

An interview with
Professor Franciszek Lyra
by Krzysztof Hoffmann

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Kennedy, the FBI and Barańczak



Prof. Franciszek Lyra,
photo by Mariusz Kosiński

Krzysztof Hoffmann: I'm very pleased to meet the first Fulbright scholar in the history of the Program in Poland. Professor, let me ask you about...

Franciszek Lyra: Let me stop you there: I didn't go through the habilitation system, and as a result, I don't have a professorship because I did my PhD in the United States.

That's right, in '62, in linguistics.

And in literature. Officially in linguistics, but I also got it in literature. As you know, there is no habilitation in the US. Not only that, there are academics who don't have a doctoral degree. I know several people like that, people close to me, even at Harvard, where I spent three years, including a break. I mentioned this in one interview, which I suspect you might be familiar with.

I am.

But there's another text – you probably don't know it – from the magazine "Ameryka." [F. Lyra takes out an issue of the journal.] It used to come out in Poland... Quite a few issues, among them, the twentieth issue for the twentieth anniversary of the journal. I was asked to write a recollective article from my stay in America. I had worked with various journals, including American ones. One of them asked me to review a publication on the state of American literature in Eastern European countries. I was surprised, I didn't speak all these languages, but I turned to some specialists on America from a few countries. Only two responded. That's how things went.

But I'm digressing. Here's the twentieth issue of "Ameryka." They asked me and Professor Daniel Aaron [the first American

Fulbright scholar in Poland – ed.] to write the texts.

I assume you knew each other.

We did, he was a very close friend of mine. He was much older than me, and died a few months ago at the age of 104. During my next stay in the States, I noticed that there was an unused bike [*laughter*] hanging in the garage of the house where I was living. I asked: “Listen, can I use the bike? – Go ahead.” When I cycled to get groceries, people were laughing at me. People do everything by car there. Only now is the bike getting more popular. Dan also rode a bike to his room.

The text in “Ameryka” features a picture from a meeting with Kennedy. It must have been very special.

This was a meeting to celebrate International Students Day. I was selected as the representative of the students from Eastern Europe. I alone represented all these countries.

Let’s go back to the beginning, though. You left in ’59. I’m curious about the last day before you left Poland and the first day stateside. Around that time, the thaw in Poland had barely started, while a strong America was experiencing a golden period on the other side of the ocean.

It was only thanks to the thaw in Poland that the Fulbright Program started. Not thanks to communism, but in that period,

because Gomulka insisted on having a good relationship with the United States. The head of English Studies [at the University of Warsaw – ed.], Professor Margaret Schlauch, was sent a message, an invite, to appoint a student, preferably an MA holder, as a Fulbright scholar. And she appointed me. At that time, I had no idea what the program was about. How was I supposed to know? I was too embarrassed to ask. And what if she hadn’t known either? [*laughter*]

It took me a year to get my passport. At that time, you couldn’t just keep it at home. When the American Embassy found out about the scholarship, they summoned me and said: “You got the scholarship so you can choose the university. But only state ones, not the private ones.” An American cultural attaché told me: “You’re the first Fulbright scholar. It’s up to you how the program will develop.” I said: “What do you mean?” “Well, you can choose to do something or nothing.” I guess he was joking. The cultural attaché gave me a list of the universities and I went back to the dorm. I sat down with a detailed map... I thought I’d go to a university that was the closest to the center of the United States. It seemed to me that Bloomington, Indiana, was just that.

So the choice came down to geography?

You mean, instead of some information about the university? Yes, simply because I didn’t have it. I had no way of getting it. Back then, such information didn’t really

reach Poland, and students definitely didn’t have access to it.

It’s the year 1959. You’re going to the States.

On board the plane from New York to Indianapolis, I sat next to a family. The mother chatted to me, she was older than me. When her husband heard I was flying to Indiana University, he said: “I teach at the English department there.” A pure coincidence. He said: “You know what? I’ll give you a lift on our way home.” At that point, it was difficult to get from Indianapolis to Bloomington. I got in his car and when we arrived, he said: “When you’ve settled in, give me a call.” He gave me his phone number and I got out.

So I get out of his car, it was mid-August. I knew I was going to live in such and such dorm. Holy moly, I was stunned. I put down my suitcase, which was heavy, because I had packed for a year, and I simply stood there. It was a late afternoon, clear blue skies, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. First, I was jet-lagged; second, I came from a country, which was what it was... And I see these massive cars, incredible, what would you need such a car for? And this bizarre city and various other things.

I finally arrive at my dorm. I get a room with a telephone. A telephone! Later I check in at the head of the Linguistics department, I introduce myself and he says: “How long are you staying for?” I reply: “I have a stipend for ten months and then I have to go back.” In those times, most Poles

who had managed to get out, stayed...

They never came back.

I said to myself, not me, because the cultural attaché told me that if I had stayed, who knows what the consequences would have been...

For the program?

For the program and future scholars, if there were going to be any. Ten months turned into three years but at that point, I'd made up my mind that I was coming back.

I quickly made a lot of friends there, in Bloomington. Not twenty four hours went by when I had gotten a few phone calls. I was a sensation – a man from a communist country. I heard on the phone: "Come visit me, let's have dinner." I didn't even know who I was talking to.

But you must have been somewhat tempted not to come back.

Sure. Especially right after my doctoral dissertation. I did my PhD because I was advised to do it. Once I'd settled in, I checked in with the right person... As you probably know, in the States, all professors have their own offices. I went into the office and the department head has his feet up on the desk, there is a sofa next to the wall. In Poland, this would have been unthinkable.

He says: "You know what? I think you should do it, sign up for a doctoral program." When I replied that I didn't know anything about doctoral studies, he

patiently explained everything to me and I followed his advice. And that's the whole story. I completed my studies and came back to Poland in '62, knowing that I was bound to find a job, because my PhD was recognized here, and that's pretty much it.

I understand that in those three years you didn't visit Poland?

No way. At that point, you couldn't leave the US. Put differently: if I had left anywhere, even for a week, I would have had to get a new visa. And it took several months to get it. But I did use the winter break to see more of the United States. And what's the best way? Not by plane, not even by bus, but in your own car. But where would I get a car if my stipend was \$110 a month? Luckily, I had already made friends with professors at different departments because they wanted me to visit. There was the Institute of Eastern Europe, which was said to be the best in the United States, and the head of this institute invited me because I came from a communist country.

So the fact that you came from a communist country turned out to be helpful?

In this respect, it was. I got to meet all kinds of people, including a nurse, who worked in Bloomington and her friend, also a nurse, who sometimes had me over for Sunday lunch. When she got sick, she asked me: "Will you take care of my car while I'm in the hospital?"

And that's how...

And that's how I got a car. Simple forms of coincidence. But they were always favorable. Once I had a car, I started driving around the US. I had saved a little bit of money but I knew I had to do it on the cheap. One time during a conversation with my colleagues, I was asked how I would spend my summer, and I said, I'll do this and this, and I'll sleep in the car. That's how I was loaned a tent, which I later used to sleep in.

And that's how you saw the States.

Not all of them, naturally, but I did visit a few. I also went to Faulkner. Is he still read?

Those who read, read Faulkner too. Did you have a chance to meet him?

Faulkner? There was no meeting. I mean, there was and there wasn't. I went all the way to Mississippi. Over there, all kinds of Warsaws and other various Polish towns are quite common. In any case, when I was there, I didn't meet him. But experiencing the South for someone who came from Poland was a valuable contribution to understanding the writer himself. And later I took part in Faulkner's meetings with students at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Participatory learning?

I wanted to be as close to life – the normal American lifestyle – as possible. A year after me, another Fulbright scholar came to the States, also to Bloomington. It was a student from Moscow... although

at that point, he may not have been a student anymore. We lived in the same dorm. Every week at the university, there were Thursday meetings on all sorts of subjects. One time, an American professor was invited to give a lecture on communism in Russia. That Russian, or Soviet, student also attended. In the discussion, he was outraged and highly critical of the lecturer. Unfairly so.

One or two days later, soon after that meeting, he was picked up by a car from the Soviet Embassy: "We're going to the embassy, leave your things here, you'll be back, we just want to talk to you." Why at the embassy, and not here? They took him and sent him back to Moscow.

He didn't come back?

He didn't.

But you also had some adventures, like the one with your passport...

Well, yes. Back then, to get a visa, you'd had to have your passport for at least six months. I sent my passport to the consulate in Chicago. I wasn't living in the dorm anymore because typically, after a year, students rented their own place. I found one too, and one time, on Friday, when the landlord was out, I heard a knocking on the door. I open it and see a stranger. It's the FBI. "Can I see your passport?"

Why you?

I was under surveillance, you know, everyone coming from

Eastern Europe was under some form of surveillance. Imagine that. It's the '60s, at that point, the FBI was a relatively young organization, and I didn't have my passport because I had mailed it. I hear: "You can't stay here without a passport." The gist was: "You have to leave the United States by Monday." It was Friday, and in the US you usually work until five on Fridays. If I remember correctly, the agent left around four. I called the dean of international students. He says: "Come and see me." Once I told him everything, he said: "Don't go anywhere, stay put. If he comes back on Monday, send him to me." On Monday, nobody showed up. A few days later, I got a letter from Washington, from the State Department. I open it, and it's an invite to meet Kennedy. You see, that was reality back then.

It's 1962 and you're back in Poland. Were you stunned again?

I said: "Come what may" and returned to Warsaw.

Let me put it through the lens of the time before I had left. When I was a student, I lived in a dorm. Back then, few people spoke a foreign language fluently. I spoke English, obviously not as well as I did after my stay in the US, on top of German, some Russian and French. Familiarity with Latin was a given back then. The Ministry of Culture learned about it, I'm not sure how, but they did. Maybe because they were close to the English department. Artists, especially from Germany or England, attended events there, which were organized quite frequently. They

had to be accompanied by a translator.

After I returned from the States, I wasn't sure where to find a job. After all these experiences? I ended up going back to the dorm. I wasn't a student anymore so I wasn't entitled to live there. But I got on well with the director of the dorm. I went to him and asked; "Do you think I could...?" "Sure." I didn't have to pay anything. It was all thanks to an Alfred, a journalist from Switzerland, whom I'd shown around when I was still a student. I'd arranged accommodation for him at the dorm, and later he would send packages, mainly to the director.

I meant more that, after three years in a country, which was – and still is – a certain model or exemplar of democracy, you were returning to a country which had little to do with democracy.

Right. A conference was organized during one of Mickiewicz's anniversaries along with a convention of Polish writers. Naturally, there were guests from various countries, among them, a Romanian delegation. "Take good care of them, the Romanian delegation" – I was told.

So I took them around Warsaw. Of course, we made a stop at the Palace of Culture, which read "Józef Stalin's." It was a small group, two or three Romanians, plus someone else. I asked them if they wanted to go inside the Palace. They didn't. One of them, when he saw the writing, came up to me and slapped me on the face. My glasses, which I'd worn since I was

a kid, fell on the ground. He looked at me: “You’re sick, you’re sick in the head.”

Going back for a moment to your stay in the US, specifically, to your time at Harvard. As a Polish scholar from UAM¹, I’m curious if you had a chance to meet Stanisław Barańczak.²

How did you know?!

It’s just a guess.

Yes, I did. Interestingly, I’d met Barańczak for the first time when I was still a student in the ’50s.

At that time, Barańczak still worked at Adam Mickiewicz University.

Exactly. I spent a lot of time at the American Embassy’s library. Every now and then, the embassy’s staff walked down the hallway. They knew me by sight because I was there so often. This is also where I saw Barańczak. But I didn’t talk to him. What is more interesting is the reason why I was at that library. It was all because of a letter from UB,³ which must have kept track of me. Back then, UB’s headquarters was in Bankowy Square. I was summoned because at some point I’d been invited to the British Embassy. At UB’s

headquarters, I was questioned and they finally told me: “No more visits to the British Embassy.” So I asked the officer: “What about the American Embassy?” “That’s fine.” I don’t know why, but in a nutshell, I was a frequent visitor there. Later I was often invited to parties at the embassy. I remember that when I was invited to the American Embassy, I was seated with a dozen people at a round table. People struck up a conversation. I introduced myself, he – Barańczak – introduced himself, and said: “You know, I read your book on Faulkner” – and that was basically it.

That was the only encounter?

There was one more in the States. Barańczak was invited as a lecturer to Harvard. When I went back to the US, to Harvard, I don’t remember who called whom. But we met at the Polish Embassy in Washington, where various meetings were held.

He was already ill then. When he spoke, you could barely hear him. He had issues.

Do you remember the impression he made there?

I have this one memory, let’s say, related to the Polish language. After all, the classes he gave there were in Polish language and literature. I never attended them and I regret it now. In any case, I know this from a person who did attend them and who worked at Harvard’s library, the so-called Widener Library. I was told then: “He’s very knowledgeable but his style of

teaching is strange. Sometimes we don’t understand him, and there aren’t many of us.” Us, meaning students; I didn’t ask about the number.

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¹ Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań – trans. note.

² A Polish poet, critic and translator most well known for his translations of Shakespeare, Hardy, Keats, Frost and many others. – trans. note.

³ The Department of Security – trans. note.