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Political Activism in American Polonia

Milestones in an Ethnic Community's Development

Donald E. Pienkos

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May I begin by expressing my appreciation to the organizers of this conference, which focuses on an interesting and important aspect of America's story – namely the place of the Catholic religious tradition in the lives of the Polish Americans. Their immigration, community building, and Americanization experience merits serious study. This panel's theme, 'Immigration, Transnationalism, and Cultural Identity' is especially pertinent in training our attention on the meaning and implications of cultural diversity in this country – not only as it involves the Poles but the many other peoples who have settled here over the years.

The story of the Poles in America is extraordinary. It involves the waves of immigrants who have come to America – first in the decades between the 1860s and the outbreak of World War I, then the post World War II emigration, and most recently the so-called Solidarity emigration from the late 1970s onward.

Each of these migration waves had its own dynamic and particular motivations. Each has included members who have made their contributions to the building and development of

the organized Polish community here - Polonia - and to the larger American society of which they became members. Each merits serious study.

The great mass migration whose 2 million members arrived and settled here from the lands of partitioned Poland before 1914 is often called the emigration ‘for bread’ or ‘emigracja zarobkowa’. While there is much truth to this characterization it is also a bit of a stereotype.

The Poles who came here were not just looking for jobs – they sought much more. Freedom from oppressive foreign rule and freedom to build new lives for themselves and their families. Freedom to help their loved ones back in Poland. Freedom to express themselves by joining voluntary organizations and sharing their ideas in the newspapers and periodicals they had established. And of course freedom to practice their religious faith without the interference of alien powers. The nine hundred parishes created by the immigrants and their children in America – fifty of them in Chicago by 1930 – testify to their conviction that their churches were much more than houses of worship. They were also centers of community, art and culture. In short, centers not only of faith but of free expression.

The waves of post World War II Polish immigrants and those who came later in the ‘Solidarity migration’ indeed differed from the earlier “for bread” emigration in some respects. For

the immigrants who entered this country after World War II the memories of life in an independent interwar Poland and of the War were the most vivid and enduring. For the ‘Solidarity Poles’ their shared experience involved a deeply felt dissatisfaction with their worsening economic conditions under an autocratic communist regime whose continued rule after 1945 depended on the power of the Soviet Union.

In fact the experiences of the two later emigrations reinforced the attitudes of the offspring and descendants of the pre World War I migration. The same was true with respect to their religious faith traditions. In short, while each emigration had its own distinctive features, what they had in common was a source of potential cooperation.

A personal note: I happen to have been born in Chicago. I am a grandson of immigrants who settled here between 1907 and 1913 from the Tarnow and Rzeszow districts of Austrian-ruled Galicia. My parents, my brothers and I attended Mass at churches built by Poles - St. Pancratius, St. Hyacinth, and St. Bruno. We belonged to parishes that have since become Polish – St. Ferdinand, St. Joseph in Summit, and St. Richard. Yes we moved about a lot – and thankfully not ahead of the sheriff!

My growing up in Chicago was infused – whether I realized it or not - by my cultural experience in a big family that was indeed Polish – or perhaps more accurately – Polish American. It was

also my good fortune to attend Quigley Preparatory Seminary from 1957 – a wonderful school with 1200 students where my teachers - all of them priests - included a number of outstanding Polish American clergymen. At Quigley we studied the Polish language - our teacher was Fr. Thaddeus Jakubowski, later a Bishop in Chicago. In my freshman English class, our teacher, Fr. Warren McCarthy, assigned me a novel to read - *With Fire and Sword*. It was so exciting that I received his permission to read Sienkiewicz's entire trilogy. Those books really got me 'hooked' on Poland! By the way we had a Polish students club at Quigley. It had over 100 active members.

In 1961 I spent a year at the new intermediate seminary in Niles, Illinois. It was located at the old St. Hedwig orphanage near St. Adalbert cemetery - where many from our family are buried. Later on, I received a grant from the Kosciuszko Foundation to do my doctoral research in communist-ruled Poland. The funds came from the Zelosky family of Chicago Obviously the Polish presence was everywhere in my Chicago!

Here let me summarize the substance of my presentation. You are welcome to a copy of my full paper. But since time is of the essence I will keep my remarks brief!

My paper focuses on three milestone events in the story of the Polish people in America and of course Chicago. Three out of many that I could have chosen. They all center around the

organized efforts by Poles in America and Polish Americans in the realm of American politics and in three distinctive periods of the past century. Each served a similar aim - to unite the community behind the cause of Poland's freedom and independence. In the process, these efforts helped to strengthen its members' identification with their shared Polish heritage.

The first of these milestone events goes back in time to 1910 and the events that occurred in our nation's capital. The second took place in 1944 – the last year of the Second World War. The third is the most recent – in 1999 – when Poland was admitted into the NATO alliance. My thesis is simply this: by engaging politically in seeking to unite the Polish community in support of the freedom of Poland, organized Polish Americans were not only rendering a service to Poland. They were helping to preserve ethnic consciousness and pride within the Polish population in this country. Moreover, they were doing this while acting in the best spirit of our American tradition of pluralist democracy and in support of a U.S. relationship with a country whose people have identified strongly with America's core values.

Moreover, these three events occurred in very distinctively different time periods. In 1910 America's Polish population numbered 3.5 million souls and was predominantly composed of immigrants. Their spoken language was Polish. Overwhelm-

ingly they worked as poor manual laborers. Already by this time the Polish community was well organized. Along with mushrooming number of Polish parishes, the many organizations of the growing fraternal movement included about 300,000 members.

In 1944, Polish Americans numbered about 6 million in all. By this time the American born outnumbered the foreign born by a more than 2-1 margin. The community's civic leaders were increasingly 'second generation' men and women with Poland-born parents, though many older Polonia leaders were immigrants. English had become the main spoken language but in many community meetings it was still Polish. The Polish press was still vibrant. For example, ten daily papers were in operation. The fraternals had grown to include about 700,000 members. Younger, mainly high school trained American born Polish Americans were often working in more skilled, unionized, jobs. However, 90 percent of all Polish Americans still resided in only 12 states - Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana in the midwest - Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maryland in the east. Politically, though Polonia's representation in the U.S. Congress would peak in the late 1950s, the Polish vote was recognized as a key voting bloc at election time.

By the 1990s things had changed dramatically. Despite the

recent influx of newcomers from Poland, 19 out of every 20 persons of the 9.2 million Americans of Polish ethnic heritage were American born - most of them two, three and even four generations removed from the immigration experience. The number of Polish speakers had sharply diminished. Most still firmly Catholic Polish Americans were now of mixed ethnic ancestry. Upwardly mobile and increasingly college educated, Polish Americans were by the 1990s far more dispersed away from their historic central city neighborhoods. Not only had many moved to the suburbs, others had transplanted to new locations around the country. And with only 68 percent still residing in the 12 most heavily Polish states, the Polish American presence in Congress had dropped. Membership in the fraternals was less than 500,000. Just three Polish language dailies were still operating. And many of the historically Polish churches had closed or lost their distinctive identity.

Here we have it – extraordinary change over time. But let's go back to our three political milestones. Here we find the concern for the *Ojczyzna*, Poland, continuing to be a constant in the work of effectively animating the concerns of Polish Americans across the generational divide.

At the start of the 20th century a wave of patriotic fervor for the Polish independence cause enveloped the immigrant Polish community in America. In Chicago it led to the holding of an

annual Polish Constitution Day parade in 1903. A fund drive to erect a monument to the great Polish and American military hero Thaddeus Kosciuszko was successful and this monument was unveiled in 1904. A year later monuments to Kosciuszko were dedicated in Milwaukee and Cleveland. These achievements inspired the leaders of the Polish National Alliance to lobby the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, to endorse a monument to Kosciuszko in our nation's capital.

Already Poles in Indiana and Ohio had persuaded Congress to fulfill its historic pledge to fund a monument in Washington, D.C. to honor General Casimir Pulaski, who like Kosciuszko had fought for the cause of America's independence and given his life to the cause. If a Pulaski monument, why not one to Kosciuszko too!

The Alliance's efforts proved successful and Roosevelt agreed to allow the creation of a Kosciuszko monument – paid for by the Alliance and its friends around the country to the tune of about $750,000 – and to place it in the square in front of the White House. Roosevelt was even invited to select the model for the monument in an international competition the Alliance sponsored. The dedication ceremonies for both monuments took place on Wednesday May 11, 1910 and in the presence of Roosevelt's successor, President William Howard Taft.

In connection with this event the Alliance organized a Polish National Congress to be held the day after the dedication. Over 450 Polonia leaders from around the country took part in this extraordinary three day gathering. Together with guests from partitioned Poland they approved a series of resolutions about U.S. immigration policy, the treatment of immigrants already in this country, and most notably, Poland's restoration to independence. This last issue – raised by the President of the Polish National Alliance, Marian Steczynski, was viewed with great hostility by Poland's occupiers – especially Germany and Russia. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Taft found it prudent to distance himself from any contact with the congress.

Two and one half years later Polonia's leaders united once more behind the Polish cause. When World War I broke out in 1914 they worked to persuade President Woodrow Wilson, Taft's successor, to give his support to Poland's independence, which was indeed proclaimed on November 11, 1918.

In May 1944, just days before the World War II Normandy invasion, the legitimate elected representatives of a later Polonia community gathered in Buffalo, New York to create the Polish American Congress. This Congress dedicated itself to the restoration of devastated Poland to full freedom and independence after victory was won in the conflict. Its delegates and elected another Polish National Alliance president, Charles

Rozmarek, to lead the effort to carry out its mission.

But this time, conditions were far more complicated from what they had been in World War I. The United States and its President, Franklin Roosevelt, was not only in an alliance with Britain and Poland against Adolf Hitler. Roosevelt regarded Dictator Josef Stalin of the Soviet Union as America's most significant ally in defeating Nazi Germany and Japan. But Stalin was the very same leader who had joined in 1939 with Hitler to destroy the independent Poland that had been proclaimed in 1918.

For a long time Roosevelt kept his dealings with Stalin secret from Poland's leaders and Polish Americans. But in February 1945 his duplicity finally became public following his return from his summit meeting with Stalin at Yalta. The Polish American Congress courageously condemned the Yalta decisions regarding Poland and declared its support for a Poland free from Soviet domination. Over the decades that followed, the Congress never wavered from its position. In these years Polonia became an early and key part of the anti-Soviet Cold War coalition as well. Its commitment to Poland was at last rewarded in 1989 with the victory of Solidarity movement and the non-violent end of communist party rule, something that the first Polish pope in history had a great deal to do with.

Let's move forward one last time. In November 1993 the Polish American Congress under the leadership of its president, Edward Moskal, formally acted to back the newly free Poland's admission into the NATO Alliance. In the months after its leaders worked effectively to win U.S. government support for NATO expansion – first in a massive letter writing, telegram and telephone campaign directed at the White House in December 1993 and then in a series of meetings with President Bill Clinton, Vice President Gore, Secretary of State Albright and leaders in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

There was opposition to Poland's entry into NATO – from high ranking U.S. officials who called for NATO to dissolve since the Soviet Union had disintegrated and the Cold War – NATO's rationale - was over. When this argument failed another replaced it - to freeze NATO membership and thus prevent any expansion of the Alliance, leaving the peoples who had liberated themselves from communist rule left out in the dark.

Undeterred, PAC and its friends eventually won out. In 1998 the U.S. Senate voted 80-19 to approve the entry of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary into NATO. A year later expansion was ratified in Washington, D.C. at the fiftieth anniversary observance of NATO's founding.

Today Polish democracy is sturdier than ever. Poland is a significant contributor to NATO. Poland has a dynamic economy

and is a valued partner in the European Union. Poland's people maintain strong and vital ties with the America. These facts are very much worth celebrating and serve as a realization of the dreams of Polish Americans going back to 1910 and 1944.

What do these three milestones have in common? Clearly the size, shape, and definition of the Polish American population have changed remarkably over the past century. But thanks to the voluntary efforts of generations of individuals America's Polish community – of men and women who have been true to their ethnic and religious cultural roots – Polish Americans as Americans have remained committed to a central and defining aspect of their identity – the connection with Poland.

Let us watch how this commitment continues in the face of new challenges in the years to come.

Selected sources:
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