

Czy wiesz, kto wymyślił wycieraczki samochodowe?

FIVE MINDS OF POLISH SCIENCE – POLSCY NAUKOWCY

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History of Poles in Great Britain

History

→ Poles in Great Britain

The History of Polish Presence in the UK Poland boasts one of the longest and most impressive emigration traditions in the world. However, the unique character of Polish emigration history is not about statistics; the true uniqueness lies in the unusual reasons and purposes that drove so many Poles to leave their motherland. It is no coincidence that the history of Polish emigration runs parallel to the history of Polish political and statehood issues. Poles would leave their homeland not in search of riches, but on a quest for the Polish state: to fight for a free, complete Poland, independent of foreign influence, even if the fight was to take place outside of the country – in terms of geography and sociology.

Making such a statement at the beginning of a text dealing with the Polish presence in the UK seems to be necessary. The overwhelming majority of the time that Poles spent in Britain was associated with their struggle for the independence and sovereignty of their motherland in the twentieth century.

Polish relations with the UK prior to that period seem to be much more loose and incidental. In the sixteenth century, one of the most interesting examples of the way the fates of our nations intersected is the story of Jan Łaski, the nephew and namesake of the Polish Primate, who, being a Catholic priest, converted to Protestantism and became a pastor. At the personal invitation by the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, he came to England, where he would help organize Protestant communities. He is considered by the Anglicans as one of the founders of the national Church of England. Among the more colourful figures, one needs to mention Józef Boruślawski, one of Europe's most famous dwarves, who lived at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He spent several years in the UK, gaining a large group of fans, who would affectionately call him "Joujou".

The heart of the Great Emigration after the November Uprising (1830-1831) beat across the English Channel – in Paris. It was there that Prince Czartoryski's Hotel Lambert operated. Paris was also the seat of other Polish political parties, such as Towarzystwo Demokratyczne Polskie (the Polish Democratic Society). The most vibrant figures of the Great Emigration, like Adam Mickiewicz or Joachim Lelewel, also chose to settle in the French capital.

In 1835, the most radical post-Uprising faction of Polish emigration, Gromady Ludu Polskiego (the Assemblies of Polish People), arrived in the UK by sea. The group included the leaders of this movement: Stanisław Worcell, Tadeusz Krępowiecki, and Zenon Świątosławski. It was because of their activities, which took place in the years 1835-1846, that we can talk about the relations between Great Britain and the Polish émigré circles in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Assemblies of Polish People had among their catchphrases and in their programme the demand for the enfranchisement of the peasants and the call for regaining Polish independence by means of a popular uprising. At Highgate Cemetery in London, in the part known as the White Eagle Hill, rest the earthly remains of the Assemblies' activists. This was also the place, a hundred years later, of several patriotic demonstrations, attended, among others, by General Władysław Anders. It was mainly a symbolic gesture, meant to emphasize the continuity between the second Great Emigration and its predecessor from a century before.

Other leading representatives of the "French emigration" also had British episodes in their life stories. The British capital was visited by Frederic Chopin, who gave several concerts there. He lived on the same street where – only a few years before – Juliusz Słowacki had rented a room.

The end of the nineteenth century marked the inception of another Polish organization in the UK – Towarzystwo Polskie (the Polish Society). It operated primarily in the social and political field. However, the importance of that particular organisation to Polish history arises mainly from the fact that – at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – it became the institutional support for the activities of Józef Piłsudski and other Polish Socialist Party (PPS) activists in the UK.

It was also at that time that the Polish Catholic Mission was established in Britain. The church on Devonian Road was throughout the twentieth century – and, to some extent, has also remained until this day – a place strongly associated with Polish patriotic initiatives. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Ignacy Paderewski – the famous Polish pianist – arrived in Britain, announced by his impresario as the "Lion of Paris". After a quite spectacular debacle at the beginning of his tour, Paderewski ultimately managed to win over the hearts of the British people. In later years, that was to bring tangible political benefits to the Polish cause. Paderewski's debut in the UK was even immortalized by T. S. Eliot in one of his early poems: "We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole / Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips".

However, the most important chapter in the history of the relations of the Polish diaspora with Britain was not opened until mid-1940. It was then that the refugees from France – conquered by Nazi Germany – arrived in London; the most important arrivals were, of course, the members of the Polish government, around whom, from then on, focused all the political activities to further the Polish cause. That moment was a turning point – since then, and up until 1989, London was to the Poles – both in Poland and abroad – as well as to the whole world, what Paris had been during the previous century.

The Polish authorities took their seat in the buildings at Kensington Palace Gardens, at the Rubens Hotel, and at Stratton House. It was there that – during the five years of war – attempts were made to break through the agreements of the world politics with the most important demand of the Polish government – to convince the countries involved in the global conflict that there was a need for an independent and sovereign Poland. However, the reality of wartime London was not only about the great politics – the every-day life of its inhabitants was, first and foremost, marked the fear of German bombings. But even in such circumstances, the Poles proved to be a hard nut to crack for the Germans. Numerous inscriptions would appear on the walls of the bombed buildings, saying: "The Poles can take it". German pilots would soon be able to test the strength of Polish resolve.

When Polish radio chatter was first picked up over London, the Luftwaffe brass considered it an English bluff. The Germans did not believe that there was such a thing as Polish aerial units in the UK – and they were not the only ones. The English also doubted the ability of the Polish pilots, and feared that their lack of knowledge of the English language would cause even more problems. As

it turned out, Zumbach, Łokuciewski, Urbanowicz, and others – would marvel all. It is hard to determine it with certainty, but without their involvement the German Operation Sea Lion might have been successful and ended in the final defeat of England. When the Poles – who were quite accustomed to flying aircraft that was of less than top quality – got their hands on British Hurricanes and Spitfires, they sowed the seeds of terror in the hearts of German pilots over the Isles. They also wrought havoc – though of a different kind – on the ground, namely: in the hearts of English girls, seduced by their “Hollywood” looks and impeccable manners. Suffice it to say that the British would hastily learn at least a few words of Polish to be able to pass as Poles in front of the ladies.

The Polish pilots achieved their greatest success on September 15th – the day believed to have been the turning point in the Battle of Britain. They shot down as many as 26 German aircraft on that day. King George VI himself sent a congratulatory telegram. Polish airmen shot down approximately 200-230 German fighters during the entire Battle of Britain; every eighth pilot defending the pride of Albion was Polish.

The British showed their gratitude to the Polish pilots in a gesture that was perceived by the latter as a painful slap in the face. The representatives of the pilots were the only Polish soldiers to be invited to the great victory parade in June 1946. The British overlooked the Polish navy and infantry, but invited a delegation of the Polish People's Army instead. The actions of the British authorities, obviously driven by political motives, became to the Poles in the UK a symbol of the times to come. The Polish airmen turned down the invitation – a decision which proved to be equally symbolic of the period of the post-war activity of Poles in Great Britain: a period of dissent and opposition in the face of the post-Yalta European reality.

It was also the time when each and every Pole residing in the UK had to make a choice: whether to return to their homeland or to remain in exile. The legitimate Polish authorities took steps in order to keep the Poles in the UK. Efforts were made to inform the Polish diaspora of the political situation in Poland in as much detail as possible. Attempts were made to shape the public opinion with the help of the most esteemed citizens. General Anders, when asked for his opinion on the possibility of return, replied flatly: “I strongly advise against it”. That was one of the reasons why Stanisław Mikołajczyk's decision to return to Poland was met with almost unanimous criticism. He considered a compromise with the Soviet Union as the only rational solution – which was obviously closer to a capitulation than a compromise. Mikołajczyk had to step down as the Prime Minister of the Polish Government (replaced at the end of 1944 by a socialist – Tomasz Arciszewski), and then he returned to the Soviet-occupied Poland – which seemed to be a natural consequence of his policy. Many other diaspora politicians followed in his footsteps, including, among others, Jan Śtańczyk, Stanisław Grabski, and Karol Popiel. However, their political ‘careers’ in Poland were short-lived, lasting several months at best. Most of them were either arrested or emigrated once again. Mikołajczyk himself had to flee to avoid incarceration. The Polish diaspora in London never forgave his act of apostasy; the return to the occupied Poland and even partial acceptance of its new communist order – and, likewise, the Yalta agreement – were interpreted as unforgivable sins in the unwritten code of the Polish exiles. Opposition to Yalta was both a cornerstone and a determinant of political activities and ideological orientation to the Polish diaspora. The moniker of a “Yaltan” or a “knight of Yalta” would forever stick to the leader of the Peasants' Party.

Spacerzy śladami Polaków

History of Poland...  

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