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AN EXPORT COMMODITY

On the cultural diplomacy of Polish poet
Wisława Szymborska.



The ceremony at which
Wisława Szymborska was
awarded the Nobel Prize
in Literature in 1996

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Wisława Szymborska
holding her Nobel Prize

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There's a compelling argument to be made that Poland's main export product isn't compact cars, computer components, or watches, but rather the commodity of Polish culture – or perhaps more specifically, poetry. And so, enriching our cultural diplomacy by striving to sculpt and promote our nation's image around Polish poetry could be immensely beneficial, both for Poland and for poetry itself. As evidence of this potential, note that back in 2008, during the seventh anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks, three different politicians speaking at Ground Zero independently quoted Polish poets: former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani quoted Czesław Miłosz, New Jersey Mayor Jerramiah T. Healy cited Adam Zagajewski, and then New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg quoted a piece from Wisława Szymborska's piece "Reality Demands." Columbia University's Anna Frajlich-Zajac later asked each of them what had led them to Polish poems. All three shared a similar sentiment: they felt that Polish poetry uniquely captured the essence of those events, embodying the voice of a nation deeply marked by history, yet finding the most lucid ways to express its experiences. And also to express hope, which despite everything somehow always smolders.

After Wisława Szymborska was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996, her international popularity surged. It wasn't just that her works were being translated into other languages, because by then she was already well-translated. This was a genuine sort of popularity, gauged in terms of book sales and name recognition – quite a feat, considering the challenges non-Polish speakers face even pronouncing her not very export-friendly name. Szymborska also started receiving scholarly papers and books analyzing her work, sent from around the world. She usually flipped through them respectfully, then set them aside on the shelf. One day, she received a letter from the United States, from a retired firefighter in Texas. He wrote that although he was not much of a poetry reader ("firefighters rarely read poetry"), he had once noticed



"Book Day" in Madrid,
April 2022
– A volume of poetry by
Wisława Szymborska
in Spanish translation



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a fragment of her poem in the subway, likely as part of the “Poetry in Motion” campaign. He jotted down the unpronounceable name of the author, went off to a bookstore, and bought her book. After reading it, he decided to write her just one sentence: “You wrote what I was thinking my whole life, but I just didn’t know how to express it.” It seems to me that this sentence meant more to her than all the scholarly dissertations written about her.

Poetry as music

While it’s hard to assess objectively, Szymborska’s poetry does indeed seem to have had an extraordinary international impact. Thirty years ago, while hitchhiking in Italy, mentioning Poland to random Italian drivers would likely prompt them to bring up Polish soccer legend Zbigniew Boniek. Nowadays, it is Wisława Szymborska who sparks similar recognition there. Her popularity in Italy, to the great

“You wrote what I was thinking my whole life, but I just didn’t know how to express it,” a retired firefighter from Texas wrote to Wisława Szymborska.

credit of her translator Prof. Pietro Marchesani and her publishers, reveals that the Italian audience was craving such a poetic voice, such a poet – a need felt to be unmet in their own literature. Today, she is affectionately referred to as “our Szymborska” in Italy, where her books, even posthumously, achieve sales figures matching those in Poland, soaring up to 100,000 copies – numbers unattainable for most authors. Events featuring her in Italy were attended not by dozens, not by hundreds, but by thousands of people, with certain individuals even traveling from Sicily to Bologna, for instance, to see their favorite poet. Her popularity also extends beyond literature: Ferzan Özpetek, an Italian director of Turkish origin, made the movie “Sacred Heart,” in which a small volume of Szymborska’s poems falls out of a petty thief’s bag, and then dedicated the entire film “*Magnifica presenza*” to her. A few days after the poet’s death, Roberto Saviano, one of the most famous Italian writers, author of the famous *Gomorra*, dedicated an entire episode of his television program “*Che tempo che fa*” to her. More precisely: to one verse from her poem “Could Have”: “Listen, how your heart pounds inside me.” Andrea Camilleri incorporated Szym-

borska’s poems into one of the adventures of Inspector Montalbano, *Il metodo Catalanotti*, and Umberto Eco not only quoted her poems in his books but also expressed his admiration for the poet at a meeting with her in 2009. In the Aula Magna Santa Lucia in Bologna, filled with nearly 1,800 people, he read out the ending of the poem “Possibilities” (“I prefer not to ask how much longer and when. I prefer keeping in mind even the possibility that existence has its own reason for being”) and added, in his own voice: “I prefer Szymborska.”

Szymborska has also had a significant impact on foreign popular music: Italian musicians of various genres use her poems or references to them in their songs. A fragment of the poem “Nothing Twice” was included in Jovanotti’s song “*Buon sangue*,” and Roberto Vecchioni dedicated a separate song to her. Hebe Tien, a member of the popular mandopop group S.H.E in Taiwan and China, released a single inspired by Szymborska’s poem “Under One Small Star,” which even quotes a fragment of it in Polish. Meanwhile, the poem “Love at First Sight” inspired Taiwanese illustrator Jimmy Liao to create the illustrated story “A Chance of Sunshine,” which became a bestseller (over 200,000 copies sold), and was adapted into a film “Turn Left, Turn Right” in Hong Kong featuring top-name stars.

Interhuman language

Coming back to Europe – in 2009, the Basque Country’s first socialist premier made a symbolic change by reciting Szymborska’s poem “Nothing Twice” under the sacred oak in Guernica, instead of the traditional religious oath of office. In Sweden, her poems are often chosen for recitation at secular funeral ceremonies. In the Netherlands, her works have been incorporated into Dutch language textbooks, a distinction rarely accorded to translations. The well-known Polish humanitarian and social activist Janina Ochojska once shared an anecdote about time she spent holed up in a bunker during a flare-up of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, together with an Israeli soldier who

Wisława Szymborska with Ferzan Özpetek, an Italian director of Turkish origin



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turned out to be able to recite a Szymborska poem from memory. Following Szymborska's visit to Israel for a literary evening, the next day the newspaper *Ha-Aretz* featured a prominent article on her by Michael Handelsaltz on its front page. Even the not particularly Poland-friendly paper *Yedioth Ahronoth* wrote about her positively on two occasions, which the Polish ambassador at the time hailed as a significant diplomatic victory.

Last year marked the centenary of the Nobel laureate's birth, prompting the Polish Senate to designate 2023 as the "Year of Wisława Szymborska." Nevertheless, the Polish authorities largely missed the chance to leverage this for international promotion, likely due to political considerations. When Italian President Sergio Mattarella visited Poland in April 2023 and met President Andrzej Duda, he opened his remarks by expressing joy at being in Poland during the centenary of the birth of its greatest poetess – a sentiment that, regrettably, was not echoed by our own president. Only a handful of Polish diplomatic missions took the initiative to organize commemorative events. Nonetheless, numerous foreign cultural institutions engaged in the celebrations, generating significant

international interest and spotlighting Poland. The most noteworthy and impressive events took place in Italy, including an exceptional exhibition at Villa Croce in Genoa, curated by Sergio Maifredi, and a theatrical production directed by him featuring renowned Italian actress Maddalena Crippa. These Italian celebrations were largely the effort of two indefatigable advocates of Polish literature in Italy: Professors Luigi Marinelli and Andrea Ceccherelli.

On this note, it's worth mentioning three international academic conferences focused on Szymborska's work, all held in 2023. One, centered on the translation and reception of her poetry, took place in Słubice and Frankfurt (Oder), hosted by the European University Viadrina. The University of Zagreb organized the second conference, while the most extensive gathering occurred at the University La Sapienza in Rome, in collaboration with the Polish Institute there. The enthusiastic participation of students at these events suggests a promising future for Szymborska's poetry in academic research. Moreover, Szymborska's legacy continues to act as a form of cultural diplomacy, celebrating Polish literature, culture, and the very essence of Poland itself. ■

Vernissage of the project "Wisława Szymborska on Dolne Młyny Street," marking the 100th anniversary of the Nobel Prize winner's birth, Krakow, 2023 (the captions read: "A living artist is always a problem" / "Not for a cat")

Further reading:

Szymborska, Wisława. *Poems, new and collected, 1957–1997*. Trans. S. Barańczak and C. Cavanagh.