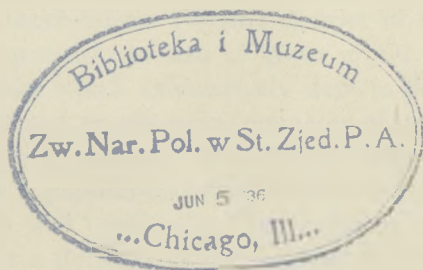


THE POLISH MINORITY IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

THE SPEECH DELIVERED IN THE CZECHOSLOVAK LOWER HOUSE
BY Mr. L. WOLF, LLD, MEMBER OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK PARLIAMENT
AT PRAGUE ON THE 7th OF NOVEMBER 1935

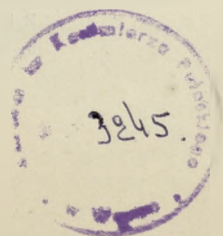
ACCORDING TO THE OFFICIAL STENOGRAM OF THE SESSION



CRACOW CULTURAL AID COMMITTEE FOR
POLES IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

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P R E F A C E

Dr. L. Wolf, who represents the Polish minority in the Czechoslovak Chamber of Deputies, is an experienced parliamentarian and has for many years ably defended the interests of this minority in a manner which is as reasonable and straightforward as it is loyal and deprived of the elements of demagogic form. The Cracow Cultural Aid Committee for Poles in Czechoslovakia believes that in taking upon itself to publish Dr. Wolf's parliamentary speech of November 7, 1935 before the Czechoslovak Lower House, a useful purpose will be served as the general public will thus be informed of the serious plight of the 150,000 Poles inhabiting the Cieszyn-Silesia (Tešín) district of Czechoslovakia. Clear expression to this is given in Dr. Wolf's authoritative address which exhaustively depicts the existing state of affairs and requires no comments of any kind.

When reading this speech, it should be borne in mind that it deals with a population which before being incorporated against its will within the Czechoslovak Republic (on the strength of a decision of the Council of Ambassadors of July 28, 1920) had enjoyed a broadly conceived liberty and was markedly developing its cultural and economic life. Well before the decision mentioned above, this population had (November 5, 1918) expressed its decided will to be under the Polish flag and was in fact represented by two deputies in the first parliament of restored Poland.

Today this population is faced by the consistent and planned, discriminatory policies of the Czechoslovak government aimed at the gradual restriction of the cultural and economic life of the Poles in Czechoslovakia, at dispensing worse treatment to the Polish citizens of the country than to those of other stock, and, as a final outcome, at denationalizing them.

The public opinion of Poland has been following the state of affairs described by Dr. Wolf with the utmost disquiet. It still firmly believes and wishes to believe that the Czechoslovak authorities will sooner or later abandon the methods which they have applied to date and that the ideal of a *rapprochement* between the two peoples will ultimately be based on Czechoslovakia actually respecting the rights due to the Polish minority on the basis of the internal legislation of the Czechoslovak Republic and on that of the Polish-Czechoslovak treaty of April 23, 1925.

In view of the fact that the Minister for Foreign Affairs in his report on foreign policy referred to the treatment accorded to the Polish minority in our country and described it as absolutely proper; that the status of the Polish minority in our country is being constantly brought up and stressed time after time in the international political intercourse between Poland and Czechoslovakia; and that certain Czech elements have evinced a marked tendency to disregard or to make little of the affairs of this minority and so menace the Poles in Czechoslovakia with the complete loss of their national rights, I am obliged as the representative of the Polish population to present the matter before the Chamber as it is regarded and felt by the Polish inhabitants of Czechoslovakia in every aspect of their civic life.

I do this as in duty bound. For the Czech elements in their press not only present the situation of the Poles in Czechoslovakia as superlatively good and even depict it in rosy colours; they also extract from the speeches of various Polish spokesmen and in particular from my own, as happened in the case of my Stonawa address, not only words and phrases testifying to loyalty to this country (this is of course not gainsaid) but also expressions of satisfaction with this or that state of affairs and even expressions of condemnation of what is unpleasant for the Czech way of thinking, constructing out of such excerpts expressions and declarations from which conclusions are

drawn that the Polish population is satisfied with the present state of affairs.

In order to furnish evidence of such satisfaction, the full texts of the addresses of such Polish spokesmen are carefully ignored, this applying especially to all the recurring and forceful complaints and protests against the illegal and absolutely unjustifiable treatment of the Polish population of this country.

Such a presentation of the case can never remove the evil and the real cause, or the discord which has arisen between the Polish and the Czech nations. Citing declarations of loyalty and from these drawing conclusions that the Polish population enjoys well-being in this country and that it is satisfied with its situation, is nothing but a deliberate concealment of the suffering and tribulation of that population — a theatrical drop-screen masking the abyss gaping between the two nations. If we really desire to bridge that abyss both Poles and Czechs must have the courage to face the truth, not to conceal evil but to disclose and to abolish it.

It will be asked: Where are we to search for the evil evoking the discontent and suffering of the Polish population and hence the cleavage between the two peoples? A full reply is to be found in the fact that although Czechoslovak legislation is good, as regards the Polish minority neither obligations are respected nor the laws arising out of the Constitution and from the legislation of this country, out of the decision of the Council of Ambassadors in 1920, and out of the treaties with Poland and especially out of the treaty of April 23, 1925 in respect of juridical and financial matters, duly published in the Journal of Laws and Ordinances of the Czechoslovak Republic on April

26, 1926 as item No. 56. In justification of this statement I refer to the numerous petitions filed by the Polish population with the authorities of the Republic, and to the parliamentary speeches of the Polish deputies in this Chamber, and more especially to my address of June 26th of this year which I uphold in every respect.

LOYALTY TO THE CZECHOSLOVAK REPUBLIC

If we Poles in Czechoslovakia are charged with any blame, we must firmly reject the accusation as we cannot declare it a crime that we defend our rights or that we call for justice when we are unjustly treated. The very fact that we have struggled, complaining, protesting and calling for justice, surely furnishes enough proof of our loyalty — that we desire to live and to flourish in this country whose political structure and legislation are such that they can yield possibilities for the development of our own national culture and ideology. But it must be stated with regret that the system applied by the competent authorities as regards us is at discord with the letter and above all with the spirit of the aforesaid liberal legislation as also with that democracy which is to be the basic feature of this country.

In the struggle for our national rights, for the prosperity of our people and for fair and equal treatment — struggling against a systematic and violent campaign of denationalization — we have always kept to legal means and for long years have desired to attain our objective by co-operation with those governing this country. But when this co-operation yielded no results and our further stay in the

service of the pro-Government parties became incompatible with our national honour, we were forced to break our connexion with these parties and, with the approval of our electorate, to take up the stand of legal opposition.

Defending our national and civic rights we have not combated the State, nor have we aimed at tearing away that part of the land which we inhabit; from the nature of things, the entirety of our action has been directed solely against those Czech national elements which have made it their purpose by all available means to denationalize our Polish population, not even hesitating to destroy the bases of sustenance of the economically dependent of our nationality who offer up resistance to denationalization. We cannot, too, support a government under whose aegis such things are happening.

The amended electoral procedure during the last parliamentary term and the splitting up of the united Polish group in order the better to weaken us nationally presented the menace that we would fail to be represented in this Chamber, the more so that the Jewish parties, our electoral allies up to recent times, this time refused to go with us. We were forced to look around for another electoral block and found it in the shape of the Slovene People's Party of Father Hlinka; we did not wish to join ourselves to any non-Slavonic organization. We are grateful to this group as with its help as members of the Autonomistic Block we have secured a mandate to this Chamber of Deputies. As a member of this group I am enabled at least to put it on record that a Polish population exists in this country and that in the uphill fight for its national rights it wishes by legal means to defend and to assure its existence.

OPPRESSION OF THE POLISH MINORITY

Owing to this attitude and in connexion with the tension in relations between our Republic and the Republic of Poland, the Polish population of Czechoslovakia, always treated as a group of second-class citizens, has in recent times been subjected to the most extreme persecution and chicanery, appearing with especial force in the following manifestations:

(1) penal investigations and proceedings against speakers at election meetings;

(2) tendentious confiscations by the Censors' Office of editions of the local Polish press, usually for quite trivial and flimsy reasons; in orders for the suspension of publication of its periodicals; in prohibiting the foundation of new periodicals in the Polish language;

(3) niggling restrictions of freedom of speech at public meetings, the stifling of even absolutely reasonable and concrete criticism of the methods followed by the Czech elements and of the system applied by the Government as regards the Polish minority;

(4) the use of *agents-provocateurs* prying for disclosures of sentiments of discontent harboured by the nationally conscious members of the Polish working-class and of other sections of the Polish minority population; in numerous arrests for this reason, and in dragging out detention in prison pending investigations in order to intimidate and confuse the Polish population;

(5) dismissals of working-men from employment for politico-national reasons, especially if they have ventured in any way to criticize the existing system;

(6) transferring railway employees of Polish nationality to points far distant from the permanent domicile of their families, and in constant threats of further transfers of this kind;

(7) persecution and harrassing of school teachers of Polish nationality because of their work in organizing Polish cultural societies and associations, arresting them on the basis of untrustworthy denunciations and suspending them in the execution of their duties;

(8) orders for the suspension of the activities of vocational and cultural societies and bodies; for example, owing to the closing of the Catholic Library and its building at Trzyniec, this body not only suffered great material loss, but this action also made it impossible for twelve other societies having their headquarters in that building to continue their activities.

For all these reasons, aggravated as they are by the constant attacks, incitement, slanders and threats of the local Czech press, as also by the various measures of purely political significance, by the strong reinforcement of civil and military police posts to unheard-of proportions, the Polish population has been led to the highest pitch of exasperation and resentment.

APPRAISAL OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S METHODS

It is obvious that under such conditions and with the application of such methods the Polish inhabitants of Czechoslovakia can never become citizens attached to a country which in the eyes of that part of the population is losing its dignity.

More and more frequently the query is raised by the members of the Polish minority: Why is it permitted that we who have faithfully carried out our civic duties are treated as aliens, — as such who are to be outlawed and deprived of the protection of the State?

Although rumours of uprisings are being assiduously spread by the provocative and uncalled-for efforts of certain elements in the country, the general mass of the Polish population has not let itself be provoked but has fully maintained its dignity and calm. If the central authorities and the others active outside our territory believe in the alleged disturbances and planned riots (as might be deduced they believe judging from the extraordinary measures taken on the occasion of the third anniversary of the death of the Polish aviators, Zwirko and Wigura, at Cierlicek), this may be traced back to the overwrought Czech press and the jingoistic Czech elements of the country, who for some hidden ends and under the influence of fear, explicable only by their transgressions against the Polish minority, seek under cover of the dignity of the State, to drive this population to despair.

PETTY EPISODES AS BASIS FOR REPRESSIONS

If, however, in such an atmosphere, some over-excitables individuals, even amongst the Polish population, misconduct themselves, such cases can be regarded only as isolated occurrences which cannot weigh down upon the whole population. Yet the whole Polish population of Czechoslovakia has been condemned by Czech public opinion merely because some windows were smashed in Czech

schools upon our territory and because the Czech newspapers thereupon unanimously announced that the culprits were Poles. That the windows of some Polish schools and of some houses occupied by Poles were also smashed, absolutely nothing is written or said. We have our own point of view regarding this whole episode. The culprits have so far not been apprehended. It seems very strange indeed, with the mass of policemen and military police quartered in our section of the country, that no progress has been reported to date.

There would seem to be no doubt that if members of the Polish minority had anything to do with these deeds, the culprits would have long ago been taken into custody. I do not exclude the possibility that this window-smashing was really done by some fanatics from amidst the Polish population, by persons who had been led to some act of despair by the existing relations; if so, they are to be pitied and their acts deplored. Such as these can do nothing to help the cause, and in fact can only harm it by furnishing material for further incitements against the Polish element on the part of the Czech press. For these reasons, we strongly protest against accusing the Polish population of such and similar actions, as also against all the measures of the police authorities directed against the Polish population for these ostensible reasons.

RELATIONS BETWEEN POLAND AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Passing to international relations; it would be absurd should we even think of stating that our nation and its life

within its own body-politic does not react upon our national life in Czechoslovakia. Nothing could be more desirable for the Polish minority in Czechoslovakia than the existence of the most ideal amity between the Czechoslovak and the Polish Republic. Thus, I and my predecessor, Deputy Dr. Burek, have always recommended in this Assembly that, for this and for other reasons, our minority be given every opportunity of developing and maintaining its national integrity unimpaired, affirming that no nation can be indifferent to the fate of any of its groups domiciled in another country. We had 22,000 children in the Polish schools in this country in 1920 — today we have only 12,000. These figures speak for themselves.

It is stated that relations between Poland and Czechoslovakia are inimical and tightly strung. Those who direct the foreign policies of this country lay the blame for this state of affairs upon the shoulders of the Republic of Poland. In our struggle for national existence, we have no opportunity of ascertaining where this blame lies, the more so that Poland unequivocally protests against this allegation.

In Poland it is openly stated that one of the causes of Czechoslovakia's unpopularity there is to be found in the attitude of the Czech central and local authorities as regards the Polish population of this country, it being brought up that the Poles of Czechoslovakia are oppressed and denationalized. Various elements in this country have tried to force the several representatives of the Polish minority to contradict such opinions rife in Poland, — opinions which condemn what is being done to the Polish minority here.

DEMANDS FOR CHANGE OF SYSTEM

Until quite recent times, the Czech nation itself fought for its rights within the bounds of an alien State, and it should understand that acquiescence in such demands exacted from the Polish minority or from its spokesmen would be tantamount to renunciation of national life; even more, it would mean abasement and disgrace for us as Poles and as human beings. True, these Czech elements state that we enjoy every right here and that our position here is of the best; these are, however, mere words—baseless and unsupported statements which can in no wise change actual reality. We did not evoke the conflict between Poland and Czechoslovakia and we cannot be held responsible for it. Moreover, we cannot demand that the Polish nation cease to occupy itself with our fate, not only because it is doing so to further our interests and well-being, but also because both countries are bound to carry out and respect the Polish-Czechoslovakian treaties in respect of mutual rights and obligations with regard to the procedure reciprocally to be applied to the minorities in both countries.

If, however, it is desired to effect a *rapprochement* between the two countries and if there is anything we can do in this field, then although we fully realise our weakness and insignificance as a minority, we are ready in the interests of both these Slavonic peoples, whenever the need arises to exert every effort in order to bring about the restoration and maintenance of friendly relations with the Polish nation.

We affirm, none the less, that this our collaboration cannot be extended at the price of harming the Polish population of this country, but must be based upon actual respect for our national rights and on the fullest equality

of rights for the Polish minority here; for that reason we express the hope that within the very near future there will be a very radical change in the mode of action systematically applied by the Czech element and by the governmental circles of this country as regards the Polish minority population of the Czechoslovak Republic.



