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“[They] would say she was betraying Poland already”¹: Major Themes in Contemporary Canadian Literature by Writers of Polish Origins

Abstract

In June 2015 The Canadian Polish Research Institute organized a panel discussion chaired by professor Tamara Trojanowska called “Writing Change and Continuity: Culture, Languages, Generations.” The debate featured esteemed writers of Polish descent: Eva Stachniak, Andrew Borkowski, Ania Szado, Jowita Bydlowska and Aga Maksimowska. Although the writers in question do not belong to the same generation and do not share exactly the same emigration experience, nowadays they form a distinguished group of Canadian writers of Polish origins. The aim of this paper is to look at the selection of the latest texts written by authors of the Polish diaspora in Canada such as Eva Stachniak’s *The Chosen Maiden* (2017), Jowita Bydlowska’s *Drunk Mom* (2013) and *Guy* (2016), Ania Szado’s *Studio Saint Ex* (2013) and Aga Maksimowska’s *Giant* (2012) among others. This paper does not venture to repeat the conclusions drawn during the panel but rather to extend the exploration of the recent Polish diasporic, multivoiced writing as well as offer a modest supplement to the famous analysis of ethnic writing proposed by Smaro Kamboureli in her *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada* (2009). Hence, the discussion comprises the authors’ choice of themes, (dis)appearance of immigrant motifs, references to Poland as a country of origin and Canada as the new homeland as well as an analysis of the genres the aforementioned authors use.

Diasporic writing has been a subject of many discussions and inquiries. Writers of the Polish diaspora in Canada have also experienced a range of dilemmas such as for instance: what language of expression to choose, how to engage their writing in a dialogue with the mainstream Anglophone (or Francophone) Canadian literature, and how to remain unique yet at the same time understandable in Canada and worldwide. The ‘Polish’ group of writers in Canada, although not extremely big, has proposed a varied and multivocal discussion on issues both connected to the experience of migration as well as more universal ones. Smaro Kamboureli, who in chapter three of *Scandalous Bodies* entitled “Ethnic Anthologies: From Designated Margins to Postmodern Multiculturalism” focusing on ethnic writing,

notices an important process of the diasporic writers' transition from defining who they were in the country of origins to becoming a new person in Canada as well as the validity of such themes in their texts: "The hiatus between *being* – who the ethnic subject was, who he thinks he still is – and *becoming* – what becomes of him in Canada, how others perceive him is what [...] these [texts] invite us to interrogate" (2000, 139). Although Kambourelis analysis does not include any example of Polish diasporic writing,² it can be applied to these works as well. It has to be noted, however, that not all of the texts discussed here straightforwardly refer to this process of becoming Canadian (or Polish-Canadian), but sometimes the presentation of a given work in the context of the writer's oeuvre helps to see these references. Moreover, as Kambourelis has stated, the doubleness of diasporic writing "does not necessarily mean that we remain lodged within the inherited binary structures that have given rise to the construction of Otherness. Rather, it points to the fact that such discourse moves away from the very boundaries these paradigmatic structures have installed; in this case [Kambourelis continues], boundaries do not separate, but mark the point from which something begins" (2000, 131). On the basis of these broad statements and their inclusive, rather than exclusive, categorization, this paper will try to present a selection of issues and themes found in prose texts written by the writers of Polish origin and published in English in Canada after 2010.

In her *Making a Difference. Canadian Multicultural Literature* (1996), Kambourelis includes a few texts written by writers coming from Central and Eastern Europe (seen as vast and rather undefined), like Frederick Philip Grove, Vera Lysenko, George Faludy, Rachel Korn and A. M. Klein, but the only writer in the anthology who is said to have come from Poland is Helen Weinzweig, who herself did not refer substantially to her country of origin in her writing.³ Among the texts selected for the second volume of Cynthia Sugars and Laura Moss's anthology *Canadian Literature in English. Texts and Contexts* (2009), devoted entirely to 20th century literature, the representation of Central European writers is also very poor and they do not appear, except for the already canonical ones such as Leonard Cohen⁴ and Frederick Philip Grove, both already perceived as mainstream Canadian.

Yet another interesting article, although too short to have grasped the whole range of the research and literary output, was published in 1981 under the suggestive title "The Unheard Voices: Ideological and Literary Identification of Canada's Ethnic Voices." Judy Young's aim in this text is to be the "megaphone" (104) for the unheard ethnic voices from precisely the region explored in this study, although Young actually focuses on Ukrainian literature in Canada. She admits, however, that in order to deal correctly with this body of work, "one must be a linguist genius, literary critic, historian and sociologist" (Young 106), thereby shedding light on the difficulty of the undertaking.

Since the question of language has been raised here, it needs to be stated that it is actually poetry of Polish immigrants to Canada that has received more of

a critical and scholarly attention than prose. There are few substantial studies of Polish-Canadian poetry, written usually in Polish, and translated occasionally into English, prepared by Bożena Szałasta-Rogowska in 2005 and 2010, Justyna Budzik in 2013 or by Bogdan Czaykowski,⁵ to name only a few. These texts, however, concentrate only on poetry which has been mostly written in Polish and thus has remained largely unknown to Canadians.

There are many reasons for the poor literary visibility of the Polish group in Canada. The fact that Polish immigration in Canada has always been lower in numbers than other groups is only one reason, and does not explain the whole issue. Both Kamboureli in her study of ethnic writing and Eugenia Sojka in her invaluable essay on the writing of the Polish diaspora in Canada quote the famous example of an anthology of Chilean texts (*Chilean Literature in Canada* (1982), edited by Naín Nómez). They emphasize the fact that the Chilean diaspora, which has only about 26,000 members in Canada, is anthologized despite its size.⁶ This comparison strongly suggests that it is not only in numbers that the ‘advantage’ of some groups in Canada over others lies. Since the 1970s and 1980s, after the implementation of the policy of multiculturalism in the form of legislation (in 1988 the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was passed by the Parliament) and rights granted to all minorities who have been invited to cherish their ethnicity (in 1971 Trudeau declared the adoption of the policy, in 1982 it was recognized by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms), more and more writers of various ethnic origins have undertaken the topic of identity and (un)belonging in their diasporic narratives. However, it happens that some groups are more visible than others, and the division does not run only through the dichotomies between visible versus invisible minorities.

Consequently, the literature of Polish writers in Canada is displaced and appears as a fragmented archipelago of interesting texts and authors. The scholarly debate on this phenomenon also reflects this problem. Nevertheless, critical inquiry into ‘Polish-Canadian’ (however awkward and undefinable the term is) writing is also visible among Polish scholars interested in Canadian literature. Apart from the comprehensive essay by Eugenia Sojka (2010), mentioned above, there are a few other publications. These include the pioneer study entitled *Obraz Kanady w Polsce* (2003), edited by Mirosława Buchholtz, which comprises essays on various topics, including a text by Professor Nancy Burke, founder of the Canadian Studies Centre at Warsaw University, and The Laboratory of French-Canadian Culture and the Literature of Quebec, led by Professor Józef Kwaterko. Mirosława Buchholtz also published *Polska w Kanadzie Kanada w Polsce* (2008), which includes poems by Maria Magdalena Rudiuk, a short story by Eva Stachniak, and essays by leading scholars in the fields of history, politics, and literature, as well as photographs by Andrzej J. Cieśliński. Another recent publication, *Niuanse wyobcowania. Diaspora i tematyka polska w Kanadzie* (2014), edited by Anna Branach-Kallas, is worth mentioning, as it joins both

English-Canadian and French-Canadian texts referring to Poland and the Polish diaspora in Canada.

While publications on the literature of the Polish writers in Canada are relatively scarce, there is quite an abundant body of literature written in Polish in Canada. The phenomenon of the Polish diaspora undoubtedly enriches the picture of the literature in question. It also blurs the boundaries of the concept of Polish-Canadian literature and encroaches upon the discussion of the classification of ethnic writers. Despite the fact that it gives voice and visibility to the extremely important trend of writing Polish literature (and not one by Canadians of Polish descent, or a Polish-Canadian one) within Canada, it may also have contributed to the lack of unity of Polish-Canadian writers, as the line of division lies within the language as well. A seminal publication in this context is the 2002 *Antologia poezji polskiej na obczyźnie 1929–1999* [*An Anthology of Polish Poetry in Exile 1929–1999*], edited by Bogdan Czaykowski, which, despite the fact that it includes a whole range of poems that have been created outside of Canada, illustrates the philosophy of Czaykowski, who wanted to give voice to the poetry group *Continents* first and foremost, but very consciously created the idea of Polish poetry written abroad.⁷ Bogdan Czaykowski, who emigrated to Canada in 1962, together with Waław Iwaniuk, Florian Śmieja, Zofia Bogdanowiczowa, Andrzej Busza, Adam Tomaszewski and Maria Magdalena Rudiuk, to name just a few, have created the concept of Polish literature in Canada, which is seen as a continuation of the great tradition of Polish immigrant literature (especially poetry), but which, at the same time, by being distinct and separate from Anglophone and Francophone Canadian literature, hinders the creation of a unified concept of Polish and Eastern European literature in Canada. Their literary output was presented to a Canadian reader in the form of an anthology entitled *Seven Polish-Canadian Poets* (1984) which is discussed in detail by Kryszak (2003, 251–266). As it is detached from Canadian literature, it is, as Zyman argues, not literature of the Polish diaspora but Polish literature *sensu stricto* (qtd. in Sojka 2010, 287). The fact that these writers and poets publish mainly in Polish is also reflected in the critical acclaim this literature gets, as the study of Polish literature in Canada is being done primarily in Poland by the Department of Contemporary Literature of the Institute of Polish Literature and Chair of International Polish Studies at the University of Silesia. The work of these scholars has resulted in two volumes: *Urodzony z piołunów. O poezji Bogdana Czaykowskiego* [*Born out of Wormwood. On Bogdan Czaykowski's Poetry*], written by Bożena Szalaśta-Rogowska and published both in Canada and Poland by Polski Fundusz Wydawniczy w Kanadzie and Wydawnictwo Gnome, Katowice, Poland in 2005, and a volume of essays by various authors titled *Literatura polska w Kanadzie. Studia i szkice* [*Polish Literature in Canada. Studies and Sketches*], edited by Bożena Szalaśta-Rogowska and published in 2010. Furthermore, Justyna Budzik's *Zadomowieni i wyobcowani. O sytuacji pisarzy polskich w Kanadzie* [*Feeling At Home and Experiencing*

a Sense of Dislocation: A Study of the Situation of the Polish Writers in Canada] from 2013 contributes to the discussion on linguistic choices of Polish poets, such as Czaykowski, Busza, Śmieja, Iwaniuk, Zyman, Kusiba and Sabo, writing in Polish and living in Canada.

1. Polish-Canadian Literature Written in English

The aforementioned texts strive to incorporate the studies of Canadian literature written by authors of Polish descent, which might be seen as the first, pioneer attempts to make these two disparate literatures come closer. It would be unnecessary to repeat the theses from the introductory text from *Literatura polska w Kanadzie. Studia i szkice* [*Polish Literature in Canada. Studies and Sketches*] by Marek Węgiński (“Pisarze polskiego pochodzenia w Kanadzie (rekonesans)” [“Writers of Polish Descent in Canada (An Introduction)”] (2010, 20–26) and the above-mentioned text by Eugenia Sojka (2010, 284–334) – both published in 2010, but it is important to stress the conclusion which emerges out of these studies. There is a significant group of authors writing in Polish in Canada, as well as writers of Polish background writing in English. These two groups are not deeply interconnected, as the loss of the Polish language by the second and third generation of Canadian writers makes it impossible for all of them to read texts by their Polish colleagues and forebears. Although the group which is of interest in the present study is definitely heterogeneous, comprised of authors who do not belong to the same generation (Stachniak was born in 1952 and Maksimowska in 1977) and do not share exactly the same emigration experience (Stachniak emigrated to Canada as an adult person, Maksimowska, Bydlowska and Jarończyk as young teenagers, whereas Borkowski, Ravvin and Szado were born in Canada), they nowadays seem to form a distinguished group of Canadian writers of Polish origins. The aim of this paper is to look at the selection of the latest texts written by authors of the Polish diaspora in Canada after 2010 such as Andrew J. Borkowski’s *Copernicus Avenue* (2011), Norman Ravvin’s *The Joyful Child* (2011), Aga Maksimowska’s *Giant* (2012), Jowita Bydlowska’s *Drunk Mom* (2013) and *Guy* (2016), Ania Szado’s *Studio Saint Ex* (2013), Eva Stachniak’s *The Chosen Maiden* (2017) and Kasia Jarończyk’s *Lemons* (2017) among others to see the most recent developments of the writing by the ‘Polish group’ in Canada.

The time caesura and the selection of texts to be discussed in this essay are determined by various factors. Despite the writers’ different migration histories, they are all the first, second and third generation immigrants. Their texts analysed here refer not only to Poland as a country of origins but also to the pre-WWII multiculturalism of Poland they remember (or inherited in postmemories) such as Jewish, Yiddish, Russian, and Belarus cultures as well as to more universal topics. Moreover, another factor taken under consideration is the fact that the

phenomenon of the very recent immigrant writing of the Polish group has not been given any scholarly attention. However, they have been noticed by major newspapers and magazines in Canada, such as *National Post*, *Quill and Quire*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *Toronto Star* to name just a few. The books in question have been reviewed thoroughly, thus, receiving only critical attention. Some of them, like Andrew J. Borkowski's *Copernicus Avenue*, received prestigious literary prizes, and others have been shortlisted for various literary awards.⁸

What is especially emphasized in the reviews, is the fact that some of these texts raise "the question of [...] spiritual and ethnic identity" (Marchand 2012), show "distinct and innovative" (Meisner 2017) stylistics, are characterized by "the keen rendering of setting" (Bartley 2011), and even become "refreshing" and are called "a revelation" (Shulgan 2013) and "a remarkable work of historical fiction" (Hansen 2017). In spite of some critical voices directed at few elements of style and portrayal of certain protagonists (Marchand 2011; Surrige 2011), the texts selected for analysis have been noticed on a Canadian literary market, thus proving their successful appearance and contributing to the multivoiced and heterogeneous Canadian immigrant literature.

This newly emerging phenomenon was noticed by professor Tamara Trojanowska, who in June 2015 organized a panel discussion at The Canadian Polish Research Institute called "Writing Change and Continuity: Culture, Languages, Generations." The debate featured esteemed writers of Polish descent: Eva Stachniak, Andrew Borkowski, Ania Szado, Jowita Bydlowska and Aga Maksimowska. It is probably too early to state whether the writers in question will form any formal group but they have definitely become representative of Polish diasporic writing in Canada despite the fact that their main impulse for writing is frequently not to give voice to their migrant experience and contribute to any of the arbitrarily established diasporic tradition (e.g. of Polish emigration literature) but to engage on various levels in universal topics understood by many literary traditions. Hence, the present discussion comprises the authors' choice of themes, (dis)appearance of immigrant motifs, references to Poland as a country of origins and Canada as the new homeland as well as an analysis of the genres the aforementioned authors use.

2. To Write or Not to Write about Poland

The title of this article: "[They] would say she was betraying Poland already" comes from the opening paragraph of Eva Stachniak's *Necessary Lies* (2000, 9). The sentence describes the attitude of a Pole left behind towards Anna, the main character, who chooses to stay in Canada in 1981 and starts a new life there. Stachniak goes on to explain that the betrayal is not because of the enchantment with full department stores, beautiful places and freedom but rather due to fear

of forgetting about Poland. The statement was uttered by a person who was unable to accept other points of view and perspectives. It serves here rather as a provocative question to be asked whether it is necessary to write about Poland and Polish diasporic experience in order to be a successful artist.

Andrew J. Borkowski's acclaimed short story collection *Copernicus Avenue* was published in 2011 and a year later received a very prestigious Toronto Book Award. Borkowski was born in Toronto and spent his childhood among the Polish community of the city. The short stories in the collection are interconnected by the reappearance of the same characters and motifs and thus form a discursive cycle devoted to various aspects of the life of the Polish diaspora living around the eponymous Copernicus Avenue, which brings the famous site of the Polish settlement in Toronto – Roncesvalles Avenue – to mind. Irene Tomaszewski indeed emphasizes this aspect of the short story cycle saying that “Borkowski's fictional recreation of the post-war Roncesvalles neighbourhood [...] weaves together [...] stories about people who had just come through the Kafkaesque experience of being on the winning side of a war [...] and losing everything” (2011). Borkowski's narration revolves around the Second World War as well as the post-war legacies of varied characters. The main character, Thadeus Mienkiewicz, was born in Polesie, just as Borkowski's father, emigrated to Canada as a result of the Second World War and remains in the book a representative of moderate views on Poland, its history and future. He even becomes “a guide and mediator” (Branach-Kallas 167) between the most radical views represented by Ignacy Poniatowski in a story entitled “Allemande Left” and a more progressive attitude presented by Pavel Skrubicki. Borkowski touches upon the painful moments in Polish history, such as the slaughter of the inhabitants of the small village of Baranica in Polesie, on the Polish-Belorussian borderland. The whole cycle is in one way or another devoted to the theme of memory, its power over humans and the role it plays in immigrants' lives. As one of his characters concludes in “Twelve Versions of Lech,” “it is a silent agreement we all have with ourselves, that nothing will ever make us prisoners again, not even a memory” (Borkowski 128). In her article on Borkowski's writing, Anna Branach-Kallas emphasizes another important motif present in the book. It is transgenerational trauma represented by Mienkiewicz's sons: Alex and Blaise. She stresses different kinds of traumatic experiences shaping the diasporic identity of Borkowski's characters.⁹ As a result, Borkowski's collection is definitely filled with Polish themes, offering a picture of Polish immigrant attitudes, but it also becomes a more universal story of loss, memory and the ways of commemorating the past.

In the very same year, Norman Ravvin published his most recent novel *The Joyful Child*. Norman Ravvin, a scholar, literary critic and writer, was born in Calgary in 1963, and is the author of essays, scholarly criticism and books (novels, short story collections and a travelogue). His Jewish grandparents emigrated to Canada at the beginning of the twentieth century from Mława and Radzanów in central

Poland. He has received degrees from the University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto and is currently employed at Concordia University, Montreal. He is also the editor of *Not Quite Mainstream: Canadian Jewish Short Stories* (2001) and an author of *A House of Words. Jewish Writing, Identity and Memory* (1997). His creative writing output includes a short story collection *Sex, Skyscrapers and Standard Yiddish* (1997), for which he gained the Emerging Artists Award, a travel book, *Hidden Canada* (2001), *Lola by Night* (2003), *Café des Westens* (1991), and *The Joyful Child* (2011) (Norman Ravvin's Profile, McArthur 2011).

Ravvin's output can be divided into two groups: scholarly and creative writing. As a Professor of Concordia University, he is interested in Jewish fiction especially by such authors as Leonard Cohen, Irving Layton and Mordecai Richler. In his fiction, he has used such settings as Calgary, Toronto, Vancouver, and the USA, often alluding to Canada's Jewish Polish heritage. Among the motifs Ravvin is interested in exploring in his prose, I would select two most important ones. The first would be the creative examination of the changes in Canada, its landscape as well as transformation of cities in the 20th and 21st centuries. The second is the inquiry into his own (and thus frequently his characters') origins as a Polish Jew. *The Joyful Child* (2011) explores the father-son bond against a legacy of the Holocaust mentioned in passing and the great North American tradition of crossing frontiers and journeying across the continent. The issues of fatherhood and the questions of freedom in traveling across Canada in a slightly Kerouacian style permeate this poetical narrative. As in other novels and short stories, Ravvin does not avoid at least a brief reference to the Jewish legacy. Actually it overtly appears only once. Paul, the main character travels across Canada with his son Nick, trying to establish a really close bond with the little kid. The child does not know much about their origins. Paul's grandmother "was a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto [...] spirited out of the Ghetto in a trunk, drugged into silence, family jewellery sewn into the lining of her Persian lamb coat, currency in her hat band" (Ravvin 59). This gruesome Polish past is kept silenced as a result of Paul's ex-wife, Mary, demanding that "it was nightmarish [...] to put such images into a child's head" (Ravvin 59). Inspired by a vision of raising the child far from an irritating metropolis like Toronto, Paul goes to visit his grandmother in her new Alberta home. Despite Mary's objections, Paul insists on this visit, subconsciously feeling that this would be a great opportunity for Nick to meet his great-grandmother for the first time and gather some memories of the "daily character of breathing: soup making, washing on the line, apples in a bag for baking" (Ravvin 58). As Paul is convinced, "once upon a time [...] you built a life around these" (58), and therefore "it could mean something to [...] [Nick] or not" (60). Such dilemmas are frequent motifs of Ravvin's writing. He does not include as detailed discussions on Poland and its history as Borkowski does. Even the issues connected to the Jewish diaspora in Poland and in Canada are not addressed straightforwardly but rather through nuanced, poetical scenes incorporated into a larger picture of contemporary Canada. However, Ravvin's texts

are important voices in the presentation of the output of the Polish-Jewish second and third generation immigrants to Canada.¹⁰

Another recent response from a Canadian author of Polish origin is the novel *Giant* (2012), written by Aga Maksimowska. The novel was a CBC Readers' Choice Top 5 book in 2012, and a 2013 Toronto Book Awards finalist.¹¹ The author was born in 1977 and emigrated from Poland at the age of eleven, in 1988; she thus belongs to the very late generation of immigrants. Educated at Canadian universities, Maksimowska undertakes a novelistic search for the identity of a Polish girl, Gosia, who emigrates to Canada with her mother and has to deal with an identity split between Communist Poland, where one could not buy anything but where her closest relatives live, especially her beloved grandparents, and affluent, colourful Canada, where she has to strive for acceptance at home and school. *Giant* represents the trend Kamboureli pointed to, namely the exploration of the process of becoming a Canadian. In his review for *National Post*, Marchand classifies the book as an “immigrant novel, or the coming of age novel or the tale of feminist empowerment” (2012) and there is a dose of each of these categories in Maksimowska's novel.

In her text, Maksimowska uses the metaphor of an extraordinary grandiosity which Gosia has to confront while growing up into a Canadian woman. She has to deal with her tangled past which stretches back to Gdańsk, the city of Solidarity, and her communism-infected grandfather, as well as her new friends at a Canadian school, who are full of stereotypes about Central Europe. During her visit to Poland, Gosia, confronted with identity questions, states:

[...] my Polish words were disappearing as quickly as our family members. I was a foreigner, a floater, but most of all a fake, from neither here nor there, somewhere in between, somewhere in the middle, nowhere really. There was no place where I was just like everyone else. I was incapable of blending in, even in the place that birthed me [...] I was a pile of sand, millions of grains of indistinct matter. I thought, *Is that what Canadian is?* (Maksimowska 200–201; original emphasis)

This fragment is representative of Maksimowska's treatment of the identity questions which haunt émigrés in the process of defining their new homes. Although Maksimowska has modelled the main character on herself, giving her the same year of birth and emigration, she has, like Stachniak in *Necessary Lies*, chosen the form of a novel in order to confront her character with more diverse situations and burdens and thus focus on various aspects of migration and diasporic experience in the converging lens of storytelling.¹²

The texts by Jowita Bydlowska, though varied in terms of genre, address more universal issues than emigration quandaries. Jowita Bydlowska was born in Poland and moved to Canada as a teenager. She published her *Drunk Mom A Memoir* in 2013 and *Guy* in 2016. She is a Toronto based, Canadian freelance journalist writing about culture, psychology and health.

Bydlowka's memoir chronicles her relapse into alcoholism, which started during a party celebrating the birth of her son. She was offered one drink then and it was the direct cause of her return to addiction. In one of her initial, honest confessions in the book she says: "I prefer drinking to anything in the world: sex, food, sleep. My child, my lover, anything. I love to drink. Sometimes I think: No, I *am* a drink. It's like my blood. Even before I get it, I can feel it in my veins. I'm not being poetic – I can actually feel it in my veins. It's gold. It's like little zaps of gold going through me, charging me, starting me up" (Bydlowska 2013, 13). In this autobiographical text, the reader is invited to accompany Bydlowka in her everyday life and witness it to the limits set by the author. Thus, we see her desires, her drinking, her love and hatred as well as her being at a loss. The readers, as witnesses or voyeurs, look at Bydlowska's down to earth existence stripped of (m)any limitations. Furthermore, *Drunk Mom* is not only a one-dimensional story about one's decline into alcoholism. Bydlowska tries to scrutinize herself as a mother figure as well as a partner and human being, and, although, from the very beginning of her pregnancy, as she declares, she wanted the child very much, she descends into the darkness and questions her impending motherhood. After the birth of her son, *Drunk Mom* becomes an intriguing study of a mother-son relationship.

Guy, on the other hand, is a novel about a misogynist narcissist. Bydlowska's witty narration takes the reader into the mind of a calculating young man devoid of feelings, who seduces women only to leave them behind after a while. He does not do so for any particular satisfaction, as we do not really see emotions such as joy, pleasure or happiness in him. The text is a psychological inquiry into the mind of a person who, under the confines of excellent manners, good taste, money and perfect clothes, treats women with disdain and disgust. The most interesting aspect of this narrative is the fact that Bydlowska leaves the readers with "no moral lesson, no great truth" (Fowles 2016) and clear ending, which makes it even more disturbing as we realize that such personages are rarely punished in any way though they move "through the world entirely undetected" (Fowles 2016). What is worth mentioning is the fact that in her two texts published so far, Jowita Bydlowska does not elaborate on any Polish themes. This would make her a "traitor" in the eyes of Stachniak's character, Piotr. However, through her narrative talent and daring treatment of universal, dark sides of the human psyche such as alcoholism and misogyny, she has definitely created a place for her writing in Canadian literature, not necessarily only diasporic. After her *Drunk Mom* and *Guy*, Jowita Bydlowska is however, inclined to tackle more 'Polish' themes as she is currently working on another memoir entitled *Go Back to Where You Came From*,¹³ which will offer an insight into her emigration story as well as diasporic experience of "eventually finding the universal home in art and in becoming a mother to the first Canadian, born into two families of first-generation immigrants" (private correspondence with the author of this article).

Both Ania Szado's *Studio Saint-Ex* (2013) and Eva Stachniak's *The Chosen Maiden* (2017) can be classified as historical novels. Ania Szado was born in Hamilton, Ontario into a family of Polish immigrants. She now resides in Toronto, writes in English and is the author of two novels and many short stories. For her debut novel *Beginning of Was*,¹⁴ she was nominated for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Canada and Caribbean region), named one of NOW Magazine's Top Ten Books of 2004 and shortlisted for the international Kiriyama Prize.¹⁵ Her latest text, devoted to the life of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, explores the biography of the famous pilot and writer, and the story is set in Montreal among immigrants as well as in New York during WWII. The story encapsulates the historical background of 1940s New York and Saint-Exupéry's relationships to his wife and a fictional, young Mignonne Lachapelle. Despite references to the Montreal environment of immigrants, Szado does not point to the Polish diaspora, but her main aim is to create an intriguing and engrossing story of a love triangle set against the panoramic view of Canada and the US of the 1940s. Hers is also a text about writing a book, as Saint-Exupéry is involved in writing his masterpiece *The Little Prince* at that time. As a result, Szado's book abounds in metatextual references to the process of writing, questions of inspiration and talent.

Eva Stachniak was born in Wrocław in 1952 and emigrated to Canada in 1981. In Poland and in Canada she was an academic. She graduated from McGill University with a PhD in literature in 1988. In 1984–1986 she worked for Radio Canada International, the Polish Section, in Montreal, and from 1988 to 2007 she taught at Sheridan College (Oakville, Ontario).¹⁶ Recently she has devoted herself to her writing career entirely.

Her writing can be divided into two groups. The first, represented by her debut novel, *Necessary Lies* (2000) and a few short stories, explores her diasporic experience of a Polish-Canadian and revises recent Polish history, presenting mainly post-Communist Poland as revisited from the perspective of a post-Solidarity immigrant in Canada. With the following texts, she departs into the more distant Polish history of the 18th and 19th centuries and explores the lives of famous Polish and Russian figures in a historical novel convention (Countess Sophie Potocka in *Garden of Venus*, Eliza Branicka in *Dysonans*, Catherine the Great in *The Winter Palace* and the *Empress of the Night*). This second group of texts is enriched by the 2017 publication of *The Chosen Maiden*, a history of the life and career of a famous ballet dancer and choreographer, Bronia Nijinska. Again, as in the case of Szado's novel, Stachniak offers a compelling life story of a talented artist based on true events, set against the backdrop of the first decades of 20th-century Europe. The meticulously reconstructed atmosphere of St. Petersburg, Kiev, Paris and London in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s as well as references to many famous people such as Coco Chanel, Igor Stravinsky and Vaslav Nijinsky make this historical novel also a universal story of pursuing one's dreams and talents, persistence but also loss, decline of the Russian tsarist empire at the beginning of

20th century, death as well as a discussion on the value of art in general. Critics highlight Stachniak's style and her ability to remain true to details without losing the attention of the reader (Hansen 2017, Moore 2017).

Kasia Jarończyk's short story collection *Lemons* was also published in 2017. The author was born in Poland and moved to Canada as a teenager in 1992. She has a degree in microbiology and a BA in English. She has published poetry and short stories in various magazines such as *The Prairie Journal*, *Room*, and *Carousel Magazine*. Together with Margaret Nowaczyk, she edited the first anthology of short stories by writers of Polish origins: *Polish(ed). Poland Rooted in Canadian Fiction* (2017). One of her essays has also appeared in *Wherever I Find Myself: Stories by Canadian Immigrant Women*, edited by Miriam Matejova, (Caitlin Press, 2017).¹⁷

Lemons is a short story cycle divided into two parts: Girls and Women, and thus comparable to Alice Munro's famous *Lives of Girls and Women* (Meisner 2017). The short stories are interconnected by the appearance of some of the characters, especially that of Basia. The majority of the stories take place in Communist Poland and are focused on presenting a patriarchal, painful reality full of both physical and psychological abuse. Some of the texts in the collection show the fates of immigrants to Canada, their choices and decisions as well as the effects of these on the family members who stayed in Poland. Jarończyk in her detached, almost cold and objective narratives refrains from directly analysing the Polish group in Canada. Instead, she offers a psychological insight into the process of growing from a girl into a woman, burgeoning femininity and sexuality in an oppressive environment. Her short stories, like vignettes, offer insights into everyday life in Communist Poland. She is far from proposing easy solutions as she narrates her stories with a scientific, sharp and seemingly disengaged voice. The way of narration present in *Lemons* helps Jarończyk achieve a powerful and convincing image of growing up and living in abusive environments.

Conclusion

Despite the pessimistic view expressed by Stachniak's character, whose words have been used in the title of the present article, Polish-Canadian writers have become more and more visible on a literary scene without 'betraying' their roots. Writing about one's origins cannot be the only criterion of acceptance as much as it might be seen as a characteristic feature of a group of writers. Moreover, as Strońska wonders "Our identities change all the time, like everything around us. And where actually is 'home' in this constantly changing world of ours?" (Strońska xvi). The novelists mentioned in the present analysis belong to the new generations of immigrants who do not have to constantly refer to their country of origins to prove their artistic skills. On various levels, through different genres, diverse topics, do

they give testimony to their talent. Through the universal themes and issues raised in their texts, they more and more frequently enrich Canadian and world literature rather than shut themselves in narrating their diasporic experiences. The phenomenon of Polish-Canadian authors going beyond the confines of diasporic borders, employing what Kamboureli calls “the interplay of faction and fiction” (2000, 135), proves their ethnicity does not relegate them to speak from the diasporic margins to the ‘Canadian’ centre. This would probably result in being known only to a limited group of readers knowing Poland or being interested in it. The historical themes, the stories of mother- and fatherhood, and the Bildungsroman type of writing locate them at the crossroads of universal literature understood and read worldwide. Borkowski, Maksimowska, Ravvin, Bydlowska, Stachniak, Szado and Jarończyk have made efforts to acknowledge their roots, while at the same time contributing to world literature in English through their talent, range of topics and generic choices.

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Notes

- 1 Stachniak, Eva. 2000. *Necessary Lies*. Toronto-Oxford: Simon and Pierre, 9.
- 2 Kamboureli focuses on ethnic anthologies in particular. The first anthology of Polish-Canadian short stories was published in August 2017. Since it comprises many interesting texts by a range of authors and offers a plethora of attitudes to ‘Polishness’ in Canada, it will be discussed in a separate article.
- 3 Korn was born in 1898 in Galicia. Kamboureli notes that Galicia was “a region of the Austrian Empire annexed by Poland in 1919” (1996, 31). This example perfectly illustrates the tangled vision of Central and Eastern Europe as Korn, writing in Yiddish, escaped with her family to the Soviet Union, lived in Moscow, then Łódź, where she was an active member of the Yiddish Writers’ Union after the Second World War, and then emigrated to Montreal in 1949.
- 4 Leonard Cohen, though born in Montreal in 1934 to Jewish parents of Polish (father) and Lithuanian (mother) origins, wrote his poetry and prose in English.
- 5 In 1988 Czaykowski claimed that “poetry is the only literary genre in which Polish writers create interesting texts in Canada” (qtd. in Sojka 2010, 293).
- 6 The essay entitled “Twórczość polskiej diaspory w Kanadzie a kanadyjski dyskurs literacki. Prolegomena do współczesnych badań” by Eugenia Sojka was published in 2010 in *Państwo-Naród-Tożsamość w Dyskursach Kulturowych*

- Kanady*. The estimated number of Chileans living in Canada is quoted after *Encyclopedia of Canadian Peoples*: <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/Encyclopedia/A-Z/c9/2>.
- 7 Czaykowski explains his aims in the Foreword to *Antologia poezji polskiej na obczyźnie 1929–1999* (2002, 5–16).
 - 8 Details of the literary prizes are mentioned in the sections devoted to particular writers.
 - 9 Apart from this study on Andrew J. Borkowski's *Copernicus Avenue* published in *Niuanse wyobcowania* (2014), Anna Branach-Kallas conducted an interesting interview with the author of the short stories cycle (published in *Niuanse wyobcowania* as well). She is also the author of "Polish Immigrants' Search for the Peaceable Kingdom: Andrew J. Borkowski's *Copernicus Avenue*" (2013), where she stresses that despite the painful visions of trauma, "*Copernicus Avenue* ends up with a sense of acceptance and hope. Portraying the changing facets of Copernicus Avenue, Borkowski's stories also highlight the positive and constructive aspect of change" (Branach-Kallas 2013, 203).
 - 10 Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) and *The Winter Vault* (2009) as well as Lisa Appignanesi's *Losing the Dead* (2000) and *The Memory Man* (2004) would be obvious examples of other Jewish-Canadian narratives were it not for the time caesura.
 - 11 See <http://www.maksimowska.com/index.html>.
 - 12 A pioneering text on Maksimowska by Ewa Bodal was published in *Niuanse wyobcowania* (2014).
 - 13 This information comes from a private correspondence with the author of this article.
 - 14 This 2004 novel is also not devoted to the diasporic experience in its entirety; this is a story of making a life after a car crash in which the main character's (Marta Fett) husband and daughter die. *Beginning of Was* is a text devoted to the study of the past and haunting memories.
 - 15 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ania_Szado; <http://marginesy.com.pl/autor/10>.
 - 16 See <http://www.evastachniak.com/eva-stachniak/>.
 - 17 See <http://kasiajaronczyk.weebly.com/>.

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