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WITNESS TO HISTORY

A visiting professor from Poland offers a first-hand look at the transitions that rocked Eastern Europe and looks ahead at what's to come.

By Matt Weiland

It all dissolved so quickly, the Soviet bloc of Eastern Europe, like snow melting beneath an April rain. One moment a shroud of white and ice, the next a patch of fertile, green earth, first in Hungary, then in Poland, then in Czechoslovakia, until there were champagne corks popping and Germans dancing in unity atop the Berlin Wall.

For visiting professor Zbigniew Czubinski, this was the fulfillment of his dreams.

A member of the faculty of Jagiellonian University and a native of Krakow, Poland, Czubinski spent the past winter and spring quarters at Cleveland State as part of CSU's International Exchange Program. Not only did he teach classes in Polish history and Eastern-European politics, he also lectured to area groups, presented papers at CSU and participated in Round Table discussions concerning current changes and future developments in Eastern Europe.

The tall, lanky professor of political science and international relations has travelled the hills and gullies of exaltation, despair and rebirth that have been Poland's course for the past decade. Fluent in five languages and a specialist in comparative politics and international law, Czubinski sought to teach CSU students why the transitions from communism to democracy

occurred and what they will mean in terms of east-west relations in the years to come.

"My goal is to offer students a fuller understanding of the people in Poland, as well as those throughout Eastern Europe, and to bring into focus what brought about the changes and what they will mean to the people of the United States," he said during his stay.

Czubinski has been a member of the Solidarity movement since its inception in August 1980 and still retains the personal air of energy that infused Poland at the time. "The early days of Solidarity were exhilarating," he recounts enthusiastically. "The party and its activities constituted the first free independent political movement in Central-Eastern Europe."

Czubinski delivered speeches and presented papers on Poland's economic and legal issues during the early days of Solidarity from his base at Jagiellonian, where almost all of the faculty belonged to the party. It was a time of invigoration and vitality, a time when the atmosphere was instilled with a sense of possibility and hope. And yet, in the end, it was also a time that proved to be fleeting.

On Dec. 13, 1981, martial law was imposed on Poland, the Solidarity movement outlawed, its leaders imprisoned. It became a pessimistic, depressing time for Czubinski and his fellow members. Their links with Western friends of the movement were severed, their visas revoked, their letters and other communications censored.

"The Soviet government didn't want our message of Solidarity exported just as they didn't want it contaminating the communist minds within," he says. "There was to be no individual contact with the West, only government contact so they could control the messages sent and maintain the party line."

It was the era of Brezhnev, of Andropov then Chernenko, the era of the "evil empire," as former President Ronald Reagan tagged it, the era of isolation and frozen relations with the West. The old guard, the com-

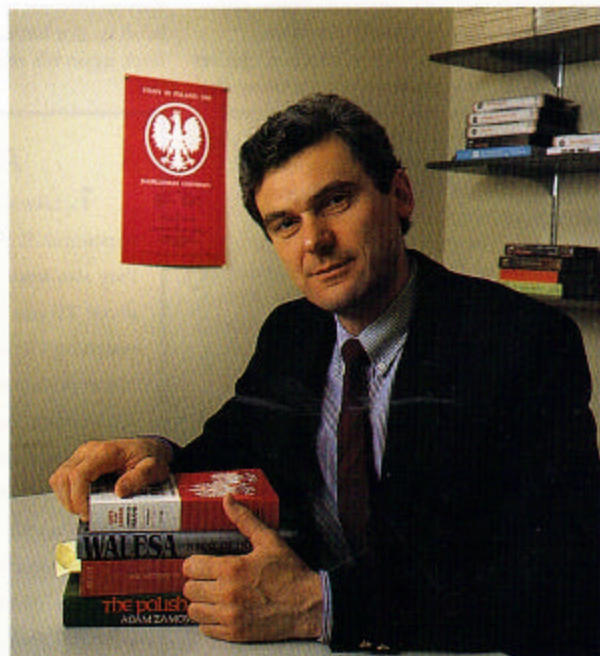
munist hard-liners who had come of age under Stalin, had frozen any efforts to initiate political reform, quelled all attempts for Eastern-European liberation.

There was a pall cast over the movement as the hope that once had lit, and guided it, gradually dimmed. Yet, beneath the surface — through meetings held in the kitchens of houses and within the classrooms of Jagiellonian — the fire that propelled the movement never was wholly extinguished.

Though the party was officially outlawed and the movement visibly halted, meetings were still held, plans were still outlined, support still solicited from within the country and from the Western powers outside it. A demonstration was held the 13th of every month to commemorate the outlawing of the party and the onset of martial law. And each month, the protests were broken up and suppressed through force by the riot police.

"Methods of repression abounded throughout everyday life," says Czubinski. "There were various forms of blackmail and intimidation focused on those who were suspected members of the movement, or even supporters. Workers were threatened with, at the very least, job loss, and at the most prison."

For Czubinski and many members of the movement, the university proved to be



Visiting professor Zbigniew Czubinski in his CSU office



UPI, COURTESY OF CSU PRESS COLLECTION

Thousands of Poles, chanting "Long live Solidarity," defiantly stage a May Day show of force in Warsaw in 1982.

a haven. The Soviet-bloc governments generally used academics for their own purposes, manipulating teaching practices and the material taught as a means to serve their own ends.

At Jagiellonian, however, the university rector (the equivalent of a president) was a member of Solidarity, and therefore faculty members who were involved in the movement were never under the threat of job loss or reprimand. And even though some were arrested for visibly protesting, the movement continued to simmer within the confines of academia, as well as within the collective hearts of the Polish people.

"It was very difficult for Polish communists to suppress the ideas of Solidarity because it was so widely embraced," says Czubinski. "Nearly 10 million people out of a total population of 38 million were pro-Solidarity, so the government couldn't use massive deportation or arrests to quash the movement."

The reinstatement of Solidarity as a legal political party and the ensuing changes that came about in the fall of 1989 came as no surprise to Czubinski and his colleagues. "We knew that sooner or later the crumble would happen, the only question was when. In 1980, we had poked a small hole in the dam. By 1989, the dam was ready to burst."

The one event that took Czubinski and his colleagues by surprise was the successful

rebellion in Romania last December. "The strength of their secret police gave us no indication that the revolt that eventually took place would happen quite so swiftly," he says. "But when members of the secret police refused to fire on their own people and defected, that took us all by surprise."

He points to the violent 1989 revolution against the Ceausescu regime — in which those in high-level government positions were tried of crimes against the Romanian people and subsequently executed — to stress the peaceful transition that took place throughout the rest of Eastern Europe. It is a transition to which he credits Pope John Paul II — and in Poland's case, Lech Walesa — for steering in a non-violent direction.

"It was a great victory of ideas over captive minds," says Czubinski. "The greatest achievement of the transition is that even the old regime — a regime that suppressed freedom and oppressed its people — were not prosecuted nor jailed. There was no vindictiveness. There was forgiveness."

When both the literal and symbolic walls finally came down it was both the end and beginning of an era, as well as a great cause for celebration. "All minds were on the same joyous event, a national holiday of sorts, with masses gathering in the streets to rejoice or celebrating in

homes with friends," he says. "Pieces of barbed wire were cut and given to friends and tourists as relics of a passing era, signs of a new beginning."

The celebrations have subsided and the work has begun. The process of liberation continues in a day-to-day fashion throughout Eastern Europe, with the collective desires of the people deciding the turn of events, instead of the rule of a single dictator.

Czubinski believes that there is no turning back the political clock, that Polish, Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, East German and Romanian sovereignty and self-determination is here to stay.

"The hope of Poles is to create a positive international environment ready to be penetrated by Western capital — money, banks, communications, etc.," says

Czubinski. What Poland needs, he notes, is for the West to invest in certain branches of the national economy, in areas such as agriculture, food processing and hotels.

Central-Eastern Europe, particularly Poland, is a prime target for American investment, he says. "It possesses a wealth of raw materials, from agriculture to mining."

It is, Czubinski notes, a temperate climate that maintains a somewhat raw, though functional, infrastructure in terms of transportation and housing. It is a country that can provide inexpensive, highly-skilled labor in addition to access to both the European and Soviet markets.

"If the United States does not jump on this opportunity," he cautions, "then Japan and the reunified Germany will." Japan, he says, has already made an impact with its economic presence throughout Poland. Yet it is the American capital they would prefer.

"Economic strength is what has become important in terms of being a world power," Czubinski says. "Those who economically control Central-Eastern Europe — the heart of Europe — through investment and development, will control Europe. Control Europe, and you control Eurasia. Control Eurasia, and you control the world." He taps his head thoughtfully, confidently, with a sense of prognostication. "The United States must develop its policy around these concepts."