

Year 1989

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Poland

Poles resisted Communism many times. Massive protests in the years 1956, 1968, 1970 and 1976 did not yield results, apart from tactical concessions of the leaders of the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza). However, the resistance of the society caused that in Poland, the only such country of the Soviet bloc, agriculture was not collectivised and the Catholic Church preserved its independence.

In the middle of the seventies, the economic crisis was growing and the lack of basic products became a part of everyday life. At the turn of 1975 and 1976, a change of the constitution was conducted and, among other things, it concerned the "leading role" of the Communist party and "the improvement of friendship and cooperation" with the Soviet Union. This led to a growth in the activity of opposition groups. After the protests of workers in June 1976, numerous opposition organisations began to emerge. A key role was played by the Workers' Defence Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników), which was created in September 1976, and by the Movement for Defence of Human and Civil Rights (Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela) created in March 1977. On 16 October, 1978, a Pole Cardinal Karol

Wojtyła became the Pope and assumed the name John Paul II. This event created enormous hope which was strengthened during the Pope's pilgrimage to his motherland in June 1979. In this situation in the summer of 1980, an unprecedented wave of strikes occurred in which hundreds of thousands of people took part. The authorities had to start negotiations with the strike committees. As a result of agreements concluded in Szczecin, Gdańsk and Jastrzębie, the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" (Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy "Solidarność") was created, led by Lech Wałęsa. Soon, about ten million Poles joined the union. Pupils, students and farmers created their own organisations. Independent press started to develop and scientific and cultural circles experienced a revival. Gradually, groups of a political character were created. The sixteen months of legal existence of "Solidarity" were full of enthusiasm and hope of changes in the political and economic situation.

Such situation could not be reconciled with the further existence of the Communist system. New leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party started preparations to solve the crisis by using force (in September 1980, Edward Gierek was replaced by Stanisław Kania, who a year later, gave way for Wojciech Jaruzelski). Soviet authorities also put pressure upon the use of force. They claimed that external intervention did not come into play but for a long time, they did not accept the "Solidarity". The events in Poland were described by the propaganda of Communist countries as a "counter-revolution".

On 13 December, 1981, General Wojciech

Jaruzelski announced the introduction of martial law. Authority was taken over by the Military Council of National Salvation (Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego). Apart from the Communist party, the actions of all organisations were suspended. Some were then liquidated (including the "Solidarity"). People were not allowed to organise strikes and manifestations, a curfew and a ban on leaving the place of residence without the authorities permission were placed. Telephones were turned off and mail correspondence was overtly censored. Thousands of people were interned in special camps; thousand were arrested and sentenced for imprisonment. Several dozens of people were killed during the pacification of strikes and demonstrations or were murdered by Security Service (Służba Bezpieczeństwa) officers. All this repression, however, could not break the resistance of the society. New secret union structures began to emerge; hundreds of underground papers were issued from the spring of 1982. Independent radio programmes were broadcast. Independent Culture, the patron of which was the Catholic Church, became a common phenomenon. Hopes were sustained by two following pilgrimages of John Paul II, one in 1983 and the other in 1987. Martial law did not destroy the "Solidarity", but it broke and weakened it. Martial law also did not improve the economic situation, despite the increase of prices under the cover of tanks. Additionally, the authorities found themselves in international isolation and US authorities applied severe economic sanctions on Poland and the Soviet Union. The situation was not changed by

the abolishment of martial law in July 1983. The same year, Lech Wałęsa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The first attempt to get out of the deadlock was made by Communist authorities in 1986. An unsuccessful attempt to involve oppositionists in the Consultative Council (Rada Konsultacyjna) was made by General Jaruzelski. Amnesty was also proclaimed and chosen opposition circles were offered to undertake legal activity. Others were being convinced that conspiracy has lost the *raison d'être*. New policy brought success in the form of the abolishment of American sanctions. The middle-of-the-road opposition circles decided to take advantage of the new situation. In September 1986, Lech Wałęsa appointed an overt Temporary Council of "Solidarity" (Tymczasowa Rada NSZZ „Solidarność”) which, one year later, joined the secret Temporary Coordinating Commission (Tymczasowa Komisja Koordynacyjna). This is how the National Executive Commission (Krajowa Komisja Wykonawcza) emerged. The Commission was, however, not recognised by part of the leaders of the union from 1981. The undertaking of overt activity was criticised by radical opposition groups, among which, the Fighting Solidarity (Solidarność Walcząca), created in 1982, played a paramount role.

At the same time, new opposition movements developed, including the pacifist-ecological Freedom and Peace Movement (Ruch Wolność i Pokój). More interest was caused by the Orange Alternative (Pomarańczowa Alternatywa), which organised happenings ridiculing the absurdity of Communism. Less popular were initiatives of a

more political character.

In November 1987, the authorities suffered a terrible defeat when, in an announced referendum, they did not manage to obtain binding results. In the direct surroundings of General Jaruzelski, new aspects of the development of the situation were taken into consideration, such as allowing the opposition to take part in ruling.

Two waves of strikes in 1988 were a catalyst for the initiation of reforms. The first occurred at the turn of April and May and was broken after a brutal pacification of one of the plants. In August, following strikes broke out with a wider range. In this situation, the authorities offered to conduct talks at the Round Table in exchange for the end of the protest. This proposal was accepted by part of the opposition concentrated around Lech Wałęsa and preliminary talks began.

At the same time, the new government led by Mieczysław Rakowski, prepared a range of economic reforms of a free-market character. The intensity of talks with the opposition weakened and the authorities counted on an individual solution of the crisis. The breakthrough was the televised debate between Lech Wałęsa and the leader of the regime trade unions, Alfred Miodowicz. The leader of the "Solidarity" undeniably succeeded in it, which caused a change of social atmosphere. In December, the Citizens' Committee by the Leader of "Solidarity" (Komitet Obywatelski przy Przewodniczącym NSZZ „Solidarność”) was created and it served as a background for negotiations.

In January 1989, General Jaruzelski, stated that he would resign and in this way he broke the

resistance of the Polish United Workers' Party activists and the plenum of the Central Committee agreed to talks concerning the re-legalisation of the "Solidarity".

On 6 February, 1989, the Round Table talks began. Apart from their ceremonial opening and closing, they were conducted in working groups which elaborated on a compromise in particular issues. The negotiations were finished on 5 April, 1989. The basic settlements were the following: re-legalisation of the "Solidarity", the establishment of the president's office, the appointment of the second chamber of the Parliament (Senat), conducting partly (in 35 per cent) free elections to the Sejm and totally free to the Senat.

The agreement reached at the Round Table was the subject of criticism by many opposition groups. It was assumed that concessions of the increasingly weaker regime were too small and the agreement for only partially free elections was criticised. The Independent Students' Union (Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów) organised many protests against the refusal to legalise this organisation.

At the same time, an intense election campaign took place. Citizens' Committees emerged in the whole country. The lack of means which the authority had was made up for by enthusiasm and ingenuity. On 8 May, the first issue of the independent daily newspaper "Gazeta Wyborcza" (Election Gazette) appeared.

The first round of elections occurred on 4 June, 1989. The society treated the election as a plebiscite and crossed out all the candidates of the authority camp. As a result, during the first

round, the opposition candidates took the majority of seats devoted to free election. The pool devoted to Communists and their allies was appointed only in the second round. On 4 June, the "National List" disappeared. On the list, there were names of the head Party and state activists. Eventually, the opposition representatives received all the seats available in the free election to the Sejm and 99 of 100 seats in the Senate. The attitude of the society finalized that the establishment of the Round Table, which foresaw the reform of the Communist system, was not up-to-date. It was clear that a change of the system was needed. In July, General Jaruzelski, however, managed to be elected president (with one vote of advantage), but General Czesław Kiszczak's mission of appointing a new government was unsuccessful. An even bigger success was the idea announced in the famous article by Adam Michnik "Your President, our Prime Minister". At the end, the new Prime Minister became the "Solidarity" representative Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who created a government based on a coalition of all the parliamentary forces.

The basic task of the government was to prepare a package of radical economic reforms which came into being at the beginning of 1990. At the end of 1989, the traditional name of the country was restored (the Republic of Poland), as was the emblem (the white eagle in the crown). The country gradually reformed; however, according to many opposition representatives, this was done too slowly, especially in the face of the fall of Communism in the whole region. Only in April 1990 was censorship abolished and in May the Security Service was dissolved. Simultaneously,

elections for local governments were conducted. In November 1990, a general presidential election was announced of which Lech Wałęsa was the winner. Free parliamentary elections took place in October 1991. The process of recovering independence and reconstructing democracy was symbolically finished by the withdrawal of the Russian Army from Poland's territory in 1993.



For Poles, the pilgrimages of pope John Paul II to his homeland were a sign of hope. Warsaw, 1979 (Chris Nidenthal/FORUM)



The "Solidarity" leader Lech Wałęsa during the strike at the Gdańsk Lenin Shipyard, August, 1980 (Marek Zarzecki/REUTERS/FORUM)



Street fighting became a daily sight in Poland in 1980s. Warsaw, 31 August, 1982 (Chris Niedenthal/FORUM)



An inauguration of the Round Table talks, February, 1989 (Jaroslaw Stachowicz/FORUM)



Before the 4 June, 1989 elections (Chris Niedenthal/FORUM)



Tadeusz Mazowiecki (Chris Niedenthal/FORUM)



Demolishing Feliks Dzierzhinsky's
monument in Warsaw, 17 November 1989
(Jarosław Stachowicz/FORUM)

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