6.
The Sad Saga of Solidarity

Something was dead in each of us
And what was dead was hope.

Oscar Wilde, *Ballad of Reading Gaol*

A JOURNALIST or a businessman landing at the modernized Warsaw airport, grabbing a taxi for the Marriott or the Bristol and then shopping or strolling in the center of town, may be forgiven the impression that Poland is now part and parcel of the affluent West. The lights are bright, and the shops resemble those of Fifth Avenue or rue du Faubourg St Honoré; indeed, they are often the same. If the newsman is driven by his professional conscience to move beyond the posh districts and even to travel to the provinces, he will rightly report that there, too, the shops are filled with goods. The contrast with his recollection of the Communist era—with its long lines, empty shelves and the *babushkas* selling toilet paper in the streets—will lead him to draw the expected conclusion that shock therapy, like Guiness, is good for Poland.

What he will not explain is why the Poles are so ungrateful for this blessing. In July 1989, in the famous partially free election which spelled the doom of the Communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe, any minor candidate photographed together with Lech Walesa—symbolizing endorsement by Solidarity—was bound to be elected. Nobody imagined at the time that the Communists, thrown so spectacularly into the dustbin of history, could climb out of it in the foreseeable future. Poland's chief shock therapist, Leszek Balcerowicz, rendered this achievement possible. The former Communists, admittedly converted to social democracy, were the strongest party in the parliamentary election of 1993, though they still

needed their Peasant Party allies to form a government.[1] Two years later, in the second ballot of the presidential election, when an absolute majority was required, the converted Communist, the smooth forty-two-year-old Aleksander Kwasniewski, defeated the outgoing president, Lech Walesa himself, who could not even save his skin with a red-scare campaign. After two years in government, the rechristened Communists could hardly be presented as a threat to capitalism.

Indeed, having in their essentials followed the economic policy of their predecessors, only in a milder form, the ex-Communist newcomers were, in turn, threatened with a backlash. Marian Krzaklewski, the leader of Solidarity, knew that his union could only recover by being more militant. Politically, he decided to unify the highly dispersed reactionary parties in a coalition— Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS)—around a platform that was populist in the worst sense of the term: it promised things—reversal of neoliberalism and hence only a conditional acceptance of Poland's entry into the European Union—without preparing the means to carry them out. The electoral success of this line revealed its hypocrisy. In the parliamentary poll of September 1997, the AWS won more seats than the Democratic Left Alliance (201 versus 164). It then formed a government with Balcerowicz's Freedom Party, known for its devotion to neoliberalism and European integration. The shaky alliance may not last as long as the time it will take to print this book, and we will return to the interesting contradictions it reveals. Here, it is enough to note that to regain popularity, Solidarity had to disown, and not to endorse, the policies introduced after 1989 by politicians issued from its ranks.

When an economic and social policy causes such deep and lasting discontent, one must look below the glittering surface, beyond the neon lights and the opulent shop windows. In Warsaw, one must cross the Vistula to visit the poorer districts on the other side of the river or take an hour's train journey to Lodz, the Polish Manchester, with a textile industry that is

1. The Social Democracy of the Polish Republic (SDRP) was the heir of the former CP. It formed the backbone of a coalition known as the SLD, the Alliance of the Democratic Left, which captured 20.5 percent of the vote and 161 of 460 seats in the Sejm. Its partners from the Polish Peasant Party (PSL) got 15 percent of the vote and 131 members. Their more than proportionate representation was due to the fact that many votes were "wasted," as several right-wing parties did not reach the threshold of 5 percent.

being "restructured." One can also travel to the one-factory or one-mine towns, torn by the closing or "downsizing" of their main sources of life and income; or to the rural areas of northeastern Poland, where the peasants driven from the land cannot find jobs in town. These gloomier impressions are confirmed by official statistics, and not only those referring to the big jump in unemployment from next to nothing to around 15 percent.[2] The immediate result of shock therapy was a sharp drop in output and living standards. It was only in 1996 that the gross national product topped its level of 1989, and real wages were still lagging slightly. What the Western press was hailing as tremendous achievement was merely a belated recovery.

The plight of the population in the intervening period may have been somewhat exaggerated in statistics by the emergence of tax evasion with the market economy: some income, obviously, went unreported. On the other hand, this is more than offset by the main feature of the new regime: polarization. Money has been changing relations in all walks of life, including health, housing, and education. While the poor, headed by a new mass phenomenon—the unemployed—were getting poorer, the new rich, led by the speculators, were getting incomparably richer.[3] Adding insult to injury, they showed off their wealth with aggressive ostentation stimulated by the new conviction that your money is your worth. To complete the Polish paradox, the pioneers of the new regime, the industrial workers, were victims of this transformation, not its beneficiaries.

In June 1996, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of an important event in the history of Solidarity, at the Ursus Tractor Works outside Warsaw local Solidarity leader Zygmunt Wrzodak had the cheek to say about men like Jacek Kuron and Adam Michnik that "in their hatred of Polishness, they cynically exploited our misfortune, our blood and our naiveté." A few months earlier, during a protest march in Warsaw, demonstrators carrying the banner of the union dared to send—true, only verbally—the reds and the yids to the gas chambers. Granted, one faction cannot be identified with the union as a whole, yet the very fact that people

2. It was reduced to 11.1 percent in 1997, largely through "the severe tightening of the unemployment benefit regime." *Poland OECD Economic Survey 1998.*

3. Poland, where the range of incomes used to be narrower, has now overtaken the countries of Western Europe in polarity, and is approaching the American level. See *Polityka*, 16 May 1998.

like this are tolerated within Solidarity shows the road traveled by that organization since that glorious summer of 1980, when it was born in Gdansk amid the applause and admiration of an astonished world. To understand that degeneration, and also to grasp such Polish specialties as anti-Semitism without Jews or anticommunism without genuine communists, we must glance back at the country's recent history. After all, Poland is the only country of Eastern Europe in which the removal of the Communist regime was prepared by a real mass movement from below, spearheaded by the workers.

Nineteen fifty-six is a turning point in East European history. It opens with Nikita Khrushchev's not-so-secret indictment of Stalin and ends with the Soviet tanks in Budapest having crushed the Hungarian insurrection. Poland had its share of drama. In June, the "workers' state" had the first armed confrontation with its alleged masters, when police shot at striking workers in the Western city of Poznan. But the Polish Communist Party, unlike its neighbors, had an alternative leader in its ranks, a man whose rehabilitation was not posthumous. Wladyslaw Gomulka, while a faithful Stalinist, did genuinely believe in the postwar talk about "independent roads to socialism" and was discarded when the net was tightened with the onset of the Cold War. Though jailed, he was not executed, and was now in a position to take over. In October, Khrushchev, Molotov, and company descended on Warsaw to prevent his return to power. Seeing for once a Communist leader backed by the whole country, they changed their mind. The Polish "spring in October" was a moment of unity and euphoria, as peasants were allowed to disband collective farms, the Catholic Church was given more room for manoeuver and the repressive straitjacket was altogether relaxed. The Stalinist era was over, gone forever.

But the euphoria was built on a misunderstanding. Gomulka never had the intention of fundamentally challenging the regime and its Russian backers. His honeymoon with the so-called revisionists—the intellectuals still dreaming of an evolution within the system, with the help of the party, towards a vaguely socialist society—was over within a year, when the unorthodox weekly, *Po Prostu,* was closed down. Total rupture with the reformist intelligentsia took place in 1968, when Gomulka allowed his minister of the interior, General Moczar, to stage an anti-Semitic purge

under an anti-Zionist disguise, and when incidents surrounding a famous Polish play with anti-Russian allusions gave the police an opportunity to club rebellious students.

It was easier to take on the intellectuals than the workers. When, in 1970, something had to be done to prevent consumption from outstripping output, the clever technocrats opted for a dramatic rise in food prices, scheduled for December, on the eve of Christmas. The response came from the country's northern maritime regions. In the harbors of Gdansk, Gdynia, and Szczecin, the shipyard workers led the offensive. They dropped their tools and proceeded to organize protest marches directed against town halls or Party headquarters. The repression was ruthless. Even in the official count, there were dozens of dead and more than a thousand wounded. Politically, if not militarily, the "workers' state" could not wage such a war against the working class. Gomulka was toppled and his successor, the pragmatic Silesian leader, Edward Gierek, who had started his professional life as a miner in France and Belgium, now traveled north to ask the shipwrights to give the regime a hand. The crisis came to an end only in February 1971 when, faced with the stubbornness of the women striking in the textile factories of Lodz, the government was forced to cancel its proposed increase in food prices.

Poland was thus in a strange stalemate. In one sense, the structure was unchanged, with the Party supreme and power flowing from above. But within this unaltered framework the Polish workers had conquered in blood a sort of veto: not a right to shape policy or to take part in the making of decisions, but a negative right to say *no* as a sign of resistance, a warning that such a policy will only be introduced over our dead bodies. To extricate himself from the resulting dilemma, Gierek chose the flight forward. With Soviet backing and Western credits, he embarked on a policy of expansion and, for a period in the early 1970s, Poland was upheld as exemplary. Then came the Western economic crisis, the difficulty of paying the debts through exports, and the realization that the investments had not been very wise. With the need to tighten the belt came the confirmation that *veto power* was not a figment of the imagination. On June 24, 1976, a Thursday, the government announced another tremendous increase in food prices, starting the following week. On Friday, striking workers from the Ursus tractor plant occupied the neighboring railway line, blocking the Moscow-

Paris express, while those from Radom, south of Warsaw, repeated the scenario of 1970, marching on Party headquarters and clashing with the police. This time, however, the movement did not last, because that very evening the prime minister proclaimed on television that the whole project was being postponed. He did so because alarming reports were heralding a strike wave sweeping the whole country.

The year 1976 was thus a shortened, condensed version of 1970, with one historic difference: it inaugurated the alliance between workers and intellectuals. In 1968, while students were clobbered and intellectuals purged, the workers did not rise. In 1970, as strikers protested in Gdansk, the students did not join in. This time it was different. The authorities, forced to yield, were seeking revenge. They were determined to jail and torment the workers involved in the riots. The victims, however, were not alone. A few intellectuals came to their rescue, doing what they could do best: spreading information and providing legal advice and social assistance. Out of this action was born the Committee for the Defense of the Workers, known on the basis of its Polish initials as the KOR. A famous writer, a celebrated actress, a few longtime socialists, and a group of younger people, of whom the activist Jacek Kuron and the essayist Adam Michnik were to become the best-known—they were not a legion.[4] But, despite arrests and continued harassment, they did their job well. After roughly a year, all the victims were released. The government, thinking that this was the end of the story, was mistaken. KOR carried on, helping in the setting up of a "flying university," sponsoring a series of dissident publications, notably a single page *Robotnik* (*The Worker*), propagating among its readers the idea that to defend their interests they would have to forge their own autonomous organization.

In its collision course, Poland had two special features. One was the massive presence, particularly in the countryside, of small property owners. The permission given by Gomulka to the peasants to leave collective farms meant their dismantlement. Over three-quarters of the arable land was thus in the hands of smallholders, and since farming still accounted for 30 percent of the labor force, a big chunk of the population wanted a change

4. Together with the brilliant young historian Karol Modzelewski, Kuron had already spent several years in jail for writing, in 1964, "An Open Letter to the Party."

of regime, convinced, wrongly, that capitalism would ensure the permanence of their claim to property. The other specificity was the prestige and popularity of the Catholic Church. In prewar days, its power had rested on the backing of the wealthy, of the big landowners, and on the backwardness of the largely rural population. After the political and social upheaval, the new Communist regime bestowed on the Catholic Church a new virginity, driving it to the side of the downtrodden. Indeed, the popularity of the Church was a measure of the bankruptcy of the ruling party. The more the CP stood for injustice and exploitation, the more the Church appeared as the champion of the oppressed. John Paul II's triumphant journey through his home country in 1979, with the police forces out of the way, may have given some Poles the idea that, after all, they could run things on their own. Yet the impending confrontation was fundamentally between the industrial workers rediscovering their strength and the party claiming to be their representative.

The two protagonists faced each other in the summer of 1980 armed with their previous experience. The rulers did not announce the increase in prices dramatically, through the prime minister amid a brass of trumpets. This time they did it quietly, simultaneously issuing secret instructions that, wherever the workers resisted, they should be given compensation. The workers, for their part, had learned to break their isolation, to establish contacts between factories, notably through the KOR, so that each concession was a spur for another shop, for another plant, to ask for more. The tide this time rose slowly and haphazardly. The first strikes started in Warsaw on July 1, as soon as the prices went up. Then the wave moved eastward to the Lublin region, where a sort of dress rehearsal was staged. Yet the real drama, with an international audience, only began when the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk struck on August 14. There were specific reasons for that stoppage, like the demand for the reinstatement of a popular woman protester, the welder Anya Walentynowicz. As the crowd gathered in front of the managerial quarters, another outcast climbed over the fence and straight into history, a thirty-seven-year-old, mustachioed electrician—Lech Walesa. Thus the stage was set from the start for the seventeen momentous days which were finally to destroy a fundamental myth, namely that the Communist Parties were, by definition or birthright, the spokesmen for the working class.

This is not the place to revive those exciting days, but simply to draw some lessons from the events. The first is that in revolutionary situations ideas ripen at tremendous speed. The concept of an independent labor union was so heretical in Eastern Europe that the inspirers of the movement in Gdansk, connected with *Robotnik*, had not dared to put a demand for such a union in their original platform. Then the idea spread like lightning and became a profound, collective conviction, so that when the intellectuals, the so-called experts arriving from Warsaw to help, objected that the rulers would never accept such a labor union, they got the same answer from all the strikers in Gdansk: "That is not negotiable." Which brings us to the second lesson: at that stage, the workers were the masters making decisions and the experts—a handful of intellectuals from left Catholic or "revisionist" backgrounds—were fulfilling their function of providing technical assistance and advice.

The other feature of this movement, despite the first signs of Walesa's predilection for personal rule, was its deep democracy, with delegates from various plants sitting together in an interfactory strike committee and negotiations with the government being carried in the open—a crowd outside the hall listening to loudspeakers. It was also very egalitarian, asking for wage increases, not proportionate but equal for all, the only exception being a supplement for those with the lowest pay. If you add to it that throughout this crisis the workers presented their interests as the superior interests of society as a whole, it sounds too Marxist to be true. Walesa wearing the Virgin Mary on his lapel and the class struggle conducted to the sound of Catholic hymns were reminders that matters were much more complicated. The regime they fought calling itself Communist, they could hardly be consciously Marxist. As was said at the time, if they acted and sounded socialist, it was like Monsieur Jourdain in Moliére's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* speaking prose—they were unaware of it.[5]

The movement also had to be highly disciplined—keeping the workers inside the factories, banning alcohol—to avoid provocation, and it had to be very powerful to force the authorities to yield. The wave swept once again from Gdansk and Gdynia all the way to Szczecin, and the sit-in strikes

5. Daniel Singer, *The Road to Gdansk: Poland and the USSR* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982).

involved not just the shipyards but most of the factories in the maritime regions. Ten days of such pressure brought the government down, but its successor was just as reluctant on the essential point. The conflict continued amid rumors of imminent armed intervention, Russian or domestic. It took the extension of the strike throughout the country and concessions by the strikers—accepting the inclusion in the agreement of references to "the leading role of the party" and to "the established system of international alliances"—for the Gdansk charter to be finally signed on August 31. The impossible had become reality. Poland was the first Communist country to admit that its workers, for the defense of their interests, required their own autonomous organization.

There followed fifteen months of virtually dual power. The Party had history and geography—the division of Europe at Yalta and the Russian frontier—on its side. It had the control of the army, of the police, of all key appointments (the so-called nomenklatura) and no intention of giving up its prerogatives. But now it had to reckon with another source of authority. It had to bow to the inevitable: the recognition, formalized in November, of Solidarity, as a decentralized yet all-national labor union, growing like a mushroom after the political storm. Whether it had nine or ten million members at its peak does not really matter. For a time, Solidarity *was* working Poland, its claimed membership accounting for roughly three-quarters of the labor force outside agriculture. Nor was it quite accurate to describe the conflict as one between Party and union, since out of the alleged three million Party cardholders, about one-third also had the badge of Solidarity.

Both sides had to face an economic crisis aggravated by higher wages and falling output. For the Party the logical solution would have been to obtain from Solidarity through collaboration what it had failed to get from the workers through its bullying tactics, namely, the acceptance of a provisional tightening of the belt plus help in the reorganization of production. For this it would have been necessary to share power with the union, and the Party was unprepared for such a concession. Solidarity, too, preferred to act as a union defending its members, since any attempt to collaborate with the authorities would have revealed contradictions within its own ranks. The Party knew that, faced with a mass movement, if it went beyond a certain point, it ran the risk of another upheaval, while the union

was aware that if it carried its action to its logical conclusion, the seizure of power, it was likely to precipitate the entry of Soviet tanks. And so it was a trial of strength with almost permanent brinkmanship; in March 1981, an open conflict was only avoided when Solidarity called off a general strike.

Yet the protagonists were also driven by circumstances to some form of collaboration. As the shortages became terribly acute, as the lines lengthened and the tempers reached breaking point, something had to be done to avoid an explosion. By the spring of 1981, several groups within Solidarity rediscovered the idea of self-management. For some this was a way of transforming society altogether, giving the working people the possibility of mastering their factories, their labor, their fate. For others, the workers' councils were, more modestly, a way of providing autonomy to the enterprise within the existing system.[6] But they were also pointing toward a possible institutional compromise. Poland was to have two houses of parliament. The first, the existing Sejm, would, in keeping with the imperatives of geography, be controlled by the Party. The second, a sort of economic chamber, would be the national representation of workers' councils throughout the country. An agreement between the two would be required for the conduct of economic and social policy. The scheme could be conceived either as the institutionalization of dual power or as the preparation for the gradual, creeping transfer of that power. When, on November 4, Cardinal Jozef Glemp, acting as matchmaker, brought together Walesa and General Wojciech Jaruzelski, promoted party leader the previous month, one could still hope they were seeking such a compromise. In vain: Solidarity, instead of a genuine share of power, was offered one seat in a body dominated by puppet Communist organizations. The other side had made up its mind. There was a purpose, then, in Jaruzelski holding the combined jobs of defense secretary, prime minister, and party boss. On December 13 at dawn, the general with the dark glasses was ready to move his troops into action.

Did he do it as a Polish patriot trying to avoid Soviet intervention? I am not very convinced by this now-fashionable version. Even after the

6. This was presumably the line of Balcerowicz, then still nominally a member of the CP, who was active in the so-called Siec (Network) advocating the development of self-management in the big enterprises.

publication of some Russian documents, we do not really know how the Kremlin would have reacted. If Solidarity had grabbed power, casting aside the party, the Soviets most probably would have sent in tanks. But what if Solidarity and the Party had reached an agreement and the Polish army was thus backed by the whole nation? All we can say is that the last thing the so-called Workers' Party wanted to do was to share power with workers' councils. What is also undoubted is Jaruzelski's professional skill. He did not bungle the coup, as Russia's putschist generals were to do in 1991. Neither was he bloodthirsty, like General Pinochet in Chile. While the miners killed by the troops in Silesia bear witness that anything would have been done to break the resistance, in retrospect it is fair to say that force was limited to what was needed for the success of the operation. The task was facilitated by the open, democratic structure of Solidarity. Almost its entire leadership, at national and local levels, could be arrested and deported in one huge swoop. With the "state of war" proclaimed, communications cut, the curfew introduced, and the harshest penalties reserved for the "militarized" key sectors of the economy, a beheaded and disorganized Solidarity could not offer active opposition for long.

In that sense, the military coup was successful. The regime could now raise prices without bothering about the workers' veto, without fearing a general strike. But the enemy, crushed, had not surrendered. Even after the end of martial law and amnesty for the prisoners, nobody of any importance rallied the regime. Passive resistance persisted. It was one thing to prevent the workers from organizing openly, quite another to mobilize them as participants in an economic reform. When in 1988 Solidarity managed to stage a strike in the maritime provinces, though it was only a pale echo of the vast movements of the past, Jaruzelski decided it was time to resign himself to sharing power. With the Soviet Union in the throes of perestroika, Poland's ruling class was ready to experiment with the market, to contemplate conversion to capitalism—anything to preserve its privileged position. For all this, it needed a partner.

The partner, in fact, was no longer quite the same. If the military coup had failed to crush and uproot Solidarity, it did change the balance of power within the organization. True, workers remained the backbone, and it was

their non-cooperation which forced the authorities to seek an accommodation. The workers' role within Solidarity, however, had altered. During the seven years of underground activity, the center of gravity had shifted from the factories to the printing presses and the emphasis had shifted from strikes to propaganda. The control of intellectuals and central organs over supplies, notably financial resources, had grown. The Church, a place of shelter and protection, increased its weight still further, while foreign providers of money for the underground also gained some influence. We shall examine below the influence all this had on the political line of the movement, but it is worth noting here the revealing change in the conduct of the talks. In 1980, in the Lenin Shipyards, the strike leaders and their advisers carried on negotiations under the direct supervision of the striking workers. In 1989, in the seclusion of the Magdalenka resort near the capital, where the talks were prepared, and the Warsaw palace in which they were held, they spoke in the name of the labor movement.

Seldom is power transferred and the nature of a regime changed altogether by negotiators bargaining at a "round table," but in this case events were to go much further and move much faster than any of the participants imagined. In one sense, it was a meeting between enemies. General Czeslaw Kiszczak, the minister of the interior, presided over one delegation, whereas most of the members on the other side were his former "guests," inmates of his prisons or provisional detention camps. Here, however, they were seeking a compromise which each side hoped to turn to its advantage. The rulers (a definition more accurate than the Party, which was now dominated by the generals heading the army and the police who had imposed this negotiation on a reluctant central committee) were aware that they needed economic reform to survive and that they could not carry it out without the backing of Solidarity; they hoped to keep power by domesticating their new partner. The spokesmen for Solidarity were conscious that all the powers of coercion were in the hands of the rulers, who could also rely on Soviet support, though how much was uncertain given Gorbachev's perestroika. Solidarity hoped to turn, slowly and gradually, its share of power into the base for a takeover.

The talks were influenced by conditioned reflexes. Thus, the spokesmen of Solidarity, who soon would be preaching the monetary gospel of the Chicago school, still remembered that they were representatives of a labor

union and obtained for Poland's working people a sliding scale of wages linked to price increases. Yet the whole relationship, with its tension and ambiguity, was best reflected in the institutional arrangement for the forthcoming election. In theory, the ruling coalition was bound to preserve its dominant position, as it was assured two-thirds of the seats in the more important lower house, the Sejm: only 161 of the 460 seats were open to free competition. At the same time, a deal was struck providing the president of the republic with important powers, notably over the army, the security services, and foreign affairs. The presumable presence of General Jaruzelski in the presidential palace was destined, notably, to reassure the Russians. As compensation, it was agreed to revive a second house, the Senate, with lesser prerogatives, but every one of whose one hundred members were to be elected in an entirely free vote.

God is supposed to first make mad those whom he decides to ruin, and the conduct of the Communists in this election was mad and suicidal. Were they blind or presumptuous? They could have weakened the shock, choosing proportional representation instead of majority rule in single-member constituencies. It was hard to understand what they hoped to obtain through these half-free and half-contrived elections. Even if the vote were free in only one constituency and Solidarity won it, all the other representatives would be deprived of even a pretence of legitimacy.[7] In practice, it proved a landslide. Solidarity won all of the 161 seats in the Sejm for which it was entitled to compete and 99 out of the 100 seats in the Senate. Quantity had a qualitative effect on this occasion. The Peasant and the Democratic parties, hitherto puppets of the Communists in the ruling coalition, faced with the dramatically shifting situation, suddenly discovered their own independent voice. Since the president was to be elected by the absolute majority of deputies and senators voting together, the outcome was no longer sure. To avoid a crisis and a possible collapse of the whole bargain, Solidarity had to provide some discreet assistance for General Jaruzelski to be elected. A price, however, was to be paid for this concession. In keeping with the headline of a controversial article by Michnik—"Their president—our prime minister"—and since Walesa did not want the job,

7. When Kuron mentioned to me the electoral deal contemplated, I argued that the Communists would never accept it, because it would spell their doom. While my analysis was accurate, my forecast was utterly wrong.

one of his chief assistants, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, was asked in August to form a Solidarity government and did so in September. A few months earlier, nobody could have imagined such a quickening of the historical pace.[8] Within the next three months, the political landscape of central and eastern Europe was to be entirely reshaped.

Poland was, once again, a pioneer. Solidarity, one could say, almost had the task of forming a government thrust upon it. It was unprepared and had to improvise. The most urgent duty was to cope with the deteriorating economic situation. The Mazowiecki government, with Balcerowicz surrounded by Western monetarists as economic overlord, embarked on what came to be known as shock therapy. With all controls abolished, prices skyrocketed. Checks were kept on wages so that they could not keep pace. Rationing by the purse replaced the long lines. While small savings were wiped out, the sky was the limit for the profits of speculators. All this was part of a conscious, relentless, primitive drive towards capitalism. The government turned a blind eye to smuggling from abroad or food and health regulations to attack the existing mechanism at its weakest, namely in retail trade. But big state enterprises were also handicapped by tax and salary advantages granted to the private sector. The drop in output and living standards proved much more dramatic and lasted much longer than the architects of that policy promised or even really expected. While economically disastrous, the move fulfilled its political purpose of smashing the existing system.

The big puzzle is how an organization whose very name spelled out the ideal of social solidarity came to preach a gospel based on selfishness. How could a movement, egalitarian in its origins, introduce a mechanism designed to prop up the privileged and damn the downtrodden? How could a labor union built by the industrial workers, particularly the proletarians from the big plants, preside over a program destined to hurt the fundamental interests of its very founders? Part of the answer is that the Solidarity of the rulers of 1990 was not the Solidarity of the rebels of 1980. This should not be taken to mean that the Polish workers were simply betrayed by the intellectuals. The so-called experts could not have done it on their own. If

8. I had lunch with Mazowiecki shortly before the poll and it clearly did not cross his mind that he might become prime minister as its result.

Tadeusz Mazowiecki or Bronislaw Geremek, to take Walesa's best-known advisers, were to go to the Lenin Shipyards or to any other plant to tell the workers to tighten their belts, they did not stand a chance. The workers *would* take it, for a limited period, from one of their own, like Walesa. Thus the whole leadership—workers and intellectuals—must take responsibility for the policy and the conversion.[9]

Who pushed them in that direction? While the Catholic Church had a reactionary influence on the governments of Solidarity in many other respects, it does not seem to have played a decisive part in determining its economic policy. Once the government was formed, the international organizations representing the interests of big business did play their role as extremely efficient pressure groups. But the ground had already been prepared. During its years in the underground, Solidarity received a great deal of assistance from the West, some of it coming from its European sympathizers, including the labor unions, with more coming from official sources, notably American. The CIA, it is now estimated, invested some $50 million in this operation—peanuts as an investment in the collapse of the Soviet empire, but a tremendous amount of money when translated into zlotys at the then-prevailing black market rate.[10]

All these factors mattered. They are not enough to explain the sweep of the conversion. In 1980, when they tied their fate to the workers' movement, Mazowiecki was a progressive Catholic (close to *Esprit,* a periodical of left-wing Catholics in France) and Geremek a "revisionist" Marxist historian. Ten years later, one was prime minister and the other the chief parliamentary backer of a government pouring bitter capitalist medicine down Polish throats, in keeping with a monetarist prescription. To understand such a shift, one must recall the change in Europe's general political climate during that decade. At its beginning, while the Polish workers dreamed of an egalitarian, self-managed society, part of the left in Europe

9. With the exception of Modzelewski, Ryszard Bugaj, and twenty-six other important activists who signed a protest against the Balcerowicz plan from the start. Together with others, they were to form Solidarity of Labor, later called Union of Labor, and thus remained true to the original aspirations of the movement.

10. About the links between the Vatican and the Reagan administration, particularly its security services, over Poland, see Carl Bernstein & Marco Politi, *His Holiness* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

was still thinking in terms of a third way between neo-Stalinist antics and capitalist exploitation: the French Socialists got into office talking vaguely about "a break with capitalism." At the end of the decade, French Socialists were champions of financial orthodoxy and Thatcherist ideology was triumphant throughout Europe. In Poland itself, the "Communist" government of Mieczyslaw Rakowski was preparing the ground for the transition, lifting controls over food prices, while Solidarity during its underground years did little to translate its yearnings into a policy. Asked why they had departed so far from their original positions, the Polish leftists turned born-again capitalists borrowed a reply from the fashionable chorus: there was no alternative. Because of their record, the leaders of Solidarity managed to persuade the workers for a spell that this was the only way out. That is how Poland, the pioneer of a labor revival in Eastern Europe, was also a trend-setter in shock therapy.

Though it worked for a time, the price Solidarity had to pay for it was heavy. Seldom has such a capital of popularity and goodwill, accumulated over years of heroic action, been squandered so swiftly. The myth was weakened within a year, as was shown in the presidential race of December 1990. With the Berlin Wall down and the Soviet empire shattered, there was no longer any need for a Jaruzelski to serve as a "guarantee." But the political forces set forth by Solidarity did not face the electorate united. Angered by the independence of the prime minister he had sponsored, Walesa launched a "war at the top," a conflict within the leadership, which resulted in the presence of two candidates: himself and Mazowiecki. The "national hero" came first, though with only 40 percent of the poll. The prime minister was not even second. He was overtaken by a vulgar rabble-rouser, Stan Tyminski, a shady emigré come home having made money in business. True, Walesa defeated him easily in the run-off, yet Tyminski's original success was already a symptom of the sickness provoked by shock therapy. Both the dispersion of the forces once united under the banner of Solidarity and their decline were confirmed in the parliamentary elections of 1991.

Whatever his proclamations during the campaign, once elected, Walesa did nothing to reverse the economic policy. On the contrary, the first prime minister he picked was an even more zealous monetarist, Jan-Krzysztof Bielecki. The latter's successor, Jan Olszewski, a leader of

Poland's extreme right, was so busy seeking reds under the beds that he had no time for anything else; actually, the security files his government produced looked so suspicious that he was quickly voted out of office. Hanna Suchocka, Poland's first woman prime minister, who took over after an interval, presided over a coalition of conservative liberals and reactionary Catholics. She followed the same unpopular economic line (tempered once again by the presence in the government of Jacek Kuron as the defender of the downtrodden). By then Solidarity, taken here in its narrower role as a labor union, was exhausted and exasperated after two years of sacrifices. Without its active and then passive support, the policy inaugurated by Balcerowicz could not have been applied, but the cost was enormous. Solidarity, once the representative of the Polish working class, now had around two million members, less than the membership claimed by the OPZZ, the official trade unions reorganized by the previous regime under martial law. Solidarity could no longer take it. To recover, it had to show that it still had some connection with workers' interests. In the spring of 1993, the members of the lower house directly sponsored by Solidarity brought the government of Suchocka down. These obsessive anti-Communists did not know that they were bringing the converted Communists back into office.

The parliamentary elections of 1993 marked a stunning setback for both the remnants of Solidarity and for the Catholic Church. We had seen the Church at the height of its moral and political influence. In 1989, the hierarchy, wisely or not, decided to institutionalize that power. It asked for the restitution of property seized not just by the Communist regime but also by tsardom. It claimed a sort of moral control over the conduct of the population, reintroducing religious instruction, banning abortion, and obtaining the promise that TV programs would not clash with "Christian values." This tutelage from the classroom to the bedroom did not appeal to the Polish people. Women, in particular, were shocked by the clergy's relentless struggle against contraception as well as abortion. The stock of the Catholic Church slumped. The coalition of reactionary parties, which fought the 1993 election under a Christian banner, did not get the minimum of votes required to have representatives in parliament.[11] The influence of the Catholic Church had not vanished, obviously, but its stranglehold was weakened.

11. That threshold was 5 percent for individual parties but 8 percent for coalitions.

Not all the parties tracing their origins to Solidarity suffered similar setbacks. The biggest among them, the Democratic Union, soon to be known as Freedom Union, including two prime ministers and most of the movement's dignitaries, came in third, with 10.5 percent of the vote. And it was followed closely by the Union of Labor, the only heir of Solidarity, which from the start rejected the economic policy of its governments. A party improvised at the last moment by Lech Walesa and a nationalist-populist movement just scraped through the 5 percent barrier, while the candidates put up by Solidarity as a trade union failed even that test. As a result of this dispersion and wastage, the new parliament was to be dominated by the two parties which came out on top and which both had their roots in the previous regime. In the election to the Sejm, first place was taken by the Alliance of the Democratic Left (initials SLD, based essentially on the converted Communists), followed by the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), previously a puppet of the Communists. Given a complicated calculation, with many votes not counted in the distribution of seats, this was enough for the two parties to get roughly two-thirds of all the deputies to the Sejm. Many commentators were struck by the coincidence. In 1989, to guarantee the Communists that proportion of seats, one had to do it by decree, excluding a number of constituencies from full competition. Now, the admittedly converted Communists were getting that share through universal suffrage, in free elections. This was the achievement of Leszek Balcerowicz and his sponsors, domestic and foreign.

But this was in no way a return to the old regime, shattered forever, nationally and internationally. The Peasant Party by now was nobody's puppet. It is the only Polish party with a social base, that of peasant smallholders, but one bound to be decimated if their country's agriculture were to follow the West European pattern. Their party could lean towards the Church and be reactionary on many social issues (notably abortion), but it had no enthusiasm for the uncontrolled reign of the market. Paradoxically, the Peasant deputies were less keen on the rapid conversion to capitalism than their ex-Communist partners, a much more complicated party.

The Social Democracy of the Polish Republic (or SDRP) was founded early in 1990 on the ruins of the CP. The old leaders were replaced by younger men, even more pragmatic than their predecessors and remaining in the ranks were only those who assumed that the reorganized Party had a future in the new society. It was at the time a highly optimistic assumption. After forty-five years of monopolistic rule by the Communists, the scope for the spoils system was enormous. In one fell swoop, the Party lost its key posts in the national and local administration, and its privileged positions in television, radio, and the press. Because of the road chosen for the transition, there was no similar purge in the economy. Since it was agreed not to transfer the plants to the working people, but to create a capitalist class to run them, those with know-how, experience, or money (usually gained on the black market) were best placed in the new rat race, and many of them had a Party connection under the previous regime. Thus the SDRP had an electorate of three layers. The first and thickest was made up of victims of shock therapy: low-paid workers, civil servants, the unemployed, and pensioners, who were now worse off than before. The second consisted of people who, whatever their material fate, resented the proposition that nearly half a century in the country's life had been simply wasted; nobody likes to be told that whatever he did—in manufacturing, in science, or in education—was work for the devil. The third layer, most influential though not most numerous, was comprised of people who did well for themselves, yet were frightened that a purge of the "reds" might deprive them of their new privileged position. To reconcile these three threads, the SDRP had to appear as the party of gradual transition, conscious of the plight of the poor and allergic to any witch-hunts. It was as champion of "capitalism with a human face" that the Alliance of Democratic Left, which it inspired, successfully entered the parliamentary elections of September 1993.

Once in parliament, since the Freedom Union, though close in economic outlook, would not collaborate with ex-Communists, the latter had to make a deal with the Peasant Party, to whom they even granted the premiership for a time. The new governmental coalition had luck. The economy having reached rock bottom, its rule coincided with the recovery. It could thus reconcile its promise to improve things and its determination not to alter policy in any fundamental fashion. Production picked up, living standards

rose, the transition was smooth, with no more basic change in foreign than in economic policy. The stage was thus set, in October 1995, for the final confrontation at the top between Lech Walesa, fatter-looking and spoiled by five years in presidential office, and Aleksander Kwasniewski, leader of the SDRP, the youthful and smooth champion of the converted Communists.

The polarization illustrated by this duel looked both inevitable and artificial. Inevitable once it became obvious that Jacek Kuron would not be a serious contender, but phony, because, in order to outbid his rivals, Walesa had to pretend that it was Solidarity versus the reds all over again, had to sound the tocsin as if Brezhnev's tanks were around the corner and ruthless commies were about to nationalize everything and jail all resisters.[12] It worked in the first ballot, with Walesa from Gdansk reappearing as the man most likely to repel the "red invasion." It did not work in the second. Though the media did favor Walesa, this was no dress rehearsal for the biased Yeltsin blitz soon to have the desired result in Russia. The West, for instance, had little to fear from a "Communist" pleading for Poland's admission into NATO and the European Union, or from a party which, during two years in office, had clearly confimed its conversion to capitalism: Kwasniewski, sounding modern and moderate, defeated the aggressive Walesa. Six years after the collapse of the Communist regime, a man who, though born in 1954, had had time to reach a prominent position under the old regime, was chosen by the Polish people to be their president. The converted Communists now had control of both the government and the presidency.

This, however, was not the end of the story. Capitalism did not acquire a human face by being implemented with the assistance of recent converts. The discontent of the victims of the transformation did not vanish even in the period of recovery, only it now found a different outlet. With the Alliance of the Democratic Left in office and the critical left, the Union of Labor, unable to produce a credible alternative, the right took over as the main voice of discontent. Not the respectable right, bowing to Mammon

12. Kuron's party, the Freedom Union, picked him as a candidate by a very narrow margin and at the same time chose Leszek Balcerowicz as its leader. This symbolic choice really ruled out the simultaneous endorsement by the leftish Union of Labor, and the Kuron candidacy never took off.

but behaving with a degree of rational decency on matters of race, social conduct, or cultural freedom—no, the clerical and reactionary right, providing phony radical answers to genuine economic problems and genuinely dangerous proposals regarding the political organization of society. These ideas proved attractive to Solidarity, no longer hindered by its complicity with the government, in its bid to regain some strength as a labor union as well as some political influence.

It was difficult for Solidarity to claim that it had been against shock therapy from the start, since the Balcerowicz plan could not have been carried out against its opposition. The best it could do was to argue that this nasty program had been smuggled into the movement by alien elements, by people who were neither good Poles nor good Christians, people who were, to put it bluntly, Jews. The survival of anti-Semitism in the country where the Holocaust claimed the biggest number of victims is at once obscene and ridiculous. It shows, incidentally, the absurdity of theories about a threshold of tolerance for foreigners beyond which natives reject them. Jews in Poland are virtually non-existent. Of the original lively, colorful community of some 3.5 million people, accounting for a tenth of the whole population, even more in the towns, only fifteen thousand to thirty thousand are left. This does not prevent right-wing demagogues from hinting that a Jewish threat is hanging over Christian Poland or from suggesting that anyone they want to brand as a villain, be it Kuron or Mazowiecki, is probably of Jewish origin (or, in the best of cases, that other evil, a "freemason").

The snag is that such dirty ideological nonsense cannot really be used for practical purposes: there are not many jobs to be had by eliminating their Jewish holders. Red-hunting, on the other hand, could supply quite a crop, especially if it were extended to the management of the economy. Indeed, purging, cleansing, lustrating—to use a term fashionable in Eastern Europe—the former Communists is at the heart of the platform of the extreme right and it appeals to part of the electorate, since many Poles feel that, while the regime has changed, the faces of the people in the privileged layers of society have not: Jaruzelski gone, the nomenklatura has remained. Actually, the whole argument about the permanence of privilege reveals the duplicity and political dishonesty of the would-be purgers.

If so many managers from the old regime have carried on, this is not due to the fact that Solidarity made a deal with the former rulers. It is due to the nature of that agreement. If it had been made on the basis of self-management envisaged in 1981, if the working people had taken over the factories and were themselves to decide how and by whom they would be run, a number of managers would have disappeared. Those who stayed would have been endorsed by the employees. The negotiators, however, opted for a quick transition to capitalism which favored those with positions, contacts, and money, old-timers and latter-day speculators, the old nomenklatura and the new. The spokesmen of the extreme right do not abandon the capitalist goal. They simply invent an imaginary capitalist society, blessed by the Pope, in which all citizens (or should one say all truly ethnic Poles) are property owners, capitalists thanks to the national distribution of shares.

The cleverness of Marian Krzaklewski was to use the discontent of the Polish workers as the foundation of an anti-Communist crusade. With Walesa discredited as a loser, Krzaklewski had the full control of Solidarity and built around the union an electoral coalition—the already-mentioned AWS—regrouping all the shades of the Polish far right, ranging from the relatively rational social conservatives to the fanatical National Christians, for whom the secular European Union is a place of perdition where the ethnically pure Polish Catholics may lose their souls. The latter were reinforced in the coalition by candidates sponsored by the popular and ultra-reactionary station, Radio Maryja, which likens parliamentarians voting for abortion to "whores sleeping with the Nazis" and would probably suspect Jean-Marie Le Pen or Jesse Helms of liberal deviation. In immediate electoral terms, the operation proved successful. What once looked like a potential big party of the extreme right—Jan Olszewski's Movement of Polish Renewal (ROP)—was marginalized; in the parliamentary election of 1997 it barely crossed the 5 percent barrier and got only six deputies. Krzaklewski's AWS came out on top, with one-third of the votes cast and 201 deputies.

But 201 does not ensure the majority in a Sejm of 460 members. In seeking partners for the coalition, Krzaklewski gave the game away. Had his intention been really to reverse the economic policies followed since 1989, he would have picked as his partner the Peasant Party, electorally bruised but, because of its social base, hostile to European integration and

the free play of market forces. Instead, as we saw, he chose the Freedom Union which, though at sixty deputies a junior partner, obtained two highly significant ministries. Bronislaw Geremek, a staunch European, was appointed foreign secretary, and the shock therapist Balcerowicz was made overlord of the economy.[13] This faithful follower of the Chicago school would not tolerate any monkeying with the market. Those who really believed in the AWS's promises to transfer to the people the wealth of the nation were now to lose their illusions. As all over Eastern Europe, this project of "distribution" would be at best a bribe and, at worse, a simple fraud.

This does not mean that Krzaklewski cannot keep his ethnic cleansers and purifiers of the economy together for a time. He could do so by offering jobs for the boys, and there are plenty in the administration. He can also keep his right-wingers happy, allowing them to hang crosses all over the place, to prohibit abortion and fight contraception, to try to impose a moral order on cultural life in general and the media in particular, in short, to turn Poland into a clerical backwater by comparison with which Ireland would look like a free thinker's paradise. But such an offensive is meeting resistance, including the president's veto, and with economic issues coming to the surface, Krzaklewski's motley coalition and the government itself are likely to fall apart.

The optimistic outcome would be that this short reign of the far right will clarify matters by destroying some myths still haunting Polish politics. Marian Krzaklewski may be putting the final full stop to the story of Solidarity, not only because workers, with the blessing of Balcerowicz, are being moved from the big state plants where Solidarity had its strongholds into small private enterprises where unionism is not tolerated, but essentially because, betrayed for a second time in succession, the Polish workers will not need a third time to grasp that Solidarity is not really defending their interests. Such a re-evaluation is necessary, if the Poles are to stop fighting the battles of yore and start preparing for the struggles of tomorrow. If it were not for conditioned reflexes, the neoliberals from the Freedom Union and those of the ex-Communist SDRP could together form a party

13. Geremek's Jewish origin gave Radio Maryja an opportunity to protest that the job should have gone to an "ethnic Pole."

representing the profiteers and beneficiaries of the transition to capitalism. The remaining majority of the SDRP could then join forces with the Union of Labor and the trade unionists to defend the interests of the workers, the public servants, the squeezed peasants, and all the downtrodden; in the process, they could start sketching the outlines of a different society. Only such a clear confrontation between right and left can gradually reduce the dangerous forces of unreason, of reactionary clericalism, to a marginal role. For when, in a country where Hitler put his gas chambers, the all but eliminated Jewish population is still being used as scapegoat, this is not a "Jewish question" (for which the Nazis, alas, had found a "final solution"): it is a sign of an irrational sickness within Polish society.

The gloomy version is that, if nothing is done to clarify the issues and fight the forces of unreason head on, they will keep on infecting the whole country. Many of my Polish friends, who showed great courage and abnegation in a long struggle for freedom, now sound very alarmed by the prospect of their country being swept by an irrational populist tide. They simply fail to perceive that they are partly to blame for this backlash because, however heroic their past, they did not have the courage to oppose shock therapy when it was being imposed as the only possible medicine and thus put off until tomorrow the struggle that should have been fought in 1989. Naturally, time may enable the Poles to find their bearings. Still, the political mess they have managed to make in their nine years of freedom contrasts with the hopes aroused in 1980 throughout the world by the Polish workers, led by the shipwrights of Gdansk, seeking their own, original way out of a seemingly desperate situation.

There is, I must admit, a personal reason for this emphasis on the Polish predicament. I was one of those who, in the heady days of 1980 or even earlier, saw in the Polish revival of the labor movement a possible example for Eastern Europe as a whole, a progressive and radical way out of the neo-Stalinist system. Let us not exaggerate my naiveté. I did not describe the workers of Gdansk as internationalist knights in socialist armor. I was aware of the weight of the Church, of nationalism, of the aversion to socialism provoked by its years of association with the regime. What I did not imagine is that this sustained mass movement of the Polish workers would lead to political suicide, to the establishment of a new system in

which the power of the working class would be smashed, not strengthened, and this is why I thought it worth examining how this paradoxical ending was brought about.

It is necessary to draw another conclusion from this experience: spontaneity, the elemental force, is not quite enough. The movement of the Polish workers was powerful, it was not ephemeral, and yet it somehow fizzled out, failing to fulfill its promise. To achieve its historical task, a movement probably requires a fairly clear vision of its project and its purpose, but also some form of organization. It needs it not only to channel its force but to ensure that the wishes of the rank and file are not thwarted, that it is not led astray.

Finally, a lesson for the whole of Eastern Europe can probably be learned from the Polish events. Poland, after all, was the only country in the area where the transformation was not initiated by a perestroika from above, where the people did not enter the stage just for a short spell, where the dissidents were not a small, if heroic, band. Here the regime had to contend with lasting pressure from below, with dissident intellectuals linked to a vast labor movement. If Poland proved unable to produce an original, progressive alternative, maybe the time is not yet ripe for it in that part of the world. Thrown into the turmoil of a savage, primitive construction of capitalism, the workers do not yet seem able to clarify and impose their interests on society. The price we are paying for the Stalinist heritage is bigger than we thought. People are bewildered. They welcomed capitalism as salvation, only to discover that it was cornucopia for the happy few. Many then looked back with nostalgia. They still have to disentangle socialism from its neo-Stalinist connections and to distinguish the freedom they conquered from the new exploitation that went with it. They still need time for their education. For all these reasons, I have the impression that, to use the old-fashioned expression, the light will not come from the east in Europe in the foreseeable future. History may prove me happily wrong. Meanwhile, let us see what Western Europe has to offer as a potential battleground.

7. French Winter of Discontent

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind"

ON NOVEMBER 15, 1995, Alain Juppé, the rather arrogant French prime minister, entered Palais Bourbon, seat of the lower house of parliament, the National Assembly, to present his plan for mastering social expenditure, particularly on national health. He did not know, nor did anybody, that he would precipitate one of those French upheavals which, while not necessarily shaking the world, do give it plenty of food for thought. Each time the storm seems to come out of the blue, and it is only retrospectively that one identifies clear warning signs. Barely a month earlier, France's public servants, the *fonctionnaires,* maddened by the government's decision to freeze their salaries, organized an impressive one-day strike and protest marches throughout the country which were surprisingly well attended. Roughly at the same time, student unrest started at the University of Rouen and rapidly spread all over France. It was also at the close of October that Jacques Chirac, the recently elected president, shocked the French with a spectacular volte-face performed on television: having promised in his campaign to right social injustices, he was now telling not the rich but ordinary people to tighten their belts.

The French people had plenty of reasons for discontent and impatience. For at least a dozen years—ever since 1983, when after two years in office the Socialists forgot their pledges and got converted to financial orthodoxy—they had been told by successive governments, left and right, that their sacrifices would soon be over, that there was light at the end of the tunnel, and that prosperity with full employment lay just around the corner.