

WIDOW'S SONG

Time has had its way with me—why not?
 The world will scarcely notice when I leave;
 the weather will continue—cold or hot—
 the wind may keen, but elements don't grieve.
 This body that I have to leave behind
 is nothing that I ever valued much—
 the nose too large, the skin a drying rind,
 each leg, once shapely, now a simple crutch.
 If only I could take a book along,
 a glass of wine—champagne would be the best.
 If only I could right all I've done wrong,
 the grave might simply be a place to rest.
 The clock reveals its round, impassive face.
 Life was a mystery; Death a commonplace.

*Linda Pastan was Poet Laureate of Maryland from 1991 to 1995. In 2003 she won the Ruth Lilly Prize for lifetime achievement. Her 14th book, *Insomnia*, is due out in the fall of 2015.*

Keep in mind that leaders of this same populist party also recently affirmed that there is no reason why basic civil rights—such as freedom of speech and religion—shouldn't be subject to a popular vote."

Zimler also speaks out on women's rights, abortion, gay rights and the treatment of migrants. Says legislator Alda Sousa, Zimler is a "natural communicator" who is seen not as "an American or a Portuguese but a citizen of the world." As a strong supporter of public education, Zimler accepts invitations to speak at some 50 to 60 public high schools around the country each year. "Most Portuguese writers consider this beneath them," he laments. Giving talks on the Holocaust and the Inquisition, he admits that he sometimes feels like a bearer of bad news and "this country's honorary Jew." But he spends much of the time answering questions about how writers live and work, offering encouragement to "find your own learning without teachers and authorities."

Ultimately, among young people, the talk turns to the fact that he is openly gay. "The reason I agree to touch on my sexuality is that I know that there are young lesbians and gays in the small towns—and not so small towns—who are feeling lonely and scared," he explains. "While Alex and I never had any difficulties, that may be because Portuguese tend to respect university professors. If we had been a plumber and carpenter, for instance, I'm not sure what the reaction would have been. Generally, it is okay to be gay here as long as you don't bring it up as an issue. Very few writers here are out of the closet. Even the young ones."

In *The Night Watchman*, he directly confronted Portugal's contemporary social ills. "One big surprise awaited me as I wrote the book: I discovered that I was far more interested in the moral crisis affecting Portugal than the economic one," he says. "That was the controversial aspect of the book in Portugal, because I discussed corruption and influence-peddling, and how these crimes affect people's lives—

and how they often go unpunished."

Despite his overall popularity, Zimler has not been embraced by Portugal's small Jewish communities. "In the New World," he observes, "we're so free within our Judaism. We can pick and choose amongst the traditions, believe this part and not believe the other part. In Europe, with the Holocaust and all that has happened, the communities are very closed. You are either in all the way or out." He admits he is slightly bitter. "In Brazil, it's 'Welcome, cousin,' but here in Porto, I'm just not one of them. I've had little support from the congregations and they never organized events for my books." As he explains, "There has been resentment at my writing the Jewish story in Portugal, because I was not 'one of them.'"

Still, he hopes his works—which seem to confront evil with equal parts outrage and forgiveness—have helped a bit to counter any rise in anti-Jewish sentiments in Portugal. "I think there are two kinds of anti-Semitism in Europe at the moment, and they overlap. First, the campaigns against Israel have given the old bigots a chance to speak openly about their dislike for Jews." The second kind is more surprising to Zimler. "Even after the Holocaust, so many educated European still openly believe the old lie about Jews controlling the world." He's less concerned about Portugal—where Jews (or North African Muslim migrants) hardly exist—but does worry about "open hatred" for Jews in Spain and elsewhere on the continent.

The Lisbon Book Fair is a sunny Mediterranean fiesta. Amid booths peddling Port wine, chorizo and egg tarts, Portuguese authors hold autograph sessions that seem more like chummy encounters at a sidewalk café. Even after nearly two decades, Zimler's lines of adoring fans are always among the longest. "Wherever he appears, there is sure to be a large audience eager to hear about

his work," says Director of Lisbon's Film Festival Elena Piatok, adding: "He has become an indispensable figure on the Portuguese literary scene and not just the Jewish Portuguese literary scene—where he is absolutely the one and only!"

I watch as one thrilled Zimlerite puts forth *A Sentimela* [The Night Watchman], trembling with excitement at getting the author's dedication. "His characters are unforgettable, whether contemporary or five centuries back," says another breathless devotee, who previously won a contest to have dinner with any local literary figure and chose Zimler. "It helps that my readers here are the most generous in the world," says Zimler. "They often stop me in the street to thank me for my books. They sometimes even tell me how my books have changed their lives."

The last word belongs to the final autograph-seeker in line. Clutching her dog-eared copy of *The Last Kabbalist*, university student Maria Manuel Cruz says, "It's our national shame that we need someone like him to make us confront our own history. But we do. And he does it so well." ♡