

THE POLISH LANGUAGE.

BY LEONARD BLOOMFIELD.

THE Polish language is spoken by some twenty millions of people in central Europe. Since the suspension, more than a century ago, of the political independence of the Poles, the Polish language has been the chief bond of Polish nationality.¹

So well has it fulfilled this function that the population of Poland is to-day as homogeneous as ever in the past. In German Poland the western neighbors of the Poles, the Germans, have as land-owners in small numbers encroached on Polish territory. In the Middle Ages large numbers of German Jews emigrated to Poland; while the upper class of these is now fairly well Polonized, the great mass still constitutes a foreign population. In compensation, the Poles have spread eastward and northward: in eastern Galicia, where the peasant population is Ukrainian ("Ruthenian" or "Little Russian"), the city-dwellers and land-owners are Polish, and in Lithuania, similarly, from two to sixteen per cent of the inhabitants—the proportion varies by districts—are Poles.

The popular speech of the Polish territory divides itself into a number of dialects, which, however, are not very divergent. The book-language, and with it that of the schools and of the educated class, is derived originally from the Great Polish dialect (spoken in the district of Posen); from an early time, however, it has been influenced by the Mazurian dialect (which centers round Warsaw) and by the Little Polish (Galician) dialect. Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), the most popular and perhaps the greatest of Polish poets, was a Lithuanian Pole; through him the Polish of Lithuania has influenced the literary language.

Although Latin was the chief written language up to the time of the Reformation, Polish possesses a number of vernacular documents from the medieval period. The Reformation, though in the end unsuccessful as a religious movement, succeeded in making Polish instead of Latin the language of books and polite intercourse.

¹ The boundaries of the Polish-speaking territory may be roughly drawn somewhat as follows. In Germany the line runs westward from the Russian border through Rastenburg, Allenstein, Graudenz, Bromberg, Birnbaum; thence southwest to Ratibor in Silesia; thence east to the Austrian border. In Austria Polish is spoken in all of West Galicia, as far as the river San. In Russia the boundary runs north from the Galician border through Brest, Bialystok, Grodno, and Suwalki; thence westward to the German border. In addition to this territory, a stretch of land on the west bank of the Vistula, northward to the shore of the Baltic Sea, is inhabited by the Cashubians, who speak a dialect of Polish.

By the end of the sixteenth century Polish was classed with Spanish and Italian as one of the three most elegant book-languages of Europe. The two following centuries were a period of decline in this respect, but at the end of the eighteenth century there came a revival; since this time there has been unbroken progress, and to-day Polish stands in the first rank as a literary medium.

In its general structure, and to some extent even in its native vocabulary, the Polish language will not seem utterly unfamiliar (as would, for instance, Chinese or Malay) to the English-speaking student.² The reason for this lies in the fact that Polish and the other Slavic languages (Bohemian, Wendish, Russian, Ukrainian, Slovene, Serbian, Bulgarian) form a branch of the great Indo-European family of languages, to which belong also the Germanic languages (English, Dutch, German, Scandinavian) and Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Persian, and others. All these languages are divergent forms of a single prehistoric language, from which they have inherited many common features.

Among the Slavic languages Polish is distinguished by a number of features. The most striking of these is the use of nasalized vowels, that is, of vowels like those of the French words *pain* and *pont*. At one time all the Slavic languages possessed these, but Polish alone has retained them. Another feature peculiar to Polish is the almost universal rule that words of more than one syllable are accented on next to the last syllable. The accent in Polish does not involve (as in English or in Russian) a weakening or slurring of the vowels of less-stressed syllables; on the contrary, these latter are pronounced with their full value; the syllables are all brought out distinctly, as in French: "a string of pearls" is the metaphor that has been used to describe this manner of speaking.³

A striking feature, present to some extent in all the Slavic languages but most widespread in Polish, is the "palatalization" or "softening" of consonants. A "palatalized" consonant is pronounced with the middle of the tongue pressed against the front part of the palate.⁴ Almost every consonant has in Polish two forms, plain and

² Thus the "parts of speech," the cases, genders, numbers, persons, tenses, and the general syntactic structure are like those of English, German, or Latin; such word-stems as *sta-* "stand," *da-* "give," or the feminine ending *-a* will be familiar to the student of Latin.

³ Technically it is known as "open-syllable-stress without vowel-weakening."—Of the phonetic beauty of the Polish language the following story is told. A celebrated Polish actress was asked to recite in her native language to an American audience. She brought her hearers to tears by counting from one to a hundred.

⁴ In English *ch* and *j* are palatalized sounds; for *ch* is not the same as *t* plus *sh* (as in *it shall*), but differs from this combination by being palatalized.

palatalized. The extensive use of the latter gives the language a soft and rather graceful sound, for there is, even for the foreign ear, an endearing quality about these "softened" consonants.

Polish goes even farther than the other Slavic languages in the clearness and freedom with which words are derived by means of affixes of the most varied and delicate shades of meaning. Almost every syllable of a word contributes its distinct share to the significance of the whole. A single example may not be amiss: *pan* means "Mr., sir, master, gentleman," but there are also the derivatives, *panek* "lordling," *panicz* "young gentleman," *paniczek* "pretty little gentleman," *paniczuszek* "little dandy," *panisko* "poor dear master"; the feminine is *pani* "Mrs., madam, mistress, lady," with such derivatives as *paniusia* "little lady" and *paniuncia* "dear little madam"; another derivative is *panna* "Miss, young lady," with its own further derivatives, such as *panienka* "little miss" and *panieneczka* "dear little miss,"—and so on, including adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, as well as nouns.

Other striking features of Polish are the six cases of the noun, the "aspects" or "manners" of the verb, and the peculiar gender-inflection of the preterite; they are, however, not peculiar to Polish and their description would take us far afield.

While all the Slavic languages have in common certain traces of the superior civilization of their German neighbors,⁵ yet Polish, more than any other Slavic language, has become in the course of centuries, a western European *Kultursprache*. Among the Slavic languages Polish is the torch-bearer of western European civilization. This is true of its syntactic and stylistic modes of expression, but is most striking in its vocabulary, which differs from that of the other Slavic languages by the great mass of western European words which it has adopted. Most of these are Latin, some are French and some German. Such terms as *determinacja*, *kombinacja*, *komunikacja*, *platform*, *balustrada*, *wagon* (railroad carriage), *lokomotywa*, *dentysta*, *sens*, *ton*, etc., etc., are immediately intelligible to any European, and are as significant as, in the opposite sense, the many and common words which the Russian has taken from the speech of the Tartar.

Two other features less immediately bound up with the language itself, deserve mention in this connection. Polish employs the Latin alphabet, and uses it more wisely than English or French,

⁵ Most strikingly, for instance, the Slavic words for "bread" and probably "city" are loan-words from the old Germanic. The word for "hundred" is thought by some to be an ancient loan from the Iranian, but this is very doubtful.

for the spelling of a Polish word uniformly and precisely indicates its pronunciation.⁶ The rhythm and cadence of Polish verse are entirely within the western European tradition, and, indeed, at the very forefront of it in beauty, dignity, and pathos,—as those will attest who have heard such masterpieces of poetic form as the “Sunset” of Mickiewicz or Kraszewski’s “Youth.”

If two Slavic peoples, the Russians and the Poles, are to emerge from these years of suffering with new liberty and hope, we shall perhaps do no injustice if we look to the Poles rather than to their eastern neighbors for the more immediate fecundation of our cultural life. The Russian will have to learn much before he becomes a European, and he may decide, wisely perhaps, to grow in a different direction; the Pole is already one of us, and needs but the opportunity to give of his best. From our national standpoint we may hope that the million Poles in America (Chicago has one of the largest Polish populations in the world) will receive a new encouragement toward the preservation of their inherited language and culture, for it is thus that the American who remembers his foreign birth or descent can best serve our country.

A WOMAN OF POLAND.

BY MAXIMILIANUS GERMANICUS.

AGAIN I dreamed of Vera. It is a long time since our paths have crossed: and yet for all these years, she, like an accusing spirit, has not ceased to haunt me day and night. Dear Vera, wilt thou pursue me forever? Will those appealing eyes of thine follow

⁶ As people are often at a loss to pronounce Polish names, the following suggestions may not be amiss. They give a key for a very rough imitation or rather Anglicization; to acquire the native pronunciation would, of course, be a serious task.

Palatalized consonants are indicated either by an accent-mark over the consonant or by an *i* written after it; for English purposes a consonant plus *y* (as in *yes*) may be substituted for the Polish palatalized consonant, e. g., *miara*, really beginning with palatalized *m*, may be pronounced as *myara*.

Words are accented on next to the last syllable. The vowels are all short but distinct, and have the German or Italian (*continental*) values; *y* is roughly like *i*; *ó* with an accent-mark over it equals *u*; *a* and *e* with a small hook beneath are, respectively, like the vowels of French *bon* and *bain*.

c is pronounced *ts*; *cz* and palatalized *c* may be roughly represented by English *ch*; Polish *ch* is somewhat like the German sound in *ach*.

g is always “hard” as in English *get*; *j* is the English *y*-sound, as in *yes*; *l* is French or German *l*, the same letter with a cross-line through it may be roughly reproduced by American English *l*.

rz is English *z* in *azure*, except after *p* or *t*, where it is English *sh*; *s* is English *s* as in *so*; *sz* and palatalized *s* may be rendered by English *sh*.

w is English *v*.

z with a dot over it and palatalized *z* are, roughly, like English *z* in *azure*.