

KEYNOTE ADDRESS ACPC JULY 11, 2007 9AM

CHURCH BELLS AND FACTORY WHISTLES

Welcome, everyone, to the 59th annual convention of the American Council for Polish Culture. And thank you for welcoming me. I'm not sure in which capacity I was invited today--as an historian of Polonia, or as the mayor of Hamtramck. One focuses on reclaiming and reinterpreting the past. The other on creating a sustainable future. But it's the combination of those two roles that guides my remarks to you today.

The theme of this year's convention--Church Bells and Factory Whistles--brings to mind Polonia's roots, particularly our collective history of working class, urban neighborhoods--part nostalgia, part reality, part memory and part desire. No matter where we grew up--city, small town, in the country, in suburbia--this is the image of Polonia that endures. This is the Hamtramck of the Heart. But in Hamtramck, as in so many other Polish neighborhoods we remember, most of the factories are long-since closed. And the church bells mingle with the chant of the Muslim Call to Prayer. What's more, scattered in the last fifty years by suburbanization, intermarriage, economic imperative and personal inclination, Polonia is less tied to geography, less a matter of cohesive neighborhoods and the tangible sights and sounds and smells of daily life, but rather something more mobile, more difficult to grasp, describe, and quantify. And it's those changes, and the challenges they present to us as Polonian activists--challenges like changing neighborhoods, lost churches, shrinking organizations, and continuing marginalization, that I'd like to talk about today.

In some ways I realize I'm preaching to the choir. You are all extraordinarily engaged in these issues. And I know that sometimes it feels like the whole weight of preserving Polonia's past and ensuring its future falls on the shoulders of we few in the trenches. That makes it all the more imperative that we think seriously and innovatively about the Polonia we want to create, because that Polonia is already evolving, and better we guide it consciously and carefully, with an awareness of our strategies and their potential results, mindful of our image and confident of our influence. We need positive energy, inspiration,

and vision. We need self-confidence and a proper sense of our worth, unassailable and unthreatened. And we need to act, rather than react.

Polonia's tendency, to the contrary, is all too often to drift into helplessness, or overcompensate with self-defeating and ill-thought-out attacks and complaints that help feed the hurtful and unfair stereotypes of which we're acutely aware. Or we turn our frustration at the slights of history and the forces of change against each other, against ourselves. One of the most common complaints I hear as mayor from Polish Americans is: "Hamtramck isn't what it used to be." "Hamtramck isn't really Polish anymore." "When I was growing up the streets were spotless; when I was growing up you could hear the Polish program out every kitchen window; when I was growing up if you did something wrong the nuns would punish you, and then you'd get in trouble again when you got home; when I was growing up..." well, I'm sure each of you can fill in the blank. I'm told these things as if it were somehow Hamtramck's fault (and now, by implication, mine) that things are no longer like they were in this idealized past. And I'm usually told these things by people who no longer live in Hamtramck, who've left the old Polish neighborhood, but somehow expect the neighborhood to maintain itself like some kind of skansen, like a Polonian Greenfield Village. (Actually, I like that idea...) Like a museum of their remembered childhood.

I'm told these things by people who probably aren't out scrubbing their front steps every morning either; who probably aren't listening to Polish radio and subscribing to our Polonian newspapers; who aren't...well, you get that idea, too. I mean no offense. Daily reality is simply different these days, for many reasons. In some ways worse, in some ways no doubt better, but undeniably different. And our old Polonian neighborhoods are also living entities, not specimens that can be preserved for display, or ethnic amusement parks for visitors who might come just once a year, or once a decade, then take a perverse pleasure in spreading the word that Hamtramckland was a shabby disappointment, that weeds were growing on the boardwalk, that the galabki weren't as good as Busia used to make, that there were people everywhere speaking funny languages. They somehow fail to notice that Polish was still one of those languages. And perhaps they don't stop to think that if they had stayed, and if they had maintained a continuing presence and base of support for the

way of life whose passing they criticize, we might be telling a different story today. (About Hamtramck, they probably also don't stop to think about what the German and French settlers must have murmured among themselves when all those Poles began streaming into town, not only changing its landscape and language and culture, but wresting political control. I remember, during the Call to Prayer debate in 2005, a very sweet and sympathetic older lady protesting that she didn't mind the Muslims moving into town, but "did they have to take over? When the Polish came in, we didn't take over." She spoke in all sincerity, and with no rancor. But of course we did take over. And we can do it again--why do we think of ourselves as the victims of historical trends? We ourselves are the agents and enactors of the changes we live out; we are helping write the scripts in which we perform.

Well, I could go on and on on this theme because the defeatist mentality is something I have to combat every day, but let me try to make some suggestions on how to change things, on how to revise our own collective script. These aren't complicated ideas, but they are the simple seeds from which change grows, slowly and incrementally, but visible over time. And as simple as they are, they require some imagination, some idealism, and some bravery. Oh, and a good measure of stubbornness helps.

First and foremost, if you want your old Polish neighborhood to survive, find ways to support it. The most radical way to support it is to live there--forget the McMansion, and remember the bungalow; forget the acres of grass to fertilize and maintain, and think about the manageable sized flower and herb garden; forget the lawn tractor, and think about the push mower; forget about driving to the mall, and think about walking to the corner store; forget about sitting in front of your tv, and think about sitting on your front porch (I'm not saying you should go back to the 1950s; you can always have your laptop with you!) And actually, if you've been paying attention to the economy these days, you'll realize that making these changes will put you on the cutting edge of the latest trends toward re-urbanization and the marketability of walkable, compact communities. The rejection of urban sprawl for urban cohesion will be good not just for Polonia, but for the country, for the planet, and for the soul. Now, I realize that these are not viable possibilities for everyone, and that

not all our old neighborhoods are intact to return to. I realize that there are individual circumstances and interests that direct our lives beyond our loyalties to a sense of Polishness or a particular place. That there are other factors in our lives. But we're talking Polonia here, and speaking practically, stores and services and parishes will only survive where there are people IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD to support them day to day, not once a year on a special trip, or just on occasional Sundays for a special Mass. There is a critical mass that has to be maintained. You're not an urban pioneer? Well, maybe your son or daughter or grandchild is. Maybe your child's friend who isn't even Polish American is. What matters is good people maintaining viable communities. Encourage them. Step by step, house by house, block by block, neighborhoods are solidified and communities are rooted. Look what happened in Chicago. Neighborhoods that were abandoned by Polish Americans were rediscovered first by young entrepreneurs and urban adventurers. The momentum attracted professionals and families, and now these neighborhoods are among the most fashionable with real estate among the most lucrative in the city. The shame is that we didn't see it coming ourselves--that the neighborhoods we'd sold for a song had value that it took others to appreciate. I realize quite clearly that it took a change in cultural perspective, developing over several decades, to bring things around. That the situation on the ground in the 1970s was not the same as it is in the 20-oughts. But now that the trend is established, let's not be the ones lagging behind the times. As we go into the future, WE need to be the visionaries, and how ironic that that future can be grounded in our own brave immigrant past.

But no Polonian neighborhood, institution, organization, or parish can continue without resources, financial or human. So here's another simple suggestion--think seriously about where you spend your money, and where you direct your economic and creative capital. A neighborhood needs businesses; businesses need customers, and they need investors. Am I suggesting that you put ideology above financial gain? Plainly put, yes. I'm suggesting that there are numerous ways to measure value--in time saved or pleurably spent, in money honestly earned and thoughtfully spent, in support of projects that may pay cultural as well as financial dividends. I'm suggesting that short-term gain or savings not be the only criteria by which you make financial decisions. And I'm suggesting that it's worth

your while in the long run to spend a little bit more money if need be to support your local--by which you can understand Polonian--businesses.

I'm also suggesting that scholarship programs for Polish American students need to be more aggressively established and more generously funded: the stipend that was awarded a college student 30 years ago is simply not enough nowadays, yet I see the same award levels that I received in 1973 being offered to students in 2007. This is shameful. Polonia has its own human capital that is woefully underfunded and under-supported. Now this is a value that the American Council for Polish Culture, with its generous scholarship program, understands. But many of our local organizations are still attached to the "factory whistle" mentality, and don't comprehend the need for, nor the realities of funding a college education or professional training. I know that mentality quite well--I was the first person to go to college in my family. My mother worked in the same factory for over 45 years, and retired without a pension. When I said I wanted (in fact expected) to go to college, my family was genuinely surprised. I still remember my own shocked realization that my parents did not seem to know me, and that despite my high grades and obsession with reading and learning, they sold me so short. My father's highest ambition for me was that I would get a good job in data entry; that is, move from the dirt and noise and danger of the factory floor into the office. I can sympathize with his modest dreams for me now, but as a young woman hungry for education and independence and adventure, it looked to me like moving from a prison to a grave. Let's not sell our own young people short. We need to feed those dreams of young Polish Americans--even the dreams that aren't our own, to give them the tools and the power to build our institutions and shape the next permutations of our changing Polonian culture; that means we need to seriously and meaningfully invest in their educations. It also means encouraging them to fulfill their individual dreams, while cultivating an interest in and knowledge of Polish and Polish American history and culture so that, no matter where else their ambitions take them, they will always have an internalized Polish home. Now I also know that a lot of young people rebel against everything Polish--I know a lot about teenage rebellion--and that their elders can either push too hard or not push at all out of fear that their children will react by rejecting Polishness altogether. I myself never thought much about being Polish, and didn't start

learning Polish until I was 30. But now as I talk to a lot of Polish Americans about their ethnicity, what I hear most is, "I wish my parents had made me learn Polish" or "I wish I knew more about Polish history" or "I wish my grandparents had told me more about the old country." They may not say it when they're 15. But they will say it when they're 30. We teach our kids a lot of things, some of which they don't see the value of till much later. Let's make sure that a firm connection to Poland and Polonia are among them.

Finally, if we truly want to guarantee our cultural survival in America, we have to become comfortable with power, With wielding it, and with sharing it. We are a sizable minority in this country, with substantial financial and intellectual resources. Yet we often act like the poor stepchild, defensive, expecting to be exploited, somehow unsure that we are accepted. We need to find ways to consolidate our ranks, to mobilize our resources, and to turn them into a base of influence that we're not shy about using. We have several national organizations, as well as individual leaders, who are well positioned to shape policy and implement projects and programs, in politics, the media, academia. These organizations--and new ones as yet unformed--need effective leadership, and they need the strong support and input of rank and file membership. We all know that club and organizational membership is down, not just in Polonia but as a general trend of American life. We can throw up our hands, or we can look for ways to reconfigure our organizational life in ways that encourage participation, in ways that effectively compete with the other activities and interests pulling us all in so many directions. And given all those options, none of us wants to put our energy into an organization or a cause that appears ineffectual, that wastes our time in futile bickering, in mindless bureaucracy, in distasteful power plays or personal attacks. If this sounds like any organization to which we belong, then we'd better find a way to change the institutional culture or risk self-destruction.

So often in Polonia when an organization faces differences in vision or personality conflicts the preferred solution is simply to splinter off into separate organizations, which now compete with each other for the same meager resources, making both the poorer and weakening whatever power base they might have utilized. While new organizations may be necessary for ideological or practical reasons, to achieve specific goals or pursue

particular tactics, we have to keep in mind the principle of critical mass that's also necessary for viable community life. And often that necessitates pooling our resources and energies, rather than diffusing them. As we all get older, it also means facilitating the peaceful succession of power, so that new members will be encouraged to join and actively participate, in the assurance that they are valued for their skills and ideas, not just for their dues payment.

So for those of you who are now leaders of organizations, I have some more advice: mentor someone younger than you. Think about where your institution will be 5 years from now, 10, 20. Think where you might be. The new blood will not simply appear to continue your legacy, nor will the new leaders do things exactly as you would have done. Know that you will have to give up the reigns, and that either someone else with his or her own ideas and methods will take them, or that they'll fall to the ground and the institution itself will die with you. And just as important--remember that institutions can no longer be run as they too often used to be--on the authority of the priest or the whim of the local president. If professional standards of accountability, management, and leadership are not guaranteed, the organization will die. No one will put their time into an institution which they have no power to help guide; and no one will put their money into an institution which can't account for its responsible stewardship of those funds. Nor should they.

As an historian, I have a great appreciation for and attraction to the past. So much has been lost because of our own ineffectiveness, our own abandonment, our own shortsightedness and poor value judgments. Some time ago I realized that my overarching purpose in life, which comes out in many ways concrete and metaphoric, is to see the value in the thing of beauty that someone else overlooked, to rescue the tarnished treasure from the trash. Not just to preserve it, but to give it new life--to USE it. But any historian also comes to realize that those treasures have a life of their own, beyond our power to control. I can try to dust Hamtramck off, to set it on a good path, but I can't determine the twists and turns that path will inevitably take. Polonia too exists and will continue to exist outside our own conception of it; it will follow a course which we can only influence, not control. It will always be a work in progress. And that is probably a good thing--none of us on our own has the imagination or the expertise or the grace to which should be entrusted the a city, a culture, a people's

future. That's why we need to think together about the Polonia (or, as we all know, the Polonias) we'd like to see, and to put our creative powers together in coming up with strategies of how to take us there. After all, It ain't our Busia's Polonia. But it is now ours, ours to guide, to shape, to position, and to develop. Ours to empower. Ours to entrust to those who follow.

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