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In memoriam : Felicja Zofia Górską Romanowicz (1922-2010)

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IN MEMORIAM
FELICJA ZOFIA GÓRSKA ROMANOWICZ (1922–2010)

No one understood or practiced counterpoint better than Zofia. From normal childhood to the mayhem of the German invasion of her home town of Radom, from resistance courier to prisoner, from KZ inmate to freedom in postwar Italy, to cultural exile in the Paris suburbs, and to political exile in France... On a sheet of barely yellowed onionskin, dating back to 1980, I read: “Zofia ROMANOWICZ, née Górską, à Radom, en 1922. Déportée de janvier 1941 jusqu’en mai 1945. Licence — philologie des langues romanes — Sorbonne 1950. Vit et travaille à Paris.” Below, a typed list of her publications with Zofia’s handwritten note, “C’est à peu près à jour!” How does one cope with so much brokenness? How does the biographer unearth layer after layer of life-panes? Most importantly, where did she find the strength to start anew, from scratch, building an impressive resume and reputation that most writers with “ordinary” lives never achieve?

Three realities: Kazik, Galerie Lambert, and Jours. Three “homes” that fulfilled her completely: her devoted husband and unfailing supporter of her work; the Parisian outlet for her artistic and social talents; and the hearty home in Burgundy, already a medieval home to eastern exiles, a robust landscape, loyal and private. I knew Kazik well — I bought countless books in the famed Libella bookstore on Ile Saint-Louis, especially in the 1980s. All I remember of the Galerie Lambert is the literary and artistic emigre and Parisian celebrities at the *vernissages* — a dazzling sight for the young graduate student that I was then. I made the trip to Jours once, with Zofia stoking the logs in the immense fireplace, and teaching me about the ancient apple tree in her front yard, another reminder of the free spirits that came to Europe from as far as Mongolia. Three homes, three anchors for her new world focused on three counterpoints. Order and chaos, creation and destruction, high and low culture. And three word registers. Words as rhythms and sounds for the teenage Ravensbrück inmate. Words as cultural echoes for the undergraduate student of Romance languages and philology at the Sorbonne. Words as the ordering of complex emotions in the novels of the adult writer.

The earliest register is found in her Ravensbrück poems. Their character is best understood through a short story that she published in the March-April 1981 issue of the London literary emigre journal *Wiadomości*. One of the young inmates belonging to the poetesses’ circle is interviewed about her work:

– *What is poetry?*

– Shared words put together by someone. This person speaks in the name of the others. Poetry is the language of survival. Collective. Timed and rhymed, especially, in order to be more easily remembered and spread from one bloc to another and beyond the barbed wire. So that the world may know, after our death. Rime and rhythm are there for beauty’s sake, of course, but above all for mnemotechnic reasons, as it was at the dawn of time, let’s say, at the time of the bards. Poetry is what one repeats without moving one’s lips, during punitive roll calls that last for hours. It makes time go faster. Poetry allows one to stand erect in one’s rank when the salvo’s echo roars from the other side of the wall and that the empty spot next to you is still warm.¹

¹ Z. Romanowiczowa, “Listy odnalezione,” *Wiadomości*, no. 3 (1981), p. 14 [transl. by A.-C. C.].

The second register is found in her 1950s translations of troubadour poetry into Polish, which are said to near perfection. They represented such an enormous contribution that, even though her novels were not published in Poland until the 1980s, her translations were.

The third register is found in the language of her short stories and novels. Her first novel, *Baśka i Barbara*, was about the words through which her toddler ordered the world around her. It was about re-ordering new realities; it was Zofia's birth as a writer. Much will undoubtedly be written about the long circular monologues through which she attempted to escape her war memories, only to return to the Ravensbrück coda. Much will also be written about exile's loneliness, and her survivor's passion for ancestral homes' secrets. Finally, much should be written about her avant-garde woman's voice, her mixing "high" and "low" literature, "short-changing," according to some of her prospective editors, her "bellettristic" style with "domestic, prosaic" tableaux — a characteristic that, according to Konstanty "Kot" Jeleński, once disqualified her work from consideration for the Neustadt Prize. In fact, like Simone de Beauvoir's, her work features a true pioneer's twists and turns and gaps, reticences and silences to which we would be well advised to pay close attention. Zofia's generation was sandwiched between old and new rules, socially, sexually, professionally. No one was better prepared than she to analyze the ground that was shifting under postwar Western civilization. She never winced, never lost her footing, never closed her eyes.

In 2001 the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Education awarded Zofia its annual Prize for the totality of her work. Ten novels, one volume of short stories, (with scores of others published in Paris' "Kultura" and London's "Wiadomości"), translations, and poems. The place and timing of her publications are revealing: they made her twice an outsider. Her first works, which were poems, were published in Poland: in the 1950s, the translations into Polish of troubadour poetry from the French, then a selection of her Ravensbrück poems in the volume *Ravensbrück — Wiersze obozowe* sponsored by the Ravensbrück Club in 1961. Next came emigre publications, and first, five novels published by Libella: *Baśka i Barbara* (1959, second edition in 1985); *Przejście przez morze czerwone* (1960); *Słońce dziesięciu linii* (1963; *Szklana kula* (1964); and *Łagodne oko błękitu* (1968). This first period gave her broad recognition through three major translations: *Le passage de la mer Rouge* (Seuil, 1960); *Passage Through the Red Sea* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1962); *Le chandail bleu* (Seuil, 1971). Except for *Baśka i Barbara*, these first novels had a direct connection with Zofia's Holocaust experiences. In fact, she was the first woman to talk about this difficult subject. In the 1970s and 1980s her growing fame among emigres was reflected in the publication of a volume of short stories and two novels by the London Polish Cultural Foundation: *Próby i zamiary* (1965), *Groby Napoleona* (1972) and *Sono Felice* (1977). In these novels, Zofia was giving the French a bleak image of their culture. In *Na Wyspie* (Instytut Literacki "Kultura", Paris, 1984), which was translated in French as *Ile Saint-Louis* (Editions du Rocher, 2002), Zofia addressed the issue of narcolepsy, a close relative to the themes of memory and identity that appear in her other novels. This completed her "emigre" publications. The next three works would all be published in Poland. In 1987, PAX reprinted *Łagodne oko błękitu*. Her last two novels followed, *Ruchome Schody* (PIW, 1995); and *Trybulacje Proboszcza P.* (Archiwum Emigracji, Toruń, 2001). Even though Zofia had "come home" openly as a writer, her characters still lived on the edge of marginalization and danger.

I am looking at the cover of her newest biography by Anna Jamrozek-Sowa, *Życie powtórzone. O pisarstwie Zofii Romanowiczowej* (2008). A large forehead, an elongated face, intelligent eyes look at me with a confident smile and the slightly

diffident innocence of her prewar world. Through the years, her eyes kept their “inner gaze” as if to warn us of things invisible and unfathomable. Almost immediately, I am drawn back to my first meeting with Zofia. I went to see her in 1975 at the request of Alexandra Oledzka-Frybesowa, whose husband had been my Polish literature professor at the Sorbonne. As an affectionately recommended translator on a mission, I became the first of several young women whom Zofia tried to turn into literary “Baškas and Barbaras,” molding our work to her scrutinizing perfection.

Zofia still occupies a large place in my house today. She has her own banker’s box, marked with her name, and filled with her books, articles, letters, pictures, bios, with journals and postcards, translation drafts and *merles blancs*. Thirty-five years of professional friendship with an individual whom the world will soon recognize as one of the great women writers of the twentieth century. The bankers’ box was not always there. Drafts and books and letters traveled between France where she lived and the United States where I now live. All these documents were gathering palimpsest qualities in the arcane filing system of my academic life until 2000. Then, sensing the urgency of age and distance, I wrote a lifetime tribute to Zofia. The piece was published as “Reżyser, Filozof, Świadek: Estetyka złamania w utworach Zofii Romanowicz.”² The reorganization of my “Zofiabilia,” however, meant a new beginning. Her books now welcome me every day like soldiers on parade. In my “to do” files, I have several projects of translations and essays at various stages of completion — patient segue ways to the future through the past. I am not letting Zofia out of my sight: I want to keep her works alive and remember the lessons of her friendship. Not unlike the poems she buried in the Ravensbrück woods, these loose threads carry a world of possibilities. With death lurking in the shadows.

For Zofia, who in the 1980s and 1990s more than once refused contracts from well established Parisian publishers rather than to change a word to her texts, it was not about fame or money, but about integrity. The integrity of language and structure. The rugged existential beauty of her style. This is how we should remember her. Farewell, Zofia. May you sail into your new journey surrounded by the light that you so beautifully evoke in one of your favorite passages:

Before dawn, the sky slides towards earth like a slowly released canopy; the stars become big and moist. Then daylight breaks. Slowly, the gates of night do part. The rising eastern light drowns the stars, covering them in thickening enamel, and before the sun appears, the sky is ready, clean, diurnal. The stars’ time is past. A lonely one resists, protected by the moon — she too, whether round or thin-slivered, cannot be so easily drowned. This star shines for a long time opposite the sun. It is she again, the One, Venus. Love. Night and day.³

Alice-Catherine Carls (Stany Zjednoczone)

² See *Archiwum Emigracji*, vol. 4 (2001), pp. 43–49. Also as “Stage Manager, Philosopher, Witness: The Aesthetics of Brokenness in the Works of Zofia Romanowicz,” *Polish Review*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2002), pp. 3–10.

³ Zofia Romanowiczowa, *Skrytki*. (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1980). First paragraph of chapter 13, p. 100 [transl. by A.-C. C.].