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HEADLINE: TODAY'S TOPIC: The Growing Popularity of Lech Walesa

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The underground words to the Polish national anthem go this way:

"Poland has not perished

"As long as we are holding out here.

"We shall fight our way to freedom

"With the cross and strikes;

"Lead us, Walesa

"From the seacoast to Silesia

"Polish Solidarity will go and win victory."

The stirring song of protest is intoned these days in moments of peaceful dissent, testifying to the enduring popular appeal of Lech Walesa, the national chairman of the suspended labor movement Solidarity, who has become a national hero.

Walesa, 38, has now spent more than eight months in near-isolation, interned by Poland's martial law authorities. He has not been forgotten. The "Walesa myth," the uncanny charm of a shrewd, emotional little man, has endured and deepened.

Just as he was associated with the Polish challenge to Communist rule, Walesa now personifies the quiet defiance to rule by martial law which was imposed during a sweeping military crackdown Dec. 13.

His photograph is placed regularly amid the floral crosses, common symbols of dissent fashioned at public places in Warsaw; his name is shouted during illegal street demonstrations that have flared this month in several Polish cities; his captivity is recalled on hand-lettered placards and banners that proclaim, "Lecha, we are waiting."

About 2,000 Poles joined in fervent prayer at a special Mass for Walesa in Gdansk on Aug. 13, the start of the ninth month of martial law rule.

On Thursday, before 300,000 pilgrims at Czestochowa, Poland's holiest shrine, Archbishop Jozef Glemp demanded, "Release Lech Walesa, or make it possible to speak as a free man."

Enforced absence "hasn't diminished Walesa in the eyes of the Poles," said one veteran Western diplomat in Warsaw. "Walesa was the spirit of the movement, the movement personified. ... Walesa made people believe in the possibility of achieving results, that things could be changed and improved. He won't be forgotten very quickly."

The regime, which is holding Walesa at a hunting lodge near the Soviet border in extreme

southeastern Poland, acknowledges that Walesa's continuing internment presents what deputy premier Mieczyslaw F. Rakowski has called "a grave problem."

There are, however, no indications Walesa will be freed soon. Rakowski has been quoted in an interview published in an official newspaper that the union leader would be held "as long as the situation requires."

Walesa, who was seized in the early hours of Dec. 13, has appeared alternately defiant and conciliatory _ as mercurial as he sometimes seemed in the 16 months after he climbed the Lenin shipyard gates in August 1980, to lead the strike that gave rise to Solidarity.

Government sources said in March that Walesa insisted that the regime's stern and unflinching leader, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, "come crawling" to him as a condition for opening negotiations.

Several months later, an International Labor Organization official met with Walesa and reported that the interned leader acknowledged "errors had been made," that Solidarity "had wanted to go forward at too fast a pace" and the right to strike could be suspended "for quite a long period" to promote social conciliation.

The right to strike and the right to form "independent, self-governing trade unions" were key provisions of the 21-point government-workers accord signed by Walesa on Aug. 31, 1980. "We will see to it that the new union will be independent, for the sake of Poland," he said at the time.

The agreement ended a wave of strikes that swept the Baltic coast; gave rise to the Solidarity union which ultimately claimed 10 million members, and cemented Walesa's position as the movement's leader.

"There was never a second Walesa, someone waiting in the wings to step in," the Western diplomat said. "He was the embodiment of Solidarity, and there never was, really, anyone who could have replaced him."

That's not to say Walesa was never challenged. A moderate in relations with the government, he was often at odds with Solidarity's young radicals, who favored such steps as a national referendum about communist rule in Poland and encouraged workers elsewhere within the Soviet bloc to form independent trade unions.

In the turbulent days before Jaruzelski imposed martial law, the regime tried to ascribe radical tendencies to Walesa. The hardline army newspaper said he was "a great liar and provocateur" directing a group of "madmen" committed to create "anarchy and chaos."

These days, Walesa leads a sedentary existence, his isolation broken by periodic visits from his wife, Danuta, and their seven children, the youngest of whom, Maria Victoria, was born in late January.

Mrs. Walesa, returning from her most recent visit early this month, said her husband has shaved the full beard he had grown but kept his drooping, handlebar mustache. He takes

walks and plays billiards with his guards, she said.

His spirits, she added, remain high, and his views, unchanged.