Elegance and Magnificence Defined

On February 5, 2011 the 39th International Polonaise Ball, organized by the American Institute of Polish Culture and under the auspices of the Ambassador of Poland, was held in Miami and honored the relationship between Poland and Canada.

Following tradition, honored at the Ball were the recipients of Gold Medals, the highest award presented by the Institute, and of Amicus Poloniae, an award presented by the Ambassador of the Republic of Poland. Lecha Wałęsa Media Award was also presented by the legendary leader of Solidarity.

Among the honored guests were royalty, ambassadors, businessmen and many other dignitaries, all gathered in a grand ballroom where sparkling baubles and beautiful décor created a regal atmosphere.
The stylish event took place at the historic Surf Club on Miami Beach. The majestic decorations included a lushly-feathered white eagle backed by red and white swags which hung above the stage. Sparkling crystals and arrangements of snow-white ostrich feathers in the shape of palm trees adorned the tables.

The evening began with a cocktail hour; ladies arrived in the most glamorous ball gowns and gentlemen were resplendent in tuxedos and regalia. They all enjoyed meeting special guests who included President Lech Wałęsa; His Royal Highness King Kigeli V of Rwanda; His Imperial Highness Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile-Selassie of Ethiopia; Ambassador of the Republic of Poland Robert Kupiecki; Consul Peter Taylor of the Canadian Consulate General in Miami; Honorary Consul for the Republic of Poland in Calgary, Zygmunt Potocki; Piotr Gulczyński, President of the Lech Walesa Foundation in Warsaw and many other notable guests.

Ball invitees arrived from as far away as Canada, Poland, Monaco, Sweden and Portugal, and from locations across the United States including California, New York, Washington D.C. and Chicago. It is a tradition that Countess Barbara Pagowska, Vice-President of the American Institute of Polish Culture, invites a group of her friends from Chicago area and Florida.
Lady Blanka Rosenstiel officially welcomed the guests and described how the people and government of Canada have always been friendly toward Poland, welcoming with open arms Polish immigrants who contributed greatly to the development and success of Canada. She thanked everyone for their attendance and wished them an enjoyable evening. Next, Ambassador Kupiecki of Poland, Consul Taylor of Canada and Archbishop Thomas Wenski welcomed all those gathered at the gala. Special recognitions were presented to Tony Muszynski of Calgary, founder and director of the educational program Poland in the Rockies; Drs. Janina and Januariusz Styperek of Palm Beach, for their achievements in medicine and support of the American Institute of Polish Culture; and to Dr. Jerome Zwierzycki of Chicago, for his charitable work with seniors of Polish descent.

While a delicious dinner was being served, guests enjoyed an artistic program by the Polish American Folk Dance Company of New York. They presented their rendition of "Barge" ("Barka") - a favorite of Pope John Paul II, the first pope to visit Canada - followed by the traditional dances of Mazur and Menuet.

Next, Gold Medal recipient and famed Polish-Canadian soprano Maria Knapik sang "Il Bacio" and the aria from Bizet's Carmen.
After Ms. Knapik’s performance came the presentation of the Amicus Poloniae by the Polish Ambassador. This year His Excellency Thomas Wenski, Archbishop of Miami and Mr. Richard Nowak were honored by this special recognition for their promotion of Polish-American cooperation.

Lovely flowers and sincere words of gratitude were presented to the Vice-President of the Ball, Countess Barbara Pagowska-Cooper, and other generous donors including Drs. Janina and Januariusz Styperek, Ruby Bacardi, Agnieszka and Keith Gray, Count Rod Hildebrant and Viscount Matthew Meehan, Paul and Teresa Lowenthal, Marquess Alexander Colonna-Walewski Montague and Marquise Maria Alonso Montague, Amedeo and Miram Guzzini and Pat Riley.

Gold Medals, the highest distinction awarded by the Institute, were then presented by Lady Blanka Rosenstiel to Maria Knapik and Maria Nowotarska, who flew down from snowy Canada with Nowotarska’s daughter Agata to accept the Medals with great joy and emotion.

Distinguished recipients of this award from previous years include President Lech Wałęsa, Senator Barbara Mikulski, actress Stephanie Powers, Professor Norman Davies and composer Krzysztof Penderecki. This year, the first medal was presented to Mrs. Maria Knapik, acclaimed soprano and proponent of Polish music. In 2007, Mrs. Knapik starred in the title role of Moniuszko’s Halka in her company debut with the Sarasota Opera. She has performed at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center as well as in operas in Canada and Poland, and in 2005 she was recognized as “The Rising Star of Opera” by the American Institute of Polish Culture.

The second Gold Medal was presented to Maria Nowotarska - actress, director, screenwriter, art director and co-founder of the Polish Theater in Toronto, Canada.

Among other awards, Mrs. Nowotarska has received the Cavalier Cross and Gloria Artis. As a result of her endeavors over 100 theatrical arts have premiered, including works about famous Poles such as Maria Curie-Skłodowska and Pola Negri.

As the night progressed, President Lech Wałęsa presented the Lech Wałęsa Media Award to Mrs. Irene Tomaszewski, writer, journalist, and co-author of the books Code Name: Zegota: Rescuing Jews in Occupied Poland, 1942-1945: The Most Dangerous Conspiracy in Wartime Europe and Inside a Gestapo Prison: The Letters of Krystyna Wituska 1942-1944. President Wałęsa stated, “The award is intended for journalists who create a positive image of Poland abroad through disseminating information about her history, rich heritage, culture and tradition. We have to recognize those who promote Poland because we have something to be proud of.”
Master of Ceremonies Jaroslaw Rottermund thanked Lady Blanka Rosenstiel for her activity, optimism, cheerfulness and enthusiasm in promoting Poland and taking up new causes. Warm words of gratitude and beautiful flowers were also given to Beata Pasycz, Executive Director of the American Institute of Polish Culture.

Once the official ceremonies of the Ball were concluded Lady Blanka invited all guests to the dance floor, where the fun continued late into the night. Charming men, poised and polished, led ladies in flowing gowns gracefully across the ballroom.
As in years past, an exquisitely delicious and festive brunch took place the following morning to wrap up the weekend’s festivities. During the official portion of the gathering, the Polish Ambassador presented the Siberian Deportees Cross (Krzyż Zesłanców Sybiru) to Mr. Mieczysław Misiag as “the way to recognize and remember the Polish citizens who were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan in 1939-1956. The medal is to honor their martyrdom and devotion to freedom and independence.” Mr. Misiag attended the brunch with his wife Candace and friend Jadzia Grabowski from nearby Melbourne, Florida.

Afterward, guests shared stories. The discussion and dancing carried over from the night before. Guests had the opportunity to meet, speak with and be photographed with President Wałęsa. After entertainment by the Polish American Folk Dance Company, guests snapped a few memento photographs and headed home happy, full of memories and looking forward to next year!