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## **Polish Immigration to Chicago and the Impact on Local Society and Culture**

### **Polska imigracja do Chicago i jej wpływ na społeczność lokalną i kulturę**

#### **Abstract**

Polish immigration to the United States has occurred largely within three waves, spanning from 1880-1920, the late 1940's, and in the 1980's. While these immigrants settled across the country, a majority found comfort in Chicago, where many Poles have settled since the early 1800's. Living in Chicago and other major cities, Polish immigrants and Polish Americans began to impact their community in significant ways across all aspects of life. Over time these immigrant groups managed to make federal policy changes, impact the Polish language spoken in American cities, and of course change the impact of religion on society coming from a largely Roman Catholic identity in Poland. This article discusses the three major waves of immigration while touching on the impacts of each group on Chicago and beyond.

**Key words:** *immigration, Chicago, Polish Americans, society, culture.*

#### **Abstrakt**

Imigracja polska do Stanów Zjednoczonych odbyła się w trzech rzutach przypadających na lata 1880-1920, późne lata czterdzieste (1940-) i w latach osiem-

dziesiątych (1980-). Wówczas, emigranci ci osiedlali się na terenie całego kraju ale większość zdecydowała się na Chicago, gdzie wielu Polaków osiedliło się już we wczesnych latach osiemdziesiątych XIX wieku. Żyjąc w Chicago i innych większych miastach, polscy imigranci i polscy Amerykanie zaczęli w znaczący sposób wpływać na różnorodną formę egzystencji. Z biegiem czasu, tym imigranckim grupom udało się wpłynąć na zmiany w policji federalnej, w języku polskim używanym w miastach amerykańskich a także zmienić stosunek do religii wyznawanej przez społeczność wywodzącą się w znacznej mierze z kościoła katolickiego w Polsce. Niniejszy artykuł omawia trzy główne fale imigracji, skupiając się na wpływach każdej z grup na Chicago i okolice.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *imigracja, Chicago, polscy Amerykanie, społeczeństwo, kultura.*

## Introduction

Polish immigration to the United States has fluctuated over the last two hundred years, impacting the cultures and societies of the cities where the Polish immigrants settled, mainly Chicago, New York City, and Boston. This immigration began as early as the 1830's when Polish refugees from the Polish-Russian War settled in Chicago with the hope of attaining economic independence. One of the first Polish men arriving in Chicago was Anton Scherrman, born about 50 miles outside of Poznań. He developed the Polish Agency, an organization that tasked itself with bringing immigrants of Eastern and Central European descent to Chicago. (Pacyga, 2019) Scherrman's Polish Agency was successful and many Poles settled in Chicago with more following to be with their friends, neighbors and family. Later immigration to the U.S. largely followed patterns set by the first groups of immigrants because the patterns provided some sense of community whether prompted by a familiar language or by family ties dating back to the earliest settlements. This sense of community drove most later immigrants to settle in Chicago. (Pacyga, 2019)

Large waves of immigration occurred in three time periods: 1880-1920, post World War II, and in the 1980's. In each wave the main influx of Polish immigrants was to Chicago thanks to the work of Scherrman. Due to these migratory influxes, Warsaw is the only global city today containing a larger population of people of Polish descent than Chicago. (Pacyga, 2019) Polish immigrants chose to settle in Chicago because they could see it as

a way of still experiencing their culture while assimilating to American life. As the immigrant population grew, the culture in the city was changed in significant ways with the largest impacts in the political sphere, in language, and in the Catholic churches of Chicago and across the U.S.

### **First Wave of Immigration**

The first significant influx of Polish immigrants was from 1880-1920. Like the earliest Polish immigrants, these Poles, who were poorly educated and from rural areas, came to the United States seeking economic opportunities. Improved means of transportation and industrialization, developed during the second half of the nineteenth century, facilitated their immigration and other mass immigration from Eastern and Central Europe. (Pacyga, 2003) As trains connected areas of Europe that were previously difficult to reach, they provided new opportunities for rural Polish peasants to travel to major port cities to utilize new steel-hulled steam ships to reach America. In the U.S., railways created connections to Chicago from port cities. This allowed for mass movement of goods and people. Trains brought recently arrived immigrants, mostly low wage workers, to Chicago to fill factory positions. This improved transportation led to over one million Poles arriving in the U.S. over a period of forty years as simultaneously capitalism drove a greater need for cheap labor in a society that was industrializing. (Pacyga, 2003) Many of this wave of Polish immigrants settled predominately near major industrial sites in five areas of Chicago. Other immigrant groups-German, Irish, Czech, Ukrainian, and Scandinavian – had populated these working class neighborhoods earlier, but the influx of Poles quickly influenced them. As more Poles entered Chicago they created cultural centers, anchored by Roman Catholic churches, Polish language newspapers, and ethnic markets. (Pacyga, 1996) Many newspapers at the time described these neighborhoods as, “spatially integrated, but socially segregated”. (Pacyga, 1996) These neighborhoods grew as more Poles began to join their families and friends in Chicago. However, this growth would not last.

Immigration began to slow following World War I as sentiments towards immigrant populations shifted in the United States. A distrust of Eastern and Central European populations grew across the continent, contributing to stricter immigration laws. This distrust stemmed from the activities of many immigrant activists and anarchists fighting for worker’s rights and unions. Activists such as Emma Goldman (a Russian born anarchist) and Leon Czolgosz (an American born to Polish parents), raised concerns for

public safety and were consequently strictly monitored by the police, who often brought armed surveillance into Eastern and Central European neighborhoods. (Goldman, 1931) This distrust resulted in the enactment of significant legislation using a quota system to slow immigration. In addition to this strict quota system limiting movement from Europe, other strict immigration laws, such as literacy testing and higher taxes for new immigrants, were implemented in 1917. The Immigration Act of 1924 allowed for only two percent of the Polish population cited in the 1890 U.S. census to enter each following year. (U.S. State Department)

## **Second Wave of Immigration**

Polish immigration to the United States began increasing following World War II. After the atrocities committed against the Polish people during the war, over 1.9 million Poles were living as displaced people and refugees throughout Germany and Soviet occupied countries. The United Nations originally created camps and assembly centers to house and assist them, but after significant lobbying by Polish Americans from Chicago, some refugees were allowed to immigrate to the U.S. (Pacyga, 2019) In 1948 President Truman signed into law a bill allowing over 200,000 displaced Poles to enter the country, and in 1950 Congress extended that number to over 300,000. (Pacyga, 2019) However, many Polish displaced people were unable to get into the United States through this law. Instead many entered other countries, including Canada, Australia, India, and the UK. In the years following their relocations, whenever the opportunity arose, quite a few of the Poles who had settled elsewhere chose to immigrate to the United States to rejoin family or friends or to seek better economic opportunities. (Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann, 2004)

Many of the immigrants arriving in the United States after World War II were veterans of the war or refugees and consequently shared a different background with the new community they joined. Having experienced tragic destruction and loss of their way of life, they sometimes clashed with those labor migrants of a similar ethnic background who had immigrated earlier. Those earlier immigrants that came as a part of the first wave that left Poland before it was an independent country, which limited their ties to a national identity, unlike those of the second wave who had fought for Poland and lost loved ones in the name of the country and its people. (Erdmans, 1995) The clash between the groups resulted in the first wave group being referred to as *Stara Polonia* (Old Polonia), while the second wave of

immigrants became known as the Nowa Emigracja (New Emigration). (Pacyga, 2019) Only old Polonia Poles had memories of the largely agricultural experience of their grandparents and parents because Poland had changed since their emigration into a more urbanized and industrial part of the world, the Poland where much of the New Emigration came from. There were also significant socioeconomic and educational differences between the groups. Immigrants in the post-WWII group were more highly educated and literate, which allowed them to overcome the U.S.'s immigration policies. Those who had come in the first wave were poor farmers who had become low-wage laborers. Many of the descendants remained in low-wage factory jobs due to limited upward mobility in U.S. cities at that time. (Erdmans, 1995) Often the Nowa Emigracja refused to live in the same areas as the poorer Polish Americans because of these differences. (Pacyga, 2019) These differences resulted in the establishment of a class system among the Polish population in Chicago and impacted who was able to participate in politics.

### **Third Wave of Immigration**

The third wave of immigrants has benefited all classes of Polish society, while exclusively identifying with the upper classes. These immigrants came in the 1980's seeking both economic gain and political safety, which eroded in Poland at that time due to the country's shifting government. Solidarność, an organization attempting to end communism in the country, had formed and become active. Some of the organization's people were at times forced to leave the country to escape persecution for their political beliefs, and many of them ended up in cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago. (Erdmans, 1995) These immigrants were politically active and highly educated and joined the upper ranks of Polish society in the U.S. Their political engagement in Chicago and other cities benefited those of Polish descent as well as Poles in the mothercountry. (Erdmans, 1995) An organization called Polish American Congress became heavily involved in federal U.S. policy making regarding Solidarność and the ongoing crisis in Poland. (Pienkos, 2011) However, despite active political engagement, differences over language use, religion, music and literary tastes, and social values kept the newest Poles from connecting as a group with older immigrant groups who had assimilated in different ways to American culture. (Erdmans, 1995)

## Impacts of Immigration on Culture – Politics

All generations of Polish immigrants have been involved in creating some major U.S. policy changes since their arrival. Even early interactions with the government resulted in big changes to the experiences of Poles in the United States and those abroad. Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, Poles were involved in several workers' rights campaigns. These campaigns included attempts to gain an eight hour work day, a six day work week, and safer working conditions. Some of these campaigns ended violently, like the Haymarket Rally in Chicago which resulted in a riot when bombs went off in the crowd (Goldman, 1931), but ultimately many of the goals in these movements were met by new federal regulations for the workplace. While many of these movements often looked like strikes and rallies organized by anarchists of Eastern and Central European descent, at times the political work of Polish immigrants remained more within the culturally accepted means of change. The novel *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair supported these campaigns and drew public attention to them by describing immigrant experiences in the Chicago meat-packing industry. Immigrant campaigns and the public attention created by Sinclair's novel resulted in the development of the Pure Food and Drug Act, a law that continues to facilitate inspections of warehouses and industries to ensure safe conditions for employees and clean food products. (Sinclair, 1906)

Polish influence in politics reached U.S. foreign policy in 1918. With the help of Polish leaders like Ignacy Paderewski, American Poles successfully lobbied President Woodrow Wilson to incorporate Poland's independence into his proposed Fourteen Point Plan as the plan's thirteenth point. (Pienkos, 2011) The inclusion for this thirteenth point was largely a result of work by Polonia, a political advocacy group created in Chicago, and the Polish American banker, Jan Smulski. (Pienkos, 2011) Between the world wars, many Poles in America were focused on gaining economic success rather than political action. This sentiment changed when the Second World War began and Poles in America found another cause worth fighting for.

After the beginning of the war in 1939, Poles in America took up the cause of supporting an independent Poland and pushing for policy to support the Exiled Polish Government and Polish refugees. The main coalition to head the lobbying was the Polish American Congress (PAC), established in Buffalo, New York in 1944. Before FDR's sudden death in 1945, the PAC was unable to meet with President Franklin D. Roosevelt due to FDR's negotiations with Stalin on Soviet-proposed borders that encroached on

formally Polish lands. Until after his reelection in 1944, FDR successfully avoided informing the PAC of his plans to allow the Soviet-proposed borders. As a result, ninety percent of Polish Americans voted for FDR in 1944. (Pienkos, 2011) In FDR's last speech to Congress on the outcome of the Yalta Conference in March, 1945, only a month prior to his death, he officially confirmed the U.S. plans for postwar Poland. The president of the PAC, Charles Rozmarek, denounced the president's actions in a letter and on several radio broadcasts across the U.S. He eventually made his way to NYC and Europe to speak in front of the United Nations and European governments on behalf of a restoration of Polish borders. These speeches helped convince the next U.S. president, Harry Truman, to adopt many political goals of the PAC. Not only did Truman allow for an increase in immigration numbers for the resettlement of Polish war refugees, but he also ordered a Congressional investigation of the Katyń murders, eventually finding the Soviet government responsible for these horrific war crimes. (Pienkos, 2011)

Over the next several years, Polonia and the PAC were able to get more and more presidential support for Polish causes. This culminated in the 1980s as the United States began to involve themselves with the goals of Solidarity in Poland. Through PAC pressure, President Carter spoke in Chicago in late 1980 to support the trade movement and the strike that was implemented to obtain greater human rights in Poland. In that speech, he warned Moscow to avoid involvement in the Polish affairs. (Pienkos, 2011) When President Reagan stepped into office, he brought high ranking PAC members into the White House to help develop policies to assist the trade movement in Poland and put an end to communism in the country. After the Round Table Agreement in 1989 allowed Solidarity to take charge of the government, Poles in America shifted their lobbying goals to help the new Polish economy thrive. Through PAC's tireless work, Congress passed the Support East European Democracy Act, providing the new Polish government with financial assistance to aid in the transition. To this day, PAC continues to impact foreign and domestic policy in America, most recently with the admission of Poland into NATO.

### **Impacts of Immigration on Polish Culture in the United States – Language**

The Polish language was impacted significantly within the U.S. immigrant groups over time as the Polish language in Poland itself changed between waves of Polish immigrants arriving in the United States. The immigrants

in the Old Polonia wave still spoke and continue to speak an “archaic Polish” that was often criticized by more recent immigrants for being out of touch with the current-day language and compared to the old Polish found in literature classes. (Erdmans, 1995) Clinging to a more archaic form of Polish was due to the rural origins of the immigrants in the first wave and the lack of Polish classes in public schools. Due to anti-immigrant sentiment, the children of immigrants were not allowed to speak their parent’s language in the classroom, leading to parents passing down dialects that were often out of date. Polish Americans were also more likely to use English syntax while still utilizing Polish words because that is how they were taught to order sentences in public schools. (Erdmans, 1995) New immigrants still see this dialect to be old and a sign of limited education in Polish culture, when in reality it is a new culture created by assimilating to American culture.

English spoken in Chicago by immigrants was also impacted through living and working throughout the city over the years. The most obvious impact is in the development of *po Chicagosku*. While this version of English is never used in text, it combines English vocabulary with Polish endings. It is the result of many immigrant’s descendents losing Polish vocabulary over time and realizing that children and English speakers understand the English vocabulary better. (Pacyga, 2019) Works like “parkowac” were developed to mean the verb to park. (Erdmans, 1995) This practice often developed separately in all English-speaking cities where large groups of Polish immigrants migrated.

### **Impacts of Immigration on Culture – Religion/Education**

As the Roman Catholic Church remains a central aspect of Polish culture in Poland, it impacts Polish communities in the United States as well. The immigration over time however, changed the landscape of religion and education in the cities where large numbers of Polish immigrants settled but in Chicago especially, as it holds the largest population of Polish Americans in the United States. Today Chicago has over fifty entirely Polish or Polish dominated Roman Catholic Churches. (Pacyga, 2019) These staples of religious life date back to as early as the first Polish immigrant communities in the 1880’s, when they wanted to remove their children from the Irish Roman Catholic influences. (Pacyga, 1996) In order to continue spreading Polish and Catholic knowledge to the next generations of Polish Americans, numerous Polish Catholic schools were developed in the North, West, and South sides of the city. These schools are still taught by Polish nuns today.

They teach students of all ethnicities and races, diverging from solely Polish students in the twentieth century. (Pacyga, 2019)

Despite the significant cultural differences in the waves of Polish immigration, the Church and Catholic schools were often the arena where the most interaction between the waves of immigrants occurred. This increased interaction naturally led to conflict in the religious sphere of Chicago. For example, the third-wave immigrants to the United States believed the Church should be consistent on both sides of the ocean. In the 1980s Poland many priests supported the *Solidarność* movement and would demonstrate that support to the community. However, American churches largely avoided participating in politics and refused to hang political banners inside their buildings. There was also significant conflict over the Polish dialect spoken by priests, as it was often the archaic version seen as inferior by new Polish immigrants. Finally the debate over specific Catholic traditions led to further tension in the Church. One such tradition was the weekly sermon, often used by American priests to collect money for community projects and Church services. The priests often viewed recent immigrants as not donating enough following these sermons, while the recent immigrants saw the practice of using sermons to collect money as greedy. They believed sermons should interpret scripture and not ask for donations. Another tradition that had changed over time in the United States was the practice of confession. Confessions in the United States are heard once a week instead of daily as in Poland. (Erdmans, 1995) These cultural differences in religious practices resulted in only minor debate as the Catholic Church remained such a vital part of Polish identity for all Polish Americans.

## **Conclusion**

Polish immigration continues to shape and impact American way of life, and in few places as much as in Chicago. The waves of immigration over time reflected significant points of history in Poland and resulted in Polish sub-cultures after assimilation despite common ancestry. Impacts of these hardworking immigrants are evidenced in all realms of Polish American society and history. As a group, Polish immigrants were able to change U.S. federal policy despite significant fractures in their communities. The Polish language, shaped by the experiences of those first immigrants, resulted in further tension and conflict between immigrant waves. This tension overflowed into the religious society of Polish Americans. Despite being a pillar of Polish identity, it was changed through the transition to U.S cities from Europe

and new Poles often had difficulty understanding this shift. Overall these impacts show Polish migration can contribute to the new society it enters, developing community amongst its participants while affecting the shape of their own world.

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