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## MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES IN POLAND UNDER THE COMMUNIST RULE

I should begin this article by saying that the scope of its subject is very large and its material deserves to be treated in a separate bulky monograph. Thus I by no means aspire to offer its exhaustive treatment, but at the most — on the basis of a few selected examples — I should like to signal the problem itself<sup>1</sup>. It should be stressed at the very beginning that myths and stereotypes in Poland under the communist rule had at least two sources. Firstly, they were created and cultivated by those in power for immediate or long-term political purposes. Secondly, as a kind of *antidotum* for the communist propaganda they were also shaped by those governed by this power. There were also those that arose independently of the efforts and endeavours of any of the above-mentioned sides, and those which were cherished to the same extent by the representatives of power and the whole society.

First I should specify how I understand in this article the notions of “myth” and “stereotype”, which have frequently and

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<sup>1</sup> There is already quite substantial literature in Poland devoted to this subject, concerning various aspects of those phenomena. Let us cite for example E. Dmitrów, whose *Niemcy i okupacja hitlerowska w oczach Polaków. Poglądy i opinie z lat 1945–1948* (*The Germans and the Nazi Occupation as Seen by Poles. Views and Opinions of 1945–1948*), Warszawa 1987; A. Drawicz, *Nasze widzenie Rosjan w XX wieku* (*Our View of the Russians in the 20th Century*), “Dzieje Najnowsze” 1995, № 2; M. Pasztor, *Główne elementy obrazu Polaka w oczach francuskich elit politycznych w okresie międzywojennym* (*The Main Elements of the Image of a Pole as Seen by the French Political Elites in the Inter-war Period*), “Dzieje Najnowsze” 1999, № 3; T. Szarota, *Niemcy i Polacy. Wzajemne postrzeganie i stereotypy* (*Germans and Poles. Stereotypes of The Way These Nations View One Another*), Warszawa 1996; W. Wrzesiński, *Sąsiad. Czy wróg? Ze studiów nad kształtowaniem obrazu Niemca w Polsce w latach 1795–1939* (*Neighbour. Or Enemy? Studies on Germans as Seen by Poles, 1795–1939*), Wrocław 1992; A. Z. Zięba, *Ukraińcy w oczach Polaków (wiek XX)* (*Ukrainians as Seen by Poles, 20th Century*), “Dzieje Najnowsze” 1995, № 2.

naturally been nourished by rumour and gossip<sup>2</sup>. It is worth recalling how these notions are defined in *Słownik języka polskiego* (*Polish Language Dictionary*). Thus “myth”, apart from its original meaning connected with Antiquity, is defined as “a false opinion about somebody or something, accepted without proof, a story about some person, fact, or event, coloured by invented details; figment of imagination, legend, story”<sup>3</sup>. “Stereotype”, on the other hand, is defined there as “a summary, simplified picture of reality, functioning in social consciousness, coloured by value judgements, relating to a thing, person, social group, institution, etc., and frequently based on inadequate or false knowledge of the world, yet perpetuated by tradition and undergoing no change”.

What were the most long-lasting myths and stereotypes in Poland between 1944–1989? Who or what did they relate to? What shaped them and determined the fact that they were rooted so long and so fast? Did myths and stereotypes arise, and disappear some time later, or did they last long, practically without change? Besides, it is certainly worthwhile distinguishing those that sprang up “on the spur of the moment” in Poland under the communist rule, from those which related to that period, but in fact emerged and gathered strength only after 1989. Without carrying out deep sociological research (and for political reasons, no such research, even superficial or fragmentary, was done in Poland — especially in the first decade following the Second World War) I would not dare and try giving an answer to the question what was the actual scope of influence of particular myths and stereotypes.

There can be no doubt that among those created by the ruling camp, the most long-lasting were “the myth of the virginal beginning” and the myth of “the sovereignty of Poland under the communist rule” — although these terms were never used. The first of the above-mentioned myths intended to inculcate on society, in an unofficial, informal way, that Poland under the communist rule was not, from the very beginning, a dictatorial

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<sup>2</sup> These phenomena have been studied in an excellent work concerning the Stalinist period: D. Jarosz, M. Pasztor, *W krzywym zwierciadle. Polityka władz komunistycznych w Polsce w świetle plotek i pogłosek z lat 1949–1956* (*In a Distorting Mirror. The Policy of the Communist Authorities in Poland in the Light of Gossip and Rumour of 1949–1956*), Warszawa 1995.

<sup>3</sup> *Słownik języka polskiego* (*Polish Language Dictionary*), vol. II: L–P, Warszawa 1979, p 187.

state. This myth was supported by the behaviour of the leaders of the Polish Workers' Party (PPR), who being mindful of the negative connotations of the words "communist" or "communism" in Polish memory, in the first years of their rule practically never used them in public. Instead, they frequently and willingly called the newly-arising reality by the name of "democracy", at the same time opposing it to the pre-war *sanacja* system. At the same time they used the term "reactionaries" for their political adversaries, even those of leftist orientation and views (e.g. socialists). They also took pains to present the "new power" to the Poles as something Polish, familiar and national. This "new power" was systematically consolidated, and its propaganda effectively appropriated as its credit the successes in the reconstruction of the country and normalization of life.

Thus in the first place the new power willingly and frequently referred to suitably selected national and patriotic symbols. For example the units of the Polish Army were named after old Polish national heroes, such as Tadeusz Kościuszko, Józef Bem, Jan Kiliński or Romuald Traugutt, who had never had anything in common with any form of communist tradition. It was also possible — and in some cases advisable — to openly confirm one's Polishness. It should not be overlooked that the threat (to what extent realistic, one does not know) emerging from time to time on various occasions, that Poland might become the "seventeenth republic" of the Soviet Union, was also used by the rulers as an instrument that shaped the "desirable" attitudes of Polish society.

The myth of a "romantic beginning", persistently sustained and created for propaganda purposes, also served to win the sympathies of society. Thus it was consistently maintained for many decades that the Polish Committee for National Liberation (PKWN), which was the first official Polish executive power in the territories west of the Bug river, was called into being on 21 July 1944. The next day its members were to come to Chełm Lubelski — the first town of present Poland liberated from the German occupation by the Red Army and the units of the Polish Army fighting at its side. According to this version, it was in this town, "in a tiny printing house", that the *PKWN Manifesto* was printed

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III: R-Ż, p. 332.

<sup>5</sup> *Chełm — miasto PKWN (Chełm — the City of the Polish Committee for National Liberation)*, "Rzeczpospolita", 21 July 1984.

on July 22. "And when the rotary machine stopped working because of breach in electricity supply, it was set into motion by the bare force of human muscles", such tall stories were still repeated forty years later in the "Rzeczpospolita" daily, then a governmental organ.

As is well-known, the truth was quite different. On July 20 the front units of the Red Army forced their way through the Bug river and on the same day in the evening in Moscow, at a joint session of the Union of Polish Patriots (ZPP) and the Central Bureau of Polish Communists with the participation of the representatives of the Home National Council (KRN), talks were finalized on the creation of the Polish Committee for National Liberation (PKWN) on 21 July 1944. Thus PKWN was created in Moscow. It was there that under the vigilant eye of Joseph Stalin the *Manifesto* was prepared whose contents were for the first time transmitted to the occupied country by Radio Moscow on 22 July 1944<sup>6</sup>.

Although the Committee, headed by a little-known socialist activist Edward Osóbka-Morawski, was formally a coalition, the party that immediately took a dominant position in it was the Polish Workers' Party (PPR) whose representatives took control of the Ministry of Security, Information and Propaganda, and from December 1 onwards, also the Ministry of Industry. The head of the Ministry of Defence, Michał Rola-Żymierski, was formally a non-party member, but actually a member of PPR leadership. This was political camouflage on the part of the communists who — regardless of who headed particular ministries — did create a monopoly of virtual power for themselves from the very beginning. Finally, contrary to the long perpetuated myth, it is worth recalling that the members of the PKWN arrived in Chełm Lubelski on board two Soviet airplanes only on the afternoon of 27 July 1944<sup>7</sup>.

Thus it can be seen that the beginning was neither romantic nor virginal, for that matter, and was based on a lie and a large

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<sup>6</sup> The credit for the identification of the place and circumstances of the creation of PKWN goes to the outstanding Polish researcher Krystyna Kersten who in the 1960s worked on the monograph of this committee. See K. Kersten, *Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego 22 VII 1944 — 31 XII 1944 (Polish Committee for National Liberation 22 July 1944 — 31 December 1944)*, Lublin 1965.

<sup>7</sup> T. Żenczykowski, *Polska Lubelska 1944 (Lublin Poland 1944)*, Warszawa 1990, p. 19.

manipulation, sustained for many years. And what followed was by no means better. In 1951 the socio-political system was consolidated so well that the leadership of the PUWP started thinking of a constitution that would sanction the changes that had taken place in Poland and define the systemic form of the state. An act was passed on the mode of the preparation and adoption of the constitution. In the autumn its draft in the Russian version was personally studied by Joseph Stalin who introduced about 50 corrections which were then carefully transmitted to the Polish version by Bolesław Bierut's own hand. Naturally, this fact was scrupulously concealed from public opinion for the next several decades.

It turned out, however, that both copies with these corrections had survived in the archives until the change of the political system in Poland. In 1990, Andrzej Garlicki and Janina Zakrzewska published Stalin's most important corrections<sup>8</sup>. Although the authors of the article — as was pointed out by Krzysztof Persak in his very interesting paper — based themselves exclusively on the Polish version of the draft constitution (which contained Bierut's longhand insertions of Stalin's corrections), still after the publication of their unusual discovery it was no longer possible to maintain that Poland of 1945–1989 was, even if only formally, an independent state<sup>9</sup>. No, it wasn't! Of course, the degree of her dependence and subordination to her eastern neighbour changed with years, even if it would be hard to prove that it grew weaker year by year, or to represent it by a straight falling line. This would rather be a sinusoid, since during the forty five years after the war there were periods when Poland gained a larger fragment (but only and always a fragment) of independence, but there were also such when her subordination to Moscow grew stronger.

Nevertheless the stereotype perception of People's Poland as a sovereign state lasted long and was finally abolished by histo-

<sup>8</sup> J. Zakrzewska, A. Garlicki, *Zatwierdzenie Konstytucji PRL (Ratification of the Constitution of the Polish People's Republic)*, "Polityka" 1990, № 28. This article was reprinted in Andrzej Garlicki's book *Z tajnych archiwów (From Secret Archives)*, Warszawa 1993, pp. 187–194.

<sup>9</sup> K. Persak, "Troskliwy opiekun i światły doradca Polski Ludowej" — poprawki Józefa Stalina do Konstytucji PRL z 22 lipca 1952 roku ("The Caring Protector and Enlightened Adviser of People's Poland" — Joseph Stalin's Corrections to the Constitution of People's Poland of 22 July 1952), in: *PRL trwanie i zmiana*, ed. Dariusz Stola and Marcin Zaremba, Warszawa 2003, pp. 199–200.

rians only after her downfall. The man who was probably most strongly attached to the ideas of the sovereignty of People's Poland was Władysław Gomułka; at any rate it was he who liked most talking about it. For example, on 16 April 1970, at the end of a debate of the "leading party and state activists", he declared himself for an umpteenth time against incurring foreign credits. He posed this problem in a dramatic and dogmatic way, saying that Poland might still "incur credits of one, two, three or five milliard zlotys in foreign currency. It can be done, and it would not be very difficult! But we would have to stop thinking of ourselves as an independent country, as landlords in our own home. Then we would have to follow the lead of those who gave us money, the lead of capitalism. But this won't happen as long as I am here!"<sup>10</sup>

This statement is very characteristic of Gomułka's way of thinking. He maintained that Poland's debts in the West would make her dependent on her creditors and would reduce her sovereignty, as if she had been a sovereign state at all. It seems, however, that Gomułka was not isolated in his opinion that Poland's dependence on the USSR was not an element that restricted her sovereignty in any way. In accordance with the argumentation widespread among the communist establishment, such subordination could be achieved only by "capitalists and imperialists" and never by "our Soviet friends".

The myth of "the virginal beginning" and the stereotype perception of Poland under the communist rule as an independent state are connected with one more, and perhaps the most persistent myth in post-war Poland — that of the return of the Poles to their "old, Piast lands on the Oder river and the Baltic coast" in 1945. It should be added that the western and northern territories, which for many people fulfilled the role of "the Promised Land", had a specificity of their own. The surviving archival film newsreels convey to us the picture of trains packed with people, some hanging out of the doors, some travelling even on carriage roofs. Apart from people who wanted to settle there to normal life after the turmoil of war, there were also adventure-seekers for whom *szaber*, that is looting, became a source of

<sup>10</sup> W. Gomułka, *Przeciwko stagnacji (Against Stagnation)*, "Kultura" 17 Dec. 1986. For the full text of this article see Archiwum Akt Nowych — the Archives of Modern Records (henceforward AMR), PZPR 1354, XIA/272.

considerable income. This was frequently accompanied by banditry and excesses committed on the indigenous population. It also happened that persons who had earlier defended the Polishness of these territories were treated as Germans and persecuted, or even became victims of repressions.

It was extremely difficult to organize the economy in the lands allotted to Poland by the Great Powers, but it was at the same time a very attractive challenge that gave the communists a chance of a great propaganda success. On 13 November 1945 a special Ministry of Regained Territories was formed, headed by the general secretary of the Polish Workers' Party (*PPR*) and at the same time vice-premier, Władysław Gomułka. In February 1946 these territories were inhabited by 2.7 million Poles, and a year later almost by a double number. The action of resettlement went hand in hand with the expulsion of the Germans. By the end of 1948, 2.3 million Germans were resettled in an organized way in the British and Soviet zones of Germany, and 700 thousand more left the territories regained by Poland on their own. The whole action of "the unification of the Regained Territories with the Motherland" was practically finished in 1949.

I should explain here, however, that the name "Regained Territories" was created for immediate propaganda purposes, and although it was universally accepted, it did not quite correspond with the historical truth. Actually some part of them were lost by the Piast state in the 12th and 13th centuries, and later, without any break, remained under the influence of non-Polish elements, most frequently and the longest under the German rule. Some areas, e.g. the Kotlina Kłodzka, had never before been part of Poland. Thus the term "Regained Territories", a stretched historical truth, played a political and even therapeutical role. At least to some extent, it allowed the communist authorities to divert the attention of public opinion from the Eastern Borderland, lost to the USSR. At the same time it was an important element in their internal policy, and allowed to sustain among society the fear of German revisionism and revenge. It remains an open question to what extent this propaganda was effective or whether this German threat really existed.

On the other hand, I am not sure whether it is possible to speak of a myth in the case of the historical controversy concerning the length and dates of the "Stalinist period in Poland". For

a long time official Polish historiography, if it took up this subject at all, tended to date the Stalinist system in Poland (the term itself appeared relatively late), between the years 1948–1956, and to associate it with the rule of Bolesław Bierut. At the same time attempts were made to prove that the years 1945–1948, associated with the name of Władysław Gomułka, were those of political pluralism. Gomułka was said to be the author of the slogan, never precisely formulated, of “the Polish road to socialism” which would differ and be independent from the Soviet experiences, and the party propagandists fashioned him as the positive hero of Polish communism. This division mystified and blurred the reality and survived even the change of the political system<sup>11</sup>. I have no doubt that the Stalinist system in Poland began together with the creation of the PKWN in July 1944 and lasted till 1956.

Although we can agree with the view that the years 1948–1956 were the apogee of Stalinism in Poland, but even earlier — before 1948 — we had to do with a ruthless dictatorship and many factors manifested themselves which we generally acknowledge as components of the Stalinist system in its classical form: terror, aggressive propaganda, censorship, mobilization of the masses, search for fictitious or authentic internal and external enemies, etc. The communists, in accordance with what Gomułka announced in 1945, were determined not to give up their power as a result of a defeat in the elections. Consequently, they did their best to win the elections of January 1947. Making use of the force and position of their army, militia, and security system, they prepared the elections in an atmosphere of terror and intimidation. Under various, generally fictitious pretexts, they barred many opposition activists from taking an active or passive part. This was accompanied by political trials of “the enemies of People’s Poland” and a strong propaganda campaign in the media. At any rate, all these “precaution measures” might not have guaranteed a success at the poll to the communists, and that’s why they resorted to rigging<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> A. Garlicki, *Stalinizm (Stalinism)*, Warszawa 1993; A. Werblan, *Stalinizm w Polsce (Stalinism in Poland)*, Warszawa 1991.

<sup>12</sup> More extensively on this subject see: K. Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy. Polska 1943–1948 (The Birth of a System of Power. Poland 1943–1948)*, Warszawa 1984.



When Bierut was appointed president and a new government was created in February 1947, the period which might be called the "era of pretences" practically came to an end. After the elections, the process of Sovietization of Poland was speeded up. In many spheres of public life she started to follow more and more clearly the "unmatched Soviet examples". Among other things, it was precisely in 1947 that Poland introduced the "labour contest" and started the so-called "battle for trade", actually aimed at the liquidation of private trade, and eventually of the free market altogether. A large campaign started of fight against speculation, interpreted in an arbitrary way. All possible means were used, such as fines, confiscation of merchandize, deprivation of industrial and commercial licenses, to discourage private enterprise.

An important role in the process of the vassalization and Sovietization of Poland (as well as other states of Central-Eastern Europe) was certainly played by the Conference of the representatives of nine communist parties at Szklarska Poręba, where the Cominform (The Information Bureau of Communist and Workers' Parties) was called into being. As Włodzimierz Borodziej rightly wrote, this signified the creation "of a new version of the institution of Moscow's control over the activity of the communists of other countries. In the next few months this control started to introduce a ruthless subordination of European allies"<sup>13</sup>.

However, regardless of whether we treat Stalinism in Poland in a more narrow (1948–1956), or more extensive way (1944–1956), the fact remains that one of its most persistent stereotypes that haunt Polish society is the one relating to "the Jewish commune" and the "domination of the security forces by the Jews". A lot of (of course, nobody knows how many) Poles are convinced to this day that in the first decade after the war a special (understood as wicked, mysterious and criminal) role was played by the communists of Jewish descent. Of course, in this stereotype conception nobody specifies who he has in mind when speaking of Jews, expecting that "everybody knows who is meant".

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<sup>13</sup> W. Borodziej, *Od Poczdamu do Szklarskiej Poręby. Polska w stosunkach międzynarodowych 1945–1947* (From Potsdam to Szklarska Poręba. Poland in International Relations 1945–1947), Londyn 1990, p. 345.

This is a serious problem and Polish historians find it very difficult to overcome this stereotype, perhaps because the believers in "the Jewish conspiracy theory" seldom read scholarly treatises. Thus I should begin with the necessary explanation of some notions and specify my own opinion on that question. Let me cite, then, what was written on that subject years ago by Krystyna Kersten, whom I treat as one of my professional Masters. "While saying 'Poles', I have in mind all those who consider themselves Polish, that is both those whose ancestors belonged to the Polish community, and those who being derived from other stocks have chosen Poland and Polishness as their homeland, not only in the sense of civic ties with the Polish state, but also in the sense of spiritual ties with a cultural community, leading them to a national identification. Similarly, the person who avows his ties with the Jewish nation, is a Jew. However, bearing in mind that the principle of self-identification has a Janus face, on the one hand it means that an individual's allegiance is chosen by himself, on the other — in a system of national monoculture — it entails compulsory identification"<sup>14</sup>.

Personally, I am also for the perception of a nation from the point of view of citizenship rather than for applying narrow ethnic criteria in this respect. Indeed, I am convinced that an individual's national identification cannot be determined by others, unless we wish to stoop to the level of the racist Nuremberg Laws, and treat any person who had Jewish ancestors as a Jew. However, this is of no consequence to the attempts at overcoming the stereotype of "the Jew-dominated Security", since, as is well-known, the fight against stereotypes has always been extremely difficult. The believers in "the Jewish conspiracy theory" will always know better where to look for the worst evil and will always resist factual arguments.

Where can we seek the source of this stereotype? After World War II many Jews, for whom the liberation of Polish lands from the German occupation by the Red Army signified the end of veritable hell, engaged in co-operation with the communists and their Soviet protectors<sup>15</sup>. Many of them found their place in the

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<sup>14</sup> K. Kersten, *Marzec 1968 i tzw. kwestia żydowska w Polsce po II wojnie światowej (March 1968 and the So-called Jewish Question in Poland After World War II)*, in: K. Kersten, *Polacy, Żydzi, komunizm. Anatomia półprawd 1939-1968*, Warszawa 1992, p. 145.

army and in the “security organs”. Since a large part (majority?) of Polish society treated the liberation of their country by the Red Army as an exchange of the German occupation into the Soviet one, they treated co-operation with the new power as collaboration. In such cases people often defend their “compatriots”, and willingly point at “the aliens” as the source of all evil. In this case it was the easiest thing to point at the Jews, the more so because at least some part of the underground propaganda said this evil was spread by the “Jewish-Bolshevik agents”. Underlying it, there was some irrational need for the idealization of one’s own nation, even at the cost of belying historical reality<sup>16</sup>.

Of course, there were “comrades of Jewish descent” in the Ministry of Public Security and its provincial agencies. Probably — especially in the managerial posts — there were proportionally more of them than in society as a whole<sup>17</sup>. But, it cannot be denied that not only Jews were the functionaries of this Ministry. Here I agree with the view of Jan Józef Lipski who in 1981 said: “Of course, I cannot accept the situation where people, mentioning the names of Różański, Fejgin, Światło, forget the men who bore the names of Dusza, Kaskiewicz, Moczar and worked in the same apparatus. I would not like the former to be remembered, and the latter to be forgotten. Everybody should be judged according to his merits and should be responsible for what he has actually done, or according to his crimes, if he has committed them. Therefore the fact that somebody’s name was Dusza or Kaskiewicz [...] does not mean that his conscience is cleaner. And just as I do not really consider Dusza or Kaskiewicz to be Poles —

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Krystyna Kersten’s article *Żydzi — władza komunistów (Jews — the Communist Rule)*, pp. 76–88. Cf J. Schatz, *The Generation. The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-Oxford 1991. See also M. Chęciński, *Poland. Communism. Nationalism. Anti-Semitism*, New York 1982.

<sup>16</sup> On this subject see: K. Kersten, *Rozważania wokół podziemia 1944–47 (Deliberations Over the Underground 1944–47)*, in: K. Kersten, *Między wyzwoleniem a zniewoleniem. Polska 1944–1956*. Londyn 1993, pp. 28–99. Cf. J. Szymanderski, *Diabły, Żydzi, komuniści (o propagandzie antykomunistycznego podziemia w latach 1945–47) (Devils, Jews, Communists. On the Propaganda of the Anti-communist Underground in the Years 1945–47)*, “Krytyka” 1988, N° 27, pp. 105–108.

<sup>17</sup> A successful — in my opinion — attempt at facing this problem was made by Andrzej Paczkowski, *Żydzi w UB: próba weryfikacji stereotypu (Jews in Security Forces: an Attempt to Verify the Stereotype)*, in: *Komunizm. ideologia, system, ludzie*, ed. Tomasz Szarota, Warszawa 2001, pp. 192–204.

I have great doubts about it and I do not want to count myself among the members of the same nation with them — I have likewise serious doubts whether Mistern Rózański and Fejgin are Jewish. I think they were just the same kind of Jews as Dusza and Kaskiewicz were Poles, just to the same degree. As we know, this was a ruthless apparatus, ready to obey any order, to murder or torture anybody presented to them for such treatment by the authorities. The view that the Stalinist Security was Jewish, leads us to forgetting the Poles—security functionaries and the omnipresent Soviet «advisers»<sup>18</sup>.

As I have just said, I agree with Lipski's view, but — let me add — with one reservation. He said that he did not want to count himself among the members of the same nation with such people as Józef Dusza or Jerzy Kaskiewicz and in this way, consequently, he denied (at least indirectly or symbolically) their right of calling themselves Poles. His argument is not convincing, however. We may suppose that few Germans would like to count themselves as members of the same nation with Heinrich Himmler, but does it follow, automatically, that Himmler was not a German? As I have already mentioned, the factor that determines somebody's national allegiance is a given person's self-identification and nobody has a right to classify him among or exclude him from such or other nation. I go along, however, with the rest of Lipski's exposition.

Indeed, not only Jews (both Polish and Russian) were functionaries of the Ministry of Public Security (*MBP*), but also, and above all, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and even Germans. Why was it so that precisely the Jews became fixed in social consciousness? I think there were at least three reasons. The first was the tendency — in some milieux — to explain the reality with the use of the conspiracy theory which has always held "the aliens" (Jews, Freemasons, Bolsheviks) responsible for any evil. The second was the activity of the "Natolinians" and later "partisans" who for over a dozen years propagated and inculcated on society the belief that it was precisely the Jews who were responsible for the Stalinist crimes in Poland. One might of course wonder to what extent such arguments convinced society, but no factual answer can be given to such a question without

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<sup>18</sup> J. J. Lipski, *Kwestia żydowska (The Jewish Question)*, in: *Marzec '68. Sesja w Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1981 r.*, Warszawa 1981, fasc. 1, pp. 45-46.

reliable sociological research. It seems, however, that large sections of population were convinced. The third reason was the wave of Jewish emigration from Poland in the years 1956–1957.

In fact, in the middle of 1956, several months before Gomułka took over, Poland saw another post-war wave of departures of people of Jewish descent. This aroused two kinds of comments: 1. The Jews are running away from Poland, since they are afraid of being held responsible for their crimes in the period of “errors and deviations”; 2. The Jews are running away from Poland, since they are afraid of Polish antisemitism and the fact that the whole responsibility for Stalinism in Poland would fall on them, and only them. As can be seen, both these theoretically opposed justifications referred to the sphere of emotions and the same argumentation: fear.

The dissemination and perpetuation of the stereotype of “the Jew-dominated Security” went hand in hand with the cultivation of another stereotype, closely connected to it, which said that generally in the first half of the 1950s “Poland was ruled by the Jews”. This slogan, too, turned out to gain wide social reception and was extremely persistent. Especially frequently mentioned as responsible for Stalinism in Poland were three prominent party activists of Jewish descent: Jakub Berman, Hilary Minc and Roman Zambrowski. I am by no means inclined to justify or explain their behaviour. Moreover, I doubt it could be rationally explained. However, what comes into play here, is a completely different matter. The stereotype that in Stalinist years “Poland was ruled by the Jews” makes one forget the “services” rendered in that period to Poland by such Polish communists as Bolesław Bierut, Franciszek Mazur, Zenon Nowak, Stanisław Radkiewicz or Aleksander Zawadzki — the comrades of Berman, Minc or Zambrowski from the Political Bureau.

Be it as it may, it seems that the question of ancestry was not the most important either in the case of the party activists of Jewish descent, or those who could boast of Polish forefathers. These people, rather than being Jews or Poles, were probably in the first place communists, votaries of a universal ideology. Many of them declared that their real homeland was the Soviet Union. There were probably among them even such, who thought about it in realistic terms and awaited the moment when Poland would become part of the USSR.

One of the most long-lasting myths concerning People's Poland was that of the consistently inflexible attitude of the whole clergy to the attempts of the communist power to spread atheism in society. Although we already know a lot on that subject, one is still amazed how much time and energy as well as what means (regardless of the "historical stage" at which the country was) were devoted by communists in Poland to the combat against Catholicism; and yet in this field — both as far as the results and efforts go — they could never equal their comrades from other countries of real socialism. By the way, Polish communists had been all the time criticised by their "Soviet comrades" as well as by the representatives of other "fraternal parties" for not being steadfast enough in their fight against the "symptoms of clericalism in public life" (so the communist jargon called the relatively more liberal policy towards the Church conducted in Poland).

It should be emphasized from the very outset that the relations between Church and State in Poland under the communist rule in different periods took a different form: there were both better times and worse, however these relations were never open or loyal. Until 1989 the dealings of the party and state with the Catholic Church were directed by sharp anticlericalism. Till the very end of their rule the communists had never given up methods of a terrorist character. Be it enough to mention the abduction and murder committed by three officers from Department IV of the Ministry of Internal Affairs on Rev. Jerzy Popiełuszko in 1984. It should also be noted that no professional or social group had been under so much surveillance by the security apparatus as the clergy.

In Poland, where over 90% of society name themselves to be Catholics (although much fewer people systematically and actively participate in religious life or try to live according to the tenets of the faith), and where at the same time the communists systematically strove to secularize public life and spread atheism, the role of the Catholic Church was extremely difficult. Throughout the period of communist rule the Church was a power that most effectively — although not always in every respect — resisted the pressure of the state authorities. Moreover, the Church was a depositary of national tradition and — at least to a certain extent — it was the spokesman of the predominantly Catholic society.

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński — years later called by Pope John Paul II the Millennium's Primate — was a man who successfully combined the formal authority connected to his office with the informal authority which he earned over the many decades of his difficult pastoral ministry. What certainly favoured the creation of this authority was his steadfastness during the Stalinist period, as a result of which he was imprisoned by the communists. And although the state authorities had never decided to stage a show trial, they kept him detained in isolation for three years without a verdict<sup>19</sup>.

During Cardinal Wyszyński's "internment" the Episcopate worked under the direction of Michał Klepacz, the bishop of Łódź, imposed on the ecclesiastical hierarchy by communists. It was under his leadership that on 17 December 1953 the bishops handed a humiliating oath of loyalty to the State to vice-premier Józef Cyrankiewicz. It ran: "I take a solemn oath of loyalty to the Polish People's Republic and its Government. I promise to do my best to help the development of People's Poland, to strengthen its power and safety. I will do my most to make the clergymen subordinate to me exhort the believers to respect for the law and the state authorities, to more intensive work on the development of the economy and the welfare of our nation. This is the civic

<sup>19</sup> Of unique value in this case is the source *Zapiski więzienne (Prison Jottings)* by Cardinal Wyszyński, published for the first time in Paris in 1982, and later republished many times in Poland. *Kryptonim Ptaszyńska. Donosy na Prymasa (Cryptonym Ptaszyńska. Information Against the Primate)*, comp. M. Romaniuk, Londyn 1993, containing the notes written by Sister Maria Graczyk, who accompanied Wyszyński, is a source of quite a different type. See also Rev. St. Skorodecki, *Jestem świadkiem (I Am a Witness)*, Szczecin 1999; J. Zakowski, *Mroczne wnętrza. Uwzięziony Prymas prywatnie w oczach współwięźniów i swojej siostry. Maria Leonia Graczyk, ksiądz Stanisław Skorodecki, Julia Wyszyńska (Murky Interiors. Imprisoned Primate as Privately Seen by his Fellow-Prisoners and His Sister. Maria Leonia Graczyk, Rev. Stanisław Skorodecki, Julia Wyszyńska)*, Warszawa 2000. The question of secret agents surrounding the arrested Primate (Sister Maria Graczyk — "Ptaszyńska" and Rev. Stanisław Skorodecki — "Krystyna") has long been a matter of argument that aroused high emotions and controversies mainly of a moral character. The conjectures concerning this question have been finally cut short by the most recent studies based on archival material produced by "Security". See: *Stefan Kardynał Wyszyński Prymas Polski w dokumentach aparatu bezpieczeństwa PRL (1953–1956) (Primate of Poland Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński in the Documents of the Security of People's Poland, 1953–1956)*, comp. Bogdan Piec, Warszawa 2001; W. J. Wysocki, *Osaczenie Prymasa (The Entrapping of the Primate)*, Warszawa 2002, and J. Żaryn, *Dzieje Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce (1944–1989) (The History of the Catholic Church in Poland, 1944–1989)*, Warszawa 2003, pp. 138–154.

duty of the clergy's pastoral work. I promise not to take any action contrary to the interests of People's Poland or aimed against the safety and integrity of its borders. Solicitous for the welfare and interests of the State I will do my most to avert from it any danger I would know of<sup>20</sup>.

Any person who identifies with Catholicism would wince at this oath. And yet the bishops took it when their archpastor was "in isolation" and even more, in the presence of those who arrested him. Furthermore, the last sentence of this oath can be interpreted as a foretaste of the practice of denunciation concerning, this should be added, the dangers that would be merely potential. Such oaths, it must be stressed, had to be taken by all priests. Those who refused were deprived of the right of ministry. It might seem that the state authorities reached their aim and limited to a great extent the independence of the Church, the last institution that did not want to be submitted to state control. This aim was thwarted largely due to the inflexible attitude of Cardinal Wyszyński.

However, at present in Poland it does not take special civil courage to write of the Catholic Church exclusively in superlatives, and even to genuflect to it, as some malicious people might say. It takes a lot of courage, on the other hand, if — in keeping with the standards of scholarship — one wants to show the whole complexity of relations between the communists and the Catholic hierarchy. For there were some "clergymen of iron", inflexible and resistant to various temptations presented to them by the ruling camp, but there were also such who yielded to those temptations and did things they could not be proud of now. The communist authorities had all the time tried to "disintegrate" the clergy, and although the circumstances, the successive ruling groups and the intellectual qualifications of the officials "dealing with ecclesiastical affairs" were changing, each of such groups might boast of some successes in this field.

In fact, one should bear in mind that the clergy's attitude to the communist power was sometimes marked by resistance, and sometimes by accommodation, and even something stronger than "only" accommodation: submissiveness or downright collaboration. Of course, there were the priests, even bishops who —

<sup>20</sup> Dziennik Ustaw 1953, N° 10, entry 31.



as I have said — were made of iron. This was the case of Cardinal Wyszyński. But, regrettably, there were also such who surrendered. And this was the case of the above-mentioned Bishop Klepacz. Sometimes the same clergymen behaved in one case more, and in another less decently. One of the members of the Workers' Defense Committee (*KOR*) who in 1976 went to Radom with relief for the participants in the June protests who suffered repressions told me that one day he called on Bishop Edward Materski and asked him to use his authority in support of these protests. In reply, the bishop told him to leave his residence at once, and renounced "any involvement of the Church in such riots". Even if we admit the bishop was afraid of provocation on the part of Security Forces, or had no confidence either in his interlocutor, or more broadly in the *KOR*, still, years later, one can hardly maintain that he always and everywhere behaved in a manner that would arouse no doubt.

In June 2002, during the meeting of opposition activists of 1976–1980, Janusz Bazydło mentioned that Bishop Bolesław Pylak during the strike in Lublin in July 1980<sup>21</sup> did not agree to start a protest hunger-strike in one of the churches in Lublin. Janusz Bazydło emphasized that at the same time the same type of action was successfully organized in Stalowa Wola<sup>22</sup> with the consent of the Bishop of Przemyśl, Ignacy Tokarczuk. It is well-known, however, that Bishop Tokarczuk was one of the most avowed adversaries of the communist power and one of the clergymen who were most hated by its representatives. One should not forget that everybody worked under the same conditions, but some bishops had a more narrow, purely religious conception of their mission, and some a broader one, involving them in the social, or even political (in the communists' opinion) activity.

This does not mean, however, that the former deserve less respect than the latter. One should remember that the Church has a timeless role to play; nevertheless a historian's duty is to try to describe and analyse the actual postures of individual

<sup>21</sup> More extensively on this subject, see: M. Dąbrowski, *Lubelski lipiec 1980 (July 1980 in Lublin)*, Lublin 2000.

<sup>22</sup> *Co nam zostało z tych lat... Opozycja polityczna 1976–1980 z dzisiejszej perspektywy (What has remained of those years... The Political Opposition of 1976–1980 from the Present Perspective)*, ed. Jerzy Eisler, Warszawa 2003, p. 214.

clergymen. At any rate, more respect is due to all those priests who were capable of effectively resisting the policy of the authorities who aimed to introduce atheism in all spheres of public life.

Among the myths concerning Poland under the communist rule, one of the deepest-rooted is that of a break-through that took place in 1956<sup>23</sup>. Of course, one cannot deny the importance of that date in the post-war history of Poland, but — it seems — many people tend to definitely exaggerate its significance. This remark relates especially, though not exclusively, to the “angry young men” of that period who rebelled against the system in its Stalinist form<sup>24</sup>. Admittedly, the year 1956 not only meant the return of Gomułka to power, but in the first place the end of Stalinism in Poland; this was a new era not only for the people who then came out of prisons but also those who came out of the shadow and could openly take part in public life. It was not accidentally that at that time so many people started talking about Poland's sovereignty, about the democratization and liberalization of political and social life, about the rule of law and justice; some people even went so far as to raise the issue of partnership in Poland's relations with the Soviet Union, as if anything like that was at all possible in this part of the world and the period under discussion.

The changes in Poland were so deep that a considerable group of researchers tended to exaggerate them. I was one of them, too, when I wrote years ago that “after October 1956 People's Poland being the same country, was nevertheless different from what it was before”<sup>25</sup>. I also remember that Krystyna Kersten even then voiced serious objections to this statement, saying I went too far in my conclusions. At that time, however, I did not quite understand her doubts. As a matter of fact, many of us — as it often happens — for many years focussed their attention on the

<sup>23</sup> On the subject of the 1956 crisis see especially: P. Machcewicz, *Polski rok 1956 (The Polish Year 1956)*, Warszawa 1993; E. Makowski, *Poznański Czerwiec 1956. Pierwszy bunt społeczeństwa w PRL (The Poznań June 1956. The First Social Rebellion in People's Poland)*, Poznań 2001; Z. Rykowski, W. Władyka, *Polska próba. Październik '56 (The Polish Attempt. October '56)*, Kraków 1989.

<sup>24</sup> For example see: *Październik '56. Pierwszy wyłom w systemie. Bunt, młodość i rozsądek (October '56. The First Breach in the System. Rebellion, Youth and Common Sense)*, ed. Stefan Bratkowski, Warszawa 1996.

<sup>25</sup> J. Eisler, *Zarys dziejów politycznych Polski 1944–1989 (An Outline of the Political History of Poland 1944–1989)*, Warszawa 1992, p. 75.

differences between pre- and post-October Poland. Indeed, as we know well, any question may be viewed in two ways: either by bringing out differences, or by emphasizing similarities<sup>26</sup>.

It was for many years that people mainly wrote about how "Gomulka's Poland" differed from that of the Stalinist era. Thus, there was much talk about the changes in the agricultural policy, especially about the rapid and spontaneous de-collectivization of farming that took place in the autumn of 1956. Of over ten thousand collective farms that existed in Poland, merely two thousand remained by the end of 1956. There was also much talk about the changes in the relations between the State and the Catholic Church. The release of Cardinal Wyszyński from the place of detention as well as of many clergymen from prisons, among them bishops who were lawlessly placed in them in the "by-gone period", acquired the rank of a symbol. One should also remember that lessons of religion were resumed in the schools where it was to be an optional subject.

Another extremely important change in post-October Poland was the resignation of the State from terror in public life. As a result of the amnesty, tens of thousands of people came out of prisons. This does not mean, of course, that People's Poland became a country without political prisoners, but the scale of repressions could no longer (even in the period of Martial Law) be compared with that of the Stalinist period. In the next years, the repressions had been directed against the open and avowed political enemies of the régime.

The new relationships with the Soviet Union, based on the parity of rights, as it was called with exaggeration, were thought to be also a very important change. It remains a fact that the information about the return to Moscow of Konstanty Rokossowski, the Soviet marshal who was at the same time Polish Minister of Defence, was enthusiastically acclaimed. Also the return to the USSR of the hated military advisers was accepted with satisfaction. Doubtless, the process of Polonization of the Polish Army (a phenomenon that could also be noticed, to a smaller extent, in Security Forces), should be regarded as one of the positive

<sup>26</sup> See especially: K. Kersten, *Rok 1956 — punkt zwrotny (The Year 1956 — a Turning Point)*. "Krytyka" 1993, N° 40, pp. 133–145; P. Machcewicz, *Zmiana czy kontynuacja? Polska przed i po Październiku '56 (Change or Continuation? Poland Before and After October '56)*, in: *PRL trwanie i zmiana...* pp. 119–158.

consequences of the transformations following 1956. After October, Poland and the USSR also came to an understanding concerning the terms on which the Soviet troops were stationed in Poland. Their presence in this country was agreed "in no way to infringe the sovereignty of the Polish state" nor "to lead to their interference in the internal affairs of People's Poland".

Deep changes could also be noticed in intellectual life. After several years' break, American films were again presented in cinemas; books by modern authors that barely a few or a dozen-odd months before could not pass censorship, started to be published; theatres started presenting plays that either had never before been staged in Poland, or at least had not been played for many years. There was a great animation in the press; one by one, the areas that had been treated like taboo, now hit the headlines. Regrettably, this animation and liberalization of intellectual life turned out to be short-lived. Nevertheless, despite the systematical "tightening of the screw" in this area, even in the early 1960s Poland continued to be the most liberal and open country in its region — as the Poles said with bitter humour — "she was the merriest barracks in the socialist camp".

At the same time in the second half of the 1950s the living standard of the Poles rose markedly, although, and this is to be taken for granted, the necessary consumption was kept at a low level. The relatively wide-spread opinion that after October 1956 the rulers made an unwritten contract with the population, based on the principle: we will let you live and you won't interfere with our rule, seems to be right. According to such a principle it was the best for the rulers if society remained politically passive, and would be activated almost exclusively by the directives of the PUWP. This situation was favoured by the above-mentioned liberalization and moderate stimulation of demand for consumer goods.

However, post-October Poland may be viewed not only through the prism of its changes and differences from the Stalinist period. Without denying the wide scope of transformations, one can focus on what remained unchanged and was firmly rooted in the system. Thus, at the very outset, we should state that this system, essentially, did not undergo a change in 1956. The old Stalinist Constitution of 1952 remained in force, while the Sejm and the Council of State continued to be façade institutions. Just as in

the previous period, the decision-making centre of power was the party leadership (the Political Bureau and the Secretariat of the Central Committee). The extremely severe legal system did not undergo any serious modification. One could still be sentenced to death and executed for offences in economic administration, be detained for a long time without a verdict, or be imprisoned for writing a book.

Polish citizens continued being spied on by the political police (Security Service), although its name was changed even earlier and its role slightly limited. The repressive, preventive censorship was still active, and if some bolder articles, books or films did appear, it was only due to the fact that the representatives of the authorities — for reasons known to nobody else — made such a decision at a given moment. Indeed, censorship (up till 1981) was not affected by any legislative limitations, and when social upheavals subsided, it could, without any problem, resume its main role of the guardian of the system.

Personal changes were not as deep as it used to be acknowledged, either. There was a new First Secretary of the Central Committee of the PUPW, while Gomułka's predecessor, Edward Ochab, remained as a member of the Political Bureau, which was an unusual event in the history of this party. The nine-person Bureau that emerged at the 8th plenary session of the PUPW Central Committee in October 1956 was enriched only by two persons who had not sat on it before: Gomułka and one of his closest associates, Ignacy Loga-Sowiński. In this situation one can hardly speak of a "new" Political Bureau, and one should remember that neither the premier (it was still Józef Cyrankiewicz) nor the chairman of the Council of State (Zawadzki) were replaced. A large group of activists removed from power in 1956, a few years later returned to prominent posts in the party apparatus or state administration. Thus, the thesis of a radical exchange of the holders of prominent offices after Gomułka's return to power, cannot be possibly defended.

Nor can one speak of any changes in Poland's relations with the USSR. Regardless of all I said above, it must be firmly stated that People's Poland, just as before, was not an independent state. All the essential decisions, concerning both foreign and internal policy, were made in consultation with, by order or at least with the approval of the Kremlin. Incidentally, the question

of the subordination of People's Poland to the Soviet Union is among the most obscure subjects of Polish history. It is still easier to ask questions than to give answers in this respect<sup>27</sup>.

Here, however, I should like to draw attention to one problem. When Marshal Rokossowski and the Soviet advisers were leaving Poland, the Warsaw Pact had been in force for over a year, and through its structures the Soviet Union gained new means of control of its allies and especially their armed forces. Soviet interests in Poland were also guaranteed by the tens of thousands strong Northern Group of Soviet Army stationed here, equipped with the most modern — as it turned out later — also nuclear arms. On the other hand, an important role in “safe-guarding” Soviet economic interests in Poland was fulfilled by the Council for Mutual Economic Aid, established as early as 1949, but definitely activated in the middle 1950s.

It was one of the special traits of Poland under the communist rule that it was the scene of political crises and social upheavals, colloquially termed as “Polish months”, that broke out at the intervals of several or a dozen-odd years. It would be a big error to maintain that these protest actions broke out only for economic reasons; this factor, however, generally acted as a detonator. Of no less significance was the sense of social injustice deeply rooted in the minds of many of the workers. Real socialism, at least at the verbal level, declared the principle of social equality of all the citizens, but the practice of everyday life frequently contradicted these ideals. The workers saw the way of life of the “red bourgeoisie”, and were generally aware of the fact that its representatives were often social parasites, living off their sweat. Although they were not theoretically educated, they understood that in the world surrounding them some people were “equal”, like themselves, but others were “more equal” — the technical supervisors, the representatives of the plants' management, as well as the activists of various levels of the party and other

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<sup>27</sup> This issue was taken up recently by Andrzej Werblan in his article *Polska w strefie dominacji radzieckiej (Poland in the Sphere of Soviet Domination)*, in: *Polska pod rządami PZPR*, ed. Mieczysław F. Rakowski, Warszawa 2000, pp. 273–291. See also: R. Łoś, *Polska-ZSRR 1956 (Poland-USSR 1956)*, Łódź 1999. Cf. also editions of sources concerning the 1980–1981 crisis: *Dokumenty. Teczka Susłowa (Documents. Suslov's Folder)*, Warszawa 1993, as well as those concerning the first years of People's Poland: *Polska-ZSRR. Struktury podległości. Dokumenty KC WKP(b) 1944–1949 (Poland-USSR. The Structures of Subjugation. Documents of the Central Committee of the ACP(b) 1944–1949*, Warszawa 1995.

organizations. They could also sense the contemptuous attitude of some representatives of the workers' (*sic!*) party who frequently, between themselves, spoke of them as of "primitive toilers".

At the same time, however, the workers sensed a growing feeling of their own power. It became clear to them that due to their violent protests their rulers withdrew from the socially unpopular decisions they had earlier made. At the same time one can hardly overlook the fact that following 1956, 1970 and 1980 the scope of civil liberties was systematically growing, and the system was gradually losing its repressive character. Although each time after checking social upheavals the authorities tried to regain "their lost positions", still — as I have said — they found it impossible to return to the state preceding the crisis.

A question surrounded with most mystification in the whole history of People's Poland was certainly the problem of what social groups participated in the successive social protests, and what was the attitude of the workers to student upheavals in March 1968, as well as of the students to the workers' rebellion in December 1970. The tradition of Polish society's risings against oppression cultivated by the "Solidarity" trade union contains one false concept. A mistaken assumption is taken for granted that the protests of 1968 were exclusively the work of the intelligentsia. At the same time it is said that the attitude of the workers to the student movement was, if not downright hostile, then, in the best case, passive. I tried to contradict this stereotype — without much success — in my book about March 1968, where I referred to various source records. I tried to analyse the actual attitude of the workers to student protests and to show the diversity of their attitudes<sup>28</sup>.

Indeed, it seems impossible to sustain the thesis of the workers' passive attitude in 1968, since they constituted the most numerous group of those detained by the police. According to the data in possession of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, from March 7 till April 6, 2,725 people were detained in the whole country, including 937 workers. Admittedly, there were at that time, and continue to be, several times more workers than students, but in the light of these numbers it seems impossible to sustain the thesis of the passive attitude of the former during the "March

<sup>28</sup> J. Eisler, *Marzec 1968. Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje* (March 1968. Genesis, Course of Events, Consequences), Warszawa 1991, pp. 273–280.

events". On the basis of these data Andrzej Friszke asked whether we should not call into question the thesis that the workers remained passive in March, although "they did not appear as a social group, did not start any action in the factories, but only appeared individually or in small groups, as particles in the crowd during street demonstrations. This was, however, a considerable part"<sup>29</sup>.

Marcin Zaremba, on the other hand, drew attention to the fact that "all the workers mentioned in reports as detained were young or very young. They were generally not older than thirty. This would suggest that in March 1968 we were dealing with a movement of one generation, and the fact that they belonged to that generation was one of their main links. In other words, it was not the workers who moved, but the young people"<sup>30</sup>. This is a very significant statement. One can guess that the young workers were often "the [primary] school-mates" or the "play-mates" of those students from the same backyard. They were linked by the common cultural code of the same generation; they listened to the same "young music", followed the same fashion for long hair, they frequently saw the same films, and they took part in the same "generation rebellion".

The point of reference for the aspirations of the young workers and students could not be pre-war Poland (as it frequently was for the representatives of the older generation), but the "capitalist countries", with which they got acquainted through television, Western films and accounts of the people who had visited them. One should remember that all revolutions, uprisings, revolts and rebellions have ever and everywhere been the work of young people. No revolution or rebellion of the fifty-year-old is known in history, although they can — and usually are — their leaders and ideologists. This is due to many factors. Firstly, young people who actively engage in protests often are not quite aware of the

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<sup>29</sup> A. Friszke, *Ruch protestu w marcu 1968 (w świetle raportów MSW dla kierownictwa PZPR) (The Protest Movement in March 1968 in the Light of Reports of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the PUWP Leadership)*, "Więź" 1994, N° 3, p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> M. Zaremba, *Biedni Polacy 68. Społeczeństwo polskie wobec wydarzeń marcowych w świetle raportów KW i MSW dla kierownictwa PZPR (Poor Poles 68. Polish Society in the Face of the March 1968 Events in the Light of the Warsaw Committee's and the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Reports to the Leadership of the PUWP)*, in: *Marzec 1968. Trzydzieści lat później*, vol. I, *Referaty*, ed. Marcin Kula, Piotr Osęka and Marcin Zaremba, Warszawa 1998, p. 159.



risk they run, which is also a consequence of their lack of experience. Secondly, the young are usually radical and uncompromising. They are not inclined to procrastination or even to cool reflection. Thirdly, it is obviously easier to take part in street fighting (since this requires physical fitness, and involves running away from the police, throwing stones and other heavy objects, and sometimes even hand-to-hand fighting) when you are twenty than when you are fifty.

All I have already said holds true in reference to December 1970. In this case we are also dealing with the false thesis that in December the social protests were exclusively of a working class character. Here, again, contrary to the facts, it was maintained that this time the intelligentsia and mostly students, paralysed with fear after the repressions of 1968, remained passive and did not support the workers. This stereotype found perhaps its best exemplification in Andrzej Wajda's film *Man of Iron* which included the memorable scene where windows in a students' dormitory were being shut during the workers' demonstration. Wajda is an artist and could be allowed to create such an unrealistic image, but the actual reality was different.

On the afternoon of 14 December, when no street clashes yet started in the town, a group of over 500 demonstrators entered the courtyard of the Technical University where they called upon the students to join the manifestation. It is generally maintained that this appeal found no response, and about forty minutes later the demonstrators left the premises of the Technical University of Gdańsk declaring they would return in the evening that day. Tadeusz Stanisław Piotrowski in his very important recollective article that, unfortunately, passed unnoticed, made an attempt to analyse the behaviour of students in Gdańsk in December 1970, drawing attention to a factor that is generally overlooked. It is true that the workers "did not meet with an active, enthusiastic response. But the whole incident did not last more than a few minutes, and its witnesses and participants on the part of the students were accidental people, completely unprepared for taking an active part in these events. Thus one can hardly be surprised at their restraint"<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> T. S. Piotrowski, *Studenci gdańscy w Grudniu 1970 (Gdańsk Students in December 1970)*, "Zeszyty Historyczne" (Paryż) 1992, N° 99, pp. 52-54.

There can be no doubt, however, that the students did take part in street clashes on that day. According to the data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, among the 329 people detained in Gdańsk on that day there were 13 students. This was a small percentage, but one should remember that at that time Gdańsk was not yet a lively and strong academic centre (University was opened there barely a few months earlier). Considering all I have written above, as well as the fact that there were two students among those shot during these incidents, the thesis about the passive attitude of academic youth in December 1970 is impossible to sustain. Thus the question suggests itself who and for what reasons is interested in upholding these stereotypes which diverge so much from the truth?

When the rulers of People's Poland referred to them (it has to be admitted, not often), one might suppose they followed the principle *divide et impera*. However, when wise and honest people who did great services to the cause of freedom and democracy in Poland, invoke them today, I must own I am lost in guessing why they do it. For example, during the above-mentioned meeting of opposition activists of 1976–1980 organized in June 2002 by the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw, this thesis was repeated by the activist of the Workers' Defense Committee, Wojciech Onyszkiewicz<sup>32</sup>. In the year 2000 there appeared an interesting book concerning the history of the Movement of Young Poland written by Piotr Zaremba, where we read among other things that on 14 December 1970 the workers wanted "to gain support of the students of the Technical University. The students did not move, remembering that the workers remained passive two years before". The same author describes March 1968 in a similar way; during the great "demonstrations of students, spontaneously supported by secondary school pupils. [...] The working class milieu, including the staff of the great shipyards in Gdańsk and Gdynia, remained passive"<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, in the light of material collected by Organization Department of the Central Committee of PUWP published in 1998, after the street demonstration in Gdańsk on 15 March 1968, 194 people,

<sup>32</sup> *Co nam zostało z tych lat...*, pp. 145–146.

<sup>33</sup> P. Zaremba, *Młodość polacy. Historia Ruchu Młodej Polski (Young Poles. The History of the Young Poland Movement)*, Gdańsk 2000, pp. 11, 15.

including about 30 students, but as many as “83 young workers, including 58 shipyard workers, were detained”<sup>34</sup>.

It is extremely difficult to polemize with these almost indestructible stereotypes. Let me only observe that in December 1970 we were also dealing to a large extent with the rebellion of young people: this time mainly young workers, but also a considerable group of students and school pupils. We should, however, pay attention to one “small detail”. In order not to diverge from the facts, while speaking of “the Polish months” we must try to be precise and say: “many of the workers”, “many of the students” and “many of the intellectuals”. And we should certainly remember that “many” does not mean “majority”.

While speaking of December 1970, to the history of which I have devoted fifteen years of study<sup>36</sup>, I have to mention two, practically indestructible myths. The first one concerns one of the most moving symbols of that national tragedy. I have in mind the procession walking along the streets of Gdynia, headed by people carrying the dead body of a young man on a wooden door. This procession was marching about the town and its participants were singing patriotic and religious songs. Who was the man whose dead body was carried? Many studies devoted to this subject and even school text-books say he was the title hero of the *Ballad of Janek Wiśniewski*.

In fact, no such man has ever existed. The ballad was written by Krzysztof Dowgiałło, who acknowledged his authorship years later, and said he deliberately chose the most popular Polish name Jan, and one of the most frequent Polish surnames — Wiśniewski — in order to create, perhaps on the model of the unknown warrior, a symbolic figure. Indeed, there was no Janek Wiśniewski, but at the same time there were, or could be many young men like him. And it is really of no consequence who was his historic prototype.

<sup>34</sup> *Marzec 1968. Trzydzieści lat później*, vol. II: *Aneks źródłowy. Dzień po dniu w raportach SB oraz Wydziału Organizacyjnego KC PZPR (March 1968. Thirty Years Later. vol. II Source Appendix. Day by Day in the Reports of the Security and the Organization Department of the PUWP Central Committee)*, comp. Marcin Zaremba, Warszawa 1998, p. 116.

<sup>35</sup> This research is recapitulated in J. Eisler's monograph, *Grudzień 1970. Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje*, Warszawa 2000.

<sup>36</sup> M. Przyłipiak, *Legenda o Janku Wiśniewskim (The Legend of Janek Wiśniewski)*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 11 Dec. 1994.

The poem was set to music by Mieczysław Cholewa, and it was adapted by Andrzej Korzyński for the film *Man of Iron*, where it was sung by Krystyna Janda. It could not go, however, without a memorable correction. The words: "The party now shoots at the workers", were replaced by the phrase: "Those in power now shoot at the workers". It could not pass that the "workers" party, as its name ran, might shoot at the workers. Although, as I have said, the concrete Janek Wiśniewski did not exist, he became perhaps the most famous legend of December 1970, and certainly the most famous legend of Gdynia where one of the streets that were blockaded at that time by the police and the army, and bore the name of Jan Marchlewski, after the change of the system in Poland was named after Jan Wiśniewski.

Mirosław Przyłipiak was certainly right in writing that "this name and surname became an inseparable part of Polish culture, an anchor of collective identity that focussed social attitudes and values"<sup>36</sup>. Unfortunately, as it turned out years later, not for all Poles, which was testified by the reaction of many young people during the screening of Władysław Paśkowski's film *Psy (The Dogs)*. This film features a memorable scene where completely drunk functionaries of the Security Forces, carrying their intoxicated colleague in their arms are "yelling", for it could not be called singing: "Janek Wiśniewski fell".

Wiesława Kwiatkowska has been trying for many years to explain all the controversial and debatable questions connected with this procession in Gdynia, and she wrote on this subject: "The descriptions of this procession contain sometimes glaring differences concerning its duration, number of participants, the way covered and the way the dead body looked as well as the place where the procession was dispersed. These things have puzzled me for many years (the procession was remembered in Gdynia for ten years, always as a single phenomenon) before a solution of this mystery was suggested by another attentive hearing of the tape recording of the conversations conducted by the functionaries of Security Forces. There were at least two processions with the dead bodies on the doors, and it can certainly be accepted there were more"<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> W. Kwiatkowska, *Grudniowa apokalipsa (The December Apocalypse)*, Gdynia 1993, p. 56.

It is very difficult, almost impossible to reconstruct precisely the way covered by the processions mentioned by Kwiatkowska. Accounts of these events frequently contradict one another, which is no wonder, considering the stress, high emotions and the great tension that accompanied them. People talked about what made the greatest impression on them and what engraved itself in their memory. Still, we do not know who was carried by the demonstrators. We can only be sure that one of those carried was Zbigniew Godlewski from Elbląg (his documents were found in his pocket).

One can hardly believe it, but it was quite long maintained in party circles that the man on the door was not dead, but only "wounded by a bullet", and died because of a haemorrhage; it was implied that if medical service came in time he would survive. This was the way an instructor from the Municipal Committee of PUWP presented this case at a meeting of the Basic Party Organization (*POP*) at the lawcourt in Gdynia. According to him the demonstrators only "did it for effect"<sup>38</sup>. And the same interpretation was included in 1982 in the original version of the calendar prepared by the "Kubiak Commission", where under the hour 9.35 it was written: "In the Czerwonych Kosynierów Street another procession is taking shape. They are heading for the City Council Presidium. On the wooden door there is a wounded man. It is supposed that if during this march he received medical help, perhaps he could be saved; when he was taken to hospital, it was too late"<sup>39</sup>.

While the myth of "Janek Wiśniewski" — as I have said — was based on an authentic story and had its real tragic dimension, another myth, connected with the 1970–1971 crisis, was created artificially, for propaganda purposes. Nevertheless, it is very long-lived. What I have in mind are the circumstances or perhaps a legend created about the meeting of Edward Gierek and Piotr Jaroszewicz on 25 January 1971 with the shipyard workers who were on strike in Gdańsk. The representatives of the

<sup>38</sup> Janina Chimiak's account delivered in July 2000.

<sup>39</sup> State Archives in Gdańsk, 2384/2525, *Kalendarium (Calendar)* (typescript), pp. 41–42. The final form of this record ran: "In the Czerwonych Kosynierów street another procession is taking shape. They are heading for the City Council Presidium. On the door the body of a shot man". See: *Kalendaria kryzysów w PRL (1953–1980) (Calendars of the Crises in People's Poland, 1953–1980)*, "Zeszyty Historyczne" (Paryż) 1983, N° 66, p. 170.

“new leadership” had many problems with winning the support of the workers. At one moment of that dramatic meeting the First Secretary of the PUWP Central Committee pronounced the famous words which were later cited many times: “You may rest assured that we are all made of the same stuff and have no other aim than the one we have declared. If you help us, I think that through our common effort this aim can be achieved. So, please answer me — will you help?”<sup>40</sup> This was the moment of one of the greatest mystifications and manipulations in the whole history of Poland under the communist rule.

It is generally accepted (and many participants in that meeting with Gierek confirm it<sup>41</sup>) that in response a chorus of shipyard workers said: “We will!”<sup>42</sup>. However, we can see that nothing like that took place if we view the archival film of this meeting or listen to its tape-recording. There was only some moderate applause; in fact mass media immediately tried to utilize Gierek’s trip to Gdańsk for propaganda purposes and to convince us that he received an unanimous declaration of support on the part of the striking workers. This myth turned out to be indestructible and survived even the change of the system in Poland.

Generally, it must be said that a large part of myths and stereotypes mentioned in the present article did survive the change of this system to a greater or smaller extent. Even if historians wrote about some problems in specialist, small circulation periodicals, and tried to overcome some of the myths and stereotypes here under discussion, still this type of knowledge finds many obstacles in reaching wider circles of society. At the same time there appeared many new issues and phenomena that became the subjects of mystification and entered with much confidence the sphere of national myths and stereotypes. Today, nobody dares to declare in public that in any period of the communist rule Poland was a democratic and/or independent

<sup>40</sup> “Dziennik Bałtycki” 27 Jan. 1971.

<sup>41</sup> Years later, Lech Wałęsa, who attended this meeting, wrote on this subject: “After Gierek’s speech somebody should have stood up and said: Comrade, it’s all right you are asking ‘Will you help?’ But who are we to help? But nobody rose [...] and the question ‘Will you help?’ was answered by ‘We will!’. People got frightened, this was not at all easy. When we were pressed [...] we said ‘We will!’”. L. Wałęsa, *Droga nadziei (The Road of Hope)*, Kraków 1989, pp. 70–71.

<sup>42</sup> For example: J. J. Lipski, *Komitet Obrony Robotników (Workers’ Defense Committee)*, Londyn 1983, p. 31.

country. But people find it possible to attempt an idealization of the 1970s and, personally, of Gierek, that has almost nothing to do with reality<sup>43</sup>.

In connection with new economic problems, and especially the growing unemployment, practically unknown in People's Poland, new myths have arisen that serve the idealization of "the old times" or of the posture of many people in "that period". In the latter case the number of alleged adversaries of the communist power in People's Poland in various milieux is growing at a surprising pace. For reasons unknown to me they do not ask themselves a simple, natural question: Why did this system last so long, while everybody was against it? It turns out that "against it" were not only practically all Catholic clergymen, but for example, almost all the journalists who worked for the then newspapers or appeared in the media controlled by the communists and their censorship. This is another sphere of very vital myths and stereotypes.

However, one of the most long-lived myths is doubtless the one of the unpaid education and unpaid health service in Poland under the communist rule, as if anything in the world — except for feelings — might be unpaid. People who repeat that type of opinions do not take into account that "unpaid health service" and/or "unpaid education" were possible only in a country that intercepted all the income and whose functionaries used it practically at their own discretion. One must also remember that in People's Poland — in various periods — the average monthly pay oscillated between 20 and 30 American dollars according to black market (which in this case means realistic) rates. This, however, tends to be forgotten by the believers in myths and stereotypes.

*(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)*

<sup>43</sup> J. Rolicki, *Edward Gierek. Życie i narodziny legendy (Edward Gierek. His Life and the Birth of His Legend)*, Warszawa 2002.