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World attention was focused on Switzerland for three dramatic days last month as gunmen occupied the Polish Embassy in Berne and threatened to blow up the building and its occupants. Correspondent Colin Farmer was on the spot to compile this special feature for the Swiss Observer.

Swiss go it alone and outwit the Polish Embassy gunmen

THE 73-hour siege began on a mid-Monday morning when four armed men entered the embassy in Bern's exclusive Elfenau quarter. It ended on the Thursday when specially-trained Bernese police stormed the building to free the hostages and capture the gunmen without a life being lost or a shot being fired.

The four gunmen – all Poles aged between 20 and 42 – had threatened to blow up the embassy and its occupants within 48 hours unless the Polish government gave in to their demands. These included the lifting of martial law in Poland, the freeing of all political prisoners and the closure of internment camps.

The Swiss government immediately set up

a crisis team, headed by Justice and Police Minister Kurt Furgler, which maintained almost constant telephone contact with the gunmen during the siege. The team included 80-year-old Polish-born priest Joseph Bochenski, who has lived in Switzerland for 40 years and who at one stage spent an hour inside the embassy with the occupiers.

The gunmen released five of their 13 hostages, four women and a student who was visiting the embassy when the gunmen took over the building. The occupiers also extended their deadline for a further 48 hours, and this time demanded payment of Sfr 3 million (nearly £1 million) and safe passage to either Albania or China.

During the siege the Polish government and state-controlled media accused the Solidarity movement of complicity in the affair – an allegation denied by the gunmen themselves and by Swiss-based "Solidarity-in-Exile" members.

Switzerland rejected Polish government requests that a Polish anti-terrorist squad be allowed to fly to Switzerland to end the siege. And the Swiss authorities also declined offers of help from West European countries – including, it is believed, West Germany and Britain.

The police operation to storm the embassy began when a security man deposited on the embassy's front porch an aluminium case previously used to deliver food to those inside. This time, it contained a powerful stun-bomb that emitted light, tear gas and noise when detonated by remote control by authorities in a car nearby.

The blast knocked down the embassy door and within seconds Berne's own anti-terrorist squad had burst into the building to end the siege.

The terrorists were led by a former convict, Florian Kruszyk who claimed to have worked for the Polish intelligence-gathering service. He was described by Swiss authorities as a "mixture of patriot and criminal."

Kruszyk, 42, who served most of a nine-year prison term for a jewelry store robbery in Vienna in 1969, was once refused political asylum in Switzerland. All four men were believed to have entered Switzerland in August.

Poland has formally requested the extradition of the gunmen, but there is no extradition treaty between Poland and Switzerland. The men will now stand trial in Switzerland, where they face jail terms of up to 10 years. Terrorism and hostage-taking are not covered by current Swiss legislation. A tougher penal code to be introduced this month will not cover crimes committed before October 1.



Berne's police are best!

– from the Berner Zeitung