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Tadeusz Mazowiecki *in memoriam*

Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a Catholic intellectual, a major promoter in Poland of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, member of the *Znak* Club of Members of Parliament, co-founder and editor of the *Więź* monthly and the *Tygodnik Solidarność* weekly, advisor to the Solidarity Trade Union, a dissident and subsequently Central Europe's first non-Communist Prime Minister, United Nations reporter in the Balkans, co-author of a text of the Polish Constitution and supporter of European integration, died on October 28, 2013 in Warsaw. Without a doubt, the most memorable moment which made the name of this statesman in modern history was his appointment to the office of Prime Minister on August 24, 1989. Tadeusz Mazowiecki's historical significance resulted from his fundamental decisions which gave rise to the restructuring of Poland's political and economic system and his persistent strife to protect Polish interests internationally by stressing the sovereignty of the country's policies and lastingly securing Poland's national interests in a volatile external environment. His accomplishments were by no means limited to the time following 1989. Tadeusz Mazowiecki's ideology, which had evolved since the post-World-War-II period, and the experience he had amassed during the successive stages of his public and social activities, all bear testimony to a whole era in Polish history and have laid the foundation for actions and decisions he took in the highest echelons of power at times which defined Europe's new contemporary landscape. A vital thread in Tadeusz Mazowiecki's long and eventful life were relations with Germany in which he played a major role ever since the first attempts to establish social and inter-denominational dialogue. His consistent and unpretentious Christian views shaped his personality as well as his approach to politics and social activism.

Tadeusz Mazowiecki (born 1927) belonged to a generation which bore the burden of having personally experienced the war and occupation: "The end of the war was also a difficult time for our family. It was a time of anxiety, of waiting for my brother Wojciech, who got arrested towards the very end of the occupation, to return from the Stutthof concentration camp. Regrettably, he never came back". His confrontation with the post-war realities of Communist Poland, including the treatment of Germany and Germans, was not easy for people who openly expressed their Christian views. Mazowiecki was unable to establish any international contacts until October 1956 when a thaw period made it possible to set up Catholic Intelligentsia Clubs. It was at that time that the *Tygodnik Powszechny* weekly, then restored under a proper editorial team, as well as the *Więź* monthly, which was edited under the guidance of Tadeusz Mazowiecki himself, turned out to be the organizations of choice for West and East Germans searching for contacts in Poland. This was also a time when Polish intellectuals and publicists benefited from rare opportunities to attend international congresses and meetings which, in Mazowiecki's case, included those organized by *Pax Romana* and the Catholic press. Certain events, such as Günter Särchen's personal visits to Poland, the work of the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, Anna Morawska's and Tadeusz Mazowiecki's essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and, last but not least, the spiritual and intellectual changes in the follow-up to the Second Vatican Council, all made people believe they needed to engage in dialogue with Germans to come to terms with the tragic events of the war and end the isolation which had resulted from the political division of Europe. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who at that time served as editor of *Więź* as well as a Catholic activist and a Member of Parliament associated with the parliamentary Club *Znak*, gained the opportunity to confront the ideals upheld by such groups with the official propaganda line which dwelled on the stereotype of a constant eternal threat from Germany to justify Poland's alliance with the Soviet Union, which was a central factor determining its status.

The Address by Polish Bishops to the German Brothers in Christ signed in Rome at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council on November 18, 1965, was a message of forgiveness and a request to forgive which provoked outrage from the Polish authorities which concluded that "the bishops have made irresponsible inroads into the world of politics". Three years later, an even more dramatic parliamentary debate which followed an intervention by members of the *Znak* Club in defense of the students who took part in the March events, showed clearly that options to remain active in politics without compromising one's values were running out. The elapse of the 5th term of office of the Parliament of the People's Republic of Poland brought an end to Tadeusz Mazowiecki's parliamentary engagement. His consistent upholding of his beliefs naturally placed him amidst the emerging opposition to the existing system.



The copious articles published in *Więź* in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, including “Poland-Germany and the Bensberger Kreis Memorandum” (*Więź* 5/1968), “The Visit at Cardinal König’s” (*Więź* 9/1969), “Poland-Germany-Europe: the New Chapter” (*Więź* 12/1970), or “He Learned to Believe Amidst Heavy Beating” (*Więź* 12/1971), demonstrates how much Mazowiecki cared about relations with Germany, which became slightly easier for religious communities after the signing of the Treaty of Warsaw. Even during the 1980s, when the developments in Poland made Tadeusz Mazowiecki one of the leading Solidarity activists and a close associate of Lech Wałęsa, he retained keen interest in relations with the country’s Western neighbors. When in August 1989 the media mentioned his name as a candidate for the office of Central Europe’s first non-Communist Prime Minister, which caused a great deal of bewilderment, his links with Germany made a regional paper published in the Palatinate run the headline: *In Trier ist er kein Unbekannter*, as a reference to Tadeusz Mazowiecki’s stays in Catholic Academiesⁱⁱ.

The extent of the victory by the Solidarity opposition in the June 4, 1989 election required rapid political turnarounds, as referred to in brief in the titles of Adam Michnik’s polemic (“Wasz prezydent, nasz premier” (“Your President, Our Prime Minister”) in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily edition of July 3, 1989) with Tadeusz Mazowiecki (“Spiesz się powoli” (“Hurry Slowly”) in the *Tygodnik Solidarność* weekly of July 14, 1989) which eventually led to the appointment of the latter as Prime Minister. Due to the situation which arose in the initial months of its rule, the new government, formed officially on September 12, 1989, was forced to urgently address the question of the two German states and the border along the Oder and Nysa Łużycka Rivers. The Prime Minister’s choice of the Minister of Foreign Affairs who, contrary to expectations, stemmed from the ranks of the outgoing political force, sent a clear message to the international community to the effect that the new cabinet was fully sovereign. The Minister, i.e. prof. Krzysztof Skubiszewski, turned out to be a pivotal figure due not least to his excellent credentials. The domino-effect events which unfolded during the Autumn of the Nations required instant decisions whose impact would extend far into the future.

The relations with Germany (and initially with both German states) during Tadeusz Mazowiecki’s brief but eventful time in office were shaped by decisions enshrined in treaties and other legislative instruments as well as by the newly emergent social and institutional landscape. Equally important was the international scene which was also largely in a state of flux. Mazowiecki’s initial days in power coincided with a wave of defections from East Germany by its citizens who sought refuge in West German embassies, including the one in Warsaw. The problem faced by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was to agree terms with East Berlin authorities for the safe passage of trains carrying such refugees to West



Germany. All of Poland's neighboring countries carried on as usual under their Communist rule with numerous Red Army bases remaining in their territories. In October, a few days after East Germany solemnly celebrated its 40th anniversary, Erich Honecker gave up his posts in the party and the state administration. Soon after the November Velvet Revolution in Prague, violent developments in Bucharest put an abrupt end to the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Helmut Kohl's November visit to Poland, which included a symbolic exchange of the sign of peace during a Church Service in Krzyżowa, was interrupted by the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. The sheer momentum gained by all these developments seemed powerful enough to lead to the reunification of the two German states. Tadeusz Mazowiecki realized that it was necessary before the German nation's sovereign right are recognized, to unequivocally acknowledge the Polish-German border on the Oder and Nysa Łużycka Rivers as inviolable and final in the shape set out in the December 7, 1970 treaty between the People's Republic of Poland and West Germany. It was critical to settle the border issue once and for all so it would not hinder Germany's reunification or stand in the way of Polish-German reconciliation which at the time was becoming official, allowing interpersonal relations across the rivers to normalize. Mazowiecki found Helmut Kohl to be a reliable partner. The two spoke the same language as they shared the experience of the same generation and subscribed to the values upheld by rapidly changing Europe. Kohl was a seasoned and determined politician who took good care of his domestic constituents. Both politicians were powerful personalities well aware of their historical context and the significance of their momentous decisions. A good illustration of the time, and one which provides excellent insights into the personalities of both figures, is a record of Tadeusz Mazowiecki's telephone conversation with Helmut Kohl of February 23, 1990 as featured in the Prime Minister's book "Rok 1989 i lata następne"ⁱⁱⁱ ("1989 and beyond") published in 2012.

The diplomatic work carried out by Krzysztof Skubiszewski with the support of the head of government, allowed Poland to participate in the 2+4 conference on border issues and Germany's reunification held in multiple sessions between March and September 1989. Soon after its conclusion, a treaty between Poland and West Germany was signed in Warsaw on November 14, 1990 reaffirming the common border between the two countries. To complete the work, a treaty on good and friendly neighborly relations was concluded on June 17, 1991. The newly gained freedom and the opening of borders put the reunification in the most appropriate context, which is that of relations among individual citizens and the building of institutional and social infrastructure on an unprecedented scale.

With his belief in imponderabilia, faithful to his distinctive style and not expecting instant results at any cost, Tadeusz Mazowiecki resembled a protagonist of his 1984 essay



on Jerzy Zawieyski in which, referring to the ability to recognize the moment, he said: “when faced with a decision to respond to one’s fate, unexpected and unknown, as if the imperative comes from the outside, with options to choose from, blinded by lightening, a man has to destroy all that is old and embrace all that is new”^{iv}. As opposed to Jerzy Zawieyski, who back in 1968 could hardly do more than the Rejtan’s gesture of protest as portrayed in Jan Matejko’s painting, Tadeusz Mazowiecki was in a position to embrace the new and devise positive solutions for the future. Without his experience of having lived under two totalitarian regimes and having struggled against all odds to create space for dialogue, he may not have recognized the time when things once unimaginable could become possible. Democracy in Poland, reconciliation with reunited Germany and European integration made complete by the accession of countries from behind the iron curtain are all achievements in which one can unmistakably detect the touch of Tadeusz Mazowiecki. When, on July 27, 1995, in protest against the passive approach of the international community, Tadeusz Mazowiecki resigned as Special Rapporteur of the UN Human Rights Committee in the former Yugoslavia, he posed the following dramatic question to the Secretary General of the United Nations: “We have fought against the totalitarian system in Poland in hopes for a better future for Europe. How can one believe in the Europe of tomorrow if it will have to be built by the children of the people we are forsaking today?”^v Even today, the question serves as a reminder that the accomplishments already made need to be nurtured. It obliges us to renounce our egoism individually, collectively and as the international community.

A lasting legacy from Tadeusz Mazowiecki is the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of April 2, 1997 which he co-authored as member of the Constitutional Committee of the National Assembly and author of its preamble, which refers to projects that were heatedly debated at the time.

The press and television coverage of Tadeusz Mazowiecki's death focused on the breakthrough developments of 1989 and the fifteen months in office of his cabinet which initiated systemic and economic reforms. Tadeusz Mazowiecki's death provided a unique opportunity for the public and the collective civic community to remember the scale of the transformations achieved at the time. The Polish mass media paid somewhat less attention to the international significance of the accomplishments of this outstanding citizen from the town of Płock although his achievements in this field went far beyond the mere work of the government as conducted through the end of 1990. Tadeusz Mazowiecki's efforts to lay the groundwork for Poland's accession to NATO and the European Union, which, although less spectacular, were equally diligent and effective and, more than anything else, his mission to the former Yugoslavia on behalf of the United Nations, place him among the most outstanding advocates for contemporary Europe made up of reconciled nations. Respect for



his bold and far-reaching decisions was expressed by the former Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who said: "Germans owe gratitude to Tadeusz Mazowiecki for his support for their nation after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and for opening a new chapter in Polish-German reconciliation". "Thanks to Tadeusz Mazowiecki's persistent dedication, we were able to come to terms with the historic suffering of the Polish nation at the hand of their neighboring country of Germany and make significant headway towards reconciliation and even friendship", added former Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker recalling the initial post-war relations between the two nations. Chancellor Angela Merkel wrote this in her official condolences: "His tireless strife for freedom and sovereignty made an unforgettable contribution to overcoming injustice and creating unity in Europe. At times decisive for Germany, the Polish Prime Minister contributed to and supported the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of our countries. This paved the way for improving the relationship between our two nations". Federal President Joachim Gauck also referred to Tadeusz Mazowiecki's previous work: "Not only Poland but also Europe has lost a genuine fighter for democracy and freedom. (...) Opposition in East Germany saw his work and that of his associates as huge encouragement. Strongly rooted in his Christian faith, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who considered himself to be a liberal conservative, supported Germany's road towards unification and the process of re-anchoring Poland politically within Europe. We, Germans, will remain particularly grateful to him for his will for reconciliation".

By invoking again Tadeusz Mazowiecki's essay on Jerzy Zawieyski, which describes intertwined personal and historical fates, we can refer these words today without hesitation to their author himself. Mazowiecki recognized well the time during which his personal fate coincided with moments of historic significance for Poland and Europe.

ⁱ This statement by Paweł Dubiel, Member of Parliament, was among some of the most restrained contributions made during the December 9-14, 1965 parliamentary debate on *The Address*, see: "Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z posiedzeń Sejmu PRL" ("Transcript of debate of the Parliament of the People's Republic of Poland").

ⁱⁱ "Trierischer Volksfreund" 191, 19-20. August 1989, p. 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ T. Mazowiecki, *Rok 1989 i lata następne. Teksty wybrane i nowe*, Warsaw 2012, pp. 113-122.

^{iv} T. Mazowiecki, "Świadczenie i uwikłanie", *Tygodnik Powszechny* 26, 1984, quoted from: T. Mazowiecki, *Druga twarz Europy*, Warsaw 1990, p. 48.

^v Quoted from: "Zbrodnie następują szybko", *Gazeta Wyborcza* 29.10.2013, p. 11.

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