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Speaking truth to power and prejudice¹

I first met Adam Michnik in Warsaw around 1970, when Jan Józef Lipski, one of the legendary figures of Polish resistance, took my wife and me to visit his young protégé in hospital, where Michnik was recovering from one of the many beatings he suffered at the hands of the communist security forces. The boyishly mischievous young man on the bed in front of us seemed totally undeterred by his experience, and his comments had all the overt defiance that made Poland such a difficult country for successive Russian imperial regimes to control.

Despite his youthful appearance, Michnik was already a veteran of seditious activity. In his early teens he had caught the eye of Lipski and another activist, Jacek Kuroń, and began taking part in their political discussion groups, which were duly disbanded by the regime. Before he turned 20, Michnik had been twice rusticated from Warsaw University. The first time was for circulating Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski's *Open Letter to the Party*, a classic in the genre of Eastern European opposition literature, and the second for organising a discussion group with the famous Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, who had just been expelled from the ruling party for his

¹ First published as a book review of Adam Michnik's *In Search of Lost Meaning: The new Eastern Europe* (University of California Press, 2011) in *Inside Story*, 24 Oct. 2011, insidestory.org.au/speaking-truth-to-power-and-prejudice.

outspoken criticism of the regime. The fact that Michnik was mingling with the elite of the Polish opposition at such an early age testified to his exceptional intelligence as well as his indomitable impertinence.

In March 1968 Michnik emerged as a leader of the student demonstrations, centred on Warsaw University, that were being staged against the increasingly hardline cultural policies of party boss Władysław Gomułka. Gomułka was a 'national communist' who had been ousted from the leadership in the late 1940s and later imprisoned for daring to defy Stalin, but was acclaimed by Poles as a national hero in 1956 when he was returned to power in defiance of Moscow's wishes. The regime's brutal reaction to the 'March events' was led by the anti-Semitic Partisan faction of the party, which had strong influence in the military and security establishment and whose leader, General Mieczysław Moczar, had ambitions for the top job.

Some of the student leaders, like Michnik, were the children of Jewish communists or ex-communists. They became the focus of the police actions and propaganda that were coordinated by the Partisan faction, which hoped thereby to curry favour with the public and destabilise Gomułka, whose wife was Jewish. For several months, the world was treated to the extraordinary spectacle of a communist regime, in a country that had involuntarily hosted Nazi death camps, conducting an overtly anti-Semitic crackdown and public disinformation campaign, sometimes employing language and cartoons reminiscent of the Third Reich. Many thousands of the small surviving Jewish community in Poland succumbed to strong official pressure to go into exile. The damage to Poland's international reputation and cultural life was severe and long-lasting.

For those of Michnik's young circle of rebels who had Jewish family backgrounds, it was a great surprise to find themselves identified as Jews and not Poles. Until then, they had not thought of themselves that way. Many involved in the protests, including Michnik, were expelled from the university and some were driven out of the country. As a key leader, Michnik was given a stiff prison sentence, but he was later released in an amnesty and allowed to resume his studies at another university.

Happily for Poland, the Partisan faction's bid for control of the regime was unsuccessful. In December 1970, Gomułka's misrule came to an end when demonstrations against food shortages in Gdańsk and other Baltic cities were suppressed by mass shootings of unarmed protesters. In the crisis that followed, Gomułka was succeeded not by Moczar but by the relatively moderate Edward Gierek. It was no coincidence that the first powerful impulse to the Solidarity movement came from those same Baltic cities a decade later.

In that intervening decade, a gradually expanding milieu of opposition intellectuals built an extensive political underground in Poland, one of the central objectives of which was to forge links with the workers by giving them moral, legal and financial support while developing illegal publications and unauthorised teaching institutions. The success of their efforts became evident in the Solidarity revolution. Between repeated episodes of detention and police beatings, and a stint studying in Paris, Michnik managed to involve himself prominently in practically all the action, especially the writing, production and distribution of illegal publications. In August 1980, he was active in the Solidarity movement, again imprisoned, and only released when the authorities finally agreed to Solidarity's demands.

With General Wojciech Jaruzelski's introduction of martial law in December 1981, Michnik was placed in an 'internment' camp. When he refused to accept emigration as a condition for his release, he was imprisoned for three years without trial, including a lengthy period in solitary confinement, where he staged a hunger strike lasting several weeks. Amnestied in 1984, he was soon rearrested and sentenced to three years in prison, but then released after a year and a half in solitary.

Having become an adviser to Lech Wałęsa, he was involved in the Round Table Talks of 1989. These negotiations led to the peaceful transfer of power, by stages, from the communist regime to democracy, making Poland the first of the communist dominoes and the one that, in many ways, set the paradigm for the relatively bloodless revolution that progressively swept the Soviet bloc. It was the Round Table, however untelegraphic, and not the fall of the Berlin Wall, that was the decisive moment in the dismantling of the Soviet empire.

Throughout these turbulent events, Michnik maintained a high-quality running commentary produced in extremely difficult conditions. He has always been a phrase-maker of rare talent with the ability to encapsulate complex historical truths or political strategies in a few words. Partly for this reason, no doubt, Wałęsa asked him to set up the legal, daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Electoral Gazette – which Michnik still edits) to present the Solidarity case in the run-up to the first more or less democratic elections to take place in the Soviet bloc.

After winning the elections resoundingly – to the extent that the regime's rules permitted – Solidarity decided to make a bold move to take over the government while allowing Jaruzelski to remain in the presidency. In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Michnik published an editorial with the impious title: 'Your president, our premier'. This boldness struck many in the West, as well as in official circles in Moscow and Warsaw, as a step decidedly too far. Yet the manoeuvre succeeded, and Jaruzelski accepted it.

This latest volume of Michnik's essays in English is a mixture of historical, literary and contemporary political commentary, much of which appears to have been written around the middle of the last decade. Looming large is Michnik's concern about the bitter internecine warfare that has often seemed to bedevil Polish political discussions. Even at times of great historic triumphs, as in the first years after Poland regained its independence at the end of World War I, or the years since the transition to democracy at the end of the 1980s, public life has been marred by furious accusations and mutual denunciations.

Though he scarcely mentions them by name, it is clear in the book that Michnik is particularly concerned with the behaviour of the main right-wing party of the past decade, Law and Justice, and its leaders, the late president Lech Kaczyński and his twin brother Jarosław, party leader and prime minister in 2006–07. That being so, Michnik would have been pleased with the result of Poland's parliamentary elections on 9 October 2011, when Law and Justice was soundly defeated again by the centrist Civic Platform party of Donald Tusk.

The other concern that keeps resurfacing in the book, especially its last two chapters, is anti-Semitism. Michnik sheets home the responsibility for inflaming this sentiment both to the nationalist right in Poland in different periods and to the communist regime in the first decades after World War II. He has suffered at the hands of both groups, and so knows whereof he speaks.

Polish anti-Semitism is still alive, if seldom violent in the way that it has been in the past. Flagrant events, like the daubing of swastikas on a memorial to pogrom victims in the Polish village of Jedwabne during the recent election campaign, are relatively rare. The Kaczyńskis, it should be noted, have never appeared to be anti-Semitic, though some of their followers are. And it is not purely a story of tormentors and their victims: the troubled history of Polish–Jewish relations contains, for example, chapters that show why and how the postwar regime in Poland at times fanned those tensions, and why Poles had some cause to resent the role of Jews in Polish communism.

I recounted some of the highlights of an extraordinary life at the beginning of this review to show a number of things about Michnik – but, above all, that here is a historic hero of remarkable courage and dedication, as well as great intellectual and political gifts. So why have many Poles, including former comrades in the Polish underground, come to be so hostile towards him? (One critic, for example, wrote a book entitled *Michnikism: A Medical History*.) Much of Michnik's book is dedicated to showing that such people are in the grip of various unworthy prejudices, and that he is yet another in a long line of Polish public figures dragged through the mud by unjust critics and the gutter press. He is eloquent and usually convincing, but perhaps not always entirely objective in his own cause. Let me try to summarise a few of the salient points in the argument.

Michnik is attacked in newspapers aligned with Law and Justice primarily because he is their electoral enemy and the battlelines have been drawn. But they have specific complaints as well. He is particularly blamed for his cordial relations with and support for some of the old enemies; for example, General Jaruzelski, the imposer of martial law; ex-president Aleksander Kwaśniewski, once a minister in a communist government in the 1980s; and even the ex-head of the security apparatus in the martial law period, General Czesław Kiszczak.

Michnik says of Jaruzelski that he acted partly from a justified fear of a Soviet invasion and that, after the Round Table, he stuck to the agreements even though they dismantled the communist regime and cost him his job. The agreements also led indirectly to his being charged with crimes against the Polish people and, despite his advancing years and poor health, subjected to lengthy legal proceedings – proceedings that Michnik opposed. In fact, the charges were only suspended this year on the grounds that Jaruzelski, who is now 88, is suffering from cancer.²

Michnik makes similar points about General Kiszczak: that although he managed an oppressive regime in the 1980s, he stuck honourably by the Round Table agreements when he could have caused a great deal of trouble for the new Solidarity Government had he chosen to try to undermine them. Many would agree with all of these points.

For his part, Kwaśniewski (president from 1995 to 2005) is widely seen, and not just by Michnik, as having been a successful and strongly pro-Western president, who defeated Wałęsa for the post in a fair election. Many of our Solidarity friends told us after Wałęsa's first term they had decided, with heavy hearts, that he was not up to the job and had voted for Kwaśniewski instead.

More broadly, Michnik argues that the Round Table was a brilliantly successful device for easing the transition to democracy without precipitating terrible bloodshed – a peaceful route that had once seemed impossible even to those optimists who dared to hope for an end to communism in Poland. It fostered goodwill and national unity, enabled the huge *nomenklatura* class to find a stake in the new dispensation, and provided an invaluable template for similar developments elsewhere.

Many of the *nomenklatura* class did indeed fall on their feet, but often with much corrupt appropriation of public property along the way, which caused great resentment in Poland. The austere and uncorrupt Kaczyńskis and their followers sought retrospectively to pursue some of these malefactors, and believe that Michnik has forgiven far too much and, indeed, become unpleasantly chummy with former regime figures. Law and Justice exponents also resent Michnik's close

2 Jaruzelski died on 25 May 2014, at the age of 90.

relations with many people in Russia, and his ready acceptance of Russia's *rapprochement* overtures after the 2010 Smolensk disaster in which President Lech Kaczyński and many other Polish leaders died in an air crash in Russia. Again, he is too chummy for their taste.

But, in Russia, Michnik associates mainly with ex-dissidents and other free thinkers. While he did seem over-eager in responding to a conciliatory article by Vladimir Putin that was published in the Polish press last year, when he participated in a public forum with Putin during a visit to Russia soon afterwards, Michnik took him to task over the Khodorkovsky case, causing Putin some rare discomfiture. Michnik speaks fluent Russian and gives forthright interviews to opposition-friendly Russian media outlets (these agencies continue to be regarded with suspicion by the Law and Justice party). And he describes himself as an anti-Soviet Russophile, which seems a defensible position to me, but is probably overdoing it for many Poles.

But, 20 years after Poland's successful transition to market democracy, surely these are differences of opinion and perception rather than matters of national treachery. One of the problems of the Polish right is that it tends to have some difficulty in adequately distinguishing between the two.

The other big issue on which Michnik has increasingly angered many on the Polish right is his strong support for efforts to expose past violence by Poles against Jews. One of his old comrades-in-arms from the events of March 1968, Jan Tomasz Gross, after a spell in a communist jail, emigrated to the United States, where he became an academic expert on Poland, specialising in the sufferings of the Poles at the hands of occupation regimes. During the last decade or so, Gross has turned his attention to the suffering of Polish Jews at the hands of ethnic Poles during and just after World War II. In collaboration sometimes with his former wife, Irena Grudzinska Gross (the editor of the book under review), Gross has published a series of books and articles on those subjects.

The first of these books, *Neighbors* (2001),³ describes a pogrom in the Polish village of Jedwabne in 1942 that culminated in survivors being locked in a barn that was then incinerated. The book caused an enormous stir in Poland, with many people trying desperately to discredit it. Over time it has come to be accepted in Poland that these events did occur much as described, but not without a fair bit of denial, reluctance and extenuation along the way. President Kwaśniewski delivered an apology on behalf of the Polish people at an official commemorative ceremony in Jedwabne in 2001, but that did not lay the issue to rest. This year Jan and Irena Gross published another book, *Golden Harvest*, which describes how during and just after the war, some Poles desecrated Jewish corpses in search of valuables while others murdered or betrayed for gain Jewish compatriots who were fleeing or hiding from the Nazi occupation.⁴ This latest book has again excited great anguish and controversy.

During the communist period most such topics were glossed over in official discourse and education, and it is only in the last few years that many Poles have been forced to come to terms with them. Having been raised to think of themselves as having a prior claim to martyr status in their own country, they have found this process of re-education difficult.

Such sensitive Polish–Jewish issues are the subject of the last two items in Michnik’s book. One, the essay on the Kielce pogrom of 1946, is particularly gripping. While clearly relating strongly to the events he describes – as a Jew who lost many of his family in the Holocaust – Michnik also makes an effort to see it from an ethnic Polish perspective. He goes to some trouble to place the ugly events at Kielce in the context of a time when Poles emerged from one brutal occupation only to be overrun by another in which, especially in the early, Stalinist years, Polish Jews played a prominent role. But of course the pogrom was inexcusable.

Michnik’s critics on the right are not necessarily classifiable as anti-Semites, even though they reproach Michnik for making too much of such horrible incidents. But some of the critics have, for example, used

3 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The destruction of the Jewish community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

4 Jan Tomasz Gross & Irena Grudzinska-Gross, *Golden Harvest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

dubious formulations like ‘true Poles’ (*prawdziwi Polacy*) to draw a line between approved and non-approved categories of Polish citizens. The Agora company, which publishes *Gazeta Wyborcza*, has pursued in court some of those who use such language, which in turn has led to accusations that Michnik is using the judicial system to suppress free speech about difficult and contentious matters.

The issues of Polish–Jewish relations are more complex than they might at first appear, and Michnik’s essay on Kielce goes a fair way towards evoking some of those complexities. Broadly, critics argue that Gross’s (and, by extension, Michnik’s) approach is selective; that too little attention is paid to the demoralising effect of occupation and the brutalising presence of the German military and security forces; that Poles were at risk of terrible collective punishments for whole families and more if they did not cooperate with the occupiers; that extreme poverty made them desperate and prepared to do anything to keep themselves and their families alive; that, after the war, many Jews who returned to Poland did so ‘on Russian tanks’ as members of a Moscow-led and trained imported Polish regime, which took vengeful action against Polish resistance fighters who had stayed in the country; that this in turn greatly aggravated traditional Polish stereotypes about Jews and communism (there is usually a subtext lurking but left unsaid here that Michnik’s father was a senior communist before the war, and his half-brother a Stalinist judge who condemned Polish resistance fighters in the postwar years); and that, anyway, on top of all this, Poles often behaved heroically to save Jews at great risk to themselves and their families, because of which they are the most numerous national group represented in the Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. They also argue that Gross’s books feed the unjust stereotypes of Poles, present in some quarters, as all being mothers’-milk anti-Semites.

But, despite all such arguments – and there is some merit in many of them – the problem remains. It would seem that there is no alternative for Poland and the Poles but to investigate any more such dark episodes as may yet emerge and face them with full acknowledgement and without flinching.

Not only has Michnik never shrunk from controversy, he continues to thrive on it. And his brilliant pen has a sharp edge. At the end of the day, however, anyone who has made such a huge contribution to

the liberation of his people and at such great cost to himself, while he should obviously not be above criticism, should at the very least be cut a fair bit of slack by his domestic adversaries. Michnik is a great representative, indeed a great hero of the Polish nation, and at the same time a great Polish Jew. The time is surely past when the two should be seen as mutually exclusive.

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