

Radio address over  
National Broadcasting System  
Washington, D. C.  
May 3, 1936



### THE POLISH CONSTITUTION OF MAY 3, 1791

I am so happy - so happy - because you are listening, and you will remember that the American colonies had not yet declared their independence one hundred and sixty years ago today, but they were already engaged in their struggle for their freedom. You will also remember that their cause was attracting the warm interest of numerous young European lovers of liberty, and most prominent among them the French Lafayette, the German von Steuben and the Polish Pulaski and Kosciuszko. Casimir Pulaski and Tadeusz Kosciuszko were both about thirty years of age when they joined the American forces. Pulaski had been exiled from Poland as the result of unsuccessful efforts in behalf of Polish liberty and coming to America he joined Washington's army in 1777. He distinguished himself at the battle of Brandywine, and was made a brigadier general and chief of cavalry. He participated in the defense of Charleston in 1779, and at Savannah that same year he was mortally wounded in a heroic charge at the head of his cavalry and died shortly thereafter - a real patriot who gave all because he loved - because he loved the principle of independence so very much.

Kosciuszko joined the American army in 1776. He was a thoroughly trained master of military science, particularly in the field of fortification and artillery. He had studied the subject not only in his native Poland, but for five years in Germany, Italy, and France. He brought to the revolutionary army therefore a disciplined and technical skill which was of the utmost value, because it supplemented the more informal type of military ability which American experience had developed. He was made a brigadier general, and became one of the most useful and brilliant officers of the revolutionary army. He distinguished himself especially at the battle of Saratoga and at Charleston.

When the cause which he had joined had succeeded and the independence of the United States had been achieved, Kosciuszko returned to Europe, and there fifteen years later he became engaged in the struggle of his own country for national liberty. The beginning of this struggle was marked by establishment of the Constitution of May 3, 1791, one hundred and forty-five years ago today, when Poland sought to overcome both the dissensions among her own people and the hostility of her powerful neighbors.

This Constitution, the anniversary of which is being observed today, was a great liberal document. It sought, like our own Constitution, then only two years old, to build a firm government upon the basis of popular liberties.

The Constitution of May 3, 1791, was composed at a time of great national need, when the country was threatened by invasion and partition. Under the old Constitution the effectiveness of the government was practically nullified by the ancient privileges of the nobles, and by the right which each member of the legislative diet had of vetoing any new measure - a privilege which practically meant, in other words, that laws could be adopted only by unanimous vote.

The new Constitution of 1791 abolished this traditional right of individual veto. It established a three-fold form of government comprising the legislative, the executive, and the judicial. It established ministerial responsibility and provided for meetings of parliament every two years. It abolished invidious class distinctions. It granted to townspeople personal privileges previously possessed only by the landed gentry. It guaranteed absolute freedom in matters pertaining to settlement on land or in towns and cities. It gave the towns administrative and judicial rights. It lightened the burden of serfdom and prepared the way for its eventual abolition. It established full religious toleration. It made orderly provision for subsequent reforms.

In these provisions the same principles are apparent as inspired our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. Poland's observance of the anniversary of her Constitution of 1791 is observance of a principle which we Americans also have reason to cherish - the principle that governments exist for the good of their people and that the welfare of their people should be their first concern.

During his struggle for national liberty, Kosciuszko led a brilliant defense of Poland with overwhelming odds against him. His army was finally crushed by a force over twice as great, and he himself, wounded and unconscious, was taken prisoner.

This second struggle for national liberty had, therefore, no such happy conclusion as the American struggle in which he had participated. Poland suffered a third and complete partition. She was no longer a nation. And when Kosciuszko, a beloved and popular hero, and yet a sad and lonely man, died in exile over twenty years later, the Polish people, disorganized and weakened, were the divided and unwilling subjects of three separate, foreign sovereigns. They were made political aliens to one another, governed by different laws, and disturbed in their natural economic relations by artificial trade barriers.

This was still Poland's situation a century later when in 1914 one of her sovereigns was engaged in war against the other two, and her territory began to be devastated by the military operations of both sides. Yet Poland's national independence again emerged as an issue that could not be denied; and in 1917 President Wilson in stating the fourteen points on which peace in Europe hinged, stipulated as the thirteenth point that Poland be a free and independent state with access to the sea. That stipulation is now an accomplished fact; and the United States, nearly a century and a half after Kosciuszko had helped to achieve the independence of the United States, was instrumental in achieving for Poland the independence which he--Kosciuszko--had himself sought and fought for - but in vain.

It is especially interesting, therefore, that the new Poland, declared an independent republic in 1918, should choose as her national holiday not the anniversary of a recent event but the anniversary of her Constitution of May 3, 1791. This indicates, I believe, a genuine attachment to the same ideals of popular liberty upon which American independence was based, and a desire to commemorate a devotion to those ideals, for apparently the Constitution of 1791 is to Poland what the Magna Carta is to England and what the Declaration of Independence is to us - of the United States.