



Sejny Chronicles

The performance “Sejny Chronicles” was prepared by the youth theatre operating at the Borderland of Arts, Cultures, Nations Centre in Sejny. Both youth and the adults are recipients of this show. It has been staged in many cities and towns of Poland as well as countries of Europe.

Presentation of the performance is a great opportunity to organize an accompanying intercultural dialogue practice dialogue for culture animators, educators and youth. The show is a part of a long-term artistic and educational program, whose parts are also a photography and books exhibition, ceramics and visual art workshops, oral history and classes at schools, and finally the intercultural “Glass Beads Game”.

Sejny is a town situated near the Polish-Lithuanian border. Inhabitants of this town are Poles, Lithuanians and Russian Old Believers; Jews, Gypsies, Germans, the Belarus and Tatars lived here before WW2. The 20th century history spared this region no conflicts, tragedies and neighbours’ wars. The result was the disintegration of a multicultural community, which had formed a rich and dynamic civilization in the years of old. “Sejny Chronicles” recreates this world from pieces of the old men's stories, legends, old photographs, melodies, folk songs and memory of the contemporary inhabitants. This is the second generation of young people who have worked with us on developing this tale; giving a new name to their place of living, creating a modern myth of borderland where everyone is at home regardless national or faith differences, and feels inheritor of the entire multicultural heritage.

The Project History

First there was the exhibition “Our Good Old Sejny” - postcards and photographs from the period 1910 to 1960. At the time of opening in 1998 the exhibits presented were primarily from the collection of the Borderland Center. After that was a steady growth: after classes at school, children started bringing their parents and grandparents and they brought more photographs, postcards,

sometimes even keepsakes from their personal collections. At that time an idea was born – to organize a Sejny history competition for children. Approximately one hundred various visual art and literary works entered the competition, and some dozen works were selected for the next stage of the competition. First the children focused on their families' vicissitudes. They described histories of their grandparents, drew family trees, put down their parents' life histories. Then they tried to place all the gathered information in Sejny. The children began with drawing, on a large piece of canvas, a detailed Sejny town map – mythical and true. They completed the map with legends (for example, about the Sejny Madonna, a daughter of a Jewish tailor, Rachel, or a Gypsy who sat in a tree) and stories heard from their grandparents; names of Lithuanian, Polish, Old Believer families living in Sejny, and finally their own photographs. The next stage was erecting the town. Earthenware tenement houses, temples and characteristic figures were created after learning about their histories, lives of former inhabitants and of those who live here now. Legends and anecdotes written down in small booklets helped to fire the children's imaginations. That is how an extraordinary miniature model of the town, with unique poetic atmosphere, came to life - an icon of multicultural Sejny and a perfect stage design for the theatrical performance.

During this work, the children in an authentic and emotional way met elder people who cherish memories of old times and traditions. Thus, for the first time after a period, especially during the time of socialism, of a widening generation gap and disparaging the past, communication between the old and the young took place, between tradition and modernity, past and future.

The elderly often reminisced about the music of former Sejny. So it was good time to fill the town with songs, music and learning each others' songs. The Lithuanian children taught other children wedding and pageant songs, the Old Believers taught old *stihis*, the Polish children – folk songs. There were also Jewish *niguns* and Gypsy songs. The work was immersed in poetic tales, hence the children “appointed” Angels, made of colorful patches of fabrics, as the town's guardians. The Angel of Love, Angel of Understanding, Angel of Music, Angel of Providence, Angel of the Hearth, Angel of Life, Angel of Bread and Water.

Then the clay town, tales, songs and Angels all took part in the “Sejny Chronicles” theatrical performance. The material collected by the children during their “historical quest” produced a book entitled “Sejny Chronicles”. On the one hand, it is a guide of the multicultural Sejny, and on the other, a documentation of joint work and method of working with children.

The next stage of this effort today are “Sejny Historical Cards” which are yet another element of the “Glass Beads Game”. Cards created from signs, symbols and archetypes form a

universal language of communication having its roots in local traditions, myths and wisdom. This language becomes the basis for an intercultural game, which integrates the world anew as if a mosaic shattered to tiny pieces which, for a long time, remained detached and separate one from another.

Excerpts of reviews and reports from work on the Sejny Chronicles project

This evening in the vaults of the Cameldolites monastery – I will hold most important theatrical experiences of my life. Imagine a group of teenagers who, bent over a miniature model of their town, spin out stories with their grandparents and great grandparents words; as they take roles of old inhabitants of Sejny and tell stories of the beautiful Rachel who died of consumption, of Gypsy camps which rolled across the town before the war, of geese smuggled across the border, of old beggars in front of the church and of a Jewish child saved from death. The vaults of the monastery in Bielany resound with Lithuanian, Polish, Ruthenian speech; Old Believers' songs, Hasidic sing-songs and Polish lullabies crossed in the air. Crooked houses of earthenware float in the air carried by children's hands, or perhaps by prayers of their long-gone inhabitants, as trying to shoot through the vaulting to the sky.

I don't know how many grand speeches one could deliver about the need for tolerance, about the meaning of tradition, about respect for other cultures, faiths and nations. They are all but words comparing to this performance where the dream of multicultural and tolerant Poland comes true.

Roman Pawowski, "Gazeta Wyborcza", 06.03.2005

"Sejny Chronicles" is a socially important performance. It brings back the memory of People once living in Sejny, of the multicultural character of this town situated in the North-East of Poland.... It is an important performance, for it was jointly worked out by young people of different nationalities and faiths – which rather exist there alongside one another than together. Their "Chronicles" go against the current of all tragic segregations in the past – they remind us of unity. That is how a story of a provincial town from the very start has a universal message concerning all of us... Yet "Sejny Chronicles" is a display of magnificent beauty and power.

Andrzej Nizioek, "Gazeta Wyborcza", 27.06.2002

When one watches the performance one can't escape the feeling that the children guiding us around Sejny move in time with ease, fluently shifting from legend to reality, unnoticeably switch from one language to another and smoothly travel across cultures. Alongside a Polish prayer we hear a Jewish of Old Believers' song, and in a second we hear Lithuanian. And all this takes place over a beautiful mini model of a town full of houses of clay, owing to which the children - little people, are greater than the town. They bend over it with care and despite their young age they seem older and wiser than inhabitants of small houses.

Edward Wojtaszek, "Scena" no. 4(18) 2001

"I envy the teenagers from Sejny. When I was their age I never met anybody like Bożena Szroeder of the Borderland Center. Someone who would accompany me, so wisely and kindly, in my intellectual and spiritual maturation... It is not far from Sejny to Vilnius. In the old provincial Vilnius young people would enjoy education (e.g. Mickiewicz, Czeczot, Zan). Philomaths and Philarets believed that could change the world. They created, educated young people. They become elite of many nations. They went down to posterity as outstanding patriots. Patriotism of today (all in all times are easier now) I find in the arduous work of the Borderland. Thanks to the Borderland we remind ourselves who we are and we learn to understand what good neighborhood means.

Wojciech Tochman, "Gazeta Wyborcza" magazine, 31.10.2001