

# Michał Królewski's death – a great loss to Polonia!

By Robert Strybel, Polish/Polonian Affairs Writer

I first learned of Michał Królewski's untimely death from Marcin Żmudzki, listowner of the Friends of Poland (yahoo) discussion group that Michał regularly contributed to. I then checked the webpage of the American-Polish Assistance Association and found the following brief obituary:

## APAA President Dies

We are deeply saddened and regret to announce that Michał Królewski, the longtime President and heart and soul of American Polish Assistance Association, passed away on October 11, 2005. His sudden death left many of us who had a chance to know him personally in deep sorrow and disbelief. He will be always remembered in the hearts of the many people whose lives he touched. We will miss him and the world will miss him.

When I checked on Google to see if I could find anything more on this, after typing in "Michał Królewski", the mentions of him that occurred all came from articles I had written about his activities over the years. I had known Michał since he was a student in his late teens in late 1960s Detroit and have associated him with "things Polish" ever since then. I have also worked with him on different projects including a campaign to brighten Christmas for Polish orphans. Although U.S.-born, he preferred Michał (pronounced: MEE-how) to Michael or Mike, and rather than the Anglo-mangled "crow-LOOSE-key", he pronounced his surname the proper way: kroo-LEFF-ski. He came from a Polish immigrant family that catered to Polish weddings on Detroit's heavily Polish northeast side and the adjacent Polonian suburb of Hamtramck.

Back in the 1960s, with a handful of like-minded young Polonians Michał set up the Polish-American Folk Theatre which, despite its innocuous-sounding name, was an extremely dynamic and, at times, rebellious youth group. Far from being just another dance group or theatre circle, the PATF was more of a movement that attracted young, mainly American-born Pol-Ams in their teens and 20s. It included the Galicja Dancers and later Little Galicja for children. The group began issuing a newspaper called "Pokój" (Polish for "Peace") and traveling to Poland to gain a deeper appreciation of authentic Polish culture, costumes, customs and dance routines. The group had its ups and down, but Królewski's unbridled enthusiasm and infectious determination enabled it to overcome many a hurdle.

At its peak, the movement spread from its base in southeastern Michigan to outposts in Pennsylvania and Ohio, infecting many young name-only Polish Americans with a new-found appreciation for their roots. PAFT members also revived many traditions that were fast disappearing in the Detroit area, including pisanki, wycinanki and other crafts, kolędy concerts and Corpus Christi processions down the streets of the old Polish neighborhoods. And those vibrant dazzling folk-dance performances by young Pol-Ams, who really put their heart and soul into it, set a new benchmark for non-professional performing ensembles of their kind. Królewski used to say that, unlike the drug-tripping hippies and Vietnam War protesters of the day, "Our kids are getting high on their Polish heritage."

But Królewski and his faithful followers were also sensitive to the anti-Polish slurs that abounded during the heyday of the "Polack joke". When the "Detroit Free Press" ran an insulting article entitled "Survivors' report from a Polish wedding" (about the alleged low-class, drunken rowdiness of such celebrations), the PAFT turned out in force and picketed the paper's offices in downtown Detroit. This was but one example of the group's ethnic assertiveness.

Not all the second-generation parents of the PAFT's youthful members appreciated such involvement. Many of them wanted nothing better than to forget their Polish roots and become "just plain Americans", and here their third-generation children were getting increasingly involved the heritage of their immigrant grandparents. But Królewski's kids did

not want to be “rootless Americans”, swept along from one commercial fad, trend or fashion to the other. Today the children of many of those teenagers and young adults are carrying on their parents’ appreciation for their Polish ancestral legacy.

Over the years, Królewski’s varied activities have included running a Polish import shop in the Detroit suburb of New Baltimore, setting up Polish language, folkcraft and dance courses and developing diverse charitable activities including the American-Polish Assistance Association (Komitet Polonia Polsce) which benefits orphans in Poland. Królewski’s group pioneered the Holy Thursday bus pilgrimages and tours of Detroit’s old Polonian parishes. As International Students Director at Polonia’s St. Mary’s College (Orchard Lake, MI) in recent years, Królewski was largely instrumental in boosting the school’s enrollment to an all-time high by recruiting students from Poland and other Slavic countries.

Books could be written about Królewski’s numerous contributions of Polonian self-awareness and self-appreciation, and hopefully some day they will. Yes, he was steeped through and through in traditional Polishness and Roman Catholicism, but stood out for his ecumenical approach to other religions and ethnic groups. After 9-11 he assisted non-Christian students from Albania, Bosnia and elsewhere who were feeling the painful sting of America’s anti-Muslim backlash. And his parish tours raised eyebrows in some corners of Polonia because they included visits to Polish National Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, even Jewish synagogues and Muslim mosques. But that’s the way Michał always was: a true Polish-American patriot devoid of any chauvinism or xenophobia.

„Wieczny odpoczynek racz Mu dać, Panie. – A światłość wiekuista niechaj Mu świeci na wieki. Amen” (Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and may the perpetual light shine upon him. Amen.)

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