Nobel Laureate Lech Walesa Visits IUB at Invitation of Students

Polish hero, Solidarity founder, and first democratically elected President of Poland, Lech Walesa, lectured on “Solidarity and Central Europe in the 21st Century” at IU-Bloomington on Nov. 5, 1998, as the guest of the student-run Union Board and the Office of the Bloomington Chancellor. He addressed a student-packed house in the Musical Arts Center, and his talk was televised and rebroadcast on the local public broadcasting channel, WTIU, several times that week. Several of IUB’s area studies programs also co-hosted Walesa during his historic one and a half-day visit to the university.

Joining the distinguished guest on stage were representatives from the many groups that had worked hard to make his visit a success. Representing the students of Russian and East European area studies, SPEA and political science doctoral student Michael Katula greeted President Walesa with a short address in Polish. On behalf of the IU student body, Union Board’s Chad Bradford also welcomed Walesa and guided the question and answer period following the speech.

Union Board Lectures Director Patrick Becker, while exhorting students to educate themselves for the betterment of the world, noted the unique opportunity to host as their guest someone who had truly changed the world for the better. Bozena Shallcross, professor of Polish literature and language, represented the Polish Studies Center as its associate director and translated questions for Walesa during the discussion period. Walesa was also accompanied by his official translator, Magda Iwinska.

In introducing President Walesa, Bloomington Chancellor Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis hailed him as one of the true heroes of the 20th century, and said that his visit to Bloomington was a chance for all to witness history. Gros Louis also provided a historic perspective of the important role IUB played for Polish faculty and students during the communist period, thanks to the exchange program between IUB and Warsaw University which has existed since 1976. During the communist era, this program provided an intellectual lifeline for Polish academics, giving them a chance to work and study in a free atmosphere during their stays here.

Lech Walesa’s peak years as a leader in the struggles for Poland spanned the 1980-81 Solidarity era; the period of martial law; his internment throughout 1982, serving as a symbol of peaceful resistance to communist authorities; his leadership role in Solidarity’s underground activities which culminated in the 1989 Round Table Talks dissolving the communist government; and his own term in office as President of the Republic of Poland, 1991-95. As president, he paved the path for a free market economy for Poland, one of the first countries to receive an invitation to join an expanded NATO.

In 1983, Walesa won the Nobel Peace Prize. His message of non-violent resistance, together with peaceful yet forceful negotiation in the face of powerful adversaries, is something he still advocates today, although his career in elected office is apparently at an end. (He was not elected for a second term as president.) Now on the lecture circuit, Walesa speaks for global cooperation and supports the need

*Members of Union Board pose enthusiastically for a picture with distinguished lecturer and Nobel Laureate, Lech Walesa (center).*

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for scholars and specialists to cooperate internationally to find solutions to the global problems of poverty and environmental damage.

While Walesa is an enthusiastic supporter of traditional structures such as NATO, the European Union, and emerging market economies, he doesn’t trust simply in strategic alliances and material improvements to solve international problems or make people better world citizens. In his lecture, he spoke often about our conscience, our spiritual dimension, and the role of religion in shaping world affairs for the better—in particular, citing the role of Pope John Paul II in strengthening Poland’s Solidarity movement. Walesa aspires to be seen as a kind of social philosopher, a man above the battle who can remind us of what we owe to our conscience, which transcends pocketbooks, political parties, and national allegiances.

Throughout his visit, Walesa seemed especially responsive to the students, who were attracted by his charisma, his down-to-earth humor, and his optimism. They pressed him with questions at all his meetings and he, in turn, was generous with his time. Over 100 students met him personally at gatherings ranging from a tea at the Polish Studies Center hosted by Director Timothy Wiles, a formal banquet in the Tudor Room co-hosted by the Union Board and Chancellor Gros Louis, and a final reception at the Dowling International Center hosted by Dean for International Programs Patrick O’Meara.

In other events, Walesa was the guest of honor at a luncheon hosted by the staff and faculty of the Russian and East European Institute, including colleagues from IU Northwest and IUPUI. He held a press conference, and met with local area business people and officials, including Bloomington Mayor John Fernandez. At the banquet, Emeritus Professor of Polish Literature Samuel Fiszman presented Walesa with a copy of his newly-published edited volume, Constitution and Reform in Eighteenth-Century Poland, commenting that he associated the book’s message of the rule of law in Poland with Walesa’s own patriotic leadership.

Polish Studies Center affiliate Frank Nierzwicki, accompanied by labor and state congressional representatives, read a proclamation from Governor Frank O’Bannon designating Lech Walesa an “Honorary Hoosier,” the highest distinction that can be awarded to an individual who is not a resident of Indiana.

At the closing reception, O’Meara presented Walesa with another fraternal gift, an IU beer stein. Dean of the School of Music David G. Woods then offered a “musical toast” to Walesa in the form of Polish opera arias sung in Polish by voice students Duane Whittmann and Renata Rudziecka. Summing up the student enthusiasm generated by Lech Walesa’s visit to the campus, one student awaiting her turn to get an autograph said simply: “We like him so much.”

Walesa’s lecture is available on videotape in English and in Polish, and may be borrowed from the Polish Studies Center; 1217 E. Atwater Avenue, IU Bloomington; tel: 812/855-1507, fax: 812/855-0207; E-mail: polish@indiana.edu.

—Timothy Wiles
Director, Polish Studies Center

Patrick O’Meara (right) presents a beer stein to Lech Walesa.