

Speech by HE Mr Zbigniew Gniatkowski, Ambassador of Poland

Turanga Library, Christchurch, 16 July 2020

Kia ora, good afternoon,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to acknowledge Mr Andrew Turner, the Deputy Mayor of Christchurch, Mrs Winsome Dormer, the Polish Honorary Consul and the Dean of Consular Corps, Mrs Dorota Szymańska and Mr Tom Prokop, founders of the Polish Legacy in NZ Trust, Mr Jacek Pawłowski, the President of the Polish Association in Christchurch.

Welcome and thank you for having me today on this special occasion.

We gather here to acknowledge Margaret Copland's valuable contributions to the promotion of the Polish culture in New Zealand. Margaret's ancestor, Rosalia Gierszewski was one of the early arrivals from Poland who settled in Marshland.

It is a great opportunity to pay tribute to Margaret, and to all those first Polish immigrants who worked tirelessly to tame the wild coastline and mainland, to make it hospitable for themselves 150 years ago and for the future generations.

Who were they and why did they end up here? You may wonder. Let me remind you briefly of this chapter in our joint history.

Due to tragic history – including long years of oppressions: partitions, the Second World War and communism, being a sad result of Soviets' conquest of Poland 75 years ago, the Poles belong to a larger group of wondering nations, with nearly 40 million strong population in today's Poland and 20 million people of Polish descent living abroad.

In the 19th century, after the partition of Poland by its neighbours - Prussia, Russia and Austria, many Poles looked upon emigration as a way to escape from despotic rule. This was most evident in the Western part of Poland, including Pomerania, occupied by Germany where hundreds of thousands were forced into exile by unemployment, military conscription, confiscation, or enforced sale of land, and other hardships such as closures of Polish schools, prosecutions for using the Polish language, etc. The Polish people had a strong belief in the ideals of justice and equality, both of which were denied to them by oppressive foreign rule. In 1870's, after the Franco-Prussian War the life of Poles became especially hard. So when they heard of a better life overseas, they thought of a new life in America as their last hope for life in dignity, if not survival.

The fact that Poland was carved up between the three occupying powers, and for 123 years disappeared from the maps of Europe, was one of the reasons why it was difficult to establish the factual number of Polish settlers in New Zealand from that time. According to "History of the Polish Settlers in New Zealand" by Jerzy Pobóg-Jaworowski, assisted immigrants of Polish origins who arrived in New Zealand between 1872 and 1883 amounted to 998 persons. Other records point to 1,400.

The first large group arrived on the ship “Friedeburg” which left Hamburg in May 1872 and arrived at Lyttelton in the end of August 1872. These Poles settled in the Christchurch district. Amongst them was Rozalia Gierszewski, Margaret’s great-great-aunt. Single girls found employment in households, single boys worked on farms. The families were employed at clearing bush in Marshland. The credit is to be given to the Poles for draining the wetlands and converting them into market garden areas. Such work could have been done only by the stubborn and hardworking people.

During the 130-day voyage of another ship - “Palmerston” from Hamburg to Port Chalmers in 1872, scarlatina, typhoid fever and other diseases broke out, mainly among the children. Among the youngest who died was Franz Orłowski, the first child of August and Franciszka. As an Auckland-based historian Barbara Scrivens says in her story, they were farmers living near Gdańsk, who were ordered out of their house by Prussian soldiers. The family walked to Hamburg (600 kilometers), and were listed under New Zealand’s Assisted Immigration Scheme. Upon arrival in Otago they realised that the land purchased for farming was too steep, and finally August turned to his profession from Poland - carpentry in high demand at that time (and after). The Orłowskis settled in Waihola. Their son John Andrew had four daughters; he loved them dearly and raised them as confident and adventurous women. The eldest one, Madeline – named after her Scottish grandmother – was to become the eldest living New Zealander only 3 years ago. I had a pleasure of meeting Mrs Madeline Orłowski Anderson in her Upper Hutt home. Turning 110 that day, she was still very chatty, showing her sense of humor and perseverance.

The Polish community in Waihola valued being able to practice their religion freely. In 1899, they built their own church, and one of the builders was August Orłowski. A small wooden Church of Mary Queen of Peace, originally named after St Hyacinth, was later moved to Broad Bay, where it serves Dunedin’s Polish community and local Catholics until today.

The majority of first Poles settled in Canterbury, Otago and Taranaki in the North Island, primarily in Inglewood. There were also Poles on West Coast – at Jackson’s Bay and Hokitika. Ship by ship, there are as many stories as the arrivals themselves. It is great that thanks to efforts of the Polish Community those stories have been kept alive until today.

The Polish settlers who made New Zealand their home, were pioneers of the best. Thanks to all their experience and strength of character, gained from their native land, they were of critical importance to the economy in NZ. We can definitely be proud of our first countrymen’s struggles. Also subsequent waves of Poles who arrived on New Zealand shores over the years, during and after the Second World War, also in the 1980s, have proved to be respected citizens of their new homeland, while cherishing their Polish roots and heritage. And also today the Polish Kiwis play a positive role in Polish – New Zealand relations. (...)

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to conclude with a few words about our cooperation with the Polish Community. It has always been very rewarding to co-organise and support various initiatives – film screenings, exhibitions or other cultural events, as well as being a part of such actions dedicated to the Polish migrants.

Two years ago, during the Polish President's visit to NZ, we witnessed an inauguration of the *Polskie Dzieci - Polish Children Square* in Wellington, named after the Polish Children of Pahiataua. It highlights the partnership and cooperation between our nations.

Let me recall another symbolical event. In December 2015, we were pleased to join the *Solidarity Grid* project here in Christchurch and all together we unveiled a street lamp from Sopot. Another street lamp offered by the city of Gdańsk decorates the Polish Settlers Place. Both beautiful cities Sopot and Gdańsk are located in the Pomerania region where the Polish "Solidarność" trade union was established in 1980. As you know this social movement successfully fought for political changes leading to the collapse of communism in Europe. These emblematic gifts reminds us of the values that Poles and New Zealanders share such as Freedom, for which our nations jointly fought for many times, and Solidarity which our New Zealand friends had shown to my compatriots by inviting them and offering shelter in difficult times.

To conclude, I would like to thank Dorota Szymańska and Tom Prokop for organizing today's event. Thank you all for preserving the memory of the very first Polish settlers and of all Polish migrants.