

# REFLECTIONS

Elizabeth Clark Reiss

Poetic Reflections on her two great passions - Her Polish spiritual mate and husband and her newly adopted and then war-lost Polish homeland.

(Edited by Robert and Stefan Reiss)

*Copyright © 2017 by Robert and Stefan Reiss*

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted without the express consent of the author.*

*Printed and bound in the United States of America  
First edition*

ISBN 978-1-946022-12-7

## PREFACE

Once in a while, one is surprised with an unexpected gift. Our mother gave us such a gift. Unfortunately, when we received it, we could not thank her or discuss its meaning, as she was already dead. We don't even know if she planned it that way or whether the gift was even intended for us. Maybe we could not have understood or appreciated it before, as it revealed to us the depth of her life's two great passions before we became the center of her attention. If only we had received her gift before ....

I think we knew that she loved poetry but never considered that she might be a poet. The gift she was to give was her poetry, perhaps never intended for anyone but herself and our father. Even he, however, would never have read some her most beautiful poems because they could only have been written after his death.

To understand, let us tell you of a little of her life. Our mother was born in 1908 into a modest family in Watertown, New York. She left home at aged 17 to study English literature, first at Syracuse University and then at the University of Wisconsin where she received her Master's degree. It was also there that she first became interested in Slavic languages and the possibility of pursuing her studies in Poland. To make that possible, she spent the next year at the University of California studying with George Noyes, a foremost authority on Polish language and literature. Subsequently, she left for Poland to study at the ancient and renowned Jagellonian University of Krakow under the sponsorship of the Kosciusko Foundation. What was intended to be a one or two year program prior completion of a PhD thesis in the United States evolved into a love affair with Poland, its cultural life, and most importantly with a fellow student. She determined that her future was in Poland and she began to establish roots in a new homeland. After marriage to our father, world events changed all of their plans. He had become a musicologist and journalist assigned to cover the New York's World's Fair of 1939, prompting their visit to the United States, where their first son, Robert, was born. The invasion of Poland and the start of World War II precluded their return to Poland.

After again taking up his journalistic career with a Polish language newspaper in New York, and shortly after the birth of their second son, Stefan, their life was again turned upside down. In 1941 he developed multiple sclerosis and shortly thereafter became home bound. To support her young family, our mother found employment as Senior Translator for the Polish Review, a literary and cultural publication of the Polish Government in Exile, but then changed the direction of her professional life and accepted the position of Assistant Executive Director of the newly formed American Council of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Service, a coordinating body for the host of voluntary agencies dedicated to humanitarian relief in war-torn Europe and Asia. While our father continued to maintain some of their contacts with the expatriate Polish cultural community, it appeared to us that aside from caring for our family, our mother's professional responsibilities were all consuming. It is that woman that we knew as our mother during our childhood and thereafter. Our father died in 1958, but aside from continuing to maintain that she was always a married woman until her death, she never gave us to understand the passion with which she loved our father and the life they had both left behind in Poland.

Following her death in 2001, we were faced with the task of disposing of their rather extensive library of Polish books and literary periodicals as gifts to the Universities of California and North Carolina and her historical records of the now defunct American Council to Rutgers University. Among all of the above material, we discovered the poetry she had written in pen or pencil to my father in the years immediately following his death. We also found war-time patriotic poems expressing her love of and hopes for her occupied Poland, together with her translations of patriotic works by famous expatriate Polish poets written during the war and published by her in the Polish Review. This unexpected gift to us introduced the passionate and talented woman we never fully knew as our mother. It is also the gift that we would like to share with you.

Robert and Stefan Reiss  
New York, 2017

## OF THE INFINITE

---

Worlds uncontained, reaching beyond man's mind,  
Unbound infinitude of space; if we  
To the macrocosm impute infinity,  
Why then, must we reverse the coin, step through

The looking glass, and in the microcosm find  
Infinity as well; atoms unbind,  
Neutrons and protons loose, the meson free -  
And with the meson we must start anew.

We must unlearn the finite, and let grow  
The idea that, cradled in pre-man, a seed  
Persists. From infinite vastness we go

Through infinitesimal space to infinite deed -  
Outreaching, thought compassing, mind-broad,  
Children, heirs of infinity - and God.

Elizabeth Clark Reiss  
Unpublished, New York, 1960

"BULGARIA DEPOSITS ALTER OF ROSES  
IN PLACE OF GOLD IN LONDON BANK"\*

---

The armored car slips down the London street,  
Draws to the curb, the weaponed guards descend,  
Bank doors open, a bobby halts his beat,  
A line of porters forms at either end

The transfer of a fortune to attend.  
The boxes pass from hand to hand. The heat  
Of London summer sun beats down to send  
Up-swirling mists of fragrance haunting sweet.

(Up-swirling fragrance dew-dipped in the sun  
Beyond the curtained East. Harvesters pass  
Along the rows. The drifting petals mass

High in the baskets, till the harvest's done.)  
Alter of roses, imperial wealth of old  
Lies in deposit, alongside London gold.

\* Written in reference to a NY Times article

Elizabeth Clark Reiss  
Unpublished, New York, 1960

# CRACOVIENNE\*

A BIOGRAPHY IN SONNET SEQUENCE OF LOVE

Elizabeth Clark Reiss  
Unpublished, New York, 1961

\* Cracovienne. The French name for a fast Polish folk dance (Krakowiak) from the Krakow region that was very popular throughout Europe in the early 19th century.



Elizabeth Clark Reiss  
b. 16 April 1908      d. 12 February 2001





Ernest Paul Reiss  
b. 4 March 1904      d. 26 January 1958



## FORWARD

---

Sir Philip turned to the masters of his day  
When he, constrained to put his love in verse,  
Sought models for his songs, and did rehearse  
The alexandrine line, the Chaucerian lay,

The honied conceits and inventions fair. -  
Yet one by one, he laid them all aside  
As lacking truth, and with his love to guide,  
Looked into his heart, and found the fit verse there.

You are not Stella, nor I Astrophel,  
Only our love the same, yet I would write  
With such fit words. The poets of today

With unrhymed and unmetered verses, fail  
As models here. And, as Sir Philip might,  
I read my heart, and with the sonnet stay.

## HOLY WEEK

---

After you died, I struggled to recall  
The days preceding. The first day before  
Reliving full, I am soon accounted for  
Each small event, each word we spoke, and all

The suddenly important nothings that befall  
Men commonly. Then, past the closing door,  
I moved to the second day, its treasured store,  
Jewels for remembrance, seeking to enthrall.

And to the third and fourth, each dimming fast,  
Till I could no more capture, as I sought,  
The further moments of those final hours, -

So the Apostles, Crucifixion past,  
Must have endeavored, in some mighty thought  
His days to recapture, for their world and ours.

## HOW CAN I STAND ALONE?

---

How can I stand alone? So long, my dear,  
We shared a single life, as in a shell  
The two parts of a nut close-lying dwell,  
Or as two eyes which single-visioned peer

From out a face. By what analogy  
Can I explain our oneness? Words alone  
Cannot express the concept two made one.  
Two separate parts, a single entity.

How can I stand alone? The ancient rite  
Which sentenced widow at the husband's death  
Perhaps the kindest, if they loved as we.

I am not one but half. I am not free,  
I cannot act, I cannot draw full breath,  
Alone, half here, half lost in blackest night.

## I CANNOT SEE YOU

---

My eyes are my betrayers. Unlike all  
The other senses, they refuse to serve  
My love. I close my eyes and every nerve  
Rejoices in your touch - how gently fall

Your hands upon my head! At times you call  
Endearingly my name. My lips preserve  
The savor of your kiss, and in the curve  
Of shoulder where my face rests, I recall

The comforting scent of you so close to me,  
Close as we ever were, thanks to these four  
Most faithful senses! All but my blinded eyes.

Dear Presence that I feel but cannot see  
Entreat for me that I might see once more,  
Pray me un-blinded - if the prayer be wise.

## ALCHEMY

---

We two were one. But now you're gone and I  
Remain. (And yet if we were truly one,  
Then only half remains, and half is gone.)  
When we were one, those many years gone by

Our thoughts, our minds were intermingled so,  
My thoughts lived in you, as your thoughts in me,  
Our minds and souls, by some sweet alchemy,  
Confluent were, in perfect interflow.

But half is gone and only half remains.  
And that half lives. Your thought, your mind, your soul  
Remain within the living half, and mine

While gone with you, the living half retains.  
And yet somewhere your spirit keeps the whole  
Till once more fused by alchemy divine.

## CHAPEL IN THE SNOW

---

Tonight it's snowing, as that night it did  
So many mile, so many years ago.  
The city streets are frosted, buildings hid,  
The bitter cold has gentled with the snow.

And now, as then, I taste the freshening air. -  
("Before the Capuchin Chapel let us meet,"  
You'd said, and I had promised to be there.  
Breathless, I hurry down the snow-swept street

And at the corner turn, The chapel low,  
Grey in the lamplight, beckons through the trees,  
The Chapel Virgin, gossamered in snow,

Waits in the garden, pondering mysteries  
I see you there. ..) For the first time I knew  
My love, my life was heaven-pledged to you.



## RENDEZ-VOUS

---

Do you recall that other meeting when  
We failed to meet? "Wait in the market square  
Beneath the clock," you said, and added then -  
Or so I thought, "Precisely at two be there!"

(You could not wait - you had to go someplace.)  
Precisely at two I hurried to the spot.  
You were not there, I looked, but not a trace!  
Had I mistaken time, or place forgot!

I never knew. Returning breathless home,  
Breathless and lost, I waited till you came.  
Angry that I had not appeared, you would

Not listen. Dearest, again I have become  
A wanderer, lost in time and place the same  
As then, - and I would meet you if I could!

## MEETING IN CLASS

---

We often laughed about it later. I,  
Newly arrived, an alien student, sat  
Huddled in first row alone, to try  
To catch the unfamiliar phrases. That

I was conspicuous, I knew. (For who  
Sits in front row at college!) Still you came,  
Sat down beside me, and the whole class through,  
In whispering words and signs you sought my name.

I felt all eyes upon me. Blushing now,  
To silence you, I wrote it in a book.  
You marveled: whence I came, and why, and how.

I knew not what your words meant, but your look  
Translating, vexedly I cast about,  
Wondering, my love, why you should seek me out!

## LANGUAGE

---

Slowly I learned your language. As a child  
You taught me, word by patient word, until  
The barrier overcome, I spoke at will  
With you in your own tongue. No more exiled

My mind from yours, our thoughts and dreams we shared,  
Recounted tales of times before we met,  
Breathlessly, lest we suddenly forget  
Some minute detail, experiences compared.

Caught up in time, we easily conversed  
On common matters; daily were attuned  
Each to the other, found that we communed

Wordless again - and so was speech reversed.  
But dearest, through what subtle language now  
Can our minds meet? Our souls with speech endow?

## FULL PORTRAIT

---

The tales you told of times before we met,  
People you knew, experiences great and small,  
The events that made you often I recall,  
The sum of these upon the known you set,

That knowing, I might know you better yet.  
You were a man when our lives crossed, and all  
Of joy and pain that earlier did befall  
You thus was hid, till generously you let

The curtain lift on scenes of childhood, youth -  
I ponder these scenes now - varied role  
They played in making you the man I knew.

Each small kaleidoscopic bit brings truth,  
Falls into place to make the portrait whole.  
The well-loved portrait that I have of you.

DEAREST, YOU TOLD ME ONCE HOW ONE  
CHRISTMAS LONG AGO ...

---

You were but a child yourself  
The day was Christmas eve  
The weather had turned cold  
Your younger brother, Richard, six years old.  
A moment unobserved, had slipped away.  
Out of the house and down into the gray  
Dusk of the city streets.  
You had been told to care for him.  
Oh, would your mother scold?  
Where had he gone?  
What would your father say?

The hours passed.  
Your brother was not well.  
Often he fell in faint.  
Was he faint now?  
Fallen in some cold place?  
Half of the night they searched.  
You waited numbly in the spell of fear.  
At dawn they found him - well.  
But how can Christmas ever again for you be bright?

## UNDERSTANDING

---

Remember? When my father died, you wept,  
Although before, you'd felt that he had borne  
Some animosity toward you. You'd kept  
A balance sheet of wrongs. But now, forlorn,

You wept. Too late, you cried he never knew  
That truly you had counted him a friend -  
Remember how I sought to comfort you?  
"It's only now that he can comprehend!"

"Only when man puts off mortality,  
Closes his human eyes and seals his ears,  
His spiritual mind at last can clearly see,

His quickened soul at last divinely hears."  
My dearest, now that mind, that soul command  
In turn, this troubled heart to understand.

## I MISS THE SHARING

---

But, above all, I miss the sharing. This  
Is perhaps the essence of love's gift -  
The chance to share a joy, a grief, to lift  
A burden, to laugh together. - Dear, I miss

The secret quick exchange of glances when  
A sudden thought amuses, or the exchange  
Of reminiscence on the children .... Strange ...  
Today our eldest son wrote home. Again,

I seek you vainly, I should like to read  
His letter with you. And the young one (now  
A junior, math and physics) phoned last night.

So much I have to tell you I would need  
Eternity! But oh, my heart cries out,  
How long before we two shall reunite!

## TWO SMALL BOYS (Left Unfinished)

---

Two small boys - brothers - one older by a year  
That's you. There is a photo somewhere that  
You showed me once.  
In sailor suits and hat,  
Posed for the picture, solemn you appear  
Two little cherubs cast in mortal form.  
Two little brothers, standing side by side -  
This I remember when .....



LORD, POLAND KEEP

PUBLISHED AND UNPUBLISHED WAR-TIME  
ORIGINAL POETRY AND TRANSLATIONS

Elizabeth Clark Reiss  
New York, 1944



Elizabeth Clark Reiss in traditional costume. c.1937.



Kościół Marjański ze szczytu atyki Sukiennic.

*Fot. St. Kolowiec.*

### Krakow, St. Mary's Church. Pre-1939 photograph.

From the tower a bugler plays an anthem facing each compass direction. The playing suddenly and unexpectedly ends. Today it is played every hour. According to legend, the playing commemorates the heroic attempt of the bugler to warn the city of the impending Tartar (Mongol) assault in 1240. The sudden ending of the anthem signifies the moment when he is killed by a Tartar arrow.



LORD, POLAND KEEP (Unfinished Draft)

---

The silent stretch of plain  
The sunrise red with blood  
The ribboned Dnieper's flood  
Its gilded waters stain

Cherson\* village in shroud  
The steeple cross from on high  
Built to surmount the sky  
Felled by a godless crowd

City wall in the dawn's aglow  
Wild eyed Mongolian face  
Measures a crimson pace  
Bloodied in human woe,

From dungeon to heaven's gate  
Above the sea breeze floods  
Softly the prayerful notes,  
Of the hymn "Lord Poland Keep"

Elizabeth Clark Reiss  
Unpublished Draft, No date.

\* Cherson (Kherson). A region of southern Ukraine, originally settled by the Greeks and given the name Chernsonesos. It was through southern Ukraine that the Mongols passed on their way to invade Poland and Hungary during the second Mongol invasion of 1237 - 1242.

## LEGEND OF THE THREE BROTHERS

---

According to words of an ancient story  
Three brothers there were. Rus, Czech, and Lech  
Each sought for himself a home of glory.  
Rus looked to the East, to the South looked Czech.  
But the third brother, Lech from his perch on a tree  
Looked out on the plains that stretched beneath,  
And the land was fair and the land was free,  
And he said: "This land is the land for me,  
I shall build my home on the verdant heath,  
And my sons shall be born and be happy here,  
And their race shall grow strong and shall rule the soil,  
The land shall grow fairer for all their toil,  
The land shall be held in their hearts most dear."

And as he spoke, so it came to be:  
Thus peacefully parted the brothers three.  
Rus went to the East, to the South went Czech  
While here on the broad plains lingered Lech.

And the land of Rus waxed strong and great,  
The land was rich and the land was wide,  
And the gods dealt kindly with its fate  
While it grew in wealth and pride.

And the land of Czech was a little land  
Hemmed in by mountains on every hand,  
It grew in wisdom and sweet content,  
Glad in the fate its gods had sent.

But the land of Lech was a beauteous plain  
Blessed by the sun and the winds and the rain,  
Where the harvest yielded their golden grain,  
And the blue sky smiled and the heart was gay.  
But its boundaries were open to friend and foe.  
Many a friend came here, I know.  
But many a foeman came this way.  
And while the land of Rus waxed strong,  
And while the land of Czech made song,  
The land of Lech was forced to fight  
And defend in battle its great birthright.

A moral there is to every story  
And so in this land of ours we find  
A moral that shines in endless glory,  
A moral that cheers the troubled wind.

For the sons of Lech gained world renown.  
As warriors, their worth was known and praised,  
Their beauteous land, though it wore a crown  
Of thorns, in its glorious deeds amazed  
The watching world, and won wide acclaim.

For the sons of Lech with a love most great,  
With their lives defended that land so dear,  
In their blood defended its holy Name.  
And the country both blessed and cursed by fate  
Became of the three the greatest here.

For riches and wisdom are only two  
Gifts of the gods to states and men,  
The third is the faith, the spirit true,  
And Poland in faith shall rise again!

Elizabeth Clark Reiss  
Published in unknown periodical (Perhaps The Polish Review)  
November, 1944

WARSAW CAROL – 1944

by Stanislaw Balinski (Translated by Elizabeth Clark Reiss)

---

Oh, Holy Mother! Let the birthday of Thy Son  
Come later pray.  
Let not the eyes of the Creator look upon  
Our plight today.  
This year, oh Mother, let Thy dearest Babe be born  
'Neath brighter skies.  
But not among us. Here our city lost, forlorn,  
In ruin lies.  
To our beloved Warsaw which Thou dost recall  
From other years,  
The crosses have grown up, the cemeteries all  
Are blood and tears.  
Our little children, Holy Mother, all are dead  
From shrapnel shot.  
Oh! Holy Mary, pray for us in His sweet stead,  
But come here not!  
And if His birthplace be with all the smoking earth  
Of Warsaw's loss,  
Then Thou hadst better place the Heav'nly Babe at birth  
Upon his cross.

The Polish Review, 1944



STABAT MATER

by Josef Wittlin (Translated by Elizabeth Clark Reiss)

---

The sorrowing mother stood upon the square,  
And saw her dead son's body hanging there.

She stood within the world's unfeeling space  
A kerchief framed the Polish mother's face.

She does not speak a single word, nor cries  
But fixes the cold corpse with stony eyes.

He hangs there barefoot, lonely and bereft,  
(The Germans took his shoes before they left.)

And in her son's shoes they would march along,  
Tramping the soil which they had come to wrong.

Tramping the martyred soil they hold in fee,  
That waits and watches, silent now as she.

*Stabat Mater, Mater dolorosa Thou,  
They've cut Thy sons down from the gallows now.*

*Thou layest each to rest in the murky tomb,  
Dead, lifeless fruit of Thy most sacred womb.*

*Stabat Mater, Mater Nostra fair,  
Polonia! Thine the crown of thorns to wear.*

The Polish Review, 1944

## MEETING IN PARIS

by Alexander Janta (translated by Elizabeth Clark Reiss)

---

He left Prince Adam's house - and through the Paris streets,  
Leaning upon his staff, in exile's cape arrayed,  
Mickiewicz walked and mused at length on Thaddeus' fate.  
When from the windows of a certain house the sweet  
And softly silver tones like trembling dew-drops strayed,  
The plaintive rhythms of the dance to emulate.  
Mickiewicz listened, stopped. "One of my countrymen,  
And with no little gift. But who? One thing is clear,  
His music bears the mark of sadness that belays  
The folk-songs of his race. But yes!" He nodded then.  
"Of course! But now I know! The young Chopin lives here!"  
He smiled. "It is some new mazurka that he plays."

The Polish Review, 1944

## POZNAN

by Alexander Janta (Translated by Elizabeth Clark Reiss)

---

So distant now it is, and yet so near in truth -  
One City was my world, the cradle of my youth,  
The years of happy childhood, the roads so broad and free,  
Though often trod in sadness and disillusionment,  
But still I deeply breathe their tender, youthful scent,  
But still they twine themselves into my poetry,  
Those distant Poznan years, those early years at school,  
Those sweet and moving years of childhood's carefree rule.

And still it stands, buttressed by walls of churches low,  
The town, encircled by the Warta's dreamy flow,  
And still it moves the heart that faith yet keeps  
With pictures of its streets, its towers' silhouette,  
Its byways traversed in the night with friends well met,  
To watch the stars and listen while the city sleeps  
The stroke of midnight from the town hall tower, Young hearts  
Eager to conquer all, the world, and all that life imparts.

Town of my childhood, town of ancient distant charm  
Begot one dreary December day, when the alarm  
Was sounded in the Bazar, which now today  
Like a great burning question illuminates our exile.  
The first brave notes of freedom sounded then a while  
Along those shining streets among the banners gay  
Bringing that happy fortune, which I partook before  
Most freely, till I lost it. Naught else can pain me more.

Poznan, beloved town of mine, silenced and mute,  
I watch and listen now, with eyes and ears acute,  
Awaiting some sign in that silence which now sings  
Like distant waves in seashell and pulsating flows  
From brow to empty hand, which now no longer knows  
The feel of weapon in a vain defense, but clings  
To hopes for a return, a day of judgment, praise,  
To re-create anew those bygone youthful days.

The Polish Review, 1944

BATTLE - SONG OF WARSAW

Broadcast by the Warsaw radio "Blyskawica" on August 24,  
1944 (translated by Elizabeth Clark Reiss)

---

Though we fight among graves, still our spirits are high.  
Fighting Warsaw fights on, none here weeps in despair!  
We straddle the Hun and with bare hands we try  
To strangle the beast as he creeps to his lair.

While you still complain of the bloodshed and flame  
Devouring Warsaw as day succeeds day,  
We here with our bare breasts the enemy stay  
And smile at your praise and suggestions of fame.

But why must your song of lamenting still sound  
When here the great day, long awaited, has come,  
And everyone, men, women, children are found  
Fighting and bleeding for Poland, for home!

Let the funeral dirges no longer be heard.  
For here beats the great heart of Poland - intact!  
Warsaw speaks! Warsaw thunders! And this is her word:  
"Give us not praise. Give us arms! Let us act!"

The Polish Review, 1944



Obviously, our greatest thanks go to our mother for this wonderful and unexpected surprise. It is important to understand that when organizing these poems into their two sections and giving them their titles, we attempted to follow our mother's notes. In putting this little collection of her poetic work together, we also need to recognize the encouragement of the wonderful expatriate Polish poet, Anna Flajlich-Zajac, now the recently retired Senior Lecturer of Polish Language and Literature at Columbia University, and that of our mother's only granddaughter, Carroll Reiss Crescimanno, who shared a very special relationship with her, and may have not been as surprised by this gift, as were we.

Robert and Stefan Reiss (eds)

