

## SOCJOLOGY

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### The anti-hero in symbolic spaces

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#### Abstract

**Background and Problem.** The issue of the presence of a hero, who was actually an anti-hero, in the symbolic space of the Polish People's Republic (PPR), has been described from the perspective of the sociology of culture and cultural anthropology, the history of the last century and semiology (symbolism). The study concerns Gen. Karol Swierczewski.

**Material and Method.** A content analysis of literature and a broad thematic discourse [Krippendorf 2004] of resources and studies were the methods used. Iconographic material and visual sociology were also used.

**Results and Conclusion.** During the time of the PPR the myth of Gen. Swierczewski and a few others like him was created in place of the chivalric and libertarian ethos Polish patriots were replaced by an internationalist combatant. Up to 1988 or 1989, i.e. until the end of the PPR, Swierczewski was present in the country's symbolic spaces, in different institutions and in small graphic forms (banknotes, postage stamps), etc. Then followed the process of the disappearance of the name and the person. Preserved artefacts illustrate this particular situation where, in the new political reality imposed by force a traitor to the country and the nation, is put on a pedestal, as a hero.

#### Introduction

The issue of the presence in the symbolic spaces of the Polish People's Republic (PPR) of a hero, who was actually an anti-hero, has been described from the perspective of the sociology of culture and cultural anthropology, the history of the last century and semiology (symbolism). The study concerns Gen. Karol Swierczewski, nickname “Walter”.

The “symbolic space” does not apply here (or only to a limited extent) to the architectural type of “myth-poetic” [Kotz 2007], but concerns the public space, especially urban areas. This applies mainly to axiologisation of the cities area and their ideologisation [cf. Tuan 1987; Kieniewiczowa, Sokolowska 1968]. Moreover, it has just been referred to the small graphic forms (coins, medals, stamps) and their symbolic content. Their presence in common circulation functioned may be as a tool ideologisation of Polish symbolic space more, than the names of streets and schools and Gen. Świerczewski monuments.

A method used here is the content analysis of literature and a broad thematic discourse [Krippendorf 2004] of resources and studies were the methods applied. It is a kind of evaluative case study research [Skinner, Edwards,

Corbett 2015: 116-133]. Iconographic material (photographs, postage stamps etc.) was also used. According to the methodological proposal of Piotr Sztompka [2004], the photographic method was used here as a complement to traditional sociological, anthropological and cultural methods. Photography is indeed becoming an increasingly valuable and more appreciated source material.

To illustrate the reflections in this study numismatic and philatelic artefacts as well as commemorative medals were collected and photographed. A common feature of the collection presented are the images and person of the anti-hero in question.

#### The anti-hero as hero

Since ancient times, tribes have worshipped their heroes in myth, song and legend. The **hero** had to possess a number of virtues, especially courage, and had to accomplish extraordinary deeds for the benefit of the tribe or nation [cf. Campbell 1949; Jirasek, Roberson 2010]. Thus, the ‘hero’ is understood here not literary, but archetypal.

“An **anti-hero** is a protagonist who lacks conventional heroic qualities such as idealism, courage, or



**Photo 1.** K. Swierczewski on PPR postage stamps

morality” [Oxford Dictionary 2016]. Such individuals often have a dark personality and traits, such as dishonesty, inconsistency and aggressiveness. They are usually considered “a visible contrast to archetypal heroes” [Jonas et al. 2012].

Dedication to the country or the nation is commendable, while treachery is a disgraceful act. Acting in the interest of a foreign, hostile country is a betrayal, especially when it concerns direct and armed action against one’s own people. The case study of Gen. Karol Swierczewski shows that in relation to Poland and the Polish nation he was a traitor.

Infamous criminals, like Adolf Hitler or Stalin, had a kind of ‘dark charisma’. They particularly attracted people who were morally and spiritually degenerate. Swierczewski was just such a soldier of Stalin. From a Polish, European and humanist perspective he emerges as an ‘anti-hero’. His biography is a manifestation of the ‘anti-way’ of a morally fallen man. However, in communist Poland he was put on a pedestal as a model hero [cf. Campbell 1949; Patelski 1996; Krasucki 2006; Cenckiewicz 2011].

### **The case study of Karol Swierczewski – a traitor and murderer**

Karol Swierczewski, alias Tanenbaum (10/02/1897 – 03/28/1947, Photo 1), was a general in the Red Army and the Polish People’s Army, and a communist activist. He fought for communism in Russia, Poland and Spain. “Between 1936 and 1939, the Republicans killed 6, 832 Catholic priests, or 12 percent of the Spanish clergy. In regions which they conquered, they aimed at the total extermination of the clergy, for example in Barbastro, the native diocese of St. Josemaria Escriva, they killed 124 of the 140 priests” [Gorny 2014: 68; cf. Chodakiewicz 2010]. Swierczewski adopted his nickname from the, ‘Walther gun’, which he used to carry out the death sen-

tences. Following the Second World War he continued to use his gun to maintain communist authority and build communism in Poland. Został, za zasługi dla ZSRR, odznaczony Orderem Czerwonego Sztandaru (trzykrotnie) oraz Orderem Lenina (dwukrotnie).

“Neither in Spain nor on the fronts in the USSR, Poland and Germany was Swierczewski successful on the battlefield. The operation of the Polish Second Army on the territory of Lusatia was especially devastating. The General’s errors led to tragic failures and huge losses among the soldiers. The difficulties in that period were due to both his constant alcohol abuse and to conflicts with subordinates, who were forced to refuse to perform some absurd orders. The decisions made under the influence of alcohol were particularly strongly objected to by General Aleksander Waszkiewicz, a deputy minister in the communist-dominated Ministry of National Defence, between 1946 and 1947. Swierczewski was at disposal of Stalin and was his representatives at all times. Despite the fact he was forced to put on a Polish uniform he never ceased to be a Soviet officer. In March 1947 he died in Baligrod in the Bieszczady Mountains. After his death he was made an icon of communist propaganda. As ‘General Walter’ he became a character in many myths and legends which had very little in common with reality” [IPN 2015].

This brief case study of Gen. Karol Swierczewski shows that he was in relation to Poland and Polish people a traitor. Arises here, as an illustration, a colourful description of Sienkiewicz. In Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel *The Deluge* the main character Kmicic turned to another character saying: “Then; listen to me, Mr. Kuklinowski, you rascal, traitor, thief, and dog catcher! Have you had enough, or shall I spit in your eye?” This Polish nobleman was particularly sensitive to the issues of honour and disgrace. In the case of Swierczewski there was a completely disgraceful betrayal of the Homeland and the nation.



Photo 2. 50-zloty banknote (1988)



Photo 3. 10 zloty 1967 (CuNi)

### Monuments, street names, schools etc.

Urban sociology points to the fact that the symbolic sphere (the names of streets, parks, monuments, Photo 14) [Kieniewiczowa, Sokolowska 1968: 177] is closely linked to the dominant ideology and axiology. In addition there are the names of various institutions and iconography.

“The communist authorities presented Swierczewski as a national hero, making him an icon of communist propaganda. [...] Already two days after his death the Political Bureau of the Polish Workers’ Party awarded him the Grand Cross of the War Order of *Virtuti Militari*, and decided to build a statue of him, rename a street and factory and create a scholarship named after him at the Military Academy. [...] He also became the patron of many schools [...]. His name was given to a number of institutions, factories and streets, including ‘Swierczewski Avenue’ – Warsaw WZ Route (now known as ‘Solidarity’ Avenue), a street and housing estate in Belchatow, the General Staff Academy in Rembertow, the Academy of Physical Education in Warsaw, the Pomeranian Medical University in Szczecin, the Precision Products Factory *VIS* in Warsaw, the *ZAMECH* Mechanical Plant Elblag, [...]. In Warsaw two streets were named after him. [...] Swierczewski’s image appeared on

the 1967 10-zloty coin and on a 50-zloty banknote in the seventies and eighties. Polish Post commemorated him on postage stamps” [Wikipedia 2015].

Set up by Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, the University of Physical Education in Warsaw, today bears the name of its founder as the Jozef Pilsudski Academy of Physical Education, but during the the communist regime it was the Gen. K. Swierczewski University. His name was also given to Primary School No. 2 in Strzyzow<sup>1</sup> and dozens of others. In the centre of Strzyzow there was a statue of Swierczewski. Interestingly, after regime change, it disappeared from the town.

Incidentally, there are other organizations still bearing the name of that communist ‘hero’ today e.g. the Police Sports Club ‘Walter’ in Rzeszow, teaching *judo* in particular, and the Walter Sports Hall.

### His presence on coins and banknotes

The images of great Poles and kings were depicted on the currency. There were for example thalers of King Stefan Batory and Jan III Sobieski and 5000-Polish Mark banknotes with Queen St. Jadwiga and Tadeusz Kosciuszko’s heads [Polkowski 1914: 80]. On the coins of the communist period the following kings appeared: Boleslaw the Brave, Boleslaw III Wrymouth, Ladislaus the Short, King Sigismund III Vasa [Polkowski 1914: 78].

The 50-zloty banknote (Photo 2) and the 10-zloty coin (Photo 3) presented “great Poles – Kosciuszko, Chopin and Copernicus next to the figure of Karol Swierczewski, who as an officer of the Red Army was, at his own request, in 1920 transferred to the army of Tukhachevsky and fought against Poland” [Polkowski 1914: 79]. This was during the Polish-Soviet (actually, Polish-Russian) war, between 1919 and 1921.

<sup>1</sup> Today it is a school named Maria Konopnicka.

According to Parachimowicz's [1995] Catalogue of Polish coins, it was the only coin dedicated to the anti-hero. The lack of the later release of collector and mock coins may suggest the questionable popularity of the Communist general among Poles (it is probable that not many people, would like to buy and collect such coins).

### Medals and postage stamps

Small graphic forms include art medals (coins, medals), as well as postage stamps, rubber stamps and military decorations etc. A series of commemorative medals (Photos 4-10) and postage stamps devoted to the communist General are depicted here and may serve an example of their political use by the authorities of the PPR.



**Photo 4.** 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Swierczewski General Staff Academy

The medal commemorating the 90th anniversary of his birth and the 40th anniversary of his death (Photos 5-6) shows the General as a renown soldier (the war trail from Moscow to Mielnik) and a statue in Jablonki. The next medal (Photos 7-8) is much less elaborate means of expression – just a bust, military rank, name and lifespan.



**Photos 7-8.** Another commemorative medal of Swierczewski



**Photos 5-6.** Karol Swierczewski 1897-1947; released in 1987



**Photos 9-10.** Going through the Nysa Luzyccka River 1945; released in 1987



Photo 11. The 60-grosz stamp '15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, 1962



Photo 12. 'A first day cover', 1962



Photo 13. Postcard, 5 zloty stamp 1987



**Photo 14.** The monument to Karol Swierczewski in Jablonki

The war episode in April 1945 became the motive for another medal also issued in 1987. That suggests that Swierczewski was not only brave, but that he also effectively and successfully commanded the army.

Other stamps bearing the image of Swierczewski (Photos 1, 11) as well as so-called ‘first day covers’, with occasional timestamps, were issued (Photo 12). There were postcards, modelled on the monument in Jablonki near Baligrod and wreaths under the monument (Photos 13-14).

The monument with an eagle, lacking a crown at the top suggests that the General served the Homeland. Probably closer to the historical truth would be the depiction of a red star or the hammer and sickle. The four-cornered cap and olive branch on the date stamp suggest that Gen. ‘Walter’ was fighting for peace.

And this (Photo 15) is a philatelic curiosity – the envelope from a letter sent to England by the ship *General Swierczewski*. So not only urban spaces, but also the sea has been ‘littered’ in this way. In the case of Polish postage stamps his depiction was not an isolated incident; many stamps with communist ‘heroes’ were released [cf. Myslicki, Sekowski, Zolkiewski 1983].

### Short discussion and conclusions

During the PPR regime, instead of the chivalric and romantic hero, the national-libertarian and libertarian [Cynarski 2011], who was often directed against Russia (the invaders) and the Soviet Union, the myth of Swierczewski [cf. Broniewska 1948; Krasucki 2006] and



**Photo 15.** A letter sent by the ship *General Swierczewski* (1964?)

a few others like him was created. The Polish patriot<sup>2</sup> was replaced by an internationalist combatant.

Unfortunately, Poland had such anti-heroes, in reality, and not only in literary fiction [cf. Jonason *et al.* 2012]. In communist times popular culture showed films featuring Captain Hans Kloss<sup>3</sup>, characters from *Four tank men and a dog*, fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Soviet troops. On the other hand there were films about Polish knights and nobles from Henryk Sienkiewicz's novels (*The Teutonic Knights*, *Mr. Wolodyjowski*, *The Deluge*). There were not just one-sided indoctrination patterns of communist fighters.

Up to 1988 /1989, i.e. until the end of the Polish People's Republic, Swierczewski was present in symbolic urban spaces, in different institutions, in small graphic forms (the 50-zloty note), etc. Then followed the process of the disappearance of the name and the person. The last twenty years Polish coinage has provided a kind of return to the content of patriotic and historical identity in the symbolic image and textual content of Polish coins [Cynarski, Cynarski L. 2015]. On the other hand, under the Act on decommunisation public space, the names of Swierczewski and similar anti-heroes should disappear within a year in Poland altogether.

Preserved artefacts (medals, postage stamps) illustrate this particular situation, where a traitor to the country and the nation, is, in the new political reality imposed by force, put on monuments, as a hero. The collected footage ("medalist and philately") indicates that at small graphic forms it is shown a soldier, Polish officer, who fought for Poland. It was a falsification of reality because Swierczewski was always faithful to Soviet Russia, not Poland (against whom he fought at least since 1920).

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<sup>2</sup> The information about the real heroes, like Witold Pilecki was carefully concealed.

<sup>3</sup> Serial "More Than Life at Stake" was a successful film production, and the main character gained the sympathy of the audience, so included in the production of indoctrination was not intrusive and therefore all the more effective.

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### **Antybohater w przestrzeni symbolicznej**

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura symboliczna, małe formy graficzne, antybohater, K. Świerczewski

#### **Abstrakt**

Perspektywa i problem. Na gruncie socjologii kultury i antropologii kulturowej, historii ostatniego stulecia i semiologii (symbolika) podjęto problem obecności w przestrzeni symbolicznej Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej bohatera, który właściwie był antybohaterem. Rzeczą dotyczy gen. Karola Świerczewskiego.

Materiał i metoda. Zastosowano metodę analizy treści literatury przedmiotu oraz szerokiego tematycznego dyskursu źródeł i opracowań. Uwzględniono również materiał ikonograficzny. Dodatkowo wykorzystano metodę socjologii wizualnej (analiza fotografii).

Wyniki i wnioski. W okresie PRL-u w miejsce etosu rycerskiego i wolnościowego tworzono mit Świerczewskiego. Polskiego patriotę zastępował bojownik internacjonalista. Do lat 1988-89, czyli do schyłku PRL-u, Świerczewski był obecny w przestrzeni symbolicznej miast, w różnych instytucjach, na małych formach graficznych (banknoty, znaczki pocztowe), etc. Następnie wystąpił proces zanikania tego nazwiska i postaci.

Zachowane artefakty ilustrują tę szczególną sytuację, gdy zdrajca danego kraju i narodu jest – w narzuconej siłą nowej politycznej rzeczywistości – stawiany na pomnikach, jako bohater.