



**Konstanty Gebert, Irena Maryniak**

## Table talk

"It is an unnatural but positive development when democracy trains people to believe that, overall, it is better to let the bastard speak." Former Solidarity activist and journalist Konstanty Gebert talks to Irena Maryniak about censorship post-'89 and anti-Semitism in Poland today.

**Irena Maryniak:** In 1989, the Polish communist authorities and the opposition trade union movement Solidarity sat down to the "Round Table" discussions that led to the first semi-democratic elections in what was then the communist bloc, and ushered in eastern Europe's first post-communist government. You were there, weren't you, reporting on the proceedings?

**Konstanty Gebert:** Yes, I was. It was a funny situation because first I was supposed to be part of the Solidarity delegation negotiating media issues. At first I was enthusiastic and then I decided: "Hell, no, we are going to sign something that I won't like." So I chickened out. But I couldn't give up covering the story of the decade. My name had been submitted on all the appropriate lists and Solidarity simply kind of forgot to withdraw my name. And I just showed up. And because my name was on the list, the other side assumed I had a right [to be there] and our side wasn't going to protest. I had this absolutely lovely situation in which I had all the credentials and powers of a negotiator without any negotiator responsibilities, my only responsibilities being those of a journalist.

So I would cover the day's proceedings mainly sitting in on the team that negotiated political transition. Then, in the evening, I would write a report that I'd file over the phone to the Solidarity committee in Paris and submit it for the underground media, and then get a little bit of shuteye and show up the next morning back to work.

**IM:** How did it feel to see your friends from Solidarity negotiating with the people who had jailed them, made life very difficult for them, maybe even killed their colleagues?

**KG:** It was utterly exhilarating. Let me give you my favourite anecdote. One of the first days of the Round Table negotiations and this government journalist, a certain Mr Tadeusz Zakrzewski, shows up with a mike, shoves it into Wlodek Frasyniuk's face (Wlodek was one of the leading negotiators, a very important — previously underground — trade union leader, a kind of biggish man with a long beard at that time) and Zakrzewski, with a smile, says, "Mr Frasyniuk, can you comment on today's negotiations for Warsaw TV please."

Now Zakrzewski had run the vilest programme that there was during martial law on TV. Government TV was vile during the 1980s as a rule, but this was slander and innuendo, the message being: you think there are heroes hiding in the underground, well they're rolling in CIA money and fucking young girls. That was basically it. And this man now asks Frasyński for a comment. And Wladek looks down at him (physically down — this Zakrzewski was a little rat of a man) and says, "You know what? When I was in jail they made us watch your programmes and I promised myself that when I got out I would track down the son of a bitch and spit in his face. And here I am looking at you and I see there is nothing to spit on." And then cool as a cucumber he delivers his comment. We had two and a half months of that. Any remaining desire for revenge had been thoroughly satiated.

**IM:** What were the expectations when the two sides sat down?

**KG:** It was very unclear, actually, for both sides. We knew that we would not sign anything that did not have re-legalisation of Solidarity included in it. This was our minimum demand: in a way a return to pre-1981. The government desperately needed to implicate us somehow in ruling the country to gain a modicum of legitimacy for the very painful economic reforms they needed to introduce. Beyond that it was anybody's guess and the kind of very complex structural reform that emerged from the Round Table was something of a surprise for both sides.

**IM:** After the talks how long did it take for change to be really felt in the country?

**KG:** Immediately. The first material proof that things had actually changed was the publication of our newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The print run was limited. I think we started off with something like 150,000 copies. Anybody lucky enough to buy a copy just stood on the street and he'd have concentric circles of people reading over his shoulder, the shoulders of others, people reading out loud. You write for such a publication...I mean, nothing beats that — not even good sex comes remotely close, believe me. And it was material proof of change. This paper with its bright red Solidarity logo, the logo that had been banned (carrying a badge could get you in jail) and it's out there in the streets.

**IM:** And the paper came out when?

**KG:** The paper came out a month after the deal was signed. We set up a national daily from zero in a month. Okay, it showed. When I look back at the first issues it is kind of embarrassing. Because it was obvious that producing a daily national newspaper is not the same thing as producing an underground news weekly. It was top heavy on political agitation. The very name *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Electoral Gazette)...it was supposed to be a propaganda sheet for our candidates for the elections. No sport, no listings, no city life, zilch.

Mercifully there were above-ground journalists, as opposed to underground journalists, who were nonetheless extremely decent people and joined the team. And they taught us how to do a newspaper. I remember Julek Rawicz, one of those extraordinary above-ground journalists, screaming at a staff meeting: "Okay, okay, you've convinced me, communism is bad. Can somebody please write about the price of cheese? Let's give these people something they want to read about!"

**IM:** And it took a while, didn't it, for censorship to be fully abolished?

**KG:** Yes. Censorship wasn't formally abolished until 1990, but one of the legacies of the first period of Solidarity was that Poland actually had a law on censorship (as opposed to other countries of the communist bloc) and that law stipulated that any intervention by the censor needs to be marked in the text: square brackets, and three lines between the square brackets, and then it continues with the name of the law, and the article under which the offending contents had been removed. So integrating expected censorship in the text became an art form, and the liberal Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* became a master of this art form.

Eventually they [the censors] became more and more aware of just how ridiculous they were in a country that's obviously moving way beyond the situation in which their presence was legitimate, even in the eyes of the authorities. And many of them started giving us advice. "Look. This I cannot let pass. But if you rephrase it in such and such a way, I can pretend I didn't understand." And then they got less and less active.

**IM:** What do you think the abolition of censorship meant to other journalists?

**KG:** Actually Poland was extremely lucky, because we had such a massive underground press that when we took over the above-ground press, as it were, it wasn't a question that often applied in other post-Soviet countries, and especially to the Soviet Union itself, of training journalists that they have a right to write what they think. We had dozens and dozens of very competent journalists who had been doing just that for the last eight years and publishing underground. What we had to do was to learn how to be serious journalists. Things like deadlines, leads and whatever...

**IM:** And also, I suppose, a readership that might not necessarily agree with everything you said?

**KG:** The readership had a problem. There were repeated attempts to introduce some form of censorship. Sociological polls show that there is a plurality, at times a majority, that supports the ideas that some content needs to be banned. Throughout the nineties there were polls that showed that 40–60 per cent of Poles believed that some content should be banned. It might be pornography, it might be offending the Church, it might be promoting communism, it depends on your particular dislike.

**IM:** Why do you think that is?

**KG:** First of all, it is a natural state. People think: "He shouldn't be allowed to say that" (whatever that is). And that it is an unnatural but positive development when democracy trains people to believe that, overall, it is better to let the bastard speak — which will mean that I, who am right, will also have my say — than to cancel the first and risk the second.

**IM:** So it's more "natural" to stop people from speaking than it is to allow them to do so?

**KG:** I actually think so.

**IM:** Where do you think that stems from?

**KG:** Basically, it stems from that bane of civilised discourse which is common sense. Common sense says that the earth is flat; that it's ridiculous to think that there are tiny creatures living in the world that you can't see but that can kill you. Common sense says that it's self-evident that the Church is right, so anybody saying that the Church is wrong should be banned because it's nonsense. And it takes a long exposure to democratic discourse to appreciate not the concept that the other guy might actually be right, but that his right to spill nonsense guarantees my right to speak the truth. We're getting there but it's a difficult process. Interestingly enough, political elites, whatever the shade, could never really be talked into supporting any form of censorship because of the experience of communism. This is still the end to all argument: "You're just like the commies!"

This made it impossible, for example, to ban pornography or to ban content critical of the Church although we do have a few censorship laws on our books. There is an article in the law on public electronic media that says that they are duty-bound to support (previously: "to respect") the Christian system of values. This is a very interesting formulation. It has not once been called upon. Nobody knows what the definition of the "Christian system of values" is; nobody wants to see this go to court; so it's there as a kind of symbolic victory for the Church. It has never been invoked.

Another much more pernicious article makes it a crime punishable by up to three years in jail to maintain that the Polish nation had any participation in or responsibility for the crimes of either Nazism or communism. As soon as this law was passed, I published an article saying that it has come to my knowledge that members of the Polish nation in the village of Jedwabne murdered their Jewish co-citizens, thus becoming part of the Nazi crime of the Shoah. It has come to my knowledge that members of the Polish nation, in the uniforms of the militia and the army, gunned down striking workers in Gdansk in 1970, thus becoming part of the communist crimes. The above statement is a violation of Article 132a of the appropriate law and therefore should be penalised and I call the attention of the prosecutors to that fact.

Sadly enough, no reaction. So I started calling all the prosecutors I know and said: "Guys, I just committed a crime on page 5 in today's *Gazeta*." Basically they all told me to bugger off. They're not fools. They know the law is an ass. But this law has been already invoked once, through Spanish journalist Pilar Rahola, who wrote an otherwise rather illinformed column in *El País*, condemning the eternal anti-Semitism of the Poles or whatever, and a legal enquiry was put in motion by the prosecutor's office with a view of indicting her for the crime of implying that the Poles could have anything to do with Nazi crimes. This of course went strictly nowhere, but to the best of my knowledge it has never been terminated, by that I mean "suspended". In theory, Pilar Rahola is under investigation in Poland.

**IM:** Poland still has this reputation for at the very least a kind of closet anti-Semitism.

**KG:** There is enough overt anti-Semitism for the closet anti-Semitism to be a minor issue. The real problem is one of perception. Because Polish anti-Semitism is as widespread as it is skin-deep. Let me explain. Take France. In France they had very strong laws against public expressions of anti-Semitism. If you express anti-Semitism in public you can be seriously penalised. This doesn't necessarily affect what Monsieur Dupont says at his dinner table (and I've sat at some of those dinner tables --- I know) but in

public if somebody makes an anti-Semitic statement you'd better believe he or she is serious, because they are willing to take the rap.

In Poland, anti-Semitism is not penalised, period. Just recently, the public prosecutor in the town of Krakow closed the investigation into soccer fans yelling "Gas them!" to the fans of another club which is labelled as Jewish because, historically, like 70 years ago, it had been Jewish. So they yelled "Gas them," and they yelled, "We'll always triumph over you, you fucking Jews," and the public prosecutor decided such contents do not constitute a crime and dropped the case. And this comes in the wake of similar statements by different public prosecutors. So anti-Semitism isn't penalised, therefore it becomes a convenient venue for the expression of frustration. So if somebody says in public it's all the fault of the Jews and they should be kicked out of the country, this does not necessarily mean, as it probably does in France, that he is a dyed-in-the-wool and dangerous anti-Semite. It might mean that he had a bad day at work, full stop. This is no less excusable morally...

**IM:** It also makes conversation very difficult.

**KG:** Yes, it does. But what it does not mean is that anti-Semitism is raging in Poland as people who see the overt signs of it — anti-Semitic graffiti, anti-Semitic publications available in bookstores or whatever — might think. Though it is no less morally reprehensible, it is not as politically dangerous as you might think from the outside.

**IM:** But given that it is a way of venting frustration and that until recently the word "Jew" was a term of abuse in Poland (perhaps it still is) how far is it possible to talk rationally about Judaism in the Polish context?

**KG:** I'd say this. The country has undergone a serious moral transformation in the wake of the Jedwabne debate [an investigation revealing collusion of Poles in a massacre of Jews in 1941]. That debate was stunningly profound and stunningly courageous. It went way beyond what I had dared to hope. With one glaring exception — the Catholic Church. And there is a new appreciation among Poles about what it is these Jews are ranting about. And there is also a practical appreciation that you don't get accepted in European salons with all that anti-Semitic dirty laundry hanging out. Actually this could backfire given that anti-Semitism is no longer as disreputable in western Europe as it was ten years ago. It might simply turn out that we Polish provincials have failed to read the latest Paris fashion and that we are out of phase.

**IM:** Obviously there's a strong sense of national identity in Poland. I wondered if Solidarity itself was an expression of that and how far that sense of identity has developed since 1989?

**KG:** I think this is a very important issue which is underappreciated in public discourse. What happened after 1989 is that Poland developed an ethnic society masquerading as a civil society. That is, the nature of the Solidarity bond between citizens is one of common blood and not one of common political interest. And it is extremely evident in public discourse, starting with the famous sentence of Lech Walesa after signing the Gdansk Accords in 1980. Describing his negotiations with the Communist Party he said: "We spoke as Pole to Pole," and therefore finally we should all agree and if somebody is in disagreement then maybe he is not all that Polish.

**IM:** Do you feel that this is a threat to democracy?

**KG:** It certainly is a threat to democracy, except that Poland is so hopelessly monoethnic that it's in a way an abstract threat. The ethnic majority doesn't realise that it is one. But it certainly is.

**IM:** And do you think this might be what lies behind what the economist Leszek Balcerowicz has called "creeping etatism" in Poland?

**KG:** It certainly is a factor. The whole issue is more complex than that, but certainly unself-conscious nationalism and concomitant racism is a factor. Poland is a racist country that doesn't know it. If you're a Polish Roma you get extremely painfully aware of just how racist the country is. Or if you're black or if you're Arab. There is a great deal of racist violence that goes completely unnoticed by Polish public opinion...

**IM:** Is that because it's not reported?

**KG:** No, it usually is reported, but if you're an ethnic Pole somehow this could be on the dark side of the moon. It's like the attitude to anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is seen as some kind of crazy issue between some stupid anti-Semites and some wacky Jews of no concern to normal people. And the same attitude will be: "Okay. So skinheads have beaten up a black man. Well, skinheads are nuts, everyone knows that. You're black in Poland where everyone is white. Well, it's deplorable but you are probably going to pay the price. And anyway, what business of mine is it?" This is the attitude — be it regarding anti-Semitism, be it regarding any form of racism — which is prevalent and dangerous.

**IM:** Is there any sign that all this is beginning to change as the country establishes itself in the European Union? The far right suffered very heavy losses in the June European elections in Poland — even though it did well in other parts of Europe.

**KG:** The far right lost not because it is much more sympathetic to anti-Semitism but because it made an ass of itself. It was ridiculous in power and also it did the unforgivable — they actually were serious about their Catholic efforts. Poland to an extent is a hypocritical country. And this is something that I find extremely positive. That is, everybody pays lip service, say, to Catholic sexual ethics. But if you have an unwed pregnancy in a village (let alone the big cities)...okay. People will make some snide remarks but basically the feeling will be "she lucked out" not "she sinned". She might be a legitimate target of some jokes, but there is absolutely no threat of her being ostracised, excluded from the community or whatever. And when the League of Polish Families started getting dead serious about enforcing Catholic ethics, Catholic Poland said: "Hell, no!" So this was one of the factors that caused their defeat in the elections.

**IM:** There is a kind of soft side to hard attitudes in Poland. It's a curious paradox isn't it?

**KG:** It's no paradox. The technical name for it is hypocrisy. I happen to be a great fan of hypocrisy, not overall, but in many aspects, it is what makes civilised life possible.

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