



Dorota Górnik

State School of Higher Education, Chełm

A Blithe Spirit' in Hard Times – Hugh Gibson's Role in the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Poland and America

Abstract

Across one hundred years of bilateral diplomatic relations between Poland and the United States, America has posted 31 ambassadors to Poland (Jones, 2011, p. 153). In this context it is worth emphasizing the rich contribution of the first American Minister to Poland, appointed in 1919, Hugh Gibson. Amid inauspicious circumstances of the interwar period, Gibson managed to give full assistance to the new Polish government and forge a successful cooperation between allied countries. Gibson's accomplishments and recognition, however, would not have been as effective without his great supporters and collaborators: Ignacy Paderewski and Herbert Hoover. The present thesis aims to provide a historical context of Polish-American relations prior to the first, official diplomatic assignment as well as Gibson's prominent role in shaping Poland's security and credibility in the international arena.

Key words: *Hugh Gibson, bilateral diplomatic relations, Ignacy Paderewski, Herbert Hoover, American Relief Administration, January Insurrection.*

Abstrakt

W ciągu stu lat dwustronnych stosunków dyplomatycznych pomiędzy Polską a Stanami Zjednoczonymi Ameryki Północnej, wysłano do Polski 31 ambasadorów (Jones, 2011, p. 153). W kontekście tym warto podkreślić ogromny wpływ pierwszego amerykańskiego ministra w Polsce, nominowanego w 1919 r. Hugh Gibsona. W niesprzyjających okolicznościach okresu międzywojennego Gibsonowi udało się

w pełni wesprzeć nowy polski rząd oraz nawiązać udaną współpracę pomiędzy sprzymierzonymi krajami. Jednakże dokonania i uznanie Gibsona nie byłyby tak skuteczne, gdyby nie pomoc jego zwolenników oraz współpracowników: Ignacego Paderewskiego i Herberta Hoovera. Celem niniejszej pracy jest ukazanie historycznego kontekstu stosunków polsko-amerykańskich przed pierwszym oficjalnym przydzieleniem zadań dyplomatycznych jak również wybitnej roli Gibsona w kształtowaniu bezpieczeństwa i wiarygodności Polski na arenie międzynarodowej.

Słowa kluczowe: *Hugh Gibson, Ignacy Paderewski, Herbert Hoover, Amerykańska Administracja Pomocy, Powstanie Styczniowe.*

In 2019, Poland and the USA mark the centennial of diplomatic relations. There are many reasons that contributed to the long-term maintenance of mutual cooperation in the field of diplomacy, but several major ones stand out: enacting the world's second oldest constitution in 1791 that was 'founded principally on those, of England and the United States of America' (Kasperek-Obst, 1980, p. 42), and the names of Tadeusz Kosciuszko and Kazimierz Pulawski, who fought for liberty in America (Storozynski, 2009, p. xi). Despite its failure, Poland's November Uprising also enhanced the credibility of Poland in the eyes of American authorities. They acknowledged Poland's fight for independence and personal courage to preserve cultural identity. The ethos of patriotic heroism of Poles was also reinforced by American newspapers, which portrayed Poles as 'gallant' and 'heroic' whereas Russians were 'brutal' and 'evil' (Lerski, 1958, p. 26, 27).

Of importance were the poetic tributes to Poland denouncing Russian treatment. The most famous ones were poems entitled: 'Freedom! Freedom! Hear the Shout!' and 'Rise, White Eagle, Rise', written by pro-Polish groups (Wandycz, 1997). In response to the spreading spirit of liberty and independence, a number of young Americans offered their military services to fight for Polish issues (Lerski, 1958, p. 27). They included Edgar Allan Poe who 'wrote a letter to his commanding officer to join the Polish Army should it be created in France' (Lerski, 1958, p. 27). On March 10, 1831, Poe wrote to Colonel Sylvanus Thayer, his commanding officer, "I intend to the first opportunity to proceed to Paris with the view of obtaining, thro' the interest of the Marquis de La Fayette, an appointment (if possible) in the Polish Army" (Vallela, 2009).

As far as the American response to the Polish Insurrection of November 1830 is concerned, it is necessary to underline the significant role of American

writer James Fenimore Cooper. Being a close friend to Adam Mickiewicz, Cooper tried to keep the attention of friendly Americans and obtain their support on Polish issues, especially in terms of financial aid. On July 1831 in Paris, Cooper formed the American Polish Committee. Its main purpose was to collect funds 'for the Polish cause'. According to Samuel F. B. Morse, 'twenty thousand francs were collected and conveyed to Polish refugees in Prussia' (Morse, 1914, p. 430). Moreover Cooper also composed, on behalf of the American Polish Committee, a letter of appeal to the United States. It motivated a national collection for Poland in American cities. "When Poland was overcome", he wrote, 'the fifth Power of Christendom was trodden upon ... The crime of Poland was too much liberty; her independent existence, in the vicinity of those who had reared their thrones on arbitrary will, was not to be endured" (Beard, 1960, p. 124-125).

In light of the growing threats and unpredictability after the collapse of the November Uprising, many of Poland's political elites were forced to flee their country and struggled to find safety in America. Fortunately, 'Secretary of State Louis McLane declared there was no federal law prohibiting the Poles from seeking asylum in the United States'(Willey, 2010, p. 1) and 'on November 22, 1833, 235 Polish exiles and number of convicts' were sent to New York (Willey, 2010, p. 1). Thanks to President Andrew Jackson 'Congress passed a bill granting the Poles land in Illinois or Michigan Territory' (Willey, 2010, p. 6). According to a historian, Eric Willey the Poles received a warm reception from Illinoisans. For example, 'at a meeting chaired by Illinois Supreme Court Justice Theophilus W. Smith in Vandalia on May 23, 1834, supporters of the Poles stressed their patriotic daring and immense sacrifice and passed a resolution to create a committee in every county of Illinois to collect money on behalf of the Poles' (Willey, 2010, p. 6).

Another turning point in Polish-American relations came in the 1860s when 'the formation of the Confederacy occurred simultaneously with a new series of revolutionary episodes in Poland that would lead to the 1863 January insurrection' (Bielski, 2014, p. 37). Although Lincoln maintained that 'the Polish question was an internal affair of the Russian Empire' (Stasik, 2002, p. vii), the Polish fight for freedom acquired a new dimension. Polish idealism and heroism became inextricably linked with the Civil War. As Ralph Wroblewski aptly notices 'The Poles who were fighting in the Union and Confederate armies were men of high ideals and their military experience was of much value since most were commissioned officers as well as veterans of wars for freedom of past decades' (Wroblewski, 2002, p. 102). The contributions to the Civil War effort on the part of such famous vo-

unteers as Vladimir Krzyzanowski and Joseph Karze need to be stressed here. The former was commander of the Union's Polish Legion and 'widely respected for his bravery' (Wroblewski, 2002, p.102), the latter 'was considered one of the best cavalry officers, and became a general in the Union Army' (Wroblewski, 2002, p. 102).

During World War I, Polish-American issues were once again brought into the international limelight. In November 1918, Poles regained their sovereignty and marshal Jozef Pilsudski became the Chief of State (Smogorzewski, 2019). Prior to this, on January 8, 1918, his speech to Congress and the American President Woodrow Wilson made a declaration that became a landmark event in forging the friendship between the Polish and the American Nation. In his speech, known as the Fourteen Points, President Wilson issued his principles for peace that became 'the basis for a truce signed on November 11, 1918 in Compiegne' (Golik, 2018).

In the context of Polish-American affairs the most important was point XIII, which manifested Woodrow Wilson's conspicuous assertion of Poland's right to independence (Pease, 1986, p. 4). It stated: 'An independent Polish state should be erected, which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant' (Link, 1984, p. 536).

There is no doubt that the political manoeuvrings of Americans affected Poland to a large extent. The fact that America was the first country to recognise Poland's renewed sovereignty resulted not only in strengthening of Polish aspirations but also changed the perception of this country in the international arena (Motta, 2017, p. 141). Confronted by inauspicious circumstances such as the Bolshevik peril and German imperialism, the Poles embarked upon developing financial ties with the United States in order to foster the economic revival of their country from the ravages of war (Pease, 1986, p. 4). Fortunately, 'American officials encouraged the extension of loans and war credits to the country, and the U.S. Liquidation Board provided quantities of military supplies to the Poles' (Pease, 1986, p. 7). In the context of material help, it is necessary to underline Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration engagement in aid (Pease, 1986, p. 8) 'Beginning in 1919, the ARA dispensed victuals, medicine, and advice to Poland for three years (Pease, 1986, p. 8).

Among the proponents of the strengthening relations between the two countries was Ignacy Jan Paderewski, who operated as Poland's spokesman

in the diplomatic arena. His political prestige was enhanced owing to fruitful cooperation with President Wilson and Herbert Hoover. They managed to raise 'millions of dollars in aid for Poland' (Siekierski, 2018). Moreover, it was Paderewski who drafted the 13th of Wilson's Fourteen points, calling for sovereignty of Poland (Siekierski, 2018). On November 11th, 1918, General Józef Piłsudski became the first Chief of State of the newly independent Poland and appointed Paderewski the Prime Minister of Poland and Minister of Foreign Affairs (Siekierski, 2018).

On June 28th, 1919, Paderewski signed the Treaty of Versailles in Paris. In the context of new world order and American involvement in European political affairs, the presence of this country in the Polish domestic scene seemed to be indispensable. 'Since the beginning of its existence, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs anticipated that the American republic would take an important part in European political affairs and would exert her influence on behalf of republican Poland and against Germany and Bolshevik Russia' (Pease, 1986, p. 5). In accordance with mutual political favours, in the spring of 1919, 'a protege of Hoover, Hugh Gibson, assumed the post as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary in newly restored Poland' (Pease, 1986, p. 8). In view of the highly volatile situation in Central Europe, the American diplomat's main task was to send accurate reports on conditions in Poland and in neighbouring Russia (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 171).

Despite a difficult situation and many obstacles H Gibson proved himself to be a highly skilled diplomat. Among many traits and actions that contributed to his considerable notoriety in the field of diplomacy there were few worth underlining. One of Gibson's most distinctive character traits was his abiding interest and passion for the craft of diplomacy. From the very beginning of his service Gibson manifested a genuine interest in Polish affairs. 'He was thrilled and challenged by the perspective of the forthcoming service in Poland' (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 161). Obviously, he was satisfied with the new diplomatic post because he wrote in his diaries: 'I am still a good deal surprised and a little incredulous about the appointment. I had thought there was some chance of my going to Prague at least temporarily. But as Poland is probably the most important legation we now have in view of its relation to Russia and Germany to say nothing of its own special problems, I had thought the President would want to send somebody whom he knew well and in whom he had complete confidence. I look forward to it as a great opportunity to do constructive and helpful work' (Gibson, 2015). Many times he engaged in animated discourse over Polish issues with Ignacy Paderewski, who became his lifelong friend. On April 1919 at a dinner orga-

nized in honour of Paderewski, Hoover mentioned that Gibson 'talked about the Polish problems that have been explained over and over the months' (Gibson, 2015). Jay Pierrepont Moffat, an American diplomat who spent two years in Warsaw, seemed to confirm this assumption about Gibson's commitment to Polish affairs. In one of his *Journals*, Moffat remarked that upon his arrival in Warsaw Gibson took him to one of the fancier restaurants: 'We sat late into the night before an open fire, sipping the Tokay, while Hugh Gibson talked to us about Poland. He wove a veritable tapestry with pictures of war and famine and plague slowly fading into the task of reconstruction. Two central figures dominated this theme: Pilsudski and Paderewski'(Hooker, 1956, p. 1-2).

Had it not been for his professionalism and effectiveness combined with a sense of humour, Gibson would not have become such an efficient player in the political arena. As Donald J. Lisio aptly notices, 'Gibson was slightly built, with sharp facial features, and a quiet natural dignity. His good judgment and sense of humour, combined with a strong professional work ethic, had propelled him into the front rank of the State Department's promising negotiators' (Lisio, 2014, p. 128) In the words of Huntington Wilson, Assistant Secretary of State, for whom Gibson worked in 1911, Gibson was, 'a blithe spirit who radiated a whimsical humour that was just what the department, too dour in its application of business, needed' (Wilson, 1945, p. 235). On another occasion, Joseph Grew, American diplomat and Gibson's close friend and companion recalled that at the State Department in 1911 he saw 'Gibson playing chimes on all the bell buttons which called all of the chiefs of bureaus to the Secretary of State's room, and then fleeing down the corridor of that sedate old Department like an Apache on the war trail' (Grew, 1952, p. 76). His legendary sense of humour is also illustrated by the ode he wrote on the night of his assignment to Warsaw: 'Ode to Colonel House/Wholly unquotable/Always ungoatable/Secretly notable/Silence's spouse./Darkly inscrutable/Quite irrefutable/Nobly immutable/Edward M. House' (Reed, 2018, p. 25). 'Also, there is no doubt that envoy's robust sense of self-deprecating humour' (Reed, 2018, p. 25) enabled him to adapt to hard conditions of his new post in Warsaw. For instance, with reference to the difficulty with pronouncing Polish names, he admitted: 'The names of these people are our despair. I have only met a few at a time so I grip each name firmly and pray for strength to remember it until I meet him next time. If, on the second meeting I can call him by name I feel I am safe but dread the thought of a big reception where I meet two or three hundred people. I shall never catch up after that' (Reed, 2018, p. 26).

Nevertheless, his whimsical sense of humour never obscured his professionalism. During his stay in Warsaw he kept sending reports to the U.S. 'informing regularly about the political and financial situation in Poland, its border problems with neighbours and perspectives for the further, mostly commercial, cooperation with the U.S.' (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 171). His input into the bilateral relations between Poland and America was highly valued and the officials in the Department of State remarked that Hugh Gibson was 'a great expert on Poland' (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 171). Another American diplomat, Jay Pierrepont Moffat confirmed that opinion when he acknowledged: 'Many times he (Gibson) had to tell his Polish friends some unpalatable truth, but the happy knack of wrapping it up with a quip or a jest enabled him to convey his message without leaving a sting. He quickly became a prime favourite with Polish society, and no gathering was complete without 'our dear Gibson' (Hoker, 1956, p. 10).

It seems that Gibson's personal connections with many politicians and diplomats served as another crucial component that enhanced his credibility in the field of diplomacy. For instance, his abilities were recognized by Herbert Hoover (the future President of the United States), who 'took a strong and abiding personal liking to Gibson' (Lisio, 2014, p. 128) and praised him as 'one of the best Americans living' (Lisio, 2014, p. 128). In 1919 Gibson was engaged in the preparation of C. Hoover's visit to Poland, which in the context of Polish-American diplomacy proved to be very fruitful. At that time Hoover was still the leader of American Relief Administration. During his visit 'the American visitor talked with Poles about the programs for the economic and financial reconstruction of the country and the prospects for the future assistance of the United States' (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 58). Touched by a heart-breaking scene of barefoot children in Warsaw, Hoover arranged the delivery of clothes, shoes and food before the onset of winter (Jeansonne, 2016, p. 131). According to Reed, 'among Americans, Hoover's influence was second only to Woodrow Wilson in Poland's regaining independence due to his association with prominent Poles (...) and his efforts to relieve suffering in Poland' (Reed, 2018, p. 22).

Apparently, the lifelong friendship with Paderewski affected Gibson's positive approach towards Polish issues tremendously. On many occasions they engaged in discourse concerning 'internal Polish problems, various political frictions, and growing danger of governmental crisis' (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 166). In her *Memoirs*, Helena Paderewska noticed, 'Another man for whom Mr. Paderewski had an immediate liking that soon developed into a strong friendship was Hugh Gibson. (...) Not only did he show himself

a man of exceptional experience, of unusual talent, of an enthusiasm rarely found in a diplomat and of a sane and sound judgment, but Warsaw quickly discovered in him a charm and attractiveness of personality that immediately made him popular with all who had anything to do with him, the foreigners as well as the Poles' (Siekierski, 2015, p. 296). Their friendship thrived amid inauspicious circumstances. Obviously this mutual affection stemmed from their genuine concern for the prosperity of their countries, the adherence to the concept of world peace and the fact that they were both ahead of their time (Reed, 2018, p. 530). When Paderewski signed his resignation of Prime Minister, 'Gibson missed a truly good friend, whom he admired and defended and who was also very supportive toward him' (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 166).

There is no doubt that the omnipresent ethos of democracy, freedom and equality cherished by the American envoy's friends and collaborators had a profound impact on Gibson's endeavours. Even when he was called back to Washington during the Polish-Soviet war he still remained entangled in Polish issues and initiatives that were supposed to account for the popularisation of the Polish affairs. On one occasion, while talking to American officials about the unstable situation in Poland, he admitted, 'Poland is keeping me about as busy as though I were in Warsaw' (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 168) Also, in the end of April 1920 'Gibson had a few meetings with Hoover and some Polonia's leaders. He talked to them about the situation and war with Soviet Russia and the loan to Poland' (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 168). Moreover, Gibson's sympathy for Polish issues became so conspicuous in his correspondence to Washington that some of his American colleagues criticized him of 'being pro-Polish or Polonized' (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 171). It is also worth underlining the fact that 'while in Washington in July 1920, Gibson turned down an offer to become undersecretary of state at the prime age of thirty-six, preferring to return to Warsaw, where, by his own account, he thought he could be more useful' (Reed, 2018, p. xiv).

Hugh Gibson served until 1924 as the US Ambassador to Poland (Reed, 2018, p. 527). Prior to his departure President Stanisław Wojciechowski hosted a farewell reception 'in honour of Gibson and recognition of his service and achievements in Poland. He was quite pleased by honours and dedications presented to him by grateful Poles for his service in Poland and for Poland' (Parafianowicz, 2014, p. 172) Apparently the Poles positively evaluated the envoy's crucial involvement with the reconstruction of their reborn country. Despite his departure, however, the envoy's involvement in 'humanitarian activity and dedication to the Poles' prevailed (Reed, 2018, p. 528)

and during the World War II Gibson accepted 'the role of director general for Europe of both the Commission for Polish Relief and the Commission for the Relief of Belgium' (Reed, 2018, p. 528). Moreover, in the spring of 1946 Gibson once again visited Poland with his former colleague Hoover in order to organize a famine relief program for victims of the war (Reed, 2018, p. 529).

In conclusion, it has to be admitted that Hugh Gibson distinguished himself by his effort on behalf of Polish-American diplomacy. His commitment, professionalism and a whimsical humour brought him recognition in the international arena. With reference to the Polish-American relations David Jones aptly noticed: 'In many respects, Poland's respect for the United States was earned as the product of individual hard efforts by the envoys these countries exchanged' (Jones and Waluk, 2011, p. 164). In this regard H. Gibson's contribution into diplomatic relations between these two countries was indisputably invaluable. As an advocate of both 'Hoover's pragmatism and Wilson's idealism', Hugh Gibson did his utmost to incorporate the ideas of democracy, liberty and equality into his diplomatic service (Reed, 2018, p. 37). There is no doubt that 'at this moment in history, his precepts are as apt as they were (...) one hundred years ago' (Reed, 2018, p. 530).

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Dorota Górnik, M.A. in English Philology – a faculty member of the English and American Studies Department at The State School of Higher Education in Chełm (Poland). E-mail: dorotagornik@wp.pl