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Poland's Political History – a Quick Chronological Overview 1/20/21

A note on pronouncing Polish words.

Lots of people have trouble pronouncing Polish words. In fact with a couple of minutes of review it is actually not hard at all!

For one thing, all letters in the Polish alphabet are always pronounced in the same way – unlike English! For another the accent in all Polish words is on the NEXT TO LAST syllable.

Now on particular letters –

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|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| W is pronounced as V | 'Warszawa' is pronounced var-SHAH- vah |
| C by itself is pronounced TS | 'car' is pronounced tsar (the Russian emperor) |
| CH together – C is silent | 'chata" (a cottage) is pronounced HAH-tah |
| CZ is pronounced CH | 'czarny" (black) is pronounced CHAR-nyh |
| CI together is pronounced CH | |
| SZ is pronounced SH | 'szary' (gray) is pronounced SHAH-ryh |
| RZ is pronounced ZH | 'malarz" (a painter) is pronounced MAH-lazh |
| J is always pronounced Y | 'jablko" (an apple) is pronounced YAHB-kaw |

A is always AH E is always EH O is always awe

A with a backward comma underneath is pronounced OH

E with a backward comma underneath is pronounced EN

L with a line through it is pronounced V

So Lech Walesa is pronounced LEKH vah-WHEN-sah

Wojciech Jaruzelski is pronounced VOY-check yah-roo-ZEL-ski (a name I don't like to say, let alone pronounce).

NOW to the Chronology!

966 - Mieszko, ruler of the Poles is baptized and Poland is recognized as part of western Christendom; it adopts the western alphabet and is greatly influenced by western arts and architecture. For Poland, nation, faith, statehood, and independence become closely intertwined.

- 1264** Passage of the *Statute of Kalisz* guarantees Jews legal protection. It later becomes the national law and for 500 years.
- 1386** The marriage of Queen Jadwiga of Poland and the ruler of Lithuania leads to a Union lasting to 1795 and the conversion of Lithuania to Christianity. The population of this vast multi-ethnic, constitutional state includes Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Jews, Germans, smaller minorities and is tolerant on religion. It has a parliament and limits the power of the king. It extends from the Baltic Sea to the edge of the Black Sea – 400,000 square miles. Its kings come from the Jagiellonian dynasty until 1574.
- 1430** King Wladyslaw Jagiello (since 1386) approves *Neminem Captivabimus* – a version of *Habeus Corpus*. This law remains in effect until 1795.
- 1473** Nicholas Copernicus is born; his theory that the sun is the center of the known universe revolutionizes thinking forever. A student at Krakow's Jagiellonian University, one of Europe's oldest such institutions, he is also a great mathematician and advises the king on monetary policy.
- 1569** At the "Union of Lublin" the *Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (or royal Republic)* is established as a constitutional federation of two nations.
- 1574** Following the death of the last Jagiellonian ruler, Poland's leaders decide that henceforth Poland's kings will be elected. The nobles (10-11 percent of the population) elect ten kings over the next two centuries.
- 1673** The bloody wars and invasions that began in 1648 and deluged the Commonwealth finally end. They took 30 percent of the population. In 1667 Poland loses half its lands in the Ukraine to Russia. This period is covered in the novels of Nobel Laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916).
- 1721** The Northern War that began in 1697 ends leaving the badly weakened Commonwealth dominated by Russia's Tsar, Peter the Great.
- 1772** Tsarina Catherine of Russia, Empress Maria Teresa of Austria, and King Frederick the Great of German Prussia combine to seize one-third of the

- Commonwealth in what becomes known as the *First Partition of Poland*.
- 1791** The Polish Parliament adopts a revolutionary new *Constitution* on May 3rd. It reforms the legislative process, strengthens the army, ends the election of kings, reaffirms religious toleration, and declares the vast peasant population to be part of the nation and under the government's protection. Russia and Prussia react by invading the country, nullifying the Constitution and seizing half its territory in a *Second Partition* (1793).
- 1795** All three empires combine to erase what little remains of Poland in a *Third Partition* after crushing the insurrection to save the country led by the reform-minded general and American hero, Thaddeus Kosciuszko. The nation remains under oppressive foreign rule until 1918 – 123 years. Great insurrections – in 1830 and 1863 - are crushed. Several million people emigrate in search of a better life. In this period, masses of urban working people and peasants become part of the expanding Polish nation. New political parties devoted to the independence cause form. Major cultural figures connected with the Polish cause in this period include Composer Frydryk Chopin (1810-1849) and Actress Helena Modjeska (1840-1909).
- 1918** In World War I (1914-1918) all three occupying empires are defeated – making possible the realization of the efforts by patriots to restore Polish independence. Jozef Pilsudski (1867-1935) proclaims independence in Warsaw – on November 11, the day the War ends on the western front.
- 1919** World renowned Pianist-Patriot Ignacy Paderewski (1860-1941) becomes Poland's first Prime minister. A new democratic Constitution is approved. It guarantees equal rights to all and women's suffrage. Poland's borders are secured in 1921 after Pilsudski's army wins a crushing victory over the Bolsheviks at the Battle of Warsaw (August 1920). The new *Second Republic* has 28 million citizens (67 percent are ethnically Polish) and is 151,000 square miles in size.
- 1926** Pilsudski takes over the country in a military *coup* aimed at bringing order and direction to a country whose inept parliamentary government failed to deal with its massive economic and foreign policy problems. His increasingly autocratic regime faces opposition from the democratic parties, whose support rises following his death in 1935.

- 1939** On September 1 Poland is attacked by Nazi Germany – the start of World War II. On September 17 the Soviet Union invades Poland from the east and the two totalitarian states partition the country, subjecting its inhabitants to incredible terror and destruction. Over the next six years, seven million Polish citizens lose their lives – 22 percent of the 1939 population of 35 million – including 90 percent of its Jewish citizenry (3 million perish). A Polish government in exile is established in London; allied to Britain it contributes greatly to victory over Hitler – e.g., in the air Battle of Britain (1940), by giving the Brits the *Enigma* code, at the Battle of Normandy. In occupied Poland, the massive underground resistance is crushed in the devastating Warsaw Rising of August-October 1944 – over 200,000 people are killed. The city is leveled to the ground.
- 1945** Polish leaders in the “London Government” are excluded from Summit talks between Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill at Yalta (February) as they had been previously at Teheran (December 1943) – despite the fact that Poland’s very political future and its national borders are being decided. In July a Soviet-run regime (soon to be the “*Polish People Republic*”) is placed in power. It remains in control until 1989 although its rule is never legitimized through a genuine referendum or a free election. Post War “People’s Poland” is 121,000 (from 151,000) square miles in size and is drastically reshaped territorially. Historic Polish cities in the east – Wilno (Vilnius after 1945 and Lithuania’s new capital) and Lwow (Lviv – part of post war Ukraine) are lost. Wroclaw (pre war Breslau), Gdansk (pre war Danzig) and Szczecin (Stettin) are in the newly reconfigured state. The country’s 22 million inhabitants are nearly all Poles by ethnicity.
- 1978** Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Krakow (1920-2006) is elected Pope John Paul II. From the start he is an advocate of freedom and justice for the Poles. In his remarkable first visit back to his homeland as Pope in 1979 he electrifies his countrymen with his vision of hope.
- 1980** The Solidarity Trade Union’s independence is agreed to by the nearly bankrupt Communist regime on August 31. Led by electrician Lech Walesa (b. 1943) the Union has nearly 10 million members in a country of 35 million and within just a month’s time.

- 1981** The regime headed by General Wojciech Jaruzelski (1923-2014) declares martial law and tries to suppress the Solidarity union. The effort fails.
- 1989** Roundtable talks begin in Warsaw on February 6 between regime representatives and Solidarity. They lead to the Union's full restoration in April and to partially free parliament elections on June 4, 1989.

Poland from 1989 – Key Developments

June 4, 1989 – the Solidarity movement – formed in August 1980, suppressed in December 1981, and restored in April 1989 – wins an amazing victory over the ruling United Workers (communist) party in a special parliamentary election. Its triumph leads to the speedy demise of the Polish People's Republic regime.

September 13, 1989 - a new Solidarity-led government headed by Tadeusz Mazowiecki (1927-2013) as Prime Minister is approved by a 402-0 vote of the national assembly (*Sejm*). To revive the moribund economy Mazowiecki unveils a bold and radical reform program – “shock therapy” - directed by his deputy, Leszek Balcerowicz (b. 1947) and inspired by economic strategist Jeffrey Sachs of Harvard University. He also appeals to his countrymen to draw a thick line (*gruba kreska*) between the communist past and their hopes for a better future. Both his economic plan and his statesmanlike political appeal are controversial and are at the heart of bitter political divisions to come.

December 31, 1989 - The parliament formally establishes the Polish *Third Republic* in place of the discredited Peoples Republic. In January 1990 the United Workers (communist) Party is dissolved. Some of its leaders form a new, self-styled *socialist* party, later named the Alliance of the Democratic Left (*SLD*).

December 9, 1990 – Solidarity leader and Nobel laureate Lech Walesa becomes Poland's first popularly elected President. A contentious figure governing in difficult conditions, in 1995 he is narrowly defeated by SLD nominee Aleksander Kwasniewski (b. 1954). Kwasniewski is reelected in 2000.

February 15, 1991 – leaders of newly democratic Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary meet in the ancient Hungarian town of Viszegrad to begin cooperative and eventually successful campaigns to enter NATO and the European Union.

September 17, 1993 – the last units of the Russian (formerly Soviet) army exit Poland – after forty-eight years of occupation.

1996 - thanks to its 1989 reforms plus help from the western democracies, Poland's economy has begun a dramatic recovery. In 2015, it is the 6th largest in the European Union and is 24th in the world. With wages up and both inflation and unemployment down to 4 percent, the respected *Economist* magazine (in June 28, 2014) describes Poland as entering into its second "Golden Age". (Its first "golden age" came in the 16th century.)

May 25, 1997 - A new Constitution is approved in a national referendum.

March 12, 1999 - Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic join the NATO Alliance following unanimous approval of all 16 of its member states.

August 16-19, 2002 - Pope John Paul II, who played a key role in inspiring the Polish people and what became Solidarity during his first visit to his homeland as Pope in June 1979, soon after his election, is in Poland an eighth time. In 2014, he is proclaimed a Saint of the Roman Catholic Church.

May 1, 2004 – Poland joins the European Union, with the Czech and Slovak Republics, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia, Malta and Cyprus.

October 2005 – Two post Solidarity political parties, Law and Justice led by the Kaczynski twins, Lech and Jaroslaw (b. 1949), and the Civic Platform, led by Donald Tusk (b. 1957), dominate the parliamentary and presidential elections. The SLD is marginalized as a factor in the country's political life.

November 14, 2007 - Donald Tusk of the Civic Platform party becomes Prime Minister. Under his leadership Poland's economy continues to improve. Tusk steps down to be President of the Council of the European Union in Brussels in 2014 and continues as the EU's "prime minister" until 2019.

April 10, 2010 - President Lech Kaczynski (b. 1949), his wife, and ninety-four public officials and dignitaries are killed in a plane crash *en route* to commemorative observances in Russia marking the seventieth anniversary of the World War II Katyn Forest Massacre. Following a period of national mourning, Bronislaw Komorowski (b. 1952) is elected Poland's fourth President on July 4, 2010 over Jaroslaw Kaczynski, leader of the Law and Justice party.

May 25, 2015 - Andrzej Duda (b. 1972) of the Law and Justice Party is elected Poland's fifth president, over Komorowski. In the parliament election held that Fall, the Law and Justice party wins over the then-governing Civic Platform party. It becomes the first party since 1989 to gain an absolute majority in the 460 member *Sejm*. It retains its absolute majority in the Fall 2019 election. Poland's Prime Ministers from 2015 are Beata Szydlo (until 2017) and Mateusz Morawiecki (b. 1963).

July 6, 2017 – President Donald Trump praises Poland's achievements and its close ties with the U.S. in an outdoor speech in Warsaw where monuments commemorate the Poles' rising in 1944 against Nazi Germany. He becomes the fifth consecutive sitting American president to visit Poland since its historic election of June 4, 1989, after George H.W. Bush, William Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. In 2019 American troops are stationed in NATO-ally Poland for the first time. That same year Poland is awarded "visa waiver" status by the United States, something its people and government have long sought.

June 2020 – Presidential elections set for May 10 are postponed due to the pandemic virus sweeping through Europe. The Civic Platform candidate opposing President Duda, Katarzyna Kidawa-Blonska (b. 1957), drops out in late May and is replaced by Warsaw City Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski (b. 1972). In the first round on June 26 and with eleven candidates in the race, Duda wins 43.7 percent of the vote, not enough to avoid a run-off against Trzaskowski's 30.3 percent. The run-off vote on July 12 results in Duda squeaking past his rival with 51.1 percent of the total vote.