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Drop Visas For Poland! The U.S. Must Respect Its Allies

By Alex Storozyński, President of the Kosciuszko Foundation
for *Nowy Dziennik - Polish Daily News*

Polish-Americans will march up Fifth Avenue on Sunday in honor of Gen. Casimir Pulaski, a hero who saved George Washington's life at the Battle of Brandywine. Yet ironically, if he were alive today, Pulaski would not be allowed to march in the parade without paying \$140 and applying for a visa. However, Lafayette and Von Steuben would be able to visit the United States for free because France and Germany are included in the Visa Waiver Program.

The *Nowy Dziennik*-Polish Daily News, The Kosciuszko Foundation and the Polish community in America urge the United States Congress to include Poland in the VWP, which allows citizens of 36 foreign countries to travel to the U.S. for up to 90 days without a visa.

Poland is one of America's closest and steadfast allies, sending its soldiers to shed their blood for freedom in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and other war zones. Polish troops have fought side by side with American troops, going wherever the United States asks them to go. So far, 29 Polish soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan, and 30 Polish soldiers have been killed in Iraq.

Like Pulaski, many Polish soldiers have served with distinction at the behest of the U.S. military. Gen. Roman Polko, former commander of the Polish Special Forces unit, GROM, (Thunderbolt), led the capture of a heavily guarded oil platform in the port of Umm Qasr during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The U.S. Army awarded Gen. Polko the Commendation Medal and the Legion of Merit Medal. But when I invited Polko to attend an event at the Kosciuszko Foundation in the spring, he told me that he could not come to New York because he did not have a valid American visa.

While Polko and other Polish soldiers can fight for American freedom, they cannot come see the Statue of Liberty without a visa.

Is this how America treats its allies?

President George W. Bush acknowledged that Poland is one of America's closest allies and promised to include Poland in the VWP. Poland meets all of the criteria for the VWP, except one - the number of citizens denied visas after they pay the \$140 fee. American consulates around the world interview foreign citizens who apply for

tourist visas to visit the United States. These consulates deny visas to people they think might overstay their 90 day visas or work illegally in America.

In 2008, President Bush announced that the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and South Korea would become part of the VWP because these countries had a visa refusal rate lower than 10%. Poland was excluded because at the time its visa refusal rate was slightly higher than that. Today, Poland's refusal rate is 9%. But after these other countries were added, Congress said that no new countries would be allowed into the VWP unless their visa refusal rate was less than 3%.

The only reason Poland has a 9% refusal rate is that American consulates count the same people over and over as they are denied visas several times. The true percentage of Poles who are denied visas is actually lower. And fewer than 3% of the Poles who do come to America stay longer than the 90 days allowed on their visas.

Countries with an overstay rate of less than 3% should be included in the VWP. The Secure Travel and Counterterrorism Partnership Act of 2011, H.R. 959, would do just that. The bill must pass both houses before President Obama can sign it.

The bill is sponsored in the House by Rep. Mike Quigley of Illinois, and the co-sponsors of the bill that are friendly towards Polonia include: Rep. Shelley Berkley [D-NV], Rep. Brian Higgins [D-NY], Rep. Duncan Hunter [R-CA], Rep. Marcy Kaptur [D-OH], Rep. Daniel Lipinski [D-IL], Rep. William (Bill) Pascrell, Jr. [D-NJ], Rep. Jared Polis [D-CO], Rep. Janice (Jan) Schakowsky [D-IL], Rep. John Shimkus [R-IL].

The Senate Bill S. 497 is sponsored by Senator Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, and co-sponsored by Senators Mark Kirk of Illinois, Mark Begich of Alaska, Sherrod Brown of Ohio, and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota.

President Obama has written to Congress in "strong support" of the bill, but it must first pass both houses of Congress before it can be signed into law.

The key to passing this bill lies with New York Senator Charles Schumer, Chairman of the Immigration, Refugee and Border Security subcommittee in the Senate Judiciary Committee. Senator Schumer can influence the outcome of this bill in the Senate. It's time for Sen. Schumer to take action on this bill and show that he cares about the one million people of Polish descent in New York State. He must become a co-sponsor.

In the House of Representatives, the key is Rep. Elton Gallegly of California, Chairman of the Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement. Both committees must pass the bill before it can go to the Senate and full House for a vote.

The arguments for including Poland in the VWP are strong. In addition to being one of America's greatest allies, a productive member of NATO, and the European Union, the notion that Poles need to come to America to work is just flat out wrong. In fact, many Poles who have Green Cards have returned to Poland in recent years because the economy in their own country has grown faster than the U.S. economy.

Those Poles who do want to seek employment elsewhere can work in various countries across Europe. Poland is part of the "Schengen Area" of 25 European nations that allows passport-free travel across borders. Poles do not need to come here to work. They only want to come here to shop, visit relatives and see tourist sites, just like other Europeans.

It's estimated that 7,000 Poles will be denied visas to the U.S. this year. Many more don't even apply because the process offends them. I have several relatives and friends in Poland that have professional careers, and they refuse to come here and spend money because of the visa issue. Instead, they travel to tourist sites in Africa, Asia and South America to spend their vacation money.

Poland presently holds the rotating Presidency of the European Union, but incredibly, its President, Bronislaw Komorowski, had to apply for visa prior to his trip to the United States. By refusing visa free travel for Poles, the United States is pushing away an ally, and taking Poland for granted.

Poles pose no terrorist threat to America, and allowing Poles to visit the United States as tourists would encourage international trade and pump tourism dollars into our economy. While the United States requires Poles to have visas when traveling to America, Poland waived visas for Americans more than 20 years ago.

Allowing Poles to travel without visas will add to our security and enhances law enforcement and crime-fighting efforts through data-sharing agreements between our respective countries.

There are 10 million Polish-Americans in the United States and they have been actively trying to include their fatherland in the VWP. As we march down Fifth Avenue today, we will not just be celebrating Polish culture, we will be handing out letters that Polish Americans can send to their Representative and Senators.

This is not a partisan issue, Republican or Democrat. It is an issue of respect. It is respect for the millions of Poles that helped build this country. It is respect for the millions of Poles who helped overturn Communism and bring down the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union thanks to the actions of the Solidarity movement and Pope John Paul II.

If, like Gen. Polko, Gen. Pulaski were turned away from America's shores because he did not have a visa, he would not have saved George Washington's life at the Battle of Brandywine. If Gen. Thaddeus Kosciuszko had been kept out of America because

of the visa issue, he would not have built West Point, or drafted the winning plans for the Battle of Saratoga. The American Revolution would have turned out much different.

For too long, the United States has treated our friends and families in Poland as second class citizens requiring them to pay hefty fees to apply for visas to visit this country, while Europeans from other countries travel here without visas.

During the parade, the Kosciuszko Foundation, the Nowy Dziennik, and other organizations will be handing out letters to members of Congress to the spectators and ask them to sign. You can mail the letter yourself, or we will collect them and mail them for you. We will also have copies to sign at the Kosciuszko Foundation's Open House right after the parade. Please join us on Sunday at 15 East 65th Street, off Fifth Avenue.