

WALLS THAT UNITE: UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIPS IN MOKOTÓW PRISON, 1949–1956

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But when you breathe into each other's face all night long, when you spend long hours of uncertainly together, when you become the chance recipient of painful confidences in nightmare-filled nights—you begin to see many different sides to the same person. The shell, if there is one, cracks under the pressure within. To know is to understand. [...] What you live with is the sadness; and sadness becomes a bond, a bond as strong as that of the humiliations you have suffered together.¹

Eva Kanturkova

Enclosed within four walls, with imposed mental and physical boundaries that seemed impenetrable, prison cells were immediately terrifying. Yet the prison cell also provided a space for new encounters. People of various nationalities, social strata, and ideological commitments—members of the Home Army, fighters in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), Communists, criminals, and Nazis—were held together or in close proximity. They were forced to engage with people and attitudes that they were unlikely to have encountered in their pre-prison lives. Although their function was to separate, prisons were, perhaps unintentionally, creating conditions in which all prisoners became equal.

¹ E. Kanturkova, *My Companions in the Bleak House*, New York 1987, p. 17.

It is rather unlikely that the authorities of the Ministry of the Public Security (MBP), the institution in charge of prisons in postwar Poland, had a master plan regarding the composition of prison cells. The archival sources are silent in this regard; a random mix of common sense and the occasional whims or malice of the officer in charge appear to have determined who was placed where and with whom. Common sense dictated separating people who were being investigated for their involvement in the same political case, in order to prevent them from comparing their testimonies. However, the nearly constant congestion of prisons made the placement of inmates cumbersome. Oral interviews with former prisoners reveal that occasionally people accused in the same case (or at least with similar political sympathies) were temporarily housed together, perhaps with the hope that they, despite the potential danger of being overheard, would start conversing about the case, the details of which a cell informant could then pass on to interrogation officers. Prisoners under interrogation were often moved to different cells to thwart the potential formation of relationships—an inmate who was in a continuous state of alienation and anxiety was more vulnerable.

Regardless of the cell composition, it was important to have an informant (a cell spy) planted in a cell. The institution of the cell spy was especially developed in interrogation prisons.² Arrested in 1947, Jadwiga Malkiewicz recalls that, in Mokotów Prison, male and female cells were purposefully alternated to help cell spies obtain information through wall flirting. Even a short conversation could be a trap set by the secret police.³ Developing close relationships with prisoners, a cell spy could learn how to take advantage of prisoners' weaknesses.

Oral interviews with former inmates suggest, somewhat unsurprisingly, that the composition of the cell often reconstituted wartime hostilities and created clusters of prisoners grouped around common national backgrounds or ideological profiles. Dynamics within the cell united some and alienated others. In most cases, the interviewees idealized the cell relationships that developed among people with similar ideological commitments (for example, Communists or anti-Communists), national affiliation (the members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army), or causes of imprisonment (war criminals, political prisoners, or crimi-

² T. Wolsza, *Więzienia stalinowskie w Polsce. System, codzienność, represje*, Warszawa 2013, p. 36.

³ J. Malkiewicz and K. Malkiewicz, *W więzieniu i na wolności 1947–1956*, Kraków 1994, p. 87. Many memoirs and recollections confirm Malkiewicz's assumptions, for example: I. Bellert, "Wspomnienia", Manuscript, Warszawa, chapter 3, 3; H. and K. Field, *Opóźniony odlot*, Warszawa 1997, p. 204; English edition of the book: H. Field, *Trapped in the Cold War*, Stanford, CA., 2002.

nal prisoners). How could one trust people in violent circumstances, where danger was lurking within and beyond the walls? What could constitute a foundation for trust if not similarities that were established prior to imprisonment? The composition of a cell meant to be a source of alienation; so perhaps it required a bit of naiveté or desperation for prisoners to open up to people whom they did not know at all.

However, the internal cell dynamic at the moment of imprisonment, without the benefit of hindsight that most memoirs present, is very difficult to gauge. We rarely have a chance to access documents created in a particular cell at the time of imprisonment—the conversations that inmates had, the relationships that they developed, the animosities or support that they offered each other. In most cases, even establishing the exact composition of a cell at a given time is problematic, because inmates were shuffled from cell to cell, and their movements were not recorded.

In this article, I take a close look at one female cell in Mokotów Prison, where, for four months, from September 1949 to early 1950, five very different women were held together: Sabina Stalińska, Halina Zakrzewska, Tonia Lechtman, Ewa Piwińska, and Vera Szot. Stalińska and Zakrzewska both belonged to the Home Army—an anti-Nazi movement whose units turned anti-Communist in postwar Poland. Lechtman and Piwińska, both committed and active Communists, stood on the opposite side of the barricades from Zakrzewska and Stalińska. Szot, arrested for her participation in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, was probably the most alienated person in the cell. She not only represented a very different ideological stance, but, as a Ukrainian, she was the cell's only non-Polish member.

The five women spent their early months of interrogation in fearful anticipation of the coming days, which were filled with violence and accusations they often did not understand. Their interpretation of the situation as well as their allegiance to postwar Poland differed. Whereas the Communist women trusted the state and their interrogation officers, the Home Army and the UPA women distrusted them. While the former wanted to discuss publicly their political engagement, the latter denied the possibility of an open dialogue with the state. The varied composition of the cell appeared to be an additional burden, as if confinement in an extremely overcrowded space was not punishment enough. Yet, the existing sources show that, despite the women's ideological differences, the cell that they shared became an emotionally and intellectually open space, where at least some of the women attempted to understand each other. They were all suspended in a space that equalized them in terms of suffering, humiliation, and anxiety. And these commonalities generated opportunities for conversation. Since the women decided not to talk about their homes and children,

their ideological commitments and Communism were the most neutral topics of their discussions. These talks became their framework of self-exploration (especially for the Communist women), which led to the close (intimate and friendly) relationships that some of them continued years after the release.⁴ The cell turned into a space where the women could discuss their past and present involvement without changing their respective political points of view.

The image of a cell as a creative environment in which people are able to confide in each other is nothing new. Stanisław Mierzeński, a Home Army officer, spent long periods between 1949 and 1954 in a cell with Hermann Field, an American imprisoned in Poland while he was searching for his brother, Noel Field, who was imprisoned in Hungary in 1949.⁵ For the first twenty-four hours, Mierzeński and Field did not speak to each other.⁶ Weeks later, they began working on a book project. What united the men was a mixture of friendship, empathy, fear, and, ultimately, the intellectual activities that they undertook in their cell to combat the idleness of prison life.⁷ One of the most dramatic examples of a close relationship is that between Teodora Żukowska and Halina Siedlik. In the late 1940s, when the ruling Communist party was purging its ranks, the committed young Communist Halina Siedlik was (falsely) accused of having aided the Nazis and was imprisoned under a new criminal law mandating prison sentences for Nazi collaborators. In 1949, Żukowska was moved into Siedlik's prison cell. Żukowska, an employee of a foreign trade company and a confirmed anti-Communist, had worked in the Nazi war administration as an informant for the underground Polish Home Army. While awaiting her own interrogation, Żukowska told Siedlik various stories about her administrative war work in an effort to convince Siedlik of her true anti-Nazi sympathies. Whereas officials repeatedly hauled Siedlik away to brutal interrogation sessions, they left Żukowska alone and unharmed in her cell. Observing her battered cellmate upon Siedlik's return, Żukowska anticipated the worst for herself.⁸ Eventually, Żukowska noticed that Siedlik, half-conscious from beatings and severe sleep deprivation, could no longer distinguish her own past experiences

⁴ The definition of intimacy comes from S.J. Olicker, "The Modernisation of Friendship", [in:] *Placing Friendship in Context*, eds. R.G. Adams and G. Allan, Cambridge 1998, p. 20.

⁵ One of the most recent works on Noel and Herman Field is T. Sharp, *Stalin's American Spy. Noel Field, Allen Dulles and the East European Show Trials*, London 2014.

⁶ H. and K. Field, op. cit., p. 190.

⁷ Nel Field and Stanisław Mierzeński wrote two books together: *Kaczory and Okiennice*. More on this friendship in: H. Field, op. cit., p. 188–197.

⁸ T. Żukowska, "Milena". *Na skraju dwóch światów... Wspomnienia 1939–1945*, Warszawa 2000, p. 218–220; J. Snopkiewicz and S. Marat, *Ludzie Bezpieki. Dokumentacja czasu bezprawia*, Warszawa 1990, p. 70.

from those of Żukowska. In her confusion, Siedlik had fabricated self-accusations of anti-Communist activity and Nazi collaboration, borrowing details from Żukowska's stories. Every time the secret police demanded more evidence, Siedlik turned to Żukowska for help. Desperate to save her, Żukowska broke down, revealing some names. In letters they exchanged following their release from prison, both Siedlik and Żukowska assumed that the secret police had put them in the same cell as a deliberate plan to crack Żukowska's defenses by forcing her to watch Siedlik's suffering.⁹

Despite these isolated cases, not many former prisoners remember sharing a cell with people who had different ideological commitments. Many women, especially former members of the Home Army, do not even recall the names of the Communist women imprisoned with them.¹⁰ We do not know how many Communist women were imprisoned, but the numbers were insignificant when compared to non-Communist women. In most cells, the non-Communist women dominated. There were other reasons that the prisoners did not notice or forgot the presence of Communists in a cell. It was incomprehensible that the system would imprison its own followers.¹¹

An exceptionally detailed and diverse collection of sources exists on the women of Mokotów Prison who are the subject of this article. Ewa Piwińska left behind a touching diary in which she described her life during her coming of age and her engagement with Communism.¹² Tonia Lechtman gave a long (unpublished) interview in which she narrated her path toward Communism as well as her experience of prison and her life after her release. Halina Zakrzewska wrote a two-volume memoir in which she related her wartime engagement in the Home Army as well as her prison years.¹³ In the early 1970s, Marcel Łoziński, then a student of the National Film School in Łódź, filmed three of his mother's friends—Lechtman, Piwińska, and Zakrzewska—talking about their prison

⁹ T. Żukowska, *op. cit.*, p. 264–265.

¹⁰ Interviews with Ruta Czaplińska, Wiesława Pajdak, Zula Magnuszewska, Hanna Wysocka. Prison narratives from other than a Polish context also bring examples of unlikely friendships. Most recently, Huszang Asadi, former Iranian political activist and prominent journalist Houshang Asadi was jailed under the rule of the shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. In 1974, he shared a cell with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader. Huszang Asadi, *Listy do mojego oprawcy. Miłość, rewolucja i irańskie więzienie*, Wołowiec 2013, p. 55–70; Houshang Asadi, *Letters to My Torture, Love, Revolution, and Imprisonment in Iran*, UK 2012.

¹¹ Interviews with Wiesława Pajdak.

¹² E. Piwińska, "Wspomnienia", Manuscript. In the possession of Marta Piwińska.

¹³ D. Dowgiałło, *An Interview with Antonina Lechtman*, Tel Aviv 1994. In the possession of Vera Lechtman; H. Zakrzewska, *Niepodległość będzie twoją nagrodą*, v. 1 and 2, Warszawa 1984.

memories. Only fragments of the material survived; the school authorities prevented the film from ever seeing the light of day. But perhaps the most important and painful source was the one produced in the cell: One of the women drafted reports to the prison authorities in which she detailed daily interactions among her cellmates. The reports are included in the archival records of Lechtman and Piwińska that are deposited at the Institute of National Remembrance.

THE WOMEN

In September 1949, when forty-two-year-old Ewa Piwińska entered cell number 26 in the 11th Department of the Mokotów Prison, four other women welcomed her to the cell as if it were their home: Tonia Lechtman, aged 29, a committed Communist; Vira Szot, aged 31, a member of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army; and Halina Zakrzewska, aged 42, and Sabina Stalińska, aged 41, members of the Home Army.¹⁴ All five women had grave fears about the fates of their loved ones, which magnified the horror of imprisonment.¹⁵ Both Lechtman and Zakrzewska remember that Piwińska was hysterical.¹⁶ In her first words in the cell, she expressed concern for her three-week-old daughter, Krysia. Zakrzewska was immediately drawn to Piwińska and calmed her down by telling her that she needed to stop worrying in order not to lose her supply of breast milk. “You have to be able to breast feed when you reunite with your baby,” she told her.¹⁷

Piwińska’s first postwar employer was the Polish Embassy in Paris. From Paris, she was transferred to the Polish Embassy in Rome, where her second daughter, Krysia, was born. Marta, her 12 year old first daughter, had stayed in Warsaw. When Krysia was three months old, Piwińska was ordered to travel immediately to Warsaw. Suddenly recalled back to Rome, she boarded a train in Warsaw after meeting with Marta only briefly. In Katowice, she was asked to step off the train, at which point she was arrested. She was first taken to a cell in a villa in Miedzeszyn, in the outskirts of Warsaw, where she was held for three weeks. She was allowed to keep her daughter, Krysia, with her. In Miedzeszyn,

¹⁴ H. Zakrzewska, *op. cit.*, v. 2, p. 96.

¹⁵ Information that it was a cell no 26 comes from a letter from Lechtman to Zakrzewska, A letter from Lechtman, 1 June 1955, Tel Aviv, AAN, file of Halina Zakrzewska.

¹⁶ Interview with Vera Lechtman, Tel Aviv, Israel, May 2013, p. 68.

¹⁷ H. Zakrzewska, *op. cit.*, v. 2, p. 34–35.

a woman took care of Piwińska's daughter whenever she was interrogated. But when Piwińska was moved to Mokotów, her daughter was taken away.¹⁸

Halina Zakrzewska, a Home Army captain who worked for the Home Army intelligence during the war, left two little children at home.¹⁹ Zakrzewska had been arrested previously. Even though Zakrzewska had willingly ended her activities with the resistance in 1945, she maintained periodic contact with underground anti-Communists. In January 1946, the secret police came to her house to arrest her and her husband. She was in the early stages of pregnancy. She was released a few months later, but her child, who was born prematurely soon after her release, died after only three hours due to heart failure.²⁰ Her second arrest came almost exactly three years later, in January 1949. Her husband was arrested at that time as well.

Other women also feared for their children. Tonia Lechtman left two children at home. She did not have anybody to take care of them, so she was worried sick. Her parents had already left Poland for Israel before the war. Her husband, Sioma Lechtman, had died while trying to escape a death march from Auschwitz, where he had been transferred from Le Vernet Internment Camp, for former members of the International Brigades, after the Spanish Civil War had ended.²¹ In 1947, approximately two years before Lechtman's arrest, her children returned from an orphanage in Switzerland, where they had been staying since 1943. With her arrest, they were orphaned again.

Sabina Stalińska was imprisoned on January 18, 1949, forcing her to leave her small son Maciej at home. During the war, she had worked for the Government Delegation for Poland in Exile (Delegatura Rządu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej na Kraj) as a commandant of the National Security Corps (*Państwowy Korpus Bezpieczeństwa*), an underground police force. Bronisław Chajęcki, her partner and the father of her child, was arrested in November 1948.²²

Empathy of a mother for other mothers who were forcibly separated from their children was a sentiment that four of the women shared. This tragic experience created a sense of commonality. Zakrzewska remembered that all the

¹⁸ E. Piwińska, "Wspomnienia", Manuscript. In the possession of Marta Piwińska. Interview with Vera Lechtman, Tel Aviv, Israel, May 2013, p. 66.

¹⁹ H. Zakrzewska, op. cit., v. 2, p. 58–61.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 34–35.

²¹ Sioma fought in the Austrian battalion in Spain. Following Franco's victory he was interned in Gurs and Le Vernet. Tony Sharp, op. cit., p. 122.

²² Halina Zakrzewska, op. cit., v. 2, p. 70. Biographical information on Sabina Włachowski, http://www.1944.pl/historia/powstancze-biogramy/Sabina_Walachowska Her life partner Bronisław Chajęcki was executed in January 1953. A.K. Kunert, *Słownik biograficznym konspiracji warszawskiej 1939–1944*, v. I, Warszawa 1987, p. 52–53.

women had agreed not to talk about their children or the families they had left behind.²³ The anxiety and the sense of powerlessness that they felt over such a loss was too overwhelming. It was also safer not to talk about children: their emotional pain was also a vulnerability that a potential cell informant could exploit.

Both Zakrzewska and Stalińska understood well that they might be imprisoned for many years. Historian and criminologist Jarosław Urat-Milecki estimates that, in 1946, there were 61,894 inmates in Polish prisons. The numbers declined significantly after the amnesty of 1947 (when almost 60,000 were released), only to rise at an even faster rate. By the end of 1949, there were an estimated 101,000 prisoners in Poland.²⁴ Women most likely constituted about ten percent of the political prisoner population.²⁵ What do these numbers mean? According to a postwar census data, there were 23,930,000 people in Poland in 1946 and 25,008,000 in 1950.²⁶ If these figures are correct, in the years 1945–49, there were 250 prisoners per 100,000 Polish citizens. Brian Porter, who suggests this incarceration rate, emphasizes that, although the numbers of people imprisoned may appear low, these were frightful times: “One reason the threat of arrest looms so large in the accounts we have of the Stalinist years is that the people most likely to write about their experiences were also the most likely to face arrest.”²⁷ The fate of political and cultural elites, to which both Stalińska and Zakrzewska certainly belonged, was the most dire—their closest circles of friends and family members disappeared.

Both Piwińska and Lechtman were familiar with imprisonment and the sense of helplessness that accompanied it. Lechtman was fourteen in 1934 when she was arrested for the first time, for participating in a Communist youth organization in Łódź, Poland. She spent only a few days in prison, but her family was terrified. Her grandfather slapped her when, in response to his question, she affirmed that she was a Communist. But this slap in the face was a punishment for something she was proud of. Her alarmed parents decided to move the family to Palestine in order to protect their daughter from Communism’s pernicious influence; a year later, she was imprisoned for writing Communist slogans

²³ H. Zakrzewska, op. cit., v. 2, p. 79.

²⁴ J. Urat-Milecki, *Więziennictwo w Polsce w latach 1944–56*, “*Studia Iuridica*”, 1995, v. 27, p. 116. According to historian Tadeusz Wolsza, in 1948 Polish prisons held 67,695 prisoners of all categories. T. Wolsza, op. cit., p. 8.

²⁵ *Zawołać po imieniu. Księga kobiet-więźniów politycznych, 1944–1958*, eds. B. Otwinowska and T. Drzał, v. 1, Warszawa 1999, p. 11.

²⁶ Główny Urząd Statystyczny, *Narodowe Spisy Powszechne*, <http://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechne/narodowe-spisy-powszechne/nsp-ludnosc-wg-spisow-1946-2002/>.

²⁷ B. Porter, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*, UK 2014, p. 210.

on city walls. She spent six months in a central prison for women in Bethlehem. Soon after her release, she married a Russian Communist named Sioma Lechtman. Years later, she recollected the Bethlehem prison with a certain nostalgia. There were six or seven women confined in a space consisting of two rooms and a porch. They ordered Marxist literature from the prison library, which they then studied on the big table in their cell. “From a library I checked out Lenin’s book on free love,” remembered Lechtman. “I remember his definition of love, in which he proves that love is not like drinking a glass of water, because the thirsty man drinks water. With sexual love, a sexual act is not enough to quench the thirst. The need for love, friendship, attachment, and many other factors is important. It is a very deep moral theory.”²⁸ For her, the prison was not a source of fear, but a school of life, and a school in a very practical meaning of the word—it was a place where she learned, where she read books, where she encountered the theory of the Communism that she had been practicing.

Piwińska’s prison experience was similar. In 1942, Nazis caught her and her husband operating an illegal printing press for the People’s Guard (GL), a Communist underground military organization. She was first sent to Majdanek, from where she was transferred to Ravensbrück. She was imprisoned for an open act of disobedience against the Nazis. In Zakrzewska’s words, “after the war, [Piwińska] returned to the ranks of active Communists in the new communist reality that she had dreamt of.”²⁹

Mokotów was different: There, she and Lechtman were Communists imprisoned by the very regime in which they believed. According to Zakrzewska, Piwińska was the woman who lost the most: “She lost her daughter, and she also lost something that was a condition of her existence—a belief in an idea.”³⁰ The wave of Communist arrests began sometime in 1949, in accordance with a trend toward a greater uniformity of East European Communism. One of the first suspects was Władysław Gomułka, the Polish Communist leader and first secretary of the United Communist Party, who was arrested in January 1949. He was accused of “rightist deviations” and harboring sympathy for “social democracy.”³¹ Key Communist politicians, party members, army officers, wives, and secretaries were incarcerated for anti-state or anti-Communist leanings.³² Ewa Piwińska was swept up in this hunt for internal enemies.

²⁸ Interview with Vera Lechtman, Tel Aviv, Israel, May 2013.

²⁹ H. Zakrzewska, op. cit., v. 2, p. 105.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

³¹ A. Paczkowski, *Posłowie*, [in:] H. and K. Field, op. cit.

³² Id., *Trzy twarze Józefa Świątły*, Warszawa 2009, p. 136–137; Z. Błażyński, *Mówi Józef Świątło. Za kulisami bezpieki i partii, 1940–1955*, Warszawa 1990, p. 141–142.

Tonia Lechtman was imprisoned in Noel Field's case. In 1944, she signed up for a training program for social workers that was open to refugees in Switzerland. There, she met Polish Communists as well as Noel Field, with whom she began working for the Unitarian Service Community, an aid organization.³³ First, she helped Poles repatriate to Poland from Germany and France. She moved to Piekary Śląskie in Silesia, where, with the help of the Unitarian Service Community, she helped to rebuild the local hospital.³⁴ The ideological justification for her arrest came in the form of a cumbersome story about how continuous class struggle was aimed at weakening communist vigilance.³⁵

THE CELL

The cell where the women lived for a few months was very small. According to Lechtman, it measured 2 meters by 2 meters; intended to hold one person, it instead held five. The women slept on pallets, as the cell was equipped with only one metal bedframe that was attached to a wall. In the morning, the women pulled down the frame, on which they stacked the pallets. At night, they spread them around on the floor.³⁶ Their existence in the cell was often interrupted by interrogations, to which all the women were subjected. They never knew when they would be interrogated. Only Sundays were free from interrogations. The more intense the interrogations became, the more often the women were called in the middle of the night. All of them experienced coercion and violence during the interrogations. Stalińska and Piwińska were tortured the most.³⁷

The cell spy began writing her reports in September, probably just before Piwińska joined the cell. Lechtman and later Piwińska were the main subjects of the reports. All the reports were handwritten, rather lengthy, and were signed *Postęp* (Progress). From the moment Piwińska appeared in the cell, *Postęp* wrote separate reports on Lechtman and Piwińska. The reports discussed the interactions that the women had in the cell, focusing on the Communists and their

³³ T. Sharp, op. cit., p. 117–118.

³⁴ Interview with Vera Lechtman, Tel Aviv, Israel, May 2013.

³⁵ The search for internal enemies took place in a number of countries within Stalin's sphere of influence: Albania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany, and Poland. The most likely to be accused were independent leaders. This was the case for Traicho Kostov in Bulgaria; Rudolf Slansky, a member of the Politburo in Czechoslovakia; or Władysław Gomułka in Poland. G.H. Hodos, *Show Trials. Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948–1954*, New York 1987.

³⁶ Interview with Vera Lechtman, Tel Aviv, Israel, May 2013.

³⁷ H. Zakrzewska, op. cit., v. 2, p. 97.

self-explorations of their relationship with Communist ideology and the past. Postęp noted any statements, behaviors, and even reactions to the women in the cell that she considered suspicious.

As Postęp underscored, the women's initial cell conversations did not concern their cases. At first, the women remained reticent. The conversations unfolded after the interrogations began, when Lechtman felt the urge to share some details from her first meetings with officers. She wondered why she had made a mistake while signing her name on the interrogation protocol, writing D instead of L for Lechtman. She added that she had never had a pseudonym.³⁸ Other conversations followed, as if Lechtman had to relive in the cell everything that had happened during the interrogation. Toward the end of her first report, Postęp wrote that Lechtman differed from the other cellmates in her attitude toward interrogations: She could not wait to be called. Unlike other women in the cell, Lechtman hoped that their conversations would solve an issue that the secret officers were working on and consequently lead to her release. She began to realize some of her mistakes, which she attributed to her naiveté. Imprisonment made her revisit some of her former suspicions. "She would not even regret months of imprisonment, but she worries about her work, apartment, and children," concluded Postęp.³⁹ At the end of the first report, Postęp stated her respect for Lechtman. She described her in almost uncritical terms as "sincere in relationships, direct, modest, straightforward, full of life, idealist, a sincere and devoted communist, a good mother with no ambitions to gain fame or privileges. She lives the idea that Communism meant the happiness of future populations (*żyje ideałem*)."⁴⁰ Similarly, Zakrzewska confirmed in her memoirs that Lechtman's candor won her the respect of all women in the cell.

With time, Lechtman began revealing more details about her interrogations in a conversation among her, Stalińska, and Zakrzewska.⁴¹ When Piwińska appeared in the cell in late September, her and Lechtman began exchanging information about people involved in their cases while attempting to guess the motivations of some of their colleagues. They met each other during the war, so they had many Communist friends and acquaintances in common. Both women were actively engaged in their interrogations. As noted by Postęp, Lechtman

³⁸ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Postęp, IPN BU 0151/8, "Donos z celi", 1 August 1949.

³⁹ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Postęp, IPN BU 0151/8, Postęp, "Donos z celi", 23 August 1949.

⁴⁰ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Postęp, IPN BU 0151/8, Postęp, "Donos z celi", 23 August 1949.

⁴¹ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Postęp, IPN BU 0151/8, Postęp, „Donos z celi”, (illegible date—most probably it is 12 September 1949.

responded to her interrogation officer's request to describe her contact with Noel Field with enormous earnestness. She rehearsed with her cellmates what she should have said, had said, and would say in the future. Her interrogation officers asked her for all the possible details, such as who she met on the day she received her passport in order to return to Poland from Berlin after the war had ended, or what she and Field had eaten for dinner on the day they met in Berlin. The cell spy testified that, after a number of interrogations, Lechtman herself began to suspect that Field was a spy and even admitted that she was objectively guilty, even though she was subjectively innocent.⁴² Years later, Lechtman explained that she had believed "where there's smoke, there's fire."⁴³ She was convinced that innocent people were not sitting in prison; those in prison were guilty.⁴⁴

According to *Postę*, Piwińska experienced her imprisonment as deeply devastating. She worried about her mother and daughter. Unlike Lechtman, who tried to understand her guilt, Piwińska felt humiliated and rejected all the accusations leveled against her or her colleagues. "She is an enthusiast, sincerely and with all her heart devoted to Communism, she lives and breathes this idea (*niq żyje i oddycha*). She knows nothing about people's perfidy, so she does not even see the thoughts that can hide under good deeds and evil intentions. Impulsive, she makes a good impression on her cellmates. Her understanding and empathy toward others and their problems wins over her adversaries—Zakrzewska and Stalińska," wrote *Postę*.⁴⁵

Piwińska grew angry. Her befuddlement and anguish reached its peak when her interrogation officer told her that she was hallucinating when she claimed to have heard a crying baby. She took this lie as an insult with which the communist authorities repaid her years of commitment.⁴⁶ Interestingly, years later, after her release and in a moment of self-accusatory reflection, she blamed her class origins for her failure to fully understand her guilt. "If I had had proletarian origins," she wrote in her diary, "I would have had a class instinct—a healthy, good instinct, which would have protected me from bourgeois-intelligentsia doubts."⁴⁷ With time, Piwińska felt increasingly humiliated. In moments of utter desperation, she asked both Zakrzewska and Lechtman to hit her in order to

⁴² Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, *Postę*, IPN BU 0151/8, *Postę*, "Donosz celi", November 1949; D. Dowgiałło, "Interview with Tonia Lechtman", Tel Aviv 1994.

⁴³ Interview with Tonia Lechtman in the film *Noel Field. A Fictitious Spy*, directed by Werner Schweizer, 1996.

⁴⁴ H. Zakrzewska, op. cit., v. 2, p. 108.

⁴⁵ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN BU 0298/403, *Postę*, "Raport z celi", 12 September 1949.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ E. Piwińska, "Wspomnienia", Manuscript.

strengthen her ability to withstand the prison's inhumane treatment.⁴⁸ There was, however, something else that made her imprisonment more difficult—fear for her baby, Krysia.⁴⁹ At this point, she came to see her prison experience as a provocation, unworthy of Communist ideals.

Postęp grew increasingly more suspicious of both women. She became impatient with Lechtman, characterizing her attitude toward her interrogators as contemptuous.⁵⁰ At some point (most likely in November), she noticed that Piwińska was lacking the fierceness (*zawziętość*) that Communists should possess. Her “liberal openness” toward “the enemies of socialism” was distrustful.⁵¹ She even returned to the day Piwińska was brought to their cell and recalled that Piwińska was more worried about her daughter than about her imprisonment. She noticed that Piwińska openly defended the Home Army soldiers in the cell while criticizing the behavior of Soviet soldiers in secret conversations with Zakrzewska, stressing that she was a Pole first and foremost. Lechtman's enthusiastic and somewhat gullible comments about Soviet achievements upset Piwińska.⁵² Did Postęp's negativity stem from fatigue at playing the difficult role of a cell spy? Or perhaps the emotional tone of her reports reflects different moods in the cell, possibly increasing disagreements between some women (Piwińska and Lechtman) and a new alliance between others (Zakrzewska and Piwińska).

In November, it seems that the point of interrogating most of the women became moot. Piwińska felt betrayed and ridiculed. Stalińska was becoming increasingly aggressive toward the interrogation officers. Both were tortured in the most horrific ways; however, their suffering was not mentioned in the reports. Zakrzewska stubbornly refused to testify. Lechtman continued to testify (which included writing testimonies in the cell), but the officers kept asking her to uncover “the second bottom” and incriminate Field. Exhausted and increasingly disillusioned Lechtman kept insisting ‘that there is no second bottom.’ As if in response to their refusal to cooperate, the women's cell was turned into a punishment cell—all the cellmates were being punished in the most cunning manner. At night, the light was kept on, and the guards organized night gymnastics for Lechtman and Zakrzewska, waking them every few hours and making them run

⁴⁸ Archiwum Akt Nowych, Spuścizna Haliny Zakrzewskiej, “Wspomnienia”.

⁴⁹ M. Piwińska, “Wspomnienia”, Manuscript.

⁵⁰ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN BU 0151/8, Postęp, “Donos z celi”, 15 December 1949.

⁵¹ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN BU 0298/403, Postęp, “Donos z celi”, November 1949.

⁵² Ibid.

up and down the stairs.⁵³ During the day, all the women had to either stand or kneel for hours with their arms spread. Preparing themselves for such instances, Lechtman and Zakrzewska made small pillows for their cellmates, which they put under their knees. To shorten the kneeling time, the women ate tobacco, which caused them to faint quickly.⁵⁴ Each time this happened, the guards searched their cell and poured buckets of water into it, which the women had to gather with their cups and hands. At some point, Piwińska, in a theatrical gesture, used the silk Italian underwear that she had bought at the diplomatic outpost in Italy to sop up the water.⁵⁵

The intensified violence affected the women's relationships negatively as well. In response to the absurd violence but also to accusations leveled against her, Piwińska went on a hunger strike, which she wanted to keep secret as long as possible. Only Zakrzewska knew. At every meal, Piwińska simulated eating while Zakrzewska ate her food. Eventually, seven days later, after the accusation against her and her husband had been dropped, she stopped her strike.⁵⁶ At this moment the informant began sharing in her reports the doubts that Lechtman had toward Piwińska. Exhaustion and anxiety were probably impacting the women's mutual relations. But these changes also emphasize how dynamic the cell relationships were. The women's ideological commitments influenced how they experienced their interrogations, but they did not determine the attitude they had toward each other. From the empathy that was born from their shared experience of motherhood, they entered common conversations about their interrogations, accusations, fears, and expectations. Unfortunately, the reports do not reveal much about how Stalińska and Zakrzewska responded to their interrogators, but we know that they remained engaged in the discussions of Lechtman and Piwińska, not taking sides, but rather trying to understand their predicament. Eventually, they all became part of the circles of trust that synchronized their reactions (hunger strikes or sewing small pillows that could alleviate pain from kneeling) to the violence and punishment administered by the prison authorities.

Who wrote the cell spy's reports? The one cellmate not featured in the reports was Vira Szot. Both Lechtman and Zakrzewska were convinced that Szot was

⁵³ H. Zakrzewska, *op. cit.*, s. 108–110; Snopkiewicz and Marat, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

⁵⁴ M. Łoziński, Interviews with Ewa Piwińska, Tonia Lechtman, and Halina Zakrzewska, video, Warszawa 1970^o. Copy in the possession of the author.

⁵⁵ An unpublished interview with Tonia Lechtman, Tel Aviv 1994, p. 65.

⁵⁶ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN BU 0298/403, Postęp, "Donos z celi", November 1949.

an informer.⁵⁷ She arrived in Poland in the spring of 1946 and served as a UPA liaison to western Poland, where she was supposed to set up transfer points for UPA members who were traveling abroad. Her arrest came on June 7, 1949.⁵⁸ In one of the interrogation protocols from July 1947, she revealed that she had already been imprisoned by the Soviets in July 1945 but was released after she had agreed to inform.⁵⁹ In a letter that she wrote in the 1990^s to Marija Pankow, a historian at the Ukrainian Organization Slovo, Szot explained that she had received a death sentence that was commuted to fifteen years in prison. After four months in a death cell in Mokotów, she decided to write to Polish President Bierut and ask for a pardon. Years later, she explained that she had appealed because she did not agree with being labeled a “fascist,” a term that appeared in her sentence.⁶⁰ She had a very difficult time adjusting to prison life. In a conversation with an interrogation officer on July 18, 1947, she said that she carried poison with her all the time, which she was prepared to use if her life became unbearable.⁶¹

Though Szot was most likely the spy, all the reports were written in good Polish, while Szot’s first language was Ukrainian. There is only one piece of evidence that suggests Szot was a spy. In correspondence from 1961 with the secret police, Szot stated that her past collaboration with them had caused her great suffering. Yet she did not explain what she meant. The officer assured her that her identity had not been revealed.⁶² Still, her long sentence and stay in Inowrocław, the harshest prison for women, casts some doubt as to whether she was a secret police informant. In most cases, informants who performed well were released early. Perhaps Szot began her cooperation with the secret police only to end it soon after and for that reason was sent to Inowrocław. These possible explanations remain in the realm of speculation.

⁵⁷ The rumor that Vira was a spy was also confirmed by Ruta Czaplińska, who was imprisoned with her in Fordon. Tadeusz Kostewicz, Interview with Ruta Czaplińska, 17. And yet it is possible that whoever wrote the reports could have omitted Szot’s name on purpose in order to direct all suspicion to her. This idea was suggested to me by Mariusz Zajączkowski, a historian from Lublin’s IPN.

⁵⁸ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN Bu 01236/760, “Raport o zezwolenie na przeprowadzenie rozmowy operacyjnej”, Warszawa, 6 March 1959, „Pismo do Naczelnika Wydziału I-go Departamentu III”, Warszawa, 12 November 1947.

⁵⁹ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN Bu 01236/760, “Protokół przesłuchania podejrzanego”, 2 July 1947.

⁶⁰ V. Szot, Letter to Maria Pankow, Maria Pankow’s archive, Warsaw.

⁶¹ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN Bu 01236/760, Vira Szot’s file, “Oświadczenie oficera śledczego”, Warszawa, 19 July 1947, s. 14.

⁶² Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN Bu 01236/760, Kap. Gorbaczewski, “Notatka ze spotkania z Wierą Szot”, p. 217.

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Sabina Stalińska, Halina Zakrzewska, Tonia Lechtman, Ewa Piwińska, and Vera Szot spent about three or four months in one cell. In December 1949 or early 1950, all Communist prisoners were moved to *dwunastka*, a section of Mokotów Prison reserved for Communist prisoners. Piwińska left prison without a trial in 1953 and soon after applied to the Communist Party for the return of her party identification card. Lechtman left Mokotów a year later, in 1954. Zakrzewska stayed in Mokotów, from where, without a trial, she was released in the middle of 1954. Stalińska was released in December 1954. Szot was moved to Fordon, a prison for women who had already received their sentences. She was released in 1954.

“A shared fate, the closeness of our pallets, using the same coat as a blanket, tightened our friendship,” explained Zakrzewska.⁶³ It was the cold, the anxiety, the hunger, and the violence leveled against the women that united them. Perhaps the space of the cell, in all its bareness and its tendency to strip prisoners of their individuality, left nothing to hinder creative openness, in cases when the character of the prisoner was so inclined. While the conditions in cells were roughly the same everywhere, only rarely did prisoners manage to generate an atmosphere of closeness. The bonds among these women were built on many different levels. There was a strong connection among mothers who respected each other’s suffering. The relationships were also based on a mutual respect for their ideological persistence despite the violent interrogations to which especially Piwińska and Stalińska were subjected. Finally, there seems to have been a particularly strong bond between Piwińska and Lechtman based on their previous engagements, common ideological commitment, and shared friends. But there was also something maternal about this relationship. The older Piwińska would protect Lechtman when necessary—for example, claiming that it was she, not Lechtman, who had tapped to a neighboring cell.⁶⁴ This could also be the reason why she did not share her decision to go on a hunger strike with Lechtman.

All four of these women seemingly trusted each other. Trust is a modern phenomenon, something that always resides within people, is always personal, and emerges with freedom of agency and individual autonomy. Faced with too many choices and options, modern individuality has become unpredictable.⁶⁵ Trust needs time to emerge. It did not exist when Piwińska first entered the cell,

⁶³ H. Zakrzewska, op. cit., p. 110.

⁶⁴ Tonia Lechtman’s file, IPN 0298/715.

⁶⁵ J. Gronow, *Review of Adam Seligman’s The Problem of Trust*, *Acta Sociologica*, 1998, v. 41, p. 181.

but it developed as a result of the many difficulties that the women shared as well as choices they made or forewent. All the women in this particular cell had a chance to experience the *other*—the other who represented a conflict, a different ideology, and a different life experience. Coexisting, for them, meant mutual sympathy and openness, in which differences were not rejected immediately but rather invited questions and reflection. It was thus their shared fate—the intensity of mutual daily contact—that created these relationships, despite the odds.

Three of the women—Zakrzewska, Lechtman, and Piwińska—remained friends. In the early 1970s, they all met in front of Marcel Łoziński's camera. They all laughed while recollecting various moments from their prison life, such as wall love affairs. Piwińska acted in a very theatrical way, exactly the way the other women (including Postęp) had described her. One of the anecdotes that Zakrzewska recollected went as follows: One day, women from a cell to which Zakrzewska was moved were asked to move out. They did not know why, but they complied. It was late and dark outside. An emergency car waited for them beyond the prison walls. Armed men were surrounding the car and also inside of it. The five women entered the car and held hands. The two Communist women thought that the car was taking them to be executed; the two Home Army women thought that they were being deported east, to Siberia. One woman, the wife of a general, thought that they were going to be released. They smelled the air and listened carefully in order to guess where they were: A river meant they were heading east; a forest meant they were heading to their executions.

In 1995, soon after Zakrzewska published her memoirs, Lechtman wrote her a letter from Tel Aviv, in which she told her how much she loved the book: "I would like to tell you what an important work you undertook—it may sound silly, but it is true—for future generations, as 'Ordon's Redoubt'.⁶⁶ Perhaps I said something silly, but that's how I think of it. Last time I read Mickiewicz, I think, was at the 11th department. When I read your story, something touched me exactly the same way I was touched when I read 'Ordon's Redoubt' a long time ago. My dear, and this chapter about our friendship—cell no. 26, this is the day of Werka's birthday (her daughter). You know, normally when one reads some description, one experiences some deficiencies (*niedosyt*), and here everything is as if you took it out of my mouth, everything exactly how it was."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ A poem by Adam Mickiewicz devoted to a defense of Warsaw from Russians during the Uprising of 1830–1831.

⁶⁷ A letter from Antonia Lechtman to Halina Zakrzewska, Tel Aviv, 1 June 1995.

