

Letter From Poland

by Mark Wegierski

Polish-German Reconciliation in an Historic Town



On August 29, 2004, just before my departure from Poland, I attended an important ceremony at the small, historic town of Nieszawa, which lies near the Vistula River, about 200 kilometers northwest of Warsaw, in the Kujawy-Pomorze (Kuyavia-Pomerania) region or Voivodeship (Województwo). It was a sunny and rather hot day. The town, which currently has about 2,200 residents, was founded in the 15th century. Before World War II, Poles and Germans had lived side by side in Nieszawa for centuries. During the time of the Partitions (1795-1918), when Poland was under the occupation of three foreign powers, the town lay close to the border between Prussia/Germany and czarist Russia. When independent Poland was reborn in 1918, the town became a county seat (*miasto powiatowe*) and attracted some illustrious residents.

Nieszawa is the first municipality in Poland to unveil a monument to both Polish and German victims of World War II. Like all cities, towns, and villages in German-occupied Poland, Nieszawa suffered extensively at the hands of the Germans. Many of the town's Polish residents—especially its intellectual and political leaders—were executed outright, sent to concentration camps, or conscripted for slave labor locally. In April 1945, in the aftermath of war, those Germans who had chosen to remain (mostly women, children, and the elderly) were drowned in the frigid waters of the Vistula at the instigation of the communist security police.

In the early 1990's, the parish priest of Nieszawa, Fr. Wojciech Sowa, a highly educated and cultured man, began to lay the groundwork for the eventual construction of the monument whose dedication I was attending. The monument is a testimony to voluntary, personal initiatives between once-hostile nations, which are often the best road toward any meaningful reconciliation.

The ceremony on August 29 was the culmination of many years of endeavor. The event began in the more than 500-year-old Church of St. Jadwiga, with a Remembrance Mass followed by a Lutheran Divine Service. The liturgies were followed by a procession to the very spot on to the shores of the Vistula where the murders had taken place in 1945. Subsequently, the crowd gathered around the actual monument, also near the shores of the Vistula, and various sonorous speeches were given. Nieszawa was represented by its current mayor, Andrzej Nawrocki, and there were representatives of the county (*powiat*) such as Janusz Chmielewski, chief executive of the county council. Along with most of the town's current residents, Dr. Gustave Bekker (a German expellee whose father had been murdered near Nieszawa in 1945), Stephan Hilsberg (a member of the Bundestag), and Julia Hilpner (a cultural attache of the German Embassy), as well as over 250 other Germans—World War II survivors or their descendants—were at the ceremony. Dr. Bekker had initiated and carried forward the idea of the monument, as part of his long-time activism on behalf of German-Polish reconciliation.

That the Roman Catholic Church takes up such activities of reconciliation is entirely apposite. Indeed, the inscription on the monument reads (in both Polish and German): "We forgive and ask for forgiveness." In response to a German Lutheran initiative in 1965, the Polish Roman Catholic hierarchy, in its "Letter of the Polish Bishops" (November 18, 1965), had uttered that magnanimous phrase.

Five million Christian Poles perished during World War II (as well as three million Polish Jews). Although Stalin's regime was clearly genocidal toward Poles in 1939-41, at least three million Polish Christian deaths during World War II can be attributed directly to the exterminatory policies of Nazi Germany—rather than, for example, military casualties. Also, even before the outbreak of the war, the Polish minority within the Third Reich was severely persecuted, and few survived.

The Polish-German conflict was further exacerbated in the aftermath of the war by the Stalin-mandated shift of Poland's boundaries westward; while Poland lost huge territories in the east to the

Soviet Union, she gained considerable lands in the west at German expense. In Stalin's conception, these would bind Poland forever to a pro-Russian orientation, because of Polish fear of German revanchism. The new boundaries were roughly similar to those of early medieval Poland. Much of the German population had fled with Hitler's retreating soldiers before the arrival of the Soviet armies, whose behavior toward German civilians was savage. Some of the Germans who remained may have felt that they had behaved relatively decently during the war and would thus be shielded by their Polish neighbors from persecution. Nevertheless, the boundary shift created its own imperative, as destitute, homeless Poles streamed in from the east, and the expulsion of the German population was seen as rightful retribution. It was also abundantly clear that—whatever reservations some Poles might have had about the expulsion of the civilian German population—Stalin himself wanted the expulsions to happen. Much of the brutality that accompanied the expulsions should be ascribed to the communist security apparatus, a significant portion of which did not (at that time) consist of Poles.

Compared to the treatment of the Polish nationalist resistance against Soviet communism, the treatment of the civilian German population was better. In fact, a civil war raged throughout Poland until the late 1940's. It has been nearly forgotten that over 100,000 Poles died resisting Soviet communism after 1945. Furthermore, tens of thousands of Polish resistance fighters (who had fought against Hitler since 1939) were rounded up and sent to the Soviet Gulag, from which most of the survivors were not released until 1956.

Although the Polish Communist Party had attempted to use the Polish Bishops' letter to stir up Polish nationalist feeling against the Church, that letter undoubtedly played an important role in the 1970 normalization of relations between Poland and West Germany, including the recognition of the new Polish frontiers (the so-called Odra-Nysa border) by West Germany.

There are at least three factors that weigh heavily on the future of German-Polish relations. First, there is the inherent asymmetry of relations between one

country whose economy is ten or eleven times larger than that of the other, and whose population is more than twice as large. Many Poles express fear that the Germans will simply be able to “buy up” Poland. There is also a troubling asymmetry between the very robust advance of German minority claims in Poland and the unfortunate situation of Polish minorities in the east.

Second, in Western Europe (as well as in North America) today, the vast extent of Nazi Germany’s evil against Slavic countries and peoples is curiously deemphasized. This leads to a situation in which some Germans may believe that, while they are obligated to defer to other groups, they are allowed to express pronounced disdain for the Poles. Indeed, the motives for some Germans’ condemnation of Poles as hidebound reactionaries are rather suspect.

This leads to the third factor—the problems with the establishment of the European Union. As a country with pronounced traditionalism, nationalism, and conservatism, Poland may indeed be out of sorts with the kind of European Union envisaged by the French, German, and Benelux socialists. Polish critics of the European Union sometimes refer to it as the “Fourth Reich” (*i.e.*, a covert vehicle for German hegemony over Europe) or as a “new Soviet Union” (*i.e.*, a bureaucratic socialist nightmare).

It is sometimes fascinating to watch how long-held animosities are affected by the massive transformations and trans-

mogrifications which most Western societies have undergone in the 20th century. For example, the basis for holding some ethnic groups in disdain is no longer ostensibly “traditional” but “progressive.” Eastern Europeans are often considered today to be “backward”—irredeemably “unprogressive”—and as suitable targets for “enlightened” reeducation projects. The underlying feeling is that people “from there,” holding those sorts of views, simply *cannot* be permitted to hold responsible positions in society. Hence, we see what could be called—to borrow the term from another context—“respectable bigotry.”

The Polish nationalist perspective on Germany is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, there is the fear of an aggressive, economically superior Germany. On the other, there may be some recognition that Germany is much different from what she was before and is indeed facing—like most Western countries—an impending demographic and socio-cultural crisis. Across the Polish political spectrum, there are convergences and divergences in attitudes toward Germany that cannot be predictively tied to partisan affiliation. The pre-World War II National Democracy movement, now frequently pilloried by the politically correct left in Poland, was, in fact, dynamically anti-German. In the 1930’s, the Polish National Democrats perceived with clarity the dangers of Hitler and argued for a close alliance with Czechoslovakia. Among most “progressives” today,

the Polish National Democrats have an unwarranted reputation as Nazi sympathizers. Although the National Democrats certainly had pronounced anti-Jewish elements, they were also among the most courageous anti-Nazis in occupied Poland and suffered disproportionately to their numbers. On the other hand, one finds among some sectors of the Polish politically correct left today an exaggerated Germanophilia—views sometimes expressed in Adam Michnik’s *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the largest and most profitable mass-circulation newspaper in Poland.

One helpful element in German-Polish relations might be the recognition by Poles of a German “conservative anti-Nazi” outlook during World War II and its aftermath. It seems clear that, today, when German conservatism, nationalism, and traditionalism are largely proscribed by political correctness, whatever German national feeling remains will have a tendency to seek expression in pathological forms or to attempt to gain political legitimacy by blackening the Poles through “progressive”-sounding condemnations. In fact, in most Western countries, it could be argued that it is precisely by giving political scope and legitimacy to authentic conservative traditions that various Nazi-like aberrations of the fringe can be reduced.

That the German-Polish dialogue has been led by the Christian churches is not at all surprising: It is precisely the Christian ideal of forgiveness that can be an answer to ever-spiraling cycles of hatred, resentment, and crude vengeance.

Mark Wegierski writes from Toronto.

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Letter From the Upper Midwest

by Sean Scallon

Life in the Iron Range



At Mineview in the Sky, a tourist attraction in Virginia, Minnesota, you can see, with binoculars that cost a quarter to operate, white smoke rising from the top of hills laden with iron ore that are still being mined, while the towns around them sit nestled in the valley below.

Three decades ago, no one would have