

THE FIEDORCZYK LECTURE



POLISH STUDIES
CENTER

Central Connecticut State University

**THE FIEDORCZYK LECTURE
IN
POLISH AMERICAN STUDIES
1992**

**THE POLISH STUDIES PROGRAM
Central Connecticut State University
New Britain, Connecticut**

The Fiedorczyk Lecture in Polish American Studies

In 1987 the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Alphonse J.V. Fiedorczyk endowed the Polish Studies Program at Central Connecticut State University with a \$10,000 gift for the establishment of the annual Fiedorczyk Lecture in Polish American Studies. The Lecture was established in memory of the Vincent Fiedorczyk Family.

Msgr. Fiedorczyk, the son of Polish immigrants, was born in New Britain, Connecticut on September 10, 1910. He attended Sacred Heart School in New Britain, and later graduated from St. Mary's College at Orchard Lake, Michigan. He went on to attend St. Bernard's Seminary in Rochester, New York, and the Grand Seminaire de St. Brieuic in France, which he completed in 1935, the year of his ordination to the priesthood. He returned to his home parish to serve as a curate for eight years. In 1943 he joined the U.S. Army as a first lieutenant in the Chaplain Corps, and after 26 years of Army service retired with the rank of Brigadier General.

During World War II Msgr. Fiedorczyk served as chaplain with this 79th Infantry Division in Europe, and was decorated with the following honors: The Legion of Merit, The Bronze Star, the French Croix de Guere with Fouragere, and the World War II Victory Medal. He also served in Korea and two post-war tours in Germany.

Upon completion of his military service, Msgr. Fiedorczyk returned to Connecticut to the Bridgeport Diocese, where he was subsequently assigned to Holy Name Parish in Stamford. He served fourteen years in Stamford, and was a critical figure in the revival of the parish's Polish profile.

First and foremost a priest, Msgr. Fiedorczyk always kept in the forefront during his 52 years of service the injunction "to preach and to offer sacrifice." He also viewed service to the Polish community as an integral part of his priestly duties, and was deeply concerned with the preservation and promotion of the history of the Polish community in America. He encouraged the Association of Polish Priests in Connecticut to commission *Immigrant Pastor* by Prof. Daniel Buczek, the important biography of the pioneering Msgr. Lucyan Bojnowski of New Britain. Msgr. Fiedorczyk was also a long-time member of the Polish American Historical Association. He was active in Polish affairs at Sacred Heart University in Bridgeport, and at Central Connecticut State University. He donated his papers and memoirs (over two thousand pages) to the Connecticut Polish American Archives and Manuscript Collection at CCSU.

After a long illness, Msgr. Alphonse Fiedorczyk passed away on November 16, 1987.

Dr. James S. Pula is Associate Dean at Empire State College - The State University of New York at Saratoga Springs. He received his PhD at Purdue University, and is past president of the Polish American Historical Association. Dr. Pula edits *Polish American Studies* and is the author of several monographs. His most

recent book, *United We Stand: The Role of Polish Workers in the New York Mills Textile Strikes, 1912 and 1916*, received the Halecki Prize of the Polish American Historical Association. His latest work, *Polish Americans*, will appear in the Twayne Ethnic Heritage Series.

On behalf of the Polish Studies Program, it is my pleasure to present to our friends and supporters the 1992 Fiedorczyk Lecture in Polish American Studies, "Polish - Black Relations: Ethnic Tensions during the Civil Rights Movement." Dr. Pula addresses a topic that is little studied, but one which contributes to an understanding of American pluralism. In disseminating this lecture, we hope, as Msgr. Fiedorczyk wished, to promote the study and preservation of the history of the Polish community in America.

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**POLISH - BLACK RELATIONS:
Ethnic Tensions during the Civil Rights Movement**

**Fiedorczyk Lecture in Polish American Studies
Central Connecticut State University
April 23, 1992**

Dr. James S. Pula
Empire State College
State University of New York

“Everybody Calls Us Racists”: Polonia’s Response to the Civil Rights Movement

Two hundred and fifty thousand people crowded into the mall in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963. They came from all over of the country and included among their number some seventy – five U.S. Senators, a like number of Representatives, and a host of celebrities including Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Lena Horne, Marlon Brando, Sammy Davis Jr., Sidney Poitier, Charlton Heston, Jackie Robinson, and Burt Lancaster. Though perhaps less recognizable, among the multitude were Myrlie Evans, wife of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evars who was murdered in front of his home in Mississippi in June of that year; Rosa Parks whose refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus in 1955 began a successful year-long boycott; and Daisy Bates, a leader in the Little Rock school desegregation movement.¹

Though disparate in social and economic standing, each of the quarter million people who gathered on the mall that hot August afternoon came with a single purpose: to demonstrate support for the idea the United States was founded upon, the idea that all people are created equal and deserve equal protection under the law.

The road that brought the multitude together was long and tedious. For more than 250 years, most African Americans were forced to endure a cruel and dehumanizing slavery wherein they lost all semblance of human dignity. With emancipation, slavery was replaced with institutionalized discrimination that denied any realistic opportunity to take part in the “American dream” on an equal basis with others. For a hundred years following Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans endured segregation, physical abuse, and the denial of equal social, economic, and political rights.

Although many attempts to spread the umbrella of legal protection to African American and other minority groups failed, beginning with the historic Supreme Court decision in the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case in 1954, a new and vibrant Civil Rights Movement emerged. The success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, the desegregation of the public school system in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, the beginning of the Sit-In Movement in 1960, the Freedom Rides of 1961-62, and the brutal beatings of peaceful demonstrators in Albany, Georgia, and Birmingham, Alabama, between 1961 and 1963, raised the general public consciousness as never before and led to an increase in support for Civil Rights throughout the nation.

In an attempt to capitalize on this new tide of indignation and support, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., began a coast-to-coast speaking tour in June, 1963. Some 25,000 people turned out to hear him in Los Angeles, 10,000 in Chicago, and an unprecedented 125,000 gathered to participate in a “Freedom Walk” in Detroit. Throughout this crusade Rev. King preached the same message. “We’ve come to see the power of non-violence,” he

asserted. "We've come to see that this method is not a weak method. For it's the strong man who can stand up amid opposition, who can stand up amid violence being inflicted upon him and not retaliate with violence."²

The culmination of King's tour came in the historic March on Washington which drew the largest crowd ever assembled in America. In addition to the quarter million gathered on the mall, tens of millions of Americans watched on television or listened on radio, while millions more followed the event in Europe.

The highlight of the day occurred in the late afternoon when King rose to deliver one of the most influential speeches in American history. A century after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, a black preacher told the assembled thousands that African Americans would no longer tolerate daily brutality, denial of service in public hotels and restaurants, denial of the right to vote, and life in the ghetto slums. "I have a dream," he intoned in his dramatic baritone, "that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."³ He dreamed of a time when "all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"⁴

This was the message of Martin Luther King Jr. A message of non-violence, of hope, of justice, of brotherhood. It was not only a turning point in the Civil Rights movement, but in the history of our nation. Following King's speech a new Civil Rights Act was introduced into Congress and passed in July, 1964, guaranteeing equal voting rights and public access and establishing a federal commission to enforce equal employment opportunity. The direct result of this was the beginning of a massive voter registration drive throughout the Southern states.

In August, 1965, the Watts Riot in suburban Los Angeles stunned and shocked the nation. In his efforts to fight political discrimination in the South, King overlooked the fact that African Americans in the North, who generally already enjoyed basic voting rights and could patronize public establishments, were becoming increasingly frustrated by discrimination and segregation that limited their economic opportunity and confined them to overcrowded urban ghettos. The shocking Watts riot led King to develop a strategy for addressing the needs of African Americans in the North, a challenge he determined to meet by launching a drive for open housing.

In January, 1966, King's Southern Christian Leadership Council began the "Chicago Movement" designed to focus attention on living conditions in the urban ghettos where thousands lived in poverty in largely unheated, overcrowded housing in unsanitary slums. To publicize his new crusade, King and his family moved into a ramshackle apartment in the Lawndale section of Chicago, an area often referred to as "Slumdale."⁵

King's purpose was to draw attention to poor housing conditions, to obtain a higher minimum wage, and to encourage public school desegregation. At every opportunity he spoke of the despair of human beings doomed to low-paying jobs and welfare, of the high African American unemployment rate and housing code violations by landlords of apartments inhabited by African Americans.⁶ While he was successful in convincing some landlords to fix code violations, his efforts brought little direct response from city officials.

The drive for open housing, however, did have a profound effect on internal relations within the cities where it occurred. In Chicago, as in other cities throughout the North, the rising expectations of African Americans, fueled by the new successes of the Civil Rights Movement, led to increased demands for equal access to housing and economic opportunities. In their quest for better housing, their gaze turned to the middle-class neighborhoods of their white working-class neighbors.

In Chicago, activists organized symbolic marches through white neighborhoods to dramatize their complaints. Some of these demonstrations entered areas inhabited by Polish Americans, resulting in a series of confrontations that made newscasts and press headlines throughout the country. Since these confrontations often occurred in Polish or other white ethnic neighborhoods, observers concluded that these areas were populated with virulent racists.⁷ To the journalists and Civil Rights activists who flocked to participate in and report on the Chicago demonstrations, Polish American protesters were characterized as "hardhats," "rednecks," and other terms laced with racist overtones.⁸ An editorial in *The Christian Century* concluded that King's activities in Chicago exposed the "intransigent racial hatred in the city's lily-white neighborhoods,"⁹ a view also held by the correspondents of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the other major print and broadcast media.

The Chicago disturbances were followed by major riots in 1967, in areas such as Detroit and Newark where large Black and Polish populations shared the urban environment. In each case, the Polish inhabitants were labeled as racists for resisting the calls of African American and Civil Rights leaders for integration. In the following year, when Dr. King was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee, the tragedy met with mixed reactions among white ethnics. In Chicago, for example, when the flag at a school was lowered as a sign of respect, the president of the local Polish Homeowners' Association raised it to the top of the pole nearly sparking a riot.¹⁰ Such actions served to confirm the conclusions of those who labeled Polish Americans as racist.

Yet, this conclusion is based primarily on observations made by people whose perspective was generally aligned with the aspirations of African Americans seeking human equality. Before finalizing the conclusion, the question of racism needs to be analyzed in an objective fashion. Is it, in fact, true that Polish Americans tend to be racist?

There have been few scientific studies conducted that focus on ethnicity as a basis for racism. Despite this, there is at least some evidence to suggest that the perception of Polish Americans as racists is not accurate. In 1973, for example, Thomas Pavlak published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* the findings of a study on racial attitudes which concluded that Poles were no more or less racially prejudiced than any other ethnic group studied. To the extent that Poles did display some prejudice, Pavlak concluded that it was due to the respondents' social class and proximity of residence to a minority population, factors long associated with the level of prejudice in other ethnic groups as well.

Two studies by Andrew Greeley resulted in similar conclusions. One suggested that education level and proximity to others were major determinants in the degree of rejection of other groups, while the second, a study of ethnic Catholics, found that Poles were no more or less predisposed to prejudiced attitudes than other groups.¹¹

In addition to these studies, there have been notable instances of Polish American rejection of racist activity. Political science research indicates that Polonia rejected the thinly-veiled racist appeals of George Wallace and like-minded politicians, while at the same time supporting collective action with other racial groups. In 1968, a conference of Polish priests in the Archdiocese of Detroit called upon Polish Americans to support equal rights for all Americans and the maintenance of interracial harmony. In the same year, Polish and Black leaders established a "Black-Polish Conference" to promote cooperation and understanding between the city's two largest ethnic groups.¹² Then too, Andrew Greeley notes that there are other instances such as Chicago where Poles and Hispanics have been able to co-exist in relative peacefulness in the traditionally Polish area around St. Stanislaus Church. "I do not wish to make a case for any great and intimate friendship between the Polish and the Latino communities," Greeley states, "but they have managed to survive alongside one another in relative peace, occupying a neighborhood which both claim to be theirs and which both have made common cause to defend."¹³

From these studies and attempts at mutual cooperation, one can conclude that Polish Americans are probably, at the least, no more prejudiced than any other group in society. Thus, the question becomes: To what do we owe the persistent resistance of Polish Americans to the movement for African American civil rights?

It is an accepted tenet of modern research on inter-racial relations that the perspectives and sensitivities of African American and other minorities in American society have been shaped by their "roots," their unique cultural and historical heritage. The individual's world view is in fact shaped by the awareness of oneself as a member of a particular group, sharing in its collective knowledge. As it is with other groups, so it is with Polish Americans.

To understand the tensions between African Americans and Polish Americans we must understand not only the legitimate fears and aspirations of the former, but those of the latter as well.

The Polish American world view consisted of the cultural baggage the immigrants brought with them from the Old Country, shaped and reformed by the common experiences they endured in America. Chief among this cultural makeup were the values of nationalism, religion, property and community.

One of the most obvious aspects of the Polish American psyche during the twentieth century has been its stubborn adherence to *Polskość*, the value of "Polishness." By the time massive Polish migration began to America in the 1880s, Poles had been suffering under foreign occupation for nearly a century, unable to control their own collective or individual destinies. In the German-occupied portion of Poland, for example, Poles were often referred to as *Reichsfeinde* (enemies of the Reich) and the German Constitution of 1871 "made no provisions for ethnic—minority rights." Further, under Chancellor Bismarck the government launched an overt attack upon Polish culture, warning the Polish clergy not to engage in politics and banning Polish religious and patriotic hymns. Priests who disobeyed were jailed, including Archbishop Mieczysław Ledochowski who was arrested for failing to control Polish objections.¹⁴

In addition to the assault on the clergy, German nationalists also initiated a systematic persecution of Polish culture. They discouraged use of the Polish language as a socially inferior idiom, launched a campaign to force Polish newspapers to print in both languages, and accused the clergy of polonizing Germanic names in an attempt to polonize the German population. In keeping with this, the German mail system refused to deliver letters if one wrote Gdańsk instead of Danzig, or if *ulica* were used instead of the German *strasse*. The Association Act of 1908 attempted to eliminate the use of Polish at public meetings by making the German language mandatory, and by 1912, some 7,500 place names had been changed from Slavic to German.¹⁵

Once in America, Poles encountered similar pressures from both secular authorities and the Irish-dominated Roman Catholic Church, each of which wanted the immigrants to shed their own heritage and become "good Americans." Secular schools forced them to abandon their language, culture, and religion, while the Catholic Church refused to promote Polish priests and attempted to enforce assimilationist homogeneity onto their flocks. Thus, Poles, whether in Europe or America, were particularly sensitive to any attempt at denationalization.

Another of the most pervasive and important cultural values that Poles brought with them from the Old Country was a very deeply held religious faith. In Poland, the local parish was the central religious, social, and sometimes political institution in the life of the peasantry. Church attendance was not on-

ly a religious experience, it was an opportunity for social interaction and for acquiring status through participation. Both religious and national holidays were occasions for parish celebrations, the local priests provided a safe venue for the transmission of religious and national heritage, and the parish provided a central focus for village and family identity.¹⁶

Polish immigrants thus brought with them to America a strong faith, a faith shaped both by the central focus of the local parish and the adversity of national partition during which Catholicism became a symbol of resistance to foreign rule. By the 1880s, there was a clear association between Polish nationalism and Catholicism. Indeed, church attendance was regarded as a sign of patriotism.

As in Poland, the parish was also the core of the Polish community in America. It provided not only religious benefits, but served as a focus for social activity, promoted Polish nationalism, and acted as intermediary with the unfamiliar ways of American society. Further, since Polish immigrants generally viewed American public education with suspicion, considering it both anti-religious and anti-Polish, one of the chief means of transmitting religious and cultural values was through the parish school, an institution Poles were willing to dig deep into their meager resources to support as a guardian of their traditions.¹⁷ In fact, studies have shown that Polish parishes in Chicago "had a higher median valuation than the parish buildings of any other nationality."¹⁸

When religious and national values were challenged, the Poles in America, like their ancestors, reacted defiantly. Evidence of this can be seen in the long and often bitter struggle of Polish Americans for equality within the Roman Catholic Church, a struggle that produced in the Polish National Catholic Church the only successful schismatic movement in the history of American Catholicism. "Why is it," Bishop Ignatius Horstmann of Cleveland once asked, "that only the Poles cause trouble in this regard?" The answer rests in the values that Polish immigrants brought to America. As J. David Greenstone noted, "the Poles were the most ethnically assertive among the Roman Catholic immigrant groups, since they found on arrival that 'their' church . . . was controlled in America by a foreign, particularly Irish, clergy and hierarchy."¹⁹

Perhaps acutely aware of their inferior status in America, it is not coincidental that the Poles' slogan in this religious confrontation was not *representacja* (representation) but *równouprawienie* (equality), a principle defended eloquently by Rev. Waclaw Kruszka who advocated as early as 1900 a theme of "unity in diversity," a view of cultural pluralism within the American Catholic Church that was clearly ahead of its time.

Another example of the transplanting of Polish cultural values to America can be seen in the Polish American focus on property ownership. In peasant Poland there was a direct relationship between status and land ownership.

Although there was little opportunity or need to purchase large amounts of land in an urban industrial setting, the tendency for Poles to view ownership as a serious status symbol was also reflected in America. This can best be seen in the value of home ownership. In America, real property became a source of security and social prestige replacing the ideal of land ownership in the Old Country. In 1930, for example, a survey in Milwaukee revealed that 70% of Poles owned their own homes as compared to only about 33% of the English and Irish. A similar survey in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania, indicated 57% of Poles owned their own homes compared to only 23% of native Whites. In Cicero, Illinois, 67% of Poles were home owners and only 22% of native Whites. Similar results were obtained in other areas.²⁰ Thus, to the Poles, home ownership was a very important cultural value.

Finally, there was community, a value no less important than the previous three. In Poland, the world view of the peasantry seldom reached beyond the local community, identifying most closely with the village or region. Similarly, in America the most important unit of social identification, beyond the family, was the *oklica*, or neighborhood.²¹ Poles identified closely with their parish, telling those who inquired that they were from "Stanisławowo" (St. Stanislaus) or "Wojciechowo" (St. Adalbert's). To say this implied more than just a church, but an entire neighborhood, an identifiable community within the geographic confines and ambiguity of the urban center. More often than not, one's job, social activities, school, and virtually all other facets of life took place within the confines of this urban *oklica*.²² A report on the findings of research in Buffalo, for example, concluded that the Poles "are in the Buffalo community, but they are not of it. They have their own churches, their own stores and business places, their own newspapers. They are content to live alone, and the rest of the population generally knows little about them and cares less."²³

Interwoven in the fabric of this community was a very intricate web of religious and secular voluntary associations. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Poland was swept by a self-help movement which political leaders referred to as "organic work."²⁴ Through this movement Poles formed self-help societies designed to address their problems through concerted collective action. Among the immigrants it had its counterpart in America where Poles found that collective action was effective in constructing churches, establishing schools, meeting unexpected expenses, and otherwise providing for community needs.²⁵ Once established, these mutual aid societies generally expanded their activities to include health insurance, community service and fundraising for the parish or the homeland. Quite often one of the early activities was the establishment of a building and loan fund to assist members in the purchase of homes,²⁶ what Frank Renkiewicz called the primary agency of "communal capitalism" and the foremost "institutional response of Poles to the challenge of an industrializing America."²⁷

Research indicates that Polish Americans traditionally value “security, stability, order, and respectability” more than “progress.” By developing their own self-sustaining ethnic communities they fulfilled these needs, while at the same time providing avenues for success and “progress” within the ethnic neighborhood. Studies of 300 parishes in Chicago conducted by John L. Thomas concluded that Polish Americans exhibited the lowest rates of separation and divorce of any ethnic group. Further, research by John Simpson suggests that 79% of third generation Polish Americans attend church regularly and consider themselves “strongly religious,” as compared with only 41% of non-Poles. Two studies by Andrew Greeley and another by Donald Pienkos suggested a similar conclusion.²⁸ In these stable, self-sustaining communities, Polish Americans feel secure from overt discrimination by the dominant group, while at the same time being able to “achieve” in symbolic terms what they could understand from the rural culture of their origin — being active in the church and community, holding leadership positions in organizations, and owning their own home.²⁹

This, then, was the Polish American world view during the 1960s. A heritage transported from the Old Country and reinforced by the vicissitudes of life in the urban industrial cauldron of North America. A world view that places tremendous value on the preservation of Polish heritage, religious beliefs, and the community *gemeinschaft*.

Beginning with World War One, Polish Americans came into increasing contact with African Americans as the latter moved from their traditional homes in the agricultural South in search of their own vision of a better life in the Northern industrial cities. In Chicago, for example, 4.1% of the population was African American in 1920. This grew steadily to 8.2% in 1940, 22.8% in 1960, and 32.7%, one-third of the entire city, in 1970. With the decline in manufacturing in the early 1960s, competition for jobs, housing and services became acute between African Americans and the descendants of European immigrants.³⁰

By the mid-1960s, a large number of middle-class White residents began a mass exodus to the suburbs to escape the ills of urban overcrowding: rising crime rates, increased violence, and physical deterioration in the inner cities. In their wake they left the blue-collar ethnic neighborhoods in a state of serious erosion.³¹ In Chicago, as in other northern cities, Polish, Italian, and other European ethnic neighborhoods became a “buffer zone” between the largely Black urban areas and predominantly White suburbia. To African American leaders, the ethnic areas appeared to be blocking their aspirations for better housing. Ethnic leaders perceived the increased pressure as a threat to their traditional neighborhoods and their way of life. Thus, collision became inevitable.³²

On the surface, the conflicts that erupted in Chicago and other urban areas during the mid-1960s appeared to the journalists and Civil Rights activists to be motivated by simple racism. Yet, to the Poles who protested the invasion of their neighborhoods along Milwaukee and Archer Avenues, the label racist reflected a lack of sensitivity and understanding that is no less disturbing than the stereotypical views of African Americans and other minorities that liberal activists professed so vocally to deplore. Rather than attempt to understand **both** sides of the conflict, the activists, the media and the general public preferred the simple, if inaccurate explanation that Poles were obviously racists. In truth, Polish Americans were as much victims of the changing economy and government priorities as were African Americans, Hispanics, or other minorities.

To Poles, family and community ties were important traditional values to be preserved. By the 1960s, however, they often found their neighborhoods slated for "urban renewal" projects that seriously threatened their traditional values and way of life. In both Chicago and Detroit, new expressways cut wide swaths through Polish neighborhoods, fracturing their integrity and sending families in search of alternate housing. At the same time, federal, state and local programs designed to promote integration were perceived as another threat to neighborhood integrity. Urban ethnics recognized very early that practices such as "redlining, panic peddling and a dual real estate market usually mean that the integrated neighborhood is merely a transition from an all-white to an all-black neighborhood."³³

Further, attempts to promote affirmative action and other programs designed to assist racial minorities left Polish Americans, themselves traditional victims of exclusion, feeling once again ignored. As late as 1980, for example, ethnic descendants of Southern and Eastern Europeans comprised approximately 30% of the population of the United States, yet only 3.2% of federal judges and a similar number of high government officials were from those groups. In Chicago, which had the largest concentration of Polish residents outside Warsaw, there was not a single Polish or Italian judicial officer and studies completed in the 1970s indicated a glaring underrepresentation of both Poles and Italians in corporate hierarchies. Yet, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission did not pursue a single case of discrimination against Poles or Italians.³⁴

To Polish Americans, urban renewal, open housing, and even the Civil Rights Movement itself were viewed as serious threats to their very way of life. It was not African Americans that they objected to, but the assaults on the treasured *oklica*: the loss of churches, property, extended families, and social networks that defined their existence. Most would agree with the Detroit resident who complained that "Everybody calls us racists; just because we want to live in a Polish-American neighborhood. I don't mind if a Black family

moves in next door or across the street. Right now there are four Black families on our street and there ain't no problems for anyone . . . But when you ask me if I would be happy with a majority of Blacks in the neighborhood, I would have to say no . . . If we had a majority of Blacks, then the neighborhood wouldn't be the same any more. It wouldn't be a Polish neighborhood.''³⁵

While Polish Americans struggled to preserve their way of life, tax monies raised from White working-class ethnics were used to purchase and tear down whole blocks of traditionally ethnic communities, replacing them with low income housing reserved for so-called "non-White" minorities to the exclusion of low income Poles. With, as Andrew Greeley explained, "a long history of oppression and betrayal by strangers," Poles reacted defensively to these incursions.³⁶

Polish urban residents found the same form of double standard at work within the Church as well. Poles viewed the parish schools as crucial to the survival of their culture and tradition among the younger generations. "Their fears," Wrobel explained, "are symbolized by a desperate struggle to keep the St. Thaddeus school open . . . Many believe the future of this Polish – American community is dependent on what happens to the school in the years to come. If it remains open, people argue, current residents with children will stay, and the neighborhood will attract young Polish – American families. But if the school closes, parents will move to the suburbs, where their children can get a Catholic education, and the neighborhood will lose its appeal for Polish Americans with school-age youngsters."³⁷

Like most parish schools, St. Thaddeus depended heavily upon the proceeds from the annual parish festival to meet its operating expenses. With the rise of the Civil Rights movement, the Archdiocese of Detroit required that 4% of the first \$25,000 raised by each parish, and 6% of any amount above 25,000, be relinquished to the diocese to fund special programs for designated minorities.³⁸ "Here is where simple economics becomes complicated by political and social forces," Wrobel explained. "For the archdiocese provides financial assistance to inner-city Black parishes, including support for schools. The parishioners of St. Thaddeus resent that. They are aware Black parishes have financial problems, and support their right to receive aid. Their argument, however, is that the problems of St. Thaddeus seem to go unrecognized by members of the church hierarchy in Detroit. Parishioners say, 'We need help too; we have to put on a festival to raise money for the school, so why can't we keep what we earn?'"³⁹

To their residents, the *oklica* were "communities" within the otherwise anonymous confines of a large metropolis. They were home to family and friends, places where social and cultural activities necessary to their way of life occurred, they were a point of group identification and individuality. They were places to be defended, much as their ancestors had resisted the de-

nationalizing forces of russification, germanization, or americanization.⁴⁰ Indeed, many would agree with historian Joseph Wyrwal who maintained that abandonment of the unique socio-religious structure of the urban *oklica* would be tantamount to “cultural genocide.”⁴¹

As Andrew Greeley eloquently argued, “Those who write off as racist all those poor benighted white ethnics who are uneasy about neighborhood change simply cannot grasp how the concepts of ‘defended neighborhood’ or ‘social turf’ can be important to anyone. If you are worried about your neighborhood, your street, your block, your property, then by definition you are a racist — a definition usually made by someone living in a fashionable, safe, upper middle-class suburb. The intellectual and cultural elites of the country simply cannot understand that there are many people who have no objection to racial integration, no resistance to blacks as neighbors or as parents of children who go to school with your children, yet still have very powerful fears of what racial change does to a neighborhood.”⁴²

Sociologist Gerald Suttles, in a seminal work on the neighborhood as a community, maintains that “the neighborhood is by definition a place to be defended. The boundaries of the neighborhood are the boundaries of an important segment of one’s life. One defends these boundaries because any threat to them is a threat to something that is seen as indispensable to life. Neighborhood is social turf, the place where one lives with ones family and friends.” The neighborhood is a “safe,” familiar place where one can be at ease with ones own, a necessary place that provides a sense of identity crucial to the psychological well-being of urban residents. The fact that Polish Americans sought to preserve the unique nature of their neighborhoods did not mean that they were racists.⁴³

Today the concept of “diversity” has become a high priority in education and government. The study of ethnic diversity need not be a wedge that separates us as Americans. Rather, the study of our various origins can and should be a means for greater understanding of all the traditions and perspectives encompassed in the American mosaic. Indeed, if we are ever to achieve the dream that Martin Luther King articulated so eloquently in Washington nearly three decades ago, we can only do so when the sensitivities of every person, regardless of race, religion, gender or ethnicity, are understood and given equal weight in determining our collective future.

NOTES

1. Lillie Patterson, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Freedom Movement* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1989), pp. 116-121; Miller, p. 161.
2. William R. Miller, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: His Life, Martyrdom and Meaning for the World* (New York: Webright and Talley, 1968), p. 156.
3. Patterson, pp. 119-120.
4. Patterson, pp. 120-121; Miller, p. 167; James Haskings, *The Life and Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Co., 1977), pp. 82-83. Patterson deletes the word "Negro" which King used and Haskings includes.
5. Miller, pp. 234-35.
6. Haskings, pp. 92-93.
7. Parot, "Ethnic versus Black Metropolis: The Origins of Polish-Black Housing Tensions in Chicago," *Polish American Studies*, Vol. 29, Nos. 1-2 (1972), p. 19.
8. Parot, "Housing Tensions," p. 16.
9. Editorial in *The Christian Century*, September 7, 1966, quoted in Miller, p. 251.
10. Parot, "Housing Tensions," p. 5.
11. Joseph A. Wyrwal, *Polish-Black Encounters* (Detroit: Endurance Press, 1982), p. 255; Andrew M. Greeley, "Why Do Catholics Hate Themselves?" *Catholic Universe Bulletin*, March 24, 1978, p. 5.
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The Polish Studies Program at Central Connecticut State University is a unique endeavor. It contributes to the diversity and strength of Central as a University, and is the only active program of its kind in New England with roots both on the campus and in the community.

The Program, inaugurated in January, 1974, seeks to preserve and to stimulate an awareness of Poland's history and of her contribution to European and world civilization. The Program's core are courses in history, politics, culture, literature, language, and on the Polish American ethnic community. The Polish Heritage Collection in the University Library, numbering over 8,000 catalogued books and periodicals, and the Connecticut Polish American Archives and Manuscript Collection, a depository of research materials and memorabilia, supplement the course offerings.

The Program's activities also include evening and weekend lecture series and cultural events, including exhibits, the screening of motion pictures, concerts, and poetry readings. Educational materials for teachers are available from the Curriculum Laboratory in the University Library, and there is scholarship aid for students pursuing Polish Studies and for students of Polish American origin.

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