

# The CHESTERTON REVIEW

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manuscript he obtained was a version of the story “The Man Born Blind” published in *The Dark Tower* (1977). Originally entitled “Light” and unpublished by the magazine to which Lewis had submitted it, the manuscript apparently languished in the files of the magazine’s publisher from which it ultimately emerged into the rare-book trade fifty years after its ill-fated submission. The (“Light” manuscript, in Lewis’s easily recognisable hand, puts to rest any doubt raised by Kathryn Lindskoog’s *The C. S. Lewis Hoax* (1988), which point Brown, as a friendly acquaintance of Lindskoog’s, makes in the gentlest possible terms. Not every acquisition is of such importance, but the collector’s path is filled with many strange coincidences and amazing discoveries—and, in Brown’s case, the formation of friendships with many surviving Lewisians, including Walter Hooper and Douglas Gresham. All of which was made possible by degrees in medicine and public health from Harvard, which launched on Brown on a career in international public health and education with its attendant travel and opportunity both for book hunting and for wide acquaintance with interesting book people. (It’s perhaps too little remarked upon that in the pre-Internet age of collecting

men whose professions took them on the road—whether industrial executives like Henry R. Wagner, salesmen like Frederick Woodward Skiff, or performers like the sleight-of-hand artist Ricky Jay—had a great advantage in building interesting collections because they could seek out important and obscure works in all manner of places.) And, in his conclusion, Brown gives thanks to Providence for all his good fortune.

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*Crater’s Edge: A Family’s epic journey through wartime Russia*  
by Michał Giedroyc  
London: Bene Factum  
Publishing, 2010  
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Two kinds of readers are likely to reach for this book. The first are history buffs from Great Britain or the United States, interested in World War II and seeking unusual stories about it. The second group of readers will be described below.

This is certainly an unusual story. An underage scion of an

aristocratic family in Poland is deported with his mother and two sisters (and one million other Polish citizens) to the Soviet Gulag upon the Soviet conquest of eastern Poland in the fall of 1939. In the meantime, the Russians arrest the father of the family, torture and humiliate him, and eventually kill him. (At the end of the narrative there is a brief account of the father's death patched together from information obtained from fellow prisoners who survived.) The familiar account of the journey to Siberia follows: cattle wagons into which human cargo are stuffed like sardines in a barrel, with hardly any water or food for weeks and a hole in the floor for a latrine; deaths during the journey; and settlement on the Kazakh border, where the Giedroyć girls are herded off to chop trees in the forest and the mother tries to earn extra food by sewing. This is contrasted with their peaceful way of life before the Soviet attack. The family estate of Łobzów, with its ninebedroom manor and traditional Polish Borderland hospitality was situated in the sea of Belarusian and Polish smallholders who, as the author points out, were much better off than the richest inhabitant of the Russian-Kazakh kolkhoz to which he was deported. Pre-war country life in Łobzów is movingly described,

from the hustle and bustle of cow and pig farming to the elegant parties that the princely family of the Giedroyćes gave for friends and neighbors. The father of the family was a senator in the Polish Parliament, while the mother came from less distinguished but fiercely patriotic stock. Both families had been victimised by Russian aggression in the past. The contrast between their life before the War and after the Soviet invasion could not have been greater.

This book is part of a series of books written by Polish survivors of the Soviet Gulag. Many such books have appeared in the last decade, as the survivors face the write-now-or-never dilemma. Virtually all of these memoirs have been written by those saved by Polish General Władysław Anders. Upon the German attack on Soviet Russia in 1941, Anders and General Władysław Sikorski negotiated with Stalin the creation of a Polish army in Russia consisting of Polish political prisoners. Anders was allowed to transfer to Persia one hundred thousand potential soldiers and their dependents. The survival accounts tell the story of difficulties in getting to the designated recruitment points, massive mortality from undernourishment and diseases and, finally, arrival in Iran. The

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joy of having enough to eat, some medical care and other attributes of normalcy that Polish recruits and their dependents experienced in various spots in the Middle East in 1942-44 is an element of this story, and other stories of this kind, that should have a sobering effect on the Western reader. The men underwent military training and were dispatched to fight Hitler. Those that survived the war settled in England or in her colonies: the author, his mother, and two sisters were in that number. Giedroyć was admitted to the University of London, graduated in aircraft design and operations, married and started a perfectly British family. One of his daughters is a now movie director.

For several reasons this account is superior to others. First, the author's narrative skills and his mastery of the English language are amazing. He surpasses Vladimir Nabokov in being able to translate precisely not only phrases but also the moods, atmosphere, and outlook that generally cannot be transferred from one language to another. Giedroyć's account is thoroughly anglicised, yet it accurately describes the experiences to which the British have had no empirical access for generations. The style is that of an upper middle class Englishman

narrating horrible adventures, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" all over again.

In the Afterword the author credits his Editors with wise and ruthless elimination of chaff. But the Editor's role must have been marginal: the book is strikingly original, while Editors tend to impose a film of uniformity over the texts they edit. The author narrates his hellish experiences with dry wit, with a stiff upper lip, and with enormous understatement. Nowhere in the book does one hear that "look-at-poor-me" tone that often permeates survivors' accounts. If the mark of class is the absence of such a tone, the author passes the test with flying colors. He is able to tell the story of a "British army padre with homosexual tendencies" (144) in such a way that he does not offend anyone's taste. Queen Victoria would have approved his narrative of the exceptionally cruel ethnic slaughters and the story of dysentery and lice on board the ship carrying the lucky few to safety, not to speak of the year spent in the Siberian village of Nikolaevka where nine people of both sexes, formerly members of the upper class, became the underclass of a miserable village and lived as a "commune" in one small room.

The author's impeccable Polish (no missing Central European diacritical marks here!) and his ability to remember details make his account one of the few that correctly define various difficult-to-explain cross-cultural situations. The Polish and British school systems are ably translated into each other, as is the status of the various social strata and social customs. The book deserves a cheer just for Giedroyc's ability to translate one culture into another.

As a fragment of the World War II mosaic, the book is even more valuable. It tells the story that has to be told in order to demythologise that War as a fight between the good guys and the bad. While there were no good guys on the German side (please! do you know what kind of letters Claus von Stauffenberg was writing back home?), there were plenty of bad guys on the Russian side. Nor are the euphemisms "Nazi" and "Soviet" helpful in creating a truthful picture of the War: it was Germans and not the mythological "Nazis" who fought on one side and committed unspeakable crimes, and it was Russians who committed little-known but similarly unspeakable crimes in the territories they occupied. For all the admirable delicacy with which brutality is described in this book,

the author does not mince words or use euphemisms in discussing fundamental matters.

The author's ability to draw historical parallels makes for fascinating passages. Part of his involuntary travels duplicated Alexander the Great's trek to Asia. He was in Palestine when the King David Hotel in Jerusalem was bombed; he heard the explosion. Among the Poles that were saved by General Anders was Menachem Begin, who participated in that attack. He and several thousand Polish Jews deserted General Anders's army to fight their own war—another little-known detail of World War II.

When all the praises of this book have been sung, however, there remains that second category of readers I mentioned at the outset of this review: the Eastern European readers. That such a category should be put forth may appear ridiculous to English ears, but perhaps not entirely so to Irish or Scottish ears, if their owners recollect their identity lost or regained. In Eastern Europe, the question of identity has remained a hot issue even today, when wars have ceased and nothing, it seems, threatens the evolution of nationality into mere citizenship. In Eastern Europe the battle for

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identities has been fierce, as has the sense of obligation toward them. The Polish tradition of Catholic fidelity makes this issue particularly important.

The author belongs to a prominent family that has been firmly rooted for centuries in Polish culture and language. As any student of past ages knows, the aristocracy was expected to pay for their privileges by serving the State in time of need. A firm sense of duty to one's nation is the only possible justification for all the privileges the aristocracy has enjoyed over generations. While in Western Europe this civic responsibility has been taken over by elected officials originating mainly from the middle classes and aristocracy has become a quaint relic of the past, in Eastern Europe, where invasions prevented the middle class from developing, nations have been in desperate need of people capable of speaking up and working for them without being elected or indeed without being paid; titled people were among the precious few able to undertake this duty. There have been aristocrats in Poland who rose to the occasion: a recently published memoir by Karolina Lanckorońska (d. 2002) records her life dedicated to the service of her countrymen before and after the War, and even

in Ravensbrück where Countess Lanckorońska was imprisoned by the Germans. However, the Polish aristocracy has mostly failed their country in this respect, and not only in World War II. In the 1980s in South Africa I ran into a group of Polish aristocrats seeking in that Apartheid State a secure existence for themselves and their families, while their main contribution to the Polish cause was attending the yearly Polonaise Ball organised by the ladies of their circle. In the United States the princely family of the Radziwiłłs married into *nouveau-riche* circles, and that was the last Poland heard of them.

When I was reading about the author's princely family, its roots in the fourteenth century, and the famous family members whose names survived in history, my enthusiasm for this memoir began to fade. Taking pride in one's ancestors is, of course, legitimate, and perhaps the author was advised by his Editors to take full advantage of his family's past glory. But it was abundantly clear that the narrator treated his princely background merely as a feather in his cap in the process of becoming a Britisher. He settled comfortably in Great Britain where he lived a pleasant and productive life. I checked him on the Internet:

nothing indicates that his Polish background made him exert himself in any way on behalf of the Polish cause. As he says himself, he became an amateur historian of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and of medieval Russia.

A section of his memoir describes going on vacation to Cairo at the beginning of August 1944 (when the Rising '44 was beginning in Warsaw). Two months later, when the Rising was choked to death, another joyful occasion is described: the arrival of the author's family. I have nothing against enjoying one's family, but the matter of the Rising is not even mentioned on the pages of the memoir that describe August and September 1944. Instead, we meet people who drink, talk, play practical jokes on one another, and, in the case of women, distribute their prewar charm and elegance. The author excuses himself by saying that "the youth has little time for the matters of state" (163). Oh really? At age sixteen, hundreds and thousands of Polish boys were up to their ears in the Resistance.

In Poland the burden of sacrifices for maintaining the Polish identity has been carried by petty nobles, educated city folk, and even peasants, but not by aristo-

crats who have usually been only too happy to blend into the societies luckier than their homeland. Yet if there is any justification for the largesse and respect that a nation bestows on its aristocracy, it lies in that social group's assumed readiness to represent a community that needs defenders. I did not find a trace of such awareness in Mr. Giedroyc's book.

Thus from the viewpoint of an Eastern European reader, this is a story of survival and self-interest that generates sympathy and compassion when the narrative deals with the Gulag machine in Soviet Russia, but also raises the question of the Polish aristocrats' lack of loyalty to their roots. Again, I am not referencing the author's decision to stay in Great Britain—a return to Soviet-occupied Poland would have been suicide. But there were many who stayed abroad while demonstrating that loyalty and speaking up for the muzzled nation, to mention only the author's great namesake Jerzy Giedroyc. This is why, in spite of the author's talent and perfect manners that I greatly enjoyed, I cannot give his book my unqualified praise.

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