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Renaming Capital Street: Competing Visions of the Past in Post-Communist Warsaw  

Efforts to create a memorial to a priest murdered for his activities in Solidarity targeted one of the oldest streets in the Warsaw neighborhood of Żoliborz for renaming. Tensions rose as the post-war generation strove to fix its heroes in Polish social memory while some older residents sought to retain a sense of continuity in a city largely destroyed during World War II. The controversy over the renaming of Capital Street reveals the diverse memories of those who lived through the war, the Polish People's Republic and the movement that brought about the demise of Communism. [Poland, Warsaw, memory, contested history, monuments]  

With many pre-war buildings intact, Żoliborz stands out as an island of continuity within a city almost completely rebuilt after World War II. In Żoliborz both public buildings and private homes are marked with plaques describing the underground activities of past residents, designating street corners as sites of executions, the wall of a movie theater as the corner at which the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 began. Dulled by rain and pollution such memorials might blend into the walls on which they hang were it not for the flowers and candles that countless residents place there on anniversaries, All Soul's Day, national holidays, and personal days of remembrance. They do so to honor the dead, but also to encourage others to take part in what my informants call “their sacred responsibility” to share their memories with others. Thus history lives in the buildings and streets of Żoliborz, bringing back memories with the turn of a corner.  

Since 1989, histories that were repressed due to the challenge they presented to the ideology of Polish-Soviet friendship now claim their place in the cityscape. Statues of Polish leaders from the interwar era, once vilified by Communist rulers, have returned to Warsaw's streets. Communist era monuments commemorating events distorted beyond recognition by the official record through references veiled in allegory
have been replaced and supplemented with new monuments that are striking in their realism. Buildings destroyed in World War II are being rebuilt more than fifty years after their destruction. Yet these monuments all refer to events that took place before 1945, and as such are the legacy that the war generation leaves its city. Still absent in the capital are memorials to the strikes and protests, to the activists and opposition groups whose efforts brought about the demise of Communist rule in Poland. This essay explores an attempt to create a memorial to one such activist, a priest, in the Warsaw neighborhood of Żoliborz.

At the outset of this project I assumed that older Warsovians, who had taken part in the underground movement of World War II, would have a sympathetic view of the Solidarity movement, and thus would have no objections to changing the name of a street to honor a Solidarity activist. Yet while Solidarity and the underground opposition of World War II are ostensibly similar, residents' responses to the proposed-name change were often far from favorable, revealing opinions about Solidarity, the Church,
and the Polish People's Republic that varied widely from one another and from my own initial expectations.

I conducted the majority of my research from November 1995 through August 1996, with shorter trips to Warsaw in the summers of 1997 and 1998. The twenty-five people I interviewed formally for my project were born in or before 1929 and have vivid recall not only of the war, but also of the interwar era. The older people who shared their life histories with me are all long-time, if not life-time, residents of Żoliborz. For the most part, their fathers were officers in the Polish Army, engineers, and doctors. Many of their mothers also held university degrees and worked before and after the war as teachers, doctors and dentists, or municipal clerks. Equal in importance to their parents' social and economic positions are their parents' political views and activities. As young people, several of their parents were themselves active in the opposition to tsarist Russia, and many of their fathers joined Piłsudski's legions in World War I. Later, some became members of the interwar era Polish Socialist Party which was very active in Żoliborz. Twenty-three out of twenty-five of my informants have university educations which, by Polish standards, places them in the intelligentsia. In addition to their family backgrounds, education level, and place of residence, they hold in common participation in various underground organizations during World War II. All were witnesses to and many were participants in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.

Code Name Burza: The Warsaw Uprising

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own by the code name Burza, or Storm, the Warsaw Uprising was launched on August 1, 1944 under the command of General Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski, leader of the centrist Armia Krajowa (Home Army), under orders from the Polish Government in Exile. Although the Uprising was an attempt to liberate Warsaw from German occupation, this was not its sole aim. The Government in Exile felt it would have a stronger case for Polish autonomy in negotiations regarding postwar borders and the form of the country's future government if Polish leaders were in control of the capital when the Red Army arrived from the east. Thus, the Uprising was an attempt not only to free the city of German occupation, but also to insure the nation's independence. Leaders of the much smaller Soviet-backed Armia Ludowa (People's Army), however, had orders from the Kremlin to assist the Red Army in occupying the city (Roszkowski 1997:135). The Uprising continued for sixty-three days. When the Home Army signed the act of capitulation on October 2, 1944 some 20,700 Polish military personnel had been killed, 5,000 were missing in action and 180,000 civilians were dead either because of mass executions, bombardments or fire (Roszkowski
Those who survived were forced to leave the city for civilian detention camps or prisoner-of-war camps. In retaliation for the Uprising, Hitler ordered the destruction of Warsaw. Starting in the Old Town and moving systematically from parts of the city with greater historical, cultural, and economic value, a special unit of German troops set about systematically burning out, then dynamiting city landmarks, industrial plants and buildings. When they finished eighty percent of the city lay in ruins (Borecka & Sempoliński 1985: 296; Roszkowski 1997:138).

At the time of liberation on January 17, 1945 the Warsaw branch of the Home Army was dispersed among various detention camps in Poland and Germany. Despite this fact, the inaction of the Home Army during the Red Army’s liberation of the city was used to strengthen Soviet propaganda alleging that the Polish underground army had collaborated with the Nazis (Roszkowski 1997:138). Under this pretext thousands of Home Army members were jailed. Though the arrests and deportations to Siberia stopped after Stalin’s death in 1953, Warsaw veterans could not hold public commemorations. Many feared that even small private meetings would draw the attention of the secret police. Absent from textbooks and state commemorations, the Uprising was, in essence, erased from official Polish accounts of World War II. With the fall of Communism in 1989 and Solidarity’s rise to power changes in social policies as well as official attitudes towards the Uprising have allowed residents of Żoliborz new possibilities for public remembrance. Names of streets have been changed, plaques have been mounted on walls, and monuments have been erected.

The Solidarity Movement of the 1980s often portrayed itself as carrying on a tradition of opposition that included, but was certainly not limited to, the underground movement of World War II. One of the many ways this is evident is in Solidarity iconography, which not only replicates forms of Home Army iconography such as stamps, but synthesizes the Home Army symbol “Polska Walcząca” (“Poland Fighting”), with the Solidarity “S” in the form of an anchor symbolizing not only the Home Army of World War II, but the shipyards of Gdansk (Long 1996: 86, 88). The stamps often depict historical events of World War II such as the Molotov-Ribbentropp pact that divided Poland at the beginning of World War II and the Katyn massacre in which thousands of officers in the Polish army were executed by the Soviets (ibid.:87). Equally important are the series of stamps that place Solidarity opposition in a genealogy of nineteenth-century uprisings against the partitioning powers.

Though rooted in the workers’ protests of 1970, Solidarity was born during a series of strikes beginning in the Warsaw area in response to the government’s decision to raise the price of meat on July 1, 1980 (Kubik 1994:183; Roszkowski 1997:360). As the strikes spread around the country, workers in the Gdańsk Shipyard organized by Lech Wałęsa and Anna Walentynowicz began the Interfactory Strike Committee
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(Międzyzakladowy Komitet Strajkowy). Though Solidarity began as a trade-union movement with strikes conducted for better pay and a return to lower meat prices (Kubik 1994:184), workers’ demands gradually changed. By late July they called for better working conditions, the right to form unions and to strike without fear of violent retaliation. In early August the movement embraced wider societal goals of freedom of speech and press, demanding information on the Polish economy, and the release of political prisoners (Kubik 1994:184; Roszkowski 1997:361). Supported by a group of lawyers, economists and Catholic intellectuals from the Committee for the Defense of Workers, KOR, and the Society for Educational Courses, TKN, Solidarity gained status as a legal organization of workers in August of 1980 (Roszkowski 1997:362). Though the agreement with the government was ambiguous and did not address many of the workers’ demands, the movement blossomed until its ongoing conflicts with the government resulted in a series of strikes in the fall of 1981 which culminated in the imposition of Martial Law on December 13, 1981. Driven underground, the organization resurfaced when it forced the government into the Round Table Talks that eventually led to partial free elections to the Sejm in June of 1989.

Ulica Stołeczna

Given the similarities of the two movements and the fact that Solidarity, itself, proposed the connection, I assumed that older Warsowians, who had themselves participated in the resistance during World War II would view Solidarity as the heir to their own opposition activities. Like Solidarity activists my informants had also participated in a movement to create an independent Poland. Perhaps they would even see the movement’s ideals of forging a pluralistic society as a return to the progressive politics of the Polish Socialist Party, which had a stronghold in the Żoliborz in the interwar era. When I started asking about the renaming of streets I realized that the situation was far more complex than this.

One incident in which public commemoration was widely contested involved the renaming of one of the oldest and busiest streets in Żoliborz, Capital Street (Ulica Stołeczna), to Popiełuszko Street. Jerzy Popiełuszko acted as the chaplain for the Huta Warszawska branch of Solidarity and served at the Church of Saint Stanislaw Kostka in Żoliborz where he celebrated “masses for the homeland.” Well attended by Warsaw workers and intellectuals who were active in the trade-union movement, these monthly masses focused on historically patriotic themes and issues of then current interest to the opposition (Popiełuszko 1986). As a result of his political activities, on October 19, 1984, the young priest was abducted,
tortured, and murdered by three members of the Security Bureau (Slużba Bezpieczeństwa). From the time of his abduction to the discovery of his body, Solidarity activists and parishioners kept a vigil at the church. When the news of his torture and death was released, Warsovians were outraged. On November 3, 1984 tens of thousands of people filled the streets of Żoliborz to attend his funeral (Kaufman 1989; Kuroń & Żakowski 1996:320).

As the story of Popiełuszko’s activism suggests, the history of Solidarity has been intertwined with that of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. In Gdańsk, Father Jankowski and others from the Parish of Saint Brigida’s where the Shipyards are located actively supported the striking workers in 1980 by celebrating masses at the shipyards and erecting a cross in honor of those workers killed in the strikes of 1970. In the early phases of the movement the Church hierarchy served primarily as mediator between the government and Solidarity (Roszkowski 1997:362). Often Church involvement took the form of a plea for a non-violent conclusion to the strikes. After the imposition of Martial Law and the jailing of Solidarity, however, the Church found itself as the only public venue for opposition activities. On December 15, 1981 the Episcopate called for the defense of human rights, the release of those arrested and interned, as well as the return of Solidarity’s legal right to function as a trade union (Roszkowski 1997:375). Shortly thereafter Cardinal Józef Glemp set up a committee to help those denied their freedom. Dioceses and parishes across the country set up similar groups creating havens for activists who had lost their jobs, or were in hiding, and offering support for their families. During Martial Law priests used their homilies as an opportunity to criticize the government, while churches themselves became meeting places for workers, as well as artists, actors, and writers whose work was banned from traditional venues (Roszkowski 1997:385). However, the church not only offered a platform for the presentation of Solidarity demands and ideology, it loaned the movement its moral authority. Although all opposition groups recognized the Church as a source of moral values they differed in the role of Roman Catholic doctrine in their programs. Such differences were insignificant in the 1980s when Solidarity was struggling for the right to have a role in creating social programs. By contrast, in the 1990s when Solidarity gained power these debates came to the fore, ultimately dividing the movement (Kubik 1994:254). Popiełuszko’s activism, however, precedes this conflict, exemplifying instead the progressive vision that Solidarity had for Polish society.

By murdering Popiełuszko the Security Bureau inadvertently created a martyr for the Solidarity movement and a symbol of national sacrifice. The circumstances and timing of his death also provided ample material for the makings of a saint. In her study of Solidarity activists, Long notes that the murder of Popiełuszko is one of the few events her informants mention when asked about Martial Law. She describes Popiełuszko’s
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death as, “the ultimate example of Polish martyrdom of the period,” in that it embodied the ideal of sacrifice for the nation (1996: 55, 60). But as Bilu and Ben-Ari illustrate in their work on saintly Jews in Israel, saints are cultural productions in which holiness and charisma are manufactured for the consumption of the faithful (1992:679). The process of creating Saint Popiełuszko began relatively soon after his death with the widespread circulation of photographs of his funeral that many residents of the neighborhood collected and placed into albums and scrapbooks. These collections were often accompanied by series of stamps issued by the Polish underground movement that depicted the image of Popiełuszko, as Saint George, slaying the dragon of Communism. The Popiełuszko stamp was produced as part of a series in the 1980s depicting Polish saints (aside from Popiełuszko) beatified or canonized by the Church.² Popiełuszko stamps, collected by many Poles during Martial Law, bore the caption, “He gave his life for beliefs and for the motherland” (Long 1996:92). These stamps placed Popiełuszko firmly within a genealogy of Polish holy leaders who with popular support opposed the political regimes of their time.

In the years following Popiełuszko’s death the Church of Saint Stanisław Kostka, where he is buried, has become a major pilgrimage site. His grave stone, a large granite cross bearing his name, is linked by a wrought-iron chain to smaller stones, outlining the shape of Poland. The effect is that of a rosary suggesting Popiełuszko as the messianic leader of a nation united, even created, by Catholicism. This unusual monument faces an outer wall of the church which is lined with memorial plaques to those members of the congregation or their loved ones who perished in
World War II. When I lived across the street from the church in the summer of 1997, I observed a steady stream of visitors, often arriving on tour buses from as far away as Śląsk, to visit his grave, see the exhibit on his life and death housed inside the church, and to attend masses. A visitors’ center bearing Popiełuszko’s name and his image in mosaic tile has been built next to the parish house to lodge pilgrims, while a bronze statue of Popiełuszko stands to the left side of the church gates. These images of Popiełuszko serve not only as monuments to his life and death, but also as reminders of the oppression of Communism.

While it is Popiełuszko’s grave and the church that pilgrims flock to, the most controversial monument to his memory is Priest Jerzy Popiełuszko Street, formerly Stołeczna, or Capital Street. The movement to change the street’s name began in the early 1990s, with the first petitions filed with the neighborhood administration in 1991 by groups calling themselves Citizens’ Committee, Komitet Obywatelski, and Movement for the Republic, Ruch dla Rzeczypospolitej (“Stołeczna-Popiełuszki?” Gazeta Stołeczna, 24 May 1993:2). Aligned with the Parish Committee from the Church of Saint Stanisław Kostka, their initial proposal was to rename Capital Street either in memory of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, or after one of the church’s main social causes, Defenders of Life and the Health of Man and the Family, Obroncow Życia i Zdrowia Człowieka i Rodziny (Osowski 1993:3; “Dawniej Stołeczna.” Gazeta Stołeczna, 8–9 October 1994:5). The latter name is indicative of the Church’s increasing involvement in social policy, an issue I will discuss below. City administrators apparently found the former proposal more palatable than the latter, but proposed that the square opposite the church’s main entrance be renamed in Popiełuszko’s honor rather than the major artery that was Capital Street (Osowski 1993:3). The Parish Committee protested, arguing that Popiełuszko’s service to the community and the country merited more than a small square in his memory (ibid.). Furthermore, they argued that Capital Street was a name with no historical value, a name fit for any street in Warsaw while Popiełuszko Street deserved its place in Żoliborz (“Dawniej Stołeczna.” Gazeta Stołeczna, 8–9 October 1994:5). Thus the petition drive to rename Capital Street continued. Reports of the number of people who signed the petitions are varied and the petitions themselves were lost by the city administration. An article that ran in Gazeta Stołeczna quoted Paweł Opalinski, leader of the Parish Committee, as saying that aside from “two [people] regarded as Security Bureau agents,” they had collected almost a thousand signatures from residents in favor of the name change (Osowski 1993:3). Equally significant are the letters the neighborhood administration received from the Huta Warszawa branch of Solidarity, the Committee for the Republic, the National Solidarity Committee, and the Polish Episcopate.

However, when the city administration finally agreed in October of 1994 to change Capital to Popiełuszko Street, Żoliborz residents protested that they had not been consulted (Osowski 1994:4). Articles published in
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*Gazeta Stołecka*, the special Warsaw section of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, reminded readers of the street's history, a history intertwined with the rebirth of Zoliborz.\(^3\) Despite the fact that street signs were changed on October 15 and a public ceremony marking the change held on the tenth anniversary of Popiełuszko's death, October 19, residents opposing the name change organized their own group, the Committee for the Defense of Capital Street, Komitet Obrony Stołeckiej or KOS, ("Dawniej Stołecka," *Gazeta Stołecka*, 8–9 October 1994:5). KOS circulated its own petition demanding that the name of the street be decided by referendum (Osowski 1994:4). Though signed by 1600 of the 3560 registered inhabitants of the former Capital Street, the name change never made it onto the ballot and street signs and maps now bear the name Popiełuszko ("Dawniej Stołecka" *Gazeta Stołecka*, 8–9 October 1994:5).

**Memory in a Changing Society**

Ten years earlier, Zoliborz residents mourned the death of Jerzy Popiełuszko, keeping vigil at the Church of Saint Stanisław Kostka, protesting his death, and flocking to the Church to attend his funeral. Why then was naming a street in his honor, even one with the historical connotations of Capital Street, so bitterly contested? The answer lies in the changes of the Solidarity movement and the nature of its relationship to the Church. Solidarity gained power in 1989, with free elections to the Sejm. As a result, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a lawyer who worked with the Committee for the Defense of Workers, KOR, and as an adviser to Solidarity, was appointed as transitional Prime Minister. Many have documented the shifts in Solidarity policy from the progressive ideals of the early 1980s to the compromises made in its rise and assumption of power a decade later (Goodwyn 1991; Kubik 1994; Long 1996). The presidential elections of 1990 pitted Mazowiecki against Lech Wałęsa, dividing the party with a campaign characterized by a focus on the personal rather than the political. The Wałęsa campaign alleged that Mazowiecki had been tainted by his dealings with the Communist government during his role as interim Prime Minister. Things became even uglier when anti-Semitic rhetoric was used by someone in the Wałęsa campaign (Roszkowski 1997:412). A third candidate, Stanisław Tymiański, a virtual unknown and émigré from Canada, split the vote with bizarre promises to make Poland the next Japan. With only eighteen percent of the vote Mazowiecki was not even a candidate after the primary. Wałęsa won with seventy-four percent of the vote in an election in which only fifty-four percent of the electorate participated, leaving Solidarity and the nation divided (Roszkowski 1997:412).
Many parties currently claim to be the ideological heirs of the Solidarity movement of the early 1980s. An analysis of where such parties stand in regard to current social and economic issues would reveal a broad spectrum of political ideologies ranging from the nationalistic Right to the center, and center-left. Those parties that currently draw on Solidarity symbolism, often incorporating "solidarity" in their names such as the umbrella organization of Solidarity’s Election Action, Akcja Wyborcza Solidarności (AWS), are far different in ideology and approach than the Solidarity of Popiełuszko’s time.

The movement to rename Capital Street in honor of Popiełuszko took place against the backdrop of the breakup of Solidarity; a breakup brought about in part by the Church’s increasingly vocal claims to moral authority in political and social issues. In November of 1989 the government and the Vatican normalized their relations (Roszkowski 1997:411). As early as 1990 some members of the clergy began to demand greater control in public matters and they took education as their starting point. By November of 1990 religion was an official subject in public schools. Initially grades for this class were not recorded on students’ official records nor were religion teachers paid by the schools. But by 1991 religion grades were printed on official transcripts in what was described as a money-saving move by a government spokesperson, and members of the clergy were employed as state-paid teachers.

The original proposition to rename the street Defenders of Life and the Health of Man and the Family indicates another way in which the Church was stepping into the lives of Poles outside of weekly masses. In 1991 clerics began a campaign to recriminalize abortion. As in the case of education the Church was successful, though it was not until March of 1993 that the ban went into effect. In the interim, parish priests and bishops had become active in their support of select descendants of Solidarity, despite the Church hierarchy’s public announcement of neutrality. In supporting the right wing of Solidarity and related opposition groups like KOR, the Church became a political player, losing its long-time role as neutral arbiter (Kubik 1994:254). The attitudes of Żoliborz residents to the renaming of Capital Street are indicative of more than nostalgia for the interwar era of their youth. Rather opposition to the name change reflects their growing frustration with the Church’s attempts to control the public through sermons expounding clerical support for right-wing candidates and the legislation such candidates backed. As politicians on both the Right and the Left, those aligned with the Church and those who began to question its right to an active role in politics all professed to be the heirs of Solidarity, disillusionment with the once progressive movement grew as people saw their hopes for individual rights and pluralism fade.

On the surface, the controversy over the renaming of Capital Street pitted residents in favor of commemorating opposition in the recent past, i.e. the period of Martial Law, against those who wanted to maintain the
historical continuity of a street whose name had survived the Communist era without revisions. Perhaps it is not entirely coincidental that those in favor of preserving the street, as Capital Street, are involved in the public and private remembering of an earlier era of opposition, that of World War II. Thus the controversy raises a number of issues about the role of memory in a rapidly changing society.

When I asked my informants about Popiełuszko, in the context of the name change, most people made a point of saying that they respect the priest, regardless of whether or not they think Capital Street should have been renamed in his honor. Pani Hanna, the one person I spoke with who identified herself as a Solidarity member, seemed to see her Solidarity activism in the 1980s as a natural outgrowth of her participation in the underground in World War II. Like her, other supporters of the name change described the priest as a martyr for the cause of freedom and Polish independence. Moreover, she viewed Solidarity as carrying on this brand of patriotic opposition. I originally thought that those people who were religious would support the name change. This did not always prove to be the case. Pan Olgierd, a man who starts everyday with prayer, told me that he does not think the name change was a good idea and he was quite confident that Popiełuszko, whom he had known personally, would agree. In addition to what he thought would be Popiełuszko’s objections about the cost of changing the street’s name, there was the issue of social divisiveness. After all Popiełuszko’s message was one of love, forgiveness and social solidarity. The irony of commemorating his life with a controversial monument like Popiełuszko Street was noted not only by Pan Olgierd but by the authors of several articles in Gazeta Stołeczna (see for example Karaszkiewicz 1993:4). Pan Olgierd also expressed his doubts about the ability to create a lasting monument by changing the name of a major road. As he explained with resignation and a hint of frustration in his voice,

Those people who fought to change Stołeczna Street to Priest Jerzy Popiełuszko Street simply wanted to fix his memory and believed that it was right and that, clearly, a street would last . . . There was this project to have the square which is opposite the church renamed to Priest Jerzy Popiełuszko Square, because his grave is there, and all the [religious] activism, it all goes on there. Now that would be lasting!—because, well, unfortunately, streets’ names change. They change constantly! And it was those streets named after active communists which were changed. Świerczewski is Solidarity Avenue now, and you can’t tell what will happen when there are changes again. They’ll change it! And here, I think that this little square would remain (unchanged) because, it wouldn’t bother anybody.

Pan Olgierd refers to the custom of changing street names with changes in political regimes. In Żoliborz name changing is ongoing as indicated by a 1998 article in Gazeta Stołeczna about additional changes
in the neighborhood ("Toży to Bogucki?" 29 January 1998:5). Thus the avenue known as Świerczewski Avenue, named for a Polish general in the Red Army, is now Solidarity Avenue. General Świerczewski Avenue is, of course, not the original name of this street either. The original name of this street, which dates to 1648, was Leszno Street after King Leszczynski (Drozdowski & Zahorski 1972:44–45; Szwanowski 1963:104–105). According to an article in Gazeta Stołeczna the names of six streets in Żoliborz have been changed since 1989 (24 May 1992:2). By the end of 1993 an additional three streets had undergone name changes, including Capital Street (Osowski 1993:3).9

Of course, the relative obscurity of the square that Pan Olgierd refers to is what would allow it to go unnoticed and, its name, therefore, unchanged. This paradox was not lost on the Parish Committee. Pan Olgierd, himself, has first-hand knowledge of the effort and cost that goes into making a street a memorial. He spent fifteen years lobbying city officials to rename a small side street in neighboring Marymont after Priest Zygmunt Tróśzyński, the Provost of Marymont during World War II. Pan Olgierd’s acquaintance with Popiełuszko began when his own mother became too ill to attend masses regularly, and the young priest was sent to their home to administer communion. After learning of Pan Olgierd’s involvement in the Home Army during the war, Popiełuszko asked him if he would lead a group of seminary students on a historical tour of Żoliborz. Pan Olgierd agreed and it was during the tour that he told Priest Popiełuszko about his own mentor Father Tróśzyński, his efforts on behalf of the poor and his ascetic lifestyle. He also shared stories about Tróśzyński’s work as chaplain of the Home Army during the Uprising, as well as the masses he gave throughout the war that were dedicated to the homeland. Pan Olgierd recalls Popiełuszko’s reaction,

That was the period before Solidarity. The Solidarity Movement didn’t exist then, and this [information about Priest Tróśzyński] made a huge impression on Father Jerzy, not knowing what history had in store for him, and that such a torturous death waited for him. He told me, “You’re lucky. I am jealous of you, sir.” Yes, I remember just what he said . . . Because Priest Tróśzyński was a great patriot, just like me and at a certain moment it occurred to me that it was as if at that very moment, Priest Tróśzyński, who was no longer living passed on the standard of freedom to Priest Jerzy, through me. As if he were commanding him to continue.

Although Pan Olgierd may be the only one who knows first hand of the source of the inspiration for Popiełuszko’s revival of the masses for the homeland, he is certainly not the only one to recall these masses or to recognize the pre-war tradition in which Popiełuszko followed. The masses for the homeland that Popiełuszko began giving at the Church of Saint Stanisław Kostka, may have been inspired by those of Priest
Trószyński during the war, but they hark back to a much older tradition of patriotic prayers for the homeland that closed each mass during the interwar period (Popieluszko 1986:23). When Popieluszko began delivering these masses at the Church of Saint Stanisław Kostka in 1982, they were tied to a larger Catholic discourse on freedom of the clergy as freedom of conscience for all people, and on human and workers’ rights (Kubik 1994:120-122). Furthermore, his sermons as well as those of other priests during the Martial Law period equated acts of Catholic faith with demonstrations of Polishness (Kubik 1994:123-124; Popiehiszko 1986). Although Pan Olgierd was not a supporter of the name change, he does not see the renaming of Capital Street as a break with historical continuity. Rather, in Priest Popiehiszko, a celebrated, patriotic, Catholic martyr, he sees the continuation of his own efforts to gain Polish independence, and in Solidarity the redemption for the sacrifices he had made. As his comments indicate, Popiehuszko represents for Pan Olgierd not a breach with the past, but its continuation.

Not all Żoliborz residents, however, share Pan Olgierd’s vision of Popiehiszko as a symbol of historical continuity. Many view the renaming of the street as a break with the past. After all, Capital Street, was the name the street had held continuously since the 1930s (Szwankowski 1963:104–5),10 which is no small feat in Warsaw. Those who wanted to preserve Capital Street took the position of practicality. Finding one’s way around a city whose referents change with the nation’s politics can be maddeningly disorienting (as I found on many occasions when I tried to find addresses on a Capital Street that was no longer in existence). Their position also reflects a different type of historical consciousness, one less
oriented towards the heroism of opposition under Martial Law and the
remembrance of politically charged events, and more focused on the
everyday. Capital Street was the artery that connected the new
neighborhood to the rest of the city, as such it played a key role in
memories of everyday life in the pre-war era.

Those who viewed the name change as constituting a bridge rather
than a break with the past, even if not active in Solidarity, were certainly
sympathetic to the movement. Those who were against the name change,
however, were less unified in their attitudes towards Solidarity as well as
to the Church. Pani Sławka who attends masses at Stanisław Kostka or
one of the other local churches weekly, and retreats for Catholic
intelligentsia annually, told me that she thought the name change was utter
nonsense. The church along with Popiełuszko’s grave is itself a monument
to Popiełuszko and she doesn’t see the point of changing the name of one
of the oldest streets in Żoliborz. As far as Solidarity of the late 1970s and
eyearly 1980s was concerned, she had this to say, “It was like a window, an
open window. Suddenly people felt free to speak the truth, and there was
real solidarity between people.” Thus, while not seeking to memorialize
the movement by making Capital Street a monument to one of its martyrs,
Pani Sławka sees the Solidarity movement as one that brought about much
needed social change. Her attitudes towards Solidarity’s Election Action
(Akcja Wyborcza Solidarności), a conglomeration of right-leaning
political parties descended from Solidarity, were certainly not sympathetic
and, when I lived with her during my fieldwork in 1995–96, she frequently
complained that their supporters in the clergy were sulllying the name of the
Church.

Pani Eugenia, a retired school teacher and lecturer in art education at
the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, is at ninety-one years of age a long-
time resident of Capital/Popiełuszko street. She is also a devout Catholic,
who at one time had a weekly radio program about homeopathic medicine
that aired on the now defunct Radio Józef. She regards Popiełuszko as a
saint and told me how even in death he has continued to aid people by
appearing to them in dreams and apparitions to give them advice. She had
no objections to the name change, though she did not campaign in its favor
either. Regarding Solidarity, she felt the movement of the 1970s and
1980s had little to offer intellectuals. Rather than viewing it as a
movement with wider societal goals, she took Solidarity as little more than
trade union. When I asked her why this was so, she explained that in her
view the branch of Solidarity involved in education had few original ideas
to offer, in fact their goals seemed to her to be unrelated to teaching.

Pani Eugenia’s comment made me think about something another
informant told me regarding her teenage son’s participation in the
resistance movement during World War II. At ninety Pani Halina is my
only informant who had children during the war. When I asked her if she
had not been afraid that her son would be arrested or killed for
participating in the resistance, she laughed and said, “What for? They
were just painting graffiti on walls!” His involvement grew beyond writing anti-German slogans, to working as a courier for the Home Army, a job which eventually cost him his life. Yet at the beginning, his activities like those of Solidarity to Pani Eugenia, seemed harmless and ineffectual.

While not denying the accomplishments of Solidarity, some of the older Poles I spoke with seemed to take a similarly patronizing view of opposition during Martial Law. This even included my septuagenarian neighbor, Pani Basia, who kept an informal archive of opposition literature in her apartment. When I asked her about Solidarity, she recalled a young man who lurked around her building’s courtyard waiting to deliver some documents. He was so obvious about being secretive, she laughed, that she was sure he would get himself arrested. When he finally made it inside, after much advancing and retreating to the shrubbery, she lectured him about the proper way to be conspiratorial. In the summer of 1998 when I was revisiting Zoliborz, I asked Pani Basia again about the archive. She kept it, she said, because the young man would have gone to jail for doing so while her status as an editor for one of the country’s official publishing firms protected her from suspicion since she was allowed to have books that were forbidden to the general population. She also told me in no uncertain terms that I was not to make the “archive,” if I wanted to call it that, into something heroic because it wasn’t, it was nothing. It was a suitcase under the bed and that was all. I ventured further, and asked, “Nothing in comparison to....?” She replied, “There is no comparison. People were interned during Martial Law, but they had beds, food, letters, newspapers. There is no comparison. Let’s change the subject.” Clearly she meant that there is no basis for comparing the consequences of opposing the government during Martial Law to the consequences of opposition under Nazi Occupation.

I told my friend Justyna, who lives next door to Pani Basia about our conversation and she told me a story that Pani Basia had told her. Pani Basia was at a parade for November 11, Polish Independence Day, sometime in the 1990s. Groups of combatants from the Warsaw Uprising and other veterans’ organizations filed by. When Pani Basia saw a group of Solidarity activists coming she said, “Here come the heroes of the white styrofoam.” Solidarity activists often refer to one another as “friends of the white styrofoam” in reference to the mats they slept on while striking. Calling them “heroes of the white styrofoam,” however, sounds rather contemptuous. A man standing nearby overheard her and glared. According to Justyna, Pani Basia returned his gaze and said, “You see I had nothing to sleep on.”

A few days after my talk with Justyna, Pani Basia called to invite me over for coffee. When I got there we were no sooner seated at the table when she said, “Don’t write about me having an archive because it’s not true! And it had nothing to do with Solidarity.” I explained that I had asked about this because I had read an article that suggested that keeping an archive was considered activism during Martial Law (Long 1996:60-
and I was curious about her own thoughts on the matter. She conceded that for some having an archive could have been activism. However, many people make such acts far too heroic in her view and she didn’t want to be made into some sort of hero for hiding a suitcase full of banned opposition materials under the bed. I assured her that I would do no such thing.

I do not dispute Long’s assertion that archiving was a form of opposition activity during Martial Law. As recorders of that era, archivists were keepers of memory at a time when the State sought to control memory, and, indeed, many archivists were jailed and sometimes beaten as a result of their activities. Pani Basia was a member of the Home Army, working as a medic during the Warsaw Uprising. Clearly the experience of opposition through urban warfare is incomparable to that of participating in a strike or keeping an archive, even under the conditions of Martial Law. Moreover, experiencing the Warsaw Uprising as a young adult for Pani Basia, and some other people whom I interviewed, was so intense that other types of opposition pale in comparison. This aside, I was very curious about Pani Basia’s feelings towards Solidarity. In particular, I wondered if she had been suspicious of the movement from its genesis in

![Courtyard of housing coop. (E.L. Tucker)](image-url)
the 1980s or if her reaction was rooted in the circumstances of the present. It is not a stretch for me to imagine that for someone as un-religious as Pani Basia, the sight of crosses hanging in the Polish Parliament, the return of religion as a subject in schools, and the loss of abortion rights might have caused her to change her feelings about a movement that had started out with the promise of pluralism. Her sister, Pani Sławka, told me however that although such things no doubt contributed to Pani Basia’s disdain for Solidarity, she had always distrusted the movement.

When I asked Pan Jerzy, a retired municipal administrator, what the mood was like in Warsaw after the war I noticed an attitude similar to Pani Basia’s. His answer was lengthy and at some point he digressed and began to detail the benefits of the Polish People’s Republic with no small amount of nostalgia. He ended this litany with the following comment,

Look, when someone says we were, forty years under Communism, that’s not at all true . . . Those people who were engaged in political activities, or who loudly expressed their dissatisfaction with the way things were, they had problems. But it is hard to say that it was the government who caused them. I would say, it is just that people chose their own fate . . .

He contrasted the “choice” to oppose one’s own government with the underground resistance of World War II. Comparing his own experiences as a prisoner in Pawiak, the Gestapo prison in Warsaw, with the experiences of political prisoners jailed during Martial Law he made the point that the conditions of the former were so cruel in their extremity and injustice that there was no comparison. While I saw Pan Jerzy’s point and agreed with him about the vast differences in Pawiak prisons and the internment of political prisoners under Martial Law, I was surprised. His attitude seemed to imply that because opposition activists suffered less, their cause was somehow less worthy and the injustice of their imprisonment less significant. Interpreting this attitude is somewhat difficult. In part it seems as if he, and those who diminish the work of the opposition in the 1980s seek a monopoly on heroism and patriotic action, by measuring all other activism against the yardstick of their own experiences during World War II.

But for other people the issue isn’t the degree of activists’ suffering, but Solidarity’s cause, which was to put an end to Communist rule. Criticism of the changes following the Round Table Talks of 1989 were often expressed by these informants and some, far from identifying with Solidarity, shared Pan Jerzy’s nostalgia for the Polish People’s Republic. As a retired television and radio journalist told me in accented but fluent English,

In our situation, you may say many bad things about the past forty years, but there was one thing though that people should remember: There was never anybody hungry. Now, we have a
couple of million hungry people. I went yesterday for the shopping, I always go shopping on Monday morning, and I parked my car just behind a big bin where the merchants were throwing the leftovers from cauliflowers and all that. And I saw a couple. Nice people, interesting people. An old lady and old man, they were searching among those little pieces trying to find something to cook. The woman says, "Well listen, I can cook that. It is almost a good cauliflower only half is spoiled." The man looked at me and said, to me, "Excuse me, sir, I'm sorry I'm asking that, I'm not asking for money, but could you buy me a kilo of potatoes?" He says, "We are on rent [disability pension]. We haven't got a penny 'til the first of the month." So, I went and bought them a couple of kilos of potatoes, then I went and passing through the store of the butcher I bought him a quarter of a kilo of bacon and gave it to him. And what happened? The woman started to cry and wanted to kiss my hand. My God! This is something unbelievable in my eyes! For forty years nobody was short of food and now suddenly we join a big family of democratic European nations and there are millions of people going hungry. I don't agree with that! I don't like that!

Conclusions

The comments of the retired journalist illustrate that the debate over the renaming of Capital Street is not only colored by disappointment with Poland's post-Communist reality, but motivated by it. As the rights gained by Solidarity have become commonplace in the 1990s, many former supporters feel disillusioned with the movement's broader goals. With growing unemployment, rising prices, and the erosion of long-standing social benefits the legacy of Solidarity grows increasingly mixed. Fearful that the accomplishments of the movement would be forgotten, members of Warsaw's Solidarity branches sought to fix Popiełuszko's place in the social memory of the city. In the Parish Committee of the Church of Saint Stanisław Kostka Solidarity found a natural partner, but one with an agenda reaching far beyond mere commemoration.

In the summer of 1997 when I returned to Żoliborz to interview people about the name change, Poland was preparing for elections and a referendum on the new constitution. Along with the usual posters of various candidates for office, the city seemed to be papered by a ubiquitous series of fliers protesting the proposed constitution as a neo-paganistic document written by anti-family atheists and communists. Pasted on bus stop shelters, kiosks, walls of buildings, and the like, the fliers seemed to be more numerous the closer I came to Plac Wilso...
the heart of Żoliborz. Why this neighborhood, once known for its left-liberal politics should be the locus of right-wing rhetoric was unclear to me for many weeks, until in search of information on Popiełuszko Street, I made a visit to the Church of Saint Stanislaw Kostka. There I discovered that the pamphlets were being distributed by the small devotional shop that sold Popiełuszko and Pope John Paul II memorabilia.

Opposition to the proposed-name change reflects local residents’ growing frustration with just this type of politicking and explains why people who mourned Popiełuszko’s death in 1984, were unwilling to support making Capital Street a memorial in his honor just ten years later. The Church’s increasing demands for control over social issues like education and abortion, voiced in particularly strident tones from their own parish church, Saint Stanislaw Kostka, caused even devoted church-goers to go out of their way to attend mass elsewhere. Moreover, such sermons created the fear that Poland was veering towards theocracy and in danger of losing its long-sought and newly-gained religious freedom. Many people expressed this view with the comment that after forty years of Communism they were not about to be told by priests or anyone else for whom to vote. Viewed in this context, renaming Capital Street in Popiełuszko’s memory was seen by residents as yet another encroachment on their lives by the Church.

Local residents’ reluctance to give their support to the name change was motivated by generational concerns as well. For older residents of Żoliborz, Capital Street was a tangible link with their past in a city that, because of the devastation of the war, lacks much physical continuity. Many of the people with whom I worked lived their entire lives in Żoliborz, some of them on Capital Street making the street more than just a street sign, but the setting for their own life stories. In the comments from the Parish Committee alleging that Capital Street lacks a connection with the past, older residents see that their own bitter struggle against German occupation or on behalf of social justice no longer resonates with the sense of the heroic of a younger generation.

Older Warsovians’ lives were interrupted by war, the imposition of Communism, and, in late life, rapid transition to democracy and a market economy. As children growing up in occupied Poland they were permitted only an elementary-school education by German authorities and that was not to include the subjects of Polish language, literature, or history. The communist era brought about the rewriting not only of the past they remembered before the war, but also their experiences as participants in the 1944 Uprising and the loss of many of their fathers, brothers and uncles in the massacre of Polish officers by the Soviets in Katyn. In fact the erasure of their experience from official versions of the past was so egregious that the term “white stains” (białe plamy) was coined in the late 1980s to describe events, kept in memory, that had not been discussed in four decades of Polish history. One by one these
"stains" began to surface in public forums as the Communist regime disintegrated.

White stains refers both to what is held in social memory (albeit surreptitiously) at the same time as its forgetting is officially mandated. And that process didn’t end with the fall of Communism. With each social and political transformation some part of these older Warsowians’ experiences is officially “whited out” and replaced. Thus, at a time when the Communist era is largely dismissed as an anomalous detour in eastern European history or vilified by the Right, it is not surprising that those who identified at least with the social goals of the regime, and have a profound sense through first-hand experience of the social chaos and destitution that preceded it, feel a sense of loss.

All of this renders the issue of what visions of the past memorials such as Popiełuszko Street offer the public a matter worthy of debate, of protest, of years working for or challenging the renaming of a street. The tribute to heroism might be all that remains when those active in the events commemorated by a society’s monuments are gone (Savage 1994:129–130), but a society that commemorates the heroic at the expense of moral action (see Todorov 1996:287–288) has an empty history indeed. The war-time memories of my informants are written in the destruction and rebuilding of the city itself, and are no more limited to memories of the heroic, than they are unanimous in their opinions about the Polish People’s Republic, or the movement that toppled the Communist government. But their memories are distinct to their generation, to the compassionate nature of social democratic politics that shaped their social consciousness and commitment as youths, and to the extent of suffering and loss they experienced as survivors of two totalitarian movements. Given those experiences, there is a good deal of truth in the lament I frequently heard that some things simply cannot be expressed, not with words and certainly not with monuments.

Notes

1 Józef Piłsudski was a politician active in the Polish Socialist Party and a military leader in the movement for an independent Poland as well as the Russian-Polish War of 1920. In May of 1926 he launched a successful military coup. As a result, parliament appointed him president. Piłsudski, however, refused the position and made Ignacy Mościcki president in his place, preferring to exercise his own influence as commander of the military forces. Half a year later he was made Prime Minister. To this day he is regarded by many as a national hero.

2 Many of Poland’s saints, and all those depicted, are perceived as being political in that they became martyrs through their opposition to the rulers of their time (Long 1996:55–60).
As a residential neighborhood after World War I, Capital Street was first planned in 1919 as part of the first housing development of the Warsaw Housing Cooperative (Warszawska Spółdzielnia Mieszkaniowa) as a new artery that would connect Żoliborz with City Center, Śródmieście (Osowski:3). The construction of Capital Street did not begin, however, until 1934, and was interrupted by the German invasion of Poland in 1939 (ibid.) at that time only four houses and the Sisters of the Resurrection Convent stood on the street (Karaszkiewicz 1993:4). The street was only completed in 1954 (Osowski 1993:3).

In The Power of Symbols against the Symbols of Power, Jan Kubik concludes his history of Solidarity with the following comment, "The Solidarity class/movement, united by a common cultural-political vision...was remarkably monolithic for only a brief moment—in the late summer and fall of 1980. By 1992 it had disappeared almost without a trace" (1994:269).

Pan and Pan are Polish terms of respect.

In her ethnography, We All Fought For Freedom, Long reports that an older informant described the Solidarity Movement as the descendent of the Warsaw Uprising (1996:74–75).

Among other things Pan Olgierd is referring to the movement to beatify Popieluszko, and an ongoing right to life campaign (see "Początek Drogi na Ołtarze." Gazeta Stołeczna, 8–9 February, 1997:2).

Karol Świerczewski 1897–1947 was born in Warsaw, took part in the October Revolution and remained in the Red Army until he returned to Poland as an officer in 1943 (Herbst 1975:660). One informant added that he was a "dark character" who undoubtedly had ties with the NKWD.

Occasionally, street names revert to those of a previous era, for example the Communist era Paris Commune Place has reverted to its pre-War title of Theodore Woodrow Wilson Place.

Morawski & Głębicki (1982:353) cite an earlier date than Szwankowski, suggesting that the street was planned as a major thoroughfare that would connect the WSM (Warszawa Spółdzielnia Mieszkanowa or Warsaw Housing Cooperative) with the rest of the city as early as 1927.

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