

## EDITORIAL

### “Ladies and gentlemen, on 4 June 1989 Communism in Poland ended”

*written by Annalia Guglielmi, 29 May 2009*

The scenes of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the cheering crowd running down Unter den Linden – which had us all glued to the television on 9 November 1989 – have remained in Europe’s memory as symbolic images of the fall of Communism in the countries of East Central Europe. That, however, was the conclusive moment of a democratization process started several months earlier. Few will remember that in actual fact the “iron curtain” had begun to give way in Poland with the elections of 4 and 18 June of the same year. On the twentieth anniversary of those events it is perhaps worth recalling the salient steps that led to radical changes in the lives of a good half of our continent.

After the heroic deeds of Solidarność in 1980, the State of War declared by general Jaruzelski on 13 December 1981, and the imprisonment of almost all the historic leaders of the trade union movement, democratic opposition to the regime continued assiduously to operate underground: the number of articles published by the clandestine free press grew and the power base of the trade union continued to promote aggregation and solidarity among the workers. They were supported in this by the presence and advice of Poland’s leading intellectuals – from Jacek Kuroń to Adam Michnik, from Bronisław Geremek to Tadeusz Mazowiecki, just to mention a few – as well as by most Church circles. The period between 1982 and 1989 was one of great intellectual and social fervour and considerable social tension, which also led to friction within the ruling party. They were also years in which the regime tightened the screw of repression and resorted to increasingly violent methods: thousands of Solidarność and opposition leaders were thrown into jail or internment camps or deprived of their livelihoods, and the security services committed numerous brutal crimes. These included the fatal beating, in May 1983, of Grzegorz Przemyski, the 18-year-old son of the opposition poetess Barbara Sadowska, and the kidnapping and assassination, on 19 October, of father Jerzy Popiełuszko of Warsaw. Father Jerzy was the chaplain of Solidarność among the Huta Warszawa steelworkers and the priest whose Masses for the Nation were attended every month by thousands of people, along with artists and other prominent cultural figures. It is as well here to remember the words with which Adam Michnik replied to the authorities’ “invitation” to leave Poland and emigrate abroad: “For me the value of our struggle does not lie in the possibility of success or victory, but in the very cause for which we undertook this struggle. May my refusal be seen as a small brick with which to build the **honour** and the **dignity** of this country, which you are making unhappier by the day”. While Władysław Frasyniuk wrote in an open letter to Solidarność members and supporters: “We must realize ... that years of hard, dreary work await us, to the point that it will seem useless. We have to become **hope** for ourselves, because it is up to us **today** to create our identity”. Jacek Kuroń said: “**Today** we are -building the Poland of our grandchildren”. The spirit of those years is aptly expressed in these words: building **today** an environment in which we can live with **honour** and **dignity**, in which **hope** does not coincide with political calculations or illusions about the outcome of a change in the system, which at that time seemed impossible.

The year 1988 began in a climate of serious social tension, favoured also by the changes under way in the Soviet Union after the advent of Gorbachev. In most of the country strikes in factories and on university campuses were multiplying: in addition to pay rises, the strikers’ main demand was for Solidarność to be legally acknowledged. On 31 August a preliminary meeting was arranged between Lech Wałęsa and general Kiszczak, at the end of which Wałęsa asked for the strikes to be suspended. This enabled further talks to take

place with the authorities. Despite a stalemate in the negotiations, on 18 December a Civic Committee was set up, chaired by the increasingly popular Lech Wałęsa.

The 10th Plenum of the Central Committee of the United Polish Workers' Party (POUP) was held between December 1988 and January 1989. The Party resolved to reach an agreement with Solidarność. This was also because, despite Wałęsa's appeals, the wave of strikes begun in 1988 was gradually intensifying: in January 1989 alone, the Ministry of the Interior recorded 49 strikes in which at least 15,000 workers had taken part, as well as 2,200 other forms of protest: processions, demonstrations, flags displayed in factories, petitions. It was in this climate that it was decided to open a Round Table, which began its proceedings on 6 February and concluded them on 5 April 1989.

The Round Table talks involved 452 people, including some of the most prominent figures in Solidarność and in the independent cultural world, both secular and Catholic: Zbigniew Bujak, Władysław Frasyniuk, Konstanty Gebert, Bronisław Geremek, Aleksander Hall, Jacek Kuroń, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Adam Michnik, Stanisław Stomma, Jerzy Turowicz, Andrzej Wielowiejski, and, of course, Lech Wałęsa.

A number of bishops were invited as observers and guarantors, including the bishop of Danzig, monsignor Tadeusz Gocłowski and the bishop of the Evangelical church in Poland, monsignor Janusz Narzyński.

Three working groups were set up and tasked with tackling:

1. the economic situation and social policies, chaired by Władysław Bak for the POUP and Witold Trzeciakowski for Solidarność;
2. political reforms, chaired by Janusz Reykowski for the POUP and Bronisław Geremek for Solidarność;
3. trade union pluralism, chaired by Aleksander Kwaśniewski for the POUP, Tadeusz Mazowiecki for Solidarność and Romuald Sosnowski representing the trade union linked to the POUP.

The final decisions were taken and signed by Lech Wałęsa and general Jaruzelski.

Throughout the proceedings, strikes had been suspended, except for the occasional flare-up.

The most important results of the Round Table were:

1. the recognition of Solidarność as a legal entity, registered on 17 April 1989 by the Danzig law court,
2. the institution of a President of the Republic, to be elected every five years,
3. access to mass media by the opposition, and the launch of an independent daily paper: *Gazeta Wyborcza* directed by Adam Michnik, today still Poland's leading newspaper.

The main achievement of the talks, however, was agreement on calling the first political elections with the participation of opposition candidates: the first "semi free" elections in a country of the Soviet bloc. The agreement provided for 100% free elections for the 100 Candidates to the Senate, while to Parliament 65% of seats (299) were to be guaranteed to a coalition made up of the POUP, the Union of the Left, the Democratic Union and the pro-Communist Catholic organizations, while the remaining 35% were for the opposition candidates. This agreement was valid for that one occasion only: subsequent elections would have to be totally free.

The Round Table was not a revolution, it was a compromise, but it paved the way for a peaceful revolution, for the transition to freedom and democracy and to the fall of the Communist system not only in Poland, but also in the other countries of the Soviet bloc. Lech Wałęsa defined it as "the bare minimum for a transition to democracy".

The very fact that the authorities of a government until then totalitarian had agreed to cede part of its power, effectively meant that it had ceded "all" its power. The POUP representatives themselves admitted as much: for them, ceding part of the seats in Parliament and in the Senate and admitting a free trade union and independent media was

a defeat all along the line. They also admitted that they had got their calculations wrong: they thought that setting up a new independent newspaper would take at least six months but never imagined that the youngsters that had been working for the underground press alongside the professional journalists that had escaped censorship would be able to print the newspaper in just three weeks, and neither did they think that Solidarność would be able to organize its own electoral committees and the electoral campaign so effectively. The elections took place with two ballots: on 4 and 18 June. At the first ballot, 62% of the population turned out to vote and the opposition candidates obtained 160 of the 161 seats in Parliament reserved for them and 92 of the 100 seats in the Senate. In the second ballot turnout was much lower and Solidarność obtained one more seat in Parliament and seven in the Senate. Almost all the representatives of the government coalition managed to win the seats reserved for them only in the second ballot.

On 18 July general Jaruzelski was elected President of the Polish Republic, while on 24 August Tadeusz Mazowiecki became the first non-Communist Premier of an East European country.

On 28 October 1989, during the evening edition of the Polish TV news, the journalist Joanna Szczepkowska pronounced the memorable phrase: "Ladies and gentleman, on 4 June Communism in Poland ended."