

POETRY AS SUSTENANCE FOR THE SOUL: AN INTERVIEW WITH UTZ RACHOWSKI

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Utz Rachowski, born 1954 in Saxony in the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany), first experienced state-sponsored persecution when he was interrogated by the East German State Secret Police (*Stasi*) and then expelled from high school for discussing literature not approved by the state with a small group of fellow students. From October 1979 until December 1980, he was a political prisoner in that country, where he was sentenced to 27 months in prison because the state secret police considered five of his poems to be subversive, anti-state agitation. Through the efforts of Amnesty International, he was released from prison, then expatriated and exiled to West Germany, where he studied philosophy and art history before establishing himself as a freelance writer of prose, poetry, and radio plays. Rachowski was co-editor of the literary journal *Ostragehege* from 1993 to 1999.

Since 2003, he has worked under the auspices of the Saxon State Commission for Stasi Files as a rehabilitation counsellor for victims of the former GDR dictatorship.

Rachowski has published 14 books of stories, essays, and poetry; he has performed readings and given lectures throughout Germany, the United States, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Finland, Senegal, Kenya, Lithuania, and Poland. Rachowski's works have been translated into English, Polish, French, Spanish, Serbian, and Finnish.

His more recent awards include the first Reiner Kunze-Prize in 2007 and the 2008 Hermann-Hesse-Stipend. In 2012, he was writer-in-residence at Gettysburg College, Pennsylvania. He was nominated in the

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United States for the Pushcart Prize in 2013. In 2014, he received the Nikolaus-Lenau Prize. In Fall 2017, he was recipient of the Prose-Prize of the *Society for Contemporary American Literature in German*, and in Spring 2018, Rachowski was invited to perform poetry readings and lecture at Texas Christian University and Stephen F. Austin State University, both in Texas.

The present interview with Utz Rachowski was conducted on 22 June 2018.

Today you live in the reunited Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), indeed in your hometown of Reichenbach, that once was part of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), or East Germany. What was it like to grow up in Reichenbach during the 1960s? Are there any key events from you childhood that are still “with you” today, and that are also important for your writing?¹

Yes, there were two events from my childhood and youth that I felt and experienced as though they were natural catastrophes. They were the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 and the occupation of the former Czechoslovakia, now the Czech and Slovak Republics, by the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968. I was a totally normal seven-year-old school boy when the Berlin Wall went up and was fourteen in 1968.

On this Sunday in August 1961, when the Berlin Wall was erected, my father went to bed at 10 o'clock in the morning, white as a sheet; my uncles who were there spoke about war and then along with my aunts, they immediately left my mother's birthday celebration. Unforgettable.

In 1968, for three days, I watched columns of tanks roll down the street directly in front of my grandmother's house, headed for Bohemia (Czechoslovakia). My brother got on his motorcycle and tried to stop the tanks by riding in front of them and continually applying his brakes to slow down his bike. Had every East German done that, those tanks

¹ This interview with Utz Rachowski was translated from German into English by the interviewer.

never would have reached their destination. They were on their way to destroy an emerging form of Socialism with a human face that had begun to take root in Czechoslovakia. That means, in this neighboring country there suddenly existed freedom of opinion, the right to strike, freedom to travel, and a free press. Everything that we in the GDR also wished for.

I wrote about all that much later in my books.

Still today, German historians deny that East German troops participated in the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia. I am collecting reports from contemporary witnesses suggesting that this was not the case. Evidently, even today, no one is allowed to express this awareness of historical events! Because once already, in 1939, German tanks had rolled into Prague, the fact that this was again the case in 1968 has been blocked by entire panels of historians.

But, as I said, other than these catastrophic events I was a totally normal school boy.

You were a normal school boy, and yet as a teenager, you and several friends formed a “philosophy club” and seriously studied important works of literature. That does not sound like a typical teenage activity in any country. What brought you, at an age at which most teenage boys would rather play soccer, to want to read literature and philosophy outside of school?

We really were just “normal” teenagers. I even, for example, played volleyball in the district league, was school champion in bicycle racing, and participated in state-wide swimming competitions. Soccer always! But let me describe our everyday life. At school, the principal was a retired National People’s Army major who ran the school like a military organization. In the breaks between classes, upper classmen wearing their blue shirts from the Free German Youth organization and red armbands patrolled the hallways and courtyard, where we were forced to march in a large circle. The director removed almost all the teachers my brother had had six years earlier and replaced them with pro-military “comrades.”

These “comrades” were then our teachers for History, Civics, and German. Their curriculum comprised exactly 100 years of human history: from 1848, the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* up to the end of World War II. Their emphasis was always on the history of the Soviet and German workers’ movement. It was fitting that, in his free time, the History teacher bred German Shepherds, dogs trained to attack people, that he sold to the National People’s Army border patrol troops.

We were fed up with all of it and, in our small town, we set about finding books, in the library or in our parents’ bookshelves at home, that dealt with topics other than those offered in school. Heinrich Böll, the German Nobel laureate, described in his earlier works his school days in Nazi Germany. We were stunned at how much they resembled our everyday life in the “Socialist German Democratic Republic!”

The term for us “philosophy club,” for these few school boys – this was created by the state secret police, the *Stasi*. At one point, they came to the school and interrogated me for six or seven hours. Over and over, they asked who our “sponsor” in the West was – they just could not imagine that 16-year-olds were capable of having their own thoughts.

Heinrich Böll was one of the authors that we students of German in the United States also read during those same years. I also remember vividly my own enthusiasm during those years for Siegfried Lenz’ *Deutschstunde* [The German Lesson] and Günter Grass’ *Die Blechtrommel* [The Tin Drum]. This was the literature with which we were coming of age. Were there other authors besides Böll whose works you were drawn to? What sort of access, if any, did you have to writers or philosophers from other countries?

We were not able to read other authors such as Siegfried Lenz or Günter Grass. We lived in the boondocks and could not gain access to titles published in the West. That only came later when I studied at the university in Leipzig, where I also later worked as a boiler man. But there were films on television, naturally on Western television that we were

able to receive well because I grew up in a town close to the border with Bavaria in West Germany. We saw the film versions of *Deutschstunde* [The German Lesson] by Siegfried Lenz and *Katz und Maus* [Cat and Mouse] by Günter Grass – an amazing experience!

The limits of the boondocks, the militarization of the school – there were also the constant visits by “successful” former pupils from our school who had become military officers and who tried to attract us to the military at assemblies in the large auditorium with their “heroic stories” – for example, how they shot down a guy at the border who had illegally tried to flee the GDR. You have to remember that while the GDR existed, we were not permitted freedom to travel outside our country. But the majority of the pupils, even those who were politically completely naïve, deeply despised these macho guys.

Of course we also read words by writers outside the GDR. Polish writers, such as Tadeusz Różewicz, who had been a partisan in the Polish Home Army, [fighting the German occupation of Poland during the Second World War], but who now was at odds with the new Communist system. Sartre was published in East Germany, as was Jorge Amado’s *Die Herren des Strandes* [Capitães da Areia]! Jorge Percec from France, the Americans Bernard Malamud and naturally Thomas Wolfe (who, incidentally, really bored me). But Hemingway’s *49 Stories* became almost a Bible for me – they contained the entire world that we so desperately were missing! And naturally we read all the Russians of the 19th Century, preferably Dostoevsky, and for me Chekov became very important.

It is clear how important literature was for you, particularly within a system that did not encourage young people to think “outside the box.” How is it that you then began to write yourself? What led you to want to become a writer?

At the age of sixteen, I was lovesick and wrote poems, but there was nothing political about them. That came at age nineteen, when I got to know Poland and saw what kind of culture was possible there – and saw

that my older colleagues were exactly of this generation that had levelled Warsaw and still boasted about their war experiences. In 1973, at age 19, I had a girlfriend in Warsaw. That made me very sensitive to these voices in East Germany – a country that supposedly was Socialist and had broken with the German traditions of militarism and oppression.

What was so different about the culture that was possible in Poland?

When, on an October evening at age 19, I was on my way to visit my girlfriend Hanka in Warsaw, I got off the train in Wrocław because I heard there was a theater festival going on there. Twenty-four hours later, I got back on the same train – and was a changed person!

What had I seen? Without sleeping for even a second: I spent the night until the next morning in a jazz club where there was tea for a *złoty* and improvisations of free jazz the likes of which I'd never heard before. The next day, I saw two plays by Jerzy Grotowski: completely new theater, world class. The actors, who wore numbered prisoners' clothing from Auschwitz, read from a play by Wyspianski, one of Poland's great national dramatists at the end of the 19th, beginning of the 20th Century, that consisted of quotes from the Bible and from Homer, all the while they were tortured with whips. The end of humanity's humanist traditions. Such an approach with the Classics was unthinkable in East Germany.

As your awareness of the possibilities for artistic expression continued to expand, and you continued to write, you again were targeted by the Stasi. You have told us how you had been interrogated at high school for reading literature not included in the official curriculum. What caused the Stasi to feel that the GDR was so threatened by your activities that they considered you a dissident?

The term *dissident*, with which those in the opposition in Eastern Europe were labelled, mainly by the media and the historian types... I don't like it. Perhaps, I was a civil-rights activist. But rather I have always

been a poet, who naturally due to the given circumstances, immediately had to chafe politically if I were to go through life in a “Socialist” country with my eyes open.

It did indeed begin at school, even earlier than I mentioned earlier. It began in earnest at middle school level, 7th grade, at age 13, when I turned in an essay in which there was a lot of imagination: In my story, five lions had human occupations (welder, electrician and mason, for example) and quite successfully made their way in the world. Immediately, my mother was ordered to the school and asked if it wouldn't be better to send me to the nut house ... The teacher was a militaristic and “athletically” oriented woman ... but then the good Lord himself saved me: she became pregnant, and I was able to move on to the academically-oriented high school. After a good two years, I was thrown out of there as a ringleader because of my interest for literature and philosophy – the so-called philosophy club I mentioned earlier –, and was sent to work in the freight yard at the train station. Then came an apprenticeship as an electrician, then conscription into the army, then medical school from which I was exmatriculated for political reasons. Then I landed in prison for five of my poems.

Could you share with us which five poems brought you this prison sentence? I think you had told me earlier that four of them were in the collection *Die Dinge, die ich vergaß*.

They were “Thüringische Legende. Für Reiner Kunze” [Thuringian Legend. For Reiner Kunze], “Jürgen Fuchs nicht zu vergessen” [Not to Forget Jürgen Fuchs], “So lange schon” [So long already], and “Selbststeller” [Selfincriminator]. The fifth one, somehow I've forgotten its title, but it ended with: “Pegasus... Poet ascends, but don't let yourselves be gunned down between the no man's lands BlackBloodGold [the colors of the flags for both East and West Germany, as is the flag of the united Federal Republic, were Black-Red-Gold]. Today I don't think it's such a good poem ...

What was it that the Stasi considered “subversive” about these poems?

I described the *tristesse*, the melancholy, the dreariness of our country, the devastated environment, and the political conformity – because I indeed loved my homeland and still do. Never did I apply for an exit visa to be allowed to leave for West Germany. As their titles indicate, two of the poems were dedicated to my poet friends who had been expatriated and forced to leave the country. And one of them, Jürgen Fuchs, had been imprisoned before being sent into exile. Therefore, the political police, the *Stasi*, also sent me to prison.

These poems were selected from roughly 80 that they found in a search of my apartment and declared to be “subversive anti-state agitation.” That was a criminal offense, I was therefore a criminal. Fortunately, however, during the search of my home they did not find any of my prose works. Just by chance, a friend in Leipzig had taken them to read. Those texts went directly to the point: the generation of our fathers, the “new Socialists” in my country as former *Wehrmacht*- and Nazi perpetrators! I “learned” this is Poland. That would have cost me dearly, brought me many more years of prison ...

In a dictatorship – in Brazil there was also one that lasted a number of decades – the rule is always that the price for a poem which contains the truth is high! For my five poems, I got 27 months in prison.

You have told us in other conversations, that continuing to write poetry while you were imprisoned helped you to survive the inhumane circumstances there. How was it that you managed to write poetry while you were a political prisoner in an East German prison?

Only in my head! During the seven months of *Stasi* interrogation imprisonment, I didn’t even have a pen or pencil, not a bit of paper. I

paced in the cell, initially many weeks of solitary confinement and “wrote away”... There is something from the famous German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe there: *ich ging im Walde so für mich hin...* [I went into the woods to walk alone...]

I have a tendency for making jokes, and that sustains the soul and also the afflicted heart...

In the “real” prison, where we were forced to work in a three-shift system, we had a pencil and were able to get our hands on paper. But I wasn’t stupid enough to hold onto a slip of paper for longer than a day. I memorized the poem I wrote down and then threw away the bit of paper, well-shredded. The prison guards inspected our cells (there were 18 prisoners in one cell) on a daily basis while we were at work. The factories were located on the prison grounds. But those of us with the yellow stripes on the backs and arms of our prison uniforms were “political offenders” – we therefore knew each other well and quickly befriended each other – we naturally were never permitted to leave the prison, not even to work.

You have told us how you managed to continue writing poetry while imprisoned. I would be interested in why you indeed continued to write poetry. I can imagine that, in an extreme case, you might feel that poetry had caused you to be in prison and that you therefore would never write a poem again. Or you could have decided to take note of your observations and sensations in order to later write only stories and essays, but not poems, because poems are simply too beautiful for certain experiences.

No, after a few days I told the interrogator that here, in this country, I was exactly in the right place: in prison.

That explains why I never even thought about regretting anything. And certainly not to consider never again to write poems if they have such a large effect that the political police reacted so hysterically and used a sledge-hammer to crack nuts. To the contrary, that encouraged me

even more! After some time in prison, I crafted exact plans in my head about how I would be able to describe artistically everything that I was experiencing. In this way, I wrote an entire radio play (in my head), *Die Blicke der Nachbarn* [The Neighbors' Glances] that was broadcast on the radio in West Germany in 1983, 40 minutes after all. In the meantime, I was 25 years old and aware that I had to bear witness if I want to be a writer committed to the truth.

To this day, you continue to write poetry. I'm curious how you regard the role poetry has played in your life after you were finally released from prison.

It is a literary form that I really love! I've also written stories and many essays – but poetry – it's something of the world! It's possible to make oneself understandable to everyone. I do not tend, by the way, to the linguistically mutilated texts that have been in full swing since Symbolism, even internationally. Sometimes I even smile while I'm writing when I feel that I've succeeded! And that I once more have stuck it to – as Elias Canetti puts it – *to the preachers of death, who continue to proliferate in literature*, that once again I have stuck it to them with a very simple word!

By the way, for the past six years, I have been taking walks mentally and poetically with a little dog that lives in the USA, in Pennsylvania. Neruda wrote in his memoirs that there was a poet in South America (I don't remember if it was Argentina or Brazil) who always showed up at meetings of authors with his cow. I simply come with my dog "Suki!" My next book – a 100-page poem – that will be published in a bilingual German-Polish edition, is naturally entitled *Walking with Miss Suki!*

Suki is the dog you cared for while you were Writer-in-Residence at Gettysburg College. You speak about how Suki, who lives on the other side of the world from you, accompanies you poetically. What

was it about Suki that stays with you still today? To what extent has Suki brought about a change in what or how you write?

I found in this dog a “person” to whom I can tell everything. In America, I can somehow breathe a sigh of relief; there is an atmosphere of private, human freedom that I can literally “smell.” Now, however, I greatly fear this might not remain the case; and yet I trust that the people of the USA also sense what they could lose.

I thank my dog Suki, who lives in Pennsylvania, for a veritable thrust in my lyrical creativeness. I explain the most difficult things in the world to her using very simple language such as “going poo,” with a simple wink of the eye.

Suki is a huge gift at my age and literally tore me from the confines of German thought and local artistic tastes.

You have traveled quite a bit – also “professionally” as a poet. What have been your experiences with readers in other countries?

Somehow I breathe a sigh of relief when I arrive in another country. I am very happy, perhaps more so than other colleagues, about these invitations. Perhaps that is so because they came for me rather late in my life; the first time I visited America, I was 53 years old. I really noticed – as I just mentioned – and I then tell all my friends at home: there I was able to breathe. But this is an experience that every poet most likely has with his own country if he has described it critically: the local conditions suffocate him.

This interview is intended primarily for readers who do not live in a German-speaking country, and this question is directed to your experiences with readers in countries outside of Germany. Can you tell us about any specific encounters that illustrate how your poems also speak directly to readers in other countries?

Yes. Very late, but all the more intensively, in countries such as Poland, Spain, or Lithuania, and even parts of the United States I discovered that I was very well understood. In the United States, my first story to have been translated into English (“The Wild Huntsman,” you can find the translation on the Internet) was immediately nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In Poland, for example, the Nobel candidate for literature, Adam Zagajewski, who is a friend of Josef Brodsky and Czesław Miłosz, wrote the foreword for my Polish volume of poetry. In Spain, after one of my readings, a professor in Malaga called out that those are not in the tradition of any German poetry! That’s Andalusian poetry! In Lithuania, they said, oh, if only we also had such poets today. Here they all are trying to mimic Modernity, which was lost to our country during the 20th Century. In all modesty, that always picked me up again whenever I was feeling any self-doubt...

In Germany, they’re always complaining about me... I don’t belong to those who are active in the world of cultural feature articles and are particularly renowned. I am suspected by them of being political. And I can live just fine with that, for Wolf Biermann once wrote about me: “The Western cultural gourmands don’t want the dry coarse bread that this Rachowski delivers to them.”

Is there anything else you would like to say to these readers who live outside the German-speaking countries – about yourself, about your poems, about your experiences living in three different Germanys – that might make your poetry more accessible to them?

Rachowski: Human life – it seems to me – is the same everywhere. Dictatorships and wars turn it into Hell – but behind the humiliation, degradation and killing are the interests of the powerful and the greed of criminals who operate internationally!

The common people must join forces, it is exactly this “old” story! Poetry can be a voice of solidarity, completely in private from person to person.

My colleague somewhere in Brazil understands why I saunter through the world with a dog ... just to be able to continue loving this world. In spite of it all.

The interviewer provided the English translation of the original German interview with Utz Rachowski.

O VICIADO EM POESIA: UTZ RACHOWSKI COMO POETA, PRESO POLÍTICO E CONSELHEIRO

Analisando poemas selecionados, este artigo traça as principais fases da longa carreira do poeta alemão contemporâneo Utz Rachowski. Primeiro, a força policial repressiva paranóica da Alemanha Oriental declarou subversivos cinco poemas de Rachowski. Depois, com seus poemas da prisão, Rachowski afirma sua subjetividade contra punições desumanas. A partir dessa fase, a metáfora “poesia é uma droga” nos ajuda a entender o papel da poesia para Rachowski. Em terceiro lugar, seu exílio levou a uma sensação de perda do lar expressa em sua poesia madura. Finalmente, assumindo a responsabilidade por um cão durante a sua estadia de 2012 nos Estados Unidos, reconfirma-se a crença de Rachowski na verdade, dando à sua poesia nova produtividade e um tom mais suave. Fora de sua carreira poética, Rachowski apoia pessoas que sofreram com a repressão de estado.

EL VICIADO EN POESÍA: UTZ RACHOWSKI COMO POETA, PRESO POLÍTICO Y CONSEJERO

Analizando poemas seleccionados, este artículo traza las principales fases de la carrera de larga duración del poeta alemán contemporáneo Utz Rachowski. Primero, la fuerza policial represiva paranóica de Alemania Oriental declaró subversivos a cinco de los poemas de Rachowski. En segundo lugar, con sus poemas de prisión, Rachowski afirma su subjetividad contra castigos crueles. A partir de esta fase, la metáfora “poesía es una droga” nos ayuda a entender el papel de la poesía para Rachowski. En tercero, su exilio llevó a una sensación de pérdida del hogar expresada en su poesía madura. Finalmente, tomando sobre la responsabilidad de un perro durante su estancia de 2012 en los Estados Unidos, se reafirma la creencia de Rachowski en la verdad, dando a su poesía nueva productividad y un tono más suave.

Fuera de su carrera poética, Rachowski apoyó a las personas que sufrieron la represión del estado.

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