

# Windsor's Polish community celebrates declaration of May as national Polish Heritage Month

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Source: "Windsor Star" • Published Mar 05, 2024 • Last updated 2 days ago • 3 minute read



Tony Blak is shown at the Union Bakery in Windsor on Friday, February 23, 2024. PHOTO BY DAN JANISSE /Windsor Star

Following the annual Shrove Tuesday tradition, appreciation for the popular Eastern European pastry will gain heightened importance now that May has formally been declared national Polish Heritage Month, thanks to the efforts a local member of parliament.

Motion-75 — championed by Polish-born MP's Irek Kusmierczyk (L — Windsor-Tecumseh) and Peter Fonseca (L — Mississauga East-Cooksville) — passed unanimously in the House of Commons on Feb. 7 establishing May as the first-ever national Polish Heritage Month.

It also designates May 3 as Polish Constitution Day — marking the date Poland's written constitution was ratified in 1791, second in the world following the United States.

“This is recognizing the tremendous contributions that Polish Canadians have made to building communities like ours here in Windsor-Essex,” said MP Irek Kusmierczyk (L — Windsor-Tecumseh), who is also Chair of the Canada-Poland Parliamentary Friendship Group.

“Here locally, we have hundreds of doctors, teachers, engineers, electricians, autoworkers and business owners who are Polish and who help to build our community. There's more than 1.1 million Polish Canadians across the country.”

Kusmierczyk's family immigrated from Windsor from Poland when he was five years old. Their fledgling years in Canada were spent living in Polonia Park — recently rebranded to River Garden Homes — a nonprofit housing project established by the Polish Canadian Centre Association in 1985.

His deep involvement in Windsor-Essex's Polish community from an early age included serving as an altar boy at Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church, participating in house league soccer for Polonia Park and Blak's Bakery, and attending Polish school.

"When the votes were taking place, I was thinking about my mom and dad and my brother and the sacrifices they made leaving Poland and coming here to basically begin a new life," said Kusmierczyk.

"So, this was a great honour to be part of this."

Kusmierczyk pointed to longstanding Polish-owned businesses in Windsor-Essex like Blak's Bakery, Victoria Steel, and Narmco.

"Here in Windsor-Essex, Polish Canadians have been here for well over 100 years helping to build our community up," said Kusmierczyk.

Building upon the valuable contributions of Polish-born individuals, engineer Ralph Modjeski served as a consultant and construction supervisor for the Ambassador Bridge, the critical international border crossing which transports \$323-million worth of goods cross the Windsor-Detroit border each day.

Kusmierczyk also highlighted the nearly 80-year history of diplomatic relations between Canada and Poland.

Tony Blak, owner of Union Bakery and former owner of Blak's Bakery, pointed to "an entrepreneurial spirit in the Polish community that has done well for our community."

Blak's grandfather initially immigrated from Poland to the United States in 1905, before later settling in Windsor and opening a bakery in 1918.

Blak's Bakery, still located at 1022 Langlois Ave. exactly where it launched more than a century ago, laid the foundation for Blak's enduring family baking legacy in the Windsor-Essex region.

"Our family has always been associated with baking and with the Polish community," said Blak. In fact, the popular paczki day tradition was propelled by Blak and his father nearly three decades ago.

"The paczki celebration was started by myself and my dad back in the early 90s," said Blak.

"Although we had made them for a long time, the whole community got involved in a little bit of polish-ness.

"On St. Patties Day everybody wants to be Irish, and on Paczki day everybody wants to be Polish." He said national Polish Heritage Month is the perfect excuse to indulge in popular Polish culinary delights such as cabbage rolls and pierogies.

"I'm always proud to be of Polish heritage, so to have it recognized by the Canadian parliament, it makes me proud."

Kusmierczyk said May 2 will mark the inaugural raising of the Polish Flag at Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

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