

OFF CENTRE: How Solidarity betrayed the man with the logo: Jerzy Janiszewski designed the Polish union's symbol, but his battles for just reward have turned him into an exile from his homeland, he tells Paul Rowinski

Financial Times (London, England) - Saturday, September 16, 2000

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A man frenetically daubs a blank white poster with large blobs of blood-red paint, moulding them into letters. Yet again time is of the essence. A minute elapses. He hands me the finished article, signed in the corner. The poster reads Solidarnosc, Solidarity.

Jerzy Janiszewski created the symbol epitomising Poland's struggle to unshackle itself from the Soviet bloc. He proudly, yet forlornly, hands me a piece of history, now a post-modernist consumer artefact from a non-capitalist Polish past. The words have lost their raison d'être, for Janiszewski as for many Poles, now that freedom has been won.

After the revolution, Janiszewski had to fight to reclaim authorship from the very man he had created the symbol for, Lech Walesa. Walesa is now facing accusations that he collaborated with the secret police during those turbulent days, which could destroy his chances in the presidential elections, due next month.

Today, Janiszewski designs, among other things, compact disc covers in Spain. He has watched the potential millions made from his original design flow into other pockets - his first bitter taste of capitalism at work.

He was in Gdansk by default at the genesis of the revolution. He had wanted to study in Warsaw but failed to secure a place, arriving in Gdansk in 1971. It was then that he discovered for the first time that there had been unrest at the shipyard the year before. Several workers had been killed and a news blackout had been imposed.

Janiszewski settled in Gdansk, working as a graphic designer. A groundswell of worker resistance emerged again, culminating in the shipyard workers walking out once more in August 1980. He recalled: "I was there at the gate. I just felt a compelling need to be there, right at the heart of events."

The Polish government had planned radical increases in the prices of food and consumer goods. The riposte was a wave of national strikes, with the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk at the centre. Leaflets were printed, translating coverage of the strike by the BBC World Service. Walesa, an electrician, emerged as omnipresent leader.

For his part, Janiszewski was determined to encapsulate all around him in some defining image. At first the picture was convoluted: the gates, flowers to the fallen workers, flags, workers linking arms.

It was in late-night conversation that a poet friend noted how a word kept recurring: in speeches, on pamphlets, in political slogans daubed on the walls - Solidarnosc. Janiszewski asked those with him to leave. It took him just a few hours to produce an enduring image.

Having received the instant approval from the head of publicity the next day, Janiszewski produced copies from a makeshift press. "When I brought the first 50, the workers were fighting and grabbing them. Some of them got torn to pieces. Everybody wanted a bit. Everyone wanted a copy. Cameras started rolling. It instantly became world news."

Painful, heated negotiations, between the strike committee, headed by Walesa, and the government, led to the government yielding at the end of August 1980. Included in the resulting agreement were the right to strike, to erect a monument to the dead of 1970 and to create a free trade union, called Solidarnosc.

Janiszewski commented: "I remember being overwhelmed with joy ...I had never dreamt it would have reached beyond the shipyard. All of a sudden it was catapulted to world fame and became a national symbol." But his joy, and that of Solidarity, was short-lived.

On realising the extent to which people were profiteering from his symbol, Janiszewski fought back. An impasse resulted, lasting many months; Walesa refused to meet him or sign legal papers granting that he was the author. Eventually, Walesa grudgingly signed and Janiszewski was awarded a "prize" of 100,000 zloty, a considerable sum at the time. He still did not have copyright, however.

Then came the bombshell of December 13 1981. General Jaruzelski, the Polish leader, proclaimed martial law. Solidarity was disbanded. Moscow's intervention had been staved off. Janiszewski, like many others, fled to France where he spent eight years of exile working as a graphic artist.

Janiszewski resumed hostilities in the spring of 1989. This time he succeeded in meeting Walesa, now a presidential hopeful. In June that year, Poland held its first free elections for more than 50 years. Janiszewski claims that Walesa imperiously argued that the logo had been "written by a worker with his blood". Janiszewski stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

He eventually regained copyright, but no income from his work was returned. In turn, Janiszewski received a second sum in compensation. Not wishing to reveal a figure, he said it was a "great help" but was not enough to retire on.

Janiszewski recounts his tale as he pushes through yet another signed copy of his Solidarnosc poster for a BBC cameraman. He was commissioned to design a logo for a series on the liberation of eastern Europe, 10 years on, entitled Freedom's Battle, shown last year. It was these words that he was now frenetically daubing on to a sheet of glass with the same pot of blood-red paint, as the cameras rolled.

The battle is won, but the freedom that is Poland, Janiszewski feels, is not worth having. He is now a voluntary exile, working as a jobbing graphic artist in one of its European centres of excellence, Barcelona. Janiszewski returns home rarely. These days he designs compact disc covers for little-known flamenco artists.

Today, he argues, what was Solidarity has become open to fragmentation and constant squabbling. He thinks the post-communists, under president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, are better organised.

In the presidential race, recent opinion polls give Kwasniewski about 70 per cent support, with Walesa on about 4 per cent.

For Janiszewski life is still not easy: he makes enough, but his freedom is, like many Poles, tinged with a sense of betrayal, that what was promised was never delivered: "The sad thing is that I feel Walesa destroyed the very union he created. It is as if Walesa has been on a self-destructive mission."

That may be confirmed, come October.

Edition: London Edition 1

Page: 11

Index Terms: Water Transportation ; Shipbuilding ; Engineering ; HR & Labor Management ; Business Management ; Strikes & Work Stoppages ; Arts & Leisure ; Elections ; Government News ; Political Parties ; Politics

Location(s): Poland Eastern and Central Europe Europe Iberia Southern Europe Central Europe Poland Eastern Europe Western Europe Spain

Record Number: ACxxxxxx0238

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