

# Book Banning and Censorship Are Only Symptoms: Lessons Learned from Personal History

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## ABSTRACT

We all have done something to push against censorship in most recent years, whether it was to sign a petition, write an op ed, attend board meetings or help organize the local community. We believe, and try to convince others, that censorship is bad. In this piece I offer a retrospective comparison from 20th century history, painting a picture of long-term consequences of decades long censorship.

I had an unusual childhood.

When I was about 6 years old, my mom went back to school to become a librarian. There wouldn't be anything special in this story if it wasn't for the fact that she not only had to create the whole collection, design the space, buy furniture, set up the cataloging, inventory and everything else that comes with opening a new library but also provide the space for it in our house. My family ended up living above the library for nearly a decade.

I remember the smell: wood, books, paper, and the tea and cookies that my mom always hid from me and my siblings in her desk.

I remember learning the alphabet by organizing her library patrons' cards. And the numerical order by placing book cards in the right order. Helping her shelve the books at the end of the day or copying cataloging cards when my handwriting was good enough for this big job, were my regular chores.

The main room of the library with the librarian's desk, tables, chairs and children's books was always busy. There were neighbors stopping down to grab the daily paper, romance readers picking up the latest editions of Harlequins (!), the works of Barbara Cartland or Danielle Steel, adventure lovers checking out Karol May, Robert Ludlum, and kids reading Anne of Green Gables. As you can see, we were not reading New York Times bestsellers but instead wanted to know about the newly available world outside of the Cold War zone. Summer was always the busiest. Kids bored out of their minds reading and reading and reading amongst the tall stacks of books that we had to help put away at the end of each day.

The second room of the library was quieter with more academic level books organized in a similar fashion to our Dewey decimal system. My favorite section was poetry and drama, especially late 18th and early 19th century romantics, the well-known ones like Goethe or Byron and more local ones such as Mickiewicz, Slowacki or Norwid, and even Pushkin.

I remember standing in the second room of the library and looking at dozens and dozens of volumes of Lenin books and asking the librarian, my mom, why does she need those books if nobody reads them. She said they came to the library as a donation when the library first opened in 1987 and she must keep them. It was the transition time from communism to democracy in 1989, when she didn't know who had the power to tell her what the collection must consist of. I would ask her when she would finally be brave enough to get rid of them.

The life of the library took a very different turn after the fall of communism and the first free elections in Poland occurred in 1990. I remember my mom whispering with other adults in the library about what they hoped for, what kind of changes they were expecting, how and what will change for all of us.

The change came to us and to our little library in the form of a color TV with a VHS player. You read that right, it was the 1990s and the library received one of the first color TV's with a VHS player in town. At the time, I didn't think anything of it. I assumed that it was new technology that everybody was getting at the same time. I had no idea that in other parts of the world that level of technology was common. I didn't realize until 1989 that western culture was prohibited in Poland.

Before we received the new equipment, we used to watch stories using slide projectors, but now we had a movie night every Friday. My mom would take a bus to the bigger city nearby and rent VHS tapes for us. Even though the library hours were Monday-Saturday, on Sundays she would open the library for teens and let them bring their own movies. It was mostly teenage boys watching action and martial arts movies that finally were available and allowed in post-communist Poland. I didn't understand the significance of having kung fu movies in our small library.

Those changes in Polish politics were also heavily marked in my elementary school. I will never forget sitting in my 4th grade history class and listening to my teacher sayings that we are the first generation, one of the first classes, that will be taught the real Polish history. That this is the first time ever in her career that she can speak freely in the classroom about the country's past without being afraid that her students, or their parents, might be communist spies and she might face persecution.

I also didn't understand my parents' excitement when English was offered as a private Saturday class in my elementary school. Those who could afford it and believed in their children's education, paid for us to learn our first words in English in the early 1990s. The classes were very popular, the teacher had two sessions with younger and older students. It was a status symbol to be one of the children taking English classes.

Hanging the cross on the walls of our school was a symbol of freedom, a symbol of victory against a communist regime that didn't allow religion in the lives of the members of the party or even the employees of the federal or local government (there are a lot of stories about people getting married at the church or baptizing their children as a sign of rebellion against the government and not a proof of their faith). The story of church and politics in 20th century Poland is very, very complicated and has little to do with religion, and a lot to do with power and control over the masses.

I remember the exhibit of Katyn<sup>1</sup> that was placed in the history classroom for the first time ever. For the first time in over 40 years we were allowed to be taught about the events of the massacre of Polish officers during WWII by the Russians.

<sup>1</sup> See: Katyn Massacre: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Katyn-Massacre>

But what really shook my world was going to high school in the mid 1990s and discovering the depth of misinformation that was spread among the older generation due to censorship in their textbooks. I remember heated debates with elders or peers who were heavily influenced by the elders, about the modern 20th century history and the way they were introduced in my textbooks vs. the textbooks written before 1989.

At first those debates were part of my household conversations as well, until my dad started to read history books that were coming out. He had a deep knowledge of historical events in our area, knew where the underground army was stationed, what battles took place and corrected the errors in his education with uncensored and well researched books published before 1989. Being myself a librarian, to this day I have issues trusting resources published in or about the Communist Bloc.

And then there were my grandparents' stories. Those were the most painful to listen to because they were firsthand WWII stories that they were never comfortable sharing. Our town was invaded and taken over several times by German and Russian armies, but until now they never could say anything negative about the Russians. Between 1946-1989 everything that went wrong in Poland was blamed by the officials on Germans, Jews and Freemasons.

Now we could freely speak of the communist regime, the plants in our government, and most importantly about the fear. Fear of someone listening to you, spying on you, trying to accuse you of something, being part of the party or in any way being someone tied to it.

Unlike many American schools, the Polish educational school system teaches history and literature chronologically: you start in antiquity and end up in modern times. I was a junior or senior in high school when we started to learn about modern history and literature in depth. You already know I loved the romantics (they were in sophomore class). The 19th century Romantics usually introduce us to protagonists who are unhappily in love with someone unreachable, often married or engaged to someone else. The romantic love is unrealistic, tragic and miserable, often ending in suicide or an attempt at suicide, all out of love. But add another layer of history to that "romantic" love and you will see a trapped door with another layer: love of freedom, independence, ethnic cultures, languages, traditions and anti-censorship. Polish protagonists in romantic literature are often immigrants who are forced to escape their motherland in order to continue the fight for its freedom. If you take a look at the history of Europe, you will realize that Central and Eastern Europeans had a pretty good idea how to fight against a long-term occupant even before 1945.

In my humble opinion this need to fight for freedom became the structure that was needed to fight the communist government in post WWII.

And we fought. In and outside of the country. Banned authors traveled to other parts of the world and continued telling their truth about gulags (work camps), the fear tactics, immobilizing the society by intentional lack of access to education, and censorship of media, literature, music and culture all together.

They even made attempts to dumb down the population by glorifying physical laborers and putting down intellectuals. Let's say that you were a college age youngster during communism. If on your application you wrote that your parents were teachers, or god forbid, college professors, you would have a hard time getting in. You would also have a lower social status than someone whose parents were factory, steel workers or coal miners. Worse case scenario if the family had a history of being able to speak one of the the forbidden languages of the Western world, especially English.

Another way to control society was to keep them drunk. Teenage boys graduating from vocational schools were sent to factories, coal mines and shipyards making more money than

ever. My dad always bragged about having so much money as a teenager working in coal mines that he could afford to take a cab to visit my mom on the weekends a couple of hundred of miles away. Alcohol was less expensive than bread. Today, when I visit the cemetery in my hometown in Poland, I cannot stop the tears at the graves of those who drank themselves to death. Many of them were my dear childhood friends.

For the first time ever in high school, I learned that history and literature can be very complicated and that they can show many sides to the same story. That we can learn from them and make an attempt to avoid the mistakes made in the past.

The most enlightening part was to learn the accounts collected right after WWII. There was an abundance of accounts that showed the humanity in those who would do whatever it takes to survive, those who will take advantage of a given opportunity to rise to power, and who will take advantage of the weak and those in need. The accounts of doctors killing babies to save them from gas chambers; of the blame placed on the innocent that they brought the enemy to our borders; the deep feelings one might have for their native country, and the country they call home later on in their lives.

I was mortified to learn that my parents' generation didn't have access to those accounts since those books were forbidden during their youth. Their history was one sided: these guys were good and these were bad. End of story.

If you got to this part of my story, you probably know where I am heading with it. I am seeing the breadcrumbs of what was done to my first motherland now happening in my second home.

We are in the midst of a culture war fighting book banning and censorship. But if you take a very big step back and take it all in, you will notice that this is not the illness we need to fight, but rather the symptoms. Symptoms of targeted attacks on high quality public education.

Education isn't a degree, diploma or certification. The purpose of education is to learn how to think critically, how to debate and discuss complex issues, and not accept what is in front of you at face value. Education is about expanding minds and the deep exploration of concepts and ideas. Right now across the country we are seeing a movement to defund public schools in K-16. We are allowing this movement to make us believe that there are separate funding issues in K-12 and public higher education. We are being pushed towards producing more trade, future professionals, and laborers rather than thinkers.

If we don't stop this train, quality education in this country will be available only to the elite the way it was in the beginning of the 20th century. If we don't find a way to stop the destruction and manipulation of public education, we will end up with a divided society for decades.

## Author

Ewa Dziedzic-Elliott serves as the subject librarian for all departments in the School of Education. She has 10 years of experience as a K-12 librarian, including work in both elementary and high school settings. She holds an MLIS from Rutgers University and an MA in Polish Language and Literature with a minor in Speech Therapy from Jan Kochanowski University, Poland, EU. She has published in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship and Library Connections*.