
“This is not a question of choice”

An interview with Aleksander Smolar by Konrad Matyjaszek

Abstract: Konrad Matyjaszek’s interview with Aleksander Smolar focuses on the contemporary Polish intelligentsia, identified as a social group and a social milieu, and on this group’s self-image as produced in relation to antisemitism, understood here both as a set of violence-based public activities and practices and as an excluding prejudice that constitutes a component of the Polish culture. Aleksander Smolar discusses the history of *Aneks*, the Polish-language émigré socio-cultural journal, whose editor-in-chief he remained during the entire time of its activity (1973–1990). He talks about the political conditions and the forms of pressure directed at the *Aneks*’s editorial board, composed in majority of persons forced to emigrate from Poland during the antisemitic campaign of March 1968, and mentions the post-1968 shift of the Polish culture towards the political right and conservatism, and the rapprochement between the left-wing opposition circles and the organizations associated with the Catholic Church that was initiated in the 1970s. He also recounts reactions to the political changes displayed by his father, Grzegorz Smolar, a communist activist and an activist of the Jewish community in Poland. Afterwards, Smolar discusses the context of creation of his 1986 essay *Tabu i niewinność* [Taboo and innocence] and analyzes the reasons for which the majority of the Polish intelligentsia chose not to undertake cultural critique directed against the antisemitic components of the Polish culture.

Keywords: Polish history; intelligentsia; 1968; Holocaust; antisemitism; communism

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Konrad Matyjaszek: I am interested in the self-perception of the Polish intelligentsia in relation to antisemitism as a task, or even a mission, as a component of Polish culture. I’m interested in the way in which the Polish intelligentsia sets itself against antisemitism or builds itself in opposition to it. I would like to talk about the *Aneks*¹ magazine. How did you, as its founder, together with the entire editorial team, create a place where, firstly, the intelligentsia as a group, a structure, a circle produced itself, and, secondly, where antisemitism was confronted, in a way by necessity. How was it, do you remember it this way?

Aleksander Smolar: I will tell you how I remember it. The words you have used are certainly not obvious, you look at it as an observer, in retrospect. These are not the words with which we described our situation, our mission, or our tasks. First of all, I must say I feel a bit of discomfort using this great quantifier: the Polish intelligentsia. There are people who study the Polish intelligentsia and who can make general statements about it. I can talk at best about a certain partial experience, about certain moments, and certain circles which could undoubtedly be counted among the intelligentsia.

¹ *Aneks* – a quarterly published from 1973 to 1990, first in Uppsala, Sweden, and then from 1975 in London and Paris, founded by Aleksander and Eugeniusz Smolar, Irena Grosfeld and Nina Smolar. Its founders originally intended *Aneks* to be a medium for the publication of Polish translations of texts that were significant for culture, social life and politics globally but were unavailable officially in Poland. Later on, the magazine also published literary texts, opinions and research analyses of opposition writers from Poland and other countries in the Eastern Bloc.

When establishing *Aneks*, the problem of antisemitism or, one could say, the Jewishness of the majority of its participants, was a significant factor. That is, *Aneks* was founded in majority by those who belonged to the March 1968 emigration,² who left Poland being bruised and battered, with a certain opinion about the situation in the country. It was not only the state authorities who were blamed for what was happening then; most of us were convinced that the events of March of 1968 resulted also from certain sentiments of the society.

After March 1968. *Aneks* quarterly

K.M.: In several of your previous statements, you mentioned that March 1968, seen as an antisemitic campaign that gained social acceptance, created a situation in which you all as a migrant community, and you personally as part of it, did not feel entitled to speak on behalf of the Polish political opposition.

A.S.: This was an important component. When I was leaving, I had no sense of any mission or of a right to speak out on Polish matters.

K.M.: So why did you establish the magazine?

A.S.: It was the result of an evolving situation. For a year, I was in Italy at an American university. The decision to establish *Aneks* wasn't just a result of my own thinking; on the contrary – there was a community, especially in Sweden, in Uppsala, where my brother and his wife had moved, made up of recent migrants, who had their thoughts about what should be done. After about a year, the idea grew on me personally (others had probably seen it earlier) that it is our duty to – how shall I put it so that it sounds modest and realistic – to give help to the active circles in Poland who wanted democratic changes. This was the only way of action we imagined – apart from practical help, which we always gave, such as material help for people in need, and later providing printing equipment. We believed that we could play a role as intermediaries between the Western thought and those circles in Poland who were active in an intellectual, social and political way, or those aspiring to such activism. Hence the concept of *Aneks*. Even its title was intended to suggest its secondary role, a role of an addendum, and by no means a leading one.

K.M.: Did this secondary character result from the fact that both you and a large part of the editorial team identified yourselves as Jewish?

A.S.: This is not a problem of identifying oneself as a Jew; most of us saw ourselves as Poles, but the problem is that – to use [Florian] Znaniecki's category of "reflected self"³ –

² A wave of antisemitic repressions and an anti-Jewish media campaign was initiated in Poland in June 1967 and culminated in March 1968, following the series of student protests demanding liberalization of social and political life. Repressions, orchestrated by the ruling Communist Party and assumed by numerous sections of the Polish society, were aimed against people labelled as Jews, disregarding their individual identities and backgrounds. Acts of institutional violence such as dismissals from jobs or university positions and expulsions of students were followed by a wave of forced emigration which affected ca. 20,000 people.

³ "Reflected self" is a term coined by sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929), developed by the philosopher and sociologist Florian Znaniecki (1882–1958). Cooley sees reflected self, also called "mirror-glass self," as

we were perceived as Jewish, and since we were active in Polish affairs, it was especially difficult not to take into account the way we were perceived.

K.M.: And you saw this perceptions as a barrier, as something that established a difference between you and the rest of the team on the one hand and the people who remained in Poland on the other?

A.S.: The very decision to leave Poland certainly created such a barrier, too; our friends who stayed in Poland often perceived this decision negatively.

K.M.: The decision to leave?

A.S.: Yes.

K.M.: But you were leaving in the context of factual events – people were losing their jobs, their positions at universities...

A.S.: Well, yes, but many others were losing jobs, too. This is a rather complicated psychological problem. Some people didn't approve of our decision, which does not mean that they maintained these judgments later.

K.M.: You mentioned elsewhere your conversation with Adam Michnik⁴ that you had in 1968, in which Michnik spoke about two of your mutual friends who were imprisoned and who – according to Adam Michnik – might have disapproved of your departure.

A.S.: He even said: "You are lucky they are still in jail."

K.M.: But it must have been obvious that the campaign of March 1968 was also directed against you.

A.S.: People were motivated in various ways then. I think that a basic motive was not to allow oneself to be defined by the authorities. The authorities were trying to define us as Jews, and therefore we should not in any way confirm this with our life choices. That was the main argument. At that time there was no political thinking or political actions, so for us it was not even a choice between leaving or carrying on a struggle in Poland. It was a period of dispersion and demobilization. So what motivated us were rather moral considerations.

K.M.: But when a time suitable for political action emerged, so did the new realities that reduced *Aneks* to merely an annex to such action. You said that the barrier was that,

an individual's self-image developed on the basis of their idea of how they are perceived by other individuals or a community (Cooley, 1902/2009, pp. 183–187). Znaniecki defines it as follows: "Each normal human being and collectivity has a reflected self constructed on the ground of those past experiences in which they have been conscious of being a social object for others. [...] [T]he content of the reflected self remains chiefly social: however exceptional an individual may feel himself to be, his reflected self is constituted of features which put him into a class with many others, make him a type or a combination of types. He sees himself under the same aspects under which others observe him; as a soldier, a workman, or a scientist; as wise or foolish, lazy or active, mild or violent, tall or small, handsome or homely, etc.; while even such exceptional features as he may ascribe to himself are usually defined by contrast with other men" (Znaniecki, 1925, p. 91).

4 Adam Michnik (b. 1946) – historian, journalist, essayist and political activist. One of the students whose relegation started the student protests that triggered the events of March 1968. One of the major activists of the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR) and later "Solidarity" movements. After 1989, the editor-in-chief of Poland's largest daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

as an editorial team, you were perceived as Jews. Who labeled you as Jews in a deprecating way, apart from the government?

A.S.: I will tell you an anecdote which was painful for me, and which I have mentioned many times before. When we were preparing the first issue of *Aneks*, with a group of friends we wrote an editorial. The main argument was that Poles in general were not divided into those living in Poland and émigrés, or according to class or social divisions, but that the fundamental dividing line – and this concerned precisely the intelligentsia – was the division between those who identified themselves with the state authorities, or at least were ready to submit to them, that is to say, who accepted the dictatorship, and those who were willing to oppose the regime in the name of the ideals of freedom and democracy. We wrote this, including ourselves in the latter group. In other words, it was an attempt to legitimize our participation in domestic life by establishing a foreign-based journal with even very modest aims. This meant, firstly, that we belonged to Poland in general and, secondly, that we belonged to that part of Poland which aspired to evolve towards democracy. I sent the proofs to Poland – at that time there was still something called proofs, a trial version of the print – and from four eminent opposition figures I received a strong demand to remove this editorial.

K.M.: I will now read an excerpt from this editorial which, as it seems to me, is the one that they had doubts about. You wrote as follows: “We are émigrés, but we do not accept the traditional division into the home country and emigration according to geographical boundaries. We are émigrés on a similar basis to all of those who consider the political system that exists in Poland to be foreign to themselves. We share the fate of the émigré with that majority of Polish society who express their disapproval of the political reality of the country most often through passive resistance, with those who in March [of 1968] and December [of 1970]⁵ took an active fight” (*Aneks*, 1973). Did their reaction concern the sentence about March and December?

A.S.: To tell the truth, this is more ambiguous than what I remember. I must say that the phrases you have quoted were read exactly in the opposite way to what we intended....

K.M.: These words are extremely mild. I must say that I read them and do not understand what these critics wanted at all!

A.S.: ...it meant that our phrasing could make it easier to attack the opposition, that it is in fact the Jewish opposition.

K.M.: But where does it say that? The only place that may reflect in any way what you are talking about is the juxtaposition of March and December.

⁵ A reference to week-long protests, strikes and riots which took place predominantly in the north of Poland in response to an increase in food prices. Some 50 people were killed and more than 1,000 wounded when the protests were suppressed by police and military forces.

A.S.: No, not only that. There are also those previous sentences, when we say which Poland we belong to. So we talk to the majority of Poles and we treat the majority of Poles as – in a sense – emigrants... But you know, this is not important. It's more about the reaction of people who were close to you, who couldn't be suspected of any untoward thoughts. This shows at most how bruised these circles were after March and, in some way, how effective this antisemitic propaganda, and this fear, was.

K.M.: As you said in other interviews, Roman Zimand⁶ phoned you then and presented this opinion, which probably was his own but was shared with Karol Modzelewski,⁷ Jakub Karpiński⁸ and someone else, Jacek Kuroń,⁹ I guess?

A.S.: No, that was not him. Actually, I do not remember the fourth name, either. There were certainly four of them.

K.M.: But did these three people on behalf of whom Zimand spoke also contact your team directly, or you personally?

A.S.: No, Zimand was in a way an emissary because he went abroad; I met him in Paris.

K.M.: So it wasn't a phone call?

A.S.: No, there were no phone calls back then, there were no automatic connections, conversations on the phone were very rare and not on such subjects. It was passed on by Roman Zimand and, to tell the truth, later I didn't talk with anyone about it.

K.M.: Not even with Modzelewski and Karpiński?

A.S.: No, I didn't. Jakub Karpiński passed away a long time ago, but when he was alive, I never asked him about it.

K.M.: How is that possible? So he told Zimand to pass on to you that your editorial was unacceptable and could not come out in print, and then you never talked about it?

6 Roman Zimand (1926–1992) – literary critic and scholar, essayist, political opposition activist in communist Poland. Researcher and professor (as of 1972) in the Institute of Literary Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Editor of *Po prostu* weekly and essayist for *Po prostu* and other titles, including the Paris *Kultura*. An activist of the Polish Independence Accords (Polskie Porozumienie Niepodległościowe), established in 1976, a clandestine conservative opposition organization. From 1980, a Solidarity activist.

7 Karol Modzelewski (b. 1937) – medievalist, historian, political opposition activist in communist Poland, and politician. Along with Jacek Kuroń, the author of *List otwarty do Partii* [An open letter to the Party] (1964), and a co-organizer of students' protests at the University of Warsaw in March 1968. After release from prison in 1971, a researcher in the Institute of the History of Material Culture, Polish Academy of Sciences, as of 1990 a full professor, a full member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and, in 2007–2010, a vice-president of the Academy. From 1980, a Solidarity activist, the first spokesperson for the trade union. In the 1989–1991 period a senator; the co-founder, and, until 1995, a member of the Labor Union (Partia Pracy) political party.

8 Jakub Karpiński (1940–2003) – sociologist, essayist, political opposition activist in communist Poland. A co-organizer of students' protests at the University of Warsaw in March 1968 and scholar at the University, dismissed in 1968. A member of the editorial board of *Głos* since its foundation in 1977. In the period 1978–1992, he lived in the USA, working as an academic at Columbia University and the State University of New York, among other institutions. As of 1992, he worked in the Polish Policy Institute in Warsaw and Open Media Research Institute in Prague, and from 1997, in the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw. He was a brother of the writer and cultural historian Wojciech Karpiński.

9 Jacek Kuroń (1934–2004) – historian, scouting movement activist, and political theoretician; one of the democratic opposition leaders in the People's Republic of Poland; co-founder of the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR) movement, and later one of the key figures in the Solidarity movement. After the systemic transition, Kuroń served twice as the Minister of Labor and Social Policy.

A.S.: It was not that it was impossible to print it; it was our magazine and our decision, but they strongly opposed it.

K.M.: What did they say?

A.S.: What Zimand conveyed was a negative opinion saying that this editorial may suggest a kind of alien character of the opposition within Poland.

K.M.: Suggest to whom? To the government? To all Poles?

A.S.: Not to the government, not to everyone. To begin with, a large part of society had an ambivalent attitude towards the opposition, even if it was not supportive of the regime, and secondly, the Jewish problem was not a simple problem in Poland. You know, I will not get into the analysis of a thought that I did not even try to explore... I'll be seeing Karol Modzelewski later today, and I have never asked him this question. And I suppose that he doesn't remember it; he is an elderly man. But I remember that I only had one conversation about it with Adam Michnik, because soon afterwards he was in Paris and flatly condemned it [withdrawal of the editorial]. I know that he definitely was not one of the four. He condemned both these arguments and this position.

K.M.: Zimand gave you the information and then you and Irena Grosfeld cut out this introduction with safety razors from each copy of the already printed magazine. What was the reason why you did not act against their suggestion? It was the first issue of the journal.

A.S.: I talked about it somewhere else – I had had enough of it then and I was ready to give it up. I had not left Poland to be hounded by complexes of other people, those who remained. But there was a sense of duty towards my friends, towards the groups that were close to me. And secondly, we defined our role modestly, as an “annex” to the matters they considered important, so we couldn't start by acting against them without a sense of what was really going on in the country. We yielded to them.

K.M.: And what could have happened if you hadn't cut out this editorial? Would those who protested against it have felt endangered?

A.S.: I don't know and I suppose there's no point in talking about it. Their reaction was more important; they were four people, I don't know to what extent their opinion was characteristic of the wider audience, I'm not sure at all, but these people were not insignificant, they belonged to the elite of the Warsaw opposition intelligentsia. Your proposition, contained in your original question, that it [antisemitism] is a problem for the intelligentsia and that the intelligentsia confronts it – it was not always true. My impressions, when I was leaving Poland, were those of great indifference and resignation. This does not mean that people accepted March, but even in intelligentsia circles I had a sense of certain isolation, a sense of being misunderstood. I had a sense that people were tired of it, a sense of being asked what the fuss was really about. There

had been persecutions of peasants as *kulaks*, of aristocrats, workers, opposition activists, and writers, so it was now the turn of the Jews. This is an opinion that I heard many times. At the same time, it was the opinion of people who otherwise fully sympathized with people like me, but for them it was the logic of this system and we fell victim to this logic.

K.M.: Did you see traces of antisemitism somewhere else in the intelligentsia as a group? In your opinion, could the intelligentsia itself create a situation where antisemitism was normalized?

A.S.: No, I do not think so. But I think that even in intellectual circles certain types of slogans which were popular in March were also accepted, at least partially. I mean the things that were effective in the March propaganda, like identifying the worst period of “real socialism” or communism with the Jews. The responsibility of the Jews. At the time one read much about the responsibility of people such as [Jakub] Berman,¹⁰ [Hilary] Minc¹¹ and [Roman] Zambrowski¹²...

K.M.: You are talking about the period before 1956.¹³

A.S.: I refer to this time, naturally, even though Zambrowski was a party executive for much longer. In the first edition of the memoirs of Andrzej Walicki¹⁴ which we published, [entitled] *Spotkania z Miłoszem* [Meetings with Miłosz] (Walicki, 1985), an opinion was present that March 1968 had some positive impact, too, such as the rehabilitation of philosophical thought. He meant that after March it was possible to write about Polish philosophy with far less restrictions. The point was that Marxist thought had previously been overvalued, which was understandable for ideological reasons, so even if Polish philosophers were discussed, they were authors somehow associated with at least the socialist tradition, if not the Marxist one, while later it was possible to write about others. To give you another example: in the early 1970s, two

10 Jakub Berman (1901–1984) – journalist, politician. Before WW2 a member of the Communist Party of Poland. Between 1944 and 1954 a member of the Politburo of the Polish Workers’ Party and of the Polish United Workers’ Party responsible for supervision over the Ministry of Public Security. Dismissed from the government in 1957, until 1969, he worked as an editor.

11 Hilary Minc (1905–1974) – economist, politician. Before WW2 a member of the Communist Party of Poland as well as an employee of the Poland’s Main Statistical Office. In post-war Poland he was the Minister of Industry and Commerce (until 1956), head of Central Office for Planning and of government’s Economic Committee, as well as the coordinator of the Six-Year Plan. Dismissed from the government in 1956, expelled from the Polish United Workers’ Party in 1959.

12 Roman Zambrowski (1909–1977) – politician, military officer. Before WW2 a member of the Young Communist League of Poland and the Communist Party of Poland. In post-war Poland president of the Special Commission for Fight Against Abuse of the Law and Harmful Economic Activity; after 1956 leader of the reformist wing of the Communist Party; deprived of political position during the antisemitic campaign of 1968.

13 A reference to the liberalizing policies adopted after the plenary session of the Communist Party held in October 1956.

14 Andrzej Walicki (b. 1930) – philosopher and historian of ideas. An academic in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, as of 1972 a full professor. Between 1981 and 1986 he was an academic at the Australian National University, Canberra (Australia), and in the 1986–1999 period he worked at the University of Notre Dame (Notre Dame, IN, USA). He is a specialist in Russian philosophy and social thought, the history of the intelligentsia, Marxism as a socio-political idea, the Polish national idea and nationalism.

of my friends, Marcin Król¹⁵ and Wojciech Karpiński,¹⁶ wrote a book, *Sylwetki polityczne XIX wieku* [19th century political profiles] (Karpiński & Król, 1974), presenting views of a certain group of public figures, Polish intellectuals of the 19th century. Among the intelligentsia this was borderline sensational, because it was exclusively about people who represented conservative and patriotic outlooks. As far as I remember, no left-wing thinkers were discussed there.

K.M.: So this part of the intelligentsia saw the undermining of the dominance of Marxism in March 1968 as instrumental in promoting those conservative and right-wing ideologies as a response to Marxism?

A.S.: No, not only as a response, one was simply allowed to write about eminent people about whom it was not possible to write before, because it was believed that their ideas were harmful, or irrelevant, secondary, epigonic. In other words, the Polish thought became an autonomous object of reflection.

K.M.: The Polish thought understood as national thought?

A.S.: No, not only that, religious thought also played an important role, for which there had not been too much place in official public life before. The point is that March 1968, through its official nationalist rhetoric, at the same time opened up opportunities for autonomous reflection on Polish thought.

K.M.: And this was perceived by some as a positive development?

A.S.: All these people, of course, thought that March was disgusting, that it was racist, antisemitic, but also that there were elements that allowed for a broadening of reflection. These are not contradictory judgments.

K.M.: And that was not followed by a reflection on the harmful or destructive influence of opening the doors to all of these currents of Polishness?

A.S.: I gave you two examples: the reflection of Andrzej Walicki, who at that time began to write not only about Russian thought, but also about Polish thought; who writes that this has some connection with the atmosphere created as a result of 1968; and about a booklet by two of my friends, much younger than Walicki, who wrote a collection of essays which in a way played a formative role in the creation of space for the liberal-conservative opposition. This was being discussed. I remember that Andrzej Kijowski,¹⁷

15 Marcin Król (b. 1944) – historian of ideas, political scientist, essayist and political opposition activist in communist Poland. A scholar in the Polish Academy of Sciences and University of Warsaw, and from 1978 editor-in-chief of *Res Publica*. An activist of the Polish Independence Accords (PKN) and participant in the March 1968 protests. He was an essayist of the Paris *Kultura*, and after 1990 became an essayist and member of the editorial board of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, and editor-in-chief of *Res Publica Nowa*.

16 Wojciech Karpiński (b. 1943) – writer, literary critic and cultural historian. He has published in periodicals including *Kultura*, *Res Publica*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Więź*, *Znak* and *Zeszyty Literackie*. He is the author of essays and biographies of writers and artists. He was an activist of the Polish Independence Accords (PKN). He has lived in Paris since 1982. He is a brother of the sociologist and political activist Jakub Karpiński.

17 Andrzej Kijowski (1928–1985) – literary critic, essayist, writer. He was the author of many articles on literary criticism, biographies and literary texts. He published in *Nowa Kultura*, *Życie Literackie*, *Przegląd Kulturalny*; from 1958 he was a member of the editorial board of *Twórczość*, and from the 1970s became an essayist of *Tygodnik*

I believe it was in [the journal] *Twórczość*, wrote about this book in very negative terms, suggesting – which was completely unjustified – its nationalist character. And it was the same Kijowski who later, after Solidarity was born, wrote about the intelligentsia returning home, meaning its return to the Polish nation.

The intelligentsia and Catholicism

K.M.: I have a question about something you mentioned before, about opening up the debate at the time to religious, Christian and Catholic, themes. How did you see this at the time? At that time, did you find it somehow troubling that Catholicism was increasingly defining the framework within which the intelligentsia created itself as a group and within which Polish society was reinvented?

A.S.: I belonged to a non-believing circle. For me, Catholicism was something alien, not only because of my Jewishness, but also because – which not everyone realized, but I was well aware of – it was something threatening. I knew about the strength of anti-semitism in the tradition of the Catholic Church before the war, about some of its manifestations also during the war, about the behavior of various priests, even though there were also cases of heroic conduct. I knew this very well, and I myself witnessed certain behaviors that made me stay as far away from Catholicism as possible.

K.M.: What were these behaviors?

A.S.: I'm not sure if I have spoken about it yet. I was once coming back by train from France; I was still a schoolboy and I had been to a summer camp. In the train compartment there were two priests who were talking to each other, carrying cans with water from Lourdes,¹⁸ and sharing it with people. And at one point I wanted to start a conversation and I turned to one of these priests saying "sir." This priest did not react at all, but turned to the other one, asking: "Do you remember who used to refer to a priest as 'sir' before the war, Father?" And the other one answered: "Of course – the kikes." I was completely paralyzed. And mind you, he didn't pay any attention to me, he didn't respond.

K.M.: He wasn't talking to you.

A.S.: No, he was not. He said that to the other priest. It was not the only manifestation, but such manifestations of complete alienation and hostility were quite obvious to me. It was a strange world for me. Before my departure I had a few Catholic or Christian

Powszechny. He was the co-founder and, in the 1978–1979 period, a lecturer and member of the program council of the Society of Science Courses (Towarzystwo Kursów Naukowych).

18 In Lourdes, southwestern France (Pyrenees region), there is a Catholic shrine built not far from the place where Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared to a 14-year-old miller's daughter in 1858. The apparitions took place in a small cave, inside which there is a water spring. Many Catholics believe that its water has healing properties. It is distributed to pilgrims who come to the sanctuary.

friends, but in fact I did not know this world. Therefore, when I was in exile and when various friends and acquaintances – my circle of friends – were getting closer to the Catholic circles of *Tygodnik Powszechny*,¹⁹ *Znak*,²⁰ *Więź*,²¹ that came as a shock for us. The same was true of some texts that our friends wrote under the influence of their fascination with Catholicism. I remember the exchange of audio tapes on which our friends in Poland explained what happened, that there was a rapprochement with the circles of the Catholic Intelligentsia Clubs.²² I also remember when Tadeusz Mazowiecki,²³ whom I had not met before, called me, and actually had a mission to explain to me what was going on. He was in Paris and he visited us; we talked for a long time and he told us all about it. Likewise, one day another friend of mine, Krzysztof Śliwiński,²⁴ a member of Catholic Intelligentsia Club, who played a significant role in the rapprochement, was on his way to Africa, to Zaire, where he was to work as a professor. We arranged a meeting, I remember driving a few hundred kilometers to the Italian side, and we spent a day at the seaside, where he talked and explained the aspects of the situation which were unclear to me.

K.M.: Did they manage to explain all of this to you then, or did you still had some doubts?

A.S.: I understood it perfectly well, and I also understood perfectly well the arguments later used in Adam Michnik's book *The Church and the left (Kościół, lewica, dialog)* (Michnik, 1977; Michnik, 1993). Still, I found some of its claims shocking and have never been

19 *Tygodnik Powszechny* – a socio-cultural Catholic weekly. Established in 1944 by the bishop of Kraków it was edited by a circle of Catholic writers and literary theorists; between 1944 and 1999 its editor-in-chief was Jerzy Turowicz. Associated with Catholic intelligentsia, it remained influenced by the thought of French personalists. Since the mid-1960s the weekly was active in promoting the reforms of the Catholic Church adopted by the Second Vatican Council. After 1990 it has been associated with the liberal wing of the Polish Catholic Church.

20 *Znak* – a socio-cultural Catholic monthly published in Krakow since 1946. Founded by a group of writers and essayists connected with the *Tygodnik Powszechny* weekly, it was linked to the Krakow Curia, but remained an autonomous institution (the monthly was published by a cooperative set up by some of the members of the editorial board); as of the 1970 it was tied with the Krakow Club of Catholic Intelligentsia. In 1959 the *Znak* Social Publishing House (Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy *Znak*) was established.

21 *Więź* – a socio-cultural Catholic monthly published in Warsaw since 1958, established by a group of writers, essayists and activists who before the October of 1956 were linked with the PAX Association. In the following years the monthly was closely linked with the Warsaw Club of Catholic Intelligentsia. Tadeusz Mazowiecki was editor-in-chief of the monthly from its establishment until 1981.

22 Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia – associations of lay Catholics, formally independent of Church structures and state institutions, set up in Warsaw, Krakow, Poznań, Wrocław and other major cities after October 1956. They performed social roles and organized the religious and cultural life of their members, remaining at the same time a political structure. Established in October 1956, the Polish Club of Progressive Catholic Intelligentsia (Ogólnopolski Klub Postępowej Inteligencji Katolickiej), after negotiations with Władysław Gomułka, was given the chance to introduce its deputies to Polish Parliament. The *Znak* parliamentary caucus representing these circles usually had five deputies in successive parliamentary terms (1957–1976).

23 Tadeusz Mazowiecki (1927–2013) – politician and publicist. In 1948–1955 an activist and editor in the pro-government "Christian nationalist" PAX Association. In 1957 he co-founded the Warsaw Catholic Intelligentsia Club (which he headed in 1975–1981). Editor-in-chief of *Więź* from its establishment in 1958 until 1981. Deputy to parliament from 1961 to 1972. Collaborator of the Polish Independence Accords (PKN). In 1978 he co-founded the Society of Science Courses (Towarzystwo Kursów Naukowych). During the Solidarity strikes in Gdańsk in 1980 he was one of the expert advisors to the striking workers, since 1983 advisor to Lech Wałęsa. In 1991 Mazowiecki became first prime minister of the Republic of Poland. In 1991–2001 he was deputy to parliament; in 1991–1995 he was the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia.

24 Krzysztof Śliwiński (b. 1940) – biologist, Catholic activist. An academic in the Institute of Zoology University of Warsaw, between 1974 and 1979 a lecturer in Kisangani University, Zaire. An active member of the Warsaw Club of Catholic Intelligentsia, Solidarity activist and a member of the Society of Science Courses. After 1990, he became a diplomat.

able to accept them. These were statements in which he treated a lack of faith as a kind of poverty. It was a claim about asymmetric relations: believers were supposed to have a certain wealth which people like himself, non-believers, lack.

K.M.: Did you see then the establishing of Catholicism as a conceptual framework as something harmful?

A.S.: No, I didn't think about it as something harmful. First, of course, I evolved myself, I was under the influence of what Leszek Kołakowski²⁵ wrote, and this evolution took place much earlier; I became aware of the meaning and positive content that Christianity brought with it.

K.M.: Where is the difference between the one and the other?

A.S.: Christianity as a certain set of beliefs or ideas is one thing, and the institution of the Church in Poland is something else. In France, where I found myself, the circles which were closest to me were members of the editorial board of *Esprit*,²⁶ where I stayed for two decades.

K.M.: What was the difference between approval of the conceptual framework of the Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia and membership in the editorial board of *Esprit*?

A.S.: It was a completely non-clerical magazine. They were profoundly believing Christians, but there was little direct evidence of this in the journal. They wrote from a Christian perspective. I no longer have direct contact with this community, but these were my close friends. Then, I was close to another group; I moved to Aix-en-Provence with my family for three years and there I regularly took part in meetings of the young Jesuits' club. It was exciting; they were very left-wing.

K.M.: Didn't it make it difficult for you that these were Catholic Church structures?

A.S.: Not at all.

K.M.: Why so?

A.S.: First, in France, I didn't have such a sense of threat. Second, French Catholicism was completely different: it was a minority position. Catholicism had to answer the questions posed by the majority of the society, which was mostly not religious anymore. Not

²⁵ Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009) – philosopher, historian of ideas, essayist. Since 1945 a Marxist philosopher, lecturer at the University of Warsaw since 1953, full professor since 1957. Since 1956 theoretician of revisionist Marxism. After 1966, his thought evolved towards Christian religious philosophy; in the same year he was excluded from the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). Having been banned from teaching and publishing after his involvement in the events of March 1968, later that year he emigrated and subsequently spent most of his later career in Oxford University, evolving towards liberalism and anti-communism. Collaborator of the Polish Independence Accords (PKN), and foreign representative for the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR).

²⁶ *Esprit* – Paris-based Catholic literary and socio-political periodical, established in 1932 by activist, essayist and philosopher Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950). It represented one of the currents of personalism, a heterogeneous and eclectic trend of Christian philosophy, which for Mounier and the *Esprit* authors consisted in the critique of capitalism and state communism, recognition of the risk of the presence of fascisms in the social and political life of post-war Europe, and a renewal based on socially-sensitive Catholicism and creating a platform for exchange of opinions and ideas with the leftist circles.

to mention that it was them who found and invited me, and I saw what my added value was in their debates.

K.M.: And what did they expect from you? Why did they want to talk with you?

A.S.: Because of my experiences. Both *Esprit* and this other circle at a certain moment became extremely interested in the problem of totalitarianism and Central Europe. They had strong ties with Poland, with personalist circles, with *Tygodnik Powszechny*, with *Więź*, with *Znak*. Back then the ties were very close, these Polish circles were strongly influenced by personalism, which was precisely the philosophy of the *Esprit* editors and writers.

K.M.: But was there “something off” for you about the Polish interpretations of these ideas?

A.S.: No. As for *Tygodnik Powszechny*, I had read it almost since I was a child, because my father would get copies of it. I was fascinated. This was in a way an alien circle to me, but it wasn't that I reacted with outright rejection. It was the institutional Church that induced such reaction in me, with a certain amount of fear, too. Naturally, I was aware that not all priests were like those I had met on the train, but this image made me keep my distance as far as I could.

K.M.: Were traces of the approach you encountered on the train somehow evident in the intelligentsia as a social group?

A.S.: In the circle in which I stayed – of course not. But it was obvious that it was present and could be encountered. Later, when independent circulation was established, it could be found in independent magazines, in émigré magazines. I had various unpleasant experiences also as an emigrant, with the Polish diaspora. All this made me keep a certain distance. Involvement, yes, but without any sense of mission, and at the same time with a sense of service, meaning that what we did and what I did served the circles I was most closely connected to.

K.M.: I want to ask about this notion of service. My impression was that it resulted from March 1968 as a catastrophe that destroyed debate and which let antisemitism come to surface, where it stayed for good...

A.S.: Right, but you know, March 1968 has never ended for me. One can say that March has finished in terms of its public manifestations and extreme forms, and in terms of manipulation by the regime. But regarding the state of consciousness of at least part of the society, I'm deeply convinced that this is still alive, as confirmed by opinion polls even today. This is what Joanna Tokarska-Bakir has written about²⁷ and many other scholars, too.

²⁷ A reference to a series of anthropological fieldwork studies on contemporary forms of the so-called “blood libel,” or the antisemitic accusations against Jews of murdering Christian children and desecrating the blessed Host. The studies were carried out by a team led by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir around Białystok and Orla (2004–2006) and

K.M.: You lived and functioned in such reality. I understand that you couldn't have disregarded it.

A.S.: I mean: intellectually, I followed the public events closely and read a lot, I think often more than people in Poland did, who didn't have access to all that was published. I followed what was published in various circulations, in Catholic and underground magazines, what was broadcast by Radio Free Europe, with which I was cooperating intensively at the time. I followed what was published by the émigré press. I was also interested, for professional reasons, in the evolution of society, in the sentiments, in the way of thinking and, of course, because of my personal sensitivity – in the Jewish matters. Although by no means exclusively, I was not obsessively focused on Jewish issues, but of course it was an important component. In this sense, I watched with interest, for example, the rapprochement with Catholic circles, the interpenetration, including the culmination in the audience granted by Primate [Stefan] Wyszyński²⁸ to [Jacek] Kuroń and [Adam] Michnik.²⁹ This would be unthinkable today. At any rate, I was watching it with interest as well as with a certain skepticism. I remember heated discussions with Adam Michnik, who arrived in France when his book [*The Church and the left*] was coming out in Paris; the book contained things which I found hard to accept. Yet I understood then his main message; the existence of a certain leftist obscurantism which prevented the understanding of the extent of the potential for freedom carried in the Christian message...

K.M.: A potential for freedom?

A.S.: Obviously. For instance, because the Church was against the monopoly of the official word and churches offered a possibility of discussion totally different from the official discourse.

K.M.: And you were convinced back then that it was a real possibility for a change for the better?

A.S.: That for sure. At the same time, I was rather skeptical. I thought I understood it perfectly, and yet I was also certain that this was a result of good will of both sides. Obviously, within the Church there were displays of hostility from various members of the clergy, there were reservations, but at the same time a rapprochement was taking place. Still, in a sense, it was a rapprochement determined by the conditions of People's Republic of Poland, which was disintegrating yet still repressive, and by the awareness

around Sandomierz (2005–2006). They proved the persistence of this belief into the present day, and its significance for contemporary Polish religiosity.

28 Stefan Wyszyński (1901–1981) – Roman Catholic cardinal, the Primate of Poland between 1948 and 1981. In 1950 he signed an agreement between the Polish Catholic Church and the communist government that secured mutual concessions. Between 1953 and 1956 he was interned by the state authorities. In 1957 he supported Władysław Gomułka's government. He propagated the model of "popular Catholicism" focused on large-scale religious celebrations and veneration of religious and patriotic symbols, consequently employing Catholicism as an anti-government mass movement.

29 An audience granted by Primate of Poland Stefan Wyszyński to Jacek Kuroń and Adam Michnik on May 20, 1976 in the Primate's Palace in Warsaw.

among representatives of the institutional Church and Catholic intelligentsia on the one hand and among the secular intelligentsia, often leftist and partly originating from the Polish United Worker's Party (PZPR) on the other, that there is a shared set of values and interests. Jacek Kuroń and Adam Michnik wrote about this.

K.M.: Didn't you have the feeling that it was a kind of ploy on the part of the Church?

A.S.: I was skeptical enough to think that it was somewhat superficial, that there were significant differences, but at the same time it seemed to me to be an extremely positive phenomenon. Recently, Andrzej Leder wrote in his assorted remarks that, in the 1970s, the surrender of the secular intelligentsia to Catholic domination killed the opportunity for leftist thinking.³⁰

K.M.: You do not remember such impression from that time, do you?

A.S.: No, I did not feel that leftist ideology was being killed, but I had the impression, which I mentioned earlier when talking about Michnik's book, that my stance had its dignity, too. That I was not religious, but it wasn't exclusively a negative choice and had positive components, too. This fundamental approach was unacceptable to me. However, I don't think that it was the cause of a process, which in fact is visible everywhere today, of a certain weakening of left-wing ideas and of an offensive by conservative thought, if not a reactionary one. It's a much broader phenomenon and here I think Leder is wrong, but in his observation about that time there is an element of truth, there is a sense of guilt for the past among the secular intelligentsia, despite the fact that Adam Michnik, of course, belonged to a generation that in no way could find itself guilty here.

K.M.: You mentioned elsewhere that you had heard the critique of the Catholic component of the Polish intelligentsia from your father, Grzegorz Smolar.³¹ You said that before March 1968 what made you different from the rest of your circles was your awareness of what Polish culture was capable of.

³⁰ Andrzej Leder said in an interview: "Many representatives of the opposition espoused the left-wing tradition and defined social problems in terms of inequality and exploitation. This is what Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski did, for example, in their famous *Open letter to the Party* from the 1960s. It was in fact an analysis of class dictatorship in the People's Republic of Poland. On the other hand, from the moment the Church and the opposition came to an agreement in the 1970s, a specific mixture of liberal and conservative language began to dominate. The language of the democratic opposition became a liberal language, although at the same time there was always a very strong conservative current in it. After the defeat of Solidarity due to martial law, this narrative was complemented by economic neoliberalism. Liberalism in the economy and social conservatism became mainstream. Even if Modzelewski or Kuroń said what they always said, they became completely isolated in the struggle for equality" (Leder & Orzechowski, 2016). Leder wrote about this topic also in a 2013 article (Leder, 2013).

³¹ Grzegorz Smolar, Hersz Smolar (1905–1993) – politician, social activist, journalist, writer. He was a member of the Communist Party of Poland and (from 1925) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, organizer of party structures in eastern Poland and editor of periodicals, arrested several times by the Polish authorities. After the Nazi Germany's offensive against the USSR in 1941 he was imprisoned in the Minsk ghetto, where he was one of the organizers of the armed resistance movement; after escaping from the ghetto, he became a member of a Soviet partisan forest unit. After the war, he was an activist of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce), and in 1949–1950 its Chairman, then Chairman of the Social and Cultural Society of Jews in Poland (Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów w Polsce) and editor of the *Folks-Sztyme* monthly. In March 1968, he was dismissed, and in 1971 he left for Israel. He worked in the National Library in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv University.

A.S.: Perhaps not so much culture, but certain elements of culture indeed played a major role. But I was aware not only of the extent of antisemitism, but also of its rise in the official world. I was aware of it, and this was where I differed from so many of my friends.

K.M.: As for your father, what kind of communication did you have with him?

A.S.: My father was a courageous man, his life proves that. At the same time, there was a certain fear in him, which was expressed in excessive caution. He warned me not to express judgments and even not to organize parties when a Catholic holiday was approaching; he remembered the pre-war pogroms before Good Friday. He had that traditional cautiousness embedded somewhere in him, if not a Jewish fear of the Catholic environment. I was aware of this as a very young man.

K.M.: So it was more about this kind of cautiousness he communicated than the information he gave you?

A.S.: What I knew from him, passed on consciously or not, or maybe simply because I was able to read things that he received and which were not in broader circulation, was knowledge about growing antisemitic excesses in official Poland. What was identified at the time with so-called Moczarism³² was intensifying. But this also happened on the wave of the positive process of 1956, when antisemitic aspects were also very strongly present and there was a large wave of emigration, larger than the one after March 1968. I was aware of this, also because, through my relations with my father, I interacted with the Jewish world, which was in a natural way extremely sensitive to all such signals.

K.M.: After you left Poland, did you have contact with your father?

A.S.: Yes, of course. He had left for Israel a few months before me. I regularly visited him, he would come to us or to my brother in England, we wrote letters.

K.M.: What was his view on what you were doing?

A.S.: Then, once he had emigrated, I think that it wasn't a problem for him anymore. I think he perceived it positively. He did not react like many Jews who left, I mean with an obsessive rejection of Poland; a reaction to what they perceived as rejection of them by Poland. My father didn't have that at all. He remained extremely interested in Polish affairs, kept track of what was going on and had very sound judgment. But when he was still living in Poland, before March, I felt this fear in him. He never tried to influence my decisions, but he was a person who, thanks to a Polish prison, didn't get to know Siberia, because, although he was called to Moscow, he didn't go; luckily, he was incarcerated in a Polish prison. But many of his friends died, as he knew very well, and he had this fear within him. Even when my brother and I were in prison, I understood later that he didn't believe that we would ever be released. Despite being a communist – one could say that

³² A reference to Mieczysław Moczar (1913-1986), between 1964 and 1968 the Minister of Domestic Affairs, supporter of linking communism with Polish nationalism, anti-liberalism and xenophobia, one of main architects of the antisemitic campaign of March 1968.

at that time he was already moving away from communism – he also had a fear of this Moloch, of this threat. I think that he had an ambivalent attitude towards our actions: on the one hand there was a fear of what could happen to us, and on the other hand there was the pride of a man who repeatedly in his life was able to take risks and pay a very high price – pride that we inherited these traits from him. I have mentioned elsewhere a very dramatic conversation I had with him in Israel when he was in hospital. These conversations were often conflicting, I was mocking and being ironic about the past and about communism, and he told me: “You know, of course we have different views, we belong to different generations, we have different beliefs and convictions, but there is something that unites us, which is very important – that is, we have never considered private matters to be the most important and we were always ready to get involved in public affairs and pay the price for it.” It touched me because I thought it was true. He had this ambivalent attitude, it was a mixture of fear and pride, and – in a sense – of admiration.

K.M.: What was the moment when you as a group or a generation rejected the choices they made as communists?

A.S.: He evolved, too. There were some conversations, some confrontations, but there was no fundamental collision. He evolved and in fact from 1956 he knew what was going on in the Soviet Union, what was going on in Poland, and even if he tried to rationalize it all, he knew that it was a defeat of everything he had fought for. He rationalized it, like many people who were communists, but often also like people in the West, who had nothing to do with communism, who rationalized this experience, saying that Marx’s prophecies had been implemented in backward and underdeveloped countries, hence the barbarity and pathology. They believed that if it had happened in developed countries, it would have looked completely different. This argument was strongly present as an attempt to justify or at least to explain what was going on.

Taboo and innocence

K.M.: Later, in the 1980s, in the text *Tabu i niewinność* [Taboo and innocence] (Smolar, 1986) you wrote quite sharply about the guilt of the Jews, or Jewish communists, a guilt for – and you wrote this directly – their treason. I would also like to ask a little more about the text itself, about where it came from and what it contained. When I read it, I see three modules in it: the first one, in which you juxtapose the situations just before the war, the situation in which Poles (taken to mean Christians, Catholics) and Jews found themselves. You write that it is difficult for you to understand the situation in which Jews as a group stood on the side of communism, and that it was a kind of rupture or guilt. Was this a reflection of conversations you had with your father?

A.S.: No, it was not the result of our discussions but rather the result of reflections on the status and sense of my involvement in Polish affairs. The best compliment I have

received in connection with this text – often also from foreigners – is that it is difficult to discern from the text whether I am a Jew or a Pole.

K.M.: Was it a compliment?

A.S.: It was supposed to mean that when analyzing and passing judgment, often a sharp one, I am able to maintain an objective distance and be understanding, and – to refer to judicial terms – I try to be a judge rather than a prosecutor or a defense attorney.

K.M.: As I said, when reading the text I see in it three modules. The first one is where you write about communism as a rupture, which is almost a guilt – it seems to me that this is exactly the word used there – the guilt of the Jews living in Poland. I cannot agree with this judgment myself when I read the text. Then comes the module in which you write about March 1968 and October 1956 as stages of a continuous process; you call March an event that is in continuity with October and with the purge that took place then.³³ At the end there is a kind of absolution of Catholicism; there is a statement that Catholicism itself is not to blame for antisemitism. When reading the first and the last modules, I fail to understand where this comes from.

A.S.: You know, I would certainly not divide this text into three modules; it would be difficult for me to agree with your interpretation. As for what you call the first module: I am not saying there that the Jews identified with communism, but only some Jews, mainly certain youth groups, while the majority of Jews were conservative, religious and afraid of communism. That they chose the Soviet Union was often because of their greater fear of Nazism. But, as I write there, at that time they were not yet aware of what Nazism actually meant for Jews. In this first period, the Holocaust had not happened, and so some even escaped to areas under German occupation as a result of their direct experience of communism. In this text I try to explain the origins of the attitudes of Jews in Poland: firstly, the sense of alienation, of being uprooted, and the growing hostility of Polish society in the 1930s, and that the result was either their escape into emigration to America and Palestine, or religious traditionalism and confinement in communities, or an escape into communism. I am writing that this was one of the paths which could be chosen; and besides, communism, even if it was repressive, at the same time did not discriminate against nationalities. From the point of view of communism, there was no difference between Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians or Jews. Poles were worse for communists and the Soviet Union because they had a greater explosive potential, and were

³³ Ewa Węgrzyn wrote about the Polish October 1956 as follows: “a wave of antisemitism, stifled since the 1946 Kielce pogrom, surged within the party circles. [...] The theme of ‘Judeo-communism’ and the ‘responsibility of the Jews’ for Stalinism recurred during party and election campaign meetings. This resulted in the transfer of antisemitic sentiments to a significant part of the society. Persons of Jewish origin were dismissed from work under the pretext of ‘personnel regulation.’ [...] Jewish children were threatened or beaten, sometimes property in Jewish institutions was destroyed. The most serious anti-Jewish incidents in October 1956 took place in Lower Silesia. [...] What began as verbal antisemitic abuse ended in physical assaults. Jews were attacked in public places and institutions. In autumn 1956, the racist murder of watchmaker Chaim Rutkowicz took place in Wrocław. The murderer declared that he wanted to ‘take his revenge on the Jews.’ Anti-Jewish riots took place in Wałbrzych, and it was only thanks to a quick intervention by the army and the police that a pogrom was averted. In Wrocław and other cities, inscriptions calling for Jews to leave Poland appeared on doors of many Jewish apartments” (Węgrzyn, 2010, pp. 138–139).

therefore a greater threat. And this was the source of the seductive power of communism; besides, it applies primarily to the first months, and it changes later. The percentage of Jews “feeding the white bears”³⁴ was higher than that of Poles.

K.M.: What was the reason you had to write about it then?

A.S.: It was obvious why. You know, I always engage in politics resolutely and radically, while intellectually I rather try to demonstrate the complexity and tragedy of history. This is my reservation for instance to texts by Jan Tomasz Gross. A book has come out recently, an interview with him...

K.M.: Where you also make a statement.

A.S.: Where I make quite harsh statements, where I summarize my criticism of what he writes. Among other things, one of my main criticisms is that there is no understanding analysis at all; that is, that he flatly rejects the idea that it was not a matter of accident that in the whole belt that was temporarily occupied by the Soviet Union there were pogroms taking place later, that it was also connected with the fact that communism had many attractive features for Jews, which it did not have for the majority of local societies. I explain that there are reasons why this was the case, but it is difficult to analyze the reactions of local societies – which is no way to justify the pogroms or the turning of Jews in [to German Nazis] – without showing the underlying mechanism that caused these phenomena to take place precisely on these territories.

K.M.: And you still think that they took place also because, as you said earlier, there were groups of Jewish youths who had a positive perception of communism?

A.S.: There are many reasons. First of all, of course, suddenly Poles saw Jews in places where they hadn't been before. The pre-war Polish Republic was not a country of equality; for example, there had been virtually no Jewish officials and soldiers and suddenly they appeared. It was a shock.

K.M.: For the antisemites it must have been a huge shock.

A.S.: One can say that not only for antisemites, at least not only for radical antisemites. This group had not been there before. In addition, when Jewish groups appeared holding banners exclaiming “Welcome liberators” – even if it was a marginal phenomenon – an obsession of some kind was created, which, if we are to rationally examine the attitudes of the entire Jewish community, was certainly not justified, but these are not conditions in which normal public opinion functions and in which one can examine what it really is...

K.M.: As for justification, in *Taboo and innocence* you observe as follows: “can this [lack of equality in pre-war Poland] in any sense justify this attitude [of some Jews], for which they soon had to pay dearly? If only it had been about welcoming with flowers. But there

³⁴ A reference to deportations carried out in the USSR to northern Siberia.

were worse things, far worse. Jews, communists and non-communists, the intelligentsia and half-intelligentsia, as people that were generally trustworthy, became members of local administration and helpers in organizing the Soviet rule. Worse yet, they helped to hunt down Polish officers, representatives of the Polish administration sought by the occupier. It does not matter much that thousands of Jews were sent to feed the white bears along with those arrested and with hundreds of thousands of other Poles. The Jews were sent there not because they were Jews but because they quickly lost their enthusiasm for the new regime” (Smolar, 1986, pp. 97–98).

A.S.: You know, it is true. I remember that [Czesław] Miłosz³⁵ sent me excerpts from his memoirs from that time; they were ghastly. He was no antisemite, naturally. And again, one might say that these were isolated incidents, but a certain type of incidents, especially in the air of such generalized antisemitism, rise to the level of a symbol.

K.M.: But was it necessary to link these incidents with the attitude of Poles, with pogroms?

A.S.: When I try to understand how it happened that the pogroms took place in this belt, I have to find rational arguments. Jan Gross rejects it saying that this claim is completely trumped up. These worst manifestations that I am talking about took place in the first months; the deportation takes place a bit later. This has deeper roots. After all, in 1918 and 1919 there were many pogroms in Poland,³⁶ in the Polish lands. As often happens, minorities identified themselves with the empire, in this particular case with the Russian empire, which provided order and security for minorities in a given territory. Poles became a threat and throughout the inter-war period many Jews did not consider Poland their state.

K.M.: I want to ask about the meaning of this argument in 1986. Your text was part of the issue of *Aneks* dedicated in part to antisemitism.

A.S.: The title of the thematic block was: *Żydzi jako polski problem* [Jews as a Polish problem] (*Aneks*, 1986).

K.M.: That is to say: Jews as a problem of Poles. In other words, Poles have a problem with Jews and the question is: what kind of problem is it? I’m trying to understand and cannot fully understand the position of your argument, but besides that I’m trying to understand also the broader context of that debate, the debate in the mid-1980s. Just

35 Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) – poet, writer, journalist, diplomat, essayist. Before WW2 part of Polish-Lithuanian avantgarde literary milieu. Between 1940 and 1944 he lived in Warsaw. Between 1945 and 1951 Miłosz served as the Polish cultural attaché in Washington, D.C. and Paris. In 1951 he defected and was granted political asylum. In 1960 he moved to the USA and took up a teaching position at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1980 Miłosz was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature.

36 A reference to anti-Jewish pogroms carried out by groups of Poles before and shortly after Poland’s regaining independence, e.g. in Lviv (November 22–24, 1918), Vilnius (April 19–23, 1919) and smaller towns, esp. in southern Poland, e.g. Strzyżów (April 21, 1919), Baranowo (May 5, 1919), Kolbuszowa (May 6, 1919), etc. There were, moreover, dozens of pogroms, murders and assaults on Jews by Polish soldiers and groups of civilians during the Polish-Soviet War of 1920.

before, Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* was released (1985), a series of texts on the same subject came out...

A.S.: I don't remember the order – was *Shoah* released earlier?

K.M.: Yes, it was earlier. And here is my question – what inspired you to enter this debate in this precise way, and secondly, I would like to ask about the debate itself, because, as far as I know, *Aneks* was the first magazine to ever deal with the subject in Polish.

A.S.: One can say that the reason was our own problems or my own problems.

K.M.: But then, specifically in 1986?

A.S.: These were problems that have always existed, but it was also a problem of recognition of the moment when it could and should be touched upon. The article by [Jan] Błoński [*Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* (Błoński, 1987a); English version: *The poor Poles look at the ghetto* (Błoński, 1987b)] is often discussed as a legendary starting point for the entire debate.

K.M.: And Błoński came up with the idea to write this article in 1983, during the conference in Oxford,³⁷ didn't he? Were you there?

A.S.: Yes, I was.

K.M.: How do you remember it?

A.S.: You know, to tell the truth, I doubt if Błoński hit upon this idea then.

K.M.: Antony Polonsky³⁸ claims that this was the inspiration. Rafael Scharf³⁹ delivered a paper in Oxford titled *Cum ira et studio* (Scharf, 1996), where he was trying to find the “golden mean” between the so-called Jewish and the so-called Polish perspective, and according to Polonsky, Błoński said that when listening to this speech, he came up with this idea, which he wrote down later...⁴⁰

³⁷ An international conference on Polish-Jewish relations held at Oxford University on September 17–21, 1984.

³⁸ Antony Polonsky (b. 1940) – historian, author of texts about Poland's twentieth-century history and the modern history of the Jews in Central and Eastern Europe. He is an academic at the London School of Economics (as of 1970) and Brandeis University (Waltham, MA, USA), and co-founder of the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies in Oxford and of the periodical *Polin. A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies*. He was the chief historian of the main exhibition of the POLIN Museum of History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

³⁹ Rafael Felix Scharf (1914–2003) – journalist, writer, historian. He was born in Krakow, and after 1938 lived in London. During WW2 he was a soldier in the British Army and secretary to Ignacy Schwarzbart (lawyer, Zionist activist, during the war member of the National Council of Poland in France and then London). After the war, he was a member of a committee for the persecution of Nazi crimes. He was also the owner of a London-based publishing house, and a co-founder of the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies in Oxford.

⁴⁰ Antony Polonsky observes: “The Oxford conference was also a key factor in leading Jan Błoński to write his article *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* (The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto) in *Tygodnik Powszechny* on January 11, 1987, which was a major turning-point in the discussion of Polish-Jewish issues in post-war Poland. At that conference Rafael Scharf had delivered a speech with the telling title *Cum ira et studio*, in which he expressed his pain at the fact that the ‘fabric of Polish-Jewish cohabitation on Polish soil has been irreversibly destroyed’. He referred to the ‘trauma of unreciprocated love’ of the Jews of ‘this last generation, nearing its close,’ who ‘cannot erase from their hearts this country where ‘they were born and grew up,’ where [...] they loved the landscape, the language, the poetry; where they were ready to shed their blood for Poland and to be her true sons. That this was evidently not enough leaves them broken-hearted.” (Polonsky, 2009, pp. 31–32).

A.S.: Even if it was so, a long time had passed. I believe that our block played a major role...

K.M.: By all means.

A.S.: ... yet Błoński never referred to it, and an interesting thing is that Polish debates omit our block of texts. Although I personally can't complain because my text has been published three times, apart from numerous collective editions. But the fact is that Błoński received priority, despite the fact that some of his observations seem very naïve today. I will tell you about this conference, it was also important to me. I went there not as a participant, but just to listen.

K.M.: Who invited you to the conference?

A.S.: Probably I was not even invited, I just wrote that I wanted to come. I knew [Antony] Polonsky, who organized the conference, Leszek Kołakowski was going there and enough of my friends. I wanted to go because these issues mattered to me. I did not talk but listened. I remember that it was fascinating. The topic you formulated at the beginning is very interesting, as there was an asymmetry between participants. The people on the Polish side were indeed the elite of the Polish intelligentsia: Miłosz, Kołakowski, [Jerzy] Turowicz,⁴¹ [Władysław] Bartoszewski⁴² and actually only one ambiguous character – he has passed away – [Ryszard] Bender;⁴³ I remember he was sucking up to the Jews as much as he could.

K.M.: Jacek Majchrowski, the current mayor of Krakow, newly reelected by the way, was there, too.⁴⁴ He delivered a paper claiming that [Ze'ev] Jabotinsky's⁴⁵ right-wing Zionism and the National Radical Camp (ONR) were in fact similar to each other.⁴⁶

41 Jerzy Turowicz (1912–1999) – journalist and publicist, co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Tygodnik Powszechny*.

42 Władysław Bartoszewski (1922–2015) – historian, publicist, social activist, diplomat, politician. Prisoner of Auschwitz in 1940–1941; after release an activist of the Polish underground state and soldier of the Home Army; in 1942–1945 an activist of the Council to Aid Jews ("Żegota"). In 1952–1955 Bartoszewski was imprisoned on false charges of espionage. Collaborator of the Polish Independence Accords (PPN) and Solidarity movements, interned in 1981–1982. Polish ambassador to Austria in 1990–1995, Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1995 and 2000–2001, senator in 1997–2001. In 1990–2014, he was chair of the International Board of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum (renamed the International Auschwitz Council in 2000).

43 Ryszard Bender (1932–2016) – historian and politician, academic of the Catholic University of Lublin (1969–1979), and, as of 1985, a professor. He was an activist of the political opposition in communist Poland, co-founder of the Lublin Club of Catholic Intelligentsia, and a deputy to Polish Parliament representing the Znak caucus. After 1989, he became a deputy and senator of right-wing and nationalist parties (including National-Christian Union [Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe], League of Polish Families [Liga Polskich Rodzin], Law and Justice [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość]). He appeared on Radio Maryja and related media, made antisemitic statements, and in 2010 was accused of Holocaust denial.

44 The conversation took place on October 22, 2018, one day after the local government election in Poland. Standing for re-election as mayor of Krakow, Jacek Majchrowski won 45.8% of votes, achieving the highest ever first round result in the history of the city.

45 Ze'ev Jabotinsky (1880–1940) – Russian-born politician, writer, poet, soldier. Leader of the Revisionist Zionist movement and founder of right-wing Zionism. During 1903 pogroms in Russia founder of the Jewish Self-Defence Organization in Odessa, co-founder of the Jewish Legion of the British Army during WW1. In 1923 he founded Hatzohar (Alliance of Revisionist Zionists). An organizer of the Jewish migration movement to Palestine during the rise of fascist regimes in Central-Eastern Europe in the 1930s.

46 Jacek Majchrowski summed up his conference paper as follows: "[it] was dedicated to the attitude of Polish and Jewish nationalist circles to the so-called Jewish question" (Majchrowski, 1985, p. 324). Antony Polonsky wrote that "Dr Jacek Majchrowski of the Jagiellonian University, whose attempt to demonstrate the closeness of the views and activities of Polish and Jewish nationalists aroused strong objections from the scholars present, irrespective of ethnic and geographical boundaries" (Polonsky, 1984, p. 53). Majchrowski's text published in *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry* also triggered a polemic from Ezra Mendelsohn (Majchrowski, 1988; Mendelsohn, 1988).

A.S.: I didn't remember him, I was not familiar with his name then. I first met him when my friends, Król and Karpiński, published his book in their blue series (Majchrowski, 1984). I remember the names I just mentioned, and indeed this was the *crème de la crème* of the Polish intelligentsia. On the Jewish side there were specialists in a rather narrow field. Specialists on the Holocaust, on the German Nazi occupation – historians, journalists. This asymmetry was something incredible. It was evident that on the Polish side the subject was a national problem, that it was a moral and intellectual problem of primary importance for the people who were present there. The Jewish side was represented by those who were professionally engaged in this field, and who were sometimes at a rather mediocre level.

K.M.: Is this how you perceived it?

A.S.: I did. One of the participants was for example [Shmuel] Krakowski from Yad Vashem,⁴⁷ who didn't make a great impression on me. Some were reliable specialists but did not have the class of Miłosz, Kołakowski, Turowicz and others, either intellectually or in terms of their biographies. The dominant discourse was very interesting there: Jews formulated accusations, sometimes subtly, sometimes brutally, while Poles, on the contrary, emphasized that the war period was a moment of brotherhood, rapprochement, understanding, overcoming antisemitism in some sense...

K.M.: Was there any awareness that this was nonsense?

A.S.: I don't think there was. I quote in my article a number of statements from people I loved, with whom I was friends, like Turowicz or Bartoszewski...

K.M.: Which article are you talking about, *Taboo and innocence*?

A.S.: Yes. At the beginning I quote completely contradictory judgments by Poles and Jews about this past.

K.M.: So this part of the text echoed your experience from the conference?

A.S.: These statements were not from the conference, but that was exactly what I felt at the conference. I remember sitting next to Miłosz, who did not speak and giggled. He was distanced from what was being said. He laughed at the Poles' statements. He was aware that the words didn't match reality, but clearly he did not want to say it loud. He only had a poetry reading where – this is also interesting, I never asked him why – he would not read poems that were the most important for Jews, that is *Campo di Fiori* and *A poor Christian looks at the ghetto*...

K.M.: Yet he did read them there.

47 Shmuel Krakowski (1926–2018) – Holocaust historian. During WW2 he was a prisoner of the ghetto in Łódź and an organizer of Zionist underground organizations in the ghetto, and later a prisoner of the Auschwitz-Birkenau, Buchenwald and Theresienstadt concentration camps. After the war he was a soldier of the Polish Army and an intelligence officer in the Ministry of Internal Security (in 1949–1966), then an employee of the Museum of the History of the Revolutionary Movement in Łódź and an employee of the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute. Dismissed in March 1968, he left for Israel, where he worked as a researcher at the Yad Vashem Institute, publishing texts on the history of the Holocaust.

A.S.: He did, but he was practically forced to do it. The audience was very persistent. This was after dinner, in the evening, during this conference.

K.M.: He didn't intend to read the poems, but they insisted, and eventually he did?

A.S.: Exactly. I don't know why, perhaps he didn't value those poems and thought that they are part of the general attitude for which he later coined the famous phrase "nobleness, unfortunately" (Miłosz, 1984) – of poets' becoming involved in public matters, which had a negative impact on the quality of poetry. I have no way of knowing. But I do remember he didn't want to read them.

K.M.: And despite giggling, neither he nor anyone else objected to the nonsense that was said there?

A.S.: I remember that this was painful for Leszek Kołakowski, who was close to me. For him, this was unacceptable, the image of relations during the war as presented by the Jews, the role of many Poles in the Holocaust – this was unacceptable. He had lived in a different community; a young boy during the war, he was part of the intelligentsia where helping the Jews was universal and where there were people hidden in every second apartment.

K.M.: So he may not have known?

A.S.: He surely didn't know. I remember that this was extremely painful for him. I did not have the nerve to ask him about it.

K.M.: But had no one told him?

A.S.: You know, he was reading various things; it is also a question of proportion. Naturally, he knew about the Polish blackmailers...

K.M.: Hadn't he seen blackmailers in the streets of Warsaw?

A.S.: One might always say that they were a criminal margin of the society. When there is no free public debate, it is very difficult to make general statements on local, if not individual experiences. This is a most complicated matter, but it also explains attitudes of the society in a broad sense in 1968. I mean that in some way in the Poles' perception of March 1968, the context of the Holocaust did not come into play at all. The Holocaust had some significance for the perception of March 1968 worldwide, for the perception by Jews, for the understanding of the attitude of Poles, for the understanding of what happened on these lands. In a way, this emerged later – and this is undoubtedly the great achievement of Jan Gross – that this evolution of consciousness began, there are many other scholars, such as Barbara Engelking,⁴⁸ Joanna Tokarska-Bakir⁴⁹ and many others who write about these matters; back then, when I was leaving Poland, I felt isolated. Even my Polish friends were unaware of some of the problems that people like me had as a result of the burden

48 E.g. Engelking & Leociak, 2009; Engelking, 2011; Engelking & Grabowski, 2011, 2018.

49 E.g. Tokarska-Bakir, 2008, 2017, 2018.

of the past, but not only of it. My friend Marcin Król even in the 1990s was still able to write that antisemitism in Poland had emerged only in March 1968.

K.M.: Why did they write it, knowing themselves how things were?

A.S.: No, they didn't know.

K.M.: No, they must have known. I see it when I read texts by [Andrzej] Szczypiorski,⁵⁰ who presents all that exactly the other way round, being himself an eyewitness.⁵¹

A.S.: You know, there is no statistical, sociological and criminological research showing what percentage of Poles were involved in these actions. Only recently a book has come out, titled *Dalej jest noc* [Night without an end] (Engelking & Grabowski, 2018), which tries to come up with some estimates, as far as it is possible at all. That is why it was always possible to say that these were actions of a criminal margin. It was possible to admit that those brave people who helped were also at the margins of society, and that the majority was indifferent, which is actually the dominant discourse until this day.

K.M.: Yes, it is dominant, but I am fully convinced that a person who was in Warsaw at the time of the ghetto, and saw what was happening around the ghetto in key places, must have been fully aware that the story about the margins and the social scum is nonsense. Still, all these people reproduced this narrative until it was no longer possible to do so. And some of them communicated it all their lives.

A.S.: This is yet another subject we could discuss here. It is a mystery for me, of course, a mystery of collective psychology. I lived in France for a long time and I have seen the same thing there. I have very close friends for whom what is said and thought about the Vichy regime is still unacceptable today, including the antisemitism of that time. I'm talking about people of unquestionable integrity. These are problems of individual and collective psychology, especially when for decades this had not been spoken about. For Poles, Auschwitz, which was then called the Oświęcim Camp (only later was this linguistic swap made in order to distance this place from Poland) was after all a place of extermination of the Polish nation and not of Jews. That is why there was this reaction to the Carmelite monastery being established there, and to the crosses on the gravel pit...

K.M.: I also ask this question because these reactions and denials, repeated as long as possible, are – at least in my perception – the framework of operation of the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia is a group which – the way I see it – communicated the story about the societal scum and the symmetry of Polish guilt and merit as long as they could. For me, there is a dramatic discrepancy between the subject of antisemitism and the subject of the mission that the intelligentsia has set before itself.

50 Andrzej Szczypiorski (1932–2000) – writer, journalist, politician. Active in the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR) and the Polish Independence Accords (PPN).

51 A reference to Andrzej Szczypiorski's novel *Początek* [The beginning] (Szczypiorski, 1986) and the author's polemic with Rafael Scharf in the Paris *Kultura* (Szczypiorski, 1979; Scharf & Szczypiorski, 1979).

A.S.: Yes, but I can come up with examples of many other countries where the problem of coming to terms with the past is very painful and time-consuming. It's not just about war and the fate of the Jews. Problems such as colonialism and slavery are still hotly contested in the West. In addition, in Poland we had half a century when in fact public debate, and thus revealing the truth, was impossible. The communists were not interested in revealing the truth, for many reasons. Firstly, such a view of antisemitism did not fit Marxist categories of interpretation at all, and secondly, because the communist authorities were accused of being Jewish, they preferred to keep as far as possible from this subject. In other words, this issue was not addressed at all. It began to appear in Catholic magazines, it existed in *Tygodnik Powszechny* from the very beginning, I quoted some statements....

K.M.: Yes, Turowicz wrote an article in which he said that when he was leaving Warsaw by train in April 1943, during the ghetto uprising, his fellow passengers were extremely sympathetic to the fighting ghetto (Turowicz, 1957). This statement was later criticized by Maria Czapska⁵² in *Kultura* (Czapska, 1957).

A.S.: I cannot rule out that, again, during the occupation, when there was a real threat of denunciation, he generalized the opinions he came across in his narrow circle and in the manor he lived in.

K.M.: So you do not have a hypothesis as to why they did this?

A.S.: There definitely was no ill will on their part. This could be partly attributed to a defense mechanism which was active when there was a fundamental threat to culture and the nation under communism...

K.M.: Then all this was written against the communists?

A.S.: I wouldn't say this was against communists. But it was difficult to mentally reconcile the awareness of a new national threat with the opening of the wounds left after the barely finished war, which took a huge toll on Poles as well. Especially due to the constitutive elements of Polish identity, where the Romantic myth of both heroism and suffering plays a fundamental role.

K.M.: In other words, they defended Polishness by idealizing it?

A.S.: This is still present today. I will say more, assuming again my role as an observer: it is all very difficult and, in a way, dangerous, because it can lead to a fragmentation of identity without making it easier to construct a new, more open one. For me personally this is, of course, a dramatic conclusion...

⁵² Maria Czapska (1894–1981) – literary historian and essayist. Activist of the Polish underground state during the German Nazi occupation. One of the co-founders of *Tygodnik Powszechny* in 1945, emigrated to France in the same year. Member of the editorial team of *Kultura*, the leading Polish émigré literary and political magazine, published in Paris.

K.M.: The solution to the problem becomes itself a root cause of the problem that we discussed.

A.S.: Benedict Anderson, and not only him, wrote about the nation as a constructed myth (Anderson, 1983). Undermining the mythological construct which forms the basis of the community, in particular at times of threat, is dangerous because it can destroy this community...

K.M.: ...which itself generates the myth...

A.S.: ...which generates the myth, whose elements may be deadly, very negative, but not only negative. This view was certainly shared by a very large part of the intelligentsia.

K.M.: Do you think that national cohesion was more important for them than the memory of the Holocaust?

A.S.: You are generalizing. To give you an example: Jan Gross himself admits that in his doctoral thesis on the Nazi occupation and Polish society (Gross, 1979), there was not a single chapter on Jews. Even for a person who was forced to leave Poland as a Jew – despite the fact that culturally he has nothing to do with Jews, and even not much through his family background – it was a natural thing that the Jews didn't exist. The Jews were exteriorized during the war, separated by a wall, and in the Polish consciousness they disappeared.

K.M.: Until they were needed again in the 1980s, as you also write in *Taboo and innocence*: the Jew as a figure of Polishness returns when communism as a political system starts to wobble. And in such time a decision was made to produce this figure.

A.S.: In the broader collective consciousness they return just after the war – as occupiers! As far as the 1980s are concerned, pockets of democratic culture emerged at the time, and so certain kinds of questions could emerge. One could say that these questions return under the influence of external factors. After all, it was no coincidence that Jaruzelski⁵³ ordered *Shoah* to be televised in Poland. This had a dual purpose – firstly, to please the Jews, as a result of the antisemitic myth that the Jews control the world, so it is worth making a gesture towards them. On the other hand, to show Poles: “Hey you, Solidarity, see what you are really like.” But the fact is that for thinking people this was a discovery of a shocking reality. A number of articles were published – not too many, and it is interesting to have a look at them – but still the problem emerged. A problem emerged of the only neighbor towards whom there was an unclean conscience in relation to the past. The conflicts with the Russians, with the Germans, even with the Ukrainians could always be explained by their crimes. In the case of the Jews, of course, it was

⁵³ Wojciech Jaruzelski (1923–2014) – Polish military commander and politician. Minister of Defense in 1968–1983. In 1981 he became the 1st Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party (a position he held until 1989) and Head of Government (until 1985); in December 1981 he was the principal decision-maker behind the introduction of the martial law (in effect until July 1983). In 1985, he became the head of the Council of State, and after its disbandment – he became the last President of the People's Republic of Poland and the first president of the Third Republic of Poland (1989–1990).

possible to explain the conflict by their behavior after September 17, 1939 [the Soviet invasion of Poland – K.M.], which Tomasz Strzembosz tried to do.⁵⁴ Still, it is obvious that even if some Jews behaved in this manner, this in no way justifies a crime of such magnitude.

K.M.: I am fascinated by this overlap – there were social and cultural circles which had earlier promoted stories about the societal scum responsible for these crimes, and the same circles became surprised by all the facts that were being discovered in the 1980s, when *Shoah* was released and all those articles, yours included, came out. This means that the same group first protects society and its founding myth of innocence through stories claiming that actually nothing happened, and then the same group is surprised by the moment when that innocence is being questioned.

A.S.: This statement again is too radical for me. If we recall all the different literary accounts, it is clearly visible there – people were aware of what was going on – in the texts by Andrzejewski, by Nałkowska.⁵⁵ It is not that they didn't know. It is that later a regress of collective consciousness takes place. There is an encysting, a sealing-up and then there are other problems. And what is more, one does really see all these Jews in power, like Berman and Zambrowski. It was not that the Jewish attitude was generalized and referred to them [to Berman and Zambrowski], but an awareness emerged, a very significant problem of the role played by Jews in communism emerged for the Polish society. And so a digging up of the war issues stood in an unbearable dissonance with that, also for those who followed this traditional national or social mission of the intelligentsia.

K.M.: There was the question of taking sides and they chose this particular one?

A.S.: This is not a question of choice. It is simply that if one doesn't write about it, this doesn't mean that one does not know or think about it.

K.M.: I understand it, but it still remains hard to understand for me on an emotional level.

A.S.: I understand. I have to tell you that it was shocking for me to learn about the work of a large group of Poles who, without any concessions to the self-imagined of their community, most thoroughly examine the most difficult chapters of the attitude of Poles towards Jews.⁵⁶ I had not known such Poles before. Before there was only indifference. When I was an emigrant, I would make jokes about Poland being a Middle Kingdom of sorts. Because we were publishing *Aneks*, we were often visited by people we did not

54 A reference to the polemics of historian Tomasz Strzembosz regarding Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbors. The destruction of the Jewish community in Jedwabne* (Gross, 2001). Strzembosz tried to prove that the massacre was perpetrated by Nazi Germans and that antisemitism in this part of occupied Poland was due to the collaboration of the Jews with the Soviet Union (e.g. Strzembosz, 2001a, 2001b).

55 Zofia Nałkowska (1884–1954) – writer, essayist, politician, social activist, activist of the feminist movement. Author of poetry and novels. After WW2 an independent member of Polish parliament, and member of the Chief Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland.

56 A reference to aforementioned texts by Barbara Engelking, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and other authors.

know. They loved to talk about Poland, about what was going on, who was siding with whom, they talked about great political issues, but very seldom asked questions which my wife and I were competent to answer, about the West, France, the relations between Europe and the United States, these countries' approaches to Poland and Russia. It was a kind of self-focus, an incredible collective narcissism. I was used to it: one's own misfortunes, one's own problems are so acute and so overwhelming that it is difficult to deal with anything else.

And one more final anecdote. An eminent Catholic intellectual read my text and visited us when we were in Paris. He wanted to pay me a compliment, but he could not bring himself to say the word "Jew." In this respect, the Polish language has changed. This does not mean that the word "Jew" has completely lost its negative connotation in Polish, but today people like you can already use this word without fear of being identified as an antisemite. I saw that this friend of ours, a man of unquestionable integrity, could not pronounce the word "Jew" *à propos* of my article, and without this word one cannot talk about Jews at all. Later, when I came back to Poland, I saw more and more people all over Poland who deal with Jewish history, Jewish culture, collecting testimonies or digging out memorabilia, looking for contacts with Jews scattered around the world. This still amazes me. Somewhere deep within me there remains a completely different image of Poland and Polishness.

Translated by Marcin Turski

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„To nie jest kwestia wyboru”. Z Aleksandrem Smolarem rozmawia Konrad Matyjaszek

Abstrakt: Przedmiotem rozmowy Konrada Matyjaszka z Aleksandrem Smolarem jest obraz własny współczesnej inteligencji polskiej jako grupy społecznej i środowiska, wytwarzany w odniesieniu do antysemityzmu, rozumianego zarówno jako zespół publicznych działań i praktyk przemocowych, jak też jako wykluczające uprzedzenie stanowiące element polskiej kultury. Aleksander Smolar opowiada o historii emigracyjnego czasopisma społeczno-kulturalnego „Aneks”, którego redaktorem naczelnym był przez cały czas istnienia pisma w latach 1973–1990. Mówi o uwarunkowaniach i presji, jakiej poddawana była redakcja „Aneksu”, składająca się w większości z osób zmuszonych do emigracji podczas antysemitycznej kampanii Marca 1968 roku; o połączonym z kampanią marcową przesunięciu polskiego obiegu kultury w stronę prawicy i konserwatyzmu; o podjętym w latach siedemdziesiątych zbliżeniu środowisk lewicowej opozycji ze stowarzyszeniami powiązanych z Kościołem katolickim. Aleksander Smolar relacjonuje reakcje na zachodzące przemiany polityczne, jakie dostrzegał u swojego ojca, działacza komunistycznego i zarazem działacza społeczności żydowskiej w Polsce, Grzegorza Smolara; opowiada też o kontekście powstania eseju swojego autorstwa *Tabu i niewinność* oraz o przyczynach, dla których przedstawiciele polskiej inteligencji nie zdecydowali się na pełne podjęcie krytyki antysemitycznych elementów kultury polskiej.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: historia Polski; inteligencja; rok 1968; zagłada Żydów; antysemityzm; komunizm



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