

Remus and the Contemporary Reader: Part III

Aleksander Majkowski (1876-1938) was a Kashubian physician and writer who recognized that Kashubians were losing their language and culture under the oppressive measures of the Prussian government in the late 19th century. In contrast to Hieronim Derdowski, who often was jailed for his activities, Majkowski worked within the law as a writer and publisher to support the Kashubian movement. His major contribution was a novel that he wrote in the Kashubian language to stimulate the pride of Kashubians in their culture and history and to encourage their resolve to preserve their culture. His novel, The Life and Adventures of Remus – a Kashubian Looking Glass, won the hearts of Kashubians, who consider it a literary masterpiece. This essay has a two-fold purpose. The first is to explore some of the literary techniques used by Majkowski to shape the central message of the novel. The subtitle, Kashubian Looking Glass, indicates that the novel provides a literary perspective on Kashubian history and culture. The second purpose of the essay is to present the details of what may be seen through the looking glass.

The plot of the novel centers on the actions of Remus, an orphan taken in by a farming family. After reading a tale about Lady Gwenevere, Majkowski's hero comes to believe that a mythical story of a beautiful young queen looking for a hero to restore her sunken castle is real. Then he is convinced that his mission as the knight Witosław is to fulfil that quest. Majkowski pairs Remus with his companion Trąba, an itinerant musician, who unlike Remus, is down-to-earth, realistic and humorous. Remus walks throughout Kashubia as an itinerant pedlar pushing his wheel barrow full of books, hymnals and other wares. Faced with many challenges, Remus remains courageous, honest, and faithful to his mission as a pedlar..

In order to explain how the novel generated such a powerful impact, it is helpful to compare it to the 17th century epic novel, *Don Quixote de La Mancha*, written by Miguel de Cervantes. Don Quixote, a minor aristocrat, reads chivalric romances and deludes himself into thinking he is a grand knight off on a quest to serve his lady and to fight evil. But he is literally tilting at windmills and fighting a herd of sheep instead of an invading army. Cervantes pairs the knight with his servant, Sancho Panza, who is practical, down-to-earth, and comical. The age of storied knights had long since passed into history. But through Don Quixote's valiant pursuit of chivalric ideals, Cervantes makes the reader aware that something valuable, for example the courage, prowess and ideals that knights aspired to in medieval Spain had been lost. Majkowski uses Remus as his spokesperson to present to his readers a mythical vision of the glorious past of Kashubia and to challenge them to remain true to Kashubia's cultural values and language. While Cervantes's novel *Don Quixote* has been revered as an exalted classic of Western literature, Majkowski's *Remus* has reverberated through the generations in Kashubia as the preeminent publication in Kashubian literature.

Another technique that Majkowski employs to heighten the drama and to forcefully present the message of the novel is that of magical realism. It is not an exaggeration to say that Aleksander Majkowski is a precursor to the famous novelists who popularized the techniques of magical realism in the 20th century.

Majkowski masterfully uses the superstitions and folklore pervasive in Kashubia to develop the character of Remus and to shape the plot. Remus's imagination gets carried away by superstitious beliefs. He experiences a vision composed of elements of the mythical stories that he has read. He becomes convinced that a young queen has asked him to carry her across a river and to rebuild her sunken castle.

However, the Quixotic mission of Remus cannot be totally explained away by a rational analysis of a poor farm boy's misguided imagination. A number of facts presented in the novel attest to the validity of the quest that challenges the hero. Remus finds a golden sword, which he gives away to a local maiden. The nobleman Zoborski gives him a golden medallion with the image of the Mother of Christ with her Child. Remus hides out for days in the secret cave with a magical entrance that has been transformed into an underground house on the island of Glonek. In a climactic scene, Sławinia, the daughter of the old lord of Sarbsk, identifies Remus as the reincarnation of the great Kashubian knight Witosław.

The lord of Sarbsk could not turn away his eyes from the portrait of the knight. In the silence his voice came, asking, "Sławinia, my daughter, why doesn't knight Witosław, the servant of the Polish King, Stefan Batory, killed during the burghers rebellion in Riga, come out?" Sławinia turned her wide open eyes toward me. Gesturing to me she said, 'He is here.' At that very moment a spark passed again through my entire body as if I were struck by lightning. . . In a rejoicing voice the lord of Sarbsk spoke authoritatively, 'Do not be surprised, brother! With the will of God the immortal spirit of a man can come to the earth more than one time. . . .

Clearly, Majkowski presents as factual a number of improbable, unrealistic, even fantastic events. He has fused the story of a mythical quest of a knight to restore the young queen's castle with the story of an itinerant pedlar. Remus becomes transformed from a stuttering pedlar into a heroic knight. By this means, the author is able to tell Kashubians that despite their downtrodden political and social circumstances, they must fight to reclaim the fullness of their heritage. They must overcome the three monsters that are restraining them : Trud (Difficulty), Stach (Fear), and Nie Warto (Not worth it). When Fr. Pawel advises Remus, the reader almost hears the voice of Majkowski delivering the central message of his novel.

Save the sunken castle! Give freedom to the enchanted young Queen to sit on the golden throne! . . . Why could our Kaszubian language not rise up like the young Queen? Why could our Kashubian people not rise up from the ground like the sunken castle? There had been a time that those people led many thousand warrior, lords and knights under the sign of the Gryf, as they crossed to foreign shores on thousands of seagoing vessels where they were terrifying when they came as enemies, but wholeheartedly welcomed when they came as friends (329).

The novel is set in Kashubia towards the end of the 19th century, and it provides a window into the daily life of Kashubians during that time period. The beginning of novel, which describes the life of Remus as a young boy tending cattle, paints a picture of what day-to-day life was like for the average Kashubian. During this time period, most Kashubians worked and lived on small farms. When someone got married , it was with someone from a near-by farm or village. And that is where one stayed one's whole life. Some farms were established from land cleared from the forest (pustkowie). In this case, there were few neighbors. Farms were for the most part self sufficient. Most everything the farmer ate, used, and wore came from the farm itself. Farmers were poor because the land was not fertile and farms were small. However, they were resourceful in supplementing the farm produce by hunting, fishing, and gardening.

But these living conditions do not signify that life was dreary. The year had a seasonal rhythm of sowing, harvesting and storing of crops, and the liturgical year had a progression of holy days and a celebration of the life of Christ that promised a heavenly reward. Indeed,

Remus says that the time on the farm as a boy was the happiest time in his life: “Everything went on in the order that God ordained – a time to sow, a time to reap, wintertime by the oven, summertime at work in the fields – all alternating in their proper sequence (83).”

Majkowski emphasizes the importance of the Catholic faith to Kashubians in a number of ways. Remus begins the description of his life and adventure with a prayer: “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I take this pen in my unskilled hand (35).” And he asks for God’s grace to put his on paper. Characters frequently invoke God’s assistance or refer to the teachings of the Church. This is how Marcyanna scolds Remus: “You will have to make money for your bread by your sweat, as the Good Lord assigns. Maybe one day you will get a piece of your own land if God so blesses you 51).” However, the most dramatic example of the fervent faith of Kashubians is the description of the pilgrimage to Wejherowo.

But those who went to Wejherowo were the true Kaszubes, our nation and our blood. They carried their own flags as they followed the image of Mary, Mother of God, while they were walking their long way to the Calvary. Each one of them carried their own little sack of sorrow and troubles through the steep pathways of the pilgrimage until they were able to drop them in front of the cross and come back home light and weightless (214).

Music is often referred to in the novel. Remus feels that singing at the end of day on the farm lifted everyone’s spirit. Whenever Trąba appears, he makes charming music with his horn. The music is emblematic of the strength of Kashubian folk culture.

And, I will tell you more – when I play from deep in my heart, it is as if something surrounds me, and I, a poor wanderer, feel such power inside myself that I could pull out an oak tree, roots and all. If a thousand people were to listen to my playing, I could sway them and herd them wherever I desired, like the fall wind which lifts clouds of leaves and scatters them as it chooses (174).

Superstition, folklore, and myth constantly influence Remus. In this fashion, Majkowski indicates how pervasive such practices were in Kashubian culture.

The morning of Candlemas Day was cloudy, which pleased the people. They knew from their forefathers that if the sun were to shine on that holy day, the livestock would be troubled with the plague during the following year. . . . Morcen and the herding boy were going to the forest to kill a snake and take its tongue. . . . Morcen intended to put it into the manger so the cattle would eat well (131).

On his way to Castle Mountain, Remus crosses a meadow where those that find the flowers of the ferns on St. John’s Day (June 23) would be lucky the rest of their lives. But to achieve this, they would have to avoid the devilish force that would twist their necks backwards on their necks (53). The pendulum clock in the farmhouse makes funny noises, and Marcyanna’s explanation is that the clock is swallowing time. What’s more, the clock sees Death. “When it sees Death at the door, it either stops ticking or it begins to chime the wrong hour” (39).

Remus’s description of ritual stones placed in circles by pre-Slavic tribes reveals how Kashubians resorted to superstition and folklore to explain physical phenomena:

On the slopes of hills, among the tall trees there are large stones shaped like humans and placed in circles as if they were dancing. People say that those are enchanted 'wedding party' guests. It is where the stories and fables are born that old people tell by the fireplaces in the evenings. There, the wild animals and birds of the forest have their own paradise, their own country, and their own freedom (232).

In an emotional scene during the funeral procession of Pan Jósef, Remus meets a spirit who answers with these words when Remus asks him what he is doing:

Know that I want to save the sunken castle! And I want to place the enchanted young queen on the golden throne. . . . Give honor to the one who is being led, because he is made of the same material that brings thrones and castles back to life (154).

Superstitions and folklore lead Remus to believe that he has been selected to restore the young queen and her sunken castle. Hand in hand with this mission is Remus's resistance to Prussian authorities. Majkowski is depicting the antipathy to Prussian oppression that was felt in the hearts of most Kashubians. While still a boy, Remus confronts a Prussian official who has come to the farm to find and arrest the old lord. Somehow Remus gets in his head that he is now David fighting Goliath. With his slingshot, Remus slings a stone to the forehead of "Goliath" and knocks him unconscious. To elude the Prussian authorities, Remus has to hide in a cellar for three days (79).

When Remus sells his books at a jarmark in Kościerzyna, he is accosted by Prussian gendarmes who confiscate his books for being seditious. Remus fights the gendarmes to defend his freedom to sell prayerbooks.

Then I formed a fist and let it fly from my left ear. I gave it to that eagle (on his helmet) until it rattled. The owner and his helmet fell down like an empty milk can. . . . So I fought bravely against these alien bullies. Each time one of them approached me, he thumped among the buckets or flew upon the fallen pierniki stall.

In a climactic moment in the story, the old Kashubian nobleman Zaborszczi from his deathbed in prison bestows on Remus a gold medal with a portrait of the Holy Mother and Child along with the charge to lead the resistance and avenge the Prussian oppression.

Now in Zabory Land the name of Mucha-Zoborszczi fades away. . . . But I know one who will not submit his neck. . . . I know how you greeted those curs when they wanted to harm you. I will make you King of the Lake (288).

Zoborszczi then tells Remus that when he was captured after years in hiding, he was not even allowed to say goodbye to his dying son. There are many scenes in the novel which manifest the anger in the hearts of Kashubians against the Prussian oppressors, but none as powerful as this one.

Half way to the lake shore, my wife and my daughter stepped in their way. They were carrying a large feather comforter. It was wrapped about my only son, my glory and my hope. Death was in his eyes. I was stopped from hugging him, or even making the sign of the cross over him, because my hands were bound with iron. The poor little one turned his eyes towards his sister and she understood. She gently raised his back

up a little so he was able to kiss my hands which were tied with the iron of slavery (295).

The contemporary reader can enjoy The Life and Adventures Of Remus – A Kashubian Mirror on two levels. The novel is exquisitely designed to deliver the author's message to his Kashubian readers to look into the mirror and recognize the value of their culture and history. Secondly, readers of subsequent centuries can look into this same looking glass to get a sympathetic glimpse of the daily life of Kashubians in the late 19th century.

Works Cited

Majkowski, Aleksander. Life and Adventures of Remus, Instytut Kaszubski, 2008