Village buildings in winter – scenery of the 1930s Photo: NAC

RECENZJA

“Poison, dump, filth, report on a dead man”

Author: **Joanna Siedlecka** 07.12.2020

In my *Ugly Black Bird* (1994, published by Marabut-Cis) I demystified the occupant memoir of Jerzy Kosiński – the basis for his literary image, as well as his alleged autobiographical The Painted Bird, considered by many a shocking document of the Holocaust.

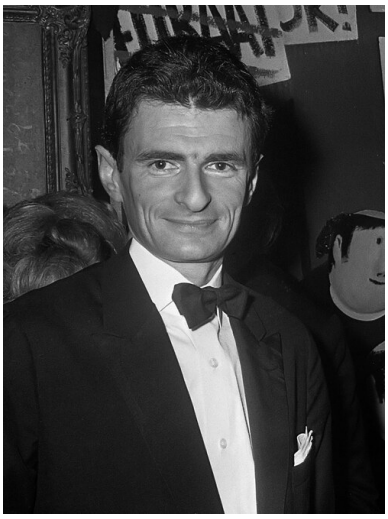
As a result of my journalistic journey it turned out that he did not in fact wander around the Borderlands of the pre-war Republic of Poland, like the most prominent American encyclopaedia claimed he did, he did not lose his speech due to the brutality of cruel, Polish farmers, he was not separated from his parents. He survived the occupation with them thanks to the perhaps uneducated, “dim”, but honest and brave residents of the Dąbrowa Rzeszycka village in the Tarnobrzeg province, who saved the Kosiński family risking their lives

and the lives of their children.

> Jerzy Kosiński, who was the first in literature to accuse Poles of participating in the Holocaust, even became its icon, a symbol of the most severe suffering of a Jewish child, while his story, even though falsified, became the unbreakable part of the so-called religion of the Holocaust. Anyone who dared question it, had to pay for it.

It began already prior to the publishing…

Even though I behaved as a reporter should, I managed to uncover facts which the world did not know about and which none of the people disagreeing with me were able to question, *The Ugly Black Bird* caused an unimaginable hate, back then simply called a witch hunt. Almost every prominent newspaper joined in on it, from the “Znak” quarterly to women’s magazines. Jerzy Kosiński, who was the first in literature to accuse Poles of participating in the Holocaust, even became its icon, a symbol of the most severe suffering of a Jewish child, while his story, even though falsified, became the unbreakable part of the so-called religion of the Holocaust. Anyone who dared question it, had to pay for it.



Jerzy Kosiński (1969) Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Eric Koch (CC0)

It all began even before the publishing of my *Ugly Black Bird*. The news about it somehow reached Henryk Daska, a March emigrant, business entrepreneur and publisher, living in the United States, a hagiographer of Kosiński, who planned to write his biography. As my co-editor Piotr Szwajcer later wrote in the "New Books" (1994, no. 6), one of the few papers which defended me at the time:

> "even before the book was published, Mr Dasko called one of us (namely Daniel Trapkowski from the Marabut publisher, apparently he was too afraid to call the author) and, knowing of Siedlecka's plans, suggested to <<consult with him the content of the book or else>> - he warned - <<it all could end badly for us>>. It did not worry us that much at the time. It was too peculiar and out of the ordinary for us to have Siedlecka, a renowned author, send her work for proofreading to a little-known critic, even when he believed himself to be the biggest and unquestionable authority in all matters related to Kosiński. […] It was not much of a surprise for me that he wrote a bad review of *The Ugly Black Bird*" (Henryk Dasko, Poison, "Ex Libris", supplement to the "Warsaw's Life", 17.03.1994).

"The Ugly Black Bird is not only a **stupid, but also maleficent** [I wrote it in bolds]" - warned Dasko. He described the proof of this maleficence across entire two columns of "Ex Libris". Among other things, he accused me of presenting the standpoint of only "one side": the farmers from Dąbrowa, and not his friends, even though they only knew what Kosiński told them. He also accused me of unfaithfully presenting the living conditions of Jews who had the so-called Aryan papers, even though I only wrote about the exceptional conditions the family of Kosiński had. However, Dasko first and foremost tried to make my book look

unfavourable to such extent that no one would read it:

> "The thesis which Siedlecka wrote is presented in such primitive and obtrusive way that nearly every paragraph brings with it a load of radical dislike towards the characters, dislike which often transforms into hate. The picture painted by this book is not anything new. It is only a continuation of a vulgar and false scheme, where – on side there are always Poles – a nation of anti-Semites, learning anti-Semitism from mother's milk etc., while on the other side are Jews or Jewish-Communists in casemates etc. *The Ugly Black Bird* is a *monstrosity* belonging to the past, there will be less and less books like this in Polish bookshops. On my shelf it lies between Pawlik Morozow and *The Silly Affair* by Stanisław Ryszard Dobrowolski. It fits perfectly there."

… an unthinkable hate…

Michał Cichy, *The Bird and The Ugly Black Bird,* "Wyborcza" daily, 15.07.1994:

> "I do not take the side of neither *The Ugly Black Bird nor The Bird* and both these books seem **hideous** [I wrote it in bolds] to me. Kosiński was a literary mountebank, while Siedlecka is insinuating. […] It is most exemplified by the matter of alleged cooperation of Kosiński-senior with the NKVD."

Tadeusz Komendant, *And the painted birds are gone,* "Newspaper on Books", supplement for "Wyborcza" daily from March 23rd 1994:

> "Siedlecka, who rose to fame in *His Lordship* by discovering Aniela, a servant of the Gombrowicz family – it is the main reason behind her fame – wrote another book from Aniela's perspective. She tried to establish how it <<really>> happened with *The Painted Bird* and what was the <<real>> story there. […] I have not read such a **hideous** [I wrote it in bolds] novel in a long time. I do not find *The Painted Bird* a masterpiece, I am not a fan of Kosiński as an author, but I see no reason to replace his fiction with a story about Kosiński's father, strung together from insinuations and claiming to be <<true>>, where the main argument against him is that he survived".

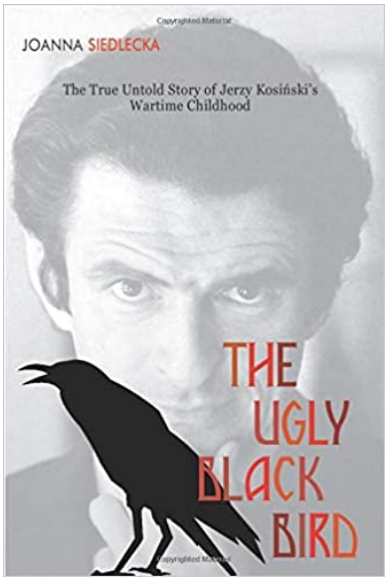
Wacław Sadowski (according to the materials of the communist Security Service, kept by the Institute of National Remembrance, a secret collaborator codename “Olcha”, *Medium*, “World Literature” 1994, no. 4-5):

> “The flat roughness of Siedlecka’s theses is shocking. By indulging in <<village talk>>, identifying with it, she became a faithful medium for her delusions”.

Monika Adamczyk-Grabowska, *A twisted truth,* “Znak” 1994, no. 11. She was also disgusted with who I asked to speak:

> “I waited for at least a few sentences where the author would detach herself from characters of her reportage. She claims that it is a story partly as untrue as the story of the Boy from *The Painted Bird*, that not all sides were heard. […] However, I found no distancing here, but instead full identification with the simple, innocent people saying prayers for the <<repenting soul>> of little Kosiński. […] It is hard to believe that such a book was even written; it is hard to believe that a renowned publisher decided to publish it. Perhaps it is good that it did so. After all, it is a testimony for the limited minds, the lack of sensitivity and a certain kind of cruelty of not only some residents of the Polish countryside, but also the author, to an extent manipulating her interviewees. It is a testimony of the strange and dangerous, one-way of thinking, which is unfortunately so common in contemporary Poland”.

Priest Adam Boniecki, *About good farmers and ungrateful Jews,* “Powszechny” weekly 1994, no. 32. *The Ugly Black Bird* was delivered to him especially to Rome, where he was staying at the time. However, the book did not come to his liking.



***The Ugly Black Bird* by Joanna Siedlecka**

> Even though I behaved as a reporter should, I managed to uncover facts which the world did not know about and which none of the people disagreeing with me were able to question, *The Ugly Black Bird* caused an unimaginable hate, back then simply called a witch hunt.
>
> "On the contrary, it only envokes bad thoughts which I did not have prior to reading it" - he wrote. It was hard for him to believe that the farmers could have hidden the Kosiński family gratuitously.
>
> "Let's assume that it happened differently. Let us assume the possibility that they were hidden for money. […] That during these two and a half years they lived under constant

blackmail and that they had to buy their safety repeatedly, that they were treated like animals backed into a corner… After all, there were plenty of cases like this. There were noble people who risked their lives to save Jews gratuitously, but there were other kinds of people too. Sometimes farmers would beat a Jew they found sleeping in their hay to death, gave them away to Germans out of fear or for money. And if it was the case with the Kosiński family (let me repeat, if) then can we assume that Siedlecka's interviewees would admit that? […] I know that I never came about memoirs of people who gave Jews away to the Germans, blackmailed them or protected them for profit. If the residents of Dąbrowa and Wola, or their parents to be precise, were not exactly honest, would they tell that to Joanna Siedlecka? I doubt it".

He then assumed that "the story of good farmers and ungrateful Jews is too black and white to be convincing. Even worse, it is unconvincing and immoral."

Marcin Piasecki, *The repainted bird,* "Polityka" weekly 1994, no. 16:

> "The critical zeal, which book reviewers lacked recently, returned to the headlines. It was awoken neither by Andrzej Szczypiorski's novel, nor the latest volume of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's sketches, nor by the series of books of <<Brulion>>. The emotions were

sparked by *The Ugly Black Bird* by Joanna Siedlecka”

- he admitted. Still, he found it to be “a striking example of the lack of thoroughness”.

“Who defends the Kosiński family in the book, presents an even slightly different standpoint? No one. The author does not reference a single statement nor a single report of a person who could in any way verify the stories of the residents of the Dąbrowa village. *The Ugly Black Bird* disappoints” - he described. “The book is shockingly one-sided, where slander and libel come to the foreground.”

Ryszard Marek Groński, *Paper is impatient,* “Polityka” weekly 1994, no. 15:

“Earlier, if any editorial office decided to publish *The Ugly Black Bird* – the report on a dead man and his parents – the report like: one lady said that old Kosiński, or actually Lewinkopf, reported to the Gestapo during the German occupation, and after the Soviets came – straight to the NKVD. The publisher would not dare to reference Ryszard Kapuściński in the note on the author. Kapuściński

wrote a good review of one of Joanna Siedlecka's book. However, I doubt whether he would want to have anything to do with Siedlecka, a sensitive humanist. One who resented the wretched Kosiński for the fact he survived. But what goes up must go down… So he was met with God's punishment and met a poor end. Earlier, the filth [term used by Henryk Daska] by Siedlecka would only see the light of day in a little office publishing leaflets on Masons, new editions of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and the memoirs of the Giertych family. Today, Siedlecka is promoted by the renowned and famous publisher <<Marabut>>. On the front <<Marabut>> sells Singer and Styron, Themerson and Burgin. It hides *The Ugly Black Bird*, praised as a <<ground-breaking text>>, for a better clientele. Why is it ground-breaking? You could discover similar things by combing through the bulletins of the <<Grunwald>>, <<Reality>> and <<Fatherland>> yearly. I don't know, perhaps the picture on the front cover is a misdirection – the thoughtful blonde could be Wiktor Szpada."

The columnist of "Polityka" attacked my book several times, always in the same manner, not sparing those who dared say even one positive thing about it.

Ryszard Marek Groński, *It flew past me,* “Polityka” 1994, no. 30:

> “The discussion party flew past me. What was discussed? *The Ugly Black Bird* by Siedlecka. Why was the place of discussion the Museum of Literature? The author of the book on Kosiński is, after all, too young to be an exhibit there. The honorary guests were Krzysztof Kąkolewski and priest professor Waldemar Chrostowski. The former tends to speak up at the church tower, near the weathercock, the latter at the cathedral and pulpit. And here – they tramped to the Museum without a book for the service, but rather serving the book. I read about the course of the evening discussion in the previous Wyborcza daily. It was pretty… […]. Zdzisław Najder, who in 1959 met Kosiński in New York, said that “whenever one needed to buy anything, he had to do it, since Kosiński spoke very little English at the time>>. I suspect, however, that there was another reason – Kosiński immediately realised that Najder can be used for small trade. He knew how to bargain, he knew both the zloty and dollar prices. A nice touch was the voice of Krzysztof Kąkolewski foretelling his protégé to become the victims of a scheme. The seer wrote about the child <<stung by

> Jews with needles>> […], even though the slayer of the dead man is not a child and calculated *The Ugly Black Bird* rather consciously, hoping for sympathy for the birdie. What does it have to do with literature though? As much as the lame reporter with writing. Not to mention the insinuating and accusing tone of Joanna Siedlecka's story."

Ryszard Marek Groński, *Typical Warsaw attacks*, "Polityka" 1994, no. 24:

> "I have good news for the exposer of dead men: Ms. Siedlecka writes the second part of *The Ugly Black Bird* about the Łódź years of the wicked man. By using her tape recording ear, she allegedly got the testimony of a friend of Jerzy K. from school. He cheated while playing air hockey! In notes of Ms. Joanna there is also a report of a former girlfriend of Kosiński. He did not want to take her to the United States, and when he came back he was so changed he didn't even recognize her."

Janusz Majcherek, *Dump,* "Res Publica Nowa" quarterly 1994, no. 5: "To be fair, I'm not that

drawn to jump on the bandwagon of insults directed at Siedlecka" – he wrote. But he still jumped on it. "I do not regret her – he continued – for she somewhat made her own bed". He found my book not only "unwise and in bad taste", but also "ambiguous" and not that pretty.

The witch hunt against me visibly toned down thanks to an American, the future biographer of Kosiński, James Park Sloan, who came to Poland following the publishing of my book. He retraced my steps and went to Sandomierz and Dąbrowa, where he talked to my characters with the help of a translator.

"The author apparently shows her true intentions: she aims to discredit Kosiński as a writer and human being […]. He witnesses blame Kosiński for falsifying the truth and presenting the reality of life under occupation

in a biased and libellous way. It is curious, that an idea of such comparative analysis did not come to Siedlecka's mind when she wrote *His Lordship*. It would be the easiest thing to prove that Gombrowicz was nothing but a perverted pig, in Małoszyce groped servants, and then playing innocent attributed all these lascivious actions to all kinds of Gonzals, Fryderyks, Miętuses and Leons, while lying left and right. You can do it like that, but such <<philology>> does not come from a nobleman, but rather from some kitchen servant who peeked on the writer from behind through a keyhole, and then told everyone that the lady visiting him was in fact a chauffeur."

There were also many reviewers who had a problem with my blonde hair, called me a "bright lady" or did not shy away from simply calling me stupid.

Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, *The author needs to be smarter*, "Wiadomości Kulturalne" 1994:

> "Lets take a look at the cover. On the back side there is a small picture of the author: a blonde lady with a thoughtful look, with a gesture of the hand pointing to thinking since she touches the side of her head with an open hand. At the front cover –there is a monstrosity. The face only partially sticking out of the shadow with sharp strokes of light, huge mouth,

hooked nose, hidden, black eyes, skin folds. The elders remember these kinds of faces from the caricatures of <<Der Stürmer>> magazine, the youth do not. It is out of balance: light-darkness; honesty – ominous, dark secret; a woman – monster. A bird. The ugly bird. […] Who are her interviewees? At first they are ordinary, quite ordinary, common citizens of Sandomierz, later also ordinary (or maybe a little less than ordinary in this remote village) residents of Dąbrowa Rzeczycka. For a reporter any witness is good, and that's the way it should be. Only it should be that way if the reporter is able to not only write down their testimony but also understand it. […] Siedlecka, who is a writer after all, this lady of a thoughtful glance and thoughtful gesture from the picture, should question a lot of things. She should i.e. reflect on the cultural shock of a small boy, raised in a wealthy house in a city, who suddenly learns that he belongs to a never before known to him people, speaking an unknown language and believing in an unknown God. She should have, but she didn't. […] I will conclude with one question, but this time with a more firm answer: does the author of a literary report have to be smarter, more conscious, sagacious and far-sighted than his interviewees and the gathered material? She has to."

I was also attacked by the so-called women's press: "Skandale" and "Femina" magazines, a supplement for "Życie Warszawy", October 1994, editor-in-chief Aleksandra Jakubowska:

> "A little black book, neither ground-breaking nor thorough, but highly outrageous and full of controversial opinions on such delicate matters as the Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War, caused such chaos and sparked critical debates no other contemporary writer managed to do in a long time. Since it received crashing reviews accusing the author of anti-Semitism, lies and bad faith, while some political camps and readers defended the truth on Jews and Poles – we have a recipe for a scandal. Moreover, the problem touches on such delicate issue as Polish anti-Semitism. The author got sad following a number of critiques, Kosiński lost some dignity and the owner of a little-known publisher <<Marabut>> sold more copies and counts his profits."

My *Ugly Black Bird* was attacked not only in the press. Maria Janion, *Will you know what you have lived through?,* "Sic!" 1996:

> “Please note how successful is the book by Joanna Siedlecka *The Ugly Black Bird,* in my opinion a **gross** [I put it in bolds] book, on Kosiński. This is the truth, the truth of an alleged document, but at the same time no one talks about *The Painted Bird.* It is not treated as an autonomous, closed literary work, which has nothing to do with Ms. Siedlecka’s fantasies.”

Jewish child on the streets of Rudnik in the inter-war period. Photo: NAC

Verification of *The Ugly Black Bird*

The witch hunt against me visibly toned down thanks to an American, the future biographer of Kosiński, James Park Sloan, who came to Poland following the publishing of my book. He retraced my steps and went to

Sandomierz and Dąbrowa, where he talked to my characters with the help of a translator. The verification of *The Ugly Black Bird* came out successful, which he wrote about in the prestigious “New Yorker”, and then in his biography of Kosiński:

> “Now, everyone needs to admit that they are shocked that a professional in the profession of a liar, a man who survived the war by living a lie, lied.”

Krzysztof Kąkolewski, “Czas Krakowski” 1995, no. 185 and 190:

> “The witch hunt against Siedlecka turned out to be unfounded. The author received enormous fame. Those who knew Kosiński’s novel bought Siedlecka’s book. Those who never heard of Kosiński also bought it. […] Such widespread witch hunt was surprising, even suspicious. There was too much effort put into it, too many people took part in it. […] It was too much: the scale for Siedlecka was pushed so low, that a suspicion arose that the entire scale was tampered with, was it possible for a book to be so bad and vicious? Perhaps it is worth reading it? […] The clear injustice, witch hunt, hate, no restraint on the most brutal descriptions – all of this would point to the fact that the oppressors of the victim fond it defenceless, thus creating the aura of compassion, interest and desire to help.”

Piotr Gursztyn, *We from Dąbrowas and Wolas,* “Rzeczpospolita” weekly, “Plus Minus” Magazine, 11.06.2011:

> “The critics of Siedlecka from before 20 years ago felt contempt towards the <<dim>> people from there. The disagreement came down to the fact that friends defended their Jerzy. <<Jerzy was a huge liar. So what?>> - said Agnieszka Osiecka about Kosiński. - Well, - ascribing this intention not to Osiecka, but defenders of Kosiński – then he is the only person who counts, not the peasants from near the San river. Jerzy was aesthetic, they were not. Joanna Siedlecka made a mistake, because she chose the truth over aesthetics. She lost in a short run, but won in a long run.”

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Thanks to the efforts of the Book Institute, *The Ugly Black Bird* by Joanna Siedlecka was translated into English by Chester A. Kisiel and was published in the United States in the beginning of 2019 by the American publisher Leopolis Press. There is also an edition of *The Ugly Black Bird* being prepared in Czech, because the Czech are co-producers of a film based on the deceptive book *The Painted Bird* by Kosiński. It already had several screenings.

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