visit to a Polish bookstore such as ARTUS on Roncesvalles reveals that there’s been a great deal of writing done by post-war immigrants, but mostly in Polish, much of it self-published. The community I grew up in on Roncesvalles consisted almost entirely of post-war refugees. I don’t have a sense that the few intellectuals who managed to escape Poland during the war found Canada a very hospitable place. Canada wanted miners, construction workers, farm labourers. The preoccupation, as in most immigrant communities, was with survival, with rebuilding their lives after losing everything. As their children, our role was to reclaim what had been lost — primarily in material terms. We had to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers. The arts were valued, but mainly as an embellishment, or as a tool in sharpening one’s ability to improve the family’s standing. It was a badge of status if your children could play Chopin or recite Mickiewicz, but you weren’t supposed to take it too seriously. I expressed my interest in writing as a career at a very early age. Interestingly the only words of encouragement I recall from my father’s Polish friends came from women. Among the men, the refrain was: “Well, you’ll never make a living at that!” Embracing the arts as a career was tantamount to disaster.

I also wonder to what extent the experience of intellectuals in occupied Poland played in immigrants’ attitudes toward the arts as a career for their children. I can recall my father showing me photographs of his schoolmates at the teacher’s college in Lwow from before the war, and pointing out which ones the Germans had shot, which ones the Russians had shot, and which ones had simply disappeared; by and large they were the ones who had written, composed, and performed. The war generation knew what human beings and their governments were capable of. While they treasured Canadian freedoms and democracy, they knew just how fragile these things could be, and they may not have been very comfortable with the idea of their children effectively painting targets on their backs.

Finally, there’s the issue of “ownership” of the material. While the stories in *Copernicus Avenue* are fictional, their subject matter has been the “property” of the immigrant generation up until very recently. As a second generation Polish Canadian, it’s only been since my father’s generation has begun to pass away that I’ve come to recognize that their stories are the richest part of my inheritance and to feel empowered to appropriate them as the basis of my fiction.

ES:

Thank you.



For more information about *Copernicus Avenue* please visit [the Cormorant Books website](#).

Buy this book at [your local independent bookstore](#) or online at [Chapters/Indigo](#) or [Amazon](#).

[HOME](#) [ABOUT](#) [FEATURES](#) [NEWS](#) [EVENTS](#) [THEMAGAZINE](#) [WIR](#) [AUTHORBLOGS](#) [LINKS](#) [ARCHIVES](#)

Copyright © 2007-2011 Open Book: Toronto. All rights reserved.

OPEN BOOK : TORONTO
IS GENEROUSLY SUPPORTED BY:

