

Document No. 13: Record of Conversation between Helmut Kohl
and Lech Wałęsa
November 9, 1989

The Chancellor greeted Lech Wałęsa and reminded him of the last meeting at the beginning of September. Since then a lot has happened in Europe!

He hopes that a new chapter in the German-Polish relationship can now truly begin. The strength of his delegation--among them 80 persons from business--demonstrates strong interest. If Poland [could] only create the necessary political infrastructure, one could do much jointly: promote agricultural cooperatives, industrial concerns, middle class enterprises--there is already the potential for cooperation.

The joint document negotiated by [our] personal representatives is rational and forward-looking.

Indeed, one must know that the left in both states does not want this visit to be successful. The discussion over the Annabergⁱ has shown this, as does the way one psychologically punishes an entire segment of the population, such as exiles--who are completely obliging--until they react.

A success in German-Polish relations in view of the dramatic developments in the GDR would be especially compelling. No one can say how it will continue--not even Krenz. Every day between 10,000 and 15,000 people simply flee the GDR. Krenz told him--the chancellor--over the telephone that he wants to continue with reforms, but following the Moscow model, not Warsaw's or Budapest's. He wants to keep the present party control in practice. But this will not work; if Krenz does not permit parties and guarantee free elections there will be no peace. Had Honecker implemented this two years earlier, this would perhaps have worked, but now in the face of demonstrations by 500,000 people in Leipzig, 600,000-700,000 people in Berlin, it is too late. One can no longer align with the police and tanks against such a crowd of people. Gorbachev also realizes this.

This is why a success with reforms here in Poland is so important. This success would be a first-class European event. Therefore, he--the chancellor--wants to do everything to contribute to this success. Clever politics is necessary on both sides.

Wałęsa thanked [the chancellor] for the opportunity to have these talks and responded to the Annaberg theme--that in this case one does not wish to emphasize it too much.

One should not forget that there was an iron curtain between the two states, that the Polish people would have been poorly informed on the chancellor's plans and efforts. The present opening is still too new to overcome these molds, these moods. In a month one could not imagine this. In half a year such a problem will no longer exist. Today, however, the widespread fear of German aggression, German tanks, continues to have an effect. The communists have psychologically maintained this image--the chancellor interjected: And exploited it.

Wałęsa advises waiting calmly for things to develop.

He sees the developments in the GDR as very dangerous. One must try to slow them down. He had said earlier that it would be good if the GDR remained in fifth or sixth place (among the reform states). He would have preferred it if developments had maintained a certain order--with Poland and Hungary on top. But now one stands unprepared before a new situation. One requires brave solutions--for instance a complete opening: everyone could go where it suits him. But no one is prepared for such solutions.

In the GDR everything works in the short-term and is thought of belatedly. A stream of people moves to the West and no one is left to turn off the light. He asks himself if the Federal Republic of Germany could stop this influx.

For Poland, the developments are coming at the wrong time: the Federal Republic of Germany would be compelled to direct its gaze toward the GDR as a top priority--in which case the Polish reforms would inevitably be in the background.

The Chancellor interjected that this is not his policy--without the developments in Warsaw, these developments would not be occurring in the GDR--and if the Warsaw reforms were to fail, nothing further would happen in the GDR.

Wałęsa replied that admittedly this is logically correct; on the other hand the situation in the GDR is developing with swift leaps and bounds. He asks himself what would happen if the GDR completely opened its border and tore down the Wall--must the Federal Republic of Germany rebuild it [East Germany] again?

The Chancellor continued: if the number of refugee-seekers grew dramatically again, the GDR would collapse.

Wałęsa continued anew: the development of reforms in the GDR is late--and if the GDR cannot and will not go further, it will seek to shift the debt to the Federal Republic of Germany.

The Chancellor views such a course as unlikely: yesterday in the German Bundestag he said that there were

three points that were crucial: admission of free parties, free elections, and credible guarantees. Then the Federal Republic of Germany could also help.

Wałęsa views such developments as coming too late. If it were up to him to decide in the GDR, he would announce that the complete opening (of the border) has been prepared, proclaim a political program along these lines, and introduce a clever solution that would not result in confusion. But this is not possible now. One already knows this in Poland from personal experience. He would have preferred a clean solution--"with gloves." But now one must improvise. In spite of everything, the attempt must also be made in the GDR to implement a well-thought-out solution, otherwise there will be chaos.

The Chancellor repeated: truly free parties and free elections are what the people in the GDR are now waiting for.

Wałęsa asked if there is anyone with whom one can talk rationally.

The Chancellor repeated his view of the GDR leadership: It is not about one person, rather it is about many who feared losing their advantages and now are feeling genuine anxiety. Within the leadership there are three groups:

--Those who still believed ten days ago that things could be brought back to order through the removal of Honecker; now they have detached themselves. "The old cement-heads" [die alte Betonköpfe] are gone.

--Krenz and his followers, who would like to implement reforms, such as a leading role for the party, following the model of the Soviet Union, meaning with a leadership role for the party. He, the chancellor, does not believe this will happen.

--Finally, the third group is difficult to characterize--however, it clearly wants actual changes. He has received inquiries regarding conditions, but of course answered that the Federal Republic of Germany has no conditions to impose; rather, all decisions must come from the GDR itself.

Above all, he emphasized that he could provide comprehensive help if there were actual reforms: the founding of free labor unions, free parties, free elections, guarantees [I]f the GDR does not go down this path, they will be swept away.

Wałęsa emphasized anew his fear and concern over uncontrollable developments: the situation in the GDR calls for a brave solution ... He sees no (long-term) planning. The SED is not in a position to carry out reforms, no one

would believe them. Perhaps one should think about including the U.N. But there is no person, no institution in particular--such as the Church in Poland--with which one can discuss [matters] rationally and control the situation. There is no earnest organization, although certain people from the nomenklatura could play with military power.

The Chancellor repeated: Military power will help no one now. However, the example of Hungary could help. There some people have realized that reforms were important.

Wałęsa does not see a second Hungary in the GDR as possible. He wonders whether the Wall will still be standing in one or two weeks.

The Chancellor emphasized that the peaceful course of the demonstrations has very clearly proven that the people are not radical.

Wałęsa reported from his own experience that he also first emphasized results after the "Roundtable" talks, but was overtaken by the outcome. Particularly because of that, he has concerns that events in the GDR are developing too quickly.

The Chancellor pointed out that the GDR, in contrast to Poland and Hungary, is not a country, rather it is a part of Germany. If there were a firm arrangement on the admission of parties and a guarantee of free elections,

then the people would no longer leave. Since there are still remnants of earlier parties--though this does not count for the East CDU--there could be a new infrastructure in three months.

Prof. Geremek interjected that the same question presents itself in the GDR as in Poland: Society wants freedom, not parties. If one were to put this to the test, then why does the Wall still stand?

The Chancellor replied: with these developments the Wall will without a doubt be cleared away. On the other hand, if someone were to open fire, everything would be over.

Wałęsa sees difficulties with the re-establishment of parties because many of the most active leadership personalities are already gone. Perhaps the party problem is even on the back burner. For the people the cry "we want parties" is, as in Poland, about freedom.

Wałęsa asked about the economic and benefits situation in the GDR.

The Chancellor sees this as a small problem. Besides, yesterday in the German Bundestag he emphasized our preparedness to help if free labor unions and parties are allowed and free elections are guaranteed. One could activate the GDR economy quite quickly. Naturally the level

of help must be significant--he harbors no illusions about this. Especially in the current situation, the Chancellor continued, he wants to clear things up with Poland. He wants to achieve results through bilateral relations, but also as a result of developments in the GDR. It would be utterly wrong to allow the GDR current priority and to claim that Poland is no longer a theme because the developments are not a German, but rather a European, problem. He evaluates everything he does as a German in this situation from the perspective of how it will work in Europe.

In Paris, London, Rome, Warsaw there are many people who did not wish for these developments. That is exactly why one must try to reach a consensus. He spoke with President Mitterrand about this eight days ago and then stated with him at a press conference: now more than ever the Federal Republic of Germany needs a partnership with France--it is existential, for we are a piece of Europe. The Germans are not the measure of all things.

He can only repeat: if things in Poland develop for the worse, then the same will happen in the GDR. That is exactly why he would give important impetus here.

Wałęsa asked if the Federal Republic of Germany could accept a million people from the GDR.

The Chancellor saw such an influx of refugees as unlikely. From his own conversations, he knows that these are normal people who actually didn't want to leave; rather, through their flight they wanted to force better living conditions in their homeland.

Wałęsa clarified anew his concerns about uncontrolled developments and "revolutionary chaos." There is a joint interest that things develop peacefully.

The Chancellor emphatically agreed. However he--the chancellor--cannot make the decision together with Wałęsa. People in the GDR leadership need yet another lesson, specifically that the party cannot continue with the same leadership. There is no military alternative--either involving their own or Russian soldiers. But just because a few people wanted to save the leadership, they would not carry out a scorched earth policy.

Wałęsa nevertheless does not rule out a development in which martial law or a state of emergency [are declared].

The Chancellor repeated anew: the people want change, not revolution.

Wałęsa and Geremek doubt that this also holds for the youth.

The Chancellor repeated: naturally they want changes and a better standard of living, but they also see the costs and risks.

Next week there will be a new government in East Berlin. He does not know the designated minister president, perhaps a few people of his background. It would not surprise him--the chancellor--if he attempted after a while to push Krenz to the side and take over his role.

Besides, the people in the GDR are well informed on relations with us. They knew what they expected in the Federal Republic of Germany. Fourteen million travelers over the past year also conveyed personal impressions.

For this reason, too, he believes there will be no radicalization. In demonstrations of 500,000 people, no broken windows--this was indeed notable. (Digression: GDR refugees in the embassies in Warsaw and Prague.)

In closing, the Chancellor gave his convincing impression that one can place things under control in the GDR with determined steps in the direction of admitting free trade unions, free parties and, in a realistic perspective, free elections. The Catholic and Evangelical churches have played a stabilizing role throughout.

After the arrival of [Franz] Cardinal Hengsbach, the Chancellor clarified anew that developments in the GDR

would not change his policy. He wants success for the reforms in Poland and Hungary. They are significant for all of Europe--if they are not successful, there will be no rational developments in the GDR.

He expressed his readiness to remain in contact with Wałęsa in case of a dramatic worsening [of the situation].

Wałęsa: thanked [the chancellor] for the talk.

[Source: Published in Deutsche Einheit: Sonderedition aus den Akten des Bundeskanzleramtes 1989/90, Hans Jürgen Kusters and Daniel Hofmann, eds. (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1998), document number 76, pp. 492-496. Translated by Catherine Nielsen.]

ⁱ The Annaberg, in Upper Silesia, is considered by many Poles to be a holy mountain. It was also the site of a 1921 Polish uprising against German control of the region. Kohl was criticized for accepting an invitation to attend a German-Polish Catholic Mass there.