Address at
National Polish Arts Conference
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
August 15, 1940.

It is a matter of real gratification to me to be in a gathering like this and to participate with you in fostering those human interests that lie at the very heart of civilization. The institutions of man may decay or be destroyed--governments and societies may be overthrown--political and national causes may be lost--but the artistic and scientific skill of man is cherished and survives. The arts and professions go on while life itself goes on.

This is nowhere better illustrated than in Polish culture. While Polish political institutions have had their vicissitudes--their tragedies and their rebirths--and while Polish economic conditions have touched both adversity and prosperity in turn--still the Polish tradition and the spirit of the Polish people has persisted without faltering. It is persisting now. There is in the Polish character a vigorous, artistic and scientific response to life which oppression and suffering have never killed. This sensitiveness to the beauty and tragedy of human existence has manifested itself in various fields--most notably, from the point of view of the world at large, in the fields of music, literature, and painting. The artistic endowment of the Polish people, strongly reflected in their history and accomplishments, has commanded the world's admiration even at times when Polish political rights were being disregarded and destroyed.

The Character of a people's artistic tradition is in part native and in part acquired. It is native to the extent that a race has it inborn as a gift. It is acquired to the extent that the environment in which a people live supplies subject matter and inspiration for the exercise of that gift.

That environment is made up of numerous and potent influences. The first of these is the home and the family. Within the home and the family each individual assimilates the basic conditions of his environment. The process of assimilation is a natural and beneficent one. It goes on in the familiar and affectionate relationships between parents and children, brothers and sisters, relatives, friends, and acquaintances.

Next beyond the home and the family, the church and the school have their place as nurseries of the culture which the individual imbibes. Within them and from them he develops contacts with a larger and more varied world than that which he knew within the family and the home. He finds in them more contacts with other cultures. The ring of experience widens.

Beyond the church and the school come those miscellaneous multiplied influences which carry the individual farther and farther into the vast and complex world where influences of every sort begin to exert their pressure upon him. There are newspapers, the movies, the theatre, sports, the activities of social groups, and prominent and particularly influential among them is the profession, trade, business or particular work that the individual finally becomes tied to. In it, it is necessary for him to sharpen and concentrate all his powers. To the various aims of

his occupation he brings not only his natural powers but the discipline to which he has been subject in the successively widening circles of his experience as a growing youth.

The individual is the product of all these influences plus his innate capacities. His life will reflect the cultural influences to which he has been subjected and to the extent that he has a sensitive and forceful personality he is not merely a participant in life but a contributor to it. By his own life he will enrich life in general. He will thus guide and direct the lives of others.

America is a country not only of great material resources and of free political institutions but of great artistic and scientific capacity. The development of these capacities, quite as much as the development of its potential wealth and the maintenance of its political institutions, will determine for the future its importance as a home of man. We do not desire that our own traditions as individuals of Polish extraction should be surrendered for the traditions of another culture; and neither do we expect that our own traditions will predominate and supplant all others. What we reasonably hope is that in a new world made up of many elements transplanted like our own from a different soil, our tradition should contribute in a substantial way to the evolution of a new and American tradition--wholesome and sound.

It seems to me, accordingly, that there is no more hopeful and constructive interest for our people to be engaged upon than that which occupies this Conference. Our future is here. Our responsibility is the successful transplantation into this new and favorable soil of gifts and talents that arose in old Poland, that have been our heritage for generations, and that are now to be cultivated here. This is our country.

The Polish contribution to American arts and sciences should be one of the most important of all the contributions out of which the future cultural accomplishments of America are to develop. But you will agree with me, I think, that what the Polish lover of the arts and sciences has to do is something far more vital than the mere maintenance of traditions and the preservation of typical Polish conceptions. Our outlook is not to be narrowed by a self-conscious determination to live in the past--to live and breath only the culture of our fathers. In the atmosphere of such a determination cultural effort becomes suffocated. The artist who is told that he must paint only in the manner of his fathers, that his music must be only that of his fathers, that his stories and his poetry must be only that of his fathers, is being denied at the outset that freedom of inspiration which is indispensable to artistic accomplishment. I have no fear that the Polish interest in the arts and sciences will die. On the contrary, I trust in its natural vigor and I am confident that in being allowed to range in this new world it will accomplish more for itself and for the world than would be possible if we tried primarily to maintain its peculiarities. If Polish art and science were merely national expressions, they would not have had the universal appeal that they have had. Their success has arisen, not from their peculiarities, but from the profound and genuine sense of human values which generation after generation of Polish artists and scientists have possessed. The secret,

that is, lies in the soul of the artist or scientist and in the skill of the workman--not in the character of his subject matter nor in the nature of his medium. An artist or scientist will be an artist or scientist anywhere.

Chopin and Paderewski both spent much of their lives outside of Poland. They were nonetheless Polish, and the world at the same time that it recognized the pre-eminence of their attainments, recognized also the ineradicably Polish quality of their work. The same thing is true of the writer, Joseph Conrad, who, though he wrote his stories in English and achieved through them a world-wide reputation as one of the most intelligent and discerning writers of modern times, nevertheless remained characteristically Polish.

I do not mean to say that you need give no thought to the future of Polish art and science in America and may leave them to take care of themselves the best they may. On the contrary, I think that in organizations and conferences such as this we are doing an essential and indispensable thing. We have, however, to pursue a policy that on the one hand frees and inspires the individual artist or scientist and that on the other hand defends and encourages him and affords him opportunities. That is what our societies do and for the best results a certain amount of organization and collective action are necessary. In fact, I am inclined to think that the contribution of our people to American culture could be made even greater than it is if our various interests had a better meeting ground than now exists. Polish organizations are numerous. They are artistic, professional, religious, and social. They have diverse points of view and at the same time they have a deep underlying unity. Means of giving greater realization to this unity I think should be found--not with the idea that our various organizations and interests should be subordinated to any one, but that each of them should have the benefit of readier communication with the others.

Together we can build--for a better future.

The suggestion has been made that we establish in Washington a Bureau whose function should be what I have just described.

This bureau should compile and make available complete statistics on our people: their number and distribution, their organizations, churches, clergymen, schools, newspapers, students, professional men and women, public officials, industrialists, farmers, businessmen, bankers and laborers, skilled and unskilled.

The bureau should likewise conduct research on matters affecting the political, social, and economic life of the United States and of our people in the United States.

National and international economic social and political studies could be conducted on which to base far reaching plans, national and local programs, and day-to-day activities with a sound and business-like approach to the solution of our every day problems. We must keep our feet on the ground and yet look to the future.

This bureau should maintain contact with Congress, its committees and its leaders and keep constantly informed on and in touch with new and pending legislation. It should also maintain contact with the various departments, bureaus, and agencies of government, with the White House, with the Red Cross, the Commission for Polish Relief, the Polish Embassy, and others.

Aside from the Government itself, Washington affords such channels and contacts as the Congressional Library, Brookings Institution, the government research departments, the Defense Commission, the United States Chamber of Commerce, Universities of national reputation, the Embassies.