

Sunday, February 12, 2006 – this is truly an important date for us – Poles living in South Australia. Premier Mike Rann invited representatives of the Polish community to the Adelaide Convention Centre for a meeting organized to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Polish settlement in South Australia, which we are commemorating this year.

Lidia Mikołajewska

The guests of Mike Rann included primarily Polish activists who have tirelessly worked to promote our Polish culture and language.

The meeting was attended by representatives of the Australian authorities, led by Mike Rann, the leader of the opposition, members of parliament, Archbishop Phillip Wilson, the Ambassador of Poland Jerzy Więclaw, and the Consul General of Poland in Sydney – Ryszard Sarkowicz, as well as heads of Polish organizations. The master of ceremonies was Mrs. Gosia Skalban.

At the beginning of the meeting, when the flags were brought in by gentlemen: Stan Ciechanowicz, Józef Glapa, Richard Baxter, Józef Lewicki, Zygmunt Zienkiewicz, Greg Sierocinski, Stanisław Kramarczuk, Marek Bukowski, and Andrzej Skrzypiec – the Adelaide Cantores Choir, under the direction of Ireneusz Lasocki, sang the Australian and Polish anthems. I should add that the event was also enhanced by the "Tatry" ensemble (choreography by Joasia and Mark Trepa).

A very touching moment was when we watched a professionally made photo montage on two screens, accompanied by the sounds of Chopin's music. First, we saw old, yellowed photographs showing our Polish settlers building houses, digging trenches, shovels in hand. But we also saw them resting after work, laughing. Adults and tiny children. They are the ones who built the foundations of South Australia as we know it today.

In the following black-and-white photographs from the last century: war, bombings, ruins, and debris, the Warsaw insurgents – girls and boys, wounded and terrified... The caption reads: "And then we arrived..." The post-war wave of Polish immigrants in Australia from various parts of the world. The photographs capture the toil and hardship, our Polish contribution to the development of South Australia.

And more photos: colorful ones. Pope John Paul II and his pilgrimage in Australia. Lech Wałęsa – the leader of "Solidarity." At the Harvest Festival – a meeting with representatives of the Australian authorities, including Premier Mike Rann. And again, the caption: "history continues."

The selection of these images that highlight the most important, pivotal moments in our history: the first settlement, the wartime and post-war contributions, the role of John Paul II and Lech Wałęsa in regaining independence – was made by Mrs. Krystyna Łużna.

150 years ago, on August 17, 1856, a group of 131 Poles from the Prussian partition arrived on Australian soil. They settled in Hill River, Sevenhill, Penwortham, and many other places in South Australia. Today, in Polish Hill River – thanks to the efforts of Adelaide community members – we have managed to preserve the church and school built shortly after our compatriots arrived in this locality.

Today, Polish Hill River is our symbol. It allows us to remember the early settlers who lived under incredibly difficult conditions. And yet, they survived, leaving behind memories and descendants who have made their mark in the social and political life of Australia. This fact

was emphasized in their speeches by Premier Mike Rann, Krzysztof Balcerak – president of the Federation of Polish Organizations in South Australia, and Dr. Andy Czechowicz – chairman of the Polish Organizing Committee for the 150th anniversary of Polish settlement in South Australia.

A very touching moment of the ceremony was when the Ambassador of the Republic of Poland in Australia, Mr. Jerzy Więclaw, presented the "Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland" to Premier Mike Rann, awarded last year by the former President of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski.

After the official part, the premier invited his Polish guests for refreshments. It was an opportunity to reconnect, even after many years. As some noted, although we live close to each other, we don't always have the time to meet and talk. However, the meeting proved that we Poles can stick together and act positively.

The Premier himself provided much emotion, emphasizing his personal, strong ties with us. During his speech, and later for the listeners of PBA FM, he said, among other things:

"I am highly honored – this is what I want to convey to Poles in Southern Australia. I am very honored that the President of the Republic of Poland has awarded me such a high distinction. Anyone who believes in freedom knows how much we owe to Poland, for no nation has fought harder for freedom, yet no other country has been more occupied, suppressed, and betrayed. My connections with you are always very personal. During World War II, my mother worked in a factory producing parts for the Spitfire. Every eighth pilot of these planes was Polish during the war for England. The role of the 303 Squadron was crucial at that time. My father fought under the command of General Montgomery alongside the Poles, as well as participating in the battles at Monte Cassino. In his memories and conversations with me, he always referred to you as "brave Poles" who had nothing to lose and a lot to gain. My father had a special affection for you. When I arrived in Australia in 1977, my first friends were you – the Poles. I was deeply moved when I recently read in a book about Monte Cassino the inscription: "For Your Freedom and Ours. We give our souls to God, our bodies to the land of Italy, and our hearts to Poland."

Participating in this meeting, Professor Maciej Henneberg told PBA FM radio that he had just made an agreement with the Prime Minister on this topic. Both of their fathers served in the same 8th Army of Montgomery. The professor's uncle, a fighter pilot, flew the Spitfires, which were controlled from the ground by the Prime Minister's mother."

The day before, on February 11, a ceremony was held in the SPK Hall at the Central Polish House, where medals, decorations, and diplomas were awarded to veterans and to community members who contributed to the development of Polish culture in South Australia. These honors were awarded last year by the then-President of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, and presented by Ryszard Sarkowicz, the Consul General of Poland in Sydney.

And so, we began the celebrations in 2006, marking the 150th anniversary of Polish settlement in South Australia. We will celebrate practically all year round. An organizing committee is working on this under the leadership of Dr. Czechowicz.

On August 17, to commemorate the ship's arrival at the port of Glenelg, a solemn Mass will be held at the Adelaide Cathedral. A formal dinner and concert are also planned.

The year 2006 is the year of Polish settlement, the year of the Adelaide Polish community.