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“POLONIA RESTITUTA”—1989 —A TURNING POINT IN THE POLISH HISTORY

1. Introduction

Texts describing break-through events are always risky if written from the time perspective of less than subsequent 100 years. The author of this article has decided to write it being fully aware that this text will contain his subjective point of view but it will also be written from the position of a witness actively participating in the events of 1989. The author also believes that the majority of accounts and synthetic articles have or will be written by persons living in a few big Polish cities; however, his text has been written from the perspective of a Polish provincial town.

2. The world and Poland of 1988 as viewed from Nowy Sącz

The more time has passed since 1988, the more often I encounter opinions and publications of people who claim that in 1988 they were convinced of the collapse of the whole communist block, in particular, of the socialist system in Poland. My memories of those times are different: I observed Gorbachev's actions in the USSR with joy but, at the same time, I was aware of the strength of the basic structures of the secret police and the military, which acted as a kind of 'backbone' of the communist system in the USSR. We all knew of the presence of the Soviet Army troops stationed in the German Democratic Republic and of the Red Army garrisons located in the western and northern parts of Poland. Everybody was also aware that the societies of Western Europe, basking in the prosperity of the then welfare states, would not even lift a finger in a dramatic situation and their sympathy for those who lost would be expressed again in the form of shipments of food supplies and clothing. Apart from the USSR, we were surrounded by two other countries where the communist rule was much stricter than in Poland (namely East Germany and Czechoslovakia) and whose societies seemed to have resigned themselves to their fate, in particular due to the fact that their material situation and relative affluence was much higher than our Polish standards of living at that time. At that time, I personally had a feeling of "Polish loneliness" and of very meagre chances for a fast political and economic change. There was one (but distant) mythical friend of Poland, namely the USA, but only a madman would think that the USA would risk an all-out military conflict with the USSR to protect Polish interests. In the 1980s, when I was asked why I was so actively supporting the *Solidarity* movement against the political establishment of that time, I answered that I wanted my daughter, who was then

a teenager, to be able to live in free Poland one day (I meant it in the 20 or 30 years' time). I could not even fathom that in a few years' time the situation would change completely and that I would be among those who co-created the new political, social and economic system and that I would become one of its beneficiaries.

Moreover, in 1988 *Solidarity* as well as independent political circles were weak, having been attacked by the Polish secret police for years and enfeebled by a relatively large emigration of *Solidarity* activists. In truth, at those times, we had only one refuge: our Pope, John Paul II, and our Catholic Church. Polish society, tired of living in the economy of constant shortages, seemed to be unable to undertake any decisive fight for new Poland.

3. Poland—the critical piece of domino

Suddenly (in the historical perspective, the whole Round Table negotiations took only a blink of an eye), there was a breakthrough and a fully peaceful one to boot. The then officials of PZPR [Polish United Workers' Party], realising how difficult the economic situation was and seeing no chance to implement fast economic recovery measures within the old system, made a decision to involve part of the political opposition, including *Solidarity* in ruling the country and to make it politically responsible for implementing reforms. We should emphasise that the process of the Polish economic transformation (from the centrally planned economy to free market economy) was initiated as early as in 1988, before the Round Table negotiations by the famous parliamentary Act on Economic Freedom authored by Minister M. Wilczek. The communists soon lost control over the transformation process: PZPR, until then a hegemonic leader, consenting to free elections to the Senate [the upper Parliament chamber], a failure of the national list of candidates in the general elections to the Sejm [the lower Parliament chamber] on June 4, 1989, a sweeping victory of the candidates representing the Civic Committee in the Senate elections (with 99 out of 100 seats taken and much bigger number of votes achieved by them as compared to candidates from PZPR)—all resulted in a political breakthrough. Kiszczak, a candidate for Prime Minister designated by the old political system, failed to form the government. And when Jarosław Kaczyński managed to persuade the two parties—allies to the PZPR, i.e., ZSL- United People's Party and SD— Democratic Party, to withdraw from the alliance, on August 12, 1989, a new government was sworn in headed by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a representative of the Civic Committee, as Prime Minister. The new government was a result of a consensus i.e., the Ministry of Defence and the Interior Ministry were controlled by representatives of PZPR, but it was still a government of independent Poland. The leaders of the Soviet Union did not react in any way either to the results of the general elections of June 4, 1989 or to the fact that the government was taken over by the Opposition (that was how the creation of T. Mazowiecki's government was interpreted worldwide.)

The events taking place in Poland in 1989 were observed and analysed with special attention by the societies of the socialist block. Undoubtedly, both the lack of reaction of the Soviet Union and the Polish communists' giving up the power and creating free market economy provided an important signal for the societies of the communist block states, in particular those under the strong regime of the secret police (i.e., East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania). It turned out that they did not have to fear the external forces' intervention by the Red Army, and the power system of the communist parties might be abolished without bloodshed. We can say that during the subsequent months, the communist system fell apart. One cannot escape an association with domino pieces arranged standing upright in a line—it is enough to push one of them in the right direction and the meticulously arranged line of dominoes will collapse. The Polish example

both influenced the public opinion and weakened the determination of the leaders of particular communist parties and their secret police to defend the old system (since it became obvious that in case of social upheavals they would not get any military support from the Soviet Union). I do not represent a Polish-centred approach, surely, the communist system would have collapsed anyway without the changes initiated in Poland since it proved to be completely ineffective when implemented by the USSR and the European countries of the socialist block. I believe, however, that this process of disintegration could have taken a minimum of a few years (or if it had been modified the way Communist China was the socialist block could last until today.) It is pointless to speculate on alternative versions of history, what matters are historical facts and these speak for themselves. The massive bloodless revolution that encompassed nearly the whole world was initiated in Poland in a few months of 1989; or one can also say that it had been prepared by the extraordinary events starting from 1978—1980 (i.e., the election of Karol Wojtyła to become the Pope in 1978 and the creation of *NSZZ Solidarność* in 1980).

4. 1989—a “point of discontinuity” in Poland’s contemporary history

In the 20th century, Poland became independent thanks to extraordinary, or even unbelievable events. After the World War 1, resulting from the destructive war waged among the countries which had occupied Poland and as a result of the October Revolution in Russia, there appeared some kind of ‘state vacuum’ from which Poles took advantage perfectly.

Another unusual moment came in 1989 and 1990. Undoubtedly, a crucial role in the events in Poland was played by the consistent policy of the American government, personified for Poles by the figure of President Ronald Reagan, which led to the economic breakdown of the Soviet Union and, consequently, to the collapse of the USSR. Establishing the OPEC’s policy of fixing oil prices at a very low level (with oil prices at approx. \$ 16.50–18.50/barrel in 1989) as well as the Star Wars programme turned out to be lethal for the USSR. No wonder that political leaders of the Soviet Union considered the events in Poland to be of marginal importance in comparison with the global challenges facing the USSR. We might only speculate on what the geo-political situation of the world would be like today if the oil prices had reached \$70 per barrel (not to mention \$100/barrel) in 1988—1990 while it is estimated that in Russian conditions, when taking into account the costs of extraction, amortisation and necessary new investments, profits appear with the oil price exceeding \$ 40 /barrel.

We must also postulate that this incredibly advantageous situation for Poland continued for another dozen years. It is hard to imagine that the European Union would have agreed to Poland’s accession if the crisis of public finance in a few EU countries had started ten years ago.

The sudden and unexpected change in the political situation, in particular in Central and Eastern Europe, caught everybody, not only us, Poles, by surprise. It can be clearly seen from the perspective of the twenty years. In my opinion, the thesis that the Russian secret police had planned the collapse of the Soviet Union cannot be defended in particular if we analyse the period of President Yeltsin’s rule and the long-term crisis of Russian economy.

There remains an open question whether we, Poles, have used properly this unexpected opportunity to regain our country’s statehood. When comparing the Poland of 2011 to the Poland of 1989 we can say proudly that Poland has made a great technological and civilisational leap including an increase in the standards of living of the majority of Polish people. Of course, today one can easily pinpoint many areas and particular solutions which could have been more effective. But it was we, the Poles, who were the first to embark on the path from the Socialist economy

and politics to democracy and free market economy and we could not follow any good examples and practices developed by others.