

Claude BONARD

1954: a Swiss captain's view of Poland and Polish officers in the context of his six-month mission within the "Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission" (NNSC) in Korea

A few months ago, Professor Tadeusz Panecki asked me to present in Częstochowa not a scientific communication but a personal testimony. I am therefore going to evoke the memories of my father and tell you how a captain of the Swiss army considered Poland and Polish officers regarding his six-month tour in Korea in 1954 as a member of the Swiss delegation within the "Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission" (NNSC). Memories which reflect my father's experiences in Korea. Memories, which, like all memories, contain obviously some elements of subjectivity. Let's briefly examine together the general context in which the testimony of Robert Bonard fits. He was at the time a 43 year old Swiss captain who had served as a young intelligence service officer at the start of the mobilization of war in Switzerland in 1939 until 1940 in charge of the Geneva intelligence collector post, in direct contact with France. He served again as an intelligence officer in the mid-50s until early 1960s and finished his military career with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Korean War, the global context

I begin with a brief reminder of the context in which my father's mission in Korea took place: June 25, 1950: 135,000 North Korean soldiers launch their offensive by entering South Korean territory. The conflict quickly became international. United Nations forces supported the Republic of Korea while Soviets supported the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Nearly half a million Chinese "volunteers" were working alongside the North Koreans. This deadly and devas-

tating conflict, both for the involved armed forces and for the civilian populations, lasted until the armistice – still in force today – of July 27, 1953, which consecrated the return to the “*Status quo ante bellum*.” A Monitoring Commission of Neutral Nations for the Armistice in Korea was created : the “Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission” (NNSC) based in Panmunjom which was originally composed of Swiss and Swedish officers on one side, and Polish and Czech officers on the other.

1953–1954: Switzerland and the global geopolitical context

March 18, 1946, after a period of extreme tensions lasting several decades which began in 1918 with the expulsion of Soviet diplomats from Switzerland and a which was characterized by the lifting in 1945 of the blockade of Soviet assets deposited in Swiss banks in force since 1941, the Swiss Confederation established official diplomatic relations with the USSR¹. Regarding the People’s Republic of China, Switzerland was in 1950 one of the first western countries to recognize its existence diplomatically. Switzerland recognized the new People’s Republic of Poland in the same way as other countries of the communist bloc. Relations between the two countries, although diplomatically courteous, were not free from problems and tense situations. I quote as an example the diplomatic incident regarding the Polish Museum in Rapperswil, Canton of St. Gallen. The castle of Rapperswil was since 1870 home of this museum founded by Earl Władysław Plater. Unfortunately, with the political changes in Poland after World War II, the castle housed after 1945 and until 1951 a “Museum of contemporary Poland.” The Swiss authorities demanded its closure, considering that the museum had moved away from its vocation as a cultural place to become a propaganda center glorifying communist ideology and the benefits of socialism. So much for the political context relating to Switzerland’s position in relation to the main powers of the Eastern bloc.

Now, back in 1953–1954. In Europe, we were in the midst of the Cold War. In Switzerland, public opinion, with the exception of the left-wing parties and supporters, was very worried to see the threat posed by the Eastern bloc to Western Europe. The “fear of the Soviets” was evident. The Warsaw Pact had not yet been created, but the armies of the countries that were to compose it from 1955 were already carefully considered by military analysts and intelligence services in Switzerland.

¹ Dodis, Swiss diplomatic documents, <https://www.dodis.ch/fr/letablissement-des-relations-diplomatiques-avec-lurss#:~:text=Le%2018%20mars%201946%2C%20un,30%20years%20of%20silence%20radio.>

Geneva and the multilateral diplomacy

Professionally, my father held senior civil servant position in the administration of the canton of Geneva. It's important to emphasize this because after World War II and the climate of the Cold War establishing itself in Europe, the international vocation of Geneva was reinforced. Geneva became the European headquarters of the United Nations and asserts itself as one of the main centers of international politics where multilateral diplomacy was constantly practiced. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) ensuring humanitarian protection and assistance for victims of war and other situations of violence was spreading the "Spirit of Geneva." From the post-war period, Switzerland, thanks to Geneva, acquired increased visibility on the international scene, hosting from the 1950s onwards, a growing number of major international conferences.

In the same time, the contacts between the Geneva authorities and international organizations headquartered in Geneva were constant.

Captain Bonard's feelings about his mission and his meeting with Polish officials in Korea

According to his military activities and experiences during the war years, my father, like the majority of the Swiss population, had a marked sympathy for the Western allies. On the other hand, he already took very seriously the potential threats that the Soviet bloc posed to Western democracies. As a result, it was a great challenge for him, meeting officers from Poland and Czechoslovakia and try to cooperate with them within the "Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission" (NNSC). Captain Robert Bonard was part in 1954 of the second Swiss contingent sent to Korea, the first having already left Zurich at the end of June 1953. The NNSC was based in Panmunjeom, (or Pan Mun Jon), an old village now disappeared from the demilitarized zone located in North Korea less than 500 meters from the border between the two Koreas.

The places where the NNSC inspections took place in 1953–1954 were five in South Korea: Inchon, Taegu, Pusan, Kangnung and Kunsan, and five in North Korea: Sinuju, Sinanju, Chongjin, Hungnam and Manpo. These "Ports of Entry" reduced to three in 1955. The period 1953–1954 was characterized for Swiss and Swedish officers by great tensions with their Polish and Czech counterparts regarding mostly the content and interpretation of the mandate of the NNSC and especially the modalities for the exchange of prisoners of war. According to the Swiss Ambassador Fritz Real who held the position of head of the Swiss delegation for a time, the activity of the NNSC was therefore very difficult from the start. The Swiss and the Swedes saw their fears confirmed in August 1953 be-

cause of the tenacity with which the Poles and the Czechs defended the positions expressed by North Korea in particular that of the mobile inspection groups of the Red Cross in three prisoner camps. Conflicts erupted within the NNSC and in this matter, the drafting of a joint report was impossible². Things calmed down after 1953–1954 and a more serene cooperation characterized the work and contacts between the Swiss and the Swedes on the one hand, the Poles and the Czechs on the other.

After returning from Korea

During the public lectures he gave on many occasions after his return from Korea and during our family discussions, my father repeatedly mentioned his personal contacts with Polish officers but more rarely his contacts with the Czechs. Listening to him a few years later, I had the feeling that he had established links, if not of friendship, at least of cordiality with some officers of the Polish delegation. Subjectively, I guess that he always remembered the Polish soldiers and officers of General Prugar-Ketling's division interned in Switzerland which he met in Switzerland a decade earlier. I am also fairly certain that having been active at the beginning of the war mobilization within the intelligence service of the Swiss army, he had been aware of the activities of the Polish intelligence services in Bern during the war years. He regretted, but could not say so openly, that the Poles, for political reasons arising from the partition of Yalta, found themselves indeed "against their will" within the Eastern bloc.

The tribulations of a Polish senior diplomat who led the Polish delegation to Korea

Finally, I would like to mention the life course of an atypical Polish diplomat from that time who served in Korea with the Polish delegation at the same time as my father and had several years later a fairly eventful life in difficult political circumstances. In Korea in 1954, my father was surprised by the fact that all the Polish officers seemed to take their orders from a civilian, Mr. Jozef Goldblat. This diplomat was born in 1923 in Lwow, and died in Geneva in 2012. During World War II, he lost his parents and two brothers in concentration camps. He managed to fly to the USSR: he spent most of the war years in Fergana, a city in the far east of Uzbekistan. He pursued medical studies at Lwow University from

² Institut für Geschichte ETHZ, Archiv für Zeitgeschichte – Dreissig Jahre Schweizerische Korea-Mission 1959–1983, Beiträge von Erhard Hürsch, Adolf Kaufmann, Peter Niederberger, Fritz Real, Klaus Urner, Zurich, 1983, p. 33.

1939 to 1941, attended a teacher training college near Moscow in 1944–1945, earning a teaching certificate. After the end of the war, he studied linguistics at the University of Moscow, then later studied economics at the University of Warsaw both in international relations and in law. In addition to his native Polish, Jozef Goldblat spoke fluently Russian, English, French, Swedish, Spanish and, to a large extent, Ukrainian and German languages. He began his career in the service of the Polish government in 1946, then attached until 1951 to the Polish Embassy in Moscow, then in Warsaw for a time as editor at PAP agency. From 1950 onward, he represented Poland as a senior diplomat within the “Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission”. He then became a disarmament adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and a delegate to the United Nations General Assembly in New York. And following the first Indochina War of 1946–1954, he represented Poland on the International Commission for Viet Nam, for a time at the head of its delegation. For several years, he headed the Polish delegation to the UN-affiliated Committee on Disarmament in Geneva. I don’t know whether or not he had private contact with my father during this period.

Nearly 13 years after his time of duty in Korea, Jozef Goldblat diplomatic career in Poland ended abruptly due to the Polish government’s campaign to purge the country of Jews. Obviously, Jozef Goldblat already felt in danger before the official launch, in 1968, of the anti-Semitic purge. I remember very well one evening at the end of 1965 or beginning of 1966. I was 19 years old. We were in our apartment, my mother had just prepared the evening meal. It must have been around 7:00 p.m. Suddenly the phone rang and I saw my father’s face change in attitude. After the phone call, he said to my mother “I am going to the train station and I will be back in a few moments. Please prepare the guest room.” Some time passed, and my father came home accompanied by a tired gentleman dressed in a crumpled raincoat and carrying a modest brown leather suitcase. My father said: “I am glad to introduce M. Jozef Goldblat, a Polish diplomat with whom I cooperated in Korea in 1954 within the NNSC. He’s going to spend the night here and tomorrow I’ll take care of him.”

The next day Mr. Goldblat left very early with my father. I learned much later that after the purge of 1968, partly thanks to my father’s network, M. Jozef Goldblat was able to reach Sweden for a long and successful career at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) where he acceded to the highest responsibilities as director of arms control and disarmament. During his SIPRI and subsequent years, he served as a consultant, advisor, or in other capacities to various agencies and organizations, including but not limited to: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) in Geneva, the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO), including as associate editor of its renamed Bulletin of Peace Proposals Security Dialogue. In Geneva he was a member of the board of directors and vice-president of the Graduate Institute of International

Studies as a research fellow³. Many years later, in 2006, as part of my official duties within the State Chancellery of Geneva, I had the pleasure of meeting him during official receptions at the Permanent Mission of Poland to the United Nations Office at Geneva. Indeed, the world is small.

Conclusion

It's time to conclude: At the end of his six-month tour in Korea, my father received only one significant gift from the other delegations of the "Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission", that of the Polish delegation. It was a book of impressive size and weight with a foreword of M. Boleslaw Bierut entitled "The six-year plan for the reconstruction of Warsaw"⁴. (5) This book was profusely illustrated with black and white photographs, including many photographs showing the ruins of 1945 compared with the 1949 reconstruction. The fold-out plates contained depictions of what buildings or streets would look like in 1955. When I discovered this voluminous – and heavy - study, I was fascinated by the photos showing the destruction of which Warsaw was the victim during World War II and also by the magnificent drawings and plans suggesting the beauties of the rebuilt capital of Poland on the horizon of 1955. On the other hand, I paid no attention to the pompously written texts glorifying the successes of socialist Poland and the generosity of the USSR!

Nevertheless this book has contributed to increase my interest in Poland and its history and the wish to one day be able to visit Warsaw ... which finally happened in 1976. A first visit which was not the last.

³ United Nations Geneva, Sous-Fonds Goldblat/P276/1-328/78 – Goldblat, Jozef – <https://archives.ungeneva.org/goldblat-jozef-2>. See: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/informationobject/browse?topLod=0&sort=relevance&query=Jozef+Goldblat>

⁴ Boleslaw Bierut, *The six-year plan for the reconstruction of Warsaw: graphic presentation, diagrams, plans and perspectives drawn up on the basis of materials and projects of the Warsaw Urban Planning Office*, Biuro Urbanistyczne. Konferencja Warszawska PZPR, Warsaw 1949.



Photo 1. Korea 1954: Captain Robert Bonard in Panmunjeom

Source: Private archives of captain Robert Bonard.



Photo 2. Korea 1954: Captain Robert Bonard, members of the NNSC and American troops during a field inspection.

Source: Private archives of captain Robert Bonard.



Photo 3. Korea 1954: A delegation of Swiss officers of the NNSC meet the commander of the U.S. Army 24th Infantry Division. (Captain Bonard second from the right).

Source: Private archives of captain Robert Bonard.

Sources

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