

ROUNDTABLE

Multilingual Literature in Conflict Zones
28 October 2025

KRZYSZTOF E. BOROWSKI

*Writing Between Languages:
Szczepan Twardoch's Literary Multilingualism*

Szczepan Twardoch, a self-identified Silesian and the author of thirteen novels, primarily writes in Polish while incorporating German, Russian, Silesian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish into his work. Centered around the two world wars, his novels *Drach* (2014) and *The King of Warsaw* (2016 in Polish; 2020 in English) exemplify a poetics in which multilingualism and linguistic hybridity are presented as normative, reflective of everyday experience, and situational, rather than fixed.

For instance, *Drach's* Joseph Magnor uses Silesian with his father but switches to German to give his medical history to a doctor, unable to do so accurately otherwise. In *The King of Warsaw*, Jakub Szapiro prefers Polish but switches to Yiddish when arguing politics with his Zionist brother. Szapiro's fellow mobster, Radziwiłłek, exhibits linguistic hybridity that becomes the novel's running joke ("He spoke five languages—and none of them well"), communicating in a heavily German-inflected Polish variety that casts him as an outsider.

Twardoch's literary efforts to decenter the dominating monolingual model and instead (re)center linguistic hybridity, code-switching, and language are closely aligned with his Silesian activism — and run counter to Polonocentric narratives that reduce Silesian identity to a regional subset of broader Polishness.

Recently, the 2021 national census revealed that Silesian ranked second as a self-declared identity and third as a commonly used language in Poland, despite lacking official recognition. As both writer and public intellectual, Twardoch engages with tensions between monolithic and pluralistic conceptions of identity, illuminating the ongoing conflict between conservative and progressive forces in contemporary Polish society.