

APPEARED

BI.

WASHINGTON POST

3 April 1986

The Diplomat As Defector

Romuald Spasowski's Tale of
Intrigue, Protest—and Poland

By Sarah Booth Conroy
Washington Post Staff Writer

"If they kill me now," said Romuald Spasowski, shrugging, "it doesn't matter. I have survived to write the truth of my life, my father's and my son's. It is a sad book."

His eye is not dry as he speaks. And a blast of Siberian cold seems to blow through the room.

At 2:14 p.m. on Dec. 19, 1981, Spasowski was the Polish ambassador to the United States. He was also dean of the Polish diplomatic corps, former Polish deputy foreign minister and the son of a Marxist philosopher for whom a Warsaw street was named.

At 2:15 p.m., Dec. 19, 1981, he called the U.S. State Department and became the highest ranking Communist to defect to the West. The Polish diplomat and his family, what was left of it, packed documents of their lives, regrets of their past and fragile hopes for the future, and

fled the ambassadorial residence in Northwest Washington for an FBI safe house.

On Dec. 20, Spasowski riveted the world's attention with his impassioned plea against the Soviet crackdown on the Polish people and the arrest of Solidarity leader Lech Walesa. "The cruel night of darkness and silence has spread over my country," he said.

Two days later, he and his wife Wanda met with President Reagan before moving on to another safe house.

In August 1982, Polish Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski and his junta finally got around to condemning him to death.

Last night, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich gave a coming out party for Romuald and Wanda Spasowski at the Watergate Hotel, their first public appearance since they disappeared from sight after their defection.

"He made the most difficult decision a man of conscience can make," said Alexander Haig, secretary of state when Spasowski defected. "People in public service have a struggle when they don't agree with their government. You can stay on, trying to do

what you can to change things. Spasowski defected when he realized he could no longer make a difference from within. Not easy, but courageous."

Another former secretary of state, Edmund Muskie, remembered well the serious concerns Spasowski expressed at the last meeting they had. Charles Z. Wick, USIA director, said he first met Spasowski when USIA filmed "Let Poland Be Poland." Edwin Meese made a brief stop before going down the river with Wick aboard publisher Malcolm Forbes' yacht.

The publishers, scenting a success, came on strong with Marie Arana-Ward, who edited the book; Richard Lourie, whose novel "First Loyalty" is about the KGB; Eugene McCarthy, who has a new book coming out with HBJ; and Marta Istomin, Kennedy Center artistic director, who also is on the HBJ board. Almost 250 friends filled the Riverview room, hugging the honorees, turning their other cheeks for double kisses, lining up to have their heavy books autographed, sympathizing with the Spasowskis' ordeal and congratulating them on their triumphant return to the world.

Spasowski's 704-page autobiography, "The Liberation of One," has all the *Sturm und Drang* of Goethe's "Faust," a middle-European drama of one who sold his soul to the devil for the traditional temptations of power and sex—but who in the end is redeemed from sin by repentance. The only glimmer of sunshine in the *Sturm* are Polish jokes, which by definition tend toward black humor.

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich publishers is betting money on Spasowski, sending the author to more than a dozen cities to promote his book. "I want to make my statement as loud as possible to be heard everywhere," he said.

At 65, six feet tall, with a goatee and mustache, his gray hair holding its coppery tints, Spasowski still looks, in his brown striped suit, like a 1930s Eastern European diplomat. His English, like his German, Russian and a few other languages, is fluent though measured and formal.

Not yet 60, Wanda Spasowski has dark hair pulled back in a bouquet of curls. Her blouse is of Polish embroidery. She counts out three heart medicine pills and puts them before him, the image of the European helpmate. She offers around the big tin of fancy cookies and instant *cappuccino* she brought herself as though the glass

hot-water pot were silver and the conference room a velvet-hung embassy salon.

To look at them, you might think, "At last, the Spasowskis have escaped to a happy beginning."

His book is finished and is promised a wide reception. Their daughter Misia and her husband Andrzej Grochulski are teaching in the United States. His 93-year-old mother, just before her death in December, received an Israeli award for sheltering Jews during the Nazi occupation. She lived out her last days in comfort in a Jewish hospice in Poland.

Still, the Spasowskis' sweets have sour centers.

"I will be always stateless," he said bitterly. "I can never be a citizen of another country. Yet my Poland does not exist anymore. As Wanda says, their Warsaw is not my Warsaw. All Poland is now a political prison and the people are the prisoners."

His words have a faint echo of the note left by his father, when Wladyslaw Spasowski committed suicide under the Nazi occupation.

"*Moriturus te salutat* . . . I am a citizen of the world and do not wish to be any other sort of citizen," the father wrote, before taking cyanide.

Years later, when Romuald Spasowski was Poland's ambassador to India, his son died mysteriously there, a brilliant 19-year-old who so hated Poland's Communist regime he could not bear to return to his native land and who had spent all he had to help the Indian poor. The youth's death remains a mystery. Was he harassed by Communist threats into committing suicide? Or was his death caused more directly?

Spasowski says it is in memory of his father and his son that he defected. "I had to be free to witness, to give testimony to what the Communists have done to Poland. It is not difficult to know what is happening."

In his book (condensed from his original 5,000 handwritten pages) he describes how he decided to make it a personal confession, a *mea culpa*, set against the painful history of Poland in this century.

I began what seemed a hundred books—in my head, in endless permutations, on scores of crumpled sheets of paper. Should it be a political essay? An anti-Communist tract? A history of the Polish people? Yet another book con-

Continued

cluding that Communism went wrong? These promised mere reflections that related little and convinced less. It is Polish lives that tell Poland's story, the human tragedies that have been played out on Poland's stage . . . To relay a sense of that story to the rest of the world I need only describe my life . . . I need only start at the beginning and tell it absolutely as it was.

Spasowski said to write the book, he had to "wear my old shoes." "Today I am a wise man. Then I was naive, stupid, an opportunist. Reliving my life is often painful."

He tells how he abandoned his wife and two children, leaving them often hungry, to live with another woman before coming back to his family. He doesn't believe his paramour was a Soviet plant. "But I was approached other times, several times, by women who were."

Twice since he asked for asylum for his family, Communists have approached his daughter, once holding her for an hour, threatening them all in an attempt to stop her father from writing the book.

"I have no illusions of what they were prepared to do," Spasowski said.

With the book out and in the stores, the Spasowskis feel safer than ever. Though they change residence often, they live under their own name.

The State Department, he says, does not support them financially now. "My publisher does," he says, "and I have no complaints. We need very little."

Spasowski came into his new life with a dowry. As though he'd learned the lesson of Franz Kafka, he brought with him suitcases full of 40-odd years of documents.

"At first I challenged him on how he could remember conversations in such detail," said Harcourt Brace Jovanovich editor Marie Arana-Ward. "I showed her," Spasowski says. "I have notes for every conversation. Notes, memos, factual material. And I am always taking these things with me."

From the beginning, he kept a diplomatic diary, in a code so carefully written, it could be read over his shoulder without giving him away.

In his memories echo the intense debates of the avant-garde intellectual salons in Poland between the wars and the broadcast peal of the Kremlin bells ringing from the radio of his father's house in Warsaw. To the Spasowskis, the talk and the bells seemed to ring in a future of equality for all.

Spasowski writes:

I would sit beside my father and vow silently never to depart from the path he had taken or betray the hopes he had invested in me.

Spasowski was born in August 1920 to the sound of guns as the Polish loyalists held the line at the Vistula River against the Bolshevik aggressors.

His father was an atheist and a Marxist revolutionary, educated amid the intellectual ferment of the early 20th century in Switzerland. He sent his only child to an orphanage for "six months of tearful nights" and took him into the slums of Warsaw to show him how others lived. In between, the young Spasowski spent his days with Warsaw's intelligentsia: poets, linguists, explorers.

Both parents' families were landowners. But hers were not prepared for his father. "Mother's father detested my father so much that once, when told in jest that Spasowski was approaching the estate, he grabbed his double-barreled shotgun and steamed out to the road to wait for him." His parents finally divorced.

As his father became part of Warsaw's Communist establishment, the young teen-ager first became accustomed to the police attention that followed him most of his life. "I was always running into strangers fidgeting in our gateway."

In the few years of Polish independence, the young Spasowski became a member of the young Polish Communist movement and fell in love with a Jewish girl who later vanished during the Nazi occupation. After the Nazi invasion, he dug his mother a bomb shelter and went off to fight the Nazis. His harrowing adventures across Poland ended in refuge with a Jewish family in Lutsk.

Later, he and his mother paid his debts by making secret underground rooms in his mother's Villa Rosa outside Warsaw where they sheltered Jews. Young Spasowski lived underground—sometimes literally. Once he and Wanda, whom he knew from the age of 2, were almost suffocated while hiding from the Nazis in a dirt pit. Wanda, even as a very young girl, served as a courier for the underground. Even so, they managed, though her family thought him a dangerous man, to marry.

Spasowski's book has tantalizing tastes of living with secrets in secret. Working for Polish military intelligence, he obtained a list of British units operating in Germany from their mutual laundry pickups. When he was at the Polish embassy in London, where his staff regularly went through his safe, he made himself a document hideaway under the parquet floor.

During Richard Nixon's visit to Poland, Spasowski as vice foreign minister was negotiating with U.S. State

Department officials. "Suddenly I heard a metallic voice that seemed to be coming from a tin can. 'Well, how come he's not saying anything?' The voice had come from under his jacket."

Spasowski tells of the temptations of real estate, foreign food, chances to buy gold and other consumer goods offered Communist officials, while American food aid was diverted from the Polish people. He says he bought nothing, that all he owned in Poland was the cemetery lot where his father and son were buried.

And he tells how his daughter and son, after growing up in the United States during his first tour as ambassador (1955-1961), went back to Poland looking for a real iron curtain—and found one.

When the Spasowskis came back in 1978, his second tour as ambassador, he told his government he wanted to retire after the tour. The Polish Embassy here, he soon found, was "no post of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs . . . but a Security espionage unit . . . Whatever I say at our meetings is reported at once to the Soviet Embassy and the KGB . . ."

Wanda Spasowski found the life "suffocating." The embassy had been stripped of its traditional Polish antiques. All the servants reported to the dread "Security." Worse yet, the Spasowskis were required, like all other Communist diplomatic couples, to attend monthly dinner parties that were actually hunting and trapping sessions, aimed at snaring any budding dissident.

In the book, Wanda Spasowski (who plans to write her own) tells of a party at the East German ambassador's residence. While the men had their cigars, the women had their own entertainment.

"It began with Irina Dobrynin," said Wanda. "She asked me to tell her some Polish jokes . . . They put on some raucous jazz and began dancing alone or in twos, stopping only to drink and devour the desserts . . . screeching wildly, undulating vulgarly, lifting their skirts above their heads, especially the wives of the Cuban and the Bulgarian ambassadors, though the Czech's wife wasn't far behind. I'd never seen anything like it. And with that demon

Mrs. Dobrynin leading them all! They carried on like a witches' sabbath . . ."

Fortunately for the Spasowskis, the government authorized them to buy a residence for the embassy. Wanda Spasowski herself oversaw the remodeling of the house in Northwest Washington. She kept house herself to be free of embassy spies.

Meanwhile, Spasowski tried to fend off Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, who he says dominated the Eastern Bloc diplomats from the Beaux Arts mansion on 16th Street. In his windowless office, which roared perpetually with a jamming mechanism, Dobrynin characterized then president Jimmy Carter as "an eccentric from Georgia" and said Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski "poisons the atmosphere." Later Spasowski said he was ordered to dig up what dirt he could to discredit Brzezinski.

Spasowski established his own independence. The Pole admired Carter's stand on human rights and hoped for sympathy from then secretary of state Muskie and Brzezinski because of their Polish ancestry. One American disappointed Spasowski. When the Pole finally got an appointment with the speaker of the House, Rep. Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill posed for a picture, shaking hands with Spasowski, and walked away.

Spasowski tells of the anxieties of those years: the Polish Politburo member who bought a diamond pendant with party dues; an attaché's illegal purchases of American electronic equipment in New York; American aid to Poland diverted to the Soviet Union; visits home when aspirin was so scarce their friends would only accept seven from a box; interpreting the Solidarity movement to the United States and finding their daughter was a part of it; and his efforts to enlist the aid of the Catholic Church for Poland.

Spasowski has been an atheist from childhood, but his wife is devout. The ambassador was often criticized for his wife's devotion, especially when Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Krakow was elected pope and the Spasowskis went to mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral.

Spasowski himself joined the church after his defection.

Not long before he defected, Spasowski had dinner with Walter Stoessel, then U.S. under secretary of state for political affairs. He told Stoessel of preparations in Poland for a Soviet invasion.

"I told him without hesitation that the Polish people were in mortal danger. I caught myself speaking my mind without any regard for the diplomatic considerations. I had crossed the line."

In August 1981, while the Soviet military maneuvers went on in Poland, his daughter and her husband received permission to come to Washington to teach.

When Lech Walesa was being taken into custody, Dobrynin summoned Spasowski to the embassy. Spasowski refused. Instead, he said to the press: "The Poles are facing tremendous odds. Listen. Can't you hear their silent scream . . ."

As the glacier of Soviet domination slid over Poland, a chill enveloped the Spasowskis. He was recalled to Warsaw.

Dec. 19, 1981. His cryptographer limited his access to the coded cables instructing Spasowski to inform the Americans that Poland was back to normal. At the State Department, John Scanlan, deputy assistant secretary for Eastern Europe, told Spasowski that the Pole was followed by Soviet military attachés. And the American showed him reports of brutal attacks on the Polish people and the death of the Wujek miners who supported Solidarity. Spasowski's secretary called again and again, "insisting that I come at once, everyone was lined up waiting to see me . . ."

"I had not made up my mind to defect," Spasowski said the other day, "but I knew then I must." In his book he writes:

I stood in the middle of the room, my mind in turmoil, images whirling: my mother in Poland, my father's burning eyes . . . the telephone . . . I reached out and lifted the receiver. It seemed as heavy as 60 years.