

The Polish American Congress - Yesterday Today and Tomorrow

This year marks the sixty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Polish American Congress and allows us to look back on the great story of our leading civic and political action federation. This occasion gives us the chance to look to the future of the PAC as well.

The Polish American Congress was created at a massive gathering of more than 2,500 delegates elected from Polish organizations and parishes from around the country that met in Buffalo, New York at the end of May 1944. That great gathering adjourned only five days before the Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944, the decisive battle that broke the back of Nazi German military power in western Europe and led to the Allies' victory the following year.

The *Kongres Polonii Amerykanskiej* was the work of two groups of Polish patriots in America. One was the National Committee of Americans of Polish Descent (*Komitet Narodowy Amerykanow Polskiego Pochodzenia*, KNAPP), led by Polish emigres and centered in New York. The other was comprised of the organizations of American Polonia, the fraternal, veterans groups, and the Polish American parishes.

In their meetings prior to the Buffalo congress, the representatives of the two groups agreed on the need to convey to the U.S. government something that was already an obvious fact - that Polish Americans, hundreds of thousands of whom were serving in the U.S. armed forces, were absolutely committed to total victory over Nazi Germany. Furthermore, they agreed that it was imperative that America's leaders back the cause of a postwar Poland - a nation which had suffered terribly under Nazi and Soviet Russian wartime occupation but whose people and their exiled government in London had contributed heroically to the Allied cause - needed to be reconstituted after the War as a democratic, free and independent state.

In Buffalo, the two organizing groups' efforts succeeded in every way. The organization they founded, the Polish American Congress, was one fully committed to their twin objectives - total victory over the enemies of freedom in Germany and Japan and true freedom and national recovery for postwar Poland. Immediately after the Congress, the elected leaders of the PAC, President Charles Rozmarek of the Polish National Alliance, Vice Presidents Honorata Wolowska of the Polish Women's Alliance, Teofil Starzynski of the Polish Falcons, and Max Wegrzynek of KNAPP, and Treasurer John Olejniczak of the Polish Roman Catholic Union, attempted to meet President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the leader of the Allied cause, to present him with their resolutions and concerns. Here they were put off repeatedly, and, sadly, when they did at last meet with the President, were misled by him.

Tragically, in the year after the Buffalo congress, the PAC did not achieve its aims on Poland's behalf. Thus, at the Yalta Summit meeting in February 1945 between Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Josef Stalin, the ruthless ruler of Soviet Russia, Poland, despite all its contributions to the Allied cause, was consigned to Soviet military occupation and to political subjugation by a communist puppet operating under Stalin's thumb.

But the Polish American Congress never accepted the "new international realities" decreed at Yalta. Indeed, the PAC was one of the very first American organizations to denounce the Yalta agreements. Charles Rozmarek and his colleagues threw themselves furiously into concerted efforts to change public opinion and U.S. government policy about the danger that Soviet Russia posed to world peace and America's own national security. In time, its efforts won many allies - in the Republican party, among increasingly concerned leaders in the Democratic party, in the American labor movement, in the Catholic Church, and among members of other east central European ethnic communities in the U.S.

Already by 1947 President Harry Truman, Roosevelt's successor on his death in April 1945, had fundamentally altered U.S. foreign policy in recognizing the serious nature of the Soviet threat. The "Cold War" had begun.

By the 1960 presidential election, both candidates, Democrat John Kennedy and Republican Richard Nixon held exactly the same views on every issue of concern to the Polish American Congress. Indeed, both candidates spoke to PAC gatherings prior to the election to win the support of Polish Americans. The influence of the PAC in U.S. affairs had reached an early peak.

The record of the PAC from 1945 to 1965 is incredible. The Congress worked for immigration reform in 1948 that allowed 140,000 Polish displaced persons to settle in this country outside the quota rules then in force. The U.S. Congress - on the urgings of the PAC - investigated the Katyn Massacre and found the Soviet Union guilty of the crime - 40 years before Russia's leaders acknowledged this truth. The PAC backed the creation of Radio Free Europe and Captive Nations Week. It supported U.S. humanitarian aid to Poland after 1956 - on behalf of Poland's people - not its government. It never stopped its calls for U.S. recognition of Poland's western borders with Germany - borders established under Allied authority in 1945 but not formally approved by our Government.

Under Charles Rozmarek's successor, Aloysius Mazewski (PAC president from 1968 to 1988), the Polish American Congress rightly resisted every call in this country in the 1970s for recognition of the Polish communist dictatorship established by Moscow - despite talk about the need to accept the new realities of a normalized relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. In August 1980, the PAC was one of the first American organizations to give its full support to the Solidarity workers' cause in Gdansk. What is more, when President Jimmy Carter spoke to the Polish National Alliance - and Mr. Mazewski - at its centennial banquet that September, he offered America's committed support to the aims of Solidarity and followed up his words with deeds in the critical months after. U.S. support for Poland's freedom continued in the Administration of Carter's successor, Ronald Reagan, and Mr. Mazewski and his fellow PAC leaders met frequently with U.S. policy makers during this period.

The fall of Polish communist rule occurred under President Mazewski's successor, Edward Moskal (President from 1988 to 2005). Mr. Moskal not only led a major PAC delegation to Poland in October 1989 to affirm Polonia's support for its newly elected democratic Solidarity government; he worked hard with President George H.W. Bush and his Administration to provide economic assistance to the new Polish government, U.S. support for universal recognition of Poland's borders with the newly reunited German state, and Poland's admission into NATO (which was achieved in 1999). Throughout every period of PAC activity after 1944, the PAC led the effort to organize Polish American humanitarian relief aid to Poland's people, those inside the country and those who were refugees. In the first years of the twenty-first century, the PAC, under its national executive director, Attorney Les Kuczynski, played a key role in winning a measure of just compensation for countless thousands of Polish World War II slave and forced laborers in Poland under Nazi rule, and to the residents in the U.S. and Canada.

In all of these efforts, the Illinois State Division of the Polish American Congress played a major role - one that should not be minimized or overlooked.

The Polish American Congress continues its work, today, under its fourth national president, Mr. Frank J. Spula. The course for the Polish American Congress is challenging in many ways. Poland is now a free and independent democracy and a firm and important ally of the United States. But many in this country

Do not fully appreciate the U.S.- Poland relationship and its historic and contemporary meaning. Here, it is up to the Polish American Congress to make this case to our fellow Americans. The same is true in promoting greater economic and business ties with Poland, working to bring more of Poland's cultural riches to the attention of the American people, and encouraging more Americans to learn about Poland here and by traveling to Poland as tourists.

Many Polish Americans do not know enough about their own heritage and the story of the Polish American Congress. If they did, more of them would rally around the PAC and its objectives, which are sensible in every respect.

Finally, there is the challenge of reaching out to our young people - whether they are American-born or from Poland - with the message that pride in the Polish heritage is something that is entirely justified - and involvement in our ethnic life can be very enjoyable and productive too.

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