

General Jaruzelski meets the Pope

by Tadeusz Rejtan

For every Pole, Italy is "the land where the lemon ripens," as the great poet Adam Mickiewicz wrote in his transposition of Goethe's famous poem. Many also know and sing the beautiful *lied* composed on Mickiewicz's verses by Styanislaw Moniusko. For every Pole, that is, except for Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski. For him, Italy will remain the country where the thornbush grows.

Indeed, Jaruzelski's two-day visit to Rome on Jan. 12 and 13, was far from pleasurable. Not only was he met by thousands of hostile demonstrators chanting "Lech Walesa" and "Solidarność," but he was also subjected to a cross-fire of questions and accusations coming from the leaders of the three trade union confederations—whatever their own reasons may be. Prime Minister Bettino Craxi himself hardly hid his reluctance at greeting the man who rules Poland on behalf of Moscow. The only smiling face Jaruzelski saw during his stay in Rome was that of Fiat boss Gianni Agnelli. But the latter has his own, not too holy reasons to court the Polish regime: to sabotage Japan's Eastern Europe strategy.

And then occurred the crucial event of this Italian trip, the 70-minute meeting with the Pope. It is for this meeting that the Vatican had the Italian government invite Jaruzelski, and that the latter accepted, among other things, the humiliation of being lectured on human rights in general and labor rights in particular.

Vatican's Polish concerns

We will probably never know what exactly was said during the exceptionally long meeting John Paul II had with Jaruzelski. But it is certain that the general sent a message from Gorbachov. Whether a letter was actually delivered, as rumored, or not, everything indicates that Jaruzelski's assignment was to draft the Pope into Gorbachov's anti-SDI "peace campaign." It is also known what the "carrot" part of the pressuring was: a conditional promise by Moscow to allow the Pope to visit Vilnius (Polish Wilno) in Lithuania, a mostly Catholic Republic of the Soviet Union, where a strong Polish minority lives to this day. The other "carrot" would be a possible participation of the Pope in the 1988 celebration of the 1,000 anniversary of (Byzantine) Christianity in Russia, or, more exactly, Rus.

One can but imagine what the "stick" was: Gorbachov has a broad range of threats at his disposal, not excluding that of sending a new Ali Agca.

But the meeting was also considered of extreme importance by the Pope himself. John Paul II, and the Polish bishops around him, consider it vital that he be able to visit Poland this year. His meeting with Jaruzelski, and the possibility that the latter could make political mileage out of it, was not too high a price to pay, considering the stakes. Despite the ostensible optimism of the regime's economists, the Polish economy is on the verge of collapse. Short of a massive inflow of Western productive capital, which considering the present situation is, to say the least, highly improbable, the only policy the Polish government can think of is more austerity. The recently published World Bank report on Poland, which has been endorsed by the "reformist" clique, criticizes the regime for having let real wages fall by "only" 20% between 1980 and 1985. Poles are castigated for "consuming too much" at the expense of investment! The World Bank/International Monetary Fund medicine for Poland, the condition for issuing desperately needed credit, includes a "balanced market situation," i.e. a massive price increase for consumer goods, including food.

It is exactly this type of measure that, in the past, led repeatedly to social unrest in Poland. In December 1970, this triggered the bloody massacres of striking workers in the main cities of the Baltic coast, and the subsequent fall of Wladislaw Gomulka. In 1976, the violent repression of strikes in the town of Radom and at the Ursus tractor plant near Warsaw, led to the emergence of an organized working-class political opposition to the regime. Austerity in 1980, led to the August strike wave and the birth of Solidarność. The only time the regime managed to implement massive price hikes without a major social upheaval was in 1982, under the State of Emergency.

In the present situation, an attempt to "bring the market to a state of equilibrium" will undoubtedly unleash a desperate wave of protest which could only have tragic consequences. Only John Paul II has the moral authority to prevent a confrontation in which the only loser would be the Polish people. This is what he intends to achieve during his pilgrimage to his native country this coming June. This is why he agreed to shake Jaruzelski's hand in public.

Pope John Paul II presented the departing Jaruzelski with the Japanese edition of a book containing reproductions of the art in the Sistine Chapel. One could hope that this gesture would indicate support for a Polish technological renaissance, through developing a policy of technological and economic exchange with Japan. Pope John Paul II's gift to Jaruzelski was presented, after all, directly before Jaruzelski's return to Poland, directly before Jaruzelski's return to Poland, where his next head of state agenda item was to receive Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone. It is hard to say who lost more sleep from the Pope's gesture, Jaruzelski or Agnelli.