Conference Examines *Home* and *Homelessness* in the Polish Context

Indiana University Bloomington was the site of the international conference, "Home/Less: The Polish Experience," held on December 4th and 5th, 1998. The conference, organized by Bozena Shallcross, professor of Slavic literature and associate director of the Polish Studies Center, was funded by the American Council of Learned Societies and the following sponsors at Indiana University: the Office of International Programs, the Russian and East European Institute, the Polish Studies Center, and the Slavics Department.

Seventy five people registered for the conference, with more than 25 participants attending from the United States, Canada, England, Denmark, and Poland. During the evening before the conference, participants had the opportunity to see an art exhibit entitled "In Transit" by the Polish artist Beata Wehr. Ms. Wehr, who was introduced by Polish Studies Center Director Timothy Wiles, offered commentary on her works which provided a fitting visual compliment to the conference's theme.

The conference was opened by Dean for International Programs Patrick O'Meara who spoke of the universal nature of homelessness and displacement. This was followed by the keynote address given by Peg Brand, IU professor of philosophy and Women's Studies, who discussed the difference between the notion of home and house in the context of postmodernist cultural points of view such as feminism. She also spoke of her personal search for her roots in Poland. Shallcross closed the session by commenting on the conference's particular objectives.

Three panels were held on the first day. The first, entitled "Home as Booty and Betrayal," included three papers on the tragedy of Polish Jewry during World War II and the perversion of "home" involved in ghettoization. Madeline Levine's paper reconstructed the Jewish home in literary testimonies.

The second panel, "Home Without Homeland," addressed the Polish experience in emigration, that is, Poles who carry their "home" with them outside their native country, a dilemma which has been extensively explored in literature. In addition, the conference participants were privileged to hear the remarks of Zdzislaw Mach, dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland, and his observations on this theme from an anthropological point of view.

In the third panel, "A Writer's 'Paradise,'" the speakers discussed the position of the writer in totalitarian-era Poland, in particular with respect to the phenomenon of the "gift home" or writer's retreat provided exclusively to the writers, who were to help construct a new society with their respective talents. Paradoxically, although Polish writers were often given this privilege to facilitate their output, the image of the home portrayed in the literature of that time reflected an underlying sense of homelessness and uprootedness experienced by these writers in particular as well as by Poles in general.

The Saturday sessions, chaired by David Goldfarb of Barnard College, opened with a major paper by Ryszard Nycz of Jagiellonian University. Entitled "Each of Us Is a Stranger: Patterns of Identity in 20th Century Polish Literature," Nycz speculated on the philosophical implications of the sense of homelessness and alienation as a modernist human condition. The fourth panel, "The Place of Disintegration," considered the notion of home in communist Poland in a broader cultural and urban context, examined in socio-literary or architectural terms.

In the fifth panel, "Home on the Stage," the speakers reflected on the problem of home and its loss in Polish drama during and after WW II. The final panel, "The Post-Totalitarian Home," offered some insights into the tension between the physical concrete structure and "home" as the object of
Indiana University Bloomington’s East Asian Studies Center is part of a five-member consortium that recently received a grant of more than $2 million to conduct seminars for teaching about Asia.

The Freeman Foundation of Stowe, Vt., awarded the $2,062,500 grant to fund seminars throughout the country over the next two years. The goal is to help middle and secondary school instructors enhance and expand their teaching about East Asian history, culture, geography, and contemporary society.

The five consortium members that will organize the seminars are IU, Columbia University, the University of Washington, the Social Science Education Consortium based in Boulder, Colo., and the Five College Center for East Asian Studies in Northampton, Mass.

Response to the seminars from teachers in Indiana and Kentucky has been outstanding. There is a strong demand for more and better classroom resources for understanding the culture and connections we have with Asia. The goal is to assist teachers by providing the training and resources to help them feel more comfortable teaching about Asia.

Each seminar will provide 30 hours of instruction intended to give the teachers a solid foundation for programs they later develop in their own classrooms. The IU-organized seminars will begin early this year in Indianapolis, Terre Haute, Evansville, Louisville and Lexington, Ky. Participating teachers and their schools will receive educational materials and a modest stipend.

Conceived as a national initiative, the grant will fund 25 seminars in 17 states in its first year. One goal is to create a network of teachers comfortable enough with Asia to serve as a resource to their peers. Each year, for potentially up to 10 years, the seminars will be held in different states, further enlarging this network.

“Teachers from outlying areas in the Northwest have repeatedly expressed a need for in-depth teacher education on Asia, but find few opportunities in their school districts,” said Mary L. Cincadce of the University of Washington.

“This project will provide these teachers with the knowledge and resources they need to bring essential topics on Asia into their classrooms.”

“In geographically diverse states such as Oklahoma, New York, Mississippi, and New Jersey, a course in world history is a requirement for high school graduation,” noted Roberta Martin of Columbia University.

“Since Asian content is now an important component of these world history and world culture courses, seminars that provide teachers with the background they need to teach about Asia will play an essential role in improving American understanding of the countries with which our relations are of crucial importance.”

- Jason Lewis
EASC

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The conference speakers and discussants represented some of today’s top polonists working in the United States and abroad. Their fields of expertise ranged from literary and cultural studies to architecture and interior design to anthropology. They examined the notion of the home (or homelessness, as the case may be) as manipulated by politics, changing ideologies, and history, as well as the vital role that the idea of the home played in the consciousness of Poles and Poland as a whole.

A volume of the proceedings from this conference is being planned. For further information, contact the Polish Studies Center, Indiana University, 1217 E. Atwater Ave., Bloomington, IN 47401; tel 812-855-1507; email polish@indiana.edu

- Bozena Shallcross & Jennifer Day
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