

"FELICE"

The Polish Beginning

Robert Harlow

WE DECIDED ON an extended honeymoon. I had a sabbatical year coming up and wanted to attempt yet again to write the war novel I'd been planning and occasionally writing pieces of for fifteen years. There were friends in Poland at the Embassy in Warsaw and so, to begin our extended trip, we decided to importune them, look behind the Iron Curtain and go to see the landscape near Wroclaw where some of the Stalags for airmen were situated during the war. The first part of the novel was to have been set in a prison camp.

We never got to Wroclaw.

The year was 1981. We went by ship from Montreal to Gdynia, a 16-day voyage at 17 knots. It wasn't simply a pleasant time, it was, and is, for me at least, the best kind of travel and the sanest way to traverse a half dozen time zones and arrive rested and alert.

It was the beginning of the first week of August when we landed. Solidarity and Lech Walesa were in very real opposition to the Polish Communist Party government and appeared to be a threat, at least to Moscow's hegemony. (We learned quickly enough that Walesa wanted not to overthrow the government, but only to make it independently Polish. He was, and is, a dedicated socialist.)

The night we docked — at one a.m. — there were said to be eighty Russian ships of war within sight of the Polish coast, circling and waiting, as well as seven tank and infantry divisions at the Russian and East German borders ready to reprise the action taken a decade earlier in Czechoslovakia. The large Canadian flag nailed against the wall of the customs shed looked faded under the green sodium dock lights. It was there as a welcome to the four or five hundred of us who had come as tourists or as family visitors, but I think many of us stood at the rail and hoped we'd see the Maple Leaf again in its natural setting.

But of course nothing happened. The Russians went home after a while. The Poles I met never for a moment thought the Russians would invade. "Who would want to take over this?" one of them asked, gesturing widely, quite happy with the proven reputation the Polish people have of being impossible to conquer, despite having been invaded at least a dozen times in the last eight or nine centuries.

In the morning, the crowd at the dockside looked pretty much like a crowd anywhere else. The Poles like colours and flowers and are full of large emotions. The men and women at customs were properly thorough and as dour as Canadians, and the immigration people were no different than any others I'd encountered. We were met by our friends, Maureen and Oakley Duff, and we drove in their car through Gdansk where there were fewer police than at home and no army at all.

That first half-hour on Polish soil was important to me. Nothing was as I had imagined it, and I sat in Oakley's car embarrassed at how much a North American I was, how much the propaganda about the Eastern Bloc had given me a particular mindset, and how willingly I had accepted it. I really had expected uniforms, straight lines, Gulag life, soldiers, police, rules, regulations, suspicions about foreigners, absolute conformity. The 350-km trip to Warsaw, down a good two-lane highway, was travelled mostly in my head where many reversals and revisions happened.

Oakley drove us, five hours later, through the wide thoroughfares of Warsaw and finally down a crescent street bordered by hedges and trees and stopped in front of a house that caused a further revision in my view of at least some kinds of life behind the Iron Curtain. Across the street was parked a new Mercedes. Next door was a rose garden and then a three-storey stuccoed house on whose balcony was the daughter of the senior army officer who owned the place. So much for equal pay and perks for everyone. Oakley's house was, of course, one assigned by the Polish government to the Canadian Embassy for use by its staff. For soft North Americans it was a wonderful place to come back to every day after seeing how most Poles had to live.

I have been to countries where I was simply a stranger, and to others where it took a week or two before useable realities registered, but Poland began to happen to me immediately. I forgot what I had thought I'd come for and started reacting to something there that restimulated visceral feelings about my own country I'd been carrying around since shortly after W.W.II. I think those feelings were made into sensitivities during Canada's cultural dark age — those twenty years between the war and our centenary in 1967 when our culture was indistinct to the point of transparency. Those were twenty years when we had to export denigrations of ourselves and have a few of them stamped okay by our American or British masters before being read, seen, sold here. My own first published novel, *Royal Murdoch*, was one of I think two novels released here in 1962 that did not have a New York or London contract before being published in Canada. The book was from B.C. rather than from old Upper or Lower Canada. The Winnipeg-based person who reviewed it in *Canadian Literature* said it was set in Alberta, as if our Central Interior was too far away and in the wrong direction: and a CBC literary person thought the effort useless because the book was regional; i.e., not based in a carefully unnamed Toronto (so that it would sell elsewhere) as was the habit of, say, Morley Callaghan. The idea that a work should be local

before it inhabits the world was an idea that was anathema to most Canadians because it upset the picture of ourselves our cultural oppressors had given us, a comfortable picture that let us be everyone's protected kid brother — a picture still revered by many and loved by our current give-away government.

In any event, I'd thought about oppression and felt I knew it, but I had not known a people before who'd fought it so visibly and so often successfully. Images of refusal and remembrances quickly appeared. Warsaw's Old Town had been made rubble by the vindictive Germans. When Poles returned to their capital city in 1945 they rebuilt Old Town stone and brick, so that now it looks exactly as it did before the war. Citizens who had little food and often no real shelter worked there voluntarily, feeling deeply that their personal deaths would be useless if this heart of Poland did not beat again.

I am not an intellectual. Research and analysis make my brain go numb. I am emotional, and experiences such as Old Town are what make for me indelible emotions and images which are liable to force me to write. Early in my visit to Poland, my mind began searching out a way to speak for and make live the images that were beginning to scintillate in my head.

Our visit was for three weeks. I could not hope to chew and digest Poland in that time. I could not even become wise about it, as so many three-week travellers do. What I had were my feelings about surviving oppression, backed up by some few facts. For instance, in Warsaw there are over three hundred monuments, plaques, reminders of atrocities done to Poles by invaders. One for every day of the year, Oakley said. Rape, butchery, mass murder: the physical options for the oppressor. Spiritual pillage does not show, except in cultural expression, and if that has been suppressed, then it can be revealed only in individual people themselves. The plaques and monuments were memory and anger, distress and defiance cemented into the physical fabric of Polish life. The poster art we bought in sophisticated shops, the movies the Poles were making, the theatre we were told about, the great jazz we heard, all gave me a sense of a culture clawing up through and splitting the laid-on cement of Soviet domination. My grey-flannel Canadian soul, grown obediently soft and fluffy to warm the commercial appendages of Yankee cultural accountants, took on a bit of colour and if I had known the words I might have joined the Poles in their anthem — a song based not in national puffery but in reality — "Poland Has Not Yet Perished."

W E WENT TO KRAKOV. In that city's central market square there is a tower, and on top of it there is a lookout where sometime in the fourteenth century a bugler was in the middle of blowing a call to arms against an invader when an arrow struck him in the throat. The time was noon. Now, and so far as

I know, ever since then, a bugler has climbed those stairs at twelve o'clock, has blown the call to arms and always it stops on a strangled note, a replica of the moment centuries ago when there had not been enough vigilance and the enemy had come so swiftly upon Poland that it was there before the bugle had finished sounding. The man who volunteered his time and who called Poland to remembrance every day was said to be the owner of a meat market near the Central square.

We stayed only overnight in Krakov, the city founded by the legendary Prince Krak, whose daughter, Wanda, drowned herself in the Vistula rather than marry a German prince. Another German prince came there during World War II. Fifty-five thousand of its Jews were sent to Auschwitz by Hans Frank, Hitler's Governor. The next day we drove in a westerly direction out of Krakov, intending eventually to find a highway south that would allow us to visit the ancient Polish salt mines.

I have to confess now that I didn't know that Auschwitz was along that road; in fact, I did not know Auschwitz was in Poland. I don't know where I had thought it was: perhaps in all the places the Germans had been during the war. Its exact location had not mattered to me until Oakley, an often laconic man, mentioned that Auschwitz was not far from where we were at that moment. Then it mattered, and I remember persuading the three I was with, all of them born since the war, that we couldn't pass Auschwitz by. Perhaps it didn't mean a lot to them, I remember saying, almost apologetically. They indulged an old sweat and said we could see the salt mines another time.

To me Auschwitz was the heart of the evil that had made me think, when I finally understood about it, that World War II had been a necessary crusade. Those of us who fought never were told what was at the centre of German insanity, and especially what was happening because of it. Churchill knew, Roosevelt, the Pope, Stalin, the tiny whoremonger, Hitler-admirer and anti-semitic who was Canada's prime minister knew, but Auschwitz and nine hundred other extermination camps like it did nothing to change how they thought about the war or how they prosecuted it. One thing had always been for me certain: had our leaders not been anti-semitic at least by omission, the holocaust could have been stopped. The men who supplied France and Italy with resistance, parachuted battalions into Jugoslavia, stalked the Germans in Norway, played exciting schoolboy espionage games all over Europe could have found a way of halting the slaughter, could have revised their priorities and made those extermination camps a front so vigorously pressured that Germany would have had to retreat from it, millions of people would not have died, and neither would our integrity and humanity been so wounded that we live still with a guilt we did not need to have.

The oppression of the Jews is basic, bottom line. All other oppressions — physical, political, spiritual, cultural — come from centuries of practising oppression,

the purpose of which is to heap one's own anger about feeling impotent and oppressed (personally, nationally) on another and then, by a leap of illogic, kill that other (physically, politically, spiritually, culturally) and think therefore that one's own projected feelings will be permanently relieved. Down the line from monarch to priest, to executive, to the privileged, to parents to children goes the oppression and the punishment. Back up the line from those who believe themselves powerless goes agreement — yes, I am bad, I am worthless, evil, I deserve oppression — and back down again comes more hate from advantaged people or nations who are trying to rid themselves of feeling not powerful enough, and often oppressed. By what? They don't know.

The cycle is as irrational as its purpose. But it is a terrible engine of destruction, and it helps keep the advantaged in power, and in a world where power and dominion are thought to be good, there must be someone to blame for those continual rotten feelings that come from having to hurt and maim and kill to stay on top. God is thought to be good and therefore cannot be blamed; if God is evil and omnipotent, there is no hope. So, the oppressors, who also feel oppressed and secretly bad about themselves, need an earthly and on-going reason for what they persuade themselves is necessary behaviour. The Jewish people, stigmatized by the Christian church as Christkillers, have for 2,000 years been for the oppressors a way of excusing themselves their inhumanity; and, for the oppressed, the Jews are a people to feel superior to while they fail to fight oppression. Institutionalized anti-semitism is our way of keeping alive — while we teach it to succeeding generations — the practice of every kind of oppression.

I had thought about this absurd process often, but now I was going to Auschwitz, and when Oakley drove us through the camp gate my mind and breath stopped for a long moment. I had not been caught up and sent here; I had insisted on this visit. It was necessary. For the oppressor and the oppressed in me, in us all, this was home.

Germans were there. Three busloads of them. I didn't believe it, and later Felice didn't either. But one of the reasons to write a book is to grow. I'm happy they were (still are) going there. For some, no doubt, their reasons were vague and experiences inconclusive, but for others the visit must have been, as it became for me, a necessity.

In the book, during a walk through Warsaw's Old Town, Canadian diplomat Ben Collins tells Felice that yes Germans are free to visit. "After the war," he says, "we gave them a life sentence — suspended for life. It saved us coming right out and forgiving them."

What Canadian diplomat Collins was saying was that what the Germans did was unforgivable and remains so. Later in her odyssey, Felice discovers herself thinking that the word Nazi is a euphemism. Why say Nazi when you mean German, a people as anti-semitic as any other, who indulged in, wallowed in, an orgy

of evil in the extermination camps, as well as in perverted politics and juvenile militarism at home? It was not Mackenzie King or the Canadian government who turned the Jewish refugee ship *St. Louis* back, it was Canadians, all of us, despite the excuse that we hardly knew it was done. We, too, were anti-semitic, and therefore we had not bothered to train King and our legislators to respect the Jews as people and as refugees and to act rationally when the request came for Canada to give life to a shipload of otherwise doomed victims of German insanity. And train our leaders we must. For a good example of sanity insisted upon, look to Costa Rica, which has no military, and is open, humane, and is perhaps the most rational country on earth.

We got out of the car and went past the German buses, the notions store, the bookstore, the ice cream vendor and through the main entrance, each of us alone with a self cut away from the group we'd been a moment earlier. The point is — or at least it was for me — that when you enter Auschwitz you are faced with at least two fears. One is of the unknown, that here something absolutely evil threatens life itself. The other is the fear that something in you will connect, will understand, *will* make you one with Auschwitz. Another true thing is that visiting there is the opposite of going to visit a shrine of the arts or politics or religion. There is no uplift, no glorying. But it is also true that as in other shrines what is there at Auschwitz is past, done, has become example, is the shell of a dead time, and to be able to experience what it means depends on one's sensitivities, knowledge and imagination. But if you have these things, dare you apply them and risk what might happen?

MY PERSONAL VISIT was like birth: afterward I did not easily remember that violent experience. I had to work on it. That's the genesis of Felice's book and what it's mostly about.

There is a scene in the Auschwitz section of the novel where Felice is with a professor from Krakov at the Wall of Death where prisoners were shot for fun after a good lunch by members of the camp's Political Section. She is brought to the edge of the horror that is Auschwitz by this gentle but tough man whose brother was in 1943 pushed against the Wall and shot by a Waffen SS man. She goes to the wall, touches it.

Still there was a barrier in herself. Then on her right, peripheral to her vision, she saw a piece of brown paper. It was wrapping paper. Someone had torn it into the shape of a heart no bigger than the palm of her hand and had pinned it with a small gold-coloured safety pin to the ripped-up wood. It fluttered in the small wind that eddied gently against the wall. She put her finger on it, held it steady and read: 'John and Sally Lusacombe, from Andover, England, were here.' The words were a shock. She expected, hoped for, more: some kind of guidance from

a clearer mind. She didn't know whether she'd gone calm or empty; then she thought: They are right, there is no message, except that you've been, felt. Her tears surprised her. They arrived pressured by a grief she hadn't known was personally hers: a rag, a bone, a hank of hair. The Jewish woman in the cattlecar appeared — a portrait, nothing else, caught at that moment beyond knowledge where understanding begins. Her own tears were prismatic; they brought the cool precision of colour back to consciousness, along with a sense of herself weeping for something dead, uselessly lost. She couldn't remember, ever, not caring who saw her crying. There was a freedom in that.

Felice's tears and loss of self-consciousness make her ready, in scenes following this one, to go to the centre of Auschwitz's purpose and terror, with survivor Paula as her guide. And that experience will, in turn, sustain her later on when she and Ben Collins' Polish housekeeper are taken separately to ZOMO Headquarters, the heart of another evil, where having to meet head-on the reality of saying No to oppression changes her personality and her life profoundly.

After nearly a month in Poland, it appeared to me that there was no better ground anywhere on which to act out that process through which one may progress from being an unthinking, unconsciously tyrannized middle class cipher (most of us are) to personal freedom. Poland is where a people has lived a thousand years suffering oppression of every kind. It also has demonstrated well how to say No to it. One of Felice's overseas Canadian acquaintances tells her:

"The Poles knew, like the rest of us, that personal survival is the wall up against which the conquered may be shot if they don't turn around and submit and, like the rest of us, the Poles turned around and submitted. Not easily, and they never would give up being Polish. But when the Germans came in the war, the orders were to exterminate Poland. Survival was no longer a barrier. They fought and died, and if you look hard you'll see that despite millions dead they won. Since the war there have been three revolts, each stronger than the last, and they all toppled regimes. But the real victory each time was the loss, even in the face of personal destruction, of the fear our rulers always count on to feed our habit of obedience."

Solidarity's power at the moment of our visit was the result of nine-and-a-half million people suddenly saying No. The government knew what had happened. It was Polish too.

I've been interested in oppression for a long time, and I believe it to be basic to human distress, so meeting Poland in the summer of 1981 was the revelation I needed to start me writing about it again. In 1984 I'd published *Paul Nolan* which, for me at any rate, was a study of the soft underbelly of oppression. It was done on domestic ground and some reviewers and readers accused me of being a male trying to speak for the feminist cause. Feminists want support but, quite rightly, want to speak for themselves. Still, the Nolan book is a portrait of a man that tells the story of the other side of oppression. Without knowing how habitual, childish, weak, impotent the oppressor always is, and how put-upon he himself

feels, saying No to him remains a terrifying act. At the end of the book, Paul's wife, Katherine, says No, but she only takes his power and is not able to share it back with him. At the end of the Felice book, Felice does not get rid of her repressed, conservative dentist husband. She is so free that she is able to leave her life open to sharing the power she has found, even though that sharing depends upon him and everyone else in her life becoming strong enough to join her.

So, by the time our Polish visit was finished, the notion of a book to complement the earlier *Paul Nolan* was growing toward becoming a novel. As we travelled to Vienna, Venice, and then to Sardinia, I tried to find a protagonist who would be right for the story and the process I saw as happening in Poland. It had to be someone from my own national culture, and it had to be someone oppressed from inside and out. Someone Canadian for certain. An obsequious, obedient, typical resident of a colony of the American empire. Then, reluctantly, I knew the protagonist was a woman, because women are institutionally oppressed by male power structures and the results are easily identified. Briefly, I thought of making her a Native woman. How oppressed could one be: Canadian, female, Indian? But I knew very little about native Indian women, so I decided on a Point Grey housewife, spouse of a professional man, happy with her stay-at-home existence and the fact that foreign travel for her was going to Hawaii for Christmas. She was 48 years old, bright, but sectorally uninformed, and had those strengths that nurturers often have which can be converted into virtual heroics when death threats occur. She was also open and compassionate, capable of understanding the oppressed even though she knew nothing about oppression itself.

At a hotel near a village in northern Sardinia overlooking a beach named Sinatra, I wrote the first words of *Felice: A Travelogue*. We went to Greece for ten weeks and I wrote from breakfast till the noonhour every day. During a twenty-day voyage from there to Savannah, Georgia, on a decrepit freighter, I wrote the Auschwitz section, and knew when I was done that my life was changed.

After five months in Costa Rica, the book was finished. That was in May 1982. Over the next months, rejections came from McClelland & Stewart, who had published *Paul Nolan*, from General, who suggested it be made into a thriller, and from Macmillan. I'd been rejected before. I revised. Then in 1984 Ron Smith at Oolichan took in the book, edited it, as he later did *The Saxophone Winter*, with compassion and skill, and published it in 1985.

To Poles and experts about their country, my relationship with Poland may look like a one-night stand. I suspect it may have been. Still, while I must make no claims for the book, I do for the experience, and now I consider a certain kind of Polish learning ground as my own.