

The Insignificant



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Prokuratura Wojewódzka w Krakowie prowadzi śledztwo w sprawie naruszenia efektywności samobrony studenta V roku Wydziału Filologii UM — Stanisława Pyjasa. Prosi się każdego, kto widział St. Pyjasa samego lub w towarzystwie innych osób w czasie od godz. 18:00 dn. 6 V 1977 r. do godz. 3:00 dn. 7 V 1977 r. o osobiste zgłoszenie się w Prokuraturze Wojewódzkiej w Krakowie, ul. Mściężnicza 7, p. 336, IV p., lub telefoniczne skontaktowanie się z Prokuraturą pod numer 114-97.

Prokurator Wojewódzki
w Krakowie

(Echo Krakowa)

Stanislaw Pyjas said goodbye to his friends late in the afternoon of May 6, 1977. After that no one is exactly sure what happened to him. Early the next morning a waitress hurrying to work found his crumpled body lying face down inside the dingy passageway of a ramshackle Krakow apartment building. It was raining, and a political crisis began to brew in Poland.

To the Polish Government Pyjas was considerably more dangerous dead than alive. His qualifications for becoming a political martyr were perfect: He was a student at the University of Krakow; he received letters threatening his life that were conveniently ignored by the police when he reported them; and, worst of all, he was working for a dissident group of intellectuals, the Workers Defense Committee. The ramifications were scary. The passions of an amazingly volatile population might be stirred and the regime's international reputation for soft-touch dealings with dissidents spoiled.

Nothing was farther from the government's intention to squelch the story than the ominous, black-rimmed posters splashed over Krakow a few days after the death. Police ripped them down, but the message got through that Pyjas, a member of the Workers Defense Committee, had been killed May 7, 1977. The illegal notices sparked immediate controversy. It was the first startling hint of a ghost that might haunt the regime. Students donned black armbands in a demonstration of mourning for their dead comrade. The tight-lipped Party was being pushed to respond.

Cafés droned with conversation of the dead student. So did most households and university dormitories in Krakow. No one was insulated from the scandal, even with the coincidental "malfunctioning" of telephone service into and out of the city. A reserved but genuine exchange of views was taking place. The vague awareness of the Workers Defense Committee became more definite, and people's suspicions concerning the young man's death were given some grounds. But no matter how much people talked or how deeply they probed the situation still seemed unclear. The unfolding of events pinpointed the human right most flagrantly violated in Eastern Europe—the right to clarity. Of all the weapons at the leadership's disposal the most lethal is their coordinated program of obfuscation.

Death

of Stanislaw Pyjas

Franco

For a few tense days it appeared that the Workers Defense Committee, and a newly formed band of students called the Solidarity Committee, would succeed in waging a wide-open public debate over the murder. In retrospect one recognizes how inhibited and frail the endeavor was from the outset. No political upheaval would erupt in the old, royal, and academic city of Krakow unless the ferment of the intellectuals and students infected the ordinary citizens. These are the people lost in the mundane tasks of working, shopping, and going to American movies.

The leadership viewed the gathering political storm clouds, fully aware that most of the population was reacting with a mixture of apathy and suspicion to the rumors that a student had been beaten to death by the secret police. While dutiful students organized solemn marches in memory of Pyjas, many more who were curiosity seekers shoved one another to catch a glimpse inside the building where he had died. The government was confident that it would win the battle for public opinion. The death of the student had entered the competition of the tightly controlled marketplace. As in the marketplace of democratic societies, truth is not always the most pressing question.

At the root of the political trouble in Krakow was a cynical set of beliefs about the evils of Communist control in Poland. Anyone who expected the official response to include clubs, tear gas, dogs, and mass arrests was disappointed. Had the government responded in that way the conflict might have been simpler. Instead the official tactic was to create a contrary set of doubts to outweigh the beliefs that had begun to crystalize into a threat. A campaign of personal defamation was started by the heralds of the Party.

There was nothing particularly slanderous about the details (which seemed verifiable) in a newspaper account reporting that a fatal accident occurred when a drunk university student fell over the banister in his girlfriend's apartment building at three in the morning. The spurious objectivity neutralized the effect of the posters that first vented public opinion over the incident. There was no official mention of the fact that Pyjas was collaborating with the Workers Defense Committee or that when he left his friends he was carrying a document prepared by the dissident group

to protest a wave of arrests in Krakow.

Skepticism about the case was insured by exploiting the notoriously provincial attitudes of the older and middle-aged population. A snapshot of Pyjas appeared in the Krakow paper thirteen days after his death. At the same time, a well-known Communist journalist from Warsaw wrote a speculative article that fashioned Pyjas as an undercover agent for the secret police and implied that the Workers Defense Committee had reason to kill him, if anyone did, because of his treachery. The snapshot, though, was far more effective in stimulating doubts about the character of Pyjas. Fortunately for the government he looked more like a "Sixties radical" from Berkeley, California, than a typical, clean-cut University of Krakow philology student. (Most students at Krakow wear suits and their hair is cut short.)

The beard and shoulder-length hair hid the face that many had come to idealize. Even the eyes, with their glinting, moral smugness, reinforced the ambiguity. How much easier it was for the average working man to believe a terrible political murder had taken place before the picture was printed. Underneath the photograph was a cryptic note asking people with information about the student to contact the policē. It was a sure sign that a "real" investigation was under way, although it left some doubt about who would be investigated. Most people assumed it was a ploy to flush out Pyjas's cohorts.

Reporters from Western newspapers flocked to Krakow for Red-bloc dissident copy, but nothing much happened. The crisis fizzled out and, with it, the hopes of overworked professors looking forward to a strike that might relieve them from tedious year-end examinations. The timing was wrong. "Juvenalia" had begun, a Mardi Gras-like festival when students become masters of the city and march through the streets in medieval costumes.

But the vigor of the movement was really killed by the image that first gave it purpose. That was the card up the government's sleeve: to submerge the city in its own suspicion and apathy. There have been greater failures in Eastern Europe—Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, for example. Anyway, the photograph of the seedy-looking martyr made this failure seem even less important.

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