The Borderland Foundation in Sejny, Poland

By Magdalena J. Zaborowska

Far from the big-city museums and tourist destinations of Warsaw and Cracow that honor Poland’s Jewish heritage and the martyrdom sites of World War II, the Sejny-Suwałki region has been marked by history on a smaller, but no less painful, scale: anti-Lithuanian riots, destruction of its large Jewish population during the Holocaust, anti-Polish pogroms, and hostility toward ethnic Belarusians, Russian Old Believers, and Roma. Housed partly in the reclaimed Jewish structures of Sejny—a northeastern Polish town that has no living Jews—the non-governmental organization (NGO) Borderland Foundation and Borderland Centre of Arts, Cultures, and Nations combines hands-on cultural activism with literary, public intellectual, and scholarly endeavors that center on the recovery and celebration of rich East-Central European regional heritage.

In a recent interview for the liberal Polish daily Gazeta Wyborcza, the president of the foundation, Krzysztof Czyżewski, commented on the difficult craft of local and international cultural activism. Building bridges between nations is a continuous process. It is not that with a single action, you can take care of business once and for all. It must involve long-term activism—workshops, conversations, and engagement of the locals in collaboration. The work toward cultural understanding cannot end with a few declarations, smiles, and organizing a nice festival. This is not enough.

Czyżewski made this comment upon receiving the Honorary Jerey Giedroyc Award on behalf of the Borderland Foundation at the Royal Castle in Warsaw on November 7, 2008. It echoes many of his lectures, speeches, and published works, the most recent an anniversary collection of his writings entitled Linia Poczta (The Line of Return, 2008). The prestigious Giedroyc Award, established in 2001, is given by the Polish publication Reczpospolita. It distinguishes those who have contributed to the Polish state through public activism that promotes democracy within the European community of nations and especially the cultures of East and Central Europe. The Giedroyc Award was named in honor of the legendary intellectual leader and anticommunist activist Malgorzata Spórkiewicz, and Bożena and Wojciech Szroeder—the foundation defines its mission broadly as the reinvention of the agora, by which it understands a democratic space for open exchange of ideas in the contemporary world. The foundation’s specific activities span regional and international locations and center on the artistic rediscovery, preservation, and promotion of the East European borderlands’ rich multicultural and multilingual heritage. Ideologically, their goal is humanitarian, to overcome regional and nationalistic divisions and to build bridges between local ethnic groups, thus promoting dialogues among various, and at times conflicting, identities, memories, and religions. In effect, the foundation’s cultural activities dare to redefine the very notions of patriotism and participatory democracy for individuals, communities, and nations alike.

As one of its collaborators, Professor Andrzej Strumillo, comments: “[T]raditionally, patriotism has been measured by means of one’s hostility toward one’s neighbors. … This is wrong.” Remembering his childhood spent with Jewish and Belarusian playmates, Strumillo calls for embracing everyday “human contact without declared divisions” based in national borders, languages, or religions. Czyżewski wrote in Sztuczka pogranicza (The Path of the Borderland, 2001) that the culture of the nation-state is “that of the gatekeeper. Closed. … It is one that erases all traces of the Other, opposing and forgetting it.” The Borderland, in contrast, “is a life-giving buffer zone … protecting diversity. … [I]t does not erode the borders, but rather expands the sphere that they encompass, absorbing those who live there, accepting their intermingling as a matter of course.” Most important, the “borderland is an agora. Here we [sic] who is not in dialogue with others simply vegetates on the periphery” (Czyżewski, 2001).

This vision of a many-voiced borderland agora is not utopian; instead, it recognizes the wounds, scars, and scabs of the painful past. Despite the destructive binaries set up by national borders and their gatekeepers, those who dwell around and on the borderlands create and enable the survival of hybrid and vital cultures. The kind of cultural recovery and dialogue espoused by the foundation resonates with Latina author Gloria Anzaldúa’s powerful iteration of the S-Mexican border culture in Las Fronteras/Borderlands: The New Mestiza (1987). “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. … [A] borderland is a vague and undefined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.”

The various activities of the foundation take this state of transition, hybridity, and constant shape shifting of border culture for granted, as their starting point. They emphasize hands-on engagement locally and internationally with what its main movers and shakers term “culture animation” and span educational youth and adult programs in the town of Sejny that often travel around the country and abroad. Their activities include a teen theater troupe and a klezmer band that perform regularly, oral history projects in the area that bring together Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Roma, and Russian Old Believers, meetings for teachers and academics from similar NGO’s in Poland and abroad; and workshops, performances, exhibits, conferences, cultural forms, and festivals for international visitors and local communities. The Foundation’s many years of local activism and regional and international outreach are impossible to sum up in a brief essay, but two theatrical projects deserve special mention for their international and local impact.

The first, Kroniki sejnyńskie (Sejny chronicles), a performance created, crafted, and performed by Sejny’s young people under the direction of Bożena Sz-
The goal of the foundation is not only to remind those living in the region today of their homeland’s Jewish heritage, but also to teach them that the very notions of homeland, local culture, and roots are intrinsically hybrid, multilingual, and cross-cultural.

The ambitious scope of Borderland’s latest project is marked by the International Center for Dialogue, which is being built around the manor house and on the grounds in Krasnogruda that Milosz bequeathed to the foundation. This construction seems to bring the ideas, aesthetics, and artistic passion behind both performances together. The center confirms the Foundation’s commitment to building bridges between local and global identities. The White Synagogue, located on the main street of Sejny, was occupied by the Nazis during World War II. It was reclaimed and restored in 1987 and has been preserved ever since. Sejny landmarks were hand-crafted by the young performers’ bodies seemed to rise from and melt into the narrative, which is being built around the manor house and the manor house’s Jewish legacy and patronage can be seen throughout the region.

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