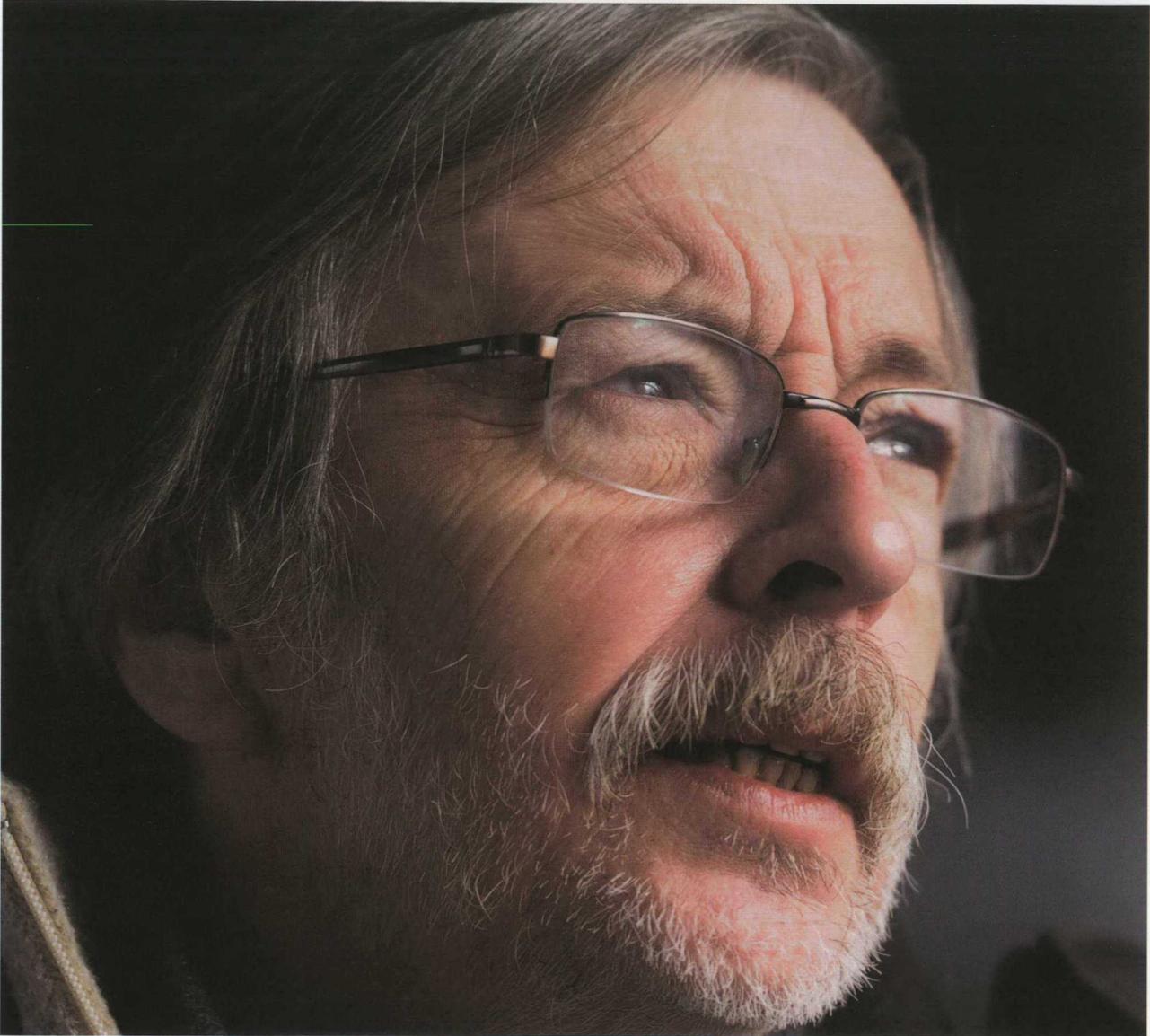


Interview with Prof. Zbigniew Mikolejko

Retelling the Past



Jakub Ostrowski

Prof. Zbigniew Mikolejko: "The dualism playing out on the public stage expresses the collision of two strategies of identity. One is contemporary, from the 20th century, and includes the need to set out clear boundaries, definitions, easily recognized brands and slogans; the other is more fluid, disordered, intangible, constantly being rewritten"

"Academia": You recently participated in a panel discussion called "In search of identity" at the Bruno Schulz Festival in Wrocław. How did it go?

Zbigniew Mikolejko: It was very good, although we strayed off topic, of course; today, the problem with identity is that it has become intangible or even suspicious - something we try to escape from. We see it as some

kind of almost entomological attempt to pin us down, immobilize us, attach us to some kind of ideological order. This is particularly important since precisely-defined ideologies of class, nationality and blood relationships resulted in so many horrific events during the 20th century. And the early days of the new millennium have also been filled with stigmatization. The issues of Hutu and Tutsi, as well as the Balkan war (described by Slobodan

Šnajder as the thirty-year war), are clear indications of this.

We talk about common identity...

One that is simply defined. I have a feeling that this tension we are also witnessing in Poland - this dualism playing out on the public stage - is an expression of a collision of two strategies of identity. One is contemporary,

from the 20th century, and includes the need to set out clear boundaries, definitions, easily recognized brands and slogans; the other is more fluid, disordered, intangible, constantly being rewritten. And we like to be with others who we feel a kinship with, don't we? We have a genuine need to belong, a sense driving us to continually define ourselves. This is difficult for many reasons, not least because we don't all belong to a single group. We form communities around languages, traditions, cultures; around gender or sexual orientation, which doesn't necessarily overlap with traditionally-defined gender. We have local associations, or identities built around emotions - from minor relationships to something I personally find very important, which remains poorly defined in Poland, and which I call emotional interest. Sociologists commonly discuss social, economic, ideological, or cultural interest, but they don't use the term 'emotional interest,' even though it is very important. I really don't understand why.

What is emotional interest, then, and why do you believe it is so important?

There has been a key historical shift, noted by Francis Fukuyama and again more recently by Peter Sloterdijk: the ongoing processes of national, cultural, and gender emancipation have largely eliminated slavery, people leading a genuinely wretched existence. So who has emerged instead? Other bearers of misery: people who feel lost or defeated. They aren't necessarily objectively crushed; they may not be enslaved or impoverished, but in their own minds they experience a sense of calamity, which has a tremendous emotional impact on them. Why? Because today's liberal world is a game, a race for social, material or professional standing, for sexual advantage, for status. Since such resources are limited, some individuals are unable to attain some or all of their goals. This brings them a sense of defeat, dissatisfaction, of being a failure.

They play the game for purely emotional reasons - they aren't hungry or destitute, but they haven't achieved "more"; seeing others succeeding where they have not can make them angry. In his book "Rage and Time," Sloterdijk writes about the capitalization of rage, the economics of rage used as an ideological or political driving force. It's very clearly visible in Poland.

But it isn't Poland's only problem, is it?

No; we also have our unresolved past. We look at Poland's fate and history in categories shaped by our nobility and intelligentsia. And yet most of us are descendants of peasants, recent serfs - the system was only abolished in the Kingdom of Poland in 1864, and endured in the Prussian partition until the 1880s. I come from a family of minor Polish-Lithuanian gentry; my ancestors worked their own land. Its degradation in the Austrian partition has been described by Adam Łysakowski in his memoirs. It is also social degradation: increasingly turning away from our gentry roots and becoming more like the peasant class, eventually turning round after 1945 towards cultural and social advancement to the working classes or intelligentsia. It is a very agrarian lineage, archaic, tied to land and poverty, to the eternal, recurring natural rhythm, to traditional customs, the annual cycle, the natural circle of life, all taking place outside the cities where, in contrast, building a sense of community involved merchants' negotiations, accumulating capital,

"...we would all like our identities to be beautiful and pure. But only some are taking the trouble to come clean"

or university debates. Additionally, during the Communist era urbanization didn't really happen beyond a physical shift of the population from the countryside to cities. It's only since the changes in 1989 that we have really started to feel the effects. My favorite maxim is by Aristotle: "A city is created by different kinds of people; if they weren't different, it wouldn't be a city." I would like this concept of differences as the foundation of communities to become embedded in the public consciousness.

On 11 November, Poland's Independence day, I watched a march in Warsaw...

...of ritualized militia-style gangs.

I saw a lot of young people. They looked quite ordinary, but they chanted horrific things, carried flags with nationalistic symbols.

I'll tell you an anecdote first. Someone I know arranged to meet his friend in the center of Warsaw on 11 November - a well-known professor with very leftwing views. He comes across a mob of young skinheads carrying banners proclaiming things like "Jews are destroying Poland." Suddenly, the most Israeli-looking man you've seen walks straight through the crowd, and no one bats an eyelid. This shows yet again that these people simply don't know their subject matter. Before the war, the professor would have been attacked - nationalist organizations knew their "enemies." The various factions were aware of one another, kept up-to-date on their reading, and so on. Similar organizations today exist outside a certain intellectual reality and in isolation of many facts. Of course it often turns out for the best - as was the case with my friend. The people are a part of a second or third generation of recent, urban elites. However, just because they live in cities doesn't provide them a place gained by a social contract, education and work; instead they focus on the simple ideology of "us" versus "them." This is a new way of interpreting old, xenophobic traditions. Perhaps that's why it

takes root so easily. A farmer whose life didn't extend much beyond a five mile radius was a part of a world of serfdom. He had a sense that those who came from the outside were strange, alien - whether they were Jews, the nobility, and so on. It's worth examining the history of the Galician slaughter, which is of key importance. I hope Michał Montowski's book on the subject will be published soon - it should create a revolution in our thinking of the history of the peasant class in Poland.

I recently came across an online discussion about morality among young people. They were asking a fundamental question: "Are we descendants of murderers? People who slaughtered others with saws, killed in the most brutal ways? Because no one taught them not to..?"

Some took a long time to kill, too...

The phrase went, "Take your time with this one, he's a good posh lad." The agenda that

Interview with Prof. Zbigniew Mikolejko

Montowski is uncovering evidence of was eugenic in nature. The aim was to kill all noble men and boys over 12 years old, but the women weren't to be raped. Why? The noble widows and daughters were to be taken as wives, to create a new race. Also, for three bloody days of indulgence, the Emperor of Austria suspended the Ten Commandments. This indicates that the Catholic faith at the time was very superficial, not really willingly accepted but rather imposed on an animalistic structure of violence and terrible poverty. Stanisław Szczepanowski's book "Destitution in Galicia in Numbers," published during the 1880s, shows that quality of life in Galicia was the lowest in the world - worse even than India.

We live on blood-stained soil.

Yes, and with a murky past, marked by an internal conflict which has not been resolved by being left unnamed, thus culminating in events as witnessed by Prof. Leszek Kolakowski in 1939. In a village in rural Poland, he overheard peasants at an inn saying, "Finally we'll see an end to this Polishness."

Not unlike the January Uprising, then.

It is the same order of things - unnamed, simply shrouded in the myth of widespread participation of peasants in the struggle for independence. Actually, this applies to Poles in general. The January Uprising is popularly believed to have had throngs of participants - in reality it was mainly groups of schoolboys, some minor nobility, a handful of peasants. No more than twenty or thirty thousand people. At the same time, around 400,000 people were willingly working for Tsarist Russia's army or administration. But you don't even need to look that far back: what about people from villages near Auschwitz and Treblinka scouring nearby fields in search of Jewish gold? And, more recently, the vulture-like plundering of Warsaw's Kabaty Forest after a fatal aircraft crash in 1987. It is the same sort of archaic pillaging. Fortunately its story is beginning to be revealed at last. In Jan Tomasz Gross "Neighbours," in Agnieszka Arnold's earlier film of the same name, in Barbara Engelking's "Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień..." ["What a beautiful sunny day..."], in Jan Grabowski's "Judenjagd." It's also in the short anthology of denunciations



An Independence Day march on 11 November in Warsaw turns into a demonstration by rightwing groups

filed by informants called "Szanowny panie gistapo" ["Dear Gestapo occifer"] about Poles who collaborated. It's not as though urban rabble or even intelligentsia and bourgeoisie circles don't have skeletons in the closet. They do, but they are usually hidden in the countryside, especially during the second and third wave of the slaughters, when Poles murdered up to three hundred thousand Jews who were in hiding. This sort of scale must not be ignored.

A dreadful chapter in Poland's history.

Of course there are plenty of great chapters, too. But for the good to shine through, we should finally exorcise the demons of our past, even try to write our own history with a fresh eye. Of course we are not alone - there are nations with an even more heavily mythologized history. For example, Lithuania doesn't even have a history as such, just myth filled with terrible lies. Germany and Great Britain have gone to great efforts to sanitize their histories. It's impossible to do this fully, even though we would all like our identities to be beautiful and pure. But only some are taking the trouble to come clean; others continue to apply more dirt.

We've talked about common identity... What has shaped your own?

Most of all it has been my resistance against psychological and physical violence, after I had been abused as a child. My mother poured onto me all her love and hatred for my father, who had left her. They divorced when I was just two and a half; when I was twelve, she started a new family, and I was brought up by my grandparents. I talk about this in my book

"Przewodnik dla błądzących" ["A guide for the lost"], but it is my personal experience, and it is rather dramatic.

My identity was also shaped by growing up in the Warmia region - a melting pot of many cultures and histories. There were Germans, Warmians speaking German, Warmians speaking Polish, people from the far eastern and southern reaches of Poland and Lithuania, people with no fixed identity speaking with a vague eastern accent - not quite Belarusian, not quite Ukrainian, not quite Polish. People who back home described themselves as "locals," but in Warmia they were "strangers." There were Tatars, Protestants, followers of the Orthodox Church, Catholics; people from central Poland were seen as a worse sort, since they brought with them anti-Semitism. The local gossip Mikula used to claim that before the war, she used to be chased by Jews who forced her into a barrel to draw blood for making matzos.

How old were you when you heard that?

Nine or ten. I ran home to tell my mother, and she gave me a huge telling off for telling tales. Back in 1939, she used to play with children of her Jewish and Belarusian neighbors, and even learned some Yiddish. When I told her I once helped some young Germans who were being attacked by skinheads in Warsaw, she burst out in tears: "How could you defend Germans when they murdered my Jewish friends and attacked your grandfather?" I didn't know that, as it happens. He was caught hauling some food over a fence for a group of Jews huddled in a field. Fortunately his captors were just small-town gendarmes rather than Gestapo proper, but he was beaten so badly he had blood pouring from



his ears. He was bought back for a handful of gold Tsarist five-ruble coins kept for a rainy day. And it certainly was a rainy day.

When I was growing up, I also experienced three major forces: Stalinist Communism (even though Stalin was no more, the system persisted in people's minds), conservative pre-partition Catholicism with all its old customs and rigid hierarchy, and Phariseism. Such was life in a small provincial town; Józef Czechowicz and I have described it as a "night-province." In young people just starting their lives it stirred mutiny and a need for independence. They usually achieved this in small steps, for minor issues, during lectures and conversation. Reading made me want to gain more knowledge and freedom. I wanted to get into a decent university. I was considering the Jagiellonian, but I ended up going to Warsaw.

When was that?

1969, in the wake of the March 1968 political crisis. The university was paralyzed, but tradition lived on. In an case, it was a much better university then than it is now. There were masters we read instead of hearing, since the majority had been thrown out; there were young assistants who rapidly turned into masters. For example, the Polish Studies faculty was outstanding: we read the latest books on anthropology, philosophy, and history of literature. It was there that I got hold of my first ever copy of the Paris-based journal "Kultura."

We held late-night discussions, because we had so much work during the day. Lectures were scattered across the city, and the only day we had off was Sunday. The university was poor and overcrowded, chronically underfunded.

The student residences were riddled with bed bugs, and we frequently went hungry. My contact with home became less frequent, which meant I was rapidly running out of money. I read new books in bookshops, one chapter at a time. I took part-time jobs in construction and chopping down trees. After I graduated, I worked as a teacher, librarian, museum curator; I was unemployed for a year, supporting myself by writing articles for cultural and women's magazines.

Let's get back to reading the myths of Poland's history. What can we do?

Here we are touching on our greatest problem: education. We, the older generation, have abolished certain initiation steps previously required to attain maturity, or at most we are maintaining an illusion that they still exist. National military service has lost its meaning. It's still awful to endure, but it used to be an important rite of passage for young men (Adam Zagajewski wrote that one's military service booklet "will never forget you if you are a real man"). The matura exams marking the end of high school have lost all their meaning. Everything is supposed to be easy and fun; it's just a case of formalizing the process of educational advancement. All cultures once held various initiation ceremonies, marking young people's transition from one age group to another, from one category to the next. We've done away with them; our permissive society regards them as a useless, antiquated system of hierarchy and division. As a result, we are seeing feral initiations, outside the society's control.

It's now possible to go to university having never read a text longer than three pages; this happens in about 30-40% of cases. And so there are scores of people who are intellectually barren, their minds a fallow ground on which anything can take root. Deep down, this is accompanied by fear, since it means a backwardness; an inability to create a genuine middle class. Status symbols have also been scattered far and wide. An apparently high material status and education formalized in diplomas can be rendered meaningless by a lack of genuine learning, attachment to a culture, or certain ways of perceiving the world. It's a sort of schizophrenia we really must overcome.

Interview by Anna Zawadzka

Warsaw, 18 November 2012

Prof. Zbigniew Mikolejko (1951): philosopher and historian of religion, head of the Department of Religious Studies, and associate professor at the PAS Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. He has published the following: *Katolicka filozofia kultury w Polsce w epoce modernizmu* ["Catholic philosophy of culture in Poland during Modernism"] (1987), *Elementy filozofii* ["Elements of philosophy"] (seven issues, 1998-2008), *Mity tradycjonalizmu integralnego* ["Myths of integral traditionalism"] (1998), *Emaus oraz inne spojrzenia do wnętrza Pisma* ["Emmaus and other insights into the Holy Book"] (1998), *Żywoty świętych poprawionych* ["Hagiographies of bettered saints"] (2001, 2004, 2011), *Śmierć i tekst. Sytuacja ostateczna w perspektywie słowa* ["Death and text: The final situation in the perspective of the word"] (2001), and *W świecie wszechmogącym. O przemoc, śmierci i Bogu* ["In an almighty world: On violence, death and God"] (2009). He is also the co-author of the books *Katolicka filozofia kultury w Polsce* ["Catholic philosophy of culture in Poland"] (1987), *Apokalipsy i kultura* ["Apocalypses and culture"] (1997), *Ucieleśnienia. Ciało w zwierciadle współczesnej humanistyki* ["Embodiments: The body in the mirror of contemporary humanism"] (2007), *Oblicza religii i religijności* ["Faces of religion and faith"] (2008), and *Institucje: konflikty i dysfunkcje* ["Institutions: conflicts and dysfunction"] (2012). Soon to be published: *We władzy wisielca. Z dziejów wyobraźni Zachodu* ["Ruled by the hangman: A history of the West's imagination"] and *Przewodnik dla błądzących. Jak błądzić skutecznie* ["A guide for the lost: How to err well"] (a volume of conversations with Dorota Kowalska).