

A Bullet and a Vision: Food for Poland, 1982–1985

By Mitch Davis, Michael G. Sullivan, and Ronald J. Ockey

This essay was assembled from reflections sent in by three of England's chief collaborators in the Food for Poland program he initiated to assist supporters of the Solidarity movement who were suffering from the attempts of Polish communist leaders to squelch it. This reflection appeared in the tribute issue *Sunstone* published shortly after England's passing.

Originally published: *Sunstone* 121 (January 2002): 46–47.

IN 1982, I was a recently married, returned missionary taking Gene's class in Mormon literature. One day, he ended our discussion a few minutes early and began to talk of his concern for the people of Poland. I remember thinking that whatever was going on in Poland was a long way from Provo, Utah. But for Gene, there was a very clear connection.

Gene related how he had been in the crowded Vatican Square months earlier when a man directly behind him had attempted to assassinate the new Catholic pope. In fact, the bullet whisked past Gene's right ear, causing ringing and pain for quite some time. Gene was convinced that the attempt on the Pope's life had occurred not because he was Catholic but because he was Polish.

Gene believed the Lord was going to use this new pope to help tear down the Iron Curtain, beginning in Poland. Gene spoke of his conviction that the Solidarity labor movement was destined to play a key role in tearing down that wall and explained how Communist government officials were attempting to starve Solidarity into submission, especially during the cold, Polish winters. If folks from the United States could get food to those in the movement, if we could keep them alive and encouraged, there was hope for the fall of Communism in Poland . . . and East Germany . . . and Russia. . . . Suddenly, I realized what Provo had to do with Warsaw: if we could link arms with the Pope and feed Solidarity, we might someday be able to send missionaries into the Eastern Bloc!

So I volunteered to help, and before I knew it, I was the *de facto* president of the student chapter of Food for Poland. My wife Michelle and I immediately went to work in the offices of this charity organization. Michelle compiled a list of potential donors on a borrowed computer while I struggled to convince students at other universities (Berkeley Yale, Stanford) that a bona fide movement was emanating from BYU.

—MITCH DAVIS

AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR of Food for Poland, I had almost daily contact with Gene during the months that turned into years beginning in early 1982. When he

approached me to direct the efforts for Poland, he explained his belief that the current struggles in Poland could be a linchpin for freedom, or the loss of it, for the people of many countries. It wasn't just that Gene had been a witness to the shooting, it was more. He had a testimony of the need and a vision that more than just a single "do good" event was needed if freedom was to be given a real chance. Someone must mount a sustained effort, and he could not do it alone. He had to convert others to this vision, people who would be willing to work together to make it a reality. Gene's efforts gained many converts. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of volunteers worked during those years in almost every state across the nation.

As the vision born from Gene's experience grew, individuals from all across the country and organizations great and small began to call and work every day on ideas about how the American people could help in Poland. —MICHAEL G. SULLIVAN

THERE WERE RALLIES in Salt Lake City and Logan, Utah. There was a statewide proclamation by then-Governor Scott Matheson. There was a sneak preview of Polish filmmaker Andrez Vajda's pro-Solidarity film.

In the end, we hit upon the idea of a nationwide "Fast for Poland!" which encouraged individuals across the country to skip two meals over their Christmas holiday and send the money saved on those meals to us. The idea caught hold both within and without the BYU community, and we raised more than a million dollars.

—MITCH DAVIS

RONALD OCKEY, LEGAL advisor and volunteer for Food for Poland, accompanied the first airlift of goods to Poland in the spring of 1982. As he met with Bishop Domin of the Polish Catholic Church, Ron recalls the bishop's thanks as, "It means so very much to us to know we're not alone."

The following month, upon meeting a shipment in Gdansk, at the very shipyard where Solidarity had first taken root, I was among many who saw container after container coming off the ship. Those supplies were going to be received by families, hospitals, and others in need.

The Catholic Church used its considerable influence within the country to provide distribution assistance. That night, while having dinner at a monastery, I received word that my wife had given birth, a little early, to a healthy, beautiful daughter. My host, the local Catholic bishop, knowing that as a Mormon I didn't drink wine, suggested we toast her birth with something else. He hurried about and finally returned with two bottles of baby carrot juice—from the shipment we had just unloaded that day! It confirmed to me that Heaven approved of the work we were doing in Poland and gave me hope for the future.

That spring, we also hit upon the idea of a national convoy of relief supplies. We had dozens of groups collecting across the United States, but they had no way to ship their goods. This problem was solved through the "Friendship Convoy," a loose caravan of tractor-trailers donated by several trucking lines. The convoy started in California and made its way through the country, picking up donations, eventually arriving in Chicago. There, with the assistance of the Polish-American Congress and Catholic Relief Services, shipping containers containing hundreds of thousands of pounds of consolidated supplies were loaded onto ships for transport to Poland.

When the Friendship Convoy arrived in Chicago, I had the privilege of greeting the trucks. It was the first of May, "Constitution Day" in Poland. Sponsored by the

Polish-American Congress, the convoy was the centerpiece of a parade held by Chicago's Polish community. The parade drew more than one-half million people. I had the wonderful opportunity to speak from the reviewing stand and offer a message of hope, conveying to those gathered that many had now grown to hold the Polish people within their hearts. That afternoon, as Bishop Bernadin, then archbishop in Chicago, put his arms around me, he thanked the "Mormons for doing more than anyone else for the Polish people (pause) . . . than anyone 'west of Chicago.'" Then, with an embrace, we turned to the television cameras and thanked the people of America.

While millions of dollars of aid was shipped over the years, without Gene England, Food For Poland would not have been attempted and would not have succeeded. His vision, unconventional ideas, eloquence, resourcefulness, tireless work, and inspiration shaped, supported, and sustained everything that was accomplished.

—MICHAEL G. SULLIVAN

IT WAS CHARACTERISTIC of Gene's lifetime commitment to principles of truth and right not to be dissuaded by risks. He constantly stressed we should not be "timid" in trying to do good works. His own efforts reveal no evidence of timidity in such matters. His personal courage was exemplary and continues to inspire.

—RONALD J. OCKEY

I THOUGHT OF Gene—and the Pope—some years later when a young man in our ward received his mission call to Russia.

—MITCH DAVIS

ON ONE TRIP with two hundred thousand pounds of flour for the people of southern Poland, the archbishop of Krakow took me aside and asked if I knew how much bread all of this flour would make for the people in need? I replied that I didn't, but I hoped it helped. He proceeded to tell me that it helped well beyond the nourishment of the body, because the flour would only make an average-size dinner roll for each person who needed it. But "its worth was far beyond the nourishment of the body. It was nourishment for the soul of each person who ate the bread because they would know that they had not been forgotten."

—MICHAEL G. SULLIVAN

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MITCH and MICHELLE DAVIS and their children now reside in Colorado. Mitch is the producer and writer of *The Other Side of Heaven*, a new movie released 14 December 2001.

MICHAEL G. SULLIVAN is a businessman in Salt Lake City where he resides with his wife Christine. They are parents of five children. Amy, the daughter born while Michael was in Poland, is a student in political science at BYU and often spends her birthdays doing relief work for people of one country or another.

RONALD J. OCKEY is now an attorney in the Utah Attorney General's office. He and his wife Arline have a son who served a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . in Poland.

How to cite this essay: Mitch Davis, Michael G. Sullivan, and Ronald J. Ockey, "A Bullet and a Vision: Food for Poland, 1982–1985," *Sunstone* 121 (January 2002): 46–47.

The Eugene England Foundation expects website users to follow carefully Fair Use of Copyrighted Materials guidelines. Please contact www.eugeneengland.org website administrators for questions or support, to submit or view thoughtful and responsible comments, and to donate to the nonprofit Eugene England Foundation.