

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

SITE: POLAND

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

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Translated from the Polish 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**

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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 Malgosia¹ 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 Warsaw². Sopot belongs to the so-called Regained Territories,³ 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 experiences⁴ 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

¹ Diminutive for the name "Małgorzata."

² **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.

³ 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.

⁴ **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.⁵ 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 awoken... 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*⁶ 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

⁵ 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.

⁶ *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 Solidarity⁷ 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 Prison⁸, and she had participated in the anti-German underground, and the other was killed during the Ghetto Uprising.⁹ So all that, you know, kind of... I mean it's, of course, terrible what happened to them, but it gave me this sense

⁷ **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).

⁸ **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).

⁹ **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's¹⁰ 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

¹⁰ **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.

Law¹¹ 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*¹² 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,¹³ 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 Table¹⁴ started, or maybe even earlier, that I went

¹¹ **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.

¹² **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.

¹³ **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).

¹⁴ **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,¹⁵ 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.

¹⁵ *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,¹⁶ when it was passed to the Senate,¹⁷ 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 Kaczyński¹⁸ 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 Wałęsa,¹⁹ 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 Krzaklewski²⁰ came to power, who was really... His power, I feel, didn't come

¹⁶ **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.

¹⁷ **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.

¹⁸ **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.

¹⁹ **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).

²⁰ **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,²¹ 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.

²¹ **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,²² for example, Shana Penn,²³ 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

²² *Slavenka Drakulic*: noted Croatian writer and publicist.

²³ *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,²⁴ but I do whatever I can to prevent that. For now, I hope, everything is fine.

²⁴ **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 Movement²⁵
- 1989-1991** Coordinator of the Women's Section in the Solidarity Trade Union²⁶
- 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

²⁵ **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).

²⁶ **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).