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DONALD E. PIENKOS

WITNESS TO HISTORY: POLISH AMERICANS AND THE GENESIS OF NATO ENLARGEMENT

On January 9, 1998, Nicholas Rey, the then recently retired United States Ambassador to Poland, visited the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, from Minneapolis, Minnesota, en route to Chicago. His aim was to build public support for the entry of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the NATO Alliance. This issue was to be debated in the weeks to come in the United States Senate, where a two-thirds majority vote was needed for NATO enlargement to occur.

A few weeks earlier, a representative of the United States Department of State and Myra Lenard, the Washington, DC, Director of the Polish American Congress (PAC),¹ had each asked me to organize a set of activities for the Ambassador during his Milwaukee stay. These were to include a breakfast gathering with members of the city's Chamber of Commerce and a meeting with the editorial board of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Wisconsin's main newspaper. Thanks to the efforts of two representatives of Milwaukee's large Polish American community, city official Terry Witkowski, then the president of the Milwaukee Society lodge of the Polish National Alliance fraternal insurance society, and County Judge Michael J. Skwierawski, a luncheon was also hastily arranged for Mr. Rey. Some ninety community leaders attended.

Mr. Rey's visit was a success. Most significant was his meeting with the editorial board of the newspaper. Previously, the *Journal Sentinel* had opposed NATO enlargement. Following the discussion, it did no more editorializing against the policy. Evidently, Mr. Rey had made a persuasive case.

At the luncheon, I was seated next to Mr. Rey and we chatted amiably on a variety of subjects. Then it happened. I mentioned that back in January of 1994 I had taken part in a meeting in Milwaukee together with a number of other Americans of Polish, Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak heritage. That meeting had been held the night before President William Clinton had been scheduled to deliver a major foreign policy speech at the city's historic Pabst

¹ On the Polish American Congress, see Donald Pienkos, *Polish American Congress, 1944-1994: Half a Century of Service to Poland and Polonia* (Chicago: Alliance Printers and Publishers, 1994).

Theater.² Suddenly, Ambassador Rey turned to me and exclaimed, “You were there! They were talking about that meeting for the next six months back in Washington! You folks had a big impact in changing our country’s foreign policy!”

Obviously, Mr. Rey’s words surprised me. Still, I had long sensed that that meeting four years earlier had indeed been significant and that I may have even been a kind of eyewitness and participant in the making of a major historical decision. For most of those of us who are college history or political science professors, such experiences come seldom, if ever. The research and teaching we do is based on describing and explaining the acts and decisions of others. Rarely, if ever, are we at ringside for a big event, much less in the ring itself, even for a moment.

My experience went back to the autumn and winter of 1993. The issue was the future of NATO. For its part, the Clinton Administration had apparently concluded that while the Alliance should continue to exist, despite earlier proposals that it be dissolved following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, new members from the once Soviet-dominated region of Eastern Europe would not be considered for inclusion. Instead, such newly democratic states as the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia had been

² The events in Milwaukee of January 5-6, 1993, have received no attention to this time. For example, in his valuable and comprehensive review of the NATO issue in the Congress of the United States, the young Polish scholar Bogusław Winid does not mention these events in his article “Rozszerzenie NATO w Kongresie Stanów Zjednoczonych 1993-1998” [The Expansion of NATO in the Congress of the United States 1993-1998] in *Rozprawy i materiały Ośrodka Studiów Amerykańskich Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego* [Discussions and Materials of the American Studies Center of the University of Warsaw] (Warsaw: American Studies Center, Warsaw University, 1999), vol. 4. A second work, by George Grayson, is titled *Strange Bedfellows: NATO Marches East* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1999). This study of the battle over NATO expansion from its earliest stages to the 1998 United States Senate vote emphasizes the policy debates inside the Administration and the complex maneuverings in Congress. Polish government efforts on behalf of NATO expansion are also presented. The role of the PAC and its president, while duly noted, is given surprisingly little elaboration and the Milwaukee meeting receives little more than passing mention. Thus Deputy National Security Advisor Sanford Berger is reported as having gone to the January 6, 1994, dinner grumbling and worrying; afterwards he is described as calling it “one of the best meetings he had had.” The author of *Strange Bedfellows* then makes an almost off-handed observation that is in fact far more important. He writes: “The White House reacted to presentiments voiced in Milwaukee by sending (UN Ambassador) Madeleine Albright, (Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John) Shalikashvili, and (State Department official and academic Charles) Gati to Warsaw, Prague and Budapest to inform the host governments of . . . Washington’s intentions for Partnership for Peace affiliation to open a pathway to a seat on the NATO council, not an alternative to membership as the Pentagon envisioned” (pp. 162-163). This last line deserves an exclamation point; the Clinton Administration had changed its policy on NATO enlargement.

consigned to indefinite “gray zone” status as “partners for peace” outside NATO’s formal protection. Each state, particularly Poland, had objected to this policy, but with little hope that either Washington or its allies would change their stance.

At this point, the Polish American Congress, the United States’ leading political action organization of persons of Eastern European heritage, had entered the picture to question the Administration’s view of NATO enlargement. Repeatedly, the PAC, mainly through its president, Edward J. Moskal, and its chief Washington representatives, Myra Lenard and her husband, Casimir, warned of the dangers of excluding Poland and its neighbors from entry into the Alliance.³ When letters from the PAC and from US Senators friendly to its position failed to cause the Clinton Administration to reconsider its NATO policy, Moskal launched a new strategy. This initiative aimed at a massive nationwide mobilization of Polish Americans and their friends to voice their concerns directly to Washington. Thus, on one weekend alone, in December 1993, over 100,000 letters, postcards and mailgrams were addressed to the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Chairman of the Democratic Party National Committee. Telephone calls in the thousands were also directed to the White house, along with more than 14,000 e-mail messages over the internet.⁴

The Administration got the message. On Monday, January 3, 1994, it was announced that the President would travel to Milwaukee to deliver a major foreign policy address on Thursday, January 6, on the eve of his forthcoming trip to Europe. There he was scheduled to meet with NATO leaders in Brussels, Belgium, then with Czech President Vaclav Havel in Prague and

³ For background on these events, see Donald E. Pienkos, “Poland, the Issue of NATO Enlargement and the Polish American Congress,” *The Polish Review*, vol. 40, no. 2 (1995), pp. 181-196. On the record of the Polish American Congress’ work on behalf of an independent and democratic Poland from the World War II era onward, see Donald E. Pienkos, *For Your Freedom Through Ours: Polish American Efforts on Poland’s Behalf, 1863-1991* (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, 1991), pp. 105-247, and scattered.

⁴ Myra and Casimir Lenard were also responsible for organizing a joint lobbying effort in Washington, DC, that brought together a large number of other organizations representing Americans of Eastern and Central European heritage. By 1998, this effort, known as the Central and East European Coalition, included nineteen different organizations. These were: the American Latvian Association in the United States, the Armenian Assembly of America, the Belarusian Congress Committee of America, the Bulgarian Institute for Research and Analysis, the Congress of Romanian Americans, the Czechoslovak National Council of America, the Estonian American National Council, the Estonian World Council, the Georgian Association in the US, the Hungarian American Coalition, the Joint Baltic American National Committee, the Lithuanian American Council, the Lithuanian American Community, the National Federation of American Hungarians, the Polish American Congress, the Slovak League of America, the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, the Ukrainian National Association, and the US Baltic Foundation.

immediately afterwards with Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the Belarusian capital of Minsk.

Following this initial announcement, I was contacted by the Milwaukee organizers of the speech for help in putting out a last minute set of invitations to ethnic leaders in the area. I also received a similar call from a White House staff person. All were anxious to have a substantial audience on hand at very short notice at the Pabst Theater, an ornate, well-preserved – and large – monument to the city’s grand culture dating back to the end of the nineteenth century. I did what I could, then looked forward to attending the President’s Thursday morning speech.

On the afternoon of January 4, I got a second call from a White House aide who invited me to attend a dinner with Administration representatives and a small number of Americans of Eastern European origins that had been set for Milwaukee’s Pfister Hotel the next evening. I asked how I had been invited but received only a polite but vague reply. Needless to say, I was on time for the next evening’s get-together.

When we convened on the fifth, I was pleased to see President Moskal, accompanied by the Executive Director of the Polish American Congress, Attorney Les Kuczynski. As things turned out, eight Americans of Polish origin had been invited to the dinner, which was to be followed by an open discussion with no stated agenda. They included Moskal; Jan Nowak-Jezioranski, former director of the Polish Section of Radio Free Europe and until 1992 a PAC national vice president; Helen Wojcik, President of the Polish Women’s Alliance and a PAC vice president; Professor Stanislaus Blejwas, a specialist in the history of Poland at Central Connecticut State University and, like me, a national director of the PAC; and myself. The three other Polish Americans were new to me: Dolores Spejewski, a vice president of the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America fraternal organization, Attorney Lawrence Leck, and banker Donald Versen. All came from Chicago.

Five individuals of Hungarian heritage, three Czech Americans, and two of Slovak ancestry attended with us. Of these ten, I knew only one, Mojmir Povolny, a retired political science professor from Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. Most hailed from other parts of the country. All told, the group had been carefully selected by the Administration; we were a diverse lot both in terms of our ethnicity and geography. Besides this, a number of invitees had been strong supporters of Clinton’s election to the Presidency in 1992, when he had narrowly defeated George Bush in his campaign for a second term in office.⁵

The Administration was well represented at the dinner. Chairing the gathering was Alexis Herman, who at the time held a high position in the White House. Several years later, she became Secretary of Labor. Present too was Attorney Sanford “Sandy” Berger, then the President’s Deputy National

⁵ The names of these fine individuals are to be found in Pienkos, “Poland . . .,” p. 191, n. 27.

Security Advisor, and Daniel Fried, a State Department specialist on Polish and East Central European Affairs. Each also rose to higher responsibilities, Berger to National Security Advisor to the President and Fried to United States Ambassador to Poland, succeeding Nicholas Rey. There were others from the White House and State Department; several I learned were speech writers. Theirs was to prove to be a long and busy night.

During the informal banter before dinner no mention was made of the issue that had brought us together, nor did I get an inkling as to how we were to proceed. Still, I sensed that we were in for a serious evening. Thus, when the young White House aide seated next to me at dinner wondered what we were going to talk about, I replied, "I think I know what's on our minds."

About 8:15 PM, Ms. Herman called on us to introduce ourselves and then asked us to give our thoughts on the issues of the day. Immediately it became very clear that this somewhat random group of dinner guests had one, and only one, issue in mind: a concern over extending NATO membership to the Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Slovak republics. Moreover, as each of us began to speak in favor of NATO enlargement, two related points were made again and again. One had to do with the timing of NATO enlargement: just when would the Administration decide if enlargement were to occur, how long would the process take, and when would it start? Second, what criteria would be used in determining whether a new applicant country would be considered for NATO membership? Amazingly, not a single individual deviated from these points. No one went on to another subject. Nor was there any disagreement . . . this among individuals who in a number of ways had been strangers just an hour or so earlier.

As I listened to what others said, and took my opportunities to make my own points, I was increasingly aware that I was at a meeting like none other I had ever attended. Of course, we all have had our experiences at meetings and know how they often work. A topic is brought up, there is discussion, then someone changes the subject, others talk, then people try to return to the original topic, then some leave out of boredom or frustration. Sometimes, as the proceedings continue, the original reason for holding the meeting is even forgotten or at least largely altered.

But this was different. Everyone was "on the same page." All held to the same point of view, which they expressed in various ways, some more elegantly, some less, some in a more wordy fashion, some more concisely. What was key was that the view was unanimous, whatever one's ethnic background. Significantly, too, the self-proclaimed Clinton supporters agreed with the others; we were one and uniformly so.

I could hardly believe it. Yet our arguments met with no response from the Administration's representatives. This became frustrating; one almost felt a bit like the boxer George Foreman battling the incomparable Muhammad Ali and falling victim to his "rope-a-dope" strategy. Why weren't they challenging our arguments?"

Around 10:15 PM, Ms. Herman rose from her chair. Coolly but politely, she expressed the Administration's thanks for our presentation of views and reminded us that we were scheduled to meet again, this time with the President himself, following his public address the next morning. But as Herman finished her farewells, PAC President Moskal also rose. Looking directly toward her, he simply stated: "It's too early to end. Not all of us have had the chance to speak our minds on this subject." Ms. Herman did not say a word. But she did sit down. And we continued, in exactly the same vein, for the next two hours.

Moskal then chose his opportunity to express himself. His words were direct and effective. He simply declared that America's failure to enroll the East Central European democracies in the North Atlantic Alliance was a grave mistake and amounted to "a second Yalta," leaving Poland and its neighbors outside of the NATO security framework. Throughout the evening, the rest of us had done our best to reason with the Administration's representatives by emphasizing the East Central European states' commitment to democracy and economic reform and the crucial importance of NATO membership to their continued progress. But our earnest efforts had been met with silence. However, Moskal's use of the word "Yalta" had struck a nerve: instantly his comment brought a sharp response from Mr. Berger. In their exchange, Moskal underscored our unanimity of views, but he had gone further in demonstrating the Polish American Congress' leadership at the meeting in going beyond diplomatic niceties and engaging in a form of political hardball. There were congressional elections to be held in November 1994, only ten months away. The Administration, he was implying, would face some unpleasant consequences if it ignored the views of twenty million Americans of East Central European heritage on the NATO enlargement issue.

It was nearly 12:30 AM. As we were leaving the room, I looked out the window and saw I would be driving home in a blizzard; most of the others had rooms in the hotel. Then as we were saying our good byes, Stan Blejwas made an observation to Moskal and me. "They're going to be busy revising the President's speech tonight." I looked around; indeed, the staff persons were already talking among themselves and they were not saying their good byes.

On my way home, I turned on the radio and learned that President Clinton's mother had just died and that he had canceled his visit to Milwaukee. Vice President Albert Gore would be taking his place. My reaction was one of frustration: all this effort and for what? But the next morning I learned our gathering had had an impact. As I listened intently to Mr. Gore's public address with its many and varied generalizations about the future United States foreign policy toward East Central Europe, I heard sentences and phrases that the audience could not appreciate. Indeed, many of the very words that I and others at the Pfister Hotel had uttered the night before were right there in the Vice President's speech. Afterwards, I spoke with several academic colleagues at the Pabst; they concluded that the speech was filled with

platitudes and generalities. I could not agree. I sensed that we had just heard a speech in which an argument had been made for NATO's enlargement.

I even recalled my own words of the night before when I had declared that I was not speaking on behalf of Poland and its neighbors. Poland and the other East Central European states have their own embassies and their own foreign ministers who can argue their cases for themselves. The inclusion of Poland and the others into the Alliance, I argued, was necessary because such a policy was critical to our American national security interest. The Vice President in his speech put it this way: "The new NATO must address the concern of those nations that lie between Russia and Western Europe (that is, Poland and its East Central European neighbors), for the security of those nations affects the security of America. . . . Let me say that again: the security of the states that lie between Western Europe and Russia affects the security of America. . . ." ⁶

After the address, our group was convened again, this time to speak directly with the Vice President. Again, I was amazed. No one retreated a single inch from the stance taken the evening before. Gore was confronted, politely but directly, by a solid wall of well-reasoned and reasonable views. Interestingly, he did respond several times to us, most notably in stating that NATO enlargement should not be rejected out of some fear of adversely affecting Russian public opinion against the United States. Gore forthrightly agreed that foreign policy issues seldom affect the public's attitude toward its government; what count far more are domestic and economic issues. Throughout, he struck me as very intelligent, someone who understood the issues very well and could express himself effectively on them, too. However, he made only one statement that could lead us to believe that a change in the Administration's policy was imminent. This came at the very close of our one-hour session. Gore thanked us for sharing our time over the previous two days. He then invited us to the White house, following President Clinton's return from his trip to Europe. "Let's keep up this dialog," he declared. Then it was all over.

On March 2, 1994, most of us were together again, this time in the White House, where we did meet with President Clinton. Our twenty-five minute conversation with him was again frank and direct, though it was always polite and respectful. Interestingly, we had been cautioned just before he joined us only to listen but not put any question to him. But once he completed his remarks, one of the Hungarian Americans, Edith Lauer, immediately challenged him. We then had a very good interchange. In it, Clinton reminded us that the question of NATO expansion was no longer a matter of "whether or not" but, as he had told President Havel in January just after our Milwaukee meeting, one of "when and how." He then went on to say, "The door to NATO enlargement is open." ⁷

⁶ In "Remarks by the Vice President on Foreign Policy," January 6, 1994.

⁷ After the President left our meeting, we spoke with Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot at length about NATO enlargement. Here things were much different

The path to that door was to prove by no means short of smooth. President Moskal and his colleagues in the Polish American Congress leadership would have to meet on a host of occasions with Administration leaders, and with members of the United States Senate and the House of Representatives, to press home their arguments for NATO enlargement. And, of course, they were not alone in their lobbying with the United States Senate, whose ratification of the amended NATO Treaty was required, and by a two-thirds majority, for enlargement to occur.⁸ With but one exception, I took no part in those important meetings.⁹ But I had been at the gathering in Milwaukee on January 5, 1994, where the Administration learned for the very

than they had been in Milwaukee. Talbot was almost combative in arguing against the idea of NATO enlargement and in return he was criticized for his views. The gist of his position was that America's relations with Russia, and not East Central Europe, were central to our foreign policy and that the Administration was convinced that Russia was on the right track towards building a stable democracy and a market-based economy. Americans of East Central European heritage (in his unfortunate phrase, "you people") were unable to hold such optimistic views about Russia's future because they had suffered so much under Soviet and Russian domination in the past. Talbot was informed more than once that our "group" was not necessarily motivated to back NATO expansion out of hatred or fear of Russia. Moreover, he was reminded that we were as American as he, and that our concern for the enlargement of NATO was founded upon our conviction that such a policy was in the best national interests of the United States.

⁸ On April 30, 1998, the Senate, by a vote of 80-19, approved the admission of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary into the Alliance. On April 23, 1999, the leaders of the three states were formally admitted to the Alliance at its fiftieth anniversary observances in Washington, DC. Earlier that year, the Netherlands had become the sixteenth and last NATO member state to approve the enlargement of the Alliance. (Enlargement required a unanimous action on the part of the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.) On April 21, 1999, at a ceremony at the Polish Embassy, Edward J. Moskal was one of twelve Americans to be especially honored by Poland's Prime Minister, Jerzy Buzek, for his work in promoting NATO's enlargement. Others singled out for this recognition included Jan Nowak-Jezioranski, Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US Senators Hank Brown of Colorado and Robert Dole of Kansas. The following day, a number of currently serving United States Senators were honored for their distinctive efforts on behalf of Poland's admission into NATO at a special breakfast near the Capital. These included Democrats Barbara Mikulski (Maryland), Richard Durbin (Illinois), Edward Kennedy (Massachusetts), and Joseph Lieberman (Connecticut); and Republicans Richard Lugar (Indiana), William Roth (Delaware), Gordon Smith (Colorado), and Paul Coverdell (Georgia). Moskal was honored at this ceremony, at the Senate Office Building, by Prime Minister Buzek. That same evening, he was singled out for recognition at a gala banquet, this time by Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski. (*Dziennik Związkowy* [Alliance Daily] (Chicago), April 23-25, 1999, p. 1.

⁹ That one occurred between representatives of the Polish American Congress and UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright, at the fiftieth anniversary observance of the founding of the PAC, October 22, 1994, in Buffalo, New York. This meeting is described in Pienkos, "Poland . . .," p. 194.

first time how strongly a group of individuals it itself had selected felt about the question. Ambassador Rey was right. Our group had made a difference and it had been my good fortune to be there to see it for myself.¹⁰

¹⁰ For an excellent overview of the role of the Polish American Congress on the NATO issue, see the booklet *Expansion of NATO: Role of the Polish American Congress* (Chicago: Alliance Printers and Publishers, 1999), p. 60.