You see, if we look at it in this way, that we’ve actually begun the most difficult battle - the first such battle in the history of mankind, one that nobody’s tried – we, small, ridiculous people, then that’s a big thing. That’s the game that I’m passionate about more than anything else in the world. (Jacek Kuron: Polityka i odpowiedzialnosc, 208)

**Friendship and Revolution. The Fate of the Committee for Workers’ Defense**

This essay has been born thanks to the dedicated work of the secret agents of the Security Police in communist Poland. In the library of the Institute of National Memory which stores up countless files bursting with manifold crimes and misdemeanours of the citizens of the People’s Republic, there is a folder with a Hollywood cryptonym: “The Players.”

The folder contains original reports of police investigations and stenograms of bugged meetings of a group of friends who are variously referred to as national traitors, political bankrupts, Judeo-masonry, political degenerates, provocateurs, the enemies of People’s Poland, wastrels, usurpers and non-Poles. One of the meetings, recorded by a dutiful agent, took place on 26 May 1978 in the house of an eminent economist, professor Edward Lipinski. The officer on duty reported with glee: “The meeting was filmed by the TV crew from West Germany, but it was as querulous as usual. Michnik and Celinski especially threw themselves at one another’s throat, though the others were even worse. Celinski said that everybody who looked at matters coolly had to see that Michnik and Kuron had to stop lecturing at the Flying University because they put people’s life in danger. Michnik answered that no, over his dead or mangled body. Kuron added: ‘Those
who look at the world coolly or through a keyhole see nothing but a keyhole.’ (‘metaphor
unclear,’ added in parenthesis). Celinski shouted: ‘So you want the police to give the
students a good kick in the arse?’ Kuron said that everybody had the right to get a kick in
the arse, if it made sense.’ Then everybody yelled at one another, but they had to stop
because Professor Lipinski said that it was 7 o’clock and he had to listen to his favourite
Brahms concert. The others protested, but Lipinski didn’t pay attention and turned on the
radio.” ¹

There was nothing unusual about this meeting, apart from the fact that the secret
police had to listen to the whole Brahms concerto recorded on their tape to find out what
happened next. The “Players” used to argue, and they did it in the passionate Slavic style,
mercilessly, with gusto, in a feverish, inspired trance which was suddenly detonated by
an anecdote or a joke. They knew they were bugged and they followed a rule: say aloud
the general, whisper the concrete, write down all names and then throw the paper to the
toilet.

Some of the police nicknames were justified. Four members of the “Players”,
including the Brahms’ lover and the host of this meeting, were masons,² about one third
were of Jewish origin, almost all had a dissident past and present. It may well be that it is
precisely their in-betweenness as ethnic and social outsiders and as political outcasts that
created a bond which was tighter than a hedgehog’s bite. And it is certainly their
hybridity that equipped them with a sparkling rebelliousness and creative impudence so

² The masons in KOR included prof. Edwad Lipinski, Jan Kielanowski, Ludwik Cohn and prof. Jan Jozef
Lipski.
characteristic of the hyphenated species: the Anglo-Irish, the Anglo-Indians, the Latin Americans.

There are two legends about them. One, now almost nearly forgotten and shuffled under the carpet, is about a group of altruistic Don Quixotes who lay fundament for the biggest anti-totalitarian revolution in Eastern Europe led by Solidarity. The second legend – held by people of a deconstructive disposition who are now in majority – talks about “hyenas, traitors and terrorists” who posed as the saviours of the nation. Not only had the Players little or no effect on Solidarity, the second story says; driven by lust for power and a sense of omnipotence, they distorted the intentions of Solidarity’s rank and file and then bungled the project of transition to democracy. In a summing-up discussion published by the Institute of National Memory, it has been stated dryly:

So far nobody has spoken positively about the people of the pre-Solidarity opposition. They did not do so themselves because of modesty; …after all it would be out of place to say about themselves: We were wonderful and brave; we did great service to the cause of freedom, independence and democracy. The communist propaganda wrote lies about them… When there was a system change in Poland, deep cleavages emerged in Solidarity before anybody said “thank you.” ….And now we, historians, using extremely tendentious materials procured by the security police and the apparatus of repression, are supposed to write the truth and only the truth about them? What truth would it be?

3 The countours of this myth are outlined, among others, by Artur Domoslawski in “Hieny, zdrajcy I terroryści”, Gazeta Wyborcza, 22.09.2001.
4 From “Dyskusja: Opozycja demokratyczna w działaniach władz PRL”, Pamięć i sprawiedliwość 2(4) 2003, p. 64.
Before we touch upon the spirit of truth, three questions are in order. What made the Players into an unsurpassed model of democratic opposition in East Central Europe? What turned them into a bête noir of Solidarity, and then a cumbersome revenant that contemporary Poles would rather forget? And what role has their friendship played in this rite of passage?

The predicament of the group is intriguing for three reasons. Firstly, it touches upon the crooked relationship between ideas and politics - the relationship that can be captured only in hypotheses and suppositions. Secondly, it makes a fascinating case study of the role of intellectuals in social upheavals, displaying, in a brutal way, the unphotogenic side of the romance between the people and their leaders. Thirdly, and most importantly for our exploration, it offers a disquieting picture of the ethics and politics of dialogue which was the axiology of the Committee for Workers’ Defense. The dialogic mode – one of the holy imperatives of modern politics in the West – has been put to a test in pre- and post-Solidarity Poland in the way which forces us to rethink both its efficacy and limitations.

As Joseph Brodsky would have put it, in the beginning there was a can of meat. In June 1976 the communist government suppressed brutally a series of workers’ strikes against the rise of food prices in Poland. The massive protests such as those in Radom, Ursus, Lodz and Plock guaranteed arrest, torture if not death, long trials and unemployment. The socialist world was organized in a simple mafia way: we give you jobs, we feed you and we bleed you when you bolt. There was no virtual chance of justice, mercy or, say, last minute reprieve for the 2500 arrested workers and their families.
But not this time. On 23 September 1976, a group of fourteen intellectuals publicly announced that they were taking the workers under their protection. They constituted themselves as the Committee for Workers’ Defence (KOR) – a clever rhetorical ploy, invoking the romantic-proletarian tradition that the communists in Poland preached but did not practice. They issued the Appeal to Society calling for financial, medical and legal help for the oppressed workers. They went on tedious trips to Radom and Ursus, where they sat through the workers’ trials as Samaritan witnesses of socialist ignominy and mock-justice. More importantly, they did it openly, publishing their names and telephone numbers in the regular information bulletin which they circulated through their own network.

“A mouse challenging a lion,” was the verdict. Jacek Kuron, one of KOR’s founders, admitted as much: “In the beginning everybody, us included, thought that this was madness, a collective suicide….We were told that if ten thousand were in jail and we found a 14 people’s strong KOR, the effect would be that there will be ten thousand and fourteen in jail.  

Normally, intellectuals believe in giving the public what intellectuals want. Not this time. When distinguished professors, gifted poets, and influential journalists in the West summoned their talents to convince the world that modern tyrants were liberators and that their crimes were noble when seen in the proper perspective, the KOR members

5 Anka Kowalska, “Poczatki” in Kultura Nr 7/8, July-August, 1981, 40; Jacek Kuron, Polityka i odpowiedzialnosc (London: Aneks, 1984), 25. Brinsilaw Wildstein, a KOR’s collaborator, reminiscences: There was fear, but not of tragedy - but of a grotesque. We dreaded that our calls and appeals will be met with laughter, and that our challenge to the state will come out as a pathetic swagger or naïve folly. “Z osobistej perspektywy”, in Kontakt (1983), 51
were busy writing their “satanic verses” exposing the beastly side of Realsozialismus. Already in 1976, they were trying to persuade the Poles to embrace solidarity with a common man wronged by the all powerful state and with no recourse to justice. At the time European elites stayed at their desks developing interesting ideas to explain away the sufferings of peoples whose eyes they would never meet, the KOR men and women went to the defeated cities, sat at court trials, knocked on people’s doors, gave out money, collected names and addresses of victims of state repression. They were eternal fugitives, followed, watched, caught, and released - to be followed again. They mixed martyrdom with carnival. Their life was punctuated by rituals of hate: threats, beatings, and terms in jail; and rituals of love: the magic of friendship, euphoric sprees after a success, long, inspired chats. Their story proves that intellectuals are like cream: they are at their best when whipped.

Why did they "stretch" themselves in this way? For Plato, this is a deep psychological question, one to which the characters in his dialogues offer many different answers. Perhaps the loveliest is that given by Diotima and reported by Socrates in the Symposium, that some people have desiring souls and yearn to “beget in the beautiful,” as she puts it. This yearning, this eros, may lead to a philosophy or poetry or to the work towards “the right ordering of cities and households”. The latter is politics in the highest sense. Wherever we see human activity for the good, Diotima tells Socrates, there we will find traces of eros.  

This can be translated into manifold terms. For Jacek Kuron, the idealist architect of KOR, the opposition was the community-making act: “I had a grand idea of love and
friendship, both of them harnessed in a brotherhood, in a struggle for a cause. For another oppositional genius, Adam Michnik, opposition was the act of self-making: “I didn’t search for an affiliation. First of all I wanted to see my own face, to find out who I was.” For the poet, Anna Kowalska, KOR offered a chance of a meaningful suicide: “I thought that if I am to lose my life, then this was the most illustrious way. I meant literally to ‘lose my life’ because I didn’t believe that an initiative like KOR would ever succeed.” For many, membership in KOR was about the continuation of the noble family tradition: linking with a grandfather who took part in the insurrections against the tsar, a mother who fought in the Warsaw Uprising. For the men especially, joining KOR was about charity, vanity and risk - participation in the combined play at Zorro and Robin Hood. Some speak openly of their need for friendship: ”I joined it because…I always aspired to a friendship of people like Jacek Kuron, Adam Michnik, Sewek Blumsztajn, Janek Litynski. And it is their friendship I cared for, not just for being there.”

“A community of hearts,” Michnik summed it up. Rather, the community of minds. For the friendship of the Players was limited to the circle of the virtuous and the

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9 See *Co nam zostalo z tych lat*, ed. (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2001) 27;
11 *Miedzy Panem a Plebanem*, op. cit, 303
equal, with little or no place for intellectual mediocrity. It struggled to combine – with varying luck - the elitism and strife for wisdom as described by Cicero and Aristotle, with the Christian injunction to love your neighbour. In this, it challenged the Aristotelian claim that in a despotic city friendship could not thrive because all social relations are based not upon positive human sentiments such as justice or virtue, but upon the negative power of fear. In the communist state this reclaimed friendship became a weapon against fear and a form of antipolitical politics. At its basis lay a creative conception of common activities: totally open and transparent, focused on the collection of funds and legal help for the repressed workers, publication of a regular bulletin registering all cases of unjust repressions, and mobilization of international media (especially Radio Free Europe) to cover all abuses of justice in extenso.

Imagination let itself be surpassed by reality, as one Polish writer put it. Within a year the Players established a virtual Republic of Friendship that included a wide national and international network of collaborators and benefactors. Robotnik (“The Worker”) - an independent newspaper published by KOR - was a hotline to the proletariat. The alliance with the “Student Committee of Solidarity” ensured the constant influx of activists. The Flying University and numerous underground publishers provided access to an uncensored version of Polish history and to intellectual achievements of Western thought. Support of international writers such as Gunther Grass, Heinrich Böll or Saul Bellow gave KOR the status of a *cause célèbre*. Inevitably, the ambitions went beyond the release of Radom and Ursus prisoners; now they were about the mobilization of the

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whole society to found its own alternative polis. In September of 1977, KOR transformed itself into the Committee of the Social Self Defense (KSS-KOR), whose aim was to create institutional conditions for the protection of civic rights and freedoms.

The KOR numerous reports and publications make and intriguing reading. None of the programmatic essays, theses or statements rests on a vision of a utopian society. There is a constant, cruel assault on illusions and consoling stories. As Michnik put it, “Since you already know that no spiritual groves or triumphant arches are to be expected, you won’t believe in a pleasant lie about yourself or about your human condition.”

With all this skepticism and guardedness—and with a constant police harassment which drove some KOR members to suicide, what was, then, the source of the Players’ stunning achievement?

The simplest, and poorest, answer is that the communist authorities “allowed” it, in the same way Gorbachev “allowed” the breakup of the iron curtain. This, however, says very little about the genius of the people, or the magic of the deeds and words that prepared the emergence of the first free trade unions in the communist block. For in this case the historical drama had a Shakespearian dimension: action was the person.

From the beginning KOR was a community which crossed the generational, spiritual and ethnic boundaries, which was its strength and weakness. There were the “older majesties” (starsi panstwo) including eminent intellectuals and lawyers who were World War II veterans (Aniela Steinsbergerowa, Edward Lipinski, Jerzy Rybicki,

\[13\] *Miedzy panem a plebanem*, op.cit., 4.

\[14\] Halina Mikolajska, the leading Polish actress and the member of KOR, attempted suicide after massive harassment of the security police.
Stanislaw Pajdak, Jerzy Kielanowski, JJ Lipski. There was Jacek Kuron, the great pedagogue and the charismatic Godfather. There was the 68 generation (“Komandosi”), people in their thirties with a dissident reputation (Michnik, Blumsztajn, Macierewicz, Litynski, Celinski, Belinski, Dorn, Romaszewski). There was Jerzy Andrzejewski, Poland’s leading writer who was fanaberyjny (read: “with homosexual leanings”), Halina Mikolajska, a famous actress who was a “great lady,” and a priest (F. Zieja) who was “a live proof of the existence of God”. In short, a very heterogeneous, subaltern team, bringing together socialists, agnostics and Catholics into a community acting out a bizarre family romance. They partied, smoked, drunk and argued as passionately as they risked their lives and careers. The charismatic, and most hated, duo - Jacek Kuron and Adam Michnik – were the Achilles and Patroclus of the group.

There were two Jacek Kurons. One was a hobo who never took off his jeans, addressed every woman as coreczko (“little daughter”), a thug who shouted and coughed, smoked 100 cigarettes a day, and who “learned English while doing push-ups, devouring breakfast and receiving phone calls.”

The other Kuron was a Christ like figure who proclaimed himself a Jew, a Gypsy, Tibetan, Ukrainian, and an HIV positive to oppose the wave of hatred and persecution. One was a psychic terrorist who infuriated the whole KOR by chronically interrupting everybody and knowing better. The other a reflexive democrat who said “Don’t burn party committees, found your own” and proposed the idea of “self-organizing society.” “Like all great pedagogues, he educated us with his very self,” say his friends. “We all wanted to be like him.”

Kuron had a twin soul, the extraordinary Gaya, who made him grow and flourish. There is an unwritten chapter

15 Anka Kowalska, “Poczatki”, op. Cit. passim.
about Gaya as a secret “Holy Graal of KOR.” For there is no doubt that the unique love-
friendship between the two colored and sustained everything that Kuron did and wrote at
the “times of contempt.”

There have been several Adam Michniks. One was an exalted dreamer and
romantic patriot who, from his prison cells in Kurkowa or Mokotow or Bialoleka, exerted
a constant moral blackmail on the Poles. The camera of a Milos Forman or an Andrzej
Wajda would capture a fifteen years’ old boy who founded a “Club of the Seekers of
Contradictions” at Warsaw University to debate the right version of the Polish history
and politics. Or a young man standing on a box in the city of Otwock in 1981 and
shouting: “My name is Adam Michnik, I am an antisocialist element!” and thus stopping
an infuriated crowd from setting fire to the headquarters of the security police. There was
yet another Michnik, a carpet knight sparkling with wit and ready repartee, a seducer of
women and men. Still other was Poland’s most gifted snob, attracted to – and attracting -
talent and fame home and abroad. (“At barely nineteen I became famous. I owe the
communists everything - I’m not sure what I would have done if they hadn’t been
there“). The fourth was an outstanding essayist with phenomenal memory, a man who
paralyzed his interlocutors and opponents with quotes from poets and sages. Still other
was a brilliant sophist, deciphering and unveiling deception and hypocrisy, navigating
between contradicting views. His paradox – of a splendid orator who stammers – was a
comical exteriorization of his hubris: an idealist errant knight who plots and schemes like
Machiavelli.18

17 Miedzy Panem a Plebanem, op. cit. 35
18 Michnik considered himself to be a “medium of Zeitgeist.” He writes: “When in 1977 I sat in prison I
wrote that God put the crooked Polish fate on my and my KOR friends’ backs, and we had we carry it.”
227, 290.
The friendship between the two masterminds of KOR was built not so much on a harmony of souls as on endless arguments about strategies they proposed, books they had written and choices to be made. There is a story which captures in a nutshell the gist of their personalities. When in April of 1984 there was a chance of amnesty, Kuron was escorted from prison by a group of jubilant friends, but Michnik refused to leave his cell. He couldn’t accept the conditions of release set by the authorities: freedom in exchange for giving up oppositional activity for three years. “If they put you up on a General Anders’ white horse and the entire country is watching you,” he told Kuron, “you can’t shit in your pants on the white horse. Especially if you are Jewish.”19 But this time Kuron was not amused. “In prison you sit with your friends,” he commented. “You can’t think solely about your honor and your dignity. You have to think about us all.”20 In the last instance Kuron’s generous communitarianism tempered Michnik’s principled megalomania - and vice versa. Socially, both men were a tonic which, combined with their strong charisma and diabolic intelligence, created a magnetic aura which mesmerized their followers and inspired venom in their opponents.

Apart from the aggregate power of “Kuroniomichnik”, the success of the KOR was made possible thanks to the resourcefulness and dedication of the other members and collaborators. The scattered comments and reminiscences accrue to a picture. The action takes place in Kuron’s flat where people camp, work, argue, sleep and eat for twenty four hours. The phone doesn’t stop ringing: students, journalists, possible collaborators, security police with threats, people offering money. When one walks through the yard in

19 Miedzy Panem a Plebanem, op.cit. 167.
20 Jacek Kuron, Kuron, Gwiezdny czas (London: Aneks, 1991) 351. The eleven KOR members were eventually released as a result of amnesty in July 1984.
the evening, one hears the taktaktak of the typing machines. Many of the callers are madmen and loonies: a woman who claims her sex life has been ruined by the security police and Scotland Yard and demands that KOR provides her with a flat; a man who claims that he has been poisoned by the Special Units; a gentleman who introduces himself as a representative of the common underground government of Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine and Poland. As Kuron put it, they were the “distorted mirror of the disease we all suffered from.”

KOR conducted politics via unpolitical means: a bohemian community sharing things, money, food; a “warm circle” which provided a sense of security and an awareness that “you can risk everything because there will always be people who love you, who will help you and who will be with you to the end.” When all the 15 founding members of KOR were arrested, they were immediately replaced by the women: Gaya, Aniela Steinbergowa, Anka Kowalska. “We could relax in prison” wrote Kuron, “because the movement not only didn’t get stagnant but got a new lease of life.”

KOR’s communal modus vivendi was regulated by a set of fragile, democratic principles. There were no more important and less important members, though, to the others’ fury, Kuron was often confused with a press spokesman of KOR. The force of the combined, intractable personalities of Kuron, Michnik and Macierewicz, was the reason why, when important decision was to be made, the members preferred not to vote in order not to confront the unsavoury division into a minority and majority; they just kept

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21 Kuron, Gwiezdny czas, op.cit. 45.
23 Kuron, Gwiezdny czas, op.cit., 36.
24 Antoni Macierewicz, who was the original creator of the idea of KOR, was from the start on a collision course with other members (especially Michnik and Kuron). Their differences became so pronounced, that in the end Macierewicz left KOR and became a co-founder of ROPCIO (Civic Movement for the Defence of Rights of Man and Citizen).
arguing and hammering it in until everybody agreed. Though Kuron describes it as a “school of democracy,” this was less a democratic and more a Socratic way of tackling problems, one which created havoc and splits, but also, paradoxically, forced the Players to develop and perfect a “dialogic imagination”.

The most impressive, and least studied, achievement of KOR is its spiritual-intellectual legacy. The Players acted consciously as a moral community drawing on and developing an original paideia. Four of the founding members had been connected with Czarna Jedynka – the patriotic scouts that had produced the heroes of the resistance during World War II. The other five had been former members of Walterowcy, a legendary team of socialist scouts run by Kuron in the fifties and sixties. The Walterowcy camps were Kuron’s attempt to build a children’s utopia, where the “law of the smallest” meant that the weakest had more rights than the stronger. “That’s how Kuron understood justice: not as equality but as granting privileges to the weak.”

Four older members of KOR had been the participants in the Warsaw Uprising who remained in opposition to the Soviet occupation. Finally, almost all younger members were involved in the 68 assault on the state socialism and had a prison apprenticeship behind them.

Their patriotic-romanticism combined a general optimism of will with apessimism of intellect. They perceived the cultural-political situation in Poland as analogous to the falling Roman Empire: the break-up of Western civilization and the

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25 Marta Petrusiewicz cited by Krzysztof Burnetko, “Obywatel J.K.”, Zeszyty literackie, op.cit, 105. There was an ideological conflict between the “graduates” of Czarna Jedynka (the national-Catholic scouts) and Walterowcy (with the socialist-internationalist profile) which resulted and further splits and disagreements.
onset of the reign of the barbarians.\textsuperscript{26} They drew on – and developed – the tradition of Polish democratic Romanticism, of early socialist thinkers, the humanist legacy of Camus, Chiaromonte, Bonhoeffer, Hannah Arendt, Leszek Kolakowski, and the vision of the two greatest bards of oppositional humanism, Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert. KOR’s often quoted motto came from Herbert’s famous poem, “The Message of Mr Cogito”: “You were saved not in order to live/ you have little time you must give testimony.”\textsuperscript{27} Mr Cogito, the poignant persona in Herbert’s poetic universe, is an emblem of the doomed rebellion inspired by the antiquarian virtues of honour, loyalty, civic duty, dignity, truth and beauty. He is an ironic, fragile spokesman of the central values of Western civilization which have been eroded by conformity, demolished by fashion, or eradicated by the barbarian hordes. With all reservations regarding the evolution of KOR’s agenda, it would not be too much to say that both the lives and books of KOR members were an extension, if not a literal realization, of Mr. Cogito’s moral codex. At the risk of simplifying a complex moral vision, I would roughly distinguish six pillars of this codex: 1) the Aristotelian conception of politics as a public struggle for values and interests carried through peaceful means; 2) The programme of solidarity and self-organization authored by Kuron in his “Thoughts on the Programme of Action” (1976); 3) The reorientation of the oppositional struggle from the one directed against the authority to the one focused on creating the independent public sphere worked out in Michnik’s programme of the “New Evolutionism” (1979) 4) The creative reworking of

\textsuperscript{26} Miedzy Panem a Plebanem, op.cit., 42-3.

\textsuperscript{27} Zbigniew Herbert, “The Envoy of Mr Cogito,” trans. John and Bogdana Carpenters, a poem registered by Polish Academic Information Center at the State University of New York, Buffalo at http://redfrog.norconnect.no/~poems/poets/herbert.html
the values of original Christianity as the ethical platform of action codified by Kuron in the influential essay “Christians without God (1975”); 5) The ethics of dialogue elaborated by Michnik in The Church and the Left (1979); 6) The code of honour, exhumed by Michnik in his prison book Z dziejow honoru (“From the History of Honour,” 1976). 28

These value premises were not some “pap for the dispossessed,” to use Seamus Heaney’s phrase. They constellated into a concrete programme of action which was consistently realized over the four years of KOR’s existence. One of the most striking dimensions of this axiology has been the endorsement of the Christian ethos despite the secular-socialist profile of KOR’s intellectual shock troops. It has been said about Kuron: “It is not important if Jacek believed in God; it’s important that God believed in Jacek. 29

Jan Jozef Lipski wrote: “We were convinced that if KOR’s answer to arrests, provocations and slander is hatred, then KOR will have to lose because hatred is self-destructive. In no other matter has the influence of Christian ethics been as conspicuous as in this.” 30 While in prison, both Kuron and Michnik read voraciously bishop Bonhoeffer’s letters written in the death cell. Kuron argued: “Again and again, in Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison there is a call to live like people who do without God… One can live as a Christian etsi Deus non daretur.” 31 One of the most dialogic – and underestimated - projects establishing a platform on which the Catholic Church and the


29 Kuron, Gwiezdny czas op.cit, p32. On Bonhoeffer inspiration see also Adam Michnik, Miedzy Panem a Plebanem, 60; Adam icnik, Z dziejow honour w Polsce (Paris: Instytut literacki, 1985).

secular left tradition could meet and mutually de-dogmatize one another, has been Michnik’s *The Church and the Left*. The book attacks both the Julianic, power-hungry and resentful church, and the religious obscurantism of the Left. It emphasizes the common objective of the secular Left and the Catholic believers: the defence of individual dignity and freedom in a dehumanized world. At the same time it opposes expedient and mindless alliances, such as the religious fundamentalists uniting with the military dictators to fight atheism, or the liberationists romancing the communists in order to fight the dictators.\(^{32}\) This was an extended Thomas Jefferson: if you want to build democracy, first find citizens, if you want to recover the humanist project, first find Christians.

The complex, syncretic wisdom of KOR – first thrashed “among friends” at riotous meetings, then ripened to an “uncertain clarity” in prison conditions - has fallen victim to many simplifications. There has been a tendency to reduce it to a secular-left ideology or to the work of a sect of hotheaded “radicals.” Matters are much more complex than that. Firstly, the strong Christian ingredient and the redefinition of friendship as an instrument of politics, gives KOR’s Weltanschauung a premodern touch. The ethics of caritas and the invocation of the tension between sacrum and profanum gesture towards the Renaissance rather than modern worldview. So does the discourse of human dignity which lay the basis for Solidarity revolution. The code of honour – explored in Michnik’s programmatic book – gives a sublime, almost aristocratic ring to the oppositional philosophy. The interest in the concrete human being rather than, say class, or universal humanity, returns to the sixteen century humanism rather than the

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\(^{31}\) *Miedzy Panem a Plebanem*, op.cit., 32.
values of the Enlightenment. The dislike of patriotic exhibitionism and reluctance to invoke the mantra of “Motherland”\textsuperscript{33} is an escape from romantic obsessions and a reactivation of Erasmian cosmopolitanism. Ditto the appeal to “habits of the heart” as the corrective of abstract rationality. In short, there are many elements which bring KOR close to the Renaissance \textit{republica litterarum}, that group of scientists, thinkers and afficados of antique literature who knew and corresponded with one another, and were united by the concrete tasks: promotion of the European citizenship, religious reform, and struggle against fanaticism through the invocation of the wisdom of antiquity. And just as the friendship of – and the argument between – Erasmus, Luther, Pico, Ficcino and Machiavelli, contributed to a momentous change in European sensibility, so did the intellectual legacy of the Players created the basis for a historical breakthrough. After the meeting of KOR with the Czech dissidents which took place in the autumn of 1977, Kuron wrote: “Over there, the secret and open police and their agents. Here we, sitting at the table, on which there is rum, salami, cheese and bread, all of them pulled out of Havel’s bottomless bag. The first trees are humming above us as we discuss how to overthrow the common enemy. It is as if at this moment the common dream of deliverance from servitude through friendship began to come true.”\textsuperscript{34}

The dream of deliverance came true – though in crooked ways. There is ample evidence to the effect that Solidarity was the KOR’s child, “albeit an illegitimate one.”\textsuperscript{35}

It is not accidental that the founding event of Solidarity was the legendary strike in the

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Kosciol, lewica dialog}, op.cit., passim.

\textsuperscript{33} Lipski, \textit{KOR}, op.cit., p.70

\textsuperscript{34} Kuron, \textit{Gwiezdny czas}, op.cit., 83.

\textsuperscript{35} The fatherhood of Solidarity is a matter of controversy, but careful reading of all native sources – including the Solidarity’s leader, Lech Walesa’s own perceptions - alludes to KOR’s crucial role in the process. See especially Robert Zuzowski’s summimg up chapter in Zuzowski, \textit{Komitet Samoobrony Spolecznek KOR}, (Wroclaw, Ossolineum, 1996), 120-171.
Gdansk shipyard where KOR had a very strong programmatic basis and an active team of collaborators including Bogdan Borusewicz, Andrzej Gwiazda, Anna Walentynowicz, and Lech Walesa.\textsuperscript{36} Without the Players’ preparatory work promoting class solidarity, the structures of self-government, and peaceful resistance - the workers’ strikes would have hardly led to a sustained and organized upheaval of 10 million people. Even taking into account the Pope’s crucial role in reinforcing KOR’s definition of Solidarity as a struggle for human dignity, it is largely thanks to KOR’s broad information and publication channels such as Robotnik, high quality journals like Krytyka, and a link with international media, that the image of resistance as a movement of moral renewal was established in the public consciousness.

The question remains why, just when the KOR seems have reached a hard-won victory, it was either sidetracked or treated as a liability by Solidarity leaders? Why were the Players not feted and extolled, why wasn’t their suffering acknowledged and rewarded and their writings studied and analysed? The secret police that had bugged KOR’s meetings and bet the guts out the members, must have been rubbing their hands with glee. In 1981 the attacks on KOR were coming from all fronts: the Communist Party, Solidarity’s leaders and advisors, the Church, and from the best and brightest of the intelligentsia.\textsuperscript{37} This was a historical anticlimax. One of the brilliant communist ploys – the argument that KOR was a bunch of radical intellectuals who schemed to take over power on the workers’ backs - was found so persuasive by some Solidarity local leaders that Lech Walesa strained and sweated to navigate between parties.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} See Seweryn Blumsztajn, op.cit 38.

\textsuperscript{37} For a review of attacks see Artur Domoslawski, op.cit.

\textsuperscript{38} Zuzowski, op.cit. pp. 163-188.
from Radom did not erect the monument to their saviours: they voted against including KOR’s apologia in the report from the Solidarity Congress. The Church, predictably, attacked the Players as the communist allies. Many “true Poles,” who had a problem with the “alien” element in KOR, were happy to add vitriol to a stream of slander. More, leading Polish intellectuals took to unmasking the “heroic amateurs” of resistance. Michnik writes: “I remember a meeting in the KIK (The Club of the Catholic Intelligentsia), at which Broniek Geremek, Andrzej Wielowieyski, and Jadzia Staniszkis talked about the strikes in the shipyards. They spoke about KOR with such ironic superiority that I couldn’t bear it and left slamming the door......For those who have just been released from prison this irony was painful and inadmissable.”

Surely, it was not the case of the revolution devouring its own children. It was the classical case of patricide. The begetters of the revolution were no longer a group of idealists who fought for “deliverance from servitude through friendship”. They were reduced to what the security police always said they were: an omnipotent Jewish mafia conspiring to overturn the state, destroy Solidarity’s Catholic soul, and take over power.

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39 See especially the accusation:” Why was the sign of the Solidarity’s Congress the star of the Sion?” in Robert Spale, “Gracze,”Pamiec i sprawiedliwose, 2/2003, 83-4

40 Miedzy Panem a Plebanem , 299.

41 Alain Turraine et al, Solidarity: teh Analsysi of the Spcial Movement 1980-81 (Cambridge: Camvbridge University Press, 1983). Touraine argues that Solidarity was mainly based on the tradition of occupational strike and lessons from the earlier proletarian experience in organization the social movement. See also Robert Spale, “Gracze”, op. cit. 83-4
“There has never been a community built on enthusiasm which would not in the end turn into a community of folly, said Proudhon.”

It is possible in this case to point to some psychological and political mechanisms of this process. The first one – which in Poland has a rich tradition - is a fierce “martyrdom race” combined with power struggle. There is no doubt that, in the conditions of uncertainty and impending Soviet invasion, the propaganda’s image of KOR as manipulating the masses stood a chance to succeed, especially among the local Solidarity leaders who were now heroes and martyrs for the cause. Like in every revolution, the atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion was further intensified by ubiquitous agents.” The situation during Solidarity was such,” Kuron writes, “that if the true news was spread that the government laid a golden egg, people would say: firstly, not golden; secondly not an egg; and thirdly, it didn’t lay it but stole it.”

Ironically, the former defenders of Polish workers were very much discussed in similar terms: firstly, not the defenders but masons; secondly, not of workers but of their own interests; and thirdly, who are they working for?

Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Solidarity’s main advisor believed the Players should not enter Solidarity’s structures, not just because they were the Communist Party’s Moby Dick, but because they “had an overdeveloped instinct of group interest.” He touched the nerve of the problem. To many outside observers, KOR was first of all a tight and powerful group of friends “who did the impossible” - a liability rather than an achievement in the crooked context of the revolution under siege. They had their own “agenda” which either unknown, misread or distorted. Finally, there was an air of

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43 Kuron, *Polityka i odpowiedzialność*, op.cit., 201
44 Janina Jankowska,”Rozmowa z Tadeuszem Mazowieckim,” *Portrety niedokończone*, op.cit. 151.
haughtiness about them, “an attitude of disdain towards the silent majority.” Some of these perceptions were justified.

Willy nilly, the Players were the actors in the first Polish “reality show” choreographed by the security police. The experience of being continuously watched and guarded by the security voyeurs, of having one’s movements registered and studied, must have been a mixture of trauma and an ego boost, increasing the sense of threat – and of self-importance. (Michnik has ironized that he owes everything to the communist agents: international fame, the status of a hero, beautiful women, and great thoughts). The KOR members were well aware of the danger. Both Michnik and Kuron speak of the threat of becoming “the possessed from the Dostoevsky’s novel,” following “the road which transforms a movement of the democratic opposition in to a religious sect or a gang of bandits – the fate of the triumphant Jacobins, Bolsheviks or the bearded partisans of Fidel Castro.” The tension between the temptation to think in terms of “l’etat c’est moi” and the Christian imperative of humility is especially evident in Michnik’s writing. Once he dumbfounds us with half-ironic statements such as “For five minutes God put me in charge of the Poles’ honour!” Then he redeems himself with brilliant polemical essays against the dissidents’ vanity.

To sum up: There are manifold reasons of the “revolutionary patricide” executed on KOR. One of the most obvious ones is a comprehensive begrudgery against a group which stole the monopoly on martyrdom from the Church, the monopoly on the compassionate socialism from the socialists, and the monopoly on patriotism and courage.

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45 Zuzkiewicz, op. cit., 173.
from the “true Poles.” There is, however, one more thread which seems to be particularly suggestive. The Players challenged the “natural order of things” with their cultivation of the dialogic. They were both-and dissidents, trying by all means to avoid the pitfalls of dogma and fundamentalism. They wanted to practice both politics and friendship. They were both patriots and cosmopolitans. They were both compassionate Christians and secular socialists. As “liberal-conservative-socialists,” they fought both for socialism and capitalism with a human face. Even their attitude to the hateful communist rulers was characterized by tolerance,” writes one of the former members. In short, they were perfect citizens in a “dialogic democracy” imagined by Anthony Giddens and contemporary professors of multiculturalist utopias.

This dialogic ethos, marshalled so fervently in countless appeals and essays, was part of Michnik’s strategy to build a bulwark against the nation’s - and his own – totalitarian temptation. In many respects the Round Table Agreement - signed by the Solidarity leadership with the members of the Communist Party in 1989 – was the crowning achievement of KOR’s dialogic politics. The basis of this dialogue went beyond the readiness to find a common ground; it invoked the Christian principle of “charity before justice”. While settling accounts with the communist generals and apparatchiks, Michnik made a spectacle of forgiving his former oppressors and not bringing them to justice. Persecuting them, he insisted, would mean that “these people will never grow up… that, being the victims of my fanaticism, they’ll be locked in the

ghetto of the damned in which there’s no point to become better.”⁴⁹ This sounds persuasive, as always with Michnik. But whatever brilliant justification he conjures, there are understandable reasons why he has preferred to talk to the communists - who, like him, were both-and people (though of the less noble sort) - than to the right wing camp of nationalist Catholics ready to have him – and the whole of KOR – for breakfast.

Today the Round Table Agreement is increasingly read not as a masterpiece of a dialogic art but as a serious political and moral blunder on the part of the Solidarity leadership. Once an emblem of peaceful transition to democracy and the dawn of a humanitarian Poland without witch-hunts and reprisals, it has become the symbol of moral duplicity, a Mephistopheles’ pact signed without consultation with the electorate. Released from Michnik’s “ghetto of the damned,” the former communists returned to power and, with great alacrity, set out to implement the new politics by old means, i.e. through lies, robbery, misrule and cronyism.

There is something allegorical about the way in which a group of friends in a communist country put to test the best ideas of modern dialogic democracy – and revealed their problematic nature. We should perhaps add here that the dialogic mode lives on in Adam Michnik’s Gazeta Wyborcza, the biggest quality newspaper in Poland and one of the greatest success stories in the media market world over. It is striking how many old oxymorons about KOR have been transferred on to Gazeta: the newspaper is seen as brilliant and manipulative, pluralist and flirting with the communists, tolerant and

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⁴⁹ Miedzy Panem a Plebanem, op.cit., 96. Seweryn Blusztajn recalls: “Forgiveness was Jacek’s obsession. He was ready to forgive everybody: secret police, Leszek Maleszka who denounced his colleagues in Krakow – it didn’t matter. In Jacek Burnetko, “Obwyatel J.K”, Zeszyty Literackie, op cit. 117.
authoritarian - not to mention “dominated by the alien element.” So much for the dialogue in practice.

One is, of course, tempted to inquire into the nature of the Players as “power-players,” to unmask the ways in which friendship became contaminated by politics, and dialogue compromised by ulterior motives. I wish, rather tendentiously, to propose another way of reevaluating the phenomenon of KOR. There are two aspects of the Players’ extraordinary friendship which deserve particular attention today, when we are rethinking the central values of Western civilization. One is the archetypal story of “virtue unrewarded,” of Plato’s “desiring souls who yearn to beget in the beautiful” - and are hated for just that reason. We need only to think of Pascal who, risking being burnt on the stake, bravely defended the Jansenists. In return, the Jansenists censored his works and lost part of his scholarly output treating it as too this-worldly. This seems to be the terrible beauty of mankind’s humanist project – desirable but resisted, often unacknowledged - and hardly ever rewarded. The cruel imperative inherent in this project has been captured in Herbert’s summons:

Go where those others went to the dark boundary
for the golden fleece of nothingness your last prize

go upright among those who are on their knees
among those with their backs turned and those toppled in the dust

you were saved not in order to live
you have little time you must give testimony

be courageous when the mind deceives you be courageous
in the final account only this is important

and let your helpless Anger be like the sea
whenever your hear the voice of the insulted and beaten

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50 See the ongoing debate in Polish newspapers and journals, especially in Krytyka Polityczna, nr. 1 (2002).
let you sister Scorn not leave you
for the informers executioners cowards - they will win
they will go to your funeral with relief will throw a lump of earth
the woodborer will write your smoothed-over biography

.....

repeat old incantations of humanity fables and legends
because this is how you will attain the good you will not attain
repeat great words repeat them stubbornly
like those crossing the desert who perished in the sand

and they will reward you with what they have at hand
with the whip of laughter with murder on a garbage heap

go because only in this way you will be admitted to the company of cold skulls
to the company of your ancestors: Gilgamesh Hector Roland
the defenders of the kingdom without limit and the city of ashes

Be faithful Go 51

Whatever their “hidden” agenda, one of the most unusual features’ of the Players’
friendship was that it was inseparably connected with this humanist - and yet inhuman –
programme, the programme which is not about being a winner but a witness. The
twentieth century expired among declarations of humanism alongside wars and crises that
unleashed suppressed repositories of violence and revealed weaknesses at the heart of the
West’s intellectual life. Today one returns again to the concepts of Renaissance thought -
such as “dignity”, “conscience”, “spirit” - but one is hardly aware of the difficult wisdom
and frightening costs of humanism in action - one for which they “will reward you with
the whip of laughter with murder on a garbage heap”.

The second dimension of the Players’ legacy is their ancient, and yet novel
conception of resistance. What makes KOR into a unique European movement of
emancipation is its thought, which embraces not the spirit of the classical nationalist

51 Zbigniew Herbert, “The Envoy of Mr Cogito,” op. cit.
struggle but the spirit of modern cosmopolis. At the same time, however, it reaches back to the premodern values neglected by the Enlightenment: the importance of religion and of “habits of the heart”, the centrality of human dignity and honour. The friendship of the Players was about politics, but it was first of all about the magic of a “warm circle” which enabled people to overcome fear and passivity. Kuron recalls a poignant episode: “In February 1978 a police broke into Bogus’s flat and interrupted Adam’s lecture. The participants closed their ranks, held Adam’s hands, and he went on lecturing. Then the police threw gas bombs and began to beat the participants with their clubs. But the crowd broke through the blockade, went down to the Florianska street and, protecting Adam in the middle, walked in the streets of Krakow singing “Poland is not dead yet” and “Rota”. They marched like that, almost 200 people, and the others joined in until they brought Adam to the flat of Lilka Batka in the Grodzka Street.52

“Lawina bieg od tego zmienia/ Po jakich oczy sie kamieniach,” (“The avalanche changes its course depending on the stones it passes”), said Czeslaw Milosz.53 Whatever the Players’ eros and ethos, KOR’s fertile friendship was one of the stones that changed the course of the avalanche.

52 Kuron, Gwiezdny czas, op.,cit. 65-6.