CHAPTER 12

Writing Themselves into History: Two Feminists Recall Their Political Development in the People's Republic of Poland

Shana Penn

> What women achieved under communism was so obvious that we never believed we had something to lose.
>
> Małgorzata Fuszara, gender studies professor, Warsaw University[1]

Come 1989 and the shattering of the Iron Curtain, it seemed that grassroots feminism suddenly leapt to life to counter the completely unanticipated threats to reproductive rights, women's employment, state-run child care, and health care that accompanied the dismantling of the communist infrastructure. But feminism, though long dormant in Central Europe, did not suddenly spring, full-blown, out of nowhere. Prior to 1989, and independent from the state, many women had long nurtured the elements of feminism, both in private and in their respective pro-democracy subcultures. Their political legacy carried into the post-communist era, helping to usher a broader-based feminism into their respective countries.

This chapter focuses on how feminism evolved in Poland during the era of state socialism, from 1945 to 1989. How did women born after World War II become sensitized to gender? How did the state-socialist system and the era's politics influence the development of their gender awareness and life choices? How did gender interface with ethnicity and religion (in this case, with Jewish identity and Judaism)? What were those women, who later became feminists, thinking and doing, and how do they assess their experiences? Through observing the lives of two Polish feminists who—although of different ages, ethnicities, and social backgrounds—share a feminism that was forged under state socialism, I aim to answer these questions.

Locating themselves in history has, in recent years, become crucial for Polish feminists. By the mid-1990s, following the tragic legislative loss of reproductive rights, many had grown cynical, worried that Polish feminism might be little more than an oxymoron.[2] The 1990s disillusionment was overcome as the first research projects reconstructing a national feminist history began to be released, and as activists and scholars, such as Maria Janion, Izabela Filipiak, and Kazimiera Szczuka, successfully intervened in public debate, arguing for continuities of indigenous feminist thinking over several disruptive centuries reaching back to the late eighteenth century. Sławomira Walczewska, codirector of the Women's Foundation *eFKa* in Kraków, initiated this "reconstructive" research in the early 1990s by creating important intellectual forums,[3] and she has since published two major books including *Feminists in Their Own Voices* ("Feministki własnym głosem o sobie"), her edited collection of oral histories of ten Polish feminists born between the 1940s and 1970s.[4] There are now several feminist oral history projects, including my own, that focus on the communist era and document how Polish feminists have been writing themselves back into history—taking the steps to reconnect with a legacy of publishing and activism that was severed in World War II and was excluded from state socialism's top-down gender platform.[5]

In this chapter, I draw significantly from this discourse and scholarship, particularly from recently published research and oral history projects.[6] My own research and interviews with women active in the opposition, feminism, and the Communist Party were conducted during 1990–93, 1997–98, 1999–2001, and 2006–08. Because this chapter also examines the intersection of Jewish and gender identities, I use research that I conducted in 1990–93 and 2005–08 on the revitalization of Poland's Jewish community during and after communism, tracking the relationship between Jewish identity and anticommunist opposition, and the reentry of Jewish issues into public discourse.[7]

World War II and Its Aftermath

Polish women recall varied pathways to feminism—through personal, cumulative experiences of sexism; through readings of feminist literature (which illuminated the sexism); from watching the 1989 political changeover systematically disadvantage women; and from the events that are our focus in this chapter—the construction and duration in power of the People's Republic of Poland (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, or PRL) following the devastation of World War II. For the two women profiled here, Bożena Umińska-Keff and Małgorzata Tarasiewicz, those years imposed formative experiences—dislocation; the loss and rebuilding of family, home and community; the obscuring or trading-in of one identity for another—that nurtured their sensitivities to their gender identities. Anticommunist opposition, as a source either of inspiration or disenchantment, was another major influence. And for Umińska-Keff, who is Jewish, ethnic identity formation and anti-Semitism together were critical formative factors. Her life story is unusual in this, as are the stories of most of her generational peers who came from secular Jewish leftist households and did not acknowledge their ethnic identity as influencing their political development; many did not acknowledge their ethnic identity at all. Moreover, most feminists with Jewish roots were not raised with a Jewish sensibility and did not derive political or personal meaning from a dialogue between their Jewish and female selves. Umińska-Keff became, beginning in the 1990s, a mentor and role model for younger feminists with Jewish roots.

Umińska-Keff was born in 1948, and Tarasiewicz in 1960. They each came of age in a pivotal political era—Umińska-Keff during the 1968 student protests and the government-led anti-Semitic campaign, and Tarasiewicz during the 1980 nationwide strikes and the formation of Solidarity. They took different paths to feminism, yet both play important roles in Poland's feminist history.

Umińska-Keff, who regards herself primarily as an artist, is a rare combination of poet, literary critic, academic, and political columnist. Using various genres, her works examine the intersection between Judaism and gender in Polish culture.[8] She characteristically gathers together two hot buttons in Polish society—Jew and woman—and holds them before her readers like discomfiting mirrors. Few people in Poland are as openly candid about their multiple identities as this Jewish feminist and artist, who has provoked fiery debate on taboo subjects.

Tarasiewicz is perhaps best known for organizing the Solidarity Union's first-ever Women's Section in 1990. For spearheading the group's pro-choice platform, she was hastily ousted by the antichoice Union

and as a result became the subject of a 1991 Human Rights Watch report.[9] Undaunted, she moved on to run the Gdańsk office of Amnesty International, and today she directs the Network of East-West Women (NEWW Polska), which connects feminist groups throughout Central and Eastern Europe to strategize region-wide actions.[10]

Though their family backgrounds and generations are quite different, Tarasiewicz and Umińska-Keff grew up with strong self-esteem that was nurtured by their families and the gender norms fostered by state socialism. They felt that this self-esteem was a given, and their notions about women and gender equality went largely unquestioned until each was exposed to Western feminism and personally experienced sexism. For Tarasiewicz, that exposure began in the 1980s opposition, but for both her and Umińska-Keff, it came into sharp focus when reproductive rights were immediately threatened in the wake of the 1989 revolution. "That's when the blinders flew off," said Tarasiewicz.[11]

Bożena Umińska-Keff: Born 1948

Born three years after the war's end to Holocaust survivors who had relocated from Lvov in eastern Poland to Warsaw, Bożena Umińska-Keff was raised in a secular Jewish household. Her parents, atypical of Jews in postwar Poland, did not hide their Jewishness, at least not in the home or from their daughter. Holocaust survivors who resettled in the United States or Israel often covered up their wartime experiences from their families and communities, if only to protect the children, but rarely concealed their Judaism. In homogenous Poland, by contrast, the number one reason for obscuring one's personal history was the fear of anti-Semitic persecution by neighbors or by the state.

In interviews as well as in her published works, Umińska-Keff discusses her feminist awakening as having been grounded in her sensitivity to her Jewish identity. She sets the story of her feminism against the backdrop of her postwar upbringing as the child of secular, leftist Holocaust survivors, and of her experience of anti-Semitism in a country where Jew-hating remained pervasive even after there were few Jews left. In the PRL, which originally proclaimed atheism but from 1956 onward allowed the practice of Catholicism, the Jewish population routinely suffered political and popular persecution. Consequently, most Jews hid or denied their cultural identity well into the post-communist era. Growing up in this hostile climate, Umińska-Keff became sensitized to the social construction of identity and prejudice.

Before its occupation by Nazi Germany and the USSR in 1939, Poland was home to Europe's largest Jewish community—a population

of 3.5 million; its capital, Warsaw, was the continent's largest Jewish city. The once-flourishing Jewish communities virtually disappeared under Nazi rule, thus destroying much of the country's rich cultural fabric. Of the 280,000 Polish Jews who returned after the war, almost 200,000 had chosen to emigrate by 1949. Most of those who remained, Umińska-Keff's parents among them, were leftists. European Jews had created or participated in various leftist movements since the late nineteenth century in their search for political answers to questions of Jewish nationality, religion, and their relationships with their mainstream societies. The political streams included the Jewish Socialist Bund, an East European Jewish workers' movement associated with socialism and Yiddish culture; an array of Polish socialist groups; and the Communist Party. Jews who returned to Poland after the war encountered ongoing popular and political anti-Semitism, beginning with postwar pogroms, the most infamous of which was in the southeastern town of Kielce in 1946. In the late 1950s, the government and its propaganda machine harassed Jews to leave Poland and liberally distributed exit visas for Israel. In 1968, a state-sponsored witch hunt further reduced Poland's registered Jewish population to fewer than 20,000.

During the war, Umińska-Keff's parents, like many Jews, took refuge from Nazism in the Soviet Union. Her father fought in the first Polish army organized in the USSR in 1942. Aligned with the Bund, her father—like most leftists—joined the Communist Party after World War II; he remained in the postwar military. The army induced him to change his surname from Keff to Uminski "so that it wouldn't sound foreign—really meaning that it wouldn't sound Jewish," Umińska-Keff explained. She noted that even during Stalin's reign over the USSR and into the postwar era, her father attached the utmost importance to the "universal and just ideal of a social order that was supposed to come into being but just kept refusing to do so."[12] Then, when he was ordered to be a prosecution witness in a 1954 show trial that would unjustly indict military colleagues, he committed suicide.

Umińska-Keff's mother, also a leftist and a member of the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR, the dominant political party in the PRL), eventually married a Jew from a small town near Lvov, who became an academic after the war. At age fourteen he had given up his Orthodox religious studies for an education in Marxist philosophy and, before the war, was arrested and imprisoned for involvement in communist activities. Umińska-Keff and her mother joined her stepfather and his son from a first marriage in a spacious apartment in Żoliborz, a northern district of Warsaw that had not been destroyed in the war. Umińska-Keff lives there today with her life partner,

Jarosław Mikos. Her stepfather died in 1998, and her eighty-seven-year-old mother retired only four years ago from her work as an archivist at the Jewish Historical Institute. When Umińska-Keff was growing up, the members of her blended household expressed their Jewish identity in leftist ideology or in reference to the Holocaust past. Both adults had lost their families; in the 1950s they surrounded themselves with friends, mostly Jewish, who had also suffered unfathomable losses.

Whereas being Jewish was burdensome at times, Umińska-Keff recalls receiving positive gender messages from her surroundings—from her mother and stepfather, in school, and, as she told me, in the "general atmosphere," which was "an agent of emancipation." In the *Feministki* interview conducted by Sławomira Walczewska, she recalls "a precisely 'women's lib'" message that there was no reason why women should not lead a life as free as one led by men. Free in the sense of choice,

> following their own will, so that they could choose their own way of life. I remember that whenever I heard a misogynist remark … I didn't even react with indignation but with amazement, as if the person speaking was a dinosaur, a relic from the past that had no right to exist in this reality any more. Everything that went against that [women's lib] message was deeply hidden and wasn't really visible.[13]

She was, however, aware of a subtly concealed bias on the part of her stepfather, from whom she sought recognition as an intellectual. Either because of kinship, gender bias, or both, he reserved that validation only for his son.

> I lost because I am of the wrong gender. But it was covert, never said out loud. I never heard in our home the statements that feminist friends heard their fathers say, for example, that they were disappointed to have daughters, they'd have preferred a son. My friends got buckets full of cold water, and I got aerosol spray with little droplets in the air. But the air was supposed to be free of aerosol.[14]

Małgorzata Tarasiewicz: Born 1960

Soon after the end of World War II, at around the time Umińska-Keff's parents were relocating to Warsaw, Małgorzata Tarasiewicz's family decided not to return to the bombed-out rubble in their native Warsaw, resettling instead in provincial Sopot on the Baltic coast. There, Tarasiewicz grew up feeling the painful consequences of her family's wartime experiences. Nazi Germany's invasion and occupation of Poland was exceptionally brutal. On her mother's side, all the male relatives and many of the women

had been killed. Well-educated and well-to-do, they were patriots who fought in the Polish military and the anti-Nazi underground. Most were caught up in the Nazi campaign of terror to eliminate Poland's political, religious, and intellectual leadership, partly as a means to halt resistance efforts and partly because the Third Reich regarded Poles to be racially inferior. The German military killed thousands of Polish civilians and imprisoned thousands of Polish males in forced-labor camps. Tarasiewicz's great-grandfather died in the Mauthausen concentration camp; her uncle was burned alive during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising; her grandfather died in Buchenwald; and her great-aunt, a resistance fighter, was arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned in Warsaw's notorious Pawiak Prison.[15] After three months in Pawiak, she and other political prisoners were taken to the Jewish ghetto, where they were shot dead. Out of the whole family, which had lived in Warsaw for more than a century, only three women survived: her great-grandmother, her grandmother, and her mother, who was born during the war. Such residual, all-female families were not uncommon at the end of World War II, which explains, in part, why the postwar communist governments mandated that women enter the labor force.[16]

After the war, the three Tarasiewicz women were taken to a displaced persons camp, and from there they moved to Sopot. Though the move was their own choice, they were part of a massive migration that occurred immediately after the war, as Poland's eastern and western geographical borders were politically redefined and concretely shifted. The forced population movements westward ousted Germans from areas where they had long lived, including the cities of Danzig, Breslau, and Poznan, which, in postwar Poland, were renamed Gdańsk, Wrocław, and Poznań. At the same time, Poland's eastern territories were annexed by the Soviet Union, and ethnic minority populations, mainly Germans and Ukrainians, were displaced by the millions of new residents from inside the new borders. The result was the largest exchange of population in European history.[17]

Tarasiewicz's mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother had to "organize" their lives from scratch and cope in a completely new place, in a postwar reality that was very difficult.

> Never again did any man find his way into the lives of my great-grandmother and grandmother. My mother, on the other hand, had a brief relationship with my father, and I am, so to speak, the fruit of that union, but then, my father left Poland. So I was raised by these three women who had gone through traumatic experiences and great loneliness.[18]

Tarasiewicz's grandmother had studied history at Warsaw University before the Nazi invasion, but she had to work a variety of service-sector

jobs to support the family while Tarasiewicz's mother earned a degree in economics at Gdańsk University. After graduation, Tarasiewicz's mother found employment with a transatlantic passenger ship company. The three women gave Tarasiewicz a sense of power; they were her heroines, her role models:

> They were so brave; women in my family provided me with such a sense of support; women were perhaps the bravest, both the ones who fought during the war and the ones who managed to wait it out somehow, hidden in a cellar. Men, on the other hand, as exemplified by my father, were terribly disappointing. I didn't feel what many people feel, that a man is indispensable to supporting a family; my father didn't even pay child support.[19]

Tarasiewicz's father studied for his maritime degree in neighboring Gdynia and was rarely at home. After her parents divorced, he worked in the shipping industry but detested the political restraints on his freedoms in postwar PRL. Compelled to leave the country, he devised a dramatic escape route: he set sail from Poland on a 30-foot, open, wooden lifeboat, carrying only survival supplies and no modern navigational devices. Fleeing by sea, together with his future wife, they headed first to the Caribbean, eventually landed in Boston, and then settled in Florida.[20] It is of little surprise that Tarasiewicz, as a child, had a deeply romantic vision of her father as an adventurous, freedom-loving man who "sailed away to America, a hero."[21] By her own account, she recognizes that her family seemed to embody a Polish cultural myth, with her father as the heroic but absent man who abandons ship, so to speak, to seek his freedom, leaving behind the quietly suffering women who would take competent command of the household and sustain family life without him. Father and daughter had a sporadic long-distance correspondence until Tarasiewicz reached the age of nineteen, when she visited him and his second wife in Miami. There, any illusions she had harbored quickly shattered. Her father behaved like a tyrant with his second wife and denigrated Tarasiewicz's worth.

Tarasiewicz couldn't wait to escape her father's verbal abuse and Miami's superficial resort scene. She returned to Sopot in the summer of 1980, just as a workers' rebellion was brewing in nearby Gdańsk. By summer's end, it exploded into a nationwide strike that would force the government to loosen its iron grip on workers and legalize the first and only free trade union movement in the Eastern Bloc—Solidarity (*Solidarność*). With an eventual membership of ten million workers, Solidarity set in motion a social revolution that in nine years' time

would help undermine the PRL and, by extension, the entire Soviet bloc. Tarasiewicz had come home just as the population was winning an unprecedented bid for freedom. An exciting new frontier was bursting wide open for Tarasiewicz and her country.

CONSOLIDATING IDENTITY: THE IMPACT OF 1968 ON A JEWISH LEFTIST

Umińska-Keff did not quite share Tarasiewicz's exuberance for the great Polish August, as the summer's unprecedented popular victory was called. Having witnessed violence against young Jewish students during the 1968 protests, she grew bitter when, in the midst of a huge Warsaw street celebration of Solidarity's creation, she overheard remarks such as, "Now we can finally get rid of the *Żydokomuna* (Jew-Communists) who run this country." *Żydokomuna* is a pejorative term referring both to the anti–Polish Jew and to an organized Jewish conspiracy that threatens the Polish nation. It is used to express an anti-Semitic stereotype that blamed Jews for having introduced and ruled the Communist Party in Poland.[22]

By the time Umińska-Keff entered Warsaw University to study psychology, a new wave of campus unrest and human rights activism attracted her attention; at the same time, political anti-Semitism had become explosive. In March 1968 the students of Warsaw and other Polish university cities took to the streets, organizing campus demonstrations and sit-ins and protesting the abuse of freedom of expression and democracy under the communist regime. The communist authorities, under Party leader Władysław Gomułka, responded with a brutal clampdown, followed by a vicious anti-Semitic campaign, which exploited the fact that many student leaders were Jewish; in fact, some were children of members of the communist elite itself. This campaign followed on the heels of Poland breaking relations with Israel after the Six-Day War, and purging its military and police of Jews. The anti-Semitic campaign, officially labeled "anti-Zionist" took the form of mass rallies and meetings denouncing the "Zionist Fifth Column"; Jews were expelled from their positions and jobs and Jewish students were expelled from universities. The government-controlled media preached hatred. Intellectuals in general, not only Jews, were targeted.

Umińska-Keff joined the protests, a decision that provoked conflict with her disapproving mother but garnered her stepfather's support. "Let her go," he told his wife. "Let her go, because if she doesn't, she won't be able to live with herself."[23] "I remember the buses full of men with truncheons, in brown coats, and how I hid in the toilet and watched them

through the window, beating a girl lying on the snow," Umińska-Keff wrote in a fictionalized account of her experience under the pen name Adela Hase.

> Afterward, the Psychology Department and many others were disbanded. … People started mentioning emigration. One of my girlfriends was in prison. Reality was decomposing itself. The dramatis personae were: the evil, stupid, primitive, manipulative authority; the conformists; the students; and the good people—student allies.[24]

Umińska-Keff watched many of her Jewish friends emigrate in reaction to the government's repressive policies. Between 1968 and 1971, some 20,000 Jews left Poland, stripped of their citizenship and most of their belongings. Almost all of them were assimilated Jews who considered themselves Poles.

A very sad period began for Umińska-Keff and the reform-minded students who remained in Poland.

> That March was the end of my childhood. I dropped out of utopia and found myself in the midst of history. In 1969, I started in the Polish Literature Department [Warsaw University] I met students who were anti-Semites. I missed my friends, my intense and colorful life, left irreversibly behind.[25]

It was a time to rethink one's personal life and the country's political reality, which had now so brutally shattered her stepfather's projection of social justice within ten years' time. Umińska-Keff entered a period of disappointment, depression, and "getting to know this country's anti-Semitic side, getting to know the Polish mentality, the Polish reality. … It was always there, I just didn't know about it, I must have been from outer space."[26] She was in fact, as she said in the next breath, a "child of the European Enlightenment who was absolutely unable to buy into the Polish national mythology."[27] Her left-wing family and their distance from Jewish religious tradition nurtured this resistance to cultural myths, she believed.

By and large, the members of Umińska-Keff's generation of reform-minded leftists with Jewish roots neither embraced their Jewish heritage nor showed any gender awareness unless they had lived for a time in a Western country. Umińska-Keff, in contrast, cared about identity and was in dialogue with her two undeniable identities—Jew and woman—and how they influenced her position in the world. In 1968 there was not yet, and would not be until the late 1970s, the social space for thinking about Jewish and gender identities. "The freedom-of-all issue was our

top priority," I was told by oppositionist Joanna Szczęsna, who was jailed and expelled from university during the 1968 student protests in Łódź. "It was not time to consider the specific interests of women or of others."[28] Thus, at a time when many dissidents, particularly young women, saw themselves as part of the larger "we," Umińska-Keff distinguished herself from her peers by writing as "I" in the short fiction about March 1968 that she published as Adela Hase: "I didn't have a nationality and I didn't want to have any. I liked being a Child of the World and the Mind, being Above. I was interested in politics. I sympathized with the Left, although I didn't belong to the Party. I thought myself a Radical Individualist."

Umińska-Keff was carving out the conceptual space that enabled her to become a feminist culture critic—a critic who is most interested, as she stated in a 2008 newspaper interview, in how individuals make their identities, and in how, why, and when people give their identities away.[29] In fact, she reclaimed her paternal surname "Keff" when, beginning in 1988, she decided to publish her poetry and some other artistic works under Bożena Keff; even her email user ID became "bekeff," while her prose continued to be published under Umińska, and more recently under Umińska-Keff. As she has emphatically stated in several interviews, one of the fundamental issues in her life is "identity," or rather,

> a human being's right to define one's own identity on one's own, and above all else, not to have to deal with people who come and say, "You are this, you are that. This is good about your identity, this is not good. This is normal, and this is not normal. And here is the norm." This simply freaks me out, I get mad. … Here is where all aspects of my sensitivity come together. Since childhood, I have felt like: "Don't touch my identity, don't invade my space, don't tell me what women are like; don't tell me this," because I simply hate these messages that "the woman is a neck that moves the head" or that "Jews have nine lives" even when all nine lives ended up in the gas chambers. I hate it. It wakes up in me an aggression. … And now I can move to feminism because this is the whole background to how I became a feminist.[30]

It is fitting that the title of the *Feministki* interview with Umińska-Keff is "Identity Stamping" (*Stemplowanie tożsamości*). I interviewed Umińska-Keff shortly after her 1999 essay, provocatively titled, "Would Żeromski throw gas into the gas chamber?" had sparked a media sensation in intellectual circles from Warsaw to Paris. Published in the highly regarded literary journal *Res Publica Nowa*, it analyzed the "unconscious use," as Umińska-Keff explained to me, of anti-Semitic and misogynist language in the works of well-known Polish writers such as Stefan Żeromski

(1864–1925), a revered novelist and icon of social progress. In the essay she wrote,

> The bottom line of what we label anti-Semitism is symbolized by the gas chamber and Zyklon B … But before the gas is thrown, a long process takes place during which the numerous possibilities for throwing are created: worldview, morality, mentality, politics, and technical developments. In the case of women, we can observe a similar phenomenon, but the standards are even lower. If a Jew is threatening, although somewhat attractive … a woman is simply inferior [and] her inferiority must be constantly confirmed. The way to reach this goal is to humiliate the "enemy" or make fun of her.[31]

In response, the intellectual and popular press hurled epithets against the "commander of the brigades of political correctness," demanding unsuccessfully that she be fired from teaching in Warsaw University's gender studies program and that the entire program be abolished for poisoning students' minds. In Poland, "Jews are dangerous, women are politically insignificant," Umińska-Keff told me. "The difference today is that in Polish intellectual circles, you can no longer be openly anti-Semitic, but you can be openly misogynist."

Feminism and the Opposition: Why Solidarity Wasn't Enough for Women

As important as Solidarity was in unseating the PRL, its brilliant logo (buoyant red letters in the shape of flag-bearing citizens marching toward freedom) was itself shifted from center stage by younger generations of activists who took their organizing cues more from the West than from their Polish predecessors. By the mid- to late 1980s, Solidarity's familiar triad of workers, intellectuals, and the church was sharing the activist spotlight with environmentalists and peace activists, anarchists, punk rock bands, street theater performers, Western-style human rights activists, and, yes, feminists. While some of these creative new forms of dissent had sprung from the grassroots trade union movement, others, including feminism, emerged in opposition to Solidarity. Solidarity claimed it would take care of the nation's women, who had been exploited and oppressed by the "unnatural" notion of equality between the sexes, which the PRL had foisted upon them. Solidarity promised women part-time work and more time in the home and with the family. This was just one of many promises that Solidarity made and did not keep, which caused women to move toward feminism. There also were groups, feminists among them, who paid no heed to the paternalism of either Solidarity—the public face

of which was all male, although women worked behind the scenes—or of the state. Solidarity, for all its talk of democratic practices such as equality and electoral representation, was a male-dominated organization; less than 8 percent of its political composition was female, even though women comprised roughly 50 percent of its membership and of the labor force in general.

The new activists had greater exposure to and affinity for Western social change issues such as peace, nuclear disarmament, and the environment than had their Solidarity forerunners. Tarasiewicz recalls that feminism became important to some of the women activists in groups that worked for these new causes, herself included, particularly as they strove to understand the male-dominated power dynamics they were experiencing. Like other twenty- and thirty-something activists of the era, Tarasiewicz belonged to several groups simultaneously to satisfy her overlapping interests. In addition to serving as the Polish liaison for Amnesty International, she helped organize many acts of civil disobedience, sit-ins, and happenings that were characteristic of the youthful movement called Wolność i Pokój (WiP—"Freedom and Peace"); WiP had branches throughout Poland and coordinated transnational actions with like-minded groups in other Eastern bloc countries. Tarasiewicz also interacted with the trade unionists, who had birthed Solidarity at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk, and she traveled to campuses in Prague and Budapest to meet with fellow anarcho-environmentalists and feminists such as Judit Acsady and Agnes Hochberg of Hungary.

For Tarasiewicz, the 1980s shaped her "personality and social vision most intensely."[32] During her studies at Gdańsk University in 1984, she participated in her first feminist consciousness-raising group, which was led by Canadian writer Myrna Kostash; she also met other visiting Western feminist faculty and writers such as U.S. historian Linda Gordon. In her formal studies, she recalls reading Virginia Woolf and discovering other works about gender in the literary monthly *Literature in the World* ("Literatura na świecie"). "I can say that one of the first serious insights was given to me by a professor who even encouraged us to write our theses on feminist literary analysis," she told me. But it was as an activist, more so than as a student, that she became enthralled with feminism. Through WiP's extensive contacts, Tarasiewicz met Western feminist activists who had come to Gdańsk to learn about the Polish opposition and especially about gender roles within dissident groups. At a 1986 pan-European conference organized by WiP in Warsaw, Tarasiewicz attended workshops with feminist members of War Resisters International. They taught her not only how to organize nonviolent civil disobedience but also how she and other women could assert their leadership within WiP.

> I liked the way they defined things I knew about but didn't realize really existed. For example, I realized there was discrimination even within WiP, with the male domination of the movement. I had known this but it hadn't seemed possible to go against it. And then I learned that it is possible to become visible, to become a leader as important as the men were. These women helped to organize women in WiP, such as Urszula Nowakowska in Warsaw and Judit Acsady in Budapest; they sent us publications, stayed in contact, continued to visit us and I learned so much from these endless conversations.[33]

Tarasiewicz and her growing circle of women friends in Central Europe were entering a new social space for thinking about and acting upon feminist ideas. Emboldened by these encounters, Tarasiewicz wrote two feminists pieces in 1986 for the *WiP* newspaper published in Gdańsk: an essay about the annual Miss Polonia competition and another specifically addressing the need for feminism. Though the Gdańsk group was more anarchistic than WiP factions elsewhere, Tarasiewicz was surprised and disappointed by the members' nervous reaction to her feminist declaration.

> Why was speaking about women's freedom, about the possibility of women making choices, about not objectifying women, why did these issues provoke such an unbelievable resistance even among anarchists? This shocked me, and also made me aware that something was at stake, that the problem existed, was not in some faraway place but existed right here, if my male friends, with whom we protested in the street, were suddenly against us when it came to women's issues.[34]

One of the earliest meeting spaces for feminist activity was a women's studies course begun in 1978 and taught by sociologist Renata Siemieńska at Warsaw University. Siemieńska's course inspired the organizing of a women's study group in the fall of 1980 by students who wanted to move beyond the one course and a classroom setting. The group organized lectures and consciousness-raising sessions and distributed leaflets at factories and schools.[35] To a certain extent, the group had also been formed in *opposition to* the newly established opposition, Solidarity, which excluded women from its core decision-making body, even though women made up half of the labor force as well as half of Solidarity's membership.[36] Although they did not directly confront the underrepresentation of women and women's interests in Solidarity, they consciously chose to operate outside its feminist-resistant platform and structures.

The year 1986 was pivotal in the gradual unraveling of the PRL's one-party rule. The government announced a general amnesty, which

allowed for the release of thousands of political prisoners. Subsequently, many Solidarity factions throughout the country, which had functioned in underground enclaves since the December 1981 imposition of martial law, decided to come out of hiding and risk above-ground activism. New forms of multigenerational, public dissent agitated for democratization of the political system. The opposition press was flourishing. Feminist activism also was steadily spreading, person by person, and from city to city.

It was only a matter of time before Umińska-Keff, with her poet's ear to the ground, caught wind of the exciting conversations taking place in women's studies classes, book groups, and arts events in Warsaw. She had already been reading feminist texts that had been translated into Polish, most notably in an anthology of second wave Western feminist texts, titled *Nobody is Born a Woman* ("Nikt nie rodzi się kobieta: Antologia tekstow feministycznych")[37]; this collection was her introduction to the works of Susan Brownmiller, Kate Millett, Sherry Ortner, and Alix Kates Shulman, among others. Translated and edited by philosophy scholar Teresa Hołówka, this book, with its Simone de Beauvoir–inspired title, was published not by an underground press but rather by an official publishing house in the year 1982—in other words, as Umińska-Keff stressed to me, at the height of martial law. What accounted for this seeming oversight on the part of the government censor? How did Umińska-Keff understand this phenomenal feminist coup? "Take heed," Umińska-Keff told me. The freedoms and repressions experienced in the PRL were "not black and white." She emphasized this repeatedly to me, particularly when she perceived my questions to be excessively "Cold War" in their assumptions. For her, it was not extraordinary that a collection of Western feminist writings had slipped undetected past the border controls during one of the most repressive periods in communist Poland. In part, this occurrence illustrated the contradictory nature of life in the PRL (as in any given society); it also underscored Umińska-Keff's perception that women were viewed as politically insignificant even at a time of hypervigilant repression; and it also pointed to her assertion that "women's lib messages" were part of the socialization process in the PRL. This point helps explain her experience in reading the second-wave feminist literature published in *Nobody is Born a Woman* and elsewhere, for her response was not one of "revelation" but, less dramatically, of affinity. "What these women were writing was absolutely common sense. I could not see a single point that would cause me intellectual doubts. It was an intellectual recognition and also about my personal history. I think feminism simply fit right into me."[38]

The year 1986 also marked an unforgettable period in the evolution of feminist activism in Poland. That was the year in which the

Warsaw women's group felt conceptually prepared to go public and organize cultural activities on the university campus and in public spaces around the city. These included an art exhibition and, most uniquely, a still talked about week-long film series, "Cinema of Women: Films by Women Directors." The city of Warsaw provided the group with free use of Cinema Kultura on the stately boulevard Krakowskie Przedmiescie, situated midway between the Ministry of Culture and Warsaw University. The cinema was made available for an entire week of uncensored film showings in the nation's capital; the local authorities sanctioned and supported the entire program, stressed Umińska-Keff. With the organizational assistance of the Dutch Embassy in Poland and several Dutch feminist groups, more than four hundred films from all over Europe were brought for inclusion in the festival, such as works by Margarethe von Trotta, Ulrike Ottinger, Barbara Sas-Zdort, Magdalena Lazarkiewicz, and the Oscar winner Agnieszka Holland; filmmakers including von Trotta and Ottinger were invited as well and spoke to audiences. No theme was off-limits, from lesbianism to unhappy domestic life and miserable workplace conditions.

This public arena showcasing women filmmakers and their respective lenses on life kicked off much more than a film festival. It mobilized and legitimized grassroots feminist organizing. It was a wildly inspiring and enormous cultural phenomenon, which would have been impossible without the public spectacle of an international film festival, emphasized Umińska-Keff. At the time she was working as a film critic and participated in the festival as a reviewer. During the week, she made acquaintance with a number of participants with whom she became politically involved, including Sławomira Walczewska, a documentary filmmaker at the time, and Urszula Nowakowska, the founder of women's rights law centers in Poland in the 1990s.

The film festival capped a feminist rite of passage for several women I interviewed, such as Barbara Pomórska and Jolanta Plakwicz, and inspired the founding of the Polish Feminist Association (*Polskie Stowarzyszenie Feministyczne*), with the participation of Umińska-Keff, Walczewska, Nowakowska, and others. From that point on, feminism gradually developed a discrete life of its own, independent from both communism and the opposition. The group garnered public attention when the popular magazine *Women and Life* (*Kobiety i Zycie*) published an article about it in August 1988. Taking advantage of the publicity, the group invited women from all over the country to attend a meeting—in fact, the first national feminist gathering—in a suburban Warsaw home. Discussion topics ranged from abortion and sexuality to domestic violence, marriage, and the next steps forward for feminism.[39] At Umińska-Keff's urging, the

Polish Feminist Association became one of the first grassroots groups to register as a nonprofit organization after the 1989 political changeover.[40]

1989: THE NEW THREAT TO THE POLISH NATION

By 1989 the exciting momentum that feminists were generating, and which held great promise for awakening women throughout the country, would turn into horror as the new democratic parliament (Sejm) proposed, immediately after its formation, to delegalize long-held reproductive rights. "It is amazing to see that our rights as human beings have grown but as women, they've shrunk," Umińska-Keff told the *New York Times*. "The church is behind all of this. It is really very disappointing, but not surprising, to see."[41] Tarasiewicz recalled feeling, in that pivotal year of 1989,

> a huge disappointment with how the struggle against communism ended, in an imperfect way, so far from what I had imagined. And that's when this new period started, this period in which the blinders started to fall off my eyes, and my fascination grew with the possibilities created by the fall of communism. It was through my involvement in women's rights issues.[42]

Tarasiewicz, Umińska-Keff, and others would watch as their worst nightmare, not their loftiest dreams, catalyzed the Polish feminist movement.

By the late 1970s, Jewish men and women—many of whom had been high school students in 1968—began to organize themselves in reaction to the cultural stereotypes and to the political suppression of their identity, history, and lived experience, marking a similarity with Polish feminist experience. They began to discuss issues of Jewish identity and history, a conversation that was part of the larger phenomenon of critical discussion within Polish society that led to the creation of Solidarity in 1980 and to the mushrooming of social change activism in the 1980s.[43] It seemed as if nothing could stop their momentum, just as nothing could hold back the larger forces of democratic transformation that were sweeping the nation as the 1980s sped toward their close.

Come 1989, however, the similarities between Jewish and feminist activism began to break down as an unexpected role reversal occurred. With communism defeated, the demonic *Żydokomuna* had been deposed and was no longer to be feared. The 5,000 or so Jews scattered among Poland's 38 million people had suddenly become politically insignificant. Jews came out of hiding and began to rebuild communal life, which had not been possible for half a century. Now, the tradition-minded Poles saw themselves facing a new menace. The nation was undergoing economic shock therapy, and in the new world of free market capitalism,

many professions that had been undervalued and thus largely occupied by women in the former command economy were suddenly highly valued. Men now wanted jobs in law, business and accounting, medicine, and the media, but women stood in the way, just as they had under the former system.

Very quickly, a back-to-the-home media campaign called for restoring the "natural order of life" and charged communism with having turned the social order upside down—with providing women access to the public sphere and, consequently, with disempowering men. Normalcy, that is, patriarchy, had to be reinstated so that men could reclaim the public sphere and women could return to fulfilling their biological destiny as caretakers of their families and homes.

The distorted allegation against women as the devious beneficiaries of communism at the expense of emasculated men did not arise out of the ether. This conception had been implicit within the democratic opposition as formulated by Solidarity, and was one reason for some women's disillusionment with Solidarity in the early 1980s and for their subsequent interest in feminism. After the 1989 political changeover, at the close of this exciting and once-promising decade, women in general and feminists in particular were suddenly being charged with obstructing the formation of a new order. Because feminists clamored to safeguard women's economic and political rights and petitioned the government to protect reproductive freedoms, their opponents viciously accused them of destabilizing the family—and, by extension, the nation. Women traded stigmas with Jews, becoming dangerous in the first years of the political changeover while Jews became insignificant perhaps for the first time in their one-thousand-year history in Poland (Jews would soon enough be re-demonized, however[44]).

Liberal, pro-choice women and men watched, horror-stricken, as Solidarity—now a political party—seemed to be betraying them even as the red rug of communism was being yanked from beneath their feet.[45] Taken-for-granted reproductive freedoms vanished, even though one million people signed a pro-choice petition that was put before the Solidarity-dominated parliament and there were mass street demonstrations. The traditional culture, represented by the Catholic Church and the male-dominated, Solidarity-dominated parliament, reared up more strongly and took back what it thought was its due.

Clearly, 1989 signaled the time to mobilize a large-scale, "bottom-up" women's movement, as Western feminists had done in the 1970s and 1980s, and as never could have been attempted under socialism, when government gender policies did not allow for the kinds of advocacy required to monitor and enforce women's constitutional rights independently of the state. Advocacy skills and structures were precisely what were

urgently needed after 1989 to safeguard the rights that women were so deeply shocked to see dismantled. Individually and as a movement, however, feminists did not have the sophistication to successfully confront the steamroller of assaults that ensued. Yet many of the participants of 1989 remain active today and bring the strength of historical memory and political experience to their work. They are all the stronger and more effective for having their history brought forward, as Umińska-Keff, Tarasiewicz, and others are doing every day. Umińska-Keff, for example, told me she is producing her strongest writing and getting greater recognition today than ever before; and Tarasiewicz's organizing skills are now enabling feminists in Eastern and Central Europe to take advantage of their countries' European Union status in their women's rights strategies. The barriers to safeguarding women's rights that were thrown up in the post-1989 political arena only made these women angrier and more determined to fight on.

As an independent, grassroots feminism has evolved in Poland over the past twenty years, its gender studies scholars, many of whom are also activists, have analyzed the complexities of their transitional society, constructed a feminist history of the last several centuries, and studied themselves. For this history to be told, however, the blinders have to come off first. Nearly everyone, feminists and nonfeminists alike, in the East and in the West, was locked into the binary Cold War mode of thinking that divided the world into Good versus Bad, East versus West, and Top-Down versus Bottom-Up. This either/or perspective precluded recognition of feminism's pre–World War II history or of any advances made under communism. Breaking it enabled and legitimized the development of both academic and activist feminism. By now, the break is almost complete, and the discourse of researchers and activists permeates the mainstream and alternative media as well as academia, though of course the opponents of feminism continue to denounce it as either a "Western import" or a "Soviet plot." Despite the fact that gender studies degree programs are not yet institutionalized in most universities and even though the current government is extremely conservative, feminists today are recognized and respected public intellectuals. Conceptual and organizing space for women and gender issues has finally opened up after persistent, tenacious effort. Maintaining it will require continual vigilance.

This page intentionally left blank