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POLAND

ORGANIZATION ABROAD /1202/

The Polish League In BERLIN

SOURCE BERLIN : An account of the meeting of the BERLIN branch of this organization of Poles in Germany which dates back to Bismarck's time.

DATE OF OBSERVATION : not specified

EVAL. COMMENT : This is a touching description of a small and poor Polish colony forlorn in BERLIN, which retains its national community and traditions against all odds.

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We find ourselves in an elementary school, where the Polish community of BERLIN has rented a classroom for 1,20 DM per hour for the purpose of holding its monthly meeting. Although the meeting has been announced for 1930 hours, the first people begin arriving at 1900 hours. As the chairman's bell sounds -- the position of chairman has been held for years by Karl SIERAKOWSKI who has lived in Germany for fifty years -- the benches are already fully occupied.

One is struck by the fact that among the fifty people present at the meeting today /the league members number about seventy in all/, the overwhelming majority are women. When one looks around one sees for the most part old, care-worn faces, hands which have known hard work, women between fifty and seventy years of age who came to Germany nearly half a century ago. They have lived here almost their whole life, here they have born their children, many have been widowed

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and live now on very scanty pensions. All of these women have not forgotten their homeland, however, and find much consolation at these monthly gatherings. Most of them still picture Poland in their mind's eye just as it was when they left it years ago.

Next to me sits a woman who looks extraordinarily young among the others. And sure enough, she does belong to the younger generation of BERLIN Poles, although she herself is a mother of two children. She was born here and attended school here; but she still can remember the glorious time of the Polish colony, before the Hitler regime put a stop to the active life of the Polish organization.

Her Polish is simple, but for someone who has only seen the homeland for short visits a few times in her life, astonishingly good. She is a member of the Polish choir, which is now hoping to be able to regain its pre-war prestige. She tells me that the choir is proud of the fact that they will soon celebrate the thirteenth anniversary of the existence of the choir. In response to the question as to what type of music they use for their choir, I learned that their repertory consists primarily of church music which is sung at the Polish mass held every third month in the little church in Moabit. Now and then they also enjoy learning Polish folksongs.

In further conversations with the men and women present one is touched to discover that although all of these people are fully aware of their weaknesses as an organization, they are at the same time fully determined to continue their efforts. "We are just getting started," they say, apologizing for all of the insufficiencies of the organization which a stranger might notice.

As one follows the course of such a meeting one is constantly confronted by a problem which seems to be insoluble at the moment: the problem of the material means which would help the organization to get on its feet. They have practically no funds at all. They are not even in a position to ask for more than DM 0.50 per month membership dues, two-thirds of which goes to the general treasury in West Germany, leaving only one-third, or almost

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nothing in their own treasury.

One repeatedly hears voices saying, "could not the American-Polish community help us...?" The magic word "LONDON" is often repeated. "LONDON," the government, the treasury," these are the gleams of hope, with which the members of the Polish league mutually encourage each other.

At the last meeting voices were raised proposing the founding of a Polish library. Many people spoke enthusiastically in favor of this but no one could suggest by what means the books could be procured. The proposal was put into the minutes of the meeting and remains for the present one of the many excellent plans of the group.

The main part of the meeting was devoted to the memory of the great victory of Jan SOBIESKI in VIENNA in the year 1683, the 270 anniversary of which was celebrated in September 1953. After the reading aloud of a memorial essay, which had been sent to the BERLIN-Poles from the West German headquarters of the league, the room became very lively. Each person reacted in his own fashion; it was a pleasure to observe the way this page out of Polish history was greeted with the same interest and participation as every other Polish problem.

A discussion developed over the outrageous injustice of the claim that not SOBIESKI, but rather Prince EUGEN was the savior of VIENNA and thus the savior of Christendom from the Turk heathen. The latter version was allegedly taught in the German schools and many of the Poles living in Germany in their youth had so learned it in their history classes. All those present, however, regardless of how, if at all, they had learned history, seemed to be proud of the Polish king who had saved Europe from the pagan invaders. For all of them, whether young or old, are deeply religious Catholics, who are bound together not only by their Polish origins but also by their common faith.

It was touching to observe what a unique atmosphere the reaction of a little old lady to the reading of the essay about the old event of history aroused in the room. The elderly lady pulled a song out of the deep recesses of
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her memory -- a song which she had sung as a child in Poland about Jan SOBIESKI. She smiled to herself and in a quivering voice began to sing the little song. Immediately a few other voices joined in and spontaneously a perhaps more expressive tribute was paid to the glorious victory than many words could have done.

At the end of the meeting the coming Christmas party was discussed. The plan is to rent a school auditorium /DM 7,50 per hour/; a Christmas tree, and a few Polish songs will provide the necessary homeland atmosphere. Naturally everything will be done very modestly, for -- as mentioned -- the means are lacking at every turn.

Before the meeting was broken up, as is customary, a song was sung -- a song which has for years been sung at such meetings -- bringing those present somewhat closer to the Poland which they carry in their hearts :

"Serdeczna Matko Oplekunko Ludzi, niech Cie placz sierot do litosci wzbudzi..."

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