

Interview Transcripts: Poland

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**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Agnieszka Graff
Interviewers: Sławomira Walczewska and Beata Kozak**

**Location: Wiśniowa
Date: June 12, 2005
Translated by: Kasia Kietlińska**



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Agnieszka Graff was born in 1970 in Warsaw, Poland. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Language and Literature from Amherst College in the United States in 1993 and later studied literature at Oxford University in Great Britain. She was an assistant professor of English literature at the University of Warsaw between 1995 and 2000 where she translated Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" in 1997. Since 2000, she has been an assistant professor at the Center for American Studies at the University of Warsaw. Graff published her first book, *Świat bez kobiet (A World without Women)* in 2001.

Sławomira Walczewska founded the Women's Foundation (eFKa) in Kraków in 1995. In 1999, Walczewska published *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Feminist Discourse in Poland*, the first Polish book about women's emancipation from a historical and a cultural perspective. As a feminist activist and a scholar, she is interested in international women's movements and is firmly committed to understanding various differences and intersections of global feminisms.

Beata Kozak studied German and Slavic Literatures at the University of Poznan, Poland and in Bonn, Germany, where she spent six years. Kozak returned to Poland in 1995 and began her work with the Women's Foundation eFKa. Along with Walczewska, she co-edited the first Polish feminist magazine *Pełnym Głosem (In Full Voice)* and, since 1999, she has been Editor-in-Chief of the feminist quarterly *Zadra (Splinter)*.

Agnieszka Graff
June 12, 2005

SW: Today is the 12th of June, 2005. Agnieszka Graff will be talking about herself and about her feminism. Could you tell us how feminism, your feminism, fits into your life? When did it come up? You are one of the best known feminists in Poland. Can you tell us about yourself?

AG: The fact that one is a public person causes this kind of a dissonance that... you know, you don't know any more what is your "media snout," you know this official, public face, and what is personal. I'm a bit disconcerted about this, but I'll try to stay away from my "media snout" and talk the way I feel about myself. Well, let me start with my childhood, let's say, and then I'll quite quickly... So well, I come from a Warsaw intelligentsia family. My parents are both philosophers. When I was a kid, I had a bit of a hard time explaining to other children what my parents did. They're philosophers, so it's really unclear what exactly they do. They think, and actually their marriage was like a continuous graduate seminar, where various abstract topics were discussed. And perhaps, the issue of gender didn't quite exist in my imagination as a family problem until my parents started their divorce proceedings. And they started the proceedings... later on, I found out it was actually very early, when I was still a little kid, but my awareness of that fact started when I was something like ten, maybe eleven years old, and, well, this was the moment I became my mother's ally in the situation when she was abandoned by my father, and he, well, he felt somehow dominated by her. And in general, this motif of what... who dominated over whom and who had a right to dominate was important even though, probably like most people in this situation, I didn't think about it in collective or political categories but just in terms of my parents, who both had very difficult personalities, and who also used me in this many-year war between them. And I had an opportunity to remember my childhood in this... in these short sketches for a book about girls, for which I once wrote a piece about the third wave of feminism.¹ And, to my surprise, the text that turned out was actually about how sad my childhood was. And that's probably true. I mean I was a terribly sad little girl, about whom many people later said... that I was this kind of a sad kid with turned down corners of my mouth, terribly serious and reflective and a bit kind of responsible for the fate of this world. Well, which, of course, meant I was... I felt responsible for my parents' marriage. When I was eleven, we left for the States. My father got a Fulbright at Amherst College, this kind of a rather prestigious college on the East Coast. I found myself in an American school and... well, it was a very difficult moment also because in 1981, in Poland, martial law broke out² and we were supposed

¹ *W poszukiwaniu malej dziewczynki (In Search of a Little Girl)*. Ed. I. Kowalczyk and E. Zierkiewicz. Konsola Press 2003. Graff's essay is titled "Feministki-corki feministek, czyli trzecia fala dobija do brzegu" ("Feminists—Daughters of Feminists or the Third Wave Hits the Shore").

² **Martial Law:** limitations on civil liberties implemented on December 13, 1981, in order to stop social activism aiming at fundamental reforms of the social and political system in the Polish People's Republic. It was confirmed by the National Council's (Rada Państwa) decree, even though issuing decrees was unconstitutional during Parliament's (Sejm) session. Prepared since August 1980, it was justified by a threat of coup d'état and take-over of power by the opposition gathered around "Solidarity," economic collapse, and a possibility of Soviet intervention. The chief administrative organ during Martial Law was the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Martial Law regulations limited basic civil liberties, introduced curfew, and suspended all activities by social organizations and trade unions. Martial Law militarized main branches of the economy,

to be there for a year, but when we saw tanks on TV and... well, and Jaruzelski's face³, there was a family vote, which decided we would stay another year. And well, it was very hard on me, because at that point, my parents weren't practically talking to each other any more, so here I was in a foreign country, foreign planet really and in the house where everything was so... where the atmosphere was very tense and unpleasant. And I would spend a lot of time up on the tree, hiding from this terrible family atmosphere. But at the same time, I was becoming a bilingual child and... while I most likely wasn't aware of it then... also a bicultural one, and this is a certain key element in my life that I always looked at myself from this kind of position of duality. I was never quite at home in Poland, and, of course, I was never at home in the States, either. We came back after these two years, and then it all came to the ultimate split between my parents. I remained with my mother, and I was really close to her, in a kind of a relationship, which I now assess as toxic, in a sense, or in some way destructive. But, of course, then I believed she was simply my best friend and that I was protecting her from the world and she was protecting me from the world. And... and I remember that in high school, I figured out that my friends wouldn't tell me about themselves, because they were afraid I'd repeat everything to my mother. And it was like a strong... like a cold shower for me, a warning that something wasn't right, that it was all too close. And... and I'm a bit afraid of this mothers-daughters theme. It kind of scares me a bit and it also somewhat attracts me. It is a very important and most likely the most difficult feminist theme about the ambivalence of this relationship and also about its great power. And... my mother is a very strong person, but, well, very intellectual in her attitude toward the world. I mean I think she has limited contact with her emotional life, but she was always a very... a huge authority for me, and I remember a moment when I realized I didn't at all imagine the world without her. I mean she's this absolute point of reference, and if she died, I would generally just fall apart. And this was the moment I was trying to leave this relationship; I was past thirty at that point, and the moment of taking care of some kind of... of, well, my own emotional life away from her. But she's absolutely the key person in my life, and I'm still struggling with this. And... she was the one who sent me to college in the States... I'm saying this with full awareness that it wasn't my choice; it was her... a fulfillment of her dream. She was an academic from a country that was very hard to leave. She's always been very ambitious, till today, and she's always felt that if she had been born in the States... if she had been born in the West, her books would have been read all over the world. I remember when she was

banned travel, and introduced censorship of correspondence and summary judicial process. Activists from "Solidarity" and political opposition, as well as some politicians from the pre-August 1980 regime, were interned (approximately 10 thousand people in all). The remaining "Solidarity" activists went underground, organizing demonstrations and strikes in factories and coal mines, suppressed by riot police (ZOMO), which often used heavy military equipment (9 coal miners were killed in the Wujek Coal Mine in December 1981, and there were fatalities in Lublin in August 1982). Demonstration participants, underground activists, and "Solidarity" members were fired from their jobs, harassed, and coerced to sign "declarations of loyalty." With the collaboration of Secret Police, employees of the judicial system, education, public administration and mass media were being vetted. The society at large reacted with organizing a boycott of all organizations and institutions controlled by the authorities; underground press and publishing ensured the independent flow of information. The Catholic Church undertook a broad campaign of helping those persecuted by the government. The underground "Solidarity" was receiving moral and material support from international organizations and labor centers. As a result of a deteriorating economic and political situation, martial law was repealed on July 22, 1983 (but repressive practices and some parts of the legislation survived till 1989), and in February 1992, the Sejm decided its implementation to have been illegal.

³ **Jaruzelski, Wojciech**: the Prime Minister and the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party since 1981. General Jaruzelski's speeches about implementing martial law were broadcast on the radio and TV early morning shows, starting at 6:00 a.m. on the 13th of December 1981.

comparing herself to Jonathan Culler, this key American literary theorist, who wrote a book about structuralism the same year her book about structuralism was published. And... and I think hers is better. Objectively speaking, she simply did a better job, but his book has been translated into scores of languages and is the main textbook, well, because her book appeared in Poland and his in the States. And this sense of coming from Eastern Europe, which is a form of intellectual and academic marginalization, has always been hanging over me. And another thing, also hanging over me a bit, was this kind of... obligation to overcome this destiny. I was supposed to overcome it by leaving for college to the States, to the same place my father had gone to before, and it was Amherst College. I got a full scholarship, and I became a kind of a token there... a token East European, well, the only East European, on this American campus, who was supposed to give rich American kids some sense that they were living in a multicultural community. I was the only Pole, and there was one Indian woman and a German guy, and well, a few people from Africa. I mean it was the kind of mix that was supposed to provide these young Americans with the sense that they had pluralism and diversity, as it used to be called then. But it was a very amusing role to play, and since the very beginning I was quite skeptical, but, well, it was a huge life opportunity as well. And... and I think that the year 1988, when I left for the States, was a major break-through in my entire life. It was because it meant a complete cut-off from the life I was painstakingly trying to build in Poland... I was in high school at that point, so it was about my emotional life, including love life, and also political life. And suddenly, I was completely torn out of all this, and the States were like the other side of the world. And it became this kind of a caesura and this kind of a big cut in my life, and in a way, I tend to perceive all my later biography as an attempt to sew these elements of by life back together. And my nick name in high school was "sandwich," which came from the fact that a hamburger is a sandwich, and hamburger is like a symbol of America. And I've always had this impression that a sandwich is something like two slices and something in-between but it's not very clear what it is. That means there has always been this duality about where I'm from. In the States, I'm Polish, and in Poland of the 1980's, I was the one who had been to the States and spoke English. Well, as a teenager, I gave private tutoring sessions in English, which was quite unusual in Poland... And this sense of alienation, which has followed me all my life, is also related to the fact that I am of Jewish descent. I mean, my father is Jewish and a Holocaust survivor, and this Jewish part of my identity was never clearly articulated at home. Much, much later, after my father had already immigrated to the States, I started talking to him about it. Well... So let me now come back to the time before I went to the States... to the moment of my... of this life melodrama, which I later re-interpreted in some feminist categories. So... as a very emotional teenager, actually a very religious teenager... I was in the Oasis Movement⁴ and in the Catholic Intelligentsia Club⁵. As a pre-teen, I had visions where I talked to Virgin Mary in the forest, so I was a very excitable person, with a very rich imagination... I was writing poems and so on. And as a sixteen-year-old, I fell in love in this completely demonic way... with this kind of complete merging into one, with a very demonic young man, whom today I see as slightly psychopathic, but at the time, he was simply a beautiful young man with green eyes and great plans to save the world. He was an

⁴ **Oasis Movement:** A youth association, whose task was to popularize Catholic faith among young people.

⁵ **The Catholic Intelligentsia Club (KIK):** created in 1956 in Warsaw. It gathers members of the intelligentsia who want to consciously experience their faith among laity. It is independent from the government and from the Church hierarchy. It doesn't support any political option but undertakes systematic reflections on the political culture. Its activities are inspired by the Second Vatican Council's documents.

opposition fighter. I mean he was a member of the Polish Solidarity opposition⁶, of the youth group the Fighting Youth Federation⁷, and later on, of the Independent Student Association⁸. He was one year older than I and was involved in publishing these various underground papers... In retrospect, I think it was a bit childish... it was all like a kid's game, but then it seemed like a big revolution. I also remember giving an interview, which I still have somewhere in my drawer, to another little opposition publication, different from ours, and which was titled "I'm an Opposition Fighter's Girl-Friend." And it was... it was a serious part of my identity. I remember situations, for example, when other opposition guys would hit on me, and since he was an important guy, he was the boss of our group, they would get a beating because they dared impinge on my dignity, or my virtue, so to say. But at the same time, there were girls in the group, whose rank was much lower than mine, who were sold off, for example... I mean I remember this... and it was always quite shocking to me then, but more from a catholic and moral position than from a feminist one... since feminism came later... but I remember the girl who was sold off by one young, seventeen year old, opposition guy to another for... for a case of beer. And she later found out about it. I mean it was... the way it happened was that the first one broke up with her and the other one hit on her and she became his girl-friend, and much later, she found out that a case of beer was also involved in this... this transaction. And it seemed immoral, or sinful, to me at the time. And... and now, I see it from a completely different, feminist perspective. And well... as an opposition fighter's girl-friend, I was experiencing some... well, an awakening, erotic and emotional, and it all involved a high level of emotional tension that I can't even access today. It involved suicide attempts when one of us would say, "I don't love you any more." It involved some ritualistic ideas... when there was an exchange of blood. It involved some scenes... actually kind of sadistic when we'd lock each other up in some awful rooms. Well... these were things... most likely borderline psychosis... And when I left... when I said, on Christmas, that I was leaving for the States, and then there was the New Year's of 1988, when my love... made a suicide attempt in a very dramatic, theatrical way, which appears in my nightmares to this day, and in general, New Year's Eve is still a rather terrible day for me. And I can't even judge today whether it was a good thing that I left. It was... it was a horrible experience. It was a sense of this monstrous loneliness, of breaking off the most important bond in my life, but I think that if I hadn't left then, most likely today I would have had four children

⁶ **Solidarity: Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" ("Solidarność"), NSZZ "Solidarity"** came into being in August and September 1980 with a wave of social discontent about the deteriorating economic situation and the methods of governing the country used by the communist authorities. In the latter half of 1980, workers' protests took up a form of strikes, at the beginning in small industrial centers and later in bigger cities. The climactic point happened in the Sea Coast region, with the occupation strike organized in the Gdańsk Shipyard on August 13, 1980. The majority of enterprises from Gdańsk and the Sea Coast region joined in and organized solidarity strikes, including the Szczecin Shipyard. The strike was also joined by the Coal Mine in Jastrzębie. On September 17, 1980, at the meeting of strike committees' and founding committees' representatives in Gdansk, NSZZ "Solidarity" was constituted, and the delegates also elected the National Coordinating Commission with its chairman Lech Wałęsa. At the moment of registration, the Union had approximately 10 million members (80% of all employed).

⁷ **The Fighting Youth Federation:** created in 1984 in Warsaw. It gathered young people who wanted to fight against the political system in Poland. After a broadcast in the Free Europe Radio, local groups started appearing in other cities, in Wrocław, Krakow, Gdansk and Lodz. The Federation members were mostly high school students, but also college students and working youth. They brought out school publications, newspapers, and leaflets, which they also distributed. They distributed banned books and participated in street protests and in organizing strikes. Some participants were put in prison for their activism. The organization dissolved in 1991.

⁸ **NZS** – the Independent Student Association – was created at the end of September 1980, but was officially registered as late as the 17th of February, 1981, after a wave of student strikes.

and I would have been tired of my life and perhaps divorced... since the level of emotion was such that it wouldn't most likely have lasted... divorced wife of a frustrated opposition fighter... since 1989 was around the corner, the opposition movement was coming to its end, and he didn't finish college and our lives went separate ways. But till today, I still believe that it was the greatest love of my life and the kind of experience that I have to constantly re-interpret and tell myself about again and again. And... and my feminism, as a deep intellectual and emotional experience, came at the moment when... I was already in college, and it was after reading Virginia Woolf, among others, for the class taught by this... her name was I think Michelle Barrett, and she was a gender studies professor at Amherst. And at the end of this class I wrote an autobiographical essay, which started with "It was a dark and stormy night," and it was about this episode when the love of my life made this theatrical suicide attempt to stop me from going my own way, and it was about my huge sense of guilt related to this, and about the whole mythology of the opposition and of... of the role of the opposition fighter's woman and a total re-interpretation of this. I mean I realized how this whole thing was entangled with my reading, reading of romance novels like *Gone with the Wind*, or... I don't know... like *The Wuthering Heights* [sic], which was the absolutely key novel for me in my early youth. And I realized... from this great distance at the other side of the Atlantic... how much things that I had believed to be the most authentic, my own, coming from the gut, my most sublime, intimate and personal things, how much it was all loaded with cultural patterns, and how these patterns were really kitsch, grotesque actually, you know, with this kind of dark, stormy night, and destructive, too. And this was a turning point. I still keep this essay somewhere, and I have a feeling that it's some kind of... well, it's not a good piece, and I would never publish it, but at the same time, it was the key for me... And I think it was... It was... It must have been 1992, since it was during my sophomore year, and it was... it was also a kind of a beginning of my later feminist path, which to a large extent was about a personal attempt to re-interpret... well... the Polish patriotism and the sense of victimization... and the kind of destiny, this Polish loftiness and this myth of a Polish man, who is macho in its cynical-desperate version, very different from the American macho, for example. And this macho's woman is supposed to constantly save him from his dark depression and from cynicism, but in the end, he... drinking vodka with the guys, he will still say it's because all women are sluts. And my boyfriend, my great love, used to say this, too. And this love haunted me for years, since I would meet him over the summer, when I was back from college. It was always in secret... these were totally secret meetings, somewhere in our totally secret meeting places in the Warsaw Old Town. And year after year, I had a feeling that the only love... since I believed it was the only love that could happen to me in my life... that this love was my destiny. It was a bit like in the *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; I knew this love was impossible, that this man was from another planet, that my life had gone in a completely different direction, but at the same time, in the back of my mind, there was this deeply rooted feeling that I was worthless without him. Even when I was already a feminist. It was a very strong feeling of being charmed by a great love and about the need to fulfill this destiny. I think I managed to overcome this only a few years ago, and it wasn't really thanks to feminism but thanks to psychotherapy. I mean I realized more clearly how this image of a man who will save me... what kind of connection this has to my parents, my father, to the fact that he left my mother and... and... and that it was simply a very complex story. Well... and so... I came back from college, from the States, and later from England, since I studied for a year in England as well... I came back to Poland... against the will of my parents, who believed it was some kind

of... and actually they called it that: a professional hara-kiri⁹, when a person working on her Ph.D. at Oxford and had all the chances to...and I was always a top student, I had all A's, I was first... I graduated from Amherst as a valedictorian, so I had a real foundation for an academic career. I got in to Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge, and simply there were no better opportunities for an English major. And after all this, I came back to Poland, meaning nowhere, to the place which is a total backwater for English studies. And... and... well, everybody was looking at me like I was sort of crazy, but I never had a feeling that I made a mistake. I never felt good in the States; I never had a feeling that teaching American modernism or English modernism to American students was my historic mission, my mission in life. I wanted to be an intellectual in Poland, and I didn't come back to become a feminist. Feminism was one of many parts of my intellectual and psychological identity... acquired in the States. Thanks to my friendships and thanks to my classes and thanks to the fact that in 1989 I participated in the huge march in Washington, D.C.... a march for reproductive rights¹⁰, and I didn't anticipate that it would become so important... I wanted to be a literature theorist. After I came back from the States I still wrote my Ph.D. on Joyce, on a kind of old momentum, in which the word "woman" doesn't even come up. Now it amuses and amazes me that it's so completely deprived of any gender issues, but it wasn't the most important thing for me. It became most important... as a result of contrast. I mean as a result of some shock related to my return to Poland, to the Poland which had already become democratic, since in 1995, it was already the new Poland, very different from the one in my memories, and in this Polish democracy, there was no room at all for thinking about women's rights. And it was shocking to me. And it wasn't that I came up with the idea that there could be some room for women; it was a shock for me that it wasn't there, since I came back from this progressive America... I don't mean to say that America as a whole is progressive, but I was on the East Coast, where feminism is an obvious part of any debate. And I found myself in Poland, where women were constantly... well... ridiculed and treated with condescension, and I had a need to interpret this situation, to understand this situation while weaving into it my double... and perhaps even triple personality and kind of counting into it this sense of estrangement related to the fact that step by step, simultaneously, I was discovering my Jewishness... So my feminism is at the cross-roads, national, civic and political. I mean it is also woven into this genealogy of the democratic, but also very patriarchal, youth opposition.

SW: Was this difference between what things were like in the States and what you found in Poland really so big?

AG: It was. I mean, above all else, it was about the fact that I considered myself brainy. I was really a brain. I read Heidegger and Joyce, I wrote my dissertation on *Finnegan's Wake*, I was a child of two philosophers, and at that point, I already considered myself as... I was quite arrogant intellectually, I think, after returning from the States and I simply considered myself an eminent intellectual. I was better than most of the guys in college, and they knew it. I was like a star in college. I taught this big literary theory seminar at Oxford, where mostly men attended, and we worked on deconstruction theory, deconstruction of deconstruction, deconstruction of deconstruction of deconstruction; it was like a game of abstractions. And for me it was like some kind of... it was my identity. And then I found myself in Poland, where in the social circle of my

⁹ **Hara-kiri**: suicide by slashing the abdomen.

¹⁰ The march to Washington, which had above one million participants, was organized as the "March for Women's Lives."

intellectual friends, I was, above all, a girl. And I was supposed to flirt and play... and participate in all these social arrangements, in which girls pretend to be dumber than they are, so that guys can be stars. And I started feeling really estranged and I couldn't adjust to that. I remember the moment when I started referring to myself with the word "feminist" to provoke them and to do something about what seemed to me a fundamentally false situation. So this observation about social estrangement came first, since I was always socially ambitious. Even though I never managed to be very popular in high school, later on, in college, I started succeeding in this, and now, all of a sudden, in Poland, my social popularity was supposed to be about... well... about self-depreciation. I was supposed to gain points in this social hierarchy of Warsaw, among people who were philosophers, sociologists, from the former opposition, you know, and there was some shuffling, but basically I was coming back to my old social group. And it was a very sexist group even though they didn't perceive themselves as such, of course, since in general, there was simply no language in Poland for this. And I started looking for feminists. I remember I got Bożena Umińska's¹¹ phone number from Piotr Sommer, this poet, whose creative writing course I took while still at Amherst. He's a Polish poet who ended up in the States at the same time I did, and he's a great authority figure for me. By the way, I wrote a lot of poems when I was in college... and later on, I just stopped completely. They were perhaps related to my longing for Poland and experiencing depression. And I got this phone number of a feminist; I remember I wrote it under "f" in my calendar, and it was Bożena Umińska's number. And I went to Bożena Umińska's house, and I remember this feeling of relief, of being at home when I sat down at her kitchen table. And I felt this was it. I felt she was the person of great warmth but who was also treating her intellectual life seriously. And she treated me seriously as a person, who is interesting, and as a young intellectual and a feminist and a Jew. I think it was thanks to Bożena, to a large extent, that I started opening up to my Jewishness. I noticed that I felt so good in her house, because she was raised... somehow shaped by this Polish, non-religious, left-wing Jewish social milieu, most likely related to Bund¹² early on, and that this is something... that this is the same milieu my father comes from. And it was the tradition completely forgotten in my home. My mother wanted to protect me from anti-Semitism, so she signed me up for this Catholic intelligentsia group, sent me to religion classes, and it took me a long time to figure out what was going on. And thanks to Bożena, I started feeling at home with feminist thinking and accepting, though without very deep probing, my Jewish identity. It's... it was somehow connected. And Bożena, I think, gave me the address of PSF¹³, which was already falling apart at this point. It was a small association, Polish Feminist Association, and there were just a few people there, and it was already dissolving and falling apart, and there was this meeting, attended by some girls, who really wanted to do something. And it was in Warsaw. It must have been 1995, late spring. At this point in Warsaw, there appeared these really shockingly sexist commercials for... Mobile Oil. The advertisement showed a couple; the guy was relaxed and calm and with this sense that he was feeling great in the car, but he was sitting in the passenger seat, and next to him, there was a woman, clutching the steering wheel, and her face was that of a mad woman, her mouth open as if she's screaming, and with a look like she's

¹¹ **Umińska, Bożena:** A journalist and feminist. Also interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project.

¹² **Bund:** (General Jewish Workers Union of Lithuania, Poland and Russia) was founded in 1897. It sought to preserve Jewish culture and Jewish nationality in the context of socialism through speaking Yiddish and perpetuating Yiddish culture. The Bund enjoyed a large following in Poland, where it set up schools and social services and ran in elections before the outbreak of World War II.

¹³ **PSF** (the Polish Feminist Association): a feminist group at first mostly gathering students interested in feminist theories and issues, which was formally registered in 1989 and existed till 1997.

completely crazy, and the words, “Even she won’t harm your engine.” Or, in other words, you may be calm, because even though this mad woman is driving, this gasoline... will protect you from her, from the mad woman. And we got furious, so we left this meeting, the three of us, the three people who had just met, and we started thinking about what to do. We met for tea at one of these girls’ houses... unfortunately I don’t remember their names any more. We were kind of friends for a while but then we lost touch. But anyway, there were three of us. One had a car, and the second one, meaning me, had a roller. It was a roller for painting my apartment, since I had just moved into a new apartment I had bought with money saved at Oxford, and I was painting kitchen cabinets, I remember, with this small roller. And this roller, fastened to my ski-stick – I remember we used string and tape to connect them – became an instrument of a terrorist, feminist attack, which involved driving around with a bucket full of white paint, since the background of this commercial was white, and painting over the letter “s,” so that what was left was, “Even he won’t harm your engine.” It was... it was a fascinating experience. For three nights, we drove around all night and painted over one hundred fifty of these ads in all of Warsaw and quite a bit outside of Warsaw as well. And it was the time in Poland when advertising wasn’t so developed yet, which means that if there were three or maybe four advertisements on billboards at one time, that was considered a lot. And it was very noticeable. And in fact, people would stop and look at these commercials with open mouths, and in general they would laugh and comment on it, and then the press picked it up. It was published in four newspapers, I think, together with the picture of the advertisement. And then, to our amusement, PSF came forward to say they did it even though neither of us was affiliated with PSF. So we got together and we were really pissed off that there was this organization which was falling apart and didn’t know what it wanted to do, but we never officially claimed it. I mean it was clear in the feminist circles that we did it. And at some point, this company, Mobil, or rather the advertising agency that did the campaign said they were sorry and it wasn’t really nice to women, but that they were planning another ad which would be malicious toward men. That ad was never made, of course, but this event helped me realize how much one person could do with just a bit of imagination. I mean that one could protest in a way... that had an element of risk and imagination. For me it was related to my memories from the end of high school, when I was active in this group Catch 22, which fought against communism using practical jokes. For example, we would dress up as dwarfs and we’d organize a march of dwarfs toward the Palace of Culture, with huge... we had posters of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, all dressed up in red hats. And the police would simply lose their heads. And this is the kind of surrealist joke, all these marches and there were many events like that, which causes the system to go after you but at the same time... there is this surrealist situation when it’s actually unclear why they’re attacking you if you’re a dwarf. Or you run around with a roller on a stick and paint over letters. I mean it’s a kind of struggle against the system, which is indirect and which brings about some element of amazement and amusement, so that people come to your side. And this... this is, I think, a connection between the history of a surrealist fight against the commies and an equally surrealist fight against patriarchy, which I consider to be a grotesque system, to some extent. I don’t... I don’t treat patriarchy totally seriously. I mean I have a feeling patriarchy is this system... kind of dying and more and more aware of its own stupidity and idiocy, and using empty clichés, a bit like late communism. This is the kind of system that’s already decaying and stinking and once in a while it still breathes in its own stench. And you just need to wave a handkerchief a little, so that it starts feeling the stink. And... and it is our... it is, I think, also our

strategy at the Manifs¹⁴ to ridicule rather than express indignation. It is... it works better. So I told you in such detail about this terrorist act of ours, because it was the act which, first of all, connects my opposition past with the later feminist interest through the form of activism, but also because it was... it preceded the Manifs by five years, but it was the first clearly feminist action, which later became a template for me... but it also proved that I wasn't afraid. That I could do something like this, since, by the way... I am the person... for example I have... at least I had then this feeling of shyness, but when I feel I'm right and at the same time I feel that what I do has this theatrical and amusing dimension, a lioness wakes up in me. I mean I feel up to doing something that's this... this... terrible, funny and wonderful. And my current fascination with the second wave of feminism and all these various terrorist attacks, like for example the 1968 attack in Atlanta, Atlantic City, I mean the attack against the Miss America pageant, is part of that. What fascinates me about it is that a small group of women does something quite crazy. Outrageous. Or my favorite event from the second wave of feminism was the occupation of the Ladies Home Journal building in the summer of 1979, the year I was born. I think it's awful to be born when such interesting things are happening, a terrible waste of time. Well, I simply mean the fact that two hundred women would sneak into... I mean dressed up as real women in dresses and stockings would simply... I don't know... would just get into elevators and simply go up to the publishing offices of the most conservative women's journal and carry out its occupation, demanding a feminist take-over of the journal. Well... it is... it is simply completely, incredibly wonderful and grotesque and... and... fantastic and... and... and I believe it would be worthwhile to go around the States to talk to women who did it, so that they could talk about it in detail. It really... really amuses me and it makes me sad when it doesn't amuse others. I mean I don't have... for me, this kind of moment of communication with the feminists is the moment when I feel it catches on. That they get excited. That's it. So what gets me excited in the Polish feminism are the crazy and spontaneous actions.

SW: When in 1995 you were driving around at night...

AG: Yea...

SW: It was 1995 and the feminist circles knew about it. What kind of circles are we talking about? Were there any?

AG: There was the PSF group, which I was beginning to get to know. I remember that at that meeting and at a few others I also attended, there were these people... Teresa Oleszczuk was very important to me then... later on, she fell off the circuit, but she was at that time the central person for the Warsaw feminism. There was Basia Limanowska, who was... whom I admired. She was the person who seemed to me... she had this aura... I haven't seen her for many years, so I don't know what she looks like now and if she still has this aura, but then she had this joint toughness and incredible beauty. Kind of feminine but also sharp. She fascinated me. There was Bożena Umińska, Wanda Nowicka, but there were also many women who aren't part of this group any more; I don't remember names. I think there was one more person. Her last name was Nowicka, because she... I was new then, so these were all new faces for me, but there were

¹⁴ **Manifestations**, which oppose discrimination against women both in Poland and in the world. The first Manif was organized in 2000 by the informal group Women's Association 8 March, and since that time Manifs are carried out every year.

about fifteen to twenty people, a few young reporters, also a few students or MAs, particularly in the English department, where there were many people connected... somehow identifying themselves as feminists. I had this friend Kasia Janic, at the doctoral program in English, who also fell off the circuit later, but was very active at the time. Later on, Kazia Szczuka joined in and... and the whole group of women from gender studies, most likely the first gender studies program in Poland, at the School of Social Sciences, and that is Kazia Szczuka, and Kasia Bratkowska, whom I have known since the Catholic Intelligentsia Club times, she was my friend from CIC (KIK), and now is one of the most radical Polish feminists... There was Agata Araszkiwicz, well... and the girls from Professor Janion's¹⁵ seminar, which is a very academic group but also, I think, more oriented toward activism than their equivalent academic groups in the States or Western Europe. Then, there was another action we did, still before the Manifis, and this time it was Kazia Szczuka and I. And again, there was driving around in a car at night, this time with Kazia's sister, since at that time I didn't yet have a car or a driver's license. And we were gluing on posters everywhere. One said "Kapera is like cholera" ("Kapera nam doskwiera")¹⁶. And the other was "Patriarchy Will Die." But it was less spectacular than the one about Mobile Oil, because it was less noticeable. I had this feeling it was... more like for ourselves, that only we knew where the posters were, they were so small. But it was... well... Kazia Szczuka was a Ph.D. student then and I was already... I already had a Ph.D. I think, I don't quite remember, but anyway, these were late 1990's and it didn't bother us. I mean we were pursuing academic careers and we wanted to be serious, but at the same time, we also wanted to be freedom fighters for women, or as Kazia used to say, "for people of female descent" [laughter].

SW: So it was all mostly going on in NGOs, and later on also at the University, right?

AG: I think for me it was more at the School of Social Sciences. Yes, the School of Social Sciences and the seminars taught by Ania Titkow¹⁷ and Małgosia Fuszara.¹⁸ This seminar was very important to me, since a big part of my book resulted from it. For a term paper, I wrote this piece about Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz¹⁹, who ran a presidential campaign in 1993. And I made some observations while participating in this campaign and this... this... I turned in this work as

¹⁵ **Janion, Maria** (born in 1926): a historian of literature, ideas and imagination, a professor in the Literary Studies Institute at the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), has taught seminars to students for many decades. An author of several books, such as: *The Romantic Fever*; *Toward Evil*; *Life after Death of Konrad Wallenrod*; *Will You Know What You Have Experienced?*; *Women and the Spirit of Otherness*; *The General's Tears*; *Essays about War*. Initiated the series *Transgressions*.

¹⁶ **Kapera, Kazimierz** (born 1942) became the Government Minister for the Family after parliamentary elections of 1997. Kapera is a member of the Christian-National Alliance, a party known for its radically conservative views on social roles of men, women and the family.

¹⁷ **Titkow, Anna**: Professor of Gender Studies at the University of Warsaw. Also interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project.

¹⁸ **Fuszara, Malgorzata**: the Head of the Center for Socio-Legal Studies on the Situation of Women and the Director of the Gender Studies Program at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw. (In May 1995, she lectured at the University of Michigan on Women's Rights in Eastern Europe.)

¹⁹ **Gronkiewicz-Waltz, Hanna** (born 1952) was a deputy chairperson of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and also a chairperson of the Polish National Bank in 1992-2000. In 1995, while running for president, she ran a campaign, which on one hand promoted a traditional model of femininity, but on the other hand tried to create femininity as an asset in the world of politics. These ideas were reflected in the campaign slogan "Let's Take Care of Poland" and in her warm, mother-like image on campaign posters.

my term paper and later on... it was I think my first published piece and it came out in the *New Res Publica*²⁰. And it was so... it got some award, and I had this feeling I had my own style, I mean I had... there was something... some kind of my own feminism, which has... which joins some tendency to ridicule with looking at reality, seeing it topsy-turvy, seeing it from the outside, and being amazed by it. Later on, after my book came out in 2001²¹, Jola Brach-Czaina²² wrote about it that... and later it was put on the cover, that I had this skill of amazement. And I think that it really is what... it is what my feminism is about. Amazement, or this kind of de-familiarization. Showing, showing something everybody can see but in a different way, in a slightly crooked mirror, to be able to see the grotesque dimension of... of this thing. In this case, it was about Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz's campaign, but... and my whole work, feminist thinking and writing, has this slant... to show the strange and the grotesque... and also perhaps the literary dimension of patriarchy. I mean showing that patriarchy uses some narratives, some stories about the world, which are terribly conventionalized, terribly... well, full of clichés, which really don't tell us anything about the world. And now, seeing these clichés, seeing these narratives from a certain distance shows that they are, in fact, just narratives, so it's possible to tell another narrative. For me, a turning point text was this piece by Shana Penn²³ which was published in one of the first issues of *In Full Voice*²⁴ under the title "The State Secret" and which later became a foundation for her book about Solidarity women. Shana Penn, an American feminist, came to Poland and conducted interviews with Solidarity women. This piece showed me a fragment of my youth in a completely different dimension, seen very differently. After I read it, I realized that feminism was in fact somehow useful for Polish history, for the Polish... for the Polish transformation period. That we don't in fact have to tell the universal narrative about women in patriarchy, but that we have tools, that feminism gives us tools, and we have to change them, so that they fit our reality, but, well, that there are some generally accessible, feminist tools, which now need to be adapted to the Polish reality. By the way, Sławka, your book²⁵ is, I think, a first attempt to talk about Polish history from this perspective. I mean it's an attempt to show that it is... that it... that this Polish patriarchy of ours also has its... own cadres... I remember this sentence from your book, which I really loved, so that I quoted it many times afterwards, that this Polish contract for knights... between knights and ladies is about the knight bringing the lady a rose and putting it down at her feet, and this rose is Poland, which these guys constantly place at our feet and we're supposed to not disturb them, you know. And this inscription... and this is also most likely from your book that I know it... and later on, it was

²⁰ *The New Res Publica* – a socio-political journal published by Professor Marcin Krol.

²¹ **Graff, Agnieszka**, *World without Women: Gender in the Polish Public Life*, Warsaw 2001, WAB.

²² **Brach-Czaina, Jolanta**: a university professor, author and co-author of many books in the field of aesthetics, philosophy, art, culture and anthropology. In 1992, published "Gaps of Existence," an essay called "the Bible of feminism" and considered one of the most important works of the last half a century.

²³ **Penn, Shana**: a U.S. scholar and a visiting professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California in 2005. She directed the Jewish heritage Initiative in Poland. She is the author of *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* (2005).

²⁴ *In Full Voice* is the first Polish feminist publication after 1989. In 1993-97, five issues were published by the Women's Foundation eFKa in Krakow.

²⁵ **Walczewska, Sławka**: Director of the Women's Foundation eFKa in Cracow, Poland and Global Feminisms Poland Site Coordinator. Co-founder of the Green Party 2004 and author of *Ladies, Knights, and Feminists: Women's Discourse in Poland* (1999).

an important inspiration for me... that this inscription in the Gdańsk shipyard²⁶, in this most sublime moment of the Polish transformation, at the Gdańsk shipyard wall, there appears an inscription, “Women, do not disturb us; we’re fighting for Poland.” We, the men, for Poland, for you. And, well... I... I think... I’m using the language... in terms of cultural narratives, and this narrative about men who fight for Poland and women are supposed to not disturb them but to admire their efforts... well, it’s a very specifically Polish narrative. It’s perhaps a bit similar to the Irish... I worked on this a little, so these Irish things are close to me, both their Catholicism and their constant sense of humil... of the humiliated national pride. And these women in black who are supposed to slowly move around and be strong, because it’s not a narrative about weak women who need being taken care of, like in the American or the English narrative; that’s a different story. But, frankly speaking, it’s equally stupid. And equally limiting and equally, well, destructive when a person is trying to be... a person of female descent. And... and to live independently.

SW: You’ve taken up this newest mythologized Polish history with great passion...

AG: Yea...

SW: ... in this piece that was published in *Wyborcza*²⁷ and started the debate. How did it come to publish this piece? What was going on? It was a hot summer, 1999 perhaps...

AG: Yes, it was a hot summer for me. I’m a bit shy, because it requires some sort of overcoming... I mean this whole story, and particularly the way Shana Penn²⁸ told it later in her book, it... it is some sort of a caesura²⁹ in... in the Polish feminism’s visibility. And I... because I later became known, I have... there is some embarrassment in this... I remember it all started with my piece. But well... that’s how it was and it... It’s a bit because it was a fine, finely written text but also because it was a really perfect fit for *Gazeta Wyborcza*’s need at that time. But let me start from the beginning. Well... in “Patriarchy after *Sex Mission*,”³⁰ a piece I wrote in the summer, or late spring 1999, which means probably even before my Ph.D. defense but I recall the sense of being done and that I would defend soon and... this was the piece, which claimed that the Polish transformation took place without women and that it happened that way because the recent... the history of recent years in Poland was told with the use of a gender metaphor. That means it was a narrative about... that communism was a matriarchy, a reversal of roles, it was a world in which women were running the show and men were humiliated, castrated actually, and they were weeding gardens instead of working in politics, because politics was this dirty... this domain of communists, so femini... so communism was the world of reversed roles

²⁶ **The Gdansk Shipyard:** one of the biggest Polish shipyards, a cradle of Solidarity, where the August Agreements were signed in 1980 (that is the agreements between the Polish government and the strike committees). August 1980 became an impulse for systemic changes, which ultimately led to the fall of communism.

²⁷ ***Gazeta Wyborcza* (Electoral Newspaper)** – a Polish national daily, second in sales figures, published by the media conglomerate Agora, Inc. *Gazeta Wyborcza* is considered to be one of the most influential press organs when it comes to shaping the public opinion.

²⁸ **Penn, Shana:** a U.S. scholar and a visiting professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California in 2005. She directed the Jewish heritage Initiative in Poland. She is the author of *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* (2005).

²⁹ Pause or break.

³⁰ ***Sexmisja* (Sex Mission):** a 1984 Polish cult comedy/science fiction film directed by Juliusz Machulski.

and now it was supposed to all go back to normal. Therefore, the roles needed to be moved back into place. And this text uses the discourse analysis method of some debates in the Sejm,³¹ which were then going on about... well... about the equal status legislation, which was rejected a few times... among laughter, among laughter and references to *Sex Mission*, a Polish cult comedy, in which... in which... well, there is this world of reversed gender roles, the underground world, since it's like... a science fiction comedy, in which women created this matriarchal world without men and they rule there... and this rule strongly resembles communist times... and by accident, two men from the futu... from the past fall into this world, and the world is all futuristic, and they generally bring in some order... I mean using diversion tactics typical for Polish opposition fighters, they impregnate... among others... they put in their healthy sperm into this factory for making girls, so at the end, in the last shot of the movie, there appears a healthy little pecker, or the future of the nation in other words, or... or again the norm. And this is the movie, which... I realized at that time exactly through these references to *Sex Mission* in these... these parliamentary debates but *Sex Mission* was also shown then at Ośka³². And... and it was Iza Ko... probably Iza, but not Iza Kowalczyk, but Iza Filipiak³³ who somehow got into this conversation with me about *Sex Mission*... that it was this... something very important in the Polish narrative of recent years, so she also has something to do with this piece I wrote. And it is a narrative about... that getting out of communism is imagined by Polish men as getting out of a woman's womb, as a cutting off of the umbilical cord. At the end of *Sex Mission*, there is a scene when they're getting out of the underground world, in space suits since they're still thinking that the earth is contaminated with radiation, and then they take off these suits, take them off and leave the umbilical cord, which is the breathing pipe in the suit... leave it behind, and they take a deep breath in this normal patriarchal world. And then... well... it turns out that this whole world of women... not only was it not needed, not only was it stupid, not only was it badly organized, but also it was in fact ruled by a guy dressed up as a broad. So there is this element of the Polish grotesque, and finally, they simply get to these women... and in general, just start fooling around with them. And they, the women, realize that sex with a real man, a man like Stuhr³⁴, is... that it's what their life is all about. And then, there is a really charming scene, for me, when they all... they're all in this little house on the surface, and they're eating soft-boiled eggs, and women try to turn off some lid on the egg, because in their technology-dominated, underground world, eggs are not real eggs, but then the guys cut off the tips of these eggs and... I have this feeling like... this egg is just like... like... like this matriarchy, you know and that's... So well, I and... re-interpret the year 1989³⁵ and what happened later... well... as a parting with this matriarchy. And now it's like ok, now we can have our own way. And these

³¹ **Sejm**: The lower house of the bicameral National Assembly (the Senate is the upper house). The Sejm is the more powerful of the two chambers. The Sejm has the constitutional responsibility of initiating and enacting laws as well as overseeing state administration.

³² **Ośka**: the Information Center for Women's Groups – is a non-profit, independent foundation, initiated in 1995, which supports women's organizations and initiatives, promotes women's participation in public and social life, and provides knowledge and information for all people interested in the situation of women and in feminism in Poland and in the world.

³³ **Filipiak, Izabela** (born in 1961) – a feminist writer, essayist, and columnist.

³⁴ **Stuhr, Jerzy** (born in 1947) – a director and film and theater actor, played the main character in Juliusz Machulski's film *Sex Mission*.

³⁵ **1989**: The year of the system's transformation. The Round Table negotiations are followed by the peaceful transfer of power by the communists. It begins with the semi-democratic election to the Sejm (Parliament), which Solidarity wins by a crushing margin. Since that moment, the process of government democratization has been under way.

are... these young businessmen with their little brief-cases, who... for whom their little wives wait with their little dinners, the way it's supposed to happen in the orderly, patriarchal world, and that, in other words, is a bit how it was in the States in the 1950's, most likely, you know, this Polish image of Paradise: this little house, wife, two and a half children, a TV set and a Cadillac. And, well... this is what I'm making fun of in this piece... this... this whole narrative, and... and I think that's why the text was published. I also talked about, following Shana Penn and her piece I mentioned earlier, how Solidarity women have been forgotten. And I think that... well, because of this passage, the text was published. Well... actually, I know this. I mean Michnik³⁶ read this piece and thought to himself, "Shoot, this thing here is good stuff." It was 1999, and that means the twentieth anniversary of Solidarity [sic. Transl.] and *Gazeta Wyborcza* was debating different versions of history and the Round Table³⁷ and Solidarity and here it was, this strange, feminist version, exotic and strange, you know, and that's, of course, how I got in. But, of course, it wasn't a completely free lunch, either. I mean... First of all, the text was quite heavily edited. Everything about Helena Łuczywo³⁸ was cut, based on her wish, and the full version appeared in my book; it is the first chapter of my book, published in 2001, and Helena Łuczywo's stuff is included there. And besides, the next day, a polemical piece came out in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. It was by Joanna Szczęsna, one of the Solidarity women I described, who was strongly disagreeing with my vision of history, disagreeing in a way that was extremely painful for me, because it referred to my cultural foreignness, not the Jewish one, of course, but the American one. I mean... there is a sentence about a stupid American, Shana Penn... I'm not quoting exactly, but something like... while that it's possible to understand that the American Shana Penn didn't quite get what it was about, but for a Pole not to get it...? When I read it, I thought to myself... I started to cry when I was reading this piece, since she hit me in a vulnerable spot, a spot where I don't feel fully Polish, for the following two reasons. First of all, I am Jewish, and this is the whole long Polish narrative, and second of all, because I stayed in the States too long. And... and this was a dilemma, I think, of my feminism... before I understood... before I had got to understand that it was an important piece, which opened a lot of people's eyes

³⁶ **Michnik, Adam:** editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (*Electoral Newspaper*) since 1989. Historian, political activist, and political writer. In 1968-1969, he was imprisoned for participating in the student protests of March 1968. Since 1977, a member of the Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR), in 1978, he became a lecturer at the Academic Courses Association (TKN). He was interned in 1981-1982 and imprisoned in 1984-1986. He participated in the Round Table negotiations (1989), which contributed to the fall of the Polish People's Republic. He has received numerous awards, including Prix de la Liberte of the French PEN Club (1982), A. Kijowski Award (1985), R.F. Kennedy Human Rights Award (1986), European Journalist Association Award (1995), the Award for Journalism and Democracy from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), IPI Press World Freedom Hero (2000), and the Erasmus Award for 2001.

³⁷ **Round Table:** Talks conducted between representatives of the opposition, mostly people associated with Solidarity, de-legalized after martial law was implemented, and representatives of the governing camp, and mostly The Polish United Workers Party (PZPR), from February 6 to April 5, 1989. The object of negotiations was to establish principles of democratizing the political system and reforming the economy, which would be acceptable for both sides. The signed agreement mandated that reforms of the political and economic system would occur by evolutionary means. The reforms were to be based on political pluralism, freedom of speech, independent judiciary, strong local government, democratic elections for all elected branches of the government, unrestricted development of various forms of property, development of the free market and economic competition, among others. The negotiations' outcomes provided the foundation for principal changes in Poland's political situation, enabled Solidarity's victory in the parliamentary elections, changed the existing Sejm coalition, and led to the first non-communist government in the post-war Poland.

³⁸ **Łuczywo, Helena:** deputy editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in whose creation in 1989 she participated. Until August 2004, she was a vice-chairperson of Agora's board of directors.

to something important, some suspicion hatched in my head that perhaps I had been outside the country for too long, that I was perhaps making something up, that perhaps I didn't understand something, that perhaps I was cut off from Polishness that I had always been longing for while considering myself a patriot. I mean I have a very strong emotional attitude towards Poland, and it may sound exaggerated and funny and stupid, but I believe my feminist activism to be patriotic. I... what I do, well, through it, I want to regain Poland for women, and it's not about America, for example. American feminism interests me only from the Peeping Tom's perspective. But I want to do feminism in Poland, for Poland, with Polish women and also with Jewish women. And... here is this woman from Solidarity, and I'm bowing to her and saying, "It's so sad you've been forgotten, you did something wonderful, why have you withdrawn from politics, come back to us, be with us." And she says to me, "What are you saying, you silly kid, you have no clue." It was terribly painful then. And at some point I started defending myself, a bit under the influence of my mother, who was very, very worried about this situation and who wanted to protect me very much, and I started making desperate phone calls to many women from feminist groups and asking them to write something. And Małgosia Fuszara wrote something, a really nice piece, and Joanna Bator wrote a piece that was a bit unpleasant to me, something that I was as a representative of the American... enlightened feminism, of its *Gazeta Wyborcza* breed, so she also let me have it, but there were as many as about seventeen of these pieces. Even Maria Janion³⁹ spoke up at some point. And since she's the biggest intellectual authority, I really felt validated. Shana Penn also participated at some point in this discussion... or maybe it was later, I don't quite remember... At any rate, there were several of these pieces, and I remember that *Gazeta Wyborcza*, represented by Krzysztof Varga, this young, rather conservative intellectual, was really looking for anti-feminist texts. But it turned out that most people who are interested in gender issues had mostly feminist views. So most good pieces were coming from feminists and it was also the case that they got a lot of very radical pieces and *Gazeta* started to pick and choose among them. And your piece, as far as I can remember, didn't get published then... and it was like a kind of warning perhaps for us... that when feminism enters into the mainstream, it isn't with the voice we've come up with, but these... the mainstream media well... these media will... will get to decide who's published and who's this nice feminist and who is a not-so-nice feminist. And this... at that point, I didn't yet have a feeling I have today that I know when I do have an impact and when I'm being taken advantage of. I still had a feeling that it was all just happening outside of my control, and that it was fantastic but also terrifying. And well... I think that this is when my career started as that of a feminist that can be accepted by the mainstream. And at times I feel very uncomfortable with this role. And I try to disrupt this role somehow. For example, when about two years ago, my picture was published in this kind of a catalogue of the most important Polish women, or something like successful Polish women, and feminists were represented by me and by Kazia Szczuka, I had a nausea attack. I mean... that this rag-like... well maybe I'm exaggerating a bit, since *Warsaw Life* is simply a local paper, but it defiles my face, puts me next to some models, some actresses, some conservative women and some... What is that supposed to be? I don't want it... I don't want to be catalogued by... by these media. But this is how it happens. They simply

³⁹ **Janion, Maria** (born in 1926): a historian of literature, ideas and imagination, a professor in the Literary Studies Institute at the Polish Academy of Sciences, has taught seminars to students for many decades. An author of several books, such as: *The Romantic Fever*; *Toward Evil*; *Life after Death of Konrad Wallenrod*; *Will You Know What You Have Experienced?*; *Women and the Spirit of Otherness*; *The General's Tears*; *Essays about War*. Initiated the series *Transgressions*.

took my picture from somewhere on the Internet... and put me in there and they said something like... that I'm a feminist but still very pretty. And simply...I was...it was awful...it was like... ouch. A very un-cool experience. But this debate in 1999... it was certainly very good and I remember that Shana Penn told me that as long as she could remember, a debate like that never happened in the States, in the mainstream press, and there was nothing like this in the *New York Times*. At that point, *Gazeta*... it was kind of a dead season, that's true, but still *Gazeta* treated the women's question very seriously. And... and it did it only once. I know that Adam Michnik, the editor-in-chief of *Gazeta*, when other discussions about women's issues were being suggested to him, would respond, "What for? We've already done that, it was done before." So it's this kind of a ...since 1999, we've been slowly learning what the status of women's question is in Poland. It's supposed to be covered as an amusing story, as a story related to other stories in an interesting way, but it's never autonomous, it's rather for the dead season, and when a newspaper checks it off once, it doesn't need to cover it again.

SW: Tell us also, at what point of your feminism are you now?

AG: I am in this place where I'm gradually withdrawing. I mean I'm focused on my academic life. I'm writing a dissertation about American feminism and I feel it's important to finish... I mean to become another feminist she-professor who will build some institutional foundations of feminism in Poland, because I see it more and more how strong the old-boy network is in the Polish academic life. And these are men who really treat feminism with disdain. So I've started treating my academic side more seriously, but at the same time, I haven't mentioned the most important thing and I should perhaps talk about it in a few sentences. My identification with feminism occurs mainly through Manifs, in other words through women's marches which started in 2000 and since then happen once and sometimes twice a year, since there is one also in December in Warsaw and now also in other cities. And I was the initiator, together with three or four other girls, of this first march in 2000. And every year, they are becoming bigger and bigger and more colorful, going back in their convention to these surrealist opposition motifs of the 1980's. And for the last two years, I haven't been the organizer; I am a participant and a helper, a bit in the role of some kind of a founding mother, who is somewhat respected by the younger girls, and a bit of a star, since my book was nominated for the Nike Award and became a bestseller, and now, about a week ago, I found out there will be another printing, so together there are about fifteen thousand copies circulating around. So I am this kind of a... feminist mom, but I've also come to realize that I have a right to say "no." I mean that I don't have to go when I'm invited to the other side of Poland because a few people there want to listen to what I have to say, that I don't have to paint banners, that younger girls can do it, that I have my own private life, and that it's a part of my feminism to take care of this life seriously. Since we're talking frankly, let me move on to this personal aspect. I really want to have a baby now and... and it turned out I have some fertility problems, and for a few years, I haven't been able to get pregnant. So I've decided to take advantage of some technological benefits but in a very conscious way, I mean, by learning this... this... this bodily... positive side of reproduction. I mean not only the right to abortion, which I have been actively fighting for in Poland, but also the right to have a baby. And it is a very difficult experience for me, an experience I'm trying to describe in writing, and I have to say nothing has ever been so hard to write about. I'm generally a fast writer and at this point, I have perhaps written about three pages, and these were the hardest three pages to write. It's about this ambivalence related to how hard it is to want to have

a baby and not be able to have it in a culture, which is so strongly oriented toward... toward... toward motherhood, and in which women are constantly being evaluated on whether they have children. It is hard to make sure that one really wants to have a baby... I should perhaps speak in the first person... that I want to have a baby, my partner and I and it's not because various neighbors, aunts, grandmothers and so on are glaring at me because I'm thirty six and no child. And that this is about entangling my own longing, my body and my intimate experience from this terrible, oppressive culture. And it's terribly hard... and unfortunately it also requires withdrawing from political life. I mean I can't at this point afford showing my face on TV to speak about abortion. It's very hard for me now... of course, I'm pro-choice and I can differentiate between somebody with an unwanted pregnancy who wants to abort and the fact that I want to have a baby, but at the same time... well, I didn't agree, for example, to wear the tee-shirt with the words, "I had an abortion" for the media. First of all, I didn't even though I could have perhaps had it at some point if I had had an unwanted pregnancy, and second of all, I am now very strongly focused on getting pregnant and I don't want any bad luck. I don't want to... I mean I want to be able to say "no." And it's also related to some feeling of guilt... to this kind of hard look at my own body, own body and realizing that my feminism has always been kind of from the head... kind of brilliant, you know, with references to Lacan here and there, to literature, to narratives and so forth, and here I have to face the challenge of my own guts, of my ovaries, and of being a woman in a bodily sense. And it is very hard and very interesting, and I think it's some new stage in my life.

Agnieszka Graff

Born	February 3, 1970
1981-1983	lived in the United States, in Amherst
1986	first great love
1988-1993	university studies in the United States and England
1993-1995	graduate school, literature, Oxford University
1995-2000	faculty member, Department of English, Warsaw University
1997	translated Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own"
Since 2000	faculty member, American Studies Center, Warsaw University
2001	published <i>The World without Women</i>

The recording session took place in Wiśniowa with Sławomira Walczewska and Beata Kozak

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Anna Gruszczyńska
Interviewers: Ola Piel and Joanna Wydrych**

Location: Kraków

Date: June 2004

Translated by: Kasia Kietlińska



eFKa

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Anna Gruszczyńska was born in 1978 in Kowary, Poland. She studied English and Spanish Philology at the University of Wrocław and at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. In 2001, Gruszczyńska started a chapter of *The Campaign against Homophobia*. She has organized marches and campaigns calling for gay and lesbian rights in Poland. She has experienced social and political repercussions as an outspoken lesbian and feminist activist. Gruszczyńska is firmly committed to fighting homophobia and regularly publishes articles about the topic in feminist magazines. She has three younger sisters and lives in Cracow.

Aleksandra Piela has a Master of Arts degree in Film Studies. She is a volunteer in Women's Foundation eFKa and has been an active participant in its Feminist Academy. Piela works as a yoga instructor.

Joanna Wydrych has a Master of Arts degree in Political Science and in Gender Studies from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. She was an active participant in eFKa's Feminist Academy. Wydrych is interested in intersections between feminism and the left.

Anna Gruszczyńska
June 2004
Kraków

Ola Piela: My name is Ola Piela.

Joanna Wydrych: I am Joanna Wydrych.

O.P. And this is Ania⁴⁰ Gruszczyńska, and we have met here in order to have a conversation with Ania, or actually more than just a conversation, since it's really going to be an interview. We're interviewing her to record a certain story, Ania's story, and more specifically her story in the context of her feminism.

Anna Gruszczyńska: Well, when I'm trying to remember... because, because I've been thinking about it many times, about this question where it all came from, this interest in gender studies, in feminism, and I have an impression that the very beginning was when I was still in Wrocław.⁴¹ This was between 1997 and 2000, when I was studying at the English Department, and when I was a junior. As part of a seminar requirement, we could choose many different courses, and there was a female professor there, who came from the States, from The Rhode Island University, as a Fulbright scholar, and she taught a course about American and American Indian female writers. At that point, it was like outer space for me. This was a course for which the whole reading list was made up not just of women writers but also these were women who belonged to this particular ethnic minority, and this was an absolutely new way of reading and something I had... I don't know, I had a hard time with at the beginning. I have to admit it was also a bit hard for me to adjust to it all. Later on, during the first semester of junior year, there were many other readings, and the one I remember the most I think was something, wait a minute, by Charlotte Perkins maybe? Or by Perkins Gilman? I don't know if it was ever translated into Polish, but at any rate in Polish that would be something like "The Yellow Wallpaper." It is a story of a woman who, because of her overprotective husband and because she has some sort of an ailment, is basically forced to undergo six weeks of therapy, which basically involves permanent rest. She ends up in bed, in a room with this yellow wallpaper, and lying on her back, she gets slightly crazy. After this "Yellow Wallpaper," I started reading a lot of things about female hysteria, about inscribing women in this kind of story of madness, story about their ailments, that they are not fully normal, that they're hysterical and so forth. So I decided to write my Bachelor's thesis about Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, about... The title was so... at any rate I'm not even able to remember it today, but I'm sure there was something about patriarchy in it, so it involved a lot of reading about women and madness. Anyway, at that point I really read a lot of that stuff, and as a result of these readings, I got into this stage of developing a need for some more practical action. And actually, at that point, I reached a stage when I became a bit tired of Wrocław -- of the university, the city itself, and my reality there -- so I decided to go to another college in another city. I managed to get into the Spanish Department in Kraków, and I remember going on line and finding information that Kraków had something like

⁴⁰ **Ania**: diminutive of the name Anna.

⁴¹ **Wrocław**: The capital city of the lower Silesia region of Poland.

a Women's Foundation. And it wasn't even, I think, eFKa's⁴² site but just some information with only an e-mail or maybe a phone number somewhere. So when in October I came to Kraków to start my new college classes and adjusted a bit, and I think that was as early as in November, I went to eFKa with this idea that I would do some volunteer work for them. At that point, I really didn't have a clue about NGOs and about organizations like eFKa. And I happened to get a volunteer job taking care of the library, organizing their catalog, preparing their complete list of books, well...I don't know, it was something like a data base. And while working on this catalog, I had another opportunity, after the one at the English Department, to read a lot of these kinds of books. And I remember that basically I was reading pretty much everything I could put my hands on and rather incessantly. And for my first year in Kraków, I was mostly taking care of this library, reading a lot, attending classes, and for the first time in my life, I got kind of socially integrated into the so-called student life there. And basically then, during my freshman year there, mostly as a result of all this reading but also kind of, you know, between the lines, I managed to figure out something I had been struggling with for the last five years... and that is that I was a lesbian. At that point, I was 21, maybe 22 years old, and it was still completely theoretical then, more of a read about than an experienced kind of thing. Later on... later on, I went to the US again, and again I brought back a whole load of books, both gender and feminist books, and among them there were also lesbian books. It was in 2000... in 2001 and I... Theoretically, it probably doesn't really matter but I was in New York on September 11, and I got caught up in this whole attack, which was an incredible shock for me. In Warsaw, on September 11, as I have learned later, there was a founding meeting for Campaign against Homophobia. It was around 3:00 p.m., which means it was 9:00 a.m. in New York, and when everything was basically falling apart, so the five organizers, and at the very beginning it was just five guys, were waiting for reporters to show up, but to no avail: nobody showed up. And later on... later on, this date kind of got blurred because it seemed silly to claim it, but I still have this thing stuck in me... and then, basically, I think I was still ruminating over this experience of becoming a lesbian, both in reading and writing. For many years, I had been corresponding with a few girls, and for the most part, these contacts never went beyond the Internet. It was all about letters only, just writing, writing, a whole lot of writing. And the funniest thing is that while I was starting the Campaign against Homophobia in Kraków, I was an absolutely theoretical lesbian, a very well-read lesbian but nothing beyond that. And probably as a result of all this reading and these ruminations, I came up with this need to move it forward. I found out from one of the women I corresponded with that the Campaign against Homophobia started a home page, and they posted this appeal, an encouragement to start local actions. And at that point in Kraków, there was basically no... I know that there was a lesbian organization LABRYS. I actually wanted to get in touch with them but I still didn't have enough guts to go to any of their meetings. I think they mostly had meetings as part of some informal DKF (film club). I remember that what kept me from attending these meetings was the fact that they were held at somebody's place, you know, in private apartments, because, obviously, the girls didn't have their own space. Or they would meet in this pub, in this now nonexistent pub "Wygoda" ("Comfort"), or in people's homes, and they would watch movies. So when I got back to Poland, I e-mailed the address provided on that page. I wrote I was from Kraków and I'd like to do something there, but basically it was simply a request for information. And very soon I got back an e-mail telling me that I was the first, or perhaps second, person who volunteered, so it was

⁴² eFKa: Women's Foundation (Fundacja Kobiet) which is in charge of the Poland site of the Global Feminisms Project.

great and could I, please, start a branch organization in Kraków and become its coordinator. I agreed rather enthusiastically, not really fully aware what I was getting myself into. And, by the way, Robert Biedroń, the founder of this organization and its chairman, you know, the person who founded it and has since remained its chairman, didn't then have much of a clue what he got himself into, either. All of a sudden, a lot of people from all over Poland were writing to him, and starting new branch offices, but then these offices would fold down. For a very long time, the Kraków branch was the only one that generally survived for more than a year and a half. At any rate, I agreed to coordinate work at the branch office, and I remember that the first historic meeting of the Campaign was on November 10, 2001. I think that people who showed up then – and these were two guys, so we had the crowd of three at the first meeting – most likely found me through Robert Biedroń. Most likely they just wrote to him asking about the Kraków branch and what could be done here. The only thing I remember is that for a long time we were wondering what kind of on-line addresses we should have, but other than that, there wasn't much else. And those beginnings were really terribly improvised. We would meet on Saturdays at St. Wojciech (Albertus) Church at the Kraków Market Square, which was dubbed as our gathering place because it's very small, unique-looking and easy to spot. And later on, later on, we'd go to Kraków's gay pubs, and sometimes just to regular pubs, and waiters often happened to be the ones really interested in the table, where gays and lesbians were being openly discussed. As for this early period, I mostly remember great enthusiasm and terrible chaos, because we were getting very little support from the main office. The only thing that happened was a single meeting of local coordinators and the rest... the rest was up to us. Very soon it turned out that strangely enough and without any real will I joined the all-male club, because the meetings were mostly attended by gay men, which I stopped liking really soon, or rather never really liked. So we had to come up with some way of attracting girls. And very soon the idea came up that the meetings should be exclusively for women, which actually after two years of this group's existence was... and the fact that it was happening every third Tuesday of the month, so it was like a regular, holy thing..., so up to this point, we can see an interest of the male contingent... in their questions, "what are you doing at these meetings?" To which they always hear the response that they can do their own meetings if they want. Counting all the initiatives, there were perhaps as many as one thousand people who passed through. Anyway, out of the whole crowd of people who would come, stay, come back, not come back, go, send e-mails, or do something, or not do something, look for a male or female partner, or treat our organization like a singles agency, a group of girls began to emerge, who... who really wanted to do something. And perhaps, in general, the most important moment, which... which caused the fact that there were more and more girls, and they were the ones who, in fact, had the best ideas and best coped with all this stuff was the campaign "Niech nas zobaczą" ("Let Them See Us"). It was more than... more than a year ago, and it was a photograph exhibit of fifteen lesbian couples and fifteen gay couples, shown in four Polish cities, plus a billboard campaign, plus an educational campaign. So, basically, already in the Fall 2002, it was necessary to begin gathering male and female models. And basically in Warsaw, finding the fifteen gay couples went very fast, but it was a real problem to find any lesbian couples in Warsaw, where we looked for them among relatives and friends. At some point, we had this desperate idea to bring women from the Czech Republic, since Czech women could easily pretend to be Polish, so nobody would figure it out if girls from our sister organization in Prague would act as Polish lesbians. But in Kraków, this group of girls included... depending on which meeting... anywhere from ten to twenty to twenty some people, and then I gave a signal, "Let's look for...", "Let's look for models." And we found them in

Kraków, as many as five couples. And... and about one of the girls who agreed to participate in the pictures, and who is at this point one of the most active leaders... it was the second time that she attended the meeting, and when the idea popped up that we were taking these pictures and needed models, she came again and decided, "why not." And a week later, actually together with me, she was being immortalized for "Let Them See Us," with the St. Mary's Church⁴³ in the background. By the way, there was a really funny story about Ilona, because... because we... I mean... the majority of reporters assumed that the pictures showed real couples, but among the thirty photos, there were maybe five to six couples. Ilona and I gave at least two interviews as a good couple, having earlier coordinated our testimonies about how long we had been together, what we thought about having children and so forth. Later on... I mean after, after "Let Them see Us," which, in general, was the first bigger initiative of the Campaign, and it took around seven months to prepare it, and it was also the first initiative to evoke such a strong... strong reaction in Kraków, because before... before "Let Them See Us," we did have some leaflet campaigns during... right before Christmas, when, on a snowy day, we were giving out leaflets with the slogan "How Gay Men and Lesbians Spend Their Christmas," to remind everybody that gays and lesbians existed and had to take questions about grandchildren for Christmas. Somehow, it didn't touch anybody, but the pictures did touch and upset people, so the whole... came into being. Well, basically, at that point, they started this rather awful TV show about... about family values, which has been continued till today, and in which the local right-wing forces are trying, at all cost, to oppose what's going on in Kraków to benefit gays and lesbians, because they would like the only action going on to be acts of violence against gays and lesbians, or some homophobic conferences like "Why Homosexual Unions Threaten the Future of the Family." As for me and as for what it means to be a feminist, or actually have an even stronger link with feminism... as a result of my activities for the gay and lesbian organization, I suddenly found out that it was an occasion to start writing quite a lot, to publish bulletins, for example. And these bulletins should feature something that makes sense, including a longer piece that would talk about the organization's work, and that even something more like a column would have a right to be there. And I started writing such general-purpose pieces. At first it was basically and exclusively for practical purposes, even though probably somewhere at the back of my mind there was an old dream, typical for many people who read a lot and dream about finally being able to read not just what others had written but also what they managed to write themselves. Somehow, somehow, for a long time, I managed to forget this dream, and while working on incidental bulletins, all of a sudden I noticed that a lot of things which were obvious to me were not at all obvious to people who were active in the gay and lesbian community. And that it was necessary to explain a lot of things, explain, for example, that lesbians existed and had rights, that there was something like a double discrimination of lesbians, that the situation of lesbians in Poland was different from the situation of gays, and that it wasn't necessarily possible to speak about how lesbians had it fine and dandy when nobody showed any intention to beat up on a couple of girls holding hands just because the weren't treated as girls, you know, who are in a relationship. All of a sudden, it turned out that with all the activities in gay and lesbian organizations, lesbians would be lost very, very fast, and very easily. And also, it quickly turned out that while going to various meetings, participating in seminars or in meetings of coordinators, I was the only girl in the room, or maybe there was one, possibly two, more girls sitting next to me. The rest, on the other hand, was made up of gays, who, well, generally would

⁴³ **St. Mary's Church:** One of the most famous and recognizable churches in Poland, located in the center of Cracow's Market Place.

take the existence of women into consideration, but weren't necessarily too interested. And by the way, I often heard these comments from people coming to our organization: "You're the first lesbian I've seen." And generally there was this recurring motif that lesbians weren't there, that they were like unicorns, since they were so rare. So suddenly, it turned out that it needed to be explained, to be written about, and I remember one piece I wrote for, for a bulletin, which most likely was printed, but at any rate, it electronically went to people connected with feminist organizations and others like gay-lesbian ones. This was... wait a minute... this was... this was a piece I wrote after I got upset by a male friend, in a cafeteria, when he was trying to explain to me that discrimination basically didn't exist, and particularly discrimination of women, and neither did discrimination against gays, that everything was OK, and we were all having great fun. Later, it turned out that this friend was a closeted gay, but that's a separate story. And this piece found its way to eFKa and to Beata Kozak,⁴⁴ who wrote to me, on behalf of *Zadra*⁴⁵ (*The Splinter*), that she liked the piece quite a bit and she wanted to publish it. And that's how ... it was in February, two years ago... I became the author writing for *Zadra*. I mean... at that point I was still treating it as a one-time, random occurrence, as my own, you know, my own whim, and also perhaps, I don't know, perhaps I didn't quite have the courage to follow up on this. Anyway, after that piece, it turned out that more pieces were needed, and that I wanted to write and get some self-realization. When, when recently I was collecting all these pieces for some application form, I mean everything I managed to produce from the last two years, all of a sudden, it turned out that, basically, in every second piece, if not actually in the majority of them, the word "lesbian" was there, and that in a variety of ways, it was always a narrative about this, this empty place. From many different sides, it was talking about this, this hiding behind the safe mask of the Internet, for example, or, or about hiding in the gay-lesbian organizations themselves, about hiding behind this kind of theoretical permission to do it, do it, that it was OK, because, because, after all, nobody was going to beat up on two girls, which, which isn't completely true, since somebody was actually trying to beat up on me for something like that once, so it'd make sense to have some reckoning with this myth of relative... I mean the myth of relative safety. And, and it was also the same moment when I had left everything that was going on in Kraków for a while, for a longer while, because first I went on vacation and then for the Socrates scholarship,⁴⁶ but still, even today, my mind keeps producing ideas for pieces that could have been. It was terribly important for me to participate in the Feminist Academy⁴⁷ as one of the lecturers. I mean... first what happened was that a year before, while taking some awful final exams, I had this surge of creativity and I came up with this cycle of eight, or perhaps, nine sessions about lesbian literature. And then it turned out that there was a place, where these sessions could be carried out, because the Campaign meetings were not really the best place, since these meetings of a group of lesbians were something between a social group and a support group, rather than an appropriate place to come and talk about literary texts. But then it turned out that the Feminist

⁴⁴ **Kozak, Beata:** member of the Women's Foundation eFKa and editor of their feminist journal, *Zadra*.

⁴⁵ ***Zadra:*** Feminist publication produced by the Women's Foundation eFKa.

⁴⁶ The **Socrates** program aims to encourage cooperation among the higher education institutions of Europe. Scholarships support students who wish to complete part of their studies in another country of the European Union, Iceland, Norway or Liechtenstein. The student's own institution must have a European University Charter granted by the European Commission.

⁴⁷ **Feminist Academy:** a series of lectures and discussions organized by the Women's Foundation eFKa.

Academy was being launched, and Sławka⁴⁸ asked me to participate, participate in the first semester as one of, I think, four lecturers. In the second semester, I also had, had a course, somewhat changed in comparison to what it was in the semester before, and it was incredible that we could sit together with other girls and talk about lesbian literature... and, I don't know, ... it wasn't necessary to bang my head against the concrete wall and convince people about the basics, like that women's literature actually existed. And that what women wrote was important, and that when during four years in college, a reading list didn't include a single woman writer, something was amiss, because if it had been the other way around, somebody would have certainly noticed. And this Feminist Academy was also a great... really neat refuge in comparison to what was going on at my college, which is decidedly an unfriendly place, or at least its department of Foreign Languages and Literatures is unfriendly to all kinds of research going beyond the defined standard. It means that it's better to work on the Spanish Middle Ages, because basically everything has already been said and discovered, so it's only possible to write some monographic study or maybe find something about Polish-Spanish relations, but God forbid to specialize in women's literature, let alone lesbian literature, which... And I committed this kind of crime, because I insisted on writing my Master's Thesis about a novel, which was the first lesbian novel in Argentina, published in 1981. And what I liked the most about it was that it's a novel about a woman, sitting in a room and writing about a relationship, which was over and which actually happened in the same room. I liked it particularly because it was kind of a return to the best sources, to Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, and also basically... this very, I don't know, a link to my own... and to how hard... how it's often hard to find and... to find this room of one's own for writing, and these five hundred pounds Virginia Woolf said every woman should have to be able to just write at peace. Somewhere, somewhere, somewhere in all of this, there is this serenity, but the place at one's own desk quickly gets lost. Anyhow, it didn't matter that I found the book that fascinated me and the topic that I liked... because basically since October till this moment... and now there is one more year of entertainment, I mean the editing stage of working at the final draft of this thesis... Anyway, for the whole year, my mentor didn't even pronounce the word "lesbian"; if at all, she talk about "relationships between women," and she's try to persuade me to... I mean between lines... that if I really had to work on such an awful topic as women's literature, and the starting point was that women's literature didn't exist, then, then why did I have to focus on lesbians? If it had to be, be on women, then let them be normal women, heterosexual, and preferably in novels, actually very common in the Latino tradition, about women who suffer because of love, whose love is exploited, and there should best also be a husband, a true Latino macho husband. And it'd be even better if a husband were to be an important politician, a dictator, because then everything would wonderfully come together: the plot... the dictatorship plot, the Marxist plot, the plot about some hysterical woman, who'd immolate herself completely in love. This is what I should have been working on, but not on a woman trying to find her own place somewhere, somewhere completely beyond this dictatorial framework. There was no place for this at the university, but there was enough room to bring in Brain Sex.⁴⁹ The one and only time my mentor tried to be nice, after I presented to her some theories of French philosophers and theories on women's writing that... so, so she decided it was scientifically proven that women wrote differently and it

⁴⁸ **Walczevska, Sławka**: Director of the Women's Foundation eFKa in Cracow, Poland and Global Feminisms Poland Site Coordinator. Co-founder of the Green Party 2004 and author of *Ladies, Knights, and Feminists: Women's Discourse in Poland* (1999).

⁴⁹ **Brain Sex: The Real Difference between Men and Women** by Anne Moir and David Jessel.

was in Brain Sex. So my existence at the university mostly boils down to refuting charges. The biggest charge was that, while writing a thesis on lesbians, I would be writing a sociological analysis of a pathological phenomenon, or something like that. That means that lesbians can't be a topic of literature but only and solely of sociology and writing about what... what is basically abnormal. Even family violence would be more normal, to the extent, of course, that it's committed by a man. And... and basically, it's also that everybody at the university just stopped somewhere, somewhere more or less in the 60's. And people who have gone any further are decidedly dangerous. That'd be all for now. I don't know.

O.P.: And how is it, do you think that any events in your childhood, simply anything that happened during your childhood, is related to this, had a later impact on your feminism?

A.G.: Well... So this is how... I mean, my, my family had mostly the kind of influence on me, and on my feminism as well, that it was mostly... and still is, in a sense, a way of... of not following the path that was, theoretically, designated for me. I mean... I have three younger sisters who are at this point 23, 15 and 11 years old... well, and at this point in my family I play a role of some sort of a... perhaps more or less harmless but a weirdo, nonetheless. I mean... for my parents, and particularly, for my father and his second wife, a feminist is a frustrated woman who, who didn't manage to find a man, and so was I, for a very long time, till, till the moment of my coming out, or actually later on as well. The message was this: well, studying is important, work is important, but a husband is most important. And... and perhaps... I was amused to tears when, a few years ago, at the time when I already absolutely felt like a feminist, a lesbian, and so forth, but, as a gift from my dad, I got the whole series of John Gray's books: Men Are from Mars, Women are from Venus, Mars and Venus in the Bedroom, and I think there is a third book in the same cycle. Anyhow, for me, this book was like from outer space, and I was reading it with this kind of dismay, as a fictionalized version of Brain Sex, you know, about men, who are sitting in a cave and should not be bothered, and women, who are coquettish and kind, and in general, the two genders have no chance to communicate. And I was basically completely out of this kind of... , but the message was more or less that I should somehow try to fit into it and simply... OK, have some education, but also be the kind of little girl, who... I don't know, who would dress nicely, would be able to take advantage of the lessons my dad's wife was trying to teach me about what kind of accessories to select, for example, how to do make-up, and so forth, and how to do my nails. I still don't know how to do these, but my younger sisters, the ones from dad's second marriage... My eleven-year-old sister has this little box with about 40 nail polishes, and when we come to visit, I mean with my sister who is 23 years old and is my full sister, their favorite way to play is to have a beauty parlor, where for more or less two hours, we have to bear tortures of having our entire faces made-up, and something like...having our hair twisted in all directions, and, of course, having little patterns done on our nails, and later on, I have to struggle to clean it all off. But this is the greatest fun for our little sisters, so... and we see each other so rarely that, that it's mostly for them. For... I mean... for my dad and his wife, all I do is usually a complete abstraction. I mean... when I told my dad that... I mean... my coming out was like this: I was terribly depressed after my relationship with a girl was over, and dad was trying to be nice and said that... "Well, perhaps you, feminists, are right, after all, and men are pigs." To which I said it was not a relationship with a man, and... which shocked him a bit, but he soon cheered up and decided that fine, it might be a girl, but there would be grandkids. And somehow he got stuck on these grandkids. I myself heard, in passing, when he was explaining to somebody

at work that his daughter, in spite of her advanced years, that is when it came to marriage plans, the husband wasn't in the picture, but she would have kids... that is there would be kids, but there would be no son-in-law, that's how we set it all up. This is perhaps, perhaps, perhaps because he can't bring himself up to say that his daughter has a girl- friend. And my mom... kind of... she always says that nothing ever reaches Jelenia Góra, the town I'm from, so she probably still feels very embarrassed as well, and the word "lesbian" is very hard to pronounce, even though, even though once in a while she asks me to say "hi" to my girl-friend, so it's at least, at least this. And she remembers her name, which is a big accomplishment in comparison to how other parents react. And really if not for my reading and if not for my decision at some point that I didn't want to live like... to follow an ideal of a woman, according to my father, who divorced my mother mostly because he didn't quite accept the relationship in which a woman would want self-realization... My mom was working on her PhD at the Economic Academy, and later, later on, because of the divorce, she gave up on her academic job and found work at an elementary school, because the point was then to work shorter hours, so that she'd be able to regularly come home earlier, and she claimed that academic work was too hard. And, on the other hand, this... this ideal of a woman, as seen by my father, is like his second wife, who is 14 years younger than him. She took it upon herself to raise two daughters born in this second marriage, she took it upon herself to manage the company, when dad is so burned out with work that he can't go on any more, and she took... Well, she took upon herself taking care of children, housework, cooking and... well and basically the whole life following some ideal from a magazine for women, which perhaps isn't that bad for someone like her. But the more I saw this, the more often my nails got painted by little sisters, and the more issues of *Claudia*⁵⁰ magazine I saw in that apartment the less willing I was to go for something like this. So, this is perhaps the main... I mean, my family accepts me mostly, mostly thanks to... thanks to denial. My mom may have perhaps read two pieces I have ever written and my father's family probably nothing. I mean, somehow they were not interested in this, because, because it's too ideological, I don't know... My feminism is a rather dangerous matter; it's better not to touch it. Women should be women like... Men should be real men... And, well, both genders should basically get involved into this permanent flirtation with one another, and, of course, as a result we'll get these great full families with children. But I have fallen out of this... and it's come out the way it's come out. On the other hand, the three other sisters, and particularly, particularly the two little ones, perhaps, are going straight into this... this model... I don't know, this model of joyful flirtation between two genders from distant planets. These two little sisters – or well, not really that little anymore, but because of this age difference of 11 and 14 years, I've learned to think about them as little sisters. For me, it was a bit... well, not maybe odd as much as hard, when as early as two, two or three years ago, they started coming up with stories about boys from class they should be interested in, about Wojtek and Michał and so on, and it was really difficult to get into it with them. However, however, recently, the one who's fifteen started having these slightly anarchist flashes. She's stopped eating meat and started dressing all in black, so perhaps if she runs into something that interests her, she'll... and perhaps somewhere on the way, she'll run into some idea like feminism. But I don't know that.

O.P.: Ania, you are a coordinator for the Campaign against Homophobia in Kraków, and actually you initiated it. You are the person who cares about something called the lesbian movement, which doesn't really exist in Poland, and which for 99% of the people is, in

⁵⁰ *Claudia*: a Polish magazine for women with fashion spreads, food recipes, love advice, etc.

general, a complete abstraction. And I'm simply wondering where you find this inspiration and strength to act. Are there, perhaps, some people around you who are giving you this strength? What is it like, in general, to create such a movement, and is it developing the way you want?

A.G.: I find... This inspiration mostly comes from... I mean I often joke about suffering from a professional English major's affliction, which means that an English major reads... reads everything in print, including serial boxes if there is nothing else. I mean... Well, of course I'm trying to select my readings in a way that's somewhat better organized than just reading food boxes. And first of all, the inspiration came from what I was reading, from these piles of books I used to bring from all over, and which I've managed to read here in eFKa, and in bookstores in various European cities, because the two places... places I always visit when I travel are modern art museums first, and then bookstores, so that I can read as much as possible. And, to wrap it up, when I was reading to prepare classes for the Feminist Academy, these elements of the puzzle somehow started coming together and... I mean, first they came into a story about what it was all like elsewhere, particularly in the States, but also what it was like in Western Europe, where it started, what it has evolved from, where it's going and what has happened on the way. I mean... all this reading and following what happened elsewhere is important because, as a matter of fact, in Poland it's not just the lesbian movement that has to be created from scratch, but in reality any movement on behalf of sexual minorities as well. And what's been happening in the Campaign against Homophobia is also about comparing to what has happened elsewhere, about comparing these models, which we know from Germany, for example, or from the United States, to what can be done here, to what is possible here. It's about the question, for example, of whether it's possible to have the revolution here like it happened elsewhere and whether, for example, it's possible here to recreate this utopia from the 70's in the United States, this place called... I mean it's hard to translate into Polish, something like "a lesbian state," "lesbian nation." At any rate, "lesbian nation" in English. And the vision of this enterprise, where the very fact that a woman is organiz... is of a homosexual orientation, will confirm... I mean, it'll lead up to the fact that it'll become a basis for some kind of common policy, common action, I don't know, thinking and being together. And this utopian vision has really stuck in my memory, even though, of course, it was never really carried out and it could never be carried out, and particularly some pieces like perhaps Adrienne Rich's Compulsory Heterosexuality. But I was also really incredibly impressed by a piece, which hardly had anything to do with lesbians, or even actually, if I think about it, was really against lesbians but was targeted toward this very narrow group, toward this famous white heterosexual middle class in the United States, and I mean The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan. Anyhow, when I first read it, it was, it was this great revelation, and particularly one thing there, I mean, this postulate to... I mean that women should take advantage of their capabilities, I don't know, their intellectual, creative, writing capabilities and so forth. And not to give up on their achievements. And this... and for a long time, this somehow carried me and inspired me very much. Apart from that... well... as far as support from other people is concerned and, in general, when it comes to creating something that could in the future be called a lesbian movement on Poland, I have an impression that support also came from reading, from Furia Pierwsza⁵¹ (The First Fury), from pieces by Joasia Mizielińska,⁵² whom I

⁵¹ **Furia Pierwsza**: a lesbian feminist literary journal.

⁵² **Mizielinska, Joanna**: Professor of gender studies and queer theory at the Warsaw University and the School of Social Psychology.

finally managed to meet two years ago at a conference in Warsaw. It came from knowing that there was a National Feminist Lesbian Archive, active in Warsaw for a while, that there was a relatively strong community, active on the Internet, that there were quite a few short stories, and that there was a place where it was possible to stop by at least for a while to make sure that lesbians could be found somewhere. On the other hand, to wrap it up, to wrap it up, in the Campaign it was very important that at some point, some girls started to pop up, and they had really good ideas and really wanted to be active. It was, for example, Illona, this girl with whom I was photographed for “Let Them See Us” as well as others, who started to come for the lesbian group meetings and became very involved in our projects, such as “Jestem gejem, jestem lesbijka” (“I am gay, I am lesbian”) or “Kultura dla tolerancji” (Culture for Tolerance). And this was also very, very supportive, I mean knowing that in some way I wasn’t alone in what I was doing. And also, at various meetings, I don’t know, at conferences, it would suddenly turn out that at some other universities, there were also students who, often shyly and not without huge obstacles, would try to push for the topic of lesbian literature, for example, or for the topic of lesbians in general. I mean, it’s perhaps hard for me to say that it’s not one specific person, but more like, I don’t know, like scattered little islands, more like the Web, like the Internet, where basically everything is available, but the point is to know how to get there and how to find it following these little threads. So I have an impression that in Poland, at various places, various occasions, and in various people, some little sparks light up once in a while and the point is to strengthen these sparks somehow in order to build more on this map with scattered little islands. And also, perhaps... I don’t know... another kind of self-perpetuating inspiration was that at some point I discovered I could write and that I was able to do it quite well. I mean, basically, a lot of... incredibly many things were born while I was writing and preparing to write, in this kind of... search for ideas and for some way to bring together into one piece all these scattered ideas. And still another kind was that for quite a few years, I have been spending every summer vacation, basically, somewhere outside of Poland, doing very many different things, from working, well, as a sort of maid in this... in a kind of an athletic resort in the state of Connecticut in the Sates to being an illegal baby-sitter in Madrid. And it mattered that then, in Madrid, I would divide my time between my baby-sitting duties, to make ends meet, and... I mean the daytime was with the kids, and evenings in the gay and lesbian area of Madrid to see how it all works there. Also... I mean these trips were inspiring to the extent that they gave me an opportunity to free myself from this at times subconscious baggage of fear I have in Poland to survive, or... I mean these kinds of skills a gay or lesbian acquires in the process of coming out, whether completely or partially, such as deciding whom it makes sense to tell, when to tell, and whether it’ll pay off. When at some point I need to survive financially in Kraków by teaching English, should I tell? I mean... I mean, it did happen to me that people who had somehow found out “my predilection” would drop me only, only and solely because... I don’t know, because a lesbian teacher is suspicious and should have no contact with rest of humanity, particularly, particularly when it comes to situations involving only two people, a tutor and a tutee, so to speak. Then suddenly, this fact that my orientation had been revealed would hang between us and it would be hard to overcome it. Also, deciding where and when I could even afford to pronounce the words “gay” and “lesbian,” since in a street car, for example, it wasn’t fully safe. I mean, it’d often happen to me in situations when, during our campaigns, reporters would call to find out what was going on and to get some quotes for the radio and so on, and since I live far away from the center, I spend a lot of time in street cars and buses. And I remember being slightly frightened when I was giving these phone interviews in a street car or a bus, and the

words “gay” and “lesbian” would pop up, and I didn’t feel fully comfortable with this. But, but when I traveled, it’d suddenly turn out that there were places where everything was much more normal and where there was much more space. There were places like, for example, Chueca, this main square in a gay and lesbian area of Madrid. I mean a square called Plaza Chueca, where there is this beautiful, colorful gathering of people: gays, lesbians, transsexual people, transvestites, the queerest kinds of people, people twisted in every possible way, and basically... It’s possible to just come there and simply be and... well, and well, and not to be afraid. And here, here in Poland, this fear, justified or not, and luckily sometimes unjustified, always stays somewhere at the back of my mind. So when I can at least remember that somewhere else there is a place like this and people like this, among whom things are more normal and... I don’t know, not as ridiculously hard as here, it also helps to have this kind of awareness.

J.W.: I’d like to ask you, did you have an experience in your life when... and I’m not talking about any kind of a... I don’t know, a formal situation, but something more personal, when you trusted somebody and said you were a lesbian, and this person simply rejected you?

A.G.: I mean... Yes, and I still... basically, I mean, my college class... I mean it was one of the hardest experiences. As a freshman, I’d hang out with people from my class a lot, and I’d go to all possible parties with them. It was when I was still getting ready for a more public coming out. Later on, when I was a sophomore and when I got involved in the Campaign against Homophobia, I really wanted to talk about it so much, about what I became so fascinated by and ... and about what I was working on and that it was so fantastic, and that I was discovering so many new things. Then, first of all, what happened was... it was this more or less openly expressed message: “What you’re talking about is boring and we don’t want you to bring it up at parties, for example, all this stuff about the organization, about gays and lesbians, because it’s embarrassing and because we don’t want to get involved in this stuff and think about it.” Later on, it was also... I mean it wasn’t so openly expressed but I also found out that the fact I was a lesbian inspired strong and rather negative emotions among my friends, with whom till then I had been hanging out at parties without a problem, because ... because they truly started feeling worried that could somehow become attractive to me and that I could... I don’t know... somehow follow up on that. And on the other hand, some of them, it seems... I don’t know, perhaps they felt such a deep anxiety that it perhaps made them think... I don’t know, made them reflect on... or woke up some latent impulses. Once or twice I happened to get these really weird and hardly welcome offers, following this type of scenario: It’s 3:00 a.m., and a friend, kind of wasted by then, says to me in this kind of a mumbling voice that basically at this point she could even kiss me. So this was the way my friends were trying to get used to the fact that they had this weirdo amongst them. But at some point... I don’t know, maybe it was because I didn’t let them take advantage of me in this weirdo role and, for example, didn’t want to serve as a prop for kissing, enabling them to find out if they liked women or didn’t like women after all, and what they would feel when kissed by a lesbian. And also, and also, there was another question that popped up in the background, whether it was safe to be alone with me, whether I wouldn’t get crazy, and whether I wouldn’t get too attracted to one of them. And probably, these early... these early experiments resulted in the fact that somehow I found myself outside this group. I mean, at some point, invitations simply stopped coming. And that’s all. And at this point... when... I mean, I have already been given a label of a feminist, a lesbian and an obsessive activist,

because, because... even if I had followed that ban on not talking [sic] about gay-lesbian and feminist issues, my name comes up once in a while anyway. It came up in the local section of the *Gazeta Wyborcza*⁵³ (*Electoral Newspaper*), for example, and the occasion was the “Culture for Tolerance.” Moreover, there is also my wretched Master’s Thesis that I’m trying to write and with the topic I’m trying to push through. And there is also... that, well, that I also... well, that I dare ask these questions like: “Why for the four years of studying Spanish literature hasn’t there been a single woman writer?” So, I function as this horrible feminist out there, out there, and I know that it’s somehow talked about within the group. But it never comes back to me at all. So... well... So it goes.

O.P.: We’d like to sincerely thank you for your story.

⁵³ *Gazeta Wyborcza*: a Polish national daily, second in sales figures, published by the media conglomerate Agora, Inc. *Gazeta Wyborcza* is considered to be one of the most influential press organs when it comes to shaping the public opinion.

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08/28/1978

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1997-2000

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Has three younger sisters

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Inga Iwasiów
Interviewer: Beata Kozak**

**Location: Szczecin
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Inga Iwasiów was born in Szczecin, Poland in 1963. She has a doctorate in feminist theory and literary criticism from the University of Szczecin where she is currently Professor of Literature and an editor of a cultural bi-monthly *Borderlands (Pogranicza)*. In 1994, she published a monograph, which is considered one of the first books in feminist theory and criticism in Poland. Iwasiów writes academic texts as well as prose and poetry and is deeply committed to feminist language not only as an academic tool of interpretation, but also as a daily form of communication. She has two sons and lives in Szczecin.

Beata Kozak studied German and Slavic Literatures at the University of Poznan, Poland and in Bonn, Germany, where she spent six years. Kozak returned to Poland in 1995 and began her work with the Women's Foundation eFKa. Along with Walczewska, she co-edited the first Polish feminist magazine *Pełnym Głosem (In Full Voice)* and, since 1999, she has been Editor-in-Chief of the feminist quarterly *Zadra (Splinter)*.

Inga Iwasiów
December 2003
Szczecin

Beata Kozak: Inga Iwasiów is a literary studies professor at the University of Szczecin. She is also an editor-in-chief of the cultural bi-monthly *Pogranicza (Borderlands)*, published in Szczecin. In 1994, she published a book *Frontiers in Włodzimierz Odojewski's⁵⁴ Work: A Feminist Interpretation*, which is one of the first books in feminist literary criticism. Inga, could you, please tell us about your childhood?

Inga Iwasiów: This is one of the harder questions because when we want to talk about childhood, we actually tend to arrange it into some kind of a plot, which isn't necessarily true. The most common would be the psychoanalytical plot, so now I should find something in my childhood that could work as a starting point, as a moment of trauma, or the moment of some exceptional enlightenment or illumination from which I could start the story. By the way, I don't like talking about my childhood. Perhaps I don't like childhood; I believe childhood to be one of the worst periods in a human life. Similarly, by the way, I consider my children's childhood as a traumatic period in their life, this time, because of me, of course. So talking about my childhood, I never know whether I'm telling about what I remember, or about what I think I should remember, or about what comes out of the psychoanalytic plot, or, finally, about what comes out of my role as a literary critic, who has read lots of childhood plots for the last several years. It's necessary to understand literature created by people born in the 60's. After all, I myself was also trying to write about my own childhood, or rather about some mere crumbs of it. Therefore, I would probably need to order it all somehow. My childhood was in the 60's, but what I remember from these years are actually only some crumbs of unpleasant experiences. Particularly, it's preschool as an institution of repression, I'd like to say, and there is something to it. As for preschool, I remember flights, dramatic flights, down the stairs that seemed terribly steep to me. Today I know that there were only five steps. I was running to mom, who worked nearby, in the City Offices, so... this preschool was located at the Red Army Street. Of course, it's not saying anything to anybody from outside of Szczecin, but it's the same part of the city where the City Offices are located. I was trying to flee and get to mom, and during one of these flights, I remember, or maybe I only imagine it, that I almost got run over by a car. The driver, who had jumped out of the car, slapped me on the butt really hard. I think I wet my panties, and this could be the traumatic childhood story. But I remember this; I think I remember this. And it isn't fun. I remember being fed with soup, and particularly with milk soup, at this preschool, to which I was allergic, to dairy, as it turned out later. And the Ice Queen, a teacher there, who was my mother's friend, and took care of me exceptionally well by tormenting me overtime. So these are monstrous memories, which don't come across at family pictures, of course, since pictures from this preschool show a beaming and pretty girl I was at that time. I was perhaps very shy, as far as I'm able to remember, even though there were two forces tugging at me. One was the need to dominate, to get attention, and to constantly be on stage, which has perhaps stayed with me, to

⁵⁴ **Odojewski, Włodzimierz:** writer, radio script-writer, journalist, and recipient of many literary awards. He was dismissed for political reasons from his post as Director of the Contemporary Theatre Studio of Polish Radio and left Poland to take up scholarship at the Berlin Academy of Literature in 1971.

some extent, till today, but this force was constantly struggling against another force, that of terrible shyness, lack of self-confidence, and tendency to hide, to disappear, behind others. So this is what I remember from day care; this somehow dominates my memories of the 60's. So it must have been incredibly important. In those times, my father worked outside of Szczecin, and that's another part of these memories. Another thing that's vivid in my memory is my father's visits. He worked in little towns close to Szczecin, so it wasn't at the end of the world, but we didn't see each other every day, so father's visits home and my trips to see him were like some kind of a holiday, which somehow I remember in terms of packing a small suitcase. But how many of these visits there were, how often – in conversations with my parents, I never went back to these facts. At any rate, in my first memories, father appears as somebody to miss, somebody to love very much, somebody nice to touch, and out of these visits, trips and meetings, I also remember that it was a great holiday to lie down near father in bed, when he was at home, exceptionally, for a week-end. It's interesting that in these first memories, I remember mother much less, apart, of course, from the fact that I was fleeing to get to her. But I remember father more physically as an absent person, but at the same time with some nice associations. And these were the 60's, which means my early childhood, which most likely is more of a projection evoked by a tape, a photo album, and these crumbs. The conscious time, on the other hand, is the 70's, or the seeming affluence of the 70's. This, in fact, is my basic experience. This is when all the stories began, which later were actually very important in my life. First of all, perhaps even before I started school, I had started learning how to play the piano, and actually these piano lessons were very important to me, the way I see it today, particularly because I was the only person who had her own teacher. I mean it was a close relationship: the instrument, he and I, and not, for example, like English lessons, which I also remember as a terrible experience of being there with thirty other children and some scary guy screaming something to me in an unknown language. And this became a pattern in my life. I mean if there are thirty people and I don't know something well, I can't cope, but when I'm by myself with somebody and an instrument, I can play it better, of course, and I begin to dominate. Actually, this motif of piano lessons, and particularly my relationship with the teacher was one of the more important experiences of my life, described, by the way, in a short story, because this man, deceased today, had MS, which actually came up gradually, after five or six years of my lessons with him. He was a very strict teacher. Later on, the disease pushed him into states that were actually pathological. He tortured me a little bit, but our relationship was so strong by then that I didn't mind. Just the opposite, I was actually going to these music lessons, to get my portion of humiliation, with great pleasure. And I actually continued these lessons even in high school for a while. Actually, because of the fact that he was sick and wasn't able to have regular hours in the music school, I wasn't going to the music school but took private lessons from him. And later, actually, as his disease was progressing, it all turned into something very important and very difficult, from which I finally escaped. And if, inadvertently of course, some psychoanalytical plot is emerging... but if I have a dream, which is very important to me and which keeps recurring. It is a dream, in which I'm walking, and he lived at this very small side street in the center of the city... in which I'm walking to his place, on this street, passing various familiar places in the city, and I'm thinking that I will keep attending these lessons. It's too bad he's sick and I can't watch it any more. It's too bad he can't walk and actually can't play by himself but only pinches me maliciously from time to time, but I'll go anyway, I should. This dream sometimes has further developments, like that I enter the apartment, I'm walking upstairs for a very long time, I'm talking to him, I'm explaining why I have been away for so long, but he's actually not saying anything. He's just

there, in the depths of his shabby apartment. And the truth is that I actually escaped from these lessons. I mean at some point, I stopped going without actually explaining to him why I was doing it. He died after about a year, I think.

BK: What was this torture about? Is it a metaphor, or was he literally torturing you?

II: One could say he was permanently violating my dignity. I mean he was a strict teacher; he believed I was talented and lazy. He was right, of course. Of course, he would order me to play the same fragments forever, but these would be silly stories, since this is more or less what learning to play any instrument is about. He probably was doing something that was about invading my intimacy. I mean he kept touching me all the time. One thing I remember from these times is, well, my first bra, which... the buckle of which... he was playing with it through my blouse. I wouldn't call it sexual molestation, to use today's language, because that probably wasn't the point in all this. The point was that he was lonely and that he actually lost control over his life, and by doing things to me that he knew were hard for me, he perhaps gained back some control over the world back. That's how I would explain it today. I was his last student. Also, he would read newspapers and later ask me if somewhere, at the so-and-so street, there was, in fact, a huge pot hole, as they were saying in the *Szczecin Courier*, and did I see it? If I didn't see it, I was indicted and punished in a sense, not literally, of course, and he didn't order me to kneel by the piano and didn't whip me. But his strict aversion, his malice, and literally his pinching me while I was playing the piano were some forms of a sadistic pay-back. There was something like this in it. But, of course, I don't need to add that it was my first infatuation, that he was somebody incredibly important to me, and also somebody who was somehow erotically important to me specifically during my childhood, since this story certainly belongs to the period of childhood and later to the period of puberty.

BK: Elementary school lasted seven and not eight years in the 70's.⁵⁵ Did something happen as early as in elementary school that you could describe as a slow process of getting closer to feminism?

II: Of course, from my perspective today, it'd be possible to look at it that way. This means, above all else, a feeling of alienation and rebellion of an individual not adjusted to an institution that school was, and school in the 70's certainly was more repressive than contemporary school, and more orderly, on the other hand. So I remember that I kept disliking school. The same story: the way I didn't like day care, I didn't like school, either, even though I was a very good student. I was also faring quite well because my parents... and this is also an important aspect, important for me today, I mean my descent, and that is the fact that my father is a watch-maker and mother a nurse, so I was actually a child of a working class, being socially advanced. That's how it could be described. So we were doing quite well, and because of that I might have had a slightly nicer school uniform, ironed more carefully, and I always had sandwiches with something good, but it didn't mean that... that it wasn't a basis for my feeling bad or being alienated in class and in school, which was located at one of the main streets in the city, and because of this, it was a school for lower classes, as we'd say today, rather than for some kind of elite, an inner-city

⁵⁵ At first, the Polish national school system consisted of 7 years of elementary school followed by general high school or trade school education. Then the system changed to include 8 years of elementary school followed by high school or trade school.

school, to say in short. I felt bad there, for some reasons, which were personal reasons. I couldn't understand rigor and coercion. Since first grade, I was singing in a school choir, and that's a continuation of my musical life traumas, but, in fact, the conductor of this choir, a lady who taught music, could show up in a dream about cruel teachers. She would also do as a heroine in film scenarios about this topic. By the way, she was a beautiful woman with sophisticated manners, which she was trying to teach us by pulling our ears. I also remember that since first grade, I couldn't live up to her expectations about some aesthetic requirements. Well, she had this habit that every year, during our second class, she would check our notebooks, and it was the first trauma. Because I couldn't, of course, make the right cover for this notebook, it wasn't as beautiful as it should have been. Even if I had the prettiest cover paper, the notebook always looked sloppy. This trait has stayed with me till today, but the best thing – I'll make a leap here to my sons' childhood – is that I have recently talked to the younger one and he has told me that in kindergarten, he was really suffering because his alphabet box was the most badly made. But, of course, not much has changed in this respect, and my manual and artistic skills have remained as controversial as they were during the time of my childhood. So we'll remember once and for all my notebook then and his box, as horribly glued together, smeared with glue, and somehow repulsive. So I would fail the notebook exam but later I still had to live up to a lot of her expectations, because I had the best ear for music and I was the most advanced in this hopeless piano-playing, so during school assemblies I had to perform the Dąbrowski Mazurka⁵⁶, and later on I had to sing in three parts in this choir, because it was an ambitious choir, and I was getting awards at some school choir contests for singing patriotic songs. I had to perform in this costume, which didn't seem to bother other children, but it would seem strangely sticky to me. It seemed to me, as I'd say today, repressive, but then I didn't know what bothered me about it. Maybe it was that my legs were too skinny for white tights, but there was something there that was crushing me, anyway. And actually, I can't say how it was, whether I lost my ear for music, but I certainly lost my voice. It's hard to talk about a girl's voice change, but I think it was a psychological change. Around grade seven, I practically refused to go on. I mean my reactions to performing and expectations posed for me in relation to this overwhelmed me to the extent that I started faking a strep throat, or perhaps I really got a strep throat. And I got a doctor's note that I wasn't allowed to sing in a choir. I was very happy and, at the same time, I started my recitation career. It seemed to me that it would be some revenge on that teacher when, instead of singing in her choir, I would beautifully recite poems on the same school stage. My recitation career is perhaps important again, because while I didn't feel good in the choir, most likely because I wasn't visible, I felt wonderful reciting poems. I had this sense of ruling over the room. Of course, this rule was institutional again, because nobody would have wanted to listen to Broniewski's⁵⁷ poems if not for the school discipline. What's interesting, this was also the time for my brief career in the artistic group of a military unit, very well-known today. Then it was the 12th Regiment of Mechanized Infantry, and today it's the 12th Corps, the one serving in Iraq. So I belonged to the artistic troupe of this unit. I didn't feel bad among soldiers I have to say [laughter]. But I did feel bad in school and actually got in some sort of trouble all the time. At one time, I wrote in a paper that my class was like some ignorant, anonymous mob of antisocial individuals, and in another, I wrote that life made no sense and I liked autumn because it was sad. At any rate, I was incredibly exalted and inclined to experience all kinds of radical

⁵⁶ **Dąbrowski Mazurka**: officially recognized as the Polish national anthem in 1926.

⁵⁷ **Broniewski, Władysław** (1897-1962): a poet representing Polish revolutionary lyricism and a soldier and participant of the Polish-Bolshevik war. He was a recipient of many military honors.

emotions, mostly for show, because, on one hand, I was very introvert, of course, and still am, but on the other hand, I knew how to act out such substitute spectacles, quite extravert, actually.

BK: But, at the same time, you held some responsible functions, since you were a president of...

II: Of the Student Congress...

BK: ... of the Student Congress.

II: Yes, I was a President of the Student Congress, I was this main person for reciting poems, and I was managing school assemblies. The sweet revenge came when I was also managing choir auditions as a host. Then, I could, of course, look with superiority at the choir, this place of my misery and of these terrible practices I didn't have to worry about any more. And I was dressed differently from all the others.

BK: After elementary school, you went to a high school, which was just a few houses down from where you lived.

II: Yes, I came closer, but it's actually possible to say that all of my life is about moving in the trajectory around my birth place. I lived at Piast Avenue., one of the longest streets in Szczecin. This is also the street where Elementary School 8 was located, and so was my high school. Today, I also work on the same street, because the university is located there, in the former military garrison. I jumped aside for a while, but no more than a ten-minute walk away, because the Polish Studies Institute used to be located elsewhere. So it's possible to say that I'm tied to... close to the place both symbolically and literally. So I did start attending this high school, which enjoyed a good reputation, most likely also because the gloominess of the building reflected the standards of their pedagogy. So it was, in fact, a rigorous school although in these days this rigor was letting up a bit everywhere, in all schools. But it was a school where again... from which I have no good memories again, just like from other educational episodes. And I'm trying to be honest with myself. Even during our 20th high school reunion, which happened two years ago, I didn't try to persuade myself and talk to my friends as if school was a great time, and it's such a pity it's all over, and it was so much fun, and do you remember when so-and-so was doing this-and-that. No, actually, I'm not trying to make this memory better, or to sugar-coat it. I believe that it was also quite decisive for me, just like the others. It was decisive in this kind of a process of formulating a slightly anarchistic worldview I have today. I mean, above all else, that school for me was the institution exerting pressure I wasn't able to manage. By the way, I attended a class with a focus on math and physics⁵⁸ while since childhood I was talented in humanities. Starting with the second semester of my sophomore year, math was actually completely incomprehensible to me, and physics was so starting in the middle of my freshman year, to the extent that I didn't manage to solve a single problem during the four years of attending this math and physics class. At the same time, however, this situation of a humanist in a math and physics class was good, because I was forgiven a lot in exchange for being able to write nice papers, for always having things to say, and for having more courageous views. Teachers would forgive me

⁵⁸ Though general in educational scope, most Polish high schools are divided into emphases on sciences, humanities or the arts, so students have exposure to more hours of the subjects in which they major.

gaps in other subjects, in math and science. Apart from that, there were a few ladies, whom today I can call sadists with no hesitation, who never forgave anybody for anything, with the strongest lack of forgiveness reserved for their own existence, of course. So, of course, I don't remember these women with warmth, but I'm not demonizing it all either. I'm trying to keep some balance when it comes to memories of that time, because it was also the case that life was actually happening outside of school. These were... it was the end of the 80's, so because of that we'd talk more about what was going on outside of school, in politics, in the world. We were quickly getting mature enough to start thinking about the world and to get some definite worldview... which actually varied, since some of my friends became religious then, others worked in some youth underground movements, and others, and this is where I belonged, were discussing issues endlessly while drinking cherry vodka. So actually, what I remember most about school is that math tests were terrible experiences, that I still disliked school, and that I thought it was hurting me. There was a group of friends, however, that I had in this school, and with whom, sadly enough, I've parted ways dramatically since then, so we're not close friends today, but then they were very important to me, and with these friends, I would spend time quite happily discussing the world.

BK: Did feminism, would you be able to say, appear in some way in high school?

II: It all depends on what we'll assume to be the moment of feminism appearing in somebody's life. Is it about reading the first feminist book, or is it about writing the first feminist piece, or about thinking of oneself as a female subject, or is it, perhaps, about some kinds of activity that doesn't accept limitations. If the last definition were to be binding, it'd be possible to say that I was a feminist since preschool, because I was independent and didn't like institutions I encountered. And these were invariably patriarchal institutions. It should be remembered that the feminized teaching profession didn't guarantee that one would be in a space beyond patriarchy. Just the opposite, all these gestures performed there, this whole framing that accompanied education in the 70's and the 80's were, of course, top achievements of patriarchy, and in its communist version, there was, of course, some place for girls. It wasn't clearly specified which place exactly it was, but it was clear that one could hold a red flag and perform at a school assembly. On the other hand, when I look at it now, I think that a feeling of not fitting in, disagreement and rebellion, and a need to look for my own place started somewhere at this preschool, when I didn't want to eat milk soup, and later on in school, when I saw various things, and I saw them, perhaps, more acutely than others, than my peers. Was it more acute in many cases... since, on the one hand, there were political issues, very important at that time, but on the other hand, there was some aura of subordination for me, as a girl, so it did start there, somewhere, of course, but it also belongs, of course, to the myth of origin, which has other moments, too. In my personal CV, there is such a moment of crystallization, much later. In spite of everything, my school biography is also the time of courtship with my husband, and therefore, it's a quest for identity through a typical romance plot, and it was a rebellious romance. My husband was older than I, and what's more, he was my teacher in elementary school, where I met him. Because of this, dating him was then, I believe, an expression of rebellion and independence. So I wasn't thinking about escaping from my femininity, or about escaping this thing one could call a typical scenario for a girl, or for a young woman. Just the opposite, I was carrying out this scenario, but always in the name of independence, always in the name of doing what I believed to be appropriate, so that I couldn't be stopped by the school principal, or by my

mom and dad, or by a neighbor, or by nasty peers, either. I got married after graduation, so one could say that I was following the patriarchy formula, and at that point, for sure, the word “feminism” didn’t appear yet, and, by the way, it didn’t generally appear all that often at all. It wasn’t the time when girls at school could talk about feminism; it wasn’t the time of feminist publications, either. If you lived in Szczecin, went to school at Piast Avenue, and then to another one and then again, married a man you met in this school, got a standard apartment from the employees’ co-op, you were actually outside the kind of language, which could become the language of openness. You would be outside feminism as a movement, as publications, and as a way of thinking. But I was in with this kind of a gesture of independence and separateness then. The real formation, however, of something that was already a definitely feminist attitude happened a bit later. First of all, it was college, when I already felt clearly that I chose what to study, so that I didn’t have problems with math tests any more. I was definitely a very good student, and I was really doing great in theory of literature, in particular. At the same time, I began to notice that I was a discussion partner, who was treated somehow by different rules. Assistant professors believed that discussions with a young novice in the field were interesting, but that a truly interesting discussion could happen only at the same level, with a male colleague. As for intellectual plans that came up then, during my junior year, I began writing, I was doing literary criticism, and I belonged to the Association of Critics at the University of Szczecin. But the case also was that serious conversations, serious things were actually happening among boys. Whether it was an assistant professor, an associate professor or just a male student from my cohort, you could feel that it was this kind of community of boys, and I was there somewhere but I had to speak up to make them hear me, and I had to push through with my presence. Even though people were saying that I was a better writer and maybe I was even smarter than my male peers, somehow the thing was that I felt secondary in this set-up. This, of course, didn’t quite determine anything, because in this... I carried out my secondary protagonist position, so to speak, quite well. I mean I became an assistant professor and started doing research without actually taking to heart all these limitations, which nobody talked about out loud anyway. But when I already started working, things began to happen that were particularly irritating, like, for example, when I was required to treat some professor, who was supposed to be my dissertation mentor, exceptionally well. He was a person from outside Szczecin, and I didn’t respect him. I didn’t consider him a research authority at all. But then some emblematic guy showed up, a professor in a shabby suit, who was supposed to be a role model for me, and, of course, he was no model, and what’s more, he wasn’t even an institutional authority. But I could already feel that everything would actually depend on this person. Finally, I ended up not having him as a mentor. Actually, it needs to be said that nobody was really my mentor. I mean I have some formal mentor written in, but he was only a formal mentor. And it was... it was one such moment. The other was... the whole system in the Institute was like a burden to me. It was the system dominated by a well-known professor, a frivolous joker of sorts, as I’d say today, rather elderly, who undoubtedly was and still is today an eminent intellectual of an incredibly sexist worldview, as well as behavior it needs to be said. I mean this convention, which was at work, of some kind of levity, some Freudian hints in every conversation, and some kind of flirtation of everybody with everybody. This was an atmosphere that was supposed to ensure this professor felt good, so that he felt good. But again, women were never treated seriously, and they weren’t partners in all of this. One or two women would show up somewhere on the horizon, but the real intellectual constellation was created by the Theory of Literature Program, in which... to which women were almost never admitted. And here, of course, was when the feelings of rebellion,

resentment, and need for change were arising in me. This was the second, or maybe already a third, element of my growth toward the word “feminism.” The third was the sexual harassment scandal at the University of Szczecin, probably the first such notorious scandal in Poland, and I became its heroine. The point, in short, was that a certain professor indulged in this harassment trade practically forever. He had come to Szczecin already with this kind of reputation, after being fired elsewhere, from another university, and he had been doing it ever since I could remember, which is probably since my sophomore year, when I had a class with him. Of course, when I was still a student, it made me laugh rather than inspire to any other kind of action, but after I graduated, the issue became more notorious. And actually, some female students came to me, personally, and asked for help in dealing with the issue. Apparently, his actions escalated, and it was actually impossible to pass an exam without letting him touch you. And I participated in the disciplinary commission’s work, I was a witness in the course of the disciplinary trial, and it also opened my eyes to a lot of things. There was one moment, in particular, when I felt that during this whole trial, or pseudo-trial, I was actually the one being on trial, and not this professor. That’s how I felt. I was being questioned in the way... the questions were asked in the way that clearly implied I was in the position of the accused. And what’s best, I was being referred to with the word “feminist,” even though I had not yet written a single feminist text. But actually, I’m gradually moving toward the most important moment, since this most important moment is, of course, related somehow to my social well-being then, to my way of functioning in the patriarchal environment, to my growth and observations, and to a certain system, in which I first happened to study and then to work. And yet my real meeting with feminism was through texts, and I don’t mean feminist texts, but through reading of literature and through searching for myself as a female reader, which seems to me a logical gesture, a logical gesture I haven’t been able to understand till today. And this is also an area of theory I’ll probably be trying to approach for the next ten years. But that’s how it is with the classical education in the humanities: we are taught that the most important point of reference is the personal subject, which has a tendency toward metaphysical concepts and transcendental quests. In other words, in language studies and other areas of the humanities, we are actually taught in a way that makes us sensitive to ourselves in relation to important aspects of the world, God, literature, and people. On the other hand, this continuum gets broken somewhere, because when we seriously start asking ourselves about our own relationship to the text, about seriousness of this text, and about what it’s saying deep down, it turns out that, if we’re women, we suddenly, at some point, have to put a cover on our very subjective thinking, on our subjectivity, because at some point it has to turn out we’re really not there in all of this. That we’re really not these subjects we’ve been trained to become. In short, we’re supposed to be a subjective... to be this central subject, but not when it’s female, God forbid! I had to notice it, of course, as an intelligent student of the Polish studies, and even more so when I started working on literature. And... I’m just approaching the dramatic turning point in my biography. It happened that I first started writing about Odojewski’s⁵⁹ work, and then, later, I realized that the anthropological path I was trying to follow in my writing had a name. And that name was feminism. So, actually, I reached feminism, the theoretical kind, from literary theory, and the one that became the most important, by accident. It is actually possible to say that it’s enough to be a reader of literature, open, well-trained, or open to your own subjective persona, to

⁵⁹ **Odojewski, Włodzimierz:** writer, radio script-writer, journalist, and recipient of many literary awards. He was dismissed for political reasons from his post as Director of the Contemporary Theatre Studio of Polish Radio and left Poland to take up scholarship at the Berlin Academy of Literature in 1971.

yourself as a subjective persona, or in other words, it's enough to be the top student in the literature theory class in order to end up with feminism. In a way, there is no other way.

BK: What was your first contact with the women's movement?

II: Let's remember we're talking about a provincial⁶⁰ feminist. In the 80's I wasn't traveling much, and had no such contacts. Therefore, my contact was, in a way, through books first. I can't reconstruct it exactly, and I wouldn't like to lie about it, but the name of Sławka Walczewska⁶¹ was involved for sure. But which book it was, and whether it was already after publishing the anthology *Głos mądra kobiety (Women's Turn)*, or at some point between... at the beginning of the 90's... I certainly wrote to Sławka with a request, or rather a question if she wouldn't like to participate in the conference I was planning to organize, the conference about persuasion in the contemporary culture. Sławka responded rather reluctantly, because she was probably thinking that the way I wanted to treat feminism wasn't the way feminism wanted to go. Till today, by the way, I insist on this option of treating feminism as one of discourse languages, which also adheres to some laws of rhetoric, and I don't see anything inappropriate in this. But, of course, at that point, this introductory... this kind of looking from afar at what it might have been about, or even some kind of initial distrust, didn't matter to me. I cared about the contact, that it got initiated. Because of that, Sławka didn't quite pick up on the invitation to my conference, but instead, she invited me to the Kraków feminist conference, organized by the Kraków foundation eFKa. I don't remember what year it was, even though these aren't really distant times, but most likely I don't remember because so much happened in my life during the last several years. And this was, in fact, the first institutional contact, if we can call it that. I basically don't know if I should call it that, because its result was not that I joined some organization or started my own organization, but only that I gained personal contacts with people, with girls, who work on these issues. And, of course, again what happened was like a chain of reading, initiatives, and thinking that was very important to me. And I actually don't know which moment is more of a turning point, the one at my own desk, or the one when I was meeting other women. Here is where my two parallel lines of thinking about feminism were being created. And I don't exactly remember, either... because later on, these conferences... everything gets to be more accelerated. I get confused about specific conferences and various incidents while facts, some funny and others very important, tend to overlap. And I don't remember whether it was the first conference, when I went through this illumination of amazement, or one of the later ones. At any rate, it was the conference, where the idea came up of excluding lesbians from the discourse, or maybe not just from the discourse as much as from the conference hall. The point was that, in an incredibly impulsive way, one of the participants spoke against the need to talk about sexual preferences that didn't involve all of us, that we didn't need it, because it was giving us a lot of bad rap, and, yet, we weren't... and here she most likely used... I don't want to put words into her mouth, but there were some words, which aren't generally considered offensive, but really are, perhaps. I remember my very childish, spontaneous amazement then, because I actually knew nothing about these discussions in the feminist movement. This was the beginning of my feminist

⁶⁰ Iwasiow uses the term since she was educated and works in Szczecin which is located away from intellectual and academic centers like Warszawa or Kraków.

⁶¹ **Walczewska, Sławka:** Director of the Women's Foundation eFKa in Cracow, Poland and Global Feminisms Poland Site Coordinator. Co-founder of the Green Party 2004 and author of *Ladies, Knights, and Feminists: Women's Discourse in Poland* (1999).

reading, so I wasn't burdened, overburdened, with any special knowledge about this. It seemed to me totally amazing that that in a group that I understood to be... that I saw as a group of people, among whom there was liberation, honesty, freedom, sisterly feelings, you know, the only place of truth, that in this group, such definite, sharp, and clear-cut exclusions could even occur. I couldn't get it. I was terribly naïve. It's strange I was so naïve while simultaneously I was a rather smart person, with some experience in life, and writing pieces that were already quite decent, so that I'm not ashamed of them today and don't consider them a juvenile form in my research career, as I'm thinking about it now. And at the same time, I was so completely naïve when it came to this issue, to the issue of what the feminist movement was like, what sisterhood was, which topics were desirable and which were the ones people were silent about. And this is actually also a very important moment and worth remembering.

BK: You've mentioned these several years since your participation in that conference. What feminist events have happened during this time?

II: Actually, almost everything that has happened is feminist, and this is some phenomenon I should be thankful for. I mean since the very beginning, since writing the dissertation, later published with the subtitle: "Feminist Interpretation," I have never really had to pretend I'm not working on feminism. Most of my research appears in pieces about feminist criticism, feminist theory, feminist interpretation, and the broader discourse theory, or this wretched persuasion, which once disheartened Sławka Walczewska, but it's all within this area. Sometimes, it's with a broader theoretical background, and sometimes it's very narrow, and particularly when I'm focusing on myself as a feminist reader. And all... actually all stages of my career have been illuminated with feminist books. That's what my habilitation⁶² was like, about Leopold Tyrmand's⁶³ work, but with questions about relations among categories of exclusion, nationality and minority, and also with questions that have been most important to me for all these years and that started it all: Who am I when facing a male text? Who am I when facing the male culture? Where is my sensitivity, the one trained in Polish studies, which is, simultaneously, the sensitivity of an aware and conscious feminist? So it's habilitation but also actually all the more important pieces that came out in the meantime, and also a series *Rozbiory (Partitions)*, which is about interpretations done with various methodologies, and where I represent the feminist methodology, and also tens of articles, conferences, meetings, and initiatives typical of the mainstream research activity. For example, there are literary theory conferences, organized every year by IBL (The Institute of Literary Research),⁶⁴ which are actually the most important theory of literature conferences in Poland, and I've been going there for years, and I always present a feminist paper. In short, I have never had to hide my feminism, and neither have I had to do any dancing around being a feminist. I have integrated it all; being a feminist and being a literary scholar is the same thing. Also being a critic. I've mentioned that I started working on literary criticism in my junior year in college, and I've been doing it ever since. It's one of my most

⁶² **Habilitation (Habilitation):** is a term used within the university systems in Poland, Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Hungary and other European countries. It describes the process of qualifying for admission as a university professor.

⁶³ **Tyrmand, Leopold** (Jan Andrzej Stanisław Kowalski 1920-1985): writer and publicist who was one of the main promoters of jazz in Poland. In 1966, he moved to the United States where he wrote for *The New Yorker* and lectured at the State University of New York and Columbia University.

⁶⁴ **The Institute of Literary Studies (Instytut Badań Literackich):** founded in 1948. Research conducted at the Institute comprises primarily Polish literary history, literary theory, cultural history, literary documentation and lexicography. It is affiliated with the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw (Polska Akademia Nauk).

favorite things to do. Also as a critic, I try to read things as a feminist, and there is a collection *Rewindykacje (Demands)*, related to these issues, which I published in the publishing house Universitas. So it'd be hard to say it's somewhere in the underground, or within a smaller, peripheral trend, or in a smaller publishing house. It'd even be hard to talk about functioning solely within a feminist circuit, organizational or any other. It seems to me that it is, indeed, very important to enter into the mainstream culture, into the mainstream scholarship, and, what's even more important, to work on making my feminist language become a part of the general language. So now at the place I am now... and now I am a contract professor at the University of Szczecin, but I'm working on getting the full professor title very soon. Also, my basis of applying for this title will be two books, which are feminist in character. One of them, *Gender dla średnio zaawansowanych (Gender for the Intermediate)*, is a kind of a handbook, which discusses the main concepts of feminist criticism. And the second book, which... which is to be published by the university press of the University of Szczecin, is handling the same issues... with... more in-depth. It's not a good word, perhaps. It's a bit... how shall I say it...

BK: Do you mean that it's more scholarly or specialized?

II: Yes, yes, yes, this second book, which uses a slightly more scholarly language, is a book about the theory of interpretation for a rather experienced reader when it comes to this kind of reading. This book, which will be published by the university press of the University of Szczecin, and which seems very important to me now, is probably the best thing I've written in my life. A bit of a paradox is that the book, which will appear in this big-edition publishing house, to me barely a background for it, will be published in just 200 copies.

BK: You are also an editor-in-chief of the cultural bi-monthly *Pogranicza (Borderlands)*, published in Szczecin.

II: Yes, next year it'll be ten years since we created this publication. There were actually the three of us, including the late Mirek Lalak, who was the editor-in-chief and an important person in my life, since he was the assistant professor who taught the theory of literature class, the professor who was letting me speak a lot but didn't treat me very seriously. It was a little like this in *Borderlands* as well. I mean, as long as this constellation was like that, that is with the two guys and later the third, who did the setting but was also very close to us, so that he also had an impact on content, and I was fourth, it was always a little bit... like always, like everywhere... that these guys were actually more important, in spite of the fact that I had never... and definitely for the last several years, I certainly had not allowed them to dominate me. Mirek died tragically, in an accident. Of course, it's always the case that deaths of people that we're close to are important experiences, this way or another, but here it also coincided with the fact that he actually, in some symbolic way, passed managing of the publication on to me at his deathbed. So again, it's like a literary plot I haven't used anywhere yet, but I'm constantly thinking about it. And I have to say that, in fact... I'm saying this more to show how it often works than to speak about myself at this point, but it so happened that since I took over *Borderlands*, a lot of things have been straightened out, from finances to its publication regularity. Somehow, I have happened to be more successful at convincing the City Council and sponsors to give us a regular donation than it was the case in those earlier years. I have an impression that some order has been brought into the magazine, because, first of all, I have been more convincing than my

colleagues, and second of all, a childhood friend of mine showed up, who... whom I have actually met by coincidence now, and who was also at a turning point in her life, looking for a job, and she became an executive secretary of the publication, and I mean the male not female connotation of the term secretary. So she becomes the executive secretary and begins to keep some order in the magazine. So this is a story of a past friendship gained back and at the same time a story of great collaboration on the publication of the magazine. And I have an irresistible impression, confirmed by many people, that she is the one who has become the central point of the publication and that we're doing it together, in a way, even if it'd be a bit immodest to attribute so much merit to myself. But somehow it happens that *Borderlands*, actually even when Mirek was still the editor-in-chief, have taken up women's issues, feminist issues but... and these were ones of more interesting publications, we need to say. That's a common opinion. It's probably because when you invite selected people and when you come up with ideas for monographic issues, it by itself guarantees at least some success. Moreover, somehow it's the case that women can write in an interesting way, in a way that still opens things up, but without circling around the same topic endlessly, like it happens in some other publications. What is particularly important to me is that in *Borderlands*, there is always room for women. Sometimes I have to pretend... I have to play dumb in front of colleagues... I have to pretend a bit that it's just coincidental, that it's not intentional. It makes me sad to talk about it, but it is a bit like this... that in this role I have to pretend the most, make a bit of a circus around the publication's profile. While I don't have to do anything like this in my scholarly work, I have to pretend in front of colleagues from the magazine. For example, if we have ten reviews of books written by women, it's like OK, women happened to write them, and they write well. On the other hand, if I tried to force the argument that women were the most interesting critics these days and that the way women go about literary criticism was now the most interesting, then most likely a discussion in the magazine would go on for a long time, and it's hard to know where it would lead.

BK: You write not only critical and theoretical works but you're also a writer and a poet.

II: It's probably that smart children, who write good papers, later become literary critics and theorists, and they miss these childhood papers, so that they'd like to become somebody else as well. Actually, before I turned thirty, I didn't pay much attention to my literary work and to myself as a person creating literature. I just happened to write some small pieces. However, the paradox is that I actually wrote my first poem... probably still as a child, but I mean the first serious poem I wrote was written as a joke, when I was preparing one of the feminist issues of *Borderlands*, and it turned out that the hardest thing to find is good feminist poetry.⁶⁵ While I could get best writing in all the other genres, poetry still, in spite of everything, could inspire some doubt if you were to use literary criteria. Then, I wrote a poem, more as a joke than seriously, but I published it myself. That was the story of my awakening to writing poetry. But, in reality, it's perhaps a different story, because the problem isn't funny at all, but it's deep and important to me, because I have an impression that, paradoxically, only now have I become mature enough to write literature, and it's much easier for me to write theory books than to write a novel, which I think I have in me. I hope that time will come when I'll be able to do it, that, among all these different tasks in life, among many professions I pursue, and inside this whole chase I'm trapped in, I will find the time, because you can't write a novel, of course, between

⁶⁵ Iwasiów writes and publishes feminist and erotic poetry. None of her poems have been translated into English.

3:00 and 3:15 p.m., during a short coffee break. By the way, I really envy these girls, my colleagues, who can devote themselves to writing, because they turned it into the way of life. At the same time, of course, I'm a post-structuralist, so I believe that all the genres are equal, and I don't see any particularly big difference between my pieces interpreting *The Doll* by Prus and my short stories about Szczecin. The thing is that I, actually, have one language for both of these forms, for both genres, and I'm very happy that this language of mine was accepted in scholarship, so that I didn't have to get rid of my literary aspirations when I was writing about the so-called serious issues. Perhaps I happened to make a lucky hit when post-structuralist writing has come into fashion. On the other hand, the thing also is that writing in serious genres, you also begin thinking about the limits of language, you also begin pondering what poetry is, what metaphor is, how to express the inexpressible, and then some inner temptation shows up to try this, to play with this and to see who you are in a poem, who you are as a subject of a poem, and who you are in the course of this operation of expressing the inexpressible. In a sense, then, writing poetry by a literary scholar is again something natural. It is an extension of breathing from literary theory. It is self-introspection in the act of using language. And this is part of the truth. The other part of the truth is perhaps that, in spite of everything, it is also an intimate act you're longing for, because even when you're writing about texts by others, or about theories of texts, in the most open and honest way, you're somehow stuck with the rhetorical structures you have to use to speak. So if you want to cross this border, if you want to touch this something... even if you are a constructivist and you don't believe this something exists, you still have a need and a temptation, and you keep looking for... looking for these various feelings and impressions you remember or simply have inside you. And that's probably how it was with me. My pieces are actually documents of some processes occurring within me, very intense ones, I feel. And I hope that I will participate in these processes many times, and that I will find myself in this something I will call inspiration, as a good Polish studies student and against post-structuralist ideas. What I mean is that now I will not write another scholarly book, but this time it'll be another literary book.

BK: As a college teacher, do you believe feminism is something that can be taught?

II: Feminism, feminist criticism, is certainly something that may belong to the academic curriculum of a modern university. And I've been co-creating this curriculum and trying to introduce this perspective for many years, since the time I taught literary history of the 19th century. Currently, I'm teaching these seminars and monographic lectures. And this is a part of knowledge students could be taught. Of course, it's possible to do something more, and I'm trying to do also this something more. And that is evoking some atmosphere conducive to feminism. You can teach by example; you can encourage students to some actions, meetings and discussions. And I'm trying to do all this. That's a part of it. It may end with success or not, because you can't force students, of course, to accept feminist ideas and to reconstruct their consciousness. You can only show some path. So I would make a distinction between teaching about feminism as providing some knowledge, and creating a certain communication community, within which it would be possible to carry out feminist principles. Both of these... there is a place for both of these at a university. In my case, it's also that my persistent action on behalf of feminist courses, conducted for many years, has resulted in a curriculum change in Szczecin, by introducing new courses related to feminism, as a broader course offering in the future, and, most likely, it will be carried out. There are also discussions that happen in the

broader context. Next year, there will be a Polish Studies Congress, in September 2004. I'm going to participate in the Congress, and I will speak about the gender subject construction. So, the issue has, actually, entered into the salons, or rather offices, where discussions are carried out about what a modern university should be and what curriculum it should have, particularly in the area of Polish studies, or, more broadly, in the area of the humanities. This is what I consider my success.

Inga Iwasiów

06.06. 1963	Born in Szczecin, Northwestern Poland
1983 and 1984	Gave birth to two sons
1987	Graduated from the Polish Studies Department at the University of Szczecin
1993	Ph.D. in feminist theory and literary criticism
2000	Received Habilitacja, ⁶⁶ a post-graduate degree

Works at the University of Szczecin, where she actively promotes gender studies. She is also an editor-in-chief of the literary criticism journal Pogranicza (Borderlands)

⁶⁶ **Habilitation (Habilitacja):** is a term used within the university systems in Poland, Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Hungary and other European countries. It describes the process of qualifying for admission as a university professor..

Publications

Borderlands in Włodzimierz Odojewski's Literature: A Feminist Intervention

Story and Silence: Leopold Tyrmand's Prose

Revindication: Today's Woman Reader

Borderlands (journal volumes)

City-my-City

Love

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Barbara Labuda
Interviewer: Sławomira Walczewska**

**Location: Warszawa
Date: November 2003
Translated by: Kasia Kietlińska**



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Barbara Labuda was born near Wrocław, Poland in 1949. She studied Romance languages in Poznań, Poland as well as Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, France. Labuda became active in anti-communist organizations in the 1970s for which she was imprisoned in 1982. In 1996, she began serving in President Aleksander Kwaśniewski's Cabinet. She admits that the anticommunist organizations with which she worked did not support women's rights for which she has actively and publicly criticized and chastised them, often to her political and personal disadvantage. She has a son and lives in Warsaw.

Sławomira Walczewska founded the Women's Foundation (eFKa) in Kraków in 1995. In 1999, Walczewska published *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Feminist Discourse in Poland*, the first Polish book about women's emancipation from a historical and a cultural perspective. As a feminist activist and a scholar, she is interested in international women's movements and is firmly committed to understanding various differences and intersections of global feminisms.

Barbara Labuda
November 2003
Warszawa

Slawomira Walczewska: Could you say something about yourself, about... about your family, your closest environment? Did the environment you were raised in have a connection to your later involvement in human rights issues, in women's rights?

Barbara Labuda: I don't know if there is a connection, for one. We can never know whether there is a connection... Of course very many psychologists, both men and women, would notice a connection, but I don't know that. It could have had, it could not have had, but I don't know that, but of course I can say a couple of words about myself. I was born after the war, after the second World War, in 46.⁶⁷ I had four siblings, there were a lot of us at home, five people, and both parents. And... my mother was a very sincere, nice, warm person, but emotionally immature, that is she couldn't take care of and take responsibility for raising such a big group of children, particularly because things were very hard in Poland then money-wise. She really wanted to be a good mother, and she had many wonderful character traits, but she didn't always succeed at being a good mother. My father, in turn, was, one could say, a very difficult person. He was a doctor, so in Poland's case it was not... I mean, we weren't a poor family, but generally Poland was a poor country, so with that many children there were sometimes financial problems, just like in the case of most families in Poland. Our home was dominated by an atmosphere of great... discipline, or even intimidation because father was a very stern, incredibly stern person, and my mom wasn't able to cope with this. Did this have an impact on me later in life? Frankly speaking, I don't know. We could very easily say that it did, we could accept this version that it had a huge impact, because my mom was dominated by a man; she was a person who was not independent, but subordinated to him, above all else she was financially dependent on him, and perhaps also emotionally dependent. She would try to solve very difficult situations or play them out... in the so-called feminine way, that is by evasions, ruses, small deceits, and tricks while father was seemingly macho. One could say that it had an impact, but could have just as well not had an impact. I don't really know. It's hard for me to say what could've been, since perhaps some of these things are, it seems to me, too simple. I mean the warm, nice but not very mature mother, you know the stereotype, who can't control this situation and the domineering father, seemingly powerful, who was an alcoholic and, practically speaking, a house

⁶⁷ **1946 Referendum:** On June 30, 1946, a popular referendum was carried out in order to check the public opinion and support levels for the opposition parties. It was also intended as a litmus test for organizational effectiveness of parties gathered around the Polish Workers' Party (PPR). After publishing the referendum legislation and the content of questions, which did not include anything truly controversial for the governing parties, PPR and its allies began a period of intensified propaganda. Treating the referendum as a form of plebiscite, the main opposition force, Polish Peasant Party (PSL), as well as the internally divided Labor Party (Stronnictwo Pracy) rallied for expressing authentic views of the society. Underground groups, participating in the referendum to manifest their negative attitudes toward communist rule, did not formulate any unified voting strategy. Some underground groups appealed for boycotting the referendum. PPR and its satellites, on the other hand, were leaders in active campaigning, taking advantage of all available means, both legal and illegal, to openly attack the opposition, whose activists were undergoing mass arrests, harassment, beatings and even assassinations. The referendum results were announced as late as July 12. According to official reports, the turnout was 85.3% of eligible voters. The opposition as well as the majority of the population considered the results to be forged; true results, however, proved impossible to determine.

tyrant, intimidating the children, but, all in all, after the years, I got to understand that he was a weak man, pitiful, in a way. He was very intelligent, very talented, a great doctor with a soul of an artist, he had great, huge talents, he was musically talented, there was a lot of music at home, but the atmosphere was really heavy. I had a difficult, the so-called difficult childhood. I came from a discordant, unharmonious family, where there was a lot of this damaged love. That's how I can describe it.

SW. Did you get involved in any public activity during your school years, for example, or in college?

BL. Very early. I'd get involved in these community-related issues as early as in elementary school and in high school. I was always elected a chair of something or other, of a class or of some other group, or I would organize some clubs myself. But I remember both elementary school and high school as very difficult, as something... as a difficult experience, hard and difficult, traumatic; I recall a lot different conflicts.

SW. Because it was a school in the previous system?⁶⁸

BL. It was a school... a school like army barracks, every time. These days, when I'm personally involved in school curricula work for children, I can see in what kinds of great schools these young people can learn, and I really envy them. In these wonderful... where you can really learn a lot, in a manner having nothing to do with fear. And in my life, almost all of it, there was a lot of fear. There were many nasty, unpleasant things for years and years. And of course, when I later learned about Eastern philosophy, the mysticism of the East, and I really got interested in it and I've been interested in it for many years now, it seems to me that I understand why it was happening, why I perhaps attracted such situations, where there are a lot of conflicts, a lot of tension, a lot of struggle, a lot of stress, and a lot of fear for somebody, or from something, from some situations, or from some people, situations which I have had to cope with and face. And this was the case both with my father, from whom I often had to protect younger siblings physically when he was simply beating up on them, or abusing them, and later on when I was older, and I was in similar circumstances in school...

SW. You were the oldest in...

BL. It's also important to me that... not to see my parents and all these different people who took care of us as evil to the core, absolutely not. And that's exactly what the whole tragedy of that situation was all about, and most likely still continues to be about that. And perhaps that's why, possibly, I choose social issues, and I get interested in how to improve people's lives, particularly those of children, how to make them happier, how to make them feel safer, because I've come to know life in fear. But I know perfectly well that every time, all these people, whether my father or mother, or my teachers, or other guardians, even if they didn't know how to

⁶⁸ The education system in communist Poland—the PRL (Polish People's Republic)—included mandatory schooling (8 grade levels) for children from 7 to 15 years of age. The next level was general high school (lyceum), technical high school or vocational school, after which it was possible to transfer to a technical high school. The educational system ended with passing of the final exams (matura or efite exams), which opened up a route to college.

care for us, they really wanted to, they tried very hard; it's only that they didn't know how, they simply were not capable of taking good care of little creatures.

SW. You were the oldest... of four siblings, right? Were you the oldest of all your siblings?

BL. No, I was the second oldest.

SW. And you had an older sister or brother...

BL. I had an older sister, whom you've met, an older sister who was older than the rest of us but she was... I love her dearly to this day. As you can see, we have a great relationship, and there are great contacts and relationships among all of our siblings, and we love each other. But she didn't know how to take care of us. So, I took on a role... for my younger siblings. A caretaker of my younger siblings.

SW. You said that times were hard, that the family had financial difficulties, but you started college. Was...?

BL. Yes, financially it was hard, as it was hard for 98% of Poles, but in comparison to a lot of others, I had it easier, because I came from a so-called intelligentsia family, where father, as a doctor, made quite a decent living, and my mother also worked for a while; she was a manager of something or another. Yes, of course, there was college; I got to go to college, because I couldn't imagine life without a higher education.

SW. But why exactly the French Department?

BL. I think there were a few reasons. At this point it's hard for me to remember exactly why, as an eighteen or nineteen year old girl or seventeen-year-old girl, I chose French then. Probably for a few reasons, but I suppose that the main was the fact that studying western languages, or other such areas, meant some way out of the country, some travel possibilities from the closed country. In a communist country, where a passport, my passport, wasn't sitting somewhere in my desk drawer, like in a normal free country, like in Poland today, but somewhere at the police station, and I mean the political police, there always had to be some justification to be allowed to leave the country, to go, to see things, to get to know other people, other cultures, other languages. So, to me, it was always associated with an opportunity to travel, to see things, to get to know things, to leave, associated with freedom, to put it shortly. It was associated with freedom and with learning something new outside of the country, the country that to me seemed gray, sad, and poor, and a little bit like my home, a bit stifled, kind of, a bit frightened. And this really was the case, because when I left Poland for the first time and went to Paris, it seemed to me an oasis of freedom, a completely different country, where people would often laugh in the street, were happy, and did what they wanted. I even remember small details, like when I would come to a café in Paris, in nineteen sixty..., I don't remember eight, I don't remember maybe in nine when I left Poland for the first time, there was this little fact that people would sit down at a table in the middle of the room. It was amazing to me, because in Poland, people would always sit down at the sidelines, somewhere on the side, in a corner. There was a lot of behavior that I found shocking. People weren't afraid to sit down in front rows in college; nobody would hide in the

back, but students... And I started college there. We liked sitting close to our professors, to the teachers, because they were nice, likable and warm people, who wanted to share their knowledge with us, and not some castrators who would just... as I became used to in Poland, check attendance and enforce, almost with a whip, learning something, often quite useless.

SW. So college in Poland was like a kind of elementary school or high school, would you say?

BL. Some classes were very good, on a good level, and I met very intelligent, competent people, but almost all of these people, these professors I had, were also, in a way, victims of the system. I mean that people were very distrustful and fearful, and it came up in a variety of ways, in such little things, for example, as the fact that they very rarely smiled. They didn't know how to show emotions, didn't want to, or were afraid to, so that classes were always like... I don't know, like some paramilitary camp, or something. And I remember it quite well, since after I came back from France, after a few years there and after going to college there and such, I started working at the university myself, as a teacher, as an assistant professor.

SW. And what year was that?

BL. In '74. And I introduced... this... practice, this practice which didn't exist in Poland at the time, but which was common in France and which I liked there; that is I got rid of what you'd call typical rows of desks, you know, like... that there is a lecturer, and students sit in rows, and the lecturer comes in, almost with the sound of the bell, checks attendance, says his stuff, then good-bye, thank you, or quizzes people, and leaves. And I introduced... First of all, I didn't check attendance. I just said that I wasn't interested in attendance but in what they knew, so I didn't take attendance at all, which was a great shock to both the students and to some of my colleagues, who believed that by this I was undermining them for checking attendance, which was then mandatory in college classes in Poland. Second of all, I got rid of rows of desks. I mean I arranged them into a square, you know, rows arranged into a square, I made a square out of desks, and we all would sit together. And during class time, we would select a person to take charge of class, who was responsible for preparing the next class, which meant that she had to do a lot of reading, studying and consulting with me, and then we would teach the class together. Later, I introduced the idea of leaving the college walls, mostly because to me they were too much like military barracks, and we would have class in a park or in some café. Or I believed it was worthwhile to take them... and I taught a class in mass culture then, so I would go with them some place where I could show them something, look at comics, think about them, or go to the movies together and discuss the issues. I taught classes in the French Department and in the Polish Studies Department, and I was trying to introduce this slightly different style. And, above all else, I introduced a habit, which was then quite revolutionary, and I think it may still be in Poland and in many other countries. I mean, in our countries, where turning to another person is formulated differently, in terms of language, linguistically, it is shocking... since I introduced the habit of addressing each other by first names. In English it's simpler, because you simply say "ty/you," right, but not in Polish, where there is a very strict division between "ty," meaning "you" and "Pan/Pani." I got rid of this, and I was on a first-name basis with my students. After a while, I realized that it was so far from what they were used to that they were trying to take advantage of it, not understanding that there was a difference between this type of informal

relationship and taking advantage of it. So, that was something they needed to mature to. But, in any case, we addressed each other on a first name basis. And, by the way, the age difference between us wasn't that big. So that's what I did, and I kept it up for very many years. It was also reinforced in the social tradition later introduced by Solidarity,⁶⁹ that is in our trade union, our rebellious, anticommunist union, where everybody used first names. This tradition seemed to me... Later, there was the underground, and when I was in the underground... and later, it was like that in prison, too. I also brought this tradition here, where I'm at now, to the President's Office, where at the beginning... now I admit I've changed that, but for the first few years I was on a first-name basis with all my co-workers, even though some people criticized this and believed it was too much like fraternizing in an institution that is, by definition, rather hierarchical, not to mention other more rational reasons for it. I'm talking about it, without resolving whether it's good or bad; I'm only explaining my needs then, and how long they survived. I mean the need for closeness with people, the need to talk to them, this freedom-and-equality need. I have no idea how somebody will manage to translate this... this kind of egalitarianism, exchange, sharing things with people, treating the fact that I was a professor as some sort of public service, as the Buddhists or Hindus would say service, serving, and that is, among other things, sharing and not speaking *ex cathedra*⁷⁰, not dividing people into lower-rank students and higher-rank professors. I have never done that.

SW. And when you went to France for the first time, and to the West for the first time, it wasn't just any year. 68, 69, was, after all, the year of the student revolt, so you ended up in the very epicenter of a volcano.

BL. Of course. Yes, exactly. It was fantastic. That was, among other things, the reason I went, because I felt so passionate about this. Of course, I had known a lot about this thing earlier, through friends, since some friendships had already started, because of the fact that some French people would sometimes come to Poland. It was very... really, awfully rare, wouldn't usually work, really, the iron curtain, and Poland was a closed country, but I was somehow able to meet foreigners, in a variety of ways, and they were really very exotic to me. And, above other things, in Poland, in March and that was before May, the famous Paris, or French May 68⁷¹, there was

⁶⁹ **Solidarity: Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" ("Solidarność"), NSZZ "Solidarity"** came into being in August and September 1980 with a wave of social discontent about the deteriorating economic situation and the methods of governing the country used by the communist authorities. In the latter half of 1980, workers' protests took up a form of strikes, at the beginning in small industrial centers and later in bigger cities. The climactic point happened in the Sea Coast region, with the occupation strike organized in the Gdańsk Shipyard on August 13, 1980. The majority of enterprises from Gdańsk and the Sea Coast region joined in and organized solidarity strikes, including the Szczecin Shipyard. The strike was also joined by the Coal Mine in Jastrzębie. On September 17, 1980, at the meeting of strike committees' and founding committees' representatives in Gdansk, NSZZ "Solidarity" was constituted, and the delegates also elected the National Coordinating Commission with its chairman Lech Wałęsa. At the moment of registration, the Union had approximately 10 million members (80% of all employed).

⁷⁰ **Ex cathedra:** Latin for "from the throne."

⁷¹ **French May 1968** (usually referred to as **May '68**): marked by general strikes at universities across France. It all began as a series of student strikes that broke out at universities and high schools in Paris. It was followed by a general strike by students and strikes throughout France by ten million French workers, roughly two-thirds of the French workforce.

the Polish March of 68,⁷² in which I was a very active, lively participant. Studying then at the Poznan University, I was one of the leaders of the student revolt then. I had some problems because of that; I was supposed to be expelled from the University, but luckily I got off somehow, etc., etc. So I was already experienced, so to speak, in anti-communist and student revolt in Poland. I somehow managed to leave for France for two months through, I don't know, some kind of a miracle, since it was terribly difficult to leave. It was right in '68, maybe in '69, I don't know, but, at any rate, in France, I was lucky enough to fall right into the arms of students of the Sorbonne⁷³, which had by that time already split up into thirteen universities, and make friends with them. These friendships, by the way, have lasted till today, and they're very strong. One of my friends whom I met at that time was a lefty, just as I had become a lefty-a "gaucheist."⁷⁴ In the meantime, our views have evolved, of course, and he's a social-democrat now, but he fell in love with Poland so much that, thanks to us, my husband, me and our friends, Polish men and women, for years and years, he has been interested in Poland, was helping Poland a lot, was helping Solidarity a lot, was helping the Solidarity underground, to the extent that he became a chairman of the Polish-French Association.

SW. And then, when you ended up in France during this period of a huge explosion, of the student revolt, did you perhaps have any contact with women who participated in it, with these spiritual daughters of Simone de Beauvoir?

BL. [laughs] With the daughters, yes, and I actually even met her. That was when I went to France for a longer period of time, not just for summer vacation, a month or two, but for four years. I chose for my studies one of these thirteen Sorbonne universities, a very leftist university, not communist but Gaucheist,⁷⁵ that's how it was viewed, and still is actually, even though a lot has changed there, but it's still being remembered in France as left leaning. Every time I'm in France, I always try to stop by and see what's going on in my department, in these buildings of mine, quote-unquote. And this was Paris *Sept*, Paris Seven,⁷⁶ in Sounsieu, that's where the university was, and it was absolutely dominated by lefties of all kinds. It's amazing that I ended up there. I also got to know French workers there, which was very interesting, because in Poland I didn't really know workers. I mean I knew there were factories somewhere and some workers worked in them, but I was from an intelligentsia family, and I was dug deep in typical intelligentsia circles, academic in particular while there, in France, I had contacts with people from various social circles, including those from this real lumpenproletariat, real proletariat, people who were workers, generation after generation. Feminist circles, on the other hand, were dominated by people... sociologically speaking, they were mostly from the intelligentsia, intellectuals for the most part, from various universities, or actresses, or artists in general. This

⁷² **The March events 1968:** a political crisis initiated by student protests and accompanied by a wave of anti-Semitism, as a result of which around 20 thousand Polish citizens of Jewish descent left the country. The direct cause of protests was a student demonstration in Warsaw against the censorship intervention and removal of Adam Mickiewicz's play *Dziady (Forefathers' Eve)* on January 10, 1968. The demonstration participants were harassed and some were expelled from the university, which caused mass student protests, brutally suppressed by Militia troops. The protesters demanded liberalization of political life. Student protests were put out by the end of March 1968.

⁷³ **Sorbonne:** commonly refers to the University of Paris or one of its successor institutions.

⁷⁴ French for "left."

⁷⁵ Leftist.

⁷⁶ Paris is divided into a numbered system of twenty districts or *arrondissements*.

way, I started being active in a feminist group, which was called Psychoanalysis and Politics. I was really interested in psychoanalysis then, incredibly interested, so I was in this group. We even wrote some little brochure; my input in writing this brochure was not big and mostly through discussions, but it got written, I had it, and later on, it disappeared, most likely later, in some house search during martial law.⁷⁷

SW. That's too bad, really.

BL. And that's where the name Simone de Beauvoir appears, and those of other women, and mine, too. Among these co-authors.

SW. And do you remember, perhaps, more or less, what was in that brochure, what found its way there? In general, what were the most important topics in your group?

BL. Oh, a whole multitude of various... a multitude of various, various topics, starting with those huge, I could say, strategic topics, such as peace in the world, how the world is ruled, what the goals are that are followed by the human race, to various major social problems. This huge concern of ours, really, was what brought us together, and not just the fact that women were discriminated against everywhere, which was obvious to us. Nobody had to convince us of that. We got together, so to speak, because we believed that. We were discussing discrimination, how to get rid of it, how to change it, and particularly in France, there was a lot that needed change. It was much worse than in Poland at the time when it came to that. I know that nowadays people don't remember that, but in France, even many years after the second World War, actually till '68 or '70, but at any rate, certainly till the events that happened in May '68, which ploughed through... which changed France, this bourgeois France, a lot, really a lot, and not just French universities but social norms, mentality, institutions, laws and so on; it really changed it a lot. These were the incredible, healthy fruits of this '68 revolt, this revolt in politics, social mores,

⁷⁷ **Martial Law:** limitations on civil liberties implemented on December 13, 1981, in order to stop social activism aiming at fundamental reforms of the social and political system in the Polish People's Republic. It was confirmed by the National Council's (Rada Państwa) decree, even though issuing decrees was unconstitutional during Parliament's (Sejm) session. Prepared since August 1980, it was justified by a threat of coup d'état and take-over of power by the opposition gathered around "Solidarity," economic collapse, and a possibility of Soviet intervention. The chief administrative organ during Martial Law was the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Martial Law regulations limited basic civil liberties, introduced curfew, and suspended all activities by social organizations and trade unions. Martial Law militarized main branches of the economy, banned travel, and introduced censorship of correspondence and summary judicial process. Activists from "Solidarity" and political opposition, as well as some politicians from the pre-August 1980 regime, were interned (approximately 10 thousand people in all). The remaining "Solidarity" activists went underground, organizing demonstrations and strikes in factories and coal mines, suppressed by riot police (ZOMO), which often used heavy military equipment (9 coal miners were killed in the Wujek Coal Mine in December 1981, and there were fatalities in Lublin in August 1982). Demonstration participants, underground activists, and "Solidarity" members were fired from their jobs, harassed, and coerced to sign "declarations of loyalty." With the collaboration of Secret Police, employees of the judicial system, education, public administration and mass media were being vetted. The society at large reacted with organizing a boycott of all organizations and institutions controlled by the authorities; underground press and publishing ensured the independent flow of information. The Catholic Church undertook a broad campaign of helping those persecuted by the government. The underground "Solidarity" was receiving moral and material support from international organizations and labor centers. As a result of a deteriorating economic and political situation, martial law was repealed on July 22, 1983 (but repressive practices and some parts of the legislation survived till 1989), and in February 1992, the Sejm decided its implementation to have been illegal.

and social issues. For example, in France then, for a long time, they had a law... I don't remember till what year, and I don't want to lie about it, but probably till '69, or '70, or even later than that, they had a law, which made it hard for a woman to have her own bank account.

SW. And what about...

BL. Very often, women had to get approval from a husband or a father... or a father to do something independently. It's simply incredible but that's how it was. It was incredible for Polish women, because it wasn't like that in Poland. But, on the other hand, there weren't that many banks in Poland, so one couldn't really have that many bank accounts anyway, but this was for other reasons; it was simply a poor country, so bank accounts would immediately look suspicious... But some things there in France were shocking to me, because in Poland the norms were different, and the mores were more pro... the norms were more egalitarian. In France, there was the rule that men talked, and women sat in the kitchen, or in the drawing room, and chatted about crocheting and mostly exchanged food recipes. It wasn't like this in Poland, right? Wouldn't you agree with me? In my house, for instance, my husband would cook one hundred times better than I did. I didn't like cooking; I have no culinary imagination. I don't think there is anything wrong with cooking, obviously, but for a lot of reasons, I'm not crazy about it. Perhaps in my subconscious, there is some conviction that cooking would push a woman into the kitchen, and maybe I didn't want to be pushed into the kitchen. It doesn't matter, but I'm not crazy about cooking while my husband loved it and my son, too, by the way, and to this day, they do it one hundred times better than I do. So I was never into it; they would do the shopping, they would cook, they would make me tea, etc. But let's say that this is quite exceptional even in Poland, but in France it was completely, completely... I simply never saw... almost nowhere, except in leftist circles, I never saw women not removed, not pushed to the sidelines, into this drawing room, or another room, or the kitchen. It was a rule than men would talk about politics, about huge strategy goals for their country, for the world, and they, the women, would go on about these food recipes. So in these feminist circles, it was obviously very different; their rebellion was even stronger, because the more stifled you are, the more violent the rebellion.

SW. And was abortion law also a topic of your meetings?

BL. Of course, and the abortion law... Just as I came to France, it happened to be at the moment when there was this initiative... I don't remember what it was called; there was this antiabortion [sic.] initiative, this written appeal by very famous women, intellectuals and artists, who came out in favor of a liberal antiabortion law [sic.], abortion law I mean, because in Polish, well, you know what I mean... because abortion was punishable by law in France then. So they said, "Let's admit to having one"; whether it was true, or not, I don't know, and I don't think anybody cared, except for the tabloids. They'd say, "I admit I had an abortion," which meant, "You're welcome to lock me up." And it was clear that this bourgeois state, or as we'd say repressive, police state, would not lock up a famous actress, or some great, eminent, famous lawyer, since Gisele Alienie [sic] was there, among others, a very well-known, very eminent lawyer, who's been taking on the hardest cases to this day, who has successfully defended and still defends a lot of women who have been charged in court for purely... you know discrimination or for reasons of morality. So it was clear that they wouldn't be locked up. And this thing, this appeal happened, in turn... the catalyst for it was the fact that some modest woman, a worker I think,

was to be locked up for having an abortion. And this appeal, this solidarity by these women from circles other than the quote unquote, working class, caused the laws to be changed. France got... I don't remember whether it was right after that, but it was relatively soon after these initiatives, after this appeal, which dominoed into more and more and more initiatives, including various actions at universities, and in the streets till it reached the Parliament and was changed, but it must have been soon, because since as early as nineteen-seventy-some, France has had a liberal abortion law.

SW. It must have been surprising to you that in that country, with all of its freedoms, there was a restrictive law, restrictive law relating to motherhood...

BL. Well, yes...

SW. ...it wasn't the case in Poland then...

BL. Well, yes, but remember that this freedom has different faces. This is what I was learning there, that you come to a country, where you have your passport at home, that is to France, where you can move freely around France, or around other countries of Western Europe, but at the same time there is a law so different than ours. We had a law that was liberal then, and theirs was restrictive. I was learning about social norms of the West then, that this freedom can assume different faces. For them it was surprising, too, that, you know... in a police state like ours you could have an abortion anytime. Which was the case, in fact.

SW. When you came back to Poland in '74, you started working at the university and soon after that you got involved in opposition work, right?

BL. Yes. Actually my opposition work started already in France, in anti-communist opposition. It started in France, right away, because, among other things, work in these groups with which I was close, leftist groups, was anti-communist. They were all strongly anti-communist, very anti-totalitarian, yes, you could say that they were more than anti-communist; they were anti-totalitarian and very willing to help anti-totalitarian movements here, which at that point didn't really exist. There were no movements but there were little ferments, tiny, little rebellious groups. Poland was at that point already after the famous letter by Jacek Kuroń⁷⁸ and Karol Modzelewski⁷⁹ directed against the communist party. Later on, they were locked up in jail for

⁷⁸ **Kuroń, Jacek** (1934-2004): a politician and political writer. A youth movement activist from 1954 to 1961 and a member of the Polish United Workers Party (PZPR), he was expelled after publishing an open letter to the Party members. As a result of his opposition activities, he was imprisoned from 1964 to 1967 and 1968 to 1971. In 1976, he co-founded the Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR). An advisor to the national leadership of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" in 1980-1981, he was interned and imprisoned in 1980 and in 1981-1984. In 1989, he was a co-architect of the Round Table agreements, which initiated the fall of the Polish People's Republic. Since 1989, he was a deputy to the Sejm (Parliament). In 1989-1990 and 1992-1993, a Minister of Labor and Social Policy, he was a co-founder of the Democratic Union in 1990, and after its transformation, in 1994, became a member of the Freedom Union. He received unwavering popular respect and received a medal of the French Legion of Honor.

⁷⁹ **Modzelewski, Karol**: historian and member of the anti-communist opposition. Initially a PZPR member, he was expelled from the Party in 1964 and sentenced to 3 years in prison for co-authoring *The Open Letter to the PZPR Members*, together with Jacek Kuroń. In March 1968, he was accused of instigating student protests and imprisoned again. After "Solidarity" was created, in 1980-1981, he was a press spokesman for the National Coordinating

this letter, and in the letter itself they appealed for some liberalization of policy. So little, and so much! And they got a three- and a three-and-a-half-year sentences; one got three years and the other three and a half years for the same letter, by the way, and later more sentences, and more jail time, so then the post-‘68 opposition was already starting to emerge, a bit more organized, you know. I came back to Poland when there was no KOR⁸⁰ [Committee for the Defense of Workers] yet. KOR didn’t exist yet, since it was created a year and a half later, but the ferment was already there; there were people who wouldn’t hide their anti-communism. And I quickly got close to these people, to Karol Modzelewski, to our friends in Poland, from Wroclaw, from Warsaw, to Adam Michnik⁸¹ with the whole group, which later became KOR. And later, there was KOR, the Committee for the Defense of Workers, which was an illegal, I mean acting legally, not in hiding, but, according to the authorities, an illegal little organization, so to speak, an aid group for workers. At the time when there were repressions in Poland, when repressions started, one more wave of repressions targeting the workers, there emerged a group, made up of intellectuals and members of the Polish intelligentsia, who... We simply helped, raised funds, got people out of prison, looked for legal aid, etc. etc. It was very difficult in Poland then, because people were obviously incredibly afraid. I don’t know if I should go into detail here.

SW. No, don’t go into detail. But I’m still curious how you felt then, after you had worked in this all-women’s group. Since in these leftist, or lefty, circles in which you moved, and about which you’re speaking so warmly, there were these women’s, I mean all-women’s groups, didn’t it seem interesting to you, just for your own interest, to try and transfer this style of work into the underground? I mean, was creating similar women’s structures, women’s groups... did it make sense at all in the Polish situation? Didn’t it seem to you that it could have been attractive in a way? Didn’t you feel that work was different somehow in these all-women’s groups than in coeducational groups?

BL. You know, first of all, when I came back from France to Poland, they almost all seemed to me... and I mean including all the people who were active in this anti-totalitarian movement, they seemed incredibly conservative to me. And I loved them like a family, or I loved my family like I loved them, it doesn’t matter which. They were simply the people to whom I was strongly attached. There was this great warmth among us, and we gave each other a lot of support. That’s what it was like emotionally that there was a lot of devotion and a lot of warmth. On the other hand, very often, I had different views on a lot of issues, different from those held by the people, who are now very famous in Poland but were yet unknown then. These were views about social

Committee. Interned during martial law, he was freed in 1984. In 1989-1991, he was a Senator, and since 1991 an honorary chairman of the Labor Party.

⁸⁰ **The Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR):** a public social opposition group founded in 1976, joined by many democratic opposition members and intellectuals. The main goal of KOR was to offer financial and legal support to the persecuted participants of the worker protests in June 1976.

⁸¹ **Michnik, Adam:** historian, political activist, and political writer. In 1968-1969, he was imprisoned for participating in the student protests of March 1968. Since 1977, a member of the Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR), in 1978, he became a lecturer at the Academic Courses Association (TKN). He was interned in 1981-1982 and imprisoned in 1984-1986. He participated in the Round Table negotiations (1989), which contributed to the fall of the Polish People’s Republic. Since 1989 an editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (*Electoral Gazette*). He has received numerous awards, including Prix de la Liberte of the French PEN Club (1982), A. Kijowski Award (1985), R.F. Kennedy Human Rights Award (1986), European Journalist Association Award (1995), the Award for Journalism and Democracy from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), IPI Press World Freedom Hero (2000), and the Erasmus Award for 2001.

norms, and particularly about feminist issues. I had a lot of disputes with such people as Adam Michnik, as Staszek Baranczak,⁸² who now lives in the United States and is an important professor, teaching at... Princeton, I don't remember exactly. And they believed I was... I'll give you an example of how it was, and it was symptomatic for my state of mind then, and theirs, too. They believed that I was a wonderful person, but with some loose marbles, with one little screw loose, one little deviation, this feminism. And they often teased me because of that. There often wasn't any malice in it, but they teased me nonetheless. This shows you that if even in such open circles, where people protested against repression by the authorities, but they also gave permission to be repressive, since repression did exist in parts of society, the reaction was so strong, from ridicule to sarcasm to real serious criticism, sometimes quite vicious, of my attitudes and views, it means that these people were impregnated with this kind of outlook to a really large extent. And this together with the lack of understanding for the issue of equality between men and women, of discrimination... They didn't see that not because they were bad people, or stupid, but because it was completely beyond the sphere of their interests. Everybody watching this will perhaps know this by heart, because that's how it is everywhere. In every country, there is some unique element, we know that perfectly well, but... It's a problem that's been described and analyzed thousands of times, etc., why there are still various people behaving like this, enlightened, open people, it would seem. Of course, this anti-totalitarian group had something like that, too, that's one thing, but... of course, there were discussions about this, but it was neither a priority nor an issue planned for, but rather unimportant in my male colleagues' view, and sometimes also in mine. But the difference between us was that I was often terribly furious about it. Even today, I can see how much of my energy went to these issues. Nowadays, I would probably act differently, but then I fought against everything, including such automatic behaviors that have by now become anecdotal, like, you know, "We need to talk about this here, and you, Basia,⁸³ could you bring us some tea?" It may seem funny, and it was amusing and really no big deal, but that's just how it started but it went further, and when there was something more serious, they'd deal with it among themselves. Or the fact that undertaking the issue, I mean intellectually and conceptually, undertaking the issue of equality for women, sex equality, was not even in the picture. Also, we need to remember that these types of issues were really very often undertaken by the official, state-controlled journalism. I don't want to sugarcoat PRL⁸⁴ [the Polish People's Republic], but that really was the case, so these issues were often associated with the official PRL propaganda, with this pseudo-equal perception of male and female issues, where both were prisoners of the communist system. But I believe that today we can certainly say that... with today's distanced perspective to what happened, you know with this good, healthy distance to what happened, to the totalitarian, communist system in Poland... With all the criticism of that system, I nonetheless believe that it did something, that it caused the women's issues, and the status of women, to be noticed and discussed, that social norms changed in Poland. And the situation of women in the Polish People's Republic, in my view, was decisively better than in France of the 60s and 70s. You may not agree with me, but I believe that's how it was, and I'm ready to defend it in every court...

⁸² **Barańczak, Stanisław**: poet, literary critic, literary theory specialist, translator. Faculty member at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, he later became a professor at Harvard University in the United States. In 1976, he co-founded the Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR) and became co-editor-in-chief of the underground publication *Zapis (The Record)*. Since 1981, he has lived in the U.S.

⁸³ **Basia**: a diminutive for Barbara.

⁸⁴ **The Polish People's Republic (PRL)**: official name of communist Poland from 1952 to 1989.

SW. I just wanted to ask... No, no, I just wanted to go back to... no, no, God forbid, I'm not going to dispute that. I'd like to go back to this tea story. I laughed not because I believe it's funny...

BL. I know, I know... it's awful...

SW. ...I think it's awful, this direct method of eliminating your opponent, "Basia, go and make some tea." This way, Basia is gone... the most literal kind of marginalization...

BL. Yes, yes, yes, for one... and...

SW. ...she's not there, for example, when a decision is made...

BL. Yes. I'm talking too much... I don't know how this video tape works... because it'll be a lot of work for you later... it'll be too much work for you later... The second problem, which was, in my opinion, harder to solve, to overcome and to undertake was the fact that in these anti-totalitarian circles, this problem was outside of the realm of interest also for women, even more than it was for men. Perhaps they thought that if they undertook the issue, talked about it, it would put them into an even harder position than if they hadn't done it, I mean in relation to their group, where we'd speak about freedom for the workers, where we'd speak about how to change the communist system, which had been repressing us, without violence, and so on. Because that's what our thinking was like, based on the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi's movement, since we didn't want to use weapons, or kill anybody, and yet we wanted to change Poland and its political system...

SW. But that means that...

BL. I don't know a single... I can't remember... and I wouldn't want to be unfair to anybody, but I can't remember a single female acquaintance, or a friend from that period of time who would have been interested in this issue. Yes, it did happen, yes, when they happened to have problems with their partners or husbands, they would come to me for help, yes, but... I mean various kinds of help, psychological, legal, or something. Of course, I sometimes discussed this issue with my friends, and particularly with my university friends, you know. I don't know... perhaps I helped open somebody's eyes to this. I hope so, because it was the issue I was really interested in, obsessively so, as many of them claimed, obsessively because everything would get on my nerves then, upset me. I mean, for example, the fact that my female colleagues didn't want to run for office even within this minimum level of democracy that was available at universities. And, in comparison to other institutions, universities then, in the 70s, or the 80s, in Poland, were these oases of freedom. And at various levels, it was possible to run for office freely, and be elected, and generally there was no cheating. But women regularly refused to run, for one thing, and second of all, they would regularly vote for their male colleagues. I talked to them about this many times, and, frankly speaking, quite recently, a female friend of mine, who is a Provost at a university today, reminded me of our conversation, our discussion, when as early as twenty five years ago, I was trying to persuade her to run for the Dean's Council as a representative of young Assistant Professors, because I believed she would be great in that

position. And she would tell me “no”, I won’t do it because our male friend, some John Doe guy... who was simply hopeless, had no leadership skills, was not a good organizer, wasn’t able to formulate his thoughts well, was very imprecise, wasn’t a good listener, so he had all the qualities, which should disqualify him as a representative of employees’ interests. And she had all the right qualities, and I believe I had them, too. And she didn’t want to become a candidate. And I was already involved in the opposition at the time, so there was no chance for me to be elected, because it was known that I was active in the opposition and that the security cops were after me, interrogating, harassing... Anyway, people were sometimes afraid to talk to me, to meet with me, and it was obvious that a person like that stood no chance of winning a college election, and besides I was already active in trade unions.

SW. Does that mean that...

BL. You know, limited as they were, but I thought I wanted to help people and I was active in the trade unions at our university. I was helping people in taking care of some social issues...

SW. Did you already know at that time that, did you talk to other women about it, that men simply, you know guys, were willing to place themselves at the top, and that it was hard for a woman to get to the top? Was it at this point a topic of some backstage discussions?

BL. Well, yes. Of course it was. I’ve already mentioned that it was; since I was trying to persuade them to run for office if they were qualified to do so, then it was an issue we discussed. My male colleagues were often good bosses or leaders, but women... I don’t know what kind of bosses or leaders they would have made; I don’t know this, because they never wanted to run; they would not give themselves that opportunity, you know...

SW. Certainly this topic of a double burden was also...

BL. I, in turn, was with the opposition, where there was no need to run, and nobody would elect you, and nobody would nominate you... nominate you, but you’d choose this path yourself, and it was a very difficult path. But there were a lot of women there; in this anti-totalitarian movement, there were a lot of women, but even there, it’d be the same every time. I don’t know... When there were some interviews for the press... journalists from the West, of course, would come, from the West, to talk to somebody competent in a more or less secretive way, to somebody active in this anti-totalitarian movement, to get an explanation of what it was all about, why we were doing this thing and not something else, what our goals were, what we wanted, our goals, what was leading us, how we imagined our Poland... when they would come, they always ran into men. Women would always refuse to be interviewed. When something was associated with importance, with prestige, women would give up on it themselves. Our male colleagues never did.

SW. That's how it was in the movement. And when freedom exploded, so to speak, in '89,⁸⁵ the issue of the abortion law came up as one of the first important topics, which also divided the opposition. Was it a shock for you? What was, at the time, the most important issue for you? Was it what was going on at the Round Table,⁸⁶ or rather these social processes, which could have been shocking to you, as a person sensitive to women's issues? Did you get somewhat involved in the abortion law issue already in the spring of '89? Was it the most important thing then?

BL. In '79?

SW. No. In Spring '89, right before the free elections.

BL. So we're leaving out everything before '89, right?

SW. You know there are a lot of materials about that...

BL. Exactly...

SW. And this side of you is quite well known, so one can just read about it in many places...

BL. Well, no... it comes up, I think that she knows about it...

SW. This material will be attached to this interview... unless you want to say something about this topic...

BL. I don't; I'm just asking because it really explains what was going on in '89.

SW. Well... if you wanted to say something not covered in those books, it would be very interesting.

⁸⁵ **1989:** The year of the system's transformation. The Round Table negotiations are followed by the peaceful transfer of power by the communists. It begins with the semi-democratic election to the Sejm (Parliament), which Solidarity wins by a crushing margin. Since that moment, the process of government democratization has been under way.

⁸⁶ **Round Table:** Talks conducted between representatives of the opposition, mostly people associated with Solidarity, de-legalized after martial law was implemented, and representatives of the governing camp, and mostly The Polish United Workers Party (PZPR), from February 6 to April 5, 1989. The object of negotiations was to establish principles of democratizing the political system and reforming the economy, which would be acceptable for both sides. The signed agreement mandated that reforms of the political and economic system would occur by evolutionary means. The reforms were to be based on political pluralism, freedom of speech, independent judiciary, strong local government, democratic elections for all elected branches of the government, unrestricted development of various forms of property, development of the free market and economic competition, among others. The negotiations' outcomes provided the foundation for principal changes in Poland's political situation, enabled Solidarity's victory in the parliamentary elections, changed the existing Sejm coalition, and led to the first non-communist government in the post-war Poland.

BL. No, no, it's all in those books, but just let me say in a sentence or two that in Polish Solidarity, our Solidarity, there were a lot of women who were active; half of this anti-totalitarian movement, of these ten million, were women. I mean statistically, and it's all researched and analyzed, there were regular membership lists, dues, lists of those who paid dues... In the leadership, on the other hand, there usually were no women, because, as it turns out, this movement was, in this aspect, a mirror image of social norms... it was the same. It was both that women didn't want to run, and I remember trying to talk them into it, and that they weren't usually elected, anyway. There were very few of them. For example, among the nineteen members, if I'm not mistaken, of the National Presidium, that is the national leadership of Solidarity, there was one woman. And that's what it was like in the majority of regions and majority of structures. On the other hand, women very willingly took charge of all the tasks that were very useful but of little prestige, such as office work, archives, press distribution, collecting dues, accounting etc. etc. But everything that was called a political politics, so to speak, in French *politique politisua* [sic.], was done by men; strategy, action goals, struggle against communism, against the police, and so on, it was all males. And it remained the case for a very long time after that, has been carried on until today, actually. But yes, of course, I was deeply involved with the Round Table. Of course, at the Round Table, it was the same thing; among sixty people, there was one woman. From the Solidarity's side, that is, there was one. A single one.

SW. Who was she?

BL. It was Grażyna Staniszevska,⁸⁷ a wonderful activist from Solidarity in Bielsko-Biala.⁸⁸ But none of us who played a really important role then in the underground and took part in it... only our male colleagues... who sometimes... many of them hadn't really played such an important role, but they were all elected, co-opted, invited while we weren't. I mean myself and my female colleagues, who, I believe, played a great, incredibly important role; we did a lot for our country and its people. But I had a job all this time. At the Round Table, I was simply producing a bulletin, which we published every day, a bulletin informing the public about what was going on then in Warsaw, about all these incredibly difficult, important, great negotiations, which brought... which simply changed the system. Through negotiations, through evolution, evolution and not through violence, not through shooting people, killing, tortures and prisons, we were changing our country, so I was very much interested in it. Later, of course, there were free elections, and I ran for the Sejm.⁸⁹ Most of my female colleagues didn't even want to run, so

⁸⁷ **Staniszevska, Grażyna:** In 1989, she was a leader of the NSZZ Solidarity People's University of the Podbeskidzie region, and after she was released from the internment camp, worked as an instructor in a community center. Since 1984, she worked in the Science, Technology, and Economy Information Center "Redor" in Bielsko-Biala. In the 1980's, she was part of the Solidarity leadership, first officially and then underground, in the Podbeskidzie region. She was interned (1981-1982) and arrested (1983). Since 1988, she was active in the national leadership for the underground Solidarity. After participating in the Round Table negotiations, she was elected to the Sejm (Parliament) from the Solidarity Citizens' Committee ballot. In 1990-1991, she was a member of the Democratic Union, and since 1992 she has been a member of the Freedom Union; she is a member of the party's National Council.

⁸⁸ A city in southwestern Poland.

⁸⁹ **Sejm:** The lower house of the bicameral National Assembly (the Senate is the upper house). The Sejm is the more powerful of the two chambers. The Sejm has the constitutional responsibility of initiating and enacting laws as well as overseeing state administration.

there were terribly few of us, but there were few of us nevertheless. Later, I became a representative to the Sejm, and when I got to the Sejm, I was interested in issues related to changes, in changing all of this, dissolving the totalitarian institutions, changing the law, and also changing the norms, the social norms, which... So I was interested in everything that's related to these issues, so the issue of abortion became something like a fifth... third... fourth priority, but later it blew up suddenly, so that I had to react somehow.

SW. Are you already talking about the Movement for the Referendum?⁹⁰

BL. No, I'm talking about the proposal to abolish the liberal abortion law, since it was before the Movement for the Referendum emerged. So, first there was a proposal filed by the right-wing politicians from Solidarity, that is from my side, the right-wing politicians who decided to abolish a liberal law that existed during the times of the Polish People's Republic and to introduce a very restrictive one in its place. It introduced jail sentences for both the women who would undergo an abortion and for doctors and for all others involved in conducting the procedure. And there was a really big splash around this issue. I wasn't that passionately involved in it at that time, because I was busy with foreign affairs. I was in the Foreign Affairs Committee, and I was also busy with the media. I proposed, for example, and it was my first step as a Sejm member, the idea to abolish censorship in Poland. And it was practically a legislative initiative, a historic one, about the institution of censorship, since there had been regular censorship in Poland, and I proposed... And this is what interested me, but suddenly abortion popped up into my field of vision. And because I had these feminist views about freedom and equality, it seemed obvious to me that I should speak about the matter, that I would defend my point of view, and that I would defend the free and liberal law. And suddenly it became clear that gradually I was being perceived as some leader of this movement, as the main carrier of the idea that many perceived as terrible, as PRL-like, repulsive and communist. And I was strongly attacked by the Church and by the right wing of Solidarity, and worshipped by former communists, who loved the fact that I was doing that and not just they, but a Solidarity activist like me as well. It just all got really mixed up, incredibly so, and it caused me a lot of trouble and difficulties in my political group. But at the same time, I believed that this issue needed to be taken care of, that it was difficult, and even more difficult because it got involved in all these political games. I was considered a traitor to Solidarity ideals, so in a sense it wasn't just about abortion, because suddenly it turned out that it was the main point of collision between the Solidarity people and former communists.

SW. And when did you notice...

BL. And at the same time it was also a real women's issue, in which women felt incredibly, kind of lost, kind of neglected, pushed aside, manipulated out, and their interests were manipulated with, because the political struggle started between Solidarity and anti-Solidarity factions through this very problem.

⁹⁰ **Movement for the Referendum:** created in the early 1990s by a wave of debates regarding a woman's right to abortion. Liberal and left-wing groups got involved in an initiative to carry out a popular referendum about the freedom of choice.

SW. And when, from your Sejm⁹¹ member's perspective, did you notice that there was a feminist movement at work in Poland? At what point did you notice...

BL. Well no, that happened very quickly, because, first of all, most of these emerging groups would come to me, so it wasn't like something was going on and I didn't know about it. A lot of groups, as they were organizing, and sometimes even just two people would get together, and they would come to me, since they thought that I would become the third person. No... Since the very beginning, I have been tracking, and in a way participating in the creation of very many groups. Between '89-'99, there appeared around thirty-seven organizations. I remember because I had them all registered, particularly since I started the Parliamentary Women's Caucus in the parliament then. It was really atypical, a world phenomenon, in a sense, the kind of an institution that didn't exist anywhere else. And its uniqueness was about... and I say that without any megalomania but just in purely descriptive terms... The idea was to bring together female Sejm members and Senators, female Senators, who would come from different political parties, with different world views, and often with different political pasts but who would agree to act together for the benefit of all women, around this slogan I then made up, "WOMEN FOR WOMEN." And I managed to create something like that. Of course, most of my Solidarity female colleagues didn't agree to participate in it, because they believed it was dominated by former communists. And they... I understood their point of view and didn't bear any grudges, but till this day, I believe that it was a great, wonderful idea and one of the most wonderful things I've ever managed to do, particularly because we really succeeded in doing a lot, in a form of something concrete and palpable, and that is the legislation, which has been a success and has not been a success, so to speak. I mean it was and was not a success, the abortion law, I mean, because it won once. I myself spoke in the Sejm six times about the proposal of changes to the abortion law. Six times. Once I managed to win, beautifully, wonderfully win, and our liberal proposal passed in the parliament, but it was vetoed by the President at that time, Lech Walesa,⁹² my former colleague from Solidarity, while my former opponent from the communist party, Aleksander Kwasniewski,⁹³ the current President, decided to support it. And, among other reasons, because of that, I decided to support him, in turn, and that's why I currently work with him. I don't know whether it's clear how strongly my life and my behavior were impacted by my

⁹¹ **Sejm:** The lower house of the bicameral National Assembly (the Senate is the upper house). The Sejm is the more powerful of the two chambers. The Sejm has the constitutional responsibility of initiating and enacting laws as well as overseeing state administration.

⁹² **Walesa, Lech:** trade union activist, politician, President of the Republic of Poland from 1990 to 1995, Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1983. During the first National Congress of Solidarity (September 5-October 7, 1981), he was elected Chairman of the National Commission of Solidarity. From 1980 to 1981, he worked in the Gdańsk Shipyard. Interned from December 13, 1981 to November 11, 1982, he returned to work in the Shipyard and continued underground union activities. In 1986, he created the Provisional Council of Solidarity, in 1987 became head of the National Executive Commission of Solidarity, and in 1988 began participating in negotiations with the communist authorities, which led to the Round Table talks. Recipient of the French Legion of Honor, he also received Honorary Doctor's Degrees from numerous universities, including Columbia University (1981), Catholic University in Leuven (1982), Harvard University (1983), and Gdańsk University (1990).

⁹³ **Kwasniewski, Aleksander:** President of the Republic of Poland (1995-2005). An activist of the Socialist Union of Polish Students, in 1977 he joined the PZPR. He participated in the Round Table negotiations as a co-chairman of the union pluralism group. After the disbanding of PZPR (January 1990), he became chairman of the Chief Council of the Social-Democracy of the Republic of Poland SDRP. He left the party after the Presidential Election in November 1995. On November 19, 1995, in the second round of the election, he was elected to the position of President of the Republic of Poland. On October 8, 2000, he was elected for the second term. He is a recipient of the French Legion of Honor.

attachment to freedom aspirations and equality needs of women, I don't know... because it ultimately decided whom I've supported and where I work.

SW. Could you...

BL. ...you know, I don't know if... I'm saying this quite confidentially now, because many of my feminist colleagues don't realize that.

SW. What is at this moment... What is important for you now? What are you working on now? And what else would you want to do?

BL. Now, working in the President's Office [President Kwaśniewski], I work on issues, which I believe are very important from the social perspective, such as drug addiction. These are mostly very difficult issues. I work on very difficult, and often depressing and sad things, but I believe they're very important. It's drug addiction, and in general some other social pathologies. I work on unemployment. I'm in charge of this really great program, really great program with the Americans. I'm in charge of a program on women's safety, very big, which, in turn, is really nice and really effective, I hope. And I hope that I'm helping a lot of women. Several thousand of women have already gone through this program of mine, and I often meet with them. Of course, I can't meet all several thousand at the same time, but I often come to seminars, which are conducted in a number of different Polish cities. And I see that they're happy about it. And I am happy, too.

BARBARA LABUDA

- 1949** born in Żmigrów, near Wrocław
- 1965-69** French Department, Poznań/Wrocław
- 1970-73** seminars, Ecole Normale Superieure, University of Paris
- 1974** Assistant Professor, French Department, Wrocław University
- 1976** beginning of collaboration with KOR [The Committee for the Defense of Workers]
- 1980** activist of the Solidarity Trade Union, founding member of the Solidarity Trade Union University, member of the Executive Committee of the Lower Silesia Region, editor of the biweekly *Region*.
- 1982** fired from her job for political reasons; during martial law sentenced to a year and a half in jail.
- 1984** defended a PhD Dissertation at the Languages Department of the Wrocław University, author of several research publications.
- 1989-98** representative in the Sejm, founding member and chair of the Parliamentary Women's Caucus, member of the Culture Committee for The Mass Media, Foreign Affairs Committee, co-founder of ROAD, Democratic Union, Freedom Union. In 1995, for reasons of political differences, removed from the Freedom Union's Parliamentary Caucus; in December of the same year, gave up her party membership.
- 1996** Secretary of State in the President's Office

Has an adult son. Vegetarian, practices yoga.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Barbara Limanowska
Interviewers: Sławomira Walczewska and Inga Iwasiów**

**Location: Warszawa
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Barbara Limanowska was born in 1958 in Olsztyn, Poland. She studied Art History (1977-1982) at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. In 1984, she immigrated to Holland where she participated in the squatters movement and collaborated on feminist projects in Poland. She returned to Poland and in 1993 co-founded *La Strada*, a foundation committed to fighting trafficking in women. She has worked with *La Strada* and various other anti-human trafficking organizations in Poland, Thailand, and the former Yugoslavia.

Sławomira Walczewska founded the Women's Foundation (eFKa) in Kraków in 1995. In 1999, Walczewska published *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Feminist Discourse in Poland*, the first Polish book about women's emancipation from a historical and a cultural perspective. As a feminist activist and a scholar, she is interested in international women's movements and is firmly committed to understanding various differences and intersections of global feminisms.

Inga Iwasiów was born in Szczecin, Poland in 1963. She has a doctorate in feminist theory and literary criticism from the University of Szczecin where she is currently Professor of Literature and an editor of a cultural bi-monthly *Borderlands (Pogranicza)*. In 1994, she published *Frontiers in Włodzimierz Odojewski's Literature: A Feminist Intervention*, which is considered one of the first Polish monographs in feminist theory and criticism. Iwasiów writes academic texts as well as prose and poetry and is deeply committed to feminist language not only as an academic tool of interpretation, but also as a daily form of communication. She has two sons and lives in Szczecin.

Barbara Limanowska
April 28, 2005
Warszawa

Ślawka Walczewska: Today is the 28th of April 2005. I am at Barbara Limanowska's apartment. I have a question. Could you tell us about yourself, about your life, about how feminism found its place in your life and what place it found, where it came from. Was it a person or an event that made you at some point become one of the most active and well-known feminists in Poland?

Barbara Limanowska: OK, you just want me to tell you everything all at once, right?

SW: Yes...as... You may start with anything in your life.

BL: I mean... I'd rather start later in life, because I'm a bit tired of all these early childhood stories about how I preferred running and playing ball to playing with dolls... In reality, my first awareness... first conscious contact with feminism was most likely through Ewa Franus⁹⁴, my friend from college. And it was rather late... at some point during my junior or even senior year, so it was kind of toward the end. Before that, it was more intuitive, I either liked something or not, but it was more about some sense of social justice, really. The idea that one shouldn't simply do some things, because it was simply... it was unjust. And as for Ewa, these were more serious conversations. Ewa was... I don't really know if she attended Renata Siemińska's⁹⁵ seminars or if she only knew girls who attended Siemińska's seminars, but she certainly was in touch with them, and she was immersed in these ideas and in this way of thinking that was developing there. And Ewa... Ewa was from Warsaw and she was often going there and then coming back to college in Poznań, and she'd bring me some written stuff. And she was educating me. And it was a kind of... learning from somebody, learning through an intermediary, you know, because Ewa herself was the kind of person who was getting involved in all of this, and she was kind of passing it on to me, both information and literature. And I think it wasn't as much through people as it was through books.

SW: You used the expression "written stuff," was it feminist written stuff?

BL: Yes, yes. You know, at that point, it was completely inaccessible and unknown, and because of that, when she brought these things, it created an impression of some news from another world.

SW: For example?

BL: Well, I can't really tell you, since I don't quite remember [laughter]... There was this book and it made perhaps the biggest impression on me then. It was perhaps the first one I read with

⁹⁴ **Franus, Ewa:** Limanowska's friend who is also an art historian and a translator.

⁹⁵ **Siemińska, Renata:** Professor at the University of Warsaw, in the Department of Philosophy and Sociology. Her work focuses on general sociology, political sociology, education, and sociology of gender.

full awareness, understanding of what I was reading. The only thing is I don't remember the author's name. It was an English book whose title was *The Skeptical Feminist*.⁹⁶ When I think about it now, I believe it generally wasn't the best feminist book, but it was interesting in a sense that it was a good reading for beginners. I mean, it was the kind of book that explained feminism in a very gentle and balanced way, kind of starting out with the idea that feminism wasn't about hating men and being a very radical person but rather it was about some basic principles of social justice and equality. And I might have needed this then... I mean this gentle entry, which would allow me to justify my interest in my own eyes. And, well, that's how it perhaps started. And later on, with Ewa, we also... I would come here, to Warsaw, and meet girls who had just participated in these Siemińska seminars, the group that later founded the Women's Center, or The Polish Feminist Association...⁹⁷

SW: And when was that approximately?

BL: Well, it must have been around 1980, maybe 1982 or 1983...

SW: And is this when your feminist activism started?

BL: Well, not really, not activism, because what kind of activism was it when the only action perhaps that was going on then was this... It must have been 1982 or even 1983, since I was already working at the Art History Institute,⁹⁸ and this activism was about sitting around at the Institute and arguing. We were arguing because I was trying to explain to everybody that they knew nothing about the world and that the only proper way of thinking was the feminist way. Yes, it was this kind of a period for discussing things and converting others. Because I looked and saw the light, it seemed to me that it was enough to say three sentences to others, and they would understand as well, since it was so simple and so obvious. It was a kind of period of this great naiveté, which was actually quite fun. But, well, that's what our activism boiled down to, since there was really no social activism. Were we doing something in Poznań? There was one action in Poznań, but I really... I participated in it... eFKa⁹⁹ was doing it, and I participated more as an onlooker than an organizer. But I don't quite remember what exactly it was, but it certainly was a trip! The one thing I remember are banners... And I know! During the strikes at the Poznań University¹⁰⁰ in 1981, while the strike was going on, some huge posters appeared, which exhorted people to accept feminism, to change the system, and they were in the same convention as all the other posters, on brown, packing paper. And I remember that I was shocked then, and I had this impression that, well, that the girls were really pushing it too far, that the country was in

⁹⁶ *The Skeptical Feminist: Discovering the Virgin, Mother, and Crone* by Barbara Walker (1987).

⁹⁷ **The Polish Feminist Association**: initially, a feminist group made up of university students who were interested in feminist theory and methods. It was officially registered in 1989 under the name The Polish Feminist Association. It existed until 1997.

⁹⁸ A department at the University of Poznań.

⁹⁹ **eFKa**: Fundacja Kobiet or Women's Foundation eFKa with its headquarters in Krakow, Poland. A feminist center founded in March of 1991 and currently headed by Sławomira Walczewska. The Center organizes social, political, and educational activities on behalf of women's and gender rights.

¹⁰⁰ **The Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań** (The Poznań University) founded in 1611 as a Jesuit College. As with many universities all over Poland, there were student strikes there in the early 1980s against the communist government's political restrictions.

need, we wanted to change the system, the Russians were at the border,¹⁰¹ and here we were doing some radical actions. And most likely nothing else was going on then. It was only later, after my leaving for Holland, that there were first real organized actions, apart from these meetings of this feminist group, in which I rarely participated; they were going on in Warsaw, after all. So later on, while in Amsterdam, also with Ewa Franus, we helped organize a festival of women's films. It was perhaps my first serious involvement in feminism activism... In other words, it wasn't just about thinking and reviewing things, but also an attempt to do something.

SW: It was this film festival in Warsaw, right?

BL: Yea, yea, it was... it was done together with Roman Gutek¹⁰², and it was... it was a really good festival... really very interesting, and also incredibly radical for that time period. We managed to get to very many films. At that point, few films were generally shown in Poland, I mean these... these engaged films from the West. And through feminist distributors, which at that point followed different rules... I mean they weren't so commercial yet and didn't want money for everything, we managed to get to... to... to really good film works, and these girls would give us everything for free and would even help us in organizing and sending the stuff, so that the program was really very interesting...

SW: And on a more personal note? Did anything happen in relation to this festival?

BL: No, little happened to me personally apart from the fact that we had to go places and beg a lot. But I didn't participate in the festival itself, since I was in Holland illegally at this point and couldn't come to Poland. Besides, there was still martial law¹⁰³ I think, right? So if I had come, they wouldn't have most likely let me back out, and this was what I didn't want at all. So I didn't take part in the festival itself. We took care of getting the films and preparing materials for publication that was brought out with the festival.

¹⁰¹ In December of 1981, Soviet troops gathered on the Polish border. The act was in line with Leonid Brezhnev's (the first Party Secretary of the Soviet Union) doctrine, according to which Warsaw Pact's countries had limited sovereignty. The main message of the doctrine indicated a possibility of military intervention in other socialist countries in an event of a destabilization of "the socialist system." The gathering of the Soviet troops in December of 1980 was in reaction to the 1980 strikes in Poland.

¹⁰² **Gutek, Roman** (1958-): film producer and distributor; founder of the Warsaw Film Festival and one of the founders of the Foundation for Cinematic Art. Since 1994, owner of the Gutek Film Company, which distributes independent films.

¹⁰³ **Martial Law: Martial Law:** limitations on civil liberties implemented on December 13, 1981, in order to stop social activism aiming at fundamental reforms of the social and political system in the Polish People's Republic. It was confirmed by the National Council's (Rada Państwa) decree, even though issuing decrees was unconstitutional during Parliament's (Sejm) session. Prepared since August 1980, it was justified by a threat of coup d'état and take-over of power by the opposition gathered around "Solidarity," economic collapse, and a possibility of Soviet intervention. The chief administrative organ during Martial Law was the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Martial Law regulations limited basic civil liberties, introduced curfew, and suspended all activities by social organizations and trade unions. Martial Law militarized main branches of the economy, banned travel, and introduced censorship of correspondence and summary judicial process. Activists from "Solidarity" and political opposition, as well as some politicians from the pre-August 1980 regime, were interned (approximately 10 thousand people in all). The remaining "Solidarity" activists went underground, organizing demonstrations and strikes in factories and coal mines, suppressed by riot police (ZOMO), which often used heavy military equipment (9 coal miners were killed in the Wujek Coal Mine in December 1981, and there were fatalities in Lublin in August 1982)

SW: This festival was your first big feminist work, right?

BL: Yes...

SW: And what happened then?

BL: Gosh! Well, then... We then had this idea... since Dorota Roszkowska¹⁰⁴ joined us in Amsterdam, and we had this idea to somehow help those girls who were still in Poland, since the biggest problem then was this lack of contacts and possibilities to start any contacts and any exchange of information between Eastern Europe and women's organizations in the West. And there were very many organizations in Western Europe, which were interested in contacts, cooperation and support for what was going on in Eastern Europe, but somehow these contacts didn't exist at all. There was no Internet yet, so letters had to be written and such, but it was also due to some political fear, you know, that it can be labeled as some political activity. It was also perhaps due to some kind of lack of experience and lack of knowledge and simply ineptitude in searching for these types of contacts. And also at that point, it was... so it seemed to us we could do something useful, because it was still the time when it was possible to do an awful lot in Poland for one hundred dollars. Basically, you didn't really need any real cash in the Western sense, because one hundred dollars in Poland was a lot of money then. So it was just that for relatively little money from the West, it was possible to do a lot in Poland, and we were trying to figure out how, from whom, and from where to get some money that we could pass on to Poland for some kind of activism. And to some extent, we succeeded, but not as much as we wanted. It turned out that what we really failed at was initiating some long-term institutional contacts, and our main goal was to start some cooperation that would be continued. And then we also... I really think... at least when I'm thinking about it now, it seems to me we had this... we were thinking about ourselves as younger sisters of Western feminism... with all the baggage of this... I mean... and with the lack of experience and a will... a kind of image that when we find things out and when we talk to these women from there, we'll find out everything and we'll understand everything, but also with the kind of expectation that help should come, because if this feminism was to be such a wonderful sisterhood movement, which was about solidarity among women, they should, of course, help us somehow, right? So it was this kind of thinking... well, not always based on rational premises; it was more like... like hope for what it should be like than a real reflection of reality. In spite of this, however, some projects started at that time were somehow successfully finished. Among other things, it was then, after all, that PFA (Polish Feminist Association) started contacts with something called FrauenAnstiftung,¹⁰⁵ which was this first... first real help, and it... and it was really very significant. This cooperation with the Germans, I think, and particularly during the 1980's, was... was incredibly important. It had a very big impact on what was happening here... and other things were perhaps less so... But apart from this, a lot of things were happening without us, because the next thing... the next sphere of

¹⁰⁴ **Roszkowska, Dorota** (1960-): a member and founder of the International Association "The Future of Media," which organizes documentary film maker conferences. She is a cultural activist and organizer of film festivals and various media events.

¹⁰⁵ **FrauenAnstiftung**: A German transnational feminist organization founded in . The organization has an explicitly feminist agenda and defines its mission as "the development and support of women's studies and women's education, documentation and consulting centers, and support for communication and networks between women's organizations."

influence, it is... it was Ann Snitow¹⁰⁶ and this thing that was later called Network of East – West Women.¹⁰⁷ So, to wrap it up, it was this very real kind of help, right?

SW: You were also participating in this somewhat, right?

BL: No, no, not really. I mean I was there at this first meeting in Dubrovnik¹⁰⁸, so I kind of took part in doing all of this, but I wasn't particularly involved. Later on, it was going on between the United States and Eastern Europe above all else perhaps, and I was still in Amsterdam, so it was kind of happening without me.

SW: And what was it that kept you in Amsterdam?

BL: In Amsterdam, in Amsterdam?

SW: Since this whole feminist thing was happening here, in Poland, and it was important for you, but on the other hand...

BL: Well, but not only that... as for Amsterdam, I ended up there without really knowing where I was going and what I was doing, since I was just going there for a two-week vacation. And... and I ended up in Rosengracht squats,¹⁰⁹ completely unaware of what it was and where I was. I had no clue, I generally had no idea that something like this existed. I couldn't even imagine that something like this could exist, right? It was... it was... The very idea of this kind of disobedience, that people could do whatever they felt like, you know, and this way they could try changing the world was completely alien to me. From this... this orderly Poland, and I mean the rules of the old system, you know, from this kind of perspective, it was something completely unthinkable. And when I saw all this, there was no way I could leave it, because...

SW: What was so fascinating about it?

BL: Well, I didn't quite get what it was about. I saw these people. I kind of saw they were really trying to live following their own principles, right? I mean some internalized own principles, not external ones, but really kind of highly internalized, and they were able to create a real social movement based on this, something that we didn't have at all, after all. And that they had some sort of ideals. These were simply things which had no right to happen in the real world, the one I knew, simply because they were prohibited, well, no, it wouldn't even occur to anybody that it

¹⁰⁶ **Ann Snitow:** a feminist activist and a literary critic and essayist. Snitow teaches literature and gender studies at Eugene Lang College and the Graduate Faculty of the New School University. She is the chair of the NGO, The Network of East-West Women.

¹⁰⁷ **Network of East-West Women:** founded in 1991 NEWW is an international communication and resource network supporting dialogue, informational exchange, and activism among those concerned about the status of women in Central and Eastern Europe, the Newly Independent States, and the Russian Federation. NEWW coordinates research and advocacy that supports women's equality and full participation in all aspects of public and private life. NEWW's overarching goal is to support the formation of independent women's movements and to strengthen the capacities of women and women's NGOs to influence policy regarding women's lives.

¹⁰⁸ **Dubrovnik:** A city in Croatia.

¹⁰⁹ Squatting is the act of occupying an abandoned or unoccupied space or building that the squatter does not own, rent or otherwise have permission to use. Holland (The Netherlands) has a varied history of a squatters' movement that, especially in the early 1980s, was considered a form of civil disobedience and revolt.

was possible to do something like this. And for a long time, I mean at the beginning, for the first few months, it was like... of course, when I saw this, I was so fascinated, there was no way... it didn't even occur to me to just leave it and go back, back to my orderly world, right? It was particularly because then, from that vantage point, this world really seemed very stable and orderly, the kind of world where you could imagine your future in twenty or thirty years.

SW: What year was that?

BL: It must have been 1983, the beginning, the first years of martial law¹¹⁰, with this kind of... without any real oppression, right? You know, political oppression, since things had already calmed down kind of fast, but there was this feeling that nothing could ever happen again. And that everything would just be... you know rules and norms and WRON¹¹¹ (Military Council of National Salvation) and PRON (Patriotic Movement of National Rebirth)¹¹², I don't know... whatever they decide... And there it suddenly turned out that it wasn't the case, that the world was not so orderly, not the same, but that it was completely different. And this... I know it sounds odd, but, well, it was a shock for me, a kind of the biggest surprise of my life. But, as I've already started saying, at the beginning I was incredibly skeptical, and I was suspecting a major hoax, because it was completely impossible that something like this was even possible, right? Because of that, I definitely approached the whole affair with a lot of skepticism, and I reasoned with myself that I should stay in order to understand what the whole thing was really about, right? I didn't want to be left with this fascination and with a sense that in leaving Amsterdam I lost something big, but I would figure it out first. I would understand it and see what it was, but later when I would find out it wasn't really so great, I would go back then... And it turned out to be great, since I stayed there for almost ten years...

110 **Martial Law**: limitations on civil liberties implemented on December 13, 1981, in order to stop social activism aiming at fundamental reforms of the social and political system in the Polish People's Republic. It was confirmed by the National Council's (Rada Państwa) decree, even though issuing decrees was unconstitutional during Parliament's (Sejm) session. Prepared since August 1980, it was justified by a threat of coup d'état and take-over of power by the opposition gathered around "Solidarity," economic collapse, and a possibility of Soviet intervention. The chief administrative organ during Martial Law was the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Martial Law regulations limited basic civil liberties, introduced curfew, and suspended all activities by social organizations and trade unions. Martial Law militarized main branches of the economy, banned travel, and introduced censorship of correspondence and summary judicial process. Activists from "Solidarity" and political opposition, as well as some politicians from the pre-August 1980 regime, were interned (approximately 10 thousand people in all). The remaining "Solidarity" activists went underground, organizing demonstrations and strikes in factories and coal mines, suppressed by riot police (ZOMO), which often used heavy military equipment (9 coal miners were killed in the Wujek Coal Mine in December 1981, and there were fatalities in Lublin in August 1982). Demonstration participants, underground activists, and "Solidarity" members were fired from their jobs, harassed, and coerced to sign "declarations of loyalty." With the collaboration of Secret Police, employees of the judicial system, education, public administration and mass media were being vetted. The society at large reacted with organizing a boycott of all organizations and institutions controlled by the authorities; underground press and publishing ensured the independent flow of information. The Catholic Church undertook a broad campaign of helping those persecuted by the government. The underground "Solidarity" was receiving moral and material support from international organizations and labor centers. As a result of a deteriorating economic and political situation, martial law was repealed on July 22, 1983 (but repressive practices and some parts of the legislation survived till 1989), and in February 1992, the Sejm decided its implementation to have been illegal.

111 **WRON** (Military Council of National Salvation): The chief administrative organ during Martial Law led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski.

112 **PRON** (Patriotic Movement of National Rebirth): an organization created in order to garner social support for the Polish People's Republic, a goal especially important during the Martial Law and the declining economic situation in Poland.

SW: So the squats tempted you?

BL: Well, no, the squats were changing, but this environment... this atmosphere. Well, the atmosphere of Amsterdam was also changing, since I happened to be there during the last moments of this true... of what was known as squatters... of this big Dutch movement of squatters. Later on, very soon, it started looking different, but I still managed to be a part of this... But I don't know if I answered your question, because I don't remember what the question was any more [laughter].

SW: The question was: what was it that fascinated you so much?

BL: Yea, that's what fascinated me so much...

SW: You stayed there for ten years and then you returned to Poland, right?

BL: Well, yes...

SW: And what did you come back to?

BL: You know, things were already quite different at that point, because it was after 1989... and it turned out that it was possible to do more in Poland than there... and this paradigm of emigration for political and social reasons, involving some emigration activism simply ceased to make sense. And this kind of self-justification that here, in the free space, I could do more to help my oppressed sisters who stayed home was just off the wall. It just didn't work out... it made no sense. And I was aware that it was kind of possible to do a lot of things in Poland, that things were changing, and that this was the time... After all, at that point, I think... and it wasn't just me... we were all hoping that these socio-political changes would be moving more in the direction of this progressive social ideal than what actually did happen. So then I... at least that's how I remember it in my talks with Ewa at that point, but also with other girls... there was this sense that it was a real chance to popularize feminism and turn it into a piece of this new social order. The best evidence is Małgosia Tarasiewicz¹¹³, who really believed that being in Solidarity¹¹⁴ at that time and creating women's sections there made sense, and that it was obvious something like this was bound to happen. I think that, to a certain extent, we all

¹¹³ **Tarasiewicz, Małgorzata:** Director of the Network of East West Women Poland. Tarasiewicz was an activist in the Freedom and Peace Movement in the 1980s and a coordinator of the women's Section of the Solidarity Trade Union from 1989-1991.

¹¹⁴ **Solidarity: Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" ("Solidarność"), NSZZ "Solidarity"** came into being in August and September 1980 with a wave of social discontent about the deteriorating economic situation and the methods of governing the country used by the communist authorities. In the latter half of 1980, workers' protests took up a form of strikes, at the beginning in small industrial centers and later in bigger cities. The climactic point happened in the Sea Coast region, with the occupation strike organized in the Gdańsk Shipyard on August 13, 1980. The majority of enterprises from Gdańsk and the Sea Coast region joined in and organized solidarity strikes, including the Szczecin Shipyard. The strike was also joined by the Coal Mine in Jastrzębie. On September 17, 1980, at the meeting of strike committees' and founding committees' representatives in Gdansk, NSZZ "Solidarity" was constituted, and the delegates also elected the National Coordinating Commission with its chairman Lech Wałęsa. At the moment of registration, the Union had approximately 10 million members (80% of all employed).

imagined it like this, that there would finally be room to talk about women's rights and about how women were supposed to function in this new society. And, well, later on, it turned out, well, that we didn't predict how it all could... Most likely we didn't have experience, knowledge and, in general, this kind of political thinking ability, but anyway, it all happened differently. But, after all, there were hopes and kind of great sense that it was possible to do things in Poland... it was all very strong, so it kind of made no sense to just sit around in Amsterdam, because the world was already elsewhere, and what was interesting was already happening outside of Amsterdam. Also, at that point, Amsterdam had already become more orderly; it started getting more conservative, respectable, quiet...

SW: After a short stay in Poland, another break happened, and you went to Thailand for two years. Where did this come from?

BL: Yes... [laughter]. Well... it was, above all else, I think it simply turned out I wasn't able to go back to Poland just like that... and just live here... And after a few months, I don't think I wanted to either...

SW: Did you have a feeling that...?

BL: I mean... I, you know, well, it's kind of hard for me to say. I really don't quite know, because I don't think there were some political reasons, for example, and some disappointment with how the situation was developing, because... I think that at that point I hadn't... or we hadn't, I should say, yet developed this sense... this ability of looking at things from a distance and evaluating them. Something odd was going on there, and everything looked a bit different, a bit sadder and a bit more stupid than we had expected, but apart from that, it wasn't possible to just say things were going wrong, and I didn't quite like it, so I was just going away... well, it wasn't quite like this... But at the same time, there was this feeling of claustrophobia I most likely had after going back to this small social environment, and... basically, so little was going on... Well, on the other hand, things were going on, since the Beijing Conference¹¹⁵ was held, after all, and things were happening before the Conference... so I lasted till the Conference, and then I just left.

SW: What were you working on in Thailand?

BL: It was still before Thailand... In 1993, I think, when Teresa Oleszczuk¹¹⁶ and I got involved in founding La Strada.¹¹⁷ It was this kind of... the first wave... or first news about the existence of something like trafficking in women in Eastern Europe. There was a Dutch organization Stichting Tegen Vrouwen Handel, which looked for contacts with organizations in Eastern Europe and particularly in Poland and in Czechoslovakia... 'cause it was still Czechoslovakia at that point...

¹¹⁵ The Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (1998).

¹¹⁶ **Oleszczuk, Teresa:** Feminist scholar and writer and Project Coordinator for the La Strada Foundation against the trafficking in women.

¹¹⁷ **The La Strada Foundation Against Trafficking in Women, Poland:** an NGO working for the prevention of trafficking in women in Poland. The Warsaw office opened in Warsaw in 1995 as La Strada's pilot organization. La Strada aims to make the trafficking in women socially and politically visible and to influence public opinion and governing institutions so that trafficking in women is seen as a human rights violation.

SW: What year was that?

BL: Somewhere around 1990? 1991? Perhaps 1992? Well, no, it may have already been...

SW: 1991 perhaps...

BL: Anyway, I don't know, somewhere around then. They wanted to initiate contact, because they didn't know what to do with women from Eastern Europe who ended up in shelters and should be sent home, but it was unclear how to do it... And Teresa and I somehow got involved into trying to do something about it in Poland. It was kind of related to what the Polish Feminist Association was doing... we kind of did it on behalf of the Association. La Strada was created, and at the same time, I had some contacts with organizations working against women trafficking in other places. Among other things, something like GAATW was created (Global Alliance against Trafficking in Women).¹¹⁸ It was an international, global organization as the name indicates, and it was located in Bangkok. And they offered me some work on the project, which was supposed to look for links and trace certain mechanisms of human trafficking in Eastern Europe and Asia. We had this idea to go beyond the "first world," beyond the language and methodology, which kind of reflected Western feminist imagination, to look at it from some Eastern vantage point, and to try to describe this phenomenon, to work on it kind of... from the inside, from our perspective, without appropriating... or... or accepting the language, which, as we felt, didn't quite reflect what was really going on in trafficking. At this point, it was already kind of... since, after all, already in Beijing, there were terrible fights and discussions between the abolitionist option and this, let's say, human rights option; there were terrible fights... At the same time, it seemed to us that it was much more about economic issues, about immigrants' rights, and about the need to look at what's happening to people in this whole process of migration, or... or... work exploitation than it was about some big philosophical discussions. And we worked on this project for two years. In the beginning, in Bangkok, we did this conference "Asia – Eastern Europe" about trafficking, and later on, we also had meetings, seminars and contact talks between organizations... in Asia and Europe. We had a series of meetings and training sessions in a few countries in Eastern Europe. Also later, after I got back from Bangkok, we were still organizing these meetings in Eastern Europe. And it was important, because while in Bangkok, we weren't really terribly successful in doing things without this Western influence, because Ally Miller¹¹⁹ was there with us. She was then with the International

¹¹⁸ **The Global Alliance Against Traffic of Women (GAATW)** is a network of non-governmental organizations and individuals from all regions of the world, who share a deep concern for the women, children and men whose human rights have been violated by the criminal practice of trafficking in persons. GAATW is committed to work for changes in the political, economic, social and legal systems and structures which contribute to the persistence of trafficking in persons and other human rights violations in the context of migratory movements for diverse purposes, including security of labor and livelihood.

¹¹⁹ **Miller Alice M., JD:** assistant professor of Clinical Population and Family Health at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, where she focuses on gender, sexuality, human rights, and humanitarian issues. Miller also teaches at Columbia's Schools of Law and International and Public Affairs. Miller has worked for 20 years as a staff member or volunteer at NGOs including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Human Rights Law Group on human rights issues in the United States and globally. Her scholarship and advocacy has addressed gendering humanitarian law, safe migration and anti-trafficking policies, criminal law, and specifically abolition of the death penalty, women's rights, sexual and reproductive health, and LGBT rights. Source: <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/health/focus/sharp/about/morelaw> (accessed on May 28, 2006).

Human Rights Law Group,¹²⁰ and... and Ally had a huge influence on what was going on. But we created this more of a human rights paradigm, and it was much more adequate, it seemed to us, or more adequately reflected the situation in trafficking than these... these theoretical disputes. Well, and later on, we were trying to have a conversation about this paradigm and to see how this way of thinking would be received in Eastern Europe... Well, and it is a similar way of doing things and thinking to those of La Strada, so... But to what extent was La Strada under the influence of what GAATW did? It's hard for me to say... It's possible that GAATW was more under the influence of La Strada. What we did was a result of La Strada's work in various countries, and we were just trying to somehow link it together. It was also when the first training manual was created. We made it to enable people to talk about and explain what trafficking in women was... and what could be done about it, so it was a very interesting project I have to say. Now, in retrospect, it was still very imperfect, but at the same time, it already included all the main elements that are still being debated till this day. So for the next ten years, we came up with very few new things when it comes to human trafficking. This thing in Bangkok and the first years of GAATW were really quite significant... And then I came back...

SW: And this time, what was it to?

BL: From rather than to.

SW: From.

BL: Because I didn't really know what I was coming back to. I mean... after two years in Thailand, I figured out I didn't want... couldn't stay on in Thailand... And it was both for personal and cultural reasons. It's probably my stupidity, naiveté and lack of understanding of the world, but I needed two years to understand that there were deep cultural differences between Poland and Thailand [laughter], and that I wouldn't probably be able to overcome them, and living there as a complete outsider, who had no contact and no understanding of daily life, was too difficult. It seemed to me... I felt like this... while in Holland I never felt like this. In Holland, I felt at home since the first day, so language issues and other traditions seemed kind of secondary, as if they didn't matter. But in Thailand, it turned out that it completely overcame me. The longer I stayed there the more I realized I would never get access to this world. It was too much. Besides, I also began to realize that I would need to start working at some point to make some money before retirement, because I was already forty, and it turned out that if I didn't start working somewhere, I wouldn't get any retirement, because I wouldn't be able to work this mandatory minimum of twenty years. So this was another reason I was thinking that, unfortunately, I had to go back and start some normal life rather than this... abnormal life. And I came back with this resolution... to start being serious... you know, so to speak, the country is free, so it's possible to find something for myself, and years are passing, so it's time to think about some stability... And that's what happened.

SW: What did this stability look like in your case?

BL: Well, stability looked like this... I won a contest for the director of OSKA, the Information Center for Women's Groups in Warsaw. And I got my stability in a director's position...

¹²⁰ **The International Human Rights Law Group:** NGO globally concerned with Human Rights.

[laughter]. No, and it was... was... I think... was a really neat kind of stability, because I also managed to stabilize my daily life... We rented a house with Ela and her daughter, and it was this kind... At least it gave us a sense that we had not become totally normal and that it wasn't just a bourgeois stability but it was about something else, but at the same time, there was a kind of peace and security... and... a salary, yes, it was really good for us. And it was, I think, a really neat time... when I managed to really do a lot. I have a feeling that we really managed to create... not an institution as much, but rather a new way of thinking about the women's movement, much more transparent, clear, and based on the exchange of information, so that people wouldn't have a feeling that there were some separate little groups, that it was unclear who did what and why, but rather that it was really based on certain principles and that it became more of a formalized movement. I think that at that time it was very much needed and useful somehow... To wrap it up, we all reached stability, right? In this messy situation, well...

SW: Your director's position in Poland lasted for a few years, right...?

BL: Till 2001...

SW: And then... then what?

BL: And later on, I went to Sarajevo, again to work on prevention of women trafficking. I surprised myself to some extent, because every time, there were periods of time when I worked on trafficking, because something needed to be done, but then I would leave it, because it got me too upset and it really demanded too much from me... It was the hardest part of being a feminist, because the most fun is just about some theoretical gabbing about what could be done, should be done, or even better about what somebody else should do, but didn't and why... You could go on. And here, it was really... there were situations when this trafficking stuff really demanded a lot of emotional involvement, and it was much harder. Well, but somehow, I got involved again, because there was some Balkan project and they were looking for somebody with Eastern European experience, somebody who could help them describe this situation...

SW: It's a very difficult place. And you had direct contact with perpetrators and victims. What was your work about?

BL: Oh! The place was not that difficult any more, because it was a few years after the war, so let's not exaggerate. Oh, these Balkans! When I was going there, I almost got myself a bullet-proof vest out of conviction that I was really going to the end of the world. But in reality, it was much calmer and more normal. But the fact also is that it was the reality after the conflict, very different from ours here and much harder for the people. I think that it was only then that I began to get it about how huge the differences were in Eastern Europe itself between individual countries, and it wasn't just about differences in material resources, but in general, about access to... to the new world and the Western world, how much we differed among ourselves. It also confirmed... I mean it was a repetition of... my thinking about emigration from the late 1970's or early 1980's in Poland, when people had a feeling that nothing was ever going to happen here, that it was all just total shit, and they just needed to split, and they tried their best to do it, and they saw the ideal of this beautiful, wonderful world somewhere abroad. And there, it turned out it was the same all over again. And this was... it was similar. Well, besides, socially it was all

kind of much harder, because you could feel this baggage of a few years... years of war. And human trafficking was a part of this whole thing. But it was done kind of on two levels. One thing was regular smuggling of people, illegal emigrants, who couldn't get to Western Europe any other way. And this... particularly in the first years... 1997, 1998, and later on, when I was already there, more or less till 2002, it was really happening on a large scale, and part of that was, in fact, human trafficking. I still can't say to what extent, because the trafficking issue... or rather the interpretation of what is called human trafficking is so politicized and used to create these anti-migration phobias and to introduce anti-migration policies, so that I still don't know to what extent trafficking is a real... I mean that it happens on a large scale, and to what extent it's simply an urban legend, or some made up scary story, like we had this story about a black Volga¹²¹ that used to be told, about kids being snatched into these cars. It's the same now in the Balkans; they also snatch children and cut out their organs; they do it in Turkey or something. But really, to what extent it's the truth... I don't know. But at any rate, there was enough to do there. Well, no, there was actually one more issue. The migration issue is one thing, but the second issue here is also interesting, and here the Balkans were really a very unique place. After the conflict,¹²² the UN troops were stationed there first, and now the EU troops are there, and because of this, a huge sex industry has popped up. I mean lots of clubs have been opened, and brothels, and places for the soldiers and for representatives of all international organizations. The appearance of all these people and all these international organizations has brought about some influx of cash and the intention to make money on them, so this is the second issue explaining why the Balkans became so... And, well, for four years... and actually the last project has ended right now... I have been working on this. The last one was a report, a third one in a row, which we have just recently presented in March, about the situation in the region...

SW: Where?

BL: Where were we presenting it, you mean? Well, these were some international... you know... the promotion was held in Geneva. It was organized by the regional office of UNICEF, and apart from that, there were promotional activities in all the countries of the region. It was organized by OSCE¹²³ offices in these countries, since it was a joint project of UNICEF, OSCE and perhaps also High Commissioner for Human Rights.

SW: I would still like to go back to what you said in the beginning. Feminism has found a fertile soil in your sensitivity to social issues; it has kind of grown in this soil, but where did it come from, this kind of sensitivity? Could you say that it was your closest environment, your family, or friends, or school? Where did this kind of sensitivity come from in your case? Do you have any sense of what the sources were for this?

BL: No, I don't. I don't know what it is.

¹²¹ **Volga:** Soviet made car.

¹²² The war and genocide in the former Yugoslavia with the most serious conflict, but by no means the only one, occurring between 1990-1991. Ethnic violence and war there continued for most of the 1990s.

¹²³ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

SW: Is it your individual trait? Or is it perhaps from your family, friends or school? Where does something like this come from? Let's say not everybody has something like this...

BL: It seems to me... well, it seems to me that perhaps...

SW: Not everybody is a feminist, for example... Not everybody is a social activist.

BL: Well, no, no, not everybody is kind of... I mean... You know... I was myself close... I would have never become a feminist in my life... since as far as I remember myself from high school and what kind of views I had then. When I have those little glimpses of discussions I had with some people, it's amazing that I didn't end up as some radical right-winger, dutifully convinced that I was always right and mine was the only way. It's just a coincidence. I could have just as well figured out it worked for me and could have been sure it was the only right way and one could do things only this way. A sense of justice most likely comes from reading *Winnetou*¹²⁴... since I don't recall any other readings. It's *Winnetou* for sure. And later on, this kind of social openness... I think it comes from my studies at the Art History Institute, which really gave me a lot, but that was actually on a kind of general level, you know, as some kind of permission to think and this kind of infusion of knowledge and information... about how one could observe and interpret the modern world. My Institute was really a very open place, and I think it was very different from what was going on in art history in other places. We were really lucky at the Institute. Well, and, well, there was simply, you know, this kind of social radicalism, which was taken for granted, since it was the way to go... when we knew that the artistic revolution of the 1970's, which, above all else, was a rebellion against the given norms and the old order, was the only option we could accept. So this kind of revolution paradigm in culture, in general, was also the only option that made sense, and it was all very convincing. We... we actually had quite a lot of this kind of reading and... this post-1968¹²⁵ kind of thinking and the stuff that popped up in the West but was barely squeezing through to us... We actually had a lot of this. We... and this is what I think... we were rather strongly convinced that only this paradigm of openness and this constant transformation was... was useful and somehow appropriate and socially responsible. We were all really into it then... So I really don't understand why my male and female friends didn't become feminists... I think this was a very, very clear path...

SW: In your case, there was also Ewa on the way, together with her feminist written stuff. Are you still somehow in touch? Are you still communicating?

¹²⁴ Main character from a series of books by German author Karl May about the "Wild West" encounters between Native Americans (of which *Winnetou* is one of the last and most "noble" representatives) and the encroaching Europeans.

¹²⁵ **March 1968:** a political crisis initiated by student protests and accompanied by a wave of anti-Semitism, as a result of which around 20 thousand Polish citizens of Jewish descent left the country. The direct cause of protests was a student demonstration in Warsaw against the censorship intervention and removal of Adam Mickiewicz's play *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*) on January 10, 1968. The demonstration participants were harassed and some were expelled from the university, which caused mass student protests, brutally suppressed by Militia troops. The protesters demanded liberalization of political life. Student protests were put out by the end of March 1968.

BL: Very rarely. The last time I saw Ewa was four years ago when she was in Warsaw. As far as I know, she's still in Amsterdam or she's commuting somewhere between Holland and France... She kind of never felt this need to return and start on fundamentals of community work... She was more interested in theoretical thinking. And also, Ewa was much more interested in art history, in working with art, than I was. There were so many social issues to take care of that I had no time left for art... Ewa...

SW: Work in Poland, right?

BL: Well, yes, and Ewa... Ewa... Ewa had time.

Barbara Limanowska

October 31, 1958	Born in Olsztyn, Northeastern Poland
1977-1982	Studied Art History at the University of Poznań
1983-1984	Tenure-track position at the University of Poznań
1984	Immigrated to Holland
1987	Co-founder of the feminist group <i>Osnowa (Groundwork)</i>
1990-93	Studied at the Fine Arts Academy in Utrecht, Holland
1993	Volunteered at the Women's Center of the Polish Feminist Association in Warsaw
1993	Co-founder of the La Strada Foundation
1995-97	Involved in the GAATW project in Bangkok
1997-2001	Head of the Center of Information about Women's Organizations in Warsaw
2001-2005	Involved in the OSCE and UNICEF projects in Sarajevo

Barbara Limanowska was interviewed by Sławomira Walczewska and Inga Iwasiów

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Anna Lipowska-Teutsch
Interviewer: Sławomira Walczewska**

Location: Kraków

Date: March 2005

Translated by: Kasia Kietlińska



eFKa

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Anna Lipowska-Teutsch was born in 1944 in Warsaw, Poland. She graduated with a Master of Arts in Psychology from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków in 1969. She worked for the Acute Poisoning Clinic in Cracow where she counseled victims of suicide, especially women who had been victimized by family members. In 1990, she co-founded the Society for Crisis Intervention designed to intervene in cases of domestic violence. Since 2002, she has also worked for the rights of Roma (often incorrectly referred to as “gypsies”) women in Poland.

Sławomira Walczewska founded the Women's Foundation (eFKa) in Kraków in 1995. In 1999, Walczewska published *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Feminist Discourse in Poland*, the first Polish book about women’s emancipation from a historical and a cultural perspective. As a feminist activist and a scholar, she is interested in international women’s movements and is firmly committed to understanding various differences and intersections of global feminisms.

Anna Lipowska-Teutsch
March 2005
Kraków

SW: Hanka¹²⁶ Lipowska-Teutsch is a psychologist and a women’s movement activist. Can you tell us about yourself, about how feminism found its way into your life? I mean feminism, or rather some sensitivity toward gender differences, toward consequences of these gender differences. Tell us about yourself.

AL: Well, feminism first appeared in my life in the early 80’s. A friend of mine came from Italy. Her name is Marzena Smolenska,¹²⁷ and she was telling me about her activism in the feminist movement in Italy. And this was the time of martial law¹²⁸ in Poland, when this kind of political, human energy, including my own, was kind of concentrated around issues related to our... stifled young democracy. And I remember that I said something like that to Marzena Smolenska, that well... that I believed that feminism was some sort of a marginal phenomenon, that important problems were elsewhere, that important problems were related to people’s inability to effectively work together – women, men, children, all genders and age groups – to resist human rights violations against all people, that this had some universal value, and that there was nothing like that here. But it was also in the 80’s, when I started having these personal experiences... I mean personal in a sense that they were related to my work, where I began to notice some amazing stories of women, stories that had been completely invisible to me before. These were women who showed up in the Acute Poisoning Clinic after suicide attempts and who had suffered some inhuman kind of abuse by their husbands, fathers, brothers, boyfriends and so on for many years. And finally they tried to take their own lives, because for many years, they had been seeking help, trying to escape, trying to get some protection from the law, trying really hard

¹²⁶ “**Hanka**”—diminutive for “Anna.”

¹²⁷ **Smolenska, Marzena**: a friend of Lipowska-Teutsch who lives in Italy.

¹²⁸ **Martial Law**: limitations on civil liberties implemented on December 13, 1981, in order to stop social activism aiming at fundamental reforms of the social and political system in the Polish People’s Republic. It was confirmed by the National Council’s (Rada Państwa) decree, even though issuing decrees was unconstitutional during Parliament’s (Sejm) session. Prepared since August 1980, it was justified by a threat of coup d’etat and take-over of power by the opposition gathered around “Solidarity,” economic collapse, and a possibility of Soviet intervention. The chief administrative organ during Martial Law was the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Martial Law regulations limited basic civil liberties, introduced curfew, and suspended all activities by social organizations and trade unions. Martial Law militarized main branches of the economy, banned travel, and introduced censorship of correspondence and summary judicial process. Activists from “Solidarity” and political opposition, as well as some politicians from the pre-August 1980 regime, were interned (approximately 10 thousand people in all). The remaining “Solidarity” activists went underground, organizing demonstrations and strikes in factories and coal mines, suppressed by riot police (ZOMO), which often used heavy military equipment (9 coal miners were killed in the Wujek Coal Mine in December 1981, and there were fatalities in Lublin in August 1982). Demonstration participants, underground activists, and “Solidarity” members were fired from their jobs, harassed, and coerced to sign “declarations of loyalty.” With the collaboration of Secret Police, employees of the judicial system, education, public administration and mass media were being vetted. The society at large reacted with organizing a boycott of all organizations and institutions controlled by the authorities; underground press and publishing ensured the independent flow of information. The Catholic Church undertook a broad campaign of helping those persecuted by the government. The underground “Solidarity” was receiving moral and material support from international organizations and labor centers. As a result of a deteriorating economic and political situation, martial law was repealed on July 22, 1983 (but repressive practices and some parts of the legislation survived till 1989), and in February 1992, the Sejm decided its implementation to have been illegal.

but to no avail. Finally, death seemed the only option left to them. And some of them died and some didn't. As a matter of fact, in our Acute Poisoning Clinic¹²⁹ we had about thirty deaths a year, with really big numbers of patients, and we had about 1000 to 1800 suicide attempts. And a big part of this group was made up of women, whose biographies hid long histories of horrific abuse, abuse in their personal lives. I remember my amazement, you know, that there was some very important experience of very many women, who, as it kind of seemed, were constantly trying to talk about this experience to other people, but nobody would listen to them. And the one important meeting for me was meeting this one woman who had tried to take her own life after a long history of extreme abuse by her husband. She was a village woman, a Catholic, who suffered through all this abuse, violence, and humiliation, through this endless "concentration camp," with no result but silence and loneliness. But she thought that if she performed all her duties as a mother, a wife and a Catholic, and if she carried her cross in this life, she would perhaps be rewarded after death. Perhaps. That that's what one needed to do. But the situation evolved, and her husband started to sexually molest and abuse the children, and it wasn't possible anymore to reconcile all these roles of a good mother, good wife and good Catholic. She found herself in this trap she couldn't resolve and couldn't escape, so she tried to take her own life by drinking some caustic substance, but with the idea to not die right away, so that she'd have time for a confession to get absolution, so that she didn't go Hell. Not to go to Hell, after all. And she did exactly what she had planned, and she died a terrible death. And this... this horrifying story kind of finally motivated me... that I had to do something. This was some kind of an element that was personally very important to me, this kind of an obligation... specifically a personal obligation toward these women who suffer abuse, who are tormented and die and... and... it's like... And I could say it's still... it's hard for me to define it, but I have this impression that they're received... I'd say, with some sort of reluctance in... let's say, in feminist salons. That the kind of person who is a very clear example of how terribly oppressive, cruel and ruthless this patriarchal system can be... of how it floods all these huge spaces of women's experience with silence... That these kinds of spectacular examples could be perceived as... as some kind of information that it's only cases that get to this point should elicit interest. That here you are, dear ladies, here you have these suffering women, these women who are tortured, raped, killed, abused, who die, and take care of them, you know. Well, there is something about this that makes you talk about these women. It's a bit like a sound of a nail scratching a board, you know. There is something kind of tactless about this. This kind of showing... flaunting of this... this suffering. There is this talk about some kind of negative effect of the victim's feminism, this kind of showing the stigmata and baring the wounds, and that, on the other hand, feminism slides down into this kind of hole, where all well-meaning people meet and they want to help somebody, you know. But that kind of dulls the blade, let's say, the political blade of feminism and focuses on the universal suffering of a human person. That there is some sort of... a gap here, you know. And it needs to be said that working with... people... women threatened with this radical abuse is terribly exhausting. And I mean... you're flooded with all this information and involved in all these absurd altercations, one after another, with the whole bureaucratic system, and finally... together with your clients, so to speak, you go through this exhaustion, this sense of helplessness and anger, this kind of helpless anger, so that it's probably the case that it's very hard to find a place, where this experience of everyday work

129 **The Acute Poisoning Clinic** (*Klinika Ostrych Zatruc*): There are nine of these clinics in Poland—one of them in Kraków where Lipowska Teutsch has worked. The clinics treat patients who became poisoned. They also perform tests for toxins, and share information about toxins and ways to aid those who become poisoned.

could be shaped into some specific political action. There is too much of this work. And there is also this kind of a danger or a trap for these women who suffer the abuse. When they get support from a person or an organization that's identified as feminist, they may end up losing the battle with the court, with the social services, or with some organization that runs a shelter. Because these institutions... As people who deserve being believed and being helped... then they are good victims, classical victims. You have to meet many conditions to be a good victim who deserves being helped. And the person who gains more confidence in her own strength, her own rights, and who begins to identify with a broader group, struggling for its place in the world, defending its right for speaking up, to safety, and to freedom, becomes less credible for institutions. And they try to cross her. And finally the outcome is that this person who believed in standing up and fighting for her rights loses everything. I know such women from my work, women who lost everything... I mean they lost everything, apartments, children, jobs. And they came out without children, without an apartment, without a job but with a stigma of a person... a bad mother, a bad mother, whose children are now being raised by the father, the violent perpetrator, who came out of this with his social status, his apartment and his custody rights. And that's, even though, like in the case I'm talking about, he was officially sentenced by the court for abusing his family, but this didn't become an obstacle for him to gaining everything that it was possible to gain in this case. So this is a very difficult... difficult experience. And... there are always two things that make up this burden. One is related to the fact that these specific [concrete, sic] people are being exposed to danger, that when they gain some sense of their own rights and some hope that they would be able to live like free human beings, like free women in a free country, this hope may be just the beginning of their defeat. This is one serious difficulty. The other is related to the fact that finally very often... at least that's true about me... that I often kind of leave certain things unfinished. I mean I have an impression that these bigger... such as diligence and ability to find support could bring some results, could bring some change, could change the law, could change the execution of the law. That it could change the women's attitudes toward other women in those various little villages, small towns, excluded ethnic groups, and social groups and all these others, you know. That something will change. And... it doesn't mean that I don't do anything about this, but I constantly feel that I do too little and that I lack consistency. That I am not able to focus enough on building this kind of... this front ... this group... this strategy, which would be carried out in the longest possible time frame. That all this information, all these crazy, terrible things related to radical infringements of rights of abused women... that every time there will be some reaction... and that's not the case, you know. And... all of this strikes me as some chaotic, interrupted action, including my own inability to collaborate, you know. That maybe something would change if I were better able to collaborate, if I were better able to assume the necessity of ... kind of wrapping up individual stages and reacting to specific events. I feel flooded by it all. And that's what's so difficult that this whole... a big chunk of my life, after all, didn't end with any real change in the lives of the women I've been talking about.

SW: Let's talk a bit more about you. You worked in the Acute Poisoning Clinic for ten years, and most likely you weren't the only person working there, but I've only heard about you as the person who got involved in some activism for women, including with [sic] this one third of your female patients. Where has it come from in you? Where has this kind of sensitivity come from? Is it a result of some type of upbringing, of some sort of experiences in your childhood, youth or in college? Did you have some friends or some

family members with whom you could develop this kind of sensitivity? After all, you were the only one who reacted this way to this one third of your patients.

AL: I mean... I mean, in me... I mean... what may be the key... it's something, something personal... it's that my personal way to react is anger. I often feel anger. And... I mean... it made me angry. Not just despair, even though there was enough to feel despair about, but more than anything else, it made me angry. And I thought to myself that I could do something. Because this link between my anger and my high self-esteem is crucial here. The kind of conviction that I can and should do something. And that the way to do it is anger. That it is possible for these women themselves but also for all the people to feel angry when they see around them this whole ocean of some absurd and monstrous injustice, that they should feel angry. But is it in some way related to my family or to my personal life? Well, maybe only in the sense that I always lived a very comfortable life. Comfortable in a sense that my whole family was the family of outsiders. In various ways, it was exposed, excluded but at the same time with some silent sense of superiority. This is what was perhaps significant. And I often tell this little story about my mom, who... The situation was that we lived on selling off our property, and the land was divided into home construction lots and the new owners, I mean the people who bought it, were moving in one by one. And at some point, one man bought the lot across from our house and, together with his family, started building a house. And day and night, they were working on the construction site, mixing cement in concrete mixers, carrying mortar, marking walls and so on. And I remember my mom sitting on the stairs to the terrace and laughing to tears. She's looking at it all and laughing to tears, and she says: "See, Hania, see what they're doing! Life is passing by, it's unclear if the world is even going to last three weeks, and they are building this house!" And it made her laugh. I mean we were weird. And looking with irony at these kinds of human comings and goings. And this... this... this certainly had its impact on... on who I am. This is kind of... it has the kind of connection that... is if I have a feeling I can afford doing a lot, you know. And nobody can do much to me. That nobody can really do anything to me. Unless they kill me. I mean I never felt this kind of a discomfort that other people think something different from me. Or that they say something different, or that they observe me, that they laugh at me, or are mad at me. Not really. And I mean... This was, you know... you know, some form of freedom, freedom of outsiders. And I'll add one thing, you know. In this toxicology clinic, it was the first time I came into contact on such a massive scale with something I consider the petty bourgeois mentality. I just didn't have this kind of personal experience before, not in my life in general and not in the psychiatric clinic, where I had mostly worked with schizophrenics. I never met this kind of a manifestation of petty bourgeois mentality face to face [in French]. But in the toxicology clinic, I was terrified... by this kind of weirdness of normality. For example, when I would meet families of these people after suicide attempts, and they would, for example, show deep worry over what the neighbors were going to say after the ambulance left and so on, these were some strange labyrinths, amazing to me, of people's imprisonment... It was some kind of resignation from their own life and subordinating themselves to some kind of seemingly obvious idea about what life should be like and how we're supposed to take other people's opinions into account and so on. And on all of this as if... in the middle of it all, like some sort of amoeba, like some kind of nuclear explosion, something kind of grew in front of my very eyes, and it was this phenomenon of this terrible subordination – squishing into the ground – crashing, yes, kind of crashing of women in these terrifying family systems, in some terrifying nets, stifling them in all possible ways. It was a terrible subjugation.

And... well, it was surprising to me... I... I never had any personal experience like that, so I was simply amazed.

SW: You're talking about your sense of otherness, of freedom, freedom related to it, and... It's not a tricky question... I'm simply curious. You were born in the year when one totalitarian system was falling down and another was to be born in a short while. You graduated from college in 1969, so most likely you experienced the 1968 events¹³⁰. How was it possible to be a free person? How did you live with your freedom in a country of socialist realism and with everything that's related to it?

AL: I mean... maybe some biographical detail here. I mean... this... I'll say this and this is at least how I heard it from my family. I mean my family didn't experience freedom, you know. I mean they didn't experience political freedom. What I mean is that it was a standard element of family conversations, what happened to my grandfather and my grandmother during the October revolution, and how terrible it was, the sea of blood and so on. I won't go into details, but there were weird and cruel scenes related to the October revolution¹³¹ and adventures of my grandmother and grandfather and other family members, including some specific stories. But I think I'll just skip the stories, but they dealt with some radical acts of cruelty, and, by the way, it was cruelty against women from my broader family in the period of the October revolution.

SW: That means... since the revolution affected your family, was your family... The family members recalling the revolution must have been living in Russia or in the Eastern...

AL: The family members recalling the revolution lived in the Russian territory, and my grandfather was Polish, you know, but he graduated from this military school, and as a white officer¹³², he was fighting in the Baron Wrangel's troops¹³³, trying to save... save Western European civilization. This... this was his main mission: the Western European civilization. My grandmother, dressed up as a nun, with one stable-boy, Siergiej, went to Caucasus to join my grandfather, through burning Russia, having left my mother in the care of her Ukrainian nanny, in the village of Szarograd. It means they had a lot of adventures. Well... they survived. They survived but barely. And...I mean, this kind of... this burning Russia was the kind of background for my mother's stories. Well, later on... My grandfather was the person who was

¹³⁰ **March 1968:** a political crisis initiated by student protests and accompanied by a wave of anti-Semitism, as a result of which around 20 thousand Polish citizens of Jewish descent left the country. The direct cause of protests was a student demonstration in Warsaw against the censorship intervention and removal of Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*) on January 10, 1968. The demonstration participants were harassed and some were expelled from the university, which caused mass student protests, brutally suppressed by Militia troops. The protesters demanded liberalization of political life. Student protests were put out by the end of March 1968.

¹³¹ **The October Revolution:** The October Revolution, also known as the Bolshevik Revolution or November Revolution, was the second phase of the Russian Revolution of 1917, the first known as the February Revolution. The October Revolution was led by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks and marked the first official Marxist communist revolution of the twentieth century.

¹³² The **White** movement, whose military arm is known as the White Army or White Guard and whose members are known as Whites or White Russians comprised some of the Russian forces, both political and military, which opposed the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution and fought against the Red Army during the Russian Civil War from 1918 to 1921. The designation *White* stood in contradistinction to the *Reds*—the Red Army who supported the Soviets and Communism.

¹³³ **Baron Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel** (or Wrangel) was Commander-in-Chief of the White forces.

terribly... he had a very critical view of “sanacja”¹³⁴ and the fascist tendencies in inter-war Poland. He saw it as a threat. He was anxious about what he perceived to be the development of Poland toward a fascist state. There were some... perhaps, some family legends, I don’t quite remember, about a meeting, I think, between my grandfather and Biernacki, a Parliament member, and he yelled at him about the topic of Bereza Kartuska.¹³⁵ Well, he was a very smart and active man. He was active and he dragged his own family behind; during the inter-war period, he moved around twenty times, because he’d run into conflicts with people around him. And then, well, there was the occupation,¹³⁶ you know. And then, finally, the Stalinist period¹³⁷. But... this was... this was... at this point, I mean it was very soon afterwards, my family consisted of women only. My father died in 1945, and, by the way, he died as a result of a very sloppy, so to speak, bombing by the Soviet army at the market square in Grodzisko Mazowieckie¹³⁸, so that a lot of Grodzisko Mazowieckie’s inhabitants lost their lives, including my father. They were running away, because they had lived in Warsaw and escaped from the Warsaw Uprising,¹³⁹ and stopped in Grodzisko and this is where it happened. Well... and my grandfather, this grandfather I mean, died in... in 1950, yes. Well... and after grandfather’s death... and by the way I remember that from my childhood memories that grandfather was somehow able to keep... probably through bribes... to keep some kind of a barrier around our house, so to say. And the moment he died, some people came to the house and started tearing fixtures off walls, “oh shit, these are pretty walls” [laughter], and pouring gasoline from canisters. Strange stuff was happening, so we moved out of Sopot¹⁴⁰, where we had lived till grandfather’s death. And later on, for years, for many long years, as a child, I lived in this kind of a capsule, created by my mom and grandma, who didn’t work but were selling off various things, and this was our only source of income for many years. This may be the source of my mom’s amusement by the construction site across the street. I mean... it was a strange place, this kind of... an anti-world in a way. But it was very nice, very nice [thinking].

SW: Were you the only child?

AL: No, no. I had a brother. And well... of course, the benefit of it all was that we were so free from pressure. Any pressure, you know. And in our house, we’d spend a lot of time talking. For

¹³⁴ **Sanacja** (sanitation) is the popular name of the political camp supporting Jozef Pilsudski’s government, which carried out the so-called May coup d’etat in 1926 under the slogan of “the moral sanitation,” or, in other words, the moral renewal of the political life in the 2nd Polish Republic.

¹³⁵ **Bereza Kartuska** is a small town in Beloruss, which belonged to Poland in 1921-1939, and which became the symbol of fascist tendencies of the Polish state during Pilsudski’s government. In 1934, the sanacja government opened up a concentration camp there, for Ukrainian nationalists, sanacja opponents, and communists.

¹³⁶ **Occupation:** World War II which is often referred to in Polish as “the occupation (of Poland)” since from 1939 to 1945, Nazi Germany occupied Poland.

¹³⁷ **Stalinism:** The period of Stalinism was a power system created during Joseph Stalin’s regime and characterized by Stalin’s single-person rule, an extensive apparatus of suppression and control, and an economy based on rigid central planning.

¹³⁸ **Grodzisko Mazowieckie:** a small town near Warsaw.

¹³⁹ **The Warsaw Uprising:** (1 Aug. 1944 – 2 Oct. 1944): a struggle against the German occupying forces undertaken in Warsaw by the Home Army (AK) troops. The lack of perspective for a successful turn of events as well as the casualties suffered by the Polish forces persuaded the AK commanders to start capitulation negotiations with the Germans (9-10 Sept.). On 10 Sept. 1944, when the Soviets started their offensive toward Warsaw, the Poles broke off their earlier negotiations. However, the Red Army offensive stopped at the other side of the Vistula River. Warsaw was left mostly in ruins; its reconstruction started right after the war and took three years.

¹⁴⁰ **Sopot:** a city on the Baltic Coast in Northern Poland.

hours, we were sitting and talking to each other. For long hours. We would tell various stories to each other and... you know family stories. We would talk about things. I liked reading various books out loud. My brother was into talking about cowboy movies he saw and... and some other stories, so we would talk for at least a few hours a day, more or less for six to eight hours everyday.

SW: Can you say that you and your brother were raised a bit differently? Or that you were simply different? A boy and a girl, close in age, raised together, were there any differences?

AL: You're touching upon a problem that's kind of important to me. My brother was a very beautiful child, very beautiful... and passionately loved by the whole family. My grandfather's ways of loving varied. But it was weird, weird... I remember one scene, and I remember it well. We had a balcony and there was an outside gutter around it. The house was in a park. And I am in the park with my mom and grandma, and we see that my grandfather is leading my brother on the gutter, hooking his neck with his cane; he is leading him around the balcony and then back inside. And then my mom and grandma reacted: "Kazik, what did you do? Why did you do something like this?" And my grandfather responded: "Because he's the person I love the most." And this is... But he did love him very much. In his own way. And that's how I... how I... They played "garibaldka," this card game, with my brother. I wanted to learn how to play, but grandfather told me: "You're too silly for that." And I'm thinking, "You just wait!" [laughter]. I just thought, "You wait!" And we went to... My brother, who was a year and a half older, and I were attending the underground school together [sic], and later, we went to first grade... no, straight to second grade. I had better grades than my brother. And my grandfather... when he saw the report card, he cried. So I was very jealous of my brother. And I used to beat him up. Even though he was a year and a half older, I would get him when nobody else was in the room and I would start beating up on him. And he didn't defend himself and only after... and he was trying not to scream, either [bursts out laughing], because if he did begin to scream, somebody would come to the room and start beating me up. And I don't know why... it's... it's some mystery, but my brother loved me very much, and I also, after this period of... let's call it early childhood rivalry, I also appreciated his goodness. He was a very good person, extremely caring and kind of... kind of amazed that people could be aggressive. You know, it never occurred to him that when I was beating him up, he should fight back. The case was that also later on, when we were already older and we lived in this place, Kozielnice, we were kind of weirdoes, you know. We were being perceived as foreign objects. And we were always going home from school through this little forest, and from time to time, there was the so-called "Apple-core's" gang, a group of some kids, waiting for us to fuck with us. And my brother didn't fight. I mean he was standing there and allowed them to beat him up. I was fighting back, and he simply didn't fight back. And well... he was this kind of a quiet, careful, and caring person, a very good person. And he was trying to take care of me all the time. That's why... I was lucky in my life to... lucky in my life to meet these incredibly caring men, who saw some meaning in supporting me in various life situations, in cushioning me. So... and my brother, brother, mom, grandma and I... we used to spend a lot of time together. We spoke to each other a lot and made no demands on each other. I mean nobody demanded anything from anybody. Well, the end result was that our house was often dirty, and we didn't go to school if we didn't feel like it [laughter]. So there was much... I mean we would be sitting and talking about some stuff for half the night and then we'd all be late for school. It was as if, well, on the one hand, there was this outside

world somewhere, which was a necessity, simultaneously funny and gloomy, but we really had nothing in common with it, simply nothing.

SW: And when you went to college, wasn't that the moment when it became necessary to get more in touch with the world, to somehow try to confront it, to get integrated, something like that? Wasn't this "capsule" of yours opening up a little at some point? Was this the time of college, or earlier, or later?

AL: Well, I mean... I think that quite an important role in my personal life was played by this friend of mine, Ewa Minge. I met her during my freshman year of college, and my first major was in Polish studies. And when I got there, I was still just a kid; I wasn't even seventeen when I got into the Polish Studies program, and I saw her the very first day, during the college entrance exams, but I had met her briefly before in Zduńska Wola¹⁴¹, where I lived at that time. She was a beautiful person, beautiful... kind of incredibly... interactive. I was actually a bookworm; I read all the time. When people came to our house... and they did come, since our house had a lot of charm for people, for people our age, even though it was radically weird and so on, maybe it was out of curiosity, or for whatever other reasons, but anyway, people would stop by, our friends, and... I mean, when somebody came, I did come down, of course, but I always came with a book, holding my finger to mark where I was at. So I kept my finger right there in the book, so that when that interaction was over, I'd be able to go back to the book right away and start reading. I really liked reading books; I read a lot.

SW: What did you read?

AL: I mean... well, I read Shakespeare, for example. I read all of Shakespeare's plays. I loved reading theater plays more than prose. I had a *Dialog*¹⁴² subscription since early hours of the day, so to speak; I was perhaps something like twelve years old when I started subscribing. So I really liked reading plays. I liked... well... then they had first editions of Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Camus; I loved French existentialists. Also, I read... and it was like a habit, you know, reading was like a real habit. For example, I read Gabriela Zapolska's¹⁴³ *Collected Works*, from cover to cover. What else did I read? Above all else, plays. Oh, I read all of Slowacki's¹⁴⁴ plays... I read all of Norwid's¹⁴⁵ plays. Yes, yes...

SW: So, how did the capsule begin to open?

¹⁴¹ **Zduńska Wola:** Small town near Warsaw.

¹⁴² **Dialog:** a professional literary journal.

¹⁴³ **Zapolska, Gabriela:** a drama writer, journalist and novelist from the turn of the 19th and 20th century, was a representative of naturalism. In her dramas, comedies and novels, she ridiculed hypocrisy and duplicity of the bourgeoisie. She is most famous for such works as *Mrs Dulski's Morality* and *Zabusia* (nick-name – Transl.).

¹⁴⁴ **Slowacki, Juliusz** (1809-1849): one of the most eminent Polish poets from the period of Romanticism. Considered to be one of the national bards, he is most known for such works as *Kordian*, *Balladyna* and "The Hymn" ("I'm sad, oh God...").

¹⁴⁵ **Norwid, Cyprian Kamil** (1821-1883): a Polish poet, dramatist and artist. A representative of both romanticism and classicism, he is known for such works as "Chopin's Grand Piano," "Promethidion" and "A Piece in Two Dialogs with an Epilog."

AL: I mean... I lived in a dorm... I lived in a dorm, and I was younger than the rest of the population, so to speak, and... a bit lost in Warsaw as I studied in Warsaw. And my mentor, kind of, my guide out of that alienation was this charming friend of mine, Ewa Minge, who always enjoyed an incredible popularity. I mean there were always a lot of guys around her. And we... we partied. But she didn't have like a favorite, you know her boyfriend, but she was always in a big group, and that's how she spent her time. So I kind of started following her to all these parties, here and there. Well... I have to admit I didn't really feel passionate about my studies. Polish studies really disappointed me. I thought I'd just be reading books and it turned out the whole thing was about something else. And there was one spectacular incident, which may have had some significance. It so happened that my room-mate was raped. And she came back to the dorm in the morning and was kind of plastered... I mean not quite sober, and she wanted to commit suicide. Since we lived on a fifth floor, she was talking about jumping out the window. I didn't know what to do, so I decided to get her completely drunk. I ran downstairs, got half a liter of vodka, and encouraged her to go on drinking, so that she got completely drunk and fell asleep, and I gained some time to come up with something, you know. And I decided to buy a dog. I figured that if she saw a small dog after she woke up from her drunken stupor, it would change something. And I carried out my plan. I went out and got a dog, a German Shepard, a small puppy. I brought it back to the dorm when she was still asleep. And this dog... It really turned out to be a smart psychological move. When she woke up and saw the dog, this puppy, which was going around and squealing and so on, the whole thing kind of passed. But the dog remained and lived in this dorm, pooped and peed and so on. I wanted to move it home, but I didn't get a chance since what happened was that the so-called sanitation committee came to our room. I opened the room, since I brought in some package, put it on the table, and went to the kitchen to get a towel, and before I had time to return to the room, that committee came in. And there were these suede shoes with little holes that were in style then, and a doctor, wearing these shoes, walked into poop, so we all started yelling really loud. And I pushed them out of this room, I mean my room. I said, "Fuck off! For now, I still live here!" But I didn't live there much longer, because I was soon evicted from the room, specifically for this. Later on, my mom came to Warsaw to try to defend me somehow, because I had no money to support myself in Warsaw if I didn't have a dorm room. So she went with me to see some Dean of Students, but he also got on my nerves. So it became impossible for me to remain in Warsaw in the dorm. And well... and then what? Well, I just went back home, to Zdunska Wola and decided that next year... to take another college entrance exam, and I wanted to study acting. I learned some fragments from all these plays, came to Warsaw and again met this friend, Ewa Minge, and she said she'd be interested in going with me to that exam to see what it looked like and so on. And she looked on at people performing, talked to people backstage and... I didn't make it to the Drama School, but Ewa Minge decided to quit Polish Studies and take her exam to the Drama School next year. Because the same... this way... and I also passed an exam the same year, because I had the second... I mean because as a back up, I also wanted to take an exam to Art History in Wroclaw... I passed an exam to the Art History program in Wroclaw, but Ewa Minge said that since she would not study... she could study Art History in Wroclaw, so that meant that we ended up living together in Zdunska Wola; we lived there for a year. And, yes, that's it. And well... and then, I mean, Ewa also entered into this "capsule" of ours and our family just incorporated her, plus... well, a group of up to twenty people, Ewa Minge's admirers. Well, this more or less looked like this: Ewa and I read books and plays, and every day, a big group of Minge's admirers would show up in our house with various things to drink, and we would drink,

and they would leave, and the next day would come... [laughter]. We spent a year like this, and it was a very nice year. And later on, Ewa Minge took an exam to the acting school, the Film School in Lodz, and I was supposed to get into the Fine Arts School in Lodz, but I didn't prepare any works, and in the end, I landed in this Cultural Education Institute. I wanted to be in Lodz; I wanted to be where Ewa Minge was. So that's how it was. Ewa Minge was in the acting school, the Film School, and by the way she graduated from there... and I didn't finish this Cultural Education Institute in Lodz, which I think was a blessing then... I won't be going into any detail here. At any rate, next year I tried to get into the Psychology Department in Cracow. And after a year, I made it.

SW: What year was this?

AL: You know what... it's hard to... I could count it going backwards. I graduated in 1969, so it must have been 1965. Well... and... And what? [reflecting]

SW: And then, five years in Cracow, right?

AL: Five years in Cracow.

SW: Without the “capsule”?

AL: Without the “capsule.” I lived in a dorm. All that time, I lived in a dorm. Well, in Cracow, after I made it into the Psychology department, I started living in a dorm. First I lived in “Nawojka”¹⁴⁶ for a year, and then I lived in “Piast.” In “Piast,” I lived for four years and later on I lived there, too, for three years, when I was enrolled in the PhD program. So “Piast” is... Well, I spent a good piece of my life in “Piast.” And what I liked about living in dorms was that all social life would be so effortless, and kind of random as a matter of fact, you know. You just find yourself in a crowd of human beings. We would talk and so on. You don't have to worry about anything. It was still in the times of real socialism, so everything was free. You'd live for free, eat for free, everything was free, you'd study for free. And... so it was all really nice. And all my years in the Psychology Department went by in the social orbit of the Mroczkowski family... the Mroczkowski family. The Mroczkowski family consisted of two brothers and a sister. One of the brothers studied psychology with me, first in my class, and then he kind of got delayed a bit. And I have to say that the Mroczkowski family's way of life was about constant partying. And so... Well, in Warsaw my way of spending any free time involved participating in Ewa Minge's parties, in Zdunska Wola, there were parties with Ewa Minge, a year in Lodz, parties with Ewa Minge, and later on, as soon as I stopped participating in Ewa Minge's parties, I started partying with the Mroczkowski brothers and their sister. And five years passed in a blink of an eye [laughter]. And I mean... I have to add... when I think about it now, since you asked these political questions... you know about the world... about 1969 and stuff, totalitarianism and such, about what I was doing at that time. So I have to say I always drank a lot of booze, and I always read a lot. And I liked sitting in cafes, talking to people, joking around, partying, taking long walks at night, when we'd hike in the hills, up and down, you know, and traveling with the Mroczkowski brothers and their many friends. It was always a group, you know, in fact, a large group, you know, I mean something like a team, or something. I was well liked in this group as

¹⁴⁶ **Nawojka** and **Piast** are names of dormitories.

some sort of a weirdo, and a bit of a child, a person a bit unprepared for life, not noticing its dangers, so it was all really comfortable. And, well, I read, I read a lot, and I studied psychology, you know. I was then thinking... since, as a matter of fact, I always wanted to become a theater director. This is what I really wanted; I wanted to be a theater director... And when I tried to get into this drama school a while back, this was my goal, to become a theater director and to create these politically engaged performances... I had this fantasy that I would create this kind of a theater group. And, actually, all these different groups of friends among which I was circulating were like such theater groups. Admittedly, their mission was not to create some artistic masterpiece, but the mission was to create a public and political alternative space in the open. And it was about playing, you know, playing, laughing, ridiculing, and my mother... us on the stairs. And about some sort of dodging. Dodging life. Not treating all this seriously. But I imagined that maybe at some point, after I graduated from psychology, I would study theater directing. And I thought that I would turn my inclination to create and live in this sort of a group, this sort of a theater group, you know, into a profession. And it would have possibly happened that way if not for the fact that in my junior or senior year of psychology, I had an opportunity to come into contact with Professor Kepinski¹⁴⁷, and even before that, I came into contact with Professor (?), Professor Tischner.¹⁴⁸ I mean, these were incredible minds, and the one particularly significant here was Professor Kepinski, his role, and... then I really wanted to become a psychologist. I started to want to become a psychologist. I really wanted to work, so that I could get to understand... yes, to get to understand people. It was like swimming into this... when I had contacts with Professor Kepinski, I understood it was a simply incredible adventure. Something like swimming into dark waters. And that it was an incredible adventure, incredible adventure. And, well, as a clinical psychologist I never had this... this... focus to help. And I was often accused after I became a clinical psychologist of having this “aesthetic” attitude toward people. That I was getting hyped up in this kind of contact but that it was also very egocentric. Well, that I was fascinated with the disease, that I was fascinated with another human being and not really eager to bring about any changes, because I was simply admiring it. And... and what? Well, that was really true. That is true. And what I saw in the people I worked with in the psychiatric clinic was not what we all shared, political, social, universal, but it was something very different. Every time what struck me was the exceptional character of this person’s experience. And just as... as I... for example, as I liked reading books, I was reading the author here, I was reading the author. It was very interesting to me, particularly when I was reading the whole series, like the whole Shakespeare, or the whole Zapolska, or something like this, you know. I liked reading the whole series and I kind of wanted... I was really interested in what his head was like from the inside, as if through the work, I was placed kind of inside, inside of this exceptional person, exceptional sensitivity, and exceptional way of building the world. And it was the same thing here, and I was trying to get inside this... this person and from the sidelines, I was trying to notice what was absolutely exceptional. And what was kind of... I mean some political aspect, so to speak. It was that I was terribly... terribly irritated by treating the patients,

¹⁴⁷ **Kepinski, Antoni** (1918-1972): a psychiatrist and professor of psychiatry who is one of the best Polish researchers in the field of psychiatry. His theories are well known and his scientific work covers over 140 publications and several books: *Psychopatologia nerwic* (*Psychopathology of neuroses*), *Schizofrenia* (*Schizophrenia*), and *Melancholia* (*Melancholy*), among them.

¹⁴⁸ **Tischner, Józef** (1931-2000): a priest and one of the most eminent contemporary Polish philosophers. He was the founder and Dean of the Cracovian Papal Academy of Theology and lectured at the Jagiellonian University and the State High School of Theatre in Cracow. He was Solidarity’s first chaplain and wrote and published more than 600 articles and books.

first of all, and by defining them... Yes, I had a sense of a really bad fit. And because I had an opportunity to read a few various anti-psychiatry pieces, so to speak, in the psychiatric clinic, I acted from an anti-psychiatry position and criticized various treatment methods, particularly electric and insulin shocks. And also the kinds of relationships that led to the fact that these people were pigeonholed. And here is where Kepinski came in, you know, who had a huge ability to... from this kind of platform, perhaps not anti-psychiatric, but undoubtedly in his way of thinking, he was before his time and before the people who worked with him and... even though the whole team was very good, yes, really very good and... That means that the psychiatric clinic in Cracow, even though they used these abominable biological methods, there was this an anti-psychiatric spirit there. The spirit there was very similar to this kind of thinking about the human person. So it was possible for me to fit in there, you know. Also, there was a lot of freedom there as far as expression of our own views and negotiation of some decisions were concerned, even by people who, like me, would come to the clinic and were inexperienced, young, and even a bit crazy, to put it mildly, you know. There was also high level of tolerance for people's behavior. So, in reality, it was like a theater, like a theater group once again, you know. A big group of people with clearly medical interests and spending a lot of time together socially... and... well, it was really the same, really the same. And... this... this... maybe what also helped me to enter this group socially was the fact that I volunteered for the first year and I also basically lived in the Professor's office. I simply slept there and I was the person he liked and took under his wing. I've mentioned this... this chain of male subjects who took me under their wing, and one of them was Professor Kepinski. The Mroczkowski brothers always took really good care of me as well. And... so I was like this mascot, living in the Professor's office [at the clinic, ed.]. This was related to the fact that every time people wanted to invite Professor Kepinski for a drink, they invited me, too and... [laughter]. So nothing changed, nothing really changed... And if... if not for the fact that, well, I had to leave the psychiatric clinic, most likely my whole life would have passed in this idyllic, alternative space. And it was really pleasant. Well... it did happen that I had to leave the psychiatric clinic. It was related to the fact that my mother was hospitalized in this psychiatric clinic three times, and three times, I would discharge her on my own request before even a week passed. And I got this warning from Professor Szymcik that if I discharged her again, I would be kicked out of the clinic. And well... This is exactly what happened. Professor Szymcik told me that he wouldn't fire me because I was a single mother raising two children on my own, since my husband had already been dead by this time, but as long as the Professor was alive, I would not be allowed to touch a patient again [laughter], as long as he was alive. So I decided that it was pointless for me to just sit in some room in the clinic, doing I don't know what, possibly translating books from French into Polish or writing essays. Here, I have to say that it was many times that I would get offers like this, also as a result of my superiors' nurturing instincts, that I could do whatever I wanted, really whatever I wanted, as long as I would stay away from patients. Well, at any rate, that was Professor Szymcik's proposal, and I concluded that it made little sense. And I applied to the Medical Academy's President for a transfer to the Toxicology Clinic.

SW: And why there, exactly?

AL: Because I was thinking about a transfer anyway. Well, I was happy working in the psychiatric clinic, because it was clearly the clinic I wanted to work in till the end of my life. But since I couldn't work in the psychiatric clinic any more, I figured I'd be willing to work with

people after suicide attempts. I knew they had no psychologists there, and I knew they really needed one. I thought I was the kind of person... and I think I was a good clinical psychologist, with a broad clinical experience specifically. And I worked in that clinic for more than ten years; I went through all the wards. Well, I conducted therapy in numerous contexts, so that I learned a lot. I worked with eminent psychiatrists. My husband was an eminent psychiatrist. And... I mean, I learned a bit from just being there and a bit from all these men, you know, from Professor Kepinski, from my husband, from all these outstanding men who were there. There were also two women who were very smart, Dr. Proszkiewiczowa and Malgosia Dominik, a very good psychiatrist, very good. I mean, there were a lot of smart people there. And we'd also talk a lot. There was a tradition there... this is simply how the clinic worked, that every day at noon, there was a meeting of the whole team, and the point was to discuss one patient. Every day. For all these years. And this discussion about one patient sometimes lasted an hour and a half, you know. They were long conversations, where people pondered on... well, on what his illness was all about, how to treat him, how we understand him, what the various treatment options were, so that it was a process of self-education for the whole team. It was, after all, a very good place, very good. Marysia, after all, also has an incredible mind. A lot of really smart people. And it was also this kind of an open space, these department meetings in Garden Tischner... I remember them best from these department meetings. This kind of constant thinking process. And... I mean, I felt competent enough to work on my own. And I wanted it, you know. I wanted to work on my own, so that I could make my own decisions. And that's how I found myself in this Toxicology Clinic, where I was simply flooded by... well, by these terrible human stories, and where there were relatively few people with psychiatric diseases, really very few. And the majority of the people were just incredibly... stifled, destroyed by... well, specifically by their lives, you know. Well... and what they always failed at teaching me, so to say, at the psychiatric clinic... I mean getting me off this carnival-like anesthetizing, off these violent exchanges... they succeeded at here. I mean this incredible responsibility, I would say incredible... for these hundreds of people. It was something really strange to me that they were all simply left to their own devices. And... these awful conditions this team of doctors worked in, you know. The terrible situation of these doctors, since in the Toxicology Clinic, you know, death lurked around every corner, so to speak. And it was up to these doctors, up to some kind of absolute mobilization of this team, whether these people would survive or not. And there were some nights when they were on call, when 19 people would be admitted in a single night, you know. They'd admit 19 people and hospitalize four of them, so the team there had to face this challenge. It's incredible, you know. It's terribly hard work, and a very different kind of work than in the Psychiatry Clinic, of course. There is no way to have a social life, some lunches or something... there is this incredible tension all the time. And this kind of... kind of fear, and this kind of trying really hard. I have a great respect for these doctors from the Toxicology Clinic for... for being so responsible. Because it never occurred to them... at least that's how I remember it... to run away, to run away from responsibility. It was the kind of clinic where you don't choose your patients, because they're simply brought in and they're there. There was a risk of contracting something from a patient. Patients were often terribly violent as a result of intoxication, but also for other reasons. There was death. And there were a lot of... kind of like a bee hive, I don't know, like a blizzard... at any rate, there were a lot of relatives swarming around. I mean these people whose relatives were dying there, you know. They were desperate, terribly anxious people, kind of entangled into their miserable captivity, so helpless about what had happened in their lives, what had happened with their loved ones. And there was this kind of

a buzz around this clinic... a buzz of their... their voices, questions, all of this. Terrible work, but, on the other hand, it gave a sense, well, absolutely, a sense that you were doing something important, that if you didn't do it, somebody could die. Or this terrible misery that's stuck there. And it starts from this completely wrong interpretation of reality, and it turns into stone, it solidifies, it becomes this terrible iron cage, in which this person will end his life, and he'll spend all his life there. And there is this great opportunity of this kind of change, of getting into this moment when all these destructive, toxic... like some heap, yes, like a heap... interpretations of reality, defense mechanisms, attempts at finding some sense in this experience are all kind of solidifying to close down on this person like some claw. And you can sneak in and change it. And there is only a small window of opportunity for this. And it was then, in the Toxicology Clinic, that I discovered crisis intervention. I mean, I read somewhere that there was something like crisis intervention, and that it's this kind of... kind of an intervention, which is not treatment, but it's about preventing this kind of fatal course of events. It's like marching into this area of looking for meaning or searching for a solution. It's putting a stop to things. And it's calling forth all the kinds of inner forces inside of these people, inside this whole context that's there, you know. It's like trying, after stopping it all, to do some kind of taking stock, together with these people, and to look for solutions from this kind of a maze, you know. And it was possible. It was enough to just catch the right moment, you know. To take this kind of stock. To concentrate, together with these people. And it's like sneaking out of a siege. There is... you know... you can see it's possible to get out, you know. It's like... literally, like some sort of a micro... micro-intervention, you know, which is not at all like psychotherapy, which tends to drag on and on, but it's like some illumination, like... like solving a puzzle, together with these people, so it's extremely attractive. And there was another aspect in this Toxicology Clinic, a political... political aspect but kind of different from the one related to the oppression of women. It was a political aspect related to the 1980's. And here, this... political trend of the 1980's, of martial law¹⁴⁹, was reaching my life through these people who ended up there after suicide attempts. And well... I'd do various sorts of favors for them, various favors... Yes, but I won't

¹⁴⁹ **Martial Law:** limitations on civil liberties implemented on December 13, 1981, in order to stop social activism aiming at fundamental reforms of the social and political system in the Polish People's Republic. It was confirmed by the National Council's (Rada Państwa) decree, even though issuing decrees was unconstitutional during Parliament's (Sejm) session. Prepared since August 1980, it was justified by a threat of coup d'état and take-over of power by the opposition gathered around "Solidarity," economic collapse, and a possibility of Soviet intervention. The chief administrative organ during Martial Law was the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Martial Law regulations limited basic civil liberties, introduced curfew, and suspended all activities by social organizations and trade unions. Martial Law militarized main branches of the economy, banned travel, and introduced censorship of correspondence and summary judicial process. Activists from "Solidarity" and political opposition, as well as some politicians from the pre-August 1980 regime, were interned (approximately 10 thousand people in all). The remaining "Solidarity" activists went underground, organizing demonstrations and strikes in factories and coal mines, suppressed by riot police (ZOMO), which often used heavy military equipment (9 coal miners were killed in the Wujek Coal Mine in December 1981, and there were fatalities in Lublin in August 1982). Demonstration participants, underground activists, and "Solidarity" members were fired from their jobs, harassed, and coerced to sign "declarations of loyalty." With the collaboration of Secret Police, employees of the judicial system, education, public administration and mass media were being vetted. The society at large reacted with organizing a boycott of all organizations and institutions controlled by the authorities; underground press and publishing ensured the independent flow of information. The Catholic Church undertook a broad campaign of helping those persecuted by the government. The underground "Solidarity" was receiving moral and material support from international organizations and labor centers. As a result of a deteriorating economic and political situation, martial law was repealed on July 22, 1983 (but repressive practices and some parts of the legislation survived till 1989), and in February 1992, the Sejm decided its implementation to have been illegal.

go into detail about what kinds of favors I mean. But anyway, there were a lot of quite drastic things related to people who were persecuted, interned and so on. And, among other things, this theme of oppression in the totalitarian system of the 1980's in Poland and how it was reflected in lives of people who committed suicides was the subject of my presentation... presentation I had in the Psychiatry Clinic. And it was preceded by some work, work... my work toward pushing for the creation of the Crisis Intervention Center within the Medical Academy, whose purpose would be to provide care for people after suicide attempts, but also, in general, for people who... who well, who were in hospitals, in Cracow clinics, and who were going through some very odd things. All these bits of information about these odd things were getting to me through these suicide patients, but I also really learned something new. I mean it's possible to imagine this, but somehow I didn't quite imagine... and, for example, I was under a big impression of dilemmas faced by parents of children with cancer, who have to make amputation decisions. I remember one man who made a surgery decision about... because his child had cancer of the eye, but before the operation they hoped to save the other eye, but it turned out not to be the case, and he decided to go for it without the child's participation, and the child was fourteen or something. And you know it's your... that's what you decided and the child has to... But no eyes are left. It's hard... hard to talk it over, you know. I mean, it's terrible when there are situations... when people make decisions not about themselves, but other people, like parents do. And you know, later on they just stew over this decision, maybe this but maybe that, because there is always some miniscule... you know, some chance that things would turn out differently. And well, for me, these were the bigger things, so to say. I mean, certainly a complete lack of services for people who lose a loved one, practically nothing. No services for these decision makers. No services for people giving birth to... to terribly handicapped children. Well, I mean it's all handled somehow, but it's... it's... the point is to talk to these people and not just "good bye" and that's it. I mean... this... this was so terribly odd to me, and really visible from the vantage point of the Toxicology Clinic, how lonely people in crisis situations really were. And how terrible it is... the depression they experience in these various closed systems, like the army, a psychiatric hospital, and a family, you know, where underneath the metal dome they're simply... they're like poppy seeds, rubbed into the walls of the mixing bowl. That's how they're being destroyed. I mean, this... and, well, and this was the time period, that is the 1980's, I don't remember which year, when we met, right? It was something like... you came to the Toxicology Clinic, was it like this?

SW: And I wanted to talk you into participating in a conference, I think.

AL: Possibly. I don't remember but I know we initially talked around this time. And somehow... I don't remember, but you'll remember what year it was, but I don't remember what year, only that it was in some... in this... somehow... you were opening this center of yours, so it was really crazy. What year was this?

SW: Well, that was already 1993, I think.

AL: It was already 1993, right? I've somehow quite forgotten; I kind of pushed it back in time. It seemed to be still at the end of the 1980's, but it doesn't matter. At any rate... at any rate, still going back to this whole issue of this Crisis Intervention Center, of the crisis intervention, there was a meeting of some department, whatever. It was probably 1987 and I had it all lined up... It

was Monday, and I had it all lined up that the Crisis Intervention Center would be created at the Medical Academy, and I was supposed to be the manager, or the director of this center, but on Tuesday, there was the department meeting and I delivered my presentation, which also included some political sub-text, about suicide attempts in the 1980's. And it turned out impossible to create the Crisis Intervention Center there, at the Medical Academy. However, it turned out possible to create the Crisis Intervention Society, made up of all the big wigs from the democratic opposition in the city of Cracow. And that's what happened. And that's how the Crisis Intervention Society came into being, with a very good cadre of founding members. Female founding members. And I envisioned that when the Crisis Intervention Society was created in these years... in 1990, in 1990, it was registered, and in 1991, the Crisis Intervention Center at the Lvov Council. And I thought that the Crisis Intervention Center would be the kind of place where... above else, where it would be possible to carry out social change. I mean noticing all these mechanisms responsible for crisis situations, of course not the kind that somebody has to decide about operating on a child to take both eyes, or that somebody dies in a car accident, but these ones which are related to all these closed systems, with all this harassment and torment of people, when they get deprived of a voice, of a possibility of acting out. So I was thinking that this is what this center would look like. And in theory it was possible, because there was a mechanism included in the statute, which was later changed, but which allowed for a kind of collection of information about all events, such as murders, assaults, police interventions in domestic violence situations, accidents, and death in violent circumstances, or in other words, events related to violence. This information was to be collected by people responsible just for collecting data. Every week we were supposed to know how many... about all such events in Cracow and its outskirts, and that we would compare that information with information about the people who came to the Center. And this weekly comparison of one set of data with another set of data was to show us... so that we could see what kinds of people and in what circumstances were generally kind of... who didn't take advantage of declarative... of the available crisis intervention services, and we could see where there were some pockets of... and where misery grew to some extreme dimension, but there was no information... no will to pass on the information or to take advantage of the information, no imagination about possible solution such an institution could bring to the table and so on. And we imagined while constructing this scheme that this is how it would be... that every time we got information about the lack of information, about something going wrong, yes, that every time we would try to reach these people through the fire department, through the police, through whomever, that we would try to understand why they... why nothing ever reached them, that it would be some kind of fishing for people in these extreme situations, reaching these kinds of closed, silent pockets of misery and turmoil. And that we would also inquire about the mechanisms causing exclusion, or some kind of oppression, responsible for the fact that large groups of people were finding themselves in extreme situations without even knowing what to do about it, either, you know. This is not what happened. We had an inner conflict within the Crisis Intervention Center. An important element of this split was the attitude toward people in endangered by domestic violence. The split was mostly about if and in what circumstances we should turn to the legal system in order to prosecute the perpetrator. It was about the kind of responsibility of the Center and of individual professionals for ensuring there was effective protection from further domestic violence. And here... one, one... one of the events that kind of... exacerbated the conflict happened when we received information from... it's actually a long story, but anyway, at some point of this story it came up that the husband of a woman who came to us was locking himself up in the bathroom

with their six year old son for long time periods, and that the boy was later complaining to his mother that the father was putting a carrot into his anus and French kissing him. Well, the situation seemed quite clear. This woman, together with a psychologist, went to the prosecutor's office to notify them. The prosecutor didn't accept it even though she could have accepted a verbal notification. She remarked that it was a very serious accusation of him and warned the woman... whether she was aware of all the possible consequences of this information and told her to file an official complaint in writing. Then, the woman backed out. She didn't want to file in writing. Because the psychologist and the Center's management knew about the case, my position was that it was the management's obligation to file the official complaint even if the woman at this point was not willing to do it. However, another solution was selected: family therapy. The family therapy for which the perpetrator never showed up, and the woman rarely came, and that's what this family therapy was like. Well... there was no will to respect the law and to offer some effective protection from further abuse of the dependents. And these... these tempestuous conflicts at the Crisis Intervention Center ended with firing a few people, including me. I was sixth or seventh to go. On the way, I was offered some scholarship in France or another option was staying in the office and doing some intellectual work, since I had such a creative mind. But I gave up on these offers, and after a sequence of some incidents, I was fired from the Crisis Intervention Center. I filed... filed a complaint against this decision to Labor Court, but I lost. And...

SW: When was this going on? What year?

AL: It was 1993, no, 1994. Anyway, I had some... some... Finally... Actually, I even have this... what shall we call it... a brief, several pages long, explaining the sentence. Several pages! The court, I have to say in its favor, had a lot of doubts and called in a lot of people as witnesses. Finally... that was... that was the decision that it wasn't really clear what crisis intervention was. And that this approach, which involves some active work for these groups of people, active work toward changing the law, and some active search for these, let's say, victims of these critical situations and so on was only one possible approach to crisis intervention. But there might also be another kind of crisis intervention, more kind of in-the-office, more psychological. At the same time, while the case was being decided by the court, the Crisis Intervention Center filed a legal complaint about the case I've mentioned, the one with the carrot, you know. After nine months, they finally decided it was worth filing. And well... and it hurt a little, hurt a little bit, because it was so... to me it seemed so... it seemed obvious to me. That nothing was simpler and clearer than the fact that in crisis intervention cases, you have to try to reach these excluded groups. That you need to understand the real reason why these people suffer abuse and find themselves in this kind of oppression. That you have to take advantage of the law, and if this law is inadequate, or the whole system is resistant, you have to change it. That it's an obligation. That we can all agree about this. That it's clear. But it turned out not to be the case, not at all! I was amazed. I was simply shocked. And also... like many people probably, I... well, I had high hopes related to our young democracy. It was this kind of... kind of hope... like some elation, faith in this... that we can, well,... build, build the kind of world, kind of Poland, Poland... where we'll care about justice... Also, by the way, I think I imagined that this... this Poland would be, well, that it would be the Poland... well, let's call it, of the anti-totalitarian left¹⁵⁰, the

¹⁵⁰ Lipowska-Teutsch is speaking of her political preferences since, instead of becoming left-leaning and liberal as she would have liked, Poland has become right-wing and conservative since the systemic changes of 1989.

anti-totalitarian left. Since my hard work in the Toxicology Clinic, I had really been very strongly attracted by the anti-totalitarian left. Everything I was... going through... experiencing there was pointing toward this... this solution as something a decent person, you know, could accept. Some minimum... minimum ethical standard, exactly, was to me associated with the anti-totalitarian left. And well... and again it turned out it's all off the wall, and whatever I was thinking... everybody around me was thinking differently. And, well... and then... it was then, I think, when I started seriously thinking about feminism, feminism as some sort of search for a political force, for some political group, well, for some kind of space, in which some social change, specifically, would become possible. But in reality it was always, so to speak, a kind of field of interest, as far as excluded and oppressed groups were concerned, that was broader than just women, you know. I mean I had enough of a foundation when it came to discrimination because of gender, or the oppression of women, or whatever, from that Toxicology Clinic, where there were heaps of stories about oppression, discrimination, violence, and attitudes toward people excluded for whatever reason. And... also... I think that at that point, when I met with the Cracow feminists, with you, what also attracted me was... was this kind of... that it was also political. That... from this kind of... well, from this simply terrible, depressing, and overwhelming sense of responsibility in the world of the Acute Poisoning Clinic, here I could see an opportunity for some kind of... breathing, of being able to play and have some joy, of meeting people, and for this kind of mocking attitude toward the world. It was some kind of return to my favorite folksy and ludic attitude about life. It was like a breakthrough, like an option to catch a breath of fresh air. And... at this point... what's important to me is some kind of connection... connecting what's related to the oppression of women with the activism I've been involved in for a long time, which, above all else, addresses people endangered by violence, and all this by including some sort of space for... diversity. It's about how to build these... plans, the plans... of escaping this... siege, plans of overcoming the oppression of, for example, Roma women. For a few years... for the last three years, I've been more deeply involved in this... this world of Roma women in Poland. And their oppression has a few dimensions. The ethnic descent oppression is connected to the oppression because of poverty, and to the oppression... because when you're a woman in a radically patriarchal society, you also live in the world denying you any right to participation, justice and information. And at this point, I somehow found myself in this world of Roma women.¹⁵¹ I'm thinking about in what way... about how this kind of contradiction... how my real propensity for guilt, actually, guilt toward... toward other people, toward, for example, Roma women, and for feeling obligated to do something, in my own life is constantly being overcome, or kind of pushed sideways by this propensity for play, for play and for looking at life with curiosity, and for swimming into more and more... kind of seas of darkness. And... I started my story with this idea that I feel guilty because all these endeavors of mine have perhaps lacked consistency. I'm thinking to myself that it may somewhat be related to this... that in some way, I'm trapped in some ambivalence. On the one hand, there is this perspective of guilt and responsibility, and on the other hand, there is also a sense of alienation and a propensity to create alternative, political spaces.

SW: I'd like to thank you for this conversation.

¹⁵¹ **Roma women:** The Roma are one of the ethnic minorities in Poland. The Roma people (singular Rom), often referred to as gypsies, are a heterogeneous ethnic group who live primarily in Southern and Eastern Europe, Western Asia, Latin America, the southern part of the United States and the Middle East.

Anna Lipowska-Teutsch

Born: September 20, 1944.

1969 graduated from the Department of Psychology, Jagiellonian University in Kraków

1990 founded The Crisis Intervention Center

1995 organized and ran Shelter for the Victims of Violence

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Joanna Regulska
Interviewer: Sławomira Walczewska**

**Location: Kraków
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Translated by: Kasia Kietlińska**



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Joanna Regulska was born in 1951 in Warsaw, Poland. She studied geography at the University of Warsaw in Poland and at the University of Colorado in the United States. In 1989, she co-founded the Foundation for Development of Local Democracy in Poland. She directs the Department for Women and Gender Research at Rutgers University in the U.S. Regulska has a daughter and divides her life and work between Poland and the United States.

Sławomira Walczewska founded the Women's Foundation (eFKa) in Kraków in 1995. In 1999, Walczewska published *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Feminist Discourse in Poland*, the first Polish book about women's emancipation from a historical and a cultural perspective. As a feminist activist and a scholar, she is interested in international women's movements and is firmly committed to understanding various differences and intersections of global feminisms.

Joanna Regulska
April 15, 2005
Kraków

Slawomira Walczewska: Today is the 15th of April, 2005. I will be talking with Professor Joanna Regulska. Good morning. Could you tell us about yourself and about your feminism? How did feminism find its way into your life? What place did it find? Where did it come from?

Joanna Regulska: Well, that's how it happens with feminism. It is... its symptom is... at least in my case, some kind of gradual growth. It wasn't quite the case that one day I woke up in the morning and suddenly it turned out that I was a feminist, but it was, most likely, a coincidence of many factors. I think that... I mean there was a moment when I... something got to me. It was, I remember, in 1978, I think, after I had already left Poland for the U.S., and I was a doctoral student then, at the University of Colorado, in the Geography Department. And there were meetings and discussions there and I realized that I was very often asked about the situation of women in Poland: What is it like, what's going on, and how about women? And, of course, these questions forced me to reflect on what I actually knew, how I was beginning to shape these responses, what I was speaking about and what I was not speaking about. And there was a moment that... that at first, I was responding to these questions in quite a naïve way, "Well, it's all good," simply without thinking about what this question meant and how... and what I really knew about this topic. It was kind of a "socialist" response, well, people are all equal, you know, and we're all fine. I mean we weren't all fine but just in terms of equality... But there's something to it, because as for education... there was access anyway, so it wasn't like as a doctoral student in the U.S., where I had to worry, you know, where the money was coming from to pay for these studies. Here I was immediately able to figure out the class system: I either have the money, or I don't have the money. It wasn't enough that I got in, but I also had to pay for it somehow and pay a lot of cash. So... so these answers I gave... the answer was... well, a result of some sort of life experience, you know, of having access to education. It wasn't, of course, access for everybody, because even though we didn't have to pay, you know, access was also regulated. So these were my first steps in thinking about what my attitude was toward what it meant to be a woman and what kind of a woman and in what kind of conditions. Later on, the element that shaped me more was my dissertation, of course, because I wrote my dissertation about migration of women, which was of course... well, I was a migrating woman myself, since I had just come to the United States from Poland, and here I was doing research on differences between women who left big cities for small towns in the U.S., who came to Colorado, and those differences were between single women, who were professionally involved, and women with families, who came because of their families. That means it was about how you looked at an individual, at self-fulfillment, at these women's rights, at what they gained and what they lost as a result of this migration; all of these had already appeared in this research. But I wouldn't say it was a fully feminist work. It was more of a work that... would describe but not yet... this feminism of mine was not a mature feminism. It was... it... it... I was definitely interested. I was definitely observing, but, well, most likely, I hadn't yet quite worked through, no, not yet, hadn't yet digested it and hadn't yet created some sort of my own version of what I was interested in.

I'm sure that if I was doing this work now, for example, I would ask different questions. I would concentrate on more... since we were sending out questionnaires. Maybe I would have used other methods, more feminist methodology. I was using a rather standard social sciences' methodology, which, of course, has a basic impact, because of the closed questions and the statistical methods' analysis... and well, the way these questions were formulated. It doesn't mean that we can't use statistical methods in feminist work, but, well, it shouldn't be the only way, but rather there should be a broad spectrum; the methodology should be much more comprehensive, so that it was just one part of it, without privileging one method, you know, and one kind of analysis. So today I would have written this dissertation very differently, but that's what it was. That's what it was, and it definitely gave me a different sense of direction for what was to come. And also, well, this experience of this migration definitely shaped in me... in a way, my identity in terms of how I reacted to certain things, how... I have no doubts that I had to be much more aware of what I could do and what I couldn't do, aware of my status as a migrant and my status as a Pole in the American environment. It was a feeling... a multiple sense that it was an unequal status, a will to be... to climb to other levels but impossible to accomplish because of the language and culture gap, a will to become somebody else. And this I have no doubts about. And at the same time, it was about possibilities. And because of that, to be somebody else, but it was also about looking at what being different is going to give me, what kind of new possibilities. Being different also has big advantages, because it allows us to grasp new means. We may take advantage of this position, well, the position on the margins, which is not... not in the middle of what's going on, to look at it, to analyze it differently. So that's how feminism was born for me. It was born through experiences, through emigration, it was also born through the fact that in the 80's when I was... well, I was there once in 1979 and then as late as in the mid-80's, because it was the time of martial law¹⁵² and later on relatively rigid restrictions and... and in the meantime, I had a daughter and... by the way, I was supposed to come to Poland with my daughter on the 13th of December [laughter], for Christmas, and this visit fell through, of course. So there was this feeling of being a Pole in the United States and it caused...

¹⁵² **Martial Law:** limitations on civil liberties implemented on December 13, 1981, in order to stop social activism aiming at fundamental reforms of the social and political system in the Polish People's Republic. It was confirmed by the National Council's (Rada Państwa) decree, even though issuing decrees was unconstitutional during Parliament's (Sejm) session. Prepared since August 1980, it was justified by a threat of coup d'état and take-over of power by the opposition gathered around "Solidarity," economic collapse, and a possibility of Soviet intervention. The chief administrative organ during Martial Law was the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Martial Law regulations limited basic civil liberties, introduced curfew, and suspended all activities by social organizations and trade unions. Martial Law militarized main branches of the economy, banned travel, and introduced censorship of correspondence and summary judicial process. Activists from "Solidarity" and political opposition, as well as some politicians from the pre-August 1980 regime, were interned (approximately 10 thousand people in all). The remaining "Solidarity" activists went underground, organizing demonstrations and strikes in factories and coal mines, suppressed by riot police (ZOMO), which often used heavy military equipment (9 coal miners were killed in the Wujek Coal Mine in December 1981, and there were fatalities in Lublin in August 1982). Demonstration participants, underground activists, and "Solidarity" members were fired from their jobs, harassed, and coerced to sign "declarations of loyalty." With the collaboration of Secret Police, employees of the judicial system, education, public administration and mass media were being vetted. The society at large reacted with organizing a boycott of all organizations and institutions controlled by the authorities; underground press and publishing ensured the independent flow of information. The Catholic Church undertook a broad campaign of helping those persecuted by the government. The underground "Solidarity" was receiving moral and material support from international organizations and labor centers. As a result of a deteriorating economic and political situation, martial law was repealed on July 22, 1983 (but repressive practices and some parts of the legislation survived till 1989), and in February 1992, the Sejm decided its implementation to have been illegal.

I mean a Pole... being a woman from Poland... it wasn't really about nationalist... no, not really, not this direction, but being... being from Poland, being a woman in the United States, but at the same time having family and friends in Poland brought about this feeling of being in-between. That I'm kind of there but there are links here, too, and this... this has remained with me. I am always... always... home is here and home is also there... that is home is in Poland, but home is also in the United States. And well, as a matter of fact, I need this flight over the ocean, this kind of space... something Homi Bhabha called this kind of third space, or in other words, the space in-between. I need it to change in some way... I mean not really change but to re-group, to leave some things and some issues behind, and depending which direction I'm flying, to start thinking about things and about the context and about what's going on, and what... what I'll be waiting for and doing and so forth. And I noticed this in a very conscious way that when I'm flying, for example, I read different newspaper depending on the direction, or what I start thinking about... or... well, definitely... these are... this is this kind of time of transition. But this... this is also a part of feminism. It is this... this kind of consciousness. This is the consciousness of who I am and what... what kind of an impact the environment has on me, what... what the priorities are, what's important and so forth, and that means this context, this awareness of the context in which I function, work, teach, and act is very important to me. And it was definitely growing with... let's say with the growing intensity of my actions, my involvement. So one thing is definitely in the area of personal experiences. I think that the second element that was very important to me was definitely getting a job at Rutgers and becoming something... which is really unique... And I had offers and options of leaving the university and relocating to another university. Because my husband works at UCLA, in Los Angeles, we've been traveling for 14 years. And this was the moment we could get out of that to live together somewhere, that means one of us could move to the other's university. And I had this offer, but I ended up staying at Rutgers. And I stayed in Rutgers as a result of a very deliberate choice, because I believe that there are no better conditions than the ones created for me by this institution. I mean the climate of feminism, the fact that I'm currently heading a department of 30 people, the Women's and Gender Studies Department, that I have 120 graduate faculty members, who are working... who are willing to work with the students, and the fact that I have 80 more affiliated faculty members. This is simply a completely unique situation. The fact that I have five institutes, centers, with which I can collaborate. It simply creates the kind of climate, where, well, I feel great, I simply... I'm really alive there. I'm alive, and it's not that I live like... you know, I have a job and I go to work I hate, but I have friends there, I have feminist discussions, I have the right kind of climate. It doesn't mean I don't have problems. It doesn't mean, you know, that some higher-ups and the administration don't do various things like... that they don't want to give us stuff and such. But there is this vibrating kind of atmosphere. Something is going on, people are coming all the time, and it's possible to do things. It's enough that we sit down together, four or five of us, and we can come up with something. I have simply... I have a feeling that everything is possible. I have a completely... like... like it's happening right now. And, of course, there are some limits, but I really have a feeling that I can go and do things, and that it's really just about having ideas. And this gives me some incredible sense of power and maybe... also some lack of understanding of how the world works outside of this institution, because one gets used to things. And, of course, when we speak about having difficulties and others talk about their difficulties, these difficulties are very often quite different. Others say to us: Well, you have no idea what you have. And, of course, we have no idea, and, of course, we want more and better things. In other words, what shaped me was obviously the fact that there were... that there was this working together, since

after all I've been at Rutgers since 1982, and these 23 years of building things together, teaching together, and together bringing about the creation of the department. The department was created as late as 2000, and before that there was only the program. Well, at the same time, this year we're celebrating the 35th anniversary of the moment when Elaine Showalter¹⁵³ first taught her course "Women and Literature" in 1969. So for the last 35 years, this institution has been working on creating, you know, this... this feminist context. And there are tensions, of course, and there are struggles, because feminisms vary, everybody has different visions about how to act, how to create this kind of lively interdisciplinary discourse, how to depart from individual disciplines. And here, in the department, with these 30 people, I collaborate with ten departments. I have connections, so it's with English and Political Science and Sociology and... I don't know, with Geography, with... with Spanish Lit and so on, and so on. So there are very many opportunities like this. But it's interesting, and it's very, very influential. In other words, it's about the people and the institutional context... an opportunity... some kind of trust and, you know, some kind of safety that I can speak about certain things, that I can teach certain things and it won't be used against me, that I'm not acting against... let's say... and that is often a problem in academic circles. On the one hand, you know, people are being expected to do certain things in order to get these different degrees, to get tenure, to get promoted. On the other hand... in other words, I'm supposed... people are supposed to be innovative, smart... to publish and so on. But if you're a feminist, building programs and so on... and of course we're doing a lot of things, which later on don't really translate into getting promoted, you know. So here is this conflict, this tension. Being a feminist in the academy is actually very difficult, because it requires extra strength, work and activism, because, on the one hand, we're keen on building and creating things and so on, but on the other hand, we have to respond to a certain promotion formula used in the academic community. And these two don't go together at all, so there is a strong tension here. Rutgers, however, gives some opportunities to lots and lots of people, and I don't want to say here that there are no problems, but it has created this kind of context, which is quite essential. So people... so, so institutions, well, well, are very important. The third thing is, of course, that if you're involved in ... when you have this sense... this sense of feminism, understanding and accepting certain values, well, it's obvious you need to carry it out practically. And here, this theory and practice is for me, for my version of feminism... since there are, of course, feminists who are only involved theoretically, but in my version of feminism, this practical activism is very, very important. So how do I link practice and theory? What am I getting out of theory and out of practice? And my approach here is... these are not two different things, but rather these are... it is some kind of a joint area... where while teaching... lecturing, I'm just using this feminist practice. At the same time, when I organize education workshops... or work for NGOs,¹⁵⁴ I draw on theory a lot, both consciously and unconsciously. I translate what I've read, most likely not even thinking I'm translating anything. For me, this opportunity for activism and the necessity of connecting the academic community... translating things into practice was very important. It started with me at the end of the 80's or rather during the 1980's, because at that time I had already tried arranging some formal contacts between Rutgers and the Warsaw University, for example. Because I'm a graduate of the Warsaw University, already in 1985 or 1986, I managed to arrange the first such contract. As a result, people started to come.

¹⁵³ **Showalter, Elaine** (1941-): feminist literary critic and Professor of English at Princeton University.

¹⁵⁴ **NGO**: Non-Governmental Organization.

Ania Titkow¹⁵⁵ came then and many other people. Magda Środa¹⁵⁶ came, and quite a few other female sociologists, as it happened, so it wasn't just lawyers [sic]¹⁵⁷ – Eleonora Zielińska¹⁵⁸, Mirka Marody¹⁵⁹, well, the whole group of them came to Rutgers then. So this was already some form of activism in a way. And then 1989 came and I really went into local democracy issues, into issues related to civic society. It was a conscious decision, since I was never too excited about parliaments and these other central institutions, but for me, this whole issue of democracy, or transformation, was to a large extent situated on the local level. I mean the local level of various activities, because at the beginning I got really involved in local government structures, and in general, in the reform toward decentralization, and this was my area of research and work and writing. What's interesting is that in spite of the fact that on the one hand, my feminism was really developing in the 80's, that period of transformation... its first years were very... Women's and feminist organizations had already begun developing, but I had some difficulties with introducing women's issues into these local government institutions. It was hard to talk about them, because local governments were strongly dominated by men. It was... there was a certain lack of awareness, both among men and women, but right away I did some research, for example, on mayors, city presidents, female mayors, well... or in other words with the female cadres in local governments. There were so few of these women that it was simply possible to interview all of them, to get their addresses and do it, and I still have these interviews. And it's such historic material. I wrote a few articles based on it, but I hold on to this material, because it's... I'll go back to it. I know I'll go back to it. And some of these interviews are fascinating. So this meant that I already had some material to work with and I could see, for example, what the barriers were and what the difficulties were. And later on, while organizing various education workshops for local government people, well, I was always trying to arrange for the same numbers of men and women, so that, you know, some standards were kept and people could be drawn in and taught. But there was this moment in 1992 or maybe in 1993 when I realized... We have... we had this kind of a program for activating local communities. It was organized by the Local Democracy Development Foundation,¹⁶⁰ which I helped create, and it was carried out in a few centers, and we had various groups and seminars there. It was this kind of a two-year program, financed by Pew Charitable Trusts,¹⁶¹ and in a second or third seminar, I realized...

¹⁵⁵ **Titkow, Anna:** Professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. Leader of the Research on Women and Family Group. (Ania is diminutive for Anna.)

¹⁵⁶ **Środa, Magdalena:** Commissioner on the Status of Equality in Marek Belka's government. An ethicist and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warsaw.

¹⁵⁷ Regulska most likely meant to say "sociologists" not "lawyers."

¹⁵⁸ **Zielińska, Eleonora** (1945-): Professor of Law and Administration at the University of Warsaw. An expert on violence against women.

¹⁵⁹ **Marody, Mira:** Professor of social psychology at the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw. Her areas of interest include theory of social behavior, theory of social representations, socio-linguistics, political-values studies, methodology of science.

¹⁶⁰ **Local Democracy Development Foundation:** (alternatively, The Foundation in Support of Local Democracy [trans.]) aims to disseminate the idea of civil self-governance, perceived as the fundamental form of democracy. Training is the main activity of its support of local self-governance. Aside from training in local self-governance, local leaders, councilors, representatives of local authorities and non-governmental organizations participate in a number of other programs such as study tours, seminars, and meetings in the effort to support local governance. [<http://www.wmd.org/wbdo/oct-nov02/capacity.html>]

¹⁶¹ **Pew Charitable Trusts:** an independent nonprofit, which is the sole beneficiary of seven individual charitable funds established between 1948 and 1979 by two sons and two daughters of Sun Oil Company founder Joseph N. Pew and his wife, Mary Anderson Pew. It serves the public interest by providing information, advancing policy solutions and supporting civic life.

Even though since the very beginning the selection criteria were... we were taking... creating small groups and there were both women and men in these groups, so that if we're building something, we could also build this dialog between them. But I realized these women weren't there. The third meeting, the fourth meeting and I lost them. I'm going into the room and thinking: What's going on? I'm thinking... Is there something special going on today? Have we chosen some bad day, or what? They aren't there. No, well, they're not there; that's no good. So we're going on with the seminar, but right afterwards I say we have to do some kind of an intervention, we have to get back to these women who haven't come today and find out what happened, why these women aren't here, since I can see some of them aren't here and when I talk to them later, they're saying they've withdrawn, they won't... and so on and so forth. So we did these quick interviews with these women, and it turns out... here is "the mayor hasn't let me go," here is "my husband hasn't allowed me to go to the seminar," here is "I was so exhausted, so tired that I simply couldn't do it," and so on and so forth, or "the men from my group are treating me badly and I can't cope with this rudeness. Or, in other words, all these barriers I was fully aware of worked in such a way that we were beginning to lose these women. And this is a rather important moment for me in my activism when I said... and it may be interpreted as a certain radicalization of my feminism, but I said to myself: Enough is enough! If that's the case, I'm going to organize seminars just for women. Democracy is great but that's enough. I kept fund-raising, and I did get a lot of funds for the Local Democracy Development Foundation and all the actions... if that's the case, let's do... let's begin creating programs only... anyway, at least the ones I'll be involved in... and I don't have... I'm tired and life is short... I mean I have the strength but I'll do it differently in some way... I have no strength to haggle with... with these barriers and I may change that, but my method of changing these barriers will be, well, through empowering women. Because of this, we're organizing programs, which are definitely targeting women. And, well, with my collaborator Anne Graham¹⁶², we created a whole sequence of programs for activating women. And it was about some... about creating conditions to, first of all, make women think what they themselves want to do, what skills they have, and about supporting them psychologically, giving them certain tools, creating... Through such programs, some mechanisms are also created, which allow women to go back to their own communities and using this as some sort of a stepping-stone like... they can say something, they are, you know, elected, they're active in this program, they are... and this gives them an opportunity to get in and to ask questions. So we had this one exercise to kind of... so that they went and did this so-called inventory of town issues... or village issues. But the main goal was to make it possible for them to go and interview the mayor or the deputy mayor, or some specific local government staff, or business people and so on. What did... did this kind of an exercise give them? First of all, it gives them an opportunity to gain some knowledge. Second of all, it gives them an opportunity for personal networking, so they begin to be known in their local communities. That means that I stay away, I don't really have to deal with it, because I just gave them the idea and they had to carry it out. On their own, they mobilize people locally by their actions. They become visible. They try out what they can do. They had to prepare for it, and they did all the work! It was generally... I left and I was gone. But whatever they heard... and by the way, they were saying themselves that what was really important was the fact that it gave them an opportunity to gain some existence in this local space. And to gain some awareness. And, of course, the result was that this sense of empowerment and awareness also woke them up to

¹⁶² **Graham, Anne:** Member of the Center for Russian, Central and East European Studies at Rutgers University. In Poland, Graham organized workshops to involve women and citizens in local governments.

feminism. They hardly... as it usually happens, they hardly admit they're feminists, you know, because everybody is often afraid of this word "feminism" and this is another chapter of this conversation, but... but the result was that they, nonetheless, started acting, functioning... They would come back after this exercise, well, simply as if the new world had opened up before them. It was, first of all, because of what they found out there, and second of all, they got to understand how these local relations were working... like what some people tell them and others don't, and how they were being treated. So they gained some experience, experience they didn't have. So they felt more... visible and more... able, more capable of acting, and so on, and so on, and so on. So this is also this kind of... in part, creating feminism, very much from a distance and with the assumption that these women are really doing this on their own, and it doesn't matter what I'll do, or what other people will do.

SW: That's right, but let's talk about how it was with you. You were also active in the feminist movement; you got involved in the Polish and American feminist organizations. Was this an important stage in your life? Was it...?

JR: I mean... this involvement... involvement in various organizations... was gradual and it was at the same time... because together with these other programs it caused, of course... and here doing these programs... with women was later transformed into involvement in NGOs and activism. From 1993 to 1994, I was in Poland for a year when I was on sabbatical. At that point, I generally worked on public administration reform, since I was at Michał Kulesza's¹⁶³ office, in the Council of Ministers Office, so, for a year, I was exactly in the very center of some political changes. I had... had a General Marshall Fund scholarship, but at the same time, together with Grażyna Kopińska¹⁶⁴, I created this informal women's group "Women, Too." And this was my moment of informal activism, but it was again a very formal connection between what I saw in these programs, this lack of women in the public sphere, in the political sphere... but it wasn't related to political parties, because I wasn't at all excited about parties... I'm not... I'm totally not interested. And creating this informal group "Women, Too" was great, well, a great experience. And it was also sort of an influential moment, of course. We just started meeting at my place, in Warsaw, and started organizing these monthly meetings. It was before the local elections, in the spring of 1994, and there was another wave of elections and we wanted as many women as possible, of course. So I organized these meetings. We created a whole series of materials... materials, and publications. We wrote a guidebook on how to win elections... how to win elections and how to run. I initiated contacts with the American organization... National Women's Political Caucus, which is a national... women's... this kind of organization like a political caucus, political organization, which in the States publishes these kinds of materials for female candidates running for office. We asked if we could use their materials, translated them and then made adjustments to Polish movements. There was little time, so writing everything from scratch... when some things had already been done, even though I always have some doubts, since things don't always work, but at this point it was like a short cut. So we took it, did a translation, and kicked out all the American stuff, since we saw it was written for Americans, and we were creating this Polish reality, since it's obviously a different culture and you can't run a campaign like in America, you can't... there are different rules and so on, and so forth. And, in

¹⁶³ **Kulesza, Michał:** Professor of Law and Administration at the University of Warsaw and the School of Business in Nowy Sacz.

¹⁶⁴ **Kopińska, Grażyna:** Director of the Program "Against Corruption" sponsored by the Batory Foundation.

addition, we wrote this whole... like a guidebook about local government. We were doing meetings, we were doing this kind of a local government emergency, and our girls were traveling all over Poland with these materials. We managed to get the money even though we were an informal group, from the Norwegian, Swedish, and Canadian Embassies. It was all foreign money, since at this point, there was no way we could get any Polish resources. But we did get the money and we were publishing these... these materials. We did some seminars for... because one thing is clear, of course, that the press is this force, which shapes our space... and stereotypes and so on in a very fundamental way. Because of this, we asked... we got in touch with *Gazeta Wyborcza* (*The Electoral Gazette*) and invited... and organized this two-day seminar for female journalists, for journalists from the local press, from these local "electoral gazettes." Our point was to make them realize that when they're looking at the candidates, when they're looking for candidates, they should realize that there are women there as well, so let them promote women, let them ask questions, let them ask political candidates about what they would do for women, let them promote female candidates. And here we got together a lot of various male and female journalists. And again, there were seminars and materials again and again... because at this point, in 1994, journalists still needed to be educated about local government. So the situation was rather complicated, because on the one hand there were these women's issues, but on the other hand, it was necessary to tell them about local governments, because they really didn't understand... they didn't quite know what kind of questions they should ask about local governments, since it was this early period. So... so we took... invite... asked some people for this seminar, for example. I remember Jacek Kuroń¹⁶⁵ speaking about citizenship, about the civil society, and Jerzy Regulski¹⁶⁶, a former government official in charge of local government issues, spoke about local government structures. But there were also female activists, feminists, female leaders, so that these two groups could get... you know. And these were all super kinds of actions... Well, it was very... a bit... a bit... I won't say that we've completely revolutionized the local government market and that we've had some tremendous achievements, but in this first stage... the flood of information certainly went out, things were certainly happening. This feminist group... or maybe not quite, you can't really say that it... At the beginning there was perhaps more and later on, it might have changed a bit. But, but... because there were women there and there were feminists, too, and it was kind of more... Well, Grażyna Kopyńska continued it as... as a co-founder, and this group has survived and it's still there. They celebrated their tenth anniversary a year ago. And it is still an informal group. Later on, there were some spectacular actions, where these women also did books... did great... they did this campaign during parliamentary elections when they would ask questions of political parties, when they organiz... , when there were..., when they bought billboards and ads on street cars, and so on,

¹⁶⁵ **Kuroń, Jacek** (1934-2004): a politician and political writer. A youth movement activist from 1954 to 1961 and a member of the Polish United Workers Party (PZPR), he was expelled after publishing an open letter to the Party members. As a result of his opposition activities, he was imprisoned from 1964 to 1967 and 1968 to 1971. In 1976, he co-founded the Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR). An advisor to the national leadership of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" in 1980-1981, he was interned and imprisoned in 1980 and in 1981-1984. In 1989, he was a co-architect of the Round Table agreements, which initiated the fall of the Polish People's Republic. Since 1989, he was a deputy to the Sejm (Parliament). In 1989-1990 and 1992-1993, a Minister of Labor and Social Policy, he was a co-founder of the Democratic Union in 1990, and after its transformation, in 1994, became a member of the Freedom Union. He received unwavering popular respect and received a medal of the French Legion of Honor.

¹⁶⁶ **Regulski, Jerzy**: an expert in local government and professor of urban studies. One of the co-founders of the Foundation for the Development of Local Government.

and so on, and so on. It was a very big organization... various opportunities for activism. Well, and for me, it was a very short but very intense period of feminist activism, so to speak, in my own organization, and later on it was with other organizations. Of course, with Ośka¹⁶⁷, we did a whole series of programs and we published a series of books, including a guide on how to be... on how to be active in public life, on how to be active in political life. At the same time, of course, I have this... this second life there, in America, and because of this, I live here and I live there, so of course, I was commuting back and forth, but the Network of East-West Women¹⁶⁸ was created and I too was in Dubrovnik, with Ann Snitow¹⁶⁹ and Sławka Walczewska¹⁷⁰ and with many other people, at this first organizing conference in Dubrovnik. And, well, I have remained with the Network¹⁷¹, getting involved with building this organization, in building this dialog over the ocean, in building various programs... in the board of directors, and later I was the chairwoman of the board. And that's how it was. I was active all this time, because this gave me an opportunity for extending a bridge between me in Poland and me [laughter] in the United States, of this fantastic bridge, actually a feminist bridge, so more and more, this is a group in which... this feminism of mine may develop, act and shape.

SW: Yes, exactly. You were talking about these two homes: the Polish one and the American one. Could you possibly talk some more about the Polish home, since you've said that the migration experience was so significant in terms of your interest in women's issues, feminist issues, but it's not the case with all immigrants, female immigrants and female migrants. Do you remember anything here, in Poland, any situations, events, contacts with parents, friends, male and female friends from school, anything that caused the fact that these feminist ideas found a fertile soil in you? Could you tell us about something like this? Or, perhaps, there was nothing like this?

JR: It's hard. I mean, there certainly were... there certainly were, there certainly were events, which... which did in some ways... because at home it wasn't like that... I always had a lot of support and... I never really fought with my parents... because they believed that I was kind of

167 **Ośka**: the Information Center for Women's Groups is a non-profit, independent foundation, initiated in 1995, which supports women's organizations and initiatives, promotes women's participation in public and social life, and provides knowledge and information for all people interested in the situation of women and in feminism in Poland and in the world.

168 **Network of East-West Women**: founded in 1991 NEWW is an international communication and resource network supporting dialogue, informational exchange, and activism among those concerned about the status of women in Central and Eastern Europe, the Newly Independent States, and the Russian Federation. NEWW coordinates research and advocacy that supports women's equality and full participation in all aspects of public and private life. NEWW's overarching goal is to support the formation of independent women's movements and to strengthen the capacities of women and women's NGOs to influence policy regarding women's lives. [<http://www.neww.org/en.php/home/index/0.html>]

169 **Snitow, Ann**: a feminist activist, literary critic, and essayist. Snitow teaches literature and gender studies at Eugene Lang College and the Graduate Faculty of the New School University. She is the chair of The Network of East-West Women.

170 **Walczewska, Sławka**: Director of the Women's Foundation eFKa in Cracow, Poland and Global Feminisms Poland Site Coordinator. Co-founder of the Green Party 2004 and author of *Ladies, Knights, and Feminists: Women's Discourse in Poland* (1999).

¹⁷¹ The founding meeting of the **Network of East-West Women** took place in Dubrovnik in June of 1991. An international network of women and women's organizations in Central and Eastern Europe as well as countries of the former Soviet Union and the United States. It works to support the development, cooperation, and education of women. [<http://www.neww.org/en.php/home/index/0.html>]

independent and kind of maybe... radical in my views and in saying things and at the same time kind of saucy, since... I... I, well, I knew... knew what I wanted and so forth. But my parents never forced me to do anything, to do this or that, like playing the piano... No, I... I actually regret, for example, that I never learned how to play an instrument, but my parents... I didn't want to, so my parents didn't force me to do it. So I had a lot of freedom to act and to shape my own personality. I came up with the idea that I would major in physics, which later, when I was already a student in the Physics Department, turned out to be a completely senseless idea, because... because as a matter of fact, I wanted to study biophysics, but it was a long way and, in general, that wasn't it. Because of this, I came up with the idea of studying geography later on, because... this kind of social geography, geography of populations... something like this... I didn't know... I was looking for something. For example, if anthropology had been more developed, I would have most likely seen myself in anthropology rather than in geography, but I absolutely don't regret it, because it gave me... it gave me a lot. And later on, there was this... this new geography now, on the socio-political space and so on, so here... here, so to speak, I have found myself. But my home gave me this sense that... that I can do things... that I should; my parents always supported me. For example, this idea of going to England for... in the 1970's... I don't quite remember, most likely, it was my father's idea that it would actually be a good idea for me to go some place and work somewhere, to do something professionally. My parents believed, for example, that if I were to go and so on, it would make sense to develop professionally. And in 1973, I went to Great Britain for more than a year, for almost a year and a half, where I worked as an urban planner, because my field was geography of urban centers. And my father, who knew some British planners, came up with this thing... It turned out that urban planning seniors had this so-called internship in the City Hall, in the office... in the Urban Planning Department, and I jumped right into it, and it was a wonderful year! Mostly because I really learned a lot. There was this moment, for example, which was also important in shaping my awareness, when we were doing the so-called social planning and it wasn't about this rigid..., you know, sitting bent over a map and drawing, but we were going into the city and asking people about the borderlines of a given... given district, or a given... given local community, about how these borders were being shaped, and what they... what the problems were and so on, and so on. These were my first attempts of seeing this... this variety in people's identities, because Coventry, for example, in spite of its fundamental similarities to many Polish cities, since it was also bombed during the last war, and also had a very strong car industry, so there were these mosen... these elements. That is, it's strongly diversified ethnically and racially. And because of this, for me, it was a look at ethnic issues, at racial issues, at class issues, or in other words, a confrontation with a strong social stratification. And that was something... something never quite discussed here... something we never paid any attention to, you know, since we were all equal in all respects. And here was this confrontation. And it certainly made me sensitive, because I still remember it vividly at this very moment. I remember exactly the moment of standing there and asking people questions, and I remember the answers about how things were happening and, you know, this... this... this diversity. So this was also a shaping moment, very... very much so. And it was, so to speak, related to my home, because... you know.

SW: But earlier, in Poland, among your family, relatives, in school or college – was there anything that would get you...?

JR: Well... I'll tell you... kind of, no, no, no, I don't have such... such... The only... only element that definitely shaped me as a person, including also this issues of being different or having a different identity, was my health thing, because I had many surgeries. I was born with a bilateral congenital dislocation of the hip and I had ten surgeries. Actually, my whole childhood, elementary school and high school, was between hospitals and schools, one way or another. And this certainly shaped me as a fighter, a toughie, knowing that it was possible... because there were no limits, no, no obstacles; one simply has to figure out how to overcome these obstacles. So this definitely shaped me, and my parents, of course, played a major role here, because they didn't shape me to become a poor, sick person in need of care, who couldn't cope with things, and who was in some way handicapped and because of this couldn't do anything. They rather pushed it to the other extreme, and that is, well, it's hard, it is, but you need... it's normal and you need... you need to go forward, and you need to function, and you need to think about... about how to organize it the best way you can. And, as for... So again, my home shaped me as a person. Well, and there is no doubt that I was different and I am still different, because it's simply... it's physically clear that something is... that there is something wrong with me, or in other words, that I'm different... and this is the physical stigma related to some limitations. This, of course, also causes me... that I kind of have these layers of being different in my identity, the layers... that I'm different because... because I'm physically limited. Children at school are cruel, so they often reminded me about it, running after me and yelling that I was a duck or something like this. So there was this awareness, this sense of awareness that people are different and have different capabilities, but for me it was, again, not that I was in some way handicapped, but rather that I was different. I have different limitations and simply different capabilities than somebody else has. Therefore, for me, it's not the so-called "disability" but rather it's "ability," but a different level of ability. It definitely shaped me in some way. And, well, migration definitely shaped me, because here again I'm different, traveling back and forth. So here are these levels of being... being different. So here my home undoubtedly shaped me, too, maybe not in the clearly feminist discourse, but it shaped my identity in a conscious way by giving me these opportunities, by treating me this particular way, and by seeing me... not as just some future mother or head of the family or... or as some other... other, you know, label but rather by seeing me as a professional woman, a woman who has interests and skills she should develop. And also by giving me this opportunity or even..., for example,... and I remember it very well that my parents really wanted me to go abroad to work in my field and not to go and just work somewhere washing pots or...or...or dishes. It's not that I have anything against washing pots or dishes, since when I left for the United States, for the first six months I did the most diverse things and I did sewing piece work and so on, so it doesn't really matter, since all work is honorable. There is, however, a certain awareness, you know, about how they see my role and my position and who I'm supposed to be, and what kind of expectations they had for me, and how they were willing to use their experience or their contacts and so on to make it an easier start for me. And certainly, this trip to the States... to... to England, well, changed me very much, because... because it opened, you know, some completely new opportunities to see things. I learned a lot; again, it shaped my... my identity, my intuition, my perceptions and so on, and so on. So these elements, well, were somehow very influential. My home in America, on the other hand, is obviously the whole area of completely different experiences such as the experience of landing with two suitcases and twenty dollars, of having a boyfriend and later on having a daughter, and later I was a single mother. So I went through all these stages of development, marriages, divorces and so forth. It was very, very hard, and at the same time, I was working,

getting... doing my doctorate, getting a job. And later on, it was “let’s move, since I got a job,” and as a result of that, of course, there was a divorce and so on. So this was a very important period of shaping my professional position in the United States, but at the same time, there was a custody fight and courts. I remember this one moment, when I’m standing there and the other party’s lawyer is asking me: “So are you a professional woman? Do you work at the university?” “Yes, I work at the university.” “So, in order to get tenure, you have to write whatever many articles?” “Yes, I have to write articles.” And I still don’t understand where we’re going with this. Well, and suddenly, I begin to realize, because the next question is: “And how much time does it take you to write an article?” And I’m thinking to myself, well, this question is like... that whatever I’ll say now, the next question will be: If you have to write five articles, and it takes you, well... I don’t know, five months, let’s say, it means you have no time to take care of a child. And this was, of course, a custody fight about who will take care of the child. And... these were... this consciousness, and well, I was just standing there and had this sense of how hard it was. Here was this fight, here is you know... this thing... here is my professional life and whatever I’ll say will be used against me, and here is the child. Women who were supposed to come to court to testify... were afraid, I mean women from the day care or something like that, since they were needed, and the woman who came later was harassed by the other side in a terrible way. So this home, this early home was really making it very hard, because... this... this feminism of mine was at this point becoming more and more radical, because, after all, these were my rights, my future, my life, the life of my child, and so on, and so on. And later on, it was just a regular life and being a single mother for a few years, and that involved some strategic... undertaking some strategic decisions, you know, about... about how to shape things, how to build this new home and how... how... how to set things up financially, and so on, and so on. But it all allows you to pluck up some courage; this kind of an experience causes... these experiences are very important, because they allow different outlooks on things – I’m not claiming everybody should go through this – but they shape... again, they shape both your identity and your understanding... your looking at others and ... just some kind of an opportunity to see what matters.

SW: So now, let me ask this typical reporter’s question, really a reporter’s question, but... but maybe... well, at any rate, I’m interested in what you’d say to your daughter. You have a daughter and you’re involved with feminism. What is a feminist message from you to your daughter?

JR: Well, she learned feminism at home [laughter], and feminism was often discussed at the dinner table... She was learning that she should make her own decisions and that she should... have a feeling that she’s able... that she can do things. I remember, for example, when recently she told me: “You know, actually, after all these...,” because she had a very difficult relationship with her father, and it’s actually still rather complicated nowadays, but she said to me: “You know, I have this feeling that I can really cope with any situation.” And for me, no matter which direction she’ll follow, whether she’ll be a radical feminist or whether... And, actually, now I really don’t know... Last year, she got married, so she has a husband, and they’ve been traveling around the world for the last two years and... but there is that feeling... it’s possible to claim that she’s aware she’ll always be okay and that she... So, well, I think I’ve done a good job, since I must have given her something like that, either through my actions, or through talking, or through what she saw and did at home, but she did, well, inherit this. So this is very good. By the

way, she has this deep sense of social justice, a need to get involved in social issues. She's a professional photographer, she was a photography major in college and..., and when she was a student, she got involved locally with various ethnic groups, using art, working with children, and so on. So, this is... She... we kind of laugh together that I'm a more radical feminist than she, that here... She's simply laughing about it... when we talk, that I'm kind of more... But I know that some elements have been passed down to her and this... she's got feminism inside her, this sensitivity... this sensitivity toward the other... toward other groups, toward diversity, and so on, and so on, it's really there. So it's definitely there. I think she's politically radical, so that these elements have been passed down to her.

JOANNA REGULSKA

- April 7, 1951** Born in Warsaw
- 1975** Graduated from the Geography Department of the Warsaw University
- 1973-74** Student internship in Great Britain
- 1976-82** Doctoral studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences
- 1980** Birth of a daughter, Anna Maria
- 1982** Employed by Rutgers University
- 1989** Co-founded the Local Democracy Development Foundation and the Program “Local Democracy Partnership” (early name “Local Democracy in Poland) in the U.S.
- 1992** Founder and director of the Center for Central and Eastern European Studies at Rutgers University
- 1993-94** Worked in the Ministry for the Public Administration Reform in Poland. Co-founded the group “Women Too.”
- 1996-98** Co-director of the “Gender and Culture Program” CEU in Budapest, Hungary.
- 2000** Director of the Women’s Studies Program at Rutgers University
- 1996 and 2004** Awarded important state medals in Poland

Lives in the United States and Poland

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Małgorzata Tarasiewicz
Interviewer: Sławomira Walczewska**

Location: Gdańsk

Date: July 4, 2003

Translated from the Polish by Kasia Kietlińska



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Malgorzata Tarasiewicz was born in Sopot, Poland in 1960. She is the organizer and leader of the Polish section of the Network of East-West Women. Tarasiewicz became involved in anti-Communist university strikes as a student during the early 1980s, which eventually led to her activism on behalf of women's rights. She admits that the labor unions with which she was involved were anti-feminist, especially during the early 1990s with the national anti-abortion debate supported by the overwhelmingly male leadership of the Solidarity Labor Union and the Catholic Church. Tarasiewicz has a son and lives in Gdańsk.

Sławomira Walczewska founded the Women's Foundation (eFKa) in Kraków in 1995. In 1999, Walczewska published *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Feminist Discourse in Poland*, the first Polish book about women's emancipation from a historical and a cultural perspective. As a feminist activist and a scholar, she is interested in international women's movements and is firmly committed to understanding various differences and intersections of global feminisms.

Małgorzata Tarasiewicz
July 4, 2003
Gdańsk

Sławomira Walczewska: Today is the 4th of July 2003. I'm in the office of Malgosia¹⁷² Tarasiewicz, head of the *Network of East West Women Poland*. We will talk about feminism and about life, about what kind of place feminism and your involvement in feminism have in your own life. How did it happen? Where did it come from? How did it start? Here's a request for you to tell a little bit about yourself, about where you were born, in what kind of a family, what your childhood was like, about the moment when you believe you started thinking about being a woman, about relations between men and women. But for now, please tell me where you were born, and how you were beginning your life.

Małgorzata Tarasiewicz: I welcome you. I think I need to start at the very beginning, or actually even earlier than when I was conceived, because my family is the kind of family, which suffered tragically as a result of World War II. I was born already quite a while after the war, but nonetheless I felt the painful consequences of what had happened then. Well, on my mother's side, only women survived the war, since all the male family members were killed. And so my great-grandmother, my grandmother and my mother came to Sopot from Warsaw¹⁷³. Sopot belongs to the so-called Regained Territories,¹⁷⁴ which means that this is where after the World War II there was a huge migration of people who either moved from the east, where they had been exiled from, or were coming here, to the area unknown to them, because they didn't want to live in the places they had lived during the war. And this was the case of women from my family, because to them, Warsaw, where they came from, was associated with such dramatic experiences¹⁷⁵ that they wanted some change of place. And this way, these three women, my great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother, found themselves in this completely new world, where they had to organize their lives from scratch. And never again did any man find his way into the lives of my great-grandmother and grandmother. My mother, on the other hand, had a brief relationship with my father, and I am, so to speak, the fruit of that, but then, my father left

¹⁷² Diminutive for the name "Małgorzata."

¹⁷³ **The Warsaw Uprising** (1 Aug. 1944 – 2 Oct. 1944): a struggle against the German occupying forces undertaken in Warsaw by the Home Army (AK) troops. The lack of perspective for a successful turn of events as well as the casualties suffered by the Polish forces persuaded the AK commanders to start capitulation negotiations with the Germans (9-10 Sept.). On 10 Sept. 1944, when the Soviets started their offensive toward Warsaw, the Poles broke off their earlier negotiations. However, the Red Army offensive stopped at the other side of the Vistula River. Warsaw was left mostly in ruins; its reconstruction started right after the war and took three years.

¹⁷⁴ After the Yalta Conference, Poland received lands, which belonged to the Third Reich before World War II, in compensation for territories lost in the east (in today's Lithuania and Ukraine) on behalf of the Soviet Union.

¹⁷⁵ **The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising** (19 Apr. 1943 – 8 May 1943): a self-defense struggle undertaken by the Jewish Resistance Organization and the Jewish Military Union against the German occupying forces. The Jews started the action when German troops entered the Ghetto in order to deport the remaining population to death camps. Until April 24, the defenders continued their struggle in a few close blocks, and then, until May 8, they fought in separate buildings and fortified basements. Small groups of fighters managed to survive in the Ghetto, and were systematically destroyed by the Germans, till the middle of July, but the organized Jewish resistance broke down on May 18. Only few survivors managed to get out of the Ghetto, and those who had not died fighting were deported by the Germans to the Treblinka concentration camp and were murdered there. The Ghetto was completely destroyed.

Poland and I didn't see him any more for over ten years. So these three... so I was raised by these three women, who had gone through traumatic experiences and great loneliness, and who... for whom this post-war reality was very difficult, quite awful really, but in spite of that, they managed to cope in a completely new place, where they had to organize everything from scratch. And I was growing up in just this kind of surrounding, this environment, and I think this had a tremendous impact on me, because I didn't really know any man in my direct environment, because even during the brief relationship my parents had, my father was in college in another city, so I was with women all the time. So I didn't really feel what many people may feel and that is that a man is somehow indispensable to, first of all, support the family, because in my case, it all boiled down to the fact that my father didn't even pay child support, but I was fully supported by my mother. And it was the same when it came to my spiritual and intellectual development; there was somehow no male presence. There was only this romantic vision of my father, who sailed away as a hero – since he crossed the Atlantic on a life boat from the Batory, he just paddled away on this boat by himself across the Atlantic to America.¹⁷⁶ And so this is really how I perceived men, as really romantic heroes, perhaps, but completely removed from reality, with whom I didn't really have any direct relations. It was just that later, for many years of my life, I'd only get postcards from various exotic places of the world, such as South America or the Caribbean. These were, of course, places where I wanted to go myself, but the whole thing just strengthened my conviction that my father had totally rejected me, because there never was any invitation for me to go with him to any of these places. So I just lived in the communist Poland, and once in a while, I just looked at postcards from exotic places, and also at *The National Geographic* that he bought me a subscription for, and these were his only business cards of sorts, the only way he marked his presence in my life. And, I mean... this has certainly awakened... the only influence he had on me was a desire to travel and an awareness that the communist Poland was not the end of the world, but that there was another interesting world out there, which I would like to get to know at some point. I think it was some sort of opening to the world, and the fact, for example, that later on I studied English in college...it was just to learn the language that would be indispensable for getting to know the world.

SW. Did you have a chance to get to know your father in any real way before his leaving?

MT. Well... not really, not at all...

SW. Were you still a child?

MT. Yes, I was a young child... no, not then when I was still a child. Later on, when I was nineteen, I went to America, because he lives in Miami. And this is actually also quite funny that out of all the places in the world, he lives in this huge resort-like place, which is associated with *Charlie's Angels*¹⁷⁷ and so forth, and that is in Miami, Florida. And it was totally a great disappointment for me, so that by that time, the myth of my father had completely fallen apart, because it turned out that he was really a tyrant, who was screaming at his wife, and since morning yelling to her from upstairs to get him some pieces of clothing, and she, a poor thing, was running around the place, finding things and getting them to him, which was not acceptable

¹⁷⁶ After the war, during Stalinist times in Poland, many people who didn't accept the vision of Poland carried out by the authorities decided to leave by crossing the border illegally and, less often, legally.

¹⁷⁷ *Charlie's Angels*: a popular 1970s American television series about three female detectives.

to me at all. And the second thing was that my father was trying to force my hand about what I should study. I mean... he wanted me to study electronics. And, he said, if I didn't feel up to it, that is if I wasn't intellectually capable, I should then become a welder and weld pipelines in Alaska, because it was a very lucrative job, so at least I would be able to support myself. This complete lack of acceptance for my interests, for my choices... well, it was so terrible for me that I went back to Poland. And, by the way, I went back in a very interesting time period, because it was right before Solidarity¹⁷⁸ started, so thanks to this I had an opportunity to participate in clearly more interesting activities and do things that were much more interesting than what I could have done in America, not to mention the fact that if I were really to weld these pipelines, it would have been even more terrible. So nowadays I'm in touch with my father but it's just dictated by some common sense, by the idea that I have to get to know him in order to get to know myself, in a way, and perhaps also in order to enable my son to have some contact with his grandfather, but it isn't really any... any close relationship.

SW. Would you like to say something about your schools, your siblings?

MT. You know, unfortunately, I have no siblings, not even step siblings, but let me, perhaps, go back to my family. It's only that... Because, except for my father, there is nobody left from my immediate family, I've always been fascinated by trying to get to know even distant relatives simply to figure out what my Warsaw part of the family was like, those who perished, and who were the people who came from Wilno, and, in general, where my family's roots come from. And, in fact, I have been making interesting discoveries. Just recently I have found a woman, who is ninety-two years old and lives in Warsaw, and who told me the story of my family who had perished. And in the story there were also these two heroic women. One of them, unfortunately, was tortured and died at the Pawiak Prison¹⁷⁹, and she had participated in the anti-German underground, and the other was killed during the Ghetto Uprising.¹⁸⁰ So all that, you know, kind of... I mean it's, of course, terrible what happened to them, but it gave me this sense

¹⁷⁸ **Solidarity: Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" ("Solidarność"), NSZZ "Solidarity"** came into being in August and September 1980 with a wave of social discontent about the deteriorating economic situation and the methods of governing the country used by the communist authorities. In the latter half of 1980, workers' protests took up a form of strikes, at the beginning in small industrial centers and later in bigger cities. The climactic point happened in the Sea Coast region, with the occupation strike organized in the Gdańsk Shipyard on August 13, 1980. The majority of enterprises from Gdańsk and the Sea Coast region joined in and organized solidarity strikes, including the Szczecin Shipyard. The strike was also joined by the Coal Mine in Jastrzębie. On September 17, 1980, at the meeting of strike committees' and founding committees' representatives in Gdansk, NSZZ "Solidarity" was constituted, and the delegates also elected the National Coordinating Commission with its chairman Lech Wałęsa. At the moment of registration, the Union had approximately 10 million members (80% of all employed).

¹⁷⁹ **Pawiak:** a notorious Warsaw prison for political prisoners during the German occupation, members of the resistance movement, and those caught during street round-ups. Pawiak prisoners were typically sent to concentration camps (around sixty thousand people), or executed (around thirty seven thousand people).

¹⁸⁰ **The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising** (19 Apr. 1943 – 8 May 1943): a self-defense struggle undertaken by the Jewish Resistance Organization and the Jewish Military Union. The Jews started the action when German troops entered the Ghetto in order to deport the remaining population to death camps. Until April 24, the defenders continued their struggle in a few close blocks, and then, until May 8, they fought in separate buildings and fortified basements. Small groups of fighters managed to survive in the Ghetto, systematically destroyed by the Germans, till the middle of July, but the organized Jewish resistance broke down on May 18. Only few survivors managed to get out of the Ghetto, and those who had not died fighting were deported by the Germans to Treblinka and murdered there. The Ghetto was completely destroyed.

of power that they were so brave, and that in my family women provide me with such sense of support, and that women were perhaps the bravest, both the ones who fought during the war, and the ones who had managed to wait it out somehow, hidden in some cellar, and then by themselves, here at these Regained Territories, managed to reinvent their lives in such terribly hard conditions. It's extremely important to me to search for women from my family and find out what they did. Men, on the other hand, were rather... that is as exemplified by my father... terribly disappointing, even though at the beginning I had these great expectations about who he was as this great hero who crossed the Atlantic in a boat.

SW. You said that as a nineteen-year-old you came back to Poland after a longer stay in the U.S., right?

MT. I mean... it was half a year. It was like that because I left during communist times, during Gierek's¹⁸¹ rule, and in fact the situation in Poland then was quite bad, so all my friends, all the people I knew from the English Department, where I was already a student, figured that I would stay in America for good, that I would work in some company, producing some computer equipment, or some other "splendid," quote unquote, career like that somewhere in America. However, for me, America was this... even apart from my father... but it was this kind of a plastic world. I mean... I think it was the question of Miami and these particular circles I found myself in, where I somehow couldn't find a place for myself, because being active in the community had always been important to me and there I somehow just couldn't find my own group. I mean... most likely if I had gone to college or traveled or even just started out in New York, it would certainly have been easier and my stay there would have perhaps ended quite differently. But, in general, this disappointment with my father and the impossibility of finding my kind of group made me come back, and I was very happy because of that. And I have never regretted that even though when people saw me back here, they were shocked that somebody could have acted so silly and returned from this great America, where she could have stayed, to this terrible Poland.

SW. What year was that?

MT. 1980.

SW. This was an important year for Poland...

MT. Exactly. So after I returned, already after August 1980, I participated in the strikes at the university, and it was... This is when the most interesting time of my life started. This was simply... It seems to me that since the moment I had come back... and then there was Martial

¹⁸¹ **Gierek, Edward** (1913-2001): a communist politician. From 1956 to 1970, he held important positions in the communist party, served as a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, and was the First Secretary of the party in Katowice. He seized power in 1970, having gained support from the party apparatus. Thanks to his cunning political maneuvers and to the fear of communism in the West, he managed to get foreign loans, which turned out impossible to repay. This soon led to an economic collapse, squandering of national assets, and numerous crises. After Solidarity came into being, he was forced to resign under political pressure in August 1980. In July of next year, he was expelled from the party as a result of infighting.

Law¹⁸² and so on till 1989. And it was the stage of my life, which shaped my personality and my social vision most intensively, because things were happening very quickly then, so I was learning a lot of things. I mean... every new day, almost every day, would bring something new, all these intense relations with people. And I think this can't happen in such a stable country as America unless you're some *Black Panthers*¹⁸³ activist, or something... I don't know ... only in exceptional situations, but here it was accessible to broad circles, and, luckily, I found myself in these circles. And that's why I'm happy I returned, and later I started collaborating with the Freedom and Peace Movement,¹⁸⁴ where my development as a person and social and political activities intensified even further. And in retrospect, I believe that this was the most... the most important, the most interesting time of my life.

SW. And this was just the beginning of the 1980s, right?

MT. I mean... it started at the beginning of the 80s, but then it went on for close to a decade, till 1989. And it was just then, when the Round Table¹⁸⁵ started, or maybe even earlier, that I went

¹⁸² **Martial Law:** limitations on civil liberties implemented on December 13, 1981, in order to stop social activism aiming at fundamental reforms of the social and political system in the Polish People's Republic. It was confirmed by the National Council's (Rada Państwa) decree, even though issuing decrees was unconstitutional during Parliament's (Sejm) session. Prepared since August 1980, it was justified by a threat of coup d'état and take-over of power by the opposition gathered around "Solidarity," economic collapse, and a possibility of Soviet intervention. The chief administrative organ during Martial Law was the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Martial Law regulations limited basic civil liberties, introduced curfew, and suspended all activities by social organizations and trade unions. Martial Law militarized main branches of the economy, banned travel, and introduced censorship of correspondence and summary judicial process. Activists from "Solidarity" and political opposition, as well as some politicians from the pre-August 1980 regime, were interned (approximately 10 thousand people in all). The remaining "Solidarity" activists went underground, organizing demonstrations and strikes in factories and coal mines, suppressed by riot police (ZOMO), which often used heavy military equipment (9 coal miners were killed in the Wujek Coal Mine in December 1981, and there were fatalities in Lublin in August 1982). Demonstration participants, underground activists, and "Solidarity" members were fired from their jobs, harassed, and coerced to sign "declarations of loyalty." With the collaboration of Secret Police, employees of the judicial system, education, public administration and mass media were being vetted. The society at large reacted with organizing a boycott of all organizations and institutions controlled by the authorities; underground press and publishing ensured the independent flow of information. The Catholic Church undertook a broad campaign of helping those persecuted by the government. The underground "Solidarity" was receiving moral and material support from international organizations and labor centers. As a result of a deteriorating economic and political situation, martial law was repealed on July 22, 1983 (but repressive practices and some parts of the legislation survived till 1989), and in February 1992, the Sejm decided its implementation to have been illegal.

¹⁸³ **The Black Panthers:** a revolutionary, African American nationalist organization founded by Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Richard Aoki. The party grew to national prominence and is one of the iconic representatives of the counterculture revolutions of the 1960s.

¹⁸⁴ **Freedom and Peace Movement:** a pacifist student political movement started in 1985 as a means of contesting the social and political reality of the Polish People's Republic (PRL – an official name of communist Poland used from 1952 to 1989).

¹⁸⁵ **Round Table:** Talks conducted between representatives of the opposition, mostly people associated with Solidarity, de-legalized after martial law was implemented, and representatives of the governing camp, and mostly The Polish United Workers Party (PZPR), from February 6 to April 5, 1989. The object of negotiations was to establish principles of democratizing the political system and reforming the economy, which would be acceptable for both sides. The signed agreement mandated that reforms of the political and economic system would occur by evolutionary means. The reforms were to be based on political pluralism, freedom of speech, independent judiciary, strong local government, democratic elections for all elected branches of the government, unrestricted development of various forms of property, development of the free market and economic competition, among others. The negotiations' outcomes provided the foundation for principal changes in Poland's political situation, enabled

through this huge disappointment about how this struggle against communism ended, in what kind of an imperfect way, so far from what I had imagined. And that's when this new period started, this period of when the blinders kind of started to fall off my eyes and so did my fascination with possibilities created by the fall of communism, but it was kind of a more pragmatic, more realistic period – perhaps more unpleasant, less creative – but at the same time also very important and interesting as well, and this was because at that point I started to get involved in women's rights.

SW. So how exactly did it start with women's rights?

MT. I mean... with the women's rights issues, it really all began still during the times of the Freedom and Peace Movement, because the western women's organizations were very much interested in learning what was going on here, whether... what this grass-roots movement was like, whether women participated, and so on, and so forth. And there was this conference, the so-called Zytunia Street conference, where the Freedom and Peace Movement activists met with... At the beginning of my activities in the Freedom and Peace Movement there was a well-known conference at Zytunia Street in Warsaw, where activists from the Freedom and Peace Movement met with representatives of various grass-roots, left-wing groups from western Europe, and feminists came to that, too. This was my first meeting with people who would later become very important to me. They were famous feminists and less known ones; they were women who were involved, who worked in this organization War Resisters' International,¹⁸⁶ for example. There was a feminist writer Mena Kostarz from Canada; there was a nurse Vibeke from Holland, who taught us how to create support groups. This woman from the War Resisters' International, for example, would teach how to organize civil resistance, that is what the civil disobedience was all about, and in what way to resist, the non-violent way to resist. And I mean this was also a very interesting experience. At the same time, they were all feminists and it was very... I mean I liked what they were talking about very much, and they were kind of completely... I had an impression that they were defining things I knew about but I didn't realize they really existed. I mean... I realized various things such as, for example, discrimination, even within the Freedom and Peace Movement, with this domination of men in the Movement, for example. And I had known that but it didn't seem possible to go against. The only solution seemed to be like these men, of course, and then, at this point, it'd be possible to become visible, to become a leader as important as they were. Being a woman, on the other hand, with the value system and behavior patterns kind of typical for women, was something that didn't give an opportunity to become a leader. And these women made me aware that this was not the case, that women in the West and in the States felt the same and that they actively opposed that. And some of them decided this was a problem and this is how a really big movement started. Some of them but in various places, so that it wouldn't be thought of as just a few women in one central place that decided about that. And these women brought together a few women from the Freedom and Peace Movement, who also started... who also thought similarly and they believed it was possible to change things... I mean by listening to women from the West. Later on, they were also sending

Solidarity's victory in the parliamentary elections, changed the existing Sejm coalition, and led to the first non-communist government in the post-war Poland.

¹⁸⁶ *War Resisters' International*: founded in 1921 under the name "Paco". It is based on the notion that any and all wars are crimes against humanity. The organization promotes nonviolent action against the causes of war or the preparation of war.

us a lot of publications, and coming many more times, so that there were really endless conversations and I got a lot from them.

SW. Do you remember what year that was?

MT. It was 1985, no, I'm sorry, 1986. And I remember that these talks were also attended by women, some of whom, at least one in Poland and one in Hungary, are very... play an important role in the women's movement. In Poland, Urszula Nowakowska from The Center for Women's Rights, was one of the people who were at Zytunia Street, but there was also one of the leading Hungarian feminists, who was also at the beginning of her involvement, and she collaborated with us, Judit Oczari. So these were those first steps. And then I started to... this paper was published... our group, more anarchistic than other groups in the Freedom and Peace Movement, published it in Gdansk. It was called *A Cappella* and I wrote feminist pieces there maybe twice; one of them was about the "Miss Polonia" contest, and the other was a more general piece about feminism, about foundations for feminism, about assumptions behind feminism. And I have to admit that even our anarchist male friends, who, one would think, should receive these kinds of pieces favorably, reacted with nervousness, so it gave me some food for thought: what's the big deal? Why was it that speaking about freedom for women, about a possibility of women making choices, about the idea that women should not be treated as objects... why did it provoke such an unbelievable resistance even among anarchists? This was shocking to me, and it also kind of made me aware that this meant that something was at stake, that the problem did exist, that it wasn't, as it could seem, that it existed but only far away somewhere, but that it existed close by if even my male friends, with whom we were protesting in the street and collaborating, were suddenly against us when it came to the women's issues. And so the news about my involvement in feminism somehow got around, and that's how I got my work in Solidarity, this next stage, already after 1989, when I became a coordinator of the National Women's Section, that is a person responsible for building this section from scratch. It was because... even though there were very many women in Solidarity – after all, many women worked for the underground and played exceptionally important roles – later on it turned out that there were no women in the union's leadership and that there actually was no single unit within the union that would represent women's issues. And because international labor unions put such pressure on Solidarity that they'd need to do something for women, and because Solidarity had to take into account that they were getting donations from the western union headquarters, they thought they had to kind of cave in, so they decided to employ a person who'd organize such a section and would coordinate it. There was only this disappointment and a sore spot for the Solidarity's bosses that evolved from this and it resulted from the fact that this Women's Section acquired an authentic character, that women's interest in it was significant, and that these women started to formulate postulates that were very important to them. This kind of surpassed what the Solidarity's bosses expected concerning how these women would sound and how well organized they would become. That's why the Women's Section reached the end of its life in a rather sudden and dramatic way. That was because the women simply formulated two postulates, and these two postulates were kind of critically important, and since others had no major significance when it came to this problem, the problem of acceptance by the union's leadership... The postulate concerning abortion, on the other hand, and the one about women's participation in the union's governance were critically important, because exactly at that point, at the beginning of the nineties, there was an ongoing debate about what kind of abort... anti-abortion legislation,

that is whether such legislation should be implemented and how it was to be formulated. And unfortunately, Solidarity, as an organization closely affiliated with the Catholic Church believed that the law should be introduced... a very restrictive anti-abortion law should be introduced, and this was a resolution passed by the Solidarity Congress in 1992, I think, or maybe it was in 1991, I don't remember. The only problem was that among the Congress delegates there were around 10% of women while in the union the numbers were more or less even, that is the ratio of men to women was more or less fifty-fifty. And women were very discouraged and upset by this resolution, and this newly created Women's Section formulated a goal to change... to exert an influence on Solidarity's position on abortion. Of course, it was completely utopian to imagine that something like this was possible. Nonetheless, we were faithful to our values and adamant in our support for this postulate. The end result was that when the anti-abortion legislation reached the Senate, that is after the first readings in the Sejm,¹⁸⁷ when it was passed to the Senate,¹⁸⁸ the Senate representatives invited representatives of various women's organizations, including representatives from the Women's Section, for the so-called community consultations. But, of course, neither Senators nor the Solidarity leadership expected the views expressed by Ms. Anastazja Konieczna, a representative of the Women's Section, who, by the way, was considered an authority among activists from Solidarity, from the opposition... she was a worker from Wrocław, that she would speak against this restrictive legislation. And this, of course, was a beginning of an end, because the moment when... I mean, as long as Kaczyński¹⁸⁹ was the head of Solidarity, and he is a pragmatic politician, so he didn't use repressive measures against the Women's Section. He... just, like Walesa,¹⁹⁰ by the way. This was actually quite interesting to me that... I mean, or perhaps it was because they minimized the significance of the Women's Section; they didn't see it as threatening, so perhaps it wasn't worth it... This is when their pragmatism became visible, that they didn't think it was worth it to raise this issue, to go against this, because it would simply die of natural causes anyway. On the other hand, the moment when narrow-minded Krzaklewski¹⁹¹ came to power, who was really... His power, I feel, didn't come

¹⁸⁷ **Sejm:** The lower house of the bicameral National Assembly (the Senate is the upper house). The Sejm is the more powerful of the two chambers. The Sejm has the constitutional responsibility of initiating and enacting laws as well as overseeing state administration.

¹⁸⁸ **Senate:** The upper house of the National Assembly (Sejm is the lower house). The Senate sets its own agenda and committee structure. As in the Sejm, committee appointments are dictated by the numerical strength of the parties and factions represented in the chamber. Besides its budget review function, the Senate also reviews Sejm legislation which it may approve, amend, or reject within thirty days.

¹⁸⁹ **Kaczyński, Lech:** In the 1970s he was an activist in the anti-communist movement. When Solidarity was legalized in the late 1980s, he was elected a Member of Parliament and vice-chairman of the Solidarity trade union (NSZZ Solidarność). He was a leader and founder of the centrist political party Porozumienie Centrum (*Center Agreement*) and the main adviser and supporter of Lech Wałęsa when he was elected the President of Poland in December 1990. Kaczyński was elected President of the Republic of Poland in October 2005.

¹⁹⁰ **Wałęsa, Lech:** trade union activist, politician, President of the Republic of Poland from 1990 to 1995, Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1983. During the first National Congress of Solidarity (September 5-October 7, 1981), he was elected Chairman of the National Commission of Solidarity. From 1980 to 1981, he worked in the Gdańsk Shipyard. Interned from December 13, 1981 to November 11, 1982, he returned to work in the Shipyard and continued underground union activities. In 1986, he created the Provisional Council of Solidarity, in 1987 became head of the National Executive Commission of Solidarity, and in 1988 began participating in negotiations with the communist authorities, which led to the Round Table talks. Recipient of the French Legion of Honor, he also received Honorary Doctor's Degrees from numerous universities, including Columbia University (1981), Catholic University in Leuven (1982), Harvard University (1983), and Gdańsk University (1990).

¹⁹¹ **Krzaklewski, Marian** (1950-): a trade union activist, politician, and academic. In 1980, he was a co-founder of Solidarity in the Polish Academy of Sciences. After the implementation of martial law in Poland in 1989, he

from any charisma or from some broad support among union members, but from this specific political arrangement, where he was close to the Church and he had its support. For him, the existence of the Women's Section with all these... from the perspective of the Church... that is with this one postulate against implementing the anti-abortion legislation was tragic, because it could in a way threaten his position in relation to the Church. So he kind of undertook steps toward repressing and dissolving the Women's Section. And these were... And also, I was, of course, quite naïve at that point, and I didn't have the kind of experience in political activity I have today, so it was kind of easy for him. He resorted to, well, totally absurd devices and he didn't want... I mean, every section had to have a charter registered by the National Commission, so, for example, he never... So the item that the Women's Section's charter was to be discussed and accepted by the National Commission was never placed on the agenda. I mean, there were always more important matters and this never found its way... was never discussed. But, when at one point, at the last moment, we managed to get the charter on the agenda and it was about to be discussed, Krzaklewski brought up some totally absurd points that the name couldn't be The National Women's Section but only the National Section of Women and other such stuff, and he just took it off the agenda, so that it couldn't be voted on. As a result, later on, he claimed that the Women's Section was illegal even though I was legally and formally employed as a Women's Section's coordinator. And he would simply invite me to his office and drag me into hours of conversations when he used some absurd argumentation. I mean, he was talking about... I mean, he was trying to convert me to his position, and I, in my naïveté, was trying to convert him to mine, which was a complete nonsense. And, psychologically, he got me to the point that I just figured it wasn't worth it. The Section's activists were harassed in this way, for example, that they weren't sent to any training abroad. One woman from Białystok didn't go because, as she was told, she was for abortion, so she couldn't represent the union abroad. Well... the Section members were forbidden to use phones in the regional union offices, so that they couldn't keep in touch with each other, and so on, and so forth. And finally, it got to the point when I was being blackmailed, so that I completely withdrew from this... I mean, not as a result of the blackmail, but because I decided it made no sense and that it'd be better to make people aware... to show outside what it was all really like, and to repudiate this Women's Section, which Solidarity had created later, you know this kind of a façade Women's Section, than to keep working there all the time and try to change things from within. So the report was prepared for the Helsinki Human Rights Foundation,¹⁹² I mean, no, I'm sorry, it was The Human Rights Watch, that's what it's called, and it's an equivalent of the Helsinki Foundation but in the US. The report was about the Women's Section, about how the Women's Section was repressed, and generally about what the situation of women's rights in the union was like. And this story

collaborated with underground Solidarity groups in the Upper Silesia. Arrested in 1984, fired from his job, and sentenced for political and union activism in 1985, he was freed as a result of the 1986 amnesty. During the Third National Congress of Solidarity (1991), he was elected a chairman of Solidarity's National Commission, and then again in 1992 and 1995. After initiating the foundation of Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS), he served as the chairman of its National Council from October 1996 to January 2001. Since September 1997, he served as a deputy for the third Sejm.

¹⁹² **Helsinki Human Rights Foundation:** an independent non-governmental organization created in 1982 as a result of civil action. It monitors whether human rights and basic freedoms are being respected, as guaranteed by international treaties signed by Poland. The Helsinki Committee has been involved in a broad education campaign to popularize the idea of freedom and respect for the law. It also prepares reports on human rights violations in Poland, publishes a bulletin *Human Rights*, and since 1988 has been a member of the International Helsinki Federation of Human Rights, located in Vienna.

kind of became... it got to be quite well known in its time. Nonetheless, the union didn't, of course, back out of their position, and the Women's Section ceased to exist in its previous shape, but the façade Section was created, consisting only of women from the right.

SW. And now you are an NGO activist. When did it start, your interest in the women's movement?

MT. I mean, all of this has been this kind of continuum, because while I was still working for Solidarity, I was invited to a meeting of kind of feminist leaders from Central-Eastern Europe, which took place in Dubrovnik and was organized by feminists from the US and from Croatia. There was Slavenka Drakulic,¹⁹³ for example, Shana Penn,¹⁹⁴ I mean many women from the US who were interested in the Central-Eastern Europe region, because, for example, their roots go back to Central-Eastern Europe. And there were many women from our region, from Central-Eastern Europe, who wanted to work together to get more strength. And it was a kind of important impulse for me, it was, intellectually but also in terms of organizing, because this is when the organization I work for today, the Network of East-West Women, was created. And since that time, which means for ten years already, perhaps more than ten years, I have been affiliated with this organization even though I had some breaks, because for a while I worked for the Amnesty International, had a baby, and for some time I lived in the United States and wasn't involved in any activities. It was as late as the end of my stay in the States when I started working for the Network, and then I got a proposition to... since I was going back to Poland, going back, wouldn't I want to organize such an institution here, in Poland, that is to organize a branch of this organization in Poland. And that's how it all came into being. In 1999 the Polish Network was created and it has been developing ever since.

SW. Are you... What are you particularly interested in within the Network? You're also collaborating with all the major feminist organizations in Poland, so what are your interests? What do you consider to be your priorities?

MT. I mean, at this point, it seems to me that... I mean, at the beginning I was, of course, fascinated, by this kind of activity, I mean regional activity, I mean in the region, and I'm thinking about the whole region of Central-Eastern Europe and I'm still interested, of course, and even the global feminist movement is also incredibly inspiring, of course, but right now, I treat these mostly as inspirations while I believe that the important thing is to transfer these experiences and values into my own direct surroundings. I mean, at this point the most important thing for me is working in Poland, in the entire country but also right here in the area, I mean in the Pomeranian region, because, in fact, I have already attended, participated in activities of various gender caucuses, or women's groups, which pop up at some United Nations conferences, such as, for example, the conference about creating the International Criminal Law Tribunal, and I also worked at the conference Peking Plus 5, and now I'm very much interested in this world summit about the information society, and I well know, I mean it seems to me that I well know the process of such a global collaboration of women at the United Nations level. But when I do

¹⁹³ *Slavenka Drakulic*: noted Croatian writer and publicist.

¹⁹⁴ *Shana Penn*: a U.S. scholar and a visiting professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California in 2005. She directed the Jewish heritage Initiative in Poland. She is the author of *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* (2005).

that, I also see how huge the gulf is between what is going on at the United Nations level, what our resolutions are, because there is always some women's working group, which kind of accepts some resolutions and defines priorities for the coming years, and they are really wonderful, but I have an impression that later on, on a local level, nobody knows about these, first of all, or few people know about it, or maybe really it's nobody... few people know about it, and, apart from that, it is frustrating that implementation of these postulates is very limited, at least in Poland. Even if we succeed in lobbying with the representatives of the Polish government, who attend a given conference in New York or Geneva, very little comes out of that later. It is, in fact, written down somewhere, in some documents, which are stashed in Polish... or they get signed, like in the case of Peking Plus 5, or ratified, but little comes out of that. And this is what interests me, this kind of transfer into this very local level of all of these resolutions, all big and magnificent and memorable, which are passed somewhere but which, I sometimes think, are just art for art's sake. That's because even if five women in Warsaw know about these, and they even polish up some formulations or decide where to place a comma, this has no follow-up on the level of some village or some small town. And that's why, for example, I'm interested, for example, in the issue of using new technologies for women. I mean, it seems to me... I mean this is something that's maybe very mundane and technical, but I think it's very important, because the European Union and the structural funds will provide some opportunities, I hope, of financing some bigger, bigger opportunities for women of taking advantage of new technologies. And our organization would like to prepare these... I mean would like to participate in these programs, and at the same time it would like to give these women not just the knowledge of how to technically use the Internet, or e-mail, how to use them, for example, for their business enterprises or for agro-tourism. I also believe, however, that our task is to inform women, through the Network's sources, where to look for information about how to fight with violence against women, how to find out about some possibilities, for example, of influencing some government work, how to reach the Government Representative for Women's Issues, how to even find out that somebody like that even exists and how to monitor her work, and how to bring up new ideas, so that these new technologies were really... could give them an opportunity of exchanging information to know what's going on with women, what rights women have all over the world. And this is kind of an opportunity of opening up to the world. And this is perhaps my "hobby" these days, this opportunity. It's perhaps because while working for the Network of East-West Women, I saw that in the Central-Eastern Europe region, there are so many opportunities of using the Internet for this exchange of information.

SW. You belong to the group of a few, of several, most well known Polish feminists. Your activities are known both within the feminist circles and outside, and could you tell me also how your feminism is carried out in your own life? Apart from your work in women's organizations, could you say that in your own private life, among friends, you're also a feminist?

MT. I mean... I think so. And it wasn't just... It wasn't easy for me in my private life. I don't mean being a feminist in my private life but achieving a status quo when my feminism is respected, that it's completely... that it meets... that my partner, or rather my partners, since it's not the case that I've been with only one man all these years, become feminists themselves. It wasn't simple, and I think that perhaps it resulted from my naive choices, because, as I've said before, when I was growing up only among women, I really didn't know men at all. It was this

image, this kind of picture, shaped by films and reading, but it didn't really apply to any real man, and definitely not a Polish man. It was a kind of an image of an ideal, who was a feminist, a partner and so on. And that's why my choices were... I think to some extent, I think, naïve, because I would choose... I mean I wouldn't choose a man who already was a feminist but it seemed to me that everything would be very simple, if only we could be together, if we loved each other, that it would all happen naturally, and that love would be translated into the mutual acceptance of our values and ideals, but sometimes it was just this terribly hard work. And sometimes I was wondering if it was worth it, but now I think it was. It's that... after ten years with my last partner, I think we've come very close to the situation when feminist principles and feminist values are being carried out in our relationship. But it was a gradual process of getting there. When it comes to my son, on the other hand, I'm raising him... I mean now we're raising him in the spirit of respect for women, of course, and for women's rights, human rights, and tolerance for otherness. I also hope, I hope that it won't happen that... as I hear it sometimes happens that when the parents are... have liberal views... or the other way around, when they are fascists, their child suddenly becomes a punk, you know. And perhaps our son will suddenly join The All-Polish Youth Organization,¹⁹⁵ but I do whatever I can to prevent that. For now, I hope, everything is fine.

¹⁹⁵ **The All-Polish Youth Organization:** an aggressive affiliate of the catholic party The League of Polish Families, it prefers fascist methods and is linked to Tejkowski, a well-known Polish anti-Semite and fascist.

MALGORZATA TARASIEWICZ

- 11-08-1960** born in Sopot, Northern Poland
- 1987** graduated from the English Department and the Political Science Department in Gdańsk, Poland
- 1986-1989** member of the Freedom and Peace Movement¹⁹⁶
- 1989-1991** Coordinator of the Women's Section in the Solidarity Trade Union¹⁹⁷
- 1991-1995** President of *Amnesty International, Poland*
- 1996-1997** Coordinator of the New York office, the *Network of East-West Women*, New York City
- 1999** Director of the Association for Women's Cooperation, the *Network of East-West Women* in Poland

Has a seven-year-old son

¹⁹⁶ **Freedom and Peace:** a pacifist student political movement started in 1985 as a means of contesting the social and political reality of the Polish People's Republic (PRL – an official name of Poland used in 1952-1989).

¹⁹⁷ **Solidarity Trade Union** (“Solidarność”): a trade union that came into being in August and September 1980 as a result of the wave of social discontent about the deteriorating economic situation and the methods of governing the country used by the communist authorities. In the latter half of 1980, workers' protests took a form of strikes, first in small industrial centers and later in bigger cities. The climactic point happened in the Sea Coast region, with the occupation strike organized in the Gdańsk Shipyard on August 13, 1980. The majority of enterprises from Gdańsk and the Sea Coast region joined in and organized solidarity strikes, including the Szczecin Shipyard. The strike was also joined by the Coal Mine in Jastrzębie. On September 17, 1980, at the meeting of strike committees' and founding committees' representatives in Gdansk, NSZZ “Solidarity” was constituted, and the delegates also elected the National Coordinating Commission with its chairman Lech Wałęsa. At the moment of registration, the Union had approximately 10 million members (80% of all employed).

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Anna Titkow
Interviewer: Sławomira Walczewska**

**Location: Warszawa
Date: November 16, 2004
Translated by: Kasia Kietlińska**



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Anna Titkow was born in Przeworsk, Poland in 1942. She has a doctorate in Sociology from the University of Warsaw and has worked as an instructor and researcher in medical sociology since 1979. She is currently a Professor of Gender Studies at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology in Warsaw. Titkow is a notable feminist scholar and one of her earliest efforts was an invitation to contribute to the *Sisterhood is Global* anthology edited by Robin Morgan and published in 1984. Titkow's work often challenges Polish social and cultural taboos around gender and sexuality. She has a son and lives in Warsaw.

Sławomira Walczewska founded the Women's Foundation (eFKa) in Kraków in 1995. In 1999, Walczewska published *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Feminist Discourse in Poland*, the first Polish book about women's emancipation from a historical and a cultural perspective. As a feminist activist and a scholar, she is interested in international women's movements and is firmly committed to understanding various differences and intersections of global feminisms.

ANNA TITKOW
November 16, 2004
Warszawa

Slawomira Walczewska: Professor Titkow is a well-known Polish sociologist. It is the 16th of November, and the year is 2004. I am in the office of Professor Anna Titkow, an author of most likely the first Polish feminist text, which was written for Robin Morgan's¹⁹⁸ publication...

Anna Titkow: *Sisterhood Is Global*.

SW: *Sisterhood Is Global*.

AT: Yes...

SW: I'd like to ask how it all started out. How did your alliance with feminism begin? At what moment of your life did you start thinking about feminism, about gender, and about relations between genders? This is a request for you to talk about yourself...

AT: It's really funny since when I remembered yesterday that we had an appointment for today, for today's meeting, I took the anthology you've mentioned and looked at the date we put in when we signed each other's copies, since it was a book promotion. It was exactly 20 years ago; it was exactly on November 16, 1984, and I think it's very funny. I like things like this a lot, and they are, I think, meaningful in a way, since it'd never occur to me that I'll run into stuff like this in my life. The book promotion for *Sisterhood Is Global* is... there are a lot of authors there, but only 25 had been invited. I had the honor to be among those 25. And it was this kind of a meeting at a table, a round table, and we were all introducing ourselves and talking about ourselves. It wasn't a known custom, and we didn't have such experiences in Poland in any situations, really. And women would get up and say, "I am divorced," "I am a lesbian," and would talk about some stories from their lives that were important to them. And I was terribly embarrassed; it was very difficult for me to say something about myself. This was the time when I was getting divorced, so I said I was just getting a divorce, but in general I didn't think I was a feminist, because while I was listening to their stories, I mean about things they did in their lives, what it was all like, I decided I didn't fit the kind of definition of feminism which was in the air. To which Robin Morgan, I think, responded, "Oh no! Because you've written this piece, and you're here with us, you're a feminist." This way I got to be defined as a feminist, kind of externally by... and it was by a high authority in feminism. I think it is... when they're using this technique, which I like more and more, as a general instrument, not only for political struggle, I'd say, but also for gathering materials, which may become a source of scientific inquiry... I mean what used to be called "herstory," what is called "herstory." I like it more and more as a way of getting to know the world, including even various social processes. I think that perhaps in

¹⁹⁸ **Morgan, Robin** (1941-): a feminist writer and activist. She worked in the civil rights, antiwar and feminist movements from the 1950s through 1970s. She helped revive *Ms. Magazine* in 1990 and has served as its editor-in-chief or contributing editor for many years. Editor of *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), *Sisterhood is Global* (1984), and *Sisterhood is Forever* (2003).

the majority of cases, except maybe... I mean in Poland except for very young people, and maybe it's happening differently abroad, but I think that in a place like Poland, in case of women my age, you know, or in other words sixty... women in their sixties, it's much more complicated. I mean, well, that the appearance of this word happened much later than when they were actually building... well, it'll sound really jargon-like, but I mean building their feminist identity as such. I think it was made up of very many various elements. Because, on one hand, I remember that I really, really wanted to be different than my mother, and here is a paradox, it wasn't because she didn't want me to get an education, just the opposite, or because she wasn't an independent, self-supporting woman, no, it wasn't that. It's only that I believed she didn't have enough feminine traits, so it's possible to say that at this point I missed something... even though, admittedly, some feminist trends directly speak about the essence, the gist... and it's simply a basis for defining separateness of women. At any rate... it was... but it was important because at this point I became rebellious... I was maybe 12 or 13 years old, and I decided I would be different. Of course, I didn't know what I would be like, I had no clue, but I knew I would be different. Now, after many years have passed, I think that, paradoxically, I didn't miss the traits that are important in promoting and carrying out careers, or some professional programs, but the ones that are simply feminine. But at any rate, what mattered was that I rebelled that I would be different, also that I'd be a little different from my friends. Since I was born in a small town, I was a bit of a foreign child, different because I came from a house where there were books, and I had music lessons, for which I'm grateful to my parents, since it's still a kind of passion of mine today. There were also newspapers and journals, so, in all, it was a little bit, I think, it was a little bit hard for me to communicate with other kids, which was painful at this age. So it was also that I kind of didn't want to be like them, because they kept talking about boys, and I wasn't really into it, because I was overweight and full of complexes, and just in general it wasn't my thing. So I think there was this sense... that perhaps I have to count only on myself, and this is another important element, I'd say a second element, which... of course, I can't place it in time when it happened, but for sure there was this moment I realized I had to do something. It wasn't very clear what exactly I had to do. Anyhow, going away to college certainly helped, and what's happening in the western world when children, you know, get separated from their parents more or less after high school and stand on their own two feet really helps in building the ability to think about the world, in general, and about oneself. But we're still very far from any kind of thinking in feminist categories, no matter how we'll define feminism here. I mean I'm talking about myself. And the situation in college was conducive for developing this kind of independence, which, let's say, is a certain... it seems to me a very important foundation, a starting point, a basis for building some kind of unconventional orientations, let's say. And I was lucky enough to still have such eminent teachers as the Ossowskis,¹⁹⁹ Ajdukiewicz,²⁰⁰ Tatarkiewicz,²⁰¹ Kotarbiński.²⁰² So it really was the world... of the people who, when they saw a

¹⁹⁹ **Ossowska, Maria** (1896-1974): philosopher and sociologist, director of Theory and History of Morality Department at the University of Warsaw and Director of Theory and History of Morality Department at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Author of *Bourgeois Morality, Social Determinants in Moral Ideas, Moral Norms: A Tentative Systematization*, among others. **Stanislaw Ossowski** (1897-1963): sociologist and cultural studies theorist and one of the best known intellectuals in post-World War II Poland.

²⁰⁰ **Ajdukiewicz, Kazimierz** (1890-1963): professor of philosophy and author of many theories and concepts in the fields of philosophy and logic.

²⁰¹ **Tatarkiewicz, Wladyslaw** (1886-1980): philosopher, historian of ideas, historian of art and aesthetician, who was a well-known figure in Polish humanities. As a historian of aesthetics, in *History of Aesthetics*, he introduced *implicite* and *explicite* aesthetics, which became internationally recognized.

freshman student... When you were a Professor Tatarkiewicz, you'd come up, extend your hand, and ask, "How are you Ms..." So it was, it was this... these weren't the males, who showed up later, who showed up in various places where I worked. I mean I'm talking about my male colleagues who behaved exactly like males, males with a sign, "Well, you are different." At this department, I had a feeling it didn't really matter whether I was a girl or a boy. It was perhaps very important, it was...

S.W.: And it was the Department of...

AT: It was the Department of Philosophy and Sociology at the Warsaw University. And I think that if... I selected Professor Maria Ossowska to be my thesis mentor; she was my mentor for the thesis. And if there was this kind of attitude toward students that she'd write me letters to my parents' house during the summer about what her vacations were like and that if I needed her help in writing my MA thesis, here was the address... So I think that this incredible first-rate quality and culture of the faculty were tremendously significant, and this perhaps also helped to gain this kind of self-esteem. Which doesn't mean that when I fell in love, the kind of crazy puppy love, even the greatest complements from professors mattered... like from Ossowski after some presentation, or from Professor Maria Ossowska and so on, the kind of complements which when I look at them in retrospect today, I'm still impressed. But when a young man said that for a girl the most important thing was to be this and that, and not to get into presentations, this truly had an impact on me for years to come. This... I honestly have to say that's how it was. But evidently, there was this... I don't know, I'd say this background, this starting point I was talking about earlier, this thing that you have to take care of yourself, that it's not really worth it. So, nonetheless, I didn't just disappear at a certain point, I didn't yield to this pressure that it's not... I graduated, and right away started working, which was important, since I was from outside of Warsaw. But... feminism? There was no source... no sources... there was no inspiration, that's how I'd say it. Because even if it was... I belong to a generation that read Orzeszkowa,²⁰³ but it was read more in terms of exploitation, you know, of lower classes by upper classes, and Marta²⁰⁴ wasn't really a woman as much as she was a representative of the exploited social class. And so it wasn't... wasn't really read that way. In general, there were no... no... in the times I was growing up, and I mean Stalinist times and the October²⁰⁵ period, I mean when I was a child, you know, and I graduated from high school in 1959. So then the whole period when my identity was forming, in the 60's in Warsaw, no... there was an outburst of these... a few short whiles after October. It simply didn't work out that way, and because I was part of the group where girls were treated... no matter what my private meanderings were, you know, these... these are as if in a different dimension...

/a cut, per Professor Titkow's request/

²⁰² **Kotarbinski, Tadeusz** (1886-1981): professor of philosophy and author of numerous theories. He influenced Polish philosophical culture and became its guardian spirit of sorts.

²⁰³ **Orzeszkowa, Eliza** (1842-1910): writer and pioneer of Polish Positivism. Author of *The Forsaken or Meir Ezofowich* and *The Argonauts*, among others.

²⁰⁴ A character from one of Orzeszkowa's novels.

²⁰⁵ There was a de-Stalinization period of the Soviet regime following Stalin's death in 1953. As a result, there were calls and protests (some violently repressed) for a liberalization of the Soviet hold on the Polish government. The events culminated in October of 1956 with the selection of Wladyslaw Gomulka, a political moderate, for the position of the First Party Secretary of the Polish United Worker's Party (PZPR).

SW: And how about the family relations between your mother and father? And what about your grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts and uncles? Was there anything there that was a challenge for you, that provoked you somehow, or maybe with your siblings? Was there anything that would give you a basis to think about relations between men and women differently, and to think differently about the role of women? Was there anything like that in this early period?

AT: (a long pause). But this... yes... this, this was... but up to a certain point, it worked without... I'd say it wasn't liberating me from the traditional, you know, from the traditional way of thinking. It wasn't like... that you know... No. It was more directed toward the idea that for myself I would... that when I had a family, it would all be different, nicer, you know, something like this. On the other hand, on the other hand it wasn't something I could say was directly steering where I was going, you know, toward... into thinking that the family wasn't necessarily... No, no, no. It was rather about some gaps in the family life that were there, my mother's influence, this... and let's say my father's warmth and involvement in my life. I think he played a huge and positive role in this... you know, in my... in shaping my psyche simply, in building what my friend, a therapist, calls my indecently healthy psyche. Here, I think, it was my father, who played this kind of role, because he was very stabilizing, secure, I mean I was always sure of his, you know, of his stable emotions. A very suppor... kind of like... to him I was always this... he confirmed my sense that I was great, that I could even become a dancer, which was my dream, of course, against other parameters. However, then I was rather... then, I mean that... as I can, as I can say it today, these relations gave me... or maybe it was a result of my grandmother's presence, and she was a very rigorous Catholic, and I think it was her doing that when it comes to the Church, I'm absolutely, totally against... Since it was enough that I had religion lessons with a priest who was a crypto-pedophile, and other things that simply offended my intellect, yes, because it was on such a level that in general... and grandmother with her rigor and celebrating every first Friday of the month,²⁰⁶ you know, so this whole thing was already a done deal, for good, you could say. But I think that at that time and even while entering adult life, building a home, I was thinking that I... that it would all be a bit different, and because of this, I was a very, let's say, a very traditional wife, for example, because I believed I was the one who should do everything. I mean not only did I support the family financially, because it happened to be the time when Andrzej²⁰⁷ was black-listed after 1968,²⁰⁸ so my PhD scholarship was the source of income, but also the child, well, everything, taking care of the house, different things, so I think I... yes, when I look at it in retrospect, it's simply... I can't almost believe, but that's how it was. I was this very, I think, this very traditional wife. At least I was trying to follow all these stipulations, models of a good wife, you know. I mean I was certainly always like this, and I'm sure it... it also had some negative impact, I can say, because most likely at some point it all piled up, and marriages fall apart for very many reasons, and various things

²⁰⁶ **First Friday of the month:** a ritual where Catholics go to confession and then attend mass to take communion every first Friday of the month.

²⁰⁷ Titkow's husband.

²⁰⁸ **March 1968:** a political crisis initiated by student protests and accompanied by a wave of anti-Semitism, as a result of which around 20 thousand Polish citizens of Jewish descent left the country. The direct cause of protests was a student demonstration in Warsaw against the censorship intervention and removal of Adam Mickiewicz's play *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*) on January 10, 1968. The demonstration participants were harassed and some were expelled from the university, which caused mass student protests, brutally suppressed by Militia troops. The protesters demanded liberalization of political life. Student protests were put out by the end of March 1968.

contribute to it, you know. I think it was piling up like this, to wrap it up, and I believed was a traditional... and so on. Possibly, feminism is perhaps also... not only some, some, let's say, defini... ideology, or something, you know, that can be defined in political issues, you know, in political categories, and sociological ones, but it may also be a matter of some attitude, because... of this thing in a person. A few years ago, I remembered Professor Wesolowski, who, by the way, was my teacher, an assistant professor at the Sociology Department, and there was some situation, I don't know if I was presenting a dissertation prospectus which smelled of feminism and gender studies to the dissertation committee, or something like this; something, something must have... there must have been some intellectual provocation. And I remember Professor Wesolowski say... and I think this is a very apt characterization, and he said, "You know, the thing with you is that you were a feminist even when you didn't know that." And he remembers me since, as I've said, since, well, almost since childhood, when I was very young, when I was... when I started college, since college years. So you know... I, well, what can he remember? He most likely remembers, sees me, since, you know, we've been working together, in the same Institute, for a few decades, and he sees me in various situations, and he most likely sees a certain person, who behaves in a certain way, and who doesn't even define it, I'd say, you know. Because, as I've said, in a situation when I was put on the spot, so to speak, twenty years ago, you know, and asked to describe my, my path toward feminism and declare if I was a feminist, I believed that to be honest I had to say I wasn't, because it seemed to me that things that were being discussed during this meeting didn't quite apply to me, you know. So I think that this, this, this is some truth about feminism that most likely there are a lot of women, who didn't find themselves in this kind of comfortable situation I faced because of my profession and because of opportunities for foreign travel at a certain time, and it certainly was tremendously important, so that they couldn't name some things, couldn't define them, explain, clarify, and so on and so forth, and couldn't even understand their behavior, which, following Professor Wesolowski's description in my case, was feminist when it didn't even occur to me to call it that at all, because maybe I didn't even know the word yet. I think there are many women like this, that there are very many women like this, but as usual, there is this painfully obvious problem of consequences and... of this kind of anathema, these bad things which are out there, out there and are linked to the term feminism. I think it is... it is... But there are a lot of women who are feminist even though they don't know it themselves, I think. And as I've said, I belong to this category of... you know, of chosen women,²⁰⁹ quote unquote, of course, because I could go... go abroad when I was still relatively young, in spite of the generation I belong to, and I was able to come into contact... And my first long trip, a scholarship stay, was at Columbia. I was affiliated with Columbia University in New York, under the tutelage of Cynthia Hoockstein [sic: Cynthis Fuchs-Epstein]²¹⁰, who arranged things for me very well, because she said, "It's all up to you." I had everything taken care of, I mean, my stay, you know, in terms of participation opportunities in all possible classes in women's studies, as we'd say. I attended seminars, but she gave me a fee reign, and she gave me time, so that I could run free, and I was running around like crazy to all these academic areas of New York. It was 1981, and I simply attended everything I could... I

²⁰⁹ "Chosen women:" Titkow is referring to the difficulty of travel beyond Polish borders during communism. It was difficult to obtain a passport and special permission was need to travel abroad. There was no such category, of course, as "chosen women," but Titkow phrases it this way to emphasize how lucky she was to have studied in the U.S.

²¹⁰ This is, of course, a misspelling of **Fuchs-Epstein, Cynthia** (1933-) who is an American feminist legal scholar currently teaching at CUNY and Columbia University in New York.

could attend. And the American sisters didn't necessarily always welcome me with enthusiasm, and when I wasn't from whatever kind of organization or something, they'd kick me out, because, contrary to appearances, it was all very... they were then... I didn't know then that they were fighting so much against each other, that there were factions; of course, I had no clue about this. But what was I doing? I was making tons of Xerox copies of various types of articles from women's studies, I mean about women and sex roles, something like this. It was something completely new to me that there were so many publications and literature on this. And it was interesting to me for reasons, I would say, not directly related to feminism, because I always had... I was always professionally sensitive to... I mean as a person, of course, too, but also professionally sensitive to what I call a façade, a façade character of social life, and to façade declarations. I remember that much earlier, much before I came into direct contact with the western feminism, I had always been very annoyed, you know, with these myths about the Poles' attitude toward children, toward the value of a child. I wrote this little book and published it in 1982, *A Child as a Value*, which, I believe, is one of my best books, because in it, I proved empirically and statistically that it was not really the case, and that it was something else to declare, "A child is the highest value," but the reality was very different. If we look carefully, if we use some slightly different techniques, it's not really the case that all women have this incredibly emotional and positive attitude toward it, and it resulted from the fact that I spent a lot of time by a sand-box with my own child, and I was listening and looking... looking at mothers' approach to children, and it was the empirical reality, I'm sorry to say, that inspired me to do this kind of research. So I was inter... I'm sure it's important what one reacts to, how one gets to... I'm talking about... Perhaps when I'm looking at my female students these days, most likely all of these... this whole process doesn't even come into the picture, because they just kind of slip into the soft slippers of feminism right away; they get everything on a silver platter, they have books, they have libraries, they have Ms. Ania,²¹¹ you know, who will give some reading advice if they're interested in something, and it's a completely different era. But then, I think, not liking the façade was a helpful personality trait, leading toward... And that's why when I went to the States and saw and read that there were different roles and not necessarily... that motherhood in our species was social and not necessarily only biological, it had a huge significance, I think. And this, I think, was something like... I didn't... didn't feel a feminist when I came. Actually, I don't know when I felt... if I felt one, but, in fact, it seems to me that, perhaps, I was one in a sense. I mean, I didn't have to out myself, so to speak, or didn't have to label myself this way, but it's simply possible to talk about it in the categories of... to look at it in the process categories, depend... my professional life was going on, you know, also and at the moment when... for sure... And there is one more important thing. For many years, my boss was Magdalena Sokołowska. She is a person who has done a lot of work for, above other things, for the sociology of medicine, since I worked in this kind of a program, but apart from this, she was also interested in women, and then we didn't speak about... there were no other terms, only "women" or "women's problems." She taught a seminar on this, and everything, of course, was happening in this kind of a defined aesthetics, a paradigm like a women's work outside the home, time budgeting, and leisure time, but she's the author of a 1963 article, which was published in *Sociological Studies* and was titled "A Household – an Unknown Work Environment." So, you know, it also matters who you're keeping company with, you know. I mean, there is one issue here that she was this kind of a woman, she was... most likely you could define her as a feminist, but she would, in turn, exclude... I mean she wasn't strongly accepting

²¹¹ "Ania:" a common Polish first name.

of these other roles, I mean roles related to personal lives, the fact that we were also mothers. To wrap it up, she didn't really like this, but she was the kind of person who... who, let's say, because of the fact that she was going abroad a lot, would bring in news, and would tell about various admirable women, in WHO²¹² or some place else, and this certainly had some significance. Besides, she herself was the kind of person who... you know, it was fun to look at her, so dynamic; she was almost like an institution. This, I think, was based on the idea that you could do it like this. I mean it was never my genre. I never liked it. I mean it wasn't my... it wasn't really my blood type, so to speak, this need to shine, this need for power that she had, but I think it also had some positive impact, because she was also an elegant woman, witty, and classy, so it all had some significance as well. But coming back to these stages, like rebellion and the need for independence, we've got it all covered. And there is a point, for instance... but I must have felt obligated, I suspect, I mean the kind of general decency toward those who sent me abroad, you know, where I spent some time, you know, thanks to Margarita Papandreu,²¹³ since it was 1984. I went for this book promotion to New York, and I found myself in this kind of a situation of a chosen person. I suspect that this... this also strengthened these interests I had kind of had, you know. And I certainly was in some way psychologically prepared for the situation that when I came back to... school, the School of Social Sciences, here in the Institute that you've graduated from, you know, and the opportunity came up to teach this kind of class... even though I was terribly scared, because I had never taught, since in the PAN²¹⁴ institutes, there is no teaching. I simply had an impression that one would have to go mad to do it, I thought, to start teaching at my age. But I took it upon myself and now it's the favorite aspect of my work. And I think there is something beneficial, I'd say, in building consciousness, in developing... well, even the fact that here, in the Institute, we have the Program for Research on Women and Families, that we have doctorates which aren't, you know, traditionally formulated but sometimes it's even necessary to maneuver a bit to explain they're interdisciplinary, but it's possible to do it in a political way and convince our male colleagues, you know, if we do it in a kind of... way. And I think that... that I simply am a feminist, in a relatively full-time sense, and most likely it started a long time ago. I mean I don't know how it is, whether feminism forgives for having been a traditional wife or not, but these are silly jokes, I think, but I must have been born with it, in a way. I mean, it's hard to say, there is no... and we talk about constructs, and I'm very careful myself to say it this way, that it's a social construct, that we're learning this. I think that if... if... in my case it was a situation, a good situation, because in my whole life cycle, my rebellions and my needs to define myself as a person, who I wanted to be, what kind of a woman I wanted to be, coincided in a way with all these good opportunities, you know, that I could have contacts with the western world, and we're still talking about the previous... previous system here, that there happened... that, you know, there was a situation... you know... What was the publication year of this book *In Full Voice*, yours, of which you were the editor?

SW: *It's Women't Turn?*

AT: *It's Women's Turn!*

SW: It was published in 1992 and there was your...

²¹² WHO or *Who's Who*: biographical information about accomplished individuals.

²¹³ Papandreu, Margarita: Former First Lady of Greece and a long-time international women's and peace activist.

²¹⁴ PAN – Polska Akademia Nauk (The Polish Academy of Sciences).

AT: In 1992, right?

SW: In 1992.

AT: In 1992. So I think these for me were the things... I felt... I'll say that, I felt honored that I could, for example... I really mean it, I mean I believed that because I never perceived myself as the kind of person, you know, who carried the banner, fought, declared, you know, got into head-on collisions and so forth, because of that they might have perhaps thought that I was a true feminist. But now, in retrospect, I can see that this has been a kind of positivist work, a kind of grass-roots work that's about the students and journalists, about the type of undertaken research, you know, the kind of research that's carried out in the Program you're heading, let's say, what we're working on, that it's the kind of work which is, well, definitely related to... it's very definitely closely related to, let's say, to the minimum definition of feminism, you know: men and women are in different situations. There is... the division is... some things are divided unfairly and something needs to be done about it. And now, it's perhaps a matter of an absolutely private choice and temperament, of course, when it comes to how it's carried out. And I think that I carry it out through my professional work, research and teaching, in which I'm trying to do my best, so to speak. I have simply always been like this, with a mentality of the best student in a homeroom, always a perfectionist, in other words, but I simply can't do things in a slap-dash manner, and particularly... and I'm politically aware of this, particularly when I know... when things are about women, then everything has to be just perfect, because it'll always be judged by different criteria, I mean harsher, less accepting than when it's about, you know, society at large, or some universals, something like this and not something directly related to women. This is always... I know that every time... even if these are just student works, or pieces students publish, or when doctoral students ask for comments, I know that... I always keep it in mind... it's like some, I'd say, some party vigilance, that it has to be very good, spotless, that there can't be anything that could be used to... because I perhaps have this sense of ongoing struggle, that here... I mean it doesn't have to be flaunted in any way, so to speak, but if you want to achieve something, you need to be very, very cunning... you need to have a thought-out and cunning strategy. You've got to be careful, I mean. And do things right. That's the most important.

SW: As a woman?

AT: As a woman.

SW: You've got to do it a tiny bit better?

AT: Yes, you do. I mean I think... I mean I suspect that if I were a man, I'd be doing the same. Perhaps, I'm not speaking precisely, but if something is related not just to my work, if it's, let's say, some team work, or something that's going outside, like a publication, then I know that various types of... that because it's about, let's say, women, men and gender or, or... that it'll undergo a different assessment than if it were about coal, men, or Gross National Product. I know this... I know this, because in my circles, even nowadays, it's still possible to hear that something is a women's issue, you know, that there are... that, you know, it's just a women's

issue. And this comes from our very educated male colleagues, who travel around the world, but still use the language “of women’s issues.”

SW: There are no men’s issues. That means something slightly different.

AT: Yes, yes, yes. But that it’s just... yes, yes, this simply is... a woman’s issue as a general area of research... a woman’s issue and that’s the kind of language that already in the 60’s Magdalena Sokołowska was generally trying to avoid, you know, if though there was no other term.

SW: And would you, perhaps, be willing to say some more about your own life experience. You were talking about college years, and at some point a husband and a child appeared in your story. What moment of your life was that? Was it still in college, or afterwards? Did you succeed at integrating your personal life with your professional ambitions? Was it well-integrated, or not really?

AT: It was very hard. It was very hard. It was... it was hard. I mean this time, one can say, this so-called best time, as it’s said sometimes, in a woman’s life. I mean when you’re already over 25, you know, which is already... it was hard, because I absolutely... and it wasn’t even the point that it was the source of money, but I absolutely wanted to work. I mean I wanted to work outside of the home. It interested me. I... I... my job... no matter how unfavorable... let’s say, because there always are some unfavorable conditions, but I like my job. It is simply... I know how to find joy in some things, like in all jobs, and from this... as well and in my job as well, and I’m still finding them today, which surprises me a little bit, but it happens. I wanted to work very much, and it was very hard on me, because my child was getting sick a lot. Later on, it got a bit easier in a way. On one hand, it was easier because of my mother’s help, because, after my father’s death, my mother came to live with me, but on the other hand, these were very difficult years for me. It was the kind of situation that... I think that, that this... Well, I mean I could say it decades later, but then, at the point when mother came to our house... when it became clear that mother would come to live with me... Nobody helped, since my husband took... backed out and said, “It’s your decision,” and my brother simply decided that would be best, since he was then divorced, and didn’t, in fact, have his own apartment, and so on and so forth. Mother who was always used to the fact that somebody would always... well, you know, even though she was my age now and in a great shape, you know, and so on and so forth, but she said there was no way she would stay there alone, you know, because before the war, she used to live in Warsaw, and it seems to me it was... And I... as... I think it was very hard on me... it was almost 25 years that she lived with me, with us. And, God forbid, I’m not going to try to blame the divorce on her but I think it certainly was a factor which very strongly contributed to this divorce of ours, but did it have, you know, any impact on my world-view? You know, I can’t tell you using these categories. I think not everything can be defined in these categories. I know one thing that that’s certainly the case... that, on one hand, she was helping out, and you... you know how it is when you’re working, and I worked all that time, and there is a child, and my husband was little involved, very little. But, on the other hand, I think that the cost, the cost of her presence was huge, my own psychological cost. And all I know... I remember this... this situation when there is a child, a husband, a mother, and I am in the middle of it. And all of this is happening in the space of a Polish apartment, 46 square meters, and two people working irregular hours. Mother has her room, we have ours, for two people with irregular hours, and

Tomek has his room. And I remember this; these are such moments, like I told you at the beginning, that when I was a child, I suddenly decided to be different than my mother, and I didn't exactly know what was going on but it was simply this kind of a creative moment: just different. I remember what I was wearing, what the circumstances were, where we were going, I remember these details, which I wouldn't have remembered in other situations. I will be different. When it comes to this, on the other hand, I remember this moment, in turn, when I undertook... when I thought to myself, "I can't cope," I mean that I wouldn't be able to have it all, to be on good terms with everybody, you know. Who do I feel responsible for? I feel responsible for Tomek, you know, for the child, and that means that my behavior will be defined by what's good for Tomek, by my relations with Tomek, and that's it. It doesn't matter what, who... who will get offended, who, who will leave me, and how it will all be. It was the moment, I think, it was very... it was the moment of a very conscious decision that I wouldn't manage to be like the UN and that I had to make up my mind. And, you know, when I look at it in after many years, when my son is an adult man with three children, I think that he is the kind of man he is... a partner, I think... even though his views are incredibly conservative when you talk to him, but I think that that he is simply the feminist ideal of a partner. This is simply... I'm looking and I can't believe my eyes, because he's really, in general, like from books, you know those published already by Teresa Hołówka,²¹⁵ you know, about the time budgeting. He's simply incredible, even though, you know, he didn't get such a model from home. But when I look at him like at an adult, I think that this decision, then incredibly dramatic for me, you know, particularly since it was about my marriage, you know, that I simply wouldn't be able to cope, this... this I remember. It is also perhaps an element of building, you know, building the kind of thinking... feminist thinking, I think. I think that simply when you talk about it, the point is, perhaps, also to perceive each other as, you know, finite beings, having a right to decide about various things, and I think that even this already happens to be feminism per se.

SW: And your relationship with your mother, in turn, reflects this topic, difficult for feminists, the problem of female genealogy, of a mother-daughter relationship.

AT: Yes, listen, I mean I... if... if I still have any of the so-called professional acumen left, when I'm finally done with this book, you know, my book about women's identity, and with all these projects, grants, and so on, I would really like to work on this issue of mothers and daughters, because it was... it was an incredible burden for me. I mean I'll tell you... In short, when I talked to a friend once, since it was sometimes very hard on me and I wasn't coping, so I needed to talk, he was saying something, as far as I remember... I remember what he told me and this is, perhaps, a real explanation. This was a point when I was making an effort, you know, and I was suggesting to my mother... because financially, we were, let's say, doing well, I mean when we were still married, so that my mother could have moved out, you know. I mean I was saying, "Mom," and I remember the conversation. "Mom, my marriage is falling apart. We have to be on our own. We can afford renting a studio for you nearby, so you'll be close to us, and so on." Well, and I will never forget when mother said to me, in this impersonal kind of language, "Now, leave the room, please, and I will never live by myself." And of cour... you know, I had no guts to go against this. I didn't have the guts, the psychological capabilities, to get my mother's stuff out, you know, or to do anything. I had no room to maneuver, no options, because I had no family members, you know, to whom I could say, "Listen, take my mother to your

²¹⁵ **Hołówka, Teresa:** Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warsaw and author of *No One is Born a Woman*, among others.

place, at least for a few months, because I have to at least try to save this marriage,” or something like this. In other words, I think that... I was asking him, listen, why am I doing this? Why didn't I do anything bad yet? Why am I not... not? Why? To which he responded, and there is something about it, and he said, “You know, you're just a decent person.” And because... with one reservation that it's possible to say... it's possible to reinvent every type of experience into the so-called positive thinking. I mean, nothing, of course, will balance out my effort and hardship, you know, the kind of deficits I incurred through the quarter of a century of living under one roof, you know, of various kinds of limitations and so on, but I think that to me, it was also... as if... I knew this, in a way, I was aware of all of this, you know. I mean I... I knew and, paradoxically, it perhaps helped me survive, so that I can look straight into the mirror, you know, and I don't have, you know, I don't have... mother is already deceased, and I don't have, you know, this feeling that, you know, that I did something that makes me feel miserable after all these years, and so on. Because, you know, I was aware of this. And I think that it's also related to this... this... immanent trait of my personality, this rebellion, or, in other words, some kind of awareness, that I'm aware of this and I know... I'm aware that I can't just say no. But I think that this awareness, this knowledge of myself, that I'm aware I'm not behaving like a wimp of sorts, simply, because that's how it's done, because of this and that, or because I'm a good daughter, oh no. No good daughter, you know! No good daughter, nothing like that. I'm just a decent person who doesn't kick people out of her house. These were the terms. And I remember, for example, when my mother... there was something, some issue of going to the symphony, and I said, “No.” No. No. And mother was going to the symphony by herself; she had her season tickets. No. Or, later on, there was an issue about going for walks. “I won't be going for walks by myself,” to which I said, “Too bad, I won't be going.” So, you know, there were, I'd say, feelers and attempts at... but I think there was also some awareness of this situation, an awareness, you know, of these relations that were kind of deprived of tenderness. Because I can't say, you know, I can't deny... whether or not she loved me, because I believe these are the things one has no right to do, you know, because these are very private, very individual matters. I think she was doing it the way, you know... like she was raised, since this tyrant of a grandmother couldn't have raised my mother any other way. And apart from this, mother was very bitter, perhaps, all her life, because she wanted to be an actress and wasn't allowed to, because, you know, she was born in 1909, so it was a long time ago. And she obeyed. I think it was something that was really poisoning her all her life. And it poisoned her, it poisoned us, it poisoned father, poisoned... you know, our family life, since she was so unfulfilled. So, like I'm saying, for example, there was no... from her side, just the opposite, when it came to the issue of college. You want to be a doctor, go ahead; you want to be a sociologist, go ahead. A great help, you know. It wasn't at all easy for my parents to support me in Warsaw, because as a child of the intelligentsia family²¹⁶, I got no scholarships, nothing, so father, you know, had to earn it all by himself. But she was, I think, that all her life, she was, you know, more like this unfulfilled person than like a mother.

SW: And this ban on acting came from her family?

AT: Yes, from her parents, yes. There was no way. There was no way. And she obeyed. I mean she didn't have, you know, this... this will power and strength, I'd say, to... to, you know, yes,

²¹⁶ During the communist rule, students applying to universities were ranked according to a point system which accorded more points, thereby increasing chances of admission and possibility of scholarship, to children from proletarian families.

and she just lived with it, but I think she was compensating for this all her life. I remember that, and it was also interesting, you know... and it's interesting how professional and private things get interwoven. It was a paradox... it was strange, the way it was working out, that when my mother died it was perhaps the same time when Bogusia Budrowska²¹⁷ was finishing her dissertation, *Motherhood as a Turning Point in a Woman's Life*. I was doing, you know, a final editing, this kind of reading right before accepting and putting out the work, and I was thinking to myself, "God, what an idea! The shoemaker's children always go without shoes, you know. Here you are, right after your mother's funeral, you know, and you still have to do this kind..." But, contrary to appearances, it was good, this situation, because suddenly, for the first time in my life, I asked this question while looking at the final draft of Bogusia's book. Suddenly, you know, I asked this dramatic question out loud, "Why didn't you love me?" So, you know, this interweaving of things, I believe, is also very important in the case of people like me, because it's very likely that if I hadn't been in the situation when I had to do it, well, had to, because, you know, there was a deadline, and the gal was waiting for me to finish the book, maybe I wouldn't have asked this question, not ever. And it's very important to ask this question and, at any rate, to define this situation, and I have finally defined it in full, you know. I mean, I'm not saying... I'd like to stress it again that I'm not denying her, my mother, a right to feelings she was perhaps convinced she had, no. But from my perspective... all of a sudden, editing a dissertation, this question, "Why didn't you love me?" And I burst out crying, so... And... and now I'm very happy, because one of my doctoral students wants to write on relations between mothers and daughters. I mean she will do her PhD. For now, I don't know where it's going to go, but it doesn't matter if a doctoral student will want to write her dissertation on this or not, but I can say one thing that experiences with my own mother, well, when supported... supported... supported by this kind of professional back-up and certainly by a personality type, allowed me to experience something very interesting, because it turned out that it's a taboo topic: relations between mothers and daughters. Well, in our society, there are many taboo topics, and this topic, in my opinion, is particularly affected by this kind of a taboo. And I remember that... because I have this habit, and by the way I do it in class very often that when I want to bring forth an argument, to show a perspective, I very often use my own life experiences, simply, my own. I refer to my own experiences, which I have a right to do, you know, so I don't infringe on anybody else's rights. And I remember that at the time when I already was aware of what my relations with my mother were like, but still before... before this dramatic outburst, I was saying things delicately, tactfully, you know, because it's not my style to go into, "You know, she's this and that," no, no, no, nothing like this. I remember when I said to a close friend once, "You know, I really envy you your relations with your mother." Because this... you know... I'm saying to her, "Because as we grow older, it's all becoming more and more important and I very much envy you your relations with your mother." And this woman is turning toward me and says, "You're forgetting I'm an actress." So it turned out that it's something like, you know, like it's enough to just touch it, and, in many instances, the whole flood of information spills out. But what this has to do with feminism, I don't know at this point.

SW: It may have something to do with it, because feminists very energetically undertook this theme of female genealogy. It'd be also interesting to know what these relations were like between your mother and grandmother, because it looks like...

²¹⁷ Budrowska, Boguslawa: Prof. Titkow's doctoral student (1993-1998). Currently, a professor in the Institute for Research on Women and Family at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw.

AT: It may have. I mean I think that it... that if the situation doesn't occur... if you're following various expectations, you know, commands, and norms, which follow the defined... which are of the specific type, you know, then, well, most likely, well, you'll repeat the cycle. Yes, you may become, well, some kind of a tyrant grandmother, or you may be a repeat mommy. I mean, I think that these attempts... that this mechanism of cutting oneself off is significant here. I mean cutting oneself off not to repeat certain patterns, you know, from these... from biographies of women close to you, and I think that this element of a kind of a rebellion, as I say, is the most important here. Besides, there are also various things later on that have an impact. If later on some women appear... and they may be completely unrelated to this awareness of women's separateness, or wrong done to women, or anything like that, no, it's enough if they only bring in some kind of elements... new elements into the life you've got as your heritage after... after, well, a grandmother and a mother. They only suddenly show you a color of life, that, for instance, some lady... I know that it had some tremendous significance in my life that my godfather's wife, who lived in Warsaw... I visited them once and something, something... They had a really beautiful place, and she always took great care about, you know, about setting up the table, about things like that. And I remember when she said, "You know, after all, all people have their favorite teacup." To me as a little girl, it was a revelation, I remember: "After all, all people have their favorite teacup." But it was very important, you know. It was very important. All people have their favorite teacup. So such things are very important, exactly this kind of things, as I've said, about teacups, and I remember that this lady, who is now deceased, and I saw her... I was fortunate enough, before she departed, and I remember that we talked about this teacup. And I have to tell you that this very old woman was pleased. I say, "Ms. Zofia, do you realize how big of a role this teacup had? That all people have their favorite teacup, to which I brought my attention?" She was the kind of a woman also... I think that if she had been born a little earlier, she would have been a feminist. "Oh, Hanusia, was that so? That's wonderful!" She was 95. So this... this I think, you know, these are perhaps various little pebbles, which work this way, and it's not necessarily about having a feminist environment. It's a paradox, I'll say, but the specifically feminist circles aren't always necessary.

SW: And how was it with these feminist circles, with this Polish movement, which was being born when I started working on these issues, exactly these issues you got acquainted with during your stay in the States? How were you looking at what was going on here, in Poland?

AT: I mean I'll tell you this: I, I can say, I immediately... because of my line of work, I had it easy right away, since if the situation is that I'm an academic, who, well, may be useful, you know, to do something for women... And I realized very soon that it's not necessarily the case, and I saw it earlier in the States, that it's enough... that it's enough of a glue, I mean the banner of "feminism," or that, you know, here we are doing something in the women's movement. It's not at all the case. I had already seen that in the States, and I was... It really shocked me, to say honestly. You know, because it was... and particularly that I had to really explore it in depth, because I had no clue, you know, about why, what, where and how. It was simply shocking, all these factions, this infighting, and it had really little to do with sisterhood. Here, very soon it was, you know, because it's a very small group and very soon it was possible to figure out that X may not necessarily like Y or Z, and vice versa. And because for me... of course, I also liked some people more, on a personal level, and others less, I didn't have to go into, you know, into

these kinds of relations that would, let's say, locate me... like I'm with this faction and not with that faction. I was trying not even to know about all this, because it is very, you know... it, it, it disrupts, it disrupts... because I don't fight politically in a sense of belonging to a specific wing of Polish feminism, but rather if... I try to provide a forum where various wings meet and talk about things, you know. I know that this infighting isn't specifically Polish, but perhaps it makes me sad because there are so few of these women. And it is something different from like when you're in New York and looking, you know, at a meeting of whichever faction, let's say, and there are three or four hundred women showing up at the meeting place, you know, and however many for another faction, you know. Also... it's all going on in sports arenas at various universities. Or, when I was already at Rutgers later on, and when there is a meeting, well, the place is full and there are, you know, 900 participants of both genders, so these are slightly different situations, and they can afford factions. Here, on the other hand, it's like... but OK, it's like an old lady's sentiment that it's such a pity it's this way and not another. On the other hand, as I'm saying, I believed that if the situation was that in the 90's, at the beginning, when the fight about the abortion legislation started out, and the Freedom Union²¹⁸ turned to me to write an expertise, you know, on this issue, I'd write the expertise. Even if, you know, another party had turned to me, I would have written it then, too, because, as I say, such things are very much needed, and not everybody is able, you know, able to do it. And, of course, you know, all that happened simply happened, but I have this, I'd say, this formula of a feminist struggle that if big words need to be used, I use them, you know. And I think that if... if... if there is this situation now that somebody calls from the office... the existing Office of Women's Affairs and is asking me to come, because there is going to be some training session for women's reps regarding the glass ceiling issue... That's how, you know, how it works here, in a definitely feminist way, with a feminist philosophy, and I think that it'll be even more like this when this book comes out – this phone call was from the editor – when the book comes out about the unpaid woman's work, *Myths, Conditions, Reality... uhhh... Perspectives*. So I think it'll also be the book which will touch upon, well, these things, which are... you can say they are “tabooized,” to use such a big word. And most likely, as long as I'm active, my feminism is going to manifest itself exactly in this way, but if someone asks me a question if I'm a feminist, I'll say, “yes” for sure, because it really makes me laugh when... it really makes me laugh, you know, because it's so... I don't know, don't know why it makes me laugh, but it does make me laugh a lot, because it's done by people who really wouldn't have to do it. On the other hand, if somebody denied me that, I think I'd enter into an argument, for sure. I mean by presenting, you know, the whole spectrum of ways to conduct a political struggle that we can have, yes, and I believe that in feminism, there is room for various forms. You know, not everybody has the temperament, you know, for dressing up and organizing a rally. It never was my thing, you know, no matter how old I was, not at all. So I think I prefer this kind of rallies [*pointing out toward the pile of books*]. It was, for example, a form of a rally when I chose this cover [*showing the cover of her book, What It Means to Be a Woman in Poland*], yes, I did have an impression it was, you know, a rally. The book *Child as a Value*, published in 1982, was probably my first publication written from a woman's perspective, even though, let's say, from the viewpoint of women's studies' methodology, I made a mistake,

²¹⁸ **The Freedom Union:** (*Unia Wolności*, UW) a liberal party founded in 1994 out of the merger of the Democratic Union (*Unia Demokratyczna*, UD) and the Liberal Democratic Congress (*Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny*, KLD). Both of these parties had roots in the Solidarity movement. It represented European liberal tradition, i.e., it advocated free market economy and individual liberty, rejected all extremism and fanaticism and favored European integration (in the form of European Union membership), rapid privatization and decentralization.

shared by all sociologists, because a lot of charts had no split into men and women, into “What Women/Men Think,” “What Views Women/Men Have,” because it was like... I’d say this: we had it printed into our thinking, into our professional training, that these things weren’t to be split, in general. But there were some chapters there already that were devoted to women. It was already... it was the first publication that was definitely... I treat it as a kind of a beginning of my, let’s say, activities in the area of women’s studies, if someone really needs some definition. But, as I have mentioned earlier, as soon as I manage to write this book about the identity of Polish women and all... and the transformation in the continuity of this phenomenon, I would still like to work on the issue of relations between mothers and daughters. I mean as... as... I mean, it’s hard to say... hard to investigate this problem in full, and I’d be a buffoon if I thought I would, but anyway, I’d like to devote some attention and some time to this issue, because it seems to me that particularly in such societies as the Polish one, where the woman’s role is also strictly defined, where the mother’s role is very specific, and where the society is entangled into this incredibly dense network of cultural taboos, it is a fascinating theme for me. And because at this point, there is more and more, I’d say, openness, not my own, since this happened a long time ago, but more public openness toward treating it as a research inquiry, with the various so-called quality techniques, like interviews or research done, let’s say, with the focus technique, which produce completely different data from those in quantitative sociological research, and I would be very happy if I managed to carry out such a project. So, we’d start with a child and end with mothers and daughters.

SW: Well, not end yet perhaps...

AT: Well, maybe not! Maybe, but anyway... anyway, it’s something that... that even during this conversation... I have to say I wasn’t thinking about... most likely since I’m tired of carrying out current obligations, I wasn’t thinking about any projects, but I think that during this conversation, it came together, and I know perfectly well what I want... what kind of a grant I want to apply for from KBN²¹⁹ in June. Thanks a lot!

SW: Oh, and may I ask you one more question?

AT: Yes, you may.

SW: It’s really a bit like a reporter’s question, a question about the kind of knowledge you would have equipped a daughter with, but you have a son, right?

AT: I have a son, but I also have a granddaughter.

SW: You have a granddaughter. What would you say to her, to a woman living in the world you know as a woman and as a sociologist?

AT: I mean I think it’s probably a rare situation when it’s possible to pass something on directly. I think I will certainly... I mean at this point I’m in this incredibly... the family situation is very comfortable for me in a cognitive sense, apart from emotions, because I can just look at...

²¹⁹ **KBN:** State Committee for Scientific Research (Komitet Badan Naukowych – KBN) has been transformed into The Ministry of Science and Information Technology (Ministerstwo Nauki i Informatyzacji).

Because the age difference between my grandchildren is only two years, I'm looking at a three-year-old little boy, and I'm looking at a one-year old girl, so it's very interesting, because, on one hand, the girl does all the things her brother, Kostek, does and that is planes, dinosaurs, and all absolutely male toys, but at the same time, there is a doll, and it's not because she's being showered with dolls, but it's a doll that was there when she was about to be born. Kostek got it, this rubber doll, to get him used to the baby, and she simply started... it all started with this doll. So there is this doll, and it's all very interesting when you're watching these things, you know, from the vantage point of research, articles and such, about whether or not girls and boys are different, what it's all like. It's very interesting. But I think that as she's developing, I will probably... you know, very discreetly, discreetly, it'll be guarded, of course, but I'll watch out to... so that she... to build in her the maximum amount of independence. I mean I'll probably pay attention if... if she isn't... if she doesn't have some kind of, I'd say, inborn... as her own thing, an inborn, let's say, predisposition, or this kind of an independence trait, acquired very early for whatever reason and in a way that's hard to explain, then I will, you know, try to, I think, pay attention to that. You know to this... I will probably pilot this, in such a way, of course, that nobody knows about it, because, after all, it's a very discreet and delicate matter, and grandmas have a very, you know... you understand. But I have a lot of opportunities to influence the children, my grandchildren. I already know this, since I have one big grandson, a twelve-year-old, so I know that grandmas have various kinds of opportunities. And for sure, a girl... I know that if I'm only still around, she'll always be able to count on me. In every situation she'll find herself in, whoever's involved and in whatever issue, she'll be able to say no. And this is the most precious thing to be able to say no, even when it's the silliest thing in the world, but simply not to stifle this, this capability of saying no, you know. I mean it'll sound a bit self-congratulatory but even though I was not able to say no to this love of my youth, you know, and started getting bad grades in college and some other things, it fortunately didn't last long, you know, and it didn't determine... didn't define my whole life. I simply returned to this kind of, I would say, something I value in myself, I probably value it particularly strongly, that I did say no, no, no, and that I will write my Master's thesis in a week, I'll be on time, everything will happen. Yes, my granddaughter probably can... My granddaughter... I mean my granddaughter can... on one hand, I will be intrigued, and on the other hand, I think she can certainly count on me, certainly, because it's not simple at all. It isn't at all simple to be an independent woman, not simple at all. And there is always a use for a person who'll say that all people like to have a teacup, always a use, that everybody has a favorite teacup. Such a person is always needed... such a person should always come up in everybody's life. I will be happy if I will be this person for my granddaughter.

SW: Thanks so much!

ANNA TITKOW

- 07/05/1942** Born in Przeworsk
- 1959-1964** Studied sociology at the Warsaw University
- 1964-1969** Worked at The Institute of Mother and Child
- 1968** Got married
- 1969** Gave birth to son Tomasz
- Since 1969** Philosophy and Sociology Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences
- 1979** Earned a Ph.D. in Sociology of Medicine
- 1993** Received Habilitacja²²⁰, a post-graduate degree

*Works at the Philosophy and Sociology Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences
and teaches Gender Studies in the School of Social Sciences in Warsaw*

²²⁰ **Habilitation (Habilitacja):** is a term used within the university systems in Poland, Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Hungary and other European countries. It describes the process of qualifying for admission as a university professor.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Bożena Umińska
Interviewer: Sławomira Walczewska**

Location: Kraków

Date: July 2004

Translated from the Polish by Kasia Kietlińska



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Bożena Umińska was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1948. She studied psychology, Polish philology, and philosophy at the University of Warsaw where she received a doctorate in 2001. She is the co-founder of the Polish Feminist Association and a translator of Maggie Humm's *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*. In 2002, her book *A Figure with Shadow: Jewish Women in Polish Literature from the End of the 19th Century to 1939* was among the top twenty nominated for *Nike*, the most prestigious literary award in Poland. Umińska also publishes under her parents' surname Keff. She has a son and lives in Warsaw.

Sławomira Walczewska founded the Women's Foundation (eFKa) in Kraków in 1995. In 1999, Walczewska published *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Feminist Discourse in Poland*, the first Polish book about women's emancipation from a historical and a cultural perspective. As a feminist activist and a scholar, she is interested in international women's movements and is firmly committed to understanding various differences and intersections of global feminisms.

BOŻENA UMIŃSKA
July 2004
Kraków

Sławomira Walczewska: I'd like to ask you how it all started with feminism in your life, and when some reflections appeared about your being a woman, about relationships between men and women. So maybe you can talk about your childhood, about your family and how it all was.

Bożena Umińska: So well, that's what I was thinking about. So let me start with my name (laughter)... I'll start with the name and here is what I'll say: My name is Bożena Umińska but it should be Bożena Keff, since both of my parents are Jewish. They both survived the war²²¹ in the Soviet Union, when it still existed, of course, and they were originally from Lvov. I mean, they ran away from Lvov to the Soviet Union and thanks to that survived, and later on they came back to Poland, just like a lot of Polish Jews, who remained in Poland after the war. My mother has... I'd say that my mother has these very left-wing views and that's how it is till this day, and I don't mean the radical left but more of a traditional sort, since she's a woman who is slightly above eighty today. And my father was simply a communist, and he fought in this Polish Army, which was... how should I say that... under the leadership... with the Red Army, so, in short, with General Berling,²²² and at some point, after the war, for whatever reasons, my father wanted to remain in the army. I can't say why, since it seems to me that he was a sensitive man, but somehow, I don't know, perhaps after the complete destruction the war brought for the Jews, this kind of military structure, closeness... because it was the army, which in the 50's..., that is there were many people who simply fought together. At any rate, he decided he wanted to stay, and then it turned out that he had to change his name, so that it wouldn't sound foreign, really meaning that it wouldn't sound Jewish, in short, and that's how he became, became an Umiński. I don't know why he decided to do that, but I was simply born as Bożena Umińska. Both names indicate my parents' complete will, I'd say, for both assimilation and total camouflage. That's why I don't want to go back to the name Keff, because I'm kind of scared by this... administrative red tape that would be involved, but I willingly use it as a kind of a pen name. I'd be actually more willing to just keep this name, but I decided to start using it after I had already had some output, and newspapers, for example... newspapers and publications I write for, since I'm a journalist, aren't very happy when less known names start popping up. So I'm either Bożena Keff or Bożena Umińska; it's kind of funny how it alternates, but Keff is decidedly more kind of personal to me. And now this... my father committed suicide in 1954, so I was a child, and I simply don't remember, don't remember... don't know him. He committed suicide... he committed suicide, because... and this is what I can only surmise from what I know... and my mother is not a good teller of other people's stories, she's a good teller of her own story, but from what I know, what happened was this kind of a certain... or actually a total bankruptcy of his faith and ideal. And sometimes I think about my father as if he were a kind of a different variation of Borowski, Tadeusz Borowski, the writer. I mean it like this: Most likely, like many Polish Jews, communists or people from the Left, my father changed his name, since he didn't attach any great importance, any great importance to nationality or ethnicity, but attached the

²²¹ World War II.

²²² **General Berling:** Commander of the 1st Polish Army organized in the Soviet Union in 1942.

utmost importance to this universal and just ideal of a social order that was supposed to come into being, but just kept refusing to do so. And my father, who was a communist, was at the same time a relatively tolerant man. I know, for example, that there was this story that he was an organizer of this... today we can call it public works, it was called Ochotnicze Hufce Pracy (Voluntary Work Troops), it was this kind of an organization... it was related, of course, to rebuilding of Warsaw, mostly, and my parents ended up in Warsaw at last. And, for example, he would give jobs to people who used to fight in the AK,²²³ the Home Army, because he didn't think, for example, that the AK past was in any way a baggage.²²⁴ And this was received very badly; he had various problems because of this, and finally this is what happened. Well... they were throwing together a trial, this kind of fake Stalinist trial, since they still... in 1954, and my father got an order in writing to be a prosecution witness. It wasn't a request; in the military you get orders. And this... this order was too much, as well as various forms of harassment and the frequently used anti-Semitic lines, so he committed suicide. That's all about the topic of my father, just to give you some sense of my background, my background of where I come from. Well, my parents are from Lvov, and that's more or less their story. After a while, my mother married again, and she married a man, who was... I've said was, since he's deceased, he passed away a few years ago, and he was this... he was the man who was this... he was like they don't make them any more. A Jew from a small town, from a very small town, from Stanisławów, which is also near Lvov, he became a communist at fourteen and changed this kind of traditional religious education, Jewish education, into very in-depth Marxist studies, which were really very deep, since he died as a professor, a man with a certain academic career. I'd also say that, apart from the fact that he was a doctrinaire and he had unusually... unusually strong political and social convictions, he was a man of incredible... incredible for me, and impressive intelligence, incredibly impressive intelligence. He had habits, which are like habits of people born in the 19th century, even though he was not born in the 19th century but most likely around... I don't remember... most likely more or less around 1915 or 1910. He'd get up at 5:00 a.m., read philosophy, studied English, because... just because he didn't know it. And he did all this... was incredibly well-organized, since Polish pre-war jails, where he did time for communism, helped him get this way, to be so incredibly well-organized. In the evening he'd always watch the TV news. He was incredibly well-versed in world issues, to the extent it was possible to be well-versed in the People's Poland,²²⁵ and he simply had this incredibly passionate attitude toward political and social issues. Sometimes this attitude and this viewpoint remained within the doctrine's constraints, and sometimes he really went beyond it, sometimes he went beyond it. But his knowledge, or I'd say political knowledge, had this... was decidedly religious in nature. Because, in general, he was a man of a huge temperament, with an incredible vitality and an incredible intellectual temperament. I think, I think that... and this is the moment, I can say, "here my story begins." Well... my stepfather, as it happened, I've noticed, among our Jewish

²²³ **Armia Krajowa** or **AK** (*Home Army*): functioned as the dominant resistance movement in German-occupied Poland. It was active in all areas of the country from September 1939 until its disbanding in January 1945. The Armia Krajowa, one of the largest underground resistance movements during World War II, formed the armed wing of what subsequently became known as the "underground state" (*państwo podziemne*). Its communist counterpart was Armia Ludowa or The People's Army.

²²⁴ Because the Home Army (AK) did not support the communist regime, its members were often harassed or persecuted after World War II.

²²⁵ During the time of the People's Republic of Poland or under the communist government (1952-1989). Since all media were censored by the communists, accurate information about national and international affairs was notoriously difficult to obtain.

friends, or among Jewish fathers... and sometimes divorced Jewish fathers would raise their children themselves. I don't recall a lot of Poles fulfilling this role. My stepfather divorced his first wife and was raising a son from that marriage. I know that the son lived... lived with us, and I'd say that I truly aspired... with all the possible distance toward the ideology he represented, and with all the possible skepticism, and yet I truly aspired to become some sort of an intellectual partner for him, and I think I had every reason to believe I could, but I'd definitely lose this battle with his son. And I think I lost for two reasons. One reason was kinship, one could say, the degree of kinship, but another could be gender. I didn't notice it then. And I think that I got the kind of message from my family... very clearly a message of ... a precisely women's lib message that there was no reason why women should not lead the life of... the life as free as the one led by men. I mean free in a sense of choice, following their own will, so that they could choose their own way of life. So everything that kind of went against this message was deeply hidden and wasn't really legible for me. My mother worked; she worked because she wanted to, because she liked it. She was very active. She's actually been working till this day, however it sounds. It's funny, but at eighty, since a few years ago, she's held some sort of a... she's an archivist at the Jewish Historical Institute.²²⁶ She's worked all her life. Up to some point... since, like in Poland in general, there was a lot of cheap labor of village people in the cities, so because of that we had some sort of house-keepers at home, who, in a very basic sense, would take care of the house. But nobody at home really paid attention to... I don't know... to making sure that it was nicely furnished, well taken care of, or that there was food in the house. It was a radically non-bourgeois household, I'd say, and it probably couldn't have been any other way, since, I mean, they were not from bourgeois families. They came from these families... from some kind of tradesman... somewhere at the crossover, I don't know, with some small business... and from small towns. My mother's mother was actually a relatively affluent person up to some point, since she used to have a very beautiful restaurant in Lvov, but she went bankrupt and lost it, and the family got to be rather poor afterwards. So in short, I'd say, this was the kind of household that was, of course, that was dominated by ideas and by this kind of lack of bourgeois care for creature comforts, which doesn't mean that there was any hardship, no, I'd actually say that they belonged to the group of relatively privileged people, not particularly, but moderately so. And that's how, that's how it went on. For me it went on like this till 68, till 1968,²²⁷ because before that I had only encountered anti-Semitism... I mean I ran into anti-Semitism very early, at the elementary school level. It wasn't really in elementary school itself, since I attended the TPD (The Friends of Children Association) school, which had no religion classes, and it was mostly attended by... either by children of secular intelligentsia, both Polish and Jewish, since till 1968, I think there were... I can't say how many, but certainly there were some Jews left in Warsaw. I mean there were some... there were still some Jewish institutions left. And by the way, I wasn't really eager to join, and neither were my stepfather and mother. In a way, they didn't really care. It was as if their Jewish identity, which they had, expressed itself in ideology, as in my

²²⁶ **Jewish Historical Institute:** an institution located in Warsaw and focused on the study of the history and culture of Polish Jews. It is the largest depository of Jewish-related archival documents, books, journals, and museum objects in Poland.

²²⁷ **March 1968:** a political crisis initiated by student protests and accompanied by a wave of anti-Semitism, as a result of which around 20 thousand Polish citizens of Jewish descent left the country. The direct cause of protests was a student demonstration in Warsaw against the censorship intervention and removal of Adam Mickiewicz's play *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*) on January 10, 1968. The demonstration participants were harassed and some were expelled from the university, which caused mass student protests, brutally suppressed by Militia troops. The protesters demanded liberalization of political life. Student protests were put out by the end of March 1968.

stepfather's case, or in some kind of views, in my mother's case, and in the past, the war past, in the Holocaust past, since they both lost their families, in the friends they had, since there were many Jews among their friends, not only Jews but many were Jews, and also in... I'd say, in a certain striking ignorance about the country they lived in, about its underlining. They were kind of looking at this country, and particularly he did, my stepfather did, from the angle of this vision, this specifically ideological vision of what it should be like here and not what it was actually like. Because of this, I'd say, that in a way he lived in this kind of a country... in some sort of a spectral country, simply. And most likely I did, too, to some extent, not having a good sense, for example, of what Poland was really like outside of this circle specifically... I don't know, intellectual, official, and very cultured. Poland of the Polish People's Republic²²⁸ times... I think so... I mean the version of Poland known as The Polish People's Republic, or in other words the Polish People's Republic was, at a certain level, a country, which was very saturated with culture, particularly in some periods. So in short... this is another stage of this background, and of course I didn't have any kind of feminist ideas; I couldn't have had them. Graduating from high school at the end of the 60's, I couldn't even have had them. On the other hand, I definitely had this sense... this liberated sense, this strong sense of liberated... of obviousness of women's lib. I remember that when I heard some sort of various misogynist remarks, which I sometimes happened to hear, I didn't even react with indignation but with a kind of an amazement, as if the person saying it was kind of a dinosaur, kind of a relic from the past, which somehow wandered into my way, so there was no point getting offended or reacting in any way, when it was something like... like it actually had no right to exist in this reality any more. And to the extent, for example... since it couldn't be any other way in Poland, I mean awareness of anti-Semitism I got relatively quickly...

S.W.: I'm sorry but...

B.U.: Oh well... My stepfather, yes, mostly him, lived in this kind of a definitely unrecognized reality, as if it was understood, it was a bit... I think I had a bit of a similar attitude to his. If, for example, he knew about it, and he had to have known in what way... since he simply came from a small town, surrounded by villages even if it was at the Eastern Borderlands,²²⁹ where there were Poles, Ukrainians and Jews almost in equal proportions, but here there were Poles. After the war, Poland became an almost ethnically homogeneous country.²³⁰ At any rate, even if he did see it, he had this attitude toward it that... I don't know that this Polish religiosity, Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and some kind of conservatism were all like this dinosaur's tail, which is really almost cut off, maybe still attached on a little thread, but it would soon get lost. And this faith of his, I'd say, was incredibly strong, and, most likely, it came from a refusal to face the reality. It was definitely above the reality, and that's what I'd like to say that I... of course, as I've said, much more skeptically, with much more of a distance, and my mother, too. We... we would often have these discussions with my stepfather, where it all simply ended up with terrible fights, because ... my mother was highly skeptical, for example, about his assurances that in 15 years, we were simply going to have social justice here, total social justice, which, of course, he called the arrival of communism. Mother had slightly different experiences, because of my father's death if not for any other reason, so it simply seemed funny to her. I think that she had her feet

²²⁸ **The Polish People's Republic (PRL):** official name of communist Poland from 1952 to 1989.

²²⁹ **Eastern Borderlands:** To the east, Poland bordered The Soviet Union.

²³⁰ Because of the Holocaust and post-World War II population movements and redrawing of national borders.

on the ground much more firmly, as she still does, but I was most likely somewhere between her skepticism, or perhaps skepticism, in general, and this kind of a passionate attitude toward ideas, and yet without a need to espouse an ideology, since I really must have seen very clearly that my stepfather was living in a country... that it wasn't... since a certain point, and certainly since 68, since 1968, when I found myself... I was already at the university, as a freshman at the Psychology Department, where I had just been accepted. And by coincidence, simply by a complete coincidence, not informed and not encouraged to come, I found myself at a student rally, which, I recall, ended up in a beating, cudgeling, and all these other things, all these other things that, we know, happened later, and that means simply the whole huge campaign, the only such anti-Semitic campaign in the so-called people's democracies. I found myself there by coincidence, and I got terribly mad, simply got furious. And I remember this one scene when the so-called worker-activists, which, most likely, were simply the police, I mean ZOMO²³¹ (the Military Police) in plain clothes, in these grey coats, jumped on this whole student rally, gathered at the Warsaw University courtyard. People started running. I was running, too, and it didn't take much imagination to know enough to run to any of the departments. I ran to the Psychology Department, which was located in a small palace with a wide flight of stairs, and at some point, I happened to be, to be the only one standing on these stairs. And when the activists showed up at the door, I simply started roaring, roaring simply like an animal, and I grabbed some broken little chair, which was standing there, and threw this chair toward the activists, just threw it, and this was the moment when I sobered up, because the activists didn't, by any means, withdraw because of the chair, but some of these guys started charging forward, and I got really scared, and hid somewhere, in a girls' bathroom, I think. I'm glad they didn't drag me out of there. The window of this bathroom faced the back, the backyard of the university, which was simply a garden. It was March, March 8, The Women's Day. There was a little bit of snow, and I remember simply standing by the window, and I had an impression I lost my mind, that I lost my mind and I couldn't understand why... that I lost my mind and I was looking through the window but I really saw a film. And in the film, two guys in grey coats were beating up with batons on a girl, who was lying in the snow; they were simply beating up on some girl, two guys beating up on a girl with police batons. It was a sight that I could process with my eyes but not with my brain and not... how shall I say it, not with my emotional capacity. But finally I took it all in, because I had to take it in, and because of... mostly because of this sight, since, as I've said, I wasn't too involved in all of this stuff... I knew that the people's government wasn't very democratic, and I had very democratic opinions, but I don't know where they came from, probably somewhere from this left-wing tradition but not through my stepfather; there must have been another source. So, in short, I came back home, because the strike had already been announced, I came back home in order to pack a few necessary things and to make myself some sandwiches, and there was a scene. My mother simply begged me not to do it, since she was expecting the worst possible consequences, and politically she was right, and she didn't want me to get involved in all this. But my stepfather was a man of uncompromising ideals, and even though in this case his beloved government turned against students, he said to my mother, "Let her go, because if she doesn't, she won't be able to live with herself." And I went. I went and then... there is no point telling about it; the course of events was what it was, there was a student strike, they crushed the Psychology Department, where I was a student, they closed it down for a while, and they closed down the Philosophy Department. Actually, I studied psychology because

²³¹ **ZOMO**: riot police (Motor Troops of the Citizens' Militia) who often used heavy military equipment to violently suppress political protests.

philosophy had been closed down earlier, because it was completely obvious to me that I was supposed to study psychology and philosophy and that it was what I was interested in. And then a very sad time period began, which was this kind of time for revision, disappointment and getting to know this country from its anti-Semitic side. This anti-Semitic side is important here, and I'll get to how it's related to... because it is, of course, related to feminism. I didn't leave Poland not because I didn't want to, but because then it wasn't within my psychological capabilities. I think... my mother was my only biological parent, and for a very long time, I was in this terribly complicated emotional relationship with my mother, in this way that was none too good. And my mother didn't come up with the idea to leave, and I wasn't up to it on my own, at nineteen. I think that at nineteen or twenty I had enough intellect at my disposal and I was relatively mature, but I didn't have enough maturity in a psychological sense. So it wasn't a fully... I mean a choice to stay in Poland wasn't really a conscious decision. Many of my friends, on the other hand, or I mean the few who stayed, since I don't have a lot of Jewish friends left in Poland, but the ones who stayed say that there was an element of a conscious decision. It was different in my case. My best friend, for example, and somebody else as well... actually, it often happened that the parents would simply grab these young people, kind of by the neck, by the neck, like I'm showing, and spirit them away. And they would get them out of love affairs, for example, or friendships, from the midst of some student life, and these young people weren't at that point particularly enthusiastic about leaving this country, leaving this country where their lives were so intense. But nobody grabbed me by the neck, so I stayed. I stayed and then I switched to the Polish Studies Department. I switched to the Polish Studies Department, because I couldn't deal... I couldn't deal with math, statistics and neurophysiology that were quite extensive in Psychology. And I was too much into the humanities, and it was before the time psychology became part of the humanities in the Polish education system. I believe that should have been the case right at the beginning. So I ended up in Polish Studies, which was so easy for me that it was actually boring. But I also remember this kind of a shock about how much the social make-up changed in my class. Maybe it was the problem with Polish Studies, but I think it was the issue of sweeping away, sweeping away all those young people of Jewish descent, generally speaking, from Poland. And I remember in my freshman year in Psychology, where I didn't even have a clue about who was Jewish and who wasn't Jewish, there were both Poles and Jews, and proportionally there were a lot of kids of parents of Jewish descent, or simply Jews, from the elites... in short from intellectual, political and all various kinds of elites. And there was this incredible intellectual ferment. I think this intellectual ferment at that point was no worse than the intellectual ferment that might have dominated western universities, but the topics, though not all of them, were probably different. On the other hand, in 1970, when I ended up in Polish Studies, and there, in my opinion,... there was only a miniscule number of children from the Polish left-wing and Jewish intelligentsia left, and it was unrecognizable and the intellectual atmosphere was dead, with nothing going on. By the way, it's typical for the Polish Studies that it's a huge department with a very mixed kind of make-up, and how shall I put it... it took a great coincidence to get together a few people who'd be really intellectually lively. The classes were so big and passive, and it was terribly depressing to me, this aura was terribly depressing. For the first time, I heard this kind of talk... like for example... we'd study, for example, in a group of some people, for some exam, and I think it was Modernism and we had Reymont's The Promised Land,²³² and one girl said something like, "You know the kike, the

²³² **Reymont, Wladyslaw** (1867-1925): writer and novelist, whose works offer a vast panorama of Polish life in the last quarter of the 19th century. Reymont was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1924. In The Promised

main character, the kike,” and there were about five or six of us in the room, and nobody said anything. And then, in general, for the first time, I started... these strongly anti-Semitic opinions from students started coming my way, and that was something I had never encountered at Psychology. But I would also say that at Psychology, the case was that... which I didn't recognize when I was a student there, that there were enough children from Polish households, the left-wing ones, children of government officials, or children of cultural elites, since they weren't just those of government officials, or children of science and education elites, both Polish and Jewish, to create a really good layer of insulation, so that nothing could get through, none of these kinds of content could get through, and then suddenly, this layer broke and it all spilled over; it spilled over in a way that was, of course, incredibly nasty to me. By the way, I think that, in general, I was kind of depressed for a while after 1968, simply depressed. This country seemed grey, mean and nasty to me as if the fresh snow melted, and, as it happens after snow melts, not only the ground but also all kinds of shit simply came out. And it was this kind of... after March, that's what... this kind of an early Spring... it's a metaphor which, of course, shows my way of getting to know this country, and it doesn't mean that this shit wasn't there earlier. It was always there; it's just that I didn't know about it. And then... it's not really anything I really like going back to, but I'll say it anyway. I really fell in love, I really fell in love with this guy who was then... well... still is six years older than me, but then it gave... well, when you're twenty, it's a very big age difference. I was beginning college; he was finishing college. He was Polish, my first husband, from a small town, a beautiful town, by the way, from Kazimierz Dolny²³³ on the Vistula, from a small-town family. He himself was a product of this kind of... I'd say of some kind of social advancement, typical for the Polish People's Republic. I mean, he was this young man from a small town who climbed well above his small town. He also graduated from Psychology, which, by the way, was a complete misunderstanding, since he generally had very little self-awareness and also little talent for it. And he started another major, and it was Film Directing in Łódź, which was very difficult to get into, but he did, so he was also a man from, well... from some artistic elite; he was making documentaries. And I'd also say that because I... we would go every year to Kazimierz Dolny on the Vistula for vacation, and there I'd spend time with his family and his friends and with some random people, I actually started getting to know the Polish reality and the Polish mentality, since before I turned twenty some, I must have been from some sort of outer space, from some strange planet, and it's not really clear from where, a bit unclear from where exactly. It's also quite typical... I had this... I was a European... I had... I wasn't able... I was never able to be touched by the Polish national mythology. Not Sienkiewicz²³⁴... I mean I read *The Trilogy* and *The Teutonic Knights*... I liked reading it as a child but I wasn't touched. On the other hand, I was the child of Enlightenment, who read a lot of... because they were publishing... when I was a teenager, they were publishing a lot of books, cheap books, and I was reading a lot, books by the French philosophers of Enlightenment, by Voltaire, and this was the foundation, that's what shaped me, and I had this universally European mindset. And for various reasons, I was absolutely unable to buy into the

Land, he depicted the growing industrial city of Łódź and the cruel effects of industrialization on textile mill owners. Raymond saw industrialization as a huge beast that swallows human resources, anticipating modern environmental debate.

²³³ **Kazimierz Dolny**: a picturesque historical town on the banks of the Vistula River near Warsaw. It is known for its artist colonies.

²³⁴ **Sienkiewicz, Henryk** (1846-1916): novelist, storyteller, and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1905. Author of texts such as *The Trilogy* and *The Teutonic Knights*, which became entrenched in the Polish literary canon.

Polish national mythology, and neither was I able to buy into the Jewish one, since it wasn't that I was able to accept this one, for example, but not that one. No, I think that my left-wing family and this kind of a distance they had from the Jewish tradition made me resistant to both. In a sense... that's very good, in a sense... in general, I think I appreciate that. So, in short, it was later that I got to know this Polish reality... It wasn't... it was very depressing to me. I recognized it as the reality full of anti-Semitic content. Before the war, Kazimierz Dolny on the Vistula was a town... and these are not the census data, so I may be mistaken, but more or less 60% of the inhabitants were Jewish, 60 to 70%. Almost nobody survived, except for just some individuals. And they left. And, of course, their houses and possessions and other things were taken over by the neighbors, by Poles. And, for example, when I was listening to some comments when somebody was saying that... These were the 70's, so a lot of time had passed since then, but these were the people who remembered perfectly well... and for them, in Kazimierz, to let out such comments... it was as if the Jews were not only still there but as if they ruled. And, of course, they were Jew-communists but also, in general, Jews were like this kind of a demon, which impersonates... which impersonates every bad power. Or, for example, I remember, because it really struck me when this elderly gentleman, who certainly went through the war and not as a small child, either, said, "After all, it's well-known that a Jew has nine lives, like a cat." And I was thinking, what is he saying? Here in this little town where not a single Jew had nine lives and the one life they had... they fell right into death, into the gas. This Polish consciousness, where facts have radically, incredibly radically, been divided from... where the reality has radically been divided from the myth, from the myth. Nothing would have happened if I had said to this gentleman, "Dear Sir, but nobody here had nine lives; there is no single Jew left here." Then he just would have said, "You are right, nobody's left here, but they are there in other places; after all, it's clear who rules over Poland," you know, and then they'd start listing... like what about all the People's Republic's government, both Poles and Jews, but all would become Jews. Because that's how it is: the government is the Jews, and particularly the disliked government is the Jews. Possessions are also about the Jews, and particularly possessions that are envied, and particularly when there were no Jewish possessions. And that's where... this particular side of the Polish mentality, which sometimes is stronger and sometimes is weaker, and after the Jedwabne²³⁵ story, it's become clear that there are places, where... and there are places, where it's much weaker or it doesn't occur at all... that's a general principle. But I got to recognize this and I think I also recognized it as a child, since well... of course I was harassed as a child by other children, and they knew things about me I hadn't known myself. They knew what the Jews did... I don't know... with, let's say, matzo bread, and I didn't know they added Christian infants' blood to matzo bread, and I didn't know. I don't know... I didn't even associate matzo bread with holidays, because it was so typical, beyond religion and tradition perhaps. And, to my surprise, I used to find out a lot of things about just who I was, and that's why I think one of the absolutely fundamental issues of my life is identity..., or rather a human right to define one's own identity on one's own, and above all else, not to have to deal with people who'd come and say, "You are this, you are that. This is good about your identity, and this is not good. This is normal, and that is not normal... and here is the norm." And this simply freaks me out, like I get mad or something. And now I can move on to feminism, because this is all the background, the whole background.

²³⁵ When Jan T. Gross's book, *Sasiedzi* (*Neighbors*), was published in 2000 in Poland about the murder of Jedwabne's (a small town near the eastern border) Polish Jewish inhabitants by their Polish Catholic neighbors in 1941, a controversy swept the country about the role of non-Jewish Poles in the Holocaust.

Feminism as such... it started, it started in a kind of way... I'd say seemingly a purely intellectual way. It was during the 80's. Underground papers were being published, and the whole nation... the whole, of course, as a slogan, since it was by no means the whole nation, was involved in the opposition.²³⁶ And a friend came by and asked if I wouldn't translate some pieces about women, about women's lib and anti-lib. And I had, at this point, borrowed a book, like a real trophy, from Professor Brach-Czaina, I mean today she's a professor and then she was just my friend Jolka, and that was a book by Kate Millet, and I just grabbed on and got stuck, since my English was very poor, but like a kid in a candy store, I managed to translate a little piece, where Kate Millet is telling about Bolshevik women-related legislation and its further development. She's simply talking about reducing... reducing, so that this fantastic legislation, fantastically revolutionary, with weddings and divorces as just formalities and with access to abortion, got to the point, really, to this Stalinist point with the ban on abortion and a return to this kind of puritanical way. I thought, "Well, this might be a great story for the underground paper, isn't it? Kate Millet as a Polish anti-communist has simply done great." And I gave them this piece, but nobody ever got interested, since it wasn't, generally, a topic that would fall within the scope of interest of the Polish underground press, which wasn't focused on this. I started focusing on this a little bit then, and I met this group of women... It was 1986, and they were students, I think, mostly from the university... mostly from Sociology, but not only. These young women got incredibly... organized an incredibly huge event in Warsaw, which they called "Cinema of Women" and it was a week-long review of women's films from all over Europe. They were being helped... they were getting a lot of help from the Dutch Embassy... they had a lot of movies brought in from some kind of feminist movie collections but not only. It went on for hours, in the heart of Warsaw, from dawn to dusk. And the movie theater got rented definitely not by the Dutch Embassy, but by the Ministry of Culture; it just couldn't be any other way. It was a thrilling event, and at that point I was generally interested in film. I worked on film... I wrote about it. I kind of started at the beginning of the 80's, because I was always attracted to it. So, of course, I was participating in this event, and later on, I kind of got close to this group of women. And later on... it must have been 1988 or 1989, I met Sławka Walczewska,²³⁷ a camerawoman, yes, and a director. And this was already this kind of feminism, feminism that was... a conscious feminism. Moreover, for a very long time I believed that my feminism, which for me was about... it would simply fit to the tee with my whole intellectual and world-view equipment. There was nothing in it that I could reject. I'm talking about this more liberal and later also a radical... Now I would most likely say that I have an inclination toward this kind of global feminism. And if I were to define it... and it changes, depending on a stage in my life, but it has simply just caught on... I read Kate Millet, and then later on, I read... later on I read other works, and the only reflection I had was simply that it was absolutely common sense what these women were writing... I could not see a single point that would cause me some intellectual doubts... And I thought it was a kind of intellectual recognition. It was intellectual recognition to a large extent, but, on the other hand, but... I think that somewhere... somewhere there, it was also about my personal history, mostly the part about my stepfather. It was clearly the case that in my competition to attain the rank of a person that... that was

²³⁶ Beginning in the late 1970s with the organization of the Solidarity Labor Union, many Poles became involved in underground movements and organizations opposing the communist government.

²³⁷ **Walczewska, Sławka**: Director of the Women's Foundation eFKa in Cracow, Poland and Global Feminisms Poland Site Coordinator. Co-founder of the Green Party 2004 and author of *Ladies, Knights, and Feminists: Women's Discourse in Poland* (1999).

important to him, I lost and I lost definitely because of my wrong gender. The only thing, though, as I've said, was that it was all covert. It was covert; it was never said out loud. For example, I have never heard at home the kind of sentence that a lot of my feminist friends did hear when their fathers would say, for example, that they were disappointed having daughters, and they'd like a son. Or one friend was telling about her father saying it was the end of his family because he had three daughters, and it was a tragedy. I have never heard anything like that. But somewhere on the side, somewhere on the side, it was there, in a subtle form. I would say that they got a bucketful of cold water, and I got some kind of aerosol with little droplets in the air. But as a matter of fact, there was supposed to be no aerosol, nothing was supposed to be there, the air was supposed to be free from this type of content. Today I think... I also think, of course, that as a young person I was completely, I was superbly aware of simply this... of how it was possible to win various... how you could win or how you could manipulate... I wasn't using it, but I was aware that, perhaps, in some really critical situations, the fact that you were a young and relatively attractive woman... that it was somehow... was used... because, of course, it was used. Or, for example, that you'd have to just deal with stuff, that if there was a professor about whom everybody was saying, "O god, he's such a lech he's drooling for every girl," of course, you could just not let him proposition you at an exam, but you wouldn't do anything further about it afterwards. That's simply how it was, because he was just like that and you had to cope. So I noted things like that, things like that. I also remember one event that has really stuck with me. At some point, in 1975, I think... something like that... I don't remember exactly, I had a debut as a poet, but I do remember that for whatever reason, this poetry journal that was then published... and for whatever reason, my poem was on the first page, well, simply on the first page, and if it had appeared inside, I would have also thought it was good, and I remember that a guy made a comment, a friend, another student... and he said, "Well, for a woman you've really been honored. For a woman, it's an incredible honor." And it really hit me somehow, something like, "What is he saying to me?" And it was like... I was taking it with some disbelief, "What does he mean 'a woman.' I'm a poetess." Or I'd even really say "a poet," it's hard to say, but because I remember it so well, it means that I took real notice. And I simply think that feminism simply fit right into me. And perhaps till today it's the kind of feminism that... I certainly strongly dislike essentialism when it comes to gender matters, and I seem to have this strong conviction that culture really matters here, that culture is decisive, and I certainly have that, I certainly have that... but there is also another aspect, and well, probably like everybody else, but maybe I'm more aware of that, I would say that... and that might just be my personal sensibility... I have this intuitive sensitivity for individual human traits, for identity, because there is this question of identity that you need to define yourself. And even though I'm very aware that... even though I sometimes like... I sometimes like dressing up as a woman, I mean wearing these more flowing outfits, skirts and such, and I look the way I look and I don't look like a visibly androgynous person, I have traits that can clearly be defined as masculine and others as feminine, and well... they're strongly interspersed. And I'm aware of that... what's known as cultural gender. I'm aware of that. And after my first marriage, when my husband was kind of... I'd say he had this... he represented this kind of a model... well, like... this is what I'd say: he wasn't a typical man from a small town and at the same time he was... and at the same time he was. There was this kind of masculinity... he has this kind of masculinity which is like this, an aspect of a very traditional masculinity. I... I started feeling I didn't like it any more, I didn't like it any more, and, for example, my second... my present partner... and for me this is a thing that's absolutely at some level of consciousness... he has a lot of feminine traits, he has

many feminine traits. And at the beginning it was even kind of striking for me and well... it was even a little scary that oh my... I might have ended up with a woman (laughter), but I think that if it is the case that I've ended up with a woman who is a man, it was meant to be, because I really like it a lot, so yes, yes that's simply how it's supposed to be. And here is where all these kinds of various aspects of my sensitivity come together, yes, I do mean sensitivity. The first thing is this permanent childish aspect... since childhood I mean and that's like, "don't touch my identity, don't touch my identity, don't invade my space, don't tell me what Jews are like, what Poles are like, what Americans are like, what women are like, don't tell me this," because I simply hate these messages. I hate these messages that "the woman is a neck that moves the head," and I hate these messages that "Jews have nine lives," even when all nine ended up in gas chambers. I... I hate it... it simply wakes up in me... even now when I'm just talking about it... It wakes up this kind of aggression in me; it wakes in me a definitely aggressive attitude. In relation to this, I'll say one more, one more thing, because it's important to me and I'm beginning... I see that it's getting to be more and more important. It's probably because of this kind of identification not necessarily with minorities but identification with people who have a harder access to self-definitions, to self-definitions and to kind of deciding what their identity is. Well... for example, at this point, at this point, I'm also known as a political writer, and the issue of gay people in Poland is incredibly important to me. For me... it works as a symbol, so that... most likely it is a kind of a surrogate of the Jewish issue, which at this point is nonexistent in Poland. But at the same time, of course, it isn't that I'm putting one in place of the other and erasing this other... it's not like that. It's only symbolic in a sense that there is no other otherness, no other otherness in this very homogenous country, homogenous nationally and morally. And I simply think more and more that this issue is my issue, that the issue of homosexual people, of gays and lesbians, their rights, and their general way of functioning in the society is definitely my business. And that's why I don't really know if my take on this isn't a bit idealistic, but that's how I define it: that being a homosexual person in Poland is a bit... for me it's a question of empathy, it's an issue... I mean they had to get to this awareness of... who they are, how they operate, and what it all means on their own. They had to kind of coin this identity... the identity connected with sexual orientation on their own, because nowadays you might perhaps go to a gay or lesbian club, or both, depending on how it works, but going to a club doesn't solve anything, either, in a society, which is very homophobic. And because of this, I...for some reason I have a kind of a high degree of identification, emotional kind of identification, with the situation of these people, in terms of their identity as well, because I imagine that it's a little bit like... a bit like... like being a Jew among anti-Semites. Being a homosexual among homophobes makes these stories similar in a way... they may, but don't have to, of course, be similar... they may be similar. On your own you had to get to the point when you say, "I am this and that," and there is nothing I should be ashamed of; nobody is going to tell me what it means, because I know what it means, since it comes from my experience of what it means. And because of this, because of this, I deserve certain rights, simply human rights, not rights for a homosexual person, but rights for a person. As simple as that. Period. I'm also a great opponent of these kinds of explanations and justifications when it comes to homosexuality, whether or not it's inborn, because if it's not inborn, it may be a choice, and then possibly a wrong choice. No discussions like that. I am who I am, and that's the end of it, and for that reason I want respect, please. And here definitely my Jewish and anti-Semitic experience... so to speak... I've brought them together here... it gives me a kind of an opportunity for a kind

of empathy... like empathizing with this situation. Definitely, that's how it is. I haven't perhaps...

S.W.: Would you like to say something about your involvement in the rebuilding of...

B.U.: Yes...?

S.W. ... or in creating some organizational structures? Have you been getting involved in some organizations, like feminist ones, Jewish ones, or political ones? I mean some involvement in a party, for example.

B.U.: No, I have never got involved in any... I have never got involved in any Jewish or political organizations; the only organizations I've been getting involved in, well, were feminist organizations. I'm not a great organizer, I mean in a sense of... I'm probably better at other things, but PSF or the Polish Feminist Association was for me a kind of... It's also known what kind of a wave pushed it up, and, well, it was pushed up by the struggle about abortion legislation, and for me the abortion legislation issue was this kind... let me rephrase this. The issue of limiting or completely banning a right to an abortion was... at the beginning, I was reading it simply in human rights terms: it's a human right, end of the story. It was generally disgusting and unthinkable for me that this right could be taken away from women, no matter what I thought about using it during the times of the Polish People's Republic, since it's a different issue, but simply... And I think that very many... I mean... then, women, or my female friends, in general... well, after all, at the beginning of the 90's, when Poland had not yet become the country where the influence of the Catholic Church was so significant and so obvious, it was disgusting, disgusting and it was the reason to act for a lot of people. So this certainly was a direct spark, but I also... well, it didn't exhaust... feminist activity didn't end with that for me. Most likely, then it simply... it was this direct cause that I got involved in, and I was involved, we all were. And I was running around, collecting signatures on protest letters and petitions, and I co-organized some two or three really big rallies in Warsaw, all of this within PSF. I was also persuading my friends then, after it had become possible in Poland to register associations, to register the Polish Feminist Association, and I remember that I was really pushing to make it an officially registered association, since at the beginning, not everybody was really convinced that it was the way to go, but I was convinced that it absolutely should be, and here is when my ... my kind of an inclination toward democratic institutions came out. For me then, it was all located in this kind of a landscape of various legally acting... in this more democratic reality... well, more democratic from the formal perspective, since ... since PRL fell, and it was very important to me. At the same time perhaps... I am perhaps... even though I can play... and I can play in a team... that is when there is a defined goal. At the same time, I'm very much afraid of doctrinarism, and I'm kind of afraid that... and by the way it did happen that way... there were various fights and various discussions. I'm very afraid that this... that somebody... and here the issue of identity pops up... that somebody will come and say: "No, you can't think like this. Your... your way of thinking, or your perspective is not good, and from the feminist standpoint, this other way is more correct." So frankly speaking, I'd run into this very often also among feminists, since there were conflicts and discussions, of course, particularly because this group was very small. It wasn't like in the United States or Western Europe, so all of these feminists, who were of various orientations: liberal, radical, lesbian-

separatist, and I'm talking about the beginning of the 90's, were... there were about 40 of us there, and we could fit into... and these discussions were simply... were definitely there... these discussions, quarrels, rows were happening. But at the same time, I had already felt safer here; I mean some sort of a basic trust was there, but I also gave myself... it was already obvious to me that within feminism I had a right to some version of it, and most likely I do follow some version. This version is definitely... like I've said, it is certainly kind of anti-essentialist, it isn't essentialist, and essentialism is simply the devil for me, because essentialism says exactly what an anti-Semite says to you: "You are this and that." And it's deterministic, it's like a pronouncement, "You are a good woman, because women are angels. They are sensitive and nurturing, and it's inborn. It's given to them." Then, I simply feel like exploding. No, thank you, I don't want it. This message to me is as attractive as informing me that Jews have an inclination to live on matzo bread made with blood of Christian infants. There is nothing attractive in this. For me, there is only coercion and this kind of... like having to fit into some coerced aspect of my identity.

S.W.: And could you tell us if your book was simply a book you wrote, or if it was some summation stage of some longer period of reflections? How does it fit into your work on identity? Were you writing it for a short or long time?

B.U.: Well... it is... and we're talking about *Postać z cieniem* (*Figure with a Shadow*), right?

S.W.: Yes.

B.U.: I would say that it's a bit... that it's a bit like... that I am this person who does these things, which I don't like any more, these academic research kind of things a little bit in order to sponsor this other person in me, who is less quick, orderly, ready and knowing, or in other words a poet or prose writer. Let's call her an artist. An artist in me is working very slowly, and this other person with a more discoursing mind is much quicker. And, in a sense, it was simply... I worked in a Research Institute, and I needed to write a book. I found a topic which I thought was... about Jewish women in Polish literature, and I thought it was attractive and again... No, I wrote it, it... I wrote it relatively fast. I mean I was dragging on with the PhD for a long time, but I dragged on for the same reason a lot of my friends did, and that's because in Poland, salaries of people who are in research are terribly low, and because of this... If you're really working on a dissertation for like two or three years, it's also a kind of financial gamble, so it's going really slowly. But, of course, also for the same reason, I probably wouldn't be able... I can't work on things that aren't somehow related to me personally... I just can't work on these... I simply haven't been able to work on these since school. If there is no element that is somehow personally linked to me, and it's not because of egocentrism, but rather a trait of people in the humanities, I'm not interested. So here it is of course... about to what extent... how the identity of such a heroine is constructed, of a literary heroine who is a woman, or more specifically a Jewish woman, in Polish literature, since it was also about looking at... looking at, observing the... well, about "How is identity given away?" It is a fascinating question: "Who gives away identity?"... you know, since it's a bit like the question... like this, like this... almost like from

Platonic ideas, almost like the story with Platonic ideas, where there is a Demiurge²³⁸ and he just... but there it's not about identity but about existence itself, you know. And he just presses the mold into the matter and these individual specimens are coming right out. And the way I see it is that there are these institutions, these various human institutions, like these Demiurges, and I don't like Demiurges... these Demiurges, who also have this identity stamp, and they just stamp and stamp. And for example, the Catholic Church stamps and says this, "You have a great Polish-Catholic identity, and simply everything is fine with you." Probably what's included is, I don't know, baptism, confessions, you know, offerings, descent, I don't know, everything, so "you're great." And then it's called... what is it called? A true Pole, you know, and we have this nationalist and fascist with a great identity. Jews may do the same thing, and women do it, and there are such attitudes within commu... communism. Oh my, what a beautiful slip! I mean feminism, where there is also this stamp from above and these are funny situations. I remember this one situation of this one ball, some kind of a feminist ball, which was also a costume ball... that's what it was, a feminist costume ball. I mean that within this circle of Warsaw feminists, there was a ball like that, and I called the hostess to figure out when and how and stuff. Then, she asked me what I'd be dressed as. I said I'd love to dress as a musketeer, that I would really like to come as a musketeer, and she kind of got terribly upset and said, "What do you mean as a musketeer? These must be female costumes." And again I felt like a living body coming into contact with a doctrine, because my living body wanted a musketeer costume [laughter] and not that of a witch, for example, a witch who lives by the woods, outside of the village and will soon be burned by the Holy Inquisition. I respect the witch and so on, but I was the one who wanted to be a musketeer, and perhaps I felt closer to a musketeer, and this kind of a reprimand I received from that side immediately becomes a signal for me that well... they're stamping identity here, they're stamping identity here, so, in short, for me the feminist project is simply a kind of an ideal. I would see it linked somewhere with this kind of a very strong individualist trend. It'd be related to the philosophers, whom I'm... and perhaps it's not a coincidence that I'm currently interested in Rorty²³⁹... this kind of an idea... it's not the ideal yet, but I mean something like this. Perhaps that's why I'm interested in Bauman²⁴⁰ and these notions of modernity and post-modernity, and also the figure of a Jew and... because I also used it in my book, where a Jewish man or a Jewish woman were the people... and this particular concept is from Bauman that they are the people who found themselves in this kind of a situation in the world of the first half of the 20th century. This was the situation of assimilated Jews, and they had to kind of assemble their identity themselves. The stamping was over, all this giving away stamps was over. The rabbi didn't give it to them, the priest didn't give it to them, and the state gave only so much, so they had to complete their identity themselves. This is very interesting for me, and I don't think it

²³⁸ In *Timaeus*, the Greek philosopher Plato gives an account of the creation of the universe by the Demiurge. Unlike the Christian God, Plato's Demiurge does not create from nothing, but orders the cosmos out of existing matter. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/p/plato.htm>. Accessed July 20, 2006.

²³⁹ **Rorty, Richard** (born in 1931 in New York City) is an American philosopher who argues that epistemology, the study of knowledge, is the product of the mistaken view that the mind is a glassy essence, of which the main function is to faithfully reproduce external reality. He attacks "universal" philosophical investigations by historicizing them and exposing their contingency. Rorty argues for hermeneutics, the explaining of texts by other texts, rather than the search for an ultimate interpretation that would be validated by a higher force.

²⁴⁰ **Bauman, Zygmunt** (born 1925 in Poznan, Poland) is a British sociologist of Polish-Jewish descent. From 1971 until 1990 he was professor of sociology at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom. In the late 1980s, he gained prominence through his studies on the connection between the culture of modernity and totalitarianism, especially German national socialism and the Holocaust.

results from any specific Jewish talent but rather from a specific situation. It was the result of a social and political situation Jews encountered in Poland before the war when they were trying to assimilate, and actually not only in Poland, but here it was particularly... And that's why this literature, for example, from the inter-war period captures it so well. There are women writers, women writers in particular... Kuncewiczowa²⁴¹ captures that well, and this was all fascinating for me.

²⁴¹ **Kuncewiczowa, Maria** (1895-1989): writer and novelist and one of the creators of Polish psychological prose. Her works deal with social reality of interwar Poland and with war-time and postwar lives of Poles outside of Poland.

BOŻENA UMIŃSKA

- February 2, 1948** born in Warsaw
- 1968-1977** University of Warsaw (psychology, Polish language and literature, philosophy)
- 1977** gave birth to a son
- 1989** cofounder of the Polish Feminist Association
- 1993** translator of Maggie Humm's *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*
- 2001** defended her doctoral dissertation
- 2002** her book, *A Figure with Shadow: Jewish Women in Polish Literature from the End of the 19th Century to 1939* among the 20 books nominated for the Nike award, the most prestigious literary award in Poland

Lives in Warsaw