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BREAD AND FREEDOM: ON THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1956 POZNAŃ JUNE PROTESTS

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Exactly three years after the June 1953 uprising in East Berlin, Polish workers took to the streets of Poznań in June 1956. Their demands for "bread and freedom" were a response to humiliation, poverty, and repression. The young workers gathered in what was then called Stalin Square discovered that values such as dignity, courage, and freedom were deeply compelling. They articulated these values not only for themselves, but also for us. Thanks in part to them, we are not a "panic-stricken rabble" but rather a courageous society.

Early on the morning of Thursday 28 June, the factory siren sounded twice at the W3 Shop of the Joseph Stalin Metal Works (ZISPO), Poznań's railway car factory. First, it sounded at the customary time of 6:00 a.m., signaling the end of the night shift and the beginning of a new workday. Half an hour later, another prolonged blast called on workers to begin a strike.[1]

The signal was familiar and had been agreed upon in advance with employees at several other factories across the city. Workers had spread word of the possible protest beforehand: "Pay close attention. If you ever hear our factory siren after 6:00 a.m., it means we're walking out. So you should walk out too."

At the same time, a strike was already underway at the Railway Rolling Stock Repair Works, located along the route from ZISPO to the city center, while a strike at the tram depot was scheduled to begin that very morning. An informant working for the local Security Office found a note there that read: "General tram workers' strike. Today we are not leaving the depot."

A LABOR ARISTOCRACY

At 6:30 a.m., the main factory siren at the Joseph Stalin Metal Works sounded for the second time. Shouts echoed throughout the plant: "Turn off the machines and get out!" One worker later recalled: "Our intention was to go into the city, to the castle, demonstrate, return to the factory, and remain there – that is, continue the strike." For the workers, marching from the H. Cegielski factory to the city center and the offices of the local authorities was a natural way of publicizing their demands – a traditional form of labor protest dating back to the prewar period. "As I entered the hall, I heard a huge cheer, and a crowd of people headed out through the second gate. We stopped in front of the power station and decided to wait for the rest of the factory crews," recalled one worker who had come in for the day shift.

Those leaving through the main gate passed an armed factory guard, who did not attempt to intervene. The workers also removed the sign reading "Joseph Stalin Metal Works" from the front of the building. Their anger stemmed largely from economic grievances, but even at that stage, they were giving the protest a broader meaning. Eighty percent of ZISPO's workforce walked out. Essentially, only management, industrial security personnel, and fire brigade staff remained on site. Over the following hours, workers at many other factories across the city would also leave their posts.

Ten thousand people marched along Dzierżyński Street (today 28 June 1956 Street) toward the city center, heading toward the castle – the seat of the Poznań National Council – located on Stalin Square, and the nearby headquarters of the Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. At the front of the procession were emaciated, poorly dressed women who worked sanding railcar bodies by hand, their wooden clogs striking the pavement. Behind them came assembly workers and welders. New slogans appeared on makeshift signs made from boards and plywood, repeatedly invoking the words "bread" and "freedom".

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1. THIS ARTICLE IS A SLIGHTLY REVISED VERSION OF A TEXT ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN POLISH IN "RZECZPOSPOLITA": MATEUSZ FAŁKOWSKI, POZNAŃSKI CZERWIEC. TŁUM HEROICZNY (RZECZPOSPOLITA, 25 JUNE 2016). THE FACTUAL INFORMATION AND QUOTATIONS ARE BASED ON THE WORKS OF EDWARD MAKOWSKI, POZNAŃSKI CZERWIEC 1956. PIERWSZY BUNT SPOŁECZEŃSTWA W PRL, WYDAWNICTWO POZNAŃSKIE, POZNAŃ 2006, AND PAWEŁ MACHCEWICZ, POLSKI ROK 1956, "MÓWIĄ WIEKI", WARSAW 1993.

Delegations broke away from the march to encourage workers at passing factories to join them, including employees of the Railway Rolling Stock Repair Works, who had already been on strike for several hours. Before noon, several separate marches were converging on Stalin Square. In total, around 100,000 demonstrators gathered there.

Why did such a large protest erupt in Poznań? The city's workers had been well organized since the interwar period, and this did not change even after the years of repressive, centrally imposed economic management during the Stalinist era. They retained memories of their strong prewar social status, of workers' rights, and of specific traditions of protest.

Before the war, workers at the H. Cegielski factory had been regarded as a labor aristocracy, enjoying high social standing and a range of welfare benefits. Although the factory was renamed the Joseph Stalin Metal Works in Poznań (ZISPO) in 1949, it remained simply "Cegielski" in the minds of the city's residents. A strong sense of workers' dignity persisted among its workforce, as did traditions of labor demonstrations. In such an environment, it was especially clear that conditions in Poland were deteriorating – and not only in economic terms.

LET FOREIGNERS SEE

Workers were poorly paid, and in 1956 their wages fell even further. During the Six-Year Plan, living standards in the Greater Poland region dropped below the national average (before the war, the region had enjoyed a higher-than-average standard of living). The sense that life had become worse than before was reinforced by comparisons between the drab reality of everyday life and the products displayed at the Poznań International Fair.

The protests in Poznań's factories erupted because of the deteriorating living conditions of workers, whose production quotas were systematically increased, effectively reducing their earnings. These issues were discussed at so-called masówki – mass workplace meetings where workers complained about worsening wages and living conditions.

The timing of the protest was the result of deliberate calculation. Workers chose to take to the streets during the Poznań International Fair, when approximately 2,000 foreign visitors were in the city. "Let foreigners see that there is poverty in Poland and that there is nothing to eat", said one participant in the discussions that took place almost daily in the weeks leading up to 28 June 1956.

Before the street demonstrations began, dissatisfied workers in Poznań had tried other ways of drawing the authorities' attention to their situation. A characteristic example was the "silent breakfast break" staged at the railway car factory as early as 1954. During their break, workers silently chewed their bread. To avoid repression, they agreed that no one would speak or explain the meaning of the protest to government representatives. This silent demonstration alarmed the authorities, while helping workers, who had

discovered their collective strength, move in the following months toward more open forms of protest, particularly after Stalin's death and the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

At first, dissatisfaction was expressed within the official channels of factory-wide meetings and workers' councils. Letters were sent to the authorities in Warsaw, to the Party, and to the Ministry of Machine Industry. In March 1956, a delegation from the railway car factory traveled to Warsaw to protest an excessive payroll tax. Additional letters followed, and various assurances were even received.

It soon became clear, however, that the authorities had no intention of fulfilling these promises. In fact, workers faced wage cuts in 1956 along with further increases in production quotas. At one meeting in May, the first explicit threat of taking to the streets was voiced. Even Party members among the workforce, who had previously been restrained, joined the demands on this occasion. Another mass meeting was held on 22 June, accompanied by threats of a strike if the workers' demands were not met.

Similar sentiments prevailed in other factories. At the Railway Rolling Stock Repair Works, lower-than-usual wage advances were paid on 25 June, further accelerating the decision to strike. The authorities, however, remained convinced that the unrest was isolated and confined to a single workplace. On 27 June, the Executive Committee of the Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party concluded that the meetings at ZISPO had resulted in a "partial easing of tensions" and did not consider the possibility of workers taking to the streets or launching a general strike. The workers, by contrast, left the W3 shop-floor meeting on 27 June convinced that they had once again been ignored. They concluded that only a strike and public demonstrations remained.

The Security Office was aware of these developments. Secret informants reported that banners had been hidden inside ZISPO, that workers planned to "march into the city and join forces with tram workers, railway workers, and the Meat Processing Works", and that "the organizers preparing the strike are gathering at Skołuda's place in Wilda".

PROTEST

The Poznań International Fair was due to end in three days. That morning, the factory siren sounded twice, and the main body of protesters from ZISPO moved down Dzierżyński Street. At the same time, a mass meeting was underway at the Railway Rolling Stock Repair Works, attended by the Deputy Minister of Railways, who had arrived from Warsaw. Shortly before 8:00 a.m., a group of workers from ZISPO entered the factory grounds and called on those assembled to join the demonstration. The meeting was interrupted, and most participants took to the streets. Tram workers joined them a little later.

Demonstrators entered other factories they passed in much the same way. Between 70 and 80 percent of the workforce at individual workplaces took part in the strike and demonstrations.

At first, the protesters proceeded in silence; only the sound of wooden-soled shoes striking the cobblestones could be heard. As the crowd grew, however, people began singing religious and patriotic songs: Boże, coś Polskę ["God, Thou Hast Poland"], Nie rzucim ziemi ["We Shall Not Forsake the Land of Our Forefathers"], and Serdeczna Matko ["Beloved Mother"]. In the reality of a repressive communist state, religious songs were an important form of protest. Previously prepared banners appeared alongside hastily improvised ones bearing slogans such as "We Are Hungry", "We Demand Bread", and "Freedom". Similar demands were shouted aloud: "We demand higher wages, we demand lower prices, we want to live like human beings, down with quotas!"

As the march approached the city center, political slogans became increasingly common: "Down with the Russians! Democracy!" "For the first time, I found myself in a group with extraordinary qualities. It was not a panic-stricken rabble, but a heroic crowd," recalled a participant in the demonstration, then an employee of the Poznań International Fair, who joined the march as it passed the exhibition grounds.

At around 9:00 a.m., demonstrators filled Red Army Street, Stalin Square, and Stalingradzka Street. A massive gathering of approximately 100,000 people formed. White-and-red and white flags were raised at the castle, the seat of the Municipal National Council, which demonstrators had entered in part through the windows. Delegates held talks with members of the Municipal National Council, but these discussions produced no results. At 10:00 a.m., all demonstrators voluntarily left the castle.

WE HAVE TAKEN POWER INTO OUR OWN HANDS...

The next building to be occupied was the nearby headquarters of the Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. The same revolutionary ritual was repeated: white-and-red flags were raised, and banners bearing the slogans "Freedom" and "Bread" were displayed. Until noon, demonstrators streamed in and out, "touring" the Party headquarters. Someone painted the words "Apartments for Rent" on the building's wall.

The demonstration at the castle was no longer merely a protest against hardship ("We Are Hungry"), but also an expression of liberation from fear ("We Want to Live Like Human Beings") and of courage ("Freedom"). It foreshadowed the later emergence of the Solidarity movement.

At noon, the protest reached a critical turning point. Amid imperfect communication, the largely spontaneous grassroots character of the movement, and rising hopes and emotions, the demands and forms of protest began to radicalize. False rumors spread through Stalin Square that the ZISPO delegates who had traveled to Warsaw for talks with the authorities had been arrested. Another false rumor claimed that similar protests were underway throughout Poland.

Not everyone gave in to the prevailing emotions. "I went back toward the University Auditorium. I lay down on the grass with a few colleagues, feeling

helpless and simply exhausted and hungry. At one point, I heard gunfire coming from the auditorium tower. [...] I realized that there was nothing we could do there, and we left. Together with a group of colleagues, we returned to HPC", Stanisław Matyja, one of the organizers of the workers' protest at Cegielski, recalled years later.

In the crowd gathered in Stalin Square, however, people had begun to realize how attractive freedom could be, and attitudes became increasingly radical. Someone decided that the jamming stations used to block Western radio broadcasts should be attacked and destroyed. Others resolved to free their allegedly arrested colleagues from the prison on Młyńska Street – a rumor made plausible by memories of the Stalinist years. Demonstrators marched toward the headquarters of the Security Office. They sang religious songs and chanted anti-communist and anti-Soviet slogans.

Using a radio broadcast vehicle seized by the protesters and driven through the city, announcements were made over a loudspeaker: "We have taken power into our own hands. We have captured the castle, the Provincial Committee headquarters, the prison on Młyńska Street, we have destroyed the jamming station, and all that remains is to free the prisoners from Kochanowskiego Street."

The siege of the Security Office building began. Protesters attacked it with Molotov cocktails – bottles filled with gasoline – and with weapons taken from the prison and the Citizens' Militia headquarters. On Kochanowskiego Street stood a tractor pulling two trailers loaded with cement. A group of eighteen-year-olds pushed the trailers closer to the Security Office building and used them as cover while firing at it. Another barricade was built around an overturned tram.

A COURAGEOUS SOCIETY

The economic protest had transformed into a national anti-communist uprising. Just as the march from the Cegielski railway car factory to Poznań Castle echoed the workers' processions that had followed the same route before the war, so too did the later street fighting evoke earlier national struggles. Young people hurling gasoline-filled bottles at tanks often wore white-and-red armbands reminiscent of those worn during the Warsaw Uprising.

The forces involved, however, were vastly unequal. The authorities deployed enormous military strength against the poorly armed and often very young demonstrators: two armored divisions, followed by two infantry divisions. In total, more than 10,000 soldiers were sent into the city, along with 2,000 militia officers and several hundred Security Office personnel. The authorities also had more than 400 tanks and other armored vehicles at their disposal.

At least several hundred people were wounded during the protests in Poznań in 1956. The victims were predominantly young. Only 17 of the 74 people killed (the exact number remains disputed) were over the age of thirty.

Although somewhat unjustly forgotten and often overshadowed in collective memory by October 1956, March 1968, the December 1970 protests on the Baltic coast, or June 1976 in Radom, the Poznań June protests became one of the most important symbolic reference points during the 16 months in which Solidarity functioned as a legal trade union. In June 1981, a monument bearing the inscription "For Freedom, Law, and Bread" was unveiled.

Speaking at a rally in Paris in July 1956, Albert Camus said that the free world must listen to and understand the workers of Poznań. He noted that he did not wish to encourage rebellion among people whose struggle he could not personally share. Yet, he said, when "those people, after enduring humiliation to its utmost limits, rebelled and were then murdered, I would feel contempt for myself if I dared show the slightest restraint in judging that murder and failed to express my full respect for the victims of repression and my complete solidarity with them. They certainly do not need our congratulations. They ask only that wherever freedom prevails, their cry resound, that others recognize their despair, that the eyes of the whole world be opened, and that everyone come to understand and respect their decision", the French writer declared.[2]

The appeal of the author of The Rebel remains relevant today. Without respect for the courage of the young workers who, 70 years ago, marched down Dzierżyński Street toward Stalin Square carrying cardboard and plywood signs proclaiming "Bread and Freedom", and without solidarity with them and remembrance of them, we would lose a great deal as a community. Confronted by constant humiliation, poverty, and repression – and in a sense shaped by those same circumstances – the workers defined and brought forth values such as dignity, courage, and freedom.

As they marched down Dzierżyński Street, those values became deeply compelling to the young workers. They articulated them not only for themselves, but also for us. It is thanks to them that we are not a "panic-stricken rabble" and can instead be a courageous society.

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2. A. CAMUS, POZNAŃ, "KRYTYKA" NO. 16 (1983), P. 203.

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