

# Four Documentary Films on Poland

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In October 1980 I went to Gdansk to immerse myself in the electrifying atmosphere of the town known as a cradle of the Polish "self-limiting" revolution. I was told I should see the film *Workers 87* a chronicle of the historic negotiations between the representatives of the Party-state and the workers. Since the film was not advertised in the media I was not able to find the movie theater where it was shown. Finally, someone pointed me in the direction of the right building. A huge poster informed me that inside they were showing... "Return of Godzilla," but the actual film shown to a capacity crowd of Gdansk factory workers was *Workers*. During all the screenings reported to me the film was received with tremendous enthusiasm. In fact all over the country it was a phenomenal box office and artistic success which upstaged Wajda's fictitious rendition of the same historical moment in his *man of Iron*. In this case, documentary genre proved more able to communicate the essence and atmosphere of the Solidarity revolution than did the feature film made by an acclaimed artist.

Bikont's film which for documentary reasons is most fascinating, is unfortunately available only in Polish. It tells the story of the round table negotiations between the communist government and Solidarity. Bikont's crew moved video cameras and microphones through the corridors and halls of the Palace housing the Council of Ministers without entering the rooms where the official negotiations took place trying to document this unprecedented event. They caught off-the-record remarks and bits of conversations and recorded brief interviews with some key participants as well as a few more formal accounts of what was going on "inside." On several occasions one can actually listen to fragments of the strategy planning sessions of the Solidarity side, led by Bronislaw Geremek or to irreverent and certainly not intended for "official" publication comments made by the "party" journalists. Adam Michnik always a brilliant jester, exchanges jokes with and about his former oppressors and challenges them on the key points of negotiations. The film should be subtitled and made accessible to a wider world audience as soon as possible for it is one of the most unique documents of current East European history.

In *After Solidarity* Gaylen Ross and his crew portray three families of former Solidarity activists who ended up in the USA in 1984 after a period of internment. The film covers the first

two years of the difficult period of transition and adjustment to their new environment. It is about the tragedy of displacement ("I have nothing in Poland and nothing in New York"-- confesses a young woman) and hope ("It is easy here but you have to work"); cultural confusion and isolation ("American people can't think what we feel") and newly gained freedom which no one is quite sure what to do with. It is also about economic hardship and suddenly discovered unlimited possibilities of material enrichment, first hypothetical and then increasingly more real ("... beautiful American bedroom"). It is also about ethnic stereotypes and Polish xenophobia: one of the most insightful motifs of the film is a tragi-comic story of a young girl who marries a young immigrant from Egypt. Her mother, shocked and confused, keeps complaining in her broken English: "Not good Arabic." All Poles develop a characteristic cultural schizophrenia, a love-hate relationship with the old and new countries ("I hate Poland" exclaims a child, causing a resigned shrug of the arms by her mother). The men of the families, still dearly in the patriarchal positions of authority (a carryover from Polish culture), were the ones who decided to leave their country. They are now burdened with responsibilities and hardships, yet they slowly gain confidence as their situations stabilize. Interestingly, even after two years in New York City they do not engage in any form of political activism, but as one of them explains: "my first goal is to provide minimum subsistence for my family." The film can be most helpful if you are looking for a teaching tool to be used in your classes, lectures, etc. on immigration.

Richard Adams's *Citizens* is, by contrast, mostly about those Poles who, after arriving in America, continued to be socially and politically active despite the hardships of the readjustment period. I have to confess that because of my friendship with Dick, who allowed me to hang around as he was working on his film and was kind enough to ask occasionally for my advice, my judgment cannot be objective. Let me thus state it clearly at the beginning: I like this film very much. Adams was getting ready to go to Poland to shoot a documentary on Solidarity when martial law was imposed. Stranded in New York and still driven by a desire to learn more about the Polish situation, he started interviewing Poles who, like himself, decided it unwise to go to Poland. As he put it, he wanted to see what was universal in this latest of Polish struggles, what was the deeper meaning of those extraordinary events that swept Poland in 1981. To me, he succeeds in this task admirably. Through an aesthetically diverse yet logical collage of music, Polish cabaret and Church in Greenpoint, NY, and several songs by Jacek Kacmarski, the most famous Polish author of "protest songs", images emotional rallies in front of the Polish Consulate

in NYC and refined aestheticism of Tadeus Antor's theater), and interviews, the film recreates the elated mood, intellectual vitality, and political inventiveness of Solidarity. It does not ignore some of the darker sides of the movement either (Seweryn Blumstain reflecting on Polish xenophobia and impulsiveness). Citizens is not a boring sequence of "talking heads" but a true "picture;" its carefully crafted visual dimension is further developed than in more conventional documentaries, yet the essential sense of certain historical events is conveyed with amazing faithfulness. This accurate rendition of the "spirit of history" is also achieved through other means. For instance, two initial interviews with Stanislaw Barancak, a renowned Polish poet, founding member of KOR and professor of Polish literature at Harvard and anonymous Rudolf, a worker from Ursus tractor factory near Warsaw, one of the strongholds of Solidarity, are so skillfully intertwined that they convey one of the essential characteristics of the movement--the alliance of workers and intellectuals--with great precision. In brief, Citizens is much more than a documentary rendition of historical events; it succeeds in conveying a deeper meaning of Solidarity (to Adams it seems to be the enthusiastic, spontaneous participation in democracy) and reconstructing the Zeitgeist. If you want to help people understand this spirit show them Citizens.

Finally, Nothing to Loose is a record of a young American journalist's visit to Poland in the summer of 1985. It was a fateful summer; the most powerful wave of strikes since 1981 swept the country leading eventually to the historical "round table accords." Charles Steiner and his Polish friend set out to explore the role young workers played in these events. These young workers were challenging the authority of the older leaders including Lech Walesa. The filmmakers traveled around the country in August and recorded several instances of the youth rebellion. In 8 episodes shot in 8 different locations they relate a story of a totally disillusioned young generation. We see and hear a group of young workers in Gdansk. One of them sings: "...and the seventh sin is to be a worker in this workers' country", a few Polish "yuppies"--cynical young "capitalists," a Woodstock-like gathering of rock-fans, and a punk band from Cracow. As a Pole I reacted to the film emotionally reading dozens of messages in its words, images and sounds; and I liked it. My wife, an American, was largely confused by choppy editing and a number of unexplained cultural details and nuances. For someone interested in politics the most informative part of the film was shot in Gdansk. An extensive interview with the young workers and a briefer conversation with Walesa, document well the simmering inter-generational conflict. Someone interested in the mood of Polish youth in the late 1980s will

appreciate the whole film, but some preparatory reading and perhaps a commentary by an expert will be necessary to grasp its full meaning. Unprepared viewers (undergraduates) may enjoy witnessing some "excesses" of Polish youth but are likely to end up confused as to the actual sense of what really happened in Poland in 1988.

**Four films under review:**

1. **Tales of the Round Table** (in Polish), by Piotr Bikont. Available from Gdansk Video [for more information call Jan Kubik (216) 263-2219]. 70 minutes.

2. **After Solidarity: Three Polish Families in America** by Gaylen Poss. Available from Filmmakers Library Inc. 124E 40th Street, Suite 901, New York, NY 10016, tel.: (212) 808-4980. 58 minutes.

3. **Citizens, An American Film Portrait of Polish Solidarity**, by Richard W. Adams. Available from: Richard W. Adams, Documentary Films, 340E 58th St., #5c, New York, NY 10022, tel.: (212) 832-3254. 58 minutes.

4. **Nothing to Lose**, by Charles Steiner. Available from: Vagabond Video, 61 2nd Avenue, New York, NY 10003, tel. (212) 777-0813. 59 minutes.