

Solidarity's Secret

Solidarity's Secret

the women who defeated communism in **poland**

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the university of michigan press ann arbor

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For My Parents

*You've come to learn about Solidarity women, so I will
tell you the truth, but who will care to publish it?
Everyone in Poland knows that women started the
1980s underground, but no one bothers to talk about it.
—Barbara Labuda, Wrocław*

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F o r e w o r d

irena grudzińska-gross

Imagine the following situation: it is a severe winter, most of the people you used to work with are under arrest, all the telephones are cut off, the streets of your city are teeming with policemen and tanks, soldiers are warming themselves by street-side fires. What are you going to do? If you are Helena Łuczywo, and this is December 15, 1981, two days after martial law was declared in Poland, you walk out of the apartment in which you are hiding and look for people with whom you can rebuild the Solidarity movement. And, rather quickly, you find that some of the people with whom you used to conspire against the communist government before Solidarity even existed have not been apprehended and are ready to conspire again. Soon, you assemble seven people and organize—it is exceedingly difficult—the first meeting, in which the future course of the resistance is set up. The most important task is to preserve the voice and the authority of the Solidarity movement, to prevent its disappearance. One of the seven people present at that first meeting takes on the task of finding and contacting any elected Solidarity leader who escaped arrest. The safety of the leaders is to be carefully managed so that they can lead the movement. And because they need to have a platform from which their words can be heard, a newspaper must be created. Hence a decision is made to

create the *Tygodnik Mazowsze* (Regional Weekly). The remaining six people sit down to plan how to accomplish this task. Such were the first steps in the long march that unseated communism.

What is rather surprising in this story is not only the courage, or should I say the audacity, of these seven persons, but the fact that all of them were women. They immediately found the formula for how to act against the political and human disaster of the introduction of martial law. And, what is even more remarkable, they persevered in their stubborn resistance for eight long and exhausting years. They hid in ever-changing apartments, evading arrest, missing their children's birthdays, working around the clock. Only one of them, Ewa Kulik, the one who went in search of leaders in hiding, became a member of the underground's decision-making structures. When in 1989 their activities bore fruit and the communist system collapsed, they went on to the next task without once receiving or demanding gratitude or simple recognition. They did not want to think about themselves as veterans of past battles and therefore marched right into new challenges. They also rejected any gender analysis, saying: we were all in it together, and we did what was needed, because it was the right thing to do. And while many people wrote themselves into the history of resistance against communism, the women of *Tygodnik Mazowsze*, as well as countless other women conspirators, are rarely mentioned. Today, barely fifteen years after the fall of communism, these are unsung, forgotten heroines of the Polish underground.

But, I should say, they WERE unsung heroines because the book you are about to read reconstructs their actions and secures their place in recent history. The story of the Solidarity movement has often been told: How, in the face of government-ordered price-raises, the young electrician Lech Wałęsa jumped over the wall of the Gdańsk shipyard and ultimately founded the Solidarity Trade Union; how that union demanded and won not only economic benefits for workers but demanded fundamental liberties; how it acquired ten million members; how it was then suppressed by martial law. But Shana Penn is the first to relate in detail what role a Gdańsk shipyard worker, Anna Walentynowicz, played before that famous Wałęsa jump, and what happened next. Expertly written by a sympathetic outsider, *Solidarity's Secret: The Women*

Who Defeated Communism in Poland is a thorough telling and deep analysis of the story of women in the initially legal, then outlawed, Solidarity movement in Poland. The book is multilayered. Part oral history, part historical and sociological reconstruction of the traditions governing Polish womanhood, it is also a political analysis of a national history that in itself is hard to disentangle. Penn pays very close attention to the particularities of the Polish situation and endeavors to communicate all its nuances. But the book's chief value comes from the fact that none of these traditions blinds her vision. She steps in with seemingly very innocent questions: What about the participation of women? Why weren't they noticed? Why were they absent from the formal leadership? Weren't they recognized as leaders as well? What did they do? How crucial were their actions for the survival of the movement? Why did they refuse to differentiate themselves as women from their male colleagues?

The responses to these questions produce a new and fascinating description of what was one of the most important mass movements of the end of twentieth century. Solidarity was a sort of protracted insurrection, and, like all great national upheavals, quickly developed into a mobilization against a common enemy. Polish history—at least the history that was actively remembered—offered many models of revolutionary behavior: that of a partisan, a negotiator, a rebel. But each Polish insurrection also had a supporting cast of wives, mothers, and sisters, who kept the fight alive, passed around (and often wrote) the movement's manifestos, supported the men, and fought the enemy on a multiplicity of fronts.

In August of 1980, when the Solidarity movement was brought into existence by men and women of the anticommunist opposition, its eventual membership of ten million was evenly divided between men and women. But the leadership was basically all men, and when on December 13, 1981, martial law was imposed, most of its leaders, who had come together at an important meeting, were rounded up and arrested. Many women were arrested as well, but their numbers had been underestimated by the police. As we see in this book, they hid the few remaining male leaders, founded underground Solidarity structures, and published the

main Solidarity newspaper, providing the continuity to a movement that was in danger of extinction. And this is the untold history of the Solidarity movement in Poland.

Penn's perspective allows her to uncover an important element in Polish history, an element invisible to her subjects, blinded as they were by the persistence of the Polish romantic tradition, which valorized the activities of heroic men much more than those of women. In fact, in researching the book, she met with incredulous resistance by the women, who considered their activities to have been something completely normal and rejected any notion of heroism. They did not want to look at their struggle through a prism of gender, were afraid of being labeled "feminists," and were tired of any ideological affiliation whatsoever. With tact, persistence, and intelligence, Shana Penn pierced that resistance and here offers the reader the most complete and interesting history yet written of a social movement that shook the world. In *Solidarity's Secret* we see for the first time the complete cast of the movement that did not show much solidarity with its women. In this "family picture," men and women are seated side by side, their presence enhancing each others' roles. Only wise feminist scholarship could produce such a complete portrait and tell this important story of a group of brave, daring women, who took on a mighty state. And won.

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