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A Buzzing Mosquito. Stefan Kisielewski 1911–1991–2011

KEY WORDS

Stefan Kisielewski, “Tygodnik Powszechny”, feuilleton writing, People’s Republic of Poland, censorship

ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to Stefan Kisielewski, one of the most prominent Polish feuilletonists and publicists of the 20th century. The source of his courage and determination, which he expressed in the feuilletons published in “Tygodnik Powszechny” in the following periods: 1945–1953 and 1956–1989, was the conviction about the necessity to serve the public good and not to surrender to the oppression of the communist regime. His views appeared to be universal in the sense that they did not lose their validity after Poland regained its freedom and sovereignty in 1989.

Stefan Kisielewski was a person who is certainly worth remembering, though it is not easy. Reasons for these difficulties can be enumerated until the moment when their register becomes a list of a considerable size what, in turn, will compel us to conclude that he was a complex phenomenon – and, perhaps, as some claim, even had a split personality (Kisielewski and Kisiel) – and, therefore, impossible to be synthetically described and analysed. It seems that it is much simpler to prove how absorbing a challenge he still is rather than stumble over what he left or deal with only a part of his work. This thesis is, to some extent, confirmed by the literature devoted to Kisielewski. Even though it is copious, it is in vain – with one exception – to look for the book which would encompass all interests and passions of its hero.¹ Simultaneously, those who think that everything what has been written

¹ The literature on various aspects of Kisielewski’s activity is substantial. However, only M. Urbanek (*Kisiel*, Wrocław 1997) dared to look holistically though – due to the requirements of the series in which he published his book – rather cursory. In addition to discussions about Kisielewski (*Kisiel*, Joanna Pruszyńska speaks about Stefan Kisielewski with Andrzej Bardecki and others, Warszawa 1999), works analysing separately his attitude, feuilleton writing, language, prose writing, diarism, music criticism and the music he composed prevail, cf. among others: M. Ryszkiewicz, *Forma ideologii – ideologia formy. O powieściach Stefana Kisielewskiego*, Lublin 2003; M. Wiszniowska, *Stańczyk Polski Ludowej. Rzecz o Stefanie Kisielewskim*, Katowice–Warszawa 2004.

and said about Kisielewski is an apt material for generalisations are mistaken. To a certain degree yes, but this incentive is balanced by the specificity of his legacy – he was *his own rival*² writing in multiple genres – as well as the concepts and terms used when attempting to define him. He was described as an institution, a phenomenon (*the only and unique* – in the opinion of Jan Nowak-Jeziorański)³, inspirer and precursor; he was perceived as Stańczyk⁴; it was thought that he *sounds like Wawel* (according to Jerzy Waldorf). Additionally, he was irreverent, flippant and yet, serious and principled. The question is what to do with this? To try and seek explanations, which the authors lack, or try to argue?

Let us assume that we are not aware of what is complicated, impossible or exaggerated and thereby we hope that difficulties can, or at least may, be overcome. However, it is worth commencing with a statement which only confirms the complexity of the matter discussed; namely, it is not clear where to start. What is the most important in the biography of Kisielewski? The specificity of times in which he lived affecting his commitment, substantial artistic attainments, diversity of interests and talents or the unconventional manner of being that did not and still does not favour balancing views and merits?

If we assume that none of these orders is either a good introduction to others or superior to them, we may acknowledge that the autobiographical account of Kisielewski, explaining the strategy adopted towards the post-war period, will be the most appropriate benchmark. He says that after the Warsaw Uprising, among his readings, he came across the figure of Victor Rochefort, publicist and publisher, journalist fighting against Napoleon III in the area of trivial affairs. He could not raise political issues since they were guarded by the censorship⁵. Kisielewski decided that it would be a good – though arising from necessity – way of being present in the public life of the People's Republic of Poland.

Kisielewski's founding myth remains beyond the possibility of verification. It is impossible to say whether or not it was real, just as it is impossible to ascertain whether the coincidence played such an important role in his life as he claimed. He assured that it was because of this coincidence that, in the beginning of 1945, he found himself in Cracow – where he lived with Czesław Miłosz whom he accidentally met in occupied Warsaw – and began working for “Tygodnik Powszechny” and “Przekrój”, and slowly became who he was.

So far, so good; yet, it is still unknown – who he really was? If we assume the criterion of professional achievement, what is trivial in fact, then the answer is simple – he was a

² [W. Skalmowski] M. Broński, *Stefan Kisielewski – powieściopisarz*, „Kultura” 1977, No. 6.

³ *Odwagą przebił barierę strachu. Wspomnienie Jana Nowaka-Jeziorańskiego*, [in:] *Kisiel*, p. 173.

⁴ *Stańczyk Polski Ludowej. Rozmowa z prof. Stanisławem Stomą*, [in:] *ibidem*, p. 232.

⁵ He mentions that he was inspired by Rochefort in, among others, *Abecadło Kisielewskiego*, Warszawa 1990, p. 140.

feuilletonist, publicist, prose writer and composer. He also proved to be a diarist – what we found out after his death – as his diary appeared to be a type of work commenting on his own life and the world around as well as his attitude towards it. If, however, we use a more subtle criterion, i.e. themes and features of feuilletons and some novels, and also if we bear in mind that he was an MP for some time, one can say that he was also, or perhaps above all, a man of politics.

Therefore, we must return to the starting point and ask which of these orders should be considered more important provided, of course, that they can be separated. Let us make the whole task easier and say that both writing, or at least a large part of it, and work in the public sphere were regarded as a whole by him; complementary in the sense that everything he wrote served a purpose, not necessarily political but not far away from politics. It was to joust with communism, watch and describe it, and thus to resist it in all its forms, manifestations, threats and absurdities. He could not write directly about the reality like Rochefort did. Hence, he wrote allusively, vicariously or wrote about things which, even though political, were formally remote from politics.

If we assume that we have in a way defined the logical axis of Kisielewski's biography and we go back to the years preceding the outbreak of the war, we are forced to treat this certainty as an illusion. Indeed, Kisielewski aka Kisiel came to light in 1945, but until then he was not nobody; on the contrary – he definitely was somebody. He made his debut as a political journalist in 1936 when he began writing for “Bunt Młodych”, a magazine specialising in political matters. He was responsible for the music section, but it turned out that writing about it is not as interesting as composing it, and even not as fascinating as dealing with politics. A year after Kisielewski's debut, “Bunt Młodych” changed its title to “Polityka” and became a weekly whose team was thinking about not only describing the world, but also participating in political life. The war interrupted these plans. However, the experience of “Bunt”/“Polityka”, not only in the case of Kisielewski, was not wasted. The acquaintance with the editor of the magazine, Jerzy Giedroyc survived despite the passage of time and it was not the only benefit. In his novel *Sprzysiężenie*, created during the war, Kisielewski used the observations made at the editorial board of “Bunt”/“Polityka” and also learned something about his passions, especially that he was *homo politicus*; additionally, he acquired journalistic skills and also something more. Namely, the belief that the sense of political writing cannot be solely reduced to commenting and that its foundation has to be a will, armed with ideals, to improve the reality.

Looking through the memories about Kisielewski and reviews of his work, one can find opinions – their sources are those who used their skills for the affirmation of the communist system and its achievements – that he was created by communism in the sense that the essence of what he wrote was exposing the system to criticism. Therefore, he would not have been who he had become if not the specificity of the People’s Republic of Poland. It is difficult to argue with presumptions what, however, does not exclude the necessity to identify the shortcomings of such reasoning. If, in 1945, Poland had not become the People’s Republic, Kisielewski would probably have also written about politics. Only that it would have presented a higher level (it would not have been difficult) than the one shaped by Bierut and Gomułka. Hence, Kisiel’s writing and his name would have meant more. The diagnosis, unfriendly to Kisielewski, does not withstand criticism for another reason as well. He was not a critic saying ‘no’ what was claimed not only by his adversaries but also sympathisers. Apart from the fact that he himself, after the October, identified the ‘yes’ period in his feuilleton writing both before 1956 and also after abandoning the October, he did not criticise only seemingly or for rodomontade.

Owing to the neo-conservative school such as the circles of “Polityka”, he developed a factual, free from emotions, attitude to the matters of history. It appeared to be useful in 1945 when his old world lay in ruins. He was raised in a home of intellectuals of the left-wing ethos, of course in the pre-war sense of the term. While his father, a Piłsudskiite, was an editor of the socialist magazine “Robotnik”, Kisielewski thought and acted like a conservative and liberal, considering socialism in all its forms, both in the Soviet as well as Western European version to be an expensive utopia.

The term ‘involvement’, like many other concepts, was devoid of content and discredited during the People’s Republic of Poland. Nevertheless, it rather accurately reflects Kisielewski’s post-war attitude and the message of his publicism inextricably tied to it. For all the time, from the beginning till the end of the PRL existence, he was committed to saving what he associated with values; in other words, against what exposed these values to risk. He was assisted in this by an apt, though dismal, diagnosis of what happened in Poland and with Poland in 1945. Communism was not something temporary – the downturn dragged on for longer and it had to be taken into account what did not mean that the situation impelled to surrender. However, the recognition of the situation was not synonymous with its acceptance.

Kisielewski's specificity can be reduced to his views and attitudes and invisible, or not always noticeable, assiduity. He estimated that he wrote around fifteen hundred feuilletons (Jerzy Turowicz talked about two thousand) only for "Tygodnik Powszechny" and, in addition, a lot of journalistic texts of other genres⁶. He cooperated with "Tygodnik Powszechny" for nearly 40 years but published his works elsewhere as well. After the war, he was an editor of "Przekrój" (until 1947), wrote for the pax weekly "Dziś i Jutro" and, what is not often mentioned, for "Tygodnik Warszawski"⁷. Both these journals, along with "Tygodnik Powszechny", defined themselves through the term 'Catholicism' but each of them saw the understanding and use of this term differently. The licensed *group* "Dziś i Jutro" cooperated with the communist regime, „Tygodnik Warszawski” tried to fight with it while "Tygodnik Powszechny" – behave realistically or, as some claim, minimalistically, i.e. attempted to save what could be saved. Initially, Kisielewski accepted these differences believing, together with Stanisław Stomma, that a community of those who consider communist governance to be fundamentally alien should be built. He broke off his collaboration with "Dziś i Jutro" as soon as he realised that the group is an instrument of the authorities. Meanwhile, "Tygodnik Warszawski" was closed down and most of the editors ended up in prison with harsh sentences. In the 1960s, he wrote for "Życie Warszawy" (music feuilleton) and, at the end of the decade, printed in "Więź".

In 1955, he renewed his political connections with Jerzy Giedroyc; became a contributor to "Kultura" and the author of the Literary Institute, believing that being subjected to censorship is a form of acceptance of the primacy of power over the spirit. Since the creation of the independent publishing movement, he wrote for underground publishing houses, including "Bratniak", "Polityka Polska", "Zapis"⁸.

Novel writing was a separate field of his creativity. Not all his prosaic books were devoted to politics; however, exactly as in the case of feuilleton and publicistic writing, he was becoming increasingly more attracted to it. Initially (in *Sprzysiężenie*), it was only the background, later – became the subject. In 1967, Giedroyc issued *Widziane z góry*, then *Cienie w pieczarze* and other works in the editorial series Biblioteka Kultury. In the late 1960s, the pseudonym under which they were released (Tomasz Staliński) became the most

⁶ *Mówił prosto z mostu. Rozmowa z Jerzym Turowiczem*, [in:] *Kisiel*, p. 281; his feuilleton writing was gathered in nine volumes and musical sketches in three.

⁷ This information is given in the ZLP survey (of 10 February 1977), Archives of the Polish Writers' Union (Archiwum ZLP), Dom Literatary, file of S. Kisielewski; in the earlier survey (of 1 September 1950), he states that he cooperated with „Tygodnik Warszawski” between 1945 and 1947. Similarly, imprecise data refer to his work for "Przekrój" 1945–1946 and 1945–1947.

⁸ The profile of oppositional Kisiel can be found in: *Opozycja w PRL. Słownik biograficzny 1956–1989*, ed. by J. Skórzyński, Vol. 1, Warszawa 2000, p. 161 ff.

heavily investigated mystery that puzzled the experts in the Central Committee and the Ministry of Internal Affairs⁹. Kisielewski became the creator of the genre hitherto non-existent in Poland – contemporary political novel.

After the war, he lectured at the Academy of Music in Cracow and edited “Ruch Muzyczny” – a journal whose creation was inspired by him. Both these adventures ended with the installation of Socialist Realism. In 1946, he was admitted to the Trade Union of Polish Writers (Związek Zawodowy Literatów Polskich). Since 1956, he participated, owing to democratic procedures, in the Polish Writers’ Union (Związek Literatów Polskich – ZLP) meetings; for several years (1956–1959), he served on the Main Board. Similarly, he was active in the Polish Composers’ Union (Związek Kompozytorów Polskich), being for some time the president of the Cracow Branch. He cooperated with Polskie Radio, staying in touch with Jan Nowak, director of the Polish Section of Radio Free Europe.

In 1956, he decided that the culmination of a tendency to do what one could do was being an MP; he was part of the Catholic MPs Association ‘Znak’ (Koło Posłów Katolickich „Znak”) and served two terms in the parliament, 1957–1961 and 1961–1965. Supporting independent initiatives complemented his public activity. He was a signatory to the Letter 34 (1964), Letter 59 on Amendments to the Constitution (1975) and the Manifesto of 14 Intellectuals devoted to repression against members of strikes in Radom and Ursus (1976).

His own account of the attitude adopted after the war allows us to understand the reasons for which he began to write feuilletons. The first one – let us bring order here – appeared in “Tygodnik” on 5 August 1945 while the last one on 25 June 1989. Why a feuilleton? First of all, because it provided a possibility to make a continuous assessment of the reality from the perspective of a scoffer who worried about what he saw. Kisiel was a light dessert, not too sophisticated but, like any dessert, served as the crowning of a meal. He found long publicistic texts attractive even though it was feuilleton that became the most appropriate genre for him and which healed with his name. The choice was not accidental. The feuilleton convention – syncretic, persiflage, creating unlimited thematic possibilities, ideal for the author valuing malice and allusion, but also justifying the change of his mind – made him feel comfortable. A little bit of commitment and nonchalance – this kind of feuilleton suited his taste best¹⁰.

It was his chosen genre because it matched the author’s intentions in the most perfect manner and, furthermore, enforcing loyalty toward the world and its affairs, turned out to be a

⁹ Cf. A. Friszke, »Widziane z góry« Tomusza Stalińskiego, „Zeszyty Historyczne” Iss. 157 (2006).

¹⁰ S. Kisielewski, *Dzienniki*, Warszawa 1996, p. 561.

handy tool. It could be used to describe, interpret, review or recall something and, if necessary (and permissible), mock it as well.

The genre of the feuilleton caused that Kisielewski did not have to adjust the tone of his writing to the matters about which he wrote, what does not mean, however, that he always amused. He assumed that his weapon would be accessibility even when what he wrote discussed heavyweight issues. Such a strategy, taking into account that people started reading “Tygodnik” with the last page since the first year of Kisielewski’s presence in the magazine, could not remain without consequences. The author became popular and his feuilleton was treated as an article of first necessity. Not necessarily as a standard line of “Tygodnik”, but certainly as something that weighed on the journal and its readers’ approach to reality. Another consequence was a progressive process of the author’s image merging with the feuilleton convention. The word Kisiel, even in the first phase of “Tygodnik”’s history (until 1953), began to mean something – if not frivolous, then at least settling on the verge of a joke, something that one needs to respect and agree with, but can afford not to treat it completely seriously.

Reading feuilletons after several years have elapsed, especially when reading their broader selection¹¹, one cannot help the impression that they are arranged in a kind of history of modern times. The specificity of the time during which they were created meant that the author had to correct his intentions, what, at times, was barely useful. The feuilleton underwent censorship and, if only its extracts were subject to reservations and not the whole, the managing editor or the person delegated to contact the Main Office for the Press, Publications and Public Performances Control (Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk) prepared it for publishing. The fight for a publication was frequently paid dearly for. Even though the text appeared, it was not what it was supposed to be. And it was not just that it lost its edge. Sometimes, it even lost its sense when a key *pasus* or paragraph fell out¹².

Coupled with dynamism, Kisielewski’s courage itself cannot be treated as an asset. It is a feature defining the psychological profile and temperament, the function of vocation and determination, remaining continually at a high level. This cold emotion proved to be an indispensable condition for analysis; owing to it, he was able to observe the communist reality. Such state was well facilitated by remaining adamantly resistant, in fact waterproof, to diverse ideological and state influences – political or prestigious – being its emanation.

¹¹ The widest selection was published in the same year in which Kisielewski parted from „Tygodnik” – S. Kisielewski, *Lata pozłacane, lata szare*, Kraków 1989.

¹² *Sławna w cenzurze postać. Rozmowa z Mieczysławem Pszonem*, [in:] *Kisiel*, p. 190.

Having found a haven in “Tygodnik”, which was the point of support, even though frail, he did not have any common issues, connections or businesses with the system; he was not engaged in any games, did not invent any strategies except for writing in such a manner that, saving intentions and thoughts, would have been palatable for censorship. It was confirmed by the content and themes of his texts, and even if someone was not eager to read – the name of his department proved intentions and independence. By the time the magazine was taken away from the editorial board after the death of Stalin, his column had been called *Pod włos...* (Turowicz was thought to have come up with the name), then *Łopatką do głowy*. In 1956, after “Tygodnik” was resumed, he began with the signboard *Gwoździe w mózgu* which, six years later, was changed into *Głową w ściany*. After the forced silence (1968–1971), the name took the shape of *Bez dogmatu*, five years later – *Wołanie na puszczy* and, through *Widziane inaczej*, he ended with *Sam sobie sterem*.

With the variety of his reluctance towards the system, Kisielewski was not an oppositionist in the common understanding of the term. Communism, both in its ideological layer as well as in its practice, was absolutely unfamiliar to him. It was more primitive and absurd than scary though he personally experienced its terrors. Nevertheless, idiosyncrasies of this kind did not lead to either its rejection or the abandonment of the reality. He never actually thought about internal emigration – even when he was forced to it after the closure of “Tygodnik” in 1953. He was convinced that, regardless of the specific characteristics of the system, its repressiveness, insusceptibility to reforms and inability to autorationality, but also because of them all, it was necessary to try to influence the way of thinking of society and, as far as possible, decisions of the authorities.

Kisielewski’s attitude to communism was not only doctrinal, i.e. he did not question it and reject it simply because he had different views. He regarded it as *the dictatorship of blockheads*, stifling everything that escaped ideological spells and with a dramatically ineffective economic policy. He harboured resentment towards it also due to the fact that the practice of communism was not able to meet elementary needs of the society, perpetuated and intensified Polish weaknesses – *indolence, lack of initiative and entrepreneurship*¹³. Owing to the insurrectional and romantic tradition, which he did not value, the Polish could not assimilate the qualities and values of bourgeois societies – respect for work and benefits of the free market¹⁴. The supposition that the best way to oppose to communism – the weapon which

¹³ *Młodszy od niejednego trzydziestolatka. Rozmowa z Markiem Królem*, [in:] *Kisiel*, p. 134.

¹⁴ K.M. Ujazdowski draws attention to this fact in *Przedmowa (Preface)* to: S. Kisielewski, *Publicystyka przedwojenna*, Warszawa 2001, p. 12.

could defeat it without bloodshed – was economic freedom was the leitmotif of many of his speeches. In retrospect, such a project seems to be indisputable; however, if we go back in time, no further than to the decadent period of the People's Republic of Poland, it appeared to be rather infeasible for many. It was not due to the reluctance to a market economy. It stemmed more from the unawareness of what it was about, from ignorance whose source was the humanistic specificity of the Polish intelligentsia and from the belief that communism had to be faced with the help of political tools.

Scepticism, despite the support provided to the actions of the democratic opposition, and the distance towards 'Solidarity' inspired his pro-market and even capitalistic inclination. He saw the importance of this movement in his own way. He did not see there the will to destroy the system but rather to advocate for its improvement. The very existence of the Union, and especially the realisation of its demands, certainly democratised the system and made it more human. However, it did not change the foundations of the regime which had to *go bankrupt* since something that does not bring financial benefits – he thought – must fall; paradoxically, it could also prolong its poor existence. He believed that the causative agent of the erosion of communism was not the workers (as claimed by, among others, Giedroyc and "Kultura") but the middle class – *bourgeois civilisation* – barely tolerated by those ruling the People's Republic of Poland.

Reminding of Kisielewski's distinct standpoint from the early 1980s leads to a reflection on the position which he held in the circles within which he worked. From the post-communist perspective, it seems that he was an important part of "Tygodnik Powszechny" and more broadly – the circles of Znak. He was and was not at the same time. Some of his feuilletons, as well as his *Dzienniki*, prove how critically he found fascinations with French intellectual Catholicism manifested by "Tygodnik" and how sceptically his circles referred to the policy of Primate Wyszyński.

The publication of *Sprzysiężenie* ended with a mini-scandal which resulted in his quarterly absence in the weekly. Bearing that in mind, he decided on a second edition of the novel (in 1957) what raised new controversies. He presented, at times it seemed that he even manifested, his distinctiveness while being part of the magazine. He created its atmosphere and genre but, simultaneously, remained something separate. Since around the mid-1960s, the differences of opinion expressed by both Kisielewski and people exerting an influence on the ideological profile of "Tygodnik" were becoming more serious. Until the end of PRL, both parties minimised their importance, realising that Kisielewski had, in fact, nowhere to write

except for “Tygodnik” and, without him, “Tygodnik” would not be what it had been until then despite the autonomous position that he had in it.

The same situation can be observed when considering Kisiel’s attitude to religion and the Church. He did not accept anything that made up the message of the Church and even his own religiousness was not standard. According to some testimonies, he practised conscientiously; according to others – doubted. It happened that he was described as a catechumen while sometimes – as an agnostic. These opinions were peculiarly coupled by the belief of Primate Wyszyński regarding him as the best theologian in the team of “Tygodnik”. In matters of faith, as in other issues, he rated what he saw and experienced using the measure of his own sympathies, norms and beliefs.

The view that one of his leading features was defiance is very frequent in the memoirs devoted to Kisielewski. The principle of opposing was an identifying value for him; it established him in the community and public life. The opposition as such certainly did not create his attitude. He criticised to make changes for the better – to grant the right to present views which were the starting point for changes – and not for the mere fact of criticising. Certainly, it was difficult to him to find himself in the world of common beliefs. It is difficult to say whether it was a sign of rampant individualism; it is sometimes claimed that he exceeded the framework of the situations in which he functioned or, perhaps, the philosophy of style that he adopted; however, what remains beyond disputes is his unwillingness to conform, adapt.

In the early 1970s, Kisielewski said that the opposition of a buzzing mosquito is also an opposition¹⁵. He was of the opinion that under the conditions of subordination of everything to an ideological scheme of thinking and the tendency to equalise and disapprove of individuality, a distinct voice really counted, not necessarily the one that could be qualified as opposing; it was important that it was simply separate. He did not aspire to the role of a contestant of the system – he became such a person automatically believing that, in the civilisation of nodding and a forced unanimity, even a single voice behind which there are other than official views was crucial. He was annoying merely by his presence and constant, nagging reminding what was consistent with common sense and what denied it.

Kisielewski’s resistance was cold, free of the need for conspiracy and spectacular gestures. Strongly bound to the past, aware of the importance of the tradition gradually annihilated during the People’s Republic of Poland, he did not value – to say the least – its

¹⁵ S. Kisielewski, *100 razy głową w ściany*, Paryż 1972, p. 8.

insurrectional variant. His opposition fed more on what was at hand – the belief that, under the conditions of real socialism, any demonstrated difference or disagreement, regardless of the significance of what was questioned, undermined the fiction of a non-existent unity of the society and the guiding force. Of course, he could venture such a mode of behaviour having “Tygodnik” at his disposal. Without the magazine which partly shared his approach, he would not have been who he was; after all, “Tygodnik” would not have been what it was as well.

Taking care not to push Kisielewski into a stilted convention which disturbs the visual acuity and understanding of who becomes the object of such a trick, it must be said that not all his analyses and assumptions proved to be accurate. In an interview given to “Kultura” in 1978, he was sceptical about the possibility of an outbreak of social discontent, not attaching too much importance to the actions undertaken by the opposition¹⁶.

Ordinariness was the form of activity that he developed. By referring to small issues and trying to call things by their names, he drew attention to the abstractness of the system whose practice was an excellent contradiction of the theory to which it appealed at every step. In the name of the belief that socialism attempted in vain to solve problems non-existent in other political systems (free market democracies), he tried polemics and persuasion, and, as far as possible, setting things straight.

His attitude arose from individualism and independence, it was steadfast but, simultaneously, also realistic and positivistic; it may be said – self-restricting and focused on what could be done. It amounted to the belief that, although the system seemed to be monolithic and react repressively to insubordination, it left enough room where one could – hence, had to – stand up for important things. His passion about politics and realistic sense did not lead to crossing borders beyond which pragmatically understood politics became fiction and realism changed into opportunism. In 1953, when the greatest pressure was exerted on “Tygodnik” and before it was closed down, he harboured concerns if the compromise which, whether desired or not, the journal agreed to had not already been exceeded. A similar situation occurred in 1965. Realising that the post-October neo-positivism which, together with Stomma, he brought to life and justified is a barren task, he ended the adventure with the parliament¹⁷.

The profile of Kisielewski impels us to use another term – rather trite, however still useful – public spirit. Yes, he was a social activist in the sense that he lived and was inspired by what was happening around him and tried, aware of the shortage of measures at his

¹⁶ „Kultura” 1978, No. 3.

¹⁷ *Stańczyk Polski...*, p. 234.

disposal, to be present. It should be said – actively, courageously and wisely present. If it was difficult through a printed word controlled by censors, he decided to publish where their power did not reach or to say what he thought and felt.

Various materials gathered by the censorship prove that Kisiel was the most difficult author of “Tygodnik” for censors; and perhaps the most difficult case of all with which they had to deal. In the reports issued to each number, his name was almost always mentioned stating the faults he committed or was to commit and justifying the reasons for confiscations. The necessity to send the manuscript of the feuilleton in two or three copies to the censorship meant that it was read not only by the district censor in Cracow but was also passed on to someone higher. He was never treated preferentially. When “Tygodnik” was returned to the legitimate editorial board at the end of 1956 and Kisielewski became an MP, everything considered to be contrary to the partisan orthodoxy was cut out in the same manner both before and after that date. In 1957, the censorship interfered in over a hundred texts which “Tygodnik” intended to announce, in some cases, having even several objections to only one article. Kisielewski took the first place in this grim statistics. Objections were levelled against feuilletons and other texts, including speeches delivered during the election campaign. The passage citing Słowacki was removed from the feuilleton intended for No. 12 (1957) of the magazine. “A part of the comment in the context of which the undertone of the quoted extract of Beniowski is anti-government and anti-partisan has been removed”, wrote the censor. In another (No. 13 of the same year), a joke in which Kisiel argued that socialism was as nerves – no one had seen it but everyone felt it – turned out to be indigestible. This passage was deleted “due to the malicious note that it contains”¹⁸.

In the infrequent moment of despondency, he wrote that censorship filled him with disgust and broke his life, prevented from being a political publicist, fabricated, distorted and spoiled much of what he published. Taking into account the effects of its actions, he proposed to call it *a factory of false texts*. In fact, it was a hidden mystification or an institution pretending that authors wrote what they thought. Its task was also to accustom authors to formulating their thoughts in a manner acceptable to the executioners of words and their supervisors¹⁹.

¹⁸ Central Archives of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych), Records of the Main Office for Press, Publications and Public Performances Control, Catalogue No. 500, Vol. 2, k. 12 and 14.

¹⁹ S. Kisielewski, *Przeciw cenzurze – legalnie (garść wspomnień)*, „Zapis” 1977, No. 4, p. 59 ff.

The practices of massacring texts must be remembered not only when reading Kisiel's feuilleton writing but also everything else that had its first edition in PRL. The censorship office was abolished in 1990; however, the effects of its actions are like ghosts still alive.

One of the forms of defence against the killing of words and thoughts was printing outside the country²⁰. In 1977, he began to publish texts removed by censors from "Tygodnik" in "Kultura" in the column *Wolanie na puszczy*. It gave him the comfort of not surrendering to the dictate; nonetheless, it was not the only form of struggle with the word control. As far as he could, he publicly disclosed the extent and nature of its activities. The management of the censorship office in Mysia Street did not like this kind of behaviour and, therefore, devoted adequate attention to it. Censorship in communist Poland was not a secret institution; nevertheless, it made every effort not to disclose the manner and scope of its activities, and unclear criteria of allowing, or not allowing, printing. The arbitrariness of records was known to authors who were their victims. Yet, not everyone was aware of it. Realising that the dissemination of information on the nature of censorship could take the form of the postulate to civilise its practices, Kisielewski voiced this issue at every possible opportunity. The Polish Writers' Union was an appropriate forum for this, particularly its meetings which gave the possibility of presenting various issues on behalf of the whole group. In 1958, during the meeting in Wrocław, he quoted a list of more than 30 detained books, asking the Board to take steps about this matter and, what was not less painful the censorship office, to normalise and disclose the criteria for not admitting to print. He thought that, until it happened, the censorship would proceed arbitrarily and feel unpunished. It would remain a tool for enforcing loyalty. In February 1959, he delivered a speech on this issue in the parliament. His presentation, unprecedented at this level, was an example of understanding duties towards oneself, comprehending the sense of being an independent MP, but also a writer and, simultaneously, an example of a comment on the opinion about his supposedly extraordinary tendency to oppose. If the censorship as practice and a state institution is a fact, why do not we talk about it? Why its verdicts are *de facto* secret? In principle, it functions illegally, without a legal basis and, thus, why is it impossible to appeal against its decisions? For the first time since the existence of the PSL (the Polish People's Party – Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe) opposition waging battles for freedom of expression after the war, someone demanded freedom of speech in the façade parliament of the state governed by dictatorship. He pleaded against the omnipotence of the censorship office which had become

²⁰ In 1972 in Paris, he published a selection of his feuilletons, including those confiscated by the censorship (*100 razy...*).

the owner of words and thoughts. He returned to this matter after some time in 1960, informing MPs about the confiscation of interpellations submitted for publication in “Tygodnik” as well as about the confiscation of the response to the interpellation submitted by the Deputy Prime Minister. This led him to conclude that the unprintability of the Deputy Prime Minister (Piotr Jaroszewicz) was an incident that occurred for the first time since Mikołajczyk²¹.

This seems natural and possible but, in reality, it was extraordinary and peculiar. A few months after Kisielewski’s first parliamentary speech on censorship, in June 1959, it was debated by the leadership of the Main Office for the Press, Publications and Public Performances Control and the presiding board of the Association of Polish Journalists. In *the course of the discussion*, the following speakers expressed their opinions: Jan Brodzki, Deputy Head of the Press Office of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (KC PZPR), and Mieczysław F. Rakowski, Chief Editor of “Polityka”. Both speakers stressed the importance of the Office, fulfilling not only the role of “an administrative controller but also, in our conditions, of an important political and educational factor”²². And, thereby, (what a beautiful view!) a censor in the role of an *educator*.

Struggling for freedom of expression under the conditions of censorship, not allowing for publishing MPs parliamentary speeches and the authorities demonstrating disregard for the ‘Znak’ Association comprised of several people could be regarded as simply pointless. However, Kisielewski found something more than sense in this madness; he saw an evidence of loyalty in it. In February 1968, during his presentation at the forum of the Warsaw ZLP, speaking of the blockheads’ dictatorship, he laid claim to the national literary and historical legacy concealed from public awareness and demanded access to the literature emerging outside Polish borders; likewise, he reproved falsifying history. Soon after that, he was beaten up. Fists and boots of *unknown assailants* became the best possible comment on the regime he opposed to. Banned from publishing in March 1968, he disappeared from “Tygodnik” for a period of three years; the authorities wanted even to be sure that he did not write under a pseudonym.

²¹ *Stenogramy z Posiedzeń Sejmu PRL*, 4th session, 35th meeting, 12 February 1959, 6th session, 44th meeting, 17 February 1960, pp. 44–46 and 287–288.

²² “Biuletyn Biura Sekretariatu Komitetu Centralnego” 1959, No. 73, k. 20.

The disintegration of PRL was a time of bitter satisfaction for Kisielewski. In fact, history carried on exactly as he predicted and expected; his views began to take tangible shapes. However, enthusiasm was suppressed by scepticism with which he referred to the idea of the Round Table and the climate in which Poland regained its independence. Simultaneously, it turned out that he could not express his views in “Tygodnik Powszechny”, his *spiritual homeland*²³. The editorial board was of a different opinion in the matter of the current political situation in Poland. At the threshold of freedom and democracy, Kisielewski began to have difficulties with writing what he wanted in his column *Sam sobie sterem* in the journal which owed its legend to his demands for freedom. The censorship – dying, though still alive – and the editorial board, taking care to adapt the message of “Tygodnik Powszechny” to its political sympathies and interests, interfered in his feuilletons. Being surprised, he asked rather non-rhetorically: “How can one write here? It is impossible, one should stop!”²⁴. His parting from “Tygodnik Powszechny” was soothed by a flood of his books, both those that could not hitherto be released in the country as well as the new ones – created on the wave of appreciating his uniqueness.

Bearing in mind the assumption that he adopted more than forty years earlier, when beginning the adventure with political writing, also brought him sad satisfaction. He then (1936) announced an essay *Terroryzm ideowy* in “Bunt Młodych”²⁵ where he supported the idea of open thinking which protects against schematism, declared aversion to rigour and intolerance, disqualified the sense of mission and infallibility leading to the hostile treatment of anyone having different views. The message of this text, sounding rather current at the beginning of transition – anyway, nowadays as well – connected the old and new publicism, proving persistency of the author’s attitude. In the late 1980s, witnessing history, he was convinced that democracy cannot be reduced to procedures and that it would be defective if not fulfilled with values derived from the Christian tradition. This represented, or at least could represent, a motto for the media and standard of public debates and behaviour.

Not everyone, however, regarded these values as worthy of recognition and Kisiel did not have enough strength to bang his head against the wall.

²³ A. Micewski’s opinion, *Stefan*, „Tygodnik Powszechny” 1991, No. 40.

²⁴ [S. Kisielewski] Kisiel, *Złapał Kozak Tatarzyna*, ibidem 1989, No. 26.

²⁵ This text was reprinted in the volume *Publicystyka przedwojenna*.