

Tribute to Bronislaw Geremek

By Madeleine Albright

In 1981, I visited Poland for the purpose of writing a book on the role of the media in the Solidarity movement. I was fascinated to find a country in the process of breaking free from the chains imposed by an alien ideology. As I interviewed journalists and other pro-democracy activists, I found myself both exhilarated and somewhat envious. I didn't just want to write about Solidarity; I wanted to be part of it.

Of all the dissident leaders I met during that whirlwind trip, Bronislaw Geremek was the most impressive. His academic credentials were beyond challenge, his intellect without equal, and his courage without any apparent limit. After the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Warsaw Pact, he had enough of a government built on lies and grew determined to spread the truth. His dignified presence – complete with pipe – was professorial, but his commitment to freedom was as stouthearted as that of any dock worker. His integrity reminded me of Tomas Masaryk, the hero of my own native Czechoslovakia. It was natural that he would become a leading voice in the Solidarity Movement and an enemy of the martial law government.

No one would have predicted, in 1981, that Geremek would later serve as the foreign minister of a free Poland or that I would ever become America's secretary of state. Yet, in the spring of 1999, when Poland joined NATO, we were able to celebrate that historic moment together on stage, surrounded by music and flags, smiling and giddy as children. The following year, we were reunited in Warsaw, when Geremek played host to the first ever conference of the Community of Democracies.

The idea behind that event was that free countries should help one another by sharing knowledge and resources, and by uniting to deal with common threats. Why not? The world has groups built around national identity, geographic proximity, commercial interests, religion, and language. Democracy is as good an organizing principle as any of those, and better than most.

Geremek and his conference cosponsors (which included the United States) invited representatives from more than one hundred nations to Warsaw. On the eve of the gathering, I joined with Geremek to lay a wreath at a monument honoring the heroes of Solidarity. We also christened a frigate, the *General Pulaski*, the newest vessel in the Polish Navy.

As these grace notes reflect, Geremek was the ideal host for the event and Warsaw the perfect place. There are many people who love freedom as much as the Polish people do, but no one loves freedom more. Geremek embodied this trait and acted on it through his fierce intelligence and diplomatic and political skills. He was both a thinker and a doer, someone who combined profound affection for the best traditions of his own country without disrespecting others. To

Geremek, democracy was not a crusade but rather a system of government which—however imperfect—would prevail wherever it was given a fair chance to succeed. In his judgment, there was no cause for the advocates of democracy to run around with bullhorns lecturing the world, but neither should we be shy about expressing our convictions.

At the Warsaw conference, Geremek emphasized both the value of freedom and its fragility. “The emergence of democracy as a universally accepted form of government is the most important development of our century,” he said in his opening address. “But another lesson of the century is it that democracy is by no means a process that goes from triumph to triumph.”

At that moment, for the first time ever, more than two-thirds of the world’s people lived under elected leaders. In three decades, the number of democracies had more than tripled. Yet, as Geremek pointed out, more democracies also meant more places where democratic governments might be threatened. His words were designed to awaken the complacent and to warn those who assumed that democratic gains, once secured, could not be lost. He also wished to generate a sense of shared interest among the diverse countries represented at the conference, pointing out that “solidarity” could be a beautiful word in any language.

One reason Geremek took pride in hosting the event is that he wanted the name of his beloved capital city to be associated with something newer and more uplifting than the cold war vintage Warsaw Pact. The Warsaw Declaration, a manifesto spelling out the elements of democracy, fulfilled that purpose. It was signed by every government participating in the conference except for France, which did not want to carry enthusiasm for democracy too far.

Bronislaw Geremek was such a quiet man that he was often under-estimated in the political arena, where the loudest voices and the most emotional arguments commonly dominate. He was not someone who sought power for himself or who called attention to his own record or role. All he really wanted was the freedom to think and to express his thoughts. That simple desire, embedded in this remarkable man, helped to bring freedom to Poland and, in so doing, changed the world.

When we both left government, we met together often as part of a former foreign ministers’ group. We all appreciated his ideas and dedication. When he spoke, all listened.

Bronislaw Geremek was one of the great heroes of democracy in the twentieth century. His wisdom, character, and warm friendship will be forever cherished and sorely missed.

My heart is sad for I have lost a dear friend.

Bronisław Geremek is Gone

by Leszek Kolakowski

Let me repeat the old wisdom: human history, like biological evolution, is a very long series of unpredictable chance events. Every great man is the result of chance. No one knows what today's world or the history of the past few decades would have been like without Bronisław Geremek. But we have reason to believe that the history of Poland – and thus of Central Europe, and therefore, too, of the world – would have been different, and worse than it is.

Bronisław Geremek was born in March 1932 and died in a car accident in July 2008. Until the late 1970s Geremek was a well-known and distinguished mediaeval scholar. In his work he concentrated on socially marginal people in mediaeval France – beggars, criminals, prostitutes, lepers. This interest was certainly prompted by a feeling of solidarity with victims of social injustice, a feeling that inspired him throughout his life. This is why he – like many intellectuals of his generation – joined the communist party. He left it, as he says, for the same reason he joined it: the dream of justice and equality turned out to be no more than a dream masking totalitarian oppression. In the late 1970s Geremek was one of the organizers of the “Flying University”, a system of underground lectures on topics the teaching of which was distorted or simply banned by the party ideology. Many scholars – historians, sociologists, philosophers – participated in this struggle against the mendacity of the regime.

Geremek's activity as a politician started in 1980, during the strikes in a Polish shipyard that were soon to give birth to the workers' movement “Solidarność”, which eventually led to the collapse of the communist regime. Two well-known Polish intellectuals – Geremek and Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the future prime minister of the first non-communist government in Poland's post-war history – went to the striking shipyard in Gdansk with a letter from a large group of intellectuals who wrote to express their support for the strikers. They were greeted enthusiastically by the strikers and their leader, Lech Walesa, who unexpectedly appointed them the movement's advisors. This turned out to be Walesa's most ingenious idea, for it initiated what was to be a permanent cooperation between the workers' movement and the intelligentsia. Out of the shipyard strike a powerful civil movement emerged; despite some temporary defeats, it was to transform the country. This was the beginning of the collapse of the entire communist world.

A united effort of workers and intellectuals was essential in building both the moral and the political strength of Solidarity. Geremek was one of the most important figures in shaping the movement's strategy; he tried, successfully, to prevent the movement from resorting to violence. With thousands of others he was arrested in December 1981 when “martial law” (or rather lawlessness) was declared by the government. He spent many months in prison, interned with many others.

The ruling party had no idea how to restore “normality” or how to deal with the 10-million-strong Solidarity movement, which had been declared illegal but continued to function underground. The country was in chaos and economic ruin. After years of repression and unsuccessful attempts at appeasement, the “round table” talks began: both sides – Solidarity and the government – were to negotiate a solution for the country’s predicament. Among the main architects of the negotiations on the Solidarity side were Walesa and Geremek. The ruling party did everything to keep its power intact; Geremek wisely avoided many traps set by them and on occasion prevented the negotiations from collapsing.

It was finally agreed that in the forthcoming election the government would have a majority in the lower house of parliament but elections to the upper house, the Senate, would be entirely free. Not a single candidate from the ruling party obtained a seat. Geremek became the leader of the “Citizens Parliamentary Club” in the lower house and one of the main figures in Polish political life. We may safely say that without him the entire process that brought to an end the power of the communist party in Poland would not have succeeded. And this was also the process that started the chain of events which in subsequent years led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the unification of Germany, and finally the collapse of communism in Central Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union. We have no idea how this process would have been possible without the Polish example, how many years and how much bloodshed it would have caused. But let me repeat: it is safe to say that today’s world would be worse than it is without Geremek’s contribution to its history.

As a professor at Warsaw University, as a prominent strategist of “Solidarność” on its path to victory, as its leader in parliament, as minister of foreign affairs, as chairman of the Democratic Union party, as a deputy to the European Parliament, Geremek was a man of extraordinary wisdom and sharpness of mind. Both his skills in dealing with political conflicts and his great historical knowledge were recognized by everyone.

The moments of his greatest joy were the Solidarność victory in August 1980, the Round Table agreement, Poland’s access to NATO and its entry into the European Union – turning points in which he played an important role.

Geremek was a politician, so he must have calculated the chances of obtaining desirable results in every conflict. But in all circumstances he never lost sight of the fundamental values that must be kept intact amid compromises and concessions. He never lied in order to outsmart the other side in negotiations. He insisted that in negotiations everything be overt, nothing secret. The value of truth can never be compromised for the sake of a good result. The Poland which he dreamed of was a free, democratic, open country, without lies, without hatred, without fanaticism.

Thanks to Geremek, the European Parliament decided that August 31 – the anniversary of the victory of Solidarność – would be named the Day of Freedom and Solidarity. Lech Walesa called him the greatest Polish patriot.

As a great authority in public life Geremek had, of course, enemies in Poland, mainly among extreme rightists. He never paid back his slanderers. He was respected even by his adversaries.

We knew each other for well over half a century. His wisdom and sense of humour enriched us every time we met. We have lost a friend, and so has Poland, and Europe, and all those who continue to believe that the world could be more honest and less poisoned by hatred.

Remembering Bronisław Geremek

by Alexandr Vondra

A very wise man, the “brain and heart of the Polish way to freedom”, as he was called in 2004 by Adam Michnik, Bronisław Geremek left European history and politics forever at a time when Europe needed him so much.

A prominent historian, he could have got along easily with the pro-Soviet regime, then in power in Poland, but decided to take a different path after Czechoslovakia was occupied by armies of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968.

He showed that the malevolence of dictatorial regimes must be confronted by both political means and educational activities. His activities in the underground Society for Educational Courses and as an adviser to Solidarność proved that resistance can be wise, elegant and highly successful – and the communist regime “rewarded” him with imprisonment.

Even before playing a key role in the eventual dismantling of communism in Poland in the Roundtable Talks, he insisted almost prophetically, in one of his articles in 1987, on the need for new Poland to cooperate with its neighbours in the East and with my own country.

Particularly now that some politicians, especially in Western Europe, bury their heads in the sand to avoid tough challenges of the future, and resort to empty talk and more or less blatant anti-Americanism, it is my opinion that rather than writing what an excellent man Bronisław Geremek was, it is more important to consider his life’s legacy.

Most of all, freedom, democracy and tolerance should not remain empty words; these values should be strived for very tangibly and respect for them continuously reiterated – first of all in our own countries, but also by helping those who strive for these values in countries controlled by dictators of all sorts. This is reflected in the need to strengthen transatlantic ties and the NATO, which is what Professor Geremek not only spoke about so often, but also practiced.

Bronisław Geremek did very much both for his own country and for the principle of freedom as such. All of us will remember him for what he sought and accomplished. But we will best commemorate his life by promoting the values that he believed in.



Minister Spraw Zagranicznych

Radosław Sikorski

Warsaw, September , 2008

**Message from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland
Mr. Radosław Sikorski on the occasion of the memorial event dedicated to the late
Professor Bronisław Geremek,**

National Endowment for Democracy, Washington DC, September 11, 2008

Distinguished Guest,

I would like to thank the National Endowment for Democracy for hosting an event in commemoration of the late Professor Bronisław Geremek. You have gathered to pay a tribute to Professor Geremek's legacy on a day that marks the seventh anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attack on the United States. Indeed, the very setting of this meeting emphasizes one of Professor Geremek's principles: the need of solidarity with those who suffer from aggression and intolerance.

Professor Geremek's life encapsulated the most heroic and tragic experiences of the recent Polish history. He lived through the horrors of the Holocaust and the war time distraction of his motherland. His longing for justice, equality and human dignity led him to a definite and unequivocal condemnation of the communist utopia and its totalitarian practices. He helped to create the great movement of *the Solidarność*, which unified the Polish nation against the oppressive regime and sparked the revolution of freedom and democracy in Central Europe that ultimately brought down the Soviet empire. He was one of the *funding fathers* of the newly independent Poland. He championed its full return to the free world by joining NATO and the European Union and advocated for a strong transatlantic community the should always be open to other European nations, who share its values and aspirations.

I had a privilege of working together with Professor Geremek. As his deputy, I learned from him what it takes to be a diplomat and a public servant. I owe him a big credit for offering me his enormous knowledge and experience. As a matter of fact, we discussed ongoing issues in the Polish-American relations shortly before his tragic death. He was generous in sharing his wise advice and exceptionally kind personality. We will all miss him very much.

With best regards,