

Derdowski And Pułaski

At the October 9, 2022, commemoration of the Battle of Savannah, the Polish Ambassador to the United Nations, Mr. Krzysztof Szczerski, noted that Kazimierz Pułaski and Tadeusz Kościuszko are honored in Poland and the United States for their heroic fighting for freedom in both Poland and the United States. They exemplify the continuing close friendship between the two countries from the very moment the thirteen colonies were fighting for their independence from England. Currently, policy makers in the American government recognize that Poland is a bastion of support for Western values and a critical ally in the fight against Russian aggression in Ukraine. But the close friendship between the two countries lies much deeper than the friendship forged from fighting a common enemy. To understand the profound depth of the friendship between the two countries, we can look to another man who is honored for advancing cultural values in both countries, Hieronim Derdowski (1852-1902).

Derdowski was “the first authentic Kashubian man of letters (Obrach-Prondzynski, The Kashubs: Past and Present, 114). He pioneered the literary use of the Kashubian language with seminal works such as Q panu Czorlińscim co do Pucka po sece jachoł and Kaszube pod Widnem. His resistance against Prussian oppression landed him in jail many times.

After emigrating to the United States, Derdowski changed the focus of his literary career to that of editor of the widely-read Polish newspaper Wiarus (trans. Faithful Veteran). As editor, Derdowski exhorted his Polish emigrant readers across the entire Midwest to remain loyal to their Polish cultural values. While they should master the English language for public places, they should embrace the Polish language at home and be involved in Polish fraternal organizations. He expected Poles to be honest, honorable, and generously supportive of their Catholic parishes and Catholic education for children.

Underpinning all of this was the messianic vision of a free Poland that would be a shining example to the world of a Christian republic. Derdowski felt it was his duty to fight for these ideals. He was the faithful soldier, the “Wiarus,” who zealously encouraged his fellow Poles to live up to these high standards and who ruthlessly attacked those that he felt undermined these ideals. Derdowski lived in Winona, Minnesota, surrounded by fellow Kashubians, even from his own village of Wiele. He had many additional friends who appreciated his work as editor. But he also had many enemies because he would attack

anyone whether a priest, a business leader, a politician, who was not living up to the high standards of his vision.

Examination of Derdowski's career in Poland and the United States reveals the underlying reason for the enduring friendship between both countries. The impetus for this friendship goes beyond the realpolitik axiom that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. American national policy has been and will continue to be friendly towards Poland because the huge block of voters, Americans of Polish heritage, feel that they have a stake in a free and independent Poland and because the enduring values inherent in their American citizenship are based on Polish cultural values.

Derdowski had a vision of Poland as a messianic country that overcomes adversity to the degree that it adheres to its Christian faith and cultural values. As the editor of Wiarus, he expected Polish immigrants in America to adhere to the same standards. And because the Kashubian-Polish immigrants in Winona held these cultural values close to their hearts, they made progress towards creating the kind of community envisioned by Derdowski. People were united in their religious beliefs, their extended families and friendly neighborhoods, their unified support of the education and welfare of their children, and support of local community institutions. We are now more wealthy and more technologically advanced in America, but our quality of community life seems to be poorer. As we now grope for solutions to our many problems, we would do well to remember and appreciate the values upon which the Kashubian-Polish community in Winona was built.