

THE NEW ZEALAND CHAPTER OF THE PEACEFUL POLISH SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT

Jacek Drecki

Seeds of Solidarity (1945-1980)

The end of World War II did not bring freedom to the Polish nation. As a matter of fact, Poland was subjected to another long period of enslavement, arguably even more evil than that experienced during any previous period. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), acting swiftly on the back of the Red Army's westward march, seized the country and installed there a vassal government which had strict reporting duties to Moscow. This puppet cabinet of collaborators had no mandate nor recognition from the Polish people. Their 'legitimacy' to govern was thanks to the power of the occupying Red Army. Their first move was to set up a militarised police force and highly organised secret intelligence units. Initially their members were entirely Russian but later Polish, though under Russian command. With great haste they stepped in and prevented democratically elected local administrations from assuming control over their own country. There were harsh rebukes and punishments against those who questioned the new state of affairs. They were, in a word, ruthless.

The sufferings of the Polish nation during the terrible German occupation of WWII had been extensive. The losses to the new occupier were particularly tragic. The communists were pickier, for want of a better word, pursuing and killing those they determined were 'the best' of those who managed to survive the war. Thus, Poland lost hundreds of thousands of their most patriotic and able citizens to this post-war period.¹

Russian dictator, Joseph Stalin, needed this new puppet government to endorse his post-war land grab and brazenly stole the territory of Poland's eastern provinces and incorporated them into the Soviet Union. Stalin knew that such a move would never be agreed to by the Polish government which, though in exile, was fully functioning in London at the time. Therefore, Stalin boldly declared that London-based government 'illegal'. Unfortunately, by signing the Yalta agreements, Western powers sanctioned the Soviet land grab by bowing to Stalin's demands, and withdrew their recognition of the exiled Polish government in mid-1945. After rigged elections in 1947, when the communists secured themselves a 'landslide' victory, it seemed that the Polish fate was sealed.

¹ Piotr Woźniak, *Zapluty karzeł reakcji*, Editions Spotkania, Wyd, III 1984, p 121; also: Zygmunt Leszek Szulkiewicz, *Czy musieliśmy? (Wspomnienia)*, Lublin 2005, p. 14.

In Europe, many Polish soldiers and displaced civilians became stranded. They knew that returning home to a communist Poland would not be safe for them. Reports from those who did return were discouraging and alarming, as many of them were prosecuted or imprisoned. For those whose home was now in the Soviet Union, a return was out of the question. Most of the post-war Polish immigrants to New Zealand were actually from the Polish eastern provinces, having lost their homes to the Soviets.

Those lucky enough to survive the war and find themselves in the 'free' world were then faced with having to stay away from their beloved country and families, watching from afar as it was enslaved again. They had to start their lives anew in foreign countries whose cultures were unfamiliar, not knowing if a return home would ever be possible. It was particularly difficult for those who felt a national duty to assist in the rebuilding of Poland after the devastations brought on by the war.

These sentiments and feelings were key elements unifying post-war Polish immigrants to New Zealand. In the Polish Children's Camp at Pahiatua, the young gulag survivors were educated to become able citizens and builders of a free Poland after the war, but most of them could not return home and stayed here. Polish 'displaced persons' and ex-soldiers quickly established associations that would help them to function in this new country, as well as keep contact and support Polish causes when possible. When we look back now it seems incredible that they managed to successfully establish themselves in the working-class and build their own relative prosperity as well as be involved in setting up Polish organizations including schools, cultural groups and self-help cells. There was also tireless fundraising for the Polish government in exile, various other financial relief actions and constantly pressing the Polish message amongst the local, mostly sympathetic society.

Unfortunately, despite great degree of awareness of the Polish fate, the official stance of the New Zealand government was to do what Great Britain did, and recognize only the Warsaw communist regime. Poland was to be treated as a Soviet dominion, not to be interfered or engaged with by any strong political stance or action. The Soviet Union was too powerful to be questioned. In such a political environment not much could be done for Poland. This, of course, did not help the passionate Polish communities here.

People in Poland had to not only bear the heavy toll of rebuilding their country, but also collectivisation, deprivation of private enterprises, low pay, indoctrination, constant invigilation and, in case of any exhibited resistance, prosecution. To lessen the burden, some had chosen to join the Communist Party but the majority preferred not to and to cope with the situation as best they could.

History shows us that the Polish nation cannot be kept under heavy restraint for long. It will always try to break free. In 1956, 1968, 1970 and 1976, street protests and strikes in many industrial centres took place. Demonstrators demanded better living and work conditions, better pay, liberalization of trade, freedom of speech, the right of association, abolishing censorship and so on. Sadly, such protests were brutally crushed with force and further repression. Hundreds of Polish people were killed, mostly in 1956 and 1970. Those events of social unrest, however tragic and painful for many, did have an effect on the hierarchy of the ruling Communist Party and changes of leadership occurred. The new leaders, at least at the beginning of their reign, did allow some reforms.

Nonetheless, the communist system was still in control. The police and secret service bureaus kept watch on everybody and not much was allowed without their permission. A total monopoly of the media enabled the regime to keep the country in isolation. People were seldom allowed to travel abroad (notwithstanding the fact that they usually could not afford to anyway) and a limited number of visitors were allowed in from outside. News about real life in Poland did not reach the western world, which was fed a diet of propagandist material. In this respect, the 'Iron Curtain' worked well for the communist rulers. Naturally, Polish communities in New Zealand knew more than what was reported in the newspapers, thanks to their own channels of communication, but their ability to rouse wider interest in what was happening in their homeland was limited.

Perhaps the only exemption was the Catholic media, which reported the 1966 celebrations of the Millennium of Christianity in Poland and the 1971 beatification of Father Maksymilian Kolbe, the martyr of Oświęcim (Auschwitz) Concentration Camp.

The Catholic Church in Poland was highly influential in helping people to keep their hopes alive. It had a strong and charismatic leader in Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński (1901-1981), who stood up to communist pressures and did not allow the church to be pacified or penetrated by the regime. It was proof that even the mightiest system had its limits. The Polish Catholic Church provided a refuge for those of the oppressed nation and facilitated activities of independent groups under a banner of academic or workers ministries, as well as harbouring some underground political opposition cells.

Furthermore, it was the Church which gave a crucial, patriotic boost to the nation, when Cardinal Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope in 1978. This event 'shook the ground' under the communist regimes in countries behind the Iron Curtain. The 1979 visit of His Holiness John Paul II to Poland saw huge numbers assemble at papal masses and meetings. It gave the repressed people of Poland a new strength. The Soviets became alarmed to the point where a

plot to assassinate the Pope was devised. (Investigations into the 1981 assassination attempt by Turkish hitman Ali Agca revealed the heavy involvement of Soviet secret agencies in the issuing of a killing order).

The election of Pope John Paul II and his historic visit to his homeland paved the way for the rise of the Polish Solidarity movement. In August 1980, after a wave of strikes, not only in the Gdańsk shipyard but in many state factories across the country, the communist government was forced to negotiate and sign agreements allowing reforms which included the official formation of Solidarity as a free and independent trade union. The formation and recognition of this free trade union, formed and run outside Communist Party control, made the whole world gasp with disbelief. Here was a paradox – a genuine workers’ movement in revolt against the workers’ state! In this peaceful revolt, the ‘rebels’ were openly holding crosses and rosary beads in their hands. Their leader, Lech Wałęsa, wore a badge with the image of Our Lady of Częstochowa in his lapel. Solidarity became a vehicle to put Poland on the road to independence. But this road would be long and winding.

Solidarity, a ‘game changer’ for Polish people in New Zealand (1980-1983)

The above developments had put Poland firmly back on the international political stage and elevated Polish matters to the front of the news bulletins. Solidarity roused huge interest and enjoyed world-wide support. Polish people living abroad shared the limelight and, suddenly, there was new interest in hearing their voices and opinions. This became a golden opportunity to contribute towards Polish independence in a more substantial way. It seemed that, finally, things could be done for Poland from abroad.

It was certainly the case in New Zealand. Upon the signing of the August 1980 agreements, a Television New Zealand reporter and film-crew made a surprise visit to the Auckland Polish Catholic Church. There they filmed a procession and conducted an impromptu interview with Mrs Wanda Ellis, a very well-known member of the Polish community, who provided up-to-date comments on the Gdańsk events. The footage was screened later that day during the main nightly news bulletin, along with a report on the situation in Poland.²

Solidarity quickly grew to a movement of 10 million active members. It became a new political force mounting a serious challenge to the communist establishment and the regime simply had to react to it by easing some restrictions. This created an opportunity for new independent press and radio stations to break the communist media monopoly. Democratically elected

² Czesław Kalinowski, personal communication, 2003.

representatives were allowed onto decision-making committees in work places, universities, local body administrations and so on. Society-initiated legislative proposals to reform the country were reluctantly sanctioned by the Communist Party, too. Although the implementation of all those changes were purposely slowed down by frequent and strong resistance by the ruling Party, the Polish nation slowly started breathing the new and refreshing air of political freedom.

However, despite all those political gains, living conditions in Poland were actually worsening as the shortages of food, medicines, medical equipment and other essentials became more and more severe. Necessities were rationed. Queuing for goods became a common aspect of shopping. For this reason, many frustrated Poles decided to emigrate, a move previously forbidden and now made possible by a partial liberalisation of passport legislations and border controls. At that time, Austria was the most convenient destination as it was granting visa-free entry and asylum on arrival. So, many went there. In 1981, between ten and thirty thousand Polish refugees were living in Austria.

Calls by Polish Bishops to the international community for help in easing the particularly painful food crisis were heard in New Zealand. Polish organizations in Wellington and Auckland, along with the New Zealand Red Cross and Catholic Church, were the first to respond. The results of their efforts were spectacular.

The 'Food for Poland' appeal was a joint initiative of Wellington's Polish Association and the New Zealand Red Cross. Within a short time, generously donated funds allowed the purchase and transport of 20 tonnes of cheese to Poland. The cheese, valued at \$34,500 was sent by the New Zealand Dairy Board from its Hamburg facility in May 1981.³

Money-raising efforts intensified when the Auckland Polish Association became involved in the appeal. The second lot of bulk New Zealand dairy products was purchased, this time with a value of \$56,000, and again transported from Hamburg to Poland, in June. This was done after assurances had been received from the deliverers and receivers of the first consignment, that the food had arrived and been distributed to the Polish people, not the Polish government. Only the Polish and New Zealand Red Cross organisations, the Solidarity Free Trade Union and Catholic Caritas organisation were authorised to distribute the goods.

Organizers of the appeal publicly stated the aim to send three more such shipments in short succession. Polish families living in New Zealand dug deep and each contributed the equivalent of a week's wages to the appeal. As a result, in just a few weeks a further \$13,000 was collected

³ *Cheese aids Poland*, in: *The Dominion*, Friday May 22, 1981, p. 2.

from the Auckland Polish community alone.⁴ Of course, many were also sending food parcels to their families and friends in Poland.

On another front, the Polish association in Wellington approached then Prime Minister, Robert Muldoon, in attempt to persuade the New Zealand government to accept Polish refugees from Austria.⁵ President of the association, Mr Zdzisław Lepionka, was himself part of the first ever refugee group to be accepted in New Zealand - the Polish orphan children who arrived in 1944. Muldoon was known for his rather circumspect immigration policies and a sometimes tough stance against non-British arrivals. Hence, the request on behalf of Polish escapees from behind the Iron Curtain was a bold move!

Muldoon was an intriguing character, a dynamic leader, a man to love or hate, but he was well aware of world politics and the calamities Soviet communism had been inflicting upon humanity. The bloody Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was clear proof that Moscow's leadership was very much on the offensive internationally. Local proof of this was when the Soviet ambassador in New Zealand was caught in an Auckland hotel handing over cash to the Moscow-aligned New Zealand Socialist Unity Party (SUP) in December that same year.⁶ Muldoon knew that the Eastern Bloc countries, with funds and agendas while acting discreetly through their diplomatic representations, were capable of destabilising the political stage in his own country. They could surreptitiously support local trade unions by supplying some of them with funds and 'expertise'. Therefore, Muldoon recognized the local Polish associations, with their strong anti-communism sentiment, were useful allies in keeping watch over activities of not only communist diplomats, but also individuals with suspected links to Soviet regimes.

Muldoon kept an interest in Polish matters to the point where (some years later) he wrote a review, for the leading Wellington newspaper *The Dominion*, of Lech Wałęsa's book, *A Way of Hope* (1987)⁷. His stated support for Polish people and their peaceful struggle for freedom won Muldoon many friends amongst Poles in New Zealand. He had personally met the presidents of both the Wellington and Auckland Polish associations and there developed a mutually appreciative friendship.

Therefore, Mr Lepionka's decision to approach Muldoon directly with a plea to accept Polish refugees had a chance of success. Coincidentally, at the same time the Intergovernmental

⁴ Glen Eden man helps people of Poland, in: *Western Leader*, Tuesday, June 23, 1981, p. 2.

⁵ Dariusz Zdziech, *Powojenna polska Nowa Zelandia. Emigracja Polaków do Nowej Zelandii po II wojnie światowej*, unpublished PhD thesis, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Wydział Historyczny, Instytut Historii, Kraków 2011, p. 114.

⁶ Robert Muldoon, *My Way*, Reed, 1981, p. 136; *Hush broken on Soviet cash*, in: *NZ Herald*, 14.1.1998.

⁷ Sir Robert Muldoon, *Man behind a movement*, in: *The Dominion*, 1987

Committee for Migration also asked the New Zealand government to help with the resettlement of Polish asylum seekers from Austria. Talks were ‘hard-bargaining’⁸, but as a result of both requests and with an agreement that the New Zealand Polish communities would extend helping hands to their arriving countrymen, a special entry quota for Poles was granted. Between September and November 1981, four groups of Polish immigrants, 102 people in total, came to New Zealand under this quota.⁹

On Sunday, April 26th 1981, Poles in Wellington staged a demonstration in front of the Soviet Embassy.¹⁰ It was ANZAC weekend, when New Zealanders commemorated their soldiers who fought at Gallipoli (1915-16) and other conflicts.

Poles commemorated the loss of 15,000 prisoners of war who, in 1940, had been murdered by Soviets at Katyń and other locations. Until 1990, the Russians denied responsibility for these war crimes and shamelessly blamed the Germans for it. For years, as the truth about Katyń was not recognised in the public domain, even in the so-called free world, it caused a continuous distress among Polish people, including those living in New Zealand.

So, several hundred gathered at the Soviet Embassy in Karori, demanding Russia openly acknowledge the atrocities committed upon the Polish nation during WW2. Beside the Katyń killings, there were also mass deportations of Polish citizens into labour camps in Siberia (1940-1941), something experienced by many Poles living in New Zealand. During the rally, a manifesto written especially for the occasion was handed out. Protestors used loud speakers when reading excerpts from Alexander Solzhenitsyn book, *The Gulag Archipelago*. More than once the police were called by Embassy staff who complained about the noise and requested protection, but there were no unruly or violent incidents. Interestingly, beside Poles from Wellington and those who arrived from other New Zealand centres, the rally was supported by a strong contingent of migrants from other communist-ruled countries including Hungarians, Estonians and Lithuanians.

Although similar rallies had been held in previous years, this one was by far the most publicized. A new and clear demand - that Moscow must refrain from interfering in Polish reforms brought about by Solidarity - was strongly voiced. The demonstration alone would not change the official Soviet stance, but due to extensive coverage in the national media and the

⁸ Zdzisław Lepionka – personal communication, 22.8.2020.

⁹ J.W. Pobóg-Jaworowski, *History of the Polish Settlers in New Zealand*, CHZ “Ars Polona”, Warsaw, 1990, p. 110.

¹⁰ Andrzej Obertyński, *Pod murami ambasady ZSRR*, in: *Wiadomości Polskie*, Sydney 13.6.1981, p. 7; Mikołaj Polaczuk (red), *Zarys historii SPK w Nowej Zelandii*, Stowarzyszenie Polskich Kombatantów w Nowej Zelandii, Wellington, 1986, p. 57;

peaceful character of the protestors, the event was a very successful promotion of the Polish cause in New Zealand.

In May 1981 another happening took place in Wellington, on a very different stage. A special charity recital by the internationally acclaimed Australian pianist Roger Woodward attracted an audience of over 1,000 people.¹¹ The artist had filled his programme with works by Chopin and donated all the proceeds (\$9,000) to the Food for Poland appeal. Woodward had studied piano in Sydney and at the National Chopin Academy for Music in Warsaw in 1960s. Years later, the pianist told an interviewer: ‘As a student in Poland, I reached out to people in a completely alien culture, lived and worked with Polish people and tried to learn their language and ways. In their moment of difficulty, it was not possible to ignore their extraordinary kindness, so I used my art for the Solidarność trades union movement. At one stage, I memorized the complete works of Chopin, playing program after program worldwide to raise money for that movement at a time when its members were being hounded, imprisoned and murdered. Poland’s struggle for freedom in the face of overwhelming Soviet military superiority was achieved through many thousands of such tiny initiatives undertaken by many others.’¹²

Woodward’s reference to Solidarity members being prosecuted and murdered brings us to the dark days of the martial law imposed upon the Polish people by the communist government in an attempt to crush the Solidarity movement. It was declared on December 13th, 1981. The night before, mass arrests of Solidarity leaders were carried out by secret police. Then tanks entered city streets, army personnel were sent as commissioners to take over civic administrations and the directorship of industrial factories and plants. A curfew was strictly enforced, and road check points set up everywhere. Trade unions, civic and political institutions were all suspended, outlawed or deregistered, except for one – the Communist Party. Any resistance was viciously dealt with by force. Striking miners were fired upon and killed at ‘Wujek’ coal mine in Katowice. Such brutally violent actions against the legal and peaceful Solidarity movement shocked the world.

Many members of the Polish community in New Zealand feared for the safety of their families in Poland. They found it impossible to contact them because the Polish telephone system was switched off. In Auckland, the Polish association held a 12-hour vigil in Vulcan

¹¹ *45 Years of Diplomatic Relations, Poland & New Zealand*, Embassy of the Republic of Poland, Wellington, November 2018, p. 34; *Pianist Plays for Poland*, Press Assn, Wellington, 1981.

¹² *Polish Honour* (SFSU publication), 2011, in: www.rogerwoodward.com (2020)

Lane, with members expressing grave concern over developments in their homeland.¹³

The New Zealand Catholic Commission for Evangelisation, Justice and Development instantly sent a grant of \$2000 to Caritas in Rome to sponsor food and accommodation for Poles who had flooded into Austria, as well as launching an appeal to raise relief funds over the Christmas and the New Year period. Some Catholic parishes collected more than \$1000 for Poland at New Year church services. The Howick parish, for instance, sent \$2,019. The Auckland Polish Association started receiving unsolicited cheques, which were forwarded to the Red Cross.¹⁴

Shortly before Christmas 1981, in a largely spontaneous action, about 600-800 people again protested in front of the Soviet Embassy in Wellington, voicing their opposition to martial law in Poland. Interestingly, it was estimated that only half of the participants were actually Poles. The other half were New Zealanders and members of communities from other Eastern Bloc countries, all appalled by reports of the violent repression of people in Poland, and all convinced that Moscow was behind this military clampdown.¹⁵

The New Zealand government sent a formal letter to Polish authorities strongly appealing for the quick restoration of normal conditions and individual freedoms for the people of Poland. They also welcomed the tough line on Poland taken by NATO foreign ministers in Brussels who denounced the imposition of martial law as a massive violation of human rights, warranting that trade sanctions be considered. Prime Minister Muldoon said in a statement: 'Our sympathy goes out to the Polish people in their privations and sufferings.'¹⁶ The New Zealand Labour Party also sent a letter of protest to the Polish Embassy.¹⁷

The two largest Polish associations in New Zealand organized street marches in Wellington and Auckland, calling for the restoration of human rights in Poland. Their marches were timed to coincide with world-wide demonstrations called for by the Solidarity office in exile, located in Brussels, Belgium. The office was supported by Poles living abroad and led by those few union leaders who had somehow avoided imprisonment and escaped to the West.

On January 30th, 1982, the 'Support for Solidarity' march up Auckland's Queen Street, from the downtown square in front of the Chief Post Office to Aotea Square, amassed several

¹³ *Poles fear for families*, in: *Star*, 14.12.1981.

¹⁴ *March for Polish rights*, in *Star*, 24.1.1982.

¹⁵ *Wiec i marsz na poparcie Solidarności*, in: *Wiadomości Polskie* (Wellington), March 1982, pp. 3-4; Mikołaj Polaczuk (red), *Zarys historii SPK w Nowej Zelandii*, Stowarzyszenie Polskich Kombatantów w Nowej Zelandii, Wellington, 1986, p. 24.

¹⁶ *NZ 'welcome' for tough Polish stand*, Press Assn. Wellington, 28.1.1982.

¹⁷ *FOL may examine Polish Crisis*, in: *Star*, 21.1.1982.

hundred participants including delegations from the Hungarian, Czech, Vietnamese and Kampuchean communities. Interestingly, the march had some opponents, who stood under a Workers' Communist League banner and several heated 'discussions' took place between members of that small group and Vietnamese participants at the back of the march. But at the front, children in Polish national costumes, accompanied by a white and red Polish national flag draped in black veil, led a colourful march. Many dressed in Solidarity tee-shirts and armbands and carried anti-communist banners and placards reading: 'Release imprisoned Solidarity members', 'Fight communism in Poland' and 'Less force, more food'.¹⁸

Among the high-profile marchers were Auckland Mayor Colin Kay; the Catholic Bishop of Auckland, the Most Rev. John Mackey; Minister of Health and Immigration, Aussie Malcolm; Labour MPs Fred Gerbic and Richard Prebble; Social Credit Party deputy leader and East Coast Bays MP, Garry Knapp; Labour Party president Jim Anderton and leaders from the Auckland Carpenters' and Engineers' Unions.

Mr Malcolm, the highest-ranking politician present at the event, said that similar rallies world-wide would show the oppressors of Poland that Polish people had friends everywhere. He has also confirmed his government's intentions to accept more Polish refugees.¹⁹

At the end of the rally people were invited to sign a petition, to be sent to the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, urging the Polish authorities to repeal martial law, restore human rights as guaranteed by the Helsinki Accords (1973), release all Solidarity members and political prisoners from custody and to reinstate the Solidarity trade union. The Auckland Polish Association initiated the petition and intended that it would be available to be signed in all main centres of New Zealand. At the conclusion of the rally the petition was read out and endorsed by marchers who passed a resolution calling for the New Zealand government to support it. The resolution read: 'The Auckland Polish Association urges the New Zealand Government, on behalf of all free people, to pursue a campaign to restore the basic human rights of the people of Poland in general and of the Solidarity Free Trade Union in particular.'²⁰

By April 1982, when the petition was officially presented at the New Zealand Parliament, there were 25,426 signatures on it.²¹ (The actual number of people that signed it throughout the

¹⁸ Anti-communist banners dominate Polish march, in: *Star Weekender*, Saturday, January 30. 1982.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Czesław Kalinowski's (President of Auckland Polish Association) Solidarity march address, 30.1.1982. *Solidarity in New Zealand Inc. archives*; also: Auckland Polish Association letter to Rt Honourable Robert Muldoon, Prime Minister, 7.2.1982. *Solidarity in New Zealand Inc. archives*.

²¹ *Poles present petition*, in: *The Dominion*, 2.4.1982, p. 4; *Government given Polish petition*, in: *The Press*, 2.4.1982.

country was believed to be well in excess of 50,000.) It was an impressive number given that there were only about 4,000 Polish people living in the country at that time. Both Prime Minister, Robert Muldoon, and the Leader of the Opposition, Bill Rowling, welcomed the petition and promised governmental endorsement and parliamentary support. The matter went through the Foreign Affairs Select Committee and was referred back to parliament for ‘most favourable consideration’ by the Government. That was the highest recommendation a committee could make and there had indeed been a bipartisan unanimity on the matter. Therefore, the Auckland Polish Association’s petition was totally in accord with government policy and as such was forwarded by New Zealand to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in November 1982.²²

The Solidarity march in Wellington took place on February 9th, 1982. The show of support was again impressive, with well over 2,000 participants (though some sources reported over 7,000) walking from Civic Square to Parliament Building under all sorts of trade union banners.

The Wellington City Mayor, Michael Fowler, Catholic Bishop of Palmerston North, the Most Rev Peter Cullinane, and trade union leaders marched with the strong Polish contingent. All were met by Muldoon and Rowling on the steps of Parliament Building. Both politicians were happily wearing Solidarity badges!²³

Increasingly loud calls for the Polish military authorities to reopen talks with Solidarity, release detainees and restore human rights, were being voiced by people from all corners of New Zealand, prompting the Polish Embassy in Wellington to be closed in May 1982. Officially, the reason given for the closure by the Polish Government in Warsaw was cost-savings.²⁴

Coincidentally, the Russian Bolshoi Theatre company was on tour in New Zealand in April 1982. The 14-member ballet troupe intended entertaining audiences in Australia and New Zealand. But, the Australian government regarded the Bolshoi Ballet as an instrument of Soviet propaganda and cancelled the Australian leg of the tour.²⁵

The Polish association in Wellington approached the New Zealand government with a request for them to do the same. At the time, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the official government policy to cut cultural links with the USSR was implemented. However, the New Zealand government adopted a different approach, stating that if the ballet was on an official

²² Warren Cooper’s (Minister of Foreign Affairs) letter to C. Kalinowski (President of Auckland Polish Association) re: petition 82/13, 12 November 1982. *Solidarity in New Zealand Inc. archives*.

²³ *Wiec i marsz na poparcie Solidarności*, in: *Wiadomości Polskie* (Wellington), March 1982, pp. 3-4.

²⁴ *Poles close embassy because of cost*, in: *The Dominion*, 4.6.1982, p. 3.

²⁵ Leaflet prepared by Polish Association in New Zealand (Wellington) on the occasion of the Bolshoi Ballet tour of New Zealand 1982. *Solidarity in New Zealand Inc. archives*.

visit, it would not take place, but because it was a private company venture the tour could go ahead.²⁶

It did not take long for Poles to react. If the private entrepreneur could enjoy the freedom of promoting Soviet ballet, they would use their liberty to protest against it. Pickets were present outside performance venues in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch and leaflets distributed highlighting realities of the Soviet world; the suppression of religion, travel restrictions, deprivation of human rights and, as in Poland, crushing by force any attempt by people to gain freedom. This was in stark contrast to the ‘dream-world of grace and beauty’ as presented by the ballet.

In Christchurch, Poles were supported in their protest by the New Zealand Society for the Study of Religion and Communism which also expressed strong criticism of the tour.²⁷ The protests did not stop the ballet company touring the country, but no member of the government nor any other politician attended the show.²⁸

In July 1982, the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs arranged a seminar titled ‘The Polish Crisis’ at Waikato University in Hamilton. Members of the Polish community were among the speakers and, due to the huge interest in the topic, a publication by Dr Stanisław Sawicki and his daughter Theresa Sawicka-Brockie - *Embattled Poland* - was printed promptly afterwards by Victoria University Press and the Institute.²⁹

New Zealanders continued to respond to the ‘Polish Crisis’ with full-hearted generosity. On October 11th, 1982, a charity concert with proceeds going to the Polish Relief Fund was held in Wellington. It had been organised by Sister Winfriede Blake, under the Patronage of Archbishop (later Cardinal) Tom Williams of Wellington. Students from St Mary’s College Schola and other musical artists performed in the Wellington Town Hall in front of a large and enthusiastic audience which included fellow students, parents and Church representatives.³⁰

Many other Catholic schools, parishes, various civic and social organizations, Trade Unions and individuals contributed greatly to the Polish Relief Fund. In 1981 and 1982 over \$227,000

²⁶ *Government given Polish petition*, in: *The Press*, 2.4.1982.

²⁷ Ballet draws protests, in: *Star*, 17.4.1982.

²⁸ *Government given Polish petition*, in: *The Press*, 2.4.1982.

²⁹ S.J. Sawicki & T.A. Sawicka-Brockie, *Embattled Poland*, Victoria University Press with New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 1982;

³⁰ Rev David Blake, personal communication, 2004.

was collected, out of which \$190,000 was used for food and the remainder for medical supplies to be sent to Poland.³¹

Solidarity in New Zealand Incorporated (1984 – 1992)

To the delight of the Polish community, the intentions of the New Zealand government, signalled by the Minister of Immigration during the Auckland rally - to grant entry to more Polish refugees - became reality. A further 178 Polish refugees from Austria arrived in New Zealand in 1982 and 1983. Together with several asylum seekers that fled from Polish ships calling to New Zealand ports, the total number of persons in this government assisted immigration scheme had reached 327. Still more people were coming by their own means, boosting the strength of the Polish communities in all major centres. Many of the new arrivals joined forces with the most patriotically active members of the Polish community and set up a new incorporated society, naming it aptly: 'Solidarity in New Zealand'. It was formally registered in February 1984.

Among the new arrivals who immediately joined the new Solidarity in New Zealand organization was Maciej Kublikowski, a prominent regional Solidarity leader from Poland who had suffered a year of imprisonment under martial law. He was arrested on the suspicion that he would be a 'potential troublemaker and source of social unrest', but had never been charged nor appeared in court. Held in atrocious conditions, in a grotty old fortress cell, he was once beaten so badly that he needed a month of hospital treatment to recover from the injuries inflicted on him.³²

After his release he was encouraged by authorities to leave Poland. With reluctance he decided to do so and joined his sister who had settled in New Zealand as a political refugee a few years earlier. On his departure, he managed to smuggle out of Poland some underground literature, photographs and prison artefacts, including a prisoner's shirt and art made by inmates. All these were on display at an exhibition organised by Solidarity in New Zealand, held at the University of Auckland in July 1985. The success of the exhibition prompted organizers to also display it at Polish House in Auckland and later in Wellington, Inglewood (Taranaki) and Christchurch. There, under the title *Solidarność – Poland in the 1980s*, it was displayed at the University of Canterbury in April 1986. In just a few days the Christchurch

³¹ Mikołaj Polaczuk (red), *Zarys historii SPK w Nowej Zelandii, Stowarzyszenie Polskich Kombatantów w Nowej Zelandii*, Wellington, 1986, p. 24.

³² Maciej Kublikowski, *Tamte dni*, in: *Solidarity in the Antipodes*, No. 4, Auckland, July-August 1984, pp. 10-12.

exhibition attracted hundreds of visitors, some of whom made voluntary donations to Solidarity and the Independent Student Union in Poland.³³

Although the New Zealand government, all main political parties, the Federation of Labour and the majority of trade unions openly condemned the military rule in Poland, there were exceptions. The Auckland Trades Council and previously mentioned Socialist Unity Party (SUP), both headed by the same president, Mr Bill Andersen, supported martial law and the crack down on Solidarity. They held a view, taken straight from the Moscow narrative, that Solidarity was a rebellion against a legal Polish government. Mr Andersen was a well-known apologist for the Soviet regime and a man who together with his close associates enjoyed trips to Moscow and Leningrad (now St Petersburg) paid for by the Communist Party of the USSR.³⁴

The SUP had a small network of followers trying to influence the New Zealand labour market. But their gains on some worksites were severely mitigated, or even completely neutralized, by Eastern European migrants. As a former member of the Australian Communist Party once said, the most effective arguments against Communism came from these migrants. They were quick to sense propaganda and warn the workers about manipulation.³⁵

SUP activists and associates were always attempting to derail or made difficult any anti-communist initiative, including those made by the Polish communities. For example, the SUP tried to discourage students from visiting the Solidarity exhibition at Auckland University³⁶ and made unsettling personal threats towards some members of the Polish Community Committee, which was planning to install a commemorative Katyń plaque in Auckland's St Patrick's Catholic Cathedral in 1990.³⁷ The SUP had no success, but proved something of a nuisance, a reminder that the battle for the truth and justice was not easy and not over yet.

Since its establishment, the Solidarity organization in New Zealand had taken a lead within the Polish community to support the freedom movement in Poland. Its members remained busy fund-raising and conducting campaigns to keep the New Zealand public informed about matters in Poland. They wrote numerous articles and letters to local newspapers, actively participated in seminars and conferences organized by various organizations and universities and published the bi-monthly, bilingual magazine *Solidarity in the Antipodes*. This periodical was, for some

³³ Krzysztof Pawlikowski, *Solidarność – Poland in the 1980s* (report from the exhibition at University of Canterbury), Christchurch, May 1986.

³⁴ *Why Andersen's not telling* in: *Star Weekender*, Saturday, March 14, 1981, p 7.

³⁵ Bernard Moran, *Solidarity says NZ "taken in"* in: *The Tablet* (New Zealand's Catholic Weekly), Wednesday, November 11, 1987, p12.

³⁶ T.S. Trościanka, *Prosto z mostu* in: *Solidarity in the Antipodes* No.11, September-October 1985, p10

³⁷ Malwina Zofia Schwieters – personal communication, 2003.

time, the best source of news on Poland available in New Zealand. For this reason, it was subscribed to by many libraries including the Parliamentary Library in Wellington.

The organization hosted Kazimierz Sabbat, Prime Minister of the Polish Government in Exile, on a visit to Auckland (March 1984) and Jacek Kaczmarski, the well-known singer and Polish patriotic song writer regarded as the 'voice of Solidarity' (February 1986). Kaczmarski's concerts for Polish communities in New Zealand were fund-raising events for Solidarity in Poland. Proceeds of nearly \$800 were forwarded to the tour promoters - the Solidarity Information Bureau in Australia - from the Auckland concert alone.³⁸

In 1985, the organization successfully secured a supply of Tagamet (a medical drug to treat stomach ailments resulting from poor nutrition, a condition frequently affecting many interned and imprisoned people during the martial law period). There was a shortage of this type of drug in Poland and the consignment obtained from New Zealand was greatly welcomed. It was sent to a convent near Warsaw, from where nuns made visitations to prisons where political detainees were held, and to the homes of numerous needy people.³⁹

Martial law in Poland was finally lifted in 1983, after which most of the political detainees were released. But, influential opposition leaders continued to be invigilated, harassed and prosecuted by the Security Police in Poland. Some were secretly killed. A charismatic priest who earned himself huge respect as a chaplain for Solidarity, Rev Jerzy Popiełuszko was brutally murdered in 1984. In 1989, two organizations in New Zealand - Solidarity and SPK (Polish Ex-Serviceman's Association) - paid special homage to the saintly martyr with a plaque on the wall in the church where Father Popiełuszko was serving as priest in Warsaw.⁴⁰ He was beatified in 2010.

Following changes to the Soviet leadership in Moscow, with Mikhail Gorbachev launching perestroika (reforms of the Soviet Communist Party) in 1985, a partial re-registration of Solidarity was granted the following year. Regrettably, this progression did not go smoothly or quickly enough for Polish workers. Strikes and social unrest ignited in various places.

A slow return to relative normality was nonetheless bringing new possibilities. After another few years of political manoeuvring and re-grouping on both sides of the political spectrum, and yet another wave of strikes in the main Polish industrial and mining centres, the regime agreed

³⁸ Letter from NSZZ "Solidarność" – Information Bureau in Australia to Solidarity Organization in New Zealand Inc., 10 March 1986. *Solidarity in New Zealand Inc. archives.*

³⁹ Letter from T.S. Trościanka (President of Solidarity in New Zealand Inc.) to T.J. Sprott ("Peace through Security") of Remuera, 4.3.1985 – *Solidarity in New Zealand Inc. – archives.*

⁴⁰ Solidarity in New Zealand Inc. – archives and T.S. Trościanka: *Krótką historia organizacji Solidarność w Nowej Zelandii Inc.* article in: *Wiadomości Polskie*, Sydney 16.11.1992;

to share power. Widely publicized round table talks resulted in Solidarity being formally re-legalised and allowed to seek a mandate in the so-called 'free election' of June 1989.

The news of free elections filled Polish people in New Zealand with renewed hope. With Solidarity re-emerging, firstly as a serious election contender, then as a victorious new parliamentary force and the strongest party in the new coalition government, a new kind of help was needed. There were no longer calls for donations of food. Instead, financial support, supplies of paper, and printing or copying machines to run political and election campaigns were sought after.

It is fascinating to realise that only a few dozen members of Solidarity in New Zealand were able to raise enough cash to purchase a high-performance copy machine for one of the Solidarity regional electoral offices in Lublin, in February 1990.⁴¹ This effort was particularly worth noting, considering all the difficulties the Auckland-based organization had with their own old and frequently broken photocopier used to print the *Solidarity in the Antipodes* newspaper! To send the money securely to Poland they used a Polish priest working in the Vatican who was in frequent contact with the Solidarity headquarters in Warsaw. The priest also facilitated other money transfers, one of which was to help Solidarity in Inowrocław to get a supply of printing paper to run an electoral office there.

Over the years, many other donations were frequently made by the same members of Solidarity in New Zealand. They supported all manner of patriotic initiatives, such as erecting historical monuments in Poland, conservation work at national shrines, helping with medical supplies for the needy, sponsoring ex-soldiers' trips to Monte Cassino for anniversary commemorations and so on. They also remained supportive of the needs of the local Polish community. Contributions were made towards the installation of the Katyń plaque at St Patrick's Cathedral and returned Polish servicemen living in Australia.

Closing the Solidarity chapter

In 1990, the Solidarity-led government announced a presidential election, the first truly free and fair election in Poland since World War II. Polish people around the globe were eligible to vote. The legendary Lech Wałęsa was one of the candidates. If elected he would replace Communist General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the man who had been responsible for martial law. The stakes were high and locally, Solidarity in New Zealand took an active part in organizing a polling booth in Auckland. For Polish people living in New Zealand it was a memorable

⁴¹ Letter from Obywatelski Klub Parlamentarny in Lublin to the President of the Solidarity Organization in New Zealand re: donation for copy machine, 6.7.1990. *Solidarity in New Zealand Inc. archives.*

event! They came in good numbers from near and far, showing unprecedented interest in this historic election. All sorts of identity documents, some expired many years before, were carried to proudly prove they were Polish citizens eligible to vote.

In December 1991, while the successfully elected President Wałęsa was in office, another important and very symbolic event took place; the Soviet Union crumbled. This enabled the Polish government, led by Prime Minister Jan Olszewski, to order the Russian Army to leave military bases in Poland in 1992. With the completion of this withdrawal, the communist occupation of Poland formally ended.

A steady flow of donations for various noble purposes continued from Solidarity in New Zealand until it was wound down as an organisation in January 2001. Their remaining funds (\$800) were sent to help needy Polish people who remained beyond the Polish eastern border.

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Jacek Drecki (29-8-2020)

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'Food for Poland' Appeal – official poster 1981. *Archives of the Solidarity in New Zealand Inc.*

⁴² Solidarity in New Zealand financial reports and Minutes from the last AGM (21.1.2001). *Solidarity in New Zealand Inc. archives.*



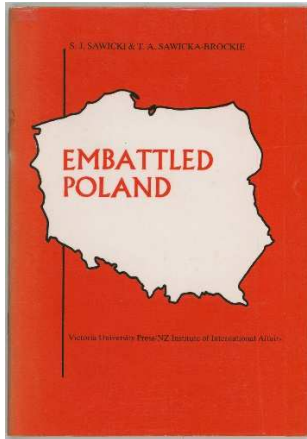
Cheese aids Poland, in: The Dominion, Friday May 22, 1981, p. 2.



Auckland 'Support for Solidarity' march press announcement. Auckland Star, 29.1.1982.



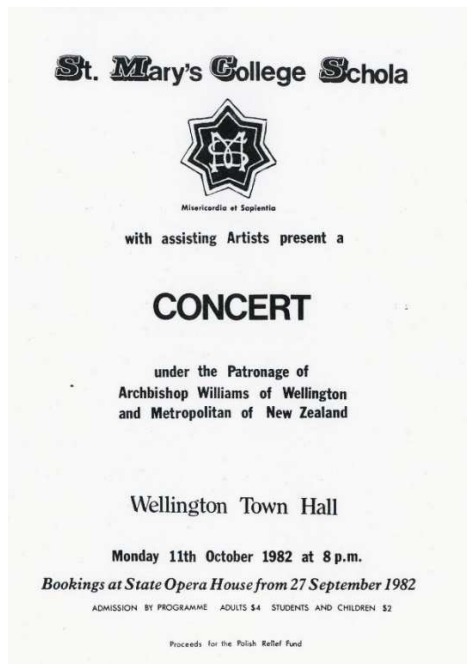
The Auckland rally sticker (1982). *Archives of the Solidarity in New Zealand Inc.*



S.J. Sawicki & T.A. Sawicka-Brockie, *Embattled Poland*, Victoria University Press with New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 1982.



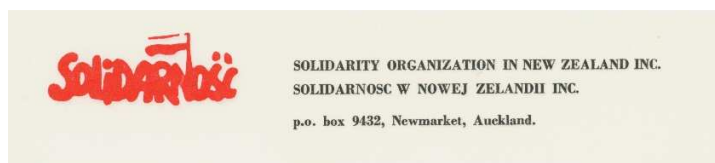
Poles present petition, in: *The Dominion*, 2.4.1982, p. 4



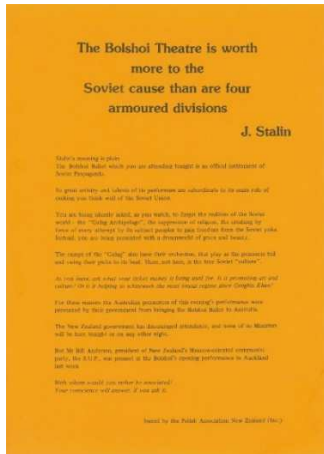
Cover page of the charity concert programme by St. Mary's College Schola 11.10.1982. Proceeds were donated to Polish Relief Fund. *From authors collection.*



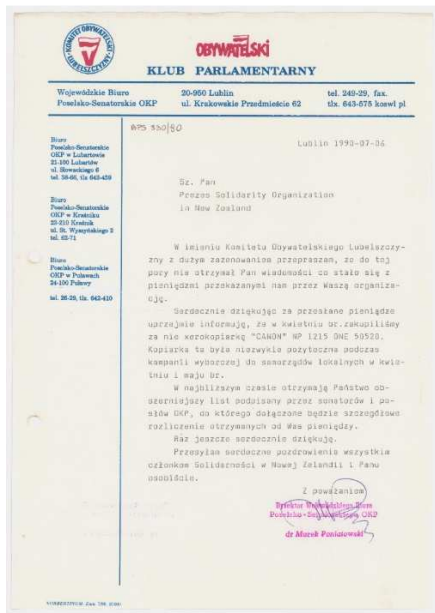
Katyn demonstration at the front of the Soviet Embassy in Wellington (1981). *Photo from: Mikołaj Polaczuk (red), „Zarys historii SPK w Nowej Zelandii”, Stowarzyszenie Polskich Kombatantów w Nowej Zelandii, Wellington, 1986, p. 57.*



Solidarity in New Zealand Inc. letterhead. *Archives of the Solidarity in New Zealand Inc.*



Leaflet handed out by picketers at venues where the Bolshoi Ballet were performing during New Zealand tour in 1982. Archives of the Solidarity in New Zealand Inc.



Letter from Obywatelski Klub Parlamentarny in Lublin to the President of the Solidarity Organization in New Zealand re: donation for copy machine, 6.7.1990. Archives of the Solidarity in New Zealand Inc.



Plaque in St Stanisław Kostka Church in Warsaw funded by Solidarity and SPK in New Zealand. Photo by Marszałek.