

October 27, 2021

A Brush with History – Winning 2021 Essay!

The Polonia Institute Grand Prize

2021 Competition on the History of Poland

A Brush with History

by Peter J. Obst

As the year 1981 was coming to a close I was working for the United States Steel Corporation at the large plant in Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania located on a bend of the Delaware River, north of Philadelphia. At this time I was still living in Philadelphia with my parents in the Northeast section of the city. Then Sunday, December 13, 1981 came and it changed our world. The evening news carried an item that Martial Law was declared in Poland and that the Solidarity Labor Union was disbanded by order of the government. Later, there would be reports that Poland's borders were closed and that many individuals active in that labor organization were being rounded-up, arrested and placed in "preventative detention."

The Polish community in the States, what is commonly known as Polonia, was shaken by this news. The Solidarity movement was Poland's hope for a freer and more open society in a country dominated by the Polish United Worker's Party or simply the Communist Party of Poland. As World War II ended in 1945 a new government was ushered in on the back of the Red Army. Ironically called the Government of National Unity, it quickly moved in to take control and suppressed any political opposition. Those who tried to resist were crushed by their Security Service, the *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa*, or UB for short.

The elections, promised by the Allied Powers, that followed were anything but open and free. The communists falsified the results as it suited them. This was documented by Jacek Kuroń in his book *PRL dla Początkujących* (2004) and in *I Saw Poland Betrayed* (1948) by Arthur Bliss Lane, the United States Ambassador in Poland at the time.

On Monday the 14th word went out through the Philadelphia Polonia that Fr. Bernard Witkowski would hold an evening prayer service "for Poland" at St. John Cantius Church in Bridesburg. We drove down US 95 from the Northeast and joined the hundreds of others who thronged the church. The place was filled to capacity, standing room only. We prayed the rosary and Fr. Bernie gave an oratory that focused on having hope, that Christ and the Virgin Mary would see us through, and that historically Poland has always endured through such crises. The atmosphere was one of apprehension, fear and confusion. Several local TV stations sent their news crews. Later, reports from the event appeared on the late news.

In the days and months that followed, local Polonia organizations and individuals would send aid to the people of Poland. Among the leaders in this action were John Cardinal Krol, Archbishop of Philadelphia diocese, and Edward Piszek, owner of the ell-known frozen fish processing concern, Mrs. Paul's Foods.

Meanwhile, President Ronald Reagan gave a televised speech of support for the people of Poland condemning the actions of the Communist Government. Two Polish ambassadors, Zdzisław Rurarz in Japan and Jerzy Spasowski in Washington DC resigned their positions and asked for asylum. In retaliation the Warsaw regime put them on trial in absentia. Convicted of treason they were given death sentences.

Later, on December 23, public television (PBS) ran a program called *Let Poland Be Poland* borrowing the title from a popular Solidarity song *Żeby Polska była Polską* by Jan Pietrzak. The White House mobilized a wide array of talent. The program was hosted by Charlton Heston and featured, along with the president, a number of prominent persons including the two rebellious Polish Ambassadors. Among the individuals who appeared were: Orson Welles, Bob Hope, Alexander Haig, Paul McCartney, Tip O'Neil, Pope John Paul II along with a number of other well-known persons. The program was a powerful statement of moral support for the Polish people. Later, this was followed by a suspension of trade relations between the US and Poland. Among the affected parties was Poland's LOT Airlines who were no longer able to land their IL-62M transatlantic aircraft at the New York airports.

The trade sanctions further affected Poland's already shattered economy. Some industries were brought to a standstill without imported materials. In reply the government propaganda organization issued a poster that listed the names of so-called "traitors," Solidarity activists who were then abroad and the two rouge ambassadors. Another propaganda poster showed Ronald Reagan as a cowboy, pointing his revolver menacingly at the onlooker. The logo implied that this was the true face of America and the forces of the west were turned against the "legitimate regime" of Peoples Poland.

To conduct their public relations program the Polish communists engaged Jerzy Urban, a sleazy journalist-writer. Though never a communist party member, Urban served them well, unleashing a cynical campaign of misinformation and lies against the banned Solidarity labor union. Foreign reporters who attended his press conferences were incredulous that someone would even try to defend a government which had such contempt for the ordinary Polish citizen.

To shift attention away for the difficult economic conditions in Poland, Urban's press bureau put out the news that Poland would donate sleeping bags to the homeless in New York City. Soon afterward, an ad appeared in the Warsaw newspapers, "Will exchange an apartment in Warsaw for a sleeping bag on the streets of New York."

At this time Poland's borders were sealed. Only information issued by the government was getting out. Foreign reporters already in Poland were under close scrutiny. When one picked up a telephone receiver, a recorded message would start blaring: "This conversation is being monitored." How many conversations and letters the government could actually review and censor was debatable, but the seeds of fear were planted.

At this time my sister Ursula was employed as a reporter at *The Philadelphia Daily News*. Among her assignments was the roving fix-it column where she would intervene in solving difficult problem for readers. Since she could speak Polish, and had family in Poland, she decided that it would be possible for her to get into Poland and report on the situation from within. Her editor heartily approved of the idea. But it was she who would first have to obtain a visa to enter Poland. Meanwhile, the Polish consulates were giving few visas, if any at all.

By sheer force of will she obtained an appointment at the New York consulate and went there to plead her case. The story she managed to sell was that her grandmother in Poland was ill and perhaps already on her deathbed. Armed with some natural acting ability and refusing to take “no” as an answer, Ursula was able to persuade a younger male assistant consul to sign off on her paperwork. I have never known of a situation where a woman’s tears could not melt the heart of even the most resistive man. Speaking aside, our grandmother would not depart this world until 1992 at age 94.

Travel to Poland required her to fly from Philadelphia to Montreal to catch a plane to Warsaw on LOT, as no other airline was flying into Poland. Unfortunately, her luggage got fouled up in the baggage transfer system and was never loaded onto the Warsaw bound plane. Not only did these contain her clothes, and personal care items, but a fair quantity of non-perishable food. The bags did not arrive at her destination until after she would be out of Poland. When opened, it was obvious then that they had been thoroughly rifled and a number of items “confiscated.”

After landing in Warsaw, Ursula traveled to Poznań to stay with her female cousin Renata Gubała and family. On the way out of the capitol she saw that there were army checkpoints everywhere. Armored cars were parked at strategically important points in the city. Across the street from the main train station in town is the Palace of Culture and Science, the tallest building in Warsaw. It was a “gift” of the Soviet Union to the Polish people. Built in the “Stalinist skyscraper” style it was completed in 1953. At a closed-down movie theater that was part of the complex, the marquee proclaimed a screening of the film *Apocalypse Now*. Ironically, troops and their support vehicles were stationed on the nearby street. This meaningful picture was captured in a photo made by one of the Solidarity supporters.

At this time, strict curfews were imposed and inter-city travel was severely restricted. Once in Poznań, Ursula would have to go to a special office of the military commandant and obtain a permit. She made her case, but it was a harrowing experience.

She did manage to travel around the city, attempting to get a reading on how life was being conducted. There were shortages of nearly everything. Food, meat, gasoline, sweets and cigarettes were rationed. Long lines of people stood outside stores, which often had very little to sell. A curfew was being enforced. Young army inductees were used to man checkpoints scattered at many points in the city.

One day Ursula was out on the town her own. Evening comes early during the winter in Poland. Darkness approached and so did the curfew hour, yet she had not returned. Renata and her mother started worrying, concerned as something evil might have befallen her. The police were arresting people at the smallest provocation. Then, suddenly, a canvas covered army transport truck pulled up on the deserted road in front of the gate. The brakes screeched. After an moment’s pause, Ursula jumped out the back and shouted “Bye, boys!” – which was answered a chorus of cheers. Apparently, the young army troopers, forced to do street patrols in the city, had a whole different approach as to what constituted “martial law.” She was fortunate that she had not run into more doctrinaire enforcers of the peace.

After reconnoitering in Poznań, she took the train to the Silesian town of Będzin, located in the industrial region around the city of Katowice. Edund Wilk, a member of our extended family lived there. Before retiring he was a Communist Party member and financial comptroller for one of the coal mines in the area. He was forced into retirement because of his criticism of the Party and he later joined the Solidarity movement.

He had information about the repressive activities of the government during the first days of Martial Law. At the Wujek Mine in Katowice, workers decided to strike in place. After 4 days the government sent a force of tanks and riot police, the hated ZOMO troops (Zmotoryzowane Odwody Milicji Obywatelskiej, known in English as Motorized Reserves of the Citizens' Militia), to break it up. When the miners attempted to resist, force was used. A tank broke the wall and the ZOMOs poured into the mine compound. An order to shoot was given, 9 miners died while another 21 were wounded. Others were rounded-up, brutalized, beaten as they ran a gauntlet formed by club swinging ZOMOs, and then taken to prison.

Because of the news clampdown none of this was known outside of Poland. Soon Ursula was talking to witnesses and to Solidarity activists who had gone into hiding and avoided detention when Martial Law was declared. During the action against the miners some individuals had taken clandestine photographs. These were made available to her. The group that took these pictures had tried to get them out to the western news services. They wrapped up a packet, that included a description of the events, and threw well wrapped package over the wall at the American Consulate in Kraków. Unfortunately, nothing came from this effort. They conjectured that one of the Polish employees at the consulate, who were also Polish security service operatives, must have intercepted this package.

The Solidarity member gave her photographs and other materials. This was a major scoop that exposed the true nature of Gen. Jaruzelski's regime and his methods of operation. Now she had to get the story back to Philadelphia and *The Daily News*.

It became quite clear that she could not just put the photographs and papers into a bag and go. On Renata's recommendation a plan was developed to sew these items into the lining of Ursula's heavy suede winter coat. Renata carefully undid the vertical double stitched seams of the coat and after placing the items behind the lining, carefully stitched them up again. Fortunately, she was able to match the thread color precisely from the large selection of colored threads that she used for embroidering.

Renata accompanied Ursula to Warsaw. After eighteen days in Poland and a series of adventures while traveling around the country in the middle of winter Ursula was ready to return. She packed a borrowed bag and went to meet her plane at the Warsaw airport.

There a female security conducted a thorough strip search. Ursula's shoulder bag was carefully emptied and a stack of notes, written in shorthand, fell out. On her visa application, she had not been deceptive but gave her occupation as writer. The notes she explained as some work she was doing on a novel. The security people were not believing her. The interrogation continued, with the plane delayed at the gate. Though they had examined and handled the coat, it did not betray its secret. Finally, Ursula was allowed to board only to face an aircraft cabin full of irate and annoyed passengers who (rightly) blamed her for the delay.

After 9 hours of flight, she disembarked in Montreal still wearing the underwear she had borrowed from her cousin.

Now the work of getting the story out began. On Monday, February 8th, readers of *The Daily News*, "the easy to hold, easy to read" tabloid were greeted with a 2 inch high headline that practically screamed "Inside Poland, Daily News Reporter's Exclusive Story." This was paired with one of the photographs

from the Wujek Mine. It showed a tank standing in the mine courtyard, while four men carried out a bleeding, injured miner on a stretcher.

The story continued for a total of three days. It was then reprinted, in part or in full, by other papers causing a bit of a flare up among the authorities in Poland. They were definitely not happy about the American press showing the amount of force and violence the regime would actually use to suppress opposition in Poland.

The Daily News made a reprint of the three days of stories that ran from February 8 to 10, 1982. Ursula would then distribute these whenever she would meet groups and speak about her experiences in Poland. One such meeting was organized at the Our Lady of Czestochowa Roman Catholic church in downtown Philadelphia. It was well attended by members of the Polish Heritage Society who presented her with a calligraphed certificate of recognition.

More recognition was to come, later that year she received the *Enterprise Award for Journalism* from the Philadelphia Press Association at their annual banquet.

Sometime thereafter, I heard from her that a British documentary film maker working with the BBC was interested in producing a documentary-drama based on the events at the Wujek mine. One of the problems they faced was that of finding a suitable mine location, one that shared some of the features present at the Polish mine. I put her in touch with the United States Steel Corporation (USS) public relations office. The matter passed out of mind.

During this period I was attending training sessions at USS headquarters in Pittsburgh. One feature that no visitor to downtown Pittsburgh can miss is the large, old stone prison building that takes up a entire block of the downtown. Now, I noticed that a new guard shack and a raised entry bar were placed at the entrance. At the time it did not mean much to me. It was odd though that the prison would need such an addition, and one painted in broad and bright red-white stripes.

However, once the film *Two Weeks in Winter* was aired on PBS, the purpose of that guard shack became quite apparent. One scene showed a number of arrestees being taken to prison by truck. They passed through this very checkpoint.

The USS public affairs office was of immense help in the making of the film. They found a closed mine in McKees Rocks, PA, where the filming could take place and additional footage was shot around Pittsburgh. Extras were hired from the local population for crowd scenes. Some put on ZOMO uniforms, others wore mining gear. A National Guard unit in the area provided the tanks – repainted with Polish markings. The film, though made on a relatively tight budget, strove to depict the actual events faithfully. And, yes, there was a dramatic scene where one of the tanks crashed through a wall. The film was broadcast on December 13, 1982, on the first anniversary of the declaration of Martial Law in Poland.

Again, this event did not go unnoticed in Poland. Polish newspapers condemned the film as a provocation and anti-Polish propaganda. My sister was declared a persona non grata in Poland.

The Wujek Mine tragedy passed into history. Events moved ahead as people went about their everyday concerns. In Poland, Martial Law slowly eased. Lech Wałęsa received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983. Fr.

Jerzy Popieluszko was murdered by the communist Security Service in 1984. Mikhail Gorbachev became head of the Soviet Union, promising reforms – *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Yet, various repressions continued against the Polish people and this gave rise to a vigorous underground press, run by Solidarity activists with support from abroad. This press was a voice that would not let the communist government forget the hypocrisy it was attempting to perpetuate – where a “workers’ party” was unjustly punishing the very people they were claiming to represent and support. Poland’s communist rulers were signatories to the Helsinki Agreements on Human Rights, yet were still unjustly persecuting their own citizens.

General Wojciech Jaruzelski, now head of the government, as well as of the communist party and the Polish army was given a favorable treatment in the *New York Times* in a lengthy article “The Importance of General Jaruzelski.” The writer, Michael T. Kaufman, tried to develop a theme where the General might have been a “secret patriot” who chose the “lesser evil” of Martial Law to inflict on his countrymen.

But the Poles were not buying this line. Mirosław Chojecki, an activist in the underground press, summed it up best, “Jaruzelski was a communist dictator who obediently executed the orders given by his masters in Moscow.”

As the end of the 1980s approached, Poland’s economy was unmanageable. The country was becoming ungovernable. Societal pressure for substantial changes in the system was growing.

With the influence of the Soviet union decreasing and the calls for reform getting louder and louder – both inside and outside Poland – the government had to give in. The first real election in Poland since 1945 was finally held in 1989. Though the communist party upper-caste rewarded itself and retained some political influence, the days of communist party dominance in Poland were over.

One may wonder on how such a change came about. Certainly there were heroes, martyrs, leaders and inspirational figures. But mainly, the revolutionaries were the people of Poland. Polish society had developed a mindset that “they were fed up and would not take it any longer.” Small acts of defiance propelled the Solidarity movement even after it had been banned. Where one person was arrested another would fill the void. Just as an avalanche starts with but a few pebbles moving and grows into an irresistible force; such was the will of the Polish people. Once they realized this they were unstoppable.

My sister Ursula’s reporting was one of these random rocks rolling down the mountain side. She got her momentum from the Solidarity activists, who would not stand for the outrage at the Wujek mine. Then her article inspired a dramatic film that, through the medium of television, activated other people into more pro-freedom activities.

In 1994 the incident at Wujek was filmed again, as a historical document *Śmierć jak kromka chleba*. This was necessary as a way of maintaining memory of such events. It is also necessary for a free people to have an unfettered press and media that can act as a collective memory for society. Otherwise, such horror-filled and tragic scenarios will continue to be replayed over and over, until the very last gasp of recorded time.

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Provided by the Polish Arts Club of Trenton, NJ

Reprinted from the internet at:

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Tonight: Cloudy

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PHILADELPHIA DAILY

NEWS

The People Paper

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Sports

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 1982

Our 250th Issue in Our 27th Year: 1955, Philadelphia Daily News

Inside Poland

Daily News Reporter's Exclusive Story



Forbidden Picture

Miners carry body of striker from Wujek mine in Katowice, Poland, following bloody fight with government forces on Dec. 16. Photo was smuggled out of Poland by reporter Ursula Obst, whose special report begins on Page 4.

Photo supplied by Solidarity underground