

JOHN RADZIŁOWSKI

POLES IN ILLINOIS: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OUTLINE

The state of Illinois is one of the major centers of American Polonia. The city of Chicago is often referred to as the “capital of Polonia” or the “American Warsaw.” It is the headquarters of many Polish American organizations. Pundits sometimes claim—with much exaggeration—that Chicago is the second largest “Polish” city in the world after Warsaw. This initial impression of Illinois Polonia, however, obscures the complex history of the state’s Polish Americans.

Illinois and especially Chicago do not have a single “Polonia,” but rather several Polonias divided by era of immigration, culture, and location. The history of Poles in Illinois has been characterized by intensive development of local communities and institutions. These dense networks of association helped immigrants adjust to life in a new reality and meet the changing spiritual, social, cultural, and economic needs of a changing population.

CHRONOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY OF POLISH SETTLEMENT IN ILLINOIS

The first Polish Americans to settle in Illinois came in 1818 when some descendants of Polish adventurer and Indian trader Anthony Sadowski arrived in the state from neighboring regions. Several Polish veterans of the November Insurrection also came to Illinois in the late 1830s and 1840s and for a brief period the U.S. government considered creating a colony for the Polish exiles in Illinois, though nothing came of this idea. A small number

JOHN RADZIŁOWSKI, PH.D. is director of the Polish Institute of Culture and Research at Orchard Lake, Michigan, and Professor of History at the University of Alaska; e-mail: jradzilowski@orchardlakeschools.com.

of economic immigrants began to arrive in the 1850s and early 1860s. This including Poles of the Mosaic faith and individuals with distinctly German-sounding names who list Poland as their place of birth. Early Polish immigrants came to Illinois by way of St. Louis, Missouri, which served as a major hub for travelers on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. Chicago would replace St. Louis as the major Midwestern center for Polish arrivals by the 1860s due to Chicago's growth as a railroad transportation center.

Significant settlement of Polish immigrants in Illinois dates to the second half of the 1860s when a growing number of families arrived in Chicago, where the first Polish parish, St. Stanislaus Kostka was founded in 1867. Early immigrants came directly from Europe as well as from other early Polish settlements in the Midwestern states and even Texas.

Both the chronology and location of Polish communities in the period 1870 to 1920 is traced most easily by following the establishment of Polish parishes across the state. Most Polish parishes were located in industrial centers, primarily but not exclusively in the greater Chicago area. Nevertheless, some Polish agricultural communities developed during the 1870s and 1880s, most notably in southern Illinois around the town of Radom. Radom was a planned colonization effort, originally the idea of a Basil Turchinov, a former Russian general who has served in the Union Army during the American Civil War.

Polish settlement in Chicago began on city's near Northwest side with the establishment of St. Stanislaus Kostka and Holy Trinity parishes. This area contained large textile plants as well as many smaller to medium size factories. Early Polish arrivals in this neighborhood lived alongside German and Irish immigrants but by 1900, this part of Chicago became intensively Polish as new immigrants arrived and the older German and Irish inhabitant moved out. The Near Northwest section, known as the Polish Downtown, centered around the "Polish Triangle" at the intersection of Division, Ashland, and Milwaukee streets, became the location of numerous Polish organizations and businesses, including the headquarters of the three largest Polish fraternal societies in the USA.

Polish settlement spread rapidly across the city, following the path of industries such as textiles, meat packing, and steel making. In addition to the Near Northwest side, Poles settled in other large concentrations:

- Lower West side, close to the Chicago ship canal and railroad yards
- Bridgeport and Back of the Yards, near the Union stockyards and its many meat packing plants

- South Chicago, a major center for steel production.¹

Illinois' medium-sized industrial cities also attracted Polish immigrants, including North Chicago, LaSalle and its neighboring towns of Peru and Streator, Joliet, Rockford, and Kankakee. In southern Illinois, a significant Polish community arose in East Saint Louis, across the river from Saint Louis, Missouri (itself home to a large Polish settlement). By 1930, close to 50 Polish parishes had been founded within Chicago's main Polish areas, along with a dozen more in Chicago's immediate vicinity (Cook County). Another 16 parishes were erected in other parts of the state.²

The creation of Polish ethnic parishes did not encompass the full extent of Polish settlement.³ Poles in Chicago were so numerous in many areas that they gradually came to dominate other parishes that were territorial or had previously belonged to other ethnic groups. In places where Poles were less numerous, they joined other ethnic parishes established by neighboring groups from east-central Europe. For example, in Streator, Poles joined the Slovak parish of St. Michael the Archangel. (In other areas, the positions were reversed with Slovaks worshipping in Polish parishes.)⁴

The largest wave of Polish immigration to the USA and Illinois occurred between 1880 and 1924, after which immigration from east-central Europe was restricted by U.S. law. A new wave of immigration arrived in the late 1940s and 1950s, following the end of World War II, consisting of refugees from German and Soviet repression and veterans of the Polish Armed Forces. Most of these immigrants settled in the Chicago area and joined existing Polish parishes. The waves of immigrants following the imposition of Martial Law by the communist government in December 1981 and those who came after the collapse of communism in Poland in 1989, also settled most heavily in Chicago. During the years after World War II, however, the Polish population of Chicago expanded both in numbers and in location. Polish recent immigrants and second and third generation Polish Americans moved into suburban areas adjacent to the older Polish neighborhoods, following economic opportunities and better housing conditions.

¹ R. KANTOWICZ, "Polish Chicago", p. 175.

² J. RADZIŁOWSKI and A.H. GUNKEL, *Poles in Illinois*, Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, p. 22-24, 181-86.

³ The American Catholic Church distinguished between territorial parishes designed to serve a geographic area and ethnic parishes designed to minister to a particular ethno-cultural group.

⁴ See St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Church, Streator, Ill., Records, 1884-1908, Immigration History Research Center Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Mn.

FAMILY, PARISH, AND WORK

Each Polish immigrant had their own story of how and why they immigrated from Europe to Chicago. Most came to improve the lives and fortunes of their family, and the decision to leave home for a foreign land was difficult and painful. Nevertheless, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, partitioned Poland provided few opportunities for the growing population of peasant smallholders and their families. Migration to American cities such as Chicago proved an irresistible attraction for Poles from all three sectors of the occupied homeland. Nevertheless, the emigrants' choices to migrate to improve the wellbeing of their families would in turn stretch the bonds of those families to the breaking point. Letters and memoirs of Poles who settled in Illinois reveal a constant tension between the need to improve their conditions while maintaining ties to spouses, parents, and children in Poland.⁵

Although immigration by whole family groups was not uncommon, before World War I the flow of immigration to Illinois was largely dominated by labor migrants, most often individuals between the ages of 16 and 40. Although men initially made up the large number of these migrants, young women began to come in growing numbers by the 1890s. Young, single women from rural Poland arriving in Illinois greatly improved their economic and social standing, earning their own income and enjoying more freedom and a better choice of marriage partners than their counterparts at home.⁶ Married couples emigrated as well, often with the husband going to America first to earn money while his wife took on the tasks of managing the farm and the family by herself.⁷

The act of immigration, whether by married couples with children or individuals, caused immense strains on families on both sides of the Atlantic, as frequently attested to by immigrant letters and memoirs.⁸ The dense network of family and neighbors that characterized life in rural Polish villages did not exist, and Polish arrivals in Illinois were initially a generation with-

⁵ W. KULA ET AL., *Writing Home: Immigrants in Brazil and the United States, 1890–1891*, Boulder/New York: East European Monographs and Columbia University Press, 1990.

⁶ Letter of Sophia Nadrowska, *Writing Home*.

⁷ See, for example, Angela Mischke autobiography, p. 3–4, Angela Mischke Papers, 1908–69, Polish American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁸ J. RADZIŁOWSKI and A.H. GUNKEL, *Poles in Illinois*, p. 32–40

out grandparents, aunts, or uncles.⁹ The challenges faced by the immigrant family lent far greater significance to the Polish parish in Illinois. The parish took on far greater social and cultural significance, creating networks of support in addition to serving as a place of worship and a focus for community activities.

Parish parishes were a physical center and a spiritual fulcrum for Polish communities that anchored immigrants to their new homes in Illinois. Poles lavished both attention and resources on building and maintaining churches that symbolized their aspiration as faithful Catholics and their status and dignity as citizens of a new country. Although working at the most dangerous and lowest paying occupations in industrial America, Poles built the nation's most impressive churches which continue to stand as landmarks on the urban skyline of cities like Chicago.¹⁰ Parishes were site of Poles' greatest aspirations and also of many of their bitterest intra-community conflicts.

Along with family and faith, work was the third part of the "trinity" of life for most early Polish immigrants. Until the 1970s, the great majority of Poles in Illinois worked in manufacturing, especially steel making, mining, meat packing, and textiles. The rise of Chicago as a major center of American industry is inseparable from the growth of Polish immigration. Work provided the Poles with income that while meager by today's standards, nevertheless allowed them to support families and communities in both America and Poland. Industrial labor was also hard, dangerous, and degrading. Polish workers were treated as expendable and were often the first to lose their jobs if the economy went into recession. As a result, Poles in Illinois were among the strongest supporters of unionization. From the 1890s, Polish newspapers in Chicago urged their readers to support better wages and working conditions and to avoid acting as "scabs" (workers used by companies to replace laborers who were on strike).

Polish workers who went on strike or protested unfair working conditions were frequently attacked by police or militia with great brutality and even loss of life. Workers were defended by the entire Polish community, especially by their own wives, mothers, and daughters, who took an extremely active role in protests. In 1893, a group Polish canal diggers on strike at Lemont were attacked by African American and white strikebreakers armed

⁹ On the implications of this fact for Polish American culture, see T. RADZIŁOWSKI, "Polish Immigrant Women and their Daughters," The Fiedorczyk Lecture in Polish and Polish American Studies, Central Connecticut State University, 1990.

¹⁰ *Parafie i kościoły polskie w Chicago* (Warsaw: Narodowy Instytut Polskiego Dziedzictwa Kulturowego za Granicą Polonika, 2019).

with rifles and clubs, killing at least three workers and injuring many more.¹¹ By 1930s and 1940s, movements to provide better wages and working conditions for workers in American industry were increasingly successful. This was due in large part to the role of Poles in those industries.

Organizational and Cultural Life

Prior to World War II, one in ten Chicago residents was Polish. This large population provided a critical mass that allowed Poles in Illinois to create and sustain an astonishing array of organizations and a rich cultural life almost without parallel in the history of the Polish diaspora. Among the first and most significant organizations Poles created in Illinois were fraternal insurance societies. Mutual benefit societies emerged locally in some parishes to provide death benefits to the families of workers, but soon expanded into national federations. The first of these groups was the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America (PRCUA), founded in 1873 by lay Catholics and priests of the Congregation of the Resurrection led by Fr. Wincenty Barzyński. A second major group was founded by secular nationalists in 1884, the Polish National Alliance (PNA). The two groups represented different factions and philosophies within the emerging Polish community in Chicago. The PRCUA emphasized loyalty to the Catholic Church and a positivist tradition of “organic work” meant to prepare Poles for greater self-determination and autonomy. It emphasized development of tightly knit “parish communities” in America designed to preserve the faith, culture, and language of Polish immigrants. The PNA promoted the cause of Poland’s liberation in the U.S., even describing itself as “the Fourth Partition.” It stressed the need for Poles to join mainstream American society and influence American politics and business on behalf of Poland. Both the PRCUA and PNA became nation-wide federations based in Chicago with branches across the country. The two fraternal societies were bitter rivals in 1890s and early 1900s, a situation that gradually eased by the time of the World War I when they were able to cooperate for the cause of Polish independence.

Another important fraternal society was founded in Chicago in 1898, the Polish Women’s Alliance (PWA). The PWA became one of the largest organizations of immigrant women in the USA. It was an advocate for Polish

¹¹ Thaddeus C. RADZIŁOWSKI, “Competition for Jobs and Racial Stereotypes: Poles and Blacks in Chicago,” *Polish American Studies* 33, no. 2 (Autumn 1976): 5-18.

Independence but also for expanding voting and economic rights for women in the USA and in Europe.

Poles in Illinois created a vast number of other organizations in addition to the major fraternals, including hundreds of religious, cultural, and social groups. Nearly every parish in the state had its own parochial school and Polish immigrants also created high schools and a junior college. Polish religious orders also operated orphanages, women's shelters, hospitals, and old age homes. Immigrants from southern Poland were especially active in forming regional clubs of people from the same area of the homeland. These groups not only provided fellowship but offered financial support to compatriots in Poland.

Hundreds of Polish theater troupes, musical and singing societies, and literary clubs were also founded in Illinois. Libraries were sponsored by parishes, political parties, and fraternal societies. Poles in Illinois published hundreds of periodicals, ranging from major daily newspapers to specialized journals and local parish bulletins. Polish book publishing began in Chicago in the 1870s with the firm of Władysław Dyniewicz. By the time of World War II, several major publishers had printed tens of thousands of titles including school texts, religious works, Polish literature, literature translated into Polish, history, science, and practical and didactic works on a range of subjects. Authors included many Polish Americans who found a ready audience writing for and about their fellow immigrants. Along with books, a rich life of Polish music and theater arose in Chicago and surrounding communities. Hundreds of amateur and several professional theater troupes performed works by Polish and Polish American playwrights, ranging from serious drama to light comedy. By the 1930s, this included Polish theatrical presentations broadcast on radio. Polish music was found everywhere from church choirs to symphony orchestras. Chicago became a center for music publishing and recording, including firms that specialized in music by and for Polish consumers.

Illinois Polonia since 1945

Due to patriotism and the particular demographics of American Polonia a tremendous and disproportionate number of young Polish Americans entered American military service during World War II.¹² As a result, a large number

¹² J. RADZIŁOWSKI, "Fecund Newcomers or Dying Ethnic? Demographic Approaches to the History of Italian and Polish Immigrants and their Children in the United States, 1880 to 1980,"

of Polish Americans had formative experiences outside of Polonia. This combined with important social and economic changes that swept post-war America and a new wave of Polish immigration transformed Polish communities in Illinois. Improving economic conditions led to migration out of older Polish neighborhoods in Chicago into nearby suburban areas. This resulted in suburbs that were heavily Polish yet did not have the same ethnic infrastructure. In particular, Catholic parishes formed after the war were mostly territorial, serving parishioners of several ethnic groups in English. For many Polish American families, the future advancement of their children seemed to require the acquisition of unaccented English. Although many parochial schools retained instruction in Polish into the early 1950s, growing resistance from parents led to its demise in most areas.

At the same time, a new group of Poles arrived in Illinois. These post-war immigrants were veterans of the Polish armed forces in the West, former prisoners of German concentration camps and slave labor camps, or refugees fleeing communist terror and repression. Often referred to as “DPs” (displaced persons) they were patriotic and highly sensitive to the importance of Polish language and culture and immediately formed a distinctive faction within Polonia. Although American Polonia and organizations such as the Polish American Congress, formed in 1944 and headquartered in Chicago, played a major role in sponsoring and assisting the new arrivals, the newcomers did not mix readily with the existing Polonia due to differences in experience, education, and language. The new wave of immigrants while cooperating with existing organizations, also formed their own institutions, such as associations of veterans, scouts (e.g., Związek Hacerstwa Polskiego w Chicago), and Polish Saturday Schools.¹³

In the decades after the war, Polonia’s existing tendencies toward atomization continued. A large group of second and third generation Polish Americans grew up speaking largely English while retaining certain Polish customs, but increasingly separated from Polonia institutions. A smaller group of “old Polonia” continued an attachment to institutional Polonia while increasingly cooperating with the “DPs” on issues related to the cause of Poland during the Cold War. This was supplemented by some continuing immigration from the PRL in the 1960s and 1970s.

Journal of American Ethnic History 27, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 60–74; IDEM, “Polonia in World War II: Toward a Social History,” *Polish American Studies* 58, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 63–80.

¹³ On this immigration, see A.D. JAROSZYŃSKA-KIRCHMANN, *The Exile Mission: The Polish Political Diaspora and Polish Americans, 1939-19569*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004.

The election of Pope John Paul II in 1978 and the rise of the Solidarity free trade union movement in 1980, once again galvanized Polonia in Chicago and Illinois on behalf of Poland. The resulting repression of Martial Law led to a new group of immigrants from Poland, who like the post-war immigration formed their own distinctive subgroup that cooperated with existing Polonia organizations but remained socially separate.¹⁴ Between the collapse of the PRL in 1989 and Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, Chicago and Illinois experienced another wave of Polish immigration. As in the century before, Poles came mainly for better economic conditions found in Illinois' growing economy. Unlike the first waves of immigrants, however, this new group of Poles contained a much higher proportion of highly skilled and well educated people many of whom opened small businesses or found work in service or technology sectors.

According to the U.S. Census, over 900,000 people in Illinois identify as having Polish ancestry, between 7 and 8 percent of the state's population, though this percentage is somewhat higher in the Chicago metro area. Signs of Polish culture and heritage are visible throughout the greater Chicago area, in institutions such as the Polish Museum of America or festivals such as the nation's largest May 3rd (Constitution Day) parade. Since their arrival in Illinois over 200 years ago, Poles continue to hold an important place in the history, culture, and society of Illinois and Chicago.

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¹⁴ On the Solidarity immigration in Chicago, see M.P. ERDMANS, *Opposite Poles: Immigrants and Ethnicities in Polish Chicago, 1976-1990*, College Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1998.

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POLES IN ILLINOIS: A BRIEF OUTLINE HISTORY

This article presents an outline history of the Polish community in Illinois from the 19th century to the present day. It describes and characterises the various waves of immigration of Poles to this state, during which the Polish community consolidated, Polish organisations were established (Polish Roman Catholic Union, Polish National Alliance, Polish Women's Alliance) and their integration with the American society unfolded. The main physical and spiritual centres of support were the parishes. The article also presents the activity of the Polish community in Illinois in modern times, its reactions to events in Poland in the 20th century and its current perception of Polish culture.

Keywords: Poles in Illinois; American Polonia; Poles in Chicago; Polish National Alliance PNA; Polish Roman Catholic Union of America PRCUA.

POLACY W ILLINOS. ZARYS HISTORII

Artykuł stanowi przekrój dziejów Polonii w Illinois począwszy od XIX wieku po czasy współczesne. Opisuje i charakteryzuje poszczególne fale imigracji Polaków do tego stanu, w ramach których konsolidowała się polonijna społeczność, powstawały polskie organizacje (Zjednoczenie Polskie Rzymsko-katolickie, Związek Narodowy Polski, Związek Polek) i postępowała integracja ze społeczeństwem amerykańskim. Głównym fizycznym centrum i duchowym punktem podparcia były parafie. W artykule przedstawiono również aktywność Polonii w Illinois w czasach współczesnych, jej reakcje na wydarzenia w Polsce w XX wieku i obecne postrzeganie kultury polskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Polacy w Illinois; Polonia amerykańska; Polacy w Chicago; Związek Narodowy Polski PNA; Zjednoczenie Polskie Rzymskokatolickie w Ameryce PRCUA.