

Jerzy J. Wiatr

Polish - German Relations

The Miracle of Reconciliation

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Foreword

Those who doubt that in political life miracles can happen should look into the change that has taken place in Polish-German relations in last fifty years. Enemies of the past have become good neighbors, or even friends in the new Europe of today. For me, a Pole who as a child lived in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, lost both parents during the war and experienced the horrors of Warsaw uprising of 1944, the change in relations with our German neighbors is one of the greatest events of my life. Had seventy or sixty years ago somebody told me that among my dearest friends there would be so many Germans, I would not have believed. As many my compatriots, I believed that the abyss of hostility created by the war would continue for many years and that reconciliation would not be possible at least during the lifetime of generations which remember the war. But the impossible has happened and I am happy that years back I was wrong.

In my public life, particularly as chairman of the Polish Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (1993-1997), I had many opportunities to address the issues of conflict and hostility between neighboring nations – in the Middle East, in Cyprus, in the post-Yugoslav republics and in other places. Often, when debating these issues, I kept drawing attention to the Polish-German experience. If – I was saying – we have been able to overcome our tragic past, everybody can.

I strongly believe that this unique experience has a wider implication for our troubled world. The intension of this essay is to tell the story as I see it. It is not a purely academic analysis albeit I rely on the scholarship of my colleagues – both Polish and German – who have studied the evolution of relations between these two nations, as well as on my own research. It is an attempt to combine my two life experiences – as a political sociologist and as a political man – to explain the change that has taken place between former enemies. I try to tell the story of reconciliation from a Polish perspective, because I am more acquainted with it. The way, reconciliation can be seen from a German perspective, may perhaps be slightly different, but the basic mes-

sage remains the same. We have been able to overcome one of the heaviest burdens of history. Even if some problems in mutual relations remain, we should be proud of what had been achieved. I am also fully aware that we need a meeting of hearts in the way in which we discuss this historical process on both sides of the frontier.

Following the advise of the great social scientists, Max Weber and Gunnar Myrdal, I frankly admit that my life experience and my system of values color the way in which I study this subject. But it does not mean that I shall not try to be as impartial as it is possible when discussing a subject so close to my life experience.

I should like to thank many friends and colleagues who offered me their time and shared with me their thoughts. I cannot list all, because they are so many. But I feel particularly thankful to Klaus von Beyme and late Rudolf Wildenmann in Germany, as well as to Władysław Markiewicz and Anna Wolff-Powęska in Poland. My words of thanks go to my publisher Barbara Budrich who has suggested that I write this essay and offered me her invaluable help. And, last but not least, to my wife Ewa for her constant support and understanding.

Chapter 1.

The burden of history

National stereotypes are rooted in history, or – better to say – in the way history has been presented, interpreted and remembered. The stereotype that portrays the German as an eternal enemy has been rooted in the reading of history of Polish-German relations which reflected not the objective truth but the experiences of the Polish nation after it had lost its independence in the eighteenth century. The best-known and most influential proponent of this stereotype was Bronislaw Trentowski (1808-1869), the founder of so-called “national philosophy”. Recognizing the cultural, economic and political achievements of the German nation Trentowski stressed the expansionist tendencies, xenophobia and the will to dominate, which he saw as Germans’ eternal characteristics, particularly in relation to their Slavic neighbors (Trentowski 1848). In Trentowski’s views one can recognize the typical antinomy present in the dominant Polish stereotype of Germans: their superiority in many fields is recognized but they are seen as fundamentally and eternally hostile to Poles and to other Slaves, considered by them to be inferior and subjected to the policy of domination.

When Poland regained her independence, one of the most influential political writers Maciej Wierzbinski (1863-1933) published two books, in which he described the Germans as “our eternal enemy” and argued that the tendency to conquer Slavic lands had been the dominant characteristics of German policy throughout history (Wierzbinski 1919,1921).

Such reading of history is far from truth. While it is true that the building of the first Polish state in the tenth century to a large extent constituted a defensive reaction to the German conquests in the then Slavic lands between Elbe and Odra rivers (Łowmianski 1973: 262-266), it is equally true that the policy of emperor Otto III and his historic visit to the Polish capital Gniezno (1000 AD) constituted a foundation for the Polish-German alliance (Łowmianski 1973: 621). In the following centuries, co-operation and conflicts characterized the relations between Polish and German states, very much as it was the case all over medieval Europe.

The American political scientist Sarah Meiklejohn Terry described the early period of Polish-German relations in the following way (Meiklejohn Terry 1983: 13: 15):

“Speaking very broadly, Poland’s history up to the times of the partitions can be divided into two sharply contrasting periods, the Piast and the Jagiellonian, each named after the dynasty that dominated it and each roughly four centuries in duration. The Kingdom of the Piasts, first united in the latter half of the tenth century in response to the pressure from the German margraves, began its history with a western boundary that ran somewhat to the west of the lower course of the Oder and then southward to the Bohemian border along an irregular line between the Lusatian Neisse and the Kwis and Bober rivers slightly to the east... Except for a brief period during the reign of her second king, Bolesław Chrobry (the Brave), when the Lusatian lands to the west and Bohemia and Moravia to the south came under the Polish crown, Poland’s boundary with the Holy Roman Empire remained relatively stable for some hundred years. It was in the latter part of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, under the influence both of internal dynastic divisions and of the Tatar invasion from the east, that Poland began to lose her grip on the west and along the Baltic, forfeiting first western Pomerania with the lower course of the Oder to the Mark of Brandenburg and somewhat later experiencing the first incursions of the Teutonic Knights in the northeast.”

The American author refers here to a special situation which emerged in Poland’s Northern lands in the first half of the thirteenth century, the consequences of which were crucial for Polish-German relations in many centuries to come. In 1226, prince Konrad of Mazowia, unable to conquer and to convert the pagan Prussian tribes living in the lands bordering with his principality, invited the military order of Teutonic Knights¹ from Jerusalem to establish their headquarters in the piece of land offered them and to help him in the fight. The Teutonic Knights in a series of crusades conquered the whole territory of the Prussian tribes² and built a strong state of their own. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries they have fought several wars with Poland, culminating in the thirteen years war (1454-1466), which ended in Poland’s victory and resulted in the establishment of the sovereignty of the Polish kings over the state of the Teutonic Knights. In 1525, the Teutonic Knights adopted Lutheranism as their religion and transformed their state in a secular one ruled by the Hohenzollern dynasty but subordinated to Poland until the second half of the seventeenth century.

1 The full name of the order was “The Order of the Holiest Lady of the German House”.

2 Prussian tribes belonged to the Baltic peoples (like Lithuanians and Latvians). Following the conquest of their lands by the Teutonic Knights they were exterminated or Germanized and with the passing of time their name came to denote the newly established German state at the Baltic seashore.

For most of the late middle ages and early modernity, relations between Poland and her German neighbors were peaceful and the Western frontier of the Polish kingdom belonged to the most stable ones in Europe. German merchants and craftsmen settled in Polish cities (under the Magdeburg law) and greatly contributed to the economic development of their new fatherland. With very few exceptions relations between them and their Polish neighbors were friendly and in many instances the German settlers proved their loyalty to the Polish Kingdom. With the passing of time most of them became Poles and many played an important role in various fields of life, as indicated by numerous German-sounding family names which one can find among prominent Poles of several generations.

When Poland became an elective kingdom (in late sixteenth century) several German princes run for the Polish throne, two of whom were elected kings of Poland (August II and August III from the Wettin dynasty of Saxony, kings of Poland in the years 1694-1773 and 1773-1763, respectively). The memory of their rule was so good that the constitution of May 3, 1791, which among other changes abolished the electoral monarchy, made the Saxonian monarchs hereditary kings of Poland.³ In no way could the then existing Polish-German relations be described in the language of eternal hostility.

The situation changed in the eighteenth century. One of the consequences of the Great Northern War (1700-1721) was the transformation of Poland in a *de facto* Russian protectorate. The Polish state became an anomaly in Europe. Its internal political order, based on very strong political position of the nobility, made Poland an island of democracy surrounded by the absolutist powers of Russia, Austria and Prussia. The position of Polish aristocracy was so strong that in all practical aspects it made the kings powerless and the state too weak to compete with its more powerful neighbors.

The popular stereotypes of this epoch reflected this geopolitical paradox. Poles were proud of their “golden liberty” and looked down on Germans (as well as on Russians) for their willingness to accept authoritarian rulers and for the lack of personal liberties for the nobility. At the same time, in the German eyes Polish anarchy was perceived as the proof of Poles’ inability to manage their own affairs in the way other, politically more mature, nations did. It was political anarchy that was referred to in the common slogan of so-called *Polnische Wirtschaft*.

Three consecutive partitions of Poland (1772, 1793 and 1795) changed fundamentally the character of Polish-German relations. Prussia, as one of the partitioning powers, took possession of the largest part of ethnically

3 The Constitution was annulled following the military intervention of Russia in 1792.