

Mikołaj Grynberg, *Księga wyjścia*, Czarne, Wołowiec 2018, s. 416

Księga wyjścia [Exodus Book] by Mikołaj Grynberg is a volume of shocking interviews with the witnesses of history which show the multifaceted size of trauma inflicted on Polish Jews by their fellow citizens in March 1968, as well as in the preceding and following months. It is a compilation of twenty-eight interviews thematically connected to one another and conducted with the victims of those bitter and painful events. Grynberg's interlocutors are both very important persons, such as two writers, Anna Frajlich and Viola Wein, and those who, after leaving Poland, blended into the crowd of emigrants in Sweden, Denmark, the United States of America or *olim* in Israel. Among the interviewers there are also people who decided to stay in Poland for many reasons, for example, Grynberg's father, Marian. The interview with him constitutes a special text which is a leitmotiv of the volume: it was divided into eleven parts and each of them appears from time to time between other dialogues. For the author, the fate of his father is a personal point of reference in understanding the situation of Jews at the time, but also – by retrospective concerning the fate of earlier generations – it provides a wider perspective.

In the interviews with people who were born right after the war and grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, interesting experiences of Jewish childhood in communist Poland are recalled: "I experienced everything in Poland that Jews could experience. [...] Protection from flying stones on the way to school".

But although "the way to Jewish school in Poland had to lead through the stones [...], worse than the stones [...] were insults. 'Scabby Jews!', 'Go back to Palestine!'. They set dogs on us" (Szymon and Małka Fisz, pp. 10-15).

These traumatic images appeared also in most of other testimonies. For example, as a little girl, Perta Kacman, because of being Jewish, was not only hit with a stone by her classmates, but also stigmatized: "The priest called everybody by their names: Marysia, Kasia, and to me he said: 'the girl of Moses' confession.' I didn't understand why" (p. 59).

Jewish children experienced anti-Semitic attitudes even before they started going to school: "The first time I heard it was in the kindergarten. A friend from my group said that my mother was "żydowica" [Jewish blot] [...]. When I was living with my father in Karmelicka Street, I went to play at the nearest playground. Everything had been OK, until the news was spread that I was a Jew. They began to persecute me and organized lynching. Older boys had given the sticks to younger and started to beat me. I did not want to fight these little kids so I was pretty beaten up that day" (Dawid Gerbaum, p. 234).

Similar flashback from the childhood was presented by Heniek Chmielnicki: "When I was five years old, I learned from my colleague from the backyard that I could not use his bike because I was a Jew" (p. 73). What did the children always shout at Nina Himmelstein? "'Jewess, scabby Jewess!' or: 'You killed Jesus!'" She answered: "Jesus was also a Jew, but this statement irritated them even more." And the older neighbors, admiring her dog, said: "what a lovely dog, what a pity it's Jewish" (p. 83). Grzegorz Himmelstein remembers from his first school an anti-Semitic teacher from whom he felt "heartfelt hate" and his colleagues shouting at him "Jew": "At that time I thought 'Jew' was a curse. I didn't understand what the matter was. My home was completely secular, no Jewish traditions, and suddenly this abasement from every side, showing that I was different." Asked if he knew about his Jewish origin, he answered: "I think I learned it from the anti-Semites at school" (p. 96).

Sometimes anti-Semitic attitudes were manifested in a surprising way: "I made friends with one Pole in a state college of technical education. It really seemed to me that we were intimates, until one day we were playing ships and I shot down his four-masted ship, then, he said: 'Oh, you scabby Jew!' The friendship was over" (Heniek Chmielnicki, p. 74).

Nina Himmelstein recalls the experiences resembling the pre-war practices of desk ghetto: "My studies were not too pleasant. Everybody steered clear of me. I was sitting at the desk with a friend who was also Jewish, and all the other students skirted round us" (p. 84-85). Majka Elczewska was arrested for taking part in a strike at Warsaw University. She remembers what she heard from officers who interrogated her: "I am the enemy of the people, and my place at university should be free, because there is no place for people like me. And all the time: 'Jews this, Jews that...'" And after the release from prison she found an inscription on her desk that could not be washed off saying: 'Scabby Jew' (p. 148). Other school desks were also used as a place for writing announcements, like the one addressed to a fifth-level student, Lidia Zajde: "a scabby Jewess is sitting here, go back to Palestine!" (p. 263). These forms of discrimination accompanied other, more sophisticated ones: "They cut my school-bags. I had many sliced school-bags! They cut. They drew the star of David. After that, the monikers began: Mosiek, Srulek, Jojne... [...] During this time I enrolled in the boxing section at Academy of Physical Education, and I began to defend myself" (Andrzej Krakowski, p. 164); or: "Here somebody spat on me, there called me 'żydówka' [a Jewess]. At school older student hit me in the stomach, normally, like in Poland" (Flora Fejgin, p. 317). Naum Norman confesses: "For ages my colleagues would nickname me: scabby Jew! [...] In the street they called to me 'żydek' [little Jew]" (p. 339). Ala Elczewska remembers a scene concerning her sister, Majka: "Majka is fleeing, and her colleagues are following her, crying: żydówka, żydówka! [Jewess, Jewess]. And once, Majka was hit in the face by her teacher because she wrote nine in a Jewish way. How to write nine in the Jewish way? When you begin from the tail and pull up, contrariwise" (p. 130-131).

One of the most shocking reports is one provided by David Guterbaum who visited a sanatorium in the 1960s: "I was stigmatized as 'for ever and ever Jew'. The wave of mass boorishness and unrefined jokes started. [...] All the time they provoked me: 'what's up, what, fucking Jew? [...] do you chomp Polish bread? Leave

it, it's non-kosher'. They sometimes said: 'leave him, it is not his fault that Hitler did not finish him'. [...] Most of the time I could hear Hitler should have a monument. [...] In the bathroom they cried: 'why are you washing in a Jewish way?'. And all the time they had tried to use Jewish pronunciation in Polish language and then laughed. When I was going down the stairs, they sent a snot to kick me in my ass and they made up rhymes like: beat the Jew, beat king David" (p. 235).

They did everything with a silent consent of the staff, who "pretended it was all right" or "disappeared when all these abuses started" (p. 235). Teresa Pollin, in turn, said: "In our stairway there lived a fellow who drank a lot. When he drank a little bit, it was all right. When he drank hard, he came at our door and then he was knocking and crying: 'You, Jews, you drink our Polish blood'" (p. 350). On the door of Anna Frajlich-Zajęc and Władysław Zajęc's flat the following words were written: "Here lives a rabble – Jews". Anna states: "we cleaned that, but we had already been stigmatized. At his time, we began to think seriously about emigration" (p. 283).

These anti-Semitic excesses were frequently accompanied by awareness of anti-Judaism, which was manifested in many ways: "[...] I asked them why they beat me. 'Because you are Jew and you killed Jesus Christ', they answered. I came back home and asked my father if I was a Jew. I was. 'Did I kill Jesus Christ?' – I asked. No, you did not, and besides, Jesus was a Jew, too" (Marek Elbaum, p. 274). Even during vacation there was no break for these experiences: "They maltreated me. They covered me with a blanket and beat me. They went to church and prayed, and I did not. They didn't let me live and cried: 'You Jewess!'" (Teresa Pollin, p. 350). The sarcastic statements are also cited: "These soap-flakes are probably made of Jews, because they do not foam" (Anna Frajlich-Zajęc and Władysław Zajęc, p. 293).

One of the questions asked by Grynberg was connected with identity of his interlocutors: "Were you a Pole at that time?". The answer of Szymon Fish was representative: "Of course, I was. At my home I was brought up to be a Pole. Poland was my homeland [...]" (p. 11). Part of this representative character is constituted by the longing of, for example, Paulina Chmielnicka (former Pesa Lajter): "I wanted to be a Polish woman very much. I was ashamed of my Jewishness, very much too". It is no wonder, especially when a seven-year-old child sees the reaction of the secretary to her personal details while being registered to school: "'Are you mad? [...] You must change her name, otherwise she will be persecuted. [...] Because it is a Jewish name!' [...] Mum changed my name in Paulina. I really did not want to be a Jewess" (p. 69-70). In an interview with Kryśia Borowicz who lives in Göteborg, Mikołaj Grynberg asks: "Did you know you were a Jewess?", and she answers: "We were Jews, but we didn't know what it meant. Only before our departure did we turn out to be different than others and that was why we had to go" (p. 47). Asked a similar question, Flora Fejgin answers: "I learned that I was a Jewess from one unknown woman in the street when I was about five years old. She came to me and asked if I was a Jewess. I came back home and also asked, and then I knew" (p. 317). Being Jewish was this generation's traumatic experience, whose effects can be seen in their future behavior: "What Jewish features do you have? This luggage of concern which orders me to call to my children and to torture them

for information where they are" (p. 51). It was even something more: "In Poland, Jewishness was a curse, I felt it this way" (Grzegorz Himelstein, p. 98). Ala Elczewska concludes this problem in the following way: "Gomułka, together with Moczar, made me a Jewess" (p. 135).

Some of the children were sent on Jewish vacation by their parents. Summer camps were organized by a Jewish Social-Cultural Association in Poland (Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów w Polsce – TSKŻ). These experiences were remembered by the interlocutors as a very nice form of spending free time. Grzegorz Himelstein refers to this time as "the best flashback from Poland". And he adds: "I felt the best in summer during Jewish holiday camp" (p. 96-97).

Grynberg's interlocutors speak about Poland very bitterly, with resentment, but at the same time with love: "[It was] this kind of homeland with antisemitism. I have lived with this antisemitism from the cradle. [...] You turn the jump rope as 'a scabby Jewess'. In the street they pulled my hair and said: 'scabby Jewess'. [...] But I loved this country, beautiful places, to which we went for Jewish holiday camp. Wonderful food, culture, literature..." (Paulina Chmielnicka, p. 72).

Nina Himelstein's relationship with Poland is expressed through the feelings she experienced during compulsory emigration: "The sense of wrong, that I was being thrown out of my country [...]. I always considered Poland to be my homeland. I was sorry" (p. 89). And more: "[...] It was my country, I had my parents and childhood in it" (p. 92). David Guterbaum, even though he was beaten and maltreated by his Polish colleagues, states: "I did not want to leave Poland at all. I loved Poland. I was a Polish citizen. I always felt myself to be a Pole..." (p. 237). And Lidia Zajde avows: "During this time I thought that Poland had abandoned me. I was offended by Poland, I didn't want to have anything in common with Poland" (p. 267).

Many people had been suffering because of antisemitism of Polish people, that is why they tried to eliminate all potential cultural differences (frequently nonexistent ones): "I always tried to be the best student in Polish language at school. So that they would not say: 'this Jewess doesn't know Polish'" (Nina Himelstein, p. 90). Later, Nina's husband took on a similar attitude "to be the best in Polish" (Grzegorz Himelstein, p. 96) or Zosia Baum was "an excellent student, especially in Polish" (p. 179). What do they owe Poland? "Poland taught me culture, language, music and everything on the highest level. [...] I love Israel, but here [in Israel] is so much vulgarity and chutzpah. I feel that I do not come from here, I come from there [from Poland]." (Zosia Braum, pp. 181-182). It is significant that when they were leaving, despite the luggage limit, they took books, as Nina Himelstein says "first of all, books" (p. 87). It was a sign of cultural belonging to the world that did not want them.

In the sphere of emotions, for many young Jews March 1968 triggered associations with the Holocaust. Zosia Braum states: "I think that in Poland Holocaust took place twice. The first one was based on physical annihilation of the Jews by the Nazis, and the second one – on stunting Jewish nation by the Soviet Union" (p. 175). Additionally, this first Holocaust left its stamp not only on people who survived it but also on their children and grandchildren. Perla Kacman recalls the following image from her early childhood: "[...] my mother would get up every morning weeping over Holocaust and family

trauma" (p. 60). It is terrifying that in the 1960s the same mechanisms, which had functioned among the Jews hiding on the Aryan side, were triggered: "You know, I wanted to be a Polish woman so much that at some point I borrowed a First Communion dress and a blessed candle from my friend. Somebody took a picture of me in this dress and I had it with me all the time. [...] When they shouted at me 'Scrubby Jewess', I pulled it out and said that I took part in the First Communion" (Paulina Chmielewska, p. 69-70).

Piotr Osęka's statement from the epilogue to *Księga Wyjścia* proves that it was not an isolated experience. He reminded there that many Polish Jews of that time who were in danger of being exiled from Poland collected "Church birth certificates, pictures from the First Communion [...], evidence of their 'Aryan identity'" (*Polowanie na piątą kolumnę* [Hunting for the fifth column], p. 391). The officers of Security Office, like experienced Nazis, were searching for the evidence of PRL citizens' Jewishness (see: Krystyna Flato, p. 376). Piotr Fejgin reports: "They found Jewish roots of my colleague from university, which even Gestapo, despite multiple revisions, could not find at his grandpa's place" (p. 315). Heniek Chmielnicki recalled the following social sentiments of March 1968: "This anti-Semitic persecution was unbearable. We were left. They took this decision from us. When Gomułka said: 'and for those citizens who consider Israel to be their homeland, we are opening our borders,' we could hear cries from the hall: 'As early as today!' As early as today. We left" (p.77).

Like during the Nazi occupation and earlier, a fear among many Jews was revived. This time it was fear of anti-Jewish demonstrations. Nina Himelstein recalls the atmosphere of March 1968 in the following way: "Dad put an axe on the gas meter near the entrance door. 'Why are you putting it here?' I asked. 'Nobody will make pogrom for me,' he answered. I was frightened; he was a very quiet man. [...] I guess I became a Jewess at that moment." (p. 86) Himilstein's acquaintances "told other strange stories about returns [visits] to their flats" (p. 88). For instance, Paulina Chmielnicka who visited Poland and her town: "I knocked and asked if I could show a flat where I grew up to my children. The woman who opened the door allowed us to come in. The flat was in poor condition, and what was the weirdest thing was that all electric sockets were dangling from the walls. I asked why they were like that. And this woman said: "The Jews lived here and we looked for dollars, but then my husband didn't want to repair them. Our children understood Polish – they were terrified" (p. 78).

Grzegorz Himelstein states: "I felt antisemitism everywhere because I looked like a Jew. Do you know that in Poland it is a compliment to say to a girl that she does not look like a Jewess?" (p. 101). In Poland at that time the atmosphere characteristic for Shoah began to prevail. It was similar to when the Nazi propaganda wanted all Poles to believe that "all Jews were secretive enemies" (Piotr Osęka, p. 397). Of course, "for a part of the society it was an anti-Semitic slander, others accepted [Gomułka's] speech with enthusiasm and satisfaction" (ibid). Not all Jews revealed their identities for fear of persecutions. Also, those who were born after the second world war sometimes stayed with their parents "in the wardrobe", living on Aryan documents. Krzysztof (one of Grynberg's interlocutors who did not want to reveal his real name and surname) states: "I was not a Jew, but from time to time somebody reminded me that I was" (p. 107). For

Majka Elczewska "what happened in March was painful, but the most painful was the fact that people whom I thought of as my friends, suddenly began to turn away from me" (p. 153).

The questions Mikołaj Grynberg asked his father and responses he received are a kind of commentary to the events the author was talking about with the emigrants of 1968. Already at the beginning the son asked about the key matter: "Dad, why did some people leave and others did not?". Marian Grynberg explains that situation in the following way: "At that time Jews divided themselves into three categories. In any case, such situation took place in Warsaw. The first group, a very little one, included those people who, for many reasons, decided to stay. [...] The second one – young people who were afraid and did not want to stay. They were leaving but they did not feel strong enough to take their parents with them. And their parents thought that the most important thing was for their children to be saved. [...] The third group included old people who did not leave and, if possible, they stuck together" (p. 55).

Viola Wein, who left Poland as a teenager, is an example of what at that time took place during the exodus of the youngest generation of Polish Jews: "At Gdański railway station... there was a crowd of people, and among them many sleuths. People drank to drown sorrows. Did you meet any friends on the train? I had this dialogue with one of my acquaintances. 'What are you doing here, you are not Jewish?' I asked him. And he answered, 'It has just turned out that I am'" (p. 124).

What do Polish Jews say about the reasons of their emigration? Szymon Fisz (like many others) was removed from the student list; hence, even though he was already "after a military study, after a military camp and after an oath", and he also had a wife and a child, for two years he was in the army with an annotation: "removed from student list, March 1968; he must be broken in". There he experienced different displays of hostility: "The first half of the year was very hard. I was on the edge of suicide; [...] the world collapsed. The roots disappeared. It turned out that I was not Polish. I was out of my depth [...]" (p. 11-12). After that, the problems with job began: his wife was made redundant; his efforts to get a pay rise (they already had two children) came to nothing, despite the good will of the boss because as the decision maker claimed: "We don't need Jews, let them hand in their notice" (p. 13). At the same time, for about four years they were not allowed to leave the country.

Peculiar policy of the authorities concerning these permissions or lack thereof led to successive tragedies connected with the separation of families. Krystyna Flato, among others, survived such a tragedy. After departure, she never saw her parents who had been forced by authorities to stay in Poland: "[...] they had begun to submit applications and they were constantly refused. We wrote to the United Nations, to Polish authorities and other institutions. To no avail. They told my mother that she could go alone because they would not free her husband. Because she did not want to go alone, they stayed" (p. 381).

Teresa Pollin's family did not use the occasion to leave because her father claimed that a respectable man does not flee, for which her parents paid with many years of waiting for the authorities' permission to leave: "[...] for ten years they had been submitting applications for departure and all the time they were

refused. [...] In the end, they got the right to leave when my dad had given up his retirement pension" (p. 348). Piotr Fejgin first met with a refusal "for very important state reasons", then "for very important social reasons", the subsequent decisions were already "without justification". Next, during a conversation with passport office workers he heard: "Forget it, we will not let you out", and to the question: "But why, what are the reasons?", he received the following answer: "I really don't know". The necessity of long separation (or even a breakup) was also one of many tragedies of people loving each other and planning to get married. The correspondence between them was confiscated (see, for example, Leon Sford, p. 329) and family documents were taken.

What did they lose because of March 1968? "Sense of belonging to your own country. [...] I ceased to be a Pole. They took it from me" (Krystyna Flato, p. 384); "Pride and honor. [...] It was tragic. I can tell you that the word 'tragic' does not reflect what we experienced" (Małka Fisz, p. 27); "The foundation of life. I felt I was a Pole" (Szymon Fisz, p. 27); "youth" (Paulina Chmielnicka, p. 77); "joy" (Dawid Guterbaum, p. 238); "frame of mind [...]. It was a horrible feeling, you know? They gave us a negative sense of Jewishness" (Flora Fejgin, p. 319); "it was like a slap in the face" (Grzegorz Himmelstein, p. 99); "They insulted me by taking away Polish citizenship. I did nothing wrong. I was decent. I stole nothing [...]" (Nina Himmelstein, p. 92). For Piotr Fejgin, the fact that he was forced to renounce his citizenship "was the most painful thing of all" (p. 317). And for Paulina Chmielnicka this loss entailed, among others, "Youth. Very early we had to become parents of our own parents" (p. 77), since after the forced departure many of them completely lost willingness to live and fell into pieces. Such was the case of Leon Sward's parents, who, after arriving at the assigned hotel in Vienna, "went to bed and completely collapsed mentally. They were not sick but they looked like death and did not get up for a few days" (p. 330). Kasia Borowicz did not want to leave, not only because of parting with her fiancé, but because, as she said: "Poland was my home. [...] Since then, I have had no home. I have lost the comfort of having my own place in the world" (p. 46). Halina Marymont ascertains: "I missed Poland, because by leaving I lost my identity. Coming back to high self-esteem, which I had at the moment of departure, took me a few years" (p. 229).

Some people also speak about positive experience in this tragic situation; for instance, Małka Fisz mentioned earlier, who admittedly lost pride and honor, "but she came out much stronger" (p. 27). And Naum Norman paradoxically states that March 1968 took nothing away from him and adds: "On the contrary. It changed me from 'scabby Jew' to a man conscious of his identity. But for the change to happen I had to leave, because there I would be this scab until now" (p. 344). Marek Elbaum represents an isolated attitude. He does not deplore that time, but he even disapproves of those who feel hurt: "For me it was an open gate. Anyway, not only for me. For all my family, too. I don't like listening to the stories about March wrongs. Yes, it was a tragedy, but on what scale? You are namby-pambies, you weep over yourselves, whereas the majority of you had been given a chance for an interesting life" (p. 283).

It is hardly surprising that he adds: "Living in Poland, I had more friends among Greek philosophers than in priests and in the majority of Polish population" (ibid.). Piotr Wiślicki, who did not leave Poland, sees positive consequences

in something different: "March made me a Jew. It did not make me come back to Jewry, but it impelled me to begin to be a Jew. I am happy that I did not migrate after March. I feel I am at my place. My grandfather would be proud of me" (p. 217-219). Nina Himelstein does not regret today that she left, though in 1988, so "when it was finally possible", she came to Poland together with her children who were born already in Israel. When she saw the sign "Warsaw", she wept: "something inside me triggered great emotion". However, she stated: "In Poland I feel like a tourist, despite the fact that Poland was once my country, *Mazurek Dąbrowskiego* [the national anthem of Poland] was my anthem, and Polish was my mother tongue" (p. 90).

It is difficult to mention all stories connected with the exodus of Polish citizens with Jewish roots at the end of the 1960s. Each family marked by the situation is a separate tragedy, constituting a separate shameful page in the history of our country. In the book by Mikołaj Grynberg there are only some trends shown that characterize how this group of Poles was cornered, some pressure coming from above, from the authority, as well as from earlier time and from the non-acceptance of their (even unconscious) Jewry. But in this book, we can find memories of neighbors and friends who made that time more humane, sometimes risking being punished by the authorities, like, for instance, the coworkers of Marek Elbaum's father, who was thrown out from the Nuclear Research Institute. Authority called them: "[...] young scholars, physicists and engineers, whom he helped, inter alia, in arranging foreign internships. They tried to force them to provide evidence of my father's guilt, but no one agreed. Then, all of them were released from work" (s. 277). And Perła Kacman remembers: "It was not an explosion of Antisemitism; it was exactly the opposite. [...] In 1968 many communities sympathized with the Jews. They were people like me. They did not like communism, they did not like the authority and some of them, for instance the Club of Catholic Intelligentsia, went to clean Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. I think that Polish-Jewish agreement had its beginning back then. [...] During that time, I came across many proofs of solidarity from this part of society with whom I had identified" (p. 66).

In his job, also Władysław Zajac met people who, despite systematic pressures, did not make him redundant, and when he quit his work a moment before his departure, they realized "that he should leave authorization for money which belonged to him", and then they paid him "all bonuses and arrears" (p. 295). And Piotr Fołga recalls his colleague who said during a meeting convened at Warsaw University of Life Sciences (SGGW) to condemn the Zionist Professors: "I am so sorry, but a moment ago these people were very important persons in the world of science, and today we can hear that they are motherfuckers and clogs'. The next day he was thrown out and summoned to do military service" (p. 309). And although Adam Gryniewicz convinces us that "antisemitism is a religion in Poland" (p. 253), Viola Wein thinks that "[...] Polish antisemitism is nothing special. The Dutch were much worse; [...] and the French are motherfuckers in general" (p. 127). We must also remember about all those people arriving at Gdański Railway Station who, in spite of the sanctions that could be imposed on them, came to say good-bye to those who could not stay longer in the country. A significant attitude was then manifested by a supporter of Polish

National Party working in Polish Agency of Information and hating Jews. She appeared at the station on the day of the departure of her previously ignored colleague, with whom she “had never exchanged any words” and said to her: “I am ashamed of my people, I am very sorry and good luck”.

Księga wyjścia by Mikołaj Grynberg is rich in emotions, both good and bad. Due to the passage of time and the current situation of the interlocutors, these emotions are toned down, but sometimes they explode with new strength. Throughout the book, the epithet “parszywy/a” [scabby] directed at them in various parts of Poland remains in the memory of the interlocutors. Naum Norman decided: “I will never set foot here again. [...] No one will ever shout to me: ‘Scabby Jew’” (p. 343). However, despite the passage of time, he and others remember, speak Hebrew, but count in Polish in their minds. They come here (to Poland), and often miss Polish theater, Piwnica pod Baranami, Łazienki park, cold Baltic sea...

[Sławomir Jacek Żurek]