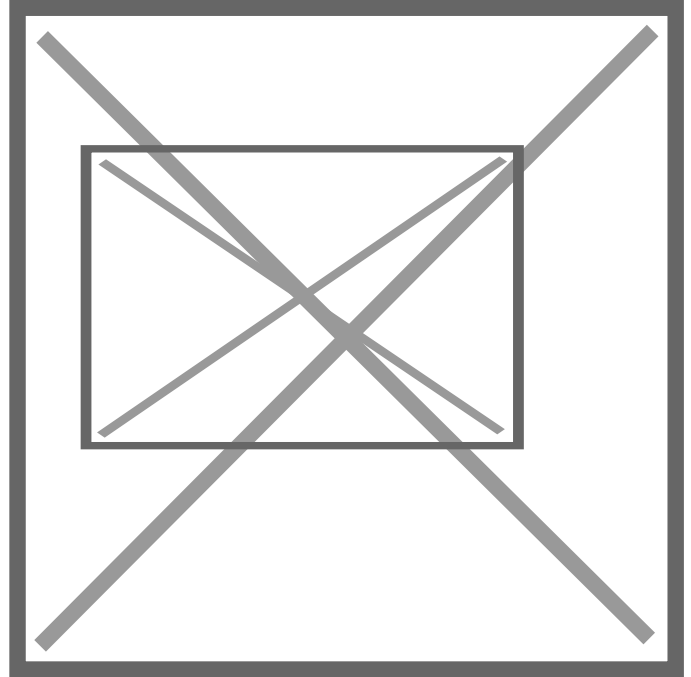


## Poland's season of Thanksgiving

*by Karen Gleason –*



A woman gives a testimony during an open air meeting as Major Kelly Pontsler looks on.

This year, as in years past, the Polish celebrated their Thanksgiving, or “dozynki,” in late August/early September, giving thanks for the harvest. Festivals took place, with traditional music and dancing lasting into the night.

Shortly after Poland's season of Thanksgiving, a new force invaded the country; this force, though, was a benevolent one, comprised of God's soldiers—The Salvation Army had arrived, making Poland the 111th country where the Army officially serves.

Western officers Lt. Colonels Dan and Helen Starrett and Major Kelly Pontsler are part of the international team supporting the Army's work in Poland, which includes leader Colonel Vibeke Krommenhoek (France), Major Hervé Cachelin (Switzerland), and Polish coordinating officers, Captains Andrei and Olga Iniutochkin (Moldova).

Major Cachelin, an international training officer, said: “We aim to build an Army of dedicated Salvationists, ready to move out to save souls, grow saints and serve suffering humanity.”

## **Project Warsaw**

The Army's ministry in Poland—entitled “Project Warsaw”—was officially launched September 23-25. The festivities included open air meetings, a gospel choir and white balloons with the Army's red shield. During the Sunday afternoon ceremony, the newly commissioned Captains Iniutochkin were installed as the coordinating officers, and the first Polish soldiers were enrolled.

The launch required 18 months of preparations and recruiting people.

Colonel Krommenhoek revealed the special significance of the inauguration date: “Haggai 2:18 says that on the 24th day of the ninth month, the foundation of the Lord's Temple was laid. By coincidence—or not—that is the date our inauguration weekend will start.”

Members of the Exeter Band from the United Kingdom Territory participated—their corps has a close tie with the work in Poland, resulting from aid carried out over many years by Exeter Salvationist Brian Hart.

According to a Polish news source (Polskie Radio), many Varsovians came to the meetings out of curiosity, while others wanted to learn more about this largest army in the world; still others “wanted to find out whether its true that many people in Poland associate its members with old men playing religious songs in front of bars and pubs and stores with second-hand goods.”

## **Cooperation with other churches**

In a public statement, The Salvation Army Poland expressed its hope to maintain close ecumenical relationships with local churches, which were invited to attend opening events.

The Salvation Army is virtually unknown here, and some observers questioned if the Catholic Church, prominent in the country, might feel threatened by the Army's presence. Krommenhoek, however, emphasized that the Army focuses on cooperation with other churches and charity organizations.

“The First Baptist Church has already been very hospitable,” said Cachelin. “The captains will be living in part of its center and have already preached at the church, where they presented the project to the congregation.” The Army is renting a two-bedroom, modestly furnished apartment from the Baptist church for the captains' quarters.

The senior pastor of the Baptist church had been helped by The Salvation Army after World War II, and recalled the caring service of the Army.

## **How the Army enters a country**

Lt. Dan Colonel Starrett serves as secretary for SAWSO designate; formerly the Starretts were secretaries for enterprise development, IHQ, when their responsibilities were to determine if the Army, in any given location, while developing its spiritual program, can develop income projects to support itself.

In an interview with *New Frontier*, Lt. Colonel Dan Starrett explained how the Army has traditionally entered a new country: first as a social service organization, then as a church, and finally as a

business. Sometimes the Army first enters as a church before setting up its social services, but it has always set up its businesses last. Starrett acknowledged that, “Countries get confused when a church tells them that it also wants to run stores.” In some countries the Army is not able to do business.

Today the Army is trying to enter countries with all its operations clear from the start. Presenting the three-prong approach of church/social work/income-generating business is fundamental to the Army’s success in a country, Starrett believes.

### **The Army as an unknown**

Starrett recognizes both the difficulty and the potential for the Army’s work in Poland. “What a challenge it is to start The Salvation Army in a country that’s never heard of it. It’s all—the terms, customs, uniforms—totally new to them.”

Fortunately, the Polish have not been put off by the Army’s military structure. “They are very curious about us,” Starrett said. “When we spoke at the Baptist church, they just stared at us; they had never seen or heard of the Army before.”

Although Poland is one of the world’s most Catholic countries, second only to Brazil, evangelical churches are growing there. The people seem open to hearing the Gospel.

In a practical sense, too, The Salvation Army is finding the way smoother in Poland than it might have a few years ago. The dynamics of doing business in Europe have changed since the formation of the European Union (EU), which Poland joined in May 2004. Borders vanish in the Union, and travel is easier. Under EU laws, legal recourse is established, and the Army knows what it needs to do to establish itself.

### **A bright future**

Starrett is optimistic about Poland’s future, and predicts that in 10-15 years it will be an economic powerhouse. It is the third largest country in Europe, behind the United Kingdom and Germany. The Polish people are industrious, and the country is quickly developing an infrastructure of businesses and services. From a business perspective, the time is right to be there. Earlier this year the Starretts studied the feasibility of setting up the recycled clothes industry in Poland, and they were encouraged; that business does well in Europe. They returned to Poland in November for further study. The future is bright for the Army in Poland to develop a sustainable income generation project—one that will begin with a grant, but will become the Army in Poland’s own business.

### **Update**

To date, 101 Polish citizens have signed up as Salvation Army supporting members, thus allowing the Army to apply for registration as an official Christian church in Poland. After the application is submitted, it should take no more than three months to receive the official status.

Worldwide support for the Poland Project has been strong. An anonymous donor in Great Britain provided the Warsaw Corps flag in memory of Major Janina Neale and Brigadier Martha Field. The flag was produced in Hong Kong and a Swiss Salvationist made the flag stand free of charge.

—Sources include: *IHQ news release, TSA Poland newsletter, November 2005, website for Polskie Radio (www.radio.com.pl) and salvationist.org*