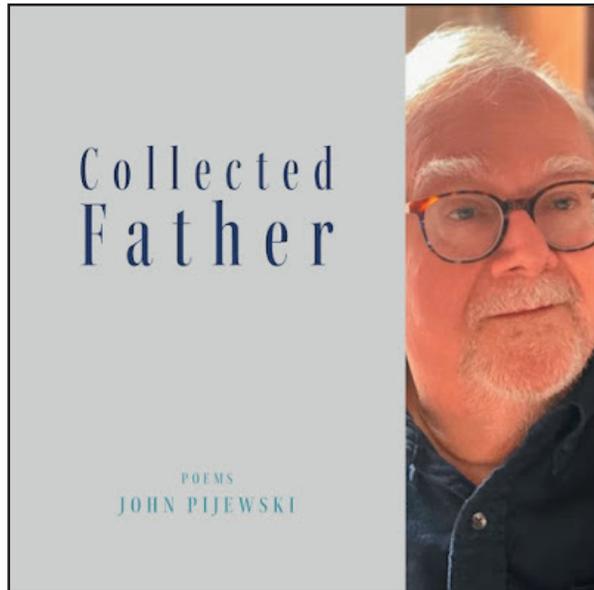


**Somerville poet  
John Pijewski interviewed  
about his new book of poetry  
"Collected Father"**

By Doug Holder

*At a recent gathering I ran into the poet John Pijewski. Pijewski, a member of the New England Poetry Club. He told me about his new book of poetry coming out from the Finishing Line Press in January 2026. It sounded gripping and harrowing, so I decided to ask for him an interview--which he generously agreed to. The poet writes:*



The poems in COLLECTED FATHER exist in the province between Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, in which an abandoned boy struggles to survive on his own in the brutal peasant culture of Poland during WW II, and Franz Kafka's *Letter to His Father*. They deal with dark subjects (my father's life in pre-war Poland and his imprisonment in a Nazi labor camp during WWII, along with the domestic violence my father perpetrated in our family). I've written the poems with the cold, clear eye of a witness, but also used nightmarishly dark humor. The poems are meant to be read like a novel, not to read randomly as though picking through a box of chocolates.



*John Pijewski was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1952. He graduated from Boston University, the University of New Hampshire in Durham, and attended Iowa's Writers' Workshop. His book of poems, *Dinner with Uncle Jozef*, was published by Wesleyan University Press in 1982. He received a writing fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts in 1984. John taught Creative Writing as an adjunct professor for 35 years at Boston University, the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, and the University of Southern Maine in Portland. His poems have been published in *The Paris Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Tri-Quarterly*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The New Yorker*, and other journals.*

*How has it been for you as a writer living in Somerville all these years?*

Being a writer in Somerville has been an absolute dream. I've lived in a house near the summit of Spring Hill for the past 28 years. The views are fabulous. The air is clean and clear. The sunlight bright and invigorating. It's spring every day of the year. Inspiration wafts through my open windows and I pluck poems from the air before they jump into my lap.

*This collection reminds me in some ways of the novel, *The Pawnbroker*, by Edward Lewis Wallant. Your father was like the pawnbroker in the story, twisted by the Holocaust, and seething with anger.*

Yes, my father was somewhat like the main character in *The Pawnbro-*

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ker. He was clearly traumatized by his three years in a Nazi labor camp. He was an angry man, but his situation was molded by more than just WW II.

He was born in 1914 to extreme poverty on his farm in Poland, as well as being brutalized by an angry father who ruled with an iron fist and a thick leather razor strop. His father was also a heavy drinker. My father's mother died when he was 9 years old, leaving him stranded in a family of all males, devoid of any feminine presence. He left school at age 12 to work full time on the family farm. It was a national disaster when the German army conquered Poland in 1939. My father was 22 when he married a local farm girl, age 18, who died at age 22 (1941) when she was pregnant with her second child, a daughter, who also died. In 1942 he was imprisoned in a Nazi labor camp and had to abandon his 4-year-old son on the family farm.

After the war my father was confined to a Displaced Persons camp in Germany for 5 years to wait for a country, any country, to accept him as a war refugee. While in the D.P. camp, he married a Polish woman who'd also been an inmate in a Nazi labor camp. Their first child, a daughter, died in childbirth in 1947. My father probably asked himself why the women in his life kept dying. In May 1950 they gave birth to a son before they arrived in United States (Boston) in late November of that year. This means that, for my father, WW II lasted 11 years, which is longer than Odysseus spent trying to return home in *The Odyssey*.

*You use gallows humor in your work, and I imagine in your life---when you think back on the past. Is humor a way to deflect the pain; is irony a sort of shield?*

Any kind of humor, including gallows humor, is a great gift in understanding and tolerating difficult situations. It's a way all of us can howl at the moon. Whether it's a coping mechanism, or a deflection of pain, or a shield of irony, humor makes pain more tolerable without minimizing it. Most great humor has pain as its source. It's also how we can achieve grace and transcend the darkness that's an inevitable part of life.

*Your father created a sort of concentration house in the West End of Boston where you lived. Was this pure cruelty, or in some perverse way was he trying to teach you something?*

My father was in a labor camp, not a concentration camp, although the two sometimes overlapped. Most of the famous Nazi concentration camps also had labor camps attached to them. The Nazis needed healthy people to work for the German war effort, so they weren't going to kill everyone (except for Jews and people who posed a political threat). There were about 200 labor camps in Germany during the war; none of these made it a policy to kill the inmates. The intention was to use slave labor for Germany's benefit. If people died in the process (many did), so be it. When (if) Germany won the war, after all the Jews had been killed, they had plans to kill most of the Poles and Russians, saving some of them to work as slaves for the Third Reich.

As a child, as a young adult, as an inmate of a Nazi labor camp, my father was always at the mercy of the power others exerted over him. He had very little, if any, power in his life. When he arrived in America, he thought of himself as, finally, having power in his family. And he wasn't

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interested in sharing his power with anyone because no one had shared power with him. Unfortunately, his life had taught him a very narrow, nasty view of what personal power was. My father never had the chance to develop much emotional maturity given how awful his life had been before he arrived in America. It became evident that my father remained a hurt child for most of his life and lashed out at his children with anger.

The book is meant not to be read as separate poems but as a whole work. Why?

Collected Father is definitely a book of individual poems. Each poem was written to stand on its own. But the poems were also built to support each other and are presented in a linear chronology. To really appreciate the book, I think, it's best to read the poems in the order they're presented, like a novel

*Was the work anyway cathartic for you?*

Of course it was. I had to enter the sensibility of a child in many of the poems to experience my father as I had many years ago. I wanted to capture the raw emotions I felt then, and I wanted the reader to feel them too. My father was distant, neglectful, dismissive, disrespectful, judgmental. He was abusive physically, verbally, emotionally, psychologically. He often called me "Shithead" in Polish (his nickname for me). He often castigated me for not being like my older brother, who didn't challenge our father the way I did.

In some ways it got worse when I became an adult. He didn't dare abuse me physically because I was taller and stronger than him and he knew I'd defend myself, but he ramped up his other forms of abuse. If I accomplished anything positive, he often expressed surprise, or dismissed it. To him I was a failure as a son and a human being. He liked to say that if I was ever sent to a slave labor camp, I'd never survive it.

It saddens me to say that his family in Boston didn't provide my father with much joy. He gave the impression that we were a constant burden to him. What seemed to give him the most pleasure was doing projects (alone) in his basement workshop and drinking with his Polish buddies.

But a curious thing happened as I was writing these poems about my father. I'd always felt sorry for him, for having faced the many hardships in his life and WW II. I also marveled that he was a living slice of history; in school we studied the awful things that had been done to the people in labor and concentration camps. By writing poems that tried to understand what he'd had to confront in his early years in Poland, and then as an inmate in a Nazi labor camp, I was able to be more sympathetic toward him and recognize the many obstacles and difficulties that had, to some degree, destroyed him. I was able to separate the angry father he'd been from the tragic man he became.

*Your mother doesn't appear in these poems. Why Not?*

Collected Father is about my father, not my mother. She makes a few appearances in these poems, but none of them are about her. I've written poems about her, and I hope they'll be published in the future.

My mother had been even more traumatized by her labor camp experiences than my father. Based on her behavior at home, I suspected some truly awful things had happened to her in the labor camp, against her as a woman. She was a basket case of anxiety at home, often startled by noises,

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and sometimes descended into a black hole of depression. She never responded to men in the street who tried to speak to her. She tended to avoid social situations and preferred staying home where she felt "safe." My father, to his credit, recognized this about her and NEVER raised his hand against her.

Despite her problems, my mother was the opposite of my father. She was very supportive and loving toward her children. Being a mother gave her great satisfaction and meaning in life. It became her identity. She devoted herself wholeheartedly to nurturing her two sons. In doing so she became my saving grace and was a blessed antidote to who my father was.

I also became bewildered that trauma could express itself so differently in each of my parents. I suspect that gender played a significant role. My father spewed his trauma as anger against his children who couldn't retaliate. He was able to express his trauma as anger against others, while my mother cast her trauma as anger inwardly, against herself, which induced her anxiety and depression. This seems to be a fairly common pattern from a gender point of view.

*Is there an historical aspect to the trauma you document in your poems?*

I think my poems show how the Holocaust was also inflicted upon the off-spring of survivors. My parents suffered tremendously but, whether intentionally or not, they gave my brother and me a taste of the Holocaust. They showed us how trauma gets transferred to a second generation.

Let's say that, metaphorically speaking, my father felt the trauma of the Holocaust as a rock thrown into a pond, a big splash. My brother and I then became the ripples that spread across the pond in all directions. Our father gave us his trauma. We became witnesses to his trauma, as well as owning this trauma ourselves (second generation). Even though the Holocaust may have ended 80 years ago, its effects are still reverberating today, and will probably appear in future generations. Not a welcome prospect.