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**THE POLISH AMERICAN CONGRESS, POLAND,  
AND THE WARSAW UPRISING<sup>1</sup>**

*by Donald Pienkos*

The Warsaw Uprising of August to October 1944 is a most appropriate subject given the impending 60th anniversary observance of this heroic and tragic occurrence. Our panel affords us with the opportunity to discuss and to reflect on this event, which in many ways embodies so much of the larger story of modern Poland.

Our discussion occurs also at a time when we recall many other events of 1944, a climactic year in World War II. June 6 marks the 60th anniversary of the successful and massive Allied military invasion of France in Normandy. This victory was the decisive military achievement of the United States of America and its allies against Nazi Germany on the western front.

July 22, we acknowledge, as students of Poland, is the 60th anniversary of the creation of the Soviet-dominated "Polish Committee of National Liberation" in the city of Lublin. That "Lublin Committee" would by the next year become the core political body of the post war communist-run People's Republic that was imposed upon the devastated Polish nation. It would at last be replaced in December, 1989 by a whole new political system, the Third Republic of Poland, a political system committed to Poland's full sovereignty as a state in Europe and to the principles of representative democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at a panel held on June 4, 2004 at the sixty-second national meeting of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America, in Boston, Massachusetts. The panel covered issues connected with the Warsaw Uprising and was chaired by Professor Anna Cieniala. Other papers were given by Professors Marek Chodakiewicz and Robert Szymczak.

My more modest subject at this conference involves yet a third 60th anniversary. This is the anniversary of the founding of the Polish American Congress in the city of Buffalo, New York, on May 28–30, 1944.

In my presentation, I'd like to take up three points. The first involves the creation of the Polish American Congress and what its establishment signified. The second involves a discussion of the response of the Polish American Congress to the Warsaw Uprising, an event that occurred only two months after its founding. The third places the Polish American Congress leadership's view of the Warsaw Uprising within the perspective of its larger approach to the cause it was formed to support, that of a free and independent post war Poland.

The Polish American Congress in fact began its existence as a true "congress," a massive gathering of energetic, patriotic people of Polish origin, nearly all of whom were citizens of the United States. They came together in Buffalo, some 2,600 and 3,170 strong, as delegates chosen to represent their various Polonia organizations – parishes, fraternal, cultural groups, business associations, labor unions, and veterans' societies – in their home communities from 26 states across the country.

The first Polish American Congress was itself organized by a national committee that was headed by Charles Rozmarek, president of the Polish National Alliance fraternal, Honorata Wolowska, president of the Polish Women's Alliance, and John Olejniczak, president of the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America. These three national organizations all had their home offices in Chicago. (Many other Polish fraternal societies also made notable contributions to the committee, among them the Polish Falcons of America and the Polish National Union, the fraternal of the Polish National Catholic Church. Both organizations had their headquarters in Pennsylvania. Together, these five organizations by themselves accounted for a combined membership that exceeded 525,000 adults in a Polonia community estimated to number 6 million people in all.

Moreover, in early 1944 the fraternal had begun working in earnest with another body of Polonia activists based mainly in the New York-New Jersey area. This second organization was the National Committee of Americans of Polish Descent, known widely by its Polish initials, KNAPP for *Komitet Narodowy Amerykanów Polskiego Pochodzenia*. KNAPP had formed in 1942; its leaders included several Polish *emigres* who had settled in the United States after serving in the pre war government headed by Marshal Jozef Pilsudski. Chief among them were Wacław Jędrzejewicz and Ignacy Matuszewski. They were joined in their work by two like-minded Polish language newspaper publishers, Max Węgrzynek of the New York *Nowy Świat* and Frank Januszewski of the Detroit *Dziennik Polski*.<sup>2</sup> While small in

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<sup>2</sup> Published materials on the founding of the Polish American Congress include: Wacław Jędrzejewicz, *Polonia Amerykańska w polityce Polskiej: Historia Komitetu Narodowego Amerykanów Pol-*

membership when compared to the fraternalists, KNAPP activists would go on to play a key role in helping to shape the political direction the Polish American Congress would later take, even if their leaders would never run the organization.

The collaboration between the two Polonia groups in forming the Polish American Congress occurred none too soon. Indeed before 1944, the only explicitly political bodies claiming to represent people of Polish origin were the pro-Soviet and pro-war American Slav Congress, together with its Polish adjunct, the American Polish Labor Council. Both enjoyed excellent relations with the Administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Both were also vociferously critical of the Polish exile government in London, especially after its decision in April 1943 to support an international investigation to determine who was responsible for the murder of several thousand Polish military officers in a mass grave the Germans had discovered in Russia's Katyn forest. This decision had served as a pretext for the Soviet regime's action to break off diplomatic relations with the London government and to embrace a communist group in Russia as the nucleus for a post war Polish regime. In January 1944 Soviet troops crossed into territories that had belonged to the Polish state prior to September 1, 1939. The Soviet position on the revision of Poland's eastern borders along the so-called "Curzon line" first broached in World War I was soon made clear; what is more, it was backed by the American Slav Congress and its Polish affiliate. Far more significant, at their Summit meetings in Teheran in November 1943, Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Churchill and Soviet leader Stalin had secretly agreed to the Polish border change.

One other broadly-based Polonia organization existed at the time, the Polish American Council, *Rada Polonii Amerykańskiej*, headed by Atty. Francis X. Swietlik, Censor of the Polish National Alliance. But Swietlik, while cordial in his dealings with the London government and its head, General Wladyslaw Sikorski, focused the *Rada Polonii's* work in the humanitarian realm, gathering parcels of food, cloth-

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*skiego pochodzenia* (New York: KNAPP, 1954); Richard Lukas, *The Strange Allies: The United States and Poland, 1941-1945* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978); Donald Pienkos, *For Your Freedom Through Ours: Polish American Efforts on Poland's Behalf, 1863-1991* (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, 1991). See also Peter Irons, "The Test is Poland: Polish Americans and the Origins of the Cold War," *Polish American Studies*, vol. 30, number 2 (Autumn 1973). A great deal of useful information about the PAC and the Warsaw Uprising is in the Polonia press of the day, most notably the New York *Nowy Swiat*, the Detroit *Dziennik Polski*, and the Chicago *Dziennik Zwiqzkowy*.

The estimate of 6 million Polish Americans was first put forward by Januszewski, repeated endlessly by PAC spokesmen, and accepted by the Roosevelt administration. According to the 1940 U.S. Census, there were 2,906,000 persons who were either Polish immigrants to the United States (the first generation in America) or sons or daughters having at least one parent who had been a Polish immigrant (the second generation or persons of "foreign stock"). Individuals whose Polish ancestry was more remote were not counted as Polish in the Census.

ing, medical items, and other goods for shipment to Polish prisoners of war, refugees and military personnel in Great Britain. To the extent that it took a political stance, the *Rada* restricted itself to supporting the general and lofty principles of President Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" message to Congress of January 1941 and the "Atlantic Charter" he and Churchill had proclaimed in August 1941. In his Four Freedoms pronouncement, FDR had stated that any settlements made after the War should be based on respect for the peoples' rights to the freedom of speech and worship, and the freedom from want and fear. Among the principles in the Atlantic Charter were the right of all peoples to choose their own form of government, the abandonment of force in settling international disputes, and the rejection of forceful territorial changes by one state at the expense of another. Needless to say, these ideas were not the basis of the American-British-Soviet alliance that had come into existence after 1941.<sup>3</sup>

By the time the Polish American Congress met in Buffalo, the situation of the London government had badly deteriorated - politically and militarily. Sikorski had been killed in an air crash in 1943 and replaced by a leader of lesser international stature, Stanislaw Mikolajczyk. With the Red army moving into central pre-war Poland, diplomatic relations between the London government and Moscow, remained broken following the Katyn incident. As ominous, an alternative communist provisional government under Stalin's thumb was in the making. But these developments did not deter the participants in the Congress from maintaining close ranks with the embattled exile cause. Thus, the Congress, both in its resolutions and in the "Memorial" or official position paper its delegates approved for delivery to President Roosevelt, strongly endorsed the London government as "the only legal, constitutional and representative government of Poland" and defended its position on its eastern borders in terms of the principles of the Atlantic Charter. In one place, the Soviet take over of the Polish lands in the east were characterized as a "fourth partition" of Poland. At the same time, the delegates stressed the Congress' patriotic support of the American war effort, and Polonia's loyalty to the country. Direct attacks on the Soviet regime and the U.S.-Soviet alliance were avoided, something that KNAPP's representatives would have preferred to include.

The Memorial to FDR concluded with a ringing endorsement of the London government's position: "The subjection of half of Poland would be a great injustice. Poland deserves well of the United States. Poland has the right to be free, independent, and to have her territorial integrity maintained. She has earned the right to claim the assistance of the United States in securing these rights and the privilege of participating in the making of the future world as an equal among nations which

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (New York: Appleton-Crofts, 1958), pp. 718-729 and *passim*.

have fought by our side. We are confident you will take full confidence of the justice of Poland's cause."

Charles Rozmarek, who was elected president of the Polish American Congress, the name the organization founded in Buffalo took as an enduring political action federation seeking to influence U.S. policy, sought an immediate meeting with President Roosevelt to present their Memorial. In this he and fellow national officers would be frustrated for more than four months, until October 11, 1944, a week after the end of the Warsaw Uprising.

Nonetheless, in the weeks after the Buffalo gathering, the new Polish American Congress was very active in publicizing the achievements of the event and its objectives on Poland's behalf. In July Rozmarek was a delegate to the Democratic party national convention. There he spoke on behalf of the PAC to its platform committee. However, while the plank the committee adopted on Poland was favorable to Poland's cause, it was at the same time equivocal in its tone when compared to the PAC stance: "Poland as the test case of the validity of the Atlantic Charter must be reconstituted after the War undiminished in area, strong and truly independent."

Later that same month, in his speech to the delegates at the national convention of the Polish Falcons of America in Pittsburgh, Rozmarek reaffirmed the right of Polish Americans to express their concerns to the U.S. government: "Polonia has the right, but even more important, the duty to defend Poland. It is our American patriotic duty... 500,000 of our boys are in the U.S. armed forces... We support the Atlantic Charter, whose author is President Roosevelt."

Neither Prime Minister Mikolajczyk's visit to Moscow at the end of July nor the out-break of the Warsaw Uprising on August 1 were presaged by major statements from the PAC leadership. However, the news of the Uprising caused Rozmarek to call an emergency meeting of the PAC's national executive council on August 11 and 12 in Washington. Out of it came an appeal to FDR to provide immediate U.S. aid to the freedom fighters in Warsaw. Rozmarek and his fellow officers made the same points at a well attended press conference in the nation's capital. There, the PAC president emphasized the right of captured Polish combatants to be treated as soldiers under the rules of war. Furthermore, he reiterated the PAC view that the London government continue to be respected as the sole legal representative of the Polish nation. Here, he took sharp exception to the Soviet regime's effort to press Mikolajczyk to deal with the newly proclaimed and Moscow-controlled Committee of National Liberation.

In August and September, the PAC sponsored scores of mass meetings in Polonia and issued hundreds of news releases and telegrams addressed to the United States government in connection with the Uprising. All appealed to the conscience of the American people and the civilized world to assist the Home Army fighters in Warsaw. In a telegram from Rozmarek to New York Mayor LaGuardia, the PAC

chief thanked the Mayor for his fiery speech at a Manhattan rally in support of the freedom fighters. On September 23 Rozmarek gave a speech over the Columbia national radio network in connection with the fifth anniversary of the outbreak of the War. In his remarks he repeated the PAC's call for Allied assistance on behalf of the Warsaw Uprising. The program, which went out over 628 stations was a remarkable, and unique, opportunity to present the newly organized PAC and its perspective on Poland to the general public. At the same time, the Congress' general focus continued to be its concern over Poland's post war eastern border situation and its opposition to the specter of communist control of the country, a concern Rozmarek repeated in a telegram he sent to FDR on the eve of his Quebec conference with Churchill.

On October 11, 1944, President Roosevelt, who was seeking reelection to a fourth four year term in November, at last agreed to meet with the leaders of the Polish American Congress in connection with the nation's observance of Pulaski Day anniversary. The meeting, however, was hardly ceremonial but was held for a strictly political purpose. Always concerned about the continued loyalty of the Polish American electorate to his candidacy (he had said as much to Stalin at Teheran the year before), FDR was keenly aware of the efforts of his Republican opponent, New York governor Thomas Dewey, to appeal for Polish American votes. Indeed, only days before the White House meeting, Dewey in his own Pulaski Day speech in New York had criticized the private arrangements over Poland's eastern borders that FDR, Churchill and Stalin had made in Teheran. The President also knew of the KNAPP organization and the close ties its American leaders, Wegrzynek and Januszewski, enjoyed with the Republican party.<sup>4</sup>

FDR's session with the PAC delegation in the Oval Office, highlighted by his ambiguous remarks on the Polish question (that we are all "agreed that Poland must be reconstituted as a great nation") and illustrated by a widely publicized, misleading, and subsequently embarrassing photograph of the get-together that showed the group in front of a map of Poland with its pre war borders, has become a fairly well known piece of political theater. Far less well known is Charles Rozmarek's prepared remarks to the President for the occasion. Rozmarek began by expressing his hope

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<sup>4</sup> Lukas, p. 126. The disturbing nature of the President's action is reported in the extraordinary memoir by Charles E. Bohlen, FDR's translator at the Teheran summit, and later the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, *Witness to History, 1929-1969* (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 149–159. Bohlen reported that it was Churchill who, with Roosevelt absent, began a discussion with Stalin on radically altering Poland's borders on the first evening of the Teheran summit. On the final day of the summit, Roosevelt brought up the same matter with the Soviet chieftain. He asked that he remain silent over the matter, because he could not risk losing the Polish American vote in his upcoming reelection campaign. See also Edward Rozek, *Allied Wartime Diplomacy* (New York: Wiley, 1958); and Pienkos, *For Your Freedom*, pp. 509–510.

that the principles embodied in the Atlantic Charter be kept in mind as they related to Poland. He then stated the PAC's concern over the President's commitment to support Poland's integrity in relation to its powerful neighbor to the east. "With respect to Russia's relationship to Poland, can the President confirm that he will not agree to the establishment of an alien puppet government in Poland nor the resettlement of Polish inhabitants against their will?"

To these direct questions, Roosevelt gave his famously ambiguous reply: "We are all agreed that Poland must be reconstituted as a strong and independent state." He then went on to assert that no one in America knew for certain what was actually happening inside Poland and that he himself was not aware of all the facts concerning the recently ended Uprising in Warsaw. He then reiterated his view, that the world was in agreement that Poland must be reconstructed as a strong, representative and peace loving nation, as one of the pillars of world peace."<sup>5</sup>

On October 30, 1944 FDR was in Chicago to give a final campaign speech before the November 7 election to the faithful massed at Soldier Field. Just before he was to leave he invited Rozmarek into his train car to secure his support for his reelection. There the President assured the PAC head that he would carry out the pledge to Poland embodied in the Democratic party platform and that he would see to it that Poland was treated fairly at the peace conference to be held after the Allies' victory. According to Rozmarek, he received "good results" in response to the points he raised to the President on all his concerns, namely Poland's borders, its full independence, the reconstruction of Warsaw, and aid to the Polish people. Rozmarek then announced that he would cast his vote for him in November. This personal expression of opinion, immediately subjected to sharp criticism from the KNAPP forces as wishful thinking by Rozmarek, was immediately broadcast to Polonia as an endorsement from the Polish American Congress. Overwhelming, perhaps 90 percent, Polish American voter support for FDR on election day was unquestionably one of the keys to his victory.<sup>6</sup>

With the election won, Roosevelt and Churchill's positions on post war Poland soon became publicly known. Prime Minister Mikolajczyk, unable to win his cabinet's approval of the border changes called for by the Big Three, was forced to resign. The Yalta agreements on Poland in February 1945 simply ratified the political and territorial fate of Poland, as determined by Soviet Russia's victory on the eastern front and the Allies' secret diplomacy in 1943. But for the Polish American Congress, Yalta was not the end of a political action organization, but a new beginning.

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<sup>5</sup> Adam Olszewski, *Historia Związku Narodowego Polskiego*, volume 5 (Chicago: Alliance Printers and Publishers, 1967), pp. 237–349, *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Lukas, pp. 126–127; Pienkos, pp. 117–118.

On March 1, 1945 President Roosevelt reported to the Congress of the United States on the results of the Yalta conference. In his words, “one outstanding example of joint action by the three major Allied powers on the liberated areas was the solution reached on Poland. The whole Polish question was a potential source of trouble in postwar Europe as it has been sometimes before - and we came to the conference determined to find a common ground for its solution. And we did - although everybody does not agree with us - obviously... I am convinced that the agreement on Poland, under the circumstances, is the most hopeful agreement possible for a free, independent and prosperous Polish state.”<sup>7</sup>

The Polish American Congress’ official response was to denounce the President’s actions at Yalta as both an injustice committed against Poland, and an injustice done to the American people. At Yalta, the principles embodied in the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms, the lofty ideals on behalf of a just peace for which the United States had fought, had been brutally trampled. The statement concluded by asserting that “it is surely a profane tragedy that in our President’s first decisions as they related to Europe’s future he would ratify the fifth partition of Poland and cooperate in the fashioning of a Polish puppet regime manufactured in Moscow.”

While the Warsaw Uprising was not mentioned in the PAC statement, it did not to be. The U.S. government’s failure to support the Freedom Fighters had been one more example of Roosevelt and Churchill’s true priorities, cooperation with Stalin in pursuit of victory over the enemy, even if this meant operating at the expense of the legitimate interests of a lesser ally.

Taking issue with Roosevelt after Yalta represented but the first steps by a political action organization that would not go away but instead become a factor of importance in a new political, military, and ideological drama that would soon be known as the Cold War. That organization, the Polish American Congress, had rapidly mobilized the Polish ethnic community in loyal support to the U.S. government in its successful pursuit of victory in a just war and commitment to the cause of Poland’s restoration to freedom and independence. These objectives were in keeping with the stated war aims of the United States as articulated by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the nation’s revered leader and the dominant figure in the great anti-Axis Alliance.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Pienkos, pp. 275–278.

<sup>8</sup> Pienkos, p. 279; Peter Irons, “The Test in Poland.”