



ARTYKUŁ

Against the total tyranny of evil. Ryszard Siwiec (1909-1968)

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In January, 1969 the whole world was shocked with the news of Jan Palach's death, who called himself the "living torch no. 1". At that time, not many people knew, that the first person to set itself on fire in the Eastern bloc was Ryszard Siwiec.

As time passed, Siwiec's story became more and more famous. His protest was described in the French "Le Nouvel Observateur" weekly already in January 1969, and only after a few weeks the Polish division of the Radio Free Europe informed about the events that took place at the 10th-Anniversary Stadium. In 1981,

Siwiec's family ordered a brochure entitled "September 8th, 1968. A living torch at the 10th-Anniversary Stadium. On the 13th anniversary of the death of Ryszard Siwiec, to all who value the truth." Ten years later, Maciej Drygas remarkably recalled the story of Siwiec in a documentary "Usłyszcie mój krzyk" ("Hear my cry") and a radio play "Testament". Ryszard Siwiec was given post-mortem medals from the presidents of the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. In 2010, Petr Blažek published an album summarising historians' knowledge on the subject.

Ryszard Siwiec's act, apart from the self-immolation of Jan Palach, is one of the best described protests of that kind today. However, it doesn't bring us any closer to grasping what seems impossible to understand – the choice to die horribly as an ultimate form of protest against evil.

Ryszard Siwiec was born on March 7th 1909, in Dębica. Following his father's death, he moved to Lviv with his mother where he finished high school and graduated from the Humanities department at the Jan Kazimierz University. Then, he got a job at the tax office, first in Lviv and then in Przemyśl, where he settled. During the German occupation he worked in a factory and then became a manager in a grocery store. He was also a soldier of the Polish Home Army.

After the war had ended, he refused a job offer from a school, because he decided that "he won't be teaching nonsense". Soon, he founded a wine and beer brewery with Jan Wojnarowicz, where (despite the nationalisation of enterprises) he worked until the end of his days. In 1945, he married Maria with whom he had 5 children (Innocenta, Elżbieta, Wit, Adam and Mariusz). His family and friends remembered him as a good and religious man, standing by his values, passionate about history and collecting literature.

A key to understanding Ryszard Siwiec's act is not; however, hidden in the story of his life, which despite many interesting facts was quite typical for his generation, but in the analysis of the events from September 8th, 1968.

A precise plan

Siwiec never came to terms with the forced implementation of the Communist system in Poland. He criticised the post-war reality in conversations with his friends; he decided to act due to the events of March 1968. At that time, he prepared leaflets signed "Jan Polak", which he sent to recipients unknown to us today, with the help of his daughter. Another, decisive blow was the intervention of the Warsaw Pact forces in Czechoslovakia. In the following weeks, Siwiec prepared and executed a precise plan of the protest – notes from his preparations were found by his family after his death.

First and foremost, he wanted the protest to be noticed by as many people as possible. That is why he chose to set himself on fire at the 10th-anniversary stadium during the Harvest Festival, with the highest-ranking state authorities present. In his notes, he wrote with relief – "entry pass to the stadium – finally done". He

chose the appropriate flammable substance and clothes. He prepared a white and red flag with "For our freedom and yours. Honour and Homeland." written on it, as well as a few dozen pamphlets, which were to inform people gathered there why he decided to take such a dramatic step. Unfortunately, the flyers were destroyed by the Communist secret services. From the documents that remained untouched, we only know that the pamphlets' opening words were "I protest against the unprovoked aggression on the brotherly country of Czechoslovakia", and the ending sentence "I'm dying, so freedom doesn't die!".

THE MESSAGE OF RYSZARD SIWIEC:

"To the authorities and officials of the Soviet Union; to the working masses, the farmers and factory workers of the Soviet Union. To the intellectuals and poets of the Soviet Union. To the youth - the future of all nations. Lenin said: any country that enslaves other nations is doomed to fall. That's nothing new. It's an old, eternal rule of history, the rule of growth and development. Do you think that your empire won't fall, simply because you called enslavement of other nations: a liberation? Because a lie you call the truth? Because you proclaim slavery to be freedom; a total tyranny of irresponsible rulers - a democracy? Because you replaced people exploiting other people, with people being totally exploited by a single moloch, a capitalist - and then proceeded to call it socialism? Because your fight to control the world you named a fight for peace? I ask: Why are you so certain, that it is you and only you, in the history of all mankind, who will manage to build and sustain an empire based on violence, wrongdoings and injustice? What country, what nation having the freedom of choice has chosen a system based on yours? No country, no nation. Your system, the system built on bayonets and brought to

other countries in Red Army's tanks, the system brutally forced upon those countries and sustained with violence is neither the dictatorship of the proletariat, nor communism, nor socialism, nor democracy. Any price is worth paying, so that such system doesn't take over the world. People, people wake up! The youth, the future of all nations. Don't let yourself be slaughtered every 20 years, so that some parties could or couldn't rule. Don't let yourself be murdered, so this or that group of people could get total power. People, who have not yet forgotten the most beautiful word in the world <<mother>>! People, who perhaps still have a spark of human emotions inside them. Hear my cry! Cry of a grey, ordinary man, a son of a nation which beloved its own and others' freedom above all, above its own life. Come to your senses! It is not too late yet."

Knowing he was going to die, Siwec also took care of all his worldly and religious matters. He went to confession and prepared his last will, in which he movingly addressed his children (among other things, he wrote "Don't ever let your faith in God be taken away from you, nor the faith in mankind, nor the faith in seeking freedom and truth") and elaborated on his goal - "after a long fight with my thoughts and careful consideration, I decided to protest against the total tyranny of evil, hate and lies which is taking over the world".

All in all, the most important element of his preparations was the message Siwec recorded on an audio tape with the help of his friends. He counted on it being sent to Radio Free Europe after his death, to be emitted by the station. The heart-breaking message came without doubt from Siwec's previous thoughts. Among the people he mentioned, were not only the participants of the March '68 protests, but also the Communist government officials and their subordinate propagandists and the society and authorities of the Soviet Union. The message, apart from historical references, included an analysis of the international, political scene and the sinister role played by the Soviet Union during that time. Siwec, many years before the famous speech given by the US president Ronald Reagan, used a phrase later popularised by the head of the United States -

“the empire created by you is the complete opposite of everything that’s good, because it’s the evil empire, based on hatred, lies, terror and contempt for people under you”.

Despite his fear for the fate of the world, Siwiec was certain that Communism would fall. He showed that in his words directed at the Soviet leaders:

“I ask: Why are you so certain, that it is you and only you, in the history of all mankind, who will manage to build and sustain an empire based on violence, wrongdoings and injustice? How can you think, that it will be you who will bring an end to ideals, truth, freedom, nobleness, man’s eternal desire for something bigger, something greater?”

Siwiec also referred to the invasion of Czechoslovakia, calling it a disgrace many times. He ended his dramatic message by saying:

“People, who have not yet forgotten the most beautiful word in the world <<mother>>! People, who perhaps still have a spark of human emotions inside them! Hear my cry! Cry of a grey, ordinary man, a son of a nation which beloved its own and others’ freedom above all, above its own life! Come to your senses! It is not too late yet!”.

“There was no other way”

In the evening prior to the Harvest Festival, Siwiec said his goodbyes to his family and left for Warsaw in a train. When he was arriving at the capital, he wrote a letter to his wife. The Communist secret services intercepted the letter, so Maria Siwiec learned what he wrote only after the fall of Communism:

“My beloved Marysia! Don’t cry! You’re going to need your strength. I’m certain, that I’ve lived all my 60 years of life just for this moment. I’m sorry, there was no other way, or the truth, humanity and freedom would perish. This is lesser evil than the deaths of millions. Don’t come to Warsaw, no one and nothing will

help me now. We're arriving to Warsaw, I'm writing in a train that's why my handwriting looks bad. I feel so good, I have such peace inside me – like never before! [...]”.

At the stadium he sat in sector 13 (he had a ticket for sector 37) to be on the opposite side of the VIP lodge. When the folklore groups begun dancing, he poured a flammable substance over himself and set on fire. While burning alive, he screamed “I protest” and pushed away people who tried to put out the flames. When all his clothes burned down, he was still shouting to witnesses around him; an officer of the secret services noted that he screamed “Long live Free Poland”. “It’s a cry of a free, dying man”, “Don’t save me, look what I have in my bag”. The last scream was connected with the fact that Siwec hadn’t scattered his pamphlets, perhaps out of the fear of being arrested before his act. After some time, he was transported to a hospital in a secret service’s car. The protest itself was recorded (a few seconds) by a cameraman of the Polish Film Chronicle, a few pictures were taken by Leszek Łożyński and the best recording was done by the officers of the “B” Office of the Ministry of Interior (almost 90 seconds of the recording was saved). Of the few dozen self-immolation acts in the history of the Soviet bloc, only Ryszard Siwec’s act was so well documented, and the remaining film materials make a unique and moving historical source.

Having burned almost 80% of his body, Siwec was under constant invigilation until his dying breath, everything he said was being recorded. Officers of the Przemyśl Communist secret service searched his home and an investigation was conducted in Warsaw concerning the distribution of Siwec’s flyers, which “included false information about the social-political situation of the People’s Republic of Poland. Which could cause public unrest”. Witnesses were being convinced that the self-immolation was done by an unstable individual.

Ryszard Siwec, who remained conscious and once again explained his reasons in the recorded talks with the secret service, died just after midnight in the night from September 11th to 12th. Even though, thousands of people witnessed the act, no information about the protest was released to the media. In Warsaw, there were some rumours circling about a self-immolation done during the harvest festival, but hardly anyone knew who and why decided to take such a dramatic step. Ryszard Siwec’s message never reached the West.

Heroism, which inspires

Even though, Siwec’s plan was not realised the way he wanted, it helps us understand his goals and reasons behind his desperate deed. There is no doubt, that Siwec acted in a well-thought, consistent way. It appears he believed that no other form of protest would be as effective as self-immolation – also witnessing the students’ protests failing in March ’68 and the lack of results with his own actions (pamphlets) - that’s what might have pushed him towards taking such a dramatic step. Siwec’s goal was not the protest itself, but the desire to move the consciences of Poles and other nations. The self-immolation, an act difficult to comprehend for anyone, was supposed to be completed by the message, which aired by the Western media would become known across the whole Eastern bloc. It’s easy to imagine, that following such a message there

would be more people, moved by Siwiec's death, ready to protest against the intervention in Czechoslovakia. Jan Palach had a similar and partially successful plan, since he motivated the Czechs and Slovaks to resist the occupying forces, at least for a short time.

Ryszard Siwiec did not fulfil his plan. Protests against the intervention died out, both in Poland and in other countries. However, it doesn't mean that his sacrifice was for nothing. His heroism is admirable even today; the number of people interested in the story of life and death of this extra-ordinary man proves it.

Article from no. 9/2013 of the "Pamięć.pl" monthly

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