HOW JAZZ CAME TO POLAND

The YMCA Polska as a hub of transatlantic exchange

by Malte Hoge

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Photo credit: A performance by the band 'Melomani' in 1956, founded a few years earlier at the YMCA House in Łódź.
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Freedom, independence, modernity, an alternative cultural lifestyle, and musical resistance to the communist regime — these were the qualities attributed to the jazz scene in the Polish People's Republic, a scene that would become a pioneering force in the development of jazz cultures throughout the Eastern Bloc. But how did jazz manage to take root in Poland in the first place?

To the simple question "When did jazz first came to Poland?", there is a simple answer: this new musical genre – originally from North America – found its way to Poland between the two World Wars.[1] *Things become more complex when we ask not when, but how.* That's because Polish jazz culture is the fruitful outcome of a transatlantic cultural transfer – made possible through the transatlantic operations of the YMCA, the Young Men's Christian Association, and its Polish branch, the YMCA Polska. This article explores how the new musical style was able to gain a foothold in Poland – and looks at the crucial role that local YMCA centers played in the development of Polish jazz.

The YMCA Polska: Reconstruction and Cultural Exchange

The YMCA Polska was (and still is) part of the internationally active *Young Men's Christian Association*. The YMCA – often referred to simply as "the Y" – was founded in London in 1844 by the draper George Williams (1821–1905) and quickly expanded. At a time of rapidly growing urbanization, the organization offered affordable housing to young men who had recently arrived in the city – alongside a Christian educational program. World War I played a key role in spreading awareness of the organization and its model, eventually bringing it to Poland. Polish soldiers became familiar with the YMCA while serving in the Entente forces, for example in the French Foreign Legion. As early as 1922, the Polish Ministry of the Interior recognized YMCA Polska as an official national sub-organization. It shared the Christian orientation of the parent organization, although this aspect played only a minor role in the association's everyday life.

The prominent mediating role of the United States is already evident in the founding of the YMCA in Poland: Within the globally active YMCA network, the Canadian – and especially the American – YMCA were key players. In the years following the First World War, the U.S. branch and its activities had a decisive influence on the establishment of the Polish organization: the YMCA Polska emerged from the "YMCA America in Poland." The American Paul Super (1880–1949) was appointed as its first leader. As the founding figure of the Polish branch, Super exemplifies the YMCA's internationalist and transnational ethos. He had initially worked as a secretary at the University of Missouri and later served the YMCA in Honolulu

and New York before moving to Poland in 1922. Super left the country following the German invasion, but remained loyal to the YMCA Polska, continuing to serve as its general secretary until 1947 and advocating for its support abroad. It was also Super who selected Warsaw, Kraków, and Łódź as the key locations for YMCA centers to be built. These were largely financed by the *International Committee of the North American YMCA* and private American donors. This strong North American influence was also reflected in the profiles and programs of the YMCA centers: Polish youth were introduced to previously unfamiliar games, sports, and other forms of group leisure activities. Camping played a particularly significant role, especially the YMCA's popular summer camps, which soon became a hallmark of its offerings. In this way, the YMCA Polska became an important agent of cultural transfer in the interwar period – a time generally marked by intense processes of cultural exchange, particularly from North America.

The Second World War and the ensuing German occupation marked a turning point for the YMCA Polska. The newly built centers were expropriated and repurposed by the occupiers. However, the YMCA Polska's activities did not cease entirely – they continued underground, not only within occupied Poland but also in countries where Polish citizens had sought refuge. There is evidence that YMCA Polska's operations continued in over ten countries, including France, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Italy, Romania, Hungary, and five African states.[2] Remarkably, the YMCA centers survived the war largely unscathed. Their well-preserved condition, along with the dedication of young Polish YMCA leaders, laid the groundwork for reorganizing the association after the war. This reorganization, in turn, provided a foundation for the rise of Polish jazz.

Jerzy Matuszkiewicz, who became the frontman of the band “Melomani”. Stefan Matyjaszkiewicz / Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

Jazz in the houses of the YMCA Polska

With the reorganization of the YMCA Polska, jazz also found its way into its local centers. They became meeting places for young intellectuals, students, and artists – including jazz

enthusiasts – who here a space for exchange. The networking among these young jazz fans soon led to the first concerts. In Warsaw, for example, the first jam session was held in 1946. Before long, jazz clubs began to be established – first in Warsaw, then in Kraków, Łódź, Poznań, and Wrocław. The close link between the emerging Polish jazz scene and the YMCA was also reflected in the names of these clubs: the second jazz club founded in Warsaw was called *Polski Klub Jazzu przy YMCA* ("Polish Jazz Club at the YMCA"). In this way, the musical repertoire of the Saturday and Sunday dance evenings at "the Y" now expanded to include jazz. And it wasn't just men on the dancefloor – despite what the literal meaning and original idea of a Young Men's Christian Association might suggest. Women were welcome, and not only as dance partners: one of the earliest concerts featured Jeanne Johnstone Schiele as a jazz musician, and she was praised in the highest terms by the contemporary press. Nonetheless, it was still mainly male jazz musicians who performed on stage. One major event took place in Warsaw on May 30, 1947: the concert "*Jam Session – Hot Jazz – Swing – Boogie Woogie*" was organized and promoted by Leopold Tyrmand (1920–1985), who would later become a Polish jazz legend. Performing there, alongside the Czech saxophonist and musical director of the Warsaw Y, Charles Bowery, were several Polish jazz musicians – including one who performed under the pseudonym Waldemar Valdi, but is well known to insiders of the scene as Jerzy Matuszkiewicz (1928–2021).

The concert, attended by more than 500 young people, embodied transatlantic exchange on several levels. In addition to the music, Tyrmand introduced the audience to the clothing style, overall appearance, and lifestyle of the American jazz musician. Positive press reviews of the concert contributed to the success of the emerging Polish jazz scene.

To this day, Warsaw fondly remembers Tyrmand as a true 'lover of jazz' (miłośnik jazzu). Adrian Grycuk / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0

However, the YMCA center in Warsaw was not the only gateway for young jazz bands: it was at the Łódź Y that Janusz Cegiełła, Marek Sart, and Romuald Żyliński founded the successful band Melomani. Jazz was now leaving visible traces in YMCA club houses across the country: their libraries became home to growing record collections and relevant publications were gathered. This was another way in which the foundations of Polish jazz culture were laid within the walls of the YMCA. Marta Domurat-Linde aptly characterizes YMCA Polska's role in transatlantic exchange as that of an "*institutional link*."[3] Despite this close connection and the YMCA's importance as a launchpad for jazz, the genre remained just one facet of the organization's vibrant postwar activity.[4] Nevertheless, this brief period of mutual flourishing was to come to an abrupt end.

The end of YMCA Polska and the beginning of Ognisko

Under the dominant influence of Moscow, the enforcement of Marxist-Leninist doctrine in the sphere of leisure and culture marked the beginning of the end for the YMCA Polska. In line with the Soviet-promoted model of Socialist Realism, the cultural sphere of the fledgling People's Republic of Poland came under strict political control, subordinated to socialist principles and the goal of shaping a "new human being" in accordance with those ideals.

The Christian YMCA Polska proved a thorn in the side of the political leadership for several reasons. Owing to its close ties with the American YMCA, including financial backing, Poland's Minister of Health, Bogusław Kożusznik (1910–1996), accused the Polish branch of harboring "American imperialism" and displaying a "counterrevolutionary tendency." At the time, three American secretaries were working for YMCA Polska, who were perceived as overseers sent by the class enemy, the United States. Mounting public pressure soon led the Polish staff to avoid any open contact with them.
Even the summer camps came under the scrutiny of the regime. The Ministry of Education sent representatives of the socialist youth organization ZMP to the camps to ensure that the ideological training provided during these retreats served the aims of the new socialist system. YMCA Polska, in its original incarnation, came to an end in 1949, when the government declared the postwar reconstruction phase over and expelled nearly all Western aid organizations from the country. Yet even this did not suffice to bring the association fully under state control. On October 21, 1949, YMCA Polska was pressured into adopting a unanimously approved amendment to its statutes – though the voting outcome had been predetermined by officials of the Polish United Workers' Party. The amendment included a renaming of the organization: the YMCA became Ognisko (Polish for "campfire"), a deliberate and symbolic break with its Christian foundations. With this transformation came a new mission: Ognisko was now to contribute to the building of a new socialist society.

This marked the loss of institutional support for Polish jazz culture. But more than this, jazz – seen as the embodiment of American music – was rejected and actively suppressed by the political leadership. In Łódź, former YMCA libraries were even set on fire by young party officials, and their record collections were smashed with hammers – destroyed beyond recovery. For jazz musicians, this triggered a period of cultural withdrawal, later known as *jazz katakumbowy*, or 'catacomb jazz'. How jazz ultimately emerged from this era and regained its role as a cultural signal is explored in Rüdiger Ritter's article ↗.

In retrospect, Ognisko was not the end of the YMCA Polska; here you can see the Warsaw YMCA building. Adrian Grycuk / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0

Footnotes

1. Domurat-Linde, Marta: From "Jazz in Poland" to "Polish Jazz", in: Pickhan, Gertrud/Ritter, Rüdiger (eds.): Meanings of Jazz in State Socialism (JAZZ. Jazz under State Socialism 4) Frankfurt am Main 2016, pp. 75-96, here p. 80. ↥
2. Schmidt-Rost, Christian: Jazz in der DDR und Polen. Geschichte eines transatlantischen Transfers (JAZZ. Jazz under State Socialism 3) Frankfurt am Main 2015, p. 65. ↥
3. Domurat-Linde, Marta: From "Jazz in Poland" to "Polish Jazz", in: Pickhan, Gertrud/Ritter, Rüdiger (eds.): Meanings of Jazz in State Socialism (JAZZ. Jazz under State Socialism 4) Frankfurt am Main 2016, pp. 75-96, here p. 85. ↥
4. Schmidt-Rost, Christian: Jazz in der DDR und Polen. Geschichte eines transatlantischen Transfers (JAZZ. Jazz under State Socialism 3) Frankfurt am Main 2015, p. 65. ↥

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