

# THE TRAUMA OF COMMUNISM

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## THE LIGHT-LIFE MOVEMENT IN POLAND UNDER THE COMMUNISTS

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*Maciej Münnich*

Our conference concerns personal experiences of the times of communism. Naturally, it will not include the first years of communism in Poland, because those who remembered them, to a large extent, are already gone. Given my age, I can only speak of the final years of the regime. However, I think my experience is quite typical of a significant number of young people growing up especially in the seventies and eighties.

It should be emphasized that the communists in Poland never managed to organize an efficient youth movement that would promote their ideas. The attempt to take over the scouting movement, i.e., the Polish Scouting Association, failed. After the removal of pre-war, patriotic instructors in 1949, the movement was incorporated into the Polish Youth Union and practically disappeared in its official form. After the October thaw in 1956, the Polish Scouting Association was reactivated. Until the fall of communism, repressed patriotic trends clashed with communist ideas imposed from above. This resulted, despite the mass of the movement (around 3 million members in 1980), in its internal division and ensuing weakness. Many of the instructors did not follow the rules of the Scouting movement and were rather government officials delegated to work with youth. The real instructors, on the other hand, had to run their activities semi-illegally. Attempts to create the so-called Red Scouting (1954–1961) also failed. It was no different with the youth group of the communist party, i.e., the Polish

Youth Union, renamed the Union of Socialist Youth in 1957. Both organizations were massive (at their peak they had 2 million members each), but membership in them was forced and, for the most part, phony. Research shows that only 10% of the Polish Youth Union members signed up for ideological reasons. This meant that the communist offer for youth, especially school children, was denied on ideological grounds, and was not considered attractive by most of the society.

The Catholic Church tried to enter this void, but it was not easy. On the one hand, the restrictions imposed by the communist authorities led to the dissolution of all Catholic youth movements in 1949 (Sodality of Our Lady, Catholic Youth Association). On the other hand, the natural tendency of young people to approach the existing structures critically did not make the task any easier. Traditional catechesis conducted outside school, although substantial in numbers, did not activate young people. It was only in the context of the Second Vatican Council that a movement emerged in Poland that tried to form young people, and later also families, independently of the communists. We are talking about the Light-Life Movement.

The Light-Life movement was established in 1976, although it had been formed earlier in 1969. Its creator was Fr. Franciszek Blachnicki. A few words are due about the founder because his biography is really interesting. He was born in 1921. Before the Second World War he belonged to the Polish Scouting Association. This had an impact on the foundations of the organization he would create. The important elements of Blachnicki's idea were: cooperation in a small group (like a scout group) and abstinence. It is interesting that before the war, Blachnicki declared himself a non-believer. In 1939 he fought as a soldier and was taken prisoner by the Germans. He escaped from captivity, became involved in the resistance movement, and was arrested in 1940. He was a prisoner in KL Auschwitz with the camp number 1201 (14 months in

total, 9 of them in a penal company), and later in German prisons in Gliwice and Katowice, where he waited for a sentence for his activity in the resistance movement. In March 1942 he was sentenced to death by guillotine. On death row, he waited for the execution until August 1942. He then experienced a conversion. Ultimately, the sentence was changed to 10 years of hard imprisonment after the end of the war. Until the end of the war, he was held in various prisons and concentration camps. He was released only on April 17, 1945. After returning to Poland, he entered the seminary and was ordained a priest in 1950. As early as 1954, he organized a retreat for children in the form of a holiday trip in a small group. In 1957 he organized the Crusade of Temperance – the abstinence movement. However, because it was beyond the control of the state authorities, the communists decided to dissolve the movement in 1960. Fr. Blachnicki was then imprisoned in Katowice (in the same cell he was in during World War II) for having illegal leaflets urging sobriety. The whole situation showed that the goal of the communist authorities was by no means to fight the scourge of drunkenness – after all, it is easier to rule the drunk. Communists could not tolerate any independent activity, even for such a completely non-political purpose.

When a priest got in the communists' bad books, the bishops often tried to "remove him from sight" of the authorities, which is why he was sent to study at the Catholic University of Lublin. Blachnicki first studied and then lectured in pastoral theology in 1961–1972. During his stay in Lublin, Fr. Blachnicki got to know the various trends of the Council's renewal (especially in the liturgy) and tried to implement them. He led the pastoral ministry of the liturgical service, which he developed into a wider "Oasis" movement, based on the method of 15-day retreats for young people and then year-round work in parishes. Since the movement was grassroots, that is, it was not initially formalized as an organization, the communists had nothing to dissolve. In addition, Fr. Blachnicki

did not organize the movement at the behest of one of the bishops within his diocese, but somewhat outside of the diocesan hierarchy. Hence, it was difficult for the communist authorities to put pressure on a specific bishop to ban the activity. The “Oasis” movement at the turn of the ‘60s and ‘70s was still very small. However, a decade later (in 1979), about 30,000 people, many of them young, went on holiday retreats already organized in all dioceses. Gradually, groups of families, called circles, also began to appear (since 1973). Even martial law (from 1981) did not stop the development of the movement, and in 1985 about 70,000 people participated in the summer retreats.

I encountered the oasis movement in the 1980s. You could say that I found it in a way that was quite typical for my generation. First, along with the whole class, I was enrolled in the Polish Scouting Association where, instead of a young patrol leader, our teacher was the instructor. She was very nice, but it goes without saying that the teacher was always treated by the young people as standing on the other side of the barricade. In order to draw us in and encourage us to act, other young people were needed – and these were simply not there. In the end, I became disaffected with scouting after summer camp, which was badly organized, and some of the staff dealt more with themselves and alcohol than with young scouts. This is how my adventure with the youth movement organized by the communist state ended. And then a nun (without a habit), conducting catechesis outside the school, suggested in our class that we could join the “Oasis.” Two of us applied. It was completely voluntary, unlike state-supported organizations. At that time, everything seemed ordinary: a young boy in the Polish countryside, in a small town of 20,000, simply began to attend weekly meetings in a small group of several people, led by an only slightly older leader. The agenda of the meetings and the subject matter were predetermined, but the form was rather loose and assumed a discussion, not a lecture. The basic element was reading the Bible and talking about the pas-

sage that was read. In addition, there were joint meetings, singing songs, going outside the city, and a lot of contact with nature, all in a peer group. The meetings in the group were separate for boys and girls. However, apart from these meetings, boys and girls were together everywhere. A 15-day retreat in the youth group was organized during the summer holidays. The tutors, or leaders, were our colleagues, and the whole retreat was led by a moderator, usually a young priest. Oases were usually organized in villages. The conditions were spartan. There were old unrenovated monasteries without running water, so we had to wash at the well. Sometimes it was a rural presbytery, where we used to nestle on mattresses in a cramped attic with narrow, curving metal steps. When a herd of 13-14-year-old boys ran over them, the whole building was literally shaking. The old parish priest on the second day of the retreat hung up a small note: "Please come down like people." The retreats were often organized in such a way that the participants slept in private houses where rooms were rented and joined common activities and meals in one of the houses or at the presbytery. The meals were modest, sometimes prepared from gifts sent from the West for the Polish Church. To this day, I remember the taste of the so-called Schmalzfleisch (not the best one, honestly). However, in view of the emerging community, these inconveniences did not matter much. They even held a certain allure, different from ordinary home life. Today, of course, no one would agree to organize a holiday for children in a center without running water.

We performed all tasks in small groups, which gave us a sense of community and taught cooperation. In addition to religious meetings and masses, there was of course a lot of physical activity, hiking, having fun together, evening bonfires, etc. There was always a lot of contact with nature, which was an invaluable attraction for the townspeople. Until the end of primary school (until the age of 14), the retreats were separate for boys and girls. Later both sexes were together. Of course, the first teenage loves were born; some of

them have stood the test of time and the couples are still married today. My best friend married a girl he had met within the “Oasis” movement (unfortunately she is no longer alive). The entire oasis program had so-called “degrees” that were associated with meetings during the year and going on a holiday retreat. After completing the final degree, i.e., around the age of 17, you could participate in a course for leaders and go on holiday retreats as a caretaker. This activity often continued throughout the study period, till the age of 23–24.

All of this took place outside of the communist state. From our perspective, the state might not exist at all. We wanted no care or money from it, and the ideals we were taught did not fit the communist ideas at all. Instead of class struggle and revolution, we learned about cooperation and love; instead of reading Marx’s works, we read the Bible; instead of helping workers in state factories, we sometimes helped private farmers with their farm work. No policy-related topics were planned for the meetings. In the material we received to conduct our meetings, politics simply did not exist. However, the values that appeared important to us excluded communist ideas. Personally, I did not know any member of the “Oasis” movement who had communist beliefs. Of course, we were too young to be members of the Polish United Workers’ Party (I was only 16 in 1989, when the communist rule in Poland collapsed), but also among my older colleagues there was no such person. On the other hand, many older friends were involved in opposition, especially during their studies. The reaction of the authorities was predictable. Starting in the ‘70s they began to treat the oasis movement and its creator as an opponent.

Initially, however, the authorities did not notice the grassroots movement. Originally, the object of interest was Fr. Blachnicki and people from his immediate surroundings. They were observed, their correspondence was checked, and sometimes their places of residence were searched. Attempts were made to accuse Fr. Blachnicki

of illegal publishing activities in connection with a magazine devoted to the post-conciliar liturgy renewal, "Bulletin of Liturgical Renewal." Ultimately, however, the Security Service (political police) did not gather sufficient evidence and the charges were dropped (1969). Following the increase in the number of oasis groups, the communist authorities acted on two levels. The first was harassment involving administrative measures. The second involved the activities of the secret services.

Attempts to intimidate through administrative action took many forms. From the beginning of the 1970s, teams consisting of local representatives of the fire brigade, sanitary inspection, and school authorities, usually accompanied by the militia or sometimes a non-uniformed Security Service officer, were sent to the farmers hosting the participants of the holiday retreats. These teams always found some fault that allowed them to issue a mandatory fine. It could have been water in the well that did not meet sanitary requirements, no lightning rod on the roof, etc. On this basis, a decision was issued to terminate the retreat and participants were ordered to go home. On the other hand, the practice of the priests conducting the retreats was to inform the authorities that the control teams operated on the basis of the regulations relating to summer camps for youth, while oases are not summer camps but retreats. The Church had permission to conduct the retreat, the moderator was sent by a bishop, and only the bishop could revoke it. Therefore, decisions to dissolve the retreat were sent to the appropriate episcopal curia. Of course, by the time the answer came from there, the retreat had already ended on the scheduled date. Sometimes, in the face of information about the planned inspection, the participants of the retreat fled, for example, to a nearby forest and waited for the commission to depart. My older brother, who was also a member of the Light-Life Movement, told me about such cases. However, the Movement headquarters advised against this type of procedure because the control teams could return at any time, which made it

difficult to implement the retreat plan. Ultimately, the inspection teams' visit ended with a mandatory fine for the farmers hosting the retreat participants and an order to terminate the retreat. In reality, however, the retreat was not terminated, and the fines were paid by the Light-Life Movement. As the movement grew, so did the number of fines issued. At one point, having a problem with paying the fines, Fr. Blachnicki asked members of the oasis for small contributions to pay the fines. The sum that was collected from thousands of payments was more than enough to cover all fines.

In an administrative manner, not only individual retreat groups were harassed, but also the headquarters of the movement, located in the small mountain village of Krościenko. Financial penalties were regularly imposed for the "illegal expansion" of the center, for example for the construction of a chapel in the attic of a building. Of course, a permit has never been issued for legal construction. There were some bizarre situations. In 1979, an amphitheater was built on the site as a meeting place for larger groups. During the construction works, a commission came and qualified the construction as a construction without a license and started sealing it off. The workers got scared of the commission and began to leave the construction site. At that time, Fr. Blachnicki said that the amphitheater was being prepared in connection with the first pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II to Poland, which had already been planned for that year. Due to such an important reason, the work had to continue. At the same time, he expressed his understanding of the work of the commission and suggested that the commission should seal half of the area, and he would work with the workers on the other. After the commission had finished sealing its part, it switched places and the commission sealed the other part while the workers continued to work, naturally breaking the seals. Of course, the fines were traditionally imposed, but the whole thing confirmed a bad opinion of authorities among the residents, as it showed the authorities as fighting the church as well as the pope, who enjoyed great authority.

Another example of activity of the Light-Life Movement limited by administrative means were such banal situations as the refusal to sell coal for heating the center in Krościenko in 1977. Fr. Blachnicki again asked all members of the movement for support in the form of sending a kilogram of coal to the center's address. In a short time, the post office in Krościenko was paralyzed with hundreds of packages of coal and the local authorities agreed to sell the coal for the center. Yet another way to limit the development of the movement was to seize the car of Fr. Blachnicki under the guise of finding illegal publications in it. Activities of this type intensified in the years 1977–79. However, they were not able to stop the development of the movement. The authorities did not decide to adopt forceful solutions, because the seventies were portrayed in propaganda as a period of stabilization, harmony, and peaceful development.

Due to the ineffectiveness of the administrative pressure, the work of the secret services was intensified. Secret collaborators began to be introduced to the Light-Life Movement, first to find out about the method of operation and the possibilities of the organization. It was relatively easy to recruit someone from among the youth. He/she could have been a substitute from the very beginning, or more often such a person could have been intimidated in some way and thus cooperated with the communist services. The most valuable acquisitions for the secret services, however, were people closely related to Fr. Blachnicki, especially priests. According to estimates (no exact data are available due to the destruction of the archives of the Security Service in 1989), about 10% of priests in Poland somehow collaborated with the secret services. Considering that every priest, and even every cleric in the seminary, had a file and was subject to observation, and in practice an attempt was almost always made to recruit him at some point, this means that about 90% of the clergy did not agree to cooperate. As far as one can compare, it was a much better result than in neighboring

Czechoslovakia or the German Democratic Republic, not to mention the Soviet Union. In the 1940s and 1950s, before the thaw after Stalin's death, clergymen were forced to cooperate by suffering bogus accusations, prison sentences, and torture. Such was the case with Fr. Stanisław Skorodecki, who was arrested and finally sentenced to 10 years in prison. In prison, he decided to cooperate with the special services and reported on a fellow inmate, Primate Wyszyński. After he was released and changed his nickname (from "Krystyna" to "Wanda"), he continued to write denunciations, this time, among others, as the diocesan moderator of the Light-Life Movement in the Lubaczów diocese. Thanks to these denunciations, the Security Service knew what was happening in the headquarters of the movement. Later, the Security Service most often used blackmail during recruitment. In Polish, the expression "korek, worek i rozporek" (cork, sack, and fly of trousers) was used. This means blackmailing over alcohol abuse ("cork"), financial difficulties ("sack") and sexual trouble ("fly"). However, since priests with the above-mentioned problems rarely showed zeal and were not involved in the newly emerging movement, the degree of infiltration by clergymen cooperating with the Security Service was relatively low.

In this situation, the Security Service began a large-scale operation to denigrate the Light-Life Movement inside the Catholic Church. I remember the effects of this type of action from the 1980s. The Security Service spread among the faithful, and especially among priests, information about the alleged "Protestantization" of the movement. I saw in the local archives of the Sandomierz diocese a letter distributed to bishops expressing concern about the alleged influence of the Baptists on the movement and warning bishops and parish priests against facilitating the activities of the Light-Life Movement. These accusations were made intelligently, for example, using the ecumenical collaboration of Fr. Blachnicki with the Protestant "Agape" movement, or with Christians in Norway, who collected food for the participants of the retreats in Poland in the 1980s

when food was rationed. Also, through the Norwegian Protestants, about 1.4 million copies of the Bible, which could not be printed in Poland, reached my homeland. To this day, I use such a Bible. Interestingly, it was an edition prepared by the Polish Catholic publishing house *Pallotinum*, i.e., together with deuterocanonical books. At some point, however, editions with the title page of the *Pallotinum* Bible appeared, but without the deuterocanonical books. So far, it has not been established who printed them and where. However, it gave rise to accusations of the Light-Life Movement of allegedly distributing the Bible in the Protestant canon. The Security Service distributed leaflets with such accusations, for example among participants of pilgrimages to Jasna Góra, the most popular Marian shrine in Poland. In addition, the Special Service prepared the Movement's original formative materials, changing some of the content but keeping the original layout and graphics. However, content was added that called for disobedience to the old bishops, who were not supposed to understand the spirit of the conciliar changes. There were also added messages indicating the worship of Fr. Blachnicki, which was supposed to suggest the sectarian nature of the movement with Blachnicki as a guru. Information of this type reached the lowest level of the Church in Poland, and I have heard from a churchman in my parish more than once that the Oasis is a sect. Such accusations were particularly easy in relation to the liturgical reform introduced in the 1970s. Fr. Blachnicki was one of the people developing new liturgical forms in the Church in Poland, and the Light-Life Movement was naturally the first environment in which they were practiced, which aroused distrust among some of the older priests. This also applied to bishops. Some of them eagerly saw the development of the Movement in their dioceses, others were reluctant to allow it. The Security Service was able to sow distrust to such an extent that the bishops decided in 1977 that all printed materials of the Movement had to have imprimatur. Fortunately, the diocese of Krakow was indicated, where the publishing

house of the movement was located at that time, and the archbishop was Wojtyła, who was favorable to the movement. Nevertheless, the accusations and doubts of the bishops regarding the actions of Fr. Blachnicki led him to resign. Although it was not adopted, it indicated the effectiveness of the Security Service's actions in trying to break up the Church from within. The most spectacular action of the Security Service was forging a letter from Fr. Blachnicki to Bp. Tokarczuk and handing it over in May 1981 to the Primate of Poland, Abp. Wyszyński. The Primate was seriously ill at the time and died soon thereafter. The letter aroused an angry reaction from Abp. Wyszyński, who wrote to the tutor of the movement on the part of the episcopate, Bp. Błaszkiewicz, his own letter strongly criticizing "the audacious Fr. Blachnicki." This private letter was soon made public by the Security Service, and due to the death of the Primate, the forgery could not be explained.

On December 10, 1981, Fr. Blachnicki left for Rome. While there he heard of the introduction of the Martial Law on December 13, 1981. As it was impossible to return to Poland, he finally settled in Germany in a Polish center in Carlsberg. Due to the absence of Fr. Blachnicki, the general moderator of the movement was Fr. Danielski. However, Fr. Blachnicki and his activities in Germany disturbed the communist authorities to such an extent that they decided to play a complicated espionage game. In 1982, the couple Jolanta and Andrzej Gontarczyk left Poland for Germany under the guise of emigration. There, the couple got involved in the activities of Fr. Blachnicki, including managing the printing house. From 1987, however, rumors began to appear that they were acting for the Security Service. On February 26, 1987, Fr. Blachnicki announced that in the coming days he would receive information on the possible cooperation of the Gontarczyks with the Security Service. The next day, the Gontarczyks met with Fr. Blachnicki. During the conversation there was a quarrel between them. A few hours later, Fr. Blachnicki died suddenly. The German doctor who arrived

at the scene said he was dead and mentioned pulmonary embolism as the cause. An autopsy was not performed. The Gontarczyks stayed in Germany for some time, but when they were threatened with exposure, they returned to the People's Republic of Poland. In the regime television they painted a black picture of Fr. Blachnicki. After 1989, it turned out that from the very beginning they had been secret agents of the Security Service (alias "Panna" and "Yon"). Jolanta Lange (now she has returned to her maiden name) is currently active in the feminist movement promoting abortion and same-sex marriage. For years there have been suspicions that Fr. Blachnicki was poisoned by the Gontarczyks, who feared a premature exposure. Currently, an investigation into this matter by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance has been reopened.

Despite various attempts, the communists did not manage to dissolve the Light-Life Movement. They did not decide to use force even during the Martial Law period, probably not wanting to threaten their relations with the Church. Perhaps they hoped that thanks to the efficient action of the Secret Service, they would be able to break up this movement inside the Church. Admittedly, in the early 1980s they were not far from achieving this goal. Paradoxically, however, the stay of Fr. Blachnicki in the West reduced tensions within the Church in Poland, and his successor, Fr. Danielski, was able to deftly counter various allegations prepared by the Security Service and made to the bishops. Ultimately, at the end of the 1980s, about 80,000 people participated in the retreat every year. Most of them were still young, although over time more and more families also appeared. Undoubtedly, the Light-Life Movement broke the monopoly of the communist authorities among youth movements, and for this very reason it was dangerous to the authorities. It is estimated that in total nearly half a million people participated in some form of Oasis retreat before the fall of communism. Over time, this mass of young people grew into adults who were insensitive to communist propaganda, but aware of the value of community

*Maciej Münnich*

and freedom. Currently, the Light-Life Movement is one of many different movements in Poland trying to organize both youth and adults. Nowadays the proportions have been reversed and most of the movement participants are families. It is estimated that only in the so-called Home Church, or the family branch of the Light-Life movement, about 400,000 people are formed.