ZESZYTY NAUKOWE • UNIWERSYTET ZIELONOGÓRSKI • 2016
SERIA: SCRIPTA HUMANA
AMERICAN LITERATURE AND INTERCULTURAL DISCOURSES TOM 7

Sonia Caputa
University of Silesia

NOSTALGIA AND MOURNING IN ANTHONY BUKOSKI'S LITERARY WORLD OF POLISH AMERICANS

Abstract

Contemporary America has discovered high, cultural, therapeutic, as well as commercial values in the notions of history, memory and nostalgia. Renewed interest in languages of ethnics, their literature and Old World customs constitutes evidence of a surge in ethnic identity. The American nostalgic ethnic revivalism also affected Polish American studies and Polish American literature, even though the latter is probably still establishing its place in the canon of American literature, and has undergone a long struggle to be considered an object worthy of scholarly research. Anthony Bukoski is a contemporary Polish American writer whose creative work explores the complex experiences of Polish immigrants and their descendants caught between the ethnic and the dominant host cultures. The aim of the present article is to shed some light upon ethnic expression in Bukoski's short stories especially grounded in ubiquitous nostalgia for the past, the controlling forces of folk religiosity, the network of family relationships, the attachment to the land, and polka music, which permeates community life within the ethnic reality.
Keywords: nostalgia, Polish Americans, Anthony Bukoski, folk religiosity

Contemporary America has discovered, in the opinion of some experts, high, cultural, therapeutic, as well as commercial values in the notions of history, memory and nostalgia[1]. Renewed interest in languages of ethnics, their literature and Old World customs has been observed in the USA especially since the 1960s, and constitutes, according to some sociologists, evidence of a surge in ethnic identity[2]. At the same time the awakening of a collective memory of various ethnic groups, reconstructions of a lost ethnic identity, opening of immigrant museums and the establishment of new university departments with scholars whose areas of interest include history, memory

[1] See D. Ugresic, *Konfiskata pamięci*, [in:] *Nostalgia. Eseje o tęsknocie za komunizmem*, eds. F. Modrzejewski, M. Sznajderman, trans. S. Caputa, Wołowiec 2002, p. 250.
[2] See R. D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity*, New Haven and London 1990, p. 29.

and the study of sometimes neglected or forgotten cultural identities, are also the results of the nostalgic fascination[3]. Whether there is something more here than the nostalgic fascination is still an open question. This renewed interest might probably be explained by the fact that nowadays there exists some sort of an "epidemic of nostalgia"[4], using Svetlana Boym's terminology, and in her opinion it is a craving for a reconstruction of the community tied by the specific, common, collective memory, the desire for a continuity in the fragmented world.

The American nostalgic ethnic revivalism also affected Polish American studies and Polish American literature, even though the latter is probably still establishing its place in the canon of American literature, and has undergone a long struggle to be considered an object worthy of scholarly research.

Anthony Bukoski[5] is a contemporary Polish American writer whose creative work explores the complex experiences of Polish immigrants and their descendants caught between the ethnic and the dominant host cultures. Bukoski is a considerably new, important voice of the American authors of Polish descent in the United States. The author created the literary town Superior, modelled on the real Polish neighbourhood in Superior city, in the state of Wisconsin (which is the place of his birth), and has succeeded in making the Polish culture of Superior a microcosm of the world. Bukoski published his first collection of short stories *Twelve Below Zero* in 1986, and even though only one short story from this collection portrayed Polish Americans, his subsequent publications, such as *The Children of Strangers* (published in 1993), *Polonaise* (published in 1999), *Time Between Trains* (issued in 2003), and the latest book *North of the Port* (printed in 2008), are peopled with Polish American cultural exiles, who "assess and reassess, discover and confront [their] loyalties, the ethnic self, the buried past"[6]. The stories cover the last 50 years of the twentieth century and are

[3] See D. Ugresic, op.cit., p. 250.

[4] S. Boym, *Nostalgia i postkomunistyczna pamięć*, [in:] *Nostalgia. Eseje o tęsknocie za komunizmem*, eds. F. Modrzejewski, M. Sznajderman, trans. S. Caputa, Wołowiec 2002, p. 274.

[5] Anthony Bukoski was born in 1945, in East End, the Polish neighbourhood of Superior, Wisconsin. His parents came to the United States from the suburbs of Warsaw, and were peasants. In one interview (J. Merchant, M. Urbanowski, *Pisząc spłacam dług Bogu… – rozmowa z Anthony Bukoskim*. "Arcana" 1999, vol. 29, no. 5, pp. 87-91) the author mentions his grandparents, who also immigrated to America. Taking into consideration the generational location, some scholars tend to perceive Bukoski as a second generation writer (M. Longrie, *Replaying the Past: An Interview with Anthony Bukoski*. "Wisconsin Academy Review" vol. 42, issue 1, 1995-1996, p. 29), nevertheless, since both the grandparents and the parents immigrated to the United States and Bukoski was raised in the two generational Polish American home, he equally may be perceived as a representative of the third generation of Polish Americans. In 1984 Bukoski obtained his Ph. D. degree and started teaching at the Northwestern State University in Louisiana, but then moved to Wisconsin State University where he teaches American literature until today. (T. Napierkowski, *Polscy sąsiedzi. Proza Anthony'ego Bukoskiego*, "Akcent" 1990, vol. 1-2, no. 39-40, p. 246).

[6] T. S. Gladsky, *Princes, Peasants and Other Polish Selves*, Amherst 1992, p. 264.

loosely connected by characters who appear in different tales. Unlike the fiction of Nelson Algren, often criticized by Polish organizations, Anthony Bukoski's prose has been valued and appreciated by both Polish and American literary critics. His collections of short stories attracted widespread recognition and gathered a number of awards; for instance, the author was awarded the Sarmatian Review Literary Prize in 2002 for the "superb ability to transform the often mundane and inarticulate lives of ordinary Polish Americans into art of the highest quality"[7]. He was also a winner of the Oskar Halecki Literary Award, and the Ann Powers Book-length Award granted to the best authors from Wisconsin.

Ethnic expression in Bukoski's short stories is especially grounded in ubiquitous nostalgia for the past, the controlling forces of folk religiosity, the network of family relationships, the attachment to the land, and polka music, which permeates community life within the ethnic reality, "mythologizes the land of the ancestors [and] provides focal points for family life"[8]. As Thomas Gladsky observes:

> Bukoski despairs for the past, […] for old values and old ways [but, while mourning, he simultaneously] points toward a redefined sense of ethnicity, an awareness by the young that something out there must be preserved; toward a new dialogue, a new expression of ethnicity[9].

Despite the fact that Bukoski, according to David Ruenzel, is "too good a writer to engage in nostalgia"[10], his short stories lament the loss of the past, and his protagonists yearn for the sense of rootedness, security and belonging, which can only be provided by the rusting away Polish American neighbourhood. Gladsky asserts that "Bukoski juxtaposes the end of ethnicity through the death of the immigrant generation with the ethnic awakening of the younger generation"[11], but it may not escape one's attention that the voices that tell his stories are mostly sorrowful, regretful, and at times, carry too heavy Polish cultural baggage on their shoulders. It may probably result from the fact that the Polishness in Bukoski's short stories, apart from the web of family relationships, abiding Catholic faith and polka music, evokes "foods, a sprinkling of myths, proverbs, […] Polish language phrases, and occasional references to history and geography"[12]. His characters can hardly conceive of happiness in America without their ethnicity grounded in humility, endurance and loyalty to family and nation.

---

[7] A letter from Ewa M. Thompson, the editor of "The Sarmatian Review" September, 2002.

[8] G. J. Kozaczka, *The Invention of Ethnicity and Gender in Suzanne Strempek Shea's Fiction*, "The Polish Review" 2003, vol. 48, no. 3, p. 334.

[9] T. Gladsky, *op.cit*., p. 266.

[10] D. Ruenzel, *A Way of Life Rusts Away in the North*, "The Milwaukee Journal" 1994, no. 2, p. 9.

[11] T. Gladsky, *op. cit*., p. 266.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 5.

Bukoski's protagonists, however, are far from being sanctified by the author. Literary Polish Americans are not elevated to such a point that they are without any fault. On the contrary, Bukoski draws his readers' attention to the fact that his characters are far from being models of virtue.

Nostalgia does not only imply mourning over displacement and irreversibility of time but it also denotes a craving for a place or home which does not exist anymore, or has never existed. Nostalgia, in Svetlana Boym's view, may be compared to a romance with one's own imagination, a blend of two perspectives: the reality and sheer fantasy, the past and the present. It would probably be hard to unequivocally define what people long for because the alluring target is perpetually ungraspable. Nonetheless, it has been assumed that nostalgia denotes homesickness and the desire for a different dimension of time, especially the time of one's own childhood, or youth[13]. Anthony Bukoski openly states that "writing his simultaneously imaginative and real stories brings [him] consolation […]. I can return to the past time and become younger"[14], he adds.

Nostalgia might be also catalyzed by the displacement from a cultural community. Roberta Rubenstein defines this kind of feeling as the "cultural mourning" which, in her view, signifies "an individual's response to the loss of something with collective or communal associations: a way of life, a cultural homeland, […] or the related history of an entire ethnic or cultural group from which [one] feels severed"[15]. Moreover, Rubenstein asserts that "culturally displaced or exiled people may mourn their separation from homeland, community, language, and cultural practices that contribute to identity"[16].

As for Bukoski's short stories, it seems that his Polish American literary characters are tormented by nostalgia for Polishness, for cultural distinctiveness and the vanishing Polish American community of Superior, for whom the Catholic religion and family values are of the highest importance. Although Bukoski has never visited the homeland of his grandparents, his prose has been characterised as the living memory of the American Polonia. Yet, the author confessed in one of the interviews that "the vital Polish and Polish-American culture and heritage in the stories exists more in [his] mind than in reality, and […] probably the one remaining vestige, or at least most visible vestige, of this heritage is [their] Polish Club, […] the Thaddeus Kosciuszko Fraternal Aid Society […]"[17], which he often refers to in his prose.

---

[13] See S. Boym, *op. cit*., p. 274.
[14] J. Merchant, M. Urbanowski, *op. cit*., p. 87.
[15] R. Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*, New York 2001, p. 5.
[16] *Ibidem*, p. 6.
[17] D. Bowen, *The Land of Graves and Crosses. An Interview with Anthony Bukoski*, "Main Street Rag" 2003, vol. 7, no. 3, p. 15.

The protagonists of Bukoski's short stories possess a great sentiment for the Polish-immersed, dilapidating neighbourhood of Superior, which does not simply constitute a place of their dwelling, but becomes their landscape of Polish American memory, an emotional space. Some of his characters are even preoccupied with remembering the geography of the place. For example Thaddeus, one of the characters of the story *A Geography of Snow*, returns to Superior for a short period of time during the interval in his military service in Vietnam, he drunkenly kisses and vacantly stares at a map of the Polish neighbourhood because "the map's contours [are] the contours of his life", and "when he gets killed, it'll be close by so a medic can get it for [him] while [he's] dying"[18]. Bukoski, using the map as the trigger, endows his character with better knowledge of himself and, consequently, the map becomes a tangible marker which has a special emotional appeal for him, because it joins the protagonist with his ancestors who used to live in Wisconsin and earlier also in Poland.

The Polish part of the literary Superior is inhabited by the characters for whom the Polish American neighbourhood transforms into a cultural repository and becomes a Polish American identity marker. It carries its own emotional history and supports the ethnic identity of its dwellers. The narrator of *The Wood of Such Trees* says:

> […] If someday I got lost, I would have the map of this Polish neighborhood to direct me back. I'd have rosaries, scapulars, and a prayer book with a Table of Movable Feasts I could pray from no matter where I was. I am saying the litany, "Lord Have Mercy on Us… Christ Have Mercy On Us"[19].

As Bukoski's literary characters mourn over the transformation of the town and the deaths of the representatives of the older Polish American generation, it may seem that in fact they grieve for Polishness, the cultural heritage threatened to be – as if – forgotten, lost or wiped out by the children of strangers, the Americans who "have taken only a minute to learn about centuries of struggle and grow bored"[20]. That is the reason why his protagonists cling so tightly to the last remnants of the Polish culture in literary Superior. For instance, in a short story *President of the Past* the narrator, Rick Mrozek, returns home to become president of the local Polish Club and realizes that the club building is going to be taken over by some other businessmen, and eventually closed. The narrator of the story is not able to accept the fact that another Polish American organization will sink into oblivion, and that he would be deprived of the place where he could find solace and cherish his heritage. The protagonist confesses:

---

[18] A. Bukoski, *A Geography of Snow*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between Trains*, Dallas 2003, pp. 11, 13.
[19] A. Bukoski, *The Wood of Such Trees*, [in:] *idem*, *Polonaise*, Dallas 1999, p. 148.
[20] A. Bukoski, *Children of Strangers*, [in:] *idem*, *Children of Strangers*, Dallas 1993, p. 89.

> with our past stored away, the club could disappear like Superior's Polish and Slovak churches. Churches gone, lodge membership dwindling, old people gone. If it keeps up, we'll have no memories. They'll all be in storage. […] How can we let this go? How can I myself let the club go? […] I, Rick Mrozek, am the president of the past[21].

Polish buildings, backyards which once belonged to Rick Mrozek's ancestors, the picture of Black Madonna, or the old photograph depicting the Polish American society named after Tadeusz Kościuszko together evoke sacred and poignant memories, which possess the power to bring the apparitions from the past back to life.

There is an enduring spirit of Poland in short stories written by Bukoski, and most of his protagonists are desperate lovers of the past. According to Thomas Gladsky, ethnicity reconstituted and rekindled in Bukoski's stories is not only limited to symbolic gestures connected with the past because the majority of his youthful protagonists sense their connection with the past and witness the immigrant dilemma. Some of the characters happen to fantasize about Poland, or they brim with nostalgia for Polish national heroes, striving to become paragons of virtue themselves. Tad, a young soldier from the short story *A Geography of Snow*, and a namesake of Tadeusz Kościuszko, endeavours to "do something brave, […] to be remembered as the East End man who wore a Purple Heart on his chest. […] I want to be [Kosciuszko], I want to win the war. I want to be a hero"[22]. Thus, Tad reasserts his ethnicity by expressing his wish to become the Polish hero.

As it has already been observed, ethnic expression in Bukoski's fiction is deeply rooted in simple, folk, highly emotional religiosity. According to Deborah Anders Silverman, "although a Polish-American's relationship with God is intense, it is also complex and mediated by priests, the Virgin Mary, and a host of saints who act as intercessors for the faithful"[23]. Such an interdependence between the pious, the saints, priests and the Virgin Mary which, in result, provides the Polish American protagonists with some access to God, is perfectly depicted in Bukoski's fiction. His short stories are characterized by God's constant presence in the daily lives of St. Adalbert's parishioners, who pray to their patron saints, to Virgin Mary, in front of the pictures of Black Madonna "with wounds that have saved the Polish nation over and over"[24], and, in return, God responds with physical signs to the pleas of the people.

Lesczyk [sic!] Iwanowski, the narrator of *A Guide to American Trees*, openly admits that "Jesus' mysteries appear in East End, [Superior]"; in *The Wand of Youth* Tadek prays for a blithe life of his mother, a new wreath for the Polish Club and health for his sister

[21] A. Bukoski, *President of the Past*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between…*, pp. 183, 186.
[22] A. Bukoski, *A Geography of Snow*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between…*, pp. 14, 17.
[23] D. A. Silverman, *Polish-American Folklore*, Urbana and Chicago 2000, p. 89.
[24] A. Bukoski, *The Shadow Players*, [in:] *idem*, *North of the Port*, Dallas 2008, p. 49.

Janina, being confident that "the Madonna would heal her regardless of what Dad says privately about her chances"[25]. Catherine Kalinowski, a 17-year-old character from *North of the Port* finds a tiny crucifix that had belonged to her grandmother and places it beneath her tongue to assert control over her sexuality, "to keep [her] soul safe from the devil"[26], thus, making sure Jesus would protect her from her sexual concupiscence and lust for the older Polish sailor her family has boarded since he jumped ship to escape communism. Bukoski makes Catholic religion an important part of the cultural and spiritual world of the community: the lives of the protagonists are governed by the yearlong cycle of holidays and family rites-of-passage celebrations. Occasionally, it seems that even the whole Polish American neighbourhood physically responds to particular religious holidays, as it is depicted in the short story *Gossamer Bloom*:

> […] on Assumption Day in August 1950, when the Blessed Virgin is taken soul and body into heaven, thousands of threadlike strands began falling from a sky as blue as the Virgin's robes[27].

It is probably not a coincidence that the inhabitants of Superior act peculiarly under such specific conditions. Magda Podgorak, for instance, the protagonist of *Gossamer Bloom*, loses herself in the mysteries of the Catholic faith and, trying to find Jesus, commits suicide because, as the narrator of the short story notices, "what but a sign from Jesus could have possessed a churchgoing woman to gaze heavenward, take a deep breath, and soar outward from the trestle […]?"[28]

Faith and ethnicity in Bukoski's fiction are inseparable since his protagonists equate Polishness with their religious affiliation and justify most of their actions with the Catholic faith. This particular stance is aptly illustrated by one of the key quotes from the short story *Gossamer Bloom*:

> [Magda Podgorak, who committed suicide in fact] had made the sacrificial flight for Poland, the "Christ of Nations," which has suffered through much of its history but, like Jesus, would come again in glory. She had leapt from the trestle for Mr. Zielinski, dying of heart problems in the East End; for Ada Borski, […] for St. Adalbert's nuns, who had little. […] "For my country America, for my country Poland, and for You, I will give myself, Dear Lord *Pan Jezu*"[29].

What seems significant is also the fact that even though the protagonists reconsider their ethnic identity they never enter the sphere of religious doubt. In the story *The Case for Bread and Sausage* two teenage boys, Wally "*Gówniarz*" Moniak and Ted, the

[25] A. Bukoski, *The Wand of Youth*, [in:] *idem*, *North of…*, p. 97.
[26] A. Bukoski, *North of the Port*, [in:] *idem*, *North of…*, p. 157.
[27] A. Bukoski, *Gossamer Bloom*, [in:] *idem*, *North of…*, p. 1.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 2.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 8.

narrator of the story, serve during a Catholic Mass and look with disdain at the new non-Polish American priest, who is to substitute Father Nowak. Nowak, who also reappears in other short stories, is an elderly stroke victim who had served St. Adalbert's Parish for forty years, and had become a paragon of virtue for the members of the younger generation. Although the new priest is a man of God, Polish American boys have doubts about if he is worthy of the sacred profession as "[there is] the beer smell on him [and it would be possible] to tuck a sign that reads '*Na Zdrowie*' into one of his three chins"[30]. As the teenagers administer the sacrament of Communion holding their patens to catch tiny crumbs from the Host, Ted realizes that the Polish American worshippers have a lot of longing for the Eucharist "that fills them in a different way than it fills people like [him]"[31]. Despite the fact that the youthful narrator perceives Communion, perhaps surprisingly, as another meal to "edge off of [his] hunger […] even if it can't fill [him] as much as a Ritz cracker"[32] or "a lunch of Polish sausage and ring baloney"[33], he confesses that "it's a mystery what [his] grandma or Mrs. Kosmatka, [his] neighbor, get from it, in their case [he] wonders if it has something to do with what they remember from Poland"[34].

Because the young ethnics are away from their ancestral country due to physical space and time, their perception and understanding of certain Polish/Catholic rituals is different from the older generation's awareness of the very same customs. The adolescent protagonists growing up within the American reality but, at the same time, in the Polish American neighbourhood, have to construct and redefine their ethnicity anew because, as Grażyna Kozaczka asserts, "ethnicity is not an attribute transplanted miraculously from the old country, but rather it is created by individual migrants and their communities to fulfill their needs"[35]. Even though the characters cannot fully comprehend the mystery of the sacrament of Communion, they see that the new priest does not practice one of the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy – to feed the hungry – as he devours all the food, leaving the hungry boys only with dirty breadcrumbs, which they eventually feed on.

The young descendants of Poles in America realize that they have a mission to accomplish, that they provide continuity; they are the remnants, the living memory of their Polish American community, representatives of the pious who still cherish Catholic values in consumerist America. The simple crumbs of bread they collect and share, acquire more meaning in the broader context; bread is not only the secular

[30] A. Bukoski, *The Case for Bread and Sausage*, [in:] *idem*, *North of…*, p. 55.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 57.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 56.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 57.
[34] *Ibidem*.
[35] G. J. Kozaczka, *op. cit*., p. 337.

counterpart to the body of Jesus but, in the Polish tradition, it is also the symbol of prosperity and wealth. Ultimately, the protagonists of the story remind themselves that their ancestors came to the New World from Poland "for bread, *za chlebem*" in order to be saved. Therefore, because of the sacral character of this food, Ted and Wally become aware of the fact that the Eucharist is holy bread and "if [they] drop a piece of bread at home, when [they] pick it up, Mother makes [them] kiss it"[36].

Because Poland with its history and old customs is a felt presence in Bukoski's short stories, most of his Polish American literary characters listen to music composed by Chopin or Paderewski. For Bukoski's protagonists Polish music is a route to a reconnection with roots; it reminds them of ancestors, "express[es] Polish people's courage and spirit"[37] and carries the echoes of the Old Country. The narrator of *Children of Strangers* claims that "[these] are haunted melodies that hurt a person with their sadness, the unforgotten music of the past"[38], and it is probably the reason why Bukoski's characters are, paradoxically, happy in their grief when they listen to music of Polish composers. Other Polish Americans in Bukoski's prose are polka lovers who approach the music with a frenzy akin to religious devotion, immersing themselves completely in "polka happiness". Despite the fact that polka originated not in Poland but Czechoslovakia, and the connection with Poland is probably expressed only in its name, Deborah Anders Silverman asserts that polka as a distinctive American form of ethnic music occupies a central position in Polish American culture, it is a class and identity marker, and polka musicians play a vital role of the "gatekeepers of the Polish culture"[39].

In a short story *Polkaholics*, Superior in Wisconsin is depicted as the phantasmagorical Polish homeland, or rather "Polka Country" with its roaring polka jamborees, and melancholic and grief-stricken wailing of the accordions. *Polkaholics* offers the image of a frozen in time and petrified culture, from which there is no way of escape, because polka haunts its inhabitants. The polka land is a background for presenting the conflict between the younger representative of the Polish descendants, Edek Patulski, and his sincere, self-sacrificing and fiercely patriotic father, Stash, the king of the polka, "that poor, foolish man [who] would put on his miller's cap like he missed work, sit out in the shade of the elm tree, and dream about the Yankovic boys"[40]. For Edek, the nostalgic fascination of his father with Polish culture, the usage of Polish language at home, as well as his devotion to the Catholic faith is a source of shame, annoyance and embarrassment. With time however, the narrator gets infected by the father's obsession with polka and attempts to experience what it means to be a polkaholic. Unable to do that,

[36] A. Bukoski, *The Case for Bread and Sausage,* [in:] *idem*, *North of…*, p. 59.
[37] A. Bukoski, *Leokadia and Fireflies*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between…*, p. 156.
[38] A. Bukoski, *Children of Strangers*, [in:] *idem*, *Children of…*, p. 87.
[39] D. A. Silverman, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
[40] A. Bukoski, *Polcaholics*, [in:] *idem*, *Children of…*, p. 134.

he "lies about being Polack. [He] eats beef and ham on days of fast and abstinence. He wipes off his Ash Wednesday ashes from [his] forehead"[41]. Nevertheless, when Stash passes away, his son, not being fully aware of his actions, turns on the polka radio station, "makes tapes on a tape recorder and plays them back to [himself], [or] maybe to [his father] if he's out there listening"[42]. The narrator confirms that the memories will never fade away and Polish values, which he often sneered at, finally become meaningful to him because the polka dance functions as a thread that connects him to his father, and at the same time to his lost ethnicity.

A cultural marker of Polish identity in the United States, i.e. polka music, sometimes turns into a catalyst of nostalgia for a lost childhood, like in the short story *The Moon of the Grass Fires*. Here, the narrator, retired Joe Lesczyk [sic!], finds a church confessional in an industrial waste landfill and brings it home because "he [can] not stand the sight of the crucifix poking out from demolition debris"[43]. The church confessional becomes an impulse for Joe to retrieve emotional memories of some Polish American parishioners and especially his mother, who was addicted to Asthmador Powder and the polka dance. It is revealed, however, that Joe's mother, frequently lost in her drug induced-hallucinations, used to send her son with a polka request to the local polka-playing musician, Buck Mrozek. Whenever the accordionist started his performance, Stella Lesczyk gave herself completely to the music, achieving the state of "polka catharsis"[44]. Even though Mr. Lesczyk told his son that "[mother's drug oblivion] has nothing to do with polka," the polka dance becomes the narrator's nightmare because he associates it only with his mother's addiction. "She shouldn't give polka a bad name"[45], Joe's father adds, suggesting that his wife disgraced the dance by her unseemly behaviour. However, on the day of her death Joe credulously believes that only "the right combination of words and polka music [would] keep [his mother] alive"[46]. With Stella gone, the polka era has reached its end, leaving the narrator with a painful problem – his memory of a past time and bitter dreams of childhood.

Polka tunes, just like religion, permeate family life within Bukoski's ethnic reality; they constitute a tool which breaks the barriers among the representatives of different generations, and enables Polish Americans to feel some connection with the land of their ancestors. Polka jamborees and the sound of the accordion become a unifying factor, which promotes family harmony. After all, everybody meets in front of the radio to listen to the "Polka Hour", or gathers in the kitchen to enjoy nightly music entertainment

[41] *Ibidem*, p. 138.
[42] *Ibidem*, p. 144.
[43] A. Bukoski, *The Moon of the Grass Fires*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between…*, p. 101.
[44] *Ibidem*.
[45] *Ibidem*, p. 102.
[46] *Ibidem*.

provided by the father, who plays "Hoopi Shoopi", "I'm from Planet Polka", or the Polish national anthem "Our Poland Shall Not Perish While We Live".

While addressing the question of the emergence of ethnicity as a social construct Grażyna Kozaczka notices that the invention of Polish American identity relies on the attempts of the immigrants and ethnics who "by blending the Polish with the American recreate many of the rituals that become powerful ethnic markers"[47]. Various gatherings and festive celebrations which have a religious, family or social character are, in fact, reinvented in the American context by a mixture of customs brought to the New World from different parts of Poland, adopted from the host culture, or created by a particular community. In this context, the characters in Bukoski's short stories are the leaders of the sodality Polish ladies worship groups, like the eccentric Mrs. Piłsudski, the character from *Holy Walker*. Some protagonists collect pasture weeds and bring them to the church believing that they are "old-time talismans against thunder, witches, weak eyes"[48]; some others are passionate and devoted members of bowling teams who win trophies for the Polish parish and attach stickers to the rear bumpers of their cars: "You betcha your dupa I'm Polish" as with Al and Pete Dziedzic, the protagonists of *Report of the Guardian of the Sick*. It is also common that Bukoski's Polish Americans fly Polish flags in their yards to honour their ancestors, they have decals of an eagle and the word *solidarność* in white letters on their front windows, they put on the Polish mountaineer outfits, or wear *rogatywka*, a four-cornered cap a person in the Old Country might wear, just to make themselves noticeable among the Americans.

Anthony Bukoski's fiction is also grounded in the so-called "culinary nostalgia", using Anita Mannur's expression; ethnic food ways have their place in American ethnic literature and, as Fred Gardaphé and Wenying Xu observe, "food often has an ability to last longer as a signifier for ethnicity than other markers, such as language and fashion"[49]. There exists a meaningful relationship between food and ethnicity because:

> [the] language of food offers a portal to ethnic history, culture and roots, [and] this language forms a gastronomic contact zone situated in cafes, kitchens, and homes where displaced individuals meet and reestablish identities[50].

Ann Hetzel Gunkel maintains that, apart from playing a "significant role in the work of ethnic memory"[51], food imagery serves as a powerful vehicle for exploring the ethnic

[47] G. J. Kozaczka, *op. cit.*, p. 336.
[48] A. Bukoski, *Winter Weeds*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between…*, p. 46.
[49] F. Gardaphé, W. Xu, *Introduction: Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures*, "Melus" 2007, vol. 32, no. 4, p. 5.
[50] *Ibidem*, p. 5.
[51] A. H. Gunkel, *Of Polka, Pierogi and Ethnic Identity: Toward a Polish American Cultural Studies*, "Polish-American Studies" 2005, vol. 62, no. 1, p. 39.

self in various literary contexts. Most of the Polish American characters depicted in Bukoski's fiction eat *pierogi*, (which are even eaten by the soldiers in Vietnam, who "ask for *pierogi* when they come back from search-and-destroy operations near An Ho"[52]) sauerkraut, *kielbasa,* pigs' feet, horseradish soup, or *bigos*, a hearty hunter's stew, consumed in order to "gain strength for the Advent season"[53]. They also drink vodka at the "Warsaw tavern" raising a toast to somebody's health, or *żubrówka,* convincingly described by the narrator of *A Geography of Snow* as "bison brand vodka flavored with an extract of the fragrant herb beloved by the European Bison"[54], which, as the narrator additionally reminds, possesses an amazing hypnotising quality. Food, and especially *bigos*, often becomes a common denominator, it serves as a sort of elixir, or linchpin which binds people together, like at the end of the aforementioned story *The Wally Na Zdrowie Show*. One may encounter Polish recipes in Bukoski's stories which, as Ann Hetzel Gunkel observes, "work as an apt metaphor for the reproduction of culture from generation to generation"[55]. Although, in his stories, Bukoski does not depict Polish American *busias* (grandmothers), who teach the third generation ethnics how to prepare Polish meals, the young descendants of Polish immigrants always associate their childhood days in the Polish American neighbourhood with the smell of freshly baked bread and other Polish culinary specialties[56].

The reassessment of the ethnic self of young Polish American characters usually takes place in Bukoski's fiction upon the death of a relative associated with the immigrant generation. *Children of Strangers*, for instance, is one of the heartbreaking stories which depicts the corrosion of a way of life of a generation of Catholic Polish Americans. Ralph and Josephine Slipkowski, the main characters, are preparing themselves for the moving and dignified ceremony of paying tribute to Sister Bronisława, the last living Polish American nun in the neighbourhood, who devoted fifty years of her life to the service in the parochial school. Bukoski's spokesmen painfully come to understand that the Polish American neighbourhood is in a state of deterioration and all the virtues the characters were taught to live by, such as "to work, to honor the Polish flag, to grow up in the faith"[57], seem to be meaningless now, especially when "people

[52] A. Bukoski, *A Geography of Snow*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between…*, p.11.
[53] A. Bukoski, *Winter Weeds*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between…*, p. 51.
[54] A. Bukoski, *A Geography of Snow*, [in:] *idem*, *Time Between…*, p.8.
[55] A. H. Gunkel, *op. cit*., p. 39.
[56] The two above paragraphs are going to be published in a modified version in Polish in the article „Kultura etniczna Polonii amerykańskiej i kulinarna nostalgia w twórczości amerykańskich autorów polskiego pokolenia: proza Leslie Pietrzyk i Anthony'ego Bukoskiego" in a post-conference volume entitled *Literatura polska obu Ameryk. Studia i szkice, seria druga*, ed. B. Szałasta-Rogowska (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016).
[57] A. Bukoski, *Children of Strangers*, [in:] *idem*, *Children of…*, p. 83.

without a heritage who draw public assistance have overtaken [them]"[58]. The bitter tone of quiet despair is visible in the story further, when the young cultural intruders, who are new residents, i.e. the threatening children of strangers, violently enter the church hall where the ceremony is held, disrespect the parishioners and remorselessly invade their lives. When the two boys observe the old Polish people, "they stare at the face of Poland, whose age and civility mean nothing to them"[59]; and when the smirking teenagers pass the parishioners they do not look at them "but through [them] as though [they] count for nothing at all on this earth"[60]. Ralph Slipkowski reaches a conclusion that any representative of the Polish American group gathered in the school building could tell the children of strangers everything about Polish history, describe the fierce battles with the enemies of the nation, elaborate on the redemptive power of Polish Catholicism and "the two intruders wouldn't care"[61].

For Josephine Slipkowski there is no hope for a better future, "no tomorrow, no ethnicity reinvented"[62], as Thomas Gladsky reiterates. The woman instinctively senses that "what's coming will be worse", she doubts whether she can survive and believes that "extinction might be better"[63]. The elderly couple is fully aware of the fact that the old ones have "faith that has travelled far"[64], a great spirituality, a dogged perseverance in Catholic loyalty which provides a continuity and gives the Polish Americans a sense of direction. It does not really matter how loud they can sing "Joining Poland's Sons and Daughters, We'll be Poles Forever", the growing realization is that their ethnic generation is coming to an end. Being afraid of the loss of memory and the general obliteration of Polish history and heritage, the Slipkowskis come to understand that, in fact, their ethnicity resides "in the mirrors in the Polish homes and in the wrinkles of the old faces and in the eyes and deep within the memory"[65].

There is an overwhelming fear that, especially, the older representatives of the American Polonia in Bukoski's fiction are gripped by and become the victims of the ingrained fear that "bleeds into successive generations so that a war or defeat or forced labor or internment are not over when they are over"[66]. This fear that the characters experience results from the fact that their lives, as well as the lives of their ancestors, had been influenced by the powerful historical and economic forces. Therefore, normal

[58] *Ibidem*.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 88.
[60] *Ibidem*, p. 89.
[61] *Ibidem*.
[62] T. Gladsky, *op. cit.*, p. 265.
[63] A. Bukoski, *Children of Strangers*, [in:] *idem*, *Children of…*, p. 83.
[64] *Ibidem*, p. 85.
[65] *Ibidem*, p. 89.
[66] L.Vallee, *Articulating the Polish American Experience*, http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~sarmatia/904/243vallee.html [access January 8, 2015].

existence was always precarious, tentative, poverty-stricken; always perceived as "a temporary armistice"[67], rather than a permanent state of peace. Hence, the hardworking, long-suffering Polish Americans in Bukoski's stories lean on their heritage, Catholic faith and the cultural repositories, such as the parochial school, St. Adalbert's church, or polka bands. They find solace in their connectedness and their hearts still yearn for better lives and dreams are waiting to be fulfilled even in grim surroundings[68]. However, what is even more significant, they discover in the ethnic culture they create "sagacity and the redeeming power which sustains [their] lives"[69]. It is probably due to Bukoski's ability to find light even in the darkest corners. The overall picture seems to be that Anthony Bukoski is believed to possess, as one of his reviewers noticed, a "fine aesthetic sense of the grim, downward spiral of the lives he chronicles, but such gloom is offset by the author's artistry and evident compassion"[70].

To recapitulate, nostalgia produces significant emotional distress, and most of the Polish American characters in Bukoski's short stories are full of despair and grief. They harbor warm feelings for the home of their ancestors, Poland and their Polish cultural heritage, Polish customs, because they constitute the integral part of their identity. They also long for their adopted domicile – the decaying Polish American neighbourhood of Superior associated with the sense of rootedness and belonging. They adhere to the last vestiges of Polish culture in the United States, hear echoes of the Old Country in polonaise or polka music, and nostalgically recall their childhood spent in a Polish American neighbourhood in order to preserve the past.

---

[67] *Ibidem*.

[68] D. Watt, *Live and Yearn. A Review of 'Time Between Trains'*, "The Dallas Morning News" October 5, 2003, p. 9G.

[69] T. Napierkowski, *op. cit*., p. 249.

[70] R. Rees, *Hometown Author's Tales of Superior Turn Out to Be Just That. A Review of 'Children of Strangers'*, "Saint Paul Pioneer Press" September 4, 1994.