

## **A brief green moment: the emergence and decline of the Polish anti-nuclear and environmental movement**

**Kacper Szulecki, Tomasz Borewicz, Janusz Waluszko**

**This article is dedicated to the memory of its co-author Tomasz Borewicz, who died just after its completion.**

**Tomasz Borewicz** (formerly Burek), born 8 December 1963 in Gdansk, died 7 November 2015, was an activist, journalist, traveler and ethnographer of indigenous cultures. He studied history in the 1980s, first in Słupsk and later at the Gdansk University, but was relegated from the university twice for dissident activities. Tomek later received a master's degree in anthropology from the University of Wroclaw where he was also working on a dissertation on his passion – anthropology of medicine and shamanism.

He established first contacts with the anti-communist, democratic opposition in 1979. During the martial law years he was involved in the underground opposition, first as a samizdat distributor for “Solidarity”, later as an organizer of the Independent Student Association (NZS) at the Słupsk Pedagogical School, where he edited the samizdat magazine “Akademik”. In 1986 he was arrested for possession of illegal publications and printing equipment. Incarcerated with hard criminal convicts in a maximum security cell for almost a month, he held a two week hunger strike in demanding political prisoner status. He was released due to deteriorating health and later subject to a general amnesty.

Since 1986 Tomek worked as a history teacher at elementary school, earning the popular nickname “Belfer” which he was known by in the activist community. He initiated the non-violent youth movement “Twe-Twa”. Co-organizer of the 1988 strikes at the Gdansk University and Lenin Shipyard. “Belfer” became a member of the “Freedom and Peace” (WiP) movement, focusing on environmental and cultural issues. He was one of the organizers of the “Peace festival” in 1988 and 1989, and an outspoken critic of obligatory “Defense Preparedness” classes in schools, due to their militarist and ideological content.

Tomasz was one of the leaders of the protests against the Żarnowiec nuclear power plant, organizing the societal referendum on nuclear energy and establishing contacts with Western activists. He recently co-authored an in depth manuscript of a chronicle of the anti-nuclear struggles, containing both the voices of the protesters and the authorities and nuclear scientists. He remained an environmental activist in the 1990s, was one of the co-authors of the report “Poland’s Eco-development 2020” written for the new democratic Parliament, and an organizer of environmental events such as the Rainbow Family Gathering, Earth Days in Warsaw and the Gdansk Environmental Study. During his struggle with cancer he was also an active advocate of legalizing medical cannabis-based pain relief. In March 2014 he received the Freedom and Solidarity Cross for his opposition activity.

## **Abstract**

*The Polish environmental movement is generally perceived as relatively weak, and mass mobilization on environmental issues is scarce. While this can arguably describe today's Polish NGO scene, subjected to professionalization and grant-dependency, it is surely not the whole story. The second half of the 1980s and the brief period after the negotiated transition from socialism in 1989 saw examples of mass protest focused on different environmental issues such as nuclear energy or air pollution. This article reconstructs the emergence of environmental issues within the opposition, describes its strategies, and highlights the main protest actions, with an emphasis on the anti-nuclear mobilization against the Żarnowiec power plant. Finally, it tries to account for the collapse of the environmental movement in the 1990s. Since the anti-nuclear protests in Poland extended beyond 1989 they provide a unique case allowing us to observe the nature of transition from socialism to post-socialism in Poland and more broadly in Central Europe, today constituting an important point of contention between different ideological camps.*

**Keywords:** Poland, environmental protest, anti-nuclear protest, Chernobyl, Żarnowiec, Solidarity, Freedom and Peace, civil society, post-socialism

## **Introduction**

The Chernobyl meltdown is widely acknowledged as a “catalyst” of civil mobilization in Eastern Europe, especially of those protest movements that focused on environmental issues (cf. Kenney 2002). To speak of a “Chernobyl effect” might be something of an oversimplification, since environmental protest existed in the region before 1986. The second half of the 1980s, coinciding with the time after the catastrophe, has, however, been a period marked by a change in protest methods and the issues taken up.

One crucial shift was the emergence of environmental protection as an issue that mobilized vast parts of the society – far beyond the traditional opposition in the various countries of the region. In Poland, the environment provided a new integrating platform of dissent, and encouraged open opposition in the second half of the 1980s, after a period of communist backlash and the decline of the “Solidarity” trade union, forced to operate as a clandestine network and losing societal appeal. Environmental mobilization, despite its seemingly non-political nature, constituted an important field of political activity for old and new activists, combining a tangible issue with an opportunity to protest the communist regime as a whole.

Open protests after the Chernobyl catastrophe focused on different topics such as nuclear energy or air pollution. Among these, Poland's emerging domestic nuclear program constituted the most visible focus of local and nation-wide

contestation. Nuclear waste storage facilities in Międzyrzecz, as well as planned nuclear facilities in Klempicz, Darłowo and most importantly Żarnowiec, were targeted.

It is sometimes argued that the successful campaign against the Żarnowiec Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), sealing the entire Polish nuclear “adventure” of the 1980s, is the “foundational act” of the Polish environmental movement (Ostolski 2008). This is in many ways true, as the campaign helped the movement to crystalize and distinguish itself from the broader anti-communist opposition. At the same time, it was the last major success of the movement, which soon fell into a state of decline, and it already showed early signs of the movement’s weaknesses. After the communist regime was ousted in 1989, some very desperate measures and a large dose of transnational campaigning were needed to actually force the new “Solidarity” government to resign from the idea of developing domestic nuclear capacity. Furthermore, while the construction of Żarnowiec was stopped and the nuclear program abandoned, this did not have a direct societal impact on the perception of nuclear power.

The Żarnowiec NPP case shows that the “magic of 1989” does not seem to work in environmental politics. This leads to a present day paradox, where former colleagues from the opposition stand at two different sides of the barricade as the idea of launching the Żarnowiec NPP is again pushed through by the Polish government.

This article reconstructs the emergence of environmental issues within the Polish opposition (not just the “Solidarity” movement), describes its strategies, and highlights the main protest actions, with an emphasis on the anti-nuclear mobilization against the Żarnowiec power plant. Finally, it asks why the decline of the broad environmental movement coalition after its mostly spectacular moments of mobilization was so drastic and why it seems to have left such a weak legacy. The research draws on archival material (samizdat as well as secret police archives), interviews with former activists, as well as secondary literature.

Sidney Tarrow’s (2011) concept of ‘cycles of contention’ is used to organize the analysis. Tarrow draws on a number of historical examples (with European 1848 at the heart of his analysis) to argue that when seen from a wider, historical perspectives, individual protest events and social movements appear to display cyclical dynamics. Put in simple terms – they emerge, set the scene for wider protest, grow, and then inevitably decline. The initial phases – protest emergence – have attracted far more attention than protest movements decay and disappearance (Goodwin and Jasper 2009, 373). Tarrow emphasizes the role of initial opportunities for “early risers” in the initial phase of the cycle, where vulnerabilities of the authorities are exposed (2011, 197-201). The next step is linked to the innovation in protest repertoire. Broadening the base and increasing the scale of protest. This is followed by the formation of a wider coalition, leading to “widespread contention [that] produces externalities, which give[s] challengers at least a temporary advantage and allow them to overcome the weaknesses in their resource base” (2011, 199). After the protest heyday

comes “exhaustion” and decline, and Tarrow provides four distinct (though not mutually exclusive) trajectories or scenarios: *institutionalization*, *commercialization*, *involution* and *radicalization*.

In our analysis, we suggest that the decline of the Polish environmental movement was conditioned by its relationship to both the Communist authorities, the broader “Solidarity” movement (and the first quasi-democratic government that it formed) as well as the society as a whole, and that its initial *radicalization* within the broader “Solidarity” coalition has at the same time allowed for reaching its most ambitious goal (the closure of Żarnowiec) and conditioned its later demise along the three other paths: institutionalization and commercialization (which we group under the joint label of professionalization) and involution.

### **Background: Dissent and the environment before Chernobyl**

While the 26 April 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster had a very significant impact on the societies and opposition movements in the Eastern Bloc, environmental issues were becoming visible on the societal agenda already in the early 1980s. It was the result of the clearly visible degradation of the environment but also, partly, inspired by the example of Western green movements. A student activist in the Independent Student Association (NZS) and later one of the leading figures of the “Freedom and Peace” (WiP) movement, Leszek Budrewicz, explains:

Environmentalism entered the scene . . . because it was an obvious idea, popular among the young, close to the heart of many, who formed WiP. It was broadcast on television . . . those great big Western protests, where everyone came with their kids. It all simply looked like a picnic and here, in this weary, gray communist reality, we longed for something so great.<sup>1</sup>

Environmental issues, because of their seemingly non-political character, were a domain of semi-official and official organizations. Apart from the long-established League for Nature Conservation (LOP), the independent but official Polish Ecological Club (PKE) was established during the open “Solidarity” period. There was also the youth network, linked with official scouting, under the murky name “I prefer to be” (*Wolę być*) (Topiński 1983; Gliński and Koziarek 2007). All these played an ambiguous role – on the one hand, providing a forum for some critique of the regime, but on the other – a safety vent for political tensions (cf. Kenney, 2002; Snajdr 2008). The attitudes of WiP affiliates towards the latter were therefore also ambivalent. Some, like the eco-activist from Wrocław Radosław Gawlik, saw the network as an extension of

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with L. Budrewicz in Kenney 2007, 122.

“Freedom and Peace” to towns and villages where open opposition could never occur, and so he attended its gatherings. Others, more radical, saw it as a façade and a “communist society for those interested in the environment”.<sup>2</sup>

It is impossible to clearly separate the emergent environmental protest movement from the wider opposition, which in the first half of the 1980s was still united under the banner of “Solidarity” – the trade union that shook Poland in 1980-81, and was forced to go underground by the violent backlash of the Martial law in December 1981. The still fresh memory of a 10-million-strong social movement, as well as the institutions of the underground trade union and its vast transnational support network created a foundation on which new structures could emerge – and eventually dissent from the trade-union mainstream.

Environmental issues also seemed to constitute a dividing line, separating two generations of the democratic opposition. The older generation, often born in the 1930s and 1940s, veterans of the student protests of 1968 and the early dissident activity of the 1970s, did not consider environment a priority issue. “Are you crazy? You wanna protest in the name of bloody white mice, is that what you want?” – the prominent opposition leader Jacek Kuroń was to exclaim in 1981, when approached by some young activists with the idea of the “Solidarity” trade union actions for environmental protection. One of the youngsters, since then and until today an activist in Warsaw, Jarosław “Jarema” Dubiel, explains that “it was not yet the time for environmental concerns”.<sup>3</sup>

The older opposition and those following in their footsteps were in the mid-1980s concerned with keeping the underground trade union alive after the harsh repressions of the Martial Law (1981-83). The younger activists, on the other hand, were looking for new topics and points of reference. In many cases they were more radical than their older colleagues, and displayed new, counter-systemic attitudes, contesting not only the militarized Polish communist regime, but also the system that they perceived, in a similar ways as the Czech dissident Václav Havel, as an incarnation of the late industrial consumerist society (albeit with fewer goods to consume).

That is why the earliest examples of environmental protest came from the Alternative Society Movement (RSA), a punk-anarchist milieu that emerged in the birthplace of “Solidarity” – Gdansk. Early green activism was based on local issues.<sup>4</sup> One of them, for the opposition community in Gdansk and neighbouring Gdynia, was the planned construction of the Żarnowiec NPP (first steps were made already in the 1970s). Initial modest protest actions were conducted in 1984. RSA quickly made a link between Chernobyl and the

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with W. Jaroń in FA, „Rozmowa z Wojtkiem Jaroniem.“ *FA - Kwartalnik Ruchu Wolność i Pokój, Region Śląski*, Nr. 1 (1988): 48–51.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with J. Dubiel, 11 June 2010, Szczecin.

<sup>4</sup> It would actually remain locally-focused, which made nation-wide mobilization more difficult and would later prove a major obstacle for the emerging environmental movement.

potential threat of Żarnowiec, and discussed these questions in a special issue of their samizdat magazine *Homek* soon after the accident. They were not the ones, however, who coined the brilliantly appealing term *Żarnobyl*. Whoever the author was, the word immediately gained nation-wide fame.

The “Freedom and Peace” (WiP) was not at first envisaged as an environmental movement – as the name indicates its focus was on human rights and demilitarization (see Szulecki 2011; 2013). It emerged in 1985 as a loose network of predominantly young activists protesting against the text of the People’s Army military oath as well as the military service in general. WiP later grew in size and scope, so that it encompassed a wide range of issues – demilitarization of the society, peace in broader terms, human rights, minority rights and environmentalism. It developed lively contacts with the Western social movements, such as the peace movement or the German “Greens”. The movement was ideologically varied, different municipal branches displayed different shades – from the conservative-national centers in Krakow and Gorzów, through “centrist” but politically active Warsaw, to largely alternative Wrocław and Szczecin and anarchist-dominated Gdańsk. On the whole, it was the largest East European peace initiative, an opposition movement of a new type (an *a new social movement* in theoretical terms), which managed to accomplish most of its goals. As the prominent dissident intellectual Adam Michnik once remarked – it was the most successful phenomenon in the history of Polish opposition, comparable only with the legendary Workers Defense Committee (KOR) (see also Davies 1988; Wylie 2001; Kenney 2001; Smółka 2012).

Already at WiP’s foundational “hunger seminar” (a hunger strike in a church outside Warsaw combined with discussions with invited guests) in March 1985 some initiators of the movement raised the idea of including environmental issues, and this was widely accepted – also because of their subversive potential. But environmentalism was not mentioned in the “Founding Declaration” (April 1985), and appeared only in the later “Declaration of Principles” (November 1985). Why only then? Apart from pragmatic reasons it can be argued that this was due to the influx of new affiliates, especially from Gdansk (former RSA members) and Wrocław (it was Leszek Budrewicz, Marek Krukowski and Małgorzata Krukowska who drafted the Declaration). Additionally, Maciej Śliwa (1992, 57) notes that on 30 March 1985 the cornerstone for the first reactor was ceremonially laid at Żarnowiec, and nuclear threat became more tangible. While those issues were clearly signaled, nuclear power was not yet seen as a pressing problem at the time: “Poland is not threatened by a dynamic development of nuclear energy, although the attempts to transplant it into the Polish context – in the light of the experiences of other countries – cause suspicion.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> „Declaration of principles”, available at <http://tezeusz.pl/cms/tz/index.php?id=2086>, last accessed 23.04.2015.

That was the backdrop against which the new current of protest in Poland could emerge. Despite its clandestine character, “Solidarity” paved the way for other, newer social movements. After 1984, in the aftermath of the kidnapping and murder of father Jerzy Popiełuszko, the Warsaw “Solidarity” chaplain, repressions on the opposition eased. That new phase of state-opposition struggle opened a field of opportunities for a new type of movements – open in their tactics and with a narrower focus on concrete issues. Tarrow notes that single issue protest cycles, like the environmental protest cycle in Poland, “do not overlap perfectly with the society-wide cycles of contention, but aggregate to form them” (2011, 199). The Chernobyl catastrophe, and the early protests that followed, made the mobilizing potential of environmental protests obvious – and showed how awkward the situation of the police and the authorities was to suppress such activity. Budrewicz remarks jokingly: “If I am an anti-communist and I want to overthrow the government, then they beat me up. Perhaps that is unsound, but everyone will say: he had it coming. But when I start taking care of a neighboring park, leaves etc. then they ask ‘Damn, why are they beating him, isn’t it just about the leaves?’ . . . we would get to a point where the subliminal limits of absurdity are surpassed.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Seizing a political opportunity: the Chernobyl catastrophe and its aftermath**

It was only on the April 28, 1986, two days after the catastrophe, that the Poles were first officially informed about a “problem” on the evening news. The next day newspapers finally mentioned the “accident in Czernobylsk” [spelling in the original] which was apparently “already discussed in the press”.<sup>7</sup> The readers were also informed that a special commission, furnished with cutting-edge equipment, is monitoring the situation and that although a radioactive cloud is in fact moving over north-eastern Poland, it is already almost gone, and was never a threat to human health.<sup>8</sup>

Aware of the fact that the society might not be inclined to trust its own experts, the paper also quoted “Swedish scientists” who claimed, that the radiation is so low, that no special measures need to be taken.<sup>9</sup> Over the next few weeks the topic was widely discussed, but voices of reassurance (“the radiation is absolutely not harmful for pregnant women and children”), expert panels (one of which finally admitted when the accident occurred and when the cloud reached Poland), bashing the Western governments and the United States for spreading “ridiculous information”, informing about seventeen historic nuclear accidents (in the US, West German, Japan, UK and Canada).

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with L. Budrewicz in Kenney 2007, 122.

<sup>7</sup> „Awaria elektrowni atomowej na Ukrainie”, *Trybuna Ludu* 30. 04 – 1.05. 1986, 1.

<sup>8</sup> „Komunikat Polskiej Komisji Rządowej” *Trybuna Ludu* 30. 04 – 1.05. 1986, 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> „Opinie ekspertów skandynawskich” *Trybuna Ludu* 30. 04 – 1.05. 1986, 2.

Finally, on May 15, major Polish papers reprinted (in full) the text of the fatherly television address by Mikhail Gorbachev, who assured that the Soviet (and allied) citizens were informed “as soon as we got the full picture of the situation”, sniped on the US and NATO for their “unworthy lies” and claimed that “the worst is already behind us”.<sup>10</sup> He was gravely mistaken, as for the leadership of the Soviet bloc states the worst was still to come.

One of the “Freedom and Peace” participant recalls that the scariest part of the entire situation was the disinformation. “People were wondering what they should really do, what they should give to their children . . . Should they give them milk, or not? Or powdered milk? Feed them lettuce, or not? For political reasons we were cut off from sincere information.”<sup>11</sup> That is why the situation had both an environmental and a directly political edge. And indeed, the anger at the authorities was most visible among women, especially mothers. “They loudly spat out phrases no worse than those on [underground] leaflets: a boycott of the communist parade [May 1], and refusing to support a regime which takes care only of itself and its militia. . . They sounded like a threat. Little groups of women – strangers to one another – in front of stores, on the sidewalks, all talking about one thing” (Kenney 2002, 72).

That spontaneous anger was quickly channeled through some early opposition actions. The first took place on May Day in Krakow, organized by the WiP affiliates there. The next day, on May 2, a more thought-through event was organized in Wroclaw. A dozen or so people from the city’s WiP “core”, reinforced by some guests from Warsaw, gathered on the stairs of a restaurant in the busy pedestrian Świdnicka street during the afternoon rush hours. They organized a sit-in,<sup>12</sup> with placards saying for example “Is nuclear death from the East any different?”, “We demand full access to information” and “Żarnowiec will be next” (Podsiadło 2010, 31). This protest was a novelty in terms of its form and, perhaps more importantly, its course. It was non-violent, building on a rich tradition of civil disobedience previously known in Poland mostly from television. It was open, spontaneous and bold – street actions were rarely taken up by the opposition after the Martial Law, and if they were, more often than not ended in riots. Although the protesters were joined by some passersby, and were surrounded by several hundred mostly sympathetic or indifferent onlookers, the police did not intervene. No one was arrested, no one was beaten up. Although the authorities rejected the claims of protesters in the official rhetoric and the media, they did not suppress the growing dissent. One of the organizers, Marek Krukowski, recalls:

It was amazing that nothing happened. It was the first public independent action. Before that everything was organized through informal channels –

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<sup>10</sup> *Życie Warszawy*, 15. 05. 1986, 1-passim.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with A. Koczut in Kenney 2007, 154.

<sup>12</sup> Usually called a *sitting* by the Polish oppositionists.



someone can be told and invited, or someone can't. What we [WiP] were doing prior to that was only echoed by the mass media, you could hear something about it on Radio Free Europe. This was the first brawl (*zadyma*), where people could touch us.<sup>13</sup>

A week later, on May 9, also on Świdnicka Street, the movement held another, larger protest. This time, understanding the moral power of the message that it is the health of the children that is at stake, the WiP-ists gathered several dozen people, among them many mothers with strollers. The crowd, joined by onlookers, walked down the street to the city's historic marketplace and back, holding placards such as "Why were we informed so late?" and "We demand powdered milk for all the children". Numerous policemen watched the demo, but no one was detained. This gave a totally new meaning to the opposition's slogan "Come with us, they are not beating today" (Kenney 2002). WiP adopted the chant as one of its trademarks, because, in the case of the movement, this was indeed true. Budrewicz, described the movement as benefiting from the "luxury of small disobediences" (Konstantin 1987).

This new situation – a tangible and resonant, seemingly non-political issue that caught societal attention, and the hesitant reaction of the authorities, exposing their vulnerabilities (Tarrow 2011, 197), marked the opening of a new, wide window of opportunity for the opposition, allowing for protest to diffuse. The visibly positive and impressive results of the protest popularized the movement in Wrocław and opened many doors within the "older" opposition. Before establishing its own samizdat network, WiP used the union's channels, and just days after the sit-in issued an appeal for "gathering all possible information on the Chernobyl threat" through the high-circulation "Solidarity" weekly *Tygodnik Mazowsze*.

Using the momentum and the occasion of Children's Day (June 1), the branch of WiP in Krakow (much more conservative in its overall profile), held a mass in the city's historic main church – intended to the health of the children growing up in a polluted environment. Outside the church the participants formed a large circle, while other WiP activists distributed informative leaflets. Finally, the entire group marched through the Old Town to the Wawel hill, chanting slogans like "We do not want iodine from the East" and holding much more provocative posters (i.e. "I'll swap a 3 bedroom Krakow flat for a sleeping bag in New York" or "We demand that USSR pay us damages"). The protest, which according to some sources gathered several thousand people, was again uninterrupted (Smółka 1994, 53).

These experiences had an impact of the actions organized by the movement from then on, gradually changing the protest portfolio of the entire Polish

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Smółka 1994, 52. The term "zadyma" normally indicates a brawl or a riot, but in the case of the opposition it is used to describe any street action. It does, however, carry the meaning of a revolt and a confrontation.

opposition and, as Kenney argues, through different kinds of transnational diffusion, on the entire Central European independent scene (Kenney 2004). That was indeed the “Chernobyl effect” in terms of protest methods.

### **Think locally, act mockingly: innovation in the green protest repertoire 1987-1989**

Green activism became an example of the best and most spectacular non-violent actions that Polish dissent had to offer in the second half of the 1980s. To give a hint of the direction the protests took – in October 1987, in a manner as unbelievable as the spelling of the town where it took place – Wrzeszcz, a district of Gdansk – four followers of the “Freedom and Peace” movement, climbed the rooftop of a local pharmacy dressed up as animals (a fox, a hare, a hedgehog and a fish). They remained atop the pharmacy for some time, displaying their banners and scattering fliers. Their colleagues on the same day in different points of the city distributed some ten thousand leaflets altogether. The human-animals were arrested eventually, but only once they stumbled down from the roof after peaceful negotiations and a long “performance” for quite a large audience of sympathetic bystanders.

That was the style of the young Polish opposition movements, which Padraic Kenney, drawing at the same time one of the famous oppositionists Władysław Frasyniuk and the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, terms the “carnival of revolution” (Kenney 2002). Innovation in the repertoire of the new opposition movements, and most visibly in the growing environmental protest movement, marks a new phase in that cycle of contention (Tarrow 2011, 203). In the following we discuss some most spectacular successes on the environmental arena, protest actions conducted by the “Freedom and Peace” movement as well as a growing coalition of environmental activists that took over the baton after WiP’s visible decline in 1989. We look at the case of the planned nuclear waste storage facility at Międzyrzecz, the air pollution issue in Siechnice and the Żarnowiec NPP – emphasizing in particular the evolution of tactics, changing levels of repression and the degree of public support.

After the success of the Chernobyl demonstrations, “Freedom and Peace” searched for different local environmental “cases” around which protest could be organized. These were not hard to find. The most spectacular examples of largely successful environmental advocacy include the nuclear waste storage facility in the Nazi-built bunker complex near Międzyrzecz (western Poland), the pollutant industrial complexes in Siechnice (metal works near Wrocław), Police (chemical works near Szczecin) and Nowa Huta (steelworks in Krakow), Klempicz (a proposed NPP location near Poznan) as well as Żarnowiec – the only real nation-wide green protest campaign. The growing portfolio of WiP’s samizdat periodicals was used to spread the information on local actions across the country, as well as raising the awareness of environmental problems and the risks of nuclear energy.

## **Międzyrzecz**

The protests against the proposed nuclear waste storage facility in Międzyrzecz began in May 1987, after the local WiP branch in nearby Gorzów learned about the plans (Kossakowski 1987). They were able to quickly gather independent expert reports, which suggested that the site (bunkers) absolutely unfit and the project is highly dangerous for the local population, as well as a very important bat habitat (Śliwa 1992, 60). The first actions were taken in Gorzów, where five WiP affiliates climbed onto the ledge of the city's major department store, displayed large sheets informing about the danger of nuclear waste, scattered leaflets and pasted posters on the building's windows.

This novel method – dubbed *ruszting* (from the Polish word for scaffold and the “-ing” as in “sitting”). The idea was to climb a scaffold or a roof, and sit there – for increased visibility of the activists and extended the length of the protest, as the police needed equipment and reinforcements to take the protester off their “nest”. This followed one of the key principles of the movement's non-violent strategy: “it takes only a single cop to arrest a standing protester, but up to four to arrest a sitting one” (and a whole platoon if you climb a rooftop and pull the ladder up).

In the case of the Gorzów *ruszting*, the firefighters called to the protest location were not able to convince the activists to get down; the riot police was summoned and dragged them down by force. The *ruszting* technique was soon mastered by WiP, as the already given example of the demo with animals atop a pharmacy shows. But actions in Gorzów, although easier to organize and perhaps safer, were not enough. The movement needed to go local, and mobilize the populace in the town of Międzyrzecz itself. After a *ruszting* held there, several informative actions, the level of mobilization achieved was very impressive. The final protest march held on October 4, concluding a hunger strike in the local church, gathered four thousand people – *twenty percent* (!) of the town's entire population (Smółka 1994, 58).

But that came at a cost now. The police was already prepared to detain, arrest, and at least heavily fine the movement's affiliates. Very high fines became a weapon much more painful, even despite international financial assistance, than short arrests. And about the time the Międzyrzecz protests were launched, WiP-ists protesting against the Police chemical works in Szczecin were also severely beaten. “Freedom and Peace” was noticed, and greater repression was evidence of the fact that the regime also understood the subversive power of environmentalism. The protests in Międzyrzecz were, all in all, WiP's first major success – the local campaign worked, and the municipal council (communist!) voted against the nuclear waste storage.

In the years 1987-1989 anti-systemic protest was spreading widely in the Polish society. Environmental protests clearly played a role, helping to diffuse contentious activism, and constituting new, previously unseen coalitions, cutting across societal groups and geographic scales (from national to local community level).

## **Siechnice**

Budrewicz learned about the issue of the Siechnice metal works (producing waste that polluted Wrocław's water sources with heavy metals) from the official trade unions (OPZZ) weekly *Związkowiec* (The Teamster) – and was appalled.

I had no idea there was such a plant. . . I checked on the map . . . the site was just 10km away from Wrocław, the water coming from there was for our city. Of course there was the problem of the workers, what happens to them if we close the place down. . . But the idea turned out to be great for two reasons – firstly, that it was so obvious, and secondly, that it touched the entire city.<sup>14</sup>

Krukowski further explained: “The opinion of independent scientists was unison: shut [Siechnice] down. It leads to such a degree of heavy metal pollution that in some time the water will be completely unfit for drinking, it will not be cleaned by any filter (Quoted in Smółka 1994, 54).

The protest actions that followed deserve attention because of their intensity, scale and the successful finale. They began in November 1986 with an information sit-in in the opposition's favorite spot – at Świdnicka Street. Two dozen activists sat by posters and sheets informing about the chromium danger, others distributed fliers informing about a protest march to be held in some weeks later. No one was arrested (Podsiadło 2010, 35). In the spirit of micro-local activity seen already in Międzyrzecz, the movement approached the workers of Siechnice with a letter, suggesting universal medical tests for all employees, which could become the basis of a large trial over financial compensation. The march itself (postponed for January), was widely publicized and gained the vocal support of prominent oppositionists. However, due to large scale preventive action on the part of the secret police (SB) it gathered only some 30 WiP-ists, but since they managed to convince an American TV crew to come down and film it, they were doing their best to look impressive (“broader, broader” – shouted some when the group holding signs was turning the corner from a side-alley and emerging into the open space of the marketplace).<sup>15</sup> That shows a high degree of PR awareness that the movement displayed – aware of their limited resources they used the Western media and RFE rather cunningly. This time, however, the presence of Western journalists did not have a protective effect (especially since they were warming up in a nearby eatery and missed all the action). The activists were surrounded by tens of riot-policemen, and despite an improvised sit-in, dragged one by one to police vans and driven

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with L. Budrewicz in Kenney 2007, 123.

<sup>15</sup> The major banner read: “Article 71 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Poland – the citizens of the People's Republic have the right to benefit from the values of the natural environment and the duty to protect it”. This indicates the legalistic edge of the protest that was known already from human rights advocacy.

to a local police station (where the merry protest continued, with songs and jokes that almost drove the police insane).

Throughout the police intervention the protesters were shouting “the police is drinking the same water” – an important element of all environmental protests including that after Chernobyl, was that the security apparatus and the regime bureaucracy were usually as much harmed by the pollution as were the protesters and bystanders. This added to the awkwardness of the situation in which the intervening police were – and influenced the (on the whole) light treatment of the green opposition.

The participants received high fines, but – and that was a novelty – openly refused to pay them, arguing that they are demonstrating against a problem of societal importance. When pressured on the telephone by a WiP-ist from Warsaw, the minister of the environment claimed, however, that the January march was not an environmental protest, but an attempt to “create unhealthy noise around Poland internationally” (Smółka 1994, 55). That was indeed the case, although it was more of a consequence than the organizers sole intention. And despite the police crackdown, the protest seemed to have had initial effects – some weeks later the regional authorities decided to shut Siechnice down (or rather – to stop its expansion and shut it down until 1992). This, however, did not eliminate the problem of the pollution.

Further protests were limited by the severe backlash against “Freedom and Peace” that occurred in the second half of 1987, when many activists received long prison sentences – for different crimes and offences. Both in its anti-militarist, environmental and transnational activities the movement was becoming visibly dangerous for the regime.<sup>16</sup> But the actions against Siechnice continued, for a time in a smaller scale. The new “survival” protest technique were the “human sandwiches” – pairs of activists wearing cardboard placards with slogans on their front and back, appearing in different public places and distributing fliers. For weeks they played hide-and-seek with the police, who arrested them whenever they were spotted – although on several occasions the sympathetic crowd of onlookers gathered around the “sandwiches” would not allow the police to detain the protesters.

Protests went massive again in 1988, when the first Black March was held – several hundred people (invited by WiP) showed up in the city center dressed in black and holding mourning flags. These marches were held regularly, and gradually grew in size, so that the final one on September 17 1988 gathered ten thousand protesters, and became the largest street demonstration in Wrocław since the “Solidarity” May Day demo and riots in 1982. This one was, however, peaceful. The authorities gave in to the societal pressure and decided that the plant would be closed down – however, little was done apart from that, and Siechnice continued to pollute Wrocław’s water. The controversy was resolved

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<sup>16</sup> Compare some analyses submitted in secret police academies at the time, as well as a synthetic article by one of WiP’s key figures in Warsaw, Jacek Czaputowicz (2009).

only after the democratic transition, when the WiP activist Radosław Gawlik, then already a member of parliament, pressured the Mazowiecki government to monitor the closure and clean-up of the site (Śliwa 1992, 63). By contrast, another WiP environmental issue in Wrocław – the protests against asbestos thermal isolation of housing estates – gathered little momentum and the toxic substance continues to haunt large parts of the city's populace.<sup>17</sup>

### **Protesting "Żarnobyl": anti-nuclear mobilization beyond 1989**

The protests against the Żarnowiec NPP began earlier, had a wider scale, but even despite those factors – the road to the final (or not entirely so) success was longer and more dramatic. A major point raised against Żarnowiec was the low engineering culture of Polish construction, and thus lack of any safety guarantees. Jacek Czaputowicz asked: "Can we believe that a system incapable of producing a decent car or even a decent bolt, a country where everyday trains, buses, and trams collide, will have a nuclear industry that is safe?" (Kossakowski, 1987). Other points the opposition raised against Żarnowiec were its costs, the risk of further economic dependency on the USSR, which was the sole provider of fuel, the inadequate plans for nuclear waste storage (especially that a second NPP was already planned in Klempicz, western Poland); and finally – the threat of a nuclear meltdown, all the more horrific in a plant located only 40km from the Tri-city (Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot) with over 700 thousand inhabitants.

The campaign against Żarnowiec intensified in 1987, when in July a petition against the NPP began to circulate in Gdańsk, and when the four local WiP activists protested on the Wrzeszcz pharmacy. The protests, however, had a rather low intensity despite the nation-wide support from the movement.

Despite large public events, such as the WiP ecological seminars in Gliwice (February 1988), attended by over two hundred guests from different organizations (including Czechoslovak independents) and Darłowo (May 1989), with a thousand participants, and in spite of the foundational declaration of the "Federation of Greens" (*Federacja Zielonych*) from December 1988, the environmental movement was losing momentum in Poland.

The climax of the campaign occurred in the years 1989-90, when "Freedom and Peace" – torn apart by internal ideational and political differences – was in its state of agony. Although at the turn of 1988 and 1989 the final steps of regime transition were still ahead, the nation-wide protest cycle was already entering the phase of exhaustion. This phase, according to Tarrow, is driven mostly by a complimentary pair of mechanisms: *radicalization* and *institutionalization* (2011, 206-7). The entire "Solidarity" constellation was cracking, and the division between the radicalizing young activists and the conciliatory union core, as well as between the anti-communist right and the pro-democratic left

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with R. Gawlik in: Kenney 2007, 165.

and center, were more apparent than ever. Same was true for the union's "offshoot" movements, like "Freedom and Peace". As the regime began collapsing, many WiP affiliates looked to continue their public engagement in politics, civil service or in private business. A new generation of radical activists took over what was left of WiP and the wider environmental protest movement – and the activities of environmental protest movement in its 1989-90 climax phase are clearly driven by radicalization. This path, however, and the relationship to both the trembling communist regime and the institutionalizing "Solidarity" core (which would soon form the new, quasi-democratic government) conditioned the later demise of the movement.

The key figure in the climax of the Żarnowiec campaign was Tomasz Burek (vel. Borewicz), formerly a WiP-ist, but, as the movement lost interest in the issue, dissolved and failed to mobilize even for the most important demos he was "a private individual", although his affiliation with the movement was still a reference point.<sup>18</sup>

Chernobyl was a catalyst in his case too, but in a peculiar way, as when the meltdown occurred, Burek was doing time in a Gdansk jail, locked up with three murderers in an isolated blockhouse where no TV or press was allowed. He learned about the catastrophe only after he left prison. This explained why at the beginning of May 1986 the inmates suddenly began to receive much better and more diverse food. Food products that were taken off the market as too contaminated were simply fed to the criminals (and prisoners of conscience alike). "It pissed me off that I was not informed, that something was hidden from me" – says Burek, adding that at the time his partner was pregnant. That was his private path to anti-nuclear protests – he learned more about the threat of Żarnobyl at WiP's "peace festival" (a large anarchist gathering in Białogóra near Żarnowiec) in August 1988. He made an internal pledge that he would protest against the plant until its construction is stopped. And that was what he did over the next two years.

Large scale protests started in February 1989, using a similar pattern as in Wrocław some months earlier – weekly marches proposed by WiP's Wojciech "Jacob" Jankowski would take place on Gdansk's main street Długi Targ, led by several dozen (seventy or so) activists, and joined by 200-1000 sympathizers. Then, following the tradition of "politics of irony" mastered by WiP and the performance-opposition group "Orange Alternative", the protesters started organizing events such as "mutant football match" or the construction of a cardboard nuclear reactor by a group of people wearing Lenin's masks, singing Stalinist songs ("Atom thundered amongst rocks...") (Waluszko 2012).

After some negotiations with the authorities, they were granted their own "agora" – a public space in the city center the official and semi-official environmental groups could use for their gatherings. The various groups involved in the protest included the youth movements "I prefer to be" and the

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with T. Burek in Waluszko 2010. Other quotes from same source.

newly formed “Twe-Twa” as well as the League for Nature Conservation, the Federation of Greens, Franciscan Ecological Club, Polish Ecological Club, Federation of Militant Youth (FMW), Movement for an Engaged Society, RSA and WiP.

In the meantime, nuclear energy was discussed at the Round Table, the symbolic negotiation process between the Communist Party and the post-“Solidarity” opposition. It was, however, the single one out of 28 environmental issues that could not be agreed upon. Regime change did not change the situation – the plans for constructing the NPP were upheld, and while police surveillance lessened, the scale and radical edge of the protests strengthened.

The protesters used a wide range of methods to advocate their cause. They interrupted local “Solidarity” meetings, marched to the Gdansk city hall, blocked the main streets. Burek along with several other activists went to Warsaw, set up a tent in front of the Government’s building, and picketed it for over a week in early November 1989. Later on, however, the protests acquired a more dramatic turn. In November the activists held a first, ten-day-long hunger strike, and tried to influence the press by taking over the Press House in Gdansk. In December, the protesters embarked on an open ended hunger strike (it lasted for 44 days), and began a “siege” of the port terminal in Gdynia where the elements of the first reactor were shipped. When the elements were moved towards Żarnowiec, the protesters were throwing themselves under the wheels of the 300 tonne transporter, and were attacked by the Żarnowiec staff (Waluszko 2012).

The environmental opposition pressured for a referendum to be held on the issue, using the opportunity created by first democratic local elections in May 1990. The government, trying to avoid a public confrontation, declined. But a referendum was held nevertheless – a “social referendum” in the Gdansk administrative region, perhaps the largest independently organized popular vote in the world (over one million people cast their vote). Improvised ballot offices were set up in schools, on busses and even in private car trunks. A quick grassroots campaign was organized, involving the visits of activists and scouts in every small village of the region, with the help of the Gdansk University Psychology Department staff, who designed the public relations message of the anti-Żarnowiec campaign (Waluszko 2012). The result was telling: 86% of those who turned up (44% of those eligible, despite a large scale officially inspired campaign of disinformation) voted against the construction of the nuclear plant. The vote was organized in one week, through a loose and informal network of sympathizers and local NGOs (also non-environmental ones, such as the representation of the local ethnic minority, the Kashubians). But the government pointed out that the results of the vote were not binding, as the 50% turn-out threshold was not met.

That is when Tomasz Burek threw the metaphorical boomerang – decided to call upon the international environmental community to pressure the



government from the outside.<sup>19</sup> Burek explained: “The petitions, the protests, the referendum – all that had rocked Poland a bit, made Żarnowiec a public issue. But this did not cause a qualitative change. The relationship was still ‘us’ and ‘them’ – the government, be it red or Mazowiecki’s.”<sup>20</sup>

Domestic protest reached its limit. Burek contacted a “Federation of Greens” activist from Krakow, who provided him with a reference letter and some links to Western environmental groups.<sup>21</sup> And so, in July he hitch-hiked all the way from Gdansk to Vienna, “speaking no foreign language, having no other contacts and only five dollars in my pocket” he knocked on the door of the Austrian Green Party. He brought two backpacks – one with bootleg rock music he intended to sell to gather some funds, and the other – with materials on Żarnowiec. He got the materials translated to English, emphasizing the case of the referendum, as its scale and grassroots organization was unprecedented not only in the still Eastern Europe. He underlined the nexus of nuclear energy and undemocratic governmental practices.

Vienna turned out to be a good place for such a message. “These guys were professionals, they organized many campaigns” – he admitted. Through their transnational network, the Austrian Greens approached other European green parties as well as Greenpeace and agreed that a coordinated action would be held on the same day against Żarnowiec.

Polish embassies and consulates in different European capitals were picketed, but occupations also occurred. Most importantly, in Stockholm the local Greenpeace entered the Polish embassy and thus prevented the ambassador from leaving for Ronneby, where he was expected by premier Mazowiecki at the summit discussing the Baltic Sea Declaration. When approached by foreign diplomats about Poland’s policy towards nuclear energy and the Żarnowiec question, Mazowiecki replied that the plant would be closed down. The statement was not something that could easily be denied, and indeed on September 4 1990 the construction of the plant was stopped, and a 15 year memorandum was introduced.

## **Conclusions: From Chernobyl to Żarnobyl**

The Chernobyl catastrophe and the way it was handled by the communist authorities was an additional element of the regime’s de-legitimization in the eyes of the society. It had a certain “othering” component – as the regime and its security apparatus (informed and protected from the radioactive danger)

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<sup>19</sup> The idea of the metaphorical ‘boomerang throw’ comes from Keck and Sikkink 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with T. Burek in Waluszko 2010.

<sup>21</sup> „Freedom and Peace” remained in contact with the West German *Die Grünen*, however, those transnational contacts were part of the network on peace and human rights. See: WiP/Die Grünen, „The Common Declaration of the Freedom and Peace Movement and die Grünen from West Germany“. <http://www.tezeusz.pl/cms/tz/index.php?id=2088> (last accessed 24.04.2015).

became “them” even more clearly than before. When on the first anniversary of the catastrophe the Wrocław WiP blocked one of the main streets with a 14-meter-long banner that read simply “Chernobyl” the real message was clear: *They knew, but didn’t tell you*. Even being a loyal and conforming citizen did not guarantee anything anymore. Additionally, non-violent, often funny and colorful street protests helped the harassed society overcome fear of police repression – as evidenced by the growing scale of protests, with the 10 000 strong Black March as its culminating point. Kenney (2002) also observes that the “carnival of revolution” helped to mobilize the people, bring them out to the streets and demand change. That was indeed something of a “Chernobyl effect”, and it can be argued that the environmental mobilization that followed after 1986, culminating in the greatest success of the Polish green movement – the closure of Żarnowiec NPP construction site – was related to it.

But the momentum soon faded away. The environmental protest actions initiated by the young opposition movements in Poland in the aftermath of the Chernobyl catastrophe were colorful, often large scale, bold, visible and involved a high degree of public participation and support. Much of that support, however, was short-term, not well rooted and to a great extent aimed at “the reds” rather than resulting from actual environmental awareness. “Chernobyl” became a symbol of risk but it was from the start associated with the communist regime. In other words, the conclusion was rather that “the Commies and the Russians can’t do anything right” than “nuclear power – no thanks”. When former WiP affiliates recently tried to gather up support for a new anti-Żarnowiec protest (see below), they were often confronted with the statement: “sorry, we were against nuclear energy *then*, under communism, but now that is a totally different thing.”

After the regime transition many people concluded that in an open society functioning along the prescriptions of liberal democracy environmental issues will somehow fix themselves automatically and rationally. However, as the cases of Siechnice, where specific pressure by the then parliamentarian Gawlik was needed, and Żarnowiec, where a dramatic domestic campaign by Burek and numerous other devoted activists, reinforced by a transnational advocacy network was required – that was not as straightforward as many expected.

From 1989 onwards, the environmental protest movement (with the anti-nuclear theme at its heart), was driven by growing radicalization. This mechanism set it in stark opposition towards the communist authorities – a fact that for most of the late 1980s allowed the movement to form different coalitions with both the anti-communist right and the anti-systemic, counter-cultural left. More importantly for the Żarnowiec campaign, however, it set it in stark opposition to the institutionalizing core of the “Solidarity” political milieu and the Civic Committee government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki. That radicalization allowed the anti-nuclear campaign to maintain its momentum through the time of political transition (1989-90) which saw the re-stabilization of society and the suppression of most other areas of contention (like union activity). It also shaped the character of protest, marked by unseen degrees of

desperation and surprising violence which occurred already after the shift towards a new, democratic regime.

After the Żarnowiec campaign ended, however, the legacy of radicalization cursed the remaining environmental protesters. Exhausted, with little resources and a shrinking societal base, they found little anchoring in the new political system, which was being shaped by the institutionalized post-“Solidarity” elite and reform communists. The movement split again – with some of the former radicals retreating into counter-culture or pockets of anti-systemic contention (*involution* in Tarrow’s typology), while many others seeking to keep the environmentalist ship afloat with late attempts of *institutionalization* combined with *commercialization* – two mechanisms that in the Polish (and wider Central European context) led to the visible professionalization of the green movement (cf. Gliński and Koziarek 2007), which became growingly dependent on external funding (moving from *bottom-up* to *outside-in*) (Waller 2010).

Political institutionalization has proven to be very weak, although two green parties (*Partia Zielonych* and *Zieloni 2004*, later *Partia Zieloni*) remained in the background for some time (both noted some limited successes in local level elections). One could risk saying that on the whole environmentalism did not take root in the Polish society. Once the translation of anti-systemic environmental postulates into anti-communist language was no longer possible, the thin diffusion of environmental awareness became evident. This is evidenced by spectacular failures of different green campaigns throughout the 1990s (e.g. the protests against the dam in Czorsztyn). The first major success was the nation-wide campaign in defense of the Rospuda river valley in 2006-2007 (Szulecka and Szulecki 2013). Unlike the earlier, unsuccessful protests, it combined the local, national and transnational components, with the unprecedented involvement of international NGOs and European Union representatives, as well as the continued support of the country’s major newspaper, “Gazeta Wyborcza”. That kind of mobilization is, however, unlikely to occur in most other environmental campaigns, and the Polish green movement remains in the background. The ongoing anti-nuclear campaign could turn out to be a new catalyst of protest, taking the entire movement to a new level.

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**Tomasz Borewicz** (formerly Burek), born 8 December 1963 in Gdansk, died 7 November 2015, was an activist, journalist, traveler and ethnographer of indigenous cultures. He studied history in the 1980s, first in Słupsk and later at the Gdansk University, but was relegated from the university twice for dissident activities. Tomek later received a master's degree in anthropology from the University of Wrocław where he was also working on a dissertation on his passion – anthropology of medicine and shamanism.

He established first contacts with the anti-communist, democratic opposition in 1979. During the martial law years he was involved in the underground opposition, first as a samizdat distributor for "Solidarity", later as an organizer of the Independent Student Association (NZS) at the Słupsk Pedagogical School, where he edited the samizdat magazine "Akademik". In 1986 he was arrested for possession of illegal publications and printing equipment. Incarcerated with hard criminal convicts in a maximum security cell for almost a month, he held a two week hunger strike in demanding political prisoner status. He was released due to deteriorating health and later subject to a general amnesty.

Since 1986 Tomek worked as a history teacher at elementary school, earning the popular nickname "Belfer" which he was known by in the activist community. He initiated the non-violent youth movement "Twe-Twa". Co-organizer of the 1988 strikes at the Gdansk University and Lenin Shipyard. "Belfer" became a member of the "Freedom and Peace" (WiP) movement, focusing on environmental and cultural issues. He was one of the organizers of the "Peace festival" in 1988 and 1989, and an outspoken critic of obligatory "Defense Preparedness" classes in schools, due to their militarist and ideological content.

Tomasz was one of the leaders of the protests against the Żarnowiec nuclear power plant, organizing the societal referendum on nuclear energy and establishing contacts with Western activists. He recently co-authored an in depth manuscript of a chronicle of the anti-nuclear struggles, containing both the voices of the protesters and the authorities and nuclear scientists. He remained an environmental activist in the 1990s, was one of the co-authors of the report "Poland's Eco-development 2020" written for the new democratic Parliament, and an organizer of environmental events such as the Rainbow Family Gathering, Earth Days in Warsaw and the Gdansk Environmental Study. During his struggle with cancer he was also an active advocate of legalizing medical cannabis-based pain relief. In March 2014 he received the Freedom and Solidarity Cross for his opposition activity.

**Janusz "Jany" Waluszko** is an activist and independent publicist, one of the organizers of the Alternative Society Movement (RSA) and the Anarchist Federation (FA), and a trailblazer of modern Polish anarchism. In the 1980s he was an active participant in many anti-communist and independent organizations, edited numerous samizdat periodicals, organized underground art performances and supported conscientious objectors to military service, for which he was arrested. An elementary school teacher for some years, in 1988-89 he co-organized street protests against the Round Table negotiations as well as the construction of the Żarnowiec nuclear power plant. Jany currently works at the Library of the Gdansk University of Technology.