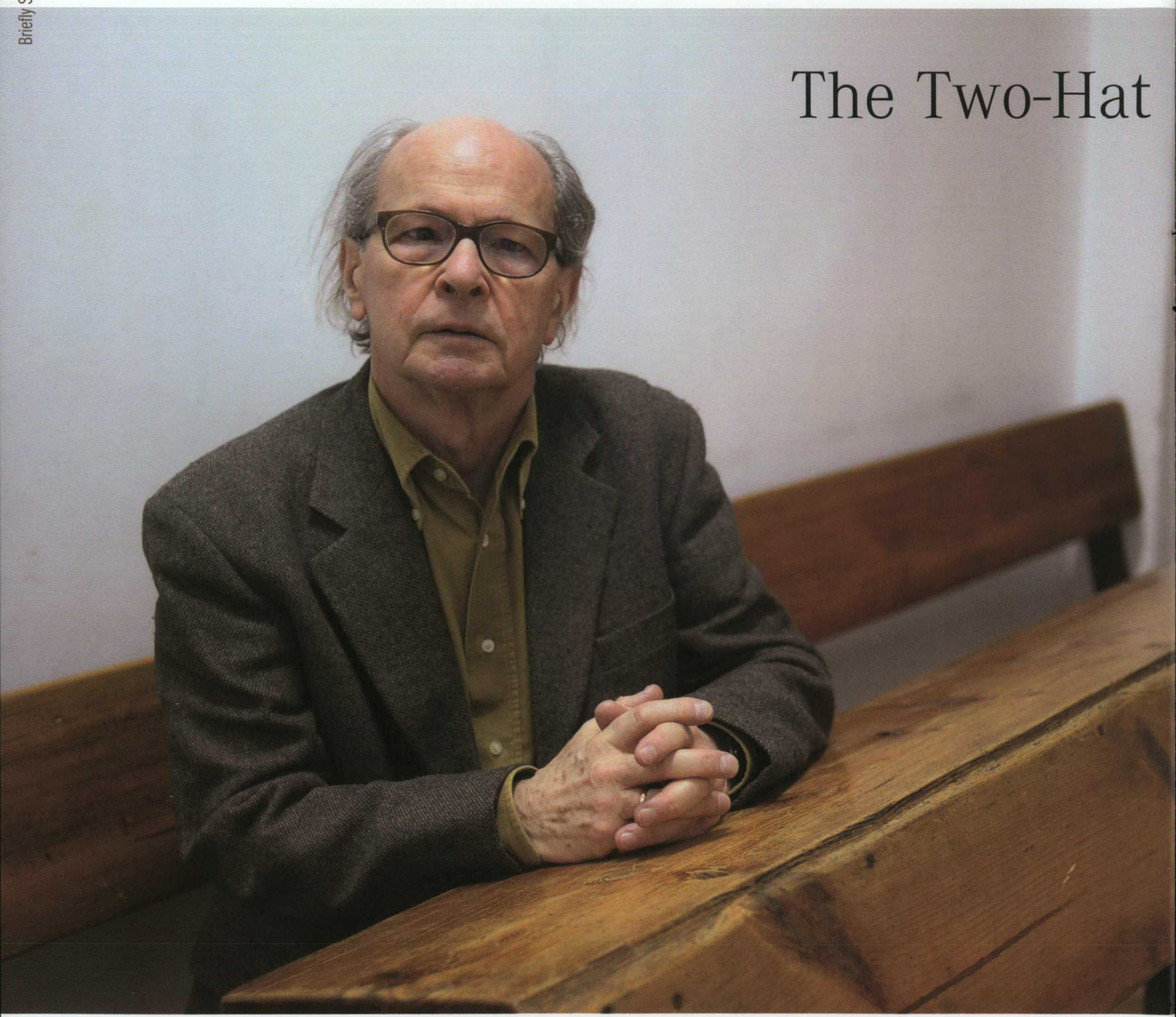
The Two-Hat



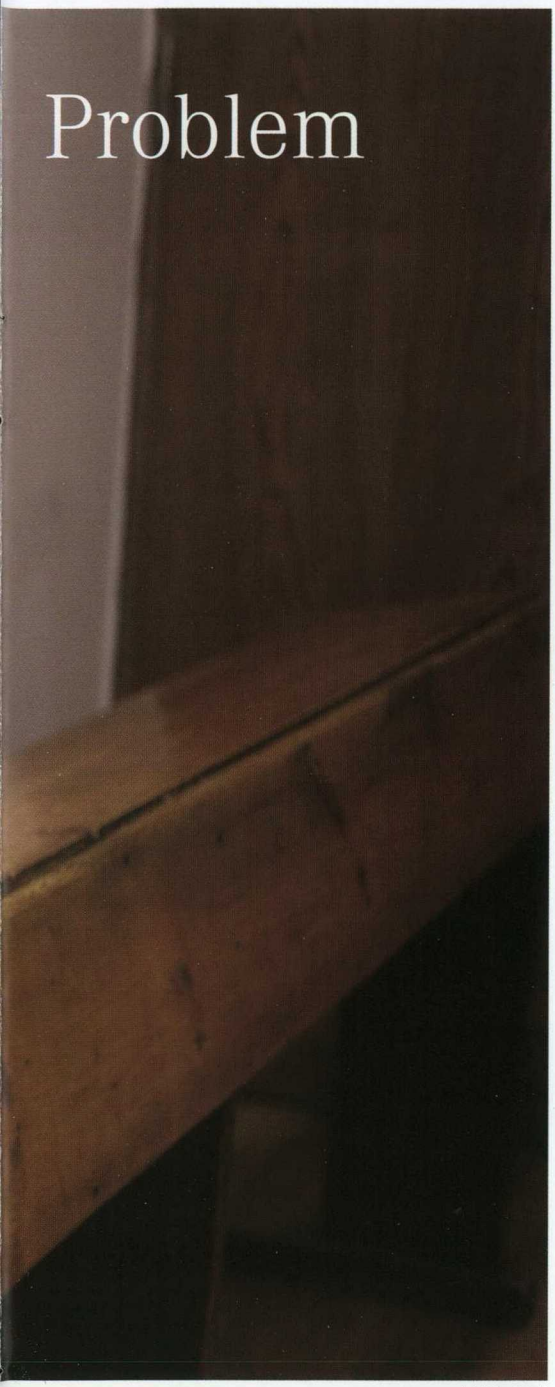
Prof. Marcin Kula is a historian, researcher, and academic teacher. He has supervised 136 master's theses and 20 doctoral dissertations

"Academia": You've been fascinated by the issue of borders for many years.

Marcin Kula: Indeed, I am most interested in all sorts of borders, also the ones I have crossed myself. Back in communist-era Poland, for example, crossing a border was invariably eventful, even if you just wanted to go the Tatras as a tourist. And what an experience it was to travel across East Germany by train, with the German services carrying out inspections every half hour on one pretext or another. For that matter, the Berlin Wall was the best example of the most stringent border in Europe, even in the whole of the world.

You have chiefly been exploring the history of migration and relations between various communities before the war and at present.

Problem



Jakub Ostałowski

I have researched the emigration of peasants to Brazil, but my fields of study also include migration to the United States in the late 19th century. Migration does not just mean crossing physical borders. Back then, emigrants were also forced to reach beyond the psychological boundaries of their "little homeland," to use the term coined by Stanisław Ossowski. After all, those people, who had not ventured farther than a nearby market town before, were suddenly forced to leave their homes and cross the border, illegally at that, from the lands under the Russian partition to the territories controlled by Prussia. While it is true that some took advantage of regulations allowing so-called small border traffic, most of them would pay off Russian border guards (who were not exactly averse to taking bribes) or simply cross the border illegally. After that, they had to take a train to Bremen or Hamburg and board a ship there, always careful not to get lost, not to lose their children or their property, not to let themselves get robbed or deceived. They ultimately reached North or South America after a stressful and horrifying voyage. For that matter, what they experienced did not end there. Arrival in the United States or Brazil was very difficult, too. All the emigrants who had crossed the Atlantic to come to the United States first landed at the southern tip of Manhattan, a place called Battery Park, or later at Ellis Island, close to the Statue of Liberty. There the immigration authorities decided who would be allowed entry into the United States and who would be denied admission, which was another major source of stress, as described by Małgorzata Szejnert in a book entitled "Wyspa klucz" ["Key Island"]. Back then, the United States feared tuberculosis and mental illnesses. All the doctors at Ellis Island were eugenicists, so they were afraid of people who looked sickly or suffered from health impairments. After all, they were facing immigrants from a different world, aliens in terms of both geography and civilization. The doctors made them take psychological tests, including intelligence tests, but they did not understand them.

Do we have to go as far back as the 19th century to spot social, cultural, and civilizational borders?

Of course not. If you look at today's Warsaw, how many gated housing estates with keypads and codes at each gate can you find? They clearly serve to accentuate social differences. Let's face it, gates may protect us against small-time hooligans but they guarantee no security against professional thieves. Favelas, the shanty towns within major cities in Brazil, are yet another example. There are no physical walls separating them from the outside world, but it is extremely difficult for strangers to cross their borders. I have visited such places on several occasions, but I was always with Brazilian friends of mine.

Personally, I have also experienced the problem of psychological borders. During one of my trips to New York, I thought to myself, "I'll go to Harlem!" I am a democrat, I am not racially prejudiced. There is no wall, Harlem just starts at a certain street. So I kept walking. At some point, I noticed that everyone else was black. Well, fine by me. But then I started to get the feeling that everyone was looking at me. I was the only white person there, after all. On top of that, I was on foot, so I might have looked unusual. I don't know if it was just me or everyone was glaring at me angrily. So I turned back, ever so slowly, not wanting to admit to myself that I was running away.

What made you feel uneasy?

I felt I had found myself in a different world, a world that was not mine, just like one of the characters from Zygmunt Nowakowski's book, a collection of stories about Kraków from the early 20th century. There is a Jewish boy in his school. One day, the boy does not come to school. Quite naturally, the character decides to go visit his house to check on him. The books gives an excellent description of the unease that comes over the character as he moves deeper into Kazimierz, the Jewish district in Kraków. He knows that he does not belong there. It finally turns out that the Jewish boy did not come to school due to a Jewish holiday.

Such problems are not limited to specific nations. They are signs of a general distance between various ethnic

different groups or communities. The Inhabitants of favelas in Rio de Janeiro are all Brazilians, after all.

You can see divisions in today's Warsaw, but you have also authored the excellent book *Autoportret rodziny X. Fragment żydowskiej Warszawy lat międzywojennych* ["Self-Portrait of Family X: Fragment of Jewish Warsaw in the Interwar Period"] based on a collection of letters that are in the possession of the only living member of the family. Why did you decide to delve into interwar Warsaw?

Family X is a very interesting case. Even though I do reveal their name in my book, the Szyks, it could have been any other family. They live on the border of two worlds. The father is a merchant, a profession that was not exclusively Jewish (despite stereotypes, in fact not all Jews were merchants). He speaks Polish but uses Hebrew when writing to his son. The mother also speaks and even writes Polish, but her language is peculiar, distorted by mistakes. Meanwhile, their three adult children can speak and write Polish just like us. One son is a doctor, a graduate from the University of Warsaw, the other is an engineer who studied at the Warsaw University of Technology. The daughter is a teacher in a modern Jewish school. So members of the Szyk family have contacts with the Christian community in different situations. But marriages are between members of the same ethnic group. As for mixed marriages in interwar Poland, I don't know the exact statistics off the top of my head, but it was a rather small share. Most of them were religious weddings, which was a source of problems. Moreover, there was the issue of their social surroundings, their acquaintances. Many people appear in those letters, but there is practically no mention of Christians. Of course, one could indicate a certain number of intellectuals who function in both groups not only in their professional capacities but also as private individuals, one symbol being the poet Julian Tuwim. But how many such people were there?

Prof. Marian Małowist, who taught many prominent historians, mentioned many years later that no one from outside the Jewish community had come to the defense of his doctoral dissertation (before the war).

Yes, that is correct. But Prof. Małowist was later brought out of the ghetto. He was kept hidden by Christians, whether practicing or not, which he often stressed in his publications.

In one of his letters, the father of the Szyk family wants his son, who has emigrated to Palestine, to buy a goat and call it *"Warszawianka"* ["Warsaw girl"]. Does this mean that those two different worlds were nonetheless closely linked?

Yes, but a gulf might emerge even between worlds that are close to each other. And this certainly had an impact on relations in the period of German occupation. Let's say it clearly, even if the Christians had taken a better stance, the tragedy of the Holocaust could not have been averted, due to quite simply technical considerations. Please note that a Jew who wanted to leave the ghetto had to attract the interest of organized rescue groups (there were not too many of them and they do deserve recognition) or simply have the right connections. Such people had to speak good Polish and could not stand out as obviously Jewish. Consequently, there is no doubt that it was impossible to save the Jews en masse, but more Jews could have been saved or at least prevented from feeling so desperately lonely. But the Christians would have had to demonstrate a certain empathy, a certain willingness to help, something they often lacked as a result of the distance between those two groups before the war.

I gave the matter a great deal of thought back when plenty of Romani from Romania appeared in Warsaw. We all regarded them as Gypsies. Back then, I would give the following example: Just imagine these Gypsies start getting murdered tomorrow. We would all think it's horrible. But how many people would be prepared to invite them into their homes and bear all the consequences, just like in Poland in the period of occupation? Aside from certain heroes, who help others for ideological reasons, people are generally inclined to support those who are close to them in some way. Quite another thing is that we must present the subject without idealization. In France, the distance between the French community and the French-Jewish community was smaller yet France does not have a clear conscience, either.

What exactly made the Poles and the Jews grow so far apart?

We could dwell on the issue endlessly. On the one hand, we should obviously go back to the Middle Ages, to the picture of Jews as Christ-killers or the notions promoted by the Catholic Church for ages. On the other hand, as we've already said, both groups remained closed to each other before the war. To use a rather unpopular word among modern researchers, the Jews who were more assimilated into the Polish community stood a better chance of surviving, as I have mentioned before. That was the reality. But many Christians were less bothered by the Jews who lived at the Jewish street of Nalewki than by the assimilated Jews in the Ziemiańska coffehouse, a popular meeting place of artists in the interwar period.

Why?

As long as there are clear-cut borders, things might be more or less OK. But atti-

Migration is about crossing not just geographic frontiers, but also borders of civilization and psychology

Jakub Ostałowski

Emigrants who crossed the Atlantic to come to the United States first landed at Ellis Island, close to the Statue of Liberty, where the immigration authorities decided who would be allowed or denied admission

tudes hostile to a given group take shape once it is elevated to a higher status and enters the community that considers itself dominant or has a majority. Such mechanisms often hold true for ethnic groups that live close to one another. And they always follow the same patterns.

We need to stress this very clearly. We think a lot about Jewish issues in Poland, we experienced a renaissance in our thinking with the publication of Tomasz Jan Gross's books. Obviously, we can't just forget that there were three million Jews in Poland before the war and most of them were killed. But, as I said, despite the appearances to the contrary, the issue of distance is nothing exceptional.

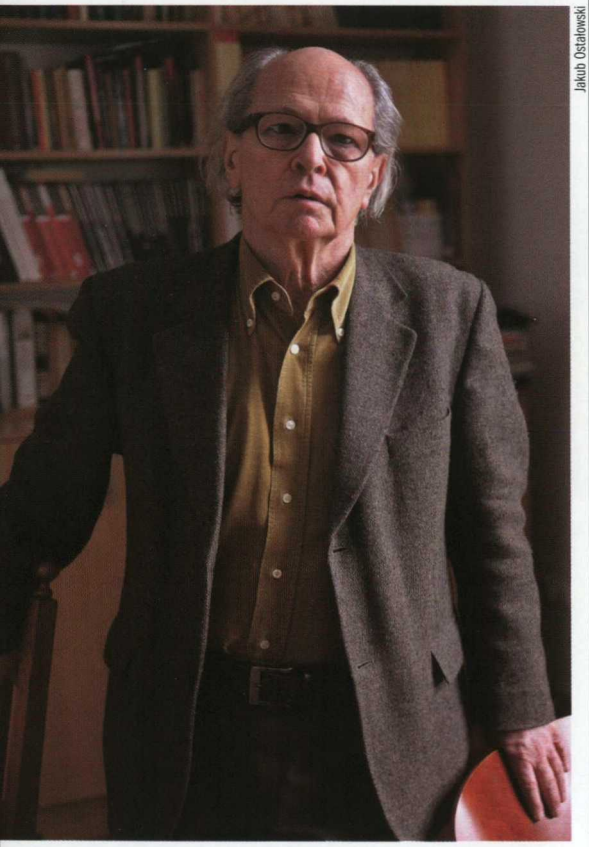
Can you see any similar relations between social groups in the contemporary world?

I believe that today's situation of Muslims in France is one example. Obviously, there are differences, for example in the length of time members of a given group have lived in a given country. Aside from that, the world is somewhat different. In interwar Poland, for example, no one alleged that Jews were terrorists. But there is a fundamental similarity: a group that is culturally and religiously different and not always in hurry to assimilate or just integrate with the dominant community starts to be seen as a threat, also in terms of culture. So the majority group is not very favorably disposed to minorities and cites such slogans as "La France une et unique" – one united and uniform France. There is an excellent interview by a French journalist who asks a French woman of Algerian origin if she would be prepared to sing La Marseillaise as her anthem. She retorts, "Yes, but on the condition that I can do it in Arabic." I am of the opinion that the French are not prepared to make such concessions to anyone. And this is what makes their country different from the United States, Brazil, Australia, and Canada. Those states experienced a clear transition from what were once called melting-pot policies to ones that allow for different ethnic groups. Linda Colley once wrote that cultural and ethnic identities are not like hats – you can put on two identities at a time but can never don two hats.

When we talk of distances, borders, aversion, and hostility between various groups or communities, the question arises of what could be done to change this situation. Do you have any advice as a historian?

I have my doubts on the issue. Should a historian give advice? To what extent is history truly needed and useful as a certain collection of experiences? In my opinion, it is useful and needed, but not in the way it is usually treated. What about patriotic education? I believe that when we teach history we should not ide-

alize our own group. It is patriotic to tell the truth about your history, even if it is unpleasant, and to present the arguments used by other people. One side can't be always right, sometimes both of them are. Sometimes, they simply have conflicting interests and it is necessary to find a compromise if the given groups are supposed to live together.



Jakub Ostałowski

It is patriotic to tell the truth about your history, even if it is unpleasant, and to present the arguments used by other people

In one of your books, you indicate that that we do not teach enough about the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a multicultural and multiethnic phenomenon.

That is correct. This is because our story of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, the relationship between Poland and Lithuania, is completely unilateral; Lithuania disappears. For example, it is completely overlooked that the Lithuanians regarded us as an older and stronger brother, one who wanted to have the upper hand. At conspiracy meetings in the 1980s, Prof. Wojcik from the PAS Institute of History presented a paper discussing the negotiations between the Polish and Lithuanian underground in the period of occupation. The Lithuanians were very much in favor of future cooperation, but any union was out of the question. The arguments were, "You have already drained us of everything that was left to drain, anyway."

So what could we do about the problem?

For example, we could conclude that certain historical symbols and heroes could be part of both countries. Who was Mickiewicz? I would suggest the following encyclopedic entry: "Born in Lithuania, never lived in Poland and never knew Warsaw or Krakow, the two capitals of Poland. He did not take part in any Polish uprising. And he started his epic poem with the words 'Lithuania, my country.'" In short, we may have to conclude that Mickievicius was also a Lithuanian hero. At some point, we will obviously find certain figures that one side sees as heroes while the other has very bad memories of them, such as Stefan (Stepan) Bandera in Ukraine. But in this case, too, I would expect historians from both countries to notice the complexities of the situation. Ukrainian historians should not conceal all the negative aspects of Bandera's activity. Polish historians, in turn, should not remain silent on the massacre in Volhynia but explain why some Ukrainians see the man as a hero, show the whole of Ukraine's difficult history, which has always been between Russia and Poland and found it very difficult to become independent. It even expected Hitler to help it create its own state. These are very difficult issues, but they cannot be any different in Central and Eastern Europe, where the ethnic frontier was a typically transient phenomenon for centuries.
To sum up, a historian should not pursue the mission of enlightening the public but should draw attention to elements that help understand the situation. We must not act according to the rule, "We have always been right and everyone else is against us."

Interview by **Anna Zawadzka**
Warsaw, 7 February 2013

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is a historian and sociologist.
He studied at the University of Warsaw and the 6th Section of École Pratique des Hautes Études w Paryżu (currently École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales).
He obtained a master's degree in history in 1965 and in sociology in 1967, followed by a doctoral degree in 1968 from the PAS Institute of History. He qualified as a professor in 1985. In 1968-1990, he worked at the PAS Institute of History. Since 1990, he has worked at the Faculty of History at the University of Warsaw. He is a member of the PAS Committee on Migration Studies.
His publications include *Polonia brazylijska* ["Polish Community in Brazil"] (1981), *Writing Home: Immigrants in Brazil and the United States 1980-1891* (edited together with Witold Kula and Nina Assorodobraj-Kula, 1986), *Historia Brazylii* ["History of Brazil"] (1987), *Między przeszłością a przyszłością: o pamięci, zapominaniu i przewidywaniu* ["Between Past and Future: Remembrance, Oblivion, and Prediction"] (2004), *Autoportret rodziny X. Fragment żydowskiej Warszawy lat międzywojennych* ["Self-Portrait of Family X: Fragment of Jewish Warsaw in Interwar Period"] (2007), which won the *Polityka* weekly's Historical Prize, *Mimo wszystko: bliżej Paryża niż Moskwy, książka o Francji, PRL i o nas, historykach* ["Paris Is Nevertheless Closer Than Moscow: A Book About France, the Polish People's Republic, and Us, Historians"] (2010), and *Najpierw trzeba się urodzić* ["First, You Have To Be Born"] (2011).