

Haiti's Polish connection

By: *Robert Strybel*,

Polish/Polonian Affairs Writer

Weeks have passed, but the Caribbean island-nation of Haiti has yet to come to terms with the death, destruction and general turmoil unleashed by January's monster-earthquake. Poland was one of the first countries to respond to the United Nations' appeal for emergency assistance. A powerful quake measuring 7.3 on the Richter Scale struck off the coast of this country of nine million, causing widespread damage and loss of life to its capital Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas.

Fifty-four Polish rescue workers accompanied by 10 rescue dogs, food, water and four tons of equipment flew to the stricken nation but had to land in the neighboring Dominican Republic and travel in motor vehicles the rest of the way. A Polish field hospital was soon set up to treat survivors of the earthquake.

Back in Poland, collections were taken up in churches and major charity groups such as Caritas raised funds and sent relief supplies to Haiti. Well-known actors and pop singer gave free concerts to aid the Haitian earthquake victims. The disaster left up to 150,000 dead, and trucks piled with corpses carried bodies to hastily dug mass graves to prevent the spread of contagious disease in the tropical heat. Thousands of bodies may still be buried under debris. Around one million people have become homeless after the tremors reduced their domiciles to rubble.

Despite financial assistance, relief supplies and volunteers from all over the world, the catastrophic situation defied description. Day after day, million of viewers around the globe have watched TV coverage of the unfolding calamity: streets strewn with rubble and rotting corpses, desperate people screaming from pain, clamoring for help and resorting to looting and gunfights in search of food, water and the simplest of medication.

"What I saw boggled the mind!" "It was absolute chaos!" "The stench, the screams, the roving gangs and total confusion were something I couldn't imagine in my wildest nightmare!" "I have been in more than one disaster area, but have never seen anything like this!" Such were the kind of observations some of the Polish rescue workers shared with TV audiences at home. The experienced fire-brigade rescuers hailed from Nowy Sącz, Warsaw, Łódź, Gdańsk and Poznań.

The recent humanitarian mission was not the Poles' first operation in Haiti. In 1994, a newly independent Poland contributed its recently created GROM commando unit to a UN-mandated Multinational Force to help uphold democracy following the collapse of a dictatorial junta. GROM's tasks included protecting UN and White House officials amid widespread unrest. The Polish commandos impressed both the locals and international observers as the only combat force not using protective helmets or bullet-proof vests. Poles involved in humanitarian and military missions as well as the occasional Polish tourist or missionary passing through soon learn of the special relationship linking their country with the black island republic. More than 200 years ago, French Emperor Napoleon sent a Polish military contingent to quell a slave rebellion in Haiti, but several hundred of them changed sides and supported the black rebels instead.

Following a bloody struggle, Haiti declared its independence in 1804 and the remaining Frenchmen and other whites were either slaughtered or prohibited from owning property. One exception were Polish soldiers could stay and were spared the fate of other whites. They settled in a number of communities which exist to this day. One of the best known is

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Land life began in Poland

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Britain's prestigious scientific journal "Nature" recently highlighted a major discovery by a team of Polish paleontologists working with a colleague from Sweden. It can be summed up in one short sentence: Until earlier finds are unearthed, it may be stated that life on land began in the area of what are now south-central Poland's Świętokrzyskie (Holy Cross) Mountains. As a result, school textbooks may soon have to be revised.

Scientists have long known that at some point a fish with lobed fins slithered onto the shore and eventually over millions of years gave rise to the world's first amphibians, dinosaurs and other reptiles, birds and ultimately mammals. The best-known fossil specimen found several years ago in northern Canada was given the Eskimo name Tiktaalik and was believed to have made the transition from water to land some 375 million years. But walking fish using lobed fins as limbs left dragmarks, not footprints.

The Polish breakthrough involved identifying numerous footprints and trackways of what appeared to be limbed animals, many of which contained toe marks – the sign of a well-evolved tetrapod or four-legged creature. The discovery was made at an abandoned quarry nearly the village of Zachelmie in what were once prehistoric tidal flats. It was also a major step back in time, since the prints, dated to about 397 million years ago, were approximately 18 million years older than the earliest tetrapod fossils ever discovered. What was to become Poland was then in a tropical climatic zone.

In addition to Swedish paleontologist Per Ahlberg of Uppsala University, the team included Polish researchers Piotr Szrek, Grzegorz Niedźwiedzki and the Narkiewicz husband and wife team. Another Polish scientist, Zbigniew Złonkiewicz from the State Geological Institute in nearby Kielce, had stumbled upon similar footprints in the same area several years earlier, but his colleagues laughed it off since the rock formation he was studying went back to a time when the only living creatures were fish.

On the basis of the approximately 10-inch-wide fossilized footprints, the scientists estimate that the four-legged creature measured more than eight feet in length and had walked on the muddy bottom of what was once a shallow sea before deciding to go on shore. The Świętokrzyskie Mountains are one of Europe's oldest mountain ranges. They got their name from a splinter of Christ's cross, venerated as a sacred relic at the Benedictine monastery atop Łysa Góra (Bald Mountain).

Jan Matejko's monumental oil painting of the Battle of Grunwald depicts a jumble of horsemen and foot soldiers struggling in one of the biggest armed confrontations of the Middle Ages. □

Polish News Bytes

By: *Robert Strybel*

Our Warsaw Correspondent

The first Americans troops are expected to arrive in Poland in March to man a Patriot rocket battery due to be installed in the northern town of Morąg. Although located some 60 miles from the Russian border, Polish authorities say the site was not selected for any political or strategic reasons but only because of its existing military infrastructure including barracks and training grounds. The Patriots, which will be stationed in Poland on a rotation basis, have been provided by the United States in place of the Bush-era anti-missile shield from which the Obama

Administration withdrew last September. (see next item.)

Russia's Baltic Fleet will be strengthened in response to Poland's plans to have American Patriot missiles installed not far from the border of Russia's Kaliningrad region. The Russian Information Agency Novosti reported Russian naval sources as saying the fleet will be enhanced with new corvette-class warships fitted with long-range high-precision cruise missiles. The Kaliningrad region, formerly part of German East Prussia, was claimed by Stalin who insisted the USSR needed a Baltic port that did not freeze over in winter.

Moscow has denied Poland's claim to having arrested a Russian spy and accused Poles of trying to whip up anti-Russia hysteria. A Polish-speaking Russian national who had spent over a dozen years in Poland, where for cover he operated a small business, was arrested in early 2009 but nearly a year went by before the arrest was officially announced in Poland. President Lech Kaczyński has decorated the agents of Poland's National Security Agency who made the arrest.

Poland experienced one of the harshest Januaries on record with heavy snowfall and temperatures as low as -25°F. Thousands of households across the country were without electricity for weeks on end. Repair crews could not keep up with sagging ice-caked power lines which were pulled down by falling trees and branches as soon as they were repaired. Numerous villages were snowed in and cut off from the outside world. Ice-jammed rivers caused flooding in low-lying areas. When everything is tallied up, the heating, repair and snow-removal bill is expected to be staggering.

Prime Minister Donald Tusk has abandoned plans to run for president in elections set for the autumn of 2010. Instead, he plans to carry one as head of government and is counting on his Civic Platform party to win the next parliamentary elections in 2011 so he can rule for at least another four years. The Polish presidency is a largely ceremonial post, and the real power lies in the government, headed by the prime minister.

Poland's population increased slightly by 37,000 last year and amounted to 38,173,000, according to data released by the Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny). A smaller increase was noted in 2008, but over the 11 years prior to then the number of Poles had declined by 179,000. In the 1980s it was widely predicted that Poland's population would top 40 million by the year 2000, but a declining birth rate reversed the trend. Poland is now the sixth largest European country in terms of population.

Poles in Belarus have appealed to the Polish government for support in their dispute with the Belarussian authorities who have prevented them from entering their Dom Polski (Polish community center) in the town of Iwieniec. The regime of Aleksandr Lukashenka, Europe's last remaining dictator, does not recognize the group and has set up a puppet organization which it says is the legitimate representative of Belarussia's half-million-strong Polish minority. Belarussian Poles live on their native turf which was cut off from Poland after Stalin arbitrarily redrew the border.

A wide-ranging ban on smoking is being prepared by the government of Poland, a country of 38.5 million, where nine million people smoke up to 20 cigarettes a day. If the bill is adopted, smoking will be prohibited in all pubs, cafes and restaurants, in public buildings, trains and taxis as well as at bus stops, stadiums and on beaches. Those violating the ban face a fine of 500 zlotys (about \$178). The bill is in keeping with European Union guidelines.

Ukrainian rebel leader Stefan Bandera has been declared a "hero of Ukraine" by outgoing president Viktor Yushchenko,

triggering protests in neighboring Poland. Bandera's Ukrainian Nationalist Organization was responsible for the wartime genocide of up to 150,000 Poles in the former Polish regions of Volhynia and Eastern Galicia. Western Ukrainians idolize Bandera as a freedom-fighter, but in largely pro-Russian Eastern Ukraine he is mainly remembered for collaborating with the Nazis.

\$20 million worth of cigarettes and alcohol valued at some and \$3 million were smuggled into Poland in 2009, according to Polish border guards. But human trafficking has declined thanks to better monitoring and patrolling. Eighty-one groups of illegal immigrants were detained last year, the most from Vietnam, Ukraine Russia and Georgia. All told, 1,488 cases of border violations were noted. Under international agreements, illegal border-crossers are sent back to the country they entered from. Those from war-torn or disaster areas may apply for refugee status.

Commie secret police pensions have been cut back at the start of 2010, ending an injustice that had dragged on for 20 years of free Poland. The post-communists and their liberal-leftist allies have done everything to prevent settling accounts with the past. One result was that former communist-era secret police thugs enjoyed fat-cat pensions many times larger than those of the Poles they jailed, beat, blackmailed and otherwise oppressed. But some of the former collaborators have already found a loophole to circumvent the cutback. Lawmakers decreased old-age pensions but forgot that pensioners may choose a disability pension if it is higher than the old-age one.

Polonization is worse than Russification, according to the nationalist wing of Lithuania's ruling Fatherland Union. It calls Poles demanding the right to sign their names the Polish way a "fifth column" allegedly attempting to disintegrate Lithuania. Several months ago the Lithuanian Constitutional Court ruled that Lithuanian Poles may retain their original names. Up till then, a Jan Jankowicz had to spell his name Janos Jankovičius in his ID papers and other documents. The nationalists also oppose bilingual street names in areas where Poles constitute a majority.

"Rabbit à la Berlin" („Królik po berlińsku") by Bartek Konopka and Anna Wydra is a Polish-German co-production that has been nominated for an Oscar in the short documentary film category. It is a fascinating history lesson through the eyes of wild rabbits which during the Soviet era made their home and freely multiplied along a 75-mile grassy strip constituting a no man's land between two Berlin walls. When the wall came down, the rabbits had their first contact with city traffic, dogs and people taking pot shot at them with guns. The irony is that the rabbits were the only ones who enjoyed the greatest freedom during communist times.

Early-morning tremors of up to 4.5 degrees on the Richter scale caused shook people out of their sleep in numerous localities around the central city of Bełchatów south of Łódź. No-one was hurt but the occurrence caused and caused panic in the wake of the Haitian disaster which has received blanket coverage in Poland. Geophysicists explained that the tremors were the result of open-cast mining in nearby Bełchatów rather than seismic activity.

Warsaw's Fryderyk Chopin Airport will be closed for repairs in 2010 on three consecutive weekends: September 4-5, 11-12 and 18-19. The announcement has triggered protests from LOT Airlines and other carriers who claim the closure will disrupt the travel plans of up to 170,000 potential passengers. Airport authorities say they chose the time for the necessary

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