

Polish-Americans
and
The Bicentennial

by

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The United States from its very beginning has been two distinct but inexorably intertwined entities. It is, on the one hand, a nation state with all of the concreteness that an army, a navy and a public administration can give it. On the other hand, it is also an idea and a symbol that expresses the profound longing of human beings everywhere for liberty and justice in all of their dimensions. The founders of the American Republic had hoped the new nation they created would be the embodiment of their ideals. They were however, wise enough to provide institutional safeguards in event their evolving ideals ran afoul of the power of the state they created or the society which developed in it. It is this clash between the institutionalized nation state that is the United States and the transcendent ideal which is also United States that has been the source of constant tension - some of it very creative - in American history for the past 200 years. It has sometimes happened that service to one America has meant opposition to or even betrayal of the other America. The conflict between the two has produced the finest moments of our past as well as its ugliest. We do well to remember that during this bicentennial year we are celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of both Americas.

If we keep this in mind we have a broader perspective from which to view ourselves as Poles and Americans at this critical juncture in our history and to provide a more satisfactory answer for our time and for our people to that ever recurring question, "Who are you?" This will also give us a solid basis for confronting the question "What shall we become?" In order to do this we must view the experience of our people against the background of the evolving history of America as symbol and ideal and as a nation in the real world attempting to live up to those ideals.

America as a watchword for justice and liberty which caught the imagination of the world two hundred years ago did not evolve out of nothing.

The ideas which were crystallized in those marvelous words of Thomas Jefferson in the Summer of 1776 were the product of centuries of thought and struggle by men and women in many parts of the Western World. In this development, our ancestors hold a place of pride and note.

Poland was one of the countries in the Western World which developed strong traditions of representative government and civil rights including the famous Right of Habeas Corpus well before England. Poland's historical development laid the basis for a political system, whatever its faults and exclusions, that was noteworthy for its respect for human dignity and its tolerance. One could speak any language, be Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jew or Muslim and still be an equal citizen of that proud and gracious Royal Republic, which so many times opened its doors to the driven and persecuted of Europe and Asia. It was not accidental that it was a Pole who first enunciated at the Council of Constance in the 15th Century the principle that no one must be persecuted or deprived of life, liberty and property because of his or her religious beliefs. In defense of its place and vision and in defense of the Western World whose best traditions it shaped and shared, the Old Commonwealth poured out its blood and treasure for centuries to hold those eastern gates of Christendom which ran from the savage Steppes to the plains of Vienna.

Beset by internal weakness and external enemies Poland found itself threatened two hundred years ago. It then, like the American colonies, produced an extraordinary generation of revolutionaries, who drawing on the same sources as their American counterparts reformed the State and wrote the Constitution of May 3, 1791. The destruction of their efforts by their rapacious neighbors and the disappearance of Poland, did not dampen the enthusiasm of the Poles for liberty and neither did its submergence again in this Century. In the face of incredible odds, they rose again

and again against oppression and foreign domination. From Raclawicza in 1794 to Warsaw in 1944 their efforts commanded the amazement and attention of the world. Those whom repression drove from their homeland and scattered from North America to Tibet, left their mark in time and space in struggles for the freedom of others and against tyranny from Savannah, Brandywine and Saratoga to Monte Cassino. Their slogan - za wolnosc wasza i nasza...for your freedom and ours - was as generous a commitment to its ideals as any people has ever made. In the turbulent 19th Century, Poles could be found in the forefront of any ideology and movement which held out the promise of liberation and justice for the oppressed. Anarchism, Socialism, Christian Communism, Liberal Democracy and every struggle for self determination all found Polish adherents. Bismarck was not far from the truth when he called the Poles "the General Staff of World Revolution." In so far as America as an idea is the culmination in 1776 of the finest hopes of mankind we can claim an important part of that vision is a legacy of our ancestors to us and to the world at large, and without the efforts of our people which I have mentioned, the evolution and meaning of those ideals over the past 200 years would be far poorer.

But we, as Poles, do not only share common ideals with our fellow Americans because of our Polish heritage but because we have also helped to found and develop both the American nation and the American ideal. In 1609, eleven years before the Pilgrim fathers landed at Plymouth Rock, a group of Polish artisans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia and established the first factories in America and in them our nation's first vocational education and apprenticeship programs. That accomplishment alone would guarantee them a place in our history but they are remembered for far more. Denied political rights by their fellow colonists because they were not English, the Poles staged the first strike and political

demonstration in our history. Their victory was not just their own but a victory in the name of the rights of all subsequent generations of Americans. These people, whose bravery saved the life of John Smith and whose labor kept Jamestown alive, made the earliest Polish contribution to American liberties.

In this bicentennial year, we must of course, remember especially the contributions of Kazimierz Pulaski, Tadeusz Kosciuszko and the brave band of their friends and followers in the winning of American independence with arms and money. Pulaski, whose skill saved the American cause on several occasions, is justly remembered as the father of the American Cavalry. His tragic death at the Siege of Savannah was a loss to both the American and Polish causes. Kosciuszko, one of the most talented military engineers of the 18th Century, is best remembered for his fortifications at Philadelphia and Saratoga. The first saved the city from the British fleet and the second helped to assure the defeat of General John Burgoyne. That defeat turned the tide of war in the north and won the support of France for the struggling American colonies. Kosciuszko because of his bravery, his ardent love of liberty, his kindness and humility, his dislike of slavery and the strong compassion he showed for enslaved Blacks is truly one of the most attractive and compelling heroes of the American Revolution.

In the first century of this country's existence only a small number of Poles migrated here, most of them political refugees. Educated and talented people with a strong commitment to the ideals on which America was founded, they contributed to the economic, political, social and cultural development of the United States in a measure disproportionate to their numbers. Two of the best known of that group are women: Ernestine Potowski-Rose and Dr. Maria Zakrzewska. The first was one of the early fighters for women's rights and an outstanding opponent of slavery. She

more than anyone was responsible for the married woman's property law in New York. She battled for twelve years for that law. An outstanding orator, Ernestine Potowski-Rose traveled widely north and south in the United States lecturing against slavery. In one of her most famous speeches in 1853 before the American Anti-Slavery Society she asked "What is a Slave?" and her answer was:

Not to be your own, bodily, mentally, morally that is to be a slave. Ay, even if the slaveholders treated their slaves with upmost kindness and charity; if I were told they kept them setting on the sofa all day and fed them with the best in the land, it is none the less slavery... Slavery is not to belong to yourself - to be robbed of yourself this is the great abomination of slavery, that it deprives a man of the common right of humanity, stamped upon him by his maker...

Her words are eloquent testimony to her devotion to the finest ideals of the Polish and American traditions.

Dr. Maria Zakrzewska was also active in the cause of both anti-slavery and women's rights. She is best remembered for her medical and social work. She created the first hospitals for women and children in the U.S. and was the first to allow women to intern as physicians. She helped organize the first American School of Nursing and her concern for children led her to inaugurate the movement for playgrounds in our cities. History knows her as the "Mother of American Playgrounds."

The bulk of the Poles who live in the United States on this 200th Anniversary of the country are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants who arrived only within the last century. When speakers on occasions such as this list the contributions of that vast majority of Poles who came in the Great Immigration and of their children to the American Nation and its ideals they usually remember how hard they worked and how well they fought in America's wars in this century. And as far as it goes such a characterization is accurate. With their muscles, brains and talents they contributed

enormously to the building of industrial America. Henry Ford called Polish workmen the cleverest of any of all of the ethnic groups he employed. When war came in this century, the United States found the Polish immigrant a willing and loyal soldier. Of the first 100,000 volunteers in World War I 40,000 were Poles and although they made up only 4% of the population they suffered 12% of the casualties. In World War II, about one million Polish Americans served. When these things are said and the Poles are properly lauded as good citizens the discussion ends. After all what else is there to say about people who came to America not out of high motives but only for bread.

In fact, however, my friends to stop the discussion there is to perpetuate an injustice for as important as those things are they are the less important contributions those people made. To stop there is also to encourage the special conceit that afflicts so many of our fellow Americans - that outside of a few exceptional foreigners who helped, it was their ancestors who invented liberty and justice and the rest of us are living on rent in their tradition. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Those poor, uneducated immigrants struggled as hard in their way for the full development of American ideals as did any revolutionary hero. In the name of social and economic justice, they stood firm against deputy sheriffs and armed company mobs even when that meant a beating or death. They demanded human dignity for themselves and others in the face of the threat of physical and legal intimidation, of unemployment and blacklisting. Those who came for bread went hungry and saw their families evicted to the streets because they refused to be treated as machines or things. And most importantly Polish American workers were not unconscious of the importance

of their struggles. As the Dzennik Zjednoczenia wrote early in this century:

The sympathies of the entire Polish society are on the side of the worker... the Polish worker must often suffer... He is a soldier, a warrior sacrificing everything for others.

It often happens that while this Polish worker is depriving his family of a last crust of bread and is standing at his post, others go and take away his job. This is the whole tragedy of the Polish worker in America.

These poor, uneducated people whose names have too often been forgotten suffered, bled and died in Lemont, Latimer, Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh and too many other places, for those values we celebrate here today. They, together with other immigrants and Blacks created the political support for the democratic institutions and the progressive legislation which brought progress and humanity to the American scene. Through their struggles - some of them small and individual, others collective, monumental and national - they insured that the heritage of our nation was maintained in integrity and that new dimensions were added to the meaning of justice, liberty and democracy. Remember freedom untested is freedom unwon - it is nonexistent. Polish immigrants helped give meaning and reality to rights and liberties that some descendants of the original founding fathers would have denied to others. They are not unworthy to stand in the tradition of Kosciuszko and Pulaski as well of Samuel Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

Drawing on our rich and complex legacy what can we as Polish Americans bring to our country as it starts its third century?

The political genius of our people in the past was the ability to put together a viable and lasting commonwealth made up of peoples of diverse nationalities, races and religions and to create it in an atmosphere of tolerance and respect. Drawing consciously on this tradition and experience, we must take the lead in extending our hand and our leadership, if it is asked, to other groups to form a coalition to work out mutually satisfactory

solutions to the problems of crime, urban blight, poverty and other corrosive problems which threaten our cities and deface our national life. This is no easy task and it must be done against the background of the tensions that arise between groups of people of widely differing views, life styles and cultures who are engaged in the intense everyday competition for jobs, status, services, rewards and political power. It is through our creative understanding of this aspect of our heritage that we may be able to bring to the American scene the mechanism, for adjusting, defusing and adjudicating the disputes which will inevitably arise out of these tensions.

What else do we have to offer as a people, aside from our individual talents, to the service of our country and its ideals? We can give America for the first time a full understanding of her own past. The history of the immigrant and his children has been as neglected as the history of the Blacks. Part of the reason for the recent failures and difficulties our country has suffered has been the erroneous conception Americans have had of themselves. They have generalized the experience of only a part of the people who make up the nation and have insisted that this is American History. The attempt to try to solve the problems which beset us on the basis of this understanding has led to some unworkable and bizarre solutions. It is like trying to make a cake by using only half of the ingredients in the recipe. We can make a significant contribution to American as well as to Polish History - as our experience is a part of both - by beginning to study and interpret our life in the old world and the new and then to teach it to our fellow Americans. If we truly believe a pluralistic society is desirable this kind of understanding along with a genuine tolerance is necessary.

We have something else very valuable that we must retain and teach our fellow Americans. Post World War II America became, in the words of the titles of two books from our era, the world of the "Lonely Crowd" and

and a "Nation of Strangers." The demands of Modern Industrial Society more than ever forced masses of people to become migrants and rootless strangers. At first many found the world of ceaseless change and mobility exciting. It seemed to promise greater freedoms and expanded individuality. But soon people became dissatisfied and they began to hunger for roots, place and community. The Commune movement of 1960's was a search for those things-- a search for what I believe we, to a large degree, have preserved.

We know what it is to migrate and we also know from bitter experience how difficult it is to preserve spiritual and humane values in the face of the hostility, the new and bewildering situations, the despair, the loneliness and alienation that is the lot of the immigrant. We know how easy it is to lose your soul. But we have kept and expanded--with all of their imperfections to be sure--the sense of family, the importance of neighborhood and place, the desire, at all cost, to retain a human face to face dimension to life, and a determination to have at least one part of our world and identity solidly anchored so that we would not be swallowed up in the mad, protean whirlwind that is Modern America. I think we can teach our countrymen how to free themselves from the search for false identities; how to live by rhythms that are different than those of the machine. To a people whose lives have been invaded by the fake, bloated, tawdry optimism of advertising in which everyone is beautiful and in which there is little pain, sickness or death we can show that we have not yet lost a sense of life and death, of joy and tragedy enjoyed and suffered with friends and kinsmen.

Some Modern Historians have argued that it is the very essence of totalitarianism to suppress all transcendence. That is to isolate man and destroy his ties to any idea or any institution--family, church, community-- which gives him an identity that allows him to go beyond himself. So that

he is totally dependent and totally malleable--like a piece of clay. Wittingly or unwittingly the demands of the state and the corporation in our society are increasingly destroying transcendence. That is why what we have to offer is of utmost importance.

Finally in closing let us look at one other point. We have referred several times this evening to the historic Polish commitment to liberty and justice. Is there something special in that commitment that we as its heirs can draw on in order to enrich the American experience? It would be arrogant and false of us to insist that we alone know the ways of liberty or have some secret key to its preservation. However, there is something in our experience which is of importance. It was best expressed in a poem written shortly before his death in 1794 on the barricades at Warsaw by the radical poet and Revolutionary General, Jacob Jasinski. He wrote:

Pay no heed that you are bound by heavy chains,
Wherever people have said "I want to be free"
they have always become free!

It is that special intensity and commitment in the face of incredible odds that has always marked the Poles. It is this desire for freedom in the face of oppression which crushed others, which we must preserve and communicate to our fellow Americans at a time when ominously powerful and wealthy forces in our society are threatening it.

At the end of one of his early poems Mickiewicz wrote a prophecy on the fate of America. He wrote:

A Star of Liberties will shine over the New World,
Virtue and learning will gather under its rays;
The People of Sovereign power will rule over its equals,
They will bend old fashioned tyrants to their feet
and kindle new fires in Europe from the Spark
of Freedom

We are Poles and as Americans have the obligation to guarantee that during the next century, Mickiewicz's vision of a nation of justice, of

freedom, of democracy, of equality and of tolerance continues to flourish; that the United States as a nation state be guided by the transcendent values of America as an ideal of Human dignity. To do less would be a violation of both our traditions. We can perhaps do it best by remembering that like the United States, Poland too is an idea.

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