

to erect a monument in Ireland honoring his labors. Her first step is this lengthy article, documenting at length Strzelecki's work to relieve starvation in the Emerald Isle.

*Dr. John M. Grondelski
Falls Church, Virginia, USA
e-mail: grondelski@op.pl*

PHYLLIS ZYCH BUDKA, *The Maska Dramatic Circle: Polish American Theater in Schenectady, New York (1933-1942)*, Sunland, CA: Moonrise Press 2016, pp. x + 252. ISBN 978-0-9963981-4-5. Also e-Book

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Schenectady is today a city of approximately 66,000 people, located on the Mohawk River about 275 kilometers north of New York City. Polish immigrants of the *emigracja za chlebem* were attracted to the city and region because of its two major employers – General Electric and American Locomotive – as well as numerous mills along the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers.

According to Robert Pascucci's "Electric City Immigrants," his 1984 doctoral dissertation studying the Polish and Italian immigrant communities of Schenectady, the city's 1920 Polonia community was 4,316, making it the fifth largest Polonian city in New York State. The dissertation is available online (<http://www.schenectadyhistory.org/resources/pascucci/index.html>). Schenectady Polonia built two Polish parishes: St. Mary's and St. Adalbert's.

This book is the history of "Maska," an amateur theater group formed by young people – presumably first generation U.S.-born Polish Americans – that staged at least 50 Polish language plays in Schenectady in the period 1933-42. Based on a detailed scrapbook maintained by Phyllis Zych Budka's parents – themselves active in Maska – the book is a compendium of many primary (programs, tickets, photographs) and contemporaneous (clippings from the American and Polonian press) sources, providing an overview of the troupe's activities during the years of the Great Depression in the United States. The U.S. entry into World War II appears to have put an end to the group, as postwar efforts to revive Maska failed.

The author came upon her parents' scrapbook after her siblings discovered it while cleaning out their parents' home after their mother's death in 2001. Fortunately, they chose to save the artifact and use modern publishing techniques to make its content available to a worldwide audience; alas, how much of Polonia's material culture is in fact irretrievably lost when the possessions of earlier generations are posthumously discarded. This would seem to be a current threat especially to the records of the *emigracja polityczna*, the few of whom sufficiently active to have had such documents would be

at least in their 90s. Between the lax archival retention of Polonian parishes (many of which are now being rendered extinct by bishops closing or consolidating them) and the sheer destruction of memorabilia in private hands, documentation of U.S. Polonia's material culture is truly threatened.

Happily, Budka chose to make this family heirloom into a book, providing insight into the cultural life of American Polonia in a northern New York city just before World War II. What we learn from those records is intriguing.

The "young people" who formed Maska were presumably composed mostly the first U.S.-born generation of immigrants. Their Polish language proficiency was apparently strong enough for them to stage plays in that language. Their stated commitment for doing that was to promote Polish literature. "... [W]e Poles can rejoice that we sit on a rich and excellent literature, so that in a list of European literature Poland is not inferior. ... But unfortunately all that beauty and richness are for lower and middle layers of our nations of that enchanted land. We can count on our fingers those peasants and craftspeople who know something about Kochanowski, Skarga, [et al.] ... Knowledge, even if superficial, is certainly needed among the lower classes of the nation, and namely the young people. Let us learn the literature of the home land" (p. 190).

A survey of Maska's repertoire displays some familiarity with a variety of classical and contemporaneous Polish drama: Fredro, Świętochowski, Z. Przybylski, and A. Karwatowa. Polonian playwrights like Antoni Jax and Karol Wachtel were featured. The performers also wrote some of their own plays, based on their lives and times, e.g., plays about Nazi Germany and Poland or about the life of Polonia in upstate New York.

What we learn from that repertoire is that: familiarity with Polish was an important factor in familiarity with cultural products from Poland in a time lacking the conveniences of modern communications, like satellite radio or internet access to texts; decline in linguistic proficiency loosens those bonds (e.g., one of the reasons attributed to the failure to relaunch Maska after the War was "few children of the next generation are able to converse in Polish" (p. 87); assimilation was already having its effect on the first U.S.-born generation's language skills (compare the texts they staged versus their own writing style in Polish in their newsletter).

Another fascinating area of insight is the socio-economic interplay. Maska's members took as their mission to familiarize Polonians, regardless of class, with their literary heritage. These young people were themselves presumably mostly the offspring of immigrant laborers, perhaps small businessmen. Set against opportunities of the larger American society, their choices were probably more limited. But they never let those limits confine their efforts to deepen their own familiarity with their heritage and to perform it with the best skill they could.

Laurie Gomulka Palazzolo observed a similar phenomenon in *Horn Man: The Polish American Musician in Twentieth Century Detroit* (Wayne State University Press, 2003). Young Polish Americans who formed polka bands in the 1930s-50s did so be-

cause they: liked music; did the best they could while trying to get the best training they could in high school music programs (and some first rate musical high schools); found a cultural need in their own ethnic community and responded entrepreneurially to it; creatively adapted folk tunes and musical patterns from their “Old Country” heritage to the music they were hearing around them, supplementing it with their own creative compositions; and often did their “artistic thing” on weekends and holidays while holding down a regular job to support their families. If, as Piotr Taras insisted, Polonia’s culture should be a creative *sui generis* synthesis, combining the heritage of its origins, the culture of where it was found, and peoples’ own experience, then Polonian amateur theater troupes – like Polonian polka orchestras – were one response to how to combine those elements into something to call their own.

But we should also not assume that all of Polonia was only working class. Budka’s scrapbook uncovers, for example, an interesting figure: Dr. Bradley Kirschberg. Kirschberg is mentioned in various articles as a judge of drama contests or an advisor to Maska. Budka’s digging (p. 34) uncovered him as an immigrant from Poland who earned a doctorate in chemistry at New York University and eventually became director of the New York State Police Laboratory. Clearly intellectually curious, he also apparently became an amateur authority on the aesthetic theory of Juliusz Tenner and a translator of Kornel Ujejski. American Polonia was intellectually alive.

Better knowledge of the amateur theater groups that existed in Polonia would give us better insight into the cultural lives of the *emigracja za chlebem*. There is a certain mythology, probably shared on both sides of the Atlantic, about the cultural limitations of those immigrants: Americans were interested in Polish immigrants for labor, not culture, and Poles probably think of those who went to America as the uneducated poor of Galicia or Russian Poland, dispatched *z ojczyzny* bereft of their true culture. If we could delve into the cultural life of late 19th/early 20th century Polonia, we might modify a stereotype of the “dumb Polack” who came to America to escape poverty. Karen Majewski’s *Traitors and True Poles* (Ohio University Press, 2003), a survey of the fiction read by the *emigracja za chlebem*, showed that those immigrants had brains as well as brawn. A study of that Polonia’s drama could reinforce that insight.

The challenges of such a study are, however, apparent. Budka acknowledges that, in addition to Maska, there was at least for some time a dramatic circle at St. Mary’s in Schenectady, and there were probably similar groups in the region. The problem is whether and where records of their activities can be found.

Budka’s book opens more questions than perhaps it can answer, but it does force us to recognize we need to know more about American Polonia of the *emigracja za chlebem* and its children from the viewpoint of its intellectual life.

Dr. John M. Grondelski
Falls Church, Virginia, USA
e-mail: grondelski@op.pl