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Zycie w Ameryce: Life in America

Polish-American Cultural Resilience and Adaptation in the Face of Americanization

Brett A. Cotter '19

Worcester, Massachusetts is often described as a “mosaic” of ethnic communities. Indeed, some of its most distinctive landmarks, particularly the many steeples that rise above into the skyline, were built by the hands of immigrants. Its industrial factories, once forming the most important part of Worcester’s economic life from the nineteenth into the latter half of the twentieth century, provided most early immigrant laborers with a livelihood. These workers returned home at the end of the day to vibrant ethnic neighborhoods speaking a wide variety of tongues, brought over from the old country. Alongside the factories, local churches, schools, and an assortment of clubs tethered these people to their respective ethnic enclaves and established a vibrant community atmosphere in which everyone seemed to know one another.

The local parish church is undoubtedly one of the most significant institutions around which a community can grow and, as can be observed in the case of Worcester, ethnic immigrant communities very often had such a religious establishment at their center from relatively early on. Today, however, many of the ethnic communities that once composed Worcester no longer exist as they did in the 1900s. Neighborhoods that were once culturally and even physically centered on a church have changed drastically for a variety of reasons. For example, Lithuanian-American families no longer walk to Saint Casimir’s parish church on Providence Street for Sunday mass, for now, it is a Pentecostal church. On the other side of Vernon Hill, the formerly-Lithuanian parish church of Worcester, Our Lady of Vilna, has adopted a Vietnamese Catholic community as its flock. Our Lady of Mount Carmel, once home to a lively Italian parish, stands empty with a thin cloth cover

Author’s note: This essay on the Polish-American community of Worcester means more to me than any other paper I have written. It was in this neighborhood that my mother’s family lived and grew, and it was in its church that I was baptized and my parents married, and countless Polish masses celebrated. The process of research brought me all over Worcester, into its public archives and schools as well as the homes of Worcester residents. It is a remarkable city of remarkable people, a city steeped in a history of which Poles are a small though no less vital part.

Not by myself could I ever have completed this research on the history of the Polish-American community of Worcester. I would like to thank the George I. Alden Trust for financial support through the Charles Weiss Summer Research Program at Holy Cross. I would also like to thank Our Lady of Czestochowa Parish and its school, Saint Mary’s, along with each of their faculties and staffs, for allowing me to access their records. I am indebted to the dozen interviewees, for whom I am genuinely thankful, whose recollections brought life to the final project. It is also essential for me to thank the Worcester Historical Museum and the Worcester Public Library for access to their historical documents. Finally, I express my most profound gratitude to my advisor for this project, Professor Stephanie Yuhl, whose guidance was indispensable. And, of course, none of this would have come to fruition if not for my parents, who gave me the idea for this project and constant encouragement throughout the process.

hanging over its front façade. Some congregations such as Our Lady of Vilna have survived the trials of the late twentieth century with remarkable adaptability. Many, such as historic Saint John's church which used to have a primarily Irish body of parishioners, have become more universal, "territorial" parishes to use Gerald Gamm's terminology. Others, like Our Lady of Mount Carmel, have been displaced.

Our Lady of Czestochowa on Ward Street, founded in 1903 as a Polish parish, has also been forced to adapt to life in America, yet it has shown remarkable resilience in the face of change. Whereas some Catholic ethnic churches have undergone dramatic changes in ethnicity or religious denomination, Our Lady of Czestochowa has remained since its inception a Polish Catholic church right up to the present day. Masses are celebrated in the mother tongue twice on Sundays alongside an English ceremony. A sizable population of first-generation Polish immigrants remains active in the community. Numerous organizations, such as the Polish Naturalization Independent Club and the Quo Vadis Club, provide services for the Polish-American community. Despite the ascendancy of English, a literal halving of the community by the construction of an interstate highway, and increasing suburbanization as part of the broader trend of Americanization, the Polish-American community centered on Our Lady of Czestochowa has adapted while preserving much of its ethnic identity.

Compared to the much larger Polish-American communities in Chicago and Milwaukee, little has been written on Worcester's Polonia (the term for the Polish diaspora and Polish communities outside Poland) except for a valuable few books and locally-distributed articles. Worcester remains a vital part of the story of all Polish-Americans. Our Lady of Czestochowa peers over I-290, nestled between Endicott and what remains of Taylor St, and the historically Polish-American neighborhood that extends from the highway up the side of Vernon Hill exists quietly, hidden from the average Worcesterite. It was from this neighborhood that many young Polish-Americans left to pursue opportunities that would promise them and their children better lives. But unlike urban migrators from other Worcester parishes, many of these Polish-Americans did not forget their roots.

In this essay, I will define "Polish-American identity", what it means to members of Worcester's Polonia, and how Polish-Americans have carried that identity in the post-World War II era. I suggest the ways in which the community resisted Americanization, how it adapted where it did not resist, and ultimately how it has been able to preserve its distinctive culture. For the sake of clarity, I use the term "Americanization" to refer to the general process that breaks down the borders of ethnic cultures and their communities to integrate them into mainstream American society. This is realized through suburbanization, the general pursuit of social mobility, and the decline of traditional cultural practices from special holidays to everyday language.

Nowy świat - A new world

An accurate understanding of Polish-American identity is incomplete without understanding the world that Polish immigrants left behind and how Worcester's first Poles constructed their new home. Between 1772 and 1795, three partitions conducted by the comparatively centralized monarchies of Prussia, Russia, and Austria resulted in the effective elimination of a Polish polity until 1918. Under the government of these three empires, Polish culture was suppressed in the name of national unity.

Scholars of Polish history most often point to Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* beginning in the late 1870s as a particularly aggressive attempt to suppress Polish culture. According to Stefan Kieniewicz, the German government sought to turn their partition of Poland into "Germany's granary" through large-scale commercial agriculture.¹ As stated in John Bukowczyk's history of Polish-Americans, many Poles were peasant laborers; mechanization under this new German economy would render them superfluous, and this meant German oppression very explicitly had an economic component.² Additionally, as Anthony Kuzniewski explained, German was to become the official language, and Polish Catholicism was suppressed.³ In Russia, too, (the partition from which most of Worcester's Poles would ultimately originate) there were similar attempts at de-Polonization and restricting education.⁴ Poles from Austrian-controlled Galicia, from which a significant number of Worcester's Poles came, were not as explicitly oppressed as in Germany or Russia, but tensions between the peasant and landowning class exacerbated by Austrian policies obstructed Polish nationalism and proved particularly disastrous for the peasant class on a material basis.⁵ Due to both cultural and economic oppression, it became necessary for many peasants to find a way to meet their needs and American industry was hiring.

It is tempting to assume that Poles who migrated from Europe to the United States came with the intention of constructing permanent communities. Bukowczyk shows that from the late 19th century, many Poles thought that they would return to Poland and that their emigration to America was a temporary sojourn to help the family's financial status.⁶ According to data supplied by Helen Lopata, the majority

¹ Stefan Kieniewicz, *The Emancipation of the Polish Peasantry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 193.

² John J. Bukowczyk, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of Polish-Americans* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 7.

³ Anthony J. Kuzniewski, *Faith and Fatherland: The Polish Church War in Wisconsin, 1896-1918* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 5-7.

⁴ Barbara Proko, John Kraska Jr., and Janice Banukiewicz Stickles, *The Polish Community of Worcester* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 7; Helen Znaniecki Lopata, *Polish Americans: Status Competition in an Ethnic Community* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 12.

⁵ Bukowczyk, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

of the seventy-seven thousand Polish immigrants who came to the United States in 1909 were males between the age of fourteen and forty-four, and only three percent of that total had more than \$50 in their pocket as they entered the country; their families usually came later, if at all, once the initial migrant accumulated enough money.⁷ For the most part, these migrants worked as laborers. In the specific case of Worcester, Polish immigrants found employment in factories owned by American Steel & Wire, Reed & Prentice Companies, as well as Crompton & Knowles Loom Works.⁸

John T. McGreevy's research into how Catholic institutions considered the question of race in the cities of the American north concludes, among other things, that the presence of a parish signifies permanence of whichever community it serves. Despite the fact that Polish immigrants did not initially intend to make their home in this new world as shown by Bukowczyk and Lopata, the eventual establishment of a permanent parish in many American cities, facilitated by the importation of Polish ecclesiastical figures, signified permanence in America.⁹ In the case of Worcester, Saint Casimir's Catholic parish was founded late in the year of 1894 as a joint Lithuanian and Polish parish. The strong ethnic traditions upheld by Saint Casimir's and, later, Our Lady of Czestochowa, meant that these parishioners had made their home here, at least for the time being, and would be unlikely to leave the neighborhood unless joining another parish of the same ethnicity.

Early on, Worcester's Poles and Lithuanians shared a parish at Saint Casimir's. Disputes between Poland and Lithuania between the world wars, notably stemming from the former's territorial claims to the Vilnius region, has marked twentieth-century relations between these two ethnic groups with controversy.¹⁰ From this it is fair to assume that it was an uneasy existence at Saint Casimir's, but it is important to note that Worcester Poles and Lithuanians from 1894 to the turn of the century coexisted with relative ease. According to William Wolkovich-Valkavicius, the Lithuanian pastor at Saint Casimir's, Rev. Joseph Jakstys, became wrapped up in controversy after numerous allegations of misconduct and misappropriation of parish funds.¹¹ Wolkovich-Valkavicius blames this scandalous and dubious story as the reason for the Polish departure from Saint Casimir's, but it is more likely that Poles just wanted their church and the liberty to celebrate in their distinctive tradition. In a short parish history detailing the earliest years of Our Lady of

⁷ Lopata, 40, 66.

⁸ Leon T. Miscavage Jr., "The Polish-American Experience in Worcester," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Rider University, 1976), 21; Proko et al, 37-39.

⁹ John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 21.

¹⁰ Dovile Budryte, *Taming Nationalism? Political Community Building in the Post-Soviet Baltic States* (Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 188-189.

¹¹ William L. Wolkovich-Valkavicius, "Tensions in Bi-Ethnic Parishes: Poles and Lithuanians in New England," *Polish American Studies* 58, no. 2 (2001), 77-78.

Czestochowa parish, the Catholic American Press paints a more industrious picture of Father Jakstys as someone who “fused” the Lithuanians and Poles together.¹² In histories made by the Polish parish itself, no scandal is mentioned and it would appear that mutual understanding was reached at the separation of the parish. Simply for reasons of divergent (but not hostile) tradition and culture as well as a growing population, the church for Our Lady of Czestochowa parish was finished in 1906 on Richland Street, just south of Kelley Square, and the Poles officially made it their home along with some Lithuanians, whose names appear as a significant minority in many parish records throughout its history.

To the members of this new parish, a separate church meant that they could organize and worship according to their own traditions. To them, a church of their own was not just a building, but it was the heart of their community, the soul of their Polonia. As every Pole in the community was Catholic, “parish” became synonymous with the community.¹³ So it was with the establishment of a permanent parish and in 1915 a parochial school that a firmly-rooted, dominantly Polish community had formed in Worcester. Soon to follow were organizations such as the Polish Naturalization Independent (PNI) Club, founded in 1906 and intended to help facilitate the transition from Polish to American life by procuring jobs and green cards as well as perpetuating Polish culture.

The early period of the parish’s history was marked by a series of short, disjointed pastorates. Its first pastor was Rev. Jan Moneta who during his short four-year term was remarkably active. He helped establish some organizations to enliven community life, from a chapter of the Polish National Alliance to the parish’s Rosary Society. Notably, he also supported the formation of a Polish Political Club, marking a desire to engage with the wider American world from an ethnic platform early on.¹⁴ He died at age forty-four due to cancer, and Rev. Peter Reding took over in 1907 until his death in 1911. He was followed by Rev. Joseph Tomikowski, who was transferred in 1913.

These short and disruptive pastorates were followed up by perhaps one of the most revered of pastors to have led Our Lady of Czestochowa parish, Father Boleslaw Bojanowski. Gerald Gamm’s research into the changing composition of Boston’s neighborhoods in the early twentieth century indicates that Catholics generally remained in the areas longer than non-Catholics due to the public presence of the parish.¹⁵ It was evident that most of the parishioners of Our Lady of Czestochowa were already there to stay by the beginning of World War I. Yet under Father Bojanowski’s pastorate they were further solidified. The parish school was

¹² Richard D. McGrall, “Sketches Sketches” *Telegram*, March 4, 1983.

¹³ Proko et al, 55

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁵ Gerald Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 83.

built in 1915, which was expanded upon with a gymnasium and auditorium in 1926. The construction of the school was a clear sign that not only was the parish permanent but that a new generation was in need of fulfilling community life. Father Bojanowski was lifted to the status of Monsignor in 1935, the year after which Saint Mary's High School had been finished as the only Polish secondary school in New England.¹⁶ The Monsignor retired in 1954 after having served for forty-one unparalleled years, to be succeeded by Rev. Chwalek.

Msgr. Bojanowski's long pastorate is not unique when compared to other ethnic parishes. It seems as though some of the longest-lived parishes similarly have a long-lived parish priest relatively early on, as John Gurda's study on late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century parishes in Milwaukee suggests. Saint Josaphat's of Milwaukee, also a Polish parish, was blessed with a similarly devoted pastor in Rev. Felix Baran, whose ministry lasted from 1914 until 1942. Interestingly, Saint Josaphat's was also founded by a particularly industrious and unfortunately short-lived pastor, who died five weeks after the construction of the parish's beautiful basilica, making for a pastorate of only nine years plagued with difficulties. Saint Michael's Parish, a German Milwaukee parish founded in 1883, enjoyed stability under Rev. Sebastian Bernard, who served from 1909 until 1948.¹⁷ A single, competent pastor meant stability and growth for a young immigrant parish.

It should be noted that the purpose of the parish school built by Msgr. Bojanowski was not merely to provide primary education but also to expand Polish culture. For this reason, public school, a formative education void of Polish-Catholic values, was viewed with aversion. The first-generation immigrants of Worcester's Polonia raised their children in a deeply Polish neighborhood, and so it was easy and perhaps taken for granted that children spoke the mother tongue. But this generation also came from a socio-economic culture that of the broadly-termed Polish peasant class, that was generally anti-intellectual. Lopata describes the Polish peasant consciousness as regarding education and knowledge as traditionally "the province of the upper-class".¹⁸ A laborer or farmer did not need an extravagant education, but only one that was grounded in the tenets of Catholicism and that taught the merits of the industry. Due to this anti-intellectualism, Saint Mary's just needed to be a grade school. As this traditional anti-intellectualism decayed, the construction of a secondary school in 1936 suggests that Msgr. Bojanowski thought it prudent to build it for the sake of the parish youth's social mobility.

Like other Catholic parishes throughout the United States, Our Lady of Czestochowa and its subsidiary institutions became a social structure protecting its parishioners against an unchecked market economy, an overreaching state, and more

¹⁶ Proko et al, 7, 57.

¹⁷ John Gurda, "The Church and the Neighborhood," in *Milwaukee Catholicism*, ed. Steven M. Avella (Milwaukee: Knights of Columbus, 1991), 8-13, 3.

¹⁸ Lopata, 21.

generally but perhaps most importantly isolation from a native ethnic community. What could have been described as a self-made Polish colony in the United States had become a permanent, autonomous community. But with permanence came new challenges.

Formation of Identity

Since Poles began to migrate to the United States in large numbers, Polish identity was always implicitly equal parts Polish and Catholic. But once surrounded by “American” culture that identity was once again thrust into an unsympathetic environment, albeit not as explicitly or hostile as under the *Kulturkampf* but enough for Poles to feel a need to preserve their culture. A neighboring ethnic group, the Irish of Worcester, for example, had been well-acquainted with Worcester since the 1850s and was among some of its first industrial laborers.¹⁹ Driven to America after the infamous 1845 potato famine, the Irish had come to Worcester and settled in the area now known as Green Island. By 1855, the Irish made up one-third of Worcester’s population.²⁰ Around the turn of the twentieth century, Poles would move into the same neighborhood, living among places bearing such names as Kelly and Brosnihan Square which indicate even today a deeply Irish heritage. Though early Irish immigrants to Worcester often spoke Gaelic, by the time Polish immigrants were moving in at the bottom of Vernon Hill, all but a tiny percentage of Worcester’s Irish spoke English.²¹ This and their earlier arrival to Worcester, enabling them to secure positions in both the diocesan hierarchy and local government, gave the Irish an advantage over the newcomers. Polish was an utterly alien tongue to an English-speaking city such as Worcester, and as this strange group with a particular tradition of Catholicism began to settle among them in numbers around the turn of the twentieth century antagonisms arose. How were Poles, even if they tended to their affairs within the boundaries of their fledgling community, to adapt to the pressures of Americanization?

Though Poles had generally been staunch Catholics for centuries, the widespread suppression of Polish culture and Roman Catholicism under the partitions’ governments in the late nineteenth century galvanized the bond between Polish nationalism and Catholicism to the point where the two became inextricable strands of the same culture.²² Polish-Catholic traditions, as well as the Polish language, held a particularly prominent place in the minds of Poles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and those who emigrated from Europe to the United States due to economic and political hardship brought that deep respect

¹⁹ Timothy J. Meagher, *Inventing Irish America: Generation, Class, and Ethnic Identity in a New England City, 1880-1928* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 20-21.

²⁰ Karen M. Pierson, *A Tale of Two Worcesters: Paths to Prosperity in Worcester, England, & Worcester, Massachusetts* (Logaston Press, 1998), 77-79.

²¹ Meagher, 26.

²² Kuzniewski, 7.

for their culture over with them.

Polish-Catholics celebrated certain traditions that were different from the ones practiced by other Catholics in Worcester. For example, the Poles of Worcester decided to name their parish *Our Lady of Czestochowa*, named for the revered icon housed in the Jasna Góra Monastery in Czestochowa, Poland. Also known as the Black Madonna because of the skin color of Mary in the image (which has been attributed to multiple reasons by iconographers), She is revered as the Queen and Protectress of Poland as proclaimed by King Jan II Casimir Vasa in 1652. The icon is associated with some folklore that exhibit its power, for example, protecting the monastery in which it was housed during the Second Northern War in 1655 from a Swedish invasion. Pope John Paul II prayed before it on a visit in 1979.²³ This particular icon holds a very central place for Polish-Catholics. In a symbolic sense, it could be said that Worcester's Poles desired Her protection for their new parish in America by invoking the name of the Black Madonna.

A century later, Catholic holidays and festivals were the most outstanding examples of things that everyone in Polonia had in common. Worcester's Poles continue to consider Catholicism as inextricable from their ethnic identity. When asked if they had celebrated Easter and Christmas growing up, one former member of the community replied, "Are we Polish?"²⁴ Though these holidays are central to the broader Christian faith, Poles in particular celebrated traditions that differed even from other Catholics. John Bartosiewicz, a member of the community who grew up immersed in Polish language and culture in the 1960s, remembered the annual breaking of the beloved *oplatek*, the Christmas wafer. "We would say a Polish prayer before breakfast, before lunch, and before supper." John recalled that Polish culture "was ingrained in us to keep it alive."²⁵ A non-Polish graduate of Saint Mary's School offered an interesting perspective of the Christmas Mass held in Our Lady of Czestochowa when she described it as more packed than she had seen at her family's previous church, with an atmosphere of particular reverence.²⁶ Carol Fredette, a lay teacher who taught at Saint Mary's in the 1970s, explained how "once a week, the entire school would walk down to the church for confession."²⁷ Polish traditions from *Świeconka*, the Polish Easter Supper celebrated the week after Easter, to the practice of *pisanka* (egg-decorating) were held as cherished traditions that were particular to Polish Catholicism.

The Lithuanian ethnic parishes were buckling under the cultural pressures of Americanization, as revealed by a transition from ethnic-language masses to masses

²³ Joe Nickell, "The Black Madonna: A Folkloristic and Iconographic Investigation," *Skeptical Inquirer* 39, no. 5 (2015), 26-29.

²⁴ Anonymous interview by author, July 19, 2017.

²⁵ John Bartosiewicz, interview by author, July 18, 2017.

²⁶ Anonymous interview by author, July 20, 2017.

²⁷ Carol Fredette, interview by author, July 12, 2017.

conducted in English. By the 1950s, Lithuanian parishioners who were not members of Our Lady of Czestochowa were either in the old parish of Saint Casimir or of Our Lady of Vilna. By 1975, the latter had nearly done away with Lithuanian masses due to the paucity of the language. By contrast, Our Lady of Czestochowa had their *first* English sermon in 1954.²⁸ All of their masses up until that point had been in Polish, a fact which speaks to the Polish community's resilience to Americanization. Any outsider who attended such a mass might have thought that they had somehow ended up in Poland.

Polish remained the primary, distinctive language of the community even after the Second World War, and not only for celebrating mass which was principally recited in Latin. Interviews with former and current members of Our Lady of Czestochowa parish reveal difficulties in communicating with the outside world. Jayne Bausis remembers her grandmother relying on younger family members for just this purpose. "If someone came knocking on the door my grandmother would take whoever was the oldest [child] there to translate, and it would be that [a] five-year-old would be translating." She recalled that for her grandparents, "to be in that community, in a Polish community, was very important to them."²⁹ As the years went on into the Cold War era, English became not only vital for interaction with the outside world but also for social mobility.³⁰ Into the 1960s, children came to Saint Mary's parish school without any knowledge of English and were required to learn (even some who were born in the United States did not know English, which speaks to the deep hesitation to conform). One Saint Mary's graduate, who emigrated from Poland at eleven years of age knowing only Polish and was thrust into public school at the urging of then Msgr. Chwalek in the 1960s for a year, presumably to be wholly submerged in an English environment.³¹

Most children of Worcester's Polonia, however, did not have to endure such isolating experiences. English seems to have been realized as necessary for social mobility years before as the first generation of Polish-Americans was being born, both for interacting in the professional world with clarity and for the pursuit of higher education, the latter of which became increasingly frequent and a dominant trend sometime after 1950 (indicative of the sharp decline of anti-intellectualism).³² Although fewer parents taught Polish to their children out of concern for their future in America, knowledge of the Polish language by no means disappeared as can be indicated by the contemporary presence of Polish masses at Our Lady of Czestochowa. Basic Polish language classes remained compulsory at Saint Mary's

²⁸ "Church Plans First Sermon in English," *Telegram*, January 3, 1954.

²⁹ Jayne Bausis, interview by author, June 29, 2017.

³⁰ Proko et al, 102-103.

³¹ Anonymous interview. July 19, 2017.

³² Saint Mary's graduation records, 1940-1980.

since the school's inception until the 1970s. A look at Saint Mary's yearbooks from the 1950s shows that almost every faculty member (exclusively nuns and priests) could teach Polish. Even as late as the 1970s, a comparatively smaller body of faculty members were listed as able promulgators of Polish studies and language.³³ Not only was Polish seen as a way to preserve their distinctiveness as an ethnic community, but it was also a practical matter of helping immigrants who continued to come to Worcester with integration and work.

While the desire to preserve the knowledge of the Polish language represents a way that full Americanization was resisted by the Polish community, as early as 1964 some traditional aspects of the Polish language were being discarded by Worcester's Polonians. In general, Polish ceased to be the primary language of school culture. A look at Saint Mary's records gives a valuable look at the diminishing practical role of Polish, but a quick explanation of Polish naming conventions is required to understand part of its value: many Polish surnames traditionally conform to a model that indicates a person's gender. For example, "Lewandowski" would connote someone who was a man, and "Lewandowska" a woman. A look at Saint Mary's graduation records shows a shift in which young women's names gradually become recorded with the masculine ending (-ski, and not -ska) by the mid-1960s, thereby signifying a yield to Americanization and the English language.³⁴ Though this might seem to be an inconsequential change, it is a definitive break from the tradition. Another, clearer sign is how grade school graduation records were recorded. These records not only show names, but qualities assigned by the students' teachers that described their personalities. Until 1957 and then for a brief stint from 1960 to 1963, these records were written entirely in Polish, but the other years in English.³⁵ Though this reflects both changing faculty, it also reflects the community's lingual transition from a wholly Polish-speaking community to a more bilingual and ultimately English-dominant community.

Thus far, the only strands of what makes a Polish-American identity that has been discussed have been the Polish and Catholic aspects. What of the American element? Over the years, as the community grew and English-speakers and bilingual members became more numerous, so too grew American patriotism. As early as the 1920s, Poles attempted to align themselves with American giants. On October 13, 1929, a massive parade was held in honor of "Pulaski Day". This parade was meant to commemorate Count Casimir Pulaski, an eighteenth-century Polish noble who fought to maintain Polish independence from Russia and, after he was exiled in defeat, fought and died for American independence during the American

³³ Saint Mary's yearbooks, 1952-1955.

³⁴ Saint Mary's graduation records, 1940-1980.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Revolution.³⁶ Another familiar historical figure with which Polish-Americans align themselves is, surprisingly, Captain John Smith of Jamestown colony. Five craftsmen of Polish descent were brought over, according to a 1958 *Telegram* article, at the behest of John Smith to teach the English settlers some trades.³⁷ While this is factual, an important detail is often left out, as it is in this article: the craftsmen were in all likelihood Protestant. This does not nullify a Polish connection with the founding of Jamestown and therefore in the foundation of the American mythology, but it is often left out because that would distance the predominantly Catholic Polonias of the United States from these fascinating figures.

Such attempts to connect Polish heroes with an American past represent both an earnest desire to be embraced into American culture as well as efforts to combat discrimination against Polish-Americans. Though admittedly not the most oppressed of America's ethnic groups, prejudice against Polish-Americans and racial tension existed in cities like Worcester. Father Richard Lewandowski, who grew up in Worcester and attended Saint Mary's in the 1950s and 60s, spoke of the generally negative stigma associated with being Polish. According to him so negative was this stigma that the sisters at Saint Mary's told their students that "because we're Polish, we would have to probably work twice as hard and perform twice as well in order to get half the credit for anything that we did."³⁸ A 1976 inquiry into Polish cultural identity provides a perspective on problems such as harmful stereotyping, bias in employment, infamous "Polish jokes," and discriminatory attitudes.³⁹ A predominantly Irish-American police force reportedly engaged in minor scuffles or at least disagreements with Polish-Americans during "rowdy" Polish weddings and celebrations.⁴⁰ An extensive 1981 *Telegram* article offers Helen C. Czechowicz's sentiment that "Poles were being cheated left and right" in the early twentieth century, a sentiment that inspired her to become a lawyer in order to combat such discrimination.⁴¹ To become "American", Worcester's Polish community had to combat this discrimination.

During the existence of an independent Poland in the interwar period, Polish-American communities were considered by nationally conscious Poles to compose the "fourth province of Poland", i.e., *Polonia*.⁴² From the beginning of the First World War into the Cold War, Polonian parishes sent goods to the homeland in order to help their compatriots in their struggles first against foreign regimes and

³⁶ "Worcester Celebrates Pulaski Day with Stirring Parade..." *Worcester Sunday Telegram*, October 13, 1929.

³⁷ Ivan Sandrof, "Poles Were Here 350 Years Ago," *Worcester Sunday Telegram*, October 5, 1958.

³⁸ Richard Lewandowski, interview with the author, July 14, 2017.

³⁹ Stanley S. Seidner, *In Quest of a Cultural Identity: An Inquiry for the Polish Community* (Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse, 1976).

⁴⁰ Miscavage Jr., 47.

⁴¹ Susanna Seymour, "Polish-Americans: Strong, Proud, Independent," *Telegram*, February 22, 1981.

⁴² Lopata, 52.

then the oppressive hegemony of the USSR.⁴³ When the Iron Curtain divided the world, Poland was more separated from Polonia than it had ever been. Communism's rejection of religion naturally meant that Polish-Americans, staunchly Catholic as ever, became vehemently anti-communist. As the world progressed into the Cold War era, Polish-Americans came to embrace and celebrate their Polish, Catholic, and now American heritage, three strands which began to compose "Polish-American identity."

Trials and Triumphs

A prevailing view of the Polish-American community of Worcester in recent years is one of decline. From an outside perspective, the community that surrounds Our Lady of Czestochowa no longer appears to be very Polish. In actuality, a very sizable, even vibrant Polish community remains. It is surprising and all the more revealing to examine some of the trials faced by Worcester's Polonia during the Cold War era as events that might have rendered other communities beyond repair.

In 1959, near the beginning of the school year, Saint Mary's School endured two fires. Though neither fire was large enough to destroy the school, the damage was extensive enough to warrant repairs. The community responded with an outpouring of support, and members of the parish pitched in to help.⁴⁴ Between 1959 and 1965 under Msgr. Chwalek's pastorate, \$300,000 and \$100,000 were raised from the community for the school and the church, respectively, in response to the fires for repairs and expansions of the community's facilities. The total of \$400,000, raised with the help of the Saint Mary's Boosters Club, amounts to well over three million dollars when adjusted for inflation. Such a sum hardly suggests a declining community. Even more telling than the cold numbers, however, is that the community's leadership and general populace desired to renovate and expand both the school and the church, not simply repair what was necessary.

The fires, however, might as well have been a prelude to a more grueling and traumatic trial for the community, one which had a more widespread effect on the cityscape of Worcester. In 1960, I-290, or what was at the time referred to as the Worcester Expressway, was completed. The Expressway cut right through Worcester, going north-south through the heart of the city, and it ran right past Our Lady of Czestochowa. The rectory was to be moved, numerous houses to be demolished and their inhabitants displaced, and many streets that once connected Vernon Hill to Green Island to be either completely removed or cut in half. Richland Street, for example, used to run from Vernon to Millbury Street and used to be the street on which Our Lady of Czestochowa was. The section of the road immediately in front of the church became a parking lot. Not only was the entire construction

⁴³ Lopata, 47.

⁴⁴ John Kraska Jr., interview with the author, June 27, 2017.

process 'traumatic' as described by some former members of the community, but noise from the highway by parishioners made mass difficult for years afterward.

It is quite reasonable to say that the construction of I-290 interrupted community life. The new highway not only isolated people on the west side of the interstate but also hurt Polish-run businesses, from Vernon Drug to the various markets. Some former and current members of the community claimed that it hurt theirs or their friends' and family's businesses. "[The expressway] didn't do us any good", remarked one longtime member of the neighborhood. As she remembered how she and her friends and family used to walk with ease from Millbury up to Ward on a variety of connecting streets, she spoke of certain isolation when she described to "all the streets that no longer go up to Ward Street".⁴⁵ John Bartosiewicz said that it created "a big divide", reflecting on the fact that her grandmother's house once stood where the highway bridge over Endicott Street now is. Once home to families, these streets were soon replaced with concrete.⁴⁶ However, most other members did not seem to think that it had much of a long-term adverse effect at all besides some inconvenience. "My relatives would live on the [Green Island] side [of I-290], more towards Auburn, and they still participated, in fact, went to the school, so I don't know if that really interfered with things."⁴⁷ Some even claimed that it helped their business, allowing quicker transportation all over the city. John Kraska Jr. reflected on how it helped his father's auto business. "No one likes change but everyone adjusted." Before the expressway came, "it took forever to get across town to deliver something, say, to Lincoln Street... what was once a twenty-minute drive was now a six or seven-minute drive".⁴⁸ Overall, it was an extraordinary change for the community that displaced and hurt some members, but it was far from a debilitating blow.

Surprisingly, one aspect of Americanization that did not necessarily spell the end of Worcester's Polonia was suburbanization. One would think that suburbanization, by scattering the population away from the traditional community center would spell its quick decline. The advent of the interstate, however, meant that regular, long-distance travel was possible than before and that people could still go to school and attend parish functions even from nearby towns. Starting in 1960, students from Saint Mary's increasingly listed their addresses as being outside of Worcester and in adjacent towns of Shrewsbury, including towns as distant as Clinton or Warren, the latter of which is even today a forty-minute drive. By 1972, the graduating class listed twenty-five members as living in other towns out of a total of sixty-nine classmates, or approximately 36% of students.⁴⁹ These commuters were no doubt facilitated in

⁴⁵ Anonymous interview with the author, July 10, 2017.

⁴⁶ Bartosiewicz, interview.

⁴⁷ Bausis, interview.

⁴⁸ Kraska Jr., interview.

⁴⁹ Saint Mary's graduation records, 1940-1980

many cases by the new interstate. These commuting trends have continued until the present day. In an interview with Father Thaddeus Stachura, a longtime member of the community and pastor of Our Lady of Czestochowa between 1993 and 2014, he revealed that during his time as pastor, parishioners would travel from towns as nearby as Auburn (under six miles) and as far away as Leominster (over twenty miles) for weekly mass.⁵⁰ Even former members of the community that had joined other parishes moved into the suburbs, and climbed into the middle class, insisted that significant life events such as baptisms and marriages be held at the historic parish in Worcester, as a cursory glance at the parish’s records indicates.⁵¹ Looked at in this light, it is possible that the Expressway, often assumed to be wholly detrimental to the Polish-American, actually helped to preserve the parish’s ethnic identity.

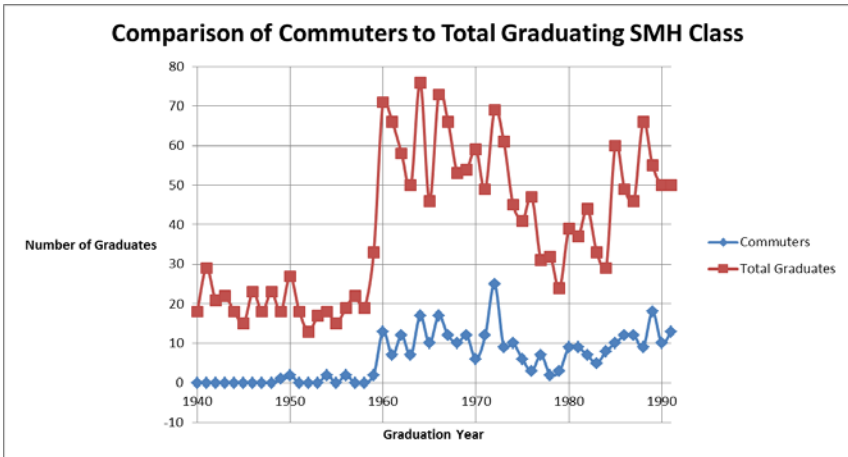


Chart 1: Saint Mary’s High School graduates who had to commute to school from outside Worcester as compared to the total size of their graduating class.

However beneficial the expressway may have been in the long run, its construction undeniably left a mark in the minds of some members, for whom it had caused some disruption. Saint Mary’s High School basketball, however, may have buoyed the community’s spirits in a time when some members had to move around Vernon Hill in response to the massive construction project. Between 1959 and 1964, SMH’s boys’ basketball team did remarkably well especially for a relatively small parish school. The 1959-60 team went undefeated in the regular season as well as the postseason, finishing 24-0 and claiming the Class A championship at the Assumption College Invitational Tournament. Four years later in 1964, the team

⁵⁰ Thaddeus Stachura, interview with author, June 22, 2017.

⁵¹ Our Lady of Czestochowa Parish records. 1950-1980.

handily won the New England championship against Malden High 77-65. An Evening Gazette sportswriter marveled at the team's success two days after their impressive win, marveling at "Little St. Mary's, a school of 288, including 133 boys, situated in the heart of the 'Island District' being the first Worcester school and also the only parochial school to annex this title in the 39 years of its history."⁵² From an outside perspective, these sports victories might seem inconsequential to any big community change. However, they provided solace to Worcester's Polish-Americans in a time when parts of the community were quite literally being uprooted. Even today, members of the community remember these triumphs with joy. John Kraska Jr. recalls how after winning the "last New England Championship that ever existed, [...] the city came together and had a celebration for all of us team members at the Worcester auditorium [where] we received gifts from the city of Worcester."

Another triumph for the community as well as Polonia as well occurred in the middle of the parish's Diamond Jubilee (75th anniversary) celebrations in October 1978. These celebrations were marked by a forty-hour devotion, special masses for important past parishioners and of thanksgiving, and numerous dances held for the community.⁵³ In the midst of all this, a groundbreaking event for Poles everywhere took place: Karol Wojtyła was elected to the papacy as Pope John Paul II.⁵⁴ After centuries of Italian popes, this was a remarkable event, and even more so due to the political climate. In a time in which Catholicism was being suppressed in Poland, it was a bolstering event to have a Pole elected to the highest office in the Catholic hierarchy.

The excitement that resounded from the Polish-American community in Worcester was deafening. Former and current members of the parish tell stories of the day the announcement was made, conveying feelings of joy, disbelief, and perhaps most of all pride. "I remember exactly where I was", began John Bartosiewicz when asked about his recollection of John Paul II's election. As president of the PNI club, he shared how the club's scholarship essay, in 2017, asked the question, "How did Pope John Paul II affect you and your family?"⁵⁵ Father Lewandowski reminisced, "When I heard that [Karol Wojtyła] was named Pope, I got the chills."⁵⁶ "You had a great sense of pride to think one of your own was chosen", remarked Mrs. Genevieve Dymek in a 1981 Telegram article, in which she and other Polish-Americans were asked about their feelings regarding his election.⁵⁷ If there were any event that can be identified as responsible for Polish-Americans' integration into mainstream American society, perhaps it would be Pope John Paul II's election, which put a Pole at the head of this stalwart, anti-communist

⁵² Proko et al, 94-100

⁵³ Gazette, October 3, 1978.

⁵⁴ Mieczysław Malinski, *Pope John Paul II: The Life of Karol Wojtyła* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 1.

⁵⁵ Bartosiewicz, interview.

⁵⁶ Lewandowski, interview.

⁵⁷ Susanna Seymour, "Polish-Americans: Strong, Proud, Independent" *Telegram*, February 22, 1989.

organization with which many other Americans could identify.

Epilogue

Beginning late in the year of 1988 in the town of Bridgeport, Connecticut, a schism developed in the Polish Catholic parish there under the leadership of Rev. John Bambol. Some parishioners expressed grievances at Father Bambol's effort to open the church to non-Poles. Bad feelings grew until finally parishioners occupied the church, angry at Rev. Bambol for allegedly engineering their previous pastor's removal, Rev. Palaszewski, for being "too active in the Polish community". After occupying the church for a week, the police were summoned on February 18th, 1989 to evict the dissident parishioners from their church. Henry Chmiel, one of those parishioners, complained, "How can they tell me I was trespassing in my own church?"⁵⁸ Parishioners continued to protest from outside the church until September when they decided to withhold financial support until their demands would be met.⁵⁹ These parishioners' efforts ultimately did not go to waste. The parish to this day retains a Polish character, as is evident from their weekly bulletins and website, written predominantly in Polish as well as English. Also, they still hold a Polish mass every weekday and two every Sunday.⁶⁰

Over twenty years later in Worcester, as recently as 2014, Father Thaddeus Stachura announced that he would be forced to close Saint Mary's school. The school had served the community for nearly a century and though its composition had changed to include fewer Polish and more Hispanic and African-American students, Polish parishioners did not take kindly to the announcement. "A groundswell of complaints and petitions" arose in opposition according to then-pastor Thaddeus Stachura. Donations came in from the community as part of a parish-wide effort to maintain the school, and in the final count, Father Stachura donated over \$200,000 himself.⁶¹ The school stayed open and has grown since. Polish-Americans, even those who no longer lived in the neighborhood, regarded the school as a vital part of the community's life and their identity.

These isolated events, separated by a period of well over two decades and in two different areas of New England, have much in common. Both speak to the fierce resilience of Polish-Americans against threats to their culture and their communal life. Both events also suggest that this vehement drive to preserve Polonian distinctiveness is something not unique to Our Lady of Czestochowa, but instead is something that can be applied to Polish-Americans throughout the United States.

⁵⁸ Steve Miller, "Church Shut Amid Protest in Bridgeport," *New York Times*, February 18, 1989.

⁵⁹ "Dissident Parishioners End Bridgeport Protest," *New York Times*, September 9, 1989.

⁶⁰ "Home", *St. Michael the Archangel Church*, accessed September 3, 2017, <http://www.smaparish.com/wordpress/>.

⁶¹ Stachura, interview.

In our contemporary era, in which new immigrants from different ethnic groups are staking their claims in America with similar methods, facing similar challenges as did the immigrants of the last century, Worcester's Polish-American community still stands when comparatively more Lithuanian-, Irish-, and French-Americans among others have receded into the suburbs. In the optimistic words of a current parishioner, a member of Our Lady of Czestochowa and resident of Vernon Hill for years, "we'll have a basilica one day!"⁶²

⁶² Irene Rojcewicz, interview by the author, July 7, 2017.