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## Sensitive Recording as a Form of Life: The Case of Ryszard Siwiec's Message

**Abstract:** By analyzing the biography of Ryszard Siwiec's recording of his message, we explore the function and changing identity of sensitive sound recordings, and the ethics of handling them. In our view, sensitive recordings are linked to the experiences of trauma, exclusion, and injustice of those whose voices were recorded and the community they were part of. A recording may also be considered sensitive if it is used in a racist context or for other stigmatizing practices. Sensitive recordings are "difficult," sometimes "troubling," but also "moving"; they stir emotions. Although sensitive recordings are associated with physical and social death and exclusion, we view them and what is recorded on them as a form of life. Each recording has its own biography and agency, becomes an active actor in a complex social network, and is subject to the actions of other actors. Our analyses of the biography of Siwiec's recording reveal its affective and emotional power, its role as a carrier of family and national memory, its changing identity, and its agency in shaping the identities of its listeners. We would like to argue that sensitive recordings require attentive and sensitive listening. This kind of listening becomes an ethical postulate that results from a concern for those whose voices are made public, the author of the recording, and the recording itself.

**Keywords:** Ryszard Siwiec, self-immolation, sound recording, biography of sound recording, sensitive sound recording

In 1924, Józef Piłsudski stood in front of a strange tube that "stole" his voice. In a short recording the Marshal says: "[my voice] will separate from me and go somewhere in the world without me, its owner. It is hard not to laugh at the strange situation where Mr. Piłsudski's voice will find itself. [...] It makes me laugh out loud that this poor voice, suddenly separated from me, is no longer my property. The funniest thing is that when I am no longer around, Mr Piłsudski's voice will be

sold for three groszes somewhere at a fair.”<sup>1</sup> This humorous speech contains several important observations that are closely related to the function, ontology, and ethics of sound recordings. Announcing his invention, Thomas A. Edison pointed to its documentary function, which made it possible to record and hear the voices of important figures, politicians, artists, and writers long after they passed away. The possibility of voice recording is a way of “sonic embalming,”<sup>2</sup> immortalizing those who passed away, a struggle against the inevitability of death. Playing back the recording is a kind of spiritualistic séance through which the dead are present. This ability to conjure up the past world makes recordings carriers of memory and correlates of heritage. They have an affective potential to evoke emotions, even if their content does not seem particularly significant.

Piłsudski refers to the ontology of recording by reflecting upon the nature of his voice captured by the recorder. The voice separates from its source, loses connection with the body, and in that sense becomes autonomous (“it will separate from me and go somewhere in the world without me, its owner”). What is a recorded sound if it is not a property of its source? Does the breaking of this relationship mean that the identity of the sound changes completely? Does the voice captured by the recorder still belong to Piłsudski? The questions posed herein are related to the ontology of the recorded sound rather than the ontology of the recording itself, in which sound is materialized. In the present paper, we would like to reflect upon the ontic status of the recording in relation to specific cultural practices (especially listening practices) that actualize a certain identity of the recording, and thus a certain way of existence.<sup>3</sup> The specific identity of the recording, as explored herein, arises out of the entire network of relations it is entangled in. Analyzing the status of the recording, we ask, for example, whether it is a document, a collector’s item, a source for research, a relic, a work of art, a commodity, or material for further processing? Perhaps its status largely depends on the answer to the question of who/what is being recorded. However, we believe that even getting an answer does not conclusively resolve this question. Recordings have different identities related to their individual biographies, in which their different uses (social and cultural practices) and contexts (social, cultural, political, economic) come to the fore. The contexts and uses of recordings also affect their status as a correlate of heritage, which can be “difficult heritage” (S. Macdonald),<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9QYAOQg29M> (accessed 22.02.2022).

<sup>2</sup> J. Sterne, *Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham–London 2006, p. 294.

<sup>3</sup> This approach to the ontic status of the recording was inspired by Ewa Klekot’s article entitled “Tożsamość rzeczy.” See E. Klekot, “Tożsamość rzeczy,” *Kultura Współczesna* 3, 2008, pp. 91–100.

<sup>4</sup> S. Macdonald, “Is ‘Difficult Heritage’ Still ‘Difficult’? Why Public Acknowledgement of Past Perpetration May No Longer Be So Unsettling to Collective Identities,” *Museum International* 67, 2016, nos. 1–4, pp. 6–22.

“orphan heritage” (J. Price),<sup>5</sup> or “sensitive heritage,” “that is, as being felt and remembered through violent histories, (re)lived through traumatic experiences, and (re)enacted through the affective relationships between people and material entities” (P. Schorch).<sup>6</sup> As can already be seen, the way the recording functions is closely related to ethical questions, including those suggested by the Marshal. To whom does the recording belong? Who has the right to dispose of it — its author or the one whose voice was recorded? When does it become unethical to use a recording? What are the conditions for ethical acquisition and sharing of recordings? Thus, can every recording be a commodity (“The funniest thing is that when I am no longer around, Mr Piłsudski’s voice will be sold for three groszes somewhere at a fair”)? How to handle sensitive recordings, and do they require any special listening mode?<sup>7</sup>

With focus on the three core issues outlined in this article, we would like to take the above-mentioned concept of “sensitive heritage” as a basis for discussing what we refer to as “sensitive recordings.” Our analysis will be based on the 1968 recording of Ryszard Siwiec’s message, which is classified as a sensitive recording.<sup>8</sup>

The genesis of each recording should always be placed within a particular historical, social, political and cultural context. This particular/local context can be seen as a field of tensions that are shaped by social and political forces, cultural norms, and values viewed on a macro scale. When considered in this way, the genesis reveals the political, social, and cultural agency of the recording. By defining recordings as sensitive, we would like to pay more attention to the context of their creation, which makes them carry a whole baggage of traumatic experiences. This can be exemplified by ethnomusicological recordings — during the colonial period, they were acquired in a context that often could be considered a “context of injustice.”<sup>9</sup> Sensitive recordings are linked to the experiences of trauma, exclusion, and injustice of those whose voices were recorded, or, a little more broadly, the com-

<sup>5</sup> J. Price, “Orphan Heritage: Issues in Managing the Heritage of the Great War in Northern France and Belgium,” *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 1, 2005, no. 1, p. 182.

<sup>6</sup> P. Schorch, “Sensitive Heritage: Ethnographic Museums, Provenance Research, and the Potentialities of Restitutions,” *Museum and Society* 18, 2020, no. 1, pp. 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v18i1.3459>.

<sup>7</sup> We believe that the questions posed herein can be included in the field of acoustethics proposed in this volume by Jacek Smolicki.

<sup>8</sup> This recording has already been examined by Sławomir Wiczorek in his article. See S. Wiczorek, “Nieusłyszane nagranie Ryszarda Siwca,” [in:] *Rok 1968 — kultura, sztuka, polityka*, eds. P. Zwierzchowski, D. Mazur, J. Szczutkowska, Bydgoszcz 2019, pp. 301–312. This article refers back to some of the earlier conclusions, but places the recording of Ryszard Siwiec within a new theoretical context as well as raises questions about his biography, changing identity, and ethical issues related to its uses.

<sup>9</sup> On the “context of injustice,” see “Human Remains in Museums and Collections: A Critical Engagement with the ‘Recommendations for the Care of Humans Remains in Museums and

munity they were part of. A recording can sometimes be considered sensitive when it is used in a racist context (as evidence of a supposedly inferior status of a given ethnic group) or for other stigmatizing practices. Sensitive recordings are “difficult,” sometimes “troubling,” and but also “moving”; they stir emotions. Their political power, including the formative one, comes from the weakness of those whose voices and sound worlds these recordings captured. Since they evoke affects and emotions and store memories of traumatic experience, they may be used instrumentally in historical and identity politics as well as in managing the emotions of audiences.<sup>10</sup>

Although sensitive recordings are related to physical death, social death, and exclusion, we would like to see them as a form of life, which is revived with each playback and use of the recording. We would also like to view the recording as a form of life that has its own biography and is alive, that is, has agency, is an active actor in a complex social network, and is subject to the actions of other actors.

## Ryszard Siwiec’s Recording

The above-mentioned functions, modes of existence, and ethics of sensitive recordings can be illustrated by reconstructing the biography of Ryszard Siwiec’s recording of his message. On 8 September 1968, during a harvest festival in Warsaw, he committed an act of self-immolation in the stands of the Tenth Anniversary Stadium.<sup>11</sup> The harvest festival was one of the largest annual celebrations of communist propaganda, attended by leaders of the ruling party with the then

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Collections’ of the German Museums Association,” *Historisches Forum* 21, 2017, [https://www.car-mah.berlin/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/HistFor\\_21\\_2017.pdf](https://www.car-mah.berlin/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/HistFor_21_2017.pdf) (accessed 20.02.2022).

<sup>10</sup> The problematic use of sensitive recordings in the manipulation of audiences was brought to our attention by the reviewer of this article and we would like to thank him for that at this point. Studying the biographies of such recordings can reveal the spectrum of manipulation, as well as the functions they can serve. An interesting example is provided by Gustavus Stadler’s analysis of fabricated recordings of African American lynchings (G. Stadler, “Never Heard Such a Thing: Lynching and Phonographic Modernity,” *Social Text* 28, 2010, no. 1(102), pp. 87–105), whose affective potential enabled them to be commoditized and used in racial discourse. Since recordings are strictly related to the context in which they were made and the source of the sound, they can be viewed as carriers of memory, historical sources, and evidence. Their functions depend on the motivations and goals of their users. Some of them, since sensitive recordings are related to trauma and exclusion, will be seen as unethical.

<sup>11</sup> For more information on Ryszard Siwiec, the circumstances of his self-immolation, and the transformations of the memory of his act, see G. Ziółkowski, *Okrutny teatr samospaleń. Protesty samobójcze w ogniu i ich echa w kulturze współczesnej*, Poznań 2018, pp. 357–412; *Całopalny. Protest Ryszarda Siwca*, eds. A. Dębska, B. Kaliski, Warszawa 2013; R. Kulmiński, *Tu pali się ktoś. Ryszard Siwiec. Jan Palach. Zdeněk Adamec*, Kraków 2016; Petr Błažek, *Ryszard Siwiec 1909–1968*, Warszawa 2010; J. Izdebski, M. Krzanicki, *Krzyk szarego człowieka. Ryszard Siwiec 1909–1968*, ebook available at [www.ryszardsiwiec.com](http://www.ryszardsiwiec.com) (accessed 20.02.2022).

First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), Władysław Gomułka, and an audience of thousands who came to the capital from all over the country. After the flames were put out, Siwiec was taken to the hospital, where he died a few days later at the age of 59. He had travelled to Warsaw from Przemyśl, where he lived and worked as an accountant for many years. Before the outbreak of World War II, he graduated from Lviv University with a degree in philosophy, and during the war he joined the underground Home Army. Known for his radical anti-communist beliefs, he refused to work as a history teacher at school so as not to teach falsified Polish history; he also prepared and distributed leaflets opposing the communist authorities. Siwiec's act is most often presented today as a protest against the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia, which took place less than three weeks before his self-immolation. Leaflets in which he protested against "the unprovoked aggression on the brotherly country of Czechoslovakia" were found scattered around the Tenth Anniversary Stadium.<sup>12</sup> Others condemned the moral condition of the modern world, which was full of lies, hatred, and evil. Siwiec's decision to commit suicide was made at least a few months before the events in Czechoslovakia. In April 1968, he prepared a last will addressed to his family, in which he wrote that he had no chance to survive the planned protest against the "total tyranny of evil, hatred, and lies taking over the world."<sup>13</sup>

Siwiec's drama unfolded during a mass event in front of around 100,000 people. Contrary to his plans, information about the protest did not reach the public opinion, so for years Siwiec and his act remained almost completely forgotten.<sup>14</sup> It was a very different situation from that of Thích Quảng Đức, who set himself on fire in 1963 to protest against the persecution of Buddhists in South Vietnam, or Jan Palach, who in 1969 protested against the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the suppression of the Prague Spring, and the apathy and passivity of his society. The news of their deaths circled the world, causing a stir in many countries, commemoration, and reactions in the art world.<sup>15</sup>

The political breakthrough of 1989 in Central Europe made it possible to recall the story of Siwiec and his act of self-immolation. Maciej Drygas's film and radio diptych devoted to his biography played a key role. Both a documentary film *Usłyszcie mój krzyk* (*Hear My Cry*; 1991) and a radio play *Testament* (1992) were awarded at several film and radio competitions and festivals (for example, the Felix and Prix Italia awards). In his works, Drygas used the accounts of direct witnesses of the self-immolation, recollections of Siwiec's family and friends as well as found archival video footage of Siwiec engulfed in flames made by

<sup>12</sup> As cited in J. Izdebski, M. Krzanicki, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> See "Testament," [in:] J. Izdebski, M. Krzanicki, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> Iwona Kurz wrote inspiringly about the reasons why his protest went unnoticed. See I. Kurz, "Między chrztem a samospaleniem. 'Teatra polskie' drugiej połowy lat 60.," [in:] *1968/PRL/Teatr*, eds. A. Adamiecka-Sitek, M. Kościelniak, G. Niziołek, Warszawa 2016, pp. 23–41.

<sup>15</sup> See G. Ziółkowski, op. cit., pp. 219–310 and 412–471.

the Polish Film Chronicle cameraman, Zbigniew Skoczek.<sup>16</sup> He was the first person to release the excerpts from Siwiec's speech recorded on a reel-to-reel tape.

It is difficult to determine when the recording of Ryszard Siwiec was exactly made. Previous publications mention one, two or four days before the self-immolation.<sup>17</sup> Digital copies of the recording contain only part of the message and they last about 46 minutes.<sup>18</sup> The initial fragment, the duration of which cannot be precisely determined, is missing. Based on the structure of the preserved recording with the clear disproportion between the lengths of the individual parts and the style of the speech (eloquent, abounding in allusions to events from political history and contemporary times), it can be assumed that this was a significant fragment. The recording begins with an incomplete part addressed to Polish society — journalists (5 minutes) and “writers, intellectuals, professors, students and youth.” Siwiec's words addressed to the people of the USSR — first to the authorities (24 minutes, the longest part of the preserved recording) and then to Soviet society — “young people and workers” — are preserved in full (14 minutes).

The content of the message encourages in-depth analyses and interpretations that have not yet been conducted as well as the contextualization of his words in reference to the texts he read and popular beliefs. In the fragment addressed to Polish society, Siwiec juxtaposed the attitude of young people and intellectuals who took part in the March 1968 protests (“a model and an example of patriotism, sacrifice, nobility, and loyalty to the ideals of freedom”) with the behaviour of the regime's journalists and propagandists who commented upon these events (“traitors and sellouts”). Siwiec also calls on journalists to abandon opportunism and lies and to join the supporters of democratic reforms of socialism in Poland. However, it is the next part of the message that is difficult to interpret because it contains a range of themes, including several moral postulates, opposition to the partitionist policy and the imperialism of the Soviet Union as well as the unmasking of Soviet propaganda. Siwiec's reflections are based on the belief that there are universal laws of historical progress, which are grounded in Christian ethics. While listening to his message, one can notice that the references to the Warsaw Pact's attack on Czechoslovakia are entangled in a broader context. In Siwiec's view, “the world is on the edge of an abyss,” and the present

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>18</sup> Description of the recording is based on the copies from the archives of Maciej Drygas and the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN): *Nagranie monologu — przesłania do narodu odczytanego przez Ryszarda Siwca. Z taśm Adama Macedońskiego*, IPN Kr 719/16 and IPN Kr 719/17. The IPN file contains a fragment, over one minute long, which is not present in Maciej Drygas's copy. This fragment is also missing in both transcripts of Ryszard Siwiec's speech (see “8 września 1968. Żywa pochodnia na stadionie X-lecia. W trzynastą rocznicę śmierci Ryszarda Siwca wszystkim miłującym prawdę,” ed. W. Siwiec, [n.p.] 1981, pp. 1–11, [in:] J. Izdebski, M. Krzanicki, op. cit., pp. 77–82; P. Błażek, op. cit., pp. 171–185.

time is critical to the future fate of humanity. According to Siwec, depending on the attitude of the USSR's rulers, democratization and liberalization could occur in Central Europe, but the USSR's military invasion can actually be viewed as a sign of the Cold War's transition to a hot phase. One future scenario which he considered possible involved a nuclear catastrophe, triggered intentionally or accidentally,<sup>19</sup> a "horrible, barbaric annihilation of civilization" when "in a moment, the globe will flare up with an explosion of hydrogen bombs and will be covered with a cloud of radioactive fungus," leading to the "agonizing death of two-thirds of humanity" and the destruction of "eighty percent of biological life on earth." Unlike his anti-Sovietism, moral concerns, or opposition to the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the catastrophic thread of Siwec's thought has never really been exposed in memoirs of his person, although source documents point to other signs of Siwec's fear of catastrophe, which are not present in the recording.<sup>20</sup> The reasons for the omission of this aspect need further analysis.

It is difficult to identify the addressee of the last part of the recording, which is the shortest fragment and lasts only about a minute. Siwec does not separate it from the previous one, as he did earlier, with a clear pause. The final part of the message opens with the words: "People! People! Wake up! Young people, the future of the nation," "People, who have not yet forgotten the most beautiful word on earth — mother!" This passage is completely different from the others. Up to this point, Siwec reads the text of his speech quite calmly, without emphasis, and raises his voice only a few times on such words as "SOS," "traitors," "disgrace," and "Targowica." One minute before the end of the recording, the speech becomes completely different. His voice breaks on the word "mother," one can hear restrained crying, despair, and dramatic silence. Siwec begins to shout, abandoning all the historiosophical references and political analyses. For the first time, he refers to himself as "an average, ordinary man" who "loves freedom more than anything" and calls: "Wake up! It is not too late!"<sup>21</sup> This leads to the question

<sup>19</sup> Therefore, they fit into two of the five main scenarios of a nuclear explosion. See L.M. Nijakowski, *Świat po apokalipsie. Społeczeństwo w świetle postapokaliptycznych tekstów*, Warszawa 2018, pp. 126–127.

<sup>20</sup> Grzegorz Ziółkowski pointed out that on his way to Warsaw, Siwec had with him the book *Letters from the End of the World*, an account of the Hiroshima bombing. In a letter written on the train to his wife he wrote: "for the truth not to be forgotten, for humanity and freedom — I'm dying. But it's the lesser of two evils — like the death of millions." See G. Ziółkowski, op. cit., p. 392. At the hospital, Siwec, while being secretly recorded by the security service, said: "let's stop the hand poised over the button that can bring about the annihilation of half of humanity." "Wypowiedzi Ryszarda Siwca — nagrane i odtworzone z taśmy minifonu w dniu 10 września 1968," as cited in J. Izdebski, M. Krzanicki, op. cit., p. 61.

<sup>21</sup> Full transcript: "People! People! Wake up! Young people, the future of all nations, don't let yourself be murdered every 20 years so that some -isms could or could not rule the world. Don't let yourself be murdered so that one group of people or another could gain total power. People, who have not yet forgotten the most beautiful word on earth — mother! [long pause] People, who

of whether the sudden change in the last part of the recording occurred because he saw the tape ending on the recorder, which meant that recording time was coming to an end.<sup>22</sup>

## Biography of the Recording

The biography of the recording is complex, dynamic, and multi-stage.<sup>23</sup> Over fifty years since its inception, the recording has changed its status, identity, and function several times under various political, social, and technological circumstances. Siwec's message, an expression of his anti-totalitarian beliefs, was hidden as potential evidence of a crime and became a family keepsake, or perhaps even a relic, which played a key role in restoring his memory. The recording got corrupted, which resulted in the loss of initial fragments, and the medium was changed — from analog to digital, and from audio to written. Therefore, we can distinguish at least four fundamental stages in its biography. The first stage marks the making of a tape recording by Siwec and includes the time it was stored by his friend. The second stage begins when the tape is handed over to the family, who uses it to recall the story of Siwec's self-immolation. In the next stage, fragments of the recording are made public in the two works by Maciej Drygas. In the final stage, the fragments employed by the director are separated from the diptych and start to function as digital files which various musicians, sound artists, and history popularizers use online as samples. The metonymic relationship between the recording and the dramatic act of its author makes it a sensitive, that is, difficult and troublesome, recording, which also proved to be "fragile." This is what it was like for its author, his friends and family, as well as the listeners, including researchers. Today, this recording problematizes and to some extent questions the obvious narrative in which the figure of Ryszard Siwec is a significant element in the Polish memory of the People's Republic of Poland, the public resistance against the regime, and the Warsaw Pact "intervention" in Czechoslovakia.

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still have a spark of humanity and feelings, wake up! Hear my cry, a cry of an average, ordinary man, a son of the nation who loves his own and other people's freedom more than anything, more than his own life! Wake up! It's not too late!"

<sup>22</sup> See S. Wieczorek, op. cit., p. 311.

<sup>23</sup> This approach to the biography of the recording was inspired by Igor Kopytoff's paper "The Cultural Biography of Things." See I. Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," [in:] *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai, Cambridge 1986, pp. 64–94.



## Planned Life

Although some of the circumstances in which the recording was made are well-known, the reason for making it is still not clear. Why did Siwiec record his message using a tape recorder? This was a fancy and rare piece of equipment in Poland then. According to Władysław Mazur, a direct witness of the event, this is why the recording was made at the Fredreum amateur theatre in Przemyśl that had a tape recorder, and with the help of others: “On Saturday evening [7.09.1968] I went to the castle where I found Siwiec and his friend Major Stefan Żółtowski, a director and actor of the Fredreum theatre. Ryszard turned on the tape recorder and started to read his essay from a typewritten page.” Years later, Mazur also recalled the emotions that accompanied Siwiec during the recording of his monologue: “Some sentences were corrected and others were completed with new words. Sometimes his voice broke and eyes filled with tears.”<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting here that although the entire recording is generally perceived as highly affective and emotional, such a perception seems to be justified only in the last part.

According to Maciej Drygas, after the recording was made, Siwiec left the tape with Mazur, who became “extremely frightened” after the self-immolation, so he hid the tape and did not return to it for a long time.<sup>25</sup> He did not decide to hand it over to Radio Free Europe, which, according to Łukasz Kamiński, was Siwiec’s wish.<sup>26</sup> Only in this way could the anti-communist message be heard by the wide audience to which it was addressed.<sup>27</sup> Siwiec hoped, as Kamiński convincingly explained, that thanks to the presence of a mass audience, journalists, and a radio broadcast, the information about his self-immolation would reach the public, and the broadcast of the tape smuggled to the West would become a source of knowledge about the reasons for his protest.

Although Mazur did not send the tape, several months after Palach’s self-immolation he informed Radio Free Europe about Siwiec’s act in an anonymous

<sup>24</sup> W. Mazur, as cited in *Calopalny*, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> M. Drygas, as cited in an episode of Alicja Grembowicz’s radio broadcast *Spotkanie z reportażem*: “Usłyszycie mój krzyk! Samospalenie Ryszarda Siwca,” Polskie Radio, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/39/156/Artykul/679910,Uslyszycie-moj-krzyk-Samospalenie-Ryszarda-Siwca> (accessed 5.02.2022).

<sup>26</sup> See Ł. Kamiński, “Przeciw totalnej tyranii zła. Ryszard Siwiec (1909–1968),” *Pamięć.pl* 9, 2013, p. 49, <https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/tematy/czechoslowacja/34873,Przeciw-totalnej-tyranii-zla-Ryszard-Siwiec-19091968.html> (accessed 5.02.2022). However, the historian did not support his thesis with references. See S. Wiczorek, *op. cit.*, pp. 305–306.

<sup>27</sup> In her book *Musical Solidarities*, Andrea F. Bohlman suggests that only in the early 1980s, political (strong democratic opposition), technological (reel-to-reel tapes replaced with cassette tapes) and economic (the availability of tape recorders) changes paved way for the development of the Polish opposition’s cassette culture, which was based on the production and independent distribution of anti-regime recordings. See A.F. Bohlman, *Musical Solidarities: Political Action and Music in Late Twentieth-Century Poland*, New York 2020.

letter. He was probably afraid that the broadcast of the tape could lead the security services to him. It is an ethical obligation to protect sensitive recordings, and perhaps for this reason he decided not to destroy the tape. By becoming its custodian and guardian, he saved it and, according to Wit Siwec,<sup>28</sup> finally handed it over to his family. However, we still don't know why the initial fragment of the recording is missing. Was it a defect of the tape recorder or the tape? Was it intentionally deleted because of its content, for example, because it exposed the presence of other people or the location of recording? The life of the recording was not planned by its author, the message was not preserved in full, and only after many years was it made public.

## Dramatization of Genesis

After the tape found its way to Siwec's family, it became a potentially dangerous keepsake that could not be shown or played freely to others and had to stay hidden. Adam Macedoński,<sup>29</sup> the author of articles about Siwec that were published, among others, in the Parisian *Kultura* (1988) and *Przekrój* (two years later), wrote about "saving [the recording] from searches." The tape was also a special gift or "the greatest treasure," as Wit Siwec said years later,<sup>30</sup> which obliged those who had it to fulfil the will of the donor by spreading its message and protecting it. This was the only way for Siwec and his act to become better known and enter the public consciousness. The first attempt to make the recorded message public was a brochure with the transcript prepared by the family on the thirteenth anniversary of Siwec's self-immolation in September 1981. It was published in unofficial circulation during the period commonly referred to today as the "carnival of Solidarity," which lasted from August 1980, when the August Agreements were signed in Gdańsk, to December 1981, when martial law was introduced. During this time, victims of the communist regime were also commemorated in the public space, for example, the monument to the workers murdered in December 1970 was unveiled in Gdańsk.<sup>31</sup> The brochure called on "all truth-lovers" to honour the memory of Ryszard Siwec's act, making him a hero and a moral authority, especially for the younger generation. "By searching for the truth," the publication was meant to help them to "make a choice,"<sup>32</sup> as the note says.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Wit Siwec, TVP Info, *Info Poranek*, 8.09.2013.

<sup>29</sup> A. Macedoński, "Ta śmierć nie może być... niepotrzebna," *Przekrój* 23, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR4wctch1W4> (accessed 31.05.2022).

<sup>31</sup> The sonic dimension of the monument unveiling ceremony was discussed by Andrea Bohleman in the work cited above.

<sup>32</sup> "8 września 1968," op. cit., pp. 1, 11, [in:] J. Izdebski, M. Krzanicki, op. cit., pp. 76, 82.

The brochure also includes a text by Wit Siwiec, who describes the circumstances of his father's self-immolation, presents his own version of the recording's genesis, and paints a heroic (and inconsistent with the facts) picture of the protest with Siwiec engulfed in flames running towards the leaders of the People's Republic of Poland and disturbing the joyful atmosphere of the harvest festival. Even the recording process itself, which he described as a spontaneous, unplanned event taking place in the hospital after Siwiec set himself on fire and was taken from the stadium, was heroic and even solemn. He requested a priest, "then called the entire staff of the Surgical Clinic to him and asked for a tape recorder. And once his requests were fulfilled, he spoke to those present. [The transcript of the recording]. Only after he fell silent, he was taken to an isolation room where the doctors took care of him."<sup>33</sup> Wit Siwiec dramatized the tape recording by evoking the topos of the last words spoken by the dying along with their whole semantic and emotional dimension.<sup>34</sup> The description adopts a biblical style and even quotes a verse from the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus sends out the Twelve Apostles (Mark 6:7), "[a]nd he called to him" — the recording of the speech becomes an act of transmitting the message from a teacher to the disciples. The image painted in the brochure emphasizes the sacrifice Siwiec made to record the message and presents the circumstances of the recording in a way that gives greater weight to his words.

This way of describing the recording was later reproduced by Adam Macedoński, who in the article published in *Kultura* places the moment of recording even later, right before Siwiec's death: "before his death, he asked for a tape recorder to be brought in and called the hospital staff to his bedside. Then, he delivered his protest manifesto against the rule of the Soviet Union and the invasion of Czechoslovakia."<sup>35</sup> In the second article Macedoński introduces one more element to dramatize the genesis of the recording — a whisper. According to him, Siwiec "managed to whisper his message into a recorder's microphone before he died."<sup>36</sup> Whispering appears as an appropriate emotional register to utter one's last words. Reading the transcript of Siwiec's speech, one could not help but notice that the recording process described by his son and Adam Macedoński is their imaginary creation. The length, style, and nature of the message undermine their versions of events. The imaginary genesis of the recording may have resulted from either

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 3, 10.

<sup>34</sup> This notion refers back to the very beginnings of phonography because, as already mentioned, recording members of one's own family and famous figures of the time was one of the many uses of the phonograph introduced and advertised by Thomas A. Edison. See T.A. Edison, "The Phonograph and Its Future," *North American Review* 126, 1878, no. 262, p. 187. However, Jonathan Sterne called the possibility of preserving the voice of the dead speaker "a defining figure in early accounts of sound recording"; see also J. Sterne, op. cit., p. 287.

<sup>35</sup> A. Macedoński, "20-ta rocznica najazdu na Czechosłowację," *Kultura* 10, 1988, p. 109.

<sup>36</sup> A. Macedoński, "Ta śmierć nie może być..." p. 5.

the author's ignorance about the circumstances of the recording<sup>37</sup> or his desire to maintain a coherent, heroic narrative about the self-immolation and its circumstances.

## Fragmentation and Popularization

The family made the recording available to people who wanted to find out more about Siwiec's act. In 1988 Adam Macedoński wrote: "I have part of the speech (also about Czechoslovakia) recorded on tape at my home in Kraków (Siwiec's family let me copy it),"<sup>38</sup> which meant another change of the recording medium from the reel-to-reel tape to the then-popular compact cassette. Later, it was made available to Maciej Drygas for his documentary film and radio play. It was then that the recording got a second life because the fragmented message was integrated into a film and radio play as one of their many components. In the film *Hear My Cry*, one scene features the material carrier of the original recording, a reel-to-reel tape. It has a piece of paper saying the word "Father" and, along with his other belongings (a burnt book, photographs, and a map), is laid out on a table "like an altar draped in a pristine white cloth."<sup>39</sup> This shot preserves the tape as a family relic. In the film, excerpts from Siwiec's recording appear right after Father Józef Tischner's reflection on the voice of conscience as the final instance deciding on the ethics of human behaviour. "If I saw that this was the voice of his conscience, I would have to acknowledge it," says Father Tischner, acting here as a kind of confessor. In response to his words, fragments of the message are heard in the film for the first (and only) time. The recording is integrated into the film narrative as the voice of Siwiec's conscience, implying what might have led him to commit this act. The three-minute speech was made up from five different fragments of the message. Although only the last fragment was preserved without cuts, the speech sounds like a seamless whole, as the use of editing was not indicated in any way. Siwiec addresses the authorities and citizens of the USSR, the Soviet empire based on violence, harm, and injustice, opposes the slogans of communist propaganda, and, fighting back tears, calls on people to wake up. The fragments of the recording were not cleaned of distortions and noise as the director wanted to

<sup>37</sup> In the radio broadcast, Wit Siwiec talked about how he learned about his father's last days while preparing the brochure: "When I found out how my father really died, I started gathering accounts and information that I believed was true; that people were telling me how it was; how it happened. Time has proven I was wrong," Wit Siwiec, as cited in "Stadion Narodowy im. Ryszarda Siwca? Nikt, tak głośno nie powiedział 'nie' systemowi," Polskie Radio, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/7/15/Artykul/927804,Stadion-Narodowy-im-Ryszarda-Siwca-Nikt-tak-glosno-nie-powiedzial-nie-systemowi> (accessed 5.02.2022).

<sup>38</sup> A. Macedoński, "20-ta rocznica," p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> M. Drygas, "'Usłyszcie mój krzyk.' Lista montażowa," *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1, 1993, p. 50.

emphasize the time distance and unreality of the voice.<sup>40</sup> In the film, the recording is accompanied by images from archival video footage found by Drygas and shot at the Tenth Anniversary Stadium on 8 September 1968. Although Siwiec is not shown yet (his burning figure appears at the very end of the video as a dramatic finale), we can see the reactions of the people gathered around him — gestures of surprise, dismay, running away from the fire, and attempts to put it out.<sup>41</sup> For obvious reasons, the director was allowed to use more excerpts from the message in the radio play *Testament*. The excerpts from the footage were complemented by comments on the behaviour of Polish society during the March events and the invasion of Czechoslovakia and a protest against this attack addressed to the authorities of the USSR. In the radio play, the theme of the invasion as the direct motivation behind Siwiec's act is emphasized through the use of excerpts from various documentary recordings. We can hear Gomułka's voice justifying the Warsaw Pact's intervention, the Prague radio informing the public that foreign armies have crossed the border, the sounds of tanks, explosions, and marching soldiers, as well as the Czechoslovak national anthem. Just like in the documentary, the finale of the radio play, which is the climax of the whole narrative, juxtaposes two different fragments of the message: the one about the inevitable collapse of the USSR, which, with the premiere of the radio play in 1992, became a fulfilled prophecy, as well as the last minute of the recording, which is the most emotionally powerful part. These fragments do not feature Paweł Szymański's "mournful" music, as Grzegorz Ziółkowski described it,<sup>42</sup> which accompanied all the other excerpts from the tape.

## Samples

Maciej Drygas's works laid the ground for the next stage of the recording's functioning. After the fragments put together by the director were digitized and made available online, they started to be used as samples, which were extracted from the original works. Today, they are available on a website dedicated to Siwiec<sup>43</sup> and can also be downloaded as mp3 files from a popular Polish hosting service. Several videos are available on YouTube, where videos of the self-immolation, including the one shot at the stadium by the security service and found only in 2001 in the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance,

<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>41</sup> On 8 September 2013, this fragment of the film was screened at the empty National Stadium in Warsaw as part of the 45th anniversary of the self-immolation and as part of the unsuccessful efforts to name the stadium after Ryszard Siwiec. For more information about the ceremony and efforts, see G. Ziółkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 402–403.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.ryszardsiwiec.com/czlowiek-pl.html> (accessed 5.02.2022).

are accompanied by the final minute-long fragment of the recording — Ryszard Siwiec’s emotional appeal. The recording was also used in two sound works by Michał Turowski, who goes by the pseudonym of Gazawat — *Ryszard Siwiec Set Himself Ablaze During One of the Harvest Festival Dances*, and *Živé Pochodně*<sup>44</sup> — as well as in Dawid Hallmann’s piece *Cena*.<sup>45</sup> Both artists quote the same words of Siwiec; however, the aesthetics, the ideological message, and the artistic contexts of their compositions are completely different.<sup>46</sup>

Dawid Hallmann is the author of CDs on Polish history of the 20th century that commemorate the victims of totalitarianisms, anti-communist partisans of the post-war era, and key figures in the history of the Church and the nation. Gazawat (Michał Turowski) releases a number of recordings that refer to wars in Chechnya, the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, the Beslan massacre, torture at Abu Ghraib prison, and serial killers. The author concentrates on the drastic and tragic nature of these events, but does not place them in the context of the nation’s history or collective memory, nor does he use them to evoke patriotic feelings.

Dawid Hallmann and Michał Turowski took different approaches to the original recording. Hallmann fragmented Siwiec’s message. Sentences were formed into single, repetitive phrases, and some words were distorted and looped. A phrase from Siwiec’s monologue was used as a refrain, which reinforces an anti-Soviet message: “no price is too high for preventing this regime from taking over the world.” Hallmann told us that he was searching for “evocative and memorable fragments,” which made working on Siwiec’s recording “not so hard.”<sup>47</sup> Turowski placed Siwiec’s recording at the end of his two works as a conclusion, just like Drygas did in his radio play. When Siwiec’s voice appears, the sonic background gradually fades away, so that the last sentences of the message have no accompaniment. Also, both composers represent completely different musical aesthetics. Characterized by a clear bass beat and fast pace, Hallmann’s piece loosely refers to dubstep, a genre of electronic dance music. In Turowski’s work, the sonic elements play out very slowly and in the background. Noise elements, the sound of fire, and disturbing short motifs interweave with the lines from Maciej Drygas’s film. Such a sonic framing of Siwiec’s story grew out of the composer’s declared

<sup>44</sup> The tracks are available on Bandcamp: <https://gazawat.bandcamp.com>. Track durations are 20’22” and 28’34”. The work *Ryszard Siwiec Set Himself Ablaze* was composed for the artist’s 2016 tour, while *Živé Pochodně* is a recording of a concert that was held in Prague before the official start of the aforementioned tour and was based on the specially prepared audio material, which was dedicated to Jan Palach.

<sup>45</sup> The piece is available on Dawid Hallmann’s website: <http://hallmann.art.pl/cieplyoddech.html> and was composed in 2014 as *Cena (Tribute to Ryszard Siwiec)*. Duration is 3’19”. In 2016, it was included in the album *Cieply oddech (Warm Breath)*, which revolves around the works of Zbigniew Herbert.

<sup>46</sup> We would like to thank Michał Turowski and Dawid Hallmann for answering our questions about their works.

<sup>47</sup> Email conversation (16.02.2022).

principle of coherence between the narrative and musical layers.<sup>48</sup> Turowski's and Hallmann's works share the need to reinforce the sonic message by using the image of Siwiec engulfed in flames. During concerts, the performance of the work *Ryszard Siwiec Set Himself Ablaze* was accompanied by a screening of a looped fragment of Drygas's film, while the original version of *Cena*, posted on YouTube, uses a frame from the film, which was found in the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance.<sup>49</sup>

*Cena* features not only the voice of Siwiec, but also an excerpt from a recording of Zbigniew Herbert reading his poem *To the Hungarians*: "we stand at the border / we stand at the border / we stand at the border / called reason / and we look into the fire / and admire death."<sup>50</sup> The poem was written in 1956 in response to the Soviet military intervention in Hungary. This juxtaposition can be viewed as an attempt to reflect the different responses of the poet and Ryszard Siwiec to the suppression of democratic and anti-Soviet protests in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Herbert's poem expressing helplessness in the face of Soviet aggression is contrasted with the act of self-immolation of an "ordinary man." The use of the poet's words can also be seen as a kind of contemporary commentary on Siwiec's act, emphasizing its radicalism and heroism. In Turowski's *Živé Pochodně*, in addition to many testimonies excerpted from Drygas's film, the section devoted to Palach includes comments on the situation in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Jan Palach himself, as well as critical reflections on his act through the lens of the contemporary generation. What comes to the foreground is the sound of Jan Palach's voice recorded in the hospital after his self-immolation. In the piece, his weak, unclear, afflicted, falling to a whisper, struggling to breathe voice is juxtaposed with Siwiec's voice that is full of determination, screaming, and breaking with despair. In this way, the work becomes part of the Polish narrative commemorating Siwiec as the "Polish Palach."<sup>51</sup>

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The analysis of the biography of Ryszard Siwiec's recording reveals its agency and changing identity. As a sensitive recording, it evoked affects and emotions in various social, political, and cultural contexts as well as sought to develop its potential to become a carrier of family and national memory. Over the course of its life, it functioned as a dangerous object, a gift, a family heirloom, a relic,

<sup>48</sup> Email conversation (3.02.2022).

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WHSNISOQms> (accessed 5.02.2022).

<sup>50</sup> Z. Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. B. Carpenter, J. Carpenter, Oxford 1977, pp. 28–29.

<sup>51</sup> For an analysis of how Siwiec is commemorated in Poland and inscribed into the Polish-Czech context, see S. Stach, "An Ordinary Man, a National Hero, a Polish Palach? Some Thoughts on the Memorialization of Ryszard Siwiec in the Czech-Polish Context," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 113, 2016, pp. 295–313, <https://doi.org/10.12775/APH.2016.113.11>.

a carrier of memory, an archival source, and material used in artistic practices, so that it could shape the identity of its listeners: the depositaries, guardians, and performers of the recorded message. The agency of the recording also resides in its metonymic relationship with Ryszard Siwiec's act of self-immolation and its function as a medium of his voice and voices of other people who were present during the recording. At this point, we would like to emphasize the significance of the voice, as the possibility of hearing determines the impact of the recording. The voice is "the author's affective sign,"<sup>52</sup> and "an intense sign of presence, allowing us to experience the author himself." As Dominik Antonik writes, this encounter develops a sense of deep connection and an "intimate, vocal relationship"<sup>53</sup> between the listener and the narrator with an affective and emotional dimension to it. Along the same line of thinking, it can be said that the "[m]ateriality of the voice [...] makes the listener shift their attention from the meaning towards the affective experience of the author's identity."<sup>54</sup> Does this mean that the content of the recorded message is irrelevant and that "understanding lags behind the affective experience of the author — as affect intensifies, the critical ability weakens"?<sup>55</sup> In our view, the discursive aspect of the recording, even if it comes only after the experience, deserves the listener's attention as much as the experience of the author's identity. The transition from experience to meaning and from voice to speech, may be considered a moral obligation of listeners to those whose voices they are hearing. Here we touch upon the complex ethical issues related to the treatment of sensitive recordings, which can be viewed as traces of the presence of what is recorded on them and often as testimonies of the harm suffered; they need to be preserved, disseminated, and have their integrity ensured. Sensitive recordings require attentive and sensitive listening. What would this postulate mean in relation to Ryszard Siwiec's tape? First of all, it is important to listen to the full version of Ryszard Siwiec's message, and not only to the fragments that were framed, edited, or processed by others. To make it possible, it is necessary to publish the entire recording in audio form, along with a full transcript and critical commentary.<sup>56</sup> Attentive and sensitive listening to Siwiec's monologue means listening not only to the whole verbal content, but also to the sound layer of the recording. This is a kind of listening that pays attention to the missing beginning of the transcript (as indicated by the unclear first recorded word), several other unintelligible fragments,<sup>57</sup> slip-ups for which Siwiec apologizes, as well as hesitations, and longer pauses between the parts. It registers all

<sup>52</sup> D. Antonik, "Audiobook. Od brzmienia słów do głosu autora," *Teksty Drugie* 5, 2015, p. 137.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> We are grateful to the article reviewer for this suggestion.

<sup>57</sup> In the last minute, for example, it is difficult to tell whether Siwiec said "izby" or "schizmy" or "izmy," and "krzyż" or "syn" of the nation.



sound indicators of emotional states (screaming, crying, holding back tears), including anxiety, calm, and despair. It captures the evident presence of others in the location of recording (manifested by coughs, sighs, clinking glass), as well as specific sound effects resulting from technical conditions — distortions, interferences, hums, and crackles. Sensitive and attentive listening involves “deep” listening and penetrating the ambiguous layers of the recording in search of meaning. It gives rise to a multitude of questions and doubts and, consequently, restraint in making judgements about Siwiec himself, his message, and its uses, also in historical politics. Having knowledge about the recording’s biography, its changing statuses and functions, its relations with various social actors, the dynamics of its popularity, and its incompleteness might prove helpful. Sensitive and attentive listening stems from a concern for those whose voices the recording makes available, for its author, and for the recording itself.

*Translated by Agata Klichowska*

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