

The Polish Underground

by Lawrence W. Reed

Six years after the Polish government crushed the independent trade union Solidarity, many Americans think of Poland as a pacified and docile society, a country of perhaps reluctant but generally obedient subjects. So much for false impressions. Poland is nothing of the kind.

Beset by political oppression, food shortages, and a socialist system that produces more headaches than goods, Poles are dodging and weaving around the Communist regime of General Wojciech Jaruzelski in ways that defy a foreigner's imagination. What is percolating in Poland constitutes such a profound challenge to Marxist dogma that it seems sure to put the government on a collision course again with its own people.

I went to Poland for seven days in November 1986 to glimpse something of the nature and effectiveness of those who oppose the government there. Escorted by activists in Poland's newest and fastest-growing opposition group, known as the "Freedom and Peace Movement," I conducted many hours of interviews in Warsaw and Krakow. What I discovered goes far beyond anything I had expected.

Much to Oppose

To begin with, there is much for the opposition in Poland to oppose. Communism's promise of a better life has given way to appalling dirt and safety conditions in work places, sooty air which poses a major health

threat, frequent shortages of everything from gasoline to toilet paper, luxury living for party officials while the masses live at two-thirds the 1980 standard, and a housing crisis that would spark a revolution in most other countries.

The long lines that are so much a part of life in socialist nations are prevalent in Poland, too, though they seem to be shorter. Double-digit inflation in the past three years simply put many goods out of reach altogether for many people.

In Krakow, where two pounds of butter cost 100 *zlotys* five years ago, the same amount is priced at 500 today. Lemons were 30 *zlotys* for a small quantity then, 600 now. Bread was 12 *zlotys* five years ago, now it's 50. Meat and gasoline are among the items rationed.

(At the time of my visit the official exchange rate was 200 *zlotys* to the dollar; the black-market rate was 800 to the dollar.)

Shortages of materials and spare parts are so common that factories are idle for 12 hours of the average 42-hour workweek.

A 27-year-old student at Jagiellonian University in Krakow told me that 10 years ago, a salary of 5,000 *zlotys* a month was enough to get by comfortably. "Now I get 20,000 *zlotys* and that's not enough," he said.

Fifteen-Year Housing Wait

He also complained that the quality of many goods has declined. Shoes that last more than six months of normal wear, for instance, are hard to find except at exorbitant prices.

The housing shortage is so bad that the average waiting time to get an apartment is be-

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tween 15 and 20 years. In parts of Warsaw, the wait is as long as 25 years—in other words, until someone dies.

But throughout my visit, I couldn't help noticing the contrasts between Poland and what I have observed on previous journeys into the Soviet Union. In that context, Poland comes out the winner: Poles are friendlier and smile more easily than Russians; Polish store fronts are much more colorful and attractive; the general appearance of Polish cities is a bit less drab and monotonous than Russian cities.

A fascination with Americans and American culture helps to distract many Poles from their economic woes. Polish children play "cowboys and Indians" and yearn for American chewing gum. Old Bill Haley and the Comets records command a premium on the legal market. A very popular radio show features country music from the United States and is called *All the Roads Lead to Nashville*. Hot dogs, the ubiquitous "OK!" and a quiet popularity of Ronald Reagan underscore a society that feels a stronger bond to America than to its neighbor immediately to the East, the Soviet Union.

Another distraction is the bane of alcoholism. I saw men in drunken stupors staggering down alleys or sprawled on doorsteps with appalling frequency.

Foreign Debt

In its trade relations with non-Communist nations, Poland as a whole is in a stupor. The government is not able even to make the interest payments on its nearly \$35 billion external debt. Both imports and exports are dismally low for a partially industrialized nation of 38 million people.

Clearly, the Polish economy is yet another socialist basket case and a source of much discontent. But Poles have seen even worse economic times before, such as in World War II.

What motivates today's anti-government activism are *political* realities, not economic problems. Change the political structure to diffuse power and break the monopoly of the Communist Party, say leading spokesmen for the Polish underground, and the economic problems will go away.

The New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights recently issued a report that details systematic and brutal repression by the Warsaw government. It condemns the "100 per cent conviction rate" in the new system of 48-hour trials for political dissidents, the "persistent practice of violence by police under which defendants in custody have been beaten with regularity, and even murdered," and prosecutions of harmless political activity.

Not even the Roman Catholic Church, which commands the loyalties of 90 per cent of Poles, is immune. In a case that shocked the world, agents of the secret police in October 1984 abducted, tortured, and murdered "Solidarity's favorite priest," Father Jerzy Popieluszko. Three officers were convicted in that killing. Other priests who have spoken out against the regime have simply disappeared.

This is a country in which even the famous logo of Solidarity, written in its familiar jaunty style, cannot legally appear anywhere.

In this situation, the always resourceful Poles have actually formed a second, alternative society. This "parallel Poland" comes complete with private, illegal versions of virtually every aspect of official life—including the press, education, insurance, theater and the arts, radio, health care, and exchange rates.

The Underground

Solidarity's Wiktor Kulerski outlined the parallel society when he wrote this while in hiding: "This movement should create a situation in which authorities will control empty stores, but not the market; the employment of workers, but not their livelihood; the official media, but not the circulation of information; printing plants, but not the publishing movement; the mail and telephones, but not communications; and the school system, but not education."

At a dinner party one evening in Krakow, hosted secretly for me by several underground printers, I was dazzled with the scope of what my hosts called "independent publishing ventures." They had translated and printed works by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Irving Kristol, Michael Novak, George Orwell, Milton Friedman, and Ayn Rand, among others. I was able to smuggle two works out of the country:



Banner proclaiming "Freedom and Peace."

Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Novak's *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*.

That particular dinner party featured some of the best food of the week, including a delicious Polish sauerkraut-like dish known as "Bigos." I asked permission to take a photograph of the table filled with a dozen colorful dishes and was politely refused.

"If the authorities ever get your film, they will use the picture as propaganda—to complain that the underground eats like rich capitalists," said one of my hosts. Almost everything I ate that evening had been secured at considerable sacrifice through illegal channels.

"Where do you get the paper for all this printing?" I inquired. The response made me roar with laughter: "We get it two ways. We smuggle some in from the West, and we steal the rest from Communists, which we regard as recovering property which was stolen in the first place."

Later in the week, I learned from a professor at the University of Warsaw that economics

students there are quietly required to read some of the greatest works of free-market scholars—many of which are banned in Poland.

Illicit Publishing

Seven illicit publishing houses in the country together produce 200 books a year in editions of up to 10,000, according to *The New York Times* (December 31, 1986). When the government recently mounted a campaign to confiscate the cars of their distributors, the publishers banded together and formed their own underground insurance company to cover the confiscation of cars, paper, and materials.

Meanwhile, entire "underground universities" flourish in the major cities, holding classes and conducting research in the most unlikely places: warehouses, basements, churches, and even the state's own university buildings after hours.

On the black market, Poles are producing and trading everything from vodka to automo-

biles. It seems there's no Pole who isn't trading *zlotys* for dollars at three and four times the legal rate. Rumor has it in Warsaw that even private banks paying interest on deposits have sprung up. The Polish economy, it seems, is being "privatized" whether the government likes it or not!

All this activity "under the table" supports and encourages an ever bolder political opposition. In recent months, the group which has concerned the government more than even the smoldering remnants of Solidarity is the one which arranged my schedule and provided my escorts—Freedom and Peace. A story in the November 4, 1986, *Washington Post* referred to this group as having "gained the support of thousands of young people and ushered in a new generation of opposition leadership eager to test communist authorities."

Restless for Change

In meetings with dozens of these Poles in their late teens, 20s, and early 30s, I was stunned by their depth of commitment and high degree of sophistication. They are the intelligentsia of Polish anti-Communists, extremely knowledgeable of world affairs and on the ideological offensive. They are restless for change and willing to endure imprisonment or worse to make change happen.

The issue that brought Freedom and Peace into existence in 1985 was the refusal of more and more young people to take the oath required upon induction into the military. They are not pacifists, but they do object to swearing allegiance to the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact alliance.

Through hunger strikes, sit-ins, petition drives, and acts of civil disobedience, Freedom and Peace activists and sympathizers have

sought with some success to pressure the government to release from prison those who refuse the oath.

In spite of all manner of harassment—beatings, torture, wire-tapping, imprisonment, and so on—Freedom and Peace has only broadened its appeal and its agenda.

It defies the government with a fund-raising campaign on behalf of Afghans wounded as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It condemns "socialist pollution" which has wreaked havoc on the air and water in Poland. It champions equal rights for women, and the democratic ideals of a free press and free elections. Its members read and distribute literature that criticizes the planned economy, pokes fun at Marxist dogma, and calls for a "free enterprise liberation" of the Polish economy.

Its leadership has even made several contacts with so-called "peace" groups in the West—in an attempt to convince them that, in the words of spokesman Jacek Czaputowicz, "without freedom there can be no peace." Speaking of Western naïveté about the Soviets and their intentions, Freedom and Peace cofounder Jan Rokita declares, "A government which makes war against its own people cannot be trusted to make peace with its neighbors."

This is strong stuff to be said and done in a captive nation, but Poles throughout their tortured history have always shown they are up to the task. Freedom and Peace is carrying on in a grand tradition of Polish patriots—and maybe even expanding the limits of creative, non-violent combat.

Visiting this troubled but intriguing place called Poland renewed my appreciation for those who struggle against oppression. What the people of Poland must endure is appalling, but how they cope with it is fascinating. □

The Politics of Unemployment

by John Chamberlain

We are living in an age of deregulation. It has paid off in oil prices, in trucking, in airplane tickets, and in telecommunications. But the politicians, mindful of the big unions, persist in a refusal to apply deregulation to wages.

Hans F. Sennholz, who is well known to readers of *The Freeman*, argues that the political fixation on a compulsory minimum wage is a primary cause of unemployment. He is inexorable about his contention in a no-holds-barred book called *The Politics of Unemployment* (Libertarian Press, Spring Mills, PA 16875, 356 pp., \$19.95 cloth). He also deals with a lot of other things that keep wages from falling to market-clearing levels that would permit full employment. There is the Davis-Bacon Act, which keeps construction costs high. There is the Wagner Act and the Norris-La Guardia Anti-Injunction Act and the Railway Labor Act of 1926. All of them bear out Ludwig von Mises' contention that interventionism imposes costs that hurt the ultimate consumer, to say nothing about investors who are being robbed of their capital. But the coercive minimum wage is Hans Sennholz's *bête noire*.

Walter Williams has thoroughly exposed the effects of the minimum wage on young people, particularly black teenagers. But this, according to Sennholz, is just the tip of the iceberg. Recent research, he says, confirms that "only about one-third of low-wage earners are teenagers; almost one-half are twenty-five to sixty-four years of age; two-thirds of the low-wage population are believed to be female; and some ten per cent are individuals sixty-five

years old or older." Taken together, low-wage earners comprise some ten per cent of the American labor force. Any further rise in the minimum wage would make it uneconomic for an employer to hire people who can't earn their keep.

Sennholz is concerned that the unemployment rate of black youth in recent years has ranged between forty and fifty per cent, which is double the rate for white teenagers. But he is equally concerned for unskilled women, and especially unskilled workers in hotels, restaurants, hospitals, laundries, and automotive service stations. These workers must live continuously with the danger of being fired when the minimum wage is raised.

Toward the end of his book Sennholz zeroes in on Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans, being U.S. citizens, can quit their tropical island if better opportunities beckon on the mainland. Some 1.5 million have gone to the continental U.S., leaving 3.5 million at home, where they welcome remittances from their departed kin.

Sennholz says the fact that the unemployment rate in Puerto Rico often greatly exceeds the U.S. national average is puzzling. The federal government levies no taxes on Puerto Rico save for Social Security, workers' compensation, and other labor benefits. Puerto Rican residents pay no taxes on income earned from local sources. And the U.S. government employs thousands of Puerto Ricans at the Naval Station at Roosevelt Roads and other Federal facilities. But none of this keeps the island from being what Sennholz calls "an overcrowded poorhouse" where "many people