**Vol. 3 (33) 2023**, pp. 111–136
http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/AE.2023.046
Archives of Emigration
ISSN 2084-3550

Karolina Famulska-Ciesielska
(Lublin)

# Between Warsaw and Jerusalem – Viola Wein

Viola Wein made her debut in 1996 with a rather small collection of short stories titled *Mezalians* [Mismatch], which was noticed and recognized. For her collection, she received a prize from the Culture Foundation, together with Wilhelm Dichter's *God's Horse*. Subsequently, the author published single short stories in *Odra* and *Tygiel Kultury* magazines. At the end of 2004, *Mezalians* was published in Hebrew (translated by Anat Zaydman) and has enjoyed much interest among Israeli critics. In the autumn of 2005, another volume of Viola Wein's prose was published in Poland; it has the title of one of the seven short stories it contains, *Rachmunes* [Rakhmones]. The new book by the author contains several motifs and problems that were already present in her debut collection, such as the figure of a father maneuvering between communism, Judaism, and Zionism on very shaky moral grounds.

The writer is also a translator. Two poetry books by Igal Ben-Arie,[1] a Hebrew author with Polish roots who lives in Jerusalem, translated by Viola Wein, have been published in Poland.

[1] Collections of poetry by Igal Ben-Arie in bilingual (Polish and Hebrew) editions were published in Lublin – the first one was titled *Żydowski sen* [Jewish dream], (1994), and the second *Inny* [Other] (1996).

Actually, it was due to her translation work that Viola Wein returned to the Polish language after more than twenty years of writing primarily in Hebrew.

She was born in 1946 in Poznań. She grew up in Warsaw, where she graduated from a music school and then studied piano at the Academy of Music. Her father, a well-known and respected historian, at one time also involved in the structures of the Polish communist government, decided to move to Israel in 1969. Having not completed her studies, the future writer left with her family, her father, Avraham, her mother, who came from the interior of Russia, and her brother, Józef, who was a year younger than her. The Wein family settled in Jerusalem. Avraham Wein continued his academic work at the Yad Vashem Remembrance Institute. His daughter went on to study music at the Hebrew University. Poland's past – both directly experienced and, in a way, inherited from her ancestors – and the process of growing into the Israeli soil form the substance of her literary work.

The debut collection *Mezalians* [Mismatch] forms a series. The glue that binds the nine stories that comprise it is primarily the character of Mirka Sztajn, intended to be a literary self-portrait of the author. Although most of the stories are at the same time portraits of other heroes, or actually mostly heroines. This is evidenced by the titles of the stories: "Maryśka," "Karolina," "Staśka," "Liza," "Rochale," "Irys" [Iris], "Miriam and Marian." Only two stories, "Oddział" [Ward] and the title story that shares its title with the collection, "Mezalians," have titles that do not refer to the main character being portrayed. The perspective of individual portraits is superimposed on the story of one Jewish family and delineates the various stages of that story. The fate of the portrayed characters intersects with that of the Sztajns. Viola Wein thus tells a story about a family, and its dynamics are determined by the portraits of the protagonist in each story. These protagonists are primarily the women who run the Sztajn household and take care of their children. At one stage of the narrative, the characters being portrayed, including Mirka, are the patients of a psychiatric ward. Mirka's story should be singled out in the course of the story of the Sztajn family and treated as a special area within the broader narrative about the family. This is because her experiences occupy relatively the largest space in the story, and one can see a kind of equivalence between her perspec-

tive of reality and that of the author. All three areas of observation and interpretation – the family, Mirka's life, and the characters she meets at various times – form an overarching whole, a reflection-saturated picture of Jewish existence in post-war Poland and Jewish Polishness in Israel, which is diverse and embroiled in numerous cultural and ethnic conflicts. This complex image, centered on specific aspects of existence, is the object of the author's reflections on identity.

The stories *Maryśka*, *Karolina*, and *Staśka* are set in Poland. The father of the Sztajn family is a Jew committed to building the new political regime because he believes in its justice and in the proclaimed ideals of equality. And at the same time, he maintains his attachment to the Jewish tradition and history. In his spare time he reads the holy books of Judaism, which are so foreign to the Communist thought. He is the son of a rabbi and tzaddik who was famous before the war. His non-Jewish wife is largely subservient to him.

In the order of the narrative, Maryśka, the housekeeper, probably fulfills primarily the role of a kind of medium: she is supposed to present the image of Jews and Jewry in the eyes of gentile Poles. The subsequent women running the Sztajn household, who have real-life prototypes,[2] represent very different backgrounds. This is to intended to complicate the said image and to objectify its reconstruction. However, we should bear in mind that, at least to some extent, this image should be treated as a projection. This is because a completely objective reconstruction does not seem possible in this form of fictional, psychological, introspective prose.

Maryśka is a very old spinster, a simple peasant. Karolina – also elderly and unmarried – is an educated, impoverished noblewoman, who continues to be fully attached to the prewar, non-communist reality. Staśka, on the other hand, is presented in an unusual way, in animalistic terms, as a semi-wild creature, a rude prostitute without any education, a drunkard, accepting the job of a maid only when she needs a roof over her head due to weather conditions, and at the same time, paradoxically, as a person free of falsehood and uncompromising within a certain moral minimum.

[2] The author talks about this in an interview I had with her. A transcript of the interview is in my possession.

The characters themselves – showed simultaneously from the outside and from the inside – also provide material for interpretation, for considering, for example, female identity and the human condition in general.

Their role is not limited to being the aforementioned medium.

Maryśka is the first of the Sztajn family's housekeepers portrayed; she takes care of their little children, who are a few years old. The narration in the story, of which she is the title hero, is, so to speak, an objectified internal monologue of a simple village woman, that is, despite the use of grammatical forms of the third person, the vision of the reality should be considered a projection of the perspective of this very hero. The language of the narrative is largely stylized as a rural dialect, saturated with the character's emotions.

Work for the Sztajns – in the city – is a challenge for Maryśka, who treats it as an adventure and a life opportunity at the same time. The images that follow the information that she has been accepted for the job make her "almost happy."[3]

She perceives and interprets the otherness of her employers, supported by the stereotypes concerning Jewish appearance and character:[4]

> The man is certainly a kike. So black, curly hair, he talks so wisely it's scary. He knows everything and understands everything they say on the radio.[5]

The characterization of the lady of the house has no reference to Jewishness. Even though her last name is Sztajn and she is married to a Jew, none of the subsequent maids suspect that she is Jewish – which is actually true. The lack of outward hallmarks of stereotypically perceived Jewishness is sufficient within this arrangement to establish the identity affiliation.

Other characters appearing in the story also do not go beyond stereotypes in their thinking about Jews. A drunkard whom Maryśka met in the marketplace cries:

---

[3] V. Wein, "Maryśka," in: *Mezalians* [Mismatch], Olsztyn 1996, p. 5. All the works by Viola Wein quoted in this text are from this edition.

[4] Cf. A. Cała, *The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture*, Jerusalem 1995.

[5] V. Wein, "Maryśka," p. 6.

> Well, Miss Mary, we're organizing a ball, the kikes are moving to Warsaw, Easter has passed and they haven't yet taken blood for a matzah from the ass of a beloved virgin, eh? Watch it, because Warsaw is a big city, they will not treat you with kid gloves there![6]

The derision in the above statement is directed both at the Jews and at Maryśka herself who, due to her being single, is also different and stands apart from provincial Polish standards.

Maryśka also seems to perceive Mirka through the lens of Jewishness, though perhaps not as explicitly as it is in the case of Sztajn. As a nanny, she is not fond of the independent-minded girl, who reads a lot, and simultaneously is sickly and does not want to eat. In addition, the Jewish father prefers the girl to her brother. From an overall perspective, Maryśka's attitude toward Mirka is ambivalent. The girl gives her guardian evidence of kindness and respect, even after years, although Maryśka's behavior towards her (as well as towards little Jurek) was sometimes, to put it mildly, inappropriate. Inducing children to "take out the pieces of glass" from her pants objectively bears the hallmarks of sexual abuse, although the primitive woman did not realize this at all. The housemaid also led the girl to church, which the girl accepted enthusiastically, and the experience certainly broadened the interpretive space within which she formed her identity.

The story of Maryśka and the part of the history of the Sztajn family, presented in the opening short story of *Mezalians*, thus bring the reader into a circle of very complicated issues, such as, among others, the relation of stereotype to reality, loneliness and misunderstanding as components of human relations, and the broadly destructive impact of sexual disorders on other areas of life.

In the subsequent stories the author goes into those issues more profoundly.

Karolina Ostrowska, the title character of the second story in the series, comes from the upper classes of the pre-war Poland. She once owned a boarding house for well-bred girls. She was unable to find her place in

---

[6] Ibidem, p. 8.

the communist reality. Her only family is her brother, who, in an effort to fit into the new working-class society and abandon the "ballast" of his aristocratic background, became a complete degenerate. Karolina decided to become a housemaid. Like Maryśka, she also paid attention to the Jewishness of her new employers:

> Mrs. Sztajn sounded good on the phone. Sztajns means Jews, but that does not necessarily have to be a problem. What, after all, was lacking in Lewkowicz, who so admirably handled the affairs of her boarding house.[7]

Karolina's approach to the stereotype – which, to some extent, she replicates as a kind of an *a priori* thing – is overlapped by the perspective of personal experience that contradicts it. Hence the statement that "it does not necessarily have to be a problem." Facts that contradict the stereotype, however, do not nullify it. Its existence is not dependent on reality. One can only wonder if it influences Karolina's actions, or if it is just a kind of background to her thoughts, perhaps an auxiliary tool for them.

Karolina, a seriously impoverished noblewoman, values style, elegance, and good manners. She is a person who is attached to certain established forms of social coexistence, which in her case are sometimes glaringly inadequate (such as the fact that she thinks it is appropriate to visit family on Sunday). Her brother, Gienek, formerly called Eugeniusz, fulfills an analogous role in the story to that played in "Maryśka" by the drunkard met in the market. Through him, the story gains an external perspective on the perception of the Jewish world, influenced by nothing but stereotypes. Again, the criticism is expressly directed against someone else, but Jews are also indirectly subjected to it, without any justification.

Sztajn himself refers on various occasions to his Jewishness. In the descriptions of how Sztajn spends his Sundays, the perspective of the narrative changes. The introspection no longer includes Karolina, but him. As for Karolina, it is only said that the reading by the master of the house of the Torah was a signal to her that she could talk to him about topics that were too difficult to be discussed on a regular day. As characterized in

---

[7] V. Wein, "Karolina," p. 14. All the emphases in the quotations are mine.

this passage, Sztajn is an emancipated Jew who has retained remnants of attachment to ancestral traditions for a number of reasons, if only because these traditions were represented by his family, murdered during the war, whose fate is not even fully known to him, and because they bind him to the youth he recalls with nostalgia:

> Sztajn, on weekdays busy building a new and better Poland, would sometimes sit in an armchair on Sundays and, turning the pages of the Torah, go back in his thoughts to his family home. He left it as a young man of 20. He was of draft age at the time, and that may have saved his life. At the beginning of the war, the Red Army enlisted him in military service. Sztajn never saw his parents, brothers, and sisters again; all of them surely perished in a concentration camp. Today, focusing on reading the verses, he returned in his imagination to his poor home, to his father, a rabbi, who remained in his memory as the wisest man in the world. He walked around Lviv, swam with his friends in the clay ponds on the outskirts of the city, played a rag football with them, and, most importantly, he longed for his mother, whose cholent, made of unknown ingredients, was the most delicious and unique.
>
> At these moments, Karolina felt that the master of the house was more accessible and she liked to have discussions with him.[8]

At the same time, he is captivated by the communist idea of equality, and drowns the doubts raised by the repeatedly perverse implementation of that idea in a glass.

The Christmas tree – seen by many communists as a completely areligious symbol – triggered in Sztajn an outburst of rage:

> Are you all crazy?! Thank God that my grandfather, Łajbysz of Dubiecko, can't see this circus! One could smell vodka from Sztajn. [...] – Miss Karolina, please bring an eight-branched chandelier immediately and put it in the window as usual. Yes, yes, in the window for everyone to see. It will stand there until the end of the Hanukkah holiday, and I will still be called Sztajn, not some Kamieniecki, and my children will still leave the classroom at the time of religious classes.[9]

---

[8] Ibidem, p. 18.
[9] Ibidem, p. 20.

In this battle to preserve the identity inherited from ancestors, the spiritual aspect is not considered at all, at least not aloud, not externally. Perhaps it falls within Sztajn's sphere of privacy, within his Sunday (tellingly, not Saturday) Torah readings. One's own identification is, according to the attitude presented here, protected by preserving one's name and basic customs.

Mrs. Sztajn completely does not consider the Christmas tree as a religious thing, and instead associates it only with Grandfather Frost, so her husband's outburst is incomprehensible to her and hurts her. This matter is completely indifferent to the almost adult son, while sensitive Mirka, fascinated by Christian rituals (at one time, she dreamed of attending her First Holy Communion in a white dress like her friends), accepts her father's decision with resentment.

Staśka, another Polish housekeeper of the Sztajns, is the complete opposite of the aristocratic Karolina. Her civilized behavior sometimes gives the impression of a game, as if she were an intelligent animal capable of playing the role of a human, a woman. She behaves in a civilized manner when she needs to achieve a goal, such as when she needs to find shelter for the winter. Her, cultural, conventional humanity is a kind of mask useful in communicating with the world. In situations that are natural to her, she is characterized by negatively charged terms, such as "monkey face," "globbes up whatever she could find," which make her look like an animal.

She perceives herself in this way, for the narrative describes the course of her primitive, yet in a sense also dramatic reflections as follows:

> Staśka will have her head hair styled, will smell like the very best perfumes, and in her hand? – in her hand there will be a gift for the kid girl and for her son-in-law![10]

Staśka's son-in-law is a Jew, so in her internal monologues he appears – according to the artistic concept evident throughout the series – in stereotypical terms:

---

[10] V. Wein, "Staśka," p. 28.

> The son-in-law, this J e w i s h s m a r t a s s, will approach Staśka and ask – whom do we have the pleasure to meet, respectable lady?[11]

At the same time, Staśka is – perhaps informally and certainly unknowingly – one of the Righteous Among the Nations. She rescued the wife of one of her clients, who years later contributed to her getting a job at Sztajns' house:

> She remembered vaguely that he came running to her when the Germans closed the ghetto, forcing her to accept money and jewelry. "Please, Miss Stanisława, take it," he begged, "it's easier for you, because you have contacts with the Germans and no one will suspect. Well, yes, she had "those" contacts with the Germans, she did. Like a cat living on the street, it made no difference to her who threw the garbage into the dumpster. She smuggled Szostakowa from the ghetto to her attic without a shadow of fear.[12]

She treats her body as an object that belongs to men naturally, not everything suits her, but in the end she agrees to everything. And she certainly does not apply traditional moral categories to her way of life.

She expresses her attitude towards Jews directly: "I am not 'anti-Semitism,' Mr. Sztajn."[13]

Significantly, each of the housekeepers working in Sztajns' home must have some sort of fixed and reflectively articulated view of Jews, even a person seemingly as unreflective and primitive as Staśka. Despite her professed tolerance for the ethnic or cultural dissimilarity of Jews, anti-Jewish stereotypes activate in her whenever there is a pretext for this. It happens in a situation provoked by Markowicz, a Jew and friend of Sztajn, who molested Mirka in the elevator. Staśka, disregarding her own body, is very concerned about this experience of the young girl and reacts very violently:

> Shush! Don't scream, you snot! Staśka is about to arrange everything! What a bastard, a lecherous kike, he has no respect for God! [...] – It's a miracle they

[11] Ibidem.

[12] Ibidem, pp. 30–31.

[13] Ibidem, p. 32.

> didn't kill him during the war, he should put a candle in that synagogue of his every day for being alive, for his woman to want him, for living in such luxury![14]

The event has nothing to do with Markowicz's background; after all, Mirka is also Jewish, and Staśka would never use the offensive term "kike" in relation to her. The stereotype is merely something of a treasure trove, or perhaps a vocabulary that helps express negative emotions. Nevertheless, in the second part of the statement quoted above, the primitive housekeeper and prostitute no longer appeals to any clichés of thought – she only draws very logical conclusions and reveals a sense of justice: "I'm not 'anti-Semitism,' but such scabby Jews should go only to the oven, you perverted cock."[15]

The Jewish world and the problem of Jewish identity in the short stories from *Mezalians*, which are set in Poland, are shown on several levels. Indeed, it is possible to analyze how individual family members, primarily Sztajn and Mirka, accept and interpret their Jewishness. Secretive in relations with his family, living in a world of his own affairs, Jurek and the non-Jewish mother, who participates through the family she belongs to in the Jewish fate, are rather in the background in this aspect, although the interpretation of their behavior is also important. A sort of background is provided by the Jewish acquaintances of the master of the house, most notably the repugnant Markowicz.

On a different plane is the attempt to sketch a synthetic picture of Jewishness in the eyes of Poles. The image is formed from the words of the housekeepers and other episodically appearing Poles. Its framework is defined by stereotypes, which influence representatives of all the social groups depicted in the texts. Every observation and thought about Jews in a particular situation remains in close connection with a stereotype, which provides ready concepts, formulations, and patterns of understanding. Even when facts contradict established perceptions, they never eliminate them.

---

[14] Ibidem, p. 33.

[15] Ibidem, p. 35.

The Jew serves as the Other and, through his or her – sometimes only alleged – otherness, helps to define the boundaries of one's own Polish identity.[16] The stereotypes invoked in *Mezalians* relate to appearance, qualities of intellect and character, as well as culture, language, customs, and religion. They are used either seriously or as a joke, a tool of derision. Sztajn's black and curly hair are Jewish. Maryśka notices something like a Jewish aura in his appearance, which is how his "becoming black" can be interpreted in the difficult association related to her daughter's illness. Wisdom also appears as a Jewish trait – the master of the house, who "understands everything they say on the radio," is wise; Staśka calls her son-in-law a "Jewish smart-ass." Yiddish – the "kikes' language," despite being referred to in such a disparaging manner – is an inaccessible domain, a mysterious area, an additional, very useful communication tool, which their mother tongue cannot become for Poles. This is because Poles cannot separate themselves using their own hermetic language from the Others. Behind the words and longer phrases from the vault of the stereotype, mostly disparaging or even contemptuous, there is often admiration. This is very evident in Viola Wein's stories. The "yids" often impress Poles, while at the same time arousing traditional resentment.

The Sztajns, meanwhile, left for Israel. A whole new stage in the history of the family began, and the identity of each of its members found itself in a frame of reference so different from the Polish one, fraught with all possible problems in this respect. Their housekeeper is now for the first time a Jewish woman – Liza. Born in Poland, she was once an ideological communist and, like many others, she spent long years in Soviet gulags. At the age of seventy-four, she came from the Soviet Union to Israel. Her attitude to the change of homeland and to her national affiliation occupies at least as much space in the short story as the problems of Mirka growing into Israeli soil. In the short story "Liza," both the title character

---

[16] Similarity and difference as two necessary elements in the process of determination of identity are mentioned by all researchers of this issue. See: I. Szlachcicowa, "Trwanie i zmiana: międzygeneracyjne różnice w strategiach opracowywania zmiany społecznej" [Persistence and change: inter-generational differences in the strategies of elaboration of social change], in: eadem, ed., *Biografia a tożsamość* [Biography and identity], Wrocław 2003, p. 12.

and Mirka are in the foreground, although the background also provides extensive material for reflections on identity. The narrative alternates between several perspectives.

Liza is stunned by the prosperity in Israel, which is in such stark contrast to what she knew from the Soviet Union and, most importantly, from her 20-year stay in the gulags. Despite her advanced age, she manages to get a job with the Sztajn family. She takes care of Mirka's daughter and has long conversations about life with Mirka herself over alcohol, and sometimes they just keep quiet and drink together. Liza appreciates simple things such as the availability of food and a roof over her head. The only thing she misses in Israel a bit is the seasons. She never mentions her religious sister living in the Holy Land, who rejected her. For the rest of her life, the last years of which she spends in a retirement home, she drinks a lot. Gradually she loses her memory and in a sense the whole drama of her fate, of her unhappy loves, turns into nothingness. Tragically orphaned many times, she is content with the fact that in Israel she met a lady with a daughter, from whom she got a job and that the lady brought her good fortune in her new country. She seems to pay no attention to the fact of how small that good fortune is compared to the magnitude of the misfortunes.

At the time she meets Liza, Mirka is also already severely afflicted by fate. In Israel, she married a man from a completely different cultural background than her, even though he formally belonged to the same nation. When Liza first meets Mirka, she sees a sad image of a skinny girl with a baby in her arms. Mirka struggles with life essentially alone, although with some help from her parents. She works all day to provide for herself and her child.

Marriage was a very difficult experience for her, but the divorce itself was no easier. For her, a person raised in a tradition of relative equality for women, this religious procedure in an ostensibly secular, democratic state was a kind of shock:

> She was already divorced from her husband. The divorce cost her and her family a lot of health, she received it only when she gave up all her possessions, during the divorce the rabbinical judges did not even look in her direction

because she was a woman, and it was almost unattainable if the man did not agree.[17]

The shock was followed by a depression, although at the same time Mirka lived with the decision that she would rebuild her life. She tried to alleviate her nervous imbalance with alcohol, in which she was assisted by Liza, who herself used such methods to solve her own problems. It is interesting that the narrative, when it comes to Mirka's descent into alcoholism, is conducted – at least to some extent – from the perspective of her little daughter. This emphasizes in a very simple way the drama of the situation described:

> And the little girl was more attached to Liza than to her own mother, a constantly jittery, odd-smelling woman. She knew that when her mother smelled like that, she was about to cry. Liza would pour a strange-smelling drink into her mother's glass, shove a piece of sausage into her hand, and say: "drink, drink, because you can't comprehend it without half a liter of booze." And the girl knew that her mom would smile at first and even play something nice on the piano, but then she would start crying. The girl didn't like it, she preferred to go for a walk with Liza.[18]

Mirka reflects on her place in Israel. In 1957, while still a child, she visited her future homeland with her family as a tourist. The image that formed in her consciousness then is still present in her memory and is at odds with the experience of everyday life. She confides this to Liza because it is difficult for her to find someone who understands her disappointment. Her father in particular, until recently devoting his efforts to the People's Republic of Poland and now committed to Israeli state-building ideals, does not allow her any criticism. Mirka, on the other hand, especially after her personal disasters in life, finds it difficult to grow roots in the new country:

> To this day, Israel for me is Biniamina, where I felt so comfortable and safe, and here in Jerusalem, I feel every day like I'm abroad. And I really don't know why the hell I go at all to this nightmarish Tel-Aviv, which looks like a sweaty,

[17] V. Wein, "Liza," p. 44.
[18] Ibidem.

> failed mock-up designed by a retarded child and made of matchboxes, to this Tel-Aviv, where you get stuck to yourself. If it weren't for the sea, I certainly wouldn't have gone there once.[19]

The new homeland appears as an unpleasant, difficult to live in, and foreign place. Liza's remark about a certain deficiency in the diversity of Israeli seasons rekindles Mirka's longing and brings back memories:

> That's true, Mirka thought, what about autumn in the Łazienki Park? Where are those multi-colored carpets of leaves and the red squirrels running around on them? Where is the scent of violets in the spring – those tiny works of art, peeking out playfully from the clumps of snow remaining here and there? And where are the catkins by the Vistula River, near Krasińskiego Street, the place where we would play truant almost every day?[20]

These mental descriptions of nature are extremely emotional. The landscapes mentioned are associated with carefree youth, with the former better life, and are therefore idealized. In contrast, the current life is extremely challenging especially for a person as sensitive as Mirka:

> In Jerusalem, every stone a person steps on injects historical adrenaline into the body, and the musical ear and rich imagination make the deliberately preserved decoration of those times – graciously and boastfully, say to you: you have received an honor, you are stepping on the navel of the world, for which our chosen people longed and sighed two thousand years! In the face of such an argument, so fraught with a biblical mood – a forester's lodge in Masuria with a non-cosher pig rotating on a skewer, a highlander's wedding in Zakopane, the Baltic Sea that is always cold, even during the greatest heat – you must quickly erase all this from memory and pretend to yourself that these colors, smells, dreams and longings, plans and disappointments simply never existed.[21]

Acclimatization – its demand or perhaps a kind of necessity – is a moral and perhaps even religious problem in this frame of reference. What is

---

[19] Ibidem, pp. 46–47.

[20] Ibidem, p. 47.

[21] Ibidem, p. 43.

that historical adrenaline? It seems that in this context it is a complex of very aggressive stimuli attacking the consciousness. They seek to control and subordinate human individuality to the senses they carry and ultimately reformulate the hierarchy of values and attachments of the object of their attack. Hundreds of years of longing and sighing for Jerusalem, flowing from the hearts and mouths of Jews in the Diaspora, have given the city great emotional power, reinforced the interpretation already rooted in biblical tradition that speaks of its unique role in the history of the world and for the destiny of the descendants of Jacob-Israel, as the chosen people among all others. However, this demand that the answer to such a bizarrely intrusive interpretation of the meaning of the existence of a place is to be total devotion to and love of it raises objections. Mirka feels an inner resistance to these intrusive stimuli and an attachment to her own individual experience, especially since the demand, which can be sensed in the atmosphere, for the appropriation and transformation of an identity that does not conform to the Jerusalem standard bears the mark of a certain manipulation. Indeed, the instrument of pressure is the "deliberately preserved decoration." In a reflex of rebellion, Mirka reduces the thing that could be interpreted as the power of a great and important history, saturated with metaphysics and turned into stones by a spell, to the category of form, which in this view – due to complex factors – becomes saturated with bad content that is pretentious and therefore destructive. Indeed, this peculiar mental dictatorship makes it difficult to function normally in Israeli daily life, and especially in Jerusalem.

According to that vision, people – Jews – are obliged to play a role that is more important than their real definiteness, but at the same time falsifies their identity, enslaving them and subordinating them to higher goals.[22] Compliance with this demand would have to lead to a real impoverishment of people, to their deprivation of any internal resources that are incompatible with the "paradigm." However, the falsehood of such subordination and its peculiar emotional blackmail would be sensible:

[22] Cf. e.g.: M. Friedman, "Jewish Identity in the Works of Elie Wiesel," in: *Ancient Roots and Modern Meanings*, New York 1978, p. 50.

> How can I live here, passing by and watching myself as a caricature of a perpetual tourist – an individual without a homeland, without my own private landscapes, without my own smells, my own cuisine, national anthem, folk costume, barricades in the name of my own cause? How can I live, when history is watching me from afar and threateningly waving its finger says: "I saw it, I saw it, you are reaching too far in your thoughts, and we must build a strong nation here, so that, God forbid, we do not go to the slaughter again like a herd of sheep!"[23]

Living in the holy city contributes particularly strongly to Mirka's realization of the pitfall inherent in the idea of being a chosen nation, which makes life unreal and, paradoxically, robs one of uniqueness. Mirka is unable to withstand the pressure that, after all, is compounded with the many other difficult life problems that a young divorcee with a child must face.

The subsequent very short story in the series is titled "Oddział" [Ward], and the event presented in it is a natural consequence of the problems depicted in the previous text. The order of the texts in the series is not absolutely determined by chronology, but also by a certain logic of the arrangement of meanings. Sztajns' daughter becomes a patient in the psychiatric ward of the "Hadasa" hospital when she is already the mother of her second child, a son, from her new relationship. She ends up in the hospital due to an accident she suffered while drunk. Her feelings of loneliness and disillusionment are still acute.

Mirka tries to see a value in her life's failures. But at the same time, she sees that she is in no way in control of her condition or situation. She does not understand herself and that unpleasant experience at least formally facilitates the interpretation of the overwhelming chaos:

> Ill, I'm just ill, Mirka breathes a sigh of relief. There is a disgusting hangover taste in her mouth, she feels that she smells of vodka even from her ears. This feeling separates her from the others.[24]

---

[23] Ibidem.

[24] V. Wein, "Oddział" [Ward], p. 54.

Mirka accepts with a relief this description of her condition given by a doctor, precisely as an illness. Illness is a condition that can be understood, that explains a lot. It is an exceptional state, but one that is largely socially conventionalized. Public perception of ill people and their self-interpretations are easier than is the case with people whose state cannot be so simply defined. However, Mirka senses the inadequacy of this determination. The psychiatric ward seems to be the only constructive way out, and the protagonist, despite all her breakdowns, always tries to strive to rebuild her life. So she ends up in this particular hospital ward, which, seen through her eyes, becomes a kind of microcosm of the existential problems of Israel's residents in general. Many Israelis besides her are rebuilding their lives there with more or less success. The relations there are an excellent field for the observation of the complications associated with the issue of identity. The following short stories – "Rochale," "Irys" [Iris], "Miriam and Marian" – bring further portraits, drawn in parallel with the development of Mirka's story.

Rochale is originally from Iraq. In her story, the issue of the importance of the differences between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews in Israel, which also appears in other short stories in the book, is emphasized.

Like Mirka and Liza, Rochale, the daughter of a Baghdad goldsmith, seeks solace in alcohol. She is quite a compulsive drinker. She married a Jewish man from Poland, despite her family's displeasure. After his death, she attempted to commit suicide. Mirka tells Rochale about Poland, about the world of her husband, who never tried to convey this lost reality to her.

He did not understand Iraq, Rochale did not understand Poland, and it seemed quite natural given the situation in Israel. Although Rochale's husband was Jewish, he was very different from what she imagined, and even of what she knew about what it means to be a Jewish man.

Rochale's imagination was limited by the perspective of the Arab world. Mirka fulfilled the role of a kind of intermediary in the communication between Rochale and her husband, even though he was no longer alive. She proved that living together in Israel can be about learning about each other's cultural backgrounds and traditions, as well as mental conditions outside the Israeli context. It does not have to come down to giving up

one's past and memory. For Mirka, it is also an opportunity to return to her beloved Warsaw at least in her imagination.

A small Jewish woman from Baghdad descended into alcoholism, fleeing from life's problems, the awareness of which was deepened by the memory of a glorious past. For Rochale's family, the move to Israel was linked to a certain social degradation, although, contrary to her belief, the feelings of the Ashkenazi Jews were similar in this regard. *Olim*[25] from Poland also often perceived their situation in their new homeland in this way. Women from Poland were even called "miał, miał" ["had, had"] ladies, as they often recalled their possessions prior to the immigration. Rochale, however, recognized and emphasized the differences in the status of Israel's residents based on their backgrounds. And the memory of the standard of living in Iraq was growing to the size of a legend, especially since Rochale was only five years old when she became an Israeli and in fact could remember little of that grandeur directly.

Rochale's story shows that the sense of being torn apart and of loss does not have to apply only to European Jews. It occurs regardless of some attachment to the new country. Rochale discloses her loyalty to Israel, for example by pointing out to Mirka that she should adopt a Hebrew name. And disagreement with the harsh reality finds its universal expression in alcoholism. Even the peculiar civilizational advancement of immigrant Jews from Arab countries turns out to be relative.

The main character of the next short story, Iris, is also one of the so-called "blacks." Her family came from Yemen. The father had two wives and eleven children. The mental and moral distinctiveness of Jews originating from Yemen was expressed in such customs, among other things. The story of the young girl is told to Mirka partly by Rochale, who was "almost proud to be able to tell the story of someone sicker than herself," and partly by Iris herself. The girl was in an incestuous relationship with her older brother, Joel, from a very early age. She is still blindly in love with him. When the family discovered this fact, Joel was forced to marry another woman, and Iris has stopped eating since her brother's wedding. When she was taken to the hospital she was emaciated, and by the time Mirka meets her, she

---

[25] *Olim* (Hebrew) – Jewish immigrants arriving in Israel.

has been there for eight months. Viola Wein touches on the extremely difficult issue with great delicacy and portrays the drama of a girl who is ill because of forbidden love.

The fact of Iris's Yemeni origin, exotic from a European point of view, makes this short story especially dramatic. According to vivid stereotypical opinions that were common in Israel, Jews from Yemen were characterized by intellectual simplicity and having a large number of children. This evokes the image of people whose physicality dominates over rationality. In some sense, it is easier in this situation to reflect on the relationship between Iris and Joel. The story of Iris also provides material for the consideration of female identity in general.

The next story, "Miriam and Marian," is also about a peculiar love. Miriam is an Orthodox Jewish woman with a repulsive appearance. She was taken to the hospital because of the sadistic sexual preferences of her husband, who abused her and did not respect her wishes. Marian, on the other hand, is a beautiful man from Poland who converted to Judaism already in Israel, where he came on a business trip. He was cheated by a dishonest business partner. He married a Jewish woman from Morocco who did not understand his Polish past and his longing. Marian created his own close and safe space: he built a dovecote. The birds raised there, however, became the cause of Marian's wife's illness, which doctors believed would end in either death or paralysis. A peculiar miracle *à rebours* took place in the man's life, for it occurred, as it seems, as a result of the earnest prayers of the desperate husband, and at the same time its consequences prove devastating to Marian's life and mind:

> Because those germs from the pigeons attacked the brain. And then the miracle happened. In the corridor, Marian met one rabbi who convinced him that if he prayed continuously, his wife would not die. And in fact the Moroccan woman did not die, she sits paralyzed in a wheelchair and does not accept any visitors. And worst of all, she does not let the children come to him. And he is so poor, constantly praying, crying, and getting such strange convulsions.[26]

[26] V. Wein, "Miriam i Marian" [Miriam and Marian], pp. 73–74.

Miriam returns home to her sadistic husband, faithful to the demands of her religion. A woman compared to a "scabby hippopotamus" became the object of an extremely beautiful love, but gives it up, driven by a sense of duty. At Miriam's farewell ceremony, Mirka performs a piano recital. For the first time in Israel, Mirka feels that she is happy, even without the help of alcohol, in the company of other social misfits, many of whom are outstanding people.

So, at the same time, somewhat in the background of all the stories set in the hospital, one can observe Mirka's struggle to restore a balance in her life. In this fight, the protagonist does not accept half-measures. She observes and evaluates her condition in full light, with complete honesty. And she fits these observations into her overall view of reality. She confronts these two orders, as well as her own way of perceiving the world, with the image imposed by a kind of discourse of social correctness conducted by, among others, the hospital staff:

> She repeatedly practiced misleading others [...]; reversing roles from the person being questioned to the person questioning, stupefying with unexpected confessions that the doctor did not ask for, demonstrating knowledge of Freud, his disciples, and other theories about psychology – a science that has the complex that it really is not a science, surprising with candor about sexual topics, putting a question mark over every affirmative sentence [...].[27]

Healthy people, or at least those whose mental and emotional problems are not easily visible, are afraid of those who deviate from the norm. The hospital stories in *Mezalians* ridicule the "full understanding," the falseness of many normal people, too content with their normalcy. According to the subsequent stories, abnormality can happen to anyone. No one is protected from it by their social position, intelligence, or origin. Indeed, regardless of these factors, there are situations that the nervous system cannot handle, and its breakdown is just a normal reaction. Many people became the patients in the ward where Mirka is staying due to specific problems closely related to the situation in Israel, although there is no shortage of those whose disorders have a completely different root cause.

[27] Ibidem, p. 70.

Mirka herself, when considering the causes of her emotional breakdown and alcoholism, points to her longing to Poland as the primary factor that destabilizes her mental equilibrium. It is not a matter of mere nostalgia, but rather of stripping away the constitutive elements of an identity considered most deeply individual. The old identity in the new conditions is difficult to maintain, hence the sense of disintegration:

> I feel like a piece of old rag that can only be revived by a harmonic arrangement similar to the great music of the Baroque! No! Chopin's polonaise! The smell of heather in the Masurian forests! Chestnut trees!? – Mirka went from exclamation points to question marks. – Mountain streams? A mountaineer's axe? Thatched roofs? Tuwim's *Flowers*? Polish soldiers on horseback against German tanks? A sanatorium for children with tuberculosis in Szklarska Poręba? A sled? Żurek soup? The organ in Oliwa? The Chopin competition? – Ah, you don't know, doctor, what I am talking about? And I can't explain! I will not explain, because in my miserable life I cannot find any parallels for your Persian origin.[28]

The Israeli reality, the experience of everyday life under completely changed conditions, among people with a different mentality, customs, and traditions that store other events in the collective memory, attached to other values – all this creates a sense of alienation, a loss of experience of belonging and social connection. Individual identity is, in a way, suspended in a vacuum, which must cause disturbances, especially because so far it has been closely linked to social identification. Collective identification becomes no longer possible. A mentally close collective becomes institutionally alien and physically distant. On the other hand, the society of which Mirka has become a new member does not have any features that she might consider close to her way of seeing reality. Before leaving Poland, the two dimensions of Mirka's identity – the collective and the individual – complemented each other.

The protagonist of the last story in the book, or actually one of the two equal heroines, is Mrs. Sztajn, who has so far remained rather in the background. The story, titled "Mezalians" [Mismatch], is a depiction of the

[28] Ibidem, p. 71.

struggles of this Russian wife of a Polish Jew, who spent twenty years with him in Poland and then had to become an Israeli; a failed struggle to gain her own place in the world:

> Soon after arriving in Israel, after several months of trying to acclimate, after unsuccessful efforts to get used to at least the different weather – Mrs. Sztajn decided to end her life. [...] Suicide was not in her nature. It is best to just make a decision, and death will somehow find its way and the right time to meet. As a result, Mrs. Sztajn died slowly, systematically, unnoticeably, and it took several years. She delayed the final decision because she wanted to see her beloved son finally standing on his own two feet, and her daughter ready to start anew after divorcing her husband.[29]

Mrs. Sztajn, it seems, longs above all for the stability of life, which the Israeli reality does not favor in any dimension, from climate to political issues. The unsatisfied and unquenchable longing becomes the starting point for the decision to die, which is simply a deep inner resignation. The woman is very lonely and withdrawn. She does not complain or fight to improve her situation – she probably does not believe in the possible effectiveness of further struggles.

In the Urals she was young, full of life and hope for the future, in Poland – somewhat lost – she found comfort in the arms of a lover. She no longer expects essentially anything from life in Israel except its end.

However, this very sensitive and passive woman unexpectedly finds her soulmate, and in a person who on the surface differs from her in almost everything. This is because one day – emboldened by the smell of fried onions – a simple Arab woman, Naima, knocked on the door of Sztajns' apartment. She was diametrically different from Mrs. Sztajn in her social position, way of life, beauty, and, most importantly, language. Naima spoke only Arabic, which for obvious reasons was completely foreign to Mrs. Sztajn, and yet the thread of understanding that formed between the two women proved very strong.

The issue of communication between Naima and Mrs. Sztajn is central to the interpretation of the story. "Mezalians" [Mismatch] is the only short

---

[29] V. Wein, "Mezalians" [Mismatch], p. 77.

story in the entire book that explicitly and directly addresses the issue of relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel. However, it contains no generalizing considerations, no calculations of injuries, and no assignment of rationales. It is simply a story of two lonely women who gave each other support through ordinary human gestures.

Naima was accustomed to the unkindness of Israelis, who saw her primarily as an Arab, and this was reason enough for them to dislike her. The difficult history of the Jewish–Arab conflict caused the majority of Israelis to "get to know the Arabs," that is, to simplify their image of the Arab community into a stereotype. Similarly, the negative stereotype also works the other way. The story without moralistic theses, as it were, by the way, expresses opposition to the universality of thought patterns. One shopkeeper, even while giving the old Arab woman kind advice, repeats the stereotype:

> Don't waste your time on those who have lived here for a long time. Your best bet is to go looking for work with the new immigrants. These suckers have not yet had time to get to know the Arabs.[30]

As in other stories in the series dealing with disparate problems, the stereotype is contrasted with existential concreteness. Naima is portrayed as a woman for whom ethnic conflicts and problems are unimportant, as a mother sacrificing all her strength for her children to earn a better future for them. She has been affected by many injustices in her life, but since this is the only life she knows, she does not complain. Instead, she is able to enjoy any positive events, no matter how small. In this she is similar to the "graduate" of the Soviet gulags, Liza. Naima is delighted by the fact that Mrs. Sztajn treats her with respect, like a human being of the same dignity.

Naima responds to this attitude of Mrs. Sztajn with complete loyalty and even love. This became particularly evident when Mrs. Sztajn's years-long dying process reached its final stage.

Another character that appears in the background of the story is Shoshana, who is unable to restore her mental equilibrium after surviving

---

[30] Ibidem, p. 79.

a concentration camp, or actually mainly after the painful experience of misunderstanding and disrespect from her relatives who spent the war in Palestine. There are also a number of other small portraits that provide an excellent complement to the whole, forming a dramatic Israeli mosaic.

The interpretive and evaluative attitude of the narrator is evident throughout the series. There is no intrusiveness or didacticism, but the whole can give the impression of a call for authenticity, which sometimes requires considerable courage. This authenticity is fostered by finding one's place in the world, in the social space, and awareness of belonging. This belonging discovered or confirmed through difficult exploration and reflection can be a challenge to people trapped in stereotypical thinking. However, only an identity that is built, often from rubble, and fully realized enables one to live life to the fullest and gives one a chance to be happy.

The series of short stories discussed here addresses many issues associated with identity. Each of the characters struggles with this problem to a greater or lesser degree, in one context or another. The course of these struggles depends on the situation and the individual sensitivity of the character.

An important issue in the concept of the human world presented in Viola Wein's *Mezalians* is the physicality, corporeality of humans. Most of the characters present on the pages of the stories are ugly. Often one person comprises a contrast between beauty and ugliness. These esthetic categories are clearly functionalized in the series. Rochale is tiny, black, dried up, and squint-eyed. Iris is described as "a strange creature, neither a boy nor a girl, so skinny that it's scary." Miriam was a caricature of a woman. Staśka had a monkey face, Liza – crooked duck legs, Maryśka – rotten teeth. Mirka plays Bach in the hospital with fingers that look like greasy sausages. Naima does not have an eye. *Mezalians* is a kind of gallery of ugliness – only the beautiful Mrs. Sztajn and Jurek clearly stand out against this background. External beauty, however, is in no way linked to internal perfection, at least understood in terms of conventional morality. Even Mirka's mother – described as a crystal clear person – had a lover in Poland and had an abortion as a result of that relationship.

The merciless descriptions of the superficial appearance of the characters, as well as of the faults of their characters and the imperfections of

their intellect, paradoxically do not serve to discredit them. Beauty and ugliness seem to be natural attributes of humanity, and both can add an extra dimension of drama to a person's fate. *Mezalians* praises love, individuality, and sincerity. And Jewishness, taken as a valuable, multifaceted tradition, can become an important constructive component of identity when it is placed in the domain of choice rather than coercion. Like any phenomenon that is part of human reality, it has advantages and disadvantages in the sober view depicted in *Mezalians*. However, in no way can it determine and reduce a person's individuality.

Viola Wein is one of the creators of a very interesting phenomenon of Polish writing in Israel, a literature of complex identity, a kind of continuation of Polish-Jewish literature that has a rich tradition.[31] It can be said that she participates in the creation of the most valuable current of that phenomenon, the current of in-depth and creative existential reflection, the master of which should be considered Leo Lipski. Existential situations forced, in a way, and still force Polish-Jewish artists (successive generations of more or less renowned writers) to reflect on various dimensions of their own identification. This can result in art that brilliantly answers the universal questions brought on by a modern era fraught with rapid change. A stable and, in a way, vested and established identity is a very rare luxury these days. Viola Wein's prose can be an inspiration (albeit not an easy one) for those to whom this luxury is not attainable.

Jerzy Jarzębski wrote when summarizing *Rachmunes* [Rakhmones], and these words can be applied with equal success to *Mezalians* [Mismatch]:

> However, it is vain to hope that they – these truths – will arrange themselves into a mythical pattern that saves the sense of being – unless we consider this

[31] On Polish-Jewish art, its traditions, and its continuation, cf. among others: E. Prokop-Janiec, *Międzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska jako zjawisko kulturowe i artystyczne* [The interwar Polish-Jewish literature as a cultural and artistic phenomenon], Cracow 1992; W. Panas, *The Writing and the Wound: On Polish-Jewish Literature*, transl. Ch. Garbowski, *Polin* 2016, vol. 28, pp. 17–29; M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Odcienie tożsamości. Literatura żydowska jako zjawisko wielojęzyczne* [Shades of identity. Jewish literature as a multilingual phenomenon], Lublin 2004.

pattern to be the story of Job, which is the most abusive to common sense and sense of justice in the Bible.[32]

Original issue: "Archiwum Emigracji" 2006, no. 1–2 (7–8)
https://www.bu.umk.pl/Archiwum_Emigracji/gazeta/ae_7.pdf

---

[32] J. Jarzębski, "Losy wykluczonych" [The fates of the excluded ones], *Książki w Tygodniku* (supplement to *Tygodnik Powszechny*) 2006, no. 5, pp. 14–15.