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Symbols of Solidarity

August 19, 2005 By Marcin Mierzejewski

Plaques of the 21 Demands, the organization's famous symbol and, last but not least, Lech Wałęsa's ball-point pen-Solidarity has left behind a rich and meaningful collection of memorabilia.

During a meeting held Aug. 17-18, 1980 in the Gdańsk Shipyard's occupational safety (BHP) room, leaders of the strike launched three days earlier and Gdańsk opposition activists united to draft the strike committee demands. Today the wooden tablets featuring the famous 21 Demands, carved by hand, are recognized as one of the historically most valuable material testimonies of their time.

The main role in writing the workers' demands was played by Bogdan Borusewicz, a member of the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR), and Andrzej Gwiazda, an activist of the Free Trade Unions (WZZ). Originally, there were only 10 demands-a further 11 were added as events progressed at the shipyard. The final version was confirmed by Borusewicz, who decided that point No. 1 should involve the demand for state consent to free and independent trade unions. Other points addressed the right to strike, freedom of speech and the release of political prisoners.

The text of the demands was written on two wooden tablets by two activists of the opposition grouping Ruch Młodej Polski (Young Poland Movement). The preamble and numbers of individual demands were done in red paint. During the crafting of the second tablet, a mistake was made so the plaque was turned over and the text written again without errors. The reverse side, containing the mistake in demand No. 8 confirms the authenticity of the original plaques and distinguishes them from many replicas.

The demands were hung on gate No. 2 at the shipyard and appeared in many photographs taken during the strike, becoming a core symbol of the Solidarity movement. In August 1981, the plaques were lent to the Central Maritime Museum (CMM) in Gdańsk for an exhibition on the anniversary of the August agreements.

One day after the introduction of martial law, Dec. 14, 1981, two employees of the museum: Wiesław Urbański, chair of the local Solidarity chapter, and driver Dariusz Chełkowski, also a Solidarity member, removed the demands for safekeeping. When most Solidarity activists were interned, this document survived hidden in a wall in the attic of Urbański's house in Gdańsk-Wrzeszcz.

The plaques reemerged in 1996 as an exhibit at the CMM. In March 2003, they were finally returned to the Gdańsk Shipyard as part of the permanent exhibition Drogi do wolności (Roads to Freedom). On Oct. 16, 2003 the plaques were inscribed into the UNESCO Cultural Heritage List-the youngest Polish document on the register.

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The Red Text

Legend has it that the word Solidarność, the labor union's most recognized symbol, was taken from a sign written in red paint during the strike on the shipyard wall. The creator of the sign was actually Jerzy Janiszewski, then a 29-year-old Gdańsk graphic artist, particularly well known and distinguished for his poster designs. Janiszewski was among the thousands of Gdańsk residents who supported the strike. He later told the Tygodnik Solidarność weekly that, standing in the crowd in front of the shipyard gate, he thought about ways to help the strikers and what he could give them of himself. As a visual artist, he decided to create a poster or a logo for the workers to identify with. He considered the motif of the shipyard gate decorated with banners and flowers: a gate that connected rather than divided people. "But I rejected that idea as excessively literary in nature. I started to focus more on a slogan. There were many written on the walls, with the word solidarność (solidarity) repeated again and again-a word that in a natural way had already become part of the strike vocabulary. I do not remember exactly when I came up with the idea for the graphic design of the inscription. It happened one night, between the second and third rounds of talks," says Janiszewski. The final concept of the symbol, whose letters stand side by side, represented the crowds of people who united in solidarity.

Janiszewski wanted to complete the work on the Solidarity symbol before the government negotiators arrived at the shipyard, so that the strikers could sit down for talks under a common banner to symbolize their unity. In the last phase of the project, the characteristic typeface letters were joined by a Polish flag rising from the letter "n." According to Janiszewski, the move was far from accidental-it was a direct result of the atmosphere prevailing at that time on the coast. No one had any doubt that the protest in the shipyard was more than just a regular strike or that the workers were fighting for a common cause, appealing to their compatriots for a mass movement. The symbol soon took on a life of its own, becoming part of the collective consciousness-not only in Poland, but on a global scale. It played a special role during martial law, appearing on banners at illegal demonstrations and in graffiti, which security forces painted over as a manifestation of dangerous activity. The solidaryca typeface used in the Solidarity symbol was widely used by various underground groupings, even those with no direct links to the organization.

The Mighty Pen

Another Solidarity symbol is a nearly half-meter-long pen featuring the image of Pope John Paul II. With this pen Wałęsa signed an agreement with the government delegation Aug. 31, later referred to as the historic Gdańsk Agreement. Wałęsa received a number of small miscellaneous objects from the people gathered in front of the gate during the strike, including the gigantic pen. "When we were ready to sign the documents, I thought: why not sign the agreements with it? True, the pen was large and unwieldy, but it had a picture of the Holy Father," said Wałęsa in an interview. Although the scene made history, some participants in the August events were angry with Wałęsa for "fooling around" with the pen at such a momentous time. Wałęsa defended his decision, explaining that "this was not a calculated act on my part. I signed with that pen by pure happenstance."

Today Wałęsa's pen is displayed among the exhibits at the exhibition Roads to Freedom. The exhibition features a number of authentic objects, mementos from the strike in the shipyard and later events related to Solidarity. A symbolic fragment of the shipyard wall that Wałęsa jumped over to assume the leadership of the strike is exhibited alongside a section of the Berlin wall, whose collapse symbolized the end of communist rule in Europe. A gift from the mayor of Berlin. This year, the exhibit will travel to almost 30 cities around the world, including venues in Great Britain, the United States and Canada.

Flag poles From Gdańsk

Solidarity symbolism was also incorporated into flag-raising ceremonies in Poland and other new EU member countries May 3, 2004 in Strasbourg, where the 10 flagpoles erected in front of the European Parliament headquarters were made by Gdańsk Shipyard workers. "The flagpoles, bearing the flags of the 10 new member states, were sent to Strasbourg from the Gdańsk Shipyard, where they were made-a gift from the Polish nation for the nations of Europe. We thank you for this symbol and gift. They remind us of the gift and duty of solidarity," said European Parliament President Pat Cox during the ceremony, directing his words towards former Polish President Lech Wałęsa, an honorary guest of the ceremony.

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