



## Polish Heritage Club of Wisconsin, Inc.– Madison WI 2020 Scholarship Awards

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To an average person, solidarity is the feeling of unity, perhaps experienced during a peaceful protest or watched on TV. To a middle aged couple living in Gdansk in 1980, "solidarnosc" meant risking everything to battle an oppressive communistic government with their fellow citizens. My grandparents were that couple, and to this day I hear stories from both them and my mother (who was four years old at the time) about the shipyard strikes in their hometown.

In 1945, at the end of World War II, Germany was finally driven out of Poland. However, instead of gaining its independence, the country was taken over by the Soviet Union. Two years later, it became a Communist People's Republic due to Soviet-run elections.<sup>1</sup> Quality of life declined for the people of Poland, and protests resulted in deaths. Finally, the communist regime promised an economic boom in the 1970's, and due to foreign loans, the country experienced some prosperity. However, because Poland's economy wasn't functioning productively, prices of food and other commodities rose shortly after.<sup>2</sup> This wasn't received well by the citizens of Poland, and intense protests led to many deaths. The years of oppression and lack of freedom of speech took away hope but led to increased tension. When Polish cardinal Karol Wojtyla was elected Pope in 1978, Poland was reminded that it was not entirely forgotten. Two years later, the beginning of the end of oppression started in Gdansk.

On August 14, 1980, the workers of the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk went on strike. About 3,000 of the total 12,000 workers locked themselves within the gates of the shipyard, and crowds came to visit and support them. The workers demanded higher pay and legalization of the Solidarność movement.<sup>3</sup> Earlier, workers in a steel factory in southern Poland had gone on strike, but relented after being granted higher pay. Gdansk was on a different track, fighting for freedom more than anything.



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<sup>1</sup> "Poland timeline." BBC News, BBC, 18 Jan. 2012, [news.bbc.co.uk /2/hi /europe/ country\\_profiles/I054724.stm](https://www.bbc.com/news/europe-1054724). Accessed 15 May 2020

<sup>2</sup> Rohac, Dalibor. "Gdansk Shipyard Strike Launched a Revolution." Inside Sources, 12 Aug. 2018, [www.insidesources.com/gdansk-shipyard-strike-launched-revolution/](https://www.insidesources.com/gdansk-shipyard-strike-launched-revolution/) Accessed 15 May 2020

<sup>3</sup> Tagliabue, John. "Thousands at Gdansk Shipyard Join Polish Strike." The New York Times, 3 May 1988, [www.nytimes.com/1988/05/03/world/ thousands-at-gdansk-shipyard-join-polish-strike.html?auth=login-email&login=email](https://www.nytimes.com/1988/05/03/world/thousands-at-gdansk-shipyard-join-polish-strike.html?auth=login-email&login=email). Accessed 15 May 2020

The protests at the Lenin shipyard were led by Lech Wałęsa, who later became the Polish president and won the Nobel Prize for peace. As the workers stayed within the gates, a large cross was set up and became the symbol of the resistance. Citizens decorated the gates with flowers and Catholic symbols, and took care of the workers. My own grandmother brought food to them and was able to observe everything that happened from her workplace just a few blocks away. The Solidarność movement gained support from other workplaces and cities, but Gdansk remained the core of the resistance. My grandfather was part of an underground radio station that kept the people of Poland informed, and my mother remembers being warned not to tell anyone about the stacks of informational pamphlets kept in their living room.

The Solidarność movement was finally legalized, becoming the first ever independent trade union under Soviet rule. However, in 1981 Martial Law was imposed. This meant that the Polish government began to work against its people by imposing police hours and rolling tanks through the streets so that people knew not to congregate and rebel. The goal was to crush the democratic opposition. My mother, although she was still very young, clearly remembers police patrolling everywhere. Once, when she was waiting at the bus stop with my grandmother, a group of people came running out of nowhere screaming "Run! Tear gas!"

Luckily, Martial Law didn't last long. Continued protests led to Round Table Talks where concrete steps were made to give Polish citizens more rights.<sup>4</sup> The communist rule relinquished absolute power in Poland, and this initiated the collapse of the communist regime in Eastern Europe.

I have always been incredibly proud of my Polish heritage, and each time I visit Gdansk, my mother's childhood home, I am awed by its rich beauty. Each building holds a different part of the city's over one thousand year old history, whether it existed before World War II or had to be rebuilt. I always knew Gdansk was a special city, but I didn't realize how big of an impact it had on the world until learning firsthand about the shipyard strikes in Lenin. What started as a need for money quickly turned into a fight for freedom that soon had dramatic effects, eventually ending communism in Europe. The fact that my grandparents actively helped the Solidarność movement awes me even more, and my mother has been able to teach me about a completely different era of history. There is a special object in our house which I never took a second glance at until it was explained to me that it was made in the shipyards of Gdansk during the protest. It is a large, bronze metal acorn, meticulously formed by a striker to stay occupied during long strike hours. It sits on an oak branch, and opens to a velvety inside. Now that I fully understand what it represents, I will cherish it and hopefully pass it down to generations to come. Although I have never experienced true "solidarność," learning about its origins gives me a greater pride and appreciation of my roots. I hope that I will someday be able to be a part of something even a small percentage as great as this movement, so I will be able to feel solidarity instead of hearing about it.

### **Sources:**

"Gdansk and the Vistula Delta." The Rough Guide to Poland [2018], 8th ed., London, Rough Guides, 2018, p. 121. Rough Guides.

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<sup>4</sup> "Gdansk and the Vistula Delta." The Rough Guide to Poland [2018], 8th ed., London, Rough Guides, 2018, p. 121. Rough Guides

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