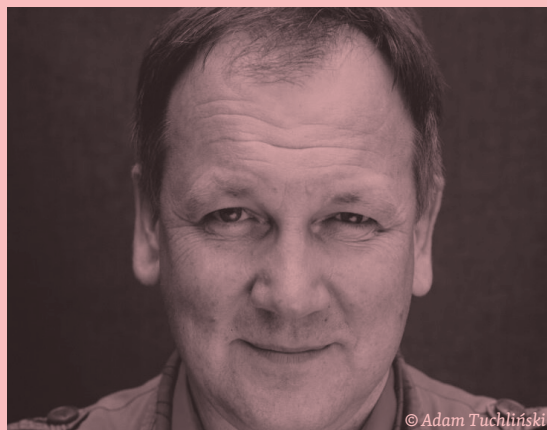


CEZARY ŁAZAREWICZ

SO THERE'LL BE NO TRACES



Cezary Łazarewicz (born 1966) is a journalist, reporter, and columnist. He has published in the leading Polish newspapers and magazines, including *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Przekrój*, and *Polityka*. His collected volumes include *A Cup of Coffee with Mrozek: Pomeranian Reportage* (2012), *Six Floors of Luxury: The Interrupted Story of the House of the Jablkowski Brothers* (2013), and *The Suave Murderer* (2015).

We have a pretty clear picture of why the Communist regime in Poland collapsed in the late 1980s. It broke down under the weight of growing debt and permanent economic crisis. Repeated political upheavals destabilized the Soviet Union's domination over its satellite states. Many prominent party functionaries came to choose pragmatism over ideology, and the benefits that could be gained from reaching an agreement with the democratic opposition allowed officials to entertain hopes for the future, while enormous costs came to be associated with maintaining their leadership. But there was of course another important reason for this collapse: the Communist Party lost legitimacy in the eyes of society. Gradually it looked as if Communist governments owed their existence only to the principle of inertia. This development was all about psychological effect – governing politicians were completely compromised, the falsity of their propaganda was grotesque and they committed disastrous mistakes as they teetered between arrogance and desperation.

Disregarding martial law, during which the threat of Soviet intervention might have allowed the authorities to pull the wool over the eyes of the Polish people, there were three final nails in the coffin of the communist regime in Poland: the fatal beating of Grzegorz Przemek (1983), the political murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko (1984) and the explosion in the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl (1986). In each of these dramatic situations, the authorities' catastrophic reactions shattered any remaining illusions regarding their moral standards.

First came the case of Przemek. On 12 May 1983, a militia patrol in Warsaw's Old Town arrested the nineteen-year-old while he was celebrating his school-leaving exams with friends. At the local police station, the officers decided to teach the young man a lesson because he had refused to show his ID card. They beat him unconscious making sure that there would be "no traces", but they damaged his internal organs. Two days later Grzegorz Przemek died.

This whole affair would probably have been swept under the carpet if the boy hadn't turned out to be the son of Barbara Sadowska, a poet associated with the opposition. The communist secret police had already threatened that her son would come to harm. What is more, there was an eyewitness to the beating, Cezary F., who had been taken to the station along with Przemek. The regime's functionaries panicked and decided to respond with absolute denial.

Cezary Łazarewicz's excellent reportage is basically a work of activism. Written almost thirty years after the events, it offers the first detailed account of the circumstances of Przemek's murder and its aftermath. It is hard to say why this issue hadn't ever been tackled before. Was it because Grzegorz Przemek was quickly turned an anti-communist martyr? Or because Barbara Sadowska, an eccentric artist with hippie leanings and a weakness for younger men, did not fit with the patriotic narrative, grief-stricken though she was? Or was it because the crime never led to any convictions – not even in democratic Poland – and the individuals who had lied, spied, and fabricated evidence continued to fare as well as before?

Łazarewicz's book is both condemnatory and compassionate. It has three threads. The first is an insightful reconstruction of the events after Przemek's death – a terrifying account of a cynical power apparatus that is guided solely by its own short-term gain. This narrative is a testimony to the government's methods of disinformation and intimidation, as well as a portrait of its influence over the administration of justice. Przemek's story offers a perfect case study of this sort of practice. The second thread describes the families of individuals involved in or manipulated into the affair. These complex portraits offer a glimpse into the stifling and depressing atmosphere of that era. The third thread is basically a courtroom drama: a study of the failure of democracy in the face of totalitarian manipulation. Ironically, the individuals who were responsible for the crime could not be sentenced after 1989 precisely because they were given a fair trial under the rule of law.

Piotr Kořta



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THURSDAY, 12 MAY

SO THERE'LL BE NO TRACES

[...]

They leave the flat around 3 p.m. In the Wiech Passage by the block of flats they run into Piotrek Kadłcik, who used to teach Grzesiek the guitar. He's wandering around aimlessly, waiting for the screening of *The She-Wolf* [Wilczyca], a Polish horror film, at the nearby Atlantic cinema. It doesn't take much to persuade him to come along to the Old Town. Why there? Grzesiek says that's where his classmates are celebrating their secondary school-leaving exams.

On the way he talks about his plans for the summer holidays - a trip to Dębki by the sea. It won't come to be, as Private Ireniusz Kościuk from the 13th Operational Company of the ZOMO has already reported for service in the Old Town. During the briefing at the headquarters he'd been told that this is the anniversary of Marshal Józef Piłsudski's death and that activists of the now illegal Solidarity trade union might use it to draw attention to themselves. They might shout hostile slogans, such as "Solidarity is alive" or "WRON will soon be dead and gone". That's why the ZOMO men must be vigilant today. Kościuk is to patrol the area around the Castle Square and arrest anyone who acts in a disruptive manner.

They take the bus to St. Anne's Church. The place is swarming with policemen in plain clothes and in uniform. They cross the Castle Square, down Świętojańska Street past St. John's Cathedral and onto the Old Town Market. There's no sign of Grzesiek's classmates, so they meander through the little streets with no particular aim. On their way back, near the entrance to the Castle Square, Grzesiek jumps on Czarek's back. It's a ridiculous sight, Czarek, unsteady on his thin legs, carrying that beanpole on his back. In the end he trips, loses his balance and falls. He's down on the ground, with Grzesiek next to him. This is when the ZOMO man comes running towards them - private Ireniusz Kościuk, not much older than Grzesiek. He's yanking him by the sleeve and demanding to see his identity card. "I don't have it!" the boy says, laughing, while behind him a militia van is already approaching. Then the action accelerates. Kościuk pushes Grzesiek towards the militia's Nysa, and when Grzesiek braces his arms against the ledge of the door, Kościuk draws his baton and thwacks him on the back until Grzesiek tumbles in. Just before the van drives off, Czarek manages to get in as well. A moment later the vehicle disappears around the corner.

Kuba packs up his friend's leather flip-flops, which were left behind on the square; Piotrek, meanwhile, runs to find Barbara, to tell her that the ZOMO had just arrested her son. From the Castle Square Kuba goes to the police station, just

around the corner on Jezuicka Street. He stands in the yard and listens. He can hear Grzesiek's bloodcurdling screams. "They're beating him," he thinks. He's afraid that if he enters now, he'll get it in the neck, too. So he waits until the screams subside, and then pushes open the station's heavy timber doors. There he sees Grzesiek, curled up on the floor. His eyes are shut and he's whimpering in pain. Kuba asks the officer on duty to release his friend. "He didn't do anything bad. He only wanted to celebrate that he passed his exams," he explains. "It would be good if his mother showed up here, before the ambulance comes to get him," the officer replies.

The ambulance arrives at the station around 5 p.m. "He's a lunatic," the angry militia men tell the driver, who looks at the delicate brown-haired boy in civilian clothes standing among the uniformed ZOMO men. They meekly stand by, their batons idle, while the boy is giving them a real mouthful. "Why are they putting up with that," the driver wonders. The ambulance's dispatch card says "psychotic". This brown-haired boy really doesn't look sane. No one in their right mind would dare to slag militia men off like this. But the sergeant on duty points to another boy. Curled up on a chair, barefoot, his trousers torn over the knees, his shirt dishevelled. The driver notices him only now. His hair is tangled, his face covered in dust. He has absent eyes, it's impossible to connect with him. He doesn't answer any questions, he's just hugging his stomach and rocking on his chair. "There were fear and horror in his eyes," the driver, Michał Wysocki, recalls. According to the sergeant, the boy is a drug addict, but when Wysocki turns up his shirtsleeves he doesn't see any track marks.

The boy is unable to stand up by himself, and he cannot walk. Wysocki puts his arm around his own neck, holds his side and slowly, step by step, takes him out of the station. Grzesiek is barely dragging his feet. The driver and the paramedic, Jacek Szyzdek, make him sit him in the back seat of the ambulance. The trip to the A&E department on Hoża Street only takes six minutes and four seconds (according to a later test run). During the whole trip the boy only stammers one incoherent sentence: "I've been to Hoża." On the way he also tries to grab the paramedic by the hair. Wysocki stops the ambulance, grips his hands and pins him down to make him come to his senses; now the boy finally calms down.

They park the ambulance right by the steps. The patient is unresponsive - they must lift him out of the vehicle. Szyzdek and Wysocki grab him under the shoulders, carry him into the entrance hall, take the elevator up to the first floor, then they drag him to the door of the psychiatric office number 108. They lay him down on the floor and set out to look for the doctor. The psychiatrist, Paweł Willmann, is annoyed that they've brought him another unconscious patient. The three of them place Grzesiek on a chair in the doctor's office. He sits bending over, hanging his head and clutching his stomach. Suddenly Czarek comes flying into the room, panting. He says that his friend was just beaten up by the militia, but Willmann pretends not to hear. He wants to send his patient on to the psychiatric ward of the hospital on Nowowiejska Street. "They'll do a gastric lavage and he'll be alright," he tells Czarek, who protests in vain that a stomach pumping won't help, given that it's not a case of poisoning but of beating.

Grzesiek mutters that he needs the toilet. Czarek takes him to the ground floor and tries to talk him into running away. They could disappear through the little window in

the toilet while no one's looking. But Grzesiek is too weak to even stand on his own two feet - climbing up to the window is out of question. He collapses. Czarek and a paramedic sit him down on a wheelchair and take him to the waiting room on the ground floor, from where he is to be taken to the psychiatric ward.

When his mother arrives, Grzesiek is already vomiting blood. She tries to talk to him, but her son isn't responding. He only moans, with his arms crossed in front of his stomach. As if he didn't even recognize her. Willmann, in his white coat, enters and hands the mother a referral to the hospital. "He was rolling around on the Castle Square and refused to follow the militia's orders," Barbara reads. She insists that instead of the hospital, she'll take her son home. Finally Willmann gives in. "I know how the mentally ill are dealt with and what treatments they're subjected to," Barbara later explains. "If my ill-treated son had been subjected to such treatments, that would've had irreversible effects. I thought that at home he'd recover from the beating and then he'd be able to sit his remaining exams, which would be impossible had he been placed in a psychiatric hospital."

Around 7 p.m. an ambulance takes the inert Grzesiek home, to the flat on Hibner Street (now Zgoda Street). The paramedics cannot take him up to the eleventh floor on the stretcher - the elevator isn't large enough. They must bring down a chair from the flat. They lay him down in the same bed from which he got up that morning. There he regains consciousness for a moment. He asks for a warm bath to soothe the pain in his abdomen. Then he falls asleep.

At 3 a.m. Grzesiek awakens from his stupor. He tells his mother about the beating. He has difficulty speaking, but remembers that before passing out he heard one militia man say to the other: "Hit him in the stomach so there'll be no traces." Barbara stays up all night by her son's bedside. She places cold towels on his aching stomach. It seems to help a little, as Grzesiek stops moaning for a little after every change. Czarek keeps her company that night. "Barbara doesn't say much. She's like someone who got whacked over the head," he recalls. [...]

THURSDAY, 26 MAY

The militia take into account the four most likely versions of the events: he was beaten up at the station, in the ambulance or at the A&E department, at home, or by his friend Czarek F. These narratives are examined by a special unit at the militia headquarters, the KGMO. The Chief Commander is General Józef Beim. Although the most likely of the four versions is the one involving the militia, no one looks into it. Indeed, as a preventive measure the militia do everything to ensure this version could not be confirmed.

Inspector Jerzy Kulczycki is tasked with proving that the deadly blow was delivered inside the ambulance. It's only logical - after all, it was the paramedics who laid the blame on themselves by writing, in their dispatch card, about the patient's aggressiveness and use of force. Kulczycki retrieves the cream-coloured Fiat estate car (WAX-147K) in which Przymyk had been taken to hospital. He puts a body double on the stretcher and tries to hit him from the driver's seat. "It's impossible," he reports to Lieutenant Kazimierz Ołowski, the director of the investigative bureau at the KGMO. Ołowski is furious and holds Kulczycki accountable. "You can't prove it?" he asks.

Translated by Tul'si Bhambry