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ANNE APPLEBAUM

Twilight of Democracy

*The Failure of Politics and the  
Parting of Friends*



PENGUIN BOOKS

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TWILIGHT *of* DEMOCRACY

*New Year's Eve*

ON DECEMBER 31, 1999, we threw a party. It was the end of one millennium and the start of a new one, and people very much wanted to celebrate, preferably somewhere exotic. Our party fulfilled that criterion. We held it at Chobielin, a small manor house in northwest Poland that my husband and his parents had purchased a decade earlier—for the price of the bricks—when it was a mildewed, uninhabitable ruin, unrenovated since the previous occupants fled the Red Army in 1945. We had restored the house, or most of it, though very slowly. It was not exactly finished in 1999, but it did have a new roof as well as a large, freshly painted, and completely unfurnished salon, perfect for a party.

The guests were various: journalist friends from London and Moscow, a few junior diplomats based in Warsaw, two friends who flew over from New York. But most of them were Poles, friends of ours and colleagues of my husband, Radek Sikorski, who was then a deputy

foreign minister in a center-right Polish government. There were local friends, some of Radek's school friends, and a large group of cousins. A handful of youngish Polish journalists came too—none then particularly famous—along with a few civil servants and one or two very junior members of the government.

You could have lumped the majority of us, roughly, in the general category of what Poles call the right—the conservatives, the anti-Communists. But at that moment in history, you might also have called most of us liberals. Free-market liberals, classical liberals, maybe Thatcherites. Even those who might have been less definite about the economics did believe in democracy, in the rule of law, in checks and balances, and in a Poland that was a member of NATO and on its way to joining the European Union (EU), a Poland that was an integrated part of modern Europe. In the 1990s, that was what being “on the right” meant.

As parties go, it was a little scrappy. There was no such thing as catering in rural Poland in the 1990s, so my mother-in-law and I made vats of beef stew and roasted beets. There were no hotels, either, so our hundred-odd guests stayed in local farmhouses or with friends in the nearby town. I kept a list of who was staying where, but a couple of people still wound up sleeping on the floor in the basement. Late in the evening we set off fireworks—cheap ones, made in China, which had just become widely available and were probably extremely dangerous.

The music—on cassette tapes, made in an era before

Spotify—created the only serious cultural divide of the evening: the songs that my American friends remembered from college were not the same as the songs that the Poles remembered from college, so it was hard to get everybody to dance at the same time. At one point I went upstairs, learned that Boris Yeltsin had resigned, wrote a brief column for a British newspaper, then went back downstairs and had another glass of wine. At about three in the morning, one of the wackier Polish guests pulled a small pistol out of her handbag and shot blanks into the air out of sheer exuberance.

It was that kind of party. It lasted all night, continued into “brunch” the following afternoon, and was infused with the optimism I remember from that time. We had rebuilt our ruined house. Our friends were rebuilding the country. I have a particularly clear memory of a walk in the snow—maybe it was the day before the party, maybe the day after—with a bilingual group, everybody chattering at once, English and Polish mingling and echoing through the birch forest. At that moment, when Poland was on the cusp of joining the West, it felt as if we were all on the same team. We agreed about democracy, about the road to prosperity, about the way things were going.

That moment has passed. Nearly two decades later, I would now cross the street to avoid some of the people who were at my New Year's Eve party. They, in turn, would not only refuse to enter my house, they would be embarrassed to admit they had ever been there. In fact,

about half the people who were at that party would no longer speak to the other half. The estrangements are political, not personal. Poland is now one of the most polarized societies in Europe, and we have found ourselves on opposite sides of a profound divide, one that runs through not only what used to be the Polish right but also the old Hungarian right, the Spanish right, the French right, the Italian right, and, with some differences, the British right and the American right, too.

Some of my New Year's Eve guests—along with me and my husband—continued to support the pro-European, pro-rule-of-law, pro-market center right. We remained in political parties that aligned, more or less, with European Christian Democrats, with the liberal parties of France and the Netherlands, and with the Republican Party of John McCain. Some of my guests consider themselves center-left. But others wound up in a different place. They now support a nativist party called Law and Justice—a party that has moved dramatically away from the positions it held when it first briefly ran the government, from 2005 to 2007, and when it occupied the presidency (not the same thing in Poland) from 2005 to 2010.

In the years it was out of power, the leaders of Law and Justice and many of its supporters and promoters slowly came to embrace a different set of ideas, not just xenophobic and paranoid but openly authoritarian. To be fair to the electorate, not everybody could see this: Law and Justice ran a very moderate campaign in 2015

against a center-right party that had been in power for eight years—my husband was a member of that government, though he resigned before the election—and was in the final year headed by a weak and unimpressive prime minister. Understandably, Poles wanted a change.

But after Law and Justice won a slim majority in 2015, its radicalism immediately became clear. The new government violated the constitution by improperly appointing new judges to the constitutional court. Later, it used an equally unconstitutional playbook in an attempt to pack the Polish Supreme Court and wrote a law designed to punish judges whose verdicts contradicted government policy. Law and Justice took over the state public broadcaster—also in violation of the constitution—firing popular presenters and experienced reporters. Their replacements, recruited from the far-right extremes of the online media, began running straightforward ruling-party propaganda, sprinkled with easily disprovable lies, at taxpayers' expense.

State institutions were another target. Once in power, Law and Justice sacked thousands of civil servants, replacing them with party hacks, or else cousins and other relatives of party hacks. They fired army generals who had years of expensive training in Western academies. They fired diplomats with experience and linguistic skills. One by one, they wrecked cultural institutions too. The National Museum lost its excellent acting director, an internationally respected curator. He was replaced with an unknown academic, with no prior museum

experience, whose first major decision was to dismantle the museum's exhibition of modern and contemporary art. A year later he would resign, leaving the museum in chaos. The director of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews—an institution unique in Europe, opened with great fanfare only a few years earlier—was suspended from his job with no explanation, horrifying the museum's international supporters and funders. Those stories were echoed by thousands of others that didn't make headlines. A friend of ours lost her job in another state institution, for example, after she had completed too many projects too quickly. Her new and unqualified director seemed to perceive her as a threat.

There was very little pretense about any of this. The point of all of these changes was not to make government run better. The point was to make the government more partisan, the courts more pliable, more beholden to the party. Or maybe we should call it, as we once did, the Party.

They had no mandate to do this: Law and Justice was elected with a percentage of the vote that allowed them to rule but not to change the constitution. And so, in order to justify breaking the law, the party stopped using ordinary political arguments, and began identifying existential enemies instead. Some were old and familiar. After two decades of profound Polish-Jewish conversations and reconciliation—after thousands of books, films, and conferences, after the construction of that spectacular museum—the government earned

international notoriety by adopting a law curtailing public debate about the Holocaust. Although they eventually changed the law under American pressure, it enjoyed broad support among the party's ideological base—the journalists, writers, and thinkers, including some of my party guests, who now say they believe that anti-Polish forces are plotting to blame Poland instead of Germany for Auschwitz. Later, the party also involved itself in a pointless spat with the Israeli government, an argument that seemed designed to appeal both to Law and Justice's angry, nationalist voters in Poland and Benjamin Netanyahu's angry, nationalist voters in Israel.

Some of the enemies were new. After a brief period of attacking Islamic immigrants—difficult, in a country with almost no Islamic immigrants at all—the party focused its ire on homosexuals. A national weekly, *Gazeta Polska*—a couple of whose most prominent journalists were at my New Year's Eve party—printed "LGBT Free Zone" stickers for its readers to put on their doors and windows. On the eve of another parliamentary election in October 2019, state television showed a documentary called *Invasion*, describing the secret "LGBT" plan to undermine Poland. The Polish Catholic church, once a neutral institution and an apolitical symbol of national unity, began promoting similar themes. The current archbishop of Krakow, a title previously held by Pope John Paul II, gave a sermon describing homosexuals as a rainbow-colored "plague" that had replaced the "red plague" of Communism. His sermon was applauded by

the Polish government and then removed from YouTube by online moderators, on the grounds that it constituted hate speech.

This sequence of events now makes it difficult for me and some of my New Year's guests to speak about anything at all. I have not, for example, had a single conversation with Ania Bielecka, formerly one of my closest friends—the godmother of one of my children—since a hysterical phone call in April 2010, a couple of days after a plane carrying the then president crashed near Smolensk, in Russia, about which more in a moment. Bielecka is an architect whose other friends include, or anyway used to include, some of the best-known artists of her generation; she also enjoys, or used to enjoy, contemporary art exhibitions, even traveling a few times to the Venice Biennale, just for fun. She once told me she enjoyed people watching at the Biennale—all of the arty ladies in their elaborate outfits—as much as the exhibitions. But in recent years she has grown close to Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Law and Justice and the late president's twin brother. She now regularly hosts lunches for Kaczyński at her apartment—she is a great cook—and discusses whom he should appoint to his cabinet. I am told that the culture minister, the author of the assault on Polish museums, was her suggestion. I tried to see her a couple of years ago in Warsaw, but she refused. "What would we talk about?" she texted me, and then went silent.

Another of my guests—the one who shot the pistol in

the air—eventually separated from her British husband. Her eccentricity has been transformed into something else, and she appears to spend her days as a full-time Internet troll, fanatically promoting a whole range of conspiracy theories, many of them virulently anti-Semitic. She tweets about Jewish responsibility for the Holocaust; she once posted an image of an English medieval painting depicting a boy supposedly crucified by Jews, with the commentary "And they were surprised that they were expelled," referring to the expulsion of the Jews from Britain in 1290. She follows and amplifies the leading lights of the American "alt-right," whose language she repeats and promotes.

A third guest, the journalist Anita Gargas, has spent the past decade investigating, over and over again, a set of conspiracy theories involving the death of the late president, Lech Kaczyński, in the Smolensk plane crash, each time postulating a different explanation. She's employed by *Gazeta Polska*, the weekly newspaper that distributed the antigay stickers. A fourth guest, Rafał Ziemkiewicz, has made a name for himself as an outspoken opponent of the international Jewish community. He refers to Jews as "scabby" and "greedy," calls Jewish organizations "blackmailers," and regrets his former support for Israel. The notoriety he gained from this language appears to have bolstered what had been his faltering career, and he now appears frequently on party-controlled state television.

I happen to know that some of these ex-friends are

estranged from their children because of their political views. In a couple of cases, the estrangement is profound. One of my former friends, though deeply committed to a political party with an openly homophobic agenda, has a gay son. But that too is typical—these divides run through families as well as groups of friends. We have a neighbor near Chobielin whose parents listen to a progovernment, Catholic-conspiratorial radio station called Radio Maryja. They repeat its mantras, make its enemies their enemies. “I’ve lost my mother,” my neighbor told me. “She lives in another world.”

To fully disclose all of my interests here, I should explain that some of this conspiratorial thinking is focused on me. My husband was the Polish defense minister for a year and a half, in a coalition government led by Law and Justice during its first, brief experience of power. Later, he broke with that party and was for seven years the foreign minister in another coalition government, this one led by the center-right party, Civic Platform. In 2019, he ran for the European Parliament and won a seat, though he is not currently part of the leadership of the political opposition.

I have lived in Poland on and off since 1988, with large chunks of time spent in London and Washington, writing history books and working as a journalist for British and American newspapers. That makes me an exotic political spouse by Polish standards, though until 2015 most people were curious about me rather than angry. I never experienced any direct anti-Semitism, never felt

any hostility; when I published a Polish cookbook—intended, among other things, to overturn negative stereotypes about Poland outside the country—the reaction inside Poland, even among Polish chefs, was largely positive, if a little bemused. I also tried quite hard to stay out of politics, mostly avoiding Polish television except to speak about my books.

But after Law and Justice won, negative articles about the government began appearing abroad—and I was blamed. I was featured on the covers of two pro-regime magazines, *wSieci* and *Do Rzeczy* (former friends of ours work at both), as the clandestine Jewish coordinator of the international press and the secret director of its negative coverage of Poland; one of them invented details about my family in order to make it seem more sinister. Similar stories appeared on state television’s evening news broadcast, along with another, wholly invented story about how the Law and Justice Party had gotten me fired from a job that I didn’t have. Eventually they stopped writing about me: negative international press coverage of Poland finally grew much too widespread for a single person, even a single Jewish person, to coordinate all by herself, though naturally, the theme recurs on social media from time to time. During my husband’s European election campaign, some of his team were asked more questions about me and my “anti-Polish activity” than about him. Whether I like it or not, I am part of this story.

When this all began, I felt a kind of *déjà vu*. I remembered reading a famous journal kept by the

Romanian writer Mihail Sebastian from 1935 to 1944. In it, he chronicled an even more extreme shift in his own country. Like me, Sebastian was Jewish, though not religious; like me, most of his friends were on the political right. In the journal, he described how, one by one, they were drawn to fascist ideology, like a flock of moths to an inescapable flame. He recounted the arrogance and confidence his friends acquired as they moved away from identifying themselves as Europeans—admirers of Proust, travelers to Paris—and instead began to call themselves blood-and-soil Romanians. He listened as they veered into conspiratorial thinking or became casually cruel.

People he had known for years insulted him to his face and then acted as if nothing had happened. “Is friendship possible,” he wondered in 1937, “with people who have in common a whole series of alien ideas and feelings—so alien that I have only to walk in the door and they suddenly fall silent in shame and embarrassment?” In an autobiographical novel he wrote at the same time, the narrator offers friendship to an old acquaintance, from whom he is now divided by politics. “No, you’re wrong,” comes the response: “The pair of us can’t be friends. Now or ever. Don’t you get the smell of the land off me?”

Today is not 1937. Nevertheless, a parallel transformation is taking place in my own time, both among the thinkers, writers, journalists, and political activists in Poland, a country where I have lived for three decades, as well as in the rest of the societies we have come to

call the West. Everywhere, this transformation is taking place without the excuse of an economic crisis of the kind Europe and North America suffered in the 1920s and 1930s. The recession of 2008–2009 was deep, but—at least until the coronavirus pandemic—growth had returned. The refugee crisis of 2015–2016 was a shock, but it has abated. By 2018, refugees from North Africa and the Middle East had mostly stopped coming to Europe, thanks to deals done with Turkey by the EU and its mainstream politicians.

In any case, the people I am writing about in this book were not affected by either of these crises. They are perhaps not all as successful as they would like to be, but they are not poor and rural. They have not lost their jobs to migrant workers. In Eastern Europe, they are not victims of the political transition since 1989, or of politics in any sense at all. In Western Europe, they are not part of an impoverished underclass, and they do not live in forgotten villages. In the United States, they do not live in communities ravaged by opioids, they do not spend much time in midwestern diners, and they do not, in fact, match any of the lazy stereotypes used to describe Trump voters at all—including some of the lazy stereotypes they have invented themselves. On the contrary, they have been educated at the best universities, they often speak foreign languages, they live in big cities—London, Washington, Warsaw, Madrid—and they travel abroad, just like Sebastian’s friends in the 1930s.

What, then, has caused this transformation? Were