

Photo by Bartek Bobkowski.

FROM WARSAW TO NEW YORK IN SEARCH OF THE BIGGER PICTURE

One sunny autumn morning, in a small, wood-paneled classroom in Hamilton Hall, a group of Columbia College sophomores sat in a circle and debated the texts of Martin Luther and the tenets of the Protestant Reformation in their Contemporary Civilization course. “How can you tell whether or not you are a good person?” “Does Luther ultimately believe that there *are* no good people?” “Is the logic in Luther’s argument flawed?” The class is part of the College’s Core Curriculum—a set of courses required for all undergraduates regardless of their major—and the texts in question belong to a standardized syllabus assigned across sections regardless of the professor.

In this case, the professor is Małgorzata Mazurek, a petite, youthful woman with bright, bespectacled, green eyes who won the international competition for the Polish Studies Chair in Columbia University’s History Department last spring. She is teaching the course for the first time and confesses that the experience, which goes beyond her realm of expertise as a sociologist and scholar of contemporary Polish history, is challenging. “I’m learning everything right along with the students and it’s like I’m feeling around in the dark,” she says. Still, Mazurek leads the discussion gracefully, with the confidence of someone who has been teaching the subject for years.

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

MAŁGORZATA MAZUREK

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF POLISH STUDIES, IN PROFILE

“I think there is a more universal story linked to Luther and the broader questions of salvation and predestination,” she tells the class in her lilting Polish accent. To prove her point, she ends the session with a text outside the official curriculum. “On War against the Turk,” written by Luther in an attempt to explain the ideological shift in his views on war against the Ottoman Empire (he swung from opposition to support), is a demonstration of “doctrine as living text shaped by events,” says Mazurek. It also “shows how political Luther was,” she adds, a fact not illuminated through the required readings.

After class, during a brisk walk across campus, Mazurek, wrapped in a large gray and purple coat, her suede heels clacking on the cobblestones, explains that the texts assigned in Contemporary Civilization confine history to a Eurocentric narrative that fails to explore how events in the West fit into the global context. So, in addition to the already demanding weekly preparations she makes for her course, she tries to read as much as possible beyond the syllabus, often turning to colleagues in the History Department for recommendations. “In the entire reading list there are only two pieces of writing by a woman and just a few by those outside the European cannon,” she says. “But how can you understand these events without seeing the bigger picture?”

Mazurek’s interest in history dates back to the collapse of Communism in Poland. Growing up in Warsaw, she was struck by the changes. “Everything that was colorful was Western,” she recalls. “And the colors were tantalizing.” They material-

ized through TV advertisements, through Toblerone bars and M&Ms, new shops and bright clothes. “The transformation was happening every day,” she says, “and I didn’t view it through the lens of the political calendar.” This early experience—she was ten when the Iron Curtain fell—paired with her natural curiosity, inspired a perpetual yearning to discover how the past interacts with the present. It also moved her to study ordinary people and their lives during a period when most scholars were focusing on Poland’s political history.

As early as high school, Mazurek conducted a series of interviews about cultural and daily life under Stalinism. At the time she was attending the first non-state school, established in 1989, where she was an outlier among the children of liberal, anti-Communists. This was new and strange; Mazurek’s parents never discussed history or politics at home, and her father had belonged to the Communist Party until the collapse of the regime. The people she interviewed, members of the Warsaw intelligentsia who had been part of the political opposition, fascinated her, as Mazurek was previously unaware of Poland’s Solidarity movement and the “bourgeois” lifestyle that had continued to exist even after the Communist takeover.

After that experience, Mazurek began to approach her research with particular attention to how social behavior and attitudes survived (or didn’t survive) political transition. She noticed, for instance, that laborers were idolized in Communist times, yet were almost entirely forgotten during the 1990s. As the government liquidated factories one after the other, Mazurek



wondered what had happened to the workers. While enrolled in M.A. programs for sociology and history at the University of Warsaw in 2001, she traveled to former East Berlin and interviewed the former employees of an electric appliances factory, most of whom were retired or working for other factories. “I was surprised to discover that twelve years after the factory closed the workers hadn’t ceased contacting each other,” she says, describing a state-sponsored clubhouse where they met every week. “They had even organized the interior of the club to resemble the layout of their factory cafeteria.” She explains that the nostalgia went even further—after a colleague passed away, his friends left his seat empty in his memory.

Mazurek was intrigued and turned to Warsaw’s working class for comparison. Polish workers, it turned out, had not maintained their factory ties—there was no club to hold workers together after their factories ceased to exist. The German state had created much stronger civil institutions. The comparison between everyday factory life in Poland and the GDR not only fueled her master’s thesis (awarded two M.A. dissertation prizes

in 2004: the Witold Kula First Prize in Social Sciences and the Józef Lipski Award of the “Open Republic Association against Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia” in History), but also laid the groundwork for her first book, *Socialist Factory: Workers in People’s Poland and in the GDR on the Eve of the Sixties* (Wydawnictwo Trio, 2005). Her next book, *Waiting in Lines: On Experiences of Scarcity in Postwar Poland* (Warsaw Trio, 2010), an exploration of how the experience of scarcity affected social ties, was shortlisted among the ten best books in contemporary Polish history in a 2011 nationwide contest and quickly sold out.

When *Waiting in Lines* came out, Mazurek was working at Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung in Potsdam, Germany,

Facing page: Małgorzata Mazurek introducing President of Poland Bronisław Komorowski at the World Leaders Forum (September 2014); photo courtesy of Columbia University. Below, left to right: Portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1528); photo of Warsaw from the International Space Station (2013).

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Right: Małgorzata Mazurek. Photo by Bartek Bobkowski.



as a research scholar. Two years prior, during her first semester in Potsdam, she'd visited the United States for the first time for the annual convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) in Philadelphia. "I was surprised that there were very few scholars present who were actually from East-Central Europe," she says. "I kept looking for another Polish historian, but everyone was American."

Torn about whether to continue her academic career in Germany or Poland, Mazurek decided to try a third option. "We have this Polish saying that you get three chances," she says. "I decided that my third chance would be in the United States." She applied for the Marie Curie Fellowship of the Gerda Henkel Foundation, a program financed by the European Commission that promotes transnational academic exchange, and won. But she needed to find an institution to take her in. It is common knowledge in the United States that the academic job market can be brutal, but Mazurek knew little about the U.S. system. She e-mailed the prominent historian Mark Mazower, Ira D. Wallach Professor of World Order Studies, whom she had long admired, and told him she wanted to come to Columbia. "I said I would come under the condition that I could have my own office and teach my own class," she laughs. "Clearly, I understood nothing."

Mazower, who directs the Heyman Center for the Humanities, received her e-mail at a fortuitous time. The Center was in the midst of staging a series of workshops and conferences on the history of development thought, and Mazurek happened to be working on a project about the intellectual history of Eastern Europe (her book in progress), which traces the lives of a group of Warsaw-based social scientists and how they shaped the economic development of the postcolonial world. The series organizers were particularly interested in the participation of a historian from Eastern Europe. "What we'd been saying is that it was all very much focused on the U.S. side of the Cold War and that people must be doing very interesting work about development on the other side of the Iron Curtain," says Mazower, who encouraged Mazurek to come.

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As she enjoyed her time in New York, she was also trying to figure out what to do once her fellowship money ran out in 2014. That's when she applied for the Polish Studies Chair, a position in Columbia's History Department. The chair was created after an extended fundraising effort by the Harriman

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Institute's East Central European Center produced donations from both Polish and Polish diaspora companies, institutions, organizations, and individual donors, establishing a \$3 million endowment. The History Department wanted someone who was not only an accomplished Polish studies expert but also "a fine historian, period," Mazower explains. "The strategy was to think who was going to put this subject, this position, this chair on the map over a ten- or twenty-year period, as opposed to whose name happens to be in the newspapers today," Mazower explains.

"Most American historians of Poland were still playing goodies and baddies. Was it a conquest of power? Was there some popular support for Communism? They're still trapped in these questions," Mazower says. Mazurek had moved beyond that, portraying the communist period itself as history. She also has the benefit of being trained as a sociologist. "Training in history and sociology together is something that would be hard to replicate here," Mazower says. "It's much more natural in the Polish context. Intellectually, that's something new and fresh." The department invited her for a job talk, which, according to Harriman Director Timothy Frye, who was on the search committee, was "fresh" and "engaging." Frye was particularly impressed during the question and answer session. "You could tell she had already given these questions a lot of thought," he says.

To her great surprise, Mazurek was offered the position. "Smaller universities would have to fight for prestige and would never take a chance on an unknown, foreign scholar like me," she says, looking at the roofs over Amsterdam Avenue through the large window in her office. She describes her task of developing Polish studies at Columbia as a "one-woman intellectual show." She is working on building partnerships with members of the Harriman community and Columbia at large. "The program will emerge through these conversations," she says.

Starting next year, she will lead seminars related to Poland and East Central Europe in addition to teaching the Core Curriculum. "Becoming the Polish Chair means to rediscover Poland in a new context," says Mazurek, who wants to teach a class through the prism of Polish memoirs and personal stories—the diaries of peasants in interwar Poland and Holocaust literature, for instance. "I want to go back to thinking about Poland as a historical-geographical space with people of different origins, various cultures," she says, "to reach beyond the figures closely related to the national canon that shaped the history of Polish lands since the nineteenth century." □