

### **Brave women, but not sisters**

Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland.

By Shana Penn

University of Michigan Press; 372 pages; \$34.95

WHEN General Wojciech Jaruzelski imposed martial law in Poland on December 12th 1981, most of the male leaders of the trade union Solidarity were imprisoned. It was women who kept the organisation going. They dodged the secret police, forged papers, gave underground seminars and produced a clandestine mass-circulation newspaper, which the authorities repeatedly, but vainly, tried to suppress. Their chauvinism meant they assumed that the conspirators they were seeking must be men. During house searches, the secret police would usually neglect to investigate anything connected with women or children. Consequently, piles of nappies became one of the most preferred hiding places.

These women had been largely invisible beforehand, and mostly shunned publicity after Communism fell. Their story is fascinating and untold. Much of the excitement of those years, and the gutsy genius of the women of the Damska Grupa Operacyjna--or Women's Operational Group, a name that parodied secret-police jargon--comes across in Shana Penn's book. But this is despite her efforts, rather than because of them. Steeped in the parochial thinking of American academic feminism, she devotes too much space to the (to her) mystifying puzzle of her heroines' lack of gender consciousness. Surely they should realise that as women battling male structures, they were feminist pioneers?

There is a lot in Poland for an American feminist to get cross about. But Ms Penn struggles, and mostly fails, to make the imaginative leap necessary to see that her subjects' preoccupations were different. Joanna Szczesna, a magnificent activist to whom Ms Penn devotes considerable space, has complained about the author's dismay that the women did not gain their share of the political fruits of victory: "It happened that once in my life I put out lots of fires, but it was not because of gender discrimination that I didn't become a fireperson. I didn't become one because I didn't want to be one."

Ms Penn makes some effort to mention the role of womanhood in romantic Polish nationalism, such as the idea of the Matka Polka (Mother-Pole), a heroic, tragic figure who must send her sons to die for the country's liberation. But she doesn't really approve (nationalism, in her world, is highly suspect). And she fails to understand the importance of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. She makes a few dismissive references to the "cult of the Virgin Mary", but no attempt to reflect its symbolism or theology.

Ms Penn also displays carelessness in failing to respect one interviewee's request for anonymity. This person appears under a pseudonym in the main text, but under her real name in the index.

However, the greatest problem is that although Ms Penn realises she is talking a different language, she cannot adapt. She writes plaintively that her subjects "had very different understandings of 'internationalism', 'leftist politics', 'feminism' and 'collaboration'. For many of them, these words held immediate, negative associations with Communism, and when I used them they made people wince or fume...my choice of language sometimes made me appear either highly suspect or incredibly naive." Quite so.