

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

SITE: POLAND

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

**Location: Warszawa
Date: April 28, 2005
Translated by: Kasia Kietlińska**



eFKa

**Women's Foundation
Skrytka Poczтовая 12
30-965 Kraków 45, Poland
Tel/Fax: 012/422-6973
E-mail: efka@efka.org.pl
Website: www.efka.org.pl**

Acknowledgments

Global Feminisms: Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan (UM) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The project was co-directed by Abigail Stewart, Jayati Lal and Kristin McGuire.

The China site was housed at the China Women's University in Beijing, China and directed by Wang Jinling and Zhang Jian, in collaboration with UM faculty member Wang Zheng.

The India site was housed at the Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) in Mumbai, India and directed by C.S. Lakshmi, in collaboration with UM faculty members Jayati Lal and Abigail Stewart.

The Poland site was housed at Fundacja Kobiet eFKa (Women's Foundation eFKa), Krakow, Poland and directed by Slawka Walczewska, in collaboration with UM faculty member Magdalena Zaborowska.

The U.S. site was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan and directed by UM faculty member Elizabeth Cole.

Graduate student interns on the project included Nicola Curtin, Kim Dorazio, Jana Haritatos, Helen Ho, Julianna Lee, Sumiao Li, Zakiya Luna, Leslie Marsh, Sridevi Nair, Justyna Pas, Rosa Peralta, Desdamona Rios, and Ying Zhang.

Undergraduate student interns on the project included Alexandra Gross, Julia MacMillan, Libby Pozolo, Shana Schoem and Megan Williamson.

Translations into English, Polish and Chinese were provided by Kim Dorazio, Cheng Jizhong, Kasia Kietlinska, Justyna Pas, Alena Zemanek, and Ying Zhang.

Technical assistance was provided by R. Thomas Bray, Dustin Edwards, and Keith Rainwater. Graphic design was provided by Elisabeth Paymal.

The project was initially supported by a University of Michigan Rackham Interdisciplinary Collaboration Research Grant. Additional support was provided by the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, International Institute, Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Women's Studies, Humanities Institute, the Center for South Asian Studies, the Herman Family Fund, the Center for African and Afro-American Studies and the Office of the Provost at the University of Michigan.

For more information, visit our website at <http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/>

© Regents of the University of Michigan, 2006

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

Sławka 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 Franus¹, 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's² 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

¹ **Franus, Ewa:** Limanowska's friend who is also an art historian and a translator.

² **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*.³ 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...⁴

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,⁵ 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... eFKa⁶ 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 University⁷ 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

³ *The Skeptical Feminist: Discovering the Virgin, Mother, and Crone* by Barbara Walker (1987).

⁴ **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.

⁵ A department at the University of Poznań.

⁶ 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.

⁷ **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,⁸ 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 Gutek⁹, 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 law¹⁰ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ **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.

¹⁰ **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 Roszkowska¹¹ 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,¹² 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

¹¹ **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.

¹² **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 Snitow¹³ and this thing that was later called Network of East – West Women.¹⁴ 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 Dubrovnik¹⁵, 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,¹⁶ 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

¹³ **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.

¹⁴ **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.

¹⁵ **Dubrovnik:** A city in Croatia.

¹⁶ 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 law¹⁷, 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 WRON¹⁸ (Military Council of National Salvation) and PRON (Patriotic Movement of National Rebirth)¹⁹, 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...

17 **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.

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

19 **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 Tarasiewicz²⁰, who really believed that being in Solidarity²¹ 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 imagined it like this, that

²⁰ **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.

²¹ **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).

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 Conference²² 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 Oleszczuk²³ and I got involved in founding La Strada.²⁴ 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...

²² The Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (1998).

²³ **Oleszczuk, Teresa:** Feminist scholar and writer and Project Coordinator for the La Strada Foundation against the trafficking in women.

²⁴ **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).²⁵ 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 Miller²⁶ was there with us. She was then with the International

²⁵ **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.

²⁶ **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,²⁷ 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...

²⁷ **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 Volga²⁸ 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,²⁹ 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 OSCE³⁰ 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.

²⁸ **Volga:** Soviet made car.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ 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*³¹... 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-1968³² 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?

³¹ 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.

³² **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