

30 Years Ago, A Moment of Joy and Hope

by Adam Michnik

Democracies are not going to defend themselves. It is we, the citizens who have to defend them. I believe it is not too late. And I am convinced that while no victory is ever a final one, no defeats along the way are definitive either. The biographies of dissidents from my part of the world provide the evidence you need.

I clearly remember that November evening.

In my country, Poland, events of great importance were taking place. Poland's first non-Communist government had already been operating for three months. The prime minister was Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a broad-minded catholic intellectual and long-standing advisor to Lech Wałęsa. Just at that time, a delegation from the Federal Republic of Germany was making its first official visit to Poland – Chancellor Helmut Kohl, President Richard Weizsacker, and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher. While I was in a meeting with Minister Genscher, an associate of his entered the room and handed him a small piece of paper. Genscher read it, looked at me, and said, "The Berlin Wall has been opened."

With a cry of joyful amazement I quickly said goodbye, ran to the editorial office of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and wrote these words which were published on the front page the following day:

Nobody knows what the consequences of the actual collapse of the Berlin Wall will be. However, something irreversible has already happened: gunshots at people have ceased. In Berlin, in the heart of Europe, in the dispute between freedom and barbed wire, freedom has won.

It's still hard to believe that this happened by accident. After all, the government of East Germany could still resist, could still close its borders. But they did not. Instead, as Günter Schabowski, a leader of East Germany's communist party, stated on television: "We made a decision today. Any citizen can leave through any border crossing." And this decision, he said, was going into effect immediately.

It seems to me now that Schabowski himself did not realize what he was announcing, as thousands of Berliners immediately rushed towards the wall and, brick by brick, began to dismantle it.

II.

Looking back on it from the perspective of today, the process seems obvious. Yet it was not so obvious at the time. As little as a month before the wall began to fall, Egon Krenz, leader of the GDR's Communist Party, was stating that he could fully understand the "Chinese solution" – the massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators, like the one in Beijing's Tiannenmen Square.

At that time, this sounded pretty dangerous to a Pole: you could not feel safe. Despite our historic success, despite our peaceful dismantling of a dictatorship, we still remembered how quickly communism turned to violence when it felt threatened.

Today, the question of why Soviet communism collapsed is answered in various ways. Some emphasize the role of the West-German Ostpolitik and the Helsinki conference, which had promoted openness. Others stress the politics of President Carter, in which human rights became a banner of the aspiration for freedom. Still others credit the politics of President Reagan, who labelled the Soviet Union an empire of evil and declared a total ideological war against it. Certainly the Soviet war in Afghanistan, which militarily and politically weakened the Kremlin dictators, also played a key role in the process.

However, from today's perspective, the most important factor is still Solidarity, that national confederation of millions of Poles struggling together for freedom and independence. Spearheaded by the workers, Solidarity completely delegitimized the Communist Party, with its slogans about the dictatorship of the proletariat. With Solidarity, the Polish proletariat gave that dictatorship a pink slip.

Thus for a Pole, it seems obvious that everything – the collapse of the wall, the toppling of the Kremlin – started in Poland. Here is the Polish sequence of events that gave birth to Solidarity: first, the broad movement of democratic opposition in the 1970s that brought together for the first time both the working-class and the intelligentsia. Then the Catholic Church and the historic 1979 visit of the Polish Pope, John Paul II, to his homeland. And finally, in the summer of 1980, a wave of strikes that ended in the official recognition of something completely new within the Soviet Bloc: an independent, self-governing trade union... Solidarity.

It was actually then that the first bricks were already being torn out of the Berlin Wall.

The Polish festival of freedom and a legal Solidarity lasted sixteen months and was ended by the imposition of martial law. Then came eight long years of resistance by an underground democratic opposition – an opposition that was locked into illegality, discriminated against, and imprisoned, but which in the end opened up a space for Roundtable Talks with the regime, and eventually the partially free elections that took place, at last, on June 4, 1989.

While the June elections, in effect a referendum on the regime that resulted in a triumphant victory of the democratic opposition, were indeed groundbreaking, it was the Roundtable Talks that were the truly historic achievement. This is because the entire Polish citizenry, including the reform wing of the ruling communists, contributed to them. Indeed, the Talks themselves may have been the greatest Polish achievement of the twentieth century.

It was after the elections that, like dominoes, the other communist dictatorships in the region began to fall. First Hungary, where the 1956 revolution and its murdered heroes were rehabilitated, then the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Albania; and finally Romania. The entire bloc of satellite states dominated by the Soviet Union fell apart like a house of cards.

While each of these events had its own local color, they also shared contexts both internal and external. Internally, they shared the economic failure of the command and distribution system; externally, each country was affected by the changes happening in Russia. These changes surprised many of us, and we did not differ in this regard from most foreign observers. For many years, we had observed the heroism of Soviet dissidents: their opposition to the dictatorship, their samizdat

publishing; their civil rights movement. This circle of Russian dissidents played a groundbreaking role in shifting the collective consciousness of the Russian intelligentsia and in changing the picture of Russian culture. It was this circle that generated three Nobel laureates – Andrei Sakharov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Joseph Brodsky. The Russian democratic opposition had become an obvious context for reformist tendencies within the ruling Soviet establishment.

Even Mikhail Gorbachev's famous *perestroika*, his official Soviet policy for fundamental political and economic reform, is impossible to understand without an acknowledgment of the Russian dissidents who for so many years had been persecuted, repressed, and imprisoned. *Perestroika*'s leaders perceived dissidents as enemies, but without these enemies a great project of political transformation would probably never have come about.

III.

The fact is that societies in the Soviet Bloc had already gone through thaws in the past and periods of hope. Krushchev's secret speech of 1956 to the Party Congress on the cult of personality and his revelations of Stalin's crimes gave rise to hope for the possibility of "socialism with a human face." That hope gave rise to some promise of change in Poland, and to a revolutionary outbreak in Budapest that was bloodily suppressed by the Soviet army.

Still, until 1968 many people had hoped that reforming forces within the ruling party would be able to initiate democratic reforms. Historically the short-lived Prague Spring and the liberalized vision of Alexander Dubczek were for many the very last moment of faith in the possibility of systemic change.

For me, a Pole imprisoned for participating in the students' democratic protest movement at that time, it became an occasion for losing one's last illusions. Not that there were many left, as our Warsaw Pact's military intervention in Czechoslovakia was accompanied by brutal police action at home, along with an anti-Semitic campaign launched by the regime. It became obvious to me that this system would be impossible to reform -- that instead, one must learn to defend oneself against it.

It was Gorbachev's *perestroika* that revealed our mistake. Historic changes taking place in Moscow began from the top down, their impulse coming from the Kremlin.. What is more, *glasnost*, a call for transparency, fell upon extremely fertile soil: the Russian intelligentsia, who had been bound for years by conformism and fear, had now become extremely vital, brave, and creative. Open political debates, however, were accompanied by an economic crisis and a crisis of institutions of the state.

From the beginning, the reform movement in the Soviet Union had two faces: in Russia and in the Soviet republics. In Russia itself, it had at the same time both a civic-democratic and a traditionalist-nationalist face. Soviet communism suppressed both democratic and conservative-nationalist attitudes. It saw in both of them a threat to its all-powerful Bolshevik ideology. Within the Russian dissident circle, these attitudes are well illustrated by Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The nineteenth century's division of Russians into occidentalists and Slavophiles had re-emerged after a hundred years. While they were allies when it came to the right to vote, their alliance ended when they regained that right. Indeed

this should hardly have come as a surprise given how completely different their ideological priorities were.

In nineteenth century Europe, democracy and nationalism together opposed the dictatorships of the conservative monarchies of the Holy Alliance. The 1848 Spring of Nations was their joint achievement. One could say that democrats and nationalists were children of the same mother, who sometimes had the face of romanticism and other times the face of enlightenment. In other words, they were brothers, like Cain and Abel. And at some point Cain wanted Abel dead.

It was different in the Soviet republics. In the Baltic countries, the sense of rebellion was obvious. There, freedom meant both personal freedom and national freedom – both individual independence and independent statehood. The situation was similar in Ukrainian urban centers, in Georgia, and in Armenia.

For us in Poland the right to state sovereignty seemed to be self-evident. And let's say it again: it was Solidarity – that great nationwide movement for both human and national rights – that was the best example of this. The movement, supported by the Catholic Church and the great authority of John Paul II, was harmoniously driven by three desires: a drive towards the emancipation of the workers, a drive to regain and cultivate national identity, and, of course, a drive toward political democracy based on human rights.

Let's repeat: each country had its own specificity, but everywhere there was a division between the democratic sensibility, which was articulated as a return to Europe, and the national sensibility, which urged us to return to our roots, our traditions, the beliefs of our forefathers. Thus, certain Poles looked to the

democratic independence tradition (national uprisings of the 19th century and Pilsuski), while others looked to the ethno-nationalist tradition of Roman Dmowski. It was in that camp that the slogans "Poland for the Poles" and "Catholic state of the Polish nation" were born – along with an increasingly virulent anti-Semitism. A similar dynamic played out in the debates of Hungarians and Czechs, Romanians and Slovaks. These two different mentalities and sensibilities, one that leaned toward Europe and democracy, the other toward nationalism and ethnic exclusivism, coexisted in both the milieu of the anti-communist opposition and in the ruling communists' camp.

Gorbachev and Slobodan Milošević are two classic examples of these differences. While Gorbachev cautiously tried to imitate social democracy, Milošević openly reached for the tradition of Grand Serbian chauvinism. Both saw the need for change. Of course it was not about giving up power, but about seeking a new way to legitimize their power. One located his vision in the future; the other, in the past.

IV.

When Poland's 1989 elections (the first free elections held in our country for a long, long time) at last brought defeat to the Communist power elite, the communists did not falsify the results. What's more, upon losing, they publicly acknowledged their electoral failure. This was an unprecedented event.

And yet, although the elections in Poland had been very carefully watched across the globe, the headlines that dominated foreign television news programs and the front pages of world newspapers were instead devoted to China, where news was

pouring forth about the massacre of freedom protesters in Tiananmen Square, the “Square of Heavenly Peace.” In China, unlike Poland, the de-legitimization of communism led to violence and nationalist/great-power ideology. This was also the beginning of the Chinese road to economic glory, to its position as a global superpower, to protecting its market mechanisms through a police dictatorship.

Thus, already in 1989, one could see the outlines of different exits from the Bolshevik model. One led towards European democratic institutions, a second towards nationalist traditionalism. A third led towards authoritarianism supported by religious institutions and communities of faith and values; and finally a fourth towards the transformation of communist system and their elites into nationalist dictatorships. Some observers pointed even then to a renaissance of the nationalist and authoritarian traditions of the 1930s.

Taking note of these paths, for example, was one Yegor Gaidar, an outstanding, prematurely deceased leader of the Russian reformers, who in his book, Collapse of an Empire, soberly called attention to the following points:

"Getting rid of a sense of national greatness and national suffering is a nuclear bomb in the politics of countries whose former system is wearing out and where there is no system of developed democratic institutions.

“The problem with a young democracy [...] is that the slogans that are easiest to "sell" to a politically inexperienced voter, when implemented in practice, become dangerous. In the second half of the 1980s in Belgrade, to oppose the slogans, "Serbia should be great" and "We will not allow Serbs to be beaten anywhere", was a task that was politically lost in advance. In the political sphere, it was easy to

apply the idea that Serbia has been and always would be great and that the authorities in other republics and autonomous provinces would not be allowed to hurt any Serbs. If a Serbian leader does not take this position, another politician will be found who inevitably uses this claim for his own interest.”

Analyzing the Yugoslav crisis, Gaidar continued: "It was not difficult to predict that in Zagreb, Ljubljana and Sarajevo politicians would enthusiastically pick up these slogans, replacing the word ‘Serbs’ with such words as ‘Croats’ and ‘Slovenians’. When the authorities in Serbia adopted the nationalist program as a political and ideological base, the fate of Yugoslavia was sealed. By presenting territorial claims to their neighbors, the Serbian leaders opened up a path to victory for nationalist ideas in other republics which then took advantage of the fear of Serbian domination. In the context of such logic wars became inevitable. A mechanism was put into motion that cost the lives of tens of thousands of people and forced millions to resettle.

Political agitation-- based on inciting conflict between nations that had previously lived side by side, with borders arbitrarily set by a prior, undemocratic regime -- became the prologue to bloody incidents.”

What Gaidar described unfolded similarly in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, in Romania and Hungary. Anti-Turkish resentment was used in Bulgaria, and refugee centers were attacked in eastern Germany. In Poland, we heard the slogans "Poland for the Poles" and the sinister screams of homophobes. Nationalism – this poison of our time – has conquered the heart of our politics.

This was not the result of Soviet or U.S. special-service conspiracies, as the proponents of conspiracy-theory of history seem to believe. They claim that social

processes are the work of the CIA, the KGB, or Mossad. Their mistake comes not just from paranoia, but from the belief that society is completely pacified and unable to resist.

In fact protest emerges unexpectedly, surprising everyone, when people who are gagged and manipulated spit out their gags. Forgotten values – truth, honesty, living by the rules, courage, dignity, and honor – suddenly come to the fore. Instead of a cemetery silence, the hustle and bustle of freedom emerges. In other words, life re-appears. At least this was the case in 1989, when the first non-communist government was formed in Poland, when the Berlin Wall fell, when crowds in the streets of Budapest, Prague, Sofia, Bratislava and Berlin were regaining their freedom.....and the crowds were demanding freedom for all.... at least at first.

For although it happened slowly, it seemed only a moment later that this crowd gradually changed its appearance and character, its slogans and dreams. It stopped demanding freedom and began to demand bread and circuses. The crowd began to turn into a mob. This was a path that led from humanism through nationalism to violence. And it can still lead to barbarism.

I got my first taste of “the mob” in 1968. Before my eyes, the barriers of decency in public speaking broke down. But some much wiser than I had diagnosed it much earlier. Leszek Kołakowski, for example. Here is how this eminent Polish humanist wrote about the mob as early as 1956, when he noted that the liberalization of power also brought along with its ideas of freedom a renaissance of anti-Semitism.

“They come in all shapes and sizes,” wrote Kołakowski, “like annoying insects: some study leaflets on ritual murder and demand that Jews be slaughtered, some talk of inferior races, others of ‘cultural otherness’, and others still are content with an animosity that is often difficult to capture but that readily manifests itself in everyday life without any help from theories.

“ [...] The restrained, bureaucratic anti-Semitism of the interwar Sanacja regime, even when limited to the ‘economic boycott’ of Jewish merchants, sustained and fueled an atmosphere in which Falanga, future Gestapo informants, and blackmailers could flourish. The Nuremberg Laws, as we know, did not contain a program for exterminating Jews but only the principle of racial inferiority. [...]”ⁱ

“In this way, kind-hearted anti-Semites beget anti-Semitic thugs, mild anti-Semites nourish anti-Semites armed with brass knuckles and knives, and passive and restrained anti-Semites give rise to organizers of pogroms. Under the right circumstances, scattered particles of anti-Semitism, each seemingly harmless and by itself feeble, can be brought together in a flash to create an explosive mixture that detonates in an atrocity. Which is why tolerating even the faintest manifestations of anti-Semitism today is tantamount to tolerating the pogroms of tomorrow. We must seize and wipe out the shadow of anti-Semitism before it becomes flesh. I mention this only because the existence of hotbeds of anti-Semitism in our time is an open secret that needs no telling.”ⁱⁱ [...]

“The mob, or the rabble, is the agent of anti-Semitism. The rabble’s composition is not determined by class, but its social tasks are. It can arise out of the most diverse social elements. The rabble comes into being in a mass of people; when dispersed it maintains no sense of solidarity but only a vague readiness to renew that bond

which is based on neither class nor nationality, and which is not a permanent band at all, but a circumstantial one, with volatile meanings. The bond established by the rabble is incapable of constructing a distinct program; it is purely negative and destructive, necessarily devoid of class consciousness. It gives collective expression to disoriented discontent and it is therefore incapable of rationalized reactions; it is categorically opposed to discussion, subject to only the most primitive suggestions, submissive in the face of ideology, and invaluable as a tool of crime perpetrated in someone else's name.”ⁱⁱⁱ

...So...I'd like to mention here that the answer of the Polish democratic intelligentsia to this poison of anti-Semitism - this religion of the mob - was to choose another way of life.

Leszek Kołakowski wrote of the mechanisms of communist dictatorship that they are based on a strict monopoly of power, implying a one-way dependency within the hierarchy, and therefore -- as in all despotic systems -- the positive traits in one's career that can facilitate one's climbing up the hierarchic ladder are servility, cowardice, lack of initiative, readiness to listen to superiors, readiness to inform, and an indifference to public opinion and the public interest, whereas the undesirable features include an ability to take initiative, and a concern for matters of common interest and social benefit, regardless of the interests of the ruling apparatus. This power mechanism, argued Kolakowski, causes a natural, negative selection of leadership in all areas of the governing apparatus, and above all within the party apparatus. Practice shows that one peculiarity of these regimes “was their systematic ousting of people having competence and initiative in favor of ones representing a cowardly and submissive mediocrity. The process launched in March 1968 – the mass promotion of dummies, informers, or even thugs (‘an

invasion of bedbugs', as it was called in Warsaw) -- was only an intensification of a phenomenon that had been around for many years.”

Still, Kołakowski was also one who warned against fatalism in our thinking. He repeated that the idea of the non-reformability of dictatorship "could easily be used to justify not only opportunism but all possible meanness. If that is the case, every individual evil act can justify itself because it can be identified simply as one component of a universal sneer that is "momentarily" inevitable and not the work of the individual, but a result of the system. The principle of non-reformability can therefore serve as advance absolution for all cowardice, passivity and cooperation with evil. For Kolakowski, those who believe they are making only slight concessions for their peace of mind will find that the price of this peace becomes higher and higher; those who only pay with a seemingly innocent obsequiousness will be forced tomorrow to become informers in order to pay for the same commodity.

In these thoughts of Leszek Kołakowski, a moral and intellectual authority for several generations of the Polish intelligentsia, any modern historian will easily recognize a prefiguration of the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR), established six years later.

V.

Vaclav Havel, the great Czech writer and dissident, a political prisoner turned president of the Republic, thought in a similar way. Havel's dissident essays built

an awareness of – and a value system for – the democratic opposition; and not only in Czechoslovakia.

Even today, eight years after his death, Havel remains a paradoxical figure. In part this was because he wanted, like his master the Czech philosopher Patočka, to be faithful to Socrates' uncompromising nature. He wanted to stay true to this even when he became president. When I met him, and read him, it seemed to me that Socrates had turned into Pericles.

In the innermost ring of his many gifts was the fact that he never lost time, even in prison. It was from behind bars that he wrote in a letter to his wife, Olga that the moment when some ideological system becomes closed and finished, perfect and universal, the system turns into rubble... because reality slips through one's fingers.

The result of such a disintegration of ideology is widespread bitterness. And the bitter man loses faith both in the world and in people. And he comes to the conclusion, writes Havel, that "all moral principles, higher aims and supra-personal ideals are naively utopian, and that one has to accept the world "as it is," that is, unalterably bad, and behave accordingly. And yet," Havel repeats, "it is not the evil of the world that ultimately leads the person to give up, but rather his own resignation that led him to the theory about the evil of the world."^{iv} For many of us - including me, whom Havel honored with his friendship - he was one of the most important guides and intellectual authorities in those years.

How closely Havel studied the evolution of an embittered man ! "As he grows accustomed to this evil world and establishes himself in it," writes Havel, "the

reality that was originally regrettable begins, as he conceives it, to change imperceptibly into one that is ‘not as bad as it could be’, and certainly better than the eventual state of uncertainty created by “utopian” efforts to transform it, until at last the status quo he once condemned becomes, in essence, an ideal.

In this way,” Havel concludes, “we arrive at the sad state of affairs in which a ruthless critic of the world is imperceptibly transformed into its defender.”^v

Havel confessed that he understood human bitterness as he understood human weakness, loneliness, and helplessness. And yet he remained convinced “that there is nothing in this vale of tears that in itself can rob man of hope, and faith in the meaning of life.” This poignant confession that defines the indomitable outlook of a dissident reveals dangerous pitfalls, the most dangerous of them being fanaticism. Fanaticism was the dangerous disease of many brave dissidents. Havel knew it well. “Fanaticism,” he wrote to Olga, “is a faith that has betrayed itself.

“Betrayed itself: first, because the fanaticism is a feeling that one is ‘responsible for everything.’ And that feeling is all the more boundless, of course, the more one feels threatened by the shock of alienation from a freshly perceived world.

“The more fanatical a person is, the easier it is for him to transfer his “faith” into another object.

Faith in an idea transforms itself into faith in a specific institution. [...] But precisely at this time the “I” commits a fatal error. The essence of this error is the notion that transferring primordial self-transcendence from the boundlessness of the dream to the reality of human actions is a one- shot affair, that all you have to do is to “come up with an idea” and then blindly serve it.

A fanatic is someone who, without realizing it, replaces the love of God with the love of his own religion, a religion he has created; he is replacing his love of truth, freedom and justice with a love of ideology, doctrine, or a sect that promises absolutely to implement these doctrines; he is replacing love for people with love for a project, claiming that it—and only it—can genuinely serve them. [...] Yes, it is tempting to become a fanatic.”

Havel concludes: “Fanaticism may make life simpler – but at the cost of destroying it. Its tragedy lies in the fact that it takes a beautiful and profoundly authentic longing of the human “I” to take the suffering of the world upon himself and transforms it into something that merely multiplies that suffering: an organizer of concentration camps, inquisitions, massacres and executions.”^{vi}

I have, over the years, thought a lot about Havel's path and his life experience. He is one of those human beings who has symbolized the glory and misery of our times, especially these past thirty years. Havel made the Czech Republic a country that was respected and admired around the world, but very quickly he encountered hostility in his own country. In his later writings, Havel describes his presidency as a banishment from a fairy tale: “It seemed to us that we were all bearers of the ideals of solidarity and the ideals of a kind of normality that in fact turned out to be the ideals of mediocrity, banality, and a petty-bourgeois philistinism. And then a dislike of the former dissidents flourished.”^{vii} [...]

“Shortly after the revolution and the regaining of freedom, there spread throughout public life a very peculiar kind of anti-Communist obsession as though some people who had been silent for years, who obediently went to vote, who only took care of themselves and were very careful not to stick their necks out, suddenly felt

a need to compensate with some mighty gesture for their previous humiliation, or the feeling -- or perhaps suspicion -- that they didn't rise to the occasion earlier. That's why they chose as their targets those who were the least judgmental of them, namely, the dissidents. Because they still regarded them as living pangs of conscience, as reminders of the fact that if someone didn't want to -- one didn't have to completely subordinate oneself. It's interesting that in times when dissidents seemed to be mad Don Quixotes, the resentment was not so great as later on, when history came out in their favor. [...]

“In the end, some new anti-Communists were more angry at them than at the representatives of the old regime. Out of this was born the strange legend that dissidents were “left-wing”, that they were “elitist” (how can someone who spent 10 years in a boiler room or in prison and never turned his nose up at anyone be considered an elitist?) or that they were insufficiently respectful of tried-and-true Western institutions, and so on. By the way, this ideology revealed a lot about itself in an article claiming that the dissidents played no special role in the fall of communism because communism was brought down by “normal” citizens behaving conventionally, that is, by putting their own private interests first, which meant that they may have stolen an occasional brick from a building site. That kind of thinking obviously resonates with a large part of the public which sees it as a confirmation that they made the right choices in life: now when it is permissible we praise capitalism to the skies and condemn anyone who thinks critically about it; earlier, when it was not possible we marched obediently to the polls to vote for the communists so we could, in peace and quiet, look after ourselves. And who is constantly stirring things up? The left-wing dissident!”^{viii}

Havel sees all this as “Czech small-mindedness “. Its philosophy? Do not meddle in someone else’s affairs. Instead, as he writes, “lean and stoop – we are surrounded by mountains, all the world’s turmoil will fly over our heads and we will play in our own backyard.”

“In modern Czech history” -- Havel often returned to this thought – “a situation repeatedly comes up in which society rises to some occasion but then its top leaders execute a retrieving maneuver, a side-step, a compromise; here they capitulate, there they give something up or sacrifice something, and they do it all, naturally, to save the nation’s very existence. And society, traumatized at first, quickly backs down, “understands” its leaders , and ultimately sinks into apathy or goes straight into a coma [...]. I was that way in the post-Munich period, then during the protectorate of 1939-1945, and finally in 1968 after the Soviet occupation. First you hear sentences like “They betrayed us”, “They sold us out”, “They conspired against us”. Next you hear “There is nothing to be done”, and it ends up with the shouting of nationalistic slogans, and speeches about “national interest”, and silent consent to the persecution of some minority. It’s the triumph of Czech small-mindedness in the worst possible sense of the word.”^{ix}

This national anti-virtue, and a character Havel calls ‘Czechaczek’ in its worst edition, wins.

“Czechaczek” is a symbol of obscurantism and hatred towards those who think differently. “We get rid of the Jews, then the Germans, then the bourgeoisie, then dissidents, then Slovaks—and who will be next in line? The Roma? Homosexuals? All foreigners? Who will be left? The pure-blooded little Czechs, "**Czechaczeks**" in their own little gardens.”^x

After 1980, “Czechaczek” reached for a more subtle formula: its most visible expression is now anti-Europeanism. This, according to Havel, “is essentially an expression of the same relationship to the world. Why should we have to consult with anyone? Why should we have to listen to anyone? Why should we share power with anyone? Why do we have to help someone else? Why do we care about their technical norms? We are quite sufficient unto ourselves. This is merely the new face of the familiar old Czechaczek, Czech small-mindedness.”

“But a word of caution” – says Havel: “The small-minded Czech will have the nerve to shout out the valiant slogans only if there is no danger to him; on the contrary, if he’s facing a powerful and cruel opponent he withdraws and ultimately becomes servile.”^{xi}

This is how Havel described the “Czechaczek” version of the mob.

VI. Opposition, populism and nationalism serve as tools in the struggle for power. Phrases about "standing up for ourselves" are a skillful trick for promoting a national dignity most simply understood. Nationalists and populists who gain power, on the other hand, use the very same clichés to divert attention from problems related to corruption, the destruction of the rule of law, and disastrous foreign policy. Enemies in other countries (like Soros !!) are easily found, and government is replaced by the operations of special services and the manipulation of human fear.

A Polish woman psychologist, a participant in many protests in defense of the Constitution, civil liberties and women's rights, expressed this clearly: "There can

be no compromise with neo-fascists. This is a cruel, inhuman – and forbidden – ideology that has been hidden in Poland in a small velvet purse. It is believed that as long as it does not resort to large-scale violence, it can exist on an equal footing with other ideologies. Baloney *Guzik prawda*. I want to take it from its purse and say: look, this is pure racism; and hence destructive hatred. There is no place for these views in the common space. [...] One must not incite hatred for racial reasons. If you do so, then you are outside of society and you must feel this rejection. There are more and more fascists because they have a complete sense of impunity.”

In turn, a well-known and popular musician says: “We live in times of widespread destruction. The destruction of people, their achievements, authority, the destruction of historical truth with lies are put into circulation. Freedom of thought is destroyed, opinions are silenced, works of art and their authors are destroyed or removed. There is no unharmed person in Poland today, no social group that is not held in contempt.”

Even if these opinions are exaggerated, they are worthy of serious reflection. They convey something very important.

VII.

The future seems hazy and unclear. That is why, in conclusion, I would like to quote opinions that provide possible directions for political debate.

Marie Le Pen explained to the French: "The French were deprived of patriotism, we suffered in silence, and we were not allowed to love our country."

This grim nonsense calculated for fools who are able to believe that black is white, shows that the disease suffered in countries like Poland and Hungary has in fact a universal dimension. The French also need to be reminded about the difference between the patriotism of de Gaulle from the patriotism of Pétain and Laval. It seems that Ms. Le Pen's dream is simply: France for the French – but those French who are obedient, who repeat stupid platitudes and remain completely free from enslavement by the spirits of Pascal, Montesquieu, Diderot, Camus, and Bernanos. This would be a very sad France, indeed, one I don't believe we'll see born. Such a France – a society of people deprived of free will, passive, conformists to any power; deprived of their creative powers, condemned to the fate of the infantile-militaristic community. No, no one can imagine such a France. France infected the world with freedom, and this virus of freedom can no longer be put back in a bottle.

A Chinese human rights defender, Liu Xiaobo, a participant in the 1989 protests in the Square of Heavenly Peace, literary critic and essayist, a 2010 Nobel Prize winner imprisoned until he lost his battle with cancer and was released two days before he died. Mr. Xiaobo, at the trial before his imprisonment, looked into the eyes of judges who were not judges but cruel officials of the regime, and said:

“I look forward impatiently to the day when my country will become a land of freedom, where the words of each citizen will be treated with equal attention. It is on this land that different values, ideas, denominations and political beliefs will both compete with each other and coexist peacefully.

Here, the views of the majority and minorities will be equally guaranteed, and those that are not in line with the authorities will receive full respect and protection. All political views under the sun will be sent here by citizens so that they can choose among them, every citizen will be able to express their political views without any fear, and they will not face political persecution due to their differences of opinion. I very much hope that in the endless sequence of literary inquisitions I will be their last victim and from that moment there will be no one else convicted for their words. Freedom of expression is the very foundation of human rights, the core of human nature; the source of truth. Attacks on freedom of speech are a violation of human rights, a suppression of human nature, a concealment of the truth.“

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in a world ruled by a Chinese leader who resembles the cruel emperor of the Mandarin age, in the world of Putin and Trump, in the world of Erdogan, Orban, and Kaczyński, I can add very little to these courageous words, steeped as they are in dignity and truth.

Translated by Elzbieta Matynia

with Karolina Koziura

ⁱ Kolakowski, *Anti-Semites: Five Familiar Theses*, in *Against Anti-Semitism*, Michnik- Marczyk,

ⁱⁱ L. Kolakowski, *Anti-Semites: Five Familiar Theses*, in *Against Anti-Semitism*, Michnik- Marczyk, ed., p. 143

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibidem*, p.149-50

^{iv} Havel, letters to Olga, p.235

^v *ibidem*, p. 236

^{vi} *ibidem* 364-5

^{vii} Could not find this quote

^{viii} Havel, *To the Castle and Back*, p. 15-16

^{ix} *Ibidem*, 118

^x ibidem, p.118-19

^{xi} ibidem, pg. 119