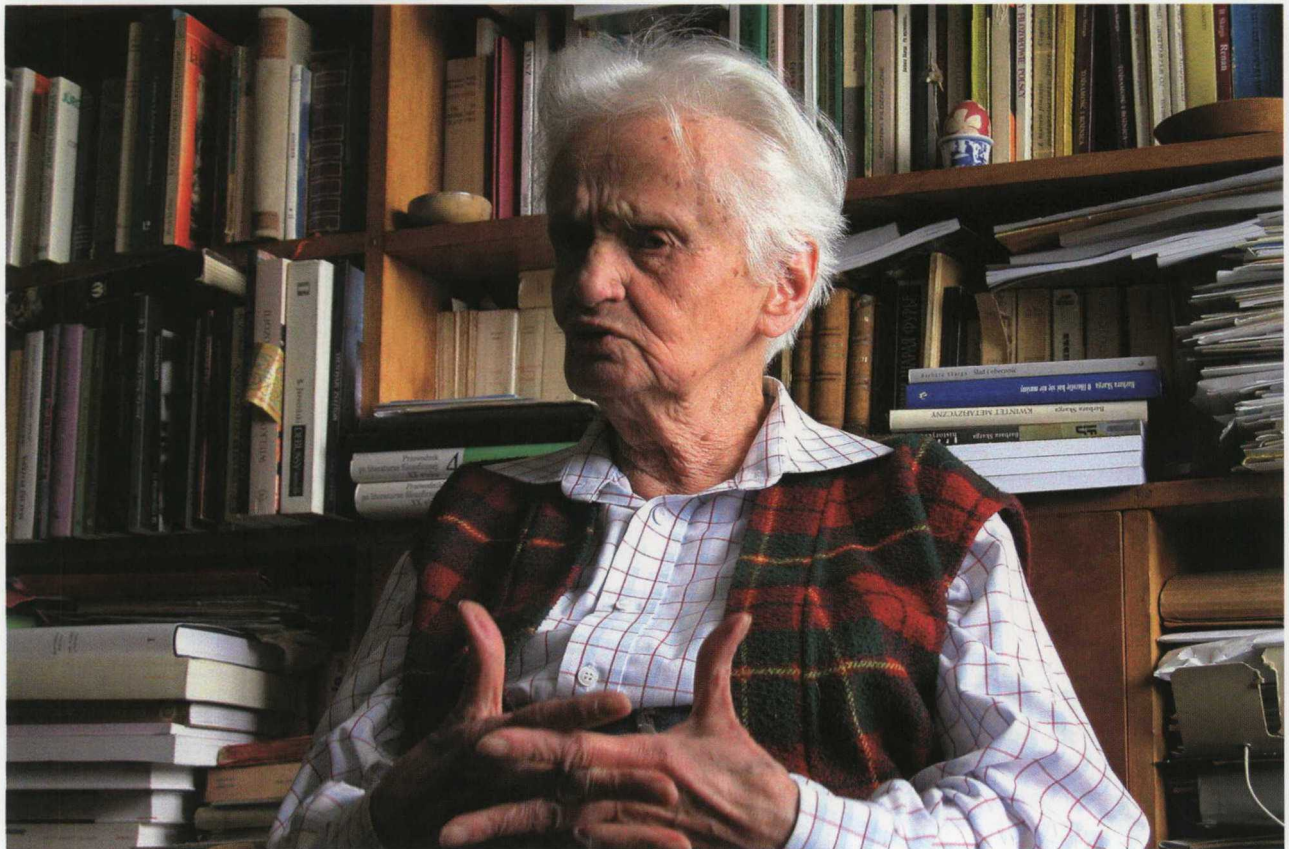


Interview with Professor Barbara Skarga

# One Must Try to Understand



Włodzisław Wasyluk/Reporter

*Metaphysics is just a question about human existence and about how far human thought can reach, what still remains open to it, and what is closed off*

**Academia:** I want to ask about your beginnings as a scholar, about your time studying at Stefan Batory University in Wilno (now Vilnius). How did you decide to study philosophy?

**Barbara Skarga:** That was my reaction to the a year and a half I had spent at Warsaw University of Technology.

You felt out of place there?

*I did well in physics and math, with top grades in those subjects. But when it came to drafting, machine science, and the like I was bored to death. Engineering lecturers, seminars, and labs were all obligatory, then the rest of*

*one's time was filled up with drafting work. Students were constantly busy. I didn't read a single book during that time. So I wanted to take a completely different direction, a different path. Because mathematics fascinated me, I took mathematics as a minor, philosophy as my major.*

I have just finished reading the second edition of your book *After Liberation... (1944–1956)*, which made a big impression on me. I was struck by how you write about the Russians. You were arrested on 8 September 1944 and spent eleven years in the gulags, full of terrible experiences. Despite that you seem to remain above harboring any dislike or hatred for

the very people who imprisoned you. How is that possible?

*Tygodnik Powszechny [Catholic weekly magazine] recently printed an interview with me where a young journalist tried to get me to speak hostilely about Russia. But I believe a person has to maintain a sense of distance towards their own experiences. Because every country has its own problems and past tragedies, especially as far as Russia is concerned. The Russians have definitely suffered more than the Poles have. First the revolution, then the whole Stalinist era. The Poles represented a very small percentage of the gulags, after all. The camps were vast, with*



some 10 million people captive. They were Russians and Ukrainians.

You find it within yourself to speak of them with understanding and sympathy. Did you feel the same way back then?

*In After Liberation... I described a scene when two KGB girls were trying on my dress and light shoes. They made such eyes at that ordinary dress, those ordinary shoes. That was during the war, but that was how we Polish young women then dressed. They were enthralled with them, being unfamiliar with such things. These were suede shoes, and what were they wearing on their feet? Essentially peasant shoes. That first clash immediately makes one feel surprised as well as sorry for those people.*

When you think about contemporary Russia now, do you still maintain such a sense of distance and understanding?

*I don't always have a sense of distance, because a kind of tsarism is now prevailing there. But the system, the political class, is something entirely different from simple people somewhere out in the countryside, in small towns. Those were the kind of people I encountered. I was never in Moscow or Leningrad. The only Russian intelligentsia I met were in the camps.*

You are 25 years old when you were arrested. 11 years later, you returned to Poland as a 36-year-old woman. How did you embark upon a career as a scholar?

*I didn't know whether I would be suited to scholarly life. Above all I wanted to work, but in some way linked to scholarship. I was helped by my sister [the actor Hanna Skarżanka - editor's note]. If it were not for her connections, things would not have been so easy. She contacted Prof. Adam Schaff and explained the situation to him; Schaff summoned me in and immediately gave a job at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. Although*

*it was at the Bibliography Department. He said: "You have to grow accustomed to reading texts again. You have to return to reading."*

What did you start with?

*Preparing a volume on romanticism and the birth of Polish positivism. I had to read newspapers from those times, weekly magazines that had by then appeared, looking for various texts with a certain philosophical content and commenting on them. I would write up short notes on what each text contained and the issues it addressed. There I met people that I became great friends with: Prof. Władysław Śnička and Prof. Jerzy Korolec.*

When did you become interested in the philosophy of positivism? In French positivism?

*Back at the Bibliography Department I began to work on Polish philosophy out of necessity. On the end of romanticism, the beginnings of positivism. Naturally I read so much that I ended up knowing Polish positivism like the back of my hand. It made no sense for me to write a doctorate thesis about Heidegger, for example, so I wrote one about the birth of Polish positivism, although that*

*doesn't mean this was what I was most interested in. That's just the way things went. Later, once I shifted to Bronisław Baczko's Department of the History of Philosophy after 1961, I could choose myself a different topic. Because I had dealt with positivism for so long, I felt it would be good to approach French positivism, essentially the cradle of positivism. I then wrote a little volume on Auguste Comte.*

In one of your books, *Limits of Historicity*, you address a topic important for the development of science. You look at the development of human thought, pondering whether it represents a disperse mosaic of various elements or whether certain avenues of development are evident. "The development of human thought progresses on several levels at once. The summits merely mark the general directions. [...] In hindsight, when seeking the problems that human thought encountered in its development, one has to descend from those summits and ask whether it might have been down below, in connection with problems entirely strange and foreign to us, that the most important things actually occurred."

*I wanted to draw attention to one thing. I had written my doctorate about the birth of positivism, meaning that I*



Prof. Barbara Skarga attending a meeting at the French Embassy, where she was awarded the National Order of Merit by the French ambassador in December 2007

Adam Kozak / Agencja Gazeta



## Interview with Professor Barbara Skarga



Sławomir Kamiński / Agencja Gazeta

Ceremony marking the renewal of Prof. Barbara Skarga's doctorate in May 2008, here with University of Warsaw rector Prof. Katarzyna Chałasińska-Macukow

was intrigued about how new thought develops. On the basis of old traditions, as a departure from them, in dialog with them, as a rejection of them. My successive publications were about positivism's decline, how it ended and altered within the Comte school, becoming something increasingly different. I wrote about that in *Problems of the Intellect*. Because these are problems of the intellect when positivism in highly varied fields of human thought begins to transform or wane. In other words, I was already then interested not in positivism itself as such, but in human thought. In how human thought posits theories and why it abandons them. Within the limits of the historical system, one more thing needed to be perceived: that there are different levels of such thought through history.

Your books *Metaphysical Quintet* and *Man Is No Beautiful Animal*, on the other hand, represent a different field of philosophy. There you touch upon metaphysical issues.

Once I had written *Limits of Historicity*, I was done with history, fed up with it. And I was intrigued by other topics, other authors.

In *Metaphysical Quintet* you write that Prof. Kołakowski once said all of metaphysics comes down to deliberations of existence, time, evil, death, and love. You looked at two of these issues: time and evil. The positivist method speaks of three stages which every field of knowledge must pass through: first a theological stage, then a metaphysical stage, and then a positivist, meaning scientific stage. Yet your own thinking followed a different path. First you studied positivism, then turned to metaphysics. How did that happen?

I began to be interested in topics like time, evil, or simply humanity. One cannot approach these topics other than with metaphysical tools. Not the tools of religion, since this has nothing in common with religion. Quite the contrary. The tools of theology in some way destroy the topic. They force it into very

narrow bounds, constrain it, because they have a priori knowledge of the truth. But metaphysics is just a question. A question about human existence and about how far human thought can reach, what still remains open to it, and what is completely closed off. And that entails certain tools, above all a certain vocabulary, a metaphysical language that needs to be used in this case.

At the same time, aside from your research work and publications, you have always been active and outspoken on issues outside of philosophy, concerning important social and public issues.

Sometimes I do speak out. When something really makes me lose my temper. (laughs)

But not very many people in the scholarly field do so. What has led you to take such stances? You wouldn't have to...

Perhaps I don't have to. But I can't just remain silent.



Were you also involved in the Society of Science Courses [underground lectures during the communist era – editor's note]?

*I was, and then during the whole "Jaruzelski war" period Władysław Goldfinger-Kunicki and Witold Karczewski and I ran a Scholarship Fund, supporting about 100 individuals over those years. I was quite deeply involved in all those things, especially since I was constantly traveling to Paris for money. I was then being allowed to travel abroad. Once I had been given a passport in 1980 it was never taken away from me. During the long 1970s I had not been allowed to travel abroad.*

When was your first visit to France?

*Back in 1961.*

So your first trip to the West was to Paris?

*Yes, that was when I was studying positivism, so I went on a Polish Academy of Sciences travel grant. I went on a second such grant in 1966.*

What were your impressions there in 1961?

*I had the impression of finally being in the old Warsaw. That I had come home to a normal city. The city of my youth. One much larger and more affluent, but the same kind of city. I spent a lot of time at the National Library. I have a photograph of the reading room here behind my computer.*

Let's get back to the book *After Liberation...* In the gulag you were a hospital worker and helped people. You write that one has to maintain one's human dignity under the most difficult conditions. These days we don't have to live under such pressure. So what kind of person does one have to be to live through 11 years of such hell and to come out with great dignity, without hatred?

*I don't know. That's not a question for me. Perhaps one has to have a bit of*

*curiosity. Not to shut one's eyes and ears to everything. Perhaps one must try to understand.*

At the same time you describe scenes in the camp when you young people laughed and enjoyed yourselves under horrible conditions.

*Yes, that was our reaction to stupidity. When a person sees so much absurdity, their reaction is sometimes laughter. The French edition of that book is entitled Une absurde cruauté (An Absurd Cruelty).*

What shaped your character?

*I come from a gentry family. I have great respect for my mother, who was kind to people and understanding. She was always very well liked. And she set high standards for us children. She would say: "He is a shoemaker. You should be first to say good morning to him."*

Do you have a sense of self-fulfillment as a scholar?

*I don't know. I might have done something more interesting if it were not for the fact that I lost and forgot both Greek and Latin. I had even studied Latin in school during the Nazi occupation. I was a good Latin student, and studied Greek at the same time. But over 11 years I forgot all of it. My French came back, even though I didn't speak it for those years. In other words, those 11 years really do represent a gap.*

If it weren't for that gap, what would you have focused on in philosophy?

*I would definitely have dipped into antiquity more often. I do so sometimes now, but while maintaining a distance so as not to offend any expert philologist.*

Why antiquity?

*Because all of European wisdom was born there. Our roots are there, the sources of all our thinking. We do not*

*even realize how much those ancient times set us on a certain track.*

You write in *Metaphysical Quintet* about love and hatred, topics that fascinate young people. What advice would you give them? How should they guide their lives?

*I can't offer advice. Everyone must follow their own path.*

Interviewed by Anna Zawadzka  
Prepared by Iwona Pijanowska  
Warsaw, 6 September 2008

**Prof. Barbara Skarga**, philosopher, was born in Warsaw 1919. She studied at Stefan Batory University in Wilno (now Vilnius). As a member of the Home Army (AK) she was arrested by the NKVD in September 1944 and deported to a gulag deep inside the Soviet Union. She returned to Poland in 1955 and began working for the Polish Academy of Sciences. Starting in 1962 she worked at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. She has published many books, including *Narodziny pozytywizmu polskiego 1831-1864* (The Birth of Polish Positivism 1831-1864) in 1964, *Kłopoty intelektu. Między Comte'em a Bergsonem* (Problems of the Intellect - Between Comte and Bergson) in 1975, *Granice historyczności* (Limits of Historicity) in 1989, *Kwintet metafizyczny* (Metaphysical Quintet) in 2005, and *Człowiek to nie jest piękne zwierzę* (Man Is No Beautiful Animal) in 2007. A second edition of her memoirs of years spent in the gulag *Po wyzwoleniu...* 1944-1956 (After Liberation... 1944-1956) was published in 2008.

She is a member of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (PAU) and the Warsaw Scientific Society. For many years she was editor-in-chief of the journal *Etyka*. In 1995 she received the Order of the White Eagle.