



# REFLECTIONS

## *The Lucky Pole*

BY NICHOLAS REY

I am probably the most fortunate Pole who ever immigrated to the United States, and not only because I have a three-letter last name.

I was born in Warsaw on Jan. 23, 1938, and escaped to the United States with my family during the blitzkrieg. Knowing several languages, I dreamed of a diplomatic career. But upon graduation from college, I proceeded to flunk the State Department orals and ended up working for 30 years in the Treasury Department and on Wall Street.

In 1990, the U.S. created a fund to jump-start private enterprise in the new Poland. At the time, I was the only white-haired investment banker in captivity who spoke Polish, and was chosen to be on the board of the fund. Three years later Bill Clinton nominated me to be ambassador to Poland.

Sending me to Warsaw was like sending Geoffrey Chaucer to the Court of St. James: I am a direct descendant of the father of Polish literature, Nicholas Rey (Mikolaj Rej, 1505-1569), the first poet to write in Polish and not Latin.

After I presented my letters to President Lech Walesa in December 1993, my wife and I took up front-row seats on history. Poland's democracy and free enterprise system were consolidating. Moreover, Poland's security

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was assured for the first time in its 1,000-year history when the country was invited to join NATO in July 1997.

As ambassador I had two equal challenges. The first was to convince the Poles that the U.S. truly did view Poland's security as a high priority. In the eyes of most Poles, the U.S. had let the country down after World War II: "Roosevelt sold us down the river at Yalta and he was a Democrat. Why should we trust Clinton?" My other task was to move them to do the things they needed to do to ensure that they would be cemented into Western structures, particularly NATO.

Given the times and the things I had to say, I ran a serious risk of being accused of replacing the Soviet (Russian) ambassador as Big Brother. But my Polish ancestry allowed me to speak not as an American but as Mikolaj Rej. Talking one Pole to another made it a lot easier to speak candidly, whether in public or telling Pres. Walesa he needed to fire his top military man and take a whole new approach to civilian control of the military.

But these were not the only reasons for my great good fortune, as I came to learn when I returned on home leave. My then-87-year-old aunt described to

me how my family had actually escaped Warsaw on Sept. 5, 1939, and it blew my mind. She told me she had known the American ambassador at the time, Anthony J. Drexel Biddle Jr., socially. When our family decided to leave, she asked him if she could borrow some gas for our car. He said he, too, was leaving, and invited our family to join his motorcade.

The next morning they discovered Amb. Biddle and his people trying to camouflage his canary-yellow Cadillac convertible. My aunt recounted helping to drape pine bows over it. The group then drove south to Romania, dodging stukas (dive bombers) all the way. So, were it not for Biddle, I certainly would not be an American today, let alone one of his successors. Ironically, my picture was placed directly under his in the embassy's rogues' gallery after I departed.

The team at Embassy Warsaw was truly fabulous. I take great pride in the fact that of the dozen senior FSOs who served on my country team, five are now ambassadors.

A week before my wife and I left, in late October 1997, our friends the Russian ambassador and his wife hosted us at an informal farewell dinner at the former Soviet embassy. The other guests were the German ambassador, Poland's foreign minister and their wives. We joked and laughed and enjoyed each other's company that night, truly appreciating that we were witnesses to the end of the Cold War and a millennium of Polish insecurity — the fruit, in no small part, of 50 years of American foreign policy. ■

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