

‘Mielno, Our Polish Lesbos’¹

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Abstract: The article examines two cases: a 1988 camping trip to the Polish seaside town of Mielno – known as ‘the first lesbian convention’ – and the 2023 play *Lesbian Sunset*, directed by Olga Ciężkowska², which re-enacts this event. Staging recent queer herstory in the theatre can be considered a form of engaged research that – as Maria Kobielska has written – can illuminate ‘a grey area’ of memory culture. The example of Mielno offers an opportunity to revisit the history of the final years of the Polish People’s Republic and the period of political transformation from the perspective of non-heteronormative women, whose experiences have remained largely absent from the dominant historical narratives. An analysis of the contemporary performance demonstrates how taking a queer position can be a starting point for reimagining a fragment of late 20th-century local history.

Keywords: recent Polish queer herstory, engaged memory studies, theatrical re-enactment, lesbian performance

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Like a familiar refrain, the ‘invisibility of lesbians’ continuously resurfaces when we examine non-heterosexual women in Polish culture, history, and politics. Scholars frequently analyse this systemic absence and imperceptibility within the public square. But let’s pause at this notion for a moment. If invisible people really existed, and one sought to learn about this group, then a difficult yet key task would be to find an appropriate research method to analyse the concrete forms of their presence. Sometimes, in the case of queer herstory, the situation can be challenging in a similar way.

¹ An excerpt from the refrain of one of the songs created and performed by Magda Dubrowska (together with performers) for the purpose of the performance.

² Ciężkowska, Olga, Magda Dubrowska, Dorota Glac, Marta Jalowska. 2025, September 22. An interview I conducted via Zoom.

Yet the unique quality of historical queer female experiences may stem from their very elusiveness, which resists the rigid frameworks of traditional historical accounts.

In what follows, I will explore two cases: first, a summer camp in Mielno, a town in northwestern Poland by the Baltic Sea, where, in summer 1988, a camping trip took place (known also as the first lesbian convention); and, second, the stage play *Lesbian Sunset*, which refers to Mielno and allows an analysis of how queer experience can illuminate new pathways in exploring memory. I argue that an engaged approach to the past – like that seen in the *Lesbian Sunset* performance – illuminates history from a fresh perspective. Instead of focusing on simplifying dichotomies like history/present, West/East, communism/democracy, progressiveness/backwardness, or identity politics/queer, a theatrical reenactment of a past trip to Mielno foregrounds a concrete – though mediated and reconstructed – experience. In this approach, representations are not systematised and consolidated, but rather, they are set in motion; meanings are activated rather than defined.

Viewing the past from the perspective of non-heteronormative women – whose experiences, generally speaking, become increasingly less disclosed the further back in time we go – can be considered analytically illuminating. Making visible these elements of the past in the present produces new circuits of feelings and meanings that exist across time, a phenomenon described by Elizabeth Freeman (2010) as ‘temporal drag’. For example, it is quite striking to learn that ‘[t]he very fact that these few women [what mattered, however, is they were without men – RM] gathered at a campsite by the sea in the height of the season was surprising for those around them’ (Kowalska, Łuczak 2005). Why exactly was it surprising? What social codes did it violate, and what does this tell us about the social norms of that time? These questions offer a useful starting point for re-examining history.

I am inspired by the theoretical perspectives of Maria Kobielska, who, in turn, follows Susannah Radstone. Radstone called for the political engagement of memory studies – not in the sense of the defence of the oppressed, but rather in the sense of engaging them to ‘understand culture – including these versions of memory culture – as ambiguous, as struggle, as a grey area’ (Radstone 2008: 36). According to Kobielska, the grey area of memory culture (‘the area of default, unquestioned, and unproblematic rules’) can be illuminated precisely through engaged research (Kobielska 2017: 404). I argue that researching queer herstory towards the end of the Polish People’s Republic and the related political transformation may be an example of such a grey area.

Turning points

Toward the end of the Polish People's Republic and later during the post-1989 political and social transformation, non-heteronormative women appeared in public discourse noticeably more often than before, yet still primarily as subjects resisting representation (Scarry 1994: 3–11). This group, which emerged as a political subject during a somewhat ambiguous period of the late 1980s, to now remains poorly recognised in Polish historiography (and beyond). Meanwhile, the authors of the *Lesbian Sunset* performance (which premiered in 2023 at the independent Warsaw theatre Potem-*o-tem*) proved that where science seems to struggle, sometimes art can succeed. By initiating work on this performance, the artistic team – featuring Olga Ciężkowska (direction), Dorota Glac, Marta Jalowska, Monika Jarosińska (performing), Magda Dubrowska (performing and music), Sylwia Chutnik (collaboration with the team on the script), Marta Szypulska, and Tosia Węglewska (set design and costumes) – made room for a new kind of story to appear (Despret 2021). The performance was directly inspired by a 2005 memoir article titled 'Morze możliwości' (A Sea of Possibilities), published on the Polish LGBTQ+ portal www.kobiety-kobietom.com. In the article, authors Alicja Kowalska³ and Agnieszka Łuczak recount their personal memories of an event from 1987:

The year is 1987. Poland. What can a girl who wants to share her life with another woman do? So far, nothing but make more or less desperate attempts to seduce a heterosexual friend. Due to the political changes in the country, censorship is loosening its iron grip, and the first social and entertainment magazine has appeared on newsstands. It's the monthly *Relaks*, A5 notebook format, mostly filled with what were, for the time, very daring personal ads. (Kowalska, Łuczak 2005)

Indeed, these personal ads published in *Relaks i Kolekcjoner Polski* magazine (which was a monthly supplement in the nationwide daily newspaper *Kurier Polski*),⁴ came to play a significant role in connecting non-heterosexual people in socialist Poland. However, queer research on the Polish People's Republic focuses mainly on homosexual men (see Fiedotow 2012: 341; Szulc 2018: 79); we know less about the customs of queer women. Nonetheless, research on non-heteronormative women's experi-

³ Kowalska, Alicja. 2025, June 3. An interview I conducted at Sady Żoliborskie in Warsaw.

⁴ The magazine had been published since 1984 (that is, earlier than Kowalska and Łuczak recall). However, 'EPOKA' publishing house suspended the personal ads column in July 1984 in response to readers' complaints and, above all, government pressure, resuming it only in mid-1987 (see EEIP Report 1985: 8–9; Fiedotow 2012: 341; Szulc 2018: 79; Morawska 2019: 61–63).

ences in neighbouring countries with a similar historical experience of transformation may be relevant to the Polish context. In Czechoslovakia, as Věra Sokolová (2014) concluded, based on numerous interviews, personal ads were one of the most common and important ways to meet other non-heterosexual women.⁵ It can be argued that in the second half of the 1980s, establishing relationships through ads became a popular practice among Polish queer women as well.⁶

One day, Alicja bought *Relaks* out of curiosity. In one of the next issues, she found the kind of ad she had been hoping for: '28-year-old woman wishes to meet a (female) life partner...' (Burzyńska 1988: 5).⁷ Despite the difficulty of revealing a secret to a stranger, she responded immediately. After two months of waiting, the reply finally arrived: Ania, who had placed the ad, wrote that she had received over fifty letters, met with a few girls, and already found the one. Not wanting to disappoint the others, she proposed a get-together for all of them. That way they could get to know each other, and romantic relationships might develop.

The plan was to gather in the seaside town of Mielno, at a campsite owned by Ania's friend. They expected a dozen, perhaps more, participants. Ultimately, six women arrived at the Koszalin railway station. Their secret sign was to wear a black bow tie. As Alicja recalls, she had to go to a store with mourning clothes to buy one. In the article, she describes how she and another women named Basia pinned on their bows at the train station and nervously glanced around: 'I wasn't aware that, thanks to the identifying mark, I was already being observed by someone' (Kowalska, Łuczak 2005). It was Dorota – who would later become Alicja's partner – observing them from a distance and deciding to approach.

A 'close reading' of each other

In the play *Lesbian Sunset*, we observe some women travelling by train. It's hot, and the atmosphere is thick; a mixture of excitement and awkwardness. Two women, who are friends, look at a third passenger. One asks the other, 'Do you think she is too?' Finally, they talk to her.

Despite the overall in-visibility of lesbians in historiography, in the 1980s they also struggled with a sense of unwanted visibility. An earnest awareness of others' gaz-

⁵ One of Sokolová's interlocutors, Ludmila (born in 1946), recalled: 'I never read much, but one exception was *Mladý svět*. (...) The personal ads section was the first thing I read, looking for something interesting. You could always tell when it was "our ad"' (Sokolová 2014: 99).

⁶ Women's ads in *Relaks* became more common in 1987, after the magazine's personal ads section was restored (Morawska 2019: 67–68).

⁷ '28-letnia, pozna współtowarzyszkę życia.' All the quotes are translated by the author unless stated otherwise.

es is a recurring theme in lesbian narratives, and it is usually accompanied by fear. The lesbian experience seems to be characterised by a constant, anxious analysis of the reactions of those around them. Evidence of this can be found in letters sent to youth magazines in the 1980s, such as the one by Alina, who wrote: 'Now I'm afraid of everything. Even a bus full of people who look at me with hostility, or so it seems to me' (*Na przełaj* 1987: 7).

In fact, ascribing excessive importance to one's appearance might well have been linked to the taboo surrounding homosexuality in the public sphere. We can draw an analogy with how Věra Sokolová interpreted the Czechoslovakian cultural context around that time: 'Since in public discourse homosexuality was not discussed and admitted as a visible presence in the society, it logically created a presumption that one would see "it" and recognize "it" when confronted with "it"' (Sokolová 2014: 95–96). I found another example of the intrusiveness of feeling observed in Grażyna Burzyńska's story 'Początek nocy, początek dnia' (The beginning of the night, the beginning of the day) from her 1987 debut collection of short stories *My dwie z naszej malutkiej wysepki* (The two of us from our tiny island). Upon returning home, the woman says to her partner: 'Yesterday, a woman from my office saw us together and started asking questions. She must have been onto something, because she was staring at me like an investigating judge' (Burzyńska 1987: 138).

Alicja Długołęcka-Lach's 1992 research sheds some light on why, during Poland's political transition, non-heterosexual women tried to avoid being visible. Based on the results of the surveys that she analysed, it can be assumed that women were influenced by observing discriminatory practices and narratives against homosexual men, who were more present in the public discourse. While few respondents (13%) experienced overt discrimination ('such as ridicule, public insults, beatings, arrests'), 80% of the surveyed women were afraid of negative reactions from their surroundings (Długołęcka-Lach 1993: 204). This situation may help account for why 'a large part of the women surveyed concealed their sexual orientation (and were therefore not placed in a situation requiring them to confront their views on social tolerance with the actual reactions of those around them)' (Długołęcka-Lach 1993: 204). Perhaps to avoid becoming the target of direct homophobia, they acted in such a way that their queerness was not noticeable to most of society. However, this doesn't mean that they were imperceptible to each other.

Later surveys by Alicja Długołęcka-Lach revealed that non-heterosexual women developed something like a subtle code of recognition – a language of secret signs. Respondents were aware of certain signs in appearance (short hair, a type of shoes and trousers, 'earrings in one ear, a wedding ring on the thumb'), and behaviour. Hallmarks could include a characteristic gait, 'less coquettish behaviour', and an "'I don't care" attitude', or even more precisely defined gestures such as 'the way they

smoke a cigarette, and that they don't let you light their cigarette or put on their coat'. One respondent answered the question concisely: 'These are women who don't care about appealing to men.' According to another one, 'sitting like a man and looking at other women' is behaviour indicating that a woman might be a lesbian (Długołęcka-Lach 2001: 263). This secret body language seems to play with the normative codes of what is considered appropriate, in a relatively safe way, allowing one to be different, without necessarily crossing the line of what is permissible.

Yet the most common signal among queer women remained eye contact. As one respondent phrased it: 'They have something in their eyes that I call a startled bird' (Długołęcka-Lach 2001: 263). Clearly, the best way to communicate, to flirt, and to make someone's acquaintance was to 'close-read' others. And it worked both ways: 'The lesbians surveyed most often make eye contact with another woman to be recognised; they do this significantly more often than talking about themselves, dressing in a specific way, reacting to someone's touch, behaving masculinely, using slang terms, or other behaviours [the author's exact calculations are omitted]', reported Długołęcka-Lach (2001: 264).

Evoking (memory of) emptiness

The resistance to presenting oneself to the world as a lesbian and the relational nature of knowing this queer identity translated into a specific 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) that has also come to shape collective memory and identity. This is quite visible in *Lesbian Sunset*. The earlier generation of lesbians lacked a distinct presence and this affected the context in which younger non-heteronormative girls grew up. Indeed, one could speak of a partly intergenerational dimension of the lesbian experience. The creative process of *Lesbian Sunset*, itself, is quite revealing in this respect.

Initially, the creators of *Lesbian Sunset* wanted to make a show about their shared experiences, the specific nature of which – as they soon realised – 'lies in the sense of lack, in this feeling of a total cultural void'. As the play's director, Olga Ciężkowska, described it in our interview, 'What we share is not events we can refer to but rather this very feeling of having no events at all – only fantasies and fleeting impressions. We concluded that the formation of this void in a place where other people have their own identity-shaping things (like tradition or family and other role models) – this feeling of emptiness was most constitutive for us.' Therefore, at the beginning of their creative process, they tried to fill this gap with their own fantasies about the erased past of queer women.

But then came this unexpected archival discovery: memories from the campsite in Mielno, written down almost twenty years later, when Alicja Kowalska and Agnieszka Łuczak, two former campmates, met by chance at the Academy of Tolerance in

Zakopane in 2005. However, Alicja and Agnieszka did not ascribe any great importance to it. In our recent conversation, Alicja remarked, 'Well, it's hard to attribute some great significance to it. (...) It was like something out of nowhere'.

Nonetheless, director Ciężkowska claimed that 'Mielno turned out to be so interesting because our protagonists also spoke primarily about this feeling of emptiness'. As the description on the show's website reads: 'This was our missing piece'. The discovered recollections of a short seaside holiday became a treasure for the artists. What might therefore seem like a rather insignificant event provided a point of reference that the younger generation lacked during their adolescence and helped them to articulate their own queer feelings and experiences.

This intertwining of individual biographies has broader significance. As spectators, we are asked to notice something that historical narratives have consistently overlooked. This is particularly valuable given that the late Polish People's Republic remains under-researched, which may partly be due to its being 'surrounded' by numerous temporally proximate historical moments that are considered more important, characteristic, or 'attractive'. Compared with the pivotal year of 1989, the seriousness of Martial Law, or the vibrancy of the 1990s, the late 1980s may seem somewhat unidentifiable.

Conclusion

An unexpected encounter with the past in the theatre, as presented in the play *Lesbian Sunset*, raises questions that align closely with Maria Kobielska's approach to engaged memory studies. Kobielska considers the possibilities and methods for responsibly assuming the role of a memory activist and intervening in parallel cultural phenomena within memory tensions. As the artists in *Lesbian Sunset* demonstrated: a self-analysis focused on the present can evolve into an intimate encounter with a significant past – a past significant in a historical, cultural, and social perspective. The history that they evoked demands a particular kind of attention. By closely observing the faint traces left queer women have left behind, we might realise how much we usually overlook.

The Mielno example shows the value of re-examining history by searching for what is hidden behind powerful symbols and canonical narratives. From this perspective, the second half of the 1980s seems more 'tangible' – perceived less as a period preceding a political upheaval, and more as a time of minor yet biographically significant shifts, the memory of which has since faded.

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