

Bronislaw Kawecki obituary: Polish dissident and Solidarity organiser

Activist who documented communist regime atrocities and fought to preserve the memory of the Radom workers' uprising dies aged 72

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Bronislaw Kawecki spent much of his life campaigning for a memorial that was never built. Nevertheless, its beginning, as a simple granite block on a street corner in the Polish city of Radom, served as a lasting reminder of a defiant workers' uprising, the subsequent communist state's brutal repression and the rise of the Solidarity union, in which Kawecki played a leading role.

In June 1976, Kawecki was working for a medical supply company when Radom became a central flashpoint in the burgeoning protests against the ruling regime. Thousands of demonstrators, including Kawecki, took to the streets after the announcement that food prices were to rise steeply. They marched on the local Communist Party headquarters, where they were met by riot police.

In the ensuing violence, the party offices were set alight, two protesters were killed and hundreds were injured and arrested. In the aftermath, further beatings and detentions ensued and many of those who had taken part lost their jobs.

Determined these events should not be forgotten, Kawecki began collecting testimonies from those who were assaulted, imprisoned and fired. His efforts cost him his own job and his freedom. Never did he consider abandoning his project — as time went on, he became ever more determined to preserve the memory of the oppression as a warning to future generations.

Even though it was never finished, the granite stone was highly symbolic and dangerous — just leaving flowers at the site was treated by the authorities as a political act. As Kawecki said, a stone that said nothing was still saying something, so long as somebody insisted on remembering what it stood for.

When the independent trade union Solidarity emerged in 1980, Kawecki helped to establish it in Radom. The following year he was the delegate for the Radom region at Solidarity's historic first national congress in Gdansk.

On December 13, 1981, the government banned Solidarity outright and launched a nationwide crackdown. Kawecki was arrested and imprisoned. He and other Solidarity members were forced to endure harsh conditions and were regularly subjected to abuse — in detention they were required to run corridors of police bearing truncheons known as “health paths”.

Born in Sandomierz in 1954, Bronislaw Kawecki grew up in a state orphanage. His politics emerged early. During a school geography lesson, when he heard that Cuba had been liberated by the Soviet Union, he remarked that in the process it had also subordinated Cuba to itself. This angered the teachers and he was expelled.

In 1973, a childhood friend fell from a tenth-floor window. “Sometime earlier the Citizens’ Militia had beaten him after he suffered an epileptic seizure — the officers apparently assumed he was drunk. I saw the wounds covering his whole body at the hospital.” Kawecki tried to organise a Catholic funeral but was told the official funeral notices needed state approval — “in the communist period these were subject to the same controls as the press”. Kawecki and his friends wrote the notices themselves. “They were later torn down by the SB [security service]. We kept putting them back up anyway.”

At the funeral, Kawecki gave the eulogy. As he was leaving, two security-service men approached and put him into a taxi. He was taken to a police station and held. Eventually he was let go but the episode cost him his job as a tutor at a state orphanage. He secured work for the medical supply company Cezal, where he subsequently started a branch of Solidarity.

It was in Kawecki's prison cell on Christmas Eve 1981 that the inmates lit a candle made from wax scraped off blocks of cheese. The wick was a boot lace. With no communion wafer to share, they broke bread instead. They opened the window and sang a Polish carol. Cell after cell took up the carol, the guards pounding on doors trying to beat back the noise.

Kawecki was also instrumental in helping to organise a prisoners' revolt, a role that marked him out further to the security services who were already monitoring him. He was released in July 1982, only to lose his job. Undeterred, over the next decade he helped distribute

underground newspapers, including *Wolny Robotnik*, which he co-edited, all the while under the watch of the security services.

When communism finally gave way in 1989, Kawecki helped to found the Citizens' Committee of the Radom region and took part in the country's first free elections. But where many of his contemporaries went into formal politics, he stayed with the work he had always done, making sure the past was not quietly tidied away. He consulted on documentaries about the 1976 protests and about Father Roman Kotlarz, a priest whose death was widely linked to a beating by the security services. Kawecki was a central figure in *Kamien* (The Stone), a film about the unfinished monument and his own long campaign to see Radom's workers remembered.

On June 4th 1991 the Polish Pope John Paul II journeyed to Radom and stood in front of the Radom 1976 stone. To Kawecki's consternation, a policeman in the new free Poland police force protecting the Pope was recognised by him as a communist-era officer who had chased and mistreated political opponents.

He married Alicja Kawecka. They later divorced. He is survived by three children, twin daughters and an eldest son. One daughter is Oktawia Kawecka-Sellers ("Octavia Kay"), a singer-songwriter and flautist who also works in a law firm. She is based in London. Her twin sister, Patrycja Kawecka-Czerska ("Pati Cze"), is also a singer-songwriter and vocal coach, living in Warsaw, where she is a director of a music school. His son, Lech Kawecki, serves in the Polish military.

Asked late in life whether the internment, lost job and decades of unpaid remembrance had been worth it, Kawecki did not hesitate. "Yes, it was worth it."

A source of sadness was the later decline of Solidarity and his disregard for its founder, Lech Walesa. "My view of him today is what it was then. Even at the time I knew he was a very dangerous man — someone very sure of himself, who always wanted to rule autocratically," said Kawecki. "Today I often wonder why Solidarity has practically ceased to exist. What became of it? Has only the name survived? Where did everything else go — where are the people? What happened to our union is worse than internment, worse than my children's tears as they hid behind the armchair while the SB searched my flat at six in the morning. Where has people's sensitivity to another human being's suffering gone?"

Bronislaw Kawecki, Polish dissident, was born on April 29, 1954. He died of pneumonia and sepsis while being treated for a stroke on August 29, 2026, aged 72