

Diplomat Zdzislaw M. Rurarz; Defected From Poland to U.S.

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Zdzislaw M. Rurarz, 76, the Polish ambassador to Japan who defected to the United States in 1981 to protest his homeland's imposition of martial law, died of cancer Jan. 21 at Inova Fairfax Hospital. He lived in Reston.

Mr. Rurarz, once the very model of a Polish diplomat, grew disillusioned and became an eloquent critic of the communist government of Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski. The general, tiring of the agitation of the Solidarity labor union and fearing Soviet armed intervention, imposed martial law, suspended Solidarity and arrested many of its leaders Dec. 13, 1981.

That action precipitated the defection of Mr. Rurarz and the Polish ambassador to the United States, Romuald Spasowski.

Tried in absentia on charges of high treason, Mr. Rurarz was sentenced to death, his Polish citizenship was revoked and his Warsaw home was turned into a children's nursery. He took precautions but continued to speak out against the regime until Jaruzelski resigned in 1990.

"No one will be able to say that I participated in a war against my own nation," he said.

Within days of defecting, Mr. Rurarz told a congressional panel that the imposition of martial law was "a declaration of war by the government against the nation." The military authorities in Poland

were "a puppet junta" whose strings were pulled from "behind the walls of the Kremlin," he said. He urged the United States to tell Moscow and Warsaw: "No trade, no food, no credits. . . . Feed this system with your grains, and one day you yourselves will be bitten."

Mr. Rurarz's message of outrage resonated as the Western world nervously watched the situation in Poland because it came from a man who until then had devoted his life to working within the communist government.

Although he had been an ambassador for only 10 months when he defected, Mr. Rurarz had been a member of the Communist Party since he was a teenager. Born into a working-class family in the small town of Pionki, Poland, Mr. Rurarz received a doctorate in economics from the Main School of Planning and Statistics in Warsaw in 1962.

He then worked as the economic attache to the Polish Embassy in Washington as the country's permanent representative to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in Geneva. He subsequently served as personal economic adviser to Poland's Communist Party chief Edward Gierek and as chief economic adviser to the foreign minister.

He returned to his alma mater to teach economics and to obtain a post-doctoral degree in international trade in 1970. He wrote seven books in Polish and another that was translated into Japanese

and Korean. In retirement, he contributed to Polish emigre newspapers and publications and worked on his memoirs.

Mr. Rurarz said his first serious doubts about the Soviet system arose during the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1968, when, after a period of liberalization, the Soviet Union and five Eastern Bloc nations invaded the country. Over time, in his own country, Mr. Rurarz came to support the Solidarity labor movement, even publicly hosting its leader, Lech Walesa, in Tokyo in early 1981.

By then Mr. Rurarz knew that the government was losing patience with the movement's demands for democracy, so it was no surprise to him when he learned that martial law would be declared in the winter of 1981, when the Polish people would be at their coldest, hungriest and most exhausted. Mr. Rurarz planned to defect with his wife and daughter as soon as martial law was announced.

But escape was delayed because his dog, Toofy, a member of the family for 15 years, became critically ill. The family waited as the dog slowly died, and then waited two more days until he was cremated and an urn for his ashes was procured.

Finally, on Christmas Eve, Mr. Rurarz told embassy personnel that his family was going to attend a school Christmas party. They slipped out and walked to the U.S. Embassy, where they asked U.S.



BY JEFF TAYLOR — ASSOCIATED PRESS

Zdzislaw Rurarz, right, is joined by wife Janina and daughter Ewa at a Capitol Hill hearing. They defected in 1981.

Ambassador Mike Mansfield for asylum. It was quickly granted.

Their defection was kept secret for 30 hours until they were aboard a U.S.-bound jet. President Ronald Reagan, during a televised Christmas message, had urged Americans to place a lighted candle in their windows to show support for Poles' freedom. Mr. Rurarz told Congress days later how moving the sight of those candles was as he and his family were driven from Dulles International Airport into Washington.

The Polish government, embarrassed by the high-profile defection of two ambassadors, sentenced Spasowski and Mr. Rurarz

to death in absentia in 1982. Mr. Rurarz, flanked by two guards, told the press: "I do not take this sentence lightly. There have been many examples over the years of death sentences being carried out in other countries against exiles from communism."

After his appearance before Congress, Mr. Rurarz spent the rest of his life speaking out on behalf of Polish freedom, addressing Polish American groups and lecturing before university audiences across the country. He became a consultant to the U.S. government and to think tanks.

"I do not stay quiet," Mr. Rurarz said a year after defecting. "I con-

sider this a, let's say, war. I still speak out. Otherwise, there would have been no sense in defecting. I could have stayed quiet in Poland."

Survivors include his wife of 52 years, Janina Rurarz of Reston; his daughter, Ewa Rurarz-Huygens of Reston; and two granddaughters.

Mr. Rurarz was not able to fully savor the fall of the communist government because he remained skeptical of the democratization changes that brought Walesa to the Polish presidency in 1990. Mr. Rurarz's death sentence was never lifted, his citizenship was never restored and his property remained out of his hands. He never returned to his homeland.