

Kings of Poland

Christianity, patriotism and a passionate love of freedom are the dominant trends of the ten centuries of Poland's turbulent history. Few nations have suffered as much and faced so many reversals of fortune while retaining their ethnic and cultural identity and vigor. Such endurance in the face of adversity inspires confidence in the future of this great nation. Some of those who enjoy freedom - and often take it for granted - may have something to learn from Poland's historical experience.

The entire early history of Poland is depicted by all of the Polish kings, from the late 9th to the late 18th century. The great nineteenth century artist, Jan Matejko, specialized in historical paintings; his portraits of all forty kings of Poland offer a vivid picture of the history of the nation and highlight the successive epochs.



Mieszko I
960-992



Boleslaw The Brave
992-1025



Mieszko II
1025-1034



Kazimierz The
Restorer - 1039-1058



Boleslaw The Bold
1058-1072



Wladyslaw Herman
1079-1102



Boleslaw Wrymouth
1102-1138



Wladyslaw II
1138-1143

Several European nations were formed by the vast migrations of people in the early Middle Ages from one area to another, but many present day Poles are the descendants of tribes living in the same lands thousands of years ago. The discovery of the remains of the town of Biskupin and other archeological studies offer proof that Poland had an active civilization well before the birth of Christ.

The birth of Poland as an independent nation coincides with the ascension of King Mieszko I, in the year 960. The major achievement of Mieszko was the adoption of the Christian faith under the authority of Rome - a fact which shaped Poland's history for the following centuries and to this day. Mieszko I died in A.D. 992, and was succeeded by his son, Boleslaw the Brave who extended the boundaries of Poland. He in turn was succeeded by his son Mieszko II, who reigned from 1025 to 1034. All these kings were members of the Piast Dynasty, which continued its rule for several centuries.

The territory of the Poland of that time was quite similar to the present one, except that it did not include much of Silesia.



Boleslaw Curlyhead
1146-1176



Mieszko The Old
1173-1177



Kazimierz The Just
1177-1194



Wladyslaw Spindleleg
1165-1202



Leszek The White
1194-1227



Henryk The Bearded
1232-1238



Boleslaw The Bashful
1243-1279



Leszek The Black
1279-1288

The House of Piast's greatest monarch - Kazimierz the Great (1333-1378) - achieved numerous changes and improvements throughout the country during his long reign. Many splendid buildings - churches and castles - built under Kazimierz still stand today. He allowed the Jews, expelled from other European countries, to settle in Poland and enjoy full freedom in all aspects of daily life, including religion and business.

Not all kings of Poland were Polish. There is nothing exceptional in that; after all, the present royal house of Britain is of German origin. King Louis (1370-1382) was a member of the French House of Anjou, founded by Saint Louis, but he was also King of Hungary, Poland, Dalmatia, Croatia, Rama, Serbia, Galicia, Lodomeria, Romania and Bulgaria. The vast empire of the Anjou Dynasty did not originally promise to be long lasting as Louis had no heirs, but eventually he

had two daughters - the Princesses Elisabeth and Jadwiga, who went on to become Queen of Poland in 1384.

Lithuania was at the time a major world power; it extended over the territories now known as Bielorussia and Ukraine. It was in conflict with Poland and several battles were fought. The Polish senators, however, planned a masterpiece of statesmanship - a marriage of Lithuania's Grand Duke Jagiello with Queen Jadwiga in 1386. It was a great sacrifice on her part, as she was very young with many young suitable male admirers, but she wanted to serve her country with honor and grace. Jagiello was baptized in the Catholic faith and took the name of Wladyslaw. Jagiello's brother Witold was also baptized.



Przemyslaw II
1295-1296



Wacław
1300-1309



Władysław The Short
1306-1333



Kazimierz The Great
1333-1378



Louis of Hungary
1370-1382



Jadwiga
1384-1399



Władysław Jagiello
1386-1434



Władysław of Varna
1434-1444

This union of Poland and Lithuania was not an annexation; Lithuania retained its identity, but the its Grand Duke was now also the King of Poland. The merging of the two nations resulted in the largest power in Europe and remained in force for approximately 190 years. Jagiello proved to be a great statesman and became the founder of the Jagiellonian dynasty, which lasted until 1572.

Both Lithuania and Poland had been attacked by the Order of Teutonic Knights, a military order based in East Prussia. This German Order was a dominant power who endeavored to extend its dominion eastward and southward, and the Teutonic Knights were armed better than most European nations. Yet when they attacked in 1410, the united Polish and Lithuanian forces under the command of Jagiello defeated them in the epic Battle of Grunwald. Thus the Prussian

efforts to conquer the entire Baltic coast and the northern provinces of the Polish-Lithuanian union were finished forever.



Kazimierz Jagiellonian
1447-1492



Jan Olbracht
1493-1501



Alexander
1501-1506



Zygmunt I
1506-1548



Zygmunt August
1548-1572



Henry de Valois
1573-1574



Stefan Batory
1576-1586



Zygmunt III Vasa
1587-1632

The last Jagiellonian king was Zygmunt-August (1548-1572). He was followed by Henri de Valois, a Frenchman, Stefan Batory, a Hungarian, and Zygmunt Vasa, a Swede. The throne of the Polish-Lithuanian union was elective - a democratic feature unknown in other European countries. Foreign princes were elected largely because it was considered that a Polish nomination might be considered playing favorites for Poland and a Lithuanian nominee a favorite for his country, while a foreign nominee was neutral.

Nevertheless, one of the best kings was Polish born, Jan Sobieski (1674-1696), who saved Europe from Turkish invasion. The Ottoman empire was then a major power and its huge army besieged Vienna; had the attack been successful, the victorious Turkish army would have continued its invasion and place western Europe in mortal danger. Sobieski, considered the greatest soldier of his time, won significant fame for his decisive victory over the Ottomans at the walls of Vienna in 1683, and was hailed by Pope Innocent XI as the saviour of Christendom. Viewed by many as a polymath or Renaissance man, his letters to his wife during that time, a French Princess, are a literary masterpiece.



Wladyslaw IV
1632-1648



Jan Kazimierz
1648-1668



Michal Wisniowiecki
1669-1673



Jan III Sobieski
1674-1696



August The Strong
1697-1733



Stanislaw Leszczyński
1704-1709 &
1733-1735



August III
1733-1763



Stanislaw August
Poniatowski
1764-1795

The last king of the Union was Stanislaw Poniatowski (1764-1795), who was a great patron of the arts and sciences and a supporter of progressive reforms. For his contributions to the arts and sciences, he was awarded membership to the Royal Society in 1776, and was the first non-British royal member.