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NEIGHBOURHOODS

## New book puts Roncesvalles Avenue on Toronto's literary map

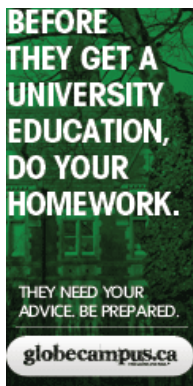
MONIKA WARZECHA

From Saturday's Globe and Mail  
Published Friday, Apr. 15, 2011 6:35PM EDT



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When Andrew J. Borkowski decided to become a writer in his early twenties, he had to deal with the reaction of his entire neighbourhood.

"I remember men practically taking meetings on Roncesvalles, with me at the centre of a group of my father's friends. They were all saying, 'You're never going to make a living at that, boy,'" he says.

The wave of post-Second World War Polish immigrants had certain expectations of their children. Mr. Borkowski explains, "You're there to help them rebuild what they've lost."

Brought up by an English-Canadian mother and Polish father on Galley Avenue, Mr. Borkowski, 54, remembers the Roncesvalles of the 1960s and seventies as being "very working class and very hard working." It wasn't until the mid-sixties that the neighbourhood really began to show its roots with the opening of Stella's Delicatessen or restaurants with traditional Polish fare such as the Sir Nicholas Tavern.

Now, Mr. Borkowski admits Roncesvalles, lined with coffee shops and bookstores, is the kind of street he wished it were while growing up – a place that attracts writers and artists.

Mr. Borkowski only started to write about his Polish roots in his early 40s. But it wasn't until after his mother's death in 1999 and father's death in 2001 that he began to devote more ink to the topic, recognizing "that these are the stories I've been given to tell."

From High Park to Sunnyside Station, from old ladies saying rosaries in church to sullen schoolboys learning to play Chopin on the piano, the writing reflects the neighbourhood Mr. Borkowski knows. *Copernicus Avenue*, published this spring by Cormorant Books, is a series of interconnected stories about life in Toronto's Polish community.

It's a community that's slowly starting to tell more of its stories.

Over the last decade, Eva Stachniak has published a number of short stories about Polish émigrés living in and around Toronto. Originally from Wroclaw, Poland, Ms. Stachniak moved to Montreal in 1981 before settling in the Greater Toronto Area in 1986.

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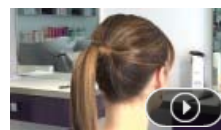
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An award-winning writer, she has also penned novels and likes to write about "people who immigrated, who left, who live in a culture that's not their own."

Finding a book like *Copernicus Avenue* was exciting for Ms. Stachniak. Since moving to Canada, she searched for stories by Polish-Canadians and found "very, very few."

"I've been waiting for that book ever since I came here," she says.

Ms. Stachniak says *Copernicus Avenue* fulfills her need to have stories told about the Polish experience in Canada. But it also satisfies her need to know the history of the place she lives.

Ms. Stachniak moved from Mississauga to Roncesvalles Village roughly ten years ago.

Polish businesses like Artus Polish Bookstore and Cafe Polonez now share the street with Sushi 67 and My Dog's Daycare.

"I see Roncesvalles become less and less Polish," she says. "So when I read *Copernicus Avenue*, I suddenly am able to imagine it the way it was. Because I see and hear traces of that Toronto, of that Polish Roncesvalles."

In the story "Allemande Left," a refugee soldier from Poland's armed forces, Thadeus Mienkiewicz, surveys Copernicus Avenue (Roncesvalles's fictional stand-in). It's "a nameless buffer zone, the perfect receptacle for Thadeus and his army of displaced-persons from other place-between-places."

Growing up in the neighbourhood, Mr. Borkowski felt it was a nowhere place. Explaining Roncesvalles to other Torontonians who hadn't heard of it, he defined the neighbourhood against what it wasn't: not gritty Parkdale, and not the more opulent High Park.

"[Roncesvalles] was this little crack in the wall where all these people can flee the horrors of Eastern Europe and put themselves back together while nobody's looking."

Amy Lavender Harris, author of *Imagining Toronto*, points out that Mr. Borkowski isn't the first Polish-Canadian to write about Toronto. Helen Weinzweig wrote a number of works, including the novel *Basic Black with Pearls* in 1980, and Ania Szado published her book *Beginning of Was* in 2004.

"It takes time [for the stories] to sift through the city's identity and filter into the publishing world," Ms. Harris says.

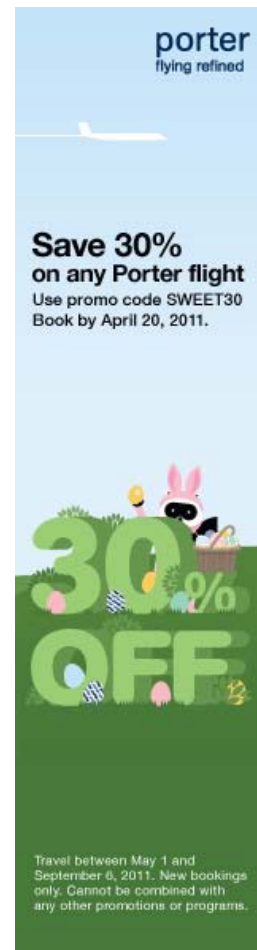
"As new kinds of people come into the city, they start to tell their stories and, over time, there's a willingness for those stories to be heard."

Ms. Stachniak sees *Copernicus Avenue* as a sign that the children of Polish immigrants are finding their voice and the courage to speak.

"The more people that are doing it, the more other writers may think, 'I have stories like that too, but I never thought anyone would be interested in them,'" she says.

"Once there is a community, these voices will come."

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