

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW

Vol. 49, No. 3



Summer 2007

Celebrating 50 Years: 1957-2007

Why I Am a Conservative: A Symposium

Richard J. Bishirjian

Jeffrey Hart

E. Victor Millone

Christopher Olaf Blum

Michael Henry

Mark T. Mitchell

William F. Campbell

T. John Jamieson

T. H. Pickett

Robert Champ

Andreas Kinneging

Ewa Thompson

Jude P. Dougherty

Stephen J. Tonsor

Gerhart Niemeyer: His Principles of Conservatism

WILLIAM S. MILLER

The Ideology of Repudiation in Higher Education

JEFFREY FOLKS

Secession and American Federalism

ARTHUR VERSLUIS

PLUS: WALTER B. MEAD ON Michael Polanyi ☞ JOHN RODDEN ON His Encounter with Russell Kirk ☞ ANTONY SULLIVAN ON the Israeli-Palestinian Debate ☞ IRVING LOUIS HOROWITZ ON Archiving as the Last Conservation

Published by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute
\$4.95 per issue / \$6.50 Canada \$18.00 per year (U.S.)



Why I am a conservative

Ewa Thompson

THE POSTMODERN CULTURE in which we live is a niche culture, where definitions of words are niche definitions. What passes for conservative in my neck of the woods may not be your definition of conservative. My notion of being a conservative excludes any permanent attachment to a political party or a public policy. In my view, "conservative" is a philosophical term, and it designates an attitude grounded in philosophical and existential premises.

I can offer an existential and a philosophical reason for why I choose to be identified with things conservative rather than things "progressive" (leftist) or liberal. The philosophical reason has to do with language and the difficulties in understanding our ability to use it. Briefly, explanations offered by the philosophical Right concerning the mystery of language seem more convincing to me than those offered by the philosophical Left. Unless one accepts a priori some kind of logocentric order underlying this most essential human tool, a sustainable philosophy of life is hard to conceive. I have written on this subject numerous times, as have others. The existential reason for my conservatism is described below.

My parents were Polish Catholics born and raised in Lithuania before the Second World War. In 1945, Lithuania's substantial minority of Polonized citizens, together with 1.5 million other Polish Catholics, were expelled from what was to become an enlarged Soviet Union. The Baltic republics, together with portions of Belarus and Ukraine that belonged to Poland before the Second World War, were annexed by the Soviets after the war. The U.S.S.R. government became the owner of the Polish properties left behind. By the agreement of the Four Powers, chunks of prewar Poland were attached to the Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian "union republics." This was part of the great migration of nations decided on in Yalta in 1945 and Teheran in 1943. The expellees were resettled in formerly German territories, from which Germans were expelled by a fiat of the Four Powers. When I hear German expellees complain about the hardships that they endured in 1945 while escaping from Czechoslovakia and Poland to the parts of Germany occupied by the United States, Great Britain, and France, I do not know whether to laugh or cry. I once heard one such former German expellee complain that he did not have a plentiful dinner until 1950. Well, I did not have a plentiful dinner until I came to the United States in 1963--and by plentiful I mean the kind of cuisine that university students enjoy. Many of my countrymen had to wait longer than that for a decent dinner.

My family was sent to Danzig. It took my mother and her two underage daughters a year to reach Danzig. My father was detained by the Soviets. We traveled in cattle cars that were occasionally left somewhere on side tracks to languish for weeks. There were no toilet facilities and little food. We spent over six months in the little Polish border town of Suwalki. It was years later that I learned that, three months before we arrived in Suwalki, the Soviet NKVD had organized there a pogrom of Catholics in which between 600 and 800 persons were tortured and then taken away, never to be heard of again. The Russian authorities have not supplied information about them to the present day. In the summer of 1946 we reached the ruins of Danzig, now called Gdansk.

By 1946 my father had obtained permission to join us in Poland. During the German occupation of Lithuania from 1941 to 1944, my parents hid a Jewish female physician in their home, in a little cellar under the housekeeper's room. I vaguely remember that little room: the only entrance to it was from the kitchen, and it was large enough to contain a bed, a nightstand, and a trunk where clothes and other personal items were kept. It was off-limits to us children except by invitation, and therefore a place of mystery. In front of the bed was a piece of carpet, and under it was a secret door to the cellar. When the Soviets came, the lady physician became an important person in the city administration. My father managed to obtain an appointment with her in the city offices. As he recounted later, he said something to

the effect of: "I helped you when you were in need; please help me obtain a permit to leave." The lady physician did help him, and my father made his way to Gdansk in 1946.

Other Polish expellees had settled there several months earlier. They moved into the few houses and apartments that were still standing. When I hear that after the Second World War Poles somehow appropriated someone else's property in Poland, I laugh. Two out of three Poles living today, or their parents or grandparents, lost their homes in the Second World War, and had to seek substitute dwellings in the ruins of cities and villages (Rzeczpospolita, August 3, 2002). They did not have the leisure to inquire to whom the ruins in which they sought shelter had belonged before the German or Soviet armies swept through. The Reds' appetite for destruction was unbelievable. Plumbing equipment was torn out of kitchens and bathrooms and taken away. In Valentin Rasputin's short story "Live and Remember" [1975], a Russian family in the Siberian village of Atamanovka enjoys receiving parcels from the front throughout 1945. Allowing for the time necessary for parcel delivery to Siberia, one can easily calculate that the loot came from Poland.

The Soviet soldiers and their generals did not have time to loot or break everything on the upper floors of the few buildings that had been only partially destroyed, but they thoroughly devastated the ground floors. The expellees and the homeless moved with stray cats into uninhabited cellars and basements if there was no other choice. Condemned public housing in the United States would have seemed luxuriant to the thousands of educated but homeless Polish families who were kicked out of cattle wagons coming from the East and told to find shelter somewhere in the city. The Soviet-controlled local administration was only too eager to register people at any semi-habitable addresses. There was no Marshall Plan as there was in Germany to rebuild ruined cities and industries. The cities that had been exposed to the hostile and consecutive occupations of Germans and Russians were stripped of whatever valuable real estate they once possessed. Everything had to be rebuilt from scratch.

My father contacted a university colleague of his who had arrived before us. He told my father that there was an empty ground floor apartment in the building in which he, his wife, mother, and two children were occupying the attic. There were some minor inconveniences involved: the apartment's windows were broken, and the door was so shattered that it looked like a sieve. Still, we moved in gratefully. There was no lumber to be purchased, so holes in the door were filled with rags and grass and whatever putty could be manufactured in conditions of total destitution. The toilet was broken, but there was running water and, soon afterward, heat. Each room had an electrical socket in the ceiling where one bulb could be screwed in. Electricity was rationed, so there was no possibility of having a reading lamp even if such an item could be found. The buildings surrounding ours were in total ruin. A few burned-out walls remained, and there were dark and dangerous basements where unexploded shells could be found, homeless cats had their kittens, and we children played hide-and-seek.

Soon both my parents, as well as other expellees, were engaged in full-time jobs, often two jobs per person. My mother taught school; my father became an accountant in two different state-owned enterprises. He was not at home except on Sundays. There were no weekends; Saturday was a working day. What followed was the hardship of life in Soviet-occupied Poland in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. Poles born in that period are noticeably shorter than their younger or older countrymen--witness the Polish President Lech Kaczynski. All too often, rationing was a cover-up for shortages. Coupons did not guarantee a purchase; if the shelves were bare there was no rain check. There were shortages of everything except bread, so there was no starvation but pervasive malnutrition. By "shortages," I mean that such items as shoes or toothpaste were unavailable for months and sometimes years. "Shopping" in the contemporary sense of the word did not exist. Bartering existed--if one had some extra butter for sale, one could buy a piece of fabric from a coworker who had obtained it illegally from a cousin who worked in a store catering to the communist party officials and offer it for butter.

As a ten- or eleven-year-old girl and an A student, I was once asked to tutor a girl whose parents were party dignitaries, sent to Poland by the Soviets. Somehow it was conveyed to me that it was an offer I could not refuse. I was supposed to go to that girl's home and help her master the Polish language. The first time I visited her home, I was dazzled by what seemed to me unbelievable luxury. I now know that it was one of those dwellings with cathedral ceilings and open living rooms often featured in American

suburbia today. In postwar Poland such architecture was unheard of, and only the truly privileged could have had such quarters built for them. My experience with that girl, whose parents never paid me for the tutoring, makes me certain that Jan Tomasz Gross was incorrect in suggesting in his book *Fear* that in postwar Poland, Jews were afraid of Catholic Poles. On the contrary, Catholic Poles were afraid of Jews who were party dignitaries, as my tutoring experience proved to me incontrovertibly.

Shortages were not the worst thing. The worst was that an entire population of under 30 million, with the exception of the privileged class who occupied leading positions in the party and administration, were not given proper wages but only tiny allowances, the kind one gives to children. Salaries in postwar Poland were in the range of 600-2000 Polish zloties. On the black market one dollar was worth 100 zloties. Thus monthly salaries were worth from six to twenty dollars. My mother made nine dollars per month; because of his two jobs my father made about forty dollars. Yes, bread and city transportation cost pennies, but virtually all items of daily use cost real money. Shoes and winter coats were the hardest to come by. A pair of Western-made shoes cost 1000-2000 zloties on the black market, or three times the monthly salary of a beginning teacher. I recall that my parents traveled to southern Poland to buy felt boots made by mountain folk and sold on the black market. In Poland, people lived like this for decades, for two generations. Little has been written about this communist crime; it is about to fade into oblivion. It should not.

It was this tendency to seek to humiliate the population that refused to be obedient and instead stuck to their Catholic faith that I find to be the most objectionable feature of the Soviet-manufactured political system that overtook half of Europe all the way to the Elbe River. The desire to put down the weak reached monstrous proportions under communism.

I earned my doctorate four years after I arrived in the United States. In 1968 I was a freshly-minted assistant professor of Slavic Languages and Comparative Literature at Indiana University. The Tet offensive was on and Richard Nixon was elected to the presidency. The Vietnam War protests were at their peak. I could not understand it: weren't we fighting the most evil political force on earth? Communism maimed the lives of my peers and destroyed many heroes of Polish resistance, such as General Emil Fieldorf. Fieldorf fought the Nazis during the war but fell into the communists' hands afterward and was sentenced to death, together with tens of thousands (this is not an exaggeration) of other Polish patriots. Communism thwarted the intellectual development of two generations in Central Europe by limiting access to what could be read and discussed. It subjected my fellow citizens in Poland to communism-induced poverty that required bartering skills and a certain kind of alertness unknown in capitalism to procure household goods. It required them to live on monthly allowances of \$10 or \$15. It further injured them by making it virtually impossible to advance in many professions without joining the communist party.

American students did not know about this, and my liberal professors (now colleagues) did not want to know. They psyched themselves into believing that communism represented a new era in the development of humanity, and interference with it was highly inappropriate. They taught their students accordingly. I could not convey that absent knowledge to them because I was hired to teach literature and literary criticism rather than politics. One day a student rally protesting the Vietnam War blocked entrances to all office buildings at Indiana University. I remember the protesters chanting that Nixon was worse than Hitler. This was the last straw. To me, Nixon was a hero for trying to stop communism in Vietnam. Americans had no economic or political interests in that country--I considered American intervention to be a truly noble action, one of the few disinterested actions by a great power that would survive in historical memory as proof that not all politics is generated by greed, hatred, or self-interest. I was so upset over the students' refusal to let me into Ballantine Hall, home to Indiana University's literature and language departments, that I decided to get to my office no matter what. With the help of my husband, an assistant professor of mathematics, I climbed in through a window onto the second floor. Once inside, it was a breeze to get to my office. I won against the pro-communist rally.

The brainwashing performed by Soviet sympathizers on American campuses was universal in those days, and only persons on the Right dared to say that the pro-Soviet indulgence was based on wishful thinking rather than fact. The liberals were like sleepwalkers in a fog. How did it happen that in a free

country like the United States the entire academic community had fallen under the spell of the discreet charm of the Gulag? Mild criticism of the Soviet Union was pervasive, but my fellow professors of Russian history and literature treated Soviet culture and politics as if it were genuine, and not a cover for one of the worst periods of barbarism in history. How was it possible that they did not wish to understand that communist practice was grounded in a deep contempt for humankind? Even in a free country it is apparently possible to fool most of the people most of the time.

The indifference toward the criminality of the Soviet enterprise made me take a second look at other ideas of liberal thinkers. I noted that they generally praised the French Revolution, just as it had been in the school textbooks I endured in Soviet-occupied Poland. I noted that in the American academic establishment, just as in Soviet-occupied Poland, the Spanish Civil War was described in black and white terms, Franco being all black and the republicans all white. I noted that the rise of communism in Hungary and Germany after the First World War was gently smoothed away in books, as if the German or Hungarian communists were the good guys opposing the all-bad "fascist" establishments. I noted that the Polish-Soviet war of 1920, in which the newly reconstituted Poland miraculously defeated the Soviet Union (somewhat like Finland in 1940), thus stopping the march of communism westward, was erased from America's historical memory. I noted that the lighthearted commentary on the Soviet Union supplied by American Sovietologists (Richard Pipes being a rare exception) falsified the relationship between Soviet Russia and the subjugated nations of Central and Eastern Europe. I noted that no one on the Left really cared that, were it not for Stalin's friendship with Hitler expressed in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August 1939, there would have been no Second World War. In those days no respectable publisher would accept U.S. Ambassador Arthur Bliss Lane's book *I Saw Poland Betrayed*. I also noted that in order to advance in American academia, one had to accept a great deal of the ideas of liberal thinkers that I knew were wrong, and profess disinterest in any kind of historical inquiry that did not correspond to an agenda friendly to the Left. In these circumstances, the additional factor of "the amazing power of money" (to borrow from *Great Expectations*) made brilliant writers side with the Left and keep inventing reasons to do so. With skills and talents worthy of a better cause, liberal writers and professors drummed into their students' heads a version of twentieth-century European history that I knew was inaccurate.

The only people who proclaimed that the evil empire was indeed evil were on the conservative Right. I had no choice but to join them. As years went by and my philosophical horizons broadened, I also realized that the most persuasive arguments about the meaning of language and reality also came from the Right. Thus I became a conservative.

EWA THOMPSON is Research Professor of Slavic Studies at Rice University.

Published in *Modern Age*, vol. 49, no. 3 (Summer 2007), 265-270.