

Women in Dark Times

Ten thinkers of lasting significance

Alicja Gescinska

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Translator Alice Tetley-Paul

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Introduction

Ich bin ein Fremdling überall

A crack slices across the surface of my life. A fault line formed by the shifting of geopolitical tectonic plates runs through my memories and existence like a scar. There is a time before and a time after. I was born in communist Poland in 1981. Shortly after my birth, General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law, although there is probably no causal relationship between the two. In the late 1970s, Polish citizens became increasingly dissatisfied with the economic malaise and poor living conditions. Jaruzelski responded in the tried-and-tested communist fashion: dissatisfaction is there to be brutally suppressed.

My parents couldn't remain there. The regime suffocated their dreams. It dictated what they had to study, it dictated where they lived, it tried to dictate what they ought to think and feel. Our family – my parents, my two sisters and I – lived in a concrete jungle, in a scarcely twenty-square-metre flat assigned to us by the authorities. My parents were not ardent dissidents, in the sense that they did not engage politically in resistance against communism. They simply wanted to be able to live their own lives – in freedom. In 1988, they took the gamble and fled to the West, hoping to taste that long-awaited freedom. *Crack*: a fault line.

The first years in Belgium taught us that freedom can be deceptive. Our lives there began in a former prison that had been converted into an asylum centre. Those early years were more about surviving than living. At the bottom of the social ladder, you soon learn that many freedoms are little more than vague promises. Our arrival in Belgium also coincided with the rise of far-right Flemish nationalism. I was barely ten years old when, in November 1991, the far right achieved its greatest electoral victory. The posters featuring scrubbing brushes and boxing gloves – promising to clean the streets of all that migrant scum – left a lasting impression on me. If you see those posters on your way home from school, even as a little girl who doesn't understand much yet, one thing you do understand is: this is about me. Far-right racism was also rife in the rural village where we lived. When we arrived in 1988, we were objects of curiosity; foreigners in the village – that wasn't something they were used to. We even featured in the regional newspaper. But for many, interest soon turned into aversion. In the early 1990s, our car tyres were slashed on more than one occasion.

Crack: the fault line deepens.

When does a person stop being a migrant? Seven years after our arrival, we received Belgian passports and returned to Poland for the first time to visit friends and family. There we learned a painful truth: we were neither true Poles in Poland nor true Belgians in Belgium. Even if migration doesn't last a lifetime, its shadow does. My life is built on the basis of displacement. Those who are displaced learn the art of being truly at home everywhere and nowhere at the same time. I haven't worked it out exactly, but I know that during my forty-four years on this planet, I have moved home more than ten times. That also means calling somewhere home and bidding it farewell again more than ten times, packing up your life (if permitted) and unpacking it again (if possible) ten times, finding your feet somewhere new ten times. It means never staying long enough – barely longer than four years on average – to truly take root. It also means, in my case at least, changing linguistic environments three times, paying in four different currencies and living away from family: no grandparents, no aunts or uncles – some years without even sisters nearby. But above all, it means being at home in displacement.

That displacement runs deep within me, and it is no coincidence that it is one of the main themes of this book. Although this book sketches the lives and philosophies of ten other women, my own portrait slowly reveals itself within the mosaic of those sketches. I am present within all these women, because they are present within me. The affinity I feel with many of these women stems in no small part from the fact that they, too, often lived lives marked by displacement. For that reason, this book is also deeply personal. It does not merely portray ten remarkable lives; it portrays what moves me at my very core and what drives my thinking.

When I delve into the depths of myself, three themes always resurface: displacement, unfreedom and dehumanisation. Or, in more positive terms: belonging, freedom and humanisation. It is not difficult to recognise an autobiographical motif here. In order to better understand a philosopher, an understanding of their life story is usually invaluable. Philosophers don't do their thinking in a vacuum; the questions that preoccupy them are almost always shaped by their personal circumstances. In my case, many of my philosophical concerns can be traced back to my parents' decision to flee Poland in 1988, and to their decision, a year later, not to return after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in Europe. I was born in 1981, but it feels as though my life began again in 1988.

Ich bin ein Fremdling überall (I am a stranger everywhere). These five words are engraved in my soul. They are words that have become a refrain for all those who have lived a life of displacement. They are the words Schubert set to music in his magnificent *Der Wanderer*. That line and that song – originally the *Fremdlings Abendlied* – has become the anthem of the migrant and the displaced. It is no coincidence that they reappear in 'O Pioneers!', a beautiful novel by the American author Willa Cather. Migration, resettlement, displacement and starting again in a new place – in North America's Great Plains – were the dominant motifs of Cather's life and work.

The fact that someone else wrote down those words that Schubert set to music, that so many people have sung those words; that makes me feel at home in my displacement, in my sense of being a stranger in this world. Displacement and estrangement need not, by definition, stand in opposition to a sense of belonging. They become part of it in the same way that they become part of an identity. Something beautiful can also emerge from migration: from displacement, new dreams and new lives are born.

Displacement

The allure of that idea must not blind us to a very different reality faced by millions of people today: forced displacement. Having to flee, being unable to stay at home – that is a terrible evil, from which

countless other evils unfold. The lives and work of the ten women who take centre stage in this book bear witness to that. And none of these accounts is as harrowing as that of Barbara Skarga. She is the only one of these women whom I met in the flesh. In 2008, our paths crossed very briefly in Warsaw, where I spent the year on a research grant at the university. We exchanged only a fleeting glance. At that time, I was not yet well acquainted with her philosophy or the tragic course of her life, but the resilient old women left a lasting impression on me. Later, when I began to immerse myself in her books, that first impression turned into respect and admiration.

Skarga was the most important Polish female philosopher of the twentieth century. Her life was marked by tragedy. During the war, she was active in the resistance movement, only to be arrested by the Red Army at the end of the war. She was condemned to ten years in the gulag camps, followed by another year and a half as an 'external exile' on a *kolkhoz* in the Far East of Siberia. It was twelve years before she saw her native land and her family again – and returned home. 'What a terrible crime it is to be forced into resettlement: to wrench people from the soil that has sustained them for centuries,' (i) Skarga wrote in her memoirs about her time spent in the gulag camps. She knew about that terrible crime firsthand. And it is a crime humanity continues to perpetrate, time and time again. 'Man is Not a Beautiful Animal' is the telling title of one of Skarga's books.

We live in a cruel world, where millions of people are driven from their homes, fleeing oppression and destruction. Among them are the Rohingya of Myanmar, described by the United Nations as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. At least 1.2 million Rohingya have been displaced. There are also the Uyghurs, who are forbidden to be themselves on their native soil in China, and are sent to 're-education' camps: hundreds of thousands of people driven from their homes and uprooted. I think of the Middle East, where thousands of Palestinians have been killed and many more forced to leave their homes. I think of Ukraine, where people have been deported to Russia on a huge scale – Ukrainian men processed through 'filtration centres' and sent on to Siberia, and the missing Ukrainian children – according to some estimates as many as twenty thousand of them – taken east to be 'Russified'. This is happening now. Today. Our present. Our world.

I am convinced that acquainting ourselves with the life and philosophy of Barbara Skarga and the other central figures of this book can help us not only better understand past tragedies, but also those taking place today. Displacement, unfreedom, dehumanisation – these are not historical relics. The ten women in this book fought against these with their entire beings, which is why they lie so close to my heart.

The Pendulum of History

From a young age, life taught me that freedom is not a given. It did not exist in communist Poland and it felt unattainable to me in the free West for a long time too. My first existential crisis – which is how I would later come to describe it, though I did not understand it as such at that time – took place in a large toy shop. We had only been living in Belgium for a few months at the time and there was a branch of a major toy chain in the village where we lived. It was one of our first family outings and my parents were no less curious than my sisters and me. We had not experienced anything like it in Poland. Aisle after aisle, fully stocked – that alone was remarkable. But aisle after aisle of toys seemed truly unbelievable: a museum, a shrine dedicated to the deity of childhood play. I had owned a single doll in Poland, which I had left behind when we fled. We spent hours in the shop, eyes wide with wonder, and at the end came the inevitable question: could I have a new doll? But my parents couldn't afford it. I protested, unable to understand. Was this why we had come to the 'free' West – to see all this abundance, a freedom we were only allowed to look at, but not to touch?

It was only later that I began to understand that freedom takes many forms, but that experience as a young girl left its mark on both my life and my way of thinking. When I went on to study philosophy, it seemed almost inevitable that I would choose to explore the question of freedom. When is a person truly free? Is freedom defined by what a person is allowed to do, or what they are able to do? I wrote my Master's dissertation, my PhD thesis and several books on this topic, and will probably spend the rest of my life writing about it, because there is never a final word on what it means to be human, or what it means to be a free human being.

What I have learnt, from life and books alike, is that our freedom and our humanity are both equally fundamental and fragile aspects of our existence. They are never a given; they are always achieved. And what is hard-won can all too easily be lost. The twentieth century teaches us this, with its many episodes of widespread unfreedom and dehumanisation. It teaches us that people are always suspended in a force field between things that can humanise and dehumanise them, that can constrain and liberate them. In my own philosophy, I try to shine a light on the forces that humanise – such as music, literature and morality – and to call out those that dehumanise. It is no coincidence that both concepts – freedom and humanity (or: the human person) – were the central topics of my dissertation, in which I explored the factors that lead to unfreedom and 'depersonalisation'. There is no greater evil than the dehumanisation of a human being: an evil that always goes hand in hand with unfreedom and displacement.

One anecdote that has always stayed with me planted this conviction deep within me. It is the account of the Polish doctor and psychiatrist Wanda Póltawska. Póltawska's life and personality were scarred by the atrocities inflicted upon her during the Second World War. She was a member of the resistance movement and was arrested in February 1941. She was tortured for weeks on end, but refused to give the names of her fellow resistance fighters. Several months later, she was deported to Ravensbrück. Women from across Europe were sent to that camp: a thousand from the Netherlands, eight thousand from France, eighteen thousand from Russia and a staggering forty thousand from Poland. They were condemned to forced labour, death, or a fate perhaps even more harrowing. Póltawska belonged to the group that faced the most extreme trials. She was one of eighty-six *Kaninchen* ('rabbits') – including seventy-four Polish women – who were subjected to all sorts of unimaginably cruel pseudo-medical experiments at the hands of various German doctors.

In these experiments, bones were deliberately broken and infected with bacteria in order to test the efficacy of treatments. The 'rabbits' endured unimaginable pain, and Póltawska was on the verge of throwing herself into the electrified barbed wire that surrounded the camp on more than one occasion. However, she survived, thanks to fellow prisoners who took care of her. Póltawska left Ravensbrück, but Ravensbrück never really left her. For a long time after the war, if anyone asked her who she was, she would automatically respond: number 7709.

It is that final detail of her account that I have never been able to shake. It fostered the insight that lies at the heart of my philosophy: a human being owes their humanity to their fellow human beings. It is only when others recognise and treat us as human that we come to understand ourselves as such. When that fails to happen, we become a number, a thing; we are dehumanised.

We are all responsible for safeguarding each other's humanity and freedom. That is precisely what the ten women in this book accomplished. That is why they were beacons of light in their dark times, and they continue to be for ours. Darkness comes in many shades of grey, and I do not mean to suggest that the darkness of today's world is the same as that of the First World War, the years of Terror in the Soviet Union, or the Second World War. Ultimately, only history can judge the darkness of an era. Life can only be lived in the present and understood retrospectively. The fact remains that we are always suspended in a field of forces that humanise and dehumanise, that constrain and liberate. History is like a pendulum between these forces. It is up to us, as human beings, to ensure the pendulum does not swing towards the wrong side.

Apathy

The displacement, unfreedom and dehumanisation that people inflict on each other constitute an evil that is made possible by another evil: apathy. Every ounce of apathy we add to the world renders it more inhospitable. The hatred of a few may be the engine of evil, but it is the apathy of the many that fuels it.

All the women in this book answered one fundamental question with their lives and philosophies: can I detach myself from the suffering of my fellow human being? The answer to this question can be found in the way Simone Weil lived, and how she made the notion of 'attention' the very core of her philosophy on humanity and morality. The answer can be found in the way Edith Stein lived, and how she placed the notion of 'empathy' at the heart of her life and work. It can be found throughout the work of Hannah Arendt, most notably in her notion of *humanitas*. It lives in Anna Achmatova's poetry, and in the way her poems were passed on: through deeply intense friendships. It can be found in Judith Shklar and Barbara Skarga's hopeful pessimism about human nature. It is present in everything Rosa Luxemburg thought and did.

The shadow of both left-wing and right-wing evil hangs over my life, which is why my choice of whom to begin this book with may come as a surprise. In any case, it surprised me to discover in Rosa Luxemburg a figure whom I have come to admire and deeply respect, even though her name is inextricably linked to the communism that scarred my life. I always kept Rosa Luxemburg at arm's length, due to my aversion to communism and the doctrinaire character of the so-called scientific socialism preached by Marxists. As a student of philosophy, I read Leszek Kołakowski's groundbreaking 'Main Currents of Marxism', in which he provides a critical analysis of Luxemburg. But despite everything, I found myself slowly drawn to her, for three reasons. Firstly, she was genuinely concerned about the fate of the poor and dispossessed. Secondly, she spared herself nothing in her efforts to change that fate. She is an example of political action, of the conviction that you must not stand by powerlessly as an individual, that you must not submit to fate, but that you can actually shape it yourself. Luxemburg lived true to her convictions. Third of all, she was exceptionally courageous when it came to expressing her opinions. She dared to disagree with anyone and everyone; she not only opposed her political adversaries, but also spoke frankly and freely with party comrades and friends. She embodied the value of freedom of thought and speech. The answer to the question of how we should relate to the world's suffering is also embodied by Etty Hillesum, who dug into the depths of her soul to find the other there. All of the women in this book developed a mature political understanding, with the exception of Hillesum, who was only just setting out on her intellectual journey. She is not deemed a major political thinker. Her life and ideas, cut short in Auschwitz, bear witness to an inner search in which the political reality barely seemed to penetrate. And still she drew from her time one of the most important political lessons: the courage not to hate, even in the face of what was unfolding. Hatred is no foundation for political action, but can all too often become its result.

Unfortunately, we are living in an era in which hatred is evident in global politics. We are living in an era in which millions of people are living in unfreedom or displacement. We are living in an era in which millions of people are being treated inhumanely by their fellow citizens. And we are living in an era in which we are all aware of this; in a globalised world, the world news enters our living rooms and even our pockets, through the screens of our televisions, computers and smartphones. Very few can claim ignorance. *Wir wissen es*. We know. How, then, should we stand in relation to it: to both the suffering in the world as well as our awareness of that suffering? How are we to go on living our lives while the lives of so many are being taken from them?

Each person must respond to that through their own life. I hope that the women in this book can inspire the reader to find a worthy answer. When we watch the news, and know what is going on in the world, it can't harm us to think of Jeanne Hersch: a Jewish woman who went to Germany in 1933 to experience what the rise of Nazism really entailed. She lived in Switzerland during the war and helped Jews to escape Nazism, but spent her whole life feeling that she hadn't done enough. She wrote, 'That distance I maintained from the events, even during the war, while my mother's entire family was being murdered – that is something I cannot understand, and cannot forgive myself for.'

(i)

When we consider our own attitude towards the world, it can't harm us to think of Martha Gellhorn, and the most poignant words of her oeuvre. Gellhorn was working as a war correspondent in Dachau when she learned of the end of the Second World War. An emaciated prisoner standing nearby reacted to the news with a half-hearted applause. Gellhorn remarked that the end of the war deserved a little more joy than that. 'It's a bit late,' the prisoner replied. Those words haunted Gellhorn for the rest of her life. She, too, felt that she had awakened to the horrors of Nazism too late. She had heard of Dachau and of political prisoners being tortured as early as 1933. But she had underestimated the scale of evil. She never forgave herself for that.

If I watch the world news today and see the same conflicts dragging on endlessly, see politicians stalling when action is necessary and hesitating to take measures against corrupt regimes and murderous leaders because economic interests take precedence over moral principles, I often think of those words: it's a bit late. What holds for politics also holds for us as citizens, as people. Now is always the right time to do good. Evil and suffering in the world are ceaseless, which is why those who fight it must do so ceaselessly too. The ten women in this book knew this or came to know it, and they lived their lives accordingly. In matters of morality, to delay is always to lose, and later will always be too late.

(i) Skarga, 2022, p. 399.

(ii) Dufour, 1986, p. 37.