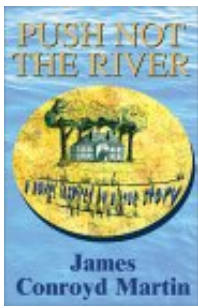

Push Not the River by James Conroyd Martin (2000), 600 pages.



The subtitle states that this is *A Novel Inspired by a True Story*. The author is an Illinois educator, and thus far removed from Poland where the action takes place. It is a story of Anna Berezowska dating back to the last five years of Poland's independence in the 18th century, 1791-1795. A long novel, it is divided into five distinct parts and covers the adventures of a young heroine from Sochaczew near Warsaw, who becomes an orphan after the untimely death of her mother and the cruel murder of her father, who had tried to enforce a basic order on his estate. She travels to a place called Halicz where her aunt lives and where she meets the love of her life Jan while also getting involved in the tangled family affairs. Subsequent events of her stay are really one disaster after another: she struggles with her conniving cousin Zofia; her uncle is murdered; she is violated by an unknown individual. When she moves to Warsaw, she is introduced, against her decent nature, to a decadent crowd that runs wild parties at the Royal Palace, in better homes downtown, and the nearby Wilanów. The heroine suffers at the hands of her terrible husband, whom she was forced to marry against her will.

Regrettably, her beloved Jan is away in Kraków with Tadeusz Kościuszko as the important Insurrection of 1794 begins. Anna is sent on an onerous winter journey to St. Petersburg, but she finds herself in a terrible predicament near Częstochowa. After her almost miraculous rescue she returns to Warsaw only to witness the devastation caused by the rampaging Tsarist troops under the infamous General Suvorov, who leads his wild troops through the Praga suburb of Warsaw. Luckily, the main city on the left bank survives as the only bridge across the Vistula River collapses.

The reader is relieved to learn that ultimately Anna survives her trials and tribulations and is reunited with her true love; her child is also saved. The villains in her life are justly punished. The story is well written and includes numerous subplots. Admittedly, reading it requires a little patience. Several historical figures are discussed, illuminating the setting and the atmosphere of those times. The author is quite aware that English-speaking readers may have only scant knowledge of Polish history and goes easy on factual details. As behooves fiction, all names of the characters in Anna's life are fictitious.

A few aspects require clarification for the sake of accuracy. Regarding the estate of Halicz on the Dniestr River where much of the action takes place, the reader may assume that it was located in the independent part of Poland in 1792. Actually, the well-known town of Halicz was annexed by Austria twenty years earlier. -- As to the milieu in which Anna lives, we are given the impression that all those titled personalities princes, counts, dukes, or barons were running the country. On the contrary, it was the unique gentry class (*szlachta*), which had no equivalent in Western Europe, that was the backbone of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. *Szlachta* accounted for almost 10 percent of the population.

All in all, the novel is a good read; the plot is brisk and captivating.

George E. Suboczewski