

An offspring from

POLIN

STUDIES IN POLISH JEWRY

VOLUME EIGHTEEN

Jewish Women in Eastern Europe

Edited by

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and

ANTONY POLONSKY

Published for

The Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies

and

The American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies

Oxford · Portland, Oregon

The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization

2005

Interview with Professor Jadwiga Maurer

KATARZYNA ZECHENTER

JADWIGA MAURER'S writing is exceptional. She began to write late in life and published three volumes of short stories: *Liga ocalałych* ('The League of the Saved', 1970), *Podróż na wybrzeże Dalmacji* ('A Voyage to the Coast of Dalmatia', 1982), and *Sobowtóry* ('The Doubles', 2002). These short stories, written in the first person, appear autobiographical; yet they are works of fiction centred on post-Holocaust life. The main character, a girl whom the reader might view as Maurer's alter ego, survives the war and moves with her mother to Munich, always remaining an outsider. She never truly participates in life; instead she observes it and ponders the absurdity of life in general. Yet she is unable to free herself from the fascination aroused by others' hunger for life, their desire for success, and most of all their need to find some purpose in the world after the Holocaust.

Maurer was born in Kielce, Poland, in 1932, into an educated, Polonized, non-religious Jewish family. Her mother studied at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and later taught Polish literature; her father taught Polish, Hebrew, and geography as principal of a high school in Kielce. The whole family survived the war mainly in Kazimierz, the Jewish part of Kraków, under 'Aryan papers' (false papers declaring the person to be Christian) with help from Żegota (the Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland), an agency run by the Polish Home Army. Maurer devotes a few short stories to the years in Kazimierz, years that she calls 'somewhat happy'. In 1944 Żegota tried to evacuate her family from Poland to Hungary, but they never reached their destination because of further German occupation. Instead, they stayed in Prešov, a small town in Slovakia, where Jadwiga was hidden by nuns in a Franciscan school. Her knowledge of and interest in Catholicism date from that time. After the war her family briefly returned to Poland but, fearing the spread of communism, decided to leave for Munich, as many other Polish Jews did at that time. Maurer studied Polish literature and received her doctorate in Slavonic studies. She eventually went to America, where she taught Polish literature at Berkeley, Indiana, and eventually at the University of Kansas.

Maurer does not write about the Holocaust per se, though the majority of her short stories are set in wartime Kraków and in post-war Munich. In her work, the

Holocaust is always present as an event that marked all Jews as the eternal 'Others'—and the surviving Jews as the most lonely of Others because they did not share the fate of the dead. Maurer's protagonist is alive, but her life is punctuated by constant questions about post-war existence and existence in general. Surprisingly she never asks 'why', as if this question and its answer(s) never make any sense. Such an existence on the fringes of reality, devoid of ambition, passion, or even humble desire, marks the protagonist as an unusual witness to the heritage of survival. Maurer's protagonist does not see an overriding purpose in life, yet the writer is determined to chronicle the remnants of Polish Jews who lived in Munich after the war. Maurer has no desire to discuss the Jewish fate in general, but only to depict the people she saw, knew, befriended, and later immortalized in her prose, because they have no other chroniclers.

The following interview with Jadwiga Maurer took place on 26 May 1999 at the University of Kansas. At the time I was an assistant professor of Polish literature and Jadwiga Maurer was about to retire. My goal was to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War on 1 September 1939 by interviewing nine Poles who survived the war and eventually moved to Lawrence, Kansas. Each story I recorded was remarkable. Among others, I interviewed a hero of the 1944 Warsaw uprising, a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1943, a survivor of Soviet occupation, and the daughter of the Polish ambassador to Estonia in 1939. Jadwiga Maurer was one of those people who survived thanks to their intelligence, wit, bravery and, most importantly, a miracle—as she says in her short story 'There Was an Old Man and a Woman'.

The interview was conducted in Polish and later translated into English.

KATARZYNA ZECHENTER. *In your short stories, the narrator is a girl or a young woman who survived the Second World War and whom the reader almost automatically identifies with the author, that is with you. Your stories, however, do not form an autobiography. Although they do contain many autobiographical elements, they are a unique transformation of autobiographical material. How do you conduct this transformation?*

JADWIGA MAURER. What I write is not autobiography and I am glad that you understand this. Many of my readers do not and therefore ask me for further details. In my short stories, I place some characters, who are fictitious, in 'real' and 'true' situations, that is in situations that appear real to me. Sometimes the exact opposite is true. Some unreal situations happen to people who in my understanding are 'real', as I remember them. I believe that 'true' autobiography does not exist, because everything we remember is filtered through our own minds, through our unique feelings and memory. And it often happens that two or three people will remember things differently. I want my readers to understand that I don't write autobiography. Sometimes, I am confounded when someone asks whether something 'really' happened; it did and it did not. It is a literary truth, not the 'true' truth.

K.Z. *Your stories tell about the end of the world of Polish Jews, about their lives after the war. The narrator pretends that one can live normally after the war, which of course is not really possible. To her identity as a Jew—born in pre-war Poland, raised on Polish literature, having survived the war on Aryan papers, and having spent time in a convent school in Slovakia—she adds other identities. For instance, she adds a Catholic identity and even a German one as a literature student in Munich after the war. Finally, she adds an American identity. How do you unite these sometimes even contradictory identities?*

J.M. First of all, I would like to go back to the word 'pretend'. I do not believe that my narrator 'pretends' in the way we commonly understand this word. She is who she is; she tries to live the way she believes she ought to live. Her identity does change a little, but identity changes in everyone. Our identity when we are young is different from our identity in middle age. A child identifies herself differently than she does as an adult. It is easy to explain the Catholic identity of my narrator. Catholicism was the first religion for both the narrator and the author, because she came from a family which did not practise any religion—as was the case for the vast majority of children who survived under Aryan papers. The Catholic religion is very attractive. The narrator talks for instance about month of May evening devotions to the Blessed Virgin and about the liturgy, which is very attractive, especially to a child. Later, she resides in the very heart of the Church: a Catholic school. Despite the fact that she is still a child, she begins to orient herself pretty well in various dogmas and even in the history of the Church. This is not a difficult identification for someone who had not known any other religion.

People often used the term 'to pretend on Aryan papers'. I have the impression—here I need to add that the author agrees with the narrator—that the word 'pretend' can only be used in the context of an adult. But, for a child, even for a young adult, such identification resulted from the fact that these young Jewish people wanted to be Poles, the same as other Poles. Yet they knew early in pre-war Poland that they were not completely Polish.

Here I would like to add something about the experiences of the author herself. My mother told me that she remembered a warm May afternoon day when she was sitting on the stairs of the house where she lived and was born. People were going to a Blessed Virgin evening devotion. She longed to go, too, because everybody else was going. This was impossible, since she came from a strictly hasidic home. This rush to identification with Poles was common, not only among assimilated Jews or Jewish intelligentsia. Besides, pre-war Poland was antisemitic. Even the children knew that there were borders that could not be crossed. For example, Jewish children were not allowed to join Scout groups. Thus their longing for identification with Catholicism is not difficult to understand.

K.Z. *What about later identifications? Your narrator has girlfriends who are German. Is there a real friendship between them?*

J.M. On some level, this is a true friendship. The narrator always remembers the past, because it is impossible completely to erase it from her memory. If she had stayed in Germany, she would have had problems marrying a German, for example. Starting a family in Germany would have created an even greater problem. However, identification with German culture, literature, or with the new state was not difficult for her. Her friends from the Jewish Student Organization simply waited for emigration. They were mostly orphans and experienced everything differently. As refugees, they neither needed support from the German culture, nor were they looking for it. They wanted to finish their studies and leave as soon as possible; this is why they chose such practical professions. My narrator, on the other hand, searches for German support.

K.Z. *Did leaving Germany mean forgetting the past?*

J.M. I don't know. It seems to me that they wanted to begin a new life in a naive and idealistic manner. They thought that once they left Germany and began to work and make money, a completely new life would begin. As I write in *Liga ocalałych*, they did not think that they needed a new language, a new start, new people. For them, the world ended and began with leaving Germany.

K.Z. *In your short story 'A Place that did not Exist on a Map', the narrator says that she would like to be a 'chronicler of places that did not exist on a map and events that history did not note'. What did you mean in writing these words?*

J.M. Actually, this is a concrete question and the answer is concrete as well. Namely, not only Jews, but also Ukrainians or Poles lived in post-war countries, especially in Germany in the DP [displaced persons] camps and in small towns where they received meagre stipends. German authorities—also American authorities and most probably British and French as well, although I am not sure—wanted to get rid of these thousands of people who terrified them simply by their presence. It was as if these camps were extraterritorial. They were places that were not noted anywhere. Today, when I mention 'DP', everybody asks, what is that? Nobody remembers any more; there is a gap in people's memory. Yes, these people and their fate in post-war Germany are not remembered. These places literally did not exist on maps, but some literature does exist about them. The writer Tadeusz Nowakowski, a friend of my parents, wrote a novel called *The Camp of All Saints* about the DP camps, in which he presented this hopeless world. These places were not prisons, but a world 'outside'. Though people later somehow managed, they existed outside almost everything.

K.Z. *Would you agree that you write to 'rescue from forgetting' or rather that your writings create another reality?*

J.M. Yes, you could say that. People are often surprised that I wrote about the post-war world, about the Holocaust, about German occupation—that these are my subjects. They know that in so-called 'real life' they talk to me about fashion or which hairdresser is the best in town. I do think that all writers, if their work has artistic merit, return to the central episodes in their lives. The war, the Holocaust, and the German occupation are the central episodes not only in my life, but also in the life of our century. Writers always come back to pivotal events, like Hemingway, who kept returning to the war in Spain until his death, or like Faulkner, who kept going back to his South even though his South did not really exist at the end of his life. I find this perfectly normal. 'Not normal', if I can put it this way, is the amazing interest in the Holocaust in the past ten years.

K.Z. *Why do you consider this interest 'not normal'?*

J.M. Because I thought that before the fall of communism, the Holocaust was almost forgotten, swept under the carpet. Suddenly, it turned out that many people born after the war, who could not have remembered, have a great—and I might add private—consciousness and awareness of what happened. I do not mean 'not normal' as craziness, but rather 'not normal' because, generally, first we remember and then we forget. And here is a total reversal. I also believe that it has something to do with the fall of communism, because under communism it was impossible to talk about it. Today people remember and want to talk about it.

K.Z. *You write mostly about the war. Over sixty years have passed since September 1939. How have these years influenced your understanding of what happened and consequently your writing?*

J.M. This is a difficult question because my belief is probably similar to yours: we will never fully understand what happened. And when we attempt to analyse it, even such events as Hitler's accession to power remain a mystery. Our understanding of what happened is similar to that right after the war: it remains a shock, a tragedy. One can, of course, use the clichés, but we will never understand exactly what happened. It seems to me that those who survived and those who read about what happened react in a somewhat similar manner: shock. The concept of Holocaust is outside our knowledge of Holocaust. Museums that are now beginning to display Holocaust writings, Holocaust memoirs, somehow exist outside the Holocaust itself. This is an incredibly difficult concept that cannot be understood.

K.Z. *Do you think that current interest in Holocaust might be somewhat influenced by globalization—by the shrinking of the world which causes people to become*

interested in what is local? Could the interest in the Holocaust be such a phenomenon?

J.M. Perhaps. Globalization exists and surely helps in dissemination of our knowledge of the Holocaust. On the other hand, it is very misleading when people assume that life is similar everywhere in the world—which of course is not correct. What we know about the Holocaust and about the German occupation belongs to ethnic studies. The writer Hanna Krall wrote that the fact that a story is improbable does not mean that the story is not true. Her statement absolutely reflects the human fate, in particular, because we can talk about survival only in the context of a miracle. And, if someone is trying to search for the ‘true’ truth that contains logic, then such a search cannot be successful. What if we realize that all Jews who survived the Holocaust and all Poles who survived the German occupation or German camps survived only by a miracle, not by any logic? Then maybe we are beginning to understand a little of what happened.

K.Z. *We were talking about the war that robbed you of your first home, which for every child is the ‘the home’. What does the word ‘home’ mean to you?*

J.M. For me and also my narrator, this first home, although very happy, was not ideal because of antisemitism in pre-war Poland. Home means family. Home as a place to live should be rather secondary. However, many people are strongly attached to the landscape of their childhood. I have to admit that, although it might sound offensive to Holocaust specialists, I am attached to Kraków’s Kazimierz section where I lived under Aryan papers during the war. It would seem that it should not have been a happy childhood. But I do have many fond memories, despite the constant threat at the time. I have many memories of running through Wolnica Square, playing with children. The human mind and the human memory are such that we can simultaneously exist on various levels.

K.Z. *So, you do not have a place, an apartment, a home that you miss?*

J.M. No, I don’t, because I moved so many times and I don’t have the kind of place that my parents did. I never stayed in any place long enough to be attached to the landscape. I was most attached to Berkeley, California, where I lived for seven years and where my daughter was born.

K.Z. *Do you feel homeless?*

J.M. I felt most homeless in Munich after the war. If something can be deduced from my stories in *Liga ocalałych*, it is that life is so temporary, so provisional—not because life had to be this way, but because people wanted to leave as soon as possible. Some were even doing very well—they had friends—and yet they thought only of leaving.

K.Z. *How were you able to live among Germans after the war? You were surrounded by them; you had to speak German.*

J.M. My parents knew German very well, because they came from Galicia and they went to Polish schools where German was taught. Yet I had not heard even one German word before coming to Munich at the age of 14. Life in Munich existed on various levels. I always had a subconscious feeling that life there was not normal, that it was not for me. On the other hand, life in a DP camp, in itself, was not normal, because it was temporary and all acquaintances were circumstantial.

K.Z. *Home means identity. Who are you? You went through hell, survived, left the country. Now you have a family, you live in the United States.*

J.M. There is not one definition that would describe me, because we are also defined by others. I consider myself Polish. With Jews, I have a common past and consciousness of the history of Polish Jews. Because I am not religious and I do not practise Judaism, I don't really have the common religious bond with other Jews. Despite everything we say about secular Jews, still, it is the religion which is bonding. I live in the United States, I work here, my husband is an American. My children were born here, though they probably have a consciousness of their European descent.

K.Z. *You said that you feel Polish.*

J.M. Yes, I consider myself Polish.

K.Z. *Are you a Polish Jew?*

J.M. That depends on who calls me that. If some Pole were to say that you are Polish and I am a Polish Jew, I would disagree. If, however, someone would say that you are a *krakowianka* (a native of Kraków) and I am a Polish Jew, then maybe I would agree. This would depend on my interlocutor and on what such description is supposed to serve.

K.Z. *How do you understand the expression 'Jewishness'?*

J.M. Around ten years ago in Jerusalem, I attended a conference about the culture of Polish Jews. They adopted a terminology that I really liked. They talked about Jews and Poles. They did not use euphemisms such as 'of Jewish extraction'. For me, the Jewishness of Polish Jews (that is, Jews who have origins similar to mine) means the consciousness of a common fate, a common past; a realization that Polish Jews no longer exist, that we are the last Polish Jews; and the consciousness of common history in Poland. I suspect that in other countries such identification is connected with religion. There exists some community among Jews but, like all communities, it is difficult to describe, since it is somewhat mythical.

- K.Z. *There are initiatives in Poland to revive a Polish Jewish community. In Warsaw, for example, there is a Jewish primary school, a Jewish kindergarten, and a synagogue. Similar attempts are taking place in Kraków. Do you think that these initiatives can succeed?*
- J.M. Perhaps, but this will not be the Polish Jews who were there earlier. Some time ago Jews constituted some sort of community, but I don't believe that this is possible now. Jewish towns do not exist; Jewish communities do not exist; Jewish intellectual currents do not exist. In pre-war Poland, in the generation of my parents, many Jews were completely assimilated and some took the final step of becoming Christians. This group must have been large. Many Jews who were scholars and professors, for whom scholarly careers were difficult in pre-war Poland, were baptized along with their families. These groups of people embraced total assimilation. Today, everything is different. I read in *Midrasz* [a Polish Jewish journal] that anyone who does not believe in any other religion and who is of Jewish origin can belong to the Jewish community, forgoing the rule that a Jew is someone whose mother is Jewish. These requirements are very liberal and perhaps will attract some people of Jewish origin. In Poland there are many people of Jewish extraction who do not admit to it or are even unaware of it.
- K.Z. *The next question cannot be overlooked in the context of Polish-Jewish relationships. Are Poles antisemitic or are some Poles antisemitic?*
- J.M. It is a mystery for me and for many people of my generation how antisemitism can still exist in Poland, though Polish Jews no longer exist. This is a strange form of antisemitism—almost traditional—that is passed from generation to generation. I read in *Kultura* [a Paris journal] that in some high schools a new word has appeared: *żydzić* or 'to Jew', the same way as *cyganić* or 'to lie' comes from the word *Cygan*, Gypsy. For a majority of Jews, it is not possible to understand this. In Polish society there still exists a huge gap between the intelligentsia and the rest of the society. The writer Boy-Żeleński said that noble status was replaced by a high school diploma. [In pre-war Poland a high school diploma suggested an educated person.] I agree with this. The Polish intelligentsia was not and is not antisemitic, even those on the political right. Those coming from the countryside, the peasants, the so-called masses including the lower ranks of clergy, were antisemitic, though I don't know why. Perhaps some ideals or concepts simply did not reach them. Perhaps this is connected with the fact that the Polish intelligentsia, even the intelligentsia of People's Poland, is still to some degree of post-gentry origin. But the culture of Polish gentry was not and is not antisemitic. Sometimes I believe that these are two nations. In other countries, in America, in Germany, or in France, the difference between the intelligentsia and the rest of society is not so tremendous; there is no such division. In Poland, however, this division still exists.

- K.Z. *I have an impression that anti-Polish tendencies in the Jewish communities in the United States are growing stronger. These abated for a short time during the era of Solidarity when the press was presenting Poland's struggle for freedom. Now these tendencies seem to have grown stronger.*
- J.M. I do not have an established opinion on this topic, although American culture interests me a lot. I do not understand it. I know that American Jews are anti-Polish and, when you ask them about it, you cannot get a sensible answer. They absorbed anti-Polonism—when, how, and in what way I do not know. I have heard different opinions on that subject. One opinion is that the first Jews who strongly influenced American culture came from Germany and that these German Jews did not have a positive attitude towards Poles. Later came Jews from Russia. Both groups were anti-Polish and somehow they influenced the general opinion. This is still a mystery for me, but it is a fact that American Jews are anti-Polish. Perhaps, to some degree, they feel guilty about the past because they did not help.