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## **Former Jehovah's Witness: I am not manure on the surface of the ground**

Violetta Szostak | 25.09.2014 , aktualizacja: 25.09.2014 09:11



Stanisław Chłościński (Photograph: Andrzej Boldaniuk / Press materials)

**In each case abandonment meets with shunning. People lose families, friends, often – work, they have a suicide attempts. Conversation with Stanisław Chłościński.**

*"One who lived in that 'organization,' and I lived there for 60 years, perfectly knows about things written by Robert" – you wrote after reading the reportage of Robert Rient "No Blood". And more: "Today I am beyond that religion. We formed an association Liberated [Wyzwoleni], which helps people leaving e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses in legal matters". One cannot simply leave?*

- Exactly, one cannot leave. At the first we met each other on the internet forum, several thousand people are active there, and many people have the similar experience: a man who leaves JW's meets with shunning. People lose families, friends, often – work, they have suicidal attempts.

The association was formally established two years ago, we wrote in our goals: helping people socially excluded who come from cults and religious movements. I emphasize that we do not have a goal to fight certain groups, but with the damage felt by people who try to leave them. We focus mainly on matters concerning Jehovah's Witnesses, because the problem of shunning is the deepest there, in comparison with other denominations active in Poland, since it is officially commanded by the organization.

### ***How does it work?***

- It is forbidden to have contact with persons who were excommunicated from the congregation, one cannot even greet such ones on the street. If a "judicial committee" decides that I am an apostate, and I have a family which belongs to the congregation, then all should sever their relationships with me. "After my excommunication I cannot see my daughter and her children. So far it lasts for 5 five years" – wrote one expelled person.

### ***What is a "judicial committee"?***

- Several brothers who are elders. If you will do something wrong, then they summons you and you have to explain the whole thing. A crime is not a necessary a misdeed. It may be that way: I start to ask questions concerning the faith, because I have persistent doubts, I found in the "the Watchtower" magazine something which contradicts my reason. A congregational elder says: "Oh, Brother Stan, your thinking is not correct, you should trust God." If I still persist in my research, then they summon me to a "judicial committee," because I am a "rebel." If I do not repent, they will excommunicate me. Afterwards they will publicly announce that I am not a Witness anymore. One of the Bible verses is then often quoted, e.g.: "But now I am writing YOU to quit mixing in company with anyone called a brother that is a fornicator or a greedy person or an idolater or a reviler or a drunkard or an extortioner, not even eating with such a man." An apostate becomes publicly stigmatized as an immoral person, he or she loses his or her good name – it does not matter what is the reason of leaving.

### ***You spent there sixty years. What happened?***

- It was not something sudden; it was a process, growing doubts, readings which opened my eyes. I was even the presiding overseer in the congregation, but probably my attitude was never close to fanaticism.

### ***Were you born in a family of Jehovah's Witnesses?***

- Yes, my parents were Catholics, but they became interested in a group which then – in the fifties – called itself the Bible Students; my parents got baptized.

The beginning of my life was very similar to that written by the author of the reportage. I even understand well such scenes like that of cutting one's penis off. I know that sense of guilt and fear. I put my tongue out of my mouth and I looked if it would rot. It was that way, because there was a book destined for studies with children, called "From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained." "Their flesh shall rot while they are still on their feet, their eyes shall rot in their sockets, and their tongues shall rot in their mouths" – such would be the fate of apostates.

Obedience was the primary thing. It was followed by the fear of a "leaders," which could couple you with apostates. God sees everything, wherever you are, you will be punished – I always felt it on my back.

I got baptized when I was thirteen years old. After the baptism you have a duty to obey God's Law as it is in the case of an adult. Even a small fault was a terrible burden. I recall when I once tried to smoke a cigarette with other boys... If someone would see me then, and inform the elders, I would have to explain myself before a "judicial committee."

I did not go to university, which I regret the most. "What is a benefit from university studies? You will not learn anything good there. But you can be a congregational servant or a pioneer instead" – my mother repeated.

I was being prepared that when I reach 19 years old I will be imprisoned – because the army will summon me and I will have to be tough to refuse military service. Maybe I personally could be convinced to receive

substitute service, but I felt the pressure of the group which expected that I should remain steadfast. It was like I was on high. I was sentenced with 3 years.

***Did you spend three years in prison?***

- I spent there 22 months. Prosecutor was enraged, when I refused the service: "I will grind you down; you will not leave the prison." But he did not have control over me; I was able to tell him: "That is why I am here."

***In order to make a sacrifice?***

- I was strengthened by the faith that we will be rewarded and that we fight for freedom of religion in the communist state. But when I sat in an arrest in Bydgoszcz, alone in the cell, then it was not a fun at all. But I have to tell that I was treated well. I was not a contentious person, so I was respected both by prisoners belonging to the prison subculture and by the administration of the jail. During my imprisonment I landed in the vacation center which belonged to the Ministry of Justice, it was in Koronowo forests, I was a waiter, and I delivered cutlets to the tables of dignitaries. I was appreciated as a Jehovah's Witness, because it meant that I did not steal.

***How did you leave?***

- I ceased to attend meetings about ten years ago. I was excommunicated in December of the former year. They summoned me by telephone to come and see a "judicial committee."

***You could not come there.***

- I came to tell them that their acts were illegal, because they violated my right to freedom. I did not attend the meetings for ten years – why someone claimed to have a right to judge me and offend me? I brought the case for prosecution; it concerned the crime of the article 191: enforcing someone to perform certain religious activity. However, the prosecutor did not find it a forbidden act.

I ask: why? If I hear that now I am as "manure on the surface of the ground, and ravens will peck my body," is it not offensive, punishable?

***What about your family?***

- My two sisters are active Witnesses; they do not have contacts with me, although we live in the same town. I have also another sister and one brother, they left the organization long ago, they moved to another city, and they were finally forgotten in the congregation. They support me.

***How do you help apostates?***

- We have two cases in courts. The first one: protection of personal data. When someone is excommunicated, then the committee fills in so called form S77. You cannot see what others wrote about you and what they are doing with that material. We demand that our personal data should not be processed. At the first, the General Inspector of the Personal Data rejected our motion, and reasoned that he did not want to interfere with the internal matters of a denomination. But the provincial administrative court ordered to take the case as every other case. Proceedings are conducted, because the lawyer of the organization brought the revocation to the Supreme Administrative Court.

The second case – that of Danuta Kubik from Głogow, against the elders of her congregation, for moral damages. They put her on humiliating trials, interfered with her private life, enforced her to live with a husband – drunkard, e.g. they came to their home and controlled if she had relations with him. The

prosecutor dismissed her case. But we helped to find a lawyer, and on October 23<sup>rd</sup> there will be the first case of her action in the court in Legnica.

***I have read about the case – did the woman intend to stay in the congregation?***

- She did not lose her faith, but she acted against certain people who stigmatized her. These cases are of such nature that the law should deal with them.

We write to institutions, members of Parliament, the parliament question will be laid – we demand that the state should observe the religious groups, that they would not violate the law. In June we organized our first manifestation in front of the Parliament: four individuals stood with adhesive tape on their mouths. So far, four individuals, people are afraid and they do not want to show their faces.

In July we organized Watchtower Victims Memorial Day, dedicated e.g. to people who died after the refusal of blood transfusion. A Jehovah's Witness who would take the blood in a hospital has to face with his or her public judgment after leaving the hospital. They say: the refusal of blood is the will of our followers. But when someone comes to a hospital, then a so called liaison committee comes after him or her. I was a member of such a committee once or twice. We visited a senior registrar, saying: "Our brother lays here; we want the hospital to respect his religion and our brother's declaration concerning his refusal to take blood." We demanded that we should look up medical documents and the senior registrar usually gave us such documents, because he did not want to have struggle with us. He gave the documents to strangers?!

When I would possibly be taken to hospital after an accident, as unconscious, then I will be glad if they would rescue me. For God's sake! Let a doctor decide about my health, instead of some self-proclaimed committee!

***How many members belong to your association?***

- Currently 18, it is the hard core of the group, and additionally about 20 volunteers. We do not intend that our association should have many people, to gather all the former members of JW's. It would be even dangerous, it could change into something undemocratic, something sectarian.

***How many people asked you for help?***

- In this year we had about one hundred cases. In many instances we are not able to do anything except our help as a support group. The important thing for excommunicated people is to be able to talk with somebody who experienced the same pain. People call and ask: "Do you know someone I could talk to who lives in my city?" We have informal support groups in Poznan, Cracow, Zamosc and Warsaw. We cannot be more active, because we lack funds.

We appealed to Batory Foundation – but we lacked a few points; to the regional council – also without effect. We do not suit charts; we would receive financial help if we could focus on e.g. alcohol addiction.

***How do you finance your activity?***

- From our membership fee, sometimes from donations. When I travel to conferences with my lectures, I pay that travel out of my pocket. A law office which conducts our cases does it without a charge.

***How can you manage with yourself? Conducting such association, you still live that religion, although on the other side.***

- It is not easy to leave it all behind. The problem remains as long as you live.

***Are you an atheist now?***

- I cannot identify myself in that way. I cannot exclude that there is something beyond us. I am sure of the one thing: membership to a certain group does not secure salvation, but being a good man, does. I will have a secular funeral. It is also an argument which convinces people who are afraid of excommunication: "When I die, nobody would conduct my funeral." I already wrote my credo for the funeral – several sentences, which I would like to transmit to others. They can be read out even by my neighbor.

***Do you have children?***

- And grandchildren.

***Do they belong to any religion?***

- My daughters were baptized as Jehovah's Witnesses, but they left the organization when they began their adult life. They were also shunned. For example I was invited to the wedding of my niece – then I was a Witness, yet – but they already did not belong. Concerning grandchildren? They are not brought up in any religion. When they grow up, then they will choose if they want.

Translation: Szymon Matusiak