

THE TRAUMA OF COMMUNISM

*Edited by Clemens Sedmak
and A. James McAdams*



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DO NOT JUDGE, BEWARE

Magdalena Charzyńska-Wójcik

Why write about the trauma of communism? Describing a trauma is said to have therapeutic effect but for me the value is somewhere else: this testimony is a warning against totalitarian systems which in one way or another deprive us of independence and require a tremendous amount of resilience to claim for oneself the freedom of thought which is, on the one hand, our inalienable right, but on the other, it comes at an enormous cost: either external because you stand up against the system or internal because you come to realise the full extent of the condition.

It could be said that for my generation – born in the early 1970s – the trauma of Communism was mostly experienced vicariously via our parents and grandparents, with 1989 as its endpoint coinciding with our coming of age. And while this is not untrue, we also went through our own childhood fears and deprivations, felt even more acutely because of our lack of understanding that resulted from our parents' desire to shelter our childhood. They were raising their children in the regime that denied all of us the basic human rights. But we lived in it without much hope for immediate deliverance. Our parents raised us to tame the feeling.

They. This word had two functions in my childhood. One was the pronoun: the usual grammatical referent to any plural noun. The other one was scary and encapsulated the contour-less omnipresent surveillance. *They* had ways of listening to you. *They* were always there. I remember that whenever adults talked about anything important, they would avoid doing it in a room where there was a telephone (though not everybody had one) because *they* could lis-

ten to you. If this was the only room where you could have the conversation (communist apartments were small), then a radio would normally be turned on and placed next to the telephone receiver to muffle up the conversation.

They could refuse you a passport. Once issued, passports were not kept at home but in the central offices and exchanged for our usual IDs for the time of the trip abroad. That is, if you could afford a trip. And provided you received permission to travel. Nobody could travel abroad without permission. You had to apply for it well in advance, present the place of destination and provide all the required details. There was no guarantee you would “get your passport”. Overall, if you wanted to travel within the Communist Bloc, this was not hard but travelling across the Iron Curtain was discouraged: you needed a good reason. Visiting friends was not one of them: how could you have friends in capitalist countries? Family? Even worse. My grandmother’s brother ended up in England after the war and did not contact her for fear of causing her trouble – a family member abroad entailed exactly that, and he knew it. Especially that he was a former soldier of the “Home Army” (*Armia Krajowa*, commonly abbreviated to AK¹). So, my grandmother lost touch with him during the war and believed him to have been killed only to find out about his whereabouts when he died and an urn with his remains was transported to Poland for her to collect. She was a tiny woman and I remember her talking about her tall elder brother. Then, she said, there was only the small box that embodied her loss. Similarly, a cousin of hers was in a monastery in Italy and also chose not to get in touch with her, driven by the same desire to protect her from communist authorities calling her in, repeatedly

¹ The Home Army was the major resistance movement in German-occupied Poland during World War II. Due to its allegiance to the Polish Government in Exile, it was considered an enemy of the People’s Republic of Poland by the communist government.

demanding explanations, questioning her “loyalty”, and generally making her life hard. He never contacted her until 1980, when our prospects and hopes seemed high for a moment in August with the rise of “Solidarity” (*Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy Solidarność*, i.e., Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity”, commonly abbreviated to *Solidarność*). This was an unusual reunion after over 40 years of separation. My grandmother traveled to Italy in 1982, months after the introduction of martial law on December 13, 1981. She was granted permission to travel as an old pensioner: not considered dangerous to the system and assessed as not likely to stay abroad at the age of 74.

They wasted no opportunity to indoctrinate us from an early age. When you went to the cinema to watch a movie you were exposed to an obligatory portion of communist propaganda pieces which showed scenes that were in stark contrast to the surrounding reality: shops full of goods, while the shelves in our shops were *literally* empty. The people in these clips enthusiastically praised their socialist country as a land of plenty where everybody gets a fair share. We learned to accept this duality as part of our daily survival pack. At a time when a child learns the value of honesty and integrity, we were learning to tame the gap between the words that were uttered in any public space and their true meaning. The only exception was the church, where you could expect to hear what was going on. A priest was somebody you could trust and talk freely with even if you did not know him personally. There were the masses for the homeland (*msze za Ojczyznę*), during which we sang in full voice with tears in our eyes “God, give us back our free homeland”.

When parents observe with pride how their children learn to speak up in defence of the values they learn at home, it was our parents’ dread that we would spill at school what we learnt from them. The children in the Communist Bloc were *taught to know* but we also *knew to stay silent* because our bravery would fire back on our parents. Though we felt strongly about our country, and we realized

its condition, our desire to rebel against the system was suppressed before we came of age.

My coming of age coincided with the fall of communism. My generation, like the generation before ours was exposed to the childhood of the ominous and omnipresent *them*. Our adolescence was very different from that of our peers from outside the communist Bloc. But – unlike the generation of our parents and grandparents – we were not put to the real test. None of us knows how we would behave under the pressure of fear or despair if the life of those dear to us were threatened. This is what so many representatives of the generation of our parents and grandparents had to go through. This is what my father, Wojciech Charzyński had to endure: he had to make his choices and repeatedly reaffirm them in the face of hostile reality, threats to his family and danger to his own life. He turns 90 this year. He never talked about his trauma of communism: ever since I can remember he always avoided conversation about his early youth. We knew it was a difficult time because his father was imprisoned by the communists. But there was so much more that happened to him and it took him years to tell us about it. When he did, we asked him to write it down. This is his story.

*My struggles with the Secret Police
of the People's Republic of Poland in the years 1948-1952*

For a long time, I could not bring myself to recount my experiences with the Secret Police (*Śłużba Bezpieczeństwa*, commonly abbreviated to SB). My contacts with its representatives were so traumatic that even after 30-40 years when I was talking about them, my whole body began to tremble. Even now, when I talk about it, my blood pressure is elevated. However, I agreed to describe it all at the request of my children. They claim that my granddaughters and my future great-grandchildren should know what the Polish reality was like in the first years after World War II.

In September 1948, at the age of sixteen, I began my high school education in Sierpc. I went to high school so late because the part of Mazovia where I lived was incorporated into the Third Reich, where education in Polish was banned and attempts to organise and conduct underground schooling were punishable with death. So, there were no schools for Poles there throughout the war and the war broke out when I was seven.² In effect, I learned to read and write at home. My father was a teacher. I started my formal education at the Primary School in Gozdowo when it was founded in March 1945, and I graduated after three years in June 1948. Then I was admitted to the secondary school in Sierpc and my father arranged for me to stay in a dormitory there as it was too far away from where we lived to travel every day.

The beginning of the school year did not herald what was to come next. I even got a small scholarship. The first unpleasant surprise was the discovery that we had all been involuntarily put into the ranks of the Union of Polish Youth (*Związek Młodzieży Polskiej*, commonly abbreviated to ZMP³). During a class, the principal teacher handed out the declaration forms for joining the Union, told us to fill them in, and then we were to sign them. There was no question of not joining: the issue was not presented as a choice. In this way the whole class joined this youth organization. The teacher then asked who wanted to be the chairman of the class division of ZMP. He did not have to wait long for a volunteer. The teacher was satisfied, he congratulated us, and the matter was settled.

At the end of October 1948, my father was arrested by the Secret Police. I had six siblings. The eldest brother was then 21 years old and in September 1948 he had started working as a teacher at the Primary School in Gozdowo. The youngest sibling was only

² School education begins in Poland at seven.

³ The Union of Polish Youth was a communist organization which served as a tool of political indoctrination of young people.

three years old. My father's hearing took place in November. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison, deprived of civil rights and his property was confiscated. The justification of this court ruling boiled down to the fact that my father had given a sweater to a friend who belonged to the "Home Army". After the war, when the amnesty for former AK soldiers was announced his friend came out, got a job, and started to live a normal life. However, he learned that he was to be arrested. Upon receiving this information, he did not return home. As he needed warm clothes, he came to my father and asked for the things he needed, including a sweater. Obviously, he got them from my father. The judge stated that "the accused", i.e. my father, being a teacher, was a conscious citizen, and yet he helped the enemy of the People's Republic of Poland, thus acting against his homeland. Therefore, the appropriate sentence for this act was the above-mentioned penalty.

The life of our entire family collapsed. Another brother, who was eighteen then, had to give up high school and get a job, not only because he could not afford to continue his education but also because he had to financially support the family. As I have already mentioned, my father was a teacher, while my mother owned a 25-hectare farm, which had been her dowry. As a result of the court ruling, my family was evicted from the house and my mother's farm was forfeited. Only in 1952, after repeated interventions on her part, was it admitted that the farm was legally owned by my mother and she regained it, albeit in a deplorable condition and without any livestock.

Things started to go bad at school too. One day in late December 1948 or early January 1949 the school secretary called me to her office to receive a phone call. It was a phone call from the Party headquarters (*Dom Partii*), where the Union of Polish Youth was also located. I was ordered to report there on a specified date and time. It turned out that a Secret Police officer waited there for me. I did not know the purpose of the meeting. The beginning of

the conversation was almost pleasant. The officer asked me how I felt at school and in the dormitory. Then he explained that he had asked me to come over because we could help each other. He knew that my father was serving a sentence in prison and the family was in a difficult financial situation, so if I wanted to cooperate with the authorities, I could contribute to his rehabilitation, and maybe even to shortening his sentence and an early release. I did not initially understand what this cooperation would be about. He explained to me that I would report on the teachers and priests (I was an altar boy). When I said that I could not do it, he replied matter-of-factly that one gets used to it, and that I would help the People's Republic of Poland. When I did not want to sign the declaration of cooperation, he said that he believed in my common sense and told me to think it over again. Then he made me write a statement that I would not tell anyone about this meeting and sign it. He also threatened that if I did not keep my word, I could be sure that my mother would not see me again. In the end he said he hoped that if I thought about it all carefully, I would see reason.

In about a month and a half I was called again by the school secretary to receive a phone call. This time I guessed it was the Secret Police. The caller specified the date and place of the meeting. It was a bench in a small square. The officer, different from the one who had met me before, took me to a small room in the basement. On the wall by his desk something resembling a leather whipping tool was hanging. This kind of "decoration" would reappear in subsequent meetings, in different venues, though I was never explicitly told that I would be beaten up if I did not comply. The conversation started innocently enough, with the officer expressing hope that I had thought everything over and that I would like to help my father and my family, as well as my country. However, when I reaffirmed my earlier position that I would not report, the atmosphere changed momentarily. My interlocutor raged in disbelief that I could turn down such a favorable offer. Despite my refusal, he

started asking questions does my history teacher (a widow of an officer murdered in the Katyn massacre⁴) date the mathematician (who was married with children); does my French teacher, Mrs. Zaleska (the sister of the President of the Republic of Poland in Exile⁵) come to school drunk, etc. I answered each of these insinuating questions in the same way: that I did not know anything about it. The meeting ended with the man's explicit disapproval of my conduct and his threat that "I may soon regret it." Then he said goodbye to me and again – in an almost friendly manner – expressed hope that I would seriously consider the offer.

After another meeting, which followed the same scheme, a representative of the Poviát⁶ Board of the Polish Youth Union appeared at my school. A meeting of the class division of ZMP was called with the participation of a teacher – supervisor of the ZMP. A representative of the board chaired a meeting, which had only one point on the agenda: removing me from the ranks of the Union of Polish Youth. My colleagues were told that I was the son of a convicted criminal who was imprisoned for his attempt to destroy the People's Republic of Poland. In his view, it was a disgrace to the class ZMP division for someone like me to be its member. The matter was put to a vote, and I found myself outside the Union of Polish Youth. I still remember the tormented expression on the face of a teacher

⁴ In the spring of 1940, 22,000 Polish officers and representatives of intelligentsia were executed by the Soviet "People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs" (*Naródnny komissariát vnútreennikh del*, commonly abbreviated to NKVD). The executions were carried out in several locations but the massacre is usually referred to by the name of the first place where the mass graves were discovered, i.e. Katyn.

⁵ August Zaleski was successively: Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Polish Government in Exile, head of the Civil Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland Władysław Raczkiewicz, and after the latter's death in June 1947, he took the office of the President of the Republic of Poland in Exile.

⁶ Poviát is a second-level local government and administration in Poland. It is roughly equivalent to a county.

who was my father's friend. Back then, I resented him for not even trying to defend me and my father's good name. Later, I realized that I was wrong: his intervention would not have helped me, and he himself might have lost his job. And much more than that.

After another meeting with a Secret Police officer, I lost my scholarship, which had paid for my dormitory and full board. My emotional condition was getting worse. However, I knew that I could not consent to cooperate in any form. It was out of the question for me to report on my teachers, priests, and friends.

The meetings were always initiated by the Secret Police. Invariably, a few hours prior to the meeting, sometimes on the day before, I received the information that I was to come to a designated place. The officers changed so I did not know them, but they always knew me. Each time I had to sign a declaration that I would not tell anyone about the meeting and anything that happened in its course. It was almost always the case that at the beginning I was greeted in a friendly way, with the officer expressing hope that I had "finally come to see reason". When it turned out that I had not, the appearance of kindness was gone. There were further arguments why I should start cooperating. One of them was ensuring that I could go to college after graduating from high school. I explained that I had many younger siblings, and I would have to get a job. I was told that I did not have to worry about the money because if I helped the People's Republic of Poland, it would also help me.

During the next meeting, when "I still failed to see reason," I was threatened with expulsion from my dormitory. I did not have to wait long to see that they were serious. When I returned to school after the holiday break, the dormitory manager told me that he did not know why but I could not stay there anymore. I had to look for lodging, even though there was a place for me in the dormitory.

Despite my repeated refusals to cooperate, the Secret Police still did not give up on me. More meetings were held. The promise to help me financially through my potential university educa-

tion returned, of course on condition that I would help the People's Republic of Poland. When I reiterated that I had to get a job after high school to support my family, the officer got upset and said that I would not get any job. It was 1951 and the draft constitution of 1952 was discussed in school during our classes. I referred to it saying that the Constitution guaranteed jobs for all citizens. This upset him even more. He blurted out that not only would I not get the job, but my two elder brothers (who supported the whole family of eight people with the greatest difficulty) would lose their jobs. He also said that if I decided to continue my education, no university would accept me.

I was feeling worse all the time, both emotionally and physically. When I started school in 1948, I weighed 63 kg, and when I graduated my weight was down to 52 kg. It was the end of my last year at high school and the time of the final exams. After the written part, my former roommate from the dormitory came to talk to me. He was the chairman of the school division of ZMP and in that capacity he was invited to a meeting of the district division of the Polish United Workers' Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, commonly abbreviated to PZPR⁷). He told me that a resolution had been passed there that I was to fail my oral exams and asked me not to tell anyone about it. I promised. The time between the written part and the oral exam was a nightmare. I could not eat, even with the greatest difficulty. I did not know what to do. Should I take the oral exam if I was doomed to fail it? I knew for sure that the Secret Police could keep their word. If I did not go, the effect would be the same. I could not ask anyone's advice because I would have to reveal too much of what I had to keep to myself. I could not tell my mother and elder brothers, because there was nothing they could do, and it would only give them more worries than they already had, keeping

⁷ The Polish United Workers' Party was the communist party which ruled the People's Republic of Poland as a one-party state.

the family afloat. I thought that not going meant giving in. So, barely conscious, I decided to go.

Students entered the oral exam room in twos. The exam took about two hours, and it covered all school subjects. Originally, I was scheduled with a colleague for 10:00, but then the schedule was changed, and I was to enter first, i.e., at 8:00. The exam started dead on time. When my colleague and I entered the room, the teacher who oversaw examining history and “knowledge about Poland” did not allow me to choose the subject I wanted to take first. She made me pick a set of questions and start with her subjects. When I wanted to prepare my answers, which was the usual procedure, she said the questions were easy enough so any preparation would be a waste of time. This additionally confused me: I thought that even she was against me. When I started answering the first of the three questions, she interrupted me saying, “Thank you, that’s enough.” It was the moment when a Party representative⁸ entered the examination room with a few minutes’ delay. After selecting the next sets of questions, this time in mathematics, physics, and Polish, I was allowed to prepare my answers for a few minutes. I was so stunned that it took me a few hours to realize that the history teacher had saved me, because in contrast to history and “knowledge about Poland”, mathematics, physics, and Polish offered no scope for the party’s representative to ask questions that would disqualify me as a high school graduate. This is how I passed my final oral exam.

When I returned to my lodging afterwards, I learned from my landlady that a man had been there asking for me who said that I was to report to the Party headquarters. In case he came back, I asked my landlady to tell him that she had not seen me and since I had left the key in the usual place, she presumed I had gone home.

⁸ A Party representative participated in oral exams on behalf of the system and could influence their outcome.

From then on, I tried to stay as far away from Sierpc as possible. In 1955, I learned that in September there would be additional entrance examinations at the Catholic University of Lublin. That was the only university without a Party representative.⁹ I passed the exams and stayed in Lublin.

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This is a story of my father's personal trauma but there are as many stories as there are people. The trauma of Communism was universal, regardless of the actual choices you made. If you gave in, you feel the trauma because you fear you failed. If you did not and showed indomitable character like my father, you ended up in trouble for decades. If you survived. And if you voluntarily cooperated with the system and had no qualms about it, you are the moral victim of the system, which had taken away from you the most precious human endowment – the desire to do good and to avoid evil. Communism infected us all in so many ways and its traumas have stayed with us for so many years after its fall that we need a brand-new generation, a generation not affected by our trauma to whisk away its ghosts. But we – the victims and witnesses – need to teach this new generation *to know* and, in contrast to my generation, *not to stay silent*; to be wary of any totalitarian systems which can lure us with promises. We need to look at them against the light and see what they really hold. We owe it to our parents and grandparents, and to our children, and their children alike.

⁹ Founded in 1918 and reopened after the war in 1945, the Catholic University of Lublin was the only independent university not only in Poland but also in the whole Communist Block.