

# Chapter 1

## An International Scholar with a Dramatic Life



Marta Bivand Erdal, Nils Petter Gleditsch, and Stein Tønnesson

Marek Thee lived a dramatic life amidst some of the 20th century's most tragic conflicts. This autobiography was written in the early 1990s. We meet him as a young leftist student in the Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk) before the Nazi takeover; as an advocate of the Jewish Zionist cause in Palestine during and after the Second World War; as a diplomat, foreign service official and scholar in the post-war Polish Republic; as a Polish representative on the Commission for Supervision and Control of the Geneva agreements on Indochina and Laos; as a foreign affairs analyst specializing on Asian affairs in Warsaw of the 1960s; and eventually, for the last 30 years of his life, as a peace researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and the Norwegian Human Rights Institute, once again in exile from his native Poland.

Marek Thee was a fighter with a typewriter. As the bibliography at the end of this volume reveals, he published extensively in Polish and English. Marek always held strong convictions. In the early 1930s, he could travel freely between Danzig and Poland, where he became an ardent opponent of Marshal Józef Piłsudski's regime. It took from him his passport. Paradoxically, this saved his life. While his family moved to Poland in 1938, after the *Kristallnacht*, and later succumbed in the Holocaust, he managed to get on a transport to British Palestine.

Marek Thee spent World War II in Palestine after his dramatic flight to escape Nazism. While there, he engaged in two parallel struggles: one for a Jewish socialist homeland, the other for a free Poland. In his characteristic fighting spirit, Marek Thee engaged in the publication of pamphlets and newsletters in Palestine – for both his favoured causes.

His texts in the *Biuletyn Wolnej Polski*, the *Bulletin of free Poland* show a vast scope of interests. Written first and foremost for Polish language readers in Palestine, they focus on issues related to the new communist Poland, to perspectives on returning to Poland, criticism of the government-in-exile in London, as well as skepticism to the post-war European democracy, particularly in Germany. Since the *Bulletin* was

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M. B. Erdal (✉) · N. P. Gleditsch · S. Tønnesson  
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Oslo, Norway

sponsored by the communist Polish authorities, it is difficult in retrospect to be sure to what extent Marek expresses his own opinions and emotions. At times, he glorifies Stalin. In these memoirs he reflects critically on his former views about Stalin and the Stalinist period. By contrast, his appreciation of the Soviet soldiers' contribution and sacrifice in the defeat of Nazi Germany appears genuine.

Marek Thee's contribution to the struggle for a free Poland through the *Bulletin* should, however, not primarily be seen through the prism of its affiliation with the Polish post-war communist authorities. Rather, his work reflects continued faith in and urge to fight for social justice and global peace and at the same time, a deep-seated sentiment for his homeland and its culture and literature. He writes, for instance, with great engagement about the establishment of the UN, in early January 1946, reflecting a strong conviction in the promise of international cooperation, and the absolute need for world peace. While in Israel after 1948 he was also instrumental in the publication of a translation to Hebrew of the Polish national epos *Pan Tadeusz*. References to this epos are visible in his writings on political affairs, directly and indirectly. In one case he quotes a famous passage from *Pan Tadeusz* on the experiences of Polish youth fighting for Napoleon in his Russia campaign in 1812.<sup>1</sup> The names of people with whom he worked in producing the *Bulletin*, and others whom he later in his consular role assisted in their return to Poland, such as Brandstaetter, Broniewski, Lec and Stern, were all well-known Polish language poets.

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, Marek Thee obtained a new Polish passport from the Polish Republic (renamed People's Republic in 1952) and became a Polish consular representative to the state of Israel after its establishment in 1948.

In 1952, he was recalled to Poland, where, shortly after, he was transferred to the Polish Institute of Foreign Affairs. As he recounts in these memoirs, this was directly due to his Jewish background and events preceding Stalin's death. He spent the next three years studying, picking up ambitions to pursue higher education which had earlier been curtailed by the war. He first took a master's degree and then a doctorate in history, with focus on the Middle East.

In 1955, Marek Thee joined the International Commission for Supervision and Control for the 1954 Geneva agreement on Indochina, serving first in Saigon and then in Laos. By the time he joined, the Commission, which included representatives of India, Canada and Poland, had carried out its most urgent tasks in monitoring the withdrawal of French troops to south of the 17th parallel, and of troops serving the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to north of that line. The political and military partition between North and South Vietnam was meant to last until general elections could be held in the whole country in 1956. As head of the International Commission's Saigon office in 1955, Marek established a close friendship with one of the top Vietnamese communist leaders, the later prime minister Pham Hung. He hailed from the south and served in 1955 as head of North Vietnam's liaison mission in Saigon. Already then, Marek learned to see all of Indochina as an integrated political and military arena. So, in 1956–57, when he was posted to Vientiane as a representative on the Control Commission for Laos, he realized the importance of close cooperation

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<sup>1</sup> See Thee (1946) Reakcja ... under Articles in the bibliography.

between the Vietnamese communist leaders in Hanoi and their Lao allies in the Pathet Lao. Laos could not in Marek's view be treated as a totally separate country. Its politics and civil war had to be understood in an Indochinese context, where neutrality and peace in Laos would depend on neutrality and peace in South Vietnam. Marek thus opposed and prevented attempts by other members of the Control Commission to inspect the border areas to Vietnam and demand the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from those areas. The border provinces were controlled by Prince Souphanouvong's Pathet Lao movement, which received support, guidance and military training from North Vietnam. To keep control of the border areas was strategically important for Hanoi in case it should decide to resort to renewed armed fighting in South Vietnam to unify the nation. In 1957, after the repressive regime of Ngo Dinh Diem had failed to comply with the agreement reached in Geneva to hold general elections in both parts of Vietnam before July 1956, some south-based communists dug up again the arms they had hidden in 1954. Two years later, the Party leaders in Hanoi decided to support a growing insurgency in the South and build what would be known as the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos to supply fighters, arms and other provisions.

At that time, Hanoi's decision did not conform to advice from either Beijing or Moscow. At a meeting between China's leader Mao Zedong and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev on 2 October 1959, they agreed that there should be no repetition of the mistake made by Josef Stalin when he authorized Kim Il Sung to invade South Korea in 1950. They did not want a repeat in Laos or Vietnam. Khrushchev imagined that an escalation of the conflict in Laos would provoke a US intervention that would crush the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

Marek Thee stood by Hanoi. A procedure had been established for the Polish representatives on the International Control Commissions for Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos to receive their instructions from Hanoi rather than from Moscow or their own government in Warsaw. Marek was not the only Polish representative to be seen as representing the interests of North Vietnam. Yet, in Indochinese diplomatic circles, he became known as a quintessential hardliner, going much further than China, the USSR and his own Polish government in his dedicated support for North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao.<sup>3</sup> With the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, Mao's China changed opinion and came out in full support of Hanoi's war for South Vietnam, while the Soviet Union remained skeptical.

In 1961, when negotiations began between the US, USSR and other countries for what would become the 23 July 1962 International Agreement on the Neutrality of Laos, the International Control Commission for the 1954 Geneva Convention was

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum of Conversation of NS Khrushchev with Mao Zedong, Beijing, 2 October 1959. English translation as document No. 3 in *Cold War International History Bulletin*, No. 12–13, Fall/Winter 2001, p. 1270.

<sup>3</sup> Mieczysław Maneli (1971) *War of the Vanquished*. New York: Harper and Row: 116, 182–185, Laurent Cesari (2007) *Les grandes puissances et le Laos, 1954–1964*. Arras: Artois Presses Université, 39. Arthur J Dommen (2001) *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*. Bloomington. IN: Indiana University Press, 311–312.

revived after having been dormant since July 1958.<sup>4</sup> In April 1961, Marek Thee therefore returned on a second mission to Laos. The 1962 agreement guaranteed the sovereignty and neutrality of the deeply divided Lao state. From the perspective of US President John F. Kennedy, the agreement was both a means to end the civil war in Laos and to prevent the flow of provisions from North to South Vietnam through Lao territory. The insurgency in South Vietnam had taken off for real with the founding of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLF) in December 1960. Marek's sympathy for Hanoi's cause now brought him into trouble with Moscow as well as Warsaw. Moscow was consumed by its wish to obtain a Western withdrawal from Berlin and was prepared to make concessions to the US in the distant Vietnam and Laos. Poland wanted to purchase American grain. Hence Moscow and Warsaw were both keen to respect the new Geneva agreement. Hanoi and Marek Thee were not.

Marek's autobiography in this volume as well as his 1973 book *Notes of a Witness* recount his decision to work with Hanoi and Pathet Lao rather than seek instructions from Warsaw or Moscow. He relates the criticism he received from the Polish and Soviet governments. The latter, in his view, was always ready to trade away the interests of the Indochinese peoples against Western concessions in Europe. On a return trip to Warsaw in Spring 1963, Marek was told that he was naïve and idealistic. Nevertheless, he was reconfirmed as a member of the Polish delegation and once again returned to Laos.

This time his stay did not last long. On 23 September 1963, Prince Souvanna Phouma, the neutralist prime minister of Laos, met President John F. Kennedy in the White House. The Prince said 'he felt, in fact he was convinced, the Soviet Ambassador was doing what he could to help ensure observance of the Geneva Agreements, but he did not seem to have direct influence on the Polish Commissioner of the International Control Commission.' Prince Souvanna told Kennedy that 'Marek Thee, the Polish Commissioner, always sided with the PL' (Pathet Lao). So, when Kennedy suggested it might be helpful to have a change in the Polish Commissioner, Prince Souvanna thought 'this was a good idea' and promised to take it up with Nikita Khrushchev during a visit to Moscow on his way back to Vientiane.<sup>5</sup>

Four months later, in January 1964, Marek Thee was back as a foreign policy researcher in Warsaw. His Indochinese adventure was over. By then, both South Vietnam's president Ngo Dinh Diem and US president John F Kennedy had been murdered, and Khrushchev's days as Soviet leader were counted. Indochina now entered the escalatory phase of what came to be known as the Vietnam War, now also with heavy support from the Soviet Union and its allies in the Warsaw Pact.

After returning from Indochina to Warsaw, Marek worked as an analyst and researcher for the Polish Institute of Foreign Affairs, directly under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is worth underscoring that it was the Central Committee of

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<sup>4</sup> Cesari, *op.cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Countries Series, Laos: General, 10/63–11/63. Confidential. Drafted by Toumayan. Published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series as doc. 489, Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, September 23, 1963, 5–6 p.m. Meeting between the President and the Prime Minister of Laos.

the Polish Communist Party that controlled public events, institutions and publications. Marek Thee found it more and more difficult to toe the party line, as his own retrospective reflections reveal. Due to his diplomatic engagements, his scholarly publications had to appear under the pseudonym Marek Gdański.

In 1968, he became a victim of a new wave of Polish anti-Semitism and lost his job. Władysław Gomułka, the chairman of the Polish United Workers' Party, gave a speech saying that we want Poland to be for the Poles and that Zionists should leave. This was followed by a nation-wide campaign to force people of Jewish origin out of Poland. Marek Thee and his family were among those. Most of the Jews still living in Poland at the time, who had survived the Holocaust or returned after the war, were forced – or encouraged – to emigrate, the assumption being they would go to Israel. Current estimates suggest that between 13,000 and 20,000 people left Poland as a result. Jews from Poland were scattered around the world, including Scandinavia, although only a handful of people ended up in Norway. Surprisingly perhaps, Marek Thee did not choose to go back to Israel, where he had already lived. Johan Galtung offered him a position at PRIO, which he accepted. His wife Erna was from Vienna – they had met in Palestine, and their two daughters Maya and Halina had grown up in Poland. All were now uprooted and taken to a foreign country in the north.

During his time at PRIO, Marek dedicated himself to an international struggle against the arms race and particularly against military research and development which he held responsible for driving the Cold War arms dynamics. He fought vigilantly for disarmament, arms control, peace and development. He championed the idea of establishing a global disarmament fund for development. His major project at PRIO, for which he had been hired, was to edit a new journal, the *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*. Its goal was 'to present systematically, to compare and discuss in the light of general peace research theory various plans, proposals and ideas for development, justice and peace.' The journal adopted 'a broad definition of the term "peace proposals"' (Thee 1970: 3). Each issue was divided into two sections, a documentation section with summaries of the proposals, and an analytical section with discussion of a set of proposals on a specific topic. Although the project was originally conceived by Galtung, it suited Marek's temperament well. He took it to heart and put his personal stamp on the journal, first in two trial issues and then as a quarterly journal from 1970.

From the start, *BPP* had an Advisory Council with distinguished academics from the Nordic countries, as well as an Editorial Committee, mainly with colleagues from PRIO. Nevertheless, there was little question that this was Marek's journal, where he defined the relevant topics and made the editorial decisions. It was his choice to shift the journal in the direction of more analysis and fewer proposals. The first published issue contained abstracts of 54 peace proposals and six short articles. In later issues, the articles became longer and more numerous. Since 1989, following Marek's retirement from PRIO, the journal was taken over by a new editor. Since mid-1992 it has been published under a new name, *Security Dialogue*, eventually adopting a critical security studies profile.

From his arrival in Oslo in 1968 until his retirement in 1988, Marek Thee was Nils Petter Gleditsch's colleague at PRIO. In 1980–82, he served as PRIO supervisor for Stein Tønnesson's dissertation on the outbreak of war in Indochina and, in 1988, welcomed Tønnesson back to PRIO with a doctoral project on the Vietnamese revolution. Marek urged Stein to travel to Vietnam and interview his old acquaintances. PRIO Researcher Marta Bivand Erdal never met Marek. She came to PRIO in 2007, eight years after her compatriot had passed away. Yet, with her Polish background, she was fascinated by his life story and got in touch with his daughters. In an interview with Marek's youngest daughter, Halina, Marta became aware of Marek's unpublished memoirs. She wrote a blog post on Marek Thee in 2019 published in the series PRIO Stories, now a chapter in Stein Tønnesson, ed. *Lives in Peace Research: the Oslo Stories* (Springer, 2022), and helped compile the bibliography of Marek's Polish writings in this volume.

We are impressed by Marek's qualities as an energetic, hard-working, independent-minded and dedicated scholar. While *BPP* was his main project at PRIO, he also lectured extensively, participated in numerous conferences, and engaged in a number of research projects. Much of this activity was channeled back into articles and special issues of *BPP*. Marek also participated actively in the decision-making at the Institute, which for most of his time at PRIO was based on a collective management style. He served as Director of the institute for two years (1981–83).

His treatment by the Polish authorities did not make him an embittered anti-Communist. While his commitment to democracy in Poland and other countries in the then Soviet sphere of interest comes out clearly in his writings, he portrayed the Cold War with its galloping arms race as basically a serious failure of the international system. He went to conferences in Moscow and to meetings organized by the Soviet-sponsored International Institute for Peace (IIP). Indeed, his somewhat acrimonious departure from PRIO occurred after the then Director of PRIO felt that he had overstepped his mark in agreeing to represent IIP at a meeting at the UN. Marek had hoped to continue to do research in an emeritus position after reaching the mandatory Norwegian retirement age at 70. In public, he loyally passed the editorship of *BPP* to his successor (Thee 1988), but in private he was strongly disappointed that PRIO's leadership would not allow him to continue working at the institute.

In the event, his separation from PRIO did not prove as destructive as it might have. Marek was invited to join the Norwegian Human Rights Institute, directed by his old PRIO colleague, Asbjørn Eide, and worked there until his death in 1999. He integrated well in his new academic home and remained active until the end.

Marek Thee's autobiography was probably written soon after the death of his wife Erna in 1989. We do not know why he did not publish it before his own death. After his death, the manuscript remained in the custody of his daughters. When Marta Bivand Erdal contacted them in preparation for the portrait she wrote of Marek Thee, we realized the importance of making it publicly available. It gives a vivid description of a dramatic life, an introduction to main themes in 20th century world history and a testimony to the worth of engaged peace research.

Marek Thee's manuscript has been subjected to some light technical editing by Gee Berry, Nils Petter Gleditsch, Halina Thee, and Stein Tønnesson. Following

Marek's own preference, it has been edited to fit the style of British English. The spelling of names and titles in Norwegian, French, Vietnamese and Laotian has been checked by the editors. Any errors remain our responsibility.

The format follows Marek's own, with some inconsistencies corrected. Thus, there are several deviations from the PRIO style as well as the house style for this book series.

The original manuscript as received from Halina Thee has been archived at the National Archives of Norway (Riksarkivet) as part of PRIO's historical archive (Privatarkiv 1955, archive code Fy).

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