

Poland's 'public' and 'private' faces

Jacques Cheminade, president of the Schiller Institute in France, reports on his recent visit to Poland. Excerpted from an article in Nouvelle Solidarité.

"Walesa acts like an emperor, king, and despot"; "A series of resignations from Solidarnosc"; "Government explodes"; "Reconciliation between the worker from Gdansk and the intellectual from Warsaw": In reading the Western press, one imagines Poland torn by political in-fighting and chaos. The image more or less insidiously communicated is that of a country naturally inept at democracy, where the ambition to rule over one's former brother-in-arms is the secret code. Since the policy of the Mazowiecki government—spiced with austerity and democracy—is defined as the only possible policy, any attempt to raise questions must of necessity be guided by the simple desire to become caliph in place of the caliph. What's worse, we are deluged with a "sociology of the Polish people," according to which the Poles would be more at ease with a good hand of cards than beside a machine, and would be fascinated by the charisma of an anti-communist, not-too-bright political fixer of a strongman who is also more or less consciously anti-Semitic.

Having just returned from Poland, what guides me in the writing of this article is the intention not only to reestablish the truth, but also to incite readers to stand beside their cousins who continue to be so courageous in the face of a history that, since the end of the 18th century, persists in tearing them apart.

The first thing that strikes the visitor arriving in Poland, by Poznań, by Gdansk, or by Warsaw, is the reconstruction effort. In spite of terrible experiences, the weakened living conditions, the ravages and looting of the regime, an entire people has strived over years to give priority to beautifying their houses. Often the charm doesn't manifest itself except in the center of town: The outskirts remain leprous, and the new towns, of the Stalowa Wola type, are an insult to the pleasure of living; but the effort, having been constrained to be concentrated and limited by circumstances, is all the more moving.

This internal life is, no doubt, with the dual support of their family and their Church, what the Poles have best been able to preserve under their hardhats. Any in-depth uplifting of the country must be based on this, on the alternative that it sought constantly to constitute and which Solidarnosc has

represented in the form of an organized movement. However, this internal family life has been affected by the conditions that the regime has created. The search for a place to live, often leading to marital arrangements, the quest for "deals" to survive, the job carried out in a social setting defined by cronyism and opportunism: so many external assaults that have degraded the sense of individual dignity, of respect for others, at least in the public arena.

Hence the major problem of Poland is found in this rupture between the "private" (family, culture, religion) and the "public" (the state, business, institutions). Toward the one, there is sentiment, affection, profound engagement; toward the other, distrust, refusal, detachment. Poland's real liberation will only come to pass, in depth, when the first of these worlds meets the other, when the feeling nourished and expressed in the first will be accomplished in the form of reason in the second.

The work carried out by resistance heroes Jan Uminski, Henryk Jankowski, Jerzy Popieluszko, and Stanislaw Gadowski—not to mention Father Malkowski—must still find its "lay" expression in the political universe. Only then, can the connection be reestablished with the national history, with that "Golden Age" of the Jagiellonian kings, in which the participation of the Polish people in the affairs of civic government—via a parliamentary system and respect for human rights—will encounter the accomplishments in Polish internal life under the form of the artistic creations of the Renaissance that one can again find today in Kochanowski, Modrzewski, and Gomulka, or in the architecture in Krakow.

If, with the 1989 liberation, there had been a corresponding period of enthusiasm, of economic construction, of grand designs, of the presence of intellectuals beside the people, of clear and firm denunciation of the oppressors, everything would have been possible very fast. Unexpected resources would thereby have been liberated in Poland.

Instead, Poland had the Balcerowicz Plan. The intellectuals who came to power had only an austerity plan that entailed a 40% drop in the living standard to offer. What is more, they did not speak clearly to the people.

TV and radio still controlled

A simple example: Upon the death of Father Uminski, Polish television blocked, at least at first, a report on his life, and on the ceremonies surrounding his burial. But here was a hero—a modest one—of contemporary Poland. Doesn't this deliberate blackout suggest that some old *Nomenklatura* remains encrusted in all the institutions of power, and in particular in the heart of the Polish radio and television broadcasting network?

It's true that Jan Drawicz, the network's current president, was in the opposition since the 1970s. But his early studies in Moscow, his participation in the communist power, in the internal debates among the "elite" from the 1960s to the 1980s, have made him incapable of hearing the real Poland. It turns out, too, that the television directors of the *ancien régime* formed their own limited partnership, and rent out their equipment—using their special connections—at outrageous prices to the public institution that just yesterday they were part of. These "well-connected" directors make up the face of Poland that Western networks deal with.

The case of Balcerowicz is similar: a onetime student at the Marxist university was taken in by the free market debauchery of Harvard, the same school as Jeffrey Sachs. So he has put into place a "market" policy—a market created before the products exist—imposing terrible sacrifices on the Polish people. Needless to say, this policy has nothing to do with the "social economy of the market" which allowed the postwar "German miracle," based on a progressive cancellation of the debt and on the mobilization of productive investment to equip the country under the Marshall Plan. In Poland, Balcerowicz's policy consists of squeezing payment out of those who have already paid. We know, since the report to the Polish parliament by Edmund Krasowski, the deputy from Elblag, that Comecon has looted Poland of several billions of dollars per year. While the National Bank of Poland would value the ruble at \$.50, the Bank for Economic Cooperation of Comecon would set it at \$1.50. The dollar bought by Poland in the free currency zones, in the West, thereby costs Poland three and a half times more than the equivalent calculated in the clearing houses with the Comecon countries. That is, equipment imported by Poland in order to re-export products to the U.S.S.R., or Western products incorporated directly into Polish export goods (e.g., the Marconi radars bought in Italy and installed on ships sold to the U.S.S.R.), were operations entailing heavy losses—a veritable organized system for "hijacking" hard currency. When you know that Polish trade with the U.S.S.R., in rubles, has increased by 20% per year on average since 1974, and that during this same period Poland sharply increased its purchases in the West (and hence became indebted by \$40 billion), you can see clearly that the "circuit" has been closed. So, the government of Poland, under the pressure from Western governments, has been unable to find any solution, today—other than to make the Polish people pay once again!

Hence, when Lech Walesa founds the Union of the Center and calls for the *Nomenklatura* to be put aside, a firmer financial policy vis-à-vis the Western banks and International Monetary Fund, and 100% elections to the Polish parliament (in those to the 1989 Round Table, only 35% of the seats were filled by election, one too often forgets, and the former "Nomenklaturists" still occupy nearly all administrative command posts), can anyone find fault in that? When he defends the dairy producers and Polish farmers who demonstrate, the Western press treats him disdainfully as a "populist" and the Mazowiecki government sends in muscle-bound police forces to clear out the ministry offices. The reality, I've been able to establish over and over on-site, is that Balcerowicz and his friends are trying to make the peasants pay for the austerity. At Lezansk, in the southeast, the peasant gets paid 220-250 zlotys for a liter of milk. The same liter is resold at the market in the same town for nearly 900 zlotys—without even having been treated or pasteurized. Elsewhere, the average price paid to the producer for a liter is 300-400 zlotys. Four hundred zlotys, the maximum established farm price, is about 4 cents!

Certainly, Mr. Walesa has presidential ambitions, and it is up to the Poles to judge if they will follow him. To support, reasonably and with prudence, as he has done, the strikers, the farmers, or the railroad workers is not, however, in itself a mortal sin, an initiative that would place the regime in peril. After all, is Mr. Walesa not the president of a union?

Everyone, under these conditions, is forced to survive by increasing his income through some wheeling and dealing (the famous round trip to Berlin to buy and resell a few poor goods represents between one and ten months' wages!) and by reselling the hard currency stashed away yesterday to compensate for the loss in buying power today. This "cushion" of hard currency (it is estimated at several billion dollars, between \$5 and 10 billion without doubt) ought to have been the precious resource for investments to "take off," and not the "forced expenditure" made to compensate for a deterioration of living conditions.

The risk is that—faced with paralysis and neglect by the Western countries, and the drop in living standards—the *Nomenklaturists* will sow trouble. The "Untouchables" are making a comeback: in three-piece suits on one side, privatizing to their advantage, and in work clothes on the other, leading strikes such as at Slupsk, in their "strongholds."

Former U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski appears, pontificating as is his wont, over Polish television, which generously opened its doors to him, leading some to say that "the American might well seek to become President of his former country." Brzezinski sought to blow on the embers of the past in encouraging Poland to mistrust the "Greater Germany." The objective is, evidently, to isolate Poland, preventing it from becoming a pillar in the Europe that is being built and which Brzezinski and his friends fear.