

# Voluntary Ethnic Groups and the Canadian Polish Congress' Role in Cold War Canada

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Canada as a nation of immigrants has had a diverse mixture of ethnicity and cultures. The Polish experience in Canada can be demonstrated to have begun in the 1800s. Some of the earliest records show that soldiers participating in the War of 1812 had names that would suggest Polish origins. These same soldiers participated in Lord Selkirk's colonization project in what is known today as Manitoba. The Polish continued to trickle into Canada in small amounts during the unstable political climate of Poland in the nineteenth century with wars and uprisings over sovereignty and partitioned lands. This trend continued and by the 1870s there was a large Polish community in Toronto that persists today. By the 1880s Polish workers were drawn to Canada after the news of the Canada Pacific Railway spread in Europe. With the Canadian West opening for expansion, the largest wave of Polish immigration began to that date in Canada. At the onset of the First World War in 1914 over 100,000 Poles which consisted mostly of peasants had entered Canada. The immigrants who went west were primarily agricultural workers hoping to achieve North American affluence and return to their native country. In the eastern cities of Canada where the larger, more established Polish communities were situated, general aid societies began with official and unofficial associations becoming the initial examples of organized Polish groups in Canada.<sup>1</sup>

The Canadian Polish Congress (CPC) was formed in 1944 as an umbrella structure of organizations designed to represent Poles of Canada. While the CPC cannot claim to represent all Canadians of Polish descent, the organization has been a part of the lives or known by almost all Polish Canadians.<sup>2</sup> This section's purpose is to focus on the role Polish Canadians, through the prism of the CPC, lobbied and influenced Canada's Cold War policy. The significance of this study is the gap in research of the story of Eastern and Central European ethnic voluntary organizations and their attempts at consolidating a voice to within Canada to aid the struggle of their home countries. That being said, this section will draw attention on a more provincial level rather than federal through the interview process. The materials lacking concern the areas of activism at the national level of the CPC due to difficulty in locating and contacting those in an

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<sup>1</sup> Myron Momryk, *Archival Sources for the Study of Polish Canadians* (Ethnocultural Guide Series, National Ethnic Archives, Public Archives of Canada, 1987), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Soltys and Rudolf K. Kogler, *Half a Century of Canadian Polish Congress* (Ontario: Canadian Polish Research Institute, 1996), 9.

official capacity at the time. This is partly due to the decreasing influence of ethnic organizations of this type. The areas where information of policies on Poland from the national levels of the CPC could be covered in interview are distinctly lacking. In other words, the higher up the organizational level the CPC we tried to reach, the more unsuccessful it became to establish contact. Therefore there is a distinct shortage on primary resources or opinions the Executive National Board of the areas of our interest. The Congress was dominated by the veterans of the Second World War. This organization was the Polish Combatants Association and this shaped the policies and tone of the Congress for years. This resulted in a generational gap that some consider being detrimental to the longevity and relevance of the Congress in the present. While the CPC will be discussed in this section, it must be noted that the view is of a provincial or local organizational level and not the organization as a whole. While the interviewee is the current president of the provincial organization and has beneficial insight into and EVO's involvement with the wellbeing of their ethnic country of origin, this is an individual's view.

In order to understand the role of the Canadian Polish Congress we must look at the role ethnic voluntary organizations (EVOs) play in a society. Newcomers to countries like Canada may find it difficult to apply the needs of immediate life (work, language, appearance, customs) to the broader social norms of the dominant group. Even after a period of adjustment to the new setting, many, especially in the Pre-War period, may still find their situation undesirable or incompatible to the larger establishment for a variety of reasons. This then requires a need for an individual to partake in the creation or joining of a distinct organization suited to support the interests of that ethnic group's special needs or well-being. The socioeconomic and political realities of the immigrants/refugees new country will shape the EVO's size, function and goals depending on the level of assimilation into the receiving into the assuming country's society and culture.<sup>3</sup> Sofia De Witt, the interviewee for this section, is the current President of the Manitoba provincial chapter of the CPC, emphasized the point several times during the interview the level of her and the current members of the organization of assimilation into Canadian society: "We are Canadians; first of all, yes we are Canadians of Polish background that's first and foremost."<sup>4</sup> This illustrates that the ethnic group's home country and its socioeconomic and political environment will change organizational policies, objectives and commitment and participation in the EVO. It is then clear that EVOs are influenced by two sides or causes, the old country and the new.<sup>5</sup> There was also a clear definition between the Polish

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Radecki, *Ethnic Organizational Dynamics: The Polish Group in Canada* (Waterloo: Laurier University Press, 1980), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Zofia De Witt, interview by author, Winnipeg MB, 14 August 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Radecki, 12.

community, those who had been naturalized or second generation versus those who were more recent newcomers and were former members of Solidarity. When De Witt was asked about the CPC communicating with other EVOs, specifically the Canadian organizations of the Baltic countries during the end of the Cold War she responded:

Yes, in terms of moral support, if there were demonstrations in either Ottawa or Toronto between particular embassies. I know that the Polish community were invited or asked or simply take part in those. There were a lot of demonstrations in front of the Russian embassy in Ottawa and also the consulate in Toronto. Also a lot of the demonstrations were staged by former members of the Solidarity. They had the organizational skills. There was a group called the “Action Group for Solidarity.” They were quite radicalized in their demands. To the point where there was some friction between the Canadian Polish Congress and that group. And I remember the convention in Toronto and it was my first convention and was it ‘84? Maybe in ‘84 and I really didn’t quite have a handle on what was, because I was just new into it, but I remember quite heated discussions what they were expecting the Congress to do and what Congress felt we could do. Because we still had to remember one basic thing and that was that we were Canadians, and people that were from that group were Polish. Self-exiles, or refugees, they didn’t yet have the feeling of being Canadian. They were Polish first, and their understanding and their demands didn’t quite match with what the Canadian Polish Congress’ position was.<sup>6</sup>

With the conclusion of the First World War and the collapse of the Central Powers including the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Polish Canadians supported the founding of an independent Second Polish Republic. While achieving independence, Poland was mired in organizational problems domestically and with hostile neighbours over consolidation issues. This led to the second large wave of Polish immigration. Between 1919 and 1931 nearly 52,000 Poles entered Canada. This began the trend of Polish immigrants holding greater national awareness as they had either participated or been affected by Poland’s independence.<sup>7</sup>

The Polish community of Canada instantly began allocating activities towards the Canadian war effort once Nazi Germany had invaded Poland in 1939 launching the Second World War. Many Polish Canadians either joined the Canadian Armed Forces or helped on the home front. During the latter years of

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<sup>6</sup> Zofia De Witt interview.

<sup>7</sup> Momryk, 2.

the War the Soviet Union began occupation during the year 1944 which resulted in the establishment of a new Polish communist government that became a member of the Warsaw Pact. A Polish Government-in-Exile was formed in London, England consisting of the originally elected members of government prior to Soviet occupation.<sup>8</sup>

In 1944 the Canadian Polish Congress was formed as an umbrella association to synchronize the activities of smaller member organizations during the war. The CPC aided refugees, immigrants and displaced persons from the outcome of Poland's situation and continues Canadian Polish aid to this day. Many Poles came to Canada in this third wave to leave the postwar atmosphere and many held their loyalty to the Polish Government-in-Exile in London. Canada admitted over 50,000 Polish Displaced Persons from Europe.<sup>9</sup> Canada badly needed to supplement the loss of forced labour of German prisoners of war and interned Japanese-Canadians after the end of the Second World War. In Manitoba agricultural workers were need in the sugar beet fields which were formerly worked by the aforementioned interned war groups. When the Polish serviceman arrived in Winnipeg they came upon a community of 36,500 Polish-Canadians (1941 census) who made up 5% of Manitoba's population and 21% of all Polish Canadians.<sup>10</sup>

A large influx of Poles in the 1940s shaped the Canadian cultural landscape. The immigration of war veterans and refugees played a large role in Canada's Post-War setting. In September of 1944 the Convention of Polish-Canadians held the Founding Convention of the CPC and passed a process in which unity would create a supportive atmosphere for the Polish community and Canadians alike. Communiqués from the first Executive Committee show that the Congress wished to be seen as an apolitical organization separate from international spheres of influence. The desire for these apolitical pronouncements proved to be difficult for the CPC. The nature of ethnic voluntary organizations is to unite around common goals. The first Congress invited associations that were in favour of a Poland which was completely independent and sovereign which essentially eliminated involvement of Polish Communist groups. Throughout the existence of the CPC its main political interests have been matters related to issues relating to Poland and what they deemed dominated people.<sup>11</sup> During the immediate years after the Second World War and the succeeding years, the Congress adopted a dual policy: They were adverse towards the ruling communist

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Patalas Kazimierz, ed., *Providence Watching: Journeys from Wartorn Poland to the Canadian Prairies*, trans. by Zbigniew Izydorczyk (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Soltys and Kogler, 44, 47.

authorities and wished to aid Polish people under the Soviet system.<sup>12</sup> This meant that the CPC viewed two separate bodies within Polish society, the government and the people. The documents of the 18<sup>th</sup> (1964) and 19<sup>th</sup> (1966) General Conventions distinctly show that all member organizations were prohibited from having contact with the communist authorities in Poland and persons who were communist or were sympathetic to the communist authorities could not hold positions in the Congress' member organizations.<sup>13</sup>

The 1970s did not change the viewpoint of or policies of the CPC, here is a passage from the 21<sup>st</sup> General Convention's Ideological Resolution passed in 1970: "Remembering our Polish roots, we send the people of Poland our love and our reassurances that with all our hearts and souls we are committed full-heartedly to Poland regaining its spiritual, political and economic freedom."<sup>14</sup> These sentiments were echoed with similar statements at the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Convention (1974) and again at the 24<sup>th</sup> GC.<sup>15</sup> When De Witt was asked about the ideology, membership of the CPC and more leftist inclined Polish EVO's she responded:

No, if there were people who were sympathetic say to the communist regime they were individuals. They were not organized. Simply because it just wouldn't be tolerated in the community. Being communist is the worst sin that you could commit. There was a Communist Party organization here in Winnipeg. Now I don't know if it was Russian or Ukrainian but that goes back, probably, not in the last fifty years, it would go back further than that. And those probably would be the immigrants from the Bolshevik era and, and this sort of thing. There was a hall on Euclid (Avenue) that had the communist, I remember seeing that, but it is long gone. But in my memory, in my experience, let's say go back fifty years can I can span that easily, I'm sixty-six now so. And like I said because I was interested in history and politics and more so at certain periods in my life than others, obviously. But to my knowledge I do not recollect any organized group that would identify itself as being sympathetic to the Polish regime prior to the overthrow of the communist regime or since.<sup>16</sup>

When the 1980s arrived there was an exceptional historical event in the Cold War. The independent and self-governing trade union Solidarity assembled. Solidarity became the largest independent labour union in the Soviet Union up to that time. The distinctive trait of Solidarity was the ability for Poles to set aside

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Zofia De Witt interview.

differences of political, economic and religious views in order to achieve a set amount of goals. This does not mean that the Solidarity movement did not have internal struggles between groups within the organization but the emphasis was on unity within the group or *bycie razem* (“being together”). In March of 1981 the majority of Solidarity members participated in the largest strike in the history of the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> Solidarity was in opposition to the communist authorities and had approximately 9 million members in the movement prior to the government’s attempts at dismantling it during the period in which martial law was imposed on the Polish people which severely hindered the normal life of many of its citizens. General Wojciech Jaruzelski was the leader of Poland from 1981 to 1989 and was responsible for the declaration of martial law effectively making Solidarity and other pro-democracy groups illegal.<sup>18</sup>

Demonstrations began on Canadian soil in cities with large Polish communities in 1981 and continued through 1982 denouncing the Polish authorities for enacting martial law. The CPC also lay blame with the Soviet Union whom they felt should assume ultimate responsibility for the crackdown on social movements in Poland. In unison with demonstrations the leaders of the Congress pressured the Canadian government to grant visas to Poles who came to Western Europe with political refugee status. In December of 1981 the Executive Committee met with Minister of External Affairs M.R. MacGuigan and urged the government to encourage Poland to release the entire arrested political detainees and emphasized normal international traffic and communication with the outside world so the Congress could continue aid uninterrupted. The period of 1981 after martial law was introduced the highest levels of Canadian government were reached out to in the most contentious tone the CPC had recorded in its history.<sup>19</sup> In a letter sent the day after martial law was introduced, the Head Executive Board sent a telegram to Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau explicitly demanding action. The telegram ends with; “We therefore urge the Canadian Government to make the strongest possible representation in the international arena’ in the first place, to dissuade any Soviet interference in Poland, and secondly, to protest the Polish government’s flagrant suppression of human rights in Poland.”<sup>20</sup> Trudeau publicly responded by saying that the demands on the Polish authorities were “excessive” and that if martial law in Poland was imposed in order to avoid civil war and the Soviet intervention, then “I cannot say it is all

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<sup>17</sup> Gerald J. Beyer, “A Theoretical Appreciation of the Ethic of Solidarity in Poland Twenty-Five Years After,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 35/2 (June 2007): 209.

<sup>18</sup> Soltys and Kogler, 67.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

bad.”<sup>21</sup> The Congress responded with a public letter released December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1981 stating:

The Canadian Polish Congress is deeply distressed with the recent pronouncement of by the Right Honourable P.E. Trudeau relating to the current crisis in Poland. We do not agree with Prime Minister’s view that martial law may be helpful in solving the political crisis in Poland, and certainly do not agree with his opinion that that Solidarity is responsible for this crisis by voicing “excessive” demands on the Polish communist regime... We would expect the head of the democratic government in Canada to lend at least his moral support to those legitimate aspirations of a nation which together with Canada signed the Helsinki Accords. It is sad to note that our Prime Minister seems to support the imposition of the martial law, which in effect, means declaration of war by the communist government on the defenceless Polish population.<sup>22</sup>

There is tangible evidence of the Congress lobbying the federal government successfully from an exchange on January 25th 1982. The Congress had the General Secretary, President of the Congress’ Head Executive Board, President of the Polish Combatants Association and President of the Polish National Union met with Federal Minister of Multiculturalism J. Fleming and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, and, the Parkdale – High Park M.P. Jesse Flis. The meeting was reported to be over an hour and resulted in the Prime Minister making a statement the following day to Parliament stating that restrictions of martial law in Poland should be loosened, a conversation for negotiations between Solidarity, the Catholic Church and the Polish authorities begin regarding those being held for political under martial law released.<sup>23</sup>

Despite some success the CPC had in having the ear of the federal government, when De Witt was asked on the relationship between the Canadian government and that of the Soviet Union she said:

Well... Like I said, at that time I wasn’t following it very closely but I always felt that Canada could do more, put more pressure on the Soviet Union government but there was the politics of the Cold War and there was no, nobody would tell the Soviet Union what to do any more than anybody could tell the U.S. what to do. Canada was a minor player in the scheme of things. And I think Canada was also at that time maybe evolving as a, as a nation, as a major player on the world platform. I don’t

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

think at that time we were quite sure where our allegiance should be attached to. I think we were still sort of, maybe not sitting on the fence, but not at the same time being as forceful as we could be. And I can, can appreciate the fact that we are not a military might, you know compared to U.S. or Soviet Union so maybe the position that our government took at that time was the only reasonable or logical position that they could have. They did support, they did, you know later on and I think the pressure came from within the Polish community here on our politicians whether it was for NATO or wherever the world forum was available to be stronger because the politicians had equal votes right? So if you have a million or so people of Polish background that this cause is very close to their heart and very important and at that time we did have Jesse Flis was in parliament at the time. Senator Stanley Haidasz was in the Senate and the Canadian Polish Congress was strongly identified with the Liberal Party, um Trudeau era and so on. Now it's the West in particular it's the allegiances between PCs (Progressive Conservatives) and, and Liberals now. But at that time we did have a strong voice and some influence. With the Canadian government and the big thing now, the latest accomplishment was pressure in the Canadian government to support Poland's entry into the European Union, you know and that took a lot of work. Another example of pressure on the Canadian government was to eliminate the visas of Poles coming to Canada which we had to have. And there were good reasons you know for abolishing, Canada wants to have some control over who is coming into the country and whatnot but we didn't see that as people coming from Poland to be a threat in any way to the stability of Canada. So there were, are examples of various intervention by the Polish community on our Canadian government through the submission of briefs, through meetings and presenting our concerns in person I made a submission to the Meech Lake Accord when the hearing was here in Manitoba.<sup>24</sup>

Although General Wojciech Jaruzelski was the leader of imposition of martial law in Poland in 1981 resulting in the clampdown of political and civil rights of Poles until the reinstatement of democracy in 1989 he remains a controversial figure in Poland and the international Polinia (Polonia is the word used by Poles for people of Polish descent who live outside of Poland – Polish Diaspora.) While this section is not about Jaruzelski's reign or choice to instate martial law on Poland, it should be noted that there is a division with two thoughts on Jaruzelski: that he was a puppet of the Soviets and wanted to crush the

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<sup>24</sup> Zofia De Witt interview.



Solidarity movement and reforms, or secondly that by imposing martial law he prevented the worse situation of the Soviet Union intervening similar to Hungary in 1956 or the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968.<sup>25</sup> During the interview De Witt mentions that a CPC delegation was invited to Poland by the Canadian Ambassador in 1990 to celebrate Canada Day at the Canadian Embassy. This was after Lech Wałęsa was elected President in democratic elections. When the Canadian delegation arrived they saw that former leader Wojciech Jaruzelski was also present. De Witt explains the situation:

What was interesting when we arrived there we spotted General Jaruzelski. Well, as you know, Jaruzelski was the person that was identified as the oppressor of the Polish Solidarity and you know, the one that imposed the martial law and so on. So of course the group of us says “Oh! How can we be in the same place with Jaruzelski after what he has you know, put the Polish people through?” So we had a little meeting, do we walk out as a delegation to show our displeasure and snub? But then we thought okay, no, that would be snubbing our Canadian ambassador. I say “it wouldn’t be right.” He was one of the invited guests at the Canadian Embassy. Now he wasn’t in power anymore but I guess the Canadian Ambassador still felt, you know, before the fall of his government, he was the Head of state. I don’t know what the thinking of the Canadian Ambassador was by inviting him but he was there. And he was like a bull’s-eye (laughs) that we were aiming for. But one of the other members of our delegation, he’s a psychologist by profession, he says “You know, I’d like to ask him a question as to why did he invoke martial law?” So he said, you now, in, in talking, seven of us, he said it wouldn’t be right to walk out, yeah, let’s go and face him, let’s go and face him as a group. And so we walked up to him and introduced ourselves and posed the question to him. He (a delegation member) says “how could you, you know, invoke the martial law and how could you bring all this hardship to the people?” And he (Jaruzelski) was very gracious. He said: “I had a very tough decision to make and I’ll be honest with you” he said “I was called to the Soviet Union to Moscow and told very plainly you either do this or we’re going to walk in.” And the Russian soldiers were spread all across the Soviet Union and Polish border, waiting for the orders to march in.

The situation was very volatile at that time and so he said “in order to protect the people from the invasion,” which of course the bloody invasion

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<sup>25</sup> Anton Pelinka and A.A. Szczerbiak, “Politics of the Lesser Evil: Leadership, Democracy and Jaruzelski’s Poland,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 78/3 (July 2000): 584.

of Czechoslovakia and the putdown there of the revolution years back, I mean that memory was very much at the forefront. So invoking the martial law, maybe stopped the Russian Army of embarking on the Polish soil. But there were other elements that came into play too. The eye of the world being focused on what was happening in Poland so that also kept the Russians in check as well because it didn't stop them before, but the political climate was much different in this time. So, that was his explanation.<sup>26</sup>

When I asked De Witt if there was a possibility in her mind that the Soviet Union would intervene on behalf of the Polish authorities, she said:

Yeah. And that, that was confirmed at the world convention in two-oh-five [2005]. I happened to have a conversation with a young man who was from Lithuania and so I, in talking to him, he says that he served in the Russian Army and he says "do you know that during that martial law period" he says "all the soldiers that were of Polish background from all the different Soviet states were shipped out as far east as possible to the Mongolian, Chinese border and the soldiers from the background of the Far East were brought and situated along the Polish border."<sup>27</sup>

The basis of ethnic voluntary organizations is an approach to where individuals are concerned for the fundamental values and concerns of their society. As Polish born Canadian sociologist Henry Radecki explains in his study of ethnic organizational dynamics, specifically the Polish in Canada:

[A]ctive participation in voluntary organizations is historically a part of a general mode of life in which an individual participated in various social groups such as extended family, the friendship clique, and other social aggregates. An individual who joins a voluntary organization acquires a special status and an additional framework of orientation and with them, a right to have and enjoy certain services and interactions not available to others.<sup>28</sup>

While this can be said about all voluntary organizations, there are important factors of identity, protection and support that are specific to ethnic voluntary organizations. Shortly after the inception Canadian Polish Congress in 1944 the Polish veterans of the Second World War would come to dominate the Congress

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<sup>26</sup> Zofia De Witt interview.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Radecki, 10.

and their policies would shape the direction of the CPC which is something still felt today.<sup>29</sup> During the interview with Sofia De Witt, acting President of CPC, Manitoba Division, she described the reality of social roles in ethnic voluntary groups:

But it was difficult for some of the other gentleman to let go of the power because of the prestige. Because for them, you must also understand, being within the Polish milieu, it gave them status. Within the Polish milieu but in the Canadian milieu they were working as machinists, whatever job, they certainly weren't, you know at the high level, there were doctors, there were lawyers, but most of them had menial jobs. But within the Polish circles they were somebody, because they could communicate and so on and so forth. For some of them it was hard to let go, the position that the organization afforded them, because you know maybe that person was a vice-president, or that person was whatever. So I could understand that but at the same time they were also hanging onto those positions within their own organizations to the exclusion of the next generation. A price, a very heavy price was paid because the young people, their sons and daughters, they didn't need the safety net of the Polish community for their social, emotional, professional wellbeing. They made their way into Canadian society. They lost a generation, it was a generation that was lost and the organizations are dying because of that.<sup>30</sup>

Ethnic voluntary organizations do not limit their functions to one specific to a single function. EVOs aim to provide a variety of aid in order to improve the opportunities or situations of their specific groups diaspora. The interview with the provincial president and research into provincial annual reports of our years of interest, mid 1980s to early 1990s, the CPC was active in domestic aid such as financial and organizational aid to Polish and English language supplementary schools, member organizations that form the umbrella of the CPC and Polish youth groups and the hosting of member conventions and Polish holidays.<sup>31</sup> It is also apparent that the CPC was heavily invested in the interests of their native Poland. In December of 1989 De Witt met with the Executive Council in Ottawa, December which she describes as the “highlight of the year” having the

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<sup>29</sup> Soltys and Kogler, 11-12.

<sup>30</sup> Zofia De Witt interview.

<sup>31</sup> Canadian Polish Congress, Manitoba Division, *Annual Report – Sprawozdanie Roczne* (1991), 6 and (1992), 4. Courtesy of Zofia De Witt.

opportunity to meet with many Members of Parliament, including Jesse Flis M.P. to discuss the official policy of the CPC called Economic Aid to Poland.<sup>32</sup>

The aforementioned Jesse Flis was a Liberal Party Member of Parliament in the House of Commons representing Park Dale – Highpark from 1979-1984 and then from 1984-1997.<sup>33</sup> Flis was born in Fosston, Saskatchewan the son of Polish immigrants and he received the Gold Award from the Canadian Polish Congress for his activism for the community.<sup>34</sup> Mr. Flis came to the attention of this project during a visit to the National Library and Archives Canada where House of Commons Debates shows that Mr. Flis on two occasions in March and June of 1990 raised questions and concern to the Progressive Conservative government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney through the Secretary of State for External Affairs Joe Clark. In March, Mr. Flis expressed concern for the reunification of Germany as he stated that Poland has a well-founded history of concern. Specifically, Mr. Flis inquired about the role the Minister saw Canada playing in negotiations in the Conference on Security and Co-Operation in Europe (CSCE).<sup>35</sup> The Right Honourable Joe Clark responded:

Mr. Speaker, the honourable member of the House will know that during the Open Skies Conference a very important agreement was made involving the four countries which had been the great powers involved in the signature of the Potsdam Agreement and the two governments of Germany. This was important because it filled a void in dealing with some of the implications of German unification.

Obviously there has to be involvement of other countries including, very actively, Canada. We are one of three nations that maintain a troop presence in Germany and consequently have an unusual interest in some of the implications of unification.

Part of that will be done through NATO. Part of it, as the hon. Member suggests, could be done in the context of the CSCE negotiations and discussions which will become increasingly important as we proceed toward developments in Europe. There is also the possibility that informal arrangements can be made involving Canada and perhaps some other

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* (1989), 5.

<sup>33</sup> Aleksandra Ziolkowska-Boehm, *The Roots are Polish* (Toronto: Canadian Polish Research Institute, 2000), 61.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Library and Archives Canada, House of Commons Debates Records (1990), 8787-8.

countries to become engaged in the process that was begun with the two-plus-four formula.<sup>36</sup>

Mr. Flis responded by raising a supplementary question asking if Canada had asked the six countries within the two-plus-four for nothing less than the assurance of an absolute safeguard of the existing boundaries between Poland And Germany. Joe Clark conceded in his response that “there is no question that there needs to be further precision coming from authorities of the Federal Republic of Germany” and that Canada was seeking those assurances.<sup>37</sup>

Mr. Flis raised petitions that had been “signed by thousands of Canadians” on the subject of Poland, the CSCE and the Cold War twice more in the House of Commons in 1990. The next was 27<sup>th</sup> June when he raised the issue to extend the expiry date of Canadian visas until they could be processed for east and central Europeans self-exiles wishing to come to Canada. In the same House of Commons session Flis brought forth a second petition also signed by thousands of Canadians pertaining once again to the unification of Germany and the impact it may have on Polish border security. Flis called upon Parliament to pressure the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) to recognize the borders of Poland as final in the present and the future.<sup>38</sup> In Flis’ final statement on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1990, which was the first day of the Parliament sitting of the newly reunited Germany, he congratulated the two-plus-four countries for the CSCE conference, the 35 participating states for the achievement of unity between Germans and emphasized Canada playing a significant role in the future of Europe’s new layout.<sup>39</sup>

Although the responses from the Right Hon. Joe Clark are vague in terms of Canada’s active role in the reunification of Germany or their involvement in the two-plus-four formula, it nevertheless demonstrates the involvement of the Polish-Canadian lobby in federal politics concerning the foreign policy at the end of the Cold War. Clark also makes note of the military presence Canada still held in Germany which the federal government felt Canada and therefore had a greater interest in the outcome of reunification. Mr. Flis spoke to Polish-American historian Aleksandra Ziolkowska-Boehm done in 1992 assessing the about the foreign affairs policy of Brian Mulroney’s government during the 1989-1990 period, the ending of the Cold War. Flis responded:

In my opinion, the present Prime Minister’s foreign policy differs widely from his great predecessor, Pierre Elliot Trudeau and his Liberal Party.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 13176.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 13793.

Prime Minister Trudeau strove to foster a Canadian identity. It could be clearly seen in some concrete, political initiatives such as the United Nations resolutions or the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe, to name a few. His first and foremost concern was the protection of Canadian interests. Canada was the first country to establish diplomatic relations with Communist China. Its policy of openness towards the Soviet Union contributed significantly to the detente process and, ultimately, to the end of the Cold War. Our identity and independent stance was also clearly visible in our day to day relations with our largest friendly neighbour – the United States.

Unfortunately, Brian Mulroney gave up this traditionally independent Canadian political approach. He encourages stronger economic ties with our southern neighbour to the point of undermining our social programmes and constraining our manoeuvring ability with regard to formulating foreign affairs policies.<sup>40</sup>

Bill Blaikie was previously a Member of Parliament from 1979 to 2008, representing the riding in the Canadian House of Commons representing federal New Democratic Party of Canada. From 20<sup>th</sup> April to May 5<sup>th</sup> 1990, Blaikie, along with Jesse Flis and Lloyd Axworthy, who was critic for external affairs for the official opposition Liberal Party at the time were accompanied by 11 other officials as the Standing Committee on External Affairs and International Trade. This committee visited the Soviet Union and the Germanies to study Canada's role in the changing dynamics of 1990s Europe. In the report, this was titled the "Report on the Committee's Visit to The Soviet Union and the Germanies" which was issued to the House of Commons on 7th June 1990. The only pertinent area relating to Poland was the section on external aspects which focus on the Poland-German border. In the report the committee describes what they call "a rather chilling experience" in which they noticed black ribbons were trailing from the flags hanging in the House of Representatives which territories lost during the Second World War. The committee felt this underlined the memories and tensions that still remained in Central and Eastern Europe which could be brought back to the surface with German reunification. The report continued that all the German officials they spoke to reassured them that they would recognize the border with Poland. The only specific suggestion they heard responding to Poland's mistrust was put forward by the German Democratic Republic's Foreign Ministry official, a Dr. Messelwitz who felt that both Germanies should have a treaty between themselves to resolve the issue to reassure Poland prior to being encourage to do

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<sup>40</sup> Ziolkowska-Boehm, 61.

so in the two-plus-four process.<sup>41</sup> The Committee concluded that the evidence and assurances put forward by both German states were satisfactory for Canada to declare that the Polish-German border would be respected and remain a foundational issue in the reunification process.<sup>42</sup>

In an interview done with Blaikie on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2013, he again referred to the black banners, or ribbons as he describes them now, hanging on flags of former German territories in the Federal Republic of Germany House of Representatives. In a follow up question I asked Mr. Blaikie about him and Mr. Flis being the only two Members of Parliament who brought up the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe being a viable option for the future of a new Europe after 1990. To this, he responded:

Jesse was a Liberal, and a very strong identity with and representative of, in every respect of the Polish Canadian community. So a lot of the thing Jesse was about, was, were kind of in some ways and I don't mean this critically, it's just a fact, driven by his, concern of the Polish Canadian Community about certain things. And he was a member of this committee. So, but the CSCE comes up here often one of the existing pan-European bodies that could act possibly form the not necessarily form in itself, but one of the places where that discussion about that new European security architecture could take place. Because there had already been some success, in terms of you know the Helsinki accords, things like that. There was a precedent for European cooperation which could have built on. So in the committee's recommendations I think you'll find that the CSCE is talked about as one of the possible components.<sup>43</sup>

Another large factor towards Polish independence was the Catholic Church in Poland. On 22nd October 1978, the Archbishop of Kraków, Cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła, became Pope John Paul II, leader of the Roman Catholic Church and first non-Italian pope since 1523. The Polish, Catholics and others around the world were optimistic from the writings of John Paul II (then, still Karol Wojtyła) that expressions of political dissent, opposition, and participation was a form of participating in the common good. The elevation of a Pole to the head of the Church would be an aid to the Solidarity movement.<sup>44</sup> The Congress had continually supported the Catholic Church since it began in 1944 and this was articulated in almost every convention through the form of a resolution or

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<sup>41</sup> The Right Hon. John Bosley, P.C., *Report on the Committee's Visit to The Soviet Union and the Germanies*, Standing Committee on External Affairs and International Trade (7 June 1990), 22.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Bill Blaikie, interview by Alexander von Plato, Winnipeg, 25 March 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Beyer, 210.

statement. The Congress also released statements with strong words whenever the Church was dealt resistance by the Polish communist authorities. In the Ideological Resolution of the 25<sup>th</sup> General Convention of the CPC it said: “We support the aspirations of the Church in every shape and form as well as its dedication on behalf of human rights, national cultural Christian education and human dignity.”<sup>45</sup> The visit of a Polish Pope on his June 1979 visit to Poland led him to become a symbol of Polish unity and mass celebration.<sup>46</sup> When De Witt was asked about the role the Pope played in Solidarity and for Polish-Canadians, she said:

See, he became the lightning rod. He became the lightning rod for the world to focus on him. I mean the first Polish pope. Which I mean is unheard of in the history. His personal charisma, his reaching out to the world and, and his presence in Poland served to give the people the strength to champion. He was their champion. People needed a symbol to identify with and the symbol I remember when his ascendancy was established and was announced to the world I remember that. See? I don't remember Gorbachev. I was pregnant with my daughter lying in bed listening to the news when that came on. I had tears in my eyes because of the pride that I felt; it was like food for the starving souls, for the people of Poland. And because of his position he brought the focus of the world on Poland and that contributed and there were many factors that influenced what was happening in Poland you know with the martial law, with this it is because now with CNN and the others it was instant news around the world what was happening. You knew what was happening in Poland at the time. It wasn't the same what happened in Czechoslovakia, it wasn't the same with what happened in Hungary and I think those were contributing factors. You know with the people themselves once the steps were taken they knew there was no turning back, they were willing to sacrifice their lives and some did. I mean people were imprisoned, people were tortured, family members their loved ones disappeared and they didn't know what happened to them. I mean that was a fact of life. There was oppression. I remember my cousin telling me that he, he was in the military and when the martial law was declared he was given an order to go an arrest a high school principal. Because the high school principal was, you know, seen as a leader in the community that could insight people against the order and so they were trying to remove potential leaders from the community to prevent these things from happening. He

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<sup>45</sup> Soltys and Kogler, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Anthony Kemp-Welch, *Poland under Communism: A Cold War History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 228-9.



said he finally talked the agent who came to see him out of it, but he said he was under great pressure to use his military position to go and arrest and place this principal of a high school under arrest. Other than that he is a principal of a high school and he didn't break any other laws. So, yes, the Pope definitely deserves a huge, huge credit for his role and Poland's role in democracy.<sup>47</sup>

The CPC established contact with the Churches in Poland and used them as a resource to make contact with Polish families in need and to supply financial, medical, clothing and other donations and the Churches in Poland would distribute it accordingly. As the Catholic Church at times was the only entity strong enough to withstand pushback from the communist authorities it is natural that the CPC wished to strengthen their ties with a permanent foundation in Poland.<sup>48</sup> De Witt explained:

[T]hey (the CPC) had rented a big warehouse and donations of food and medical supplies were shipped to Halifax in containers and loaded onto ships that took it over to Poland and that was done through the Church. The network that was established was through the Church. A charitable organization called Caritas, C-H-A-R-I-T-A-S [spells it aloud]. I believe it's still in existence today. And it was the churches that would receive the donations from the West and so they would then establish a network of ensuring it was distributed to local parishes and to, to the most needy. I know that it was undertaken during that period.<sup>49</sup>

The Polish Round Table Talks between the communist authorities, Solidarity and other opposition groups began at the beginning of February of 1989 and lasted almost exactly two months. While the talks were initiated by the government to disperse the growing political unrest in the country it ultimately resulted in the first free parliamentary elections in 1991. In 1990 Lech Wałęsa was elected president in partially free democratic elections and the German-Polish Border Treaty was completed that brought a conclusion to the Polish-German border which had been an uncertain question since 1946. Polish Foreign Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski and Hans-Dietrich Genscher signed the agreement on 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1990. This resulted in the Congress facing a new situation for the first time in their history, a democratic and liberated Poland. Although there were some concerns with the large number of parties in the new political climate after the democratic shift in Poland the Congress adopted a more nonpartisan

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<sup>47</sup> Zofia De Witt interview.

<sup>48</sup> Soltys and Kogler, 61.

<sup>49</sup> Zofia De Witt interview.

role.<sup>50</sup> The approach to Poland had to change for the Congress as they were now dealing with elected officials, no longer the communist government which the Congress had always refused to recognize as legitimate authority. The Congress moved to normalize relations with Polish embassy although occasional matters arose after 1990 on international importance it is difficult to find particular issues in the documents of the CPC.<sup>51</sup> In the following years the revival of Germany's military strength would become an issue for a period. The Congress also supported Canada's efforts to strengthen its position in NATO continued.<sup>52</sup> When we asked De Witt if the CPC was involved after Poland's transition to independence she told us of an encounter she had with the Polish Ambassador to Canada:

We did. We still continued with the material aid because the need was still there but I remember a conversation with the Polish ambassador to Canada and I guess that must have been around '96, '96 or '98 we'd have to check in here. The ambassador, it was a national convention here in Winnipeg of the Congress and we were having a private chat about things. And so he says to me, he says Sophie, by then we were on a first name basis and such, he says "Can you influence Congress to stop sending the clothing and the food to Poland." And I said "Why?" and he says "We'll it's embarrassing it's about time that we were able to take care of our own." See? It wasn't like it was a formal kind of approach saying to stop, but here is an ambassador saying "You know, maybe it's time" to recognize that and by then Poland was quite well. I mean presently it's one of the best economically situated in the European Union, I mean other than Germany maybe. But whereas Italy, Portugal, Spain, Italy were facing financial crisis and Poland is a very thriving, very strong economy. And the appearance of it was already there going back fifteen years or so. So I remember that conversation, he says, he says "It's time. Can you stop sending the used clothing?" You know, to Poland because it is time to sort of wean people off it. It, it is, he didn't see it as a need there. I mean to the point where now I was able to get \$150 000 dollars from the Polish government to support the Polish Studies Program at the University of Manitoba. And that's a reversal.<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, the measuring of success Polish-Canadians had on the Canadian federal government's Cold War policy is impossible to definitively say.

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<sup>50</sup> Soltys and Kogler, 79.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>53</sup> Zofia De Witt interview.

It would be fair to label the Congress' ideology as conservative in their approach to Canada, the Church, the communists in Poland and domestically. It would therefore not be an overstatement to think they would have supported the extension of NATO to a country they cared for so much. Ultimately, there were significant contributions made by a substantial part of Canada's population who showed a concern for their own people.<sup>54</sup> When Jesse Flis was asked by Aleksandra Ziolkowska-Boehm in 1992 to measure the place of Polish-Canadians in Canada's multicultural society, he replied:

Presently, Poles occupy a dignified place in Canadian society. They are all well-educated, work in a good number of prestigious areas such as education, medicine, engineering, business and law. In 1991, the Polish Engineers Association celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The Polish Teachers Association has, for years, participated in international seminars on education and has published books for children. The Polish Alliance of Canada is the oldest ethnic organization with separate sections for women and youth and a popular newspaper *Zwiazkowiec*. It would be worthwhile to write a book about the Polish scouts, the Canadian Polish Congress, Polish churches, the Polish Credit Union and other organizations so important to our community.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Soltys and Kogler, 91.

<sup>55</sup> Ziolkowska-Boehm, 69.