

'From Strangers to Neighbours, Encounters Between Poland and Ireland'

A lecture at Royal Łazienki Museum

By the Ambassador of Ireland, Gerard Keown,

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I would like to thank Izabela Zychowicz, Director of Łazienki Museum, for the kind introduction.

It is a great pleasure for me to be here tonight, in this beautiful and historic setting at Pałac na Wyspie in the stunning Royal Łazienki Museum. This is one of Warsaw's jewels, and it is always wonderful to visit here.

I am delighted to be able to talk to you tonight about the history of Irish-Polish connections through the years.

The Irish and Poles are often described as kindred spirits: two peoples who, although separated by geography and the currents of European history, have much in common. A shared experience of loss of self-rule and a struggle for independence, the interplay of literature and politics, a desire for liberty and a love of travel and exploration are just some of the themes that link us.

For long periods of our history, connections were shaped by encounters between Irish and Polish people. In recent decades the Irish and Polish peoples and states have formed deeper and lasting bonds. Today, Ireland is home to a large and welcome Polish community.

Last month, the Embassy was proud to display here at the Palace an exhibition, Strangers to Neighbours, which tells the story of Irish-Polish history. Its panels outline some of the personal narratives that have linked our countries, from the occasional and sometimes surprising connections of centuries past, to the enduring connections of the present day, and how Ireland and Poland moved from being strangers to neighbours.

I am grateful to the Director of the Museum, Prof Zbigniew Wawer, for agreeing to host our exhibition, and for the invitation to speak here tonight.

I would also like to thank Jagna Lewandowska, Exhibition Coordinator and Piotr Skowroński, from the Centre for Research.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We Irish are good at telling stories, our own stories for sure, but also those of others.

It was an Irishman who was first to tell the Polish story in English, when Bernard Connor published his two-volume *History of Poland, its Ancient and Present States* in 1698. There is a copy in the National Library on Plac Krasińskich.

Connor was an interesting man. A native of Kerry, he spent a year in Warsaw as Jan III Sobieski's personal physician in 1694 before accompanying the king's only daughter, Teresa Kunegunda, on her journey to Brussels to be married. Connor's book, in which he details the history and geography of the Commonwealth in its glory days, was based on his year in Poland and the conversations he had on the way from Warsaw to Brussels.

Twenty years after Connor's book was published, the granddaughter of King Jan III Sobieski, Maria Klementyna Sobieska, married James Francis Edward Stuart in 1718. He was the son of King James II of England, Scotland and Ireland, who had been deposed and exiled in 1688.

Pope Clement XI regarded the Stuarts as the rightful heirs and recognised Maria as Queen of England, Scotland and Ireland. On her way to Italy to be married, Maria was imprisoned in Innsbruck on the orders of King George I of Britain to prevent the wedding taking place. An Irish soldier, Charles Wogan, rescued the princess and brought her safely to Italy, where she married James Stuart, but she was never able to claim her crown in Ireland.

Despite these early connections, for long decades Poland and Ireland remained largely unknown to each other.

An exception was the career of the Irish gardener, Denis McClair, who made a name for himself in Poland as Dionizy Mikler. The young McClair came to Poland in 1790 at the invitation of Princess Izabela Czartoryska, who wanted to introduce the fashionable English style of gardening to her Polish estates. McClair intended to stay for a short period, hoping to find his father, John, who he thought was working in the Polish army.

McClair's garden designs for Princess Czartoryska's Puławy estate and for Princess Helena Radziwiłł's Arkadia made him famous. Polonising his name to Dionizy Mikler, he designed gardens for the Polish aristocracy, including the Lubomirski, Potocki, Sobanski and Orłowski families. Much of his work was in Lubelskie, Wołyń and Podole. In all, he designed around 50 gardens, of which many have survived.

It is only towards the end of the eighteenth century that we begin to see political parallels drawn between Poland and Ireland. These parallels were drawn predominantly by Irish nationalists, who hoped to secure an independent Irish state.

The first to do so were the United Irishmen, founded in 1791 with a mission to unite Protestants, Catholics and Dissenters behind the cause of Irish liberty. How to reconcile the different traditions on the island of Ireland is a defining theme in Irish history. It was natural that there should be interest in how Poland, that other multi-faith polity, arranged its affairs.

For the United Irishmen, Poland was an example to be followed. A gathering was held in Belfast in 1792 to celebrate the anniversary of the constitution of the 3rd of May, while their *Northern Star* newspaper told its readers 'we cannot sufficiently admire the judgment, the ability, the policy, which it displays on every page.'

In his pamphlet 'An argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland', the leader of the United Irishmen, Theobald Wolfe Tone, cited Poland as an example of a country in which a Catholic population espoused the cause of liberty and in which cooperation and tolerance between faiths had been achieved.

Tadeusz Kościuszko's failed rising of 1794 and the final cruel partition that followed it, aroused deep sympathies among the United Irishmen and Wolfe Tone in particular.

Kościuszko's Rising inspired Wolfe Tone in a Rising in Ireland four years later, in 1798, which suffered a similar fate. In his speech from the dock having been condemned to death, Tone invoked Kościuszko's spirit and his call to arms. Parallels were drawn, too, between Kościuszko and Robert Emmet, who led a second unsuccessful rising in Ireland in 1803. This was a parallel Maria Konopnicka would evoke a century later, in her 1908 poem *Robert Emmet's Kiss*.

In the century that followed, failed risings in both countries were accorded heroic status. The pattern of historical experience for Poles and Irish under their respective rulers were different, of course. Conditions differed among three the three Partitions, and between all of them and Ireland. But there was similarity enough to convince nationalists in Ireland and Poland that theirs were parallel causes.

Of course, in both countries a tradition of seeking autonomy and eventual independence through constitutional and non-violent means competed with an insurrectionary tradition embracing the physical use of force.

There are parallels, too, between the Young Ireland and Młoda Polska movements, and the romanticist literature which accompanied each. A poem in the Irish nationalist newspaper, the *Nation*, at the time of the 1863 Uprising in Poland referred to Ireland as the 'Poland of the seas'. A few years later, A.M. Sullivan's celebrated *Story of Ireland* published in 1880, picked up the parallels with Poland, referring to Ireland as 'this western Poland—this "Poland of the seas.'

The Irish MPs John Pope Hennessy and William Smith O'Brien took up the cause of Poland and the 1863 Uprising, visiting Poland that year. The cruelty with which the Rising was suppressed in the Russian Partition convinced many Irish nationalists that only through self-reliance and not foreign aid could independence for Ireland be secured.

Of course, the intersections that did exist between Ireland and Poland – and between Poles and Irish people – were not defined solely by nationalism.

The story of Paweł Edmund Strzelecki and the many lives he saved during Ireland's Great Famine is only now being properly told. One of Poznań's famous sons, Strzelecki raised over £250,000 – an enormous amount at the time – to relieve starvation in Ireland's westernmost counties. He left us a harrowing account of what he witnessed.

Strzelecki's life-saving work was recognised in 2015 when a plaque was unveiled on Dublin's main thoroughfare, O'Connell Street, on the site of the house he had lived in. It records the gratitude of the Irish people for this Polish man who came to Ireland in its darkest hour to save lives.

We should also recall the influence of Thomas Moore on Adam Mickiewicz, who translated Moore's *Meeting of the Waters* and said it was only through Moore's writings that he could feel the beauty of the English language. Three of Moore's *Irish Melodies* were translated by that other giant of Polish poetry, Juliusz Słowacki.

In the musical sphere, there is the influence of John Field on Frederic Chopin. Born in Dublin in 1782, Field was considered the greatest pianist of his day. He began composing and gave concerts in Paris, London, Vienna and St. Petersburg, where he lived for much of his life. Field became associated with the nocturne, a form that he developed and popularised. Fryderyk Chopin was strongly influenced by the work of Field, whom he greatly respected, and he particularly admired Field's eighteen nocturnes. Chopin took the nocturne developed by Field and expanded on the form to create a unique sound of his own.

The experience of WWI transformed the political situation in both Poland and Ireland.

Polish newspapers reported the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, focussing on the parallels with Poland. Looming large in their coverage was the Rebel Countess' Constance Markiewicz, wife of a Polish Count and the first Irish woman parliamentarian and minister. The journal *Świat* called her a 'modern Irish amazon' and drew parallels between Ireland and Poland. She remains a symbol of Polish-Irish ties. There is a school named after her in Bemowo in Warsaw.

For many Irish nationalists, the resurrection of 'a free and un-partitioned Poland' was as just a cause as that of Ireland and its claim to self-rule.

The trade union leader, Louie Bennett, summed this feeling up when she told a meeting of the Irish Women's International League in February 1918 that 'Ireland of the East' would surely support 'Poland of the West' in its bids for independence.

When the Irish declared independence from Britain in 1919, an appeal was made to the new Polish state for support. The document was written in Polish – there is a copy in the library of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan. But the reborn Polish state had troubles of its own, in fighting off the Red Army, and was not in a position to take up any cause other than its own.

In the early years of independence, the paths of the Irish and Polish states did not immediately cross. A continent separated us and, although we sat together in the League of Nations, each was preoccupied with creating institutions of state and rebuilding the economy, free from outside interference.

A Polish diplomatic presence was established in Dublin in 1929, under Tadeusz Waclaw Dobrzyński, as Consul General. In a far cry from today, the Polish community could fit inside a single Dublin church in 1930, for the first official 3 May celebrations in Ireland.

Dobrzyński's career in Dublin would span twenty-five years, representing the London-based government-in-exile during the dark years of World War II and their aftermath. I am delighted that his grandson, Ian Cantwell, who has researched his grandfather's life and career, is with us this evening.

If there was no Irish embassy in Poland, an Irish diplomat, Sean Lester, would play an important role as League of Nations High Commissioner in Gdansk from 1933 to 1936. Lester was one of the first to warn of the danger posed by Nazism, and to protest the persecution of the city's Polish and Jewish inhabitants. Lester has been honoured by the City of Gdansk and his portrait hangs in the headquarters of the Irish Foreign Ministry in Dublin.

During the war, an Irish woman, Eileen Frances Short, served as a nurse with the Kryska Group operating in Czerniaków during the Warsaw Uprising. She survived the Uprising and afterwards escaped to Britain, where she worked as a translator for the Polish Government-in-Exile. Her husband was Józef Garliński, a senior figure in the underground resistance. There is a plaque in her memory at the Field Cathedral of the Polish Army in Warsaw, where the Embassy of Ireland lays a wreath every year on 1 August.

After the war, there were approaches from the Warsaw-based government, but Ireland maintained relations with the Government-in-Exile, and would do so until 1958. For a while there was speculation that the London government might even move to Ireland and unofficial soundings were made.

Initially, Ireland's post-war relief efforts were focused in Western Europe, emergency beef supplies were shipped to the port of Gdynia in 1946 and funds were given to the

International Red Cross's relief effort in Poland. Plans were developed to rebuild a hospital in Warsaw.

There was discussion about opening an Irish embassy in Warsaw. Weighing against this were growing concerns in Dublin about persecution and repression within Poland, and a reluctance to recognise a communist regime.

Soundings were taken in Rome, with Cardinal August Hlond and with Pope Pius XII. A decision was taken not to recognise the PRL. It was not without its costs, when Warsaw joined the Soviet veto on Ireland's UN membership. As the Cold War division of Europe took hold, plans to construct the hospital in Warsaw were abandoned and relief aid dwindled.

During these years Ireland became a temporary home for hundreds of Polish soldiers and airmen from the Home Army. They came to study at Irish universities at the request of the government-in-exile, the first group arriving in 1946. The drive to bring them came from University College Cork, in south west Ireland. For the Irish government, it was an opportunity to show solidarity with Poland. A Polish House was established in the city of Cork, where Polish students lived, providing a focus for Polish activities.

For a while the Polish connection in Ireland thrived, but it proved to be short-lived. Most moved on after they finished their studies, finding new lives in Britain and the United States. Few remained in Ireland when the scheme came to an end in 1962.

This is a little-known episode in Irish-Polish history. It reminds us that the history of our engagement is richer than we might suppose. It is also a reminder of the need to work hard to maintain people-to-people connections, which can falter if not sustained and renewed,

In another little known connection, papers from the archives of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs were stored in Dublin for safe keeping from 1943 until 1959, when they were moved to the Hoover Institute at Stanford.

Another again, is the government in exile's proposal to create a Polish Cultural Institute in Ireland. A conference was held in Dublin in 1946 to discuss the idea, but the conditions in Poland meant few were allowed to travel and the idea did not get off the ground.

One of those who did make it to Dublin was Jan Łukasiewicz, a former Rector of Warsaw University and founder of the acclaimed Lwów School of Mathematical Logic. He lectured at Irish universities until his death in 1956.

Ireland was one of the last countries to recognise the government in exile. Dobrzyński remained Consul General in Dublin until 1954. His daughter published a biography of her father, *An Unusual Diplomat*, in 1998 in which she recounts his work for Poland in Ireland.

He was replaced by Zofia Zaleska, sister-in-law of August Zaleski, president of the government-in-exile.

Formal relations with the government in exile came to an end in March 1958, when the Polish consulate closed. For some years after, there were no relations with between Ireland and Poland.

Ireland did not establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of Poland until 1976, but there was no Irish embassy in Warsaw or Polish embassy in Dublin. Contact was limited, with little real engagement between governments.

Things were different on the football pitch, with the Irish and Polish teams playing throughout the decades of Communist rule. Indeed, Ireland has played more football matches against Poland than any other country – a total of twenty-seven encounters. The first match was played in Warsaw in 1938 and the most recent encounter was played in October 2015. For those with an interest, the tally is in Poland's favour. But this doesn't stop us being friends! And the warm welcome given to the Irish fans during the Euro Championship in 2012 is still talked about in Ireland. As I think about these few weeks, I am struck by the power of sport to bring people together.

But that is to move forward too fast. If there was no formal engagement with Poland in the 1980s, there was great popular sympathy and interest. The Solidarity movement captured the public imagination in Ireland, and there was an outpouring of sympathy and support when martial law was imposed in December 1981.

Despite a difficult economic situation at the time, Ireland pledged a large contribution to the EEC's food aid programme for Poland, while charities and church organisations raised £500,000 (worth over €1.6 million today) to help. Protests were held outside the Soviet

embassy in Dublin. The Irish government worked with other EEC members to shape a common response to events.

The Irish Polish Society, founded in 1979, raised £250,000 to ship twenty containers filled with medical supplies, food, and clothing to Poland by February 1983. Artists and musicians also pledged their support: U2's famous 'New Year's Day' was dedicated by lead singer Bono to Lech Wałęsa, who was interned at the time the song was recorded.

It was the historic change of 1989 that opened a new era for Poland and, the chance to create a new relationship between Ireland and Poland. The Irish government opened an office in Warsaw in the autumn of 1989 which became an embassy the following year. A Polish embassy opened its doors in Dublin a year later.

From the beginning, Ireland supported Poland's wish to join the European Union. Having benefitted from membership ourselves, we believed the benefits should be extended to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. To help Poland prepare for membership, the Irish government began a scheme in 1992 to bring Polish officials to Ireland to work alongside Irish civil servants and learn from our experience of the EU. This scheme ran for sixteen years, and hundreds of Polish officials took part.

New possibilities were created for Polish and Irish people to travel, meet and get to know each other. I was one of them, visiting Poland for the first time as a first year university student in the summer of 1990. It is wonderful to see the transformation that has been achieved when I returned to Poland as Ambassador 25 years later.

We are proud in Ireland that Poland formally became a member of the European Union in Dublin, on 1 May 2004.

Within the framework of the EU, sustained, contact and engagement became possible. As members of the EU, Ireland and Poland are working together to advance shared goals and interests and to promote common values abroad. EU membership has brought us together in ways that could only be imagined by earlier generations.

We are proud, too, that we opened our labour market to citizens of the new Member States in 2004. In the years that followed, tens of thousands of Polish men and women have come

to Ireland to work, live and study. Today some 150,000 Poles live in Ireland, making them the largest foreign community in Ireland. Polish is now our most spoken foreign language.

Poles are a feature of Irish life, our friends and neighbours, workplace colleagues and, members of our family. They are very welcome.

To celebrate their contribution to Irish life, the Irish government sponsors an annual Polska Éire Festival, a week-long series of events across Ireland celebrating the cultural, sporting, business, political and, above all, personal ties between Polish and Irish people.

The presence of the Polish community has transformed relations between Ireland and Poland. At the start it meant a daily bus service from Dublin to Warsaw, followed by Polish language newspapers, the appearance of Polish food aisles in supermarkets, and the now everyday sight of the *Polski sklep* on Irish high streets. The daily bus service has been replaced by over sixty flights a week to Ireland from twelve Polish airports.

Ireland and Poland are now more closely connected than at any time in history.

A dynamic trading relationship has been built up, worth over €3.4 billion a year. Irish exports to Poland and Polish exports to Ireland are both growing by an estimated 15% a year.

A new generation is growing up, both Irish and Polish. There are an estimated 25,000 children living in Ireland whose parents are Polish. When I think of what this means, a generation of young men and women, speaking Polish and English, whose identity is both Irish and Polish, I am confident for the future of Irish-Polish relations.

And among the many Poles who have lived in Ireland and returned home to Poland, some have brought with them children who were born in Ireland. These young people and their families are a new and unique part of Ireland's global diaspora, forming yet another bridge between Ireland and Poland.

I look forward to the day when this new generation, comfortable with both Irish and Polish identities, will play their part in developing business, cultural and sporting relations between Ireland and Poland. Perhaps in the not too distant future, we will see Polish names on the back of our sporting jerseys.

One thing is certain, the Irish government is committed to working with Polish people who have lived, worked or studied in Ireland and returned home to Poland, and to catering for the needs of the Irish diaspora here in Poland. The Embassy has created Network Irlandii to enable Poles to retain their connections with Ireland.

So today, ties between us are no longer shaped by isolated encounters.

We are living through the most sustained and intensive period in Irish-Polish relations.

I like to think that the Polish community in Ireland has become the 'Poland of the west,' in a way that Louie Bennett could not have imagined a hundred years ago. And the small but growing number of Irish people living here in Poland, as well as a new generation of dual Irish-Polish people, are her 'Ireland of the east'.

That this has been achieved so smoothly and in such a spirit of friendship and cooperation is something that Irish and Polish people can together take pride in. When the historians of the future gather they will be able to tell this remarkable story and how it was achieved.

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