

How to be a Fashionable Woman in the Reality of Communist Poland

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Abstract:

For almost 50 years (1944-1989) Polish society has functioned within a communist system. Following a worldwide fashion was a real challenge for Polish women and it turned out that that only creativity could help in being fashionable.

Shortly after the Second World War problems connected with shortages were combined with an influence of the intrusive ideology of Stalinism, very critical to Western fashion. Nevertheless many women ignored criticism of the governing communist party. The golden age of personal tailoring began as a reaction against pure quality of garments available in shops.

In the 1970s large-scale borrowings from the West led to a relative prosperity, but even then handicraft remained extremely important. When the western money had finished society had to face a crisis of 1980s. Store shelves were deserted, and women started to make the most original or even bizarre artistic clothes, using the most unexpected materials.

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Poland under communist rule (1944–1989)

Poland became a country dependant on the Soviet Union in 1944. For almost 50 years Polish society was functioning within a communist system. The authorities claimed the right to intervene in every aspect of citizens' lives. People started to search for freedom in various areas of contemporary culture. Following a worldwide fashion was a real challenge for those Polish women who wanted to continue traditions of pre-war elegance. Their clothes preserved in museum and private collections prove that they were able to look like exotic flowers against a background of an ugly communist reality. Strong determination of Polish women to be fashionable inspired the exhibition entitled “Fashionable in Communist Poland”, which was held in the National Museum in Krakow and in the National Museum in Wroclaw (2015-2016). During researches conducted together with my colleague from Wroclaw, Małgorzata Moźdzynska-Nawotka, we discovered many objects of self-made fashion, which show that caring about a fashionable look was extremely important. Following western fashion was a way to express independence and individuality – virtues that were unwelcome in the country governed by communist ideology of equality. Women were supposed to work for prosperity and happiness of their communist mother country and not to lose time for beautification. Health, strength and practicality were the most valuable virtues of a communist woman. The situation varied from decade to decade, but being fashionable was always problematic from the point of view of communist ideologists. In the country of the dictatorship of the proletariat elegance was perceived a manifestation of bourgeois lifestyle.

Re-cycled tailoring in Poland after the Second World War

Poland was dramatically destroyed during the Second World War and many people were deprived from their homes, properties or even personal belongings. Nevertheless, together with peace hope for a better life was born. Women wanted to look beautiful hoping for a happy new life, with beloved men by their side. It was very difficult in the impoverished society. Shortly after the war, garments were made of few available materials or were re-

tailored from older clothes. The results were sometimes excellent. Recycling became the best solution. Shortages lead to invention. One of the most popular recycled materials were parachutes or silk escape maps, which were a part of allied pilots equipment. Parachutes were very graceful object of experiments. Surprisingly not only a silk or nylon canopy was used. On the exhibition “Fashionable in Communist Poland” it was possible to find a delicate blouse carefully knitted of silk taken from suspension lines (private collection). Sometimes stories connected with clothes are particularly moving. In the collections of the National Museum in Krakow “wandering shoes” are preserved – it is a pair of very elegant wine red suede pumps bought by a Polish soldier in Egypt (according to family tradition) and brought to Poland as a present for his wife. The soldier fought under the famous Polish general Władysław Anders, and we can imagine elegant women’s shoes resting quietly in the war camp during the strong battle of Monte Cassino in 1944. Another story is connected with a battledress-style jacket made of parachute nylon (fig. 1).



Fig. 1:
Jacket made from parachute, Krakow 1945. The National Museum in Krakow.
Photo: Karol Kowalik, Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Krakow, stylization Sara Damm

The material was brought as a present by Lieutnat Franciszek Macak, who served under the command of General Stanislaw Maczek, commander of the Polish tank troops, which bravely fought during invasion in Normandy, in the battle of Falaise and were crucial military units to free the Netherlands and Belgium. The jacket was made by Teresa Siedlar-Kołyško (born 1929), who during the war was a member of the Gray Rank (the codename of the Polish Scouting Association, which was a part of the resistance movement) and the battledress-style garment was both fashion-able and useful, as a substitute for a scout uniform. A very useful source of costume materials was aid given by UNRRA. Sometimes clothes found in the parcels sent by this organization were inadequate to harsh reality, but they could be re-tailored – for example on the exhibition “Fashionable in Communist Poland” it was possible to admire a beautiful all-purpose dress made of a silk dressing robe (private collections). Unfortunately some of the most astonishing post-war creations survived only in memories – a skirt assembled of seventeen black silk SS ties or trapeze shape coats made of chequered woollen blankets sent by UNRRA.

Communist Garments contra Bourgeois Fashion

Problems connected with shortages were combined with an influence of the intrusive ideology of Stalinism, critical to the Western fashion as ridiculous, impractical and incompatible with needs of working women. Elegance became a dangerous manifestation of a sentiment for pre-war Poland or for capitalism. It happened that women who dressed too fashionably had to face hate of the crowd. The governing communist party (PZPR) had very good tools to influence the minds of society, especially those of the lower classes – poorly educated and eager to listen to promises of a better life within the communist system. For many of them one of the most pleasing advantages of the system was equalisation of all members of society, and depreciation of higher classes. It meant that simple workers or peasants did not have to admire the rich and try to become similar to them. Fortunately, even in such unfavourable circumstances many women were faithful to old values – most of them were coming from the intelligentsia, the nobility or the bourgeoisie. They were equal to others by the means of wealth but different in the sphere of aspirations.

The intriguing painting “Figures” by Wojciech Fangor (1950) shows a worker and two women (fig. 2). The first one is a strong working woman in a blue overall – and it is *her* who is the partner for the man, not a lovely “kitten” with red lips and nails, in sunglasses, wearing fashionable clothes. Nevertheless Polish women preferred that criticised look.



Fig. 2:
Wojciech Fangor, Figures, 1950. Art Museum in Łódź

Journalists were ridiculing western fashion while at the same time describing it precisely enough to enable Polish women to follow it. Very often it was hard because of the bad quality and ugliness of garments sold in shops. Acquaintance with a skilled seamstress was a treasure. A characteristic feature of the fashion world in Poland during the first decades after the war was the lack of great designers. Making money on fashion and promoting one's own name was impossible in the communist country. Traditions of craftsmanship were preserved by tailors and seamstresses who had been trained in their art before the war, in the democratic country. Thanks to them it was possible to meet women on Polish streets dressed according to the latest fashion trends, inspired by Dior, Chanel or Balmain. Perfect cut characterises the creations of Anastazja Kotlarska, a seamstress from Krakow. A red chequered woollen suit made by her, consisting of a semi-fitted jacket and pleated skirt is obviously inspired by Dior's New Look (collections of the National Museum in Krakow, fig. 3). We can observe that clothes made in Poland in 1950s were less extravagant and more practical than those worn in the West. A softer and more natural silhouette was also the result of shortages – it was very difficult to obtain materials necessary to stiffen bodices or to make skirts fuller.



Fig. 3:
Anastazja Kotlarska, Red suit, circa 1950, given by Maria Taszycka in 2006.
The National Museum in Krakow. Photo: Jacek Złoczowski, Studio of the National Museum in Krakow,
stylization Sara Damm, models Beata Augustyniak, Martyna Szopa

Self-made elegance (1956-1970)

In 1956 Stalinism had collapsed and a period of “small stabilization” began in Poland. Life was easier, but not so much. The golden age of personal tailoring was born while the production of state-owned clothing factories was of rather pure quality. But deficiency led to creativity. A good example is a knitted suit (collections of the National Museum in Krakow): the machine made skirt, bought in a state-owned shop, was too big (it was the only size

possible to obtain by the client) and some wool was taken from it to make a hand-knit sweater in reversed colour combination – quite an innovative idea then (fig. 4). It is worth stressing that the ability to knit, crochet, sew or embroider persisted among Polish women until the end of communism in Poland. Self-made clothes were very popular and the skilled “everywoman” was able to compensate by herself the lack of good quality ready-made garments. Independent seamstresses formed an indispensable part of the Polish fashion world. Most of them were working on the black market. In the museum collections there are many garments created by them. The exhibition “Fashionable in Communist Poland” presented a navy blue lace dress made for Polish composer Krystyna Moszumańska-Nazar or a peacock-blue taffeta dress with cap sleeves and a pencil skirt which could be completely altered into an extravagant ball gown by adding a matching bolero jacket, a wide overskirt and a sash with a big bow (both in the collections of the National Museum in Krakow). Another source of fashionable clothes were parcels sent by family living in capitalist countries – western clothes “from parcels” were admired and became important articles sold on flea markets.



Fig. 4:
 Fragment of the exhibition “Fashionable in Communist Poland”. In the center a Norwegian style suit, ca. 1967.
 The National Museum in Krakow. Photo: Mirosław Żak, Studio of the National Museum in Krakow,
 exhibition design Elżbieta Szurpicka

Few craftsmen were trying to work legally, which was quite a challenge. Private artisans were obliged to follow many rules, sometimes absurd, sometimes written just to oppress “private initiative”. Very nice examples of private craftsmanship are preserved in Polish collections, which are worth mentioning, are a yellow lace turban and gloves made by a Krakow modiste for a civil marriage celebration (collections of the National Museum in Krakow) and shoes for the twentieth anniversary of Polish People’s Republic made by Bruno Kamiński (private collection of the shoemaker’s nephew).

The sensibility of Polish women for Western fashion trends was particularly visible when “mini” was born. “Mini” skirts and dresses appeared in Poland as early as in 1963. A very

good example from the collections of the National Museum in Krakow is an off-shoulder black mini ball dress made in a Krakow cooperative. “Mini” fashion was also a very good solution for communist economy, because women could use quite small amounts of fabrics to be fashionable. When “maxi” started becoming “en vogue” in the beginning of the 1970s it provoked the reaction of rulers who wanted to prevent journalists and designers from popularizing this wasteful fashion.

Barbara Hoff – the most influential Polish designer

In 1950s the greatest individualist among Polish designers had appeared – Barbara Hoff. Her mission was to make Polish women fashionable and not let them to look like “soviet women”. Longing for western fashion was supposed to be a first step to hanker after western freedom. As a journalist she advised women how to use the few available fabrics or garments to look great. Simple sketches helped to understand fashion lines. She taught “How to fashionize” *old dresses* drawing old silhouettes with a blue line and “fashionizing” them with a black one, she searched for fashionable fabrics in Polish shops and was able to find cretonne for aprons (to make a summer dress), batiste for curtains or chequered taffeta for umbrellas (to make a dancing dress) or striped fabric for sunbeds (to make shorts). According to her men’s undergarments were perfect for making stylish blouses and ugly tennis shoes could almost magically be changed into fashionable, yet unavailable ballerinas. At the end of the 1960s Barbara Hoff started designing for state-owned clothing factories under her own name and developed a label “Hoffland”. This was a very unusual situation in communist countries. It is hard to believe, but for the first 13 years of designer work she had not been paid – she earned her living as a journalist. Barbara Hoff clothes were always fashionable (which wasn’t so common in ailing communist economy, always late, at least one or two years). For a very long time the only place where it was possible to buy Barbara Hoff garments was only one department store in Warsaw – easily recognisable thanks to long queues of women dreaming about really fashionable and comfortable clothes. It is interesting that during the exhibition “Fashionable in Communist Poland” “Hoffland” clothes were appreciated mostly by male visitors, who liked their functionality (fig. 5).



Fig. 5:
“Hoffland”, pink overall, 1979. The National Museum in Warsaw. Photo: Jacek Świdorski, Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Krakow, stylization Sara Damm, model Martyna Szopa

Luxury for the few – The socialist fashion house „Moda Polska” (1958-1998)

The official state fashion house called “Moda Polska” (“Polish Fashion”) was created in 1958 to influence the state production and represent Polish communist fashion abroad. Poland was lucky to have Jadwiga Grabowska as an art director of this institution. This lady was fascinated with French elegance and the most important designer for her was Coco Chanel. As a result the official fashion house of the communist country was promoting most of all a bourgeois style, at least until the retirement of Jadwiga Grabowska in 1968. From that moment a team of young designers started to dictate fashion in “Moda Polska”. They were much more open for extravagant trends. The team consisted mostly of female designers: Irena Biegańska, Krystyna Dziak, Magda Ignar, Kalina Paroll (fig. 6), Krystyna Wasylkowska, responsible for different types of design. The most expressive personality was Jerzy Antkowiak, a theatre and opera lover. His unusual creations were perfect for theatrical fashion shows.



Fig. 6:
Kalina Paroll design, “Moda Polska” in collaboration with the silk factory in Milanówek, 1979.
The National Museum in Krakow. Photo: Mirosław Żak, Photographic Studio of the National
Museum in Krakow, stylization Sara Damm, model Martyna Szopa

„Moda Polska” luxury clothes were made from fabrics brought from Paris. Polish women could only dream about garments of such quality. “Moda Polska” had a net of magazines but with extremely expensive clothes of worse quality (made of Polish fabrics and with simplified cut) than those shown during the fashion shows. The true beneficiaries were wives, daughters and lovers of communist officials. We cannot deny an influence of “Moda Polska” designs on street fashion – “Moda Polska” fashion shows could be seen in cinemas, during short “Film Chronicles” shown prior to a film and were described in detail in journals.

It is a paradox that state-owned “Moda Polska” created luxury fashion for the few while Barbara Hoff, a representative of the former upper class and a member of the intelligentsia was making democratic fashion for everyone.

1970s – Hippie and folk

In the 1970s a policy of opening up to the West had been established. It meant to be a safety valve for the moods of discontent. Large-scale borrowings from the West led to a relative prosperity. It was also a very good time for Polish clothing factories and the quality of offered garments was higher than before. Nice clothes were produced by state factories, such as “Cora” in Warsaw, “Telimena” in “Łódź” or “Dana” in Szczecin. Really good designers were working there, but usually clients didn’t know their names. An exception was Grażyna Hase, model and designer. She worked in “Cora” and was determined enough to make her name well-known, also thanks to her feuilletons published in one of the popular newspapers. She specialized mostly in elegant sporty-style clothes.

Among the greatest desires of Polish youths were western jeans, hardly available and very expensive. It was possible to buy them in state-operated Pewex stores paying with dollars or special coupons. Jeans produced in Poland were hated by young people – they neither looked nor fitted right. But the worst feature of Polish jeans was the bad quality of the fabric – it was impossible to wear them off gradually. They looked like new until the first wholes appeared.

Handicraft was still extremely important, especially if someone wished to follow a fashion inspired by the hippie movement criticized by the authorities. In the collections of the National Museum in Krakow there is a very nice example of a student’s garment – a hand-painted blouse made for juvenilia in Poznań in 1969, with a large heart in the front and naked breast and foot on the back.

In the 1970s very strong folk inspirations could be observed in fashion design. In the communist country it had different connotations. Fascination with Polish folklore was growing thanks to the hippie movement and was also a continuation of the pre-war tendency to appreciate the beauty of country culture. Folk-style embroidery used in self-made garments or utilization of textiles made by traditional country weavers raised from the real delight in folklore (fig. 7). But on the other hand folkloristic inspirations were promoted by the communist state whose ideological foundation was the alliance of workers and peasants. It was the reason why some designers didn’t want to make folk-inspired designs – they were afraid of being suspected of collaboration with the communists.



Fig. 7:
Folk-style blouse, made by Jadwiga Muc, embroidered by her daughter Mirosława Szulc,
Ruda Śląska 1966, given by Mirosława Szulc in 2015.
The National Museum in Krakow. Photo: Jacek Świdorski, Photographic Studio of the
National Museum in Krakow, stylization Sara Damm, model Martyna Szopa

1980s – Crisis, „Solidarity”, time of martial law and personal creativity

When the western money had finished the crisis of the 1980s began. In 1980 social discontent led to the establishment of “Solidarity” – the first independent trade union in the Soviet-bloc country. Two years of hope for freedom came to an end on 13th December 1981 with the imposition of martial law and repressions. People were shocked. “Solidarity” structures became a base for organising the resistance movement. Tension between authority and people was very strong. Society was tired of the crises and manifestations of discontent were common, even if showing hatred of the governing communist party or the Soviet Union could be finalized by imprisoning or even homicide committed by “unknown

murderers”. Women were very active in the resistance movement, but the most visible manifesto of independence and individuality, virtues hated by communist ideology, was the way of dressing up. Store shelves were deserted, and Polish women had to show their creativity in the field of fashion again. Clothes were made of such unexpected materials as diapers or waste wool from carpet production (fig. 8). Original or even bizarre artistic clothes, easy to place within the trend of *wearable art*, contrasted with hopeless reality.



Fig. 8:
Fragment of the exhibition “Fashionable in Communist Poland”. Colourful sweaters made of yarn waste from the carpet factory in Kowary (The National Museum in Wrocław and private collections) and grey and black sweater pieced together from worn-out Shetland wool pullovers (The National Museum in Kraków).
Photo: Mirosław Żak, Studio of the National Museum in Kraków, exhibition design Elżbieta Szurpicka

Conclusion

Analyzing almost 50 years of fashion history in communist Poland proves that the most characteristic feature of Polish fashion world was the creativity of common women. Problems connected with disabled economy developed unusual ingenuity among them and the ability to sew, knit, embroider etc. was widespread. The exhibition “Fashionable in Communist Poland” was supposed to be a tribute to all these women, who used the medium of fashion to make grey reality more colourful and versatile.

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