

Paweł Libera

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5541-0822>

Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences

HENRYK DEMBIŃSKI: THE MAN WHO BECAME A COMMUNIST AFTER DEATH?

Abstract

The case of Henryk Dembiński (1908–41) represents the left-wing involvement of Polish intellectuals in the interwar period. After 1945, the party historians left a communist mark on his image. Those in exile also accepted this thesis. In fact, party historians portrayed Dembiński's life in a one-sided fashion and omitted events inconsistent with their narrative. In light of relevant accounts and documents, this article shows that Dembiński was neither a member of the communist party nor its youth organisation even though, in 1935–6, he participated in some activities inspired by the Communist Party of Poland (KPP), and edited a periodical supported financially by the KPP. It is unclear whether this was conscious cooperation or a matter of manipulation by the party. In 1937, Dembiński joined the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) and was engaged in catholic activities centre, which the communists at the time perceived as a change of his political views. Nonetheless, after the war, party historians unequivocally stated that he was a communist.

Keywords: communism, Comintern, the left, Communist Party of Poland, Communist Party of Western Belorussia, Henryk Dembiński, Czesław Miłosz

I

For several decades, the history of Henryk Dembiński has been the subject of discussion and debate in Poland. Dembiński was one of the most prominent representatives of left-wing youth in interwar Wilno, and his history is related to the broader discussion of the left-wing and communist activity of intellectuals in Europe.

Henryk Dembiński (31 July 1908 – 12 August 1941), a young law graduate, underwent an evolution in his worldview that led him from a Catholic student organisation to the communist party. Initially, he

was highly active at the Stefan Batory University in Wilno in the Catholic organisation 'Odrodzenie' [Rebirth]. Because of his radical views, he left 'Odrodzenie' and, with a group of other students, he co-founded the poetry group 'Żagary', collaborating, among others, with Czesław Miłosz. For a short time, they edited a supplement to the conservative daily *Słowo*, after which they entered into periodic cooperation with the liberal *Kurier Wileński*. There was talk already at that time of the 'Dembiński group' and the 'Wilno academic left'. After finishing his studies, Dembiński went abroad on a scholarship. At that time, his friends formed the organisation 'Front', which soon contacted the outlawed communist party. After Dembiński's return, they jointly published periodicals *Poprostu* and *Karta*, which the authorities considered communist and therefore closed.

In 1936 and 1937, members of the Wilno academic Left were accused of propagating communism and were prosecuted twice. Dembiński was also prosecuted in the second trial. They were defended by many Wilno professors, politicians and even clergymen, convinced that the accused did not belong to the communist party. Most of those detained left prison soon; Dembiński and Stefan Jędrychowski were released after the intervention by Father Władysław Korniłowicz and Wanda Pełczyńska, a member of parliament and the wife of the recent head of Polish intelligence. Dembiński and his wife moved to Warsaw, where he collaborated with the community of socialists and cooperatives gathered around the Warsaw Housing Cooperative [*Warszawska Spółdzielnia Mieszkaniowa*]. After the outbreak of the Second World War, he returned to Wilno, now occupied by the Red Army. Unlike his friends, he did not try to attain high positions; instead, he became a teacher in the Belarusian countryside. There he was shot and killed by the Germans. After the war, Dembiński's friends took part in the establishment of communist rule in Poland and accepted high party and state positions. Most of Dembiński's pre-war defenders did not recognise communist rule and went into political exile.

Already in the interwar period, the legend developed of the Wilno left-wing community and its leader – Henryk Dembiński. After 1945, it was narrated in the forms of memoirs, historical studies, novels and films. Poles in exile also commented on their version of events. After the political system's transformation in 1989, a Catholic politician and journalist, Stanisław Stomma stated: "The case of Henryk Dembiński

has disturbed me all my life”.¹ Jerzy Giedroyc, who was friends with Dembiński and believed that his history had been falsified, returned to this topic many times, and regarded him as “an extremely interesting character, one of the most interesting people I have ever met”.²

The figure of Dembiński eludes simple schemas and differs from the ones offered by those involved in the communist movement from the very beginning, such as the poet Bruno Jasioński, or those who initially moved in and out of communist circles but then definitely left even before 1939, such as poets Aleksander Wat and Józef Łobodowski. Discussion of the Dembiński case has been going on for many years and, in fact, continues to this day.

This article is intended to summarise this long-standing debate. In texts published so far, we notice significant discrepancies in the accounts offered by former left-wing activists in Wilno, who expressed their opinions differently in public than they did during discussions held in a closed group. The avoidance of specific inconvenient questions and sources, along with the discovery of new materials, prompt us to ask the old question once again: what was the nature of Dembiński’s relationship with the communist party?

II

‘THE CREATION OF A LEGEND’ IN PEOPLE’S POLAND

The history of the academic Left in Wilno was described for the first time by the writer Jerzy Putrament, one of the members of the Wilno youth community. His novel *Rzeczywistość* [Reality] was written during the war, and the primary impulse that prompted him to take up this topic was the alleged suicide of one of his colleagues, Józef Schuss.³ The novel was published in 1946, but it was discussed beforehand among his former friends. The text was also handed over to the president of communist Poland at the time, Bolesław Bierut, who “asked to propose ... a few minor changes”.⁴ These changes apparently

¹ Stanisław Stomma, *Trudne lekcje historii* (Kraków, 1998), 71.

² Mirosław Adam Supruniuk, *Uporządkować wspomnienia. Nieautoryzowane rozmowy z Jerzym Giedroyciem* (Toruń, 2011), 166.

³ Anna Jędrychowska, *Zygakiem i po prostu* (Warszawa, 1965), 266.

⁴ *Na rogu Stalina i Trzech Krzyży. Listy do Jerzego Borejszy 1944–1952*, ed. by Grzegorz Paweł Bąbiak (Warszawa, 2014), 379–82.

concerned one of Bierut's associates, whom Putrament mentioned in the novel. The novel was reissued many times and was turned into a film in 1961.

After Dembiński's death, Stefan Jędrychowski published a memoir in which he emphasised, in a very general way, Dembiński's ties to the united front tactics used by communist parties in the mid-1930s.⁵ These ideas were developed by the writer and columnist Jerzy Kornacki, who did not know Dembiński even though before the war he had belonged to the circle of leftist writers, and after the war, he was involved in building the new political order in Poland. In 1946, Kornacki argued in an extensive essay that *Poprostu* heralded a fusion of patriotism and leftist ideals. Dembiński was allegedly "a natural child of the Soviet revolution, ... a witness to, and student of, its social content, its proletarian virtues". He was also "an ardent promoter of the most complete friendship with the Soviet Union of Socialist Republics and simultaneously a ruthless patriot fighting for a better Poland".⁶

Soon, an idea was born among youth activists in communist organisations to publish a magazine that referred back to the Wilno *Poprostu*. This initiative was supported by Jędrychowski, and a publication soon appeared under the title *Życie*, the organ of the Management Board of the Academic Union of Fighting Youth [*Akademicki Związek Walki Młodych*]. It alluded to the name and graphic design of *Poprostu*; it even continued the old Wilno magazine's numbering.⁷ In its first issue, Jędrychowski explained that 'the soul of the young generation' has a vital stake in the struggle between the communists and the 'reactionary camp'. In the text, he mentioned Dembiński, who,

along with a wide circle of friends, left the community of believing and practising Catholics. ... It was only numerous adversities and experiences that made him aware of the deep conflict between the platitudes and the essential function of Catholic social doctrine and nudged

⁵ Stefan Jędrychowski, 'Droga Henryka Dembińskiego', *Nowe Widnokregi*, 16 (1943), 5.

⁶ Jerzy Kornacki, 'Słowo o Dembińskim', in Helena Boguszewska and Jerzy Kornacki, *Ludzie wśród ludzi* (Warszawa, 1946), 34, 41, 47, 49.

⁷ Jerzy Sławomir Mac, 'Geneza warszawskiego *Poprostu*', *Kwartalnik Historii Prasy Polskiej*, xviii, 3 (1979), 72, 75, 78.

him toward those advocating social progress and in the direction of Marxist theory.⁸

It was clear that a new patron had emerged, a model, in whose history the converted representatives of the 'reactionary camp' were to find their place.

The topic returned in 1953 with the first academic study devoted to *Poprostu* and *Karta*. In the introduction, the author stated that those periodicals were initiated by the Communist Party of Poland (KPP) and implemented its program using the slogans of the People's Front. This information came from Kazimierz Petruszewicz, a biologist, scientist, party activist, and pre-war member of the 'Dembiński group'.⁹ In his statements, he talked about the so-called group of Wilno communists and claimed that during the first trial, Dembiński was "one of the leaders of the revolutionary movement", a "party activist, organiser of many actions and mass events".¹⁰ Such statements were combined with other initiatives to define the history of the Wilno academic left and commemorate the anniversary of Dembiński's death. In 1960, a film was produced based on Putrament's novel, and in December 1961, the Department of the History of the Party [Zakład Historii Partii, ZHP] at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party [Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR] and the Socialist Youth Union [Związek Młodzieży Socjalistycznej] organised an evening at the University of Warsaw devoted to Dembiński.¹¹

During this period, historians associated with the ZHP began researching the history of the communist youth movement. One representative of the Wilno community, Anna Jędrychowska, Stefan's wife, took part in this research.¹² At the same time, scholars collected reports on the Academic Left [Lewica Akademicka], which later became

⁸ Stefan Jędrychowski, 'Dawniej a dziś', *Poprostu*, 1 (1947), 1, 3.

⁹ *Poprostu – Karta, 1935–1936*, ed. by Barbara Winkiel, iii (Wrocław, 1953) (Materiały do dziejów postępowej publicystyki, 3), 9, 13, 19, 33.

¹⁰ 'Rozmowy o ludziach KPP: O Henryku Dembińskim opowiada prof. Kazimierz Petruszewicz', *Głos Pracy* (18 Oct. 1958).

¹¹ 'Wieczór poświęcony pamięci Henryka Dembińskiego', *Trybuna Ludu* (2 Dec. 1961).

¹² *Walka młodych pokoleń. Materiały Konferencji Historyków Ruchu Młodzieżowego, Warszawa 7–9 grudnia 1962* (Warszawa, 1965).

the primary source for writing on this subject in Poland. The results of these activities were: Dembiński's *Wybór pism* [*Selected Writings*];¹³ a modified version of Eugeniusz Filipajtis's Master thesis;¹⁴ and the memoirs of Anna Jędrychowska. The latter publication was to be "a synthesis of memories of the so-called Wilno group, which was active in the 1930s and underwent an ideological evolution toward communism from different starting points". It took into account the author's memories and recordings prepared at the ZHP and other materials, including the notes of Halina Sztukowska, one of the attorneys who defended the accused in both of the Wilno trials.¹⁵ Jędrychowska's book was undoubtedly the most important of these publications, and for many years it set the direction for the interpretation of this history, both in Poland and abroad.

The first polemics in the discussion about Dembiński emerged in the mid-1960s. Their author was, above all, Leon Brodowski, who at the time was an activist in the state-recognised PAX Catholic association. He saw in Dembiński's milieu the precursors of Catholicism's evolution in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the announcement of "the evolutionary social changes of the Polish intelligentsia towards socialism, which took place several years before the Manifesto of the Polish Committee of National Liberation".¹⁶ Brodowski wrote a piece on Dembiński in 1971, but it was published almost two decades later because, as he claimed, "a religious leader in a leftist current so close to communism was unthinkable". He believed that it was his fervent Catholicism and Christian ideals properly understood that led Dembiński to cooperate with the communist movement.¹⁷ Catholicism could thus be reconciled with the 'spirit' of communism, which would seem to be one of Brodowski's most important theses.

¹³ Henryk Dembiński. *Wybór pism*, ed. by Michał Szulkin (Warszawa, 1962), 5–42.

¹⁴ Eugeniusz Filipajtis, *Lewica Akademicka w Wilnie, 1930 – pocz. 1935* (Białystok, 1965).

¹⁵ Jędrychowska, *Zygziem i po prostu*, 5–7.

¹⁶ Leon Brodowski, 'Henryk Dembiński prekursor dialogu', *Słowo Powszechne* (25 July 1965); *id.*, 'Widzieć i nie kochać', in *Współczesna formacja katolicka w Polsce 1945–1965* (Warszawa, 1967), 68–9; *id.*, 'Henryka Dembińskiego myśli o dialogu', *Miesięcznik Literacki*, lx, 8 (Aug. 1971), 98–104.

¹⁷ 'Prekursor naszych czasów. Dyskusja redakcyjna o Henryku Dembińskim', *Tygodnik Polski*, 1/2 (1989), 10–11.

In his book, Brodowski introduced many previously unknown facts and corrected many mistakes and omissions committed by publishing houses related to the ZHP. Regarding Dembiński's relations with the communist party, he argued that Dembiński was not a communist but remained a believing Catholic.¹⁸

The authors of the memoirs and journalists representing the 'official' party story argued against Brodowski's claims. The writer Kazimierz Koźniewski claimed that there was no 'binding testimony' that Dembiński, in Warsaw, "somehow ... returned to his old Catholic path, as if he were making intellectual attempts to integrate communism with Catholicism, attempts for some – simply for his own use – pluralist dialogue".¹⁹ Jędrychowski expressed a similar opinion; he believed that claims about Dembiński's return, after leaving prison, to the Church's philosophical and ideological platform were unfounded.²⁰ Dembiński's religiosity provoked their most determined opposition, though no arguments supported that opposition.

III

'TRAGEDY OF ERRORS' – ÉMIGRÉS ON DEMBIŃSKI

After 1945, a significant part of the pre-war Polish elite found themselves in exile. The first texts from the émigré community devoted to Dembiński were written in reaction to what was being printed inside Poland. Individuals who had participated in the very events under discussion here and who were often also associated with leftist circles (although far from communism), spoke up to present their version of the history. The first was Wanda Pełczyńska, who had defended Dembiński in 1937. In her opinion, Kornacki had tried to turn Dembiński into 'a patron of the Sovietisation of Poland', and Putrament had tried to demythologise him, which – in Pełczyńska's eyes – was what led to his rehabilitation. Pełczyńska believed that Dembiński and the communists parted ways from the moment he

¹⁸ Leon Brodowski, *Henryk Dembiński, człowiek dialogu* (Warszawa–Kraków, 1988), 6.

¹⁹ Kazimierz Koźniewski, 'Przez Wielkie Drzwi', in *id.*, *Zostanie mit* (Warszawa, 1988²), 118.

²⁰ Stefan Jędrychowski, 'Henryk Dembiński – trybun antyfaszystowski', *Nowe Drogi*, 11 (1988), 139.

joined the PPS, and during the Second World War, he “cut himself off from ties to Moscow”.²¹

The Wilno left-wing circle, which included Henryk Dembiński, appeared in Czesław Miłosz’s famous book *The Captive Mind*. In his sketch focusing on Putrament (‘Gamma’), the character Henryk (no surname) appears. In the eyes of Miłosz, he is a ‘Stalinist’, just like Jędrychowski. As Miłosz wrote, he “... was an unhappy man, internally at war with himself; he was the most glaring and tragic example of a Polish Communist torn between two loyalties”.²²

Jerzy Giedroyc wanted to publish a text devoted to Dembiński; he had previously published the book by Miłosz. Probably this idea appeared after press publications in Poland, which Giedroyc followed closely, and after the publication of Jędrychowska’s memoirs. He turned to Kazimierz Okulicz, a politician and long-time editor of the *Kurier Wileński*, and later to academics Stanisław Swianiewicz and Wiktor Sukiennicki. In the end, the text was written, though reluctantly, by Sukiennicki.²³ From the planned article emerged a book devoted only partially to Dembiński. The author expressed the reservation that “he was never one of his great enthusiasts”,²⁴ but he honestly corrected many simplifications and mistakes that appeared in national publications. The book clearly showed that Sukiennicki accepted most of the information about Dembiński’s ties with the communist party.²⁵ Not all émigrés were happy with his book. It was criticised by Okulicz, who believed that it did not present Dembiński objectively and devoted too little space to Dembiński himself.²⁶

After the publication of Jędrychowska’s book, Pełczyńska spoke up again. In an extensive text, she tried to reconstruct how the legend

²¹ Wanda Pełczyńska, ‘Po raz drugi broń Dembińskiego’, *Wiadomości*, ii, 46–47/85–86 (23 Nov. 1947), 2.

²² Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York, 1953), 141, 163.

²³ Wiktor Sukiennicki to Jerzy Giedroyc (18 Jan. 1966 and 6 Aug. 1966); Jerzy Giedroyc to Stanisław Swianiewicz (1 April 1965), in Sławomir M. Nowinowski, Rafał Stobiecki, Anna Brzezińska, and Milena Przybysz-Gralewska (eds), ‘Mam na Pana nowy zamach’. *Wybór korespondencji Jerzego Giedroycia z historykami i świadkami historii 1946–2000*, iii (Łódź–Paryż, 2019), 210–12, 277; Jerzy Giedroyc do Kazimierza Okulicza (6 March 1965), Kazimierz Okulicz do Jerzego Giedroycia, *ibid.*, ii, 891, 893.

²⁴ Wiktor Sukiennicki, *Legenda i rzeczywistość. Wspomnienia i uwagi o dwudziestu latach Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie* (Paryż, 1967), 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 57–60, 89–90, 106.

²⁶ Okulicz to Giedroyc (Aug. 1966), in ‘Mam na Pana nowy zamach’, ii, 908.

of Dembiński had been created in Poland, one that had been meant to serve short-term propaganda purposes. She also listed numerous errors and omissions in texts published in Poland. On the essential point, she changed her mind, saying that: “the indictment [in 1937] contained the full truth, which the regime press today has confirmed about Dembiński and his group in its entirety”. Summing up Dembiński’s defence in 1937, she added: “we were wrong”. However, she noted that the communists were dissatisfied with Dembiński’s testimony during the trial and his behaviour in the last period of his life, which turned out to be “a tragedy of struggles, breakdowns and errors”.²⁷

Beyond those voices trying to discuss the Dembiński case, most émigrés maintained their earlier opinions and considered Dembiński a communist. This was the view of Ada Kozieli-Poklewska, a journalist at *Słowo*, who nonetheless admitted the possibility that at the last stage of his life, he had changed his mind.²⁸ Józef Mackiewicz, a writer and journalist at *Słowo* who believed that the academic Left was made up of “Bolshevik agents associated with the subversive activities of the KPZB [Komunistyczna Partia Zachodniej Białorusi/ Communist Party of Western Belorussia]”, and that Dembiński was “the ringleader of this mess”, also did not change his mind.²⁹ After the publication of Jędrychowska’s memoirs, even the editor-in-chief at *Słowo*, Stanisław Cat Mackiewicz, who had in the meantime returned to Poland, reportedly exclaimed that he was right when, before the war, he had accused Dembiński of being a communist.³⁰ Only a few émigrés did not succumb to these suggestions.

There is no doubt that most of the historiography (primarily related to the party concepts) on this topic, including memoirs, published during the People’s Republic of Poland, bore an unmistakable mark of the times. While they focused on describing the first half of the 1930s until the arrests and trials of the activists of the Academic Left, they discussed the later period in an only cursory fashion. Above all, émigrés tried to react to what was written in Poland, although they readily accepted the thesis that Dembiński was a communist. After

²⁷ Wanda Pełczyńska, ‘Tworzenie legendy’, *Polemiki*, 6 (1967), 6, 53–4, 57.

²⁸ Ada Poklewska-Kozieli, ‘Zygakiem, ale nie po prostu’, *Wiadomości*, mxc, 8 (19 Feb. 1967), 4.

²⁹ Józef Mackiewicz, ‘Fragment epoki’, in *id.*, Nina Karsov (ed.), *Wielkie tabu i drobne fałszerstwa*, select. by Michał Bąkowski (Londyn, 2015), 190.

³⁰ Paweł Jasienica, *Pamiętnik* (Kraków, 1989), 136.

1989, this matter aroused less interest, but several vital publications appeared. Olga Filasziewicz did not try to assess Dembiński's attitude towards communism, but she introduced into circulation new source material and put in proper order many complex issues.³¹ Jarosław Tomasiewicz, having analysed the research to date, supported Brodowski's thesis about Dembiński, whose thinking was a precursor of liberation theology and whose radicalism resulted from religious faith.³² The most important event was the appearance of Dembiński's previously unpublished letters to his wife.³³

Most of the works published in People's Poland, as well as those published abroad by émigrés, regarded Dembiński as a communist. The most extensive biographical entry argued that he had been a member of the Communist Youth Association of Western Belarus [Komunistyczny Związek Młodzieży Zachodniej Białorusi, KZMZB] and that he worked closely with the KPP.³⁴ Although more cautious writers described him as a 'progressive journalist' involved in the united front,³⁵ the party publication, which included an extensive bibliography, was a kind of reference text.³⁶ What was the nature of his relationship with the communist party? What was it that indicated he had been a communist? The answer is not easy and cannot be found only in the writings of Dembiński himself, though his activity should be assessed in the context of the united front tactics that the communists had been using since the Seventh Congress of the Comintern. From that moment on, the communist party's goal was not to recruit new activists, but to create a broad bloc of left-wing groups around the common idea of 'battling fascism'.

Research conducted so far shows that until 1932 Dembiński did not have close contacts with the communist party. The situation

³¹ Olga Filasziewicz, *Respublica Academica Vilnensis: polskie stowarzyszenia ideowo-wychowawcze studentów Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie w latach 1919–1939* (Elbląg, 2014).

³² Jerzy Tomasiewicz, *Po dwakroć niepokorni. Szkice z dziejów polskiej lewicy patriotycznej* (Łódź, 2014), 97–105.

³³ 'Henryk Dembiński, Listy do żony', ed. by Marek Zaleski, *Res Publica Nowa* (Summer 2004), 130–41.

³⁴ Regina Uszyńska, 'Henryk Dembiński', in *Słownik biograficzny działaczy ruchu robotniczego* (Warszawa, 1985²), 563.

³⁵ Antoni Czubiński, *Komunistyczna Partia Polski (1918–1938). Zarys historii* (Warszawa, 1988²), 278.

³⁶ Uszyńska, 'Henryk Dembiński', 563.

changed when, in May 1932, the Wilno left-wing group established the Intellectuals' Club, within which there were two tendencies regarding contacts with the communist party. Part of that community, including Dembiński, Henryk Chmielewski and Jędrychowska, believed that affiliation with the party should not take place at the expense of restricting freedom of movement and of the expected departure of those supporters who were not prepared for such a move. Others, including Jędrychowski and Petruszewicz, believed they should immediately join the communist movement. By autumn of that year, most in the group were convinced that the second alternative was best,³⁷ the consequence being the creation, at the beginning of 1933, of the Association of the Academic Left 'Front' [Związek Lewicy Akademickiej 'Front'], which established permanent contact with the KPZB. A KPZB youth cell was set up within that organisation, including the Dziewicki sisters, Jędrychowski, and Petruszewicz.³⁸

At that time, Dembiński was serving in the army and wrote his doctoral dissertation, after which he received a foreign scholarship. He returned to Poland in December 1934. Until then, he had not participated in the work of the 'Front'. He reportedly supported that organisation, but its anti-religious tendencies put him off, and his decision to join, despite numerous discussions, came after a 'painful delay'. Before going abroad, he reportedly declared to his closest friends that they should follow "Kazik [Petruszewicz] and Stefan [Jędrychowski]'s way. That's the right way".³⁹ Despite this, when he returned to Wilno, they did not know how to respond to him, and before their upcoming meeting, "even ... Henryk's closest friends and pupils had doubts". These doubts were dispelled by Dembiński himself, whose first words to Petruszewicz reportedly were: "Are you already in the party or are you just in contact?" In 1934 (according to Petruszewicz), he joined the KZMZB and became a member of the "'Front's' governing body".⁴⁰ Contrary to dominant opinions, he probably did not immediately engage in the whirl of organisational

³⁷ Filipajtis, *Lewica Akademicka w Wilnie*, 46–7.

³⁸ Kazimierz Petruszewicz, 'Grupa wileńska, czyli "Front"', in *Komuniści. Wspomnienia o Komunistycznej Partii Polski*, ed. by Leonard Borkowicz et al. (Warszawa, 1969), 499. Filaszkiwicz, *Respublica Academica Vilnensis*, 130–8; Filipajtis, *Lewica Akademicka w Wilnie*, 47.

³⁹ Jędrychowska, *Zygzakiem i po prostu*, 111–12, 115–16.

⁴⁰ Petruszewicz, 'Grupa wileńska, czyli "Front"', 494, 499, 503–4.

work, since in February 1935, as the leading 'Front' activists were being arrested, he was reportedly able to keep himself at a safe distance as if he were absent. Jędrychowska suggests that it was because he fell in love with Zofia Westfalewicz. He himself was not arrested.⁴¹

There was no unanimity among former 'Front' members regarding whether the group belonged to the communist youth and to the party. At a closed meeting at the ZHP, when Jędrychowska asked about affiliation with the party, Petruszewicz replied that they had demanded admission to the party, "and we even argued about it ... but apparently we were not yet wanted in the party. ... The greatest difficulties came with the fact that we were intellectuals, not workers, and we needed to be tested more". A KPP liaison promised to arrange in Warsaw that the entire group be treated as candidates for the party, although such a term was not used at the time. The accounts of Rudolf Heller, Samuel Malko and Grzegorz Smolar, the editor-in-chief at the KPZB Central Editorial Office, shed new light on this issue. Malko argued that the 'Front' was regarded as "one of our legal groups of the intelligentsia", but meeting participants disagreed as to who was considered a member of the communist youth. They agreed about Maria Dziewicka and Petruszewicz, but Dembiński's name was never mentioned in this context. Smolar pointed out that Dembiński wanted to politicise the group in 1936, but the Secretariat of the Central Committee refused because some in the group were already in the KZM.⁴²

IV POPROSTU

Post-war accounts indicate that in 1935 the community of the academic Left in Wilno established contact with the KPP. The first meeting brought no organisational consequences, though the party delegated a permanent liaison to the Wilno community.⁴³ Meetings with the liaison were attended by a group of five people: Petruszewicz, Jędrychowski, Dembiński, Bohdan Skarżyński and Maria Żeromska, although that group probably did not always attend in full. One of the

⁴¹ Jędrychowska, *Zygazkiem i po prostu*, 138–9.

⁴² Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereinafter: AAN), Relacje działaczy ruchu robotniczego, ref. no. R-144; 9, 14–15, 21–3, 55.

⁴³ Filipajtis, *Lewica Akademicka w Wilnie*, 59.

liaisons, Grzegorz Smolar, mentioned that he met with Dembiński regularly every two weeks between May 1935 and May 1936. Petruszewicz claimed that they had received funds from the KPP liaison publications.⁴⁴ The biweekly *Poprostu* was published from 5 August 1935 to 5 April 1936, and after its suspension, *Karta* was published from 1 June to 25 July. How did the party influence the shape of these periodicals? Jędrychowska wrote that editors had consulted with the party about the content of subsequent issues. These consultations concerned the “main content of each number”, which was published in agreement with the liaison officer from the KPP, and information about the fact that Dembiński had spoken to the liaison officer from the KPP was supposed to end all disputes about the content of each issue.⁴⁵ However, at least initially, the party’s influence must have been weak, and the dependence on the party relatively small, since Petruszewicz mentioned that the party’s envoys were upset that there was too little writing about the Second Congress.

According to his reports, the periodical was “created on the initiative and under the leadership” of the KPP, but it could not openly declare its program; therefore, it published information and reprinted declarations created as part of the united front under the influence of the KPP and participated in the amnesty action of the International Organisation for Aid to Revolutionaries (also known as International Red Aid).⁴⁶ Indeed, it published the declaration of 35 writers *Za porozumieniem* [For Agreement] to “cooperate with the united-front movement of the masses” and the draft Declaration of the Rights of the Young Generation. The KPP inspired both.⁴⁷ The magazine also regularly commented on amnesty for political prisoners.⁴⁸ The fact that the periodical printed the two declarations was not the reason for its confiscation. Its texts on the amnesty aroused great concern, but the Voivodship Office and

⁴⁴ AAN, Relacje działaczy ruchu robotniczego, ref. no. R-144; 5–7, 9, 27–8, 47, relacje K. Petruszewicza i G. Smolara.

⁴⁵ Jędrychowska, *Zygzakiem i po prostu*, 158; *ead.*, ‘Introduction’, in *Henryk Dembiński. Wybór pism*, 30.

⁴⁶ *Poprostu – Karta*, 19–21.

⁴⁷ See Józef Kowalski, *Komunistyczna Partia Polski 1935–1938. Studium historyczne* (Warszawa, 1975), 189–93, 222–7. The texts were reprinted in *Poprostu – Karta*, 39–43.

⁴⁸ E.g., ‘O pomoc dla amnestionowanych więźniów’, *Poprostu*, 11 (1936), 10; ‘O pomoc dla amnestionowanych’, *Poprostu*, 14 (1936), 4.

Municipal Office in Wilno had no doubts that *Poprostu* was meant to further the policy of the communist party.⁴⁹

There is no doubt that in his texts, Dembiński criticised the current reality and the Sanacja's rule. He most often referred to specific issues, such as tax burdens, unfair national politics, unemployment, anti-Semitism, and foreign policy. The anti-government and radical left-wing nature of these articles is beyond doubt, but it does not automatically mean that he propagated communist views. However, he spoke positively about the united front policy and supported it.⁵⁰ Less often, in Dembiński's texts, we read statements that could be construed as 'glorification of the USSR', though he sometimes used such words at meetings and public lectures.⁵¹ Moreover, as the editor-in-chief, he took responsibility for such statements in the articles of other authors. Another indication of cooperation with communists was Dembiński's participation in the Congress of Cultural Workers for the Defense of Freedom and Progress [Zjazd Pracowników Kultury w Obronie Wolności i Postępu] on 16–17 May 1936 in Lwów.⁵² Before his departure to Lwów, Dembiński reportedly discussed the details of his speech with Smolar. The declaration he made there was not forgotten: Red Wilno, the capital of Western Belarus, greets Red Lwów, the capital of Western Ukraine. The communists were delighted with his speech and declaration, though they emphasised that Dembiński generally had not acted in accordance with what had been previously agreed.⁵³

The reception of texts seemed interesting from the point of view of officials within the Central Committee of the KPZB. Rudolf Heller recalled that the following issues were discussed at that Committee's Secretariat:

To some extent, things were discussed that needed to be discussed, what can and should be inspiring for *Poprostu*. I do not rule out that an article was planted from time to time, and it was possible that it was written in Smolar's hand. It could also be that an article was written by us, accepted

⁴⁹ Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybes Archyvas, Starostwo Grodzkie Wileńskie (hereinafter: SGW), ref. no. 53-23-2984, 23, 37, 61.

⁵⁰ See texts in *Poprostu*, 2, 4, 13 (1935, 1936), and in *Pisma*, 107, 129, 131, 168 (1935, 1936).

⁵¹ LCVA, SGW, ref. no. 53-23-3144, 36.

⁵² Kowalski, *Komunistyczna Partia Polski*, 274–6.

⁵³ AAN, Relacje działaczy ruchu robotniczego, ref. no. R-208, 2, Relacja M. Naszkowskiego, ref. no. R-144, 55–6.

by us, but there were also articles directly prepared and discussed in our office in Warsaw at the meeting of the Secretariat with the Editorial Office ... We got suggestions from the Secretariat of the Central Committee, and we gave our own opinions.⁵⁴

Statements made by KPZB functionaries [i.e., full-time employees of the party] indicated that the party's goal was to maintain a periodical that would spread specific ideas and function legally. For this reason, they tried to protect the magazine from confiscation and suggested that it should be prepared carefully. Over time, however, there were clashes with Dembiński, who wanted to push for more radical content.⁵⁵ The above accounts of the Central Committee of the KPZB are consistent with the only party document discovered so far concerning *Poprostu*, a letter from the Central Committee Secretariat to the Politburo indicating that Dembiński's group agreed to publish a magazine whose profile was proposed by the party. It was supposed to raise the issues of "equal rights among nations and the national issue". The letter specified that the issue of the "occupation [of the eastern Polish *Kresy*]" or "self-determination until separation [from Poland]" would not be raised, "not only" because of press censorship issues, but also because "this group does not stand with our communist positions".⁵⁶

V

LEAVING THE COMMUNISTS?

The last period of Dembiński's life, from mid-1936 until his death, occupies a special place in deliberations on the evolution of his views. During this period, he apparently withdrew from communist circles.

Contacts with the Polish Socialist Party

Just before their arrest, in June 1937, Dembiński and Jędrychowski reportedly joined the PPS. A suggestion runs through published memoirs and studies that this move was done with the knowledge

⁵⁴ AAN, Relacje działaczy ruchu robotniczego, ref. no. R-144, 21–2, Relacja R. Hellera.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, ref. no. R-144, 21–2, 28–9, 55, Relacja S. Malko i G. Smolara.

⁵⁶ AAN, Komunistyczna Partia Zachodniej Białorusi, ref. no. 163/V-84, 39; List Sekretariatu KC KPZB do Biura Politycznego (9 July 1935).

and consent of the KPP and was a consequence of the implementation of the guidelines of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern. However, in the light of unpublished reports from the same witnesses, the situation looks more complex. First of all, the decision of the 'Front' to join the PPS was not well received by the KPP. Warsaw KPP functionaries were reportedly against this idea, and Petruszewicz claims that consent was forced by the 'Front'. Members of the Wilno organisation were reportedly told: "You will see that you will break away from us".⁵⁷ Grzegorz Smolar said that Dembiński explained to him in prison his reasons for joining the PPS, stating that when he joined the PPS it was about saving face, and that when he was negotiating with the PPS, he had no contact with the party.⁵⁸ Could this mean that his contact with the PPS, in fact, took place without the KPP's agreement?

At the end of 1936, Dembiński made contact with the editorial office of the *Kurier Powszechny*, published by members of left-wing circles but not related to the communist movement.⁵⁹ Soon he published several texts in which he strongly rejected Mackiewicz's accusations against communism. Among other things, he wrote that "we can now see that our place in political life is only with the Polish Socialist Party, the People's Party and the syndicalist youth ZZZ, that is – with the camp of Polish democracy".⁶⁰ He agreed that he could be accused of spreading "Marxist and socialist propaganda", but he firmly rejected the practice of "Bolshevik agitation". He also mentioned that the publication had been suspended not because of anti-state tendencies, but because of the dissemination of false news that could cause public concern.⁶¹ The texts of the articles printed in its pages were not used at all by those writing in Poland about Dembiński, despite the fact that the former editor-in-chief of the *Kurier Powszechny*, Bolesław Wit Świącicki himself, sent these materials twice to the ZHP.⁶²

Many reports indicate that Dembiński's joining the PPS was not perceived as a tactical move taken with the consent of the KPP, but rather

⁵⁷ AAN, Relacje działaczy ruchu robotniczego, ref. no. R-144, 44–5, 58, Relacja K. Petruszewicza.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Relacja G. Smolara.

⁵⁹ Bolesław Wit Świącicki, 'Henryk Dembiński a wileński *Kurier Powszechny*', *Pamiętnikarstwo Polskie*, 2 (1971), 108–9.

⁶⁰ 'Oświadczenie Henryka Dembińskiego', *Kurier Powszechny* (12 Feb. 1937).

⁶¹ 'Co jeszcze 'Słowo' napisze w tej sprawie?', *Kurier Powszechny* (19 Feb. 1937).

⁶² AAN, Akta H. Dembińskiego, ref. no. 1, 54, B.W. Świącicki do ZHP (5 March 1961).

as a change of political views, or even betrayal. Wanda Wasilewska believed that it resulted from an internal crisis.⁶³ Lidia Ciołkosz, associated with PPS leaders at that time, argued that Dembiński had broken with communism, the cause reportedly being the trials of the old Bolsheviks in Moscow.⁶⁴ Giedroyc mentioned that in May 1936, he met Dembiński, who was then returning from Lwów: “I already saw in him his departure from communism”.⁶⁵ He also recalled a conversation from 1939, which apparently showed that Dembiński had “radically changed his views”.⁶⁶ We know that the Moscow trials were of great interest to Dembiński, and he referred to this topic among his friends, though – according to Jędrychowska – they came to the conclusion that they were in no position to understand the matter and should not talk about it.⁶⁷ The first Moscow trial took place in August 1936, the second in January 1937. Soon the Comintern began to summon and arrest leaders of the KPP, KPZU and KPZB in Moscow. Dembiński shared this information in prison with Smolar, among others.⁶⁸ It is difficult to believe that he did not try to conclude from this fact. This behaviour was consistent with accounts offered by Dembiński’s pre-war friends who found themselves in exile. Stanisław Swianiewicz, a witness to the Katyn massacre, wrote that Dembiński never accepted Soviet philosophy.⁶⁹ During the trial in 1937, Mieczysław Niedziałkowski recalled that in the fall of 1936, Dembiński had assured him that he “cannot and will never cooperate with a movement whose decision-making centres are located beyond Poland’s borders”.⁷⁰ Other members of the academic Left were highly disappointed with Dembiński’s behaviour during the trial, because in his statements, he overly emphasised “his alleged differences with the party”.⁷¹

⁶³ ‘Wspomnienia Wandy Wasilewskiej’, *Z Pola Walki*, xli, 1 (196), 166–8.

⁶⁴ Lidia Ciołkoszowa, *Spojrzenie wstecz* [interviewed by Andrzej Friszke] (Paris, 1995), 105.

⁶⁵ Supruniuk, *Uporządkować wspomnienia*, 166.

⁶⁶ J. Giedroyc to M. Król (19 June 1979), in *Mam na Pana nowy zamach*, ii, 261–2.

⁶⁷ Jędrychowska, *Zygziem i po prostu*, 178–9.

⁶⁸ Grzegorz Berendt, ‘Hersz Smolar o swojej działalności politycznej do 1939 r.’, in *Komuniści w II Rzeczypospolitej. Ludzie – struktury – działalność*, ed. by Marcin Bukała and Mariusz Krzysztofiński (Rzeszów, 2015), 103.

⁶⁹ Stanisław Swianiewicz, *In the Shadow of Katyn: Stalin’s Terror* (Nepean, ON, 2002), 187.

⁷⁰ Quote from Brodowski, *Henryk Dembiński, człowiek dialogu*, 183.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

PPS authorities at the time, in the person of Niedziałkowski, distrusted Jędrychowski, but they had no doubts about Dembiński's honesty. During the trial, they spoke out in Dembiński's defence, and when he was sentenced, his wife, who was living in Warsaw, travelled to visit her husband using a *Robotnik* train ticket, that publication being the main PPS organ.⁷² Dembiński also maintained contacts with the socialists after he was released from prison.

VI ATTITUDE TOWARD CATHOLICISM

Another issue that put distance between Dembiński and the communist party was his deep religiosity. Former members of the academic Left argued that in the mid-1930s, Dembiński moved away from his Catholic faith. Brodowski, who gathered a great deal of evidence and testimony, along with Polish political émigrés, who knew Dembiński, disagreed. For example, Dembiński's stay in Rome and his contacts with the former guardian of 'Odrodzenie' in Wilno, Father Walerian Meysztowicz, has been described in various ways. According to reports from inside Poland, the two men rarely saw each other, and Dembiński reportedly felt little but contempt for the priest. But Father Meysztowicz claimed that Dembiński stayed with him for an entire semester. They spent a great deal of time talking about the "juxtaposition of communism and the Church".⁷³ Stanisław Swianiewicz was also convinced of the sincerity of Dembiński's religious attitude and his genuine friendship with Father Meysztowicz.⁷⁴

During his trial, clergymen testified favourably for Dembiński. Father Henryk Hlebowicz, a new guardian of 'Odrodzenie', was particularly important. He claimed he had maintained contact with Dembiński in the days preceding his arrest and was convinced that neither he nor M. Żeromska was a communist. Father Hlebowicz believed that in search of social justice, Dembiński moved towards radicalism, but not to communism. Dembiński never undermined the truth of the faith and never attacked the Catholic Church. Father Hlebowicz heard from

⁷² Pełczyńska, *Po raz drugi bronię*, 2.

⁷³ Walerian Meysztowicz, *Gawędy o czasach i ludziach* (Londyn, 1983^{2 rev.}), 238.

⁷⁴ Stanisław Swianiewicz to Jerzy Giedroyc, in 'Mam na Pana nowy zamach', ii, 295.

Dembiński “that he does not agree with philosophical materialism, which would be contrary to Poland’s interests”.⁷⁵

Dembiński’s behaviour in prison aroused emotions at the end of the 1980s. Jędrychowski denied that Dembiński’s letters from prison to his wife were testimony to his return to the bosom of the Church. References to Catholic writers indicated only their interest in socially progressive works and the search for opportunities for dialogue and cooperation between Marxists and Catholics. “The claim that he returned to the Church’s philosophical and ideological platform is unfounded. Henryk could have been employing certain phrases through playful perversity, with an eye cast toward the second obligatory reader of these letters beside his wife – the prosecutor”.⁷⁶ However, the letters to his wife show that he was a profoundly religious man, regularly reading religious literature and the Bible.⁷⁷ We also know that, in prison, he reportedly played along with the mass on a harmonium.⁷⁸ Even before his arrest, Dembiński was in close contact with the Catholic centre for the blind in Laski near Warsaw, where Father Władysław Korniłowicz, associated with the Catholic-social milieu surrounding the periodical *Verbum*, was chaplain. One of the nuns working in Laski was the sister of Zofia Dembińska. At the end of 1937, Father Korniłowicz visited Dembiński in prison, especially to take his confession. It was to the intercession of this clergyman – who had taken the before-death confessions of Józef Piłsudski and Wanda Pełczyńska – with Prime Minister Sławoj Składkowski that Dembiński and Jędrychowski were to owe their release from prison.⁷⁹ Dembiński also maintained contact with the clergy after his release from prison. Brodowski recalls that towards the end of his life, when he was working at a school in Belarus, Dembiński made contact with a local priest who “gave him Holy Communion shortly before his tragedy, and socialised with him”.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Lietuvos Mokslu Akademijos Vrublevskis Biblioteka, ref. no. F.318-9264, 6-8. My thanks to Włodzimierz Mędrzecki who indicated this document to me.

⁷⁶ Jędrychowski, *Henryk Dembiński – trybun*, 138–9.

⁷⁷ *Henryk Dembiński*, ‘Listy do żony’; Brodowski, *Henryk Dembiński, człowiek dialogu*.

⁷⁸ Bohdan Kawecki, *Z wędrówek wileńskiego prokuratora* (Londyn, 1977), 208, 210.

⁷⁹ Pełczyńska, *Po raz drugi bronie*, 2.

⁸⁰ Leon Brodowski, ‘Widzieć i nie kochać’, in *Współczesna formacja katolicka w Polsce 1945–1965* (Warszawa, 1967), 65.

VII THE LAST YEARS OF LIFE

After his release from prison, Dembiński was not actively engaged with the communists. The texts he wrote did not refer to united front issues. His contacts with former friends loosened. He collaborated primarily with the PPS and the cooperative movement in Warsaw.⁸¹ Dembiński's behaviour after the outbreak of war was a matter of some controversy. Eleonora Syzdek pointed out that he left for Wilno "without seeking contact with Soviet communists". According to Michał Szulkin, "an interview was carried out with Dembiński" in the Central Committee of the communist party of Belarus. "The questions were quite unpleasant for him because they touched upon the transition from one orientation to another. For them, it was completely incomprehensible, and they were then inclined to treat such an attitude as a lack of decisiveness, or perhaps something worse".⁸² These words are confirmed by other accounts. Okulicz, who met Dembiński during the Soviet occupation of Wilno, recalled that Dembiński had advised him to leave. He also said that "he himself would have to escape the eyes of the Wilno authorities, because they would certainly kill him off as a 'heretic'".⁸³ In turn, during an investigation in Wilno, Pełczyńska heard from NKVD officers very unflattering statements about those who had defended Dembiński during the 1937 trial.⁸⁴ Wacław Zagórski explained the issue of Dembiński's participation in the removal of library collections from Wilno, which caused some excitement.⁸⁵ It was emphasised that, unlike his friends, Dembiński took no significant position during the Sovietisation of the *Kresy*. He settled in the countryside where he taught at a local school and was shot and killed.

Party propaganda cultivated in People's Poland left its mark on discussions about Henryk Dembiński's communist involvement, discussions which have been going on for many years. Bending the past to the moment's needs and ignoring all doubts, the Party explicitly stated that Dembiński was a communist. A segment of the Polish

⁸¹ Stanisław Tołwiński, *Wspomnienia 1895–1939* (Warszawa, 1970), 455–73.

⁸² *Prekursor naszych czasów. Dyskusja*, 10.

⁸³ K. Okulicz to J. Giedroyc (Aug. 1966), in *'Mam na Pana nowy zamach'*, ii, 908.

⁸⁴ Pełczyńska, *Po raz drugi bronię*, 2.

⁸⁵ Wacław Zagórski, *Wolność w niewoli* (Londyn, 1971), 42.

emigration population accepted this thesis almost uncritically. In fact, Dembiński's story appears to be more complex. There is no doubt that he was not a member of the Communist Party. At the same time, he was in contact with illegal party envoys for at least a year; he edited a periodical that was at least co-financed by the party's treasury; and, above all, he pursued the policy of a united front, which was consistent with the implementation of the tactics set forth by the Seventh Congress of the Comintern. There is no doubt that this activity benefited the Communist Party and Moscow. However, it remains an open question whether he collaborated with the KPP in a fully conscious way or whether – as speeches of functionaries and discovered documents appear to suggest – he was manipulated. This later thesis would also be supported by moments in which he acted against the suggestions party liaisons had given him. This issue requires further careful research. There is no clear evidence from his later period that Dembiński maintained contacts with communists and pursued their policies. Multiple accounts show that he had withdrawn into the shadows, though he did not publicly dissociate himself from his previous activities. Did he perhaps think he had already accomplished that goal through his statements at the trial and in press publications in late 1936 and early 1937? One gets the impression that this is how the communists perceived his behaviour. In this sense, it can be assumed that due to the work of his comrades, he became a communist only after his death.

transl. Paul Vickers

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Paweł Libera – eastern policy of the Second Republic of Poland, Polish-Lithuanian relations, Polish political emigration until 1945; assistant professor at the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences; e-mail: pawel.libera@interia.pl