

Polish-American Experience

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**Abstract**

The United States is a composite culture, developed from a number of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. One such group is the Polish. Polish-Americans have been a part of the American cultural catalog since as early as 1608 and still maintain a distinctive presence in the culture.

### **Polish-American Experience**

The Polish-American experience began in 1608 in the Jamestown Settlement in Virginia colony. The first Polish settlers were experienced craftsmen and artisans who were taken to North America by the expedition of Captain John Smith (Richmond, pp72). It is difficult to determine exactly how many Polish immigrants settled during that time because Poland was experiencing difficulties in remaining a unified sovereign nation. Poland was partitioned, and thus there was not a recognized nation from which the immigrants would have arrived (Pula, 1996). The first purely Polish settlements were in Texas during 1854. The settlements were primarily farming communities (Richmond, pp71-72). As of the 2000 census there were over 9 million individuals claiming Polish descent living in the United States, with 550 thousand being born in Poland (Booza, 2007). Collectively, persons of Polish descent living outside of the Poland are referred to as Polonia (Chirkov, 2009).

Polish immigrants experienced a different level of culture shock depending on when they emigrated from Poland. The Poles in Jamestown were mostly separated by language and cultural boundaries related to customs (Pula, 1996). Immigrants arriving in America during the nineteenth century were leaving a rural country of close community to a country on the verge of

industrialization. Initially in the 1800s Poles had some difficulty with acculturation (Chirkov, 2009) and did not easily "melt" into American society well enough to develop a healthy cultural pluralism. Some Poles tried to hold on very strongly to the "old country", while (somewhat fewer) others were too hasty in casting off ties with Poland. Over time with the establishment of Polish-American schools and Polish communities the difficulties were overcome and a healthy balance of cultures was able to be sustained (Krolikowski, 1981). Polish immigrants arriving in modern times would likely have an easier transition than any of their predecessors. The American culture is more open minded and receptive to immigrants than in the past and there are established Polish communities which can be beneficial in the transition to a new ethnic identity while relating to the old (Kosic, et.al., 2004). These Polish communities are scattered around the country, with most existing in the north. Some of the more prominent Polish-American communities exist in Chicago (Illinois), New York City, Hamtramck (Michigan), some areas of Pennsylvania and a large portion of New Jersey (Booza, 2007).

The social structure in Poland at the time most immigrants departed was very family-centric. Most of the norms and values of the culture were those that were designated by small, close-knit communities. Upon immigrating to America the Polish people

found themselves in a culture that was more heavily driven by laws and national customs. The new Polish-Americans also found themselves as individuals with more independence than they previously had experienced. This independence left many Polish-Americans without their familiar social support structure within which to function (Chirkov, 2009). In Poland marital discord was a normal part of any marriage (Pula, 1996). The immigration to American and the attempt at acculturation caused the dynamics of this "normal" function to change. Polish customs encourage disagreements between husband and wife to be dealt with either privately within the relationship or with the support of the community. American customs allow for these matters to become a matter of legal process. Polish culture presents any problems in a marriage that threatens the stability of the marriage as a moral issue and the conflict is between the individuals in the marriage and their own moral duty to protect the cohesion of the marriage with responsibility resting on the male to ensure the survival of the marriage. The objective is to resolve conflicts and ensure solidarity. In American customs the interference of the legal process presents a unique threat to the relationship between the individuals. It is no longer a moral question that reinforces the marriage, but a situation of legality which places the individuals in the marriage as opponents against each other, ensuring an emotional separateness. This legal

interference gave woman a certain power in the marriage to ensure the control and compliance of their husbands. This situation resulted in many Polish-American males feeling that their masculinity was being threatened. The result of these feelings and the legal action of the wives was less feelings of familial loyalty and the demise of the previous feelings of moral obligation to protect the marriage (Chirkov, 2009).

Another aspect of change that occurred in the ritual of marriage is when weddings would be allowed to occur. In Poland weddings were primarily held in autumn after the harvest. After immigrating to America the rituals changed somewhat. Being outside of the guidance of a predominantly Catholic community allowed for marriages to be held almost any time of year, however, certain religious observances would still prevent weddings during some periods of time. Weddings were discouraged during lent and advent, and any wedding occurring during such times were not allowed music, dancing or other forms of "gayety" as it would disrupt the spirit of the occasion. To continue with the theme of individuality and independence that occurred as a result of acculturation into American customs, the selection of mate moved from a family controlled task to an individual choice. In Poland it was customary for the parents of young people to select, or at least approve future spouses. In the individualistic culture of America the young people rejected

parental control over such a personal decision. Such a rejection did not stop relative or friend commentary on the selected mate and in some cases did result in a relationship being destroyed (Radzilowski, 1989). Both in Poland and in America, family is very important to Poles and their descendants. As a result of the Catholic religious influences the Polish-American population has a somewhat lesser percentage of single-parent families and divorce compared to the national average (Booza, 2007).

Family structures for Polish-Americans differ slightly from the family structure in Poland. The primary way this is reflected is in how children regard their parents. In Poland a strict adherence to a parent's guidance is crucial, whereas American attitudes have influenced Polish-American children to present challenges to the authority of the parent. Polish-American families are also more likely to encourage autonomy of children than in traditional Polish homes. For first-generation American-born Polish-Americans the challenging of parental wishes and independent nature was fueled by a combination of their own familiarity with American customs and the unfamiliarity thereof of their parents. Over time such rebellious attitudes were quashed and a new parental control was established. In the present state of Polish-American families in urban American communities there is little room for the community-familial interdependent support structure which Polish

parents relied upon. In its place there is a more American urban support system that exists. Parochial schools took part in the support system at first, but were replaced by the support of the public school system and casual relationships between parents, creating a safe environment in which children could grow (Pacyga, 1982).

While Polish-Americans are away from the highly organized community environments in Poland, they continue to live in communities that are highly populated with others of Polish descent. In most cases, areas where initial settlements of Polish immigrants were established still exist and still attract new immigrants from Poland (Booza, 2007). In some instances Polish-American communities are socially isolated from other communities. The foundation of the Polish-American communities is the church. The religious institution gave solidarity and helped ossify the relationship between Polish families living in each parish. Poles did not wish to simply dissolve into American society, but instead be an active participant in social and political movements that affected them (Pacyga, 1982).

As with most ethnic groups, there are stereotypes that exist for Poles. In entertainment media Poles are portrayed as having little creativity or intelligence, but being well suited for tasks requiring great physical strength. The stereotypes and the support that was generated for them served to create a

negative self-image. The self-image generated caused Poles to begin ignoring their heritage. There have also been attempts at discrimination against Polish immigrants in an attempt to maintain the Anglo-Saxon purity of the United States (Pula, 1996).

Education is very important to Polish-Americans. Going against the stereotypes, 30.9 percent of Polish-Americans over 25 have completed a bachelor's degree or higher, whereas the national average is 25 percent. Almost half of recent Polish immigrants have some amount of college education, with 15 percent arriving with graduate level degrees (Booza, 2007). A strong dedication to education is a long-standing tradition among Polish-Americans. In the 1870s Polish community leaders sought to create an educational system that would embrace the ethnic heritage of their children as well as teach things that were important to the community, such as morals based on their religion. Polish immigrants were tempted by the presence of tax-supported public schools, but were dissatisfied with the teaching of moral values without the presence of theology. Following the example of other Roman-Catholic followers, such as the Dutch and German, the Polish communities began forming parochial schools. The schools grew from small, crowded classrooms to adequate sized facilities by 1900. During the same time the initial lay teachers were replaced by nuns who

## POLISH-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

10

specialized in teaching. This change in teaching staff brought about a reforming of the schools, but also encouraged occasional feelings of spiritual superiority among many Poles. The growth of the schools was not all positive. The facilities were a simple matter to expand for the growing number of Polish-American students in the parochial schools, but the number of qualified teachers was slow to catch up. The difficulty in securing teachers caused concern among parents, church officials as well as the Polish-American media (Galush, 2000). As the schools grew it was determined that the available texts from Poland were inadequate for an American atmosphere, and that professionally produced texts were little better. Eventually the job of creating textbooks was delegated to the nuns, who wrote on all topics from religion to ethics to mathematics (Krolikowski, 1981). Initially the parochial schools were very different from the American public schools, but evolved over time to include components of both the American education system as well as the traditional Polish values. Teaching methods were quickly adapted from the American public schools and put into use in the parochial schools. The parochial schools embraced literacy and endeavored to rival the quality of education offered by the public schools. A major criticism of the schools is that some content areas, such as geography, were very Poland-centric. Other areas, such as history, were well-rounded and

## POLISH-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

11

presented a more balanced world-view than the American public schools. American history texts of the time ignored any major figure that was not born in America. Ironically, the church-operated schools taught of various religions and the American concept of religious freedom. The parochial schools served the Polish-American communities until they were eventually phased out in the 1960s, but many of the public schools of those communities still embrace the Polish heritage of their students (Galush, 2000).

In addition to being well educated, or perhaps as a result of it, Polish-Americans have above average incomes. The average Polish-American income was \$10,000 above the national average in 2000 (Booza, 2007). This is quite unexpected as most Poles who immigrated were peasants and entered the country with no aspirations of wealth, only the aspiration to provide better living conditions for their families. Polish immigrants before World War II were primarily farmers and other physical laborers. A common occupation for a Polish-American before World War II was a packinghouse worker. With this type of work the Polish immigrants found it necessary to participate in such social movements as the formation of workers unions (Pacyga, 1982). In modern times, Polish-Americans are somewhat more likely to hold a managerial or professional career than the average population (Booza, 2007).

## POLISH-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

12

The political involvement of Polish-Americans is limited outside of their own communities, however that does not mean that they are absent from influencing change. Polish immigrants have been visible in critical moments of American history since 1775 when Thaddeus Kosciuszko fought in the American Revolutionary War under General Marquis de La Fayette. Kosciuszko was given the roles of engineer and architect charged with constructing protective structures. He was responsible for establishing numerous American fortifications including Fort Billingsport (Whitridge, 1975). World War II had a significant impact on Polish Americans. The conflict hit Polish-Americans with dual-loyalties quite hard, especially those with family still residing in Poland. As soon as Poland was invaded by Adolph Hitler's forces the American Polish population began providing relief for Poland by adopting communities and shelters in Poland. As the United States joined the war the relief effort was expanded to include providing resources to increase the safety and comfort of soldiers fighting to defend Poland. In 1943 the Government-in-exile of Poland sought to organize all of the major Polish-American groups into a large group supporting the efforts to restore the independence of Poland. In May of 1944 this effort was turned into an objective called the "Polish-American Congress", an effort to unify all Polish-Americans in efforts to secure peace. There is presently no

## POLISH-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

13

discontinuity in the loyalties of most Polish-Americans

(McGinley, 2003).

Polish-Americans are a strongly rooted ethnic group that is a part of the American composite culture. Polish-American communities have their own unique culture, but strongly embrace American ideals and many Polish-Americans actively contribute to American society.

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## POLISH-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

15

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