

# Xenophobia and anti-Semitism in the Concept of Polish Literature

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## From Literature to Literatures

'Literature' is a body of writings, be it novels, stories, plays, or poetry. In the past, the term used to cover also other genres – such as religious texts, scholarly works, or technical guides – that nowadays are not usually subsumed under the label of literature. In the modern period the meaning of literature became limited to belles lettres, that is, basically fiction, be it in verse, prose or dialog. Furthermore, this originally French term differentiates between the best works of this kind and the rest, the distinction of 'literature' often reserved only for the former. This normative exclusion constitutes the basis of the 'canon' of literature, meaning the best, standard works. The western idea of such a selection, as carried out by an elite, goes back to the theological concept of deciding which books of the Christian Bible are 'true' and should be officially approved. This was the original 'canon,' and until recently many literate persons limited themselves to perusing the Bible.

Prior to the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, in western and central Europe, literature meant mainly the body of writings in Latin. Translations into nascent vernaculars or original works composed in them were marginal to the Latin-language canon. The pendulum switched in favor of vernaculars after the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Afterward, with the decline of writings in Latin, in the west – as coterminous with western and central Europe – literature began to be construed in secular terms, and increasingly in plural. The previously single literature became numerous literatures, separated from one another by languages in which they were written. Because religion remained the main ideology of power and statehood legitimation until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, often the confession of authors was taken into consideration as the yardstick for separating, for instance, 'Catholic literature' from 'Protestant literature.' The western concept of literature got adopted in the Orthodox countries of eastern Europe and the Balkans from the turn of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while among Jews and in Muslim countries of the Balkans and Middle East only from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Hence, initially, 'literatures of other faiths' did not feature in the European (western) discourse on the Protestant-Catholic cleavage. In the case of German-language writings, this cleavage was exemplified by universal in their aspirations multivolume authoritative encyclopedias. Catholic intellectuals and readers sided with the Catholic reference, namely, *Herders Conversations-Lexikon* (first edition published in 1825-1827), while their Protestant counterparts with the *Meyers Konversations-Lexikon* (first edition came off the press in 1840-1850). To a degree, the creators of both encyclopedias drew at Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751-1766), which did not promote any religion, its guiding principles being the Enlightenment values of secularism and reason. This French tradition of universalism that transcended the narrow confines of religion and language, to a degree, emulated

the then already lost Latin-based cultural unity of the west. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, French replaced Latin as the 'universal and most rational language.' Antoine de Rivarol developed this argument in his (in)famous essay *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* (On the Universality of the French Language), written in 1784 for the competition held by the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin.

### **From Nationalism to National Literatures**

Vernacular literati disliked this domination of French as the presumably 'universal' language of diplomacy, nobility, scholarship, culture and social advancement. During the period of ancien régime, such literati had no choice but to acquiesce to the estate pressure of nobles in this regard. But soon the French Revolution destroyed the old world, replacing it, in western Europe and the postcolonial Americas, with republican nationalism. This change, though stopped midway in central and eastern Europe after the Congress of Vienna (1815), gave a boost to literatures in vernaculars. Soon the lowly vernaculars were rebranded as full-fledged and increasingly dominant national languages, or even as official languages in polities created for this or that nation, meaning all the population of a given state.

As a result, literature was also 'nationalized.' It was construed as part, or even the basis, of national culture in a given nation-state. National literatures were defined through language or the state citizenship of authors. Writers creating works in Dutch, English and Italian were seen as producing Dutch, English and Italian literatures, respectively. However, American authors writing in English produced the American literature of the United States, rather than English literature, this designation reserved for Britain's literary production. In a similar, though confessionally impacted vein, Catholic Belgium's writers created Belgian literature, both in Dutch and French. Any commonality of Belgian literature with that of the Netherlands (also authored in Dutch) was prevented by the latter nation-state's ideological Protestantism. Similarly, post-revolutionary France's secularism did not allow for the submergence of the French leg of Belgium's literature with French literature.

In central Europe, where the multiethnic empires of Austria-Hungary, Germany, the Ottomans and Russia survived until after the Great War, language became the very basis of the region's national movements. In accordance with the tenets of ethnolinguistic nationalism, all speakers of a language equate the nation. In turn, the territory compactly inhabited by the language's speakers (speech community) should be overhauled into a nation-state for such a nation. While in western Europe and postcolonial states outside this continent, typically state is primary to language, in central (and to a degree in eastern) Europe it is the other way round. Not surprisingly, in this region, between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, numerous literatures emerged solely defined by this or that national language. More so than elsewhere in the world, linguistically construed literatures became part and parcel of central (and eastern) Europe's national projects.

Outside Eurasia, usually, literatures are not created in indigenous languages, but in the language of the former colonial powers. Hence, French-language works written in Guinea

or Canada are seen as part of French literature. The same is true of English-language writings produced in India or South Africa, which tend to be seen as 'belonging to' English literature. This tendency is even more pronounced in the case of books composed in Portuguese, be it in Angola, Brazil, or Portugal, which in the eyes of literary scholars constitute a single Portuguese literature. Closer to central Europe, the phenomenon is observed in many post-Soviet states, where a variety of authors write in the post-imperial and post-Soviet language of Russian. Their books, rather than subsumed into Estonian, Turkmen(istani) or Ukrainian literature, are perceived as part of the singular Russian literature, which 'properly' belongs to Russia and its 'transnational' Russian nation.

Significantly, elites in numerous non-Eurasian nation-states do not see national literature as an important prerequisite to statehood or national politics. Millions of citizens in Botswana, Chad, or South Sudan are content to live their political, social and cultural lives without the legitimizing prop of any distinctive Botswanan, Chadian or South Sudanese literature. On the other hand, Spanish-language writers in Chile, Ecuador, or Paraguay do not see themselves as creators of their specific countries' literatures but rather contribute to the continent-wide Latin American literature. What is more, Latin American literature is quite multilingual, because also Portuguese-language writers from Brazil, English-language writers from Belize, or Dutch-language writers from Suriname contribute to it.

## **Yiddishland**

Until the Holocaust, the majority of the world's Jews lived in central Europe, or more exactly in the lands of the former Commonwealth of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (in short, Poland-Lithuania). In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Habsburgs, Prussia and Russia partitioned this Commonwealth out of existence. Poland-Lithuania was erased from the political map of Europe. But the Jewish population living in the Polish-Lithuanian lands, in the course of modernization, gradually secularized and began to emulate central Europe's ethnolinguistic nationalisms. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they predominantly settled on Yiddish as their national language. The proponents of Ivrit (Modern Hebrew) remained just a significant minority.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Yiddish-language writers created a body of literature in this language, which gave much cultural substance to Yiddishland, with close to 12 million speakers of this language. Unlike in the case of other national languages in central Europe, Yiddish literature did not become a basis for a territorially-based national project. Yiddishland was *not* to become a Yiddish nation-state. Trusting in the Enlightenment ideals of emancipation, modernity and equality before law, Yiddish-speakers believed that they can enjoy and create their Yiddish culture in conjunction with the languages and cultures of these nation-states where they happened to live as these polities' citizens. This hope turned out well in New York, which nowadays – among other salient characteristics – is also the world's largest Jewish city. Jews constitute over a tenth of the city's population, or about 1.5 million nowadays. That is so, because American nationalism does not hinge on a language. No piece of federal legislation designates any language as official in the United States.

Meanwhile, the situation of Jews became difficult and then tragic in central Europe. The region's ethnolinguistic nation-state did not tolerate any other languages that could impinge on the national language's monopoly in culture and politics. After the Great War, the leading Zionist leader, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, rightly predicted that minorities and especially Jews would not be tolerated in central Europe's ethnolinguistic nation-states, but most disregarded his clear-eyed prophecy.<sup>1</sup> Despite these difficulties, Yiddish-language literature and culture flourished in interwar Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, or Poland. Yiddish-language writers and intellectuals also flocked to the Soviet Union. In 1924 the Kremlin made Yiddish a co-official language in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, and ten years later founded a Jewish Autonomous Region for Yiddish-speakers in Birobidzhan on the Soviet-Chinese border in the Far East. But already in 1938, Yiddish was decommissioned in Soviet Belarus, while its role was scaled down in favor of Russian in Birobidzhan.

The Holocaust dealt the final blow to Yiddishland in central Europe, where wartime Germany and its allies wiped out nine-tenths of the region's Yiddish-speakers. About a tenth of the interwar population survived, mostly in the Soviet Union. After World War II, many survivors attempted to recreate a modicum of Yiddishland in this country and in the Soviet-dominated communist Poland. But their efforts were cut short by the adoption of anti-Semitism as a legitimate element of state policy and ideology, first in the early 1950s in the Soviet Union, and then in Poland, especially after 1968. In Israel, where Ivrit was announced to be the nation-state's official and national language, Holocaust survivors were prevented from establishing a viable sphere of secular Yiddish-language literature and culture. On the other hand, the attraction of American culture, combined with the pronounced absence of Yiddishland in post-Holocaust central Europe, led to the generational switch from Yiddish to English in New York during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **What Is Polish Literature?**

The Polish nation-state was founded in 1918. In the national master narrative Poland is proposed to be a direct continuation of Poland-Lithuania, but this nation-state is anything but. From the spatial perspective interwar Poland overlapped with about half of Poland-Lithuania's territory. On the other hand, post-1945 Poland contains only a third of the Polish-Lithuanian lands. What is more, a third of the country's present-day territory used to belong to Germany and the Free City of Danzig before World War II. Poland-Lithuania was an estate polity, where the nobility and clergy ruled over unfree serfs. The former constituted less than a tenth of the population, while the latter almost 85 per cent, the rest composed from the tiny group of burghers. In Poland-Lithuania only the nobles and clergy were referred to as 'Poles.' In interwar Poland, a third of the inhabitants used other languages than Polish and professed other faiths than Catholicism. In postwar Poland practically all the inhabitants speak Polish, while 95 percent are Catholics or of Catholic origin.

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<sup>1</sup> Henryk Grynberg. 2018. *Memorybuch*. Wołowiec: Czarne, p 26.

Given the unusual importance of literature for creating, legitimizing and maintaining nations in central Europe, the question arises what Polish literature is, the subject being the staple of the country's school curricula. As dictated by the master narrative, the 'commonsensical' answer provided in today's Polish school proposes that Polish literature amounts to all belles lettres written in the Polish language. In the popular view it means all writings produced on the territory of Poland, because no other language is official or national in this country. In accordance with the ideological assumptions of ethnolinguistic nationalism, the linguistic and territorial principles should fully overlap. Hence, literature written in Poland should be composed in Polish only, while by definition Polish-language works must be created within the Poland's frontiers.

This simplistic opinion is often anachronistically projected into the past. From this nationalist perspective of the 'historical principle,' all literature written in Poland-Lithuania was 'naturally' jotted down in Polish, or authored by 'Poles,' if they happened to compose their works in the non-national Catholic tongue of Latin. Rarely does a Polish school textbook of history mention Orthodox and Greek Catholic writers who employed the Cyrillic-based language of Ruthenian, Jews who wrote in Hebrew and Yiddish with the use of Hebrew letters, Tatars who employed their Arabic script-based Slavic, burghers who tended to write in (Low) German, Armenians who wrote in (Old) Armenian and Kipchak with the use of the Armenian alphabet, let alone Lithuanian- or Latvian-language writers. If the issue is raised during a history lesson, most often than not it is brushed aside as marginal, the teacher authoritatively – but speciously – opining that Polish was the sole official language in Poland-Lithuania.

In this manner, all of Yiddishland is brushed away, as presumably 'marginal,' from the cultural panorama of interwar Poland, and the same treatment is meted out to the country's writers who composed their works in Belarusian, Czech, German, Hebrew, Kashubian, Lithuanian, Mazurian, Russian, Silesian or Ukrainian. In postwar Poland the few remaining writers in these 'non-Polish' languages were even more strenuously silenced, and even persecuted. On top of that, next to no attention is paid to German-language writers from the German territories east of the Oder-Neisse line, which the Allies passed to Poland after 1945.

## **Complications**

The seemingly straightforward concept of Polish literature as created through the mutually reinforcing overlap of the aforementioned linguistic, territorial and historic principles hinges on the unnoticed marginalization and forgetting of masses of writings done in other languages than Polish and composed by numerous authors of non-Catholic extraction. Likewise, no comment is spared on the ideological union between descendants of Poland-Lithuania's Catholic nobles and Catholic serfs, or 'real Poles' and 'non-Poles' from the estate perspective. Somehow, it does not matter whether a present-day Polish writer is of the former or latter origin. At present both groups are seen as equally Polish (at the expense of the exclusion of other post-Polish-Lithuanian groups). No distinction is made between their books, all of them are deemed to be legitimate parts of Polish literature. Obviously, had Poland-Lithuania's nobles and clergy alone been overhauled in a Polish nation, a putative literature created by Polish-

speaking descendants of serfs would have been decried as 'un-Polish.' Hence, ideologues of Polish ethnolinguistic nationalism, if they choose so, are well able to excel at generous inclusion.

Especially in interwar Poland and nowadays in postcommunist Poland the oft-repeated oxymoronic label of 'un-Polish Polish-language' literature is specifically reserved for works of Polish novelists and poets of the Jewish religion or origin, many of whom were bilingual and also actively contributed to Yiddishland's culture. Hence, Polish nationalists tend to deny Polishness to works by such excellent poets as Julian Tuwim<sup>2</sup> or Bolesław Leśmian,<sup>3</sup> though as kids they read their poems in school anthologies. Likewise, their parents amused them with beloved children's poems by Jan Brzechwa,<sup>4</sup> also an author of Jewish extraction. But such openly Jewish authors in the choice of their topics and comments as Zuzanna Ginczanka<sup>5</sup> or Henryk Grynberg<sup>6</sup> continue to be omitted from the Polish language and literature curricula for schools in today's Poland. Although, Polish émigré authors of Catholic origin were included in textbooks of Polish literature after the fall of communism in 1989 (for instance, Czesław Miłosz,<sup>7</sup> Gustaw Herling-Grudziński,<sup>8</sup> or Witold Gombrowicz<sup>9</sup>), those who had settled in Israel continue to be excluded (for example, Kalman Segal,<sup>10</sup> Halina Birenbaum,<sup>11</sup> or Natan Gross<sup>12</sup>).

The long-lasting remembrance of the ethnoconfessional cleavage takes precedence in the case of these Polish (and Yiddish) authors of the Jewish religion or origin. However, the openly declared Protestant religion or origin of such a popular contemporary novelist as Jerzy Pilch<sup>13</sup> does not prevent lauding him as a Polish writer and featuring his writings in school anthologies of Polish literature. Furthermore, the proud Lutheran and Polish-Lithuanian noble Mikołaj Rej<sup>14</sup> can be considered one of the founders of Polish language and literature. Hence, the 'religious principle' of exclusion, as practiced by Polish nationalists, is almost solely directed at authors of the Jewish religion or origin.

The same is true in regard of Poland's Yiddish-language writers, alongside Isaac Bashevis Singer,<sup>15</sup> or the sole Yiddish winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. To the contrary, there was no problem to include his books within the confines of American literature, as attested by the 2004 three-volume edition of his stories in the Library of America.<sup>16</sup> This book series publishes the canon of American literature. But authors of Polish school textbooks have no qualms about claiming the English-language oeuvre of

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian\\_Tuwim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_Tuwim)

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolesław\\_Leśmian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolesław_Leśmian)

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan\\_Brzechwa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Brzechwa)

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zuzanna\\_Ginczanka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zuzanna_Ginczanka)

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henryk\\_Grynberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henryk_Grynberg)

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Czesław\\_Miłosz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Czesław_Miłosz)

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustaw\\_Herling-Grudziński](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustaw_Herling-Grudziński)

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witold\\_Gombrowicz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witold_Gombrowicz)

<sup>10</sup> [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalman\\_Segal](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalman_Segal)

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halina\\_Birenbaum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halina_Birenbaum)

<sup>12</sup> [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natan\\_Gross](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natan_Gross)

<sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerzy\\_Pilch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerzy_Pilch)

<sup>14</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikołaj\\_Rej](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikołaj_Rej)

<sup>15</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac\\_Bashevis\\_Singer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Bashevis_Singer)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.loa.org/writers/111-isaac-bashevis-singer>

the Polish-Lithuanian-noble-turned-British-writer Joseph Conrad's<sup>17</sup> as part of Polish literature, his name usefully semi-re-Polonized as Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski.<sup>18</sup> The Holocaust survivor and survivor of the 1968 ethnic cleansing, Michał Friedman,<sup>19</sup> in 1988, founded a book series Biblioteka Pisarzy Żydowskich (Library of Jewish Writers).<sup>20</sup> Until 2005, 16 volumes of Polish translations from Yiddish and Hebrew were published, but none has made it to any school anthology of Polish literature. This anti-Semitic in its character exclusion from Polish literature of Polish authors of the Jewish religion or origin, who happen to write in Hebrew, Polish or Yiddish, continues to this day in presumably democratic Poland, a member state of the European Union and NATO.

Numerous Belarusian, Lithuanian or Ukrainian writers active between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries (for instance, Ivan Franko,<sup>21</sup> Vincent Dunin-Marcinkievič,<sup>22</sup> or Antanas Baranauskas<sup>23</sup>), stemmed from the ranks of Polish-Lithuanian nobility, knew Polish, but chose to write in the then emerging new national languages of their environs. To this day, many intellectuals from Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine regularly visit Poland and read books in Polish. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet Adam Mickiewicz<sup>24</sup> is claimed for each post-Polish-Lithuanian literature and his works are anthologized in textbooks for Belarusian, Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian schools. Furthermore, the historical and cultural commonality of these four post-Polish-Lithuanian countries' national literatures is underpinned by the persisting ghost of Yiddishland. Yiddish-language writers often knew other post-Polish-Lithuanian languages, and also wrote in them or translated between these languages and Yiddish.

After the end of communism, some regional activists and open-minded elite intellectuals reached out to the previously denied tradition of German-language literature in the lands that Poland had gained from Germany after World War II. The German author stemming from interwar Danzig (now Gdańsk in Poland) who also won a Nobel Prize in Literature, Günter Grass,<sup>25</sup> was reinvented in Poland as a Kashubian writer. The books of another renowned German writer, this time from Upper Silesia (a former German region, nowadays in Poland), Horst Bienek,<sup>26</sup> were published in Polish translations to much acclaim. The popular German-language children writer, Janosch<sup>27</sup> – or 'a Brzechwa of today's Germany' – comes from the same region. His books in Polish translations proved a runaway success among Polish kids, too. But these biographic, territorial and historical links are deemed too tenuous for including their writings in the lofty house of Polish literature, as taught as a school subject in today's Poland. There is no place in it for an 'Austrian-cum-German Adam Mickiewicz,' or Joseph Eichendorff,<sup>28</sup> either, though he was

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<sup>17</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph\\_Conrad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Conrad)

<sup>18</sup> Cf <http://www.sto.org.pl/szkola/109/spoleczna-szkola-podstawowa-im-josepha-conrada-korzeniowskiego-w-tychach>

<sup>19</sup> [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michał\\_Friedman](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michał_Friedman)

<sup>20</sup> [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michał\\_Friedman#Tłumaczenia\\_literatury\\_pięknej](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michał_Friedman#Tłumaczenia_literatury_pięknej)

<sup>21</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan\\_Franko](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Franko)

<sup>22</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vintsent\\_Dunin-Martsinkyevich](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vintsent_Dunin-Martsinkyevich)

<sup>23</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antanas\\_Baranauskas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antanas_Baranauskas)

<sup>24</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam\\_Mickiewicz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Mickiewicz)

<sup>25</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Günter\\_Grass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Günter_Grass)

<sup>26</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horst\\_Bienek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horst_Bienek)

<sup>27</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janosch>

<sup>28</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph\\_Freiherr\\_von\\_Eichendorff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Freiherr_von_Eichendorff)

born and lived in Upper Silesia. According to Polish nationalists, German, like Yiddish, cannot be considered a Polish language, or a language of Polish culture and literature. However, as mentioned above, the English language of Joseph Conrad's writings proves to be no obstacle in this regard. The same is true of Jan Potocki's<sup>29</sup> French-language picaresque novel *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*.<sup>30</sup> It seems that the English- and French-language writings of both authors are included in Polish literature on the strength of their 'ur-Polishness,' courtesy of the fact that they were Polish-Lithuanian nobles. Hence, when Conrad and Potocki were already Poles, this distinction was still denied to Slavophone Catholic serfs toiling in the fields owned by both writers' families.

The Slavic microlanguages languages<sup>31</sup> of Kashubian, Mazurian and Silesian are employed, respectively, in the vicinity of Gdańsk, around Olsztyn, and in Upper Silesia. After the passing of the homelands these languages' speakers from Germany to Poland in 1945, the Kashubs, Mazurs and (Upper) Silesians were claimed to be Poles. But to this day, Polish nationalists treat them as 'crypto-Germans.' Likewise, their languages are classified as 'dialects of the Polish language,' though in quotidian relations they are seen as the sure 'proof' of the 'foreignness,' 'un-Polishness' and 'concealed Germanness' of these ethnic groups. The postwar persecution of the Mazurs in communist Poland was heightened due to their 'un-Polish' faith of Lutheranism.<sup>32</sup> Hence, by the turn of the 1970s the majority of Mazurs had left for West Germany. In 2005 Warsaw finally recognized Kashubian as a regional language, but the most renowned Kashubian-language writer, Aleksander Majkowski<sup>33</sup> remains unknown in Poland, and his works do not feature in school anthologies of Polish literature. Likewise, Mazurian-language writings<sup>34</sup> are barred from school curricula in Poland. Despite the fact that after Polish, Silesian is the second largest language in today's Poland, in school textbooks no attention is paid to the poetry of Óndra Łysohorsky,<sup>35</sup> whom, in 1970, Switzerland nominated to the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The same high-handed disregard and marginalization is the fate of the Belarusian writer Sakrat Janovič<sup>36</sup> who lived in Poland and wrote both in Belarusian and Polish, or of the Ukrainian writer Andrii Bondar,<sup>37</sup> who settled in this country in 2016. The oeuvre of the Romani-language poet Papusza<sup>38</sup> was translated into Polish by her friend, Jerzy Ficowski,<sup>39</sup> a poet and distinguished translator from Hungarian, Romani, Russian and Yiddish. On top of that, all around the world Papusza is recognized as the first major Romani poet ever. She lived her entire life in Poland, and was the first Romani-language author to give a written witness account of the Roma Holocaust<sup>40</sup> (Kali Traš) in the form

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<sup>29</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan\\_Potocki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Potocki)

<sup>30</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Manuscript\\_Found\\_in\\_Saragossa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Manuscript_Found_in_Saragossa)

<sup>31</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavic\\_microlanguages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavic_microlanguages)

<sup>32</sup> Cf [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rose\\_\(2011\\_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rose_(2011_film))

<sup>33</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksander\\_Majkowski](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksander_Majkowski)

<sup>34</sup> Cf <https://pismiono.com/zaginiona-mazurska-powieśc-sprzed-120-lat-rzuca-nowe-swiatło-na-jezyk-mazurów/>

<sup>35</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Óndra\\_Łysohorsky](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Óndra_Łysohorsky)

<sup>36</sup> [https://be-tarask.wikipedia.org/wiki/Сакрат\\_Яновіч](https://be-tarask.wikipedia.org/wiki/Сакрат_Яновіч)

<sup>37</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Бондар\\_Андрій\\_Володимирович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Бондар_Андрій_Володимирович)

<sup>38</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bronisława\\_Wajs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bronisława_Wajs)

<sup>39</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerzy\\_Ficowski](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerzy_Ficowski)

<sup>40</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani\\_genocide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani_genocide)



of a haunting narrative song-poem. In 2013 an award-winning feature film was devoted to her tragic life and poetry.<sup>41</sup> Yet none of these rare achievements has earned her a suitable place in Polish literature.

## **Polish Literature 2.0?**

After the founding of the Polish nation-state in 1918, xenophobia and anti-Semitism have limited Polish literature and its cross-pollinating connections with the wider world of global culture. Times and again these constraints, dictated by the Polish ethnolinguistic nationalism, have seriously stunted the development and imagination of Polish literature, including its creators and readers. Ideologues of Polish nationalism saw it as a must that the Polish mind must be closed and safely isolated from the inherent 'foreignness' of the rest of the world. Other languages, and especially the languages of the neighboring states and of the minorities living in Poland are portrayed as a 'danger' to the Polish nation and its language and culture. But in reality these are the indispensable 'yeast' of creative ferment, without which Polish literature is condemned to incestuous naval-gazing. A strong disagreement to such a downgraded role of Polish literature, in addition then tightly controlled by censors in communist Poland, gave rise to the burgeoning samizdat publishing industry at the turn of the 1980s.

This cultural grassroots and dissident inclusiveness of the Age of Solidarity<sup>42</sup> carried over to democratic Poland in the 1990s. However, the difficulties of the economic transition and the gradual fortification of ethnolinguistic nationalism as the main guideline of Polish politics sidelined literature as a whole, and swiftly limited its newly-found inclusiveness. The Armenian, Austrian-Galician, Belarusian, Czech, Esperanto, Hebrew, Ivrit, German-Prussian, Kashubian, Lemko-Rusyn, Latvian, Lithuanian, Mazurian, Romani, Silesian, Slovak, Tatar, Ukrainian, or Yiddish roots of Polish culture and literature, as moored in the tradition of Poland-Lithuania, were forgotten and willed out from the active remembrance. Ironically, the turning point was the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century marked by Poland's membership in NATO and the European Union, achieved in 1999 and 2004, respectively. The attention of Polish intellectuals, writers, publishers and critics decisively moved toward the predominantly Anglo-American west, as mediated through the 'global' language of English. Translations from English replaced and further marginalized the multiple post-Polish-Lithuanian cultural traditions intimately and multidimensionally interwoven with Polish literature, culture and language.

In 2015 ethnonationalists gained power in Poland, and with that control over culture and education. The ruling party combined both in its program and activities, making culture, history, politics and even economy into one. This holistic national oneness presupposes ideological 'purity' of one language, one nation, one culture, one religion, one history, one memory, one economy. All must be Polish through and through, entailing the continuous deepening of national homogeneity through the never-ending purge of 'foreign elements' that presumably 'invade' Polishness from without and within. Pure

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<sup>41</sup> [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papusza\\_\(film\\_2013\)](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papusza_(film_2013))

<sup>42</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solidarity\\_\(Polish\\_trade\\_union\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solidarity_(Polish_trade_union))

Polish culture is seen as identical with and the very prerequisite of Polish capital, industry, economy and politics. *Geschichtspolitik* (politics of memory) became present-day Poland's economy, culture and governance. Polish history is now, the future and the timeless always and forever. With the ideologically decreed abolishment of time and reason, past military defeats, historical wrongs and erstwhile economic collapses may be now at long last rectified. It is high time the Others would finally pay for their 'sins' committed against the 'inherently blameless' Polish nation.

How counterproductive, divisive, self-limiting, un-Polish – that is, un-Polish-Lithuanian – this approach to politics and culture is. Nationalists reject the heartfelt appeal of the 1997 Polish Constitution's Preamble that democratic Poland should dwell on the best multicultural, multiethnic, polyglot and polyconfessional traditions of Poland-Lithuania and interwar Poland. That democratic Poland's nation should remain bound in community with their compatriots strewn across the world, irrespective of any difference in language, religion, origin, gender, social, or economic status. Instead, the increasingly violent and exclusivist struggle for national purity, as previously practiced in the latter 1930s, seems to be back. The half-opened Polish mind of the turn of the 1990s is being forced to close again.

Literature, open and broadminded Polish literature 2.0, is a chance for preserving the endangered constitutional values and political freedoms, and even for turning the brown tide that currently engulfs Poland. It can be done if creators of Polish literature become receptive to and engages in dialogue with their Polish-Lithuanian roots and with the cultures and languages of all the post-Polish-Lithuanian states, and of the ethnolinguistic minorities living in today's Poland. This benchmark of required openness and inclusiveness continues to be fulfilled by some authors and their works. For this very achievement the incumbent government flatly rejects their works and strenuously and unjustly denigrates them with arguments *ad homini*.<sup>43</sup> The latest examples of this kind of cultural achievements are provided by Olga Tokarczuk's<sup>44</sup> monumental novel *The Books of Jacob*,<sup>45</sup> and by the British-Polish director, Paweł Pawlikowski's,<sup>46</sup> film *Ida*,<sup>47</sup> which won an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film of 2014.

Therefore, there is hope. Writers, filmmakers, poets, translators, or singers may take a different course than that of xenophobic and anti-Semitic ethnolinguistic national homogeneity, which is now preferred by the Polish powers that be.

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<sup>43</sup> Cf <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/234878-pluzanski-ida-to-film-antypolski-ktory-przynosi-wiecej-szkody-niz-pozytku-nie-ciesze-sie-z-tego-oscaru-nasz-wywiad> ; <https://www.salon24.pl/u/ostatnimit/868676,czy-olga-tokarczuk-jest-polska-pisarka>

<sup>44</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olga\\_Tokarczuk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olga_Tokarczuk)

<sup>45</sup> [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ksiegi\\_Jakubowe](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ksiegi_Jakubowe)

<sup>46</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paweł\\_Pawlikowski](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paweł_Pawlikowski)

<sup>47</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ida\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ida_(film))