The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 180
"1919 – Poland II"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

That there was going to be an independent Poland was now inarguable; where the new Poland's borders would lie, on the other hand, was still very arguable indeed. Poland has no natural geographic features that might help define a good, defensible border, which is part of the reason the old Poland fell.

The process of defining Poland's borders led to conflict with every one of the country's new neighbors.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 180. 1919 – Poland, part two.

This is the fifth episode of our 1919 World Tour. In the previous episode, we talked about the reemergence of Poland as an independent nation in November 1918. In that episode, we saw the new nation fight a seven-day war with Czechoslovakia and a four-month war with Ukraine over border disputes. That was just the beginning; there are more border disputes to come.

Before we get into that though, I'd like to take a step back and review the big picture. There were upward of thirty million Poles living in Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century. Add to that the Romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century, which was seeing disenfranchised minorities across Europe rediscovering their cultural roots and demanding equal rights, and toss in a helping of "self-determination," which is now all the rage, and the prospect of a revived Poland begins to seem inevitable, at least in hindsight. As I pointed out last time, think about how much grief five million Czechs gave the Austrians, or four million Irish gave the British, and ask yourself how long even the mightiest empires in Europe can hold back the aspirations of thirty million Poles.

In fact, you might be tempted to ask by now, not “How was Poland reborn?” but “What took so long?” The answer lies in the partition. The Poles may have had the numbers, but they were sundered. They lacked the advantage of unity that the Irish or the Czechs enjoyed. All three empires put up obstacles to Polish nationalism, but they were different obstacles in each. Austria-Hungary was a Catholic monarchy, so the Poles of Galicia were free to observe their faith and the Austrians were more tolerant of minorities than were the Germans or Russians, but Galicia was enchained in poverty. It was one of the poorest places in Europe, and that was not mere misfortune. It was imperial policy, made in Vienna in order to maintain control.

In authoritarian Russia, on the other hand, the emperors ruled with a heavy hand. Poles were forbidden to speak their language and forced to worship in Orthodox churches. Economic opportunities were few. Germany presented a different challenge to its three million Polish subjects, only about 10% of the Polish population of the region. Here lay the greatest economic opportunities and Catholics in Germany were free to worship, but in Lutheran Prussia, being Catholic was an obstacle to employment and the Polish language was discouraged. This meant that the key to taking advantage of the prosperity offered in Germany was leaving your language and religion behind. And in fact, Polish Germans tended to be more assimilated than their cousins in Russian Poland or Galicia. This is why Roman Dmowski thought Germany was the greatest threat to Polish nationalism.

Undoing the partition of Poland presented the new provisional government with a host of challenges. Merging German Poland and Russian Poland and Galicia into one Polish state meant combining regions accustomed to operating under different legal systems and using different currencies. The roads and railroads in Poland had not been laid down to bind Poland together, but to tie bits of it to its neighbors. Think about the problems of combining rail networks and signaling systems that had never been intended to work together, not to mention that the Russians used a different gauge of track on their lines.

And that’s before you get to the problem of where to draw the borders. Poland has no natural boundaries, no easy places to draw the lines or to defend against foreign invasion. Indeed, this is an important part of the reason why the old Poland was no more. It had too much difficulty defending itself. And it’s the reason why the new Poland is finding itself embroiled in not one or two, but several conflicts with its neighbors over border questions.

We talked about Austrian Galicia last time, and how the whole of it ended up under Polish rule, much to the dissatisfaction of the Ukrainian population. This week, let’s look first at the German, and then the Russian, territories that will become part of the revived Poland.

A major Polish population center in Germany was the city that the Germans call Posen and the Polish call Poznań. Poznań lies in the western part of the region the Poles call Wielkopolska, or Great Poland. Wielkopolska had always been the Polish heartland; after the partitions, the border between Prussia and Russia ran smack through the middle of it. When the Germans were setting

up their Polish puppet state, they meant to create it entirely out of Russian Poland and did not intend to give up a millimeter of German soil.

But the predominantly Polish inhabitants of Poznań and the surrounding province had other ideas, particularly once independence had been declared in Warsaw and the Fourteen Points were now official German policy. They rose up in revolt. German authorities had other revolts to worry about—we'll get to that when we get to Germany—and by January 1919, it was clear that the former Prussian province of Posen was going to be the new Polish province of Poznań, bringing with it the industry that had grown up there during German rule and making it the most important industrial center in the new Poland.

And that brings us to economics. As we've already seen, it wasn't enough for the peacemakers in Paris to draw new national borders based on ethnic lines. A new nation has to be economically viable, or it wouldn't survive. The Allied leaders understood this. What does it take for a new nation to be economically viable? In 1919, it means industry—okay, you can sorta check off that box. It means coal—okay, Poland has abundant coal reserves; no problem there. It means petroleum. Well, coincidentally, those lands in eastern Galicia that the Poles grabbed in early 1919 have oil deposits. Or maybe it wasn't a coincidence, as David Lloyd George once noted in a conversation with Polish Prime Minister Ignacy Paderewski. Paderewski replied by asking Lloyd George if he really believed the thirteen-year-old Polish boys in Lwów taking up arms for Poland were doing it because they were interested in the oil. Yeah, he's got a point.

Where was I? Oh, yes, economic viability. You need iron ore—let's come back to that one. And you need access to the sea. In an era when tariffs were a major source of government revenue, having a seaport is a huge economic advantage. It allows a nation to trade with any other nation in the world that also has a seaport without having to pay tariffs to any third party. The sea nearest to Poland is the Baltic, but before the Great War, the southern coast of the Baltic was entirely controlled by the German and Russian Empires. To force Poland to ship its imports and exports through either Germany or Russia amounted to giving a stranglehold over the Polish economy to two nations both likely to resent an independent Poland.

Woodrow Wilson understood this fully. That's why his thirteenth point spoke not merely of an independent Polish state, but an independent Polish state with "free and secure access to the sea." Okay, but talk is cheap. How are you going to make this happen?

The most important river in Poland is the Vistula, which flows roughly north into the Baltic. Both of Poland's two most important cities, Kraków and Warsaw, lie on its banks. At the mouth of the Vistula lies the port city the Poles call Gdańsk and the Germans call Danzig. Also, there is a corridor of land that runs through West Prussia between Wielkopolska and the seacoast the inhabitants of which are predominantly Polish. Hey, here's an idea. Why don't we go ahead and call this place "the Polish Corridor." That's what everyone else is going to call it for the next twenty years. Catchy.

Aha, you may say. Problem solved. Well, yes and no. The population of the city of Danzig is predominantly German. And when I say "predominantly," understand that I mean like 90% plus, though it was immediately adjacent to that heavily Polish Corridor. Still, how does that fit in with self-determination, Mr. Wilson? Danzig has a long German history. Even when it was under Polish rule, it was a free city with close trade links to other German ports. They had once called it "the Amsterdam of the East." In modern Germany, Danzig had been the capital of West Prussia. To the Germans, the only thing more terrible than losing Danzig would be a corridor of Polish territory cutting East Prussia off from the rest of Germany altogether, which, yeah, this proposal also envisions.

In the end, the Allies decided that Poland needed to be secure and economically viable, even if that meant some Germans ended up living in Poland. That meant the Polish Corridor must go to Poland. It would be far easier to guarantee the Germans transit rights across the corridor between East Prussia and the rest of Germany that it would be to guarantee the Poles transit rights through a German port on the Baltic. And in any case, East Prussia had a perfectly good seaport of its own, Königsberg, through which people and trade goods could easily pass by ship to and from the rest of Germany.

As for Danzig itself, the city would be neither German nor Polish. The Treaty of Versailles instead created the Free City of Danzig, an autonomous city-state that would have self-rule, although Poland would gain control over Danzig's international relations, a Polish military outpost in the city, and free use of the harbor. Danzig would also be in a customs union with Poland, and this whole arrangement would be overseen by the League of Nations.

The now severed East Prussia also contained predominantly Polish regions, especially in the south of the province, and in years to come two plebiscites would be held in two of those regions on the question of whether the inhabitants wished to be part of Poland or Germany. Despite their Polish heritage, the voters here chose overwhelmingly to remain part of Germany. This was probably because the Poles living here were pretty well assimilated into German culture, and they also may have had their doubts about the economic viability or even the survivability of the new Poland. Remaining German may well have struck them as the safer option, although because of these plebiscites, the rail line from Warsaw to Danzig would pass through German territory along the way.

More referenda were held in the German province of Upper Silesia, a slice of German territory wedged between Poland to the north and Czechoslovakia to the south. The population was 65% ethnic Polish, but the region was home to a large share of Germany's coal, iron ore, zinc and lead deposits. This had been German land for centuries, and the Germans had built its many mines and steel mills. This was a question of the economic viability of *Germany*, the Germans argued. Poland had coal and iron mining elsewhere. David Lloyd George worried that losing Silesia might leave the Germans unable to pay their reparations. Jan Smuts said that putting Germans

under Polish rule would be like putting white people under the rule of native Africans. Perish the thought!

A plebiscite was eventually held in Upper Silesia, in 1921, but only after the violence there between Germans and Poles was put down. The plebiscite produced a mixed result, with different parts of the province voting different ways. Eventually the League of Nations stepped in. A commission composed of four League member states with no interest in the dispute—Belgium, Spain, China, and Brazil—drew a line on a map that gave most of the land area of the province to Germany but awarded most of its industrial and mineral wealth to Poland.

[music: Chopin, *Mazurka*]

All right, so we've talked about Poland's seizure of Galicia. We've talked about which German territories the Allies awarded to Poland in the Treaty of Versailles. That leaves us to determine the new Poland's eastern border.

The difficulty here is that Russia is not a party to the Paris peace talks. Do the Allies even have the legal or moral authority to decide where the border between Poland and Russia should lie? The Allied Supreme Council meeting in Paris decided that they did, and instructed the Commission on Polish Affairs to draw an eastern border that would include all indisputably Polish territories into Poland. This work was not completed until December 1919, months after the Treaty of Versailles was already signed. The border they came up with was very close to the eastern border of Poland as we know it in our time. This border will be known to history as the Curzon Line, because…well, hold that thought for a minute.

The situation in western Russia was in complete chaos in 1919. I'm speaking here of the lands that Germany seized and occupied during the Great War and were awarded to Germany in the now-defunct Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Or to put it another way, the lands that in our day are approximately Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, western Belarus, and Ukraine. Recall that the Germans had in mind setting up buffer states in this territory, and at least some Germans, like Hindenburg and Ludendorff, intended these states to be German puppets, and they were garrisoned with hundreds of thousands of German soldiers.

After the Armistice, the Allies asked the Germans to maintain their garrisons in these occupied territories until the Peace Conference could decide what to do with them. This proved to be an impossible task for the German military. With the war over, morale at rock bottom, and revolution breaking out at home, those German garrisons weren't interested in biding their time in lonely outposts in rural Ukraine, let's say, while their homeland was in the throes of a political upheaval. So they left.

And when those German garrison troops abandoned their positions, they left behind a mish-mash of would-be governments fighting over the right to rule these lands. There were the puppet governments the Germans helped set up and then left to their own devices. There were

nationalist Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, who saw in the collapse of the Russian and German Empires the opportunity to assert their independence. There were Bolshevik Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, eager to import the blessings of the proletarian revolution already enjoyed by their Russian comrades to the east. There was the Bolshevik government in Moscow and its Red Army, eager to export the blessings of the proletarian revolution they already enjoyed to their Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian comrades to the west. And there were the various factions that comprised the White Army, who disagreed over many things, but were in agreement on at least one thing: that Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians all properly belonged inside, not outside, the borders of Russia.

Now, I'm going to defer the stories of the Baltic States and the Russian Civil War to future episodes, so I'm just going to pass lightly over that today to keep the focus on Poland. The Polish provisional head of state and military commander Józef Piłsudski had no intention whatsoever of limiting the Polish state to the Curzon Line. The Paris Peace Conference had the power to define the western border of Poland, but in the east, as he put it, "there are doors that open and close, and it depends on who forces them open and how far."

The absence of natural borders in Eastern Europe historically has made it difficult for the Poles to keep enemy invaders out. But the converse also applies; it has also made it easy for Poles to leave. We've already seen that multicultural empires lead to migrations, mixing of peoples, and blurring of lines. In the Russian Empire, the Poles had been fruitful and multiplied, moving eastward into territories not historically Polish, but this gave the new Poland an arguable claim to them.

The Polish Army had already moved to take eastern Galicia. In the spring of 1919, as the fighting in Galicia continued, Polish troops moved northeast into Lithuania, where Lithuanian nationalists were fighting the Red Army. There was a substantial Polish population here in eastern Lithuania. Piłsudski himself had been born and raised there. At first, Polish and Lithuanian forces formed an alliance of convenience against the Red Army, but Piłsudski had something more in mind than fraternal assistance to Lithuanian nationalists. He wanted Lithuania to join Poland and recreate the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Well, this idea went over with the Lithuanians about as well as you could expect, which is to say not at all. Those Lithuanian nationalists hadn't risked their lives breaking away from Russian rule so that they could live under Polish rule. In April, the Poles won a significant victory, forcing the Red Army out of the city the Russians call Vilna and the Poles call Wilno. The Lithuanians call it Vilnius, and they also call it "our capital." Indeed, Vilnius is the capital of Lithuania in our time, although in 1919, its population was overwhelmingly Polish and Jewish. Less than 10% of its citizens identified as Lithuanian. When the Poles took over the city, they promised a referendum on its future, but, um, that's not going to happen.

What did happen was a sharp deterioration in relations between Poland and the Lithuanian nationalist government. But the Polish Army wasn't done yet. They continued to push farther on to the east, and by August had captured the city of Minsk, which in our day is the capital of Belarus. Here Piłsudski ordered an end to the offensive. The Polish Army had pushed the Red Army back to approximately where it had begun, behind the line drawn at Brest-Litovsk, while Poland had secured all the lands that were predominantly Polish, or partly Polish, or arguably Polish. That winter, the Poles aided the Latvians in pushing the Red Army out of Latvia.

So up to this point, everything has been going about as well for Poland and Polish interests as you could hope. The Polish Army, equipped with arms from France, had bested the ragtag Red Army every time. And, consistent with Józef Piłsudski's vision of Poland as the leader of an anti-Russian alliance of Eastern European states, Poland has come to the aid of Latvia and Lithuania, although the Lithuanians were proving to be spectacularly ungrateful and kept going on about wanting their capital back.

The year 1920 opened with the Red Army regathering its strength for another offensive against Poland. Meanwhile, to the south, the independent state of Ukraine had been battered by White and Red forces, and by spring of 1920, the Red Army controlled most of the country.

Piłsudski saw an opportunity, and concluded an agreement with the Ukraine government in April. In exchange for the Ukrainians agreeing to an alliance and making territorial concessions in the west, Poland would contribute 65,000 soldiers to assist in driving the Red Army out of Ukraine. The offensive began brilliantly, with a surprise attack that captured 8,000 Red Army soldiers and a large cache of weapons and supplies at a minimal cost to Poland. By May 7, Polish troops had taken Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, from the Red Army.

But the Red Army was not defeated. The Bolsheviks, masters of propaganda, accused Poland of imperialist designs on its eastern neighbors, accusations that many Ukrainians found easy to credit. On May 30, *Pravda* published an editorial by none other than our old friend Alexei Brusilov, mastermind of the Brusilov Offensive and once commander-in-chief of the old Russian Army for a few weeks during the rule of the Provisional Government. Brusilov was no socialist, but he supported the communist government in Moscow for patriotic reasons. His editorial called on officers and soldiers of the old Imperial army to support the new Red Army in its fight against the Polish invaders.

These appeals to patriotism helped the Red Army recruit over 100,000 officers and enlisted soldiers, many of whom had previously been deserters. In June, the Red Army was able to retake Kiev, and the Poles were in retreat and on their way out of Ukraine. On July 4, the Red Army's Northwest Front, commanded by Mikhail Tukhachevsky, one of the Red Army's most talented commanders, began a parallel offensive farther north, into the territories Poland had occupied last year, and within days Polish forces were in full retreat up and down the front.

The Polish government appealed to the Allies for help. The British Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, cabled the Russian government, proposing a ceasefire along the line that the Allies had drawn at the Paris Peace Conference and threatening Western military aid to the Poles should the Russians refuse. And it is here and now, because of this ceasefire demand, that this line became known as the Curzon Line. But the Russian government rejected the Curzon proposal, noting tartly that the Western imperialists had remained studiously silent for the past year while Polish forces were moving eastward into Russian lands, but had suddenly become outspoken advocates for peace just as soon as Russian forces began moving west. The Lloyd George government announced that it would send equipment and supplies to Poland, but the British Trade Union Congress opposed aid to what it saw as just another counter-revolutionary White Army force and threatened a general strike. The French did send Poland a number of military advisors to aid in their defense, including a 29-year-old staff officer named Charles de Gaulle.

By August 1, the Red Army was crossing the Curzon Line and Warsaw lay less than 100 kilometers away. Moscow felt confident enough to set up a Polish communist government in Białystok, called the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee. It drew its members from territories claimed by Poland, though few of them were ethnic Poles. Mostly they were Jews and other minority groups, people uneasy about their prospects in Piłsudski's Poland.

On August 10, Red Army cavalry units crossed the Vistula River north of Warsaw, the opening move in encircling and capturing the Polish capital.

But Polish military intelligence had broken the Russian code, and learned that a portion of the Red Army's Southwest Front had disobeyed orders to advance toward Warsaw and had instead turned west toward Lwów, creating a gap in the Russian line south of Warsaw. One of the political commissars in the Southwest Front at this time was Joseph Stalin, and there's speculation that Stalin was behind this move. It wouldn't be the first time Stalin disobeyed orders from military commanders, whom he often distrusted. You'll see more examples of this when we get to the Russian Civil War.

In any case, that gap in the Russian line was a tempting opportunity in a situation that offered the Polish few opportunities, and so, in a last-ditch gamble, Piłsudski put together an attack group and ordered it across the Vistula south of Warsaw in hope of penetrating the Red Army line between the two fronts and disrupting operations in the rear.

The attack was an enormous success, costing the Red Army over 10,000 dead, 30,000 wounded and 100,000 captured or interned and became known in Poland as the "Miracle at the Vistula." The Red Army retreated in disarray, the Poles advanced, but by this time both sides were exhausted, and the fighting ended in October 1920. The following spring, a peace treaty was signed in Riga that basically split the difference between the Curzon Line and the farthest eastward advance of the Polish Army a year ago. The border between Poland and Russia would

run some 250 kilometers east of the Curzon Line, incorporating into Poland substantial pieces of Belarus and Ukraine.

The treaty had its critics on both sides. The Belarusians certainly didn't like the partition of their country. The Ukrainians didn't, either, and they especially resented Poland's renunciation of its treaty with Ukraine, signed less than two years ago. Lenin and his government were disappointed at how their plan to spread the revolution westward had been frustrated at the gates of Warsaw.

In Poland, some leaders in the new Sejm, the Polish parliament, objected to incorporating something like a million Belarusians and four million Ukrainians into Poland, fearing that would lead to discontent and instability—Spoiler alert: it will—while more radically nationalist Poles objected to how the treaty still left hundreds of thousands of ethnic Poles behind the Russian border. Józef Piłsudski didn't like the treaty, either. He called it an "act of cowardice" for its abandonment of Poland's Ukrainian allies.

The Treaty of Riga explicitly refrained from setting the border between Poland and Lithuania, declaring that it was a matter to be settled in separate negotiations between those two countries.

And what of Lithuania, you may ask? Well, the Polish Army had retaken Vilnius last autumn and had set up a provisional government for what it called the "Republic of Central Lithuania." Talks between the Polish and Lithuanian governments over the status of Central Lithuania went on for months. The Lithuanians proposed a federation of the two Lithuanian states, with special protections for the rights of Poles in Central Lithuania. The Polish side wanted Central Lithuania to federate with Poland and proposed an arrangement under which Poland and Lithuania would share control of Central Lithuania, but this went too far for Lithuanian nationalists.

The matter was referred to the League of Nations, which spent most of 1921 trying unsuccessfully to craft a compromise the two countries could agree to. The Polish military authorities in Central Lithuania then called a general election for January 1922 to elect a Central Lithuanian Sejm, and they put their thumbs on the scale pretty hard in favor of electing candidates who supported union with Poland, so much so that most Belarusian, Jewish, and Lithuanian citizens boycotted the election, and the League of Nations declared it invalid. Nevertheless, formally it elected a Sejm, which met in February and voted to petition for union with Poland. By March, the deed was done. Central Lithuania ceased to exist, and Poland now controlled an arm of territory stretching north and east around the rest of Lithuania all the way to Latvia, and including Vilnius, or Wilno, if you like.

Lithuania never did recognize the incorporation of Central Lithuania into Poland and maintained Vilnius as officially its capital while the Lithuanian government met in Kaunas, the second-largest city in Lithuania. Lithuania would refuse diplomatic relations with Poland, a situation that would last until 1938, and even then, Lithuania only agreed to an exchange of ambassadors under threat of war.

So seemingly against all odds, a new Poland not only emerged, but had become a large and strong nation with the Baltic seaport it so badly needed. But all this came at a price, the price being that Poland would have poor relations with all its neighbors, every one of which had some kind of grievance against the new country. Nor were the Western Allies pleased with Poland's unseemly expansion to the east, although the French would maintain a military alliance with Poland.

Internally, less than 70% of the population of the new Poland would be ethnically Polish, with Ukrainians and Jews being the two largest minority groups. Poland had the second largest Jewish population in the world at the time; only the United States had a larger one. About one out of five Jewish people in the world was a Polish citizen. There were also significant numbers of ethnic Germans, Belarusians, and Lithuanians in Poland. And despite the fact that minorities accounted for almost a third of its population, Poland had both legal and informal restrictions on minorities, especially on its Jewish citizens.

The new Poland would not prove to be fertile soil for the growth of democracy. The nation adopted a constitution in 1921, modeled on the French system. In 1922, the National Assembly elected a new president, and Józef Piłsudski stepped down as head of state, but the newly elected president was assassinated by a right-wing extremist just two days after assuming the office.

Piłsudski became chief of the Polish General Staff, and the next five years saw a dizzying number of largely ineffective governments forming and collapsing until the autumn of 1926, when Piłsudski led a coup and ran the country from behind the scenes as a military strongman for the next nine years, until his death in 1935. Afterward, Poland would remain largely an authoritarian state run by the military with only the trappings of democracy until…well, *that* is very definitely a story for another episode.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Tony for his donation, and thank you Nicolás for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep this shop open and the history coming, so thanks so much to all of you for your support.

Next week will be a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we travel north across the Baltic Sea to consider the birth of Finland. That's in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

Oh, and one more thing. I hope you'll indulge me while I share something personal with you, in my own special way, which means, yeah, sit back and relax. This is going to take a while.

I've shared with you before that some of my ancestors were from Galicia. Specifically, my maternal grandparents, both of whom were Polish *galizianers* who emigrated to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. My grandfather was a coal miner who met and married my grandmother in America and they had four daughters together, the youngest of whom is my

mother. My mother was the only one in the family to marry outside the tribe, as it were. My father was Pennsylvania German, and that is why I don't have a Polish surname.

My grandparents and my mother experienced discrimination as Polish Americans. Polish people were the last white ethnic group in the United States that it was considered okay to look down on. Apart from Jews, of course. Anti-Semitism never seems to go out of style.

When I was a kid in the 1960s and 1970s, it was still considered acceptable in the US to make Polish people the butt of jokes. Polish jokes were so common they were an established category of humor. You heard them from stand-up comics, on television sitcoms and variety shows, and often in real life. They sold Polish joke books in the bookstores. The gist of all these jokes was very straightforward. Polish people were stupid. Full stop. The archetypal Polish joke was the riddle that asks, "How many Polish people does it take to change a light bulb?" The answer is, "Three. One to hold the light bulb and two to turn the ladder." Because Polish people are stupid. Get it?

Also, they didn't say "Polish people." They used an ethnic slur that I'm not going to repeat in my podcast, even though my cousins use that same ethnic slur on each other all the time and we all laugh at it but we'd all be very upset if we heard *you* using it. By the way, do you want to know why it's okay for people within an ethnic group to use an ethnic slur among themselves but it's not okay when *you* use it? I'd be happy to explain it to you. It's very simple.

It's just how it is. Deal with it.

But I digress. I'm telling you all this not to induce you to feel sorry for me or as an outlet for decades of repressed anger. (Well, maybe a little bit of repressed anger.) I'm setting the stage for a story I want to tell you. This is context. Keep it in mind as I begin.

I don't have a Polish surname or an accent, so most people didn't know I was Polish unless I told them. Which I always did, because it's nothing to be ashamed of. But when I did mention it back in those days, the usual reaction from the other person was to say something nasty or make a joke at my expense.

I had a high school teacher whom I very much liked and admired. He was Italian American by heritage, not that it matters, except that I had a private conversation with him in once which I told him I was Polish, and his response was to explain to me, in a very sober and scholarly way, that while Italians had produced much great art and music and architecture and the Renaissance and all that, no Polish person had ever contributed anything of value in the entire history of Western civilization.

Well. I'm proud to be able to tell you that fifteen-year-old me had enough moxie to reply to this claim with one word: "Copernicus." You know, the guy who first figured out that the Earth revolves around the sun, instead of the other way around?

My teacher gave me Copernicus, but maintained that was only one person and he lived four hundred years ago, so it hardly counted.

So I said, “Chopin.”

My teacher wouldn’t give me Chopin. He said Chopin lived in Paris throughout his career and did all his composing there, so it didn’t count. I don’t know *why* that makes it not count, but that’s what he said.

And I’m afraid fifteen-year-old me ran out of moxie at that point and let the subject drop. I didn’t know enough history back then to be able to say what I would say today, that the reason Chopin lived and worked in Paris was precisely because he was talented and successful and that was the place to be if you were talented and successful, especially if you were Polish, and in any case he couldn’t have lived and worked in Poland because there was no Poland at the time and that Chopin’s birthplace was under a brutal and authoritarian Russian rule.

Oh, well. Don’t you hate it when you don’t know what to say at the time, but then the perfect comeback comes to you 47 years later?

I tell you this story because it has been much on my mind for the past four years while I have been producing *The History of the Twentieth Century* podcast. Because although we’ve only done a twenty-year slice of history so far, we’ve already met a number of important and accomplished Polish people. People like Marie Curie, who helped uncover the mysteries of radioactivity and won two Nobel Prizes, and Jan Bloch, who foresaw the nightmare of the Great War—he was born Jewish, so maybe I don’t get to claim him—and Joseph Conrad, who became an influential and respected writer in English although his first language was Polish and who helped blow the lid off the scandal that was King Leopold’s Congo. There was Vaslav Nijinsky, the greatest male ballet dancer of the century and his sister Bronisława and Maria Kshessinskaya, two more of the greatest ballet dancers of the age. There was Albert Michelson, the Polish-American physicist who laid the groundwork for the theory of relativity and was the first American to win a Nobel Prize in the sciences. I think that’s a pretty respectable lineup for twenty years’ worth of history.

I say this not to exalt Polish people over any other people. All peoples are gifted and talented and everyone has something to contribute. I say it because I was surprised myself at how often I came across Polish people in my exploration of twentieth-century history.

Because that conversation I had with my teacher 47 years ago had affected me more deeply than I had realized. I had internalized his view of Polish people without even realizing it, to the point that I was surprised myself to discover how wrong he was. I had to immerse myself this deeply into history to prove even to myself that Polish people have as much to offer as anyone else.

I suppose some of you listening to this podcast may have wondered from time to time what *I* learned from doing *The History of the Twentieth Century*. You may have wanted to ask me, "What was the biggest or most interesting or surprising thing *you* discovered while doing this podcast?"

Well, if you ever wondered these things, here's your answer. I learned something about my heritage. I learned something about myself. And an episode centered on Poland seemed like the right place to share all this with you.

And most important of all, I learned that you should be careful what you say to kids. Because kids are very impressionable and they take what you tell them to heart. And they have long memories.

You wouldn't want to leave someone with a wound that will take 47 years to heal.

[music: Closing Theme]

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