



Polish Hero an Inspiration

PLAYING HOST TO A NOBEL PEACE PRIZE recipient and a former President is a great honour, so the visit last summer by former Polish President, Mr Lech Walesa, to a fundraising event organised by the Friends of Rehab in Mayo was a very special occasion.

Mr Walesa, who received his Nobel Peace Prize in 1983 and was elected President of Poland in 1990, now travels the world as part of his Foundation's work to raise awareness of the need for people to work together to bring about change in society. His presence at a Rehab event was particularly apt given the organisation's activity in championing the rights of people with disabilities throughout Ireland and in campaigning for changes in attitudes.



Pictured above: Lech Walesa speaking at a gala fundraising event organised by the Friends of Rehab in Mayo

Lech Walesa – the essential guide

1943

Lech Walesa is **born** in Popowo, Poland.

1967

He began working as an **electrician** in Lenin Shipyard, Gdansk.

1969

He **married** Mirosława Danuta Golos. The couple have **eight children** together.

1970

Member of illegal strike committee in Gdansk shipyard. Walesa was **arrested** for "anti-social behaviour" and spent a year in prison.

1980

Walesa became **leader** of the occupational strike at Gdansk shipyard, which was followed by a general strike across Poland. In September that year, the Communist Government signed an agreement with the Strike Coordination Committee to allow legal organisation, but not actual free trade unions.

Pictured left: The Archbishop of Tuam, Dr Michael Neary, shakes Lech Walesa's hand after he planted a tree in memory of Pope John Paul II in the grounds of Knock Basilica



Pictured above: Polish student Mirka Gorecka meets her hero, Lech Walesa, in Mayo. The Dublin-based student wrote in her *Irish Times* column that the former President of Poland was the person she would most like to meet

Mr Walesa and his entourage, which included his wife, Danuta, and daughter, Brygida, had an action-packed schedule during their weekend in Mayo. A mass in the Basilica in Knock was followed by a tree-planting ceremony in memory of Pope John Paul II and a visit to the Hennigan Heritage Farm near Swinford.

The highlight of the visit was undoubtedly a glittering Gala Banquet in the Breaffy House Hotel, where the man, who was instrumental in changing the course of world history, addressed a captivated audience. He outlined the fight for Polish

freedom through the 80s and 90s, saying that his country was still looking for a third way between capitalism and communism. He expressed his hope that Ireland and Poland could work together to create a framework for a new Europe.

There are an estimated 170,000 Polish people currently living and working in Ireland. Representatives of the Polish community in Mayo attended the weekend's events and were delighted to have the opportunity to meet a man who is considered a hero in his home country.

Among them was Mirka Gorecka, a young Polish woman, who recently completed the Leaving Certificate in Ireland and who wrote of her experience in *The Irish Times*. In her column, she commented on her first impression of meeting her hero, the former electrician from the Gdansk Shipyard. "He jokes with the Poles. We feel that we are talking to an ordinary man, but actually we are talking to one of the greatest, the most courageous, the most determined."

Rehab is set to build even stronger links with Poland in coming months with the opening of the Rehab Enterprises plant in Lodz. The operation will provide a service to Dell computers and aims to employ 100 people within its first year, 50 per cent of whom will be people with a disability.

For Rehab Group's Director of Enterprises, Michael Horgan, the new Rehab Enterprises initiative is playing its own small role in the ongoing deepening of relationships between Ireland and Poland. He says, "Many of President Walesa's fellow countrymen and women have come to Ireland and greatly added to our economy and our community. Rehab is greatly looking forward to embarking on its new project in Poland and to further strengthening the links between the two countries." ■

1981

Named "**Man of the Year**" by *Time* Magazine. Walesa arrested and interned for 11 months.

1983

He received the **Nobel Peace Prize** for his contribution in bringing about tremendous change in Poland.

1988

He organised an occupational strike in Gdansk shipyard and, after 80 days, the Government signed an agreement to re-establish the Solidarity trade union and to organise "half-free" elections.

1990

He was elected **President of Poland**, a position he held until 1995.

2004

Gdansk International Airport renamed as **Gdansk Lech Walesa Airport** to commemorate the famous Gdansk citizen.