

ILLINOIS DIVISION THRIVES DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND



The Polish American Congress, Illinois Division (PACIL) had a very busy schedule during 2021 and 2022. Despite the COVID 19 pandemic, or maybe because of it, the Executive Board and the President decided to confront the reality that many people, especially our seniors in Polonia, were truly most vulnerable to the deprivation that came with the lockdowns. **Assisted by the Polish American Medical Society (PAMS) PACIL volunteers organized rides for Polonia seniors to doctors' offices, purchased and delivered food to shut-ins.** This proved to be especially useful in winter and late fall of 2021.

While this effort was ongoing, other Board members worked closely with the Polish American Retirees group, writing letters on their behalf to Congressmen and Senators to push forth the repeal of double taxation on their retirement income from Social Security and Polish ZUS. Ironically, it's named "**Windfall Elimination Provision**", or WEP. We found this effort to be very frustrating. It's a problematic political issue which involves a treaty between Poland and the US. While all politicians commiserate with our retirees, there is very little actual political will or support, undoubtedly due to cost to the Treasury vis a vis the lack of perceived political power of the Retirees. We are also engaged in the support of HR. 664 aimed at ensuring that the world never forgets the unprovoked September 1939 attack on Poland by both Germany and Soviet Union.

All members of the Executive Board were quite active, each assigned tasks by the President. The Illinois Division gained numerous new members, one of them being an organization and the balance being individual young Polish American professionals, all signing up because of serious recruiting efforts by the Board members. We also signed up college and high school students and are in the process of creating a "Youth Chapter" with the concept of renewing our organization. After all, Board members' average age is well north of 50.

We are happy to inform that we retained over 90% of our membership during the pandemic. We are also saddened to report that Covid-19 took two of our Board members, Andrzej Gedlek and Edward Praznowski.

The Board embraced **new technology** and conducted its meetings at least twice a month via Zoom, while regular face-to-face monthly meetings of general membership resumed in June of 2021. Because we were unable to hold fundraisers in 2020 and early 2021, our operating cash account started running low. Well before the funding could have become a problem, our President attacked the issue head on, trying to secure operational grants from affluent benefactors. He was quite successful in securing such, not only for the IL Division, but also for some of our member organizations as well as some churches in need with the majority of parishioners of Polish descent.



At the start of the pandemic in early 2020, PACIL Executive Board realized that we must modify our approach and expand our reach to the larger Polish community. It was decided that an hourly radio program, once a week, would be a good place to start. An inaugural program of the “**Voice of Congress**” was broadcast on June 11 of 2020, and quickly became quite popular. Various accomplished and interesting

scientists, artists, doctors, financial advisers and politicians are interviewed on our program. The program is gaining an audience via the internet as well as over conventional radio. It’s success is mainly due to the dedication and tenacity of the talented First Vice President of PACIL, Walter Bochenek, who is faithfully broadcasting every Thursday from 8 to 9 PM on 1490 AM. Weekly recordings are posted on our website and Facebook for the convenience of our listeners.

In 2022, the war in the **Ukraine** cast a heavy shadow on our hearts, so we jumped on the chance to organize fundraisers and other efforts to help Ukrainian people. At the same time, another “war” was ongoing, this one locally: the decision by the Chicago Archdiocese and Cardinal Cupich to close and sell the **Basilica of St. Adalbert (Sw. Wojciech)**. This basilica, one of the most beautiful of churches built by the Polish Diaspora on American



soil, is slowly being dismembered while discussions are ongoing. The latest affront to the Polish faithful was the removal of the full-size replica of Michelangelo’s Pieta from St. Adalbert Basilica. IL Division as well as the National President, Mr. Frank Spula are involved with this issue.



At the end of 2021 **PACIL acquired an office building**, with 3 office spaces, and a total area of approx. 3000 sq. ft. PACIL occupies one office space, approx. 1000 sq. ft., while the two remaining office spaces generate rental income, thus making the building self-sustaining financially. For the last 17 years, PACIL paid rent which, with utilities cost 9-12 thousand per year. With severe inflation rapidly eroding the PACIL bldg. fund, it was decided it was our last opportunity to buy our own office. The office is used for

general PACIL business use, archives and meetings of the Board. We also encourage our member organizations to use the office space for their meetings. The office space was thoroughly gutted and the building modernized to the latest standards. We held a Grand Opening, including a ribbon cutting ceremony in June of 2022 with the participation of local politicians and VIPs. Incl. PAC National President Mr. Frank Spula.

The Board decided not to co-mingle the finances of the core IL. Division (member dues, fundraising) and the real estate income as well as the radio program advertising income in order to verify the self-sustainability of each operation. As of this writing, all financial goals for each entity have been exceeded.



In October of **2021** PACIL held its 51st annual **Heritage Banquet** which was extremely successful as both a fund raiser and a meeting of 300 influential people in Polonia society who paid tribute to honored members of Polonia.

This success was repeated in October of **2022** when 52nd Annual **Heritage Banquet** was held again at the beautiful Allegra Banquet Hall with 320 guests attending. Guest speakers included Consul general of Poland **Pawel Zyzak**, Consul General of Ukraine **Serhiy Koledow** and President of PAC National **Frank Spula**. In March of 2022 the annual Pulaski Day banquet was held, together with the Polish American Foundation. Polish ambassador to the USA was a keynote speaker, again a very successful event.





PACIL also participated in various Polonia activities, such as the **May 3rd Constitution Parade**, Polish American Contractors Assn. Banquet (PACBA) PAMS fund raiser, Polish American Chamber of Commerce (PACC), Polish Museum of America, Alliance of Polish Clubs, Polish Highlanders banquet, and events organized by the Polish Consulate.

In May of 2022, PACIL organized a “**Candidates Night**” with 40 political candidates presenting their position on various topics to the membership. We are pushing hard to increase the participation of Poles in the local elections. On November 15th, we helped to organize a “**meet and greet**” for **Dr. Willie Wilson** at Copernicus Center, a major benefactor of PACIL, who is a candidate for the mayor of Chicago in the 2023 elections. Dr Wilson has been endorsed by members of PACIL for the office of the Mayor of the City of Chicago.



PACIL is regularly invited to various events held by other ethnic or political organizations. The best example would be the **Italian American Society**, (IAS) where PACIL had a car and front row marchers in the annual October Columbus Day Parade, while IAS representatives include IAS President, **Ron Onesti**, attended our office Grand Opening and Heritage Banquet. PACIL supports the Italian group in their efforts to restore to its original site the statues of Christopher Columbus

and Air Marshall Italo Balbo, removed by the City of Chicago to appease the rioting anarchist Antifa members.

On Feb. 8th of 2022, a **hateful anti-Polish article was published by the Chicago Sun Times, written by Neil Steinberg**, in which Steinberg alleges Poles were on par with the Germans in murdering Jews before, during and even after the war and “took pleasure from doing so”. PACIL wrote a letter outlining the history of Polish-Jewish relations over nearly 1000 years and requested a retraction and an apology from the Sun Times and Steinberg. As expected, we did not get a courtesy of a reply. President Niedzinski and four other Board members of PACIL decided not to burden PACIL finances and to pursue this issue on their own and are financing **the lawsuit** out of their pockets. As of this writing the lawsuit is in the 3-person State Court of Appeals. We expect a verdict before years end. Win or lose, we have the satisfaction that we forced the Sun Times to commit resources to defending a nasty writer and an ugly piece of trashy journalism. Since Sun Times was just recently acquired, we are certain the new owners are not thrilled by our lawsuit.



Several years ago, in order to be proactive, not reactive in the **Jewish - Polish relations**, PACIL established good relationships and an open line of communication with Ms. Kelly Shany, executive director of the Holocaust Museum in Skokie, IL. Just recently

Ms. Shany was promoted to the position of president of the museum and she approached PACIL with the concept of creating an exhibit showing Polish martyrdom during WW II, with focus on Poles saving Jews during WW II. She asked for help in gathering historical documents, photos etc. to create the exhibit.

Besides putting out a request for such materials locally with the help of the Polish Museum of America and the Polish daily "Zgoda", PACIL president Michael Niedzinski approached Poland's Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) and established a dialogue between Ms. Shany and IPN. IPN possesses a veritable treasure trove of such materials and artifacts, so it should be a great and badly needed exhibit to educate the local population, especially children, about the tens of thousands of Poles risking and losing their lives in an attempt to save Jewish lives.

Due to the engagement of all on the Executive Board and decisions made, the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic became opportunities, making the last two years quite successful for PACIL. **We became a more focused, goal-oriented organization at a time when many organizations struggled to survive.**

Wojciech Niedzinski

Corresponding Secretary
Polish American Congress, Illinois Division

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