

It Is Hard to Explain to Family and Friends that You Are a Jew

About “Sekret” [“The Secret”] – a book on the complicated human nature, discriminating against others and trying to answer the question of who you are – we are talking with its author Sylwia Borowska, who succeeded last year with “Mój mąż Żyd” [“My Jewish Husband”]

It appears from your book that the reactions of people who learned about their Jewish origin were often similar – first came surprise, then they would inform their friends, who usually began with comforting...

In the sentence “Don’t worry about being a Jew” there is a hidden suggestion that this fact does not matter, and yet it is of fundamental importance for people who have just learnt about it. Implicitly, there is also a suggestion that being a Jew is a burden or a problem that must be tackled now. Comforting is a display of pity.

Is this already evidence of anti-Semitism?

Poles are not aware of the fact that they are speak out anti-Semitic lines. This is evidenced by some verbal constructions that have taken root in the Polish language greatly – years ago people would call an inkspot in an exercise book a “Żyd”, meaning a Jew, the word “pożydzić” is used to denote skimping or people say “give your car to the Jew” in the meaning of “get rid of it”.

The expression “żydowskim targiem” [it means bargaining or negotiating in such way that each negotiating party waives part of their demands to reach an agreement] is used...

In my previous book, "Mój mąż Żyd" ["My Jewish Husband], I quote an anecdote about a Pole from the Greater Poland Province carrying an Israeli couple in his car. At one point he says, „żyd mi się zapalił" ["the Jew has lighted up"], thinking about the fuel consumption indicator. He didn't feel it was a faux pas in the presence of Jews. It is interesting how much such expressions have grown into the language. How little sensitive to it we have become. And yet times have changed and today it is unthinkable to call a black person a Negro...

But it still happens. It seems to me that Poles are very careless in what they say and how it can hurt others...

Not only Poles. In "Sekret" ["The Secret"] however, I wanted to show, as I wrote in the introduction, that Poles are or even want to be a homogeneous nation, not even suspecting how many of them could be, for example, of Jewish origin. The narrative of declared Polishness, however, makes them dislike aliens and others. Anti-Semitism ingrown into language is one thing, the other is behaviour. One of my female characters had to file a case in court against a neighbour who scratched the star of David on her door, peed at the door and threatened to finish what Hitler had not.

You write that Poles are united by hostility towards others...

This is a psychological mechanism. Those who do not understand others or aliens are hostile to them in advance. Yesterday, Poles united against refugees, now against LGBT+ people, and the figure of the Jew as an Alien is eternal. I think that "The Secret" is also a book about the complicated human nature, about discrimination against others, about the fears of both those of Jewish descent and Polish descent. What's more, in this book we talk about the fact that these two identities can be found in one person who feels both Jewish and Polish and tries to reconcile it somehow, seeking a new definition, an answer to the question who they really are now... Therefore, my characters' discoveries are so difficult for them and their environment.

Did the awareness of their Jewish origin help those who had learnt about it in their lives? Of course, not in the sense that thanks to it they were able to do something for themselves...

This is another stereotype, in addition testifying to anti-Semitism, that people who found out about it entered some magical community or interest group and immediately were better off. According to my observations – no. If the stories about the six Jews ruling the world were true, then people in the diaspora in Poland or in Israel itself would not live on credit. And they do live like that! Many of my characters learn about their origin when they are very grown-up. For example, they are 50 years old and have a dilemma, should they go to Israel?...

It is hard for those who don't know Hebrew...

Sudden transplantation to Israel bears high risk – they have grown up, have a family and they work here. It is different for young people who have their whole lives ahead of them. They can still make it in another country. In the book, I also talk to a person from a family already assimilated at the end of the 19th century. The discovery of her Jewish origin does not change anything in her. She is proud of her origin, but she will never say that she is Jewish, but that she has Jewish roots.

Can studying your roots turn your life upside down?

Almost all my interlocutors had to learn what it was like to be a Jew. They only started to learn what Judaism was, how it influenced a Jew's life, what tradition was, what kashruth was, how to behave on the Sabbath, what holidays there were and how to celebrate them. The reader will find even funny anecdotes on this subject in the book. For some, such an inheritance in the form of knowledge of their Jewish roots is a burden, while it is exciting for others. Although – as one of my interlocutors noted – in Polish conditions being, for example, a religious Jew is almost unfeasible. You have to dress differently, eat differently, and have days off on Jewish holidays.

Are there any interlocutors in your book who completely rejected their newly discovered Jewishness?

There is a story of a woman who converted and lives in Israel, and her mother does not consider

herself Jewish. Some characters admit that they consider themselves Jews, but their brother or sister does not, because they want it to remain a secret.

It was only from the „Secret” that I learnt about the Jewish Helpline...

I had no idea about it before either, and I was completely surprised, although you could read about it in 1997 in Gazeta Wyborcza’s advertisements section. The helpline was not a secret. It only shows that if certain matters do not concern us, we do not notice them. Those affected by the Jewish Helpline noticed the information and used it as long as it existed. The initiator was Stanisław Krajewski, with whom I talk about it in the book. Jewish life in Poland had begun to revive slowly after 1989. Officially, it was only in 1997 that the Jewish Religious Community was established, after the war only the secular Jewish Social and Cultural Association in Poland and the Jewish Theatre in Warsaw operated. In the 1990s, to build themselves, the communities were supported by international Jewish organisations. On the occasion of the Jewish Helpline, therapeutic groups were launched to support people so that they could say without the feeling of guilt and shame about myself: I’m a Jew. For me helplines have always been associated with support for victims of violence, addicts and those who feel that they are in a hopeless situation. In the book, Stanisław Krajewski explains that being a Jew in Poland is an emotionally difficult situation. I don’t know if Jewish helplines operated, for example, in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, but attempts were also made to revive Jewish life in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. One of the female characters of “The Secret” told how she travelled to Israel to educational camps for young people and met young people from the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Bulgaria and how they talked about what it meant to be a Jew in their countries.

How did you find the people who shared parts of their lives with you?

The idea of the book was born in my head after meeting Zoja, whom I thought of at the beginning as the protagonist of the book “My Jewish Husband”. She told me that she had not married an Israeli man by accident. This was a consequence of the fact that her mother, when Zoja was 15, told her a secret, namely, she told her that she was a Jewess. I wondered why it had to be a secret. We began to talk about how difficult it was to tell our relatives and children that

you were a Jew. I felt compelled to go more into this topic and find out why these people had to be afraid, and experience personal dramas. Since Zoja lives with her husband in Poland, and in that book I focused on Polish women who live with their husbands in Israel, I decided to put her story in the second book. I also asked Zoja for protection in reaching Jews from the Warsaw community or other people she knew and who had also discovered their Jewish origin. I was also looking myself and I knew a few people in Israel. There are many more „secrets” than this book could contain, but I decided to choose individual stories that are different and, when combined, create an interesting and, in my opinion, full picture.

Did your interlocutors include atheists who, having learned that they were Jews, became religious?

Yes, and even one, passionate in her youth, Catholic woman.

How can one come to such a huge worldview about-turn?

It's a matter of choice. In "The Secret" I like the story of a girl who was Catholic, and when she learnt the truth about her origin, she became an orthodox Jewess. First as a teenager, she went to a yeshiva in Montreal, now she lives with her family in Israel. After meeting her, I realised that in the world in which we live today, in which it is difficult to find a reference point and in which authorities are lacking, I am lacking God myself. People in whose lives God is present have a clear plan for their lives, and they know what to stick to. They have an easier life.

Interview by KZK

Photo: WGM