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'You expect him to have the charisma and manner of a monarch. But John Paul II has the presence of a kind old uncle who will help you out with pocket money'



The Pope's visit to Poland in 1992

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Radek Sikorski recalls his private meetings with the Pope and pays tribute to the personal inspiration of a man who has always fought tyranny

In the spring of 1992 – when I was a 29-year-old deputy minister of defence in Poland's first fully democratic post-war government – I was sent on an unusually delicate assignment. My boss, Poland's first civilian minister of defence, told me to go to Rome. There, I was to meet the Pope, and to ask for his assistance.

It was only weeks since the Soviet Union had collapsed and everything there was up for grabs. Lech Walesa, then the president of Poland, had embarked on a hare-brained scheme to acquire nuclear warheads from the former KGB. We did not know whether it was a provocation against our government or a genuine offer. Either way, Poland, a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, would look foolish at best, a pariah at worst, if the scheme went through.



Still, despite our efforts to talk him out of it President Walesa seemed determined to go ahead. He is half Mahatma Gandhi, half village yokel, and it was impossible ever to know which side of his personality would predominate. He had been only barely dissuaded, at the very last minute, from sending a congratulatory letter to the leaders of the 1991 Moscow coup.



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On the issue of buying nuclear weapons, we felt the Pope was the only person who could talk sense into him, get him to end the deal.

It wasn't difficult to arrange the meeting: foreign dignitaries had to wait months to see the Polish Pope, but for Poles it was easier. While in Rome at a Nato conference, I made a telephone call to a friendly priest, and the following day was shown into the Pontiff's study.

I started to explain my mission – but it turned out to be unnecessary. John Paul II nodded. "I know," he said. In fact, the Vatican knew everything – about the plan, about the nukes, about the military intelligence officers who were whispering in the president's ear. The Vatican's own intelligence service was obviously sharper than ours. By the time I got back to Poland, President Walesa had already stopped talking about the plan: Karol Wojtyla had changed the history of Europe again.

That trip to Rome was not, however, my first sight of the Pope. The first time was on the first day of his visit to Poland as Pope in 1979, a few months after his election. More than a million people had gathered on a disused airfield outside Gniezno, the city from which Catholicism had spread throughout Poland. For the first time in my life, I was taking part in a public event in Poland into which I had not been coerced. The police were nowhere in sight, yet perfect order reigned. Jubilant, we sang religious songs until the Pope's white helicopter descended from the sky. Karol Wojtyla was obviously delighted to be back in Poland. Even at the distance of 100 yards, he radiated good humour and strength. He told us: "Before I go away, I beg you: Never lose your trust, do not be defeated, do not be discouraged." We were not and we did not disappoint him. "We", the people, saw for the first time that we were more numerous than "them", the Communists. And then, when we got home, television reports showed only old women and nuns at the Pope's open-air masses. That combination – awareness of our numbers and tangible proof of Communist duplicity – helped to produce the Solidarity revolution the following year.

My second encounter with the Pope, at his summer residence in Castelgandolfo, during the years of Gen Jaruzelski's martial law, was more intimate. I had stayed in Britain as a political exile; the Communists took revenge on me by harassing my parents in Poland, and banning them from travel to the West. Through the intercession of a priest relative, they finally obtained their passports in order to go on a pilgrimage to Rome – where they saw me, and we saw the Pope together.

Before meeting the Pope face to face, you expect him to have the charisma, or at least the manner, of a monarch, some quirk to indicate that this is the head of the oldest organisation in the Western world. The prelude before being introduced – the Vatican officials, the Swiss guards, the high vaults of the ceremonial chambers – only heighten the expectation. But John Paul II himself has the presence of a kind old uncle who will listen to your troubles and help you out with pocket money. His is a charisma that breaks, rather than erects barriers.

Audiences are highly formal occasions and the Pope usually says little, instead encouraging his visitors to talk. He asked my mother about how



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she managed to travel from Poland and about my studies in Britain. She broke down in tears of joy. He blessed her and handed each of us – even my father, an incorrigible agnostic – a rosary with the papal coat of arms on the back of the cross. At this time, after two assassination attempts, and a tense period in 1981 – when John Paul II reportedly threatened to come to Poland if it was invaded by the Soviet Army – he was no longer jolly. He seemed more subdued and melancholy, as if disappointed in human nature. For us, he was the uncrowned king of Poland and we drank every word of encouragement he uttered.

I am always surprised by the contrast between the kindly man I remember and the picture painted of him in the Western media. Naturally, like any powerful man with a radical message, the Pope attracts enemies. But underlying many of the criticisms is a strain of ethnic prejudice that would be considered racist if the Pope were a Nigerian. In Britain, Richard Dawkins mocked Paul Johnson for "taking his orders from an elderly Pole", as if it is any worse to be an elderly Pole rather than a clapped out Englishman. A British biographer was "fascinated and appalled" by the "brief Polish interlude" in the Church's history.

"The Polish Pope does not like Western values," opined The Daily Telegraph. The Nation has called him a "Polish authoritarian" who "galvanised the international Right wing" and "destroyed the careers of activist Catholic leaders who challenged US military and business interests". The editor of The New Republic feared that the Pope's teaching might harm liberal society: "If you doubt this, visit Poland." The Pope's philosophy supposedly stems from his roots in a backward, patriarchal, authoritarian country with a reactionary Church hierarchy preserved by communism in a counter-Reformation time warp.

In fact, calling him a Polish Pope, in the sense of bringing a specifically Polish perspective into the Papacy, is correct – but not in the way that the critics imagine. The Poland in which Karol Wojtyla ascended the steps of his ecclesiastical career was indeed ruled by authoritarian, even totalitarian regimes, first Nazi Germany and then Soviet-imposed communism. Yet he was nurtured in opposition to them, which is why he makes such frequent and passionate pleas for respecting human rights. And while Poland is still poor, it is not especially illiberal.

Polish attitudes to contraception and abortion, as measured by public opinion polls, are very similar to attitudes expressed by Germans and Americans.

In fact, John Paul II's Polishness is reflected more subtly, in his emotional sense of history. His passionate pronouncements on behalf of multi-ethnic Sarajevo, besieged by the Orthodox Serbs, is explained by historical memory which went back 300 years: any Pole knows that Orthodox Russia destroyed the multi-ethnic Polish Commonwealth in the 18th century. On the other hand, would any but a Slav Pope have sent 10 cardinals to the celebrations of the millennium of Kievan Rus's Christianity in 1988? Would any other have supported so steadfastly the underground church in Lithuania, or the Uniate Catholics in Ukraine? Nor is his sensibility merely European: look, for example, at the special effort he made in Cuba.

Having spent three decades fighting a Communist regime, this Pope also knows the power of symbolic gestures. It took a Pole from Krakow on the throne of St Peter for a pope to visit Auschwitz, where Jews and Poles had suffered together. In 1986, John Paul II became the first pope to visit a synagogue. And if you don't have any divisions to send in, solidarity with the victims may be the best weapon.

The candles that simultaneously burnt in the window of his Vatican study, and of Ronald Reagan's White House, to grieve for Solidarity's suppression in December 1981, carried a more powerful message to the Kremlin than dozens of new missile silos. The few million dollars sent via Vatican accounts to Solidarity's underground cells were hardly significant as material support, but shored up the freedom fighters' morale.

The Pope's Polish experience – of rule by two godless ideologies, of war, genocide, poverty and revolution – chimes in better with the experience of most of the world's Catholics who do not, after all, live in the wealthy West. It is his experience of the transitory nature of regimes, power and wealth in his native land, that reinforces his insistence on personal, rather than collective or state-directed, pursuit of goodness. After all, for most of the last century, remaining personally decent while nasty regimes came and went was all that the average Pole could hope for. His Polishness also strengthened the Pope's solidarity (a word that crops up very often in his speeches) with the world's underdogs. Hence his condemnation of apartheid, his visit to a leper colony in Ivory Coast, and his meal with the Vatican's tramps. Even his pronouncements on international relations – his passionate belief that lasting peace can only be built on justice – may stem from his perceptions of the history of Poland, repeatedly the victim of realpolitik played by more powerful neighbours. "If you want peace, remember man," is one of his favourite maxims. Hence his advocacy of the Bosnians, the "Wandering Palestinians", and the Kurds.

I was reminded of my mission to Rome in February 2001, when two elderly Poles met at the Vatican: Pope John Paul II was receiving Poland's foreign minister, Wladyslaw Bartoszewski. Bartoszewski - an Auschwitz survivor, an inmate of Communist jails, an honorary citizen of Israel for his role in saving Jews during the war, foreign minister for the second time - had been summoned to offer his advice on the Pope's forthcoming trip to Ukraine, the first-ever by the Bishop of Rome. Only a Central European can appreciate the poignancy of such a conversation. Ukraine's Christians had recognised Rome in the 16th century at the time of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which included most of today's Ukraine. Centuries of persecution under both tsarist and Communist Russia followed. Now, a Polish Pope was consorting with a Polish foreign minister on how to make a papal comeback easy on local sensibilities. And the Ukrainian trip, in June 2001, was a smashing success: three years later, Ukraine carried out its own democratic revolution. It could have been a coincidence, or it could have been that Karol Wojtyla was making history again in ways that his Western critics barely understood.

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