

# I wish my symbol solidarised people once again

**Jerzy Janiszewski** on the Polish logotype well-known all over the world, on the symbolism of “Solidarity”, and on art as a participant in great historic events. Interviewers: Marzena Tataj, Kamil Broszko.



The first T-shirts with the Solidarity logo. The second from the right – Jerzy Janiszewski, author of the logo, the Lenin Gdańsk Shipyard, August 1980



Poster "21 x YES"

**Marzena Tataj:** You were born in Płock, you graduated from the art school in Warsaw, and you sat your exams to the Fine Arts Academy here, but you studied in Gdańsk.

**Jerzy Janiszewski:** It was by sheer accident that I found myself in Gdańsk. I passed my exams to the Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw, but due to lack of places I was transferred to the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Gdańsk (today Fine Arts Academy). Initially, I planned to go back to Warsaw after the first semester. But I was so charmed with the climate of the school, the people, the "Żak" club, the "Mewa" student dorm, the SPATiF club in Sopot... All this made me feel like staying instead of taking off. I started my family quite soon, my daughter was born, I didn't have to wait long for my first commissions for graphic designs. Quite simply, I just felt brilliant in Gdańsk.

**MT:** You are the author of the "Solidarity" logo, one of the most recognisable logotypes in the world

I was living in Gdansk, when in August 1980 the Lenin Gdansk Shipyard went to strike it was absolutely not indifferent to me. Ever since the first days of the strike, I would stand at the Gate No. 2 in the constantly growing crowd of strike supporters. Subsequently I managed to get a pass authorizing me to enter the premises of the shipyard, and there I was, right in the middle of the strike until its very end. I came home late at night to get some sleep. I observed the course of events close up - incredible emotions, Polish flags, speeches, open discussions, singing together, tears.

This direct clash with democracy, for the first time in my life, came to me as a shock. Facing all this I knew that I had to do something, express my emotions somehow, support the strikers. I am a graphic designer, so I wanted to express myself in a poster or a sign. I was looking for symbols - I thought of the gate of the shipyard which did not divide, on the contrary it unified the protesters. I also considered flags or flowers. I started with writing down the strikers' slogans written on the walls, where the word Solidarność (engl.: solidarity) was repeated in all possible forms: "only in solidarity", "our solidarity", "in solidarity with". It quickly became obvious to me, also thanks to a suggestion of my friend, the young poet Krzysztof Kasprzyk, that this word illustrated everything. In the evening, in my flat in Morena, I started trying how the word could be best expressed graphically and with which typeface. I wasn't particularly happy with my trials. And suddenly it hit me that the word should be handwritten, with paint and a brush, like the slogans on the walls. I started to link the

letters, such as people linked together like being links of a chain - in solidarity. On a DIN A5 format paper I wrote with a small brush and red color: SOLIDARNOŚĆ. I put the letters even closer together which was to symbolize solidary people sticking together. The accents were to bring associations with the people's heads. The flag had its best proportions on the letter "N". At the third attempt I succeeded the right proportions and dynamics of the sign.

On August 20th I presented the project at the Gdansk shipyard and it was agreed to disseminate it for strike purposes. However, there were no technical capabilities, no paper for copying and thus I turned to my friends for help. Andrzej Popiel elaborated suitable printing plates at the Gdansk University of Technology, Ania and Tadeusz Strzelczyk restarted their small screen printing studio in Sopot, somebody brought paint. We made the first printouts, manually, slowly. The paper was provided by everyone whoever had any. We were printing the sign with the caption "GDANSK August '80 on A5, later on also on A3. Many people helped. Every single day until the end of the strike, we printed 100-200 exemplars. Quite by the way, the poster "21 x YES" came into being. I prepared the design hastily, according to the concept of Krzysztof Kasprzyk I have already mentioned. We printed about 50 A3 copies. Also some T-shirts with the "Solidarność" sign were produced.

The first A5 Print-out I brought to the shipyard, which I preserved to this day, was signed by Lech Walesa, Anna Walentynowicz, Henryka Krzywonos and somebody from the Inter-Enterprise Strike Committee (polish: MKS). And that is how it all began.

I transferred further copies in the shipyard to Krzysztof Wyszowski and Bogdan Borusewicz. The sign appeared in the BHP-hall, where MKS-sessions were held and on the gate of the shipyard. I helped to paper the walls of a small room, prepared for a meeting with representatives of the government, with them. Copies were scattered in the crowds at the gate, to be snapped up right away.

Some of the copies reached the shipyard in Gdynia. The sign started to circulate. Thanks to the presence of international media the sign appeared in other countries sooner than in Poland, completely blocked at the time.

Later on, after the agreement had already signed, I heard from the press that my sign had become the logo of the newly established Independent and Self-Governing Labour Union "Solidarność".

**Kamil Broszko: Was the creation of this symbol a key event, determining your entire life? And perhaps this design has become a certain type of burden?**

**JJ:** I was happy and proud that the symbol was present amongst the protesters, but it certainly did not determine my life. At the time, nobody knew what would be the course of events, how the strike would end. I didn't think the logo would go beyond the gates of the Shipyard or beyond Tricity, I didn't know that the Independent and Self-Governing Labour Union would be established, with the name and logo of "Solidarność". As the years went by, as the symbol started to be recognised, visible, as it was accompanying the most important events in Poland, during the martial law, or during the 1989 election, naturally, I came to realise the importance of this fortunate coincidence which made me a direct witness of historic events and provided me with an opportunity to do something significant. Something like that can happen only once in a lifetime. I did everything I could for the symbol not to become

a burden, so that I could keep working, designing, as if nothing had happened.

**KB: The symbol of “Solidarity”, what was its meaning in 1980, and what is it today?**

**JJ:** In 1980, this symbol expressed incredible solidarity and determination of Poles. It became a symbol of transformations, of the fight for democratic Poland, for freedom. It also stood for hope and joy. I will never forget one particular day, perhaps a month after the strikes: in a tram an elderly lady noticed a small “S” badge – one of the first plastic badges ever – attached to my shirt and she stared at it for a long time. I gave it to her. She kissed it and clutched it in her hand, she nearly cried.

And today there is a problem. The logo is still there. It is used by the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarność” in its key visual, but it has nothing in common with real solidarity. The symbol is being devaluated, deformed, illegally used for commercial purposes in Poland and abroad. Who else except for me knows today what its original version looks like? Its artistic and historical values are being violated, and so are its copyrights. And if sometimes it appears during manifestations organised in defence of fundamental rights, for example in defence of the constitution, those who use it face the risk of punitive sanctions. The Poland of today is different.

**KB: The art is often said to have no influence on important historical and social transformations and to be merely a background, a commentary to them. Your work, however, seems to be a participant in the changes in its own right. Do you perceive it in the same way, too?**

**JJ:** The art has no influence on social or historical changes if it does not participate in them directly, concurrently, if it is created upon a commission of any sort, e.g. a political one. If it is the case, it passes away with no artistic significance, just like the ideologies it accompanies. The “Solidarity” logo came into being in the context of direct events, together with them; it is not an effect of any commission, it was not imposed. It was created by specific events and people connected with them.

**MT: In 2012, you created a logo “Solidarity 2012”, in which each letter is different. Does this concept reflect an internal division, disintegration of the society, and is it to be in contrast to the unity and integrity of “Solidarity 80”?**

**JJ:** Yes, because the former unity does not exist anymore, whereas members of numerous groups or political parties believe that “Solidarity” is their roots and that they represent its values, although they preach different views and have different political goals. Hence this interpretation of the logo – its fragmentation and white and red flags fluttering in different directions.

**MT: Despite being the author of this well-known logo and the “Solidaryca” typeface, you do not use this fact to promote yourself. You don’t seem to mind when the logotype is used in crucial social issues.**

**JJ:** I prefer to work and act quietly. I have created a lot of works using the “Solidaryca” typeface myself, as I have the exclusive right to it: “89 2019 GDAŃSK” to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the election, “25 Years of Freedom”, the poster “Danuta W” for Polonia Theatre in Warsaw, “Kolęda Nocka 30 Years Later”,

“Archiwa Przełomu”, “PL 2011.eu”, a poster “Man of Iron” to the movie directed by Andrzej Wajda. In Paris, I designed solidarity leaflets against the martial law, as well as the sign “Sarajevo”, which opened a manifestation in defence of this city during the Balkan conflict. The logo “Madrid” from 2004, on the other hand, was a symbol of solidarity with victims of the terrorist attack of March 11<sup>th</sup>.

To make things clear: under the copyright law, it is prohibited to develop logotypes in the fashion of “Solidarity”, using the same typeface. Absolutely nobody has the right to do so without my consent. Regrettably, there have been such cases, which depreciated the historical and artistic value of the original logo. It has been used e.g. in the promotion campaign of vodka or cigarettes, obviously illegally. I try to bring an end to such actions, although it is not a simple task.

**KB: You left for Germany during the martial law. Later on, you stayed in France on a scholarship, but eventually you settled in Spain. Your choice of the Iberian culture, was it quite accidental?**

**JJ:** Yes and no. I was invited to Barcelona by my friend, Pacolbáñez, musician, author, and composer, who I had worked with before for 13 years in Paris. This time it was also about cooperation, namely about developing graphic designs to reissues of his albums, concert posters, etc. The time has passed quickly, and consequently I have been living in Spain for 20 years now – first in Catalonia, and now in Galicia, in La Coruña. Even before that, I had worked in Madrid, Valencia, the Basque Country, Andalusia, and I had always been fascinated by the diversity of the Iberian culture. The people, their temperament, the climate, the cuisine, and most of all my current family – these are the reasons for which I settled here.

**MT: Could you tell us about your current artistic and professional projects?**

**JJ:** The most important and current project is a logotype for Gdańsk in commemoration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the election, and numerous versions of this logo for other Polish cities. In cooperation with the Ronald Reagan Foundation, I have been working on the design of a monument of the real “Solidarity”, which will be located in Warsaw. A similar monument, albeit a little smaller, is to be installed in Brussels in front of the headquarters of NATO. For some time now my Hamburg-based friend, Jurek Misiorny, and I have been working on a new website presenting my works. My permanent, continuous occupation is creating collages from various materials, which I make in my free time, listening to music – this work helps me unwind.

**MT: Despite the fact that you live and work in Spain, you willingly participate in projects in Poland. Perhaps you could tell us something about “Concerto for Ribbons” and the project “Ogarna 2.0”.**

**JJ:** I always emphasise that I am from Gdańsk, and every occasion to spend some time in Poland, especially in association with my work, gives me great joy. The idea and the project “Concerto for Ribbons” came into being in 1986 and it was implemented in San Sebastián and inaugurated in Madrid in front of the opera house in Plaza de Isabel II during the Autumn Festival. Subsequently, every few years I displayed it in France, Barcelona, and eventually in Gdańsk in 2012 within the scheme of the Solidarity of Arts Festival. The biggest installation was built in Łódź in Old Market Square in 2016. It was 30 x 30 m, and 50 km of ribbons were used to

prepare it. The last “Concerto for Ribbons” was opened last year by Mayor Paweł Adamowicz in Węglowy Square in Gdańsk. I dedicated it to Lech Wałęsa in commemoration of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his Nobel Peace Prize.

These installations consist of 10-metre-long, light, polypropylene ribbons suspended on a net at high altitude. There are thousands of them, and each time they are in different colours and create different compositions. Thanks to wind and sunlight, this entire constantly moving mass, intermingling colours, never repeating combinations of ribbons create a spectacular audio-visual effect. It gives people enormous joy and energy, it provides them with new visual experiences.

My participation in “Ogarna 2.0” was a unique challenge for me. It focused on the development of a design of a sequence of façades of nine buildings in a prestigious location in Gdańsk, in Rybackie Pobrzeże, right beside the Motława canal. It is a space marked by history, with post-war tenements. Therefore, having studied the photographic documentation, I came up with an idea to integrate historical inscriptions in the façades, associated exactly with this place. Today, there are former names of German and Dutch stores visible there; the inscriptions are blurred, as if timeworn. A big inscription “Gdańsk” is visible from a distance, too.

**MT: What were the origins of the logo of the Polish presidency in the European Union and the logo of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the free election?**

**JJ:** I was invited to the competition for a logo of the Polish presidency in EU. My logotype won. Contrary to different opinions, nobody suggested I should make references to the “Solidarity” logo. I was convinced that this interpretation – a reference to the historic Polish symbol, still valid at the time – would be appropriate. Besides, the logo was not addressed to Poles only, it had to be legible for people in different EU states. I created arrows in colours corresponding to flags of the European Union states, “holding hands” like people would, led by Poland, which stood out thanks to a flag taken from the “Solidarity” logo.

My latest project, created in commemoration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the June election, came into being upon the commission of the City Hall in Gdańsk. I also prepared its versions for many other Polish cities. A simple, typographic symbol with the dates 1989 and 2019, written in the Solidaryca typeface, is combined with the name of the city. It makes a reference to the election of 1989, during which the “Solidarity” logo was omnipresent and clearly indicated who was worth voting for. From this project, I extracted the sign “2019,” which appeared on the cover of your magazine. I wish it could unify people and – considering the great importance of the double election in Poland – I wish it could encourage them to vote.

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**Jerzy Janiszewski** – independent graphic designer. Graduated from the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, Faculty of Graphic Design. Author of the “Solidarity” logo, one of the most recognisable symbols in the world. In 1982, during the martial law, he emigrated to the Federal Republic of Germany, and in 1983 to Paris, where he was given an artistic scholarship and a studio. In 1996 he returned to Poland. He founded the “Ograf” studio in Sopot. In 1998 he left for Barcelona, from where he moved to La Coruña. Since 1986 he has been implementing outdoor installations

made of thousands of ribbons, integrated with the urban space of the city (e.g. “Concerto for Ribbons” in 2012 in Gdańsk, “Łódź Concerto” in 2016). He has presented his works in Poland and abroad, e.g. in Paris, Barcelona, Venice, NYC. His solo exhibition in Washington (Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art Gallery) was recognised by Washington Post as one of the most interesting exhibitions in 2012. Winner of numerous prizes. In 2006 Jerzy Janiszewski was awarded the Knight’s Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta, and in 2011 he was honoured with the “Neptuny” Prize of the Mayor of Gdańsk.



**“Concerto for Ribbons”, Gdańsk, Węglowy Square, 2018**