Preface

It is hard to know when to begin the story of the Polish Round Table of 1989. Some would have us start as far back as 1795, when Poland was partitioned by its three more powerful neighbors, Russia, Prussia, and Austria. For the next 123 years there would be no independent Poland on the map, and the resurrection of the country in 1918 would prove to be painfully brief. Nazi Germany and the USSR conquered the country once again in 1939, and after WWII Poland joined the rest of East-Central Europe within the Soviet Bloc, nominally autonomous but undeniably subordinate to Moscow's wishes. During these many dark years, Polish national consciousness had remained strong, thanks mainly (it is said) to the unwavering leadership of the Catholic Church. The election of Karol Wojtyła in 1978 as Pope John Paul II began a process that ultimately led to the overthrow of communism in 1989, and the restoration of Polish independence.

That's one way to tell the story—a way popular among conservatives and nationalists—but there are many alternative narratives. Another tale begins in 1945, with the liberation of Poland from Nazi rule and the inauguration of a new order. The old, unjust social system, which had been characterized by an enormous gap between a narrow landowning elite and a desperately impoverished peasantry, was at last overthrown. The bold new future promised by the socialist revolution quickly turned sour, however, as the heavy-handed authoritarianism of Soviet-style communism perverted all the ambitions of the early post-war years. The death of Stalin in 1953 and the fall of his Polish minions in 1956 led to new hopes, but these too were soon dashed. By the early 1970's, repeated acts of state-sponsored violence and the deepening economic inefficiencies of the regime helped fuel the growth of both a vocal dissident community and a nascent labor movement. This united front of opposition exploded in 1980 with the birth of Solidarity, an independent trade union with as many as ten million members. Martial law was declared in 1981 in an attempt to quash this display of resistance, but Solidarity just went underground. Finally, in 1989, the regime was compelled to enter into negotiations with the opposition, and the first significant crack in the iron curtain appeared.

And there is yet a third way to tell our story. This one draws a tighter timeline, beginning sometime in the late 1960's or early 1970's. It was evident by then that the communist system could not sustain the dynamic growth of its early decades, and that the inefficiencies and absurdities of the planned economy were leaving Poland (and the

rest of the bloc) far behind the West. In the eyes of economists, both within the communist apparatus and in American universities, two fundamental problems plagued the country: 1) a growing gap between prices and the costs of production, leading to overconsumption and a disastrous balance of trade; and 2) gross inefficiencies in production that led to the waste of scarce resources. Economists and political leaders tried to address these concerns, but every attempt to close an unproductive factory was blocked by some entrenched interest group, and every effort to raise domestic prices was met with social unrest. The deadlock became obvious in 1987, when a referendum on economic reform was soundly defeated. The only option after this was to turn the enactment of needed reforms over to a government that enjoyed popular legitimacy—something the communists clearly did not have by the 1980's. This was accomplished in 1989, when the Round Table negotiations facilitated the rise of power of a new leadership rooted in the Solidarity movement. This new regime promptly enacted what came to be called the "shock therapy" package, an extraordinary leap towards liberal, free-market economics.

These three stories do not exhaust the possible narratives of Poland's modern history, nor do they encompass the many nuances that could be elaborated within each of them. Nonetheless, most Poles will find the general outlines of their favorite version of history in one of the above paragraphs. One of the most striking elements of these stories is that they all culminate with the events of 1989: the Round Table Negotiations, the partially free elections that followed, and the selection of Poland's first non-communist premier since World War II. There are many ways to evaluate 1989, but it is impossible to deny that it was one of the most important dates in modern Polish history. No matter how you map out Poland's recent past, all roads must pass through the Round Table.

By the mid-1980's, it was clear to just about everyone in Poland that the status quo could not hold. Solidarity was gone—or so it seemed—but the regime's legitimacy was gone with it. Back in 1980 and 1981 the country had been shaken to the foundations by the emergence of the largest mass movement the communist bloc had ever seen. Solidarity had many roots: in the intellectual dissent of the 1960's and 1970's, in an anti-communist labor movement that had long been boiling beneath the surface of the Polish People's Republic, and in the Catholic Church. The phenomenon we call Solidarity can't be easily defined or even described, because it encompassed all the voices of protest against the communist regime—and by 1980 those voices had risen to a cacophonous roar. That roar was silenced by a military crackdown in 1981, but force couldn't resolve the problems that had generated so much unrest in the first place. General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the leader of Poland in the 1980's and the mastermind behind the suppression of Solidarity, wanted to find a way to domesticate the popular anger against the communist order and direct it towards some sort of modest reform, while reassuring Moscow that nothing was amiss. The latter task became easier with the rise of

Mikhail Gorbachev as leader of the Soviet Union, but the former remained intractable—and by the mid-1980's Jaruzelski knew it. After the imposition of military rule, no one could believe the vapid slogans of the "workers' state," and no one would lift a finger to help build towards a better future under Jaruzelski's leadership. The economy sank into a morass of bread lines, rationing, and half-empty shops, and the population grew ever more hopeless and apathetic. "Emigration" became the slogan of the decade, either literally (as the lines grew longer outside the US embassy), or figuratively (in the form of "internal emigration," as people withdrew into their private lives and struggled to extract whatever they could from the decaying socio-economic order).

In this environment, the opposition faced almost as many hurdles as did the regime. The anger of 1980 had turned into the cynical despair of 1985. The underground leaders of Solidarity were finding it increasingly difficult to mount any sort of organized protest against anything. This was partially a product of fear, but perhaps even more important was the sense that Solidarity had enjoyed its moment of opportunity, and had failed. Lech Wałęsa, the widely-recognized leader of the opposition, retained a certain amount of respect, but this rarely translated into a willingness to demonstrate or strike against the regime. Millions would turn out for papal visits in 1983 and 1987, but the political content of these events was at best ambiguous. In any case, Wałęsa and the other leaders of the movement were not sure what they could do in the face of armed force. Although student groups and small clusters of political activists continued to play cat-and-mouse with the security police, it was clear to most observers by 1986 or 1987 that a stalemate had been reached.

Thus arose the impetus for negotiation. Early feelers from both the Jaruzelski regime and the Solidarity leadership were sent out quietly in late 1987 and early 1988, but a new sense of urgency came when wildcat strikes broke out in May 1988. These had not been planned by Wałęsa's team of advisors, who saw the strikes as random cries of frustration rather than productive demonstrations of resistance. The local organizers of the protests, in turn, looked upon the Solidarity leadership as overly cautious, and perhaps incapable of addressing the deepening crisis that Poland faced. The strikers tended to be young, and many observers noted that a new generation was emerging—one disinclined to follow blindly the heroes of 1980. Already the fissures within the opposition were becoming clear, although the substantive issues behind these splits remained obscure.

The regime suppressed the strikes of May 1988, but the episode only highlighted the fact that Poland was becoming a tinderbox. Another wave of wildcat strikes in August provided the last push, leading to a series of meetings between Lech Wałęsa and General Czesław Kiszczak, the Minister of the Interior and a close aid to Jaruzelski. These preliminary talks led in turn to the formal convening of the Round Table Negotiations in February 1989. Solidarity entered these talks with one unshakable demand: re-legalization. To their surprise, the government granted this almost

immediately, and the talks quickly took on a momentum of their own. Jaruzelski's negotiators were searching for a way to bring Solidarity into the system, in the hope that doing so would give the regime some legitimacy and bring the social and political deadlock to an end. The Solidarity team was well aware of the danger of co-optation, and tried to ensure that the talks would lead to real, substantive changes in the political order. After a ceremonial opening at which all the leading delegates sat at the eponymous round table, the talks were broken down into a series of "sub-tables" focusing on unions, the media, political institutions, youth, various sectors of the economy, and more. Meanwhile, the voices opposed to the negotiations were starting to make themselves heard. "To Talk With the Commies is Treason," proclaimed banners carried outside the building where the talks were being held. More quietly, Jaruzelski and his supporters were feeling pressure from communist party members who feared that their hold on power was about to be compromised.

Despite these voices of dissent, the Round Table Accords were signed in April 1989. Solidarity was re-legalized; partially free elections were promised for June; freedom of speech and assembly were proclaimed. The formula for the upcoming elections was complicated: two thirds of the seats in the parliament were reserved for the communists and their allies (there had always existed a handful of docile puppet parties, designed to provide a façade of pluralism), but to compensate, a newly-created upper house, the senate, was to be entirely open to a free vote. Few expected Solidarity to do well in the elections. Freshly legalized and still lacking any sort of political apparatus, the movement had to organize a nation-wide campaign almost overnight. But when the vote was taken in June, the impossible happened: Solidarity won all but one of the senate seats, and all of the parliamentary seats that had been open to contestation. Many Poles today point to the elections—not the Round Table negotiations—as the real moment when communism fell in Poland. The drama did have another act, however. The defeat of the communists was undeniable, but technically they still had enough seats to govern (thanks to the provisions of the Round Table Accords). Only after a lengthy process of soul-searching by both the Solidarity delegates and Jaruzelski's supporters did a final compromise emerge: the General became the President of Poland (a new post that had been created by the Round Table just for him), and Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a prominent Catholic intellectual, became Premier.

Told in isolation, this is a dramatic story with a happy ending. But almost immediately, world events overshadowed Poland's accomplishments. Before 1989 was out, the communists would fall (with much less ambiguity) in every other East European country, and the opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9 would remain engrained in the memory of everyone who lived through those incredible months. Poland was left with a compromise that seemed entirely unnecessary, and many Poles felt that their revolution had been incomplete, unfulfilled. Perhaps worst of all, they lacked any evocative moment of liberation to commemorate. The Czechs had the

demonstrations on Wenceslas Square in Prague, the Germans had the Wall, and even the Romanians had the execution of Ceauşescu. All the Poles got was a big table, occupied by the people who would turn out to be the country's new elite. Then again, the whole process had been entirely peaceful—and wasn't that worth something? Didn't it matter that the Poles had blazed the trail out of the communist era? Was the "negotiated revolution" a necessary step on the road to liberation, or a fatal compromise that allowed the communists to retain a prominent role in Polish politics? Perhaps most fundamentally, did the whole process of peaceful change lead to a better Poland? These are among the many questions about the Round Table that are still debated today.