

# **“TAKE CHARGE OF OUR DESTINY”**

Remarks of Justice Aurelia Pucinski  
To the PAC Council of National Directors  
Chicago, IL, May 17, 2012

We are having trouble getting the visa waiver Program passed.  
The Mayor of Chicago didn't come to our Parade.  
We only have one Polish American Alderman in Chicago's City Council and he doesn't come to anything.  
Kosciuszko School was renamed for Rudy Lozano.  
Television stations talk about Cinch de Mayo but not the Polish Constitution.  
We used to have enough Polish Americans in Congress for a viable caucus.  
We could raise \$200 million dollars for Solidarity.  
We could sell enough war bonds to buy whole planes.  
We had the ear of Presidents.

We meet here today to face a challenging and troubling future.

When the Polish American Congress was formed in 1944, 2,600 delegates from across the nation gathered to show respect for both nations they loved: America and Poland.

By joining forces Polish Americans were able to speak with one voice on major issues affecting Poland:

- boundaries
- immigration
- veterans' benefits
- refugees
- The Katyn Forest Massacre
- NATO for Poland

And, while we were not always successful – think Yalta – at least we knew that politicians knew that we knew we were getting screwed.

That is no consolation for the generations of Poles who were shoved behind the Iron Curtain by our leaders and their allies.

But we have had our successes, too.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I submit that our successes were the result not of a Polish Agenda but because as Americans men and women of Polish heritage took their most valuable asset – their vote—seriously, and demanded respect by voting for those who would help us and against those who would not.

We had Polish American political leadership because we took our citizenship in this great nation

seriously– not as a place to make money – but as a place to participate in the very democracy that was denied to our families and ancestors.

Do you think that Sen. Feinstein of California would DARE to be against visa waivers if the 500,000 plus Polish Americans in California ALL voted?

When we want something done we have been successful when we put all the parts of our equation together:

- Political action is taken by politicians.
- Politicians are elected.
- Voters elect politicians.
- Politicians pay more attention to people who DO vote than to those who DO NOT.

When Polish Americans vote --- consistently and in large numbers – they tell politicians at all levels that they are WATCHING what is being done, and that just as they can vote FOR someone they can vote AGAINST someone.

Politicians know how to count.

When large numbers of Polish Americans vote, politicians see it, and respond by courting our vote during their term AND when they seek re-election.

From Presidents to Aldermen we have allowed too many politicians for too long to ignore us, to take us for granted and to make empty promises.

We see them showing up right before an election, suddenly very friendly, suddenly finding a Polish Grandma.

It takes more than a name to be Polish. It takes a commitment to the goals of Polonia.

But, that's the problem: what is the goal of Polonia today?

During WWII it was easy: protect Poland, protect the borders, give refuge to those in need.

During Solidarity it was easy: help Walesa and his band of troublemakers make enough trouble to overthrow communism.

After Solidarity it was easy: help Poland's economy.

But Ladies and Gentlemen: having articulated a "Polish Agenda" for so long we have forgotten that it is the American agenda that makes it possible.

We cannot leverage for ANY good to be done for Poland without first committing to the cause of democracy right here.

We cannot leverage for ANY good in our own community without first committing to be active in our own democracy.

Taxes too high? Who is watching them?  
Corruption in office? Who is watching them?  
Unreasonable government? Who is watching them?

At the pre-parade breakfast this year I was approached by a very nice gentleman we would all recognize.

He was angry because we don't have enough Polish elected officials.

"We need more," he said.  
"We used to have power," he said.  
"They used to listen to us," he said.  
"Did you vote?" I said.  
He said he was too busy.

TOO BUSY?? TOO BUSY to vote in the nation that welcomed us and our families?  
TOO BUSY to vote to demand that elected officials pay attention to us?  
We have no member of the School Board.  
No member of the Park District.  
No member on the CTA.  
We have one Polish Congressman who never shows up.  
We don't even have a member on the Committee that runs Jamestown: a place we helped start in 1608!

Ladies and Gentlemen, we all understand the fierce independence of Poles.

We have seen how when someone gets mad they just go off and start their own group.

We have seen – and felt--- the personal sadness  
when Poles don't support qualified Poles for office or in an organization.

Today, tonight, at this meeting, I ask each of you to remember your roots.

And, equally important, to remember WHY YOU ARE HERE

IN THIS GREAT NATION.

Today, tonight, at this meeting I ask each of you to return to your organization, your friends and family and make getting out the vote the number one project on every Polish American's mind.

Every organization, every group should be committed to this.  
Should see the value of it.  
Should work for it and should organize around it.  
Every Polish school.  
Every Polish employer.  
Every Polish mother and father.

IF we cannot agree on ANYTHING else, let us at least agree that by showing up in huge numbers in November no one will be able to ignore us.

This organization was started as an umbrella organization with other Polish organizations, to help coordinate efforts, to work together

– TOGETHER – on common goals.

We are facing a huge challenge, in Chicago, in the nation.

The president has been in office for three years and we have no effective commitment from him.

The Mayor has been in office one year, and in a community in which Poles own more real estate property than ANY other group, we still do not have a significant dialogue with him.

If we want respect we will have to work for it.  
No one will just give it away.

We can look to our Italian, Jewish, Greek, Hispanic and Black neighbors. They get respect because they stick together to the outside world, to political forces, and demand it, not violently, but peacefully at the ballot box.

We must re-energize our Polish Americans to register to vote AND to vote.

Let us set our goal: to have the largest per capita turnout in the next election.

Let that be the single most important goal of every organization in Polonia across the nation.

Let us show our political leaders that we are active, involved and committed to the process of democracy.

We are not here as spectators.

Some members in our community are very vocal, they don't plan to stay here, so they don't care.

BUT WE ARE STAYING. WE ARE CITIZENS.  
WE HAVE THE BLOOD OF PULASKI AND KOSCIUSZKO IN OUR VEINS.  
WE HAVE THE SPIRIT OF THE POLISH CONSTITUTION IN OUR HEARTS.  
WE CANNOT BE TOO BUSY.  
WE CANNOT LEAVE IT TO SOMEONE ELSE.  
WE CANNOT THROW UP OUR HANDS AND SAY:

"Politics is so corrupt, I don't even bother to vote."

If politics is corrupt it is because 80% of the voters stay home.

The foxes are watching the chickens.  
We must be part of the solution not part of the problem.  
We must shake things up.  
We must take our destiny in our own hands.  
We must, as leaders, volunteers, and thoughtful Polish-AMERICANS make sure that everyone we know is registered to vote and then votes.

Vote any way you want. That is not the issue.

Presidents, Mayors and Aldermen pay as much attention to people who don't vote FOR THEM as to those who DO.  
Maybe more because all of a sudden they feel insecure, feel,  
"Hey, I might lose next time if this guy doesn't start to support me."

We have the numbers: 900,000 in Cook County.

Ask yourself, what would Cook County Board President Preckwinkle do to keep us happy if 900,000 Polish Americans had voted in the March primary? She'd be all over us trying to make sure we like her.

We have the property base.

We have the business base.  
We have the intelligence.  
We have the freedom of this blessed democracy.  
Why are we wasting it?

Polish mothers do not raise their sons or daughters to be Aldermen.  
"Own your own business, own your own home, take care of your family."  
That is the mantra most Polish Americans hear.  
We need to change the mantra.

“Take charge of our destiny.”

Take charge of American politics so that we can EFFECTIVELY influence American policy on Poland.

Take charge of American politics so that we can EFFECTIVELY influence policy here.

Our businesses will run easier, our homes will be more secure, our families – from neighborhoods to schools to parks – will be better when elected officials are afraid of our power.

We do not have to fight with a sword like Kosciuszko or a horse, like Pulaski. We do not have to spill blood.

We have something far more powerful, far more important, far stronger, and that cannot be taken away: our vote.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let us take our Polish pride and become a force for change, a force for good government, and a force to be reckoned with.

Thank you.

JUDGE AURELIA PUCINSKI

Judge Aurelia Pucinski was elected to the Illinois Appellate Court 1st District in 2010. She served as a Circuit Court Judge in Cook County from 2004 to 2010. As a trial judge she heard more than 10,000 domestic violence cases and developed the program to provide extra protection and services to senior citizen victims of domestic violence.

She then followed with an assignment hearing adoptions, mental health, election and property tax deed cases. She is particularly interested in the law as it affects senior citizens and the disabled and has been appointed by the Supreme Court to teach judges about elder abuse.

She served as Clerk of the Court from 1988 to 2000 where two of her major accomplishments were getting child support checks processed in record time and computerizing courtrooms.

She started practicing law in 1976 in a neighborhood law office where she developed a reputation for pro bono work, including representing parents who sued the Chicago Board of Education to keep a local school open – a case she won in the Appellate Court.

A native Chicagoan, Judge Pucinski is a graduate of DePaul College of Law.