



Norman Ravin

Concordia University, Montreal

A goldene medine? A Dialogue
in Many Voices on Canadian Jewish
Studies and Poland

ABSTRACT

This paper is an account of the conference titled *Kanade, di goldene medine? Perspectives on Canadian-Jewish Literature and Culture / Perspectives sur la littérature et la culture juives canadiennes*, which took place in Łódź in April, 2014 as a result of collaboration between the University of Łódź and Concordia University (Montreal). As a venue for discussing Canadian Jewish identity and its links with Poland, the conference supported a dialogue between Canadians, Polish Canadianists, and European scholars from further afield. Established and young scholars attended from Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, the Czech Republic, and Canada, in addition to many Polish participants. The presence of scholars such as Goldie Morgentaler or Sherry Simon as well as curator Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett contributed to an examination of both past and present Canadian and Polish Jewish life and led to an examination of Polish and Canadian literature and history from a highly personal perspective. Conference-goers took advantage of the opportunity to get to know Łódź, via walking tours and a visit to the Łódź Jewish community's Lauder-funded centre on Narutowicza. The paper aims, as well, to investigate how the history of Jewish Łódź is conveyed in the novels of Joseph Roth and Chava Rosenfarb.

In the English translation of Joseph Roth's *Hotel Savoy*, the novel's actual location is not named. "This is the town where my relatives live," Roth writes, at the outset of his narrative, "my parents were Russian Jews" (3). The novel's setting is a town of music hall performers, industrialists, demobbed army men, striking workers, as well as a Jewish quarter of questionable character:

We arrive at a small lane. There are Jews standing around here and walking about in the middle of the street with ridiculously rolled umbrellas with crooked handles. They are either standing still with pensive expressions or endlessly walking up and down. Here one of them disappears, there another one comes out of a doorway. . . . The people pass each other like silent shadows. This is a collection of phantoms; this is where people long dead walk about; for thousands of years this tribe have frequented these narrow lanes. (30)

The final line in this passage is indicative of Roth's way with his setting; a mysterious and seemingly misleading reference to Jews—at least to the kind of Jews inhabiting the town's shadowy black market economy—who have lived in this borderland "for thousands of years" (30). But elsewhere, Roth's portrait is accurate and detailed in its depiction of interwar Łódź, where the author himself stayed after his release from army service and time spent, as he told it, as a prisoner of war. Upon arrival at the Hotel Savoy, Roth's narrator luxuriates in the fact that he is "standing once again at the gates of Europe." The town of his relatives offers an escape from the war-torn east, and an entranceway to the cosmopolitan west: "It promises water, soap, English-style toilet, a lift, maids in white caps, chamber pots . . . and real beds with eiderdown quilts billowing . . ." (3).

During his stay at the Hotel Savoy, Roth's alter ego meets up with a cast of locals, hotel guests and staff. Among them is the lift-boy Ignatz, whose domain is one of the hotel's most pleasing accoutrements:

I am taken up by a lift, mirrors adorning every side of it; the lift-boy, a man already advanced in years, lets the rope slip through his hands, the compartment rises, and I sway with it—I think to myself, I could so easily fly aloft like this for a good long time. I love this swaying, and reckon how many wearying steps I'd have to clamber up if I weren't able to sit in this splendid lift; and I hurl back down all my bitterness, and my hardship and wandering and homelessness, my beggar's life now in the past . . . (4-5)

Today, if you stride down Łódź's main drag, Piotrkowska, turn onto Traugutta, and enter the Hotel Savoy, you will discover that a "lift-boy" remains

on staff, even very late at night, to spare guests the “wearying steps” to the sixth floor, the height from which Roth’s narrator gazed out at the view of his unnamed town. Like Ignatz, this contemporary master of the elevator is no boy, but, rather, a lean, grey-haired man of courtly manner. The lift is not original. But the winding stairs that circle its cavernous drop no doubt are, and if there were occasions when Roth avoided Ignatz in favour of six floors of exercise, there is a chance that a contemporary visitor to the Hotel Savoy can set her foot just as the author did, nearly slipping over the worn rounded edge of marble stairway.

Łódź is terra incognita to North Americans. Even for North American Jews, including those who have visited Poland, or, at least, studied up on it to recover a sense of their ancestry, the city remains off the radar. They have likely seen iconic photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto, but Łódź’s own German-made catastrophe is mostly a mystery to them. This reflects an overall ignorance about Poland—even in light of great interest in the Holocaust—among those who feel they have, via their ancestral connections, some stake in the place. This phenomenon represents, from the perspective of North American Jewish culture and identity, a massive problem, which underwrites ongoing efforts by descendants of Polish Jews to understand a Polish past.

By way of certain coincidences, friendships, as well as overlapping interests shared by Polish and Canadian academics, the goals of a recent Łódź-based conference called *Kanade, di goldene medine? Perspectives on Canadian-Jewish Literature and Culture/Perspectives sur la littérature et la culture juives canadiennes* included an exploration of Canadian Jewish identity and its Polish links (the conference took place at the University of Łódź, Apr. 2–5, 2014). Some of the conference’s presenters and its organizers found themselves aloft in the lift at the Hotel Savoy late one night, as part of their cultural work of discovery in Poland. Among these were Sherry Simon, who had come from Montreal to talk about the unique cultural outpost that existed in Czernowitz between the world wars; Evelyn Tauben, a Toronto-based independent curator and cultural program manager; Justyna Fruzińska, a newly minted Łódź-based Ph.D. whose research examines recent Walt Disney films; John Crust, a Canadian who lived, until recently, in Łódź; Krzysztof Majer, a Canadianist and professor at the University of Łódź; and myself, a writer and descendant of Polish Jews whose borderland town was overrun by the Germans at the outset of World War Two. On the night we took our elevator ride and then strode down the stairway in Roth’s footsteps, our organizational efforts had born fruit, in particular, through the gathering of an unusual group of papers focused on Canadian literature, as well as on Canadian Jewish

life more broadly. One goal of such a set of conference papers—echoing a longstanding Canadian Studies project in Poland—was to maintain a dialogue that reflected the state of the art of Canadianist literary and cultural scholarship in eastern Europe.

Canadian studies centres have a long and varied history in Poland, and exist in such varied places as Warsaw, Kraków, Toruń and Sosnowiec. These bear a close relationship with the Polish Association for Canadian Studies, whose roots are traced to Warsaw and the early efforts of the American-born academic and cultural impresario Nancy Burke. *Kanade, di goldene medine?* profited from the established dedication of Polish scholars to the field. Panels included young faculty and graduate students, who represent a new generation of specialists interested in such figures as Mordecai Richler, Régine Robin, Teczka Werbowski, or in representations of Jewishness in the works of non-Jewish authors such as Ann-Marie MacDonald and Thomas King. Holocaust history and Yiddish cultural heritage were addressed in talks by Dagmara Drewniak and Karolina Krasuska. Sephardic and Chasidic identities in Montreal were examined by Annie Ousset-Krief, Renata Jarzębowska-Sadkowska and Jessica Roda. The Polish home institutions of the speakers—Konin, Toruń, Szczecin, among others—made the panels, with their engaged audiences, a true dialogue between Poles and Canadians, with Europeans from further afield providing a third constituency. The latter group included Canadianists Alexander Ramon and Dominic Williams from the United Kingdom; Yvonne Völkl, of Graz; Kathleen Gyssels, of Antwerp; and Petr Kyloušek and Eva Voldřichová Beranková of the Czech Republic. Among the conference's eight panels, three were conducted in French, thanks to organizer Krzysztof Majer's collaborative work with Warsaw-based panellist Józef Kwaterko. Parts of the conference were attended by representatives of the Canadian embassy in Warsaw, which supported conference events and travel, and the conference's bilingual presentations (with discussion in other languages, including Yiddish) reflected the best-case scenario of multicultural developments in Canada. Europeans, so commonly comfortable in two or more languages, found their way to the Canadian language that best suited their scholarly aims. An important part of the audience was a group of Canadian non-academics—mostly Torontonians—who travelled with their academic partners and contributed to the conference from start to finish.

A subset of the conference's talks focused on the work of Régine Robin, a French-born, Quebec-based writer of fiction and critical works who was among the conference's four keynote lecturers. The other three keynotes were given by Sherry Simon from Concordia University, myself, and Goldie Morgentaler of the University of Lethbridge. To these we added

Warsaw-based, Toronto-born curator Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as a “Special Guest Speaker.”

If the panellists’ Polish and western European frame of reference conveyed a particular view and set of concerns regarding Canadian literature and culture, the keynote talks presented a group of Canadian voices in response. Among these, the voice and subject matter presented by Goldie Morgentaler and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett offered intimate examinations of questions of Jewish-Polish heritage as it has been worked out by Canadian artists and writers. Morgentaler’s talk, entitled “Chava Rosenfarb’s *The Tree of Life*: Recreating Jewish Poland on Canadian Soil,” added to her longstanding translational, editorial, and critical work dedicated to her mother’s Yiddish-language *oeuvre*. *The Tree of Life*, first published in Yiddish in 1972, appearing in an English translation by Goldie and her mother in 1985, is arguably Rosenfarb’s major work. The novel’s introductory chapters offer a detailed portrait of pre-war Łódź—both its down-at-the-heels Jewish quarter and its top-of-the-heap manufacturing class. Rosenfarb’s Baluty is not a zone of covert commerce, but it is, like Roth’s zone of Jewish covert economy, a puzzle of decrepit alleyways:

The majority of the houses on Hockel Street were old wooden cottages, as were most of the houses in Baluty. Here and there stood a fading stucco building with several storeys, constructed in the style of the city. These houses had deep arched entrances leading into dingy backyards walled in by three or four-storeyed apartment boxes. Each of the latter had its own murky entrance with a crooked staircase leading to the upper floors. Each floor had its own dark corridor, and each corridor was filled with strong smells which escaped from beneath the countless doors. (33–34)

The home of Samuel Zuckerman, one of Rosenfarb’s Jewish manufacturers, is on Narutowicz Street, which is how the novel’s English version spells this address. Zuckerman enters his magnificent home to find that a

ball was in full swing. All the lights were on in the salon and the lustrous glitter of the crystal chandeliers and candelabras made everything sparkle with a glow of its own. The new mahogany buffet tables, a creation of Woodke, a German and the best carpenter in town, were crowded with vases out of which luscious flowers poked their heads through thin green ferns, so delicate that they looked like the filigree work of a meticulous artist. (14)

Here, Rosenfarb's fiction provides an insider's view of the kind of scenario that Roth offers only glancingly in *Hotel Savoy*, when his narrator visits a relative who has grown fat on his business successes and welcomes his visitor "before a gleaming copper samovar eating scrambled egg and ham and drinking tea with milk" (13).

The experience of listening to Goldie Morgentaler discuss her mother's creative and personal connection with Łódź in *Łódź* offered an unusually rich sense of how readerly possibilities can overlap with actual experience; the still extant neighbourhood of Bałuty, where the Germans created a Jewish ghetto, is a manageable walk from the university buildings that provided our conference venue. The Poznański Palace, repurposed as a museum; the elaborate redbrick factory complex transformed as *Manufaktura*; the still dilapidated workers' houses across from the slick new *andel's Hotel*, beckoned too. In the early chapters of Rosenfarb's novel, the decades of Łódź's economic boom are gracefully, lovingly recreated. If Roth's book offers a veiled portrait of these developments, Rosenfarb sketches them in truer and fuller shape. Walks around Łódź today present the possibility of a third layer of recognition, a kind of return, to the sights and scenes presented in these novels.

Our conference group took a number of walks together, in one case to see the impressive old Jewish cemetery, and then the Radegast Station monument, which takes its name from the occupation period when the Germans renamed the platform for its use as the transport point from which many thousands were sent from the ghetto to Chełmno and Auschwitz. This tour was led by the Łódź-based guide Milena Wicepolska, who, among other pursuits associated with the city's Jewish history, organizes volunteers to clear the cemetery's overgrown grounds. Our most substantial city walk as a group led us along *Narutowicza* to the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation for a Sabbath service and dinner—a remarkable addition to the conference's other forms of boundary crossing, immersion in the local scene and, as it might have been for some, anthropological study of local texture and Jewish reality. Lauder's early investments in post-communist Jewish life are well known, and the philanthropic goals of his organization model themselves on North American ideas and institutional goals, which include a place to pray. At Lauder we did something I have not done on my many visits to Poland: in a room divided by sheer cloth, we were led in prayer by a good old-fashioned-sounding *ba'al tefillah*, who, I was later told, is an evangelical Christian convert to Judaism (the man's background made my corny effort at night's end to address him in Yiddish a kind of Marx Brothers moment, for it would be the last language he was likely to understand, as negligible as my own Polish). The evening at the Lauder

Foundation offered many pleasant surprises: members of our group sang in Yiddish, and these female voices offered a Canadian rejoinder to the Polish males who led after-dinner songs around a maze of tables. But I wonder if others, besides myself, felt that the night's undertakings had unlocked the possibility, sometimes suggested in books, of conjuring real and semi-real places of great majesty. Bruno Schulz points toward this possibility in his *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, when a childhood encounter with a marvellous book conjures faraway places: "Canada, Honduras, Nicaragua, Abracadabra, Hipporabundia. . . ." (34). I floated, I felt, on the fringes of a land called Rosenfarb, or, a little less fully formed, the terrain of Rothania, where the city's memories heaved themselves up before us, momentarily physically present, along with the racket of trams that passed outside the open windows on Narutowicza.

To be true to Rosenfarb's creative motives, one needed to hear some of her work read in Yiddish. And this was provided by Goldie Morgentaler at an evening event that included readings of Rosenfarb's poems, as well as my own fiction and the creative work of Régine Robin. Yiddish language and literature arose as a compelling motive for discussion at other stages of the conference, including Vivian Felsen's consideration of Chaim Leib Fuks's efforts to create an encyclopaedic history of Canadian Yiddish writers, and in Isa Milman's presentation of her poetry related to Jewish immigrant and farming life on the Canadian prairie.

Readers of Rosenfarb's *Tree of Life* recognize that her writerly project was a form of historical recovery mixed with testimony, asserting the need to reproduce a world that was entirely destroyed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's presentation at the conference centred on the screening of a film devoted to her father's slow but ultimately substantial voyage of return to the Polish city of Apt, or Opatów, where he was a boy before the war. At his daughter's urging, relying on his perfect recall of the pre-war years, Kirshenblatt began to paint the Polish places of his youth. Interest in his paintings led to his return to Opatów on the occasion of an exhibition, overseen by local officials, attended by old-timers and youthful citizens alike. Mayer Kirshenblatt's accomplishments mirror his daughter's, as she completes the curatorial work on exhibits for the newly opened Warsaw Museum of the History of Polish Jews. At the museum, memory and Jewish re-immersion in the Polish contemporary scene are twin goals. The sleek building that houses the museum offers a meeting place between past and present, which includes newly laid out contemplative surroundings, the original Warsaw Uprising monument and a roadway named for Irena Sendler, saviour of children in the Warsaw Ghetto.

One of the exhibits being readied for view is a recreated wooden painted ceiling, after the seventeenth-century synagogue at Gwoździec (Hvizdets), which was destroyed by the Germans. Evelyn Tauben took part in the project to paint the rebuilt facsimile of the ceiling, relying on photographs and descriptions of its pre-war glory. Tauben's presentation to the conference, like Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's, offered a portrait of different modes of return, recovery and reconsideration of Polish-Jewish cultural links from a Canadian perspective. This aspect of the conference could be said to be its most idealistic: the prospect of challenging stereotypic, even destructive notions of Poland, and expressing the urge among a new generation of curators, writers and scholars to uncover fresh forms of immersion and dialogue. There were points of resistance to this goal, moments at which expressions of deep personal hurt linked with the shared past made the promise of a change in Polish-Canadian Jewish relations seem unlikely. Regardless of the outcome of these discussions, the depth and level of personal engagement expressed were not what one expects to hear at an academic conference. Such discussion, alongside intellectual challenges, raised ethical, even existential propositions and counter-propositions, which demand attention. Whether one headed home on foot, along Narutowicza, or via air, toward western Europe, Victoria, Toronto or Montreal, the concluding feeling was one that called for further work. Canadians and Poles alike were struck by the need for continued engagement with the questions raised by our panels, talks and readings. Certainly, the Canadian attendees of *Kanade, di goldene medine?* felt a new respect and affection for the once-Jewish streets of Łódź.

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The Task of Attention

Sherry Simon (Concordia University)
Talks to Krzysztof Majer and Justyna Fruzińska
(University of Łódź)

Krzysztof Majer, Justyna Fruzińska: Let us begin with a subject that you have written much about, and always passionately: your home city—Montreal, or perhaps Montréal. It has often been portrayed as a cosmopolitan metropolis, similar to New York or London, but you have chosen more striking analogies. In your book *Translating Montreal*, you describe it as a “divided city,” and you propose reading it via turn-of-the-century Trieste or Prague, colonial Calcutta, or even contemporary Mostar, evidently challenging the comfortable image of the Canadian mosaic. In these cities, encounters with difference would have been associated with unease or danger. However, barring the October Crisis of 1970, Montreal is not associated, in the global imagination, with violence or peril.

Sherry Simon: It was not only the October Crisis itself—a period of months—which brought violence into the city but the decade preceding and following. Those who lived through the difficult years of the 1960s and 1970s remember a very fraught atmosphere, not only in the political arena but in the sphere

of daily life, too, as Québécois nationalism penetrated every area of cultural life, making the time very exciting but also full of antagonism across language lines. Montreal was for much of the twentieth century a colonial city, one dominated by a minority English-language bourgeoisie. The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s progressively changed this situation, so that today the city is largely French-speaking, and English has only a minority role. There is less a sense of division today because the hierarchies of the colonial situation no longer obtain. Yet Montreal shares with many postcolonial cities a shape and a sensibility that has to do with a past of stark divisions—the spatial divisions of colonial Calcutta or of German-Czech Prague.

KM, JF: In your book, you map various “translational” journeys and passages across the divided city which have occurred over the last sixty years or so, with different outcomes. Translation is here understood very broadly, that is including diverse forms of language contact and interference. These may occur spontaneously, but may also be

variously motivated: from the linguistic violence of superimposition practised by the authorities to unprompted, sincere, grass-roots voyages of individuals curious to “see how the other half lives.” But you conclude that “the identity of the city is to be understood as the sum total of the passages that define its evolution, each testifying to changing conditions of reception.” This is a very dynamic portrait of Montreal, which points to the impossibility of producing a final, complete vision. The Montreal of today seems very far removed from Hugh MacLennan’s notion of “two solitudes,” which was still current, or perhaps fashionable, until very recently. Have there been any major shifts over the eight years since the book was published? Are we able to speculate about the city’s future shape?

SS: The “two solitudes” image long outlived its accuracy as a description of Montreal’s social dynamics. And as you say, today’s Montreal has a much more diverse and complex cultural landscape. I think that the ways in which young people identify with language continue to change. You don’t necessarily choose one language identity and stick to it. There is a lot more fluidity. The historical English-language community is dwindling, but English continues to be an important player—as an international language rather than as the historic colonial enemy. More and more languages

of immigration are important today as third languages. Montreal will, however, remain a French-language city and it is important to defend the language laws that allow French to be protected in the public realm. It will be interesting to watch how French itself becomes more diversified, even as it remains the dominant language of the city.

KM, JF: Speaking of linguistic diversification, how do the Francophone inhabitants of Montreal, or indeed of Quebec, see their language vis-à-vis French as spoken in Europe, *dans l’Hexagone*? Historically, the ties to the language and culture have been very strong, also as far as supporting the idea of sovereignty—one thinks, for instance, of Charles de Gaulle shouting “*Vive le Québec libre!*” from the balcony of Montreal City Hall in 1967. But how have the Quebecois negotiated their position with regard to the other colonial mantle, i.e., that of *l’Hexagone* itself?

SS: After decades of very intense debate, there is now a clear consensus that Quebec French is a separate variety of French, neither better nor worse than the Hexagonal, and distinguished by accent, vocabulary and—to some extent—syntax. Influence from English is still considered to be detrimental to Quebec French, and in fact Quebecers are much more attentive to interference from English than are the

French, who don't seem to mind if their language is increasingly Anglicized. It is no longer France which is considered the absolute arbiter of correctness as far as expression is concerned—Quebec French is, like North African French or Caribbean French, an equal contributor to the culture of *la Francophonie*. Language consciousness in Quebec extends to the recognition of the gendered nature of language, and while France still declares the Rights of Man, Quebec is attuned to the rights of Humans, and feminizes the professions (including *la Première ministre*).

KM, JF: Among the many encounters between the various cultures of Montreal described in your book there are, of course, instances of translation in the strict sense. One of the most fascinating examples is the rendering in other languages of a Quebecois theatre classic, Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-sœurs* (1965), originally written in *joual*, i.e., the language of Montreal's Francophone working class. *Joual* was then considered an impure, déclassé idiom, and Tremblay's decision was—as you remind us—a fervent political gesture. For almost thirty years, Tremblay expressly forbade productions of his piece in Montreal in a language other than French. However, he finally made an allowance for two translations into languages themselves considered impure and déclassé, i.e., Glaswegian Scots (Bill

Findlay's and Martin Bowman's 1989 translation as *The Guid Sisters*) and Yiddish (Goldie Morgentaler's 1992 translation as *Di Shvegerins*). Especially the second was significant, when staged in Montreal: a dialogue between—as director Dora Wasserman put it—“two threatened cultures,” relations between which had historically been based either on hostility or obliviousness. You discuss this production in the context of other, often surprising connections being forged between the Francophone culture and the traditionally Anglophone Jewish community in Montreal, principally through the work of historian / translator Pierre Anctil. Would you say that *Di Shvegerins* has had a lasting effect?

SS: You are right to point to the cultural significance of these translations, particularly of *joual* into Yiddish. What are their lasting effects? *Di Shvegerins* was produced under the auspices of the Yiddish Theatre company founded by Dora Wasserman, and then directed by Bryna Wasserman and others. The goal of the company was to keep Yiddish theatre culture alive, and the translation was just one of the many projects which the company undertook. This long-term project has had invaluable effects, both for the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. *Di Shvegerins* should also be placed in the context of the many translations recently undertaken by Pierre

Ancil from Yiddish into French, again a long-term project whose payoffs have been immense. All these efforts have contributed to the diversification of Francophone culture in Montreal, and to the creation of a new understanding of the history of the city. Montreal is about to celebrate its 375th birthday [in 2017], and hopefully the events surrounding this anniversary will build on the huge efforts in the last 25 years to construct a new and more inclusive understanding of the history of the city.

KM, JF: To continue on the subject of Jewishness: in the first half of the twentieth century, Montreal was, after New York, the second most important centre of Jewish (particularly Yiddish) culture, “the Jerusalem of the North.” Various factors have contributed to the gradual decline of this cultural status quo—the influx of immigrants from the Pale of Settlement and other parts of Europe was obviously cut short by the Holocaust; in Montreal itself, the older generations died out, while the younger loosened or lost their connection to Yiddish. More recently, in the 80s and 90s, both separatist referenda in Quebec and the fear of Francization also led large numbers of Jews to abandon the province for Ontario, chiefly Toronto, which now has the largest Jewish population in Canada (160,000 to Montreal’s 90,000). However, efforts are being made nowadays—not least by your

own scholarly work—to reclaim the traces of Jewish past in the city both for the Anglophone and the Francophone world. Could you describe what they are and how successful they have been so far?

SS: Well, you’re right to underline the fact that Toronto is now Canada’s major Jewish city, with Montreal falling very significantly behind. It is important to mention, however, the important Sephardic Jewish population of Montreal which was attracted to it as a French-speaking city, and which has become increasingly present as a cultural force. The specifically Yiddish past of Montreal has now become the subject of historical research, and in connection with this I would like to call attention to the work of Rebecca Margolis, professor at the University of Ottawa, who has contributed significantly to our knowledge of Yiddish Montreal, in particular by her book *Jewish Roots, Canadian Soil* (2011). It is impossible to overestimate the work of Pierre Ancil, as a translator and scholar of Yiddish Montreal, in his efforts to redefine relations between Francophones and Jews. Other scholars, like Esther Trépanier (for visual culture) and Jean-Marc Larrue (for the history of theatre), have also been active in making the Yiddish Montreal past part of a common Quebec history. And a significant amount of research has been done within the Francophone literary world to

reconnect these histories. So altogether I think that the scholarly efforts within the Francophone world in particular have been immensely significant—signalling a sea-change in perceptions of the past and understanding of the present.

KM, JF: One of the goals of our conference, in which you kindly participated as keynote speaker,¹ has been to strengthen, or perhaps forge anew, the connection between Łódź and Montreal. A general connection, or even mirroring, exists here: in pre-war Poland, Łódź had the second largest Jewish population after Warsaw, and saw the development of a very vibrant modern culture centred around Yiddish (e.g., the influential “Jung Jidysz” collective). And then there are, of course, individual writers: chiefly Chava Rosenfarb, whose Yiddish masterpiece *Der boim fun lebn* (*The Tree of Life*) is a fictionalized account of the Łódź Ghetto, but also, for instance, Yehuda Elberg, who was born in the nearby Zgierz. As conference organizers, we felt that, in that respect, the presence of Goldie Morgentaler—Rosenfarb’s daughter, translator and commentator—was key

to what we were trying to achieve. Rosenfarb’s monumental novel is still virtually unknown in Poland, mostly due to a lack of translations; it is a glaring absence, for the time being filled up by Polish versions of vastly inferior works such as Steve Sem-Sandberg’s *Emperor of Lies*. But to the point: we would appreciate your thoughts on, and impressions of this first visit to Łódź, and of its potential for strengthening the ties with Montreal.

SS: I lament with you the fact that Chava Rosenfarb’s amazing trilogy, *The Tree of Life*, is not better known. I was also struck by the lack of attention to her novel in the reactions to Steve Sem-Sandberg’s *Emperor of Lies*. Rosenfarb’s novel is a much more textured and wide-ranging account of life in the Łódź Ghetto, a testament to the powers both of memory and the imagination. As Goldie Morgentaler has explained, Łódź is a living figure in Rosenfarb’s work—and the city takes on immense importance. In this sense, I could say that visiting Łódź for me was something of an uncanny experience, because I was trying to bring together what I saw with what I had read. (Another literary presence is, of course, Joseph Roth’s *Hotel Savoy*). The industrial past of Łódź as the “Manchester of the East” enhances the sense of the uncanny—because the red-brick industrial architecture of the city is so similar to the red-brick factories of the

¹ *Kanade, di goldene medine? Perspectives on Canadian-Jewish Literature and Culture / Perspectives sur la littérature et la culture juives canadiennes, Łódź*, April 2–5, 2014. The other keynote and guest speakers were Régine Robin, Goldie Morgentaler, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Norman Ravvin.

north-east corner of North America. Montreal's factories in Saint-Henri seem to be replicas of the ones we see here. My stay in Łódź was far too short for me to come up with any substantive impressions for possibilities of links between the two cities, but I am sure that there is ample potential. The fact that so many important figures from Łódź have had an impact on the Yiddish-language literature of Montreal is a promising beginning.

KM, JF: To return to the subject of translation: you describe a remarkable development within Anglophone writing since the 1980s, chiefly among women writers, i.e., to either consciously adopt French as the language in which to write (e.g., Agnes Whitfield), or to deliberately allow French structures and vocabularies to interpenetrate English, so that the outcome is designed to read like a translation (e.g., Gail Scott). Somewhere along that spectrum we also find the creatively playful translations (or “translations”) and “appropriations” of Erin Mouré, who works, among others, with texts by Nicole Brossard. Brossard herself often problematizes translation, or else her texts appear to enact a translation which does not in fact take place (*Le désert mauve* is a case in point). Of all the “contact zones” which you describe, this seems to be the one most promising, productive and open, because it seems to deny, or at least challenge, the existence

of a privileged original, or in fact, a privileged language.

SS: Yes, it is interesting that women writers have been particularly active in promoting forms of “translational writing.” These are forms of experimental writing, and the figures you point to have been active in avant-garde experiments. Translation remains an important area for such experiments (another figure is Anne Carson), and, of course, Montreal is a particularly apt place for such cross-language excursions. But this writing does remain marginal.

KM, JF: Since we are already discussing privileged languages, perhaps you won't mind talking straightforward politics. Recent weeks have seen a staggering defeat of Parti Québécois in the local election, and a victory of the Liberal Party under the slogan *Ensemble*. Since its inception in 1968, Parti Québécois have had a separatist agenda; whenever they came to power, they proposed a referendum to gauge the society's attitude to the province's independence. Both the 1980 and the 1995 referenda failed, but in the second the outcome was incredibly close. This time the incumbent Premier of Quebec, Pauline Marois, hoped for a majority government and it seems that another referendum was in the offing, but these dreams were cut short by surprisingly low results (the Liberals under Philippe Couillard won 70 seats to PQ's 30). This

seems to have been caused at least in part by the controversial Charter of Values which Marois had been championing, and which would forbid civil servants to wear traditional headgear (e.g., hijabs, burkas, kippas). Is it possible, however, that we are seeing a more general shift in the province, where PQ’s nationalist agenda has more or less run out of steam, and the younger generations cannot be rallied to the cause of *le Québec libre* the way their parents and grandparents could? Or do you think that this is only a temporary lull?

SS: You are asking questions that all the political analysts in Quebec were asking on the days following the surprising election results. For most of us, we were simply elated that the Quebec population had not been taken in by what looked for a while like successful electoralist tactics. For me, it is hard to separate the issues from the particularly sleazy way in which Pauline Marois and her henchmen set about trying to win this election. The Charter from the start was a dishonest manoeuvre, meant only to win votes and not to prove any particular point. And so I was thrilled to see this particular team of politicians bite the dust. About the real issues in the long term? I am sure that independence will remain on the political horizon, but it will only have meaning when it carries with it some sort of progressive political

project. Independence for its own sake has no meaning, and that is what the electorate so resoundingly said a few weeks ago.

KM, JF: Why is Quebecois separatism still attractive enough to serve as a constituent of a political programme? There is a trend in analyzing nationalisms springing up in many European countries as a response to the marginalization of certain groups due to an economic consensus blurring any real distinctions between left- and right-wing parties. Thus, populist sentiments in Central Europe are often interpreted as expressing the frustration of those who feel they have no serious political representation. What fuels separatism / nationalism in Quebec? Is it a mere vent for political disappointments, or can it be seen as a realistic proposition, in social and economic terms?

SS: This is a particularly interesting question in light of the results of the elections of last April. There is a sense in which supporters of nationalism feel that the clock is ticking and that globalization will rob them of the numbers they need to ensure a majority in the case of a referendum. This is true. It is difficult for the nationalists to enrol the support of immigrants for their cause—especially as the huge economic disparities which once separated the English (perceived as the colonizer) against the French have

to a large extent disappeared. In fact, it is more and more difficult to determine who is English and who is French when so many individuals are bilingual and where immigrants now increasingly assimilate to the French language (largely because of the success of Bill 101 [The Charter of the French Language]). Is it only the older generation which clings to the idea of a majority “us” against “them”? This is what some commentators are saying.

KM, JF: An interesting response to the notion of Quebec sovereignty recently came from the well-regarded 25-year-old Francophone film director Xavier Dolan, who made two comments, in Cannes, that may have seemed contradictory at first: “Whatever my political views are or standpoints, I feel like my movie [*Mommy*, 2014] is very Québécois” and “For me, it’s not about a country or a province or old dilemmas or wars—that, my generation doesn’t associate with or relate with anymore.” Speaking for an entire generation, he seemed to single-handedly detach the idea of sovereignty from Québécois identity, the existence of which he did not, however, deny. Would you see this as a young man’s flippancy or part of a legitimate stance which the Francophone 20-somethings are taking in Quebec today?

SS: Yes, absolutely. Quebec is a distinct society with a very distinctive

culture. This remains true, whether Quebec is politically separate or not. The existence of a strong Quebec government within Canada is essential, for many reasons, including the promotion of the arts. The Harper government is destroying a great deal of what allowed Canadian culture to flourish, and so it is important that the provincial governments, and especially Quebec, continue to act as a counter-weight.

KM, JF: If we may end on a more personal note: you yourself are perfectly fluent and at home in both English and French, to the extent that you pronounce your name differently in each language. In the preface to *Translating Montreal*, you acknowledge both the sense of adventure and of disorientation that had accompanied your early ventures into Francophone territory, while in the last pages of your book you turn this into something of an ethical injunction, which you call “the task of attention” and which may perhaps be applied more broadly, to living within an agglomeration: “[a]ttention to differences—those that are fleeting, those that endure—is central to the lessons of city life. To be alert to diversity is both task and reward.” Do you see the “New Montrealer” as embodying this attitude, or is this still a project, a hope for the future?

SS: The daily encounter with difference is, I think, the most compelling

aspect of urban life. All cities offer this experience, but some cities offer more intense doses or varieties of diversity. Montreal’s language situation strikes me as a particularly rich kind of daily confrontation with difference. Perhaps this is because I was born into this city and am fascinated by the evolution of its language relations, and by the kind of attention it obliges each of us to maintain. This is a very mundane kind of attention on the one hand (what language does my interlocutor speak? how can I be sure that the language I speak is appropriate, and correct—that is untouched by the influence of the other tongue?) and also an attention that has metaphysical and ethical dimensions (how does the presence of other languages and other systems of values affect my own sense of what is right?). In both cases, I am talking about an ongoing project which is both the privilege and the obligation of the city-dweller.

American Studies in Poland: A Collective Enterprise

An Interview with Agnieszka Salska by Jadwiga
Maszewska and Zbigniew Maszewski
(University of Łódź)

Jadwiga Maszewska, Zbigniew Maszewski: How did you become interested in American literature? In the 1960s a preference for things American could be considered as a form of protest against what we had and what we were experiencing here in Poland. Do you remember it that way?

Agnieszka Salska: No, I don't remember my interest in American literature as a conscious political choice. My entering the newly opened English Department at Łódź University (it was reopened in 1957 following the political thaw in the wake of the "Polish October" of 1956) was influenced by my high school teacher of Polish who kept pointing out that studying English (I was thinking of studying in the Polish Department) will more effectively open the world for me. Special interest in American literature came only later and quite spontaneously. After our third year of studies, we were required to attend a summer course where instructors were native speakers provided by the British Council and the Cultural Section

of American Embassy in Warsaw. One of our American instructors, I think, it was the poet, Peter Vier-eck (much later I found out that he taught history at Mount Holyoke, the college Dickinson attended, called in her time Mount Holyoke Seminary) brought a recording of poems by Emily Dickinson read by an actress whose name I no longer remember. I'm sure my English at that point was not adequate to the task of actually understanding the poems. Still, they made a tremendous impression, probably because the folk rhythms of the stanzaic forms Dickinson relies on are quite universal and worked for me above (or beneath) the semantic level of her clipped sentences. As a result, confirmed in my first reaction to Dickinson by Charles Anderson's admirable study *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (1960), I produced an MA thesis on Dickinson's idea of poetry. My supervisor was doctor Róża Jabłkowska of Warsaw University, a Conrad scholar, who however was tolerant enough to accept my non-British and non-novelistic interest.

JM, ZM: How did your interests in American literature evolve? Could you say a few words about your itinerary as a scholar of American literature?

AS: The evolution of my scholarly itinerary since then was a combination of luck and negotiations between personal interests and the needs of the Department which I joined in 1964 as a young assistant, having for a year taught English in a high school in Łódź. Professor Witold Ostrowski, the then Department Chair, a Victorian scholar, admirer of the English realist novel and something of an anti-romantic, was nevertheless aware of the need to include courses in American literature in the curriculum of English studies. And Polish Americanists had yet to be educated. Thus my Ph.D. dissertation, motivated perhaps by the orderly desire “to begin at the beginning,” was focused on Puritan and colonial poetry; more specifically—on the issue of its relation to the evolution of political and aesthetic concepts of independence. As a Kościuszko Foundation Fellow, I worked on large parts of the dissertation at the University of Virginia, in its wonderful Clifton Waller Barrett Library and its rich Alderman Library. My academic advisor was Floyd Stovall, a noted Poe and Whitman scholar. So, in a way, I brought back from Virginia not only materials and drafts of my Ph.D. dissertation but also foundations of

my interest in Whitman. They surfaced in the book on Dickinson and Whitman largely conceived while in the early seventies I was a Postdoctoral Fellow at Yale University on scholarship from the Polish Ministry of Higher Education. The book came out first in Łódź as my *Habilitationsschrift*. The final (colloquium) part of the procedure took place early in 1982 in somewhat dramatic circumstances since martial law was introduced in Poland in December of 1981. I am grateful to the then Dean of the Faculty, the late Professor Maria Kamińska, and the University of Łódź for pushing on with the formalities despite the political uncertainties of the time. A year later, in response to the proposal I submitted of revising and developing my Dickinson-Whitman book, the American Council of Learned Societies offered me a Fellowship. I was very fortunate to be able to take advantage of the award, travel to Philadelphia and continue working on the project. Although initially the authorities denied me a passport, the Rector of Łódź University, Professor Leszek Wojtczak, successfully intervened on my behalf and, somewhat belatedly, in November 1983 I began my stay as Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Pennsylvania. I was even more fortunate to be able to leave Philadelphia in July of 1984 with a contract signed for the publication by University of Pennsylvania Press of *Walt Whitman and Emily*

Dickinson: Poetry of the Central Consciousness. When the book came out in 1985 to reasonably favorable reviews, I became invited to lectures and conferences, asked for reviews and contributions to specialist publications such as, for example, *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*. The practical help and moral support I received in Philadelphia from American scholars, especially Daniel Hoffman and Everett Emerson but also others, have remained for me a model which I have tried to follow of the relationship between older and younger generations in the profession.

In the fall of 1984 I became Director of the Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, and in 1988 the Department of American Literature was finally created within the Institute with myself as Chair. This added so much administrative work that I remember the period as mostly struggling with bureaucracy and fighting to make time for my students. When the pressures of administration eased, towards the end of the 1990s, there came the proposal of writing a history of twentieth-century American literature for Polish readers with the idea of, in some way, summing up American literary achievement in “the American century.” I could think of such a huge undertaking only as a collective enterprise supported by a grant from the national source. KBN (Komitet Badań Naukowych—Committee for Scholarly Research) responded

favorably to the application and, for all the tensions of deadlines and differences in temperament of several co-authors, the two-volume project was brought to a successful completion in 2003 with all the participants still talking to one another. It certainly was a project in which my past experience as President of Polish Association for American Studies served me well. I can only wish that a similar spirit of collegial cooperation continues among Polish Americanists bringing scholarly results.

Thinking back on my work as an American Studies scholar and teacher, I must also say that I feel proud of the work of several of my former students, by now colleagues in full career at various Polish institutions of higher education. I wish them every success. There is nothing better in the experience of a scholar-teacher nearing the end of her/his career than to be able to think that one was professionally surpassed by one’s students.

JM, ZM: Who were your most memorable teachers? With whom did you share your interest in American literature in Poland in the 1960s and 1970s? At that time, did you have contacts with other Americanists in Western or Eastern Europe?

AS: From my student days at Łódź University I vividly remember the British instructor and writer in his own right, Mr. Derwent May, and

a young American lecturer Victor Contosky, a poet. Victor used to bring his guitar to class and sing American folk ballads, as part of the survey of American literature course. Derwent May gave occasional parties for his students. On the whole, with native speakers there was a noticeable difference in the teacher-student relation in comparison to what we were used to in our relations with Polish faculty. Years later my own students were telling me that in their opinion relations between students and instructors in the English Institute were much less hierarchic than in other Departments of the University or in other Polish schools. Qualified native speakers, on whose employment in the Department I have always insisted as Chair, convey not only knowledge; equally importantly, they pass on vital elements of their culture(s).

From my student days I also remember long seminars with doctor Jabłkowska who every other week traveled from Warsaw to Łódź. And so every other week we sat through a double portion of classes with her. Well, five or six hours of the course in "The English Novel" can be quite trying to young bottoms, no matter how competent the instructor. Our MA program included then a mandatory course in logic which I still recall with pleasure because Professor Tadeusz Pawłowski was such an excellent lecturer. More generally, let me add that the elimination

of courses in logic and Latin from the present curriculum of language studies has seriously eroded humanistic education.

The first American Literature Department in Poland was established in Poznań where Professor Jacek Fisiak brought doctor Andrzej Kopcewicz, his colleague from Warsaw University, and Marta Sienicka, a graduate of our university who soon completed her degree. Erudite and kind, Professor Kopcewicz for a long time served as external reader and supervisor of dissertations in American literature in practically all Departments of English in Poland. In Warsaw there was doctor and then Professor Zbigniew Lewicki but not until the mid-eighties to early nineties can we talk of the growth of some significant Americanist milieu in Poland.

Still, few as we were in the late 60s and 70s, we were eager to keep in touch with European Americanists of roughly our own generation while they, in turn, seemed willing to come over and contribute to the seminars and conferences organized in Poland. My acquaintance with, for example, Marc Chénétier or Heinz Ickstadt, both of whom later acted as Presidents of European Association for American Studies, dates back to that time. In the mid-seventies the English Institute at Łódź hosted a conference of European Association for the Study of English (which included an American section) and developed its own

network of scholarly contacts and exchanges. Some of them, like the one with Justus Liebig University at Giessen, are still effectively continued. At the time, largely through the energetic efforts of Professor Janicka-Świdorska, we established institutional contacts with University of York, University of Sheffield and University of Lyon II. Professor Maurice Gonnaud of l'Institute d'Anglaise at Lyon, an authority on Emerson, was especially helpful and kind to me, eventually acting as one of the external readers of my *Habilitationsschrift*. There were then no regulations sanctioning transnational cooperation on the level of formal degree procedures but the good will of many European colleagues and our determination to make the best use of whatever possibilities we saw allowed to make at least some openings in the official intransigence of the political division of Europe. And the European Association for American Studies cooperated. By its statutory rules the Association only accepts members via national organizations; however, in view of the practical/political impossibility at the time of establishing national American Studies Associations in communist countries, individual members from those countries were admitted. And, if I remember correctly, even the payment of dues was waived in their case while the Cultural Section of the American Embassy in Warsaw contributed to our conference

expenses if the applicant's paper was accepted in the program. American Studies became the field of humanities where, though not without difficulties, European scholars could meet, learn from one another, and cooperate, as if above the divisive issues of European history and current political reality.

Ironically, before the political change of 1989, contacts with scholars from Eastern Europe were quite weak partly because they were less eagerly sought after by us and by colleagues from the Eastern bloc. The bureaucracy and political surveillance had to be negotiated by both potential partners and both sides undoubtedly felt that they must not squander their energies on applications for passports and visas within the block when success of such applications seemed even more dubious than in the case of invitations from the West. Thus, we met colleagues mostly from the Eastern side on the Western side of Europe. For example, in the summer of 1973 at one of the sessions of Salzburg Seminar in American Studies, I met colleagues not only from England, West Germany, Turkey or Italy but also from Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. With some of them I still keep in touch.

JM, ZM: If we remember correctly, in the 1970s and 1980s the United States, via the American Embassy in Warsaw, supported American Studies in Poland quite generously.

Could you talk about that? What were the forms of their support? Did they bring significant writers and critics to Poland?

AS: The Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization (later in American Studies), established in 1947 in war-devastated Europe, aimed at bringing together scholars, artists and intellectuals from all European countries and facilitating their contacts with American scholars, artists, translators, journalists, theater people, critics, and intellectuals in general. In 1947 among the faculty of the first seminar there were such luminaries of the American intellectual scene as Professor of Literature and History at Harvard, author of the now classic *The American Renaissance*, F. O. Matthiessen, Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Columbia University Margaret Mead, and the literary critic Alfred Kazin. The Salzburg Seminar at Schloss Leopoldskron (formerly Max Reinhardt's residence), founded largely by private sponsorship and effort, was also supported in its mission by the State Department. By now the Seminar, renamed as "Salzburg Global Seminar," has broadened its reach with the aim of bringing together educators, potential community leaders and opinion makers from all over the world.

Within the former Eastern Bloc, Poland was the only country where the Fulbright foundation had maintained, since 1959, a working program of

scholarly exchange. Thus Fulbright lecturers and visiting professors were brought to Polish institutions of higher education, and a number of Fellowships to American Universities were offered each year to Polish scholars in different disciplines, some Americanists among them. In addition to the Fulbright Program, the Cultural Section of American Embassy in Warsaw ran a consistent program of funding acquisition of language teaching materials, dictionaries, American literature and linguistics books, subscriptions of periodicals, etc. In view of the currency restrictions, this indeed was invaluable help. For many years the person responsible for the program was the Embassy's English Teaching Officer, Ms. Anna (we all referred to her informally as "pani Ania," or simply "Ania") Wilbik, with whom it was a pleasure to cooperate. The Cultural Section of American Embassy in Warsaw supported various teacher training programs, teacher exchanges and summer courses for Polish teachers of English. For some time in the first decade of this century, it also created, in cooperation with Departments of American Literature and Culture at some Polish universities, a regional program of summer seminars for doctoral students from ex-communist countries. For three consecutive years the American Department at Łódź hosted such a seminar relying on the help of our current and past Fulbright instructors and

exchange contacts. Running our own graduate programs we could, moreover, benefit from the shorter visits of American scholars under the auspices of Fulbright specialist program. Such three to six weeks stays, if planned carefully and well ahead of time, allowed for offering intensive graduate courses oriented towards the interests of a particular group of advanced students.

Visits of noted authors and critics organized and sponsored by the Cultural Section in cooperation with various, not necessarily academic, institutions in Poland have always been the highlights of the American Embassy's support not only for American Studies but more broadly, for translators, critics, writers and the general public interested in American literature. Thus, when John Updike, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, William Styron and other important American writers came to Poland, they usually traveled to several Polish cities, met with Polish critics, writers and readers as well as lectured at Universities. You must yourself remember a conference that we held in Łódź in early 1990, in which the writer Mary Gordon and the critic Mark Schechner participated. Apart from unorthodox catering experience (in the difficult time of the early years of Polish transformation we were preparing our own breakfasts and lunches), the nightly performance of nightingales in the bushy surroundings of the then modest

University Conference Center near Łagiewniki provided a memorable experience for the American guests. And when Jerzy Kosiński, a graduate of our university, came to Łódź, the biggest lecture hall of our Faculty of Languages could not hold the crowding public.

The Polish Association for American Studies could also rely on the patronage of the Cultural Section of American Embassy. The local organizers of the annual PAAS conference were usually able to invite one or, in good years, even two plenary speakers from the United States whose travel was sponsored from the budget of the Cultural Section. Thus Barton Levi St. Armand or Marjorie Perloff came to Łódź when it was our Department's turn to host the annual meeting.

JM, ZM: The Polish Association for American Studies is a well-established organization today. For over two decades it has been meeting annually and it has a fair number of members. It is associated with the EAAS. Could you tell us about the beginnings of PAAS in Poland? When and where exactly was it established? You were the organization's president for many years. How did you see your mission?

AS: As I have already said, several Polish Americanists became members of EAAS individually before 1989. In the late fall of that year a group of us met at the American

Studies Center in Warsaw to discuss the initiative of forming a national American Studies Association so that Poland could be officially represented in EAAS and Polish Americanists could have a recognized professional forum within the country. The Association was formally called into being at the beginning of 1990. Its first meeting elected the Board with President and Vice-President. History Professor Michał Rozbicki of the American Studies Center in Warsaw became President and myself Vice-President. Very soon, though, Professor Rozbicki went to the United States where he was offered a position and so resigned his Presidency of PAAS. As Vice-President, I naturally took over and was later elected President. The beginnings felt somewhat shaky; the first official annual conference of PAAS was held in Skierniewice, where through family connections and the offices of Professor Zagaja, we found hospitality in the facilities of the Research Institute of Horticulture. It was a very modest affair leading to a slim post-conference volume called *The American Dream, Past and Present*, published by Łódź University Press. My second term as President ended in 1996. By then I felt that the Association was well established, secure in its membership, scholarly activity, and representation in EAAS.

I considered the consolidation of the Association my main task as President. To that end, the Association

needed to establish a tradition, not to say a routine, of annual meetings together with the practice of different American Departments and the American Studies Center in Warsaw taking turn with conference organization and editorial/publishing work. Local organizers needed support in bringing interesting speakers from outside Poland, thus formal cooperation and possibly financial support of the Fulbright Commission in Poland and of the Cultural Section of the American Embassy had to be secured. Informal contacts with Americanists from the United States and Europe needed to be activated. Since each conference would lead to the publication of a selection of papers presented, we started to have a kind of Yearbook of American Studies in Poland. The idea was for PAAS to create a platform for professional exchanges, contacts and mutual support for Americanists from different Polish institutions as well as a venue for publication of the research results, especially for younger colleagues. When Professor Jerzy Durczak was taking over as President of the Association, I felt that the organization attracted sizable membership and developed procedures and ways of functioning. Taking further steps in that direction, with the help of the Polish-American Fulbright Commission, Professor Durczak as President initiated *Polish Journal of American Studies*, another regular form of publication under PAAS

auspices. Moreover, looking at the programs of EAAS conferences for the past decade or so, one may see that members of PAAS have been contributing quite solidly and consistently reading papers, giving invited lectures, and coordinating workshops.

During my second term in office, the Polish Association of American Studies began the practice of extending invitations to colleagues from beyond the Eastern Border offering to host at our annual conferences one or two Belorussian and Ukrainian colleagues free of cost. As far as I know, the practice is still continued and we have developed contacts with Americanists in Minsk, Kiev, Lviv and other universities beyond Poland's eastern border.

JM, ZM: What is the situation of American Studies in Poland today? Is there anything that worries you and that you would like to see changed? What do you think should be the organization's objectives?

AS: That's a tricky question, for while on the one hand the number of Polish Institutions of higher education offering courses and degrees in American Studies has been growing, on the other hand the interest in the discipline seems no longer as lively as it used to be. The reasons, I think, are complex. First of all, since Poland has become a member of the EU, Europe and things European feel to our students closer and

their knowledge more immediately applicable in future careers. Not only is America geographically farther away but since about the mid-nineties, the United States has limited its interest in Europe and, especially, in our region. American Studies has always been a politically sensitive discipline so changes of political weather significantly influence its condition.

From the point of view of someone trained as literature specialist, another important factor is the change of orientation within the discipline, in itself—the corollary of a larger cultural change. The years following World War II were the period of intense popularity of American literature in Europe and the heyday of literary criticism. One may even say that American Studies initially developed somewhat in opposition to the new critical ideas of literary studies with their stress on autonomy of the literary work as leading achievement of any culture. American Studies aspired to a more interdisciplinary perspective and to greater awareness of the various contexts of artistic creation. The research energies pushed not only beyond the work itself but also beyond its national background expanding the horizon of American Studies into Cultural, Multicultural, and Global Studies. The change of name from Salzburg Seminar in American Studies to Salzburg Global Seminar reflects the shift. Removed from its leading position, American Studies has become but

an element of a much larger field. Consequently, the discipline has lost the focal interest it used to enjoy. Thus, to some extent American Studies has become the victim of its own success. Promoting interest in and absorption of American culture helped to equate the notion of “American” with notions such as “modern,” “global,” “transnational,” “multicultural,” and took off the stress from “American.” I do not know whether this is good or bad. But it is a fact that Americanists have to confront and cope with.

Naturally, as a literature scholar, I cannot help regretting the withdrawal of literature from its dominant role in the culture. It seems that in cultural studies, sociology and politics prevailed over the domain of literature with its focus on individual experience. I am afraid that with such a shift, sensitivity to the aesthetic and emotional functions of language as a subtle system capable of expressing and ordering nuances of complicated experience has significantly diminished. To the majority of our students language is simply a practical instrument of communication.

Especially in view of the situation, I would like to see greater involvement of mature Polish scholars in the activities of the Polish Association for American Studies. It seems that over recent years, its annual conferences have been mostly attended by doctoral students and scholars in the beginning

stages of their career. I believe they need to feel greater solidarity and support of the professionally established colleagues. Humanities do not enjoy attention, not to mention concern, of the powers that be and so we’d better develop a stronger sense of collegial loyalty. I’d like to see the Association as a firm organization voicing professional concerns and promoting professional achievements. It also seems vitally important that, as a professional organization, we continue contacts and offer support to colleagues in the Ukraine, Belorussia and other countries east of the Polish border. I would especially encourage Polish Americanists to take part in the conferences organized by scholars working at the universities east of our border and try to involve them in our activities. We need to make a serious effort to counter the isolationist pressures within our region.

JM, ZM: Please, tell us what you are working on at the moment. What are the questions about American literature and American Studies in general that you would like to address today?

AS: My interest in American literature started with poetry but in the past decade or so, without betraying poetry, I have devoted more and more attention to the short story. The genre seems characteristically American. Perhaps, with the possible exception of Russian

literature, no other national literature has produced such abundance of excellent, self-consciously artistic and sophisticated stories. The artistic short story, as opposed to folk-tale or myth, is the youngest, eminently modern narrative genre. It is also the form of prose in which language in its economy and intense aestheticization comes closest to poetry. Moreover, in practical terms, the short story seems at the moment the most teachable form of literature. Students today seem frightened of both the novel (too long!) and poetry (too difficult!). The short story feels to them more reader friendly. On the instructor's side, its compact form allows exposing design and showing how form suggests, intensifies, even creates meaning. So while on the one hand I have been working with the poetry of James Schuyler and going back to the work of Galway Kinnell to look at his ties with the heritage of modernism, on the other I have followed developments in the contemporary American short story and thought in particular about Alice Munro and her affinities to Southern American women authors, accomplished practitioners of the story genre like Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor.

As to the broader perspective on American Studies, one of the most interesting issues today seems to me the return and popularity of historical writing: historical novels, fictionalized histories, popular historical thrillers, memoirs, biographies, and

local histories in which solid research and factual material is being crossed with fictional form. Especially in the American context, in the context of the country and nation so ostensibly oriented toward the future, the intensified concern with history seems puzzling. Yet, to quote Adam Garfinkle, the editor of *The American Interest*: "what interests us about the past is at least partly a function of what bothers us or makes us curious in the present." Questions can be asked from different perspectives of American Studies: by literary scholars investigating forms and manners of revitalization and transformations of the historical novel, by sociologists enquiring what present social and cultural anxieties or attitudes trigger the rise of historical interest, by historians looking at how the past is being (re)shaped by present historical writers and so on. The field seems large and inviting though it may be that it seems especially attractive to me under the influence of my own, increasingly back-looking perspective, to which even this conversation testifies.

Contributors

Paulina Ambroży is an Assistant Professor of American literature at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland. She has published articles on American poetry and prose and is the author of *(Un)concealing the Hedgehog: Modernist American Poets and Contemporary Critical Theories* (2012), which approaches American modernist poetry through contemporary critical theories. Her research interests include modernist and contemporary American poetry, nineteenth-century American literature, word-image relations and literary theory. She is a recipient of Fulbright Foundation Fellowships of 2002–03 (Stanford University) and 2014–15 (University of Chicago). Currently, she is working on an intermedial project *Turn of the Sign: Crisis of Representation in American Poetry and the Visual Arts*.

apaulina@wa.amu.edu.pl

Aaron Angello is completing his Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Colorado Boulder, where he teaches literature, creative writing, and digital media studies. He is a poet and media artist whose work has been exhibited in a number of venues across the country, a curator of Boulder's Media Archaeology Lab, and the creator/curator of the Denver Poetry Map, an online, interactive geo-locative reading experience. More information can be found on his website, www.aaronangelo.net.

aaron.angelo@colorado.edu

Kacper Bartczak is an Assistant Professor of American Literature at the University of Łódź. Author of *In Search of Communication and Community: The Poetry of John Ashbery* (Peter Lang, 2006) and *Świat nie scalony* (Biuro Literackie, 2009); a Fulbright Fellow at Stanford (2000–01) and Princeton (2010–11). His main research interests focus on developing a pragmatist poetics—the poetics which seeks parallels between the work of American poetry and the pragmatist and neo-pragmatist thought.

kacper@uni.lodz.pl

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Dorota Filipczak teaches British and postcolonial literature as well as translation theory in the Department of British Literature and Culture, University of Łódź. Her monograph on Malcolm Lowry was published in *The Malcolm Lowry Review* (Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario, 1998–99). Her recent publications are *Unheroic Heroines: The Portrayal of Women in the Writings of Margaret Laurence* (Łódź University Press, 2007) and “Is Literature Any Help in Liberating Eve and Mary?” in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Pamela Sue Anderson (Springer, 2010). With Agata Handley she co-edited *Bringing Landscape Home in the Writings of Jane Urquhart* (Łódź University Press, 2010). She has published five books of poetry, and is a member of the Association of Polish Writers.

dorfil@uni.lodz.pl

Justyna Fruzińska holds an MA in American Literature and a Ph.D. in Cultural Studies from the University of Łódź, Poland, where she teaches American literature, culture, and history. She is the author of *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films* (Cambridge Scholars, 2014). She has published on American popular culture, Transcendentalism, and Polish poetry. She is also a published poet and translator working in Polish, English, and Hebrew.

fruzinska@uni.lodz.pl

Brygida Gasztold, Ph.D., holds an MA degree and a Doctorate degree from Gdańsk University, and a diploma of postgraduate studies in British Studies from Ruskin College, Oxford and Warsaw University. She is an Assistant Professor at Koszalin University of Technology,

Poland. Her academic interests include American Jewish literature, Canadian Jewish literature, as well as the problems of immigration, gender, and ethnic identities. She has published *To the Limits of Experience: Jerzy Kosiński's Literary Quest for Self-Identity* (2008), *Negotiating Home and Identity in Early 20th-Century Jewish-American Narratives* (2011), *Stereotyped, Spirited, and Embodied: Representations of Women in American Jewish Fiction* (2015), and essays on immigrant literature and ethnicity.

bryga@neostrada.pl

Krzysztof Majer is an Assistant Professor at the University of Łódź. His academic interests include contemporary Canadian fiction, North American Jewish literature and culture, and musico-literary intermediality. His doctoral dissertation, *The Picaro Messiah and the Unworthy Scribe*, was devoted to Mordecai Richler; he contributed to the Richler issue of *Canadian Literature* (2010). He has also written on Rawi Hage, Mark Anthony Jarman, Thomas Bernhard, and François Girard. With Grzegorz Kość, he co-edited *Tools of Their Tools: Communications Technologies and American Cultural Practice* (2009). Dr. Majer has organized several conferences, e.g., *Kanade, di Goldene Medine? Perspectives on Canadian-Jewish Literature and Culture* (Łódź 2014), with Dr. Justyna Fruzińska and Prof. Norman Ravvin (Concordia University). He is also a translator of literature and criticism, e.g., Allen Ginsberg's letters (2014) and *the Kerouac / Ginsberg correspondence* (2012). In 2015, he was awarded residency at the Banff International Literary Translation Centre with a project on post-millennial Canadian prose for the journal *Literatura na Świecie*.

krzymajer@gmail.com

Katarzyna Małecka is a full-time faculty member in the English Department at the University of Social Sciences in Łódź, Poland, where she teaches courses on American literature and culture. She is the author of *Death in the Works of Galway Kinnell* (2008), one of few studies analyzing the artistic output of the American poet Galway Kinnell. Her main domains of interest are laziness in film and literature and different aspects of death, dying, and grieving in art, film, and literature.

kmalpecka@hotmail.com

Jadwiga Maszewska has been the head of the Department of American Literature at the University of Łódź since 2010. At

the centre of her academic interests is contemporary American ethnic literature. In 1994–95 she held the fellowship of the American Council of Learned Societies with affiliation at Harvard University, and in 2004 she spent a semester at the University of Texas at El Paso on Fulbright Fellowship. She is the author of *Between Center and Margin: Contemporary Native American Women Writers, Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich*. Maszewska has also published several articles on Black and Chicana/o writers, as well as on writers of the American South. Her article on Ellen Glasgow's short stories is scheduled to appear in a post-conference volume of the 2013 Southern Studies Forum, *Performing South: The U.S. South as Medium/Message*. Presently her research is connected with Mexican American and Chicana/o writers: Olga Beatriz Torres, Helena Viramontes and Daniel Chacon.

jadwigamasz@gmail.com

Zbigniew Maszewski defended his doctoral dissertation, which dealt with self-reflexive motif in the works of American Romantic authors: Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne, in 1991. Since then he has been teaching in the Department of American Literature at the University of Łódź. In 1994–95 he held the American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship with affiliation at Harvard University. In 2003 he published *William Faulkner and Bruno Schulz: A Comparative Study*. His special areas of interest are American Romanticism and American and European literatures of the 1920s and 1930s. He has recently published on the American Southwest (an article dealing with the motif of the desert in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which appeared in *Visuality and Vision in American Literature*, a volume which Maszewski edited), as well as on Ernest Hemingway's letters and his novel *Under Kilimanjaro*. Both "Under Kilimanjaro: Homesickness for the Wild and Hemingway's African Dressing Gown" and "'It Is Beautiful Country Jim': The Art of Hemingway's Letters" came out in 2014 in *Polish Journal for American Studies*.

z.maszewski@yahoo.com

Rod Mengham is Reader in Modern English Literature at Cambridge University and Curator of Works of Art at Jesus College, Cambridge. He has published monographs on Dickens, Brontë, Hardy, Henry Green; edited collections of essays on contemporary fiction, violence and avant-garde art, fiction of the 1940s, Australian poetry; anthologies *Altered State: the New Polish Poetry* (2003), *Vanishing Points: New Modernist Poems* (2005); poetry, most recently *Paris by Helen* (Oystercatcher, 2014) and translations, most recently

Speedometry with poems by Andrzej Sosnowski (Contraband, 2014). He has also curated numerous exhibitions, most recently “Sculpture in the Close 2013,” featuring the work of Mirosław Bałka, Theaster Gates, Harland Miller, Damian Ortega, and Doris Salcedo; and “You” featuring Agnès Thurnauer (2015), and is the publisher of Equipage poetry pamphlets.

r.mengham@jesus.cam.ac.uk

Jacek Partyka teaches history of American literature, modernism in American literature, and American Holocaust fiction at the University of Białystok, Poland. He holds a Ph.D. from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and is the author of the dissertation *Poetry as Palimpsest: W. H. Auden’s American Longer Poems* (2011). Much of his current research focuses on documentary and “found” American poetry of the 1930s (Charles Reznikoff, in particular). He has published articles on the poetry of W. H. Auden, Louise Bogan, Czesław Miłosz, as well as on the prose of Cynthia Ozick, Edward Lewis Wallant, and W. G. Sebald.

jacek.part@gmail.com

Alicja Piechucka is an Assistant Professor in the Department of American Literature at the University of Łódź. From 2001 to 2005, she was a Ph.D. student. In 2002, she came runner-up in the *British Vogue* Talent Contest. In 2006, she received her Ph.D. in American literature from the University of Łódź. Her doctoral thesis was on T. S. Eliot’s poetry. Her academic interests include American modernist poetry and contemporary American prose. Much of her research focuses on comparative studies of American and French literature. She is also interested in the visual arts and American visual culture. She teaches, among others, courses in American literature and American painting. A literary critic, she has been a regular contributor to *Nowe Książki* and *Tygiel Kultury*.

alicja.piechucka@uni.lodz.pl

Norman Rawin is a writer, teacher, and critic. 1999–2012 he chaired the Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. His fiction publications include the novels *The Joyful Child* (2011) and *Lola by Night* (2003), as well as the story collection *Sex, Skyscrapers, and Standard Yiddish* (1997). His essays on Canadian and American literature appeared in *A House of Words: Jewish Writing, Identity and Memory* (1997). He is the co-editor of *The Canadian Jewish Studies Reader* (2004) and *Failure’s*

Opposite: Listening to A. M. Klein (2011). His stories and non-fiction have appeared in magazines across Canada, on CBC Radio, as well as in his book *Hidden Canada: An Intimate Travelogue* (2002). Recent work includes the introduction to George A. Walker's *The Wordless Leonard Cohen Songbook* (2014) and a chapter on Canadian Jewish writing for the *Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*. He has written on such authors as Bruno Schulz, Philip Roth, and Irving Layton. He is at work on a novel set in Poland and Vancouver.
ravv@videotron.ca

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Anne Lovering Rounds is a poet and Assistant Professor of English at Eugénio María de Hostos Community College, a campus of the City University of New York located in the South Bronx. Her critical and creative work has appeared in the journals *Coldnoon*, *Hartskill Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *New Writing*, *Penny Ante Feud*, and *Proteus*. Her poetry manuscript, *Variations in an Emergency*, received the 2014 Cathlamet Prize from Ravenna Press. Prior to her appointment at CUNY, she was an editorial assistant at the New York offices of Cambridge UP, and she has also served as a managing editor for *Modernism/modernity*, the journal of the Modernist Studies Association. She earned her doctorate in Comparative Literature from Harvard in 2009 and her bachelor's degree in English and Classics from the University of Chicago in 2004.
arounds@hostos.cuny.edu

Agnieszka Salska is the author of *Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson: Poetry of the Central Consciousness* (U of Pennsylvania P, 1985). She wrote the chapter on Dickinson's letters for *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* (U of Massachusetts P, 1998), published numerous articles, mostly on American poetry, and is one of the authors as well as the editor-in-chief of a two-volume history of twentieth-century American literature for Polish readers (Kraków: Universitas 2003). Professor Salska retired from the Department of American Literature and Culture at the Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź where she taught courses in American literature and served as Chair. She also served as President of Polish Association for American Studies from 1990 to 1996.
salska@uni.lodz.pl

Sherry Simon is a professor in the French Department at Concordia University, Montreal. Among her recent publications

are *Translating Montreal. Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (McGill-Queen's UP 2006; French translation: *Traverser Montréal. Une histoire culturelle par la traduction*. Editions Fidés, 2008) and *Cities in Translation* (Routledge, 2012; French translation: *Villes en Traduction: Calcutta, Trieste, Barcelone, Montréal*. Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2013). She is co-editor of *Changing the Terms. Translating in the Postcolonial Era* (Ottawa UP, 2000), *New Readings of Yiddish Montreal—Traduire le Montréal Yiddish* (U of Ottawa P, 2007) and *Failure's Opposite. Listening to A. M. Klein* (McGill-Queen's UP, 2011), and editor of *In Translation: Honouring Sheila Fischman* (McGill-Queen's UP, 2013). She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and a member of l'Académie des lettres du Québec. She was a Killam Research Fellow (2009–11) and in 2010 she received the Prix André-Laurendeau from l'Association francophone pour le savoir (ACFAS).
sherry.simon@concordia.ca

Adam Sumera is a senior lecturer in the Department of British Literature and Culture, University of Łódź. His publications include *Muriel Spark's Novels* (Łódź UP, 1996), "Ian McEwan's *The Innocent*: The Novel and the Movie" in *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies*, 21.2, 2010, "Monty Python's Fliegender Zirkus: The Unique German Show," in: Tomasz Dobrogoszcz (ed.), *Nobody Expects the Spanish Inquisition: Cultural Contexts in Monty Python* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014). His current research is devoted to film adaptations of contemporary British fiction.

asumera@uni.lodz.pl

Bryan J. Zygmunt earned his Ph.D. in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at the University of Maryland in 2006 and is Associate Professor of Art History at Clarke University in Dubuque, Iowa. A scholar of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American art, history and culture, he is a former Visiting Scholar at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the author of *Portraiture and Politics in New York City, 1790–1825: Gilbert Stuart, John Vanderlyn, John Trumbull, and John Wesley Jarvis* (VDM Verlag, 2008). In 2013, Zygmunt was a Fulbright Scholar to Poland and taught two courses in the Department of American Studies and Mass Media at the University of Łódź. He currently serves as Contributing Editor of American Art at *SmartHistory*, a peer-reviewed online art history textbook. He and his wife, Anna Kelley, are the proud parents of a precocious one-year-old son, Clark.

bryan.zygmunt@clarke.edu