

MAZURKIEWICZ OPUS 17 - PROJECT DESCRIPTION - POPULAR

William J. Tonesk (1906-1992) was born in Schenectady (NY) to Polish-born parents. As a young man he tried his talents in journalism, theatre, as a writer as well as a producer of some of the earliest American TV shows. Obviously fascinated by resurrected Poland, he travelled extensively – in Poland (1920-21), Czechoslovakia (as one of the early Kosciuszko Foundation Fellows, in 1935-1936), Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia, as well as in non-East Central European countries in 1937-1939. He studied at Union College in Schenectady and then moved on to obtain a MA degree from Columbia University in New York in English and East European Studies (1932). Fascinated by the works of Stanisław Przybyszewski, he pursued his PhD Degree but did not submit a final dissertation. His fascination with the country where his parents were born became a life-long passion, if not love.

During the war he served as a lieutenant at the Office of Naval Intelligence (since 1943), in December 1944 he was recalled to Washington only to proceed to Moscow as Averell Harriman's translator (February-July 1945). From Moscow he went on to Warsaw as a naval attaché in charge of opening US embassy in Poland after World War II. He disappeared from the picture in March 1946 when he left Poland with his newly wed Polish wife. From 1946 to 1952 Tonesk worked for US intelligence (Office of Special Operations) overseeing American operations in Poland.

In 1952 Tonesk became a consultant to the Republican National Committee, joining the Eisenhower administration upon his electoral victory as a political analyst in the Department of State (Research Division, focus on Eastern Europe). From 1956 to 1961 he served in Frankfurt as Consul and Chief of Special Research Unit. In 1961, he returned to Washington as deputy chief of protocol in the State Department (under Angier Biddle Duke), and he remained in that post until 1964. He helped with the arrangements for the funeral of President John F. Kennedy. During the Vietnam War era, Tonesk was first a liaison officer with the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East and later the first secretary of the U.S. embassy in Bangkok, Thailand. Tonesk retired in 1974 and became a private consultant on foreign affairs. However, at this very time his connection with the Korbońskis, which included translations of Stefan's articles printed in the opinion-leading journals was particularly important. It was also in the 1970s, that Tonesk initiated cooperation with the Polish American political lobbying groups. Tonesk died on March 2, 1992 in Tuscon, Arizona at the age of 85. His beloved wife Stefania (Xenia) died in 1982.

While Tonesk's rich and complex life story was not typical of his Polish American peers, his life epitomizes major policy shifts in bilateral relations between US and Poland. Inspired by this year's celebration of the centennial of American-Polish relations, I am convinced that I can contribute to the historical account of these by re-examining the 20th century from the perspective of a second-generation Polish boy, born and raised in the U.S. whose life mirrors American-Polish relations with its many shades, dimensions and flavors.