

## Evoking a Displaced Homeland: the 'Poetic Memoir' of Andrzej Chciuk

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### Abstract

This article looks at some poems by Polish Australian writer Andrzej Chciuk (1920-1978). Chciuk migrated to Australia from France in 1951, having escaped Nazi-occupied Poland as a twenty-year-old in 1940. In Australia he worked as a schoolteacher in Melbourne while continuing to write poetry and fiction in Polish. His work was published in prestigious Polish emigré outlets like the Paris-based journal *Kultura* and in Australia with sponsorship from the Polish migrant community; to date no English translations of it have appeared. My article focuses on a sequence of poems in his 1961 *Pamiętnik poetycki* (Poetic Memoir) called 'Tamtą Ziemią' (That Other Land), about the cities and towns of Chciuk's childhood: Lwów, Borysław and his hometown of Drohobycz. When the author was growing up these towns were in eastern Poland; by the time of his writing, in the 1950s, however, they had become part of Soviet Ukraine, and were thus doubly removed from his life in Australia. He wrote as a displaced person whose childhood home had itself been displaced. Hence the powerful note of longing that pervades his 'poetic memoir'. Through a reading of some passages in my English translation, I hope to convey something of Chciuk's lively poetic voice, and to show that he deserves admission to discussions of twentieth-century transnational Australian literature.

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Translingual writers from Ha Jin to Jhumpa Lahiri are increasingly at the forefront of contemporary literature in English, but writers in Anglophone countries working in languages other than English have tended to remain obscure, as Sonia Mycak<sup>1</sup> and Michael Jacklin<sup>2</sup> have shown in the Australian context. A case in point is the Polish Australian author Andrzej Chciuk (pronounced 'H-chook') (1920-1978), whose work in Polish produced in Australia reflects the post-World War II global migration of languages and literatures. Chciuk's writings are essentially unknown in Australian literary studies, and occupy a marginal place in Polish literary history.<sup>3</sup> His best known text, the prose memoir *Atlantyda* (Atlantis), published in London in

<sup>1</sup> See Sonia Mycak, 'Transculturality in Australian Literature: Multicultural Writing Practices and Communities,' *Journal of Australasian Studies: Multiculturalism in Australian Literature* 1 (2004) 59-66.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Jacklin, 'The Transnational Turn in Australian Literary Studies.' 'Special Issue: Australian Literature in a Global World', Wenche Ommundsen & Tony Simoes da Silva, eds., *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (JASAL)* [online] (29 June 2009):

<http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/1421/1755>

<sup>3</sup> Chciuk has a Wikipedia page in Polish, but his writings are not, to the best of my knowledge, studied at schools or universities in Poland. Online, I have found references only to a 1999 paper on Chciuk by Andrzej Bałajewski of Marie Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS), Lublin, and a 2005 conference paper presented at UMCS by Halina Szelwach, a student at Drohobych Ivan Franko State Pedagogical University, Ukraine.

1969 by the Polish émigré press, appeared in Poland for the first time in 2002 – 24 years after his death. I encountered his work through research on Polish-language texts for the ‘Australian Multicultural Writers’ subset of the *AustLit* database, which documents Australian literature written in languages other than English.<sup>4</sup> If not for the 2002 Polish reissue of *Atlantyda*, the 1999 biography in Polish by Australian scholar Bogumiła Żongołłowicz, Ukrainian translations of Chciuk’s memoirs (2011) and his recent inclusion in *AustLit*, Chciuk might be forgotten today. Given the verve of his writing and the originality of his perspective, this near-erasure is worth redressing.

Andrzej Chciuk was born into a Polish middle-class family of rural working-class origin in 1920 in Drohobycz, a town near the city of Lwów in what was then eastern Poland and is now western Ukraine: a complex, contested, and, for centuries, multi-ethnic terrain. Ruled in mediaeval times by Kievan Rus’ princes, the Halych region was conquered by the Polish kingdom in the mid-fourteenth century. Annexed from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by the Austrian Empire in 1772, until 1918 the region – now known as ‘Galicia’, a Latinised form of ‘Halych’ - was the largest province in the Habsburg empire. A ‘multicultured land’ as a recent history calls it, Galicia was a major centre of European Jewish life, the birthplace of Hasidic Judaism, the childhood home of philosopher Martin Buber, among others.<sup>5</sup> Uilleam Blacker’s recent review of an English translation of Polish Jewish writer Józef Wittlin’s memoir ‘Mój Lwów’ (My Lvov) suggests the rich character of pre-war Lwów’s cultural life, as elegized by Wittlin.<sup>6</sup> The provincial capital, ‘Lwów’ to Poles and ‘Lviv’ (Львів) to Ukrainians, was ‘Lemberg’ in both Yiddish and the empire’s official German. With the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s collapse at the end of World War I, the former Galicia was fought over by Polish and Ukrainian armies, declared Ukrainian territory in 1919 and wrested back by Polish forces in 1920, the year of Chciuk’s birth. It was part of the Second Polish Republic until the Nazi-Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939; in 1944 it was annexed by the Soviet Union and became part of Soviet Ukraine. It remains a key region of post-1991 independent Ukraine, with Lviv (Львів) a major cultural and political centre.<sup>7</sup>

Chciuk escaped Soviet-occupied eastern Poland as a twenty-year-old Polish partisan in 1940. He fled through Hungary to France, where he joined the French Resistance and was briefly imprisoned by the Gestapo in 1942. He studied French literature at Toulouse and settled in Paris after the war, studying journalism and working for the local Polish émigré press including the socialist paper *Robotnik polski* (The Polish Worker). In 1951, Chciuk migrated to Australia with his first wife Barbara Kulwieć and their two young children Jacques and Anne. He supported himself with various work including as a self-styled French chef at schools in country Victoria and later as a schoolteacher in Melbourne while continuing to write in Polish and co-founding

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/5960600>

<sup>5</sup> Luiza Bialasiewicz, ‘Back to *Galicia Felix?*’ in Christopher Hann & Paul Robert Magocsi, eds., *Galicia: A Multicultured Land* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 169-172.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/ghostly-parades-in-lost-cities-babels-odessa-and-wittlins-lviv/>

<sup>7</sup> See Tarik Cyril Amar, *The Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv: A Borderland City between Stalinists, Nazis, and Nationalists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

and performing with Polish Australian theatre group, ‘Kabaret Wesoła [Merry] Kookaburra’.<sup>8</sup> His fiction was published in leading Polish émigré outlets, the London journal *Wiadomości* (News) and the Paris-based *Kultura* (Culture); his *Pamiętnik poetycki* (Poetic Memoir) appeared in Australia with the financial support of local Poles. To date, no English translations of his work have appeared. Natalka Rymska’s Ukrainian translations of *Atlantyda* and its sequel *Ziemia księżycowa* (Lunar Land) were published in Ukraine in 2011.<sup>9</sup>

Chciuk’s *Pamiętnik poetycki*, the focus of this article, was published in Melbourne in 1961. The title means ‘Poetic Memoir’ or ‘Memoir in Verse’, and it was the only collection of poems published by Chciuk in his lifetime. It includes a long opening sequence written in the late 1950s, ‘Tamtą ziemią’ (That Other Land), as well as earlier poems dating back to his years in France during and after World War II and his first years in Australia. Through a reading of passages from the ‘Tamtą ziemią’ sequence, quoted in Polish and followed by my English translations, I hope to convey something of Chciuk’s distinctive poetic voice, and to show that he deserves to be included in discussions of twentieth-century Australian transnational literature.



*Chciuk’s roguish pose in this photo at 19 anticipates the irreverence of much of his writing.  
Photo reprinted from Bogumiła Żongołłowicz, Andrzej Chciuk, pisarz z antypodów.*

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<sup>8</sup> See Bogumiła Żongołłowicz, *Andrzej Chciuk, pisarz z antypodów* (Andrzej Chciuk, Antipodean Writer) (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999), 77.

<sup>9</sup> See Rymska’s profile and details of her 2012 public lecture in Lviv on Chciuk and other ‘Galician’ writers: <http://www.lvivcenter.org/en/publichistory/educational-projects/?newsid=856>



*He assumes a more deadpan style in his school cook's outfit at a Polish gathering in Melbourne in the 1960s, Photo reprinted from Bogumila Żongolłowicz, Andrzej Chciuk, pisarz z antypodów.*

The sequence 'Tamta ziemia' recalls the towns of Chciuk's childhood, including Lwów, Borysław and his hometown of Drohobycz. When Chciuk was growing up these towns were located in eastern Poland; by the time of his writing, they had become part of Soviet Ukraine, and were thus doubly removed from his life in Australia. Thousands of Poles from eastern Poland were forcibly resettled in western Poland (in the so-called 'recovered territories' taken from Germany) after eastern Poland's wartime Soviet annexation. Poles like Chciuk who had been members of the Polish resistance during the war ran the risk of arrest if they attempted to return to Soviet-controlled Communist Poland, let alone formerly Polish, now Soviet territories. This was the fate of one of his brothers, Tadeusz, who in 1945 returned to Drohobycz to marry, and was imprisoned by the Soviet authorities.<sup>10</sup> At the time that Chciuk wrote his *Pamiętnik*, then, post-war Poland and Drohobycz (now Drohobych [Дрого́бич]) and Lwów (now Lviv [Львів]) in Soviet Ukraine would have seemed permanently out of reach. Hence the powerful note of longing that pervades the memoir.

In a poem about the writing of 'Tamta ziemia' titled 'O własnym poemacie' (About My Poem Cycle), Chciuk declares his debt to the poet Julian Tuwim, whom he calls 'the Master' ('Mistrz'). Tuwim (1894-1953), a Polish Jewish writer widely regarded as one of the most significant poets of the inter-war years, popularised the use of spoken language in Polish poetry; one of his best-known poems ends: 'Całujcie mnie wszyscy w dupę' (You can all kiss my arse). Drawing on the Polish Jewish cabaret tradition of *szmonces* or satirical songs in Yiddish, Tuwim's poems alternately celebrate and mock modern urban life in Poland.<sup>11</sup> Chciuk's poems similarly blend the lyrical and the colloquial, using a mix of idiomatic contemporary Polish and older poetic language. They contain snatches of dialogue and phrases in *bałak*, the Polish dialect

<sup>10</sup> See Żongolłowicz, 58.

<sup>11</sup> See Agnieszka Uścińska, '[Szmonces - polska specjalność](http://www.teatr-pismo.pl/archiwalna/index.php?sub=archiwum&f=pokaz&nr=691&pnr=37)' (Shmonces – a Polish specialty) (2006): <http://www.teatr-pismo.pl/archiwalna/index.php?sub=archiwum&f=pokaz&nr=691&pnr=37>

spoken in Lwów, where Chciuk was a law student when war broke out in 1939. The poems brim with nostalgia, but are also sharply satirical, often at the poet's own expense. Chciuk mocks his persistent longing for a lost past, while eloquently expressing that longing. In a poem called 'Traktat o tęsknocie' (Treatise on Longing) he writes of how Polish immigrants return obsessively in mind to the places they grew up in, no matter how parochial:

[...] w Rzymie kogoś wciąż zachwyca  
Młodość spędzona w ... Medenicach  
(a o nich nawet poniektóry  
nie wie gdzie szukać takiej dziury).  
Innemu – znam go – ciągle w głowie  
jak to tam było w Zdołbunowie  
i wciąż w sydneyjskim złocie plaży  
tylko Zdołbunów mu się marzy ...

In my English translation (which lacks the rhymes of the original), these lines read:

[...] in Rome someone is still dazzled  
by a youth spent in ... Medenice<sup>12</sup>  
(a place most wouldn't have a clue  
where to look for, it's such a hole).  
And another one I know  
Keeps thinking back to Zdołbunów  
and in the gold of Sydney's beaches  
Zdołbunów is all he can dream of ...

'Zdołbunów' is a place name that in Polish sounds comically humble, a kind of 'Woop-Woop'. Yet, according to the 'treatise', it is places like Zdołbunów that have bewitched immigrants like Chciuk, holding them in thrall even in the face of the ostensibly superior beauty of Australian beaches.

'O lwowskim bałaku' (Of Lwów's Bałak), the opening poem of the 'Tamta ziemia' cycle, is an energetic ode to the city's *bałak* dialect. It opens with an exclamation, partly in *bałak*: 'Lwowski bałaku! Śliska mowo!/Z polskich akcentów najpiękniejszy!' (Lwów's bałak! Lovely speech! / Of Polish accents the most beautiful!). It then launches into an exuberant stream of *bałak* phrases, beginning: 'Słuchać batiara – taż to koncert!' (Hearing a batiar – wot a concert!). A 'batiar' – derived from the Hungarian 'betyar', or bandit<sup>13</sup> – was a member of Lwów's pre-war 'knajpa' or tavern culture; somewhere between 'a punter' and 'a low-life', perhaps, but a term used with affection (see Wittlin; Szolginia). The lines are presented as a batiar's speech, overheard and eagerly recorded by the poet. The batiar scolds himself for getting into trouble: '„Ta pocoś zalazł tu, batiaru, / tutaj na Gródku insza chewra / jo, stąd gelajzig masz trzy żebra...”' This translates, approximately, as: 'Why d'you crawl in here, batiar, / it's a different

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<sup>12</sup> 'Medenice' is pronounced in Polish something like 'Meh-deh-nitseh'.

<sup>13</sup> Lwów/Lemberg was the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's province of Galicia (see Bialasiewicz), hence the presence of Hungarian loanwords in *bałak*.

crowd here at Gródek, / you'll leave with three ribs.' Chciuk abruptly breaks off this riff with a wry aside in his own voice, a mix of standard Polish and *bałak*:

Listę tu przerwę. Każdy wyraz  
trzebaby ubrać w odsyłacze,  
opisać źródło, wytłumaczyć  
co wszystko to po polsku znaczy,  
a to przerasta moje siły  
i erudycję. Boże miły,  
bałakać wpirw, ja skut, po lwosku  
z samej istoty spraw i rzeczy  
si w domu przecież nauczyłem,  
dopiero w szkole zaś po polsku  
i frajer byłbym temu przeczyć!

I translate this as follows:

I'll stop the list here. Each phrase  
would have to be dressed in footnotes,  
be given a source, a translation  
into Polish, and that's beyond  
my powers of erudition. Dear God,  
I first learnt to 'bałak' in Lvovian  
as a toddler, at home,  
truth be told,  
it wasn't till school that I learnt Polish,  
And I'd be a fool to deny it!

The verb 'bałakać' used by Chciuk here is a Polish rendering of the Ukrainian 'balakaty' [балакати] (to talk), just as 'bałak' is a Polishing of the Ukrainian 'balak' [балак] (a talk), which shows the indebtedness of this Polish dialect to Ukrainian.

One way to translate the *bałak* words in this passage would be via English slang, for example using 'sucker' for the word 'frajer': 'I'd be a sucker to deny it'. But Chciuk's language is particularly difficult to translate because it blends dialect with standard Polish in a way that sounds entirely natural in Polish, where in English, to have 'sucker' follow closely on a word like 'erudition' would be jarring. American poet Robert Bly has noted how 'high' and 'low' registers combine more readily in modern German than in English, and Polish resembles German in this respect.<sup>14</sup> A fluent mixing of registers also seems to be symptomatic of the context in which *bałak* was spoken, by working-class men, university students and intellectuals who drank at the same taverns in 1930s Lwów.<sup>15</sup> It was effectively a kind of male drinking lingo, to which the poem pays loving tribute.

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<sup>14</sup> See Mary Besemeres, *Translating One's Self: Language and Selfhood in Cross-Cultural Autobiography* (Bern/Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002), 79.

<sup>15</sup> see Wittlin; Szolginia.

Chciuk goes on to evoke the atmosphere of inter-war Lwów through the speech of some older Poles who still identified emotionally as citizens of the Habsburg empire, although by 1920 Lwów was part of newly independent Poland: ‘co dzień si gorsze świństwu zdarza, / Nie tak to było za cysarza!’ (‘there’s some new swindle ev’ry day, / Weren’t like this under the emp’ror!’). Hearing the Austrian anthem performed during an opera the men stand to attention, tears dripping onto their coats, to the amusement of watching youths. The passage relates equally to the boys laughing (Chciuk might have been one) and to the old men being laughed at, conveying an ironic nostalgia for an earlier generation’s own nostalgia. Given the strength of nationalist sentiment among the twentieth century Polish diaspora (see, for example, Matthew Frye Jacobson) this genial portrayal of Austrophile Lvovians is strikingly countercultural. Chciuk celebrates *bałak*’s multilingual heritage, naming Ukrainian, Yiddish, Russian, German, Tatar, Turkish and Hungarian as influences. The poem ends with the forlorn conclusion, in *bałak*: ‘O, lwoski śliszny nasz bałaku, / ty już wymirasz, niboraku!’ (Oh, lovely Lwów bałak of ours, / You’re dying out, you’re a goner!’). As Chciuk would have had no need to remind Polish readers, *bałak* was dying out because its city Lwów had changed hands, becoming part of the Soviet Union, and most of its speakers had been displaced elsewhere – like Chciuk himself.

I look now at another poem from the ‘Tamta ziemia’ sequence, ‘O moim kochanym i śmiesznym Drohobyczu’ (Of my beloved and absurd Drohobycz), which is equally nostalgic but ultimately darker in tone. A number of poems in the *Pamiętnik* lament the war-time destruction of Jewish life. This poem, which begins with an affectionate portrait of pre-war Drohobycz as a blend of picturesque old architecture, mud, oil from the local refinery and provincial boredom, moves on to recall Jewish and Ukrainian figures from Chciuk’s childhood who perished during the Nazi and Soviet occupations. These characters appear as ghosts who populate the imagined post-war Drohobycz of Chciuk’s mind.

The brilliant Polish Jewish writer and artist Bruno Schulz, author of *Sklepy cynamonowe* (The Cinnamon Shops) (1934), was Chciuk’s art teacher at King Jagiełło Public Secondary School in Drohobycz. He appears to have been a significant figure for Chciuk; according to Żongołłowicz, Chciuk drafted a book-length memoir of him which he considered publishing until the appearance of Jerzy Ficowski’s biography *Regiony wielkiej herezji* (Regions of the Great Heresy) in 1967 made the project seem redundant. Schulz appears in other poems in the *Pamiętnik*, including ‘Poemat o Brunonie Schulzu’ (Elegy for Bruno Schulz), which represents his uneasy relationship to Drohobycz petit-bourgeois Polish society as a loner, an experimental writer, and a Jew, and records his murder by a Gestapo officer in 1942. He is also the subject of an evocative essay in the prose memoir *Atlantyda* (Atlantis) (1969), where Chciuk recalls his eccentric and compelling manner in the classroom. In the poem ‘O moim kochanym i śmiesznym Drohobyczu’ Schulz appears at the head of a crowd of phantoms ‘wandering the streets where they were made to die’, with his ‘Nerwowa twarz. I smutny uśmiech’ (Nervous face. And sad smile). The shot that killed him then rings out, followed by the ‘rechoł tłuszczu’, the mob’s croaking laughter.

The lines that follow evoke the destruction of Jewish districts of Drohobycz:

Na Małym Rynku i na Łanie  
zagasły światła wszystkich bóżnic

– u Pomeranza gdzieś nad ranem  
już nie pożywią się podróżni.

Już nikt dorożką Zuckerberga  
z głównego tu nie zjedzie dworca  
dyrektor Blatt, profesor Sternbach  
nie przejdą się wśród tłumów ‘corsa’.

In my English, this reads:

In the Small Market and Łan districts  
lights have gone out in all the synagogues  
– travellers arriving at first light  
Won't get a meal at Pomeranz's.

No one will get in from the station  
on Zuckerberg's droshky,  
Director Blatt, Professor Sternbach  
won't stroll down the crowded ‘corso’ again.

The subtitle of Eva Hoffman's book *Shtetl*, a searching history of Jewish life in Poland from the thirteenth century to World War II, provides an apt comment on these lines' depiction of normal life erased: 'The History of a Small Town and *an Extinguished World*' (my italics). Chciuk's main image is likewise that of light extinguished: 'zagasły światła wszystkich bóżnic' (lights have gone out in all the synagogues).

Another ghost of pre-war Drohobycz is the poet's Ukrainian school friend, 'Józek Łobodycz':

I mój kolega Ukrainiec  
Józek Łobodycz, co tak wiersze  
kochał: trockista. 'Wiej, bo zginiesz'  
– radził mi szczerze. Zginął pierwszy.

Bo gorsi dla nich heretycy  
są nowej wiary, niż poganie.  
W enkawudowskiej zmarł ciemnicy  
po którymś z rzędu przesłuchaniu.

I translate these lines as follows:

And my schoolmate, a Ukrainian,  
Józek Łobodycz, who loved  
poems; a Trotskyist. 'Run, or they'll get you',  
he advised me. They got him first.

Because heretics of the new faith  
Are, for them, worse than heathens.  
In an NKVD cell he died  
after a final interrogation.

Having warned Chciuk to leave Drohobycz when war broke out, Józek Łobodycz was himself arrested and killed by Soviet police as a Trotskyist, a ‘heretic’ in the poem’s mordant term. Next appears Józek’s brother, Sławek, with whom Chciuk shared a school bench and played football after school. The poem recalls Sławek’s passion for Ukrainian theatre, describing how he was so overcome after seeing a performance of a play by the Ukrainian playwright Tobilewicz (Тобилевич) that he couldn’t bring himself to leave the theatre, staying on long after everyone else had left and earning the ire of the building’s janitor.

In lines that movingly distill his feelings for the Łobodycz brothers and his and their shared birthplace, Chciuk writes:

Ta sama ziemia nas zrodziła  
mnie, oraz Sławka Łobodycza  
jednako jedna, swoja, miła,  
jednego w świecie Drohobycza.

On kochał ją po ukraińsku  
a ja po polsku ją kochałem

In English, this reads:

The same earth bore us  
me, and Sławek Łobodycz  
equally singular, our own, dear,  
the only Drohobycz in the world.

He loved it in Ukrainian  
while I loved it in Polish

The poem then relates how Sławek favoured the idea of a ‘Federation’ which would allow Poles and Ukrainians to resolve their conflict over territory, imagining it as a ‘marriage of convenience’, in which ‘love – who knows? might follow’. The memory of Sławek passionately advocating this notion is ‘bitter’ (‘gorzko’) because he was killed in the war soon afterwards. Sławek’s utopian vision has been forfeited, along with inter-war Drohobycz as Chciuk knew it. Their friendship is presented as emblematic of the poet’s memory of his displaced homeland.

Like other poems in the ‘Tamta ziemia’ sequence, this one reflects on how 1920s and 30s Drohobycz was a place where people of Jewish, Polish and Ukrainian descent coexisted, and how this multi-ethnic society with all its tensions and interconnections was destroyed by the Nazi and Soviet occupations. Chciuk’s nostalgic vision of the Lwów region represents the viewpoint of someone writing un-self-consciously from within what had been the politically dominant ethnic group, rather than someone who had experienced bigotry or discrimination as one of an oppressed minority. Polish Jewish writer Henryk Grynberg’s title story in his powerful collection *Drohobycz, Drohobycz*, which draws on conversations with a Holocaust survivor, presents a much bleaker picture of widespread Polish anti-Semitism in 1930s Drohobycz.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Chciuk appears (briefly) in an unfavourable light in Grynberg’s story ‘Drohobycz, Drohobycz’, based on conversations with Holocaust survivor Leopold Lustig, where he is recalled as a high-school student who sold

Ukrainians in eastern Poland were victims of a number of repressive government policies during the 1930s.<sup>17</sup> While local anti-Semitism is acknowledged – and mocked – in Chciuk’s poem on Bruno Schulz, and the history of Polish-Ukrainian conflict is alluded to in his ‘Drohobycz’ poem, Chciuk’s *Pamiętnik poetycki* does not fully confront either of these traumatic histories. It does, however, represent the region (‘that other land’) as Jewish and Ukrainian no less than Polish, in a way that is distinctive for post-war Polish diasporic writing.

In its tribute to poet Julian Tuwim, the *Pamiętnik* draws on an acknowledged Polish Jewish satirical tradition, and in its use of *bałak* it draws specifically on Lwów urban humour, as epitomised by the inter-war comedy duo ‘Szczepcio’ (Kazimierz Wajda) and ‘Tońcio’ (Polish Jew Henryk Vogelfänger) who used *bałak* in their hugely popular radio broadcasts.<sup>18</sup> In his book *Bloodlands* (2010), a deeply nuanced account of the fates of Jews, Belarusians, Poles, Ukrainians, Baltic peoples and Russians under Hitler and Stalin, US historian Timothy Snyder highlights the complexity of national and ethnic identity in this part of Europe between the world wars. Chciuk’s poems capture something of this complexity, in a language that remains vivid. And in this they resonate with the work of other transnational Australian writers, which reflects the fraught diversity of what, from a mainstream Australian perspective, might appear to be internally unified migrant cultures.

I turn now to a poem about the city of Borysław, which typifies Chciuk’s mix of sardonic humour and open nostalgia for the places he grew up in: ‘Pieśń o Borysławiu i o borysławskich łebakach’ (Song of Borysław and Borysław's Łebaki). ‘Łebak’ is a *bałak* word, not included in any of the online dictionaries I consulted. The clearest image of a ‘łebak’ I found online shows a man with two buckets and what looked to me like a handle-less mop (left).<sup>19</sup>

This image suggested that *łebaki* were street cleaners. A closer reading of the poem and further research revealed that they were in fact villagers who skimmed crude oil from oil wells, using buckets and severed horse-tails. Oil was discovered in Borysław in 1853, when the town was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and it became a centre of the empire’s oil industry.<sup>20</sup> According to historian Alison Fleig Frank the ‘łebacy’ (another form of the plural *łebaki*) were



newspapers containing anti-Semitic propaganda. Given his early left-leaning political views and lifelong friendships with Polish Jews including Marian Hemar, Barbara Schenkel and Gwidon Borucki it seems unlikely that Chciuk ever shared the outlook of these papers, though he might have sold them as a teenager. As Eva Hoffman writes in *Shtetl*, in Poland after 1935 ‘the ideology of chauvinist nationalism moved closer to the center of political and social life’ (194) and anti-Semitism pervaded mainstream media, particularly Catholic outlets.

<sup>17</sup> See Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 144-53.

<sup>18</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weso%C5%82a\\_Lwowska\\_Fala](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weso%C5%82a_Lwowska_Fala)

<sup>19</sup> A 1922 postcard in a ‘Views of Borysław’ series <https://polona.pl/item/581391/0/>

<sup>20</sup> See Alison Fleig Frank, *Oil Empire: Visions of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005), 244.

destitute locals who were often Jewish. In Chciuk's poem, the *łebaki* visit the oil wells at night with their buckets and stolen horse-tails and dip these into the wells, squeeze the oil from the horse-tails into their buckets, then sell it on in nearby villages. A scene towards the end of the poem depicts their aggressively cocky demeanour around the guards at the oil wells, who keep well clear of them, mindful that guards have sometimes been drowned in the wells:

Przeto gdy w nocy stróż posłyszysz  
wśród szybów kroki wie: łebaki!  
Więc zachowuje się najciszej  
jak byś Borysław posiał makiem

(So when at night the guard hears  
footsteps among the wells he knows it's łebaki!  
And he keeps ve-e-e-ry quiet –  
you could hear a pin drop in Borysław)

Literally, 'jak byś Borysław posiał makiem' means 'as if you'd sown Borysław with poppyseed' – a Polish idiom close enough in meaning to the English 'you could hear a pin drop', but one which suggests a softer, hush-like silence and hence a more ironic contrast with the loud footsteps, and with the guards' intended role as police.

The poem ends with an image of the wiry *łebaki* with their buckets full, swaggering off into a misty, crumbling distance which only exists in Chciuk's fading memory, and pouring their ill-gotten oil right into his heart. 'Pieśń o Borysławiu i o borysławskich łebakach' (Song of Borysław and Borysław's Łebaki) portrays the *łebaki* romantically if humorously as wild outlaws, but also includes images of their destitution, the shacks they live in and their emaciated figures lined up for unemployment benefits by day, contrasting them with Borysław oil tycoons who make millions 'dla sportu' (for sport).



*A turn-of-the-century photograph of oil wells in Borysław. Photo: Wikipedia*

The poem cycle 'Tamta ziemia' conveys love for a particular region and for complex local subcultures rather than for a whole country – less nationalism than love of place, including

industrial landscapes. In this it is arguably unusual for post-war Polish diasporic poetry, which more often imagines Poland as a whole, in a patriotic, nostalgic vein, like Jan Lechoń's poetry, or via scathing satire, as in Kazimierz Wierzyński's *Czarny polonez* (Black Polonaise), or by evoking metropolitan Polish culture as embodied by the capital, Warsaw, as in Julian Tuwim's *Kwiaty polskie* (Polish flowers):

A polski bez jak pachniał w maju  
W Alejach i w Ogrodzie Saskim,  
W koszach na rogu i w tramwaju,  
Gdy z Bielán wracał lud warszawski!

(How fragrant Polish lilac was in May  
In the Avenues and the Saxon Garden  
In buckets on street corners and inside trams  
When Warsaw's crowds rode home from Bielany Forest).

Nobel-prize-winning poet Czesław Miłosz in his poems celebrates the beauty of the Lithuanian countryside of his childhood, as did the nineteenth-century ballads of the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz – but for both Mickiewicz and Miłosz, as for most Poles before World War II, Lithuania was strongly identified with Poland as a nation.<sup>21</sup> In Chciuk's *Pamiętnik*, it is the towns of pre-war eastern Poland – primarily Lwów, his hometown of Drohobycz, and Borysław – which are the focus, rather than Poland viewed as a nation.

The closest the *Pamiętnik* comes to referring to 'Poland' in a wider geographical sense is in the poem 'O własnym poemacie' (About My Poem Cycle), where Chciuk ironically contrasts his frenzied longing for Drohobycz with his wife's yearning for the elegant baroque palaces of her home city Warsaw, the 'Belvedere' and 'Łazienki':

zrozumiesz jak to zapach nafty  
potrafił mi się przyśnić nocą  
aż byłem potem nieprzytomny  
ze szczęścia mego i mej męki  
(Tak jak gdy Tobie z Twoich wspomnień  
śnił się Belweder i Łazienki).

In my English, this passage reads:

you'll understand how the smell of oil  
returned in my dreams  
until I was faint  
with joy and anguish  
(Just as it was for you when  
you dreamt of the Belvedere and Łazienki).

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<sup>21</sup> see Norman Davies, xvii

Chciuk's second wife Jadwiga Wanda Ernst died after an operation in March 1960.<sup>22</sup> The *Pamiętnik* is dedicated to her memory, and here Chciuk evokes her fond tolerance for his attachment to a 'provincial' Poland she had never encountered. The poem recalls his hope when he began writing the 'Tamta ziemia' cycle that it would acquaint her with this 'lost Poland', and imagines her reading it even now, with the same understanding she showed when she was alive. A scene earlier in the poem which seems to encapsulate this understanding has his wife returning home from work, seeing Chciuk at the typewriter and commenting mockingly, 'wieszcz znowu pisze' (the bard's at work again), then relenting and putting on some Chopin records which she knew helped him to write.

## Conclusion

From his own writings and from Żongołłowicz's biography it seems clear that Chciuk himself viewed his work as part of a post-war Polish literature in exile, rather than as contributing to Australian literature. Most of what he wrote appeared in London- and Paris-based émigré outlets like *Wiadomości* and *Kultura*; only his *Pamiętnik* was published as a volume in Australia (by migrant printers Polpress) with the help of donations from Polish readers in Sydney and Melbourne. In including records for his work, however, the AustLit database is effectively reclaiming him as an author of Australian literary texts. On the back cover of the 2002 Polish reissue of Chciuk's memoir *Atlantyda* (1969), the publishers point out that although Chciuk was widely read among Polish immigrants in Australia, the US and Britain, he was 'entirely unknown in the People's Republic of Poland'. As the work of an emigrant who failed to return to post-war Communist Poland, his writings would have been barred from circulation there.

Perhaps the best way of thinking about their cultural location, a concept that the larger AustLit 'Multicultural Writers' project helps bring into focus, is as occupying a particular kind of transnational/translingual limbo characteristic of writings in minority languages produced by contemporary diasporas. According to a contributor to a Polish online reading forum 'Dziś wieczorem czytam' (Tonight I am reading), Chciuk's poem 'O lwowskim bałaku' appears in Krzysztof Masłoń's 2014 anthology *Puklerz Mohorta. Lektury kresowe* (Mohort's Buckler: Kresy Readings).<sup>23</sup> The contributor, alias 'Rudbekia', quotes the lines about the *batiar* which I discussed above, commenting that she was 'charmed' by the *bałak* phrases and that 'it doesn't matter that I barely understand half of it', it's the work of a writer 'as interesting' as he is 'forgotten' (my translation). Chciuk's biography by Bogumiła Żongołłowicz (1999), the Polish 2002 reissue of *Atlantyda*, the 2011 Ukrainian translations of Chciuk's memoirs, his presence in the AustLit database and inclusion in a 2014 Polish anthology and finally this online reader's discussion of 'O lwowskim bałaku' in 2015 all suggest that the transnational limbo Chciuk's work occupies may yet be evolving in a productive direction – a place of possible future readers, here and elsewhere.

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<sup>22</sup> See Żongołłowicz, 105-107.

<sup>23</sup> See 'Rudbekia', 20.8.2015: <http://www.ogienilod.in-mist.net/viewtopic.php?t=59&start=900>

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