


Małgorzata Szymańska 

The Kosciuszko Foundation, New York City, United States
mszymanska@thekf.org

A Short Introduction to the History of the Kosciuszko Foundation and Its Programs

The text outlines the history of the Kosciuszko Foundation, paying special attention to the life of its founder, Szczepan Mierzwa, who came to the USA in 1910, at the age of 17. By 1925 he changed his name to Stephen Mizwa, became Assistant Professor of Economics at Drake University, and founded the Kosciuszko Foundation in New York City, which has been providing financial support to Polish scholars ever since. The text also gives an overview of all the programs that the Kosciuszko Foundation currently offers to Polish and American scholars and students.

Keywords: The Kosciuszko Foundation, Szczepan Mierzwa, Stephen Mizwa, Kosciuszko Foundation programs and grants

The history of the Kosciuszko Foundation closely mirrors the life of its founder, Szczepan Mierzwa. A self-made man, Mierzwa could serve as the poster child for the early 20th century American Dream. In his book *The Story of the Kosciuszko Foundation: How It Came about* (Mizwa 12-13), he recounts his experience of landing at Ellis Island on 17 February 1910, at the age of 17, with just \$16 in his pocket and no knowledge of English. As he recounts in his book, a \$9 loan from a friend, Joe Mach, enabled him to meet the \$25 requirement to enter the United States at that time. Eleven years later, the same man, who, in the meantime, Americanized his name to Stephen Mizwa, took up the position of Assistant Professor of Economics at Drake University (Mizwa 28-29). By 1925, Mizwa had founded the Kosciuszko Foundation in New York City, built on little more than his determination, enthusiasm, and without any support from the Polish or American governments, or from any of the large philanthropies of the time.

In many ways, the Foundation faced the same uphill battle to success and recognition as the penniless non-Anglophone immigrant on his journey to becoming a professor at a prestigious university. Unlike the many diaspora-support organizations mushrooming in the peak days of European immigration to the U.S. ("Immigrant Aid Worker"), the Foundation embarked on a much more abstract mission – a genuine cultural, educational, and scientific exchange to benefit two nations – Poland and the United States (Mizwa). Mizwa's own life story has taught him that even the most talented individuals need a little help to realize their full potential (Mizwa). Mizwa and his early associates believed that assisting gifted immigrant youth would not only benefit them but also enrich America, which would gain a fresh perspective and creative impetus from elsewhere than the countries of what would later be called "old Europe."

Unlike the immediate results of diaspora-support organizations of the time, which helped to feed, clothe, educate, and find jobs for new arrivals to the U.S., the intangible and long-term objectives of the Foundations proved a much more challenging unique selling point, with Mizwa expressing his frustration at one point, stating "all the principles of Economics, Money, and Banking courses that I was teaching did not tell me how to ask people for money for which they would not receive anything in return – except a promise that their donations would help some young people that they did not know" (Mizwa). Yet, despite these challenges, Mizwa began working on the Polish American Scholarship Committee in the summer of 1923, laying the groundwork for what would become the Kosciuszko Foundation. His initial goal was to raise \$5,000, an amount Mizwa describes in his book as follows: "\$5,000! It was set so modestly to make its realization feasible, and yet big enough to bring the first group of eight Polish students to America" (Mizwa 40-42). The fundraising effort started small, with the first donation of \$5 coming from Mr. Stephen Swierczynski of Massachusetts. However, within a year, the "modest" target of \$5,000 was met, and Mizwa was able to officially convene the Polish American Scholarship Committee in September 1924. This committee continued its work until the formal incorporation of the Kosciuszko Foundation in 1925. Władysław Wróblewski, a former Jagiellonian University law professor and Prime Minister of Poland's interim democratic government served as the first President of the scholarship committee (Mizwa 40-48).

The KF Exchange Program to the U.S., as it is now known, began with just nine scholars coming from Poland to study at prestigious universities, including Harvard, Yale, and Columbia (Mizwa 46). This initial round of scholarships provided the momentum needed to institutionalize and formalize the Foundation. In his book, Mizwa recounts how the new organization's name was inspired by the 1926 sesquicentennial anniversary of Kosciuszko's arrival in the U.S. and the discussions on how to best commemorate his legacy:

"The question of another monument of stone or bronze, on horseback or on a pedestal, came up. But there were already a few Kosciuszko monuments in America (...) Now I do not recall whose brainchild it was, but the idea came like a bolt of lightning: Why not a Living Memorial to Kosciuszko, for the purpose of promoting cultural relations between the two countries he so nobly served, Poland and America? THE KOSCIUSZKO FOUNDATION!" (Mizwa 51).

In 1925, The Kosciuszko Foundation, Inc., was incorporated in New York. In his article "The Kosciuszko Foundation – A Living Memorial", the Foundation's first President, Professor Henry Noble MacCracken, wrote:

"The purpose of the Kosciuszko Foundation is the promotion of cultural and intellectual relationships between Poland and America: through exchange of students, scholars and professors between the two countries, through publication of books and other informational literature in Poland about America and in America about Poland, through its service as a clearing house of information for those interested solely in cultural relationships between Poland and the United States" (MacCracken 5).

The first meeting of the Board of Trustees took place on 2 October 1925, in Philadelphia (Mizwa 65). True to Mizwa's original vision, the Foundation was not created as an organization by the diaspora for the diaspora but rather as a catalyst for equitable exchange between two nations. This crucial distinction is evident in Mizwa's choice of his six co-founders for the new Foundation, all of whom were distinguished leaders in America's academic, business, and military circles who shared a strong affinity with Poland. In addition to Mizwa, they included Willis H. Booth, Vice President of the New York-based Guaranty Trust Company; Cedric E. Fauntleroy, an American pilot and former Commander of the Kosciuszko Squadron, which fought in the Polish-Soviet war; Dr. Robert H. Lord, Professor at Harvard University, Chief of the Department of Polish Affairs and a Delegate to the Paris Peace Conference; Dr. Henry Noble MacCracken, President of Vassar College and the first President of the Kosciuszko Foundation; Dr. Paul Monroe, Head of the Department of Education at Columbia University and consultant to the Polish Government; and Samuel M. Vauclain, President of Baldwin Locomotive Works. As Mizwa mentioned in his book: "With the exception of the present writer, we had an All-American team, ready for action" (Mizwa 65).

It was decided that for the Foundation to fulfill its mission, it needed to raise \$1,000,000 in endowment funds, a much less "modest" amount than the initial \$5,000. It took Mizwa 45 years to achieve this goal (Mizwa 113). The prestige and reputation that the Foundation managed to build in just a few years helped it weather the historical storms it would soon have to navigate – the Great Depression, World War II,

Poland's occupation by Germany and the Soviet Union, and the establishment of a communist regime in Poland.

As times changed, the Foundation's programs and initiatives evolved and grew, adapting to the shifting nature of collaboration between the U.S. and Poland. Following MacCracken's 30-year tenure as the Foundation's first President, Mizwa took over in 1955, serving until the year before his death in 1971. His legacy was carried forward and enriched by subsequent Presidents: Dr. Eugene Kusielewicz, Dr. Albert Juszczak, Joseph E. Gore Esq., Alex Storozynski, John S. Micgiel, and the Foundation's current President, Marek Skulimowski (*The Kosciuszko Foundation*).

Over the decades, the Kosciuszko Foundation has spearheaded a myriad of initiatives and programs, including tuition scholarships for Polish Americans, the exchange of Polish and American scholars, support for Polish studies in the U.S., summer study programs in Poland, the renowned Chopin Piano Competition showcasing the talents of young pianists from around the world, and the Marcella Sembrich Opera Competition dedicated to preserving the legacy of the legendary Polish soprano. Additionally, the Foundation offers a wide array of educational and cultural events, including lectures, exhibitions, and film screenings, providing a platform for dialogue and engagement within the Polish-American community and beyond (*The Kosciuszko Foundation*). In 2023, the Foundation awarded \$1.8 million in grants and scholarships and provided an additional \$500,000 in support of other cultural initiatives. The Foundation has also grown, expanding from a townhouse on the Upper East Side of New York City to include offices in Washington, D.C., and Warsaw, as well as ten local chapters across the U.S., furthering the Foundation's mission beyond its traditional New York stronghold.

From its humble beginnings in 1925 to its current status as a beacon of Polish American cooperation, the Foundation continues to embody the spirit of Tadeusz Kościuszko. His legacy serves as a guiding light for all who seek to build bridges of understanding and friendship across nations and cultures. Through its diverse programs and initiatives, the Foundation strives to foster cross-cultural understanding, celebrate Polish heritage, and inspire future generations of scholars and artists.

LIST OF THE KF PROGRAMS:¹

Tuition scholarships	The Foundation awards tuition scholarships to American students of Polish descent for undergraduate and graduate-level studies at colleges and universities in the United States.
Exchange Program to the U.S.	The KF Exchange Program to the United States, one of the oldest KF programs, enables Polish scholars to pursue research, artistic, or academic projects at U.S. institutions. Each year, the KF awards approximately 40 scholars with grants and fellowships, totaling over \$600,000. The first scholars arrived in the U.S. in 1925.

¹ The list of programs, competitions, awards, and other programs is based on the information available on The Kosciuszko Foundation's website: <https://thekf.org>.

Year Abroad Scholarship Program	The Intensive Polish Language Program offers scholarships for studying Polish language and culture for one semester or a full academic year at Jagiellonian University in Kraków. This Program is organized in collaboration with the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA).
Studies & Research in Poland Grants	The program offers grants to undergraduate and graduate-level students to study full-time at Polish universities and for graduate and postgraduate research at state universities and institutes in Poland. This program is co-funded by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA).
The Sophie Wojciechowski Endowment Fund for Gifted Polish Youth	A scholarship awarded to Polish students for a short-term intensive educational enrichment program in the United States. The scholarship covers tuition, registration, and general institution fees, round-trip airfare and transportation from and to the airport in the U.S., accommodation, health insurance, visa fees, and a daily stipend for meals and books.
Summer Study in Poland	Scholarships awarded to Americans of Polish ancestry to attend summer language courses at Jagiellonian University and John Paul II Catholic University, Lublin.
Polish studies in the U.S.	Over the years, the Kosciuszko Foundation has helped fund Polish Studies at over 20 American Universities, increasing American knowledge about the Polish language, culture, and history.

COMPETITIONS

Chopin Piano Competition	The Kosciuszko Foundation's Chopin Piano Competition, established in 1949 to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Fryderyk Chopin's death, is dedicated to supporting gifted young pianists in furthering their studies and performing the works of Polish composers.
Sembrich Voice Competition	The Kosciuszko Foundation Marcella Sembrich International Voice Competition was established in 1968 to encourage young singers to study the repertoire of Polish composers and to honor Polish soprano Marcella Sembrich Kochanska, one of the greatest artists of the late 19 th and early 20 th centuries, who made her Metropolitan Opera debut in 1883.
The Kosciuszko Foundation Wieniawski Violin Competition	The Kosciuszko Foundation Wieniawski Violin Competition, established in 1969, aims to support young musicians in their creative development and inspire their artistic growth. Initially held biennially and later at irregular intervals, the competition encourages participants to explore Poland's rich musical heritage by studying the repertoire of Polish composers.

AWARDS

Janczewski Award

The Bohdan and Zygmunt Janczewski Award was established by the late Zygmunt Janczewski, a distinguished andrologist and professor at the Warsaw Medical Academy. Prof. Janczewski decided that the award would be presented biennially to a Polish medical doctor (holding Polish citizenship and permanently residing in Poland) whose writing contributes to the development of his discipline. Professor Janczewski designated the Kosciuszko Foundation as the award's administrator, a role the Foundation has fulfilled since 2004. The award, valued at up to \$15,000, recognizes authors of the most original and substantial publications in clinical medicine. The prize can also be granted to those authors whose research, conducted at a foreign scientific institution, results in a publication. To be eligible, papers must be published in international medical journals in English within the two years preceding each award cycle.

Lipski Award

The Award was established in 2005 to honor the memory of Dr. Witold Lipski (1949-1985), a pioneer of Polish computer science who prematurely died at the age of 35. It is considered the most prestigious distinction awarded to young computer science specialists in Poland. The Award, initiated by Polish computer science experts living abroad: Professors Krzysztof Apt, Wiktor Marek, and Mirosław Truszczyński, has fostered cooperation between science and business. In December 2021, the Foundation for Information Technology Development (FITD), which had previously organized the competition, transferred this role to the Kosciuszko Foundation. Thanks to the generosity of a private donor from the United States, starting in 2022, the Award is presented in two categories: for achievements in the theoretical aspects of computer science and for advancements in computer science applications, with each category carrying a monetary value of approximately \$12,000.

Frank Wilczek Award

The Kosciuszko Foundation established the Frank Wilczek Award in 2019 in partnership with Jagiellonian University to honor high-achieving young Polish scientists. The \$12,000 Award is presented biennially to young Polish scientists who have made significant discoveries in physics, astronomy, or related fields. Scientific achievements considered for the Award must be individual or, in the case of collaborative work, the nominee's contribution must be clearly defined, leading, and essential to the project's success. Professor Frank Wilczek of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, one of the world's most eminent theoretical physicists, received the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2004 with Hugh David Politzer and David Gross for the discovery of asymptotic freedom in the theory of the strong interaction. Patrons of the Award include Professor Frank Wilczek and the Dean of the Faculty of Physics, Astronomy, and Applied Computer Science at Jagiellonian University.

Pienkowski Award The Pienkowski Award is conferred annually by the University of Warsaw Institute of Natural Physics and funded by the Marek Pienkowski Foundation and the Kosciuszko Foundation. It recognizes outstanding scientific achievements in experimental physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, and medicine that have contributed to the development of the Polish scientific research community, as envisioned by Professor Stefan Pienkowski. The namesake of the award, Stefan Pienkowski (1883-1853), was an inspirational, world-renowned scientists, academician, author, and decorated citizen who served as the President of the University of Warsaw. Pienkowski strived to create a culture of scientific education in Poland, building the country's scientific community with an emphasis on cultural awareness and excellence, and instilling a sense of national pride in the achievements of Polish scientists. The Pienkowski Award is granted every two years.

OTHER INITIATIVES

Cultural events and art exhibitions The foundation organizes a wide range of cultural events, including concerts, exhibitions, and lectures, to promote Polish culture in the United States. The KF's art exhibitions feature works by Polish and Polish-American artists.

Teaching English in Poland Program The TEIP English teaching program is a unique initiative centered around American volunteers who travel to summer camps throughout Poland to teach English to children and to introduce them to American culture through sports, art, and cultural projects.

Kosciuszko Foundation Collegium of Eminent Scientists Established in 2012, the Collegium aims to honor eminent scientists of Polish origin and ancestry who have achieved recognition in the United States. Membership consideration is open to distinguished natural scientists working in fields such as physics, chemistry, biology, biotechnology, and other cross-disciplinary areas essential to scientific research, including mathematics, statistics, computer science, and information sciences.

Help Ukraine Initiative When Russia invaded Ukraine, initiating a full-scale war, the KF Board of Trustees launched a fundraising campaign to provide relief to those who had to flee their homes, which were attacked and bombed by the Russian army. The Foundation's members and friends demonstrated remarkable generosity, raising over 1.5 million U.S. dollars. The funds were immediately used to provide humanitarian aid along the Polish-Ukrainian border and to various NGOs assisting Ukrainian refugees across Poland.

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