Two thousand eighteen is a year of significant anniversaries: one century since the end of World War I—and Poland regains its independence—and in the history of the Polish People's Republic the year marks a half-century since the events of March 1968. I suspect that the fear of this second anniversary caused the greatest controversy. It would have been better to organize comprehensive, impartial education of the events of 68, including both the negative and positive aspects of this historical moment.

One must remember that 1968 was an unusual year around the world. The date alone became a symbol of historical, political, and social upheaval in Paris, Prague, Warsaw, Berkeley, Chicago, and Columbia University in New York City. It was the year of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. In Poland it started with student demonstrations protesting the ban on performances of Adam Mickiewicz's Romantic drama *Forefathers' Eve*. Students demanded democracy and freedom of speech. They were brutally attacked by the militia, ZOMO and ORMO. That fact was quickly transposed by the political regime into the primitive, ever-useful, anti-Zionist propaganda with all its consequences.

Fifty years have passed since the infamous March of 1968 and I still consider that event and its aftermath the major formative factor in my life, despite the fact that I was not a participant in the events, but rather a recipient. I still stand by the words of my poem:

Again I travel over
Gdansk Station
Only I cannot
Get past it

to the order of the day.[1]

I have traveled to Poland many times since my first return in 1993, but I never go down the stairs to see the station itself. Even though I know that there is a plaque commemorating our exodus, and now even the impression of my face appears there on a mural. The image of the station that I saw the last time on November 12, 1969, predominates in my memory. It's not an image I cherish, but I cherish the memory of friends, some of whom I saw there for the last time.

Who I am now was determined by my exilic experience. It was there and then that I realized how brittle the principle of our safety was, and this forced me, initially against my will, to take charge of my own life. It sounds a bit like a slogan, but it was a great lesson in humility, which exile always is.

Twenty yeas ago in my article published in the magazine *Midrasz*,[2] I argued that the words "émigré" and "exile" were often used synonymously in regard to our emigration, even though they are not synonyms. Every exile is an émigré but not every émigré is an exile. My argument, supported by this quotation from Joseph Conrad, "Words, as is well known, are the greatest foes of reality," was prompted by the existing inclination to diminish the status of that fact. The criterion for exile is to be the subject of exile; it cannot be reversed by open political borders, and/or diluted semantic borders. We do not speak about Adam's emigration from the Garden of Eden or Ovid's emigration from Rome.

---

[1] Translated by Thomas Anessi.

[2] Anna Frajlich, "Marzec zaczął się w czerwcu," *Midrasz* (March 1998): 6–8.

Of course, I appreciate the attention our emigration has received in the last fifty years from scholars like Jerzy Eisler, Krystyna Kersten, Dariusz Stola, Jozef Banas, and a number of others. For many of us, rereading these books is like reading a review of our biography, and listening to the present rhetoric of some politicians becomes such a review as well. It is very important to give credit to those scholars, writers, and editors who worked to document this period. Recently such studies more and more often have met meet with aggressive negation.

Even though March 1968 has been quite well researched, assessed, and described, it is still worthy of being remembered now, when Gomułka's slogans are still found to be useful, and he himself becomes a model for some politicians to follow. We witness similar manipulations in many countries, where anti-Semitism has returned to some of the most prestigious universities in Europe and the United States, and where in the contemporary newspeak anti-Semitism is hidden under the slogans of anti-Zionism.

In 1968 the ruling party understood that playing the anti-Semitic card would unite a considerable part of society against the demonstrating students. The party's anti-Zionist campaign sidelined the students' opposition. Talk about censorship and the opposition was replaced by talk about the Jews. Everything was strictly controlled, and when this aggressive anti-Semitism started to embarrass the Party, the Zionists were renamed revisionists. From the sociological point of view, it is interesting that as a result a considerable number of people joined the Communist Party.

Recently I came across this quite interesting definition by Andrzej Bobkowski, who in 1943 writes: ". . . hideous nationalism is an enticing wrap in which a bitter pill is served."[3] For so

[3] Andrzej Bobkowski, *Szkice piórkiem*, 430. The translation is mine.

many years our predicament was like internal bleeding, our wounds were deeply hidden and invisible to an outsider. Not much attention had been paid to it inside or outside Poland; the nature of the hurt was incomprehensible and was to be suffered in silence. At the time, I was grateful for Kazimierz Wierzyński's satire *Czarny Polonez* (Black Polonaise)[4]. Even though written before 1968, it was perhaps the first Polish émigré literary work to deal with the subject of what would lead to the events of 68. It took some years for our exile to become the subject of writing and scholarly inquiries. There was a tendency to minimize the fact that we were banished from the country that we considered our own. We were all forced to renounce our citizenship. I had to sign the renunciation for my two-year-old son. Even after we left, painful forms of harassment followed some of us, people were denied entry visas to bury their parents, or visit sick family members. Some who were allowed to enter faced harassment: they were told they were lucky that their parent had terminal cancer otherwise they wouldn't have been given a visa.

Most of us were raised in an atmosphere that was both patriotic and dogmatic, which made coming to terms with the reality of banishment all the more difficult. It was not only making the painful decision to leave the country, being forced listening to false public accusations, but also enduring the false atmosphere that surrounded this matter, as well as the curse cast upon those who left and those who maintained contact with them. Hence, letters were sent without the sender's address, meetings, if any, were always held in secret. Everything was calculated so that the person falsely accused would feel guilty.

[4] Kazimierz Wierzyński, *Czarny Polonez* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1968).

Our generation, which grew up in a very closed and claustrophobic society, was brainwashed on the topic of emigration. We were taught that the emigration of the nineteenth century was to be glorified, and the one of the twentieth to be despised.

One had to liberate oneself from that burden. For me writing produced this liberating affect. Sometimes my own poetry, for example, “Jestem oddzielna” (I am separate), allowed me to pass from the dogmatic perception of personal freedom to the truly personal experience of it. The poem “Aklimatyzacja” (Acclimatization), a poem about the necessity and the impossibility of forgetting, helped me with a similar transformation.[5] One must forget, because constantly looking back leads to sterile nostalgia. Moreover, this is a poem about the desire to control something as involuntary as remembering and forgetting. Slowly I was being transformed from the person I had been made by others into my own true self. It was Witold Gombrowicz who said that the writer is a neurotic who cures himself.

While writing these poems I did not intend to represent anyone but myself, although I did find many readers among our emigration of 1968, as well as those of the older political emigration, who empathized with me. It was the support of my readers that helped me to overcome the enormous depressing and paralyzing effect of exile.

It did take some time for historians and sociologists to make their first attempt to document and classify the March events. Today the bibliography concerning the 1968 exodus is rather impressive. Books by scholars, historians, sociologists, specialists on literature, and

---

[5] Translations of the two poems, with the Polish text, can be found in *Between Dawn and the Wind,* tr. with an introduction by Regina Grol (Austin, TX: Host Publications, 2006), 58–59, 10–11.

journalism fill and continue to fill the blank pages of that particular chapter. In 2008 our family (my sister, my husband and myself) contributed to that pile by publishing our correspondence[6] with our parents during the year and a half of separation. It took us almost forty years to recognize that this correspondence, preserved and typed by my late mother, possessed documentary value.

The literary contribution of the writers who experienced this particular emigration is growing. Earlier books by Michal Moszkowicz and Natan Tennenbaum, were later joined by those written by William Dichter, Tamara Slawny, Wlodzimierz Holsztynski, Henryk Dasko, and recently Ewa Herbst and Sabina Baral. This literature, together with film documents and compilations of interviews, gives a just and thorough representation and interpretation of this disgraceful episode.

Michal Moszkowicz's *Dog's Passport* and especially his *Kadish* are important books that contribute to the understanding of the vital problems of Polish Jewry of my generation, and that of our parents, the problem of identity. Moszkowicz deals with young East European Jews, and their attraction to communism during the interwar period, as well as their attitude toward religion and tradition. The book is concise, well written, and devoid of sentimentality. Tennenbaum, a popular songwriter before 1968, dedicated a number of his poems to the subject: in one poem he writes about Odysseus seeking his "return ticket," and in another he proclaims: "There is no Ithaca without you, as there is no me without Ithaca."

---

[6] Felicja Bromberg, Anna Frajlich, Władysław Zając, *Po Marcu—Wiedeń, Rzym, Nowy Jork* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Midrasza, 2008).

For a long time, poetry and fiction primarily used allegorical language: Tennenbaum wrote about Ithaca; I viewed our ordeal from the position of the eternal Jewish lot of exile; Moszkowicz was tormented by dreams about seeking his "Dog's passport"—the infamous travel document. Speaking of allegorical language, I found a certain level of comfort in reading Andrzej Szczypiorski's novel *Msza za miasto Arras* (A Mass for Arras),[7] published in 1970.

Reading *The Family Carnovsky,* written by the elder Singer, Israel Joshua, in the 1940s, and even Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*, I was amazed to see that all such departures looked the same, and shared common strategies, with intimidation playing a prominent role.

The novel *Glupia sprawa* (Stupid Thing) by Stanisław Ryszard Dobrowolski, published in 1969 in Poland, added insult to injury. In a country where a business card could not be printed without the censor's approval, publication of such a defamatory novel about the Jews in the ghetto was meant to offend those already offended.

Adam Michnik quite appropriately termed 1968 in Poland a "dry pogrom," because "pogrom" connotes physical violence and an attack on a person's dignity by various means, including an attack on one's possessions. We hear and read how custom officials deliberately broke people's sets of china and memorabilia. Actions such as these are part and parcel of the pogrom mentality.

Many countries throughout the world have expelled Jews at one time or another. And time and time again we observe an increase of anti-Semitism in Europe, and the United States, by which I mean not only randomly expressed anti-Semitic sentiments, but also the increased

---

[7] Andrzej Szczypiorski, *A Mass for Arras*, tr. Richard Lourie (New York: Grove Press, 1993).

general acceptance of such expressions. Today we see quite often how blaming Jews shifts to blaming the Zionists, especially on university campuses. It is a recognizable deception.

One has to remember that what we call March 68 in Poland, started in June 1967, immediately after the Arab-Israeli War. First, we experienced banishment in the form of definition, from Poles of Jewish origin we suddenly became Zionists, the "fifth column." One of the most humiliating acts took place long before March, by forcing the board of the Cultural Association of Polish Jews to condemn Israel. On the one hand, Gomułka and his gang named every Jew a Zionist, and on the other, they wanted to grill every Jew so that they would deny being one.

Pregnant at the time, I felt physically threatened and for the first time I feared that I was not protected by the law in the face of all the propaganda and the so-called "spontaneous" demonstrations of Arab students on the streets of Warsaw. Not being engaged in political life, we soon—like many of our friends—started to feel its effects, culminating for us in an anti-Semitic, offensive sign on our door. Such a sign on the door is not only an offense—it is a denunciation. Many of us tried to wait out the hate campaign; we could not see ourselves leaving Poland. To prompt people like us, the Polish Press Agency published a warning that permission to leave would be issued in the "usual" manner only until September 1969. That infamous communiqué, accompanied by rumors of resettlement, did the trick for the many who were undecided.

The stigmatized person remembers not only every sympathetic gesture, but also every neutral one. And we remember many people who went out of their way to reassure us of their loyalty. My professor and mentor Janina Kulczycka-Saloni invited me to her house for a talk. And

of course, we remember all the friends who came to our farewell party. They all came to the infamous railroad station in Warsaw, Dworzec Gdański, and greeted us twenty something years later when we could visit Poland for the first time. I believe that the voices of such people should be heard as well.

Obtaining our American visas required passing through the customary vetting "stations"—a few days in Vienna, and seven months in Rome. Finally, we landed in the States. As a group we were too insignificant to merit special treatment or attention, as was awarded later to the Russian Jews, who immigrated to the United States *en masse* in the 80s. Playing the victim would be the worst strategy in such a country as the United States. Rather we had to deal in silence with our anonymity and social degradation, which often was more painful than the financial shortages. We tried to find ways to keep afloat without letting go of our aspirations. Faced with the crisis in American industry, my engineer husband experienced one disappointment after another. Lack of work, lack of help, lack of hope—that was our beginning. However, without the language, without contacts, just by sheer determination, he accomplished his goal, and he eventually found work in his chosen field of optical engineering and happily worked for many years. My four years working as an assistant in a scientific laboratory helped us to establish ourselves to a certain degree.

Later on, I started my graduate studies in order to overcome the degradation, and eventually I did defend my doctorate. These are byproducts of our "March." Among these I count my books, my publications in the London journal *Wiadomości* and *Kultura* in Paris, and last but not least, my thirty-five- year career at Columbia University. We slowly left behind our isolation, and other exile-related psychological problems. Our losses were balanced by gains.

Fifty years later many things look different, the sole fact that most of us survived, and many of us succeeded in our new life is an act of defiance and a triumph over what might have been. Many of those who did not emigrate also constructed good lives and careers.

But I am painfully aware that this was not everyone's lot. I have seen too many lives ruined by this exile. People who were pulled out of their lives at a later stage, people who could not find themselves in the new circumstances, and could not recover psychologically and otherwise. My loyalty to them, and to their fate determines my ambivalent view on recovering the citizenship taken away from us at departure.

It is my parents' generation whose pain is of the greatest concern to me. Despite their heroic efforts to survive in the new circumstances, they never recovered from their exilic wounds. Theirs was a generation that suffered two world wars, which lost everything and almost everyone in the Second World War, who had worked all their adult life in their home country, and faced exile in their retirement after losing that retirement at home. They are the silent ones, those who passed away before they could share their stories. Even those who did not emigrate faced humiliation and separation from their families and friends. Families of three generations were uprooted to another country as the direct result of 1968. Grandchildren spoke a language that the grandparents were too old to master.

During World War I my father's family fled the Cossack pogroms from Galicia to Prague; during World War II he was forced to go East with the work battalions, leaving his family behind. When both my parents returned from the Soviet Union, where they survived the war, their native town Lwów was off limits; none of the parents, siblings and families left behind were alive.

Only when I found myself in exile did I realize that my parents' postwar life was already an exilic experience, only then was I able to comprehend their life-long feeling of displacement and their nostalgia for Lwów. This is the subject of many of my poems, for example, "The Lost Land," "Birds," Forget-Me-Nots."[8] Initially my parents, due to their poor health, did not leave the country, but in December of 1970, upon learning that the government was killing workers in Gdańsk, they decided to leave regardless of their condition. In the United States, my father, already in his late fifties, afflicted with post-stroke epilepsy, and often falling and getting up on the streets, went back to work, in order to secure the smallest American pension.

Among the writers of the older generation with a very strong Jewish identity and recognizable creative output who left Poland because of 1968 one should mention: Stanislaw Wygodzki, and Arnold Slucki; neither of them ever fully found their place in exile. Israel was not the right place for Polish-Jewish writers or even Yiddish[9] writers to lick their wounds. Slucki very quickly moved to Germany of all places, where he died prematurely. Stanislaw Wygodzki tried hard to adapt to his new home. After reading my poem "To a Friend in Haifa," with the lines:

Czemu tutaj
gdzie każdy pęd puszcza korzenie
ty wciąż jak ziarno
które spadło na kamienie.

[8] Translations of the first two poems appear in *Between Dawn and the Wind*, 6–7, 14–15.

[9] Like my first mentor Hadasa Rubin.

Why here

where every sprout strikes root

you are still like the seed

which fell upon the stone?[10]

Wygodzki wrote to me: this poem is about me, I am "the seed which fell upon the stone."

Poets who represented the voice of the most tragic fate of their generation, that of the Holocaust, were to a great degree silenced by the bitter experience of the 1968 exile. Thanks to the charismatic efforts of Professor Sławomir Żurek at Catholic University of Lublin, and other scholars in Poland, the work of these poets is coming back to the Polish reader.

Was 1968 a shock because it happened so soon after World War II? One wanted to believe, for no apparent rational reason, that such blatant anti-Jewish propaganda could not take place so soon.

Two books of interviews remind us of what happened to many people in 1968: Teresa Torańska's *Jesteśmy* (We Are) and Joanna Wiszniewicz's *Życie przecięte: opowieści pokolenia Marca* (Life Cut in Two: Stories of the March Generation).[11] I admit that I approached reading these interviews with some trepidation, among other concerns I was afraid that I would find the

[10] Ibid., 28–29.

[11] Teresa Torańska, *Jesteśmy: rozstania '68* (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2008); Joanna Wiszniewicz, *Życie przecięte: opowieści pokolenia Marca* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2008).

material to be somewhat redundant. But it was just the opposite—both books made me relive the entire process week by week. One cannot overestimate the significance of the material collected by these two authors. I think this is the most that can be done while our generation is still on hand to bear witness. The two authors, unfortunately, have passed away prematurely.

Placing her interviews with the ’68 exiles in the context of official speeches and policy documents, Teresa Torańska demonstrates that the enforced emigration was intentional. It was not a byproduct of the policy—it was the goal. Together, the government, the Party, the security forces, and the army set the entire apparatus into motion with a campaign of harassment and humiliation of young and old alike. Many scholars of Jewish origin throughout the country were harassed, fired from their jobs, and even arrested. Some were fired and not allowed to emigrate if they insisted on stating that their nationality was Polish. The ruling people needed the apartments and positions to allure supporters.

Already outside the university, and working in a small peripheral magazine for the blind, I was not fully aware at the time how systematically that particular task was being carried out. There is one more thing I realized while reading Torańska’s book—how actively involved Jaruzelski was in this process. His orders concerning officers who served many decades in the Polish Army were appalling. From my own observations, I recall a person who worked for the army as a sport consultant being persuaded to leave his Jewish wife and small son, and was then sent for an indoctrination course. All this happened on Jaruzelski’s watch. One other phenomenon has received too little attention–the suicides. We clearly do not have the complete numbers, but a little note lurks here and there as a reminder. In order to retain its

legitimacy, any synthesis and research of the1968 anti-Jewish campaign should deal with that matter in all its complexity.

The book of interviews *Księga wyjścia* (The Book of Exodus),[12] collected by Mikołaj Grynberg, reinforced this image from a more recent perspective. The interviews presented in all these books help the reader to distinguish the various degrees of exile. The degree was proportional to the awareness of one's identity. A number of the interviewee's were not aware of their Jewish identity, or denied it. Their exile started not at the crossing of the border but at the moment of the realization that they were not the person they thought they were. The renunciation of one's Jewishness plays a role in many narratives, including Maria Stauber's book, *Z daleka i z bliska* (From Far and Near).[13]

People perceived their Jewishness on different levels, for many it was a secular Jewishness, not even realizing that secular Jew is for many a contradiction in terms. Under the Communist regime, the renunciation of religion and/or religious practices was expected of everyone, but somehow these expectations were more applicable to the Jews, and adopted by them to a greater degree.

Our generation, the generation of postwar European Jews, grew up without grandparents, and usually it is the grandparents who are the bearers of tradition. During my childhood, I had many friends, both Polish and Jewish, whose relatives were killed by Germans, but I did not have a single Jewish friend who had even one living grandparent.

---

[12] Mikołaj Grynberg, *Księga wyjścia* (Warszawa: POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews and the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland in cooperation with Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2018).

[13] Maria Stauber, *Z daleka i z bliska* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2001).

The dilemma of redefining one's identity is a natural step in the process of maturing and development. But it should never take place under the pressure of finger-pointing and public demonstrations, which at any moment threaten to turn violent, or controlled violence when the lawlessness of collective responsibility is at work.

Despite many claims that it was a fight for political power, one can clearly see that a shoemaker and an accountant in the Jewish cooperatives in Wałbrzych or DzierŻoniów were equally good targets as the political big shots in Warsaw. The racial card was the only card played there. As Professor Piotr Wandycz states in his article: "The Polish communists used nationalism to gain legitimacy."[14] It is astonishing, how the generation of our parents, many of whom were Communists or sympathizers themselves, were blinded to that strategy until it was used against them.

The underlying message used by Gomułka, hoping to find support in the masses, was his apparent commitment to ethnic cleansing, for all practical purposes. In 2005, Professor Jerzy Jedlicki in his interview with Anna Jarmusiewicz published in *Rzeczpospolita*'s literary supplement *Plus Minus* states: "In 1968 the Communist Party and the other parties licensed by it reached with delight for the rhetoric of fascist nationalism." [15]

---

[14] Piotr Wandycz, review of *Europas Platz in Polen: Polnische Europa- Konzeptionem vom Mittelalterbis zum EU-Beitritt*, *Slavic Review* (Summer 2008).

[15] Anna Jarmusiewicz, "Rozmowa z prof. Jerzym Jedlickim," *Hańba domowa*, *Rzeczpospolita/Plus Minus*, no. 54, March 5, 2005, accessed January 12, 2020, http://or.icm.edu.pl/texty/Jedlicki-O-Marcu_68r.html.

While speaking and writing about 1968 one should not ignore the phenomenon that became a primary, and seemingly reasonable, subject of blame—the perception of an overrepresentation of officials of Jewish origin, in the various branches of the government, administration, security, and the Party. I myself could not believe that an entire class of people, because of their position, lived in special neighborhoods, thus creating a sort of elite whose children, for example, were chauffeured to the same school. Knowing the nature of dictatorial regimes, one cannot think that it was an accidental or overlooked phenomenon.

I was amazed to learn of the existence of such enclaves, and I can appreciate that their exile was perhaps even more painful, for they lived in utopia to the extent that they did not know their own identity; perhaps their parents wanted to believe that they had already entered the international kingdom of communism. Amazingly, their passage abroad was in many instances eased by Western liberals because they spoke the same political language.

Many of us had a foothold in some sort of utopia, even if we did not partake in a privileged life. I am referring to the belief instilled in us that we were living in a relatively safe world, a world without racial prejudice. We know better now that there is no such world, nor such a society, and the only answer is an open society with strong and just laws against racial prejudice, against hate language and hate crime.

Because even such overrepresentation does not justify shifting blame on an entire ethnic or racial (you name it) strata of people from party officials, professors of the university, journalists and bookkeepers of cooperatives in backwater Silesian towns.

Joseph Banas rightly entitled his book *Scapegoats*.[16] I hope that most people would agree that such practices definitely do not belong in what we call civil society. One must also remember that while we were being stripped of our citizenship upon leaving the country, most Polish citizens could not leave the country at any cost. Hence, perhaps our exodus might have been viewed as something to be envied by those who could not leave.

I believe that greater attention should be paid to those who did not give in to the general atmosphere, but who stood by their moral principles and their friends, so that it is not only a history of well-known figures but considers those lesser known. It would be equally instructive to have a record of what motivates decency when one has to pay for it. The testimonies of the people who opposed the policy should supplement the testimony of those who were subjected to that policy. Perhaps not enough attention is being paid to those non-Jews who left with their spouses, sometimes risking that they would not see their relatives for years, if ever.

As many other historic events have taught us, it takes time for an event like this to find a narrative that will do it justice.

Anna Frajlich-Zajac

Poet, Senior Lecturer Emerita of Columbia University and International Advisory Member of the Forgotten Exodus Project

(Source: Anna Frajlich, *The Ghost of Shakespeare: Collected Essays*)

---

[16] Joseph Banas, *Scapegoats: The Exodus of the Remnants of Polish Jewry*, tr. Tadeusz Szafar, ed. Lionel Kochan (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1979).

The Ghost of Shakespeare: Collected Essays by Anna Frajlich