

Driving Mr. Wałęsa

Wałęsa arrived in the U.S. with his entourage, including his son, the director of his foundation, a translator, and a ubiquitous bodyguard—as he, the former President of Poland, was entitled to Secret Service protection.

Even before his arrival, Greg and Candy faced a crisis: the staff at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, designated as Wałęsa's accommodation, were on strike. The Polish Embassy's liaison, apprehensive about potential negative media coverage, urged a change in venue. Accustomed to appeasing such disputes, Greg decided to negotiate with the leadership of HERE to forestall the protests or at least ensure the presidential suite was attended to. The union, holding a respectful stance towards Wałęsa agreed. They even expressed gratitude for the heads-up, anxious to avoid the irony of a champion of workers' rights being inconvenienced by a union action

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Amidst the seriousness of their challenges and occasional mishaps, there were, however, moments of genuine humor as well.

On the eve of the auction, where Solidarity memorabilia were to be offered, Greg visited Wałęsa at his hotel to obtain his signature on several items. The President was in his bedroom, presumably resting, and when he finally emerged into the suite's main chamber, he was still wearing his pajamas and white oversized slippers. Greg laid the books, photographs, and posters on the dining table—those rare and intensely coveted High Noon editions from the 1989 Solidarity election, featuring Gary Cooper as the new sheriff. Just as Wałęsa poised himself to sign, he paused, went back to his bedroom, and reemerged wearing a jacket and a vest over his pajamas. Still in those hotel slippers.

“Let’s make it super-Cooper presidential,” he declared with a wink.

Another vignette for the memory banks. After their long flight from San Francisco, Wałęsa disembarked quickly and began a curious expedition across the waiting area. He darted from one spot to another, even stooping beneath rows of seats—Greg and the rest of the group observing in a mix of wonder and bewilderment. His prey? An electrical outlet. A simple socket to charge a tablet. When he finally located one, he straightened up, flashed a grin, and said, “I’m an electrician,” as though that explained his peculiar urgency. And it wasn’t even his own tablet but his son’s. Perhaps, he was closing an argument with his son, who had earlier complained that, strangely, no outlet could be found at American airports.

But there they stood in a corner of the airport hall—the former President of Poland, his entourage, and local officials— while cars idled outside, waiting. They remained in place until the device had absorbed enough power to proceed with their trip.