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THE AMERICAN MYTH IN POLAND AND CENTRAL EUROPE AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR

From its beginnings America had offered freedom, democracy and an opportunity for many persecuted people. For the centuries it was also a land for people eager to discover «the New World», for many travellers, and those who were earning for the adventure and the excessive desire for getting rich in such a mysterious and promising land. At the turn of the XIXth century books about America written by the Polish visitors, namely by educating people, artists, writers, politicians etc., spread some knowledge about the country, but, above all, excited eagerness and fascination about the magic, rich and promising country so far away across the ocean. (These «letters» were written for the readers of «Gazeta Polska», which paid for writer's visit to American in 1876—1878. The «letters» were published in «Gazeta Polska» in 1876—1878 and later in the book version with a several editions) [13, 16, 24].

With plenty of natural resources and land America was also a dreamland for millions of foreigners who sought for economic opportunity, especially during the industrialisation period in the second half of the nineteenth century. This includes also the economic emigration from Poland, often called «for bread» (*za chlebem*). The mass Polish emigration to the United States reached its peak in the last decade of the nineteenth century and then it continued, despite some restrictions, until the First World War. The immigrants were predominantly peasants from poor rural parts of partitioned Poland such as *Rzeszowszczyzna*, *Galicja* and *Kurpie*. They hoped to earn some money and to return to Poland to improve their standard of living.

First of all, they were thrilled by the exciting stories about the rich country, which offered such a great opportunity to everybody [17]. These stories were persuasive enough for all potential immigrants, the more so that many of their cousins and relatives managed to earn some money quickly. They were influenced by such stories and, as for many Poles at that time, it became an exciting dream to go to the «promised land, flowing with milk and honey, the land of opportunity» [17, p. 430, 440].

The majority of emigrants knew very little about America, the everyday life and labour conditions there. And what they did know was based mostly on letters and money-transfers, which came from the United States, as well as on stories told by the returning emigrants and limited information in the newspapers. Uncritical yet promising opinions about America and conditions of life and work there only strengthened the convictions of potential emigrants. The image of America was usually very positive and contained, above all, the elements which were missing in the home country, such as guaranteed work, adequate wages, availability of farmland, great possibilities, adventure and freedom. America became a legendary country and a dreamland for many Poles, as well as for millions of other foreigners who expected to find there, above all, the work, wealth, and freedom.

America was imagined as a country «flowing with milk and honey», a sort of paradise, which was very tempting, especially for young and energetic, yet poor, people who were determined to experience the New Land and money there. Certainly, such an idealised image was created mostly by the emotional expectations and imagination of potential emigrants, fed by positive experiences of others. In fact, it involved very little factual objective information. This was neither needed nor sought by those already determined to go to America. What's more, even if there was information and critical stories available about difficulties and dangerous situations awaiting immigrants in America, nobody believed it. Stories of misfortune were considered to be isolated incidents suffered by lazy or ineffectual newcomers. Psychologically this attitude is quite clear.

Most of the future emigrants had dreams about a better life «a heavenly place somewhere» where they could escape. The idealised image of America suited such hopes and dreams perfectly. They left the villages to seek treasure, wealth and their fortune in America. Certainly, their dreams of having houses with beautiful furniture, carpets and pictures on the walls would come true there, «in rich America». That was true. In Poland most of them had lived in very basic and poor conditions and had never even

witnessed such wealth with their own eyes. Of course they could imagine that a country gentleman or a factory owner might afford such things and riches. But not common people or peasants! The following remark reflects their sincere surprise caused by the realisation that material comfort was possible for the working class: «When I went to church in America the first time I was amazed. Women were dressed up in silk and hats and men were also carefully dressed. (...) I couldn't believe they are our Wojteks and Kasias from Polish villages» [17, p. 143].

The Polish immigrants hoped to share with other nations the benefits of American wealth, democracy, and freedom. For many those who saw their expectations bear fruit and who improved their economic status, the U.S. became the real «promised land». Many of them later on worked not only in meat packing plants and steelworks, but also became owners of restaurants, shops, service stations etc. Most of them were quite satisfied with their way of life and, above all, with the standard of living in America. They bought cars, houses with gardens, refrigerators, and radios and they were very proud of the fruit of their hard work [17, pp. 191—192, 305, 452]. They came to believe in the superiority of everything American and became the strongest supporters of the American way of life and the system itself.

In Poland only very few rich people could afford a car at that time. In America, thanks to hard work, good luck, and American prosperity in the 1920s it was even possible for a worker, previously a poor Polish peasant. I think such an example is very significant and explains a very basic part of the modern American myth. Many Poles had dreams about such a rich and promising America for everybody, with «a dollar instead of the leaves on the trees», as one angry visitor complained. In the United States they enjoyed the comfort of modern technology, such as electricity, cooking facilities, heating. They wrote about it with great satisfaction to their countrymen and they did impress them enormously. This is the main key for understanding the American legend, so strong in inter-war Poland.

American Poles praised also the American system, democracy and freedom, especially in comparison to the situation in Poland. Anyway, the more they

compared America with Poland, the more they admired the first. Most of those who returned home missed America and couldn't live in Poland any more. They wanted to return to the United States and many of them did. They preferred to live in «rich, abundant, democratic and free» America. In spite of their American experience for millions of other Poles America became only a dreamland, great, fantastic, promising, yet unreal.

The image of such a rich and prosperous America was created in Poland mostly by the Polish immigrants (later Polish-Americans), the return emigrants and visitors from the United States. In their letters, memoirs and during their visits to the old country they disseminated a lot of stories about not a fictional but real «promised land» and their own careers «from rags to riches». For their countrymen who knew them as poor and sometimes illiterate peasants this was a proof that in America a real career and success were possible. Certainly such a visible success (sometimes «proved» only by stories or pictures) was fascinating and persuasive enough for destitute people dreaming about money and wealth. What is worth mentioning is the fact that about 80—90 thousands Poles came back to Poland after the First World War, but shortly after most of them came back again to the US, because they could not accommodate themselves in the Polish circumstances.

Some emigrants who came back to their homelands in Poland, Bohemia, Hungary or Slovakia became even more successful in the eyes of their neighbours and did spread enormously the American dream. They could buy more land and afford some other needs. In a very visible way they did improve the standard of living and did implement some innovations, modernisation etc. As one chief administrator reported about such emigrants: «People demolish their wretched little houses one after the other, they build headlong attractive stone and brick houses with thatched roofs — now also covered with tiles — large windows that can be opened, which is important to community health because it is possible to keep them clean and also to air out the houses. They pay more attention to their clothing and nourishment, carrying the first to luxury, the second to extravagance. Generally, prosperity and contentment have risen» [25, p. 57]. Those successful emigrants became so often nicknamed «Americans» in their native villages and they did Americanise somehow the neighbourhood.

The packages, food and medical supplies sent after the First World War and, above all, the magic dollars sent to the Polish Families and relatives strengthened the extremely positive image of the abundant and rich United States where everybody could live comfortably. Such one-sided picture of America became again a sort of dreamland for millions Europeans struggling for life in Europe devastated by the war and famine.

Since the First World War spreading American culture and values came under greater US governmental direction. The Committee on Public Information (CPI), created in 1917, constituted the first official effort to convert the world to «the Gospel of Americanism». «We did not call it propaganda», wrote its director, George Creel. «Our effort was educational and informative throughout». But the real goal was

popularisation of America, its ideals, generosity, superiority etc. Creel introduced on a large scale, as the author calls it «spreading the American dream» [3].

During the First World War American soldiers in Europe with their equipment, fancy gadgets, cane food and cigarettes became the most effective, intentionally

or not, propagators of American wealth and abundance. They also became the visible symbols of American ideals, democracy and freedom with its great leader, President Woodrow Wilson who was a moralist in politics and a man of vision. Deeply drawn into international affairs, he continued to seek inspirations and motivations for American policy. In his messages he very often declared that even small nations and states have a right to equal treatment and have a right to enjoy the same respect for their sovereignty. He declared for a just, permanent, open peace, and stressed the desirability of consulting the wishes of the minority groups and oppressed nations. The president's fascinating phrases proved to be a mighty instrument of propaganda in the world (George Creel, the head of the American Committee on Public Information, played an active role in it. A huge amount of pamphlets, booklets, leaflets and posters, etc. introduced Wilsonism and the „Gospel of Americanism» to the world).

President Wilson condemned the cruelty of the First World War and appealed to all fighting countries to «end all war» and «establish justice». He became the champion of many oppressed nations, above all, in Central Europe. The principle of national self-determination was for him a natural right, as well as freedom and democracy. America and Wilson became for a time the chief exponents of democratic ideology and moral principle in politics, especially in the eyes of small European nations. In his «Peace Without Victory» address, delivered before the Senate on January 22, 1917 Wilson declared again his principles, which was received with a great enthusiasm and hope by Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and many other small European nations. The American president became not only their «national hero» but also a sort of «super-arbiter» in international affairs. The grateful Poles organised manifestations to honour America, and Polish leaders sent many telegrams of thanks to the president. At this time Wilson became the most popular man in Poland [6, p. 336]. In poster-portraits and sketches he was presented as a «new Messiah» for the oppressed nations. The entrance of the United States into the war with Germany in April of 1917 had a great impact on subsequent events and enhanced Wilson's moral leadership. It also cast a new light on relations with the national movements of East-Central Europe. The war activities of the United States were not only a struggle against the subjection of small nations and states. America became an active participant in the war, as well as the creator, in the name of Wilsonian ideals, of a new international order. This was a «war to end all wars» and a war to make the world «safe for democracy».

Wilson's message of January 8, 1918 and especially 13th point about the independence of Poland made him a hero in Polish eyes and encouraged his later legend. The American president was pictured as the champion of Poland and its independence [20]. In spite of a later more critical approach, mainly presented by historians, Wilson's message had a great moral and diplomatic value for the Poles convinced of, or rather wishing for, more effective American support for Polish independence.

United States participation in the war efforts and its political involvement in the region in the decisive years, 1917—1918, influenced the growth of expectations for American support of the national movements in Central Europe. Ignacy Jan Paderewski, Roman Dmowski, Thomas G. Masaryk and other leaders undertook many more efforts to gain American assistance for their plans.

The revolution in Russia and the military destruction of the Central Powers, to which the Polish and Czechoslovak movements also contributed, made their independence possible. The victory of the Allies, and French and British policy stimulated and contributed to the independence movements in East-Central Europe much more than U.S. policy. But Wilsonian America also played a role, especially at the end of war- an active part, which became a quite useful object for overwhelming propaganda and the legend of Wilson as «liberator» and «saviour» of the oppressed nations in Central Europe.

Such an emotional, positive and idealistic image became even stronger during the Peace Conference. In Paris Wilson was spontaneously greeted by a crowd of admirers as the «American saviour», who had helped to destroy militaristic Germany and who seemed to promise international justice and peace. In England and Italy, where he journeyed, he was warmly greeted as well. During the Peace Conference, the American president was considered by the majority of Europeans and especially by the oppressed nations as a «crusader for liberty» and a «moral leader in a corrupted world». Many national delegations from around the world asked for the president's audience, seeking for his understanding of their goals and «objective judgements of his justice» [21].

The Wilsonian legend survived in Poland and in Czechoslovakia long after he had become unsuccessful and almost forgotten in his homeland in the 1920s. American president became one of the

most popular and famous politicians in East-Central Europe after the First World War. Among the newly liberated nations of that region, including Poland and Czechoslovakia, Woodrow Wilson was one of the most known and cherished leaders. Many streets, schools, buildings, and institutions were named after him, and many monuments were dedicated to his memory. For millions of Europeans he symbolised American democracy, freedom, and all that was best about America. For millions of Central Europeans he also became a symbolic hero to whom they owed their gratitude for American support and the restoration of their independence. For Poles, Czechs and Slovaks he symbolised the good will of America toward their native lands. He became a «defender of democracy», «apostle of freedom», «founding father» and a «liberator» of Poland and Czechoslovakia for millions of grateful countrymen [27, pp. 26—27].

In the recognition of Wilson's achievements in 1920 he was awarded the Nobel Prize and in 1922 in Poland the Order of the White Eagle. Great devotion to him was showed on July 4 each year in the capital cities of Poland and Czechoslovakia. The ethnic groups from Central Europe played a significant part in the creation and preservation of the Wilsonian legend.

The main train station in Prague (Wilsonovo nadrazi) and several buildings in the capital city, as well as in other towns were also named after Wilson. He was, after President Masaryk, the most admired hero and the «founding father» of Czechoslovakia. On many occasions Czechs and Slovaks showed their gratitude to America and Wilson for the moral and diplomatic support for independence, as well as for the humanitarian aid they received. His portrait hung in all governmental offices in Czechoslovakia [3, p. 16; 4, p. 844].

President Wilson's death and funeral in February 1924 were commemorated with requiem masses and ceremonies in Central European countries. There were many masses and meetings to commemorate President Wilson and his achievements

in Czechoslovakia. In a letter to his widow, Edith Galt Wilson, President Masaryk wrote: «We are grateful to Wilson and the American Nation for helping us so magnanimously during the war and the Peace Conference in recovering our liberty. Personally I am grieved at having lost a real friend» [5, p. 5].

On February 10, 1924 a special gathering of governmental officials under the guidance of Masaryk was organised. They showed a deep appreciation for Wilson and America for the kind assistance and friendship shown to Czechs and Slovaks in the difficult times during and after the war [14].

February 5, 1924 was proclaimed a day of mourning in Poland. Banners on governmental buildings in Warsaw and other towns were hauled down. On the same day, in a special session of the Polish parliament, its speaker Maciej Rataj delivered a message to commemorate President Wilson. He emphasised Wilson's role in the resurrection of the Polish independent state, particularly his message to the Senate delivered on January 22, 1917 [1, p. 34].

In many other messages Polish officials gratefully emphasised Wilson's ideals and appreciated his integrity in politics and his great contribution to world peace. He was owed a special gratitude for «being a friend of Poland in a difficult time» and for «bringing the Gospel of freedom» to the oppressed people of Central Europe [1, p. 35].

In the following weeks there also were organised informal lectures to commemorate President Wilson, and special meetings at Polish schools to inform pupils about his achievements. His policy toward Poland was presented in a very positive, sentimental and almost mythical way [1, p. 35].

In 1928 during the tenth anniversary of independence of Poland and Czechoslovakia Wilson's name came back again to popular attention. On July 4, 1928 a monument was dedicated to him in Prague. The ceremony, with the participation of many American and Czechoslovak officials, was positively commented on not only in Czechoslovakia but also in American newspapers [12; 15]. Many more streets, squares and buildings were named after Wilson and America. Telegrams to President Calvin Coolidge and American officials repeated again «a deep appreciation and gratefulness for ever» to America and President Wilson [19].

In many Polish towns, including the capital, streets, squares, hospitals, etc. were after Wilson. His great and friend, Paderewski sponsored a monument to Wilson, which was dedicated in Poznac on July 4, 1931 [9]. Such positive, sometimes quite naive opinions about Wilson showed a real gratitude and appreciation by Poles, Czechs and Slovaks. It is not easy to say if such adulation was justified, or to what extent. Wilson's policy and his achievements were critically examined and depreciated in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War [See: 2, 7]. Certainly, the American president played a role in the creation of the new states in Central Europe, but it was largely exaggerated. He became the symbolic hero («liberator», «new Messiah», «moral judge», etc.) for millions of people, mostly because of the sociological need for such a myth. He fulfilled this role in the best possible way. Some of those opinions, however, reflected the low level of journalism in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Other comments by Polish or Czechoslovak officials were also motivated by tactical reasons. The image of American president as a

devoted friend of Poland and Czechoslovakia became even more necessary in the following decade, when both of the newly restored countries were in danger of pressure from revisionist tendencies.

Besides Wilson there was another American hero recognised and cherished in inter-war Poland and Czechoslovakia — humanitarian Herbert Hoover. His personal legend strengthened enormously the American myth in inter-war Europe, especially in Central Europe. The American Relief Administration (ARA) organised by him and humanitarian aid for millions of European children, mothers, orphans, sick people etc. established the closest, very positive and quite emotional link between the US and Europe. The ARA activities contributed also a lot to promote the American charity, idealism, generosity and the superiority of its economic and political system and a better way of life. Hoover became a very popular hero in Poland and Czechoslovakia and received numerous accolades. He was awarded the honorary citizenship of several Polish cities and the citizenship of Polish Republic as well. In mid-August of 1919 Hoover visited Poland and was received enthusiastically by Poles grateful both to him and American republic [10, pp. 20—22].

In Warsaw there was the Hoover Square on Krakowski Przedmieście Street. On October 29, 1922 the monument of the gratitude for America, the work of famous artist Xavery Dunikowski, was unveiled at an impressive ceremony. The dignitaries of Poland and diplomats were joined by 100.000 school children, all who gathered to demonstrate their gratitude to the man and nation who saved hundreds of thousands from starvation and failure [10, p. 32]. In the coming years Hoover, like Wilson, was admired and almost worshiped by many Poles.

In a letter to president-elect, Herbert Hoover in November 1928, American minister in Poland, John Stetson wrote: «Your name is second only to that of President Wilson in the minds of the Polish people. Their feeling for President Wilson is abstract; for you it is personal because of the tremendous services you rendered in supplying the population with food and other necessary articles immediately after the armistice» [8]. Hoover symbolised and personified the best of America — its charity, idealism, humanity, but also prosperous, rich life. He himself was a poor boy, Quaker, an orphan, who became a very successful businessman and millionaire.

Fascination with America and everything American after the First World War became very visible in the newly restored countries, such as Poland and, to a lesser extent, Czechoslovakia. Polish officials, to mention, above all, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, became extremely useful and supportive in the creation of a positive approach and image of America and in consequence in Americanisation of Poland. In Czechoslovakia a similar role was played by President Masaryk and his family, above all, his American wife Charlotta Garrigue, and children — Jan and Alice, educated in America and fascinated in many ways by American values and culture [11].

Occasional pamphlets, books and works of fiction created and established also a very positive image of America in Central Europe. Some publications of YMCA, YWCA, as well as the Quakers literature about ARA activities just only strengthened the image about the best of America — its democracy, idealism, charity, and generosity in sharing of its wealth. Such a belief that other nations could and should learn and replicate America's own ideas and experience were widely spread in Central Europe.

Since the Paris Peace Conference English became the language of diplomacy, equal to French, and did play an excellent role in the Americanisation of the whole world, including Europe. In Poland and Czechoslovakia, previously dominated by Russian and German languages, were established the English schools with courses

on English and American literature and history. Also exchange programs were initiated between the universities, the scholar institutions and the American foundations for the promotion of better understanding between the nations. In many cases it was used for the popularisation of American values and techniques.

July 4th became a very special event in Warsaw and Prague. There were parades, picnics, lectures about America and remarks of gratitude in the messages of Polish and Czechoslovak officials. It was a good occasion for many comments and articles in the newspapers about American democracy and efficiency of economic system. In 1926 in Poland during the celebrations of 150th-anniversary of the independence of US the fascination with America and its superiority reached the peak [26]. A special address was dedicated to American friends and 111 albums (as a gift and a gratitude) was presented to the United States by Poland with 5,5 million signatures of Polish people. Among the signatures, official seals, photographs there are also many original and unique illustrations by leading Polish painters and graphic artist of the time, such as Stanisław Czajkowski, Ferdynand Ruszczyk, Władysław Skoczylas,

Zofia Stryjewska and Leon Wyczynowski (This unique collection is in the Library of Congress in Washington — *H. P.*).

It is also worth mentioning that Polonia and its organisations, namely many associations and foundations including the Końciuszek Foundation, had played a significant role in the establishing a sincere, cordial and friendly approach and the development of mutual Polish-American relations. The same happened with American Czechs, Slovaks and especially Ruthenians who became, intentionally or not, the most effective propagators of America and, above all, its wealth and economic superiority. The significant, yet controversial role, was played in it by the first governor of Ruthenia, American born Ruthenian Gregory Zatkovic and his staff [7].

The American diplomats, particularly envoys and consular officers in Warsaw and Prague (such as Hugh Gibson, Richard Crane, Lewis Einstein) played an important role in promotion of everything American. They promoted not only positive, friendly image of America and mutual relationship but also encouraged Poles and Czechs to learn «American business, its methods and efficiency», American political system and even «American way of life» etc. In many cases, in spite of criticism or scepticism, they became quite successful. Poles, as well as Czechs and Slovaks were very fond of American technology, mechanisation, Ford cars. They highly evaluated the American efficiency, method and organization of work, professionalism etc. and they tried to implement some of them in their countries. In Czechoslovakia the fascination with American cars was limited, mostly because of the competition between the Ford cars and their own Skoda, good quality and popular cars. Czechs established the quota system to protect their own Skoda Auto Plant and its industry [18].

The Department of Commerce and its agents were selling successfully a large amount of American products abroad in the early 1920s. Herbert Hoover, as its head, became very efficient in propagating the quality of the American products after the war. He was also very useful in the promotion of American values and superiority of its political and economic system. Obviously, the success of US food, money and technical know-how cultivated American prestige in Europe, especially in Central Europe [More about it: 22].

In the 1920s the Hollywood film became very popular in the whole Europe, and especially in Central Europe where Mary Pickford and Frederick Douglas became not only a famous film stars but also a heroes of «the prosperous and rich America». They also became one of the most successful propagators of a comfortable life with the fancy gadgets and nice dresses of common Americans. The very true was that the post-war prosperity in America enabled such a comfortable life for millions of American families who could realise then their dreams about prosperous life. The contrast with Central Europe, heavily destroyed, starved and in need of food and all products, was so huge. Obviously, Europeans were impressed with the abundance and prosperous life, which gave rise to a lot wishes, dreams and fascination about America.

Americans introduced at the European market coca-cola and chewing gum as well as cars, machinery, equipment, highly evaluated by customers as the best and excellent. The trademark «made in America» for many people in Central Europe, who didn't know English, was recognised as standing for high quality products. Americanisation of Poland and Czechoslovakia became quite visible. As one journalist wrote «it begins with the film and ends with fashion» (dresses, shoes, hats etc.).

But American policy and, above all, the execution of the war debts and isolationism became at the mid-1920s a bitter disappointment for the Europeans. The extremely positive image of America, based mostly on the wishful thinking and sentimental expectations rose by Wilson's policy, became more and more inadequate to the reality and hard to defend even by their supporters. In cartoons a new image of the «Uncle Sam» appeared — a big and fat man with a cigar and pockets full of money. Such a selfish and self content rich American was also unconcerned about the rest of the world.

The Great Depression dramatically worsened the standard of living in the U.S. It was a very hard time for Americans because a great many people were unable to find work. Many of them were having trouble making a living others lost their houses, property and savings. Polish immigrants were also victims of the Great Depression, and they suffered like millions of others. During the thirties, due to the deterioration of conditions in the United States, many of them lost their jobs and savings, a tragic experience especially for those who had been prospering in their new life. «No work, no home, no money» may be a short and essential comment on the condition of many of them. Shame, self-doubt and pessimism became epidemic among the immigrants, the more so as they aged and fell ill. To those who were disillusioned by the new experience, mostly by difficulties to find a job, the country became strange, unfriendly, and terrifying. For some Poles in America, especially those getting older, nostalgia became an additional source of frustration and a motive, albeit sentimental, to return to Poland. Yet, in spite of their previous plans, they decided to stay permanently in the new country [17].

The Great Depression had a great impact on the image of America around the world. Then it was the beginning of the erosion of the idyllic image of America as a country of economic prosperity, abundance and opportunity for everybody.

Obviously, the impact of the American dream has varied widely. Many people in Central Europe have benefited in many ways. They were fascinated by the United States economic, political and ideological power, and its mechanisation, efficiency, mass production, openness, generosity etc. Exhausted by the war,

disillusioned with their own societies, many Europeans wondered whether they should not adopt the methods of highly successful Americans. In many cases they became successful, in other there were only the wishful thinking and dreams.

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