

= Ryszard Siwiec =

Ryszard Siwiec (Polish pronunciation : [ʐɨʂard ɕivjɛt s] ; 7 March 1909 ? 12 September 1968) was a Polish accountant and former Home Army resistance member who was the first person to commit suicide by self @-@ immolation in protest against the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia . Although his act was captured by a motion picture camera , Polish press omitted any mention of the incident , which was successfully suppressed by the authorities . Siwiec prepared his plan alone , and few people realized what he tried to achieve with his sacrifice . His story remained mostly forgotten until the fall of communism , when it was first recounted in a documentary film by Polish director Maciej Drygas . Since then , Siwiec has been posthumously awarded a number of Czech , Slovak , and Polish honors and decorations .

Siwiec 's death foreshadowed the much better known self @-@ immolation of Jan Palach in Prague four months later . Siwiec was the first person from Central and Eastern Europe to self @-@ immolate in protest of the invasion , and the only one in Polish history .

= = Biography = =

Siwiec was born in D?bica on 7 March 1909 , under the Austrian Partition of Poland , then part of Austria @-@ Hungary . He graduated from the Lviv University with a degree in philosophy . Siwiec worked as an accountant since the 1930s in Przemy?l , where he moved shortly after graduation . During World War II he escaped forced labour for the Germans by taking employment as a gardener and joined the Armia Krajowa (Home Army) , the Polish resistance movement . Ryszard Siwiec married in 1945 and had five children .

= = Self @-@ immolation = =

According to friends and family , he had extensive historical knowledge and was deeply disillusioned with the reality of communist Poland . He supported the protesting students during the March 1968 Polish political crisis in Poland , printing bibu?a leaflets and asking his daughter to distribute them . According to health professionals , he was of sound mind , and fully rational , at the time of his suicide . Siwiec planned his self @-@ immolation months in advance , writing out a last will in April , and leaving written and tape @-@ recorded statements explaining his revulsion at both the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and the People 's Republic of Poland 's participation in it .

Siwiec obtained passes to a national harvest festival taking place on 8 September 1968 at the 10th @-@ Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw . His goal was to have his act be witnessed by nearly 100 @,@ 000 spectators , including numerous journalists and the national leadership of the Polish United Workers ' Party . He set himself ablaze during one of the festival dances using a flammable solvent . This method of protest was likely inspired by recent series of similar protests by Buddhist monks in Vietnam , most notably that of Thich Qu?ng ??c . He had a banner with the words " For our freedom and yours " and " Honour , Fatherland " as well as some leaflets , which he is said to have thrown around right before the incident , though neither attracted much attention , and both items are primarily mentioned only in the documents of the investigating secret police . He refused immediate help and shouted " I protest " . He retained consciousness after the flames had been extinguished , giving brief statements , as well as later when he was transferred to a hospital (Szpital Praski) , where he was able to communicate with the medical personnel , and where he received a brief visit from his wife . In the hospital , he was put under police surveillance , dying four days later on 12 September .

= = Significance and remembrance = =

The incident was immediately suppressed by the authorities . A story invented on the spot was that it was an accident caused by drinking vodka and smoking , or spontaneously combusting , aiming to

divert interest to gossip and portray Siwiec as an irresponsible drunk . He was also declared mentally ill .

Despite many attendees at the festival , there were relatively few witnesses , and the incident did not cause any delay in the main proceedings . Journalists and others knew that they would not be able to publish any photographs or movies , so those aware of the incident did not bother recording it other than by accident , nor did any try to investigate it afterward . Most of the few photographs of the incidents have been destroyed or forgotten and lost . Siwiec was censored out of official photographs of the Central Photographic Agency (Centralna Agencja Fotograficzna) , which had a monopoly on issuing photos for the press in the era of communist Poland . His act was captured in a 7 @-@ second film by a motion picture camera of the Polish Film Chronicle , but the official newsreels of the festival omitted any mention of the incident . This footage however survived , mislabeled either by accident or purpose , until it was rediscovered over twenty years later .

Polish secret police (S?u?ba Bezpiecze?stwa) made a routine investigation that ended quickly due to the " death of the culprit " , followed by routine low @-@ key surveillance of his friends and family , during which it intercepted Siwiec 's last letter to his wife (delivered decades later) . Overall , the authorities had little trouble suppressing the events , as none of the relatively few witnesses have shown any particular desire to make the event more widely known . There was some gossip about the incident , with most people considering it a suicide rather than an accident , but the reason for it was unclear , and no one connected Siwiec 's dramatic actions to contemporary political events . As publicist Stefan Kisielewski wrote in his diary two days after Siwiec 's death , " There are rumours about a self @-@ immolation [during the festival] but none knows the reason for it . "

= = = Funeral = = =

Siwiec ' funeral in Przemy?l was well attended , but did not turn into a political manifestation ; it was guarded by police , and secret agents spread rumors aimed at damaging Siwiec 's reputation . His family reported that while some acquaintances were supportive and aware of Siwiec 's true purpose , many turned away from them , either intimidated by the authorities or believing the stories that Siwiec had been drunk or mentally ill .

Siwiec 's timing has been described as unfortunate , as he chose to commit his act during a dance (mazurka) , at which time his cry was muffled due to the sounds of an orchestra playing . Some , like Tomas Kavaliauskas or Krzysztof K?kolewski , have speculated that if he had chosen to act moments earlier , during a speech by Polish communist leader W?adys?aw Gomu?ka , first secretary of the Polish United Workers Party , the commotion he caused would have likely interrupted it and his message might have been witnessed more widely . Publicist Antoni Zambrowski noted that many other self @-@ immolators like Czech Jan Palach had cooperated with anti @-@ communist opposition movements and left messages and other documents which helped publicize their activities ; Siwiec worked alone and so the Polish anti @-@ communist opposition with which he identified with was not aware of his action and the meaning behind it until much later .

Radio Free Europe learned about the incident a few days or months (sources vary) after the incident but did not consider the message reliable nor newsworthy , as the broadcaster was also unaware of its political context . This changed only after the famous self @-@ immolation of Palach in Prague four months later , on 19 January 1969 , and after RFE received more information , which clarified the political statement that Siwiec wanted to make . The RFE broadcast about Siwiec aired in February , March or April (sources vary) that year . If Palach became aware of Siwiec 's actions , it would thus have been due to word of mouth , rather than from RFE .

= = = Recognition = = =

Through the efforts of his family and friends , information about Siwiec became known to the anti @-@ communist Solidarno?? opposition in Poland by the 1980s . A brochure about him was published in 1981 . After the fall of communism , Siwiec became the subject of the 1991

documentary film Hear My Cry (Us?yszcie mój krzyk) , by Polish director Maciej Drygas . The film won several awards including the European Film Awards " Felix " prize for " Best Documentary " that year . Drygas , who is credited with reconstructing and popularizing Siwec 's story , remarked that compared to other similar incidents of that time , such as the self @-@ immolations of Palach or Romas Kalanta , Siwec death 's is unique in how little attention it attracted . Jan Nowak @-@ Jeziora?ski , the director of the Polish section of Radio Free Europe , expressed a similar sentiment : " This was an unheard of human tragedy ... The tragedy lay in that his sacrifice went completely unnoticed . " In the same vein , Kavaliauskas interprets Drygas ' movie as a critique of contemporary Polish society , saying that witnesses did not want to have this incident spoil their enjoyment of the festival on an otherwise " perfect day " .

Following Drygas ' movie , Ryszard Siwec was posthumously awarded a number of Czech , Slovak and Polish state decorations . Memorial plaques dedicated to his memory exist in Warsaw , D?bica and Przemy?l . A bridge in Przemy?l , where he lived , was named after him in 1991 , as well as a street in Prague in front of the Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes , with a nearby memorial dedicated to him , unveiled in 2010 . A street in Warsaw was named for him in 2011 . Nonetheless , as noted by Kavaliauskas in 2010 , he still is less known than other self @-@ immolators of his time .

= = Honours = =

Siwec was awarded the following honours posthumously :

Order of Tomá? Garrigue Masaryk , first class , awarded in 2001 by Václav Havel , President of the Czech Republic .

Order of Polonia Restituta , Commander 's Cross , awarded in 2003 by Aleksander Kwa?niewski , President of Poland .

Order of the White Double Cross , 3rd Class , awarded in 2006 by Ivan Ga?parovi? , President of Slovakia .