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"A layer of universal civilisation"

An interview with Krzysztof Czyżewski, president of Halma, the Network of European Houses of Literature, on good European books, the interest in new discoveries and Estonian authors in Paris.

euro|topics: *Have you read a truly European book lately?*

Yes.

euro|topics: *Which one?*

Every book I read by Claudio Magris, who has been excellently translated into Polish from Italian, is a European book for me. His writing goes deeply into the local context, into the 'mikrokosmi' as the title of one of his best books is naming it, but at the same time he possesses this mastery, not very common today, to transcend it and lift up to the universal. I feel I share the same culture and orientation.

euro|topics: *How do you recognise a European book?*

Being a writer in Poland means being involved in the development of the national culture and language. Because we were threatened by foreign powers, we experienced the risk of [our language and culture] disappearing. Our challenge now is to build a new Europe after all these conflicts and struggles. For that we need literature and also a notion of European citizenship on the political level.



The poet, essayist and editor Krzysztof Czyżewski, born 1958 in Warsaw, is president of the Borderland Foundation in Sejny, Poland, and of Halma, an association of literary institutions.

Photo: private

euro|topics: *How will such a literature of European engagement develop?*

There have been many writers in the past who are not yet European, simply because they have not been translated or promoted in the European arena. It is about making an Estonian writer present in Berlin, Paris or London.

euro|topics: *Isn't that wishful thinking? Most literary translations in Europa are made from Anglo-American literature (60 percent in 2004) and not from Estonian.*

I am myself a publisher among other things. My publishing house is devoted mainly to so-called Central European literature, from Estonia to Albania. Not all these books are bestsellers, although some of them are, for example books by the Czech writer Josef Skvrecký or by the Lithuanian writer Tomas Venclova. But we have in Poland a growing market for small languages and what you might call far-away cultures.

euro|topics: *Why?*

More and more creative people are not any longer interested in the former centres of European culture, like Paris or Rome, crowded with tourists, but rather in unexplored regions, pushing our asses forward towards new horizons corners of Europe.

euro|topics: *Can the event of a literary reading – something European – connect writers and their audience?*

To organise a reading means first to organise translation, travel, an audience. It means giving writers the opportunity to travel to other countries and to visit places to which other famous writers were connected – for example the Thomas Mann Cultural Centre in Nida in Lithuania, the Canetti House in

Rousse in Bulgaria, the Borderland House in Sejny Poland, which is linked to the work of the poet Czesław Miłosz. A reading makes literature audible and opens it up for dialogue. You might say literary readings are one of our main activities in Halma, a network of European literary institutions. We are cross-border activists.

euro|topics: *What was the reason for founding such a network?*

It was built at the grassroots level, responding to a need for exchange. The initial intention was to open up [writing from] the East to a German audience. What followed was an interest by Eastern partners in communicating with the West. In the nineteenth century, literary life and the European spirit were present in literary cafés, in Vienna, in Berlin, in Czernowitz, in Kraców and Vilnius. We want to refer to this tradition today – moving away from official festivals to small intimate spaces of literary exchange.

euro|topics: *Much of the literature coming from countries like Poland, the Czech Republic and Ukraine explores a geographic space and consciousness and is looking for an emotional heritage.*

When we explore our roots, there is no homogenous feel in our regions or cities. Because they were not homogenous, there were many conflicts. But at the same time there is a layer of universal civilisation, of something that was established in these parts of Europe, in these borderlands, which you can explore today as positive potential for the future. The duty of writers, if I can put it that way, is to explore this heritage and put it in a modern European context.

Interview: Nikola Richter



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