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Lech Wałęsa and the Solidarity Era

The Myth Revived?

❖ Michael Szporer

Andrzej Wajda's film about Lech Wałęsa, *Man of Hope*, the finale of Wajda's trilogy about Poland's Solidarity era, expresses nostalgia for the man Wałęsa could have been and for an era that once was and can no longer be—a time of hope that was Solidarity. That the golden age was less golden than it now appears to us is not a novel idea. But subscribers to the myth hope and believe its heroes could have been loftier than they actually were, downplaying their private, human failures—and dramatizing their virtues. *Man of Hope* is a fairly accurate portrayal of Poland's struggle against Communist dictatorship and Soviet domination, but it is not strictly a historical film about Lech Wałęsa. It is instead, in the words of Janusz Głowacki, who wrote the screenplay, a “civics lesson.” It shows Wałęsa's self-aggrandizing manner, his flamboyant garrulousness punctuated by occasional flashes of wit, and his habit of pressing on without pausing for thoughtful reflection. Not that Wałęsa is incapable of quieter moments out of the public limelight. However, as a loosely staged montage of fact and fiction, Wajda's film does invite a dialogue with history.

Most striking in the film is the “look and feel” of dehumanized life under Communism—the small and not-so-small indignities, the lack of public accountability, the constant shocks, and the incongruous assertions of state authority. Drama does not always require a police officer with a college education discussing his sex life with a colleague while torturing a young kid by forcing his head under water in a bathtub. Such daily debasements did not necessarily happen to Lech Wałęsa or to his wife Danuta, but they intruded on the public psyche and were common occurrences. As Głowacki describes it: “In Peoples Poland, Security Service goons [*esbecja*] ran like a running faucet. Apart from those in jail, the bulk of the citizenry, myself included, stood

in muddied water up to their neck, not knowing who still wore underwear and whose butt was naked.”¹

Memorable moments are plentiful as the film graphically replicates the routine oppression of the time, from a protestor savagely mauled by tank tracks—a memory from the December 1970 strikes along the Baltic coast, as described by Bogdan Lis—to a hollering infant in prison, reminiscent of young Jakub Wyszowski’s experience as an imprisoned infant; to the airport strip search to which Danuta Wałęsa is subjected in the film after her return from Oslo with the Nobel Prize. Although Danuta’s account of her arrival back in Poland does not mention a strip search, the Wałęsas were harassed by the militia on their way from the airport to Jasna Góra, where the Nobel Prize was put on public display.²

As an interpretation of historical events, Wajda’s film can be framed by the interview Oriana Fallaci conducted with Lech Wałęsa in 1981. The interview made clear that Fallaci was not impressed with the Solidarity leader’s bloviating persona and saw him as rather reckless. Both Fallaci and Wałęsa were quite aware of the tension between them but were willing to accommodate each other.³ At one point the outspoken Fallaci even compared Wałęsa to Iosif Stalin. Wałęsa spoke with much confidence, as if he knew what would happen. Fallaci was struck by Wałęsa’s disturbing, overconfident bluster, with the Solidarity leader’s conception of himself as being capable of taking power in Poland if the military strongman, Wojciech Jaruzelski, were to fail. She was skeptical when he discounted the very real possibility of Soviet military intervention, which he dismissed in the interview as unthinkable.

Exposing uncomfortable history has been Wajda’s hallmark as a filmmaker, beginning with a risqué war trilogy that included *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) about the Polish Homeland Army’s assassination of a Communist official. For this reason it is difficult, for me at least, to see *Man of Hope* as completing the Solidarity trilogy that Wajda began with *Man of Marble* in 1977 and continued with *Man of Iron* in 1981. The latest film does not fit as a companion piece, despite all the formal gestures, *cinema verité* fluidity, and allusions. What was compelling about the earlier films was their broaching of taboo subject matter.

By contrast, *Man of Hope* attempts to restore the myth of the working-class hero, the image of a mustachioed, plain-spoken tribune of the people

1. Janusz Głowacki, *Przyszłem, czyli jak pisałem Scenariusz o Lechu Wałęsie dla Andrzeja Wajdy* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2011), p. 6.

2. Danuta Wałęsa, *Marzenia i Tajemnice* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011), p. 258.

3. Oriana Fallaci, *Interviews with History and Conversations with Power* (New York: Rizzoli, 2011), pp. 331–351.

that once made Wałęsa globally appealing and earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983. Wajda admits to an attempt at reanimating the myth, which is also why he consciously limits his portrait of Wałęsa to the period of Poland's struggle for freedom. After the fall of Communism, Wałęsa became a controversial figure, especially during his tenure as president, mostly because of his inability to overcome his personal shortcomings and his penchant for distancing himself from his friends and colleagues.

Wajda's earlier films from the Solidarity era exposed the falsity of life in the "workers' paradise," highlighting the difference between reality and Communist propaganda. In *Man of Marble* a young filmmaker named Agnieszka (played by Krystyna Janda) uncovers the story behind the Stalin-era worker role models. The champion bricklayer Mateusz Birkut is killed by a militia bullet on his way to work in the shipyard during the protests in December 1970, and his son, Maciej Tomczyk (Jerzy Radziwiłłowicz doubles as both the son and the father), becomes a dissident in *Man of Iron*, further developing the Polish narrative of liberation of the worker-hero (*stakhanovite*) transformed into a dissident.

Maciej is close to Wałęsa and welds an iron crucifix to commemorate his father's senseless killing. When the film is narrated from the point of view of an alcoholic media hack, it "sobers" him up to Solidarity, openly inviting visual comparisons with Sergei Eisenstein's *October*. In effect Wajda casts his lot with the myth of liberation, visually warring with Communist iconography and touching on sensitive subjects, often symbolically. His worker protagonist rejects the reigning ideology for deeply personal reasons. These subtleties are lost in Wajda's third film about Wałęsa, the inevitable hero of the Polish revolution.

Wajda's film expresses nostalgia for squandered hope. But the problem is how to restore Wałęsa as a national hero after he acted ignobly in the post-Communist era in trying to cover up his weaknesses and outright failures, most notably his murky past as an informant for the Security Service (SB) in the early 1970s. A frank acknowledgment of this moral failing would undoubtedly have been forgiven by the large majority of Poles, who were well aware that hopes were often broken and informants abounded during the Communist era. Wajda deserves credit for at least raising this issue in the film, but the explanation he offers for that humiliating experience is unsatisfying and factually inaccurate. Heroes are expected to be perfect only when we think of them in the old-fashioned way as objects of personality cults. They can also be thought of as flawed figures, and perhaps we should be heartened by the fact that they—like the rest of us—are only human.

Man of Marble is loosely based initially on Piotr Ożański, the champion

bricklayer from Nowa Huta, whose team on 14 July 1950 beat a Warsaw team by laying 34,728 bricks in eight hours, a work rate 525.5 percent above the norm.⁴ Two months later his team beat its own record by stacking 66,232 bricks. Subsequently he was used as a propaganda tool and embraced by the Stalinist president of Poland, Bolesław Bierut. After Ożański fell to drink, married a 15-year-old girl, and squandered his rewards, he fell out of favor with the party and was rejected by the system. The working-class champion in Wajda's film, based on Aleksander Ścibor Rylski's screenplay, is really a composite portrait of larger-than-life figures who served as role models for youth during the Stalin era.

Although labor competition reflected Marxist-Leninist thinking and had propaganda value by spotlighting workers, as a practical program it often backfired by giving workers a platform, with unanticipated results. Some *stakhanovites* became vocal critics of social inequities under Communism, voicing deep frustration with management over ineffective planning and supply-chain irregularities, ineptitude, and corruption, which were rampant. In *Man of Iron*, the film that largely focuses on Solidarity's triumph in 1980, Wajda's immediate inspiration was Anna Walentynowicz, at one time a *stakhanovite* welder from the Gdańsk shipyard. Wajda recreates the Communist management's forceful removal of Walentynowicz from the shipyard, the event that sparked the 1980 Gdańsk shipyard strike.

A compassionate, self-sacrificing woman, Walentynowicz, like Wajda's champion bricklayer Birkut, initially believed in the slogans of the workers' state to help and be responsible for others, a notion that accorded with her religious values. Walentynowicz was a devout Catholic and never a party member. But her attempts to improve working conditions were frustrated by corrupt shipyard officials in cahoots with security agents, who began harassing her, eventually spurring her to join the Coastal Free Trade Union (WZZ). The two Solidarity icons, Walentynowicz and Wałęsa play themselves in *Man of Iron*, attending the underground wedding of Maciej Tomczyk to Agnieszka, the filmmaker from *Man of Marble*, an event loosely based on the marriage of two well-known Solidarity dissidents Alina Pienkowska and Bogdan Borusewicz.

The super-worker ideal was a hallmark of Stalin-era propaganda that openly preached self-sacrifice for a better tomorrow. Model workers in the early postwar years sprang up throughout the Communist bloc following the Stalinist blueprint of the Soviet Union in the 1930s and taking on the challenge of the Donbas champion miner Aleksei Stakhanov. The first Polish

4. Hubert Wilk, "Człowiek z Marmuru Historia Prawdziwa," *Mówią Wieki*, No. 4 (April 2009), pp. 14–17, available online at <http://www.mowiawieki.pl/index.php?page=artykul&id=138>.

working-class hero of the Stalin era was Wincenty Pstrowski, a miner from the Jadwiga mine in Zabrze (Silesia), who challenged Polish workers in 1947 to outdo the norm but died shortly thereafter of exhaustion at the age of 44. Whereas monuments to Communist-era cult figures have been taken down and streets have been renamed, monuments to super-workers remain, perhaps as memorials to these overachieving victims from another era.

Wajda's latest film about Wałęsa selectively reinterprets well-established history. For example, it seriously understates the leading role of Walentynowicz in the August 1980 strike. Her firing was the immediate cause. Wajda also downplays the significance of the Coastal Free Trade Union (WZZ) movement, which, in the film, relinquished its role to the "decisive" and self-confident Wałęsa. In fact, Wałęsa's initial meeting with the Coastal WZZ during the 1978 hunger strike for Błażej Wyszowski, who was on a hunger strike in prison at the time, went very differently. At first the strikers suspected that Wałęsa was a police agent, especially after he proposed bombing Communist militia stations. Eventually he modified his plan and used catapults in order to minimize collateral damage to political prisoners kept in the cellars. The later Nobel Peace Prize winner began with terrorist bluster but quickly adjusted, learning pacifism from the Coastal WZZ, which was the real cradle of Solidarity.⁵

Wajda's film is fond of Danuta Wałęsa, perhaps because of her frank memoir, but it distorts the role of women in the strike. Henryka Krzywonos, the tram operator who broke ranks with the already striking Gdańsk transportation workers but soon had a change of heart and stopped the tram to rejoin the strike, becomes Wajda's symbol of heroism. Krzywonos played a significant role as the leader of transportation workers together with Zenon Kwoka. But to imagine Solidarity without Walentynowicz is a serious historical distortion in Wajda's film. Her name appeared in early reporting by foreign press a good week before Wałęsa's. Wałęsa himself typed her name first when composing the shipyard strike committee.⁶

Women, particularly Walentynowicz and Alina Pienkowska, but also others, were pivotal in transforming the character of the strike from bread-and-butter issues to a strike of solidarity with other working establishments. This solidarity strike, first articulated in Gdańsk, is what most of Poland joined. Downplaying the role of women, and Walentynowicz in particular, might have seemed less of a gaffe if the film took the narrative viewpoint of an overconfident, single-minded figure like Wałęsa, played by Robert Wieckie-

5. Michael Szporer, *Solidarity: The Great Workers Strike of 1980* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), pp. 168–169.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

wicz. But the film's narrative perspective includes the strong-willed and highly skeptical Fallaci (played by Maria Rosaria Omaggio), who probably would have had an easier time interviewing Walentynowicz.

Wajda shows much sympathy for Danuta Wałęsa, whose tough life—with an overbearing (and unfaithful) dissident husband, a public persona, and a large family that must have taken up much of her time—is valiantly portrayed by Agnieszka Grochowska. The portrait owes much to Danuta Wałęsa's memoir *Marzenia i Tajemnice*, published in 2011. The simplicity of her account is believable as a counterpoint to the pomp of her famous husband precisely because it lacks pretense. Danuta Wałęsa candidly shows her differences with her husband and her obliviousness to his machinations. Głowacki admits that Wajda, visibly moved by Danuta's memoir, wanted to “warm up” Wałęsa, to make him more appealing to women by presenting him as a family man and a loving father who read fairy tales to his kids and even gave them a bath.⁷ But such personalization is not by itself all that convincing.

Wajda's *Man of Hope* provoked Sławomir Cenckiewicz to call the film government propaganda in *Człowiek z teczki* (A Man from His Police File).⁸ Cenckiewicz was so eager to shape public debate about the film that he attended the opening at Cannes. But Wajda's film is no more propaganda than William Shakespeare's *Richard III* is a distorted Tudor portrayal of the last Plantagenet monarch. Cenckiewicz has been Wałęsa's arch-nemesis and harshest critic, having published three controversial biographies seeking to discredit the Solidarity leader, beginning with *SB a Lech Wałęsa* (The Security Service and Lech Wałęsa), coauthored with Piotr Gontarczyk and published in 2008 by the Institute of National Remembrance, which subsequently dismissed Cenckiewicz after a furor broke out. *Sprawa Wałęsy* (The Wałęsa Affair), a more popular version of the book, attempted to dispel numerous myths and provide a more comprehensive portrait of the Polish leader. Cenckiewicz's latest jeremiad challenges the Wałęsa myth by pointing to the Solidarity leader's early years as a willing collaborator who informed on his friends and was never held accountable. The new, more compromising information—Cenckiewicz claims—shatters the myth that Wałęsa was forced to collaborate because he and his large family were threatened.

Cenckiewicz's accusations illustrate how polarized reflections about modern history have become in post-Communist societies, especially in Poland, where the courts have been asked to preside over historical disputes, notably in the ongoing lawsuit brought by Wałęsa against Krzysztof Wyszkowski, as well as another filed against Cenckiewicz and his publisher, Zysk. The prob-

7. Ibid., p. 106.

8. Sławomir Cenckiewicz, *Wałęsa, Człowiek z Teczki* (Poznań: Zysk, 2013).

lem has been legally complicated because Wałęsa (or more likely someone on his behalf) removed personally damaging evidence from the “Bolek” file in a cover-up during his tenure as president in the first half of the 1990s. This rearguard action dealt a major setback to de-Communization in Poland, in effect postponing lustration as a useful healing process. The newly uncovered sources fill in the missing pages from the incomplete “Bolek” file, supported by testimony of security officers who were Wałęsa’s handlers, and strongly suggest Wałęsa cooperated with the Polish security apparatus during the December 1970 strikes on the Baltic Coast, and possibly his earlier registration by Polish military intelligence.

The available evidence points to Wałęsa’s cooperation with the SB from the beginning of the December 1970 strikes even though the Wajda film shows him compelled to collaborate and suggests that he had little choice. Apparently Wałęsa did more than simply profile leaders, identify protesters, and inform on coworkers (including Henryk Jagielski and Józef Szylar) after he was interrogated and threatened. Cenckiewicz claims that Wałęsa was a paid informant from the beginning of the events. According to Cenckiewicz, this explains why Wałęsa was able to speak to protesters in the street from the second-story window of the militia headquarters flanked by the commandant and his deputy in an unsuccessful attempt to pacify the crowd. The use of deadly force against the December 1970 strikes and the subsequent memorialization of the 45 victims helped give rise to the big strike a decade later, making Gdańsk the focal point of a nationwide Solidarity movement.

Cenckiewicz alleges that Wałęsa’s first formal contact with the SB occurred as early as 14 December 1970 when he was not at work in the Gdańsk shipyard. The protest did not turn into a street battle until the evening of the 14th when the militia attacked the demonstrators, leaving at least six dead. On the 15th Wałęsa was one of the instigators calling on the shipyard workers to take to the streets and march on the militia headquarters to liberate their arrested colleagues, an action that ended in the burning of the party headquarters, the so-called Reichstag. Cenckiewicz’s account contradicts Wałęsa’s claim that he was a strike leader and suggests instead that he was selected as a delegate not by the workers but by the shipyard directorate.

Trying to forge a consistent personal portrait, Cenckiewicz attempts to explain why Wałęsa eventually compromised with Wojciech Jaruzelski’s regime, agreeing to sideline Solidarity’s “radicals” (Walentyłowicz and Andrzej Gwiazda, among others) before the roundtable talks in 1989 and why he has over time grown to accept his former enemies and even befriend them. Cenckiewicz notes Wałęsa’s willingness to testify as a witness for the defense in a court proceeding brought against Jaruzelski for the December 1970 bloodshed, and he also notes the former Solidarity leader’s public displays of home

and hospital visits. Such public displays, which some see as humiliating, would perhaps be easier to digest if Wałęsa had taken equal strides to make peace with some of his fellow workers from the 1970s.

At the same time, Cenckiewicz's presumption of consistency seriously limits his assessment of Wałęsa. In reality, Wałęsa has been anything but consistent in his choices and admissions over the years. This does not necessarily mean that his self-assessment is reliable, but the real question is what his appraisal of himself has to do with his historical significance. Wałęsa has sold himself as a problem solver, not as a systematic thinker. Moreover, Cenckiewicz's dedication of his book to Wałęsa's illegitimate son comes across as a tactless, historically irrelevant, and petty stunt, even if he means it as a sign of his irritation with the personal attacks he has come under from the former president. One has to remember that few who lived under Communism came out clean from the experience (although this is not an excuse for moral weakness and misdeeds). The victims of informant "Bolek" deserve an apology, and illegal destruction of government documents deserves condemnation, even if the culprit is a national hero or an internationally recognized public figure.

Wajda, however, overcommits cinema to presenting an edifying role model, something that is probably no longer needed some 25 years after Communism ended. One could compare *Man of Hope* to Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, which is an edifying portrait that humanizes the assassinated U.S. president. Spielberg's *Lincoln* is a unique persona, not "the great emancipator" but a shrewd and calculating politician procuring votes to pass the 13th Amendment to abolish slavery. Wajda's film about Wałęsa does have an agenda. The question is whether that agenda justifies departing from well-known facts, something Wajda does routinely. Is Wajda molding history to reclaim some kernel of truth missing in our historical understanding of Solidarity and subsequent changes in Europe, or is he bemoaning the loss of innocence and hope? I think the latter.

If putting an end to personality cults by peaceful means is an enduring achievement of the Solidarity revolution, one wonders how worthwhile it is to try to resurrect the myth of Wałęsa as the worker who toppled Communism. He was certainly not the only worker who contributed to toppling the system. Wałęsa undoubtedly had an impact on modern history as leader of Solidarity, irrespective of his personal flaws or contacts with security services. Whether he was replaceable as a leader has more to do with his unique character traits, such as the gift of the gab or the ability to communicate worker concerns plainly from the heart, which he undeniably had. That he would have been more memorable had he listened to the advice of wiser or more learned men has more to do with opinion than with history. Fallaci herself raised this point when she observed that in her time historical figures have become much diminished in stature—perhaps this is simply the result of realism.