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CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS IN SOCIALIST POLAND, 1980-1987

by Lawrence Klippenstein

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Poland has no independent peace movement, and Polish pacifism is a contradiction in terms. So it has been said and commonly believed. Evidence for this view is ready at hand. The official press of Poland, for example, has carried little "peace propaganda," while Polish participation in the Christian Peace Conference and the Pugwash Conference seems insignificant, albeit not missing totally. There has seemed even in the recent past to be a reverence for things military that the years of communist control of the armed forces has not changed. Western peace movements have been scorned by many Poles, while demonstrations for nuclear disarmament are not infrequently passed off as propaganda orchestrated somehow by the Kremlin itself.

Not long ago, however, another wind has seemingly started to blow. For example, in February 1984 the Founding Section of Militants for Peace and Solidarity (Szegedi pokoju i solidarnosci) published a declaration of peace concerns. "We do not want to have enemies either in the East or West," the statement said, "we value truth, freedom, and peace. . . . Our primary goal is to initiate a general peace movement in the People's Republic of Poland." The group's ten "desiderata" included a call to remove all atomic weapons from Polish soil, the departure of all Soviet troops from Poland, a demand for reduction of armaments, the disbanding of all para-military formations, an appeal for all European nations to protest against increasing militarization in their societies, and a call to all peace movements to protest against the suppression of independent peace movements in the GDR, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, and the People's Republic of Poland.¹

The creation of Wolnosc i pokoj (Group for Freedom and Peace) is another, possibly more dramatic case in point. According to KOS, an underground journal of Komitet Oporu Spolecznego (Committee for Social Resistance), this organization came to life in the spring of 1985 with
a hunger strike at Podkowo Lesna, near Warsaw. Twenty participants had met there to protest the imprisonment of a person refusing to take the military oath. For this action Marek Adamiewicz, a student from Szczecin, has been expelled from university in 1978, and interned during the period of martial law.2

In focusing on the issue of the oath, and indeed the broader question of military service itself, one of the protestors, Jacek Czaputowicz, noted, "We want to change the system, so that there is alternative service for those who do not want to enter the army. There is already alternative service for those whom the government decides not to send into the army--like members of the party."3

That was the concern already of the Committee against Repression for Those Objecting to Military Service established within Solidarity before the imposition of martial law (1981). Specifically it had aimed at changing the constitution of Poland to allow exemptions for military service, while at the same time providing some form of civilian service "of general benefit" instead. It hoped as well to improve the lot of those refusing military service by organizing mediation sessions on non-violent resistance and self-help psychotherapy for those who wished to prepare for imprisonment, by disseminating information on repressive measures against COs, by spreading information on how the question of National Defense was dealt with in other countries, and by making available literature presenting pacifist beliefs.4

The extraordinary conscription of many young Solidarity supporters during the period of martial law, and the military suppression of the movement generally, brought the matter of recruitment to military service into added disrepute for these conscripts and many others.5

Twenty-two-year-old Maciej Glebocki had helped to force the issue when he refused to obey his call to military service in 1982. He was sentenced first to three years imprisonment, then had it extended to two and a half more. After the amnesty of 1983, when the section of his prison which housed sentenced trade unionists was closed, Maciej was moved to another prison. He was not eligible for amnesty. The Polish Episcopacy intervened on his behalf in the autumn of 1983, but in vain.6

Objectors to the military oath received more public attention when a Warsaw University student, Miroslav Zablocki, refused to take the oath in May 1984. His case was referred to the High Court in Warsaw for definition of his legal position. In October of the same year, the court declared that refusing to take the oath was equivalent to rejecting military obligations (identical to the view taken on the matter in the Soviet Union). Zablocki was thus liable to punishment by imprisonment of up to five years. He was, in fact, sentenced to
only one year, suspended for two years. It is believed that over a hundred people were imprisoned by the end of 1985 on the basis of this precedent.\(^7\)

The protests of Podkowa Lesna on behalf of Marek heightened as the year went on. On October 4, 1985, 21 persons, mostly students, handed in their military papers to the Polish Ministry of Defense. It was not only a protest against the sentence of two and a half years' imprisonment handed down to Marek in December the year before. The students were concerned as well about the content of the oath required of all recruits for the Polish army.\(^8\)

Four days later more than 100 citizens of Gdansk signed a petition in support of conscientious objection to military service, and submitted it to the Polish Sejm (Parliament). Before long the number of signators had risen to over 1,000. The petition put forth the following demands:

1. Immediate release of all who had been condemned for taking the oath in its present form, or having refused to do their military service.

2. Introduction of the principle of voluntary military oath, and limitation of its content to obligations to the Fatherland.

3. Provision for every person who refused military service for political, ethical, or religious reasons, of serving society in a different form.

Signators of the petition included Lech Walesa, Fr. Henryk Jankowski, Andrzej Gwiazda, Joanna Dud-N-Gwiazda, and Anna Walentynowicz.\(^9\)

The hunger strike itself included a seminar on peace and human rights held at the church in Podkowa Lesna. Leading intellectuals such as Jacek Kuron addressed the group. The seminar, which stressed the teachings of Pope John Paul as well as the pacifism of Ghandi and Buddhism, lasted a week. That was when the "Movement of Freedom and Peace" (Ruch Wolności i Pokój) came into being.\(^10\)

The military oath has become a particular target of criticism and protest now because its wording was recently altered, after the imposition of martial law. Conscripts must now pledge allegiance and loyalty not only to their own country as was the case before; they must swear allegiance as well to the main ally of Poland, i.e., the Soviet Union. Nationalistic Poles usually found the former quite acceptable, but the latter increasingly difficult to do.\(^11\)

As suggested earlier, military prosecutors have argued in recent cases that refusing to take the oath implies refusal to carry out military duties generally, i.e., it is paramount to rejecting military service altogether. Military service is by law compulsory for all males, and for certain groups of females, such as doctors. All non-student males are conscripted at the age of 19 for two to three years
for basic training and service. After that they are periodically recalled to serve in 2-3 month "refresher" camps, and are obliged to carry military identity cards. Young soldiers have to take the oath between the period of basic training and active combat service. Provisions for civilian service (seemingly never granted) were withdrawn at the time of martial law in December 1981. Exemptions are granted only to priests, farm workers of certain categories, and mothers. Students may get deferrals.12

During April 1985, the Freedom and Peace group drew up a declaration of its broader purposes which, it said, had been inspired particularly by the sermons of Pope John Paul II. The declaration stated that it was the aim of Freedom and Peace to bring the greatest possible number of Poles to a true unfalsified understanding of the notion of peace. "The word peace," John Paul II said in a sermon of 1979, "has become a slogan which deceives or stultifies . . . . Consequently to many people in Poland, anyone using the term peace has become morally suspect or politically alien." First of all therefore we want to give peace activities back their moral and political values.13

First of all, the statement declared, there must be an effective guarantee of personal freedom for all.

There can be no peace where traditional political values have been destroyed, where systems of government repression and enforced ideology have been formed, and where the individual has been relieved of his right to independence and initiative. There can be no peace then in a Poland governed by communists.14

The primacy of a concern for personal freedom of conscience shone through in a document submitted to the Minister of Defense on behalf of Adamkiewicz. Personal conscience was the reason, said the document, for returning the draft cards, not any objection to the principle of military service in defense of the country.

Another of the group members, Jacek Czapatowicz, explained in an interview with the Solidarity magazine Kontakt (published in Paris), "We are a peace movement, but unlike pacifist movements in the West, we are concerned primarily about concrete issues, not about the disarmament of Europe, or the reduction of arms in Poland."15 A leaflet handed out in Polish cities at the time of the October 1985 big antimi ssile demonstration in Brussels called for "real peace talks" and suggested that individuals from the West form "personal peace pacts" with Polish counterparts. There ought to be direct cooperation be-
tween independent social movements and more personal contacts between persons from the warring blocs. Individual commitments, the pamphlet suggested, might go much further than détente treaties signed among the superpowers.16

Polish authorities kept a sharp eye on all peace activities, individual or otherwise, unswervingly opposed above all to any actions resisting military service. Heavy fines were laid on several leaders of the spring Adamkiewicz protest. Leszek Budrewicz, Pawel Jacek, Marek Krukowski, and Tomasz Wacko of Wroclaw each had to pay the equivalent of five months' wages, i.e., 50,000 złotys, or spend 30 days in detention. Five other men from Warsaw were given the same "alternatives." Others were arrested. Those convicted said they would refuse to pay the fine but till January 15, 1986, at least, they were able to remain out of jail.17

On November 15, 1985, Wojciech Jankowski, one of the members of the Gdansk demonstration, was arrested for refusing military service. He was immediately sentenced to three months of detention. Trial was set for December 23. His hearing at the Navy court in Gnydia was set forward an hour so friends who wanted to be present arrived in the courtroom only to be told that the session was over and that Jankowski had already been sentenced. The court judge had given him three and a half years imprisonment. He made it plain, moreover, that his sentence was to be a deterrent to others, noting also that it reflected the "socially damaging nature of the offense," and the fact that "similar offenses occur with increasing frequency in the area of the court's jurisdiction." In the course of the latest call-up around the end of the year, 14 persons from the Gdansk area had refused to serve in the army.18

The Freedom and Peace movement published a more clearly nuanced and expanded program in December 1985. It acknowledged the importance of the struggle for citizens' rights, as well as freedom of speech and the press, and the right to form independent unions. Viewing the Catholic Church as the "spokesman for national aspirations and universal moral values," the document affirmed the push for religious freedom as an essential aspect of the struggle for the defense of human rights. It also declared that any means to obtain national independence, as long as they were nonviolent, could be justified. The group itself plans to further all its objectives in the struggle against evil on this non-violent basis.

Along more political lines, the program called for a neutral demilitarized zone in Central Europe on the condition that the countries of eastern Europe be democratized! Efforts of western peace groups, and the support of those bodies especially which emphasize concern over human rights as an essential precondition of peace, are
noted in the program also. It includes furthermore a concern about protection of the environment, hunger in the Third World, education with the hope of reforming military education in particular, the full development of individual human potential, and support of the principle of universal tolerance.19

Was anyone listening in the Ministry of Defense or elsewhere higher up? One may assume that the authorities were indeed well aware of what was being said and planned by the peace movements and related groups. But the evidence suggested that nothing was changing very fast. On February 19, 1986, Jacek Caputowicz and Piotr Niemczyk, two members of the Freedom and Peace group in Warsaw, were arrested, and charged with belonging to an illegal organization. Both were taken to Radowiecka Prison to await trial. A strongly worded protest from Lech Walesa was published in the underground press in March.20

Less than a month later, on March 16, six women began a week-long public fast in support of conscientious objectors. The fast was held in Podkowa Lesna, a village outside of Warsaw which had been the scene of an earliest fast and protest leading at that time to the founding of Freedom and Peace. As well as seeking to "defend" the imprisoned members of Freedom and Peace, the women's group made a strong plea for developing a better educational process, one which would delete aggression and violence from society and further democracy in the country. The statement of the group defined the basis of its proposals thus:

The road to the realization of these ideals is shown to us by the values of Christianity; love your neighbor, including enemies; rejection of punishment, which means revenge or vengeful; non-violence and forgiveness.21

The women declared that they hoped to begin this task by establishing a "Social Education Center" which would organize the exchange of experiences between scientists, activists of different movements, teachers, and all interested persons. The aid and encouragement of Father Leon Kantorski was specifically acknowledged by the fasters in their report of the event.

The Freedom and Peace group continued to hold its high public profile with a demonstration on May 2, protesting the opening of Poland's first nuclear plant. The Chernobyl explosion had taken place only a week earlier. People gathered quickly and police came to disperse them, yet held back. When the gathering finally did break up, five persons (not members of Freedom and Peace) were detained.

Two days later others members of Freedom and Peace attempted to commemorate publicly the life of Otto Schimek, an Austrian soldier in
Hitler's army who was shot after refusing to open fire on Poles. Hopeful participants were warned not to gather at Schimek's tomb in Machowa as announced. The gathering took place anyway. It included several pacifists from other countries, i.e., at least one East German and journalists from France and Italy. Police prevented people from actually meeting at the tomb. Many people were stopped and questioned, including 24 members of an Otto Schimek prayer group from Krakow. In the evening a few individuals did manage to visit the tomb.  

The holding action of the Polish authorities appeared to be shifting with the announcement by General Jaruselski in September that all persons sentenced or arrested for crimes and offenses against the state and public order would be released shortly. Explicitly, the amnesty was promised for September 15, and 225 prisoners would be affected. Solidarity leaders, Zbignew Bujak and Władysław Frasyniuk, were named in this group but whether Freedom and Peace prisoners would be also included was not immediately clear. Few expected this category to be among those involved in the release.  

As it turned out, however, all but one of the prisoners from the Freedom and Peace group were amnestied. Wojciech Jankowski began a "dry" hunger strike to secure his release as well. That followed in October, some days after the arrest of 15 members of RWP who had been demonstrating in a Warsaw shopping center for the right of consciencious objection.  

The difficult cases of more than 100 imprisoned Jehovah Witness conscientious objectors have been gaining attention during the months subsequent to the amnesty. It was rumored that some were being released as a runner-up to the amnesty. By late November 1986, news of several imprisoned individuals had reached the West. Keston News Service reported that information had been received about Jehovah Witnesses Bronisław Krest and Zenon Katulski, both sentenced on December 23, 1985, to 2 1/2 and 3 1/2 years of prison respectively. Jan Plitt and Tadeusz Garczynski were tried during the winter of 1985-86 and received sentences of 3 and 2 1/2 years respectively. All were being held in the Zwartowo prison in Warsaw. All together, Freedom and Peace sources said, about 300 Jehovah Witnesses were serving similar sentences. Others put that figure as high as 500.  

The Information Service of the Freedom and Peace group published more details about these objectors in their issue of November 30, 1986. A listing here included the names of fourteen Jehovah's Witnesses conscientious objectors. All of these had been arrested in 1985--one in February, one in March, one in October, and the rest in November. Three of the people were from Gdansk, one was from Puck,
one from Tczew, one from Tuchol, one from Kwidzyn, and the rest from Gdynia. Except for two persons, all received sentences of 3 to 3 1/2 years. The others got two and a half years.

Freedom and Peace pointed out clearly that the detention of these people was an infringement upon the Polish constitution which guarantees freedom of conscience and religion. It demanded the immediate release of all Jehovah's Witnesses still being held in prison.25

The ongoing campaign of Freedom and Peace for a civilian alternative to military service seems finally to be yielding some results. On January 30, 1986, the official Warsaw daily, Zycie Warszawy, reported that Polish recruits opposed to military service on religious grounds will be allowed to an alternative service in civilian organizations.26 In a reference to this kind of option, the government spokesman, Jerzy Urban, had made it clear that if such an alternative would ever be introduced it would be under the control of the army.27

Article 92 of the Polish constitution continues to state categorically that the defense of the country is the sacred duty of every citizen, and "that military service is the honorable patriotic duty of every citizen in the Polish People's Republic."28 It seems that no alternative service has been available till now, even though Jehovah's Witnesses were promised in 1980 already that they would no longer be imprisoned for refusing military service (hence allowed to do some substitute work). Now the Ministry of Defense has let it be known that "members of religious denominations which forbid the carrying of arms or all contact with the military may serve in the health service or other social services."29 This also means that men doing substitute service, for a minimum of two years, without interruptions, will not be required to wear uniforms. General Leslaw Wojtasik, who made the announcement, also told journalists that the 300 or so conscripts who refused to serve in the military each year do not affect the army's strength.29 It now remains to be seen, of course, whether this new policy will in fact effect significant changes for conscientious objectors or not.

At a press conference several months later, Jerzy Urban spelled out a few details of the alternative service proposal. First of all he admitted that some Jehovah's Witnesses were, indeed, being punished for refusing to serve in the army--far fewer, though, he said than the "thousands" some were saying had been imprisoned. He noted that this religious group was in fact an illegal one, but added that persons resisting for religious reasons were being sentenced not for their religious views but because they would not accept obligations of citizenship. He then added that the persons mentioned, i.e., Jehovah's Witnesses, also would not accept an alternative service. Such service, he said, "can be carried out in places of public services,
such as hospitals, institutions for protection of the environment, certain sectors of civil defense, voluntary work groups, fire protection, etc.\textsuperscript{30}

Then there is a bigger question behind it all: Can the peace movements, or more broadly stated, Polish pacifism, find some permanent rootage in the national soil? That calls for more analysis than will be attempted here. Suffice it to say, as more than one student of the situation has done already, that there are signs that what we see today is more than a passing phase.

A good deal has been said, for instance, about the essentially non-violent approach which characterized the Solidarity movement, even at the peak of its activity. Added to that are the teachings of the late Father Blachnicki in the renewal movement of the Roman Catholic Church, called Oasis. Besides these evidential materials, one could cite the teachings of Roman Catholic professors like Andrzej Grzegorczyk as well as other intellectuals, not to mention the peace emphasis of the Vatican in the speeches of Pope John XXIII and the present pope, John Paul II, constantly alluded to by Freedom and Peace groups themselves. Considerable disillusionment with the ineffective violent revolutionary tactics of Polish nacionalists in past history may help to fertilize the soil as well.\textsuperscript{31}

As Jacek Czaputowicz put it during the first hunger strike: "It is usually thought that peace movements have no chance here. We would like to discuss that during our strike--is there really no hope? And what would a Polish Peace movement look like? We are planning a series of seminars on that." The international peace seminar organized by Freedom and Peace in Warsaw on May 7-9, 1987, no doubt intended to touch on these issues as well. Little has been heard about the results of this meeting so far.\textsuperscript{32}

Paul Keim has this to say in the conclusion of his study of the theme:

Regardless of the political face of Poland's present reality, there is a spiritual transformation taking place which cannot be repressed and will continue to surface on the politically troubled waters of Eastern Europe. It is a spiritual transformation which Christians, and especially non-resistant Christians, in the West cannot afford to ignore.\textsuperscript{33}

With that judgment this brief survey of recent developments in one facet of the total picture can only concur. The story of the Polish peace workers in the 1980s is now pressing upon us seriously to be told in full.
Endnotes


3Peter Lane, "Polish groups risk harassment."

4"Solidarity Members on Conscription," WRI Newsletter, No. 186 (February 1982), p. 7. The article was translated from Solidarity's magazine, Voice of Solidarnosc, where it appeared before the imposition of martial law.

5These conscription activities were described in part in "Solidarnosc--At Czerwony Bor," WRI Newsletter, No. 192 (February 1983), p. 4.


9Ibid.

10Irena Korba, op. cit., p. 321.


13 Korba, op. cit., p. 321. Cf. also an address to the END convention in Amsterdam dated April 14, 1985, signed by 18 persons. An English translation is in the author's file.

14 Ibid.

15 Korba, op. cit., p. 322. An earlier interview with Jacek regarding the original hunger strike was published as "Servility is Threat to Peace," WRI Newsletter, No. 205 (May-June 1985), p. 6.

16 See "Text of Leaflet: London, Warsaw and Brussels," WRI Newsletter, No. 208 (November-December 1985), p. 3. Polish groups supporting the statement included Wola, Robotnik, MRKS (Interfactory Workers' Committee of Solidarity), and Fighting Solidarity. The idea of personal peace treaties was also promoted in Western peace groups such as those in The Netherlands. "Personal Peace Treaties--East/West," WRI Newsletter, No. 210 (April-May 1986), p. 10.

17 "Polish Anti-militarists Meet Repression," WRI Newsletter, No. 209 (January-February 1986), p. 3. Counseling for those seeking military exemption was offered through WKU (Army Complements Command) set up by RSA (Alternative Society Movement), the local anti-militarist organization of Gdansk.

18 Groups explicitly mentioned include CODENE (Comité pour le Desarmement Nucleaire en Europe), IKV (Interkerklyk Vredes beraad), and END (European Nuclear Disarmament).


20 Korba, op. cit., p. 323. Piotr was arrested following a visit to the West and charged with spreading false information in Poland and abroad. It was a charge that carried a maximum sentence of five years, but, it seems the charge was dropped not long afterward. "Poland: Freedom and Peace on Trial," WRI Newsletter, No. 210 (April-May 1986), p. 3.

22"Poles Protest Against Nuclear Plant and for CO," WRI Newsletter, No. 211 (June-July 1986), p. 2. An attempt to commemorate Schimek's life in 1985 was also made the previous year, two days after the arrest of Janowski in November. At that time, too, police interfered though some people did gather at Mochovo on that occasion. "Polish Anti-militarists Meet Repression," WRI Newsletter, No. 209 (February-March 1986), p. 3.


