

**BRIDGING THE ODER:  
REFLECTIONS ON POLAND, GERMANY, AND THE  
TRANSFORMATION OF EUROPE  
PART I**

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I would like to talk about German unification in the context of the Polish-German relationship, in four parts. First, I will compare the two countries with regard to their situation before German reunification in 1989. Because of the time constraints of this lecture, I will do this in a very selective way. The second part will compare key points in the transition and transformation period of both countries. In the third, I would like to present my analysis about the present state of the German-Polish relationship. The fourth part will be a kind of conclusion.

**I**

Before I start, let me make one comment. When we talk about the reunification in Germany, we very often start with negative remarks: things that have not developed well. Having been born in West Berlin, I am thankful for reunification every day. There was a big difference between living in West Berlin, which was very much an island, and living in Cologne or Bavaria, where you did not really feel the problem of Germany's division. The notion that Berlin would either become a part of the GDR or remain an island forever was not acceptable to me, so I never gave up on the idea that there had to be a reunification—for the sake of freedom, not so much for the sake of national reunification. Because I traveled constantly to the GDR starting in 1967, I could observe the process of change in East Germany. Even though I was quite critical toward West Germany, I felt the differences between the East and West German political systems very deeply. I felt them physically when I would leave East Berlin and return to West Berlin. I remember that when my son was three years old, we were in a car crossing the East German border. We

had finally provided all border documents and were just leaving the customs area when my son asked me very loudly, looking out the window of our car: "Mama, why does it look like a prison here?" I am not only very thankful for reunification, but I am especially thankful to Poland, because Polish behavior and activities—Poland's refusal to accept the division of Europe, Poland's ingenuity in overcoming the difficulties of the "Round Table" situation—have become for me an example of how to deal with a complicated reality. I am very thankful to Poland for that.

What were the fundamental differences between Poland and Germany before 1989? Germany was divided, Poland was not. West Berliners and East Germans never gave up on the idea of unification. Most of them wanted unification, they were interested in it. I remember an encounter near Dresden, when my husband and I were traveling and we asked the way because we were a little lost. Some East Germans explained the way to us, and when we left they said: "Never forget unification." This was very interesting—this was in 1987. At that time, many West Germans did not think of unification at all. If you traveled in the Rhineland, if you traveled in Bavaria, they did not think of it. Even today, many of them do not feel differently, except that they think they have to pay for reunification. There was a clear difference between West Berliners and East Germans, on the one hand, and West Germans (with the possible exception of those who lived close to the inner-German border) on the other: the former remained interested in reunification, the latter had more or less forgotten it.

The motivation of East Germans was that they wanted freedom of movement, a better standard of living, and the dignity of democracy, including freedom of speech—roughly in that order. I think one needs to be clear about this: There were many East Germans who did not suffer from the absence of the freedom of speech, who were not primarily interested in freedom of speech, but who were interested in the freedom of movement—to go and travel anywhere they wanted—and in having a better life. But there was an elite that was interested in freedom of speech, in more democracy, and these people were the ones who initiated the protests in East Germany. These people were not fundamentally pro-capitalist or anti-socialist. Those who were pro-capitalist and anti-socialist had mostly left East Germany long ago. Those who started chanting "*Wir sind das Volk*" and longed for the democratization of the system often thought that there could be a better GDR and were not immediately thinking about reunification. Even if the slogan changed very quickly from "*Wir sind das Volk*" to "*Wir sind ein Volk*"—from "We are the people" to "We are one people"—this was not the intention of the initiators. But there is a dynamism of rhetoric. If you have "*das Volk*" and somebody says "*Wir sind ein Volk*," things quickly change. The original protesters

wanted to build a better GDR. This was one of the reasons why in East Germany there was no Solidarity movement. Many of the East Germans who were interested in a more democratic system were also very critical of West Germany's capitalist system.

In Poland, the political movements' main point of departure was to overcome what the Poles called "Jalta": the division of Europe that was sealed at the 1945 Yalta Conference. The Polish opposition considered it a grave injustice that, having fought Nazi Germany together with Great Britain and having suffered such terrible losses, they were, in 1945, subjected to dictatorship, to a government that was not theirs, to national dependency. In the Polish opposition, the national and the freedom aspect were joined. In Poland, most of the politically active people wanted to overcome the division of Europe. Their country was not divided, but they wanted to overcome the division of Europe.

There was a second key difference between the pre-1989 domestic situations in Poland and Germany. Since 1956 there had been a kind of semi-pluralism in Poland. Sixty percent of the farmers were cultivating private plots. More importantly, the Catholic Church had regained its institutional strength when Cardinal Wyszyński was released from house arrest. In Poland, the Communist Party had completely lost its authority, and most people did not fear it, whereas in East Germany they did. The Poles did not even maintain their respect for the army, although the army had always enjoyed great respect in Poland. I remember that in 1967, when I had my first conversations with Leszek Kołakowski to collect ideas for my dissertation, he told me that in Poland, nobody believed any more in all that stuff: Marxism, communism. This was very different in East Germany, which had believers in communism and Marxism. Poland, by contrast, had islands of open speech, of democratic speech. There were the clubs of the Catholic intelligentsia, which often dealt with private problems—such as how to educate children in the Christian faith while being surrounded by communism—but they also practiced a culture of discussion that was much closer to that of a civil society than in East Germany.

I recently coordinated a collective research project on the building of democratic identity in post-dictatorial societies, comparing Poland, Germany, and France, with three researchers from each country. Our research revealed that in Poland, the revisionist socialists and part of the Catholic intelligentsia were very interested in democracy but not in nationalism. In Poland, there had been a tradition of social self-organization since the partitions of the end of the eighteenth century. There was a special expression for it in Polish—*praca organiczna*—organic work or cooperation, one could say, which meant that society tried to organize itself at a distance from the state, which was an occupying state. This

tradition continued until the First World War and was taken up again by *solidarnosc* in the 1980s and the “flying universities” that tried to organize education in order to shape people’s ideas of Polish history independently from the official teaching. It is interesting to note, by the way, that despite this Polish tradition of self-organization against an occupation government, Poles currently have difficulty in organizing what we call in Western terms “civil society.” Self-organization and civil society are quite different because self-organization took place in complete opposition to the state, whereas civil society has to find a middle way between cooperation and opposition. I remember an article by Tadeusz Mazowiecki from around 1990, in which he wrote that Poles were wonderful in opposing totalitarian dictatorship, but that they would have more difficulty organizing coalition-building and coming together for a constructive policy. I think this is a crucial point. If for nearly one-and-a-half centuries your psychological, mental, and even physical survival have depended on a clear and strong opposition to the authorities, it is difficult to develop an attitude of balance between opposition and cooperation.

In East Germany there was no organized opposition to the Communist Party of the kind that the Catholic Church represented in Poland. The East German Protestant Church was different from the Catholic Church, especially toward the end of the GDR. It was a haven for the development of many movements—for the environment, for democratization—but this was not the same as the opposition of the Catholic Church to the government in Poland. In Germany, you had more of a state-oriented mentality. This has been a long tradition. Karl Marx criticized Hegel, who saw the state as the main entity to bring together bourgeois society. But although Marx considered Hegel’s idea an illusion, he himself became—especially in the Leninist version—more state-oriented in the transition period than the Poles ever were. In Germany, you had a strong sense and tradition of political discipline. You have to do your work, even if you don’t know exactly what the work is for. In Poland, this sense of discipline does not exist, and this is one of the reasons why Poland had that wonderful anarchy against the state authority during the communist period. I said it already: In Germany you still had Marxists and communists; in Poland you had none after the 1950s.

Those who initiated peaceful revolution in Germany mostly wanted a better GDR. West German politicians hesitated to work or call for unification—even the Social Democrats, who had been more serious about unification, especially under Kurt Schumacher, their first postwar party leader. But there were also other orientations. And when the opportunity for unification became visible, I had the impression that Helmut Kohl and Willy Brandt were closer to each other with regard to unification than Brandt and Oskar Lafontaine or Kohl and the Bavarian CSU. There were

splits within the parties. These divisions represented different generations, but also different levels of proximity to the GDR and to the whole problem of the division of Germany. So the picture was complex. One person who really wanted reunification and who played an active role during that time was Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who hailed from Saxony. In short: In Poland, the aim of overcoming Yalta's division of Europe in favor of a free and united Europe had never been abandoned; in Germany, the overcoming of Yalta's division no longer seemed attainable to most.

## II

Turning to the post-1989 transformations of the two countries, the most striking difference is that the GDR became a part of the Federal Republic, was helped financially by the Federal Republic, and was shaped by the Federal Republic. While one result of this process was a rapid improvement of the GDR's infrastructure, it also provoked a feeling of non-sovereignty among many East Germans, a lack of self-esteem, and also an escape from responsibility for their region and field of activity. Recent research has shown that the *idea* of democracy is accepted to a high degree in both East and West Germany, but consent for the *existing* democracy has declined: in West Germany it is about 60–65 percent, and in East Germany it has dropped to about 30 percent. Of course, such research is always problematic because people who dislike the government in power might say they do not approve of the existing democracy. Nevertheless, I think this difference between East and West Germany is important. The advantage of West Germany, I would argue, is that many more people have had the chance to experience active democracy in civic associations and social movements, which creates support for existing democracy.

In Poland, the situation was different. While there also is a difference in attitudes between winners and losers, the Poles transformed themselves on their own—they were not transformed by somebody else. There was no elder brother to educate or to lead them from outside. This does not mean that there is fundamental unity in Poland. On the contrary, I would say that at present Polish society has many fissures. In Germany, there is a kind of continuity and stability of "West German" institutions. Only one new party emerged: the PDS, now the Linkspartei. The East Germans also experienced immediate integration into NATO and the European Union. There is no governmental instability and no need to create everything from scratch; you do not find all the problems that Poland and the transformation countries have. These countries do not yet have political parties or orientations rooted in the society; such roots are

difficult to grow. In Poland, there is a clear discontinuity of political institutions. Whereas West German companies often tried to prevent East German competitors from becoming strong by buying them out, in Poland there was a chance to develop an unexpectedly successful economy. I remember a meeting in Berlin with potential investors from America in about 1990. The Americans said: "Poland? Forget about it. There will never be a chance to invest capital in Poland." The contrary has happened: Poland has attracted a lot of capital, and it is interesting to see this empirical defeat of prejudices. The Polish economy is doing quite well. But both countries have problems in the mental transition, especially among the losers.

### III

I now come to the third point: the present situation. After 1989 a period of surprisingly good relations began between Germany and Poland. After some hesitations related to upcoming elections, the German government guaranteed the German-Polish border along the Oder-Neisse line. Germany also helped Poland become a member of the European Union. There were some ideological problems, especially the question of the German expellees. For a while, these seemed to have been settled, and they were not an issue between the governments. In the last few years, however, more problems have reemerged. The first is the ideological one: the so-called Center against Expulsion, the idea of the League of Expellees, which began in 1999 or 2000. This problem started on the German side. These ideological disturbances are very unfortunate. Then there is the problem of the gas pipeline, the German-Russian relationship, and the friendship between Schroeder and Putin. These problems had already started during the last Red-Green government.

Where are we now? On the general level of civil society, great progress has been made in German-Polish relations. We have constantly come to a better mutual understanding. Surveys have demonstrated this. It is very impressive that a majority of Poles consider Germany their favorite political partner, and that they even consider Germany—after the United States and Great Britain—as their favorite military partner, which seems miraculous to me. We have also witnessed constantly improving economic relations and cooperation. Exports from Germany to Poland have grown, and tourism from Germany to Poland has grown. Of course, there is a fundamental, historically grounded asymmetry between Poland and Germany. First of all, it has to be remembered that it was not Poland that divided Germany, and it was not Poland that invaded Germany in the Second World War, but the other way around. Nevertheless—this is the second historically grounded asymmetry—Poles are much more in-

terested in Germany than Germans are in Poland. There is always asymmetry from east to west. Poles know Germany much better than the other way around. Poles know the German language much better than Germans know Polish. There are about 2.5 million Polish youngsters who are learning German, but fewer than 10,000 Germans who are learning Polish.

If you are interested in somebody but the other person is not interested in you, that is not pleasant. Psychologically, that is very clear. So we always have to take this asymmetry into consideration. Nevertheless, all the surveys show that Poles have not only more respect, but more sympathy for Germans than the other way around. German attitudes are very slowly improving. But it remains remarkable that Poles—who were victims of German policy not only under the National Socialists but also earlier—are more at ease and more sympathetic toward Germans than the other way around. In a way, this is psychologically understandable because those who have done something bad often have an unconscious tendency to think that the victims must also have had their part in it. This psychological mechanism is at the basis of the “anti-Semitism of resentment.” Because we don’t want to acknowledge our role as perpetrators, we say in order to ease our feelings: “There must have been something about the victims themselves.” And this is the case to a certain degree with Poland too, I would say, especially in the last few years. Public discussions of the Nazi past and World War II in Germany were first about Jews and then expellees, but not that much about what was done to Poland. I think this is a deficit that has to be overcome in order to teach contemporary Germany what really happened in Poland.

There are also problems on the governmental and media level. I cannot deny that I have some problems with the present Polish government. There are points of divergence in their views concerning respect for minorities and homosexuals, the death penalty, and freedom of the press. These are fundamental differences. Playing the “anti-German card” will not succeed in Polish society, and politicians who use it will be prevented from cooperating with Germany. The bigger problem is the instability of the Polish government, which runs the risk of creating a situation where one does not know who one’s political partner will be from one day to the next.

## IV

In conclusion: First of all, it is very important to strengthen the good relationship between the two civil societies. I also hope for political stabilization in Poland. Common projects could also help our relationship. This is what Janusz Reiter and I had in mind when we were moderators

of the German-Polish forum. We should try to find a common policy toward Poland's eastern neighbors, because Poland has wonderful expertise in the Ukraine and, to a certain degree, in Belarus, and we should try to discuss how a "good neighbor" policy on the part of the EU could work. We should also discuss what the difficulties concerning the European constitution are and how we can move forward concerning the budget. By the way, I have the impression that especially in the agrarian sector Poland is realizing that the subsidies from the European Union are very helpful. I learned from a Polish politician that there could be a discussion about a common gas station in Szczecin/Stettin. I would also like to see more frequent meetings between the two governments, and to find common ground in the interpretation of history.

Finally, I think it is very important to prevent a negative dynamic from arising from the debate surrounding the so-called Center against Expulsion. The problem, as I see it, is not that Poland does not accept German mourning over the expulsions. What Poles do not like is historical revisionism, and they are right not to like it. The initiators of the Center against Expulsion have put forward revisionist positions. Just two weeks ago, I heard a prominent figure among them saying on the radio that Poles and Czechs had always wanted to expel Germans from Silesia and the Sudetenland, and that Hitler gave them the chance to do this. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a leading German newspaper, allotted a whole page to an article by an independent historian, Stefan Scheil, arguing that the Second World War was caused not only by Nazi Germany, but that Nazi Germany was reacting to aggressive and expansionist policies of the allies, especially of Poland. His idea is that the German *Drang nach Osten* was only a reaction to the Polish *Drang nach Westen*. While this will seem completely ridiculous to you, the fact that the so-called evidence for such an interpretation of history is given a whole page in a serious German newspaper is worrisome. This is still a completely isolated position among professional historians, but it represents the ideas of many people who are pushing for the Center against Expulsion. They say that National Socialism merely provided Poles and Czechs with the incidental opportunity to realize long-standing expansionist plans after 1945. Although many people consider the interpretation of history an academic issue, experience has taught me that we have to be careful with interpretations of history because they motivate our actions and our political interpretations for today and for tomorrow.