
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 16-16

Ambassador Romuald Spasowski House

3101 Albemarle Street NW
Square 2041 Lot B

Meeting Date: April 27, 2017
Applicant: Forest Hills Neighborhood Alliance
Affected ANC: 3F

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Ambassador Romuald Spasowski House at 3101 Albemarle Street NW as a historic landmark to be entered into the DC Inventory of Historic Sites. The Period of Significance extends from 1979 to 1981 and represents the dates of occupancy by Polish Ambassador Romuald Spasowski before his dramatic defection to the United States in 1981. HPO further recommends that the Board forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.



Historic and Architectural Background

The dwelling at 3101 Albemarle Street NW is a stately two-story, central-passage-plan, Colonial Revival-style stone house constructed in 1926 in the emerging suburban neighborhood of Forest Hills. The house, constructed for owners Howard and Katie Fulmer as a single-family dwelling, sits high upon a hill on the north side of Albemarle Street, one block east of Connecticut Avenue and directly across from the trail entrance to the Soapstone Valley. In 1979, the house was

purchased by the Polish government at the encouragement of then-ambassador Romuald Spasowski, a lifelong diplomat and official member of the Communist Party of Poland, who was fulfilling his second tour of duty as Ambassador to the United States.

Spasowski arrived in Washington in 1978 for his second tour as ambassador where he, his wife and family lived in a “cramped suburban apartment” provided by the Polish government for previous ambassadors. Not long after arriving, Spasowski found that the Polish Embassy on 16th Street was a “security espionage unit” where all of the servants and staff members were reporting back to the KGB. Suffocated by the Russian surveillance and by their cramped quarters, the Spasowskis insisted that the Polish government provide an official residence for them. The Polish government purchased the house at 3101 Albemarle Street, and for the next two years, the house would come not only to serve as the home of the Spasowskis, but as a “safe house” for them during the “Polish Crisis” up until Romuald Spasowski defected to the United States in 1981. After his defection, the house remained vacant until 1988, but from 1988 until 2008, it again served as the official Polish Ambassador’s residence.

Once an ardent communist, Spasowski’s loyalty to the party had begun to waver even before he began his tour as ambassador in 1978, a sentiment that would become more entrenched with the rise of the Solidarity Movement which Spasowski saw as symbolizing the best hopes and aspirations of the Polish people. As his loyalties continued to shift and Spasowski became concerned about his privacy and safety at the Polish Embassy building, the Ambassador increasingly sought refuge at his residence at 3101 Albemarle Street. There Spasowski kept a safe for official and personal documents and met secretly with diplomats of western European countries to discuss the state of the Solidarity Movement and ways to aid the struggling Polish people.

In December 1981, as the Polish Crisis reached a head and President General Jaruzelski declared martial law in Poland, Romuald Spasowski defected to the United States, becoming the highest ranking diplomat to do so during the Cold War. The actual defection occurred on December 19, 1981 when Spasowski called the State Department from his residence to seek political asylum. Over the next several hours, the ambassador and his wife packed their belongings with District policemen and FBI agents standing guard around the house, and then escorting them from the residence to a safe house. Three days later, President Ronald Reagan personally and officially granted the Spasowskis asylum, “welcoming them to America as genuine Polish patriots.” Romuald Spasowski died in 1995; since his death two films have been produced based on the Spasowski story.

Evaluation

The Ambassador Romuald Spasowski House at 3101 Albemarle Street meets D.C. Designation Criterion A (Events) as it was the site of events that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture and development of the District. In particular, the property was the scene of one of the most significant and dramatic diplomatic events in the history of the Cold War when on December 19, 1981 Polish Ambassador Romuald Spasowski defected to the United States from the house. The house had been Spasowski’s “safe house” up until his defection and was the site of his actual defection.

The property also meets D.C. Designation Criterion C (Individuals) for its association with the lives of persons significant to the District of Columbia, namely that of Romuald Spasowski, a distinguished diplomat and then official member of the Polish Communist Party who applied for political asylum while in Washington, D.C. during his term as ambassador to the United States. Spasowski whose defection provided the Reagan administration with a public relations victory at a time of political crisis between the United States and Poland, worked with the Reagan and Bush administrations in ensuing years towards better conditions for the Polish people and improved political relations between the United States and Poland. In 1987, six years after his defection, Spasowski was present, alongside President Reagan at the ceremony marking the end of U.S. sanctions against Poland.

The Period of Significance of the property is 1979-1981, the period of time in which Romuald Spasowski and his family lived in the house.

For the same reasons cited above, the property meets National Register Criteria A and B with Politics and Government as the Areas of Significance. The property also meets National Register Criterion Consideration G for exceptional significance, for its association with Romuald Spasowski and his defection, a person and event of national import.