

Like the rest of Eastern Europe, Poland came under the control of the Soviet Union after World War II. In 1944, the Soviet Army began liberating Polish territory from the control of Nazi Germany; by 1948, Polish Communists had completed their takeover of the government, the economy, and social institutions.

Soviet leader Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) was suspicious of the Poles; he once remarked that installing his system there was like saddling a cow. Indeed, Poles did not take the saddling calmly. No society under Communist rule staged resistance more frequently than did the Poles. An armed resistance from 1944 to 1947, an uprising in 1956, a revolt by intellectuals in 1968, massive strikes in 1970 and 1976—these were just the more dramatic episodes leading up to the Solidarity experiment in 1980. Polish oppositionists in the 1980s looked to these moments of inspiration and also looked farther back to the underground state and army during World War II and to the uprisings against Russian rule in the nineteenth century. Poles, it seems, had never been willing to accept foreign or dictatorial rule. The Catholic faith that many shared (see, for example, Document 11) and that was affirmed worldwide by the election of a Pole as pope in October 1978 further encouraged resistance.

But what form of resistance was the most effective? This question reemerged with new intensity among Polish thinkers and activists during the period of martial law that followed the crushing of Solidarity in December 1981. During the first winter of martial law, slogans of rebelliousness appeared on city walls across the country: “The winter is yours, but the spring will be ours.” This was a vague promise, though, because very few Poles saw value in resorting to armed uprising. Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader until his death in November 1982, was the same man who had invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979 to “defend” socialism in those countries. Perhaps the Soviets would be squeamish about the possibility of massive Polish casualties—but perhaps not.

On the other hand, Poles were also practiced at waiting generations for justice. Perhaps the heroes of Solidarity, now in prison cells across Poland, would become martyrs, their names and pictures treasured secretly until a new generation would someday take up the cause. The documents in this chapter show, however, that a different scenario emerged. Polish society had been transformed by the sixteen months of relative freedom in 1980 and 1981 (see Document 8). Millions of people had gained some experience with organizing or participating in Solidarity. Many of these gave up in the face of repression, but enough stalwarts remained that the Communist leaders could not put the lid fully back on. Moreover, the economy stalled. Party leader General Wojciech Jaruzelski (1923–) had promised, in imposing martial law, that he would make the economy more efficient and would improve people's standard of living. His failure to do so undermined the passive support that Václav Havel (Document 1) and others had realized was key to Communist survival.

Three types of resistance emerged. First, there was the underground of which Adam Michnik writes in his essay (Document 9). This vast network of union organizing, self-help, and above all news—in the form of thousands of clandestinely written, edited, printed, and distributed periodicals—ensured that Solidarity and the people who fought and suffered repression were not forgotten and that they even found new allies. Second, a new generation of social movements arose, captured in Documents 10 and 11. For the most part, these were people who had not been active in Solidarity; in place of Solidarity's rhetoric evoking national traditions, they offered more prosaic ideas. Finally, Solidarity's leadership included many brilliant strategic thinkers like Jacek Kuroń (Document 12).

In the spring and summer of 1988, huge strikes broke out across Poland. Ultimately, this evidence that the Polish opposition could not be suppressed convinced the Communists to open negotiations. They hoped to draw Solidarity into taking some responsibility for the mess the regime had made of the economy. From February to April 1989, representatives of Solidarity and of the regime met at a Round Table discussion in Warsaw. The results of the Round Table included the legalization of Solidarity, the creation of an independent newspaper, and semi-free elections to parliament. In that election, held on June 4, 1989, Solidarity candidates (including both Kuroń and Michnik) swept 99 out of 100 Senate seats and all the seats allotted to the opposition in the lower house of parliament. Less than three months later, they had wrested control of the government from the Communists, thus beginning the cascade of revolutions that would sweep the region that year.

As you read these documents, ask yourself what you learn about Polish national values from these writings. That is, when Poland or Poles are mentioned, what concepts seem to be associated with them? If they are not mentioned, do you think that fact is significant? The same question can be asked about other values, such as those related to citizenship or to Catholicism.

Another way to read these documents is as if they were in conversation with one another. For example, how do you think the participants in the actions described in Documents 10 and 11 might respond as they read Jacek Kuroń's essay (Document 12)?

8

The Solidarity Program

October 1981

Solidarity, a trade union and social movement uniting nearly ten million Poles (close to half the adult population), came into being as the result of strikes that swept Poland in July and August 1980. This was the first time that a Communist regime had allowed such an independent organization to exist. Solidarity quickly grew beyond workers to welcome white-collar professionals, students, farmers, craftspeople, and others. With its own newspaper and an entire structure of assistance to members independent of Communist control, it gave Poles—and people around the world, especially in Communist countries—hope that a space for freedom could be carved out of the dictatorship without force.

Solidarity's high point came during its National Congress in September–October 1981, at which this program was forged. Just two months later, rejecting the call for dialogue that closes the excerpt below, the Communist leaders imposed martial law on the country and detained thousands of Solidarity activists. The authors of this programmatic statement affirm both Solidarity's roots in Polish traditions and its pertinence to struggles for human and civil rights generally.

Who We Are and What We Want

The independent, self-governing union Solidarity, which was born out of the 1980 strike, is the most powerful mass movement in the history of Poland. . . .

Our union sprang from the people's needs: from their suffering, and disappointment, their hopes and desires. It is the product of a revolt by Polish society after three decades of political discrimination, economic exploitation, and the violation of human and civil rights. It is a protest against the existing form of power.

For none of us was it just a question of material conditions—although we did live badly, working hard, often for no purpose. History has taught us that there can be no bread without freedom. We also wanted justice, democracy, truth, freedom of opinion, a reconstructed republic—not just bread, butter and sausage. . . .

Our organization combines the features of a trade union and a broad social movement; it is this which gives us our strength and determines the importance of our role. Thanks to the existence of a powerful union organization, Polish society is no longer fragmented, disorganized and lost, but has recovered strength and hope. There is now the possibility of a real national renewal. Our union, representing the majority of workers in Poland, seeks to be and will become the driving force of this renewal.

Solidarity embraces many social currents, bringing together people of different political and religious views and different nationalities. . . .

Our aim is to rebuild a just Poland.

Respect for the person must be the basis of action: the state must serve people instead of dominating them. The state organization must be at the service of society and not be monopolized by a single political party. . . .

In determining its activity, Solidarity turns to the values of Christian ethics, our national working-class tradition, and the democratic tradition of the labor world. John Paul II's encyclical on human labor¹ is a fresh source of encouragement. As a mass organization of the working people, Solidarity is also a movement for the moral rebirth of the people.

We believe that people's power is a principle that we do not have the right to abandon. But it does not mean the power of a group which places itself above society, arrogating to itself the right to define and rep-

¹Laborum D

represent the interests of society. Society must have the right to speak aloud, to express the range of social and political views. Society must be able to organize itself in such a way as to ensure a just distribution of the nation's material and spiritual wealth and a blossoming of all creative forces. We seek a true socialization of our government and state administration. For this reason our objective is a self-governing Poland. . . .

The Union in the Country's Present Situation

We are fully aware that Polish society expects actions from us that will allow people to live in peace. The nation will not forgive a betrayal of the ideals for which Solidarity was created. Nor will it forgive actions, even the best intentioned, which lead to the spilling of blood and the material and spiritual destruction of the country. This awareness compels us to carry out our objectives in a gradual manner, so that each consecutive action obtains the support of society.

Our sense of responsibility compels us to look with clear eyes at the relationship of forces in Europe which resulted from the Second World War. Our aim is to perform our great labor of renewal without damaging international alliances; indeed, we seek to provide more solid guarantees for those alliances. The Polish nation, animated by a sense of its dignity, patriotism and traditions, will become a valuable partner from the moment when it consciously assumes its own commitments. . . .

AGREEMENT ON ECONOMIC REFORM

Agreement on economic reform requires collaboration between the state power and society for a radical change in the existing economic order. The reform should give the leadership of enterprises to personnel within the economic system who will harmonize the laws of the market with planning. The hundreds of agreements signed by the government still remain only on paper. Promises made by the state to the working people should be honored.

AGREEMENT FOR A SELF-GOVERNED REPUBLIC

The agreement for a self-governed republic should provide the direction and means for a democratization of public life, of the *Sejm* [parliament], the political, territorial and economic authorities, the courts, national education, etc. Realization of this agreement will establish a just relationship between citizens and the state. The road to a self-governed republic is the only one which will make Poland internally strong, an equal partner with other nations.

The union considers the new social contract to be an indissoluble unity. The action program of Solidarity is above all a commitment by the union to the nation. We are confident that it will meet with the approval of the entire nation. No partisan, individual or group can consider itself to be above the nation.

We do not pretend to have a monopoly on the truth. We are ready for an honest and loyal dialogue, an exchange of ideas with the state power, a quest for just decisions which will better serve the country and the interests of working people and citizens. May this accord unite us around what is national, democratic and human in Poland; around those things which do not divide us.

9

ADAM MICHNIK

On Resistance

1982

Adam Michnik (1946-), today the editor-in-chief of the Polish daily newspaper Gazeta wyborcza ("Election Newspaper"), was getting into trouble with the regime for his dissenting views even before he had graduated high school. Though he identified strongly with the left, he always connected his politics to a fierce love of Poland. He has written extensively on Polish intellectual history. While Solidarity was legal, he was one of the union's most outspoken proponents. Not surprisingly, he was interned during martial law for almost three years and was arrested again in 1985 and put on trial. This essay, written in prison in the form of a letter to an unnamed friend, appeared in English in 1985. In 1989, Michnik emerged as one of Solidarity's key negotiators with the Communists. He created Solidarity's independent daily newspaper, mobilizing people to participate in the June 1989 election.

My dear friend,

You have asked me how things look from this vantage point—from Białołęka prison—how I assess the effectiveness of resistance, what my projections are. . . .

You ask me whether I believe that it is sensible to maintain a political underground. . . .

No nation has ever been given human rights as a present. These rights have to be won through struggle. The question is: How should this struggle be conducted?

I am one of those who in the past ten or so years have criticized the idea of conspiratorial activity. Today I am for organizing an underground. We have no choice. Jaruzelski has made the choice for us.

This is what Polish honor and Polish thinking demand from us today. Honor: because a nation that humbly submits to those who are taking away its liberty does not deserve this liberty. Thinking: because a nation that sees no real chance for the restoration of its liberty and is not prepared to take advantage of such a chance when it arises will never attain freedom. It is difficult to be optimistic today. But who ten years ago could have foreseen the existence of a democratic opposition, an independent press, and finally August 1980 and Solidarity? It is obvious that what happened only once cannot be made into a model, but those events are an invaluable legacy. They are proof of how much can be accomplished by people who want to do something sensible for their country.

Today, the underground is a *fait accompli*. The forms it should take remain an open question. Let us begin by describing what it should not be. It should not be an underground state with a national government, a parliament, and armed forces. It cannot be an underground state because it has no national mandate. Our country needs many things but it does not need self-appointed national rule. It needs democratic representation—not a pseudo-parliament, which is the only thing possible in conspiratorial conditions. An underground state was able to function under the Nazi occupation because there was no middle course and because there was a war. Only a blind person could draw parallels between the General Gouvernement¹ and WRONa,² especially

¹ Nazi term for the administration of occupied Poland

when it comes to armed conspiracy and attempts at terrorist action. This must be said clearly: armed actions could be conducted only by misguided people or by provocateurs, and the underground has a responsibility to protect society from such actions. Terrorism leads to nothing but revenge and a spiral of terror—to a strengthening of hatred and cruelty and to the estrangement of the majority of people from the underground.

It is not terrorism that Poland needs today. It is widespread underground activity that will reconstruct society, spreading throughout towns and villages, factories and research institutions, universities and high schools. Underground Solidarity has to encompass all this. . . .

Only concerted pressure, which may go as far as a general strike, can force WRONa to make concessions; this is one side of the coin. On the other side, however, is the fact that a centralized and hierarchical organization, modeled on a Leninist party, which would steer the whole national opposition, is not realistic. Life is always richer than organizational structures, and the power of an underground union organization must lie in its roots in factories and not merely in an apparatus made up of professional conspirators. Also, by its very nature, the organization must be connected to a network that goes beyond the factory, for this is indispensable in maintaining links between different groups in society, in publishing independently, in organizing internal union structures, and in organizing distribution of fliers. But if such an organization is detached from those who are living the everyday life of martial law, it can easily lose touch with reality and become an army of generals without soldiers. . . . For the activists must understand that an underground movement makes sense only when it is able to create forms of action accessible to every single Pole, when it remains an open and tolerant movement, and it always remembers that many roads lead to democracy—that the Polish national anthem can be played on many different pianos. . . . We must look for ways to develop civil society and not just undertake actions simply in order to be a nuisance to the “junta.”

But, above all, we must create a strategy of hope for the people, and show them that their efforts and risks have a future. The underground will not succeed in building a widespread national opposition without such a strategy—without faith in the purpose of action. Otherwise, resistance will amount to nothing more than a moral testimony or an angry reaction. And the movement will cease to be one that is aware of its political goals, that is armed with patience and consistency, and that is capable of winning. . . .

Underground Solidarity's basic goals are obvious: to create an authentic society, a free Poland, and individual freedom in Poland. No political miracle will help the Poles if they do not help themselves. A Polish democratic state will never be born if democratic structures do not exist beforehand in Polish society. And independent of the institutional success of the underground, a base for Polish democracy is being created today. It lies in the moral sphere. . . .

Two strategies deserve to be considered: the strategy of "instant change" and the strategy of the "long march." The former assumes a vehement and spontaneous explosion of society's discontent. Such an explosion, even if it is bloodily suppressed, can lead to polarization within the government and restore the possibility of compromise with Solidarity. The underground must be prepared for both the quake itself and the subsequent negotiations. It must figure out ways of preventing bloodshed and ways of backing rightful demands. . . .

But this does not mean that we should bank on a head-on collision between the underground and the government for the success of our efforts. Today, any confrontation must lead to tragedy, since WRONa is full of determination and will not back down even if it means shedding rivers of blood. . . .

The "long march" strategy requires consistency, realism, and patience. These are not platitudes. They define a program of arduous, risky, and often ineffective activity, in the face of repression and suffering—a vision of work on economic, administrative, legal, and educational reform and on spreading among the public a concept of a "reformist Poland." The level of public awareness will determine the effectiveness of these actions. . . .

The underground will never meet all society's needs for a movement of resistance. It can only be one part of this movement, and the national interest requires us to seek a common denominator for different types of activity, different temperaments, and different models of concern for our motherland. The movement of resistance must teach freedom and democracy. The movement's character will determine the character of Poland as it emerges from the state of war. But the shadow of the "possessed" from Dostoyevski's novel³ looms over every underground movement. Every conspiracy demoralizes. In its depths flourishes the spirit of a sect that uses a language all its own,

that is based on rites of initiation, on tactics to which everything is subordinated, on an instrumental attitude toward truth, and on disregard for any values that are not political. There is a unique type of activist-conspirator, whose characteristics make him as useful in the underground as they are dangerous later on. Such an activist has to make arbitrary decisions, to distrust newcomers and strangers. A spirit of democracy is not one of the virtues required by a conspiracy; pluralism is not the style favored by it. Underground activity isolates people from the taste and smell of everyday life, skews perspectives, gives birth to dangerous absolutism and intolerance. Conspiracy requires disobedience to the enemy and obedience to the underground central command. It proclaims equality but within itself calls for hierarchical subordination. Conspiracy thrives on the spirit of Manichaeism.⁴ "He who is not with us is against us." . . .

The conspirator idealizes the underground, which is not surprising, but this is precisely why he must constantly be reminded that it is not police terror that will bring about real defeat but the hostile indifference of society. An underground that is detached from a base is doomed to become degenerate and weak. . . .

The underground must know how to interpret society's needs and find flexible means of satisfying them. It must be attractive to people and it must be essential to them. These are platitudes; to adhere to them, however, we must make it clear to ourselves and to others that it is unrealistic to count on a return to the situation that preceded December 13, 1981,⁵ to count on a spectacular victory, with virtue rewarded and vice punished. Underground Solidarity must not seek revenge but rather a democratic alternative. Democracy is neither an easy nor a straightforward solution. It is born in pain, strengthened in conflict; it only shows its virtues after a long time. This is why we should not promise the sky to ourselves and to others, for it is not an instant and definitive solution for Poland's troubles that awaits us but only risk, toil, and disappointment. This is usually the price of freedom.

It seems to me that the underground today does not need the moral principles and organizational structures of an army or a party of the Leninist kind. What it needs is the bond of shared aims and solidarity in action. And respect for individuality. And consent for plurality. It seems to me that the underground should not promise a world devoid of conflict. I think that it should suggest a program of practical

⁴Manicheism.

activity for reform, a program for social self-defense, contacts with real culture and cultural values, participation in authentic civic and intellectual life. Plus a pinch of dignity, a pinch of fraternity. And a daily breath of truth. Of the truth that every compromise is temporary, that every political solution is illusory. Because, as a philosopher wrote, but for death, all solutions are illusory. This is what I think.

10

WALDEMAR FYDRYCH

The Revolution of the Elves

June 1987

The Orange Alternative, a guerrilla-art collective, emerged in the southwestern city of Wrocław in 1987. It had no political program and no organization, yet by creating opportunities for free politicized expression, it quickly became the most talked-about phenomenon of Polish opposition. Its participants were students at the university, high school students, artists, musicians, and hippies; among them was Waldemar Fydrych, a thirty-four-year-old who styled himself "Major" and often dressed in military green. The Orange Alternative had staged small "happenings"—absurdist street art or performance art—since 1981. For example, participants painted little elves on walls, in places where the police had painted over political graffiti. The elves came to life in Orange Alternative's celebration of Children's Day, an actual Polish holiday, in June 1987.

Reading this document, which consists of the text of a leaflet distributed the week before the happening plus "Major" Fydrych's account of the event, it is important to avoid overanalyzing it. After all, Orange Alternative sought constantly to subvert any political meaning. Still, this and other happenings broke through the indifference to politics, exacerbated by economic crisis, that many Poles felt at this time. By engaging in ridiculous and yet accessible acts, they invited Poles to enjoy themselves again in public and to lose their fear of the police and the regime.

Leaflet

The elf has played an important role in world history. This creature, who lives in the forests and in books, feeding on mosses, mushrooms, and wild strawberries, is little known. . . . Elves who work in mines, in forestry, or looking after princesses and orphans are real hardworking folks. The *krasnoludek*—"krasny" meaning red, from the color of their caps, and "ludek," or little person—constitutes an important problem at the global and local scale. . . .

In the Polish People's Republic elves are not something seldom seen, but appear quite frequently. They will appear in Wrocław on Świdnicka Street by the clock at 3 p.m. on June 1. Perhaps the elf will turn out to be a great patron and friend of . . . economic reform. Others argue that the elf might be the result of those reforms.

Come! You are no worse than a princess or an orphan. Poland has a future. Long live surrealism. May the global forces of peace blossom in the shade of the military arts. . . . P.S.: Let no one be surprised if some of the elves appearing on Świdnicka Street are enormous like Gulliver. This strange mutation was caused by the explosion in a certain nuclear power plant,¹ which released heavy isotopes (cesium and strontium) that have been absorbed by mushrooms and forest undergrowth, elves' preferred food. Probably further explosions will allow us to breed with these pleasant creatures. Try to bring your own red cap.

Waldemar Fydrych's Account

This leaflet appeared in many public places . . . [and] mobilized the police. The strategic forces and rapid-response divisions turned their attention to Świdnicka Street. . . . The police know very well that in this city there are more intelligent people than modest ones. At 3:00, a none-too-modest parade marches down Szewska Street. There is a huge bear in dark glasses, festooned in toilet paper, and a sign carried by elves. On the sign is a picture of an elf, with a hole where the face should be (anyone can stick his or her face in and be photographed like an elf). Bravo! Finally the Secret Police can investigate something more colorful than the gloomy underground. . . . At 3:00 two officers go on the attack. They arrest the sign. . . . The action begins.

¹The nuclear

Someone hands out red caps—and is detained. It's red all over, with new red caps. Here come three more policemen. An elf is handing out candy and finds himself in a police van. Another van pulls up, next to a crowd of elves as big as Gulliver. . . .

Now it's five after three. They're leading away a guy carrying bags of candy—he's still throwing handfuls to the crowd. A guitar strikes up. . . . The elves are dancing, weaving a dance line that bumps up against the police vans. Some elves knock on the windows of the van, greeting those sitting inside. The crowd presses closer, and a group starts a cheer like at a football stadium: "Elves are real!" . . .

Now there are two or three hundred elves. There are more and more caps. The crowd fills Świdnicka Street. So it's a revolution. . . .

A laugh comes from one of the police vans; a fat elf opens the door and two others jump out, throwing handfuls of candy. The elf with the guitar sings "O Rosemary Mine."² The crowd is partying. . . . Two elves run up to the policemen—but they don't want any candy. . . .

Now the police turn on their megaphones. . . . "Please disperse! Those who do not take off their caps must show their identity cards! Please take off the red caps!"

They arrest the guitar player. . . .

"Mommy, why are they arresting the elves?"

"Because there are no elves in the socialist system, only in capitalism," answers Mommy. . . .

"Now the reds are by the Opera—please send in the blues," reports a secret policeman. . . . The blues surround the reds—and now there are no more reds. . . .

And what will happen next time? Next time we'll have another success.

The policemen have managed to become legend: a fairy tale not just for children, but for elves, too. . . . For the first time, elves and people can compare their fairy tales as they happen.



Children's Day, June 1, 1987, Wrocław, Poland.

The Orange Alternative's "happening" at first seems spontaneous: People are singing and dancing in a circle. But the presence of the guitar player (Krzysztof Jakubczak, one of the organizers) and the red caps worn by many remind us that even the most frivolous-seeming protest needs coordination and structure.

NAF Dementi.

The Hardest Thing to Overcome Was Our Own Foolishness . . .

June 1988

Freedom and Peace, or WiP, was one of the most powerful social movements to emerge in Poland after 1981. Students opposed to Communist control of the military founded it in 1985. They quickly expanded their activities to focus on environmental problems as well. In a country that had been driven to panic by the Chernobyl explosion of 1986, nuclear power was a potent issue.

In this document from a WiP underground paper, a woman from Międzyrzecz in northwest Poland recalls how the efforts in her small town to oppose the construction of a radioactive waste dump (in concrete bunkers built by Nazi Germany) benefited from the brazen support of WiP students from a nearby city. She shows how one small action can lead to another and how such actions can lead to concrete changes—in this case, to a decision by the Communist-controlled town council to oppose its bosses in Warsaw and refuse the construction of the waste site. Although actions by intellectuals and trade union leaders in Warsaw or other capital cities across the Communist bloc got all the attention, the self-organizing efforts in small towns like Międzyrzecz were crucial to building people's confidence in their ability to bring about change.

Międzyrzecz, beside the fact that it is a small town, a bit settled and moldy in its ways, also has a rather special population. One-third of the town is military, one-third police, and one-third are what I would call normal people. That two-to-one ratio is rather intimidating, but these are the conditions we faced. The whole thing played out spontaneously, without calculation; there were no expectations. In this environment, it wouldn't have been possible to do things differently.

Theoretically, the matter was clear. No one in Międzyrzecz, at least in private conversations, supported the storage site, but those were

only discussions at home. No one from Międzyrzecz would go out onto the street to manifest dissent.

We began by forming a committee—we gathered a few people (only sixteen)—and wanted to work administratively, by lodging protests. Of course, the authorities de-legalized our committee immediately, even though it did not even have legal status yet. . . .

The whole time we wanted to act openly and not engage in some conspiratorial discussions, creating new micro-organizations. We knew that we had to go out normally onto the streets and act so that people would dare to protest aloud. Our first action was a success, though there were more onlookers than people who were genuinely engaged. After that, there were crises, too. In July [1987], for example—I consider that a disaster. A tiny little group marched. I don't know if this was because of the summer vacation or because of intimidation (by then the secret police had begun to do its thing).

At this critical moment, the boys from Gorzów's WiP helped us enormously. They began to organize pickets, which really emboldened people. . . . September came, and thanks to the boys from WiP, who picketed for two hours in the very center of town, the issue gathered steam, and something in people began to crack. After two hours, when those guys left the square, people did not allow them to be arrested. So they joined the crowd and marched through the streets with their banners, all the way to the church, where they thanked the crowd. Only after leaving the church were they detained. This action, by six boys from Gorzów's WiP, was on September 2, and then on September 6 there was a really large, successful demonstration: Then people marched with conviction. Thirty-two people were detained then. Of them, sixteen were young people who were beaten up at the police station. They tried various methods on the people they detained. One boy, for example, was stretched out on a desk while they pounded him in the kidneys. He had to get examined by a doctor, but his mother didn't want to file a complaint.

After this demonstration, twenty-five people were also fined, ranging from 25 to 40,000 złotys.¹ October 4 was the date planned for our next demonstration, and the misdemeanor court was scheduled for October 2.

The misdemeanor court came as a real shock in small-town Poland, especially since about half the people charged were chance

¹Equivalent to two to three months' salary at the time

bystanders (the other half were Solidarity activists). And then, in addition, repressive measures began about a week before the court proceedings. . . . After the misdemeanor court handed down the fines, doubts and lack of faith in the value of taking action once again threatened to overcome us. The hardest thing is to convince people that their voice matters in the world in which we live and that their going out onto the streets can matter. People felt ridiculous, and threatened, and played for fools, but they did not feel that they mattered.

Meanwhile, the authorities unleashed a full assault. For about a week and a half there were open meetings in workplaces, at which they tried to persuade people that dangerous political forces were directing the protest actions. There were also meetings with the parents of high school students and special pedagogical consultations. Young people were informed that there could be bloodshed and that any student who took part in a demonstration would be expelled from school.

People reacted wonderfully. A couple of these meetings were simply broken up. Women were especially radical. . . . But the situation was no joke; the misdemeanor court could pacify the community. They tried various things to cause fear. For example, the Gorzów press published an article, shortly before the planned demonstration, entitled "The Police Are Not Angels," in which there was a discussion about how the police sometimes have to use firearms.

On the other hand, we knew that there was an intense discussion on the topic of Międzyrzecz, and we knew we couldn't let the matter die. So we decided on a hunger strike. This was not an easy decision. The hardest thing was to overcome our own sense of foolishness: to go beyond the role that one plays (in a small town, it is hard to escape the role in which you're cast). It is really hard to shrink: One's ambitions have to shrink to nothing, especially since no one had any experience or certainty as to how it would turn out. We also could not be sure how people would respond to the hunger strike. A small town can be cruel in its criticism; we were really afraid that we would end up looking like lunatics. This was a stressful situation, as we did not know if we would have the moral strength to take this on, or if we would just look ridiculous. . . .

None of us was completely convinced about the hunger strike. That is, we believed in the value of doing it, but we had real doubts about the form of protest. Only after two or three days did we come to feel that it has to work. People created such an atmosphere; they came to thank us, to talk, to show that they approved of what we were doing.

So this was also a moral victory: We were afraid of looking ridiculous, and instead we encountered gratitude and approval. The responsibility began to weigh upon us. One of us commented: "Even if we were to die here, we can't back out."

Our hunger strike was a complete surprise, and so people's support was both authentic and enthusiastic. The hunger strike was in protest of repression, against the approaching misdemeanor court; we condemned the issuing of such severe sanctions and demanded that civil courage be respected. . . .

We sent protest letters to the Provincial Governor and to the City Council. Our City Council, which had so far been silent, held a debate halfway through our hunger strike (on the fourth day). They met until four in the morning and, against the position of the [Communist party] first secretary, passed a resolution rejecting the decision to store radioactive materials in the bunkers and sent that resolution to the State Council. . . .

On Sunday, at noon after Mass, we were supposed to end our hunger strike and leave the church. There was a discussion: Should we exit with our banners, or without? . . . The city was dead. Other than police in their vehicles, there was no one. At each of the morning masses there were 15 to 20 people. We felt that we had lost; but then at quarter to twelve crowds of people began streaming into the church. And then, as we left the church, people's enthusiasm was enormous. Despite the fact that there was a lot of police, despite the fines, prohibitions, and intimidation, entire families came, with grandmothers and children. This was a moral victory, a civil disobedience. People greeted us with flowers, they cheered, they sang. . . . Most of all, they really weren't afraid, there was no sense of fear. . . .

One of my friends says that in our current situation one has to give people concrete activity; one should not create far-reaching, abstract ideals, but give them concrete matters to be resolved. In a small town, there is a certain kind of political awareness, and you have to work within that. If you hang banners saying, "We don't want a nuclear power plant in Żarnowiec,"² of course that will elicit people's approval, but it won't draw people out onto the street. Now in Międzyrzecz, the social energy has accumulated, certain habits have been broken. That's the moral value of the whole affair. People have come together

²The Polish government had begun building a nuclear reactor at Żarnowiec, on the

and raised up their heads. They have mobilized themselves from within. . . .

A kind of new model of resistance has been born in Międzyrzecz. It's a kind of conscious citizenship and an experience in social self-organization. Until now, activism was the normal, spontaneous kind; now we have to work it out theoretically, so as not to waste that energy. We'll have lectures and discussions, to show people that there can be two or three theories on one topic (for example, on social movements). The point of all this is to embolden people and to work out methods of conscious disobedience. . . .

The open meetings in workplaces were more than just angry encounters; they were demonstrations. People stood up and told those secret police and party bosses that they are swindlers. At the meeting with high school parents, for example, parents stood up and said that they don't care about all these prohibitions and injunctions, because the lives of their children are more important to them. . . .

Above all, we have to come out of our hiding places. Certain activities have to become public if they are going to be effective. Nothing will be taken care of if we do not come out and demonstrate our citizenship.

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JACEK KUROŃ

Instead of Revolution

March 8, 1989

In this document, Polish dissident Jacek Kuroń (1934–2004) reports on the negotiations at the Round Table for the leading underground weekly newspaper. Kuroń was considered by many to be Solidarity's foremost strategic thinker. Like Adam Michnik, he spent many years in prison for his tireless defense of the freedom to organize and the freedom of speech.

After the bloody uprisings of the 1970s, Kuroń exhorted the people of Poland: "Don't burn down communistes, but form your own!" That is, instead of attacking Communist party headquarters and burning it down in rage, they should organize themselves. Once a radical, Kuroń had by 1989 become a hardheaded realist seeking to wrest concessions from the Communists. He saw the Round Table as a step toward Solidarity's taking power but came to the conclusion that Solidarity would have to cooperate with its opponents for the good of Poland. Here he takes on the task of convincing Solidarity's enthusiastic supporters to accept compromise.

Our deliberations are in the Office of the Council of Ministers—that is, in the ruler's palace. Oppositionists enter palaces either at the head of an armed people, in order to take power away, or at the invitation of the ruler who wants to consolidate his power. Can the opposition agree to such an invitation? Yes, if it will therefore have a greater likelihood of accomplishing its program.

Some of those in the ruling elite have lately realized that the current system of exercising power is lethal: The destruction of the country will sooner or later lead to their own destruction. They probably hope that they can manage to stabilize a more efficient system, with themselves at the top. To achieve this, however, they have to take the path of democratic changes. And thus there emerges a sphere of mutual interests.

There are some people who accuse us: You're propping up the regime when of course it would be better to wait a little longer and ride a wave of strikes and demonstrations into the palace. That is, at the head of an armed people. I won't get into whether we could win. Let's even assume that such a possibility exists. The thing is, however, that dozens of revolutions have already taken place around the world. It's an old fairy tale: People place all their hopes in a revolution, and those hopes cannot be fulfilled. There always comes a crisis and hatred: The first revolutionaries are swept away by their successors, until finally one of these successor groups uses violence against the people. There have not been other kinds of revolutions. And thus, ever since I stopped being a Communist and a very young man, I have ceased to advocate revolution. Today a revolution would be many times worse: We've got, after all, a ruined country, and through revolution we would not only fail to rebuild it but would ruin it further. All the problems that we have now would rise up before us with even greater force.

I don't deny that it may turn out that there is no other way. But we have a responsibility to attempt a process in which the entire society will organize itself and change the present order gradually. The task of people who engage in politics is to do everything to pursue process instead of coup d'état.

Despite the popular belief that there is no point in talking with Communists, I would like to declare that not only is it possible, but we in fact have no choice.

Does this mean that I trust the regime—that I propose that we have confidence in the *nomenklatura*,¹ the bureaucracy, the party? Well, I am against any mixing of one's social life and politics. I can have confidence in my friends, but in politics one should follow the principle that power is the only guarantor. . . .

Our basic demand at the Round Table is for the right to organize; here we have achieved a great deal. We also need access to mass media, which makes it possible not only to organize, but also to communicate among ourselves, independently of the regime. . . .

The regime tells us that it requires a guarantee that organized social forces will not overthrow the government or tear down the system. And it does not seek these guarantees in the form of pledges or self-limiting from our side but in the parliamentary system. It demands that we participate in parliamentary elections, which would be much more democratic than before, but still nondemocratic. This would of course place limitations on the independent forces, because entry into parliament imposes on us responsibility for the state. Recently they have added the creation of a presidency with quite broad powers and a Senate chosen by genuinely free elections to their proposal.

If it does turn out to be possible to set democratic processes in motion, then it seems to us that this contract can only be accepted as a one-time deal; we would declare quite clearly that the next elections would have to be free. I have often been asked what guarantee we have that the next elections will be free. I think that is a silly question. . . . The only real guarantee, in fact, is an organized society. To the extent society is able to transform the actual situation, so too it will be able to bring about free elections. . . .

It is worth recalling that when our side entered the talks it thought: We'll get Solidarity back, and maybe something else, and we'll pay for

¹*nomenklatura*: the Communist elite, who held key positions in the state administration and in the economy.

it with undemocratic elections. Now we have the Solidarity we wanted. . . . A change in Solidarity's philosophy has occurred; we understood that the point of these talks is not to snatch something for ourselves, but to get the whole process moving. . . .

What will happen if the agreement breaks down: If society rejects it *in toto* for economic reasons? If the decisive piece of paper is not the ballot, but the ration card? It is not an accident that at assemblies in factory I talk about Parliament, the Senate, and the elections, and people ask about wage hikes and price hikes. . . . But I don't believe in the primitive class vision: that if someone is a steelworker in the Lenin [Steel] Mill, then he sees nothing beyond his position in the mill. Experience, especially the experience of Solidarity, shows that this is not true. One is also a consumer, a citizen, a Pole. And this means that we can overcome the resistance to economic change.

We face a problem: Are we capable of conducting this transformation from totalitarianism to democracy peacefully? Someone said to me: In four years, Solidarity will win the elections anyway, and the Communists will lose [and so why bother to negotiate?]² This way of thinking is as if today's situation would still hold four years from now. But we have the opportunity to create a completely new political geography, favoring the stabilization of a democratic system over the course of those four years. In four years, Solidarity and the Communist Party will not be opposing each other. I think that the party will split up, and so will the opposition.

Besides, one cannot think about free elections like a revolution. If one side loses in a revolution, it does not rebuild, unless the revolution itself fails. But if a party loses an election, it might win in four years—and if not in four years, then in eight.

What is happening in Poland—and it must be happening with Gorbachev's approval—is a decisive experiment for the [Soviet] Bloc. Gorbachev faces the same problem . . . : Can one reach an agreement with the opponents of totalitarianism?³ . . .

²The agreement eventually signed at the Round Table called for partial elections in 1989 and free elections . . . that is, with . . . for partially . . .

Of course, there is the possible scenario in which the Soviet Union collapses. In that situation, we will build independence and democracy from the ground up. In a system in which there is a fundamental chasm between rulers and society, any revolution and total transformation result in completely unprepared people coming to power and governing the state and the economy. If we succeed at the Round Table in overcoming that chasm in some places, then the collapse of the system will be less dangerous because there will be more directors, administrators, bureaucrats, judges who are reasonable. The greater a social accord we achieve today—in the sense that we trust this or that judge, director, or minister—the easier will it be for us to cross over to a new system.

Yesterday we still stood in the trenches of two opposing armies, which fired upon each other and destroyed everything in their path. Today a completely new social, political, psychological situation has arisen.