

Hundred years of diplomatic relations between Poland and Japan



History of Polish-Japanese relations

Text: prof. Ewa Pałasz-Rutkowska

Polish original available at <https://pl.institut-polski.org/100lat/>

Translation to Japanese by Kuyama Koichi available at <https://institut-polski.org/100th/>

Below translation to English in agreement with the author: Bartosz Skibiński

Poland and Japan are distant countries, both geographically and culturally; their history didn't make it easy to bring them closer together. Poland did not exist as an independent state until the end of the World War I, while Japan until the second half of the 19th century was existing in isolation. However when it opened its borders it became interested in Poland and its history. From then on, the Japanese were referring to the Polish with great affection, and Polish people shared similar feelings towards the Japanese. This was due to political as well as emotional reasons, and to the similarity between the way they understood certain universal values, such as a respect for tradition, the defence of cultural identity, valour and courage, an attitude towards family and the elders. The Polish admired in the Japanese their lack of individualism and their devotion to the community and the public good.

In 1885 Japan, Tokai Sanshi wrote about Poland in his novel *Kajin no kigu* (Unexpected Encounters with Beautiful Women). This was the first time one could read about the tragedy of the Polish people, the partition of the Polish country and its independence movements. In a similar spirit Ochiai Naobumi composed the poem *Porando kaiko* (Reminiscence of Poland), which was part of a bigger work dated 1893 called *Kiba ryoko* (Journey on horseback) inspired by the reports of major Fukushima Yasumasa from a lonely horse ride from Berlin to Vladivostok in 1892-1893 through the Polish territories. The aim of this journey was to get some information about the modern European armies, especially the Russian army,

dangerous neighbour of Japan at the time. Fukushima, as the first representative of Japanese authorities, established contacts with the Polish who were representatives of the independence movement, and those who had been exiled in Siberia. He thought that due to their many years of experience in fighting against the oppressor, they would be able to provide him with the most accurate data about the Russian empire and its military force.

Among the Poles who came to Japan at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and wrote about Japan, were travelers - Karol Lanckoroński and Paweł Sapięha; researchers, including two exiles from Siberia, ethnologist Bronisław Piłsudski, ethnographer and writer Waclaw Sieroszewski. The first, Bronisław Piłsudski, became one of the greatest experts in Ainu language and culture. The second, Waclaw Sieroszewski, wrote about Japan in his memoirs and stories. At the same time there began to appear in Poland the first intermediate translations of Japanese literature, works on the history and culture of Japan. This was also the birth time of the trend of Japonism in the Polish arts, in which main stage took Feliks Jasieński "Manggha", a fan, lover, propagator and collector of Japanese art.

A significant increase in the interest of Poles in Japan occurred during the Japanese-Russian war in 1904-1905, at a time when hopes were born to defeat Russia and regain independence. In Tokyo, unofficial contacts took place between activists of the National League (Roman Dmowski) and the Polish Socialist Party (Józef Piłsudski) and representatives of the Japanese authorities. Although, ultimately, such cooperation did not happen on a wider scale, the sympathy born in the hearts of the Polish people towards Japan survived the years of war and it continue to present day.

Years: 1919 - 1941 - 1957

After the World War I, in March 1919, Japan's recognition of Poland as an independent state marked the beginning of the official international relations between the two countries.

In the 1920s, a trade treaty was signed and military cooperation was established. The Japanese Red Cross helped repatriate about 800 Polish orphans from Siberia, and as a proof their sympathy for Japan Poland awarded over 50 Japanese officers with the Order of Virtuti Militari (the highest military decoration) for merits during the war with Russia. In 1930, Poland was visited unofficially by the younger brother of Emperor Hirohito, prince Takamatsu with his wife. Mutual interest in the cultures of both countries had grown significantly. In 1919, a Japanese language course was started at the University of Warsaw. Both in Poland and in Japan, friendship societies were established, translations of literature and publications on topics related to the cultures of both countries were published.

In the 1930s, due to the change in the international situation, Polish-Japanese contacts were revived. Military cooperation was developing significantly, especially in the field of cryptology and intelligence, mainly directed at the Soviet Union and Germany. This continued until 1945, long after the suspension of mutual relations in October 1941 and the Poland's declaration of war on Japan on 11th December 1941. Among others Consul Sugihara Chiune and Lieutenant Leszek Daszkiewicz were active in Kaunas and Königsberg, and General Onodera Makoto together with Major Michał Rybikowski in Stockholm. Thanks to the visas issued by Sugihara and the humanitarian support of the Japanese in Vladivostok & Tsuruga, as well as the actions of Tadeusz Romer the ambassador of the Republic of Poland in Japan, over 2000 Polish Jews escaped what would have otherwise been an inevitable death.

Throughout the war, Polish missionaries, above all the Conventual Franciscans, continued their activities in Japan. Their mission was founded in 1930 by father Maksymilian Kolbe, who came to Nagasaki, with brother Zenon "Zeno" Żebrowski. He acted there until the end of his life in 1982, offering help to orphans, the elderly, the poor and the disabled. To this day, many missionaries and nuns from Poland are actively working in Japan.

After 1957

After the World War II, as a result of the bipolar system of states, Poland and Japan found themselves in opposing camps, dependent on their allies, the Soviet Union for Poland and the United States for Japan. These boundaries were even more clearly marked by the Iron Curtain, which divided the East and West during the Cold War. This is why Poland, together with Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, did not sign the peace treaty with Japan on the 8th of September 1951 in San Francisco.

With the agreement on the restoration of normal relations between the Polish People's Republic and Japan, stipulated on the 8th of February 1957 and in force from May 18, the state of war between our countries ended and official political, economic and cultural relations resumed. However, due to the differences in their political systems, the cooperation between the two countries was developing slowly. In the 1970s, economic cooperation between Poland and Japan intensified greatly. The uprising of Polish workers at the beginning of the 1980s, which initiated the process of democratization of Poland and ultimately influenced the changes in the post-war world order, caused the sympathy of the Solidarity movement and its leader Lech Wałęsa in Japan. However, after the imposition of martial law in Poland in December 1981, bilateral relations were again limited. Their gradual improvement has been taking place since 1985. The visit to Poland in that year by Foreign Minister Abe Shintarō was a testimony to the gradual improvement of the

bilateral relations. In 1987, Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro came to Warsaw, and the head of the State Council, Wojciech Jaruzelski, went to Japan. A significant improvement in international relations followed the crucial Polish elections in June 1989, as proved by the official visits of many Japanese officials: among others Prime Ministers: Kaifu Toshiki in 1990, Koizumi Jun'ichirō in 2003, Abe Shinzō in 2013; Ministers of Foreign Affairs: Ikeda Yukihiko in 1997, Aso Tarō in 2007, Kono Tarō in 2018. An extremely important event was the visit of Their Imperial Majesties of Japan to Poland in July 2002. Poland was also visited by the representative of the imperial family, Prince Takamado and his wife in 1994, who also visited in 2015. As many Japanese came to Poland, so too many Polish officials went to Japan, for example president: Lech Wałęsa in 1994, Aleksander Kwaśniewski in 1998, Lech Kaczyński in 2008, Bronisław Komorowski in 2015; Prime Ministers: Jan Krzysztof Bielecki in 1991, Jerzy Buzek in 1999, Marek Belka in 2005 and Foreign Ministers: Krzysztof Skubiszewski in 1994, Bronisław Geremek in 2000, Stefan Meller in 2006, Radosław Sikorski in 2008, Witold Waszczykowski in 2017.

At present, Economic, scientific and cultural contacts are developing very well. Polish and Japanese artists inspire and interact with each other. In Japan big popularity has Polish film, theater, Polish poster, graphic art and Polish music. The performances of both classical Japanese and avant-garde theater, Japanese poster, graphic art, music and film, including animated ones, are warmly received in Poland. Thanks to Polish-Japanese and Japanese-Polish scholars, numerous valuable studies on the two cultures, as well as direct and professional translations of literature were given to readers in both countries.

We have a lot of evidence that Poland and Japan cultivated and continue to cultivate friendly relations. Thanks to the development of cooperation in many areas, we are close to each other despite the distance and cultural differences that separate us. The events on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of establishing official relations between Poland and Japan will undoubtedly be another proof of this.