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In Memoriam: Professor Bronislaw Geremek

Andrew Targowski
targowski@wmich.edu

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**Remembering Professor Bronislaw Geremek
(1932-2008)**

Dr. Andrew Targowski
Western Michigan University

President of the International Society for the Comparative
Study of Civilizations
Former President, World Council for Polonia Studies
(2001-2007)

I recall Professor Geremek for two reasons. First, because he was a co-author with me and others of the unique book *Vision of Poland* (1997).¹ Second, and even more important: as a specialist in civilization studies, I want to mention his role in the development of civilization.

Professor Geremek, former Minister of Foreign Affairs for Poland, was an intellectual who specialized in Medieval France. He was a long-time lecturer at the Sorbonne and was its *doctor honoris causa*. He understood thoroughly the role of those French intellectuals whose ideas triggered the great French Revolution of 1789. This revolution transformed Europe from a feudal to a democratic society.

It is important to remember that in the post-revolutionary Third Polish Republic, intellectuals were needed; without them, the nation was blind. The cleverness of the plutocracy in collecting material goods is admired by many, particularly by the media and the public. However, cleverness is not wisdom. Today it is evident to me, since I have lived abroad for almost 30 years, how very much the wisdom of the intellectual class is needed by Polish society. As with most revolutions, the Solidarity Revolution is eating its own children too.

Let's remember that in the last 324 years, five very important revolutions took place. These revolutions changed the world for the better, since they were guided by ideas created by intellectuals.

Here are the examples:

- **The Glorious English Revolution** (1685-1714) gave power to the parliamentary system, thus circumscribing the king's activities. This solution resulted from ideas formulated by Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), James Harrington (1611-1677), John Locke (1632-1704), Charles Blount (1654-1693), William Shakespeare (1664-1616) and John Milton (1608-1674).
- **The French Revolution** (1789-1794) introduced the idea of a citizen, a subordinate of the state and not owned by the king. It was the result of many discussions among intellectuals, those whose brilliance lit up the Parisian salons. Among them were Charles-Louis Montesquieu (1689-1755), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and Voltaire (1694-1778).
- **The American Revolution** (1775-1783) introduced democracy (even if at the beginning only for the elites), the result of ideas formulated by such intellectuals as David Hume (1711-1776) and the French "philosophes", all known by educated Americans.
- **The Bolshevik Revolution** (1917), which introduced the classless society, was a utopian communist movement designed by Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) and Leon Trotsky (1879-1840), who were inspired by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). This revolution was brought down by the next revolution.
- **The Polish Solidarity Revolution** (1981-1989), which overthrew the communist regime, was mostly due to the ideas and activities of such intellectuals as: Leszek Moczulski (1930-), Bronislaw Geremek (1933-2008), Jacek Kuro (1934-2004), Karol Modzelewski (1937-),

Adam Michnik (1946-), Jan Lityński (1946-) and others who were the students of Leszek Kołakowski (1927-).

The ideas of these intellectuals inspired the crowds, from which came such leaders as Lech Walesa, who will pass into history as the anti-Lenin. But Bronislaw Geremek will survive in history as one of the fifty most influential intellectuals in the past 324 years, those whose ideas and activities have changed the world.

One must emphasize that Communism in fact was overthrown in 1989-91 from within, not from outside. In the Soviet Union communism was not brought down by that heroic professor Andrej Sakharov or the great writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, but rather by a legal leader—President Mikhail Gorbachev and two members of the *politburo*: Yeltsin and Yakovlev.

Gorbachev and Jaruzelski promised Pope John Paul II that they would not use military power against Solidarity, thus permitting this independent union to survive. The Polish Pope was guided by Christian moral values, which determined the fate of communism. It happened only because the members of this triangle wanted to solve the problem in this way. If other members had been given power, such as moderate *politburo* members, the regime might have lasted until today. Clearly, Vladimir Putin, today's leader of Russia's transformation, apparently regrets the fall of the USSR and wants to restore elements of it.

À propos the defeat of Communism, one can mention the interesting role played by Yuri Andropov, the former First Secretary of the Communist Party, who was also was head of the KGB. He knew the Soviet system well and he designated Gorbachev for the top job (after the death of Chernenko), with the mission of reforming the Soviet system.

In addition, one must mention that Andropov as the Soviet Ambassador in Hungary crushed the Hungarian Uprising of October 1956. Later he seemed to have regretted it, and he felt some sort of remorse, which he soothed by listening to American jazz.

A curriculum vita of Professor Geremek is complex, dramatic, and difficult to comprehend at first glance. It falls into the category of the “psychology of power,” which he shared with other leaders of the Solidarity movement. They risked their lives to provide moral vision and motivation for the ten million members of Solidarity. Revolutions are managed not by saints but by leaders with life experience, men who are ready to die for the sake of the ideal.

Nowadays in the Third Republic of Poland, many, particularly those who were arrived late at the barricades, want to “make another revolution.” Their predecessors in Solidarity were unselfish and cared about Poland. Not so today, with the current roster of politicians.

It is difficult to find a place for intellectuals in contemporary Poland. But without them it won’t be a free Poland. Man does not live by bread alone.

In a chapter of *Vision of Poland*, written eleven years ago, he argued for Poland’s admittance to NATO and the European Union and normalization of relations with Germany and Russia. His ideas prevailed (with the exception of friendly relations with Russia—since there is too much bad history for relations with Russia to heal yet), due to his service as Poland’s Foreign Affairs Minister.

Did he get gratitude from his fellow countrymen? History will give him credit, but contemporary fellow-citizens always look for angels rather than real heroes, particularly those who are or were successful.

Finally, I would like to mention that I shook hands with Professor Geremek in Ann Arbor, Michigan, when, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, he gave a speech to a large and enthusiastic audience. He told me then to “please continue what you are doing.” So I am doing what he asked me to do and say a grateful goodbye to Professor Geremek.

Endnote

¹ Andrzej Targowski and Stanislaw Dronicz. *Wizja Polski (Vision of Poland)*. Warsaw: Agencja Wydawnicza CB, 1997.