

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Anna Gruszczyńska
Interviewers: Ola Piela and Joanna Wydrych**

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eFKa

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Anna Gruszczyńska was born in 1978 in Kowary, Poland. She studied English and Spanish Philology at the University of Wrocław and at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. In 2001, Gruszczyńska started a chapter of *The Campaign against Homophobia*. She has organized marches and campaigns calling for gay and lesbian rights in Poland. She has experienced social and political repercussions as an outspoken lesbian and feminist activist. Gruszczyńska is firmly committed to fighting homophobia and regularly publishes articles about the topic in feminist magazines. She has three younger sisters and lives in Cracow.

Aleksandra Piela has a Master of Arts degree in Film Studies. She is a volunteer in Women's Foundation eFKa and has been an active participant in its Feminist Academy. Piela works as a yoga instructor.

Joanna Wydrych has a Master of Arts degree in Political Science and in Gender Studies from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. She was an active participant in eFKa's Feminist Academy. Wydrych is interested in intersections between feminism and the left.

Anna Gruszczyńska
June 2004
Kraków

Ola Piela: My name is Ola Piela.

Joanna Wydrych: I am Joanna Wydrych.

O.P. And this is Ania¹ Gruszczyńska, and we have met here in order to have a conversation with Ania, or actually more than just a conversation, since it's really going to be an interview. We're interviewing her to record a certain story, Ania's story, and more specifically her story in the context of her feminism.

Anna Gruszczyńska: Well, when I'm trying to remember... because, because I've been thinking about it many times, about this question where it all came from, this interest in gender studies, in feminism, and I have an impression that the very beginning was when I was still in Wrocław.² This was between 1997 and 2000, when I was studying at the English Department, and when I was a junior. As part of a seminar requirement, we could choose many different courses, and there was a female professor there, who came from the States, from The Rhode Island University, as a Fulbright scholar, and she taught a course about American and American Indian female writers. At that point, it was like outer space for me. This was a course for which the whole reading list was made up not just of women writers but also these were women who belonged to this particular ethnic minority, and this was an absolutely new way of reading and something I had... I don't know, I had a hard time with at the beginning. I have to admit it was also a bit hard for me to adjust to it all. Later on, during the first semester of junior year, there were many other readings, and the one I remember the most I think was something, wait a minute, by Charlotte Perkins maybe? Or by Perkins Gilman? I don't know if it was ever translated into Polish, but at any rate in Polish that would be something like "The Yellow Wallpaper." It is a story of a woman who, because of her overprotective husband and because she has some sort of an ailment, is basically forced to undergo six weeks of therapy, which basically involves permanent rest. She ends up in bed, in a room with this yellow wallpaper, and lying on her back, she gets slightly crazy. After this "Yellow Wallpaper," I started reading a lot of things about female hysteria, about inscribing women in this kind of story of madness, story about their ailments, that they are not fully normal, that they're hysterical and so forth. So I decided to write my Bachelor's thesis about Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, about... The title was so... at any rate I'm not even able to remember it today, but I'm sure there was something about patriarchy in it, so it involved a lot of reading about women and madness. Anyway, at that point I really read a lot of that stuff, and as a result of these readings, I got into this stage of developing a need for some more practical action. And actually, at that point, I reached a stage when I became a bit tired of Wrocław -- of the university, the city itself, and my reality there -- so I decided to go to another college in another city. I managed to get into the Spanish Department in Kraków, and I remember going on line and finding information that Kraków had something like

¹ **Ania**: diminutive of the name Anna.

² **Wrocław**: The capital city of the lower Silesia region of Poland.

a Women's Foundation. And it wasn't even, I think, eFKa's³ site but just some information with only an e-mail or maybe a phone number somewhere. So when in October I came to Kraków to start my new college classes and adjusted a bit, and I think that was as early as in November, I went to eFKa with this idea that I would do some volunteer work for them. At that point, I really didn't have a clue about NGOs and about organizations like eFKa. And I happened to get a volunteer job taking care of the library, organizing their catalog, preparing their complete list of books, well... I don't know, it was something like a data base. And while working on this catalog, I had another opportunity, after the one at the English Department, to read a lot of these kinds of books. And I remember that basically I was reading pretty much everything I could put my hands on and rather incessantly. And for my first year in Kraków, I was mostly taking care of this library, reading a lot, attending classes, and for the first time in my life, I got kind of socially integrated into the so-called student life there. And basically then, during my freshman year there, mostly as a result of all this reading but also kind of, you know, between the lines, I managed to figure out something I had been struggling with for the last five years... and that is that I was a lesbian. At that point, I was 21, maybe 22 years old, and it was still completely theoretical then, more of a read about than an experienced kind of thing. Later on... later on, I went to the US again, and again I brought back a whole load of books, both gender and feminist books, and among them there were also lesbian books. It was in 2000... in 2001 and I... Theoretically, it probably doesn't really matter but I was in New York on September 11, and I got caught up in this whole attack, which was an incredible shock for me. In Warsaw, on September 11, as I have learned later, there was a founding meeting for Campaign against Homophobia. It was around 3:00 p.m., which means it was 9:00 a.m. in New York, and when everything was basically falling apart, so the five organizers, and at the very beginning it was just five guys, were waiting for reporters to show up, but to no avail: nobody showed up. And later on... later on, this date kind of got blurred because it seemed silly to claim it, but I still have this thing stuck in me... and then, basically, I think I was still ruminating over this experience of becoming a lesbian, both in reading and writing. For many years, I had been corresponding with a few girls, and for the most part, these contacts never went beyond the Internet. It was all about letters only, just writing, writing, a whole lot of writing. And the funniest thing is that while I was starting the Campaign against Homophobia in Kraków, I was an absolutely theoretical lesbian, a very well-read lesbian but nothing beyond that. And probably as a result of all this reading and these ruminations, I came up with this need to move it forward. I found out from one of the women I corresponded with that the Campaign against Homophobia started a home page, and they posted this appeal, an encouragement to start local actions. And at that point in Kraków, there was basically no... I know that there was a lesbian organization LABRYS. I actually wanted to get in touch with them but I still didn't have enough guts to go to any of their meetings. I think they mostly had meetings as part of some informal DKF (film club). I remember that what kept me from attending these meetings was the fact that they were held at somebody's place, you know, in private apartments, because, obviously, the girls didn't have their own space. Or they would meet in this pub, in this now nonexistent pub "Wygoda" ("Comfort"), or in people's homes, and they would watch movies. So when I got back to Poland, I e-mailed the address provided on that page. I wrote I was from Kraków and I'd like to do something there, but basically it was simply a request for information. And very soon I got back an e-mail telling me that I was the first, or perhaps second, person who volunteered, so it was

³ eFKa: Women's Foundation (Fundacja Kobiet) which is in charge of the Poland site of the Global Feminisms Project.

great and could I, please, start a branch organization in Kraków and become its coordinator. I agreed rather enthusiastically, not really fully aware what I was getting myself into. And, by the way, Robert Biedroń, the founder of this organization and its chairman, you know, the person who founded it and has since remained its chairman, didn't then have much of a clue what he got himself into, either. All of a sudden, a lot of people from all over Poland were writing to him, and starting new branch offices, but then these offices would fold down. For a very long time, the Kraków branch was the only one that generally survived for more than a year and a half. At any rate, I agreed to coordinate work at the branch office, and I remember that the first historic meeting of the Campaign was on November 10, 2001. I think that people who showed up then – and these were two guys, so we had the crowd of three at the first meeting – most likely found me through Robert Biedroń. Most likely they just wrote to him asking about the Kraków branch and what could be done here. The only thing I remember is that for a long time we were wondering what kind of on-line addresses we should have, but other than that, there wasn't much else. And those beginnings were really terribly improvised. We would meet on Saturdays at St. Wojciech (Albertus) Church at the Kraków Market Square, which was dubbed as our gathering place because it's very small, unique-looking and easy to spot. And later on, later on, we'd go to Kraków's gay pubs, and sometimes just to regular pubs, and waiters often happened to be the ones really interested in the table, where gays and lesbians were being openly discussed. As for this early period, I mostly remember great enthusiasm and terrible chaos, because we were getting very little support from the main office. The only thing that happened was a single meeting of local coordinators and the rest... the rest was up to us. Very soon it turned out that strangely enough and without any real will I joined the all-male club, because the meetings were mostly attended by gay men, which I stopped liking really soon, or rather never really liked. So we had to come up with some way of attracting girls. And very soon the idea came up that the meetings should be exclusively for women, which actually after two years of this group's existence was... and the fact that it was happening every third Tuesday of the month, so it was like a regular, holy thing..., so up to this point, we can see an interest of the male contingent... in their questions, "what are you doing at these meetings?" To which they always hear the response that they can do their own meetings if they want. Counting all the initiatives, there were perhaps as many as one thousand people who passed through. Anyway, out of the whole crowd of people who would come, stay, come back, not come back, go, send e-mails, or do something, or not do something, look for a male or female partner, or treat our organization like a singles agency, a group of girls began to emerge, who... who really wanted to do something. And perhaps, in general, the most important moment, which... which caused the fact that there were more and more girls, and they were the ones who, in fact, had the best ideas and best coped with all this stuff was the campaign "Niech nas zobaczą" ("Let Them See Us"). It was more than... more than a year ago, and it was a photograph exhibit of fifteen lesbian couples and fifteen gay couples, shown in four Polish cities, plus a billboard campaign, plus an educational campaign. So, basically, already in the Fall 2002, it was necessary to begin gathering male and female models. And basically in Warsaw, finding the fifteen gay couples went very fast, but it was a real problem to find any lesbian couples in Warsaw, where we looked for them among relatives and friends. At some point, we had this desperate idea to bring women from the Czech Republic, since Czech women could easily pretend to be Polish, so nobody would figure it out if girls from our sister organization in Prague would act as Polish lesbians. But in Kraków, this group of girls included... depending on which meeting... anywhere from ten to twenty to twenty some people, and then I gave a signal, "Let's look for...", "Let's look for models." And we found them in

Kraków, as many as five couples. And... and about one of the girls who agreed to participate in the pictures, and who is at this point one of the most active leaders... it was the second time that she attended the meeting, and when the idea popped up that we were taking these pictures and needed models, she came again and decided, "why not." And a week later, actually together with me, she was being immortalized for "Let Them See Us," with the St. Mary's Church⁴ in the background. By the way, there was a really funny story about Ilona, because... because we... I mean... the majority of reporters assumed that the pictures showed real couples, but among the thirty photos, there were maybe five to six couples. Ilona and I gave at least two interviews as a good couple, having earlier coordinated our testimonies about how long we had been together, what we thought about having children and so forth. Later on... I mean after, after "Let Them see Us," which, in general, was the first bigger initiative of the Campaign, and it took around seven months to prepare it, and it was also the first initiative to evoke such a strong... strong reaction in Kraków, because before... before "Let Them See Us," we did have some leaflet campaigns during... right before Christmas, when, on a snowy day, we were giving out leaflets with the slogan "How Gay Men and Lesbians Spend Their Christmas," to remind everybody that gays and lesbians existed and had to take questions about grandchildren for Christmas. Somehow, it didn't touch anybody, but the pictures did touch and upset people, so the whole... came into being. Well, basically, at that point, they started this rather awful TV show about... about family values, which has been continued till today, and in which the local right-wing forces are trying, at all cost, to oppose what's going on in Kraków to benefit gays and lesbians, because they would like the only action going on to be acts of violence against gays and lesbians, or some homophobic conferences like "Why Homosexual Unions Threaten the Future of the Family." As for me and as for what it means to be a feminist, or actually have an even stronger link with feminism... as a result of my activities for the gay and lesbian organization, I suddenly found out that it was an occasion to start writing quite a lot, to publish bulletins, for example. And these bulletins should feature something that makes sense, including a longer piece that would talk about the organization's work, and that even something more like a column would have a right to be there. And I started writing such general-purpose pieces. At first it was basically and exclusively for practical purposes, even though probably somewhere at the back of my mind there was an old dream, typical for many people who read a lot and dream about finally being able to read not just what others had written but also what they managed to write themselves. Somehow, somehow, for a long time, I managed to forget this dream, and while working on incidental bulletins, all of a sudden I noticed that a lot of things which were obvious to me were not at all obvious to people who were active in the gay and lesbian community. And that it was necessary to explain a lot of things, explain, for example, that lesbians existed and had rights, that there was something like a double discrimination of lesbians, that the situation of lesbians in Poland was different from the situation of gays, and that it wasn't necessarily possible to speak about how lesbians had it fine and dandy when nobody showed any intention to beat up on a couple of girls holding hands just because the weren't treated as girls, you know, who are in a relationship. All of a sudden, it turned out that with all the activities in gay and lesbian organizations, lesbians would be lost very, very fast, and very easily. And also, it quickly turned out that while going to various meetings, participating in seminars or in meetings of coordinators, I was the only girl in the room, or maybe there was one, possibly two, more girls sitting next to me. The rest, on the other hand, was made up of gays, who, well, generally would

⁴ **St. Mary's Church:** One of the most famous and recognizable churches in Poland, located in the center of Cracow's Market Place.

take the existence of women into consideration, but weren't necessarily too interested. And by the way, I often heard these comments from people coming to our organization: "You're the first lesbian I've seen." And generally there was this recurring motif that lesbians weren't there, that they were like unicorns, since they were so rare. So suddenly, it turned out that it needed to be explained, to be written about, and I remember one piece I wrote for, for a bulletin, which most likely was printed, but at any rate, it electronically went to people connected with feminist organizations and others like gay-lesbian ones. This was... wait a minute... this was... this was a piece I wrote after I got upset by a male friend, in a cafeteria, when he was trying to explain to me that discrimination basically didn't exist, and particularly discrimination of women, and neither did discrimination against gays, that everything was OK, and we were all having great fun. Later, it turned out that this friend was a closeted gay, but that's a separate story. And this piece found its way to eFKa and to Beata Kozak,⁵ who wrote to me, on behalf of *Zadra*⁶ (*The Splinter*), that she liked the piece quite a bit and she wanted to publish it. And that's how ... it was in February, two years ago... I became the author writing for *Zadra*. I mean... at that point I was still treating it as a one-time, random occurrence, as my own, you know, my own whim, and also perhaps, I don't know, perhaps I didn't quite have the courage to follow up on this. Anyway, after that piece, it turned out that more pieces were needed, and that I wanted to write and get some self-realization. When, when recently I was collecting all these pieces for some application form, I mean everything I managed to produce from the last two years, all of a sudden, it turned out that, basically, in every second piece, if not actually in the majority of them, the word "lesbian" was there, and that in a variety of ways, it was always a narrative about this, this empty place. From many different sides, it was talking about this, this hiding behind the safe mask of the Internet, for example, or, or about hiding in the gay-lesbian organizations themselves, about hiding behind this kind of theoretical permission to do it, do it, that it was OK, because, because, after all, nobody was going to beat up on two girls, which, which isn't completely true, since somebody was actually trying to beat up on me for something like that once, so it'd make sense to have some reckoning with this myth of relative... I mean the myth of relative safety. And, and it was also the same moment when I had left everything that was going on in Kraków for a while, for a longer while, because first I went on vacation and then for the Socrates scholarship,⁷ but still, even today, my mind keeps producing ideas for pieces that could have been. It was terribly important for me to participate in the Feminist Academy⁸ as one of the lecturers. I mean... first what happened was that a year before, while taking some awful final exams, I had this surge of creativity and I came up with this cycle of eight, or perhaps, nine sessions about lesbian literature. And then it turned out that there was a place, where these sessions could be carried out, because the Campaign meetings were not really the best place, since these meetings of a group of lesbians were something between a social group and a support group, rather than an appropriate place to come and talk about literary texts. But then it turned out that the Feminist

⁵ **Kozak, Beata**: member of the Women's Foundation eFKa and editor of their feminist journal, *Zadra*.

⁶ *Zadra*: Feminist publication produced by the Women's Foundation eFKa.

⁷ The **Socrates** program aims to encourage cooperation among the higher education institutions of Europe. Scholarships support students who wish to complete part of their studies in another country of the European Union, Iceland, Norway or Liechtenstein. The student's own institution must have a European University Charter granted by the European Commission.

⁸ **Feminist Academy**: a series of lectures and discussions organized by the Women's Foundation eFKa.

Academy was being launched, and Sławka⁹ asked me to participate, participate in the first semester as one of, I think, four lecturers. In the second semester, I also had, had a course, somewhat changed in comparison to what it was in the semester before, and it was incredible that we could sit together with other girls and talk about lesbian literature... and, I don't know, ... it wasn't necessary to bang my head against the concrete wall and convince people about the basics, like that women's literature actually existed. And that what women wrote was important, and that when during four years in college, a reading list didn't include a single woman writer, something was amiss, because if it had been the other way around, somebody would have certainly noticed. And this Feminist Academy was also a great... really neat refuge in comparison to what was going on at my college, which is decidedly an unfriendly place, or at least its department of Foreign Languages and Literatures is unfriendly to all kinds of research going beyond the defined standard. It means that it's better to work on the Spanish Middle Ages, because basically everything has already been said and discovered, so it's only possible to write some monographic study or maybe find something about Polish-Spanish relations, but God forbid to specialize in women's literature, let alone lesbian literature, which... And I committed this kind of crime, because I insisted on writing my Master's Thesis about a novel, which was the first lesbian novel in Argentina, published in 1981. And what I liked the most about it was that it's a novel about a woman, sitting in a room and writing about a relationship, which was over and which actually happened in the same room. I liked it particularly because it was kind of a return to the best sources, to Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, and also basically... this very, I don't know, a link to my own... and to how hard... how it's often hard to find and... to find this room of one's own for writing, and these five hundred pounds Virginia Woolf said every woman should have to be able to just write at peace. Somewhere, somewhere, somewhere in all of this, there is this serenity, but the place at one's own desk quickly gets lost. Anyway, it didn't matter that I found the book that fascinated me and the topic that I liked... because basically since October till this moment... and now there is one more year of entertainment, I mean the editing stage of working at the final draft of this thesis... Anyway, for the whole year, my mentor didn't even pronounce the work "lesbian"; if at all, she talk about "relationships between women," and she's try to persuade me to... I mean between lines... that if I really had to work on such an awful topic as women's literature, and the starting point was that women's literature didn't exist, then, then why did I have to focus on lesbians? If it had to be, be on women, then let them be normal women, heterosexual, and preferably in novels, actually very common in the Latino tradition, about women who suffer because of love, whose love is exploited, and there should best also be a husband, a true Latino macho husband. And it'd be even better if a husband were to be an important politician, a dictator, because then everything would wonderfully come together: the plot... the dictatorship plot, the Marxist plot, the plot about some hysterical woman, who'd immolate herself completely in love. This is what I should have been working on, but not on a woman trying to find her own place somewhere, somewhere completely beyond this dictatorial framework. There was no place for this at the university, but there was enough room to bring in Brain Sex.¹⁰ The one and only time my mentor tried to be nice, after I presented to her some theories of French philosophers and theories on women's writing that... so, so she decided it was scientifically proven that women wrote differently and it

⁹ **Walczewska, Sławka**: Director of the Women's Foundation eFKa in Cracow, Poland and Global Feminisms Poland Site Coordinator. Co-founder of the Green Party 2004 and author of *Ladies, Knights, and Feminists: Women's Discourse in Poland* (1999).

¹⁰ **Brain Sex: The Real Difference between Men and Women** by Anne Moir and David Jessel.

was in Brain Sex. So my existence at the university mostly boils down to refuting charges. The biggest charge was that, while writing a thesis on lesbians, I would be writing a sociological analysis of a pathological phenomenon, or something like that. That means that lesbians can't be a topic of literature but only and solely of sociology and writing about what... what is basically abnormal. Even family violence would be more normal, to the extent, of course, that it's committed by a man. And... and basically, it's also that everybody at the university just stopped somewhere, somewhere more or less in the 60's. And people who have gone any further are decidedly dangerous. That'd be all for now. I don't know.

O.P.: And how is it, do you think that any events in your childhood, simply anything that happened during your childhood, is related to this, had a later impact on your feminism?

A.G.: Well... So this is how... I mean, my, my family had mostly the kind of influence on me, and on my feminism as well, that it was mostly... and still is, in a sense, a way of... of not following the path that was, theoretically, designated for me. I mean... I have three younger sisters who are at this point 23, 15 and 11 years old... well, and at this point in my family I play a role of some sort of a... perhaps more or less harmless but a weirdo, nonetheless. I mean... for my parents, and particularly, for my father and his second wife, a feminist is a frustrated woman who, who didn't manage to find a man, and so was I, for a very long time, till, till the moment of my coming out, or actually later on as well. The message was this: well, studying is important, work is important, but a husband is most important. And... and perhaps... I was amused to tears when, a few years ago, at the time when I already absolutely felt like a feminist, a lesbian, and so forth, but, as a gift from my dad, I got the whole series of John Gray's books: Men Are from Mars, Women are from Venus, Mars and Venus in the Bedroom, and I think there is a third book in the same cycle. Anyhow, for me, this book was like from outer space, and I was reading it with this kind of dismay, as a fictionalized version of Brain Sex, you know, about men, who are sitting in a cave and should not be bothered, and women, who are coquettish and kind, and in general, the two genders have no chance to communicate. And I was basically completely out of this kind of... , but the message was more or less that I should somehow try to fit into it and simply... OK, have some education, but also be the kind of little girl, who... I don't know, who would dress nicely, would be able to take advantage of the lessons my dad's wife was trying to teach me about what kind of accessories to select, for example, how to do make-up, and so forth, and how to do my nails. I still don't know how to do these, but my younger sisters, the ones from dad's second marriage... My eleven-year-old sister has this little box with about 40 nail polishes, and when we come to visit, I mean with my sister who is 23 years old and is my full sister, their favorite way to play is to have a beauty parlor, where for more or less two hours, we have to bear tortures of having our entire faces made-up, and something like...having our hair twisted in all directions, and, of course, having little patterns done on our nails, and later on, I have to struggle to clean it all off. But this is the greatest fun for our little sisters, so... and we see each other so rarely that, that it's mostly for them. For... I mean... for my dad and his wife, all I do is usually a complete abstraction. I mean... when I told my dad that... I mean... my coming out was like this: I was terribly depressed after my relationship with a girl was over, and dad was trying to be nice and said that... "Well, perhaps you, feminists, are right, after all, and men are pigs." To which I said it was not a relationship with a man, and... which shocked him a bit, but he soon cheered up and decided that fine, it might be a girl, but there would be grandkids. And somehow he got stuck on these grandkids. I myself heard, in passing, when he was explaining to somebody

at work that his daughter, in spite of her advanced years, that is when it came to marriage plans, the husband wasn't in the picture, but she would have kids... that is there would be kids, but there would be no son-in-law, that's how we set it all up. This is perhaps, perhaps, perhaps because he can't bring himself up to say that his daughter has a girl- friend. And my mom... kind of... she always says that nothing ever reaches Jelenia Góra, the town I'm from, so she probably still feels very embarrassed as well, and the word "lesbian" is very hard to pronounce, even though, even though once in a while she asks me to say "hi" to my girl-friend, so it's at least, at least this. And she remembers her name, which is a big accomplishment in comparison to how other parents react. And really if not for my reading and if not for my decision at some point that I didn't want to live like... to follow an ideal of a woman, according to my father, who divorced my mother mostly because he didn't quite accept the relationship in which a woman would want self-realization... My mom was working on her PhD at the Economic Academy, and later, later on, because of the divorce, she gave up on her academic job and found work at an elementary school, because the point was then to work shorter hours, so that she'd be able to regularly come home earlier, and she claimed that academic work was too hard. And, on the other hand, this... this ideal of a woman, as seen by my father, is like his second wife, who is 14 years younger than him. She took it upon herself to raise two daughters born in this second marriage, she took it upon herself to manage the company, when dad is so burned out with work that he can't go on any more, and she took... Well, she took upon herself taking care of children, housework, cooking and... well and basically the whole life following some ideal from a magazine for women, which perhaps isn't that bad for someone like her. But the more I saw this, the more often my nails got painted by little sisters, and the more issues of *Claudia*¹¹ magazine I saw in that apartment the less willing I was to go for something like this. So, this is perhaps the main... I mean, my family accepts me mostly, mostly thanks to... thanks to denial. My mom may have perhaps read two pieces I have ever written and my father's family probably nothing. I mean, somehow they were not interested in this, because, because it's too ideological, I don't know... My feminism is a rather dangerous matter; it's better not to touch it. Women should be women like... Men should be real men... And, well, both genders should basically get involved into this permanent flirtation with one another, and, of course, as a result we'll get these great full families with children. But I have fallen out of this... and it's come out the way it's come out. On the other hand, the three other sisters, and particularly, particularly the two little ones, perhaps, are going straight into this... this model... I don't know, this model of joyful flirtation between two genders from distant planets. These two little sisters – or well, not really that little anymore, but because of this age difference of 11 and 14 years, I've learned to think about them as little sisters. For me, it was a bit... well, not maybe odd as much as hard, when as early as two, two or three years ago, they started coming up with stories about boys from class they should be interested in, about Wojtek and Michał and so on, and it was really difficult to get into it with them. However, however, recently, the one who's fifteen started having these slightly anarchist flashes. She's stopped eating meat and started dressing all in black, so perhaps if she runs into something that interests her, she'll... and perhaps somewhere on the way, she'll run into some idea like feminism. But I don't know that.

O.P.: Ania, you are a coordinator for the Campaign against Homophobia in Kraków, and actually you initiated it. You are the person who cares about something called the lesbian movement, which doesn't really exist in Poland, and which for 99% of the people is, in

¹¹ *Claudia*: a Polish magazine for women with fashion spreads, food recipes, love advice, etc.

general, a complete abstraction. And I'm simply wondering where you find this inspiration and strength to act. Are there, perhaps, some people around you who are giving you this strength? What is it like, in general, to create such a movement, and is it developing the way you want?

A.G.: I find... This inspiration mostly comes from... I mean I often joke about suffering from a professional English major's affliction, which means that an English major reads... reads everything in print, including serial boxes if there is nothing else. I mean... Well, of course I'm trying to select my readings in a way that's somewhat better organized than just reading food boxes. And first of all, the inspiration came from what I was reading, from these piles of books I used to bring from all over, and which I've managed to read here in eFKa, and in bookstores in various European cities, because the two places... places I always visit when I travel are modern art museums first, and then bookstores, so that I can read as much as possible. And, to wrap it up, when I was reading to prepare classes for the Feminist Academy, these elements of the puzzle somehow started coming together and... I mean, first they came into a story about what it was all like elsewhere, particularly in the States, but also what it was like in Western Europe, where it started, what it has evolved from, where it's going and what has happened on the way. I mean... all this reading and following what happened elsewhere is important because, as a matter of fact, in Poland it's not just the lesbian movement that has to be created from scratch, but in reality any movement on behalf of sexual minorities as well. And what's been happening in the Campaign against Homophobia is also about comparing to what has happened elsewhere, about comparing these models, which we know from Germany, for example, or from the United States, to what can be done here, to what is possible here. It's about the question, for example, of whether it's possible to have the revolution here like it happened elsewhere and whether, for example, it's possible here to recreate this utopia from the 70's in the United States, this place called... I mean it's hard to translate into Polish, something like "a lesbian state," "lesbian nation." At any rate, "lesbian nation" in English. And the vision of this enterprise, where the very fact that a woman is organiz... is of a homosexual orientation, will confirm... I mean, it'll lead up to the fact that it'll become a basis for some kind of common policy, common action, I don't know, thinking and being together. And this utopian vision has really stuck in my memory, even though, of course, it was never really carried out and it could never be carried out, and particularly some pieces like perhaps Adrienne Rich's Compulsory Heterosexuality. But I was also really incredibly impressed by a piece, which hardly had anything to do with lesbians, or even actually, if I think about it, was really against lesbians but was targeted toward this very narrow group, toward this famous white heterosexual middle class in the United States, and I mean The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan. Anyhow, when I first read it, it was, it was this great revelation, and particularly one thing there, I mean, this postulate to... I mean that women should take advantage of their capabilities, I don't know, their intellectual, creative, writing capabilities and so forth. And not to give up on their achievements. And this... and for a long time, this somehow carried me and inspired me very much. Apart from that... well... as far as support from other people is concerned and, in general, when it comes to creating something that could in the future be called a lesbian movement on Poland, I have an impression that support also came from reading, from Furia Pierwsza¹² (The First Fury), from pieces by Joasia Mizielińska,¹³ whom I

¹² **Furia Pierwsza**: a lesbian feminist literary journal.

¹³ **Mizielinska, Joanna**: Professor of gender studies and queer theory at the Warsaw University and the School of Social Psychology.

finally managed to meet two years ago at a conference in Warsaw. It came from knowing that there was a National Feminist Lesbian Archive, active in Warsaw for a while, that there was a relatively strong community, active on the Internet, that there were quite a few short stories, and that there was a place where it was possible to stop by at least for a while to make sure that lesbians could be found somewhere. On the other hand, to wrap it up, to wrap it up, in the Campaign it was very important that at some point, some girls started to pop up, and they had really good ideas and really wanted to be active. It was, for example, Illona, this girl with whom I was photographed for “Let Them See Us” as well as others, who started to come for the lesbian group meetings and became very involved in our projects, such as “Jestem gejem, jestem lesbijka” (“I am gay, I am lesbian”) or “Kultura dla tolerancji” (Culture for Tolerance). And this was also very, very supportive, I mean knowing that in some way I wasn’t alone in what I was doing. And also, at various meetings, I don’t know, at conferences, it would suddenly turn out that at some other universities, there were also students who, often shyly and not without huge obstacles, would try to push for the topic of lesbian literature, for example, or for the topic of lesbians in general. I mean, it’s perhaps hard for me to say that it’s not one specific person, but more like, I don’t know, like scattered little islands, more like the Web, like the Internet, where basically everything is available, but the point is to know how to get there and how to find it following these little threads. So I have an impression that in Poland, at various places, various occasions, and in various people, some little sparks light up once in a while and the point is to strengthen these sparks somehow in order to build more on this map with scattered little islands. And also, perhaps... I don’t know... another kind of self-perpetuating inspiration was that at some point I discovered I could write and that I was able to do it quite well. I mean, basically, a lot of... incredibly many things were born while I was writing and preparing to write, in this kind of... search for ideas and for some way to bring together into one piece all these scattered ideas. And still another kind was that for quite a few years, I have been spending every summer vacation, basically, somewhere outside of Poland, doing very many different things, from working, well, as a sort of maid in this... in a kind of an athletic resort in the state of Connecticut in the Sates to being an illegal baby-sitter in Madrid. And it mattered that then, in Madrid, I would divide my time between my baby-sitting duties, to make ends meet, and... I mean the daytime was with the kids, and evenings in the gay and lesbian area of Madrid to see how it all works there. Also... I mean these trips were inspiring to the extent that they gave me an opportunity to free myself from this at times subconscious baggage of fear I have in Poland to survive, or... I mean these kinds of skills a gay or lesbian acquires in the process of coming out, whether completely or partially, such as deciding whom it makes sense to tell, when to tell, and whether it’ll pay off. When at some point I need to survive financially in Kraków by teaching English, should I tell? I mean... I mean, it did happen to me that people who had somehow found out “my predilection” would drop me only, only and solely because... I don’t know, because a lesbian teacher is suspicious and should have no contact with rest of humanity, particularly, particularly when it comes to situations involving only two people, a tutor and a tutee, so to speak. Then suddenly, this fact that my orientation had been revealed would hang between us and it would be hard to overcome it. Also, deciding where and when I could even afford to pronounce the words “gay” and “lesbian,” since in a street car, for example, it wasn’t fully safe. I mean, it’d often happen to me in situations when, during our campaigns, reporters would call to find out what was going on and to get some quotes for the radio and so on, and since I live far away from the center, I spend a lot of time in street cars and buses. And I remember being slightly frightened when I was giving these phone interviews in a street car or a bus, and the

words “gay” and “lesbian” would pop up, and I didn’t feel fully comfortable with this. But, but when I traveled, it’d suddenly turn out that there were places where everything was much more normal and where there was much more space. There were places like, for example, Chueca, this main square in a gay and lesbian area of Madrid. I mean a square called Plaza Chueca, where there is this beautiful, colorful gathering of people: gays, lesbians, transsexual people, transvestites, the queerest kinds of people, people twisted in every possible way, and basically... It’s possible to just come there and simply be and... well, and well, and not to be afraid. And here, here in Poland, this fear, justified or not, and luckily sometimes unjustified, always stays somewhere at the back of my mind. So when I can at least remember that somewhere else there is a place like this and people like this, among whom things are more normal and... I don’t know, not as ridiculously hard as here, it also helps to have this kind of awareness.

J.W.: I’d like to ask you, did you have an experience in your life when... and I’m not talking about any kind of a... I don’t know, a formal situation, but something more personal, when you trusted somebody and said you were a lesbian, and this person simply rejected you?

A.G.: I mean... Yes, and I still... basically, I mean, my college class... I mean it was one of the hardest experiences. As a freshman, I’d hang out with people from my class a lot, and I’d go to all possible parties with them. It was when I was still getting ready for a more public coming out. Later on, when I was a sophomore and when I got involved in the Campaign against Homophobia, I really wanted to talk about it so much, about what I became so fascinated by and ... and about what I was working on and that it was so fantastic, and that I was discovering so many new things. Then, first of all, what happened was... it was this more or less openly expressed message: “What you’re talking about is boring and we don’t want you to bring it up at parties, for example, all this stuff about the organization, about gays and lesbians, because it’s embarrassing and because we don’t want to get involved in this stuff and think about it.” Later on, it was also... I mean it wasn’t so openly expressed but I also found out that the fact I was a lesbian inspired strong and rather negative emotions among my friends, with whom till then I had been hanging out at parties without a problem, because ... because they truly started feeling worried that could somehow become attractive to me and that I could... I don’t know... somehow follow up on that. And on the other hand, some of them, it seems... I don’t know, perhaps they felt such a deep anxiety that it perhaps made them think... I don’t know, made them reflect on... or woke up some latent impulses. Once or twice I happened to get these really weird and hardly welcome offers, following this type of scenario: It’s 3:00 a.m., and a friend, kind of wasted by then, says to me in this kind of a mumbling voice that basically at this point she could even kiss me. So this was the way my friends were trying to get used to the fact that they had this weirdo amongst them. But at some point... I don’t know, maybe it was because I didn’t let them take advantage of me in this weirdo role and, for example, didn’t want to serve as a prop for kissing, enabling them to find out if they liked women or didn’t like women after all, and what they would feel when kissed by a lesbian. And also, and also, there was another question that popped up in the background, whether it was safe to be alone with me, whether I wouldn’t get crazy, and whether I wouldn’t get too attracted to one of them. And probably, these early... these early experiments resulted in the fact that somehow I found myself outside this group. I mean, at some point, invitations simply stopped coming. And that’s all. And at this point... when... I mean, I have already been given a label of a feminist, a lesbian and an obsessive activist,

because, because... even if I had followed that ban on not talking [sic] about gay-lesbian and feminist issues, my name comes up once in a while anyway. It came up in the local section of the *Gazeta Wyborcza*¹⁴ (*Electoral Newspaper*), for example, and the occasion was the “Culture for Tolerance.” Moreover, there is also my wretched Master’s Thesis that I’m trying to write and with the topic I’m trying to push through. And there is also... that, well, that I also... well, that I dare ask these questions like: “Why for the four years of studying Spanish literature hasn’t there been a single woman writer?” So, I function as this horrible feminist out there, out there, and I know that it’s somehow talked about within the group. But it never comes back to me at all. So... well... So it goes.

O.P.: We’d like to sincerely thank you for your story.

¹⁴ *Gazeta Wyborcza*: a Polish national daily, second in sales figures, published by the media conglomerate Agora, Inc. *Gazeta Wyborcza* is considered to be one of the most influential press organs when it comes to shaping the public opinion.

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