

Press Release

London, UK – December 13th 2011

Thirty years ago on December 13th 1981, martial law was declared in Poland. This drastic step, taken by the then Prime Minister General Wojciech Jaruzelski was intended to suppress political opposition and restore communist party control throughout the country. In that, it was initially successful mainly because thousands of political activists were rounded up and interned. A shocked world watched as high-profile oppositionists, including Jacek Kuroń and Jan Józef Lipski, vanished in the crackdown. Deprived of the chance to speak out publicly at the time, they later recorded their stories, and these videos are now free to view on the Web of Stories website (<http://webofstories.com>).

The news that Poland was under martial law came after months of escalating social and economic unrest in that country. Although the ferment, particularly following the founding of the independent Solidarity trade union in August 1980, meant a response from the communist government was likely, the crackdown, when it came, surprised many. Outside observers had been focusing on the possibility of a Soviet invasion especially after Soviet armed forces had moved into Afghanistan two years earlier. This fear was shared by many Poles for whom the influence of the Kremlin on Poland's domestic policy was frighteningly predictable. The CIA, however, concluded that at such a critical phase in the Cold War, Poland's communist rulers would use martial law to deter a Soviet invasion. In fact, what the communist leaders in both Warsaw and Moscow were intent on doing was to reassert state control over society.

To this end, leaders of the free and independent trade union Solidarity were arrested and isolated, as were around 5000 Solidarity supporters. The crackdown was severe and units of riot police were mobilised to deal forcefully with demonstrators in the ensuing protests.

Ordinary citizens were affected, too, as they awoke on the morning of December 13th to find troops and tanks patrolling the streets, telephone lines disconnected, airports closed and road access to major cities restricted. Only one TV channel and one radio station were broadcasting, and in both cases they were airing General Jaruzelski's address to the nation in which he declared that Poland was under martial law.

Inevitably, among the first of the activists to be arrested was Jacek Kuroń, a veteran in the struggle against state repression of worker's rights. Here, he recalls the unsettling conversation he had with the security serviceman who arrested him on that day:

... we were driving alone in a police van, going through the snow-covered streets of Gdańsk full of armoured vehicles, tanks, and the man from Gdańsk says to me, 'Well, Mr Kuroń, was it worth doing all those things that you did?' To which I replied, 'Do you remember how 2 years ago when you would come to get me, you would come in three maybe four cars, but today, look how many tanks you had to use to get me'. Leśniak leaned over to me and said, 'This time, it's very serious'.

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www.webofstories.com

Over the next 19 months, until it was lifted in July 1983, martial law continued to affect every area of public life. The restrictions imposed by Poland's military managers were felt even by artists and writers whose work was subject to extreme censorship. In their stories recorded for Web of Stories, film director Andrzej Wajda and poet Julia Hartwig recollect, among other things, how the lack of artistic freedom which followed the events of December 13th 1981 impacted on their creativity and prompted them to move into temporary exile abroad.

These and more stories can all be found in Web of Stories which hosts a video archive of the most vivid memories of four renowned Poles – Jacek Kuroń, Jan Józef Lipski, Andrzej Wajda and Julia Hartwig – all of whom were affected by the declaration of martial law in Poland 30 years ago. Hours of footage have been divided into individual stories which viewers can watch, listen to, comment on, and share with their friends and colleagues. The videos are also free for embedding into personal blogs and websites. We invite the public to watch these stories and to record and share their own video stories, not just about their own experiences of living through the dark days of martial law in Poland, but on any other topic.

<http://www.webofstories.com/people/jacek.kuron/1>

<http://www.webofstories.com/people/jj.lipski/1>

<http://www.webofstories.com/people/julia.hartwig/1>

<http://www.webofstories.com/people/andrzej.wajda/1>

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NOTES TO EDITOR

About Web of Stories:

Everyone has a story to tell. Over time many stories become forgotten, but now Web of Stories offers members of the public the chance to tell their stories for future generations to enjoy.

Web of Stories began as an archive of life stories told by some of the great scientists of our time. As the number of stories grew, it became obvious that some were on related topics and a web was slowly being created of connected stories. After a while we also invited famous people outside the field of science to tell their life stories.

Web of Stories is also open to the public to record their stories for the world to view and share. The project is built on the belief that we all have wonderful stories to share, and have family and friends whose tales we would like to hear. The great thing about Web of Stories is that anyone can come and talk about virtually anything they like. Just like our famous speakers, it is an account of their experiences as they remember them.

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We hope to provide lasting, first-hand accounts of people's experiences – imagine that in a hundred years' time your grandchildren or great grandchildren will be able to watch you telling stories about your life today!

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