

THE POLISH THAW: YOUTH CARNIVAL, DOMESTIC REVOLUTION, AND TRANSNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS

An NCEEER Working Paper by

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Executive Summary

This paper focuses on rebellious public activity of young people – students, young professionals and artists - during the Thaw in Poland (the period between the death of Stalin in 1953, and the Polish and Hungarian revolts in 1956). Author discusses three major areas of young people’s activity: the student theater, the student press, and two examples of trans-border encounters: The Fifth World Youth Festival in Warsaw in summer 1955, and the Polish student humanitarian mission to Budapest after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November 1956. In all these cases, author is interested, in particular, in a subjective sense of agency and empowerment, and in the rebellion against what many young people saw as the oppressive ways of the older generation. The latter would become the defining feature of the Global Sixties. The discussion departs from the conventional “national” image of the Thaw in Poland by pointing to the interaction of domestic and international forces on the level of everyday life. Author argues that for the young generation, the desire to be part of a globalized youth culture was a strong component of building an improved version of socialism.

The Polish Thaw: Youth Carnival, Domestic Revolution, and Transnational Encounters

Working draft of Chapter 1 of *The Sixties Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth Cultures and the Search for Freedom in Poland in the Global Sixties*

Introduction

In January 1954, less than a year after the death of Stalin, a new illustrated magazine *Around the World* (Dookoła Świata) appeared on Polish newsstands. It created a sensation among the public. The magazine's colorful cover stood out from the typical black-and-white newspapers, while the title suggested the excitement of exploring foreign lands. The magazine was different from a typical state propaganda omnipresent under Stalinism. No one in the magazine called on the readers to build socialism or to worship the leader. A contemporary writer and jazz lover, Leopold Tyrmand, recorded in his diary: "Warsaw has new fun – a new weekly the regime launched titled *Around the World*. Today, the third issue of this magazine came out and was, literally, snatched from newsstands within less than an hour." What caused its popularity? Tyrmand asked. "The reason is very simple," he thought. "Ninety five percent of this magazine is cleared from a political propaganda; it is an imitation of all kinds of entertainment-sensational press of the world. ... Sports, short stories, a lot of stories from real life, from games, from entertainment; pictures from parties, cafes and restaurants; practical advice, ... funnies - this is sufficient. Warsaw, and especially the youth, is starving for this sort of the press, and hence the popularity."¹ The Warsaw public dubbed the new magazine "The Voice of the Bikini Boy," alluding to the youth subculture in Poland in the 1950s, the equivalent of the Zoot Suit in the United States, Zazou in France, and Teddy Boys in England.²

¹ Leopold Tyrmand, *Dziennik 1954. Wersja Oryginalna* (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 1999), 92.

² Bikiniarze were part of the global youth subculture. See Maciej Chłopek, *Bikiniarze. Pierwsza Polska Subkultura* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademickie "Żak," 2005); and Katherine Lebow, "Kontra Kultura: Leisure and Youthful Rebellion in Stalinist Poland," in *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, edited by David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 71-92.

This chapter focuses on rebellious public activity of young people – students, young professionals and artists - during the period between the death of Stalin in 1953, and the Polish and Hungarian revolts in 1956. In personal and historical narratives, this period is often associated with the “Thaw” – the relaxation of the Stalinist grip on Soviet and eastern European societies, and the discovery of new intellectual and cultural freedoms. The term Thaw came from the novel of Ilya Ehrenburg published in the fall of 1954 in the Soviet Union, and soon translated into other languages, including Polish. The novel was not in any way revolutionary – it was a socialist realist story typical for Stalinism – but the title caught the attention of the public. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a young journalist at the time, remembered reading the Polish translation of Ehrenburg’s novel and identifying with a sense of change suggested by the title: “We were coming out of the era of fear and nonsense.”³ Many young people in Poland felt the same way, and manifested their rejection of Stalinism – especially the Stalinist youth organizations – in increasingly open ways. Soon, the Polish term – *Odwilż* – was adopted to mark a widespread sense of a new beginning. As I argue in this chapter, the rejection of Stalinism was more than a rejection of a specific political system. It was also a rebellion against the oppressive ways of the older generation that would become the defining feature of the Global Sixties.⁴ My discussion focuses on a subjective sense of agency and empowerment that many young people began to discover in the political climate of the Thaw. While this rebellion was associated and made

³ Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Zygmunt Skórzyński, “Historia nie tylko złudzeń: Październik 56,” in Stefan Bratkowski, ed. *Październik 1956. Pierwszy wylom w systemie. Bunt, młodość, rozsządek* (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 1996), 215-243, 218.

⁴ I define the Global Sixties or the Long Sixties as the period roughly between 1954 and 1975 marked by unprecedented cultural liberalization and social upheavals in many parts of the world. The term “global” refers to transnational connections and generational shifts that characterized these movements. The precise chronology of the Sixties is a subject to debate, which will be addressed in other parts of my book. Following Timothy Brown, I focus on the “process” rather than a significance of a particular event (such as the upheavals of 1968). See Timothy Scott Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Antiauthoritarian Revolt, 1962-1978* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Little research exists on the Sixties in Eastern Europe. For a pioneering book on the developments in the Soviet Union and the communist bloc see Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker, eds. *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

possible by political changes in the eastern bloc, I argue that it also had a generational manifestation that crossed political and national boundaries.

As I demonstrate in this chapter, the Polish Thaw started before the appearance of the Soviet novel, but the harbingers came from the same source – the print culture. The first visible signal was the publication of an illustrated magazine *Around the World*, which young people took as an invitation for cultural pluralism. Other forms of new expression in the public realm -- no longer limited by the Stalinist dogma -- were the emergence of the grass-roots student theater and the student press. The Polish Thaw ended with the so-called Polish October in 1956. The turning point was the Eight Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Polish ruling party, which took place between October 19 and 24, and brought to power a Polish “national” communist leader, Władysław Gomułka. Gomułka, an anti-Stalinist and an advocate of “national roads to socialism,” had been purged from the party in 1951 and held under house arrest until December 1954. For large segments of Polish society, he was associated with the “Polish revolution,” but as I argue in this chapter – students and young intelligentsia envisioned a more radical change.

Indeed, 1956 has been seen as a “national” moment in Polish history, when both the population and domestic political elites stood up to the Soviets.⁵ From the beginning, Gomułka built his legitimacy on ideas of national sovereignty and Polish cultural tradition. My aim is to complicate this overwhelmingly “national” picture of the Thaw by pointing to the interaction of domestic and international forces on the level of everyday life, which shaped the departure from Stalinism and the embracement of a more open socialist system. I argue that for the young

⁵ For a recent account of the Thaw in Poland as a primarily national movement see Paweł Machcewicz, *The Rebellious Satellite: 1956 in Poland* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). For an excellent analysis of nationalism as a legitimizing force under Gomułka see Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, Legitymizacja, Nacjonalizm* (Warsaw: TRIO, 2005).

generation, the desire to be part of a globalized youth culture was a strong component of building a non-Soviet version of socialism. Starting in 1954, the Thaw opened the eyes of the young generation to the outside world - both through the mass media and the expanded travel opportunities within and beyond the eastern bloc. In that sense, the Thaw was full of internal tensions: the national project was also a cosmopolitan one, and transnational interaction shaped the new political and cultural environment. In many ways, the Thaw marked the beginning of the Sixties in eastern Europe, when national roads to socialism confronted increasingly globalized cultural, political, and economic networks.

Liberation 1954

1954 does not usually figure as a significant year in postwar history. Yet it was a breakthrough year in Poland, a prelude to the culminating point of 1956 that closed the era of Stalinism. Those who lived through it, often point to 1954 as the time when “there was something in the air.”⁶ Jacek Fedorowicz, an Art Student from Sopot at the time, like many of his friends, thought that perhaps the Stalinist system “would not last without Stalin.” The personified leadership was gone, and he remembered wondering if the newly established “collective leadership” in Moscow would not have problems agreeing “whom to execute.”⁷ Liberation 1954 was imprecise and difficult to define, but it denoted a hope for a new beginning. At the same time, the title of the new magazine “Around the World” indicated a new relationship between Polish readers and the outside world. The cover of the first issue depicted a charmer of the snakes in India. The caption under the image read: “This Hindu fakir does not even suspect

⁶ Jacek Fedorowicz, “Kultura młodych. Teatry studenckie w połowie lat pięćdziesiątych,” in Paweł Ceranka and Sławomir Stępień, eds. *Jesteście naszą wielką szansą. Młodzież na rozstajach komunizmu 1944-1989* (Warsaw: IPN, 2009), 358-363, 361.

⁷ Fedorowicz, “Kultura młodych,” 361.

that he has just been ‘immortalized’ on the photograph; less so ... by a Polish journalist.”⁸ The sudden encounter of the distinctly Polish observer with an exotic Hindu was symbolic of the more open attitude towards the outside world.

1954 was set up for major political developments that found their culmination during the Global Sixties. In late January 1954, the Berlin Conference signaled an early “thaw” in the relations between East and West, albeit a precarious one. Foreign ministers of the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union met to discuss the peace settlement to the Korean War, and the war between France and Viet Minh in Indochina. While Soviets agreed to withdraw from Austria in exchange for Austrian neutrality, the parties failed to reach an agreement on the status of Germany. In March, French troops suffered a major defeat at the battle of Dien Biehn Phu, leading to signing of the Geneva Accords in July and dividing Vietnam into South and North. Just a month earlier, the Obninsk Nuclear Power Plant was opened in the Soviet Union, to generate nuclear energy for civilian purposes for the first time. In October, at the Paris Conference, Western European leaders ended the allied occupation of Germany, and admitted West Germany and Italy to the Brussels Treaty (or the Western European Union) thus marking a major step for the formation of the European Union.⁹ The end of the month saw the beginning of the Algerian War of Independence, a breakthrough in de-colonization. In the Western hemisphere, 1954 was a breakthrough year for paving the road to racial integration in the United States with the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* by the Supreme Court to end the racial segregation of schools. In foreign policy, the American empire reasserted itself in Central America by launching the CIA-directed coup in Guatemala in June, and installing a US-

⁸ Cover of *Dookola Świata*, 15 December 1953. The issue was announced as a “test issue,” but the same image appeared on the cover of the first official publication of *Dookola Świata*, 3 January 1954.

⁹ The original signatories of the Brussels Treaty in 1948 were Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and the United Kingdom.

backed military junta. A thirty-year long civil war followed. Alongside political events that strengthened global connections and interdependencies, the revolution in the mass media was underway. Broadcasted of both political and cultural developments went to every part the world through radio and television. In April, Bill Haley and His Comets recorded “Rock around the Clock” giving rise to the era of rock-and-roll and a distinct genre of youth music. And in September the Miss America Pageant was broadcasted on television for the first time.

In Poland, at the threshold of 1954, cautious reforms of the Moscow-directed Malenkov’s New Course were finally under way.¹⁰ In October 1953, the collectivization campaign was slowed down, and the government made a move to improve the standard of living for the population by implementing price reductions and some relief to compulsory deliveries required of peasants.¹¹ For young people in Poland, 1954 was a moment when they began to translate what they sensed “in the air” into everyday practice. The changes in the Kremlin raised hopes for more political and personal freedoms. The public debut of *Around the World* signaled a new kind of pluralism in the public sphere and the right to speak about everyday life in a language divorced from ideological dogmatism – not a small thing after at least five years of a uniform political message. Moreover, the new type of “liberation” through print media opened opportunities to participate in the expanding global youth culture. No wonder that Tyrmand’s girlfriend, an 18-year old Krystyna, embraced the new magazine wholeheartedly as a long desired and well deserved “window into the world.” She “browsed the ... magazine with a

¹⁰ Malenkov’s New Course refers to a series of reforms after the death of Stalin in March 1953 that aimed at dismantling elements of the Stalinist system, including the terror machine. Most of the reforms focused on economic innovation and directing more resources to the consumer sector of socialist economies. The New Course also established the so-called “collective leadership,” in which the leadership of the party-state was split between two individuals (the First Secretary of the Party and the head of the state). For further discussion of the New Course in Eastern Europe see Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), esp. 155-268.

¹¹ Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc*, 165. One should note that immediately after the death of Stalin, political repression in Poland increased. In September 1953, the head of the Catholic Church, cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, was put under house arrest until 26 October 1956. Trials against priests also continued through 1953.

satisfied grin on her face. For the first time, she held in her hand a Polish-language magazine that spoke about her problems, the most interesting ... images of life. So far, she had seen all of this in French or English, but this magazine, even though it was less beautiful and not as rich, was in Polish; it featured photographs from the cafes and streets she knew, with people who looked like her, real people from everyday life, rather than some lame (*młodzieżowo-papierowe*) conventions of the youth from Nowa Huta or boring congresses and meetings.”¹²

The new popular magazine inspired students like Jacek Fedorowicz to seek new forms of cultural expression. Contrary to what Horkheimer and Adorno had argued a few years earlier about the detrimental effects of popular culture on the human mind, the actual meaning of cultural products depended on the specific social and political context. *Around the World* was taken as an invitation to contribute to the new pluralist culture. The very existence of a magazine different from other publications inspired intellectual energy and artistic creativity. Students and young artists turned to drama and formed what soon became known as “the Student Theater.” Resisting the existing models of institutional or amateur theater, the Student Theater was an avant-garde theater through which to express “the social and moral unrest of the young generation.”¹³

The first such theater was created by a group of students at the Warsaw University in March 1954, under the name of the Student Theater of Satirists (Studencki Teatr Satyryków) or STS. In the early stages, the critical support for the STS came from a professional drama group – the Theater of Satirists (*Teatr Satyryków*) in Warsaw directed by Jerzy Jurandot. The first show titled “Youth is coming” (*To idzie młodość*), which premiered on 2 May 1954, relied on help from professional script writers and directors. The play, however, did not shy away from the

¹² Tyrmand, *Dziennik 1954*, 93.

¹³ Edward Chudziński, “W stronę teatru otwartego,” in Edward Chudziński, ed. *Kultura studencka. Zjawisko, twórcy, instytucje* (Kraków: Fundacja STU, 2011), 125-133, 125.

explicit celebration of the creative powers of the young.¹⁴ It was not until 9 November when the STS staged its first independent show – “The Simple People” (*Prostaczkowie*) - written, directed, and performed entirely by students.¹⁵

A more original theater and one that was especially difficult to read for state authorities was the Bim-Bom, formed in the late fall of 1954 in the coastal city of Gdańsk by a group of students together with young graduates from the Theater School in Cracow. The most charismatic leader of the Bim-Bom was actor Zbyszek Cybulski, soon to be known as the Polish James Dean. No one better embodied youth rebellion than Cybulski, a non-conformist in life and on stage. Wearing dark glasses and a leather jacket, he became a symbol of the era not unlike young rebels in contemporary American films.¹⁶ Yet Cybulski was a different kind of a hero – shaped by the idealistic vision of socialism. As literary scholar Iwona Kurz argues, besides being an actor he was also a social activist (*społecznik*). “Popularity is one’s duty to society,” Cybulski explained in one of the interviews. The “young hero” was responsible for actions and values he “embodied” on the screen and stage.¹⁷

Although tightly connected to the Thaw, the Student Theater went beyond the specific Polish concerns. It was part of a larger movement in arts and culture in East Central Europe, which Czech political analyst, Vladimir Kusin, identified as crucial to paving the way for the political reform movement in the late 1960s. “The new concept of culture, which began to crystalize after 1956,” Kusin wrote, “was first of all directed against the regime’s understanding

¹⁴ Henryk Malecha, “Od tego się zaczęło. Tak powstał STS,” in Chudziński, *Kultura studencka*, 159-163, 162.

¹⁵ Malecha, “Od tego się zaczęło,” 163.

¹⁶ The most famous film that established the image of Cybulski as a young rebel was *Ashes and Diamonds* directed by Andrzej Wajda in 1958.

¹⁷ Iwona Kurz, *Twarze w tłumie. Wizerunki bohaterów wyobraźni zbiorowej w kulturze polskiej lat 1955-1969* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006), 199. The quote comes from an interview with Cybulski in “W stronę gwiazd. Cybulski mówi o sobie,” *Kino* 1 (1966).

of culture as an ‘instrument’ for the ‘re-education’ of the masses.”¹⁸ Young writers and artists turned to “grasping the sense of life” of a common man.¹⁹ “The ordinary man was neither an exemplary function-holder nor a war hero, neither a wicked kulak nor a wavering ‘middle’ farmer, neither a suffering proletarian nor a conscientious worker, neither an enthusiastic youth unionist nor an awakening smallholder, neither a Party vigilante nor an enemy agent. He may have been any of these, but above all he was just a man, with all his weak and strong points.”²⁰ Bim-Bom, a collective effort of students and artists, was an early expression of this cultural movement. Student-performers searched for a new language to talk about existential problems.

The Student Theater struck a note with the entire generation of students and young professionals. Bim-Bom resisted any clear-cut artistic categories; their plays often relied on spontaneity rather than on a written script, and “non-professionalism” part of its artistic credo.²¹ Responses of the audience to the first two shows by the Bim-Bom, “Achaaa” and “The Solemn Joy” (*Radość Poważna*) in early 1955 “surpassed all expectations.” Fedorowicz recalled: “I had no idea one could live through something like this. I had never seen those kinds of cheers either before or after.”²² The performances included not only student-actors, but also the technical team responsible for decoration, lighting, scenography, and sound. Cybulski, “a natural born leader,” made sure that each “technical person” made an appearance on the stage at some point in the play.²³ After each show, the audience was invited to discuss the play with the performers.

What did Bim-Bom do on the stage that the young audience found so compelling? Filmed performances of any of the student theaters are hard to come by since the Student Theater

¹⁸ Vladimír V. Kusin, *Intellectual Origins of the Prague Spring: The Development of Reformist Ideas in Czechoslovakia* (Cambridge University press, 1970), 56.

¹⁹ Kusin, *Intellectual Origins*, 58.

²⁰ Kusin, *Intellectual Origins*, 59.

²¹ Jacek Fedorowicz, *Ja jako wykopalisko* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2011), 89.

²² Fedorowicz, *Ja jako wykopalisko*, 93.

²³ Fedorowicz, *Ja jako wykopalisko*, 102-103.

explicitly rejected recordings as part of its artistic formula.²⁴ Rare glimpses of the Bim-Bom performances were featured in a 1959 film directed by Janusz Morgenstern *Good Bye until Tomorrow (Do widzenia do jutra)*.²⁵ More often, we know about the specific shows from enthusiastic reviews featured in the student press. One is tempted to read these reviews as another form of artistic expression, the proof that the audience participated in the artistic process. Contemporary actress, Halina Mikołajska, was no doubt taking part in constructing the message of the Bim-Bom when she vividly described the performance she attended:

A group of young people wearing colorful tights runs onto the stage. They are beautiful. Girls have long, beautiful legs, high hips, and slim shoulders. They all have child-like faces. With the waltz playing in the background, they dance in a simple and relaxed manner holding a balloon. A balloon, in its essence, is nice and light. It is as light as air, and almost as light as a dream. It shines in light. Children like the balloon, because it comes a bit from a fairy tale. These young people on the stage are at times awkward in their child-like charming gesture. And this is beautiful too.

Suddenly, a man walks onto the stage. He is serious. He does not make faces. Slowly, he approaches the little balloon. He tries to frighten it with a cigarette. He wants to destroy the little balloon. For a moment, the beautiful people are hovering over the beautiful toy. Eventually, the balloon bursts under the shoe of the man. The man quietly leaves the stage. A small scrap of the balloon remains on the floor.

²⁴ Bogusław Litwiniec, interview by author, digital recording, Wilcza, 15 July 2013.

²⁵ *Do widzenia do jutra* (1959), in which Cybulski played the leading part was directed by Janusz Morgenstern.

A girl stands in front of the group. She extends the terribly empty hand after the departing man. The forestage becomes dark. With a bright horizon in the background, two figures swing steady like the pendulum of a clock. The time passes by. The curtain falls. The first act is over.²⁶

Like Mikołajska, who was mesmerised by the use of poetic forms, Stanislaw Jonas, a journalist from the medical student weekly, *The New Medical* (Nowy Medyk), could not shake what he saw for several days. He attended a Bim-Bom performance in a crowded hall with no chance to find a sitting spot. But “believe it or not ... the two-hour standing by the wall in the worst imaginable jam did not make me tired at all.” Jonas was struck by the unusual form and the invitation for the audience to think in a critical and independent manner. “I saw new things, unexpected things that required one to think in an intense manner.” He compared the theater to pantomime as it used no spoken word. Working through images, movements, and metaphors, the new theater asked the viewer to engage: “The constant change of scenes, dimming the lights, closing the curtain do not weary the audience because these intermissions are needed to absorb the content of the previous scene, to calm down after the shocking but very authentic ending, and **to formulate one’s own conclusions (yes!)**”²⁷

State officials in charge of cultural matters found the performances “shocking.” As Fedorowicz explained, “they were accustomed to student artistic groups presenting folk dances and solo accordion players; if there was a satire, it was intended for the student dining hall crowd and it was dealing with a few well-established themes ...”²⁸ In addition, the Student Theater operated in ways that directly contradicted the nature of the authoritarian and bureaucratic state.

²⁶ Halina Mikołajska, “Rehabilitacja metafory,” *Po prostu*, 8 May 1956, 6.

²⁷ Stanislaw Jonas, “Teatr o własnym obliczu,” *Nowy Medyk*, 1 May 1956, 4.

²⁸ Fedorowicz, *Ja jako wykopalisko*, 105-106.

The Bim-Bom was run by an elected self-government, the Group Council, that decided on all organizational matters, personnel issues, and finances.

State officials found themselves confused by the short scenes and metaphors presented on the stage. They were not sure how to interpret them: “DREAMS, GHOSTS appear on the stage, dogs pee in the corner of the street. Against whom do they pee? In favor of what political line? Say, aren’t you guys being apolitical by any chance? (*Koledzy, czy wy przypadkiem nie jesteście apolityczni?*)”²⁹ This humorous statement by Fedorowicz captured the essence of the emerging youth culture. The term “apolitical” would become an important tool for artists and journalists to negotiate their own space in the official cultural sphere through the 1960s. For now, being “apolitical” was in fact a deeply political statement. It meant the right to define one’s own politics and to decide what politics was after all.

Nevertheless, in the climate of the Thaw, the Student Theater was accepted by the state and placed under the patronage of the official Student Association (*Związek Studentów Polskich* or ZSP). This coexistence exposed the ambiguous boundaries between state and society. Bim-Bom and other student theaters were difficult to be rejected on ideological grounds, but they had to constantly explain and reinvent their place in a socialist polity. Students and artists capitalized on the importance of youth to the socialist system and the communist obsession with change. According to one participant of the Student Theater, the “ideology of activism” was the key to sustaining the theater: “the desire for change is a natural human need in all circumstances and all places in the world, but no other system made ‘activism’ as such the essence of its existence.”³⁰ On the more practical level, the theater benefited from dissent and plurality within state ranks,

²⁹ Fedorowicz, *Ja jako wykopalisko*, 106.

³⁰ Tadeusz Nyczek, “Studencki, alternatywny, otwarty. Rzecz o teatrze,” Chudziński, *Kultura studencka*, 75-101, 76.

where individual youth and party activists supported the student theater and intervened in critical moments, when it was time for hard negotiations with censors and other state officials.³¹

Writing the Revolution: The Student Press

The end of stalinism did not only mean a change in political leadership and tone of official speeches. For young people the Thaw was about new sensations: the sound of jazz on the radio and the taste of coffee at a newly opened student club. In that sense, the Student Theater was just the tip of the iceberg. The Thaw was the time of carnival for the youth. On 4 September 1955, the student weekly *Po prostu* (Straight Talk) changed the color of its frame from red to green. The issue initiated a period of critical journalism that became a lynchpin for youth movements of the Sixties era everywhere. As Timothy Brown explains for the West German case, “this is true not only because ... the struggle over the meaning and content of the literary-publicistic sphere was inseparable from the struggle over access to public space, ... but also because in the antiauthoritarian revolt, political action was inseparable from the production of knowledge.”³²

Po prostu was not completely new on the Polish publishing market. A periodical under this title was first published in 1935-36 in Vilnius by a group of young leftists headed by Henryk Dembiński, Stefan Jędrychowski, and Jerzy Putrament among others, but soon interwar authorities closed the journal and took its founders to court on the charges of spreading communism.³³ *Po prostu* was then reactivated in 1945 as “a social-literary student periodical of the Main Directorate of the Association of Polish Youth.” It did not differ from other mouthpieces of the state propaganda until it gradually gravitated towards political non-

³¹ Nyczek, “Studencki, alternatywny, otwarty,” 77.

³² Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties*, 153.

³³ Kazimierz Koźniewski, *Historia co tydzień* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1999), 135.

compliance in the mid-1950s. After a summer break in 1955, during which Warsaw hosted the Fifth World Youth Festival, *Po prostu* changed its graphics and its course.³⁴

Young journalists of the new *Po prostu* declared themselves to be true communists on the quest to change the world. “We are a group of young enthusiasts – students and alumni of higher education institutions. We are the people, who are unable not to engage in everything that is happening around us.” The group was clearly evoking the intelligentsia ethos in Polish society, but at the same time used the dominant rhetoric of Soviet superiority: “We ... are the mighty army of commanders, who ... direct the changing face of our marvelous country – our fatherland ... We are supposed to be the commanders of the Golden Age of humanity, that started by the opening of the first nuclear energy facility in the Soviet Union – the nuclear age in the service of the human happiness.”³⁵ Referencing the Soviet nuclear energy facility in Obinsk, young reformers were careful to acknowledge their stance on the Cold War divide. Theirs was a quest to improve socialism, not to undermine it.

The weekly was a living proof of the intellectual dynamism of the era. The circulation number reached 150,000 copies, one of the highest among all periodicals at the time. Referring to the popularity of *Po prostu*, one student commented in June 1956: “Never has one stood so patiently in line by the newsstand.”³⁶ The list of topics and issues discussed in *Po prostu* was long and diverse. Young journalists engaged with ideological issues and critically wrote about Marxism. They were the first to publicly speak about the persecution of the members of the Home Army under Stalinism, and the need to rehabilitate the wartime non-communist

³⁴ Readers and journalists remember the issue of 4 September 1955 as symbolic of the change, but politically bold articles appeared in *Po prostu* earlier. See Dominika Rafalska, “‘Pokolenie ZMP’. Urodzeni w latach trzydziestych – Ich wizja socjalizmu na łamach tygodnika ‘Po prostu,’” in Ceranka and Stępień, “*Jesteście naszą wielką szansą,*” 79-96, esp. 81.

³⁵ Koźniewski, *Historia co tydzień*, 137.

³⁶ Izabella Trojanowska i Jan Piepka, “Złamać znowę milczenia,” *Kontrasty*, 5-19 June 1956, 5.

resistance.³⁷ Local reporting played a significant role in the journal as young reporters revealed economic mismanagement, corruption, and abhorrent work conditions in a “workers’ state.” Many of the articles spoke about the lives of the intelligentsia sent on “work assignments” to small towns, and the clash between ideology and reality that they experienced.³⁸ *Po prostu* acted as a “consciousness” of Polish society on many levels. For the first time after the war, it publicly discussed the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations, and sharply reacted against the surge of popular anti-Semitism during the Thaw.³⁹

The word “revolution” was on the minds of many students and young professionals. Young enthusiasts wanted to “democratize” socialism through a revolution in human values and everyday life: speaking the truth, finding one’s authentic self, living in a meaningful community. They considered education, discussion, and daily routines rather than political upheavals to be vehicles for change. One of the editors of *Po prostu*, Ryszard Turcki, believed that “writing the truth” was a revolutionary act. When the student periodical critically assessed conditions of student life, it acted in a revolutionary way, because “the truth about a student cafeteria was already a revolution.”⁴⁰ *Po prostu* became a school of radicalism for both young journalists and readers. Journalist Włodzimierz Godek, “originally a quite conservative stalinist youth activist (*ZMP-owiec*)” changed his mind upon travelling to small towns and villages. “A reporter awaken in him, ... he became radicalized upon the encounter with the specific (z konkretem),” remembered Turcki.⁴¹

³⁷ See, for example, Jerzy Ambroziewicz, Walery Namiołkiewicz, Jan Olszewski, “Na spotkanie ludzom z AK,” *Po prostu*, 11 March 1956, 2-3.

³⁸ See, for example, a series of articles by Włodzimierz Godek about the town of Nowy Sącz.

³⁹ See, for example, Leszek Kołakowski, “Antysemita. Pięć tez nienowych i przestroga,” *Po prostu*, 27 May 1956, 1-2, 7.

⁴⁰ Ryszard Turcki, “Skoro nas nie sadzają, idziemy naprzód,” in *Październik*, 9-21, 18 and 20.

⁴¹ Turcki, “Skoro nas nie sadzają,” 20.

The periodical inspired a wave of similar periodicals by students in all large cities in Poland. These included *Od Nowa* (Fresh Start) in Warsaw; *Zebra* in Cracow; *Wyboje* (Rough Road Ahead) in Poznań; *Poglądy* (Views) in Wrocław; *Pod Wiatr* (Against the Wind) in Lublin; and *Kontrasty* (Contrasts) on the Baltic Coast. It was a grassroots movement, as one scholar put it - a genuine press “by the students” rather than “for the students.”⁴² Students took charge of every step in the process of publication and distribution. As Bogusław Litwiniec, a student-editor of *Poglądy* recalled, he was the one in charge of delivering copies from the printing shop to different newsstands in the city of Wrocław. He transported them on his bike.⁴³

Like the student theater, being part of the student press was a way of life. The group associated with *Po prostu* described themselves as “dreamers.” “We were 20 years old,” remembered one student journalist. “We listened to jazz, read Hłasko, Ważyk, loved Gałczyński, recited (yes) Mayakovsky, made love, played and sinned.”⁴⁴ The Lublin students, who published *Against the Wind* declared their commitment to progress: “*Against the Wind* always wants to be dissatisfied with the current state of affairs – it wants to gather people, who believe that standing in one place really means backtracking.”⁴⁵ The editors of *Zebra*, a periodical of art students in Cracow, believed in the empowerment through art: “We are a group of young people. We paint, sculpture, write. ... We would like our journal to become the weapon in the struggle for truth, justice, and human dignity. We do not intend to announce a program here – we would like our works to speak for themselves.”⁴⁶ But even those student journals that were not produced by the artistic milieu, believed in the transformative power of art and literature. *Nowy Medyk* (The New

⁴² Emil Orzechowski, “Prasa studencka w latach 1956-1981,” in Chudziński, *Kultura studencka*, 275-289, 276.

⁴³ Interview with Bogusław Litwiniec.

⁴⁴ Wiesław Dutkiewicz, “Wierzyliśmy w piękny świat ludzi równych,” in Bratkowski, *Październik*, 152-157, 157. Marek Hłasko was a contemporary Polish writer; Adam Ważyk and Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński were poets.

⁴⁵ “Do czytelników,” *Pod Wiatr*, 1 December 1956, 1.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Orzechowski, “Prasa studencka,” 279.

Medical), a medical student periodical, turned to combining political and artistic expression in late 1955. Like *Po prostu*, it changed the graphic design, content, and message.⁴⁷ It especially focused on “student culture” and poetry of young authors. *Wyboje*, *Poglądy*, and others featured poetry, drawings, and photographs by young artists. Like the Situationists a few years later, student artists refused to “regard the society of the spectacle as an immovable condition of (post)modernity.”⁴⁸

The student press did not stray away from light entertainment associated with popular culture. The political avant garde went hand in hand with new notions of the relationship between the self and the possibilities of the modern world, including crossing artistic and geographical boundaries. The back cover of each student periodical was usually devoted to humor, mild advertising, erotic images, and sexual innuendo. In one advertisement for the men’s fashion house AS in Cracow, the Biblical Eve is presenting Adam with a suit. The drawing showed a naked couple with their private parts covered by a fig leaf. The caption read: “PARADISE: - Here is a suit from “AS”, you will finally look like a human being.” The humorous advertisement was accompanied by another, more erotically explicit cartoon, which depicted a woman in scant clothing bending and showing her knee. In a suggestive way, she was standing next to a lantern with the Barbakan (a medieval landmark in Cracow) in the background. The caption read: “Cracow is a city full of beautiful historic buildings.”⁴⁹ The new eroticized and gendered style in popular culture could be seen as another expression of breaking away from Stalinist dogmatism. But it also represented a re-assertion of a masculine culture

⁴⁷ *Nowy Medyk* was first created in 1953 under the control of the Warsaw Medical Academy chapters of the Youth Association (KU PZPR ZU ZMP) and Student Association (KU ZSP). In 1955, the Student Association became the sole patron. Like other student periodicals it promoted a broad definition of “student” to include all young intelligentsia, and declared itself to be “the journal of students and professionals at the Medical Academy in Warsaw.” Later, it had regional editions and a circulation of 10,000. Orzechowski, “Prasa studencka,” 281.

⁴⁸ Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9.

⁴⁹ “Dom mody męskiej ‘AS’” and “Pamiętnik Funia,” *Zebra*, 2 April 1957, 15.

dominant in the student milieu. Eroticized images and texts would become a permanent feature of the post-Stalinist cultural landscape, a trend which will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 3.

The Thaw was the time of revolutionary enthusiasm, but also the time of confusion and alienation. Many young people felt ambivalent about ideological changes, and the amount of contradictory messages they were asked to absorb. The student press became a forum to talk about alienation. Student Janusz Gazda in the Warsaw-based *Od Nowa* (From the Beginning) published a semi-reportage on the lives of medical students in the provincial city of Białystok in north-eastern Poland. There was no plot, but rather a collection of images that depicted a typical evening at a student quarter. The story presented young people as alienated from all social authority, including the state and religious institutions. What was left was sex, alcohol, and sheer hedonism.

In one vignette, a young female student, Teresa, returns home from the hospital after assisting in saving the life of a young woman brought to the hospital after a botched abortion. As the author explained, the woman had gone to a 'wise woman' (*babka*) to have an abortion, because "the priest forbids such procedures. ..." The woman died. Teresa comes to her apartment, where she lives with her boyfriend and a few other students. "Bożena hums Gypsy romances. Piotr's brother fills the glasses. Piotr is studying anatomy. The exam is around the corner." They drink, smoke, and have sex. The description is almost pornographic. Piotr tells Teresa: "Bożena's breasts are nicer than yours." Teresa responds: "It's not true." Both girls are taking off their shirts. "Teresa nervously unbuttons her shirt. ... Piotr takes off her bra. Then Piotr's brother switches off the light."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Janusz Gazda, "Białostockie rozmówki," *Od Nowa*, 12-26 April 1957, 1 and 3, 1.

In another scene, the author takes the reader to a vestibule at a local church where the following sign invited people for a retreat: ‘Virgin Mary guides the program of our renewal (*Idea maryjna programem naszej odnowy.*)’ “Every nation has to have its guiding idea,” the author derisively commented. He mocked the Catholic teaching on the Virginal birth: “Listen, dear gynecologists, Christ was born without disturbing the body of the Virgin Mary.” If young people felt alienated from state political messages, they found no solace in traditional ways of life. As Gazda suggested, Catholicism offered the same kind of hypocrisy and mythology as other political ideologies. The author ended his essay: “Youth comes only once in a lifetime.... Don’t count the time. It is too abstract. It leads to dark thoughts. And the world has to be bright, white, not only from the hospital kitle. The legends about paradise teach us to eat the forbidden fruit. That is what counts. Let’s laugh and drink. The world might not last for more than a day.”⁵¹

How were the independent student press and the plurality of young voices possible under state censorship? The Thaw generated a new climate, in which censors found themselves disoriented by the changes and the extent of new freedoms. The first critical articles in *Po prostu* were accepted for publication, because censors assumed that the texts had been already approved by party officials. Censors operated according to the conventional process, in which the editor-in-chief “cleared” (uzgodnic) every piece with his or her patron in the party-state structures before submitting the material to the censors. The censorship office then usually put the rubber stamp on the publication with only cursory reading to be sure that politically unacceptable statements did not slip in. In particular, they made sure that no critical remarks about the Soviet

⁵¹ Gazda, “Białostockie rozmówki,” 3. The short story generated feedback from readers. A letter from a Catholic female student from Białystok defended Church teachings, and claimed that the author gave a false account of the life of medical students: “As I was reading [the text], I thought this was happening in France, in the basement at Saint-Germain-de-Prés...” The student claimed that Christianity was the dominant philosophy of students in Białystok: “We are not the pathological types from the novels of Sagan. We are living human lives, not the lives of deviants (*zbożców*).” Danuta Komra, “Odpowiedź na Białostockie rozmówki,” *Od Nowa*, 27 May – 10 June 1957, 7.

Union found their way to the publications.⁵² Ultimately, the responsibility for a controversial text rested with the editor-in-chief. This process was unexpectedly disturbed upon the personal changes in the party-state institutions, and the liberalizing signals from Moscow. It took some time for the Censorship Office to catch up.⁵³ When they did, “they [censors] took off not only individual articles, but entire pages,” remembered one journalist. “With time, however, ... we worked out a strategy for action.” One way was to try out a variety of intimidating techniques. “For small issues,” editor Lasota remembered, “it was enough to convince the censor that he did not understand what we wrote, “letting him know that he was not very bright (tuman).” If this did not work, editors made a telephone call in his presence to one of the supervisors and reported that “the censor here at the printing press is some dumb idiot (tępy idiota), who understands nothing.” The editors then presented their own interpretation of the contested articles to the supervisor. “Often, this was effective, and we managed to defend the material. Sometimes, however, one had to intervene with the higher-ups. Negotiating at the higher level “required more craftiness.”⁵⁴

Subverting clear-cut categories of the established press, *Po prostu* and other student periodicals in Poland were precursors to the underground student press in the West that aimed at “challenging and proposing alternatives to the narrative claims of authority.”⁵⁵ Timothy Brown points to the importance of the “new, critical journalist” for shaping the culture of the Global Sixties. The mixing of styles and themes – “youth revolution and popular culture, sexual

⁵² Interview with Jerzy Tejchma by author, digital recording, Warsaw, 1 July 2011.

⁵³ For example, when three journalists from *Po prostu*, Janusz Kuczyński, Janusz Reykowski and Ryszard Turski, published an attack on Marxist-Leninist lectures at the Warsaw University titled “Formulas or Worldviews?” (“*Formułki czy światopogląd*”) in 1955, the novelty of the text caught the censors off guard. “Never having to read this sort of text,” remembered Turski, “the censorship office allowed for the publication; the commotion (*awantura*) came later.” Turski, “Skoro nas nie sadzają,” 19.

⁵⁴ Eugeniusz Lasota, “Jak to się zaczęło?” in Bratkowski, *Październik 1956*, 46-56, 51.

⁵⁵ Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties*, 154. For a similar argument and comparative points between Polish and Western student press see Orzechowski, “Prasa studencka,” 276.

provocation and political critiques of postcolonial warfare” – were crucial markers of the West German underground student press that emerged in the early 1960s, including *Spiegel*, *Stern*, *Pardon*, *konkret*, and *Twen*. The mixing of unlikely styles and messages reminds of the Polish student press and suggests a generational affinity that crossed geopolitical boundaries. The political and cultural demands of the Western student press were of course far more radical than the relatively mild calls for “democratization” by Polish students, but the idea of critical journalism as a tool to change society and perhaps even world politics was the same. Both the Polish and Western student press attempted to “breach the permissible, to push back the boundary of what one was allowed to say, and to challenge Cold War boundaries.”⁵⁶

The Time to Be Young: From the Red Corner to the Club

Young people searched for new forms of self-expression as well as for new spaces not controlled by the state. One of the key questions debated in the student press was how to resurrect the true revolutionary spirit of the youth. Student journalists argued that the rigid Stalinist approach to youth organizations changed the revolution into a matter of routine and bureaucracy. In June 1956, *Po prostu* published a breakthrough article on the need to abolish the Association of Polish Youth – the ZMP, and to create a new organization based on ideas and forms of activism that came from below. The Leninist title “What is to be done,” pointed to the urgency and gravity of the issue. At the center of the quest to redefine the organizational formula was the need to reclaim the physical space. Former activists of the Youth Association now decided to move the revolution from the red corner to the club.

⁵⁶ Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties*, 127

Why did youth activists - “the constructors of Stalinism”⁵⁷ - stand at the forefront of the new movement to abolish their organization and take the “revolution” somewhere else? Writing in the mid-2000s, sociologist Hanna Świda-Ziemba remembered being perplexed by a quick turnover in attitudes and beliefs of many young people she knew. Her students and friends changed their views “overnight, as if upon the application of a miracle cure.” What Świda-Ziemba found especially “paradoxical” was that the former believers in Stalinism seemed to be oblivious of their own change. They showed no signs of “being converted” but rather acted as if they came from “spaces outside Stalinism and directed their weapons against the Stalinist scenario as ‘newcomers.’”⁵⁸

Jumping on the band wagon of de-stalinization might have been a motivation for many. However, when we look at both Stalinism and the Thaw as different ways of searching for self-definition, we may be able to see a more complicated picture. Contributors to the student press were aware of the issue of sudden conversions. “Everyone,” wrote Hanna Malewska in *Wyboje* in late 1956, “has friends who first had called Marshal Tito a fascist and an imperialist agent, and then voiced the view that Tito was not a fascist, but that he searched for his own road to socialism – and it was Beria who was the fascist and an agent.”⁵⁹ Malewska argued that the problem of sudden conversions had deep roots in Polish culture, in which people had been trained, even before Stalinism, to believe in “the Authority,” and changed their declarations accordingly. These were “closed-minded people,” who tended to follow the current political or religious authority for their own personal gains. She believed, however, that the change in many young people was “authentic,” and resulted from uncovering new information and new

⁵⁷ Hanna Świda-Ziemba, *Młodzież PRL. Portrety pokoleń w kontekście historii* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011), 254.

⁵⁸ Świda-Ziemba, *Młodzież PRL*, 255.

⁵⁹ Hanna E. Malewska, “O zmianach poglądów,” *Wyboje*, 27 November – 3 December 1956, 6.

arguments. These were “open-minded” people, who searched for the truth, “regardless of the fact if the truth was convenient or unpleasant for them.”⁶⁰ She admitted that it was not always easy to tell who was an opportunist and who was not, but one sign was whether a person expressed a critical view before “the Authority accepted the new standpoint.”⁶¹

Personal biographies point to the intricate evolution of beliefs. Jacek Kuroń was one of the most known symbols of a personal journey from an idealistic Stalinist – a leader of an avant-garde youth organization *Walterowcy* – to a prominent anti-communist activist and dissident, a central figure in the Solidarity movement in the 1980s. He started his oppositional activism during the Thaw.⁶² But there were other, less-known stories, which seemed typical of many students at the time. Journalist Stefan Bratkowski, born in 1934, lost his parents during the war. He grew up at the Home of Youth in Krzeszowcie, “an ideal republic of three hundred girls and boys.” His teachers were mostly former members of the Polish Socialist Party (traditional socialist party in Poland), who managed to run the facility in an idealistic socialist fashion. For Bratkowski, “Socialism was self-government, democracy, equality, prosperity for all, a complete opposite of capitalism, which compromised itself by the Great Depression, Hitlerism and the wartime annihilation of millions of people.”⁶³

When Bratkowski left the Home of Youth in 1951 to study law at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, he found himself “confronted with the reality lesson” for the first time. As an editor of a wall newsletter, he made jokes of the leaders of the Youth Association, who got drunk at an official student function, and “acted in a manner one could find at a village inn.” The next day, Bratkowski was summoned to the Youth Association Headquarters at 10 PM. “They

⁶⁰ Malewska, “O zmianach poglądów,” 6.

⁶¹ Malewska, “O zmianach poglądów,” 6.

⁶² For Kuroń’s autobiography see Jacek Kuroń, *Wiara i wina. Do i od komunizmu* (Warsaw: Niezależna oficyna wydawnicza, 1989).

⁶³ Stefan Bratkowski, “Pod znakiem pomidora,” in Bratkowski, *Październik*, 68-83.

put me in a chair with a light directed at my face, in front of a dozen people sitting behind a crescent-shaped table.” The gathering turned out to be “an interrogation and a court.” Bratkowski, however, did not let himself to be intimidated. He turned the light away from his face and shouted: “You should be ashamed of yourself!” The action worked. Bratkowski was released, but the event made a lasting impact on him.⁶⁴

In 1954, Bratkowski and his friends started an association of their own, an independent student club that they humorously called the Clan of the Flaming Tomato (*Klan Płonącego Pomidora*) or the KPP. The abbreviation KPP was intentional since it evoked the interwar communist party in Poland – *Komunistyczna Partia Polski* or KPP, whose leaders were executed on Stalin’s orders in the late 1930s. The name “was supposed to make people think.” Despite the political reference in the name, the club had no explicit political agenda; rather it celebrated youth and personal freedom. First meetings included five male and two female students. Bratkowski remembered: “We talked about everything openly and unapologetically – and we played together, dancing till we dropped, mainly at a spacious [private] home of the ... Tejkowski family.”⁶⁵

Soon, *Po prostu* called on its readers to establish a network of new discussion clubs, the so-called Clubs of Young Intelligentsia. The first one known as the Club of the Crooked Circle (*Klub Krzywego Koła*) started in Warsaw, at a private apartment located next to the Old Town market, on the Crooked Circle street. A small group of people gathered there to talk “on cultural topics and drink a black coffee.” But at one such meeting in January 1955, according to the owner of the apartment, Jerzy Mikke, “someone suggested to gather as a group every week, on Thursday, for a regular exchange of ideas ... Someone else suggested to invite experts on

⁶⁴ Bratkowski, “Pod znakiem pomidora,” 68.

⁶⁵ Bratkowski, “Pod znakiem pomidora,” 69.

different cultural topics. And yest someone else committed to make a presentation.”⁶⁶ Clubs emerged spontaneously, and served multiple functions, including facilitating a moral catharsis. Young participants came not only to engage in free discussion, but also to talk about their own complicity in Stalinism and that of others. According to Mikke, “The reckoning of the past by specific discussants took on different shades of dramatic confessions, deeply intimate moral dilemmas and conflicts. ... In this way, the Club of the Crooked Circle gradually became a free tribune like Hyde Park in London.”⁶⁷

Participants considered clubs primarily as spaces for “self-government, democracy from below.”⁶⁸ The Intelligentsia Discussion Clubs were not limited to large cities, but often became a gathering point for local intelligentsia in small towns in different parts of Poland. In Brzozowo near Rzeszów, local medical doctors and lawyers visited local villages to provide medical care and legal advice. In Tarnowskie Góry, the intelligentsia club supported rebuilding tourist sites (such as an old lead mine) and initiated annual celebrations of “The Days of the Lead Miners (*Dni Gwarków*).”⁶⁹ Clubs stimulated a civic attitude and commitment to one’s locality. In Brzozowo, the local intelligentsia helped build a modern oncological hospital, “the pride of the province” with 450 beds, teams of specialists, and advanced technological equipment.⁷⁰

Although *Po prostu* supported a broadly understood left-wing agenda, the actual clubs were more diverse in intellectual and political pursuits. Tadeusz Mazowiecki and his friends, for example, formed a Catholic discussion club inspired by a leading French philosopher of Personalism, Emmanuel Mounier. According to Mazowiecki, Mounier’s Personalism was

⁶⁶ Jerzy Mikke, “Niczego nie żałuję,” in Bratkowski, ed. *Październik*, 57-62, 57-58.

⁶⁷ Mikke, “Niczego nie żałuję,” 59.

⁶⁸ Mikke, “Niczego nie żałuję,” 59.

⁶⁹ Mikke, “Niczego nie żałuję,” 59.

⁷⁰ “‘U nas tak dalego w Brzozowie.’ Interview with Zbigniew Kubas,” in Bratkowski, *Październik*, 63-67, 67.

“simultaneously anti-totalitarian and communal – both of these elements were important to us.”⁷¹ For Catholic clubs, diversity and intellectual exchange were as important as for those oriented towards secularism and the Enlightenment tradition. According to participants, young Catholic intellectuals “integrated many diverse trends and traditions.” Zygmunt Skórzyński, who co-founded the Catholic club together with Mazowiecki considered the experience to be “one of the most important events of my life.”⁷²

In different cities, students initiated their own clubs, which typically included discussion rooms, bridge and chess rooms, dancing halls and a room to play jazz. These were spaces they owned and controlled. In Lublin, students transformed a prewar winery located in the Old Town, into “a center for cultural and artistic life of Lublin.” They wanted a place “where one could freely manage the house (*gospodarzyć*) according to one’s ideas.”⁷³ Jacek Fedorowicz was talked into co-organizing a club at a student dormitory in Sopot. He was attracted by the very word “club,” which for him “smelled of something unknown, something a bit Western.” In contrast to “red corners” promoted by the Stalinist state, the club was a space that students themselves made and owned: “Clubs released a secret longing for a life a bit more enjoyable, less coarse and unappealing.”⁷⁴

Student clubs embraced new forms of music, dance, and socialibility that radiated from the Anglo-American popular culture. One such club was “Stodoła” “(the barn) created by students of the Warsaw Polytechnic in April 1956. Every Saturday and Sunday, crowds of young people lined outside to enter the club and have a chance to dance rock-and-roll. Students were let in every half-an-hour upon the showing of a student identification documents. A student reporter

⁷¹ Mazowiecki, Skórzyński, “Historia nie tylko złudzeń,” 232.

⁷² Mazowiecki, Skórzyński, “Historia nie tylko złudzeń,” 233.

⁷³ “Studenckie podziemie,” *Od Nowa*, 14-20 March 1957, 4.

⁷⁴ Fedorowicz, *Ja jako wykopalisko*, 63.

described one such evening in *Od Nowa*: “Rock-and-roll, boogie... Evening dresses and underskirts are swirling; men’s bow-ties glitter ... sweaters, sweaty shirts... Rock! Rock! Rock-and-roll. ... Two pretty girls are waiting for their male friends to finish the super-important discussion and ask them to dance.”⁷⁵

Student Clubs became a testing ground for a new model of negotiation between state and society. They also exposed the increasingly porous boundary between the two. Seeking the protection of a party official or a youth organization was a necessary part of the club movement. The Club of the Crooked Circle sought “a tacit patronage from the Central Committee” to stay alive. The Clan of the Flaming Tomato or the KPP managed to get support from the local officials in September 1956. The negotiations were not always smooth, but rather both sides tested the limits of what they could do. The KPP was a case in point. Leaders of the Clan hoped to use the university space for its meetings, but the administration denied them that right after the club organized an open meeting at the Faculty of Marxism. The KPP looked for another location, but not without a passionate article expressing their outrage at the authorities published in *Po prostu*.⁷⁶ Alongside the Student Theater and the student press, clubs became laboratories, in which the post-stalinist state and society learned to negotiate, compromise, and accommodate.

Gobal Connections: the World Youth Festival and the Hungarian Revolution

Around the World regularly offered a virtual travel to foreign lands through photographs and reports, but the contact with the outside world slowly ceased to be purely imaginary. Alongside the new wave of color magazines, young Poles had a chance to meet foreigners and make more tangible crosscultural connections. Two main events exemplified the growing significance of a transnational interaction: the Fifth World Youth Festival in Warsaw in July-

⁷⁵ J. Porębski, “Rock, rock, rock and roll. Zabawy warszawskich studentów,” *Od Nowa* 14-20 March, 1957, 4.

⁷⁶ Stanisław Chelstowski and Włodzimierz Godek, “Płonący Pomidor,” *Po prostu*, 10 March 1957, 1-2.

August 1955, and the Hungarian Revolution in October-November 1956. The two events were very different; they marked the beginning and the end of the Thaw. The World Youth Festival sparked cultural liberalization and openness, whereas the Soviet invasion of Hungary set limits on the newly found freedoms. In that way, they demonstrated different potential of the youth revolution as a transnational event.

The origin of the biannual world youth festivals dated back to 10 November 1945 when the World Federation of Democratic Youth was established in London by the United Nations. In 1947, the World Federation of Democratic Youth joined with the International Union of Students with the aim to provide a cooperating platform for youth from all parts of the world, including capitalist and socialist countries. Dominated by leftist activists and directed primarily against fascism and imperialism, the organization promoted peace and an anti-nuclear agenda. The official slogan for the 1955 gathering was “For peace and friendship, against the aggressive imperialist military pacts.” In the early postwar period, festivals were held in capitals of socialist countries: in 1947 in Prague; in 1949 in Budapest; in 1951 in East Berlin; and in 1953 in Bucharest. These were followed by the festival in Warsaw in 1955, and the largest one – in Moscow two years later. The Warsaw festival took place on 31 July – 15 August 1955 gathering an estimated number of 26,600 participants from 116 countries. In addition to this number, 150,000 youth from different parts of Poland joined the celebrations.⁷⁷

The festival gathered a range of young people from all continents and political systems, including the United States, Western Europe, the Soviet Union, China, Syria, Egypt, Israel, Brazil, Mexico, Sudan, Nigeria, and many others. Many participants came from communist organizations, but delegations also included representatives of the YMCA, YWCA, social

⁷⁷ Andrzej Krzywicki, *Poststanlinowski karnawał radości. V Światowy Festiwal Młodzieży i Studentów o Pokój i Przyjaźń, Warszawa 1955* (Warsaw: TRIO, 2009), 310 and 246.

democrats, Zionists, and the Polish diaspora.⁷⁸ The festival featured a variety of events: folk dances, films, circuses, sport games, competitions in literature and art, and avant-garde theater. The events included the opening of an exhibit of Polish art at the Arsenal gallery, the first that broke with the socialist realist style.⁷⁹

The gathering of young people from every part of the world made a lasting impact on young Poles. The World Youth Festivals was remembered in two dominant ways: as the time of unprecedented opening to the world, and as the time of carnival and liberated sexuality.⁸⁰ Polish youth's willingness to get to know and participate in a globalizing youth culture surprised both party leaders and young Poles themselves. In December 1956, a little over a year after the event, one student journalist remembered the festival as "a window to the world," a turning point that changed the self-definition of Polish youth. "The Warsaw Festival knocked out a huge hole in the hermetically sealed iron curtain," the author wrote. The festival was a meeting point for a global audience, not reduced to the East and West, but encompassing a range of geopolitical and national diversity. It was clear to the author that he and his friends did not want to live in isolation; they wanted to see the world and to interact with young people from elsewhere: "What remained are memories, photos, and addresses of friends. What remained is nostalgia for foreign lands, newly made friends – sustained by letters peppered with colorful stamps from all over the world. Only do we know how many evenings we spent studying the world map and foreign dictionaries. Life acquired new colors."⁸¹ The student, no doubt representing a feeling of many

⁷⁸ Krzywicki, *Poststanlinowski karnawał*, 50-51.

⁷⁹ Krzywicki, *Poststanlinowski karnawał*, 70-71.

⁸⁰ The collective memory of the Warsaw festival is strikingly similar to the Sixth World Youth Festival held in Moscow in 1957. For a discussion of the Moscow festival see Pia Koivunen, "The 1957 Youth Festival: Propagating a New, Peaceful Image of the Soviet Union," in Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith, eds. *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev* (London: Routledge, 2011), 46-65.

⁸¹ Andrzej Konopacki, "Okno na świat," *Kontrasty*, 25 December 1956, 2.

participants of the festival, articulated a strong link between the global youth culture and a fulfilling personal life.

Although the goals of the festival were political and ideological, the event acquired its own dynamic and shape. According to one student-participant, Stanisław Manturzewski, the festival was “one big alcoholic-erotic party, a sort of sexual-artistic uncorking.”⁸² A large transparent with a sign “baise-moi” was displayed in the center of Warsaw. Participants took it as an encouragement to kiss. The sexually charged atmosphere was not absent from the official coverage of the festival. News reels from the festival showed hugging and kissing couples. In one report from the festival, the audience saw the participants playing “a new Polish game: I pick who I want.” The voice over explained to the audience that Polish girls were acting as “teachers” and men from different countries pretended to be their “students.” The commentary did not explain the exact rules of the game, but the viewer could see young women and men first walking in circles, and then forming couples. They hugged, kissed, and danced together. The camera then zoomed in on an older woman watching the scene. “You cannot do it,” the voice over pretended to speak for the outraged woman. “You can,” the same voice over responded, “if you are eighteen years old and dancing on the three-year old MDM [a new Warsaw residential district].”⁸³

Although collective memories of the festival point to the event as the beginning of the Thaw, in fact, foreign guests arrived in a country that was in the process of reinventing itself. Festivities took place not only in official meetings halls and squares, but also in newly created cafes, student clubs, and theaters. Bim-Bom arrived from Gdańsk to give performances, and a

⁸² Quoted in Marcin Meller, “Szlafroki na placu defilad,” *Polityka*, 12 August 1995, 12.

⁸³ “Warszawskie spotkania,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eoNEMX6qWI> Accessed 16 June 2014.

young Arab man by the name of Yassir Arafat came to watch a play by the STS, and made friends with student-actors.⁸⁴

The global encounter accelerated rather than initiated changes. Foreign participants brought with them vinyl records, new dances and music such as boogie and jazz. They also brought a different lifestyle that shocked many Poles. One participant remembered: “We were convinced that we were the most happy and cheerful youth in the world; meanwhile in a direct personal encounter, it turned out that we were sad, grim, stiff-necked, uptight, and did not really know what to do with ourselves. And they, the foreign guests, danced, laughed, kissed in the streets... This was unimaginable for us: how can one kiss in the street! It is difficult to describe how huge our shock was.”⁸⁵ The festival taught young Poles new things about themselves: “The enthusiasm of the generation that built socialism was nothing in comparison to the fascination with exoticism. And then everything that was different, even if it came from Czechoslovakia, was exotic.”⁸⁶

If the festival revealed the youth desire to cross geopolitical barriers, the Hungarian Revolution in the fall of 1956 prompted a different kind of rethinking of the international encounters. The Revolution was sparked, to a large extent, by the developments that took place in Poland after the World Youth Festival. In June 1956 in the city of Poznań, workers demonstrated against economic hardships, but soon the manifestation changed into a mass uprising with demands for political and national freedoms. Although the initial reaction was to crush the rebellion, by the early fall it was clear that Polish leaders found it increasingly difficult to control the situation. Within a few months, public demonstrations prompted the First Secretary of the party, Edwar Ochab, and his associates to start negotiating with Władysław Gomułka, who

⁸⁴ Krzywicki, *Poststalinowski karnawał*, 48.

⁸⁵ Andrzej Drawicz quoted in Krzywicki, *Poststalinowski karnawał*, 283.

⁸⁶ Krzysztof Mroziewicz, “Klub czyli hybryda,” in Chudziński, *Kultura studencka*, 307-321, 312.

had been quietly released from house arrest in December 1954. Just a few days after the Eighth Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee in late October 1956, where Gomulka was elected by the Politburo to head the Polish party-state, Hungarians rose against their Stalinist regime in hopes of working out a solution similar to the one in Poland. The Hungarian “national” communist – Imre Nagy – had been gaining increasing support from the reformist circles within the party and the population in general. A powerful student demonstration took place in Budapest on 23 October 1956 calling for the retreat of Soviet troops from Hungary and for implementing a number of democratic reforms, including free elections. The Soviet military stationed in Hungary entered Budapest in hopes of quickly suppressing dissent, but instead encountered youth armed with Molotov cocktails, ready to fight back. All these events were followed in Poland with huge interest and open support for the Hungarian revolution. Students and intellectuals saw the Hungarian revolt as both a national uprising and an attempt to implement a more authentic form of socialism. Finally, the decision of Imre Nagy to withdraw Hungary from the Warsaw Pact prompted the Soviets to finish what they had started. On 4 November, they launched a full-fledged military invasion. Within less than a week, the Hungarian Revolution was crushed.

The Soviet intervention in Hungary had a tremendous impact on Polish society. Eventually, it helped restrain the zeal of young revolutionaries. The initial reactions to the intervention, however, sparked street demonstrations and other manifestations of solidarity with the Hungarians. Students rushed to assist Hungarians in any way they could: “We collected things, people gave out blood; they cried, made fists, cursed ‘the Russians’, but we knew we

could not allow for a similar situation in our country – another bloodletting [after World War II] could not have been sustained.”⁸⁷

Students from the Mining and Steelmaking Academy in Cracow organized a march in support of the Hungarians. A large crowd walked carrying Polish and Hungarian flags tied with a black crape.⁸⁸ Some students suggested to go to the *Gazeta Krakowska* – the city’s daily – and ask them to publish a resolution in which they called on the Polish state to leave the Warsaw Pact, break off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, and militarily assist the fighting Hungarians. One freshman called on the crowd to march on the Soviet Consulate.⁸⁹ The angry crowd moved into the direction of the Consulate, but soon they were slowed down by a Soviet military vehicle blocking the street. The demonstration changed into a “silent march,” and then quietly dispersed.⁹⁰

Some Cracow students took a more practical approach and formed the Student Committee to Assist the Fighting Hungarians (Studencki Komitet Pomocy Walczącym Węgrom).⁹¹ Crowds of people came to the Main Station in Cracow on 26 November, the day the cargo train was scheduled to leave for Budapest, with “patriotic speeches and flowers.” The local military garrison provided sleeping mattresses, sheepskin coats, and food for the student mission. By the end of the day, four train cars carrying 20 tons of flour, 10 tons of apples, 4 tons of salt, bacon, sugar, lard, and soap each, and other supplies left the station.⁹²

⁸⁷ Bratkowski, “Płonący Pomidor,” 77. For similar impressions see Antoni Zambrowski, “Młody komunista w poszukiwaniu swojej rewolucji,” in Bratkowski, *Październik*, 113-126, esp. 124-125.

⁸⁸ Bratkowski, “Płonący Pomidor,” 78.

⁸⁹ Tadeusz Cynkin, “Panie pułkowniku, nich pan coś zrobi, bo będzie nieszczęście,” in Bratkowski, *Październik*, 158-165.

⁹⁰ Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie ktoś bliski potrzebował pomocy,” in Bratkowski, *Październik*, 183-195. The key role in restraining the students was played by Tadeusz Cynkin, the head of the Military Science Program (Studium Wojskowe) at the Jagiellonian University. See Tadeusz Cynkin, “Panie pułkowniku,” 158-165.

⁹¹ Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,” 183-195.

⁹² Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,” 188-189.

The Hungarian Revolution facilitated a personal encounter of Polish students with other citizens of the eastern bloc: first with Czechs and Slovaks, and then with Hungarians. Although the conventional image of the eastern bloc has assumed a high degree of commonality among its inhabitants, the truth was that cross-bloc personal interaction was rare before 1956. The Thaw, for the first time, provided an opportunity to get to know neighbors from the socialist camp, and to compare notes. The Polish-Hungarian encounter demonstrated a transnational potential of the revolution and an opportunity for cooperation within the bloc against the Soviets. At the same time, the encounter between Poles and Czechoslovaks pointed to the power of political elites to exploit national resentments and to play one neighbor against another for political purposes.

As Polish students were about to find out, not everyone in the bloc rebelled against the Soviet power the way they did. When the transport from Cracow reached Czechoslovakia, students expected solidarity with the Hungarians from the Czechs, but instead found “monuments and portraits of Stalin ... red stars and banners declaring the eternal love for the USRR ... No sympathy for the Hungarians existed here.” The Czechoslovak regime’s propaganda was especially effective in exploiting national tensions between Czechs and Hungarians, and Czechs and Poles. The revolts in Poland and Hungary were depicted not only as anti-socialist, but also as specifically anti-Czechoslovak. As Czechoslovak leaders claimed alluding to the events in 1939, Poles and Hungarians were about to start a new world war and implement another “partition (!) of Czechoslovakia.”⁹³

According to Polish students, Czechoslovak officials and workers obstructed their voyage to Hungary in every possible way. The Committee had anticipated Red Cross trucks at the Polish-Czechoslovak border in Cieszyn to help with the transport. Instead, Czechoslovak officials attached their cars to a local train. “Our protests did not work,” remembered one

⁹³ Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,” 189.

student. “The Czech railroad workers treated us as if we were plague-stricken.” At one station, students were refused water. At another, they barely escaped arrest: “During a fiery exchange of words with a stationmaster, a portrait of Stalin fell from the wall; they [Czechoslovak officials] almost arrested us for offending the leader.”⁹⁴

A completely different picture unfolded when Polish students crossed the Hungarian border in Komarn on the river Danube. Students were greeted by “enthusiastic crowds of Hungarians” waving Polish flags. “Women carried out large trays with cookies from the bakery, and men put glasses filled with wine in our hands.”⁹⁵ In Budapest, “every Hungarian wanted to host us [in their homes] (and host us with their terrific wine). A not-so-young female taxi driver named Marica drove us around Budapest for two days for free.”⁹⁶ Polish students also went to a clandestine meeting of the Hungarian student organization MEFESZ that played a leading role in the Revolution.⁹⁷

The visit to Budapest, however, provoked a sober reflection on the part of young Poles. Walking the streets of the Hungarian capital, students saw the remnants of the recent invasion and fighting. They could not help, but resist comparisons to the Polish war-time experience. “We paid a particular attention to ruins. We passed by a destroyed building of a Hungarian radio and the military barracks, where the insurgents were said to defend themselves to the last. On squares and plazas, we saw graves of people, who had died in the streets. From many a broken window, a tri-color Hungarian flag was hanging tied with a black crape - and with the hole in the middle

⁹⁴ Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,” 189.

⁹⁵ Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,” 190.

⁹⁶ Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,” 192.

⁹⁷ Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,” 193.

instead of the socialist crest.”⁹⁸ Andrzej Bratkowski, the older brother of Stefan, was reminded of the Warsaw Uprising, which he experienced as a child.⁹⁹

On the way back, Polish students were again harassed by Czechoslovak authorities. “Friends who went back with [Polish] truck drivers through Cieszyn were searched by the Czechoslovak border patrol. The officials confiscated all the souvenirs they brought from Hungary, including items such as blood-stained flags taken from Budapest streets and graves, and even letters [from Hungarians] to be sent out to the West from Poland.”¹⁰⁰ Other Cracow students eventually managed to smuggle one flag with a cut out center, and several hundreds of letters. In Cracow, they repacked the letters in Polish made envelopes and sent them out to the West.¹⁰¹

The two different “windows to the world,” the World Youth Festival and the Hungarian Revolution, demonstrated two distinct potentials of the global opening. One was the power of youth to overcome political barriers; the other was the power of world leaders –the invading Soviets in this case – to cut short any such possibility. The crashing of Hungary was a clear sign that the youth carnival was over, and that the Soviet empire was back.

“The Heroes of October Are Playing Bridge?”

On the morning of October 19, the first day of the Eight Plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Polish ruling party, an unexpected aircraft entered the Polish air space from the east. The controllers soon found that the plane was carrying no other but the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, accompanied by his closest associates and eleven generals.¹⁰² The Soviet leaders,

⁹⁸ Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,”191.

⁹⁹ Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,”192.

¹⁰⁰ Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,”189.

¹⁰¹ Student Jurek Michalewski from the Student Revolutionary Committee kept the flag at his home until 1995 when he donated it to the president of free Hungary. Andrzej Bratkowski, “W Budapeszcie,”195.

¹⁰² William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (Norton and Company: New York, 2003), 293.

concerned about the social and political unrest in Poland, decided to fly unannounced into Warsaw. The Polish leaders had communicated the plan for the Eight Plenary meeting to Moscow a few days earlier, and they knew that the Soviet army stationed in western and northern Poland was ordered to march towards Warsaw.¹⁰³ Still, they did not expect the visitors of this caliber. After landing at the Warsaw airport, the Soviet delegation was greeted by Polish leaders, including the First Secretary Ochab, who was about to abdicate, and Gomułka. Khrushchev was furious. “He began demonstratively to shake his fist at us from a distance,” remembered Ochab. When he approached Ochab, he “started brandishing his fist under my nose.” Gomułka was deeply troubled by the behavior of “Soviet comrades,” who clearly tried to show the Poles their place. “The entire conversation was carried out in a loud tone,” Gomułka recalled, “so that everyone at the airport, even the chauffeurs heard it.”¹⁰⁴

Little is known about the internal negotiations between Gomułka and Khrushchev, but eventually the new Polish leader convinced the Soviets that the changes in Poland would not threaten Soviet domination or the socialist system. According to the testimony of the Polish Politbureau member, Roman Zambrowski, who witnessed some of the conversations with the Soviet delegation, the decisive factor was Gomułka’s genuine commitment to socialism. During a fiery exchange with Khrushchev, the new Polish leader “lost control ... he switched to Polish; he spoke fast as if in a trance ... someone started translating, but could not keep up. Khrushchev looked at him helplessly asking Gomułka to switch back to Russian; finally, they announced a short break. Later, Khrushchev confided that this particular incident made a profound impression on him. Only a person, who deeply believed in his own words could have forgotten himself in

¹⁰³ Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 166.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 293.

this way.”¹⁰⁵ No doubt Gomułka was no Imre Nagy. He was a loyal communist, even if he envisioned the system in a different way from the Soviet leader.

The Polish October was a tense and dangerous time. The Eighth Plenary Meeting that brought Gomułka to power was the high point of the Thaw, and an official end of the Stalinist era in Poland. Ironically, this was also the beginning of a retreat from the Thaw. After negotiating with the Soviet delegation, Gomułka used his power to gradually stabilize the political situation and to tighten the grip on society. Shortly after October, Gomułka –backed by large segments of society - started implementing his vision of communism. This vision was, certainly, not a Stalinist one, but also not the one imagined by the the avant-garde student movement. Gomułka was quick at work curtailing the freedom of the media, including the student press. Already on 1 November, he created the Press Bureau as part of the party structures, and the Press Commission, the advisory body within the Central Committee, to deal with the sphere of publishing that, in his mind, got out of control.¹⁰⁶

Gomułka was able to legitimize his power further in the elections to the Sejm (lower house of the Parliament) on 20 January 1957. The elections included a democratic component. Instead of the customary one-candidate-per-one-place rule, the number of candidates in each district could be two-thirds higher than the number of seats. If no names were crossed out on the ballot, the candidate in the first position won. To help boost a popular legitimacy for the elections, the party formed the Front of National Unity, in which different political groups were invited to participate (including nominal Catholic and peasant parties).¹⁰⁷ A few days before the elections, Gomułka appealed to the public to vote without crossing out names. In the election

¹⁰⁵ Roman Zambrowski, “Dlaczego Gomułka i co spowodowało odwrót Gomułki,” in Bratkowski, *Październik*, 133-151.

¹⁰⁶ Piotr Pęziński, *Na rozdrożu. Młodzież Żydowska PRL, 1956-1968* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2014), 71.

¹⁰⁷ Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 214.

campaign, Gomułka was careful to avoid the word “socialism” and emphasize instead “Polish sovereignty and independence.” More than 94 percent of eligible voters went to the polls, and 89.37 percent of them voted according to Gomułka’s wish, without crossing out names.¹⁰⁸

By early 1957, the youth revolution lost momentum. Members of the intelligentsia clubs found themselves discouraged and disillusioned. According to Wiesław Głowacki, who wrote an article in *Po prostu* under the provoking title “Victims of the Stabilization?” claimed that clubs became spaces for socialization and leisure, and that “the heroes of October are playing bridge.” Indeed, the contrast between October 1956 and the period shortly after was striking. In Częstochowa, for example, during October, the local Club of the Young Intelligentsia pressured local officials to organize “free elections” to the city government. But now the same young woman, who headed those efforts gave up. She had had enough. “One cannot break the wall with one’s head,” she soberly pointed out to Głowacki during an interview. Another former enthusiast from Częstochowa claimed not to “give a damn” for the club any more because club discussions became boring. The only thing left for the young, as he claimed, was “playing bridge.” And in the Olsztyn area in northern Poland, young people from the intelligentsia club, once “the most aggressive and revolutionary ... Jacobins,” did exactly the same.¹⁰⁹

The question mark at the end of the title, however, indicated that Głowacki in fact doubted that playing bridge at the club was a sign of a full-fledged retreat. “True, they are no Jacobins,” he admitted, “...but they are normal clubs,” and normality meant that Poland was no longer an anomaly on the global map. The clubs acted “as any clubs of this type anywhere in the world,” Głowacki concluded. The most important impact of the club movement for the author

¹⁰⁸ Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 233.

¹⁰⁹ Wiesław Głowacki, “Ofiary stabilizacji?” *Po prostu*, 12 May 1957, 1-2, 1.

was that they became part of the cultural and social landscape. In fact, the number of the intelligentsia clubs was on the rise.¹¹⁰

The article foresaw a new trend in youth activity necessitated by the changing political context. Contestation did not disappear, but it took on a different shape. “I talked with many individuals, who once passed for the young heroes of October, and now if there is anything they are passionate about it is [playing] bridge.” Głowacki, however, saw these activities as a temporary escape and as another stage in the search for a new form of political activism, since the “heroes of October” knew that “in the long run this sort of ‘apolitical’ vegetation did not make sense.” In fact, despite their declarations, many of the former “heroes” remained involved in less visible local politics and social work. One activist from an intelligentsia club in Opole, who expressed his desire to stay “as far as possible from any politics” turned out to be heavily involved in local activism, because as he explained - “one is pissed off (cholera bierze), when one sees this mess and people’s poverty so one wants to help.” Głowacki asked: “Isn’t this exactly what makes politics?”¹¹¹

For young people, the search for a new self-definition did not end after October. Rather, the chain of events in late 1956 prompted some young people to see themselves as a distinct generation. One of the most compelling generational manifestos came from a young Cracovian, Stanisław Stanuch. It appeared in *Zebra* under the title “The Confession of an Anarchist.” Stanuch was 26 at the time, a poet and a journalist, who recently graduated from the Philosophical-Historical Department at the Jagiellonian University.¹¹² He saw himself and other young people primarily in existential terms. The “anarchist” in the title was not a self-designation, but rather an ironic reference to the term used by the older generation towards the

¹¹⁰ Głowacki, “Ofiary stabilizacji?” 2.

¹¹¹ Głowacki, “Ofiary stabilizacji?” 2.

¹¹² Stanisław Stanuch (1931-2005) was a writer and journalist. He co-founded a literary group Barbarus.

young. Stanuch explained that the rebellion of the young was not only a protest against Stalinism as a political system, but rather against the older generation scarred by the war and complicit in building the new order. The most important goal for young people was to liberate themselves from those, who claimed to be “patrons” of the youth. He wrote on behalf of his generation: “... we entered life ... pushed from behind, led by the hand, or under the gun put to our head (trzymani za mordę)...”

The young generation was not uniform. It mattered when one was born and at what point in time one encountered Stalinism. “My generation (the oldest from the cohort of the young) was the last that took socialism seriously,” Stanuch wrote. “It was our first – and so far – the last adventure.” Those you joined the Youth Association later, were different. “They never believed,” because at that time “any searching was already impossible.” Although critical about people slightly younger than him for their “cynicism” and “snobbish attitude,” Stanuch claimed that all young people had one thing in common: “the entire young generation feels the aversion towards the Lie as a guideline for action; it is fed up with ‘higher right’ which turned into closed-minded righteousness of a narrow group of ‘experts’ on consciousness ... who indeed could push the world on the brink of abyss. No one from the young generation wants to be a soldier in a future war.” Rather, young people wanted to regain their subjectivity and actively shape the future: “A few places became available at the thill. But we want to be the horses, who see WHERE the road is going. Our ‘anarchy’ is nothing more than looking for our “‘WHERE.’”¹¹³

In the article, Stalinism became a metaphor for the uncritical and oppressive ways of the older generation. “Patrons” could be found in any regime and any part of society. In this context, Vladimir Kusin’s reflection on the Czechoslovak literature and film in the 1960s rings true for the Polish case as well. Kusin explains the global appeal of Czechoslovak works, such as those

¹¹³ Stanisław Stanuch, “Wyznanie anarchisty,” *Zebra*, 13 April 1957, 14.

by Kundera, Skvorecky, or Forman – all experiencing Stalinism during their formative years - in terms of the artist's ability to express the intensity of human alienation. In this way, the Czechoslovak, or for that matter Polish, “ordinary man” in literature and film stood for “the feelings of every man in the modern world.”¹¹⁴ One is tempted to suggest that the experience of Stalinism helped one realize this universal condition in clearer terms.

The Frost

“A thaw, a Lenin Library smokers concurred, was not quite spring. The spring is cyclical and irreversible, and it turns to summer as surely as night turns to day. But a thaw is tenuous. A frost could strike any day.”¹¹⁵

The end of the Thaw in Poland is usually associated with the closing down of *Po prostu* in November 1957. This was a symbolic moment, a successful consolidation of Gomułka's leadership. The newly created Party Press Bureau identified *Po prostu* as “oppositional.” The main charge against the student periodical was that it continued to pursue radical politics despite the change in the regime, which according to the Press Bureau, solved political conflicts in Poland.¹¹⁶ The move has been typically interpreted as a crack down on the freedom of speech. After all, the free press is an essential element of a liberal-democratic society that was not going to be tolerated by communists. But there was something more to this decision. Interestingly, the internal report of the Press Bureau made no references to the threat of “reactionary” Western influences as one might expect. The report clearly stated that the closing down of *Po prostu* was a necessary act against a domestic upheaval since “the periodical called for the continuation of the revolution, while at the same time suggesting the necessity of the second stage by promoting

¹¹⁴ Kusin, *Intellectual Origins*, 60.

¹¹⁵ Ludmila Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Pittsburgh, 1993), 74.

¹¹⁶ Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), Komitet Centralny (KC), Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (PZPR), Biuro Prasy, 237/XIX-234, *Po prostu*, 1957-1958, “Uwagi dotyczące czasopisma ‘Po prostu’ za okres od 15. XII. 56 do 10.II. 57,” kk. 1-8, 1.

the slogan ‘All power to the [Workers’] Councils (Cała władza w ręce Rad).’¹¹⁷ In other words, *Po prostu* wanted to take the socialist revolution too far. However exaggerated the charge might have been the fact that the party was not so much afraid of the liberal-democratic freedom of speech as of the “revolution” from below is significant. The justification to close down *Po prostu* revealed that it was not capitalism or Western liberalism that communist regimes considered the most threatening. The real threat was a revolution enacted by diverse social groups and interests at home.

The battle for *Po prostu* began in the early fall of 1957. The first issue after the summer break was planned for 7 September 1957, but the Press Bureau halted the publication. Editors appealed to Gomułka, who they still considered to be on the side of the “Polish revolution.” A few high party officials joined to convince the First Secretary to allow *Po prostu* to continue. Students organized a public demonstration in Warsaw in support of the weekly, but soon the militia put it down. Members of the editorial board were expelled from the party. On 5 October 1957, Gomułka met with the press to confirm the new hard line: “Journalists and publicists will have to choose: either you are with the party or against the party. Either you are with socialism, or against socialism.”¹¹⁸ The message was clear. Although Stalinism was over, socialism had clear boundaries now delineated by the new regime.

The crackdown on the independent press, while silencing the revolution from below, exposed the power of the printed word as an instrument of change. The ruling regime decided to control the public discourse, albeit on different terms. Gomułka did not plan to go back to Stalinist uniformity, but rather envisioned a guided pluralism for the press, in which there was a space for “de-politicized” topics. This was a logical outcome of the new “social contract,” in

¹¹⁷ AAN, KC PZPR, Biuro Prasy, 237/XIX-234, *Po prostu*, 1957-1958, “Uwagi,” k. 2.

¹¹⁸ Władysław Gomułka, *Przemówienia*. Wrzesień 1957-Grudzień 1958 (Warsaw 1959), quoted in Pęziński, *Na rozdrożu*, 72.

which the regime increasingly ruled through concessions and accommodation with the population. *Po prostu* was eliminated, but *Around the World* remained in circulation, because a magazine about travel and gossip was considered to be “non-political.” Editors and journalists would now have to navigate in the new environment that erased “revolution” from the banners of the press, but at the same time created a new space to talk about “non-political” topics. Like the clubs, the student press was encouraged to switch from “Jacobinism” to “playing bridge.”

The remaining independent student periodicals soon shared the fate of *Po prostu*. The last issue of *Poglądy* came out on 20 Dec 1957, and *Od Nowa* in February 1958. Carcow-based *Zebra* lasted the longest with the closing edition in April-May 1958. According to Bogusław Litwiniec, a student-journalist from *Poglądy*, the justification communicated to the editorial board was last-minute and mundane: the state ran out of printing paper.¹¹⁹

At the closing of 1957, young people were back to testing the boundaries of the post-Stalinist system in a manner that reminded of the beginning of the Thaw. They tried to discern what Gomułka’s Poland meant for them. Fedorowicz’s account of one of the first meetings of student performers from Bim-Bom with those from the STS in Warsaw in late 1954 illustrated the sort of testing that continued to go on: “We wanted changes, but everyone spoke up with the awareness that if they said a word too many, and that the changes would not go the way we sensed, this might result in the dismissal from school or even in a prison sentence. Every critique of the current situation... had to have a disclaimer that this was in harmony with the declarations of the party and with the dominant ideological principles. It was at that time that we began to uncover this way of speaking with the regime, the way that was to flourish until the end of the People’s Republic.”¹²⁰ This was not “speaking Bolshevick” as Stephen Kotkin described in his

¹¹⁹ Interview with Bogusław Litwiniec.

¹²⁰ Fedorowicz, “Kultura młodych,” 362-363.

book on Stalinism in the Soviet steel city, Magnitogorsk. This was “speaking change” in a more inclusive socialist system that was still authoritarian, but more attentive to voices from below.