

# A Zen Circle Behind the Iron Curtain: Identity Formation of the First Polish Zen Buddhists\*

PRZEMYSŁAW SKRZYŃSKI

*Jagiellonian University*

**Abstract:** The increased interest in Buddhist practice, developing in the United States and Europe since the 1950s, has also affected Poland and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Initially limited to the academic community—linguists and philosophers—in the second half of the 1960s, on the wave of fashion and the development of hippie ideas, interest in oriental religions, especially Buddhism, penetrated into Polish artistic and countercultural communities. In this article I analyze the activity of the pioneering Zen Buddhist community, the ‘Zen Circle’, operating in the Polish People’s Republic, which began its activity in the early 1970s. The Buddhist group was the subject of concern for the Security Service (secret police), one of whose tasks was to investigate churches, religious communities, and religious associations. In the article I discuss the charges brought against Buddhists by the Polish United Workers’ Party authorities and the political police, as well as the forms of surveillance to which they were subjected, including using a network of secret agents operating inside and periodic

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\* The article is an abridged version of two articles published in Polish (Skrzyński “Realizacja Dharmy Buddy w nurcie budownictwa socjalistycznego społeczeństwa”; *idem*, ‘Działalność wspólnoty buddyjskiej “Koło Zen”’) and has been expanded with new information, based, among others, on the analysis of source materials from the Philip Kapleau Papers located at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

forms of pressure, such as detentions, searches, and confiscation of illegal writings published by Polish Buddhists. Polish authorities also feared the group's ties to its main leader, Philip Kapleau, who, as an American, was seen as a 'representative of an imperial power'. Kapleau's visit in 1975, which initiated the group's formal development, was also the first visit by a Buddhist teacher to Poland for missionary purposes. The work places the group in the broader context of minority religious communities operating in the Polish People's Republic and how Buddhist adepts functioned 'behind the Iron Curtain'.

**Keywords:** Zen Buddhism, Buddhism in Eastern Europe, Buddhism in Poland, Rochester Zen Center, Philip Kapleau, illegal religious communities

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On June 4, 1989, the first partially free elections were held in Poland after World War II. They were groundbreaking and led to the fall of the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) in Poland.<sup>1</sup> A month earlier, on April 1, the first scientific session in Poland devoted to Buddhism was held at the Theological Seminary of the Verbist Fathers in Pieniężno, northern Poland. Andrzej Janusz Korbel (1946–2015)—a representative of the Zen Buddhist Association 'Sangha', the first legalized Buddhist community in Poland, was invited as a speaker. There, Korbel presented the beginnings of organized Buddhist practice in Poland:

Back in the 1970s, when I submitted an application for registration of a Buddhist religious association, during a conversation with an official at the provincial level, I heard the following words: 'You write

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<sup>1</sup> On the circumstances and significance of the 1989 elections in Poland, see, for example: Pakulski, 'The Breakthrough', 523; Ash, *The Magic Lantern*, 131–56.

about your tradition in your application, but you have no tradition!<sup>2</sup>

The Buddhist's answer certainly did not convince the official, but it illustrates well the engagement and sense of mission to which the members of the Polish Zen Buddhist community were committed at that time:

This tradition is so old that it has no beginning. When did man first ask himself the question about the meaning of life and the cause of death? When did he first feel compassion and sorrow for his sister or brother suffering? When did he hold a wildflower in his hand?<sup>3</sup>

Korbel then told the gathered missionaries that Buddhism has always been in Poland, the 'real current', which is the essence of the practice, flows continuously, and 'the cultural layer is only a passing façade'.<sup>4</sup>

But the real current had only been flowing for less than fifteen years. In August 1975, during the *jukai* ceremony, a group of Polish Zen adepts (at that time still unnamed), thanks to the alleged succession of their teacher, Philip Kapleau (1912–2004)—the heir to the teachings of Hakuun Yasutani (1885–1973), himself the heir to the teachings of Harada Daiun Sogaku (1871–1961) and back through the patriarchs of the Japanese, Chinese, and Indian lines, down to Mahākāśyapa and Śākyamuni Buddha—officially became part of the great tradition. A tradition, let us add, that operated illegally in Poland until the early 1980s and, in the opinion of the state authorities, was a potential threat to social order.

### From Occultism to Zazen: 'The Studio' as a Melting Pot of Religious Ideas

The beginnings of the formal practice of Buddhism in the Zen

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<sup>2</sup> Korbel, 'Narodziny Buddyzmu Zen w Polsce', 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

tradition in Poland date back to the late 1960s and a group of visual artists from Katowice: Henryk Waniek (born 1942), Andrzej Urbanowicz (1938–2011) and his first wife Urszula Broll-Urbanowicz (1930–2020). This city located in southern Poland was one of the main industrial centres during the Polish People's Republic, known for its numerous coal mines. In 1960, the Urbanowicz family adapted the attic of the nineteenth-century tenement house on Piastowska Street for the purposes of a painting studio, which became a meeting place for friends united by artistic interests and fascination with esoteric traditions of the East and West. For the above-mentioned artists, as well as for other artists closely associated with 'the Studio', art was a starting point for broader intellectual themes, including philosophical and religious issues. In the first period, due to the availability of printed materials and knowledge of the German language, the group's religious interests were directed towards the tradition of Western esotericism: alchemy, anthroposophy by Rudolf Steiner, and especially depth psychology by C. G. Jung, who was at that time almost unknown in Poland.

Interest in Jung led the group to explore the meanings of the *Bar do thos grol* [Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State], the English translation of which was received by Henryk Waniek in 1966 or 1967. At that time, there were only a few books in Polish dealing with the topic of Buddhism. The group expanded its knowledge on the basis of English and German editions sent from abroad or found in antiquarian bookshops. But the key moment in the history of the first period of formation of the Zen community was another book that Waniek received from his friend from Berkeley, California in August 1967.<sup>5</sup> It contained a copy of *Three Pillars of Zen* by Philip Kapleau. First published in 1965, the book was the first in-depth presentation of the practical dimension of Zen Buddhism written by a Westerner. This instructive value of the book was a novelty for the group that had previously been familiar with the topic only intellectually:

This book offered an opportunity we had been missing. It told us

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<sup>5</sup> Urbanowicz, 'Dotknięcia. Ślady', 53.

how to practice zazen, how to position the body, what to do with the mind. The moment came when there was no longer any excuse, it was necessary to sit down in zazen. That's how it started. Crossing your legs, straightening your spine. Pain slowly giving way to comfort. At first, I didn't sit in zazen regularly, but it was this irregularity that convinced me to do this practice the most, because I noticed the beneficial differences.<sup>6</sup>

At the end of December 1971, a community of about twelve people was formed and began a cyclical, weekly zazen practice, conducted according to the instructions contained in the group translation of *Three Pillars of Zen*. Almost from the very beginning, the leader of the group was Andrzej Urbanowicz—a charismatic and extremely active host of 'The Studio'. The group took the name 'Buddhist Community in Poland'. The group functioned as an illegal religious association, operating without the consent of Office for Religious Affairs.<sup>7</sup>

In 1973 the group started publishing activities, which were de facto illegal. From 1946 to fall of PZPR in Poland, each published publication was supervised by the governmental censorship agency: the Main Office of Control of Press, Publications, and Shows (Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk). Polish Buddhists began publishing their own translations of source Buddhist texts and inaugurated the periodical magazine *Droga* [The Way], later *Droga Zen* [The Way of Zen], a newsletter of 'friends devoted to the realization of the Buddha's Heart-Mind/Dharma/in everyday life'. The newsletter, published from 1974 to 1978, contained texts translated mainly from English and German related to the Buddhist tradition, most often Zen. The group also began to translate, pub-

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<sup>6</sup> Urbanowicz, 'Serpentyny', 331.

<sup>7</sup> Office for Religious Affairs (Urząd do Spraw Wyznań) was a unit of the state administration of the Polish People's Republic, established in 1950, whose task was to regulate the state's relations with religious associations (primarily the Catholic Church), but in fact worked towards social atheism. For more about the status of religious orders in Polish law after 1949 see Ordon, 'Modification Of The Legal Basis Of The Activity Of Religious Orders'.

lish, and distribute books, including a Polish translation of Kapleau's books (*Three Pillars of Zen* and *The Wheel of Death*).

The publishing activity of the community was possible thanks to Urbanowicz's acquaintance with one of the Katowice censors, with whom he had cooperated since the late 1960s in publishing his legal catalogues of artistic works and other material. 'I noticed that [the censor] is an alcoholic and that it is easier and faster to arrange anything when [...] I buy him some vodka'.<sup>8</sup> In the early 1970s, Urbanowicz came into possession of a roll of Tibetan woodcuts, which, thanks to his relationship with a responsible official, he was able to reproduce in a low-volume manner in the official printing house located in Katowice at Ligonja Street: '...for the employees of the copying plant, I was a friend of the censor, and therefore a reliable person. When, after some time, I came with an order [for printing materials of the Buddhist community], there were no problems with the implementation'.<sup>9</sup> Urbanowicz states that initially the circulation of published texts was from 200 to 500 copies, and then in some cases it exceeded 1,000. In total, by the end of the 1970s, twelve issues of *Droga* and *Droga Zen* were published, as well as a dozen or so books signed as publications of the 'Buddhist Community in Poland'. Interestingly, Urbanowicz's principle was to break the anonymity of the underground press and publish an editorial footer, which included not only the names of the magazine's editors (Andrzej and Urszula Urbanowicz), sometimes the names of translators and collaborators, but also the editorial office's address, which was their place of residence. A community leader recalled: 'Weren't we afraid? Of course. Transporting prints from [the printing house at] Ligonja Street to the Studio has always been incredibly stressful for me. The only thing that kept me going was the belief in the deep meaning of what I was doing'.<sup>10</sup> Saṅgha materials, intended for internal use, quickly began to be distributed outside the narrow circle of 'friends of the Studio'. Many future Buddhists were contacted through acquaintances in

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<sup>8</sup> Urbanowicz, *Trzy Filary Czego?*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

countercultural circles: those associated with artistic circles, alternative theatre, and, above all, hippie circles.

In early August (1–5) 1974, at Urbanowicz's summer cottage on Kamieńczyk Hill in central Poland, a group of over eleven Zen adepts began Poland's first informal (without a qualified teacher) meditation retreat, modelled on the *sesshin* rules practiced in Japanese temples.<sup>11</sup> Nine people completed it. In addition to weekly 'sittings' in the studio on Piastowska Street and periodic group zazen, the community also began organizing introductory workshops accessible to outsiders.

At that time, the secret police, the Security Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (commonly known as SB), which cooperated with the Office for Religious Affairs, had been collecting information about the saṅgha from the very beginning of its activity, suspecting its members of a number of political and social offenses (see below).

On January 6, 1974, Urbanowicz sent a three-page letter to the Rochester Zen Center, run by Philip Kapleau. In it, the sender described the activities of the modest group (including translation work), described his physiological and mental difficulties in Zen practice, and asked for correspondence management of the group, as well as for the possible arrival of Kapleau 'or other person qualified in Zen'.<sup>12</sup> In the response sent in March, the teacher provides the addresses of the publishers of his books, as well as the affiliated centre in Hamburg, suggesting contact details. He refuses to declare regular correspondence, but informs that he plans to come to the German Federal Republic in 1975. 'The world has really matured for Buddhism and it makes my heart happy to know that the Buddha's Way is beginning to take root in Poland',<sup>13</sup> writes Kapleau in the conclusion of the letter. In one of the following letters, the teacher accepts an invitation to visit the Polish group in the summer of the next year.<sup>14</sup>

On August 22, Philip Kapleau arrives in Warsaw, accompanied

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<sup>11</sup> Sar, 'Historia pierwszej buddyjskiej', 9.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from A. Urbanowicz to P. Kapleau, 6 I 1974, 2. (PKP)

<sup>13</sup> Letter from P. Kapleau to A. Urbanowicz, 26 III 1974, 2. (PKP)

<sup>14</sup> Letter A. Urbanowicz to P. Kapleau, VIII–X 1974, 1. (PKP)

by Toni Packer (1927–2013) as a teacher, and two monitors from the Rochester Zen Center. Three days later, the teacher conducts a workshop in the Studio, now Zendo in Katowice, attended by about a hundred people, and then a four-day session (August 28–September 1) for selected twenty members of the community. Earlier, during the *jukai* ceremony of accepting the Ten Precepts by a lay believer, more than twenty people became Buddhists and committed to practicing in the lineage led by an American teacher. On September 26–27, 1975, the first general meeting of the community was held, which then took the name ‘Zen Circle: Buddhist Community’. A management board was appointed and the first version of the statute was adopted. The group initiated the creation of the first Buddhist community operating outside the administrative structure of the Polish People’s Republic. But their ambition was to develop and to function fully legally.

### **The Way to Register the ‘Zen Circle: Buddhist Community’**

In the Polish People’s Republic of the 1970s, the main decisions regarding religious policy rested with the PZPR leadership—the First Secretary of the PZPR Central Committee, Edward Gierek (1913–2001, position held from 1970–1980), the Political Bureau of the Central Committee and the Central Committee Secretariat. On behalf of the party, the central role in the policy of the state’s relationship with the Church and religious associations was played by Stanisław Kania (1927–2020)—Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (1971–1980), member of the Politburo of the Polish United Workers’ Party (1975–1981), head of the party (1980–1981) and government Team for Religious Policy—a politician who also supervised the activities of the Security Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The administrative body of the religious policy of the Polish People’s Republic was the Office for Religious Affairs (UdSW), established in 1950, whose territorial managers were voivodes. The last religion registered in Poland (1967) was the Unity of Polish Brethren, a Christian anti-Trinitarian community referring to the Arian tradition from the sixteenth century.

Among several forms of legalization of communities in the Polish People's Republic, from the beginning of its efforts, the Zen Circle applied for the form of registration as a *registered association*, thanks to which, after registration, they would have legal personality, own property, and could establish branches throughout the country.<sup>15</sup> The two formally necessary conditions to be met were the submission of a list of at least fifteen members and a statute. The first version of the statute, governing the Buddhists' internal administration, was submitted in mid-1976.<sup>16</sup>

One of the main goals of the post-war authorities in Poland, adhering to Marxist-Leninist ideology, was the full secularization of social life. The PZPR programmatically aimed to eliminate religion (especially the Roman Catholic Church) from the social and public space and to remove the religious element from the minds of citizens and replace it with a materialistic worldview.<sup>17</sup> The Zen Circle doc-

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<sup>15</sup> Godlewski and Jabłoński, *Prawo a religia*, 88.

<sup>16</sup> The document has not been preserved in any archive collecting official documents of that time, but a copy of it was attached as an annex to the master's thesis (submitted in 1986) of a student of the Higher Officer School of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, educating staff of the Security Service.

<sup>17</sup> These actions characterize the entire period of PZPR rule in Poland, from 1944 onward. In 1952, a new constitution was adopted, establishing the separation of religion and state. The actual consequences of this move were the establishment of far-reaching dependence of religious organizations on the decisions of the government, especially the Catholic Church. This resulted in such actions by the authorities as approving (or not) priests, confiscating church property and lands, persecuting and arresting priests, internment of the highest hierarchy of the Catholic Church (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński), closing Catholic charities (e.g., Caritas), and the editorial offices of most periodicals (see Davies, *God's Playground*, 435; Dudek and Gryz, *Komuniści i Kościół w Polsce*). In the document-instruction on the forms of operational work of the Secret Service from 1960 we read: 'The clergy of the Catholic Church, with its centralized organization, significant support base, and significant influence in various layers of our society, constitutes the main anti-socialist force within the country' (Marecki, Musiał, and Zając, 'Wprowadzenie', 19). From that time, to the end of 1980s, a

ument was formulated to meet the expectations of the secular state. The most interesting points formulated in the document are goals of daily individual and group zazen practice. The statute highlights both the positive effects in terms of religious and personal development, as well as social benefit: achieving the unification of body and mind, maintaining mental and physical balance and health, achieving focused attention in all activities, shaping an attitude of affirmation of everyday life and a positive social attitude, implementing Ten Precepts, achieving the experience of Awakening, understood as the realization of Buddha Nature within oneself (point II, §6). The attitudes developed during practice also served political and systemic purposes. The submitted statute included a point that was controversial among some members of the group:

*Point II, §5*

By actively joining the trend of building a socialist society based on progressive Polish traditions, it strives to embody universal brotherhood in the internationalist spirit, to promote knowledge about man in order to improve him by using the full human potential, to

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form of surveillance of religious denominations in Poland was the creation of a network of secret agents recruited from among the faithful or priestly ranks (e.g. Isakowicz-Zaleski, ed., *Książa wobec bezpieki na przykładzie archidiecezji krakowskiej*; see also the review essay Szporer, 'Review: *Managing Religion in Communist-Era Poland: Catholic Priests versus the Secret Police*'. In 1961, the Sejm of the Polish People's Republic passed a law that abolished religious education in schools (they were reintroduced to schools in 1990). The development of the first Buddhist community in Poland marked a turning point in Catholic church-state relations and the government's overall attitude toward religion. This was largely influenced by the social consequences of Karol Wojtyła's (John Paul II) election as pope (see, e.g., Bernstein, 'John Paul II'). The policy of liquidation and repressive action was not limited to the Catholic Church. Between 1945 and 1989, particularly severe repression was inflicted on the Greek Catholic Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as the Methodist Church, the United Evangelical Church, the Union of Seventh-day Adventist Congregations, and the Polish Catholic Church (see Michalak, "Na drugim planie").

work for progress and peace, and all this through self-realization, i.e., realization of the Buddhadharma in everyday life.

Urbanowicz, the leader of the community and the author of the statute, argued during the Buddhist meeting: ‘if a clause is not included in the statute that we cooperate for the development of socialism in Poland, we have no chance of registration’.<sup>18</sup> Despite that, the application was rejected due to ‘lack of social demand’—in accordance with Art. 20,<sup>19</sup> the establishment of a religious association was not in line with social benefit. This was an argument that was difficult to dispute and was very often used by the Office of Internal Affairs to block hypothetically politically harmful initiatives. Officials based their belief on information provided by the Security Service, which had become interested in the activities of Polish Buddhists since 1974.

The organizational unit of the Security Service responsible for operational investigation, surveillance and the fight against the ‘reactionary’ nature of Churches and religious associations operating in the Polish People’s Republic was Department IV of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Dep. IV of the MIA). When analysing the plans of Dep. IV, we rarely come across provisions relating to religions other than Roman Catholic Christianity, which was subject to the most extensive surveillance activities. If they were noticed, they served functional purposes: they were used to weaken the influence of the Church. In Poland, before the creation of the Zen Circle, Buddhism

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<sup>18</sup> Based on e-mail correspondence with Jan Sar, February 16, 2023. In the author’s archive.

<sup>19</sup> As we read in the then applicable document regarding the basis for legalizing associations: ‘The registration authority may, by means of a duly justified decision, refuse an application for registration for the reasons indicated in Article 14 or because the establishment of such an association does not meet the requirements of social demand, and may also make its consent to the establishment of the association conditional on changes to the statute’ (Regulation of the President of the Republic of Poland of 27 October 1932 - Law on Associations, Dz.U. 1932 nr 94 poz. 808, Article 20).

in the sense of practiced religion did not exist and the theoretical knowledge about it in society was negligible. An important factor that influenced the administrative and political attitude towards the followers of Buddha's teachings was the almost complete ignorance of the representatives of the militia and security services regarding religious assumptions, ethics, the nature of the organization and the attitude of members of the Polish Zen community to political reality. The information they collected was not favourable to Buddhists: 'This belief consists in avoiding work, praying and taking drugs, and not recognizing any legal regulations',<sup>20</sup> we read in one of the first pieces of information recorded in the secret police documentation. Despite source materials of the Zen Circle successively acquired during operational activities, Buddhism was a kind of abstract intellectual puzzle for the officers in charge.

Security Service officers carried out operational work using the so-called personal Sources of Information (OZI): every person who expanded the knowledge of Security Service officers about the 'past, current or future state of operational work'.<sup>21</sup> In a narrower sense, this term included a number of types of collaborators of the ministry: secret collaborators (Tajny Współpracownik, TW), operational contacts, consultants, and official contacts. The secret collaborators were managed by so-called 'handlers', operational officers of the Security Service (SB) whose goal was to ensure that the secret collaborator behaved and acted in a manner that achieved the purpose for which they were recruited. The basic documentation of this collaboration was contained in materials collected in the agents' files, primarily in the personal files and work files of the secret collaborator. To date, only a few complete files of secret collaborators of the Security Service who were members of Polish Buddhist communities have survived.<sup>22</sup> The number of individuals collaborating or

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<sup>20</sup> AIPN Bu 00612/2205 t. 1. Official note from Sgt. Czesław Chodźko, Masłów, March 26, 1975, card 54.

<sup>21</sup> Musiał, *Podręcznik bezpieki*, 348.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to be aware of the limitations and dangers posed by an uncritical or one-sided reading of the 'files'. When adopting the security service's

under surveillance in various casework is unknown. The scale of the service's interest in Buddhists is evidenced by the fact that over the course of three years, at least fifty-eight members and supporters of the Zen Circle from Warsaw alone were brought under the agents' attention.<sup>23</sup> The number of individuals listed in the community membership lists obtained by the Security Service is several times greater. Over the forty-year history of the Polish People's Republic, the records of the Security Office, and later the Security Service, were subjected to numerous manipulations, including repeated destruction. Włodzimierz Suleja, a Polish historian of the period, estimates that the gaps in the materials, caused by the ministry's mass destruction of files, can be estimated at sixty to eighty percent of the entire collection.<sup>24</sup> Various surviving materials indicate that in the 1980s, at least two operations were conducted against Polish Buddhists ('Unia' [Union] and 'Ewangelści' [Evangelists]), whose records were destroyed at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Security Service also owed its effectiveness to other forms of surveillance of figures or groups: secret inspection of correspondence, observations, interviews, and other material. Most of these forms of surveillance were used against Polish Buddhists in the 1970s.<sup>25</sup>

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perspective, it's important to remember the principle of limited trust, meaning that these documents were written from the perspective of a specific value system, for specific purposes (variable depending on the time and the ministry that prepared the documents), using specific, hermetic language. It's also possible that some of the phrases attributed to the informant in the documentation were entirely or partially created by the officer.

<sup>23</sup> AIPN 0247/91, List of persons interested in Buddhism undergoing the case of the codename 'Buddha', no. 31, 808, pages 1 and 2.

<sup>24</sup> Suleja, 'Żłudny czar teczek', 111.

<sup>25</sup> The evidence supporting this is abundant; let's mention some. Andrzej Urbanowicz's correspondence was intercepted by the Secret Service since at least 1969. The document certifying the commission's destruction of correspondence intercepted as part of the 'Budda' case (concerning Urbanowicz) provides dates for 178 letters. See AIPN Ka, 036/2020, List of documents 'W' regarding the case codenamed 'Budda', Katowice, January 15, 1977, page 92. Correspon-

The militia and security services had known about the activities of Buddhists in Katowice and a related group in Kielce (central Poland) since September 1974, but it was not until late 1975 that they acquired the first secret collaborator operating within this hermetic environment. Recruited agent ‘Herman’ was a close friend of above-mentioned Andrzej Korbel.<sup>26</sup> He signed the commitment

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dence of other members of the Zen Circle was also intercepted, especially those suspected of involvement in the political opposition (e.g., H. Waniek, W. Eichelberger). Urbanowicz remained under constant surveillance by the secret service, spied on by neighbors in the tenement building where the Studio was located, who collaborated with the Secret Service (see, e.g., AIPN Ka, 036/2020, Official note after a conversation with citizen Zygmunt Musiał, Katowice, January 21, 1976, page 47). The operational file devoted to Henryk Waniek (AIPN Ka, 036/1, vol. 1 and vol. 2) contains very detailed records of daily activities, photographs taken from a secret location, and, for example, accounts of wiretapped telephone conversations. Tomasz Hołuj, who headed the Buddhist Association ‘Sangha’ in the early 1980s, spoke to me about numerous ‘planted individuals’ or even ‘Secret Service agents’ participating in individual zazen sessions in order to gather information about the nature of these meetings. Members of the Zen Circle were repeatedly interrogated by the citizens’ militia or the Secret Service regarding their activities in the Zen Circle (Urbanowicz, Hołuj, Sencercz, Lis, Janowski, and others). The purpose of most interrogations was not only to obtain information and intimidate them, but also to potentially recruit them to collaborate as secret collaborators, surveilling the Buddhist community.

<sup>26</sup> His case is interesting and typical of a number of recruited agents. In the process of developing the mentioned Buddhist candidate as a secret collaborator, no materials were obtained that would incriminate him in a legal, political, or moral sense, but in the course of the activities, a quite obvious thread emerged that could be used in a compromising context: ‘In the workplace, [the candidate] did not admit to being a follower of Buddhism. He hides this fact from his surroundings so as not to become an object of ridicule and malice from his colleagues’, wrote a secret police agent in operational materials (AIPN Ki 0024/5301. Official note regarding the Candidate for TW (Secret Collaborator), Kielce, October 14, 1975, page 2, card 51). After talking to him as a candidate for a secret collaborator, he noted: ‘You could feel that he was embarrassed to

and was recruited to cooperate by the Security Service in November 1975. In total, six meetings were held with him, during which he provided general information about Buddhism, the activities of the Zen Circle, Korbek, and the secret construction of a centre for retreat practice on the Kamieńczyk hill in central Poland. Based on the preserved operational materials, we can say that the number of collaborators belonging to the Zen group and reporting on the composition, activities, and intentions of the community at various times can be estimated at several dozen people, of which at least a few were members of the group's management board.

Initially, the reason that certainly attracted the interest of the secret police and effectively delayed the registration of the Zen Circle was the unclear image of the attitude of Buddhists to the issue of public order, primarily (since many Buddhists came from counter-cultural circles) the attitude to drugs. In the document "Summary of the Registration Questionnaire No. 31805 codename "Buddha" from 1977, we read, referring to the Katowice group of Buddhists: 'the only doubts are raised by the suspicion of drug use during the meetings'.<sup>27</sup> In later years, with the growing wave of social discontent and the emergence of illegal democratic opposition organizations, such as the The Workers' Defense Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR).<sup>28</sup> In the '80s, during the 'Solidarity' movement,

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reveal his affiliation with the Buddhist denomination'. A sense of shame could be the basis for blackmail. Revealing 'Herman' as a Buddhist could have a negative impact on many areas of his activity: professional, familial, and religious. AIPN Ki 0024/6301 Analysis of personnel and work files of TW pseudo 'Herman', Kielce, August 21, 1981, page 1, card 64.

<sup>27</sup> AIPN Ka, 036/2020, Summary of the Registration Questionnaire nr 31805 codename: 'Budda', January 13, 1977, card 94.

<sup>28</sup> The Workers' Defense Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR) was a Polish opposition organization active since September 1976, providing assistance to those repressed as a result of the June 1976 events. On June 24, 1976, the Polish government decided on a drastic price increase. A wave of spontaneous strikes, involving a total of approximately 80,000 people, swept across the country. Workers' strikes in Radom, Ursus near Warsaw, and Płock were particularly

the interest of the security services was focused on the political views of the community and relations with the central centre (in this case with Rochester Zen Center) located in the ‘imperialist country’.

Aware of surveillance by the secret police, Buddhists continued to strive to formally legalize their activities, writing, amending, and creating subsequent applications and statutes. Meanwhile, knowledge about Buddhism and interest in the activities of Polish practitioners was growing, which is reflected in the statistics of participation in introductory workshops and lectures conducted by the Zen Circle, as well as in the lists of ordinary and extraordinary members. The issue of legalization was becoming more and more urgent. Therefore, the group’s management circle decided to try to organize a meeting between government decision-makers and a teacher of the Polish community, Philip Kapleau, who was planning his third stay in Poland for the summer of 1980. The discussion was formally initiated by Kapleau, who on June 27, 1980, sent a direct letter to Minister-Manager of the Office for Religious Affairs Jerzy Kuberski (1930–2007), asking for the possibility of scheduling a meeting to discuss the future of the Polish Zen community.

From the perspective of the topic we are interested in, the most important issue is a number of concepts developed in the letter which seem to meet the expectations of the ministry: the desire to build a secular, essentially atheistic philosophy, which would not only become a real alternative for the youth who were increasingly gravitating towards Catholicism, but also it would also develop their positive, creative potential, so far effectively used by the institutions of the Church. Kapleau suggested the Buddhist alternative:

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damaging to the government. These demonstrations were brutally suppressed by the Citizens’ Militia. Repression against protesters included prison sentences, detentions, and dismissals. Established in 1976, KOR united and institutionalized some opposition groups to create a platform for helping those repressed as a result of their participation in the demonstrations, providing care for those imprisoned, their families, and those who lost their jobs. The KOR’s activities covered three main areas: financial aid, legal and medical assistance, and informing the public about repression. About KOR see Lipski, *KOR*.

The goal of Zen training is to achieve ‘salvation’ during this life, [achieved] through one’s own efforts, and not reserved for the posthumous reality or received by the graciousness of an imaginary God (...) People practicing Zen do not seek comfort in prayers or cries addressed to some God, nor to Buddha understood as God. Zen practice has nothing to do with this dualistic approach and is neither dogmatic nor fanatical.<sup>29</sup>

Further in the letter, Kapleau argued that the Buddhist doctrine is consistent with the scientific image of the world, that the religion is not organized in hierarchical structures (the practice is supervised by a qualified teacher, a Zen Master), and that the relationships between the teacher and students are exclusively spiritual in nature. The argumentation presented in the letter was rational and convincing. Kapleau seemed to suggest that the potential of Buddhism lies in, among others, the absence of pushiness and intellectual discretion, the skilful use of which could, referring to the market paradigm of Stark and Bainbridge, compete with the increasingly attractive offer of the Catholic Church. In other words, Buddhism could—with the tacit consent of the authorities—play a formative role, but not in the sense of a traditional system of implementing the ideology, but in the form of an attractive alternative education.

A decision was made to accept a Buddhist teacher by the management of the Office for Religious Affairs and the date of the meeting was set for August 26, 1980.

### **Meeting of Philip Kapleau with the Minister-Manager Jerzy Kuberski**

The situation was difficult for the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party at that time. This was influenced by the constantly decreasing standard of living of Poles and structural impairment, which historian Krzysztof Podemski defines as ‘depriving

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<sup>29</sup> Letter from P. Kapleau to J. Kuberskiego, Rochester 27 VI 1980, page 3. (PKP)

society of the ability to decide on its own fate, depriving it of the right to be a subject of social life, as well as total dependence on total power'.<sup>30</sup> Huge inflation and economic collapse deprived Poles of access to basic goods and medicines. According to research on social moods conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion and Program Studies, in 1978 the authorities lost the trust of Poles by about twenty percent, and a year later by another one to two percentage points. In the summer of 1980, in reaction to food increases the first strikes broke out in Lublin (East Poland) and immediately afterwards on the Coast (Gdańsk and Szczecin). The result of the socio-economic situation in Poland was the decline of social values, anti-social behaviour, alcoholism, a dramatic decline in production, and the demoralization of youth (alcoholism and drug addiction among young people were some of the main problems). However, this also began—again quoting Podemski—'the process of organizing society, transforming the masses into a civil society'.<sup>31</sup>

Wojciech Eichelberger (born 1944), one of Kapleau's closest Polish students, wrote to the teacher that the government wants young people:

...to return to work and school and to regain some confidence in the economic, political, and social structure in which they live; an ideology that would have nothing to do with either the Church or the state. Recently [the authorities] even tried to involve the Church in cooperation in these matters. (...) However, as the Church sees it, the only way out [of the situation] would be to change the entire political and social system (and they are right). This creates a situation in which the Church plays the role of a powerful silent opposition, provides a lot of support for influential and ever-growing dissident movements and attracts more and more young people, not because of their religious beliefs but rather because of their political and patriotic ones.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Podemski, 'Prasa "Solidarności" w oficjalnym obiegu w 1981 r', 234.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from W. Eichelberger to P. Kapleau, Warszawa 23 VII 1980. (PKP)

The position of the Catholic Church was extremely strong at that time in Poland. As a result of the election (October 1978) of Karol Wojtyła as Pope (John Paul II) and his pilgrimage to homeland in June 1979, the general degree of religiosity of Poles began to vary and was at a level of ninety percent,<sup>33</sup> of which a significant percentage were young people. Moreover, according to research, some of those who had never belonged or had drifted away from the Church had then begun to return to it. In these circumstances, the Polish government tried to find an ideology, or at least a set of values, that could be effective and attractive enough, especially for young generation. Regarding the issue of the Catholic Church in the context of the upcoming meeting, Eichelberger suggested:

Rosi, you must be extremely careful and not let them play themselves, or Zen, against the Church. We can exist without the government's will, but we probably could not exist without the tacit consent of the Church. I would avoid saying anything that could antagonize us [toward] the Church and the people belonging to it. (...) In the specific Polish situation, we must build the belief of both the government and the Church that we [Buddhists] are working for them (or at least not against them).<sup>34</sup>

On August 26, 1980, a meeting took place. The visit of a Zen teacher who came to the central headquarters of the Office for Religious Affairs in priestly robes was an extremely unique situation, especially at a time when the ministry's work was largely focused on relations with representatives of the Catholic Church.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Zaremba, 'Zimno, ciepło, gorąco', 23.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from W. Eichelberger to P. Kapleau, 23 VII 1980, page 3. (PKP)

<sup>35</sup> We have two materials reporting this meeting. The first is a note prepared by a Security Service officer, Second Lt. Pilarczyk, based on an interview with TW codenamed 'Artist' (undisclosed), who is a member of the Zen Circle. The 'Artist' was closely associated with the management board of the Buddhist community, and the direct source of his knowledge about the meeting was a personal conversation with the head of the group—Andrzej Korbel. The second source is

As early as the beginning of the meeting, Minister Kuberski ‘expressed surprise that so far this confession [Buddhism] has not been legalized’<sup>36</sup> and added that ‘he is personally interested in the practices of “Zen” because he knows that these practices lead to the improvement of a person’s external and internal life’.<sup>37</sup> The minister talked about the impression made on him by the ‘article about Erich Fromm and Buddhism’,<sup>38</sup> and also mentioned his visit to Mongolia, where he had contact with the local version of ‘lamaism’ (Tibetan Buddhism). The conversation also touched upon the topic of World War II and the suffering of the Polish nation (during his first visit to Poland, in August 1975, Kapleau visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum).<sup>39</sup> Then, Kapleau and Korbel presented to the minister the doctrinal assumptions of Zen Buddhism, the principles of the community’s activities and the goals that the group set for itself after legalization. They considered the most important to be the dissemination of authentic Zen teachings among society, the creation of several more centres where workshops could be held, and the development of publishing activities. When asked by Kapleau whether the minister was familiar with the content of the letter sent, Kuberski replied affirmatively: ‘Yes, and our answer is positive. We support your request [to legalize Buddhist activities]’.<sup>40</sup>

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Korbel’s handwritten note, which records the most important decisions made during the meeting (it is located in the Philip Kapleau Archives, deposited in the Duke University library).

<sup>36</sup> AIPN Ka, 085/12. Note from the meeting of lieutenant colonel A. Pilarczyk with TW pseudo ‘Artist’, Katowice, September 29, 1980.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Kuberski probably had in mind the article ‘Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism’, published in Polish translation for the first time in 1966.

<sup>39</sup> As a side note, let us add that the events that most significantly influenced Philip Kapleau’s worldview, and indirectly his choice of the Buddhist religion and his dedication of the latter part of his life to it, were his participation in the trials of German and Japanese war criminals of World War II in Nuremberg (1946–1949) and in Tokyo (1946–1947). He participated in them as a court reporter (in Nuremberg, as head of this section).

<sup>40</sup> ‘Meeting with Min. Kuberski’—A. Korbel’s notes from the meeting with

Other recorded fragments of the conversation prove the exceptionally positive attitude of the official towards the Zen teacher. 'We wish you development and many devoted students, and when you come to Poland again, please visit me',<sup>41</sup> said the head of the Office for Religious Affairs. He also offered assistance to the official publication of the book *Three Pillars of Zen* in an official publishing house Czytelnik (Reader).<sup>42</sup>

Shortly after meeting, a new statute of the association was submitted to the Office for Religious Affairs, on the basis of which, on December 15, 1980, the 'Buddhist Community' was entered into the Register of Religious Associations and Unions under a new name: Zen Buddhist Association 'Sangha'<sup>43</sup> (now, The Bodhidharma Zen Buddhist Association).

### **Legalization of the Zen Circle: Hypotheses of the Reasons For the Ministry's Decisions**

There are no surviving documents that would clearly show the reasons why the ministry decided to legalize the first non-Christian religious association in thirteen years. To answer the question of why the activities of the Buddhist religious association in the Polish People's Republic were legalized, a number of questions should be asked, considering various aspects of the potential threat to the social system (political and moral) that could be associated with a change in the status of the community and, in this context, recall the previous analysed threads. Two basic ones are: (1) whether the Buddhist

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Minister J. Kuberski, August 26, 1980, page 1. (PKP)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> The first official publication of the book (translated into Polish by Jacek Dobrowolski, member of the Zen Circle) took place in 1988. It was published by the Pusty Obłok publishing house, legally operating under the auspices of the Zen Buddhist Association 'Sangha'.

<sup>43</sup> AIPN Po, 38/29, Statute of the 'Zen Buddhist Community in Poland - Religious Association', card 29-38.

denomination could be a tool of the party and state authorities in the fight against the Roman Catholic Church and (2) whether the existence of a central centre in a capitalist country did not pose a threat from the perspective of foreign agent surveillance.

(1) The first hypothesis is not unfounded. This assumption was included in the scope of work of Division III, Department IV of the Ministry of Internal Affairs for the years 1978–1979:

*Point 9.*

Using the possibilities and positions of non-Roman Catholic churches and religious associations to conduct special and disintegration activities against the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>44</sup>

Did the anti-church potential that UdSW decision-makers most likely saw in Zen Buddhism come true? The documents of the Ministry of Justice, Office for Religious Affairs or the Third Department of the Fourth Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs analysed by me do not clearly indicate that Buddhists were supported at any stage of legal activity, as an environment that could constitute real spiritual competition (such as for young people) to the Catholic Church or that could have another destabilizing influence on this institution.

Most religious scholars and sociologists researching the so-called ‘Oriental religions’ active during the Polish People’s Republic are of the opinion that most of the participants in these movements came from secular families. Member surveys known to me of various Buddhist associations operating at that time confirm that only approximately thirteen percent of members admitted to previous connections with the Catholic religion. Buddhists brought up in the Catholic tradition constituted a relatively small percentage of the total religion. However, it is more important that, in the 1980s, relations between legally operating Buddhist communities and the Catholic Church were good. Catholic monasteries and churches provided accommodation for Japanese Buddhists making pilgrimages

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<sup>44</sup> Bieleaszko et al., eds., *Plany Departamentu IV MSW na lata 1972-1979*, 277.

for peace. Polish representatives of both religions organized joint ecumenical meetings and prayers for peace.

(2) The argument about the political and social potential of Zen meditation turned out to be unsuccessful, although in this case the issue of final assessment seems more complicated. On the one hand, as it turned out, Buddhism actually reinforced the mental stagnation of young people. The attitude of political indifference was noticeable and unchanging. In the 1980s, just like today, there was a strong social belief that the followers of the so-called 'Oriental religions', focusing on their own spiritual development, ignored the problems of the outside world. The documentation produced by Department IV of the Ministry of Internal Affairs contains opinions emphasizing the harm of the social attitudes adopted in these environments. So, the Krishna Consciousness Society, still illegal at that time, was supposed to assume 'rejection of love for the Homeland and patriotism', the Zen Buddhist Association 'Sangha' promoted 'the complete alienation of the individual in society', and the civic policy of the Zen Association 'Chogie' (Chogyo, Zen Buddhism of the Korean tradition) was supposed to lead to 'the disappearance of the features of man's usefulness to society'.

However, the socio-political situation was changing, and with it the attitude of some members of these communities. A good example is Eichelberger's personal involvement in the activities of the democratic opposition. During the period of legalization and later, his apartment (which was also the central headquarters of the Buddhist association), was to become an important underground point of the 'Solidarity' camp in Warsaw, where the secretariat and staff office of the democratic opposition magazine KOS, a screen-printing workshop and the underground literature warehouse, were located. Most of the Buddhists practicing there were unaware of the materials found in the other room—the materials, let us note, revealed during a hypothetical police search would incriminate not only the owner of the apartment but also all those who were present during the search.

During martial law in Poland from 1981–1983, it was not possible to move between voivodeships without special passes. The position of chairman of the Buddhist community allowed Eichelberger to obtain a pass, thanks to which he could move around the

country (officially for religious purposes) without major restrictions while conducting opposition activities like smuggling publications of the democratic opposition. Years later he said: 'Zen worked well as a conspiratorial cover'.<sup>45</sup> There are many examples of Buddhists' involvement in democratic opposition activities in Poland, especially during martial law. We know many cases of members of the Buddhist communities of Japanese and Tibetan traditions acting as copyists of banned magazines and books, smugglers of documents to foreign human rights centres, organizers of strikes and local committees of 'Solidarity'. Long-term participation in an underground, well-organized religious community under surveillance by the Security Service certainly played a large role in their political effectiveness.

From the beginning of the introduction of martial law in Poland, Philip Kapleau was keenly interested in the political and social situation in Poland. This is evidenced by numerous fragments of correspondence with members of the community, as well as privately collected clippings of articles published in the American press about Poland. The topics covered were extensive and included both issues related to the activity of opposition groups, as well as large-scale problems, such as alcoholism, which reached its peak in the country in the first half of the 1980s. At a time when Poland was on the verge of economic collapse, Kapleau, following the example of many Western charitable initiatives, organized the shipment of food parcels (there were at least a dozen of them)<sup>46</sup> addressed to members of the saṅgha. Similar activity was also undertaken by Wally Muszyński (a descendant of Polish immigrants), a member of the Rochester Zen Center, who led a group practicing in the Kapleau lineage in Chicago (the largest Polish community centre in the world). At the end of 1981, he organized a financial collection among the local Polish community for the saṅgha.<sup>47</sup> The Polish community could count on not only material support from the central centre, but also spiritual. Ceremonies for Peace dedicated to the Polish community were held

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<sup>45</sup> Eichelberger, *Wariat na wolności*, 316.

<sup>46</sup> IZBZS 1981 (4): 2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

in Rochester. The same ritual was performed simultaneously in all the Zen Buddhist Association 'Sangha' groups in Poland.

## Conclusions

Based on the analysis of source materials, it should be concluded that Buddhism was, in the opinion of the security services, something more than just a 'sitting religion'. It was political in nature, and the group of people who followed it were considered a potential source of sabotage. The paradox is that the members of the Zen Circle viewed their religion and the social obligations of Buddhism in the same way. In the above article, I tried to argue that the nature of the political system of the Polish People's Republic, in which the followers of Philip Kapleau's Zen line lived and practiced, had a significant impact on the formation of their community identity, and the social situation in which they practiced sometimes redefined their understanding of Buddhism itself. My second goal was to show that Buddhists, contrary to the beliefs held by the security services, officials, the so-called 'statistical Poles', and parts of the Buddhist community itself, actively participated in the fight for the political sovereignty of the country, often stimulating their activity with religious motivations.

The legalization of Philip Kapleau's community of disciples became a legal precedent that made it possible for other religions to apply for registration. Among the twenty-three non-Christian communities registered in the 1980s, there were five Buddhist communities and three referring to Hindu traditions. Significantly, the number of churches and religious associations legalized in the 1980s exceeded the number existing until 1980.

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### Abbreviations

AIPN      Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance)

- IZBZS Informator Związku Buddystów Zen ‘Sangha’  
[Information Bulletin of the Zen Buddhist Association  
‘Sangha’]
- PKP The Philip Kapleau Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare  
Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

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