



Andrzej Skalimowski
Sigalin. Towarzysz odbudowy
[Sigalin. Comrade architect]

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In recent years, the interest in exploring biographies has increased among researchers working on the historiography of the Polish People's Republic. Such works have been devoted to Jerzy Borejsza, Roman Zambrowski and Jan Józef Lipski, to name but a few. That biographies are being published is of great value not only because we clearly need to educate ourselves on the subject of the lives of the individuals who played an important part in the history of Poland in the second half of the 20th century, but also because they allow us to explore the fate of an individual as both the subject and the object of the processes which were taking place at the time. The biographical genre provides a unique opportunity to present the full scale of the mechanisms in question, which would not be possible if the narrative and historical analysis were limited to an institutional perspective.

Andrzej Skalimowski took advantage of this very opportunity in his book on Józef Sigalin, who functions in the collective mind of society chiefly as the Head Architect of Warsaw during the Stalinist period.

As the basis for the book, the young historian used his doctoral thesis which he defended at the Institute of History, at the Polish Academy of Sciences. Its academic origin is evident from a highly extensive and well-chosen selection of sources. The author has carried out comprehensive research, looking for mentions of Sigalin in both domestic and foreign archives. Worthy of special note is the fact that he managed to locate the architect's family archives. The foreword suggests that in doing so, he might have saved them from fading into oblivion, since following the death of Sigalin's daughter who held on to the archives, the entire legacy of the architect remained locked away in an abandoned and sealed-off apartment. On the basis of the information presented in the book, one may deduce that the archives played a substantial role in the analysis and constituted an important point of reference for the author.

For publishing purposes, the work has been revised and given a more popularizing character, without sacrificing the quality of the

analysis carried out by the author. While presenting Sigalin's life story in a skilful and meticulous manner, Skalimowski avoids getting bogged down in unimportant details. This life story could be seen to a certain extent as one typical of the representatives of the so-called "generation of the Communist Party of Poland." Born in 1909 to Michał and Rozalia Sigalin, the sixth child in a family of largely assimilated Jews, he had a promising future ahead. His grandmother's kefir production company allowed the family to amass a considerable fortune, which in turn secured the means for providing the next generations with higher education. The family business collapsed due to an economic crisis, revealing to young Józef the bitter reality of social order, which had been previously hidden behind the façade of money. Influenced by Stefan Żeromski's books among other things, he developed great empathy for those experiencing oppression and injustice. As a consequence, he started gravitating towards the milieu of the Communist Party of Poland. These ideological inclinations quickly led to his full commitment to underground communist activism. Within the Polish Communist Party, he was a member of the Military Department, to whom the Soviets assigned the task of infiltrating the Polish Army. Sigalin's responsibilities included gathering information about the country's defensive capabilities and the soldiers' morale, as well as writing propaganda leaflets and materials. His ideological position at the time can be described as that of a "steadfast communist," as his world view remained unshaken even when Joseph Stalin dissolved the Communist Party of Poland in 1938. Throughout this time, Sigalin continued to acquire new professional skills and advance his career as an architect, which allowed him to live out his dream of creating purely for the sake of leftist ideals and work in the field which at that time happened to attract many people who shared similar beliefs. This is how he met, for instance, Marian Spychalski.

During the war he survived the Holocaust. Following the outbreak of the war, he fled to the East, despite being saddened by the news of the Soviet invasion of Poland. He was eventually disappointed by the living conditions in the Soviet Union, but the acquaintances he struck up during this time led to his involvement in the political structures for Polish communists that were newly-established by Stalin. Sigalin's stay in the USSR limited his chances of promotion in the party hierarchy. He executed the party's orders but wasn't allowed to join the ranks of the future rulers of the Polish People's Republic. It seems as though he accepted this fate, focusing on architecture as the main area of activism. After the war, he joined the Warsaw Reconstruction Office established with the aim of rebuilding the city of Warsaw from ruins. Thanks to his acquaintance with Bolesław Bierut, Sigalin became the *éminence grise* of the Warsaw Reconstruction Office. By rebuilding the capital, communists hoped to gain authority, following Stalin's remark: "Warsaw is where you must be to rule over Poland." Among the employees of the Warsaw Reconstruction Office

were also people who did not sympathize with the new authorities, which allowed Sigalin to extend his network of contacts. It also explains why he has been remembered in a twofold manner – as Bierut’s spokesperson within the architectural milieu, and as a benefactor who hired people with a “reactionary past” on various positions away from the spotlight. Sigalin’s team built, among other things, the Warsaw w-z Route and the Marszałkowska Housing Estate – structures of both utilitarian and propagandist significance. The Head Architect of Warsaw was in his element: he was creating and organizing a bright future, assisting in the construction of its symbol – the Palace of Culture and Science. What is more, the restoration of the Old Town was also carried out during his time in office.

Skalimowski used in his work the following quote from Sigalin’s book, which aptly summarizes the architect’s motives: “I have tasted what it means to create. I have grasped the meaning of life and consider that a blessing” (p. 291). It is hard not to see the Faustian motif here, as the power to create was granted to him for the price of serving the system of evil. Sigalin’s actions were surmounted on the belief that he was founding modernity. This modernity, however, was just a façade consisting in buildings of “national form and socialist character.” Their cost and purpose were incompatible with the social needs and actual economic capacity of a poor country. Such architecture played a vital role in the process of shaping the identity of a citizen of a Stalinist state. Within this system, Sigalin played the part of the administrator and executor of the will of the communist elites headed by Bierut, who demonstrated an interest in architecture. For this very reason, during the Polish thaw of 1956, Sigalin was heavily criticized alongside doctrinaires promoting Socialist realism such as Edmund Goldzamt. Consequently, he was forced to resign from his position as Head Architect of Warsaw, but he continued to practice his profession until 1973, taking part in various projects, including the construction of the Łazienkowska Thoroughfare. In 1983, while he was dying of cancer in a hospital, he watched the system which was supposed to bring liberation to society enter a period of stagnation. Sigalin passed away with a sense of disappointment regarding the communist party, and with a photograph of John Paul II on his bedside table.

The book penned by Skalimowski is a superb biography of a member of the “generation of the Communist Party of Poland,” which skilfully combines a personal portrait of an individual with the events and processes that shaped his life. It shines a light on this largely forgotten figure, whose role in the history of Warsaw in the second half of the 20th century deserves recognition. The projects supervised by Sigalin shaped the most characteristic parts of the capital. Still present in today’s Warsaw, Sigalin’s buildings constitute a symbolic and very distinctive monument to their creator.

Bartłomiej Kapica

(transl. by Julia Niedzielko)