

Poland in the Rockies 2010: Victor Ashe, Alex Storozynski and more

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Former U.S. Ambassador to Poland, Victor Ashe, and Kosciuszko Foundation President Alex Storozynski put the spotlight on contemporary and historic Polish-American relations at the 2010 edition of the biennial Poland in the Rockies (PitR) symposium held in Canmore, Alberta. They were joined by a dozen other speakers from Canada, the US and Poland, plus a few distinguished visitors - among them the

Minister of Employment and Immigration for Alberta, Thomas Lukaszuk, Member of Parliament Blaine Calkins who is Chair of the Canada-Poland Friendship Parliamentary Committee and retired Chief Justice of the Court of Queen's Bench of Alberta, Allan Wachowich, for ten intensive days of lectures and discussions.

Alex Storozynski opened the symposium with a presentation about Tadeusz Kosciuszko, noting not only Kosciuszko's progressive views but also the fact that this early Polish-American bond should be remembered and celebrated. He also gave a brief history of the impressive Foundation bearing the revolutionary hero's name. An engaging speaker who always sparked an animated discussion, Storozynski took part in several sessions, including one on Polish-Jewish relations and Polish-American relations. In the latter, he noted that Polish Americans were dismayed by the current administration's insensitivity, ignorance - or both - when sending notice of a cancellation of a defensive missile plan on September 17, the date the Soviet Union invaded Poland in 1939. And while President Obama could not attend the funeral of the Polish president after the Smolensk airplane crash, it would have been more sensitive to go and sign the book of condolence at the Polish embassy than to head out, very publicly, for a game of golf.

Storozynski stayed for seven days, the whole time actively engaged in informal conversations with the students. He also introduced a new activity which henceforth will be a regular feature of PitR. Taking advantage of a free morning, he and his son decided to go whitewater rafting, extended the invitation to anyone interested, and were soon accompanied by a large group.

History was ably and engagingly covered by Neal Pease, a professor of Polish history at the University of Wisconsin. It is no mean feat to give a "course" in just a couple of days but Pease focused on critical issues and their ongoing relevance in contemporary times. Accompanied by his wife, Ewa Barczyk, who is the Director of Libraries at the University of Wisconsin, their original plan was to take a private holiday once Pease's professorial duties were finished. However, they were so taken with the program that

they spent their holiday with PitR until the end, not missing a single session - and later sent this note: "The program is outstanding, the setting spectacular, and the young people simply exceptional. This will go down as one of the most satisfying educational experiences we have shared in, and we are proud to have been a part of it."

The Polish-Jewish relations panel started off with Irene Tomaszewski who spoke about her experiences with Polish-Jewish dialogue launched in Montreal in 1994 with Polish-Canadian Dialogue Committee and the Canadian Jewish Congress. One of the participants in those days was Eli Rubenstein who was a guest speaker at PitR in 2008 and dropped by in 2010 for this session. It was with Rubenstein that the first meetings between Polish and Jewish-Canadian youth were introduced, the first such meeting in the March of the Living. The initiatives undertaken in those meetings are continuing. Another speaker in this panel was Shana Penn, Executive Director of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life who spoke about the Foundation's work in Poland and about Polish and Jewish-American initiatives here such as the Sister Cities project linking San Francisco and Krakow.

Perennial favorites, Tamara Trojanowska from the University of Toronto and Bill Johnston from the Center for Polish Studies in Bloomington returned for the third time. Sharing a full day, they introduced the students to classical Polish literature, trends in modern Polish literature, read and discussed poetry, among them Baczynski, and to cap it all, a translation workshop revealed some of the challenges of interpreting a culture in a different language.

One disappointment for PitR was that one very interesting speaker - Karen Majewski, the mayor of Hamtramck, Michigan - had to leave PitR for no less a demand than President Obama's visit to her city. It was agreed that anyone other than the President of the United States himself would not be forgiven for taking Dr. Majewski away.

A regular feature of PitR is the screening of new films, with the director on hand for discussion. This year, there were two such presentations: Mary Skinner, director of "In the Name of Their Mothers" discussed her film about Irena Sendler and her team of women who rescued Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto and Piotr Uzarowicz presented "The Officer's Wife," his film about the impact of Katyn on his family.

Our final guest from the United States was Professor of Communications at the University of Maryland, Dr. Michael Szporer, who discussed Polish-American political organization, voting patterns, and the need for political engagement.

Finally, guests from Poland also stayed for a week, as speakers and as participants in discussions: Father Slawomir Nowosad, the Vice-Rector of John Paul II University in Lublin and Krzysztof Stanowski, who recently was named Deputy Foreign Minister. Their contribution and their friendship will long be remembered. **CR**

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