

The Polish Weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*:

A Legend's Struggle

A Unique Newspaper faces Typical Problems

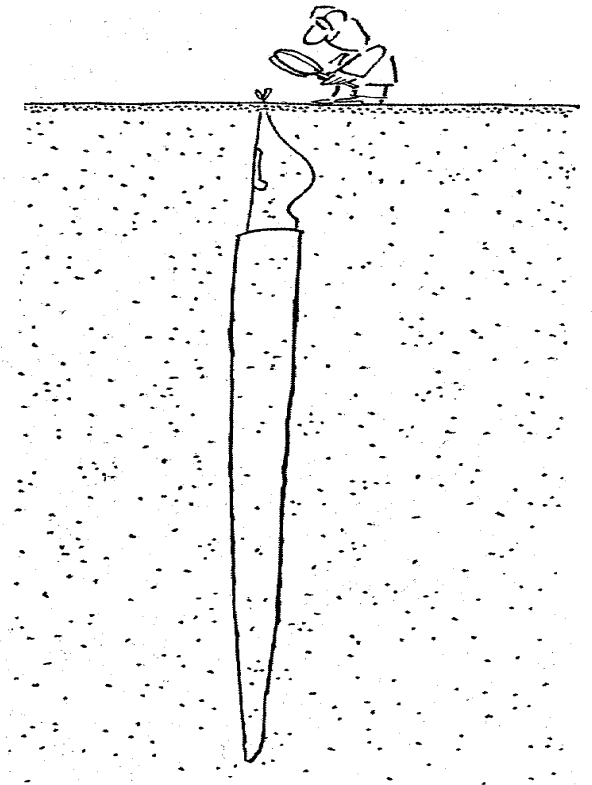
55 years is a long time to struggle permanently for survival. And to be honest: The Polish *Tygodnik Powszechny* (literally translated: *General Weekly*) doesn't always look too fresh these days. But a newspaper can be reborn with every new edition, even if it has reached the status of a legend that fears to risk its great history.

That history started in spring 1945. It was right after the Second World war and the Communists were taking over the power in the small country in the centre of Europe. Many cities in Poland were laid in ruins under German shellfire and again later by the artillery of the Russian "liberators". Food was short and so was printing paper, when the dedicated Catholic Jerzy Turowicz founded the "Weekly for Culture and Society" in the Polish city Kraków.

As publisher and editor-in-chief of the *Tygodnik Powszechny* Turowicz shaped the spiritual and political Polish scene during the long period of communism like no other. He made the newspaper an oasis of free thinking in a censored press scene. Nearly all the famous intellectuals of the world contributed with articles to the Polish *Tygodnik*. When he died in January 1999 Adam Michnik, one of the famous intellectuals in Poland, called him the "voice of the Polish conscience".

Of course Turowicz was also affected by censorship. He was, however, smart enough to mark the censored spots. If a whole article was taken out, the relevant space was left empty. This courage in publishing made him a legend when he was still alive. The Marxist philosopher Leszek Kolakowski regarded him as his teacher as well as Pope John Paul II, who had also written for the *Tygodnik* as a young man.

Turowicz had to work hard to keep his paper and his famous authors. The Communist Party restricted the allocation of paper. In the Stalinist era the newspaper was even banned repeatedly (altogether for a period of three years).



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The Catholic Church also had problems with the incorruptible observer and his investigations into the “black spots” in Poland’s history. The *Tygodnik Powszechny* received the insulting name “Zydownik” (Jew paper) because of its debates on anti-Semitism in Polish society. On another occasion the editor was called a “submarine”: Turowicz and his authors were the first to make efforts in the reconciliation process with the Germans and also later with the Ukrainians.

For almost 45 years, the *Tygodnik Powszechny* remained a unique and outstanding newspaper. However, with the fall of Communism it became a typical example of the new problems the confessional press had to face almost all over Europe. The newly achieved freedom gave place to a strong variety of cultural and political papers. Competition was also created by other newly established church papers. And with the changes in the political system the *Tygodnik Powszechny* lost many previously important functions. The church became one social actor among others, a general drop in the trust in Catholic Media went hand in hand with a deep impoverishment of the people and a general loss in the importance of the press. Radio and in particular TV became the dominating media in the time budget of the Polish people.

The effect was a rapid drop in the number of copies sold: While the circulation had been around 80,000 in 1989, it rose to 100,000 for a short time in 1990, and had already dropped to 35,000 only one year later. The “average reader” is in his 50s, lives in one of the big cities and holds a university degree. The interest among the intellectuals may be good for the *Tygodnik*’s reputation and shows that the weekly still has a high standard, but can hardly convince publicity managers that it is an ideal advertising medium.

In 1993 three French investors rescued the publishing house *Znak*, to which the *Tygodnik Powszechny* then belonged, with fresh financial injections. Many different steps to increase the attractiveness have had little effect so far, although the number of copies sold rose by roughly 3,000 per year.

The myth is still alive and widely recognised by the Polish public. But while legends can survive on reputation only, a printed newspaper has concrete materialistic commitments. The struggle for survival is now merely a commercial component which has to be won on the market. Meanwhile a new editor-in-chief - Adam Boniecki, General Superior of the Marian Congregation - was elected by the staff, he was considered the ideal candidate by Turowicz himself. Boniecki had already worked as an editor for the *Tygodnik Powszechny* in the 60s and 70s before he became head of the Polish edition of the *Osservatore Romano*. And Boniecki is the one who has to lead the *Tygodnik* into the next 55 years of existence.

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