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Scott Thompson – "Anti-Marlboro Man"

Witold A. Zatoński^{1,2}

¹Health Promotion Foundation, Nadarzyn, Poland ²Higher Vocational State School in Kalisz, Poland

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Witold A. Zatoński, Health Promotion Foundation, 51 Mszczonowska Street, 05-830 Nadarzyn, Poland, e-mail: wazatonski@promocjazdrowia.pl

"Scott Thompson, a Californian, spent most of a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall in Poland, where he used his only marketable skill, his native language, to support himself as a teacher. Surrounded by a frenzy of cigarette marketing, he channeled his revulsion and shame into tobacco control efforts".

This was the note I received from Scott after asking him for an autobiographical piece devoted to the time he spent in Poland in the 1990s. "As you know, tobacco control is one of my favorite topics. In contrast, among the subjects I least like to discuss is myself" – he added. Instead, attached to his e-mail was a reflective essay on the uncompromising barrage of marketing practices that the US tobacco companies were delivering against the newly democratizing nations of Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Iron Curtain (see *One American reflects on cigarette promotions in Poland in the 1990s*, pp. 131-132).

This modesty, and the willingness to use every opportunity to promote public health rather than himself, are characteristic of Scott. However, this humorous self-deprecation did not manage to fool Daniel Michaels, a Wall Street Journal reporter who in 1999 described the phenomenon of Polish anti-tobacco advocacy for his newspaper (Fig. 1). Scott introduced himself to the reporter as an "aimless, unambitious Californian" but Michaels saw right through that. In his article, he presented Scott for who he was - an idealistic health advocate who decided to devote a decade of his life to help defeat the tobacco-related disease epidemic that was ravaging his second homeland. Scott was also representative of a larger group of Western health advocates - medical doctors, epidemiologists, activists - who brought invaluable expertise, knowledge, and passion to our struggle against smoking. It is thanks to people like Scott that Poland's anti-tobacco efforts were so successful, and that we could halve lung cancer incidence among Polish men between the peak years and today.

Pollish Activists Make Headway In Fight Against Tobacco Use - WSJ

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BUSINESS AND FINANCE - EUROPE

Polish Activists Make Headway In Fight Against Tobacco Use

By DANIEL MICHAELS Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal Updated April 8, 1999 12:01 a.m. ET

Unlikely Sidekick

At the same time, he is calling on U.S. health-advocacy groups to train lobbyists across Eastern Europe in "marketing and achieving goals." Spearheading this drive is his unlikely American sidekick, Scott Thompson.

A self-described "aimless, unambitious Californian," Mr. Thompson, 34, drifted from Tenerife in the Canary Islands to Poland in 1990 to teach English. Incensed at seeing how American cigarette makers were wooing his teenage students, the wiry basketball fanatic discovered his "obsession" in educating Poles about the health risks of smoking. A year ago, he moved to Warsaw from the small northern city of Torun to work with Dr. Zatonski.

"When Scott came here, he was a real greenhorn," says Dr. Zatonski, who dubs his acolyte the "Anti-Mariboro Man." "Now he's getting better and better," he adds.

Dr. Zatonski, who serves as top health-policy adviser to Poland's deputy finance minister, says he has improved at promoting health himself. A doctor of internal medicine in Poland during the 1960s, he saw that most of his young patients with heart attacks were heavy smokers. After training in Western Europe in the late 1970s, where he learned of smoking's potential health risks, he returned home and "realized tobacco was one of the main reasons we had such high premature mortality in Poland."

Sitting in front of large bowl of fruit on a table in his office, a picture of himself with Pope John Paul II displayed above his desk, Dr. Zatonski recalls that in communist Poland he was "under heavy attack from colleagues who said it was nonsense to sugges controlling cancer by controlling smoking." He also got a warning from communist authorities for a 1986 comment in the Western media criticizing the government's promotion of cigarettes, vodka and fatty sausage as a way "to keep people quiet." So he began collecting data and organizing conferences to make his case.

FIG. 1. The Wall Street Journal April 8, 1999

DISCLOSURE

Author reports no conflict of interest.