

Prize-winner: Adam Michnik, Polish journalist

Adam Michnik is a leading Polish intellectual. His life's work is interwoven with the end of the Eastern Bloc and the beginning of Eastern Europe – as a key dissident figure under the communist regime, a civil rights activist and one of the first to conceive of a free, democratic state, and as the publisher of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland's largest national newspaper. He uses its voice to fight for freedom and reconciliation, even beyond Poland's borders.

Of his role in Polish society, Adam Michnik once said: "I would like to defend those values which I believe to be the highest. I would like my newspaper to disseminate the European ideas and values as defined by Denis de Rougemont: Man has the right to free elections, to freedom of conscience – nobody may dictate anything to him here, neither the state nor the church nor any party."

Throughout his life, Adam Michnik has defended freedom and human dignity with great courage and dedication. He was one of the leading members of the anti-communist movement and took part in the "round table" talks which in 1989 led to a democratic Poland. He established the renowned liberal-democratic "*Gazeta Wyborcza*", the first independent daily newspaper in Poland and today the country's largest, whose editor-in-chief he has been ever since. He has battled tirelessly for politics to "draw a thick line" under the philosophy of revenge and he has demanded the truth about the crimes of the communist regime.

Part and parcel of his political philosophy was always to seek reconciliation with neighbouring countries. He also pursued this aim with the *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s "Central European Supplement", which was intended to provide a forum for intellectual exchange between the Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania, as well as between Germans and Russians. His was one of the most important voices calling for his country's accession to the EU – both inside and outside Poland. As a mediator, he has fought for continuity between Poland and its neighbours in the West and the East; prior to 1989 he refused in particular to allow the country's link to Germany to be destroyed, and time and time again created a bridge between the two countries. Coming from a Polish family with Jewish roots, he has battled fervently for Jewish-Polish peace. Adam Michnik is to be awarded the Goethe Medal in recognition of the outstanding services he has rendered to the dialogue between Germany and Poland and between Eastern and Western Europe.

Adam Michnik was born in 1946. Although he began a degree in history and economic policy in Warsaw, his opposition activities resulted in his being excluded from university and, in March 1968, to his spending a year in prison for the part he played in the student protests. In 1976 he was one of the founders of the KOR (Workers' Defence Committee), the anti-communist opposition movement. In the nineteen eighties he was repeatedly arrested on account of his political work for the independent *Solidarność* trade union. State repression did not succeed in silencing him, however – after his release he continued his political activities. In 1989, he finally played a key role in Poland's transition to a democracy: he was

involved in the “round table” discussions between the government and the opposition movement, in which Poland’s democratic future and the first free elections in June 1989 were negotiated. The following years were all about building up Poland’s fragile democracy – from 1989 to 1991 Michnik held a seat in the first freely elected Polish parliament. At the same time, he founded Poland’s most important newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which from the outset subscribed to liberal values such as pluralism, tolerance, social sensitivity and market economics. Adam Michnik has received numerous awards in honour of his life’s work, and today lives in Warsaw.

Quotations from Adam Michnik

“My vision is a democratic, fair, free Poland in a democratic, fair, free EU. Whether this vision is realizable I do not know, but one must at least attempt to achieve it. There will never be a world without misfortune. We have a duty, however, to eliminate any misfortune that we can.”

(In an interview with Die Weltwoche on 21.04.2004, edition 17/04)

Adam Michnik’s justification for not going into exile:

“In the life of every man there comes a difficult moment, General [Kiszczak], when the simple statement this is black and that is white requires paying a high price. It may cost one one’s life on the slopes of the Citadel, behind the wire fence of Sachsenhausen, behind the bars of Mokotów prison. At such a time, General, a decent man’s concern is not the price he will have to pay but the certainty that white is white and black is black.”

(A Letter to General Kiszczak, 10 December 1983)

Quotations about Adam Michnik

“Because I am by nature a pessimist, as no doubt everyone in our part of Europe is, and because, like many people all over the world, I also have a tendency to believe in the unswerving laws of history as it pushes mercilessly forward, Michnik is for me a kind of miracle. His intellect is a kind of miracle, his faith is a kind of miracle. [...] [H]e is for me not only an extraordinary personality and individuality, but also perhaps an embodiment of certain strengths – probably the best strengths in the Polish tradition, which he expresses in an unusually clear way. [...] Even more, I see in Michnik’s thoughts and actions compensation for those who died in Poland.”

Speech by the poet Czesław Miłosz on the occasion of the presentation of Adam Michnik’s book “Letters from Prison and Other Essays”, New York, 1986

“(…) Among the voices that speak to us from Poland today, the most important may be that of Adam Michnik. Michnik is not a political philosopher – and certainly not a “political scientist” – nor is he the proponent of any ideology or system of political thought. His writings, like the Federalist papers of Madison and Hamilton, or the articles and letters of Gandhi, are not only reflections on action but a form of actions themselves.”

Jonathan Schell: A Better Today (1983)

An unsent letter to Adam Michnik

I do not write out of shame.
I am free, have already lived so many years
and yet was unable to protect the defenceless
from suffering and torture.
In vain I searched for words
that would wrest the weapon from the murderers
and open the prisons.
I repeat only:
“Were I really a poet,
I would have been able to prevent the war”^{*}
But when I heard today
that you read poems
of my master –
I can breathe somewhat more easily.

^{*} “Were I really a poet, I would have been able to prevent the war” – quotation from an anonymous author dated 23.08.1939, cited by Elias Canetti in his essay “Der Beruf des Dichters” (1976)

The Polish poet Ryszard Krynicki on Adam Michnik in 1983

Bibliography

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