

# Bożena Keff

## The voice of the excluded

by **Renata Ingbrant**

**P**oet, essayist, film critic, journalist, feminist activist, researcher at Polish Academy of Science, literary researcher at Jewish Historical Institute and lecturer in gender studies at Warsaw University – Bożena Keff’s professional career is as multifaceted as it is interdisciplinary, and her interests impressively manifold.

Bożena Keff belongs to the Warsaw cultural and intellectual circle that engages in cultural and political debates promoting new ways of thinking that challenge the conservative Catholic tradition, Polish nationalism and contest all kinds of oppression founded in prejudice and institutionalized by a system. Readers may have come across her name in the Polish media in several different context: debates on Polish feminism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and – in the context of the Polish debate on the Oscar winning motion picture *Ida*, and the controversies about the placement of a monument dedicated to the Righteous Among the Nations near the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

As a scholar she is well known for her study *A Figure with a Shadow. Portraits of Jewish Women in Polish Literature* (2001) in which she explores the double stereotyping of Jewish women in the works of the most prominent Polish authors. Recently, her book *Anti-Semitism. An Unclosed History* (2013), which contains reflection on cultural and historical contexts of the phenomenon, received much positive attention. The work that has won her probably most recognition as an original writer and a poet is *A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland* (2008), nominated in 2009 for the prestigious Nike Literary Award. It has also been widely acclaimed thanks to Jan Klata’s multiple award-winning theater production from 2011 that was first staged at a theater in Wrocław and later at festivals all over Europe and, lately, in South Korea. In fact it is not a theatrical play – rather it is an innovative cross-genre work. The author herself perceives it as poetically organized work that is however not strictly poetry. It turned out to be a work that combines elements of other genres (“opera, tragedy and oratorio”, according to the Polish critic Przemysław Czapliński). *A Piece on Mother and Fatherland* is a story of a tense relationship between a mother, who is a Holocaust survivor, and her daughter, who is imprisoned in her mother’s suffering. In other words, it is a story of the post-trauma of the Holocaust, although it can be read in a larger framework as the drama of all war victims and the postwar genera-



Bożena Keff.

PHOTO: ANDRZEJ GREGORIEW

tion. It is also, in a way, a story about Polish nationalism where anti-Semitic prejudice is one of the factors that binds the Fatherland community – a subject that constantly reappears in Keff’s work. Previously translated into German and Italian, English, Spanish and Hebrew, it has been now translated into Swedish by Dawid Szybek and Michal Piotrowski, and its fragments are to be presented at Theater Galeasen in Stockholm in a reading performance by the actors under supervision of the well-known theater director Natalie Ringler. This is the main purpose of Keff’s stay in Stockholm, I learn, when we meet. After the performance she is to discuss her work in conversation with Stefan Ingvarsson, Swedish cultural journalist.

She and I arranged a meeting at her hotel within a stone’s throw of the Polish Institute. We meet up on March 8<sup>th</sup>, which also is the first real sunny spring day of 2015. How appropriate! The hotel is not far from the place where FI (Feminist Initiative – a feminist Swedish political party) has gathered for the annual Women’s Day meeting. Later that day, a demonstration will start nearby. Meanwhile in Poland, the Polish women’s movement organizes its annual protest marches called *Manifa* in all big cities. This year, due to her Stockholm visit, Bożena will not participate in the event that has been a manifestation of women’s mobilization in Poland for 15 years now.

**BOŻENA KEFF BECAME INVOLVED** in women’s activism in the late 1980s. As she is one of the original founders of the Polish women’s movement, I would like to ask her what she thinks about where Polish feminism is now on the road to equality, whether she would have expected it to be farther along than it is these 30 years later. However, she immediately suggests being on first-name terms, and instead, on our way to a café, we chat about her previous visit to Stockholm, about her friend whom she last met 15 years ago and whom she plans to reencounter this

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afternoon. We also chat about recent Polish movies. “I don’t really like recent Polish movies. I don’t usually go to see them at the cinemas, but the movies that I have seen lately and would really recommend you to see are Małgorzata Szumowska’s feminist feature *Body*, and Borys Lankosz’s *A Grain of Truth*, says Keff the film critic. “Even though I do not usually like either detective stories or thrillers, this one shows that popular culture in Poland has a better way of dealing with Polish anti-Semitism than all these works that aspire to be high-culture.” Clearly, today her mind is set on other issues than Polish feminism. Tomorrow, at Galeasen, the conversation will certainly revolve around her views on Polish anti-Semitism. So I continue to follow this thread, leaving the questions regarding her feminism until later.

**Looking from the outside on what is going on in Poland, it seems that there has been a change for the better. Among other things, it seems that there has been an improvement in Polish-Jewish relations. I mean, there was the debate on Polish anti-Semitism and Polish involvement in the Holocaust (the so-called Jedwabne-debate) that spurred a new development in Polish-Jewish relations. The height of the development and, in a way its great achievement, was the opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw last autumn. One can also observe the growing interest in Jewish culture among young Poles. Would you agree that there is a change for the better in this matter?**

– If you want a real change for the better, you need to start from educational programs, that is, what knowledge Polish kids acquire at school – similarly, I understand, to you and me, when we went to school: Although in different periods of time, we used to hear a similar story. I call it a “set with a tree” – a standard Polish narrative which says: the Poles during the Nazi occupation did as much as they could; they could not do much, because of the death penalty, which everyone feared; despite the fact that they could not do much they still have 6,000 trees planted at Yad Vashem for the Righteous Among the Nations. This is the story we all know and which we are told again and again. Yet, even if you reckon with eight, up to ten, or even 15,000 Poles who helped Jews during the German occupation (I doubt if there were so many), it still amounts to only about half of one percent of the Polish population at that time. I mean, no one thinks of the proportions. First of all, only about 0,5% of the Polish population helped Jews; secondly, crimes that resulted in the death penalty at that time included a lot of other things, such as breeding pigs, trading meat, trading cattle, possession of weapons, conspiracy, having and listening to radio, etc., but only the death sentence for hiding and helping Jews is constantly invoked in this context. Thirdly, the fact constantly omitted is that all those people who were killed for helping Jews were killed as a result of denunciation by their Polish neighbors. The direct threat to Jews and the Poles who helped them were not Germans but other Poles. Germans were on foreign territory, and due to the number of Jews in Germany (about 600,000) and their status there (mostly assimilated Jews), they did not really know how to distinguish Jews from the rest of Polish population. Consequently, those who denounced Jews to the Gestapo did not kill anyone with own hands; rather they expected Germans to do that. After years of dealing with this topic, I can only see World War II in Poland in terms of ethnic cleansing.

**DURING THE WAR** there was an eruption of anti-Semitic hatred that had accumulated over the years. This hatred was mainly founded in Catholic beliefs and nationalist ideology. People seldom ask the question of how it was before 1939. But during the interwar period there was an anti-Semitic fever in Poland – there were paramilitary groups at universities, there were pogroms, overall attitudes towards Jews were alarming. All this is well documented and the atmosphere of hopelessness – in fact a kind of trap – felt by the Jews in the 1920s and the 1930s is well described, not least by Isaac Bashevis Singer. Jan Karski, courier of the Polish Underground State who delivered mes-

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*A piece on mother and the fatherland* was first staged by Jan Klata and the Polski Theatre in Wrocław in 2011.

sages on the Holocaust from Poland to the West, called anti-Semitism a “narrow, and perhaps the only bridge connecting Poles with Germans.” The collaboration between Poles and Germans was established on the basis of anti-Semitism, regardless of the language in which it was conveyed. For the Nazis, it was the discourse of racism, while the discourse of Polish anti-Semitism was more ethnic and religious.

The project to erect a monument to the Righteous Among the Nations just outside the Museum of the History of Polish Jews sustains and petrifies the official, dominant narrative I have mentioned. The museum has many visitors. The idea is to force people who come to visit the museum – Poles, Jews, and people from other foreign countries – to acknowledge this narrative, while the truth is that many people perceive it as a kind of blasphemy. Therefore we have signed the petition against the project.

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The petition was authored by Bożena Keff and two of her friends and colleagues, Elżbieta Janicka (a photographer and the author of the book *Festung Warschau* on how the places of commemoration compete with each other in Warsaw’s urban landscape) and Helena Datner (a sociologist and historian and member of the team responsible for the developing exhibition at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews). What the three intellectuals have in common is their struggle with anti-Semitism as well as the attentiveness to the issue of how the hegemonic culture and its dominant narrative suppresses the voices of the excluded, leading to the tension between conflicting narratives, conflicting memories that results in many controversies and public debates. Janicka’s book *Festung Warschau* is a thought-provoking guide to Muranów (the former Jewish ghetto) and the places which either no longer exist or have been totally transformed. These are the places where the Jewish presence has been commented on from the Polish perspective, through the Polish narrative: “We also suffered; we suffered even more.”<sup>1</sup> Helena Datner’s work with the post-war gallery at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews was constantly questioned and controlled. She was publicly asked not to use the term “Jewish point of view,” because it could make the exhibition unreliable. The post-1989 part of the gallery was eventually excluded from the main exhibition.<sup>2</sup>

Among people who signed the petition were Jews living abroad, emigrants of 1968, writers such as like Henryk Grynberg ... “There are many Poles who think the same,” adds Keff. “We think that the monument would symbolically contribute to sustaining the dominant narrative about Polish people rescuing Jews. However, in the dispute around the project, Jews and Poles are on both sides of the conflict. My biggest opponent in this conflict is in fact the Jewish activist Konstanty Gebert.”

Keff is of the opinion that in this place the Jewish narrative should dominate, not the Polish, official one. “The museum is located in the area of the wartime Jewish ghetto, where Jews were left completely alone, cut off from the outside world and where nobody helped them because nobody could, since access to the ghetto was prohibited. Even when the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising broke out in 1943, the Poles did not join the Jews in the battle, although the leader of ghetto fighters, Mordechai Anielewicz, apparently counted on the help from outside.”

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**Recently we observe an increase of anti-Semitism in Europe. Is the same thing happening in Poland? What is the difference between Polish and, let’s say, West European anti-Semitism?**

– As others do I call Polish anti-Semitism “anti-Semitism without Jews”, because there are really few Jews living in Poland, about 6,000 to 7,000 altogether, so you cannot even speak of a Jewish minority. In comparison, the largest ethnic group living in Poland are Germans. They even have their own representation in the Polish parliament. In the Second Republic of Poland (1918–1939), Jews constituted approx. 10% of the Polish population, that is they were the second largest minority group after the Ruthenians (i.e. Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Russians). Approximately 3.3 million Jews lived in Poland before the war there. (Jews 3.3, Ruthenians circa 6 million, Germans 500,000, Poles 27 millions). In comparison, about 600,000 Jews lived in Germany among a population of about 60 million.) Today their number does not even amount to 1%. During the interwar period,



Poster from 2013.

**The Polish population took part in ethnic cleansing during WWII – a hard truth to swallow.**

despite the formal right to Polish citizenship, Jews remained second-class citizens, at least according to the ideology of nationalist parties.

– It is true: There has been growing interest in Jewish culture, particularly among the youth. For it is mainly young people that seek their Jewish roots, even if they have to go as far as the third or fourth generation, which only proves that Polish identity has become too limiting, so they look for other options.

– In the context of what is called Eastern Europe, Poland is undoubtedly the country where most is happening as regards Jewish matters. Nevertheless, anti-Semitism is still very much alive and thriving there. One could prevent or avert it only through education, I guess. The truth is I do not really know how the school curriculum relates to this subject nowadays or if it is taken into account at all. Even the Polish Institute of National Remembrance presented a sanitized image of Polish-Jewish relations. One takes care of the façade. Challenging the prevailing official narrative about Polish anti-Semitism takes place mainly in culture, especially in new cultural phenomena in the periphery of the mainstream culture, while the mainstream, official culture keeps resisting the change.

**In your studies, in your literary work you too challenge the “official narrative” as opposed to the “narrative of the excluded”. You seem to be most interested in what constitutes a system of exclusion in a given, and in this case Polish, society. What made you engage in work against discrimination?**

– Anti-Semitism, homophobia, misogyny are for me a part of one and the same package. However, anti-Semitism affects me personally. Even though there are very few Jews in Poland (in comparison there are quite a large number of homosexual people and half of society is women), anti-Semitism is very much alive. This is not a paradox – it is rather the proof that anti-Semitism is a kind of mythological structure and does not need a real object. To be scared of demons one does not need their existence. I know a great deal about anti-Semitism, since I have written the book entitled *Anti-Semitism. An Unclosed History*, a 100 -page overview of the topic. It covers a period of almost 2000 years and all of Europe, it is popular, for everybody but I believe deep enough.

**How did you get involved in the Polish women’s movement?**

– In 1986, the Warsaw city authorities rented out a cinema, *Kultura*, in the city center to the organizers of a film festival. It was a pro-cultural gesture in late-socialism style which would not be possible today. Of course the city got revenue from the tickets. We showed films from different European countries, courtesy of the Dutch Embassy in Warsaw. This festival became the first feminist festival in Warsaw, and it was huge. Then we started the Polish Feminist Association, which became registered as soon as the law allowed it, that is in 1989. For me, involvement in the women’s movement was an alternative to involvement in the Solidarity movement, to which I had belonged before I realized its strong Catholic, nationalist and anti-Semitic undercurrent. The left-wing liberal mainstream would not, or could not, defend themselves against it, or was too weak to do so. This was in a sense an alternative that I needed at that time, because I needed a movement and ideas with which I could identify. I needed somewhere I could belong. In 1989 the Feminist Association left Solidarity when we realized what was brewing in relation to the abortion law.

**You have no problem with calling yourself a feminist. But why are Polish women so reluctant to call themselves feminists? Most women support the feminist agenda, yet they do not want to be identified with this movement. Is it because feminism in Poland is mainly associated with activism, while feminism in western countries is a kind of self-awareness, or a state of consciousness?**

– The majority of Polish men and women today see the Catholic Church as the main authority. The Church is unreformed and its current edition represents the backward-looking version of Catholicism, except perhaps for the community around the *Tygodnik Powszechny* (a Polish Catholic weekly, published in Krakow, accused by its opponents of leaning towards a much too liberal and left-wing Catholicism). After World War II, along with the state socialism and its system of social benefits, Polish women received the so-called “emancipatory package.” They have

achieved a serious degree of emancipation, but on the basis of a very patriarchal consciousness. Socialism gave women a lot, but at the same time it retained its patriarchal consciousness.

– Polish feminists and their struggle for the dominance of emancipatory values, introducing the convention against violence, lifting the ban on abortion – these problems do not exist in Sweden, because in Sweden one has thoroughly

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