

David Frick

David Frick (1955–2022), who taught Polish literature and culture in the Berkeley Slavic Department for some four decades, died on December 10, 2022, at the age of 66. David was trained as a philologist, receiving his PhD in 1983 from Yale where he worked with Riccardo Picchio. When David then came to Berkeley he was, in effect, succeeding Czesław Miłosz, who had been the previous professor of Polish literature in the Slavic Department. It was perhaps a fitting succession, since David would come to focus on the eastern lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Lithuanian, Belarussian, and Ukrainian lands that were also very close to the poet's heart. I remember Miłosz in Dwynele Hall in the late 1970s reminiscing about the beauties of Vilnius, which he mistakenly thought he would never see again. I also remember, some forty years later, noting with interest that David was writing in Dwynele Hall his magnum opus about the lost world of seventeenth-century Vilnius. When he died last year David was working on a Miłosz translation project.

David's first book, *Polish Sacred Philology in the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation*, published by the University of California Press in 1989, was a work of astonishing erudition, analyzing multiple translations of the Bible into vernacular Polish, comparing the differences and variations and evaluating their significance both linguistically and theologically. The study was significant because these were the first translations of the Bible into Polish, but also because it was in this period that Polish itself first became a literary language. Let me note that Polish was not David's family language, and that his expertise came entirely from language study, though his interest in religion and the Bible came partly from his family, for his father was an ordained minister of the bible-focused evangelical Church of God and later a college president at campuses with religious histories.

David was born in Dover, New Jersey, in 1955, when his father was serving in that area. I grew up around Dover myself, and David referred to us both as "Dowerianerzy" in an invented baroque Polish. "My Dowerianerzy musimy trzymać się razem" (We Dover guys have to stick together.) In high school in Elmhurst, near Chicago, he was a teenage trumpeter, and his ambition was to follow his "adolescent hero" into the Chicago Symphony Orchestra: "My completely unrealistic plan was to replace the principal trumpeter of the Chicago Symphony, Adolph Herseth," as David once told me. Instead he became a Slavacist.

Over the years, David's interests evolved in the direction of cultural history in such a way as to make us very close colleagues in the intimately small field (within American academia) of the early modern study of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He continued to pursue the study of religion, considering especially the encounters among the Commonwealth's many different religious faiths and confessions. At Berkeley David came to work closely with his colleagues in the History Department, both in the fields of eastern Europe and Early Modern Europe. He was, above all, an exemplary Slavacist, and our friendship, living on opposite coasts, was always built around meetings at ASEEEES conventions, dating back to when they were still AAASS conventions.

His 1983 Yale dissertation dealt with the writings of Meletij Smotryckyj as an "Orthodox Humanist" in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It was not, however, until 1995 that David published

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(with the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute), his book *Meletij Smotryckyj*, focusing on this important churchman and theologian who came from the Ukrainian or Rus lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and very dramatically converted from Russian Byzantine Orthodoxy to Uniate Greek Catholicism in the 1620s. David, considering Smotryckyj's theological writings and his religious polemics, attempted to evaluate the religious and cultural identity of a man poised between two radically opposed religious and cultural worldviews that met in the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The book is a fascinating excavation of who Smotryckyj really thought he was, and what religion meant to him. In an overflow of erudition David then went on to publish an 800-page volume of Smotryckyj's major writings, *Rus Restored*, translated and annotated by David Frick.

David's book on Vilnius, *Kith, Kin, and Neighbors: Communities & Confessions in Seventeenth-Century Wilno*, published by Cornell in 2013, offered a religious reconstruction, almost house by house, of the neighborhoods of seventeenth-century Vilnius, one of the great urban centers of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Today of course it is the capital of Lithuania but was then usually denominated as "Wilno" in Polish. David (who taught himself Lithuanian to carry out this project) worked in the archives of Vilnius to excavate the religious anthropology of the Orthodox, the Roman and Greek Catholics, the Calvinist and Lutheran Protestants, and the Jews (Vilnius was perhaps the world capital of rabbinical Judaism), living side by side in the same city. He meticulously presented the neighborhoods of Vilnius, so that it was possible to see with astonishing clarity how urban society, sociability, and family functioned in the seventeenth century. The book was, in some sense, a masterpiece of the Annales school, Braudelian in its accumulation of social detail, but at the same time informed by the approaches to religious history in the work and school of Natalie Zemon Davis, uncovering the intricate dynamics of religion and society. David posed the most important agenda of questions for historians concerned with early modern Europe, that is: how did communities of different religious faiths coexist within the same urban fabric, what was the balance of tension and cooperation between them, and exactly how and when did they interact with one another?

Anyone who has been to Vilnius knows it as a city of astonishing churches—and spectral spaces where synagogues once stood before World War II. Frick's book places the worshippers within those sacred spaces, both the spaces that still exist and those that are now gone, and, even more important, follows those worshippers home, to work, through their daily lives, through the cycles of their lives, into their most private family concerns and through their most public interactions with one another. The fascinating narrative details of people's lives that Frick reconstructed from his sources also gave the volume an element of storytelling, even as the accumulation of those stories produced the volume's ultimately comprehensive impact: the detailed conjuring of a whole city. Here David achieved some kind of extraordinary interdisciplinarity: trained in literary and religious studies, he executed this work also as both historian and anthropologist. For David the art of understanding a lost cultural world was something like the "Ars Poetica" of Czesław Miłosz, an exploration of houses, doors, keys, and invisible presences.

Ten pożytek z poezji, że nam przy-
pomina.

Jak trudno jest pozostać tą samą
osobą,

Bo dom nasz jest otwarty,

we drzwiach nie ma klucza.

The purpose of poetry is to remind
us

how difficult it is to remain just one
person

for our house is open,

there are no keys in the doors,

A niewidzialni goście wchodzą i wychodzą. and invisible guests come in and out at will.

—“Ars Poetica,” translation by Miłosz himself, with Lillian Vallee

Let me also mention David’s own translation of Chopin’s letters, published in 2016, and his translations of the fiction of contemporary Polish writer Jerzy Pilch, *A Thousand Peaceful Cities* in 2011 and *My First Suicide* in 2012. While David was thoroughly intimate with Polish culture, it is important to note—especially now, given his death at the time of Russian aggression in Ukraine and the Russian denial of Ukrainian nationhood—that he was also deeply involved as a scholar in understanding the distinctiveness of Ukrainian culture. He explored especially Rus or Ruthenian culture and identity in the Ukrainian lands of the early modern Commonwealth. Considering the philological distinctiveness of Smotryckyj’s writing style, David argued that the early modern churchman was seeking “those areas of acceptable differentiation in which a kind of Orthodox Ruthenian ‘otherness’ could enjoy a certain autonomous existence,” that “the peculiarities of Smotryckyj’s usage” indicated an “ultimately unsuccessful attempt to ‘co-opt’ the language of a dominant culture for the goals of the subordinate.” (205)

In David’s Vilnius book, there is a brilliant chapter on “The Bells of Wilno,” addressing the different and syncopated religious calendars of the different faiths and denominations and what time itself therefore meant in a multireligious and multicultural city. David described what he called “the Wilno acoustic environment” as if he himself were living in the seventeenth-century city:

The cacophony of Wilno bells and calls to worship meant that all Vilnans were constantly reminded of the fact that they were sharing the city with a number of other confessions and religions, which could have led to tension and resentment; but it also meant that a citizen of Wilno had a good sense of the rhythms of life of all those others. An insomniac visitor to the old town of a modern European city quickly learns to distinguish the bells of one establishment from those of another—by pitch, volume, direction, and manner and purpose of ringing. Surely Vilnans knew immediately whether a given bell was intended for them and if not, who among their neighbors was being summoned and for what purpose (98).

I always supposed that David himself was the insomniac traveler, listening to the bells that intimated to him the historical experience of early modern neighbors. He was a very amiable man, a very modest genius, a lovely friend, with a wry sense of humor, but he also had his demons and surely had some insomniac nights with the tolling bells.

For a philologist, of course, the crucial acoustical environment was linguistic, and David wrote about the hybridity of language, with different and even unrelated languages converging in their morphology and syntax among the multilingual communities of seventeenth-century Vilnius.

As we move through the corridors of the various houses, through the various neighborhoods, drop in at workplaces and at christening parties we hear many different hybrid languages. . . . We hear people communicating with each other across linguistic and ethnic boundaries. We also hear people making jokes in secret about the others in their own secret languages. . . . But mostly we will hear them all speaking Polish (the Jews and Tatars also spoke Polish), as this was the language of public discourse in most circumstances. But it was a Polish with an articulation and syntax that

Ruthenians, Lithuanians, Germans, Scots and Italians, Jews, and Tatars could accommodate (116).

Only a very brilliant philologist and historian would have been able to appreciate those subtle adaptations and complex accommodations that made the seventeenth-century Polish language of Lithuania into a lingua franca for such a complex urban ethnography. If David had been living in that city he would have been the ideal listener in that acoustical environment, understanding all the secret jokes, comprehending the multifarious meanings of the bells and the marvelous complexities of the hybrid languages. The bells would have been then—as they are now—tolling for him.

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