Pease on Reed, 'An American in Warsaw: Selected Writings of Hugh S. Gibson, US Minister to Poland 1919-1924'

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Hugh S. Gibson was a rising star in the US diplomatic corps when in 1919 he received an appointment as the first American minister to Warsaw, capital of a Poland newly restored to independence after more than a century of foreign rule. Gibson congratulated himself on having been given responsibility for “probably the most important legation we now have,” reflecting his expectation—widely shared within the government of Woodrow Wilson—that the infant Second Polish Republic, strategically located in a key region of Europe, would stand as a close ally of a United States actively involved in the rebuilding of Europe after the First World War (p. 43). Things did not turn out that way, and in *An American in Warsaw* this perceptive and tart-tongued observer records the impressions and frustrations of his anticlimactic five-year ministry in his own contemporary private and official words. The result is a book both informative and engaging.

The typical envoy who followed Gibson as the State Department’s man in Warsaw during the interwar years was either a political nonentity or a patronage appointee, but he also was an able and well-connected professional diplomat whose posting to Poland owed much to his association with the relief efforts organized there and elsewhere in war-torn Europe by his friend and patron, Herbert Hoover. Gibson took his mission in Poland seriously but not solemnly; he was called a “blithe spirit” so often by colleagues or acquaintances that it seemed part of his name, and the characteristic sense of jaunty playfulness that runs through the dispatches, reports, and personal correspondence collected here will come as a welcome surprise to any reader expecting to have to wade through five-hundred-plus pages of leaden diplomatese. Gibson emerges from these pages as a man of opinions firmly held and plainly spoken, of strong likes and dislikes, and not free of the genteel prejudices common to the Foreign Service of his day but also capable of intelligent and discerning description and analysis of the fledgling Polish state, with its myriad and daunting troubles, and of the notables he dealt with in work and leisure, such as Ignacy Jan Paderewski, Gabriel Narutowicz, and Józef Piłsudski.

Gibson’s first year and a half in Poland was dominated by a pair of significant matters, the first of which came to involve him controversially, while the other found him temporarily absent from his post. In 1919 he reported, not without reason, that reports of pogroms and violence against Jews in Poland, while not groundless, had been greatly exaggerated, but when his views became public knowledge, it exposed him to charges of caring little about Jewish suffering and whitewashing the misdeeds or negligence of a friendly government. It did not help his reputation that he and his
staffers at the Warsaw legation were given to making fun of the traits of East European Jewry and
that he reacted with none too temperate exasperation at his American Zionist critics, but there is no
evidence that his personal attitudes, such as they were, affected his work. In fact, he showed a
sophisticated grasp of the historical complexity of Polish-Jewish relations, and his writings here leave
little doubt that he thought and hoped that “patience ... common sense and hard work” could
overcome the tensions and disorders of the moment, to the mutual benefit of Poland and its Jews
alike (p. 127). Soon after, in January 1920, he accurately warned his superiors in detailed terms that
his host country faced grave danger of military conquest by the nascent Soviet regime, but
he happened to be in the United States for consultations during the crucial weeks of the dire crisis of
that summer, when Polish forces won a last ditch victory at the gates of Warsaw and put the
oncoming Red Army to flight, preventing Polish independence from being snuffed out in infancy.

That same year, Gibson turned down an offer of a position of higher rank in the State Department on
the grounds that “I can do more good in Poland than I can in Washington” (p. 210). However, he had
not foreseen the steady diminution, practically to the vanishing point, of American interest in the
Second Republic as a political or economic partner. This left him with little to do other than comment
on the turbulent and difficult condition of his host country. He stated that “no government, since
orderly governments were established, has been faced with so many serious problems, so many vital
problems, at one time,” and he vacillated between optimism and despair at the future of Poland (p.
211). He also fumed at the inefficiency and what he called the “Oriental” pettiness and
obstructionism of the Polish bureaucracy and lamented that “the foreign policy of Poland, which is of
vital importance during these early years, has been deplorably foolish and at times almost suicidal”
(p. 372). By 1924 Gibson was more than ready for a change of scenery, welcoming his reassignment
as minister to Switzerland—in itself, a measure of the drastically reduced role of Poland in American
concerns. Still, for all his scathing criticism of the faults of Poland and the inadequacies of its
politicians, he consistently and strenuously insisted that the greater fault was that of the victorious
World War I allies, including the United States, for not having done enough to support the reborn
Poland they had sponsored and to guarantee its security. He retained an affection for the country and
grieved at the destruction of the Polish capital that had been his temporary home when he returned
in 1946, accompanying Hoover as part of a mission to survey needs for relief efforts following an even
more devastating world war.

Editor Vivian Hux Reed has skillfully assembled this collection of Gibson’s writings, drawn mainly
from his personal papers and other collections at the Hoover Institution Archives, as well as the
records of the State Department in the US National Archives and the published series Foreign
Relations of the United States. She has collaborated with Jochen Böhler, Jan-Roman Potocki, and
M. B. B. Biskupski on an excellent introduction that provides useful context for Gibson’s Polish
tenure, explains what he wanted to do there and why, and squarely and fairly discusses the historical
debates regarding their subject. The diplomat’s son, the late Michael Francis Gibson, has added a
brief appreciation of his father. Their combined good work has produced a book that gives us a
valuable self-portrait of a noteworthy American diplomat and, through his eyes and with his witty and
lively pen, a revealing picture of Poland in the early years of its restored statehood.

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