A spy for Solidarity comes in from

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(Editor's note: Jeff Lilley, 27, was a reporter at The News-Sun for a year in 1986-1987. He recently received his master's degree in Soviet Studies from Johns Hopkins Nitze School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C. This summer he traveled to Poland and Czechoslovakia. Fluent in Russian, he plans to relocate to Moscow soon.)

By JEFF LILLEY

(Third in a six-part series)

When Witek Radwanski walks the corridors of the Polish Ministry of Finance, he carries a remarkable family history deep inside him, a tale intimately connected with the tragic history of his country. But the story remains a mystery to his fellow workers. Soft-spoken and pensive, Witek, 31, prefers to concentrate on the task at hand: Poland's economic reconstruction.

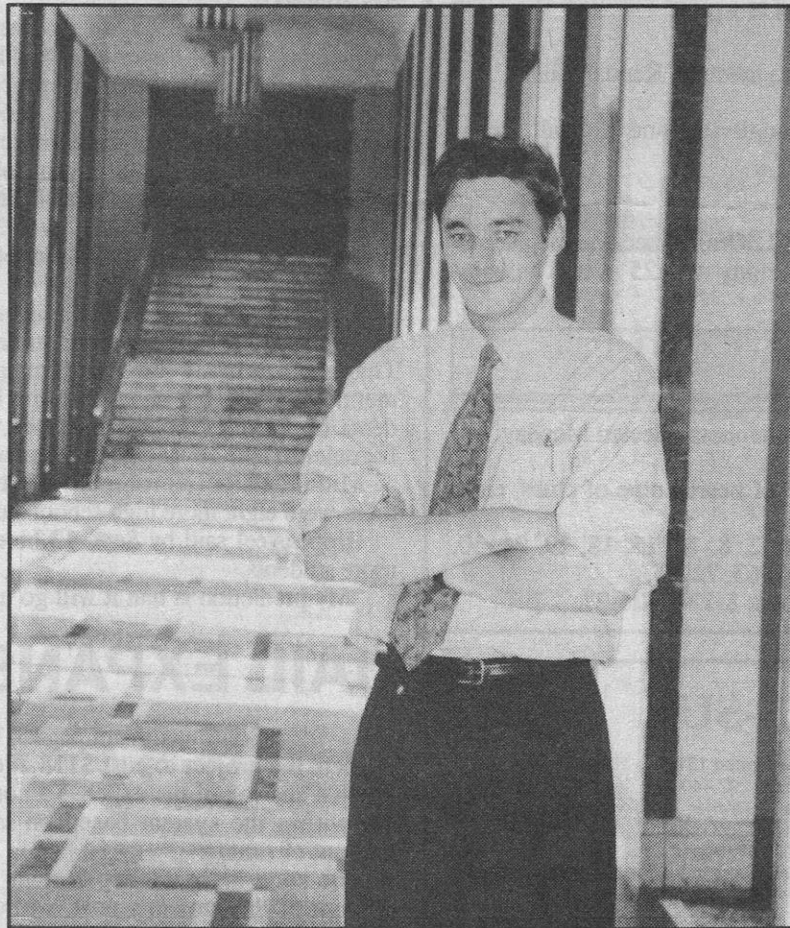
Born in Africa to Polish parents, Witek attended a university in England and is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Johns Hopkins Nitze School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C. His life, however, has been tied up with Poland for the past 10 years. This summer he returned to Poland to work in the Finance Ministry as an adviser to Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz, the architect of Poland's rapid transition to a market economy

There was a time, though, when Witek's life in Poland was much less tranquil. From 1984-1987, he worked as an undercover operative for the trade union Solidarity, the powerful opponent of the communist government forced underground by the declaration of martial law in 1981. Witek was in charge of smuggling operations, which brought printing equipment and books into Poland. Under the guise of a journalist with the European magazine Business International, Witek undertook missions — "James Bond-type adventures" he labels them — which had him escaping from the Polish secret police and the Soviet KGB. The deliveries helped sustain Solidarity during the dark years of the 1980s.

Brave family

By risking his life for his country, Witek was following the lead of his family before him. Like many Polish families, the Radwanskis have an uncommon story of bravery and suffering which goes back to the middle of the last century.

In 1863, Witek's family on his mother's side was part of the small-landed gentry living in a Polish ethnic area of what is now northwestern Russia. During a Polish uprising against the domination of the Russians, who at that time controlled one-third of Poland, an ancestor assassinated the Russian governor. The ancestor was executed, his property confiscated and the family deported to Siberia. It was the first in a long line of tribulations suffered at the hands of Poland's oppressors.



Formerly an undercover operative for Solidarity, Witek Radwanski now works in the Ministry of Finance. He is the latest in a long line of family members to dedicate his life to the struggle for freedom in Poland. (Photo by Jeff Lilley)

The family eked out an existen in Siberia. One son decided become a soldier because,

the cold

Witek's words, it was the only sure way for an ethnic Pole to move up in Russian society. The son became an officer in the czar's army and fought in the Russo-Japanese War at the start of the century. In 1905, he lost a leg in battle and was taken prisoner by the Japanese, a seemingly unfavorable circumstance which turned out to be a boon.

When the Japanese discovered Witek's ancestor was a Pole and not a Russian, they made him an offer: "If you don't escape, we'll allow you to live freely, give you a wooden leg and provide you with the pension of a Japanese officer." He lived freely in Japan until the end of the war, when he returned to Russia.

The fates continued to be in his favor. In Russia he was given a medal for his service, promoted to colonel and allowed to move his family back to European Russia. The family settled in Minsk. At the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917, the daughter of the colonel, Witek's maternal grandmother, was an opera singer on tour in Finland. At the end of World War I, Poland was reconstituted as a free state in accordance with the Treaty of Versailles. From Finland, his grandmother moved back to Poland, which was finally liberated after more than a century of domination by its neighbors.

But Poland's respite was brief.

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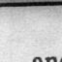

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By the late 1930s, the country was battling attempts by Germany and the Soviet Union to parcel up the country. Witek's uncle was involved in a conspiracy against the Russians. He was arrested and shot by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. The family, which included Witek's mother, Estella, and grandmother, was exiled to Siberia as punishment. Estella was sentenced to 35 years of hard labor in penal camp south of the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk.

But in another quirk of fate, the family was saved by the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Poland became an automatic ally of the Soviet Union now that the U.S.S.R. was itself fighting the Germans. The Soviet government announced an amnesty for all Poles in the Soviet Union. Estella and her mother began the long journey back west across the Soviet Union to try to find Witek's grandfather, who was a prisoner of war in northwestern Russia. But the journey proved too hard on Witek's grandmother, still a young woman, who died en route. Estella, who was at that time a young teen-ager, was left to fend for herself. She managed to get out of the Soviet Union via Persia, traveled to India and wound up in England.

On to England, Africa

During the period when Estella was toiling in Siberia in the early 1940s, Witek's father was fighting in the Polish underground resistance against the Germans. The son of a highly decorated soldier who had escaped Russia after the Russian Civil War in the 1920s, Witek's father had grown up in England. Returning to Poland to fight in the Polish resistance, he was arrested in 1944. After being brutally tortured by the Gestapo, he was sent to the Majdanek death camp. There, with death all around him, he was able to survive because of his allotment of an extra onion daily, earned because he played guitar in the camp orchestra. However, because he was so strong, he was then moved to the Mauthausen labor camp where prisoners were worked to death in stone quarries.

For Witek's father, quickly wasting away and close to death, the horror of the camp ended not a day too soon. As Allied troops approached the camp, they discovered 10,000 bodies in huge mass graves, the victims of death marches and executions. Witek's father was personally liberated by a unit of black American soldiers, a memory he holds close to his heart to this day.

The father found his way back to England where he soon met his future wife, Estella. Following training as a tropical soil specialist, Witek's father moved his family to Africa. He later learned his whole unit of resistance fighters had been killed after the war by the Soviet secret police.

The family's personal tragedy in Poland was not over yet. Witek's paternal grandfather left England to return to Poland with high hopes for the post-war government, but he ended up in a Stalinist camp because he was considered a socialist contaminated by foreign influence. Then, in 1956, on the heels of a liberalizing trend in Poland which included the abandonment of collectivization, more freedom for the church and the rise to power of a Polish nationalist, Witek's family itself returned to Poland. In Witek's words, the decision to go back was "a gross mistake." Disillusioned with life, the family returned to England and readopted the U.K. as its country-in-exile.

Recounting the tale of his family, Witek remarked, "You know, I am the first of five generations not to have been born, exiled to or to have lived in Siberia."

"At least not yet," he added with a wry smile.

New hope for Poland

Witek's decision to tie his life to the future of Poland was motivated by the imposition of martial law in 1981. Following riots in southern Poland, the communist government forced Solidarity underground and arrested many of its prominent leaders.

"It was one of those things that shape a person's life," Witek said, describing his reaction to the martial law declaration. "It was a great shock."

While still a university student in England, Witek became actively involved with Solidarity. Following study for a master's degree, he decided to become an operative. The country's predicament demanded a commitment.

"I decided to get involved with people risking their lives," he said, "because I saw there were many people writing on the situation abroad or directing operations but fewer actually carrying out the missions."

As an operative, Witek carved out a niche from which he couldn't extricate himself. Having worked in the dangerous business for several years, he thought it might be time to pursue the Ph.D. program which he had been delaying. He was too important, though, to the success of the operations.

"It was difficult to leave," he explained, "because the key player in an underground network is everything."

Martial law was lifted in 1988, and Witek returned to London to work as the editor-in-chief of an oil industry newsletter. But he was miserable: Poland was going through historic changes, and he was stuck in London. The historic year of 1989 brought the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. In Poland, the "roundtable negotiations" between Solidarity and the communist government led to free elections and the emergence of the first democratically-elected government in Eastern Europe in 45 years. Witek was trapped. He could not bear to ask his American fiancee Mary, whom he had convinced to join him in England, to pick up and move with him to Poland. But Mary sensed his disappointment.

"One day in a cafe, to my surprise, Mary suggested we move to Poland," Witek recounted.

Thus, in early 1990, the two moved to Warsaw, where Witek began work in the Ministry of Finance. He immediately recognized comrades from the underground, many of whom had assumed important positions in the government. Intellectuals who had been toiling away in insignificant jobs — "gray, clerical types in universities" as Witek calls them — had become ministers. "You read about revolutions and watch them on TV," Witek said, "but they actually do turn people's lives upside down."

Witek's life now is in Poland. He has taken back his Polish citizenship and now travels to promote Poland's economic recovery. To hear Witek speak is to hear a man articulate a powerful sense of mission, a mission which goes back more than a century.

"When I think about family continuity, I think about all those family members who suffered so much and kept coming back to Poland only to suffer more," he said. "I cannot cut the cord because then all their efforts would be meaningless."

In 1989, Witek's father returned to Poland for the first time in 30 years. He took Witek on a tour of Warsaw, pointing out the places where he had fought against the Nazis in the 1940s. "That's where I robbed a store, and on that corner I assassinated an SS man," father told son. Witek in turn showed his father where he had waited for a delivery and where he had escaped from the Polish and Soviet secret police.

Same city, same street corners, events separated by some years, but connected by one family's long history of fighting for Poland's freedom.

Poland has finally earned its freedom, and the challenges for Witek in 1991 are different from those of his ancestors. But their legacy runs deep in this young Polish man. "This is my country," he says with conviction.