

## INTRODUCTION

### “Writing Polish in America”: The Case of Anna Frajlich

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I have borrowed for this introduction the title of Anna Frajlich’s 2006 presentation at the Association of Nationalities annual convention, which was first published in her *Ghost of Shakespeare: Collected Essays* (2020).<sup>1</sup> Frajlich opens her talk with a personal anecdote that quickly moves from humor to tragedy:

When people used to ask me where I was from, my favored answer was “from Brooklyn,” since that for many years was my permanent address. But because my accent is not exactly a Brooklyn accent, I would need to explain further: “from Poland.” But where in Poland? And now it would get a bit complicated. Both my parents were from Lwów, from whence they fled to Russia in 1941 to escape Hitler’s invasion. I was born in Kyrgyzstan, and then lived for some two or three years in the Urals. On our way back to Poland, Lwów was off limits, and all our relatives had perished in the Holocaust. Having neither home nor family to return to, my parents went to the last stop of the transport train: Szczecin.<sup>2</sup>

Forced into exile by the virulent, government-sponsored anti-Semitic campaign of 1968, Frajlich left Poland a year later as a beginning poet and young mother, with no hope of return to her homeland or parents. Moreover, it seemed highly unlikely that she would be able to put to use her graduate degree in philology that she had earned at Warsaw University.

As she writes in that same essay:

I should say that even though exile and living in exile was the central experience of my life, and is the predominant theme of my poetry, I am perhaps a somewhat atypical example. [ . . . ]

When I left Poland I was not a “writer” yet, even though I had already published some poems and articles and the manuscript of my first collection of poems had

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1. Anna Frajlich, “Writing Polish in America,” in *The Ghost of Shakespeare: Collected Essays*, ed. Ronald Meyer (Boston: Academic Studies Press), 268–273.  
2. Frajlich, “Writing Polish in America,” 268.

been favorably reviewed by a publishing house. [...] I had to wait more than twenty years to publish my first book in Poland.<sup>3</sup>

All of the contributions to the present issue of *The Polish Review* bear out this centrality of exile, both as it appears in her poetry, and also as a major theme in her short prose and correspondence.

As she has stated on more than occasion, Frajlich believed her creative and professional lives to be over when she arrived in the United States. But things turned out quite differently. Frajlich worked as an epidemiological assistant at the New York Blood Center from 1971 until 1975, where, among other things, she interviewed clients about their sexual habits and other personal details. As she wryly remarks in the short story “Laboratorium” [The laboratory, 1975]: “My studies of Polish literature at Warsaw University did not prepare me for this.”<sup>4</sup> As it happened, the Blood Center employed a number of scholars, scientists, and diplomats who had asked for asylum as a result of political events in Eastern Europe. Russian became the lingua franca for this group of émigré Czechs, Poles, and Romanians.

The Blood Center was located near Hunter College, and Frajlich took advantage of that to re-enter her chosen field of study, literature. Meanwhile, she embarks on her writing career as an émigré writer. As she states in “Writing Polish in America”: “Being an émigré writer poses the problem of homelessness. It was *Wiadomości* that provided me with a surrogate home when I needed one.”<sup>5</sup> A meeting with Zoya Yurieff, professor of Slavic Literatures at New York University proved to be fateful; Yurieff, who knew Frajlich from her *Wiadomości* publications, encouraged her to apply for graduate school, saying “Your place is at the university.” Frajlich would go on to write her dissertation about Russian Symbolist poetry—relying now on her Russian that she had revived at the Blood Center.

Her graduate studies at NYU and her frequent appearances in the émigré press opened the door to her lecturership in Polish at Columbia University, where she taught for over 30 years. She was hired by Professor Robert A. Maguire, who was not only a specialist on Nikolai Gogol, but also a former student of Manfred Kridl and one of the first translators of Wisława Szymborska into English. Apart from teaching, Frajlich organized conferences and lectures on major figures of Polish literature and culture, for example Józef Wittlin and Bruno Schulz, as well as thematic conferences, for example, “North America in the Eyes of the Polish Beholder” and “The Polish-American Woman: The Other in Both Cultures.” All the while, she became more and more recognized as a major poet writing in Polish.

3. Frajlich, 268.

4. Frajlich, “Laboratorium” (The laboratory), dated 1975, the title story in her collection of prose by the same name (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Forma, 2018), 12. The quotation is from my translation-in-progress of Frajlich’s prose, which includes the title story and another seventeen pieces.

5. Frajlich, “Writing Polish in America,” 270.

In 1993, Frajlich returned to her homeland for the first time to promote her first book published in Poland, *Ogrodem i ogrodzeniem* [The garden and the fence]. Five more books of poetry have followed. Among her many honors, she holds the Turzanski Foundation (Toronto) Literary Prize (2003) and the Kościelski Foundation (Geneva) Literary Award (1981).

In 2016, the year of her retirement from Columbia University, Frajlich traveled to London to receive the Literature Prize from the Union of Polish Writers in Exile for her “work as a whole,” citing her “deep literary roots in Polish, Jewish, and American culture,” yet recognizing that it is in “the Polish language that she finds a safe haven and belonging. [. . .] The journey, exile, and the passing of time are frequent themes in her work, which has a deep humanitarian dimension.” Later that same year, a conference in her honor was convened by the University of Rzeszów and Jagiellonian University—the present issue publishes translations of three contributions from the conference volume.

Since that time Frajlich has added another book of poetry, *W pośpiechu rzeka płynie* [Like a rushing river, 2020]. In 2020–2021 she was honored with the Jubilee Medal from the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, and the Szczecin University Medal. In addition, she published the volume *The Ghost of Shakespeare: Collected Essays*, and has added bilingual editions of her poetry in Spanish and Ukrainian to the previous volumes in French and Italian.

This special issue of *The Polish Review* devoted to the work of Anna Frajlich is set to be published in March 2022, to coincide with her jubilee. Half of the essays first appeared in Poland—my heartfelt thanks to those authors for permission to publish their work in English translation. The other essays were contributed by scholars residing in the United States. My aim was to paint as broad a picture of Frajlich’s work as possible. To that end, the volume opens with essays by Jarosław Anders and Wojciech Ligęza. Anders considers Frajlich’s poetics and her treatment of space, time, memory, human relations, while Ligęza investigates the concept of time, among many other things, in both her poetry and prose. Alice-Catherine Carls and Beata Morzyńska-Wrzosek both analyze Frajlich’s experience of emigration and exile by examining Frajlich’s published correspondence. Carls pays particular attention to the correspondence with Stefania Kossowska, editor at *Wiadomości*, who played such a crucial role in Frajlich’s literary career, while Morzyńska-Wrzosek bases her microhistory on the correspondence of Frajlich, her sister Felicja, and her husband Władysław Zajęc in the letters they wrote to Frajlich’s parents who had remained behind in Szczecin. Ewa Bartoś’s study of corporeal tropes continues the themes of the wound and trauma of exile in Frajlich’s work. Ross Ufberg, Frajlich’s former student and her frequent translator, interviews the poet about her “conversations with the dead.” Sławomir Jacek Żurek takes as his subject Frajlich’s cycle “Wiersze izraelskie” [Israel poems], written during her travel to Israel in 1991. Ross Ufberg’s translation of these poems follows. My own essay traces the transformation of the image of New York City in Frajlich’s poetry from hostile environment to beloved home. Alice-Catherine Carls makes another appearance

in the volume as co-author, with Grażyna J. Kozaczka, of the review essay on *The Ghost of Shakespeare*.

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