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Anna Walentynowicz, Polish Provocateur Who Spurred Communism's Fall, Dies at 80

By **DOUGLAS MARTIN**

Anna Walentynowicz, a labor leader whose firing as a crane operator at the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk in 1980 touched off the strike that led to the founding of Solidarity and the unraveling of Communism in [Poland](#), died on Saturday in the plane crash in Russia in which Poland's president and dozens of Polish leaders were killed. She was 80.

Those killed, including President [Lech Kaczynski](#) and 95 others, were going to a commemoration of the Soviet massacre of Polish officers in the Katyn forest during World War II.

Mrs. Walentynowicz, who was in her early 50s when she came to prominence, was known as "the grandmother of Solidarity" and the "conscience of the movement."

A welder, then a crane operator, Mrs. Walentynowicz was a fiercely determined organizer whom her bosses considered a troublemaker. At a time when political opposition to the Communist government was sprouting throughout Poland, her dismissal on Aug. 7, 1980, ostensibly for participation in antigovernment activity, prompted a strike at the shipyard. The firing came just five months before her scheduled retirement.

After strikes erupted elsewhere in Poland, the government reinstated Mrs. Walentynowicz, as well as [Lech Walesa](#), the Solidarity leader, who had also been fired but returned to help lead Gdansk strikers. Mr. Walesa would later become president of a non-Communist

Poland.

The authorities also agreed, with only slight modifications, to worker demands for guarantees of free speech, pay raises and official recognition of the Solidarity union. Within two years the union would have 10 million members.

“If we didn’t press them to the wall before, we would not have got anything,” Mrs. Walentynowicz said of Solidarity’s threat of a general strike to win concessions.

One of Mrs. Walentynowicz’s provocations was publishing an illegal newspaper, copies of which she not only distributed to workers but personally handed to her bosses. Each December she was arrested for collecting money for flowers to memorialize 50 or more workers who had been shot down in 1970 by police officers as they protested food shortages.

Some have compared her role in Solidarity to that of [Rosa Parks](#), who became a catalyst for the American civil rights movement when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in 1955 in Montgomery, Ala. But others say she more resembled Crystal Lee Sutton, the union organizer whose stand on her worktable at a textile factory in North Carolina in 1973 was the inspiration for the 1979 film “Norma Rae.”

Mrs. Walentynowicz (pronounced vah-len-teen-OH-vitch) was born in on Aug. 13, 1929, in Rowne, in what was then Poland. She was orphaned during World War II and had to go to work as a maid at age 10. In 1950, she was hired at the Gdansk shipyards and trained as a welder. Because of her small size, she worked in the airless hulls of ships. She later learned to operate a massive crane.

She also joined the Communist Party, but only after first refusing to because she did not consider herself sufficiently worthy, according to a published biography.

“I was full of enthusiasm for the new Communist government and its slogan, ‘Youth building ships,’ ” she said in an interview with [The Christian Science Monitor](#) in 1989.

But she soon began to question Communism. She told [The Monitor](#) that she had been shocked to be told at a meeting of young Communists in East Berlin that party members should lie if convenient.

Mrs. Walentynowicz was further radicalized by the 1970 massacre, which set off civil disturbances that brought down the government of Wladyslaw Gomulka. Yet the reforms that had been promised by the government that replaced Gomulka’s “turned out to be

another lie," she told *The Monitor*.

In May 1978, Mrs. Walentynowicz helped set up independent labor unions to oppose state-sponsored ones. She also became associated with the Committee for Social Self-Defense, which emerged after increases in **food prices** set off riots in July 1976.

In his book "Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland" (1991), Lawrence Goodwyn wrote that Mrs. Walentynowicz enraged Gdansk supervisors in the summer of 1978 when, in her underground newspaper, she reported on their spending for luxuries.

Mrs. Walentynowicz was quoted as saying that she felt free to take political risks because she was a widow and because her son was in the military. Information about her survivors was unavailable.

When the authorities fired Mrs. Walentynowicz at the Gdansk shipyard in 1980, they said she had stolen candle stubs from a nearby graveyard to make new candles to mark the anniversary of the 1970 killings.

Solidarity went on to surge in popularity, and in December 1981 the government responded by imposing martial law. Mrs. Walentynowicz was convicted of antigovernment activities and given a suspended sentence. By 1989 Solidarity had triumphed in parliamentary elections, ending Communist rule.

A memorable moment in the 1980 Gdansk strike came when workers meeting with management refused to keep talking unless Mrs. Walentynowicz were present. The shipyard director sent his own sedan to pick her up. When she arrived, workers showered her with cheers and flowers.

"Surely at that moment she felt the connection more vividly than anyone else," Mr. Goodwyn wrote, suggesting that the emotions in the room were fuel for social action still to come. "But everyone there felt something."