

Acting Out:

Qui pro Quo in the Context of Interwar Warsaw

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In the turbulent context of interwar Polish politics, a period bookended by the right-wing nationalists' repression of an ethnically heterogeneous state, several popular high-quality cabarets persisted in Warsaw even as they provoked and defied the nationalists' harsh criticism. In their best, most influential incarnation, *Qui pro Quo* (1919–1932) and its successors, these literary cabarets violated the right's value system through their shows' insistent metropolitan focus, their stars' role-modeling of immoral behavior and parodic impersonation, and their companies' explicitly Jewish–Gentile collaboration. In the community of the cabaret, which was even more bohemian and déclassé than that of the legitimate theater, the social and ethnic antagonisms of everyday Warsaw society mattered relatively little. Writers and players bonded with each other, above all, in furious pursuit of fun, fortune, celebrity, artistic kudos, and putting on a hit show. This analysis details how the contents and stars of *Qui pro Quo* challenged right-wing values. Its shows advertised the capital as a sumptuous metropolis as well as a home to an eccentric array of plebeian and underworld types, including variations on the *cwaniak warszawski* enacted by comedian Adolf Dymśa. Its chief female stars—Zula Pogorzelska, Mira Zimińska, and Hanna Ordonówna—incarnated big-city glamour and sexual emancipation. Its recurring Jewish characters—Józef Urstein's Pikuś and Kazimierz Krukowski's Lopek—functioned as modern-day Warsaw's everymen, beleaguered and bedazzled as they assimilated to city life. *Qui pro Quo*'s popular defense against an exclusionary nationalism showcased collaborative artistry and diverse, charismatic stars.

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Political life was no cabaret in the capital of the Second Polish Republic during its two fleeting decades of sovereignty (1918–1939). After over a century of Russian occupation, a newly independent Warsaw served as a political and military battleground between right-wing Polish Catholic nationalists and an internally unstable center-left coalition composed of Christian liberals, Jewish parties ranging from assimilationists to socialists, and representatives of Poland's smaller German, Ukrainian, and Belorussian ethnic minorities.¹ Even after the nationally charismatic leader Marshal Józef Piłsudski prevented yet another right-nationalist coalition with a military coup d'état in May 1926, his maintenance of a “guided democracy,” which upheld a federalist model tolerant of ethnic heterogeneity, lasted a mere four years.

The government's imprisonment of centrist and left opposition leaders in the Brześć fortress in 1930 marked its turn to authoritarianism, and Piłsudski's death in 1935 unleashed the right wing's repression of those they stigmatized as "non-Poles"—specifically, economic and educational boycotts and violence targeting Polish Jews.

Yet throughout these turbulent decades, several popular high-quality cabarets persisted in the capital and defied the right-wing nationalists' harsh criticism and looming oppression. The 1920s and 1930s constituted the golden age of cabaret in metropolitan Poland, when little theaters (*teatrzyk* in Polish, *Kleynkunst reviteatr* in Yiddish) proliferated in the major cities of Warsaw, Lwów, and Łódź. Eschewing coffeehouse locales for small halls outfitted with a formal stage, proscenium, curtain, and audience seating, these cabarets presented variety shows linking together sketches, monologues, songs, and dance numbers, performed to the accompaniment of in-house jazz bands.² In Warsaw, which had long been a great theater town because of the theater's permitted showcasing of Polish language, drama, and music during the Russian occupation, the cabaret threatened to outstrip the popularity of the legitimate theater. It offered patrons an informal, intimate atmosphere, fabulous comedians and musicians, and shows based on the latest political news and social fads.³ As historian Ryszard Marek Groński observes, the cabaret was the only theatrical venue in the Second Republic to react to daily events and give vent to the passions and absurdity surrounding them.⁴ In contrast to the daily press, the cabaret created a space in which the news was broadcast through farce or satire and shared live with a like-thinking audience. In one fell swoop, the cabaret could inform, critique, facilitate comedic catharsis, and build solidarity.

In its best and most influential incarnation, the Warsaw cabaret explicitly challenged right-wing values through the contents and stars of its shows. *Qui pro Quo*, opened in 1919 in the Luxemburg Gallery on Senatorska Street and closed in 1932, eclipsed all competitors in its duration and all-around artistic excellence. Successive core groups of former *Qui pro Quo* writers and performers managed to revive its model of literary cabaret and strong ensemble work in different incarnations until the 1939 German invasion closed them down. These later versions included *Banda* (Band), *Cyganeria* (Bohemia), and *Cyrulik Warszawski* (The Barber of Warsaw). From its inception, *Qui pro Quo* was allied with public liberals who later supported the post-coup, pre-Brześć Piłsudski government. The noted liberal and cultural commentator Tadeusz Żeleński, writing under the pseudonym of "Boy," served as *Qui pro Quo*'s "godfather" and most astute champion in the press.⁵ Several of the cabaret's writers, the Polish Jewish poet Julian Tuwim and the poet and essayist Antoni Słonimski, a converted Jew, belonged to the deliberately a-programmatic poetic group "Skamander" and contributed regularly to Warsaw's leading liberal cultural journal *Wiadomości Literackie* (Literary News), which, according to historian Eva Plach, represented the antithesis to the right-wing Catholic nationalist *Narodowa Myśl* (National Thought).⁶ Members of the highest echelons of the Piłsudski government regularly attended *Qui pro Quo*. The Marshal's high-living, artistically aspiring

adjutant, General Wieniawa-Długoszowski, became a cabaret fixture and reference.⁷ Józef Beck, who would become Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs, reportedly slipped into his cabaret box from the wings.⁸ Piłsudski himself did not visit the theater on Senatorska Street, but he invited the troupe of *Qui pro Quo* to give a command performance at his in-town residence in the Belweder Palace.⁹

That *Qui pro Quo* approximated court entertainment for Piłsudskites was irritating enough for right-wing nationalists. The cabaret violated their value system more forcefully, however, through its shows' insistent metropolitan focus, its stars' role-modeling of "bad" behavior, and the entire company's unabashed "non-Polishness." In general, the nationalists excoriated what they deemed to be immorally modern, ethnically mongrelized city life, contrasting it with the purity and folk culture of rural Poland.¹⁰ Warsaw in particular was branded as Sodom and Gomorrah combined, for it had evolved into the most westernized of all Polish cities.¹¹ From Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and New York, Warsaw eagerly imported irreverent forms of popular culture and modern lifestyles destructive of the traditional family. The nationalist press particularly attacked new sexual and social freedoms for women (public dancing, extramarital sex, access to divorce and contraception), for these assailed their absolutes of Polish maidenhood and devoted motherhood.¹² First and last, Polish nationalists fingered the Jews as the root of all evils in what should have been an exclusively Polish Catholic nation. By 1918, the city served as both a national capital for Poles and the leading cultural center for Jews the world over; one-third of Warsaw's residents were vaguely identified as "of Jewish background" (*żydowskiego pochodzenia*), a category that encompassed assimilated Jews, socialists, Zionists, and the Orthodox.¹³ The right wing faulted all those "of Jewish background" and their liberal Christian supporters for every contagious vice, from secular freethinking to demeaning the exalted status of the Polish language and masterpieces of Polish high culture.¹⁴

Qui pro Quo's Warsaw

Qui pro Quo's roots in a modernizing, ethnically heterogeneous Warsaw equipped it to flourish as a singularly entertaining and influential opponent. Like all Polish-language cabarets, it evolved as a joint Jewish-Gentile enterprise in which assimilated Jews dominated as producers, composers, musicians, lyricists, and sketch writers. Seweryn Majde, the owner of a soap and cosmetics factory in Warsaw, served as its business manager, miraculously "digging up funds" as needed from his private list of "patrons of the arts."¹⁵ Majde's long-term Gentile partner, Jerzy Boczkowski, functioned as *Qui pro Quo's* artistic director and contributed as a writer and a rigorous trainer of writers-to-be. Apart from Boczkowski, the cabaret's writing mainstays were all "of Jewish background"—Tuwim; Marian Hemar (Jan Maria Heschel), a terrific lyricist from Lwów whose relocation to Warsaw was funded by

the oil executive Leon Orłański; and Konrad Tom (Runowiecki), who also directed and acted.¹⁶ In the second half of the 1920s, more young assimilated Jewish writers passed muster with the exacting Boczkowski—among them, Jerzy Jurandot (Jerzy Głogowski), Emanuel Schlecter, and Władysław Szlengel.¹⁷

The ever-changing constellation of stars at *Qui pro Quo*, which featured Jews and Gentiles alike, worked closely together in ensemble and fraternized extensively offstage—socializing in cafés and restaurants, playing extravagant practical jokes on each other, and even joining in impromptu soccer games.¹⁸ Cabaret associations resulted in Jewish–Gentile friendships, numerous love affairs, and at least two well-known marriages—Tom and the sexy singer comedienne Zula Pogorzelska, and Marian Hemar’s short-lived union with singer Maria Modzelewska (for whom the writer converted to Christianity).¹⁹ In the community of the cabaret, which was even more bohemian and déclassé than that of the theater, the social and ethnic antagonisms of everyday Warsaw society mattered relatively little. Writers and players bonded with each other, above all, in furious pursuit of fun, fortune, celebrity, artistic kudos, and putting on a hit show. Within this community, a “Jewish background” was perfectly acceptable, often grounds for attachment, and sometimes a great boost to one’s star appeal.

Whether *Qui pro Quo*’s artists were born Varsovians or recent transplants, their shows located Warsaw as the center of their universe and the cosmopolitan vantage point from which to gaze upon the rest of Poland. When its writers resorted to the oft-used sketch formula of touring the nation with a foreign dignitary or specialist, they reduced the nationalists’ cherished Polish village to a musical interlude—a folk song or a folk dance.²⁰ If a peasant character came to the big city of Warsaw, he could only be written and played as a rube. City sets and character types took possession of the cabaret stage, though in a few instances *Qui pro Quo* hauled “the folk” unceremoniously into their twentieth century. In the 1926 sketch “How the *Casino de Paris* would stage Moniuszko’s *Halka*” (a famous Polish opera about the betrayed love of a mountain girl for a rich landowner), singer Hanna Ordonówna and comedian Adolf Dymśa starred as the mismatched lovers “dressed in absurd costumes and wigs” and performing highlander dances in the hot jazz, risqué style of the famous Parisian music hall.²¹ A 1929 Polish traditional dance number, titled “Łowickie-Ameryckie,” featured performers in bold variations on peasant costumes and jazz renditions of “Łowickie” folk songs; Dymśa presided over the singers and dancers in a comically striped double-breasted suit and a gaucho hat, a North/South American conductor.²² In effect, *Qui pro Quo* was rustling the sacred cows of the nationalists—the Polish countryside, Polish classics about the countryside—for irreverent display in their thoroughly modern corral.

Like prominent cabarets elsewhere in Europe, *Qui pro Quo* advertised its hometown as a dazzling metropolis, a site of sophistication and sumptuous living.²³ When in 1924 Majde, Boczkowski, and the lovely Ordonówna lured Fryderyk Jąrosy away from *The Bluebird*, an impressive Russian émigré troupe, they recruited a first-class conferencier-cum-director and an invaluable Warsaw booster.²⁴ An Austrian citizen

of Hungarian, Croatian, and Viennese background, Járosy never lost his accent in Polish, and his first act as a director was to fashion himself, a handsome, charming, impeccably dressed foreign raconteur, into a guarantor of his cabaret's European status. He teased Polish audiences about their difficult language, but he reminded them time and again that he was the cosmopolitan impresario who *chose* Warsaw as his showplace. In that showplace, the stars paraded about onstage as willing product models, displaying all the best that Varsovians could buy; often that best was provided by Polish Jewish merchants. The comedienne Mira Zimińska remembers the lovely clothes given her by the firm of Żmigryder and the furs supplied by Apfelbaum.²⁵ Such gift wardrobes were printed in the program or, on occasion, cleverly announced onstage. When Járosy flaunted the new suit made gratis for him by a certain Mr. Borkowski of No. 27 Żurawia Street, he protested to the house that he would never mention Mr. Borkowski of No. 27 Żurawia Street “because our theater does not stoop to advertising.”²⁶

Qui pro Quo also trawled the lower strata of Warsaw society for non-*couture* comedy. Some of its players specialized in impersonating the city's plebeian and underworld types. Romuald Gierasiński combed the city's flea markets to assemble authentic costumes and props for his comic portraits of janitors, couriers, and undertakers.²⁷ When the notorious Jewish gangster Urke Nachalnik (a pseudonym roughly meaning One Tough Crook) mesmerized the city with his post-prison memoirs, the basset-hound-faced comedian Ludwik Ławiński (Latajner) parodied him as Dziurke Krochmalnik, bearing a ridiculous place name that rhymed with the real crook's moniker and referred to his lair—“The Little Hole on Krochmalna Street.” The Jewish mob had their headquarters on Krochmalna, in that section of the city where unassimilated and poorer Jews lived and worked.²⁸

The best mimic in Warsaw, and likely all Poland, was Adolf Dymśa (Bagiński), a railroad worker's son who grew up observing the teamsters, drunks, and crazy folk in his overcrowded Old Town neighborhood and palled around with older character actors (including Gierasiński) in his teens and early twenties (Figure 1).²⁹ Compact, athletic, with a mobile boyish face and explosive manic energy, Dymśa often played variations on an enormously popular local type—the *cwaniak warszawski* (the Warsaw shyster/braggart).³⁰ He injected the *cwaniak*'s audacity and craftiness into a host of characters—among them, a brash Warsaw newsboy, a presumptuous pub-crawler attempting to woo a fair maiden, a cross-dressed ballerina stealing the show in *Qui pro Quo*'s all-female dance troupe, and a send-up of visiting opera singer Jan Kiepusa, whose exuberant, self-aggrandizing performances from hotel balconies, atop car roofs, and in carriages made him a luscious target.³¹

Dymśa's contemporaries tried to pinpoint his genius by comparing him to American comedians—Buster Keaton (extreme physical comedy), Chaplin (the sympathetic, subversive underdog), and even Danny Kaye (crazy patter songs).³² Dymśa excelled, however, as a Warsaw original and a Varsovian who could channel the world. He could import any celebrity or character type. Anecdotes about

Figure 1
Dymsza in a *Qui pro Quo* program. Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe



Source: http://img.audiovis.nac.gov.pl/PIC/PIC_1-K-11410.jpg

Dymsza's amazing mimicry abound: it was said that he could impersonate someone impersonating someone else impersonating someone else with unerring accuracy. To dupe someone, particularly a fellow performer, with his impersonations in real life was his ultimate number. Dymsza so effectively impersonated the record producer Maks Gercwolf when he phoned the popular crooner Mieczysław Fogg, that the latter genuinely believed that he, a baritone, was contracted to sing a tenor lead on an opera recording.³³ When the *Qui pro Quo* troupe complained that they had no time to see the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson, Dymsza's promise to "pipe in" the soundtrack from a nearby cinema involved his lying over a sewer grate outside and mimicking Jolson's "Sonny Boy." The players "bought it" until their Jolson wrapped up the number with an off-color proposition in Polish.³⁴ More than any other cabaret artist, Dymsza demonstrated the ability to play with supposedly "pure" in-born identity, to transgress the lines of class, ethnicity, and individuality and to "pass" as an authentic someone else.

Dymcza's gifts inspired his great admirer Tuwim to experiment wildly with the creation of new city types. The poet concocted fast-paced monologues to exploit the actor's deadpan performance of the absurd. Dymcza's signature character Teofil Winegret (Teofil Vinegar Sauce), an eccentric bum spouting provocative nonsense mixed with affected poetic speech, was announced by Tuwim's introductory song, "Dziwak jestem" (I'm an oddball): "A tragedian, a magician, with a proud mien / Even I don't know my origins, for / No one gave birth to me, / No one sired me, / No one showed up / At my christening. / I've got no ancestors or family."³⁵ Made up with heavy brows and a beard, wearing a black suit, no shirt, a bowler hat, and a rope for a tie, Dymcza's Teofil would leap or pirouette about the stage, then suddenly pause, sigh, and utter "jamais" or some other incongruous *bon mot*.³⁶ In the June 1927 show *Z papriką!* (With paprika!), Tuwim wreaked the same sort of modernist havoc with other dwellers in Warsaw's lower depths (a brothel owner, a ragpicker, a drug addict, a robber, a little match girl) in his elaborate staging of Teofil's ball.³⁷ In lieu of recycling Warsaw's familiar poor and criminal types, Dymcza and other members of the *Qui pro Quo* troupe drew on Tuwim's ingenious script to create grotesque hybrids of lower-class characters imperfectly appropriating the speech and sensibility of the city's jazz-age high society. The ball-goers swapped etiquette tips ("Bow to me, damn it!") and social observations ("Organ-grinding is decidedly a superior profession to public toilet attendant").³⁸ *Qui pro Quo*'s ingeniously deformative performance of Warsaw's tenement dwellers thrilled its audience, yet incarnated one of the nationalists' worst nightmares, violating social hierarchy with impunity, defiling the Polish language by mismatching stylistic levels, and ceding the spotlight to audacious urban mongrels of a "non-Pole's" design.

The Female Stars of *Qui pro Quo*

In a review written toward the end of *Qui pro Quo*'s long run, Boy pondered the special appeal of the cabaret's female stars: "Women perform the most charming characters, while men stick to caricatures."³⁹ The cabaret did occasionally feature handsome actors such as Eugeniusz Bodo, provided they could sing and dance. But in shows that accentuated satire, parody, the grotesque, and the absurd, the funny-faced comedians that the administration hired were male. Female performers, regardless of their other talents, were relied on to grace the stage with their beauty and charge it with sexual energy.

In the early 1920s, many Warsaw cabarets advertised a sexual revolution in crude, calculatedly commercial ways, trotting out choruses or tableaux vivantes of bare-breasted female dancers in order to pack the house. *Qui pro Quo* made use of a scantily clad chorus line until it at last invested in Tacjana Wysocka's well-schooled professional dance troupe.⁴⁰ The triumvirate of female stars who reigned at *Qui pro Quo*—Zula Pogorzelska, Mira Zimińska, and Hanna Ordonówna (nicknamed

Ordonka)—kept their clothes on for the most part, but proved to be far more provocative in the eyes of right-wing nationalists, who insistently railed against examples of the modern Polish woman's immodesty and irresponsibility (Figures 2–4).⁴¹ Zula, Zimińska, and Ordonka modeled new attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles that appealed to an ever-growing fan base.

The vivacious Pogorzelska, who grew up in Kharkov and first performed in Russian-language cabaret, moved to a newly independent Poland to restart her fledgling career as a soprano in operettas. A botched throat operation soon replaced her clear high tones with what Boy described as the rough alto of “an old Viennese cabby” and consequently enhanced her prowess as a comedienne.⁴² With her husky voice, large dark eyes, bobbed hair, enormous sex appeal, and the “shapeliest legs in Warsaw,” Zula wowed *Qui pro Quo* audiences as Warsaw's brunette bombshell and female high roller.⁴³ That status was sealed when she introduced the capital to the Charleston, the consummate flapper dance, in 1926. Such new exhibitionist dances, with their kicks, shimmies, and jazz hand moves, were said to have evolved from African American models.⁴⁴ These attracted cosmopolitan Varsovians as Western, sexy, and fashionably “primitive”; they repelled nationalists as pornographic and non-Polish. When Zula clearly enjoyed herself doing the Charleston (or the black bottom or the foxtrot), she set a dangerous example for all those young Polish wives and mothers who might prefer dancing the night away to sitting at home with their kids.⁴⁵ As the comedian Kazimierz Krukowski recalled, Zula happily displayed the physical and material riches of the new fast set: “The prettiest legs, the latest car, the most beautiful dress, a fashion queen, the queen of the ball.”⁴⁶

Zula was also scripted to be frank about her desires in hits titled “Ja się boję sama spać” (I'm afraid to sleep alone”), a fear playfully ascribed to night terrors and insomnia, and “To wystarczy mi” (This will be enough for me), which lists her modest needs—caviar and champagne, a villa, a yacht, trips to Paris or St. Moritz, and a man “like you.”⁴⁷ Despite the fact that these songs verged on the vulgar, her delivery made them piquant and refreshingly matter-of-fact, the “latest” in modern manners. Groński praises Zula as a game-changer: “A woman who dares to advertise her charms was no longer a fallen angel, some lady of the camellias with a certain reputation, but a desirable partner to play with.”⁴⁸ Moreover, audiences knew Zula to be a very talented cabaret artist. She played the bombshell best of her cohort, yet she might do battle as a pugnacious street urchin in another sketch or bare a tender heart in the song “Mały gigolo” (The little gigolo), divulging the sad fate of a male dancer for hire who slavishly obeys all the orders of his bitchy client.⁴⁹ The thoroughly modern Zula won many male and female admirers as a happy-go-lucky sexually emancipated woman with plenty of agency and appetite.

Mira Zimińska was a transplant from Płock, where her family worked for the local theater, and she initially substituted in *Qui pro Quo* shows for Zula. Zimińska resembled Zula in size, coloring, and shapeliness, and she developed characters and songs that expanded on the fun-seeking city girls that Zula first incarnated. Yet

Figure 2
Zula Pogorzelska, the funny brunette bombshell



Source: http://coquet.pl/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Zula_Pogorzelska.jpg

Figure 3
Mira Zimińska, the clever comedienne



Source: <http://www.polskamuza.eu/images/upload/siedemodslon/mira2.jpg>

Figure 4
Hanna Ordonówna, the wistful Romantic



Source: http://i.wp.pl/rozrywka/gallery662388/2012/08/33/3en_1344934176.jpg

Zimińska's impish, sparkling eyes and facial expressiveness revealed her quick wit; she soon distinguished herself as *Qui pro Quo's* cleverest comedienne. Her abilities prompted the writers to pair her often with Dymśza, whom she matched in temperament, comic timing, and parodic skill. Zimińska, too, excelled as an impersonator. She entertained audiences with "incomparable imitations" of an amazing array of characters—imperious opera singers, Charlie Chaplin, even her friendly rivals Zula and Ordonka.⁵⁰ Zimińska covered a more impressive range as an actress than any of her co-stars. She could perform her signature city girl song written for her by Tuwim, "Pokoik na Hożej" (A little room on Hoża Street), in which a jilted young woman insists that "my heart on Hoża is more important than the world and the stars," then switch class and sensibility altogether to present an "unretouched" parody-portrait of a society lady, a specialization of her own design.⁵¹ By the late 1920s, Zimińska was alternating between cabaret performances and serious theater parts with ease.

Zimińska herself recognized that she differed from Zula and Ordonka in being an idol of the intelligentsia rather than a popular star.⁵² She was singled out as the favorite female chum of Tuwim, Hemar, Słonimski, and other cabaret writers. Zimińska shared ideas with them which grew into songs and sketches; she lent her apartment to a contingent from *Wiadomości Literackie* when they needed a place to work on one of their special shows of political satire.⁵³ The writers, in turn, entrusted her with such little gems of "pure nonsense" as Tuwim's song "Tata da raka" (Daddy'll give you a crab). In Tuwim's estimation, only Mira could do justice to this shaggy dog story about a father so stingy with his crab dinner that the authorities are called in; only Mira could shape its repeated nonsensical refrain into a comic crescendo:

Tata da raka, tata
 Tata da raka, tata
 Tata da raka
 Tata da raka
 Tata da raka, tática!⁵⁴

In some shows, Zimińska wrote her own material, competing successfully with her beloved writers. Krukowski vouches for her natural genius as a conferencier in the show *Halo, Ciotka!* (Hello there, auntie!): "Onstage she didn't repeat a word of what had been written for her and improvised the entire script. She paid a fine for this . . . but she'd conquered the audience at the premiere and then all of Warsaw."⁵⁵ When the troupe performed for Piłsudski at the Belweder Palace, Zimińska was saddled with the difficult job of improvising rhymed wishes for the assembled luminaries and she naturally rose to the challenge: "I walked through the Hall with a basket from which I'd hand out 'orders' as I sang . . . a little silver bottle—probably given to Wieniawa[-Długoszowski], a big red heart to some

amorous dignitary, a stork to someone who had no desire to become a father, and a bogus news headline to a malicious critic. There was no end to the laughter.”⁵⁶ Mira Zimińska thumbed her nose at the right’s ideals of good Polish womanhood and Polish ethnic-religious purity with her sympathetic city girls, parodies of grand dames, close association with Jewish and philo-Semitic liberals, and wicked wit.

Ordonka (Maria Petruszyńska) was interwar Poland’s most popular star, in large part due to the romantic biography she played out before her public. A railroad worker’s only child, who eventually had to choose between family acceptance and a life in show business, Ordonka studied ballet in her youth and spent her early years in cabaret as a dancer. She achieved stardom through her association with Járosy. Their love affair persuaded him to jump ship in Warsaw and join *Qui pro Quo*, and his coaching delineated her star persona as that of a classy, elegant dame who wore her heart on her sleeve.⁵⁷ Ordonka was neither a bombshell nor a natural wit. But she flourished as a romantic heroine. Her wistful-to-melancholic expressions and slight soprano voice made her convincing as a poignant dreamer. She was pitch perfect in the song “Marzenie” (Dreaming), contrasting the daily grind of her factory job with her nighttime pleasure at the movies, where she is transported by the fabulous love that Ivan Mozzhukhin (a Russian émigré film star) shares with his “Mia Maya”: “Oh, how wonderful life would become / If Mozzhukin no longer played / In those movies they show in America / And directed my factory instead!”⁵⁸ Ordonka’s Greek profile, smooth blond coiffure, long slender body, and dancer’s grace also enabled her to carry off the parts of urban sophisticate, tragic lover, or misjudged femme fatale. This Ordonka was forever identified with the Tuwim-Wars hit “Miłość ci wszystko wybaczy” (Love will forgive you everything), in which she equates herself with a transformative, mad, forbearing, cruel love.

While Ordonka radiated a movie star’s glamor years before she starred in films, her popularity also depended on the relationship she projected with her cabaret audience. Guided by Járosy, briefly schooled by the French cabaret singer Yvette Gilbert, she learned to use her limited voice to best effect as a *diseuse* who sang, spoke, and sometimes even whispered her lyrics. In her songs Ordonka confided her emotions to her audience; her millions of confidantes responded with rapture and partisan moral support. They adored her bared emotions and her presumed sincerity, the more so when her actual love life became part of the public domain—her break-up with Járosy when he fell in love with dancer Stefcia Górńska, her Cinderella-like marriage to Prince Michał Tyszkiewicz in 1931, and her multiple extramarital affairs, all covered or insinuated by the press.⁵⁹ The romantic melodrama enacted by this sexually emancipated cabaret star proved most captivating of all. It was no exaggeration when right-wing journalist Adolf Nowaczyński admitted and deplored the ascendancy of Ordonka’s “national model” in Polish society over that of Emilia Plater, a woman who donned a soldier’s uniform and took part in the November 1830 uprising against the Russians.⁶⁰

Jewish Characters in *Qui pro Quo*

Like most of the Polish Jews working in the Polish-language cabaret, Kazimierz Krukowski, the cousin of Tuwim, was born into the assimilated Jewish professional intelligentsia. His father was a doctor and his mother taught German; Krukowski first trained as a classical lyric tenor.⁶¹ In his early years at *Qui pro Quo*, he served mainly as musical accompaniment, singing ballads to the side of center stage in his prerequisite smoking jacket. Yet when Hemar and Boczkowski proposed that he sing a *szmonces* song as a solo in early 1926, Krukowski was outraged: "How was I, a tenor who sang Turiddu in *Cavalleria Rusticana* and the Prince in *The Jewess* (perhaps for just that reason), to sing 'szmonces songs'? No! Never! This was shameful and disgraceful."⁶² When he finally assented, Krukowski's first performance as the shabby, harried Jewish shopkeeper named Lopek made him a Polish star.

Krukowski balked, as he explains, because the specific cabaret genre of *szmonces*, which initially appeared on the Viennese stage, could easily devolve into anti-Semitic caricature. In the wrong writer's hands, *szmonces* songs and sketches could squeeze tasteless humor out of the "żydlaczenie" (the Jewish corruption) of Polish, "a senseless distortion of words" which allegedly reflected the substandard Yiddish-inflected Polish spoken by uneducated Jews.⁶³ But Krukowski claimed that the *szmonces* produced by Tuwim and Hemar and performed by Ławiński, Tom, and himself on the *Qui pro Quo* stage constituted "a high class type of satire and wit," a parody of the language of snobby, socially aspiring, and not quite sophisticated Jews that prompted good-natured laughter from Gentiles and Jews alike.

Defining the *szmonces* of *Qui pro Quo* is key to assessing the markedly Jewish characters that the cabaret regularly presented. Krukowski's redemptive qualification falls short because he implies that the "snobby" characters being spoofed were unlikeable. Cabaret historians Groński and Dorota Fox develop more useful definitions based on the comments of *Qui pro Quo*'s liberal reviewers. Both describe the *szmonces* written by Tuwim, Hemar, and other *Qui pro Quo* regulars to be a clever stylistic deformation accenting the absurd and characterized by specific syntax and intonation, neologisms, and intentional stylistic mistakes in Polish and, occasionally, French.⁶⁴ Both indicate that the characters uttering this distinctly constructed, rather than transcribed, speech were scripted and performed to be expansive, excitable, malapropic, easily befuddled, yet, above all, sympathetic. Furthermore, these newly rich or petit-bourgeois urban Jews most closely approximated the Varsovian "on the street," who was saddled with modern city woes, desirous of modern city pleasures, and not quite certain how this new world worked. To a great degree, the *szmonces* acted out by the Jewish characters in *Qui pro Quo* became the model for modern Warsaw comedy.⁶⁵

Five years before Lopek's birth, the short, bald, mustachioed comedian Józef Urstein pioneered *szmonces* performance "in the best sense of the word" on the *Qui pro Quo* stage, playing the lovable character Pikuś.⁶⁶ In his history of the Jews of

Figure 5
Pikuś on the phone with Micia Titipulka



Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/1f/J%C3%B3zef_Urstein.jpg/220px-J%C3%B3zef_Urstein.jpg

Warsaw, Marian Fuks approves Pikuś's humor as "good-natured and characteristic of the jokes told by Jews"; it bore "nothing in common with ridiculing simple folk or the Jewish petit-bourgeoisie." In Pikuś's hilarious phone conversations with his beloved wife, Micia Titipulka, the comedian relayed Warsaw gossip, local scandals based on actual events, complaints about his business, and commentary on current politics with such hilarious expressions and gestures that he brought down the house (Figure 5).⁶⁷

Other *Qui pro Quo szmonces* sketches featured character pairs such as Maks and Moryc (played by Urstein and Tom) or the two Gwircmans (Krukowski and Ławiński), who swapped funny, ill-informed opinions or naïve questions and ignorant answers to the great amusement of the audience. For example, Maks and Moryc find much to ponder during a visit to Paris:

Person I: Elegance and luxury at every turn . . .

Person II: Luxury? What does that mean—luxury?

Person I: Don't you know what it means? Let's take an example: someone has a long beard, like this, so you can't see underneath it, but he wears a tie anyway. That's luxury!

Person II: Aha! Yes indeed, it's elegant here. And the technology! Telephones, telegraphs, radio, shmadio everywhere!

Person I: You know, I still don't understand what it is with the telephone, why you can hear things far away.

Person II: Very simple. Wires!

Person I: Okay, wires, but why can you hear?

Person II: I'll give you a *paregzampla*. For instance, there's this long, long dog, with his tail in Paris and his snout in Warsaw. When you pull his tail in Paris, he barks in Warsaw.

Person I: I understand. So how does a radiotelephone work?

Person II: It's the same thing, only without the dog.

Person I: What's the dog do then?⁶⁸

The formulae in place here—the pairing of the voluble dunce with the slightly more worldly shyster, the comically pedestrian approach to defining upper-class sensibility, the absurd metaphors used in explanations and then mistaken for real—all recur in American popular comedy, in the dialogues of such duos as Chico and Groucho Marx or Lou Costello and Bud Abbott. It bears noting that Shimen Dzigian and Yisroel Shumakher, a comic team who dominated Warsaw's Yiddish-language *Kleynkunst reviteatr* in the 1930s, likewise delighted their audiences through hilariously confused renderings of the day's news.⁶⁹

Krukowski's stardom as *Lopek* built on the audience's embrace of these zany *Qui pro Quo* characters. He had to exchange his smoking jacket for an oversized bowler hat, a long shabby coat, and a greasepaint mustache, yet he felt richly compensated by his public's adoration (Figure 6). The cabaret writers fleshed out his character more than any other played by the troupe, creating for him a family (his wife *Malcia*, son *Hipek*, and daughter *Mincia*), incessant business troubles, and an evolving philosophy on life.⁷⁰ *Jurandot*, a second-generation *Qui pro Quo* writer, could observe this development from his early days in the audience: "Against his family background, their hero took clearer shape with each song, becoming an extraordinarily accurate caricature of a middling shopkeeper from *Bielańska* or *Nowolipki* streets [in the Jewish quarter]. More—it became the synthesis of this entire Jewish petit-bourgeois milieu."⁷¹

Lopek's songs revealed how Warsaw's everyman survived the onslaught of big city troubles and temptations. When the shopkeeper prepared for a meal, he shut out the world: "When the soup sits on the table / You'll be speaking to some post / . . . / And *Malcia* knows it, / *Hipek* knows it, / And everyone knows it. / It's time for quiet, time to hush. / Hush up, 'cause daddy's eating." *Konrad Tom* sums up *Lopek's* saving spirit of compromise in his character-building song, "Jak się nie ma, co się lubi, to się lubi, co się ma" (When you don't have what you want, then you want what you have). Here *Lopek* admits that though he would love to eat steak at the Hunters' Club, he'll settle for his wife's cooking. In the same vein he sings: "Maybe I really do prefer *Greta Garbo* and *Pola Negri*, / but I'll take whatever *Malcia* gives me."⁷²

Instead of suffering ridicule as a caricature or a parody, *Lopek* became *Qui pro Quo* patrons' favorite, most beloved character, held onstage encore after encore and entreated to sing all the hits of his life's story.⁷³ Dressed as *Lopek*, *Krukowski* found that he was promoted to the first row, "alongside *Ordonka*, *Pogorzelska*, or

Figure 6

A scene depicting Krukowski as Lopek (far right) in the post-*Qui pro Quo* cabaret *Wielka Rewia* (The Grand Revue); also featured is Ludwik Ławiński (middle) and Czesław Skonieczny



Source: <http://www.audiovis.nac.gov.pl/obraz/151948/72a19dc9789a9d39f2a260619d6cebee/>

Zimińska,” in the cabaret’s finales.⁷⁴ His fame traveled with him into the city at large. When he encountered the crime boss Ferdzio Klapsztos at the *Narcyza*, a locale frequented by the underworld, Klapsztos hailed Krukowski with “Bravo, Lopek!” and cordially offered to help the performer recover his father’s stolen watch.⁷⁵ The strength of Lopek’s appeal was such that Krukowski could capitalize on it, establishing a club called *The Lopek Dancing*.⁷⁶ Lopek also became a film star in the 1930s, his persona adjusted somewhat so that he could embark as everyman on other comical adventures. The cabaret character of a put-upon Jewish shopkeeper thus emerged as a companionable national celebrity and circulated as a desirable metropolitan brand.

The great popularity of *Qui pro Quo*’s *szmonces* sketches, songs, and their performers directly opposed the nationalists’ stigmatization and “othering” of the Jew. The cabaret incarnated funny, sympathetic Jewish characters who shared the same modern world with their audience and puzzled with greater openness over its imperfections. Rather than depict inhabitants of the shtetl or the city’s Orthodox Jews (Jews who likely seemed alien to the writers and performers themselves), Hemar, Tom, Urstein, Krukowski, and others created types and situations that comically reflected on the plight of the modern Varsovian. Both Jews and Gentiles faced the challenge of assimilation in the big city. In *szmonces*, the characters vented emotionally for the audience, transforming what was intimidating and depressing in their shared world into humor. They wondered, pontificated, gossiped, bickered, complained, and joked. At *Qui pro Quo*, the *szmonces* that these uninhibited Varsovians spoke and sung did not offend the audience as a defamation of Polish, as the right-wing press insisted, but cheered them as the language of absurd, yet topical, comedy.⁷⁷

Finale

The producers, directors, writers, and artists of *Qui pro Quo* were not and could not be in the business of sociopolitical reform. They were fortunate that their cabaret's existence coincided with the most stable liberal period in Poland's interwar history. Key members of *Qui pro Quo* allied themselves with Piłsudski's government in print to show their support, and the troupe was honored and perhaps even a little smug about performing an exclusive engagement for the Marshal.

Yet, even during the government chaos of the pre-coup d'état 1920s and the increasing authoritarianism and conservatism of the 1930s, *Qui pro Quo* managed to undermine the right-wing nationalist ideals of an idyllic Polish countryside, women's premarital chastity and absolute maternal devotion, and an ethnically "pure" Polish Catholic nation. The cabaret's response was a matter of artistic ambition and absolute survival. The right's ideals denigrated what *Qui pro Quo* was—a capital city entertainment co-created by Jews and Gentiles, sexually emancipated female performers and audacious male writers and comedians, all of them Varsovian by birth or choice. When the audience came for their monthly dose of comedy to help them digest current news and events, they were entertained by ever new artistic visions of their hometown. *Qui pro Quo* framed and reframed Warsaw as superlative and superficial, exhilarating and heartbreaking, luxurious and shabby, funny and cruel—yet, in all cases, the only place to be.

The sketches and performers incarnating a diverse Warsaw society scoffed at exclusivity of any sort. They parodied high-culture artists and high-society hostesses. They championed the audacity of the *cwaniak* and the desires of young working women out for a good time, a soft berth, or a nicer guy. Jewish characters qualified as full-fledged Varsovians, and a conferencier with a foreign accent conducted the whole show. In effect, *Qui pro Quo* demonstrated again and again that "pure Polishness" could not possibly encompass all that Warsaw was. Such a one-note identity was just another act—an act so dull that it would stop the show.

The "pure Polishness" prescribed by right-wing nationalists would also kill the high spirits that *Qui pro Quo* engendered. The happy co-creation of writers and performers caught fire onstage. The writers tailored their work for the actors they admired, and the actors played off each other and naturally included the audience in their fun. Inclusivity defined the cabaret's atmosphere as well as its acts. The performers befriended their public, projecting themselves as both idols and intimates. *Qui pro Quo* audiences adored "buying" Dymśza's tricksters and Zimińska's impersonations; catching up with Lopek on life; indulging themselves along with Zula; listening in on the quibbling Maks and Moryc; and sharing Ordonka's agony and ecstasy. *Qui pro Quo*'s enduring defense against an exclusionary nationalism batted on the collaboration of artistic genius and an ensemble of diverse stars.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Eva Plach's detailed retracing of this political history in *The Clash of Nations: Cultural Politics in Piłsudski's Poland, 1926-1935* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), 1–16. See also Władysław T. Bartoszewski and Antony Polonsky, "Introduction," in *The Jews in Warsaw: A History*, ed. Władysław T. Bartoszewski and Antony Polonsky (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 37–38; and Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918-1968* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 130.

2. Dorota Fox, *Kabarety i rewie międzywojennej Warszawy* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2007), 13–14; Ryszard Marek Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie: Kabaret warszawski, 1918-1939* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1978), 11.

3. For a condensed discussion of the position of the theater in nineteenth-century Warsaw, see Beth Holmgren, *Starring Madame Modjeska: On Tour in Poland and America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 64–70.

4. Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 9.

5. *Ibid.*, 136. See also Antony Polonsky, "'Why Did They Hate Tuwim and Boy So Much?' Jews and 'Artificial Jews' in the Literary Polemics of the Second Polish Republic," in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*, ed. Robert Blobaum (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 189–209. Fox notes Boy's role as godfather to *Qui pro Quo* and its successor cabarets (*Kabarety i rewie*, 59).

6. Plach, *Clash of Nations*, 139, 140.

7. In the best of his memoirs, *Moja Warszawka* (Warszawa: Filmowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1957), Kazimierz Krukowski remembered how the General loved to consort with poets and actors in Warsaw's premiere cafés (*Moja Warszawka*, 44).

8. Ludwik Ławiński, *Kupilem: wspomnienia z za kulisami* (London: MacNeill, 1958), 48.

9. *Ibid.*, 49.

10. *Ibid.*, 205–6.

11. Plach, *Clash of Nations*, 71.

12. Polonsky, *Jews in Warsaw*, 205.

13. Marian Fuks, *Żydzi w Warszawie: Życie codzienne, wydarzenia, ludzie* (Poznań: Sorus, 1992), 116, 271–74. Edward D. Wynot Jr., "Jews in the Society and Politics of Interwar Warsaw," in Bartoszewski and Polonsky, *Jews in Warsaw*, 291.

14. Polonsky points out the right's accusation that Tuwim expressly demeaned the calling of Polish poet through the themes of his work and using his poetic gift to write for the cabaret (*Jews in Warsaw*).

15. Fuks notes the advertising jingle of Majde's company: "Mydło Majdego umyje każdego" (Majde's soap will clean anyone) (*Żydzi w Warszawie*, 329); Ławiński, *Kupilem*, 82.

16. Anna Mieszkowska, *Ja, kabareciarz: Marian Hemar od Lwowa do Londynu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Literackie, MUZA SA, 2006): 35–36. Hemar's patron Orłański was also a sometime contributor of songs under the pseudonym Orsza.

17. Krukowski, *Moja Warszawka*, 79–81, 83.

18. Roman Dziewoński, *Dodek: Dymsza* (Łomianki: Wydawnictwo LTW, 2010), 50.

19. Mieszkowska, *Ja, kabareciarz*, 60.

20. Groński notes that the cabarets treated the village exclusively as a folklore preserve (*Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 147).

21. Tadeusz Wittlin's account republished in Dziewoński, *Dodek*, 67. See also Tadeusz Żeleński (Boy), *Pisma*, t. 22 (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1964), 596, originally published in *Kurier Poranny* 4 V 1926, no. 261.

22. Dziewoński, *Dodek*, 129.

23. On Berlin cabaret's representation of plenitude and high fashion, see Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14–18.

24. Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 103–6. In her biography of Járosy, Anna Mieszkowska asserts that his performance in *Sinniaia ptichka* largely emulated the style of its chief conferencier, Iakov Iuzhnyi. *Jestem Járosy—zawsze ten sam!* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Literackie MUZA SA, 2008), 53.

25. Mira Zimińska-Sygietyńska, *Nie żyłam samotnie*, opracował i przypisami opatrzył Mieczysław Sroka (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1984), 136. See also Krukowski, *Moja Warszawa*, 71.

26. Jerzy Jurandot, *Dzieje śmiechu* (Warsaw: Iskra, 1959): 63.

27. Dziewoński, *Dodek*, 23, 29. Tadeusz Żeleński (Boy), Pisma, t. 23 (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1965): 539, originally published in *Kurier Poranny* 3 V 1930.

28. Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 66. The root *krochmal*, referring to laundry starch, also makes this parodic name sound funny.

29. Dziewoński, *Dodek*, 17–19, 23–25.

30. *Ibid.*, 17.

31. *Ibid.*, 114.

32. *Ibid.*, 73; Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*; Krukowski, *Moja Warszawa*, 88.

33. Ławiński, *Kupiłem*, 50.

34. Jurandot, *Dzieje śmiechu*, 60.

35. Dziewoński, *Dodek*, 76.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 81–82.

38. Dziewoński, *Dodek*, 81–82.

39. Boy, t. 23, 1965, 539 (*Kurier Poranny* 1930, no. 125).

40. Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 154; Fox, *Kabarety i rewie*, 13–14; Krukowski, *Moja Warszawa*, 83.

41. Plach, *Clash of Nations*, 144–45.

42. Ławiński claims that this botched operation facilitated Pogorzelska's acceptance at *Qui pro Quo*; she had not impressed the cabaret management when she sang in operettas before she had had surgery (*Kupiłem*, 44–45). According to Ławiński, Boy described her voice as that of "an old Viennese cabby."

43. Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 110.

44. On the cabaret's unleashing of erotic energy, often through wild dancing, see Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 4, 35, and Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out. New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, CT & London: Greenwood Press, 1981): 81–85, 153–54.

45. Plach shows how Boy threw down this gauntlet: "I prefer today's mother who, returning from a dance, wakes her son and tells him how much fun she had." Right-wing journalists responded to his provocation by invoking positive past images of Polish women's nation-serving self-sacrifice (*Clash of Nations*, 144–45).

46. Krukowski, *Moja Warszawa*, 84.

47. Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 110.

48. Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 109.

49. Text located in Kazimierz Rudzki, ed., *Dymek z papierosa, czyli wspomnienia o scenach, scenkach i nadsценkach* (Warsaw: Iskry, 1959), 483.

50. Krukowski, *Moja Warszawa*, 85.

51. *Ibid.*, Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 112.

52. Mira Zimińska-Sygietyńska, *Nie żyłam samotnie*, opracował i przypisami opatrzył Mieczysław Sroka (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1985): 80.

53. *Ibid.*, 112, 86–87.

54. Text located in Rudzki, *Dymek z papierosa*, 477.

55. Krukowski, *Moja Warszawa*, 84.

56. Zimińska-Sygietyńska, *Nie żyłam samotnie*, 77.

57. Tadeusz Wittlin, *Pieśniarka Warszawy: Hanka Ordonówna i jej świat* (Londyn: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1985), 95, 107–114, 124. See also Beth Holmgren, "War, Women, and Song: The Case of

Hanna Ordonka," *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History* 2 (2010): 139–54.

58. Rudzki, *Dymek z papierosa*, 490–91.

59. Groński remarks how Ordonówna's biography invokes the Cinderella story (*Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 108).

60. Plach cites Nowaczyński's intriguing protest against Ordonka as role model (*Clash of Nations*, 146).

61. Kazimierz Krukowski, *Mała antologia kabaretu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Radia i Telewizji, 1982), 21, 24.

62. Krukowski, *Moja Warszawka*, 81.

63. *Ibid.*, 73.

64. Fox, *Kabarety i rewie*, 168; Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 44.

65. Fox, *Kabarety i rewie*, 170–74; Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 44–46.

66. Fuks, *Żydzi w Warszawie*, 329.

67. *Ibid.*, 330. See also Groński, *Jak w przedwojennym kabarecie*, 45–46.

68. Krukowski, *Moja Warszawka*, 72–73. For two sample sketches of Maks and Moryc and the Gwirnians, see Krukowski, *Mała antologia kabaretu*, 188–94.

69. Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 325–28.

70. Krukowski, *Moja Warszawka*, 82. Jewish shopkeepers (small traders) such as Lopek were especially buffeted by the changing economy of the interwar period. See Bartoszewski and Polonsky's "Introduction" in *Jews of Warsaw*, 36–37, 43.

71. Jurandot, *Dzieje śmiechu*, 9–10.

72. Rudzki, *Dymek z papierosa*, 497–98.

73. Jurandot, 1959, 9.

74. Krukowski, *Mała antologia kabaretu*, 24.

75. Krukowski, *Moja Warszawka*, 39.

76. Krukowski, *Mała antologia kabaretu*, 30.

77. Fox, *Kabarety i rewie*, 169. Fox notes that the nationalist press leaked news of a government war against *szmonces* in 1936.

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