

Application to AIR litteratur Västra Götaland 2021

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Motivation for application, description of my project.

"March Disgrace. March 1968 in Polish films"

As I am writing these lines, it is a warm September afternoon. My dog is sleeping peacefully next to my desk. He must be dreaming about something, because he is moving his paws as if he was running, and he even barked softly.

Next to the laptop there is a mug of good, strong tea and a large red apple that my husband just brought me. When I look up, I can see some trees through the window. Their leaves slowly begin to change colours. I like looking at them.

Perfect working conditions, right? But my house, my husband, my dog, my cats, and finally me - we are in Poland, which is slowly becoming a fascist state, more and more, day by day. Hateful slogans appear every day in the radical right-wing and public media (these terms are synonymous today). They are confusingly similar to those used in the Third Reich, in pre-war Poland and in 1968, when the last several thousand Jews, who still lived here, were expelled from Poland.

Verbal and physical attacks faced by people defending democracy and human rights activists are becoming more frequent, with the open acceptance and often inspiration from members and supporters of the ruling party (ironically named *Law and Justice*) and the Catholic Church. The police, on the orders of the government, attacks peaceful demonstrations and harass those taking part in them. Teachers and lecturers, who oppose the propaganda messages of the Polish Ministry of Education and Higher Education, led by a fanatical Catholic, are removed from schools and universities. Polish authorities express their opinions in an insulting, contemptuous manner about anyone who does not share their way of thinking, respects humanistic values, or does not allow history to be falsified, and public space taken over by the Catholic Church.

In such a world I teach my students and write about Polish-Jewish relations – as they really were. Though, it is practically prohibited by law now, I speak and write about the way

Polish films present these relations, as well as about what Polish films do not say and why it happens. I talk about the Polish-Jewish history of the twentieth century through the prism of film, because nothing shapes collective memory and historical knowledge as much as cinema. “Schindler's List” by Steven Spielberg did more to remembrance of the Shoah than thousands of academic papers.

My current project talks about how Polish documentaries and feature films tell the story of the so-called March 1968. I titled this book "March Disgrace. March 1968 in Polish films". In 1967, the Polish communist authorities sided with the Soviet-backed Arab countries, which lost the so-called Six-Day War with Israel. Consequently, diplomatic relations between Poland and Israel were severed, and an anti-Semitic campaign, lasting over a year, began in Poland. As a result of it, over 15,000 Polish Jews were forced to emigrate - almost all who lived in Poland at that time. Many of them did not want to leave, even though Poland was a poor, backward and closed country. Even though, they loved it and it was their homeland, they were not allowed to stay here. Their jobs and housings were taken away, they were harassed, insulted, robbed, and deprived of all their rights. It was not only the Polish authorities who did that – it was also done by ordinary citizens, who today do not want to talk about that or remember what they did or witnessed. Polish Jews rarely encountered gestures of friendship, compassion, empathy and help. The feeling of being cornered and embarrassed prevailed.

Many of those who left Poland at that time found their new home in Sweden or Denmark. Only a few returned to Poland when it became possible after 1989. The others, for the most part, found themselves perfectly in their new homelands. They finished their studies, started families, run their own businesses, create art, write books, and make films. One of them is Joanna Helander, a great photographer and filmmaker who also has an atelier at Konstspidemin and has worked there for many years. The opportunity to get to know her in person (we met online several months ago) would mean a lot to me, as well as the opportunity to meet and talk to other immigrants who left Poland in the late 1960s for political reasons and who live in Goteborg now. I probably won't have any other chance to meet them. I would like to ask how they look at what happened to them. Listen if they want to speak. Finally, try to confront their memories with the vision of these events recorded on film tape and fill the places where there are still white spots.

I am writing this book also because I am ashamed - I am extremely ashamed of what happened to the Jews in their (and my) country at that time. And I'm trying to make amends somehow. Maybe such a gesture – this book - does not mean much. However, this is the only way for me to say: this what happened in 1968 and the following years, was a disgrace and

harm. I'm sorry. I remember about it. I will try to do everything possible, so that it does not happen again.

I was getting ready to write this book for several years. I put together subsequent chapters in my mind, analysed films, read the memories of the witnesses and participants of the events of 1968, followed publications on this subject, studied historians and sociologists, trying to find out as much as possible about March and see it from different perspectives. For a long time I thought - I wanted it to be so - that the matters that I was investigating belonged largely to the sphere of the past, and although I encountered anti-Semitic, xenophobic and homophobic comments and behaviours, although I saw anti-Semitic drawings and slogans, I considered them the work of the loud and visible, but still marginal, people who are stupid, limited, primitive and simply evil. I also thought that I could defend myself against this – that the fact of living in an academic enclave, in a modest circle of tried and tested friends with similar views, were factors that formed a barrier between me and evil. I believed that by protesting strongly and firmly, when harmful and stereotypical opinions were expressed in my presence, that by condemning violent behaviour, I do as much as I can and should – and that this is enough to create a civil society, open, attentive to the fate of people, animals and the condition of the planet. I was wrong. That is not enough.

Today, again, as in 1968, we see "what happens to the society when the authorities give a signal and permission to hate, to report, to judge. And they encourage, make it worth it, make that it pays off. It introduces an unwritten compulsion to behave in this way" (Stefan Meller, former minister of foreign affairs). People who preach shameful, racist, homophobic and xenophobic content today are in power and hold the highest offices in the state. On June 13, 2020, Andrzej Sebastian Duda, a seeking re-election candidate for the office of the president of the Republic of Poland, at an election rally in Brzeg, uttered shameful words: "LGBT are not people, it's an ideology", thus denying the humanity of two million Polish citizens. He won this election; he is now the Polish president.

In 1968, instead of "the Jews", Władysław Gomułka used, without understanding it, the term "the Zionists". Today, the President of the Republic of Poland calls non-heteronormative people an "ideology" using the same procedure that was used 53 years ago by the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (KC PZPR). The results are also similar: a clear signal that it is possible, and even necessary, to attack a designated enemy which resulted in numerous acts of verbal and physical aggression against the LGBT+ community and the decision to emigrate for many of its members. The same violence, verbal and non-verbal,

affects everyone whom the Polish authorities consider an enemy today: Jews, refugees, feminists, atheists and others.

I don't feel safe here. Together with my husband - also an academic lecturer - we are involved in the activities of non-governmental organizations defending human rights and democracy in Poland. We organize and take part in demonstrations, we protest and show our students films and books that are forbidden by the Polish authorities to read or watch.

When I wake up every day, the first conscious thought is fear of what will the day bring - will I spend the day relatively calmly and on schedule, or will I have to suspend my life again to protest against evil. I wonder what will be the price of this protest or if I still have the strength for it. A month-long stay in Sweden, in a democratic country, functioning according to the clear rules, would help me not only to meet the characters of my book and finish it, but also to simply relax. It would allow me to distance myself from this what is happening in my homeland right now, to breathe with normal air, not to react with fear at the sight of a policeman or a soldier.

It would be equally important for me to be able to see how the Konstspidemin community works. In Poland, and probably also in Europe, there is no similar institution that would bring together so many art creators in one place. The possibility of getting to know them, observing some of them at work, exchanging perspectives and views would be an invaluable experience.

I cannot also ignore the fact that my stay in Sweden would allow me to get to know Swedish cinema better. Swedish classical films (from Victor Sjöström and Mauritz Stiller to Ingmar Bergman) are available in Poland but contemporary films are almost completely unknown. Swedish culture is viewed in a very stereotypical way in my country. I would like to immerse myself in it, breathe it and admire it – not in a hurry, in a break between one activity and another, but carefully and deeply.