A touch of Michigan in Warsaw: Hat shop owner Andrzej Zareba received this gift from a teacher at the suburban Detroit seminary. Business "was much better in Communist times. It was tougher to get a store, but business was better."

Looking for Mr. Headgear

and other adventures of a fathead in post-Solidarity Poland

By William J. Mitchell

THE FIRST TIME I WENT TO Poland, I forgot my hat.

It was November 1980, a hell of a time to get careless. A mushrooming new movement called Solidarity was challenging Communism as never before. Moscow was alarmed. Washington was worried.

I was cold.

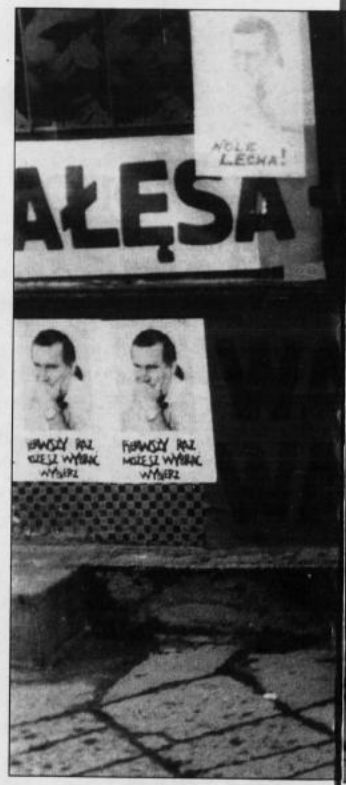
Nie ma problemu, said the taxi driver at the Forum Hotel in Warsaw. No problem. Just head over to Marszalkowska Street. Do yourself some shopping.

Nie ma czapek, said the surly clerk at Moda Polska, the state-run department store. No hats. Instead, I got a crash course in Polish life: empty shops, workers hardly working and a strange language in which *No Problem* meant *Very Big Problem Indeed.*

I never did find a Polish hat in a Polish shop. I bought my hat — a fake fur *papacha* made in the Soviet Union — for 10 American dollars in a makeshift bazaar across the Vistula River. A cheap imitation of the more expensive rabbit or mink hats you see on the heads of Soviet leaders and American foreign correspondents in Moscow.

I loved that hat. It started conversations. It got me stories. It kept me warm. A hat, alas, that was too good to last. Back in Detroit after three years in Europe, I lost it.

Last fall, with a frequent flier coupon about to expire in my pocket, I knew the time had come to replace that hat. Fighting off second thoughts about traveling 10,000 miles on such a mission, I sought reassurance in the notion that Poland is the kind of place where the best way to learn about A and B is to ask about X.



Much looks the same 10 years after an initial visit — old men still gather to talk on the streets of Gdansk. But startling new sights have also appeared, such as the mother and two children begging outside Lech Walesa's campaign headquarters in Warsaw.

So why not? Instead of conducting interviews on the state of the Polish economy and the future of East Bloc democracy, I'd spend a week in Poland looking for a hat. In the process, hopefully, I'd see what difference a decade had made — and get a sense of the Poland to come as well.

ON MY FIRST MORNING BACK, JET LAG jolted me awake long before dawn. *Nie ma problemu;* I was eager to see how things had changed.

Despite the political cataclysm that had occurred since my last visit, nothing *looked* any different when Polish Airlines Flight 266 taxied toward the arrival hall at Okecie Airport a day earlier. The apple-cheeked teenagers wore the same long, brown soldier suits. The articulated transit buses still twisted like snakes across the tarmac, unreplaced by antiseptic jetways from the West.

It sure *felt* different, though, as I approached Passport Control and Customs Inspection, those intimidating passageways from West to East that caused me such concern — and once a brief detention under guard — on my way into various East European countries. Gone, this time, was the dental-chair anxiety that used to come over me as I waited to see whether my visa would be rejected, my passport confiscated, myself locked up, tossed out or otherwise drilled, grilled and forever barred from the socialist Polish People's Republic.

And despite the letters and packages I was carrying for friends as a faster and safer alternative to the Polish Post Office, I barely broke a sweat at Customs. None of that nasty poking around in my bags; no rooting around in my underwear in search of subversive documents; not even a peek at my papers. Just a distracted, backhanded sweep of the hand and, boom, there I was, back in Poland.

FREE PRESS EUROPE CORRESPONDENT Roddy Ray had not been too encouraging about my prospects. He'd been looking for a hat himself, he told me by computer message before I left Detroit, without any luck. Something about the size of Polish hats and American heads. When I spotted him waiting to meet me on the other side of Customs, Roddy's head was bare.

Arriving on the eve of the free elections Solidarity had spent 10 years fighting for, I had not expected to find people dancing on

PHOTOGRAPHS—WILLIAM J. MITCHELL

The recent presidential election originally looked to be a race between Lech Walesa (right) and Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki. But emigre Stanislaw Tyminski came from nowhere to dump Mazowiecki.

Looking for Mr. Headgear

Marszalkowska Street, and I didn't; history has left the Poles warier than that.

What had always struck me as remarkable — and had made Poland my favorite country to cover — were the layers of warmth and humor and courage and enterprise the Poles wore so well beneath their cloak of cynical fatalism. Ten years to the week after my first visit, I was eager to see how freedom fit them.

That first Sunday morning, I clomped out onto the cobblestones of Bednarska Street in front of the pre-war flat the Free Press rents near Old Town. It was 5 a.m. At the taxi stand on Krakowskie Przedmiescie Street, a driver slept behind the wheel with his head back and mouth open. A bus with no passengers rattled around the curve. The few shop windows I spotted looked full. But my chances of finding a hat today — a Sunday and Election Day to boot — looked slim.

The polls would open in an hour. I looked forward to chatting with voters much as I'd done in Detroit or New Hampshire or Germany or — well, a lot of places, but never anywhere in Eastern Europe. Until now, what was the point?

The first time I went to Poland, there was little real debate about who and what was right. Solidarity leader Lech Walesa and Pope John Paul II were the heroes, the Communist Party and the Soviets were the villains. The opposite was so in the deadly dull and predictable state-run media. But years of distrust and hatred of the government had conditioned readers to embrace what the media condemned, and to believe as gospel what it dismissed as nonsense.

Now, public opinion looked as diverse as the newly, almost bizarrely free press. Jerzy Urban, the former government spokesman, had abandoned Communist orthodoxy and taken up publishing. His weekly newspaper, *NIE* — in English, *No* — had been busy in recent weeks chronicling the sex lives of members of parliament with pornographic color sketches. After Walesa won the first round of presidential voting, Urban published Walesa's bedroom phone number in big blue type on Page One — and suggested readers ring him right up.

The 1989 revolutions that toppled the Communist Party throughout Eastern Europe — a series of dominoes set in motion by the Poles in 1980 — had turned a lot of things inside out. This Sunday, people who had learned to live so long with no choice found themselves faced with a choice they didn't like. A split at the top of Solidarity had spawned a bitter presidential campaign between former allies.

There was Walesa, the 47-year-old electrician and Solidarity chairman. Though no longer God-like, he had remained popular despite — and because of — such outrageous campaign promises as his offer to provide each Pole with 100 million zloties — about $10,000 — to invest as he or she saw fit. And there was Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the 63-year-old former newspaper editor tapped by Walesa in 1989 as Poland's first prime minister.

The alliance of Walesa and Mazowiecki symbolized what had made Solidarity special. Nowhere else had workers and intellectuals so effectively united to change their government. But with power came discord. Mazowiecki took increasing flak for an economic recovery plan that kept wages low and let prices rise. Despite his Catholicism, he fell victim to anti-Semitic charges suggesting Jewish heritage among his supporters and ancestors. Walesa expressed support for Mazowiecki's economic policies, but told Poles he would listen more carefully to their complaints. He attacked anti-Semitism but described himself as "a real Pole."

The ringer in the bunch was Stanislaw Tyminski, the 42-year-old emigre who had left Poland for Canada and Peru 21 years before. Now he was back, presenting himself as a Polish Horatio Alger who could lead his homeland to similar prosperity. Among other things, Warsaw newspapers reported that he had been kept out of Polish military service because of "personality disorders and reactive depression." Even so, in a public opinion survey asking Poles whom they'd choose to handle their money, more than half picked Tyminski.

BACK IN POLAND NOW FOR 17 hours, I figured Mazowiecki, the prime minister, would do much better than expected against Walesa. Sure, plenty of problems remained. But so much had so obviously changed for the better — everything from goods in the shops to the wild and wacky free press — that it seemed way too soon to dump the guy making it all happen. Even if his main opponent *was* the guy who made it all possible.

The way I figured it, Tyminski, the emigre candidate, just wouldn't be a factor. Savvy Poles weren't going to vote for a guy who promised all of the gain of democracy with none of the pain, and who wanted to arm Poland with nuclear weapons.

On my way to see a man about a hat, I discovered how wrong I

After a couple dozen conversations, it became clear that the people I had pegged as Mazowieki voters – teachers, doctors, lawyers, scientists, while collars of all sorts – were all voting Walesa.

was about Mazowiecki's chances. After a couple dozen conversations relayed through Ela Perepeczko, a friend helping me as an interpreter, it became clear that the people I had pegged as Mazowiecki voters — teachers, doctors, lawyers, scientists, white collars of all sorts — were all voting Walesa.

"He started everything," said a 36-year-old chemist I stopped on his way home from voting. "Walesa *is* Poland. He's a Christian. Mazowiecki? Well, what can I say about him?"

His supporters said he was providing courageous, dignified leadership of the most aggressive reconstruction program in Eastern Europe. But more people were saying he had to go, complaining that the 40 percent drop in spending power and the bulging unemployment rolls were making life worse than before.

However badly Walesa would beat his old friend Mazowiecki, it became clear that this was the day the music would finally, formally die for Solidarity. Big *S* as well as small. It should have come as no surprise. The whole *point* of Solidarity, after all, had been to unleash democracy in all its messy conflict; the movement could never have survived its own sting for long. Still, no one seemed prepared for its passing. And with both the party and the union fading from the picture, who would fill the void?

Certainly not ... Stan Tyminski?

I DIDN'T MEET MY FIRST TYminski voter until I got to Mrokow. I'd gone to the little farming village south of Warsaw to see about a hat. Back in 1981, when I first met Stanislaw Kiljanczyk, socialist farmer and delegate to that summer's emergency Communist Party Congress, I was struck both by his politics — there weren't many Communist farmers in Poland — and by the big American cowboy hat on his head. Not to mention the collection of hats on the wall of his farmhouse. If any of my Polish acquaintances could put me onto a hat, it stood to be Stan.

When we pulled into Stan's farmyard Sunday afternoon, he was just stepping out of his front door. He had on one of his trademark hats, of course, and was on his way to vote. Beyond recommending a shop back in Warsaw, he couldn't help me much with a hat. But he invited Ela and me to pile into his old Mercedes (don't believe *all* you read about the poverty of private farmers in Poland) and head over to the village firehouse.

A good-natured guy with a walrus mustache and a smile as big as his hat, Kiljanczyk, 43, knew his American friend would get a kick out of how much his politics had changed since 1981. Or had they?

"I'm voting for Walesa," beamed the former Communist as he maneuvered his car around the ruts in the road. "The country needs a strong hand, and I think he will be a dictator."

Stan didn't mean he expected

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PHOTOGRAPHS—WILLIAM J. MITCHELL

This father and son, pulled over police-style by the Free Press international hat squad, happily climbed out of their car and posed.

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The Polish marketplace has changed. Although prices were low, shoppers had to stand in line for hours to buy many hard-to-get foods. Now many foods are in ready supply but few Poles can afford the high prices.

Walesa would turn out to be one hard-nosed, stud-hombre president; he meant he expected Walesa to be a *dictator*. "I'm certain the government will be introducing martial law again if things continue the way they're going," he said. After pausing for Ela to translate, he explained: "It will be a martial law for the economy."

He complained that Mazowiecki's government had encouraged farmers like him to become more ambitious just before it pulled the rug out from under them. After spending a lot of money to expand his potato crop, he was caught flat-footed when the government cut price supports.

Suddenly, it was costing him more to produce his crops than he could sell them for. Farmers around the country were up in arms with similar complaints. And though Walesa and Tyminski had both pledged to continue Mazowiecki's headlong lunge toward a market economy, millions of voters believed either would pursue less painful economic cures.

At the firehouse polling place, one of Kiljanczyk's friends, 43-year-old tomato farmer Jan Marczak, explained his vote for Tyminski like this: "We need someone who knows how to rule the economy."

If I'd listened a little closer to Kiljanczyk and Marczak, I might have been less surprised when, at the end of the day, Mazowiecki found himself eliminated and Walesa, the world-renowned Nobel Prize winner, faced a runoff against Tyminski, Poland's newest and certainly most underestimated politician. Even later, after Walesa trounced Tyminski in the runoff, the 3.7 million votes — 25 percent of the total — cast for a wingnut like Tyminski seemed a stunning signal of dissatisfaction in a democracy so young. Exit polls showed that voters like farmer Marczak chose Tyminski as an outsider offering more of what they wanted in their lives — more security, less sacrifice, quicker success — than either the Walesa or Mazowiecki wings of Solidarity were willing to promise.

One of the newspapers pointed out the next morning that many Poles were at home with neither Walesa's nor Mazowiecki's brand of Solidarity. A new force had emerged, the paper declared — a group of mostly poor and rural Poles who saw no future for themselves in the Poland of Solidarity.

Among the more intriguing conclusions drawn from the results was this one from Jozef Tischner, a Catholic priest and author: "Homo Sovieticus has revealed himself among us." I would learn more later about this notion of "Soviet person." For now, I took it as a tip-off to the kind of personality traits that might help explain the funk this place was in.

DEMOCRACY HAS ARRIVED in the Polish marketplace, but so far, it is hard to hear the cheers. Stepping out of the neo-Gothic train station the morning after the election in Gdansk, 215 miles northwest of Warsaw on the Baltic coast, Ela pointed out the oranges piled up at the kiosk.

The recent free elections didn't exactly have Poles dancing in the streets in Warsaw. History has made them warier than that. Low wages and high prices are making them warier still.

Under the Communists, oranges appeared only at Christmas and Easter, usually imported from Cuba or Libya. The price was right — as little as 10 cents a pound — but they went only to those shoppers willing to stand in line for hours.

Now oranges were in ready supply. The lines were gone, but only because relatively few consumers could afford the new high prices — about 50 cents a pound.

On the horizon, silver-blue cranes rose from the Lenin Shipyard behind the 138-foot monument to the workers slain there by troops in 1970. On assorted cloudy days and rainy nights from 1980 to 1983 — the sun seems an infrequent visitor to Gdansk — I had been to the shipyard for moving commemorations of the battles of 1970, for unruly demonstrations against martial law, and once for a brief chat with Anna Walentynowicz, the trade union activist and crane operator whose dismissal in 1980 touched off the strike that crystalized into Solidarity. It had all been heady stuff. This time, all I needed was a tip on a hat shop.

I got that and more from Tadeusz Lech, who knew what it was like to lose a hat you like. He left his in a taxi in Odessa while working in the Soviet Union. Before sending me over to Wojciechowski's Hat Shop on Weglarska Street, Lech expanded my understanding of the Tyminski phenomenon.

A former Communist Party member, Lech was not especially harsh on Solidarity for failing to bring dramatic improvements after only 18 months in control of the government. But neither was he investing any *hope* in the splintered Solidarity or the discredited Communist Party. Along with millions of his fellow Poles, he was looking instead to Stan Tyminski.

"Tyminski doesn't belong to any organization — not the Party and not Solidarity," he said, "and that's good."

The 50-year-old shipyard worker said his life was getting steadily more difficult. After posing with his smart brown cap in front of the shipyard gates, Lech recited a refrain that was becoming increasingly familiar.

"I make $1,100,000 zloties (about $115) a month to support my wife and three children," he said. "My wages are staying the same, and all the prices are going up." Including, he noted sadly, the price of a decent hat.

Over on Weglarska Street, hat dealer Henryk Wojciechowski explained why: Rent at the shop has gone from 70,000 zloties a month to more than two million — that's an increase from about $7 to about $200 — and the cost of materials for a typical *papacha* has gone from about $13 to about $20. "Business was better under martial law," said Henryk, who has worked in his brother Eugeniusz' shop for 30 years. "Everything is expensive. People have no money. If they do have some money, they spend it on food, not hats."

Henryk showed me some good-looking *papachas* for about $26 — about a fourth of Tadeusz Lech's monthly pay — but they were all too small. True, my head is a little on the large size — 7¾ — but you'd think a shop with nothing *but* hats would have some big ones, too.

No dice. The biggest hat in the place was too small.

I figured I was finally in luck at my next stop, where clerk and hat maker Genowefa Cylka told me she'd been trying to get rid of a nice, extra large *papacha* for two years.

Too small.

Whether all this was primarily

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PHOTOGRAPHS—WILLIAM J. MITCHELL

"Trying to become equal with the West in all ways," said Sister Francisca Wodzianna, "this is one of the prices we will have to pay."

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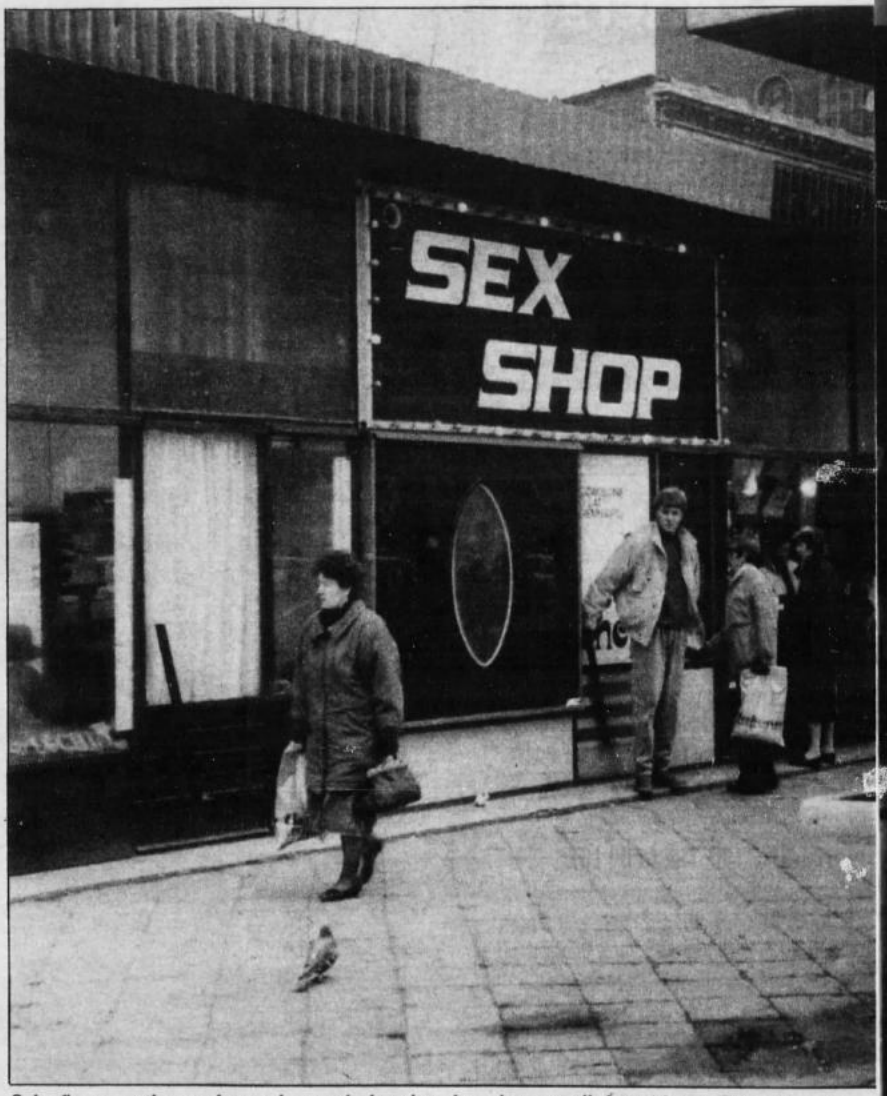
a problem of a big head or of small hats seemed of little consequence to the hat makers I met. They and other Polish merchants had bigger problems on their minds. Many have been risking a great deal as they leap into the deep and uncharted waters of the new free market.

CONSIDER MAREK PODgorczyk. A former supervisor in the Solidarity press office, today he owns a couple of boutiques specializing in men's and women's clothing in the Gdansk district of Wrzeszcz.

Marek's main problem? "I don't see the upper middle class developing in Poland who can be my customers," he told me during a brief chat in the tiny office he keeps behind his sales floor. "My strategy is to sell very expensive goods, but I'm not sure it will work."

By the time I got all the way out to the apartment complex where Ludwika Topp and Adzik Zawistowski live, to deliver some mail, I was bushed. Still without a hat, I'd run into one other problem as well. About midway through election day — no doubt as a result of inadequate headgear — I had begun losing my voice. By Monday night, it was completely gone. Ela could interpret my conversations only by reading my lips, prompting some interviewees to wonder: Just what language is *this?*

Leave it to the Zawistowskis, whom I'd met in Harper Woods during their visits to mutual friends. After listening to me squeak, rasp and hiss for a while, Ludwika got Adzik's mom, who's a doctor, on the phone. For my voice, she prescribed an array of syrups, pills and a special vocal chord remedy of masking tape, plastic bags and a 2-foot bolt of industrial strength surgical cotton to be soaked in hot water and strapped around my neck while I slept.



Sales figures at the sex shop and a nearby hat shop showed sex outsells hats 16-to-1. The poster says

It worked. And it wasn't so bad. Nothing like the *gorzka pigulka* — the bitter pill — Poles swallow every day as their economy wheezes into a new era of free markets. In Adzik's view, though, too many Poles have been complaining too much. They've been too quick to condemn the people they had supported only 18 months before — back when those same people were fighting the government instead of leading it.

"People hated the Communists for 45 years," he said over a glass of wine at his dining room table, "and now they hate Mazowiecki after one and a half years. They hate anybody in authority. They believe politics necessarily denigrates people, and that's not necessarily so."

As I bundled up my medicines, Ludwika carried out the evening's piece de resistance — what else? — a hat. Not a fancy hat, but a stocking cap knit originally for Adzik. Not exactly the *papacha* I was looking for, but hey, it was free and it fit. That's because it didn't fit Adzik, who dropped it over his head like a bucket.

CLIMBING ON A PLANE TO head back to Warsaw the next morning, I recalled the last time I took a domestic flight in Poland. The country was still under martial law, and the flight attendants looked a little strange. Not that you could blame them. Because hijackers kept bopping them on the head to get to the cockpit, the attendants had donned leather helmets before directing the return of seats to a full upright position. Now that anybody could leave the country at will, the attendants were hatless. I felt a certain solidarity.

Back in Warsaw, it was time to return to the place where I failed to buy a hat the first time around. I hadn't counted on the Moda Polska shop on Marszalkowska getting replaced by a Benettons.

The smiling, smartly dressed Benettons clerk was folding some new blue sweat suits when I approached in search of a hat.

Nie ma czapek, she said.

No hats.

The more things change ...

Of course, I should never have

Mazowieckie would "represent the republic with dignity." He lost.

bothered with Moda Polska in the first place. The Polish hat business has been private, operated outside the sphere of state-owned shops, for decades. Then as now, all I had to do was cross Marszalkowska Street to find a couple of hat shops.

Hat-man Andrzej Zareba, 34, got my hopes up when I spotted a red and white hat on his wall with the logo: "I love Orchard Lake."

Unfortunately, the hat was just a gift from a teacher at the suburban Detroit seminary, nothing but a cruel tease suggesting the presence of some expansive, American-sized hats. Zareba was giving me old news: "It was much better in Communist times. it was tougher to get a store, but business was better."

Down the street, beneath a large, stark sign that read "Sex Shop," another merchant was having better luck in the Age of Free Markets.

"There are plenty of hat shops," noted 23-year-old clerk Zbigniew Gajewski, a student of economics and management at the University of Warsaw. "But we have almost no competition. People are seeing our goods for the first time in their lives." From the look on the faces of many of Zbig's customers, it was not a difficult claim to believe. I felt momentarily distracted from hats myself.

A quick comparison of gross sales at the sex shop and a small, empty hat shop next door revealed that sex outsells hats in Poland these days by a 16-to-1 margin. That's gross revenues. Zbig said he's glad he's not selling hats: "It's much more interesting to sell our goods. If somebody wants to buy a hat, the only problem is style, price and size (Tell me about it!). Whereas the people who stop in here have many different problems."

Joanna Piotrowska said she thought such shops were overdue. "The older generation is still shocked, but they'll get used to it."

Zbig's boss, 32-year-old Piotr Bunicz, began pushing to get into the sex business before the government changed hands in 1989. By the end of last year he had four shops, each of them open 24 hours, with big plans to bring topless go-go to the Polish capital in 1991. The Communist authorities said he could open his shop and sell his collection of skimpy nighties, condoms, magazines and, uh, marital aids. But they said he couldn't use the word Sex on his sign. "The authorities," Bunicz said, "were scared."

But not the Solidarity government, which appears to be enforcing no laws against pornography in newspapers, magazines or shop signs on Marszalkowska Street. Sister Francisca Wodzianna, 30, appeared a bit embarrassed when I interrupted her Christmas shopping to ask her reaction to Bunicz's sex shop.

"It's a problem," she said, unable to suppress a grin. "I think Poland is trying to become equal with the West in all ways. To a certain degree, this is one of the prices we will have to pay."

Joanna Piotrowska, also 30, interviewed after picking out something for her husband at one of Buicz's other shops, said she thought such shops were overdue in Poland. "The older generation is still shocked," she said, "but they'll get used to it.

THE MARSZALKOWSKA HAT shops were facing more direct competition as well. Just out the door and down the street from Christina Luczywek's shop a new street market has sprung up around the Palace of Culture, the wedding-cake structure bequeathed to the Poles by Stalin. Merchants from around the country — and from the Soviet Union and the rest of Eastern Europe — come to sell their goods with very low overhead indeed.

When traveling salesman Igor Butyrin offered me a good-looking *papacha* and told me he was from Odessa, I thought immediately of Tadeusz Lech, the Gdansk shipyard worker who lost his hat in an Odessa taxi. Naah ... Igor didn't look like the kind of guy who'd swipe a hat from a Pole in a taxi. He was the kind of guy who'd charge whatever he could from the bare-headed American journalist with the Nikon around his neck.

"Oh, American," the 27-year-old economist noted when I asked about the $6 price, "for you price can be $10."

It would have been the perfect ending — another Russian hat, from Warsaw's newest street market, at the same price I paid in 1980. But there was a problem.

Too small, and nothing any bigger.

This was getting ridiculous.

It was time to meet personally with Marek Sterkowski, director of the Warsaw area association of hat makers. Hat expert extraordinaire. Eager to accommodate a foreign journalist with a high degree of interest in Polish hats, he not only agreed to see me, but insisted on coming to the Free Press' apartment.

"In the past, the big problem was getting raw materials for hats," he said. "But we had no problem selling the hats once we made them. Now the situation is reversed. We have all the raw materials we need, but we're having a hard time selling."

Sterkowski said he was optimistic that relatively low costs in Poland would create export op-

PHOTOGRAPHS—WILLIAM J. MITCHELL

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portunities in the West. But, with government safety nets gone, it's a risky time: "Every mistake you commit could be your last," he said. "Just like in the West."

We'd been discussing the state of the industry for nearly an hour when Sterkowski mentioned that the aluminum forms used to manufacture men's hats in Poland range in size from 54 to 60 centimeters.

"Hmmmmm," interpreter Agnieska Maleta announced with a look in my direction, "I think we should measure your head." The office tape measure showed my head to be four centimeters bigger around than the upper limit of Polish hats.

"Finding a hat for you," Sterkowski said soberly, "will require the creation of a new form." Unwelcome news. But it beat not knowing.

There were a lot of other things I wanted to know and didn't.

Along with the big head, my baggage on this trip included an outsider's bias about this rapidly changing country. But I couldn't help myself. I wanted to see people savoring, if only just a bit, the freedom they'd fought for and won.

On the other hand, I sympathized with 62-year-old Alina Skuza, a widow whose hat shop went out of business last year in the face of rising costs.

I felt for Judzan Slawinska, also 62, a retired teacher who described what life is like on a pension of $45 a month. Shopping for a hat in the $5 to $10 range, she said it would be the biggest single purchase she'd make for herself all year.

The day before I left, I was jolted by a striking — and very unPolish — scene outside Walesa's Warsaw campaign headquarters: A Polish mother of two begging on the sidewalk.

Snapshots like those made it clear that the Poles had not exchanged Communism for Consumerism. For the most part, I saw Poles struggling for the basics, not the luxuries that carry so many in the West to debt.

Whatever the precise reason, it was clear that a new cynicism was brewing among Poles about their future — free elections or no.

Had Poles been faced with such tough economic times with the party still in control, their resentment would surely have spilled into the streets. Yet in some ways, this personal financial struggle seemed to be leaving many Poles more isolated, perhaps even more despairing, than they'd been during their fight against Communism.

After taking a few photographs of the woman begging by Walesa's headquarters, I witnessed an encouraging scene: First one, then several passers-by began depositing food and money in the woman's baby stroller. One man bought hot-dogs for the kids and told me to get lost.

Trying to figure out Poland's prospects, I was feeling pretty lost already. By the end of the week, I was in serious need of perspective. It came from the parents of a friend.

If I behaved just like a brash American that day, knocking unannounced on their door for a mid-day pit stop, they responded just like other Poles I'd come to know and love. They invited me for lunch of vegetable soup and cheese and beef and potatoes, and we ended up spending the afternoon sipping tea, talking politics and trading theories.

My host, a Warsaw sculptor, asked that I not publish his name because, he insisted, he was serving only as a "filter," providing me with the ideas of others in capsule form. Especially the idea of Homo Sovieticus, the "Soviet person" described by emigre Soviet author Alexandr Zinoviev and adapted to the Polish experience by Father Tischner.

Tischner had argued that more than four decades of Moscow-directed repression has left millions of Poles psychologically and spiritually crippled. Both suspicious and easily influenced, selfish and jealous of others' success, dissatisfied but unwilling to change, Homo Sovieticus displays a jumble of contradictory characteristics that makes it difficult indeed for Poland to summon the kind of individual initiative, risk-taking and ambition essential to its transformation from socialism.

My first inkling of this character came the day after the strange emigre candidate, Tyminski, did so well in the election.

But a week's worth of conversations made it clear that, whoever leads Poland through the '90s, Homo Sovieticus will be among his constituents. "You have to respect the staying power of Homo Sovieticus as a species," Tischner wrote. "It has scattered itself in a thousand different varieties."

The sculptor took it further: With most of the population working in state-run shops and factories for 45 years, parents had passed on very little in the way of traditions of excellence at work. "There is an ethos of decency that is missing," he said. "In a family business, you wouldn't cheat or bribe. You wouldn't want to compromise the family tradition."

The Poles' fundamental dilemma, he said, is this: "We have freedom and we don't know how to respond."

With Solidarity fragmenting and Homo Sovieticus still alive and well, I was beginning to understand why the defeat of Communism had fallen so far short of overcoming its legacy. As for my hat, I was feeling quite reconciled to the gray and black ski cap bestowed by Adzik and Ludwika. I asked Agnieska if there were any old Polish proverbs that might sum up my search.

She came up with this: *"Jak sie nie ma co sie lubi to sie lubi co sie ma."*

They seemed like words to live by, at least until Poland develops some new aluminum hat forms: "If you can't have what you like, like what you have."

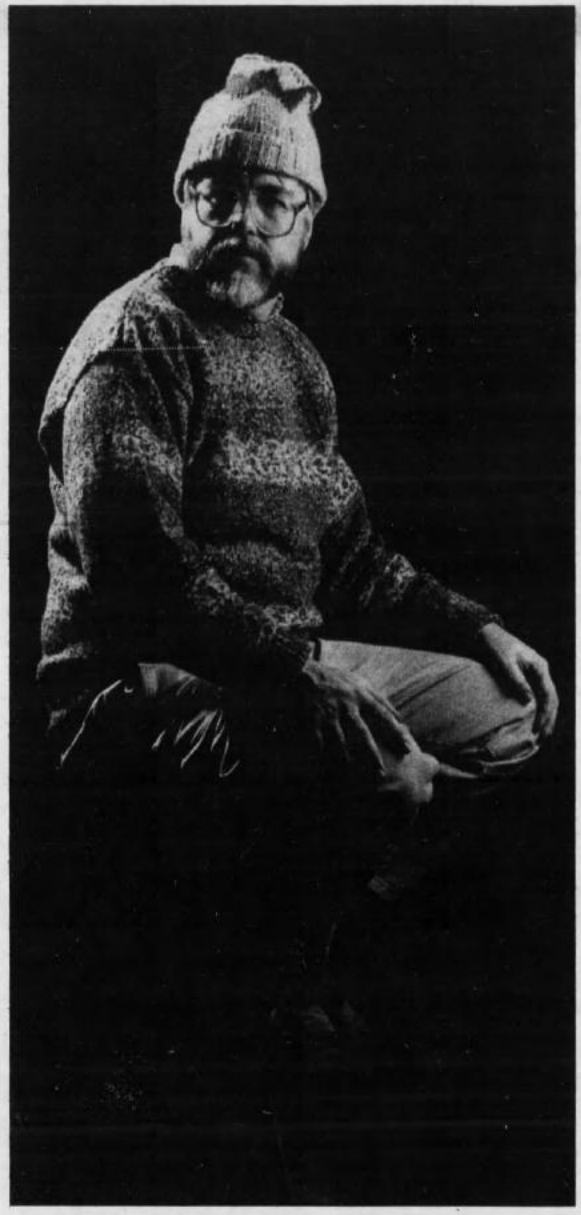
Clearly not a slogan for the revolutionary '80s.

But for now, maybe it set just the right, tough tone for Poland's painful new adventure with democracy.

On my last morning in Warsaw, a heavy snow began falling before the sun came up on Bednarska Street.

Nie ma problemu.

I pulled Adzik's cap down over my ears and headed for home.■



Bill Mitchell came home with a sturdy stocking cap knit originally for Adzik Zawistowski in Gdansk. It is not a fancy hat, but it was free and it fit, and makes for a warm memory of the brave new Poland.

PHOTOGRAPH—STEVEN R. NICKERSON

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