

The 1956 Poznań protests

ARTYKUŁ

## ***Goodfella*. Robert De Niro pays tribute to the participants of the Poznań June protests of 1956**

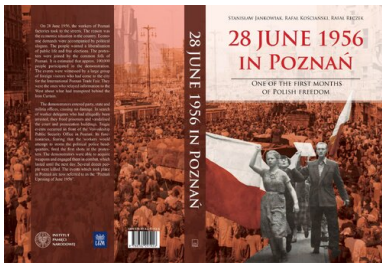
Author: **RAFAŁ RECZEK** 10.07.2023

He is a two-times Oscar winner, a movie director, producer, but first and foremost one of the greatest actors of his generation. There is no need for further introductions of Robert De Niro. However, not many people know about his deep respect for the difficult, but heroic pages of Polish history — a feeling which the actor decided to emphasise with a moving gesture.

Who among us doesn't know the incredible roles of one of cinema's living geniuses, Robert De Niro?

We can easily name the unforgettable *Taxi Driver* or the *Raging Bull* from Martin Scorsese's pictures and that would be enough, because with just these roles Robert De Niro cemented his place among the cinema's greats and became one of Hollywood's biggest stars. And he still has had plenty of other amazing performances and the recognition of both the audiences and critics alike, as well as two Oscars for his extraordinary roles.

But it is not his film achievements which I wish to write about in this article, but rather his interest and fascination of Poland's history and his visit to Poznań. Not many people know of Robert De Niro's gestures of sympathy for Poles and our past experiences.



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**English language publication, 28 June 1956 in Poznań. One of the first months of Polish freedom, by Stanisław Jankowiak, Rafał Kościński, Rafał Reczek, of the Institute of National Remembrance and Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań**

### **As Wojciech Fibak's guest**

This incredible actor visited Poland multiple times at the invitation of his friend, a great tennis player, one of the best in Polish history, Wojciech Fibak. He recalled:

„Robert De Niro visited me twice in Poznań.”

These were both private visits, in Fibak's family home, but also official with historical meaning.

Robert De Niro's first visit to Poland came in 1989, when our country was taking its first steps on the road to freedom. During this eventful visit, on September 21, 1989, Robert De Niro met with Lech Wałęsa in Gdańsk. During this almost two-hour long meeting, attended by, among others, Wojciech Fibak and Gustaw Holoubek (famous Polish actor), they talked about the future of Poland. Then, on the very same day, Robert De Niro went to the Monument for the Fallen Shipyard Workers and the shipyard's gate, to see with his own eyes the place of the 1980 August Strikes, which brought us the "Solidarity" movement. On September 23, Robert De Niro also visited Oświęcim, where he laid flowers in tribute to the victims of the former Nazi German concentration camp.



**Poznań Newspaper, issue no. 99,  
27.04.1992, archives of the  
Poznań University Library. The  
headline says: Robert De Niro:  
our spiritual "god father"**

We can compare these beautiful gestures of solidarity and respect to similar moments from 1981, when many great and famous people from the world of politics and culture, including many Hollywood stars, showed their unity with Poles after the introduction of the martial law in our country by the communists.

The next visit of Robert De Niro in Poland took place several years later, when he came to Poznań at the invitation of Wojciech Fibak, at the time the owner of the *Poznań Newspaper*, on April 26, 1992. Although it was only a short, four-hour long visit, it also had a historical aspect to it. When journalists asked him about his sympathy to Poland, De Niro responded by saying:

“I like your country, I am fascinated with its history.”

As Wojciech Fibak recalls:

“Robert has always been eager to come to Poland, he values and likes Poles for their history, romanticism. We spoke many times about our various historical achievements.”



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Przy pomniku „Poznańskiego Czerwca”.

Fot. Z. Ceglarek

zbieg okoliczności, w przyszłości może być zupełnie inaczej. Nie miałbym nic przeciwko temu.

#### Milczenie

Pod Pomnikiem Ofiar Czerwca 1956 Robert de Niro składa wiązanek kwiatów. Milczy. Ten gest nie wymaga komentarzy.

dwie godziny, a to przecież jeszcze nie koniec programu wizyty.

#### Muzyka i prezenty

Czy podobał się panu ten koncert? — pytam po drodze na ulicy Koźlą. — Nie — odpowiada szczerze aktor — ja lubię tylko współczesną muzykę rozrywkową. W jednym z najelegantszych po-

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## In memory of the Poznań June, 1956

Then, one particular event stood out of many meetings of this unique visit. Robert De Niro paid tribute to the participants of the protests of Poznań workers in front of the Monument of the Victims of the 1956 Poznań June. Here is how the *Poznań Newspaper* described the event at the time:

“Robert De Niro lays flowers in front of the Monument of the Victims of June 1956. He is silent. No words are needed.”

This press note is enigmatic, perhaps one could add some more emotions to it, but this is not about words, but rather something more important. These gestures are very important mostly due to their symbolic and human nature, which is their greatest value. They are the conduits of memory and help promote history through the context of the person who makes them.

Robert De Niro’s visit was noted by the media and thus the information about the visit to the Monument of the Victims of Poznań June 1956 reached a wider audience, at the same time spreading the story about the people of the June protests. On the eve of the anniversary of the protests of June 28, 1956, Robert De Niro wrote his own epilogue to the story by delivering his message to the citizens of Poznań. These words have special meaning and we, Poles, are grateful to their author.



**Poznań Newspaper, issue no. 102, 30.04.1992 — 01.05.1992, archives of the Poznań University Library. The headline says: *Four hours with Robert De Niro*. The article describes the visit of Robert De Niro and laying of flowers in front of the Monument of the Victims of the 1956 Poznań June, as well as various meetings**

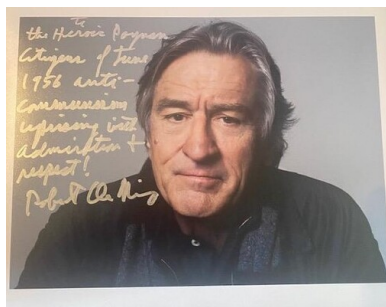
But Robert De Niro also mentioned the workers' protest in Poznań in recent times. How did that happen? In 2022, we had the 30th anniversary of the actor's visit to Poznań. While looking through the archive materials, I thought it would be something truly special if Robert De Niro sent us a gesture of sympathy or a kind word regarding the events of 1956. After some effort I managed to get the phone number of Mister Wojciech Fibak and, knowing about their friendship, I sent him a message. I did it rather anxiously; I explained my intentions and asked if this dream wasn't too bold, especially coming from an employee of the Institute of National Remembrance who was anonymous to the recipient.

To my surprise, even though I had great hopes, Mister Wojciech Fibak responded to my message after a few days. After we had several conversations and I presented the context of my idea, he agreed to help me and relay my request to Robert De Niro. Several weeks had passed and I received the following message from Mister Fibak:

"We got it."

There was a picture of Robert De Niro attached to the message with a special tribute:

“To the heroic Poznan Citizens of June 1956 anti-communism uprising with admiration and respect! Robert De Niro”



**Picture of Robert De Niro with inscription, author's collection**

Apart from thanking Mister Robert De Niro in the name of the participants of June 28, 1956, citizens of Poznań and Poles, I also wish to thank Mister Wojciech Fibak. Without him, we wouldn't be able to fulfil that dream, and it was worth trying.

We offer these words and this picture to the participants of the protest of liberty and to the citizens of Poznań!

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