

“THE MOTHER OF SOLIDARITY”: ANNA WALENTYNOWICZ’S QUEST IN LIFE

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The story of Anna Walentynowicz is the story of a self-made woman. Her life encapsulates a microcosm of Polish “Solidarity” – a free trade union established in August 1980 that within months became much more than a mere trade union. Solidarity was an imaginary site of national transformation and renewal; a movement that initiated the most intense, and eventually successful, struggle against Communism; and finally a platform that contained various and often contradictory concepts as to what the future post-communist and democratic Poland would resemble. Anna Walentynowicz remains a symbol of what Solidarity fought for, but also of the problems it bore. As a Solidarity icon, she was often called *Matka Solidarności* (The Mother of Solidarity) – a phrase that indicated her participation in the birth of the movement, but which also implied her claim to understand the ‘real’ Solidarity – deeply and intimately – the way only mothers do.

The demand to rehire fifty-year old Walentynowicz, who had been fired a few weeks prior, was one of the demands of the workers who began striking in the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk in August 1980 (these strikes eventually led to the emergence of Solidarity). Walentynowicz – Pani Ania (Mrs. Ania), as, according to Timothy G. Ash, “the shipyard workers all affectionately called her” – arrived at the Shipyard soon after the strikes began, on Thursday, August 14, and decided to stay there as long as necessary¹. On August 16, when the leader of the strike, Lech Wałęsa, decided to end the protest in the Lenin Shipyard, Walentynowicz and a group of other women convinced him and other workers to continue striking in solidarity with other factories, which in the meantime had joined the protesting shipyard. This was her moment: her vision

¹ T. Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*, New Haven – London 2002, p. 42.

of solidarity had prevailed. But regardless of her strong position among the shipyard workers, she soon ran into conflict with Lech Wałęsa. Lasting with varying intensity until her tragic death in 2010, this conflict contributed to her growing alienation from her former Shipyard companions as well as Solidarity activists. With time, this conflict grew into the main focus of Walentynowicz's professional career and the prism through which she, as well as others, evaluated her life.

This petite woman still captures the attention and imagination of historians, artists, and filmmakers². Perhaps most fascinating is the contrast between who she appeared to be – an elderly, seemingly weak woman with very little formal education – and how she portrayed herself and was portrayed – a controversial and fearless woman committed to her ideals, who was able to own her life. “Walentynowicz was a Heroine of Socialist Labor turned dissident. Her life was very much like Poland's, never nothing, but if you are not afraid to speak up for yourself and care for others, just look what you can become, «Pani Ania,» a worthier role model than most, because an honest one. Our caring and protective mother!” says Michael Szporer, Professor of Communications at the University of Maryland, as if subscribing to a cultural idiom that equips mothers with special powers³. But Walentynowicz's own interpretation of her role as a woman and a mother was far from straightforward. On one hand, she appeared to portray a quintessential gender stereotype: a religious and modest widow who claimed that women as leaders negatively affect the image of any cause of the organization they are heading. Only men should be leaders⁴. On the other hand, she was a strong and independent woman, who at every step questioned and challenged authorities. Inherent tensions between various images of Walentynowicz enhance the symbolic and figurative meaning of her story.

One of the first documentaries that explored the enormous potential of her life was *Far From Poland*, a unique production by American director Jill Godmillow. The film was largely devoted to Walentynowicz, yet was made without her participation⁵. The woman playing Walentynowicz in the film, avant-garde

² There are at least four movies devoted to Anna Walentynowicz: *Anna Proletariuszka*, dir. Sławomir Gruenberg (1981), *Far From Poland*, dir. J. Godmillow (1984); *Strike*, dir. V. Schlöndorff (2006); and the most recent *Matka Solidarności*, dir. Wincent Koman (2012).

³ M. Szporer, *Woman of Iron, Global Museum of Communism* <http://www.germany.globalmuseumoncommunism.org/content/woman-iron-anna-walentynowicz-dead-tragic-flight-bound-katyn>, accessed 23 February, 2014.

⁴ Interview with Anna Walentynowicz, Gdańsk, x 2005, a tape-recording.

⁵ Godmillow was about to embark on a journey to Poland to begin a movie about Solidarity, when, in December 1981, Martial Law broke out. Denied her visa, Godmillow was forced to search for less conventional ways of making the movie. In the production, she

stage actress Ruth Maleczech, spoke in a low voice, pronouncing every sentence with a distinct East European accent. Maleczech, an actress "who could do an analytical reading of an existing text and perform it at the same time," well reflected the self-styled heroine that Walentynowicz certainly was⁶. Evoking an air of serenity and distance, she was Godmillow's own interpretation of Walentynowicz – or perhaps who the Solidarity heroine ought to be. Convinced that documentaries do not guarantee "the truth," Godmillow attempted to create a documentary that purposefully mixed elements of a traditional documentary with a feature movie. "There's something wrong with the idea of documentary footage as pedigree – as authenticating pedigree for the right to speak," says Godmillow⁷. According to this reasoning, the finished product, regardless of whether it is fiction, a feature film, or documentary, provides the audience with no more than an interpretation – a reflection of how the author viewed the presented events at that given moment.

Godmillow never met Walentynowicz. And yet the nuanced, dramatic strokes with which she 'wrote' Walentynowicz created a very convincing image of a very self-aware woman. In 2005, over twenty years after the movie was made, standing in the corridor of Walentynowicz's tiny apartment and looking at this stooped and fragile woman who walked with apparent difficulty, I 'read' Walentynowicz through the prism with which Godmillow's movie had equipped me. Understanding her own life as a mission, Walentynowicz paid careful attention when narrating her past, exactly as Godmillow had portrayed her in the movie. As was the case in the movie, her story was well-rehearsed and performed. However, she was less balanced and calm. Her loud, high-pitched voice appeared to reflect an intense relationship with her past. She was full of memories and dialogues she had had with various people, sometimes even minute details, such as the colour of somebody's shoes⁸. From the very first interview I had with her, Walentynowicz, as an active author of her story, led

mixes conversations with Poles living in America, footage that local Gdańsk crews made for her in the Shipyard, and three reenactments, one of which involved depicting Anna Walentynowicz. *How real is the reality in documentary film? Jill Godmillow in conversation with Ann-Louise Shapiro*, „History and Theory”, 4 December 1997, p. 80–101.

⁶ D. Lynn C. Miller, *[Un]documenting History: An Interview with Filmmaker Jill Godmillow*, <http://www3.nd.edu/~jgodmilo/history.html>, accessed 23 February, 2014.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Regardless of some disagreements between us, we established what Philippe Lejeune calls an 'autobiographical pact'. She committed to giving me her story and her 'truth' and I was committed to trying to understand if not her principles, at least the logic behind her story, which I saw as a medium to attain a consensus with oneself and an outer public. P. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, Minneapolis 1989, p. 21–23.

me through its various stages, providing an elaborate but straightforward image of a heroine who devoted all her energy to what she believed in. She very consciously conceptualized her life within the larger framework of a struggle for independence from Communism, which she increasingly grew to understand in terms of Christian values.

In this article I look at how in three different oral interviews, Walentynowicz reconstituted her past – how she recognized, described, and secured the meaning of her life. Walentynowicz was a very self-reflective narrator who treated her interviews as something larger than a mere conversation about her life – it was almost an imagined conversation with both her opponents as well as her supporters through which she made sure that her listeners appreciated the fact that it was her experience that provided the strength and intimate knowledge through which she interpreted and inhibited the present. Her self-understanding emerged somewhere at the intersection of the past and present. She was using her past to explain her present, but at the same time her present experience, more than anything else, helped her reinterpret her past.

In 1985, in one of her first oral history interviews, Walentynowicz presented herself as a strong woman who never gave up. Despite various difficulties and obstacles, she continued her struggle for the ideals that she had internalized and she saw as constituting the core of Solidarity: Poland, religion, and human solidarity. Her life story was centred on a quest – from difficult childhood and teenage years through the slow realization of the effect she had on people, to the fight for her ideals. She was on a quest physically – travelling in search of a place where she could find fulfilment. But she was also on a mental quest – searching for strength and understanding from her own life. This exploration of self, which was accompanied by an exploration of the world around her, brings to mind the Western model of storytelling, which traditionally centres on the search for “home” – “a narrative space of familiarity, crafted in a process of generalizing the particular”⁹.

As sociolinguist Charlotte Linde emphasizes, narrative “is among the most important social resources for creating and maintaining personal identity”¹⁰. As if complementing Linde, writer Oliver Sacks says: “We have each of us, a life

⁹ C. Kaplan, *Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects*, [in:] *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. S. Smith, J. Watson, Minnesota 1992, p. 130.

¹⁰ Ch. Linde, *The Creation of Coherence*, New York 1993, p. 98. I follow Charlotte Linde's definition of ‘narration’ and a ‘life story’, who sees it as “consisting of all the stories and associated discourse units, such as explanations and chronicles, and the connections between them, told by an individual during the course of his/her lifetime”. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

story, and inner narrative – whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives ‘a narrative,’ and that this narrative is our identities”¹¹. By narrating her life, Walentynowicz constituted and reconstituted the meaning of her life and her ‘self’ in a dialogue between her past and present. She relived and reevaluated her life. “All notions of time involve narrative as their primary descriptor, for narrative necessarily involves tense; narratives look not only backward but forward, locate the self in the present and pivot the focus through time and space,” writes Mary Chamberlain¹². Embedding an individual in a framework that links the past with the present, a narrative remains a significant resource for providing an individual with a coherent story and continuity of the self (through time)¹³. Narrative is a tool, but also the result of the process of seeking for life coherence. Life as a difficult journey became the foundation of Walentynowicz’s identity.

This internal dialogue also concerned her private and public self. As an observer and participant in some of the most pivotal moments in post-1945 Polish history, Walentynowicz included elements of Polish history into her story – confirming Maurice Halbwachs’ observation that individual experience is remembered in reference to a shared context. “Narrative is... related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine,” says Hayden White¹⁴. Walentynowicz drew on various aspects of the Polish past in a rather surprising way. There are elements of the Polish national master narrative, especially those that focus on Polish tragedies – from the Second World War to the post-war Soviet-imposed order. But there is also a sense of benefiting from opportunities that after the Second World War opened up for people like her – a poor woman with no family to fall back on – opportunities that the socialist Poland provided her with. These two historical frameworks are ultimately the source of her identity and her moral authorship over her life story as representing the essence of Solidarity: the national and class entitlement to be rewarded for war deprivation, failed post-war hopes, and the insulted dignity of Polish workers.

Walentynowicz narrated her story in an epic-romantic mode. According to Daniel James, “epic form implies the individual’s identification with the community and its values, and leaves little room for the expression of individual

¹¹ Quoted in M. Chamberlain, “Narrative Theory”, *Thinking About Oral History. Theories and Applications*, ed. T.L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, R. Sharpless, Lanham – New York – Toronto – Plymouth 2008, p. 149.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹³ Ch. Linde, *The Creation of Coherence...*, p. 98.

¹⁴ H. White quoted in: Mary Chamberlain, “Narrative Theory”..., p. 147.

identity”¹⁵. And yet she found a personal key that positions her story similar, but unique. It is this element of romance as a narrative strategy “through which a more specifically individual story of the self can be narrated. Romance involves a quest for values in a degraded world, whereby the individual’s moral career is established through her ability to overcome obstacles and difficulties”¹⁶. Her individualism led to her isolation – she remained a romantic heroine, who, as a mother, worker, and woman, chose a road less travelled¹⁷.

The combination of epic and romantic – the collective and individual – reflect some tensions that permeate her story. Her multiple identities and life roles – a woman subscribing to a traditional way of viewing women’s roles, a single mom, a worker conscious of her rights, and finally a lonely Solidarity heroine – remained in an internal dialogue that perhaps reflects a certain epistemological chaos, but also an active search for meaning of her life. As a result of this search, she composed a deeply redemptive story of her life in which she used her non-opportunistic nature to explain and justify moments of bitter disappointment usually stemming from various arguments she was part of. Her faith in her convictions allowed her to resolve any tension that the juxtaposition of her ideals (such as her commitment to people) with reality (her alienation from the shipyard workers) may reveal. She believed that truth and justice was on her side because she never wanted anything for herself, but fought for the disenfranchised and against the regime, the establishment, and people with power. An ‘unwavering commitment to the truth and sacrifice to others’ are key notions that granted her life story coherence, uniting her various roles in life.

Her values are additionally strengthened by the presence of God, who usually appeared in her narrative during unexpected life events. “Do not worry. You suffered a lot and experienced much harm. ... To people like you, Mother Mary runs in one shoe,” she heard from a priest, who, with these words, assured her that one of the most difficult decisions she had made early in her life was correct. And these words built a confidence and very intimate relationship with God, which accompanied her for the rest of her life¹⁸.

¹⁵ D. James, *Dona Maria’s Story. Life, History, Memory, and Political Identity*, Durham–London 2000, p. 162.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ D. James in a very persuasive way shows that individual’ memories “are profoundly shaped by criteria drawn from the needs and desires of their particular collectivity”, D. James, *Meatpackers, Peronists, and Collective Memory*, „The American Historical Review”, December 1997, p. 1409.

¹⁸ T. Jastrun, *Wielkie kłopoty i rozmowy z Bogiem*, [in:] id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz*, Warszawa 2011, audio-book.

The oral history interviews that I look at in this article were recorded in the intervals of ten years, from 1985 to 2005. In 1985, Tomasz Jastrun conducted the first interview, which took place soon after her release from the intern camp to which she had been sent during Martial Law introduced in December of 1981¹⁹. The second interview was conducted in 1993 by Danuta Kobzdej, who at the time of the interview served as head of the Solidarity Museum in Gdańsk²⁰. The third interview was conducted by myself in the summer of 2005²¹. Out of the three interviews only the first was published. There is a substantial difference between Jastrun's interview and the other two. Jastrun's interview does not contain questions, only answers. It resembles an edited, organized, and rather polished story. Whereas the other two interviews are raw conversations with their own dynamics, hesitations, and spontaneously emerging questions that at times change the flow of the conversation into political tirades and commentary on contemporary political issues.

All three interviews are remarkably similar. They all took place at pivotal moments of Polish history – at the threshold of changes when new challenges were looming on the horizon. Jastrun's interview took place soon after Martial Law was lifted. The second interview took place after the fall of Communism, when Polish authorities had just begun facing political, social, and economic challenges. This was at the peak of her disagreement with Wałęsa, whom she had begun accusing of betraying Solidarity ideals despite his status as the first post-communist President. The last interview accompanied discussions related to Poland's entry to the European Union, which provided more fuel for Walentynowicz's criticism of the Polish government at that time.

The interviews differ mostly in details, sometimes in the emphasis that Walentynowicz put on certain events or in the tone of her voice, and at times in the level of her emotional engagement. While reading and listening to the interviews over and over again, I felt almost like somebody who searches for small inconsistencies in recollections only to prove that a memory is always active and the way one remembers is subject to constant changes. Unsuccessful in my quest to find serious alterations, I came to realize that the differences in interviews, though small, are not inconsequential. Walentynowicz's life story, as is the case with any life story, is structurally and interpretively open, the changes or lack thereof provide insight into this particular nesting of memory, history, and an understanding of the various ways history, infused with symbo-

¹⁹ Id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz...*

²⁰ D. Kobzdej, Interview with Anna Walentynowicz, tape-recording, Gdańsk 1993.

²¹ Interview with Anna Walentynowicz, Gdańsk 2005, a tape-recording.

lic meaning, can prefigure individual memory. At this intersection of history and memory, in Walentynowicz's story one can also locate a subjective meaning of Solidarity.

LIFE AS AN EPIC ROMANTIC STORY:
BREAKING THE SHACLES

Walentynowicz's childhood and early adolescent years, which she recounted in detail to Jastrun, were difficult. Loneliness, poverty, and overall misery dominated these years. Born in 1929 in Rovne (the Volhynia region of modern day Ukraine), she was orphaned at the age of eleven. Her father died in September 1939, soon after the Second World War broke out. Other tragedies followed. After the disappearance of her brother, Walentynowicz's mother died from a heart attack. In 1940, after the Soviets entered the town where she lived, her school was closed. She was forced to finish her education after completing only five grades of education. Her entire world crumbled.

The story about her childhood and teenage years contains all the elements that built the core of her life-narrative. As a morality tale – of trust, betrayal, and forgiveness – her story always balances between positive and negative. While negative experiences might have slowed her down at first or even caused her bitter disappointment, they eventually provided her with yet more evidence that she chose the right path. Good always prevails over evil. While speaking about her childhood, she presented herself as a lonely protagonist, whose difficult life paralleled Polish history. In the interview from 1993, Walentynowicz said: “It was life that pushed me to political and social activity”²². Her difficult childhood turned into an epistemological moment – the key to understanding and structuring her life as a constant journey full of obstacles. It was the process – the journey – that mattered, not the end result, which never seemed to realize its initial promises.

Walentynowicz did not seem to remember much of the war; she was fighting her own battles. As an orphan, she had to work as household help on a nearby farm and later in Gdańsk after the end of the war, where the family she worked for moved²³. She felt abused. Waking up very early in the morning, she had to perform hard physical work. In the conversation with Jastrun, while recounting this time in her life, she said that she was as lonely as a stray dog. That state felt

²² D. Kobzdej, Interview with Anna Walentynowicz.

²³ T. Jastrun, *Święte drzewa*, [in:] id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz...*

permanent. The landlady who took her in used to say: "I will raise you to become wise, and you will bring me to death" (*Ja cię wychowam do rozumu, a Ty mnie do śmierci*)²⁴. In the midst of the war fever, Walentynowicz experienced a whole range of humiliations. Treated as a person of lower social standing, she addressed the woman who took her in by *Pani* (Mistress). Eventually, the husband of her landlady attempted to sexually abuse Walentynowicz. In her interviews, she emphasized that his wife walked in and chased her husband away. But it is clear from the narration that the gulf between her and the family had widened. A deep sense of class and gender humiliation pushed her to an unsuccessful suicide attempt. Finally, after long months of hesitation, she decided to leave²⁵.

Looking retrospectively at her life, both the successes and disappointments, when talking to Jastrun, Walentynowicz tried to reflect on the lessons of her childhood: "Why was I so weak towards these people? Why was I not able to change my situation? I think that it was because ever since being a child in this house, I was taught to be submissive and that one cannot trust anyone; because a human is a wolf to the other human. I was taught what every police state teaches his subjects. And similar to a captive nation, I did not have enough strength and courage to break the shackles"²⁶.

She saw a clear affinity between her personal situation and the outburst of Solidarity. "An abused human being is like an abused nation," she said while subscribing to the romantic notion of nations as entities capable of feeling and suffering. She was an abused human being who needed time to be able to defend herself. But the moment of this realization was significant because it meant the beginning of a very deep connection between her life and Solidarity. Her life reflected the struggle that led to the emergence of Solidarity.

Interestingly, in the conversation with me, the most recent of the three interviews, her childhood memories gained yet an additional element. When I asked her about the source of her uncompromising nature, she explained that it came from her father, who, as she had recently found out, had participated in the Polish Legions and died fighting for Polish independence during World War II²⁷. She very clearly inscribed herself into the romantic tradition of descendants of fighters for Polish independence, who with an active deed showed their commitment to Poland. This was also an indication that she was able to switch codes that she used to explain the sources of her engagement. Her struggle for Solidarity, which in the conversation with Jastrun she saw as a national, but also

²⁴ Id., *Kopciuszek*, [in:] id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz...*

²⁵ Id., *Nie potrafię umrzeć nie potrafię żyć*, [in:] id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz...*

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Interview with Anna Walentynowicz.

class struggle for social justice, shifted into a struggle deeply rooted in Polish history. Our conversation took place when Poland was celebrating its access to the European Union, which Walentynowicz criticized. At that time, in a new democratic Poland, referring to national traditions appeared to carry more weight than claims to social justice, which her allegiance to Solidarity represented.

RITES OF PASSAGE: WELDER IN THE GLOW OF FLAMES
AND THE SHEAVES OF SPARKS

Freed from the shackles of her former heavy work, Walentynowicz was on a quest to find her place in the world. Her childhood ended when she decided to begin her journey for a better life. In 1950, she got a job in a butter factory, which, as she recollects, was a source of pride and a harbinger of a better life for Poland. “Butter-packing filled me with great creative joy,” she told Jastrun. “I felt that these sticks of butter were bringing us closer to the future of our dreams”²⁸. The butter-packing factory signified an abundance of luxurious food items. From now on, food, or rather providing others with food, would be one of the central motives of her story. Not only did she manage to conquer hunger, but she also shifted her own position from a person who takes to a person who gives, while mothering others by providing them with food. But that is not where her quest ended. Her interview from 1982 with Hannah Krall, a Polish essayist and the author of the interview that Godmillow used in her movie, well reflects Walentynowicz’s sense of journey. She said: “One summer, when I was 19, I decided to leave, to go wherever my legs would carry me. I walked and walked. I slept. I walked some more, all the time wondering what to do with myself. ... I found my way to a bakery. What made me stay there were the baskets full of white rolls all over the place. I could have had as many as I wanted, no one told me not to... so I ate, and ate, and ate... I have met so many good people in my life, Hannah, some let me eat white rolls, some let me stay in their basement for free, others gave me a little heater to put in my basement. But of all these people, the most important was the man who said to me: Anna, don’t sit around here like this. Go to the Shipyard. There you have a chance to learn and to make something of yourself. That night I didn’t sleep a wink. I prayed to Our Lady of Ostra Brama. I hoped they would take me in the Shipyard”²⁹. The Shipyard was where a significantly better life began.

²⁸ T. Jastrun, *Dziewczyna z młotkiem i piłą*, [in:] id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz...*

²⁹ H. Krall, Interview with Anna Walentynowicz, quoted in Goodmillow: *Far From Poland*.

Enchanted by the propaganda of early socialism that spoke poetically of gender equality and the possibility for women of fulfilling any jobs, Walentynowicz dreamed of being a “welder in the glow of flames and the sheaves of sparks”³⁰. She decided to take some evening classes at the Shipyard and serve her country as a welder building new ships. At first she wanted to continue school, but as she admitted to Jastrun: “For a twenty year old, clothing was a big problem. I was returning from work in a work uniform and rubber boots filled with newspapers”³¹. She added some details to this story while talking to me – the rubber boots for women had a heel in order to fit what women would typically wear. But she did not have any shoes that fit the rubber boots, which were part of the Shipyard uniform, so she had to fill the empty space in the heel with old newspaper. Thus, she quit school and in November 1950 began working in the Lenin Shipyard. Soon she became a heroine at work. “It was hard. I barely had money to eat. I was earning extra money by doing laundry, but I did not pay attention to how hard I worked. What was important was the fact that I felt like a human being and I felt grateful and appreciative for the state, which spoke so much and so beautifully about justice and equality. It was not surprising that I joined the Association of the Polish Youth (a communist organization). Then they decided to write about me in newspapers. My photos appeared in newspapers – I became the girl from posters with a hammer and a saw”³².

Her story and the way she presented it, how she drew satisfaction from it, undoubtedly brings to mind the acclaimed movie from 1976 by Andrzej Wajda “Man of Marble” – the story of a candid young man with a dreamy look, Mateusz Birkut, who committed himself and his youth to building socialism as a bricklayer dreaming of serving people by building new apartments. In one scene from the movie, we see Birkut leaning over his notebooks and mathematical equations at night, while engaging into arduous physical work during the day. His story was about emerging from darkness – from poverty, hunger, and lack of direction – and maturing to and within socialism with the collective good in mind. Walentynowicz’s narrative is similar – filled with life obstacles and a determination to serve people – with one important difference. Throughout her oral interviews, she was narrating her march to and with socialism with a certain irony. By adapting a familiar genre, she nevertheless was emphasizing that she was the author of her own life. While accentuating the effect others had on her,

³⁰ T. Jastrun, *Dziewczyna z młotkiem...* For the importance of the Stalinist mobilization of Polish female workers; vide: M. Fidelis *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*, Cambridge 2010.

³¹ T. Jastrun, *Dziewczyna z młotkiem...*

³² Ibid.

she was taking her reader on a tour that showed the uniqueness of her life choices, which certainly started with the decision to become a welder—an unusual choice for women.

According to historian Małgorzata Fidelis, the time of the six-year plan, from 1950 to 1955, was a period when “the communist press idolized these women as model socialist workers,” Fidelis writes³³. Even though, as Fidelis emphasizes, the planners “did not abandon the idea of ‘regendering from above’,” which implied viewing women and men as essentially different, they suggested that jobs for women take into account women’s psychophysical characteristics and, when possible, remove them from jobs that posed a threat to their health, the women attracted to men’s jobs challenged the traditional gender hierarchies in the most obvious ways³⁴. According to Walentynowicz, there were only a handful of women welders working at the Shipyard³⁵. This can possibly be explained because the work of a welder was strenuous and the state, especially in the post-war years, provided very limited help for them. The post-war destruction and overall shortages made the situation more difficult.

In later years, Walentynowicz viewed this time period very critically: “So much was being said about equality between men and women, but I noticed very fast that equality meant that women were graciously allowed to work equal to men’s work, often when the work is above their strength. And nothing more”³⁶. Her work in the Shipyard must have become even more difficult in 1951, when she got pregnant. As she recollected, no state help was guaranteed for women working in difficult conditions. For the rest of her pregnancy she worked at the bottom of the ships without any special protection. She performed her work while crawling on the bottom of a dark ship that was lit by only a small lamp that she had to carry in her hand³⁷.

In 1952 Walentynowicz became a single mother. As she recollected in all three interviews, the father of her child was unfaithful and she decided to raise her son alone. The moment she talked about having a child out of wedlock provided her with an opportunity to talk about her relationship with God. Her decision to face motherhood alone was her moment of reconciliation with God, who had not played a very important role in her life prior to that point. The priest,

³³ M. Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*, p. 130.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁵ Regardless of what Walentynowicz says, it is estimated that around 9% percent of the Gdańsk Shipyard staff were female workers. I would like to thank Piotr Perkowski for this information.

³⁶ T. Jastrun, *Budujemy Polskę*, [in:] id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz...*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

with whom she revealed her fears of raising her child alone, blessed her. This blessing provided assurance that her decision to raise the child alone was the right one. Years later, she seemed to interpret that moment as giving her assurance about her other life choices as well, even if they destined her to loneliness. With God's blessing, she was breaking from tradition women's roles while extending traditional women's roles in domestic as well as public spheres³⁸.

The difficulties of being a single mother rarely resurfaced in her story. Even though she had to work two shifts, including nights, she refused alimony from the father of her child. Her son had to spend long hours in the crèche. Her neighbour had a key to her apartment just in case her son woke up and cried. Returning at 5:00 a.m. from a night shift, she had enough time to take her child to a day care located in the Shipyard³⁹. Her work at the shipyard delineated her time, which she measured in the burning of electrodes. "Two electrodes meant five minutes. Two more electrodes, I have to go to a meeting, after some more electrodes, another meeting," she recollected⁴⁰. Though emphasizing that she managed to overcome all of these personal difficulties, she focused on how well she performed her Shipyard work. By narrating her very personal and on many levels touching story, she sent a very political message: regardless of her comfort, or even the comfort of her family, she never tolerated dishonesty. But the juxtaposition of her work in the Shipyard and her personal life suggests something else. It was the Shipyard more than her home that served as the domestic sphere where she acted like a mother who knew best what people needed. "I tried to help people in my factory. I worked four hours during which I was able to fulfil all my tasks and in my free time I tried to do something for people. During the break, in our cafeteria there was always a very long line of people who were trying to get milk. People did not want to stand in the long line and they were giving up after a while. But the milk was very important for them, especially for those who worked in difficult conditions. I started collecting milk ration cards and bringing milk to the Shipyard. Later, I also began bringing soup. [...] Next, I found a strip of soil between the pavement and the factory walls. I planted flowers there"⁴¹.

The years 1968–1970 were some of the economically most difficult years in the history of post-war Poland⁴². Trying to improve the economic situation, in

³⁸ Id., *Wielkie kłopoty i rozmowy z Bogiem...*

³⁹ Id., *Budujemy Polskę...*

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Accordign to Piotr Perkowski, 1967 was a crucial year for the disillusionment of the Shipyard workers. Vide: P. Perkowski, *Gdańsk – miasto od nowa*, Gdańsk 2013.

December 1970 the authorities “prepared limited economic reforms, an integral part of which was a drastic price hike of many items, especially food products, introduced eleven days before Christmas”⁴³. The price hike was announced the night before the hike was to take place, on December 13, preventing people from buying and storing food at the old prices. This situation triggered disturbances and strikes in the port cities of Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Szczecin. In response, the authorities sent troops to the streets. The bloodshed that followed claimed forty-five lives. Over one thousand were wounded⁴⁴. Almost immediately, December of 1970 acquired an extraordinary place and a ritualistic importance for the memory of the social outburst against the communist authorities in Poland. It also created an important political context and the common anti-communist narration for the strike of 1980 in the Lenin Shipyard.

As Walentynowicz recollected in 1985, in December of 1970 she was with a group of workers who pushed a militia’s car through the streets of the city, only to finally reach the Gdańsk University of Technology, where workers apologized to students for not participating in their strike in 1968 and asked the students to join them. The correct order of those days slipped her memory. She remembered the tanks surrounding the Shipyard, information being spread that the captured workers were being taken to Stuthoff (the remains of a former Nazi concentration camp), a militia officer being torn to pieces for shooting a young 19-year old boy, the militia car that an angry crowd turned upside down and burned, or the moment when a crowd approached the party headquarters in Gdańsk and set it on fire⁴⁵.

In her later recollections of December 1970, she emphasized her own activism during those days. In contrast to her interview from 1985, when she saw December 1970 from the crowd’s point of view, in her narration from 1993 with Danuta Kobzdej, she stressed her own contribution to the events – again mostly in terms of her motherly mundane steps – the soup that she fixed for the protesting workers. She said: “In the evening I was running around. I wanted to do something, so I started cooking soup... I cooked as much as I could... so the Shipyard workers could eat. There was a line for my soup. The helicopter was above the heads of the people in this line. They were shooting at people, so people were hiding in the shadows... Later, we decided to start delivering my soup to

⁴³ J. Eisler, *Grudzień 1970*, <http://grudzien70.ipn.gov.pl/g70/historia/1642,Grudzien-1970-Jerzy-Eisler.html>, last accessed 28 February, 2014.

⁴⁴ Lista Ofiar Grudnia 70, <http://grudzien70.ipn.gov.pl/g70/ofiary/1755,ListaofiarGrudnia03970.html>, last accessed 20 March, 2014.

⁴⁵ T. Jastrun, *Krew na ulicach*, [in:] id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz...*

various departments of the Shipyard"⁴⁶. The story shifted from her being passive when the mass of workers were wandering around the city to her being actively involved in the riot and providing the workers with food.

Even though her personal involvement in December 1970 had become integrally woven into her political biography, it was not the turning point in her political biography. That moment came later, in 1971, when Walentynowicz went through a personal tragedy – the man she married in the mid-1960^s, the man whose name she carried for the rest of her life – Walentynowicz – died of cancer. At that time, the Shipyard authorities ordered obligatory medical examinations for welders, which is a good example of a positive impact that Communist Poland as a welfare state had on the lives of workers⁴⁷. As a welder, Walentynowicz underwent examinations, during which uterine cancer was detected in her body. After surgery and chemotherapy, Walentynowicz was given a few years to live. She reconciled with death, and only at times while looking around her apartment she regretted that soon a different woman would occupy her space and wear her clothes. Struggling with the constant threat of the cancer returning, the illness of her husband took her by surprise. He died in 1971, a few months after the detection of his cancer.

"I did not have to worry about my husband," she told Jastrun and later repeated in a conversation with me, "because the worst had already happened. I didn't have to worry about my son, because he was grown up. I didn't worry about myself, because God saved my life (*darował mi życie*), even though I didn't quite understand why. What was I supposed to be afraid of? No, fear did not play any role here"⁴⁸. Walentynowicz cried while recollecting this moment in the conversation with me. "I decided to act openly, as openly as possible. The suffering of others became my own, the joy of others became my own"⁴⁹. She repeated this assertion in very similar words in all three interviews. Each time Walentynowicz linked this assertion to the fact that she had survived cancer while her husband had died from cancer – her life was spared for a reason. "I live on a loan that I received from God," she repeated⁵⁰. She presented herself as a martyr, consciously following the path down which her life and God pushed her. Once again, she referred to God as the force that shaped her life.

⁴⁶ D. Kobzdej, Interview with Anna Walentynowicz.

⁴⁷ I would like to thank Piotr Perkowski for this suggestion.

⁴⁸ T. Jastrun, *Spotkanie z opozycją*, [in:] id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz...*

⁴⁹ Interview with Anna Walentynowicz, digital recording.

⁵⁰ D. Kobzdej, Interview with Anna Walentynowicz; and T. Jastrun, *Z własnym nazwiskiem*, [in:] id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz...*

Walentynowicz explained her engagement in the oppositional circles of the late 1970^s in terms of the debt she had to repay for surviving cancer. When narrating that time, she continued describing her activities within the terms of motherly care for the needy, hurt, and those forgotten by the regime. In addition to circulating illegal leaflets and *samizdat* material, at the centre of her activities was caring for the graves of the victims of state violence – those who had died in December 1970. It was at this point that her narrative clearly gained religious undertones. She saw any conversation with the Secret Police as the devil’s temptation, and deciding to collaborate was akin to Judas’ sin. In this black and white world, engagement with the opposition was the only moral choice.

As she stresses in the interviews from 1993 and 2005, at first she feared being arrested. Later, while arrested and being threatened, she would respond to the officers who investigated her by saying: “I don’t care about my own life. Murdering me won’t give you anything good. It is like Popiełuszko, who was psychically weak, but mentally strong. If you murder me, I will become a hero and a martyr”⁵¹. Jerzy Popiełuszko, who she referred to in this quote, was a priest and vocal advocate for Solidarity. He was murdered by the Polish secret police in October 1984 – four years after an enthusiastic August and the establishment of Solidarity and also after Walentynowicz’s longest imprisonment. His brutal death turned him into a victim for the cause of Solidarity. It was a model of victimization that was clearly associated with the religious suffering for the ‘truth’ against state oppression and violence. “Martyrdom was not a passive affair, a mere acceptance of meritorious suffering and death [...]. Martyrdom was a prize one sought, a mobilizer for audacious action [...],” says Natalie Zemon Davies in her readings of the lives of a 17th century pious Catholic woman⁵². Walentynowicz appeared to perceive martyrdom similarly. Popiełuszko and the model of martyrdom that his life implied was an encouraging voice of authority, but also a tool of the powerless.

Throughout all three interviews, Walentynowicz introduced religion and her close ties with God gradually, but very consequentially. Looking back at her life, she made a link between the blessings that she had received early in her life and everything that happened later. She read her life as God’s will; but this interpretation was kept within the larger framework that organized her story – that of a journey bringing her home through a gradual understanding of who she was and where she was heading. Religion encompassed her private and public world –

⁵¹ D. Kobzdej, Interview with Anna Walentynowicz.

⁵² N.Z. Davis, *Women on the Margins. Three Seventeenth-century Lives*, Cambridge 1995, p. 78.

the initial blessing that she had received for her private decision to raise a child alone out of wedlock prepared her to sacrifice her life for the cause. Sacrificing herself, she herself became the cause, consciously obliterating the difference between the private and public.

IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE: *MOTHER SOLIDARITY*

As a result of her oppositional activity, on August 9th, 1980, the Shipyard authorities fired Walentynowicz. She had five months left to her retirement. According to how in 1985 she narrated her return to the Shipyard, she was at home when the workers' representatives from the Shipyard came to ask her to join them in the strike, which, among others postulates, demanded the return of Anna Walentynowicz to work. She said: "I have my heart in my throat. I see innumerable masses of people. I see a digging machine. People want to see me. I climb on the roof of the digger. Somebody gives me a bouquet of red roses. I stand on the roof of the digger with the roses and the sea of heads. On a banner, I see the words: Rehire Anna Walentynowicz and a 1,000 zloty (Polish currency) salary raise. I would like to say something, but I cannot. My head is spinning"⁵³.

On the third day of the strike, on August 16, Shipyard authorities yielded to workers' demands. Lech Wałęsa, the leader of the strike, announced the termination of the strike. Two women, Anna Walentynowicz and Alina Pieńkowska, a nurse and free trade activist, decided to stop the workers from leaving the Shipyard. Both women called for transforming this protest for economic issues into a solidarity strike with other striking companies. Thanks to popular support within Poland, as well as international support and media coverage, the Gdańsk workers held the strike two more weeks until the government gave in to their demands. On August 30 and 31, representatives of the workers and the government signed an agreement ratifying many of the workers' demands, including the right to strike and the establishment of a labor union independent of communist-party control. In retrospect, this appeared to be the first step to dismantling communism. When the Solidarity trade union was registered, it had nearly ten million members.

Soon after these enthusiastic and successful moments of Solidarity, Walentynowicz resigned from work at the Shipyard. To join the struggle with the new

⁵³ T. Jastrun, *Niepewne dni*, [in:] id., *Życie Anny Walentynowicz*. According to historical accounts, the Shipyard workers demanded a 2,000 zloty pay rise. The management offered them 1,500 zloty, which had been initially, on 16 July, 1980 accepted, but rejected the next day.

challenges, she decided to work for the Free Trade Union of Solidarity, established as a result of the strikes. As a result of her close contact with Wałęsa in the trade unions, her conflict with him exacerbated. At first she criticized him for being too individualistic and desiring to take credit for everything that the workers achieved. One of the most serious arguments concerned Wałęsa's decision to change the name of the monument devoted to those workers killed in December 1970 from the Monument of Fallen Shipyard Workers to the Monument of Reconciliation. Walentynowicz vocally rejected the name the Monument of Reconciliation. With time, Walentynowicz's alienation from Solidarity grew. Among the many complaints raised against her was that she was giving too many interviews to foreign correspondents during which she criticised Wałęsa. As a result, in 1982 she was denied the right to vote during the Solidarity Congress. This was one of the lowest points in her recollections. She blamed Lech Wałęsa for turning the workers against her. In a conversation with me she said that the same workers who were ready to fight for her in the summer of 1980, turned against her. In her autobiography, when referring to the same moment, she said that according to Wałęsa: "women's place is to deal with pots and flowers". "He saw me as the pots," she continued. "His wife was a florist, so perhaps he reserved the former for me"⁵⁴.

Martial Law was introduced in December 1981, interrupting these first moments of joy and disappointment. Many members of Solidarity, including Walentynowicz, were interned and consequently imprisoned. Due to her poor health condition, Walentynowicz was released from prison in April 1984. But returning to life after her release from confinement was more difficult than the confinement itself. She returned home to find her son abusing alcohol, his marriage falling apart, and her grandson as a "little old man" left to himself. While reflecting on her son's life, she said; "I did everything for him, but at the same time I expected too much in moral issues. I was too strict and uptight. [...] Now after years I see my mistakes, but it is too late"⁵⁵. The sense of disintegration that she experienced at home made her alienation from Solidarity even more poignant⁵⁶. The day after her release, she went to the Shipyard, but nobody talked to her. She met a young guard who told her that she needed to leave the Shipyard. "I always had two homes," she told Jastrun in 1985. "Had I lost them both?"⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ A. Walentynowicz, *Cień przeszłości*, quoted in: *Anna Walentynowicz-apokryf historii*, <http://pismozadra.pl/archiwum/zadra-3/384-anna-walentynowicz-apokryf-historii>, last accessed: 1.04.2014.

⁵⁵ T. Jastrun, *Gdzie jest mój dom...*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*, *Nie dam się wyrzucić ze Stoczni*, [in:] *id.*, *Życie Anny Walentynowicz...*

Alessandro Portelli emphasizes that in the case of difficult, painful memories, authors sometimes shift the focus in their stories⁵⁸. Recollecting perhaps the most painful life difficulties, Walentynowicz clearly shifted her narrative from concentrating on the Shipyard story to her home. But as already noted, in the Shipyard she fulfilled most gender conventions – she prepared food for workers, delivered milk, and planted flowers. She treated the Shipyard as her second, or perhaps first home. While opening up about her past, reflecting on the mistakes she committed while raising her son, she probably had in mind also her lost connection with the Shipyard. But the existing tensions may have yet another subtext. It was perhaps difficult to mourn the loss of the Shipyard, a public sphere, in a world and patriarchal culture where women are valued more in the domestic sphere than public sphere.

In almost every conversation, and certainly during every meeting with me, she emphasized the inferiority that came from her lack of both education and skills to occupy higher positions. She often emphasized that she believed that the role of a woman is to support men. "As a woman, I did not want to rule," she told me. "And for that reason I yielded power to Wałęsa"⁵⁹. Even though she accepted this clearly delineated role for women, she complained about the artificial equality that communist workplaces introduced. "Women were treated as sexual objects," she told Jastrun⁶⁰. Despite calling for real equality, she imagined women having supporting roles, in the background for men-leaders. She questioned the patriarchal world, but she was too strongly rooted in it to reject it.

Regardless of these tensions, she fashioned herself as a work heroine in a supportive role, who needed to carry on regardless of the circumstances. Despite downplaying herself throughout many stories, her weakness was her strength. She transcribed to traditional gender norms, but with a certain twist – it was the Shipyard that became her home; it was her workplace where she tried creating a conducive atmosphere for her work partners. This twist provided her with agency. She presented herself as the Mother of Solidarity. And this aspect of her identity seemed to overshadow everything else – it was the key to various chapters of her life. Her view on gender roles allowed her to extend her actions, but ultimately provided her with redemptive reasons why she was not able to go any further. The source of the tension was external. It was not her fault that she did not become a leader. In her constant journeys through life, she went as far as she could.

⁵⁸ L. Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, p. 112.

⁵⁹ Interview with Anna Walentynowicz, digital recording.

⁶⁰ T. Jastrun, *Nie dam się wyrzucić ze Stoczni...*

CONCLUSION

From her sad childhood to the dramatic moments of Solidarity, Walentynowicz built a very romantic epic image of herself. She overcame her fears and weaknesses in the name of the belief that she was meant to do something for people. How she narrated her life experience surpassed the ordinary experience of the reality that surrounded her. In the three interviews, she presented herself more and more aware of her role in life, but also more aware of who she was and what guidelines directed her. Oral stories are not significant because of their fibula – “the logical, casual sequence of the story,” says Portelli, but “they become unique and necessary because of their plot – the way in which the story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell the story”⁶¹. The way Walentynowicz clothed her story revealed her cognitive modes of perceiving the world as well as her survival strategies, which helped her minimize or perhaps even explain the sense of rejection. Her memory was her healer that made possible the organization of the past – with its tensions, fears, and disillusionments – in a comfortable mode.

How close to the ‘truth’ is my reading of Walentynowicz? How can I reconcile with Daniel James’s intuition that “in the end, the interpretation of any text is a profoundly personal issue of reading, involving intellectual and emotional elements that I personally bring to a particular interpretative encounter”⁶². An interview always depends on the rapport that the interviewee creates with the interviewer, and vice versa. Everything matters – the questions that an interviewer asks, the way an interview is conducted, as well as the interviewer’s age and gender. As Jacques Derrida says: “There is always something politically suspect ‘in the very project of attempting to fix the context of utterances’”⁶³. It is political, as Derrida suggests, because it sets a non-‘natural’ relationship to others. In other words, the situation of an interview (recreating a life-story) is never ‘natural’ or neutral. It is always a game, the rules of which are usually assigned by the researcher.

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⁶¹ A. Portelli, *What makes oral history different*, [in:] *The Oral History Reader*, ed. R. Perks, A. Thomson, London – New York 1998, p. 67.

⁶² D. James, *Dona Maria’s Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity...*, p. 278.

⁶³ J. Derrida, *Afterword. Toward the Ethic of Discussion*, [in:] *Limited Inc*, Evanston, IL 1988, p. 136.

Walentynowicz died tragically in April 2010 in the plane crash that claimed the lives of ninety-six Polish officials who were travelling to Smolensk, Russia in order to celebrate the anniversary of the massacre of Polish officers in the Katyń forest in 1941 during World War II. Soon after her burial, suspicions emerged regarding whether it was her body that was buried in her grave. Her grave was opened. A DNA test confirmed the mistake. It took a few months to locate her body and bury it for a second time. In December 2013, Walentynowicz's grandson claimed that the collection of documents that had arrived from Russia was missing some documentation regarding Walentynowicz. The family demanded a second exhumation and re-opening of her grave⁶⁴. Walentynowicz's son and some politicians from PiS (Law and Justice) used Walentynowicz's body as a moral argument in a political struggle while arguing for the continuous need to search for those guilty of the Smoleńsk crash. Walentynowicz saw her life as a struggle for respect and justice for others in the name of truth accorded by the highest, non-earth, authorities – speaks through her disrespected body. Not properly buried, Walentynowicz's *post-mortem* presence still haunts the public sphere and public memory. Her life story continues to be written.

⁶⁴ *Będzie kolejna ekshumacja? Rodzina Walentynowicz: Brakuje jej akt*, <http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/bedzie-kolejna-ekshumacja-rodzina-walentynowicz-brakuje-jej-akt,378951.html>, accessed February 10, 2014.

