IMMIGRANT'S IMPRESSIONS

by

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(Written for the presentation at the Douglas County Republican Women's Club meeting on June 4, 1997)

Prologue

Thank you very much for giving me the honor to become a "Woman Entrepreneur of the year 1997". I am very flattered by the nomination, especially that I am not exactly an entrepreneur, in the popular meaning of this word.

I heard once a funny Yogi Berra quotation: "When you come to a fork of the roads, take it!" This quotation carries the ideas of adventure, courage, opportunity, and sense of humor. All of these ideas relate to America.

Citizen of Two Countries

I came to this country at the beginning of 1980 as a visiting scientist at the University of Dayton, Ohio. I was supposed to go back to Poland, my home country, a year later. After over 17 years I am still here. The United States became my new home by rational choice. This choice was not easy. There was a price: separation with old friends and a few members of my family (I succeeded, however, to bring my only son to this country), abandoning cultural attachments, a new language, unknown customs, and literally, only two suitcases of my belongings. All this meant that I had to start my life from scratch. I brought to the USA, however, something that the communists back there did not appreciate enough; my knowledge received through a quite intensive education. By making the decision to stay here, I knew that the door back to Poland would be closed to me forever. By the Polish communist authorities I was considered a criminal, and would be punished if I returned.

Sometimes history makes jokes. Suddenly, unexpectedly, this door reopened eight years ago: communism collapsed! This was a personal gift to me, and to millions of others. Since then I have visited Poland five times, and feel freer than ever!

I can freely go back to Warsaw, enjoy my old friends (they still remain my friends) and enjoy my hometown. It was always a great pleasure to see again the Warsaw Old Town, rebuilt after the war, as it used to be in the 18th century (Figure 1), and to see the Royal Palace, which restoration was completed a few years ago (Figures 2 and 3). The Second World War left these places in ruins (Figures 4 and 5).



Fig.1 Warsaw Old Town Square



Fig. 2 Restored Royal Palace in Warsaw, 1992



Fig. 3 Restored reception hall in the Royal Palace; Warsaw, 1992

In order to understand why I stayed in the USA, in spite of the price, and why I consider America a great country, you should know a little about the political and economical situation in Poland dominated by the Soviet Union after the Second World War.



Fig. 4 Ruins of the Royal Castle in Warsaw; 1944



Fig. 5 Ruins of the St. John Cathedral in the Old Town Warsaw; 1944

Poland during the Second World War

The war started when I was less than 4 years old. My father soon was killed by the Soviets who attacked Poland from the East, just a couple of weeks after the Germans attacked from the West. My parents were physicians; my father was the professor of internal medicine at the University of Warsaw, and my mother was an ophthalmologist. Medicine was a very fortunate profession for these turbulent times. My mother always had plenty of work, so we were not starving. My childhood was, however, seriously affected by fears of war: cruel Nazi soldiers occupying Warsaw and capturing civilians during frequent roundups, continuous attempts of the Polish underground Home Army to fight back, resulting in scattered shooting in the streets, and there was a lot of killing in the Nazi concentration camps, as well as during bombings.

With my mother and brother we survived the tough Nazi occupation and the unsuccessful Warsaw Uprising in the summer of 1944. After the defeat, together with about 900 thousand Warsaw citizens, we were extradited from Warsaw to a temporary camp. We were stripped of all our belongings. Our apartment building downtown Warsaw was first robbed, then burned to ground. The same fate happened to 95% of all buildings of the capital of Poland. The Nazi executed Hitler's order "level Warsaw to the ground." While the Nazis, enraged by losses at the Eastern front, were taking their revenge on Poles for the Warsaw Uprising, the other Polish enemy, the Soviet Red Army, was standing at the Eastern bank of Vistula, the river flowing through Warsaw. They were quietly waiting, until the outrageous, unthinkable devastation of the capital of Poland was completed by the Nazis.

Poland After the War

After the war we lived in Bydgoszcz (pronounced Bidgoshch), a middle size town in central Poland. Nazi Germans exterminated the majority of Polish intelligentsia, physicians among them. My mother was the only ophthalmologist in a very large district. Later on, the Soviets who took over Poland continued the persecution of the intelligentsia. My mother was very brave, always very enthusiastic and full of energy. I learned from her to be self-reliant, and learned the lesson that if you want something to happen, you have to work hard for it, and you will certainly achieve the goal. She always encouraged me to learn as much as possible: "You can be robbed of material goods, but knowledge is something that nobody can take away from you," she told me.

Studies in Moscow, USSR

After high school I was sent by the Polish authorities to the best technical university in… Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union. It was like being dropped in the middle of a lake without knowing

how to swim. I survived, and it was for me a life-size experience. I learned the language, the culture, and above all, I learned what was the communist system.

Working Women

Interestingly enough, in the Soviet Union at that time 100% of the women were already in the work force. At the University there was at least an equal number of girls and boys. The communist idea that everybody has to work was implemented just after the Bolshevik revolution, but it became a real necessity during the Second World War. In all professions women had to replace men, as most of them were in the army. Working women did not surprise anybody; totally another issue was about their salaries.

After two years I succeeded in transferring to the Technical University of Warsaw. I returned to my hometown, and soon graduated with a Masters Degree in Mechanical Engineering. There were only three women among 200 students at the Engineering Department I was attending at the Warsaw University. In Poland, in spite of the law that equalized men and women, there still existed the old traditions, and old stereotypes. One of these stereotypes was that "ugly women go to Engineering Schools in order to more easily find a husband." Women were often considered stupid; they were neglected and discriminated against. My attitude was always the same. Ignore everything, just work. This way at the University, as well as later, when working in the Research Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, I became a leader, and soon received my scientific degrees, and recognition among peers. At age 34 I was already presenting the keynote speeches at big international conferences, the conferences mainly populated by men. In 1974 at the International Conference on Rotor Dynamics in Lyngby, Denmark, where I was invited to lecture, I was the only woman among over 200 men. Some of them knew my name from publications and correspondence, but many of them did not realize that I was a woman! It was rather amusing.

During my first trip to America in 1973 I visited several Universities and presented seminars there. Every time the audience met me with disbelief. They did not expect a woman talking about technical subjects. Later on, meeting the staff at lunch or dinner, the same conversations always followed: "How is it that you, being a woman, work in such an area? Why do you work at all!?" Finally one "macho" man made the statement that "Women are created for a sole purpose, of bringing happiness to men." I answered that I heard that "Men are created to solve all world problems, and by the way, what is your opinion on the Russian-Chinese conflict on the river Ussuri?" (in the early seventies there was a lot of military activity on the Soviet-China border). This man did not have anything further to comment.

When I started working at the University of Dayton, Ohio in 1980, I did not realize that the situation of women in the United States had changed. I was equally surprised as disgusted when a young female engineer came to me one day, and asked questions on how I succeeded working with men, and how to use the new "Equal Opportunity" law. She did not look very smart to me, and certainly she was not very diligent. At that time I did not even heard what was this new law. I tried to explain to her that I just worked hard. This did not appeal to her. For me the work is work, and does not have a gender.

Engineering Versus Medicine

I should mention here that Engineering was not my first choice for a future profession. I wanted to be a physician, a doctor, like my father, mother, and grandfather. I was sent to the Technical University, not just because I was good in the Sciences, but mainly because in the communist,

Soviet system they hated the old intelligentsia. The communists would not allow one to continue the same professional tradition. They also encouraged separation of young people from their families, to create better conditions for their communist re-education.

I was not allowed to become a doctor. Today I am a doctor, but of machinery. My Engineering specialty today is Vibrational Diagnostics of machinery. Through vibrational testing we can diagnose machine malfunctions and correct machine operation similarly to physicians who diagnose diseases and prescribe cures.

I was very fortunate to find an excellent job in the USA, at the Bently Nevada Corporation. During last 16 years I can use here my knowledge in very useful applications.

Communist System

I am very much flattered to be nominated as the woman entrepreneur of the year. I am not exactly an entrepreneur in the popular meaning of this word. This meaning, however, is changing. Following the prominent economists, the economic growth depends considerably on the quality and professionalism of the entrepreneurship.

The entrepreneurship is something that did not exist in the communist system. People were supposed to follow orders, only. An initiative, an attempt to change something, was not at all welcome. Communism was an appealing concept, but not a realizable idea. This idea was very prolific, though, to brainwashing people. It was executed by a small group of those who held power in their hands. They were called "a nomenclatura." The "communist" system is structurally and economically a totalitarian system. In this system, there exists one capitalist: the state. Practically "the state" means also the same group of people who held power. Economically this totalitarian system means a total disaster. The good features of capitalism: the competition, free market, promotion of initiative, do not and cannot exist in a totalitarian country. The state tries to control everything through orders and reports, through centralized planning of every step. Obviously the state fails. Big-size events are followed by big-size errors. This system replaces the imagination, initiative, and man's natural tendency to improve his own behavior, by an abstract and deceptive goal of a "common good," which is actually neither common nor good. At the same time the communist system seeks to make virtues out of man's less fortunate qualities, particularly the submissiveness, susceptibility to corruption, and the abuse of power at each level. The system works on opposite principles than the free society: everything, which is not permitted by law is forbidden, as opposed to a free society's principle that everything which is not forbidden by law is permitted. While doing things necessary for just a survival, people are under continuous pressure that, may be, they are acting against the law.

There was a powerful system of control, through various police organizations, headed by the KGB. They operated also in all free countries with the large goal in mind: Destabilize the western world. The communist system was actually an aggressive, imperialistic, totalitarian, police system. In Poland, police became the most hated professional minority.

You may know a bunch of stupid jokes, called "Polish jokes" in America. These kinds of jokes exist in many countries, and they are leveled against some national or professional minority. In Poland these jokes were told about policemen. Sometimes they would gain much better punch lines, though. You know the joke, which goes in America: "How many Poles are needed to replace a bulb in a hanging lamp?" The answer is: "Four. One Pole steps on a chair, puts the bulb into the lamp

socket, and three of them rotate the chair." This stupid joke also existed in Poland. "How many policemen.. etc." But there is the next question: "How many officers of the police are required to do the same job?" The answer is: "One." The officers usually have higher education. The officer steps on the chair, puts the bulb into the socket, and waits. He is educated; he knows that the Earth turns around!

In the communist system there was inefficiency in everything: Material goods were wasted, due to a lack of proper organization and management, and "nobody cares" attitude. There was also a waste of people's good natural features, such as politeness, helpfulness, and responsibility. These features possibly worked only inside gang groups. Without admitting it, the system promoted corruption and the black market. The black market was especially tolerated; otherwise, the state would entirely fail economically. Corruption became the second nature of people in the communist system; there was no control over corruption. Store shelves looked often empty, the goods were passed under the counter or through back doors.

Officially there was no unemployment, but people were highly demoralized by poorly organized work.

An example: A Japanese delegation visits a plant. They are surprised to see three people pushing a small cart. The guide explains: "Yes, only three today. The fourth one is on a sick leave."

People "pretended" to work and the State "pretended" to pay salaries. As a result, everybody in this system was poor. That is why it was easier to control everybody.

Differences between the free society and the communist system are well illustrated by the following two stories.

They say that there are two Hells. A newcomer to Hell is surprised to find out that there exist a capitalistic Hell, and a communistic Hell. There is a long line in front of the gate to the communistic Hell, and nobody in front of the capitalistic gate. The newcomer asks what is the difference, why nobody wants to get into the capitalistic Hell. He gets the answer: "You see, both Hells are very similar; the devils in charge are vicious – they beat us up, then burn us in the open fire, boil us in large kettles, etc. But you know, in the communistic Hell it is somehow easier, because due to organizational chaos, and a lack of efficiency, from time to time there is no coal to set the fire, or there is an interruption of electricity supply, or the water is cut off, and there are often breaks in these tortures, so it is altogether easier…"

The second story tells about President Reagan and Soviet President Brejniev, after an official meeting at a summit, sitting in a skyscraper hotel room discussing honesty and commitment of their assistants. President Reagan calls his assistant and orders him: "Jump through the window!" The assistant objects: "Sorry Mister President, I cannot do it; I have a wife, and children…" Then Brejniev calls his assistant: "Jump through the window!" he orders. The assistant immediately jumps. President Reagan is surprised and feels sorry. He runs downstairs to the street to see what happened. The guy was still alive. President Reagan asked him: "Why did you do it?!" With a weak voice the guy answers: "Because I have a wife, and children…" (This means: "If I disobeyed we all would be send to a gulag.")

There were usually plenty of political jokes in Poland. Jokes were always a powerful tool to expose lies of the system. The joke wits helped people to survive in this tough system. Russians also love jokes. But in the Soviet Union telling political jokes was very dangerous. They say that the White Sea Channel was dug by the jokers. And it was true. This channel was built by forced labor, by the political prisoners in gulags. Actually you would not believe how many such forced labor camps were operating in the Soviet Union territory. When I was in the West I was shocked, seeing the map of the USSR covered by them (Figures 6 and 7). The millions of prisoners worked in most difficult and dangerous areas to prepare grounds for so-called "Soviet Monuments of Communism."



Fig. 6 Concentration Camps, Prisons, and Psychiatric Prisons in the USSR (mid eighties), marked by small dots. Source: The Institute of World Politics



Fig. 7 Women's and Children's Concentration Camps and Prisons in the USSR (mid eighties). Source: The Institute of World Politics

With all these bad, deceptive features of the communist system, one is superior over democracy. It is the highly reinforced discipline in schools. Children, like the adults, have to follow orders. For children it is, however, very beneficial. Too much freedom, too early, leads to nothing but troubles, which are revealed later. Children do not know what would be good or bad for them in the future. If they are allowed to have free choice, they will choose the easiest and funniest. This way they waste their precious years of opportunity to learn, to succeed, to train the brain when it is still like a sponge. In the Soviet system the education and youth behavior were superior to that of the USA. In the old days, in a free society, the imposition of discipline, principles and ethics was done by parents, regrettably not anymore.

Situation Today

Communism failed. It was predictable, but not many experts expected it to happen so soon. Everything started in Poland: At the beginning of the eighties the Solidarity movement started. It was soon crushed by communist forces. But the idea was not killed. This idea led to the destruction of the Berlin Wall, and to all following events. The gloomy Soviet power disappeared.

The former US ambassador to Poland summarizes the events as follows: "*We spent $4 trillion fighting the Cold War, and we looked up one day, and the war was won by a small group of people in Poland, without firing a shot*."

Communism failed, but in many post-communist countries there are still the same people with the same mentality, without any knowledge of democracy and democratic rules. This is especially the case in the ex-Soviet Union countries. How would you expect people, who had been brainwashed

through at least three generations, to suddenly change their habits? The majority of people are simply lost, and become poorer and poorer. Nobody teaches them about democracy, free market, initiatives, entrepreneurship, and risks. Those who were politically educated were the communists, placed high in the power structure. They now are taking personal advantage of the economic boom for themselves. Very easily the communists shed their skin and became ruthless capitalists. The domination of the Communist Party was replaced by chaotic rules of gangs.

This did not happen, though, in Poland. Poland was always a democratic country. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries Poland was the only democratic and the most tolerant country in the world. Polish kings did not get their power by inheritance; they were elected. Democracy, however, has a weakness. Other powers can easily conquer a democratic country. This happened to Poland. Poland lost its independence. During 130 years Poland was partitioned and occupied by Russia, Prussia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Polish nationality, however, the language, the culture and the tradition, survived. After a short period of independence between the First and Second World Wars, Poland got involved in the terrible war, by being between Germany and the Soviet Union. After the Second World War, Poland fell under the domination of the Soviets. But communism never had any roots in Poland. Polish people were often described as radishes: red outside, and white inside. When communism collapsed, stripping the outside red skin was very easy. Now the political and economic situation in Poland is quickly improving (Figure 8).

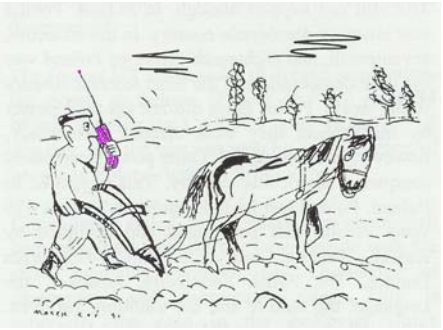


Fig. 8 Situation in Poland improves

Today the USA has a friendly relationship with Russia. It seems, however, that our politicians, in their naiveté, do not realize that Russians have not changed since the time of the "Evil Empire," as President Reagan called the USSR in the mid-eighties. The policy of the USA toward Russia (as well as China) is too lenient and based on wrong assumptions, and may soon lead to a disaster. Remember that the Soviet Union accumulated a tremendous amount of weapons. Once produced, they somehow, somewhere, sometime will be used.

A few years after I came to the USA I started noticing some disturbing changes in this country. I immigrated here because I did not like the system I was living in. The changes here are becoming frightening. I call them a "Sovietization of America." It appears that the traditional values start fading away. I was very impressed by Newt Gingrich's vision and strategy to renew and "devolutionize" America. This is something that the country needs, and has to work for. You must be very familiar with this great program. It is paramount to decrease control of the Federal Government. The Government in Washington D.C. must not decide on such details like "what children in Vermont or Nebraska have for lunch every day." Unfortunately there is a lot of opposition to Newt Gingrich's vision, fed by egoism, narrow-minded ambitions, or plain stupidity. The political climate today has somewhat changed, and the process of rebuilding America's grass root values is slowing down. I came to America and became a citizen of the USA because I liked it very much. It is sad to see this country declining.

Grandmother

I want to tell now a very personal story, the story about my grandmother. At the beginning of the century, my grandmother took my 3-year-old mother, and my slightly older uncle, and emigrated

from Poland to France. The situation in partitioned Poland under occupation was difficult. My grandmother lost her husband, and decided that life would be easier in France. She was from the suffragette's generation. She did not have any money and did not have a college education, as at that time women were very seldom admitted to Universities. She had two hands and a lot of energy. She was good in modeling and sewing clothes and was also skillful in gardening. But in France she chose a more profitable business – boarding houses. Just before the First World War she ran three such houses in Paris. Unfortunately during the First World War she lost everything, and restarting from scratch was difficult. Then she decided to immigrate to America. In 1924 she landed in New York City. Very brave and independent (my mother and uncle, both adult at that time, were still in Europe) my grandmother started a new business: she invented, patented, and started production of decorative pillows in the form of flowers (Figure 9). She became one of the pioneers of the mail order business in the USA. Two of her flower pillows are now in the archives of the White House, as she presented them to President Roosevelt. Then, during the depression she lost everything again, and restarting was very difficult. She was also homesick. In 1938 she was 60, and decided that this was about the age to die. She wanted to be buried in Poland. She sold or donated everything she had, went back to Poland, and landed in my parents' apartment in Warsaw. That was the time I met her. When she arrived, as my mother remembered, with her white hair she looked tired and old, just almost ready to die. My brother and I were very happy to have a grandma at home. One day a month later, my mother and father got a shock: grandma came back from shopping, with brown, nicely cut and curled hair. She was dressed in brand new elegant clothes, and… in her purse there was a ticket for the trip back to New York! My parents could not understand what happened; they felt guilty that maybe their hospitality was not warm enough. But this was not the case. My grandmother couldn't stand the slowness of life in the remote, and technologically poor country, she was used to having telephones, elevators, taxis, but these were seldom available in Poland. Above all, however, she wisely understood that the war was just about to begin, and she did not want to live through another one. It was a very smart decision, although in the USA her fourth restart in life was more difficult than ever. She managed, and when after the war she located us in Poland through Red Cross inquiries, she started sending us parcels with food, clothes, soaps, and what not. Sometimes she hid some jewels or dollars inside a package of rice or flour. Then in letters she asked: "How did you like the rice?" Her parcels helped us to survive the tough post-war situation in the devastated country. My grandmother was continuously active and healthy until 1953, when, very sadly, a drunken driver killed her in a New York City street.



Fig. 9 Grandmother Anna Majewska – Jellinek-May with her pillows-flowers; 1928

Epilogue

I am often asked whether it was scary to move to another country, leaving everything behind, and to start life in different environment. No, I was not scared.

People sometimes have relatives living in a nearby village. Then this village becomes a known, and friendly place, the place where the relatives live. For me America was that near-by village, known, warm, and inviting – the place where my grandmother lived.

Now I am a grandmother myself (Figure 10). I hope that for them, and for all other Americans, the United States remains forever the greatest country in the world.



Fig. 10 My grandchildren, Alexandra (8) and Arthur (11); 2005

Minden, Nevada, June 1997
Revised January 2006