

## Swiss - Polish Relations: Past, Present and Future

Speech by H.E. Mr. Bénédict de Cerjat, Ambassador of Switzerland in Poland,  
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*(Einführung auf deutsch)*

When the President of the Swiss Confederation, Micheline Calmy-Rey, visited Warsaw last spring, the then Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczyński opened the official talks with a rather unexpected statement: “The Swiss nowadays probably don’t know what importance their country has played in Polish politics.” Mr. Kaczyński is well known for his straightforward manner, so I don’t think we should see this just as a cheap compliment.

What was this special role of Switzerland Mr. Kaczyński had in mind then? Surprisingly enough, he was not mentioning the Second World War, nor our humanitarian tradition in particular. He was alluding to the many Poles who had fought in the January uprising of 1863, and subsequently fled to Switzerland. Poland did not exist as a state at the time, since it had been divided up between Prussia, the Austrian and the Russian Empire.

It was in the castle of Hilfikon, in the Canton of Aargau, that these Polish freedom fighters founded in 1867 the so-called Polish League – Liga Polska. The goal of this organisation was to re-establish an independent Poland within its pre-division borders. What can be considered as a clear Swiss inspiration is the fact that this new State would have to be a Federation, respecting the rights of all ethnic minorities.

Our common PAST is full of such references and examples that resemble the Liga Polska. I can not mention all of them, of course, and would like to focus briefly on the contribution of Switzerland to the making of the II. Republic, when Poland finally regained independence after successful intervention in the Paris conference.

As it is today, Switzerland in the eve of World War I. was a safe haven for political émigrés from all over Europe. To this day, Russians remind us regularly, that “the Swiss” had sent Lenin from Zurich to St. Petersburg in a concealed train wagon to start the Revolution there. What we have achieved with regard to Poland was, if I can say so, less dramatic, but had also much impact. Switzerland was crucial for the re-establishment of Poland as an independent country after World War I.

Not that it had an active hand in the making of the II. Republic – its limited international power and its adherence to political neutrality would not have allowed this anyway. But Switzerland had played a not less important role in forming the elites that would take power in the new Poland:

**Gabriel Narutowicz** lived in Switzerland 1887 to 1919. He studied hydraulic engineering at the Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich. As an engineer, he contributed actively to the modernization of Switzerland by building hydroelectric plants. 1907 he became professor at the ETH. This Swiss experience was crucial for Poland after General Piłsudski called Narutowicz to participate in the building of the II. Republic. In 1922, Gabriel Narutowicz, who had also acquired the Swiss nationality, became the first president of Poland.

**Ignacy Mościcki** lived in Switzerland from 1897 to 1913. In his academic activity as a chemist at the University of Fribourg, he did a truly pioneering work. At the turn of the century, the world was concerned with the increasing of global population and the depletion of the sources of nitrogen in the soil. Chemists all over the world tried to synthesize atmospheric nitrogen. The electric arc process, on which Mościcki's team had focussed in Fribourg, didn't prove very successful in making fertilizer at that time. But the process needed strong capacitors which could bear a high tension during a longer period of time. This led Mościcki to develop his own patent, one of many during his creative life. As a by-product, his design proved commercially successful. Thus, in 1903, Mościcki and partners founded the "Fabrique Suisse de condensateurs Jean de Modzelewski" (named after the Venture Capitalist, not after the inventor). In 1913, Mościcki left Switzerland following a call of the Technical University of Lwow. Back in Poland, he became increasingly involved in the political process that resulted in the country's independence in 1918. In 1926, he became the third President of the II. Republic and the second Swiss citizen to occupy this post. Mościcki remained president until 1939, when German and Soviet occupation forced him to return to Switzerland. He died in Versoix near Geneva in 1946.

The fates of both Mościcki and Narutowicz are emblematic for the intense relations between Switzerland and Poland at that time. It was a relationship based on science and politics, but most of all on numerous bonds that existed between great personalities of our countries. Not less important were other great Poles living in Switzerland, such as the great pianist and politician Ignacy Paderewski and the Polish writer and winner of the 1905 Nobel Prize Henryk Sienkiewicz.

The **formation of elites** – this is very much what we are talking about here today. Switzerland's role in this important field did not stop here: Many of the 13'000 soldiers that were interned in Switzerland during the Second World War had the opportunity to study, mainly at the University of Fribourg and at the ETH in Zurich. The unfortunate fate of Poland during and after the Second World War brought this fruitful interaction of Polish scientists and politicians with Switzerland to an abrupt end. During the communist era, a relatively small but high profile Polish community continued to live in Switzerland.

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In 1989 Poland freed itself and central Europe from communism. Together with the rest of Western Europe and North America, Switzerland contributed actively to ensure that the transition from a centrally planned economy to a free market proceeded without too much hardship. A failure of the economic reforms in Poland would have brought much disillusionment with democracy. This was not in Switzerland's interest. During the nineties, Switzerland has contributed with 264 mln. Swiss Francs to assist this important process. The reforms were successful and a model for many other countries of the region. So were Switzerland's aid efforts, in Poland and elsewhere. Alongside with the success of the reforms, our economic exchanges increased significantly. Swiss companies started to rediscover Poland, although not to the extent that Poland's size would have justified. For historical reasons, many Swiss companies preferred the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Had the ties we had during the II. Republic, thanks to Narutowicz, Mościcki, Paderewski, Sienkiewicz, continued to develop freely, we would be among the most tightly connected countries in today's Europe. As we stand at PRESENT, we are in a process of intense mutual re-discovery. The last few years have been crucial in this process. The accession to the EU has shown Poland's real dimensions and it's immense potential to the Swiss people. We can say that the Poles have done a good job in conquering the hearts and minds of the Swiss; which – as you may know – is not an easy thing to achieve! Unlike other places, the proverbial “Polish plumber” has not deterred my fellow citizens to vote, on 25 September 2005, in favour of the extension of the free movement of persons to the new EU member states. To convince the Swiss voters to allot their taxes to smoothen the integration of the same states into the EU was not always easy – but in the end, on 26 November 2006, it was a full success. We agreed to spend a billion Swiss Francs in favour of the EU-10, of which Poland will receive about half.

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What better starting-point could we wish for our common FUTURE? The near future will see us busy implementing the Swiss enlargement contribution. Science and Education will be an important aspect of this co-operation. I am convinced that we will see an increasing number of Poles studying and doing their research in Switzerland, becoming thus worthy successors of their great forebears Narutowicz and Mościcki. Not that they will have to play such dramatic roles in their country's domestic affairs, hopefully not. But as scientists, Narutowicz and Mościcki were already at their time able to show how mutually beneficial research co-operation in an economically dynamic environment can be. Poland has benefited from their work as much as Switzerland.

Today, this economically dynamic environment exists in both countries, with Poland's economy far from being saturated and thus with an enormous potential. Free movement of persons works both ways. Today, it is my impression that neither Poles nor Swiss perceive it that way. But wait a few years, and we will discover more and more opportunities in Poland and find a new and unsuspected wisdom in our decision to vote in favour of free movement. Poland's prospects are bright. These prospects increasingly bring open-mindedness to its new generations. And I hope this optimism of a country that has much to gain from the future and nothing to fear from globalization, will also infect the rest of Europe.

Switzerland does not belong to the EU, and I don't expect a quick change. Our bilateral way has been successful and we are one of the EU's most important partners. Being an important partner of the EU means being an important partner for Poland, who will exert an increasingly decisive role in this community. Like the Poles, we have learnt to put globalization at our use. We both have learnt to quickly adapt to this new challenge. Could one wish for a better common ground on which to develop our future relations?