Tomorrow May Be Too Late

INTERVIEW WITH LECH WALESA

Editor’s Note: Former president of Poland, Lech Walesa—the man who played the most significant role in Eastern European democratization—visited the United States in 1998 and spoke at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, as part of the distinguished John Findley Green Lecture series. His visit provided us with an opportunity to meet with him and interview him for Demokratizatsiya. We would like to thank the administration of Westminster College and personnel at the Winston Churchill Memorial and Library at Fulton, Missouri, for their assistance in arranging this interview.

Walesa’s speech in Fulton, which he gave in Polish, was not published. However, we have chosen to include some of his remarks along with the transcription of our interview, where those comments could provide illumination or clarification.

Lech Walesa was born 29 September 1943 in Nazi-occupied Popowo, Poland. As an adult, he worked as an electrician in the Lenin shipyard where, in 1970, he led a strike that resulted in his arrest. In 1980, Walesa led the famous Lenin shipyard strike that touched off a wave of strikes among workers all over Poland. To end the strikes, the Polish government was forced to negotiate with Walesa, who engineered an agreement that allowed workers to strike and organize an independent union. The Solidarity union was born from that event, and under Walesa’s leadership it succeeded where similar movements in Eastern Europe had failed. Solidarity was proffered as an alternative, not a replacement, to the Polish Union Workers’ Party. Passive resistance was favored instead of revolt. On the way to democracy, no blood was spilled—a remarkable achievement credited to Walesa’s efforts. Unlike a politician, Walesa was not protected by his position—he was a simple worker who risked his life and family in a heroic struggle for freedom.

In 1980, Walesa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He donated the prize money to a program set up by Poland’s Catholic churches to channel Western aid to private farmers.

In 1990, Walesa was elected president of Poland in the first free elections since before World War II. As president, Walesa began to privatize the economy and promote Western liberties and freedom. But sudden economic change and the resulting decline in industrial performance caused great social difficulties for the Polish people, and they became less accepting of Western capitalism than had been expected.
In November 1995, Walesa lost the presidential election by a narrow margin to Aleksander Kwanieski (51.7 percent to 48.3 percent) and he returned to private life, with his unprecedented contributions to Eastern European reforms firmly established in the history of the world. Walesa’s efforts to secure freedom and social justice for the people of Poland succeeded in altering the map of the world at the end of the twentieth century.

BARBARA FRIEDMAN AND NIKOLAI ZLOBIN

Demokratizatsiya: Mr. President, what does it mean for you to speak here, in the shadow of other warriors such as yourself: Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, and of course, Winston Churchill?

Walesa: Sir Winston Churchill was a great, great politician and also a man who enjoyed good humor. As you know, he participated in the Yalta Conference and he agreed that Poland would be handed over to the Soviet bloc. Perhaps he couldn’t have done it any other way. But then again, maybe there was a chance for Poland to be saved. Gorbachev was far from office when our Solidarity movement was organized. You mentioned Ronald Reagan; he really did contribute greatly to the end of the cold war and to the end of communism, just as much as George Bush and Margaret Thatcher did from her part of the world. Because of them, we can say we’re living in a new era. So while I stand in their shadow now, I’d like to say I also stand in their light.

[From Fulton speech] My country is located between two big powers, Russia and Germany. Those two big, powerful forces sometimes want to argue, and sometimes they want to talk a bit. And they often cross our country to “meet” each other—one way or the other. Sometimes they stay for a little while, and sometimes they stay longer. On one occasion, they stayed for 123 years. Then, Poland was erased from the maps. But we struggled for our freedom and won it—then lost it again in the Second World War.

The Polish people never accepted the dominance of the Soviets. We struggled against Soviet oppression, against Soviet imprisonment. When we began, it was an armed struggle. Then it was by strikes and demonstrations in the streets. We were shot down; we failed every time we tried. I had been watching until, in the last stage of the fight, I had the privilege to become a leader. At that point, Poland was surrounded by 100 thousand armed Soviet soldiers. We used the method of labor strikes, but not in the streets. This time, we remained in our factories.

Demokratizatsiya: Mr. President, in your opinion, is Russia still a threat to Poland?

Walesa: Countries in the world today are as standardized as building blocks. The conventions they have adopted are pluralism, democracy, and free market economy. Whoever maintains those conventions, those norms, can participate in any kind of construction that is going on around the world. Russia must adopt those norms, and it is no longer a question of “if” but of when and at what price.
We must all help Russia in a way that will bring results. I have spoken to President Yeltsin about this many times.

Another problem is the Russian economy. The communist system lasted too long in Russia, and it caused significant transformation in the country. It is difficult to get back—you can make fish soup from an aquarium of fish, but you cannot make an aquarium from fish soup. Communist countries are facing that kind of difficulty in effecting reform. But the world is moving in this direction—democratization—and Russia must follow. It has no choice.

[From Fulton speech] We are living in a beautiful world, we know it and we must not let it be destroyed. How can people in the United States really feel secure? Look at the disaster of Chernobyl, for instance. The calamity of Chernobyl was a threat to the entire world. Disasters of that kind take place in one part of the globe, but the results are felt all over. So, we should be grateful every morning when we wake up to find we’re still living. We were happy to have the Soviet troops driven from Poland, but with them went nuclear potential, moved to unknown locations.

The struggle is not over, though. And the danger is not gone yet, either—new ones have emerged. Once, we had two opposing blocs in the world, the communists and the capitalists. They interacted and disciplined one another. Now we are all left with one bloc only, the United States, the only superpower left in the world. That means it has a great obligation to the world. In this new role, the United States should provide a vision for the new world. So I appeal to you to participate more, to be more active in a search for new solutions.

Demokratizatsiya: What would you suggest the average person do to help the world change for the better?

Walesa: The problem in today’s world is that too few people participate in an organized way in political systems. For example, I visit seventeen countries on various continents every year, and typically, I find their political systems outdated. So few young people organize themselves in political parties; they tell me that politics is dirty business. My response? If you don’t like the current system, do something to change the situation! Where there is no participation, there is room for dictators—democracy means participation.

[From Fulton speech] People should organize themselves into labor unions because we’ve reached a situation where anybody can be fired from work and replaced by a machine. When I visit factories, I see only machines working, not people. And do you know what kinds of working conditions these machines enjoy? I never had such working conditions. We must do what we can to provide employment, to ensure social justice. Otherwise, we will pay a high price. Here, you enjoy a peaceful, quiet life. But in some countries and some cities, people are afraid to walk the streets. So much unemployment, so much poverty have led to so much crime. If we want to face the kind of total destruction that the Mayans did, we can continue along this track. Scientists still wonder what happened that the Mayans could disappear without a trace, but I know what happened. They introduced machines into their lives and the machines were so efficient that they
never left any trace of their activity. If we introduce machines, we should work four-hour days and earn twice as much. That’s the way it should have been; at least, that’s the way we wanted it to be. But what is happening now? We have more machines, but we have more unemployment, more social injustice.

**Demokratizatsiya:** Mr. President, what can the West do to help Eastern Europe prepare for the twenty-first century?

Walesa: Eastern Europe needs your generals—General Motors, General Electric... We don’t want sentiment in Poland; we want to do business with the United States. We want to learn from the United States, by U.S. examples, and we want the West to provide us with some concepts.

**Demokratizatsiya:** Mr. President, what do you think about NATO extension in Eastern Europe?

Walesa: Well, when we speak of NATO, let us remember that there are two ways of seeing NATO. We perceive NATO expansion as a kind of expansion against an enemy, but also as something that can eliminate the potential for conflict in the future. Those who are against NATO expansion today are creating a dangerous situation tomorrow. We all want to live in a world of security and peace. In our lives, there is a time for joy, a time for sorrow, and there is also a time for decisions. It is time to make decisions now.

Let me say, one concept is confrontational—that we expand NATO against an enemy, and without saying it out loud—we think that it is against Russia. Everybody knows who we mean as an enemy, but nobody mentions the name out loud. But there are other ways of looking at NATO expansion, ways that I have been propagating all along. We should expand NATO where superiority already exists. Perhaps we will need to make other countries members of NATO to eliminate the possible danger of any opposing force. Therefore, NATO expansion is a means to achieve more peace, to have opportunity for peace in the world. Those who are against NATO expansion today are against peace tomorrow. It is as simple as that.

So there is only one question, whether Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, once they join NATO, are strong enough to safeguard the superiority of NATO and eliminate the potential of confrontation. Therefore, I beg the people who can influence those who make decisions to make sure and do so. After all, tomorrow may be too late. That’s why we try so hard to thank God for this great victory, for entering NATO. I am deeply confident that we are not going to waste this victory.

**Demokratizatsiya:** When you started democratization of Poland, Mr. President, what were your relations with Gorbachev?

Walesa: When we created Solidarity and by means of that, we pushed our way forward to achieve freedom, Mikhail Gorbachev was not in office. The only thing he could do when he reached office was to accept it. So he did, and he declared openly that the Iron Curtain had been lifted. You can see how much Solidarity can achieve. Gorbachev happened to be a driver of a car called the Soviet Union.
He was going uphill and then, at a certain point, his engine simply stopped. So then his car was going backward, but without the engine running. Fortunately, he did not cause any accidents along the way, but he didn’t have the chance to get up the hill, either.

[From Fulton speech] Of course, we thought we did this, we had this wonderful gift of the Lord that is the person of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II. He is the one who reveals the truth about ourselves. This is what he did in Poland. He revealed the truth to us about the communist system. He helped us to see we were not alone in our struggle, because we could see each other in big masses when he was there. I just happened to be the one who organized those revealed truths in the movement of Solidarity. The Holy Father also revealed truths when he visited Cuba, for example. Of course, we wonder what the Cuban response will be, how they will act on receiving those truths. We have already seen the results of the events in Poland, and in the world. The Holy Father is not a provocateur; but he is the one who incites the choice.

Demokratizatsiya: Mr. President, do you believe in the Rule of Law?

Walesa: Let me say this, whether we want it or not, all of us have broken the law at some time. How is it that we are not punished? Is it because we don’t allow ourselves to be caught? Can you imagine what the world would be like if we all specialized in evading punishment from any and every little criminal act? Some older people may remember that under the communist regime, when some people wanted to seek freedom, they would hijack a plane. It became an obsession with us, really. So the communist authorities decided they would deal with the problem by imposing legal regulations. They sent security people, masquerading as tourists—carrying guns to make sure no planes were hijacked. But then on one occasion, it was the security guard who hijacked the plane, can you believe it? So another group of security people were introduced on board the plane, to watch the first group. The situation was finally such that the planes were full—of security people—and they were still being hijacked. You can see clearly that any law can reach an absurd level like this. So I suggest that we base all the legal regulations on values. But then tell me, who among us is up to the task?

[From Fulton speech] We have generally reached the situation in which politicians are interested only in their local policies. Therefore, we have few politicians of vision, but many politicians of television.

We wish, and the United States wishes, freedom for all countries in the world and for all the borders to be open. But just imagine if we opened up the borders of China right now. We’d have a billion and a half Chinese immediately here overnight. That’s only a rough count, of course. You wouldn’t have enough leaves in your garden to feed them. And since they often walk without their shoes on, they could creep up so silently that you wouldn’t even realize they were coming.

We’re not saying they should not enjoy freedom, it is inevitable and it will come in the future. But we have to realize that, first, some balance must be achieved. Differences must be equalized before we can achieve total freedom. Premature openness might destroy the processes already under way in the world.
Demokratizatsiya: What can you say, Mr. President, about Russian-Polish border issues?

Walesa: As I’ve said before, the location of Poland on the map of Europe was a curse during the era of confrontation. When we decide on the solution for the world, once we have joined NATO, our location in Europe will be a blessing. We’ll have to work hard to reach consensus, though, because whenever two Poles meet, you get three political parties. But I’m convinced that once we solve two issues, NATO and the European Union, Poland will be a normal country. I have spoken to Yeltsin on a number of occasions, and on one, we broached a border question. He tried to prove to me that Poland is in possession of some land that belongs to Russia, while I tried to prove to Yeltsin that he’s already taken some of our land. Two hours later, we still couldn’t come to an agreement. Finally, I said to him, “Oh, Mr. President, without a half liter of vodka, we can’t solve this problem.” Later, I told Gorbachev about that conversation, and he said, “I think you’ve underestimated us, it should be a liter of vodka at least.”

So, border issues remain a serious concern. But I think the relations between Poland the Ukraine must be good because in the past, whenever we had bad relations, we always had a conflict.

Demokratizatsiya: What do you wish for your children, Mr. President?

Walesa: I have eight children. No, let me correct that—my wife has eight children. No matter what education they get, I would like them to grow up to be decent and fair, and with a good sense of humor. My personal philosophy is based on religious faith.