A musician of words

A conversation with Polish poet Ewa Lipska

Ewa Lipska, Lukasz Wojtusik
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In interview, Krakow poet Ewa Lipska offers a rich portrait of her homeland's literary heritage: from fighting the communist regime, when books were everything and some poetry volumes had print runs of 10,000, to writing this year for the Polish rapper O.S.T.R.

Lukasz Wojtusik: In 2013, Krakow was awarded the title of UNESCO City of Literature. This reflects Krakow’s image as a city of Nobel laureates in literature, poets and writers. You are also one of the names associated with this title. Do you think that Krakow has a literary identity?

Ewa Lipska: Krakow’s literary story began a long time ago. As early as the tenth century, a merchant named Abraham ben Jacob presented Krakow in the memories and commentaries of his journey as a city situated on trade routes, which gradually became a city of culture. In the fourteenth century, during the rule of King Kazimierz Wielki, an unusual patron of the arts, the Sukiennice (Cloth Hall) and the most famous churches were built. During his reign, the Academy of Krakow, later transformed into the Jagiellonian University, was also founded. These are the trails that lead us to the contemporary city. Even during the partitions of Poland, when Krakow became a part of Austria, it was the spiritual capital of the country. That is why today you can hear the sounds of history in every wall here, in every street you take.

I was born in 1945, right after the war, and grew up in politically very special times. Back then, Nowa Huta, the workers’ district, was coming into existence. It was meant to diminish the intellectual spirit of intellectual Krakow, but, paradoxically it became a centre of high culture itself. I remember the great plays staged at the Ludowy Theatre, run by Krystyna Skuszanka and Jerzy Krasowski, and the innovative set designs of Jozef Szajna. For us, it was the first encounter with avant-garde. Another very important intellectual experience for my generation was Tadeusz Kantor’s Cricot 2 Theatre. I remember the opening night of Kurka wodna (The Water Hen) by Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz (commonly known as Witkacy), which took place in the Krzysztofory Palace. Beyond this, Krakow has hosted countless exhibitions of prominent Cracovian painters, to
name just a few: Maria Jarema, JonaSz Stern, Adam Marczyński and Eugeniusz Waniek. There was also, of course, Piotr Skrzynecki’s famous literary cabaret, Piwnica pod Baranami.

LW: Would you say that during these difficult times, poets, writers and artists had a good life?

EL: Of course life more difficult than it is now. We could not travel abroad freely and we had problems getting a passport. It is unbelievable today, but sometimes we had to queue from 4:00 am to get a passport and we had to face tedious talks with government representatives. Very often we were refused a passport, which prevented us from taking part in literary meetings abroad. The economic situation in Poland was also difficult, but at the same time we lived closer to each other. Today, we would say that we lived more “offline” than “online”. We did not make phone calls, because we either did not have phones or we knew that our conversations were being tapped. We met mostly in homes, for example, the one belonging to Kornel Filipowicz, an excellent writer, or at Wisława Szymborska’s. Nowadays, it is almost impossible to meet a few times a week. We live a completely different rhythm.

Those times were also the times of paradoxes. We fought the regime, but I think the more we drift away from those times and look at our freedom, the more calmly we look back at this era, the past, which fortunately does not threaten us anymore. As there were no computers, no Internet, no “culture industry” as Theodor Adorno put it, we read a lot. Books were everything. Some poetry books had print runs of 10,000. And we found shelter in art.

LW: Did art substitute or provide a sense of freedom?

EL: I think both. We were happy that by using the language of allusion, we could say more, something that the censor did not notice. I remember the weekly Tygodnik Powszechny and its column called “image of the week”, which was sometimes a linguistic masterpiece. We knew how to read between the lines.

LW: The famous Writers’ Home on Krupnicza Street is often said to be a place where talents are born...

EL: A lot of great writers lived in that house: Ildefons Galczynski, Stefan Kisielewski, Tadeusz Nowak, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Tadeusz Rozewicz, Sławomir Mrożek, Wisława Szymborska... It is impossible to name them all. I lived there as well for a few years. My flat, a kitchen converted into a 12-square-metre room, belonged to a so-called kolkhoz, meaning that three families lived in it. But I was happy to have it. Despite the harsh conditions, a vibrant social life flourished in this place. Then, a group of young writers was formed and literary workshops were organised and led by Adam Włodek. We read our texts and discussed them.

LW: For my generation, when we think about these times we imagine the Orwellian censorship and the eye that hung over the writer.

EL: Because those were truly Orwellian times. The author of 1984 would say “Big
Brother was watching” us all the time. Let me give you one example from my life. I once happened to meet the poet Adam Wazyk in Warsaw. Years later the journalist Anna Bikont brought me a document she found in the archives which had been drawn up by the secret police. The document stated “then the opposition poet Ewa Lipska met Adam Wazyk”. But we, regardless of the system we lived in, were young, enthusiastic and willing to fight, some on the literary battlefield, some in an active way and we wanted to mislead the eye of the censor. When I worked for the Wydawnictwo Literackie publishing house, we began to publish a series of emigration poetry, which was a daring thing to do, because they were poets who lived abroad and they wanted to print in Poland, but faced difficulties both here and there. We published poems by Adam Czerniawski, Jerzy Niemojowski, Boleslaw Taborski and Jan Rostworowski.

LW: My generation often hears idyllic descriptions of fishing trips that you went on with Szymborska and company. Were these just myths?

EL: We went fishing very often and even on obligatory election days! The company was always the same: Wislawa Szymborska, Kornel Filipowicz, my husband and I. We mostly chose the Dunajec or the Skawa rivers. On every election day, Kornel Filipowicz pulled out a bottle of his famous homemade liqueur, poured it into little glasses and proposed a toast: “To hell with them!” The men went fishing, and Wislawa and I chatted about the “transient world”, preparing a bonfire and dinner.

LW: Was Krakow a place for “free thinking”? Would you say that the indoctrination here was not as strong as elsewhere in the country?

EL: Perhaps Krakow resembled other cities, although it was always a little different. It was in Krakow where Kantor’s events took place, the Piwnica pod Baranami cabaret existed, you could listen to forbidden jazz music, Konrad Swinarski staged Dziady (Forefathers’ Eve) by Adam Mickiewicz in the Stary Theatre and Andrzej Wajda put on Stanislaw Wyspianski’s November Night. We would often leave parties at about 3:00 am and looked at the misty beauty of the city and it seemed to us that if the old buildings had survived the turbulent periods, wars and partitions, and still looked so beautiful in the fog. Peacefulness and consolation radiated from the walls of this city. There is something like this in the city. From early childhood, I used to look at St Mary’s Church as a large nativity scene which you can take out and put in another place. The Adam Mickiewicz statue majestically looking at history, the enchanted carriage from a poem by Galczynski. Today, waves of tourists sweep Krakow. There is an obvious acceleration of life and an excess of everything. The “charm of sadness” of those years gone has quickly been forgotten.

LW: Are you able to find a distance from Krakow? I am asking this question specifically thinking about the time you spent as the director of the Polish Institute in Vienna.

EL: To be honest, Krakow sometimes irritates me, as it has become a dustbin, especially the city centre, which, by some miracle, puts up with loud concerts, go-go clubs and an increasing number of liquor stores. It upsets me that beautiful old houses, which are subject to drastic changes, disappear irrevocably and are replaced by nightmarish upward extensions, let alone the chaos of billboards and uneven pavements.
LW: Let us move back to the time before you went to Vienna. Your debut dates back to 1967. Anyone who does even the smallest research on your life will come to the conclusion that Ewa Lipska did not fully identify with any contemporary movement, nor her generation. I am very curious what can you tell us about this rebellion.

EL: I am linked with my generation through history, birth certificates and friendships, but I have never belonged to any literary group simply because I have never liked them. A rebellion? It has always been part of my life. But it is also typical of young people. I remember when we read Jean-Paul Sartre and were fascinated by the philosophy of existentialism and we wanted to be different. Now you can dye your hair green, but then there was no such possibility. I started to smoke a pipe. Back then, it was something really astonishing.

LW: With tobacco?

EL: Oh that was awful! It was called Najprzedniejszy (“Excellent”), but it was impossible to smoke it so I quickly gave it up. Today, a rebellion is different because the society is different. There are different material goods and we live in a different reality. Young people leave the country, smoke joints and find shelter in the virtual world. I often talk to them about these things. I support rebellion, although I do not like all of its “shades”.

LW: Your generation gave a new direction to Polish literature and culture. However, I would also say that it is very easy to change a revolutionary into a guardian of the revolution.

EL: Oh yes for sure, there is always such a danger. A political poem can become a propaganda leaflet, a pamphlet, and this is something that literature does not like. History offers examples of such artists, sometimes prominent, whose works served ideology. A good example is the film director Leni Riefenstahl, whose films served Nazi propaganda. Even a work of art that is in opposition to ideology or reality, may turn into journalistic rhetoric. This has always frightened me, sometimes it seemed to me that I trod a fine line.

LW: But there are also the guardians who had their debuts a few decades ago and now dictate to young people what literature is and what it is not, what you can and cannot do...

EL: Do such guardians really exist? Young people will eventually say “thank you, this is not your bus. We are now travelling on our own bus.” And they will be right. It is bad when you lose touch with another generation. I also remember being told: “When we were young...” Now I can sometimes hear similar words and they make me want to laugh. Mankind is incorrigible.

LW: How would you characterise your relationship with the younger generation, writers and readers included?

EL: I would say that I have great contact with young people. Often, after meetings that I have with readers our contacts become more private. We meet to talk about the world we live in, about literature, about everything that upsets or worries them, about school,
teachers, love and death. I am also interested in their virtual world, this multibillion state called Facebook, where they live in a great collective loneliness. I read the poems that they publish on the Internet, where poetry has moved now. I also find a lot of my own poems there.

**LW:** And you do not mind that nobody has asked you for your permission to republish your work?

**EL:** No, I do not. Just the opposite: it makes me glad.

**LW:** You once said that writing is “the most serious anecdote” of your life.

**EL:** It is. Karel Capek, one of the most important Czech writers, once said that “Humour is the salt of life and whoever is well salted will long keep his freshness.” I used my own definition of poetry on the cover of my book, which has just been published in Bulgaria, but also have some other concepts. Let me give you a few: Love – an incurable disease everybody dreams about. A writer – a musician of the word. Politics – the oldest profession in the world. God – an emergency for those who believe. Morality – the ten commandments. Beauty – replacing thinking with seeing.

**LW:** Is friendship among writers possible?

**EL:** Of course it is! I have had a lot of interesting friends, both in Poland and abroad, about whom I could write a book. Unfortunately, many of these interesting people are dead. But here in Krakow, I now often meet with the people from the “new wave” group. These meetings are always very nice and warm and good times were spent chatting, chatting and more chatting.

**LW:** Chats about writing?

**EL:** We hardly ever talked about writing. I have never felt the need that we should. The most I talked about my poems was with my Danish translator, Janina Katz, who, unfortunately has passed away. What we do, however, are more what I would call working discussions, not discussions friends hold. Wislawa Szymborska and I never discussed our poems. Rarely did we take part in meetings where people read their poetry. Maybe it sounds funny, but I have a feeling that it was our colleagues and the prose writers who needed such discussions. Not us.

**LW:** What is your view about literary criticism today in Poland? Can we complain about it a bit?

**EL:** You cannot complain about something that does not exist. I do not envy the young generation. We were very fortunate that we were introduced to the literary scene by such critics as Jerzy Kwiatkowski, Zbigniew Bienkowski, Ryszard Matuszewski, Jan Blonski, Julian Rogozinski and Kazimierz Wyka. And they were great and distinguished critics and literary historians. Even though we lived in times with limited freedom, magazines with large circulations wrote about us. After my debut, there were a lot of reviews of my work. Today’s generation unfortunately is deprived of this comfort. In addition, there is a general crisis of values – the criteria have been blurred. On the publishing market you
find can everything. High culture is mixed with popular culture. Criticism was once used to introduce order, it taught the appropriate attitude to literature and was a point of reference. Now the ocean of mediocrity sweeps everything. The high standards are only maintained by universities and faculties of humanities. Fortunately, we still have excellent literary historians who write about literature.

**LW:** The tendency of today is that young people more often write than read. But you seem to like this new generation as you always accept the offers to meet with them and talk to them in their schools.

**EL:** Whenever I have free time, I meet them. Unfortunately, I often leave Poland. Nonetheless, such meetings are indeed important to me. I am very interested in what young people think about, the times in which they live, why they feel good or not, what they read or why they do not read. We happen to argue and have different opinions. But the most important thing is that we talk in person, not via the Internet.

**LW:** Is that why you wrote a text for a rapper?

**EL:** While writing the text you are referring to I did not think that it would be performed by the eminent Polish rapper, Adam Ostrowski, also known as O.S.T.R. This decision took place in Kalisz, during the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the destruction of the city. This idea came from Adam Klocek, the director of the Philharmonic there. I really liked the performance; I did not think that I would make a debut with a rapper.

**LW:** And if you were to make a debut today?

**EL:** Oh, no! Today I would be a pianist.

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