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Remarks by Senator Edmund S. Muskie at the St. Stanislaus Koska Communion Breakfast

Edmund S. Muskie

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REMARKS BY SENATOR EDMUND S. MUSKIE
ST. STANISLAUS KOSKA COMMUNION BREAKFAST
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
9:00 A.M., SUNDAY, MARCH 19, 1972

Serdeczne Bog Zaplac. (Trans.: I thank you in my heart; may God repay you.) I am not parading under fake colors. My mother tells me that until I was four, the only language I could speak was Polish.

But there were only three Polish families in town, and so when I went to school I soon lost the language. My next education in Polish came when I was in law school in New York. I used to spend vacations in Buffalo with my mother's family, and they started to teach me Polish all over again. Of course, most of the Polish they taught me, I have never been able to use in public.

But now I am gradually picking up some new phrases of an old and familiar tongue. That is one of the advantages of this presidential campaign. The other, of course, is that it takes me around the country to meet my father's people. We do not have many Poles in Maine. I do not know exactly why my father happened to settle there, but he did. I assure you it wasn't a Polish vote that elected me in Maine. But I think I got all the Polish votes there were.

And I was proud of that support. It was the kind of pride my father took in the achievements of the Polish calvary that used to tour the world in those days between the two wars. . . and in the achievements of Marshal Kosciuszko and Paderewski. He followed them closely, and he clipped stories out of the newspapers and pasted them in scrapbooks.

It is the kind of pride that Poles have always taken in Polish history, Polish accomplishments, and the progress of Poles wherever they live. It is one of those wonderful ties that bind us wherever we live in this great country of ours. And I suppose it is especially strong for us as Poles because so many of us here in this room and across the country are the descendants of people who left a Poland that was not free to find a place in a country that is free.

Just a few years ago, we all celebrated the thousandth anniversary of Christianity in Poland, and the thousand years of Poland itself. And I have had the privilege of traveling around the country to speak with Poles and to Poles about the meaning of those ten centuries of history in our homeland.

And as I did, I was reminded over and over again of what my father used to tell me when I was young. I didn't fully appreciate it then.

I suppose his story is very much like the story of your fathers or your grandparents who came here years ago. My father came here because, shortly after he was born, his father decided to send him away from a country that was occupied by three powers. . . Russia, Germany, and Austria. He lived in the Russian occupied sector, where Poles were not free to be Poles, where they were not free to teach their children Polish history or to keep Polish culture alive. So, my grandfather apprenticed my father to a tailor, and when he had learned his trade, at about the age of 16, he was sent to England and then to America.

There was no mystery about why he did that. He did it because, like all Poles for a thousand years, he cherished freedom over everything else. He wanted his son to know freedom, to live in freedom, to grow up in freedom, and to have children of his own who would also be free.

So, my father came here. He did not have much formal education, and when he came here he found that he was not instantly free. America was a land of opportunity, but immigrants had to make their own place and to be accepted as equals by their own efforts. And that is what my father did in fifty years of hard work.

He also took a great interest in public affairs. He learned to read English and to speak it by himself, and he did it mostly by reading the newspapers. He followed public issues, politics, and candidates for President. He developed convictions about what was right and what was wrong. It was always right with him if it was good for freedom and if it was good for people. . . if it helped people move ahead and find opportunity and improve their lives. That was the kind of leadership he looked for in candidates for state office and for the Presidency itself.

My father used to discuss his hopes with me when I was a boy. He used to talk to me about Al Smith and Harding and Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt. Party affiliation did not mean very much to him. As a matter of fact, I think he was always enrolled as a Republican, although I doubt that he ever voted Republican. But he was always more interested in what a man stood for than the party label that he carried.

He voted for Roosevelt, but I heard him bitterly criticize Roosevelt at times. He voted for Al Smith, but ~~was~~ was critical when he thought Al Smith was wrong.

Although he did not vote for Hoover, he had some nice things to say about him, at times when he thought he was right. He always remembered what Hoover did in Europe to alleviate starvation among the peoples of Europe after World War I. And he always believed that a good and just nation is a country that tries to improve the lives of its average citizens.

I guess what my father taught me will live with me for all the days of my life. He died a year after I was elected Governor of Maine, and it has always seemed so wonderful to me that he lived long enough to see it. It must have proved a lot of things to him, to see the son of a Polish immigrant become the Governor of his state.

I was elected to the Legislature in a town where Republicans had been elected for years. I unseated a Republican representative to the Legislature. I ran for Governor against a Republican Governor and won. I served four years and then ran for the Senate, and I ran against a Republican Senator and won against him.

This was possible in a state where there are no Poles to speak of, in a state where descendants of immigrants had not won an elective office in the state's history, in a state where Democrats had not won in a decade, in a state where no Catholic had ever been elected Governor, in a state where no Catholic had been ever elected to the United States Senate. And all this happened to the son of a Polish immigrant. It happened because the people of Maine put aside the fears that divided them and joined together in the hopes that united them.

My father came here to escape fear and to find freedom. He came here to escape hatred and to find peace. He came here to find opportunity for himself, because he thought there was opportunity for everyone who lived in this country. He came here believing that freedom here was freedom for all Americans.

But there are some Americans who claim that those who have a stake in our society -- those who have already made it -- must build a wall between themselves and the deprived in order to be safe and secure. But anyone whose forebears lived in Poland knows what walls can mean. Walls were built in Poland by occupying powers. . . to protect the rulers and the privileged classes against the unrest and dissatisfactions of an oppressed people. We know what those walls represented. They represented suspicion and hatred. Nobody is safe in that kind of a country. The only thing that makes a country safe is freedom for all the people.

Once we begin denying the rights of any citizen we jeopardize the rights of every citizen. Paderewski understood that. He often came to the United States to breathe the air of liberty. . . which is what he brought back to his homeland in the brief period between the World Wars. He understood that liberty was what Poles had been fighting for -- for a thousand years -- not only for themselves, but for others. This is why Kosciuszko came here. . . and it is what he helped America to win in the eighteenth century.

Poles often succeed in fighting with each other. . .but never over their common commitment to freedom. This always united them against every enemy and against insuperable odds.

I have been to Poland just twice, and I will never forget the first time. It was in 1959, in my first year in the Senate, and I just had a weekend there. I stayed in Warsaw and traveled on a Sunday west to Poznan where the freedom fighters lie buried in a nearby cemetery. . . and I attended mass in the ancient cathedral.

I remember that Sunday morning, as we drove west from Warsaw. I remember the horses and the wagons. I remember arriving at Church in a Communist country which frowns on religion, but has never been able to kill the faith of the Polish people. The church was crowded to overflowing. . . and all along the road, there were religious shrines. . . everyone of them neat and perfectly kept. . . all of them beautiful.

We stopped and talked to some of the villagers. I had to do it through an interpreter, I am sad to relate. But the pride they took in their possessions, in their religion, and in their nationality came through in their eyes and in their faces. The next day I went east to Bystrzyca. I went to a village where an open market was being held. It was in October. In the crisp autumn air, in the smell of the new fallen leaves -- even in a country under Communist domination, there was the eternal love of liberty of the Poles.

I had just come from 30 days in the Soviet Union, also Communist, but Poland was so different. You could feel it without speaking to a soul. You could see it in people's faces without hearing them say a word. You could see it in the pride that women took in their dress. You could see it in the care the people took of their few possessions, in their pride, and in their determination to be Poles above everything else.

I was never so proud of the people from whom I came until I saw them under the oppressive conditions in which they have been forced to live.

Now we have found here what Poles have treasured and fought for and died for in the last thousand years. . . the chance to be free. It is for this reason, really, that I am running for President of the United States.

I believe we need a President who will unite our country, not divide it. We need a leader who will dispel fear and build understanding and compassion. . . a leader who can persuade Americans to work together.

So I need your help. I need your help to break the walls down, to tear down all the barriers that stand between us and our future.

When my father came here, he faced an uphill fight, and he did not stop until he won. And when I ran as a Democrat in Maine, that was an uphill fight, and I didn't stop until I won. This, too, may be an uphill fight, but we are not going to stop until we win. As a matter of fact, it is more fun to win that kind of fight. And when we win this one -- in Illinois this Tuesday and across the nation next November -- we will know that we have done something worthy of our heritage and our history.

God bless you all.

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