

Quo Vadis: the Polish-Canadian Youth Challenge

Friday, 14 August 2009 16:56



by Anna Kisielewska



I didn't quite know what to expect when I signed up to attend *Quo Vadis? Polish-Canadian Youth Leadership Challenge* that took place the weekend of May 1st in Ottawa, Canada. Organized by members of the Polish Students' Society of the University of Ottawa led by Kamil Mróz and Magdalena Sułżycka, *Quo Vadis* seemed like a good place to meet young Polish-Canadian leaders who are involved in their communities. It proved to be that and much, much more.

"Inspiring and thought-provoking" was how Simon Bamburak, who was one of the student representatives from the University of Alberta, saw the weekend conference. "The organizers have a very professional

approach and [*Quo Vadis*] is proof that it's possible for young people to think big," echoed Arek Gruszowski, a young entrepreneur from Edmonton, Alberta. Attended by 117 Canadian students and young professionals of Polish origin representing almost all regions of Canada, *Quo Vadis* was organized under the themes of Heritage, Leadership and Unity.

The conference was kicked off in historic surroundings with a reception in one of the most beautiful rooms on Parliament Hill, just down the hall from the Senate. The participants were greeted by a number of VIP speakers, including members of provincial and federal parliaments, the Polish Ambassador to Canada Piotr Ogrodziński and president of Canadian Polish Congress Władysław Lizoń. The dynamism and energy felt that night set the tone for the whole weekend, during which participants had plenty of time to network and participate in discussions.

A talk by Lieutenant Colonel and Special Advisor to the Chief of Land Staff Walter Perchal, who didn't mince words calling for the participants to get involved, was rewarded with a standing ovation. A panel discussion led by Prof. Sokoloski of the University of Ottawa asked some tough questions: Why, compared to other, smaller ethnic groups, the Polish community does not succeed on the wider Canadian stage proportionally to its size? How can this situation be improved? How can the myriad Polish-Canadian organizations cooperate more closely and get youth involved? Why are second generation Canadians of Polish origin often invisible in the Polish community? What does their heritage mean to young Canadians with Polish roots? A number of accomplished Canadians of Polish origin - senior public servants, CEOs, politicians, academics and recipients of the Order of Canada - tried to answer these tough questions. Discussions continued late into the evening during a reception held at the Polish embassy in Ottawa.

An alumnus of Poland in the Rockies (2006), Kamil Mróz, cites PitR as one of the inspirations behind the vision for *Quo Vadis*. He teamed up with Magdalena Sułżycka in an effort to organize a substantial event in their final academic year together as senior executives of the Polish Students' Society of the University of Ottawa (PSSUO), before handing the club's reins to younger students. They wanted to finish off with a "big bang" and carefully planned *Quo Vadis* for almost a year. From the beginning, they divided responsibilities, with Magda bringing event planning experience to the logistics side, and Kamil in charge of fundraising and overall planning. Both stress, however, that they were able to pull it all off thanks to teamwork, good communications and commitment. They got a number of PSSUO members and volunteers involved and ensured everyone had an important role to play. Furthermore, they credit the guidance provided by Prof. Sokoloski and Dr. Wielgosz of the University of Ottawa with helping bring their vision to fruition.



From the choice of venue, use of technology, media coverage, support from senior federal and provincial politicians, activities for participants to the selection of speakers, *Quo Vadis* was organized with a professional approach. The organizers raised more than \$30,000 to make it happen and they've set a benchmark for future events of this kind.

Most important, *Quo Vadis* achieved its aim in that it got young Polish-Canadians talking, and inspired them to plan events in their own communities. Already, and as a direct consequence of *Quo Vadis*, the [Young Polish-Canadian Professionals Association](#) (YPCPA) was born in Toronto, and its first event, a networking opportunity, took place in June.

Kudos to Kamil, Magda and the entire Polish Students' Society of the University of Ottawa for proving that "Yes, we can!" and may their vision continue to bear fruit among Polish-Canadian youth and beyond.



Anna Kisielewska is a graduate of Concordia University in Political Science, though she's spent most of her career in the fields of translation and subtitling. Anna attended PiTR in 2008 and is now channeling its infectious energy into the Canadian Foundation for Polish Studies, organizing events and doing outreach with university students. Anna loves travelling and reading, but most of all, she loves spending time with her three-year-old son, Julian.

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Last Updated on Wednesday, 26 August 2009 03:56