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Poland Has Not Yet Been Lost

The first four words of the Polish national anthem are "Jeszcze Polska nie zginela," "Poland has not yet been lost." That line captures the essence of what it means to be Polish: Poles, however disheartening the prospects seem, will not allow their nation to perish, even when the country faced senseless loss.

These four words came to life for me this past weekend, through the voice of a lone man standing in front of Poland's presidential palace. It was he who in the dead of night, amidst flickering candles and silent, bereaving crowds, sung out these words, only to be followed by the chorus of thousands following him, the echo expressing the national spirit. It was a tribute to the solidarity that has become a trademark for Poland, and which its deceased President was a part of.

Speaking truth to power and fighting against Goliath was ingrained in the cultural conversation of my home, as a Polish-American growing up in Chicago. I rode the shoulders of my father as a toddler when my parents rallied with the city's Polish-American community with one voice demanding freedom for Soviet-occupied Poland. I remember being strangely drawn to the writing on the "Solidarnosc" signs which looked like dripping blood.

Polish-Americans in Chicago often boast that the city "has more Poles than Warsaw." This was my reality growing up, watching my grandmother baking "paczki" (a kind of jelly doughnut) and blueberry pierogi. My mother was a precinct captain on the "Southwest side" of the city, working tirelessly to give Polish-Americans a voice in local politics. We would tramp through the neighborhoods of Pulaski Avenue attempting to persuade Polish "babcia's" to vote for various Democratic candidates. I'm not sure whether we convinced anyone but we always left feeling we fought the good fight with stomachs full of 'kolaczki'.

Like the children of any immigrants, I came to age inhabiting the oft-confusing crawlspace between cultural and national identity. The contradictions inside and outside my home were significant. The same contradictions are present in Poland today with new and Western colliding with old and traditional. My Polish parents tried to connect with me and I pushed back on what I

thought were out-dated, un-American ideas.

My family diligently dragged me each year to the "Polish Constitution Day" parade in Chicago. I hated going to this and one year threw a tantrum, ripping off the traditional "KraKowianka" corset I was wearing and screaming "I was born in America," all the while standing on a float emblazoned with the face of Pope John Paul II. The imagery was just too much for my highly observant parents and we never attended again.

These cross-cultural hi-jinks turned pernicious when a high school girl asked me in front of a large group whether my parents were "the two Polaks who came to clean her house each Saturday." I came home in tears; all I wanted was to be an American, but my Polish heritage contributed to a feeling of "other."

That day, my father sat me down and showed me a book containing a chapter about my grandfather, called "Westerplatte". When you read this you will understand and be proud of the Polish character, he said.

"The battle of Westerplatte was a personal tragedy for me and my friends," my grandfather wrote. In September 1939 off the peninsula of Westerplatte near Gdansk, Corporal Jozef Lopatniuk helped lead 182 Polish soldiers against a smothering attack by the 3,000 Nazis shooting from the German ship, the Schleswig-Holstein. The Germans expected an easy victory due to their robust numbers and ammunitions, but the Poles held them off for seven days. "If the Germans had soldiers like the Poles, we could take over the world," the Commander of the Schleswig-Holstein later said.

The surrender marked the beginning of WWII and my grandfather was taken to the labor camp, Niewola in Germany, or Oflag #5. He was a prisoner there for five years until the end of the war.

My grandfather's heroism and sacrifice helped me see through time that Polish culture is not about traditional garments and food, it's about values and history. What I mistakenly saw as "un-American" is actually a defining thread in the fabric of Americana--the respect for and defense of the dignity of the individual and the communities they are a part of. For me, being Polish is an inextricable part of my identity as an American.

Today, like in Westerplatte, the Poles face a daunting challenge. Yet, they are already exhibiting the grit I witnessed so many years ago in those Solidarity rallies, and in the convictions of my own parents. The Polish nation will power through this because it is an integral part of their narrative. One day, I will work to make my own daughter appreciate her heritage. When she is facing an adverse obstacle, I will tell her about this weekend's tragedy. If she opens her mind she too may understand and be proud of the Polish character.

