

Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethnic Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed, eds. Allan Amanik and Kami Fletcher, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 2020, pp. viii + 288, PB. ISBN 978-1496-827-890. Also HB and e-book.

An oft-repeated truism among historians of American Polonia is that, as soon as they could after settling somewhere, Polish Americans would first build a church and then a school. Less often mentioned is that, along with the church, they also often bought land for a cemetery. Mortality was high and immigrants lacked the social safety net they had in Poland. Many worked in dangerous professions (e.g., coal mining or industrial plants) with few, if any safety standards. The proliferation of the fraternal societies like the Polish Roman Catholic Union or the Polish National Alliance occurred in part because they were insurance firms: like parish-based *kasy pośmiertne*, they afforded at least one guarantee to an immigrant – a decent burial.

It is, therefore, surprising that so little attention has been paid to Polish American cemeteries, both within Polonia studies and certainly within the broader field of cemetery studies in the United States. James Pula's chapter in this book, "'Death Is Not a Wedding': The Cemetery as a Polish American Communal Experience," (pp. 35–85) tries to address that gap. Pula is professor of sociology at Purdue Northwest University.

This book's eight essays deal with cemeteries among seven American ethnic groups or races, including Polish Americans. The book was inspired by a 2014 Organization of American Historians' conference on "crossing borders." Its editors wanted to explore how ethnic cemeteries either maintained or broke down lines between groups in the United States. They acknowledged "the tendency among most Americans to separate their dead along communal lines rooted in race, faith, ethnicity, or social standing ..." (p. 4).

Pula's essay seeks to generalize about Polish American cemeteries, based on visits to ten such graveyards in five states and interviews with 29 persons associated with Polish burial practices, i.e., priests, funeral directors, and researchers (p. 37). Given that, at their zenith, there were almost one thousand Polish American parishes in the United States, there are a lot of cemeteries there. Given the efforts of American Catholic bish-

ops to close or “consolidate” Polish American parishes, there are now more Polonian cemeteries than parishes. It’s hard to close a cemetery.

Some readers’ first reaction might be, “but we know that. We know about our cemeteries!” The question is: Do we? If it isn’t written down, will that knowledge remain only in Polonian circles and eventually die there? How much knowledge of Polonia has been lost (as the American idiom puts it, “taken to the grave”) because it was not written down?

Pula is not as focused on Polish American death customs as much as more precisely on its funerary and graveyard customs. What customs and practices did the immigrant generation bring from Poland and how, over time, did those customs and practices undergo assimilation in America? What did Polish American funerals, particularly as communal affairs, first look like and how did they, too, assimilate? One example of such assimilation was the commercialization of the wake: viewings of the body before burial moved from the decedent’s house to a “funeral parlor.” Another was the custom of taking a route after the funeral Mass from the church to the cemetery that passed by the deceased’s home, a tradition this reviewer was familiar with at least in 2001.

Pula also explores the ornamentation of Polish American cemeteries. Anyone familiar with a Polish cemetery knows how much is invested in tombstones, grave markers, and other ornamentation on the family plot. How was the ornamentation of Polish American graves and cemeteries affected when poor immigrants, for whom the death of a breadwinner threatened impoverishment, marked their graves? Grave ornamentation in Polish *góralskie* cemeteries sometimes featured carved local wood handicrafts. Did any of that tradition also emigrate to America, especially among Highlanders?

Finally, how did cemeteries maintain the “boundaries” that inspired this book? Both ecclesiastical discipline and ethnic solidarity played parts. Catholic ecclesiastical discipline held that Catholic cemeteries were for Catholics. The cemetery is also part of the Catholic parish community – the Church triumphant or suffering, the Church at rest. Ecclesiological unity meant Catholics should not to be buried in unconsecrated ground (e.g., municipal cemeteries) nor with non-Catholics (which, as Pula shows, had impact on Polish National Catholics in those Polonian centers where a Polish National Catholic Church was set up). Ethnic solidarity also influenced things. Polish immigrants generally gravitated to their fellow countrymen, in life and in death. Just as Polish neighborhoods exhibited what one author called “institutional completeness” (a self-contained society that addressed all its inhabitants needs), so that ethnic cohesion continued after death. If the cemetery is part of one’s parish, why would one not want to rest among one’s neighbors?

Kudos to Pula for this contribution. Polonian scholarship should be better represented than it is in such collections of cross-group studies of American ethnics. Scholarship on Polonia itself is a limited niche, because of the numbers of scholars focusing on it, the limited communities not being renewed by immigration, and the gravitation of

American academic interest away from European ethnics. Without denying that Polonia (with help from Polish scholars) should continue studying Polonia *per se*, it is also vital that Polonia make itself visible to their fellow Americans in broader and comparative fields of study.

American Polonia's physical presence is threatened in three ways: by mobility, by assimilation, and by the drive of Catholic American bishops towards large scale closing or "consolidation" of Polonian parishes. Polish immigration is shrinking. Those who come and descendants of those who came no longer see Greenpoint or Detroit as destinations (at least not permanent ones). Assimilation among Catholics, coupled with ecclesiastical institutional consolidation, blurs ethnic lines. Catholic cemeteries in the United States are now more often run by dioceses than parishes. And, with the destruction of the Polish American parish network – up until now the critical glue holding Polonian communities together – perhaps we will have to study our ethnicity and its material culture among the tombs. As Pula shows, we have only just begun.

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