



Poland, Czech  
Republic,  
Slovakia,  
East Germany  
and Ukraine

1989   
EUROPE ON THE MOVE



# Women in Times of Change, 1989-2009



 HEINRICH  
BÖLL  
STIFTUNG  
WARSZAWA



Poland, Czech  
Republic,  
Slovakia,  
East Germany  
and Ukraine



# Women in Times of Change, 1989-2009

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# Introduction

The twentieth anniversary of the 1989 breakthrough is an occasion for summaries. The year 2009, now coming to an end, was full of intense debates about achievements and failures, successes and lost opportunities of the past two decades. In the countries of the former Eastern Bloc those debates were a sort of closure on history. In the context of broadly publicised disputes about hierarchy of events and symbols (the Polish Round Table vs. the fall of the Berlin Wall) and the lists of those deserving most honours (whether and why Wałęsa or Gorbachev ought to be included), both the role and significance of women

in the events of 1989, and their experiences during the twenty years of transformation constituted a marginal topic in the anniversary discourse.

In spite of the twenty years of democratic transformation, women did not manage to reduce their distance from men enough for their voice to be clearly heard in public debate. Furthermore, the account of the past two decades, as seen from the women's perspective, is not exactly in tune with the celebratory anniversary atmosphere. It is a paradox that for women in the former Eastern Bloc the freedom regained in 1989 was often combined with significant limitations of economic, social and reproductive rights. Women were those most hit by the cutting of social expenses, and the resulting removal of maternity entitlements of the times of real socialism, or the restructuring of large industrial plants. Particularly in the initial stages of the transformation, women – seen by employers as “a worse category of employees” responsible for looking after children and housework – experienced mass unemployment and feminisation of poverty. In spite of their involvement in the democratic opposition and the dissident movement, after 1989 women were also excluded from participation in power and relegated to the private sphere. There was a renaissance of right-wing discourse, in which women were seen only in the context of community, as guardians of family values. In all post-socialist countries – though to a different degree and with differing outcomes – a debate took place, concerning the right to abortion. In Poland, it concluded with the passing of a restrictive anti-abortion law, which provides for termination only in extreme cases, nevertheless even those strict provisions are not observed by public healthcare units. One may easily formulate a thesis that in spite of the aroused expectations, in practice civil activity of women faced limitations.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the last twenty years saw the creation of several women's organisations, which draw public attention to dis-

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<sup>1</sup> An excellent analysis of the first years of transformation in Poland, former Czechoslovakia and Hungary can be found in the publication of British sociologist Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market. Citizenship, Gender and Women's Movement in East Central Europe*, London – New York 1993.

crimination of women, try to publicise striking violations of women's rights and run public awareness campaigns. Nevertheless, a mass women's movement has not been born, and there has been no sense of shared interests.

The Polish Women's Congress, which took place in Warsaw twenty years after the first almost free parliamentary election, was – at least in the Polish context – a noticeable exception from that rule. A grassroot initiative, which regardless of differences united women's organisations and gathered more than three thousand participants ready to establish a shared platform for exchanging experiences and creating a positive action programme, deserves particular recognition, and at the same time it emphasises the need to notice and appreciate the women's experience and their role in the transformation.

Today, it would be hard to find a holistic analysis of the situation of women during the past twenty years, which attempts to answer the question about the women's influence upon the transformation, and the way the transformation influenced the position of women. Some reports devoted to social and economic changes and including the perspective of gender equality were created in the past, nevertheless those analyses are fragmentary and dispersed.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, few works present individual experiences of women from various areas within the region, expressed in their own voice.

In the face of the lack of public debate on the role of women in the time of transformation, the publication of the Heinrich Böll Foundation Regional Office in Warsaw attempts to present a multidimensional dialogue about the transformation experiences, giving voice to women. The Authors of the publication judge the past twenty years of reforms from the point of view of women from the former countries of the Eastern Bloc: the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine and former East Germany, and in this context, from the perspective of personal experiences. At the same time, the publication constitutes a platform

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. *Gender and economic opportunities in Poland: has transition left women behind?* The World Bank, Warsaw 2004.

for inter-generational dialogue, as the Authors come from different generations: there are women whose adult life began long before 1989, women who entered into adulthood around the time of the breakthrough, and women, who never personally experienced the earlier period. The Authors include writers (such as Jana Jurášová, Božena Umińska-Keff, Petra Hůlová, Natalka Śniadanko, Sylwia Chutnik), researchers of feminism (e.g. Agnieszka Graff, Lubica Kobová or Mirjam Hirsch) and journalists (Rita Pawlowski, Jana Simon), who combine their work with involvement in the women's movement. In the publication, personal texts meet more theoretical reflections, and literary accounts often complement more objective attempts to describe the past twenty years.

According to the Authors, the freedom regained after the breakthrough of 1989 often tastes bitter of disappointment, although the awareness of lost chances came with time: "20 years ago, I was not particularly naïve. Still, in 1990, I believed that feminism could soon become a leading ideal for women, since pluralism of political ideas was about to set in, and with it a possibility to articulate one's own political interests – why should women not do it then?" writes Božena Umińska-Keff in her essay, adding that in the following years pluralism was substituted with fossilisation and levelling of everything with a right-wing roller, while the liberation from "the Reds" proved – paradoxically – to be a liberation from the ideals of emancipation. Jana Jurášová, co-founder of *Aspekt*, the first Slovak feminist organisation and a long-term partner of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, reminisces that in the first years of transformation she and her colleagues were accused of wasting their energy on issues less important than defending democracy, as they were claiming women's rights. Within the discussion on the direction of change, it was difficult for feminists to put across the message that democracy without women is not a genuine democracy, and in that context participation of women is a measure of its quality.

Rita Pawlowski writes about difficult relations dividing Germany united after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Young feminists from the former GDR stated that "without women, it is impossible to create a state", and they became dynami-

cally involved in its construction, founding the Independent Women's Association (Unabhängige Frauenbund), which stood in critical opposition towards the Democratic Women's Federation of Germany (Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschland) – a post-socialist organisation their mothers strived to preserve trying to find a place for themselves in the new world. Rita Pawlowski's text, by no means lacking in self-criticism, is conducive to comparing the development of women's movements in different post-socialist countries, and to reflection on the extent to which the "state" women's organisations managed to redefine their role, whether and how women's movements of different roots cooperate, and, finally, whether the cooperation of post-socialist organisations with the women's movement newly created after 1989 would have improved the effectiveness of pro-equality actions? The text by Kateřina Jacques, who represents the Czech Greens (Strana zelených), tries to evaluate the influence of women's organisations upon politics. Jacques writes about the difficulties in cooperation between female politicians and women's organisations, which try at all costs to remain "politically impartial" and unaffiliated to any party, but they often become embroiled in contradictions resulting from the fact that they "put the issue of gender above the substance of political work" and they judge other people's political activity only in this context, not taking into account the rest of political agenda.

The assessment of the democratic transformation from the women's perspective, though largely critical, is not devoid of accents allowing for an optimistic view of the future. According to Jiřina Šiklová, Czech sociologist, signatory of Charter 77 and founder of the legendary Gender Studies in Prague – the first feminist organisation in the Czech Republic – Czech women in 1989 started from level zero, while at the moment, as far as "the development of women's movement, feminism and gender approach to social issues" are concerned, they are equal to most nations of the European Union. Based on nearly twenty years of observation of trends in political discourse, Agnieszka Graff comes to the conclusion that although "if you look at the hard facts, things are bad", the

last years brought something, which might be called “loss of collective gender innocence”. The issues of gender became strongly politicised: the discussion of those issues no longer involves wisecracking, passing clever remarks and reproducing overheard clichés; instead, people have started to dispute and contradict each other. The role of women is discussed by left-wing and conservative politicians alike, based on the same premise – that women are discriminated – but proposing completely different remedies for this deadlock. Twenty years after the breakthrough of 1989, the public debate does not yet lead to spectacular changes, but it has gained in substance.

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1.

Poland

# Reclaiming the Tractors

**Bożena Umińska-Keff**

## Bolshevik Percherons

In *Świat bez kobiet* [*World Without Women*], a book published in 2001, which was the first major attempt at gender analysis of Poland after transformation, Agnieszka Graff wrote:

“(...) the freedom spurt that was ‘Solidarity’ in the symbolic dimension constituted an act of restoring the patriarchal order, which had been distorted by the totalitarian system. Just as in the collective unconsciousness communism became the period of *Seksmisja*,<sup>1</sup> emerging to the surface constituted the moment of reclaiming manhood, cutting off the detestable umbilical cord”.<sup>2</sup>

Remark to the point. The thing is, there was no need to “restore the patriarchal order”, since in the People’s Republic of Poland it was not in danger of any major shake-ups. However, after the collapse of the system it was necessary to **remove** the essentially democratic corrections concerning gender, which *real socialism* (and not communism, as it never existed as a system), related – however distantly – to the set of emancipating and left-wing social ideals, introduced into social practice.

For some reason, the most readily quoted icon of the communist deviation connected with gender and insolent liberation of women (in other words – with forcing them to adopt an alien standard) were female tractor drivers. Historically, we are talking about photographs and films from the early 1950s, about covers of women’s magazines featuring the new heroines of socialism – and, at the same time, the new heroines of the gender model – young women on tractors, often leaders of production, sometimes named, often with informa-

<sup>1</sup> *Seksmisja* – a Juliusz Machulski film from 1983, about a subterranean totalitarian women’s state, where there were no men at all. In spite of the lack of male presence, women kept affirming the significance of womanhood as if taking example from feminist consciousness-raising meetings, and they used medication to reduce libido, because without men they had no use for it. Well...

<sup>2</sup> Agnieszka Graff, *Świat bez kobiet*, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., Warsaw 2001, p. 26.

tion about the village where they lived and worked. I can imagine that for many young women they were as attractive as film stars; they stimulated imagination, because they represented the new model of femininity. The return of “normality”, as Agnieszka Graff observed in *Świat bez kobiet*, was to be carried out by symbolically pushing them off those tractors (and only those symbolic ones), and putting them where they traditionally belonged, e.g. next to the cooker. Where they were standing anyway, even having come back from their work on a tractor, since socialist Poland never did propagate any model of actual equality between the sexes. Why then do those tractors from the early People’s Republic of Poland still remain so irritating and shocking for traditionalists and the Right? Had those tractor drivers been male, nobody would have remembered them today. In fact, nobody does.

Let us have a closer look at the question then.

Tractors are technology, progress of civilisation, and therefore power and independence attributed by our culture to men. The tractor means control over nature and power over it. What is more, it needs to be operated skilfully, with technical skills. Then, it can move – move away from home, because it certainly does not belong in the domestic sphere. (Operating a washing machine causes no objection, but then a washing machine stays home and does not distract women away, not to mention that it washes a husband’s clothes under the supervision of his wife, i.e. in accordance with tradition). On the other hand, a tractor is no Jeep, it will not go far and, all in all, it is safe. Yet again, as a tool of technical progress it is a weapon of sorts, a means of controlling the resources and the environment. Meanwhile, a woman, according to the scheme of culture and religion, is passivity, dependence and pleasant stupidity. Technology gives a sense of cause, power over the environment and production. All very masculine attributes.

According to the political Right, a woman can produce nothing but children and services – she can only reproduce the very hierarchy, in which she occupies the bottom position. She is absent from community, except to

play ancillary roles: to cook, to bandage up, to clean. She could not go as far as ploughing a field though. Ploughing is a man's job, an expression of controlling the resources, of possessing the resources. It is the male power over the feminine fertility of soil. When a woman sits on a tractor, the earth's fertility goes nuts and does not know where it belongs in the symbolic sense. Now, that is *Seksmisja* – creating fertility and produce without the help of the phallus.

Further still – the tractor has no national connotations, there is nothing specifically Polish about it. All the more communist and hostile it is – with a woman on top of it, anyway. This woman on a tractor looks to the right-wing, she's "our" woman, a woman from our tribe, seduced or abducted by the Bolsheviks and sat on their horse.

(Further psycho-sexual connotations could be interesting, considering that women found the horse rather attractive. Many wanted to be a tractor driver, and many were. Obviously, you could say today that a tractor is like a Percheron, a draught horse with no grace, besides – mechanical and rowdy, whilst our Polish horse is passionate and gallops so elegantly; who knows, this Bolshevik one might even be a mare.

No, obviously this would be at odds with the spirit of the times. Then again, who really knew what sex the woman on the tractor was?)

Shopping recently in Carrefour, I took a look at a dejected lady driving a huge floor-cleaning machine. This is 2009, not 1949 of course, so a woman in this situation does not surprise. Then again, we know she goes about her own business, to earn her pay, and her social significance is about the same, as that of any cleaner, even if her mop is huge and mechanical. A tractor driver, on the other hand, was in the centre of communal life, in the centre of social life. Her presence on a tractor was a presence of **the woman** in social life – not within her private space, but within the public one, and it was not ancillary or menial, it was causal. Even more so than in the case of female bricklayers on building sites, since they were not technologically equipped, and often supervised by a

foreman.<sup>3</sup> Tractor drivers supervised their own tractor, which in those days, in technologically backward Poland, was not a common sight. It was a novelty, a sign of progress, development, achievement. A Mercedes of sorts. In those days the common sight was a horse.

That is why all this thoughtless mockery of the image of emancipation has never been about reality, about the fact that women had little access to tractors, that women found the job very attractive and that it increased their self-esteem; that in comparison with other farming work driving a tractor is relatively easy, i.e. suitable for women, who in the West or in the U.S. have operated farming machinery for a long time. Finally, it has not been about the fact that the legend about tractors' alleged adverse effects on women is just that: a legend. Riding a tractor can be harmful only during the first three months of pregnancy; instead, as a permanent job it is supposed to be bad for male fertility, since overheating and shaking the scrotum weakens sperms.

The woman on a tractor is outrageous not as a set of facts but as a symbol, obviously, as an usurpation, as reaching for what is absolutely masculine. From today's perspective, too, women can be excupated – they are, after all, susceptible to male manipulation (as illustrated by the quoted *Seksmisja*, for example). The communists are to blame, those alien, non-Polish and non-Catholic manipulators. They made the subversive image popular and they turned it into something resembling the “reverse” sexual position in Redliński's novel *Konopielka*. Let me remind that the book is set in Polesie, among the marshes cut off from the rest of the world, after the Second World War, in a village, which for the first time is visited by a teacher arriving to set up a school and teach children. This teacher is at one point spied on by the farmer she lodges with, as she is having sex with her partner – him underneath, her on top! The farmer literally sees the upside-down world, and the position is like a symbol heralding the end of the old world order by negating its basic divisions constituting the pillars of the regime. The

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<sup>3</sup> This is discussed by Ewa Toniak on the basis of socialist-realist images in: *Olbrzymki. Kobiety i socrealizm*, Korporacja Ha!Art, Krakow 2008, pp. 103-120.

female and the male, the weaker and the dominating, the woman below, the man on top. Interestingly enough, the Polesie farmer himself gradually begins to side with the novelty, he includes new elements in his view of the world.

For the political Right, however, and for the Polish Catholic Conservatives, there are no multiple orders – “this order” and the new order, because for “this order” there is no alternative. “This one” is “the” order, full stop. In this sense the Right is always authoritarian, because it only sees one possibility, the one it considers natural, given and eternal, the one which needs to be protected.

Back to the main subject – as the transformation in Poland aimed for democracy, Polish citizens obtained certain freedoms. The freedom of (certain) political choices, of expression (increasingly, within limits), of travelling, and consequently of leaving the homeland, and others, which cannot be dismissed. Citizens, i.e. us: men and women.

However, the transformation in Poland was a creation of people who had had little experience of the democratic order, and sometimes understood it superficially, or anachronistically (Wałęsa being a good example); furthermore, the entire “Solidarity” movement was linked to people and ideals of the Church, which is a hierarchical structure, inflexible and based on obedience rather than discussion. Hence, certain freedoms were lost by the citizens as well. Particularly by the female citizens, because liberation from “the Red” was also liberation from the ideals of emancipation. Furthermore, rejecting all kinds of left-wing traditions, which in the 1990s were still represented by Jacek Kuroń and Zofia Kuratowska<sup>4</sup> – and after them by nobody from the “Solidarity’s” side – was deadly. Solidarity and post-Solidarity propaganda persuaded people that whatever was good for the Church, was good for them, because the interests and goals were identical. In a way, the Catholic Church in Poland said “I am the state”. But such identity does not exist, and never did.

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<sup>4</sup> Jacek Kuroń (1934-2004) – a Polish politician, one of the leaders of the Polish dissidents’ movement before 1989, co-founder of KOR (the Committee on the Defense of Workers), known from his left-wing political opinions. In 1989-2001, he was elected to the Sejm. He was the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs. Zofia Kuratowska (1931-1999) – a Polish doctor, politician, diplomat. In 1989-1997 she was elected to the Senate. She had always strongly supported women’s rights.

Understanding one's own political interest is related to individualism, which is almost absent from Polish tradition. Individualism, in turn, is connected with a sense of self-respect, of respect for one's **identity, whatever it might be, as long as it is human and it is one's own**. There is little room for both those stances in Poland – for individualism and respect for identity (not the mythologised one and not collective). The Church punishes equally for individualism and for independent thinking; it is but a huge store issuing mass-produced collective identity. Its key principle is exclusion, removing anything potentially leading to, however small, changes in the identity described as Polish and Catholic.

“(…) anything that was Polish they turned into Catholic, anything Catholic they considered purely Polish, and so cleverly did they fence with this duality, that they managed to undo almost everything that had been achieved in the general conscience of humanity since the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the expense of blood, life and hard work of scientists and heroes, the wise and the good.”

That much from 19<sup>th</sup>-century writer Narcyza Żmichowska, commenting on the establishment of the cluster: “a Pole – a Catholic”. She was quoted by Boy-Żeleński in 1929, as he added his comment about Poland's revival in 1918:

“The tombstone was removed, Poland began to live a life of its own. Immediately, the clergy reached for it, as if it were their rightful inheritance. Strengthened in their power by our electoral law, aware of their influence upon the peasant masses and the women, they made their foundation of those two factors.”<sup>5</sup>

Well, exactly.

## **How I understand the ban on abortion in Poland**

20 years ago, I was not particularly naïve. Still, in 1990, I believed that feminism could soon become a leading ideal for women, since pluralism of political ideas

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<sup>5</sup> Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, *Dziewice konsystorskie*, in: *Pisma*, vol. XV, PIW, Warsaw 1958, p. 75.

was about to set in, and with it a possibility to articulate one's own political interests – why should women not do it then?

Feminism was my input into the transformation, my chosen ideal of all, since I found the rest of them impossible. Let me just remind that in 1993 we collected over a million signatures in support of the referendum on abortion. All of them were ignored by the new Polish democracy. Though the general direction was apparent, the domination of the Church was not yet a confirmed fact, as it is 18 years later. Poland was not yet an extra-constitutionally confessional state.

I felt superiority towards activists of the old Polish Women's League<sup>6</sup> – as if they were dinosaurs, heavily stepping off the world's stage on their huge paws, whilst we, the mammals, the new formation, the light-armed anti-patriarchy, were jumping on. I did not take into account that there were different kinds of dinosaurs, and that us, mammals, inhabited a valley belonging to the dinosaurs not of the Polish Women's League variety, but to those bearing crosses. And that in total, **in practice**, we were not that remote, the feminists and the activists, though we would have been divided by our interpretation of reality. I probably would not say it aloud at the time, because as the new mammal I would not want to admit affinity with the old dinosaurs. But today, when it is obvious that neither they, nor us, were winning, there is no point in renouncing the kinship of emancipation.

Today, I am far more prone to respecting those women and their feminine solidarity, which is rather lacking in the Third Polish Republic. All of us – we, the new ones, the feminists, and they, the older ones, the activists – were outraged by women being deprived of their rights as citizens and humans, which culminated in the new anti-abortion law of 1993. As we can see now, it was only the beginning of an ongoing process.

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<sup>6</sup> Polish Women's League – women's organisation affiliated to the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) working for women, dissolved along with the Party at the beginning of the 1990s. The League's activists were distrustful of feminism, they operated according to the old pattern of intervention, particularly where women were harmed by the custom, but they did not see women as a social group. During the debate on the abortion law they consistently defended the women's right to choose.

I would like to repeat that for me the ban on abortion means women are being deprived of their elementary rights as individuals and as human beings.

One can personally encounter this situation, or not, depending on whether an unwanted pregnancy happens to her, or whether, for example, she has the misfortune of getting seriously ill while pregnant.

The first situation can be practically sorted out by money for an illegal abortion, and most Polish women resort to this solution – to the zloty, the euro, the rouble or the hryvnia.<sup>7</sup> The second situation can be beyond solutions, as was the case of a young woman who died of untreated *colitis ulcerosa*, a serious illness of the intestines. The illness was untreated, because doctors “were afraid” to damage the foetus during examination. Effectively, they sentenced a 25-year old woman to painful agony and death.<sup>8</sup> They robbed her of her life. The defenders of life.

In this situation there is no remedy for bad cases. There certainly is none for degradation of human dignity. As we know, no man will ever be refused treatment because he fell ill with a foetus inside him. Men never happen to be at once ill and pregnant, do they?

**Female human beings**, as a community, in Poland lose a part of their human and civil rights, such as the right to decide about one’s own life and its course, the right to protection of life and health, physical and psychological – should they encounter a situation, which only happens to female humans.

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<sup>7</sup> The Ukrainian currency. In Ukraine, as in all Poland’s neighbouring countries, termination of pregnancy is legal.

<sup>8</sup> In 2005, a 25-year old resident of Piła died of sepsis, without medical help. Doctors were afraid of causing a miscarriage, so they refused to examine and treat the woman, quoting the conscience clause. The girl’s parents tried to seek justice, but the prosecutor’s office discontinued the case in September 2008. The court supported the prosecutor’s decision and the medical disciplinary court decided that the doctors did not commit malpractice. The case has been brought to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, which applied a fast-track procedure, just months after receiving the suit. Lawyers of the Federation for Women and Family Planning provide legal support to the family of the deceased woman.

Thus **female human beings** are deprived of their subjectivity, or the human causative power over their own lives. In certain situations, representatives of the Church and the state take over direct control over bodies of **female human beings**, even against their choices or against the very possibility of making those choices.

**Male human beings** do not have unwanted pregnancies, and they do not fall ill during pregnancies, be it wanted or unwanted, do they?

But if some humans do not get pregnant and others do, we should in fact ask a question whether there are two species of humans, or is there one? If there is one, than the rights must be identical. **All** people should have the right to decide about themselves and their lives. Regardless of their sex.

As soon as the foetus obtains civil and human rights before the female human being in whose uterus it is developing, the question arises: who gives those rights to the foetus, having first deprived of them the woman? The Church does, along with politicians representing its interests – they take over the control over the woman's body.

And that is the conclusion – in Poland, only men and the Catholic Church, as the representatives of the collection of principles and attitudes – enjoy human rights to the full. Women have been pushed out. The Church must maintain hierarchy not only inside its walls, but also within the society it rules, exactly to feel the rule and the unity with the society.

Yes, but... But women obtained their political and civil rights in 1918. Quite a decent date, immediately after the First World War, along with most European countries. Earlier than other women – if we remember that the French women obtained those rights in 1945, the Italian ones in 1946, the Spanish in 1931, the Swiss even later than that, depending on the canton. If, then, women possess some rights, and do not possess others, they resemble someone who walks with one foot on a curb and the other in a gutter. They can change their situation by themselves, without any help, just by an act of will, by placing the legs next to one another.

Let us face it: if women in Poland have a bad, discriminating abortion law, they can change it themselves. If they do not, if they do not even attempt to tackle the problem as a group of social interest, than their passivity describes the state of

their consciousness. The Church is considered as the no. 1 political power that should never be irritated. Boy-Żeleński's texts about the clergy's power in Poland between the wars, particularly about their pressure on women, were entitled *Nasi okupanci* [*Our occupants*]. But who occupies us? Whose occupation is it in a situation potentially politically open to various possibilities? We occupy ourselves, our conformism must provide consent for the Church's power. Polish mentality creates this state of affairs. As far as I know, the Catholic Church, even in Poland, does not have an army, marine forces or missile launchers.

This enslavement is a self-enslavement, this occupation is an auto-occupation.

Still, in the context of the ideal of justice, the situation indeed looks as if we had two, rather than one human species – the (relatively) free male one, and the sub-male, dependent on the male as far as very basic issues are concerned. However, as we said, history does not repeat itself and we are not in the same place any more. Today, women have a broader choice and can choose an honorary sex for themselves – at least symbolically and at least those who are not sensitive to their own human humiliation. They can become a right-wing MP and send other women off to church, where they can all bow to the “conceived baby”, this weird creature of imagination and language, which became synonymous with pregnancy and now expels women from their bodies. We no longer know how this “conceived baby” found itself inside a woman's body – not required as a body any more, merely as an abode for the heavenly creature. You can be an abode then. Or you can be a woman of success, and name yourself:

### **a he-manager, a he-teacher, a he-wife.<sup>9</sup>**

Women respond to today's situation – which is a kind of backlash, an anti-eman-  
cipation counter-offensive – in the worst possible manner: with an assimilative

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<sup>9</sup> In Polish, almost all nouns are gender-specific. The language fashion of the last decades has been to treat male versions of nouns defining jobs and positions (particularly the prestigious or expert ones) as gender neutral, and female versions of those nouns as “funny” or “sounding strange”.

strategy. **Assimilation, or mimicry, is a principle according to which the minority is to blend into the majority, mimic it,** try to fit in. That is supposed to be the price of acceptance, though it usually is not. Historically, this method was used by minorities aspiring to equal rights, where the rights were assigned by those holding power in societies unfamiliar with the concepts of diversity and equality. Assimilation is a strategy of the weak and the aspiring, in which it is assumed that the significant power is beyond their reach. Assimilation does not come cheap: the price is blurred identity and distortion of self-respect. In Poland though, women with full capitalist force assimilate to the male rule, to the male sense of superiority, clearly sharing without protest the everlasting assumption that whatever is masculine is significant, and whatever is feminine – is not. The masculine is prestigious, rich and powerful.

**If men in Poland had purple skin, and women had yellow, women would universally paint their skins purple.**

And they do, only their make-up is language. Polish is very inflectional and pays much attention to observing the right gender, i.e. the sex of the person speaking. Even in the plural, we “zrobiliśmy” (did) in the feminine and “zrobiliśmy” in the masculine.

Still, every professionally active woman is a man, every professional is a he-professional. A he-doctor, a he-teacher, a he-journalist, an actor, not an actress.<sup>10</sup> “Jestem pisarzem” – “I am a he-writer” announced Manuela Gretkowska. To make things worse, she said that as President of the Women’s Party. Oops.

I am a he-historian, a he-journalist, a he-sociologist, a he-psychologist, a chairman, say women, and it is no coincidence. Whenever a sister (i.e. a brother) contradicts them, calling them a she, others are outraged – if she admits to being a she, it will

<sup>10</sup> Due to the gender-specific character of Polish, an “actor” does not have the universal meaning it does in English, hence the linguistic situation is in a sense the reverse of the English-language one, where female actors find being called “actresses” demeaning.

come out into the open – they, too, are she-journalists! How would that sound?

It sounds as if women did not want anybody to notice they were not **male human beings**. In a social sense, obviously. Because in private, I presume, they want others to notice they were not men.

The thing is, those suffixes do not mask the sex of a woman who uses them; they emphasise the patriarchal character of Polish culture, the secondary position of women who, not necessarily consciously, assume that using the right suffix would deprive them of gravitas, particularly in the professional context. Using the inappropriate one, on the other hand, exposes their fear of feminine insignificance. As well as the women's incompetence in coping with this fear except for what is described as identification with the aggressor, with the stronger party.

What was wrong with the female tractor drivers then? I would say there was nothing wrong with the drivers themselves, with those women on covers of women's magazines, with this new model for women to follow. What we find irritating today, perhaps, is the fact that the leading power were the men, that it was them who put women behind driving wheels of tractors. It could not have happened any other way though. In the early 1950s, even Betty Friedan probably did not think about feminism. Maybe Simone de Beauvoir did, but her thoughts could hardly have been optimistic.

Still, when even today in Poland right-wing men talk about the ridiculous female tractor driver, that alien force in the Polish countryside, I boil over with anger. As if she were a rabid she-wolf attacking little Red Riding Hoods busy running to church, as if she were a Queen-Kong destroying Krakow with its lovely churches, as if she were a pro-abortionist vampire, some kind of Jewish Lilith lying in guard to drink fresh blood from the conceived baby's heart – conceived only a day ago, but she is in so much hurry, she cannot comprehend the heart does not exist in a physical sense, that she has to wait. If, then, this woman on a tractor is so evil, if she raises so much resistance, perhaps she is our symbol, our icon, perhaps we should stand firmly behind her and not let anyone attack her? Maybe she is the Polish version of Rosie the Riveter of the "We can do it" fame, and we should

put her on our banners rather than deny ever knowing her! Perhaps she was our mother, aunt or grandmother? Because the female tractor drivers were not made up – they had faces, names, addresses and achievements.

Since there is so much lost, could we, just for the start, dream for the first time about claiming back the tractors?

Even in the shape of the correct suffix. I am a she-teacher, I am a she-journalist – it sounds powerful, like a starting tractor engine.

You have to begin somewhere when you are a Polish prodigal daughter, who, in churches, wasted so much of what Mother Emancipation had given her.

Translated by **Katarzyna Nowakowska**

Where did the  
Woman on a Tractor  
and the Cynical  
Tough Guy Go?  
Gender Innocence  
Irretrievably Lost

**Agnieszka Graff**

Women were conspicuously missing in anniversary exultations, emotions and summaries. Oddly, the media associated twenty years of democracy with heroic men, but not heroic women of Solidarity; with male, but not female politicians of the years immediately after the breakthrough. Little was said about equality – as if gender democracy had no relation to democracy itself. It is fine of the Heinrich Böll Foundation to enquire about memories of women and the transformation... but this hardly makes up for the general silence of Polish mainstream media.

I believe the enthusiasm about the Polish Women's Congress was a reaction to this omission.<sup>1</sup> It was the total disregard for us as a group that made women from such diverse circles feel like a community for a short while. Women close to the Catholic Church talking to feminists, left-wingers meeting businesswomen, women from NGOs sharing panels with members of radical groups – what made it all possible was irritation, injured dignity, a sense of having become transparent in the midst of patriotic turmoil. Women, too, felt the need to celebrate free Poland. During those two days, we felt like a community, maybe even a group of political interest. In my view it was an ephemeral sort of unity, and I said as much in my congress speech. I do not believe in enduring alliances between a feminist who has for years fought for secular education and a founder of Przymierze Rodzin, a group intent on just the opposite goal,<sup>2</sup> or between an employer and a woman she employs. Still, we did talk. Together, we were moved to tears when Henryka Krzywonos walked onto the stage to receive the title of the Polish Woman of the Two

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<sup>1</sup> The Polish Women's Congress "Women for Poland – Poland for Women" took place on the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2009 in Warsaw. It gathered over 3 thousand women from all over Poland; the agenda included 21 discussion panels; the Congress produced over 100 postulates, including the demand for a parity system for election lists and alternating placement of women and men on those lists, as well as the creation of an independent office of the Plenipotentiary for Women and Equality, who would be elected by the Parliament.

<sup>2</sup> Przymierze Rodzin [Family Alliance] – a Catholic educational organisation.

Decades.<sup>3</sup> The sense of unity in spite of divisions was something real, a phenomenon of the politics of emotion. It was also a sign of the times.

## **The Congress: a lost opportunity or a revolution?**

The Palace of Culture Congress Hall full of women from all over Poland – can it be seen as a “lost opportunity”? Agnieszka Mrozik and Piotr Szumlewicz say so in their much-discussed article published in “Gazeta Wyborcza.”<sup>4</sup> They assess that “the meeting was organised by women of all possible views. Hence it was difficult to come up with a shared programme of any kind: all that was left were group sentiments and a warm atmosphere,” while the shared efforts focussed on “pacification of voices of protest.” I do not think so. I was there, I listened, I talked to dozens of women, and I do not think so. In fact, I *know* things looked different. Rebellion and radicalism were in the air. I heard those tones in a toilet queue. Of course, one can still ask how much of this rebellion was truly feminist rebellion, or how left-wing it really was, and then judge whether it was enough. For Mrozik and Szumlewicz – decisively not. As for myself, I was perfectly satisfied.

I have no illusion that the crowd of women in the Congress Hall was comprised of feminists. True, they listened with deep emotion to the feminist lecture of Professor Maria Janion, they cheered for Magdalena Środa (a feminist), they wept during the (by all means feminist) official laudation in honour of Henryka Krzywonos,

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<sup>3</sup> Henryka Krzywonos-Strycharska – tram driver, Solidarity activist, signatory of the August Agreement of 1980; on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1980, she stopped her tram number 15 in Gdańsk, declaring: “This carriage is not going any further”, which was a signal for the city transport to join the strike. She made Lech Wałęsa keep up the strike, when he wanted to end it. “If you abandon us, we will be lost. They will leave the shipyard alone, but small plants will be crushed like worms! Don't break the strike, buses will not win against tanks”, she exclaimed to Wałęsa. The Polish Women's Congress honoured her with the title of the Polish Woman of the Two Decades.

<sup>4</sup> Agnieszka Mrozik, Piotr Szumlewicz, *Kongres Kobiet: stracona szansa*, in: “Gazeta Wyborcza”, 4-5/07/2009.

and they applauded my own (undoubtedly feminist) speech. Does this make them feminists? A French journalist told me that many women to whom she talked in the corridors of the Congress Hall had begun their statements with a sacramental disclaimer: "I am not a feminist, but...". So I want to make this much clear: it was not a crowd of feminists, because such crowd does not exist in Poland. Still, whatever came after the "BUT" is worthy of our attention and respect. After the "but" comes feminist insight, regardless of whether the statement's author is prepared to accept the stigmatising label. We are a part of age-long tradition of women's resistance, the core of which is not the nomenclature, but protest against the patriarchal state of affairs and the shared sense that women should, and can, oppose it.

I hope the Congress will prove to be the beginning of change, the beginning of a revolution. But in my opinion, the event was a revolution in itself. Politics does not comprise solely of successfully introduced laws and victorious parliamentary debates, but is constituted by human emotions as well. And this was an explosion of women's collective political emotion – something that had not transpired in Poland before. The Congress demonstrated that something had changed in this country, as far as women's issues are concerned. This change is real though it does not register in statistics about unequal pay (they remain relatively stable), or in the evident defeat of the pro-choice side in the Polish struggle for reproductive rights (we are on the defensive – no longer fighting for the right to abortion, but trying to prevent a ban on in-vitro fertilisation).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Poland's anti-abortion law is one of the most restrictive in Europe. The act of 7/1/1993 on family planning, protection of the human foetus and conditions of pregnancy termination allows for abortion only when the woman's life or health are in danger, the foetus is damaged or the pregnancy is the result of a criminal act. In spite of several years of efforts, changing it proved impossible, and the article allowing for abortion due to the woman's difficult living conditions or personal situation, introduced in 1996, was eventually deemed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Tribunal in 1997, thus losing its legal binding power. At the moment, work is underway on an act regulating the in-vitro fertilisation: MPs from the Law and Justice party (PiS) demand a ban on such treatment, and the draft prepared by the Citizens' Platform (PO) largely limits access to IVF, does not provide for NFZ (the Polish NHS) funding for such procedures and is inconsistent with modern medical knowledge. Thanks to the initiative of the Federation for Women and Family Planning, a civic draft of the act was prepared, providing for introduction of NFZ funding for IVF treatment.

## **Facts say one thing, intuition another: Why things are better than they are.**

If you look at the hard facts, things are bad, really bad. At the time of writing, the media are reporting about the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, which deprived Deputy Minister Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak of a huge part of her duties after she returned to work from maternity leave. Her boss, Minister (Ms.!) Fedak, comments in the “Dziennik” daily: “She is a woman with three children, and I do not believe she is short of things to do.” Without batting an eye, a woman (and a woman of extremely high merit) is discriminated against in a government department headed by a woman and responsible for, among other things, counteracting discrimination against women.

The media response to the Congress was singularly unimpressive. The event was warmly received and reported by “Gazeta Wyborcza” daily... And that would be it, ladies and gentlemen. To the participants’ amusement, Roman Kurkiewicz, our ally in the media, mocked this situation in the “Przekrój” weekly:

“And what if a thousand miners arrived and each exclaimed a thousand times? And what if a hundred football fans got into a huge fight? (...) And what if one male MP appeared with an artificial brain or a plastic dick in his hand in front of journalists in the Parliament? (...) Then we would have a celebration of freedom, i.e. press headlines, news on the telly, plenty of information on the radio. But four thousand women in the Congress Hall? Women who speak, who demand, who ARE THERE? What sort of story is that?”<sup>6</sup>

What then, are the grounds for my optimism? Let us say, perversely, that I base it on female intuition. This intuition of mine (along with over a decade of observation and reading) tells me that the subject of gender has become politicised in the course of those past twenty years. Let us call this development “loss of collective gender innocence”. My intuition also tells me also that this a

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<sup>6</sup> Roman Kurkiewicz, *Knebel jest mężczyzną*, in: “Przekrój”, 2009, no. 26.

good thing. It is what the feminist vision of the world is all about: making issues of gender less colloquial, less transparent, and more political. It is no longer clear and obvious in Polish culture that a woman is simply a woman, and a guy is just a guy, and that anyone can see who is who, and who wants what in life. Things have become less obvious. Matters that used to be discussed among references to “mother nature” and “brain sex,” in an atmosphere of crude jokes and colloquial obviousness, have become a subject of political reflection and political debate. It happened in part due to openly political conservative attacks against women’s rights in times of right-wing rule, and in part thanks efforts of the women’s movement. The Congress demonstrated that the language of rights and disputes has replaced the language of obviousness, not least in the minds of women, and women of very diverse views.

It is no longer possible to dismiss inequality in access to the labour market with jokes about blond bimbos. The case of the Vice-Minister demoted for being a mother was discussed by all the media as an example of gender discrimination. They could have wondered collectively whether she was a good mother and whether a mother can be (ha ha!) a minister. Ten years ago that is just how the story would have been framed, no doubt including expressions of concern for the Deputy Minister’s husband. As a society, we have ceased repeating tired clichés about gender issues, we have stopped ogling, joking and giggling. We have begun to argue, to take sides. To me, this change is all the more striking since I devoted several years of my life in the late 1990s to registering and describing the diverse tones of Poland’s collective giggle over gender – that is what my book *Świat bez kobiet* [*World Without Women*]<sup>7</sup> is about. I hereby declare with pleasure that the chapter about media nonsense replacing a debate about equality between the sexes is out of date. In order to write such

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<sup>7</sup> Agnieszka Graff, *Świat bez kobiet*, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., Warsaw 2001.

a piece today, I would have to read nothing but tabloids and "Nasz Dziennik,"<sup>8</sup> and I have no intention of doing so.

## Ageing machos and a naked woman

I realised the scale of mentality change thanks to a recent effort to return to the discourse of gender innocence – a moving attempt in a sense, because it was so desperate, so utterly doomed to failure right from the start. I am talking about the exhibition by the Łódź Kaliska art group, entitled *Niech szczeną mężczyźni* [*May men rot*],<sup>9</sup> presented in January and February 2009 at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw. The exhibition comprised of fourteen large-scale staged photographs of naked women engaged in "men's" work: there were women-lumberjacks on one, women-builders on another, metal workers, carpenters, sailors etc. In other words, it was a cultural event meant to encourage reflection about that astounding freak of nature: a naked woman who thinks she can do a serious job.

What did the artists mean by that? The curator's note informed the viewer (only a male one, I suspect) that the photographs "create and unusual vision of absurd futurism with overwhelming feminism," and that the project was "inspired by modern culture, particularly by its aspect described by the term 'gender', or more precisely – 'feminism'". The exhibition was accompanied by a *Manifesto*, which reads as follows:

"We, the four men from Łódź Kaliska, representing the male kind, declare: 1. Sex segregation was, is and will remain a fact; 2. Women are a different race and men are a different race; 3. The differences are huge; 4. They cannot

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<sup>8</sup> "Nasz Dziennik" ("Our Daily") – an ultra-Catholic daily newspaper representing views close to Radio Maryja.

<sup>9</sup> Łódź Kaliska – a neo-avant-garde art group created in 1979. In 1981, it changed its programme to a far more Dadaist – Surrealist one. Its objective was to ridicule the absurdities of Communist Poland; the group undertakes artistic interventions and performance, at the moment its strategy involves annexing the achievements of mass culture by art.

be levelled out, ignored, omitted (...) We four men representing the entire male kind, (...) manifest: Adoration for women, for their motherly wisdom, their bitchy enterprise, natural gentleness, uterine desperation, vaginal sensitivity, the acquiescent power of endurance of the Divinity of Being a Woman.”<sup>10</sup>

I admit I groaned silently when TV Kultura channel asked me – the feminist they like to call from time to time, when in need of a feminist sound-bite – to have a say about this work of art. It was not the first time that I was facing this dilemma. If I comment, I will not only come across as touchy and lacking a sense of humour, but I will also deliver just what the four aging machos from Łódź Kaliska want – I will play the role of an offended, censorious feminist. If I refuse to comment, they will say I am snob, a supporter of porn, or a coward. I did comment. And after a few days I registered, with relief and some surprise, that for once my reaction was not at all exceptional on the Polish market of ideas: most critics responded to the exhibition with embarrassment, as to something astoundingly anachronistic. Dorota Jarecka wrote in her devastating review in “Gazeta Wyborcza”:

“Łódź Kaliska conjures up a dinosaur version of feminism and tells us what a monster it is. It has a bum, tits, and, worse still, it wants to work in a factory. The famous art group is asked to kindly return to reality. (...) The view that feminism is about turning women into men is about as accurate as the view that Communism was an era when you were supposed to put on a red tie and march.”<sup>11</sup>

Does misogyny, as performed by Łódź Kaliska, tell us anything about today’s Poland? What is the point of describing in a feminist text a failed artistic project calculated to gain splendour by outraging feminists? The point is that

<sup>10</sup> Marek Janiak, Adam Rzepecki, Andrzej Świetlik, Andrzej Wielogórski, Łódź Kaliska – *Niech szczerą mężczyznę*. The Manifesto and the photographs can be viewed at: <http://fototapeta.art.pl/2009/lka.php>.

<sup>11</sup> Dorota Jarecka, *Łódź Kaliska na mieliznie*, in: “Gazeta Wyborcza”, 21/1/2009.

this exhibition – or rather in its failure – allows us to see, as if through a lens, an enormous change in our collective mentality. The visit at the Centre of Contemporary Art felt to me like a *déjà vu*: I was struck by the stylistic likeness and similarity of message between this project and Juliusz Machulski's film *Seksmisja* (1984). Its reinterpretation was a breakthrough moment for my personal feminist thinking years ago. The mastery with which Machulski pictured feminism as a topsy-turvy world, became a curse for Polish feminists, not because Machulski is a genius, but because that language was ready, transparent, unproblematic, and he skilfully transformed it into a plot. Feminism = totalitarianism; communism = woman on a tractor – these were the ready-made associations in the 1980s and nobody questioned their obvious merit. Not so today. Machulski himself clearly underwent the same transformation, as his recent pro-women picture *Ile waży koń trojański* (2008) clearly shows. Many women perceived it as an apology for *Seksmisja*.

## **There is no turning back, even though your heart weeps**

In conclusion, let us return to the woman on a tractor. As far as I can remember, there was no such figure among the butch women in the Łódź Kaliska's work. But don't be fooled: in the end, it was all about her. The message was clear: talk about gender equality is some sort of communist nonsense, and we, Poles, have been through all that before. The fact that this view did not resonate with the public, that it annoyed rather than amused, is evidence of a huge cultural gap between the two eras, represented here by two twin events in the Polish culture – Machulski's *Seksmisja* and *Niech szczeną mężczyzn* by Łódź Kaliska.

This gap exists between the reception of both works and is the effect of the exhaustion of a certain language. The intended effect is strikingly similar: in both cases we hear the same ostentatiously "innocent" and seemingly apolitical male voice praising beautiful women and the "natural difference between

the sexes,” and associating feminism with communism. In both cases this voice demands that we appreciate it for being oh so brave and rebellious. But the Łódź Kaliska’s exhibition embarrasses with its anachronism, its unconsciously veteran air. In 2009, it uses the language of the 1980s, a language of humiliated manliness, throwing itself into battle against bosomy totalitarianism. Four ageing machos from Łódź Kaliska demand that we accept misogyny as a language of counter-culture, artistic avant-garde and rebellion. Meanwhile, modern-day viewers do not find courage in those gestures – on the contrary, they find them mouldy and completely out of place at the Centre of Contemporary Art.

Igor Stokfiszewski captured this dissonance well, when he asked in his review for “Krytyka Polityczna”: “What exactly happened during the last few years to turn the hub of critical thinking, as the Ujazdowski Castle used to be perceived, into a clinic for ageing misogynists, affirming the quasi-nationalistic social order?” The reviewer continues to mock not the exhibition, but the Castle itself:

“Why not go one step further along the fertile ground of discrimination, and have an anti-Semitic exhibition with pictures of Jews in a rubbish dump, or better yet – a homophobic one! Let’s hang a few faggots in the courtyard of the Ujazdowski Castle, as an artistic event. Let us style the scene to echo well known photographs of the World War II executions, in order to introduce elements of history and inter-textuality.”<sup>12</sup>

*Seksmisja* does not cause such irritation, because we understand it was created in a different era – in times when misogyny and rebellion against the “system” harmonised perfectly with one another. And if it remains a cult movie today, it is not because we are all closet misogynists, but because this voice from the past allows the audience to return, for a moment, to the old times, to the era of gender innocence.

<sup>12</sup> Igor Stokfiszewski, *Łódź, kał i ska*, <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/Igor-Stokfiszewski/Kal-i-ska/menu-id-194.html>

Nostalgia is a powerful force, and the dark 1980s were beautiful times for thoughtless, narcissistic masculinity *a la polonaise*, that peculiar mix of chivalrous gestures, sexism, rebellion and shameful hurt. In those days, you could be a conservative, a misogynist, and a romantic rebel all at once. You could love women and hate women's rights. And, being a woman, you could fall in love with such a sexist rebel (believe me, I know a thing or two about it), and, having fallen for him, feed his wounded ego and sneer with contempt whenever feminism was mentioned: a mere Western whim, when we in Poland are fighting Communism.

A charming misogynist rebel, a bit cynical, a bit unwashed, a perennially depressed romantic – such was the central figure of collective imagination in the times of waning Communism. The remains of this charm were still possessed by Bogusław Linda in the early 1990s.<sup>13</sup> His most quoted line, spoken deeply, with resignation, went like this: “Cause she was a bad woman...”. Well, you could not get away with that today. *Seksmisja* is a nostalgia flick, an occasion for time-travel. Linda's macho parts in *Psy* and *Sara* look like self-mockery to today's viewer. We have lost our innocence irrevocably. There is no turning back, ladies and gentlemen. There is no turning back.

Translated by **Katarzyna Nowakowska**

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<sup>13</sup> Bogusław Linda – one of cult Polish actors; in the 1970s and the 1980s he played in so-called “films of moral anxiety” by Agnieszka Holland and Krzysztof Kieślowski. He became famous in the 1990s, thanks to Władysław Pasikowski's films, where he played tough macho types.

Transformers,  
or the Changes  
in Poland after  
1989, as Seen  
by a 30-Year-Old

**Sylwia Chutnik**

Before 1989, my time, as well as that of my family's, was largely spent in the St. Stanisław Kostka church, where little Sylwia, immersed in her prayers, danced in nativity plays and scattered flower petals during processions. Buried on parish grounds was father Popieluszko,<sup>1</sup> murdered by the security police – his grave drowning in flowers. And we – the kids on their way to divinity classes in a cool classroom – ate loads of chocolate bars from foreign aid. The entire world sent us parcels, because we were a poor, oppressed country in the East. We loved it all.

Anti-communist opposition was closely linked with the Catholic Church, and the vision of free Poland invariably brought about associations with the cross. As we found out later, this was to have negative effects in the context of women's rights.

Meanwhile, the fence between the church and the street was covered in Solidarity flags and banners. I cannot remember exactly, but I don't think they could be hung arbitrarily, without consent from the parish priest. Judging by the scale of those canvases, the priest must not have been particularly assertive.

I used to associate the year 1989 with the strong scent of church flowers. I was ten, when one of my primary school colleagues brought in a poster with a cowboy on it.<sup>2</sup> An election was to be held, so the evening children's programmes were shorter for a while – people on the telly kept talking about the Round Table.<sup>3</sup> I also remember that once, during the evening news, I was

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<sup>1</sup> Jerzy Popieluszko was a priest involved in the opposition movement. Since August 1980, he closely cooperated with workers and actively supported Solidarity. During the strike he was delegated to say mass in the Warsaw foundries; during the martial law, he organised masses for Poland in the St. Stanisław Kostka church. Abducted and murdered by the security police in 1984.

<sup>2</sup> The famous poster encouraging people to vote during the first free election in Poland showed Gary Cooper in "High Noon", with a Solidarity badge in his lapel. The caption contained simply the film title. At the bottom there was the date of the election: 4, June, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> The Round Table – talks held by the authorities of Communist Poland, representatives of the democratic opposition and the Catholic Church between 6, February and 5, April 1989. The talks resulted in the commencement of the systemic transformation in Poland, culminating in the first free election on 4 June 1989. Effectively, Poland became the first country of the Eastern Bloc, where elected representatives of the society gained real influence upon execution of power, and, in August 1989, the government headed by Tadeusz Mazowiecki – the first non-communist prime minister – was appointed.

wearing my Madonna-style dress and dancing on the living room carpet, singing: “The Round Table, they talk about it again, I’m sick of it, why don’t you stop?” to the tune of “Like a Virgin.” And though I liked the excitement of the upcoming change, I was afraid that after the election they would stop giving away parcels full of sweets.

## **Changes without women**

My fears proved unfounded, chocolate and colourful toys could be bought in normal shops, and, for the first time, I could feel the great alliance between the government and the Church: in 1990, religious instruction was introduced to schools. I cannot tell how it came about that the 11-year-old good girl, and a believer, went mad. Anyhow, it resulted in my categorical refusal to participate in divinity lessons, and complete abandonment of all contacts with the Żoliborz parish. Furthermore, I began to notice that my family’s material situation did not improve at all, and that for a long time assurances from the new government had nothing to do with what was actually happening.

Years later I began to discover other “sins”, for example, that out of 26 participants of the Round Table talks on the opposition side only one was a woman – Grażyna Staniszevska, and only one out of the 29 participants on the party’s side – Anna Przeclawska. Let us add to the picture the two press officers and three observers from the Church side – the two ladies look statistically quite insignificant against the crowd of men participating in the negotiations between the opposition and the authorities. It is also worth some consideration that in spite of introducing parity during the Sejm election, in order to ensure appropriate participation of party members and those from the opposition, there was no mention of parity according to sex. A slogan from 1980, painted on the Gdańsk shipyard wall, kept resounding in my years: “Women, do not disturb us, we are fighting for Poland.” You could say it is still

in force.<sup>4</sup> We (implying: the gentlemen) have so many things to see to. Women's demands, or simply "women's perspective" in politics remains a nuisance – both in the context of the Great Systemic Change of '89 (election lists practically without women, the Round Table guidelines – without them as well), and right through to this day.

All one needs to do is follow the statistics of electoral lists of all the parties participating in the so-called free elections over the past twenty years. So little has changed – how tedious seem those quarrels about top positions. For who are those elections free, open, democratic? The percentage of female MPs in the Sejm<sup>5</sup> provides an answer to this question: during the years 1989-2001, on average 13% MPs were women. The percentage went up to 20% in the following term (and has remained at that level).<sup>6</sup> The situation looks far worse in the Senat: there are only 8% women there.<sup>7</sup> Curious, how little has changed, in spite of all the actions (e.g. by the Parliamentary Women's Group or other women's initiatives).

Low representation of women in high positions (be it in government or in business) is one of the failures of the past 20 years.

However, we must not forget about the women working in low-paid jobs, who do not necessarily aim to become managers. Feminisation of poverty and assigning low-paid jobs mainly to women (predominantly at the level of care and social services) illustrates the economic discrimination of women taking place in the name of the "free market". Its most radical representation is the concept that women cannot cope in the new system because they are too lazy or maladjusted.

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<sup>4</sup> See: Agnieszka Graff *Rykoszetem. Rzecz o płci, seksualności i narodzie*, WAB, Warszawa 2008, p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> The lower house of parliament in Poland. The higher house is called Senat.

<sup>6</sup> *Polki w Sejmie 1918-2008 [Polish Women in the Sejm, 1918-2008]*, study by Fundacja Kobieta eFKa, Krakow 2008, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> After the 2001 election, there were 23% women in the Senat, but after the coming into power of the right-wing parties in 2005, their representation began to shrink again.

The latter term is repeated in the media and public discourse like a mantra, relating to all those who did not manage to get on board the Brave New World of Capitalism.

Once we realise the persistent discrimination of women, we can see that the “miracle” of the breakthrough “cowboy” election did not, unfortunately, concern cowgirls.

## **If not the parliament, then perhaps the Third Sector**

In spite of the unsatisfactory state of affairs in official politics, women in Poland did organise, however unfavourable the conditions. Their activity was based on three key premisses of the system transformation: the mainstream system transformation (introduction of democratic institutions and procedures), the economic transformation (creation of a free market based on private ownership) and the social transformation (changing social mentality, acceptance of the new rules of operation). Obviously, the ways of implementing those objectives were quite diverse, often even critical towards the general guidelines. I refer to the economic and the free market question, criticised by the Left. Still, those actions were performed in relation to the changes proposed in '89.

A few informal groups describing themselves as feminist were created in the 1980s, mainly by students interested in gender issues and theories. In time, those groups began to specify their activity and fields of interest. Since 1988, emotions were stirred mostly by the abortion debate. In Warsaw, a group which used to organise e.g. women's film retrospectives began to organise demonstrations, collect signatures, write protests, gather opinions, deal with lobbying and networking. In time, it was transformed into the Polish Feminist Association, officially registered in 1989. Two years later, along with four other organisations, it founded the Federation for Women and Family Planning, thus creating a pressure group in the struggle for legal abortion. A

breakthrough moment in the activity of women's groups was the year 1993, when the anti-abortion law came into power (the act on family planning, protection of the human foetus and conditions of pregnancy termination), allowing for abortions to be performed only under exceptional circumstances, such as a threat to a woman's life or health, rape, irreversible damage to the foetus. Abortion was allowed only in state hospitals. The debate stirred huge controversy, which continues to this day. At the same time, women's organisations and informal groups were active in areas like culture, women's economy and women's rights. The Women's Rights Centre was created in Warsaw, the eFKa Women's Foundation began to operate in Krakow. Subsequent women's organisations appeared within the following few years. In 1995, the first informal anarcho-feminist group was created – Women Against Discrimination and Violence (KDP), a year later transformed into Emancypunx. The KDP tried to consolidate women from alternative circles and aimed for political and public action. The group dealt with issues like the women's right to legal abortion, anti-fascism, propagating feminism and anti-sexism within the alternative movement, and pro-environmental actions.<sup>8</sup>

Informal groups, along with non-governmental organisations, created the last twenty years of changes concerning women's rights. At the same time, they influenced the special character of the women's movement in our country, successfully mixing different circles (academics, students, workers etc.) and methods of operation (informal groups, art, non-governmental organisations or individual projects).

I myself started off working in the informal groups' movement, to eventually found my own non-governmental organisation – the MaMa Foundation – at the age of 26. It was not as much a mature decision to join orderly structures, as an attempt to seek new methods of social activity and more

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<sup>8</sup> Based on: *Niezależny ruch feministyczny po 1989 roku [The Independent Feminist Movement after 1989]*. An exhibition prepared for the Polish Women's Congress, 20-21/6/2009.

official forms of contact with local authorities, as well as with those high up, in the ruling elites. For somebody, who used to organise pickets outside ministries, the sheer experience of entering those buildings and having coffee with people in power is quite peculiar. Nonetheless, all this does not signify compromising anything or the age-old dilemma of “radicalism vs. legalism” – it constitutes a natural progression and an attempt to use the opportunities provided by official structures (and I do not only mean access to the mythical “EU funding”, but to actual influence as well).

## **A few years later — alternatives for the free market**

I would risk a thesis that real actions aimed at improving the situation of women started in 1995, when the first results of the anti-abortion law introduced two years earlier became perceptible, and the non-governmental organisations became stronger. A milestone in development of the non-governmental organisations working for women's rights was the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), which issued a Platform for Action as its final document. Women from Poland participated in the Conference, and they tried to implement its provisions on home grounds.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, in the mid-1990s, a flood of pro-women and feminist initiatives could be observed (pickets, festivals, publications), all of them aimed at transforming the parts of the system which did not live up to expectations after our passage into the capitalist, or the free-market economy. One of those movements was anarcha-feminism, in which I myself became active in 1995.

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<sup>9</sup> Results of those actions can be followed by studying the Conference follow-up materials *Dziesięć lat po konferencji w Pekinie [Ten Years After the Beijing Conference]* [http://www.unic.un.org.pl/kobiety\\_rozwoj\\_pokoj/konferencja.php](http://www.unic.un.org.pl/kobiety_rozwoj_pokoj/konferencja.php)

I was 16, had long before ceased to drop flowers in front of priests, and possibly belonged to the first generation of “free” Poland, which was a recipient of the systemic changes.

With those recipients I had little in common. I was disillusioned by the Church’s excessive role, and began to look for less hierarchic groups. Under the wing of poet Danuta Wawilow, who conducted art workshops for young people, I wrote poems and got actively involved in public work – initially during voluntary work for Amnesty International, and later in informal groups. Feminism had been brewing in my head for a long time by then, and as soon as I became old enough to start participating in meetings and “go out in the evenings”, I immediately got involved in the blooming freedom, punk, and – finally – anarcho-feminist movement.

Interestingly enough, my peers did not always follow the consumerist lifestyle of the “at last we can buy everything” kind. Very soon they realised that a fair system based on Solidarity’s demands was not built. With our own eyes (young, but therefore sensitive) we saw the plight of our parents’ theory, and its transformation into compromises we could not accept.

Anarcho-feminism was never scientifically analysed (apart from some dispersed articles), but it constitutes an important element of the activity of the women’s movement in Poland, because due to its manner of operation it influenced the mainstream fraction of the movement, e.g. the informal Porozumienie Kobiet 8 Marca group, which, since 2000, has been organising Manifas – street demonstrations in defence of women’s rights.<sup>10</sup>

In the context of the free market and Poland’s delight in “money making” and new opportunities after 1989, radical critique of the system seems an important element of democracy. A critical voice is meant to sober up those enchanted by capitalism, and draw attention to the social groups which did not benefit from the changes.

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<sup>10</sup> More about the initiative: [www.porozumieniekobiet.home.pl](http://www.porozumieniekobiet.home.pl)

An activist and theorist of the American feminist movement, Peggy Kornegger, created the most powerful and simple definition of anarcha-feminism. She came to the conclusion that the entire idea is based on fighting Patriarchy, Money and State. In one catchy slogan we find three ideas of three leading social movements: feminism, anti-capitalism and anarchism. Here is what the three main opponents of anarcha-feminists are.

## **Patriarchy, Money, State**

Patriarchy is the system of authority and domination of men over women, which, via its social, economic and political institutions constitutes a source of oppression not only for women, but men as well. The concept of patriarchy is one of the basic concepts of the critique of social relations in feminism. It can be found in practically all fractions of the movement. Colloquially, patriarchy is quoted in relation to the struggle for women's liberation. Increasingly, in social critique, patriarchy becomes a symbol of hierarchy within the family and interpersonal relations based on unconditional obedience to the father, brother or husband. Feminists draw attention to the fact that regardless of culture (Muslim, Catholic or other) or political situation (Iran or Western Europe) women are expected to obey men. The only difference lies in methods of executing this demand. For anarcha-feminists, money is an attribute of domination, a symbol of the material rather than the freedom-focussed outlook upon life. Also, it constitutes yet another way of controlling and exploiting people. Money here is a symbol of the economic situation of women, who are discriminated in the labour market. They are paid less, in spite of working the same jobs as men. We can observe feminisation of professions considered inferior in social hierarchy (kindergarten teacher, cleaner, nurse), and connecting them with women's "natural" disposition. Money influences the situation of mothers in the job market, the fact that they are asked questions about their reproductive plans during job interviews, their problems with finding a job due to possible unavailability related to looking

after children. Finally, it means the situation of single mothers and the way they are treated by social services: lack of financial support and help funds, closing down of childcare facilities, low level of execution of overdue alimonies from fathers, liquidation of the Alimony Fund.<sup>11</sup>

In their critique of money, anarcha-feminists are close to situationist anarchists in their attention to consumerist culture. As far as their economic critique is concerned, their views are similar to the stance of syndicalists or anarcha-communists. They try to create independent cooperatives or collectives, where decisions about management or funds are made democratically. Also individual initiatives in the anarchist or the feminist movement – e.g. distribution of press and publications or textiles – are conducted according to the principle of complete control by all people involved in the initiative.<sup>12</sup> Another method of improving the economic situation of women is involvement in the activity of trade unions.

According to anarcha-feminists, the state resembles the patriarchal system, which constrains both sexes, restricting and destroying their individuality. In their critique of the state, anarcha-feminists are close to the traditional critique of restricting freedom, characteristic for different fractions of anarchism. Freedom, to anarcha-feminists, is important mainly as the liberation of women: from the authority of the father, the state, social pressure or stereotypes. Only when a woman is capable of making her own decisions, will she be able to call herself emancipated. The difference in the anarcha-feminist approach to coercion is the area of interest and critique, in which it is similar to the feminist movement, focussing on reproductive rights and the issues of physicality, sexuality, relations with loved ones, issues of housework and paid work, prostitution and trafficking in women, life choices (career, motherhood, staying single), sexual preferences

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<sup>11</sup> See: Zine "Obrzydza", 1996, no. 2 or "Vacula", 2004, no. 1.

<sup>12</sup> See: "Emancypunx distro", [www.emancypunx.com](http://www.emancypunx.com) or "Porcamadonna", advertising leaflet in possession of the Author, Italy.

and the issues of women's creativity. Freedom of choice should be secured in practically all of those areas. Only then will we be able to speak of women's freedom and their right to self-determination.

According to anarcho-feminists, an individual builds their identity on the basis of private autonomy. A woman, equally to a man, should have freedom to decide about anything that concerns her. Neither medical, nor social, nor any other predispositions can undermine women's personal freedom.<sup>13</sup>

Anarcho-feminists oppose using women or their situation for political purposes. This concerns the parties drawing attention to so-called "women's issues" in their election campaigns in an attempt to win votes. There are subjects, which serve solely for political gain, and have nothing to do with actually helping women, e.g. reproductive rights, particularly sex education and the right to legal abortion. Anarcho-feminists vary in their approach to possible cooperation with parties or parliamentary groups wanting to change the law on issues concerning women. They do not cooperate with them, nor do they get directly involved in activity aimed at introducing the changes – they concentrate on public education and informing the society.

Sometimes, they try to bypass legal barriers and create an alternative for the official situation. This takes place in the area of so-called "radical gynaecology" (abortions, sex education, medical and non-medical education – homeopathy). Anarcho-feminists try, as much as they can, to bypass the state's interference with their life, by resorting to alternative education. Kindergartens and schools based on freedom-oriented education methods (usually on the unschooling movement, or the Steiner-Waldorf methods) are organised in private homes or places created by the anarchist circles – at squats, collectives, infoshops and meeting places.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Siren, *Anarcho-feminist manifesto*, in: *Quiet rumours*, Rebel Press, London 1996, p. 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> To create a definition of anarcho-feminism, I used an M.A. dissertation by Joanna Zwierkowska, written under the supervision of Professor Małgorzata Fuszara at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences of the Warsaw University, 2005 (unpublished).

## **The New Politics**

The general activity takes place within the framework of the so-called “new politics”, which (unlike the 1968 revolution throughout the world) developed in Poland after 1989. The right to associate and increasingly frequent contacts with foreign social activists resulted in new initiatives based on the principle of non-hierarchy. Each participant of the movement has an opportunity to make decisions, and a sense that their voice does matter. Another important principle is the conviction about privacy of an individual being a public matter, i.e. the old feminist slogan: “private is public”, meaning that even our least significant activity can influence the social situation. Hence the rejection of the understanding of politics, which separates the home sphere from the parliamentary one. This facilitates the uncovering of the hidden authority which does not originate from individuals, but constitutes a synthesis of their actions or approach to individuals. One example of such hidden authority is mass culture, which often uses a manipulated message disguised as the objective truth.

## **Here comes the Union**

The idea of “new politics”, combined with strong structural support, could create a dream social system, where social activity founded on democracy would fight for particular legal solutions, and, supported by the law, those solutions would develop all across Europe.

Hopes connected with Poland's accession into the European Union were soon shattered, as we learned that EU regulations and norms are not automatically introduced at the national level. On the other hand, access to EU funding, grant programmes and free training, open borders and freedom to travel, learn and work, gave my generation of women excellent tools for self-improvement, tools of which our moms could not even dream.

If we look closely into the market of economic activity, we can conclude that Polish women are quite successful – they top European rankings. According to the European Commission report on gender equality, in Poland women constitute 36% of lower and medium management, i.e. 3 % over the EU average. In 2009, i.e. just five years after the accession, over a third of Polish women have their own, quite prosperous companies.<sup>15</sup> The report omits the fact that we have mass “self-employment”, i.e. one-person companies, which have little to do with business. Unfortunately, also very few Polish women occupy top positions. Only 2% of general directors and company presidents are women – poor statistics.

While writing this article, I looked through the issue of the OŚKA Bulletin entirely devoted to women’s rights in the European Union. Published in 2001, it informed about Poland’s integration process, directives on equal treatment of women and men, jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and other “inventions” of the unified Europe. I wrote a critical text for that issue, focussing on centralised structures and their negative influence upon communities.<sup>16</sup> My critique was strong in tone, and reading it brings back memories about the manner in which the debate about Poland’s joining the Union and the 2003 referendum was conducted. On the one hand, the government’s delight in the profits derived from being “a part of Europe”, on the other, the ultra-Right’s discourse of danger to Poland and potential extinction of the Polish nation. My text was dominated by a sense of disappointment in the Union (before we even joined its structures) – I concentrated mainly on the issue of sealing borders and the EU’s policy towards refugees.

<sup>15</sup> *Raport Kongres Kobiet Polskich 2009. 20 lat transformacji 1989-2009 [Report of the Congress of Polish Women 2009. Twenty Years of Transformation 1989-2009]*, Fundacja Femi-noteka, Warsaw 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Sylwia Chutnik, *Pozorna wolność w obrębie struktur państwowych albo śmiech wolnej meduzy [Apparent Freedom within State Structures or the Laugh of the Free Medusa]* in: *Biuletyn OŚKI*, 2001, p. 44.

Several years later, I get an impression that the texts written over the past 20 years from the perspective of women's rights usually concern the same thing: disappointment that joining a tried system, seemingly eliminating gender inequality, did not sort out our problems for us.

This refers to both leaving the communist era and returning to Europe via the EU accession. 1989 (the first free election) and 2004 (joining the Union) were in fact the years of hope for women's movements, who expected that the situation of women would finally improve.

I would not want to finish this text with a straightforwardly pessimistic picture of the changes taking place during the past 20 years. Nevertheless, I do believe that certain Polish afflictions, such as the lack of a secular state, conservatism and depreciating the women's point of view (on all levels) seriously blemish the picture of the "twenty years of freedom". What sort of freedom is it, if women's rights in the labour market continue to be violated, non-heterosexuals have virtually no rights and the battle for legal access to termination of pregnancy seems a lost cause right from the start?

Laborious efforts of women in non-governmental organisations, informal groups or teams will continue, in spite of permanent problems with funding and resistance from subsequent ruling parties. Hundreds of women involved in the feminist movement remind me of an ad, which used to appear on Polish TV in the 1990s: the Transformers figures suddenly change from cars into dangerous monsters. The slogan encouraging to buy toys reads: "It's a hidden weapon". I think that is what women in Poland are – a hidden weapon, just as they used to be in the times of illegal opposition, which Ewa Kornatowicz illustrates perfectly in her book of interviews with women involved in the democratic opposition;<sup>17</sup> and as they used to be in the times of the first government after the systemic change. They still are now – both at the level of private family relations, and in

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<sup>17</sup> See: Ewa Kondratowicz, *Szminka na sztandarze [Lipstick on the Banner]*, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warsaw 2001.

companies or political parties. A hidden weapon not only in terms of methods of achieving the goal – far from aggressive instigation, close to dialogue rather than confrontation – but of the consistent struggle for women's rights as well: outside the official system (though closer and closer to the mainstream), but with increasing effectiveness.

Translated by **Katarzyna Nowakowska**



**2.**

Czech  
Republic

# Happiness short of Sean Connery

**Petra Hůlová**

It is spring and the streets are glowing with color. Colorful dresses, frivolous shoes, hats of all shapes, women youthful, younger and older, swaying their hips and with flowing skirts they cruise the streets of Prague as if they were ships.

Ever since I was a little girl I have been fascinated by their attention to detail. Every woman can put on a tight skirt that barely covers her bottom. But enticing with little hints, and looking like you've stepped out only by accident, is quite another business.

Twenty years ago the streets used to come alive with the spring as well. Women proudly carried their perm hairdos reminiscent of puffy clouds, the cobblestones in the street resounding to the clapping of their heels. Wearing high waist pants with large pockets and wide belts, they clutched their mesh shopping bags. No playful purses. The mesh bags were either empty or packed full, depending on whether they were about to get in the line for the bananas or whether they were already done.

Back then women didn't mix and match the latest fashion fads with antiques dug out of grandmother's closets. Shabby was shabby. Brand-new worn-out clothes pretending to be unpretentious were not in style. Bright lipstick and a miniskirt were sexy, greasy hair in a bun and suede Oxford shoes signified an intellectual, and most communist youth workers in the elementary schools of communist Czechoslovakia used to die their curls purple. One simply knew right away who one was dealing with.

It's called nostalgia, that longing for the good old times, the times when life was easier and the reality was readily legible and comprehensible. Everybody was employed. All the emancipated workers of the socialist state, female or male, were required to work. Naturally, women also looked after children and the household – that was self-evident. Women worked as tractor-drivers, City Council comrades,<sup>1</sup> Communist Party officers as well as secret police agents. Not only school canteens, but entire elementary schools, supermarkets,

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<sup>1</sup> "National Council" (národní výbor) was a communist equivalent of today's City Council.

trams, „Pioneer” youth groups,<sup>2</sup> and even the long office halls of the communist authorities were all fully staffed by women and thrived without male presence. How was that possible? Differences between men and women had officially been erased. And men were not interested in the less paid jobs in “feminised” fields. Women’s work however, didn’t stop at clock-out time. The second shift awaited the Stakhanovite woman<sup>3</sup> at home. She was the Queen of Household Chores (having her house fully under control), the Heroic Mother, the Woman by the Stove, the Cleaning Squad, and the Worker Reaching the Goals of the Five-Year Plans<sup>4</sup> all at the same time.

Ladia,<sup>5</sup> the husband of this versatile woman, let’s call her Marie, spends his free time tinkering about at the cottage.<sup>6</sup> Whether he works hard in his job at the state-owned enterprise or not makes no difference, so he prefers to save his drive for the cottage. After all, there is hardly anything for him to do at home, nothing to control, so he has got energy left. Every year he paints the gate. He also collects wires, sticks, pieces of wood, sticks, acorns, bark and other natural materials for making hooks, hangers, key pendants and other hand-crafted decorations. In the afternoon, while Marie is mopping the floor and making plum preserves, Ladia, provided he has finished his tinkering for the day, steals a moment to read a little samizdat.<sup>7</sup> He reads a part of the barely legible carbon

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<sup>2</sup> Communist, centrally organised youth groups for all ages.

<sup>3</sup> Stakhanovite (údernice): the communist ideal of a strong and fearless person able to take on any physical or psychological challenges.

<sup>4</sup> Five-year plans were a characteristic feature of the centrally-planned economy.

<sup>5</sup> Ladia – a colloquial form of a typical Czech male name.

<sup>6</sup> In the socialist era, most urban families owned so-called “cottages.” These were bungalows in the country or in the suburbs where people would spend their weekends gardening, fishing, grilling, or pursuing other “creative” activities such as handicrafts.

<sup>7</sup> Samizdat was underground literature by authors banned by the regime that was illegally circulated and copied, typically using a typewriter and carbon copy papers.

copy of a text by Havel<sup>8</sup> that raises civil society. In the evening, while Marie is putting the children to bed and hanging the laundry out to dry, Ladia nurtures a few thoughts as he enjoys a cigarette by the window (so that the laundry doesn't absorb the smoke). He might even be lucky enough to catch Medek<sup>9</sup> speaking on Radio Free Europe.

The samizdat Ladia was reading had probably been transcribed by somebody like Marie. Women typically did this quiet discreet labor requiring no more than mindfulness and patience. It was theirs to do. Samizdat texts had no chance of surviving, had there been no transcribers. Thank you, women. Mere transcribing of other authors does not deserve applause, however. Havel wouldn't have lasted long without his wife Olga's cooking. He got all the credit, though, naturally. Olga only created the home, the working conditions, so to speak, for her husband. Olga did it just as Marie did it for Ladia who had read something by Havel. Just as thousands of Czechoslovak women did it for thousands of their Czechoslovak husbands whether they had been reading Havel or not. In regard to emancipation, or feminism, or gender analysis, one's affinity with political dissent was inconsequential.

The Czech dissent was, obviously, concerned with human rights, not women's rights. Emancipation and gender tend to become issues in societies that „can afford it”. These societies tend to be rich, democratic and capitalist. And even though communist Czechoslovakia was rich in comparison with some countries, it was not democratic nor capitalist and, therefore, it was not „ready” for a debate on gender or equality –the pseudo-feminism of the Communist Women's Union excepted. It also seems natural that in a system that treads upon human rights, the treaded upon unite in fighting against the oppressive sys-

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<sup>8</sup> Vaclav Havel (born in 1936) – a Czech writer and playwright, signatory of Charter 77. He led the political changes in former Czechoslovakia after 1989. He was the last President of Czechoslovakia and the first President of the Czech Republic.

<sup>9</sup> Ivan Medek was a legendary reporter on Radio Free Europe, a banned station that broadcasted in Czechoslovakia.

tem, and that becomes their sole focus. Communism was the common enemy and fighting it was the goal the dissident community shared. As a result, differences of opinion faded away. Perhaps it was a time of true luxury. Or perhaps the domestic and public spheres are not to be compared. It is also possible that resistance against the regime had nothing to do with the tough regimes in the dissidents' apartments in Prague where they were being waited on as they lay in their slippers on the couch. But the sad truth remains that the patriarchal regime was alive and well in socialist Czechoslovakia, in the families of communist bootlickers and of dissidents alike. And among these there definitely were families in which traditional gender roles had not resulted out of the „mutual agreement” of both partners, as claimed by those who accuse feminists today of infringing on people's personal freedom. Relationships are not contracts made from scratch: they are bastions of relationships past, conserving the bonds between our mothers and fathers.

It is easy to be wise after the event, they say. But the point here is not to judge whether emancipation was supposed to take place as a part of the resistance or whether it was right to save it for later, for a good reason. The point is that the issue of gender seems to have been neglected in the underground circles altogether. Gender simply did not make it on the long list of intellectual topics taken up at apartment seminars.<sup>10</sup> A pity for the women, and their own fault. Nothing comes free. The grand changes in the political regime needed a push too, to say the least. Men were not inclined to discuss gender, for obvious reasons, and women did not push the issue. Maybe it did not even occur to them. This lack of dialogue, however, led to absurd situations, such as a sense of relief on behalf of the wife following her husband's imprisonment. Finally she had a moment to herself, wives of former dissidents have told me time and time again. In situations like this, women are not the victims. Everybody suffers. Not

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<sup>10</sup> For lack of public space, academic discussion took place at illegal seminars in apartments of dissident intellectuals.

only women deserve the status of the victims. Given how much women are and were able to manage now as well as then, they must have had the capacity to carry on a dialogue on gender. They just did not dare, they did not think of it, nobody encouraged them to. Old gender habits die hard. The positives and negatives of the customs forged by our ancestors are with us now almost as much as before the fall of the Iron Curtain.

I am no real eyewitness of the communist era. I was ten years old when the regime fell. For my understanding of that historical period I rely on reading, interviews, my imagination and a few fragmented memories. My parents represent their generation perfectly. They did not lack character but they were certainly very flexible. Like most people around them, my parents were afraid of the regime. They were not willing to risk anything, including risking for their own ideals.

What I recall best from that time is the aesthetics. The look of groceries, the political bulletins on the wall of the house, the winter hats with tassels and pom-poms kids used to wear, and the greyness of the capital I thought was house paint. None of this looked shabby; it was normal. What wasn't normal was what came afterwards.

Politics was never discussed in our home. We celebrated the fall of the regime by attending the demonstrations as a family. I had not realised there had been something terrible about the place we used to live until it was all over. I had not realised dissidents were heroes. My mother fell platonically in love with Havel in the first few days of the Velvet Revolution. Like thousands of other women who had never heard of him until then, she has kept his photos above her desk to this day.

Socialism was a period of zero ambiguity. That came later. Relative outlooks on communism came along: not everything was that bad. Relative outlooks on dissent came along: the dissidents had made agreements with the communists in the end so what kind of revolution was that? And relative outlooks on established gender roles came along too. In comparison with Western

Europe we seem to have made a step back at first. Nurseries were being abolished across the board, including some kindergartens, because children were happiest at home with their mothers. After decades of central planning, family values were asking for the floor in the early 1990s.

When the first Western feminists arrived in the Czech Republic to raise the consciousness of the unconscious local members of the gentler sex, both parties were rather confused. Feminists from Western Europe and the U.S. praised the high numbers of women in the workforce. What they found appalling were the manners of Czech men and the fact that the care for the children and the household was still exclusively the job of the women. While Czech women would have preferred to stay at home with their children as long as possible, a novelty after all those years, Western feminists worried about the low numbers of women in the civic sector.

Feminism aroused disgust among Czech women after the Velvet Revolution, owing more to the fact that its protagonists appeared to fill the roles of yet other experts who showed up in the country in the early nineties "to help". Most of these well-meaning, self-assured foreigners with little knowledge of the local historical and social contexts were met with mixed feelings rather than welcome. Czech women were simply not interested in their style of feminism at the time. They had worked plenty, both on and off the job, and it had been of no use. The fall of the regime brought along freedom and more desirable options. Opportunities to pursue travel or meaningful studies as well as chances to find oneself a man with good prospects presented themselves. So Czech women, along with their Slovak and Polish counterparts, became marriage material in demand, precisely thanks to the qualities Western feminists had come to help them unlearn. The willingness of Eastern European women to take on the burden of care for their husbands and for the household in quite a traditional sense was rather different than the kind of care common among well-educated women in Western Europe. Czech women traded their traditional qualities for higher standards of living on a mass scale. Dating and living with foreigners was

called „not being ashamed of one’s femininity,“ an identity starkly contrasted with being „feminist“.

The image of a feminist was (and, to a large extent, still is) unflattering. Even though much of it no longer holds, images of the woman with a moustache wearing baggy clothes, the woman who is undesirable to men and therefore frustrated and hateful, or of the woman who constantly makes ungrounded accusations, are still around. In the Czech Republic today, a feminist woman can still be viewed as one who has failed „as a woman,“ and whose sexual frustration and lack of male attention have led her all the way to feminism.

Moreover, feminist women who also live for themselves and their work, and whose primary role is not to keep the family hearth, claim their allegiance to feminism with a sense of hesitation. They typically introduce it starting with the following caveat: „I am not a feminist but. . .“ Finally, even women who see the world in feminist terms dislike the label out of fear of being called men-haters.

The conflict between Western feminism and women raised in socialism was also rooted in the traditional association of feminism and left-wing ideology. Its proponents were neither able nor willing to share local women’s fascination with the new opportunities capitalism had introduced. Their different historical experience did not predispose them to understand the relationship between communism and the lack of freedom in the same way Czech women did. Seeing that gender equality seemed to be grounded in the idea of an egalitarian Utopia, they immediately associated the latter with their experience of communism. These rough edges, however, as well as the “Us versus Them” mentality have smoothed out now in the new millennium. Perhaps we have sobered up about democracy, or perhaps the Radical Left in the West has lost its sex appeal. Other contrasts have also become less distinct. There are no vast differences in education, fashion, hobbies or in the pop-culture in the East and the West any more. Due to globalisation, the former vast disparities between the women living on the opposite sides of the Iron Curtain have become mere differences.

Despite all its particularities, Europe is significantly more unified today than it was twenty years ago, and the same can be said of feminism, or feminisms. Two essential trends can be observed in Prague, Berlin, and Barcelona alike. Feminism based on the ideal of women's self-realisation "outside" of the family co-exists with the trend of the "new family" or "new motherhood", both of which seek to revive tradition, making a peculiar step back in time. „It's us who are marginalised now," these new-old voices are saying. „We are oppressed by the feminists who don't give family care the credit it deserves. In their eyes, homemakers are second-class citizens. We are not like them!", "new" mothers assert themselves, calling for greater respect of their life choices. Both extremes receive media attention – women in high decision-making positions as well as women who spend their days looking after and cooking for their six children. And what about Marie and Ladia?

Marie and Ladia, or rather their younger counterparts born in the 1970s baby-boom generation called „Husak's Children",<sup>11</sup> have a one-year-old son, Raphael. Unusual names are fashionable among young parents nowadays. Marie works as an accountant and Ladia is a sales representative in a large multinational company. At the moment, Marie is at home on maternity leave with Raphael. She had a baby at the age of thirty, after she had done some travelling. Her and Ladia had gone to Corsica twice and they had made two trips to Paris. Marie's mother had had her first child when she was ten years younger than Marie. She had just turned twenty but having children at this age was perfectly common when the commies were around. Marie and her friends ridicule their mothers from time to time. Young families had to share living quarters with the grandparents, „Gee, we couldn't do that now!" They used to get married to be eligible for those newly-wed loans! The brides used to have big pregnant bellies

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<sup>11</sup> Children born during the baby boom in the 1970s when Gustav Husak was the President of Czechoslovakia. This period, called "normalisation", followed the Prague Spring of 1968 when the socialist reform movement was violently suppressed. The Party "normalised" the society by stronger control of personal expression in all spheres of life".

at the wedding ceremonies. They spent the first year of the baby's life washing cotton nappies and their apartments smelled of pee and poo. Young moms didn't use to be able to leave the house because the strollers were too big to be taken out even to the shops, not to mention public transportation. There were stairs, stairs, and stairs everywhere. At least the large apartment buildings had assigned special storage rooms for parking the strollers. Nursing in public was an embarrassment. So folks stayed at home. No innovations like baby travel beds, disposable wet towels, baby monitors or ice teething soothers. Unlike her mother who used to sit at home, Marie sits with her friends in a café with a baby corner now. They are talking about how far the times have finally come. Ladia has promised Marie he would buy diapers on the way home from work. He does a good job at changing Raphie by now and he is fast at it. Marie's dad never would have done either shopping or changing and her mom would never have thought to ask. Marie decided to enroll Raphie in baby swimming and baby dancing classes upon reading in a magazine that children must develop their skills from an early age, something the commies had neglected too. They watch the levels of sugar in the baby's blood and the nitrates in the carrots much more carefully nowadays. There is a lot Marie can be happy about, and not only from the mother's perspective. Her employer is supposed to set up new part-time work options, rumour has it. They might even start a company kindergarten. She could work three days a week and spend four days at home with Raphie. Luckily, mother is retired and available to watch him. That will be great.

Ladia isn't quite as happy as Marie. His life is nowhere close to ideal. His father used to have a lot less to do after work. Ladia's dad thinks Ladia is a little hen-pecked, doing nappy shopping on the way from work. Thank God Ladia doesn't iron and he will never mop the floors, never! That would be the last straw. How low we have sunk! The world has lost its order. Ladia kind of believes this. He would never mention it in front of Marie. He lets her have her say but he is never going to mop, ever! And if she thinks he is always going to just dance to her tune, she is wrong. She even said recently at the movies that she

liked Jean Claude Van Damme and Sean Connery the best. They haven't seen a mop once in their lives! When he told her this she just frowned, no answer. Women, what can you say. „Are you sure this isn't what you wanted?“, Ladia asks himself. But he knows exactly what he wants. Sometimes he just wants to have a normal woman at home, one who doesn't fight all the time. Ladia has enough fighting at work and home is supposed to be a haven, isn't it? Ladia feels that the times are unfair to him and that his role in society is unclear, but he doesn't know what to do about it.

The proponents of „new motherhood“ would say Ladia and Marie's marriage is going downhill. The problem remains, however, that there is no clear answer to whether Czech women are happier now than they used to be. And if there is one, it is probably negative.

Men lack the opportunity to prove themselves “as men”. Already in the era of communism physical strength was taking a back seat, but patriarchal etiquette was still upheld at least in the home. And while women today still seek support with the men, men have nowhere to turn. They put their clubs and axes aside long ago and now they are fighting with their wives about who is the boss. And while women have never put aside their women's weapons, men are no longer allowed to respond to them in the same way they always have.

Liberal feminism reached its peak with the passing of the right to vote. The aspirations of radical feminism are as broad and blurry as the limitless European Union project. It is attractive for a wide range of social actors as long as they find comfort in the idea of their own potential membership. Europe is like a seductress who never says a final „No“. Although she is unavailable for Turkey and many countries of Eastern Europe, she leaves everyone hoping for the blissful moment of becoming one. If project Europe drew its boundaries, it would lose its charm. Similarly, if radical feminism set its goals, it would pave the way to its own decline. Like the universe that must expand not to collapse, radical feminism has us following it into the great unknown, as the world of equality seems to shimmer somewhere in a distance and we are not quite sure what it should look like.

Some people believe the main contribution of feminism in the last three decades has been the fact that women have extremely high expectations these days. They expect too much of themselves as well as of men and when they fail, they project their frustration onto the society saying it did not enable them to have a life that stands up to their dreams. The thirty-year-old Marie despairs over the fact that her employer still has not set up the part-time work options as promised, and that there is still no company kindergarten. And although Ladia does the shopping, his share of the household chores is far smaller than his fair half. He does maybe a quarter of what she does in the house. He doesn't even notice the mess. So she puts hope in little Raphie. Every time she dries the dishes, she sticks a handkerchief and a plastic cup in his hand, so that he can follow her example. Practice makes perfect. But Raphie usually doesn't give a damn and quickly throws the cup away.

Conversely, the fact that Marie just cannot be like a normal woman gets on Ladia's nerves, at least now and then. He does not force her to do anything, so why doesn't she leave him alone. He didn't get married to be constantly corrected, especially by someone who should take out the log out of her own eye before she takes the splinter out of his. She doesn't look after herself. She barely ever puts on make-up, in spite of his compliments every time she does. It is already spring and she hasn't even taken that sky-blue skirt he gave her last year out of the closet.

Ladia looks out of the window of his office, the sales representative of a multi-national company, and he sees a street bathing in sunlight, resplendent with color. Manifold dresses, frivolous shoes, hats of all shapes, women youthful, younger and older, swaying their hips, with their skirts flowing, they cruise the streets of Prague as if they were ships. "If I had lived a century ago," Ladia says to himself, "I could just stop by a brothel on my way home." But he isn't sure he would. "Maybe Marie would even like that," he thinks. "She would have another reason to say that men are nothing but scoundrels and that's why the poor women must keep treading the war path."

Marie is also looking out the window onto the street. Raphie is taking his afternoon nap and she is smoking her secret cigarette by the window. It is her window in her apartment that she has inherited from her parents. Ladia lives with her but should something go wrong, it is her who is going to stay. Last week, when they last made love, he bent her over the washing machine in the bathroom. She enjoyed that. She thought of Sean Connery. Would he have fought the commies back in socialism? She imagines him holding her in his arms. Not the Sean Connery as he is today but the old one from James Bond, when he was all young and handsome. It makes her head spin for a moment.

Translated by **Kateřina Kastnerová**

# Women and Transformation: Example of the Czech Republic

**Jiřina Šiklová**

Twenty years is enough time to assess change in society. But what angle to take? In this case, transformation is understood as an indistinct process of transition from a system of „real“ socialism and a centrally planned economy to a market economy, or in terms of ideology, to capitalism. However, these terms do not help us define the criteria for success and failure. Is success the rate of GDP growth, change in income stratification, or the fact that a country joins international structures and institutions?

In respect to the growth of the women's movement, feminism, and applying the gender lens to social and political issues, post-1989 changes have been enormous.

In brief: we started at ground zero and today we have reached about the same level as other EU states, as far as the position of women is concerned. Equal opportunities for men and women, gender gaps in wages or social security benefits, the representation of women in top professions, science, and in political parties, the need to change the image of women starting with the education process, the role of language in reinforcing male dominance, empowering women from sexual and national minorities, reinterpretation of history from the perspective of women, all these topics are discussed in the media nowadays, even including issues that used to escape our attention, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment or sex trafficking. All this work has begun at grassroots level; it is the women themselves who have been founding interest groups and civic associations, out of their own initiative rather than upon any government or state order. When facing challenges, women in the Czech Republic are now usually able to state their demands and to form civic initiatives to address them.

At the same time, women have experienced all the twists and turns the complete society has been going through in the last two decades: property re-privatisation, coupon privatisation,<sup>1</sup> the split of the Czech and Slovak Republics,

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<sup>1</sup> An uniquely Czech method of privatisation in which shares in companies are distributed free to those citizens who have registered as interested and who have bought books of investment coupons (editor's note).

the steep stratification into rich and poor, including the emergence of the new establishment, the new „them” whom we hold accountable. In general, however, women have not been the primary actors driving these processes. There are fewer businesswomen than there are businessmen and there were fewer women than men involved in shaping new decision-making centres; therefore, women are less responsible than men for what has gone wrong. Women carried less stigma of collaboration with the former regime and the secret police than their male counterparts did when they entered the public arena. They had ideal conditions at the start but they have not taken advantage of them, and now the numbers of women in the top positions in politics and business positions are lower than the numbers of men. In contrast to twenty years ago, however, women's roles have greatly transformed and diversified.

Let us take the following as an example illustrating my point: Prior to 1989, there was only a single top-level women's organisation, permitted to operate by the Communist Party – the Czech Women's Union – a member of the National Front<sup>2</sup> coalition, of course. For younger readers, let me explain that every organisation founded in the socialist era was required to enter the National Front, and to declare that it sought to build socialism and follow the lead of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. No other organisations for women were permitted by the Party. Today we have 51 women-initiated non-profit organisations,<sup>3</sup> according to *Alts and Sopranos II*, a 2005 pocket guide to gender equality initiatives in the Czech Republic. There are two academic centres dedicated to gender issues, one at the Charles University in Prague and the other at the Masaryk University in Brno. Additionally, the Academy of Sciences has a Department for Gender, Equal Opportunities and Research and there is a department researching the position of women in science.

<sup>2</sup> Communist-controlled coalition of all civic or community organisations in socialist Czechoslovakia. Membership in National Front and a pledge of allegiance to the ideology of the Communist Party was necessary for obtaining permission to operate legally.

<sup>3</sup> The Czech law on non-profit organisations distinguishes two types of organisations governed by different regulations: o.s. – civic association, and o.p.s. – public good association.

Four women's groups associated with different political parties are active in the Czech Republic. There are 5 organisations and 3 centres studying and promoting gender-equality issues. Besides the „Gender and Sociology“ Department at the Institute of Sociology at the Academy of Sciences, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has an Inter-Departmental Committee for Equal Opportunities, and there are the Government Council for Human Rights, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Equality Committee at the Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions. The first and oldest non-governmental civic initiative, a library called the Gender Studies Centre, was founded as early as 1991. Today the organisation boasts probably the best and largest library specialising in gender in Central Europe, or, as far as we know, at least in the post-communist states. Gender Studies often represents Czech civic, non-academic women's initiatives abroad and serves as the first point of contact for international entities and individuals interested in the field. The success story of Gender Studies owes a lot to its early date of founding, right after the Velvet Revolution when Czechoslovakia was a popular destination. Prague was likened to Paris of the 1930s and was considered a feminist “Mecca”. The financial and moral support of the German Heinrich Böll Foundation, a.k.a. the Green Party, and of international organisations advocating women's issues, particularly the New School for Social Research were also essential to the success of Gender Studies. The New School helped establish the Network of East-West Women (NEWW), a platform for cooperation of women in Eastern Europe, which has served as a launching pad for many women's civic and interest groups that eventually became independent. In a like manner, Gender Studies initiated many projects for women from post-communist countries, such as the Karat Coalition, the Women's Memory Oral History Project, international training initiatives and legal and other assistance programs for migrant and minority women. Finally, the fact that the Czech Republic sought entry into the European Union and that politicians strove to meet the Union's criteria for membership created more favourable conditions for gender equality. More women entered public offices and a variety of women's interest groups emerged.

Despite the bias against feminism prevalent in the early 1990s, the topic of gender (although most often discussed from a perspective which is not feminist) has by now penetrated public debate. What is often bemoaned is the low number of women in politics. However, these numbers are not low as a result of discrimination against women, legally speaking. In the Czech Republic, women are well represented in local politics as mayors of villages and towns and in the non-profit sector. But they are missing from leadership positions in political parties and in the government. The reason is that the competition between men and women is stronger in politics, which is always in the media spotlight, and the fact that becoming involved in top-level politics is not very appealing to women. People who are not well-informed point out that there used to be more women in the Parliament during the communist era (28%) than there are now (barely 15%). I always use my standard response: in socialism, all political decisions were made by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Parliament had no decision-making power. Its composition was dictated by the Party that set exact quota for workers, farmers, „working intelligentsia,“ and for women. Unlike the others, the category of women somehow circumvented acquired professional status; women were a category based on their biological sex.

Questions about why women who were formerly active in the anti-communist resistance and entered the first political institutions in 1990 later left the Parliament and resigned from political party leadership are as common as comments on women's representation in the Communist Parliament. In my opinion, nobody forced these women out of their political positions. Rather, they resolved to leave politics on their own and go back to their original professions, which they had not been allowed to practice in the period of normalisation.<sup>4</sup> After all, a similar process has taken place in Poland (as described by author Shana

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<sup>4</sup> A period called "normalisation" followed after the Prague Spring of 1968 when the socialist reform movement was violently suppressed. The Party "normalized" the society by stronger control of personal expression in all spheres of life.

Penn from the U.S. – analyses of internal gender relations from “the outside” were also typical of this time period), Hungary, in the Baltic states, and in some countries of the former Yugoslavia. And possibly this was the case in Russia and Ukraine as well, although I do not have data on these geographical areas. The women active in top-level politics nowadays are not, and have never been, active in the anti-communist resistance movement; their promotion to office was based on their party membership. Former women dissidents, like their former male partners, tend to stay away from political parties. Gender discrimination in the Czech Republic today stems out of prejudice, as according to law, women and men in the Czech Republic are perfectly equal. Still, it is unpopular to say, or, God forbid, write, that the position of women is significantly better today than it was twenty years ago. Certainly, it is correct to point out inadequacies, but the unceasing stream of self-pity strips women of self-confidence because it makes them believe their efforts have been in vain.

A discussion on feminism or feminisms as ideas and ideologies is barely taking place in this country. Even in the academia, feminist debate is hard to find. The majority of research applies the gender lens to social issues. Research results are then published, in over-simplified terms, in the media. People are not interested in feminism as a philosophy, as a tool for interpretation of history and culture, or as an ideology for social change. Most of the women who are still alive remember the times of forced employment (97.8% women capable of work had jobs) and forced „stabling“ of their children in nurseries and kindergartens. Their subconscious selves might still be haunted by communist slogans that portrayed feminism as the enemy ideology aiming to ruin the workers' struggle to establish socialism as the world order. Younger and less-educated women often claim that the position of women during socialism was high because every one could easily find employment. Many women may really believe that the fact that a woman can do the same work as a man demonstrates her equality. In communist ideology, sameness was an important value. Consequently, equality was put to practice by rejecting the differences that characterised women. Inequalities between the social

positions of women and men, such as the fact that women's wages amounted to no more than 69% of men's wages (in contrast to today's 73%), have long been forgotten. Poverty, formerly discussed only in terms of "social groups with limited consumption potential", violence against women, divorce, prostitution, abortion, and women's inability to apply their education in the profession they had pursued at school – all these issues were interpreted merely as remnants of capitalism. Owing to the fact that these social problems were not officially subject to public debate or published writing, many people believe they did not exist.

Questions or debates concerning feminist theory and the different schools of feminist thought are very rare. Thanks to gender studies, however, we realise that social problems related to the position of women are not limited to feminism or feminisms. Critique of social problems is grounded in the concept of human rights, which also constituted a banned topic during socialism. The first Czechoslovak president Thomas Garrigue Masaryk lectured on "the women's question" as early as in the 1890s. Similarly, the position of women in society and gender equality were addressed by women senators Františka Plamínková and Milada Horáková, among others, before and after the First World War. Milada Horáková was executed by the communists in 1950. The official approach to women varied over time even during the socialist era. In the beginning of the 1950s, women were incorporated into the workforce as cheap and unqualified labor. Over the next decade they acquired higher qualifications and were able to rise up in the professional ranks.

Right after the fall of the regime in 1989 it was difficult to discuss the position of women and feminism in the media. These days, however, gender is an established topic of public discourse and gender principles are applied in discussions on art and art critique. Integrating the gender perspective into various fields in the Czech academy has been another positive post-1989 development. Finally, awareness of gender aspects and of the specific position of women constitutes the third approach to dealing with gender issues. It is coupled with creating political structures or non-profit organisations that promote women's interests informed by this awareness.

Each of the above mentioned approaches deserves a separate study that would describe its evolution in the particular context of the Czech Republic as a post-communist state.

The overthrow of the regime in November 1989 provided opportunities for a spontaneous revival of civil society. Many civic organisations and foundations emerged and formed the so-called “third”, or NGO sector. Impulses for this development came, yet again, from the West. The first part of the 1990s can therefore be called a period of *diversification, searching and re-stratification of social positions and interests* of all citizens including women. In this time period, practically anything related to the past regime was rejected and ridiculed. Feminist theories were being introduced as well as critiqued and ridiculed, all at the same time. We knew more about antifeminism than about feminism itself. Consequently, Czech women understood and accepted the term gender rather than feminism. Given that we had decades of centralised politics and of the National Front fresh in our memory, we naturally, at the time, resisted founding an umbrella organisation for women’s issues. And to date, there still is no such umbrella organisation, although we have come to see the value of networking in the women’s movement.

With the continuous help of foreign organisations, the NGO Gender Studies also housed the first initiative aimed at establishing research sites where feminism would be studied. The first theoretical lectures on feminism took place on GS premises. After some time, perhaps in 1993, these GS-run lectures moved to the Faculty of Arts. Nowadays, lectures on feminism are commonplace in many academic departments and have even been integrated into teaching curricula. The current Director of the Institute of Sociology at the Czech Academy of Sciences, Marie Čermaková, has founded a Department of Gender Studies at the Institute. It explores a variety of issues from the perspective of gender rather than feminist theories. Presentation of feminist theories, something akin to women’s studies in the West, has been the job of the Department for Gender Studies at the Faculty of Humanities under the Charles

University. It was founded in 1999, again upon the impulse of the Gender Studies NGO. Students can earn Master's degrees in Gender Studies at this department. In addition, the second largest university in the country (Masaryk University in Brno) has established an equivalent programme in gender studies.

The general public, however, is interested mostly in social and political issues. These include policies on equal opportunities and anti-discrimination provisions. This explains why studies on gender mainstreaming have been emerging. Gender mainstreaming means monitoring of all legal or social policies on federal or local levels for the (differential) effects they have on the position of women and men. Gender budgeting, another related method, enables us to monitor and evaluate the differential impacts of investments and budgets of all business entities on each gender. The gender lens is beginning to be applied to demographic statistics, social security for the elderly, retirement policies and to paid and unpaid work in the family and the home. The latest trend is to use the term "genderagemainstreaming" to speak about the aspect of gender in different age groups. As women compose two-thirds of the aging generation, the term is typically applied to the elderly. However, there are other age groups where gender also plays an important role. Certain populations of young people face different expectations when they are looking for work. These expectations, based on whether applicants are women or men and their respective gender status and roles, determine how easy or how difficult the job search is for each applicant. As I already mentioned, the questions and suggestions the European Union made prior to admitting the Czech Republic into the Union had paved the path for many new laws. The position of Czech women today and their ability to reflect on it and to pursue and protect their interests has improved significantly since 1989 and constitutes one of the major post-1989 changes in respect to women's issues.

All these advancements help solidify the women's movement, even though its traditions have suffered. The historical continuity and local development of the women's movement in the Czech Republic were interrupted

in 1948<sup>5</sup> and when the opportunities to revive the movement recently presented themselves, we ignored them in order to catch up with the West. Czech women's organisations now copy some Western trends. They do so, in part, for purposes of fundraising, as they seek grants from the European Union. EU grant competitions tend to be announced in areas considered important for Europe today. The indirect effect of this situation is that we are constantly comparing ourselves with others and adjusting our projects to the criteria championed by women in other European countries. It is hard to imagine what the development of the women's movement would have looked like without this influence. And this will never be established. After all, we cannot change our country's geographic location... Balancing inequities among various social groups is the right thing to do. Women are one of these influential social groups. What I personally value the most is the ability of women in this country to reflect on their needs and to promote their interests, however slowly, through representation in the democratic institutions of this country and via civic initiatives.

Translated by **Kateřina Kastnerová**

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<sup>5</sup> In February 1948, the Communist Party nationalised all private property, gaining absolute control over resources. The Party dominated all spheres of public life in the following decades.

# Women's Velvet Revolution is Yet to Come

**Kateřina Jacques**

*Waiting for Women's Velvet* is the title of a collection of interviews with women politically active in the Czech Republic published in 2006 by Forum 50 %, a civic association promoting gender equality. It aptly describes the position of women in the Czech society 20 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The extensive changes introduced by the so-called Velvet Revolution starkly contrast with the still slow and insufficient engagement of women in all the areas of social and public life. Even though the position of women and their self-perception has improved, gender inequality persists in many fields. The representation of women in positions of power and decision-making is low and thus men continue to have control over the country's governance. Men also occupy the majority of positions of social prestige.

## **Rates of women's political participation fall behind global average**

The levels of women's participation in top politics are appallingly low. The Czech Republic lags behind Europe as well as the world. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the country ranked 76<sup>th</sup> among 135 countries in women's public participation rates. On the other hand, public opinion polls<sup>1</sup> suggest that an overwhelming majority of the population (86%) believe that women's participation in politics is important and that it should be actively supported by the society (3/4 of poll respondents). It is encouraging that public trust in women's political participation has been growing over the years. In 1991 only 61% of poll respondents considered women's participation useful. By the mid 1990s the level rose to 75% and in 2004 it reached 84%. This positive trend presents a challenge to political representatives as well as to the non-profit groups seeking to involve women in politics. It appears that the potential of the situation remains largely untapped...

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<sup>1</sup> June 2009 poll by CWM agency commissioned by Forum 50% in June 2009.

## No to Quota

Despite the strong consensus on the need to involve more women in politics, opinions on the best way to achieve it vary. Affirmative action strategies, such as quota,<sup>2</sup> have been criticised and rejected by men and women politicians as well as by the public. As a result, there is no pressure for political parties to engage women or put female candidates on the ballot. Moreover, although the voters would like to see more women participate in politics, it seems to have no effect on their voting decisions. Political ideologies and the election platforms of political parties seem to be much more important to voters than the numbers of women on the ballots. The experience of the Equal Chances Party (Strana Rovnost Šancí) that put only women on its ballot in 2004 demonstrated this phenomenon. Voters as well as the media viewed the party as an odd experiment rather than a real political force and in the 2006 parliamentary elections, the Equal Chances Party gained only 0.2% of votes. On the other hand, the party's media campaign played into this perception. In general, however, few Czech citizens take equal representation into consideration when making their voting decisions.

Recently, the Minister for Human Rights and Minorities Michael Kocáb of the Green Party made a "revolutionary" proposal to the government by presenting a new policy that would require a minimum of 30% of women candidates on each ballot. This policy would apply to the Parliamentary Chamber of Deputies and to local government elections and it is to be drafted by the end of 2009. However, as the proposal was passed "merely" by the current so-called "government without a political mandate,"<sup>3</sup> it is not

<sup>2</sup> Quota mandates, numbers of women members in political party leadership or on the candidate lists.

<sup>3</sup> In March 2009, the Czech government had to resign because a voted of no confidence vote. A new government "without a political mandate" was formed to lead the country until new elections take place.

certain that it will be implemented. Judging by the response of the media and of political representatives so far, its chances are unfortunately not very high. Nevertheless, the draft will be developed and will serve as a potential point of departure in the process of updating the Czech political landscape in the future.

The only party in the Czech Republic that currently pays attention to fair representation of men and women in its management bodies and on the ballot, is the Green Party. Along with its partners around the world, and especially in the European Union, Czech Greens consider equal opportunities as a platform issue despite the fact that so far, it is more of an expression of its progressive political culture rather than a way to secure votes. For example, although the Green Party ballot for the 2009 European Parliament elections had equal numbers of men and women candidates, alternating the order of men and women on the lists,<sup>4</sup> the media, political pundits and voters alike seemed to ignore this unique strategy, proving it of no concrete benefit to the Party in that particular election.

## **Few women in top politics**

There are only a few women who have established themselves in the popular consciousness as politicians after 1989. Many women have been involved in party leadership at local and middle levels but they have rarely assumed top positions. Many are politically active in their communities and regions but only a few work (or have worked) as politicians at the national level, in the spotlight of the media that would bring them public recognition.

In 2006, there were only 31 women MPs among the 200 members of the Parliamentary Chamber of Deputies, making up only 15.5% of all the MPs.

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<sup>4</sup> The ballot followed a so-called zipper principle, which requires female and male candidates to be listed in alternating order (man following woman following man...).

In the Senate, women held 14 seats (17%) out of the total of 81 seats after the last election in 2008. The situation is different at the local level, where women make up a quarter of all the elected representatives.

## **The way women feel is important too...**

An important factor in evaluating the progress the society has made since 1989 in its approach to women is women's own view of the changes in their position. As sociologist Jiřina Šiklová has mentioned, looking merely at the post-1989 political involvement of women is shortsighted; women's subjective feelings matter just as much, according to Šiklová. In general, they say that people are more free in a democratic system than in a totalitarian one. In order to draw any useful conclusions and to gain perspective, however, we must compare individual aspects of women's lives in the two political eras (socialist and post-socialist). A seminar held by the NGO Gender Studies in 2006 as a part of the Women's Memory project, put this comparative method into practice.

It was dedicated to the Czech-German writer Alena Wagner, in honour of her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. At this seminar Jiřina Šiklová suggested that in place of the unproductive dichotomy of *better* and *worse*, detailed narratives of women's day-to-day lives before and after the revolution be used. Then she spoke about women's lives before 1989, including women's formal political involvement. She mentioned the fact that 30% of the MPs were women in the 1980s with the following caveat: "When someone asks me how come there has been such a drop in women's political participation after the Velvet Revolution, I reply with the old joke: The Parliament used to be something between a museum and a theatre. The membership made absolutely no difference."

## Three stages of „real socialism”<sup>5</sup>

According to Alena Wagner, real socialism was not a single time period but consisted of three stages. The first stage started in 1950 with the passing of the Family Law that formally established women and men as equals. (Interestingly, the Federal Republic of Germany didn't pass a similar law until 1971.) The second stage started in 1959 when experts began introducing the concept of gender. According to Wagner, a particular milestone event was a 1961 conference of pediatricians in Bratislava that introduced a new child-raising theory that put the central role of the family above the social role of peers. This trend led to the extension of maternity leave, for instance. The third stage started in 1969 after the Prague Spring<sup>6</sup> and it was a period of stagnation when women retreated from the public sphere dominated by communist ideology in favour of childcare and domesticity.

## Me and the Velvet Revolution

The Velvet Revolution, which ended the period of real socialism in 1989 and set off a wave of transformations in all the spheres of the society, also marked a significant shift in my own life. In 1989 I turned 18 years old and officially became an adult. The fall of the totalitarian regime and the new freedom it brought were my beautiful surprise birthday gifts. My understanding of life in Czechoslovakia prior to 1989 therefore draws on my experience as a child.

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<sup>5</sup> *Real socialism* (also *actually existing socialism*, *really existing socialism*, *developed socialism*, and *state socialism*) was a term introduced by Soviet propaganda in the 1970s to refer to the *de facto* socialism as found in the Eastern Bloc and differentiate it from traditional (or ideal) socialism. *Real* referred to the fact that not all utopian promises of the socialism and communism could be implemented in the beginning, and so this real socialism was only a stepping stone towards the ideal, promised socialism. (Wikipedia)

<sup>6</sup> In response to a rising liberation movement, the Soviet Union occupied Czechoslovakia in 1968.

1989 was a turning point for everyone. At secondary school I had imagined my life would take place on the margins of mainstream society, among Prague dissidents. I had not aspired to a university education or to a position of influence or public recognition. Instead, I had searched for meaning in friendships and family relationships and planned a career that would in no way support or rely on the establishment.

## **Courageous Dissident Women Role Models**

My role models at the time were the brave women in the Charter 77<sup>7</sup> circles who were politically active outside the Communist Party system. They were usually the mothers of my friends and seemed to seamlessly combine their family life with their politically apolitical involvement. These women, in addition to interesting independent literature, played a key role in shaping my beliefs at the time. I was not involved in any official children's or youth groups and made friends outside of school.

## **Children as equals**

Courage was characteristic of the strong women in my memories. Women dissidents enjoyed a natural authority. Their approaches to family and raising children differed from the mainstream in that they viewed children as their peers rather than inferiors. The boundaries between children and adults seemed thin. Children understood the point of their parents' efforts and grasped the cynical nature of the power of the establishment.

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<sup>7</sup> Charter 77 was an informal civic initiative named after an anti-communist manifesto signed by over 200 Czech citizens in 1977.

## **My memories and beginnings of my civic engagement**

The Charter 77 community inspired civic engagement. I became very politically involved already at secondary school when I was attending demonstrations, including the one that took place on November 17<sup>th</sup> 1989, an event that marked one of the most violent clashes between the armed establishment and the citizens. Later I organized a strike at our secondary school, I spoke in public for the first time from an improvised stage at the top of a truck at the Old Town Square in Prague...

Yet, the fall of the Iron Curtain surprised practically all of us. I had not been able to imagine a future other than life behind the barbed wire; I had not prepared for life in a free society. Nevertheless, as soon as I graduated from secondary school in 1990, I seized the opportunity to travel abroad and left for Berlin to pursue further study and work

I realise in hindsight that my desire to have children early was a result of my pre-1989 conditioning. Children represented a sense of grounding that enables, rather than hinders, woman's broader self-realisation. Motherhood felt as a natural role and a vocation to me, even though other women in my generation shifted their priorities and postponed having children in order to take advantage of the new opportunities. Unlike the women who first studied, then built their careers and then had children, I raised children and studied at university (or worked) at the same time.

## **Women Heroes of 1989**

The women I remember the most from 1989 actively participated and symbolised the transformation. Marta Kubišová, for example, a singer previously banned by the regime for signing Charter 77 and an icon of the anti-occupation struggle in 1968, strongly marked the spirit and the atmosphere of November

1989. Soon after, she stopped her political work, although she continued to be active in the arts and in the non-profit sector, especially in the area of animal protection. Her story was typical for many well-known women who had not been able to work in their professions prior to 1989, and who had often been imprisoned for their anti-communist activities. These women had strongly contributed to the fall of the establishment and although they had actively participated in the process of the transformation, they stayed in the background in the shadow of men. Often they decided not to continue their political work for an extended period of time and returned to their original careers.

## **The european union has an influence on the changing position of women**

The public as well as the political representatives of the Czech Republic saw membership in the EU as one of the primary goals of the post-1989 period. Full integration into the Union took over ten years in the course of which the society underwent “ills”, some of which have been troubling it to this day. Rising corruption, search of quick and easy gain, larceny, lack of respect for traditional values, and other issues became common among ordinary people as well as among the politicians. Many elected representatives turned away from ideals of a fair and just society which led to a lack of respect for emigrants, dissidents and victims of the former regime and an overall high tolerance for crimes committed in the communist era. As a result, former communist officials have returned to social positions of power. Equal opportunities and women’s issues were not considered important in the early years after 1989.

The European Union however, put pressure on the Czech society and helped shape its early democracy with restorative standards and rules that have had a positive influence on the country’s social milieu. One of the areas affected by EU trends and policies has been the area of gender. I believe that the EU has been playing an instrumental role in improving women’s position in the society

and in developing women's NGOs. Factors such as the requirement to fulfill the EU admission criteria and the increasingly common interaction with other countries in the form of professional and student exchange programs, in addition to tourism, have cultivated the Czech culture and environment. They have also created more space for women's self-realisation and more freedom for women to make decisions about their own lives. Women are less restricted in respect to planning children, their choice of marital status or a career, and they face progressively less pressure to fulfill the limited range of traditional gender roles. Following the trends in more economically and politically developed countries, male and female gender roles have been changing in the Czech Republic in the last twenty years and, increasingly often, women prioritise professional careers and adjust family plans and lives accordingly.

## **The long road to implementation of Anti-Discrimination Legislation**

After years of negotiations and under the threat of severe sanctions by the European Union, equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation was passed in June 2009, almost a moment too late. Paradoxically, the legislative process itself was protracted by the Social Democrats, who voted against it despite their platform that touts equality.<sup>8</sup> The passing of this piece of legislation received a lot of media attention and triggered perhaps the most fervent and long public and political debate in recent history involving both the non-profit sector and the academia in a very productive

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<sup>8</sup> In 2008, President of the Czech Republic Václav Klaus vetoed the anti-discrimination legislation which the Czech Republic was obliged to pass in order to fulfill EU requirements in the field of gender equality and combating discrimination. It took a long time to encourage the lower house of the Czech Parliament to open a debate on this law and the presidential veto. The Social Democrats claimed that due to the fact the vetoed law would provide rather weak protection against discrimination progressive political forces should work on a new law. The Greens as a progressive part of the coalition government preferred to withdraw the presidential veto and to pass the law. They argued that the law should be passed and amended later on (editor's note).

way. NGO groups and experts agreed on the value of the legislation even though its final version had been stripped-down due to political compromises. However, the long years it took the Czech Republic to pass the law made it the last country in the EU that lacked comprehensive anti-discrimination provisions. In effect, the Czech Republic had failed to fulfill its EU membership obligations and provoked several lawsuits by the European Court. The anti-discrimination law has been the subject of dangerous politicking in the last three years. The Green Party was the only party that had consistently pushed it forward and eventually succeeded when the center-right coalition government finally finished its draft and presented it to the Parliament. The Social Democrats, their women MPs included, opposed it for many months, blocking the law in the Parliament using a variety of objections. The law was finally passed right after the fall of the Czech government in the spring of 2009, almost a whole year after it was vetoed by Vaclav Klaus, the current Czech President known to espouse anti-European views, and the Czech Republic finally formally joined other civilised European countries.

## Walking the talk

Interestingly, one of the politicians who opposed the anti-discrimination law most fervently was a woman MP Alena Čurdová of the Social Democratic Party, who had made equal opportunities issues key to her politics. Her example, unfortunately, illustrates a problem that begs to be discussed frankly: There are some male and female politicians in the Czech Republic who claim to seek improvements in the position of women but whose deeds contrast starkly.<sup>9</sup>

An alarming and interesting example of this conflict was a speech given by the Prime Minister Miroslav Topolánek at the official launch of the *European Year of Equal Opportunities* in Prague in April 2007. The Prime Minister sparked an extensive public controversy that attracted a lot of media attention as well

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<sup>9</sup> See the footnote above (editor's note).

as powerful opposition on the side of anti-discrimination and women's NGOs. In his speech, Topolánek raised doubt about the purpose of any affirmative action provisions and claimed that such provisions actually put the social groups that face discrimination in the position of disadvantage. Anti-discrimination provisions on the basis of group identity, he argued, lead to discrimination against these social groups. To illustrate his point, Topolánek erroneously quoted the Labour Code that „protects women all too much and on terms all too rigid, and therefore puts women's employment at risk and encourages the practice of giving preference to men.“ The Prime Minister's error consisted in the fact that the new Labour Code does not draw a distinction between male and female employees. On the contrary, it specifically uses the term “parent” to give equal weight to women's and men's roles in childcare.

In his speech, Topolánek went even further by refuting the concept of equal opportunities and by saying that it was incorrect to call women a discriminated minority. In his opinion, pregnancy and motherhood are the privileges of being a woman and that while this situation is natural, logical and healthy, women can freely choose not have children and then enjoy the same opportunities as men. The law should take these conditions into account, according to Topolánek, and not force protective measures upon women who are not interested in being protected, especially when they evoke discrimination. If a woman decides to devote herself to her natural vocation, she does not need the law to make her equal with men. On the contrary, a woman needs a job market flexible enough to employ her on terms that are beneficial to both the employer and to herself. Finally, a woman needs the support of her family, of course.

## **Media and non-profit voices protest Prime Minister's speech**

Representatives of the academia and non-profit organisations drafted a protest note that strongly criticized Topolánek's speech. The Green Party joined this

effort. The authors of the note, along with many media commentators, all pointed out that the Prime Minister's speech undermined the country's commitments to the EU and other international treaties.

## **Essential role of the Non-Profit Sector**

The civic and non-profit sectors have undergone tremendous growth in the post-1989 period of democracy building and it is noteworthy that both sectors employ more women than men. Many well-known women, including many of the strong women previously active in the pre-1989 political underground, have pursued careers and assumed leadership positions in these sectors (Libuše Šilhánová, Dana Němcová, Jiřina Šiklová, Rut Kolínská or Marta Kubišová). Non-governmental and non-profit groups have been the ones to take on feminism and gender issues, such as the issue of women in politics, and have helped to establish them as credible topics in academia and science. As a former political science student and now as an active politician, I have been able to follow and participate in their programmes or surveys and to utilise the data they have collected, and I am optimistic about their work.

## **Policy – roadblock for non-profits**

Speaking from experience, I believe that women's organisations are very successful in awareness-raising about women's rights and gender equality. Their work in the fields of policy, however, has not been very effective, possibly for the following reasons. The groups do not seem to understand the world of politics nor do they exhibit a willingness to learn about it in greater depth. Theoretical knowledge is rarely applied in efforts to promote women's rights. The Czech Republic lacks interdisciplinary experts able to design strategies that implement knowledge from the fields of political science and gender at the same time.

Non-profit organisations claim to strive to be “apolitical” and “non-partisan” in their work. In promoting women into politics though, impartiality is

problematic because politics is a pragmatic business, however ideology-rooted. Organisations claiming to be equal, non-partisan, and apolitical in their engagement of politically active women run into trouble in practice. Non-profit groups and their leaders are typically left-leaning and this often clashes with the political programs of their women partners who are involved in real politics.

I see the following trends among women's NGOs. Their efforts to remain neutral in respect to political programmes result in undermining the very nature of political work. In their equal treatment of all politicians and political bodies, the groups prioritise the issue of gender over the content of political work itself. In effect, they judge and support women politicians on the basis of "objective" criteria, irrespective of other aspects of their work. This approach produces situations in which women politicians in the Communist Party can (and do) achieve high rankings from the non-profits despite the fact that they represent a formerly totalitarian party with a programme that deeply conflicts with democratic principles.

For all these reasons, civic initiatives are rarely able to maintain their ability to evaluate, differentiate and make up hierarchies and to simultaneously observe their policy of objectivity and non-partisanship. On the other hand, it is a fact that implementing strategies that promote women into politics in a balanced way is an extremely difficult endeavor.

### **Non-profits typically lean left<sup>10</sup>**

A recent event in the Social Democratic party serves as a good example of the lack of willingness among women's NGOs to critique a left-wing party. Social Democrats, a large party that claims to welcome women and to be sensitive

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<sup>10</sup> The author classifies the Social Democrats and the Czech and Moravian Communist Party as left wing parties. The Czech Greens consider themselves neither left nor right part of the political spectrum (editor's note).

to gender issues, was repeatedly unable to find a woman member to fill the Deputy Chief position as its bylaws stipulate. With each unsuccessful election round, the electoral process grew more and more pathetic.

In the end, the party leadership introduced a young and attractive candidate with no qualifications for the job. She demonstrated her lack of knowledge in the interviews when she failed to cite not only the main tenets of the party platform but even the names of the party leaders. However, even she was not elected and in the upcoming national election in the fall of 2009 the Czech Social Democratic Party is going to run, for the second time, without a woman in its leadership.

This internal election process received a lot of media attention and earned a lot of criticism in opinion columns. However, there was no wave of protest on the part of NGOs dealing with women's issues, which had so strongly reacted to the above-mentioned controversial speech by Prime Minister Topolánek in 2007. No activists commented on this utter failure of the left-wing Social Democratic party. Moreover, there seems to be a general lack of critical perspective on the part of NGOs in respect to problems that occur on the left side of the political spectrum, leading to a gradual loss of credibility of NGOs among the public and among politicians who no longer feel under watchdog pressure.

Another example of the failure of NGOs to adhere to their principles of non-partisanship was a discussion regarding the implementation of the U.S. anti-missile radar system in the Czech Republic. Many women's organisations were actively involved in the anti-radar movement and expected that women politicians would follow. By creating an image of "women peacemakers" activists pressured women politicians to assume a pacifist stance.

## **Unhealthy idealisation of women**

A tendency to idealise women with the help of arguments that are too hard to prove poses another risk to the women's movement. Many well-meaning activist efforts use bad, easily refuted examples of morally superior values women

politicians are supposed to uphold simply because they are women. The claim that greater participation of women would lead to less conflict and more rationality and efficiency in political negotiations, is a good example.

The public rejects such naïve premises and, therefore, these are not useful but even counterproductive. I believe that the argument for fair representation as a cornerstone of democracy is strong enough in itself. This principle demands that the proportion of women in a population be reflected in decision-making structures and if it is not, it is a systemic problem that must be addressed.

## **Solidarity as a result of strategy**

Many awareness-raising efforts refer to the so-called “women’s solidarity” factor. It is said that this principle of solidarity becomes effective at a thirty percent threshold for any social minority. According to interviews, Czech women politicians have not seen this principle at work so far, except for women’s fractions and clubs within political parties. Women in the Social Democratic Party have even tried to set up a „shadow government of women“ in protest against the all-male government led by the Social Democratic leader Miloš Zeman in 2000. Nobody gave this effort much significance, and it was viewed rather as a joke. Similarly, women’s clubs within political parties have not been very successful in working together toward concrete goals. Real results have usually been produced by women and men working together. But let us not forget that solidarity and teamwork are much harder to implement in the political arena than in other fields, due to the competitive nature of politics which is not only a contest of ideas but a struggle for real power and position. Women in politics participate in all these struggles, fighting for positions within their parties as well as outside of them. Just like men, women have a hard time finding consensus on strategies to promote their political platforms or to secure their candidate listing positions. Instances of a unanimously shared agreement among women politicians on strategies or issues are extremely rare and have never occurred in top politics in the Czech Republic. On the con-

trary, women politicians often develop their own kind of rivalry including personal and emotional attacks. Even within public agencies, women's interests are rarely promoted in a coordinated way, whether they come in the form of equal opportunity, family policies or gender budgeting.

This is not to deny the importance of solidarity among women. I believe in its value whether it is spontaneous or results from a rational strategy. Women politicians could find a shared voice for a variety of reasons. It is interesting that some women politicians have developed a sense of solidarity and a self-awareness as a result of negative personal experiences, and changed their attitude toward equal opportunities after getting personally hurt. Miroslava Němcová, a top politician in the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) for instance, refused to acknowledge her identity as a woman in politics and strongly opposed affirmative action policies. Much to everybody's surprise however, Ms. Němcová ited gender discrimination as the reason behind her failure in the internal party election. In a like manner, her party colleague Alena Páralová sought the support of women's NGOs following her unsuccessful candidacy for a ministerial position she had prepared for in the shadow government. After years of staunch refusal of EU equal opportunity policies, Ms. Páralová tarted speaking of the unequal position of women in politics once her male counterpart had been elected for the office.

Perhaps analyses of stories of women who have been successfully involved in politics would be useful for building strategies aimed at raising the numbers of women in politics. Although there have not been many women politicians in the Czech Republic in the last twenty years, the few who became well-known influenced public opinion more than any awareness-raising activities (Hana Marvanová, Petra Buzková, Jaroslava Moserová a others). Real role models are always more inspiring. This is an interesting question: Who is more popular: women politicians tough enough to compete for the top candidate positions or the women "whom nobody minds"; women who seem to hold no actual power? Case studies on situations within individual parties may suggest an interesting answer. On the surface, it appears that the Czech political landscape

accommodates two types of women at the level of top politics: either very active women who fight for their space or very passive women who respond to offers made by political parties.

The NGO initiatives I appreciate the most concern education and knowledge production: training for inexperienced women politicians, collecting and publishing interviews with women seasoned in the field, seminars and the NGOs' work with the media.

I do not believe that women politicians produce better quality work than their male counterparts. This said, there is no doubt that women's life experiences and strategies differ from those of men and may be leveraged to argue some policy points more convincingly. Areas such as childcare, family law, health, consumer protection come to mind. Women politicians tend to get involved in humanitarian areas such as education, arts or social affairs. It has been argued that this is a result of the limited opportunity women get in the more prestigious spheres of influence that remain under the control of men.

## **Controversial role of the media**

Although the amount of attention gender receives in the media is growing, it is difficult to assess its positive and negative effects, particularly when it comes to politics. Women in politics face different types of pressure than men, and their images in the media vary as well. Women usually have to answer questions men are never asked. They are forced to describe their family situations and to defend their readiness to balance their work and childcare duties. Unlike men, women also tend to be judged on the basis of their appearance. Their looks are subject to public scrutiny in tabloid as well as broadsheet media that ceaselessly publish opinion surveys on women politicians' taste in fashion. In contrast to their male counterparts, women politicians are also ascribed nicknames or attributes based on their looks, "a blonde", for example.

Empirical research has demonstrated the differences in the public per-

ception of male and female politicians. Studies have indicated that people associate different characteristics with each gender and project their expectations accordingly. For instance, the media have cited cases of retiring or unsuccessful women to argue that women were not fit for politics and that efforts to balance the numbers of men and women in the field missed the point. Much of the public shares this opinion. Studies have also shown that in their desire to find unifying factors among women politicians that would allow for putting them all in one homogeneous group, people make misguided generalisations about women more frequently than about men. A mistake made by one woman would be applied to the entire social group and used to argue against women's involvement in politics a priori. Women interested in political work must take these pressures into consideration and expect that they will be forced to defend their positions and fight negative stereotypes.

Speaking from experience, I can also attest to other barriers women must overcome if they seek a political career. It is indeed difficult to strike a balance between political work and family life. Party meetings are time consuming and often take place in the evenings or at weekends which puts a great burden on mothers without substantial family support. Moreover, it is difficult to rise in party ranks without intense involvement in the life of the party.

Twenty years after political transition, I think that it is necessary to move discussions on women's participation in public life along. We must leave some clichés behind and look for inspirations that will bring better results. To achieve this, we must hold an open and critical debate. Women have helped shape the last twenty years of our history. In terms of power and influence however, they have occupied marginal positions in comparison with men. Women's Velvet Revolution is yet to come.

Translated by **Kateřina Kastnerová**



**3.**

Slovakia

# How Our Past Is Still in Our Present

**Jana Juránová**

## Images

Shortly after the velvet revolution I was watching, by accident, a very stupid TV show. I was watching it with my friend and colleague. In the show some women were dressed up as “fruits”, but they were more exposed than dressed, seductive and tempting. As my friend watched it, she said, disgusted, something like: “I hope that the change of the political system will not bring us this kind of ‘freedom’”. I remember her sentence till this day. This stupid show was no exception. Nowadays, there are many programmes in which women – very sexy and very “beautiful” women, who are nothing more and nothing less than sexual objects – are “dished up” to men, to be crunched by them.

The media image of women just after the change of regime both reflected and shaped the real position of women in the society. Mass media formed the image of women from the very beginning after the crash of communism. The “new wave” of images started to be increasingly visible even though these images were far from reality. But they had a very strong influence on the real lives of real women and sometimes images seem to be more real than real women’s lives. These “new” images are very often irritating and even frustrating. They might not seem dangerous at first, but in reality they contribute to violating women’s sense of selves.

How do these mass media images of women in Slovakia function nowadays? Are women really expected to identify with them? If so, then how? Are they really important? Or should they simply be treated as unpleasant “pollution of the environment”? What does it mean that women’s bodies are used to sell almost all products? What kind of body is it? Is this young, naked, bare body “only” a decoration? Is it a real body or is it artificial and anonymous, not a real woman’s body? For whom is it important? Is it important for women themselves, or for men? What is the relation between the position of women in society and the images of women visible in public places? Do these images change the situation of women? Or does the situation of women change the

images? What is more influential and more important: the situation of women, or the images in which they are captured?

To some degree there exist two contradictory poles in women's images created by the media: a beauty and a mother. During the last twenty years women were being confronted with both of them very strongly. The beauty ought to be physically perfect; she must spend a lot of time taking care of her body. The beauty is young, sexy, slim, but with an ample bosom, etc. Her function is simple: to present a product and sell it. The mother should also be perfect; she must spend her time entirely with her children and husband. This image predominates in advertisements for some kinds of food, drugstore goods, etc. – all needed by the family and provided by women.

All these "good mothers" and housekeepers are at least pretty, if not beautiful, but for a long time both myths were strictly divided. By now they have started to be joined, fused into one myth. The result is an absolutely perfect and absolutely beautiful young mother, who not only looks beautiful, but also cares for her family perfectly. She knows everything: how to clean a toilet, how to cook a delicious meal, how to shave her armpits so that they are absolutely smooth, etc.

The myth about beautiful Slovak women is very vivid in Slovakia. Even politicians, from time to time, repeat that women in Slovakia are the most beautiful in the world, and that "they" are "our national wealth". Such sexist speeches come from the entire political spectrum – regardless of the speaker's political orientation. They are uttered by conservatives but also by socialists and post-communists, even liberals. Even the President of the Slovak Republic has made similar statements several times; and the former minister of foreign affairs lately claimed that a woman model is the best representative of Slovakia in the world.

Several years ago, probably because of the influence of models from abroad, both myths started to merge. The pregnant body is exposed much more frequently than in the past. During socialism, a pregnant body was taboo. This state of affairs continued for a while after the fall of communism – only

non-pregnant and non-motherly bodies were exposed. Nowadays, young and beautiful pregnant bodies can even be very active; e. g. an ad may portray a pregnant woman with a baby in one hand and her notebook in the other hand. This image, influenced by the very formally grasped gender equality politics, can be seen as the realisation of the newly outlined gender democracy.

The double and even triple burden of women in socialism, with the socialist ideal of the “emancipation” of women, will be perhaps – on the ideological level – replaced by the burden of misunderstood gender democracy.

## Roles

It can be said then, that the roles which women are encouraged to assume through public discourse – advertisements, media, etc. – are strictly defined and fixed. Even older women are expected to be beautiful, slim, and caring – all at the same time. All media are full of sexy images of women’s bodies, yet, at the same time, all women ought to be mothers. This creates tension on the one hand, but, on the other, also a kind of schizophrenic imperative and instruction for women: be sexual objects and careful mothers at the same time.

In this context of women’s roles it is very interesting to analyse how some special days devoted to women have been celebrated since the fall of communism. Even after twenty years of democracy International Women’s Day on March 8 is assumed by many to be a communist feast without a message. The truth is that during communism the holiday was celebrated in a very disgusting way; and it therefore remains a symbol of the empty socialist emancipation of women, without any content. On the other hand, several years ago this holiday started to be reclaimed by feminist activists in this part of Europe, to some degree also in Slovakia. These activities are not massive; it is mainly younger women who present their discontent with the official celebration of the holiday. Nonetheless, these activities are intentionally belittled and disregarded. The present governmental party, which pretends to be social democratic (*Smer*,

in English *Direction*), regularly organises special March 8 meetings mostly for older women. These meetings are very similar in spirit to the former celebrations of International Women's Day during communism: a mixture of kitschy entertainment programmes, compliments, and red carnations. These meetings are not very massive, but all media inform about them, and the topic of International Women's Day is lost; its sense is absolutely devalued.

Mother's Day was not officially celebrated during communism; this traditional holiday is celebrated in May. It used to be quite popular in the period before communism. There is significant pressure in the media to celebrate this holiday; there are many statements and utterances about mothers, their "function" in the society, etc. In recent years some of these utterances have assumed a slightly critical tone because, on the one hand, motherhood is put on a pedestal, but on the other hand, real mothers suffer discrimination, especially mothers with young children. Even though the media promote large families, the real atmosphere experienced by mothers and their children is quite unfriendly.

## **Violence against women**

I recently watched a talk show in which a woman from a distant village in Northern Slovakia was talking about the divorce of her daughter. She said that people should not divorce and that the breakup of her daughter's marriage was a real tragedy for the entire family. And after that she continued in a humorous tone: "If a woman is a good wife, she ought to be beaten to be even better; and if a woman is not a good wife, then she should also be beaten so that she might become a good one." The woman moderator was so stiffed by this utterance that she was not capable of responding. Several years ago the moderator – whether a woman or a man – might have laughed at this comment and treated it as a good joke. Now the society is much more sensitive to the topic of violence against women.

The same TV talk show also featured a young woman working in a crisis center for beaten women. At first, the young woman talked about her work and

later on, in the TV studio, she met with one of her clients. The woman moderator was very involved this time and even though the topic – violence against women – was not discussed from the feminist perspective, it was still discussed in a very sensitive way, which would not have been possible twenty years ago. Nevertheless, the “joke” of the older village woman remained uncommented – it was met with silence.

The approach to the topic of violence has changed a lot since 2000 in Slovakia, as a result of two national campaigns organised by a coalition of feminist NGOs. Both were carried out without any support from the government. The campaign with the slogan: “Every fifth woman is abused” was shocking for the society in Slovakia in 2000 and 2001. To some degree change is visible also in praxis (several positive legislative changes have been introduced), but the positive changes are much more visible in the language used to discuss the topic. Till the feminist NGOs began talking about the problem, violence against women was a subject discussed only in the tabloid media. Violence against women was approached as the failure of a concrete woman. At that time no one dared to say that there were many women suffering from the problem of violence. Even though breaching the issue in public encountered significant hostility, most of society – and especially women – understood that violence was a real problem.

The number “five” in the slogan “Every fifth woman is abused” was derived from European campaigns against violence against women; one of them also realised in Austria, a country considered similar to Slovakia with regards to this issue. After two campaigns, research was conducted in 2003 and it turned out that the figure was even worse: every fourth woman in Slovakia has experienced violence. If research of this kind had been done before the campaign, the figures would have been “better”, because women did not talk openly about the problem and they could not name it. Unfortunately, there exist areas where the figure is even worse: women in a suburb of Bratislava, all on maternity leave, told us that in their area every third woman was abused at some time.

## Feminism in Slovakia

As in most post-communist countries, also in former Czechoslovakia there were about as many women and men demonstrating and calling for freedom in November 1989, but it was mostly men who presented passionate speeches from platforms during demonstrations. Even though there were some women students who were politically active at that time, later on the functions were given almost only to men (or were taken almost only by men). Women were mostly silent during the velvet revolution and afterward. But one voice stands out. The famous Slovak actress Emília Vášáryová and her highly emotional speech. The leitmotif of this speech was “love” – and she pronounced the word “love” several times very dramatically, so that for many people it sounded very funny. Not that those other speeches given mostly by men were not emotional. But she, as a woman, fulfilled her role to be very emotional and to speak about “love”.

After the fall of communism, it soon became clear that all important positions were occupied by men. This does not mean that all the women disappeared. In fact, they were very helpful. But quite often they were invisible, or less visible. Even ambitious women were mostly employed in service positions. Why did this happen? This was an important question and one of the impulses for starting activities from which the new project ASPEKT was created in 1991 and officially established in 1993.

In Slovakia we felt the absence of the whole sphere of feminist thinking, literature, culture, politics, etc. We started to publish the feminist cultural journal ASPEKT in 1993 and this event can be regarded as the formal beginning of gender studies in Slovakia. Most of us were active in literature at that time, either as critics or authors. So naturally, our first interest was literature. Yet, early on many of us grasped the fact that social sciences, and even more generally – social problems, are more urgent. So we started working on issues which we considered the most important. For this reason we established initiatives dealing

with such topics as violence against women, sexual minorities, human rights of women, gender-sensitive pedagogy, etc.

For me this was like fresh air, a new world opening. All topics were interesting and many questions were asked. More were asked than answered, but still, the feeling was: "Now I can understand the life I am living". This positive feeling was soon spoiled by the reaction of the democratic part of the post-communist society in Slovakia. Those women who identified themselves as feminists were confronted with very negative reactions: they were likened to communist officials (even though there were very few female functionaries, in comparison with male ones). None of the members of ASPEKT were former communist party members, but there were still attempts to call us communists.

The atmosphere in the society changed a lot during the sixteen or more years of existence of the first feminist NGO ASPEKT, the emergence of gender studies at Comenius University in Bratislava and the founding of some other feminist NGOs. More women became interested in the topic of gender. Although the general public perceived the development of feminism in Slovakia as an attempt to take over power, it was obvious that this was a very well planned misinterpretation. Almost twenty years ago many told us: "The most important thing is to protect democracy and you are wasting your energy on something unimportant". And we still use the answer which we formulated quite a long time ago: "There is no democracy without women". But I am afraid this answer was not grasped quite properly, or perhaps it is misunderstood intentionally. My feeling was: This is my freedom. Now I have my own idea and there are women who have their ideas and we can realise them. Till then we were realising mostly some other ideas – mainly those of men. Now we felt liberated. And the price was repudiation, but fortunately not forever.

## **Women in politics**

After the fall of communism there were many topics to be opened. The beauty myth, the myth of motherhood, women's access to power being only some of

them. Still, the presence of women in high politics was a typical indicator of gender democracy in this part of the world. Women were not seen in “high politics”. Many discussions were going on about whether women ought to be in politics or not, even though at the same time some of them – very few – already were. Every election to the national parliament reopened discussion of this topic.

A true story from the early 1990s illustrates the point very well. ASPEKT was invited to a discussion on women in politics. A woman politician from the Christian democratic movement told us: “I would like to listen to your report very much, but my party chief asked me to come, he wanted to tell me something important”.

After several years more women began to be seen in politics. Women’s faces were appealing and attractive for the voters, but the political leaders manipulated them a lot, so that they were only fulfilling special “tasks” and were not leaders themselves. Many examples of this approach can be provided; the most flagrant was the candidacy of Professor of Sociology, the vice-president of the SDKU (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union) Iveta Radičová for presidency this year. She lost, but she was enormously successful. And still, her home party did not take advantage of her popularity, but pushed her aside not to endanger the chief of the party.

Although today there are quite a few women in politics, they are not in the real positions of power. On other hand, it can be said that the topic of women in politics holds in it many other topics, simply said: all gender stereotypes internalised by the society in Slovakia. Still, much has changed, as it was seen e.g. in the presidential election I have described above. Ten years ago the media and male politicians were very critical of the female candidate Magda Vášáryová, because she was, according to them, impolite. The fact is that she sometimes interrupted other male candidates, because it was the only possibility for her to be given the floor. On the other hand, nationalist politician Jan Slotá, who came drunk to a TV discussion, was not criticised as much as she was. In this respect the presidential campaign was somewhat better this

time; but women are still very vulnerable in the public sphere because of their body, age, marital status etc. The opinion presented by one Christian democratic politician is very typical. He answered the question about why there were no women on their candidate list in the previous parliamentary election campaign: "Our wives are there with us, so it is as if they are themselves on the candidate list".

Even though there are some women politicians in Slovakia, most of them play an inferior role. They even appear in TV discussions mostly when there is some very unpleasant problem; male chiefs send them to solve troublesome issues and they usually do it very willingly.

There are also practically no female politicians who try to realise a women's political agenda. Party leaders would not admit anyone with such an agenda into "high" politics, both in the present and in the past. The gender agenda is simultaneously dismissed as unimportant, irrelevant and perceived as dangerous. Explanations of this schizophrenic attitude can be discovered in our past.

There was no women's movement in former Czechoslovakia and in Slovakia, which was then a part of it. In the 1960s some dissolution of the rigid and cruel communism of the 1950s started, but in 1968 the Soviet Army, together with armies of other Warsaw Pact countries, invaded Czechoslovakia and that was the end of the so-called Prague Spring. The 1970s were a decade of strong "normalisation", understood as the closing of both physical and mental borders.

We lived through so-called communist emancipation of women. What the regime really meant by emancipation was that women were needed in the labour force in order to boost the economy. As there was no political movement of women, there is no consciousness of women's problems. ASPEKT is the first feminist project and because of this we are, unwillingly, in permanent conflict with many parts of society. Twenty years after the fall of communism and more than fifteen years after the establishment of ASPEKT, the situation is slightly better. But the heritage of communism – prevalence of form over content – is

still dangerous. Women's problems remain invisible or are only acknowledged with rhetorical gestures which do not transfer into practical solutions.

Life goes on, with its hopes and disappointments. Five years after the fall of communism I presented a paper at some conference and made the following diagnosis: "The problem of Slovakia cannot be formulated as an opposition between democracy and totalitarianism. The problem is: of what quality will the democracy be; with women or without them?" And I must say not much has changed after fifteen more years.

# Tell Sophie and Others...

**Anna Grusková**

## **...a good girl first learned to properly clean her shoes...**

I'm in the country at my father's parents. I'm twelve. For the whole afternoon, my cousin of the same age is "fixing" a motorbike he got from my father. There is a workshop in the yard and he's lying in front of it on the lawn completely covered in oil, snorting while loosening some screws.

"Will you give me a ride when it's done?" I ask shyly. "We'll see", he retorts with a newly gained male superiority and turns his attention back to the motorcycle. His father has already taught him to drive a car.

"The dishes!" my father yells from the kitchen. I shuffle my feet; I don't feel like doing it, I don't enjoy this ritual twice a day. Moreover, we don't have a proper sink. I have to warm up water on a stove and pour it into ancient pots. I wash the dishes in bubbles of soap, then I put them into another pot and rinse them with water, which at the beginning may be clean, but then it starts resembling the soap bubbles. I don't feel like doing it, but in the end I go to the kitchen because I'm a good, which means obedient, girl.

When the dishes are washed, dried and placed in the cupboard, I run back with relief to a book I started to read. But my father has another task for me: cleaning my shoes. I go out to the yard with a pair of white shoes with perforated tips. My cousin is still lying under the motorbike. I'm watching him from the corner of my eye. He has disassembled my father's old Jawa and now he's adding new, modern parts to it. It's really hard to believe that this strange array will ever be able to function again. In the end, the young repairman leaves everything as it is and runs out onto the street. His father, my uncle, a very nice man, came to pick him up. He never accepted my grandparents' house rules; he always takes a nap after lunch, he even smokes, which they consider to be most decadent.

My cousin gets in my uncle's car; they're going to the airport where some guy they know will let them fly a sailplane. When they disappear, my father with a dissatisfied expression on his face is eyeing the disassembled bike

and its parts scattered around, but says nothing. Then he picks up my polished shoes and shouts out: “You don’t mind that there is shoe polish in those holes? Grab a toothpick and clean them. Learn to do things properly!”

### **...but she didn’t know how to dance...**

For years I had many lively dreams with the same theme. They contained various permutations of the situation I have just described. In one dream I see two women. One is beautiful, wearing a broad skirt and jewellery on her neck and hands. She is beating a small drum hanging from her neck and dancing by herself. The other one is not dancing; she is looking at her friend with a mixture of admiration and envy. She is ill, she can’t dance – this crosses my mind while I’m sleeping.

In one dream I’m at a ball. A young man comes to ask me to dance, but I’m petrified with fear that I don’t know how to dance. I beg him to teach me to dance, but he is convinced that I must know how to do it. I’m looking around, I’m ashamed, and then I see my friend, how well she is dancing. She looks gorgeous dancing ardently. All of a sudden, my father approaches me carrying some ashes from a fireplace on a dustpan and sticks them under my nose. I stop dancing; spill the ashes from the dustpan on the floor and leave. I don’t want to dance any more.

The other night I dreamed about country wagons passing me by. They carry joyful young people in colourful clothes; they are singing, having a good time. This isn’t good, I explain to myself. The wagons are not covered, if the rain starts, they will get wet. They aren’t protected. And there’s another dream that I still remember mostly as a very impressive image: I’m standing in front of a big table full of ripe yellow pumpkins. I know this is my harvest and I must process it and store it somehow. I process maybe one pumpkin and leave it; meanwhile the others disappear. Then I’m angry with myself.

Only nowadays, when I have taken up dancing, do I understand the meaning of these dreams. I have very few journal entries, but I jotted down

that feeling when I started to artistically express myself at the age of around forty: "That joy of creation, I can't believe it I'm creating, I'm very happy, like when one experiences physical love, cuddling, and I'm surprised to realise that it is true, that I'm not just dreaming it, that it's happening now, and I'm afraid it will only last a short while and that terrible useless time of empty longing and dreaming will replace it . Over and over again old relations, old wounds, old scars keep coming back to me."

### **...respected her family...**

Before I started to create and dance, I stumbled many times and sometimes somebody tripped me: the regime antagonistic to free creativity, my parents formed by the regime and their own parents, I myself formed by the regime and parents who had been formed by their parents and the regime... Who will assess the degree of culpability?

Where was my mother when my father taught me to clean the holes in the tips of my shoes with a toothpick? Surely, she must have been somewhere around. My mother is Slovak; all relatives from my father's side are Czech. She was poor; she didn't have her own house. My mother didn't fit into the house of my father's parents. To this day she dislikes cleaning; she cooks with no special pleasure, with a corresponding outcome. Although she eventually learned to bake my father's favourite Christmas pastries, she never eats those jams and sweets because she wants to be slim and pretty. She liked to laugh, they were frowning all the time, as they needed to work and work is serious business. They didn't understand her and she didn't understand them. Mom has always been my sun. Only today do I see its shadows as well. She hasn't been a good role model as a woman, she has been living with a man who does not respect her and humiliates her. She gave up on finding fulfillment in love and sexual life and turned to God – a usual path for a Slovak Catholic. On the other hand, in her forties she did not hesitate to change her job when she had a chance to

improve her professional qualifications through postgraduate study. My grandma liked to tell how she had come to live on the estate of her husband's aunt. It was right after her wedding; she still had her wedding dress on. The aunt pointed out of a window: "Those are our fields. You're going to work there." Grandma didn't realise that she applied this pattern of behaviour also to her daughter-in-law, my mother.

Until very old age, my grandma had black hair and she grew more beautiful with age. And she didn't even try. Her greatest adventure was when she had ridden a bike 15 kilometres from a district town with a piglet on her back. She liked to describe what that piglet had been doing. Once, on a very hot day, she saw a mirage in a field. She used to say that a whole ancient village, maybe Italian, had appeared in front of her. The image was trembling in hot air.

My grandma lived long enough to experience the post-revolution times, but in principle, she was happy with what had been before. She was happy with little things. "The most important thing is that people have enough food", she used to say. "When I was a girl I saw how poor people would take potato peels from pigs." She didn't want me to study that much; she used to send me to dances. At that time, I laughed at it... She wanted me to wear bright colours and short skirts, but I liked to do just the opposite. Her son, my father, who more and more takes after her, was unable to come to terms with his own heroism. It broke him down. When, after the invasion of the allied troops of the Warsaw Pact on Czechoslovakia in 1968, he proclaimed that he disagreed with such "fraternal help" he got fired from the job he loved. My father was a very good pilot, at that time he was thirty-seven. He couldn't find another job. He wanted to fly at least agricultural planes, he wanted to be a travel guide in Czechoslovakia, but after many unsuccessful attempts he ended up as a welder in an automobile plant. He was different from his co-workers, much gentler. They sensed it and laughed at him. My father, whom from my childhood I remember as a charming and cordial man, grew sour.

He started to assemble airplane models. He started to beat me. He would beat me every day; for petty things, when I disobeyed something or didn't clean

something up. Most often he would slap my face, but sometimes he would take out his belt. I didn't disobey on purpose, I was simply thinking about other things. I was nineteen when he beat me up for the last time. At that time I was working in Prague, I was commuting and I wanted to stay there for a weekend. He started yelling and beating me. That time I rebelled and I returned the strokes. That took him by surprise and he stopped for good. Later I talked about it with my peers. Many of them were beaten by their parents. Then, under socialism, it was nothing exceptional.

My father was fifty-seven when communism fell. He was rehabilitated and he got some symbolic financial compensation. A number of his colleagues with similar life stories passed pilot exams, hired small airports, but he didn't want to do so. He was retired, taking care of his parents and he liked to go skiing. And also, for many years, he wanted to buy a country house. During socialism, having a country house was a national sport, an escape to nature, to the world of one's own rules. "Under commies" it was possible to cheaply buy an old country house. We had many such chances, but nothing ever came out of them. Today I realise that for my father it was some kind of adrenaline sport. He knew he was going to inherit his parents' house, he knew they disagreed with the country house. In principle, he too was a good boy.

### **...listened to her bad teachers...**

One day, when I was in the last year of grade school, my mom came home devastated. "I spoke with your teacher; you're not going to get a recommendation to study at a college prep school. She told me the mother of your best friend had yelled at her she'd been giving recommendations to children of class enemies." In spite of good grades I'm not admitted to the prep school, and to avoid going to apprenticeship I study, in a complicated manner, at librarian schools in Brno and Prague. With my background I wouldn't have been admitted to a university either, but my beautiful mom manages to arrange it. She goes to the ministry of economy to talk to a brother of a well-known resistance fighter, partisan Ján

Nálepka. She knew him from her youth when he courted her. We go to the ministry together. In the end, I'm admitted to study at a university, after we send in an appeal. There were two of us who got admitted this way. And only the two of us for years really worked within the discipline we had studied – theatre theory. And both of us earned an academic degree.

At the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague we have a seminar with one feared theater theorist and critic. As the only one of our teachers he addresses us as “comrades”. He is a vice-dean for ideology. After a fellow student turns in her analysis of Bulgakov’s plays he threateningly asks her whether he should understand it as her approval of Christian ideology, or else he would be compelled to draw consequences. She is scared and denies everything. This person later successfully sails through the waves of changes in 1989. For a short while after the revolution he even becomes the new minister of culture.

During socialism and also after it, he always had a large group of admirers, especially of the female sex. He was a very eloquent speaker, he spoke English, which at that time was a rare thing, but he also knew how to deeply offend and embarrass people, so many people feared him.

Among others, this man taught us critical analysis. Once he gave me an assignment to write a review overnight. After the theatre show he offered to give me a ride back to my dormitory, so that – as he claimed – I could start to work on it sooner. He said he lived nearby anyway. When we arrived at the dorm, he stopped in a shady area, turned off the engine and sat silently. I was confused, didn't know how to react, so I said nothing. After a while I got out from the car and parted with him. If until then he had “liked” me, since then he hated me. At the beginning I was a very good student, but later my grades got worse. I had big problems with final exams. It's strange, but at that time I didn't see these linkages. I blamed myself for not being smart, educated, pretty enough...

I wanted to write a final thesis about a method of one of the most important world theatre directors and theorists Augusto Boal. He dealt mostly with the social dimension of theatre, and at that time he was working and living

in Paris. I wrote to him and he wrote me back, inviting me to Paris. My teacher-ideologist immediately prohibited me from going there. I couldn't go without his recommendation. He said: "You would get married and stay there."

After the revolution, one of my colleagues, an admirer of the professor-ideologist, invited me to an international seminar. "Who's that?" one Canadian feminist theatre theorist whom I invited asked me during the professor's presentation. "He's talking about nothing." Really, in translation his presentation lost all rhetorical embellishments and dramatic pauses and what remained was quite uninteresting.

Today I see this small, subtle man, who despite being married for years has had affairs with many other women, as a typical product of the totalitarian regime based on manipulation and fear. I remember my dreams from those times. One was repeated. I am amidst grey, dead natural scenery, branches of dead trees are sticking out at the horizon and I'm wading in dirty water. Nobody's around.

### **...she rode a rickety Karosa bus...**

In these days of cheap airplane tickets I basically stopped riding long-distance bus lines, but recently I had no other option. At night we stop on the German border. "Get your documents ready, please", the driver announces into a mike and mercilessly turns on the light. A German border guard enters the stuffy air and walks among sleepy passengers. There are no longer any border checks on the Austrian side where I go more often, but apparently they still exist on the Czech-German side. They even collect all IDs and take them away. I'm surprised how insulted I feel. I recollect all those years of humiliation, of luggage searches in front of the whole bus, of travel permits, of the atmosphere of mass shopping trips to East Germany organised by the Revolutionary Labour Unions at my father's workplace.

That part of my life when I lived in socialism now seems to me like a bus trip in a rickety Karosa bus with closed windows and stuffy air, to keep the heat inside. A despotic driver, vexed passengers, the smell of home-fried pork chops

and salami sandwiches, tea in plastic vinegar bottles... Of course, these weren't railroad freight cars on their road to Auschwitz. Luckily, we could look out the windows, we could get off, from time to time use some public bathrooms...

### **...she lived in a “universal” world...**

To me, November 1989 is related to joy connected to the conception of my son, which happened shortly before. At that time I already knew I was pregnant. In those crowded squares I experienced great euphoria! I didn't join the revolutionary committees, I had the feeling they were mostly for men and the truth was that they indeed were. I lived in a universal world, which in reality was male, and that was reflected in our language too. To these days I must watch myself not to forget to speak about authors in appropriate gender terms. Germans resolved this issue by creating one expression – AutorInnen; we have to use two words to refer to male and female authors.

### **...she didn't know how to fight for herself...**

There were only two women, both former communists, at the defense of my dissertation in 1995. One was my supervisor, an educated woman, later the first female professor of theatre studies in Slovakia. The other one belonged to those apparatchiks who during socialism had positions and power and she didn't want to give them up after the regime change. She was friends with the head of my research institute who also used to be a very active communist. The rest of the committee consisted of old men, most of them past retirement age, who wanted to stay on at the university a few more years – and that was up to their boss to decide. Neither I nor my supervisor knew they all had agreed they were going to vote against my getting the academic degree.

This was due to several reasons. In my dissertation I had to deal with the work of some of them and, in accordance with my convictions, I pointed to some ideational and methodological stereotypes prevalent in Slovakia. Besides, we also significantly diverged in our political inclinations. I was never able to accept neither primitive nationalism nor hidden animosity towards Czechs; I myself had come from Bohemia to live in Slovakia when I married a Slovak. But these attitudes were popular at that time. Vladimír Mečiar was the Prime Minister and suspicious shadows of connections with the mafia, unresolved crimes and profound deterioration of political culture in Slovakia have been lingering over since his years in power.

The expert reviews of the dissertation were quite positive; I refuted all reservations some of which were ridiculously unprofessional. It looked like a successful defense. They voted and I passed, although it was close. They congratulated me with insincere smiles. Two days later, the head of the committee called me to let me know I didn't pass – a mistake had been made in counting up the votes. They invited my supervisor to sign a new protocol. When she was leaving, the head of the institute shouted after her: "You should've won the elections!"

My supervisor didn't complain; she didn't fight for me. I didn't fight for myself either. It even did not occur to us... Today I find it incomprehensible. How come we didn't complain at the Presidium of the Slovak Academy of Sciences? Maybe because we sensed that those committee members had connections other than purely academic. I guess that socialist fear was still strongly engraved in us together with a tested experience that such complains had been futile and could do more harm than good.

I was saved by one of my opponents – an important figure of the Velvet Revolution. He wasn't present at the defense due to a trip abroad. He organised a new defense at a different institute. My dissertation was later published as a book and got a number of positive reviews. My former boss took revenge on me by posting on the website of his institute the information that I hadn't

defended my dissertation. He formulated it in such a malicious way that un-informed people will get the impression I never defended it. When I stopped greeting him, he would yell at me in front of people that I was a wretch because I'd written a poor dissertation... I believe this was my most intense post-revolutionary encounter with the filth of the past.

My dreams corresponded with those harsh times. I come to an old house, trying to turn on the light, but I can't do it no matter how hard I push the button on the light switch. The rooms remain dark. Then I find an old closet, I'm excited I may find some treasure there and indeed I find an old fur collar there. But when I look at it in light I see the fur is gone. I realise there's nothing interesting there. Or another dream: I sit on a cold, unlit train. Then I find out there are some other cars there too, for instance a restaurant car. One cannot sit there, but I don't mind. It's warm and lit, there are people and food there, while I – together with someone I don't even know – am freezing somewhere on the side in darkness.

Luckily, at that time a new world was opening up to me and it brought me a whole new perspective. Yet another train dream proves it: I'm traveling on a nice modern train, but I have to stand as there's no place to sit. I put my handbag somewhere, forget about it and move on. They I remember I don't have it; I look in that direction and see there is a woman taking something out of it. I push my way back to her and I see she isn't opening my bag but hers is lying next to mine. Moreover, I know this woman, maybe she's even my relative. My initial distrust turns into joy.

### **... and then she didn't want to be a good girl... or a woman of style...**

My most important post-revolutionary discovery was the power of female solidarity and, in parallel, exploration of my own femininity. Until then I was fascinated by decadence, art déco, I would make myself into a femme fatale,

a woman of style, and I was proud of it. I had no idea that a femme fatale is mainly a projection of male fantasies. Then one day, all of a sudden I wrote: A Femme Fatale is a female clown. An upside-down clown. On 2000 New Year's greeting cards I painted rosy cheeks of a clown on my picture. I wanted to be a femme fatale in my own projection, not in the projections of others.

### **...because she knew the power of female solidarity and became a woman...**

My first significant encounter with concentrated female solidarity and female intellect happened at a conference of a unique, pioneering feminist group – ASPEKT. From my previous life I had been used to academic events dominated by men. I knew very well the game around the best self-presentation, laconic conciseness, the cryptic nature of narrowly specialised themes, hiding one's lack of knowledge in a flood of foreign works and quotes by authorities... Rarely had there been any interesting discussion, rarely had I discovered something lively, real, up-to-date. All of a sudden I found myself in a different world. Women were listening to each other, they were speaking to say something and not to show off. But the most important thing was the subject of the discussion. I found all themes very interesting; they were tackled from a multidisciplinary perspective, in an erudite fashion, with zeal. All seemed to speak about myself. I have often mentioned this experience and I will never forget it.

When I think about it with hindsight, I recollect a Hungarian novel for girls *Tell Sophie* by Magda Szabó. I read it at that time when I was watching my cousin grow while polishing my shoes, but I understood the meaning of the book only much later. Just like the meaning of my dreams. The novel was about a girl whose mother had died. She left her daughter a message, but she couldn't finish it. The girl investigates the meaning of the message to learn, in the end, that the world is full of mothers who, together and gradually, can provide her with what her mother couldn't give her.

## **...who seeks and finds her sisters and mothers...**

I read *Women Who Run With the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, I read the book *Woman: the Body and Soul* by American gynaecologist Christiane Nothrup, I read great books by other "sisters and mothers" published by my "sisters and mothers" Jana Cviková and Jana Juráňová from ASPEKT: Karen Horney, Judith L. Herman, Elisabeth Badinter... I started to do theatre and find others there. In the Bronx, in Antwerp, Berne, Prague, Banská Bystrica and also at home in Bratislava I have my theatre mothers and sisters, I write and edit plays, stage them, sometimes I also act... And I haven't forgotten about theory either.

I started going to different dance courses. I wear bright colours and short skirts. I dream less and live more.

## **...and she hasn't stopped yet**

Recently, at a workshop "The Inner Child" with Israeli actress Neta Plotzki I came across a picture of a girl jumping a rope held by two boys. The first thing that crossed my mind was that the boys were manipulating the girl and dictating to her how to jump. But then I realised they were actually helping her to be happy. And that there was a time for a change in my head.

Now I'm faced with an important task – to find my fathers and brothers. I know I must do it.

Translated by **Eva Riečanská**

# Feminism as a Practice of Freedom

**Lubica Kobová**

It happened some time in July 1996 in the town of Humenné. We were on our way from a swimming pool that I had not found very entertaining. To me, splashing around in a crowded pool was an unfamiliar urban pastime and – as someone who used to spend most of her summer vacations in the countryside – I did not understand it. But for urban adolescents, water was a must, just like magazines and books during the summer and planting potatoes in the spring and harvesting them in the fall were a must for adolescent countryside intellectuals.

Humenné is called the metropolis of Zemplín. Maybe that's true – at that time it had one bookstore and names of all businesses were written in two languages – Slovak and Ukrainian. Maybe it was a deed of the blind hand of the book market that on dark brown cardboard shelves in the one-story house of the local bookstore I came across the magazine *Aspekt*. The subtitle on its cover read: "A feminist cultural magazine" and they only had two issues – *Female Writing* and *The Lesbian Existence*. I walked away from the store with one of them and spent that evening flipping through the pages of the feminist magazine – instead of watching horror movies which my uncle and aunt had bought after the revolution during their first trip to visit relatives in Switzerland.

A few years after several women in Bratislava and Prague had proclaimed that it was "time to take the words about equality and democracy seriously and apply them in real lives of people of the female sex in Slovakia."<sup>1</sup> I connected with them – feminists – through the already old-fashioned medium of a magazine. Seven years after "the revolution" a seventeen-year-old "gal" is perusing a feminist magazine on the periphery of a periphery, in eastern Slovakia. Isn't that the fulfillment of a dream about good – pardon the masculine bureaucratic term – dissemination?

I never experienced my "own" 1989. I spent those November days in hospital with pneumonia, a lump of teenage emotions and a strange realisation that there was something going on out there. But I had my year 1996. For myself I discovered feminism as a practice of freedom.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *O Aspekte* (2009). Available at <http://www.aspekt.sk/about.php>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Zerilli, Linda M. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005.

But have people – women and men – ever had their year 1989? Overtly, the change of the regime was described as a revolution and it was supposed to start something new. Hannah Arendt wrote that we can speak of revolution “only where this pathos of novelty is present and where novelty is connected with the idea of freedom.”<sup>3</sup> But has this political and social change meant the beginning of a practice of freedom for women and men of the old-new state?

When I look at the recent past with hindsight, when I go through newspaper clippings of articles on the state of women’s rights in Slovakia, when I read feminist social critique and fiction books written by female authors I cannot see any single beginning, a single deep breath followed by a gradual transition to democracy and the market economy also *for women*. The past twenty years have not followed an ideal scheme of linear development from the declaration of liberation in 1989 to gradual – albeit faltering – democratisation in 2009. The thesis about non-linearity of democratisation may have become shared academic knowledge in social sciences dealing with transformation, but it only represents a small fragment of our beliefs and convictions.

I believe that most women and men wanted, and still want, to be part of a polity which develops in a sure and unquestionable direction, guaranteeing prosperity and “the future of our children.” And maybe it seemed that this would be brought about by the fall of a republic that for some unknown reason was called “socialist.” Anyway, there was “no other alternative” but the combination of democracy and free market. A rupture in the old regime should have been just one. However, it seems to me that due to hard-to-change social and political relations, this rupture has multiplied and induced smaller or bigger crises. To resolve them, politicians have used various strategies that, in line with their ideas, have been meant to ensure stability of the political and social system. And one of the ways to avert crises is to locate their causes or their solutions in women.

According to feminist theory, we should be wary of the category of “women,” which magically becomes whole when we fill it with various elements of race, class, age,

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<sup>3</sup> See Arendt, Hannah, *On Revolution*, Penguin, London, 1990, p. 34.

ethnicity and sexuality. What is denoted by the term “women”, and what is called upon as such when seeking the causes of crises or their solutions, does not have one common referent and is not a sum of several concrete referents. “Women” are an attempt at construction of a political subject in a concrete space, at a concrete time, here and now. Otherwise there would be no such category, just like there is no political category of “men”.

## Let the elections be democratic

In 2001, for the first, I time placed my signature under a public initiative concerning women's rights. I joined thousands of women and men who disagreed with the planned ban on abortion, which would have ensued from changes in the Constitution of the Slovak Republic proposed by MPs from the Christian-Democratic Party. By signing the petition, called *The Pro-Choice Initiative*,<sup>4</sup> women mobilised as a subject whose relations with the state should, according to some legislators, be derived from their ability to give birth. The mobilised subject of women clearly rejected this definition.

Just a few months after women, men and women's rights NGOs had united in the common public action which they – given the course of further events – modestly called an “initiative”, public space in Slovakia was occupied by one “informal women's movement”. It was the first time after 1989 when some collective activity of women called itself a movement. Feminists, intellectuals, academics were still uncomfortable with using the word “movement” when speaking about the activity of women's organisations in Central and Eastern Europe or in Slovakia.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For more see the texts of the Initiaves of February 5 and 19, 2001 published in: *Iniciativa za možnosť voľby* (2001), in: Cviková, Jana, Juráňová, Jana, *Možnosť voľby. Aspekty práv a zodpovednosti* ASPEKT, Bratislava, 2001, pp. 102-104.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the women's movement in the Czech Republic and Slovakia see e.g. Farkašová, Etela, *Bola to naozaj šťastná zhoda okolností*; Havelková, Hana, *Ženské hnutie a genderová kultúra v Česku 1989-2003*; Kiczková, Zuzana, *Stretnutie s feministickou filozofiou bol na začiatku skutočne osobný a intelektuálny šok.*; Lacinová, Lubica, *Subjektívne dejiny slovenského feminizmu*; Vodrážka, Mirek, *Diskursívni smrt a feminizmu bez feminizmu*; Wöhner, Veronika, *Spôsob hovorenia o feminizme na Slovensku by som nazvala ako „doing feminism“* and discussion on these conference papers. In: *ASPEKT má 10+. Jubileum* (2003). Available at <http://www.aspekt.sk/desat.php?desat=17>.

"Women, let's speak about what bothers us! Women, let's claim what we're entitled to!" These appeals gradually, one by one, were addressed to women via billboards placed along roads and motorways several weeks before the 2002 general elections. When and where should we speak and claim?! Should we complain to our friends even more? Give a piece of our mind to our partners, be angry with parents and tell them to stop poking their noses into everything? Nobody understood those mysterious messages. An on top of everything – that name: *Let's Do IT!* This was not a campaign for the newest jogging collection for women from Nike, but an ad for a "women's movement". Like in a bad home video, a guy kept attacking us from the TV screen, for a seemingly endless half-minute, speaking about his plight. His wife joined a "women's movement". Take sympathy on him. All he wants is to have his wife back. Also that daughter standing next to him with a sad stare on her face will be happy when her mom is back home, with her family. Because when women of Slovakia join the "movement", their mom will be able to return where she belongs – to her daughter and husband. And will let the movement be.

But what wouldn't a Slovak woman do to make one man happy? Or two, three of them or...the whole government, coalition parties! Finally, all was exposed. A couple of days before the elections the third billboard appeared and a popular actress came up with her TV appeal: "Women, let's vote!" Thank you for reminding me. Isn't it nice to remind women – through flowers on billboards and a membership card that could be used in partner businesses for discount purchases – that they have the right to vote and are a dynamic force of democracy?

How did women deserve such attention, so much TV time, so many billboards and – so much money? It was simple. Allegedly, at that time democracy was under threat and women needed to be mobilised. In 2002 the victory of the ruling coalition parties – which in 1998 had succeeded in breaking the authoritarian style of governance of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar – was far from certain. Pre-election polls, however, indicated that women were an untapped pool that the coalition parties could use. Some women over 55, with

lower education and from smaller towns up to 5,000 inhabitants, intended to cast their ballot for the opponent of the ruling coalition – the HZDS party. Many women over 55 were undecided.<sup>6</sup> Was there any significant gender difference in voting behaviour in Slovakia? According to the polls, women's election participation as voters was at about the same level as men's, so was it legitimate to speak about a gender "gap" at all?<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the target group of the *Let's Do IT!* "informal women's movement" precisely corresponded with the description of undecided female voters or those who intended to vote for the oppositional HZDS. These were supposed to be women with the following characteristics: "age 30-65, elementary or secondary education, living in smaller towns and villages."<sup>8</sup> This women-targeting election campaign was successful – the pre-2002 ruling coalition secured another term in office and the support of women significantly facilitated the formation of the right-wing coalition.<sup>9</sup>

The movement *Let's Do IT!* indeed did a lot of "it" shortly before and after the elections. In addition to attracting women to the ballots they succeeded – for a time exceeding the very existence of the movement – in distorting the meaning of the notion of "women's movement" to denote something demeaning, a fake creation, a marketing product of one US media advisor and PR agencies cooperating with her in Slovakia.

Everything was organised unbelievably smoothly. Where before feminist and women's rights organisations had demanded better cooperation with the state, the *Let's Do IT!* movement succeeded immediately. After the elections,

<sup>6</sup> Gyarfášová, Oľga – Paľková, Katarína, *Potenciál aktívnej účasti žien vo verejnom živote*, Inštitút pre verejné otázky, Bratislava, 2002, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Filadelfiová, Jarmila – Bútorová, Zora – Gyarfášová, Oľga, "Women and Men in Politics", in: Mesežnikova, Grigorij – Kollár, Miroslav – Nicholson, Tom (ed.), *Slovakia 2002. A Global Report on the State of Society*, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava, 2003, p. 335.

<sup>8</sup> Slušná, Lubomíra, Päť mýtov o Urobme TO!, in: *SME.sk*. 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Filadelfiová et al. (2003), p. 336; *Slovakia Parliamentary Elections, September 20 & 21, 2002. Election Report*, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Washington, D.C. 2002.

its representatives met with politicians. Women presented their demands and ministers and MPs, without any hesitation, committed themselves to their fulfillment. Handshakes, smiles for the camera – and the new gender contract in Slovakia came into existence. Representatives of the female folk met with representatives of the male folk and, without having any real power to be able to monitor whether the men really upheld their commitments, they granted – as “women of Slovakia” – legitimacy to the new political elite.

Once again, women rushed in to help the state in a time of crisis; or more precisely they came to give their helping hand to faltering democracy. The women, who perceived themselves as those who were a little left-behind by the democratisation process, were supposed to be its engine – at least during the elections. *Vis-à-vis* the ideal state order they were somehow different and politically backward. Allegedly, they didn't know how to use their right to vote. But thanks to the noble intentions of the “informal women's movement” they uprose and uplifted the Slovak democracy, which, in turn, allegedly gave voice to women. Through their diligent work on the altar of democracy, the “women of Slovakia” earned their status of citizens of a state which, since 2002, was increasingly defined by its neo-liberal orientation.

## **For God or for the Constitution**

The repertory of possible public roles for women has not been exhausted by their identification with democratisation. As a political subject, women were continuously constructed as a population of disorderly subjects whose morals had been destroyed by the allegedly excessively liberal abortion law of the 1950s. For right-wing and conservative politicians of both sexes, religious NGOs, Catholic clergy and one popular neo-conservative weekly “women” did not represent real women. This anti-secular coalition advocating neo-moralisation (which has become one of the most common ways of doing politics not only in Slovakia) constructed women as a discursive tool.

Women are used to stabilise the limits of the sought-after political order. As a discursive category they are supposed to proceed from sinning, through repentance to understanding their nature and, finally, to redemption – not only in heaven but, ideally, in a non-secular state, already on earth. Disorderly women must be continually disciplined and their inner evil called upon so that they could discover their inner good. And if it is not possible to achieve this once and for all with one law, then it is convenient to tame at least one woman, once in a while.

When in April 2009, sociologist and – from fall of 2005 until the elections in 2006 – Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family Iveta Radičová ran for president, she dared to do something unforgivable. She proclaimed – not in an academic journal with hardly any readership – but in public: “what is moral or immoral in society is a matter of social convention.”<sup>10</sup> She spoke about abortion and about the fact that the opinion of the church has its limitations – a secular state with its constitutions and its citizens of both sexes. I presume that by social conventions she did not mean a unilateral decree that she would have issued as the future president of Slovakia. But maybe this is precisely how those whose power rests upon hierarchical relations – representatives of the Catholic Church in Slovakia – picture a social contract on social change. No wonder that statements of the presidential candidate were repeated by both lower and higher ranking priests. From Polish priests who a few years back had come to evangelise the godless capital city, and who anxiously strove to do so also through publishing colorful magazines preaching sexual abstinence before marriage, to Catholic bishops, of whom we have eighteen in Slovakia, but of these only one or two can be heard in public.

Immediately after the statement about morality and abortions, representatives of the Catholic Church denounced the public activities of Iveta Radičová.

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<sup>10</sup> Tódová, Monika, *Radičová: Slová biskupa ma ranili*, in: *SME.sk*, 26. 2. 2009. Available at <http://volby.sme.sk/c/4325397/radicova-slova-biskupa-ma-ranili.html>.

In sermons and media statements they commented on the presidential candidate, but claimed they were only presenting their personal opinions as common citizens. All right, let's consider this option as well. But who was it who, a few days after a sermon preached by Bishop Rudolf Baláž, in which he had indirectly compared Radičová to Hitler, had a meeting at the Bishop's Office in Banská Bystrica? Was it Iveta Radičová – a citizen and presidential candidate and Rudolf Baláž – a citizen from Banská Bystrica, or was it Iveta Radičová – a Catholic and presidential candidate and her shepherd, bishop and politician Baláž?

After a fifteen-minute discussion they presented to the media a common statement saying they had “no difference as concerns fundamental questions”<sup>11</sup> and refused to provide the media with any further answers to their questions. I tried to imagine what could have been the subject of their discussion and what political, non-civic, Christian lesson Radičová had received. Maybe her talk with the bishop resembled the dialogue between a bishop and a nun in a book written by Jana Juráňová: “‘You must, my child, learn that our plans are not in our hands,’ the bishop told her the other day. Klára does not comprehend why the bishop’s office wants to change people’s plans. Does the office represent God on this earth in this respect as well?”<sup>12</sup> Let’s swap Klára with Radičová and we get the first political message of the Catholic Church to the candidate. She too was obliged to grasp this lesson – in Slovakia a representative of God has more power than a symbolic representative of the people.

And let’s swap Klára for other women who in 2001 – when the Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH), at that time a parliamentary party of the ruling coalition, proposed changes in the Constitution that would have meant a ban on abortion, added to their signatures under the peti-

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<sup>11</sup> SITA (2009), *Radičová si vyjasnila svoje postoje s biskupom Balážom*, in: *SME.sk*, 9. 3. 2009. Available at <http://volby.sme.sk/c/4341167/radicova-si-vyjasnila-svoje-postoje-s-biskupom-balazom.html>

<sup>12</sup> Juráňová, Jana. *Orodovnice*, ASPEKT, Bratislava, 2008, p. 85.

tion comments such as: “The KDH proposal is idiotic.”, “I add my voice to support the pro-choice stance. And, of course, I’m a woman and I’d love to kick the asses of those men who talk such baloney.” “It is absurd that political sects would usurp the right to decide in the name of all citizens.” “I disagree that men from KDH should decide about us, women. No man has the right to decide on behalf of a woman. Each woman has the right to decide about herself freely and on her own.” “How come it is men who initiated this proposal to change the abortion law?” “I’m against the ban on abortion. I believe I have the right to decide freely, we live in a democratic state, don’t we?”<sup>13</sup>

To sum it up: we live in a democratic state, don’t we? In 2001, the change of the Constitution did not come into being. In 2002, political games with abortion led to the demise of the government and the life of women and men in Slovakia now goes on with a new, allegedly social-democratic, government. At the end of 2008 the government discussed the National Programme for Protection of Sexual and Reproductive Health – a document that, not without a reason, had been put aside for a long time. The recapitulation of the discussion about it looks like a mass crash: the minister of health who had prepared the document was recalled, none of those who had proposed their comments was able to successfully push for their interests, and the national programme ended up as some incomprehensible amalgam. The whole – democratic – discussion led to a stalemate. But what is decisive for the nature of politics shaping women’s lives is the fact that it was not about a clash of pro-life and pro-choice organisations. The National Programme that was supposed to define the steps to the improvement of sexual and reproductive health of men and women was sent to the shredding machine due to one meeting of the Prime Minister with bishops, during which the “bishops (finally) came to an agreement with Prime Minister Robert Fico that the controversial material would not be discussed by

<sup>13</sup> *Iniciatíva za možnosť voľby* (2001), pp. 102-104.

the government.”<sup>14</sup> It must have been a rather pleasant meeting; the conversation must have proceeded non-conflictually and smoothly. Neither of the attending parties would want to ruin their *common dinner*.

## **Burdens from the Times of Emancipation**

What to do with the women who will not bear any more children and whose wrinkles make them unfit for a commercial of the “women’s movement”? Pensioners have ended up badly. They are unattractive, they eat up the state budget – as some would say – and maybe they are good only for taking care of their grandchildren whom could not be placed in daycare. The best thing these women could do is be invisible.

But in the past two years they have received ample media attention as supporters of the main ruling party SMER-SD, when the party organised celebrations of International Women’s Day for them. Elderly women have become the visual materialisation of a socialist society. Hundreds of women, pensioners were packed in theatres and sport arenas to see the show, a handful of politicians and get a red rose.

Authors of video recordings from these celebrations, published with pleasure by internet news portals, never missed a chance for mockery: some elderly women are trying to find seating in a packed hall, another one is chewing on a hamburger, yet another is covering her face maybe wondering how the whole thing would turn out. But whom should we laugh at? The Prime Minister, the Minister of Interior as well as the Minister of Culture are decorating cakes, telling jokes, revealing secrets from higher politics. They make a few jokes when they call the neatly groomed women in the audience (only a few of them are accompanied by their husbands) “dear girls” and introduce themselves as “handsome guys”. But the

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<sup>14</sup> Program sexuálneho zdravia nebude. Cirkev uspeľa. (2009). In *aktuálne.sk*, 21. 1. 2009. Available at <http://aktualne.centrum.sk/domov/zdravie-skolstvo-spolocnost/clanek.phtml?id=1173702>

air does not thicken; there is no erotic tension of male-female courtship. However, it is not imbued with the rage of forgotten and excluded old women either.

The mother of the politician resembles the women in the audience. She worked hard and, besides, brought up the politician and his siblings. If it is impossible to properly appreciate her work, then it is necessary to ritualise this appreciation. The politicians face women who in their lives experienced the double or triple burden of the “socialist emancipation” of women. Nowadays, the women themselves are burdens left over from those times of “emancipation”, so what shall we do with them? Nothing, we’d rather do nothing. There are more and more of them and so it is a good thing to make peace with them, and wish them all the best “on the occasion of your holiday, International Women’s Day”.<sup>15</sup> And, in turn, to expect they will cause no trouble.

When society, its politicians, husbands, employers and children show “respect” to women – and it does not matter whether they do so on IWD or Mothers’ Day – they publicly acknowledge that they ignore them for the remaining 364 days of the year. It is necessary, then, to symbolically include women in society on that 365<sup>th</sup> day, and stop looking at them as some incapable beings who do not even understand their own pensions, low salaries, abuse of their maternal and family “obligations” by their relatives and the state. But the Prime Minister understands this well when he tells them: “Let me symbolically embrace you all...”<sup>16</sup> And so the state embraces them and there is no problem whatsoever.

## How much liberation, how much freedom

Women, then, do not exist on their own, be it in transforming society or in any other political, social and economic regime. Each question asking what has

<sup>15</sup> Robert Fico, in: Mátyus, Róbert, *Video dňa. MDŽ skončil, šou musí pokračovať*, in: *aktuálne.sk*, 11. 3. 2009. Available at <http://aktualne.centrum.sk/video/?id=962863>.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Fico, in: Holičková, Zuzana, *Video dňa. Premiér oslavoval MDŽ aj v Bratislave. Zdobil tortu*, in: *aktuálne.sk*, 13. 3. 2008. Available at <http://aktualne.centrum.sk/video/?id=948836>.

happened to women then and there first asks about the meaning ascribed to women in social relations and the meaning that women give to themselves. I tried to describe three figurations of women – actors of democratisation, mothers under moral scrutiny and useless pensioners – through which politics and public debate have politicised the category of women in Slovakia after 1989. This has happened in order to foreclose the category from further possible problematisation. However, the politicisation of women should take the opposite direction. It should open the category of women and enable also conflictual figurations of the subject of women. Such politicisation should be a legitimate part of unstable democratic politics, the conflictual nature of which is related to the fact that democracy is a practice of freedom and not some administrative machinery carrying out democracy according to some scheme.

Finally, I would like to get back to two questions which the texts in this publication touch upon. How much have women gained or lost during transformation? If I leave out the problem of the non-existence of one homogenous subject of woman, even if it were delineated by the territory of Slovakia and the time period of 1989 and 2009, I am still unable to answer this question no matter how much I try. A partial answer to the question “how much” could be found in gender disaggregated statistical data collected by the state, gender indicators in evaluations of recently finished “European” projects, the number of female MPs or institutions dealing with gender equality. However, I consider the real informational value of these indicators to be null as long as there does not exist a group of female scientists, teachers, authors or simply intellectuals who have enough time and money to critically interpret these data, to research current problems of women and of gender organisation of society, publish their findings and critically discuss them. If feminist research existed in Slovakia, then I would in this place write about problems of those women I have so far only heard of from news or from final reports of NGO “women’s projects”. I know only very little, for instance, about unemployed women in Eastern Slovakia working as caretakers of dying Russians or Poles in the USA, about the current gender division of labour in small factories producing semi-products for the automobile industry, scattered all over Slovakia, or

about the reasons why the total devaluation of the work of teachers in elementary and secondary schools has not induced mass protests yet. And I don't think that these problems of women would be any smaller than those embodied by the described figurations of women as actors of democratisation, mothers under moral scrutiny and useless pensioners. I simply don't know them or know very little about them, and I think that this is the case of other female intellectuals in Slovakia as well.

To the second question: Have the changes of 1989 “liberated” women? In contrast to equality, which I have always deemed as something measurable, I have for a long time regarded freedom as a concept too vague and too often instrumentalised to be meaningful. Just like the editors of this publication, I usually understood freedom as a notion in quotation marks. This indicates that the status of this grand word is unquestionable, but its meaning is problematic. Nevertheless, I believe that freedom is tangible. It is experienced as a strategy of action against oppression. What else but their own practice of freedom could explain women's opposition to the attack on their freedom when they spoke up against the ban on abortion? The “liberation” of women that has happened after 1989 in the sphere of reproductive and sexual rights does not contain the pathos of the questions posed at the beginning of this paragraph. However, it contains a different pathos – of a collective action of women against their oppressive relations with other people and institutions. I don't want to narrow the freedom of women in Slovakia down to a single sphere, but this example is blatant. I don't have doubts that many women and girls follow the lines of freedom, be it in smaller or bigger events of their lives. My practice of freedom is feminism.

Translated by **Eva Riečanská**



4.

East

Germany

No State Can Exist  
Without Women!  
German „Turning  
Point” Experiences  
1989/90 and  
Afterwards

**Rita Pawlowski**

The Germans coined the term *Wende* or *turning point* for the societal changes of the years 1989/90 in their country. And indeed, in the months between November 1989 and October 1990 quite a few turning points were reached between the Oder and Rhine rivers: The 40 years of two German nations came to an end, the wall between the East and the West disappeared in no time at all, socialist East Germany (DDR) and capitalist West Germany (BRD) united... okay, but into what did they unite? Today, 20 years later, the answer is: *Germany*, which does not call itself capitalist and is certainly not socialist.

The debates are still ongoing and tons of paper have been filled with descriptions of this metamorphosis. In united Germany there is no general agreement about the gains and losses of the turning point. And the interpretation of the past – especially the past of the DDR – is becoming increasingly more vehement and ideological.

There is only one topic in these endless debates that seems not worth mentioning: women – before, during and after the turning point! A large photo exhibition on Berlin's Alexanderplatz documenting the time from 1988 to 1990 is exemplary in this regard. Dozens of strong and brave men look down onto the visitors of the exhibition. And the many strong and brave women, where are they? Perhaps they didn't exist at all? In German memory, it seems that the female subject disappeared in the celebration of democracy and freedom.

But appearances are often deceitful. "No state can exist without women," said our daughters during the time of the turning point, full of self-confidence, and on December 3 1989 founded a new, feminist women's association, the Independent Women's Association (Unabhängiger Frauenverband or UfV). They were rebelling against the patriarchal structures and politics in the DDR, and were also rebelling against us, their mothers, who predominantly accepted and supported these structures and policies. They wanted a transformed DDR and changes in the relationship between the genders. As the founders put it in their manifesto of December 3 1989, "We must insist that women's questions are not a marginal societal issue, but instead are basic existential questions."

They further stated that there was neither public awareness of gender, nor an appropriate political advocacy group for women. The group aspired to change both of these things. The engagement of our daughters was thrilling, almost limitless and absolutely self-confident.

They defined a notion of feminism for the DDR that, in contrast to West Germany, focused on the perception and representation of women's interests, without completely excluding men. In January 1990 they successfully secured a ministerial position for the UFV in the Modrow government. In a wide-ranging alliance of political parties and civic movements they phrased their feminist ideas about the future of the DDR in a "social charter". They plunged, inexperienced, into the parliamentary elections in February/March 1990 and in doing so underestimated their male colleagues in the scramble for positions of power in the new DDR parliament. They made formerly taboo topics, like same-sex love and spousal abuse, subjects of open discussion. They were provocative in their television appearances, aiming to publicise the social inequalities between women and men and challenge ideas about the emancipation of East German women.

They encountered enthusiastic approval from both men and women, as well as unsympathetic or even hostile rejection. But in many women they triggered a thought process that is still being felt today.

With the unification of the two German states in October 1990 it was also the East German feminists who publicly positioned themselves against unification at the expense of women and who marched in the streets for women's right to work, right to self-determination and the right for women's voices to be heard in all areas of politics and economic life.

The state powers of the new Federal Republic of Germany completely ignored the demands and suggestions of the East German women, which was aided by reawakened feelings of superiority of East German men, among other things. In 1998 the feminist women's association disappeared from the political landscape in the new Germany, thus ending one of the most exciting and motivational chapters of the history of the German women's movement.

Yes, our intelligent, emancipated daughters were not counted among the winners of the turning point era.

From my point of view, the new feminist women's movement in the DDR in 1989/1990 was the only political movement of the time that also more or less openly dealt with generational conflict. The rejection of what at that point was East Germany's only women's association, the Democratic Women's Association of Germany (Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschland or DFD), is an important indication of this.

The younger generation of women felt that the initials stood for something else. They ironically deciphered the acronym DFD as "**D**ienstbar – **F**olgsam – **D**umpf" ("Subservient – Obedient – Musty"). It was a harsh judgement about a generation of women to which I belonged. It was also unfair, as we had taken advantage of the chances offered to us in the DDR; chances we had worked hard to get. Did that make our gratitude to this country uncritical? Was our lack of feminism a lack of self-confidence?

The turning point did not allow the old women's association DFD with its 1.5 million members and the baggage of its history a fresh start in 1989/1990. For 40 long years the association was committed to the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) and to East Germany. Now the members of DFD needed to act and think on their own.

Federal structures and new responsibilities for the 17,000 grassroots groups in the cities and villages had to be developed from the association's ubiquitous and strongly internalised centralism. However, this proved to be a difficult problem. Many, many members and staff of the association left the organisation, disappointed and uncertain. The lack of membership dues and government funds forced drastic budget cuts, which meant that more than 1,000 women lost their jobs with the association. Until February 1990 we argued and struggled to find new forms and content for the work of the women's association, however, this mostly took place behind closed doors.

Adding insult to injury, as an organisation close to the state the DFD ended up under the control of the trustee corporation entrusted with the privatisation and reorganisation of East Germany's nationally owned assets. The bright minds of the women's organisation spent months, even years struggling with the trustee corporation to defend the interests of the association, especially the association's property.

In this situation the political position of the DFD remained powerless, ineffective and invisible to the public. And at the time, no one wanted to listen to the "elders" or cooperate with them: they were assigned shared responsibility for the failure of the DDR per se and the exclusion of the women's association close to the state seemed appropriate. And we, "the elders"? How long did we need to get over our previous entitlement of speaking on behalf of all women and assume a more easy-going view of competing with our daughters who had formed the new feminist association!

But perhaps this exclusion played its part in ensuring that the old East German women's organisation did not totally disappear from the scene even 20 years after the turning point. It may sound paradoxical, but the association that, in contrast to the feminist women's association UFV, did not attain any political publicity in 1989/1990 was compelled – almost unavoidably – to refocus on its strengths: on-site social work. The association's well-founded knowledge about the situations and needs of women in the regions, experience in dealing with administrations, counselling and assistance structures in place from the DDR era, not to mention the still active membership all over East Germany proved advantageous for the DFD. It already had a network in place that the newer associations first had to arduously put together.

I cannot conceal that I was not one of the members that contributed to the turning point of the DFD, which turned it into a community welfare organisation with its current name "Democratic Women's Association" (demokratischer frauenbund or dfb) and demanded that it took new political positions.

However, I do recognise the success of this transformation and the group's accomplishments for women. Over many years the association organised temporary jobs for thousands of women and occupational re-training financed by the federal government, especially for unemployed East German women. In 1996 the dfb charity established a unique living project for homeless women (and now also men) called "Undine," which was one of the winners in the "Social City 2006" nationwide competition. And the general manager of the charity, who before 1989 was also the federal secretary of the DFD federal board of directors for a short period of time, received the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 2006 for her social engagement.

Today the association no longer counts over one million members and the majority of the remaining and/or new 50,000 members belong to the older generation. This accounts for the fact that the dfb was not able to gain a foothold in former West Germany and has found its base and supporters in the East of the Federal Republic.

Today, when I think back to the weeks and months of the year 1990 until the disappearance of the DDR and the creation of a larger Federal Republic of Germany I ask myself, "What could have been achieved if the generations of mothers and daughters of the DDR had found common ground to work together with the women's associations of West Germany? And why did our attempts to surmount the walls between women in the East and West fail? We certainly shared the same language – yet despite this we could not understand one another, or only with great difficulty. Pointless questions? Probably, but perhaps important ones for the generation of our granddaughters?

While we women were trying to understand one another in 1989/1990, it was the politicians, meaning especially men that were putting together the packages for the country's future. And these packages for the future did not contain many of the women's rights achieved previously. The legal system in force today and the current social system mean a step backwards for me as an East German woman. What I understand by this is that the promotion of women

within companies and on the national level, women's self-determination, child-care, care for the elderly and healthcare are for the most part understood as economic categories and are thus subject to the rule of money. I feel that this is a loss for which the gains of the turning point cannot completely compensate. Naturally, nowadays I, and not the state, decide about what I do or don't do, whether I speak or remain silent, about my engagement or my reticence. The feeling of freedom is a lovely feeling. And at the same time this freedom is, nevertheless, not enough for me when the sisters by my side don't know how they can fill their children's bellies, or afford sending them some day to university.

It is time that we, women, kicked against the pricks again. However, this time with the many experiences of the German turning point!

Translated by **Anthony B. Heric**

# My Failure at Becoming Italian

**Jana Simon**

During my childhood Europe meant Italy to me. *La Strada* was the first film that made me cry, I adored Italian cuisine and once received a postcard of the sun shining on the Spanish Steps. That was the moment I fell in love. Italy combined all of my childhood wishes and longings: spaghetti with tons of tomato sauce, gelato in all flavours, good looking dark-haired boys on mopeds, convertibles driving along narrow coastal roads – the sweet life of the siesta, a mixture of idleness and consummate beauty. I painted the outline of Italy on the wall in my room, taped up pictures next to it and marked the most important cities with a dot from a black felt-tip pen. I lived far away from these places in East Berlin in the 1980s and dreamed of a country that I had never seen and probably never would, just as I would not see the rest of Western Europe.

At school I delved into expert discussions with my friend. She had just one flaw, as she preferred France. One day during geography class she looked at me from the side and whispered into my ear, “Jana, the Italians are lazy, you know.” After that I stopped speaking to her for a couple of days. She had injured my sensitive national pride and I plotted my revenge. Soon thereafter, much to my great delight, I was able to crow about Italy becoming World Football Champions in 1982 and France landing far behind in fourth place. In any case, East Germany could not compete, and even if they could have, I doubt that I would have been rooting for my native country.

It was a life of the absurd. Our fantasy world seldom collided with our everyday lives, we compartmentalised very meticulously. During lessons we took notes on the superiority of the socialist system, these perfectly conceived five-year plans: bituminous coal, potash salts, machine building. Too bad that there still wasn't any ketchup or any Depeche Mode records to buy. We received postcards with ugly socialist buildings on the front. Girls and boys completely unknown to us from the Soviet Union wrote: “Dear German Friend! I congratulate you on the anniversary of the Thälmann Young Pioneers. Your Soviet friend.” I wrote similar words on postcards of Berlin's Television Tower and sent them to Moscow or Vladivostok. Everyone knew we would never

meet, never get to know one another. We were happy about it. The thought of meeting and having to chat about the Thälmann Young Pioneers could only cause panic.

Under the chairs my friend and I further lived out our secret Westerner existence, exchanging notes discussing Madonna's new hairstyle. We planned our futures far away in Rome or Paris, and preferably with Marcello Mastroianni. Maybe we, Easterners, were the first real Europeans – we changed our nationality every day, slipped into it and took it off as we pleased. Completely unsuspectingly. In our thoughts we already lived in a Europe without borders.

As I entered the third grade I decided to transform myself into a fully-fledged Italian. To do this I now needed that which could no longer be avoided: the language. My parents placed a classified advertisement and one week later Mr. Kurz appeared in our living room. My first Italian teacher wore grey synthetic-fibre pants, had a dark beard and his eyes disappeared behind glasses that were so large they almost engulfed his chin – he must have gotten them in the Soviet Union. Kindly put, I had pictured Mr. Kurz a little more Mediterranean. Regardless, I was ready to spare no effort in becoming Italian. From that point forward, once a week I went to Mr. Kurz, he lived far away from us in a newly constructed high-rise in Lichtenberg. The hour-long lesson always began the same way: to start, Mrs. Kurz placed a glass of orange sea-buckthorn juice in front of me on the ochre-coloured coffee table, I took my notebook out of my bag and then recited vocabulary sitting next to the brown wall unit. In my Italian book from the West the people constantly took walks along the Lido in Venice, ordered “un vino per favore” and talked about where they had spent their vacations, which fit well with my ideas of Italy. I took my personal vacation from East Berlin, plunged into the fascinating world of “professores”, “dottores”, “ingenieres” and even managed to forget the claustrophobically low ceilings in Mr. Kurz's apartment. I repeated sentences like, “Ah buon giorno dottore, anche mia moglie e qui,” which means some-

thing like, "Ah, good day Doctor, my wife is also here." For ten-year-olds an indispensable turn of phrase, Mr. Kurz seemed quite serious about my education. After the hours on the Venice beach I returned to Berlin Johannisthal where my parents reckoned the wine was sweet, gelato was called vanilla, chocolate or fruit ice cream and for school I had to memorise the characteristics of a revolutionary crisis. Italy, like all of Western Europe, belonged to a parallel universe – I may have heard about it daily on the radio and watched it on television, but I unfortunately had no idea about what it felt like. Gradually I left my homeland and became an intermediate entity. I lived as an underground Italian in East Berlin and in doing so felt somehow subversive.

It also had much to do with the fact that I was not particularly pleased with my real identity – who was happy to be citizen of a country whose bands named themselves "Roundabout" or "Inca", where fellow citizens fought over discounted bottles of neon-coloured nail polish and where, when on the telephone, you always also greeted the suspected state eavesdropper on the line. My identity was a magnificent mosaic made up of many colourful individual pieces that had no connection to one another. One day I could be an Italian for the day, tomorrow a Brit. I became a master of staging. And of self-denial.

In the late 1980s my friend and I often travelled to Budapest in the summer, which was our capital of the West in the East. One of the ironies of history is that Hungary was admitted much later to the European Union than the former East Germany. In Budapest there was Coca Cola, pink pants and *Flashdance* was showing at the cinema. One evening in July 1987 we decided to pretend we were English girls for the night. We teased up our hair, lined our eyelids with black kohl and struck out for the night. On our way to the club we constantly stopped in the middle of the street, loudly yelling "wonderful" and in English asked passers-by for directions that we already knew perfectly well. The club was located in the middle of a park, everyone danced beneath the open sky, we sat elegantly on the margins and watched. Soon

from the right two lads approached us asking where we came from. “London!” we screamed. The two of them eyed us with respect, in their eyes we had reached the pinnacle of the glamour scale, or at least that was what we fancied. Unfortunately, we could hardly talk to them now. The only sentence that kept crossing my mind was, “Hello, I’m Mike and I am a boxer” from my English lessons, my friend softly muttered “Big Ben, Big Ben” like a mantra to herself. Perhaps she was hoping to be asked about the sights in London, we had studied them in school. We fell silent and I planned my escape. Finally, I departed the scene with a terrible combination of English and German, saying, “I hol us paar drinks.” The two lads just nodded knowingly and grinned.

But I did not want to see it, understand it. And so there was a second story of wanton deception. At a campsite on Lake Balaton in the late 1980s I met two Dutch girls. We chatted for a while and then came the unavoidable question of where I came from. “From West Berlin,” I answered, unaffected. Although my father’s Lada with its East Berlin license plate was parked next to our tent for all to see. I spun a long, complicated yarn. I lived with my mother (true) and said that she and I had emigrated to West Berlin (false). I only spent summer vacations with my East German father. I cocked my head to the side and looked earnest, everything was just very complicated. The two of them looked at me with some astonishment but appeared to believe me. This story at least had the advantage that I did not have to speak perfect English but instead could freely speak in my mother tongue. I perfected my methods.

The falsehood robbed me of the summer and my insouciance. From that point onward I lived in constant fear of my true identity being discovered or that my father would accidentally betray me. I only wore my most colourful t-shirts, read all day from a dog-eared Donald Duck comic book and thought about whether or not I should remove the “VEB”-label (“state-owned enterprise”) from my towel. After all, one of the Dutch girls might catch me in the shower with a towel from the East. That would allow them to draw dangerous conclusions. I was so busy with my new identity that I gradually

grew lonely. I no longer knew exactly what I had told to whom, so it was better not to talk to anyone. I had been strung up by my own yarn. For just a short moment in time I became one with my new identity, I could taste it, the sweetness of the West, separated from the tedious everyday of the East. Unfortunately, this feeling never lasted long – it left a bitter aftertaste of deceit in my mouth, of betrayal. In the end I was happy when we departed so that I could give up the game.

My becoming Italian was also at a standstill; Mr. Kurz was nowhere to be found. After he thoroughly quizzed me about my family background he just disappeared. I never heard from him again, the only things that remained were the three volumes of *Italian for You* on my bookshelf. It was a shame, as I had enjoyed the apolitical hours on the Lido of Venice in an environment where everything was analysed politically.

Even as I small child I had declared my solidarity with Angola. Generally, in East Germany we were constantly involved with some random country in the middle of nowhere. We sent letters to Nicaragua, collected clothing for Mozambique. I remember once standing in front of my childhood bookcase for a long time, pondering what I should send to a starving child in Africa. I decided on a Smurf. That was a real sacrifice. After all, it was from the West and was certain to be just as coveted in Africa as it was with us in East Berlin, I imagined.

My political socialisation reached its zenith in the eleventh grade, 1989, as we were instructed to dialectically evaluate the formation of fold mountains in geography class. No god could have his holy hands in play. Even the mountains were on our side. Despite this, East Germany foundered shortly thereafter. I had left it long before the Berlin Wall came down, however it had failed to notice.

Reunification was extreme in all respects. That an entire system, including its unbeloved representatives and products, could simply disappear is an experience that separates us from our contemporaries in the West. In history class in school we once again started with prehistoric man but by the

end of the school year we had only reached the Middle Ages. All authorities were in a state of disintegration, our feared civics teacher landed in a psychiatric ward, the formerly influential school director left by taking an early retirement. Books were stacked up next to the trash containers, books telling the history of the working classes, portions of which we had been required to memorise. Anyone who has experienced that will have difficulties ever believing in authority again or taking political parties seriously. Because we saw that nothing is certain and permanent – no system, no party, no authority, not even a formerly powerful world order.

At some point during this time I lost the ambiguousness of my identity. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall I saw myself as a Western European who, due to some divine oversight, was living in the East. Now after the change in political systems I would finally be re-naturalised into my natural environment. To my great surprise, no one in the West recognised my true identity, they viewed me as a true Easterner from the East, one that in my memory I never was. Everyone assumed I could speak fluent Russian, was well versed in the works of Karl Marx and the teachings of dialectical materialism, but I had never been interested in any of that. After the embarrassing experiences in Budapest I had focussed more on the English language and also felt at home with the wisdom of Donald Duck. I in no way fulfilled their expectations. At the same time, I couldn't really join in. I was intimately familiar with the Milky Way candy bar, Levis jeans and Madonna, however the subtle differences that ruled life in the West left me baffled. I had no idea how this nation, this Western European entity was structured. I knew the theory behind it, but not what held it together at its core. Even today it may be the case that I cannot name all of the West German federal chancellors and foreign ministers in order; I grew up in a different country. The Soviet national leaders disappeared from my memory and I floated in a no-man's-land detached from time and space.

When I finally physically went to Italy in 1992, travelled to the country of my longings, I was both happy and disappointed. In Perugia it was hot, the

cappuccino was creamy, a few individual older men still took siestas, but all of this did not have much to do with me. I shared a room with a Dutch woman, there were Brits, Austrians, Swiss, even a Brazilian – but I was the only one from the East. Sometimes I had the feeling that I was observing my fellow lodgers from a far away place, benevolently, but their experiences at anti-nuclear power protests in Gorleben and school exchange programmes in the USA left me strangely unaffected. My stories about military defence teacher Major Mendel, parties drinking vodka with cola, the decision as to whether or not to become a member of the Free German Youth and songs like *Spain's heaven spreads its stars above our trenches* sounded exciting, almost exotic, but they now separated me from the others. Suddenly, all of these past events were weighed down by an unforeseen gravity and seriousness. It seemed to me that there were no more categories into which I could flee. So I tried to transform myself back from a full-fledged Italian into a full-fledged Eastern European; I started studying Russian and travelled to Moscow for the first time. Earlier, in East Germany, I had refused to go there, as that was something an Italian in exile in the East just simply could not do.

In the great East I stayed with Irina, an unemployed French teacher and her daughter, Katja. I never was able to find out how the two of them spent their days. Regardless of whether I was coming or going, they were wearing floral terrycloth robes and blow-drying their hair. Katja was 23 years old, newly divorced and seemed unhappy that her mother had allowed me to use her old childhood room and that she had to sleep on the couch. Perhaps this is why she looked me up and down with such detached condescension or totally ignored me. It was very surprising when she spoke to me one morning in the kitchen. Warily she asked me who had won more medals at the last Olympics, Germany or Russia. "Russia, probably," I answered. She lit a cigarette, lowered her hand to the table with an "I-knew-it" gesture, turned away from me and disappeared without uttering another word. She just wanted to show this clueless Westerner her place, she who knew nothing of the glori-

ous victories of bygone Soviet power. I understood Katja very well – I saw the colourful sheepdog calendar on the wall and the leather Lenin armbands under the bed. Here the yearning was palpable in every object – in the toy figures from the children's surprise eggs behind glass, in the Coca-Cola sticker on her shelf. It was as if I were looking into a mirror back into the past. I could feel the heaviness, the melancholy. I knew her dreams, but there was no longer any trust between us. I had switched sides; in her eyes I was a Western European.

Whenever I travel into what was formerly the East I am now a woman from the West. Recently, as a journalist, I visited Azerbaijan, a country with a lot of oil that has left behind a series of ugly black lakes everywhere and a president and former head of the KGB who loves to persecute his citizens with his own personal quotes and photos of himself. In a café in Baku I met an opposition politician, stout in stature with a dark moustache, who smoked a lot and smiled a lot. He talked insistently for several hours and tried to hypnotise me with his eyes. Without a doubt the man had a mission. His country belonged to Europe and absolutely nowhere else, he said. Democracy, Western values had for centuries been deeply rooted in Azerbaijan. I felt like an EU diplomat who was supposed to pass judgement for or against Azerbaijan and Europe. Looking at him I felt sorry for him. How should I know what Europe really is and who is allowed to belong or not? I always imagined Europe as a large building, somewhere in Brussels, where they store a lot of documents that get pushed back and forth, occasionally they lose a file or it gets withheld. They decide on condom sizes and how apples are supposed to look. I do not know what any of that has to do with me. The opposition politician opposite me started to sweat, small moist spots blossomed on his shirt. And then I suddenly had that East German feeling: someone is trying desperately to be relevant in the world and simply does not want to miss the boat. At this moment I am playing the Western European who explains the East together with communism, from whom gifts are expected and for whom one always has time,

even when other appointments beckon. I observed myself in this role and tried to make no mistakes, not to hurt anyone or seem arrogant. I couldn't tell the man anything about my unsuccessful attempts at becoming Italian, he would have thought I was overwrought. So I remained silent about that. "I'm reporting about oil," I said in the end, and wished him the best of luck.

Translated by **Anthony B. Heric**

Transformation –  
an Unquestioned  
Western Category?  
The Example of  
Post-Communist  
Germany

**Mirjam Hirsch**

## Introduction

Ever since I was asked to write an article for this publication, I repeatedly returned to thoughts about what concepts like “women” and “transformation” mean for me in this context. Because of this, I would like to initially approach these terms by clarifying exactly what I understand by them. Since my critical gaze also results, at least partly, from my position in society, I will also explain my personal context. A critical approach to the term “transformation,” which is often understood statically, is central to my argumentation. I will specifically discuss problems of “west-centrism.”<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently, I will make a case for a dynamic understanding of transformation, taking into account its historical context. This dynamic understanding will be distinguished especially by its multidimensionality. I will clarify this concept by analysing the simultaneous „feminisation” of poverty in former East Germany and a specific „stubbornness” of East German women who continue to seek full employment, trying to balance family and professional life. The economic challenges that women face, however, do not result solely from upheavals in the political system, but are additionally strongly influenced by neoliberal reorganisation processes. Over the course of these processes, the welfare state and its social safety net have lost relevance. This in turn leads me to the question of the interdependence of dimensions of domination and control. I will align myself with Peggy Watson’s thesis from „Gender and Politics in Postcommunism”<sup>2</sup> in recommending the introduction of an East-West dimension and in emphasising the importance of an interdependent approach, using the example of discourse about racism in East Germany in the post-turning point era.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “west-centrism” here in reference to the term eurocentrism.

<sup>2</sup> Compare: Watson, Peggy. *Gender and Politics in Postcommunism*. In: Jähnert, Gabriele et al. (ed.), *Gender in Transition in Eastern and Central Europe Proceedings*. Berlin 2001. p. 37–39.

<sup>3</sup> The German word *Wende* is usually translated into English as *turning point* to refer to the events of 1989-1990 that led to the reunification of Germany.

## Clarification of meanings and self-positioning:

### I. Women

Here, at this point, I will not speak for *all* women of my generation from former East Germany, since I believe there is no common “we” for all women, which stands opposite the category of “men”. This will become much more clear when I compare my personal background with those of many other women from former East Germany, as it is likely that I share very few experiences with the majority of them. This is because I grew up as the daughter of a pastor in rural East Germany and was living there in 1989 and afterwards.

For example, due to the oppositional stance of my parents and other family members (some of whom were subject to physical violence and/or jail sentences), I was the first and only child in my school who was not allowed to join the Young Pioneers. For outsiders this may sound banal, for others even subversive. For me as a child, however, these were experiences of exclusion and discrimination. For instance, this was expressed during the well-known flag-rolls, in which we lined up from shortest to tallest. I always had to stand in the back even though I was one of the shortest.

I was also not allowed to participate in the *Spartakiaden* – East Germany’s youth sport competition – although I was the fastest runner in my class. I could not comprehend these exclusions at the time, however, they did create in me a strong sense of recognising injustice.

Moreover, my mother was one of the few women in East Germany who did not perform any wage labour. Instead, she was a stay-at-home wife and mother, and additionally performed the unpaid “voluntary” work of a pastor’s wife. I mention these things because they make clear that the oppositional stance of my parents did not simply result in concrete exclusion from important social areas, but was also expressed in our family arrangements. As a family we deviated quite far from the norm in a few central aspects; violating ideas that

extolled wage labour for men and women and, for the most part, placed child-rearing and childcare in the hands of the state.<sup>4</sup>

Today, however, I am writing this article as a young feminist from Berlin who has a very critical view of both „the East” and „the West”. In my college gender studies programme I have been especially influenced by feminist theories from the West and Latin America.

## 2. Transformation

With this background, being familiar with terms like “Stasi”, “informer”, “surveillance” and “wiretaps” from an early age onward, I also experienced the turning point of 1989 as a sort of “liberation”. This was naturally also conveyed through my immediate family environment, a few of my relatives still use this liberation terminology to this day. Central aspects of this terminology seemed intelligible to me as a child, for example the newly won freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, freedom of travel, and the freedom to form political parties and organisations. What is conspicuous here is the repetitive use of the term “freedom”. What bothers me about the abundance of these collocations is the implicit assumption of equating “the West” with freedom. As Watson writes, “The freedom/captivity coding of West-East difference rests on a one-dimensional opposition: liberation, theoretically, is all it takes to make “them” one of “us”<sup>5</sup>. What this produces is a natural history of political change, whereby aberrations are attributed to the abnormal environment of communism.”<sup>6</sup> This is accompanied by a concept of transformation that assumes a simplified „before” and „after”. Before in this chain of associations is linked with the East – totalitarian state,

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<sup>4</sup> However, it is important to mention that despite this, women were also responsible for childbearing, which subjected them to a dual burden.

<sup>5</sup> It is very fascinating to note that Watson is writing from a western context. Personally, I do not feel included in her definition of “us”, but instead am more likely to identify with “them”.

<sup>6</sup> Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

oppression – while the after is associated with the West – democracy, freedom. Both of these concepts are thus ahistoric and statically constructed. As a result, historical developments, differences and contradictions within the systems, as well as activities between the regimes, move outside of our field of vision. This is why a static understanding of transformation must be traded for a dynamic one, one that examines social circumstances in their historical context and their often contradictory multidimensionality. This is the only way a comprehensive analysis can be productive.

The binary juxtaposition of East and West contains a clear hierarchy in favour of the West. Watson writes, “Within the particular definitional context of transition, the West is first and foremost a ‘place’ where people are *free*.”<sup>7</sup> This freedom is set as the norm and usually not questioned further. In order to explain my point, I would like to quickly mention, by way of example, the newly won freedom of travel. On the one hand, it is said that people in East Germany were unable to travel and were, therefore, imprisoned. This is only true to a point, because it was very much possible to travel within the Eastern Bloc. Travel to the West, possible only with official approval, was certainly a problem. To set this on equal footing with a total ban on travel, however, once again sets the West as the unquestioned norm, because the argument is phrased as „those who cannot travel to the West cannot travel”. This becomes even more cynical when aspects of new border demarcation are further illuminated. With the unification of Germany it may have been the case that every person with German citizenship was allowed to travel. At the same time, the borders of Germany were closed down, as manifested in, among other things, the de facto abolition of the right to asylum in 1993. Additionally, refugees living in Germany are still subject to „compulsory residency” (Residenzpflicht), which requires them to remain within a particular administrative district. Leaving the district requires a permit that is often issued arbitrarily, however, sometimes it is denied. So as of yet,

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38 – italics in the original.

not everyone has been able to enjoy the newly won freedom of travel. A group of former citizens of East Germany were allowed access to this freedom, but the right was denied to others who, in the past, had been able travel in former East Germany without a problem. However, since the West is associated with democracy and human rights, it is very difficult to articulate these unfair wrongs and to make them heard. This concept of freedom is especially convenient for justifying the implementation of the interests of the West.<sup>8</sup>

## **Gender and Transformation**

The radical change of the political system was accompanied by transferring the West German framework of institutions, legal norms and market economy onto the East. Women's and family policies from the East, which today are often considered progressive and forward-looking, were ignored in the new formation of society. One of the effects of the devaluing of everything originating from the East has been the incompatibility of having a career and a family, in a context where public day-care for children practically disappeared.

Instead, western concepts like the model of the family with the male as the sole wage earner and the woman as housewife (although often working part-time) were adopted. The right to abortion, which since 1973 had been a woman's legal right up to the third month of pregnancy in East Germany, was abolished. Abortion in West Germany was illegal, but depending on the circumstances could result in "immunity from prosecution". This was the case with proof of "court-certified mediation", for instance. As Irene Dolling summed it up in her account of the effects of the systemic changes on gender relations, "[...] With the transition to a modern capitalist-type society, gender difference as

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<sup>8</sup> The justification of ruling interests as more important than the idea of freedom has had a long history. In the context of enlightenment and colonialism "the savages" are to be freed from "barbarism".

a factor of social differentiation had [therefore] become more powerful than it had been in the GDR".<sup>9</sup>

Women in former East Germany have been and still are affected by unemployment, especially long-term unemployment. Furthermore, they experience discrimination when resuming wage labour after a break. Despite this, it is difficult to speak of women as "losers of the unification process".<sup>10</sup> This one-dimensional perception<sup>11</sup> is short-sighted: the labour force participation rate of women in the East is still higher than that of women in the West, and nowadays it is still somewhat taken for granted and self-evident for women from the East of Germany to hold full-time jobs. It is often said that East German women are stubborn<sup>12</sup> but this stubbornness is conditional upon a variety of factors. Firstly, full-time employment is an economic necessity since wages in the East are such that two breadwinners are needed to feed a family. And secondly, there remains a very large income gap in the East as compared to West Germany. In other words, stubbornness in seeking employment is an economic necessity. However, purely economic reasons are not sufficient to explain the phenomenon. Internalised social norms according to which female wage labour is considered normal also play an important role. Wage labour is considered an important factor for social and personal recognition, and for the majority of women, as well as men, a successful professional life boosts self-esteem.

At the moment, one can observe re-traditionalising of gender roles. This phenomenon is especially visible in the division of labour and in the sphere of

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<sup>9</sup> Dölling, Irene, *Ten Years After. Gender Relations in a Changed World – New Challenges for Women's and Gender Studies*, in: Jähnert, Gabriele et al. (ed.), *Gender in Transition in Eastern and Central Europe Proceedings*. Berlin, 2001, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Nickel, Hildegard Maria. *Zurück in die Moderne? Kontinuitäten und Veränderungen im Geschlechterverhältnis*, in: *Funkkolleg Deutschland im Umbruch. Studienbrief 5*, Tübingen, 1998, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18; Dölling, *op. cit.*, 59.

sexuality, as seen in discourse about family and children. However, we must wait and see how this phenomenon proceeds and whether it develops into a trend. Still, it should be noted that these discourses and policies are not solely the result of changes in the political system, but are also an expression of the neoliberalisation of a global world. Peggy Watson suggests that “in East Germany, flexible labour contracts, hours and forms of work have already been achieved which are seen as ‘pointing to the future’ of West Germany as well, in terms of neoliberal deregulation and reductions in the social welfare state.”<sup>13</sup> Flexibilisation and individualisation is actually making making the labour market more precarious and will result in even more marked social inequalities. These, in turn, will also influence inequalities between the genders and increase the differences among women. Thus it is all the more important to understand gender as an interdependent category. As already suggested above, it is thus indispensable to also consider inequalities and differences in the West and to thus pursue a dynamic term of transformation.

## **Criticism of West-Centrism**

When I argue for a dynamic understanding of transformation, the question of how it is possible to analyse transformation multidimensionally naturally comes up. To do this I would, as Watson does, advocate for the recognition of further differentiation. Following the critique of a female unit/unity, as especially expressed by African-American feminists from the USA and as adopted by the feminist critique of science, Watson recommends the introduction of an East-West dimension. “[...] [A]n idea of the West – even if implicit and unspoken – is an inevitable part of the cognitive frame within which the discourse of transition is constructed, just as this discourse itself produces ‘the West’. Insofar, then, as this ‘West’ is an unspoken point of reference for the representation of Eastern

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<sup>13</sup> Dölling, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

Europe, a westerncentredness, analogous to whiteness, structures interpretations of change."<sup>14</sup> However, Watson explicitly points out the fact that this relationship of the West to post-communism is not the same as that of the West to Orientalism, as described by Edward Said. Additionally, the racism of white women, one that is structurally anchored, is in no way to be compared to the western supremacy toward women from the former East.

Watson's expansion must therefore be understood interdependently, since racism, through which white norms are reproduced, also exists in the East. This racism includes white East German women as "perpetrators". This makes German "reunification" difficult to describe without responding to racist structures and aggression. After the pogrom-like attacks of Rostock Lichtenhagen in 1992 and Hoyerswerder in 1993,<sup>15</sup> racist-motivated violence became an attention-getter for the (international) public. The reasons for these attacks were often found in communist upbringing, which meant an after-the-fact "defamation of the East". In my opinion, the reasons for these attacks have different roots and are very multifaceted. For one, I absolutely believe that economic and social uncertainties and the much-discussed „lack of orientation" during this phase of political upheaval led to an increase in racism. However it would be fatal to assume that this was the only layer!

A second layer was a new nationalism that formed over the course of the frenzy around German unification. Slogans like „finally what belongs together is together once again" (*Endlich ist wieder zusammen, was zusammen gehört*) and other similar ones were not uncommon. East German citizens could represent themselves as victims of a totalitarian regime and were also gladly constructed as such from the western point of view. This allowed the western capitalist democracy to present itself as the sole alternative.

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<sup>14</sup> Watson, *op. cit.*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> In 1992 and 1993 Neonazi groups attacked the asylum-seekers' centers in Rostock, Lichtenhagen and Hoyerswerder. These acts of violence were welcomed by the neighbours of the centers. The police did not intervene for the entire day.

Thirdly, not all this racism was new; in fact, it had been present during the communist regime. This can be seen, for example, In an institutional level in the handling of victims of the Nazi regime, who were celebrated as „heroes of the working class”, while victims of anti-Semitism and racism were either ignored, or Jews were ostracised as part of the bourgeoisie and were, in a sense, further persecuted.

A fourth level is the institutional level. It is at this level that restrictive asylum and migration policies were enacted. As a consequence of these policies a society which differentiated between people with and without German citizenship was institutionalised; a society in which refugees are unable to freely choose their place of residence, unable to travel freely within Germany and are housed in asylum homes often located on a city's outskirts or even in the woods.

Additionally, the creation of the European Union has made new border demarcations important. On a discursive level this situation has constructed a racist image of illegal immigrants, who are often perceived as being connected to with organised crime, human trafficking and forced prostitution.

The majority of these aspects mentioned do not solely apply to former East Germany. Racism is also present in the West, where outbursts of racial violence have also taken place, for example in Solingen in May 1993. The almost exclusive focus on former East Germany in the public consciousness thus produces a western norm, which implies that racism is not a problem in one's own backyard.

The question that remains, however, is to what extent this West-centrism in post-communist discourse, which equates the West with freedom as shown above, creates a universal patriarchy and reproduces it on a transnational level.<sup>16</sup>

This becomes clear in the example described by Smejkalová in her essay “Gender as an Analytical Category of Post-Communist Studies”, in which the West German claim “The private is political!” describes a terrible joke for women who have fought their whole lives to push back the influence of the state on the

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<sup>16</sup> Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

private sphere.<sup>17</sup>In my opinion this argument is very meaningful since it opens up a multidimensional perspective that allows commonalities and differentialities to be appropriately analysed and implemented in feminist scholarship and practice.

## Conclusion

As my observations have shown, the term transformation, as used in post-communist Germany, is a completely western category, which masks fundamental dimensions of dominance and control. The introduction of an East-West dimension is thus productive for making visible specific life situations and social positionings of women from the former East. Furthermore, for me personally, such expansion of the meaning of the term poses challenges for meaningful self-positioning within the scholarly and activist fields. These challenges stem especially from the contemporaneity of various power structures: on the one hand, this allows a specific experience under the communist regime to be made visible. Yet at the same time, it definitively positions “the West” in a global context, with all the privileges associated with it. This contradictory simultaneity requires the complication of power structures, as this is the only way to make possible relevant analyses in scholarly and political activism. Reflection upon and deconstruction of binary oppositions, like “male” and “female”, “East” and “West”, “repression” and “freedom” must thus be central to emancipatory approaches and concepts. This is the only way to overcome a static interpretation of the term transformation. That is why, in conclusion, I argue for an exact contextualisation and positioning, not just within a social, but also an historical framework. Contextualising helps do justice to various life situations, theoretical concepts and feminist practices, since these can have very different meanings in various contexts.

Translated by **Anthony B. Heric**

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<sup>17</sup> Smejkalová, Jirina, *Gender as an Analytical Category of Post-Communist Studies*, in: *Gender in Transition in Eastern and Central Europe Proceedings*, Jähnert, Gabriele et al. (ed.), Berlin, 2001, p. 50.



**5.**

Ukraine

Being or Considering  
Yourself – or on  
the Unpopularity of  
Ukrainian Feminism

**Natalka Śniadanko**

I find it difficult to answer the question whether I consider myself a feminist. First of all, because of the uncertainty of the reflexive verb “consider yourself”, which sparks the immediate association with the eternal Slavic divide between what is said and what is done, what is promised and what is real, between identifying yourself as someone and sticking to this claim in everyday life. And this irreversibly entails all kinds of rhetorical questions, such as – is it better to consider yourself or to be someone, which one demands more courage, which one is more necessary and to whom?

On the other hand, it seems impossible not to agree with the uncompromising view expressed by my Polish fellow writer, Olga Tokarczuk: for a modern, thinking woman it is impossible not to be a feminist. However, such uncompromising words pay a lurking tribute to sad reality – as it seems undesirable to link feminism with lack of choice.

An important aspect of my reflections on this subject is the geographical one. The question whether I consider myself a feminist has never been posed to me in Ukraine. Similarly, rarely have I heard this question in Western Europe. Only once in Vienna I was approached by a journalist from an aggressively disposed feminist magazine who asked to interview me. However, after the interview, she admitted she didn't see the possibility to include my account in the format of the magazine, with its main concept of aggressive feminism, as all she learned about me was “too normal”. I didn't recount any experiences of traumas from family violence, as did her interlocutor from Africa, nor any discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual orientation, as did other women she wrote about. All I told her seemed to be about success, peacefulness, self-fulfilment, and therefore uninteresting to publish. I remember having sighed with relief that all went so well in my life and didn't regret much this lost PR opportunity. Well, let the lack of publicity be the price I pay.

The question whether I consider myself a feminist has most often been posed to me in Poland. And it was asked without further specifications – such as which current of feminism I subscribe to: ecological, pacifist, separatist, liberal,

neoliberal, Marxist, radical, modern, postmodern, poststructural, psychoanalytical, lesbian, sadomasochistic or queer. Still, it might not be justifiable to draw any space-time conclusions from the above and predict a sudden outburst of feminist activity within several years also in the territory of Ukraine. It would be all too simple if the world was governed by such cause and effect analogies.

For Ukrainian women, the feminist worldview is less of an only option than one could imagine, based on the Soviet claims to have solved all women's issues as early as in the 1930-40s. The feminist movement in Western countries is clearly delimited in time and closely interrelated with political changes within societies. For instance, last year I found that a German newspaper announced the anniversary of German feminism, the beginning of which was marked by passing some landmark law. In the countries of Eastern Europe the revival of feminist discourse started to be noticeable after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. But it would be difficult to give such precise dates for Ukraine. Ukrainian feminism did not start to enjoy rapid growth neither with the onset of independence, nor after the Orange Revolution.

"Wikipedia", an online encyclopaedia, eagerly reports that "independent Ukraine undergoes an active process of returning to the values of liberal feminism, and sees the revival of Ukrainian organisations (such as the League of Ukrainian Women), the creation of new ones, strengthening the ties between Ukrainian women's organisations and international women's networks". However, among the cited women's organisations it is difficult to find ones which were not created in the diaspora.

And the stories recounted by feminists "in practice" do not seem to bring any more optimism. See for example Tamara Zlobina, known as the author of a feminist pop-project "Feminism Is..." – a book with postcards and pictures aimed at "glamour" popularisation of feminism, such as "feminism means buying your diamonds yourself". Last year in a text entitled "Being a Feminist/Being a Woman in Ukraine" in the *Krytyka* magazine Zlobina said: "For several years of my conscious feminism I have gathered a collection of typical reactions to

my identity. Many times I have heard angry tirades such as 'These feminists! Awful, unpleasant women, no one wants them so they hate all men!' or other words to that effect. The less my interlocutors knew about feminism, the more emotional were their reactions. And because in most cases I was the only feminist in flesh and blood they knew, and I did not fit their vision of an 'old, awful woman', they either saw my feminism as some juvenile exaggeration (which made it all fall back into place) or became confused and tried to prove that 'men are supreme to women' (to show me where my place is?). I also happened to meet emancipated women or girls in favour of independence and equality who started or finished their speeches with 'but don't think I'm a feminist'. As if being a feminist was a cause for shame."

The negative stereotype linked with how the word "feminism" is seen in Ukraine is indirectly confirmed by the translation of the title of the classic work by an American researcher of Ukrainian origin, Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, *Feminists Despite Themselves* – in Ukraine the book was published under the title *White over White: Women in Ukrainian Community Life, 1884-1939* (Kyiv: 1995). Most probably, the Ukrainian publisher decided to avoid the "problematic" term so as not to discourage potential readers.

I found few theoretical analyses of Ukrainian feminism on the internet. One was an abstract of the thesis by O. Stiazhkina, defended in Donetsk National University: "Women in the history of Ukrainian culture in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century". Although the thesis clearly states that the feminist approach is used in the analysis of such historical material "for the first time", the very fact that such an analysis exists is optimistic. The author of the thesis notices a decisive turning point in the social perception of feminism in the post-Soviet period and tries to explain the emergence of the negative stereotype: "the first cause might be linked to some psychological tiredness of women, whom the Soviet state offered the opportunity to put into practice the idea of a 'working mother'. With an underdeveloped social sphere, the double burden of duties – at work and at home – caused this model to be associated with negative

features, not arousing much enthusiasm to follow this example in everyday life. A beautiful, well-groomed, perfect and relaxed woman, as opposed to 'an old aunt from the queue' could therefore be an appealing image and a dream for many women. Other factors influencing the emergence of new cultural stereotypes are the consequences of globalisation and popularisation of models and constructs of, Western lifestyle, in Ukraine. The uncritical attitude towards the so-called achievements of European civilisation has led to superficial copying and replication of stereotypes which represent women in a humiliating way."

Oksana Kis, a researcher, in her analysis *Female Strategies in Ukrainian Politics*, published last year on the website of the Western Analytical Group, points out the same two models of successful female realisation dominating in post-Soviet society, although she labels them in a different way – Berehynia<sup>1</sup> and Barbie. "Berehynia is rooted in the traditional gender order of Ukraine, which includes a myth about a special eternal, true Ukrainian Woman. The complete image of Berehynia was created quite recently – at the end of the 1980s. And although she is an eclectic combination of elements diverse in their nature and origin (from the elements of pagan beliefs and matriarchal myth, typical folklore motifs and features of different literature characters to the Christian cult of Virgin Mary), society sees it as an authentic canon of traditional national femininity. The key representatives of this image are the Great Mother, a Zealous Christian and a Devoted Patriot. It is also important that Berehynia has some important matriarchal connotations, encouraging women to demonstrate dominance, decisiveness and competence within their sphere of activity. The other image – Barbie – emerges from market ideology and the culture of mass consumption." Serving the nation or the aesthetic and erotic pleasure of men – these are the roles implied by each of these models. "Serving" is the common denominator here, without any individual freedom of choice, the element lying at the heart

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<sup>1</sup> Berehynia is a female spirit in Slavic mythology. She is considered to be a protectress of the home.

of the feminist theory. Moreover, in order to achieve real success in the sphere of politics, one woman should combine the elements of these two images, becoming thus the sex symbol of the nation. Such a phenomenon is investigated by Oksana Kis' in the biography of Yulia Tymoshenko, the prime minister of Ukraine.

Obviously, there are also other models of successful women, but they remain marginal and do not enjoy wide social recognition. In the Ukrainian context, feminism is perceived similarly to cultural production in the Ukrainian language. On the one hand, it seems fashionable and progressive, on the other it is difficult to get rid of provincial and rural connotations, attached to both discourses in the Soviet times. It can be often noticed that middle-age Ukrainophone women switch to Russian in conversations so as not to seem like "old aunts from the queue", but to be seen as "cultural and educated".

This dual perception also explains the feelings of contemporary women described by Tamara Zlobina – those in their thirties or forties, having a successful family life and career, who despite their success are haunted by an oppressive question – is everything all right with them, is everything well. This is precisely the kind of women who end up in the gap between the abovementioned "considering themselves" and "being" feminists. Because to add it all up they live and think like feminists, but might not dare to call themselves ones, under the influence of the associated negative connotations. The lack of a positive model linked with feminism leaves their success unrecognised by the society, because instead of being simply a woman and a mother, they take on the burden "that women do not need".

Gender-differentiated upbringing still dominates in Ukrainian society, so today's children often hear, if not from their parents, then from their grandparents or teachers, the same comments that my generation used to hear over and over: "But you're a girl/a boy!" They also hear long-winded explanations of what is necessary or unnecessary in the life of a real woman or a real man. I used to hear, for example, that girls do not need to speak foreign languages, because

“they will get married and have children anyway”, while boys do not need to study music, because “why would they need it?”.

A symptomatic indicator of the level of gender awareness of the contemporary Ukrainian society are the traditional newspaper publications before Christmas or Easter, when most issues of local press feature wives of different officials who describe the recipes for their favourite festive meals. Extremely rarely do such publications reveal something more about these wives than just their culinary preferences.

The antifeminist attitudes of the society may also infringe on the rights of men. First of all, obviously in the sphere of their relations with their own children. For example, the local clinic refused to issue a medical certificate for my husband seeking family leave to care for a child, requiring him to present proof that his wife was unable to provide such care. As it turned out, this refusal was without any legal grounds. However, during many years of practice the local doctor had never encountered a man who demanded such a certificate, so she was not even aware of the existence of appropriate legal provisions.

Needless to say, feminist trends have not as yet reached such theoretical spheres as grammar, so there hasn't yet been a wide debate about introducing feminine endings, for example in nouns used to describe professions. And despite my protests, on my work certificates I am usually described as a “journalist” or “editor” in the masculine form of the word. Only on book covers I manage to feature as a “female writer” or “authoress” in the feminine form.<sup>2</sup>

Cases when a woman does not take on her husband's surname after marriage are extremely rare. So every time when I pay bills for kindergarten or school, I have to deal with the long and significant stare of the accountant, when instead of simply answering the question “surname?”, I ask for clarification “my surname

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<sup>2</sup> In Ukrainian, as in all Slavic languages, all nouns are gender-specific. Thus, a “writer” does not have the universal meaning it does in English, hence feminists are calling for the reintroduction of feminine versions of the names of professions.

or my child's?". Situations when the mother, father and children have different surnames are not associated by public opinion with family bliss. The Ukrainian language has the phrase "maiden name", but there is nothing like a "bachelor name" counterpart. I have never encountered any cases of using double surnames. Children usually use the surname of their father, even if their parents are divorced. Moreover, even if the father "disappears" for many years from the life of the child and does not participate in any way in his or her upbringing, the mother does not have the right, for example, to take the child abroad without the written consent of the father, certified by a notary. This is a common problem in the current Ukrainian context, where thousands of migrant workers illegally stay abroad, sometimes even without their families knowing in which country they are currently residing. This can not only be an obstacle for tourism, summer holidays or educational trips of the child, but also for treatment of serious diseases in a foreign country. Although such cases are widely discussed in the press, the authorities have not taken any steps to solve this issue so far.

Cases of children staying with their father after the divorce are extremely rare in Ukraine, and Ukrainian legislation is not adapted to such situations. It is much more difficult for fathers than for mothers to obtain custody of the child in case of divorce; even in a situation when the couple has reached an agreement and decided that the children should stay with the father.

In an interview, Mariana Rubchak, a renowned American researcher, a professor of the Valparaiso University in a joking manner recounts her struggle with the common Ukrainian interpretation of feminism. When a famous Ukrainian researcher started a meeting by dashing to kiss her hand, Ms. Rubchak tried to explain that it feels humiliating and makes her feel like a doll on a pedestal, not a woman. Her attempts to have her hand shaken were futile. So next time, upon entering his cabinet, she caught his hand and kissed it. This made him turn deep red in embarrassment. Anecdotes about this event were repeated manifold. Some other time, while she was standing in a queue in Khreshchatyk Street, an unknown man addressed her with the common Soviet "*zhinochko...*"

(diminutive for “woman”), so she answered “Yes, *cholovichku?*” (diminutive for “men”). The man flew into a rage and the situation almost led to a fight.

If the archaic and no longer widespread ceremony of gallant and pretentious kissing of a woman's hand can be still considered to have some charm, more modern Ukrainian greeting rituals much more openly demonstrate a disdainful attitude towards women. Being among a group of several men who greet one another, every time I need to force myself to extend my hand, because I'm fairly certain that my hand will simply not be shaken – instead, I will be given a haughty, suspicious look. Sometimes, even when I get to have my hand shaken, the face of my interlocutor blushes in embarrassment. This way or another, it seems impossible to avoid the unpleasant moment – someone, either a man or a woman, feels humiliated in this ritual.

With no less wonder does Ms. Rubchak recount the classical phrases mouthed by different well-known politicians, both men and women, such as “We don't need any foreign feminism, because Ukrainians have always been a feminist nation” or “In fact in our country women have all the real power in their hands, even if they do not appear to.” She found it difficult to grasp how it was possible to convince women so successfully that “women in Ukraine do not need anything, they are powerful anyway.” This curious Ukrainian version of feminism as an ancient tradition is readily illustrated with historical facts. For example that since 1646 the Trebnyk (the Book of Needs, a liturgical book containing the rituals of sacraments and blessings) states that a priest solemnising marriage between the bride and the groom should tell the groom that a woman is always equal to a man and that he should treat her as a friend, not as a slave or hired workforce. Another example: the widely-known liberal attitude towards witches in the Middle Ages in Ukrainian territories. At that time, while witches in Europe were burned alive, after having had their breasts cut off in slices, in Ukraine they often simply had to carry two buckets full of water to a designated place and if they managed to do this without spilling a drop, they were pardoned.

It is also interesting to look at the particularities of the statistical data about women's dominance in different professions. O. Stiazhkina in her dissertation notices a sharp fall in the number of women in creative occupations at the beginning of the 1990s compared to the Soviet period, explaining this with growing misogyny and the spread of a negative image of women in the arts. Recently, however, the number of young women entering different spheres of arts, first of all literature, has again noticeably increased. But it does not seem that we can talk about any shifts in the quality of gender awareness here. It can rather lead to a conclusion that women's greater activity in this sphere is linked to a drop in the prestige of the creative professions. A drop in prestige that can be also explained by the suppression of material benefits flowing from membership in such professions in Soviet times – free workshops, public demand, special vacation houses and resorts etc.

A similar trend can also be noticed in the Ukrainian contract army. According to the available data, currently 40% of contract soldiers in Ukraine are women. This optimistic statistics puts Ukraine in front of many other European countries, such as Norway with only 7.6% of female soldiers. However, as explained in a recent interview in the *Korespondent* magazine by major Natalia Dubchak from the Department of Humanitarian Policy of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine: “Ukrainian women join the army not with the aim of self-fulfilment but in order to work somewhere. Unfortunately, nowadays men are unwilling to serve for such a meagre salary, while women agree to do so. Moreover, two years ago we carried out a survey to find out why women join the army. It turned out that most of them are family members of male soldiers, who helped them get employed.”

The same trend is pointed out by O. Stiazhkina concerning women in the arts. She notices that in the Soviet times women usually entered the world of artistic creation through family connections.

Natalia Dubchak also discusses everyday curiosities linked with the presence of women in the army. For example, the tie which is worn in the female

military uniform is attached to the shirt with a special buckle in the form of tryzby (the coat of arms of Ukraine). But the designers of the uniform did not take into account that women's shirts are done up on the left not the right side, which is why female soldiers have to wear the state symbol buckle upside down – an insult to the national symbol. Natalia Dubchak even donated one such shirt with a buckle to the recently created Kharkiv Gender Museum – the first such museum in Ukraine.

Modern trends in child upbringing are also treated in a curious way. Tetyana Isaeva, one of the initiators of the Kharkiv Gender Museum, gives an interview in which she explains the following experiment – a group of children were told that now their father can also take “paternity” leave to take care of a child and asked to draw a picture of how it might look like. The drawings showed both parents in their traditional roles – mum wearing an apron in the kitchen, and dad in a suit driving a car to take the child somewhere interesting and cool. Not a single child had the idea to switch the parents' roles and make the father wear an apron in the kitchen, and give the mother the car keys and the “cool” status.

The bulk of publications on “female issues” in Ukraine traditionally end with the conclusion of a sad “male” fact. According to official data, the current life expectancy for men in Ukraine is 62 years, 12 years less than the average for Ukrainian women, and 5-6 years less than in Western countries. Of all European countries, the situation is worse only in Russia, where the discrepancy between the life expectancy of women and men amounts to 14-15 years. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ukraine strengthens its image of the country of girl-brides. According to the survey carried out by *Korespondent*, the stereotype of a perfect man from the point of view of a 30-40 year old Ukrainian woman goes as follows: “he should be wise, handsome, considerate, generous, rich and willing to get married.”

In the eyes of a Russian bride such a list of expectations might seem exaggerated. Last year on a train I met a fellow passenger of my age, a specialist in

literature from Yekaterinburg. After a curious tirade praising Mr. Medvedev and the bliss his presidency brought to an average Russian, her spirits suddenly fell and she unexpectedly stated: "Everything's fine, except there's no one to bear children to. All men get drunk before you can turn around. In Ukraine it might not be as bad as that, but in Russia every single one drinks."

I didn't ask my interlocutor about feminism in Russia or whether as a specialist in the folklore of the peoples of Ural she considered herself a feminist. I did not dare. Which is a pity, I guess.

Translated by **Natalia Kertyczak**

# Eeating and Drinking

**Tanya Malyarchuk**

A woman is what she eats and drinks. A woman's freedom is the freedom to choose food and drinks. In any case this freedom is dangerous, because enjoying it a woman enters two categories of similar social disadvantage. She becomes either fat or alcoholic. Personally, I don't see any other alternative.

## 1.

Both my grandmas lived through famine. One in 1933<sup>1</sup>, the other one in 1947. The famine radically changed them. My grandmas remained “hungry” forever. The value of food squeezed any other values from their idea of happiness. A set out table, a pantry crammed with sacks of wheat, barrels with sauerkraut and pickles, 10-litre buckets with melted pig fat – this is practically all they aspired to achieve during the calendar year and what made them utterly happy. The awareness of this gastronomic happiness made my grandmas benign and gentle, caused their faces to shine with dignity and self-respect, even though both of them perfectly understood – it would be too early to relax. Gastronomic happiness is elusive, just as elusive are wheat in sacks and lard in buckets.

Grandma Yadzia, for instance, liked to go out into the garden during a lasting drought and forecast poor crops and imminent famine. I saw the pleasure with which she expressed such thoughts. Sometimes I suspected that grandma Yadzia was really awaiting famine, wanted it to happen again. All that of course in order to show her thoughtless children and grand-children the true and only meaning of life – the search for a piece of bread.

Grandma Yadzia remained a slave to crumbs on the table. After lunch, she would diligently gather all breadcrumbs from the table and put them into her mouth. In fact, she might have even found these breadcrumbs the most

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<sup>1</sup> The Great Famine (Holodomor) of 1932-33, during which millions of people were starved to death because of the Soviet policies of collectivisation.

tasty part of the meal as they brought her the final satisfaction. Grandma Yadzia tried to teach me to eat crumbs from the table as well, and when I resisted, she would get angry and shout. She said I was good for nothing, I had no chances of becoming a human being, as I did not value the bread that had been graciously given to me. When there would be no such bread – and this might come shortly! – I would regret, I would understand, but it would be too late.

I was a huge fan of the “famine” stories of my grandma. Like, Yadzia is five. A complete orphan, she strolls the market in Zhytomyr and gathers plum stones. Next, she smashes them against a stone and eats the middle. All around, there are people shrivelled from famine. Most of them are women. They walk around like sleepwalkers, leaning against fences and enclosures so as not to fall. And then Yadzia is taken to an orphanage. The orphanage ensures one meal per day. There is bean soup on the menu, but it could be called bean only because of one single bean from an unknown source in a plate of thin water. And finally: Yadzia is taken to a young Jewish mother to take care of her child. Yadzia obediently stays in the corner of the room awaiting the verdict. The Jewish woman looks at the thin, grimy five-year-old creature and quarrels with her husband. She says: how can this creature look after my child?! And Yadzia thinks: give me a slice of bread and I will serve you like a dog, I will lick your hands and feet, just give me something to eat. The Jewish woman gives Yadzia a slice of buttered bread and ever since that time Yadzia will say “bread, and even buttered.” Simply bread would have been perfectly enough.

Grandma Vasylyna remembers the famine of 1947 in a special way. This was the year when she got married. She even had a wedding party, although I cannot imagine what kind of food was served. Probably some kind of weed pancakes. I know that after midnight, when the invited children already went to sleep, the wedding guests danced naked. Grandma Vasylyna told me about it fairly recently, when she started to consider me old enough to hear it. I can imagine such “naked” dancing pretty well. A sort of a wild dance of death. There is nothing to eat, let us therefore dance as is fit for this last time.

In the spring of 1948 grandma Vasylyna couldn't find anything to plant in her garden. She put potato peels in the vegetable patch. And these peels gave wonderful crop. Grandma Vasylyna never again saw such enormous potatoes in her life. She said this was a miracle.

When Western Ukraine fell under the Soviet rule, grandma Vasylyna had to hand in 200 kilos of meat into the collective farm. Roughly the equivalent of two pigs. Grandma didn't want to give away pigs. In order to satisfy the appetites of the head of the collective farm, she bred rabbits in a hole in her garden. No one knew exactly how many rabbits there were, they bred uncontrollably and grew up to one-metre tall. They dug tunnels and, as grandma said, went close to the forest to eat grass. When it was time to give meat to the collective farm, grandma opened the hole and randomly took the first rabbit out by its ears. Ten rabbits were enough. As grandma Vasylyna said – this was another miracle.

She made curious dishes. For instance *zaterka* – milk porridge with an egg scrambled with flour. Or her own version of stuffed cabbage with mamalyga rolled up in beetroot leaves instead of cabbage leaves. Or dumplings with feathers – this is what grandma called the shoots of onion. Her strangest dish was *kreplyky* – herring pies. She prepared them only for Christmas and this is truly one of the most tasty dishes I have ever tried. I think God could be born in the human world just in order to taste the *kreplyky* of my grandma.

Grandma Vasylyna completed only two classes of school – there was not enough time to do the rest. At school grandma learned how to hold a pen properly and how to sign with a cross. She learned by heart two poems, which she used to recite to her cows during each milking. I liked to lie on hay next to her and listen to these poems. They seemed different every time. It seemed that no book would ever be able to tell me anything new.

During all her life grandma Vasylyna never quit the borders of her village. She always said that you could gain wisdom in your own courtyard. This principle first of all related to her. She was wise and good. She lived a quiet, unpretentious life. She cultivated hectares of gardens, took care of her grand-children, and once

a week she would plait her hair and make her feather dumplings. Now I can remember grandma Vasylyna as the only woman I've known who was happy with what she had, because she knew what it was like not to have anything.

## 2.

In 1991 I was eight years old. I don't remember a lot from the Soviet times, but I remember perfectly what I lacked. I lacked everything. Chewing gum, oranges, clothes, colour markers, dolls, nylon fishnet tights, chocolate butter, bicycles, American cartoons and Brazilian TV series. This era will forever remain to me the era of lacking the indispensable. The period of uncontrollable desires and childish anger at somebody great and unknown – the one who fails to pay the salaries to my parents. My mum taught me to lose the habit of asking to buy things. I studied my schoolbooks and wrote passionate compositions about how true happiness is not a matter of money but of the freedom of thought. I wore the dresses of my older sister and comforted myself with the thought that the world revolves around me as I am the only one to understand it fully. In fact, I was the only one to understand it at all.

My mum, as the true child of one sixth of the earth's surface,<sup>2</sup> wanted only to be like everyone else. She was afraid to even minimally cross the self-imposed limits concerning respectability and good manners. All her skirts were slightly below her knees. She simply didn't buy any shorter or longer ones. All her shoes had three-centimetre heels, not higher or lower. Her New Year salad was composed of the same set of ingredients, never changing over the decades: cheap boiled sausage, tinned peas, potatoes, carrots, onions, two eggs and mayonnaise. Quite recently my mum started to enrich the salad with pickled cucumbers of an average size. I do not understand why. It didn't change the taste of the salad in any way.

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<sup>2</sup> The area covered by the USSR.

Potatoes were what we used to eat most often. Boiled, fried, baked and grated potatoes. I have to admit that I can imagine worse things than such a “potato childhood” but today, instead of eating potatoes, I stuff myself on principle with rice with soya sauce. In order to restore some gastronomic balance and diminish the influence of potatoes on my worldview.

The aesthetic taste of my mum would fully emerge when she got to preparing marinates, jams and compotes in the autumn. She used to put half-a-litre, litre and three-litre jars with all kinds of tasty contents on the corridor shelves. These jars had powerful magnetic properties. I simply liked to look at them, to sort them according to their size, colour or content. Marinated tomatoes, together with marinated peppers and cucumbers. Pear and cherry compotes in the front, apple and sour grape ones in the back, where it was impossible to get them without a stool. Mum allowed me to open these jars only for big holidays but I wanted to eat them all the time, everyday, every minute. I remember once I could not help myself and, when no one was at home, opened everything I wanted at once. One compote, two salads and marinated pumpkins. I made a whole feast of it with music and smart clothes: I turned on the record player with Alla Pugachova's “Arlequin” – my favourite back then, I pulled on my mum's mink hat (I judged it to be the most expensive item of clothing in the flat) and spent several hours eating salads and strawberries from the compote. My feast must have looked quite miserable, as my mum burst into tears when she saw me sleeping with the mink hat on, next to the undeniable proof of the committed crime – four empty jars.

The declaration of independence of Ukraine did not make my mum any happier. Possibly even the other way round. My mum turned out to be helpless in the struggle with the new times, which required women only to have good selling skills. All friends of my mum started working on the market. Our small town in Western Ukraine changed into one huge ghetto of female sellers. A new fashion emerged – big, leather jackets with numerous pockets where it was easy to hide the money earned. This was when I saw gloves with cut finger

holes for the first time – it made it easier to smoke in winter, while marking time near the stall with Turkish sweaters with hideous red flowers on the front. I also got one such sweater. In the dark, you could see sparks flying from it, and I was convinced I had superhuman power to set things on fire with my eyes.

In the third grade I started to have teenage problems with weight. It seemed, however, that my mum liked it. Her daughter was getting plump, which meant she was eating well. My mum would gently call me her “doughnut” and bake delicious doughnuts with plum jam every week. I used to eat like three people and would stuff myself with absolutely anything. Pasta, cabbage rolls, dumplings, pasta again, bread with sausage and mayonnaise, pasta, pasta and pasta. Eating gave me enormous satisfaction. It healed the wounds caused by the persistent inferiority complex I suffered from. Of course, I took fullness for wholesomeness. I stuffed my stomach and believed it filled all the emptiness inside me.

Right now, my mum lives next to the “Arsen” supermarket. It’s a five-minute walk to get there. My mum treats this supermarket like a human being, possibly even of the male sex. Regardless of the demands of her refrigerator and the possibilities of her wallet, she goes there three times a week. She scrupulously walks all the aisles, finds out about brand-new products, sometimes allows herself to buy some overseas delicacy, such as a bottle of Czech beer. My mum feels cosy at “Arsen”. As if it could protect her when needed, defend her against another undesirable change of times. And my mum says: a woman is the supermarket where she shops. A woman’s freedom is at least ten different kinds of cream in the dairy aisle.

### **3.**

It so happened that in 2004 I lived two revolutions at once. A family revolution and a national one. I was victorious in both of them, although I didn’t want to fight with anybody.

At the beginning of the year I got married against the will of my parents and fled to Kyiv. I literally fled. All my past fitted into one small rucksack, although to be frank, it would be easier to get by without it. In my pocket I had some *hryvnas* for the next pack of cigarettes and that was it. Smokers in love are not very demanding.

My husband worked as a TV journalist in an investigative programme, probably the only more or less objective one at that time. Once or twice a month he had to go away on business, and I would insist on going with him, as I was afraid to be alone again. I thought that if I was next to him, nothing bad would happen. I would be able to save him.

In Mukachevo, during the first round of presidential elections, our car was attacked at night by unknown skinheads who almost managed to roll it over. At the last moment we managed to close the windows and doors, placing unjustifiable hope in the quality of the local manufacturer. The skinheads were interested in the cassette from our video camera, I was interested only in getting the answer to one question: what kind of country demands sacrifices all the time without giving anything in return.

We saw the second round of elections in Luhansk. From Luhansk you can reach the border with Russia on foot, although in my opinion there is no need to go anywhere at all – the whole of Russia can be found in the very centre of Luhansk, in Radianska Street, in the hotel named “Russia”. The driver we hired was a racer, which turned out to be very useful when fleeing from persecution. The black “Jaguar” kept its distance at the beginning, but then decided to have a closer look. For our driver-racer (a young boy under twenty five) this must have been the most exciting Formula 1 race in all of his life. He was not afraid. He hugged the steering wheel and raced ahead making my head spin. With all of that, our racer calmly remarked that he knew the owners of the Jaguar. Luckily, they were not going to beat us up. Just shoot.

What did I eat then? Spices. In unbelievable quantities. All possible kinds, except the classic black pepper and bay leaf. With utter lack of respect for any

culinary recipes, I spiced up any meal with a pinch from each packet. And I had several tens of different packets. I pity those who were forced to consume my almost criminal experiments. I was most generous with ginger and rosemary. Rosemary got between my teeth, and ginger burned my tongue and digestive tract. Curry painted my lips orange, but fortunately orange was very much in vogue back then. The spices became the symbol of the changes I had been awaiting since I was born. Food, just like life, gained a whole new different taste. Even pasta tasted different when spiced with oregano, and chicken with tarragon tasted like a plum dried in the sun.

The day when “Maydan”<sup>3</sup> started I was concerned not about justice and the future of my country, but about the safety of my beloved one. Women go to the barricades unintentionally, in order to be closer to their senseless men, who sometimes for some unknown reason are tempted to become heroes. There were a lot of such men. Practically all of my friends and acquaintances. Journalists, poets, artists, photographers, university lecturers. Next to them were girls and wives – revolutionists in disguise. And I am convinced that their rage is much more dangerous, since they defend the backs of their men, not some illusive, worthless political slogans. Sometimes, in the dead of night, I used to think that in a moment they were going to come and shoot everyone – journalists, poets, artists, lecturers – and who would remain alive? I, for that matter, did not want to count among those who remained. It seemed it would be dreadfully boring to stay alive in such company.

I do not feel proud or boast, I avoid talks about the Orange Revolution, but I profoundly dislike other people's sneering and complaints. Such as, look, what and who did you fight for? What have you achieved? Has it become any better? You were used in political plotting like brainless puppets. It's funny to hear that, because I do not consider myself deceived or taken advantage of. No revolution

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<sup>3</sup> Maydan Nezalezhnosti (the Independence Square) in Kyiv was the main scene of protests during the Orange Revolution, which took place from November 2004 to January 2005 following the 2004 rigged presidential election.

has ever met the expectations of its participants. Its value lies entirely somewhere else. Possibly, in the opportunity to taste chilli pepper at the edge of a blunt knife.

#### 4.

I find women who drink much more appealing than women who eat. However awful a woman's drinking spree might look like, it hides some unbelievable power of resistance and protest, unbelievable charm which arouses both compassion and admiration at the same time. I understand why women are more at risk of becoming alcoholic – they cannot stop at half-a-bottle. Alcohol is like a river, where most people just paddle up to their knees, but when you get there up to your waist, the current takes you. A drunken woman falls in love with herself – so tragically failed and thus so beautiful. The social masks that have been so carefully chosen fall off, just like the perfect evening make-up. What seemed important when you were sober, is forgotten when you're drunk. Finally, only one question becomes important: what is all this for? Men need to become heroes now and again, every now and then make sure that they are important, but what do women need? I suspect that women-drunkards know the answer to that question, but they no longer have the articulatory power to explain it.

My neighbour, whose name I ignore, is a dedicated drunkard. Similarly, I have no idea how old she is and whether she has any family. The appearance of this woman brings to mind a basketball player disappointed with life. She is exceptionally tall and thin, her hair is cut short, she wears trainers and a sports jacket, regardless of the season outside. She has a tiny dachshund she often walks under my windows. When the drinking spree comes, she becomes more lively. She approaches people in the street, discusses something aloud, every hour goes to the shop nearby to get another bottle of the cheapest vodka and laughs, laughs, laughs. The drinking spree always ends in the same fashion: the helpless woman lying in the corridor at the door to her flat, asking everyone she sees to help her open it. I come up to her and try to open the door, but it is locked up. I ask the

woman to give me the key. And then she says what only women-drunkards can say and for what I respect them more than many zealous teetotallers. She says: with a key, I could open the door myself, try doing it without one! I can help you only with this one – and she shows me a remote control.

All shop assistants from the local shop hate her. The shop itself is left over from the Soviet times. There are three departments there and, as is fitted, all three close at the same time for stocktaking. And there goes my neighbour-drunkard, entering the shop with a very clear purpose – to buy something to drink. She takes time studying the choice of alcohol, asks to show her something, politely apologises and asks to show her something else. The shop assistant is seething with anger, but tries to refrain herself. She explodes only when my basketball player wants to have a closer look at the most expensive bottle of Georgian wine in the shop. In order to get this wine from the display, the shop assistant has to climb a special ladder. The drunkard holds the bottle of wine like a holy relic, respectfully blows the dust off, attentively studies the label and – indeed! – asks whether the bottle has been stored under the correct angle. When the shop assistant is red with anger, the woman gives her the bottle back and asks for the usual quarter of vodka.

I often feel like talking to my neighbour in order to ask her some extremely banal question such as “what is the meaning of life?”, but I’m afraid she would laugh straight into my face.

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A woman is what she eats and drinks. Relentless search for food makes a woman a slave to potatoes and pasta, and too much freedom – a slave to supermarkets. I don’t know, maybe it has to be this way. Balancing between these two forms of slavery, a woman has the chance to manage to feel, do or understand something.

Translated by **Natalia Kertyczak**

# About the Authors



**Sylwia Chutnik** (1979) – a graduate of the Institute of Polish Culture and Gender Studies at the University of Warsaw. Since the 1990s she has been involved in the women's movement. She is a co-founder of MaMa Foundation, which advocates for mothers' rights from the feminist perspective. She is the author of the novel *Kieszonkowy atlas kobiet* (2008) for which she was rewarded with *Polityka Passport Award* in the field of literature. In 2009, the book was also nominated for the *Nike Award* which is the most prestigious Polish literary award.



**Agnieszka Graff** (1970) – Adjunct Professor in the American Studies Center at the University of Warsaw, where she lectures on American literature and culture. She is also a lecturer at the Gender Studies Programme at the University of Warsaw. She is a graduate of Amherst College (U.S.), Oxford University and the School of Social Sciences at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The author of two books *Świat bez kobiet. Płeć w polskim życiu publicznym* (*World Without Women. Gender in Polish Public Life*, 2001) and *Rykoszetem. Rzecz o płci, seksualności i narodzie* (*Stray Bullets. Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Nation*, 2008) as well as many articles about feminist thought, gender in popular culture and the women's movement in the U.S. and Poland. She received a Fulbright Fellowship (2004/2005) within the programme for the New Century Scholars "Towards Equality. The Global Empowerment of Women". She cooperates with the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in Poland and is a member of "Krytyka Polityczna" (Political Critique).



**Anna Grusková** (1962) – is an author of plays for theatre, radio and scenarios for documentary movies. They were realized and presented in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Austria. She works as a dramatic adviser and theatre theoretician as well. Occasionally she works also as a theatre director and journalist. She graduated from the Charles University in Prague. She lives in Bratislava.



**Mirjam Hirsch** – a student of Gender Studies and Modern History at the Humboldt University of Berlin and the Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires. She has worked on the Argentine tango and gender, social and feminist movements in Europe and Latin America and interdependence of sexism, racism, (neo)colonialism and capitalism. Furthermore, she is a political activist in the areas of (transnational) feminist, antiracist and anticapitalist politics.



**Petra Hůlová** (1979) – a graduate of the Charles University in Prague with degrees in Cultural Studies and Mongolian Studies. She works as a freelance writer and novelist. She has authored several novels, such as *Paměť mojí babičce* (*In Memory of My Grandmother*, 2002), *Přes matný sklo* (*Through Matt Glass*, 2004), *Cirkus Les Mémoires* (*Les Memoires Circus*, 2005), *Umělohmotný třípokoj* (2006) and *Stanice tajga* (*Station Taiga*, 2008). Her novels have received numerous prizes and have been translated into English, German, French, Hungarian, Dutch and Polish.



**Kateřina Jacques** (1971) – a politician of the Czech Green Party. She was elected to the lower house of parliament of the Czech Republic in the June 2006 election, representing the Prague electoral district. She has worked as the director of the human rights section of the prime minister's office. From 1994 to 2002 she

studied political science and German translation at the Charles University in Prague. In 2006 she received a Ph.D in political science.



**Jana Juráňová** (1957) – Slovakian writer, feminist and co-founder of ASPEKT, the first feminist organisation in Slovakia. She is a graduate of the Comenius University in Bratislava, with degrees in English and Russian literature. She has written plays, such as *Salomé* (1989), *Misky strieborné, nádoby výborné* (1997)

and novels *Zverinec* (1994), *Siete* (1996), *Utrpenie starého kocúra* (2000), and books for children *Iba baba* (1999), *Bublíny* (2002), *Babeta ide do sveta* (2003), *Ježibaby z Novej Baby* (2006). Her book *Orodovnice* (2007) was nominated for the most prestigious Slovakian literary award Anasoft Litera 2006. Her recent novel *Žila som s Hviezdoslavom* has also been nominated for this award this year. She has translated into Slovakian books by Margaret Atwood, Judith Butler and Virginia Woolf.



**Ľubica Kobová** (1978) – philosopher, doctoral student at the Comenius University in Bratislava and a graduate of Gender Studies at the Central European University in Budapest. Since 1998 she has been co-operating with ASPEKT, the first feminist organisation in Slovakia. She is the co-author of some of ASPEKT's

publications, such as *Aká práca, taká pláca? Aspekty rodovej nerovnosti*

v odmeňovaní (*Equal Pay for Equal Work? Aspects of Gender Pay Gap*, 2007), *Kradmá ruka feministky rozvažuje za plentou. Aspekty parlamentných volieb* (2007), *Histórie žien. Aspekty písania a čítania (Women's History. Aspects of Writing and Reading*, 2007), *Žena nie je tovar. Komodifikácia žien v našej culture (A Woman is not a Commodity. Making Women a Commodity in Our Culture*, 2005), *Lesby-by-by. Aspekty politiky identít (Lesbians coming out. Aspects of Political Identity*, 2004). She specialises in social and political philosophy, feminist studies of science and queer theory. In 2008/2009 she was a Fulbright Fellow at the Women's and Gender Studies Department at Rutgers University, U.S.

**Tanya Malyarchuk** – born in 1983 in Ivano-Frankivsk. She graduated from the Vasyl Stefanyk Prykarpatsky University, Faculty of Philology. She has lived in Kyiv since 2004. She is the author of 4 novels (*Endspiel Adolfo abo Troyanda dla Lizy, Zhory vnyz (knyha strahiv), Jak ja stala sviatoju, Hovoryty*). The German translation of the last one was published in 2009 by *Residenz*, an Austrian publishing house. Her 5<sup>th</sup> novel – *Zviroslov* – is about to be released. In 2006 Tanya Malyarchuk won the Ukrainian BBC Book of the Year award.



**Rita Pawlowski** – was born in 1941 in Pomerania into a farming family, went to school in Mecklenburg and worked in a printing shop. In 1962 she started a multi-year journalism course in Leipzig. She had a son in 1964. Starting in 1977 she began working in various positions for the Women's Association of East Germany, ending in 1989 as press spokesperson for the DFD federal board. After 1990 she worked for several years in women's archives in Wiesbaden and Berlin, was unemployed several times and retired in 2001. She resides in Berlin.



**Jirina Šiklova** (1935) – Czech sociologist and publicist, former dissident, involved in the Prague Spring'68, a member of Charta 77, arrested during the communist regime for smuggling illegal dissidents' texts, dismissed from the Department of Sociology at the Charles University in Prague, of which she was a co-founder. After 1989 she returned to the Faculty of Arts and founded the Department of Social Work at the Charles University. She is a founder of Gender Studies which is the first feminist organisation in the Czech Republic. She is the author of numerous articles and two books: *Deník staré paní* (*A Journal of an Old Lady*, 2003) and *Dopisy vnučce* (*Advice for My Grand-Daughter*, 2007). In 1995 she was rewarded with the *Women for Europe Award* for her contribution to the European integration.

**Jana Simon** (1972) – German journalist and writer. She worked for ZDF, *Der Spiegel*, *Berliner Zeitung*, since 1997 she has been working as a freelancer for *tageszeitung*. In 2001 she was awarded the Axel-Springer-Preis for young journalists. She is studying Italian Philology and Political Sciences in Berlin and London. She is the author of books, such as *Denn wir sind anders. Geschichte des Felix S.* (*As We are Strangers. Story of Felix S.*, 2002) and *Alltägliche Abgründe: Das Fremde in unserer Nähe. Reportagen und Porträts* (*Gap in Everyday Life: A Stranger is among Us*, 2004).



**Natalia Śniadanko** (1973) – she lives and works in Lviv. She is a Polish and German translator and a journalist. She translated into Ukrainian Polish authors, such as Zbigniew Herbert, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Czesław Miłosz, Jan Brzechwa, Olga Tokarczuk and German authors, such as Franz Kafka, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Günter Grass, Stefan Zweig. She is the author of several books. Her novels were translated and published in Poland, Russia, Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, Belgium and Belarus.



**Bożena Umińska-Keff** (1948) – a poet, writer, translator and academic lecturer. She is a Polish literature specialist and a philosopher. She works in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Since the beginning of Gender Studies in Poland she has been teaching different interdisciplinary courses. She is the author of volumes of poems, such as *Razem osobno* (*Together in Separation*, 1986), *Sen o znaczeniu snów* (*A Dream about the Meaning of Dreams*, 1995), *Nie jesteś gotowy* (*You Are Not Ready*, 2000), *Utwór o matce i ojczyźnie* (*A Poem about Mother and Mother-land*, 2008) and essays, such as *Postać z cieniem. Portrety żydówek w polskiej literaturze* (*Figure with a Shadow. Representations of Jewish Women in Polish Literature*, 2001), *Barykady. Kroniki obsesyjne* (*Barricades or Obsessive Chronicles*, 2006).

The Heinrich Böll Foundation (**Heinrich Böll Stiftung**), with headquarters in Berlin, is a German political foundation linked to the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen party. The Foundation's basic objective, both in Germany and abroad, is civil education aimed at supporting formation of democratic attitudes, social and political activism and understanding between nations. Its key values are: ecology, democracy, solidarity and nonviolence.

The Foundation is particularly devoted to building a democratic society based on respect for the rights of immigrants and the principles of gender democracy, understood as a domination-free relation between women and men. Both those principles constitute a basis for cooperation inside the Foundation, as well as in all areas of its public operation.

International operation of the Foundation involves cooperation with over 160 partner organisations from 60 countries on 4 continents, as well as running 27 foreign branches.

For over 15 years, the Foundation has been active in Central Europe, including Poland. In the 1990's, the Foundation mainly supported projects of partner organisations working towards human rights, equal opportunity for women and men, and balanced development of the natural environment. The Polish branch of the Foundation inaugurated its operation at the beginning of 2002, when the negotiations before EU accession of the countries of Central Europe reached their final stages. One of the tasks of the Polish branch was to monitor and support actions aimed at inclusion of the equality perspective into the process of integration of those countries with the EU. Since the accession, the branch has faced new challenges: it initiates and supports social and political debate in Central and Eastern Europe (i.e. in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine), including the perspective of other issues close to the "Greens".

You can find more information about Heinrich Böll Stiftung, its operation and publications on our websites:

**[www.boell.de](http://www.boell.de)** or **[www.boell.pl](http://www.boell.pl)**.

The twentieth anniversary of the 1989 breakthrough is an occasion for summaries. In spite of the twenty years of democratic transformation, women did not manage to reduce their distance from men enough for their voice to be clearly heard in public debate. Furthermore, the account of the past two decades, as seen from the women's perspective, is not exactly in tune with the celebratory anniversary atmosphere. It is a paradox that for women in the former Eastern Bloc the freedom regained in 1989 was often combined with significant limitations of economic, social and reproductive rights.

In the face of the lack of public debate on the role of women in the time of transformation, the publication of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Warsaw attempts to present a multidimensional dialogue about the transformation experiences, giving voice to women. The Authors of the publication judge the past twenty years of reforms from the point of view of women from the former countries of the Eastern Bloc: the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine and former East Germany, and in this context, from the perspective of personal experiences. At the same time, the publication constitutes a platform for inter-generational dialogue. In the publication, personal texts meet more theoretical reflections, and literary accounts often complement more objective attempts to describe the past twenty years.

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