

# Building Alternative Identities

## Observing a Presentation of Polishness by an Alternative Theatre Play in 1970s Poland

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*This article is based on my thesis Unikuvia puolalaisuudesta: 1970-luvun marginaalinen puolalaiskansallinen omakuva Sennik polski -näytelmän esittämänä (University of Turku, Cultural History 2004), which won the Arenberg-Coimbra Group Prize in 2007. I collected material for my thesis during my stay as an Erasmus exchange student in Kraków in 2000-2001. I interviewed Mr Krzysztof Jasiński, Director of Teatr STU and Sennik polski; Mr. Edward Chudziński, scriptwriter of Sennik polski; and Mr. Wojciech Sulczyński, former actor of student theatres and present lecturer at the Department of Theatreology at the Jagiellonian University. The opportunity to collect material on the spot and to interview people, who had participated in running the theatre over the years covered by my research, was crucial in broadening my understanding on the cultural scene of Poland in the 1970s. Later I gave a course on marginal culture of socialist Poland at the Alexander Institute of the University of Helsinki based on the material collected in Poland.*

Chemy go stroić, chcemy go malować,  
chcemy w teatrze tym Polskę budować!<sup>1</sup>

We want to build it, we want to paint it,  
We want to build Poland into this theatre!

The communist regimes of Eastern and Central Europe collapsed in 1989-1991. It has been argued, that the role of the first free elections in Poland in 1989 and the model of the Polish political movements were crucial in starting the wheel of the political changes in the region. What were the roots of the political and social movements in Poland? Under which circumstances were they born?

There were strong political and social movements in Poland even before the elections and the victory of the Solidarność (Solidarity) movement in 1989. Movements like KOR, ROPCiO and Solidarność<sup>2</sup> were effective mainly at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. The foundations of these movements were the overwhelming feeling of inequality and injustice in society, violent reactions of the authorities to several social protests<sup>3</sup>, the critical economical situation and the comparatively low level of fear for the authorities.<sup>4</sup> One of the main factors establishing social and political movements was the development of alternative ways of thinking. By 1975 strong alternative culture and mass media that supported world views, which were not in harmony with the point of view of the authorities. Alternative identities of Polish people not bound to the official representations of Polishness began to flourish. The role of the alternative – *tolerated* or *prohibited*<sup>5</sup> – culture was essential in forming an alternative identity.

As an example of alternative culture forming the Polish identity that differed and even opposed the Polishness formulated by the authorities we will now observe how Polishness is represented in a script of a play, *Sennik polski (Polish Dream book)*. The theatre called Teatr STU produced the script

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1 Script of the play *Sennik polski*, [1974], page 6. The scriptwriters of the play, Edward Chudziński and Krzysztof Miklaszewski used texts by various Polish authors in the play. Translations into English are by the author of this article.

2 KOR, Komitet Obrony Robotników (founded 1976); ROPCiO, Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela (founded 1977), founding year of Solidarność 1980.

3. There were large protests and strikes in Poland in 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976, 1980-81.

4 Frenzel-Zagórska 1990, Dybkowska & al 1995, Jakubowska 1990, Koralewicz & Ziółkowski 1993, Szulc Packalén 1997. The level of fear of the authorities in Poland was low compared to the period of Stalinization right after World War II and to many other socialist countries.

5 In my thesis *Unikuvia puolalaisuudesta* (2004) I divide the culture of socialist Poland into three categories: *officially prohibited*, *tolerated* and *desirable*. *Officially prohibited* signified prohibition by the censorship, *tolerated* meant allowed by the censorship, but not ideal from the point of view of the authorities and *desirable* was meeting the requirements of the socialist culture set by the authorities. For more information, see *Unikuvia puolalaisuudesta* (2004), University of Turku, Cultural History, p. 12-13.

and performed the play in 1974-76. Teatr STU was originally a student theatre but it gained the status of a professional – though minor - theatre when they performed *Sennik polski*. Artistically the theatre was rooted in the marginal culture: in the *tolerated* experimental Polish theatre and the rebel youth culture of the socialist country. On the other hand, Teatr STU was in many ways in the centre of the marginality, as it was a well known theatre that participated actively in the cultural life and attended several theatre festivals even abroad. Therefore it can be argued that the role of the play performed by Teatr STU could lead to the formation of the identity of the mainstream marginality of the urban youth.



*Sennik polski* observes Polishness from several points of view. By comparing the Poles to the French and the Russians *Sennik polski* is reflecting a stereotypical Pole situated between East and West. The play describes Poles of the time of performing the play from the viewpoint of the marginal movement of young artists of *nowa fala*<sup>6</sup>, whose main message was to speak out loud about the problems of the practice of Communism in Poland. The play hints at the situation where Poles are not happy as the allies of the Soviet Union and criticizes the reactions of the authorities to the protests of the people. Among other aspects brought into discussion by the play is the tradition of romantic nationalism.

The manuscript of *Sennik polski* looks back to the tradition of romantic nationalism and public discussions provoked by it since early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the main characters of *Sennik polski* have the same names as the heroes of known Polish plays.<sup>7</sup> The names of the characters point at

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6 *Nowa fala* (also called *pokolenie '68* or *młoda kultura*) was a movement of young artists (poets, musicians, film directors, artists, etc.) at the end of the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s that wanted to describe in their art the gap between the communist ideology and the practice of it in Poland. They criticized the older generations of artists of closing their eyes to the social problems.

7 Name of Konrad comes from *Forefather's Eve* (1823/1832) by Adam Mickiewicz, Kordian from *Kordian* (1834) by Juliusz Słowacki, and Jasiek from *The Wedding* (1901) by Stanisław Wyspiański.

different views of understanding Polishness in Polish literature and debates on the national questions of rebellion against foreign authorities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even when describing Poland in the 1970s the play reflects on the political situation through the old national ideals.

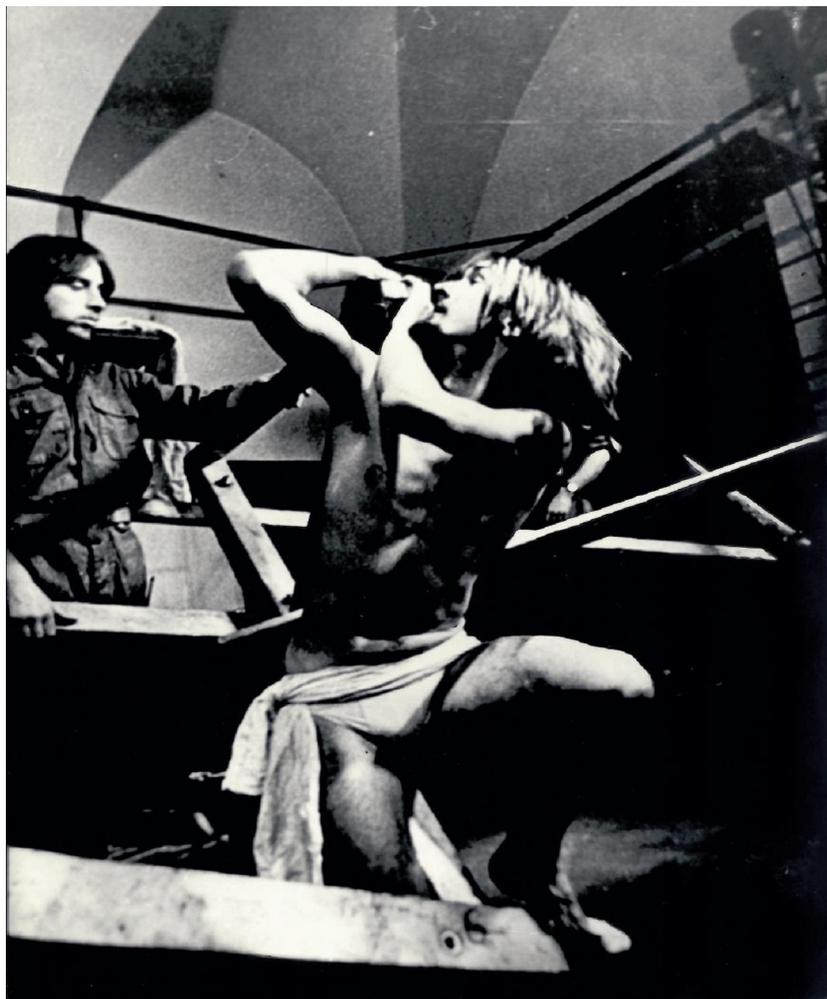
Musicie walczyć za Polskę, Francję i świat cały i musicie zwyciężyć. Niech was Matka Boska Częstochowska ma w swojej opiece i niech was Bóg prowadzi.<sup>8</sup>

You'll have to fight for Poland, France and the whole world and you'll need to win. May the Mother of God of Częstochowa protect you and God lead you.

This extract from the script is a good example of presentations of romantic nationalism in *Sennik polski*. Another aspect of the romantic national tradition is the myth of Poland as the last bastion of the West against foreign, Eastern invaders. As the Poles have been protecting Europe in battles against the Tatars, Turks and Orthodox Russians, according to this myth they also protect Catholic culture and values of the West. A well known national and religious symbol is the icon of Black Madonna in the monastery of Jasna Góra in Częstochowa. It was crowned as Queen of Poland after it miraculously saved the Poles in a battle against protestant Swedish troops in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It therefore symbolizes the special auspices of the Virgin Mary to the Catholic nation of the Poles.

Strong religious symbols in the nationalistic tradition of *Sennik polski* were not ideal in a socialist society which based its ideology on atheism and a scientific world view. According to the Marxist-Leninist theories nationalistic thinking was supposed to have vanished after the establishing of the communist regime. Pointing to the myth of Poland as the last bastion of the West can be interpreted as Poles fighting against the Soviet invaders from the East and as the protection of the Virgin Mary needed for the nation of Poles also in socialist Poland of the 1970s. By using strong religious and nationalistic symbols in the play, Teatr STU brought into discussion symbols of Polishness that the

authorities would have preferred to forget and did so in a way that could be interpreted as a challenge to the point of view of the authorities.



To fight for Poland, as seen in the quotations above, can be interpreted not only as fighting against the external enemy, but also as insurrection, as fighting against the illegitimate authorities. The Polish tradition and mythology of insurrection is in focus also in other parts of *Sennik polski*. According to this myth, the fate of each generation of Poles is to rise and fight for the freedom of their country. The myth was born after divisions of Poland at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. There were uprisings against the new authorities in 1794, 1830-31, 1848 and 1863 and the insurrection myth was also strongly represented in the literature and poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In *Sennik polski* different aspects of the insurrection tradition are revised and it is not always seen

from a serious point of view. There are funny situations arising from the different interpretations of the myth. The discussion of 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland on the right way to react in various situations in the home country – to fight against the occupiers or to surrender to martyrdom – is repeated in the play in several stages.

The core aim of *Sennik polski* is to show to the public how the insurrection tradition is still topical in the mid 1970s when the play was performed. The scriptwriters, director and actors of the play belonged to the generation of students, who participated in the demonstrations and student revolts of 1968 and whose belief in the authorities was crushed during that period. They felt a strong cohesion with the rebels of previous generations of Poles. This created an identity of marginality: although socialist mythology also contains a tradition of uprising, during the time of performing *Sennik polski* the socialist revolution was part of the language of the authorities. Highlighting the romantic uprising tradition could be interpreted as rebellion against the authorities of the socialist regime. This is clearly seen in the play where the nationalistic symbols are used in a different way from what the authorities wanted, from the *desirable* culture used.

Mr. Edward Chudziński, one of the scriptwriters of *Sennik polski* that I had the opportunity to interview while staying in Poland, told me that Teatr STU and the cultural scene surrounding it were mainly rebellious in a cultural and aesthetic sense, not aiming at straight-forward political action. By bringing into discussion aspects of social questions that were not discussed by the *desired* culture they were establishing a broader understanding of Polishness in a socialist country.

When the socialist regime was established in Poland after World War II, one of the main focuses of the authorities was to build a new, socialist way of thinking. By renewing the education policy, controlling the media and culture and trying to destroy the old cultural structures – such as the Catholic Church and the old ways of thinking - they tried to achieve this goal. That is why the active destruction of symbols representing the old mentality was so important to the authorities. Reminding people of these symbols, as *Sennik polski* does, was an extremely political and rebellious gesture of opposition to the authorities. By using and processing the nationalistic symbols, that were condemned as old and outdated by the authorities, the marginal theatre created a new way of seeing them. They took the power of defining what is important to Polishness and what is not, what is worth remembering and what is not, from the hands of the political authorities into their own hands. By devaluating the authority of the regime to define their identity, the political opposition gained genuine authority in the country. As Barbara Törnquist Plewa has shown in her research, *The Wheel of Polish Fortune* (1992), the romantic insurrection tradition was effectively used by the rising opposition at the end of the 1970s, mainly the Solidarity movement.

