

O_KAZ

Literature about Kazimierz, vol. 2

No6

JULIA AIN-KRUPA

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THE PAINTED LADY

The dream is always the same.
I am walking down the streets
of Kazimierz, the old Jewish section
of Krakow, my wooden clogs beating
loudly against the cobblestone streets,
when I arrive at her house. Her name
was Irena, and she was a great poet.
She died along with the rest of them,
and for a moment I can see her wedding
dress floating from the balcony, as if
there were an invisible person inside.

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Jumping from the old cement block terrace, covered in flowerpots where buds are tenderly grown, placed beside an old plastic chair (to watch the world go by, only now, nobody is there to see), the dress falls to the ground. I step inside and it wraps around me, like a twisted shawl, or a snake, engaging my entire upper body. Any tighter and it would choke me, but mostly it just hangs on, like a child of a certain age, playing games that lead you to discover that now, all of a sudden, you are the adult in the room. We (I with the shawl) walk through the city, and as we approach the Wisła River banks, I crouch down to the ground. "What do you want?" I wish to ask, but the shawl just slithers off me and into the water. A naked woman surfaces from beneath the reflective waters. Her body is visible for less than a minute, as she is almost immediately wearing the dress. The two have collided and become one, and it turns out that I was just the delivery girl. Now clothed in the dress which became a shawl and then went back to being a dress, the swimming woman turns to blow me a kiss, strands of her long black hair fanning out beneath the water, like seaweed extending from her somewhat human form. At lightning speed she swims away, her feet resembling a tail, caught in the morning light.

I turn to face the city, and the houses, the streets, are all gone. Only a great big grassy field stretches out before me. Here children play, tossing a ball or dancing around. They are one with the space, and I shudder as I look down, discovering that for the time being I am invisible, and so I move through their midst, smiling as they smile, laughing when they laugh, living happily in their shadow. *Is this the hidden life of Krakow?* I wonder, as a little girl takes my hand. She is wearing a tiny floral bandana around her head, and though she is small, no more than six years old, her face is ancient, lined, so innocent and sweet, while at the same time looking as if it has lived one million lives. *I thought you couldn't see me*, I think out loud, and

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she responds with a smile. She leads me back to the river, to the spot where a fire-breathing statue of Smok, the mythical dragon, emits a fiery breath, and as she sits on an old stone watching him with watery eyes, the city returns to life.

“Now I am gone again,” she whispers sadly, and her body fades into a patch of grass, exhaling a tiny cloud of mist.

I walk back slowly, into the emptiness. With no child or dress on my back, I find myself returning to the wall where her image is painted, Irena the poet, chalk outlining her features, so eerily reminiscent of my grandmother’s face, though there is no relation, and I stand there like a devotee, or a lost girl, trying to find a reason to wake up in this world again.

But I do awake, sitting up in my bed, listening acutely to the sound of the rain. Cold gray drops pour from the slate-colored sky onto the glass pane of my skylight, cut on a slant into the ceiling right beside the loft bed in my tiny storybook apartment. I live on a street where history actually took place. Here in this city, the past is everywhere, even in the wisps of pollution, and in the drops of rain.

I came here to record a catalogue of stories, but the truth is that I spend most of my days walking. I arrived here last September, and in the first months I walked so much, that when November came around, I had already replaced the soles of my shoes twice. Pan Maciek, the local cobbler, became my first Polish friend. He taught me about the virtues of Polish herring, and how to beware of falling ice.

Cobblestones are hard on your feet, but the women here wear heels anyway. I didn’t know what I was running from or towards, but when my grandmother died, I wanted to know more. This is not to say that I would have boarded any train or taken just any flight. No, I had more specific desires. I wanted to return to the country where my family lived, and also from where it fled, to understand

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something about where I belonged. I always felt myself an outsider. I mean, I couldn't even claim to be in-between. I grew up knowing that I was both Jewish and Polish, and that my parents chose art over religion. I knew that I was an outsider everywhere, so who could I claim to be? I flew from Poland to the U.S. when I was still in the womb, and boarded my first plane to Poland when I was just a few weeks old, and from that moment on, I became a citizen of the world, a nice glossy way of referring to a resident of no man's land. As I grew up, I found my little niche on a cloud slightly separate from my surroundings, but until that time, I discovered a world of poems and tales. I began collecting stories. The first one came to me by way of a Chinese monk when I was just six years old and my mother fell ill. He made strong, black tea, and taught me the way. Then there was the Japanese Teahouse. The list went on.

I came to Krakow this time, because I wanted to collect the tales of the mist. I once read that the Baal Shem Tov, perhaps the greatest Tzadik of all time, believed that when the heavens could not be repaired through prayer, they could be healed with a story. I wanted to find the essence of the tales that separated Krakow from itself, the Jew from the Pole, the light from the darkness. I wanted to find it, and return the stories to their rightful owners, as if giving those souls a voice could make them live again. And so I tried. But who knew there were so many stories to tell? At first I just wanted to understand myself, get closer to the dead, but pretty soon I discovered that there was something much greater at hand. I became a victim of the Krakow syndrome, which took control of me with a force, and I was soon addicted to the feeling of getting closer to the atmosphere, of entertaining ghosts. First I invited one spirit over for dinner – a simple meal that consisted of cold borscht and apple cake, two of my favorites – and before I knew it, I had thirty souls living with me. I liked to refer to them as my out-of-town

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friends, which was quite suspicious to my real life friends, for who in the world hosted so many invisible guests? And in an apartment the size of a fly? Of course when a friend came over to visit me for an afternoon, the ghosts would hide away, but still, I needed relief from the dead. So I began to walk around the city as a way to gain some freedom.

You can laugh at me and tell me that it has already been many years, and that I ought to leave the past alone. This is the modern world, what am I talking about, three generations have already passed, and besides, who cares? Who believes in ghosts, anyway! But everybody knows that the spirits still linger here. And now I have many stories to convey their existence. And if you don't believe in stories, then I even have the dreams to prove it!

The Krakow syndrome gives life new meaning, kind of like a miniature Jerusalem syndrome, only here a person doesn't believe his or herself to be the Messiah. No such grandeur is at play. With the Krakow syndrome, one becomes a servant of the past, a devotee of the Polish-Jewish revival and commemoration, often reaching the point where a person might abandon their previous lives, just to get closer to the dwelling of ghosts. I have seen this epidemic claim many foreigners who returned to Poland to get closer to their roots, but also I have seen it take over the lives of young Poles who, with great love and tenderness, wish to give voice to the dead. I have seen it happen to those who are discovering their roots, as well as to those who fabricate their Jewish roots, thinking that becoming a part of the small and forgotten people will give them some advantage over their neighbors. And in those cases I close my eyes in anger, because this is something that I cannot understand. The storyteller is not supposed to judge their subjects, but in these moments I fail, for I hate pretention, and it hurts me to see someone think that becoming a Jew makes them better than all the rest.

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The Krakow syndrome has not yet been officially documented, in part because these days there are greater problems at hand, but one day it will become a legitimate psychiatric condition, a force to be reckoned with, and then I will have the stories to prove its existence.

It is not unlike walking blindfolded into a heavy mist, and a bit like falling in love.

Of course I would rather be taken victim by the Paris syndrome than I would the Krakow syndrome, for I have always felt myself a perfect fit for any Paris street, and I could even envision myself lying delicately in a Paris psychiatric hospital bed, alongside the ghost of Camille Claudel, pining after her lover and a piece of clay, but one cannot have everything in this life, I am told. I guess that I am just not a possible fit. I have never been disillusioned by any trips to Paris, and found my culture shock not in Europe, but in other parts of the world, such as in the Middle East, where a vegetable seller shouted at me for ripping a banana from its bunch, and where a friend's mother pointed a knife's edge at me, not knowing about common courtesies. And besides, I am not even Japanese. No, Krakow is my Bashert, my destiny, the place in which I needed to climb through a veil of pain to understand just what remains. I've done my best to discover the truth, but I know that I will leave here with more questions than when I came.

I dress carefully, so as to disguise the disfiguration that I experienced the first time that I flew across the world, and lost my home. This trans-migration happened several times in my early life, so there is a map of devastation to prove it. If you were to see me in the nude, then you would discover the great hole in my heart, the gap in my side, the scar that descends from head to heart, but which is carefully concealed by masses of hair, a genetic gift inherited from both sides. Only my lovers have seen the strangeness that is my naked form. Last week there was a solar eclipse, and I stood naked before

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a mirror as the moon crossed the sun. And for the first time in my life, I understood what it was to see myself whole. Once in a lifetime is enough, just to know that in another reality I am all there.

Not everybody can take cues from ghosts, I know, but somehow this has become my way. I walked through this city one thousand times, dipping into Kazimierz and out again, back up to the Rynek, where everything shines, and where one has to look beneath the surface to find the sadness, whereas down in Kazimierz, it is all on display, both the magic and the pain. It is in the air that you breathe, and on the streets you walk. If you close your eyes, it dares to come close, touch your face. Something so immaterial can make you feel so alive, and if you stay here long enough, beware, or you might become a part of its maze. By the way, one night can be enough to catch you off guard. Cupid's arrow can also make you fall in love with ghosts. You wouldn't believe what miracles will appear before your eyes.

I never planned to be a modern day Persephone, but here I am, trailing the underworld, looking for another story to help bring the past back to life. You may accuse me of being a sham, for I tried many things, including religion, believing every mirage. Yes, another aspect of this Krakow syndrome meant that I, a tried and true agnostic, even came close to becoming a religious Jew. Maybe it was all those talks with the Rabbi – both the real one from Jerusalem, and the pretend one from Gazowa Street, each with a valid and very educated point of view. Then there was the trip to the forests near Białystok, the cemetery where my family was buried, that sparked feelings of curiosity. If not me, then who? I asked myself. After all, I was the only one standing there.

There was the trip to Lublin on Chanukah, the cozy Shabbat dinners, which reminded me of my grandmother's home, and before I knew it, I was being pushed (or pulled?) closer and closer. But all

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that changed, when I was fooled by a man. His piety was the first mirage, but then there were many others, ladders leading to hidden doorways, and as I went higher, deeper, I closed my eyes harder. After I lost all my possessions purchasing his life story, a sort of Chagall painting meets *The Big Lebowski* mash-up, so unoriginal that I should have known that something was up from the start, I closed shop for a while, even stopped collecting stories. I can still see myself playing the role of a good girl, standing at the freezing back of the beautiful old Remuh Synagogue on Yom Kippur, stomach growling from lack of food, weeping pointless tears behind a lace curtain as my False Messiah stood at the front chilling out with the boys, playfully twirling the strings of his tzitzit. Fashion statement or Mitzvah? This, I will never know.

But what about the night when we walked through the city in the mist? When he giggled and was brave and held me as if I was his savior? What about the swans? What about when he said that I was his “destiny?” But oh, an overlooked cliché. I should have known better, but none of it mattered anymore. I closed my eyes and saw him turn away. In the dream he became two men, one young and colorfully dressed, while the other was religious, old, judgmental of us both. And then I knew that I had made a mistake.

“Now everything will get worse for me,” he mumbled, before paying for my coffee and walking away.

What fury I felt, suddenly opening my eyes to find myself amidst a group of people who were performing a lost world. I shuddered for hours as the full moon took its place up in the sky. I sat at a table of jubilant strangers, eating cold nalesniki, not believing how this malady could have led me so far astray.

That was the first and only day that I lived as a religious Jew.

When I went home and changed my clothes, stepping out of my long black skirt and into my red knit hot pants, allowing the young

Viennese boy to lick my wounds and undress me, showing him all my hidden treasures, I remembered that I could never belong. So I regained my dignity. It took me months to emerge from that spell, for even storytellers can be fooled sometimes, and even more often than others, because they believe in all possibilities, in human frailty, in redemption, in the beautiful ugly, the beauty behind the beauty, and in everything. He may have shattered all my stories, broke them into one million pieces, but I was able to put them back together, and I returned stronger than ever, a world class fighter in the ring, filling an entire third volume of my *Krakow's Book of Mist*, before I'd even opened my eyes. And when it was printed, I mailed the first copy to him.

Krakow's Book of Mist, also known simply as *The Book of Mist*, is currently on display at the Museum of Honorary Misfits, aka, the Musée d'Honoré - a tiny glass-enclosed structure at the back of the Louvre, a small but lovely Château once inhabited by Napoleon's beloved Josephine, before she failed to give birth to an heir and lost her stately home. The book is signed and sealed, and it even has glorious 3D printed illustrations, some painted by earthly beings, including several of my friends, and others, by light creatures in mid-flight, the kind that I encountered while visiting the other side. The first and second volumes are currently being translated into twenty-five languages, including cuneiform, which nobody reads anymore, but someday somebody might, and I want the book to be ready for them. Soon, once I give the word, the books will tour the world. I don't really want to let them go, you know. I feel like a mother sending her child to college, but, as they say, I must let go. These stories need to be released. I have a dream that they will help to reunite the lost. Maybe it is foolish, but I have hope about it, anyway.

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When my Jewish grandmother died, they laid her body out for twenty-four hours, wrapped in a white cloth. A religious man from Brazil sat with her, saying prayers. He came to be with her once a group of women had come to wash her body, also in prayer. She looked so profound, my sweet Dorothy, her cheekbones high, protruding from her face. My father helped me to cut a small lock of her gray hair, and I keep it still, though now I know that I never needed to fear losing her, for I see her all the time in my dreams.

When my Polish grandmother died, she was kept in an open casket in a tiny chapel in her hometown. This was where she was born and where she died, somewhere near the border of Germany, where German words still found their way into the everyday conversation. She was dressed as if she were about to go out for tea, pocketbook in hand. Where is she going in those shoes, and with that makeup? I asked myself, while a group of villagers recited prayers, shifting rosary beads in a language and a religion that I had no part of, but still, I was her only grandchild. And I was there.

The night before my Polish grandmother's funeral, my Jewish grandmother came to me in a dream. "I didn't know you'd be so far away," she said, suddenly youthful, just as the dead often are in the dream world. Then she hugged me, sending me on my way. In this time I re-discovered that death does not really keep us away, though there is nothing like a real embrace, the sound of a voice, the smell to remember.

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Just as I was preparing my manuscript for its first printing, I found myself sitting at the same table in the same café, everyday. I tend

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to create habits like this, something left over from the time when my days and nights were measured out in small amounts of cocaine. This much for the bus, this for the movies, this is for Biology class, and this, for today's story. I was very economical in my addiction, you see. That is, until it started playing games with me. Those were the days, many years ago, when I was convinced that stories came from open doors, and that only mood-altering substances held the key.

So to this day, when I eat one thing, I tend to want it again the next day, and at the same place where I had it before, which can be quite debilitating, for instance, if you want a meal in Paris, but are spending time in Poland. Luckily, the simple home cooking of Krakow stole my heart, evoking my grandmother's table, and I easily gained ten pounds.

So there was nothing surprising about my finding tremendous comfort in this particular café. Right in the heart of Kazimierz, at the corner of this rabbi's home and that great synagogue, on a street where you could catch a glimpse of the chalk painting of Irena, the poet, on the corner, on the street where she lived and died. Here I found my niche to complete my works. It was different from the gloriously empty velvet lined café where I had first compiled the tales. That one was in the center of town, and had sadly, suddenly, shut down. Perhaps it was because I was the only customer. But oh, I had loved it so.

This place made amazing Turkish coffee, which they gave a distinctly Jewish name. They played good music, a mix of old Eastern European tunes and Israeli new music, which often had a Middle-Eastern tone. They had an extensive library of Jewish-themed books in all languages, and they were also kind and hospitable, something that a person needs when they are far away from home. Often I would just sit in my chair, or on a cushion on the floor, jumping

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around, enjoying the music, and observing the passing rain, doing my best to be a devoted student of stories. I always wore either my gray or my black jumper, both of which I loved dearly, and which reminded me of the sweet schoolgirls in one of my stories, the girls whom I had also dreamt about so long ago, like a kind of premonition of their own existence. I sat at the same table where my False Messiah had told me that he was walking away. I sat in his seat. I didn't care anymore. I had decided to take control.

One day something strange happened to me, though I can't say that it really surprised me or caught me off guard, given the kind of duality that I then inhabited. Pen in hand, manuscript before me, pages laid out on the perfectly finished cherry wood table, a finjan of coffee steaming at my side, I started to work. About an hour into the process, something drew my attention up from the page, like a wind or a call, but really it was just a feeling. Had the music stopped? No. The door opened? No, it wasn't that. Twice I had refused the lady who came 'round to beg for money to buy soup, and then I had given in, for she would yell at me if I persisted. I lifted my head to see what was pulling me, and suddenly I envisioned a man. I didn't hallucinate, and yet I can't say that I felt nothing, for it wouldn't be true. Suddenly, and for just a moment or two, there was the presence of a man there who loved me. And I felt his love like nothing I had ever felt before. That afternoon, as I settled into my cozy bed, calmly gazing up at the light, watching the raindrops as they fell, I knew that something new was about to come.

Two weeks later, I was walking home from my customary swim in the basement of an old and very fine hotel, one that I love most of all for being a mostly secret hole, when I saw this man step out of a tobacco shop around the corner from where I live. I took notice of his tall, lean figure, and his black bowler hat, his sleek raincoat, which reminded me of a figure that I had once read about, and possibly

even dreamt of, as well. *The Master and Margarita*, a Nick Cave song, where was I, all of a sudden? I thought about him for a few minutes, because as he turned to walk the other way, he looked at me and smiled. It was more of a half-smile, really, but there was something dark and hooded in his eyes. I thought about him as I walked home, that he had a sort of energy about him that was interesting, and as I walked through the door, several of my “out-of-town guests” descended upon me in a way that I found sort of unusual. They were especially perky that day, but soon we transitioned from the desire for love to the state of the Japanese translation of my manuscript, and I was engaged in other things, including a map of Kyoto, which I have always dreamed of visiting.

Late that afternoon, as the sun was setting, I decided to walk along the Wisła River, to get to my café. The light was pink and subdued, looking as if a fireball had found its way behind a corner of mist, and now hovering over the river, everything was transformed into a kind of flat, pink, watercolor world. Like a Japanese woodblock print, I thought, like *Ukiyo-e: Images from the Floating World*. I tried to take a picture with my old Bolex camera, hoping that I could pick up at least an impression of the beauty, and who knows? Maybe even use it for my book cover.

I was profoundly uplifted by the moment, and by the group of swans that gathered, summoning up all my power of magic and dreams. Suddenly I smiled, realizing how far I'd come. After all, these days I often walked around with my wounds exposed, totally unashamed of being incomplete, my hair gathered in a crown of thick braids at the top of my head, exposing my elongated scar. I was not afraid anymore. My stories had taught me more than life itself, and I felt suddenly overcome with emotion. After traveling the world one thousand times, beautiful Krakow, with its gray fog and endless beauty, its remnants of the past, had given me a new life. I wrapped

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my woolen shawl around my head as the pink fog gave way to the evening thick.

I was supposed to leave the following month, and had even started packing. I was going to travel to a mountain in the Himalayas, where a new volume of stories was to be collected. The work was to be sponsored by a group of scientists who believed in the occult, sort of like a network of academic magicians. I was sad to leave, but I knew that the time for a new adventure was coming. I wondered if my out-of-town guests would accompany me in my travels, if they were more like guardian angels now, or just social friends who hung around when things were most convenient.

I walked the path that led along the river and back to Kazimierz, where the dream had taken me just the other night. I saw no woman swimming beneath the water's surface, but I felt her there, hovering, waiting for something to change. As I crossed the expanse of Plac Wolnica, I heard footsteps behind me, and I even tensed up for a moment, something that I rarely experience when I am in Krakow, for here I always feel safe. I looked to my left, and there was the figure of the young man beside me. Walking at my pace, he smiled as he came to my side.

"Can we walk together?" he asked. I noticed that he had an accent. Probably British. I would never normally welcome the company of a stranger, and at times I even find myself rejecting the company of a friend, but Krakow had changed me, so I said okay. He was really tall, and quite beautiful, which made me feel a little shy. I gestured to cover my scar with my woolen shawl, but he just gently smiled in a way, seeing me, brushing my hair away from my neck with the back of his hand, so I stopped myself. We walked right at the corner, onto Bożego Ciała, so empty in every way, echoing a past that would never let go. We spoke a little, my kind of small talk. He asked what I did, and I told him that I was a story collector, and also

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about *The Book of Mist*. He smiled, so I guessed that he liked the idea, which made me relax a little, and my shawl fell around my shoulders.

“Funny you should speak about your book,” he said, his voice melodic and soft. He rubbed his dark beard with his fingers, so long and beautiful, like those of a pianist. “Yes, I am an absurdist, like you,” he continued. “I spend my time traveling and recording nature.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Not the visuals, but the sounds, like the song of the wind in Antarctica, or the melody of a leopard walking in the rainforest of Kenya. I wanted to become a poet, like my grandmother, but instead I became a librarian of sounds, which is similar, in a way.” He pointed up, happily.

We had arrived at the chalk outlined face of the great poetess, Irena, whose work has experienced a great comeback this last year, with the debut of new volumes of poetry, a documentary film, and even an opera about her life. This was her home more than half a century ago, and there is the balcony from my dream. Only in real life, there are no flowerpots to be seen.

“She was my grandmother, but I never knew her,” he says wistfully. “That’s why I came to Krakow. My father told me never to come, but now he has died, and I just needed to. I tried, I traveled around, but I just couldn’t let it go. I wanted to record the wind in the trees outside her home, like the poem that she wrote, *The Wind in the Leaves at Dawn*, about the beginning of the War. “But now that you are here,” he continued, “I would like you to be a part of my sound collage. Would you allow me to record your footsteps in the wind outside Irena’s home?”

“Of course I will,” I said, and blushed. He took me by the hand, his palm so vast and warm, like something I had already known. He removed a miniature microphone from his pocket, and then got to work, setting up the take. The painted lady looked down at us, the

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same one that I had seen as I walked this way and that, this time jubilant, that time heartbroken, so often alone. She had seen it all, and now we were standing here, in my adopted city, the past and the future, all at our feet. I closed my eyes: the watery, shining, rain-drenched sun blasting the cobblestone streets anew, and the fleeting world, alive.

The ghosts know more, I thought.

“Now take a step,” he said calmly, releasing my hand.

**„O_KAZ. Literature
about Kazimierz”, vol. 2**

Designed by:
Oksana Shmygol

**No 4 Michał Mądracki
& Ula Palusińska**
Spacermistrz

DTP:
Marek Wadas

No 5 Wit Szostak
Kazimierz i głosy

Printed by:
Know-How
Piotr Kaczmarczyk

No 6 Julia Ain-Krupa
The Painted Lady

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ul. Józefa 36, Kraków, Poland
www.cheder.pl
fb:cheder.krakow

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Anastazja Oleśkiewicz

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Literary portraits of cities or quarters are not so much documents which tell the story of a place, but rather texts that create the atmosphere. Urban fiction allows to understand better the space in which you live, but also gives you the chance to invent it again and to wander away from well-known stories, get lost and wake up in front of a building you haven't seen before.

What can the 21st century literature tell you about Kazimierz? How does it treat it? Is this quarter of Krakow pictured as the main character, a lost supporting role or perhaps just the background for events? We have invented *O_KAZ*, our literary programme, to be able to talk about it.

Julia Ain-Krupa – is a writer and multi-disciplinary artist. She has contributed to *Cinema Editor*, and is the author of *Roman Polanski: A Life in Exile* (Praeger, 2010). Her short films have been screened at the IFP festival, the Jung Society in New York, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her most recent film works, *Dancing with Brando* and *Joan of Arc Dreams*, were presented in conjunction with Paris fashion week, and in a Teatr Stu production of the opera, *Joan of Arc*, in Krakow, Poland. In 2013, she completed a Fulbright year in Poland, where she wrote *The Upright Heart*, published by New Europe Books. She lives in New York City, Krakow, and Tel Aviv.

The Jewish Culture Festival and the Cheder were set up in Kazimierz, Krakow, inspired by its history and culture. We have been trying to be more than a festival and to become a process – a process of change in thinking and perceiving Jewish culture and change in Kazimierz itself. We are interested in creative work in the quarter and with the quarter, especially since it seems to be a bit lost today and less and less friendly to the residents.

www.jewishfestival.pl, www.cheder.pl

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