

Poland at a crossroads between chaos and cultural flowering

by Frank Hahn

The following travelogue, shortened here, originally appeared in July in the West German weekly Neue Solidarität. Frank Hahn is a member of the Schiller Institute in Germany.

A visit to our neighbor Poland in the summer of 1990 awakens the happy sense that Europe is no longer divided. Despite the visa restriction which is still in effect, crossing the Oder River from East Germany is as routine as crossing the Rhine into Strasbourg, France. Following the turmoil of the last few years, we are traveling not into a desolate region where we are met with hardened faces full of fear and mistrust, where anger, hatred, and brutal violence keeps both resident and visitor alike in chains. No—now we can finally experience the land to the east of the Oder as part of the old Europe and of the Europe about to be created anew. We experienced Poland as a friend, as a neighbor, and as a great cultural nation which will firmly take its place among the concert of the new Europe of the fatherlands.

Images of the country

As representatives of the Schiller Institute, we had been invited to hold political talks and to establish contacts with the country and its people. If one is to travel to Poland with an open heart, one must first make up one's mind to bury some prejudices. The idea that everything east of the Oder River must be a lot grayer and uglier and more run-down than even in East Germany, is quickly corrected. The West German visitor is amazed at the well-constructed streets, the relatively quick pace and good condition of the railways—in short, the condition of this country's infrastructure is by and large quite passable.

The people, despite having to do without many things, radiate a sense of happiness. Much value is placed on maintaining a good personal appearance and being tastefully clothed.

But without a doubt the most impressive thing was Poland's cities. Gdansk, Poznan, and Warsaw, whose centers had been 90% destroyed in the last war, can now be counted among the most beautiful cities of Europe, with their historically faithful reconstructions of their center cities. The spacious main thoroughfare of Gdansk, with its picturesque

gabled facades dating from the time when it was a member of the Hanseatic League, and terminated on both ends with artistic Renaissance-era gates, are unmatched throughout the entire Baltic region.

The old courthouse in Poznan, reconstructed in typical Renaissance style, surrounded by the crowded, colorful fifteenth-century houses with their arched entrances, is impressive not only because of its architecture, but also because of the quite visibly immense accomplishment of reconstructing it all.

The crowning high-point of this Polish city-building culture is Warsaw. Admittedly, the area around the main railroad station is a symbol of the brutal ugliness of the dominance of the two superpowers: on one's left there juts out the Cultural Palace, which, built in the Stalinist confectionary style, was a "gift" to the Poles (who had to finance it themselves, of course). To the right, the no less ugly glass palace of the American Marriott Hotel disfigures the cityscape. But the castle which towers over the Vistula River and was completely rebuilt in only seven years, the plazas and little streets of the Old City with their colorful houses dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth century, and the broad boulevards with their bright, gleaming representative classical buildings—all of these elevate Warsaw into one of Europe's most beautiful cities.

What an immense drive, will to survive, and zeal for labor we see here, and especially, what deep respect for history and culture! A city with nearly 2 million inhabitants, completely leveled to the ground: Should one set about to reconstruct it, or should one not build a completely new, featureless one from the ground up, one lacking any personality? The Poles have decided to save their nation and their own soul, and in Warsaw they have created a masterwork of fine art, which, to be sure, has a long way to go before it is completed.

This thought has special force for the German visitor who has seen the horrible example of East Germany. One thinks about East Germany's ugliness-by-decree as a means of degrading its people: Even in those places where some effort was made at reconstruction, such as in Dresden, one cannot escape the impression of ugliness in its very artificiality. For

Dresden was not reconstructed as an entire city, but instead only one part of it was turned into a museum area—and even that was clumsily done.

Looking for work

To put the situation briefly: No one here is going hungry in Poland, but certainly no one can live on their regular wages. The average monthly income is 500,000 zloty (about \$60 at the current exchange rate). Of that, an average of 150,000 zlotys must go for rent, and, following the 100% price hikes on July 1, another 150,000 zlotys goes for gas and electricity. The remaining 200,000 zlotys are of course not nearly enough to get by on: For that amount one person could eat a good meal, with meat and vegetables and perhaps a little vodka to top it off, no more than once a week. A family of four needs an income of 2 million zlotys in order to more or less survive. Under these conditions, it is quite understandable that thousands of people can be found waiting in long lines in front of the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw, in order to get a visa for entering the United States. Whether in the United States, in France, or in Germany, Poles are looking everywhere for a couple of months' employment abroad so that they can live without trouble for a few years at home. And here we won't even speak of the Polish small-time traders who shuttle between Lodz and Berlin. If the labor which Poland is currently losing through the black market trade and work stints abroad could be applied instead to the construction of Poland itself, within a very short time the country could develop a flourishing domestic economy.

Going beyond ideologies

But is this overall picture perhaps a little too rosy? Aren't the Poles in reality a lazy people, dirty, and alcoholic to boot?

Where did all these ugly slanders come from, and why have prejudices and mistrust erected such barriers between Poles and Germans? Some hints toward a full answer can perhaps be found by comparing Poland to East Germany.

The Poles, who we generally found to have a very friendly attitude toward Germany, have always regarded the German Democratic Republic as a fascist country. On the most obvious level, this was tied to the activities of the East German secret police, the Stasi, in Poland itself, and the Stasi's training of the Polish secret police.

But let us ask ourselves: Isn't there something unique about the deadly perfectionism with which Germans built their communism behind barbed wire and cement, something which in the final analysis was impossible to achieve either in Poland, or in Czechoslovakia, or in Hungary? Would Poles have shot at their own people who were wanted the cross the Vistula from East Warsaw into West Warsaw?

The blind zeal, the extinguishing of all human emotion in the fulfillment of one's duty, the resulting cold-bloodedness of betraying even one's own family in the service of the system—are these qualities not especially marked in the

German style of communism? Have Germans' minds not become assailed and atrophied by the unholy threesome Kant, Hegel, and Bismarck, more so than we would care to admit?

As mentioned before, the German Democratic Republic was built on one fundamental principle: ugliness. Even in its public edifices, where the bestial stink of chemical antiseptics still reminds one of war, prison, or times of misery, the primitive tastelessness of plastic furniture reigns supreme. In Poland, at least one sees an effort to achieve a certain elegance of style. And when one looks at the brilliant artistry of Poland's reconstructed cities, it is no longer possible to believe that lack of financial means has been the sole cause for the deterioration and collapse of East Germany's cities. No, the rule of ugliness had been raised into a method. A life led only in the colors gray and brown was meant to deform people into strict uniformity. The very idea of a German nation had to be extinguished. Concepts such as fatherland or nation were supplanted by words such as "our territory"—what a mockery of the German language!

Poland, on the other hand, remained a nation following the war. And even many communists considered themselves Polish patriots first and ideological zealots only after that. After 1945, Poland's century-long conflict with Russia led to an attempt to keep alive as much of the Polish nation, the desire for freedom and of Polish culture as possible—to save the Polish soul, as were. And preserving individuality was possibly only through beauty—as exemplified in Poland's cities.

This is not to overlook or deny the very real problems of Polish ideology. The tendency to wallow in the the nation's misfortunes, Poles' legendary chaos in acting and thinking, their frequent dishonesty toward each other, and much more—these would be a subject in its own right. And before we self-righteously wrinkle our noses at Poland we had better consider what we can give Poland, and what it can give to us.

The coincidence of opposites

There is in my opinion no better figure than the great Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa, who can unite Germans and Poles on a higher level. The deep religiosity which marked his entire life, and his rigorous scientific method unite, so to speak, the best sides of Germans and Poles. The concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the unity of opposites on a higher level, as developed by Nicolaus of Cusa, should be raised up as an ideal not only for Germany and Poland, but for the growing together of all Europe. This new higher level of commonality can only find expression in the conviction that every human individual is sacred and must be considered inviolable in his dignity, and that the creative power of all individuals in our nation is the sole source of progress. Only the political power which recognizes and demands adherence to these principles, has won its legitimacy.