

Everything changed after John Paul's speech in Warsaw

Polish pope's address in 1979 marked beginning of the fall of communism

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I still get goosebumps when I think about it - the day everything changed. That was 30 years ago, in June of 1979, in Warsaw. John Paul II had returned to his native Poland for the first visit since his election as pope in Rome the year before. Celebrating outdoor mass in the capital's Victory Square, the pope spoke of the centrality of Jesus Christ in human affairs.

"Christ cannot be kept out of the history of man in any part of the globe, at any longitude or latitude of geography," he declared - and suddenly 250,000 Poles were applauding furiously, almost unstopably. When the clapping died down in one part of the vast square, another part would start up, and so it went, wave after wave of desperate, defiant applause delivering the people's verdict on 35 years of Communist rule.

That was just the beginning. The crowd began to croon hymns. "Christ conquers, Christ rules," they sang as yellow-and-white papal flags were unfurled - and some a lot more daring. Close by, a thin young man began furiously waving a banner proclaiming (in Polish) "Freedom, Independence, Human Rights!"

It was startling. My first reaction was worry for the safety of the young man. I looked around for the public-security goons who, surely, would soon knock down his banner and cart him away.

It is hard to convey how very sad, oppressive and poor Eastern Europe was in those days. There really was an obscenity known as the Berlin Wall. The Stalinist Soviet Union, together with its satellites, was a genuine evil empire where dissenters were squashed like June bugs. Everywhere behind the Iron Curtain, sinister figures stepped out of the shadows and demanded to see one's papers.

I had visited a number of such places, beginning with Poland itself in 1962 as part of a touring hockey team. My destinations included Czechoslovakia, East Germany, East Berlin, Russia and Ukraine - not to mention holidays in Franco's Spain plus two years observing Mao Tse-tung's Big Brotherhood in China. In none of these places did young men call for freedom, independence and human rights, not if they wished to remain healthy. So I gazed around anxiously, expecting the worst.

And ... nothing happened. No goons, no tearing-down, no arrests. The crowd continued to sing, more daring banners were waved, and John Paul II stood mute before a huge cross for fully eight minutes before the eruption subsided. It was one of those rare moments in a reporter's life when he feels the Earth move. Suddenly, the fear was gone. Eastern Europe was beating its way back to civilization.

The emotions of Victory Square set the tone as the papal whirlwind crossed Poland. The visit became a nine-day campaign for hearts and minds that the church's boy won in a walk. Brilliant, learned, his quarryworker's frame clad in dazzling white, pious, eloquent, both charismatic TV star and stern Old Testament prophet, the man the Poles called "Karolek" provided the starkest possible contrast to the stale regime in Warsaw.

"No shots were fired, no governments fell, but things can never be quite the same," I concluded brilliantly in a dispatch when the pope took off for Rome - after celebrating mass with 2 million Poles near Krakow. Ahead lay an eventful decade: Lech Walesa and his mates in Solidarity, martial law, democratic elections, Mikhail Gorbachev, the closing of Checkpoint Charlie, dissolution of the Soviet Union, German reunification, NATO's peaceful conquest of the Warsaw Pact, and all the rest.

As I recall, my correspondent colleagues and I predicted almost none of these, but we did get one thing right: Something big was happening. It still gives me goosebumps.

It was not until 25 years later that I met Lech Walesa. It was in Warsaw, where he gave his visitors a pointed geography lesson.

Poland, he noted, sits right between the Germans and the Russians - "and they enjoy travelling a lot and like to visit each other and, of course, the shortest way is across Poland. And when they get here, they see our country is so beautiful that they decide to stay. One of those stays lasted 120 years." Laughter with a bite.

Walesa's moustache had gone white, but he was still full of furious rhetoric. He sounded like a man itching to come out of political retirement. Unfortunately, his most recent adventure at the ballot box, in 2000, had seen him gather precisely one per cent of the votes cast for president.

He was still a national treasure, but one that his countrymen had tucked away on the shelf.

The man that Poles truly kept in their hearts, their own Karolek, died in 2005. By then the pope was a frail and exhausted figure, remembered by most as a shuffling lion in winter. They should have seen him in Victory Square; he had some roar.

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