

DETENTION

Interview with Lech Walesa*

As one of the leaders of the Polish workers, Lech Walesa was detained several times during the 1970s. He led the shipyard strike and later negotiated the Gdansk agreement of 31 August 1980. In December 1981, Walesa, along with several thousand others, was arrested when General Jaruzelski imposed martial law and “suspended” the labour movement “Solidarnosc” (Solidarity). Walesa was interned in a country house in a remote part of Poland, close to the then Soviet border, and was visited three times by ICRC delegates. During this period, the ICRC visited 4,850 other internees (79 visits to 24 different places of detention) and it provided assistance and helped to restore contact between internees and their families abroad. At the same time and in conjunction with the Polish Red Cross and the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (as it was then known), the ICRC carried out an extensive assistance programme for the benefit of the civilian population which was in dire need of basic goods.

In November 1982, Lech Walesa was released and returned to the Gdansk shipyards. He received the 1983 Nobel Peace Prize, but remained under the surveillance of State authorities. At the end of the Cold war and nine years after he had climbed over the shipyard wall during the Gdansk strike, Lech Walesa was elected President of the Republic of Poland in a general ballot and served until November 1995. He currently heads a foundation set up in his name.

It’s December 1981, the army takes over the government in Poland, and thousands of opposition activists are arrested and interned. You are one of them. How do you recall the circumstances surrounding your detention?

You have to understand my dual position at that time. I was an electrician, a worker, the father of a family and one of the thousands of people who were arrested. As an individual, I missed my family, I missed my children and I was

* The interview was conducted on 5 January 2005 in Gdansk by Toni Pfanner (Editor-in-Chief of the International Review of the Red Cross) and Marcin Monko (ICRC regional delegation in Budapest).

worried about them. I was afraid because I was isolated from the outside world. But I was also a well-known politician, the leader of the Solidarnosc movement, and I was consciously fighting the government at that time. As a politician I was waiting only for the regime's defeat, which had to come sooner or later. I told my persecutors that it was me who was the victor and that they were hammering the last nails into the coffin of the communist system by confining thousands of innocent people. Of course, it is hard to think back to those days but I did truly believe that they were actually scoring points against themselves in detaining me. So without taking this dual position into account, you cannot understand my situation. Maybe it would have been better if I had only been in one pair of shoes, as the majority of the thousands of internees were.

Compared to your colleagues, you were materially in a more privileged position.

Again, the twofold position was important. I was angry and alone and with overwhelming power against me. Of course, I had good material conditions; I was kept in a "golden cage". But that cage did not enhance the circumstances of my internment. If the jailers had received the order to get rid of me, they would have done so immediately, and very much like the infamous Damocles sword this danger was constantly looming over me. Even after a sumptuous dinner, they could have executed me. In addition, I had no contact with my colleagues, or even any chance to get in touch with them as I was very well guarded. In fact, I was arrested for the very purpose of cutting me out of the trade union and isolating me from the movement. The jailors never lost sight of me.

How did you perceive the situation of the other people who were arrested and interned?

As for the other members of Solidarnosc detained under martial law and the other persons arrested during that time, they were certainly not treated with such ceremony. For them, basic material items were crucial, they were often treated badly and kept under very harsh conditions. In addition, Poland was going through a self-made but nevertheless catastrophic economic crisis. In a strictly humanitarian sense, the visits of the ICRC delegates to them and the assistance given were maybe more important for them than for me.

What did you feel about those visits?

I was visited several times by a Red Cross delegation. I didn't have any problems in talking with the delegates openly, even in front of the government officials. As you know, I fought communism with an open visor. In my case, such visits were perhaps not typical for the ICRC, but they were important to me for political reasons. I used your visits in my political fight, especially to demonstrate how morally low the regime had sunk. A respected international organization comes to see what the government is doing to its people and to the leaders of the opposition, to see what barbaric methods they are using, putting an innocent and popular man in jail. A government is finished once it has to resort to

violence against its own people in order to keep itself in power. This recognition was important for me.

When delegates visited you then, did they ask about your health, the conditions of detention, and contacts with your family?

Obviously, but I was quite a special internee. I remember that when I tried to mention political issues during the ICRC visits, the delegates always tried to avoid them; your colleagues from the Red Cross did not want to talk about politics with me. In that sense I was a difficult case. But even during my detention, I wanted to fight the government. I did not want to talk confidentially. I did not want to hide anything and I wanted to fight openly. When I recall those moments now, I am surprised myself that I was not afraid, when I should have been. Today I would probably be more cautious.

Having said this, it should be stressed that for others those visits were very much needed and indeed indispensable. For most people deprived of their freedom, the most important issue is not their political fight, but often their sheer survival, their humane treatment and the preservation of one's dignity. Your visits gave reassurance to detainees that they were not forgotten and that there was still hope. It is extremely valuable for every person to know that. Of course, different issues are important in different places and at different times — and Poland in the 1980s was also a special case. But visits from the outside world to every detainee are always important. Those visits change their situation: the detainees who are visited know that they are not forgotten, they are less afraid, their families are reassured. These are very important issues. I did not do enough to pay back my debt to you; I know there are still places that you do not have access to, and I would be ready to help you get that access to those forgotten places.

You were clearly a political prisoner, but it's often difficult to say who is a political prisoner and who is not.

That's true, but in fact it doesn't matter. We always have to see the prisoner as a human being. Everyone is entitled to be humanely treated, to see a chance of solving one's problems, to have hope. Your mission must be purely humanitarian.

Once you were a prisoner, and then you became the head of state.

Well, I was always the same person. I was put in jail for the same things that later helped me to be elected president of Poland. Obviously, the change from being in a prisoner's cell to a presidential palace, with all the responsibility that comes with it, alters your views. I now had to care about security interests and be aware that humanitarian values and security measures have to coexist. It was hard for me, for example, when the death penalty was still in force in Poland. It was unacceptable for me, but I had to abide by the law. When I received requests from convicts asking to be pardoned, I had to weigh the interests of the State and society and the purely human sense of compassion and forgiveness.

Still, there are basic limits imposed by religion or humanity, as you will, limits that are never to be breached. There was no trade-off between the standards I fought for and security. Otherwise I would have fought in vain.

In situations of armed conflict, internal violence or when terrorist attacks occur, many persons are arrested.

Of course, arrest and detention always take place in tense security situations. You have to face this reality and establish and follow minimum humanitarian standards. You have to take into account different levels of development and State capacities and different traditions in dealing with security issues, while maintaining those standards. Even the ICRC approach has to take the security situation into account, otherwise its interventions may become counter-productive.

In the light of major terrorist attacks, do you think the security threats are bigger than before, and that there is a shift in the balance between security and humanitarian interests?

Let me say this: the threats are not necessarily bigger today, they are different. The collapse of Soviet communism consigned some of them to the history books, but new ones have appeared. We have to understand the times in which we live. Almost until the end of the 20th century the world was clearly divided. There were different threats and different opportunities. The end of the bipolar world, together with rapid technological development, has propelled us into a new era. In our globalized information society, borders are less important and defending our pieces of land is less of a priority than before. Today's threats, such as international terrorist organizations or environmental exploitation, are cross-border phenomena. This new era requires a new system of governance.

How should we deal with these new threats and simultaneously save the old values?

I have always proposed, and I do so again today, that we need a global democratic assembly, global government, including a global defence department. Those bodies should be able to resolve the old types of armed conflicts and international terrorism, and fight racism, anti-Semitism and other scourges that are the cause of our insecurity. New international governance on the basis of today's United Nations should ensure the new order, in the name of the generations of the 20th century which faced the most traumatic experiences ever known. I see the only way to resolve today's problems as being at the level of global governance.

How could this be accomplished?

Today we have only one superpower capable of ensuring global stability, but which obviously suffers from a lack of legitimacy. At the same time we have a legitimate body, the United Nations, but it is paralysed, has no executive powers and no means of giving effect to its decisions. This is one of the main reasons why we are not able to tackle current global security problems. We are just emerg-

ing from an era of great political and cultural divisions. Economic and technological progress is increasingly allowing us, and in fact to some extent requires us, to get rid of unnecessary divisions. Abandoning former restrictions, we have opened State borders and liberalized the movement of goods, services and capital. However, such a process calls for a global approach. We should not forget the potential side-effects of the process of globalization, which has also paved the way for global crime and has even triggered transnational terrorism. A coherent and adequate response to some global social needs and global truths is still largely lacking. Perhaps with time, remedies will be found and the situation will calm down by itself, but we should ask ourselves how many lives will have been lost by then. So why not try to “programme” globalization and to channel its effects in a more structured manner? On such a basis it would be much easier to anticipate potential threats and to prepare adequate structures accordingly.

Coming back to detention issues, where are the limits that because of religious or moral reasons we are not allowed to overstep?

The United States leads the world economically and militarily, but it no longer does so morally. This is partly due to the fact that it has occasionally resorted to immoral methods to fight the phenomenon of international terrorism. It says: we have the money, we have the means, and we will fix the problem ourselves. But how much will this cost in human terms? You have to prove your high moral standing by deeds, not by words. This also applies to detention. I say it with all due respect for the reasonable concerns of the United States and as a friend of the Americans, who are facing serious threats from terrorist organizations. Terrorism as we are witnessing it today is also a leftover of the two-bloc confrontation. Both superpowers trained and equipped various groups and individuals and even entire nations to fight the enemy. When the Soviet Union collapsed, those people and groups supported by the former regime suddenly found themselves in a vacuum. Now they are engaging in their own private wars. Since no considerable concern has been shown for these people over a significant period of time — we have not assisted them in their development, we have not supported their education nor have we helped to finance their transition — many of them now resort to violence. In many ways we demand that they open their societies, their economies, and adopt our values, but at the same time we close our borders to them and we close our economies to their products. We have to find new ways to deal with this unsatisfactory situation. I see a great responsibility for Europe and its governments to cooperate constructively with America in this task and to work out modes of action that are sustainable and acceptable on both sides of the Atlantic as well as worldwide.

In Iraq the director of Care International, Margaret Hassan, was taken hostage and killed. Other humanitarian workers, including some from the Red Cross and Red Crescent, were also killed. How do you view this phenomenon? These are acts by people who are extremely desperate and weak, who do not seem to have other means of advancing their causes. Of course, for us it's tragic

and appalling, but it is a consequence of the general situation in that part of the world, the humiliation of local people. We have to remember that we also had both torture and hostage-taking in Europe, so while we should condemn and fight these horrible acts, we should also try to understand the reasons for them — which does not mean justifying or accepting them. The prohibitions of torture or hostage-taking are venerable achievements. With my experience, I believe I have the authority to say that the Red Cross should continue its work despite all these difficulties. It is extremely dangerous and hard work, and you are up against very powerful forces, but there are lots of people who share the same concerns and goals.

What are the responsibilities of politicians?

Politicians have a moral and legal obligation to give clear and unambiguous messages and instructions to uphold minimum humanitarian standards even in the worst situations. It is their moral responsibility. I am afraid the present international atmosphere is not helping us, but I believe that everybody is increasingly aware of their responsibilities and that we are heading in a better direction.