

POLAND

works



Agata Stafiej-Bartosik

Poland works

Ten stories of thirteen Ashoka Fellows — the people who saw a problem, build a team and changed the world.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995 in Poland, *Gangsta's Paradise* by Coolio and *Dziewczyna Szamana* by Justyna Steczkowska topped the music charts. Lech Wałęsa lost the election to Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who became the new president of the Republic of Poland. The first Woodstock Festival took place near Żarnowiec, and the Dayton Agreement was signed in Paris to put an end to the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

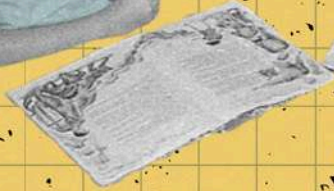
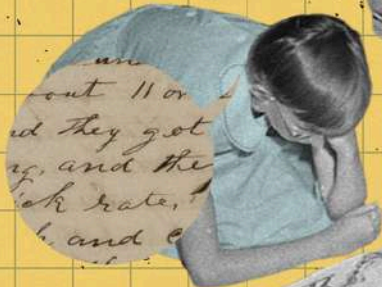
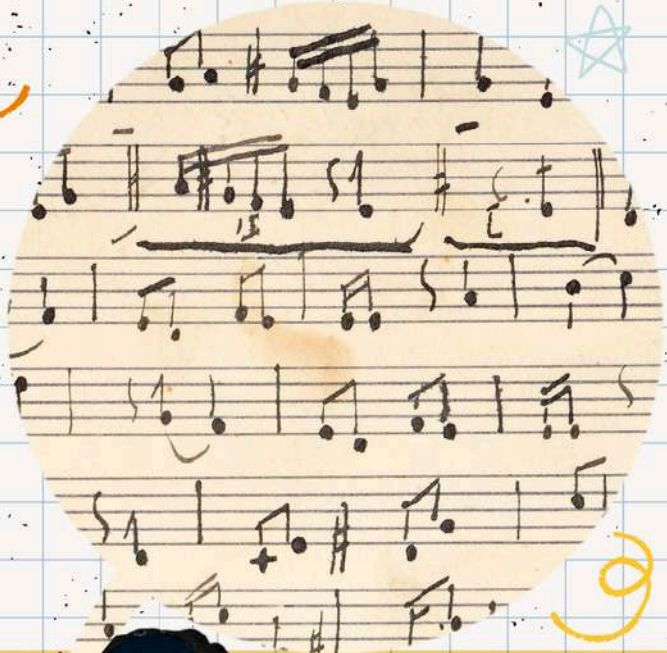
In the meantime, Ryszard Praszker – a psychotherapist, co-founder of the Children and Youth Mental Health Center "Synapsis", received an out-of-this-world proposal. Well, not so out of this world. It was from Bill Drayton, the founder of Ashoka. "Why don't you stop what you are doing and launch the Polish office of Ashoka – the first Ashoka office in Europe".

Ashoka is an organization that supports people who are changing the world. It looks for people who meet the five criteria. They have a new idea that can make a significant, positive impact on reality, they are creative, entrepreneurial and have an unquestionable ethical fiber. At Ashoka, we understand that all changes in the world happen because someone works to make them. Someone dedicates his time and talent to make that change happen. They have an idea, they implement it, they build a movement and empower others to take action. That is why Ryszard spent 20 years looking for people who fit these criteria – in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. And later – in many other countries around the world. Thanks to his work – and the efforts of people he introduced to Ashoka, trained, and equipped with knowledge and skills – over 250 new members have joined the Ashoka Fellowship network. Today, there are almost 4,000 of them in 99 countries and territories.

And in Poland? Ashoka Fellows have designed, promoted and supported changes that make our country a much, much better place today than it was three decades ago. Over the years, we have invited 90 people to join the Polish Fellowship. Each of them has worked or is currently working for a better Poland and a better world for all. Isn't that wonderful? In this publication, we present ten of those stories and twelve Ashoka Fellows.

There is still a lot of work to do. There is still a lot of injustice and inequality. But these stories of people who have improved many aspects of our lives for the better should be an inspiration for us. First, they illustrate a simple fact that nothing happens on its own – goodness and beauty require our effort. Secondly, each of us can make a difference for the common good, and if we care about something, we can take action. There's no need to wait for "bigger" and "stronger" ones. There is nothing more powerful than a group of people who really want to change their reality. Every single one of us can at least begin to scratch the surface of the world. Sometimes to give someone joy, a bit of hope, restore their dignity or their power to act. And that can set great changes in motion.

Agata Stafiej-Bartosik
Ashoka Fellow



Do you know any children who have attended a kindergarten other than a public one?

Between 1990 and 2001, one in three public kindergartens in Poland was closed. Political and economic changes made it impossible to keep them running, especially in rural areas. In these regions, fewer than one in five children attended kindergarten. This is especially concerning, as more than 80% of brain development occurs before the age of five (UNICEF, 2024). Supporting early childhood development is the key to success in adulthood.

Teresa Ogrodzińska, an Ashoka Fellow, built and led a team of outstanding people who changed the Polish preschool education by introducing the alternative forms of early childhood education. The Comenius Foundation for Child Development, co-founded by Teresa, decided to make use of local resources instead of relying on the central administration. In libraries, fire stations, or facilities near schools, children met with carefully trained caregivers – often former kindergarten teachers, but also instructors from community centers or libraries. The rooms adapted through the efforts of the parents hosted the children three or four times a week. These flexible and inexpensive, yet highly professional formats were adapted to the economic conditions of villages and small towns of Poland. This also inspired the mothers to get involved. By helping create educational spaces and volunteering during classes, mothers gained a voice in shaping their children's future and they have recovered their agency in an unemployment struck times.

To scale this social innovation required a change in the Polish law regulating education. A long fought for addition to the policy, making it possible for local governments to create “the alternative forms of preschool education” was a game changer. In 2020, in rural areas, seven out of ten children already had access to preschool education. And cities benefited from this new option too.

Years later, the organization – now under the leadership of Monika Rościszewska-Woźniak – created a program of kindergartens adapted to the needs of children and parents with a refugee experience.

Together with **Jacek Jakubowski** (Ashoka Fellow, who is one of the parents of the Polish school of sociotherapy), they developed and implemented a program of preschool groups for families who fled to Poland from the war in Ukraine.

Today, the solutions developed by Teresa inspire early childhood education initiatives outside of Poland as well. Programs based on the method are implemented in Georgia and Tajikistan.

If your or your friend's child – went to a Polish kindergarten other than a public one, take a moment to feel a bit of gratitude. It was possible, thanks to the work of Ashoka Fellows and their teams – people who had a dream, built a "team" and changed reality.

Windows. In the sev
atic pilot from Alabama ca
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seized with an ambition to rebuild t
ranch, he called on exiled islanders an
very cheaply. After all, who could exp
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Did you know that in Poland fish and dogs have legal rights?

After 1989, many people in Poland felt that they had regained freedom, agency and dignity. However these changes did not apply to other living creatures. Animals were still treated like objects – live carps were packed in plastic bags, and dogs were chained to dirty kennels. But in 1997, something happened that changed the way the legal system treats animals. The Polish parliament passed a law that, for the first time in the history of Poland recognized that an animal was not an object, but a living and feeling being.

The people who co-drove this change were **Jacek Bożek** – Ashoka Fellow, founder of Klub Gaja – along with Beata Tarnawa and their team. They were building a movement that not only demanded better laws for animals but also changed attitudes. Over the years, they carried out campaigns, pickets, and social educational initiatives. Thanks to their efforts, the Animal Protection Act imposed an obligation on people to care for and protect animals. They also introduced sanctions for the abuse of living beings. Although it was a major success, it turned out to be the beginning of a long journey, during which Klub Gaja became one of the leading voices for animal rights in Poland.

One of the most recognizable efforts was "The Carp Is Still Alive" campaign. Its origins go back to 1976, when Jacek – as a teenager – rescued the carp from the bathtub at his parents' home and released it. It was a custom in Poland to kill a carp before the Christmas Eve and prepare a dish out of it. Some people believed that the food would be better if the carp was bought alive and killed at home. Later, as an activist, Jacek fought to ensure that fish were not treated as a commodity without feelings. He used various media – campaigns, educational work, conversations with politicians, and even performances, such as the one where he wrapped himself naked in plastic foil in front of the parliament building in Warsaw to illustrate the absurdity and cruelty of practices toward fish.

The result? An amendment to the Animal Protection Act extended its provisions to include farmed fish, granting them the same rights as other vertebrates in Poland. The law prohibits abusing them, keeping them in conditions that cause stress or are unsuitable for their survival – for example, without water.

Klub Gaja also worked in other areas: it implemented local bans on performances of circuses with wild animals. As early as in 1995, the city of Bielsko-Biała, where Jacek comes from, banned such "attractions". Many cities followed Bielsko's example – thanks to this, wild animals are no longer exploited in shows that ignore their natural behavior or kept in conditions unsuitable to their needs. The Gaja Club was also a pioneer of the vegetarian movement in Poland and of buying live horses from transport to slaughter. Nearly one and a half million people living in Poland have been involved in initiatives for animal and nature protection.

Thanks to the work of Jacek and people like him, animal rights in Poland have become more concrete, more enforceable, and better adapted to the biological and behavioral needs of animals. And perhaps we've become a little better too... A little more empathetic.

Someone showed us the importance of respect and kindness toward other living beings who share this planet with us.



Did you know that public institutions in Poland have to be accessible to everyone?

Over 4 million people in Poland have some kind of a confirmed disability, and the number may reach 5 million if undocumented disabilities were to be included. There are 64,000 public institutions in the country — offices, schools, hospitals, courts, cultural centers — which for decades many citizens could not access. Stairs, lack of ramps or elevators, unclear signage, narrow doors, high counters, thresholds, and inaccessible toilets were the everyday reality of the '90s and early 2000s.

Lack of accessibility is more than a physical barrier. It sends a message: "This is not a place for you". It leads to social exclusion. Limits access to education, work, health care, and civic life. It suggests that, as a community, we do not care enough about those who face more obstacles.

Ashoka Fellow **Piotr Pawłowski** (1966–2018) knew this from his personal experience. After an accident, when he was 16, he began using a wheelchair and quickly saw how inaccessible public space was. In 1994 he founded the magazine "Integration," which has been published for over 30 years, and later created an Association of Friends of Integration and the Foundation of Integration — organizations that became national experts on accessibility.

Combining personal experience with his academic background from Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University and the Polish Academy of Sciences, Piotr built dialogue between people with disabilities, public institutions, architects, and politicians. His team carried out over 1,000 architectural audits and 800 website audits, documenting barriers, proposing solutions, and promoting a universal design of an approach that serves everyone.

Piotr didn't stop at diagnosis. He initiated competitions and certification systems that rewarded good practices, such as "The Person without Barriers" and the "Accessibility Leader" award. To this day, Integration has

granted more than 250 "Object without Barriers" certificates, highlighting exemplary architecture and urban solutions.

For almost 25 years, Piotr led social campaigns, empowerment projects, and advocacy initiatives. He challenged stereotypes, raised awareness, and showed that accessibility is not a cost but an investment. An investment in dignity, independence, and equality. Thanks to his persistent efforts, Integration became a partner to local governments, ministries, and national institutions, and accessibility began shifting from an idea to an emerging standard.

In 2019, a year after Piotr's premature death, his wife, Ewa Pawłowska, took over the leadership of Integration. At the same time, something groundbreaking happened: the Act on Providing Accessibility to People with Special Needs was adopted. For the first time, public institutions in Poland were legally required to remove barriers and design spaces for everyone. As a result — building on years of Integration's work — hundreds of buildings and public areas have been adapted, with ramps, elevators, contrasting signage, induction loops, and improved service for people with special needs. Public awareness of the rights of people with disabilities has also grown.

Today, people who were once invisible or dependent on help are increasingly present in offices, schools, clinics, cinemas, and theaters. They move more independently, take care of their own affairs, study, work, and participate in cultural life. When you encounter a ramp in an office building, a wide door without thresholds, Braille signage, or an accessible website, think warmly of Piotr Pawłowski and the Integration team — people who not only dreamed of accessibility but helped turn it into reality.



Do you sometimes worry that the Internet knows too much about you?

At the beginning of the 2000s, the Internet in Poland and Europe appeared to be a space of freedom. People could exchange information and learn more about the world on their own terms.

Over time, it became clear that both online and offline – traveling, shopping or using a mobile phone – we generate a huge amount of information about ourselves. Many state governments made sure to secure access to this data for their needs. This marked a beginning of an era of mass surveillance, which was clearly shown by the information revealed by Edward Snowden.

Later, telecommunications operators began to collect call data – who called whom, when, and from where – and the state imposed on them the obligation to store this information for up to two years. Large online platforms began to build their business models around the data generated by users.

They did not mention what data they were collecting and how they'd use it. The existent regulations could not keep up with the development of digital technologies. And the citizens had no control over who processed the information about their daily lives or how it was used.

The Panoptikon Foundation was established in 2009 as a grassroots initiative of several young people who were united by their opposition to treating new technologies as a panacea for all problems. Ashoka Fellow, **Katarzyna Szymielewicz**, became the President of the Foundation. From the very beginning, the Foundation had one goal: to defend human rights in the digital age.

It all began modestly – with the Warsaw City Card. The Foundation objected to its implementation implying that data on all trips of Warsaw residents would be linked to their surnames on one huge database. Panoptikon was successful in making sure that people could travel freely and no data on their travels was linked to their names.

Later, there were further interventions exposing the ubiquitous surveillance made possible by the collection of digital data.

Panoptikon kept explaining to the wide audience what the metadata was and why it often could reveal more information than it seemed. It demonstrated how algorithms impose certain kinds of content to the users on social media. It reminded us that even if online services seem to be "free", we keep paying for them with a different currency - privacy, attention and freedom of choice. The Foundation began to publish their opinions on the existing laws and on those still in the making. In their reports, they described how, under the false pretenses of security and convenient services, we give information about ourselves to states and corporations.

To this day, the Panoptikon team combines strictly legal work with educational and narrative effort. A good metaphor can sometimes be as effective a tool for social change as a favorable court judgment.

Panoptikon's work had a direct impact on everyone's lives in Poland. Thanks to legal changes, the operator can no longer store your call or location history indefinitely. Therefore, no one has an unlimited access to this data. You know more about who uses your personal data, on what basis and for what purpose. You know your rights better - for example that you can request the deletion of your data from any database. You can also expect greater transparency from online platforms that control what you see on the Internet and find out how to use new technologies safely.

Thanks to the work of people such as Katarzyna Szymielewicz and the Panoptikon team, you are not only a source of valuable data – you are a person with rights.

And Panoptikon continues to advocate for your freedom in the digital world.

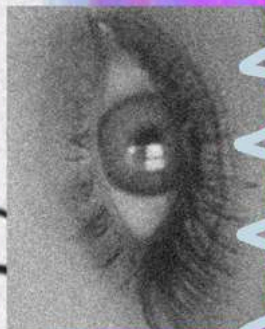
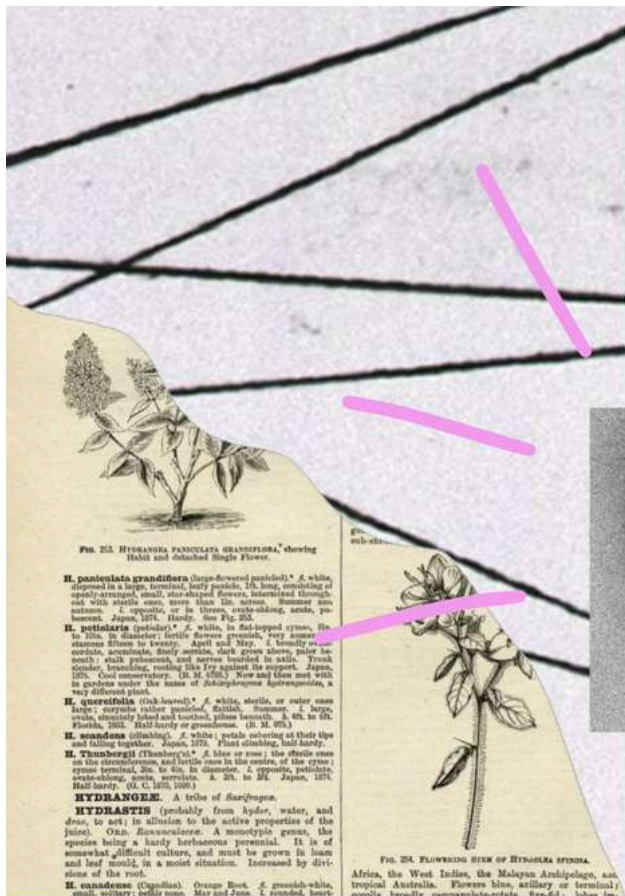
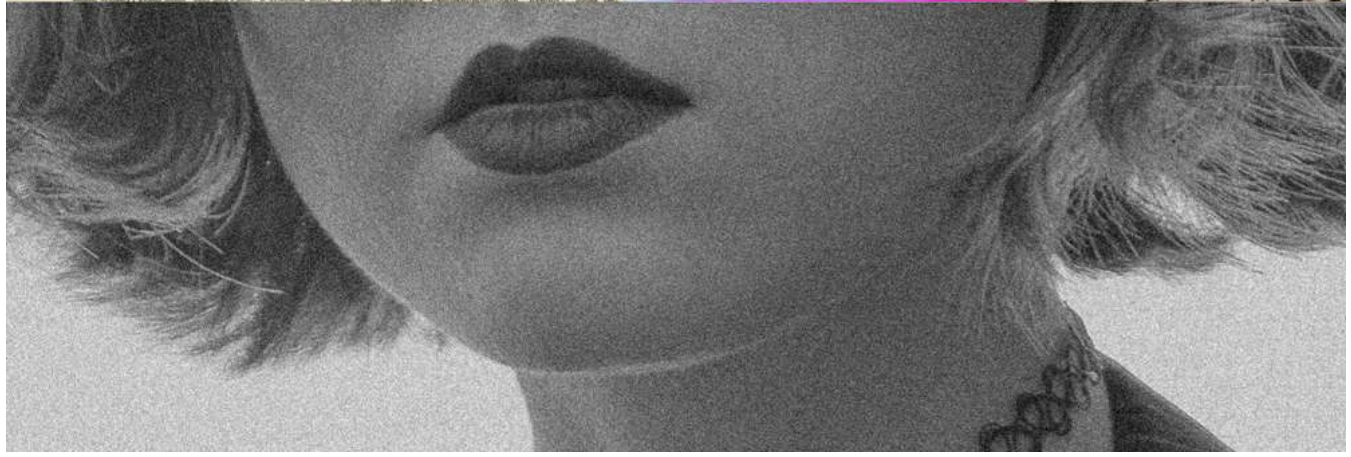
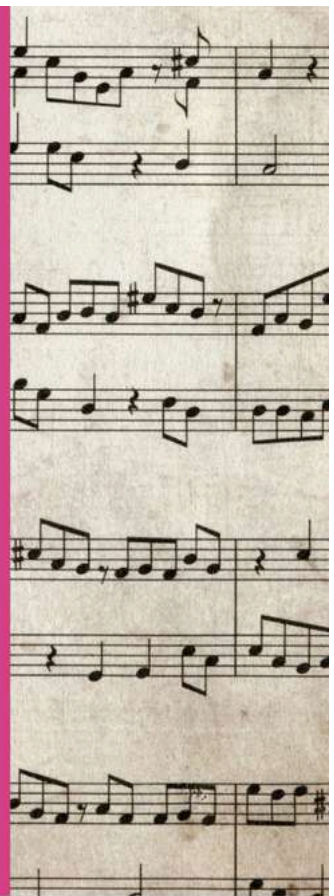


FIG. 252. FLOWERING STEM OF HYDRANGEA SPINDA.
Africa, the West Indies, the Malayan Archipelago, and tropical Australia. Flowers blue, axillary or terminal; sterile large fls. greenish-lobed. (Fig. 51.) - *Hydrangea*



Do you know someone on the autism spectrum?

In the 1990s, hardly anyone in Poland knew what autism really was. Children who did not speak, avoided eye contact or reacted differently to sounds and touch were often labeled "strange", "ill-mannered" or "disabled". The children were diagnosed late, and their families were left to face fear, helplessness, and incomprehension all alone.

We know now that early diagnosis and properly selected therapy can change the trajectory of a person's development. But back then, everything was lacking: specialists, knowledge, systemic solutions. Ashoka Fellow **Michał Wroniszewski** – a psychiatrist and a father of a son on the autism spectrum – decided not to wait for the system to change. In 1989, he established the SYNAPSIS Foundation – the first organization in Poland to provide comprehensive support for people with autism and their families. Michał and his wife Maria built a team of specialists who not only diagnosed and provided therapy, but also began educating teachers, supporting parents, publishing manuals, and running social campaigns. Thanks to collaboration with doctors and scientists, the foundation developed an early autism detection program – "Badabada" – which allows to identify the symptoms of autism in children as young as 18 months.

The SYNAPSIS team has been consistently working on systemic changes as well. After years of expert and advocacy work, a separate code for autism was introduced in the Polish healthcare system, granting children on the spectrum the right to educational support tailored to their needs. The regulations regarding special education organization also changed. Yet Michał knew that changes had to continue – extending into adulthood. For that reason, SYNAPSIS launched training apartments, employment programs, and workshops for adults on the spectrum.

Building on the achievements of Michał and Maria, Ashoka Fellow **Ewa Furgał** – a person on the autism spectrum – began to speak publicly about how many women with autism remain invisible. For years, they endured misunderstanding, struggling with burnout, depression, misdiagnoses. Ewa established the "Girls in Spectrum" Foundation, started a blog, wrote books, and organized training sessions for various stakeholders. Thanks to her, it became clear that autism has many faces, manifests itself differently in different people – and does not always look in real life like it does in the textbooks.

In 2021, over 74,000 children and adolescents in Poland were diagnosed with autism in various forms – several times more than just a decade earlier. More and more families are receiving early diagnoses. More and more schools know how to work with children on the spectrum. More and more adults – including women – get a simple but empowering message "It's not your fault that you are different. You're on the spectrum. And you have the right to support and understanding".

If you know a child who has received therapeutic support thanks to an early diagnosis, or an adult who has discovered their identity through spectrum recognition, take a moment to think sometimes about the people who started that change. Ashoka Fellows Ewa Furgał and Michał Wroniszewski, along with their tireless teams that not only identified the problem, but also built knowledge, created solutions and changed reality – making it more accessible, more humane and fairer for everyone. For you and your loved ones too.



Can you buy the plant-based food in your local store?

For decades in post-war Poland, one menu pattern dominated on a Polish plate: meat, potatoes, and a salad. Plant-based foods were treated as a side dish, and animal protein was an indisputable staple of any diet.

Global reports are unequivocal – increasing the production of plant-based protein for food purposes and raising the share of plant protein in our daily nutrition is essential if we want to prevent environmental destruction, improve public health and ensure food security. The latest EAT-Lancet report, published in October 2025, indicates that global food systems are responsible for approximately 30% of greenhouse gas emissions. On the other hand, according to FAO data, livestock farming is responsible for 14.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Poles are at the forefront of Europe in terms of meat consumption per capita, exceeding the national dietary guidelines in this regard by more than half.

Ashoka Fellow **Maciej Otrębski** from Roślinniejemy* has been working with the food industry for years to help consumers make better daily choices and show that change is possible – as long as it is accessible, convenient and, above all, tasty. Instead of preaching and making people feel guilty, Maciej and his team work with major companies, restaurants, and retail chains to show that plant-based food is fun, trendy and tasty. They help chefs, producers and retailers to see that plant-based alternatives are not only the ethical choice, but also a smart business solution. Over the years, Roślinniejemy has worked with meat processing companies, restaurants, large catering businesses and even grocery stores across Poland. A very important partner in driving this change was the Żabka Group, - a network of 12 000 local stores, - which introduced plant-based products into its regular offering.

In Maciej's vision, plant-based food does not have to be exclusive or expensive, which is why he focuses on accessibility – in a local store, at a gas station, in a school cafeteria. Change becomes a norm when it does not require an effort or a sacrifice from a consumer – it simply gives them a convenient choice.

Thanks to this work, more and more Poles reach for plant alternatives out of curiosity, for health or ethical reasons – without the feeling that they have to give up anything. Today, plant-based products are in the regular offerings of many major chains, in both small and large cities, as well as rural areas. Plant-based menus in restaurants and cafes have become common, and schools and universities are testing less meaty meals – for example, following the Christian tradition of Friday fasting. In 2024, the value of the plant-based products market in Poland was estimated at 1.08 billion PLN, and according to the Roślinniejemy research, already 40% of Poles declare that they are reducing their meat consumption.

If you buy a plant-based spaghetti or order an oat milk latte from your barista – think with gratitude about the work of Maciek Otrębski and his team. About people who not only understand that we need to change the way we eat but also make this change easier for thousands of people in our country.

- *Roślinniejemy is a wordplay that, on the one hand, describes the process we are undergoing — we are becoming more plant-based — and, on the other, is a blend of the words “we eat” and “plant-based.”**



Do you know what your childbirth was like?

In Poland in the 1990s, maternity wards were places where doctors and medical staff held almost complete authority. Birth took place in shared rooms, without intimacy, without the support of loved ones, and without the right to choose birthing positions or types of care. Children were taken from their mothers, and the woman's body was treated as part of a medical procedure – without regard for emotions, dignity or needs. The family was almost entirely absent: fathers waited outside hospital windows, and children were seen only through the glass. Meanwhile, the way a person is born affects their health, their bond with their parents, their sense of security and the well-being of the entire family.

In 1994 – a year after the "Quality of Birth – Quality of Life" congress – organized with the support of Gazeta Wyborcza, the "Childbirth with Dignity" campaign began. The initiative, launched by journalists and activists reacting to the dramatic conditions in Polish maternity wards, evolved two years later into a Foundation – one of the first and most recognizable advocacy organizations in Poland.

A key figure of this movement was Ashoka Fellow **Ewa Smuk-Stratenwerth**, who co-founded the foundation. Ewa documented women's experiences, spoke openly about childbirth trauma, and advocated the right to information, the presence of a loved one, and dignified treatment.

The Foundation and its allies focused on systemic actions: documenting conditions (reports, surveys), defining standards of perinatal care (including rankings like "Where to give birth with dignity"), lobbying for the right to a birth companion, ensuring immediate mother-child contact ("skin to skin"), and preventing routine medical interventions without consent. They also worked on building the social awareness – childbirth classes, guides, and information materials – so that women knew what to expect and how to talk about birth. More and more people understood that childbirth could – and should – look different.

Ashoka Fellow **Katarzyna Oleś** – a midwife, co-organizer of the midwives and parents' movement, and co-founder and long-time president of the "Well-Born" Association – also helped drive this change.

Kasia described the work of the independent midwife, proposed a model of a safe out-of-hospital birth, co-created regulations setting perinatal care standards, and supported midwives in gaining knowledge about good childbirth and conscious birth choices. She also wrote and published very important and popular books such as *Natural Childbirth*, *Important! Pregnancy*, co-authored with a colleague, and a beautiful children's book about pregnancy and birth entitled *The Belly Button* to build awareness of the importance and beauty of childbirth from the early years.

Thanks to these efforts, what was once an exception – an intimate birth supported by loved ones, in harmony with physiology and respectful of the needs of a woman and her child – is becoming increasingly common. In recent reports from The Childbirth with Dignity Foundation, over 90% of women declared being able to have loved ones present while they were in labor, over 90% had "skin to skin" contact with their newborn baby, and over 80% said information from the hospital staff was communicated clearly and with respect for privacy.

If today you hear a mother say that her labor was difficult but beautiful, or simply a good experience, think of the many changemakers who made it possible. They built a movement and changed the laws and practices – so that birth could be more than a medical procedure – an experience full of dignity, warmth and love.



Have you ever been amazed by a flower meadow in a city?

Just 10 years ago, green spaces in Polish cities looked almost identical: neatly trimmed lawns, compulsorily mowed several times each season, watered during drought and fertilized to enhance their appearance. Aesthetically pleasing? Maybe. Efficient? Not really. Sustainable? Not at all.

Scientific research and international experience show that this model not only generates high costs for local governments but also does not benefit either the environment or the health of residents. Heavily mowed lawns have low biodiversity, do not retain water, and their maintenance generates pollution and noise.

In 2014, Ashoka Fellow **Maciej Podyma** built and led a team that showed the world there was an alternative to the boring lawns – flower meadows. Maciej and the Meadow Foundation team proved that flower meadows are not only beautiful, but also functional – they retain water, filter the air, support pollinators and are cheaper to maintain than lawns. To promote flower meadows as a legitimate part of any urban greenery, they trained local government employees, educated residents, developed their own seed mixtures and produced tens of thousands of seedlings. In collaboration with citizens, local government and companies, the Meadow Foundation has already established over a million square meters of meadows across the country.

It turned out that by sowing a meadow or suggesting its creation in the participatory budget, each and every one of us could do something about the important issue of biodiversity. Thanks to meadows, insects once considered lost have returned to cities: wild bees, bumblebees, butterflies, and pollinating flies. The Meadow Foundation conducts entomological monitoring, which is why we know that in Gdańsk, after the establishment of urban meadows, the number of pollinators more than doubled, and in Kraków, new butterfly species appeared, including the Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*) and the Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*). These insects find both food and shelter in the meadows – something that intensely mowed lawns cannot offer.

Thanks to Maciej's work, many cities in Poland have begun to update their green space management strategies, including flower meadows as an integral part of the green infrastructure system. In Warsaw alone, projects covering several dozen hectares have been implemented, and thanks to programs such as the Metropolitan Flower Meadows or Echo-Meadow, flower meadows have also been introduced into private investment urban constructions and infrastructure spaces, including roads, railways, and airports.

Maciej Podyma convinced decision-makers that flower meadows are not an experiment or an exotic, hipster idea, but a symbol of a new way of thinking about the city – one that is more sustainable, open to nature and supporting health of residents in times of climate change.

If a flower meadow is blooming in your area today – by the road, close to your school, or even your bus stop – remember that sometimes beauty and common good need to be fought for, just like Maciek and his team did.



Has anyone close to you spent a night at a hospital with their kid?

After the political changes in Poland in the 90., many systems required reforms – including the treatment of children with cancer. The children spent weeks or even months in hospitals, frequently without their parents. The presence of mom or dad was treated as an "extra", not as an integral part of the treatment. In Poland, approximately 1100–1200 new cases of cancer in children are diagnosed each year. This means that, on average, one in 600 children may develop cancer before reaching adulthood. Each of these diseases is always a crisis of the whole family. The isolation of parents from the child adds to the suffering.

Ashoka Fellow **Elżbieta Pomaska-Skrzypczak**, whose son was diagnosed with cancer, decided to change this situation. In 1991, she founded the Foundation for Assistance to Children with Cancer, and a few years later co-founded the Polish Coalition for Children and Adolescents with Cancer. She built bridges between parents, doctors and decision-makers, emphasizing that effective treatment is not only chemotherapy or surgery, but also the presence and support of the family.

One of her most important achievements was securing the right for parents to be present with their child in the hospital – including at night. Thanks to her efforts and advocacy campaigns, measures were introduced that seem obvious today: a parent can stay with their child 24 hours a day, and since July 2019, they are not charged for it.

This was a major improvement in the quality of care – psychologists emphasize that the closeness of the parent reduces the child's anxiety, facilitates cooperation with the staff, helps them recover faster after procedures, and even supports the effectiveness of the treatment.

Thanks to Elżbieta and her Foundation, Polish hospitals began to see the child not only as a patient, but as a person who needed the support of their loved ones. Her efforts have changed the practice of the entire system, and today thousands of parents can be with their children during the difficult moments of hospitalization.

So, if you know a family that was able to spend nights together in the hospital, remember with gratitude that this right was established thanks to the determination of a person who turned her personal experience into a systemic change.



Don't you think that when it comes to environmental protection, we sometimes argue too much instead of taking action?

In recent years, many discussions in Poland and Europe have focused on the environment and the energy policy. However, discussions often turn into political disputes rather than focusing on finding common solutions. Meanwhile, what really matters is the everyday experience of real people. Farmers struggling with drought, residents of flood-prone areas, or miners who worry about the future of their families and towns. Without their voice and participation, it is difficult to make meaningful decisions that will stand the test of time.

Ashoka Fellow **Natalia Węgrzyn** decided to change this stalemate by making environmental discussions more collaborative than confrontational, and thus leading to real commitment. Natalia worked at the Purpose Climate Lab, where she developed campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe aimed at local communities – from mining regions to villages struggling with floods and droughts. In 2021, she was one of the founders of the Our Common Home network, which brings together organizations and people working for the common good and environmental protection. The network includes 15 countries, among them Poland (Polska z Natury), Brazil (Morada Comum), France (Nuances d'Avenir), Germany (Heimatwurzeln), and Spain (Legados). It is a space for joint projects, exchanging methods and strengthening local civic institutions that implement practical solutions – from small initiatives to more complex long-term projects.

The next step was the creation of the Shared Ground think tank, which combines research, analysis, and design of solutions that are based on a broad participation of diverse stakeholders. It sounds natural, but in practice it requires tools and methods that allow constructive conversation and thinking beyond conventional patterns.

This is exactly what Natalia does with her team: she conducts research and workshops that bring together officials, local communities, entrepreneurs, and politicians. As a result, discussions about the environment become a process of collaborative planning rather than confrontation.

More and more people who previously felt left out of debates about climate or ecology are now co-creating solutions and engaging on their own terms, guided by their values. These are not only data from reports, but above all the real experiences of people who go from being recipients of decisions to co-creators of solutions.

Dialogue and democracy also need support – from people, teams and networks that know how to facilitate them. Natalia and her colleagues do this on a daily basis.

And maybe there is a role for you to play as well?

EPILOGUE

All right – you now know a few stories about extraordinary people and their teams. But why does it matter?

Do you ever wonder why there are so many social initiatives in some communities, while in others even a small change seems impossible? The answer may lie in a concept of the "changemaker density". That is the density of people making change. It is still an informal term, researched by Ashoka, which refers to the proportion of people in a given society who not only recognize problems but also take concrete actions to solve them. Simply put, it's a measure of how many "changemakers" – that is, people who make a change for the common good – live and act in a certain place.

In the world of polycrisis, when we face simultaneous political, climate, social, and technological challenges, it is not enough to wait for someone to come and solve our problems. According to Ashoka, the future belongs to societies where "everyone is a changemaker" – from a student to entrepreneur and to public officials.

Changemaker density does not have a single, official unit of measurement. Ashoka looks at this concept holistically, taking into account, among others, the number of social initiatives per capita, the level of youth involvement in civic activities, access to education that fosters empathy and collaboration and the sense of agency among citizens.

The higher the "density of changemakers", the greater a community's resilience to crises, the better its support systems, the stronger its social bonds, and the more dynamic its economy. A high "changemaker density" also means that systemic change – for example in education, healthcare or environmental protection – can not only occur but also be sustained.

Poland has a huge potential in that area. According to the 2020 CBOs report, as many as 46% of young people were involved in social activities. We have over 100,000 non-governmental organizations, and recent years have seen active protests, civic movements, and the development of many social innovations. Starting this year, thanks to the collaboration of many Ashoka Fellows and their successors, civic education has been introduced as a part of the educational curriculum in Polish schools. So, what are the obstacles? There are only two (unfortunately significant). One is the funding of civic or so called non governmental organizations. The second is the legal mechanisms that prevent NGOs from being a true co-creation partner to the local governments and the state. Unfortunately, many initiatives in Poland still depend on the determination of individuals rather than on a supportive system.

The more people feel they have an impact, the more resilient a society becomes – to crises, to polarization, and to manipulation of any sort. It is also a recipe for innovation, as grassroots actions often lead to lasting systemic changes.

So, if you want to know whether you live in a healthy society, don't look only at the economy. See how many people around you are changing the world with the common good in mind. Maybe you could be one of them too.

ASB

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