

Reinhold Vetter, Polens eigensinniger Held: Wie Lech Wałęsa die Kommunisten überlistete, Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, Berlin 2010, 414 S., kart., 37,00 €.

This book is the first German biography of Lech Wałęsa and was written by the established German media correspondent in Poland Reinhold Vetter.

The study is based on many different sources: it derived advantage from Polish and German literature, from more than 30 press titles (Polish and German) and archival documents from the Lech Wałęsa Institute, The Archives of New Records and the Archives of The Institute of National Remembrance, The Archives of Polish People's Republic Documents, The Archives of Opposition in the KARTA Center and the Archives of Willy Brandt. Interviews with Bogdan Borusewicz, Richard von Weizsäcker, Helmut Schmidt, Ludwig Mehlhorn, Klaus Lindenberg and of course with Lech Wałęsa have also been used.

For the first time the author met the main character of his book in 1980 during the strike in the shipyard of Gdańsk. On one hand Vetter introduces Wałęsa as "the man of the turning point", who directly had the impact on the distruction of communism in Poland and Central Eastern Europe. On the other hand Lech Wałęsa is profiled as a president, who in the author's opinion was incapable of maintaining dialogue and compromise because of his character. It was the main reason why Wałęsa lost the presidential elections in 1995 to Aleksander Kwaśniewski. Despite that fact the presidency of Lech Wałęsa is assessed positively. The author recognizes however the unconventionality of this presidency, the fact that the decisions especially in the field of economy were made intuitively and that Wałęsa had problems finding his way in the new reality of a democratic country.

Reinhold Vetter also broaches the subject of the charges pressed against Wałęsa that he cooperated with the secret police of Polish People's Republic. In his opinion there is no clear evidence that Wałęsa did any harm to his colleagues from the shipyard or from the communist opposition.

Reinhold Vetter's book is not only the biography of Lech Wałęsa. It is also a description of the recent history of Poland and Polish-German relationships before and after 1989. We find a number of facts from Wałęsa's life beginning with his birth in 1943 in the occupied Poland, the childhood during the stalinist reality, the first political and professional experiences through the strike in 1980 in the shipyard of Gdańsk, the internment under martial law, the receiving of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, the overthrow of communism, the presidency of 1990 to 1995 and the ineffective fight for re-election in 1995. The description is completed by a number of photographs documenting the most important facts of Lech Wałęsa's life. In addition the reader learns about the most important events of the recent decades in Poland: those connected with the Second World War, the stalinist times, the establishment of Solidarity, Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage to his homeland, the murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, the round-table conference, the elections of 1989, Tadeusz Mazowiecki's government and the presidential elections in the 1990s in Poland.

This book is one of the most important titles which could help to understand Lech Wałęsa as the former leader of Solidarity and to develop this subject for German readers. The work provides clearness and, furthermore, logical chapters, although some facts are described too laconically and the author devoted not enough space to them. On the other hand the book already consists of 414 pages. The author also included a name index, a geographical index and a subject index – in Polish and German, which are very useful. Additionally, the inclusion of a large number of Lech Wałęsa's quotations (possibly a bit too many) as well as citations from historians and politicians complete this study. They constitute a way to summarise each chapter or a part of the book and show different opinions. This makes the book more dynamic and easier to read.

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