Two Sister Cities…
A Long History
By: Gilbert J. Mros

Three of the B-17s turned back. Of the remaining 107, “I’ll Be Seeing You” was the only one shot down by the Germans. After being hit by German fighter and anti-aircraft fire, the plane exploded. The German-occupied Dżekanów Leśny near Łomianki, a town approximately nine miles northeast of Warsaw.

Some of the crew bailed out before the explosion, but they were subjected to German gunfire either as they were descending or after they reached the ground. Two crewmembers survived but were captured and imprisoned for the duration of the war. The remaining eight fliers perished.

The disaster was witnessed by an impressive twelve-year-old boy named Ryszard Szczesiński who collected a few pieces of the aircraft from the crash site and kept them along with memories of the courageous but ill-fated crew.

After 63 days of fighting, the Warsaw Uprising was crushed, over 200,000 Poles died, and Hitler, furious over the Polish resistance, ordered the entire city of Warsaw obliterated.

Later, the Soviets advanced on Warsaw, took the city from the Germans, and set up their own Communist government. Under Communism, public discussion of the heroic efforts of the Poles, and the sacrifice made by the American fliers, was suppressed until the coming of Glasnost and Perestroika in the 1980s.

The Poles Remember

During all that time, the Poles never forgot the brave fliers that dropped supplies to them during the Warsaw Rising of 1944. In May of 1981, a small group of people, including Ryszard Szczesiński, came together to initiate planning for a commemorative plaque on a schoolhouse near the crash scene to honor the crew of the B17-G “I’ll Be Seeing You.” But the imposition of martial law in Poland between December of 1981 and July of 1983 along with other bureaucratic problems delayed progress on the project and changed its venue and form.

However, on September 21, 1986, at Kielcey cemetery where some 2500 Polish war heroes are buried, the citizens of Łomianki dedicated a memorial to honor the American crew of “I’ll Be Seeing You.” It was the first monument in Poland to honor American servicemen of World War II.

Thus started the tradition that on the first Sunday after September 18th, the anniversary of the incendiary attack on downtown Warsaw during the battle of Łomianki on September 22, 1939, the residents of Łomianki hold a formal memorial service in memory of the American fliers who tried to help them.

In 1989, families of the crewmembers were invited to attend a ceremony. Among them was Bernard Szczesiński, a resident of Columbus Heights. Bernard was the brother of crewmember Walter Shimshock, the tail gunner who died during the descending of “I’ll Be Seeing You.”

Across The Ocean

That same year, Columbus Heights resident Dolores Strand initiated an effort to establish a Sister City relationship for Columbus Heights. Her committee surveyed residents of the city and found that they were interested in being a Sister City to Łomianki.

Locally, the organization sponsors free Polish language and culture classes, maintains the flower bed at Łomianki Park, sponsors a yearly “Young Artists Showcase” for Columbus Heights students aged 13 through 18, maintains display cases of Polish culture at Murzyn Hall and City Hall, donates books on Polish topics to the public library, and provides a Polish Heritage Month display at the public library every October. The group has also sponsored cultural events such as Chopin Concerts, and the “Lolek,” about the early life of John Paul II. The organization receives no tax money, and all of its activities are paid for through dues and fund raising efforts.

Meetings are held monthly, except July and December, at Columbus Heights City Hall. For more information call co-chairs Dolores Strand (763 571-7097 or Gilbert Mros (763 571-1166)

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