**Zbigniew Romaszewski: A Life in Human Rights (1940-2014)**

**In Memoriam**

**By Eric Chenoweth**

I first came to know about Zbigniew Romaszewski while working for the Committee in Support of Solidarity, based in New York. The Committee was established by Polish opposition veterans Irena Lasota, Jakub Karpinski and several others who were in the U.S., either as exiles or by circumstance, on December 13, 1981. In the early morning hours on that day, General Wojciech Jaruzelski had imposed a martial law regime on Poland. In fact, Jaruzelski invoked the constitution’s provision for *stan wojenny*, a state of war, a provision intended to rebuff external invasion. At the time, however, the provision was employed to destroy the threat to communist rule posed by Solidarnosc (or Solidarity), which had arisen in August 1980 to unite Polish society in an independent trade union and social movement. Not having any clear constitutional justification, Jaruzelski effectively declared war on the Polish people, unleashing tanks, soldiers, truncheon wielding riot police, water cannons, and all other weapons in the police state’s arsenal to destroy Solidarity. Unlike Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, where the Soviet Union had to invade to brutally quell rebellions, in Poland, Jaruzelski acted as a Soviet satrap, using Poland’s own military and police forces to re-impose firm communist rule.

The Committee in Support of Solidarity was created the next day and I, a young American-born trade union activist and lone non-Pole, became the director. One key part of the Committee’s mission was to chronicle the vast human rights violations being perpetrated by the Polish government: tens of thousands rounded up in internment camps, tanks rolling over resisting workers (we documented more than 100 killed), soldiers occupying factories, police closing universities, students taken to prison, protestors mowed down by water cannon and beaten by riot police. A long black night had fallen on Poland after sixteen months of unheard of freedom in a communist country, freedom brought about by a unique movement allying workers, students, intellectuals, farmers, and artists. It was a movement born from years of human rights work by, among others, Zbigniew Romaszewski and his wife and partner, Zofia.

The Committee’s other job was to shine light not just on the regime’s repression but also on Solidarity’s organized resistance to martial law. The Romaszewskis were among hundreds of activists and leaders who had escaped arrest and were busy putting into place the plans the Solidarity movement had made for such a circumstance. Workers and others were actively resisting martial law through strikes, demonstrations, wearing outward manifestations of support for Solidarity like pins (by itself subject to three years’ imprisonment), recreating underground union structures at all levels, distributing clandestine publications, and organizing other acts of opposition to the regime. Zbigniew Romaszewski was an initial member of the Regional Coordinating Commission of the Mazowsze (greater Warsaw) region, one of the temporary underground structures of Solidarity organized according to its territorial structure.

Zbigniew and Zofia Romaszewski were also behind one of the more daring acts of early opposition to martial law, Radio Solidarnosc, a series of renegade broadcasts that used temporary transmitters set up on rooftops to override the main state broadcasts with 15 to 30-minute programs that included announcements of national and regional Solidarity leaders in hiding, information about worker resistance and the fate of those arrested and detained in internment camps, and other independent news in a period when state propaganda was trying to convince the Polish nation that it had been utterly defeated and that it was hopeless to resist. Radio Solidarnosc, broadcast in every major region of Poland, offered tangible proof of the lie that martial law had destroyed the workers’ movement. Indeed, the broadcasts helped to organize important national protests (such as lighting candles in windows at a specified time on the 13th of each month), Italian strikes and work slowdowns, and other actions that helped reinforce for Poles that the social bonds that they had recreated through years of political opposition had survived. The Committee in Support of Solidarity’s busy documenters, translators and editors publishing reports of all the dramatic events taking place in Poland also discovered that even more than demonstrations and clandestine union structures, Radio Solidarnosc was one of the more important proofs for American politicians and opinion leaders that the union movement was not destroyed.

Aside from the technical challenge of getting transmitter equipment and recording the programs, the broadcasts required semi-guerilla tactics, with close calculation for the activists who set up the transmitters on roof-tops in order to escape the immediate police dragnet deployed to find and disarm them. Unfortunately, the police grew increasingly adept not only in catching the activists who set up the transmitters but also in closing in on the organizers. Zofia Romaszewski and several activists were arrested in early July 1982 and Zbigniew Romaszewski later that month. They were charged with “continuing union activities after December 13, 1981 and disseminating false information through the broadcast of Radio Solidarnosc about the political situation in Poland that could incite unrest and riot.” At the conclusion of their famous trial held in February 1983, Zofia received a sentence of 3 years’ imprisonment and Zbigniew a term of 4½ years, while 8 other defendants received sentences of 1 to 3 years. Despite this setback, Radio Solidarnosc continued to broadcast, although with less frequency, and an even more audacious TV Solidarnosc was launched. The Committee in Support of Solidarity reported all of the trial proceedings. What I was most struck by at the time were the statements of the two main defendants and their colleagues. They all displayed an easy defiance and assurance. They weren’t backing down in the face of impending imprisonment. In his speech, Zbigniew Romaszewski told the court of the moral bankruptcy of communism, asserted that the judges lacked legitimacy, and promised further resistance by a society “that had taken a step forward in August 1980 and [was] not stepping back.”

The Radio Solidarnosc trial added to the Romaszewskis’ growing legend.

• • •

After a life engaged in struggles for human and worker rights, including twenty-two years as the longest serving elected Senator in Polish history, Zbigniew Romaszewski died unexpectedly of a stroke in February 2014 at the age of 74. His life spanned the twin totalitarian occupations of Poland of the twentieth century and Poland’s reemergence as an independent, democratic country after 1989. He and his lifetime partner and wife Zofia, who survives him, did much to make that happen and their efforts are worth recounting as a major contribution to anti-communist opposition and democratic activism.

Both were born in 1940 and survived the Nazi occupation: Zbigniew in a concentration camp (where his father was killed); Zofia in hiding as her parents (one Jewish) participated in the Home Army resistance. They grew up during the dark post-war Stalinist era of in which Polish communists, backed by their Soviet overlords, entrenched totalitarian rule in the newly created Polish People’s Republic. At the time, communism appeared unchangeable and, as recounted by Czeslaw Milosz in *Captive Minds*, most intellectuals succumbed to its dictates. Zbigniew and Zofia never did. They both grew up with a deep understanding of human rights and of the heritage of Polish freedom, learned in the privacy of their homes from families who had lived in independent Poland between world wars and who had survived the terrible conflagration of World War II.

In the mid-1960s, they both chose to study physics at Warsaw University—science was one way to escape and transcend political ideology. There, they fell in love and formed a life-long partnership to advance human rights and freedom—a love story and partnership that mirrors those of Andrei Sakharov and Yelena Bonner in the Soviet Union and Vaclav and Olga Havel in Czechoslovakia.

By the summer of 1976, they had already been active for several years in Poland’s opposition movement, taking part in the 1968 student protests, signing letters and the petition to change the constitution of the Polish People’s Republic, forming opposition study circles and publishing samizdat. It was in 1976, however, that they began to make a distinctive mark by organizing support for workers brutally repressed for spontaneous strikes in Radom and Ursus. The Romaszewskis traveled 43 times to Radom that summer to get legal assistance for arrested workers, to monitor the court proceedings of those charged, and to raise material aid for the repressed workers and their families. Zofia described the thinking behind their actions in an interview for the Bush Center’s “Freedom Collection”:

[T]hese were mostly people who never had any run-ins with the courts, with any criminal past, they knew nothing about these things, and they were completely helpless in the face of the machinery of coercion in Poland. So, they did not know such things, as what is a defense attorney, where you get one, how do you apply for a food parcel, for mail [privileges of prisoners to send and receive mail], for a jailhouse visit—they were entirely helpless in this whole context. . . .

You know, any movement can become organized and be effective when it has some form of protection. What I mean is, when people are able to organize in such a way, where there is a component of empathetic solidarity, protection, and where people know that it is one for all and all for one—that you yourself would go to prison for another—that is very important.

Poland is a central European country bordered by the Baltic Sea, Belarus, Ukraine, Germany, Russia, Lithuania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Poland has a population of 38 million people; nearly 90 percent are Roman Catholic.

Poles struggled against foreign dominance from the 14th century and the modern Polish state is less than one hundred years old. Polish borders expanded and contracted through a series of partitions in the 18th century. After a brief period of independence and parliamentary democracy from 1918 to 1939, World War II brought occupation by Nazi Germany and the near annihilation of the Jewish population. [According](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005687) to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Poland’s Jewish population went from over 3 million in 1933 to 45,000 in 1950.

After the war, Poland became a Soviet satellite state and a communist system was imposed. Farms were collectivized, basic freedoms curtailed, and a culture of fear developed under a Stalinist regime. The 1960s brought greater prosperity and some liberalization. Labor protests in the early 1970s tested the communist government’s resolve and prompted modest reforms.

In 1978, Polish Archbishop and Cardinal Karol Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II, the first non-Italian to hold the position since the 16th century. The pope’s triumphant return to Poland in 1979 saw massive outpourings of public support, shaking the foundations of the government and inspiring the opposition to press for peaceful change.

In 1980, shipbuilders in the seaport city of Gdansk united to confront the government. Their calls for greater political liberties and improved working conditions developed into the Solidarity movement. Solidarity’s leader, Lech Walesa, became the movement’s voice. Protests and unrest spread throughout the country and the communists replaced their leadership. General Wojciech Jaruzelski became prime minister and declared martial law on December 13, 1981. Solidarity was outlawed and Walesa and other Solidarity leaders were imprisoned.

While martial law was lifted in 1983, Poland continued to stagnate. Mikhail Gorbachev’s elevation to leadership of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985 brought new pressures for reform in Poland. A failing economy and continued repression incited workers to a new wave of strikes in 1988. A desperate regime agreed to legalize Solidarity and conduct semi-free elections. In the 1989 parliamentary elections, Solidarity won 99 of the 100 Senate seats and 160 of the 161 lower house seats they were allowed to contest. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a Solidarity leader, became Poland’s first non-communist prime minister in over four decades. In 1990, Lech Walesa was elected president with 74 percent of the vote. While Solidarity splintered as Poland democratized, a coalition government of anti-communist parties won fully free parliamentary elections in 1991.

Poland transitioned to a market economy and applied for integration into western institutions. Economic dislocation returned the former communists, now social democrats, to power in 1993. Free elections and peaceful transitions in the following decades solidified Poland’s multi-party democratic system. Reforms eventually led to a more robust economy and Poland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1999 and the European Union in 2004.

In Freedom House’s [Freedom in the World 2013](http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FIW%202013%20Booklet%20-%20for%20Web_0.pdf), Poland earned the status “Free,” (as it has since 1990) receiving the best possible rankings in the categories Political Rights and Civil Liberties.

The June strikes and repressive aftermath sparked the creation of a unique group, the Workers Defense Committee, or KOR, that would help to end the pattern of failed worker rebellions in communist Poland (and other communist bloc countries) by helping to bring together intellectuals and workers in united opposition to communist rule. Initially composed of 13 veteran opposition intellectuals, KOR openly set out to overcome the regime’s (up to then successful) ruling strategy of atomizing society and keeping different groups not only apart but at odds. It was this strategy that had set workers against students and intellectuals during the 1968 student protests and that had kept intellectuals and students from joining workers in the 1970 strikes on the Baltic coast that were brutally suppressed by police. KOR, which grew to 33 members, including the Romaszewskis, became a key instrument for building the future Solidarity movement.

Some in KOR were elder statesmen of Polish opposition whose role was to craft and endorse proclamations, denounce the government for violating the Helsinki Accords, or develop manifestos and resistance strategy. Others organized underground publishing houses that were aimed at putting out banned literary and scholarly books. Others, like the Romaszewskis and the (equally legendary) Jacek Kuron (joined also by his wife, Danuta), to name a few, undertook the organizing and active defense of workers who were fed up with government-imposed price increases and wage controls, the tyranny of enterprise directors, and the social and workplace manipulation engineered by communist controlled trade unions.

The experiences in Radom led the Romaszewskis to create the Intervention Bureau of KOR, a not legal but more formal means to defend citizens’ rights. In taking on this large task, the Romaszewskis and others built a broad network of helpers who educated workers in international labor rights, documented human rights violations, found lawyers to defend workers arrested or fired from their jobs, traveled around the county to monitor judicial proceedings and to bring assistance for families of imprisoned workers, advised families on how to ensure that prison authorities honored the rules for family visits, and generally made sure that workers knew they were not alone in their struggle against the communist Leviathan. Based on the Intervention Bureau’s documentation, Zbigniew and Zofia launched the Polish Helsinki Commission, which produced a famous comprehensive report to the 1980 Madrid Review Conference of the Helsinki Final Act.

The significance of what the Romaszewskis, KOR, and other colleagues did was history in the making. Their efforts helped to convince more and more people that they were not alone and that possibly they had power in joining together. This sense was made even more palpable by John Paul I, the first Polish Pope, who during his inaugural trip to Poland in 1979 told the millions of people who gathered to hear him “to live in truth” and “not to fear.”

The true impact was seen soon thereafter, in August 1980, when millions of workers joined together in the largest and most consequential national strike in the annals of international trade unionism. As the nationwide strikes grew in strength (and gained international support), the Polish authorities were forced to sign the Gdansk Accords, whose first provision recognized the right of workers to create and join independent trade unions of their own choosing—a fundamental admission that the communist government did not represent the working class. Suddenly, all of Polish society had achieved a fundamental understanding of social solidarity and willingly took on the power of the communist state. Today, we think everything was inevitable: Solidarity, 1989, the fall of the Soviet Union. In August 1980, nothing was inevitable. Every worker acted not knowing what the consequences would be. From previous experience, they knew what the risks included: prison, dismissal from work, police harassment, retribution against family members, or, worse, targeted violence or “liquidation.” And, of course, Polish workers had stood up to demand basic rights and freedoms knowing the real possibility of the ultimate retribution: a Soviet invasion. They did so because they had taken what Romaszewski called “that major first step towards freedom,” the belief that it “was one for all, and all for one.”

• • •

During the first period of Solidarity’s legal or aboveground existence (August 1980 to December 1981), most of the intellectuals in KOR were key advisors helping to devise strategy. Zbigniew Romaszewski (like Jacek Kuron and the originator of the trade union’s name, another veteran oppositionist, Karol Modzelewski) had earned enough trust of workers to be elected to the union’s National Commission and its acting body, the presidium.

The Romaszewskis also organized Solidarity’s “Intervention and Lawfulness Commission,” a way of institutionalizing their human rights protection mechanism within the trade union. The sixteen month period of Solidarity’s first legal existence was often called “the carnival.” The term reflected the joyfulness of Poles about their newfound ability to express themselves and organize in a relatively free atmosphere. In fact, though, this period was fraught with constant tension. The communist hierarchy, still fully in control of the state, tried at all points to protect as much of its power as possible and constantly tested Solidarity’s and Polish society’s mettle through police attacks, harassment, dismissals, targeted enterprise closures, engineered food shortages, and military and police maneuvers.

The Romaszewskis documented everything and organized a defense system for all acts of repression—legal help, a public spotlight, financial aid, material assistance—all the while building a network that could survive a major crackdown. Behind everything the Romaszewskis did was an understanding that opposing dictatorship was not an abstract idea: everything taking place in Poland involved real people, whose lives were often harmed by the risks they took to speak up and act for their beliefs. Every day, they encountered the true impact that the communist system, in all of its repressive and bureaucratic apparatus, had on ordinary people. They made sure that Solidarity lived up to its name as a moral creed and never forgot those who took risks and suffered the consequences.

Internally, within the leadership of the union, indeed within all of Polish society, there was a constant debate over “how far to go” and what would “provoke” the authorities beyond a “breaking point” that would result in a crackdown or Soviet invasion. The historical evidence shows that the regime began preparing a crackdown even as it signed the Gdansk Accords in August 1980 and that General Jaruzelski directed carefully the plans as they evolved. The Soviet leadership was kept regularly informed of these plans and Soviet threats to invade were meant to prod Jaruzelski to take action earlier. In the end, the crackdown engineered by Jaruzelski was thorough and complete, but ultimately, as Romaszewski predicted, it failed to break Solidarity and the Polish people’s resistance. Most Poles had indeed taken “the first major step towards freedom.” As the Romaszewskis proved after martial law, with enough preparation to resist a crackdown, Polish society would not take a step back.

• • •

The authorities released Zofia and Zbigniew Romaszewski early, about a year apart in 1984 and 1985, as part of “amnesties”—an annual ritual in which the Polish authorities would release some political prisoners in order to get relief from sanctions imposed by the U.S. (and to a lesser extent Western Europe). The Romaszewskis were in no way broken. Indeed they remained resolute. But, like other released political prisoners, they found themselves in an odd situation. They were no longer in prison, but they could not go back into hiding or re-enter clandestine Solidarity structures—this would be too dangerous for their still underground colleagues. They had to now figure out how to continue organizing resistance for Solidarity.

So, on their release, the Romaszewskis did what came naturally. They recreated the Intervention and Lawfulness Commission in 1985 so as to organize protection and material assistance for repressed Solidarity members and their families. The structure was neither legal nor underground and its activities were both public and clandestine. Despite the informal nature of the structure, the Romaszewskis retained their initial authority to act from Solidarity’s legal existence. (This authority was reinforced by statements by Solidarity’s underground structures and the union’s chairman, Lech Walesa, who was also outside prison.) Except now, despite the formal “lifting” of martial law and the supposed general nature of the amnesties, the scale was even greater, involving thousands of repressed workers who were still frequently detained, sentenced by administrative to large fines, sentenced to imprisonment by penal courts, constantly under police surveillance, dismissed from work and unemployable, their children harassed and prevented from studying at university, and otherwise repressed by the regime.

Surprisingly, the Polish authorities allowed Zofia to travel to the U.S. (part of the effort to show “liberalization” in exchange for sanctions relief). It was then that the Committee in Support of Solidarity’s president, Irena Lasota, herself a prison veteran from the 1968 student protests, met Zofia for the first time. The two women were similar ages and had similar orientations: they were people of both action and compassion, with common strategies for opposing communism through peaceful means and with similar understandings of the necessity for helping people who suffered the consequences of standing up for human rights. Lasota and the Committee had raised money for underground Solidarity and directed some of this money to support the Romaszewskis’ network, first in the broadcasting of Radio Solidarnosc but also for human rights documentation and social assistance.

What was needed now, Zofia argued, was social protection on a vast scale. Tens of thousands of workers had been dismissed from their jobs for union activities. Hundreds were still in prison. They and their families needed assistance, which the underground Solidarity structures had difficulty organizing. Without such assistance, there was a danger that the extended period of repression by the communist state would break again the social bonds of solidarity that had been so important to the union’s existence. The Romaszewskis argued that the recreated Intervention Bureau could act more effectively while operating semi-openly, since they and their network of human rights workers were able to travel within Poland now with relative ease, no longer fearing being caught and, given the delicate diplomatic dance of the Polish authorities with Western governments, unlikely to be arrested again. The Committee raised a substantial amount of money in the next several years for this purpose and others, like Joan Baez’s Aurora Foundation, also provided grants (the amounts totaled more than $100,000 over three years). Irena Lasota organized channels for the delivery of this assistance. And the Romaszewskis developed means for receiving and distributing the assistance without any of it being seized.

Rebuilding those networks of social solidarity helped to bolster worker resistance. When workers in Nowa Huta, Silesia and the Baltic Coast again organized well targeted strikes in the summer of 1988 demanding the legal reinstatement of Solidarity, the Polish authorities, fearing that the strikes would again spread nationwide, agreed to new negotiations resulting six months later in the Roundtable Accords. Not only did the government agree to Solidarity’s legal reinstatement, it agreed to semi-free elections in June 1989. From the evidence, it appears the Polish authorities believed they could neuter Solidarity by compromising the movement in a subordinate position in parliament. In the end, Polish society used the elections to register an overwhelming referendum against communism, electing Solidarity candidates by 90 percent votes in all but one of the contested elections and refusing to vote for most communist party candidates, denying many a quorum to be elected (required by the regime’s own electoral law) and thereby denying the regime legitimacy to rule. Ultimately, as satellite parties defected, the communist government was too weakened to survive. The first non-communist government was formed in September 1989. The “springtime of nations” revolt of Eastern European countries soon followed.

In the June elections, Zbigniew Romaszewski ran as a candidate in a working class district of Warsaw for a seat in the Senate, a newly created upper chamber of parliament (initially having limited powers) with 100 contested seats. With his wife running the campaign, Romaszewski won one of the largest percentages of any Solidarity candidate. In the years that followed, he won re-election six times, serving a total of twenty-two years, the longest serving member of parliament after June 1989.

• • •

During the spring of 1988, the Romaszewskis launched another, perhaps even more significant initiative. They had long built networks not just in Poland but throughout Eastern Europe. They understood the struggle in Poland to be part of a broader struggle against Soviet-imposed communist regimes throughout the region. Although there were still constant acts of harassment (and arrests of activists in their network), by this time, they had been acting for several years without arrest or serious retribution. They believed it was possible to now be even more bold: to hold an international conference involving human rights activists from throughout the communist bloc countries as well as others with the aim of fostering a region-wide human rights movement. They invited hundreds of people from throughout the Soviet bloc, Western Europe, and the U.S. to come to Nowa Huta, a communist-created city built around a steelworks outside Krakow, to discuss how to bring about fundamental change in respect for human rights in the region. While there had been cross-border meetings of KOR and Charter 77 of Czechoslovakia, among others, this was the first time that anyone had attempted to organize an open forum for human rights activists from communist countries.

The Romaszewskis got approval from local Church officials to hold the conference in a newly built church in Nowa Huta created at the behest of and dedicated to John Paul II, who had been Bishop and Cardinal of the Krakow diocese and had long sought to build a church in what the communists originally conceived as a centerpiece to the atheist regime. (The director Andrzej Wajda depicts the creation and socialist culture of Nowa Huta in the “Man of Marble.”) The Romaszewskis believed that the Polish authorities would not directly intervene to prevent the conference from being held in this church building, called Mistrzejewice, and, despite the presence of battalions of black-coated secret policemen outside, they were correct. In the end, several hundred activists walked right past the battalions to attend the conference. They represented the by-now significant democratic opposition movements in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Baltic states, human rights activists from Russia, Romania, and Bulgaria, and an array of representatives from other repressed nations and ethnic groups within the Soviet Union. The general secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, John Vandervecken, and a representative of the AFL-CIO, teacher union leader Albert Shanker, attended along with human rights activists from Western Europe and the U.S. As the conference got under way, the first strikes in Silesia began (Vandervecken left immediately after his speech to join the miners).

It is hard to know the direct impact the first International Human Rights Conference in Nowa Huta had in spurring events in Eastern Europe. Nor the direct impact of the second conference the Romaszewskis organized in 1990 in Leningrad in spurring the downfall of the Soviet Union. Certainly, many of the participants went on to become parliamentarians, civil society leaders, and even prime ministers and presidents of newly free countries. What we do know, however, is that this was perhaps the first time that many human rights and democracy activists, all with similar purpose, had had an opportunity to meet, talk, craft strategy, and declare for their countries a common future dedicated to the respect of human and worker rights.

• • •

Before 1989, nearly everyone thought that getting rid of communism and bringing democracy to Eastern Europe was impossible. Afterwards, the same “experts” who had thought such a change impossible then declared it “inevitable”: communism fell because the system failed. During the heady events of 1989 to 1991, however, what was clear was that the fall of communism was the result of millions of people rising up to determine their fates. They chose to bring about an end to communist dictatorship and to craft a democratic future, oriented to Europe and the West, for their countries.

Those who organized internal opposition to communist regimes knew that any change, any transformation, depended on individuals standing up to and resisting the state’s power and challenging communist ideology. Without anyone to challenge the system, it could have continued much longer. There were many heroes who stood up and resisted. Some are well known internationally, like Andrei Sakharov and Vaclav Havel; others, like Zbigniew and Zofia Romaszewski, are known in their own countries and even regionally, but not more widely. Then, there are those who are wholly unknown but, as the Romaszewskis could attest, whose actions were the basis of all the remarkable change and transformation that took place. They were the ordinary workers and members of society who finally decided to stand up and be counted, to create a new nation based on social solidarity, joining in chorus “one for all and all for one.”

• • •

While many Eastern European countries are now in the EU and NATO, tied to the West, nevertheless the transitions in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have turned out to be much less than what human rights activists and leaders hoped for. The revolutionary chorus of “one for all, all for one” changed to a cackle of political ambitions and self-interest, not the least of which were the functionaries from the old regime protecting themselves and their associates. In the former Soviet Union, most countries simply switched from communist dictatorship to authoritarian rule by KGB veterans—Putinism and its variations—rule protected by a new oligarchic elite of former communists controlling most of the economic assets. In Eastern European countries, there was more development of basic democratic institutions, but in fact we have seen a great deal of political life stunted and warped by the continuing influence of former communist elites in public and economic life.

Twenty-five years after World War II, most Western European countries were well developed democracies with stable politics and economies. Twenty-five years after 1989, Eastern European countries are facing different degrees of political turmoil and economic distress. No country (not even the most successful Baltic States) has stable political parties reflecting basic historical and social interests in the manner of the Netherlands, France, United Kingdom, or even post-Nazi West Germany in 1970, twenty-five years after the cataclysmic World War II. Today, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland and Romania all face serious economic and social crises, with political establishments unable to present satisfactory solutions to the electorate. In Poland, which supposedly has had the strongest economy of all post-Soviet bloc countries, two million mostly young people have left their homeland in the last ten years, most never to return. The out-migration of more than 5 percent of the total population (and nearly a quarter of Poles aged 18-40), is a unique phenomenon in a developed democratic country and likely to create enormous burdens on future governments.

Many revolutionaries from 1989-91 were either incapable of confronting the new challenges of democratic politics or, worse, were seduced by power and money and simply forsook their principles and the people they once led. There were a few, however, who never stopped trying to fulfill the hopes of 1989. As a senator, Zbigniew Romaszewski was among those few. He set about trying to institutionalize human rights into legislation, called for accountability for the human rights violations of the communist regime, and challenged the new economic orthodoxy of free markets, which seemed to benefit mostly old communist officials. Many Solidarity leaders also cashed in on the new free market Poland and some became anti-union zealots, but Romaszewski stayed true to his roots, defending workers against forced closings, massive unemployment, and lack of social services. He sponsored legislation to support Solidarity activists who had permanently lost jobs and ended up in dire poverty as a result of their courage under communism.

Romaszewski also stayed true to his internationalism and his belief in the universal struggle for human rights and dignity. Romaszewski remained a champion for freedom throughout the former Soviet bloc and worldwide. In 1998, he and Zofia organized a third International Human Rights Conference, this time hosted in the Polish Sejm, or parliament, building to highlight the unfinished business of human rights implementation in post-communist and still-communist countries (including the People’s Republics of China and Korea and the last unchanged Warsaw Pact country, Cuba). He led international efforts to defend helpless Chechens from Russian invasion (including organizing a special Senate investigative commission on Chechnya that took him to the war-torn region); he advocated for Crimean Tatars who were fighting Russian chauvinism in their homeland in Ukraine after returning from Soviet exile after 45 years; he carried out human rights investigations of crimes in former Yugoslavia; he stood up to the new authoritarian regimes in the Caucasus and Central Asia; he joined with his human rights brethren in Russia against the rise of Putinism and Putin’s reassertion of Russian domination of the former Soviet empire; he sponsored and supported the creation of Belsat to offer Belarusans independent news under the dictatorship of Aleksander Lukashenka; he traveled with Zofia to Cuba in 2006 to share with dissidents the experience of Solidarity; among many other actions. In retirement from the Senate, he (and Zofia) undertook new human rights campaigns, among them helping the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (the Committee in Support of Solidarity’s successor organization) to monitor elections in Georgia in 2012 that led to the first peaceful and democratic transfer of power in that country. A month before his death, he traveled to Ukraine to register his personal support for the civic Euromaidan movement.

• • •

I came to first know the Romaszewskis by editing accounts of Radio Solidarnosc and informing the American public of their daring resistance to martial law. After their arrest, I reported on Zbigniew Romaszewski’s calm and certain declaration of future victory in court—even as he, Zofia, and his colleagues faced several years’ imprisonment. Despite not sharing a common language (I never learned Polish well enough to converse), I came to know both Zosia and Zbyszek closely after their release from prison. After Zofia’s trip to the U.S. I raised funds from trade unions, human rights groups, individuals, and the NED to support their campaigns of social solidarity and lawfulness. I also assisted their organization of the Nowa Huta and Leningrad International Human Rights Conferences and several of their post-1989 efforts (including the third conference in Warsaw) to keep the spirit of Solidarity and human and worker rights alive in the region. Throughout, I knew I was in the presence of true makers of history. The Romaszewskis’ contributions to the struggle for Poland’s and Eastern Europe’s freedom are immense. But what struck me most about both of them was how their sympathy for and commitment to others mirrored their personal devotion to and love for each. It is rare to know individuals whose private and public actions are a consistent reflection of principled values and human cores. The Romaszewskis were such individuals.

Zofia Romaszewska has lost her partner of more than 45 years; his daughter Agnieszka, who continued in her parents footsteps (and currently directs Belsat), has lost a devoted father and teacher. Poland has lost a great hero. And I and many others in dozens of countries have lost a true friend, someone whose values and commitment helped to guide us for 30 years. Zbigniew Romaszewski never thought any issue was complicated and was never tied up by any ideology. He always stood on the right side, the side of human rights and freedom, wherever and whenever it was needed. I hope his legacy continues to guide me and others.

*Eric Chenoweth is co-director of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe. He co-founded and directed the Committee in Support of Solidarity from 1981 to 1989.*