



## Kosciuszko Day 2019 Guest Speaker Dr. Stephen S. Skorczynski

I would like to thank everyone for coming together to celebrate the birthday and the life of a truly remarkable Polish man, Thaddeus Kosciuszko. I gave a similar address many years ago when this commemoration was held in a local hotel not far from here. At the time, I spoke about the forces that led to the painful partitions and ultimate demise of the Polish Kingdom. We spoke about Kosciuszko's education

and his service to this great nation and to his beloved Polish homeland. Many speakers over the years have delivered thoughtful, informative and inspirational insights and tributes to General Kosciuszko. What more could I possibly add? Today, I would like to look at him in a slightly different way and expand our thinking about this hero of the American revolution and of Poland. Specifically, I would like to speak to you about bridges.

Bridges in their simplest form are structures or paths that overcome obstacles. They often times bring together things that ordinarily could not be joined in any other way. I speak here of two Polands; one a great kingdom with a history of over 8 centuries, not only as a bastion of Christianity, but also as a safe haven for diverse peoples and beliefs. The other is a Poland of the future that, once shrouded by darkness, would not see the light of day for another 123 years when it would be reborn from the ashes of a great war that would consume the world. It would be a Poland that would struggle for its very life in the early decades of the 20th century but would shine brightly as a leader in the dawn of the 21st. It was the centennial year of this risen Poland that we celebrated this past November.

Today, we celebrate the birth of one of the builders of this great bridge of hope that connects Poland's history, Tadeusz Kosciuszko, son of liberty. It was because of the example and sacrifice of Kosciuszko, that others would follow and safely cross the chasm of despair and uncertainty to find salvation and freedom in a new Poland. He would build other bridges as well; bridges to enlightened thinking, bridges to a reimagining of the social order of the world, from rebellion in the colonies to the upheaval in his homeland; from supporting the emancipation from serfdom in Poland to seeking freedom and education of slaves in the newly minted United States. These ideals he fought for until his final days.

Thaddeus Kosciuszko came of age in the twilight years of the Polish Commonwealth, the Rzeczpospolita Polska. In 1746, the year of his birth, the world was profoundly changing with the growth of new empires, ever expanding, looking to extend their power either at the expense of weaker nations or through the exploited resources of the new world. For Poland, the situation was becoming increasingly bleak. After a long declining period of wars and rebellions, hindered by a noble class that could not be united, favoring their "Golden Freedoms" over the welfare of the people, the nation was depleted. Poland was no longer in control of her own destiny and was poised to be consumed by her neighbors. It was in this environment that Tadeusz Kosciuszko, born into an aristocratic family of modest means, would diligently pursue a solid classical education at a local Church school and go on to a military career.

By 1769, the last king of Poland, Stanislaw Poniatowski took notice of this young man who had excelled in his studies at the Royal Military Academy of Warsaw and sent him to France for further education in the advanced study of engineering and artillery. This was an education that would be useful, for by the time Kosciuszko finished his studies in 1774, Poland had already suffered its first partition by Prussia, Russia and Austria in 1772.

In the wake of this first partition, as Poland would come to grips with this new reality and struggle to reform and overcome this challenge to her sovereignty, Kosciuszko would ultimately cross the ocean and come to this very city to answer the call to freedom and liberty that gripped the colonies in the Revolutionary war. Commissioned Colonel of Engineers by the Continental Congress, Kosciuszko's engineering contributions at the Battle of Saratoga and West Point were regarded as turning points in the War of Independence. Towards the end of the war, he led American troops into Charleston, the last point of British resistance in the South. Congress would name him Brigadier General granting him U.S. citizenship, along with a medal for his service to the Continental Army.

If this was all that Kosciuszko ever did, we would still regard him as an accomplished man and a hero. But as I mentioned earlier, He was a bridge builder and he would now join his zeal for freedom to the rising spirit of liberation in his homeland. For shortly after his return to Poland, a great parliament would convene that would culminate in the adoption of a new May 3rd Constitution for Poland in 1791 and a feeling of renewed hope and purpose. This hope would be crushed under the hooves of Katherine the Great's army when Russia invaded Poland in 1792.

In the ensuing war, Kosciuszko would fight valiantly for king and country and rise to fame as a division commander during the bloody Battle of Dubienka.

But when King Stanislaw gave up on the liberal cause, Kosciuszko resigned his commission and briefly went into exile. Shortly thereafter, the Russians and Prussians would oversee the second partition of Poland in 1793.

This would not be the end for Kosciuszko. He would go on to swear a solemn oath in Krakow's old town square and lead an insurrection against Russia and Prussia. The Kosciuszko rebellion scored a major victory in the Battle of Raclawice and the revolutionary fervor inspired by this victory spread across the land. The Polish cause relied on units composed of peasants armed with only scythes who fought with great vigor and bravery against a superior foe. Kosciuszko would recognize the contributions of these common people to the cause of liberty by issuing the "Proclamation of Polaniec", in which he partially abolished serfdom in Poland, and granted civil liberty to all peasants. Alas, the insurrection would come to an end at the battle of Maciejowice where Kosciuszko was wounded and taken prisoner by Catherine's army. Without his leadership, the uprising collapsed. The Third Partition in 1795 effectively ended Poland's existence as a nation until after World War I.

Released from prison in 1796, Kosciuszko returned to Philadelphia to a hero's welcome and formed a lasting friendship with Thomas Jefferson. The two men would maintain a correspondence for over 20 years and Kosciuszko would make Jefferson the executor of his will, stipulating that the proceeds of his American estate be spent on freeing and educating African-American slaves, including Jefferson's.

To the end of his life he would be active in the struggle to secure Poland's freedom. After Napoleon was defeated and the Congress of Vienna was held, a new Polish realm under Russian rule was formed in 1815. Emperor Alexander was anxious for Kosciuszko's support. However, Kosciuszko demanded social reforms and expanded boundaries of the Polish state that were not to the liking of the Emperor. Tadeusz Kosciuszko retired from public life and died in Switzerland in 1817.

Such was the measure of the man, that he ultimately was laid to rest in Wawel Castle beside the tombs of the Great Polish kings. His dreams were far reaching. He was a champion for freedom in both Poland and America. His passion for social justice, from emancipation of Polish serfs to his desire to free and educate African-American slaves, was progressive and well ahead of its time.

He would be remembered fondly on two continents and the bridges of thought and zeal for liberty that he built would span the generations. In World War I, just prior to the rebirth of a new Poland, a Kosciuszko squadron of volunteer American pilots would take to the skies against the axis powers. World War II would see a new Kosciuszko squadron of Polish pilots continue the fight against the Germans as part of the RAF.

Kosciuszko fought for what he believed in and never gave up on his ideals. I urge everyone here today, especially the children to grasp the importance and fullness of his life and follow the lead of Tadeusz Kosciuszko. No matter what life's challenges are, they can be spanned. Build your own bridges. Cross over into the future and fulfill your dreams. Thank you.

Dr. Stephen S. Skorczynski

(Delivered on February 2nd, 2019, at the Polish American Cultural Center Museum, 308 Walnut Street in historic Philadelphia, PA.)



Dr. Stephen Skorczynski and Thaddeus Kosciuszko, (portrayed by Shane Maziarz), in front of Kosciuszko's portrait during the Kosciuszko Day Ceremony.

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