

A Short History of Poland

The story of Poland is a tale of long stretches of foreign rule, and repeated attempts by Poles to evict foreign occupiers and to reclaim self-rule. **Between 1600 and 1845 alone, Poland was invaded, or fought for freedom, 43 times.**

The arrival of the Slavs on the land known today as Poland gave rise to the Piast dynasty and the adoption of Christianity in **966** – the year when Poland is considered to have been born as a nation. The next great dynasty began when the **Grand Duke Jagiello** of Lithuania married Poland's **Queen Jadwiga** who **ruled Poland with the full powers of a King**. Jadwiga and Jagiello continued to rule together as **co-equals**. This union of the Crowns eventually led to a full political union of the two states, subsequently known as the **Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth**, in 1569. The **Polish Winged Hussars** were the main cavalry in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between the 16th and 18th centuries.



The Commonwealth, often referred to as the **First Polish Republic** (their **kings were not absolute monarchs** as elsewhere in Europe, but were **elected and responsible to the Senate**) was the largest and most populous state in 16th and 17th century Europe, spanning some 390,000 square miles and with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population of 11 million at its peak. It

was **known for religious tolerance**, as exemplified by **King Zygmunt Augustus** who stated that he was the King of the people, but not of their conscience. **Uninvolved in Europe's religious wars**, Poland was a refuge for many people persecuted because of their religion. Jews found not only refuge when they were expelled from other European countries, but were given royal protection by the **Statute of Kalisz** (1264), and in the mid-16th century were granted community autonomy with the establishment of the **Council of Four Lands**, an exemplary treatment of a minority even by modern standards.



Jan III Sobieski from 1674 until his death was King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. Sobieski's military skill, demonstrated in wars against the Ottoman Empire, contributed to his prowess as King of Poland. Sobieski's 22-year reign marked a period of the Commonwealth's stabilization, much needed after the turmoil of the Deluge and the Khmelnytsky Uprising. He was an able military commander, most famous for his victory over the Turks at the **1683 Battle of Vienna**. After his victories over them, the Ottomans called him the "Lion of Lechistan"; and the Pope called him the savior of Christendom.

The **Polish Constitution of May 3rd 1791** was the **first codified constitution in Europe** and second only to the United States. It was the formal expression of Poland's long history of tolerance and love of liberty, justice and honor. Traditionally, on or about May 3rd, the City of San Francisco celebrates Polish American Heritage Day at a flag raising ceremony at City Hall, organized at its inception by the Polish-American Congress. In honor of Constitution Day, Friends of Poland join Polish-Americans at an annual concert in Golden Gate Park.

The Partitions: The Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and Habsburg Austria -- all ruled by absolute monarchs -- collaborated in the destruction of Poland and divided Polish territory among themselves in three successive partitions: **1772, 1793** and **1795**. Despite many attempts to regain their independence, including the final one led by **Tadeusz Kościuszko** (ironically a man who helped America win its freedom), Poland was **partitioned**

in 1795 and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ceased to exist. Thus, **three times in the second half of the 18th century Poland lost its sovereignty** by territorial seizures from neighboring countries. **The Ottoman Empire was the only major country that did not recognize the partitions of Poland.**

Poland regained its independence as the **Second Polish Republic** in **1918** -- November 11th marking **Poland's Independence Day**. That year, **President Wilson** proclaimed his support for a free Poland, with access to the sea, in his famous Fourteen Points. **Józef Piłsudski** (Chief of State) played a major role in creating the 1918 **Second Republic of Poland**. For only a short 21 years Poles enjoyed their long-sought-for freedom.

Between 1939 to 1989, Poles were forbidden to celebrate National Independence Day. After the collapse of the socialist/communist government, the holiday gained particular significance.



In August 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact** that included a secret agreement to invade, partition and occupy Poland. With staggering brutality, Hitler and Stalin oversaw the **destruction of cultural and educational institutions, and arrests, deportations, enslavement, torture and the execution of millions of Polish civilians.** In response, the **Poles fielded the largest and most determined resistance in occupied Europe.** **Poland fought alongside the allies in Norway, North Africa, Italy, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, distinguished itself with its air force (The Polish 303 Fighter Squadron was the highest scoring squadron), had a small but effective navy, and contributed superb intelligence, including the first Enigma machine.** Without sufficient help from the Allies, however, their resistance, including the **Warsaw Uprising of 1944**, was doomed.

In total, **Poland lost six million citizens during the Second World War** – three million of whom were Jews. **All of Poland was annexed or occupied during WWII by Germans or Russians.** Helping Jews was punishable by death to entire families with at least one thousand such executions recorded.

Denmark Poland (WWII) 1940: 7,800 Danish Jews 3.3 million Polish Jews Denmark surrendered within 6 hours of the "gentle" German invasion. There were at least 2 Danish SS divisions. There were no Polish SS divisions. Number of Righteous: Danes: 22 Poles: 6,532
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At the war's end, Poland did not regain her freedom, having been turned over to the Soviet Union by her allies at the **Yalta Conference**. Moscow then controlled Poland's internal and foreign affairs and the Polish Armed Forces. The Communist regime was installed with brutality including wholesale arrests and executions of former resistance members. Red Army forces were stationed in Poland until 1989. The **People's Republic of Poland (PRL)** was the official name of Poland from 1952 until 1989.

Solidarity (Solidarność), the largest and most successful non-violent resistance movement against the communist regime, united almost 10 million people from all walks of life: workers, students, professionals and intellectuals. Its most visible leader was the fiery labor leader, **Lech Wałęsa**. The regime tried to suppress Solidarity by imposing **martial law** and arresting thousands of dissidents. In the end, the government and the movement negotiated a compromise – agreeing to a partially free election -- but this election revealed the total moral bankruptcy of the regime and victory of the people. A year later, in the full and free election of 1990, Lech Wałęsa was elected the President of Poland.

POLES IN CALIFORNIA

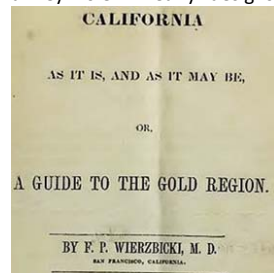
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Polish California: From Pioneers to Silicon Valley

November 2013 marked **the 150th anniversary** of the founding of **The Polish Society of California**. The occasion was observed by a grand celebration at the **Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco**, a venue chosen in part because at the Fairmont some of the **first meetings of the United Nations** were held in **1945**. Poland had not been invited to participate, an irony not unnoticed by at least one distinguished UN guest who, as will be revealed below, ensured that Poland would not be entirely forgotten.

But that year, the event was not a meeting but a celebration aptly titled **“From Pioneers to Silicon Valley,”** providing perfect bookends for the multi-volume history of Poles in California. Those first pioneers were talented and exciting people: **writers, cartographers, physicians, lawyers, engineers, businessmen** and, of course, **the celebrated actress, Helena Modjeska (Modrzejewska)**.

Today, there is a strong Polish presence in Silicon Valley. Along the way **Andrzej Poniatowski**, the great-nephew of the last king of Poland, brought **the first hydroelectric power lines to the Bay Area**, established the **Sierra Railroad Company**, and formed the **Standard Electric Co.,** now **Pacific Gas & Electric**; Modjeska’s son, **Ralph Modjeski**, became **one of America’s greatest bridge builders**; he played a key role in early designs of the SF-Oakland Bay Bridge. The “Polanders” threw themselves wholeheartedly into American life, grateful for the opportunities afforded them but also remembering the loss of freedom in their homeland that sent them into exile. One of the first was **Feliks Pawel Wierzbicki, M.D.,** a prominent member of the California Medical Society who is best known for *writing the first book published in English in California --*



California As It Is and As It May Be. (San Francisco 1849). That year (shortly before California’s admission to the union), **Aleksander Zakrzewski (ex-Polish**



officer) drew one of the early “official” maps of San Francisco that hung for a time in the Mayor’s Office.

In May 1863, the Polish pioneers in California formed the first Polish organization on the west coast, inspired by the January 1863 Uprising against Russia by the citizens of Poland. Headed by **Kazimierz Bielawski**, a civil engineer and surveyor, and five executive officers, among them a farmer, three merchants, and the rabbi from Congregation Beth Israel, these men were determined to assist the countrymen of their birth to regain their freedom. Monthly meetings took place at **the Russ House** at 235 Montgomery Street. The **Russ family** (Riensi) arrived in California during the gold rush; Russ became **one of the City’s most respected assayers.**



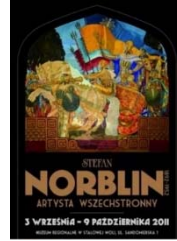
Having established a Society, these patriotic pioneers quickly convened a **“Grand Mass Meeting in Favor of Polish Freedom and Nationality.”** Held at Platt’s Music Hall, the convocation was attended by civic leaders and dignitaries -- a “who’s who” of 1863 California that included three future mayors, two future governors, two future U.S. senators, the publishers and editors of four daily newspapers, and legislators, industrialists, bankers, and merchants too numerous to mention.

It was a dynamic and colorful community. One of them, **Captain Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski**, co-founder of the Polish Society of California, was the **inspiration for Henryk Sienkiewicz’s Trilogy character,**

Zagloba. Colonel J.C. Zabriskie, *the first Sacramento City Attorney, raised funds for the Polish uprising*, as did **Charles Meyer** who belonged to both the Polish Society of California and the first Hebrew Benevolent Society. In 1882, the Polish Society printed in local newspapers a *condemnation of the anti-Semitic persecutions* then taking place in Russia.

As the years went by, the Polanders assimilated into the mainstream of American society. Immigration waned during the early part of the 19th century, not to be resumed in significant numbers until after World War II.

Among the first post-war immigrants was **Stefan Norblin** (whose **Art Deco** paintings in pre-war Poland and whose wartime paintings in India have recently been rediscovered and celebrated in exhibitions and film); Norblin settled in San Francisco with his wife, the popular Polish actress, **Lena Żelichowska**.



Some Polish-Americans moved to California as well, among them **Warren Winiarski**. A Chicagoan by birth, Winiarski had gone to Italy in the 1960s to study Machiavelli and returned to America inspired to



make his own wine. Soon after, he moved to the Napa Valley, north of San Francisco. There he tasted a wine that gave him his “Eureka” moment: it had what he described as both a regional and a universal character. Within four years he produced a red wine, **a Cabernet Sauvignon, which won top honors at the historic Judgment of Paris in 1976**. Nobody expected a California wine to beat out the French, least of all the French judges themselves. In a blind tasting, Winiarski’s **Stag’s Leap Cabernet Sauvignon** won, and the French had to live with their judgment – which they did, but not without sour grapes. And so it was that Warren Winiarski – surely a name destined for just this kind of victory – established his **Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars** on par with the world’s best, and **put**

California wines on the map. It’s doubtful that you could buy a bottle of 1973 Stag’s Leap Cabernet Sauvignon these days but you can have a look at one at the **Smithsonian National Museum of American History**.

And history moves on. The anniversary celebration was well attended, including a contingent of the new Polish pioneers, the **engineers of Silicon Valley**. The celebratory crowd drank a toast to the many generations of Poles in California, and to those still to come. *Sto lat!*



And so, 68 years after the historic meeting of the United Nations that had excluded Poland, the Fairmont Hotel was the site of a much happier gathering of a new wave

of “Polanders.” Once again both the American and the Polish national anthems were heard, and it was time to recall **the man who had not remained silent in 1945**. It was none other than the **great pianist, Artur Rubinstein** who had been asked to play at the inaugural concert. As he subsequently wrote in his memoir, he was acutely conscious of Poland’s absence, and deeply distressed:



“I walked on the stage, quite composed but with my heart beating... to play the Star-Spangled Banner [as required]... When I finished, I stood up to announce my first piece and something strange happened; a blind fury took hold of me. I addressed the audience in a loud, angry voice. **‘In this hall where the great nations gather to make a better world, I miss the flag of Poland, for which this cruel war was fought.** And now — I shouted — I shall play the Polish anthem.” “I played with a resounding impact and very slowly, and repeated the last phrase with a resounding forte. The audience stood up as one man when I finished and gave me a great ovation.”

Learn more about the Polish Pioneers in California:

- <http://www.polishclubsf.org/FairmontSlides.pdf>
- <http://www.polishclubsf.org/150%20Years%20Polish%20Society%20of%20California.pdf>
- <http://www.polishclubSF.org/PolishSocietyOfCalifornia.htm>
- <http://www.polishclubSF.org/Newsletters.htm>
- <http://www.polishclubsf.org/PolesCalifornia.pdf>