

'A Pole faces up to history' from L'Humanité (22 April 1992)

Caption: On 22 April 1992, the French daily newspaper L'Humanité publishes a retrospective devoted to the political action taken by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, Polish Prime Minister from 1981 to 1985 and Polish Head of State from 1989 to 1990. The newspaper particularly praises his management of the 1981 crisis, in which Soviet intervention was avoided, and his role in the peaceful transition to a democratic regime.

Source: L'Humanité. 22.04.1992. Paris. http://www.humanite.fr/1992-04-22_Articles_-UN-POLONAIS-DEVANT-L-HISTOIRE. "Un polonais devant l'histoire".

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/a_pole_faces_up_to_history_from_l_humanite_22_april_1992-en-71211751-8a3f-45ac-afaf-cacb4ceda78f.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

A Pole faces up to history

Nothing, apart from the war, predisposed the young Wojciech, offspring of the landed nobility, to become a Communist leader. Having taken part in the liberation of Poland in 1945, side by side with the Red Army, in December 1981 he prevented the country's political and social crisis culminating in Soviet military intervention.

'In the twilight of my days, I cannot say that I have ended up on the wrong side of the river. At the end of this long road, I have lost many of my old certainties. But I think I can say that although I may have strayed, I have never lost my way.' This is how General Wojciech Jaruzelski concludes *Chains and Refuge*, the memoirs of a man whose life, for the Head of State of an Eastern bloc country, took an unusual course. Having been pushed to the front of the stage of history under the worst possible auspices (the proclamation of martial law on 13 December 1981), the famous general in the dark glasses fairly soon, and despite the upheavals of the political struggle in the 1980s, saw history do him at least partial justice.

By taking that dreadful initiative at the most difficult moment in the crisis, Jaruzelski was able to avoid the worst — Soviet military intervention — and although he did not, in the long run, manage to prevent the fall of the system he was defending, he did make it possible for it to happen peacefully. On this aspect of matters, the old soldier feels he has done his duty, but the Communist, who joined the Party after taking part in the liberation of his country in 1945, observes perceptively: 'Although we managed to avoid the worst, I no longer think now that we could have saved the regime, the system, our hold on power, socialism ...'

There was nothing to predict that this descendant of an old aristocratic family would become an officer of the people's army, an influential member of the Politburo and then First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP). Nothing, that is, apart from the horrors of war, the martyrdom of Poland, a land of contrasts which Jaruzelski expresses when he talks of his own destiny and that of Archbishop Josef Glemp: 'The son of a poor working-class family, who attended a distinctly secular and socialist secondary school and belonged to a left-wing youth organisation, became Primate of Poland. Meanwhile, the son of a noble, rather well-off family, raised in a secondary school run by priests, a one-time choirboy and member of an ultraconservative Catholic organisation, became First Secretary of the Party.'

After fleeing from west to east to escape the Germans, the Jaruzelskis were arrested by the KGB in Lithuania and deported to a town in Siberia. The father, Wladyslaw, who had taken part in the war against Soviet Russia in 1920, was not to survive the exodus. The young Wojciech enlisted in the Polish military force set up in the USSR from 1943 onwards. He was to return to Warsaw as a soldier on the winning side before ending the war on the Elbe, the meeting point with the American troops. He found his country in ruins, his people in a state of shock. 'Do not forget that 38 % of Poland had been destroyed — that, proportionally, the losses we suffered were 47 times higher than those of Britain and 23 times greater than those of France.'

The trials he went through in the war revealed him as the soldier that he would never cease to be and helped to shape his attitude towards the Soviet Union. 'Whatever events we have been through since 1989, nothing can wipe out the fact that six hundred thousand Soviet soldiers lost their lives on Polish soil.' Soon after the war, in 1947, the man who, at 33, was later to become Poland's youngest general, joined the Party. 'A sort of rebirth,' he notes. There then began a long period in which the immediate post-war enthusiasm took a battering from the Stalinism imported into Warsaw. 'If I'd waited a few years, faced with the conditions we experienced in the 1950s, I don't know if I would have taken that decision. But at the time, discovering politics in such a context, in such a climate of freedom of thought and debate, I couldn't make any other choice.'

That choice is one Jaruzelski stood by with discipline and a sense of responsibility which often put him at the centre of clashes between conservative tendencies and the desire for reform within the leadership. 'I am perfectly well aware,' he admits, 'that at that time (between 1956 and 1970) I was closer to the dogmatists than to the liberals.' But he points out: 'I was not a dogmatist in the pejorative sense which people attach to the word today. For me, dogmatism was synonymous with unwavering conviction. The old Communists

were dogmatists. But so were we neo-Communists, staunch believers and deeply committed as we were. It followed naturally that we had to defend our Church and its dogmas ...' 'Later, the careerists flooded in, all those people who had realised that the Party could make their lives easier, be a way for them to climb up the social scale. It was undeniably one of our basic mistakes and one of the reasons why we were defeated.'

But the deep sincerity of a man who long nursed a complex because of his social origins was not sufficient for him to be able to grasp, in time, the movements which were starting to emerge in society. Jaruzelski honestly admits that he shared the blindness of the PUWP leadership in the 1960s, when, for example, Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski were expelled from the Party and given long prison sentences. They had written an 'Open letter to the members of the Party' in which they accused the leadership of 'exploiting the working class'. 'I see our behaviour then as one of the main causes of the events which left such a spectacular mark on the end of the 1980s, with the crumbling of a whole world.' He talks about the 1960s, when barely disguised anti-Semitism poisoned government circles and the media. 'I regard that period as one of the most shameful in our history.'

In 1970, the terrible suppression of the demonstrations in Gdansk, which left 36 dead and 100 seriously injured, led to the removal of Wladyslaw Gomulka, to which Jaruzelski contributed with all the authority conferred on him by his post as Minister for Defence, and with the accession of Edward Gierek, from 1970 to 1980, there was breathing space ... until the next crisis, when Gierek did his best to defuse tensions by pouring more and more funds into Western markets and importing massive quantities of consumer goods. 'Gomulka had left tens of millions of dollars in the State coffers. At the end of the 1970s, our debts stood at more than 20 billion dollars.'

The strikes in August 1980 caught Jaruzelski, like Gierek and most of Poland's leaders, on holiday. Once again, a measure of 'price liberation' put a match to the powder in the shipyards. But the strikers were not just content with material demands, they were also calling for the right to strike, trade union freedoms, the abolition of censorship, the release of political prisoners and so on. A link was immediately forged between workers and intellectuals like Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Bronislaw Geremek, who were close to the new Pope, John Paul II, the former Bishop Karol Wojtyla.

Analysing that period with the benefit of hindsight, General Jaruzelski points to the illusions the PUWP was under as regards Solidarity's objectives. Some statements by Lech Walesa ('We are not questioning socialism'; the interview with *Polytyka*) and calls for moderation from the Church gave the — mistaken — impression that the opposition's objective was not the overthrow of the system.