

# **THE NONFORMAL UNIVERSITY OF TEREMISKI**

**WWW.TEREMISKI.EDU.PL**

## **BACKGROUND**

*“We have forced ourselves to believe that the sole motivation of human activity is profit—maximized profit being the best option. This is false. For love and solidarity are the highest values, and they are creative. I believe that we will survive, only if we start building together a world in which each person will be able to realise their most beautiful dreams. I believe in this community of all humans; it is of such a community—built in midst of everyday hardships, and everyday care for our neighbour—that I dream of. And when I look at the young people that are starting to work together in Teremiski, I take it as a good sign.”*

(Jacek Kuroń in *Znak*, nr. 592)

The Nonformal University of Teremiski is located in a tiny village close to the Belarusian border of Poland. The university was established in 2000 by the extended family of Jacek Kuroń, who was in life-long opposition both to the Polish communist party with its oppressive regime and to the hyper-capitalist shaping of the country after the fall of the Eastern bloc in 1989.

The university was set up to counter a series of lacks that affect people in post-communist Poland, especially in rural villages of the now defunct Polish state-farms: limited access to culture, education and work. The initiative sets itself the goal to address these lacks together with the pressing question of how to live meaningfully in contemporary society.

In its first years, the university’s program expressly addressed rural youth who couldn’t count on financial support for their education both because their parents were unemployed and because their families suffered from wider social problems. For them, joining the Nonformal University of Teremiski meant joining, for the period of one year, a context in which they were encouraged to build their identity and make choices of value.

## **AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT**

During the first six years, the university was focused on the education of young Polish people between the age of 18 and 21 who came from deprived rural areas, regardless of their level of schooling. The objective of the educational program was to prepare up to twenty students per year for an independent and creative life, a life in which they would participate in cultural, social and civic life and in which they would

be prepared to find employment. The students who obtained a diploma were equipped to act as animators of local development and as animators of culture and education.

Since 2008, the university has been contributing to the cultural and social development of the Białowieża region, where it is located. These contributions are made through the organisation of activities within the local educational context as well as through the running of the Barn Theatre, the first and only theatre in the region.

## **FUNDING**

2002-2008: friends from various periods of Jacek Kuroń’s political opposition and leadership; royalties from Jacek Kuroń’s book *The Republic for my grandchildren (Rzeczpospolita dla moich wnuków)*; the Jacek Kuroń foundation; the Norway Fund; royalties from the work of the poets Julian Tuwim and Irena Tuwim.

Since 2008: small project grants from regional and national government.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

2000: writing the basic program for the Nonformal University

2001: recruiting the first 20 students across Poland

2002: 1<sup>st</sup> year of educational program in Teremiski

2004: Jacek Kuroń dies

2008: funding for the Nonformal University is cut

2009-2011: the program of the university is reduced to local interventions

2011: funding for the engagement in regional development is secured

## **LOCATION**

Teremiski, Poland, 50 inhabitants, situated on the border of the oldest virgin forest in Europe (Białowieża Forest), which is a UNESCO world heritage site.

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## **CONVERSATION**

This conversation with Katarzyna and Paweł Winiarski, co-authors and leaders of the educational program of the Nonformal University, was held in their home in Teremiski in May 2011.

**Bianca Elzenbaumer: You have both been involved in the Nonformal University of Teremiski from its very beginning. Could you tell us what urged you to set up this initiative?**

**Paweł Winiarski:** In 1989, when the political and economic system in Poland changed, most of the people who created that change were on the left side of politics, so rather social and focused on equality more than on other things. But economists like Jeffrey Sachs, who at that time was campaigning for mainstream neoliberalism, had dominated the changes that were finally implemented. The economists' tasks, together with that of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), were to make the Polish economy effective in such a way that it could fit into the global system. From today's perspective, we can say that the generation which created the changes in Poland, won and lost in the same moment: they really changed the country from the ground up, but also lost everything they believed in. Some of the people who fought for bringing about a change, like Jacek Kuroń, the second husband of my mother Danuta, were unhappy with this loss, while others fitted quite happily into the new structures.

Kuroń, who was one of the main leaders and strategic thinkers of the democratic opposition in Poland, spent his life campaigning for social equality. He never accepted the way the changes went after '89. He was active in social dialogue and published lots of articles on which way Poland should go. Having seen how the country was affected by the remodelling of the economy, Kuroń created a foundation which helped children in places where the economic and political changes had hit people the hardest. This foundation helped with school life, with family problems, with health and food issues—basically with nearly everything. The foundation's strategy was to find money to support local organisations which were focusing their work on children.

After ten years of this kind of engagement, when the first children of this group had grown up and become adults, they discovered that in the social world, there was no place for them. People that had grown up in deprived, rural areas were completely out of the system: their abilities did not matter; all that defined their place on the social ladder was their place of birth. Growing up in such run-down areas was like a life sentence.

When this dynamic became clear, Kasia and I had just finished our studies in cultural animation and sociology in Warsaw. We decided to join the team at Kuroń's foundation, which, at the time, basically constituted Kuroń himself and my mother, in order to work towards changing these discriminating social structures.

**Katarzyna Winiarska:** The first ideas for an educational program for young people from disadvantaged areas

started to grow in 2000: we began to imagine a place where such things as background, economic and social status didn't matter. It took us one year to prepare a program for a hypothetical university and to prepare a space for this educational program to be located in, and another year to recruit students from all over Poland.

**Paweł:** At that time, there were two traditions that inspired us. The first big inspiration was the high social capital in Poland: every time we are occupied, we manage to have an excellent working underground state, like, for instance, in the 1860s with the January Uprising against the Russian occupation. During the Russian occupation, there was a huge underground educational movement called The Flying University, which had schools all over the country and an underground university with four faculties in Warsaw. The second inspiration was the Dutch idea of the Volkshogeschool—a higher education institution for adults that does not award a degree. These schools were also good practice in Poland during the 1920s and 1930s, but had since disappeared.

So, our idea was to combine these traditions and to set up a village house in which to create an educational community which is like a home. We imagined it to be like a family environment, living to the rhythm of the everyday and celebrating feasts, like Christmas and Easter, together. Personal, deep contact, as well as a constant working rhythm, were the main ideas.

**Katarzyna:** With the creation of our own educational program, we wanted to operate outside the official educational system, without any papers and stamps from the Ministry of Education, but also without any support. We wanted to start out with an open field, in order to create a program especially tailored for the group of people we had in mind. The aim was to address specific needs and to break down social and economic barriers for those people who grew up in the most impoverished areas of Poland. We wanted to support those who really wanted to learn more but who didn't have the money for the journey to a school located 20km from their village.

**Paweł:** After one year of theoretical preparation, we began to organise meetings with the people we wanted to work with—future students in different parts of Poland. We wanted to invite them to the program, but also we simply wanted to get to know them. Engaging with rural youth was to enter a completely different social world for us, so these first encounters were very important.

**Bianca:** Your initial vision was to create your own educational program and to start out with an open field. How did this work and what were the basic guidelines you put in place?

**Paweł:** The idea of this program was bi-directional—on the one hand, we invited the students to participate and on the other hand, we invited young academics to become lecturers and to extend the cycle of their subject. These lecturers came to Teremiski, once a week or twice a month, to deliver the regular program that they had devised through exchanges with our students. When the first group of students arrived at the Nonformal University, there was no program. We only had a rough idea of what direction to go in and of the subjects that might be fitting. The most important principle was that culture is the basis for everything—both if you like to be a humanist or a mathematician. Culture is the base you need in order to be human and to be happy.

Besides the young academics, we also invited famous people to teach here. People that would have some authority attached to their figure, like famous writers or people known from TV. We invited these people once or twice a year, which always turned into an event. So, once in a while, we would have a guest like this, who would not only come to speak for an hour and then leave, but who would stay for dinner and over night. This allowed the students to speak with the guest in a completely informal way about everything they wanted.

**Katarzyna:** For us, space was a very important tool of education: you can talk about everything when you are in the class room, but when you are sitting together next to the fire place or are making soup, the atmosphere and the way of speaking are completely different. The English lessons would, for instance, be delivered by two native speakers who were living with us and who would be cooking with the students. The most important thing for native speakers was to be with the students in all situations and to talk to them. The formal lessons were in second place. During traditional lectures you were able to develop your knowledge, but during dinner or while being on the veranda, you could transform that knowledge into inspiration, make plans for the future or develop the passion to take a book and start to study for yourself.

**Paweł:** Another very important element was that we invited the students to create their own program in dialogue with the lecturers and us: one group bringing

a knowledge of the contemporary world and the other contributing knowledge of the real condition of life in this world. Both approaches were important to each other and had equal value in shaping the program. I believe that the strength of our initiative was in this kind of interaction.

**Katarzyna:** One of the professors of sociology, who is a specialist in poverty, said that during the one year she spent lecturing with our students, she got to know more about poverty than during all her years of research.

But coming back to the program, the idea was to invite lecturers to show the students a way of living which creates something not only for oneself, but that contributes to the society we are living in.

**Paweł:** We wanted to encourage them to return to their home villages and to become people who start change. But, of course, this is a very difficult path to go down and just a few of the students chose this option.

**Katarzyna:** But a lot of them chose this way of life, even though they are not now in their local communities.

**Fabio Franz:** Could you tell us more about the conditions that the students came from and what was needed for them in order to join the Nonformal University?

**Katarzyna:** Our students came from all over Poland. Many were from the north because that was the area where a lot of the State Agricultural Farms [PGR] were located. These enormous farms had been implemented in 1949 and were based on the idea of communism that private ownership is the root of social evil—believing that if everything will be common, people will stay equal. In practice, this idea, proposed in the Russian revolution, conflicted with the social rights and traditions of free farmers. So the state insisted that these traditions had to be broken and thus took the fields away from the farmers. In Ukraine, this practice led to a hunger disaster with millions of people dying in the '20s, because the state's policy insisted on breaking the common agricultural tradition.

In Poland after WWII, the state border was moved 300km to the west and included previously German land, without Germans as they had been moved out. On these vast stretches of land, the state created these PGRs and people from the east were moved to the west to cultivate the fields.



**Paweł:** After 1989, a variety of problems arose for the people living in these PGRs: in the first place, the state had no idea how this kind of enterprise could exist within a capitalist economic system, which meant the state farms collapsed. Moreover, social problems surfaced since the roots of these state farmers had been cut and there were no other places they could have moved back to, or could have got support from. Therefore, the political and economic changes were especially destructive for these workers and their families. The change of '89 was like an earthquake for these villages. For example, you would have a block of city flats and next to it, a similar block where chicken were bred. One day, the block of chicken collapses and you can't do anything else, as all you did your whole life was to feed these chicken. You end up with one hundred people living in the middle of a field who find themselves without work, without public schools, without skills to do anything, but needing to deal with this new situation, while even the state has no idea of how to intervene. The only thing that keeps on working in such places is a shop where you can buy alcohol, which only makes the social problems run deeper and deeper. And it is from these rural and family contexts that we recruited most of our students.

**Katarzyna:** The people who came to us had different levels of education. Some of them would have done the equivalent of their A-levels, but many hadn't and some even only had a diploma from primary school.

**Paweł:** For us, it was important to say that they didn't need any official papers, or any money, or anything else in order to join the study program.

**Katarzyna:** The only thing we checked was if people really wanted to come here. But we also didn't take any people with such evidently strong social problems that they needed therapy rather than education at that point. We couldn't take these kinds of people because

we are not equipped to deal with them and therapy was not the idea of this group, the idea was education. Of course, then, most of the students did have some problems connected to their past that had to be solved. In relation to the social problems, it has been very important that we chose this specific place for the university: this Belarusian region is multicultural and we could use this local context with its multitude of traditions to explore different problems connected to identity. The culture of this place was the base which would appear in most of the subjects taught. Visiting the synagogue, the orthodox church, meeting people from different religions and cultures was very important for the students to think about their own identity, their roots and their families. The best example of this is related to one of our female students who had an extremely low self-esteem, thinking that she was of no value. During an excursion through these borderland villages, she discovered that she is from a very big Tatar family [Tatars are Polish Muslims]. This was an enormous discovery for her and her family, providing them with a bigger picture for their own life narration. And like her, many students confirmed that engaging with identity issues had been very important for them.

**Bianca: What happened once the students had gone through the program in Teremiski?**

**Katarzyna:** After the nine months in Teremiski, some of our students decided to finish their secondary school or to go on to study at official universities. Our foundation supported these further moves by renting a house in Warsaw where the students were hosted for free but had to earn money for their food and all other expenses. In Warsaw they lived together, they took care of themselves but also helped and supported each other. Also the educational program continued in Warsaw, albeit at a much lower frequency—meetings were held only every two weeks.

**Paweł:** The support structure in Warsaw was important, because when you break social barriers and invite people to an educational program such as ours, you still have no answer as to how they can be independent in their lives. Our experience showed that in the framework of such a program, you need to have the financial means to support people for a minimum of three years. Because after the first very crucial year, a person needs another two years to become truly independent: to find an adequate employment or to continue their studies at university level. Of course,



we needed a lot of money for this, but still, one student in our university was cheaper than a child in an orphan house or an inmate in a state prison. In that sense, our educational program was a much cheaper and more effective way of improving the social situation for people than what was proposed by many institutions at state level.

**Fabio: This transition from Teremiski sounds like a crucial part of your program. How was this transition structured?**

**Katarzyna:** In Teremiski, we were living closely together for nine months, which helped everyone make big steps in their education, but did not necessarily contribute to making people independent. Here we gave them everything—even their toothbrush—because we decided that money should not be an issue. But money exists and we did not want them to be “addicted” to us and to the structure. So in Warsaw, we invited them to start to work for themselves. Also, with regards human support, everyone knew that all the lecturers of the university would also be at their disposal in Warsaw, but that the students had to organise the meetings themselves.

**Paweł:** With the house in Warsaw, we also wanted to support those who were eager to continue their education. Finding the money for a place to live was a barrier that we wanted to eliminate. Besides the financial barrier, we also wanted to create a safe space in the capital from where the students could explore their choices for life. Those who continued their studies did very well and one student, who came to Teremiski without having done his secondary school diploma, is now even doing a research degree. Some of the former students returned to their villages, some are teachers and others have become social animators. We will see what will happen with them, it is still open.

But now the program is finished because the money for constant financial support ran out with the death of Kuroń and because running such a program on unreliable grants is impossible. It also ran out because in 2004, Poland joined the EU and the work markets of Western Europe became open. This opening up of the borders meant that for the bravest young people living in deprived areas, going abroad to earn money became a much more seductive option than coming to Teremiski to study in a non-registered university that would not even give you a degree. Going to the West for many has become some sort of natural choice.

**Bianca: You successfully worked with students for six years and then the funding ran out. What do you think were the main factors that made this happen?**

**Katarzyna:** Certainly the death of Jacek Kuroń was one factor that made finding funds more difficult. He knew many people and many were indebted to him for one reason or another. This meant that he could secure funds by simply ringing up important people and getting them to support the initiative. Besides Kuroń’s personal influence, another main issue might have been that we refused contact with the media. We wanted to protect our students and only ever presented our intentions and the educational program to the media, but did not allow them to get close to the students. We did so because we felt that nobody wanted to understand what we were trying to create—all they were interested in was putting our students into boxes as stereotypes and keeping them there all their lives. Thus, for the first five years of our activities, we were completely closed to media. A lot of people thought that this was foolish as money flows are closely connected to the media presence of an initiative.

**Paweł:** And maybe those people were right. Maybe, if we had created a show about the program, people would have cried about these ‘poor children’ and would have given financial support.

**Katarzyna:** But that would have been contrary to what we wanted to do. Our aim was to break class structure and stereotypes and not to put them on show in order to finance the project. We think there is something more important than the question of how to pay for a project like this. If we want to help these people, they should be in the centre.

**Bianca: The initial program of the Nonformal University has ended, but you are still living here in Teremiski and have in fact settled here by buying and renovating a traditional wooden house and raising your two children in this community. What have been your plans from 2009 up to now?**

**Paweł:** The situation in Poland has changed, but this change also opened up a new way for us. Already, by 2006, we knew Białowieża quite well and we could see that this area needed to deal with a lot of problems. As our philosophy is that of noticing things and then doing something about them, this meant that we felt

the urge to get engaged locally. We are still trying to find an answer to the same question of 'How to live, be independent and creative in a rural place', it's just that the focus has shifted to a much more local context. The villages in the area have only a 200-year old history because the forest was closed to people for more than 600 years of Polish history: first it was the property of Polish kings, then it was owned by Russian emperors. Only in the last part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were Teremiski and other villages established around a growing wood industry. But that industry collapsed just as did the PGRs. After 1989, the State Forest Industry became just a normal enterprise on the market and they began to lock people out. This means that for the society in this region, there are no more means of using the forest industry as a driver for development. But there is also no collective idea of what to do instead. Of course, everyone here has his or her own answer, but there is a deep divide in opinions and this makes us weak as a community. In my opinion, with this conflict we are risking to lose those things which can make us rich and happy people. I think a place with this natural and cultural heritage could find a way into the contemporary world based on its symbolic value in order to produce money for development, while at the same time protecting the environment and the regional culture. With this vision in mind, we are now working on the idea of a social and cultural development centre in Białowieża, which is 7km from Teremiski and the biggest local village. The goal of this centre would be to bring people together to solve this conflict of interests and to find a way for our society to move forward.

But this project about local development still lies in the future. For now, we have been invited by official representatives of this district to work on the cultural development of this region. For six years, we have been waiting for this invite, because we did not want to impose anything on the local people, as doing things without an invitation is never good in small societies. We have since started programs for different groups, for children in the local kindergarten and also for elderly people. All activities deal with culture and identity and we try to create constant educational situations which allow children to engage in activities all year long. For the work with the kindergarten, we invited the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra to give a monthly concert for children. They come and play classical music, but also talk about the music, the instruments, the culture the piece came out of and so on. We also set up a library in the kindergarten from where the children can borrow books to take home. In that library we also organ-

ise weekly encounters where local adults read stories aloud to the children. This reading initiative has been running for a year and a half, but now we can't find more people who want to dedicate their time to it.

We also had a program for school children but that was very difficult, because Teremiski is 7km from Białowieża and there are only five buses a day and none at the weekend. This limitation of mobility made us realise that if we wanted to do something for the area, we needed to set up a place in Białowieża.

**Bianca: Do you think that you can find funding for this new project centre?**

**Paweł:** We have been preparing this project for more than one year and we don't have any money for it yet. Last week we met with the Ministry of Regional Development and maybe something will change, but we don't know.

The grant system we are operating on for the initiatives with the children is making programming very difficult and sometimes we have to suspend the activities for some months until the next grant money comes in.

**Katarzyna:** For example, we didn't get selected in the application process for financial support for a big program of after-school activities we wanted to run next year. This arbitrariness of funding makes it very difficult to do anything and even when you get some support, it might only be 30% or 50% of what you asked for. But then you are still expected to do the whole program.

Moreover, everyone wants you to do something "innovative". We believe that continuity is more important than innovation, because when you do basic things in kindergarten, you can then do something more challenging and innovative when these children are older. It is like the pyramid of Maslow: if you don't have any food to eat, you don't think of ideas like self-realisation and philosophy. It is the same with education, if you don't have basic education and skills, you can't do any innovation.

**Bianca: Does your own income depend on these grants?**

**Katarzyna:** Yes, it does. We haven't received any money since January. We basically live on money my parents give us and on the guided tours that Paweł does in the forest, but it is really not big money. And even when we have money from the ministry or from other

foundations, it is usually dedicated to organising activities and not for us. If we were to pay ourselves a wage, there would be much less money available for the projects. This is very problematic.

**Paweł:** In the Polish NGO sector, there are a lot of big and rich organisations which appear to operate as centres where leaders educate leaders. They have hundreds of workers and get really good money. People like us are just the first line of soldiers and we are told that we are not professionals.

**Katarzyna:** The thing is that you can't say that NGOs are bad. They are great because they help people...

**Paweł:** ...even if after twenty years of activity, nobody sees what has happened with the people's energy and the money? Where are the social changes? Maybe we need less bureaucracy and more action.

**Fabio:** So now that you are in this phase of transition, trying to get the new centre off the ground, what is happening with the building of the Nonformal University?

**Paweł:** We are trying to rise again after the winter. Because of our financial problems, we have not been able to properly heat the building and some pipes have broken, so now we are trying to prepare the school for the summer groups. It is a very difficult moment as our foundation does not have any money in its account and the future doesn't look very optimistic, but we will see. Maybe this is the last year of this adventure and the first year of a new departure.

**Bianca:** Would it be possible to support the school with donations?

**Katarzyna:** We have some forty people who support us, but that is not enough. We would need 400 people to support the school with 50 złoty [about €13] per month to pay all the bills for the building and to have a constant program. But it is not easy. Also, the money we get from grants is tied to specific expenses. For example, with the grant from the ministry, you can rent hotels in Białowieża for big money, but you can't pay for the central heating in our school in order to have twenty people staying over. This would be a lot cheaper, but you can only use the hotel.

**Paweł:** Of course, Kasia and I don't know how long we

can sustain this anymore with our children and living off money from her parents. But, like I said, the generation of the democratic opposition spent their lives to do things which everyone had thought were impossible. How can one, two or one hundred people fight the Russian communist state? They changed the system, even if they lost the main values, but they changed something. So, maybe we will see what happens with our work. There are many important things to be done in Białowieża.

[www.teremiski.edu.pl](http://www.teremiski.edu.pl)

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