



WIADOMOŚCI Z BIBLIOTEKI

POLISH LIBRARY NEWS PUBLISHED BY THE FRIENDS OF THE POLISH LIBRARY IN WASHINGTON
1503 21ST STREET N.W., WASHINGTON, DC 20036 TEL: (202) 466-2665
www.PolishLibrary.org, e-mail: mailbox@polishlibrary.org YEAR XX

April /May 2011
Kwiecień /Maj 2011

Hic mortui vivunt, hic muti loquuntur. / Tu martwi żyją, a niemi przemawiają.

Conversation with Professor Grzegorz W. Kołodko, author of the international bestseller *Truth, Errors, and Lies: Politics and Economics in a Volatile World*, former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister of Poland

Iza Chmielewska (IC): Even though we both speak Polish, let's give into the globalization trend and conduct this interview in English. Within and beyond Poland, you are an accomplished scholar, a respected economist and politician, a seasoned traveler, and an avid marathon runner. How does one become the “renaissance man” in this modern age? What is the source of your energy?



Grzegorz W. Kołodko (GWK): Such source is the lasting certitude that what I do does serve to good reason. And the reason is development and progress in this vola-

tile world. And how does one becomes, as you say, the “renaissance man” in this modern age? Well, it’s easy: one reads and listens, then one thinks, and therefore one speaks and writes. And one travels a lot, across cultures and lands, through space and time. And one takes photographs, listens to the music, runs. But the most important thing is that one must be an interdisciplinary thinker. Economics is not enough, there is so much more in this contemporary world of interdependence. Albert Einstein is believed to say that thinking has a big future. I’m positive that interdisciplinary thinking has a great future!

IC: Your latest interdisciplinary book, which has already enriched our collection - *Truth, Errors, and Lies: Politics and Economics in Volatile World* - has been recently published by Columbia University Press in English under a different title than in Polish (*Wędrujący świat*). The title must entice the reader. Is the change perhaps driven by a different mentality of the audience? Do Poles & Europeans enjoy a philosophical reflection and Americans love a riveting story?

GWK: The adventure had started from surprising difficulty to translate this rich Polish word: ‘wędrujący’. The English proxy is ‘wandering’, but ‘wędrujący’ implies something different, and isn’t pejorative, since ‘wandering’ may suggest aimlessness, but this is not

what I mean. An alternative – ‘the moving world’ – wouldn’t be enticing either. So, after a long debate with the publisher, we’ve arrived to title ***Truth, Errors, and Lies: Politics and Economics in Volatile World***. Interestingly, the book’s been published in ten languages and in each one it has somehow different title. For instance, in Russian *Mir v dvizhenii*, which means ‘The World on the Move’, or in Hungarian *Megatrendek*, that is ‘The Megatrends’.

As for Americans, in general they are less interested in the world affairs than the Europeans. Or, more precisely, they are interested in the global issues from a specific American perspective. Europeans look more often into the history to see the future. But you must be careful with such comparisons since Europeans differ between each other a lot! Take a look at the English and Italians or Norwegians and Greek. Or compare the Poles with the Germans. The old ironic adage “the Polish discipline and the German sense of humor” still holds, yet it seems that recently we’re more disciplined and less humorous.

IC: Perhaps that’s an effect of the gradual, ongoing merging of Europe? Looking at another trend, I must admit that I am an anti-fan of neoliberalism, and that element certainly drew me in to read the book. And that’s just one point of discussion. What ideas can the public explore by diving into the pages of ***Truth, Errors, and Lies...***?

GWK: A strong criticism of the contemporary *laissez-faire*, or neoliberalism, is just one, yet important, episode in the book. However, it’s a grand tour de force in time and space, holistic and scientific, but at the same time literary and entertaining. The latter because I’m bringing a lot of comparative analyses from so many different places around the world, which I did explore -- almost 150 countries. During my class at Columbia University in New York, I overheard that ‘in his books Kolodko attempts to claim that one is not able to understand anything as long as one doesn’t understand everything’. I’m not going that far – since it would be too far – but indeed I’m showing the modern world the unique and complex yet understandable network of interdependence between the issues and processes of various nature: economic and political, social and cultural, technological and demographic, environmental and natural. The mantra emanating from the pages of my book is that *things happen the way they do because many things happen at the same time*. The art is to catch, understand and describe this happenstance. It’s fascinating!

IC: Indeed, very interesting! An inside source let me on a fun fact about the translation process of ***Truth, Errors***

and Lies... into various languages. From what I hear, in many cases it was not translated by a rather dry man well-versed in economic jargon, but by a poet. Is linguistic agility the key in conveying the message of this unconventional book?

GWK: Yes, indeed. Whenever I was able to find and suggest to the publisher an interpreter, I was looking for somebody able to translate the beauty of the literary language, to be sure that the book will be as readable and enjoyable as it’s in my native language. Hence, the translation for English was carried out by Mr. William Brand, who’s done the famous works by Kapuściński before. The Russian translator, Mr. Yuriy Tchainikov, has translated, inter alia, the Witkacy writings. The Turkish translator, Mr. Osman Firat Baş, has previously interpreted Nałkowska’s, book. The Vietnamese translator, Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Thanh Thu, was recently awarded for her translation of the Herbert poems. Language – its beauty, secrets, idioms, tones, I would say, its taste – is so important in making the book not only interesting, but enjoyable too.

IC: Language is a living art. But what about technology? It’s moving this world in a fast-forward mode – so much has changed during the past decade. Your newest book has a complimentary multimedia website (www.volatileworld.net), and it has been released in an electronic version for Nook and Kindle. What do you think of these rapid changes? Is slowly walking away from the printed word an advancement for society, or are we losing something important and irreplaceable?

GWK: Definitely, we’re losing a kind of intimacy of keeping the book in our hands and turning the pages. Similarly, the classical theatre stage and a DVD are not the same. But there’s no need for fear: the paper books will be around in 5, 15, 50 and 500 years from now. They’ll co-exist with the e-books, just like the TV co-exists with the movies. But – of course – the number of the e-books will grow exponentially. My daughters already prefer to read books and newspapers on their iPhone or Kindle, but I favor to wait a week more to get ***The New Yorker*** in my hard mail box... But it is also a matter of policy. While in the U.S. an e-book price is just around 25 percent of the cover price, in Poland it’s a shocking 80 percent, and it includes VAT of 23 percent. Such bias discourages buying the e-books.

As for the complimentary multimedia website, that is another story. It serves as dynamic, regularly updated (at least twice a year) statistical appendix (with over 120 charts, maps, and tables in sections: World and Politics; People; Economy; Environment) as well as a source for

data, useful links, and bibliography. There is also a lot about the book itself, including reviews, blurbs, interviews, video talks, etc. And – to make browsing it even more interesting – over 180 pictures I’ve taken all over the world. Under each photo there is a very brief quotation from the book, with the page number, and an inscription explaining what is going on. Thus, this NAVIGATOR, as it is called, is a kind of GPS to help the reader to go farther and deeper, delving into the details – if one only wishes to do so.

IC: The Navigator will certainly keep the readers freshly abreast with everything global, and probably will tempt & inspire some globe-trotters! You have visited over 140 countries. Amazing! Which three are most vivid in your memory and would recommend visiting?

GWK: Although this is the question I’m being asked quite often, it’s still next to impossible to answer... First, they’re the great countries where you may see many monuments of nature and a lot of rich culture. These are the USA, China, India, and Russia. I’ve visited 44 states in the United States, and in Russia I went as far as Kamchatka and Chukotka. I don’t count my visits to India and to China anymore, but I wouldn’t dare to say that I have seen these countries to their very end. But if you want me to leave these huge countries aside – and also Japan, Egypt, Mexico, and Brazil – then I would recommend to visit Bolivia or Peru in Latin America, Mali or Ethiopia in Africa, Cambodia or Nepal in Asia. If you still want just three, it’s as cruel as to force the child loving his parents equally to answer the question I hated during my boyhood: whom do you love more, your mother or your father? But here we are: Peru, Mali, Cambodia.

IC: Thanks, that’s some valuable perspective. You document what you see around the world via photographs, which have been exhibited across Poland. What are your thoughts behind the camera, what do you aim to capture and convey?

GWK: The difference. The difference between here and there, between us and them, between now and then, between the stereotype and the truth. Or, from another angle, the composition of shapes and colors. The picture must be interesting in the sense that it tells a story. It must sustain the moment. My photographs, shown at the exhibitions, are not signed. I presume that they speak for themselves, yet often I’m asked: where was this picture taken? I believe it is more important what it shows than where it happened.

IC: True, images often speak louder than words. You also spent a couple of years here, in Washington. Is there

anything Washingtonian that you miss in Poland? On the flip side, what have you missed most about Poland when you were living in the United States?

GWK: Oh yes, I like this city. It’s never boring, neither culturally, nor politically. You ought to master your time management to take advantage of mounting occasions to be, to attend, to see, to participate, to learn. I also enjoy the green environment and the vicinity of places where you can go for a weekend. And there are also so many Washingtonian institutions, such as the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, the National Mall, or the Phillips Collection. But above it all, it’s a city of so many smart and knowledgeable people with whom it’s worth to talk with.

As for Poland, I don’t think I was missing anything after my family – including the dog – had joined me. Definitely not the politics and the way it is still debated in the media. The things here kept me busy and my country was doing relatively well, so I became more and more globalized. After all, I’m not only Polish; I am the citizen of the world too.

IC: What financial advice for a library like ours could you give? We exclusively rely on the work of volunteers, and our budget is fully based on member contributions and semi-annual events. Our dream is to move to a more attractive, spacious & intellectually-inspiring place, but currently we do not have sufficient funds.

GWK: As for the place, you must find a reach sponsor to fund it. How come that has not happened yet? As for the books, ask – publicly, using influential, opinion-leading media in Poland – the authors and the major publishing houses to send you complimentary copies of their publications. It will work! Let’s start from asking my publisher, *Prószyński*, to send you all the books authored by Polish writers they release. And, for sure, I’ll ask everybody to follow my example...

IC: Perfect, that’s a deal! Thanks for the good advice, we will certainly continue to seek a sponsor for the Polish Library. Just out of pure curiosity, what is your favorite book or movie for a rainy Sunday?

GWK: I work on Sundays too. And I run. I love to run when it rains! And I walk the dogs. As for the book, I’m reading them – a lot of them! – unceasingly, so Sunday is nothing special. Right now I’m reading *Wolf Hall* by Hillary Mantell in English, *Dien oprichnika* by Vladimir Sorokin in Russian, and *Dziennik na nowy wiek* by Józef Hen in Polish. And a couple of academic books too, including the last works by my colleagues, Dani Rodrik

and Frank Fukuyama.

I like to hear music around all the time. Right now Prokofiev. I very often go to the opera and concert halls. And as for the movies, I prefer to watch stories which happened or could happen. Recently it was *The King's Speech* and – you bet – *The Inside Job*. In the waiting line are *Black Swan* and *127 Hours*. I only wish the day had 30 hours, as it has each time I'm flying westbound to Washington...

IC: You are not only a globe-trotter, but also a tourist of

literature. Our lives would most definitely be more fun with more time to read, travel, go out, and watch movies. On behalf of the Polish Library I'd like to thank you for your delightful insight!

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