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New Festival Honors Memphis in Poland

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The year was 2015. The scene, a dinner held in recognition of that year's Memphis in May honored country, Poland. Former Polish ambassador to the U.S., Ryszard Schnepf was so impressed with Memphis in May that he declared then and there that Poland would have its own festival honoring Memphis. Members of the Polish-American Society of Memphis, who were at the dinner, thought he was joking. He was not.

The Memphis in Poland festival will be held in Sopot, Gdansk, and Warsaw, June 12th-18th. The week-long event is designed to highlight the parallels in food, music, and civil rights between the two places.

Jacek Dutkiewicz and Pawel Jankowski, members of the Polish-American Society of Memphis, were

at that dinner. The society coordinated the festival.

(An aside: the Polish-American Society of Memphis was founded in the late '70s after Len Jankowski opened a phone directory and started calling Polish-sounding names.)

According to Jankowski, they began by thinking small — perhaps they would have a couple of concerts and call it done. But they reached out the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau who hooked them up with the Blues Foundation. And then they started thinking about Poland's recent history with the Solidarity Movement, which led them to the National Civil Rights Museum. (Poland's President Lech Walesa was given a Freedom Award by the museum in 1999.) They also knew that American-style barbecue had become suddenly popular in Poland. Plans started to gel.

The festival kicks off with the opening of an exhibition from the Civil Rights Museum at the European Solidarity Center. The museum's director, Dr. Noelle Trent, will later give a speech.

Blues Night Shift, a popular Polish blues band and onetime competitor at the International Blues Challenge, will perform, as will the Memphis-based group Memphis Mix, which features Marcin Arendt, Joe Restivo, and Susan Marshall, among others. There will also be a performance of "Rock for Human Rights," a multimedia show with music, visuals, and speakers.

The festival will feature a mini Barbecue Fest, with chef Edward Nowakowski, who lived in Memphis for a bit and now live in New York, doing the cooking.

Finally, there will be a virtual chess tournament with the champs from Douglass taking on two Polish schools.

Closer to home, the Polish-American Society regularly holds events in Memphis, including a special Christmas Eve dinner and Poland's independence Day on November 11th. In 2006, they founded the School of Polish Culture and Language.

Tags: Polish-American Society of Memphis, Memphis in Poland, Image

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