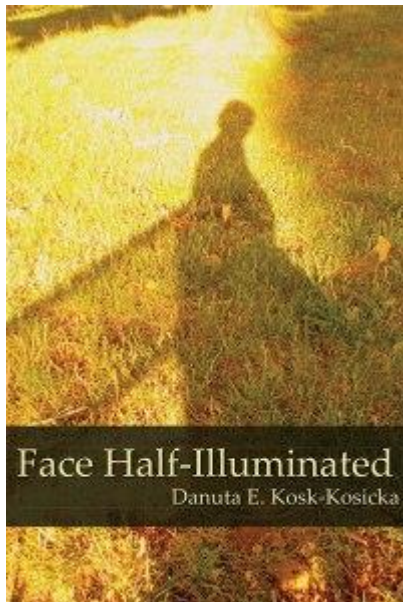


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## Interview with Danuta Kosk-Kosicka | Little Patuxent Review

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Prolific *LPR* contributor Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka has two books being published. The first, *Face Half-Illuminated*, includes sixteen original poems and Kosk-Kosicka's translations of sixteen poems by her mother, Polish poet Lidia Kosk. Apprentice House published the book just this week, and it's available [on their site](#) as well as [Barnes & Noble](#).

In April, CityLit Press releases Kosk-Kosicka's Harriss Prize-winning chapbook *Oblige the Light*. Contest judge Michael Salcman, a poet and the art consultant for *LPR*, selected Kosk-Kosicka's twenty-eight-poem manuscript.

This is all in addition to the contributions Kosk-Kosicka has made to *LPR*'s pages in print and online. Her poems "Lake Patzcuaro" and "The Movie in my Head" appeared in our [Spirituality](#) and [Make Believe](#) issues, respectively. She also contributed [an essay on her experience as a foreign-born poet](#) as part of our [On Being Invisible series](#) that coincided with the [Social Justice issue](#).

This fall, Danuta and I met over coffee at Ellicott City's Bean Hollow to discuss her work.

LS: Congratulations on the new books.

DEKK: I keep smiling. It's a very good feeling.

LS: Do you draft your poems in your native Polish or in English?

DEKK: I came to this country as a scientist. I have a Ph.D. in biochemistry. I was writing grant proposals, scientific articles. Everything was in English. So it became natural for me to write poems in English as well.

As a teenager I wrote [poetry] in Polish. I was a professor at Hopkins, and in the last few years I found myself, when I was writing scientific papers, scribbling some poetry on the back.

It's just natural for me [to write in English]. I live here. I worked in this language. My kid was born here. Everybody around me speaks English. Most of my friends are English-speaking, so it was totally natural.

LS: Did you leave the scientific field to focus on your writing?

DEKK: I was beginning to feel very ill, and then I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. Turning to poetry was a life-saver, so to speak, because I'm a very active person. Many people with fibromyalgia spend time in bed, can't do anything. Of course, I have days like that too, but with writing and translating I can pace myself. Writing is a good thing and I chose poetry over novels. . . . I don't have the energy to write a novel.

I had this burst of writing in 1997, a huge amount of poems in both languages. Apparently it was in me and it had to come out. I think it was probably that feeling of loss [after leaving my job because of my illness]. Having been an associate professor at Johns Hopkins, that was a huge loss.

LS: You came to the U.S. during a time of political upheaval in Poland.

DEKK: In 1980, people didn't know much about Poland. It was not very often that scientists came from behind the Iron Curtain.

They wouldn't let my husband come with me. The thinking was: Two professionals going abroad, they will not come back. He was let out in December only because Solidarność (Solidarity) was born in Poland and they let him go visit his wife. I was going to go [back] to Poland for Christmas and I couldn't because martial law was imposed and there were no flights.

When you have no communication and you know you can't go back, you have to kind of build a wall for security. You want to forget, but of course you can't forget.

I'm looking at the titles of the poems and I'm thinking many of them are [about] loss. It comes in different ways. It's the loss of country. For many months I couldn't call my parents; there was no communication. I had to forget certain things so I didn't go crazy. Part of the poetry is recovery [of those memories]. Many of the poems are like dreams.

LS: Translation is an art form in its own right. How did you get started translating poems?

DEKK: It's a challenge. I guess that's why I started . . . it was a challenge and something I could try to do. You know, the first poem I translated was Wisława Szymborska's "People on the Bridge." [When Szymborska won the Nobel Prize], a friend asked me if I could translate and I said I'd never done anything like that. At that time, there were no books by her in English.

When Szymborska's books came out, that poem I translated was in two of them. My friend copied the published translation and compared it with mine. We realized they were very different. This was when I started to say, "Okay, what is a translation?"

Mom asked me to translate her poems. The first poem of hers I translated was a rhymed poem. That tells you how innocent I was—a rhymed poem in another language. It was published in *Passager*. Then I thought this was a great project to do.

LS: Do you remember your mother writing poetry when you were growing up?

DEKK: She is a lawyer and she worked all her life. Her first book was published when I was already here. Mom—she's just totally amazing. [I remember her] writing occasional poems for the kids in school.

Putting together this book [*Face Half-Illuminated*] at Apprentice House was very difficult. I felt a huge sense of responsibility because it's my mom and me together. [Kosk-Kosicka has translated and edited two previous collections of her mother's poems.]

I came up with this idea. I proposed it to Apprentice House. They picked it when I was in Poland this year. So I told Mom, "We're going to have this book!" Then I started going through the translations all again. My poems had to speak to each other. Her poems had to speak to each other and then they had to go across. I was the only one who could do it. My mom does not speak English.

LS: Who are some of your favorite Polish poets that Americans haven't really discovered yet?

DEKK: Gałczyński. This is a poet we grew up with, my generation. And Norwid. He's very difficult. A philosopher, a bit like Blake . . . he was very serious. I don't know anybody who wrote like that.

Find previews of poems from both books [here](#) and [here](#).

*Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka is a scientist, bilingual poet, writer, poetry translator, photographer, and coeditor of the literary journal Loch Raven Review. Her poems have appeared in the U.S. and throughout Europe in numerous literary journals and anthologies—most recently in International Poetry Review, Beltway Poetry Quarterly, Spillway, and A Narrow Fellow Poetry Journal. Her translations of Maryland poets laureate—Lucille Clifton, Josephine Jacobsen, and Linda Pastan—have been published in Poland. Her translations of Lidia Kosk, Ernest Bryll, and Wisława Szymborska's poems have been published*

*in the U.S. She has translated into English almost 100 poems for two bilingual books by Lidia Kosk: niedosyt/reshapings and Słodka woda, słona woda/Sweet Water, Salt Water, the latter of which she has also edited. Danuta is the author of Face Half-Illuminated, a forthcoming book of poems, translations, and prose (Apprentice House) and the winner of CityLit Press's fifth annual Harriss Poetry Prize for her chapbook manuscript Oblige the Light.*

*Lidia Kosk is the author of eleven books of poetry and short stories, including two bilingual volumes, niedosyt/reshapings and Słodka woda, słona woda/Sweet Water, Salt Water, as well as two poetry and short fiction anthologies that she compiled and edited. She collaborated with her late husband, Henryk P. Kosk, on the two-volume Poland's Generals: A Popular Biographical Lexicon. Her poems and prose have been published in literary journals and anthologies in Poland and in the U.S., most recently in Lalitamba, The Blue Lyra Review, The Fourth River, The Dirty Goat, and International Poetry Review. Her poems have been translated into seven languages and into choral compositions and multimedia video presentations. She was featured, with Danuta, on National Public Radio station, WYPR's "The Signal." Lidia resides in Warsaw, Poland.*