



Eugenia Prokop-Janiec

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0703-3959>

Jagiellonian University in Kraków
Kraków, Poland

The September Victory: The Switches of History According to Ziemowit Szczerek

Wrześniowa wiktoria.

Międzywojenne zwrotnice dziejów według Ziemowita Szczereka

Abstract: The article analyzes counterfactual historical scenarios developed in the works of Ziemowit Szczerek. In his prose (journalism, essays, documentaries, novels), the writer reflects on the possible history of the Second Polish Republic after its victory over the Germans in the September campaign of 1939. In a narrative game in which he confronts, on the one hand, interwar geopolitical projects, modernization programs, colonial plans, artistic utopias, as well as an urbanist and technical thought, and, on the other hand, contemporary historical knowledge and current ideological discussions, the author considers the extent to which the events he depicted in *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska* [Victorious Poland] and *Cham z kulą w głowie* [A Lout with a Bullet in the Head] could be reconciled with the processes unfolded during the PRL and after 1989. The idea is to reveal a hidden continuity between the interwar and postwar periods and the post-transformation years, as well as to the continued presence of the legacy of 1918–p1939. Among the factors that might influence this state of affairs, he points to the condition of the society, its moral standards, mentality, and models of civilization. Another important motif in Szczerek's writings is the projection of the imperial and colonial experience of the Poles and the reflection on the consequences that Poland would have to face if it acquired the status of a Central European superpower.

Keywords: legacy of the Second Polish Republic, contemporary Polish literature, counterfactual history, alternate-history novel, Ziemowit Szczerek

Abstrakt: Artykuł analizuje kontfaktualne scenariusze historyczne rozwijane w twórczości Ziemowita Szczereka. W swej prozie (publicystyka, eseistyka, reportaże, powieść) pisarz rozpatruje możliwe losy Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej po jej zwycięstwie nad Niemcami w kampanii wrześniowej 1939 roku. Podejmując narracyjną grę, w którą z jednej strony angażuje międzywojenne projekty geopolityczne, programy modernizacyjne, plany kolonialne, utopie artystyczne, myśl urbanistyczną i techniczną, z drugiej zaś współczesną wiedzę historyczną i bieżące dyskusje ideologiczne, autor rozważa, do jakiego stopnia rozwój wydarzeń przedstawianych w *Rzeczpospolitej zwycięskiej* i *Chamie z kulą w głowie* mógłby być zbliżony z procesami w epoce PRL i po roku 1989. Stawką gry, którą prowadzi, jest wskazanie ukrytej ciągłości pomiędzy okresem międzywojennym a powojniem i epoką po transformacji, a także trwałej obecności dziedzictwa

lat 1918–1939. Wśród czynników mogących na to wpływać wskazuje stan społeczeństwa, jego standardy moralne, mentalność, wzory cywilizacyjne. Osobnym i ważnym wątkiem jest u Szczeka projektowanie doświadczenia imperialnego i kolonialnego Polaków i namysł nad konsekwencjami, z jakimi musiałaby mierzyć się Polska, gdyby uzyskała status środkowoeuropejskiego mocarstwa.

Słowa klucze: dziedzictwo Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej, współczesna proza polska, historia kontrfakualna, historia alternatywna jako gatunek literacki, Ziemowit Szczerek

Historia Eventualis

The use of alternative history is undoubtedly the most radical form of rethinking the interwar period and taking a stand on its traditions. In post-1989 Polish literature, experiments of this kind constitute a clear trend, co-created by writers of different generations and ideologies, who, in the new conditions of the post-transformation period, undertake exercises in “other” historical logics. Ziemowit Szczerek is one of the youngest, the most active, and ideologically most outstanding of these authors. His entire oeuvre seems to be permeated by an alternative historical intention articulated in different genres and discourses. As a historian, journalist, and prose writer, Szczerek introduces this factor into all the forms he pursues: historical essays, reportage, journalism, and novels. He presents one of the central motifs of the alternative history of Poland in the twentieth century: he switches of history in 1939 and reverses the course of the Second World War. His stories do not contain the defeat of September, as it happened, but a victory of September. The Poles stop the invaders at the river line, conquer Berlin, occupy Germany, modernize the country, gain colonies overseas, and achieve an imperial position in Europe. Victorious Poland experiences neither German occupation nor Russian domination. There is no shifting of borders and no great *exodus* of the people from the East to the West. There is no Holocaust of the Jews, no elimination of nobility, and thus no cruel social revolution, which gave rise to the new order after 1945. The salvaged Poland remains a state with significant economic inequalities, sharp civilizational contrasts, and destructive internal tensions caused by long-term conflicts with minorities.

Compared with other authors, who have created similar historical scenarios (Lemann, 2019), Szczerek shows a greater inclination to observe processes and the functioning of groups and communities and a lesser inclination to offer a literary game in which real historical figures are placed in new roles. This is accompanied by the device of extending the “two decades” by many subsequent decades until the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this way, the author presents the probable course of Poland’s history in a longer perspective, as it would have been possible if “for a while, [Poland] had managed to be what it wanted to be if its dreams of being the ideal had come true” (Szczerek, 2013b: 9) and if the Polish dream of the imperial position had materialized. The assumption that the interwar period continues to exist opens the space for thinking about the continuity of its tradition. If the processes developed before 1939 are not interrupted by external intervention, one can imagine their further course and test their durability and value in various hypothetical conditions.

By introducing counterfactual historical scenarios into texts of various genres, Szczerek not only examines how they resonate with different literary, historiographic, and journalist forms, as well as with analytical and narrative modes but also presents the historical-social circumstances in which such narratives are conceived. His observations on the mythologization of the interwar period are radically critical. He is equally reluctant to idealize the interwar period in its aesthetic aspect as he is to treat it as a resource of still topical political ideologies and social prescriptions. The first of these approaches is commented ironically in the fictionalized reportage *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli Tajna historia Słowian* [Mordor Will Come and Eat Us, or the Secret History of the Slavs] (2013). Here, he presents two students of Polish literature who make a pilgrimage to Drohobych and worship avant-garde writers Bruno Schulz, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, and the interwar period as a time when “everything was better and wiser, (...) the press used elegant language (...), and people talked about wise and non-banal things in coffeehouses” (Szczerek, 2013a: 32). The other approach is commented on in *Międzymorze. Podróżę przez prawdziwą i wyobrażoną Europę Środkową* [Intermarium. Journeys

through a Real and an Imagined Central Europe] (2017), while analyzing the fascination with the interwar period manifested by the Polish right-wing politicians. Although they were born after the war, they “grew up with their heads set in (...) the interwar period,” in an atmosphere “that was some desperate dream about the interwar period while in the real world, there was the course of the People’s Republic of Poland” (Szczerek, 2017: 235). In both cases, the sources of mythologization are to be found in the contemporaneity. It is the unaccepted reality of communist Poland and the disappointing reality of the post-communist Poland, which are juxtaposed with Poland that “never existed because (...) the idealized interwar period is a fairy tale” (Szczerek, 2017: 235). Creating the mythologized image involves the psychological mechanism of compensation, which allows one to reject what is unsatisfactory and replace it with what is satisfactory, as well as the logic of nostalgia, which adds value to the past. Regarding psychological and social motivations, Szczerek also interprets the image of the September Victory as a reaction to the humiliation and trauma of the defeat. The narrative of *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska. Alternatywna historia Polski* [The Victorious Poland. An Alternative History of Poland] (2013) begins by recalling press reports from the first days of September 1939. Lying to the public then, Polish newspapers reported on the war’s success and the Allies’ support. These alternative scenarios constitute the first variants of what the author believes to be an obsessive Polish vision of victory in 1939. In its background, there is a wave of social emotions caused by the change of position between domination and subjugation, freedom, and enslavement. Furthermore, the historical experience of an “impotent empire” becomes important: “the state that remembers itself as an empire that (...) itself fell victim to the empires” (Szczerek, 2013b: 124).

Victorious Poland

The first book by Szczerek provided a vision of the interwar period: *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska* referred to the images of this period that

emerged after 1989. The author partly polemicized with his predecessors and somewhat continued their various ideas. In the process, he referred both to Czesław Miłosz's analytical mode in *Wyprawa w Dwudziestolecie* [An Excursion through the Twenties and Thirties] (1999) and to various alternative history novels by authors such as Maciej Parowski *Burza. Ucieczka z Warszawy '40* [Storm. Escape from Warsaw '40] (2009) or Szczepan Twardoch *Wieczny Grunwald* [The Eternal Grunwald] (2010), as well as contemporary discussions by historians and journalists. He constructed the text as a hybrid of genres, combining original excerpts from the press, quotations from source documents, pronouncements by ideologists of the day, and statements by the politicians with contemporary historical analyses. Szczerek placed them within the framework of his own narrative, where he maintained the rigor of reliable factual analysis, carefully selecting arguments and diligently separating the intersecting actual and counterfactual lines of history. The author presented the assumptions that were necessary for the hypothetical history to remain probable. He also showed how the changed conditions would lead to a different course of history. In doing so, he followed the rules of methodology formulated by historians, which require that all assumptions be based on the knowledge of historical facts and their rational justification in the broadest possible context (Chwałba, Harpula, 2019). While revealing his methods for constructing a new interwar period history, Szczerek also recalled the strong presence of alternative thinking in all historical reflection, both in speaking about the causes of events and in evaluating them (Dermandt, 1999). In *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska* this rhetoric of historical analysis (which included the addition of a bibliography and notes to the text) was contrasted with an element of a literary play: the inclusion in the counterfactual parts of spectacular pastiches of the prose style of Witold Gombrowicz, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, or Melchior Wańkowicz.

However, counterfactual speculation, carried out according to the rules of historical analysis, eventually proved too precarious at some point: the range of possible options and variants of the course of events proved too wide to be presented, analyzed, and justified. Therefore, the

author decided to abandon the essayistic mode in favor of literary fiction, allowing him to “adopt a specific (...), the most probable course of events” (Szczerek, 2013b: 230). It was presented in the epilogue to the story in the form of *Reportaż z Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej w 2013 roku* [Reportage from the Second Polish Republic in 2013]. The protagonist of the reportage, a journalist arriving from abroad (a privileged figure in Szczerek’s narratives), traveled across Poland and discussed the history and the current situation with various informants.

Including the date in the title of the reportage was an element of a strategy to mark the author’s own position in the discussion about the interwar period and accentuate the historical conditioning of his own opinions. One of the most critical factors influencing Szczerek’s position in *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska* is his knowledge of the communist People’s Republic of Poland (PRL). Among the questions, he poses are those of continuity and discontinuity between the Second Polish Republic and communist Poland, and of presumed parallels between the probable history of the “long interwar period” and the actual history after 1945. The author’s speculations are based on the assumption that everything was all “different but not that different” (Szczerek, 2013b: 224). Using the perspective of historical processes, collective mentality, and social behavior leads him to a conclusion about the close relationship between these two formations and the durability of some traditions from the interwar period that have been continued regardless of the change of political regimes. This is mainly due to the social factor: “Foreigners did not build the PRL, but by the same people who would have expanded the Second Polish Republic had it survived” (Szczerek, 2013b: 224). The processes of urbanization and modernization, the cultural landscape, and the rhythms of political downturns could thus be very similar in the “long interwar period.” Another point of reference is the experience of the Third Polish Republic. Here, Szczerek points out the distance and warns against jumping to conclusions about similarities: “Because the Second Polish Republic did not resemble the Third. It was very different. And for the most part – although there were exceptions – it was *in minus*” (Szczerek, 2013b: 30). The author refers in particular to the

backwardness and poverty of the rural areas of interwar Poland, as well as the vast gap between the lifestyle of the provinces and that of European-style Warsaw. From the center's perspective, the "worse Poland" had the status of allegorical Ruritania: a fictional land on the border of the West, presented as the pre-modern world, being invaded by the element of the barbaric East. For this reason, the interwar Polish state was for its citizens not only a source of national pride, stemming from the fact that Poland was reborn after 123 years of the partitions, but also of civilizational shame for its backwardness.

Szczerek treats the aspirations for Poland's imperial position as the most important attitude of the interwar period, not only in its political aspect but also in its national and social dimensions. The author also shows how this syndrome was articulated in the literature of the time, recording the "dreams of power" captured in the scenarios of alternative histories. He sees the sources of imperial ambitions and claims in the complex of underestimation and lack of recognition, as well as in Polish immaturity (Szczerek, 2017: 336). The categories used by the author: immaturity, adolescence, original form, and imitation – are derived from critical discourses of the interwar years. Witold Gombrowicz was a strong proponent of these categories, both in his literary works, criticism and programmatic writing. He became a vital authority not only for Szczerek but also for other contemporary creators of counterfactual histories. In *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska*, Gombrowicz is a patron of analyses of the imperial and colonial dreams of the interwar period. Assessing Poland's chances of becoming a regional hegemon, Szczerek believes it could probably act as an "empire on loan," a giant with feet of clay supported and financed by the West. Its economic weakness and cultural immaturity have disqualified it as an autonomous imperial power. A hegemonic center can only constitute itself if it represents values and models that are attractive to the periphery (Zarycki, 2009). In fact, then Poland was forced to "catch up" with the West by adopting its models. In *Reportaż z Drugiej Rzeczpospolitej w 2013 roku*, one of the characters concludes this question:

One is a superpower when the content of what one is can affect others. When one radiates outward. Not when one just wants it like a child, and that is it. One must create one's own internal and original structure first. A strong, consistent, powerful structure to inspire the world. And that is what you offer people, not just a cry to be seen as a power. (Szczerek, 2013b: 282)

The figure of Poland as a child, the motif of a “childish Poland,” immature and acting out its complexes in an immature way, is also introduced by the author in his other texts.

Szczerek's oft-repeated assessment of what is original and proprietary in the Polish culture, and thus competitive with European models, is also close to Gombrowicz's point of view. In the classic essay *Gombrowicz a ethos szlachecki* [Gombrowicz and the Ethos of the Nobility] (1974), Jan Błoński once argued that the tradition-critical writer still appreciated some values of the nobility's lifestyle and made the apotheosis of freedom and autonomy that characterized the nobility's attitude a model for his own actions as an artist. According to Szczerek, it was indeed the “nobility who was the element uniting Polishness in a way that gave it a certain really attractive form,” and it was the gentry that constituted the only autonomous, attractive, original Polish form to which “one could refer when building national identity” (Szczerek, 2013b: 215).

Among the harmful traditions of the interwar period, Szczerek includes nationalist and xenophobic attitudes manifested in relations with minorities. The attempt to dominate other groups by means of repression and persecution, forgetting Poland's own recent position as a subjugated and persecuted community, could be explained as acting out or compensating for the humiliations experienced. The author explicitly points out this change of roles: the paradox of a colonized colonizer, a recent victim now victimizing others. The conflicts with minorities are thus treated as such permanent elements in Polish life that they cannot be excluded from the counterfactual scenarios of the history. Aggressive nationalism is thus linked to imperial claims as another form they assume.

Alternative History and the Hard-Boiled Story

The novel *Cham z kulą w głowie* [A Lout with a Bullet in the Head] (2020) represents another step in the demythologization of the interwar period in Szczerek's literary oeuvre. Here the author fictionalizes another variant of an alternative history of the "long interwar period," which began with the victory of September 1939 and continued after 2000. As Catherine Gallagher claims, counterfactual scenarios can be combined "with various novelistic generic forms" (Gallagher, 2018: 3). This time, Szczerek uses the formula of the hard-boiled story modified with the devices of the postmodern novel. For example, he ostentatiously exposes genre conventions by commenting on the construction of the main protagonist and the settings of the events, and ironically juxtaposes popular literature with high art by providing a motto from Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve] about the quest for revenge. The author exposes the ex-centric narrative perspective (the events are narrated, among others, by a female ghost and a female pagan goddess) and introduces the "erased figures": figures with an unclear and uncertain ontological status, present and absent, participating in the story and being voided at the same time (McHale, 2012: 149–150). Szczerek's play with ethnic stereotypes demonstrates both their social power and their role in artistic works. In addition, he creates a network of explicit intertextual references in his story: to *Ferdynand* by Witold Gombrowicz, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, and *Popioły* [Ashes] by Stefan Żeromski. Literary quotations and allusions are also abundant in the novel's language, which combines and mixes various stylistic registers.

As Umberto Eco argues, the interpretation of popular literature must consider the ideological dimension of genre forms (Eco, 2008: 120). In *Cham z kulą w głowie*, the combination of an alternative history scenario with the models of the hard-boiled story has a significant ideological message. This genre presents the world governed by chance, impenetrable and inexplicable. According to Slavoj Žižek, hard-boiled fiction is

primarily a genre with a critical social dimension. It exposes the illusory nature of social normality and security by revealing the evil behind it, the lawlessness, violence, and hidden connections between the elites and the criminals (Žižek, 1990). The activation of the hard-boiled narrative conventions reinforces the demythologizing aspect of Szczerek's novel: the *uchronia* becomes a dystopia. The alternative Poland of the "long interwar period," a "post-agricultural country on the edge of Europe, on the very border of the Great Soviet Unknown" (Szczerek, 2020: 57), is a world of chaos and crime, embroiled in ethnic and colonial wars, shaken by political revolts, and open to bloodthirsty religious cults.

The dark sides of reality are explored by the main protagonist, who is placed at the center of social, ethnic, and colonial conflicts. The multiple exclusion and marginalization determine the uniqueness of his position: Franciszek Kary is a lout, a bastard, and a traitor. As a peasant, he belongs to an underprivileged social class; as a bastard, he does not participate in the typical structures of family ties; as a soldier of the imperial army who condemns colonial crimes, he breaks away from the national community. Following him, the reader observes the interwar period from the "perspective of a peasant, a lout" (Szczerek, 2020: 18). Szczerek thus inscribes his alternative history of Poland with a plebeian perspective, enriching it with the popular and provincial dimension, with questions of class conflicts and injustice. On the other hand, Kary's character is still a "*noir* detective" modeled on the rules of the genre. He is a broken man and a loser, a protagonist who deals with the depraved world and is involved in its dangerous game, who pursues private revenge, and does not refrain from cruelty and violence. He sees reality as an unclear, deceptive, and even phantasmagoric combination of waking life, hallucinogenic visions, and psychological projections. In solving crimes, he follows his intuition and instinct, but his actions do not restore the destroyed moral order.

In defining Kary's identity, Gombrowicz's opposition of the lout and the master is of vital importance. On various occasions, Kary analyzes his peasant experience, the peasant traits of his character, the peasant language, and the peasant complexes. The novel's central theme is the question of identity. The author introduces and fictionalizes the conflict

between the proponents of two models of identity: the constructivist and the essentialist model. The first approach is represented by characters who repeat that all divisions between people are artificial, being only cultural constructs. The other approach is prevalent among proponents of the idea of “blood and land,” who believe in the existence of a national essence that is biologically determined and inherited. This way of thinking points to a non-eliminable natural difference that forms the basis for distinction and reproduces mechanisms inherent to racial beliefs. By exposing them, Szczerek uses the method of combating racist theories that was used also by Gombrowicz: he shows their conceptual absurdity. In the fever of reaching the pure proto-Polishness, the proponents of this concept go back to prehistoric times, proclaim the Poles as the descendants of the “First People,” and create the theory of a great Neanderthalia. In this way, what was supposed to be specific, and super-Polish, proves to be shared with others. In his journalism, Szczerek also criticizes the myths of national and cultural purity and points to hybridization processes as a factor in the formation of Europe.

In a historical scenario invented in *Cham z kulą w głowie*, Szczerek makes two important changes from the version known from *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska*: he strengthens the motifs of triumphant nationalism and the traumatic colonial experience. In the novel, Poland undergoes several political turns after 1939 to become a country ruled by the national camp. Finally, the adherents of nationalist-mystical ideas create a new syncretic religion incorporating pagan Slavic cults and blood-shedding rituals of exotic sects. This form of faith becomes a manifestation of narcissistic patriotism that sacralizes and worships the nation.

The triumph of the nationalist camp consequently leads to an escalation of conflicts with minorities: wars against the Ukrainians and the expulsion of the Jews. In *Cham z kulą w głowie*, the author presents an extended scene of a pogrom in Warsaw, as well as drastic descriptions of atrocities committed in the fighting on the eastern borderland by both sides of the conflict. This way of presenting counterfactual scenarios of history aims at deconstructing the nostalgic and mythologized image of the Second Polish Republic as a multi-ethnic state. The idealization

approach emphasizes the values of difference, heterogeneity, and plurality but disregards and overlooks the problems they may cause. Szczerek does not hesitate to speculate about the most extreme variant of the course of events. The harassment of minorities and the battles with the Ukrainians will end in a conflict with the other European countries and a prediction of a war against the West.

In *Cham z kulą w głowie*, Szczerek also radically rewrites the history of the Poles as colonizers. This time it is not Madagascar that becomes a Polish colony but a fictional island in the Caribbean with living descendants of the Poles who arrived there in the Napoleonic era. Its name: San Fernando, can be associated with San Domingo. Kary's traumatic colonial experience during his stay on the island recalls the experiences of legionnaires presented in Stefan Żeromski's *Popioły*. It is about transforming the tropical island into a tropical hell, fighting against the freedom-loving people, and slaughtering the defenseless. As in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the colonial space is presented as a space of anomie, collapse, and a crisis of moral and ethical norms.

Like many other alternate-history novels, *Cham z kulą w głowie* is linked to the current state of affairs and could also be interpreted as a satirical commentary on the current situation. In Szczerek's journalism, the questions of xenophobia, hate speech, racism, and nationalism in contemporary Poland are among the central motifs. Therefore writer's conditional assumptions about how "the prolonged interwar period" could develop, as well as the scenario of the triumph of nationalist parties and the nationalist model of identity, form an exceptionally pessimistic and critical commentary on the value and vitality of the legacy of the Second Polish Republic.

Conclusions

Both of Szczerek's works analyzed here are part of the trend of new explanations of the interwar period that emerged after 1989 and aimed at

interpreting and reinterpreting its legacy. The author is one of the most consistent critics of the nostalgic, idealized image of the period. His scenarios of the alternative history emphasize the dark side and the negative consequences of the attitudes, political programs, and ideologies developed at that epoch. At the same time, however, Szczerek sees the interwar period as an important point of reference for the present times, proving its legacy by adopting the perspective of continuity. Identity discourses crystallized at that time: the conservative discourse apologetic for Polishness, and the modern, critical discourse, are exceptionally durable and still prove their formative power today. The author himself proclaims critical tradition, patronaged by Witold Gombrowicz.

Researchers point to various filiations of alternative history as a genre and analyze its relationship to historical prose, as well as to the identity and national narratives. According to Catherine Gallagher, counterfactual histories establish the nation as their hero and analyze the nation's agency and responsibility in history as well as "national characteristics" important in different scenarios of historical events (Gallagher, 2018: 237–238). In both *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska* and *Cham z kulą w głowie*, Szczerek questions the possibility of Polish "dreams of power" coming true, referring to the characteristics of the "Polish form" as immature, unfinished, and not yet solidified. The scenarios constructed by the author are full of provocative, grotesque, and caricatural tones, with disappointment and disillusionment coming to the fore in the end. Thus, Szczerek's shifting the switches of history as a starting point for speculations about possible histories produces neither national reparation nor consolation.

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EUGENIA PROKOP-JANIEC is Full Professor of Literary Anthropology and Cultural Studies of the Faculty of Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. She specializes in the history of modern literature and literary criticism, literary ethnology, Polish-Jewish literature and Polish-Jewish cultural and literary contacts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She is the author of *Międzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska jako zjawisko kulturowe i artystyczne* (1992, Jan Karski & Pola Nireńska award YIVO 1993, English translation: *Polish-Jewish Literature in the Interwar Years*, 2003), *Literatura i nacjonalizm: Twórczość krytyczna Zygmunta Wasilewskiego* (2004), *Pogranicze polsko-żydowskie. Topografie i teksty* (2013), *Literatura & etnologia* (2019), editor of the anthology *Międzywojenna poezja polsko-żydowska* (1996), and collections of articles *Polacy-Żydzi: kontakty kulturowe i literackie* (2014), co-editor of *Teatr żydowski w Krakowie* (1995), *Literatura polsko-żydowska: Studia i szkice* (2011), *Polskie tematy i konteksty literatury*

żydowskiej (2014), and collected writings of Maurycy Szymel *Twarzą ku nocy* (2015), Anda Eker's *Miłość stracona* (2017), and Stefan Pomer's *Złota Lipa* (2019). She is the contributor to the scholarly journals and collective volumes in Poland, Europe, North America, and Israel (e.g. *Pamiętnik Literacki*, *Teksty Drugie*, *Ruch Literacki*, *Polin*, *Gal-Ed*, *The Polish Review*, *Yearbook for European Jewish Literature Studies*, *Studia Judaica*, *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*).

EUGENIA PROKOP-JANIEC, profesor zwyczajny w Katedrze Antropologii Literatury i Studiów Kulturowych Wydziału Polonistyki UJ. Jej zainteresowania badawcze obejmują historię polskiej literatury nowoczesnej i krytyki, związki literatury i etnologii, polsko-żydowskie kontakty literackie i kulturowe w XIX i XX wieku, piśmiennictwo pograniczy etnicznych. Opublikowała m.in. *Międzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska jako zjawisko kulturowe i artystyczne* (1992, Jan Karski & Pola Nireńska award YIVO 1993, przekład *Polish-Jewish Literature in the Interwar Years*, 2003), *Literatura i nacjonalizm: Twórczość krytyczna Żygmunta Wasilewskiego* (2004), *Pogranicze polsko-żydowskie. Topografie i teksty* (2013), *Literatura & etnologia* (2019).

E-mail: eugenia.prokop-janiec@uj.edu.pl