

Wałęsa: hero, informer or victim of circumstance

By: **Robert Strybel**,

Our Warsaw Correspondent

WARSAW—No stranger to controversy, Lech Wałęsa, the former shipyard electrician regarded by many as “the man who overthrew communism”, is again at the center of a heated national debate. The allegation that he had been a communist secret police informer code-named Bolek in the 1970s has resurfaced time and again since 1992, when the then President led a parliamentary coup that toppled the government of Jan Olszewski.

When the right-wing government threw open secret-police files showing that the current president and other leading politicians had collaborated with the regime’s security apparatus, Wałęsa rallied a group of top parliamentarians to vote Olszewski and his cabinet out of office. Among the backers of the plan was future president Aleksander Kwaśniewski and today’s Prime Minister Donald Tusk. The latest round of the ongoing controversy erupted with the publication of “The Security Service and Lech Wałęsa” (“SB a Lech Wałęsa”), a book by two historians attached to the National Remembrance Institute which investigates communist crimes.

On the basis of surviving secret-police files, its authors Sławomir Cenckiewicz and Piotr Gontarczyk contend that in the years 1970-1972 Wałęsa had been on the regime’s payroll and had informed on his anti-communist coworkers at the Gdańsk shipyard. Józef Szyler, a shipyard worker at that time, said on Polish TV recently: “Wałęsa was the only person I had told of a plan to create a workers’ action group at the shipyard. How else could the secret police have got wind of it and thwarted the move if he didn’t inform them about it?”

Among Wałęsa’s severest critics have been crane-operator Anna Walentynowicz, whose dismissal in 1980 had triggered the Gdańsk Shipyard strike, and engineer Andrzej Gwiazda, initially Solidarity’s second in command. Through its infiltrators, the regime constantly dropped suggestions that they should have been Solidarity’s main leaders and planted evidence that Wałęsa was a secret-police stooge.

After toppling the commie-busting Olszewski cabinet, President Wałęsa requested and received the Bolek file from the state archives but later returned it with the incriminating pages missing, the book’s authors contend. But they managed to track down other documents purporting to show that for a time Wałęsa had been an informer and signed receipts for the payments he received in exchange.

Even before the book appeared, a group of journalists and intellectuals condemned it as a “smear campaign” against Wałęsa and the entire Solidarity movement. In response, a group of conservative activists countered that there should be no “sacred cows” and all the facts should be brought before the public. Despite Wałęsa’s denials and a court ruling eight years ago that he had never been a communist agent, President Lech Kaczyński repeated the allegation in a TV interview. Wałęsa then said the president should be impeached. He has also threatened to sue Polish TV for screening a documentary portraying him as a collaborator.

Probably Wałęsa’s biggest mistake has been his overly nervous reaction to the allegations, including his ouster of the Olszewski government, suppression of evidence and attempts at stonewalling. Only under the greatest pressure did he admit that he had indeed signed some papers but has tried to downplay their importance. People called in for questioning by the communist secret police were routinely required to pledge

not to reveal what went on during the interrogation. They also had to sign for the return of their belts, shoelaces and personal belonging when leaving custody.

According to the Polish-American historian Dr John Radziłowski, “it is likely that Wałęsa was an informer at some point during the 1970s.... The ‘Free Trade Unions of the Coast Region’, which was the genesis of Solidarity in the shipyards, was a creation of the security services. It is a common tactic in totalitarian societies for the secret police to create its own opposition groups. What happened in 1980 is that due to a unique combination of factors, the authorities lost control of their own creation.... Poland needs people who will tell the truth, not more lies, and we do Poland no favors by joining the chorus of those who want to suppress evidence and silence unpopular opinions.”

Among the documents surfacing recently was an SB (security service) report from the mid-1970s describing Wałęsa as uncooperative and virtually useless as an informer. That suggests that SB agents had pinned their hopes on the young shipyard electrician who may have simply led them on without providing any valuable information. But even if at one stage he did play ball with the regime’s police apparatus, that in no way detracts from his later achievements. Partly by being in the right place at the right time and partly thanks to his natural political instinct, Wałęsa took command of the 1980 shipyard strike that led to the creation of the Soviet bloc’s first and only independent trade union. Although it was suppressed the following year under martial law, during which Wałęsa spent a year in forced isolation, simmering opposition to the regime ultimately led to its peaceful overthrow at the polls in 1989.

Norman Davies, a British historian specializing in Polish and East European affairs, said the book was damaging to Poland’s international image and he himself would never have considered tackling such a sensitive subject this early. “In Britain secret state documents remain under wraps for 50 to 100 years.... The row over Wałęsa’s past is very harmful not so much to the former president, because it diminishes the prestige Solidarity and its victory round the globe,” Davies explained. But Prof. Andrzej Nowak disagrees: “This book brings us closer to the truth, even though the materials it contains are incomplete. Over a dozen items are missing, because they were illegally removed by Wałęsa in the early 1990s and not returned.”

The world-renowned composer Krzysztof Penderecki put it this way: “Lech Wałęsa can be forgiven for his indiscretion in view of his later accomplishments. His biggest mistake was to deny it and try to destroy the evidence.” That seems to be the majority view. In a recent survey, 60 percent of Poles said that Wałęsa should be forgiven even if the accusations are true, considering all he has done for Poland.

Wałęsa became Poland’s first Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1983 and its first democratically elected president in 1990. He has been showered with high-ranking decorations, honorary degrees and other awards by foreign statesmen and universities and has lectured extensively around the globe. Since the death of Pope John Paul II, Wałęsa has remained the world’s single most recognizable Pole, and most educated foreigners are now even able to correctly pronounce his surname: “Vawensa”. More importantly, he has already achieved a permanent place among the world’s most prominent 20th-century figures, and that is something no moment of weakness or youthful indiscretion can change. □

Did You Know that . ?

By: **Robert Strybel**,

Polish/Polonian Affairs Writer

** With is population of 38 million, Poland has more people than all five Scandinavian countries, Austria and Ireland combined.

** The lands of the Polonian-related tribes, the Pomeranians and Polabians, stretched far into what is today Germany. Their Slavonic names themselves indicate their territorial extent: Pomerania (Pomorze) means “along the sea” and Polabian (po Łabę) translates as “up to the (river) Elbe”.

** If you are online a word translated from Polish to English or from English to Polish visit this website: www.poltran.com However, only basic vocabulary is included.

** The distance from Warsaw to Białystok is 188 kilometers (117 miles), to Częstochowa - 222 (139), Gdańsk - 339 (211), Kraków 295 - (184), Lublin - 161 (100), Poznań - 310 (194) and Szczecin 524 - (327).

** Pol-Ams visiting Poland quickly catch on to distances in kilometers if they imagine each 10 kilometers to be roughly six miles. So a 300-km distance becomes about 180 miles and a speed of 50 km/h is approximately 30 mph.

** Richard M. Nixon was the first serving president of the United States to pay an official visit to Poland (in June 1972). Earlier (August 1959) he had become the first presiding US vice-president to pay an official visit to that country.

** According to the last US Census, 3.3% of America’s population, or 9,292,875 people, declared themselves to be Polish Americans. Italian roots were claimed by 5.9% and Irish ancestry – by 12.2%.

** Poland’s national anthem is “Dąbrowski’s Mazurka” which begins with the words: “Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła” (Poland has not yet perished). “Boże coś Polskę” is regarded as its religious anthem.

** With “Made in China” goods flooding the world market these days, a refreshing change of pace was news that China’s Jiujiang Aeronautics Co. had clinched a deal to purchase a fleet of 150 helicopters from Poland’s PZL Świdnik aviation works.

** The official name of today’s Poland is the Republic of Poland (Rzeczpospolita Polska). The Soviet-controlled puppet state that collapsed in 1989 was officially known as the People’s Republic of Poland (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa).

** Poland is Europe’s stork stronghold and home to one-fourth of all the world’s white storks. although called the “bocian biały” (white stork), it actually has black wings. Poles regard the species as a good-luck symbol and a stork’s nest on a farmhouse or barn as a good omen.

** You may be able to find the addresses and phone numbers of relatives in Poland by visiting this site: <http://ksiazka-telefoniczna.com/index.php>

** Krzysztof Penderecki, who recently celebrated his 80th birthday, is regarded by many experts as the world’s greatest living composer. Most of his great compositions have been based on monumental religious or historical themes including Auschwitz and Katyń.

** Loup City, which is located in Sherman County and has a population of nearly 1,000, is known as “the Polish capital of Nebraska”.

** Poles use bath sponges of varying size and texture (from gentle to abrasive), not washcloths, when they wash, shower or bathe.

** You can study medicine or dentistry in Poland in English at much less than what it costs in the US. After passing the required exams, graduates can get licensed to practice medicine in America. For information visit: <http://www.gotomedschool.com/faqs.html>

** President Harry Truman was the first American chief executive to proclaim

Pułaski Day a day of official remembrance in 1946.

** The Polish term krupnik has two completely different meanings. It can be both a potent honey-spice cordial (usually served piping hot) and a hearty barley-vegetable soup.

** Janosik, Poland’s (and Slovakia’s) legendary Tatra Mountain brigand, led a band of adventurers who defended peasants persecuted by the nobility and stole from the rich to give to the poor.

** Polish forces are currently participating in international peace-keeping operations in Afghanistan, Chad, Syria, Congo, Lebanon, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo as well as the US-led stabilization mission in Iraq.

** Poland or Polska got its name from the Polonians, the West Slavic tribe the became the nucleus of the future country in the 10th century under the rule of Duke Mieszko I. The term “Polonian”, comes from the word “pole” (field) and means field-dweller.

** Roman Catholics in Poland receive communion by having the consecrated host place on their tongues, not in their hands. In parishes of the Polish (National) Catholic Church, the host is first dipped in consecrated wine by the priest before being placed on the worshiper’s tongue.

** Polish is a West Slavonic tongue, spoken by 38 million people in today’s Poland and, with varying degrees of fluency, by perhaps another 10 abroad. It belongs to the same language family as Czech, Slovak and Wendish (Sorbian).

** Robert Kujawa (stage-name: Bob Kames), who created the world-famous “Chicken Dance”, died recently of prostate cancer at 82. The Milwaukee Pol-Am had performed with Lawrence Welk, had his own TV program and recorded more than 70 albums.

** Non-Poles have a hard time trying to say “W Szczepieszynie chrząszcz brzmi w trzcinie” (in [the town of] Szczepieszyn a beetle is buzzing in the reeds). Another tongue-twister is “Stół z powyłamywanymi nogami” (a table with broken legs).

** With gasoline inching its way up to \$9 a gallon, and Poles earning only about one-fourth to one-fifth of what Americans make, it’s no wonder compact and subcompact cars are so popular in Poland.

** Pol-Ams into stamp collecting can see what the Polish Post Office has produced and is planning to release by visiting www.poczta-polska.pl/znaczk/index.html

** The countries neighboring today’s Poland are: Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Russia’s Baltic enclave known as Kaliningrad. Before World War II Poland’s neighbors were: Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Soviet Russia and Lithuania.

** The first Polish Jazz band, the Karasinski & Kataszek Jazz-Tango Orchestra, was founded in 1923 and became an immediate sensation on Warsaw’s cabaret and nigh-club circuit. In the 1930s it toured Europe and the Middle East.

** Information on the Polish customs of Christmas, Easter and Corpus Christi may be found at website: www.polishtraditions.org

** The total length of Poland’s borders amounts to 3,504 kilometers (2,190 miles), including a 440-kilometer (275-mile) maritime frontier on the Baltic.

** King Casimir, the only Polish ruler to earn the title of “the great”, expanded Poland’s territory, reformed its currency and military, codified laws, set up what would become the Jagiellonian University and promoted the country’s economic development.

** As long as anyone can remember, elections in Poland have always held on a Sunday to ensure a better turnout. A great many Poles visit the polls on their way home from Sunday Mass.

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