

The anti-Malthusian current in Poland

by Kerstin Tegin-Gaddy

Of the world's industrialized countries the two with the highest birth rates are Poland and Ireland. Zero growth or even negative population growth predominate in the other nations of Europe and North America.

There are two explanations of Poland's status as a stronghold against Malthusianism. The first is the powerful position of the Catholic Church there. The Church in Poland has never ceased its efforts to stop abortions and divorces and to protect the family; in one of the most prominent cathedrals in Warsaw, St. Anne Cathedral, the entire lobby is one big exhibit on the "right to life." Unfortunately, the Church has not gone unchallenged on this point. The Polish communist party was an early and strong proponent of free abortions, something that created an unnecessary basis for conflict between the Church and the party. The communists were so extreme on this point that Poland became renowned throughout Europe during the 1960s and 1970s as a center for abortions on demand. In countries like Sweden and Denmark, where there were no free abortions at the time, pro-abortion-lobbyists set up travel bureaus for women to go to Poland. This conflict between the Church and the state has not been resolved, but the Church appears to have the upper hand insofar as the population listens to its moral messages.

The second reason for the anti-Malthusianism in Poland is that the Poles know what genocide means. Six million Polish citizens were killed by the Nazis in the Second World War. It was not until 1981 that Poland finally rebuilt its population level to what it had been in 1939—thirty-six million people!

Despite Poland's severe economic crisis today, the belief in growth and in the future can be seen in the way the Poles think about their children. If you look around in Warsaw, you will find that there is a scarcity of almost everything, starting with clothes, food, and cars. In any of the department stores built during the consumer boom of the 1970s, you will find floor after floor of empty shelves. Nevertheless, certain sections of the store will have goods in abundance—the departments for toys and children's clothes!

The reason for this was explained to us again and again:

The children must not suffer in this economic crisis. There has been a great deal of publicity about the food lines in Poland. We didn't see any, but we did see enormous lines outside the candy and chocolate stores. Asked why they would stand in line for hours to buy chocolate, people explained to us that Christmas was approaching and that every year the Polish tradition is to give the children chocolate for Christmas.

There are a lot of children in Warsaw, and they look well-nourished and well-dressed. The most striking thing, though, was not that the children seemed to be spared material hardship, but that they expressed curiosity about the world and a belief in the future. For a Swedish resident like myself who has followed the almost total destruction of the younger generation in the West over the past two decades, it was moving to see such small things as young people giving up a seat for their elders on the buses, being helpful and courteous.

We had visited the Warsaw Opera twice. Close to half the audience was made up of teenagers, who came with their teachers and parents, and apparently loved the classical culture they were offered. We experienced the same thing with somewhat older youth at the Warsaw Polytechnical Institute. On a weekday evening, the Student Union Orchestra was to perform the Suite in B-minor by J. S. Bach and other pieces for their fellow students, as part of a monthly series. Half an hour before the concert began, the 250 chairs set up in the student gym had been filled and extra ones had to be brought in. The quality of this student orchestra—technical and engineering—was remarkably good; the audience demanded four encores.

Yet there is cause for concern about the future. The absence of punk rockers and youth gangs, for instance, will not continue for long unless the government of Poland makes a conscious effort to stop the influence of the Anglo-American drug culture. The forces outside Poland that want to undermine the country are very conscious that one of their best weapons is to destroy the youth, just as youth has been practically destroyed in the West. We concluded that it is a national-security threat to allow the proponents of the rock and drug culture to appear on national television, as the Poles do today.

Of course, not all of the adverse cultural influences in Poland come from the West, as anyone who has seen a Polish poster exhibition can testify. A great deal of Polish culture is influenced by existentialism, an existentialism bordering on suicidal insanity. But apart from that, Poland is a cultured country, a nation with pride in its literature, art, and music. That this cultural pride is still alive was very visible in the sheer number of bookstores in Warsaw. Each city block seemed to contain at least one bookshop, often more, full of people of all types. If Poland can use this consciousness of culture, making strategic use of its own humanist classical culture, and that of the rest of the world, I think the nation's manpower will have a foundation for rapid economic advance.