

Christian Fuehrer

From a speech by Reverend Christian Fuehrer, Lutheran pastor of the St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig, Germany, on July 4, 2002. Rev. Fuehrer spoke through a translator about his role in the “Velvet Revolution” in what was then East Germany. This is an edited version of the transcript.
— Melissa N. Matusevich

Introduction

St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig, Germany, was the cradle of a peaceful revolution in 1989. There was an artificial border in Germany, and we, the people of East and West Germany, wanted our nation to be whole again. In 1871, the bloody Franco-Prussian War resulted in German unification and the establishment of the German Empire. This lasted until World War II, when the Russians took over occupation of the eastern sector and instituted an oppressive regime. In 1989, Germany was again united, this time without bloodshed. On October 9, 1989, the entire city of Leipzig held a march for peace. It was unprecedented. The citizens knew and the government knew that the era of oppression was over. The prayer services for peace finally culminated in the collapse of the East German government. One month later, on November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall was torn down. It all began simply with a prayer service for peace and a few brave souls willing to risk openly speaking their minds. Here is the story.

Small Beginnings

In 1980 the government was about to build up arms—middle range atomic missiles—meaning that world war would be six minutes away on the “Doomsday Clock” of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which estimates the danger of nuclear war in the world. Both East and West German citizens wanted to stop this build up of arms.

I came to this church in 1980 and decided to offer something for the peace movement. I had an idea. I decided to schedule a midnight service to pray for peace and then wait and see what would happen. On the first night, I went to the altar room and about 120 people came. They were young people, punks with spiked hair, tattoos, and piercings everywhere. They were the ones I least expected! The government was afraid of these young people, two of whom were songwriters. They created songs and we used the church as a forum. The youth were not Christians. Many had never been in a church before. “What do I say to them?” I wondered. So I told them about the cross and its meaning as Roman punishment. I laid the cross on the floor and put a basket of candles next to it and asked if anyone wanted to speak. Almost all the young people spoke.

Then, a miracle occurred. It was an act of liberation as all



spoke freely. We lined candles up on the cross and made it shine to show the resurrection. The most important thing about what happened was the moment when the young people had a chance to speak. After the service, people stayed. It was a strange situation. So, I prepared tea and bread. It was odd. Near the altar, which is a space for the minister and other church officials, was a large group of people with a teapot and bread. They enjoyed it so much that I realized the solution was to open the church to people who could not speak freely outside.

Because the government had a policy in regard to churches, most people didn't know much about church. The church was always struggling with the authorities. Even though small, the church community had many sympathizers. They called themselves “The Minority with a Future.” State officials became very afraid of what was going on because we held prayer services for peace every Monday night after that. Government officials began to monitor the goings on at the church. We were not allowed to publish anything or to put up posters. But they were not needed. Word of mouth worked.

Government Reaction

In the beginning, the government underestimated the significance of the prayer services for peace. The government always pretended publicly to be a moderate, tolerant state to the outside world. It claimed that people had the liberty to go to church and to worship. So, the government had to fight the church in secret. First they infiltrated the church with members of the secret service. Their aim was to cause deterioration from

the inside. Then, government wrote a paper criticizing the character of the church. They put pressure on a higher church authority to move the preacher (me) to a new location. Only in the very end, in 1989, could the government no longer hide its oppressive efforts. The public square outside the church became the most heavily guarded spot in East Germany.

The government began organizing “camps” for church leaders. At any moment I could have been taken away. In September, I was taken into custody and questioned. I was told that if I did not stop the Monday prayer services, the government would. All of us were afraid day and night, but in the end my faith was stronger than my fears. We continued the Monday night prayer services for peace.

Repression Increases

Beginning on the 8th of May, 1989, all roads to this church were blocked. The more the government tried to stop them, the more the people came. Something East Germans respected very much was this church. A great challenge arose when the church was filled and there was no room for more people and then the entire square outside was filled to capacity. This was all because of the work of a few young Christians and a few church people. Imagine 2000 people standing in the halls of the church. They weren’t even Christians. The government couldn’t control this and it all happened peacefully. It was miraculous. In a way, the people in the church were touched by the spirit of God.

Let me describe the setting for this event. The church’s infrastructure was a mess. There were two toilets — “East German” toilets. You had to flush them ten times and then there was a flood. I kept repeating the Sermon on the Mount to the crowd. When people would leave, I’d tell them to take the peaceful nonviolent attitude of Jesus to the roads with them. It took half an hour for all the people to get out of the building.

Fifteen minutes after they started leaving the church, a government official broadcast a warning over a loudspeaker, “Citizens disperse!” Of course people didn’t disperse from the square. So, the police, the *Stasi*, arrested one person and took him away. This made everyone, including the young people, tense. But we did not fight violence with violence. One young man had an idea: If anyone should get arrested, that person should shout his or her name as loud as possible so that someone could write the name and publish it in church. So we did that. We put the names on boards and hung them in the church. If someone was missing, people could come to the church to check the names. Then people began to put candles and flowers with the names and set them in the train station for all to see. Suddenly, everywhere in the train station were flowers and candles and names of people the government had taken away after the prayer meetings. But the government could not stop it. One government official called me and told me to remove the candles because they were a safety hazard. I told him that it was common for East-German constructed chimneys to fall from roofs, which was far more dangerous, so if he would fix all the chimneys, I’d get rid of the candles.

Expressions of Solidarity

The candles and flowers were also placed in the large square outside the church. One morning in September, I saw a government official coming with snow-collecting equipment. He removed all the candles from the square. It made me very sad. After, there were only leftover bits of candles. The garbage collectors picked them up and lit them and set them in the church windows. It was a very brave thing for them to do. It may not be stated in any history book, but this was a good example of a peaceful revolution, a revolution of people not asking permission.

People could come to the prayer service and speak extemporaneously about what touched them personally. It was hard for some to speak in front of such a large group, especially knowing that there were government spies in the audience who could identify them later. This shows you how people found courage in the church when they were no longer able to bear the backbreaking weight of oppression. Having spies in the church turned into an advantage for us. Every week they heard prayers and the Sermon on the Mount. Where else could people have heard that?

I began to say to the audience, “Today I want to especially greet all informal members of our government.” People began giggling and smiling and then laughing. This alleviated the fears of oppression. I used to say, “What a great thing it is that we have these big churches and the security of 2000 visitors.” This also made everyone feel relieved. But people were afraid of the *Stasi* because they were so powerful in the East German government. The *Stasi*, though, had no power inside the church. People were frightened seeing them sitting openly and grim in church. But in the end our services made the big state institution come to an end.

Epilogue

Looking back, we can see that religious communities had an important advantage over the government of East Germany—the church had a monopoly on freedom, both physical and spiritual. This led to young people criticizing the communist system freely in church. And this was the beginning. 🌍

For Further Reading

“Welcome to Germany” and other curriculum materials from the Inter Nationes and the Goethe Institut (see the Publications link at www.socialstudies.org).

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Corazon Aquino

Born in Manila on January 25, 1933, Cory Aquino attended high school and college in the United States. Her father was a three-term congressman in the Philippine legislature. Her mother, a pharmacist, was the daughter of a senator. In these early years, she was shielded from the worst aspects of life under the oppressive government of dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

Upon her return to the Philippines, Corazon began studying law, but ended when she married Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. They had five children.

Benigno, was a political activist and legislator. He was the first person jailed under martial law in 1972. For more than seven years he was imprisoned in a military camp. He was an elected senator, and was a leader of the party opposing Ferdinand Marcos, when he was assassinated on August 21, 1983. Soldiers shot him as he was escorted off an airplane at Manila International Airport. Most people suspected that Marcos was behind the killing.

After her husband's assassination, Corazon Aquino gradually assumed leadership of the opposition to Marcos. Some, including U.S. policy makers, regarded her as inexperienced and naive. Yet in the events leading up to Marcos's ouster, she displayed unexpected shrewdness and determination.

Corazon became leader of the People's Power movement, which was especially popular in the cities. People's Power included members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the business elite, and a faction of the armed forces. Its millions of working-class, middle-class, and professional supporters were united not by ideology or class interests, but by their esteem for Aquino's widow, Corazon, and their disgust with the Marcos regime.

The United States supported the dictatorial Marcos regime despite its unpopularity. Marcos announced his decision to hold a "snap" presidential election on television's "This Week with David Brinkley," setting February 7, 1986 as the date. He promised skeptical Americans that poll watchers could monitor the elections. Observers noted many signs of fraud, but Marcos claimed victory.

Two weeks later, some Philippine military leaders issued a statement demanding Marcos's resignation. Marcos ordered loyal units to suppress the uprising, but a popular Cardinal appealed to the people (through the Catholic radio station) to bring food and supplies for the rebels and to use nonviolence to block pro-Marcos troop movements.

Hundreds of thousands of citizens responded. In the tense days that followed, priests, nuns, ordinary citizens, and children linked arms with the rebel soldiers and faced down, without violence, the tanks and machine guns of government troops. Many of the government troops defected, including the



The government shut down public transportation to discourage people from going [to my husband's funeral], but the people came out. The government sent out buses when rain started to pour, to show its concern, but the people would not ride.

—Speech upon Receipt of the Fulbright Prize, October 11, 1996, gos.sbc.edu/a/aquino.html.

crews of seven helicopter gunships, which seemed poised to attack the massive crowd on February 24, but instead landed and announced their support for People's Power. Violent confrontations were prevented. The Philippine troops did not want to wage war on their own people.

Marcos and his wife fled to exile in the United States. An almost bloodless revolution brought Corazon Aquino into office as the seventh president of the Republic of the Philippines. She successfully served her term and presided over an orderly transfer of power to her successor, President Fidel V. Ramos. 🌐

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Wangari Maathai

Wangari Muta Maathai was born in Nyeri, Kenya, East Africa in 1940. The first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate degree, Maathai studied in the United States, Germany and the University of Nairobi, where she became a professor in the Department of Veterinary Anatomy.

Wangari Maathai was very interested in the connection between poverty and land use. Throughout Africa (as in much of the world), women hold primary responsibility for tilling the fields, deciding what to plant, nurturing the crops, and harvesting the food. They are the first to become aware of environmental damage that harms agricultural production: if the well goes dry, they are the ones concerned about finding new sources of water and those who must walk long distances to fetch it. As mothers, they notice when the food they feed their family is tainted with pollutants or impurities.

Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement on Earth Day, 1977, encouraging the farmers (70 percent of whom are women) to plant “Green Belts” of trees to stop soil erosion, provide shade, and create a source of lumber and firewood. She distributed seedlings to rural women and set up an incentive system for each seedling that survived. To date, the movement has planted over thirty million trees, produced income for 80,000 people in Kenya alone, and has expanded its efforts to over thirty African countries, the United States, and Haiti.

Maathai won the Africa Prize for her work in preventing hunger, and was heralded by the Kenyan government and press as an exemplary citizen.

A few years later, Maathai denounced Kenya’s President Daniel arap Moi’s proposal to erect a 62-story skyscraper in the middle of Nairobi’s largest park (graced by a four-story statue of Moi himself). Government officials warned her to curtail her criticism. When she took her campaign public, she was visited by security forces. When she still refused to be silenced, she was subjected to a harassment campaign and threats. Members of parliament denounced Maathai, dismissing her organization as “a bunch of divorcees.” The government-run newspaper questioned her past. Police detained and interrogated her, without ever pressing charges. Eventually President Moi was forced to forego the project, in large measure because of the public pressure Maathai successfully generated.

Years later, when Maathai returned to the park to lead a rally on behalf of political prisoners, pro-government thugs beat her and other women protesters, sending her to the hospital. They threatened to mutilate her. But Wangari Maathai was more determined than ever, and today continues her work for environmental protection, women’s rights, and democratic reform.



[Green Belt Movement] participants discover that they must be part of the solutions. They realize their hidden potential and are empowered to overcome inertia and take action. ... Citizens were mobilized to challenge widespread abuses of power ...

—Nobel Lecture, December 10, 2004, nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/2004/maathai-lecture.html.

In December 2002, Prof. Maathai was elected to Kenya’s parliament with an 98 percent of the vote, she representing her home region. In January 2003, a new president, Mwai Kibaki, appointed her Assistant Minister for Environment and Natural Resources in Kenya’s ninth parliament, a position she currently holds. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 “for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace.” 🌱

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Desmond Tutu

Desmond Tutu was born in the South African state of Transvaal in 1931. Although he had planned to become a physician, his parents could not afford to send him to medical school, so he trained to be a teacher.

After World War II, the National Party had risen to power promising a system of *apartheid* — complete separation of the races. All South Africans were legally assigned to an official racial group; each race was restricted to separate living areas and separate public facilities. Only white South Africans were permitted to vote in national elections. Black South Africans were only represented in the local governments of remote “tribal homelands.” Blacks were barred from certain jobs. They could not form labor unions. Passports were required for travel within the country. Critics of the system could be banned from speaking in public and subjected to house arrest.

When the government ordained inferior schools for black students, Tutu refused to cooperate. No longer teaching, he was yet determined to do something to improve the life of his disenfranchised people. He studied for the Anglican priesthood and was ordained as a priest in 1960. At the same time, the South African government began a program of forced relocation of black Africans and Asians from newly designated “white” areas. Millions were deported to distant “homelands,” and only permitted to return as “guest workers,” which divided families for most of the year.

During the 1970s, tens of thousands of black workers went on strike. Demonstrations turned into violent riots in Soweto and other large cities. A popular student leader, Steven Biko, rejected the use of violence adopted by earlier black leaders. But in 1977, Biko, who was a medical student, died from massive head injuries sustained during a police interrogation.

In 1978, Tutu, now a bishop, became the first black General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. He now had a national platform to denounce the *apartheid* system as “evil and unchristian” and to call for an economic boycott of South African businesses by other nations. The government revoked his passport to prevent him from speaking abroad, but his case soon drew the attention of the world. In the face of an international public outcry, the government was forced to restore his passport.

In 1984, Tutu was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. Two years later, he was elected Archbishop of Cape Town — head of the Anglican Church in South Africa. The growing international boycott, and internal dissent from blacks and whites alike, was forcing the South African government to reform.

In 1990, Nelson Mandela, leader of the opposition movement, the African National Congress, was released after almost



Our children protested against inferior education, singing songs and displaying placards and marching peacefully. Many in 1976, on June 16th and subsequent times, were killed or imprisoned. ... Many children went into exile. The whereabouts of many are unknown to their parents.

—Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1984, nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1984/tutu-lecture.html.

27 years in prison, at age seventy-one. The following year the government began the repeal of racially discriminatory laws.

After the country's first multi-racial elections in 1994, the new President Mandela appointed Archbishop Tutu to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, investigating the human rights violations of the previous 34 years. As always, Tutu counseled forgiveness and cooperation, rather than revenge for injustices of the past. 🌐

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Lech Walesa

Lech Walesa was born on September 29, 1943 in Popowo, Poland. After graduating from vocational school, he worked as a car mechanic at a machine center. He served in the army for two years, and rose to the rank of corporal. In 1967, he was employed in the Gdansk shipyards as an electrician. In 1969 he married, and now is father of eight children.

During those years, Poland was ruled by a communist, one-party government allied with the Soviet Union. During a clash in December 1970 between the workers and the government, Walesa was one of the leaders of the shipyard workers and was briefly detained. In 1976, as a result of his activities as a shop steward, he was fired and had to earn his living by taking temporary jobs.

In 1978, with other activists he began to organize free, non-communist trade unions and took part in many protests and meetings in coastal towns and factories. He was kept under surveillance by the state security service and frequently detained.

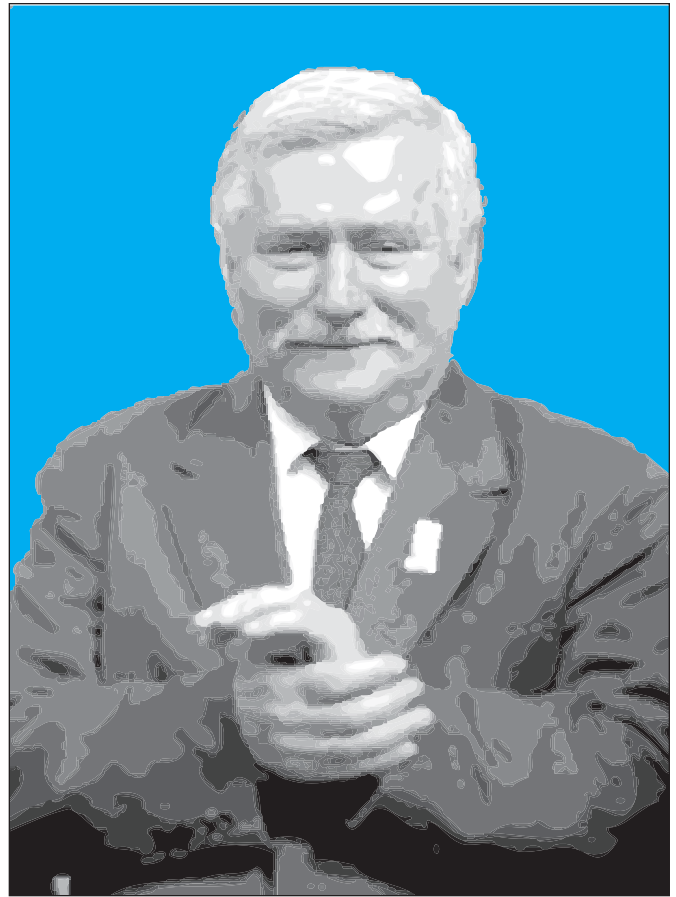
In August 1980, he led the Gdansk shipyard strike. This gave rise to a wave of strikes over much of the country. The primary demands were for workers' rights. The authorities finally capitulated and negotiated with Walesa. The Gdansk Agreement of August 31, 1980, gave the workers the right to strike and to organize their own trade union, independent of the government.

The Catholic Church supported the movement, and Walesa visited Pope John Paul II in the Vatican. Walesa has always regarded his Catholicism as a source of strength and inspiration. In September 1981, he was elected Solidarity Chairman at the First National Solidarity Congress in Gdansk.

Suddenly, the country's brief enjoyment of freedom ended in December 1981, when General Jaruzelski imposed martial law, "suspended" Solidarity, arrested many of its leaders, and interned Walesa in a country house at a remote spot. Jaruzelski feared that the Soviet Union, alarmed by workers in Poland getting so much political power, would intervene with armed soldiers.

In November 1982, Walesa was released and reinstated at the Gdansk shipyards. Although kept under surveillance, he communicated with other Solidarity leaders in the "underground." While martial law was officially lifted in July 1983, many of the restrictions were continued in practice. In October 1983, the announcement of Walesa's Nobel Prize raised the spirits of the underground movement, but the award was attacked by the government press.

The Jaruzelski regime became even more unpopular as economic conditions worsened. It was finally forced again



When I recall my own path of life I cannot but speak of the violence, hatred, and lies. A lesson drawn from such experiences, however, was that we can effectively oppose violence only if we ourselves do not resort to it.

—Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1983, nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1983/walesa-lecture.html.

to negotiate with Walesa and his Solidarity colleagues. The result was the holding of parliamentary elections, which led to the formation of a non-communist government. The Soviet Union, under Mikhail Gorbachev, was no longer prepared to use military force to keep communist parties in satellite states in power, so it did not intervene.

Walesa was now head of the revived Solidarity Labor union. In December 1990, in a general ballot, he was elected President of the Republic of Poland. He served until defeated in the election of November 1995. 🇵🇱

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