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Polish Theatre in the Time of War (1939–1945). Fight—Will to Survive—Losses—Legacy[1]

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Abstract: During World War II Polish theatre people took an active part in the fight with both Germany and the Soviet Union. Several of them fought with a weapon in hand as officers and soldiers of Polish armies in the September 1939 campaign, later as combatants of the Home Army (AK), and also within Polish armed forces fighting abroad. Many more fought with a weapon of the word. While boycotting German sponsored stages in the General Government, they created the whole network of small underground theatre groups. Two major centers of this activity were Warsaw, where the Clandestine Theatre Council (Bohdan Korzeniewski, Leon Schiller, Edmund Wierciński and others) organized and sponsored underground theatre productions and acting studios, and Kraków with The Rhapsodic Theatre (led by Mieczysław Kotlarczyk), The Independent Theatre (led by Tadeusz Kantor), and a circle of artists and apprentices gathered around Juliusz Osterwa, who frequently gave one-man shows. Productions were also prepared in German oflags and concentration camps. The great actor Stefan Jaracz performed for fellow inmates in Auschwitz, Zofia Rysiówna in Ravensbrück, and Roman Niewiarowicz in Dachau. Such productions were recorded also in Soviet camps (gulag system). Soldier theatres were organized at the Gen. Anders Second Corp, then also at the Polish forces under Soviet command. Losses of Polish theatre due to the war were staggering. In terms of material losses, The National Theatre in Warsaw was bombed by the Lufwaffe on September 19, 1939, and eventually Poland lost about 70% of theatre buildings standing in August 1939, plus their libraries, sets and costumes magazines, etc. In terms of human losses, about 300 theatre professionals died (out of about 2000 in 1939). Some were killed in military actions, some murdered in either German or Soviet camps. The losses in the spiritual domain were uncountable. Theatre artists were deprived of the possibility to perform, thus executing their profession and vocation. Theatre spectators were left without their artistic nourishment. The struggles, sacrifices, and deeds of the war-time Polish theatre had a profound influence on the history of Polish theatre of the second half of the 20th century. They were not only an important element of the nation's war-effort, but—indirectly— contributed to the restoration of Poland's freedom at the end of the 20th century.

Key words: underground theatre, boycott, soldier's theatres, material losses, human losses, spiritual losses, legacy

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Teatr polski w czasach II wojny światowej (1939–1945). Walka – wola przetrwania – straty – spuścizna

Abstrakt: W czasach II wojny światowej polscy ludzie teatru wzięli aktywny udział w walce zarówno z Niemcami, jak i Związkiem Sowieckim. Wielu z nich walczyło z bronią w ręku w Kampanii Wrześniowej 1939 r., a potem jako żołnierze Armii Krajowej. Niektórzy służyli w Polskich Siłach Zbrojnych za granicami kraju. Prawie całe środowisko teatralne (z małymi wyjątkami) walczyło natomiast bronią słowa. Bojkotując przedstawienia oficjalnie dozwolone przez okupanta niemieckiego i starając się nie poddać zarządzeniom okupanta sowieckiego, ludzie teatru stworzyli sieć teatru podziemnego na terenie całego kraju. W Warszawie utworzono Tajną Radę Teatralną (Bohdan Korzeniewski, Leon Schiller, Edmund Wierciński i inni), grano tajne przedstawienia i prowadzono tajne studia aktorskie. W Krakowie działały podziemnie: Teatr Rapsodyczny (prowadzony przez Mieczysława Kotlarczyka), Teatr Niezależny (stworzony przez Tadeusza Kantora), oraz środowisko skupione wokół Juliusza Osterwy, który dawał przedstawienia „teatru jednego aktora", uczył aktorstwa, prowadził kursy w seminariach duchownych oraz spisał plany powołania dwóch zakonów teatralnych, zwanych „Genezja" i „Dal". Przedstawienia były również przygotowywane w niemieckich oflagach oraz obozach koncentracyjnych. Stefan Jaracz występował dla współwięźniów w Auschwitz, Zofia Rysiówna w Ravensbrück, Roman Niewiarowicz w Dachau. Podobne, choć rzadsze przedstawienia zanotowano także w sowieckich obozach dla oficerów i w łagrach. Teatry grające dla żołnierzy oraz polskich cywilów powstały w 2 Korpusie gen. Władysława Andersa i innych polskich formacjach wojskowych na Zachodzie, a także przy polskim wojsku pod komendą sowiecką. Straty materialne teatru polskiego spowodowane wojną były ogromne. Teatr Narodowy w Warszawie został zbombardowany przez Luftwaffe 19 września 1939 r. Ogólnie Polska straciła ok. 70% budynków teatralnych oraz teatralne biblioteki, magazyny dekoracji i kostiumów itp. Straty ludzkie wyniosły ok. 300 zawodowych ludzi teatru (na ok. 2000 w 1939 r.). Niektórzy padli w walkach (jak Ludwik Berger). Inni zostali zamordowanych w więzieniach (jak Nina Veight) i obozach niemieckich (jak Mieczysław Węgrzyn) lub sowieckich (jak Eugeniusz Bodo). Straty duchowe są nie do policzenia: artyści zostali pozbawieni możliwości realizowania swego powołania i praktykowania zawodu, a widzowie strawy duchowej i przeżyć artystycznych. Walka, ofiary, działania i plany ludzi teatru czasu wojny miały głęboki wpływ na historię polskiego teatru w II połowie XX w. Przyczyniły się – choć nie bezpośrednio – do przechowania polskiej tożsamości narodowej w czasach rządów komunistycznych i do odzyskania przez Polskę niepodległości w końcu XX w.

Słowa kluczowe: teatr podziemny, bojkot, teatry żołnierskie, straty materialne, straty ludzkie, straty duchowe, spuścizna

An Actor-soldier Story

On September 1, 1939, in the morning, a star-actress, Jadwiga Domańska, went to her theatre in Katowice for the last dress rehearsal of *Defense of Xanthippe* by Ludwik H. Morstin in which she performed the lead. Yet, from 5 a.m. bomb explosions were heard from the Muchowiec Airport and frantic voices on the radio informed that German armed forces were

attacking Silesia from the south and the west. The rehearsal went on, but the opening, scheduled for the next day, was called off because on September 2, due to overwhelming pressure by the enemy, the Polish Kraków Army decided not to take a stand in Silesia, but to withdraw north. Thousands of civilians also decided to move towards central Poland. Domańska was one of them.

She arrived in Warsaw. In November 1939, she joined the underground Union of Armed Struggle (Związek Walki Zbrojnej), took the oath, and became a soldier. Her duties included dispatch-travels between German-occupied Warsaw and Soviet occupied Wilno.

In March 1940, Domańska was arrested by the Soviets while crossing the border between the German and the Soviet zones. She was sentenced to eight years and sent to a camp (gulag) near Novosibirsk. In October 1941, thanks to the Sikorski-Stalin[2] treaty, she was released and immediately joined the Polish troops (later known as the Second Corps) organized in the Soviet Union under the auspices of the London-based Polish government-in-exile.

In the Spring of 1943, the Commander of the 2nd Corps, General Władysław Anders, appointed Domańska the manager of the newly-created "Dramatic Theatre of the 2nd Corps", as it was called. She organized a fully professional theatre company, counting about fifty actors, plus sizable technical staff—all former Soviet prisoners, including the distinguished director Wacław Radulski. After appropriate training Domańska earned the rank of lieutenant. Her theatre preformed for Polish troops and for civilians in Iraq, Palestine, and Italy, ending its Odyssey in London after the war. In Domanska's story we have in capsule both a typical and a symbolic journey of a Polish theatre artist during World War II: theatre—underground military service—imprisonment in gulag—overt military service—theatre again.[3]

Here, I should add that besides the Dramatic Theatre of the 2nd Corps, several smaller acting companies were active within the Polish Army in the West. Also the Soldier's Theatre was created at the Polish troops[4] organized by the Soviet Union in 1943. Additionally, several Polish civilian acting companies performed for their compatriots scattered by the war all over the world. Such companies were active in Romania, France, Great Britain, Canada, the United States, and Brazil.[5]

[2] Formally: Sikorski – Mayski treaty. It was, of course, the treaty between Sikorski and Stalin.

[3] Domańska's journey had a long, bitter finale: Betrayed by the Allies thousands of brave Polish soldiers were turned into abandoned political refugees. They could not return to their country now ruled by the Soviet-installed Communist regime. But this was after the war, so I will not discuss this chapter of Domańska's life, similar to that of so many of her brothers and sisters in arms.

[4] "The Kościuszko Army" organized in 1943—First Division, later also Second Division.

[5] Irena Eichlerówna was a great star of Lwów's and Warsaw's stages. She first performed in Polish shows in Brazil, then made a splendid career on Rio de Janeiro stages.

Why did Domańska join the underground military in the country and later rushed from the gulag to the Polish Armed Forces organized on Soviet soil?

First, she called upon her family's patriotic tradition. Her three older brothers[6] were volunteer soldiers fighting the Bolsheviks in the War of 1920. The oldest, Kazimierz, earlier was a soldier in Pilsudski's Legions, and later one of the first Polish "aviators" (as they were called). He was killed in 1920.

Second, Domańska cherished the old Polish theatre tradition—the theatre being a stronghold of national values and language. During the time of partitions (1793-1918), when Poland did not exist politically, ruled by Russia, Austria, and Prussia (later Germany), the nation was subjected to the aggressive Russification or Germanization, which included imposition of Russian or German as the official language in all areas of public life. Only in two public institutions was the Polish language still publicly used and heard: in the Roman-Catholic churches and in the theatres. The Church used Latin in the liturgies and sacraments, but readings, homilies, and songs resounded in Polish. Theatres, in all three partitions, performed in Polish. In this way theatre became a repository of the national spirit and the symbol of resistance. Historians have differed in explanations as to why the Polish language was not banned in the churches and the theatres—were the partitioners afraid of encroaching on these two precious and popular sanctuaries? Or did they fail to appreciate their importance? In any case the fact remains: In the collective memory of the nation theatre in Poland acquired special dignity and took on responsibilities over and above purely artistic or entertaining ones. The notion of "service"—service to the nation—became inseparably linked with creating theatre. For Domańska, and scores of her colleagues, military service was a logical and obvious continuation of their theatre service. Also, continuing to perform underground or in soldier theatres, was treated by them as a noble duty.

Let us now go back to the first days of the war and join Domańska when she arrived in Warsaw on September 5, 1939. This will show us the situation of the Polish theatre since the German attack on Poland, September 1st, followed by the Soviet invasion on September 17th .

Fighting with a weapon in hand

The first part of the discussion is dedicated to those theatre people who actually fought with a weapon in hand, who served in the Polish Armed Forces. If they were actors or directors, as well as theatre technicians or craftsmen, they were typically in the reserve before the war and were mobi-

[6] Jadwiga Domańska's (1907–1996) maiden name: Braun. She had three brothers: Kazimierz (1899–1920), Jerzy (1901–1974), Juliusz (1904–1990, my father).

lized at the end of August 1939, or earlier. When the war broke out they took part in the fighting.

After the September '39 campaign, all these people—generally speaking—had three choices in front of them: Some moved abroad and continued their military service; some remained in the country and joined the underground resistance; some became prisoners of war and were either sent to the gulag's camps or were exterminated by the Soviets (let us remember the Katyń Massacre of 22,000 Polish officers), or to German stalags (POW camps for soldiers) and oflags (POW camps for officers).

As an example of a typical biography of an actor-soldier during World War II we can consider the case of Captain Aleksander Żabczyński. He was trained as an artillery officer, but chose acting career and transferred to the reserve. In the 1930s he became one of the brightest stars of Warsaw's stages and a beloved silver screen hero. Mobilized in August 1939, he fought the Germans, never surrendered, and went with his unit to Romania where he was interned. He escaped and joined the Polish forces in France. He fought in the German-French war of 1940. He was evacuated to England. From there he was transferred to General Anders' Second Corps and fought in the battle of Monte Cassino (1944) where he was wounded. After the war he returned to Poland and resumed his acting career.

Actors, who before the war were officers in the reserve, were mobilized, fought in the September '39 campaign, and remained in the country had different biographies. Several of them became soldiers of the Home Army[7] and fought the enemy weapon in hand. Here, the most notable example was Major Roman Niewiarowicz—a well-known playwright, actor, and director. He returned from the battlefields to Warsaw, joined the underground Polish military and became head of an intelligence unit of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), taking part also in armed actions. Arrested by Gestapo in 1943, he was imprisoned, tortured, and sent to the concentration camp in Gross-Rosen. He survived the camp, returned to Poland, and resumed his theatre career.

Numerous theatre people—actors, directors, and designers, along with some playwrights—who were officers and fought in 1939, were taken prisoners of war, and found themselves either in German oflags or Soviet camps. They had to lay down their arms. But they remained soldiers.

[7] Actors who were soldiers of the Home Army: Zbigniew Blichiewicz, Irena Mora-Brzezińskia, Ziemowit Karpiński, Maria Kowalewska, Jerzy Macierakowski, Maria Malanowicz-Niedzielska, Henryk Modrzewski, Jadwiga Litwiniszynowa (later murdered in Ravensbrück), Halina Łuczewska (later imprisoned in Ravensbrück), Mieczysław Orsza-Łukaszewicz, Halina Skarżyńska, Ewa Stojowska, Janusz Strachocki, Andrzej Szalawski, Maria Strońska. Marek Szacki, Feliks Żukowski – according to Janina Hera, p. 317–319, see Bibliography. To name only a few notable artists Home Army soldiers: Halina Łuczewska, Irena Mora-Brzezińska, Janusz Strachocki, Andrzej Szalawski, Feliks Żukowski. See: Janina Hera, p. 317–319, work in Bibliography. On a personal note: As director, I had the privilege to work with Andrzej Szalawski.

In German oflags theatre productions were permitted by German authorities, although severely censored and supervised. Polish shows are recorded in at least thirteen oflags.[8] They included Christmas and Easter theatrical presentations, cabaret performances, revues, and full-scale productions of dramas, with stage scenery, costumes, and props—all visual aspects of the productions had to be, of course, improvised from nothing. Casts consisted of professional actors[9] joined by amateurs trained by their professional colleagues.

Several imprisoned officers were poets, writers or playwrights.[10] They served as "literary managers" of these oflags' "theatres". Playwrights recreated from their memories their own dramas, and also wrote new plays or cabaret scenarios. Other plays were recreated from memory by actors who performed in them before the war. Additional plays were smuggled to the oflags in boxes with food sent by the families.

There are records of oflags' productions of William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*, Pierre Baumarchais' *Figaro's Wedding* and *The Barber of Seville,* Herik Ibsen's *Peer Gint,* Georg Bernard Shaw's *Cleopatra and Caesar,* Aleksander Fredro's *The Revenge,* Cyprian Norwid's *The One Thousand Second Night,* Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Wedding*, Karol Hubert Rostworowski's *Judas* and many others. Their productions usually obtained a very high artistic level. They were enthusiastically received by the spectators-inmates.

Polish theatre productions were also prepared in German stalags (camps for soldiers). Similar, although much more modest productions are recorded in the Soviet camps for Polish officers, as well as in the camps for Polish military interned in Romania, Hungary, and Switzerland.

Fighting with the word as weapon

Several theatre artists who were soldiers of the September 1939 campaign and after it ended took off their uniforms. Some joined the armed resistance in the country as members of the Home Army. But the majority of the theatre milieu fought with their most fitting weapon: the word. Yes, the word. For a theatre artist this was the weapon of choice.

First, however, we have to speak about a different, special, and paradoxical form of fighting with the word as weapon—that of silence. It was a very powerful weapon used by Polish theatre people during to war.

[8] Below I give official names of the oflags: II A Penzlau, XA Itzethe, VII A Murnau, II B Arnswelde, VI B Dössel, X B Sandbostel, II C Woldenberg, X C Lübeck, II D Grossborn-Wesfalenhof, II E Neubrandemburg, VI E Dorsten.

[9] Some actors-oflags' prisoners: Jan Koecher, Witold Korzeniowski, Wiesław Mirecki, Kazimierz Rudzki, Stanisław Wolicki, Janusz Ziejewski and many others.

[10] Among them Stefan Fulkowski, Zdzisław Skowroński, Józef Słotwiński and others.

In October 1939, German authorities ordered all theatre artists in the General Government to register and apply for permits to perform in theatre which the authorities wanted to organize. It was an attempt to make an illusion of the "normalization" of life in the occupied country. In response to this order the Polish Actors Union, functioning underground, ordered its members not to register and not to perform on German-sponsored stages. This decision was confirmed by the Clandestine Theatre Council formedin 1940[11]. This body, composed of the leaders of the theatre milieu,[12] set the professional, political, and moral standards for all theatre people. It organized and sponsored underground productions, underground acting studios, playwriting competitions, and drew plans for the theatre reform after the end of the—as they hoped—victorious for Poland war.

According to the ZASP and the Theatre Council instructions, the majority of theatre artists chose not to register, and—therefore—resigned from practicing their professions. The boycott referred specifically to the German-sponsored theatres, but more generally to all orders of the occupiers. It emboldened thousands. As a result of the boycott scores of actors, singers, dancers, directors, choreographers, conductors, designers, and musicians became jobless. In order to somehow support themselves they worked as waiters, janitors, street-car controllers, manual laborers—young Karol Wojtyła (later Pope John Paul II), an aspiring actor of an underground theatre, worked for about two years in the stone mine near Kraków. A much sought after job in Warsaw in the fall of 1939, was the glazer—because practically all window panes in the city, in houses still standing and in other buildings, were broken during the bombardments.

We have to point out that a small minority of actors did not participate in the boycott and chose to perform on German-controlled stages with repertoire usually veering towards shallow entertainment. Some of these people were persecuted and sentenced to a variety of punishments after the war.

While practically going underground, the theatre milieu moved towards creating clandestine productions, illegal from the point of view of the occupiers and, therefore, threatened by arrest, deportation to a concentration camp, or death.

Historians of theatre count about 200 small, secret groups theatre in between 1939 and 1945, functioning all over Poland within its pre-war borders. Additionally, because all schools of drama were closed, theatre

[11] The Clandestine Theatre Council (Tajna Rada Teatralna) was an agenda of the Polish Underground State, Home Representation of the Polish Government-in-exile. As it is known, the Polish Government-in-exile residing in Paris, then in London, had in the country its underground Home Representation including the executive, the parliament, the judiciary and the military (Home Army) divisions. It also sponsored cultural activities.

[12] Members: Karol Adwentowicz, Dobiesław Damięcki, Stefan Jaracz, Bohdan Korzeniewski, Jan Kreczmar, Andrzej Pronaszko, Leon Schiller, Janusz Warmiński, Edmund Wierciński, Jerzy Zawieyski.

instruction was carried on underground in small studios. Their graduates included several actors who had splendid careers after the war, like Halina Mikołajska, Andrzej Łapicki, Wiktor Sadecki and others.

Underground theatre in General Government

In the German occupied General Government two major centers of underground theatre emerged—Warsaw and Kraków. Best known actors and directors, helped by master-stage designers secretly prepared productions. These were held in private apartments, artists' studios, rectories, or monasteries. The *mise-en-scène* was—of course—very modest. The spectators numbered several dozen at most. But information about these shows circulated very widely uplifting the spirit of resistance of the population.

The repertoire of Warsaw's underground companies was most frequently based on classical national plays, such as Zygmunt Krasiński's *Irydion*, or Juliusz Słowacki's *Kordian*. Pre-war acting stars, like Elżbieta Barszczewska or Wojciech Brydziński, performed. Best pre-war directors, like Marian Wyrzykowski or Edmund Wierciński, directed. Best pre-war designers, like Andrzej Pronaszko or Iwo Gall, prepared scenographies.

Kraków turned out to be the center of the avant-garde. Two theatres created during the war paved the ways for new experimental approaches to theatre creation. The first was The Rhapsodic Theatre and the other The Independent (Niezależny) Theatre.

The Rhapsodic Theatre was created under the auspices of the organization "Union" ("Unia", 1940), headed by the poet and philosopher, Jerzy Braun[13]. The Union was a group of intellectuals, scholars, writers, and theatre artists fighting the occupiers in the field of culture[14]. It published books and cultural magazines. It organized, of course secretly, symposia and discussions. Members of the Union were, among others, Mieczysław Koltarczyk, head of the Rhapsodic Theatre and director of its shows, and a young actor of this theatre, Karol Wojtyła. The productions of the Rhapsodic were based on the word. The word was the main, or sometimes unique, means of expression in the performances, which were based on poetry, prose adaptations, and dramas.

The Independent Theatre was a venture of fine art artists and young actors. Its head was Tadeusz Kantor—painter and stage designer, turned director. He used to create his productions using mostly visual means of expression. During the war he prepared two experimental shows based on *Balladyna* by Słowacki and *Odysseus' Return* by Wyspiański. Both

[13] Jerzy Braun (my uncle), in 1945, was the last Head of the Polish Underground State, the Home Representation of the Polish Government-in-exile.

[14] Later on the Union organized also armed fighting troops.

were performed by companies of actors and painters in a studio of one of the members, Ewa Stebnicka, for about 50 spectators, and repeated many times. The mise-en-scénes—in terms of sets, costumes, movement, and texts delivery—were stylistically abstract.

Kraków's third underground theatre milieu centered around Juliusz Osterwa. He was one of the most prominent figures of Polish pre-war theatre—creator and head of the Reduta Theatre, former manager of the National Theatre in Warsaw and of the Słowackiego Theater in Kraków, leading actor and director. He took part in the defense of Warsaw in September, 1939. Threatened with arrest by the Gestapo he moved to Kraków and gathered a circle of theatre enthusiasts and apprentices. He gave one-man shows based on the soliloquies from classical Polish plays, he taught acting, and gave diction classes in the seminaries for priests. He also penned down projects of two theatre-religious orders.[15] He was not able to materialize these plans after the war in the country ruled by Communists.

Personally, as a child, I had also an experience of attending underground "one-man shows" given in my home by the actor and composer Antoni Żuliński, member of the Rhapsodic Theatre, who performed soliloquies from *The Deliverance* by Wyspiański, reciting them to his own music.

Theatre under Soviet rule

In the Soviet-occupied and later Soviet-annexed Polish territories Polish theatres were permitted to reopen in the Fall of 1939, in Wilno, Lwów, Białystok, Grodno, and Łuck, but were put under strict censorship and political control. Polish classics were prohibited in the repertoire, as well

[15] **To establish new work ethics and transform theater people internally, Osterwa envisaged two theatrical associations, Dal ("Further away") and the Fraternity of St. Genesius or Genezja ("Born again"). Dal was to be a community of theater artists oriented toward service to society through service to art.** A personal vocation to devote one's entire life to theater was to be a precondition for membership. Besides training, rehearsing, and performing in the productions, members were to supervise community groups, teach acting, lecture, preach, and publish theater manuals. They were to work within a cooperative structure, and their way of life was to approach the monastic. **Genezja was to be an artistic-religious order, a brotherhood of theater people, representing the next step up beyond Dal.** Service to God, within the Roman Catholic Church, was to be the first priority in Genezja and the basis of service to society, through the medium of theater. The monk-members were to lead a monastic life, observing religious practices, training as actors, preparing performances with religious themes, and organizing church ceremonies in which they were to participate as lectors, vocalists, and preachers. Both Dal and Genezja were clearly utopian projects, but, like every utopian idea, they challenged the present and contained a seed for the future: a call for total sacrifice to theater and for the subordination of theater itself to higher values. Based on: Kazimierz Braun, *A History of Polish Theater, 1939-1989. Spheres of Captivity and Freedom,* Greenwood Press, Westport, London 1996, p. 20

as the slightest allusion to the Polish cultural and artistic heritage. The Polish management was replaced by the Soviet executives. For example, in Lwów City Theatre the literary manager, poet Władysław Broniewski, was arrested, and a writer collaborating with the Soviets, Wanda Wasilewska, was appointed to this position. Soon, Polish companies were evicted from their venues and given temporary, inadequate accommodations.

In spite of the restrictions and difficulties Polish theatres were still functioning. The shows were given in Polish. In this way theatres remained the last public sanctuaries of Polish identity on these lands. They also provided shelter, work and livelihood for many actors—both local and scores of refugees from western and central Poland, who tried to escape the German troops, but were overwhelmed by the Red Army attacking from the east.

Permitting Polish companies to perform Soviet authorities tried to create an illusion of "normalization" in these territories. (The same scheme was used by Germans in the General Government). Performances on public Polish stages were supposed to conceal the mass repressions of the Polish population, terror, torture, executions, and the fact that thousands were sent to Siberia or Kazakhstan. This formed a difficult dilemma for Polish theatre people. On the one hand, they wanted to keep playing, speaking Polish, and serving Polish spectators; on the other, they understood that they were being used for propaganda purposes by the Soviets. While there were theatre people who quickly learned the ways of camouflage and of cat-and-mouse games with the Soviet regime, others began to acquiesce to theatre work that was politically and ideologically steered and controlled.

After the Germans invaded their ally, the Soviet Union, in June 1941, and added parts of the former Polish eastern territories into the German-occupied General Government, the situation changed. Polish theatres were simply shut down, as in the General Government. Since then only underground productions were prepared from time to time by those Polish actors who survived the fighting and remained. Many of them moved west, to Kraków or Warsaw.

Theatre under German rule

The Polish theatre activity in the territories incorporated into Germany by the decrees of Hitler of the 8th and 12th of October 1939, was virtually impossible. In the homes and apartments of the few Poles still living there (while others were expelled) only very rarely and in complete secrecy an artistic event could have been organized. Family members and close friends would attend a Polish poetry or play reading. There are records of such events from Toruń and Bydgoszcz.

There are also records showing that theatre artists imprisoned in German concentration camps kept fighting with the blade of the word. The

most unusual phenomenon was "The Jaracz Theatre" ("Teatr Jaracza")—as fellow inmates called it—in Auschwitz. The great actor Stefan Jaracz was arrested in Warsaw in March 1941, and sent to Auschwitz. (At that time the camp's population was almost exclusively Polish.) Jaracz was incarcerated in Auschwitz on April 6, 1941, along with a group of theatre artists,[16] including Zbigniew Sawan, a great movie star; Leon Schiller, considered the greatest Polish director before the war, manager of theatres, Dean of the Directing Department at the Warsaw State Institute of Theatre Art;[17] and a prominent theatre critic, Bohdan Korzeniewski.[18]

Jaracz had his prison number tattooed on his forearm, 13580. Assigned to the camp's kitchen to peel potatoes, he recited Polish Romantic poetry to the fellow-inmates—which was punishable by death. Then, he was allowed to give short "one-man shows" during the intermissions in wrestling or boxing fights organized by the camp's authorities. (It should be explained that the German command of Auschwitz used certain "theatricality" as a means to cover up the horrible conditions of life in the camp. They sometimes organized wrestling or boxing fights; they gathered musician-prisoners and put together orchestras which played marches for prisoners returning from work to the camp in the evening; they also allowed short appearances of actors.) Thus, Jaracz gave his "one-man performances", Sawan recited soliloquies from classical dramas, and Schiller sang folk and religious songs. These shows, permitted by the camp's authorities, were followed by the creation of as many as seven small acting companies performing secretly in Auschwitz's barracks for the enchanted prisoners. These performances were, of course, very infrequent, and all the time in danger of the most severe punishment.

Similar semi-theatrical productions were staged by Roman Niewiarowicz in the concentration camp in Gross-Rosen. Also, there are records that in the notorious Warsaw prison, "Pawiak", a group of women-actresses-prisoners performed a cabaret show in a cell on May 25, 1941. Polish puppet-theatre Christmas show was performed in 1942, in the concentration camp Dachau, a hub for priests.[19]

Actress Zofia Rysiówna, arrested in Warsaw, was sent to the concentration camp in Ravensbrück, notorious for the cruel medical experiments performed on women. Rysiówna, two other actresses, Maria Szczęsna and Zofia Łuszczewska, as well as opera diva Maria Didur-Załuska, were giving

[16] Other actors—prisoners in Auschwitz: Bronisław Dardziński, Tadeusz Kański, August Kowalczyk, Kazimierz Smoleń, Tadeusz Sobolewicz, Mieczysław Węgrzyn, Witold Zacharewicz.

[17] Organized by Schiller in 1933, it was the first in the world Theatre Directing Department with full academic program.

[18] Jaracz, Korzeniewski, Schiller were released thanks to numerous interventions on their behalf. Infrequent releases from Auschwitz happened in 1941, 1942.

[19] A staggering number of about 2700 Polish priests were jailed in Dachau.

"one-woman shows" for the fellow inmates. There are also records from Ravensbrück showing Karolina Lanckorońska, countess and professor of the Lwów University, reciting Homer's *Iliad* to a group of Greek prisoners sentenced to death, expecting execution.

For both actors and spectators of these productions theatre was, in a way, a life-preserver. It helped to maintain humanity under most inhumane circumstances. Generally speaking, Polish theatre during the war was a significant torch bearer in the fights for freedom of thought and freedom of artistic expression which contributed to the nation's fight for political freedom.

Polish Theatre's Losses During the War

The National Theatre in Warsaw was bombed by the Luftwaffe on September 19, 1939. Fortunately the building was empty at that time—the performances were halted on September 3. The destruction of the National Theatre was a loss of a beautiful, neoclassical building (erected in 1833) and had also a spiritual and symbolic aspect—behold: the main, the central national stage was destroyed and burned; a stage on which plays of national classics were performed by the best actors; a stage where thousands of spectators were celebrating their national heritage, experiencing strong artistic stimuli, and receiving profound spiritual nourishment.

In the German-annexed and German-occupied Polish territories the new rulers planned to degrade the Poles completely—as an element of their general policy of exterminating the Polish nation. The basis for the anti-Polish cultural policy was a theoretical study, ordered by Adolf Hitler, prepared by the German Racial Bureau, dated November 25, 1939, supplemented with instructions by Heinrich Himmler in a memorandum of May 15, 1940. According to this policy, the Poles had to be kept at a low cultural level. They were to be deprived of any educational institutions, except elementary schools with only four grades. Thus, all Polish universities, high-schools, and upper grades of elementary schools were closed. In the domain of theatre the German authorities closed all still standing theatre buildings and terminated employment of their staff. The theatres either remained empty, or were given to German companies. The Polski Theatre in Warsaw was renamed "Theater der Stadt Warschau" and served travelling German productions. The manager of the Polski, Arnold Szyfman, a Jew, went into hiding and survived the war at the country estate of the playwright Ludwik H. Morstin.

Attempts of the pre-war theatre managers to reopen their theatres failed. Instead, a few producers asked German administration for licenses to open revues and cabaret stages. Eventually, a few small theatres started to give shows, under strict German supervision. Productions could not have any artistic character or touch upon any serious subjects. Plays based on Polish

national classics were prohibited. The shows were to either express Nazi propaganda, or to provide primitive entertainment, with special encouragement of pornography. The functioning of these theatres was scorned by the majority of theatre people and condemned by the Polish underground authorities.

In the Soviet-occupied and soon annexed territories the general policy towards theatre was based on Stalin's directive of total Sovietization (and thus Russification) of all areas of cultural life. One of the elements of this policy was a wide-spread extermination of Polish intelligentsia and professional classes, including artists, through murder, imprisonment, and deportation to Siberia, the Far North, and Asia.

The war history of Polish theatre in these lands embraces three periods. The first lasted not quite two years (September 1939—June 1941), that is, from the Soviet invasion of Poland until the German attack on the Soviet Union and their rapid movement eastward. The second period lasted about three years and was the time of German rule (1941-1944). In the summer of 1944, the Soviets pushed back the Germans and restored their control. The third period lasted for about a year (summer 1944—summer 1945). Polish theatres in Lwów, Wilno, and Grodno reopened manifesting their bond with the rest of Poland. It was their way to fight for Poland's freedom and independence, as well as the integrity of its territory. But the Teheran (1943) and Jalta (1945) agreements between Stalin and Roosevelt, supported by Churchill, confirmed at the Potsdam Conference (July 17-August 2 1945)[20] allowed the Soviets to stay on these Polish lands, which represented 48% of Poland's territory before the war. The Soviet authorities ordered Polish theatres to leave or close. Wilno's theatre went to Toruń. Lwów's theatre moved to Katowice. The Polish theatre in Grodno ceased to exist.

In general, the losses of Polish theatre during the war had three dimensions: material losses, human losses, and losses in the spiritual and symbolic domain.

Material losses of the Polish theatre caused by the war were enormous. Out of 13 Warsaw's theatres ready for the new season starting September 1, 1939, all but one—The Polski Theatre—were destroyed by Germans. In the whole of Poland out of about 100 theatre buildings used by professional companies 35 lay in ruins. Additionally, Poland lost eight theatres in the eastern part of Poland annexed by the Soviet Union. More theatres were destroyed in 1944 and 1945, when the Soviet-German front was rolling over Poland. Eventually, about 70% of the theatre buildings lay in ruins. Theatre libraries, collections, archives, and sets and costumes magazines suffered irreparable damage—sharing the fate of scores of museums, galleries, collections, and libraries.

[20] Teheran Conference (November 28—December 1, 1943); Jalta Conference (February 4–11, 1945); Potsdam Conference (July 17—August 2, 1945). At Potsdam the USA was represented by President Harry Truman, Great Britain first by Winston Churchill, and then by Clement Attlee.

Human losses were equally devastating. The professional theatre milieu numbered about 2000 in 1939. About 300 died as war victims. The death toll of Polish theatre people caused by the war can be categorized as follows:

(1) Those who perished in the country. Here we can list those who were killed in mass executions, such as Jędrzej Cierniak and Stefan Esmanowski, both theatre scholars, shot in 1942. Others were killed in military actions of the Home Army, like actor Ludwik Berger, killed in 1943, on a street of Warsaw in a skirmish with Gestapo, or an aspiring young playwright, Tadeusz Gajcy, killed during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. Additionally, horrible war conditions, malnutrition and lack of medicines precipitated the passing away of several theatre artists, including the famous actress, director, and pedagogue, Stanisława Wysocka, who died in 1941. Many, like Juliusz Osterwa, died soon after the war.

(2) Those who perished in the east, like the great actor and director Aleksander Węgierko, who was killed in the midst of German-Soviet fighting in 1941, or the theatre and film star, director and producer, Egeniusz Bodo, murdered in the Soviet camp (Gulag) in Kotlas near Archangielsk in 1943.

(3) Those who perished in the west, in German concentration camps or prisons. Actor Mieczysław Węgrzyn was murdered in Auschwitz in 1942. Actress Jadwiga Litwiniszynowa was murdered in Ravensbrück in 1943. Actress Nina Veight, an intelligence Home Army officer, caught by the Gestapo, was beheaded with an ax in a prison in Berlin in 1943.

(4) We have to add to the list of human losses of the Polish theatre caused by the war those artists who found themselves in the West in 1945, and refused to return to the communist-ruled Poland.

The losses in the spiritual domain were uncountable. Theatre artists were deprived of the possibility to perform publicly, thus not realizing their profession and vocation. Theatre spectators were left without their artistic nourishment. We have to add that the film industry, very prolific in Poland before the war, was blocked by both German and Soviet occupiers.[21] Scores of actors, directors, and technicians lost their jobs. Spectators ceased to see their beloved stars. Movie theatres, depending on their location, presented either German or Soviet films—shallow entertainment or cheeky propaganda.

Legacy

Fighting with arms in hand or using the word as a weapon, Polish theatre people firmly believed that they were fighting for Poland's freedom. When the war ended, they realized that they has been fighting in vain. Overrun

[21] A German propaganda movie, *Heimkehr* (directed by Gustav Ucicky), produced with participation of Polish actors met with condemnation of the rest of the theatre and film milieus. The producer of the movie, a Polish actor and German agent, Igo Sym, was sentenced to death by the Polish Underground State tribunal and executed.

from the east, betrayed by the West, Poland faced more than fifty years of unwanted communist rule. The theatre shared the fate of the nation. My report on Polish theatre during the war ends in 1945.

I need to add a few words on the legacy of the war-time Polish theatre. For years its story was either officially forgotten, or truncated by the censors. Yet, the actions taken, the decisions made, and the ideas put forth by theatre artists of that time had a profound influence on the history of Polish theatre of the second half of the 20th century.

First, the general attitude of the theatre milieu, that of defiance and opposition towards the communist regime, was a direct continuation of the stance taken by the whole nation during the war including theatre people. Of course, as in the war-time, there were those who collaborated with the regime.

Second, bold experiments conducted during the war under the most difficult circumstances, continued. Kantor, creator of The Independent Theatre and master of visual theatre, created Cricot 2, which became one the leading avant-garde companies in the world, well-known in America thanks to its visits here.

Third, Osterwa's dreams about theatre-monastery and his plans for a reform of Polish theatre penned down during the war—though not directly—resounded in the works of many Polish experimenting theatre artists.

Fourth, the boycott of German-sponsored shows, declared by theatre people during the war echoed in 1982, when, in response to the introduction of martial law by Jaruzelski's junta, the theatre milieu decided to boycott the official media (television, press, and also film productions). The majority of scholars, writers, journalists, fine art artists, and musicians joined the boycott. That boycott, and the oppositional activities of many theatre people, were one small, yet significant step, towards the eventual overthrowing of Communism in Poland.

Thus, war-time struggles, sacrifices, and works of Polish theatre were not only an important element of the war-effort of the nation, but contributed to the restoration of Poland's freedom.

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