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## **Przeróbka**

### **Historical and spatial study for the purposes of NARRACJE 2021 festival**

In terms of population, Przeróbka is one of the smallest districts of Gdańsk – it has slightly more than 4,000 inhabitants, and this number is dwindling year after year. Around a decade ago, the neighbourhood still had almost 5,000 residents. Nevertheless, in terms of size, this is by no means a small quarter of the city. It encompasses vast industrial and warehouse areas, the Westerplatte peninsula, which played an important role in Polish and universal history, and a unique heritage building, the oldest coastal defensive structure in Poland: the Wisłoujście Fortress. Residential buildings are located in the southern part of the district, and this is the area typically perceived by Gdańsk locals as Przeróbka. Westerplatte and Wisłoujście, separated by industrial zones, are not generally seen as components of the district. Since the NARRACJE 2021 festival will be focused on the district's residential area, this is the part that is described in most detail in the present study.

Przeróbka is a small working-class district without any significant institutions, a church or even a park. However, the architecture is rather varied – the neighbourhood features small houses with gardens, red-brick tenements, and even 10-storey tower blocks. Its history may be summarized in one sentence: until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this was meadowland where rafters would dry – or “process”<sup>1</sup> – grain later sold in Gdańsk, and then the small local settlement evolved into a working-class district, whose life was governed by the local rolling stock factory (*Zakłady Naprawcze Taboru Kolejowego*).

Przeróbka is one of the eastern districts of the city. These areas tend to score relatively low on the citizen satisfaction index. The lower standard of living is caused by a number of factors, with the most important ones being: low sense of security related to higher crime levels, decidedly lower level of commercial and service infrastructure as well as cultural infrastructure, the quality of residential architecture, inadequate transport connections with the rest of the city (the situation has greatly improved with the recent construction of the tunnel under the Dead Vistula), decidedly poorer access to medical care as well as secondary and tertiary education (there are no hospitals, higher education institutions or even secondary schools in the eastern districts). The eastern part of the city is dominated by industrial and port functions, which has a significant impact on the quality of life experienced by residents of such quarters as Przeróbka, Rudniki, Stogi, Krakowiec and Górki Zachodnie. In spite of the seaside location, the unfavourable circulation of wind blows the pollution emitted by industrial facilities towards the land, as a result of which Gdańsk and its immediate vicinity has for years had one of the highest values of cancer incidence.

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<sup>1</sup> In Polish, Przeróbka stands for “processing” (translator's note).

## Location

The geographical location of Przeróbka is extremely interesting, as it occupies the western part of Port Island. Port Island is the second largest island of Gdańsk (after Sobieszewo Island). It was created in 1840, when – owing to an ice jam upstream – the swelling waters of the Vistula found a new outlet to the Bay of Gdańsk, cutting off the area of today's Port Island from the remaining part of the Vistula Spit. The new Vistula outlet was dubbed the Bold Vistula (*Wisła Śmiała*), and the old river bed was called Dead Vistula (*Martwa Wisła*). Because of the permanent risk of flooding, the Vistula Cut (*Przekop Wisły*) – an artificial outlet constructed between Świbno and Mikoszewo – became the main river mouth in 1895.

The current districts – Przeróbka, Stogi, Krakowiec and Górkki Zachodnie – emerged from former settlements located in the area. A characteristic feature of the island are the diverse functions located here: port functions are performed by the Northern Port – the most modern part of the port of Gdańsk, industrial functions are represented, among others, by the Gdańsk Refinery or Gdańsk Phosphate Fertilizer Plant “Fosfory”, and shipbuilding functions by the Wisła Shipyard and Joseph Conrad Shipyard. Owing to its forest beaches, the Port Island is also a popular leisure and recreation spot. The Stogi bathing site, regarded by many Gdańsk locals as the most beautiful beach in the city, boasts a broad offer of leisure centres and camping sites. In addition, the Island is a hub of water sports – the National Sailing Centre is just one of the institutions that have its seat here.

On account of its location, Przeróbka is very clearly distinguishable as a district. The residents of Gdańsk have no trouble indicating its borders – at least when it comes to the residential part, located in the bend of the Dead Vistula. The river acts as a natural border of the district from the south and west, while from the east, Przeróbka is limited by Henryka Sucharskiego Street (national road no. 87, which forms part of the E 75 European route joining the northern and southern parts of the continent – the road crosses Norway, Finland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, Northern Macedonia and Greece), beyond which there is a strip of allotment gardens and the Joseph Conrad Shipyard – these areas separate Przeróbka from Stogi, the largest residential neighbourhood on Port Island (and the largest residential neighbourhood east of downtown Gdańsk). From the north, the residential part of Przeróbka adjoins industrial and port zones stretching all the way to the Wisłoujście Fortress and then on to Westerplatte and the Northern Port.

## Elements of the district

### Przeróbka Mieszkaniowa

The southern, residential part of the district is located in the bend of the Dead Vistula. Przeróbka comprises just 10 streets: Lenartowicza, Sienna, Siennicka, Bajki, Przetoczna, Dickensa, Brzechwy, Andersena, Pastoriusza and Kryniczna. This is a typical working-class district. Residential architecture adjoins a large complex belonging to the rolling stock construction and maintenance factory – Zakłady Naprawcze Taboru Kolejowego – where most inhabitants of nearby houses used to work.

### Sączki

Sączki is the former meadowland that joined Wisłoujście and Przeróbka with Stogi. This area is occupied by industrial zones, wasteland and allotment gardens. The name<sup>2</sup> comes from the irrigation fields established here in 1871, which were used to treat municipal waste from the Ołowianka sewage pumping station. The waste was filtered using layers of sand, which were then used to fertilize the nearby farmlands, where grains, vegetables, fruit and asparagus were grown. The irrigation field was still in place after World War II. In the 1960s and 70s it was overloaded – excessive waste from the pumping station would run off its surface. The problem was solved by the construction of the Sewage Plant East in Rudniki.

### Wisłoujście

This area is associated with an old fortress, whose origins date back to the Middle Ages.



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<sup>2</sup> In Polish, Sączki stands for “land drains” (translator’s note).

A settlement gradually grew around it – a church was built for the inhabitants and soldiers, followed by a cemetery. The village was incorporated into the city in 1914, turning into a district of Gdańsk. The local St Olaf's Church was destroyed during World War II and never rebuilt.



After the war, around 1,500 inhabitants resided in this remote neighbourhood. A primary school, commercial centre and health care centre were built here. However, the residents of Wisłoujście did not enjoy their improved quality of life for long. Between 1970 and 1971, the district was eradicated and its inhabitants were driven out (mostly to Stogi). Most of the buildings were demolished (the school building survived), and the area was taken over by the growing Siarkopol chemical plant. What remained was a unique heritage building – the oldest fortress on the Polish coast. Until 1758, its tower served not just as an observation point, but also as a lighthouse. However, as the sea shore kept moving away, it lost this function over time. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was used as a prison, and is currently known as a bat sanctuary.



### **Westerplatte**

Westerplatte is a peninsula created out of tonnes of sand, gravel and stones carried by the Vistula river current. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a bathing site was established here, with a beautiful spa park, baths, spa house and pier.



Guests staying in elegant guesthouses could avail themselves of medicinal waters, restaurants, tennis courts and other attractions.



The interwar period brought this idyll to an end. Following the creation of the Free City of Danzig, the bathing site was eradicated, and the peninsula was taken over by the Military Transit Depot managed by the Polish army. On 1 September 1939, German forces attacked the Polish depot, which marked the beginning of World War II. After the war, in order to commemorate the heroic defence of Westerplatte, the area was transformed into an atmospheric memory park: the remains of the ruined barracks were reclaimed, and a monument was built at the end of a specially demarcated path. The design was selected in a competition – the winning concept was designed by Adam Haupt (spatial design) and Franciszek Duszeńko (statue). The statue was unveiled in 1966.



## History and architecture

The area occupied by today's Przeróbka used to be a meadowland, where rafters – having navigated the river for weeks – “processed”, i.e. dried, sifted and cleaned grains harvested from nearby fields. To this end, dry straw was thrown onto the ground and covered with pieces of cloth, onto which grains that had been drying in the sun and wind were heaped with shovels. The friction that characterized this process polished the grain, making it shine and increasing its value. Depending on the quality of the grain and its dirt and dampness levels, the operation could last from three days to even a few weeks. As a result, the area was called Przerabka or Przerapka. A second name, Troyl, evolved over time, from *trel* – the line used by rafters to move their rafts and boats.

In the Gdańsk of yore, whose inhabitants mostly spoke German, Polish rafters were a colourful bunch. During the rafting, the meadows of Przeróbka would come to life: raftsmen built makeshift houses there, and in-between work, they had fun, played the violin and danced around bonfires. This is how they were described by Kathe Schirmacher: *Many raftsmen who came here on their rafts lived in Przeróbka/Troyl on the Vistula, along the way to Stogi. They built a camp there like Indians [...] In the evenings, they would dance and sing.* With time, grain was replaced by timber. The meadows of Przeróbka proved too small for the vast quantities of this material, so timber was dried along a lengthy stretch of the Vistula shore, including on the opposite side. The aerial photograph shows timber yards on today's Litewska Street, with the buildings of Przeróbka visible on the other side of Dead Vistula.



The small settlement on the Dead Vistula was established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and comprised just a few households. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it already had almost 400 inhabitants. Its traces may be seen in the irregular form of architecture along the Vistula at the exit of Sienna Street, which used to be the main route eastwards from Gdańsk towards the Vistula Spit.

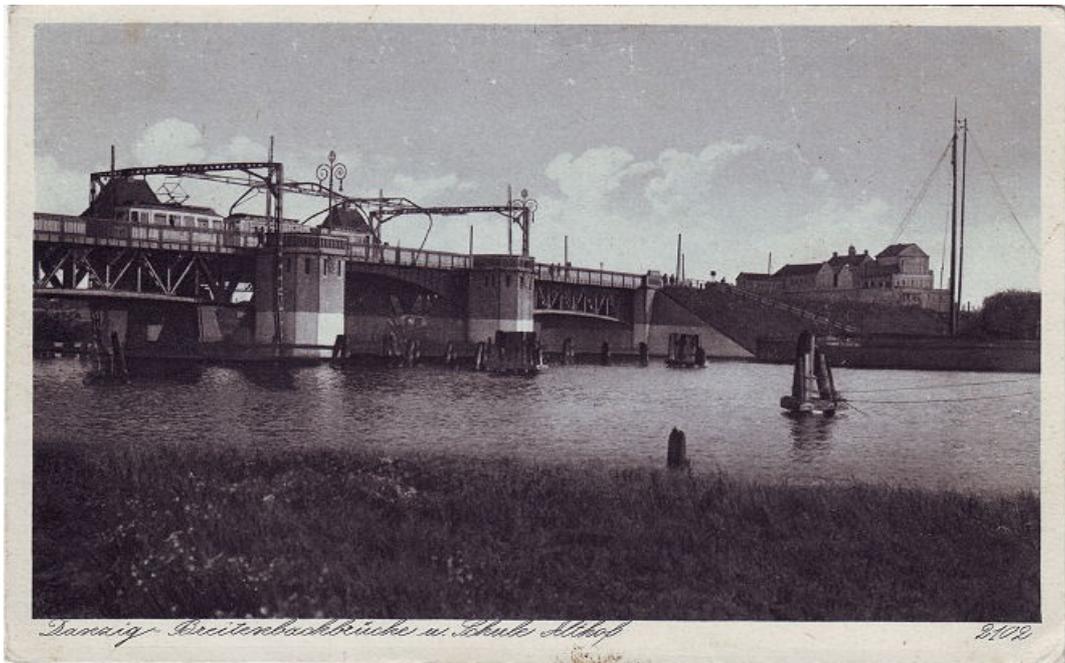
The year 1907 marked a breakthrough for Przeróbka: it was incorporated into Gdańsk, and since then, subsequent houses for workers were being erected in the neighbourhood. In 1912 construction began on the Central Railway Workshops Gdańsk “Troyl”. Workshop buildings were located across a 30 ha area, and included the two largest industrial shop floors in Gdańsk Pomerania. The architecture of the buildings was sophisticated and coherent. The railway workshops were the second largest employer in Gdańsk after the shipyards.



Houses for employees gradually sprang up next to the workshops. Günter Grass described the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Przeróbka in his most famous novel, *The Tin Drum* – this is where the grandfather of Oskar, the main protagonist, lived with his family: *In winter, when the rivers were frozen over and times were lean for the raftsmen, he sat like a good fellow on Troyl, where only raftsmen, stevedores, and dockers lived, and watched over his daughter Agnes...*



In 1912, the Siennicki Bridge – the largest drawbridge in Gdańsk – was put into service. Before that, Przeróbka was only accessible from the Gdańsk side via a ferry that passed by the legendary Gęsia Karczma inn, which had hosted King John III Sobieski and tsar Peter I.



During World War I, a POW camp Russian soldiers was established in Przeróbka. The number of prisoners held there varied from 4 to 15,000. The POWs mostly worked in the shipyards, munitions factories or the brewery, were tasked with handling cargo in the port, or dug ditches for sewage and water supply systems. The camp even had its own magazine, *Troylskaya Gazeta*. It was disbanded in July 1919. The picture shows a Red Cross committee inspecting the camp.



A tram connection was launched in 1927 – the route ran from downtown Gdańsk through the Siennicki Bridge and Przeróbka to Stogi and ended at the bathing site. New residential buildings were also erected during the time of the Free City of Danzig. The most interesting one is the modernist house on the curve of Kryniczna Street. An interim camp for emigrants was established in the eastern part of the neighbourhood – mostly for Jews travelling from the East to the Far West: the USA. The barracks that had served as the POW camp during the war, and afterwards as council housing of the lowest standard, were disassembled a few years ago with the construction of a new railway bridge.



During World War II two labour camps were established in Przeróbka – subcamps of the Stutthof concentration camp. The inmates were forced to work in the railway workshops and the shipyard.

After the war, Gdańsk again became part of Poland. The district's name, Troyl, was polonized to Trojan, and officials even tried to introduce a new term: Zawisłe. Eventually, though, the decision was made to return to the old name used by rafters. Out of the two variants, Przeróbka and Przerabka, the Ministry of Public Administration endorsed the former. The railway workshops were restarted already in 1945. Destroyed houses and buildings were rebuilt. An interesting memento of these times is an inscription in Russian (*Min net...*) preserved on the building at 13 Bajki Street and the bunker near the tram depot, which was used after the war to grow mushrooms.



According to accounts of the inhabitants, post-war Przeróbka resembled a village or distant suburb rather than a district of a large city – the houses were surrounded by large orchards, gardens and yards, where livestock was kept.



With time, however, gardens gave way to new houses. In the 1950s, two-storey buildings were erected on Lenartowicza Street – their sloping roofs matched the period architecture from the Free City of Danzig.



In 1960, a primary school was built here – until then, children from Przeróbka had to cross the Siennicki Bridge to attend Primary School No. 6 in downtown Gdańsk. Primary School No. 61 was possibly the first modern building in Przeróbka. The typical 1960s school building with a flat roof was erected in the eastern part of the neighbourhood. The early 1960s also saw the construction of a health care centre and an emergency housing estate situated closer to the Vistula – an estate built in a cheap technology that provided housing to people who used to live in buildings that were in a very bad state of repair (a rather serious problem in Gdańsk at the time).

Neighbourhood life revolved around the main employer, that is the railway workshop (Zakłady Naprawcze Taboru Kolejowego, ZNTK). The siren on the tower of the management's office dictated the rhythm, signalling the beginning of work, breakfast, subsequent shifts, and end of the working day (the alarm rang at 6.00, 6.40, 9.00, 9.15, 14.00 and 22.00). The enterprise employed several thousand people, also from other districts.



The main entertainment venues were the Zorka Cinema (the building currently houses a paint shop) and the Sezam Club located in the canteen building next to the main entrance to ZNTK (the image shows the entrance to the club in 1969).



Interior of Sezam club:



The 1970s brought substantial changes. The “Kolejarz” Housing Cooperative built panel blocks and tower blocks that dramatically changed the appearance of this rather green neighbourhood. At the same time, ZNTK built a modern office building visible already at the entrance to the district and – unfortunately – converted the canteen building with the Sezam club next to the main entrance to the facility.



In the 1970s and 80s, the locals would seek entertainment in the Kamena café located in the very

heart of the district and later also at the Stara Karczma Gdańska, a pub near the Dead Vistula.

The 1990s and the resulting economic transformations brought unemployment to the district. The appearance of the streets was getting progressively worse. Towards the end of the millennium, work began on the construction of a modern road leading to the port – to this end, the John Paul II Bridge of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium was built. It provided a second option to reach the district and, what is particularly important, relieved the Siennicki Bridge and the residential part of Przeróbka from the bothersome transit transport.

The main streets of Przeróbka were modernized in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the tram lines were rebuilt and new stops of the Vienna type were established. Some of the houses were renovated, insulated and painted in pastel colours. A new railway bridge was built too. Unfortunately, the old one was disassembled in 2016 – its unique structure included a movable central span, which, once moved, had enabled larger vessels to enter the port.



## Notable buildings

### Zakłady Naprawcze Taboru Kolejowego

The construction of the railway workshop, encompassing several buildings, began in 1912. It originally belonged to the German railways, and during the Free City of Danzig, it was transferred to an international company with British and French capital representing 30% of the shares each, and Polish and Gdańsk capital – 20%. Steam engines were assembled here, and railway carriages and engines were repaired. During the war, the enterprise – taken over by the Reich's railways – also manufactured components for the military (bodies of motor torpedo boats). After the war, the destroyed buildings were rebuilt, and the complex itself was relaunched already in 1945. Damaged rolling stock was still repaired here, in addition to the production of buses and snowploughs. The Przeróbka facility was responsible for adapting the carriages from Berlin's S-bahn, contributed as part of war reparations, for the local SKM urban rail. After 1990, ZNTK was restructured: employment was radically reduced, and as the facility (since 2001 operating under the business name Zakłady Naprawcze Taboru Kolejowego i Miejskiego Sp. z o.o.) requires only one shop floor to operate, the remaining buildings were sold or leased.

In 2002, the complex of eclectic industrial buildings was entered in the register of heritage buildings. The entry encompasses the carriage maintenance shop, the engine repair shop, the copper and brass forge, the wheel rim and coil spring forge, the boiler house, the water tower, school workshops, the porter's lodge, the management's office, the canteen and shop, the wall with gates and a kiosk. Unfortunately, the entry came too late to save all the facilities – it is particularly unfortunate that the seat of ZNTK's canteen with the Sezam club was not preserved in its original form (the building was redesigned in the 1970s). The bathhouse was also rebuilt.

In the picture, from left: canteen, main gate, and management's seat, with the bathhouse visible in the back.





Engine maintenance shop:



Carriage maintenance shop:



Detail from the copper and brass forge – teapot:



Water tower and boiler house:



The boiler house now:



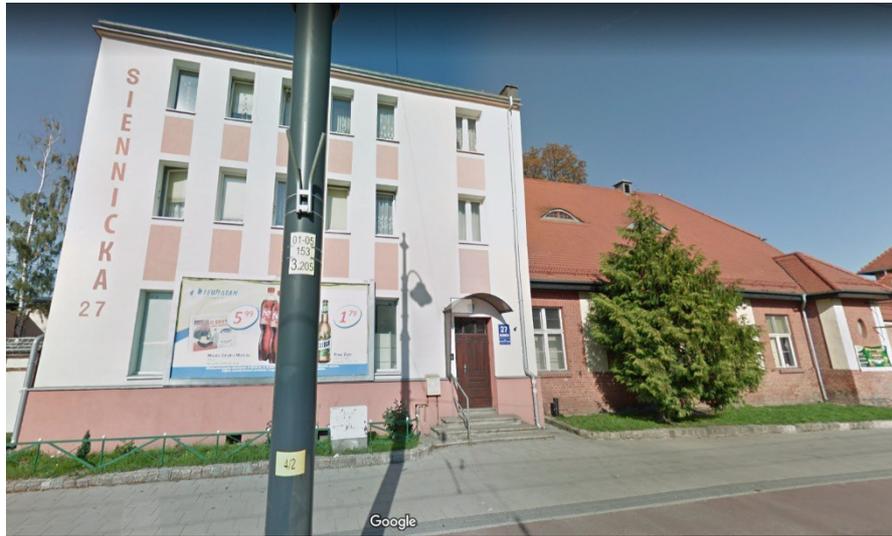
Detail from the ZNTK bathhouse – Triton blowing a shell surrounded by seahorses:



Postcard showing the building located next to the main entrance, which housed a restaurant and canteen for employees. After the war, this was the seat of the Sezam youth club. Unfortunately, the building was altered in the 1970s.



The building currently houses a shop and apartments.



Detail from the school workshops:



### **Emergency housing estate**

In the 1960s, the municipal authorities tried to solve the burning housing shortage. Several thousand people lived in very difficult conditions in the old districts of the city. 12,000 applications for a new apartment were filed with the Executive Committee of the Municipal National Council. Many buildings were in danger of collapsing, and the apartments were devoid of any conveniences. In order to help those most in need of a new address, the construction of so-called emergency housing estates began. The design of buildings erected based on a cheap and fast technology was conceived by architects from Gdańsk. The first estate emerged in the western part of Stogi, and was significantly developed over time. The buildings were simple Nissen huts – from single- to two-

storey ones. They were equipped with electricity and water, and each inhabitant had a garden where they could grow vegetables or keep livestock. Such estates were to be built in several districts of Gdańsk. Ultimately, though, they only appeared in Stogi and Przeróbka. The responsibility for overcoming major housing shortages was shifted from the municipal authorities onto housing cooperatives, and the experimental technology was replaced by panel blocks. Emergency housing estates were criticized for their appearance – the barrack-like buildings were regarded as monotonous. The use of cheap, new technologies, such as reed mats for walls, led to voices that residential facilities in Gdańsk were substandard.





## Prison

The prison was established in 1970 in concert with the Polish State Railways (PKP). PKP was to provide the land and buildings, and find occupation for inmates. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, PKP wanted to reclaim the area, but an agreement was signed in 2000 and the facility was taken over by the prison services. Following the agreement, the prison was thoroughly modernized. The facility is dedicated to juvenile delinquents and first-time offenders. It has seven branches: five semi-open and two open ones.





## Statues

There are two statues in the neighbourhood.

### **“In tribute to those who died for freedom”**

The statue is located on the square next to Siennicki Bridge. The monument in the form of a glacial erratic commemorates inmates of the Stutthof concentration camp branch in Przeróbka. The initiative to erect it was proposed by the local circle of the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (ZBoWiD) active at the ZNTK railway workshops. The statue was unveiled in 1978.



The inscription on the plaque commemorates the camp inmates who, in very dire conditions, contributed slave labour to the Third Reich: IN TRIBUTE TO THOSE WHO DIED FOR FREEDOM, HERE IN PRZERÓBKA, IN 1941-45, THERE EXISTED A BRANCH OF THE STUTTHOF CONCENTRATION CAMP AND CAMP FOR POWs FROM THE ANTI-NAZI COALITION. AS A RESULT OF HARD, DESTRUCTIVE LABOUR AND INHUMAN TREATMENT, MANY INMATES AND POWs DIED. MAY THEY REST IN PEACE. ZBOWID ZNTK GDAŃSK, SEPTEMBER 1978.



**“We’ve been here, we are here, we will remain”**

The second monument was also erected upon the initiative of the ZBoWiD circle active at the ZNTK. It was located within the facility itself and unveiled in 1985. It is also in the form of a glacial erratic.



## **Fountain**

Since the late 1970s, the square next to the Siennicki Bridge was adorned with a fountain designed by a well-known Gdańsk sculptor Zygfryd Korpalski (it stood directly in front of the ZNTK building). The fountain was shaped in the form of two amorphous, fleshy shells facing each other. Some inhabitants of Przeróbka saw a school of fish there, others referred to the structure as the lungs of a ZNTK railwayman. The fountain was disassembled a few years ago, and only the plinth remains. At present, the fountain is not listed in the register of similar objects kept by the Gdańsk Water Authority, so in all likelihood it will not return to its former spot.



**Sources of information and photographs:**

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wspomnienia Wandy Król-Kühnel publikowane w Gazecie Wyborczej