

## Halina Mikołajska

**"More than anything I am afraid of being afraid"**

**Marek :** This is what Polish actress Halina Mikołajska said about herself. Her monument stands today in one of Warsaw's parks, although she probably wouldn't want it. She didn't consider herself a hero. When she realized what a hypocritical reality she was living in, she decided to oppose it. And the fight against the communist regime brought her to the edge of suicide.

**Bartłomiej :** Halina Mikołajska, was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1925 in Kraków. Her father was an officer in the army of the Second Polish Republic - a country that had only just regained its independence, but was not to enjoy it for long. When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, Poland was divided between two totalitarian regimes - Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Halina, together with her mother and three sisters, moved to Lviv, which had fallen into the hands of the Soviets. Even then, at the age of fifteen, she made it clear – she wasn't to stay indifferent to the political situation of the world around her. The organisers of the propaganda for the Labour Day celebrations must have been shocked when they came for the portraits of Lenin and Marx held in the school's storeroom – only to find them covered in black paint by Halina. After this incident, she and her family moved back to Krakow.

Halina's father never returned from the war, and after her sister's sudden death, her mother couldn't bear the heartbreak and lost interest in the house and her other daughters. Halina was then performing in Kraków's Underground Theatre. During the war, the cultural life of Poles was strictly controlled by the German occupiers, so the creation of secret theatre centres became a common occurrence. However, she couldn't fully devote herself to acting. To support her family financially, she got involved in the illegal cigarette trade. Besides, deep down, she dreamt of becoming a singer.

From the young age, she was an extremely strong and curious person. She was passionate not only about art, but also about natural sciences. Inspired by the achievements of the Polish Nobel Prize winner Maria Skłodowska-Curie, she studied chemistry at Jagiellonian University for a while. Theatre, however, never really left her mind.



**Kinga:** Once, shortly after the war, I was reading aloud *The Great Improvisation* at my boyfriend's house. His mother heard me and said that if she had such a talent, she would go to theatre school. At this he became indignant: he said "my wife will never be an actress". We had a big fight and even split up for a while. And then, to spite him, I got into drama school.

**Marek :** Her career path took her to the stage of the Stary Theatre in Krakow, where she immediately achieved great success. Even before receiving her diploma, she played Eurydice in *Orpheus* and Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello* – which brought delight to both audiences and critics alike.

In 1950 Mikołajska moved to Warsaw. She not only played in the theatre but also started to appear in films, which increased her fame and recognition. It was then that Halina's greatest weakness became apparent, which was being notoriously late for rehearsals:

**Kinga :** It's probably some kind of disability. Really, because I don't want to be late. I'm the only person that doesn't have a sense of time. It's especially bad in the mornings. I've had a lot of trouble because of it: theatre directors have imposed disciplinary penalties on me. Director Dejmek even got me sacked from the theatre for constantly being late.

**Marek :** After two failed marriages, in 1955 she finally got engaged to the true love of her life - Polish novelist and reporter named Marian Brandys, with whom she remained for the rest of her life. They had no children of their own, but Halina's niece lived with them, and the couple treated her as their daughter. However, the family's happiness was not meant to last in communist reality.

**Bartłomiej :** In June 1967, US-backed Israel defeated a coalition of Egypt, Jordan and Syria in six days. The Soviet Union, which was sympathetic to the Arab states, launched a campaign against the Jewish citizens of its state. Other Eastern Bloc countries, including Poland, were forced to follow. Although a large part of the population stated with joy that "our Jews beat their Arabs", the party leaders of the communist regime weren't at all laughing. An anti-Zionist campaign began, resulting in thirteen thousand Poles of Jewish origin leaving the country.

At that time, Halina went with her husband Marian on their first holiday together. At the sanatorium, the actress had dinner in the company of a priest. Marian was lying upstairs -



his asthma was bothering him. - The food is delicious – the priest said – the room is comfortable and clean, and most importantly: there is not a single Jew in the entire sanatorium.

**Kinga :- Actually, there is. My husband.**

**Bartłomiej :** In his diary, Marian wrote that since then Halina based her opinion on someone's decency by their attitude towards Jews. The year 1968 became a turning point in her life. From then on Halina's opposition to the reality around her continually grew.

In the 1970s, the actress began to become firmly involved in social issues. She openly admitted that her motivation was not political but moral. She did not agree with the violation of human rights, harassment and imprisonment of people who were considered politically inconvenient. She was prompted to act by Bogusław Drewniak's book titled Theatre and Film of the Third Reich. It made her realise that she was merely a cog in the great propaganda machine. Shocked, she wrote to her husband:

**Kinga :** I believed that the actors were telling the truth, I was imagining something about a mission. Awards and banquets, not so much with Goebbels as with Bierut, Sikorski or Cyrankiewicz. I was part of a certain disgusting monopoly, a monopoly of propaganda; and the truths most worthy of defence were subordinated to a single ideology, in the name of which people were murdered and imprisoned. Oh, I know! No one judges me so harshly, I was apolitical, and I was just an actress. We are somehow absolved of responsibility for the past and the present: jesters, people to be hired?

**Marek :** In 1975, without hesitation, she put her signature under a letter from 59 intellectuals opposing a planned constitutional amendments. The alliance with the Soviet Union was to be inviolable, and Poland was to be ruled forever by the communist party. Mikołajska stated briefly:

**Kinga :** 'I feel the rising tide of shit and I feel that it is still possible to make a gesture'.

**Marek :** In June of 1976 a wave of workers' strikes started in Radom, Ursus and Plock in response to sudden rise of food prices, that doubled or even tripled over the night. In a centrally controlled economy, it was the party that decided how much would the product cost, so in the



face of a growing state debt, products that was most often bought became more expensive. The authorities had only one answer for the strikers: workers were arrested, fired from factories and punished with a wolf ticket, which in the communist reality meant being deprived of work for the rest of their lives.

In response to the June events was the creation of the Workers' Defence Committee, of which Halina became one of the first activists. She travelled to trials of strikers and collected money for the families of those imprisoned. She acted as a press secretary. While visiting Western European countries, she also collected funds, informing emigrants and representatives of world culture about the situation of the opposition in Poland. Together with her husband, she made her flat available to organisers of opposition meetings and women in need.

**Bartłomiej** : Her activities didn't go unnoticed by the security service. By signing the Letter of 59, she sealed her fate and her life was to never be the same. Halina's name was put on the censor's list, which prevented her from appearing in state theatres, radio or television and doomed her further acting career. She had to choose between keeping her job and being moral - and so she did, but the consequences of this decision went much further. She was constantly receiving threatening or silent phone calls. Threats whispered in an indistinct voice. She was harassed at home, the locks on her doors were taped. There was even a simulated attack when she was alone on a night train. She received letters containing absurd accusations and threatening her with death. Her car remained constantly broken down because someone was always puncturing the tyres, dousing it with paint or setting it on fire.

Despite overwhelming support from admirers, letters and bouquets of red and white flowers, Mikołajska was falling into an increasing mental breakdown. On Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> of November 1972, Marian Brandys noted in his diary: "She cried for a long time, desperately cuddled up to me. She said: **'If I didn't have you, I would kill myself'**." Four years later, in December 1976, she swallowed forty pills of Valium. In her farewell letter she wrote: **"More than anything I am afraid of being afraid"**. She was saved, but the first days after her suicide attempt were a true nightmare. Her husband recalled: "She defended herself desperately against returning to life. She screamed that she had to do it because she could no longer live this all-encompassing lie. She was in a state of acute shock."

**Marek** : In August of 1980 the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarity was formed, in which ten million Poles became involved within months. At a concert celebrating the



registration of Solidarity, Mikołajska was greeted with thunderous applause. At the time, she responded with a distant:

**Kinga : "I'm hanging from the stage like a national banner".**

**Marek :** Solidarity was the largest opposition organisation in the Eastern Bloc, but the joy of its creation was short-lived. On 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1981, martial law was unconstitutionally imposed in Poland. The movement of ten million people was metaphorically smashed by the caterpillars of the tanks that appeared in the streets all over the country. Halina, like thousands of other opposition activists, was interned, i.e. forcibly imprisoned in a detention centre, where she was constantly under surveillance and repressions.

She was released only after five months thanks to the intercession of the acting community. After each of her performances, she was showered with flowers and rewarded with ovations lasting several minutes each. However, this could not stop her from deciding to end her career. As she herself explained:

**Kinga : I came out of internment in 1982 and was immediately engaged in the Polish Theatre by Dejmek. It wasn't that I didn't have any job offers at the time. That possibility of returning to the theatre existed and probably still exists. But I voluntarily withdrew from the professional movement, from practising my profession. I did so for many reasons, including personal ones.**

**Marek :** After her retirement, Halina Mikołajska began performing as a one-woman theatre group in churches and private homes. Her shows were primarily religious in nature or presented poems banned by the censors. One of these may have been the one written by Wiesław Kazaniecki:

**Kinga : And one talks a little about this**

**The life that will come, oh surely it will come**

**No doubt, and already forty years close to**

**A dyed dream, mostly red**

**Bartłomiej :** Halina Mikołajska spent the last days of her life in hospital, where she lost her battle to breast cancer. Shortly before her death, she lived to see the first partly free elections



after the Second World War. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1989, despite her poor health, she was carried on a stretcher to the polling station set up in the hospital. She died less than three weeks later, on 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1989.

She was a self-confident woman ready to fight for her values - equality and respect for others. Although her resistance to the communist regime cost her her acting career and meant a life of suffering and repression, she remained true to her ideals to the end, becoming an inspiration to many. "She was a walking remorse of our environment". - Andrzej Łapicki stated years later. When most actors preferred to remain silent and sit with their heads down, Halina Mikołajska would raise her head and shout loudly, believing she could make a difference. The words of Polish Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz, engraved on the actress's monument, fully reflect her life attitude: **"In the moment of history, when nothing depends on man, everything depends on man"**.

