

Where were you going, Poland (before you were so rudely interrupted)?

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23 September 1939. The pianist Władysław Szpilman plays a concert of Chopin's music, at Polish Radio's Warsaw studios. A German bomb destroys the power supply.

The first musical broadcast from Warsaw after the Second World War. Szpilman starts with Chopin's nocturne in C sharp minor: the work he was playing, before he was so rudely interrupted...

The idiom 'as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted' was coined by the journalist William Connor in his first postwar column. In its eloquent understatement, it was matched by Szpilman's gesture.

Szpilman had escaped from the ghetto established by the German occupants for Jews. He had fought in the 1944 Warsaw Rising, and later been found and saved by a German officer, Wilm Hosenfeld. Warsaw was rebuilt from the rubble, but it could not be the same Warsaw. Szpilman's memoirs were published in 1946, but the uncensored version only appeared half a century later. So Szpilman could play, but could not say, as he had been doing before he was so rudely interrupted. Why not?

In September 1939 Stalin's USSR and Hitler's Germany partitioned Poland. They tried to destroy Poland's elites, culture and memory. In the summer of 1941 Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, advancing through territories that had been part of Poland. After the elimination by the Third Reich of Jews, Roma, and the handicapped, tens of millions of Slavs – Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians and Poles – were marked for extinction. National elites would be killed first, the rest reduced to slave labour and then starved. Only a few hundred thousand former Poles would be left alive by the early 1950s.

Poles made a huge contribution to the Allied victory. They included those who fought, on land, at sea and in the air, abroad and at home, those who broke codes, those who taught in secret, and those who helped Jews to survive – risking the death penalty. There was no Polish Quisling, Pétain, Pavelić or Tiso. Thanks to the heroism of men such as Jan Karski and Witold Pilecki, Poland's government-in-exile informed the world that the German occupants were murdering millions of Jews. Those individuals who did collaborate or contribute to the

Shoah – yes, some Poles did kill, denounce or blackmail Jews – risked the severe judgment of the underground Polish state.

The postwar Polish state was not only shoved westwards, it was also subjected to a totalitarian regime run by Polish communists. Although the reign of terror was relaxed after 1956, a malignant dictatorship subservient to the Kremlin still ruled the country – with decreasing success – until Poles regained their liberty and sovereignty at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s.

The role of *Solidarność* – an independent, self-governing trade union with ten million members – in fatally weakening the Soviet Empire as a whole might incline us to see 1989 or 1991 as opportunities for Poles to resume what they had been doing, before they had been so rudely interrupted in 1939.

Bearing in mind the enduring power of intertwined national and religious symbols, so evident in the millennium of Polish Christianity and John Paul II's pilgrimages, we might well find meaning in Polish history precisely in Poles' ability to pick themselves up, after each and every 'rude interruption'. A nation undaunted by adversity.

Such an interpretation would not be inaccurate. The threads of continuity have run thin, but have never all been broken. At the end of the eighteenth century, the monarchs of Russia, Austria and Prussia carved up the country, and agreed 'to abolish everything which could recall the memory of the existence of the Kingdom of Poland'. But the idea of Poland was infectious. Perhaps one million people considered themselves Polish when the old Republic or Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita*) was dismembered. Perhaps twenty million people did so when the Second Republic arose at the end of the First World War.

The Commonwealth was less than two lifetimes distant. Veterans of the 1863-64 rising were saluted in the streets by serving officers of the Polish army. Those veterans could remember former insurgents, who in 1794 had fought in defence of the old Republic. So Poles did not have to claim a distant medieval statehood.

There was no Polish 'national revival' of the nineteenth century. The Polish language did not have to be collated from country dialects. Written Polish emerged from the shadow of Latin in the sixteenth century. It has evolved ever since, a literary language of sophistication, subtlety and strength. One extremely difficult to pronounce...

After the Polish state was destroyed, some intellectuals and nobles collected relics of the national past, so that even if the Poles did disappear into the dust of history, their monuments might survive. Those custodians were also cultivators. They faced the challenge of keeping up with, and contributing to the march of nineteenth-century civilization. They established and funded learned societies and libraries, such as the Kórnik Library, the Raczyński Library in Poznań and the Ossolineum in Lwów – now L'viv. Most of the Ossolineum came here to Wrocław after the Second World War, when so many Leopolitans became Bratislavians.

So Poland is a continuous community of all those who have considered themselves Polish – a contract between the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. For Poland is a living tradition, not isolated from the world, but open to it. But... where was Poland *going*, before being so rudely interrupted? And was it possible, after each interruption, for Poland to

resume the same direction of travel? Some would answer with a resounding yes, that Poland has always struggled, with Divine help against her earthly foes, for her freedom. Perhaps.

But I would argue, first, that the context always changes after ‘rude interruptions’, so changes of direction do occur. Second, the metanarrative of a nation undaunted in adversity does not do justice to the riches of Polish history and culture. Many fascinating melodies of Poland’s heritage are drowned out, if the *Leitmotiv* is played too loudly without *intermezzi*.

The greatest change of direction in Poland’s history was consequent on the partitions of the Commonwealth. It particularly affected Poland’s parliamentary and constitutional tradition.

In the west of this continent, there is a prejudice that ‘the East’ came late to political democracy, the rule of law, religious tolerance and individual liberty. So communist dictatorship was not an aberration, but a variation on older themes: corruption, intolerance and autocracy, alternating with anarchy.

Poland might seem to provide a good example. Hear this:

Poland, Poles themselves have claimed, subsists by anarchy. Poland means private interest, Poland means ill will. Poland means anarchy. [...] a nation of anarchy, powerlessness, licence, a nation which was led to its downfall by private interest, which could accept no authority.

So, in 1923, spoke Józef Piłsudski: a patriot from an old noble family, a man immersed in Romantic poetry and the insurrectionary tradition, at ease with the ethnic and religious diversity of the old Commonwealth, a national hero who had led Poland to victory against the Red Army in 1920, and secured independence. His contempt for Poland’s ‘anarchic’ parliamentary democracy led him to stage a coup d’état in 1926. True, his regime was far milder than most in interwar Europe. But his words and actions strengthened the conviction that the old Republic had fallen through anarchy.

Piłsudski’s arch-rival, Roman Dmowski, thought likewise. For Dmowski the old Commonwealth was an anarchic anachronism; the modern Polish nation had to be disciplined, realistic and egoistic, to survive among the fittest.

‘Anarchy’ was also invoked by post-war Polish communist dictators as they restricted Poles’ liberty. Under their inept regime, appreciation of the Commonwealth’s political culture grew. One of the principles of *Solidarność* was *nic o nas bez nas*: ‘nothing that concerns us without our participation’. This maxim expresses the spirit of *Nihil novi*, a statute agreed in 1505. No new law could be introduced without the consent of the lower chamber of parliament.

Nihil novi was based on the *communitas regni*, the community of the realm, an idea common in medieval Europe. Under the influence of ancient ideals of citizenship rediscovered during the Renaissance, sixteenth-century Poland proceeded towards the Aristotelian ideal of a polity in which elements of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy kept each other in balance.

At the same time, Poland, Lithuania and Rus’ converged. Most of the Orthodox Christian principalities of Kyivan Rus’, weakened by the Mongols, had come under pagan Lithuanian rule in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Poland and Lithuania faced a

common enemy in the Teutonic Knights. In 1386 the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Jogaila, accepted Catholic baptism, married the young Queen of Poland, Jadwiga, and began the work of evangelization himself. The Teutonic Order, deprived of a rationale for its Baltic crusades, claimed that Lithuania's baptism was a sham. Jurists from Kraków University argued, before all Christendom at the Council of Konstanz, that treaties made with pagans should be honoured, and that Christianization should not proceed by fire and sword. Jews, persecuted in western Europe, would find religious freedom and communal self-government in Poland and Lithuania.

Slowly the tensions between – and within – Lithuania and Poland were resolved. By 1569, shortly before Jogaila's dynasty expired, it was possible to bring together 'two states and nations into a single people' gathered in 'a single and shared Commonwealth'. The Union of Lublin was to join 'the free with the free, the equal with the equal'. The Polish-Lithuanian union was not always a marriage of equals. But it was a partnership whose progeny was a joint political community, in which it was possible to be both Lithuanian and Polish.

And so the greatest poem in the Polish language, Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, opens with the words 'Lithuania, my fatherland'. Published in exile in Paris in 1834, the poem recalls, with gentle humour, the land and people of his childhood. Those lands are now in Belarus.

Towards the end of the poem, the young landowners decide to grant their peasants freedom and land. Two old nobles comment approvingly that peasants are becoming Polish citizens. That was rare indeed, but there is a saying that whereas other nations abolished nobility, the Poles made everyone noble. This has its origins in two gestures by Tadeusz Kościuszko during the 1794 insurrection. He donned a peasant cape and ennobled a brave peasant soldier. Today Poles formally address each other in the third person as *Pani* and *Pan* – literally meaning lady and lord.

Nevertheless, one of the most frequent criticisms of the Commonwealth is that its liberty was only for nobles. Most people were peasants, exploited by their masters and mistresses irrespective of their church or language.

Well, in the first place, the situation and status of the rural population varied greatly. While, compared to western Europe in the sixteenth century, most peasants in the Commonwealth had a worse legal status, there does seem to have been more land and food to go round. Things got worse in the seventeenth century under the impact of war.

Second, slavery in ancient Athens does not stop us cherishing Athenian democracy as the foundation of 'European' and 'American' values. Incidentally, the situation of Polish-Lithuanian noblewomen allowed them far more independence than in ancient Greece or nineteenth-century Britain.

Third, the electorate of the old Republic was substantial. Up to 8 per cent of the total population was noble, and adult male nobles could directly elect parliamentarians, judges and the king.

Fourth, the practice of citizenship was not confined to the nobility. Self-governing towns and cities multiplied from the thirteenth century onwards. In the rich region of Royal Prussia, which had voluntarily joined with Poland in the mid-fifteenth century, the mostly

German-speaking cities, led by Danzig (Gdańsk) ranked among the most powerful players in the old Republic.

Jews enjoying communal self-government also considered themselves citizens. So did the Cossacks of the Ukraine. The failure of the nobility to accept them as fellow-citizens caused a disastrous civil war in the mid-seventeenth century. But again, the Commonwealth's failure to extend its own ideas of citizenship does not invalidate those ideas.

Those ideas have been criticized. 'Monstrous political liberalism' was Dmowski's verdict. Many have concurred, that an excess of individual liberty weakened the duty of collective responsibility, and stifled the state. In a word – anarchy. But the Polish word *nierzęd* can also be translated as disorder. And some disorder was the price of freedom. 'Better perilous liberty than tranquil servitude', wrote the ancient Roman historian Sallust. So what did liberty mean?

Since the French Revolution, positive and negative freedom have been contrasted. Positive liberty is the collective freedom of a society to rule itself – it has been called republicanism or democracy by admirers, but the tyranny of the majority by critics. Hence the liberal emphasis on the separation of powers. Negative liberty is the freedom of each individual from coercion. For critics, this is licence for selfish and amoral individualism. Earlier republican ideas of freedom embraced both positive and negative concepts of liberty. The liberty of each citizen was secured by citizens' participation in government. Negative liberty was secured by positive liberty.

Decisions in the Commonwealth were made by consensus. This was the process of *ucieranie zgody* – thrashing out agreement, involving both compromises and the art of persuasion. The conviction took root that merely counting votes would expose liberty to the corrupting schemes of the king and his court. Besides, majority voting might have torn the Commonwealth apart, at a time when Europe was riven by wars of religion. Instead, in 1573, the Commonwealth's nobility, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, forswore persecution – as equals. As time passed, this equality became a narrower toleration of non-Catholics by Catholics.

Unfortunately, in the mid-seventeenth century, the principle of consensus was pushed to absurdity. The *liberum veto* allowed a single envoy to curtail a parliament, preventing the agreement of new laws or taxes. The Commonwealth declined from a great power to the object of its neighbours' manipulation, and an international joke.

The slogans of liberty may have sounded hollow, yet they contained the civic values that enabled the later eighteenth-century Commonwealth to recover – morally, intellectually, socially, and in the end, despite Russian hegemony, politically. Reform was controversial. Some thought Poles should become modern, enlightened, cosmopolitan Europeans, at the expense of ancestral values. Others believed that all foreign influences should be resisted, lest they corrupt traditional virtues. Between these extremes lay the discriminate application of those solutions which could best restore the Commonwealth to health.

At last, Russia was distracted by war with the Ottoman Empire. The Parliament that met in the autumn of 1788 slipped beyond anyone's control, restored national sovereignty, bypassed the *liberum veto*, expanded the army, raised new revenues, and began to overhaul the system of government.

The culmination of this 'gentle revolution' was the Constitution of 3 May 1791. The fifth article juxtaposed a declaration that all power in human society derives from the will of the nation, with Montesquieu's principle of balance between legislative, executive and judicial powers. The *liberum veto* was abolished along with elective monarchy. In sum, this was a partnership between a strengthened executive and a strengthened parliament, with vigorous local government.

The Constitution had to persuade the provincial nobility. So its prose by turn flatters, cajoles, warns and explains. Noble liberties were confirmed. Serfdom was not abolished, although immigrants and returning persons were to be free, and the peasants were declared the most numerous and useful part of the nation, protected by law and government. Urban citizens were offered extensive civil liberties and self-government, as well as limited participation in parliament. The Constitution reconceptualized the Polish nation, from a community defined by noble birth, to one open to all, irrespective of religion, in which political rights depended on property and education. The Commonwealth was ready for the nineteenth century.

Such success could not be tolerated. In 1792 Russia invaded, with Polish-Lithuanian collaborators in the baggage train. Within three torrid years the old Republic was destroyed.

The Commonwealth left two political testaments. One was the Constitution of 3 May. The other was the insurrection of 1794 – socially democratic, but involving temporary dictatorship on the Roman model. Insurrectionary republicanism proved the stronger. But had by some miracle the Poland reformed by the Four Years' Parliament survived, it would have proceeded in a different direction to the road taken. So, where were you going, Poland, before you were so rudely interrupted?

Poland was on the path of evolutionary change: broadening the national community, blending the republican heritage with the 'orderly freedom' of parliamentary monarchy, moving into modernity without absolute monarchy or revolutionary terror. A path that shows that this part of Europe did *not* come late to democracy, the rule of law, religious tolerance and individual liberty.

After such a traumatic 'rude interruption', the restoration of Poland after 1918 could not proceed as smoothly as Szpilman's resumed performance of Chopin. Forced onto the rockier paths of resistance and survival, Poland, to adapt the American poet Robert Frost, 'took the road less travelled by, and that has made all the difference'.