

Catholic Poland's anguish

By Neal Ascherson,
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Last autumn in Poland, I went to visit the graves of two friends near Kraków. They lay side by side in the little cemetery of the Benedictine monastery at Tyniec. The sun was warm; it was a still, golden day and the Vistula river at the foot of the hill seemed to drift rather than flow.

Both men, as 20th century Poles, had lived tormented, complex lives. Both, I think (though they never spoke of it), came from Jewish backgrounds but had lived their lives as devoted Catholics. One, an editor, had defied communist censorship and Vatican disapproval to run an intellectual Catholic weekly. The other, a journalist, had a more shadowed past; his mockery of everything except his own vision of his nation and his church had made some people suspect him - wrongly - of having no principles at all and acting as an informer to the secret police.

Coming away, my companions pointed to a row of plain crosses where the Benedictine monks of Tyniec were buried. One of them bore the name of Brother Michalowski. No special mark on the cross suggested that this monk had not been as holy as his neighbours. But Brother Michalowski, I was told, had been revealed as a long-term paid agent for the secret police who had done infinite damage to his order, his church and his nation over many decades.

In 1968, for example, he had given shelter to a Czech couple who had fled over the mountains from the Soviet invasion in August that year. They confided to him their plans to reach the west by smuggling themselves onto a Swedish ship at the port of Gdynia. But their saintly protector passed this information to the *Sluzba Bezpieczenstwa* (Security Service / SB [1]), who arrested the young Czechs on the quayside and ensured that they spent many years in prison.

Neal Ascherson is a journalist and writer. He was for many years a foreign correspondent for the (London) *Observer*. Among his books are *The King Incorporated: Leopold the Second and the Congo* (1963; Granta, 1999 [2]), *The Struggles for Poland* (Random House, 1988 [3]), *Black Sea* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996 [4]), and *Stone Voices: the Search for Scotland* (Granta, 2003 [5])

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A Warsaw storm

The facts of Brother Michalowski's treachery only emerged after his death. He was luckier than Archbishop Stanislaw Wielgus. A growing storm of media revelations [7] about Wielgus's past as an SB informer culminated on Sunday 7 January 2006 in an incomparably Polish melodrama. In front of a completely unprepared congregation gathered to witness his installation as archbishop of Warsaw, which including the president of the republic (Lech Kaczynski) and the primate (Jozef Glemp), Wielgus announced that he was resigning [8] immediately.

Next day, the rector of the Wawel cathedral in Krakow, Father Janusz Bielanski [9], surrendered to similar press stories about his collaboration with the secret police and resigned. And the storm blows on.

The daily paper *Dziennik* now says that it has a list of twelve names of senior church figures, at least one of them a bishop, who collaborated with the religious affairs division of the SB in 1978 in an unsuccessful attempt to influence the choice of the next primate of Poland. A Kraków priest who specialises in researching SB files on the Catholic church, Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski, says that he will publish [10] a book in mid-February listing thirty-nine clerical informers, including three current bishops. And so it goes on.

In immediate political terms, the spreading scandal obviously serves the aims of the present rightwing coalition government (headed by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, twin brother of Lech). The platform of the leading party in the coalition, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc* (Law & Justice / PiS [11]), is dominated by a raucous, populist campaign which warns that hidden communists and Russian agents are still in important positions, and asserts that the "lustration [12]" process supposed to keep former secret-police agents out of public life has completely failed. Exposing SB influence in the senior church hierarchy obviously helps to raise the temperature [13] of public panic - as long as the government does not overdo it by offending the faithful masses in what remains Europe's most Catholic nation.

A church invincible, and fallible

But how much of a revelation, really, are all these exposures of informers within the church? The problem is that Poland, over the last fifty years or so, has retreated into a fog of cognitive dissonance on this and other subjects. People have wanted to believe that everything is corrupt, and at the same time that everything is heroic.

It's fifty years since I first travelled in Poland, and I can confirm that collaboration by many priests and bishops with the security police was absolutely common knowledge then and has remained common knowledge ever since. And yet at the same time, Poles have also sanctified the Catholic church as the carrier and saviour of Polish national identity and culture through the darkest periods of wartime and post-war [14] oppression. In the communist decades, they spoke of the priesthood as a league of devoted, stainless patriots defending (as Father Jerzy Popieluszko used to say) "Poland's thousand-year-old religion of love against the modern Bolshevik cult of atheism and hatred".

Father Popieluszko [15] was one who perfectly fitted that vision. He supported the Solidarity uprising in 1980, eluded clumsy SB attempts to compromise him (mostly with women), and was eventually murdered by officers of the SB religious affairs division in 1984. No wonder that in the early 1980s, as young men flocked to volunteer for the priesthood during the dark years of martial law, people said: "In Poland, our army wears black".

So these two notions, of the church invincible and the church all too fallible, somehow coexisted in Polish minds. But the real division in the church was generational, between those who accepted that the communist state could not be overthrown and must be conciliated and those - the younger priesthood, especially - who thought that the state's authority was fragile [16] as well as corrupt and should be confronted.

It's ironic to recall the life of one of the great princes of the Polish church, cardinal and primate Stefan Wyszyński. By the time of his death in 1981, he was revered as the most steadfast and unbending antagonist of the communist system; next to Pope John Paul II [17] in Rome, he was the individual the Polish regime feared most. Yet even he had once fallen under Vatican suspicion of being a communist agent.

Arrested in 1953, he had been released by Władysław Gomułka [18], the communist leader who in October 1956 defied Soviet power and introduced a brief period of relative liberty. Wyszyński and Gomułka reached a compromise unique in the Soviet empire: the church would respect the authority of the Marxist state and the Soviet alliance, and in return would regain its right to make its own appointments, to teach religion in schools and to publish an independent newspaper.

As Polish passions in those months seethed up towards insurrection, Wyszyński used all his authority to urge prudence and obedience to the state. In a famous sermon, he said that "a man dies once and is quickly covered with glory, but he lives in difficulty, in hardship, pain and suffering for long years, and that is the greater heroism..." But all these compromises with the "Bolshevik, atheist" state were regarded as scandalous by the Vatican, and Cardinal Wyszyński was treated almost as a communist collaborator when he visited the Holy See a few months later.

The Vatican has never shown much grasp of Polish realities, apart from the twenty-seven years when Karol Wojtyła [19] wore the triple crown. Pope Benedict XVI went ahead and nominated Stanisław Wielgus as archbishop in spite of warnings about his past. During the second world war, Pope Pius XII did little to stop the murderous persecution of the Polish church by the Nazi occupiers and ignored Polish Catholic appeals to protest against the extermination of the Jews.

And back in the 19th century, while Poland was partitioned [20] by foreign empires, the papacy supported "order" imposed by Prussian Lutheran kings or Russian Orthodox czars and condemned as dangerously "liberal" the freedom struggles of a Catholic nation. In other words, Polish popular reverence for the papacy, in the pathetic belief that the Vatican has always regarded Catholic Poland as the holy church's favourite child, is another venerable self-deception.

The Polish web

Two factors made police pressure on the church especially harsh in communist Poland. The first was the utterly bizarre and heretical status of the church after 1956: a huge, self-managing institution independent of party control and essentially hostile to the Marxist worldview. No other communist state would have tolerated this, but the price of the Polish compromise was the enormous time and resources [21] which the state devoted to spying on the church, infiltrating or blackmailing its hierarchy and trying to influence its decisions.

The second factor behind this pressure was that the church had a great deal to lose, and the security men knew it. There was church property, of course, but even more precious was the right to minister to the Catholic faithful, to preach, to administer the sacraments and to preserve what remained of Christian influence in an officially atheist society. These are duties owed - in the religious view - not only to man but to God, and much compromise can be justified in order to preserve them. A bishop, warned that a seminary would be closed for "health and safety" reasons unless he agreed to give Colonel X monthly briefings on the opinions of diocesan clergy, was in a hard moral position. So, in a different way, was a parish priest being told by Captain Y that his affair with a local woman would be reported to his bishop, unless he gave the police a list of all his parishioners who listened to Radio Free Europe.

The church, in short, was hopelessly vulnerable. The episcopate, above all, had every motive to keep the parish priests under tight political control, in case they gave the SB a chance to intervene with threats or blackmail. In retrospect, it is amazing that some bishops - like Cardinal Wyszyński himself, or the irrepressible Bishop Ignacy Tokarczuk [22] of Przemyśl - were as defiant as they were. But other leaders, like Wyszyński's successor as primate, Józef Glemp [23], exasperated democrats by their reluctance to stand up for human rights or defend clergy under attack for their political opinions.

Today, nearly twenty years since the collapse of the communist regime, it's hard to reconstruct the context in which priests became informers. Does it matter? Unfortunately, it does. The significance of all these old revelations is that they are pushing the authority of the Catholic church in Poland into a different [24], qualified, diminished shape. Often, the individual cases are unfair. But in a historical perspective, it may be that the scandal of the church informers is doing to Poland what the long scandal over the abuse of children in church care did to Ireland: opening a painful passage towards modernity.

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- [13] <http://www.humanrightshouse.org/dllvis5.asp?id=2937>
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