

Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/6887,Janek-Wisniewski.html>

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Janek Wiśniewski

Zbyszek Godlewski, the real protagonist of the "Ballad of Janek Wiśniewski", may have fallen down, but he grew into a symbol which dented the regime.



Ballad of Janek Wiśniewski

Guys from Grabówek, Chylonia lads,

Today Militia used firearms*

Our stones hit target, we stood our ground

Janek Wiśniewski's down

Down Świętojańska, sprawled on door planks

carried against them cops, them tanks

You shipyard lads, avenge your man

Janek Wiśniewski's down

In clouds of gas and bangers' cracks

blows raining down on workers' backs

they drop the old, women, the young

Janek Wiśniewski's down

Some end up hurt, others fall dead

The thugs from Słupsk wanted blood shed*

The Party's shooting the workers now

Janek Wiśniewski's down

...

Mothers, don't weep, it's not in vain

Black-ribboned flag on shipyard crane

For bread and freedom, new Polish home

Janek Wiśniewski's down

*Citizens' Militia, the main police force in communist Poland

*Cadets from Citizens' Militia school in Słupsk

In 1970, the communist state was barely twenty-five years old, and it had already doused two major crises: in 1956 in Poznań, it sent tanks to crush the protests of hungry workers, and in 1968, clubbed unruly students demanding civil liberties back into campuses. The former confrontation claimed dozens of dead and hundreds of injured, the outcome of the latter was thousands of people beaten up, arrested and dismissed from their jobs, as well as a big group of citizens of Jewish descent dismissed from their country. Both times shocked the society, but the needle did not go all the way up on the shock meter: Poznań protesters still remembered the horrors of WWII ended merely eleven years before, and 1968 students suffered no fatalities.



1970, however, was different. Hungry workers, too young to develop the party-giveth-and-party-taketh attitude, protested against food prices increase, which literally drew the regime's fire. Since they were too young to remember the horrors of WWII, the sight of their dead colleagues made the needle go all the way up on the shock meter and get stuck there. Zbyszek Godlewski was an 18-year-old boy freshly out of school and into his first job, on his way to it in Gdynia when the army, acting on the communist party's orders, cut him down with a machine-gun burst. Other young men placed the body on a door and carried it downtown, flying a blood-drenched national flag as they marched.



The authorities had even fewer qualms about dispersing that spontaneous demonstration than attacking commuters hours before. The crowd carrying the body on the door was fired at with live ammunition and tear gas, and the people forced to abandon their gruesome burden in the middle of the street and take cover. The authorities took the body, and treated Zbyszek just like other victims: in an attempt to conceal the massacre, they gave him a night-time secret burial at which ninety percent of mourners were heavily-armed Citizens' Militia officers and only the boy's parents wept. However, none of these cover-up efforts mattered anymore: Godlewski was already turning into a symbol.



By then a photograph of the corpse carried on a door had been taken by one Edmund Pepliński – to be as widely as illegally circulated – while Krzysztof Dowgiałło, a young Gdańsk engineer witnessing the scene, was scribbling the lyrics for his immortal "Ballad of Janek Wiśniewski". Both, the photograph and the song, captured the shock of the generation of the regime's peers at that regime's murder of its peers. Zbigniew Godlewski – generically named Janek Wiśniewski by the ballad author – stood for twenty-odd-year-olds who protested though they were not allowed to, died because they protested, and deserved remembrance because they died.



The authorities which gave the orders to fire, the party hardliners headed by Władysław Gomułka, were continuing in the best traditions of the Soviet revolution, including the terminology: they were revolutionaries, which made the protesters counter-revolutionaries, and as such, targets. Nevertheless, having killed forty-five and wounded over a thousand, they realized the society's shock and started back-peddalling vigorously: the party's leadership had to go, and the price increase was called off. The system got a touch of make-up, a face-lift, but inside it remained the same because just like all regimes imposed against the will of a nation, it was beyond therapy.



Five and a half years later, more price increases sparked another wave of mass protests and the Workers' Defence Committee emerged, ten years later the protesters forced the party to commemorate the December victims and legalize the "Solidarity" Trade Union, eleven years later the make-up wore off with the Martial Law, and twenty years later the system was gone.



And in his small way, Zbyszek Godlewski, aka Janek Wiśniewski, lifeless and sprawled on a door, was one of the keys that unlocked it.

Sources:

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Jarosław Szarek, „Nie płaczcie matki, to nie na darmo..." ["Mothers, don't Weep, it's not in Vain-"]

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