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HST 420

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Polska Imigracja (Polish Immigration)

The three days prior to Easter Sunday are important across the world for Catholics, as it typically marks the end of their Lent. Celebrations take up most of that weekend up until Easter Sunday itself when families, Catholic or not, will share candies and a large meal. The day after Easter is usually uneventful as it marks the return of the work week, except in the cities of South Bend and Buffalo. If one were to find themselves on Easter Monday in South Bend, Indiana, they would be greeted to thousands of Polish Americans parading through the street for a holiday known as Dyngus Day. That same day halfway across the United States, citizens of Buffalo, New York celebrate by indulging themselves with sausages, beer, and an old mating ritual that takes on a peculiar look.¹

South Bend and Buffalo are not the only cities in the United States that have a distinctly large and well-preserved Polish population. Poland's culture and ideals exist in several major cities throughout the United States, as do communities of Polish immigrants. In Chicago, Poles seeking religious freedom and a sense of community free from oppression would go on to form the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America.² The Catholic church was a center for Polish communities to learn and interact with each other, being a focal point of Polish villages. Language and traditions have survived, to a certain degree, but have also been intertwined with

¹Robert Siegel, "Celebrating Dyngus Day, a Buffalo, N.Y., Tradition," NPR, April 18, 2006, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5349324>.

²Marek Kępa, "How Chicago Became a Distinctly Polish American City," Culture.pl, last modified April 27, 2020, <https://culture.pl/en/article/how-chicago-became-a-distinctly-polish-american-city>.

American cultures. This paper argues that Polish culture survived the trip across the Atlantic and heavily impacted communities in American cities.

The historiography on Polish immigration is not very well kept, surprisingly so considering the number of Polish immigrants that came to the United States. Much of the work done that examines the lives and cultures of Polish immigrants in the United States is through the lens of major cities, such as Chicago and Cleveland. Dominic Pacyga's book "Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago: Workers on the South Side, 1880-1992" examines everything from the journeys Poles took to leave their country, to Polish women in the University of Chicago's Women's Club.³ There has been similar work done in Cleveland by John Grabowski. His book "Polish Americans and Their Communities of Cleveland" begins with a history of Poland dating back to the Piast dynast in 966 and ends the section on Polish history in the 1970s. In the book is a collection of Polish American figures, Polish organizations in Chicago, Polish culture in Chicago, Polish business in Chicago.⁴ These are well-synthesized works that investigate several aspects of Polish immigration to the United States, but they limit their scope of immigrant life to specific, Rust Belt cities. This paper connects the life of Polish immigrants in the United States throughout several cities and regions, making it a more complete collection of the overall Polish immigrant experience.

By examining both the reasons Poles fled to the United States and their enduring culture across the United States, this paper will fill a gap that is not recorded often. A large reason for the gap, which is shown well in the 1910 census, is that Poland was not a fully independent

³ Dominic Pacyga, *Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago: Workers on the South Side, 1880-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 161.

⁴ John Grabowski, *Polish Americans and their Communities of Cleveland* (Cleveland: Cleveland State University, 1976) 101-227.

nation for 123 years. Following the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, it would not be until after the first World War that Poland would reemerge as a country in 1918.⁵ When questioned on their country of origin, many people replied “Poland” to the 1910 census takers. The United States decided that this was not enough and had Poles name which part of Poland they were from under the partition. Available choices that they could respond with were, “Poland Austrian, Poland Russian, Poland German, and Poland Unknown.”⁶ This grey area about whether or not Poland was a country of origin lead to confusion amongst people recording history at the time.

First, this paper will examine the reasons why Poles fled from their home country and what drew them to the United States. Through partitions by oppressive regimes and religious intolerance, many Poles were driven from Poland. Second, I will explain how Polish communities lived and thrived in American cities like Buffalo, Chicago, and New York. Third this paper will highlight the importance of the Catholic church in the lives of these immigrants and their communities. Lastly, this paper will conclude with an examination of Polish traditions that were adopted in the United States and how they were Americanized throughout the years.

Poland, although an old country with a strong people and culture, did not appear on European maps for 123 years. Through a series of three treaties drawn up by the Prussian, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian Empires, Poland would cease to exist as an independent country. Not long after the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, Napoleon of France would sweep through Europe, eventually meeting his demise in a failed invasion of Russia. Signing the Treaty of Vienna, the agreeing European powers created a Congress Kingdom of Poland that, while semi-

⁵Department of State, “A Guide to the United States’ History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: Poland,” Office of the Historian, last accessed September 27th, 2021, <https://history.state.gov/countries/poland>.

⁶U.S. Census Bureau, Population, (U.S. Census Bureau, 1910), 788, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1910/volume-1/volume-1-p11.pdf>.

autonomous, was also ruled over exclusively by the Russian Emperor.⁷ The Russians ruled over the Polish with a hard hand, leading to unrest amongst Poles. This, combined with the success of a recent uprising in Greece, drove Poles to rise against the Russian empire. The revolution failed for a number of reasons, but what is more significant is the harsh repercussions handed down for the mutiny. Of those that participated in the uprising, several thousands of Poles had their properties taken, ethnic institutions lost, protective laws revoked, faced exile to Siberia, and became subject to a new tyrannical Russification process.⁸ This pushed tens of thousands of Poles out of Poland into countries like Great Britain and the United States. While the Congress Kingdom was incorporated into Russia and all Poles were subject to the brutality of imperialism, none suffered as much as their Jewish neighbors.

When Russian Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, the blame was inaccurately placed on the Jews in the empire. Anti-Semitist sentiment spread throughout Eastern Europe, leading the Russian government to encourage horrific massacres of Jewish communities, called pogroms.⁹ These government-supported killings would continue into the twentieth century, prompting mass migrations of Jews from Eastern Europe to the United States. According to a study by the Committee for the Defense of Jews in Poland and Other East European Countries, there were pogroms in over 120 Polish towns where Jews were killed, their businesses ruined,

⁷ “The November Uprising: What the Poles were Fighting for and Why,” Poland.pl, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, last accessed November 10th, 2021, <https://poland.pl/history/historical-events/the-november-uprising-what-were-the-poles-fighting-for-and-why/>.

⁸ Jarosław Szarek, “We are telling the world about Poland. The President of the Institute of National Remembrance on why Poland has managed to survive so many difficulties,” Institute of National Remembrance, last modified May 11th, 2020, <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/digital-resources/articles/7368,We-are-telling-the-world-about-Poland-The-President-of-the-Institute-of-National.html>.

⁹ “A People at Risk,” Library of Congress, Congress.gov, last accessed November 11th, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/polish-russian/a-people-at-risk/>.

homes destroyed, and synagogues burned.¹⁰ It was believed that pogroms were carried out by the troops of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, but as the study points out, many of the agitators were common citizens alongside Polish Legionaries. In April of 1919, Polish soldiers returning to Warszawa brutally beat Jewish citizens and stole from Jewish businesses, causing thousands of marks worth in damages. That following month of May, at the Kovel Station in Warszawa, hundreds of Jews waiting at the terminal were ambushed by Polish Legionaries and an angry mob. Several Jews were stabbed, beaten, and robbed by the Polish Legionaries in a bloody fashion.¹¹ These terrible, state-sponsored murders and robberies prompted a mass fleeing of Jews from Poland and surrounding countries to seek shelter in the United States. It is estimated that from 1880 to the early 1920s, about three million Jews immigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe.¹² The United States of America was a promise of not just religious toleration, but also that of opportunity and fortune to Polish immigrants.

Life in Poland, especially in the periods being ruled over by empires, offered little in terms of economic opportunities. Many Poles fled to the United States for a chance to earn money, often times sending a piece, if not a majority, of their pay back to their families in Poland. Many Poles made the voyage across the Atlantic at a young age, such as the Petryła brothers and Franciszek Gąsowski. At the age of eighteen, Gąsowski followed the example of his fellow countrymen and went to the United States looking for work. He found work in a coal mine, as many immigrants did, and worked to set money aside to return to Poland and buy

¹⁰ *Evidence of Pogroms in Poland and Ukraina: Documents, Accounts of Eye-witnesses, Proceedings in Polish Parliament, Local Press Reports, etc.* (New York: Information Bureau of the Committee for the Defense of Jews in Poland and Other East European Countries, 1919), 7.

¹¹ *Evidence of Pogroms in Poland and Ukraina*, 101.

¹² "A People at Risk," Library of Congress.

himself a farm with land.¹³ Some Poles, like the Petryla brothers, were sent to the United States by their father in order to earn money for the betterment of the family back home. As fate would have it, they also found work in the coal mines of Chicago and Pennsylvania. The brothers sent money back to their father Józef before returning to Poland a few years later.¹⁴ Poland, even in her youth as a reborn nation, did not offer much in economic success apart from agriculture. While numerous factors drove Poles to move to the United States, the Polish immigrant communities developed there showed similar characteristics throughout.

Polish immigrants, corresponding with other Eastern and Southern European immigrants coming to the United States, took jobs where they could find them. More often than not, these Poles were employed in manual, unskilled labor. For Józef Bocek and the aforementioned Franciszek Gąsowski and Petryla brothers, there was work to be found in the coal mining industry. As Bocek wrote in his letters back home, “I earn between 2 and 3 dollars a day, but I earn nothing in the Summer....”¹⁵ These were low-wage jobs, usually with poor working conditions and were physically taxing. Immigrants coming to the United States at the turn of the century were finding bountiful jobs as factory workers in rust belt cities, Poles differed not. Many of the Polish community in Cleveland, Ohio found work in steel mills and other industrial jobs, working up to fourteen hours a day six days a week.¹⁶ Polish people were well known as a

¹³ Hanna Gąsowska-Kröhnert, “Franciszek Gąsowski,” Archiwum Emigranta, Organizatorem Muzeum Emigracji jest Miasto Gdynia, last accessed November 11th, 2021, https://www.archiwumemigranta.pl/en/przeczytaj/franciszek_gasowski.

¹⁴ After the Petryla brothers experienced a near-death explosion and found an underwater lake in the mines, they wrote back to their father that the working conditions in the United States were too dangerous. He responded, ordering them back to Poland. “Historia rodziny Petrylów,” Archiwum Emigranta, Organizatorem Muzeum Emigracji jest Miasto Gdynia, last accessed November 11th, 2021, https://www.archiwumemigranta.pl/en/przeczytaj/history_of_the_ptyl_family.

¹⁵ Magdalena Legocki, “Józef Bocek,” Archiwum Emigranta, Organizatorem Muzeum Emigracji jest Miasto Gdynia, last accessed November 11th, 2021, https://www.archiwumemigranta.pl/en/przeczytaj/jozef_bocek.

¹⁶ John Grabowski, *Polish Americans*, 219.

working people, taking work where they could get it and not refusing extra hours. Those who did not find jobs in these industries turned to what Poles did best, that being agriculture.

There were several Polish farming towns established in Texas, along with what is believed to be the oldest Polish settlement in the United States, Panna Marya. Poles, unlike their Texan counterparts, employed the entire family unit in the fields. One could find father, mother, and child tilling the dirt of a cotton farm in Texas.¹⁷ To many native-born Poles, this was work they were familiar with, having been the children of farmers back home. Evident in these farming towns was that Poles liked to stick together, no matter the circumstance.

Polish immigrants in the United States tended to live in communities together, creating organizations to help maintain their Polish identities. The Polish National Alliance, founded under its official name in 1880, promoted the development of Polish immigrants, Polish industry, Polish schools, and Polish cultural holidays.¹⁸ They also took on an aid approach, paying out over a million dollars to families who lost loved ones. Polish grocery owners founded the Polish Grocers Association (P.G.A.) in 1926, becoming a cooperative group for Polish businesses. Members were given spaces to store in a warehouse, business owners gave each other discounts on bulk buys, and even offered management training to new businesses. The P.G.A. helped give appeal to Polish businesses and put them at the forefront of Cleveland, the organization lasting into the 1960s.¹⁹ Similar to the P.G.A. in the pursuit of economic stability, the Polish National Union of America (P.N.U.) was founded in 1908 by Prime Bishop Franciszek Hodur. The P.N.U. provided monetary support for Polish Catholic parishes and their members, giving several

¹⁷ Leroy Hodges, *Slavs on Southern Farms: An Account of the Bohemian, Slovak, and Polish Agricultural Settlements in the Southern States* (District of Columbia: G.P.O., 1914), 11.

¹⁸ Paul Fox, *The Poles in America* (New York: G.H. Doran, 1922), 90.

¹⁹ John Grabowski, *Polish Americans*, 198-99.

million dollars in aid. They also supported the practicing and teaching of Polish traditions, helping maintain the Polish identity even decades removed from immigration.²⁰ In keeping the spirit of a Polish national identity alive, many Polish immigrants looked to extracurriculars in order to appeal to the broader community.

A great number of social and activity-based groups were created in the Rust Belt city of Cleveland to perpetuate Polish culture. . Polish song thrived in groups such as the Halka Singing Society of the Association of Polish Women and the aforementioned Polish National Association's choir. These groups performed not only in Polish community churches to their kin, but also to the broader community of Cleveland. In a way, they acted as a cultural bridge between Polish immigrants and Cleveland's natives. Groups like the Harmonia Chopin Society grew to be very popular in the city of Cleveland.²¹ The Polish National Association, again showing its influence, created the Cleveland Society of Poles in 1923. They sponsored a sundry of events, the primary of which were dances to introduce Polish daughters to heterosocial relationships. In the pursuit of educational advancement, the American Polish Women's Club and the Polish Educational Society were created. The former focused on teaching English to the Polish-speaking population, while the latter also taught math, politics, and history.²² Poles in Cleveland, keeping in tradition the militaristic sports-focused routines they followed in their native country, founded groups to promote nationalism. Groups like the Knights of St. Casimir paraded in Polish military garb and were often closely associated with a Catholic church. The Polish National Alliance founded a group called the Polish Falcons, or Sokol Polski. They were a

²⁰ "About Us," Polish National Union of America, last accessed November 23rd, 2021, <https://www.pnu.org/about.htm>.

²¹ John Grabowski, *Polish Americans*, 191.

²² John Grabowski, *Polish Americans*, 193-94.

Polish athletic team until the start of World War One, where they formed a Polish-volunteer army that fought on the side of the Allied powers in Europe. The Falcons and other groups would return in the 20s to involve themselves with basketball, baseball, and track.²³ While these groups supported Polish immigrant communities in the United States, they did not blanket over every group fleeing Poland.

Polish Jews fleeing to the United States found themselves in between identities; they were immigrants in America and were unwelcome in Poland. Similar to how they lived in Poland, Jews and Poles immigrating to the United States settled in communities neighboring one another. Both linked to the other commercially for their economic needs, but culturally they segregated themselves due to the negative stereotypes both sides held of the other. Polish Jews claimed, rightfully so based on the pogroms of the time, that Catholic Poles held anti-Semitic views. Conversely, Catholic Poles believed that the Jews had sided with the regimes of Prussia and Russia and were thus justified in their anti-Semitic belief. This came to a head in 1912, when Polish American communities planned a boycott of Jewish businesses. Jews, seeking to protest this boycott and the ongoing pogroms in Poland and Ukrainia, formed Jewish activism groups.²⁴ Prominent groups such as the American Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee saw an influx in membership and activism. Polish Jews, again finding themselves in between identities, sought to create their own group. It was their belief that other Jewish groups had a basis in Germany and Russia, so Polish Jewish interests were not a priority to them. The result was the creation of The Federation of Polish Jews in America. Similar to Catholic Polish immigrant groups, they provided: hospital-like care of the sick, homes for orphans, and care of

²³ John Grabowski, *Polish Americans*, 195.

²⁴ 'Ukrainia' is used opposed to 'the Ukraine' in reference to *Evidence of Pogroms in Poland and Ukrainia: Documents, Accounts of Eye-witnesses, Proceedings in Polish Parliament, Local Press Reports, etc.*

the elderly. They were very well-connected to the Jewish communities back in Poland, and offered them aid, counsel to Jewish refugees, supported assimilation into America, and fostered Jewish culture.²⁵ While both Jews and Catholics fled from the same countries and lived in close proximity, their experiences as immigrant communities differed greatly.

Many of the Polish immigrants coming to the United States were lacking in general education, literacy, and knowledge of the English language. Illiteracy was seen to be a deplorable characteristic in immigrants, and seeking to elevate their status, several Polish institutions committed to educating their communities.²⁶ The Catholic church, being an integral part of the Polish identity, helped to bridge this educational gap. The Polish Roman Catholic Union of America was founded in the city of Detroit in 1873. Along with the church came hundreds of parochial schools that taught in both English and Polish.²⁷ These schools were very popular among Polish immigrants young and old, and attributed to the conservation of Polish culture. In a study of the Polish immigrant community in Buffalo, New York, it was found that more Poles attended parochial schools as opposed to public schools. Similarly, as Polish immigrants clung to their church school, they also held near their language. It was shown that in only about thirty percent of Polish immigrant homes surveyed that the English language was spoken.²⁸ This can likely be attributed to the strong sense of nationalism that Poles had, an attribute that was further strengthened by the Catholic church.

²⁵ Andrzej Kapiszewski, "The Federation of Polish Jews in America in Polish-Jewish Relations during the Interwar Years (1924-1939)," *Polish American Studies* 56, no. 2 (1999): 45–68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20148567>.

²⁶ *A Memorial of the Polish-American Organizations of the United States in Reference to the Proposed Lodge Immigration Bill, Now Pending in the American House of Representatives* (Chicago, 1898), 26.

²⁷ Kępa, "How Chicago Became a Distinctly Polish American City."

²⁸ Niles Carpenter, *A Study of Acculturation in the Polish Group of Buffalo ; Acculturation in the Polish Group of Buffalo; 1926-1928* (Buffalo: University of Buffalo, 1929), 109-10.

The Catholic church served the community beyond religious and educational needs, offering a center of social gatherings, fraternity, and business. The previously mentioned Polish Roman Catholic Union of America homed orphans and supported widows in the community. Community aid was a common theme throughout Polish churches, and likewise were social gatherings. In Cleveland, many mutual-aid and social groups, like the Knights of St. Casimir, had their own facilities in Catholic parishes. Father Francis Kolaszewski rose to be a prominent figure in the community, supporting Polish laborers with funding and food during times of strife.²⁹ Fr. Kolaszewski's philanthropy became a trait of the Catholic church in Polish communities, but usually activities like picnics and skills classes prevailed above all else. Over 900 Polish Catholic churches would be founded that preserved Polish cultural traditions, traditions that would be adopted by the broader American community throughout time.

As Polish immigrants primarily settled in Rust Belt cities in the United States, so did their culture. From New York to Indiana and beyond, Polish figures and holidays have become a staple of several American cities. One of, if not the most, prominent Polish Americans is Casimir Pulaski, known for fighting in the American Revolution. In the city of Chicago, one would find not only a Pulaski Road but that the first Monday of March is actually Casimir Pulaski day.³⁰ Its origins could be considered controversial since it was created in response to Martin Luther King Jr day. The White ethnic community wanted a day to celebrate a cultural hero as African Americans do with MLK Jr, and such, Casimir Pulaski Day was birthed. Chicago's overwhelmingly large Polish population supported this move, and it was made official in 1986. This is not the only public display of Polish pride found in the city of Chicago, as the Polish

²⁹ John Grabowski, *Polish Americans*, 178.

³⁰ Evan Moore, "What Casimir Pulaski Day Means to Chicago," Chicago Sun Times, last modified March 5th, 2018, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/3/4/18329309/what-casimir-pulaski-day-means-to-chicago>.

National Alliance started the Polish Constitution Day Parade there. The first parade took place on the centennial of Poland's constitution being ratified on May 3rd, 1791. Thousands of Polish Americans and dozens of Polish groups flock to Chicago to march and participate. Among the events included are a beauty pageant, Chopin concerts, a banquet, Catholic mass, and the raising of Poland's flag in Richard J. Daley Plaza.³¹ While Chicago hosts two major events commemorating Poland's history, they share a stage with other Rust Belt cities in terms of Polish heritage events.

In the city of South Bend, Indiana, Easter Monday means the celebration of Dyngus Day. Much of South Bend's 100,000 residents come from a Polish ethnic background, being laborers in factories and fields. Dyngus Day had always been celebrated to a smaller degree by the Polish community, until local politicians started using it to appeal to the Polish population. Massive political figures like Bill Clinton and Mike Pence have made appearances at the parade, and it has become synonymous with the start of campaigning season.³² To the North East of South Bend, on the same day for the same occasion, the people of Buffalo, New York celebrate their own Dyngus Day. Thousands of Buffalonians come to dance, drink beer, and eat kielbasa with one another while wearing red and white. The holiday originally held context as a mating rites ceremony between young boys and girls. Boys would splash water onto girls they like, and girls would whack boys with pussy willows if they reciprocated those feelings. While the American version in Buffalo is more about communally gathering to drink and eat, love still does flourish on Easter Monday.³³ In the same Western New York city of Buffalo, a market on Broadway

³¹ "History," Polish Constitution Day Parade, last accessed November 23rd, 2021, <https://polishparade.org/history/>.

³² Thomas Tarapacki, "Dyngus Day is a Big Deal in South Bend," last accessed November 23rd, 2021, <https://ampoleagle.com/dyngus-day-is-a-big-deal-in-south-bend-p13337-226.htm>.

³³ The reporter interviews Chris and Joelle Bartlett, a couple that married after meeting on Buffalo's Dyngus Day. Dina Temple-Raston, "Celebrating Dyngus Day, a Buffalo, N.Y., Tradition," NPR, last modified April 18th, 2006, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5349324>.

Street draws thousands of customers in the weeks leading up to Easter celebrations. While the Broadway Market was founded by several Eastern Europeans in 1888, one walking through the market cannot deny the overwhelming Polish dominance of the marketplace. Today one can find the likes of Babcia's Pierogi Company and Camellia Meats, two Polish American businesses still serving traditional Polish foods and meats.³⁴ While Easter and Christmas draw the most customers to the market, thousands of customers can be found at the Broadway Market non-seasonally. Not just the existence, but the popularity of the Broadway Market in the Buffalo community shows the long-standing links to Polish heritage.

The people of Poland come from a beautiful, Eastern European country in which many of them would have loved to stay. Between imperial reign, economic deprivation, and ethnic tensions, millions of Poles sought refuge in the United States. While no story is the same, the overall Polish immigrant experience is similar between generations and location. Poles wanted to live in communities with other Poles, working together to seek better economic and educational achievements. Settling in low-skill jobs or as farmers, Poles looked to the Catholic Church as a center to maintain their identity, language, and heritage. Living predominantly in Rust Belt cities, Poles continued on with their traditions and influenced the communities around them. Polish song, food, and holidays spread throughout America and remain until this day. Polish people living outside of Poland's borders are often referred to as Polonia. These communities of people have, and continue to, support one another in keeping Polish nationalism alive. Authoritarian regimes, a trip across the Atlantic Ocean, and economic disparity in the

³⁴ "Vendors," Broadway Market, last accessed November 23rd, 2021, <https://broadwaymarket.org/vendors/>.

United States were not enough to diminish Polish culture, and if anything, only contributed to its growth throughout time.