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# Polish Prison Subculture Before and After 1989: Views from the Inside

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## [Polish Contributions to Criminology](#)

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## Abstract

This study explores the evolution of the Polish prison subculture before and after the political upheaval of 1989, marking the transition from communism to a more democratic and open society. It examines how these systemic changes influenced the informal hierarchies and social structures within prisons. Under the communist regime, prisons were spaces of severe repression and control, where the inmate population was strictly managed through a combination of intense surveillance and punitive measures. Inmate labor was

exploited, and any form of dissent was brutally suppressed, fostering a distinct subculture among prisoners known as ‘grypsmen.’ The fall of communism brought significant reforms to the penal system, aiming to improve conditions and reduce inmate exploitation. However, the remnants of old subcultures persisted, adapting to the new sociopolitical environment. This paper delves into the continuity and transformation of these subcultures, shedding light on the social dynamics that govern inmate interactions and the unofficial codes that continue to influence prison life in post-communist Poland. The research highlights the resilience and adaptability of subcultural norms amidst sweeping changes, offering insights into the complex interplay between structure and agency in closed institutions.

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The present article utilizes the material collected by both authors during their incarcerations and is based on their publications listed in the References. When referring to our personal experience in prison, we will use our prison nicknames Student and Cyborg. All described inmates are men.

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## Keywords

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[Prison](#)

[Prison subculture](#)

[Prison system](#)

[Transition](#)

## Introduction

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During the communist era in Poland, crime was not considered a politically neutral phenomenon. In the so-called social justice system, which communists believed communism to be, crime was supposed to be non-existent, considered a relic of a bygone era.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, someone charged with stealing, and as Paweł Moczydłowski asserts, 90% of criminals engaged in illegal activities for economic reasons, they were often treated by the authorities as engaging in illegal privatization. This could be interpreted as helping to

restore capitalism as the political and economic system of the state. Such actions prompted an appropriate response, which was decidedly severe (Moczydłowski, [1994](#), 3–4).

The main purposes of punishment were to eliminate the criminal from society for a long time and to apply repression as revenge for the harm done to that society. Successive criminal codes aimed only at increasing penalties, reaching a peak in 1985 with the so-called episodic laws, introducing sentences of 5 to 6 years for stealing a chicken (ibid., 4–5). All this resulted in the prison rate reaching nearly 400 individuals incarcerated per 100,000 inhabitants in 1973 (Nyzio [2020](#), 546). Prisons were severely overcrowded. In 1973, they housed 130,000 inmates, supervised by only 16,000 correctional officers (Moczydłowski [1994](#), 5). The official capacity of prisons at that time was 106,000 places (Nawój-Śleszyński [2013](#), 116), but it is worth noting that at that time, the standard for space per inmate was calculated not in square meters, but in cubic meters. Given that prisons were often converted from former monasteries (narrow and very high cells), such standards beautified the harsh reality (Nyzio [2020](#), 547). Additionally, personnel shortages meant 200–250 inmates per rehabilitation specialist (wychowek). Therefore, they couldn't address the inmates' issues satisfactorily, which in turn caused frustration and increased tension (Moczydłowski [2003](#), 96).

When the overcrowding of prisons reached its zenith, the communist authorities coped by announcing amnesties, which were also useful as a tool for political relaxation and a propaganda instrument. Amnesties throughout the communist era were carried out in the years: 1945, 1947, 1952, 1956, 1964, 1969, 1974, 1977, 1983, 1984, 1986, and 1989. They were causing a sudden decrease in the number of prisoners, but their effect was only temporary. After each amnesty, prisons quickly filled up again, and the time for the prison population to return to its previous size was also gradually decreasing (Nyzio [2020](#), 532).

Employment was used to exploit the prisoners, who were very poorly paid. Inmate labor was compulsory, and refusal was strictly punished. Employment reached 90% of the incarcerated population. Being often treated as social enemies, they could not just be isolated and fed at the expense of the socialist state. The prison work period did not count as pensionable service years (Moczydłowski [1994](#), 7).

The approach to prison security was based on recognizing the prisoner as a dangerous enemy. The aim was to achieve a state where the prisoner was completely subordinate and defenseless, ready to execute all the administration's commands. Given a small number of officers relative to the number of prisoners, this was achieved by equipping them with machine guns, batons, gas, dogs, handcuffs, etc., but also through the use of vast informant networks. Interactions between prisoners and officers were filled with permanent confrontation and tension. Sometimes the beating of a prisoner by officers turned into an uncontrollable outburst of aggression and collective riots, in which prisons burned and people died. The largest waves of riots swept through Polish prisons in the years 1955–1956, 1971–1972, 1981, and 1984. The strongest of them occurred in 1989, after the collapse of communism in Poland (Moczydłowski [1994](#), 7–9).

Thus, the communist prison system was repressive and focused on retribution. Over the years of communism, political thaws led to some relaxation of these tough measures. Nevertheless, the idea of rehabilitation, although present in lofty slogans, was practically foreign to the system. Prisoners were expected to improve, but only through the harsh conditions they were forced to endure. Prisons were overcrowded, personnel overworked, and all goods, including space, were in short supply. It was under these conditions of low control and scarcity of resources that the grypsmen subculture grew and solidified (Kaminski [1994](#)).

## 1985: Mokotów and Białołęka Jails

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The roots of the Polish prison subculture are entrenched in the criminal culture of the Russian Empire. According to political prisoners from the 1940s and 1950s, a universal inmate subculture within Polish prisons did not exist at that time. Nonetheless, localized microcultures were present, governed by the highest caste of ‘thieves’ who sowed the subcultural seeds for the emerging ‘grypsmen’ (Wojciechowski [1981](#)). Membership in such a caste was exclusive to bona fide thieves. Their subculture involved many components of the future grypsowanie, i.e., the grypsmen subculture, including intricate norms regulating behavior within cells, playing deceptive games with newcomers, punishing the use of prohibited words, especially improperly used profanities, and adhering to specific hygienic taboos. Inmates of lower castes were often coerced into serving their master-thieves. It is plausible to conjecture that the supreme caste in the thieves’ subculture expanded and

flourished subsequent to the broader democratization following the 1956 post-Stalinist thaw. By the 1960s, prisons had become inundated with ‘characterniaks,’ ‘gits,’ and ‘grypsers’ (Michalski and Morawski [1971](#), 3; Stwora [1967](#); Moczydłowski [1991](#)).

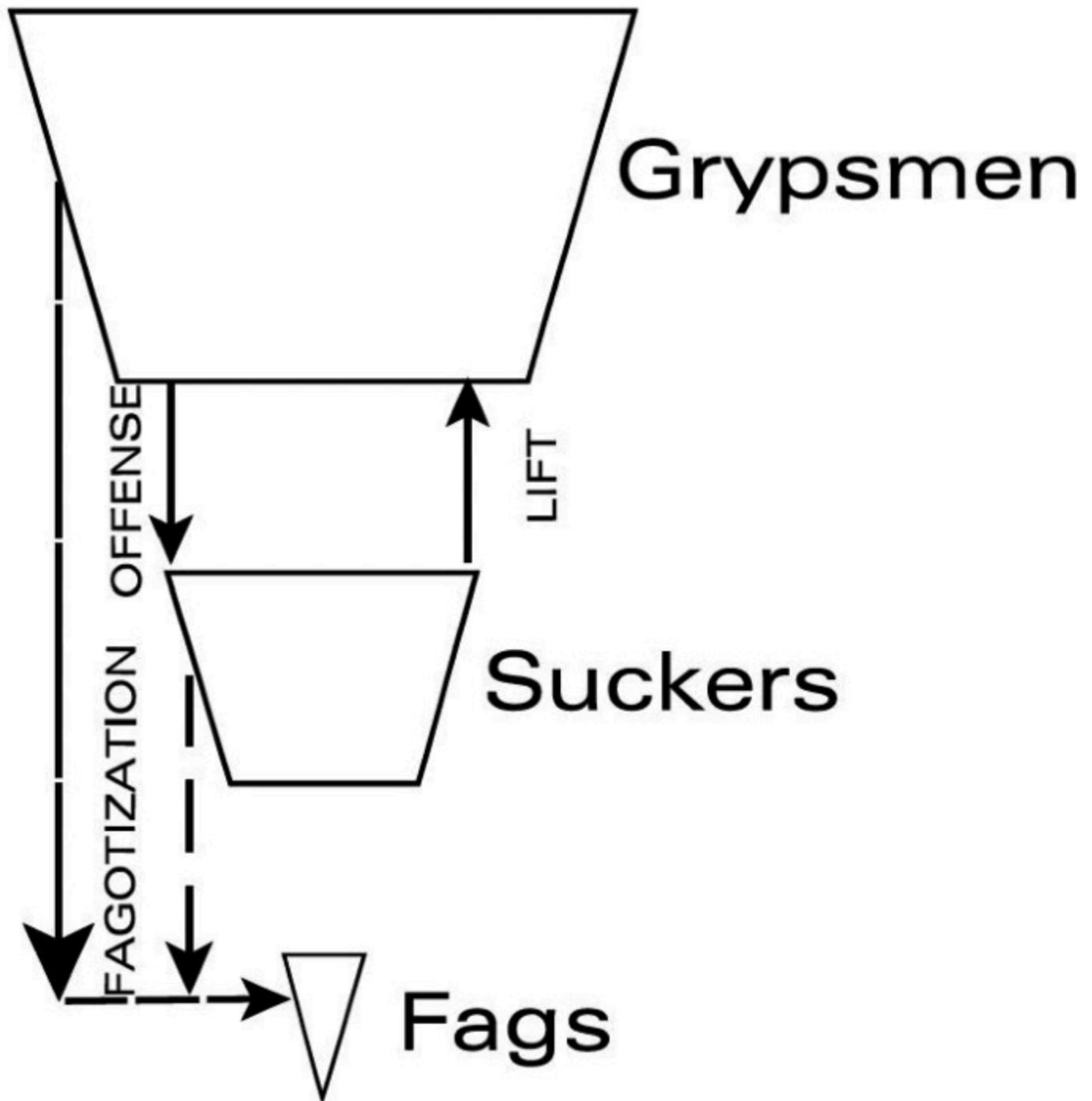
## Social structure

By 1985, when Student<sup>2</sup> spent five months in Białołęka and Mokotów Jails, the grypsmen caste was open to all newcomers, except for addicts, members of the Communist Party, pedophiles, and members of the enforcement and judicial professions—however, it was welcoming to lawyers. In addition to grypsmen, the social structure in both jails included suckers (frajerzy) and fags (cwele). These three castes were characteristic of all Polish prisons, though ephemeral groups vying with grypsmen such as fests or ladybirds (biedrony), or those neutral in inter-caste conflicts like swiss (szwajcarzy), might also be encountered. Strong rival castes could significantly alter the dynamics and norms of grypsowanie (Moczydłowski [1991](#); Kaminski [2004](#)).

In Białołęka and Mokotów Jails, grypsmen were predominant (see Fig. [3.1](#)). Fests and ladybirds primarily existed within grypsmen folklore and served as warnings for rookies.<sup>3</sup>

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### Fig. 3.1



Relations among major castes. *Note* The areas of the polygons are proportional to the estimated caste memberships. The arrows indicate potential pathways for social mobility between the castes. *Source* Kaminski (2003)

Grypsmen norms were largely clandestine but also included public components that all inmates, regardless of their caste membership, were required to adhere to. The most fundamental covert norms included a quintet of principles. While variations existed, the

most prevalent versions of these principles consisted of Honor, Solidarity, Refusal, Help, and Hygiene. Honor was the cornerstone of all principles, obliging a grypsman to defend his honor against contemptible threats. Among these, a physical assault should invariably be met with bravery and a refusal to capitulate. A grypsman should also be vigilant of attempts at symbolic desecration. Furthermore, he should refine his verbal skills to repel verbal assaults.

Solidarity entailed refraining from interfering in other grypsmen endeavors, such as transporting grypses (secret messages) within or outside prisons, creating noisy disturbances when an inmate was attacked by guards, or abstaining from stealing from fellow grypsmen. Refusal forbade any significant form of collaboration with the administration, although cooperation that evidently benefitted all inmates was allowed. Help required active support for a physically weak or ill grypsman. Hygiene demanded rigorous discipline in maintaining one's physical and mental well-being. Beyond the obvious sanitary measures, group masturbation (referred to as derby), prevalent in youth cells, was discouraged, as was silting (zamulenie), that is, succumbing to depression and withdrawing from cell's life. Another mandate of Hygiene for rookies was swift prisonization, meaning rapid acclimatization to prison life.

Behaviors operationalized the principles into a catalogue of specific guidelines instructing grypsmen on how to conduct themselves in common prison scenarios or adhere to the purity norms that categorized all prison objects as clean, dirty, and untouchable or 'fagotized' (przecwelope). A brief excerpt of behaviors from an extensive list provided by Kaminski (2004, 72–76) includes:

- The penis of another inmate: The most hazardous object in the cell! Touching it or being touched by it is strictly forbidden.
- Your hand: Immediate washing is mandatory after touching one's own penis or after defecating. Additionally, washing immediately after waking up in the morning is obligatory, given the assumption that an inmate masturbated during the night or otherwise touched his penis.

- **Walk:** It is advisable to stay in the cell with a sucker or fag who skips the daily walk and monitor his actions.
- **Handshake:** Forbidden for suckers, fags, staff, and various external visitors. Exceptions are made for one's brother, father, solicitor, or a doctor who has saved the grypsman's life.
- **Cell lightbulb:** Tampering with the lightbulb for amusement is prohibited. The bulb socket is to be used as a source of electricity for boiling water for tea.

Another fundamental component of grypsowanie was the argot (*bajera*). In addition to an extensive vocabulary naming and prioritizing various objects, processes, and situations commonly encountered in prison, the argot included numerous complex rules associated by grypsmen with Honor and other principles. The paramount rule was to avoid offending other grypsmen. Among the gravest linguistic offenses were comparisons of a grypsman to a fag, a woman, labelling him a communist, or an informant. More nuanced insults included the use of prohibited adjectives such as 'red'—as it was another term for communists—or words that could be interpreted as euphemisms for the penis. Likewise, careless speaking about playing a flute, trumpet, or even blowing a whistle could be viewed as serious affronts to a grypsman's honor. By extension, the rules prohibited grypsmen from referring to their cellmates as 'nice' or 'boys,' since such terms were considered appropriate only for women or fags. Although expletives were frequently used, one had to ensure they were clearly indicated as non-offensive. One should not merely ask a cellmate to 'pull' but should employ the procedure of concluding (*krańcowanie*) and request to 'pull this wire' to eliminate ambiguity. For the same reason, the most popular expletive, repeated over a thousand times daily in every cell, 'whore' (*kurwa*), had to be properly concluded as 'whore-your-mum' (*kurwa twoja mać* or *kurwa mać*). Surprisingly, referring to someone's mother as a 'whore' was not seen as an insult in this context.

Basic argot rules, especially the imperative not to offend grypsmen, formed part of the public norms. All inmates were required to master them, even though non-grypsmen didn't learn their complex justifications. As a basic requirement, inmates had to shed any sense of shame when naming or discussing human body parts, physiology, or anything related to sex. Another important set of public norms included the prohibition of using the *jaruzel* (the

name for the toilet bowl was traditionally derived from the name of the First Secretary of the Polish Communist Party, whom in the 1980s was General Jaruzelski) or passing wind without a clear and loud announcement (pucowanie). Such a declaration might announce that the 'jaruzel is thirsty', 'hungry', or that it 'gets lunch'. Frequent flushing was recommended to prevent 'burning' or 'choking the jaruzel'. Eating had to be announced to ensure that everyone in the cell was aware of this activity and didn't pass wind or use the jaruzel simultaneously. Grypsmen treated lower castes poorly. However, all inmates were expected to maintain some residual level of dignity and behave with self-respect. Naturally, informing or reporting to the authorities was strictly prohibited, and any inmate violating this rule risked a dramatic fall in the prison hierarchy.

The lower castes did not develop any specific norms or language but rather adopted the norms and argot formulated for them by grypsmen. Suckers, also referred to more politely as non-grypsmen in cells where they held greater influence, occupied an intermediate position, and were consisted of fallen grypsmen who committed some offense against grypsmen code, or rookies who didn't pass the required initiation tests. They were barred from shaking hands with grypsmen or dining at the same table. Grypsmen were allowed to steal from suckers, regarded them as potential informants, and obliged them to clean the cell and perform other menial services. However, wanton humiliation of suckers was discouraged. Suckers who were helpful or had influential protectors were typically left undisturbed. A sucker who made an extraordinary effort to assist grypsmen or demonstrated notable bravery could have the opportunity to be reinstated (lifted or raised) into the grypsmen community. His prospects significantly improved if accompanied by generous gifts for the cell elders.

Inmates at the lowest tier of the prison social hierarchy were termed fags. Typically, they assumed this social role when they voluntarily decided to provide sexual services to grypsmen. They were assigned feminine names and provided entertainment for grypsmen through on-demand dancing and singing. They were prohibited from touching the belongings of grypsmen and were generally subject to numerous behavioral restrictions and taboos. Their movement was confined to a small area around the corner (kącik) with the jaruzel and washbasin, where they were also required to eat. In the most severe scenarios,

they were subjected to rape or, more commonly provided sexual services to grypsmen voluntarily. Even if a fag was no longer sexually active, his stigma was permanent.

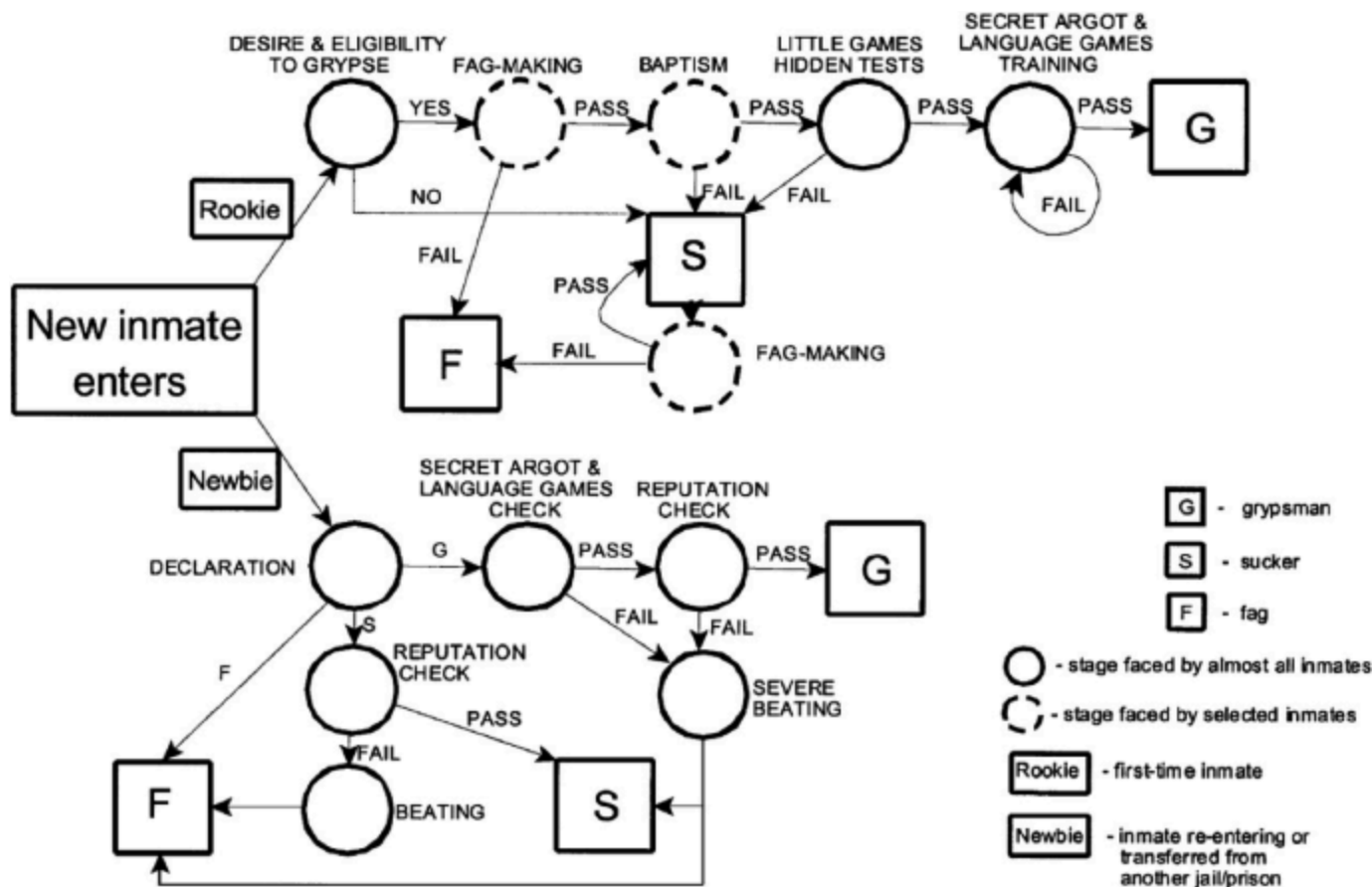
## Allocation to Castes and Grypsman Initiation

The allocation of new inmates among the castes commenced as soon as they entered the cell. The newcomer was posed a simple question: ‘Are you a grypsman?’ Despite its apparent simplicity, responding ‘yes’ was invariably the poorest choice, regardless of the newcomer’s actual caste affiliation (Kaminski, [2004](#), 16–20). For a grypsman, the expected response was ‘Ask the other grypsmen!’ This reply ingeniously extricated him from the interrogation by his new cellmates and transferred the onus to verify his reputation onto the inquirer. For members of other castes, answering ‘yes’ was immediately recognized as a falsehood and punished accordingly. The newcomer might not even realize he was being tested. He might be caught off guard with a dish towel thrown at his feet. He should not bend down to pick it up; instead, the expected action was to wipe his feet on it. The common denominator across all these greetings and their numerous variations was to assess the newcomers’ familiarity with the secret argot and their street smarts.

Most newcomers were inmates transferred from other cells, cellblocks, or prisons. They were promptly assigned to the appropriate caste and their proclaimed membership was meticulously scrutinized unless there was good reason to believe them. Less commonly, the newcomer was a rookie who needed to be initiated. If he wished to become a grypsman—and almost all inmates aspired to this role—he should answer ‘I would like to be one’. Then, upon confirming his eligibility for membership, he was subjected to a lengthy series of initiation tests and games (see Fig. [3.2](#)).

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### Fig. 3.2



Allocation of new inmates among castes. *Note* Newbies face a lengthy passive verification process to prove their claims. Rookies who express interest in joining the grypsmen endure an extended initiation period with tests and games. *Source* Kaminski (2003)

The first, and arguably most daunting, of all tests was termed 'fag-making' (przecwelanie). This test was generally administered to younger newcomers who seemed ill-equipped to cope with the harsh realities of prison life. Throughout an entire day, grypsmen would subject the newcomer to mild forms of humiliation. He might be questioned about his sister's sexual exploits before being forced to endure lewd speculations or find a burning newspaper landing on his head while utilizing the jaruzel. The beleaguered rookie would retire to bed in the evening, and after the lights were turned off, he would hear a soft proposition whispered in his ear by one of his tormentors: 'You, don't worry, I'll look out for you and tell the other grypsmen to treat you kindly. You only need to do one thing for me. Suck my cock. Just this once, I won't tell anyone'.<sup>4</sup>

The ordeal aimed to mentally brace the rookie for the proposition, which tested his determination to uphold his honor. He was expected to prefer death over succumbing to such a degrading offer. In truth, no physical confrontation with the potential assailant was required. A simple ‘No’ or a more emphatic ‘Fuck off’ was sufficient to pass the test. Those who failed the ‘fag-making’ test were relegated to the role of fags, remaining unaware that a mere refusal could have spared them such indignity.

A more widely applicable and less degrading initiation test was baptism (chrzest), which led rookies to anticipate a severe beating, whereas in reality, the ‘beating’ would involve merely gentle taps with a towel dampened and rolled to resemble a carrot (marchewa). Failure to pass this initiation test resulted in the rookie becoming a sucker. A grypsman could also be demoted to sucker status for some infringing grypsmen norms. The most serious infractions led to being branded a fag.

Newcomers who successfully navigated one or both tests, or who were exempted due to their impressive demeanor or strong reputation, were then subject to numerous covert and overt ‘little games’ (gierki) or linguistic puzzles designed to test their acumen. For example, in the ‘Disneyland’ game, the newcomer was seated on a stool while the test conductor immobilized his knees between his own. The conductor would then introduce his left hand as Mickey Mouse and his right as Donald Duck, before striking the rookie hard just above the knees—a particularly tender spot. The ensuing question, ‘Who hit you?’ harbored a catch; the correct answer was neither ‘Mickey Mouse’ nor ‘Donald Duck’ but ‘You!’ (refer to Kaminski [2004](#), 46–54 for a more comprehensive discussion of little games and covert tests).

In the evenings, a rookie might face a proposal such as, “Look, it’s entertainment time! Would you like to sing or dance for us?” Naturally, he should reject any such humiliating offers. Singing was acceptable, but solely as a voluntary activity.<sup>5</sup>

In language tests, the optimal option was often not presented by the conductor. Finding a proper answer or deflecting the intended mockery back onto the instigator would be a good strategy. For example, one might be asked, ‘What distinguishes a woman from a beehive?’ Proposing such riddles of dubious originality could backfire on the questioner. The rookie

might know, or devise, the clever riposte 'Insert your member into a beehive and you'll discern the difference!'.<sup>6</sup>

A rookie could impress the grypsmen by sharing an original jest. Humor that mocked communists or Russians, whom Poles viewed as oppressors, was especially appreciated. A typical joke from this genre involved the highest-ranking Polish and Russian officials from the era of late communism and went as follows (Kaminski [2004](#), 99):

General Jaruzelski caught a goldfish. His first wish: Give me a big palace! No problem. His second wish: Give me twelve beautiful naked women! No problem. His last wish: I want the biggest dick in the world ready to play! Bang! The door opens and Brezhnev enters with a balalaika.

A rookie who had successfully completed all the trials and proved his astuteness advanced to the concluding phase of initiation, often termed 'the prison academy'. His alternating instructors delivered their lectures deep into the night, swiftly bringing about exhaustion through sleep deprivation. He was gradually enlightened about all the mysteries behind the tests, little games, and the full extent of the argot rules. The more dedicated educators might also share knowledge on self-injury techniques or ways to rehabilitate a disgraced grypsman. Then, the time for the examination would come. No mistakes were tolerated. An error resulted in punishment, and the examination cycle would start over.

Instead of a certificate, the graduating rookie was given a formal handshake by all the grypsmen in his cell, signifying his acceptance into the caste. By an odd twist of fate, Student underwent the 'prison academy' thrice, each time with commendable outcomes, yet he never received the ultimate sign of acceptance. Every single time, he was moved to another cell just before the final ceremony.

## Everyday life

The life of a grypsman, though intense during the initiation phase, predominantly comprised routine daily tasks for the majority of his incarceration. He faced the challenges of combating depression, alleviating boredom, and engaging in the trade of scarce goods. For every inmate in the 1980s, two overarching goals were to maintain and enhance his standing

among fellow cellmates and to strategize for his eventual release. Therefore, inmates' daily decisions revolved around achieving a satisfactory life in the present while also working towards securing their earliest possible future release from prison. The practical pursuit of these goals was shaped by a pervasive scarcity of resources, lenient administrative oversight, and cell overcrowding.

In the 1980s, an unexpectedly valuable aspect of quality life in Polish prisons was the consumption of tea. Owing to the sensory deprivation experienced by inmates, strong tea acted as a stimulant and enlivened evening conversations, helping to pass the overly abundant time. Tea had a monopolistic position among prison guilty indulgences since alcohol was expensive and difficult to smuggle, and the use of hard drugs was heavily stigmatized. Inmates were legally forbidden from possessing any electric heaters, which implied a ban on the brewing and consuming tea. Nonetheless, they managed to boil water for tea by illicitly tapping electricity from cell lightbulbs using makeshift heaters composed of two razors, two matches, two lengthy wires, and a sturdy cord. The procurement and trading of tea blossomed into a vibrant commerce with fellow grypsmen or guards, and it encouraged the excavation of diggers (*przebitki*), i.e., small tunnels within cell walls for the transport of tea, payments, and grypses Fig. 3.3.

Each of the ten prison cells visited by Student at Białołęka and Mokotów Jails had clever tunnelling systems connecting to all neighboring cells and, in some cases, to cells above and below. The digger system provided the most efficient channels for trade and communication, but grypses and goods were also carried by barbers, cooks, and sometimes guards. Inmates communicated and traded by shouting through windows, sending packages up and down using small baskets and ropes, used the Morse alphabet by tapping on the sewage pipes, or gesturing with a silent 'hand alphabet' when cell windows were unobstructed. Political prisoners often emptied the *jaruzel* and used the toilet pipes as a 'telephone'. Such a technique was strictly prohibited by grypsmen as it violated their purity norms, which included avoiding contact with *jaruzel*'s interior and content.

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### Fig. 3.3



A typical gryps wrapped in plastic. *Note* To hide the message, the paper was tightly folded, wrapped in plastic, and made easily concealable in body cavities. Sending a gryps could, for example, allow partners to communicate and potentially synchronize their stories, potentially leading to lighter sentences. *Source* Student's personal collection

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The collective consumption of tea or perishable items received in parcels from families incentivized the formation of inmate coalitions, known as teahouses and waferhouses. These coalitions consisted of two to four grypsmen, and sometimes included defensive alliances to protect against potential aggression. Suckers were allowed to remain isolated

with no rights to form associations. Any attempt by suckers to establish a defensive coalition would be promptly neutralized by grypsmen.

Access to television or radio was non-existent, save for brief broadcasts from the prison's own radio station. Despite this, art and culture thrived, generously supplied by the inmates themselves. The majority possessed invaluable scrapbooks with shrewd aphorisms, fearsome drawings frequently used for tattoos, or their favorite songs (see Fig. [3.4](#)).

**Fig. 3.4**



A drawing by a prison artist. *Note* This picture, like most drawings, was intended as a tattoo design. It combines two of the most popular tattoo motifs: erotica, typically depicted by a naked woman, and monsters. *Source* Student's personal collection

Melancholic verses portrayed young inmates wrongfully incarcerated, weeping mothers and girlfriends, frightened children, deceitful sleuths, and fresh corpses (Kaminski [2004](#), 117; see Kaminski, [2006](#) for an expanded analysis of prison argot):

I remembered your eyes my love  
Separation erased them far away  
And a silent sound of handcuffs  
That a sleuth put on my hands  
You cried then silently my dear  
You thought I'm a hangman or rascal  
You looked at me with disdain in your eyes  
And now I yearn for you from behind bars

The talents of singing, telling engaging jokes, drawing, or tattooing were highly valued and could enable inmates to secure the much-coveted position of a court jester or a skilled professional. Inmates who made themselves useful to as many other inmates as possible gained protection against degradation. Even grypsmen might show some respect to well-behaved and helpful suckers.

More advanced skills included the ability to compose thoughtful love poems, draft compelling formal letters to authorities, teach English, play bridge, and offer medical advice, particularly regarding self-inflicted injuries. The latter expertise warrants further discussion.

Almost every one of the 119 inmates encountered by Student considered leveraging their health for personal gain. Official statistics from circa 1980 estimated the number of self-inflicted injuries at 1,000–1,100 cases annually (Mums [1986](#), 76), a figure that likely severely underestimated the actual occurrence.

Being recognized as ‘ill’ could lead to a reduction in prison time, suspension of sentence, or other benefits. Strategies observed by Student included simple acts such as refusing food or surgery, ingenious attempts to simulate paralysis (unsuccessfully) or Parkinson's disease (successfully), and numerous forms of self-harm.

The most common methods of self-injury included swallowing foreign objects (połyk), cutting one's veins or abdomen (pochlastanie), inserting needles into one's eye or nails into the forehead (wbitka), scalding legs with boiling water or setting them on fire, and injecting harmful substances into one's muscles (wstrzyk).

Among the most hazardous methods of self-injury, combined with simulation, was the seesaw (wyhuśtanie). An inmate and his accomplice would spend weeks diligently preparing for a convincing mock suicide attempt. In the early hours of the night, the seesawer would hang himself from the window bars using his bedsheet, while his partner would ‘and ‘luckily’ discover the attempt and rescue him ‘just in the nick of time’. In reality, the accomplice would attentively wait until the seesawer lost consciousness and then swiftly cut him down during the crucial few minutes before death could occur. A doctor could easily confirm the unconscious state, intended to convincingly demonstrate the seesawer's death wish to a prosecutor or judge. The goal was to exert pressure for reduced charges, a more lenient sentence, or parole. This strategy banked on the reluctance of prosecutors, judges, or prison wardens to deal with seriously troublesome or determined inmates. These officials could easily restore their peace of mind with a single stroke of their pens favorable to the seesawer.

Prison staff and researchers often misunderstood self-inflicted injuries. They viewed them as mere attempts to “cause trouble and disrupt the routine work of the personnel” (Michalski and Morawski [1971](#), 59). However, they were strategic means to achieve the inmates' specific goals. As one seasoned criminal put it, “It is easy to fill your stomach with

iron and die. The real skill lies in causing no harm to yourself while securing release from prison” (Stwora [1967](#), 109).

The success of the numerous cases of self-injury observed by Student varied considerably. The most adept inmates— primarily grypsmen— managed to reduce their sentences from nine to approximately five years, evade the inevitable death penalty, secure parole, mitigate the prosecutor's charges, enhance their status within the cell, protect themselves from abuse or even demotion by fellow grypsmen, and achieve various minor practical benefits. In contrast, the less fortunate suffered dire consequences, including death from untreated cancers or infections following botched swallows, partial paralysis, loss of vision, limb amputations, or other disabilities.<sup>7</sup>

## 1989: Transition

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*Don't fucking beat 'em!*

Paweł Moczydłowski at a briefing with prison and detention centers wardens,

May 1990. (Nyzio [2020](#), 529)

The year 1989 was a breakthrough for Poland. Communism was replaced with democracy and its centrally planned economy with one based on free markets. A period of transformation has begun, affecting almost all institutions and social areas, including the prison system. There was a widespread belief that the transition was thorough and successful.

A new minimum cell area standard for a prisoner was introduced, which was now 3 m<sup>2</sup>. Thanks to the 1989 amnesty, with fewer inmates, amounting to only 40,000 at the end of December 1989, the prisons were far from overcrowded. This problem reappeared in 2000. In 1993, the prisonization rate was 160 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants; it exceeded 200 in 2001 and has remained at a similar level since then, e.g., in 2018 it was 194 (Nyzio, [2020](#), 545–547).

Prison regulations were relaxed, especially those regarding contacts with family and the outside world (parcels, media). Possession of many consumer or material goods, such as radio, televisions, video games, was allowed. Prisoners could file complaints about ill-treatment by officers. Prison officers were now instructed to address inmates as ‘mister’ instead of the informal ‘you’ previously used (in Polish, the informal ‘you’ is considered disrespectful unless used with close friends or family). Inmate salaries for work performed were also raised (Nyzio, [2020](#), 548), although the jobs, due to the liquidation of many prison workplaces, became scarce. However, work in prison has become an activity sought by prisoners, not a form of exploitation.

At the beginning of 1990, Dr. Paweł Moczydłowski, an academic sociologist who had no previous connections with the prison service but had extensive experience in researching prison institutions, became the head of the prison service. He placed emphasis on selecting appropriate staff, which meant that a large number of officers who were not willing to change their methods of working with prisoners (e.g., giving up beating) had to leave the service. In this way, approximately 7,000 officers left within 2.5 years, which constituted 40% of the staff.

Using prisoners as informers was abolished as it torpedoed social rehabilitation, which has now become one of the main goals of imprisonment. One way this ‘opening of prisons’ was implemented was through temporary leaves: In 1992, 261,000 leaves were granted to 45,000 prisoners, covering over 60% of convicts. As Moczydłowski emphasizes, non-returns from leave amounted annually to only 5.5%, which demonstrates the extent to which the climate and situation in prisons have changed (Moczydłowski [1994](#), 14–15).

This opening was also reciprocal—from then on, scientists, journalists, religious associations and charities now had access to prisons. From an institution about which no one except the Ministry of Justice knew what was happening inside, and which the mass media could not talk about, the prison came under the democratic supervision of the President, the Sejm (the Lower House), the Senate, the Ombudsman, the Helsinki Committee, independent courts and the media (Moczydłowski [1994](#), 10–11).

## **2000–2002: Chojnice Jail and Gdańsk–Przeróbka Prison**

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Kamil Miszewski, the author of this section, spent 2 years and 5 months (between 2000 and 2002) in Chojnice Jail, as well as brief periods (two weeks each) in Strzelewo and Potulice Prisons, and Gdańsk-Przeróbka Prison, while a student at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. These incarcerations were due to causing a car accident. His cellmates nicknamed him Cyborg (Składak) because of the large screws protruding from his broken leg following the accident.

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Maciej Szaszkiewicz pointed out that in the mid-1990s, two opposing views emerged among the professionals and researchers on the future of prison subculture:

1. The subculture would adapt to the changes taking place and possibly thrive even more than under the *ancien régime*.
2. With the fall of the totalitarian communist system, the repressive prison system and its by-product and archenemy, the prison subculture, would both collapse.

According to Szaszkiewicz (1997), the argument in favor of the first scenario is that in the past, after periods of prosperity, the subculture went through phases of regression, but each time it found a way to get out of the crisis, most often due to the flexible adjustment of subcultural norms to the existing situation. Therefore, it is possible that this will happen again as well. The second scenario is supported by the observation that the *raison d'être* of the subculture was the principle: 'the worse, the better'. The more severe the policy of judicial punishment, the more painful the system of repression, the more severe the fight between the prison staff and the subculture, the stronger was its level of internal integration, the more popular its philosophy among frustrated prisoners, and the greater the self-esteem of its participants. Therefore, the final collapse of the repressive penitentiary system may also mean the final end of the subculture. Szaszkiewicz wrote in 1997 that he was unable to predict which direction the subculture would go, and both scenarios seemed to him likely (*ibid.*, 173–178).

## Social Structure, Allocation to Castes and Lack of Grypsman Initiation

When Cyborg entered the Chojnice Jail in June 2000, there was still a division into the three main castes that Student had encountered in 1985, but their numbers and inter-caste relations were substantially different. A little more than 10% of the inmates were grypsmen. The rest were suckers who, due to their numbers and a fresh prison-specific political correctness, were commonly called 'non-grypsmen'. During the entire period of his sentence, Cyborg met only two prisoners who were suspected of being fags, but no one could fully confirm this fact.<sup>8</sup> However, there were those who were called 'heavy suckers' (ciężki frajer), who got caught by law enforcement agencies in an embarrassing way or behaved stupidly in prison. Both grypsmen and other non-grypsmen looked down on them, if not outright despised them. Cyborg's estimated their percentage in the prison population at 3–5%. The above-mentioned percentages of prisoners occurred in all prisons where he stayed, although it must be emphasized that due to the nature of his crime, he was not sent to maximum security units but to semi-open and open prisons.

When, at the beginning of his sentence, Cyborg was thinking about joining the grypsmen (at a later stage it was no longer possible), his cellmates advised him against it. In their opinion, there was no real benefit from such membership. Grypsmen were no longer perceived as the prison's 'first league,' as a caste worth joining for the sake of splendor and values, or even to ensure safety, even though they considered themselves like that. The grypsmen were rather perceived as those who live in the memory of the subculture's former glory, who follow anachronistic rules, which in the altered situation make their prison life even more difficult.<sup>9</sup> They invariably declared hostility against the prison administration, not noticing that it was no longer their enemy, that everything had already been won, or at least implemented. Their attempts to challenge the system through disruptive actions only reinforced the administration's perception of them as troublemakers. As a grypsman, it would automatically be difficult for Cyborg to advance in the progressive system and obtain parole or temporary release, which was very important to him because he wanted to continue his studies while serving his sentence.

In Student's time, grypsowanie seemed to be the first and obvious choice of every prisoner. Only when this option was not available or if an inmate misbehaved, he was relegated to

lower castes. In the 2000s, in Cyborg's prisons, being a non-grypsmen was already the first choice for the majority of new prisoners. This does not mean that the grypsmen have now fallen to the second league and the non-grypsmen have been promoted to the first, but simply that the perceived positions of both castes converged. Non-grypsmen wanted to serve their sentence in peace, without being involved in any troublesome actions of the grypsmen. Therefore, they reported their access to the non-grypsmen immediately upon entering, without fear of the grypsmen's reactions.

According to Cyborg's observations, the five main principles of grypsowanie have been significantly devalued, starting with the most important one – Honor.<sup>10</sup> One may also seriously doubt about the adherence to the principle of Refusal to cooperate with administration.<sup>11</sup> Cyborg also witnessed a situation where the grypsmen did not defend their friend, whose rehabilitation specialist had unfairly demoted him from a semi-open group to a closed one, and for whom prison SWAT unit (atanda) came to take him out of the cell. However, their solidarity against aggression or hostility from non-grypsmen depended on the latter's status. They rarely intervened against strong and hardened criminals. The principle of material assistance no longer functioned in Student's times, and in the prisons where Cyborg was imprisoned there were no hospital cells, so he had no opportunity to assess whether the grypsmen helped the physically weaker or sick from their group. Easy access to showers (once a week) and hot water (daily) ensured hygiene for all prisoners, regardless of their caste. Finally, tolerance against non-social but non-aggressive behavior increased. Cyborg encountered cases of long-term silting among depressed prisoners, usually caused by family problems such as a divorce filed by the wife, to which the rest of the group did not react.

The most striking sign of the grypsmen code's erosion was the disappearance of 'America,' the lengthy and demanding trial period Student went through, i.e., before a novice is allowed to join the grypsmen. Like any novitiate, it did not provide a full guarantee of success, but it allowed grypsmen to detect and reject candidates who were physically and mentally weak, as well as those who were not very intelligent. In the 2000s, anyone who expressed such a will was accepted into the group, without any tests being carried out. Grypsmen only checked whether he was accused of pedophilia. However, rapists of women faced no barriers to entry. Cyborg personally witnessed a boy admitted to his cell who had come to serve an alternative

sentence of 6 days in prison for failing to pay a fine. Inmates, who observed such inconsistencies and corruption of values often decided against becoming grypsmen.

This negative publicity was also reinforced by the existence of the lifting practice. During Student's time, a grypsman degraded to the sucker caste could be reinstated (lifted), requiring him to demonstrate strong character, unwavering loyalty to the code, and a willingness to make selfless sacrifices for the group's good. Gifts for the group elders in the form of tea and cigarettes were only of secondary importance. In the 2000s, group leaders used the procedure of lifting as a tool to make money or even exploit weaker grypsmen, deliberately finding faults to degrade them, so that those who wanted to be grypsmen again had to redeem themselves. Then the whole procedure could be repeated many times. Other former requirements for reinstatement have simply been abandoned. The above-mentioned practice was also connected with another one: the grypsmen leaders were prison drug lords and turned their subordinates into addicts. At a price three times higher than in freedom, drugs generated hefty profits. Those unable to repay their debts were demoted and deprived of access to drugs until the debt was settled, after which their caste membership was restored. This mode of functioning not only violated the principle of excluding addicts from grypsmen, but even produced them.

Even in the 2000s, the prisons Cyborg experienced maintained the strict distinction between clean, dirty, and untouchable objects, with the latter shunned like the plague. The specter of becoming a 'fag,' a pariah figure few had encountered but all feared, instilled cautious behavior in most prisoners.

The argot described by Student was known and used by both grypsmen and non-grypsmen. Some of the once-secret argot has now become public knowledge. Even non-grypsmen found terms like 'pull' or 'move' offensive, instinctively grasping the nuances of the argot despite lacking full knowledge of its rules. They knew about substitutes, concluding and more. Perhaps even the grypsmen themselves were not privy to all the intricacies.<sup>12</sup> Notably, from Cyborg's comparison of the older and newer versions of argot, the 2000s seemingly saw only one major addition to the lexicon: 'little glass' (szkiełko) referring to the television, a luxury like most other media and electronic devices absent from cells in the 1980s.

Within Cyborg's prisons during the 2000s, grypsmen leveraging non-grypsmen for cleaning duties depended heavily on their relative power within a specific cell, not the entire prison. In Gdańsk-Przeróbka Prison, some cells still had 'traditional' arrangements where non-grypsmen did all the cleaning.<sup>13</sup> However, non-grypsmen often resisted this pressure, resulting in each caste cleaning their own areas. The relations were slightly asymmetric: Wealthier inmates, regardless of caste, sometimes hired poorer non-grypsmen to clean, and stronger prisoners, grypsmen or not, could coerce weaker non-grypsmen into cleaning duties. Grypsmen were not for hire.

Announcing toilet use remained a custom only in cells where grypsmen held sway. Elsewhere, the rule was disregarded entirely. In these former grypsmen strongholds, some non-grypsmen even resorted to deliberate defiance, flaunting their disregard for the grypsmen's authority to test their remaining power.

## Everyday Life

Mornings at Gdańsk-Przeróbka Prison defied regulations. Prisoners woke up for roll call and breakfast, then returned to bed until around 11 a.m., creating a conveniently peaceful morning for the unit officer in the pavilion. Waking inmates turned on their electronics (TVs, tape recorders, Playstations) creating a cacophony that lasted until evening. Prisoners freely moved between cells,<sup>14</sup> shared coffee, which had become the preferred drink since the 1990s, replacing tea. Interestingly, inmates primarily used self-made heating devices (buząła) to boil water for coffee. While commercial heaters and kettles were available in the canteen, buzałas were seen as quicker and easier to operate.

Drugs were prevalent within the prison, becoming the go-to stimulant, replacing tea in popularity. After a few months spent in one of the cells, the grypsmen invited Cyborg to smoke marijuana together. They tried to acquire a new client, but also to protect them against possible denunciation from him. Alcohol, for the same reasons as in Student's times—high price and inconvenient smuggling—enjoyed little popularity.

A comedic scene unfolded in Gdańsk-Przeróbka prison. A guard from Cyborg's pavilion used hand signals (pisanie na witach) to communicate with a guard from the neighboring pavilion through the window. Witnessing this, the grypsmen were baffled. None of them

recognized the 'flasher' (miganka) or Morse code. By the 2000s, smuggled cell phones and teletext on TV sets, before the administration confiscated remote controls, had become the primary means of illicit contact with the outside world.

Prison art fell under the administration's control. The 1990s saw a surge in prison art exhibitions, presenting inmates' paintings, sculptures, and pieces made of straw, soap, and matches. However, Cyborg's impression was that it ceased to be a spontaneous initiative of the prisoners, that these works were created only for the sake of these exhibitions, and that some prison wardens seemed to enjoy competing with one another to see which prisoner would be the greatest artist. Prison prose and poetry suffered similar degradation. The submissions to an official exhibition, biennale, or music contests never became part of the informal prison culture, passed down among inmates. Unlike the songs and ballads documented by Kamiński (2004, 2006) and Szaszkievicz (1997), Cyborg found no new prison songs or ballads from the 2000s that were widely known and spontaneously sung among inmates.

Prison tattoos have shed their subcultural significance entirely. Artistic styles popular in the free world dominated in the 2000s. Group approval for secret rank signaling or otherwise meaningful tattoos was a relic of the past. Even if such a residual formal requirement for approval existed, the weakened grypsmen lacked the power to enforce it or punish offenders.<sup>15</sup> (Miszewski, 2022, 271–272).

The 2000s saw prison administration categorize self-harm as emotional or manipulative, with a high success rate in identifying the latter. This significantly reduced such incidents. For instance, swallowing an object not only caused immediate pain but also resulted in a hefty fee for medical intervention, effectively deterring others from similar attempts.

## Conclusion

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The post-communist transition's reforms directly led to the shrinking and banalization of prison subculture. Higher living standards within cells, expanded prisoner rights, and improved communication channels all contributed to this shift. Consequently, prison life began to resemble a regular life outside, less like an exile into the wild and more like a temporary break from the routines of everyday life.

Szaszkiewicz's predictions about the subculture's future, outlined in the previous section, proved inaccurate. It neither adapted as a whole to the new realities nor simply vanished. Instead, it fragmented. For decades, a single dominant group ruled the country's prisons, where changes happened swiftly and uniformly across the nation.<sup>16</sup> However, after the transformation, a multitude of groups emerged, each forging its own path (Miszewski [2022](#), 276).

The fragmenting grypsowanie subculture splintered into three distinct subgroups. First, the 'traditionalists' vehemently rejected post-1989 changes. Loathing the subculture's transformation, they clung to pre-reform practices. The second group, the 'classicists,' stripped grypsowanie norms down to their bare essentials, mirroring the minimalist rules of the pre-war subculture: no snitching, no passivity in homosexual encounters, and maintaining hygiene. Finally, 'teenagers' (małolaty) existed on the fringes. Incarcerated separately and yearning to become grypsmen, they lacked teachers or proper training. Their attempts at grypsowanie were a caricature, a hodgepodge of misinterpreted rules devoid of understanding.

In addition to the grypsmen, Polish prisons of the early 2000s housed a diverse array of other significant groups, each with a varying degree of internal homogeneity:

- Non-grypsmen, who were by far the most numerous.
- Dodgers (cwaniaks): Another subculture, as out of touch with changing times as the traditional grypsmen, they were also hostile to them.
- Wise men (organized crime): To the grypsmen's dismay, organized crime only aligned with them in about half the cases. Regardless of grypsmen affiliation, they were typically the strongest group.
- White-Collar Convicts: With unimaginable wealth compared to ordinary inmates, they often made prison life more economically oriented.
- Homies (Ziomale): Inmates from the same localities who found solidarity in prison.
- Fags: The lowest group in the hierarchy, which has maintained its position unchanged.

Considering all these groups, castes, and social divisions, only two elements were uniformly constant in prison stratification: the first-league positions of organized crime convicts, regardless of whether they were grypsmen or not, and the lowest third-league position of fags. Apart from these, everyone, including the three groups of grypsmen, could move up or down within this stratification and be either in the first or second league. The position depended on the strength of a specific group, caste, or social category in a specific prison, pavilion, or even cell (Miszewski [2005](#), 70–91).

An intermediate scenario has come true for the post-transition subculture of grypsmen as it has partially adapted to the new times and its strength has decreased significantly. It split into three subgroups, trying to cope with the new reality in different ways, sometimes at the cost of almost completely self-destroying their identity. Grypsowanie lost much of its numbers and importance, which meant that its undivided rule ended.

Finally, the transitional reforms brought valuable lessons for policymakers and future reformers. The fall of communism eliminated many inefficiencies and paradoxes generated by this inept and inflexible system. The relatively simple and inexpensive modifications resulted in many unexpected changes but also substantially improved the outcomes produced by penitentiaries. The elimination of harsh physical punishment, resignation from the employment of informers, and the introduction of temporary leave humanized inmate life and made rehabilitation more meaningful. Furthermore, the hostility between inmates and guards was reduced. Amateurish tattoos, which often disfigured inmates' bodies, decreased in frequency. Charging for medical procedures, which shifted some of the costs of inmates' actions onto themselves, dramatically diminished the frequency of most self-injuries. With the partial demise and fragmentation of grypsing, the prison experience lost its aura as a heroic test of manhood that often broke lives and characters. It became perceived instead as a sad, boring, and well-deserved punishment that one does not want to repeat.

## Notes

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1. In describing the political system of the Polish People's Republic (1944–1989), we use the generic name ‘communism’. Other popular terms that were also widely used include state communism, socialism, real socialism, or peerel (a Polish term).
2. Marek Kamiński, the author of this section, whilst a student at Warsaw University, established and oversaw the underground publishing houses STOP and KSIĄŻNICA LITERACKA between 1982 and 1989. In 1985, he spent five months in Mokotów and Białołęka Jails as a political prisoner. His fellow inmates nicknamed him ‘Student’.
3. In Białołęka Jail, possessing any item with a ladybug motif was dangerous. Student learned this the hard way when local grypsmen discovered his soapbox with a small ladybug picture. The discovery sparked a heated discussion, and Student was forced to swear he wasn’t affiliated with the ladybug group.
4. This is a reconstruction of a proposal made by inmate Maniek to Student in his first regular cell at Białołęka Jail.
5. Creative alternatives to this dilemma were available. Student opted to sing an anti-communist anthem by Jacek Kaczmarski, containing lines like ‘Tear the teeth from the walls’ bars; sever the handcuffs, shatter the baton; and the walls will tumble, tumble, tumble, and bury the old world,’ which was met with enthusiasm from his eight cellmates. Each requested that he jot down the lyrics so they could copy them into their scrapbooks.
6. One of many riddles presented to Student at Białołęka Jail.
7. Student engaged in an elaborate simulation exercise with the assistance of prison physicians and specialists from the National Institute of Oncology in Warsaw, leading to

his early release due to 'serious health issues'. This type of voluntary and extensive support from medical staff was often offered to political prisoners of late communism.

8. The weakening of the subculture code, frequent leaves, and the introduction of intimate visits significantly reduced the number of rapes in prisons. Moreover, the policy pursued by the prison administration ensured that perpetrators of so-called nasty crimes (mainly pedophiles) were preventively imprisoned separately from the rest of the prisoners, in so-called custodians or nurseries.
9. This pertains, for example, to the previously mentioned announcement by Student of the intention to use the toilet. According to the rules of grypsowanie, one cannot perform any physiological activities while eating or drinking. When the so-called sanitary corners were separated from the rest of the cell only by a curtain or a structure made of fiberboard, this rule made perfect sense, as the stench spreading around the cell was a serious discomfort, especially during meals. However, once the toilets were walled off from the rest of the cell, announcing defecation became pointless.
10. This is evidenced by the situation during Cyborg's stay at the Gdańsk-Przeróbka Prison. A newly arrived prisoner, who was rumored to be a fag, was offered a deal by the cell's grypsmen: We will keep this information to ourselves, but in return you clean the cell and do the laundry and dishes. In 1985, such a situation would have been unthinkable, and the fag would have been treated with all severity. Pragmatic considerations were put above the code of honor here.
11. An illustration is provided by another situation in Gdańsk-Przeróbka Prison: an inmate from Cyborg's cell, whenever the night shift of a certain unit officer was scheduled, was invited by him and the other officers from that shift for vodka in the evening (he returned after a few hours, being more or less drunk). Other grypsmen did not benefit from this. Such fraternization, unthinkable in the Student's times, highlights the erosion of grypsmen principles.

12. A prime example from the 2000s: a toilet bowl in prison was called a 'gier'. None of the grypsmen Cyborg questioned could explain the origin. Only upon meeting Student did Cyborg learn the explanation. According to the earlier-described principle, the toilet bowl was named after the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. Thus, in the 1970s the toilet bowl was called gier after Edward Gierek, and in the 1980s, jaruzel after Wojciech Jaruzelski. In the 2000s, the old name returned, probably because it was shorter and more convenient to pronounce, but the roots of the name were forgotten.
13. This prison housed inmates in mixed cells (grypsmen and non-grypsmen), typically 11–13 people per cell. The second ward, a therapeutic unit, was an exception; there, the administration disregarded caste divisions and housed inmates in cells of 2–3.
14. It was a combined semi-open and open facility with open cells.
15. At the Chojnice Jail bathhouse, Cyborg encountered a peculiar sight: a young man with a colonel's military rank tattooed on his arms representing in the past a long-term hardened criminal. Cyborg's surprise deepened when he learned young man was only serving a five-month sentence for a petty theft conviction.
16. As we wrote earlier, before the transition, other subcultural groups were ephemeral, and suckers and fags couldn't be considered an organized group.

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