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A Look into the Eyes of Czesław Miłosz

> Polish-American poet Czesław Miłosz's (1911-2004) life and work stretched almost the whole of the 20th century, and though he had the misfortune of enduring first-hand the tyranny of that era's two great evils – Nazism and Stalinism – his moral outrage, humanism, and intellectual independence, expressed in the august elegance of his poetry, caught fire in the face of those encroaching nightmares, and cast a light which even today remains a sentinel against their return, whatever form they may next assume. (Jones)

Miłosz was able to "fuse his own experiences with the larger events in his society" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008) and become "one of Poland's leading intellectual figures" (Pettinger). Miłosz's historical period, beliefs and political views, personal experiences, and the voice of the man that gave the "Poles the courage to demand change" ("John Paul II: A Strong Moral Image"), greatly affected Czesław Miłosz's writings ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008).

Czesław Miłosz's passages were greatly influenced by the historical period that he lived in, as he developed books on the focus point of the history of his native country, Poland ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008). In *Zdobycie Władzy* (*The Seizure of Power*) and in "Biedny Chrześcijanin Patrzy Na Getto" ("A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto"), Miłosz's "entire effort is directed toward a confrontation with experience-and not with personal experience alone, but with history and all its paradoxical horror and wonder" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013).

The Seizure of Power (1955) is an

> …autobiographical novel that begins with the Russian occupation of Warsaw at the close of World War II. As the Russian army approached the Nazi-held city, the Polish Resistance rose against the German occupation troops, having been assured that the Russian would join their fight once the uprising began. But instead, the Russian's stood by a few miles outside the city, allowing the Nazis to crush the revolt unhindered. When the uprising was over, The Russians occupied Warsaw and installed a communist regime. The novel ends with the disillusioned protagonist, a political education officer for the communist, immigration to the West. ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013)

In this book, Czesław Miłosz retells the history of the past in a novel of what really happened during his lifetime in his country, Poland ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013). During World War II, Poland was occupied by the Germans, but after the war, the power would "change hands" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013) and would land in the hands of the Russians, making Russia an unstoppable power. *The Seizure of Power* is "a novel of ineffable sadness, and a muffled sob for Poland's fate" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013). Miłosz is also talking about himself and puts himself into the shoes of the character, the political education officer. In comparison, Miłosz was a man who worked for the Communistic government as a cultural diplomat at the Polish Embassy, but did not approve of the Communist teachings, and left Poland to escape to the West in America, just like his character did ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013). *The Seizure of Power* was not the only book that was written that is based upon the historical facts that flourished during his lifetime ("Czesław Miłosz" 2007).

There are many things in life that will leave an impression on someone for life ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008). In "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" (1943), Czesław Miłosz "describes his experiences of watching the Warsaw ghetto go up in flames" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2007) while he lived in Warsaw during the Warsaw Uprising of 1943 and 1944 (Buczynski). From October 1940 to May 1943, the Nazis controlled many imprisonment camps that were throughout Poland. Due to discrimination, 300,000 Jews, in the summer of 1942, in the Warsaw area alone, were the victims of mass shootings, forced labor, exile, starvation, and deportation to concentration camps ("The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising"). On the night of Passover in 1943, a very special and religious holiday for the Jews, Anti- Nazi Polish resistance groups came together and fought for the freedom of their brothers, which Czesław secretly was a part of ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008). In return, the Germans started to burn the Jewish ghetto, forcing the Jews to come out of their hiding spots and killed thousands who were fighting for a cause that many people today in America would classify as very a simple principle: freedom (Buczynski). Out of the 56,000 Jews who were in the ghetto, 7,000 were shot during the Warsaw uprising, and the rest were deported for extermination to Treblinka death camp in Nazi occupied Poland ("The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising"). Miłosz writes about himself as the poor Christian, as it states in the title of the poem, who was a Christian that could not practice his faith freely, as he looks at the burning ghetto during its last moments, which was an event that collaborated the historical and political atmospheres of the era (Buczynski).

Not only was Czesław Miłosz influenced by the historical period during his life, but also by his own beliefs and the political views that he encountered during his lifetime ("Czesław Miłosz, a Polish Émigré Poet"). "…His poems tend to be considered en masse, in relation either to the condition of Poland, or to the suppression of dissident literature under Communist rule, or

to the larger topic of European intellectual history" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008). From his exposition to the radical nature of politics, he wrote *Zniewoloy Umysł* (*The Captive Mind*) ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013).

"For the next 40 years he [Czesław Miłosz] tried to explain to the West both the real nature of Communism and the things it had extinguished" ("Czesław Miłosz, a Polish Émigré Poet"). *The Captive Mind* (1953) explains in great dept as it "examines the life of the artist under a communist regime" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013) and takes "a critical look at Polish intellectuals under Communist rule" (Jones). In addition, Miłosz explains his reasoning for exiling from Poland ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013).

> In astonishing graduation Miłosz shows what happens to men subjected simultaneously to constant threat of annihilation and to the promptings of faith in a historical necessity which exerts apparently irresistible force and achieves enormous success. We are presented with a vivid picture of the forms of concealment, of inner transformation, of the sudden bolt to conversion, of the cleavage of man into two. ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013)

He tells the story of how four of his friends and colleges, "Alpha (Jerzy Andrzejewski), Beta (Taduesz Browski), Gama (Jerzy Putrament), and Delta (Konstanty Ilefons)" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2007), who were seduced by the Russian occupation and "lended their talents to the Stalinist regime" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2007). Czesław Miłosz worked for the Polish Communist government, but did not favor their beliefs and left Poland to seek a new life in Paris, France in 1951 and then went on to America in 1960, where he intertwined the truths of the Communistic reign into poetry and words ("Czesław Miłosz" 2007). Miłosz is a "person in history, and the

interchange between external event and the individual life is the matrix of poetry" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013).

When the Russians took control of Poland and overthrew the Germans, they installed a "puppet" (Buczynski) government that was fully dependant on the monstrous Soviet Union, and would change the lives of many, as Poland's enthusiasm would decline and would be transformed into a "Communistic Paradise" (Buczynski). "The government started a war with their own people and all of Eastern Europe was overrun by the Soviet Union" (Buczynski). There was only a Communistic party that ruled the nation without any legal opposition. Poland was then lacking freedom, free enterprise, a central economical system, and had no democracy. To the government everything was communal and belonged to them. The Communist controlled coal mines, sea ports, train stations, media, public administration, health services, power stations, and telephone lines were cut so no one could sneak a rebellion. There were soldiers stationed at every street corner to make sure that everyone was in order and could be seen in the mornings, striking their metal "sticks" (Buczynski) on the ground, as they "warmed up"(Buczynski), before they got into their cars and drove off to breakup any strikes, rebellions, and opposition groups, which many were secret and underground (Buczynski). By the end of the Communistic rule in Poland, the military tanks that roamed the city streets so much to hinder opposition groups, that they left their imprint their tracks on the pavement roads that new roads had to be installed. When the situation was at its peak, the government went full out against their people and ration cards were distributed because the government slowed down the importation of goods into Poland. One could go to the store and wait for hours and hours in lines, in harsh weather, just hoping that there was something left on the shelf to buy, or a truck of goods would come and stop to replenish the empty shelves in the storeroom. The faith was also disregarded and put

aside and no one could practice it. The government controlled books, newspapers, radio stations and television shows and they would not allow any item be published or air if it contradicted the ideas of the Communists. This meant that children at school, and adults at work, could not learn and comprehend the political and economical problems of their county and understand why everything was happening, unless they were a part of a secret underground opposition group, which many of them wrote illegal newspapers that stated the latest news about the progress of Poland's rising rebels. Czesław Milosz also served as a poetry editor for the underground newspaper and none of his great works of literature were never legally published in Poland before the fall of the Iron Curtain because they interfered with the teachings of the Communist. "Do not feel safe. The poet remembers. You can kill one, but another is born. The words are written down, the deed, the date" (gtd. in Pettinger). "These lines of his [Czesław Miłosz] that are inscribed on a monument at the Gdansk shipyard, honoring Polish workers shot for striking against the dictatorship of the proletariat" ("Czesław Miłosz, a Polish Émigré Poet") and "the Communist régime" (Pettinger). Czesław Miłosz proclaims in his passage to all of the Communists that all of their actions will be remembered in his works, because all of the things that the Communist were doing in Poland, the poet, Czesław Miłosz, was writing it down for all future generations to remember; everyone of those men and woman, fighting for their freedom will always populate the world, but "there was no freedom" (Buczynski). Miłosz was fed up with the mistreatment of his homeland, and left Poland to seek a better life ("Czesław Miłosz, a Polish Émigré Poet").

"Miłosz died having seen the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian empires rise and fall, while his two native lands finally escaped their miserable history to end up safe and free. He wrote about it all, mostly in exile, in America, in essays, novels, and volumes of poems" ("Czesław Miłosz, a

Polish Émigré Poet"). In *Widzenia nad Zatoką, San Francisco* (*Native Realm: A Search for Self Definition and Visions from San Francisco Bay*), and *Na Brzegu Rzeki (Facing the New River: New Poems),* Miłosz writes about his personal experiences in various forms during his exile in America and about his homecoming ("Czesław Miłosz, a Polish Émigré Poet").

In *Native Realm: A Search for Self Definition and Visions from San Francisco Bay (*1969), Czesław Miłosz compares his life, now in California, to his life in Poland, in a political and social aspect and self-questions his life ("Czesław Miłosz, a Polish Émigré Poet"). He writes about how grateful he is now to be living in a country that has great economic power and freedom ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008).

The book

> is a political and social autobiography, shorn of polemic intent, deeply self-questioning, and dominated by the sense that neither historically nor metaphysically are most Westerners in a position to grasp the true nature of the East European experience since the First War. ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013)

Most Americans could not grasp the idea of what was going on in the East and Miłosz tries to get the people of the West to understand it ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008). "He tells the story with the humility of a man who has experienced tragedy and who believes in faith and destiny. It is a work that reflects the stubborn optimism of his heart, even as it dwells on the pessimism of his intellect" ("Czesław Miłosz 2008"). Once again, Czesław puts himself into the shoes of the character, as Miłosz has also experienced many tragedies within his life that are directly related the problems in his homeland and "his writings and poetry deal extensively with the rise and consequences of totalitarianism" (Pettinger). The character of the story also believes in faith, and that is why Miłosz continued to write about what he did, with the help and admiration towards

Pope John Paul II and it was made possible by him, the pope, that Czesław Miłosz could return to his native land, Poland ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008).

"Throughout his life he was confronted with the evils of totalitarianism, being forced to flee his county of birth. However it was his capacity to reveal the real nature of totalitarianism that led to some of his greatest works" (Pettinger). In *Facing the River: New Poems* (1995), Miłosz focuses his writings about his return to his childhood town after returning from the United States in 1989, after the fall of the Iron Curtain (Pettinger). Czesław Miłosz was born in the village of Satenina, Szetejnie, in the Russian Empire, what is today called Lithuania (Wilhelm 1045). He and his parents were Polish, but they left their bucolic hometown of Vilnius, Poland during World War II to escape the political power in their native land ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013). Miłosz writes about the experiences that he had in his childhood town and recalls all of the streets and buildings that he could remember, but there was one thing in particular that is very different when Czesław returned to his hometown; the people who had once lived there were all gone and dead because of the Communistic rulings ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008). They were not all physically dead, but spiritually as well. Miłosz expresses his accomplishments of being back in the country that he once exiled from and is a piece of the truth that proved that the Communism would end, and he would be able to return to his free country, though many doubted his thoughts. "Having been a poet of exile, he had now become the poet of the impossible return of the past" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008). Czesław Miłosz began one of his poems dedicating to his homeland (Czesław Miłosz 2013). "My corner of Europe" (qtd. in "Czesław Miłosz" 2013), he writes, "owing to the extraordinary and lethal events that have been occurring there, comparable only to violent earthquakes" (qtd. "Czesław Miłosz" 2013), that were defeated and conquered with the help of Pope John Paul II (Buczynski).

Many people wonder what influenced Miłosz to continue to write about subjects that were socially and politically unaccepted during his historical time period; his strong beliefs led to his books being band from his beloved native country, Poland (Buczynski). This famous person that influenced him was Pope John Paul II, who gave "Poles the courage to demand change" ("John Paul II: a Strong Moral Image"). When Karol Wojtyła was the Archbishop of Poland, he greatly opposed Communism and even as a child he did so (Buczynski). He, himself was a prisoner of the Communists in Poland, just like Czesław Miłosz. When Karol Wojtyla , the first Polish pope, who took the name of John Paul II, was elected, the people did not know that he would be such a great influence and help to make changes everywhere throughout the world and is now credited for bringing Communism to an end ("John Paul II: a Strong Moral Image"). "Before his pontificate, the world was divided into blocs. Nobody knew how to get rid of Communism" ("John Paul II: a Strong Moral Image") ,said Lech Wałesa, Poland's future president ("John Paul II: a Strong Moral Image"). Archbishop Wojtyła made the people believe that this was not the end, that things would get better, and if the people did not try to stop the Communism, then the nightmare would never end and it would get even worse (Buczynski). Karol Wojtyła realized that the people needed to stand up for what they believed in and told them "Be Not Afraid" (gtd. in Buczynski), and influenced many people, like Czesław Miłosz, to keep on writing on a topic that was politically and socially unexpected. When Miłosz won the Noble Prize in Literature in 1980, "for voicing with uncompromising, clear-sightedness man's exposed condition in the world of severe conflicts" (Bielawska) , "he was hailed as national literary icon, a voice of Poland's conscience" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2005).

> The Noble Prize for Czesław Miłosz is not just a prize for his talent. It's also a prize for resilience and loyalty to the voice inside him that led him through the

> obstacles of history and his own personal experiences. Miłosz's sentences are clear, but his poetry is dark, twisted in its richness…which paints the world with just a few lines. (gtd. "Czesław Miłosz" 2013)

Jan Błoński defends Miłosz in his quote and says that Czesław had obstacles in his life that included the painful life that he and the people from his native country had to live through and survive ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013). Miłosz wrote about these hardships and described them, as he listened to his conscience and led people out of the darkness by collaborating his experiences with the "obstacles of history" ("Czesław Miłosz") that he and many other individuals lived through ("Czesław Miłosz"). "Miłosz stayed true to his beliefs and spoke out against Communism at every opportunity" (Neumayr). The people of Poland were so happy when Wojtyła became the Pope, because when Karol was the Archbishop he had the people of Poland behind him, but now, not only did he have the Catholics to stand beside him, but everyone else in the world was behind him for him to proclaim about what were the unjust actions that were becoming a horrific reality in his native country, Poland, and across the rest of Europe (Buczynski). Czesław Miłosz was a follower of Karol Wojtyła, and that was just not only because Miłosz was a devout Catholic, and Christian, but he too, told the world through his writings, the consequences and realities of the life that he and his people were living through in Poland ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013). Miłosz was truly an activist for a movement that was thought that could never be stopped ("Czesław Miłosz" 2007). Many people said that "we needed to hear in our new and already deeply troubled country" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008) and Miłosz would then go on to keep and preserve his culture and history of Poland and would interpret the "echoes of his people's history" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008) in his writings ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008). The Russians were trying to obliterate the Polish culture and try to make the Poles forget who they

really were (*Karol: A Man Who Became Pope*). In reply, Karol said to fight with love and faith, and not with hatred, for a world that was filled with evil, because those are things that Communists did not know about. He said to trust in love and in the strength of hope because it will always prevail evil and to fight with words and not by bearing arms. As Miłosz wrote, poem after poem, book after book, about all of his encounters and reality of Poland, he brought "the absent dead to life, one by one" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008), by retelling their story and fighting with words and speaking Karol's message (*Karol: A Man Who Became Pope*). A man once said that once a tradition is gone, it is really gone and there is no turning back to go and grab that part of oneself to share with future generations (Buczynski). In Miłosz's writing's he "stresses the importance of the nation's cultural heritage and history in shaping his work" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013) and is the "spokesman of the millions of the Holocaust, the Gulags, the Polish and Czech uprisings, and the added millions of those who will go on dying in the imperfect world" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008). Miłosz took Pope John Paul II's words, "Be Not Afraid" (gtd. in Buczynski), deep into his heart and was influenced by them to stand up and relieved the pain and suffering of those people, not only to conserve the historical facts, but also to be the one who told the world and informed them of the situations, though his writings, of their lives as Czesław Miłosz followed in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II (Jones).

Czesław Miłosz is the "most important representative of Polish literature in the West and one of the most articulate and widely heard dissident émigrés from Communist Europe" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2007). In the powerful writings of Miłosz's pieces: *The Seizure of Power*, "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto", *The Captive Mind, Native Realm: A Search for Self Definition and Visions from San Francisco Bay,* and *Facing the River: New Poems*, "the events of history became experience…as Miłosz turns the memory of his experience back to elucidate

the event" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2013). Czesław Miłosz was able to write these particular pieces of work because of his historical period, beliefs and political views, personal experiences, and the influence of voice of the man that gave the "Poles the courage to demand change" ("John Paul II: A Strong Moral Image"). "He lived through the twentieth-century Eastern Europe and… his poetry fuses his own experiences with the larger events in his society" ("Czesław Miłosz" 2008).

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