

# Polish encounters

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I have visited Poland frequently since the 1970s. As an American teacher and scholar on Central and Eastern Europe, I found it useful to meet not only academics but politicians as well. Although I do not speak Polish, I could pronounce most of the names fairly well; the name of Janusz Onyszkiewicz was among the more difficult ones. My Polish encounters were largely limited to those who spoke English. The irresistible Adam Michnik was an exception: our conversations needed an interpreter. If I may say so, our friendship has managed to develop nevertheless. I try to see him every time I am in Warsaw, most recently in the autumn of 2016.

I was born and raised in Budapest, Hungary. Having left that country as a refugee in late November 1956, after the Soviets crushed the 1956 Revolution, I soon ended up as a student at Indiana University in Bloomington. My three closest friends there were all Polish: Jarek Piekalkiewicz, a political scientist working on his doctorate there; Paweł Depta, another graduate student; and a young woman who – I learned much later – was informing on us to one of the Polish intelligence services.

## Lasting relationships

Years later, in 1970, I joined the Research Institute on Communist Affairs (RICA) at Columbia University. Its director was Zbigniew Brzezinski. Another scholar there, who became the institute's director many years later, was Seweryn Bialer, a defector from the Polish communist party's apparatus. I developed a lasting rela-

tionship with Zbig, as everyone called Brzezinski. Before I accepted a full-time position at the Department of State in Washington in 1993, I consulted with him about that role and about what I should do as a senior member of the policy planning staff there. He talked me into accepting the position and recommended that I focus on NATO enlargement. That is exactly what I did. Some years later the

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Polish government recognised my contribution and awarded me a high decoration for my role in that unduly complicated but eventually successful process.

In Washington, three Polish-Americans made a significant difference in my life. When Jan Karski decided to retire, Georgetown University did not have an easy job finding someone to replace him. Everyone in Poland knows that Karski was a hero – and a man of utmost integrity. Fewer people know that he was an extraordinary teacher as well; some of his classes had to be moved to an auditorium to accommodate all the students interested in his lectures. In the end, the job

was offered to Madeleine Albright, but I was enormously pleased to learn that the great Jan Karski apparently favoured my appointment.

Although I met Jan Nowak-Jeziorański only in the 1990s, I had certainly heard of him before. I was always impressed by the role he played in Munich as head of Radio Free Europe's Polish desk. Nowak-Jeziorański did not fall for the over-enthusiastic and indeed empty slogans of "liberation" and the "rollback" of Soviet power from Eastern Europe that were in vogue in Washington and elsewhere in the mid-1950s. In 1956 during the "Polish October", the Radio's Polish broadcasts were marked by moderation and caution. Like Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, Nowak-Jeziorański understood that "something is better than nothing". Unlike the Radio's Hungarian Desk, which pressed for a more radical outcome than was possible at that time, Nowak-Jeziorański – a wise, realistic statesman – knew the limits of Soviet tolerance. Later on, as "Mr Poland" in Washington, he cultivated Democrats and Republicans alike to keep the Polish issue on the agenda. He had access to the White House; he had access to the State Department. We worked together on NATO enlargement. At one point, I recall, he and Zbig Brzezinski resigned from a Polish-American group for its leader's antisemitic comments. Both did so out of conviction, and they deeply cared about Poland's image in the United States.

With Brzezinski, our professional relationship turned into a real friendship. Until his death this year, we lunched together a couple of times every month, visited each other's homes and talked on the phone regularly. We maintained an abiding interest in Central Europe, notably in Poland and in Hungary. In 2013, when a

book I edited about Brzezinski's life and contributions appeared, he was thrilled; and when it was published in Polish (and in Hungarian, Czech, and this year in Russian), he showed copies to his friends and visitors.

One of the great stories in that book tells of his relationship with Pope John Paul II. In their paranoid way, the Soviet leaders had come to believe that Brzezinski had engineered the pope's election in order to undermine communism in Poland and elsewhere. That was the background to Brzezinski's story: "I remember saying good bye to him [the pope] once and he said, 'Come and see me soon.' I said, 'Oh, I can't do that so often. This is too much. You know, it's a privilege.' And he replied, laughing, 'You elected me. You have to come and see me.'"

Zbigniew Brzezinski's death this year is a huge loss to me and my wife (who, when we met, was Brzezinski's research assistant at Columbia University). He was America's greatest strategic thinker. Whether one uses American or Polish political terminology, it is hard to say if he was more liberal than he was conservative. I think most of his views were liberal, a few were conservative. But it is easy to say that he was a western-style democrat. He did not want to interfere in Polish domestic politics, but he had little patience with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian "solutions".

### **The communist era**

Near the beginning of my career as an American specialist on Central and Eastern Europe, I came to Warsaw to participate in a conference on East-West relations. It was in the mid-1970s. Immediately after checking in at the Forum Hotel, I called an acquaintance at the US Embassy (a former student) to let him know I had arrived. He took my call, but he said he was at a meeting and would like to call me back. When I said I was at the Forum already, he interrupted. "Let me guess your room number", he said. As I recall, he mentioned three numbers – rooms right above each other. And, yes, one was mine. "I'll call you in an hour, but you're more important to them than you think." I was stunned to learn that the US Embassy knew which rooms were bugged at the Forum. At dinner that evening, I remember laughing about surveillance in "People's Poland".

During that trip, I met the US Ambassador, Richard T. Davies. He suggested that we take a walk. A genuine expert on Poland and on East-West relations, he wanted to talk only about Radio Free Europe and how it made his diplomatic mission so difficult. I did not know much about Washington infighting, but I understood that the Radio's job was to keep hope alive and the State Department's job was to maintain diplomatic relations between the two countries. Ambassador Davies insisted that he could not do a good job trying to improve relations while the Ra-

dio upheld the promise of a free and independent Poland. He helped me understand better the inherent contradiction between the task of diplomacy and what was called later on “democracy promotion”.

I also had a very brief meeting at that time with Bolesław Piasecki. I no longer recall who recommended that I meet him; ~~who~~<sup>he</sup> was described to me as a prominent Catholic intellectual, but I do recall that I did not know what exactly PAX (a pro-communist secular Catholic organisation) was or who he was. He knew I was born in Hungary and perhaps it was that association that prompted him, within minutes after our first handshake, to start on an antisemitic tirade. The gist of what he said was that Jews brought communism to Poland. When I was able to get in a word edgewise, I said that the Red Army brought communism to Poland and while there was a relatively large number of Jews in the communist apparatus after the Second World War, they were long gone by now. I reminded him that in 1968 Gomułka had purged those who were still around. In his angry rebuttal, Piasecki suggested that “they” may be gone but their spirit still infects the country’s orientation. Disgusted, I paid for my coffee (not his) and excused myself. I thought Piasecki was a dangerous fraud.

I was in Warsaw again a few years after the introduction of martial law. I was on a Europe-wide lecture tour that took me to Italy, several German universities, Romania and finally Poland. I varied the topics a bit from country to country, but the focus was always on American foreign policy in the Reagan administration. By then I was better known in Poland. In 1982 I published a long essay in *Foreign Affairs* titled “Polish Futures, Western Options”. I also published an article that appeared on the first page of the weekend edition of the *Washington Post* with a most unfortunate and misleading title: “Jaruzelski is Not Moscow’s Stooge”. The article did not say anything of the sort, but the headline writer apparently needed a sensational title. I was furious, especially when the Polish press – I recall a commentary in *Polityka* – decided I was a “revisionist” and added in typical Marxist fashion that I must be speaking on behalf of certain progressive elements in American society. (If they only knew that I cannot even speak on behalf of my wife, let alone on behalf of “progressive elements”.)

In any case, my lectures at the Polish Institute for International Affairs (PISM) and elsewhere drew some attention, especially from my old acquaintance Longin Pastusiak, a specialist on the United States at PISM. He had visited with me at Columbia University on a fairly regular basis. He brought me up to date on Polish politics, adding details I did not know, and I told him what I knew of Reagan’s foreign policy. In Warsaw, he was my host at PISM and then accompanied me to two or three other places as well. He always asked critical – never nasty – questions, but I was used to being questioned closely by my graduate students at Columbia

and so I was not troubled at all. What I did not know was whether some central authority instructed him to follow me, or he decided on his own will to show up again and again. I teased him once by saying that I have nothing new to add to my previous talk and so it was not worth his time to attend, but otherwise I was pleased with his presence at all of my presentations.

### Friends or foes?

Far more controversial was my meeting with Wiesław Górnicki. We first met in 1957 or 1958 in Bloomington, Indiana. We were students at Indiana University, where we ate pizza and drank beer and talked about Poland and Hungary. We agreed on Imre Nagy and Gomułka and Tito. We laughingly concluded that both Poland and Hungary would have needed a Tito to become independent. I knew he was a reporter at *Życie Warszawy*, and he spoke favourably of *Po Prostu* (a post-war literary magazine – editor's note).

Years later I learnt he was in New York as a correspondent covering the United Nations. I called to ask if he would meet a group of undergraduate students interested in the UN and he was more than willing to make time and meet us. My students definitely liked him. He spoke without a text or even notes, and so he did not sound like other speakers I lined up from the communist bloc. Soon after the meeting with students, he returned to Warsaw and I did not see him for years. I heard from someone that in 1968, during Gomułka's purge of Jewish or Jewish-born Communists, Górnicki spoke out against the official policy. That certainly added to the favourable image I had of him.

My surprise could not have been greater when I next saw him on American television. The face was familiar. Could it be my old friend from Bloomington and New York? In military uniform, everyone looks different. But there he was, now Colonel Górnicki, President Jaruzelski's spokesman, telling the world that the new martial law regime was doing nothing less than saving Poland. He implied that if Jaruzelski did not act when he did, the Soviets would have invaded the country and return a harsh, perhaps Stalinist, political order.

I forget how I got in touch with him, but I wrote him to say that I was coming to Warsaw and would like to see him. His positive answer was almost immediate. And so I showed up at the Presidential Palace and we talked for at least two hours. He smoked incessantly. The atmosphere was similar to what it was between us 25 years earlier at Indiana University, except that he smiled only once. That was when I asked him about his military uniform. It was intended to impress two audiences, he said. The Polish people look up to their military, you know. The other audience

was a group of hardliners in the communist party. They do not approve of Jaruzelski's reluctance to use force. They complain to Moscow about us, he said. The uniform is a signal to them too, nothing else.

Górnicki knew how to flatter me. He recalled our old conversations about Imre Nagy, Gomulka and Tito, and he said the only choice for Poland was between a strict Soviet-style political and economic order, together with full support for Soviet foreign policy, and a more nationalist and perhaps eventually more tolerant orientation that would allow for a modicum of intellectual freedom and considerable freedom for the Catholic Church. As if it had made any difference to me, he whispered that Jaruzelski's wife was still quite religious. When I asked him why some of his former friends – writers and journalists – are in jail, he said they were treated well and would be released soon. He asked me not to quote this piece of “information”.

This was a really upsetting encounter. I did not raise a question about his specific identity, but I understood that he was an officer in Polish military intelligence. Was he a genuine reporter once? Did he report on me? I tried to search my memory for details: what did I tell him in Bloomington or in New York that could have gotten me in trouble? Should I get on the next plane and head back to New York (where I then lived) before it was too late? The answer to one of these questions surfaced some 15 years later from a once top-secret Hungarian archive. There it was: a long, four-page Polish intelligence report on my American life – in Hungarian translation. It was part of intelligence sharing among the communist bloc. A big shot Polish official sent it to a big shot Hungarian official, with “comradely greetings”.

The text made it clear that it was written by Górnicki. References were made there to my friends Jarek and Paweł in Bloomington, and to the Polish woman who supplied Górnicki with some of the information. It was, however, full of factual errors about my family and it made fun of me for trying to adjust to the American way of life. It characterised my anti-communism as “moderate”. It seemed to distinguish me from Polish émigrés who – he claimed – worked hard to overthrow “People's Poland”. Obviously, he did not know that the day after he announced martial law to the world in 1981, I demonstrated in front of the Polish Mission to the United Nations on an incredibly cold day in New York, shouting my opposition to that inglorious move and getting quite sick in the process.

### **Unexpected visits**

On my next visit to Warsaw, in 1987, I rented a car with an English-speaking driver from Orbis, which was nominally a tourist agency. I had so many meetings

scheduled during this one-week trip that I felt the need to have a driver. One day, soon after my arrival, the driver asked if I had any dinner plans because the head of the Orbis agency wanted to invite me for dinner. I agreed. We ate at a restaurant featuring duck dishes in the corner of Warsaw's Old Square. This was a "private" restaurant, but I heard that several intelligence services used it for meetings with foreigners. The restaurant had the best food in Warsaw at that time.

The director was an easy-going guy and he spoke good English. Even though I knew his purpose was to size me up, I was stunned when he related that Orbis was a new assignment for him. His previous assignment, he volunteered, was as head of Polish intelligence in Scandinavian countries. Why is he telling me this? Is this how they begin to size up candidates for recruitment? I asked him about Sweden, and I wondered how he is making the adjustment from the exciting life as a spy to the routines of a travel agency. He ordered more wine and soon offered to have his driver take me back to my hotel. I guess somewhere along the line I conveyed a message, not in words but through body language or facial expression, that I liked being a teacher and a scholar and that I was not interested in changing professions. Truth be told, I really enjoyed the encounter. Although I travelled extensively in Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia, and at times in Russia, too, nowhere did the locals try to recruit me. By contrast, the Poles apparently recognised my importance – and I got a free meal too...

On this trip, in 1987, I had my most memorable encounter with a high-level Polish official. He was Józef Czyrek, then a member of the Polish Politburo and the Central Committee Secretary in charge of foreign policy. He was also, supposedly, a very close, if not the closest, of Jaruzelski's associates. In the leadership lineup, he was number two. We had met once before, in late 1981 or 1982, when he visited Columbia University and I served as the moderator of his discussion with students and faculty. He was foreign minister then. As I recall, I gave him a hard time after he finished his presentation, but he was clever enough to say that while my conclusions were wrong, I was pretty well informed. He added that I should come to Warsaw so that we could continue the dialogue.

Some five years later I was in his office at party headquarters. The number of telephones on his desk showed that he was a very important person indeed. He was really friendly too. He said he hoped that I would be as candid as I was at Columbia. He gave me about 90 minutes of his time. After the usual preliminaries,

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he asked me to tell him what I thought of the Polish political landscape. That was a rare invitation from someone in his position – after all, it was he who was supposed to have all the answers. But Czyrek was a bit different in this respect. Either he was really curious or enjoyed a good argument. In either case, I told him that given the important changes in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, he should take *Solidarność* seriously and start a historic dialogue with Lech Wałęsa. Warming up to my brave idea, I said there was only one Poland; the two of them were both good patriots; and international circumstances pointed toward the probability that Moscow would not send in tanks in defence of “socialist achievements”. I ended my little lecture by suggesting that he should do it before he *must* do it, but he should watch out for the East Germans and the Czechs. In any case, I added, why don’t you pick up one of those phones and call Wałęsa right now? I would like to witness the event.

His reply was two-fold. First, in good East European fashion he tried to make a joke of my recommendation. “As you know so much about our country,” he said, “why don’t we make a deal? Just you and me. You take my job here and I take your job at Columbia University. I like to lecture too”, he said. Second, he ran his hand across his throat as he said: “Professor, I would rather cut my throat than call that Polish traitor on the phone.” Czyrek obviously did not expect me to be so straightforward and provocative, and I did not expect him to be so unbending and dogmatic. Soon enough, our meeting ended. In less than two years, the roundtable talks began.

### Post-communist Poland


I have returned to Poland many times since the collapse of communism. I met Bronisław Geremek a few times. As two pipe-smoking professors we had some wonderful conversations as well as an exchange of pipe paraphernalia. On many occasions, I met Janusz and Joanna Onyszkiewicz at Aspen Institute gatherings on the future of Russia and Eastern Europe. When I accompanied then-Ambassador Madeleine Albright to some 11 countries in early 1994 to discuss prospects for NATO enlargement, I sat at one of the sessions next to Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the future president of Poland; since then we have met in Warsaw and in Washington dozens of times.

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It was an unusual experience, one that I deeply cherished, to visit Warsaw when Daniel Fried was there as the very popular and indeed impressive US ambassa-



dor. It does not happen every day that a professor can look up to one of his students and admire his accomplishments. A one-time professor and then foreign minister, I got to know over many years has been the very smart and very sophisticated Adam Daniel Rotfeld. Another foreign minister I met on numerous occasions is Radek Sikorski. And I have developed close relations with practically all of Poland's distinguished ambassadors to Washington; each would require a separate chapter.

Maybe I will return to these encounters another time. Meanwhile, I still root for a democratic Poland in NATO and the European Union. 

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