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From “Rzeczywistość” to “Rondo”. How a communist hard-liners’ weekly discovered capitalism in the late 1980s

Abstract

The article presents an unusual metamorphosis of the weekly “Reality”, which from the propaganda tube of the so-called communist concrete transformed into a champion of “managerial” capitalism in the late 1980s of the XXth century. Against the background of the then opening of party discourses for economic liberalism, the article analyses explicit changes in the journalism of the “Reality” on economic topics in the years 1981–1990. It also follows attempts to save the weekly in a new formula under the name “Rondo” in 1989, which, however, did not achieve long-term success due to the liquidation of the party press group RSW “Press-Book-Movement”. On the basis of this specific case, the article highlights the issue of ideological erosion among proponents of “real socialism” in Poland and brings closer the sources of the concept of nomenclature capitalism.

Keywords: “Reality”, “Rondo”, party press, economic journalism, free market transformation, nomenclature capitalism, history of the Polish press.

Od „Rzeczywistości” do „Ronda”. Tygodnik betonowych komunistów na drodze w kapitalizm w latach 80. XX wieku

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono nietypową metamorfozę tygodnika „Rzeczywistość”, który z tuby propagandowej tak zwanego komunistycznego betonu przekształcił się w orędownik kapitalizmu „menedżerskiego” pod koniec lat 80. XX wieku. Na tle ówczesnego otwarcia się partyjnych dyskursów dla liberalizmu gospodarczego przeanalizowano wyraźne zmiany w publicystyce „Rzeczywistości” na tematy gospodarcze w latach 1981–1990. Śledzi także próby uratowania tygodnika w nowej formule pod nazwą „Rondo” w 1989 roku, które jednak nie odniosły długotrwałego sukcesu ze względu na likwidację partyjnego koncernu prasowego RSW „Prasa-Książka-Ruch”. Na podstawie tego specyficznego przypadku, artykuł naświetla zagadnienie erozji ideologicznej wśród zwolenników „realnego socjalizmu” w Polsce oraz przybliża się źródłom koncepcji kapitalizmu nomenklaturowego.

Słowa kluczowe: „Rzeczywistość”, „Rondo”, prasa partyjna, publicystyka gospodarcza, transformacja wolnorynkowa, kapitalizm nomenklaturowy, historia prasy polskiej.

From the national-communist propaganda tube to market enthusiasts

Although the popular mass movement of Solidarity had been effectively crushed by general Jaruzelski's Martial Law, Poland became an increasingly uncomfortable place for orthodox communist hardliners in the course of the 1980s. The nightmare they had experienced in 1980, when workers revolted against the party that was supposed to represent their own class, might have been over. Still, enthusiasts of Soviet style communism became a dying breed even amongst the members of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). Rather than defending ideological purity, the Jaruzelski regime preferred to highlight law-and-order issues and geopolitical necessities to legitimise its rule. All the party newspapers continued to read "Proletarians of all countries – unite" on the top of their front pages, but they hardly ever recurred to the Marxist-Leninist "classics" for answering questions of the present. Simultaneously, the underground press of the so-called "drugi obieg" (second circulation) effectively challenged the party's monopoly on public communication.

In these troubled times, the party weekly "Rzeczywistość" ("Reality") provided one of the last refuges for true believers of "real socialism". It owed its reputation as the voice of national-communist pig heads, and in fact its very existence, to the open confrontation between the party state and Solidarity, and even more to the infighting between moderates and hardliners within the PZPR in 1981. Far from being interested in the subtle intellectual challenges of Marxism, the paper promoted a narrow-minded version of communist "realism" that restricted itself to staunch loyalty to Moscow, vulgarised working-class sentiments, and blatant nationalism. After its establishment by national-communist party factions in May 1981, it was identified by many with the controversial "Grunwald" Patriotic Union led by filmmaker Bohdan Poręba, which became notorious for its outright nationalist and anti-Semitic positions. As Przemysław Gasztold-Señ has shown, there were no direct organisational links between "Rzeczywistość" and "Grunwald", but their ideological and political proximity was beyond question.¹ Throughout the 1980s, "Rzeczywistość" maintained a deep mutual aversion towards the liberal party weekly "Polityka", which was considered its counterpart in both ideological and cultural terms – although "Rzeczywistość" never succeeded to build a comparable opinion-making position in significant segments of society.²

Given the political origins of the paper, it comes as a surprise that "Rzeczywistość" ended up promoting "entrepreneurship" and so-called "menedżeryzm" at the end of the decade. In fact, pro-market orientations were not completely new to the Polish press then. However, they had rather been advanced by "Polityka" and other party liberals, as well as by the liberal wing of the opposition – in short: by the communist hard-liners' traditional enemies. It is, therefore, all the more astonishing that

¹ P. Gasztold-Señ, *Koncesjonowany nacjonalizm. Zjednoczenie patriotyczne Grunwald 1980–1990*, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Warszawa 2012, pp. 232–240.

² Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 237, 385f.

“Rzeczywistość” was relaunched under the new name “Rondo” in spring 1989, now advertising itself as a “weekly for enterprising people with initiative and spirit” (“Tygodnik dla ludzi przedsiębiorczych, z inicjatywą, z ikrą!”). In spite of this major change of the paper’s profile, the editorial staff survived this operation nearly unchanged. As a matter of coincidence, the first number of the re-branded weekly was published on 7 May 1989 – the day before the first issue of “Gazeta Wyborcza” appeared.³

“Rzeczywistość”’s unexpected metamorphosis from a stronghold of pig head communism to a tabloid devoted to market enthusiasm certainly was a fairly peculiar story. Nonetheless, it offers a telling example of how Polish communist elites opened up for capitalism in the second half of the 1980s. To my knowledge, it has remained unnoticed by cultural scientists and historians to date. This fits in with the general state of research on media culture in late socialist Poland: While the fascinating facets of the underground press have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, and rightly so, the state-controlled media of the time have been researched far less intensively. Yet, even a short glance at papers like “Polityka” or “Rzeczywistość”, “Gazeta Krakowska” or “Żołnierz Wolności” (“Soldier of Freedom”) reveals that they presented a considerable variety of perspectives and opinions. Although censorship was still in place and despite all other evident limitations, the official Polish press of the 1980s showed a range of pluralism that was impossible to conceive of in neighbouring communist countries, for example in the GDR. Notably, economic issues, such as the alarming level of Polish debt, or shortcomings of the badly needed economic reforms, were debated quite openly in commonly accessible economic papers like “Życie Gospodarcze” (“Economic Life”). Therefore, the state-controlled Polish press offers a highly interesting field for research into the conspicuous trend towards economic liberalisation during the second half of the decade. In tracking the way “Rzeczywistość” turned into „Rondo”, this contribution does by no means aspire to exhaust that issue. By confining itself to this specific case, it may, however, provide some initial insights and raise further research questions of wider scope.

The story of unexpected metamorphosis

To put it in marketing terminology, “Rzeczywistość” was a brand with a high recognition factor right from its first issue published in May 1981. The attention it attracted was not entirely positive, though. In times of severe paper shortages and heated debates on democratic “renewal” (*odnowa*), the sudden launch of a new weekly with a sizeable print run of 150.000 copies aroused suspicion and harsh criticism. The weekly’s straightforward anti-Solidarity, anti-intellectual, and anti-liberal profile provoked indignant reactions from Solidarity supporters and party liberals alike. “Polityka’s” columnist Daniel Passent publicly asked for the paper’s hidden patrons and remarked caustically: “A new paper comes out without any discussion and consultation of public opinion.

³ See “Zeszyty Prasoznawcze” 1989, No. 30/4, p. 155.

We will only have to wait until we see new private armies emerging and taking part in occupations, turmoil, and confederations [...].”⁴ Others went even further and prepared a fake front page of “Rzeczywistość”, which mocked the paper’s national-communist line with portraits of Brezhnev and Hitler and fictitious congratulations by “M. Bormann and Dr. Mengele”.⁵ The weekly was rightly seen as a mouthpiece of the anti-reform faction inside the PZPR headed by Stefan Olszowski and Tadeusz Grabski, who struggled for influence with the grassroots “horizontal structures” and the centrists. As we now know from the minutes of a conversation between Konstantin Rusakov and Erich Honecker in October 1981, “Rzeczywistość” was directly supported by the Soviets, who provided printing paper and protected the editorial staff against interventions by the Polish party leadership.⁶

The weekly’s first editor-in-chief Henryk Tycner had proven his ideological mindset by active participation in the infamous “anti-Zionist” propaganda campaign of March 1968.⁷ He accounted for the aggressive profile of the paper and its obsession with unmasking and fighting ubiquitous enemies. Much of the peculiar “reality” “Rzeczywistość” claimed to uncover was permanently endangered by various anti-communist and anti-Polish forces.⁸ After the temporary close-down of the paper during the first months of Martial Law, Tycner was replaced by Jerzy Pardus, who had been in charge of the Polish Socialist Youth Union’s magazine “Płomienie” (“Ardour”) before. Pardus and his new team sought to present themselves more respectably and abandoned Tycner’s ructious nationalism in favour of a more conservative line. In consequence, they even broke up with the “Rzeczywistość” discussion clubs (Kluby Wiedzy Społeczno-Politycznej “Rzeczywistość”), which had only been established a few months before by Tadeusz Grabski and the national-communist journalist Ryszard Gontarz.⁹

Despite this change in editorial staff and style, “Rzeczywistość” continued to cultivate favourite topics of the nationalist hardliners within the party. It showed a pronounced affinity to cold war clichés and did not miss any opportunity to expand on security threats evoked by American “imperialism” and West German “revanchism”. In doing so, it insinuated a closely coordinated German-American effort to revive “Prussian-Hitlerite

⁴ D. Passent, *Cyryl jak Cyryl, ale te Metody!*, “Polityka”, 6.6.1981, No. 23, p. 16.

⁵ Cf. P. Gasztold-Señ, *Koncesjonowany nacjonalizm*, *op. cit.*, pp. 242–245.

⁶ See *Hart und kompromißlos durchgreifen: Die SED contra Polen 1980/81*, ed. M. Kubina, M. Wilke, Geheimakten der SED-Führung über die Unterdrückung der polnischen Demokratiebewegung, Berlin 1995, No. 86, pp. 377–383, here pp. 378f. (Polish translation in: *Przed i po 13 grudnia. Państwa bloku wschodniego wobec kryzysu w PRL 1980–1982. Vol. 2*, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Warszawa 2007, No. 308, pp. 327–331, here p. 327).

⁷ Tycner continued to take pride in this episode of his journalist career until the late 1980s. – Cf. J. Eisler, *Polski rok 1968*, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Warszawa 2006, pp. 526, 546; B.N. Łopieńska: “Komu to służy?”, “Res Publica”, No. 3, March 1988, pp. 53–69, here p. 56.

⁸ Cf. P. Pytlakowski, *Betonowa “Rzeczywistość”*, “Polityka” 11.1.2003, No. 2.

⁹ See *Kluby Rzeczywistości*, “Rzeczywistość” 23.5.1982, No. 1, p. 2; J. Pardus, *Sposób myślenia*, “Rzeczywistość” 5.12.1982; No. 29, p. 2; cf. also P. Gasztold-Señ, *Koncesjonowany nacjonalizm*, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

doctrines" and to continue the centuries-old German "Drang nach Osten".¹⁰ Neither did it tire to attack the underground opposition activists as unpatriotic traitors financed by Western secret services and West German revanchist expellee organisations.¹¹ Apart from that, the paper's journalists devoted noticeable attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East, invariably adopting a decidedly anti-Israeli position that included comparisons between the Israeli "racist Zionist regime" and Nazi genocidal policies.¹² Przemysław Gasztold-Señ has pointed out close personal relations between Jerzy Pardus and Arabic press correspondents and embassies, which were apparently based on shared animosities towards "Zionists" and might even have paid off in temporary co-financing of "Rzeczywistość" by Arabic secret services.¹³ Anti-Semitic and anti-German attitudes recurred in articles on historical topics, too, as for example in Tadeusz Bednarczyk's dubitable accounts on mass scale Polish help for Jews during Second World War.¹⁴

With regard to economic issues, the weekly adopted a technocratic and law-and-order approach that was quite in line with the typical viewpoint taken by state and security apparatus officials of Jaruzelski's Martial Law regime. While paying lip services to the necessity of economic reform, "Rzeczywistość" kept its distance from serious reform discussions. Instead, some of the weekly's journalists and collaborators questioned central reform principles like self-management of state companies, and rejected the introduction of market mechanisms as "elements of voluntarism and anarchy".¹⁵ In their eyes, the main reason for the crisis was a lack of discipline and modesty on behalf of the workforce. Thus, the blame for the economic problems was shifted to the allegedly irresponsible behaviour of Solidarity and opposition leaders, who were accused not only of creating ferment and disorder at the working place, but also of raising undue popular expectations. The introduction of free Saturdays in 1981 was presented as Solidarity's greatest sin in this respect. As late as 1987, an extensive and fairly matter-of-fact article on Polish foreign debt did not miss the chance to remind its readers of who was to blame: "Much depends, however, on the employees themselves. On every level. On their solidity, their fidelity, their diligence. [...] This would be the opposite of allowing oneself free Saturdays during the deepest economic regress our country has seen after the war [...]"¹⁶

¹⁰ Cf. A. Barabaszy, *Kwestia niemiecka na łamach tygodnika „Rzeczywistość”*, "Przegląd Politologiczny" 2013, No. 18/4, pp. 133–153.

¹¹ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 138f.

¹² See e.g. T. Korab, *Horror*, "Rzeczywistość" 8.5.1983, No. 19, pp. 12f.

¹³ Cf. P. Gasztold-Señ, *Koncesjonowany nacjonalizm*, *op. cit.*, pp. 357–360.

¹⁴ Cf. D. Libionka, L. Weinbaum, *Bohaterowie, hochsztaplerzy, opisywacze. Wokół Żydowskiego Związku Wojskowego*, Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, Warszawa 2011, pp. 159–184.

¹⁵ See W. Przelaskowski, *Problemy funkcjonowania rynku w gospodarce socjalistycznej*, "Rzeczywistość" 17.10.1982, No. 22, p. 7; W. Pomykała, *Samorządność przedsiębiorstw*, "Rzeczywistość" 28.11.1982, No. 28, p. 16; *Ekonomista: Własność i motywacja*, "Rzeczywistość" 27.1.1985, No. 4, p. 15.

¹⁶ P. Olejnik, *Zadłużeniowa pułapka*, "Rzeczywistość" 4.1.1987, No. 1, pp. 1/8–10.

Even though “Rzeczywistość” denounced cases of corruption and mismanagement by state officials and management staff as well, it tended to judge them as instances of individual moral failure, not as systemic problems caused or at least favoured by the ineffectiveness of economic planning. Instead of arguing for entrusting individual decision-makers with more leeway, the weekly usually called for more control by the authorities.¹⁷ Likewise, “private initiative” was not presented as a possible way out of the crisis, but most often depicted in negative contexts of illegal speculation and black market activities.¹⁸ Characteristically, the most extensive text to be published on this topic was a multi-part “sensational reportage” (*reportaż sensacyjny*) by Mieczysław R. Olbromski, which invoked all sorts of stereotypes on private entrepreneurs (*prywatyzarze*): profiteering, illegal trading, moonlighting, “mercedesy”, beautiful young women, dolce vita and the like.¹⁹ But also less fictional articles carried a similar emotional load. In 1985, for example, “Rzeczywistość” reported with satisfaction on the revocation of the licences of privately-owned Polonia companies in Cracow, complaining that “the jargon of the social and economic margin of currency speculators and profiteers” had come to define the dubious activities of foreign-owned private companies in Poland.²⁰ Being more worried with defending the good name of the Polonia than with the realities of economic practice, the weekly offered little ideas for what should be done to get out of the crisis.

At the same time, the editors’ paternalistic perspective on economic issues conflicted inevitably with the staunch “left-wing”, pro-working class identity they claimed for themselves. This latent tension intensified when the tide for market-oriented economic reform rose in the second half of decade. Now, “Rzeczywistość” did not want to stay behind and opened up to notions it had been quite ill at ease with before: In February 1987, editor-in-chief Pardus asserted that „entrepreneurship” (*przedsiębiorczość*) had rightly become fashionable of late, “since the quick overcoming of social and economic sluggishness depends on it”.²¹ Evidently, this endorsement did not come easy: Pardus complaint that the notion was often exclusively associated with private activities, while he advocated to encourage entrepreneurial spirit also in the “socialised”, i.e. state-controlled sector.

But also private business was presented in a different light now: On the occasion of the Poznań international fair in June 1987, “Rzeczywistość” came up with a “Let’s talk about business edition”, which was entirely devoted to economic issues. Besides articles highlighting the important role of the fair and the long trade tradition of the city

¹⁷ See e.g. K. Krzyżanowski, *Brakoroby na ławie oskarżonych*, “Rzeczywistość” 3.3.1985, No. 9, pp. 1/5.

¹⁸ See e.g. E. Olbrych, *Handel dla ubogich, handel dla bogaczy*, “Rzeczywistość” 20.6.1982, No. 5, p. 3; J. Bielicka, *Kto nie boi się fiskusa*, “Rzeczywistość” 2.1.1983, No. 1, p. 5; P. Lisiewicz, *Sto twarzy spekulacji*, “Rzeczywistość” 9.1.1983, No. 2, p. 8f.

¹⁹ M.R. Olbromski, *Prywatyzarze*, “Rzeczywistość” 19./26.12.1982 (episode 1), No. 31–35, No. 19, 8.5.1983 (episode 20).

²⁰ J. Ratajczak, *Koncesje w Krakowie odbierają*, “Rzeczywistość” 27.1.1985, No. 4, p. 7.

²¹ J. Pardus, *Wędzido?*, “Rzeczywistość” 8.2.1987, No. 6, p. 2.

of Poznań, the issue featured a complaisant interview with Ignacy Soszyński, the founder of the most successful Polonia company “Inter-Fragrances” and probably the wealthiest man in Eastern Europe at the time.²² Again, in an obituary for Soszyński, who died in September 1987, Hubert Kozłowski praised the deceased entrepreneur as a “fascinating” man of success, and defended him against various attacks and interventions by the press and the authorities. Such attacks, in Kozłowski’s opinion, were to be traced back to “frenzied and embittered advocates of egalitarianism”, who preferred to “sustain big bureaucratic structures for sharing the shortages” instead of allowing people to increase their wealth – in other words: to “representatives of a backward and ossified way of thinking that is harmful to Poland [...]”.²³

Along with the significant change of the paper’s attitude towards private business, the positions on economic reform voiced on its pages grew more courageous, too. In 1987, the small group of professional economists who expressed their views in “Rzeczywistość” was joined by Waław Wilczyński, a declared advocate of radical reform. In an interview published under the headline “We will have to swallow this bitter pill”, Wilczyński insisted: “We simply cannot afford our current standard of living”, and argued for a quick liberalisation of prices and a decentralisation of the economy, even if this would force Poles to tighten their belts for two or three years.²⁴ Such calls for radical implementation of market-oriented reforms were frequently accompanied by the well-known lament over the population’s lack of reason and its limited readiness to prosperity losses, which were still presented as the main obstacles to rational reform. Leonard Siemiątkowski, a former chairman of the National Bank of Poland, took the same line and remarked that “a bigger part of society does not realise the difficulties we have to overcome on the way to economic stabilisation. We want to live easy and comfortably, and want to drive out of the crisis with our Fiat 126p, to which every Pole claims a right. In this situation, we have to tell numerous people in our society openly that they mistook both the way and the means of transport.”²⁵

Facing the difficult economic realities

However, it was also the weekly itself that had to face increasingly difficult economic realities. Namely, “Rzeczywistość”’s militant roots turned out to be a persistent burden that weighed heavily on the paper’s sales. Already during Martial Law, the returns had exceeded the sold copies, and the split within the core readership after the breakup with the “Rzeczywistość” discussion clubs certainly did not help to regain the former

²² See *Rachunek za myślenie*. [Interview with Ignacy Z. Soszyński.] “Rzeczywistość” 14.6.1987, No. 24, p. 5.

²³ H. Kozłowski, *Pożegnanie inżyniera Soszyńskiego*. “Rzeczywistość” 25.10.1987, No. 43, p. 13.

²⁴ *Musimy „zjeść tę żabę”*. [Interview with Waław Wilczyński], “Rzeczywistość” 29.3.1987, No. 13, pp. 1–4.

²⁵ L. Siemiątkowski, *Polityka małych kroków?*, “Rzeczywistość” 3.5.1987, No. 18, pp. 1/7.

splendour.²⁶ The composition of the weekly's dwindling readership hardly looked promising: According to a non-representative poll carried out in March 1987, half of the surveyed readers were older than 50 years, 60% were members of PZPR or the block parties, and only 13% were women.²⁷ Widespread ostracism prevented "Rzeczywistość" from attracting both new readers and new journalists. In letters to the editors, even loyal readers admitted that they did not reveal to their friends or colleagues that they read "Rzeczywistość". Editor-in-chief Pardus acknowledged substantial problems in finding new collaborators and complained about what he called a "total psychological pressure" in journalist milieus.²⁸

The highly negative image of the weekly resulted in a steady decline in readership, and also in a significant loss of relevance to the general public. When government spokesman Jerzy Urban derided Pardus' editorials on economic policy for their lack of orientation in May 1987, he stated maliciously: "«Rzeczywistość» is still appearing, watching out for some readers." Writing under pseudonym in the satirical magazine "Szpilki", Urban commented: "A few years ago, it was proper to polemicise against this paper. This trend is gone for long. No one is interested in blasting "Rzeczywistość" anymore. [...] The weekly is dying in oblivion – a natural dead, not a violent one."²⁹ As a matter of fact, few Poles wanted to know how former communist hardliners tried to cope with the changing political situation – the paper was simply regarded as an anachronism.

This turned out to be a major problem, when the weekly's publisher recognised the signs of the times, too, and started to assess his portfolio in categories of economic success. As all other party newspapers, "Rzeczywistość" was published by the "Workers' Publishing Cooperative Press–Book–Distribution" (Robotnicza Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza "Prasa–Książka–Ruch", RSW), a party-owned holding that clearly dominated the Polish press market and was a monopolist in press distribution. Since 1973, this press holding had been the main source of income for the PZPR's budget, but the task to meet the party's financial demands became more and more difficult in the course of the 1980s.³⁰ As it became apparent that RSW would fail to do so in 1988, its management board contemplated substantial cuts amongst its press titles. Rumours spread that 70 out of more than 270 current papers and journals would be closed down, or continued with a lower print run or frequency. Apparently, the editorial staff of "Rzeczywistość" was highly alarmed by these plans. In an editorial article, Jerzy Pardus invoked the "educational

²⁶ See J. Pardus, *Siła stereotypu*, "Rzeczywistość" 2.5.1989, No. 6, p. 2.

²⁷ *Ankieta*, "Rzeczywistość" 15.3.1987, No. 11, p. 10.

²⁸ J. Pardus, *Siła stereotypu*, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Klakson [Jerzy Urban], *Zmierzch*, "Szpilki" 28.5.1987, No. 22, p. 14.

³⁰ See *Wydział Propagandy KC PZPR: Notatka w sprawie wzrostu zysku RSW oraz wpłat do budżetu partii, 16.7.1988* [in: A. Bečka, J. Molesta, *Sprawozdanie z likwidacji majątku byłej Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej*, Sopot–Warszawa 2001, annex 102, pp. 719–724; cf. D. Stola, *Partia i jej finanse* [in: D. Stola, K. Persak (ed.), *PZPR jako machina władzy*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk–Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Warszawa 2012, pp. 26–54, here pp. 47f.

and cultural functions" of the press, "which cannot always consist in printing hardcore pornography, horoscopes, or pre-war love stories", and pointed out that even in the West, the press is not financed exclusively through sales.³¹

At this point, RSW's management did not decide to discontinue "Rzeczywistość", but tried to raise profitability by establishing new cash cows like "Pan", the Polish version of "Playboy", whose first issue appeared in October 1987. Nevertheless, the necessity for loss-making journals to fight for a sustained market position had become perfectly clear. It must have been in this uncomfortable situation, that Pardus and his colleagues decided to reinvent their paper head-on. Searching for new audiences, which could replenish the dissipating milieu of communist pigheads the weekly had once been addressed to, they discovered the Western concept of "yuppie". In their perception, yuppies' belief in individual career inside the framework of the given system had much in common with their own long-standing appeals to professionalism, responsibility, and commitment to hard work. In a programmatic article from November 1988, Piotr Olejnik concluded: "If we want to be successful as a state and society, [...] the rebellious "Polish yuppie" will be simply indispensable. We have to promote him and offer him conditions to develop."³²

And yet, the "yuppies" the editors of "Rzeczywistość" had in mind, were not to be found amongst private business newcomers in the first place, nor in foreign-owned companies. As became apparent from the way the weekly addressed the issue in the following months,³³ it represented first and foremost the point of view of the managerial staff in state-owned enterprises, who were about to open up for some sort of nomenclature capitalism. Notably, it was rather the manager (*menedżer*) than the free entrepreneur, who served as the archetype for "Rzeczywistość"'s approach to market economy. The paper definitely preferred business professionals operating in established frameworks to someone waging own capital in start-up ventures. In fact, the essence of the weekly's reorientation towards "menedżeryzm" was probably captured best in a cartoon by Jerzy Sowiński. It showed an apparatchik being asked by his son: "Daddy! If they have to do this capitalism here, will we at least be the exploiters?..."³⁴ Although the idea behind this ostensibly naive question was presented in the guise of humour, the cartoon articulated an insight that certainly haunted the minds of many members of the economic and administrative elites at the time. In adapting to this trend, "Rzeczywistość" hoped to find a future for itself, too.

³¹ J. Pardus, *Zamęt wśród dziennikarzy*, "Rzeczywistość" 31.5.1987, No. 22, p. 2.

³² P. Olejnik, *Yuppie po polsku*, "Rzeczywistość" 13.11.1988, No. 46, p. 3.

³³ See e.g. the highly sceptical articles on preferences for foreign investments and on newcomer entrepreneurs registering their business: B. Janicki, *Z głowy na nogi... zagraniczne*, "Rzeczywistość", 18.12.1988, No. 51, p. 9; K. Barankowa, *Czas przedsiębiorczych*, "Rzeczywistość" 12.2.1989, No. 7, p. 11f.

³⁴ Cartoon by Jerzy Sowiński. "Rzeczywistość" 29.1.1989, No. 5, p. 1.



Rys. Jerzy Sowiński

The attempts of saving “Rzeczywistość”

The weekly's first step to reinvent itself was the change from broadsheet to tabloid format in February 1989. This change did not only involve the introduction of a completely new layout, but, more importantly, came along with a shift of the main thematic focus. Instead of politics, “Rzeczywistość” devoted considerably more space to lifestyle and self-help topics now. While the front page featured eye-catching pictures and headlines, which advertised stories on divorces, luxury prostitution (“Confessions of a Moscow courtesan”), or impotence (“How to rescue virility?”), the following pages offered gossip columns, horoscopes, credit offers, and health advices. In line with this editorial environment, the subsequent sessions of the Round Table negotiations were covered with articles dwelling on the biorhythms of the participants.³⁵ Furthermore, the redesigned weekly featured articles on an initiative to organise the directors of state-owned factories into the “All-Poland Managers’ Association”, and reported on professional trainings for prospective managers.³⁶

³⁵ See *Biorytmy uczestników okrągłego stołu*, “Rzeczywistość” 19.3.1989, No. 12, p. 19; 26.3.1989, No. 13, p. 19; *Biorytm prawdę ci powie*, “Rzeczywistość” 2.4.1989, No. 14, p. 19.

³⁶ See Z. Lempe, *Menedżer po polsku*, “Rzeczywistość” 5.3.1989, No. 10, p. 12; K. Grzegorzówka, *Wypełnianie luki. Prawdziwi businessman powinien wiedzieć co się opłaca...*, “Rzeczywistość”

Yet, owing to its controversial past, "Rzeczywistość" was all but an attractive brand. In the last number, which came out in April 1989, its editor-in-chief conceded that "in spite of many attempts, we did not manage to overcome the negative stereotype".³⁷ Therefore, the weekly was finally discontinued and relaunched under the new title "Rondo". Its old antagonist "Polityka" commented sarcastically: "Because of economic reasons (returns higher than print run), "Rzeczywistość" does not appear any more. Its sponsors have already ceased to appear earlier."³⁸ Apart from the satisfaction the close-down evoked amongst "Rzeczywistość"'s traditional adversaries, it did not have tragic consequences for most members of its editorial staff. They found shelter with the new "weekly for enterprising people with initiative and spirit", which was de facto a continuation of "Rzeczywistość".

The old and new editor-in-chief Jerzy Pardus described the mission of *Rondo* as follows: "We address our paper both to those, who already know how to do business, but would like to have a look, how others are doing, and to those, who only just began and go through the hard school of putting their idea into practice [...]" Pardus did not hide which side he saw his paper on: "We will not only promote enterprising people, Polish managers and businessmen, but also defend them – against envy, blockades of their ideas, and also against making them scapegoats for failed moves and operations. That is why we establish close cooperation with the Managers' Association, organisations of directors, employers, artistic and professional associations." And finally, he stated even more frankly: "Our weekly wants to [...] help the enterprising, support with advice and defend progressive managers of socialised companies."³⁹

This editorial line was reflected by numerous reports, interviews, and comments illustrating the hard job of directors and promoting the associations they were organising themselves in. One of the headlines conclusively summarised the tendency of these articles: "Protect the directors".⁴⁰ Likewise, "Rondo"'s coverage of the campaign preceding the first semi-free parliamentary elections on 4 June 1989 was quite revealing: While the weekly kept its distance from what it called the "nomenclature of Solidarity", it openly promoted candidates who presented themselves as independent businessmen, but usually had good connections to the PZPR establishment or to the "Grunwald" movement, like Edward Brzostowski from Dębica, Wojciech Kornowski from Poznań, or Henryk Gański from Bytów.⁴¹ Although these candidates were without a chance in the elections, "Rondo" remained faithful to the socio-political group they represented. After "Gazeta Wyborcza" had exposed irregularities during the transformation

26.3.1989, No. 13, pp. 6/9; *idem*, *Specjaliści od ryzyka*, "Rzeczywistość" 16.4.1989, No. 16, p. 16.

³⁷ J. Pardus, *Ostatni numer*, "Rzeczywistość" 30.4.1987, No. 18, p. 2.

³⁸ Cited after "Zeszyty Prasoznawcze" (1989), No. 30/4, p. 154.

³⁹ [Jerzy Pardus], *Od redaktora*, "Rondo" 7.5.1989, No. 1, p. 2.

⁴⁰ J.P., *Chronić dyrektorów*, "Rondo" 21.5.1989, No. 3, p. 6.

⁴¹ See [Jerzy Pardus], *Od redaktora*, "Rondo" 28.5.1989, No. 4, p. 2; S. Sikorski, *Senator spoza klucza*, "Rondo" 7.5.1989, No. 1, pp. 14f; K. Barankowa, *Z piasku bat ukręcił*, "Rondo" 14.5.1989, No. 2, pp. 14f; S. Sikorski, *Prywatna kampania*, "Rondo" 28.5.1989, No. 4, pp. 12f; Izba... Menedżerów. [Interview with Wojciech Kornowski] "Rondo" 4.6.1989, No. 5, p. 5.

of the state holding “Igloopol” into a joint-stock company, the weekly reacted with outrage at this “witch-hunt against the managerial staff” and devoted a series of articles to refute the accusations.⁴² “Igloopol” was a major player in the Polish food industry and had been the first state concern to be transformed into a joint-stock company. As it turned out, the fact that its chairman Edward Brzostowski served as deputy minister of agriculture at the same time, had a significant impact on this process.⁴³

It is worth noting, that one of the few new journalists who joined “Rondo”'s editorial staff was Andrzej Nałęcz-Jawecki. Nałęcz-Jawecki had been the first chairman of the Polish Federation of Consumers (Federacja Konsumentów) established in 1981 and editor-in-chief of the federation's weekly magazine *Veto*.⁴⁴ However, his participation in “Rondo” did not result in observable attention for consumer issues – the weekly was conspicuously less concerned with consumer goods prices or quality than with the business success of their producers. Presumably, it was rather Nałęcz-Jawecki's later experience that was of interest for his new colleagues: After the dissociation of *Veto* from the Consumers' Federation, Nałęcz-Jawecki had turned the paper into a tabloid magazine publishing sensational articles, serialised erotic novels, and photographs of pin-up girls. As it turned out, a similar line was to be followed by “Rondo”. Notwithstanding Pardus' former declarations about the “educational and cultural functions” of the press, he did not hesitate to publish a serialised novel by Adam Cempel (“Anita”), the educational values of which were at best debatable, or to organise a contest called “Miss Striptiz '89”. In the latter undertaking, which was said to be geared towards the preferences of “big managers and businessmen”, Nałęcz-Jawecki served as head of the jury.⁴⁵ Without elaborating in more detail on the representation of gender roles in “Rondo”, it is evident that its editors held quite retrograde views on their target group. They evidently assumed that “enterprising people” were predominantly men, while women were assigned merely decorative functions. Consequently, when even translations of essays by US neoliberal economist Milton Friedman and his wife Rose failed to attract crowds of new readers,⁴⁶ “Rondo” also resorted to printing photos of scantily dressed girls.

In spite of all these efforts, the audience of the paper remained marginal. Its print run had decreased from 130.000 copies during Martial Law to 30.000 in 1989 – with only 20.000 copies being actually sold.⁴⁷ In August 1989, the board of RSW, which

⁴² [Jerzy Pardus], *Od redaktora*, “Rondo” 27.8.1989, No. 17, p. 2; J. Wolny, *Igloopol Story?*, “Rondo” 13.8.1989, No. 15, p. 10; 27.8.1989, No. 17, p. 9; 3.9.1989, No. 18, pp. 4f.

⁴³ Cf. J. Tittenbrun, *Upadek socjalizmu realnego w Polsce*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 1992, pp. 143f., 151.

⁴⁴ Cf. M. Mazurek, M. Hilton, *Consumerism, Solidarity and Communism. Consumer Protection and the Consumer Movement in Poland*, “Journal of Contemporary History” 2007, No. 42/2, pp. 315–343, here pp. 331–333.

⁴⁵ B.W., *Superstriptiz '89*, “Rondo” 7.5.1989, No. 1, p. 23.

⁴⁶ See M. Friedman, R. Friedman, *Spojrzenie na wolność gospodarczą*, “Rondo” 13.8.1989, No. 15, pp. 8f; No. 16, 20.8.1989, pp. 8f; No. 17, 27.8.1989, pp. 8f.

⁴⁷ Cf. the figures given by Pardus, *Siła stereotypu*; and W. Sonczyk, *RSW “Prasa–Książka–Ruch” w procesie transformacji rynku prasowego w 1989 roku*, “Rocznik Historii Polskiej Prasy” 2010,

was under pressure to restructure the party's press concern as soon as possible, listed "Rondo" amongst the papers to be liquidated in the first instance. An internal report stated that "despite the changes in the profile and the implementation of promotional efforts, the weekly did not manage to win a considerable number of readers". In the first half-year of 1989, the subsidies amounted to 33 million złoty. For that reason, RSW's board of directors proposed to discontinue "Rondo" at the end of 1989 at the latest.⁴⁸

But again, this verdict was not the last word. This time, the weekly's editors were forced to prove their entrepreneurial spirit for their own cause. They developed a concept for a joint-stock company that would publish "Rondo" from January 1990 onwards, and invited their readers to participate in it. Presenting the idea under the luring slogan "Everybody can participate in the "Rondo" company", the editors maintained that three different associations of managers and employers (in fact, the same ones which had been promoted by the paper before) had already declared their readiness to take part in the company. But apparently, in spite of the editors' promise that "investing in "Rondo", you will not risk anything"⁴⁹, this offer did not arouse sufficient interest. In any case, the idea of a public company, which would include lobby organisations as well as readers, did not materialise. Indeed, a new company for publishing "Rondo" was registered in December 1989, but the share of both the weekly's readers and private entrepreneurs in it was at best marginal: In the company named Przedsiębiorstwo Produkcyjno-Wydawnicze "Rondo-Graf" sp. z o.o. (Production and Publishing Company "Rondo-Graf" Ltd.), the main shareholders were the party's RSW and a handful of state-controlled companies and institutions, amongst them "Igloopol" S.A. (which seemingly returned the favour of "Rondo"'s benevolent coverage), the state forest authority, and the Socialist Youth Union's tourist office "Juwentur".⁵⁰ In short, good connections to the nomenclature directors of these companies seemed to have been more important than entrepreneurial spirit.

The "private" company "Rondo-Graf" did not only continue to publish the weekly in 1990, but also made a last attempt to raise its attractiveness by enhancing its paper and print technique.⁵¹ "Rondo", now appearing as a "weekly for enterprising people", was changed into a four-colour magazine, which offered a rather curious mix of portraits of Polish businessmen, political commentaries criticising the economic policy of the Mazowiecki government, and sensational articles reporting, for example, on the peculiar "business" of a Warsaw pimp.⁵² The magazine's variegated content was completed by two new elements, namely frequent advertisements by state-controlled companies like PZU, and editorial contributions that obviously promoted certain products. This might have helped "Rondo" to make end meets for some more months.

No. 13/1–2, pp. 309–331, here p. 321.

⁴⁸ See W. Sonczyk, *RSW "Prasa–Książka–Ruch" w procesie transformacji*, *op. cit.*, p. 321f.

⁴⁹ *Każdy może przystąpić do spółki „Ronda”*, "Rondo" 10.9.1989, No. 19, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Cf. A. Bečka, J. Molesta, *Sprawozdanie z likwidacji*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁵¹ See J. Pardus, *Miesiąc przerwy*, "Rondo" 26.11.1989, No. 30, p. 2.

⁵² See S. Sikorski, *Stajnia pana Bolka*, "Rondo" 1.–8.4.1990, No. 13, pp. 4f.

But with the adoption of a law regulating the liquidation of PZPR's press holding by the Polish parliament in March 1990, the fate of the paper was finally sealed. According to the law's regulations, all subsidiaries of RSW founded after August 1989 were to be liquidated.⁵³ This applied to the "Rondo-Graf" company as well, which had to close down the weekly in the summer of 1990.

So, the last issue of "Rondo" in June 1990 spelled an end to a long story of decline of a paper that had begun as a major counterpart to both Solidarity and the liberal party press, and ended up as an insignificant advertising rag. Without overstressing the example, the self-transformation of "Rzeczywistość" from a militant national-communist propaganda organ to a tabloid promoting nomenclature capitalism can be read as a specific, but telling case study into the dynamics of ideological disintegration of late socialism in Poland. Both "Rzeczywistość"'s self-proclaimed "leftist", pro-working class position, which had been in conflict with authoritarian and paternalist inclinations from the beginning, and its narrow-minded nationalism were successively supplanted by an ostensibly liberal, pro-market outlook. Instead of fighting for ideological convictions, the weekly's editorial staff opted for the consistent representation of the interests of the social and political milieu of the party bureaucracy. Therefore, "Rzeczywistość" and "Rondo" accompanied the communist apparatchiks and directors when they embraced the idea of nomenclature capitalism and turned into "managers" in order to secure their social position. And yet, the failure of the paper's own short-lived transformation was symptomatic of the non-viability of nomenclature capitalism in the Polish circumstances, where strong counter-elites stemming from the anti-communist opposition movement inhibited large-scale transfer of socialised property into the hands of the former party elites.

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