Digital Heroes

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The Institute of National Remembrance has presented its new and innovative project “Digital Heroes”. The technology that was used during its development made it possible to take real people into the virtual world. With a system of more than forty cameras and advanced algorithms, it was possible to scan facial movements and automatically build digital models fully reflecting the unique features of the person scanned. In addition, recordings of entire individuals were also made as part of the project. The project “Digital Heroes” focuses on Polish heroes and their stories. The Institute of National Remembrance has decided that using the latest technology, it will recreate the figures who played an important role in Polish history and remind their stories in a digital form. One of the first “Digital Heroes” was Andrzej Gwiazda, one of the most important leaders of the strike in August 1980 and of Solidarity in 1980–1981, founder of the Coastal Free Trade Unions and signatory of their Declaration in 1978. Repeatedly imprisoned and repressed for his anti-communist activities. In August 1980, he became a member of the Presidium of the Inter-enterprise Strike Committee in the Gdańsk Shipyard and was a co-author of the list of 21 demands. After the introduction of martial law in 1981, he was interned and then arrested. After his release from prison, he demanded the restoration of Solidarity’s statutory structures and opposed the Round Table compromise. Another figure involved in this innovative project of the Institute of National Remembrance was Krzysztof Wyszkowski, an activist, pressman and journalist, known for his involvement in the Solidarity movement. He was a co-founder and one of the signatories of the Declaration of the Coastal Free Trade Unions and secretary of the editorial board of “Tygodnik Solidarność” (“Solidarity Weekly”). He was interned after the introduction of martial law in 1981 and then arrested in 1983. Krzysztof Wyszkowski participated in strikes at the Gdańsk Shipyard in 1980 and 1988 and was an observer at the Round Table talks. In later years, he became a political advisor to Prime Ministers Jan Krzysztof Bielecki and Jan Olszewski. The date of the launch of this project is not accidental, as 29 April marks the 45th anniversary of the establishment of the Founding Committee of the Coastal Free Trade Unions by independence activists from Gdańsk. The event was inspired by the foundation of the Free Trade Unions in Katowice in February 1978. Only three people signed the declaration, although the group was more numerous. Among the signatories of the document were Andrzej Gwiazda and Krzysztof Wyszkowski, whose memories of those days were recorded thanks to the “Digital Heroes” project. It was they who initiated the independent trade union movement in the communist state, and their courage and determination resulted, two years later, in the emergence of the great Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarity, with nearly 10 million members. Formation of the Coastal Free Trade Unions The first independent trade union in the Polish People’s Republic was founded in Katowice in February 1978. It was headed by Kazimierz Świtoń, an electrician cooperating with the Movement for the Defence of Human and Civic Rights. A group of independence activists in Gdańsk embraced the idea of forming an independent trade union under Convention No. 87 of the International Labour Organisation, ratified by the Polish People’s Republic, granting workers and employers the right to form their own trade union organisations without permission. On 29 April 1978, the Founding Committee of the Coastal Free Trade Unions was formed in Gdańsk and published a Declaration, signed by three people, including Andrzej Gwiazda and Krzysztof Wyszkowski. The emergence of an independent trade union organisation in the Polish People’s Republic was a remarkable event. The society, previously enslaved by the communists, revolted from time to time, expressing its discontent and spontaneously demanding “bread and freedom”, as in June 1956 in Poznań, in March 1968 in Gdańsk and Warsaw, in December 1970 in Gdańsk, Gdynia and Szczecin, in June 1976 in Radom and Ursus. The circumstances changed in the second half of the 1970s. First, structures independent of the communists emerged, aspiring to act as spokespeople for the interests of society. Second, independent civic and trade union organisations were operating under the legislation in force. The presence of these two figures at the launch of the IPN project is not incidental. It was the Gdańsk activists who initiated the independent trade union movement, and their courage and determination resulted, two years later, in the establishment of the massive, nearly 10 million-member Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarity. The “Digital Heroes” project is an excellent combination of history and new technologies. In an innovative way, it reminds us of important moments in Polish history and makes it possible to discover the extraordinary stories of Polish heroes. The project will be expanded, which will hopefully result in more digital heroes and their stories. One of the next steps planned is to incorporate machine learning into this technology, based on the petabytes of data stored in the resources of the Institute of National Remembrance. Check out the “Digital Heroes” project in the digital library of IPN TV, and follow other events and projects carried out by the Digital Technology Division of the Institute of National Remembrance.

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