

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

SITE: POLAND

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

Location: Kraków

Date: July 2004

Translated from the Polish by Kasia Kietlińska



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

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

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

BOŻENA UMIŃSKA
July 2004
Kraków

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

Bożena Umińska: So well, that's what I was thinking about. So let me start with my name (laughter)... I'll start with the name and here is what I'll say: My name is Bożena Umińska but it should be Bożena Keff, since both of my parents are Jewish. They both survived the war¹ in the Soviet Union, when it still existed, of course, and they were originally from Lvov. I mean, they ran away from Lvov to the Soviet Union and thanks to that survived, and later on they came back to Poland, just like a lot of Polish Jews, who remained in Poland after the war. My mother has... I'd say that my mother has these very left-wing views and that's how it is till this day, and I don't mean the radical left but more of a traditional sort, since she's a woman who is slightly above eighty today. And my father was simply a communist, and he fought in this Polish Army, which was... how should I say that... under the leadership... with the Red Army, so, in short, with General Berling,² and at some point, after the war, for whatever reasons, my father wanted to remain in the army. I can't say why, since it seems to me that he was a sensitive man, but somehow, I don't know, perhaps after the complete destruction the war brought for the Jews, this kind of military structure, closeness... because it was the army, which in the 50's..., that is there were many people who simply fought together. At any rate, he decided he wanted to stay, and then it turned out that he had to change his name, so that it wouldn't sound foreign, really meaning that it wouldn't sound Jewish, in short, and that's how he became, became an Umiński. I don't know why he decided to do that, but I was simply born as Bożena Umińska. Both names indicate my parents' complete will, I'd say, for both assimilation and total camouflage. That's why I don't want to go back to the name Keff, because I'm kind of scared by this... administrative red tape that would be involved, but I willingly use it as a kind of a pen name. I'd be actually more willing to just keep this name, but I decided to start using it after I had already had some output, and newspapers, for example... newspapers and publications I write for, since I'm a journalist, aren't very happy when less known names start popping up. So I'm either Bożena Keff or Bożena Umińska; it's kind of funny how it alternates, but Keff is decidedly more kind of personal to me. And now this... my father committed suicide in 1954, so I was a child, and I simply don't remember, don't remember... don't know him. He committed suicide... he committed suicide, because... and this is what I can only surmise from what I know... and my mother is not a good teller of other people's stories, she's a good teller of her own story, but from what I know, what happened was this kind of a certain... or actually a total bankruptcy of his faith and ideal. And sometimes I think about my father as if he were a kind of a different variation of Borowski, Tadeusz Borowski, the writer. I mean it like this: Most likely, like many Polish Jews, communists or people from the Left, my father changed his name, since he didn't attach any great importance, any great importance to nationality or ethnicity, but attached the

¹ World War II.

² **General Berling:** Commander of the 1st Polish Army organized in the Soviet Union in 1942.

utmost importance to this universal and just ideal of a social order that was supposed to come into being, but just kept refusing to do so. And my father, who was a communist, was at the same time a relatively tolerant man. I know, for example, that there was this story that he was an organizer of this... today we can call it public works, it was called Ochotnicze Hufce Pracy (Voluntary Work Troops), it was this kind of an organization... it was related, of course, to rebuilding of Warsaw, mostly, and my parents ended up in Warsaw at last. And, for example, he would give jobs to people who used to fight in the AK,³ the Home Army, because he didn't think, for example, that the AK past was in any way a baggage.⁴ And this was received very badly; he had various problems because of this, and finally this is what happened. Well... they were throwing together a trial, this kind of fake Stalinist trial, since they still... in 1954, and my father got an order in writing to be a prosecution witness. It wasn't a request; in the military you get orders. And this... this order was too much, as well as various forms of harassment and the frequently used anti-Semitic lines, so he committed suicide. That's all about the topic of my father, just to give you some sense of my background, my background of where I come from. Well, my parents are from Lvov, and that's more or less their story. After a while, my mother married again, and she married a man, who was... I've said was, since he's deceased, he passed away a few years ago, and he was this... he was the man who was this... he was like they don't make them any more. A Jew from a small town, from a very small town, from Stanisławów, which is also near Lvov, he became a communist at fourteen and changed this kind of traditional religious education, Jewish education, into very in-depth Marxist studies, which were really very deep, since he died as a professor, a man with a certain academic career. I'd also say that, apart from the fact that he was a doctrinaire and he had unusually... unusually strong political and social convictions, he was a man of incredible... incredible for me, and impressive intelligence, incredibly impressive intelligence. He had habits, which are like habits of people born in the 19th century, even though he was not born in the 19th century but most likely around... I don't remember... most likely more or less around 1915 or 1910. He'd get up at 5:00 a.m., read philosophy, studied English, because... just because he didn't know it. And he did all this... was incredibly well-organized, since Polish pre-war jails, where he did time for communism, helped him get this way, to be so incredibly well-organized. In the evening he'd always watch the TV news. He was incredibly well-versed in world issues, to the extent it was possible to be well-versed in the People's Poland,⁵ and he simply had this incredibly passionate attitude toward political and social issues. Sometimes this attitude and this viewpoint remained within the doctrine's constraints, and sometimes he really went beyond it, sometimes he went beyond it. But his knowledge, or I'd say political knowledge, had this... was decidedly religious in nature. Because, in general, he was a man of a huge temperament, with an incredible vitality and an incredible intellectual temperament. I think, I think that... and this is the moment, I can say, "here my story begins." Well... my stepfather, as it happened, I've noticed, among our Jewish friends, or among Jewish fathers... and sometimes divorced Jewish fathers would raise their

³ **Armia Krajowa** or **AK** (*Home Army*): functioned as the dominant resistance movement in German-occupied Poland. It was active in all areas of the country from September 1939 until its disbanding in January 1945. The Armia Krajowa, one of the largest underground resistance movements during World War II, formed the armed wing of what subsequently became known as the "underground state" (*państwo podziemne*). Its communist counterpart was Armia Ludowa or The People's Army.

⁴ Because the Home Army (AK) did not support the communist regime, its members were often harassed or persecuted after World War II.

⁵ During the time of the People's Republic of Poland or under the communist government (1952-1989). Since all media were censored by the communists, accurate information about national and international affairs was notoriously difficult to obtain.

children themselves. I don't recall a lot of Poles fulfilling this role. My stepfather divorced his first wife and was raising a son from that marriage. I know that the son lived... lived with us, and I'd say that I truly aspired... with all the possible distance toward the ideology he represented, and with all the possible skepticism, and yet I truly aspired to become some sort of an intellectual partner for him, and I think I had every reason to believe I could, but I'd definitely lose this battle with his son. And I think I lost for two reasons. One reason was kinship, one could say, the degree of kinship, but another could be gender. I didn't notice it then. And I think that I got the kind of message from my family... very clearly a message of ... a precisely women's lib message that there was no reason why women should not lead the life of... the life as free as the one led by men. I mean free in a sense of choice, following their own will, so that they could choose their own way of life. So everything that kind of went against this message was deeply hidden and wasn't really legible for me. My mother worked; she worked because she wanted to, because she liked it. She was very active. She's actually been working till this day, however it sounds. It's funny, but at eighty, since a few years ago, she's held some sort of a... she's an archivist at the Jewish Historical Institute.⁶ She's worked all her life. Up to some point... since, like in Poland in general, there was a lot of cheap labor of village people in the cities, so because of that we had some sort of house-keepers at home, who, in a very basic sense, would take care of the house. But nobody at home really paid attention to... I don't know... to making sure that it was nicely furnished, well taken care of, or that there was food in the house. It was a radically non-bourgeois household, I'd say, and it probably couldn't have been any other way, since, I mean, they were not from bourgeois families. They came from these families... from some kind of tradesman... somewhere at the crossover, I don't know, with some small business... and from small towns. My mother's mother was actually a relatively affluent person up to some point, since she used to have a very beautiful restaurant in Lvov, but she went bankrupt and lost it, and the family got to be rather poor afterwards. So in short, I'd say, this was the kind of household that was, of course, that was dominated by ideas and by this kind of lack of bourgeois care for creature comforts, which doesn't mean that there was any hardship, no, I'd actually say that they belonged to the group of relatively privileged people, not particularly, but moderately so. And that's how, that's how it went on. For me it went on like this till 68, till 1968,⁷ because before that I had only encountered anti-Semitism... I mean I ran into anti-Semitism very early, at the elementary school level. It wasn't really in elementary school itself, since I attended the TPD (The Friends of Children Association) school, which had no religion classes, and it was mostly attended by... either by children of secular intelligentsia, both Polish and Jewish, since till 1968, I think there were... I can't say how many, but certainly there were some Jews left in Warsaw. I mean there were some... there were still some Jewish institutions left. And by the way, I wasn't really eager to join, and neither were my stepfather and mother. In a way, they didn't really care. It was as if their Jewish identity, which they had, expressed itself in ideology, as in my stepfather's case, or in some kind of views, in my mother's case, and in the past, the war past, in the Holocaust past, since they both lost their families, in the friends they had, since there were

⁶ **Jewish Historical Institute:** an institution located in Warsaw and focused on the study of the history and culture of Polish Jews. It is the largest depository of Jewish-related archival documents, books, journals, and museum objects in Poland.

⁷ **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.

many Jews among their friends, not only Jews but many were Jews, and also in... I'd say, in a certain striking ignorance about the country they lived in, about its underlining. They were kind of looking at this country, and particularly he did, my stepfather did, from the angle of this vision, this specifically ideological vision of what it should be like here and not what it was actually like. Because of this, I'd say, that in a way he lived in this kind of a country... in some sort of a spectral country, simply. And most likely I did, too, to some extent, not having a good sense, for example, of what Poland was really like outside of this circle specifically... I don't know, intellectual, official, and very cultured. Poland of the Polish People's Republic⁸ times... I think so... I mean the version of Poland known as The Polish People's Republic, or in other words the Polish People's Republic was, at a certain level, a country, which was very saturated with culture, particularly in some periods. So in short... this is another stage of this background, and of course I didn't have any kind of feminist ideas; I couldn't have had them. Graduating from high school at the end of the 60's, I couldn't even have had them. On the other hand, I definitely had this sense... this liberated sense, this strong sense of liberated... of obviousness of women's lib. I remember that when I heard some sort of various misogynist remarks, which I sometimes happened to hear, I didn't even react with indignation but with a kind of an amazement, as if the person saying it was kind of a dinosaur, kind of a relic from the past, which somehow wandered into my way, so there was no point getting offended or reacting in any way, when it was something like... like it actually had no right to exist in this reality any more. And to the extent, for example... since it couldn't be any other way in Poland, I mean awareness of anti-Semitism I got relatively quickly...

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

B.U.: Oh well... My stepfather, yes, mostly him, lived in this kind of a definitely unrecognized reality, as if it was understood, it was a bit... I think I had a bit of a similar attitude to his. If, for example, he knew about it, and he had to have known in what way... since he simply came from a small town, surrounded by villages even if it was at the Eastern Borderlands,⁹ where there were Poles, Ukrainians and Jews almost in equal proportions, but here there were Poles. After the war, Poland became an almost ethnically homogeneous country.¹⁰ At any rate, even if he did see it, he had this attitude toward it that... I don't know that this Polish religiosity, Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and some kind of conservatism were all like this dinosaur's tail, which is really almost cut off, maybe still attached on a little thread, but it would soon get lost. And this faith of his, I'd say, was incredibly strong, and, most likely, it came from a refusal to face the reality. It was definitely above the reality, and that's what I'd like to say that I... of course, as I've said, much more skeptically, with much more of a distance, and my mother, too. We... we would often have these discussions with my stepfather, where it all simply ended up with terrible fights, because... my mother was highly skeptical, for example, about his assurances that in 15 years, we were simply going to have social justice here, total social justice, which, of course, he called the arrival of communism. Mother had slightly different experiences, because of my father's death if not for any other reason, so it simply seemed funny to her. I think that she had her feet on the ground much more firmly, as she still does, but I was most likely somewhere between her skepticism, or perhaps skepticism, in general, and this kind of a passionate attitude toward ideas, and yet without a need to espouse an ideology, since I really must have seen very clearly that my

⁸ **The Polish People's Republic (PRL)**: official name of communist Poland from 1952 to 1989.

⁹ **Eastern Borderlands**: To the east, Poland bordered The Soviet Union.

¹⁰ Because of the Holocaust and post-World War II population movements and redrawing of national borders.

stepfather was living in a country... that it wasn't... since a certain point, and certainly since 68, since 1968, when I found myself... I was already at the university, as a freshman at the Psychology Department, where I had just been accepted. And by coincidence, simply by a complete coincidence, not informed and not encouraged to come, I found myself at a student rally, which, I recall, ended up in a beating, cudgeling, and all these other things, all these other things that, we know, happened later, and that means simply the whole huge campaign, the only such anti-Semitic campaign in the so-called people's democracies. I found myself there by coincidence, and I got terribly mad, simply got furious. And I remember this one scene when the so-called worker-activists, which, most likely, were simply the police, I mean ZOMO¹¹ (the Military Police) in plain clothes, in these grey coats, jumped on this whole student rally, gathered at the Warsaw University courtyard. People started running. I was running, too, and it didn't take much imagination to know enough to run to any of the departments. I ran to the Psychology Department, which was located in a small palace with a wide flight of stairs, and at some point, I happened to be, to be the only one standing on these stairs. And when the activists showed up at the door, I simply started roaring, roaring simply like an animal, and I grabbed some broken little chair, which was standing there, and threw this chair toward the activists, just threw it, and this was the moment when I sobered up, because the activists didn't, by any means, withdraw because of the chair, but some of these guys started charging forward, and I got really scared, and hid somewhere, in a girls' bathroom, I think. I'm glad they didn't drag me out of there. The window of this bathroom faced the back, the backyard of the university, which was simply a garden. It was March, March 8, The Women's Day. There was a little bit of snow, and I remember simply standing by the window, and I had an impression I lost my mind, that I lost my mind and I couldn't understand why... that I lost my mind and I was looking through the window but I really saw a film. And in the film, two guys in grey coats were beating up with batons on a girl, who was lying in the snow; they were simply beating up on some girl, two guys beating up on a girl with police batons. It was a sight that I could process with my eyes but not with my brain and not... how shall I say it, not with my emotional capacity. But finally I took it all in, because I had to take it in, and because of... mostly because of this sight, since, as I've said, I wasn't too involved in all of this stuff... I knew that the people's government wasn't very democratic, and I had very democratic opinions, but I don't know where they came from, probably somewhere from this left-wing tradition but not through my stepfather; there must have been another source. So, in short, I came back home, because the strike had already been announced, I came back home in order to pack a few necessary things and to make myself some sandwiches, and there was a scene. My mother simply begged me not to do it, since she was expecting the worst possible consequences, and politically she was right, and she didn't want me to get involved in all this. But my stepfather was a man of uncompromising ideals, and even though in this case his beloved government turned against students, he said to my mother, "Let her go, because if she doesn't, she won't be able to live with herself." And I went. I went and then... there is no point telling about it; the course of events was what it was, there was a student strike, they crushed the Psychology Department, where I was a student, they closed it down for a while, and they closed down the Philosophy Department. Actually, I studied psychology because philosophy had been closed down earlier, because it was completely obvious to me that I was supposed to study psychology and philosophy and that it was what I was interested in. And then a very sad time period began, which was this kind of time for revision, disappointment and

¹¹ **ZOMO**: riot police (Motor Troops of the Citizens' Militia) who often used heavy military equipment to violently suppress political protests.

getting to know this country from its anti-Semitic side. This anti-Semitic side is important here, and I'll get to how it's related to... because it is, of course, related to feminism. I didn't leave Poland not because I didn't want to, but because then it wasn't within my psychological capabilities. I think... my mother was my only biological parent, and for a very long time, I was in this terribly complicated emotional relationship with my mother, in this way that was none too good. And my mother didn't come up with the idea to leave, and I wasn't up to it on my own, at nineteen. I think that at nineteen or twenty I had enough intellect at my disposal and I was relatively mature, but I didn't have enough maturity in a psychological sense. So it wasn't a fully... I mean a choice to stay in Poland wasn't really a conscious decision. Many of my friends, on the other hand, or I mean the few who stayed, since I don't have a lot of Jewish friends left in Poland, but the ones who stayed say that there was an element of a conscious decision. It was different in my case. My best friend, for example, and somebody else as well... actually, it often happened that the parents would simply grab these young people, kind of by the neck, by the neck, like I'm showing, and spirit them away. And they would get them out of love affairs, for example, or friendships, from the midst of some student life, and these young people weren't at that point particularly enthusiastic about leaving this country, leaving this country where their lives were so intense. But nobody grabbed me by the neck, so I stayed. I stayed and then I switched to the Polish Studies Department. I switched to the Polish Studies Department, because I couldn't deal... I couldn't deal with math, statistics and neurophysiology that were quite extensive in Psychology. And I was too much into the humanities, and it was before the time psychology became part of the humanities in the Polish education system. I believe that should have been the case right at the beginning. So I ended up in Polish Studies, which was so easy for me that it was actually boring. But I also remember this kind of a shock about how much the social make-up changed in my class. Maybe it was the problem with Polish Studies, but I think it was the issue of sweeping away, sweeping away all those young people of Jewish descent, generally speaking, from Poland. And I remember in my freshman year in Psychology, where I didn't even have a clue about who was Jewish and who wasn't Jewish, there were both Poles and Jews, and proportionally there were a lot of kids of parents of Jewish descent, or simply Jews, from the elites... in short from intellectual, political and all various kinds of elites. And there was this incredible intellectual ferment. I think this intellectual ferment at that point was no worse than the intellectual ferment that might have dominated western universities, but the topics, though not all of them, were probably different. On the other hand, in 1970, when I ended up in Polish Studies, and there, in my opinion,... there was only a miniscule number of children from the Polish left-wing and Jewish intelligentsia left, and it was unrecognizable and the intellectual atmosphere was dead, with nothing going on. By the way, it's typical for the Polish Studies that it's a huge department with a very mixed kind of make-up, and how shall I put it... it took a great coincidence to get together a few people who'd be really intellectually lively. The classes were so big and passive, and it was terribly depressing to me, this aura was terribly depressing. For the first time, I heard this kind of talk... like for example... we'd study, for example, in a group of some people, for some exam, and I think it was Modernism and we had Reymont's The Promised Land,¹² and one girl said something like, "You know the kike, the main character, the kike," and there were about five or six of us in the room, and nobody said

¹² **Reymont, Wladyslaw** (1867-1925): writer and novelist, whose works offer a vast panorama of Polish life in the last quarter of the 19th century. Reymont was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1924. In The Promised Land, he depicted the growing industrial city of Łódź and the cruel effects of industrialization on textile mill owners. Reymont saw industrialization as a huge beast that swallows human resources, anticipating modern environmental debate.

anything. And then, in general, for the first time, I started... these strongly anti-Semitic opinions from students started coming my way, and that was something I had never encountered at Psychology. But I would also say that at Psychology, the case was that... which I didn't recognize when I was a student there, that there were enough children from Polish households, the left-wing ones, children of government officials, or children of cultural elites, since they weren't just those of government officials, or children of science and education elites, both Polish and Jewish, to create a really good layer of insulation, so that nothing could get through, none of these kinds of content could get through, and then suddenly, this layer broke and it all spilled over; it spilled over in a way that was, of course, incredibly nasty to me. By the way, I think that, in general, I was kind of depressed for a while after 1968, simply depressed. This country seemed grey, mean and nasty to me as if the fresh snow melted, and, as it happens after snow melts, not only the ground but also all kinds of shit simply came out. And it was this kind of... after March, that's what... this kind of an early Spring... it's a metaphor which, of course, shows my way of getting to know this country, and it doesn't mean that this shit wasn't there earlier. It was always there; it's just that I didn't know about it. And then... it's not really anything I really like going back to, but I'll say it anyway. I really fell in love, I really fell in love with this guy who was then... well... still is six years older than me, but then it gave... well, when you're twenty, it's a very big age difference. I was beginning college; he was finishing college. He was Polish, my first husband, from a small town, a beautiful town, by the way, from Kazimierz Dolny¹³ on the Vistula, from a small-town family. He himself was a product of this kind of... I'd say of some kind of social advancement, typical for the Polish People's Republic. I mean, he was this young man from a small town who climbed well above his small town. He also graduated from Psychology, which, by the way, was a complete misunderstanding, since he generally had very little self-awareness and also little talent for it. And he started another major, and it was Film Directing in Łódź, which was very difficult to get into, but he did, so he was also a man from, well... from some artistic elite; he was making documentaries. And I'd also say that because I... we would go every year to Kazimierz Dolny on the Vistula for vacation, and there I'd spend time with his family and his friends and with some random people, I actually started getting to know the Polish reality and the Polish mentality, since before I turned twenty some, I must have been from some sort of outer space, from some strange planet, and it's not really clear from where, a bit unclear from where exactly. It's also quite typical... I had this... I was a European... I had... I wasn't able... I was never able to be touched by the Polish national mythology. Not Sienkiewicz¹⁴... I mean I read *The Trilogy* and *The Teutonic Knights*... I liked reading it as a child but I wasn't touched. On the other hand, I was the child of Enlightenment, who read a lot of... because they were publishing... when I was a teenager, they were publishing a lot of books, cheap books, and I was reading a lot, books by the French philosophers of Enlightenment, by Voltaire, and this was the foundation, that's what shaped me, and I had this universally European mindset. And for various reasons, I was absolutely unable to buy into the Polish national mythology, and neither was I able to buy into the Jewish one, since it wasn't that I was able to accept this one, for example, but not that one. No, I think that my left-wing family and this kind of a distance they had from the Jewish tradition made me resistant to both. In a sense... that's very good, in a sense... in general, I think I appreciate that. So, in short, it was

¹³ **Kazimierz Dolny**: a picturesque historical town on the banks of the Vistula River near Warsaw. It is known for its artist colonies.

¹⁴ **Sienkiewicz, Henryk** (1846-1916): novelist, storyteller, and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1905. Author of texts such as *The Trilogy* and *The Teutonic Knights*, which became entrenched in the Polish literary canon.

later that I got to know this Polish reality... It wasn't... it was very depressing to me. I recognized it as the reality full of anti-Semitic content. Before the war, Kazimierz Dolny on the Vistula was a town... and these are not the census data, so I may be mistaken, but more or less 60% of the inhabitants were Jewish, 60 to 70%. Almost nobody survived, except for just some individuals. And they left. And, of course, their houses and possessions and other things were taken over by the neighbors, by Poles. And, for example, when I was listening to some comments when somebody was saying that... These were the 70's, so a lot of time had passed since then, but these were the people who remembered perfectly well... and for them, in Kazimierz, to let out such comments... it was as if the Jews were not only still there but as if they ruled. And, of course, they were Jew-communists but also, in general, Jews were like this kind of a demon, which impersonates... which impersonates every bad power. Or, for example, I remember, because it really struck me when this elderly gentleman, who certainly went through the war and not as a small child, either, said, "After all, it's well-known that a Jew has nine lives, like a cat." And I was thinking, what is he saying? Here in this little town where not a single Jew had nine lives and the one life they had... they fell right into death, into the gas. This Polish consciousness, where facts have radically, incredibly radically, been divided from... where the reality has radically been divided from the myth, from the myth. Nothing would have happened if I had said to this gentleman, "Dear Sir, but nobody here had nine lives; there is no single Jew left here." Then he just would have said, "You are right, nobody's left here, but they are there in other places; after all, it's clear who rules over Poland," you know, and then they'd start listing... like what about all the People's Republic's government, both Poles and Jews, but all would become Jews. Because that's how it is: the government is the Jews, and particularly the disliked government is the Jews. Possessions are also about the Jews, and particularly possessions that are envied, and particularly when there were no Jewish possessions. And that's where... this particular side of the Polish mentality, which sometimes is stronger and sometimes is weaker, and after the Jedwabne¹⁵ story, it's become clear that there are places, where... and there are places, where it's much weaker or it doesn't occur at all... that's a general principle. But I got to recognize this and I think I also recognized it as a child, since well... of course I was harassed as a child by other children, and they knew things about me I hadn't known myself. They knew what the Jews did... I don't know... with, let's say, matzo bread, and I didn't know they added Christian infants' blood to matzo bread, and I didn't know. I don't know... I didn't even associate matzo bread with holidays, because it was so typical, beyond religion and tradition perhaps. And, to my surprise, I used to find out a lot of things about just who I was, and that's why I think one of the absolutely fundamental issues of my life is identity..., or rather a human right to define one's own identity on one's own, and above all else, not to have to deal with people who'd come and say, "You are this, you are that. This is good about your identity, and this is not good. This is normal, and that is not normal... and here is the norm." And this simply freaks me out, like I get mad or something. And now I can move on to feminism, because this is all the background, the whole background.

Feminism as such... it started, it started in a kind of way... I'd say seemingly a purely intellectual way. It was during the 80's. Underground papers were being published, and the whole nation... the whole, of course, as a slogan, since it was by no means the whole nation, was

¹⁵ When Jan T. Gross's book, *Sasiedzi (Neighbors)*, was published in 2000 in Poland about the murder of Jedwabne's (a small town near the eastern border) Polish Jewish inhabitants by their Polish Catholic neighbors in 1941, a controversy swept the country about the role of non-Jewish Poles in the Holocaust.

involved in the opposition.¹⁶ And a friend came by and asked if I wouldn't translate some pieces about women, about women's lib and anti-lib. And I had, at this point, borrowed a book, like a real trophy, from Professor Brach-Czaina, I mean today she's a professor and then she was just my friend Jolka, and that was a book by Kate Millet, and I just grabbed on and got stuck, since my English was very poor, but like a kid in a candy store, I managed to translate a little piece, where Kate Millet is telling about Bolshevik women-related legislation and its further development. She's simply talking about reducing... reducing, so that this fantastic legislation, fantastically revolutionary, with weddings and divorces as just formalities and with access to abortion, got to the point, really, to this Stalinist point with the ban on abortion and a return to this kind of puritanical way. I thought, "Well, this might be a great story for the underground paper, isn't it? Kate Millet as a Polish anti-communist has simply done great." And I gave them this piece, but nobody ever got interested, since it wasn't, generally, a topic that would fall within the scope of interest of the Polish underground press, which wasn't focused on this. I started focusing on this a little bit then, and I met this group of women... It was 1986, and they were students, I think, mostly from the university... mostly from Sociology, but not only. These young women got incredibly... organized an incredibly huge event in Warsaw, which they called "Cinema of Women" and it was a week-long review of women's films from all over Europe. They were being helped... they were getting a lot of help from the Dutch Embassy... they had a lot of movies brought in from some kind of feminist movie collections but not only. It went on for hours, in the heart of Warsaw, from dawn to dusk. And the movie theater got rented definitely not by the Dutch Embassy, but by the Ministry of Culture; it just couldn't be any other way. It was a thrilling event, and at that point I was generally interested in film. I worked on film... I wrote about it. I kind of started at the beginning of the 80's, because I was always attracted to it. So, of course, I was participating in this event, and later on, I kind of got close to this group of women. And later on... it must have been 1988 or 1989, I met Sławka Walczewska,¹⁷ a camerawoman, yes, and a director. And this was already this kind of feminism, feminism that was... a conscious feminism. Moreover, for a very long time I believed that my feminism, which for me was about... it would simply fit to the tee with my whole intellectual and world-view equipment. There was nothing in it that I could reject. I'm talking about this more liberal and later also a radical... Now I would most likely say that I have an inclination toward this kind of global feminism. And if I were to define it... and it changes, depending on a stage in my life, but it has simply just caught on... I read Kate Millet, and then later on, I read... later on I read other works, and the only reflection I had was simply that it was absolutely common sense what these women were writing... I could not see a single point that would cause me some intellectual doubts... And I thought it was a kind of intellectual recognition. It was intellectual recognition to a large extent, but, on the other hand, but... I think that somewhere... somewhere there, it was also about my personal history, mostly the part about my stepfather. It was clearly the case that in my competition to attain the rank of a person that... that was important to him, I lost and I lost definitely because of my wrong gender. The only thing, though, as I've said, was that it was all covert. It was covert; it was never said out loud. For example, I have never heard at home the kind of sentence that a lot of my feminist friends did hear when their fathers would say, for example, that they were disappointed having daughters,

¹⁶ Beginning in the late 1970s with the organization of the Solidarity Labor Union, many Poles became involved in underground movements and organizations opposing the communist government.

¹⁷ **Walczewska, Sławka**: Director of the Women's Foundation eFKA in Cracow, Poland and Global Feminisms Poland Site Coordinator. Co-founder of the Green Party 2004 and author of *Ladies, Knights, and Feminists: Women's Discourse in Poland* (1999).

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

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

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

B.U.: Yes...?

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

B.U.: No, I have never got involved in any... I have never got involved in any Jewish or political organizations; the only organizations I've been getting involved in, well, were feminist organizations. I'm not a great organizer, I mean in a sense of... I'm probably better at other things, but PSF or the Polish Feminist Association was for me a kind of... It's also known what kind of a wave pushed it up, and, well, it was pushed up by the struggle about abortion legislation, and for me the abortion legislation issue was this kind... let me rephrase this. The issue of limiting or completely banning a right to an abortion was... at the beginning, I was reading it simply in human rights terms: it's a human right, end of the story. It was generally disgusting and unthinkable for me that this right could be taken away from women, no matter what I thought about using it during the times of the Polish People's Republic, since it's a different issue, but simply... And I think that very many... I mean... then, women, or my female friends, in general... well, after all, at the beginning of the 90's, when Poland had not yet become the country where the influence of the Catholic Church was so significant and so obvious, it was disgusting, disgusting and it was the reason to act for a lot of people. So this certainly was a direct spark, but I also... well, it didn't exhaust... feminist activity didn't end with that for me. Most likely, then it simply... it was this direct cause that I got involved in, and I was involved, we all were. And I was running around, collecting signatures on protest letters and petitions, and I co-organized some two or three really big rallies in Warsaw, all of this within PSF. I was also persuading my friends then, after it had become possible in Poland to register associations, to register the Polish Feminist Association, and I remember that I was really pushing to make it an officially registered association, since at the beginning, not everybody was really convinced that it was the way to go, but I was convinced that it absolutely should be, and here is when my ... my kind of an inclination toward democratic institutions came out. For me then, it was all located in this kind of a landscape of various legally acting... in this more democratic reality... well, more democratic from the formal perspective, since ... since PRL fell, and it was very important to me. At the same time perhaps... I am perhaps... even though I can play... and I can play in a team... that is when there is a defined goal. At the same time, I'm very much afraid of doctrinarism, and I'm kind of afraid that... and by the way it did happen that way... there were various fights and various discussions. I'm very afraid that this... that somebody... and here the issue of identity pops up... that somebody will come and say: "No, you can't think like this. Your... your way of thinking, or your perspective is not good, and from the feminist standpoint, this other way is more correct." So frankly speaking, I'd run into this very often also among feminists, since there were conflicts and discussions, of course, particularly because this group was very small. It wasn't like in the United States or Western Europe, so all of these feminists, who were of various orientations: liberal, radical, lesbian-separatist, and I'm talking about the beginning of the 90's, were... there were about 40 of us there, and we could fit into... and these discussions were simply... were definitely there... these discussions, quarrels, rows were happening. But at the same time, I had already felt safer here; I mean some sort of a basic trust was there, but I also gave myself... it was already obvious to me that within feminism I had a right to some version of it, and most likely I do follow some version. This version is definitely... like I've said, it is certainly kind of anti-essentialist, it isn't essentialist, and essentialism is simply the devil for me, because essentialism says exactly what an anti-Semite says to you: "You are this and that." And it's deterministic, it's like a

pronouncement, “You are a good woman, because women are angels. They are sensitive and nurturing, and it’s inborn. It’s given to them.” Then, I simply feel like exploding. No, thank you, I don’t want it. This message to me is as attractive as informing me that Jews have an inclination to live on matzo bread made with blood of Christian infants. There is nothing attractive in this. For me, there is only coercion and this kind of... like having to fit into some coerced aspect of my identity.

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

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

S.W.: Yes.

B.U.: I would say that it’s a bit... that it’s a bit like... that I am this person who does these things, which I don’t like any more, these academic research kind of things a little bit in order to sponsor this other person in me, who is less quick, orderly, ready and knowing, or in other words a poet or prose writer. Let’s call her an artist. An artist in me is working very slowly, and this other person with a more discoursing mind is much quicker. And, in a sense, it was simply... I worked in a Research Institute, and I needed to write a book. I found a topic which I thought was... about Jewish women in Polish literature, and I thought it was attractive and again... No, I wrote it, it... I wrote it relatively fast. I mean I was dragging on with the PhD for a long time, but I dragged on for the same reason a lot of my friends did, and that’s because in Poland, salaries of people who are in research are terribly low, and because of this... If you’re really working on a dissertation for like two or three years, it’s also a kind of financial gamble, so it’s going really slowly. But, of course, also for the same reason, I probably wouldn’t be able... I can’t work on things that aren’t somehow related to me personally... I just can’t work on these... I simply haven’t been able to work on these since school. If there is no element that is somehow personally linked to me, and it’s not because of egocentrism, but rather a trait of people in the humanities, I’m not interested. So here it is of course... about to what extent... how the identity of such a heroine is constructed, of a literary heroine who is a woman, or more specifically a Jewish woman, in Polish literature, since it was also about looking at... looking at, observing the... well, about “How is identity given away?” It is a fascinating question: “Who gives away identity?”... you know, since it’s a bit like the question... like this, like this... almost like from Platonic ideas, almost like the story with Platonic ideas, where there is a Demiurge¹⁸ and he just... but there it’s not about identity but about existence itself, you know. And he just presses the mold into the matter and these individual specimens are coming right out. And the way I see it is that there are these institutions, these various human institutions, like these Demiurges, and I don’t like Demiurges... these Demiurges, who also have this identity stamp, and they just stamp and stamp. And for example, the Catholic Church stamps and says this, “You have a great Polish-Catholic identity, and simply everything is fine with you.” Probably what’s included is, I don’t know, baptism, confessions, you know, offerings, descent, I don’t know, everything, so “you’re great.” And then it’s called... what is it called? A true Pole, you know, and we have this

¹⁸ In *Timaeus*, the Greek philosopher Plato gives an account of the creation of the universe by the Demiurge. Unlike the Christian God, Plato’s Demiurge does not create from nothing, but orders the cosmos out of existing matter. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/p/plato.htm>. Accessed July 20, 2006.

nationalist and fascist with a great identity. Jews may do the same thing, and women do it, and there are such attitudes within commu... communism. Oh my, what a beautiful slip! I mean feminism, where there is also this stamp from above and these are funny situations. I remember this one situation of this one ball, some kind of a feminist ball, which was also a costume ball... that's what it was, a feminist costume ball. I mean that within this circle of Warsaw feminists, there was a ball like that, and I called the hostess to figure out when and how and stuff. Then, she asked me what I'd be dressed as. I said I'd love to dress as a musketeer, that I would really like to come as a musketeer, and she kind of got terribly upset and said, "What do you mean as a musketeer? These must be female costumes." And again I felt like a living body coming into contact with a doctrine, because my living body wanted a musketeer costume [laughter] and not that of a witch, for example, a witch who lives by the woods, outside of the village and will soon be burned by the Holy Inquisition. I respect the witch and so on, but I was the one who wanted to be a musketeer, and perhaps I felt closer to a musketeer, and this kind of a reprimand I received from that side immediately becomes a signal for me that well... they're stamping identity here, they're stamping identity here, so, in short, for me the feminist project is simply a kind of an ideal. I would see it linked somewhere with this kind of a very strong individualist trend. It'd be related to the philosophers, whom I'm... and perhaps it's not a coincidence that I'm currently interested in Rorty¹⁹... this kind of an idea... it's not the ideal yet, but I mean something like this. Perhaps that's why I'm interested in Bauman²⁰ and these notions of modernity and post-modernity, and also the figure of a Jew and... because I also used it in my book, where a Jewish man or a Jewish woman were the people... and this particular concept is from Bauman that they are the people who found themselves in this kind of a situation in the world of the first half of the 20th century. This was the situation of assimilated Jews, and they had to kind of assemble their identity themselves. The stamping was over, all this giving away stamps was over. The rabbi didn't give it to them, the priest didn't give it to them, and the state gave only so much, so they had to complete their identity themselves. This is very interesting for me, and I don't think it results from any specific Jewish talent but rather from a specific situation. It was the result of a social and political situation Jews encountered in Poland before the war when they were trying to assimilate, and actually not only in Poland, but here it was particularly... And that's why this literature, for example, from the inter-war period captures it so well. There are women writers, women writers in particular... Kuncewiczowa²¹ captures that well, and this was all fascinating for me.

¹⁹ **Rorty, Richard** (born in 1931 in New York City) is an American philosopher who argues that epistemology, the study of knowledge, is the product of the mistaken view that the mind is a glassy essence, of which the main function is to faithfully reproduce external reality. He attacks "universal" philosophical investigations by historicizing them and exposing their contingency. Rorty argues for hermeneutics, the explaining of texts by other texts, rather than the search for an ultimate interpretation that would be validated by a higher force.

²⁰ **Bauman, Zygmunt** (born 1925 in Poznan, Poland) is a British sociologist of Polish-Jewish descent. From 1971 until 1990 he was professor of sociology at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom. In the late 1980s, he gained prominence through his studies on the connection between the culture of modernity and totalitarianism, especially German national socialism and the Holocaust.

²¹ **Kuncewiczowa, Maria** (1895-1989): writer and novelist and one of the creators of Polish psychological prose. Her works deal with social reality of interwar Poland and with war-time and postwar lives of Poles outside of Poland.

BOŻENA UMIŃSKA

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

Lives in Warsaw