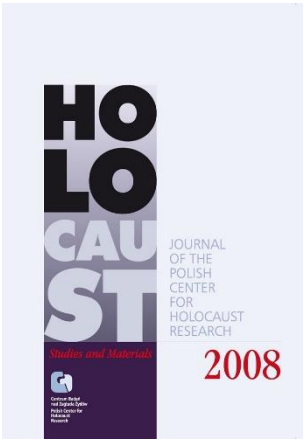


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Błoński's Essay Years Later

Michał Głowiński
Institite of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences

redakcja@holocaustresearch.pl

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Michał Głowiński

Błoński's Essay Years Later

1

Since January 1987, when Jan Błoński published the article "Biedni policy patrzą na getto" (Poor Poles look at the ghetto),[1] he has not, at least publicly, dealt with Jewish-related issues; nor has he written about relations that developed in the course of recent history between the Polish and the Jewish communities. It was his first publication on the subject, which was not only noticed and widely discussed soon after it was published, but is still remembered. Twenty years later, one can safely say, without risking exaggeration, that not only did it play an important role in the formation of the Polish discourse regarding these issues, but it is also a classic piece of Polish journalism. This extraordinary, and as it was to prove, important text initiated a style of thought and discussion, different from the traditional one, on issues dealt with in this article, and, to a certain extent, it was a breakthrough, inspiring an extremely important process as its catalyst. It is a rare occurrence in the history of literature for a relatively short statement by someone with no power or someone who is not the head of an influential institution, speaking only in his own name, to have played such an important role in any sphere of social life. This proves how great this text is, and it proved to be so fundamental and innovative in outlining the issues in question that it could not have passed unnoticed or been treated as ephemeral, to be forgotten within a few weeks at best.

The role this text began to play soon after its publication stems not only from its unquestionable immanent qualities. In order for the article to have exerted such a strong influence then and now one more factor had to appear: general social interest in these issues, i.e. the growing awareness that something must be done about it, that certain issues need to be tackled; although they had been silenced or discussed in a manner typical for the propaganda of the People's Republic of Poland, i.e. falsely and hypocritically, they had not been completely repressed from social reflection. This text did not meet with public approval. The strong reactions to this text stemmed, among other things, from people's being accustomed to a certain kind of language, one that was considered canonical and used to describe the attitude

[1] Jan Błoński, "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, No. 2. This article is based on a volume of articles on similar issues under the same title (Cracow, 1994). All citations in this text are from that volume.

of Poles towards the Jews; this language had been long adopted by official newspapers published in the People's Republic of Poland, finally formed in the broadly understood period of March 1968 and which was not (I shall return to this later) an original product of communist propaganda, as it had adopted previously employed patterns and elements. Thus, to a certain extent, it can be treated as its epigonic continuation. Jan Błoński did not engage in a debate with this well-polished and largely accepted language; nor did he discuss it, but, simply, by his sheer style of writing, he distanced himself from it, and, consequently, from those taboos, which had been elevated to the rank of an incontestable position. This precisely reveals this text's greatness. For some, it was a marvellous manifesto or even a discovery, for others an irresponsible and scandalous act, detrimental to Polish interests on the international arena, and, essentially, anti-national.[2]

2

Błoński's text is extraordinary for a number of reasons, one being that when we begin reading it, we might think that it is a literary critical essay. Its first part contains remarks on two poems written by Czesław Miłosz during the [German] occupation: the first poem, generally known since its publication and relatively easy to understand, is *Campo di Fiori*, and the second, far more complex and difficult due to its symbolism and message is *Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto.* Initially the reader may surmise that this text would bring an exegesis of these two so important and meaningful – in both senses of the word – poems. Jan Błoński is an eminent literary critic, perhaps the most distinguished of those who made their debut in the second half of the 20th century, and had great achievements for several decades. His mere name suggested, therefore, that we would deal with reflection on poetry. This is however, only the starting point; but still, this reflection cannot be overlooked by anyone dealing with occupation-period Miłosz's work, published in the volume *Ocalenie*.

Despite their seemingly modest role, the references to poetry are of key importance to Błoński's line of argument, and they are invariably relevant and multifaceted. They were not essayistic fioriture to decorate the text or to make it more attractive, for a number of reasons: primarily because both Miłosz's poems rate

[2] In this article I shall not deal with the polemics (with two exceptions) Błoński's article triggered. They varied enormously, as there were extremely interesting voices in the discussion, published by *Tygodnik Powszechny*, apart from texts published by party newspapers, being part of a press campaign launched by party press. Incidentally, the reactions to Błoński's article merit a separate analysis, as they tell us a great deal not only about the social consciousness and the styles of thinking on Polish-Jewish issues, but also about propaganda styles at the end of the People's Republic of Poland. Jerzy Turowicz, in his article "Racje polskie i racje żydowskie" (Polish arguments and Jewish arguments) [*Tygodnik Powszechny* 5 April 1987 No. 14 (1971)], states that over a hundred letters and articles regarding Błoński's essay had been received by the newspaper. According to Turowicz's testimony, the authors of the materials sent to the editor often expressed the belief that the Poles themselves had been subjected to terrible oppression during the occupation, so they had to save themselves in the first place.

among the most serious and greatest poems written about the Holocaust (perhaps alongside Władysław Broniewski's *Ballady i Romanse* and the equally great but less known *Jeszcze* by Wisława Szymborska), but, at the time, they constitute a deeply internalised analysis of national attitudes.

Miłosz is the patron of Błoński's reflections, not only in the narrowly understood literary dimensions, although obviously they should not be ignored. He is the patron as a writer and thinker, who, in different variants, approaches and contexts, constantly returns to the issue of Polish nationalism, and who, precisely for his pragmatic distance to his nationalism,[3] was an object of ruthless attacks, both from the right and the left. Readers aware of this context, from the beginning of their reading, should be able to understand that the reference to the great poet determines both the tone and the direction of Błoński's considerations. Such a signal appears to have been particularly important when *Tygodnik Powszechny* published this article. Matters regarding Jews were rather marginal in the journalism of that time, and in the 1980s not much was happening in this sphere. Polish-Jewish relations were, with varying intensity, a carefully guarded taboo. Gone was the aggression, so characteristic of the "March period", but the problem itself did not disappear; one might say it glimmered on the margins of social consciousness. It might have lost the mark of topicality, and was no longer dramatic, but none of these aspects had been revised, no new attitudes or threads were introduced, and no propositions had been made. Stagnation ruled; what remained was an invariant of communist propaganda in this sphere and nothing could modify the opinion which could be treated as virtually official and binding: during the occupation Poles heroically and with utmost dedication saved the Jews; on the other hand, those who claim otherwise or say that the situation then was more diverse and complex were accused of being anti-Polish or even, and this did happen, of being an enemy of the Polish nation, or at least of helping or serving such enemies. Given such circumstances it was difficult to say anything, at least for some time, about Polish-Jewish relations which would go beyond this scheme, the more so that it was guarded by the censorship office. It is no accident that at that time, it was impossible to publish anything equally important as, for example, the monograph edition of the émigré journal *Aneks* regarding these issues.[4] It was impossible until Błoński's breakthrough article was published.

Its uniqueness lies, among other things, in the fact that, first, Błoński began to analyse this issue with no reference to any particular political embroilment, and he was not interested in the possible reactions to his interpretation of those issues or what was said on this subject in those circles or others. Because, and this is the second fundamental consideration, this was a moral problem for him. A problem for Poles to tackle, the more so, given that not only had it not been resolved (and could not be resolved and one should not expect that), or even decently discussed, considered and debated. The third factor is equally important: the fundamental thesis that reconsideration of the attitude of Poles towards the Jews, primarily the Holo-

[3] He was and still is. Even his death did not silence insinuations and did not stop this rapid torrent of hatred which can be found in such press organs as *Nasz Dziennik*.

[4] See *Aneks* No. 41–42, 1986 . The general title was "Żydzi jako polski problem".

caust, but not exclusively, is a task for Polish society, and no one can do it for them. Błoński's perspective is consistently Polish.

All three reasons determine this text's greatness and render it free from schematic approaches, which even if not dominant, were still current, despite being the product of myth, without much relation to historical reality. Błoński does not engage in a debate either with the negative or the positive myth, but simply dismisses them with equal consistency, believing – rightly – that in an argument conceived as a formulation of principles, direct refutation would have no justification whatsoever. According to the negative myth, cultivated in some Jewish circles, Poles, even if not directly responsible for what happened on Polish soil, stood by during the Holocaust with satisfaction, and sometimes even helped the Germans carry it out. Thus it was no accident that the major death camps were built on Polish territory. One could say that, in this approach, the face of a Pole was the mug of a blackmailer ("*szmalcownik*"). There was another myth, its polar opposite – the positive myth, propagated in Poland, particularly during the "March period" [in 1968], no doubt an element of the anti-Semitic discourse propagated at that time. According to this scheme, Poles, as one man, stood up to help the persecuted Jews, risking their lives and those of their families. In this interpretation, the face of a Pole was that of a hero. Whoever questioned its authenticity, or expressed even the slightest doubt, could have been branded as an enemy of the Polish nation.[5] Naturally, in the 1980s, both those myths were present, if not in a milder form, then in a certainly less aggressive one. Still, one thing is certain: whatever their form, they made it impossible to think seriously on these issues and could only serve one purpose: falsification of history and paralysis of authentic reflection.

3

Thus we reach the heart of Błoński's essay, his language. What I wrote here shows that it is not a language of accusation, or of apologia, or of polemic with accusations, or a language of polemic with apologia. If elements of polemic do appear, which is inevitable in a text that brings a new interpretation of such an important matter for social consciousness and social well-being, then they are, so to speak, a secondary, merely marginal element, as they do not aim to instruct or mend ways, but to reflect upon a problem, reveal those of its aspects that had been passed over in silence, and to work out certain ways of thinking. Such purposes cannot be served by accusation or apologia or a direct refutation of either. Rejection of both extreme positions is Błoński's fundamental assumption, which is fairly easy to decipher.

In his discussion of Polish-Jewish relations and of Polish visions of the Holocaust, Błoński consistently uses the language of morality. It must be said with par-

[5] This was the case especially in the "March-period" propaganda, which saw increased activity of authors specialising in the promulgation of this myth. One of them was Tadeusz Bednarczyk, active both in the "March period" and later, who wrote a number of anti-Semitic publications. See Dariusz Libionka, "Apokryfy z dziejów Żydowskiego Związku Wojskowego", *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* vol. 1, 2005, particularly chapter 3 of this extremely interesting work.

ticular emphasis: this is the greatest novelty of Błoński's article. Obviously, it is difficult to claim that no one had done that before, or to claim that this is an absolute novelty, as such a claim would be hard to prove, like all claims regarding absolute precedence; but it is a fact that in this matter Błoński is exceptionally consistent and this [quality] was noticed, but also – I shall return to this later – led to fairly serious misunderstanding. His use of the language of morality is here a fully conscious assumption, one might say programmatic:

> In other words, instead of haggling or justifying ourselves, we should first think about ourselves, about our sin or weakness. Such a moral revolution in our attitude towards the Polish-Jewish past is necessary. Only this can gradually clean contaminated soil (21).

This fragment is sufficient for us to notice that Błoński employs Christian language and Christian symbolism, which is clearly, but not only, related to the fact that one of the starting points is Miłosz's poem *Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto*. These relationships are far broader and more fundamental. Błoński is a moralist but not a moraliser. He considers a moral issue but does not instruct anyone. He considers it in the spirit of the Gospels. Paradoxical as it may sound, apparently no one before him, in such a Catholic country as Poland, had ever written on Polish-Jewish issues in this manner. In this type of context, he was the first to use this kind of language, at least so programmatically and so consciously. It would seem that this language ought to have been easily understood. It turned out to be, if not completely different, then more complex. Let us stress at this point: publications in response to Błoński's essay cannot be divided dichotomously; had it been so, then on the one hand we would have communist journalism where this type of language was naturally alien, and the other, those texts whose authors could by no means have been classified as exponents of the communist government or followers of Marxist ideology, but who frequently emphasised their Catholics views. These complications merit closer examination.

4

Błoński's article quickly became famous, and, as a result, different types of statements appeared. It was immediately noticed and became an object of fierce attacks in official newspapers, which is hardly surprising, as it violated certain rhetoric, principally dominant since the early days of the People's Republic of Poland, no doubt since March 1968, even though in the second half of the 1980s it was more civilised and less aggressive than before. Błoński was seen as someone who made Poles look hateful, acted against Poland, and provided arguments for Western Germans, who tend to blame the Polish nation for their crimes, as well as to Jews, who were unfavourable toward Poles. Party journalists read into Błoński's text what was not there, simply projecting stereotypes onto it, which they had previously interiorised and identified with, believing in them only because they were their ideological axioms, never to be questioned; those who do are no doubt enemies of the Polish nation, traitors, people who sympathise with its slanderers. The numerous publica-

tions that refute Błoński's article reveal more or less explicitly anti-Semitic ideas. But this does not seem to be most important. Those publications, prepared by authors who represent the official position, prove at least two points: the domination of nationalist views, sometimes extremely nationalist, and the fact that for such authors, the language of morality is totally incomprehensible, as they are only capable of using a language that can be defined as ideological or political. Their articles demonstrate that their authors, in essence, constitute one impersonal communist entity and are incapable of reading such texts as Błoński's article.[6]

Naturally, polemical voices published by *Tygodnik Powszechny* are of a completely different character apart from one pitiful exception, but are particularly interesting for us. As we know from Jerzy Turowicz, there were quite many of them, and the weekly's issue 14 of 1987 was nearly monothematic, virtually devoted to this single matter. They are diverse: from the matter-of-fact and balanced text of the historian Stanisław Salmonowicz[7] and an article fraught with information by Teresa Prekerowa, the famous author of publications on "Żegota",[8] to the deeply personal reflections of Ewa Berberyusz[9] and the extraordinary internal dialogue of Janina Walewska,[10] who is probably a completely unknown author, and whose text is an extremely interesting document of reflection on Polish-Jewish relations as well as of overcoming stereotypes, usually accepted at face value. Władysław Siła-Nowicki's sizeable article differs from the texts published by *Tygodnik Powszechny* in the character and type of arguments, and indeed in all respects.[11]

I must refer to my personal recollection; I recall my astonishment when I read this article in the winter of 1987, astonishment turning into aversion, accompanied by a strong need to dismiss this type of argument. My astonishment was even greater because I knew that its author was an eminent barrister, a defence councillor in political trials, and a member of the anti-communist opposition. Today, looking back on this text, I see its embroilments and contexts, but this does not change my perception or opinion. To call a spade a spade: Siła-Nowicki's sizeable text is a collection of stereotypes, deeply rooted in reflection on Jewish issues. It was not well received by *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Turowicz, in his comment referred to above, explains why he published the attorney's polemical article on the reflections and theses of the analysis of how poor Poles look at the ghetto (the *Tygodnik*, explained its editor-in-chief, is a pluralist periodical). Two important polemical texts

[6] I describe *Trybuna Ludu's* reaction to Błoński's article in a note of 9 April 1987. See my book *Końcówka* (Cracow. 1999), 246–247.

[7] Stanisław Salomonowicz, "Głębokie korzenie i długi żywot stereotypów", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 8 February 1987 No. 6 (1963).

[8] Teresa Prekerowa, "Sprawiedliwi i bierni", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 29 March 1987, No. 13 (1970).

[9] Ewa Berberyusz, "Wina przez zaniechanie", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 22 February 1987 No. 8 (1965).

[10] Janina Walewska, "W jakimś sensie jestem antysemitką", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 5 April 1987 No. 14 (1971).

[11] Władysław Siła-Nowicki, "Janowi Błońskiemu w odpowiedzi", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 22 February 1987 No. 8 (1965).

discussing critically Siła-Nowicki's enunciations were published: Kazimierz Dziewanowski's[12] and Jerzy Jastrzębowski's.[13] Neither author spares him harsh words. Dziewanowski says that Siła-Nowicki uses language that does not become him, while Jastrzębowski states expressly: "The excellent trial lawyer evidently fails to understand the ethical stance proposed by Błoński." Both texts reach the heart of the matter. For Siła-Nowicki, Polish-Jewish relations are not a moral issue; he flatly rejects the language of ethics, and that is why Błoński's essay terrifies him as an instance of anti-Polish attitude, so dangerous for the fatherland. When he writes about Jews he consistently employs the language introduced by the traditional nationalist right, including that of the inter-war period. He uses astonishing arguments, as he claims, among other things, that in the 1930s, a period he must have remembered quite well (he lived from 1913 to 1994), there was no anti-Semitism in Poland at all.[14] Błoński's text, therefore, was useful for the Germans and offered support to Jews that are hostile to Poland.[15]

When I read Siła-Nowicki's text soon after its publication, I was astonished by one more thing: its arguments and even its style were virtually identical to what was published in official newspapers. I was unable to explain it at that time, but I can now. The point is not that the lawyer and politician consistently anti-communist through his life suddenly surrendered to a communist line of thinking. It was something else. Siła-Nowicki wrote according to rules formed by the nationalist right, used his own language, and did not have to borrow it from anyone. It was the communists who, for some time, began to adopt the rules of right-wing discourse, and thus its style of thinking. This close affinity between the ONR (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*) and the [communist] party was noticed with brilliant perspicacity by Miłosz,[16] and the stylistic similarities between both styles of writing became evident or even spectacular in March 1968.[17] Siła-Nowicki's arguments were largely similar to those used by the communist press because it had adopted characteristic elements of nationalist think-

[12] Kazimierz Dziewanowski, "*Proszę nie mówić za mnie*", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 5 April 1987 No. 14 (1971).

[13] Jerzy Jastrzębowski, "Na różnych płaszczyznach", *ibid*.

[14] It seems that Siła-Nowicki understood anti-Semitism only as the so-called extermination anti-Semitism, which led to Auschwitz, Treblinka, Bełżec, etc. Such a restricted definition of this term is characteristic of the nationalist right, as it gives it an ideological and quasi-moral alibi, but is also useful for social engineering purposes.

[15] This thesis is challenged by Krystyna Bernard's article, published in the Israeli Polish-language newspaper *Nowiny i Kurier*. See its summary with numerous citations in: *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1 March 1986, No. 9 (1966).

[16] *Cf*. his famous formula from *A Poetical Treatise* of 1957: "The party is an heir to the ONR"

[17] In the case of Siła-Nowicki we deal with a direct continuity of tradition and discourse, as in the 1930s he had written for *Prosto z mostu*, appealing for a swift solution to the Jewish issue; it was to consist of, among other things, confiscation of capital owned by Jews. The anti-Semitic texts of the lawyer, who, apparently, had not always favoured legal solutions, are discussed by M. Domagalska, *Antysemityzm dla inteligencji? Kwestia żydowska w publicystyce Adolfa Nowaczyńskiego na łamach "Myśli Narodowej" (1921–1934) i "Prosto z mostu" (1935–1939) na tle porównawczym* (Warsaw, 2004), 111, 121, 126.

ing.[18] Looking back, one notices the extraordinary continuity that has determined the presence of nationalist (national-democratic) discourse since its origins in the late 19th century, throughout the 20th century, from its earliest forms, through the radicalism of the 1930s, [its] communist mutation until today. This, however, is a broader issue, reaching far beyond matters related to Błoński's essay, which has become a classic text of Polish journalism. This interesting phenomenon could be discussed on another occasion. The reception of this extraordinary text demonstrated that with respect to the attitude to Jews, and, particularly, to Polish-Jewish relations, the language of morality cannot be understood by those who have internalised nationalist ideology and recognise only the rules of nationalist discourse.

POSTSCRIPT

I wrote this article in early 2006. A few weeks after its completion I read a brilliant article by Adam Leszczyński published in *Gazeta Świąteczna* (No. 84, of 8-9 April), "Polityka historyczna. Wielki strach". This polemical text soberly and reliably analyses the views of the conservative proponents of the so-called "historical policy". I was particularly interested in one theme: their reference points are two famous texts from the 1980s: Jan Józef Lipski's "Dwie ojczyzny, dwa patriotyzmy" and Jan Błoński's "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto". According to Dariusz Gawin, one of the ideologues of historical policy: "Błoński makes a mistake, because he assumes that collective admission of guilt by Poles would lead to a just assessment of attitudes towards the Holocaust. Architects of 'historical policy' accuse Lipski and Błoński (and their unidentified epigones) of a naïve attempt at Christian 'angelification'. From their point of view this is less than naïvety; it is a political mistake for which we pay as a community. 'Critical patriotism' dangerously approaches the point of adopting an alien interpretation of history, understood as detrimental to the Polish community."

The enunciations of right-wing "historical policy-makers" demonstrate a number of points: primarily that the famous, classic texts of Lipski and Błoński have remained valid, given that they still inspire reactions similar to those of their opponents at the time of publication. But not only that. They also demonstrate that discussion of Polish affairs in ethical terms still encounters resistance, precisely among those authors who readily refer to Christian values. As I was reading Leszczyński's article, it occurred to me that, regrettably, nothing in this world, at least in the field of ideology, ever disappears. After all, the type of accusations formulated by today's proponents of "historical policy" and levelled at Lipski and Błoński are frequently reminiscent of those of communist propagandists in official newspapers. One should bear in mind that the employees of the ideological front of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) were busy carrying out a certain kind of "historical policy", even though they never used this term.

18 April 2006

[18] For the role of nationalist attitudes and ideologies in the People's Republic of Poland see M. Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce*, (Warsaw, 2001).