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## Hero or Traitor?

Adam Michnik

15 September 1998

*A former spy's return home kindles controversy*

Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski was treated to a hero's welcome when he returned to Poland last spring after 17 years in exile in the United States. Kuklinski joined the Polish People's Army in 1947, and from there he pursued a trajectory that led him into the highest and most sensitive placements in the Polish military command. In 1973, he was appointed chief of strategic planning; in September 1981, he became chief of planning in a ministerial group preparing the ground for the imposition of martial law by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, Communist Party secretary. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, for 11 years Kuklinski supplied confidential information about Polish and Soviet military matters to the United States. One month before Jaruzelski imposed martial law, Kuklinski was spirited out of the country by his CIA handlers to set up a new life in the United States. In 1984, he was sentenced in absentia in Poland to death for treason; in 1990, that sentence was reduced to 25 years in prison. A year ago, the charges were withdrawn, and the sentence was lifted. His betrayal of the communist government was, according to the court that repealed his sentence, "done in the name of a higher necessity." This April, he returned to Poland for a two-week visit. His contributions to Polish sovereignty are as yet unclear, and his heroic beatification in need of reappraisal.

During Kuklinski's visit it became obvious that for hundreds of thousands of people he is a national hero, whereas for other hundreds of thousands he remains a traitor who broke his oath. Who is the real Ryszard Kuklinski? I do not know. However, I do know that his case is far from being unequivocal.

So far, no one has raised as much enthusiasm in the circles of the right as Kuklinski during his triumphant travels through Poland. His arrival was compared to Pope John Paul II's pilgrimages, and he himself was compared to the great independence fighters Waldemar Lukasiski, Piotr Wysocki, Romuald Traugott, and Jozef Pilsudski.

It was only thanks to the action taken by politicians from the post-communist Socialist Labor Party circles that Kuklinski's triumphant arrival and his political beatification became possible. President Aleksander Kwasniewski and Leszek Miller, interior minister at the time that Kuklinski's sentence was lifted, played a decisive role in the prosecutor's decision to free Kuklinski from the treason charges. Their support for Kuklinski was due partly to a desire to remove potential obstacles to Poland's membership in NATO.

### PROPAGANDA OF PATRIOTISM

Six years ago, Wiktor Woroszylski, eminent poet and moral authority of the Polish opposition intelligentsia, wrote: "I am on Kuklinski's side, because it seems to me that I can understand his way of life—from a 16-year-old member of the Polish Workers Party and a soldier, probably an enthusiastic one, even though, maybe, also an ambitious one, full of a young man's energy and greed for the desires of active life, who, in a natural way, pursued his career in the chosen area, and who, with time, lost trust in the world he co-created, and, finally, felt disgust for it and took a dangerous decision on waging a secret war against it. This reflects one of the Polish types of fate of our epoch, the fate of a given generation, more spectacular than others, but still convergent with the less spectacular ones, so let us put aside ... symbolism and let us see this life in its human, dramatic enough, dimension."

Woroszylski was a writer who was free of the fervor of the extreme anti-communist right; he was hardly alone in his views. I know many people who remained, for many years, in integral opposition toward the communist

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regime, and they paid a high price for it: they spent many years in prison, they were persecuted, and their lives were often in danger. But all of them agreed on one thing: even total opposition toward the authorities of the communist regime, which they considered a dictatorship subordinate to Moscow, cannot lead to collaboration with foreign intelligence services. At this moment, loyalty toward one's own state ends—even if that state is not democratic and not sovereign—and the loyalty toward a foreign state begins, even if it is democratic and represents the values for which one is struggling. This was the difference between the philosophy of the Polish democratic opposition, which was pro-United States, and collaboration with U.S. intelligence.

I treated the accusations made by the martial law propagandists that we, the people of Solidarity, worked for various foreign intelligence services, and not for Poland, as mean slander. I believed that I worked for Poland, while our antagonists defended Soviet influence and domination in this part of Europe.

A clear line separated the activity of the democratic opposition aimed at Poland's independence and the idea of working for foreign intelligence. Many outstanding emigrants warned me against contacts, not to mention collaboration, with foreign intelligence. I met no one who was of the opinion that the Solidarity underground circles should get involved in this type of collaboration. On the contrary, I remember that such accusations in the communist propaganda were rejected with contempt.

Intelligence is intelligence, and espionage is espionage. U.S. special services applied rather inelegant methods to their intelligence activities, such as intrigue, blackmail, bribery, or even assassination. Numerous books have been written in the United States on this subject. We, the people of the democratic opposition who openly opposed the dictatorship, considered such methods disgraceful and immoral. Joseph Brodsky wrote: "I have always considered espionage as one of the meanest human jobs, probably due to the fact that I grew up in a country in which the course of events was beyond comprehension of its native residents."

I understand Brodsky. I always felt disgust for books about heroic agents that were written by secret police agents. "Abomination to spies," wrote Brodsky, "is not caused by the fact that they are on a low level of the evolutionary ladder, but by the fact that treason makes a man slide down." Woroszytski attempted to see in Kuklinski's biography a different variation of his own fate: from ideological fascination with communism to a total break with it. Brodsky could have replied to him that everyone who followed the way of espionage "selected the most useless opportunity out of all given to man—betrayal of one group of people for the benefit of another."

Should one look at it in a global way and state that at that time, the world was a stage on which two blocs fought—the democratic and the totalitarian—and Kuklinski acted in favor of the free world and against an oppressive ideology? One can do this, but only if one lives in Washington.

In 1945, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed his approval for the provisions of the Yalta Conference. Was this compliant with the philosophy of the free world? Maybe it was; maybe the president had no other way, but this was not in concordance with the Polish national interest. In 1982, U.S. political analyst Norman Podhoretz—who was critical of President Ronald Reagan's Soviet policies—argued that Reagan should provide Solidarity with enough support to prompt Soviet intervention in Poland. The Soviet Union, forced to fight a war on two fronts—in Afghanistan and in Poland—would be mixed up in contradictions that would lead to its defeat.

When one lives in Washington, one can reason in such a way. From that perspective, Poland was on the same playing field in the fight against communism as Korea, Vietnam, or Afghanistan. When one lives in Poland, such a global perspective is false. A Pole cannot be indifferent to an option: is it 100 people or 100,000 people (like in Afghanistan) who are killed in a given conflict? Kuklinski did not have any influence on the choice of U.S. strategy.

The attitudes of two people I respect—Zbigniew Brzezinski, former U.S. national security adviser, and Jan Nowak-Jezioranski, a hero of the anti-Nazi Polish Home Army during World War II—are very interesting. They unequivocally support Kuklinski.

Brzezinski is an outstanding American politician with a warm Polish heart. It

seems that his American logic can reconcile identification of the interests of the old country with the interests of the United States.

Nowak-Jezioranski worked for many years after World War II as the head of Radio Free Europe. He served the Polish cause very well, worked hard, and used all his talent and involvement. He came to the conclusion that the road to an independent Poland leads through the United States. I do not see anything wrong with that perspective. From the point of view of a Polish emigre and a Home Army soldier, this was a rational decision, which was made publicly and often justified by Nowak-Jezioranski himself. But Nowak-Jezioranski did not support the idea that Polish emigres should get involved with the U.S. special services.

The so-called Berg case sent ripples through the Polish opposition when it was revealed, early in 1953, that the group of CIA-funded Polish emigres who had committed themselves to supporting U.S. Cold War policies—by maintaining information pipelines to communist Poland and attempting to boost the morale of the Polish opposition—had been infiltrated by the Communists' intelligence services. The case raised a wave of indignation in emigrant circles not only because the whole thing was infiltrated by the secret police, but also because of the presentation of fighters for independence as agents of U.S. intelligence.

#### SOLO DECISION

Kuklinski is the only person who tells us what he really did, or we must take Brzezinski or Nowak-Jezioranski's word for it. We have not seen any documents. We know one thing for sure: Kuklinski effectively worked for U.S. intelligence.

I do not have any grounds to question what Kuklinski says, but this is the only case I know in which one is the sole witness in one's own case. Suddenly, all is forgotten about this man. It is forgotten that for many years he was a member of the Communist Party; that he was so appreciated (materially and politically) that he could afford to buy a villa in Warsaw and a yacht—not a standard for colonels of the People's Army at that time; that he worked well enough to be promoted to very high positions in the military. It is forgotten that he was in the army in March 1968, during the anti-Semitism campaign and the brutal suppression of the opposition student movement; that he was in the army during the invasion of Czechoslovakia; and that he did not publicly condemn those actions, leave the army, leave the party, and somehow join the opposition. He decided to start collaborating with U.S. intelligence.

Did he think that, in his high position in the People's Army, he could do a lot more than in the opposition circles? I do not exclude such a possibility, but if someone comes to such a conclusion, he knows that he makes such a decision alone. Maybe German Richard Sorge came to the same conclusion when he spied for the Soviets during World War II. He was a hero of the special services, but he was not a hero of Germany.

Jozef Korzeniowski, the 19th-century Polish writer, was a French spy—against the Germans, occupying Poland at the time—but this fact was discreetly omitted in school textbooks. It was not presented as a virtue, because it did not fit our ethos of struggle for a free Poland. No one stated, either, that Korzeniowski was a great Pole because he spied for the French. If he was a great Pole, it was despite the fact that he was a spy.

In Germany, opinions are still divided on whether the Red Orchestra, a communist organization that worked for the Soviet intelligence, can be included in the anti-Nazi resistance. It was against Adolf Hitler, but it worked for foreign intelligence services.

And it is clear that the United States is the most important and strategic ally of Israel. Nevertheless, the Federal Bureau of Investigation did not hesitate to arrest Jonathan J. Pollard for spying on behalf of Mossad in the United States. The very fact of working for U.S. special services is not a title to glory in Poland. There were many spies in Poland working for the United States. I shared my prison cell with some of them. Usually, they were mean, abominable people. But, of course, they were useful for the CIA. Many of them were later exchanged for Marian Zacharski, a Polish secret agent arrested in the United States; they did not become my idols because of this. However, the logic of the special services is different; for them, these people

had a title to glory. Thus, no wonder that Kuklinski, who had done so much for the CIA, was awarded its highest distinction.

The problem is not the formal attitude to the oath of office. The main issue is espionage for a foreign power, for a foreign state. These are two different things. Similarly, comparing Kuklinski with Pilsudski is a misunderstanding. Pilsudski went to Japan as a leader of a political camp, to propose to create an alliance. He played the role of a partner, because he believed that an enemy of one's enemy is one's friend.

This is why all those who compare the work of the Home Army officers for the British intelligence with Kuklinski's activity are wrong. The Home Army officers acted pursuant to the orders of their superiors, whereas Kuklinski acted on his own behalf, or pursuant to the orders of his U.S. superiors. He rendered services to U.S. intelligence and had no influence on the manner in which his information would be used. He worked for U.S. special services, and only those services benefited from his work.

Comparing Lukasinski, Wysocki, or Traugutt, who initiated independence plots, with Kuklinski, who decided to become a spy on his own behalf, seems very strange to me. All that he did, he did on CIA orders, without any attempt to reveal himself and establish contacts with Solidarity, the church, or the opposition. In this regard, he compares rather unfavorably to Adam Hodysz, a secret police functionary who cooperated with the activists of the Gdansk opposition and spent several years in prison as a result. I never had any doubts about Hodysz's activity—he also broke the oath, but he never acted on the orders of foreign powers.

#### THE FOGS OF ESPIONAGE

I do not agree that the dispute over how to assess Kuklinski's activity follows the lines of former political divisions, that those who used to be the supporters of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) now accuse him of treason, and those who opposed the PRL now call him a hero. I always opposed PRL, and this is why I do not respect spies. Maybe also because of the fact that I knew them.

In 1983, when Kuklinski's court case began, I admired U.S. special services for their ability to place their agent in the Polish army's general staff. I felt sympathy for Kuklinski—he managed to deceive the Communist counter-intelligence. Today, I believe the reasons for Kuklinski's attitude may have been important. I cannot question the rationale of his decision to be a "hidden agent" in the general staff, aimed at the struggle against the Soviet Union.

After his escape from Poland, he was master of his own fate. His first interview in Kultura was full of sensible, impartial opinions. But later, Kuklinski behaved in a manner that was surprising to me. He acted as a mentor; he instructed and reprimanded. I heard similar tones during his recent visit to Poland. He accused the defense minister of weakness and launched accusations that there were secret agents inside Solidarity, while submitting no evidence to support the charge.

If one is to assume that Kuklinski acted out of a "higher necessity" when he began his collaboration with the CIA, one cannot accept the opinion that it was he who defended humanity against a World War III. Does Brzezinski believe that during Jimmy Carter's presidency—as supposedly stated in one of the documents Kuklinski allegedly gave the United States—Leonid Brezhnev prepared an invasion of Western Europe? This is sheer nonsense.

If one is to assume that Kuklinski was right in thinking that collaboration with the CIA was his patriotic duty—and this is what hundreds of thousands of Poles think—than one has to accept that the situation of higher necessity also occurred on the other side. There were some significant points supporting the attitude of Wladyslaw Gomulka, Edward Gierek, or Jaruzelski. They could think that in the epoch of global conflict, the main guarantor of territorial integrity and Poland's western border—whatever this Poland was like, dictatorial and not sovereign—was an alliance with Moscow. In this context, the Gomulka-Brandt pact was a success for all of Poland, and not only of the ruling nomenklatura.

This contradiction contains certain features of the Polish drama from 1914, when the Poles who loved Poland were soldiers in the armies of the

invaders and shot at one another. However, to grasp this drama, one must have a historic imagination.

Did Kuklinski save Poland from a Soviet invasion? More data support the thesis that—if anything—two other far more significant factors saved Poland from such a catastrophe. There was the attitude of the leaders of Solidarity and the Catholic Church, who chose a long march of passive civil resistance. And the second was the policy of Jaruzelski's government, which did not want a bloody fight and did not want to provoke bloody retaliations.

Through this journey, Kuklinski became a new, clear symbol for the right, awakening the enthusiasm of large crowds. The right can refer to this symbol in the future. Kuklinski himself said, in an interview for Wprost weekly magazine, "If I come back, I will have no political ambitions and I do not intend to get involved in politics. I have one dream—to unite Poles around the development of a new, democratic state."

Kuklinski consented to become not a banner for those forces who want reconciliation and broad consensus on Poland's path to NATO and the European Union, but an instrument for those who strive for further disputes and political wars.

It is good that this case was settled from the legal and penal point of view. I am for the zero option. I do not forget anything, but I believe it is time to understand that there always will be people in Poland who consider Kuklinski a hero, and those who consider Jaruzelski a traitor. And we have to live with it.

At the same time, something bad has happened in the Polish-U.S. relationship. Poland should be an ally and partner for the United States, but Poland should not suggest that in the future it will become a collective Kuklinski. If the result of all this celebration will be the use of personal attitudes toward Kuklinski and U.S. special services as tests of Polish patriotism, it will mean a pathetic end to Polish dreams for freedom.

Adam Michnik is editor in chief of Gazeta Wyborcza newspaper in Warsaw and a founder of the Solidarity movement.

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