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Hail Roncesvalles! Andrew J. Borkowski brings Little Poland to the page

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Mark Medley Apr 1, 2011 – 11:00 AM ET | Last Updated: Mar 31, 2011 3:39 PM ET



Andrew J. Borkowski stands in front of his childhood home, just off Roncesvalles Ave. Brett Gundlock/National Post

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Standing on the corner of Roncesvalles and Howard Park avenues on a recent Monday morning, Andrew J. Borkowski looks south, towards the lake. “This, to me, as a kid growing up, was kind of the edge of town,” he says. Behind him, the College streetcar rattles through the intersection, while a small army of construction workers, clad in bright orange vests, dutifully continue the never-ending “improvements” that have plagued local businesses the past couple of years.

In *Copernicus Avenue*, Borkowski’s recently released debut collection of short stories, a character describes the strip as “the border between city and suburb ... a nameless buffer zone” that became home to an influx of Polish immigrants in the years following the Second World War. Borkowski’s father was one of them. The 11th child in a well-to-do farming family in eastern Poland — what is today Belarus — he first came to Canada during the war: After evading capture by the Soviet Red Army, he fled to the U.K., joined the Air Force and came to Toronto to attend navigator school; he met Borkowski’s mother, an English Protestant, at a square dance.

“I grew up with one foot in the [Polish] community and one foot out,” Borkowski says. “Which is not a bad place for a writer to be.”

They settled in Roncesvalles, in a house on Galley Avenue, where they lived until they died. Borkowski, who lived in the neighbourhood for the first two decades of his life, explores the avenue’s rich history in this collection of 16 tales.

“I still walk around with my own personal Roncesvalles in my head,” he says. “This is a fictionalization of the street. ... I like the story I’ve made up better than anything that’s probably in the city archives.”

Indeed, the Roncesvalles of Borkowski’s youth is pretty much gone; residents have fled west to Mississauga, the new centre of Polish life in the GTA, much the same way as Toronto’s old Chinatowns, on Spadina Avenue and Gerrard Street, have been replaced by the huge malls to the north of the city. There’s Thai restaurants, trendy coffee shops, even a pet spa. “As a truly Polish neighbourhood, this neighbourhood probably peaked in the ’70s, and got another injection in the ’80s when Solidarity came along,” he says. The 54-year-old Borkowski, wearing a porkpie hat, dark navy jacket and red-and-white scarf, lives on the Danforth now. “People make their pilgrimage down here.”

Copernicus Avenue is a reminder of the street as it was, not as it is today. “It’s a place and time I’m trying to capture,” he says. “It’s a place that’s rapidly disappearing.” That’s not to say it’s completely gone; walking south, he points out mainstays like the Solarski Pharmacy and Benna’s Fine Food.

One place that remains much the same is the High Park library, at the corner of Roncesvalles and Wright Avenue, one of three Toronto libraries built by Andrew Carnegie’s foundation in 1916. Borkowski spent many an afternoon in the children’s section, which at the time featured mullion windows, oak tables and a big stone fireplace. “It was like the Friendly Giant’s castle,” he says. “The perfect place to learn to love books was this library. I spent a lot of time here.”

Just up the street is another place at which he spent lots of time, though under duress. He stops in front of St. Vincent de Paul Roman Catholic Church, where he sat through many a Mass. The doors are locked, though Borkowski doesn’t seem all that concerned about getting in.

“A forbidding place it was,” he says. “Dark. Dank. The failing bastion of the Irish, after they had expelled the Poles. Well, they didn’t expel the Poles — the Poles left because they wouldn’t give them a Polish Mass. They went down the street and started their own church, and that was the end of this place!”

Church, as any Pole worth his weight in kielbasa knows, is a central part of life. “Polish Catholicism is a really hard thing for non-Poles to really grasp,” he says, making his

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way down to the statue of Pope John Paul II, which stands outside the credit union, newly laid flowers at the figure's feet. But the fact that Borkowski's father was the only member of the family to speak the language meant they had to attend English-language Mass at nearby St. Casimir's. "There was nothing that made you feel more like a second-class citizen than the English Mass."

At the end of the avenue, Roncesvalles T-bones Parkdale. There, on the other side of the Queensway stands the Katyn monument, which honours thousands of Polish officers murdered by the Soviet secret police and buried in mass graves. Borkowski looks up at Tadeusz Janowski's monument, at whose base rests several bouquets of wilted flowers.

"My dad used to say that if he had surrendered like he was suppose to in 1939, he would have been in that grave," he says. "To me it's the ultimate symbol being dumped in your lap as a writer: At the root of the street, this is what you've got."

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