

And Now Let's Toast Nicolaus Copernicus, The Famous German

* * * 3/10/73
German? So One Politician
Claims; at Any Rate, It All
Illustrates Ethnic Politics

WSJ
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WASHINGTON — Next month the Smithsonian Institution will throw a dignified bash honoring the 500th birthday of Nicolaus Copernicus, the astronomer. The Postal Service will issue a commemorative stamp, and President Nixon is being asked to proclaim the week of April 23 as "Nicolaus Copernicus Week."

It's a fitting tribute to the man known as the father of modern astronomy. And it's a couple of things more:

—It's a classic case study of old-fashioned ethnic politics, in which Congressmen show up at meetings of Polish-American groups to praise Copernicus as an outstanding Pole and discuss his theory of celestial mechanics. There, he's called by his "real" name, Mikolaj Kopernik, and his fame as a 16th Century scientific superstar is touted as an antidote to those snide Polish jokes.

—It's a Communist plot, abetted by the liberal news media. Copernicus, insists a lone wolf Congressman, was really a *German*.

Controversy was something that Copernicus largely managed to avoid during his lifetime, though he is said to have been the victim of the world's first recorded Polish joke. After his death in 1543, however, the Roman Catholic church mounted fierce resistance to his concept of the planets moving around a stationary sun. Now his view is universally accepted, and the Copernicus cult has taken the offensive. This, in turn, has led to the ethnic politicking.

Dogged Conclusions

Ethnic politics turns up regularly in the dull gray pages of the Congressional Record, with lawmakers wooing Italians and blacks by inserting articles and speeches about Columbus and Crispus Attucks. For about the last year Copernicus has been a favorite among members representing heavily Polish constituencies. Of course, speakers praising him have to know at least a little about astronomy, but they're up to it.

Here, for example, is an analysis given one day last year on the House floor by Rep. Thaddeus Dulski (D., N.Y.): "Until the discovery by Copernicus, it had been accepted theory that the universe revolved around the earth. Ignoring tradition and his peers, Copernicus persevered with his research and doggedly concluded that, rather than revolving around the earth, the universe revolved around the sun."

And here's another assessment, delivered two weeks later before the New Jersey division of the Polish-American Congress by Rep. Henry Helstoski (D., N.J.): "Ignoring tradition and his peers, Copernicus persevered with his research and doggedly concluded that, rather than revolving around the earth, the universe revolved around the sun."

As it turns out, there's a helpful fellow at the Library of Congress who bats out rough drafts for lawmakers who want to praise Copernicus. Under the circumstances, some duplication is to be expected. (This draft, incidentally, accurately describes the original Copernican theory, but that's outdated now. Early in this century it was established that, while the planets of our solar system move around the sun, the whole blooming universe certainly doesn't.)

"Great Prussian Astronomer"

Even before the Smithsonian's official birthday celebration next month, Polish-American groups around the country have been throwing banquets and seminars, drawing an unusual mixture of scientists, historians and politicians. Edward Rozanski, chairman of the "Mikolaj Kopernik quincentennial observance" committee in Chicago, gets right to the point of these affairs: "The fame and greatness of Kopernik is a weapon which can erase and nullify today's many insults, taunts and jibes against the good and honest names of all the Poles in America."

"Copernicus" just doesn't *sound* Polish, and his boosters are trying to get people to stop using this Latinized version of the name. At a Copernican banquet last month in Milwaukee, University of Wisconsin professor Edmund Kawacki opened his speech by complaining that Copernicus "is rarely if ever associated with Poland or Polish culture." It's a bum rap, he continued:


"No one in America speaks of Descartes as Renatus Cartesius, for we know he was a Frenchman, and we pronounce his name in French. Perhaps if we all knew that Copernicus was a Pole, his Polish name pronounced in Polish would be standard, too."

It's obvious this is a subject that people can get pretty touchy about. So it was doubly shocking the other day when Rep. John Rarick gave the Congressional Record an analysis bluntly entitled: "Copernicus Was German."

Mr. Rarick is a super-conservative Democrat from Louisiana who often angers colleagues by inserting into the Record material derogatory to blacks and Jews. His new one promises to anger Poles.

"Now we learn," Mr. Rarick said, "that our government and the liberal press have joined together to exploit for political benefit the great Prussian astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus by designating him a Pole." He linked this to "Communist efforts to cover up their short-

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comings and cultural voids by rewriting history to steal credit and acclaim of accomplishment."

The nationality of Copernicus actually is an old argument in that part of Northern Europe where he served as a minor churchman and worked at the mathematics of the solar system. The towns were all mixed up with Germans and Poles, according to a Polish historian in the March issue of Smithsonian magazine. It's the historian's opinion that Copernicus could speak both Polish and German, but that he thought in Latin.

It was in Latin that Copernicus wrote his 1543 book arguing that the movement of the sun, moon and planets around the earth was only illusory, and that everything really revolved around the sun. And it was in Latin that an anti-Copernican theologian delivered "the first scornful Polack joke of historical record," according to Prof. Zawacki in his Milwaukee banquet speech last month.

By this account, the theologian was asked what he thought of Copernicus' new theory. What he said in Latin translates as an attack on "that Sarmatian astronomer who moves the earth and stops the sun." Mr. Zawacki said Sarmatian is another word for barbarian, and using it to describe Copernicus was like using "Polack" in English today." In his speech it took Mr. Zawacki four paragraphs to explain the joke.

Despite Rep. Rarick's suspicions of a Communist plot, Congress may formally come down on the side of Poland as Copernicus' real homeland. Last year the House easily passed a resolution specifically noting his Polish origin and asking President Nixon to proclaim Feb. 19, 1973, as "Nicolaus Copernicus Day." The Senate didn't get around to acting, so the astronomer's February birthday went unproclaimed. Now, Rep. Dulski is sponsoring a resolution transferring the proclamation to the week of April 23 as part of the Smithsonian's celebration.

Congressmen of Polish origin, of course, are keen to pass it, as are members whose districts contain a lot of Poles. This includes Rep. Frank Annunzio, chairman of the Italian-American Democratic Committee of Cook County and a master of the Chicago school of ethnic politics. Mr. Annunzio carefully notes that the great Polish astronomer received part of his education in Italy, where "he must have received a certain amount of inspiration, encouragement and impetus from the productive activities taking place in Italy during that time."

Greek ethnic sensibilities haven't become aroused yet, but they could. As with the old Leif Ericson vs. Columbus argument, which pits Scandinavians against Italians, there's a who-was-first question involved.

Seventeen centuries before Copernicus, the Greek scientist Aristarchus suggested the possibility of a stationary sun at the center of a moving family of planets. Copernicus referred to Aristarchus' theory in an early draft of his book, but crossed it out. On Copernicus' behalf, however, astronomical historians say his formal proofs were more convincing than the tentative arguments of Aristarchus. At any rate, both astronomers have been honored by having craters on the moon named for them, significant craters bright enough to be located with the naked eye.