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Communist Women and the Spirit of Transgression: The Case of Wanda Wasilewska

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Life has to be a struggle.

Wanda Wasilewska,
Dzieciństwo [*Childhood*]¹

Personal Genealogy

In her autobiographical sketch *O moich książkach* [*About My Books*] (1964), penned towards the end of her life, Wanda Wasilewska noted:

My home schooled me well – far from a bourgeois sense of contentment and bourgeois ideals, it was always focused on general affairs [...], the aura of my family home, where general affairs were always put first, instead of personal ones, must have had an impact on my adult life. It was kind of a given that one should take an interest in what was going on around them, and actively participate in life...²

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1 Wanda Wasilewska, *Dzieciństwo* (Warszawa: PIW, 1967), 123.

2 After Eleonora Syzdek, *W jednym życiu tak wiele: opowieść o Wandzie Wasilewskiej* (Warszawa: Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1980), 18–19.

Remembering the upbringing she received in her family home, Wasilewska – writer, Communist activist, wartime head of the Union of Polish Patriots in the USSR, a post-war member of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union – wrote about her *credo*: fight which becomes one's life-purpose and thus is all-consuming. She thought it obvious that there ought to be a direct correlation between one's proclamations and one's way of life: the political forced its way into every nook and cranny of the private sphere, engulfing and subjugating it. At the same time, personal experience became an impulse to undertake political action, to initiate changes or participate in a process already underway. It was a practice that was familiar to the Polish intelligentsia, which had lived and breathed general affairs for decades, but simultaneously a new one, different from the established patterns: the Communists, whom Wasilewska joined at some point, were following the idea of a radical interweaving of the political and the private, of revolutionizing every aspect of social life – and they began with themselves and their environment. As French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote: “revolution [for them – A.M.] was not just a political project; it was also a form of life.”³

In one of his lectures delivered at the Collège de France in early 1980s, Foucault pointed out that starting from the Cynics all the way to contemporary times, revolutions were not merely political events, but also living ideas, rules which governed life, projects manifested by those who propagated them, whose very lives attested to the verity of their slogans, sometimes to the point of (auto)destruction. Foucault was far from making a simple analogy between, for instance, the revolution of 1968 and previous ones, including that of 1917: they were too far apart in terms of the historical, political, and cultural context, as well as in terms of the methods of exacting their demands, or even the way they defined them. And yet, he did notice a certain continuity in thinking about revolutions and the actions of people who dreamed up visions of social change at great personal cost: broadcasting their views meant challenging the world, which in practice translated into separating themselves from the community in which they were raised, and rejecting the rules they were taught, including the fundamental ones on submitting to violence or using it against others: “Going after the truth, manifesting the truth, making the truth burst out to the point of losing one's life or causing the blood of others to flow is in fact something whose long filiation is found again across European thought,”⁴ wrote Foucault.

3 Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II). Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 183.

4 Foucault, *The Courage*, 185.

In this article, I would like to take a look at Wanda Wasilewska – “Leon’s daughter,” as she was referred to by her contemporaries when they were trying to underscore her “refined/upper-class/proper upbringing” (Polish, patriotic, intellectual) and her “rejection” of it on her journey to Communism⁵ – in an attempt, based on Foucault’s musings on “revolution, which becomes an existential project,” to capture that which has heretofore eluded her biographers and the commentators of her activities: to see neither the icon or of the Communist coup nor a symbol of national betrayal, but a “living person,” a participant of social life, firmly set within a specific historical and geographical context, and defined by it. I am interested in Wasilewska, and more broadly, also other female activists of the Polish post-war Communist movement, as a revolutionary both in the public and in private sphere, as one of the theorists, ideologists and propagandists of Communism in Poland, but also a person whose “entrance” into Communism took place on many levels, resulting in a certain “scandal of the truth,” to quote Foucault.⁶ This intersection of the private and the public is something striking in Wasilewska’s writing, her literary and journalistic texts, and her personal documents – memoirs, interviews, letters. Wasilewska’s “voice” – rarely recalled today as it is marginalized as “unreliable” and “compromised”⁷ – takes us through the process of how her Communist identity was shaped, revealing the moments she crossed several boundaries: of gender, nationality, social class – a gesture she saw as “rejecting superstition” or “delusions;”⁸ it reveals her gradual experience of the boundaries of Communist transgression as well. This “voice” deserves, I believe, to be heard and to be given a chance to present its own reasons, to reveal its motivations for certain behaviors and actions, especially as other “voices” referenced in this article constantly interpret what she says, closely and carefully “investigating” and “reading” her words. However, Wasilewska does not appear in this article as the only witness in her own trial – she is not put in the position of the accused without a right to defense.

5 See for instance Adam Ciołkosz, *Wanda Wasilewska. Dwa szkice biograficzne* (London: Polonia Book Fund, 1977).

6 Foucault, *The Courage*, 183.

7 Remarking on Wasilewska’s work Joanna Szczęśna, journalist of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, declared: “Although her novels criticizing Poland of the Sanacja period can hardly be categorized as masterpieces of Polish prose, Wasilewska’s books on Soviet reality are simply unreadable.” Joanna Szczęśna, “Wanda Wasilewska: Bywszaja Polka,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 23.03.2001, accessed January 20, 2013, <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/kraj/1,34311,192981.html>

8 Wanda Wasilewska, “Listy Wandy Wasilewskiej (I),” *Zdanie* 6 (1985): 36. (Letter to mother from November 25, 1931.)

There is a method of writing about human beings, proposed by feminist literary scholar Toril Moi, which includes his or her voice, assumes empowerment of the “object of study,” but also “reads” their voice contextually, allowing to see human life not as a coherent, finished “product” but rather as “a process of production,” a *m a k i n g* of the “I.” Moi calls this method a “personal genealogy,” emphasizing that it is different from biography as it

seeks to achieve a sense of emergence or production and to understand the complex play of different kind of power involved in social phenomena. Personal genealogy does not reject the notion of the self but tries instead to subject that very self to genealogical investigation. Personal genealogy assumes that every phenomenon must be read as a text, that is to say a complex network of signifying structures.⁹

In my attempt to outline Wanda Wasilewska’s “personal genealogy,” I would like to reflect also on the usefulness of the method used by Moi in her work on French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir for the study of Communism. Looking at the identities of persons/ groups/ generations/ communities in the process of “becoming” and transforming, the analysis of motivations and forces which trigger or inhibit action, while recording the moments of intersection between the political and the personal, can help problematize the image of Communism in Poland, dominated today by a totalizing approach. This is because “personal genealogy” or, putting it more broadly, genealogy as seen by Foucault,¹⁰ is not a project aiming to construct a large, monumental, unifying narrative of Communism, but rather a proposal to break it into many smaller ones: narratives that treat the actors of events as subjects (for instance by not denying them a voice), to situate them in a broad historical, cultural, geographical context, to take into account the complex system of forces and power relations in which they existed and which they undermined, and at other times preserved.¹¹ It is an approach that allows

9 Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29.

10 See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, genealogia, historia,” in *Filozofia, historia, polityka: wybór pism* (Warszawa–Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2000), 113–135.

11 It must be noted that this methodological approach has already been applied in the research on Communism. In *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw’s Generation’s Life and Death in Marxism* (2006) American historian Marci Shore described a generation of Polish intellectuals, enchanted and disenchanting with Marxism, against the background of Polish and European history of the first half of the 20th century. In *Żydokomuna* (2010 motion picture) sociologist Anna Zawadzka looked at Communism through the eyes of Polish-

to “capture multiple aspects of [Communism’s] history itself” but also to see in the “people entangled in its history” something more than only “passive objects run by impersonal forces of the system.”¹²

No One is Born a Communist¹³

Communism is not something one is born with, nor is it something to be “inherited” from one’s parents or grandparents,¹⁴ as clearly proven by the biographies of several Communist (and anti-Communist) activists. Rather, as a set of views, attitudes, approaches, convictions and behaviors, it is something “acquired,” developed in the process of socialization: by reading certain books, frequenting certain circles, meeting certain people. Sometimes, however (and here one can also find many examples), it is also something one can identify with¹⁵ against the grain of socialization: against the education received at home, against the tradition one is shaped by – something formed in a certain field,¹⁶ whether intellectual or political, as a result of principles governing this field or in violation thereof.

I emphasize this, because it is common in Poland (though not only here) to view Communism, especially among the intellectual elites, as a kind “blindness,” “bite,” “seduction” or “possession”; a kind of “impulse,” “momentum,” “action” leading to a tragic “reaction.” Such reasoning applies also to Wanda Wasilewska’s case. Adam Ciolkosz, an activist of the Polish Socialist Party and Wasilewska’s friend from her days in Cracow’s Union of Independent Socialist Youth, and a political opponent after the war, spoke of Wasilewska’s involvement in Communism as a kind of “ecstasy of love” or “passion” which

Jewish activists, noting both their differences at the point of departure but also the evolution of their views and attitudes from the 1920s until the present.

- 12 Marcin Starnawski, “Tęsknię za tobą, Żydzio-rewolucjonisto! Demitologizacja, etos i nieprawomyślne lekcje w filmie Anny Zawadzkiej *Żydokomuna*,” *Recykling Idei* 13 (2012): 168.
- 13 To paraphrase the famous sentence from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, “No one is born a woman” (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 301.
- 14 Marci Shore, *Nowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*, trans. Michał Sutowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012).
- 15 For the difference between identification and identity, see Stuart Hall “Introduction: Who Needs Identity?,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 1–17.
- 16 As defined by Pierre Bourdieu. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Dystynkcja. Społeczna krytyka władzy sądzonych*, trans. Piotr Biłos (Warszawa: Scholar, 2006).

gripped her suddenly and fervently.¹⁷ Remembering Wasilewska of the Lviv period (1939-1940), the ex-communist poet Aleksander Wat mentioned “fanaticism,” her almost religious “ecstasy” or “exaltation” or “mysticism [as the] Saint Teresa of Communism.”¹⁸ Both of these frames of reference – religion and love – are particularly powerful when applied to women; Wasilewska’s femininity sharpens her image as someone irrational, ecstatic, possessed by sudden passions.

However, explanations of the “nature” of Communism based on religion/ love fail to reveal motivations behind the human involvement in it, except for the psychological one: ultimately, the Communist (especially when female) is presented as weak and prone to “addiction.” They also fail to account for “the journey into Communism,” focusing only on the movement in the opposite direction, where freeing oneself from “addiction” is being praised as a demonstration of individual willpower and determination. Finally, they do not encourage a reflection on what this journey may have encompassed, its obstacles or sacrifices: if we assume involvement in Communism to result from an “impulse” or “blindness,” all discussions of it as a process, a movement with everything that the movement entails, and its consequences (changes of direction, pauses, changes of pace) are rendered invalid.

Meanwhile, the latter issue, i.e. engagement as a process, often extended over several years, a movement that is difficult to define as something steady or straight, seems particularly important when discussing Wasilewska. Her “passage into Communism” was not, as revealed especially by her letters, a single “jump into the realm of freedom,”¹⁹ but a long process that on the one hand occurred smoothly (being a “young lady from a good family” she could afford the luxury of “maturing into radicalism”), but on the other, was not free of its shocks, precisely because of the environment Wasilewska was raised in.

An analysis of such process should begin with two questions: what “makes” someone a Communist, what private and/ or public events, what emotional “upheavals,” what thought processes are behind it? And when exactly can we pronounce someone a Communist? Is it determined by the party affiliation, an ideological declaration, a specific act (and of what kind)?

17 Ciołkosz: “And here is the key to the story of Wanda Wasilewska’s life. When the Soviet troops entered Polish territory, she discovered – as Piotr did – the true love of her life, the red star” (in Adam Ciołkosz, *Wanda Wasilewska*, 32).

18 Aleksander Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, vol. 1 (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), 317.

19 After Andrzej Walicki, “Marksizm i nieudany „skok do królestwa wolności,” in *Polska, Rosja, marksizm* (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), 397-446.

In Wasilewska's case, these questions were frequently asked, but depending on who and when penned her biography, the date of Wasilewska's "entrance into Communism" moved back and forth. The early (sympathetic) biographies by Soviet authors²⁰ accentuated her every act of youthful rebellion, even as a child, to present Wasilewska as a radical as early as possible. Others (who are anti-Communist), in turn, emphasized her long "socialist childhood" and safe life under the wing of her father's influence, followed by a sudden "jump" into the deep waters of Communism on September 17, 1939, when she fell into Stalin's arms.²¹ Questions about the exact date of her "joining the Communists," but also about the symptoms of her pre-war Communist activity – a certain verification of Wasilewska's biography – were used both to legitimize her status as an icon of the Communist revolution in Poland or, on the contrary, to expose her as a "traitor," "renegade," "a degenerate daughter of her people."

Wasilewska's case is interesting because in a lot of respects, it differs from a typical "blueprint of a Communist." She was a self-proclaimed PPS (Polish Socialist Party) supporter and not ashamed of her background. Talking to historians of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party in January 1964, she started with a "confession":

I was born into a PPS family with strong independent leanings, in a family not only reluctant, but hostile toward Russia, whether Tsarist or Soviet. Already in early childhood, my PPS family and the cult of Piłsudski made me see certain connections between things. It was clear, that the red banner stood for the workers. My father worked in a socialist press house, went to the workers' meetings, my mother was active in the workers' movement. Already as a child I grew used to May 1 being an important holiday, a day when holding my mother's or my father's hand you walk in the first row of the parade.²²

Remembering her childhood, Wasilewska also reconstructed the tradition she was raised in: a patriotic, committed one where the Romantic notion of a struggle for freedom interconnected with the positivist idea of hard, daily work. The struggle for Poland's freedom was a priority for her parents,

20 See Elena Usievic, *Vanda Vasilevskaā: kritiko-biografišeskij ošerk* (Moskwa: Sovetskij pisatel, 1953); Leonid Vengerov, *Vanda Vasilevskaā: kritiko-biografišeskij ošerk* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1955).

21 See Ciołkosz, *Wanda Wasilewska*.

22 Wasilewska, "Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej," in *Zpola walki* 1 (41) (1968): 118.

Leon Wasilewski and Wanda *nee* Zieleniewska (they both supported Józef Piłsudski's push for independence), and so was social and educational activism – before WWI Wasilewska's father published *Przedświt* [*Daybreak*], a socialist journal, and her mother was a member of the Circle for People's Education.

In the autobiographical essay quoted earlier, *O moich książkach* [*About my Books*], Wasilewska spoke of her family home having “schooled her well,” teaching her to connect the private, the intimate and personal with the public, the social and the political; a secular, democratic, egalitarian environment. She admitted being raised in a context that stimulated activity instead of teaching passiveness.²³ And it was a particular kind of activity, consisting of teaching, writing for leftist journals, agitating in small towns and villages, organizing a workers' library or taking part in the students' theatre where in 1933 she staged *Cyanide*, a play by Friedrich Wolf (1929) about the problem of conscious motherhood; in other words, a “traditionally socialist” kind of activity, reformatory rather than revolutionary in nature, as for some time she viewed the latter type – associated with the Communism – as something fanatical, almost sect-like.²⁴ In her circles, as among the majority of the society, Communism was viewed if not with hostility, then definitely with suspicion and distance.²⁵ Several years later she noted that the decision to join the Union of Independent Socialist Youth and not any other similar youth organization was motivated precisely by the radicalism of the Communists with regard to their methods:

I can't remember which pamphlet exactly said that, but I remember reading a sentence that said: “Fighting against socialist fascism: we must join labor unions and if they can't be taken over, they must be destroyed.” And that was the moment I decided to join the ZNMS [Union of Independent Socialist Youth] and not “Życie” [“Life”] because I thought that when one joins a labor union, one should work for it. I thought it made no sense

23 The ethos of Polish pre-war leftist intelligentsia was the subject of Andrzej Mencwel's *Etos lewicy: esej o narodzinach kulturalizmu polskiego* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009).

24 See Eleonora Syzydek, *W jednym życiu tak wiele*, 56. A critical portrayal of the Communist Party of Poland of that period can be found in Jan Alfred Reguła, *Historia Komunistycznej Partii Polski* (Warszawa: “Drukprasa,” 1934).

25 For discussion of the portrayal of the Communists, the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Russia in Polish interwar poetry, see for instance Ewa Pogonowska, *Dzikię biesy: wizja Rosji sowieckiej w antybolszewickiej poezji polskiej lat 1917–1932* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2002).

to destroy a union which took so much effort and work to create – and then, suddenly, I hear they're to be destroyed.²⁶

Elsewhere she added:

We had a lot of trouble with the Communists because they aggressively promoted actions that could end in the spilling of blood and we believed that that should not be done. We engaged in rather innocent fights with the police – we threw pepper at the officers, salt in their eyes etc. We tried to avoid spilling blood.²⁷

Several of Wasilewska's friends, critical of Communism after the war, highly valued her PPS activity. Aleksander Wat wrote that "being a daughter of a socialist minister, she absorbed good traditions at home,"²⁸ and Julian Strykowski thought that the "scent of Austro-Hungarian Cracow around her, the atmosphere of Leon Wasilewski's home (Wasilewski was a foreign minister in Piłsudski's government)" helped to balance the outlook of the "Red Army Colonel," which was the rank Wasilewska gained during the war in the Soviet Union.²⁹ Stalin appreciated Wasilewska's PPS past for different reasons: Eleonora Syzdek, one of Wasilewska's biographers, believed she was chosen to represent the Poles in the USSR since, as a member of PPS, she was less suspicious to Stalin than the members of the Communist Party of Poland, dissolved in 1938.³⁰

And yet, it was precisely her lack of KPP (Communist Party of Poland) membership before the war, combined with Stalin's significant degree of trust gained in the Soviet Union, that resulted in the degree of interest in Wasilewska, or even suspicion, in postwar Poland. If she was never a member of a Communist party, why then was she the one to represent Polish interests to Stalin. Did she represent those interests as a Polish

26 Wasilewska, "Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej," 123.

27 *Ibid.*, 135.

28 Wat, *Mój wiek*, 315.

29 Julian Strykowski, *Ocalony na Wschodzie* (Montricher: L'Édition Noir sur Blanc, 1991), 180.

30 Eleonora Syzdek, *Działalność Wandy Wasilewskiej w latach drugiej wojny światowej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1981), 68. In a conversation with Teresa Torańska, Jakub Berman said that: "Stalin [...] was impressed that a daughter of a pre-war Polish minister – Leon Wasilewski, and a writer, is also a Communist," see Teresa Torańska, *Oni* (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 1997), 354.

Communist, or as someone appreciated in the Soviet Union (or by Stalin himself?)³¹ for different reasons? Talking to Polish historians in 1964, questions such as these were politically motivated – on the one hand they were meant to increase the credibility of Wasilewska herself, clarifying who she was in fact, whether she was a Polish patriot and Communist or a Soviet agent, and on the other hand, to legitimize Władysław Gomułka's "Polish way to socialism" that began after October 1956.³² This is why, answering these questions, Wasilewska was careful about her choice of words:

I've never had an inclination for leadership, and did certain things because I could, because I had opportunities to do them and others didn't. And even though I did my best not to cause any kind of friction, I understand that there were people who didn't approve that suddenly the Communists, the KPP [Communist Party of Poland] members, people with a certain view about the Soviet Union and with a long time party membership, former prisoners etc., were not talked to, and all the matters were settled through me.³³

Wasilewska's lack of institutional affiliation was important for Adam Ciołkosz for another reason: it discredited her as a radical. He wrote, sarcastically, that before the war she "stuck with the PPS [Polish Socialist Party]" and if she indeed was a radical, it was "only to the degree that the entire PPS was radical at that time."³⁴ He recalled that the choice of PPS was "practical" for Wasilewska: as a socialist she could operate legally and, additionally, with the help of the "fairy godmothers," "this revolutionary, this new version of Rosa Luxemburg (though of lesser intellect), the Polish Pasionaria not even once (let me stress: not even once) had known the bitter taste of prison bread, not even once had she looked through the barred windows of the prison cell, not once had she been struck by the lawman's club."³⁵ Questioning Wasilewska's

31 One of the most frequently repeated "legends" about Wasilewska involves her alleged sexual relationship with Stalin. See for instance Sławomir Koper, "Ulubienica Stalina," in *Kobiety władzy PRL* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czerwone i Czarne, 2012), 33-85.

32 See Andrzej Werblan, *Stalinizm w Polsce* (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze i Literackie, 2009).

33 Wasilewska, "Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej (1939–1944)," *Archiwum Ruchu Robotniczego* 2 (1982): 427.

34 Ciołkosz, *Wanda Wasilewska*, 16.

35 *Ibid.*, 47.

radicalism as something “unstable,” “emotional,” almost childish, Ciołkosz created an image of pre-war PPS as the only left party that consistently and maturely had continued to criticize the state authorities and had resisted it with determination.

Wasilewska herself explained her institutional choices as follows:

(...) what happened, happened as it does for everyone: one's character shapes the environment. My life was greatly influenced by the people I'd associated with.³⁶

Her memories suggest that she followed her parents in many areas: the ethos of action and involvement as well as a certain school of thought and action of the Polish intelligentsia. Her radicalism grew gradually. It also resulted from the disappointment with the situation in the country, of which she wrote many years later:

My early childhood was spent in the atmosphere of a dream about a free, independent Poland... How this independent Poland was supposed to look was of less importance, pictured vaguely and it seemed to go without saying that it would be free and just for all. I was raised surrounded by romantic literature and poems about the fight for freedom, steeped in the tradition of Polish uprisings, books about fighting the Tsarist regime and the Prussians, in the deep belief that once liberated, Poland will be a paradise for all of its people. Then came 1918. From WWI and the Revolution toppling the Tsar, the Polish state was born, after 120 years of non-existence. And it immediately revealed its classist face. It was a capitalist state, dependent on foreign capital, with all its consequences. The rift between childhood dreams and reality was glaring, even for a child. This is why as a thirteen-, fourteen-year-old, I went to workers' meetings and demonstrations, and joined the youth socialist organization during the first year at college.³⁷

– and from the disappointment with the fact that the chosen path, that of reform, led nowhere as former revolutionaries, both old and young, made compromises with state authorities, were given nice jobs and thus turned into conformists. In a letter to her mother from 10 September 1934 she wrote:

36 Wasilewska, “Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej,” 120.

37 Wasilewska, “Podróż po życiu i książkach (I),” *Tu i Teraz* 1 (1983): 16.

I am formally suffocating: Cracow is fast turning into a muddy puddle... What I know for sure is that we're a bunch of fools, lunatics who wasted their lives for several years for a handful of bastards to grow in wealth and power at our cost. [...] After all, we were accomplices in deluding the people, we participated in the big scam taking place continuously at the expense of the masses. The Communists are absolutely right in this respect.³⁸

Complaining about apathy and being deprived of the possibility of action, she also criticized the elitism among the authorities of the Cracow's PPS, the growing distance between the party's upper and lower tiers, and more to the point, the betrayal of principles that the PPS claimed to champion. Writing to her mother on April 8, 1932, she noted:

The masses moved to the left – I am now snowed under with work and I can see that in the last few months the process accelerated significantly. But the “top” has remained where it used to be. Hence the gap between the “top” and the “masses,” and moreover, the “top” is completely certain of its greatness and wisdom, which rules out the possibility of communication... I am sure that it will only take a few more months of misery – the people are desperate. [...] The Party won't have any say here, I mean the Party as the current group of people. Something will be done: either the Communists will do something, or us, or us and the Communists together.³⁹

In the spring of 1932, she joined the faction of radical youth which increasingly pushed for confrontation with the Sanacja authorities, advocating for a broad structure of resistance created jointly with the Communists (as part of the then-established Popular Front). In another letter to her mother, from November 1931, Wasilewska still confessed to becoming “thoroughly ‘bol-shevized’ in all respects. And I'm willing to take this further. For far too long I failed to re-examine several utter superstitions.”⁴⁰

What did she have in mind mentioning “superstitions”? Did she mean only formal, institutional ties with the Communists? Or rather adopting, at least in some respects, the Communist view of relationships between Poland and Europe, including the situation in the Soviet Union? The last point seems

38 After Syzydek, *W jednym życiu tak wiele*, 97.

39 Wasilewska, “Listy Wandy Wasilewskiej (I),” 37.

40 *Ibid.*, 36 (letter from November 15, 1931).

particularly significant as it concerns not only Wasilewska's worldview and the direction it was evolving in, but also the important question of the "nature" of Communism in prewar Poland: to what extent did it result from a "fascination" of the Polish Communists with the October Revolution, and to what extent was it born from the disappointment with the situation in Poland? There was also the question of its support by the Polish intelligentsia (one of the proposed explanations claims that this support was provoked by the atmosphere of the late 1930s, as well as rumblings of the oncoming war). Wasilewska's case proves that the matter was more complex: in the vast majority of conversations with historians, she claimed that on the eve of WWII she had no doubt that only the Soviet Union was capable of stopping fascism. This conviction was not shaken by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 23, 1939:

As we discussed this matter, we've concluded that clearly the situation was such that the Soviet Union had to postpone at all costs a clash with Germany. Although this evoked rather complicated emotions, apparently, it was necessary to save the Soviet Union.⁴¹

Just before the outbreak of the war, she already "put her money" on the Soviet Union. Also a year or two earlier, when the Moscow trials took place and the Communist Party of Poland was dissolved, she believed that "certain actions [were] necessary" as fascism was growing stronger and the USSR was becoming increasingly isolated on the international stage. Several years later she discouraged voices critically evaluating pre-war events: "It seems to me that one must approach these matters carefully today, so that later diagnoses are not transferred to those times."⁴²

In May 1936, Wasilewska participated in Lviv in the Congress of Cultural Workers which gathered writers, intellectuals and cultural activists opposing war and imperialism and championing humanist values. Congress participants adopted a resolution declaring that:

Advocating common struggle of all people exploited and oppressed by fascism, regardless of their nationality, we believe that the fight against the imperialist war is the first duty of all progressive cultural workers.⁴³

⁴¹ Wasilewska, "Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej," 189.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴³ After Syzydek, *W jednym życiu tak wiele*, 143.

It was a declaration of international cooperation of the leftist intellectuals to oppose the expanding fascism, but also nationalism and capitalism. It made no reference to the “leadership” of the Soviet Union, emphasizing instead international humanist values. Wasilewska left Lviv convinced that “today the place of the writer, of the artist is among the proletariat of towns and villages, fighting for its liberation,”⁴⁴ a conviction expressed in her last pre-war novel, *Ziemia w jarzmie* [*Land under Yoke*] (1938). It was both anti-capitalist and anti-nationalist book – or rather, by locating the action of the novel in the areas along the Bug river and focusing on the Polish countrymen exploiting uneducated peasants that spoke a mix of Polish and Belarusian – it was a book revealing the strong interconnections of class and national relations, and economic exploitation increased by the power drawn from access to the dominant language and culture.⁴⁵ In this and in her earlier novels such as *Oblicze dnia* [*The Face of Day*] (1934) and *Ojczyzna* [*Homeland*] (1935), Wasilewska accused Poland of unequal treatment of its citizens, of “being twofold”: bourgeois and proletarian, for the elites and for the masses. “What did Poland give to those who fought for it? Whose true homeland has it become? The answer was clear and unambiguous – that Poland is a mother to factory owners and landowners, and a stepmother to the worker and peasant,”⁴⁶ Wasilewska wrote after several years of being disappointed with interwar Poland, a disappointment she transferred to her protagonists.

The content of her prewar novels was not something that pleased the Sanacja authorities (which we know also from Wasilewska’s letters to her father⁴⁷): a clearly drawn picture of misery and exploitation, anger born of having no sense of prospects, a growing “hum” of an approaching revolution.

44 After Syzydek, *Działalność Wandy Wasilewskiej*, 48-49.

45 In the 1930s ethnographer Józef Obrębski conducted broad research of ethnographic relations in western Polesie – area overlapping one described by Wasilewska in *Ziemia w jarzmie*. Grażyna Borkowska referenced his work asking about the role of Poles in the processes of colonization of these territories which now belong mostly to Belarus and Ukraine. See Grażyna Borkowska, “Perspektywa postkolonialna na gruncie polskim – py-tania sceptyka,” *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2010): 40-52.

46 Wasilewska, “Podróż po życiu i książkach (I),” 16.

47 In a letter from February 9, 1934 Wasilewska wrote to her father: “I castrated what I could, I’m still afraid it won’t be enough, but really [otherwise – A.W.] the entire thing loses any sense. [...] Formally the censor has nothing to pick on right now, and if he wants to pick on something that is alluded, there’s nothing I can do about that” (“Listy Wandy Wasilewskiej (II),” *Zdanie* 11 (1985): 28.) In a commentary to that letter, Eleonora Syzdek explained that Leon Wasilewski was personally involved in the publication of *Oblicze dnia*.

In the final scene of *Oblicze dnia*, Anatol, a bricklayer, becoming a leader of the protesting workers, announced that together they will build “a new world:”

Anatol turns his head and looks at the street. The crowds flow like a river. Here and there blooms a sudden red banner. Above it all floats the victorious song, wondrous, cheerful and mighty. Like wine, through the streets rushes unspeakable joy, yearning satisfied. He looks at the terrified faces, their impotent rage, at the group marked with filthy fear and says – not to them but to his own dark childhood days, dreary teenage years, his rebellious youth, to the flowing crowd and the billowing banners – firmly, confidently and gleefully: We are building a world of the free people!⁴⁸

The building of the “new world” had already been announced in Wasilewska’s earlier poem, written after the so called Cracovian accidents of 1923 when the police fired shots at protesting workers.⁴⁹ Its final lines read: “From their death comes a bright day for the world/ They are the seeds scattered onto ground/ From which there shall grow/ A great and happy and joyful/ Proletarian homeland!”⁵⁰ Expressions such as “free people” and “proletarian homeland” were of key importance in these passages, assuring that those who were promised justice together with independence will themselves reach for it. In March 1936, *Płomyk* Glimmer, a children’s magazine published by the Polish Teachers’ Union and co-edited by Wasilewska, referenced an example of this “proletarian homeland” being created right next door, causing a stir in the media and leading to accusations of “pro-Soviet propaganda.” Did she really “promote” the Soviet model of revolution, furthermore, “for foreign money” as

48 Wanda Wasilewska, *Oblicze dnia. Pisma zebrane*, vol. 1 (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1955), 195. In his review of the novel for *Wiadomości Literackie*, Emil Breiter wrote: “Wasilewska stormed literature with a battle cry [...] She knows only two types of might: darkness and rebellion. There is no communication between these words, there is no bridge over the abyss, one is either here or there. The battle is for life and death, and the victory certain, immediate and decisive. In Wasilewska’s novel, victory becomes a fact. Baryka’s place is taken by the young Anatol leading the millions of unemployed to their triumph” (Emil Breiter, “Powieść Wasilewskiej,” *Wiadomości Literackie* 42 (1934): 4).

49 See Tomasz Marszałkowski, *Zamieszki, ekscesy i demonstracje w Krakowie 1918–1939* (Kraków: Arcana, 2006).

50 Wasilewska, “6.XI.1923” in Helena Zatorska, *Wanda Wasilewska* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1976), 165.

claimed in the title of a recent film about Wasilewska?⁵¹ Did she play with the Polish authorities knowing that if needed, her father would come to the rescue? The whole affair spawned much gossip⁵² contributing to the Wasilewska's "black legend."⁵³

Ciołkosz believed that it was precisely Wasilewska's "looking repeatedly" to the east in search of good models, of modern solutions for social relations, which eventually pushed her to replace her "Polish homeland, or two Polish homelands, with a new homeland: a Russian-Soviet one,"⁵⁴ defining her as a Communist of a certain type. Grounding his authority in the fact that he knew the young Wasilewska and was the one to introduce her to the secrets of "party work," Ciołkosz claimed that until the mid 1930s, she certainly had not been a Communist, and when she became one, it was immediately in the "Soviet fashion" (Ciołkosz dismissed her earlier radicalism as a "romantic whim").⁵⁵ His memories cast a shade on Wasilewska: they presented her pre-war attitudes as "confused" and the only Communist tradition Ciołkosz eventually linked her with was the Soviet Stalinist one.

It is not my intention to search for the "truth" about Wanda Wasilewska, to find out facts that would determine precisely when she became a Communist and how she consequently defined her Communism. The case of Wasilewska seems interesting to me as it allows us to look at Communism in Poland (especially in pre-war Poland) as an "identity in making," formed within a certain context, undergoing transformations dependent on various internal and external factors, to look at Communism as a "manifestation" both public and private. Wasilewska's case shows also that the process of becoming a Communist was accompanied by breaking out of certain roles and crossing certain boundaries. But also by establishing new ones.

51 See *Wanda Lwowna Wasilewska*, TVP 2008.

52 Maria Dąbrowska wrote that in Poland "no one touched a hair on Wasilewska's head." "She was getting good money for the books and *Płomyk*. The only unpleasant thing she experienced was when she was stripped of editing *Płomyk* after it increasingly became a tool of Soviet propaganda." See Maria Dąbrowska, *Dzienniki. 1914–1965*, vol. X (1956–1957), (Warszawa: PAN, 2009), 41.

53 Wasilewska herself claimed that the *Płomyk* affair was an "innocent" matter, "spanned into something" during the period when the relationship between Poland and the Soviet Union were improving: "One should remember that a deal was made, 'The Internationale' was played at the castle as the Soviet delegation was coming" ("Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej," 180). Also Janina Broniewska wrote about the *Płomyk* affair in *Tamten brzeg mych lat* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1973), 102–108.

54 Ciołkosz, *Wanda Wasilewska*, 43.

55 *Ibid.*, 44, 50.

Life as a "Scandal of Truth"⁵⁶

Wasilewska often described her life in terms of motion, flow and change: "one lived in a constant tension of the nerves, in a constant search for the last ounce of strength."⁵⁷ This motion is to be taken literally – as specific actions that she undertook – but also metaphorically. The communism she engaged in was a total kind of motion, a crossing of all boundaries, norms, barriers, a "fluidization of all that is solid," as in the words of *The Communist Manifesto*: "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."⁵⁸ The more she was "swayed" politically by Communism as an idea seeping into her novels and speeches, the more it was becoming – to quote Foucault – a "form of life," a lived idea, "a principle defining a certain mode of life"; it gave birth to the "scandal" of revolutionary life which by "breaking with the conventions, habits and values of society life" bore witness to the truth.⁵⁹

The "scandal" of Wasilewska's life was that in several areas she moved beyond what was allowed by the societal norms of the circles she was raised in: she crossed the class boundary, "stepped out" of her gender role, broke several unwritten rules of life in a national community. Her relationship with Marian Bogatko, a bricklayer, can be seen as one such manifestation, especially as it was not formalized for years. Cracow's society was not particularly stirred by this, as Jan Topiński recalled: "we were all united by bounds of cordial friendship and more than one worker-student marriage resulted from this."⁶⁰ However, from the perspective of the Warsaw intelligentsia, whose ranks Wasilewska joined in autumn 1934, a relationship between a minister's daughter and a worker could seem unusual, as indicated by an admittedly friendly remark found in Janina Broniewska's memoirs: "Marian Bogatko, Wanda's husband, was to an extent a prototype for Anatol from *Oblicze dnia*. Bricklayer by profession, and – on the top of that – one from Cracow, which gave the whole thing a specific character."⁶¹ Ciołkosz, too, saw in Bogatko a model for

⁵⁶ After Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 183.

⁵⁷ Wasilewska, "Lata, które minęły (8)," *Argumenty* 35 (1975): 8.

⁵⁸ Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, accessed May 5, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/cho1.htm>

⁵⁹ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 183-184.

⁶⁰ Jan Topiński, "Trzy pokoje w Domu Robotniczym na Dunajewskiego 5," in *Cyganeria i polityka. Wspomnienia krakowskie 1919–1939*, ed. Kazimierz Bidakowski (Warszawa: „Czytelnik,” 1964). 88.

⁶¹ Janina Broniewska, *Maje i listopady* (Warszawa: „Iskry,” 1967), 242.

Anatol, but contrary to Broniewska, he believed that the relationship with Wasilewska did not benefit the former, leading to his “de-classing”:

Bogatko de-classed and stopped working entirely. He looked after the house, assisted his wife in her activities among the literary left, in May Day marches he'd walk with a group of journalists and writers not with construction workers, he switched to the bourgeois lifestyle and there was nothing about him that resembled Anatol – the flame and sword of revolution.⁶²

The way Ciołkosz saw it, Wasilewska and Bogatko's crossing of boundaries in their private life came at a political cost: Bogatko transformed into an odd hybrid – a worker aspiring to the intelligentsia, more so, assisting his wife in her activities – and no longer corresponded to the image of a male leader of a proletarian revolution sought by the prewar left intelligentsia. Instead, it was Wasilewska who took the helm of the Communist left during the war, which – combined with Bogatko's death in Lviv in May 1940, added a ghastly, demonic-castrating undertone to the entire story. Years later, Ciołkosz assessed:

There was something abnormal about her [Wasilewska's – A. M.] choice of men: she needed someone intellectually inferior. She herself admitted she could only love men whose standing was lower to hers. She was attached to them and jealous of them, she had an “owner's instinct” in this respect. They were indispensable but they were not the most important thing in her life.⁶³

Wasilewska viewed her relationship with Bogatka differently: although she did model Anatol's character on him,⁶⁴ she did not treat Bogatko only as “literary material.” Raised, as she used to say, in a mixed environment of workers and intelligentsia,⁶⁵ she saw her relationship with a worker neither as a misalliance, nor a whim. While still in Cracow, she wrote to her mother:

62 Ciołkosz, *Wanda Wasilewska*, 16.

63 *Ibid.*, 25.

64 In a letter to her mother from 16 July 1933 she wrote: “In general – the world as darkness, proletariat as the maker of the new day. This is why the main protagonist is a bricklayer, shamelessly modeled on Marian by the way.” (“Listy Wandy Wasilewskiej II,” 26.)

65 Wasilewska, “Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej,” 119.

You want me to write something about Marian, Mama [...] I've never thought that one could feel about anyone the way I feel about him. [...] This boy does not think about himself for a second – giving comes so easily and naturally to him that it is almost unnoticeable... For some time it troubled him that he's a worker... we debated about him turning into an intellectual... I strongly opposed. I don't want him to do anything because of me.⁶⁶

Wasilewska admitted that Bogatko inspired, but also motivated her: he was the first person to read her writing and suggest improvements. She was proud that he led the bricklayers' strike in Cracow in July 1933. In another letter to her mother, Wasilewska worried about his future:

Warsaw is first and foremost something for my benefit but I care for it mostly because of Marian. With time, he will inevitably become like our worker activists – and that would be terrible... And the way things worked out here, they'll want to destroy us.⁶⁷

According to Broniewska, Wasilewska's relationship with Bogatko was "regarded, not without reason, as the most successful,"⁶⁸ and perhaps its secret lied in it being non-normative gender-wise. Bogatko, coming from the "manly" workers' circles, clearly did not view as "unmanly" several activities he took upon himself, such as looking after Wasilewska's daughter from the first marriage, making coffee or becoming his wife's secretary, nor did he seem envious of her literary or political success (he joked with Broniewska that together they were Wasilewska's "entourage," "a retinue of the suburban queen" – as they referred to Wasilewska.)⁶⁹

Did her relationship with a worker trouble her parents? From the exchange of letters between Wasilewska and her mother it seems that it was rather its informal character which did, its public manifestation of contempt for social conventions:

I've seen several times what a good decision it was not to get married. Firstly, for our own sake – do you remember, Mama, how you said yourself that one should do what springs from the inner need and not what

66 *Listy Wandy Wasilewskiej (I)*, 38. (Letter from October 6, 1932.)

67 *Syzdek, W jednym życiu tak wiele*, 97. (Letter from September 10, 1934.)

68 Broniewska, *Tamten brzeg moich lat*, 127.

69 *Ibid.*, 97.

is required by other people, appearances or compromises? It would be cowardly to give in to some gossip we don't care about at all. Secondly – I am finally a person and not an attachment to a person. Were my husband an idiot or loser he could be an attachment to me, but now things are as they are and even if Marian and I were viewed as equals, I would still be disadvantaged by just being a woman; I would be a "Mrs." and not myself. For party-related reasons we can, being two independent units, serve different functions that would not be entrusted to a married couple... Anyway, what is actually the issue here? We're so happy together it's almost ridiculous... Marian is an extraordinary man, an extraordinary husband and an extraordinary father and he would remain one with or without marriage.⁷⁰

This particular letter seems important for two reasons. Firstly, Wasilewska criticized marriage as a union frequently born out of societal pressure and upheld out of concern for tradition or form. She opted for relationship based on choice and not a need to adjust to social norms, for a union of two free persons of equal status. One could naturally claim that Wasilewska's declaration, just as her relationship with Bogatko, was nothing particularly unusual among the prewar Warsaw intelligentsia, looking no further than Irena Krzywicka's views and her relationship with Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński.⁷¹ But what seems to make Wasilewska and Bogatko exceptional was their declared (and, according to several witnesses, also practiced) gender and class egalitarianism: belief that their relationship was devoid of power resulting from belonging to a particular gender or social stratum. The question of power must have been important for Wasilewska, since she devoted an entire passage in the quoted letter to the woman's position in private relations with men, and – in broader terms – in the relation with society. Wasilewska wanted to see herself as equal to men and a church marriage would put her in a subordinate, inferior position. She would stop "being herself," carry meaning as "an independent entity" and become "an attachment" to the man, a "Mrs." She felt that a non-formalized relationship would not take away her

70 Syzdek, *W jednym życiu tak wiele*, 84. Wasilewska and Bogatko got married in late 1936: "When in 1936 Bogatko and I were invited to the Soviet Union, the question of marriage act resurfaced [...] whether we wanted to or not, we decided to go to my old Calvinist congregation in Leszno. When the preacher asked for some statement of religious character, and we were in a hurry, he got mad and finally asked: I don't understand, what is it that you actually want – to get married or to get some papers? I replied: definitely some papers only" (Wasilewska "Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej," 121-122).

71 See Irena Krzywicka, *Wyznania gorszytelki* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1999).

independence, the way marriage would, her autonomy and significance as an entity, it would not reduce her in the public sphere to the role of “her husband’s wife.”⁷²

Echoes of the quoted letter can be found in *Oblicze dnia* where Anatol is accompanied by Natalka, a female character who does not see herself as an addition to the man but as an autonomous entity, a comrade in the shared struggle, which is what she builds her identity on: “Natalka is happy. Since she’s come here, among these people, she does not feel an orphan anymore. Everyone cares for everyone, everyone thinks of everyone. Soon she is to understand that a «comrade» means much more than a «brother».”⁷³ She lives with Anatol in an informal relationship, despite surrounding frowns, especially from women who point fingers at Natalka, calling her a “slut.” They defend their marriages as the only space of self-realization for women – despite the violence inflicted by their husbands and the exhaustion from house chores, turning marriage into anguish rather than something joyous.

Paper, patent, document. A brand pressed onto the forehead for the rest of one’s life. Something that gives meaning, position, something that justifies – everything: drunken fists, syphilitic ulcers, stupid children. It’s all part and parcel of married life, after all. And here, between the basement and the third floor, Natalka walks just like that, with no patent, no stamp, no seal, her face shining with the shameless light of love.⁷⁴

Marriage in Wasilewska’s novel joins the ranks of oppressive institutions such as the church, school, workplace, but its particularly oppressive character reveals itself with regard to women: this is where connection between the power of patriarchy and the power of capital is the strongest. This is why Natalka and Anatol reject marriage, convinced it is the only way to save love, mutual respect and human dignity.

72 One may wonder to what extent Wasilewska’s attitude resulted from an attempt to avoid the fate of her mother who, after a period of activity in the Polish Army during WWI, turned to looking after the house and later “hid” in theosophy – or, more broadly, to avoid the fate of all politically active Polish women who with the end of wars and revolutions were relegated to the private sphere, “redirected” to the roles of wives and mothers, and channeled their energies into religion and charity. See Alicja Kusiak, “Narodowa pamięć historyczna a historia kobiet,” in *Polka: medium, cień, wyobrażenie*, ed. Monika Rudaś-Grodzka et al. (Warszawa: Fundacja Odnawiania Znaczeń, 2006), 214–217.

73 Wasilewska, *Oblicze dnia*, 139.

74 *Ibid.*, 160.

One could wonder whether and to what extent Nataka was based on Wasilewska herself: during the bricklayers' strike in Cracow, she aided Bogatko and they lived together without marriage. Still, the matter is more complicated than a simple analogy between life and literature. Both the letter to her mother and the novel are important as Wasilewska's manifestation of independence: private and public, signifying her search for the possibility of autonomous action, of emphasizing one's self. Did she see a chance for it among the Communists? Despite being a successful writer and speaker, for many she remained her father's daughter: "Leon's daughter" was how she was referred to, or "Roman Szymański's widow" (after her first husband who died of typhus in August 1931). Continuously inscribed into the patriarchal structure of kinship, she was losing the right to individual achievement. As a woman and an activist, her symbolic meaning was achieved through the names of men she had ties to, her father's in particular: it defined her and established her political value. She wanted to build her own history among the Communists:

When my father died [in December 1936 – A.M.] – and at that time I was a fully grown-up person – comrades and Communists, who had very clear opinions of him, brought a wreath for his coffin with an inscription: "For Wanda's father."⁷⁵

Years later, Jan Karaśkiewicz, a communist activist and a soldier of the First Polish Army in the USSR, recalled Wasilewska at the peak of her activity:

I began to look at her a bit differently. So far I'd seen her and known her as a social worker, one of those who use words and the pen to fight for social justice and political liberties. Then we realized, my comrades and I, that she grew into a statesperson who represents a specific, consistent political orientation.⁷⁶

Among the Communists, Wasilewska built both her public and personal history. It was where she found her "family of choice": with Janina Broniewska, the ex-wife of the revolutionary poet Władysław Broniewski and co-editor of *Plomyk*, she shared her daily life in Warsaw, and they later walked together the war trail in the Soviet Union, joined by a "friendship stronger

⁷⁵ Wasilewska, "Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej," 133.

⁷⁶ Jan Karaśkiewicz, "Wyrosła do rangi męża stanu," in *Wanda Wasilewska we wspomnieniach*, ed. Eleonora Syzydek (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1982), 135.

than love.⁷⁷ Her views of family as a relation of choice had little to do with a traditional definition: intimacy and bonds of kinships were not a matter of shared genes but of shared experiences, views, work; they did not come from birth, from the natural state of things, but from a gradual sharing of memories and shared codes of communication. This is how Broniewska described it:

Both of them [Wasilewska and Bogatko – A.M.], complementary and inseparable became to me – at that time and later – something more than natural siblings could ever be. One does not choose brothers or sisters. Those two were a choice of the heart, of the mind. Each day, family bonds grew tighter.⁷⁸

Although Wasilewska never rejected her biological family (nor was she rejected by them), she admitted “forgetting sometimes about some of its members”: she and her elder sister Halszka “were not particularly close” which changed to an extent only during the Lviv period.⁷⁹ On the other hand, she was always close to her father with whom she had “a quiet pact – we would not discuss politics because we knew that would result in an irreversible tear.”⁸⁰ The attitude to Russia was a particularly sensitive issue in their relation:

My father, whom I loved dearly and to whom I was very close emotionally, hated Russia as such. It didn't really matter whether it was a white Russia or a red Russia. It was an attitude of absolute negativity toward Russia, regardless of its state and form.⁸¹

A question arises: should this very different view of the individual and community, related possibly to Wasilewska's political evolution, not “spare” issues of such fundamental importance as nation, homeland, patriotism? Should there really be no limits to even the most radical criticism of the

77 Janina Broniewska *Maje i listopady*, 242. Broniewska's friendship with Wasilewska was discussed in detail by Marni Shore: “«Czysto babski»: A Women's friendship in a man's revolution,” *East European Politics and Societies* 12 (3) (2002): 810-863.

78 Broniewska, *Tamten brzeg moich lat*, 302-303.

79 Wasilewska, “Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej,” 335.

80 *Ibid.*, 133.

81 *Ibid.*, 120.

nation? (Wasilewska characterized it as “two camps between which there can be no agreement: one consisting of workers and peasants, the other of those who hate and exploit workers and peasants.”)⁸² Ciołkosz said that Wasilewska’s notion of “two homelands” was nothing new or shocking in the PPS: “We didn’t hold *Ojczyzna* against Wasilewska; as Polish pro-independence socialists we accepted it entirely.” What they could not “accept” and “forgive” Wasilewska was her “breaking away from the Polish homeland” and “replacing it with a new, Russian-Soviet one”: “This was her greatest mistake in life.”⁸³

Ciołkosz’s assessment, extremely harsh and stigmatizing, resembles that of a teacher chiding a schoolgirl for a failed exam in Polishness. Meanwhile, for the present article, the motives behind Wasilewska’s “choice” of the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1930s and reasons why she felt there “at home” even before acquiring its citizenship are equally important as the question why she stopped feeling “at home” in Poland. When did her searching for an alternative become a “betrayal?” An interview with Antonio Negri, providing the following definition of “betrayal,” may be an interesting point of reference for further reflection: “Betrayal signifies the ruin of an ongoing project of construction. It is, strictly speaking, an act of destruction... Betrayal shatters «the common».”⁸⁴ It seems that the case of Wasilewska allows to present the problem differently, asking: can we speak of betrayal where there is no community or where the functioning of community prevents the individual from becoming/ feeling a part of it?⁸⁵ What kind of national community did Wasilewska reject and what kind of nation did she fight for? It is a complex issue, especially as the war imposed on everyone, including the Communists, new obligations both toward Poland and the Soviet Union. British historian Eric Hobsbawm noted that in the face of fascism, the pre-war internationalism gained new meaning: it was becoming a kind of antifascist patriotism or even “antifascist nationalism [...] engaged in a social as well as a national conflict.”⁸⁶ This change was reflected in Wasilewska’s interviews but its detailed analysis lies beyond the scope of this article. At this point one

82 Wasilewska, “Lata, które minęły (I),” *Argumenty* 21 (1975): 1 and 8.

83 Ciołkosz, *Wanda Wasilewska*, 42–43.

84 Antonio Negri, *Negri on Negri. Antonio Negri in Conversation with Anne Dufourmentelle*, trans. Malcolm B. DeBevoise (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 53.

85 For this observation I am indebted to dr Grzegorz Wołowicz and the panel “PRL w (auto) biografii,” organized by IBL PAN on 24 October 2012.

86 Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 147.

can only say that her understanding of Communism as the “absolute criticism of all that exists” could not “exclude” issues such as nation, homeland, patriotism and Polishness; and searching for an alternative for that what existed, for what was “natural,” was inscribed into this mode of thinking, acting and living.⁸⁷

There lies also the gist of Wasilewska’s “scandal of the revolutionary life:” after a critic and art historian Mieczysław Porębski it can be defined as a sequence of “spectacular transgressions of the normal, socially sanctioned order of things.”⁸⁸ Her crossing of boundaries took place in different directions and on several levels. She crossed them in her private life and in the public sphere, blurring or even annulling the distinction between the private and the public. She sometimes actually annulled the private for the sake of the political, as she did when she agreed to cooperate with the Russians despite being aware that the NKVD was responsible for Bogatko’s death in Lviv in 1940. In his memoirs, Soviet politician Nikita Khrushchev revealed that “Wasilewska believed that it was not the case of premeditation and continued active work.”⁸⁹ All of this may be hard to comprehend: did she see her beloved husband’s death as collateral damage? Did she put his death and her own life on the altar of the cause they both had been fighting for? Perhaps it was political pragmatism or maybe simply fear? I can find no answers to these questions. Her daughter Ewa Szymańska said that if Wasilewska suffered, she never let it show: “Bogatko’s death was taboo in our house. We never talked about it.”⁹⁰ One way or the other, it was yet another boundary that she left behind.

The Limits of Transgression

Somehow, the notion of boundaries “stuck” with Wasilewska: her biography is measured up with a sequence of boundaries she violated or crossed. Ciołkosz claimed that her moving to Warsaw marked the first threshold crossed on her

87 See Michael Hardt, “Komunizm jest bezwzględna krytyką wszystkiego, co istnieje,” *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, accessed January 1, 2013, <http://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/index.php/michael-hardtkomunizm-jest-bezwzglesna-krytyka-wszystkiego-co-istnieje>

88 Mieczysław Porębski, *Ikonosfera* (Warszawa: PIW, 1972), 120.

89 Nikita Khrushchev, “Fragmenty wspomnień,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* 132 (2000), 140. In another explanation of Bogatko’s death, it was caused by the “anti-revolutionary gangs,” in some versions of Polish, in other of Ukrainian origin. Some sources claimed Bogatko was the target, others that it was Wasilewska who at this point was already a delegate to the Supreme Council of the USSR. Eleonora Syzydek, *Działalność Wandy Wasilewskiej*, 78.

90 See also documentary *Errata do biografii: Wanda Wasilewska*, TVP 2009.

journey to Communism – the next one being Wasilewska's choice of the Soviet homeland in September 1939. Joanna Szczęsna commented on the issue of Poland's eastern border which became symbolic for Wasilewska's relationship with her father – he negotiated it for Poland after the end of Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920, she surrendered it to the Soviet Union at the end of WWII. A precise outline of the boundaries allowed critics to delineate in her biography areas which still remained Polish and which were foreign, areas of patriotism and of "betrayal." Disambiguation of what had been elusive and unclear became a mechanism of restoring the very order that Wasilewska, and the idea she followed, managed to disturb. Labels such as "renegade," "traitor," "collaborator" can be thus seen as a gesture of "introducing order," performed also through labels referencing her gender and defining her position relative to men – such as "Stalin's favorite" or "Leon's disgraced daughter."⁹¹ Not only did such labels deprived Wasilewska of individual agency and subjectivity, they were also helping to domesticate the threat of Communism as "the world turned upside down"; the assumption that a female Communist is not a "comrade," equal to men, or an independent activist, or politician, but someone's daughter, wife or lover made it easier to take control over her (and as a consequence, of the entire system), to restore the temporarily disturbed "natural" order of genders within the national community.

Thus, the gesture of overstepping boundaries – Wasilewska's tendency to transgress – deserves attention not only in the context of private, biographical discussions but also in the political and cultural ones: we are dealing with a situation where a certain symbolic potential of an individual made her particularly "attractive" to various authorities. They inscribed into her their own content whose sense changed depending on the political situation. A detailed analysis of Wasilewska's biography, continuously rewritten and corrected, allows to see her as a "liminal character," one used to mark the boundaries of political periods and ideological attitudes.⁹² Stalinism made her into a revolutionary icon, an embodiment of progress, a symbol of bourgeois Poland transformed into the peoples' Poland; consequently, the movement inscribed in her life became an allegory of movement that swept

91 Szczęsna recalled that in *Historia Polski* by Władysław Pobóg-Malinowski, Wasilewska is referred to as "Leon's disgraced daughter." Szczęsna, "Wanda Wasilewska."

92 I discussed the construction of Wasilewska's biography in Polish People's Republic and Republic of Poland in an article entitled "«Wanda, co wołała Rusa». Wytwarzanie (biografii) komunistki – wytwarzanie (tożsamości) narodu," in *PRL - życie po życiu*, ed. Katarzyna Chmielewska, Agnieszka Mroziak, Grzegorz Wołowicz (Warszawa: PWN, 2013). For the concept of Wasilewska as a "liminal character" I am indebted to dr Grzegorz Wołowicz from the Institute of Literary Research, Polish Academy of Sciences.

through the entire society. On the other hand, during various “patriotic turns,” emphasis was placed on her military and social activities, reactivating the connection to Romantic, national symbolism: in a long chain of such connotations Wasilewska would “lose” the uniform of being the Colonel of the Red Army and become simply a women and army leader – another incarnation of Adam Mickiewicz’s Grażyna, or Emilia Plater, or Polish Joan of Arc. For the opponents of the political orientation she identified with, she embodied the “monstrosity” of a world without boundaries, the “horror” resulting from the fact that “all that is solid melts into air,” the “pathology” of Communism as a system of “disturbed norms.” Hence, there have been attempts to disambiguate her choices, clarify her attitudes, establish identity boundaries for her transgressions (or offenses) based on gender, nationality, class and others.

Finally, one can pose the open question about the extent to which the mechanism, described by literary scholar Maria Janion, of repressing women from the public space while simultaneously turning them into allegories⁹³ – living signs of the revolution – applies also in the case of Wasilewska and the Communist revolution. With the end of the war, she gradually moved away from big politics – the sphere of power and decision making – and engaged increasingly in a different kind of public activity: propaganda, both diplomatic and literary, but also increasingly in home and family-related matters. In Wasilewska’s own retelling, the moment of stepping back, or being removed from the decision making bodies, was given rather enigmatic explanation, related to health issues and family life which, located in Kiev, rendered her participation in big politics impossible. According to her family members, friends, political opponents and in the official biographies, the post-war Wasilewska was a woman who first and foremost valued family life, and only later did she appear as an award-winning author and a political authority. One could risk an assumption that after the war ended, Wasilewska became one of the icons of the new order in its phase of stabilization, institutionalization and ossification.⁹⁴ While becoming a symbol and a beneficiary of this order, did she become aware of the limitations for instance associated with gender roles?⁹⁵

93 See Maria Janion, “Bogini Wolności (Dlaczego rewolucja jest kobietą?),” in *Kobiety i duch inności* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1996), 5-49.

94 See Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power. Soviet political posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: Univeristy of California Press, 1997).

95 One may wonder whether after the war Wasilewska experienced a certain paradox of Communism described by Marshall Berman: “Marx looked forward to communism as the fulfillment of modernity but how can communism entrench itself in the modern world without suppressing those very modern energies that it promises to set free? On the other hand, if it gave these energies free rein, mightn’t the spontaneous flow of

According to historian Felix Tych, who talked to her in January 1964 in Warsaw, Wasilewska “played her role till the end” and “gave the impression of a fully Sovietized person.”⁹⁶ This assessment, however, does not say whether through “playing the role” Wasilewska actually became attached to it or whether there was in her approach a sense of discomfort, disappointment, frustration. An answer can perhaps be found in the post-war letters to her mother, where Wasilewska described her health problems: “Besides, I think that all my ailments come from one source only, as they used to sing in Warsaw before the war – «it’s those damn nerves, dammit!»”⁹⁷ Perhaps (but this is only a careful hypothesis), Wasilewska’s diseased body expressed something she could not express otherwise: a certain kind of resistance to the corset of a monument which she was given to wear. But it is also possible that both the “role” and the “resistance” were just a part of life understood as “following the truth” which, as Foucault wrote, took one to the very edge of (self)destruction.

Translation: Anna Warso

popular energy sweep away the new social formation itself?” Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (London-New York: Verso, 1982), 104-105. We do not know what role her relationship with the Ukrainian writer and politician, Oleksandr Kornychuk, played in Wasilewska’s post-war life. Several people but also official biographies recalled that Kornychuk was the “reason” behind her decision not to return to Poland. The relationship was supposed to fulfill her as an intellectual but first and foremost as a woman. This vision fitted perfectly the post-war order where there was finally a place for love and happy family life, which Wasilewska described in her several novels: *Po prostu miłość* [*Just Love*] (1944) and *Gdy światło zapłonie* [*When the Light Comes On*] (1946). However, according to Władysław Gomułka, Wasilewska’s “following her heart” did not benefit her in the end: “As it is usually the case with women, she put her marriage and her feelings for Kornychuk before everything else. I think that years later she regretted this choice. But there was also no return, she had to drink from the cup of bitterness that was once filled with love and personal happiness.” See Władysław Gomułka, *Pamiętniki*, vol.2 (Warszawa: Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza BGW, 1994), 493-494. One could also wonder if Wasilewska found happiness in this relationship or was she simply “stuck” in a certain role which also involved – apart from the appearance of a fulfilled activist and writer – the appearance of a happy woman (even if the reality was quite different).

96 After Joanna Szczęśna, “Wanda Wasilewska”

97 After Zofia Aldona Woźnicka, “O mojej siostrze,” in *Wspomnienia o Wandzie Wasilewskiej*, 77 (letter from April 2, 1947). Wasilewska’s younger sister, Zofia Aldona Woźnicka, recalled that after the war, “Wanda suffered from a lot of health issues. She had an acute catarrh of the stomach (late in 1946), and a painful inflammation of the nerve in the left arm (1951), in the summer of 1952 radiculitis immobilized her for over a month. She suffered from a chronic sore throat, damaged by her many speeches.” 76-77.