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“Solidarity” in the Eyes of the Youngest Generation

Abstract: In autumn 1980 *Świat Młodych*, a newspaper addressed to teenagers, announced a competition called “My World 80–81.” By early 1981 hundreds of letters had come in. This unique source of information allows us to get a glimpse of teenagers’ perception of the birth of the “Solidarity” movement. Thanks to these letters, we can take a closer look at school discussions, conversations at the family table or disputes during school intervals. Everyday life is also reflected in these letters: queues, crowded public transport, fatigue and uncertainty. The vast majority of the letter writers sympathised with “Solidarity” although the prospect of confrontation between the regime and the inchoate movement was a source of anxiety. The authorities were largely perceived as a degenerate oligarchy. The quoted letters are also a testimony of discovery of the past and withheld historical facts and also of the search for new authorities (e.g., Czesław Miłosz). The young generation’s declarations suggest that it wanted to participate in public life with previously unparalleled gusto. Martial law nipped this positive energy in the bud.

Keywords: teenagers, awareness, “Solidarity,” moods, expectations

The View from the Neighbourhood Yard

“When the seaside strike was announced we met in the yard. Ewa was very anxious. First she asked me what a strike was. I explained without going into any details,” recalls sixteen-year-old Liliana K. from Rzeszów in her letter to *Świat Młodych* in January 1981. “The yard” saw Liliana as a carer and games organiser. Little Ewa was not satisfied with her older friend’s explanation, however. “You know,” she said looking at me earnestly, “What will happen now?” “What do you mean?,” I laughed, “Nothing is going to happen. They’ll strike then they’ll stop striking.” “Well but what if they don’t?” “Don’t what?” “Don’t stop?” “How can I know?” More and more frequently, activities at the neighbourhood yard were interrupted with questions and stories of what one had just heard. Once again Ewa approached Liliana. “[...] Can this lead to war?” “War? Don’t be silly!” “Because you know, I think to myself that if there was to be a war then my brother would die.” “Listen, Ewa. Nothing’s going to happen.” Little Ewa was still apprehensive, however. “Yes but there’s a strike and my mummy is going to go on strike too. They can lock her up in jail and then what will I do?” “You know what, let’s change the subject.” Liliana was clearly irritated, particularly considering that she herself was in the fog. “Cos if they continue to strike

like this there may be a revolution,” Ewa continued her list of potential woes. The strange word—revolution—intrigued the other playmates. Even “little Cathy” and her even younger brother Pete joined in. “What’s a revolution?” This time Ewa began to explain: “It’s when everyone murders each other and there’s nothing to eat.” Cathy nodded her head whereas Pete walked up to Ewa and cuddled in to her: “So there won’t be a circus any more?” This scene moved Liliana particularly because it was she who suggested that the kids play circus.

This is just a fragment of one of the epistolary reports submitted to the competition “My World 80–81” organised by *Świat Młodych* at the beginning of 1981. Only 302 letters have survived. Most of them are deposited in the Manuscript Department of the Warsaw University Library. These letters are a unique testimony to the age of “Solidarity” as seen by the youngest generation. All these youngsters felt that they were participating in a historical spectacle. In 1980 history even reached the yards and playgrounds. (For a more detailed account of these letters see my book “Teenagers ’81. Adolescent Awareness in the Age of *Solidarity*.”).

Something New: Everybody’s Talking

Everybody was talking about history, strikes, “Solidarity” and the crisis of communist Poland. Who knows, perhaps the greatest achievement of the “Solidarity” revolution was that people began to talk to each other. “Everybody’s talking: at school, at home, in the queue, with acquaintances and strangers, among the youngsters and among the elderly. All circles and occupations joined the discussion. These days will be remembered,” diagnosed seventeen-year-old Waldemar D. from Gulczewsk near Marzenin. In their attempt to convey the atmosphere of the “S” age, the young people indicated these ubiquitous conversations as something special and unparalleled in former years. What surprised Waldemar from Gulczewsk most was the change of atmosphere at school since autumn 1980. “Me and my friends talk a lot about the economic situation in our country. We all watch television, the news and we often quarrel because we all have different opinions. Zbigniew M. from Ralkowice in the Legnica province “often” talked with his school friends about the crisis of communist Poland and the inchoate “Solidarity.” “We don’t always agree and then we usually quarrel. Each of us tries to convince the others that he is right.”

Politics infiltrated lessons at school. “We often talk about politics at our lessons with our class tutor. We usually agree, we’re all on the side of the workers, we believe them and in them,” wrote fourteen-year-old Wiesława J. from Paprotnia concisely. Equally heated disputes also took place in the primary school attended by fourteen-year-old Wiesława P. from Old Gnatowice in the Warsaw province. “We often discuss politics in class,” Wiesława admitted, adding that “everybody” took the side of the workers.

These political discussions carried over from the schools, parental workplaces, queues and ‘the street’ to the youngsters’ homes. Here is a typical scene. “The news, Dad!,” called Agnieszka. “Coming! Stir the broth Mariola (that’s me), so that it

doesn't boil over.” “Oh, dear, I'd rather watch the news.” “Do you at least know what it's all about?” This family dialogue reproduced in the letter of Maria S. from Anin could possibly take place in other homes as well. About 19:30 when the TV newsreel was due to begin excitement rose in many homes. People waited for the new announcements. After the news they usually had long discussions. Politics divided people but it also integrated them. Thirteen-year-old Wioletta P. from Łapy confided: “We have recently begun to study the economic reform project.”

Some youngsters were beginning to have enough of these incessant discussions and disputes. For example, Eva G. from Czersk admitted, “I'm utterly fed up with all this because, day in day out, it's always the same, at home, at school, in the street, even at the school disco.”

Hope

“Solidarity” with the trade union prevailed in these conversations (such declarations, though not unconditional, can be found in most of the surviving letters). Why did these young people support “Solidarity?” Their motives were not very complicated. They hoped for a general “revival.” The word “justice” resounds in many letters. “Solidarity” was to reinstate justice and make it the fundamental rule of everyday life. For example, Elżbieta G. from Tarnów, age 14, wrote that, “the happiest thing is probably that someone has finally taken care of justice.” Fourteen-year-old Ewa S. from Smroków in the Cracow province shared this opinion: “I think about the Free Independent Trade Union *Solidarity*, I believe in them, that they'll win, as far as this subject is concerned, although I'm just fourteen.” Anna S. from Cracow, a year younger than Ewa, also hoped that the principle of justice would be reinstated. In her letter she mentioned that when she went back to school after the summer holidays in 1980 she could feel a “breath of fresh air.” “Something had become uncorked, had let go, there was no injustice, no lying.” Anna counted on it that if the atmosphere at school had cleared so quickly then it would also be possible to put things right in the whole country.

The hope that “things will be put right” is probably the second major reason why the youngsters tended to support “Solidarity.” “I'm now waiting for “Solidarity” to finish putting things in order *up above* and start putting things in order *down below*,” wrote Zbigniew K. from Katowice, age 13. This is an example of typical argumentation. Similar arguments can be found in other letters. Sixteen-year-old Andrzej S. from Cracow argued that once things were put right this would help to prevent future “errors and distortions” and the government would begin to treat the people “as a partner:” “Maybe it will then be possible to overcome the economic crisis.”

Andrzej also gave other arguments.

There is one other thing they fought for during the strikes, something extremely important—the right to truth. Now, although there is still no satisfactory censorship act, we have at least partial truth. We can now find out many things which couldn't get through to us several years ago.

This motive—the quest for truth—returns in many letters. Another sixteen-year-old, Maciej M. from Ostrów Wielkopolski, argued that the time had come to revise “the official version of history fed to society.” He emphatically described his recent visit to the cinema to see Andrzej Wajda’s *Marble Man*.

Of course there were also more prosaic reasons for the youngsters’ sympathising with “Solidarity” such as their parents’ opinions. The letter from Wioletta P. from Łapy (13) whose mother was one of the “S” leaders in her workplace is a typical example. Wioletta admitted that ever since she joined “Solidarity,” her mother had lived largely for the union and the factory and this “had spread to us (me and dad).” Obviously the attitudes of the grownups (several million people joined “Solidarity” at the turn of 1980 and 1981) significantly affected the opinions of their teenage offspring (even if they did not always admit to emulating their elders).

Some letter-writers expressed their (sometimes active) support for “Solidarity.” One typical example is the strike organised by the pupils of the Agriculture Mechanisation Technical School in Sejny, described by Stanisław S. (16, grade II) On October 25, Stanisław reported, “we got no bread for supper so we went on hunger strike which lasted until October 28 inclusive.” “We submitted our postulates and some of them have already been fulfilled.” The pupils demanded better food, equipment of the common room and also... more discs. “I was all for the strikes, things had to change eventually,” commented sixteen-year-old Stanisław.

The youth strike “Solidarity” style was a rather exceptional attempt to join into the protest movement, however. A more frequent form of support for the movement was the development of independent pupil organisations (The Inter-School Movement for Pupil Revival) or the publishing of underground gazettes (e.g., “The Polish Pupil”). “Solidarity” fans sometimes contented themselves with wearing the union badge. “Many of them wear the *Solidarity* badge,” wrote Maria S. from Anin (16). It is worth noting, however, that it was mostly youth from the large cities who wore the badge. We do not know whether this habit was also followed in small towns and villages.

Fear for “Solidarity”

“Solidarity” beguiled most teenagers but they remained amazingly critical nevertheless. Interestingly enough, it was the idea itself, the faith in reinstatement of justice, law and order, the need to discard falsehood, rather than specific union leaders which attracted them to the movement. The boys and girls mentioned names, even the name of Lech Wałęsa, amazingly rarely. Besides, the “Solidarity” leader evoked intense emotions. For example, this is how Anna I. from Warsaw (16) described one Sunday Mass for children and adolescents: “Let us pray for “Solidarity” and Mr Wałęsa, Lord hear our prayer!,” read his supplication one “little boy.” The prayer greatly impressed Anna as well as the parents gathered in the church. “The adults nearly fell off their seats with laughter but the children responded seriously...” But there were also doubts. Beata D. from Tarnów (16) was very critical of Wałęsa’s behaviour on 31 August 1980, directly after the signing of the agreements with Mieczysław Jagielski:

“[Wałęsa] was carried to the tribune on the shipyard workers’ shoulders. He was too sure of himself.”

“Solidarity” fascinated but it also aroused apprehension. Surprisingly many young authors criticised the idea of free Saturdays because they thought this might lead to further degeneration of the work ethic. Strikes were particularly worrying. Hence they warned against confrontation in their letters and also asked that peace be observed.

Fear of Crisis

The most important reason for supporting “Solidarity” (and the most important source of anxiety) was the profound sense of crisis. “Poland is currently experiencing a crisis.” This opinion, shared by fifteen-year-old Monika M. from Łódź, could be gleaned from any and all of the letters quoted here. For example, thirteen-year-old Mirosław P. from the village of Kozięłowy in the Częstochowa province gave an account of the functioning of a nearby agricultural co-operative. He gave a sarcastic portrayal of the deputy manager of the co-op who “is drunk and enters his car *on all fours*. If governance is in this sort of hands then we need not worry about the future because this is the end!”

In the eyes of the teenagers the authorities, both local and central, were something alien. The ruling party was seen as an oligarchy. With just a few exceptions the youngsters described them using the pronoun “they.” “They” loomed large as a separate, alien caste which lived on the outskirts of society with its own representational buildings and its own shops. The young letter writers held these authorities accountable for their hardship.

The youngsters felt that Poland was in a state of collapse. They described the empty shelves: the lack of school materials, copybooks, paper, electricity, food... “Even the hens seem to have gone on strike because there is a shortage of eggs,” noted Monika M. from Łódź sarcastically. And sixteen-year-old Jacek M. from Lubañ Śląski voiced the opinion that “our country is resting on loans.”

As they observed the condition of communist Poland, the boys and girls paid particular attention to the educational system. “This is what our classroom looks like now: nothing but concrete, but we aren’t cold because our classroom is directly above the furnace room. Behind the blackboard there are shelves with an untidy array of books. Even the windows won’t shut, so they have been nailed up and although the door is new it won’t shut either.” This is how Irena Z. from Kamień in the Cracow province described her primary school. This is a particularly pertinent example but it is hardly exceptional. School curricula and textbooks evoked widespread resentment. “The textbooks are often written in such a way that they discourage us instead of encouraging us,” argued Paweł G. from Piotrków Trybunalski.

The list of complaints concerning the “people’s state” was much longer, however. The young boys and girls criticised the wastage, lack of work ethic, devastation of property, corruption and cliques, drunkenness and bureaucracy.

Fear of Emulating the Adults' "Careers"

Most of all, the young respondents feared social determinism. "Will my friends turn into indifferent office workers a few years from now?" Will they quarrel? Will I have to *fight* for an apartment, a telephone, bread? Everybody is fighting with everybody else. I don't want that! I can't! A don't know how to!"—wrote Beata D. (15) from Warsaw emphatically (perhaps paraphrasing Cezary Baryka, the hero of Stefan Żeromski's "Early Spring"). It looks as if the youngsters protested one and all against the prospect of emulating the adults' careers. They did not want to be sentenced to the role of conformists who had mastered the art of adjustment. Neither did they want to adapt to the system which they resented.

Surely machinations, years of experience and lessons of cunning have not erased our ability to tell right from wrong, black from white. We have not yet learned to calculate *what is worth it and what is not*. So perhaps it would be a good thing to ask us for our opinion

—pondered Ewa K. from Gorzów Wielkopolski, as if in the name of all her peers. But she seemed to harbour no illusions: "immediately we are overwhelmed, deafened out, made to toe the line." Ewa had the impression that the young generation was at risk of falling into the ruts and losing its youthful sensitivity and perceptiveness.

"Solidarity" held the hope that the young generation would not emulate the adults' destinies and careers. This was not a time of generation rebellion but nevertheless distrust of the "grownups" prevailed. "I'm afraid," wrote Maria S. from Anin, "that a blemish has developed on our faith in your wisdom and infallibility." "Grownups" have lost their authority because, observing how they behave in the queues, at work, sometimes even at school, in the top governing ranks, the young generation feels that they have been double-faced and insincere. This is how fifteen-year-old Katarzyna W. from Toruń defined the problem: "Adults don't walk like they talk. They say and teach one thing and do another thing hence showing us their real face." Katarzyna asked bitterly, "why don't they do what they preach?" "why do they say that we are to tell the truth yet they themselves breach the truth and contradict their own words?" "Who is responsible for the youth rebellion?," she asked rhetorically. Małgorzata Sz. from Poznań also wrote about adults who should be a "paragon" for young people but turned out to be "humbugs."

Many young people did not want to wait for someone to ask their opinion. In the days of "Solidarity" they felt more grownup. "Although I'm just 13 I perfectly understand the crisis in our Fatherland," boldly declared thirteen-year-old Tomasz F. from Zawady in the Nowosądeckie province. "When I was in younger classes I could never figure out what Fatherland meant. But now I know. Many children and adolescents have reached the same awareness as I," admitted Ewa G. (16) from Czersk. Malina W. from Pawlice n/Rakowiec shared this opinion:

The time has come when every voice spoken by every Polish citizen counts. So let's not waste the opportunity, let's say what should be changed, what is still wrong.

Most youngsters really did speak up. Similar comments can be found in most of the 302 surviving letters. We may even risk the conclusion that youth wanted to pass as a fully legitimate part of civil society.

The Search for New Authorities, Values and Symbols

“Solidarity” age teenagers sought new authorities, values and symbols. They even sought a new language. They needed landmarks. This was also a time of fascination with the past. The respondents frequently objected to falsification of history and particularly to civil education lessons (or, as they called them, “propaganda”).

Many youngsters were extremely moved by Andrzej Wajda’s new film, *Marble Man*. Equally important was the unveiling on 16 December 1980 of the monument commemorating the shipbuilders who had been killed by the communist regime. Reminiscences of 1968 also returned, albeit probably only in some circles. Seventeen-year-old Paweł S., pupil of a Warsaw senior secondary school, mentioned “a text devoted to the 1968 events” which appeared in the school corridor at the beginning of 1981 and which, Paweł pointed out, “had been reproduced at Warsaw University.”

In their quest for an alternative for the rotting regime, the young boys and girls gradually began to reach further and further back, as if discovering the times of the Second Republic anew. Some of them were deeply moved by Independence Day (11 November), also celebrated in the churches. “I met nearly half of our class [in the Cathedral]—believers and nonbelievers alike,” wrote Anna I. from Warsaw.

This heightened interest in history and general awakening was accompanied by an increase in religiosity. Could “Solidarity” have been possible without John Paul II, one wonders. The youngsters wrote about the pope with great affection or even ardour.

Another figure which began to act as a symbol was Czesław Miłosz. This emigrant poet, completely absent in Polish language textbooks, was the first Nobel Prize winner for literature since Władysław Reymont (1924). This itself greatly impressed the youngsters. “So many questions come to mind... For example, why didn’t we know anything about Miłosz? No need to explain any more. Today we fight in queues for his poetry,” wrote Renata K. (17) from Cracow at the beginning of January 1981. What is important is that, despite observable signs of disintegration of Polish society, these young boys and girls felt that revival was possible—together with new patrons.

There is probably also another reason why the success of Czesław Miłosz made such an impression on the youngsters: he was a man of the West. In the young generation’s consciousness the myth of a better, affluent, western society also played a significant role. They increasingly longed for this world. Giving an account of his experience with queues, thirteen-year-old Tomasz F. from Zawady in the Nowosądeckie province observed,

People are nervous. They speak with admiration of Austria which is so well organised and where everything is brought to people’s doorsteps. They remember how easy it is to live in the USA.

There is no doubt about it: at the turn of 1980 and 1981 young people dreamed mainly of a world of order, peace and justice. They wanted to have an easier life than their parents. They did not accept the surrounding reality: empty shops, nervous tension, poverty, bleakness.

Despite their apprehensions, disapproval of surrounding reality sometimes bordering on refusal to identify with communist Poland, however, the young respondents

seemed to be greatly attached to their Polishness. The popularity of Jan Pietrzak's song "Let Poland to become Poland." is rather significant. Despite their (selective) fascination with the West, the letters suggest that the young generation did not want to emigrate. Only Piotr Ch. from Gdańsk ended his letter with the very bitter observation: "I sometimes think that perhaps when I get my training I might escape and go abroad, somewhere quiet, with no armaments, no strikes."

Ideal system?

It is not sure how the youth imagined the ideal system in which they would like to live. They had lots of good intentions but it looks as if patriotic elation was a substitute for specific ideas. To a certain extent they perceived the age of "Solidarity" as an age of miracles—and expected more miracles. "The first Pole in space, the first Polish pope, the first trade unions, the first serious strikes," enumerated successive significant events Sławomir S. from Bydgoszcz to conclude, "the first serious crude oil..." It is really hard to believe how enthusiastically those teenagers responded to the assessments of the alleged oil deposits in Karlino. Joyous anticipation of the ensuing benefits was the dominant mood. "Thanks to this discovery Poland may become richer," argued fourteen-year-old Ryszard Sz. from Czesław, for example. In a way the miraculous aura fostered the illusion that it would not be difficult to overcome the crisis and reconstruct society.

Only a few were aware that noble intentions must be accompanied by individual effort. The absence of the concept of democracy in the youngsters' letters is quite striking. As if they had no such word in their lexicon. They were fascinated with western affluence but knew very little about the systemic mechanisms which facilitate economic growth. Nobody taught them about these things, either at home or at school. The parents of this generation of teenagers were born or at least educated in communist Poland. If they did not take advantage of the opportunity to travel to the West which was available in the seventies they could not personally know any other system than the communist one. In a way, the youngsters' dreams attest to their independent yet lonely search for ways to improve the surrounding reality.

Teenager awareness in the age of "Solidarity" was the product of anxiety, the sense that the state was disintegrating or even aversion towards the state, distrust of "grownups," patriotic elation, enchantment with newly discovered recent history, fascination with symbolic figures such as John Paul II or Czesław Miłosz, interest in religion and the West. These boys and girls dreamed of changing their own country and despite their helplessness and anxiety, their lack of specific ideas (but not of goodwill), their insufficient knowledge, they wanted to do something for their local community and for society in general. These dreams were largely shattered on 13 December 1981. The show was over and all that was left was a game of "circus."