

## **Herbert Hoover and Poland**

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In the period immediately following World War I, the name Herbert Hoover was known to virtually every Pole. During the war, Hoover had successfully aided the citizens of Belgium through his organization of the Commission for Relief in Belgium which provided critical food aid while the country was under an allied blockade and German occupation. Hoover had tried to provide similar aid to Poland as early as 1915, but was thwarted by both the British and Germans at the negotiating table. Hoover never forgot Poland though and the desperate conditions there related to him by his trusted friend and collaborator. Dr. Vernon Kellogg who visited the country during the war.

In late 1918, Hoover, by then the U.S. Food Administrator, sent the American Food Mission to Poland to assess the conditions in the country and determine what humanitarian relief that America could provide. The mission's work coincided with one of the most dramatic periods in Polish history, when the fledgling nation was just beginning to establish its government, settle its borders which were simultaneously in conflict with the Germans, Czechs, Ukrainians and Bolsheviks and revive and unite a society and economy devastated by four years of war and more than a century of foreign partitions. Ultimately the efforts of the American Relief Administration would provide Poland with hundreds of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid, distributed through thousands of kitchens throughout Poland, especially targeted towards malnourished children and nursing mothers. Poland's gratitude for these efforts was recognized by granting Polish citizenship to Hoover during his visit to Poland in August, 1919 and in 1922, on the 4th of July, when the "Pomnik Wdzięczności Ameryce" was unveiled on the newly named Skwer Herberta Clarka Hoovera on the Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw.

Hoover's contact with Poland extended back even further than World War I, all the way to his time as an undergraduate at Stanford University in California. In 1892 he arranged to host a concert by Ignacy Jan Paderewski who was touring the United States at the time to great acclaim. To Hoover's chagrin, Stanford announced a school holiday on short notice, which fell on the day of the concert. Hoover was thus unable to sell enough tickets to cover the sum promised to Paderewski. A despondent Hoover met with the great pianist and apologized for his inability to provide the money and promised to work to recoup the costs. A generous Paderewski told Hoover to keep what he had collected and to repay him sometime in the future. Hoover would never forget the gesture and one can say that Hoover repaid the debt many times over, not only in the immediate aftermath of the war, but as a sympathetic and powerful voice in the Woodrow Wilson administration when Poland was vying for her independence.

Hoover's interest in Poland didn't end with the ARA operations in the early 1920s. Though Poland didn't factor in prominently during his presidential administration from 1929-1933, he did take significant actions to aid Poland in 1939 at the outbreak of World War II. Following a request from the Polish Government in Exile, Hoover established the Commission for Polish Relief and served as its honorary chairman. The organization was led by Maurice Pate and Chauncey McCormick, associates of Hoover's, and veterans of the humanitarian relief work conducted in Poland and other parts of Europe after World War I. The CRP would cooperate with the American Red Cross, then led by Norman Davis and the Paderewski Testimonial Fund, the last great act by the Polish statesman before his passing in 1941, to raise money and provide aid to Poland.

The Commission for Polish Relief faced far greater challenges than those seen in Poland in 1919. The brutality of the Nazi occupation and the adamant opposition of the British to importing relief supplies that could be confiscated by the Germans, severely hampered the organization's efforts. Despite these hurdles, about \$6,000,000 was raised (over half from the Polish Government in Exile and American Polonia) which helped provide approximately 200,000 meals per day to undernourished women, children and elderly Poles by early 1940. About 50,000 Polish refugees in France were also fed and provided with clothing.

The increasing severity of Nazi policies, including forbidding aid to be provided to Jews and mandating that the SS-controlled German Red Cross serve as an intermediary between Hoover's organization and the aid recipients, blunted the scope of the endeavor. As subsequent nations were occupied or joined the Axis, and the British initiated a total naval blockade on Nazi-occupied countries, routes for transporting the food all but disappeared. Attempts were made to import food from Russia and the Baltics, but the results were negligible and the CPR ceased its activities in German-occupied territories by the end of 1941, though relief to Poles in neutral and allied countries continued for several years.

The connection between Herbert Hoover and Poland persists to this day through the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University in California. Founded in 1919, the Library and Archives of the Institution are home to the largest collection of historical documentation on modern Poland outside of its borders. These holdings began with the acquisition of informational materials from the Polish Government Delegation at the Paris Peace Conference. The largest addition to the Polish holdings came when the bulk of the records of the Polish Government in Exile were sent from London to Stanford. The transfer, arranged by Jan Ciechanowski, the Polish Ambassador in Washington D.C., was facilitated by Jan Karski, the famed courier for the Polish underground state, who worked as an acquisitions agent for Hoover immediately after the war. The Polish government documents (more than one million pages), were microfilmed and given to Poland in the 1990s after it regained independence. The documents have since been digitized and are available online through the National Digital Archives of Poland.

It's worth mentioning that the heretofore unknown memoir of Helena Paderewska, discovered in the collections of the Institution, have been recently published. My dad, Dr. Maciej Siekierski, the curator of the European Collection at Hoover for thirty years, edited the memoir. It was published by the State Publishing Institute in Poland several months ago and the English version was published by the Hoover Institution Press yesterday.

Regarding the Katyń Massacre specifically, the Hoover Institution Library and Archives also house the Wiktor Sukiennicki papers. Sukiennicki was the chief

investigator of the disappearance of thousands of Polish officers for the Government in Exile starting in the early 1942. His research served as the foundation for the determination of Soviet culpability for the murder of the Polish officers, seven thousand of whose bodies were found by the Germans in the Katyń Forest near Smoleńsk in 1943. Sukiennicki worked as a research fellow in the Hoover Institution as a Sovietologist, starting in 1959.

Herbert Hoover's support for Poland was made manifest in both word and deed. Beyond the tremendous humanitarian endeavors that benefitted Poland, Hoover dedicated much of what he wrote to the country. The book, *Freedom Betrayed: Herbert Hoover's Secret History of the Second World War and its Aftermath*, only recently published, was considered by Hoover to be his Magnum Opus, and presents his case for how the Allies betrayed their self-stated principles and sacrificed millions of people to communist tyranny. Besides referring to the tragic fate of Poland throughout, including the efforts of the Roosevelt administration to ignore the Katyń, he dedicated an eighty-page case study to Poland entitled "A Step-by-Step History of Poland", which describes the betrayal of Poland, culminating in its communist takeover at the end of World War II.

Few Poles know of the heroic actions undertaken by Herbert Hoover on Poland's behalf. It can be argued quite convincingly that the Polish people never had a better American friend and champion than Herbert Hoover. Regrettably, the Pomnik Wdzięczności Ameryce no longer stands on the Skwer Hoover. It was taken down in the 1930s when it began to crumble. All that remains is a small, stone tablet that references Hoover's relief work in Poland.

After more than twenty-five years of independence, it's high time to revive the memory of Herbert Hoover and the other Americans who came to Poland's aid in her times of need. Hoover himself visited Poland for the final time in 1946, witnessing the devastation wrought on Warsaw which had barely begun to rebuild after the the Warsaw Uprising and the systematic leveling of the city by the Germans. Despite the apocalyptic landscape before his eyes and the knowledge that Poland was entering a new phase of subjugation, he never lost hope that the fierce will and determination of the Polish people would triumph and that "Poland would rise again".