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Biography between Special Services and Politics]

Zbigniew Siemiątkowski*

**Franciszek Szlachcic (1920-1990).
Biografia między służbami
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[Franciszek Szlachcic (1920-1990).
Biography between
Special Services and Politics]**

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In Poland's recent political history, Franciszek Szlachcic stands as a significant, though perhaps now largely forgotten, figure who exerted considerable influence on the country's political developments in the not-so-distant past. He served as Minister of Internal Affairs, a member of the Political Bureau, and, between 1971 and 1973, he held the position of second-in-command within the leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). He later became Deputy Prime Minister and, finally, President of the Polish Committee for Standardization, Measures, and Quality. Szlachcic remains a controversial figure, one who historically evoked extreme reactions, attracting both loyal supporters and fierce critics. Anna Sobór-Świderska is uniquely well-equipped to write this biogra-

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phy. She is evidently drawn to strong, unambiguous, and controversial personalities, figures perhaps in the background, yet crucial in pulling the strings of power behind the scenes. Her research skills were already demonstrated years ago in her biography of Jakub Berman, the second-most powerful man in Bolesław Bierut's administration.¹ Given the strong reactions her earlier work provoked, the author must be aware that not everyone will approve of the narrative approach she has adopted in Szlachcic's biography. Some readers may object to the emphasis she places on his relentless pursuit of knowledge, his dedication to self-education, his study of foreign languages, and his fascination with new theories of quality and human resource management. Others may be skeptical of her portrayal of Szlachcic as someone who surrounded himself with educated individuals, drew upon their knowledge and experience, and corresponded with leading figures in contemporary Polish science and culture.

The author does not fit into the currently fashionable and widely supported historical politics, and even distances herself from it. And again, not everyone will appreciate this. In writing the biography of her new subject, she rejects the color black and seeks instead to bring out all the shades of gray from the history of the Communist Party and the People's Republic of Poland. She aims to show the circumstances, dilemmas, rationale, and emotions of the people involved in the system. There are no epithets in the work, there are facts and their analysis. Personally, I appreciate this approach. I like the fact that she wants to fill the gaps in the historiography of Poland in the 20th century and the biography of the postwar period with her work; that her ambition is, as she writes, to add a brick to the picture of the inner life of the Polish United Workers' Party, laboriously built by researchers. To be honest, the author has already added a rather substantial brick to that work.

She made the goal of her work an attempt to answer the question: What was more important to her protagonist, the Interior Ministry or the Party? What was more important to him, his career as a security officer or his Party career? What was the culmination of his career, the office of the Rakowiecka chief, or membership in the Politburo and the office of secretary at the White House? These are important and properly posed questions. There are other questions too: the promotion of secret service personnel in the People's Republic of Poland to the power elite. How did it go on the example of not only Szlachcic, but also other heads of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Mieczysław Moczar, Mirosław Milewski, Czesław Kiszczak, and how did it look with our "Soviet friends" in the KGB, such as Aleksandr Shelepin, Vladimir Semichastnyy, and Yuri Andropov? By outlining these "parallel biographies," the author shows the paths and life choices of members of the PZPR elite:

1. A. Sobór-Świdorska, *Jakub Berman. Biografia Komunisty*, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej 2009.

Edward Gierek, Zdzisław Grudzień, Jan Szydlak, Szlachcic's successors in the Ministry of the Interior, Wiesław Ociepka, Stanisław Kowalczyk, and others from the ministry (Słabczyk, Wallach, Piętek). These parts of the work contain a lot of information, unknown facts, and connections that explain a lot and help to understand the meanders of PRL politics. The author goes beyond the framework of classic historical works, which in the hands of some writers border on chronicles where the most important questions are who, when, and where, not why. This is a work at the intersection of two disciplines: political science and political history. Particularly valuable are the sections of the work in which the author tries to answer the extent to which Szlachcic's background, living conditions, and family environment pushed him into the communist movement, and what circumstances caused him to bind his life for many years to the security service of the new system. Here, one must ask: How was it possible that a self-taught man, coming from the social lowlands, could reach the heights of power? It was possible under the conditions of a systemic change, which shattered the order based on a different hierarchy of values and prestige, enabling the social advancement of previously underprivileged strata. Szlachcic and thousands like him benefited from this. They found themselves in places that had previously been inaccessible to them. But that does not explain everything, not everyone became a minister. In Szlachcic's case, factors beyond the social and historical must have played a role. He was certainly helped by his emotional intelligence, his thirst for knowledge, his diligence, and what is most important in politics: he was in the right place at the right time and met the right people. In Olsztyn, it was Moczar; in Katowice, it was Gierek. They were the patrons of his career. But who was his main patron? Gierek or Moczar? Was Szlachcic part of the "partisan" group, or was he more mentally connected with the "Silesian" group? And why did he eventually "abandon" Moczar and was instrumental in elevating Gierek to the seat of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party? These are the problems that we find on the pages of the reviewed work, and which the author tries to answer. Other questions emerge: Who was the mastermind behind the December 1970 conspiracy? Szlachcic, Babiuch, Kania, or Wojciech Jaruzelski? What was the significance of the Sixth Congress and Szlachcic's transition to the party apparatus? Was this a genuine or alleged promotion to the party leadership? He was warned against this step by Andropov, who arguably had a better understanding of where real power is. Why didn't Szlachcic listen to him? What pushed him to take that step? Fatigue with the special services? Willingness to shake off the stigma of the security forces? Pride? Willingness to act in a different sphere? Then there are the reasons for Szlachcic's fall. Were they a consequence of his character traits and the methods he brought from the special services? A failure to understand the rules that apply to the political realities of the People's Republic of Poland? Or was it, as Szlachcic believed until the end of his life, the result of a conspiracy

by his enemies, Stanisław Kania and Edward Babiuch? What was the role of Soviet friends in this? These are the issues raised in the pages of Sobór-Świderska's work, and which she explores with passion, and which I will address later in the review. It is important to emphasize the fact of the broad social and political context in which the author places her subject. In her treatment, this is not only a political biography of Szlachcic but a piece of well-shown political history of four decades of Poland. She shows the processes, describes the events in Polish history that left a mark on the fate of Polish society, and she also reveals quite extensively, thoroughly documenting, the backstage politics of the communist era.

The questions posed above are answered by the structure of the work, which is based on a chronological and problematic arrangement. The author begins the story by showing the childhood and youth of her protagonist, as well as the circumstances of his involvement with the communist movement and, later, with the communist partisans during the war in Silesia. The second and third chapters deal with his service in the field organs of the UB/SB in Silesia, then in Kraków, Olsztyn, and Rzeszów, including his position as Provincial Commander of the MO in Katowice. The fourth chapter shows Szlachcic at the Ministry of the Interior as deputy minister, highlighting his close cooperation with Minister Moczar and his gradual entry into the political orbit beginning with the Fourth Congress. The fifth chapter deals with his split with Moczar and his increasingly strong relationship with Gierek. In the next two chapters, the author dynamically recreates Szlachcic's participation in the dramatic days of December 1970 and the role he played in "casting" Gierek as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. In the next chapters, she shows Szlachcic as the fully established head of Rakowiecka and describe his role in the court of the new White House host. The tenth chapter covers the process of the so-called "Franciscans," as it was referred to in Warsaw at the time, and his eventual downfall in 1974. The work concludes with a final chapter that depicts Franciszek's struggle to get back into the game. The structure of the work fully corresponds to the author's research goal.

Worthy of emphasis and praise is the source base of the work. In addition to the subject literature and the critical use of other authors' findings, the author conducted a thorough search of archival sources stored in the Archives of New Records, the Institute of National Remembrance, and the Social Archive of Historical Documentation of the People's Republic of Poland, located in the Main Library of the Pułtusk Academy of Humanities, where the archival legacy of Franciszek Szlachcic and other leading PZPR activists is preserved. The author deserves separate praise for her use of

sources stored in Russian archives, mainly the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History and the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History. There are collections and personal files of leading Polish communist activists. Their contents are sometimes striking. The characterizations of these activists written by Soviet diplomats, officers of Soviet special services, and employees of the Polish sector of the Foreign Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU, as well as records of conversations and denunciations made by them against their political rivals from their own party, exhibit the worst possible moral and political testimony to Edward Gierek's political team and him personally. The notes quoted by the author from Soviet Ambassador Stanislav Pilotovich's conversations with Gierek are a stark illustration of the First Secretary's extreme servility toward his "Soviet friends." Given the current situation, Polish researchers will have to wait a long time for access to Russian archives. It is good that the author managed to reach them before the war in the East began.

F Franciszek Szlachcic's career is full of understatements, highs, sudden changes in roles and places, and finally crowned by a spectacular fall. He constantly changed masks, assumed poses, at times a policeman, at other times a politician pandering to intellectuals. On one occasion, he flattered the hardliners in the party, thundering against Zionists and revisionists at meetings in the Interior Ministry, and another time he received an ovation while lecturing to writers in Radziejowice. He cultivated friendships with individuals from widely differing wings of the PZPR. He dined with Mieczysław Rakowski while also maintaining a friendship with Władysław Machejko. He drank milk with Jaruzelski and vodka with Grzegorz Korczyński. He served under Gierek and visited the retired Gomułka. He negotiated with Egon Bahr and spoke with Henry Kissinger. Not only researchers but also his contemporaries had trouble assigning him to any of the party groups preparing to succeed Władysław Gomułka. Was he part of the "partisans" or not? The author tried to grapple with this problem, and let me say right away, does so successfully. He participated in the famous Thursday meetings at Moczar's house and was friends with his associates. Biographically, socially, and mentally, he was a "partisan." Opponents from the power apparatus (such as Artur Starewicz) even considered him a pillar of the partisan group. So, was he Gierek's man in the Interior Ministry, or did Moczar consider him his man in Silesia? Was he dragged by Moczar to the Interior Ministry headquarters as a gesture to Gierek, making him a liaison between the groups? I believe that Szlachcic, despite the veteran bond he had with Moczar, identified more with what the technocratic Silesian lobby represented. In his early years in Warsaw, he was close to the "partisans," but over time, his reading and contacts with people from science and culture allowed him to better understand the end of a certain world that Gomułka and Moczar represented. He felt more comfortable as the world of "country

people” and “people in splints” was becoming a thing of the past. A time of “modern patriotism” and “managerial patriotism” was opening up for Poland. The new, educated generation entering the party ranks already needed other ideologies. Not insignificant in these choices, the author writes, were changes within the Soviet special services. The fall of Shelepin and KGB chief Semichastnyy, figures who had elevated Leonid Brezhnev to power, must have given Szlachcic food for thought. Moczar’s patrons in the Kremlin had fallen. Szlachcic immediately recognized Moczar’s weakening position in Moscow and drew practical conclusions for himself, something the Polish People’s Republic ambassador to Moscow, Jan Ptasieński, who promoted Moczar in the Soviet power apparatus until the end, could not understand (See his diaries.).

Another problem in Szlachcic’s biography concerns his role in the December crisis. The author rightly notes that reconstructing his role during those December days is an extremely difficult task. This is not helped by Szlachcic himself. He gives contradictory accounts. At times, he diminishes his role; at others, conversely, he puts himself in the role of the demiurge of these changes. He is afraid of being held responsible for the tragic events on the coast, claiming he was just an unassigned observer who, for lack of specific tasks, was dozing off. The author rightly mocks Szlachcic in this case. Was he on the coast merely to be close to the events and thus able to steer them toward some specific “target,” as the author suggests? He was there with an ear to whom? Gierek, whom he called several times, yet refuses to admit in his memoirs and publicly filed accounts of the December events. The louder he denies his causal role on the coast and his behind-the-scenes work on behalf of Gierek, the more credible these allegations seem. This credibility is reinforced by the post-December careers of those in the ministry who accompanied Szlachcic to the coast: Adam Krzysztoporski, Stanisław Zaczkowski, Władysław Pożoga (head of the Gdańsk SB), and Tadeusz Bejm, municipal commander of the MO from Gdynia. Interestingly, Pożoga politically outlived Szlachcic. He was Kiszczak’s first deputy in the Interior Ministry until 1989. Was he protected by Kania and then Jaruzelski? We won’t find out, we can only guess. And we certainly won’t find out either from Pożoga himself, who made such rambling statements after 1990 that his credibility is nil. He accuses the “strong four,” Jaruzelski, Babiuch, Kania, and Szlachcic, of conspiracy on the coast, conveniently forgetting his role and his career by their side after December 1970. His testimony before the Constitutional Responsibility Committee of the third-term Sejm only confirms the worst possible intellectual and moral judgement on him.

Another problem is the December night escapade of Szlachcic and Kania to Katowice to fetch Gierek. Here, we have conflicting accounts from the protagonists of that night, including disagreements over the significance of the expedition. The discrepancies even extend to the very course of the conversation between the envoys of the Warsaw “conspirators” and Gierek. The very term conspirators, eagerly used by Szlachcic, does not correspond to reality. At the time of the conversation with the guests from Warsaw, everything had already been clear for some time. After Piotr Jaroszewicz’s talks in Moscow and Jaruzelski’s talks in Warsaw with envoys of the United Warsaw Pact Command, Gomułka’s fate was already sealed. Therefore, the “conspirators” were not risking anything by talking to Gierek. It seems that Piotr Kostikov, head of the KGB’s Warsaw residence, is right when he writes that Gierek played a comedy in front of his Warsaw guests. It is worth noting that immediately after December, the biggest winners next to Gierek, were Babiuch and Jaruzelski, who were given membership in the Politburo. Kania and Szlachcic had to wait a little longer for their promotions.

Franciszek’s downfall is handled masterfully in this part of the work. The process of Franciszek’s devaluation is depicted with detective-like inquisitiveness. The author pointed out a number of factors that determined the downfall of her protagonist. She does not insist on which factor was the most important: the issue of German reparations negotiations, the “orgasm” of power following the successes of 1972, the revenge of Moczar’s people in the Interior Ministry over Matejewski and “Zalew,” character traits, secret police methods, haste and impatience, envy from those around him, betrayal by his closest allies, loss of trust with his “Soviet friends,” or the reversal of a previous patron. All were important. I would point out one more circumstance that determined that the fate of the ambitious Szlachcic was already sealed the moment he decided to abandon the ministry career he had practiced for twenty-six years in favor of a job as a party activist (a step he was warned against by Andropov). In this job, a different kind of rules apply. Years of apprenticeship in the apparatus count. The capital one acquires in these years: acquaintanceships with people of the apparatus from all over the country, from the farthest committees, with whom over the years one has been at countless course conferences, party conferences, conventions, plenaries, delegations, forming a networked structure of power. In this world, Szlachcic was an outsider. Babiuch’s and Kania’s networks of connections could not be offset by the “Franciscans” Szlachcic had positioned within the central administration. The latter could be dispersed by a single decision of the Central Committee secretariat or bribed with the promise of a takeover by a new patron. Szlachcic’s main opponents were children of the party apparatus, well versed in the rules of that world. Hitting one of them triggered a chain reaction, secretaries from the most distant corners of Poland could speak up in their defense. Their

voices could not be ignored, even by the First Secretary of the Central Committee. After all, they were the depositaries of the convention sabers. In this context, the hypothesis put forward by the author, that the strike against Szlachcic was in fact a blow aimed at Gierek, looks interesting. It was aimed at depriving Gierek of a person close to him, isolating the First Secretary in order to replace him with a new party chief at a new stage. This mechanism was later used against another close Gierek man from Silesia, Szydłak, whom the Kania-Babiuch tandem eliminated from the Central Committee apparatus by “sending” him to the government. Józef Teichma and Józef Kępa had already been marginalized. Finally, the victim of this mechanism was Babiuch, “maneuvered” into the prime ministership in 1980. But that is another story. By the way, I urge the author to deal in the near future with Edward Babiuch, another “second” in the history of the PZPR.

Finally, I would like to refer to the author’s repeated tendency to treat certain events as strange coincidences, unexplained circumstances, and other mysterious situations. In 1964, on the route to Katowice, Szlachcic suffered a serious accident. Edward Gierek also suffered an accident on this route. Earlier, Deputy Minister of the Interior Ministry Antoni Alster had also suffered an accident. Aren’t there too many unfortunate traffic accidents, the author asks, including two on the route from Warsaw to Katowice? Another issue: near Szczecin, Minister of the Interior Ociepka died in a plane crash. The circumstances of the crash are not entirely clear, the author concludes elsewhere. I suggest that in this type of situation, if there is no hard evidence, one should apply Occam’s razor and accept the simplest explanation. They were simply unfortunate accidents. In my opinion, contrary to some opinions cited by the author, Szlachcic’s death in November 1990 was as natural as possible. I had seen him in December of the previous year, he was very changed, with visible traces of severe illness.

Thanks to Anna Sobór-Świdorska, we have received a valuable publication worth recommending to all those interested in politics and able to draw conclusions from the past.

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