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联合国教育、
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**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the "From the Solidarity trade union to the fall of
communism" evening, held to mark the twentieth anniversary
of the Round Table and free elections in Poland**

UNESCO, 25 May 2009

President Walesa,
Madam Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of Poland to UNESCO,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to host in the presence of President Lech Walesa, this evening's "From Solidarnosc to the fall of communism" event held to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Round Table talks in Poland.

President Walesa, you do the Organization a great honour by being present this evening. We have just celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and are already preparing to observe the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Wall, yet you retain your universal stature as a symbol of liberty, political courage and openness to dialogue and compromise. You are therefore most welcome here.

Allow me also to express heartfelt thanks to Ambassador Wodzinska-Walicka, Permanent Delegate of Poland to UNESCO, who has taken the initiative of organizing this important symposium, to which I am delighted to have granted the Organization's patronage.

Lastly, I welcome all of the prestigious experts who have agreed to take part in the debate here today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I shall not review the history of the Round Table at this point.

I should simply like to stress once more the importance of UNESCO's involvement in collective discussion on this subject and the enduring relevance of its task of promoting human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic ideals.

Mr President, you championed these universal values in particularly difficult and painful circumstances.

Your resolve and courage forced the communist regime to negotiate a peaceful political and economic transition for your country during that famous Round Table.

The Round Table talks, which began on 6 February 1989 and lasted for two months, were attended by representatives of the communist government, the Church and opposition leaders.

That spirit of compromise and dialogue led to the signing of a series of political and economic agreements on 5 April 1989 and had remarkable consequences such as the legalization of Solidarity on 18 April, recognition of plural trade unionism, the first free elections held on 4 June 1989 which won Solidarity the nomination on 19 August 1989 of the first non-communist head of government in the East, under Tadeusz Mazowiecki, leader of the coalition.

I remember this period very well, for it was the backdrop against which we first met in Warsaw, in January 1990, as I accompanied the then Prime Minister of Japan, Toshiki Kaifu, on an official visit to Poland at the invitation of Prime Minister Mazowiecki. You had not yet been elected President of Poland – that would not happen until November 1990 – but we already knew that you were guaranteed to restore democracy to your country.

The changes in Poland, in particular its model of peaceful negotiation, were decisive in the fall of communism in the East, influencing the dual Round Table talks held in Hungary in March, and later from June to September 1989, and the talks in Czechoslovakia from 26 November to 9 December 1989.

Today, this history appears recent and yet so distant. Distant because Poland, which joined the European Union in 2004, has covered much ground by quickly reinstating Poland's democratic tradition.

It also seems recent because the memory of Solidarity and of the events in 1989 lives on in the hearts and minds of many generations.

Here, too, allow me to look back on our meeting in January 1990. The main aim of Prime Minister Kaifu's visit was to turn a new page in cooperation between post-communist Poland and Japan. I retain a vivid memory of that historic period, and I can now gauge the importance of international cooperation as an instrument of peace and development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Throughout the communist era, UNESCO was an invaluable forum for East-West exchange, cooperation and dialogue.

As we take stock with hindsight, we are pleased that we too can place in perspective the role played by international organizations in facilitating political transition in the East.

Furthermore, we consider it essential to promote international reflection on these historical processes by enabling the protagonists to make their voices heard.

I thus commend the efforts of the Permanent Delegation of Poland to UNESCO, which in the past three years has actively participated in celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the birth of the journalist Jerzy Giedroyc, the 25th anniversary of Solidarity and the 40th anniversary of the 1968 Prague and Warsaw Spring.

Allow me to conclude by saying again how honoured we are to welcome the man who, from Solidarity to the office of President of the Republic, steered Poland, by negotiation, out of communism and returned it to democracy.

Today, in tribute, we commend your career, your courage and your commitment to the ideals that made reunified Europe a haven of peace and freedom.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you an excellent evening.