

1992

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Recommended Citation

Persoon, Jim (1992) "Buy Me Some Peanuts and Kielbasa," *Grand Valley Review*. Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol7/iss1/5>

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Buy Me Some Peanuts and Kielbasa

JIM PERSON

The Warsaw Sparks are a Polish baseball team. Michigan poet Gary Gildner, on a Fulbright teaching exchange, is interrupted one January day in his American literature class at Warsaw University by two men carrying one old Rawlings mitt between them, asking if he can help their baseball team. Start of a novel for Gildner? One might suspect so, for he has spent the last decade in Iowa, home of such mythical baseball novels as *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* and *Shoeless Joe*, but all this really happened.

And Gildner reports it all in this funny, elusive, *Moby-Dick* of a small book. Did I say *Moby-Dick* and small in the same sentence? No odder than Polish and baseball, or any of the other beautiful pairings in these 239 pages: the startlingly sudden beginning of love in the U.P. and a history of baseball in Poland; bits of Napoleonic lore and play-by-plays of the bigger games; the World War II death camps and lyric travelogues; commentary on the current political scene and memories of a Michigan childhood; stories of his grandfather, buried with a copy of Conrad no one could read, and teaching at the university; all interspersed with new poems.

The link is Gildner, for whom the connections come sometimes slow, sometimes fast, often as memory, or as in this case, sudden insights: the team is practicing in a gym, but something is missing. For weeks Gildner has not known what it is. So much is missing. Equipment. These guys' skills. Any sense of the game they're trying to play. And then it hits him: there's no talk, no chatter. He makes a speech, through his translator, the right fielder, Jerzy, whom he calls George. The speech comes out as a poem:

George, baseball players *talk*
They razz and praise each other,
they're like ravens, man, they haw
and quack and keep their heads up—
listen, your guy's pitching
you say come on baby blow it
past this ugly cripple he can't hit
kielbasa come on baby smoke it
hum it Jacek humbabe humbabe

Of course, later that summer, at least one umpire will refuse to allow such rude talk, and the lesson in chatter will be in vain, but Gildner, who thinks he is teaching these boys something, learns himself from their silence. He recalls how all winter long in practice they are “quiet as mourners unless we broke something.” Are these young athletes such children that only breaking a window or a light can bring out the cheers, the laughter, the chatter? And then one of the players explains to him. They are practicing in the gym of the *Milicja*, the police, in a country under martial law. Now Gildner wants to break as many windows as possible, and he finds an ending for his poem on chatter, one that gives his players a political rather than a baseball voice:

hey pitcher this one's coming back
between your jollies buddy
this one's on the grits it's all she wrote
hey pitcher pitcher this one's
going going this one's going—
where's it going, George?
“It's going over the fence, Coach.”
“Hell, George, give it a ride, baby,
pound it over the tallest joint in town.”
“It's going over the Palace of Culture, Coach.”
“All *right*, all the way to Moscow boom boom
and landing on Lenin's tomb.”

Gildner tells some Polish jokes along the way, but real Polish jokes, from the Polish point of view, which is to say, not ethnic slurs about stupidity but jokes with sharp political messages. One is about the Palace of Culture, that concrete monstrosity that dominates Warsaw, Soviet-built as a gift from the freedom-loving Soviet people to commemorate the liberation of Warsaw. Poles have a different view of the Soviet role in liberating Warsaw, and of just what kind of culture the Soviets could give to them. The joke Gildner heard goes like this: “From where can you get the best view of Warsaw? Answer: On top of the Palace of Culture. Because then you don't have to look at the Palace of Culture.” I remember with pleasure the first such joke I heard on my first trip to Poland, in 1984: “How are Poland and America alike? Answer: In both countries, you can buy anything with dollars, and in both countries you are free to criticize the President of the United States.”

Warsaw Sparks is an elaborate Polish joke, in this sense of the Polish joke, in which the Poles are adept at noting the gallows humor inherent in their situation, whether it is the geographic blessing of being on a plain between Germany and Russia or the absurdity of Slavic baseball. The sense of absurdity is never simply cynical for Poles, however; it is usually mixed with a desperate individual brand of heroic romanticism. In his reading in the Calder Art Gallery here in October of 1991,

Gildner began with an example of this futile but wonderful heroism that characterizes Polish life, recalling the opening days of the Second World War when Polish cavalry, sabres drawn, charged the panzer armies pouring across the border.

Modern-day Poland is a little like that, a mix of cynicism and heroism, of past intermingled in present. That same mix increasingly characterizes this book, whose genre, finally, seems to be memoir. The longer he is in Poland, the more Gildner begins to recall and re-examine what he knows of his Polish grandfather, who “did not speak—or care to speak—English.” He recalls watching the man fly into rages and sulk in his northern Michigan apple orchard, the rest of the family a little afraid of him; or finishing his whiskey, picking up his lamp, and going up to bed, “taking with him long, dangerous, thrilling shadows”; or reading books—“he was the only member of my family I ever saw read books.” The grandfather becomes a mystery whose solution might be in Poland. And the association of the grandfather with reading begins to stand for the mystery of Gildner too, something that attracts because it may reveal himself to himself:

He read, I learned later, whatever he could get, and always in Polish. Joseph Conrad was his favorite. When he died—in the hollyhocks one morning—a book by Conrad was found in his hands. My grandmother, who was not a reader of anything except her Daily Missal, put that last book in his coffin before it was closed. She couldn't tell me, when I was old enough to want to know, what it was called; but I have always believed it was *Heart of Darkness*.

Poland becomes for Gildner a mysterious, romantic heart of darkness, a place where he is as foreign as his skilled javelin-throwers and soccer players are on the ball diamond (laid out on soccer fields—always with a short right field—where hitting it over the fence means a ground-rule double). About his players he writes that

sometimes I felt I was watching a bunch of guys who were trying to catch up on something they didn't even know they'd missed, and then I'd drift back to all those springs and summers I had had, those long days of stepping out and following through, of firing over and over under the sun, into my buddy Eddie Hill's oiled mitt, and never wanting to quit this thing, this motion, this smooth overhand wave taking in Newhouser and Kaline and Mays, taking in as darkness came on, all the stars and taking them home: night after night the perfect plays wrapped in my glove strapped to my bike's handlebars, or tucked in a rear pocket like glorious cash that couldn't be given for anything ordinary.

The timeless, eternally youthful perfection of baseball, this America-as-Garden-of-Eden is perhaps what his players do understand, though they don't understand.

Gildner's players are convinced that he is a good friend of Stan Musial, in fact played with him ("is there any instrument," Gildner asks, that can measure the distance between American Legion ball in Flint, Michigan, and Stan Musial). They don't know the stars—not Kaline or Mays or Newhouser. But they do know the stars, how to take their glittering promise in at night in the soot-colored towns.

But it's not just these guys who are "trying to catch up on something they didn't even know they'd missed." Gildner starts to catch up on the incomplete stories of his childhood whose meanings were missed the first time around:

But drinking whiskey and reading, remembering, I knew what had happened to Aunt Mary, the eldest child, knew that her wedding was never mentioned because there hadn't been one. . . . Some things I understood then. . . . I understood that my cousin [Donny], who was sixteen and lived on the farm, was not happy pulling beans and forking manure because when he came in late from setting pins at the bowling alley in town on Saturday nights and woke me up to give me a Baby Ruth, he would make a fist and shake it out the door toward the dark corner where Grandpa slept, and tell me that *next year*, next year, Grandma would sign the papers letting him join the Navy and not tell him. But I did not understand everything, my cousin said, because I was a boy. Much later when I thought I understood everything, my grandfather and grandmother were dead, my father was dead, Aunt Mary was dead, and Donny was dead.

Drinking whiskey and reading, like his Polish grandpa, Gildner, in Poland, starts to reconnect and re-member his past. Unfortunately, in Poland there are not many signs to mark the way, metaphorically or literally. Anyone who has driven there can attest to the authenticity of the opening of *Warsaw Sparks*: the team bus, on the way to a game in the south, takes a wrong turn, and then another and another. "No proper signs!" one of the Poles yells out in frustration. Pedestrians are sometimes of help, sometimes not. The restaurant they had planned to stop at closes its kitchen. They end up in a night-club for a late-night supper; its atmosphere suggests that someone "must have checked out some American Legion Halls and some Holiday Inns in places like North Dakota, and listened to a lot of three-piece combos play 'Misty' into the wee hours." All perfectly accurate, and the only place I fault Gildner: Polish-Americans in the Dakotas decorate those American Legion Halls the way they do because they *like it that way*. My Polish friends used to explain away the Christmas-tree-light decor of restaurants and public places with an embarrassed reference to the poverty of their country, meaning financial poverty, and I always reassured them that it wasn't financial at all, that Poles in America always took great care to make Legion Halls just as showily bare, jolly, unpretentious, and homely as the tackiest places in Warsaw. Somehow they were never comforted.

Travelling in the Eastern Bloc in the days of the Cold War was an exotic ex-

perience. Driving through East Germany in July one could see a dozen combine harvesters in a single field, in perfect staggered precision chewing up wave upon wave of grain, and then passing into Poland one passed into another century, a village-full of men using scythes to cut the golden wheat, women shocking it, children picking up fallen stalks to make fistful-sized bundles, old men leading the horses that pulled the wagons, into which the thresher dumped the grain. Gildner captures the lyricalness of this Poland and its other-worldly, other-century quality. Though his experiences are recent, this Poland is at this moment already passing into history. This does not lessen the *Warsaw Sparks*: the parts of it which are reportage and outrage and idiosyncratic humor become now another piece demanding memory and understanding.