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Found in Translation: A Poet's Journey

David W. Kriebel

*In summer 2003 I had the pleasure of interviewing Polish poet Lidia Kosk with the assistance of her daughter, poet and translator Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka, known to friends as Danka. the interview took place at Danka's home in the Baltimore area, where her mother was visiting following publication of her book of poems, **Niedosyt/Reshapings**, which was translated by her daughter. I found Lidia to be a spirited and thoughtful person. Her personality fits her poetry, some of which you can view by clicking on the link on this page. The book may be purchased through Amazon.com.*



Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka & Lidia Kosk

photo by Dave Kriebel

Lidia Kosk is a woman who takes chances.

As a young girl living in Poland during World War II, she was shot at by German troops while running after a Jewish friend who was being led away with other Jews in a forced march. As an adult, she helped compile materials and conducted interviews for her husband's book on Polish generals, a controversial

work during a time of Soviet domination. And throughout her life she has always stood unafraid before the powers of man and nature, whether in

the form of a storm at sea or the aerial bombardment of a city.

Perhaps Lidia's courage comes from the experience of a writer who has lived much of her life in the shadow of totalitarian oppression. But it seems to have deeper roots. She has always seen herself as part of something larger, a feeling expressed in her poetry about nature and her sense of connection to the natural world.

"It's like a deep urge, a necessity to be part of nature, to be united with nature." She feels the connection to be tightest in places and situations that some would call awesome, and dangerous—storms, oceans, mountains. For instance, Lidia recalls being on a cruise in a severe thunderstorm. The seamen wanted her to go below decks, but she refused. She wanted to be part of the storm. She has always had the need to stay until the end of such an experience, to live through it and not run away.

Still, she has learned to be humble in the face of the natural world. "We are part of nature," she notes. "We ought to take from nature what nature offers us and learn what nature teaches us." She has always looked at people's relation to nature—whether they respect nature or damage it. "If you are there (in nature) and destroying everything around you, what does that do to a human being?"

Lidia is a profoundly spiritual person, a fact also reflected in her work. One of the most wonderful people she knows is fellow Polish poet Pope John Paul II, with whom she had an audience during a pilgrimage to Monte Cassino, Italy, where many Polish soldiers were killed fighting the Germans during World War II. She agrees with his thoughts on work and prayer: "The best prayer is work. . . Work in such a way as if everything depended on you. Believe as if everything depended on God. So," she notes, "when you're working, you're praying."

When she hears the birds sing, she thinks it's like prayer, and when she sees something beautiful, it's for the glory of God. The last poem in her latest collection *Niedosyt*, or *Reshapings*, refers to "three live leaves"—the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. Lidia was brought up to believe that attendance at mass was less important than the manner in which one behaved. "That was God—the whole way of living your life."

By the time she was a teenager, Lidia had first-hand experience of the horrors of war. Twice she was captured by the Nazis in random round-ups of Polish citizens. Yet, she still believes that human beings are naturally good, even though there is a part of us that is evil and can be activated by ideology. She describes two quite different experiences from attending to wounded in 1944 when a German train taking Ukrainians across Poland to a forced labor camp was derailed in a German bombing. She cared for

two victims, a 12-year-old Ukrainian boy and a German soldier, both dying. As Lidia tried to hold in the bowels of the Ukrainian boy, he cried, "Slaughter all the Poles." To her, he was simply wounded and in need of help. Later, when she gave water to the dying German soldier he reacted differently. He was grateful to her and asked her to inform his wife in Germany that he had died. "Since he was not indoctrinated, he was able to give a human response." She also blames ideological indoctrination for the September 11 tragedy, expressed in her poem "Before a Human Killed With a Human." Lidia sees this event as a turning point: "...that a human being whose thought is used for the good of humankind, that same human being is used to destroy."

Lidia cannot recall a time when she wasn't writing. She had her first publication—a poem called "Human Fate"—at age 9, in a school newsletter. But hers was no life of leisure. Even before the war, she had to work hard on the family farm. Since there were five daughters in the family and no surviving sons—her only brother died when she was five—she had to shoulder her share of the load, taking care of horses and standing behind a plow. "I was the boy," she says, smiling.

Growing up she was convinced that a different life awaited her, the life she would create herself through work and studies. She knew all along that she would get a university degree. Everything that surrounded her, no matter how difficult and unpleasant, was only a bump on the road, an obstacle she had to overcome, and so she overcame those obstacles.

She always made time to write poetry and short stories. She was influenced by the classics and the romantics, but she is hesitant to single out any one influence because there were so many. She read widely. She notes that the role of poetry in Poland has been different from the role of poetry in America, particularly today. "Poetry there is not like introspective American poetry," she notes. Poetry in Poland, and in all of Eastern Europe, plays a more political role.

Lidia is currently working on two books, which she sees as two volumes. These will be personal memoirs, but also a mirror of the times in which she has lived. Fortunately for American readers her works have been translated into English by her daughter, Polish-American poet Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka. Danka, as she is known to friends, feels that the fact that the poet she is translating is her mother gives her a good deal of freedom, since she can confer with her easily on points of translation. Nor does she find translating poetry particularly difficult, conventional wisdom notwithstanding. "Of course, I don't want to diminish my achievements," she says, laughing. The hardest part was the fact she herself is a poet. "Being a poet you have to be careful walking this line, so you don't start writing your own poems."

Generally, she tries to remain as close to the original text as possible, introducing changes only as necessary. For instance, in the poem “Monte Cassino,” her mother refers to battle there during the war, and Danka had to find a way to explain that to an American audience that might not know the history. “There is a song in Poland: ‘The poppies in Monte Cassino are red because they grew from Polish blood.’” It is also often hard to translate rhyme. And for one of her mother’s sonnets, Danka changes it to the English sonnet form, using iambic pentameter.

Perhaps one of the hardest tasks Danka has faced is the title of the present collection. The original Polish word, Niedosyt, means insatiability, longing for more, doing many things and still not being satisfied. “I couldn’t find a word which has so many meanings.” She settled on Reshapings after translating the poem “Niedosyt” as “Memory” in the text. The poem concerns her father’s passing. Danka finds that translation helps her to gain a deeper insight into the work. “When you translate, you have to read many times—translating is a way to discover things you won’t if you read only once.”

Lidia hopes readers will find something in her poetry that will make their lives easier, to give them a lift. “Happiness is inherently in us—you just have to wake it up. There are different ways of making this happiness. Poetry is one way to bring it out. I would like to help people in this way.” Her one complaint? “The world and people are so interesting, it’s a frustration that I won’t be able to meet all of them, to learn everything.”

- More info on [Niedosyt/Reshapings](#) by Lidia Kosk
- [Two poems](#) by Lidia Kosk
- [A Celebration of Work by Lidia Kosk](#) (Reading)
- [Six Women in Search of Each Other: Inside Quatrain](#)
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