THE FIEDORCZYK LECTURE

POLISH STUDIES CENTER

Central Connecticut State University

THE FIEDORCZYK LECTURE
IN
POLISH AMERICAN STUDIES
1990

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 then Grand Seminaire de St. Brieuc 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 memoires (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. Thaddeus Radzilowski is Professor of History at Southeast State University in Marshall, Minnesota. He is the author of important studies on Polish-Black relations, immigrant feminism, Polish American religious sisterhoods, ethnic politics, and immigrant workers. Prof. Radzilowski is currently preparing studies of the second generation and of the role of Polish-American women in the organization of the CIO. He is a former president of the Polish American Historical Association and recipient of the Association's Haiman Medal.

On behalf of the Polish Studies Program, it is my pleasure to present our friends and supporters the Third Fiedorczyk Lecture in Polish American Studies, "Immigrant Women and Their Daughters, which Prof. Radzilowski delivered on April 19, 1990. 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.

Stanislaus A. Blejwas
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IMMIGRANT WOMEN
AND
THEIR DAUGHTERS

Fiedorczyk Lecture in Polish American Studies
Central Connecticut State University
April 19, 1990

Thaddeus Radzilowski
Department of History
Southwest State University

This lecture is Dedicated with love and
thanks to those women whose world this was

My Grandmothers
Ewa Fugiel Ochałek and Franciszka Kaminska Radziłowska

and their Daughters
My mother Genevieve

and
my aunts: Mae, Clara, Sister May Columbine,
CSSF, Sister Mary Calasantia, CSSF, Cecilia, Helen,
Virginia, Sister M. Adonia, CSSF, and Rita.

and to

Hildegarde Nebel Pliska
who welcomed me into another immigrant tradition.

Immigration from the rural areas of the lands of partitioned Poland began in earnest in the last third of the Nineteenth Century. It was fueled by the same forces that were modernizing the European countryside elsewhere but it was exacerbated in the Polish lands by a condition of colonial oppression. For rural Polish families the new pressures of this situation was aggravated by their growing fertility.

As elsewhere, economic and social changes were accompanied by rapid population growth. The birth rates in Galicia, for example, rose from 4/1000 in 1850 to 15/1000 by 1900. The increasing population caused greater and greater demands for land. More sons meant ever greater parcelization. By 1900, in Galicia, only 1500 holdings exceed 50 acres, half a million were from 7 1/2 to 50, 600,000 were from 2 1/2 to 7 1/2 and more than 200,000 family plots were less than 2 1/2 acres. On these subsistence plots families were no longer able to support themselves, or to meet the demands of an increasingly market-oriented economy into which the village was being drawn.

In Prussian Poland, the parcelization characteristic of Austrian Poland did not take place. There, however, the German government carried on a deliberate policy of driving the Poles off of their lands. This policy combined with Bismarck's Kulturkampf against the Catholic Church and a policy of repression of Polish language, culture and identity helped to accelerate a migration already heavy because of economic changes.[1]

The Polish peasantry, like their counterparts elsewhere, resisted as long as they could the forces that threatened their way of life. Migration to earn enough money to allow the family to stay on its homestead or to buy additional land to solidify the family's position in the vilage was one significant response to the new situation. The first migration was often local and temporary or seasonal. It took one to an adjacent manor or town or it involved seasonal work in nearby areas during planting or harvesting. Soon many migrants found themselves drawn to larger cities or more distant seasonal migration. Young Polish peasants from Russian or Austrian Poland followed harvests across Prussia and Denmark. Finally, they began migrating for long periods to more distant European lands or overseas to the United States, Canada or Brazil. They found work in the steel mills and coal mines of the Ruhr and Pennsylvania; they worked in textile factories in Belgium and in Massachusetts as well as in Łódż.[2]

The local and regional migration involved women as well as men. In fact, because they were the most expendable in the family economy, young women were often the first to go. They sent their earnings back to keep the family on the farm; to buy new land or tools; or to earn their own dowry. However, the long distance migration was,

[1] On the emigration see A. Brożek, Polish Americans 1854-1939 (Warsaw: Interpress, 1985) 18-42; E. Morawska, For Bread with Butter: The Life-worlds of East Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pennsylvania 1890-1940 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 22-78; The figures on Galician land parcelization are from Philip Taylor, The Distant Magnet (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 52-53.

[2] For a detailed breakdown of the distribution of Polish emigrants see the following articles in A. Pilch (ed), Emigracja z ziem polskich w czasach nowozytnych i najnowszych (XVII-XXVV) (Warsaw: PWN, 1984): A. Brożek, "Ruchy Migracyjne z ziem polskich pod panowaniem pruskim w latach 1850-1918", 141-195; K. Groniowski, "Emigracja z ziem zaboru rosyjskiego (1864-1918)," 196-251; A. Pilch, Emigracja z ziem zaboru austriackiego (od polowy xix w. do 1918 r.), 252-325.

at first, drawn mainly from the male population of the village. Their leaving, however, had an important impact on the women who stayed behind.[3]

Wives and daughters had to assume new roles and take on some of the responsibility and work of husbands and sons. Their traditional roles expanded as they raised children alone. The new arrangements often put strains on the family. Wives sometimes did not readily or easily return to their traditional roles when the husband returned or they ignored his attempts to guide family affairs from a distance. Sometimes they found themselves alone for years or even, in some cases, abandoned. At other times, a wife refused to leave her home and join her husband abroad if he decided on a long term or permanent stay. If a few rare cases, they abandoned their husbands.

By the end of the century young women were going abroad in increasing numbers with family or small groups of relatives or acquaintances or sometimes even alone. Many of the women who migrated were going to join husbands. They often made the arrangements themselves. They sold or leased the land, bought tickets, arranged local transportation and border crossings (often illegal) aided only by vague instructions from distant husbands. Women who had little experience beyond the village or had traveled as migrants only locally or regionally now traveled across Europe and crossed the ocean alone or with small children. They carried with themselves much of what they owned.[4]

The trip could be dangerous. Police reports in cities all along the immigrant trail recorded the disappearance of women without a trace. On trains and ships, or at temporary boarding houses women were subjected to sexual harassment and even rape by crew, workers or fellow travelers.[5]

A 1911 report by a Czech-American woman who traveled in steerage as an undercover agent for the Bureau of Immigration describes in graphic detail the difficulties faced by young women traveling on immigrant ships.

> One steward who had business in our compartment was as annoying a visitor as we had and he began his offenses even before we left port. Some of the women wished to put aside their better dresses immediately after coming on board. As soon as they began to undress he stood about watching and touching them. They tried to walk away, but he followed them. Not one day passed but I saw him annoying some women, especially in the wash rooms.
>
> One night, when I had retired very early with a severe cold, the chief steerage steward entered our compartment, but not noticing me approached a Polish girl who was apparently the only occupant. She spoke in Polish, saying 'My head

[3] Morawska, 49-55.

[4] On some of the problems the emigration caused, see the letters in Witold Kula, Nina Assorodobraj-Kula, Marcin Kula, Writing Home: Immigrants in Brazil and the United States 1896-1891, edited and translated by Josephine Wtulich (Boulder, CO: East European Mongraphs, 1986). In particular note letters 148, 166, 174, 212, 276. Henceforth cited as Kula/Wtulich.

[5] See "Protection of Immigrant Girls on Arrival at Interior Points" from the First Annual Report of the Immigrants Protective League of Chicago in The Ordeal of Assimilation edited by Stanley Feldstein and Lawrence Costello (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1974) 86-89 and George K. Turner, "The Daughters of the Poor" McClure's (November 1909), 45-58.

aches, please go away and let me alone.' But he merely stood on and soon was taking unwarranted liberties with her. The girl, weakened by seasickness, defended herself as best she could, but soon was struggling to get out of the man's arms. Just then other passengers entered and he released her. Such was the man who was our highest protector and court of appeal.

The manner in which the sailors, stewards, fireman, and others mingled with the women passengers was thoroughly revolting. Their language and the topics of their conversation were vile. Their comments about the women, and made in their presence, were coarse. What was far worse and of continual occurrence was their handling the women and girls. Some of the crew were always on deck, and took all manner of liberties with the women, in broad daylight as well as after dark.

Not one young women in the steerage escaped attack. Some, few of the women, perhaps, did not find these attentions so disagreeable; some resisted them for a time, then weakened; some fought with all their physical strength, which naturally was powerless against a man's. Two more refined and very determined Polish girls fought the men with pins and teeth, but even they weakened under this continued warfare and needed some moral support about the ninth day. The atmosphere was one of general lawlessness and total disrespect for women.[6].

After arrival, single women usually moved in with relatives or friends. Sometimes, however, circumstances put them with people they knew only slightly or not at all. Many worked some distance from their place of residence among men and women of other ethnic groups. Wherever they found lodging or work, they found the social structure, networks of gossip and extended family that had restricted their activities in the village much weaker and less contraining here.

The young immigrant women developed a new sense of her rights and the possibilities for greater control over her life choices. She changed jobs on the advice of friends, got her own paycheck and often negotiated with her family about how much she would keep and how much she would contribute. She picked her own husband and arranged her own wedding aided only by girlfriends or sisters. As the women began to explore the new power and freedom their immigration gave them, many found themselves torn between the hope for the future that the immigrant experience offered and the guilt it awakened over having left behind parents and siblings.[7]

A remarkable 1891 letter from Chicago written by a young Polish immigrant woman to her parents in Russian Poland sums up eloquently all of these opportunities and hopes as well as the guilt and conflict. She has done quite well in America and is about to

[6] "Steerage Conditions" from the Reports of the United States Immigration Commission XXXVII (1911)" quoted in Feldstein and Costello, 47-49.

[7] Louise Lamphere, From Working Daughters to Working Mothers: Immigrant Women in a New England Industrial Community (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987) 81-82, 159-165. Leslie Woodcock Tentler, Wage Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States 1900-1930 (Oxford University Press, 1979) 80-81.

oper her own shop. She is clearly committed to her new life and wants to bring her sister over to share it despite her parents misgivings. She writes:

> I now work in a tailor shop and earn two and a half dollars a week, and I will earn more. I am going to be sewing at this tailor shop until Christmas, and then I will set up my own sewing business, and I will let you know more about it. Only I ask that Petra (come to) help me. I will send her a steamship ticket at Easter, if the most holy Mother of God allows it. Dear Daddy and Mama, do not forbid Petra (to come) because she is only wasting her life there. Dear Mama and Daddy, I do not want to bring her to America so that she would be lonesome for you, but rather that it would be better for her than it is there.

She rejects most adamantly the offer of a local suitor passed on to her by her parents and heaps scorn on his request for a dowry.

> In America if a man has three hundred dollars, then he can get married, because in Chicago the custom is that the girl's boyfriend must even buy her a wedding dress and everything else that is needed for the house. The young lady only has to worry about getting to the wedding. Here they do not ask how much dowry she will receive, dear parents.[8]

The letter ends on an ambivalent note: life in America is exciting and rich and yet she is lonesome for her family and old home; she has changed so much that her parents might not even recognize her yet she has forgotten none of his duties to her parents. Thus she concludes her letter:

> Chicago is Poland in perfection. You can hear Polish hymns in Church. It is very gay here, so that one can forget one's longing. But when I think about you I am a little lonely. I am, as it were, still at home. There are three of us now. Helen is no longer with us; they live seperately, but not far from us. We are sending you Helen's wedding picture. Helen's wedding dress cost thirty dollars; it was canary-colored silk. When you receive this letter from me, and I receive an answer from you I will send you my photograph; but you will probably not recognize me. Dear Mommy and dear Daddy, do not be lonesome for me, because I thank you for sending me to America. I trust in God and the Mother of God, that they condescend to hear my prayers, so that I will still take care of you until death and that you will die in my arms.[9]

Life in the new world also changed the situation of the married woman. She had to assume new public roles as her husband went off to work six days a week some distance from home for ten to twelve hours a day. Urban residence required a greater participation in public life and more contact with public and private agencies than was true in the village she left behind and in her husband's absence the immigrant woman acted often in the name of her family. She dealt with city officials, teachers, social service agencies and settlement house workers. As the parish church assumed new social and religious

[8] Kula/Wtulich, Letter 220, Sophie Nadrowska, Chicago, IL to Reynold Nadrowski, Ugoszcz, Rypin District 2/XII/1890.

[9] Ibid.

functions in immigrant community it fell to immigrant women to carry out and support many of them.

With the husband away for much of time the organization of the family's social life and community obligations became increasingly the responsibility of the wife. As a result her own siblings and relatives came to play a larger role in her family's life than they had in the old world where she often lived among her husband's relatives. It was a natural choice and it was strengthened as the land which has been a major element of the tie to her husband's family has ceased to be a factor.

Many immigrant women made their new homes without the assistance or advice of their mothers or mothers-in-law in an environment very different from the one in which they were reared. They raised their children without grandmothers in a strange world. They had much less help than they could have expected in their old homes. More and more they came to depend on friends, neighbors and even outsiders for suppport and advice on raising children and making a home. They also had to expect more support and companionship from their husbands in the absence of the customary female network of relatives.[10] My grandmother, for example, was married in Detroit at eighteen. The only people she knew in the entire city were her husband, brother-in-law and her husband's friend from his village. She started her married life entirely on her own in the first large city in which she had ever lived.

Polish immigrant women also formed a wide variety of formal organizations to replace the informal networks they had left behind. As even a cursory look at the history of any major Polish immigrant community demonstrates the organizational fever that gripped Polish America was not confined to men. The majority of these organizations were religiously based but there were also many tied to neighborhoods, settlement houses, social networks, insurance and moral and educational uplift. Some, as we shall see, expanded to become regional and even national in scope.

Like their single sisters, married Polish women developed a new sense of their rights in the United States. They began to feel that they were entitled to a certain level of treatment and standard of life that was often at variance with old world practice. For example, a young Polish woman raised in America filed for divorce from her husband, a recent immigrant, on the grounds that he was a "greenhorn" and not suitable as a husband for an American woman.[11]

The files of the Chicago Legal Aid Agency studied by Thomas and Znaniecki show that Polish immigrant women were very quick to turn to the Police and social agencies in case of abuse, non-support or desertion. They soon learned that they would have to develop new strategies for coping with life's problems in urban America. Many of these problems had been dealt with informally in the village by gossip or recourse to family and friends. In their new homes, immigrant women had to be dependent more on public

[10] Lamphere, 77-81. See also T. Radzilowski, "The Second Generation: The Unknown Polonia," Polish American Studies, XLIII, 1 (1986 Spring), 5-12.

[11] Dziennik Polski (Detroit) November 1, 1924.

structures for assistance and support than their sisters in the old country.[12]

Polish immigrant women created one of the most important basis of Polish ethnicity in the United States. As they established new lives for themselves and their families in America they had to think consciously about what it meant to be Polish and how to translate those meanings into everyday life. In order to preserve the culture of the old world they had to create new forms of it. They had to decide what could be kept and what had to be abandoned, how to teach it to their children, how to celebrate holidays and rites of passage in an unfamiliar environment. These creative adaptations were largely done by young women very often without the aid of their mothers.

Clifford Geertz has noted that human beings are caught up in webs of significations they themselves have spun. Immigrant women had to spin and respin those webs. They wove dense new fabrics of signification that became the basis of identity and meaning for their families and communities. They shaped many of the elements on which a personal ethnicity built around home, food, celebration, child rearing, marriage is created. This is the ethnicity that traveled with later generations as they moved far from the neighborhood, parish and the ethnic institutions and organizations that were built by male immigrants.[13]

The best known secular organization founded by Polish women in the United States in the Związek Polek w Ameryce (ZPA) known in English as the Polish Women's Alliance. It had its origin in an organization of middle class immigrant women in Chicago who were not permitted to join the Polish National Alliance. Founded in 1898, it soon developed ties to other such groups elsewhere to create a national organization. As an insurance organization it soon developed chapters in almost every Polish settlement in the country. Two decades later it had over 25,000 members, ran education programs and libraries for women and children in many larger Polish communities, and published a weekly newspaper, Głos Polek (The Voice of Polish Women) which was read by 10 to 15 percent of Polish women in the United States.[14]

Although the ZPA has changed in many ways in the course of its history since 1898, it remains one of the most important organizations founded by immigrant women of any ethnic group in the United States. It has not, however, received the recognition outside of the Polish community which its accomplishments have merited. It is ironic that in 1975, leading newspapers in the United States heralded the establishment of a Women's Bank in New York City capitalized at 3 million dollars as a breakthrough for women at a time when the insurance and investment division of the ZPA, run entirely by women for decades, was worth about 40 million dollars. The Women's Bank subsequently failed

[12] William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki; The Polish Peasant in Europe and America Five volumes in two. (New York: Dover, 1958), II, 1750-1751.

[13] For a survey of Polish American Ethnic Folkways see Eugene Obidinski and Helen S. Zand, Polish Folkways in America: Community and Family (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1987).

[14] For a brief early history of the Polish Womens Alliance see my article "Immigrant Nationalism and Feminism: Głos Polek and the Polish Women's Alliance in America, 1898-1917," Review Journal of Philosophy and Social Science, (Winter 1977) II, 2, 182-203. It was reprinted in abridged form in Maxine Seller (ed), Immigrant Women (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 174-179.

but the ZPA has continued to grow and prosper to this day. The history of the ZPA is worth a little closer look.[15]

It was on the editorial pages of Głos Polek, that the leadership of the ZPA tried to define the meaning of the organization for Polish society in America in general and Polish American Women in particular and to set high and progressive goals for them during the difficult early years of immigration and settlement.

Stefania Laudyn, one of the most talented of Głos Polek's editors, clearly saw the organization as a unique fusion of women of the working class and the intelligensia. In an editorial in Głos Polek she called for the solidarity of all Polish women:

> Let us join hands - women who do hard labor and women of words and thoughts - let us believe in each other, let us respect each other's work . . . (Women of) all classes, ranks and conditions - forward! Let us clear the road to enlightenment and the future! Let us not divide but unite; let us not destroy but shape and create what Polish women want and need.[16]

The single most important activity to which the Polish Women's Alliance devoted itself was the education of Polish women and children. This work was carried on in a variety of ways. The group established a reading room for women in Chicago which contained books, newspapers and journals, especially women's magazines from Europe and America. Staffed by volunteers, the library was open two evenings a week for members. Through its Education Division, the Alliance conducted schools in Polish language, history, and culture as well as summer camps for Polish immigrant children from the cities. Local branches of the Alliance and individual members who could afford it established schools in homes and meeting halls to teach girls and young women skills such as typing, sewing, and hat making so that they might enhance their chances of finding decent work. These informal schools also helped young immigrant women to improve their literacy and to learn something about the national history and culture.[17]

The ZPA's newspaper, Głos Polek was its most significant instrument for education and socialization of the immigrants. Its columns were given over to didactic articles on organizing and running a household, cooking, advice to consumers on products and shopping, on health and how to maintain it and on raising children. The newspaper also ran, as part of its regular format, features on the lives of famous women, especially Polish heroines and writers, signed articles on foreign and domestic affairs and poems, serialized novels and stories as well as a special children's "corner".

The history of women, their contemporary struggle for justice and rights in the western world and their problems in other parts of the world were central issues in the news columns, the signed articles and on the editorial pages of Głos Polek. The paper ran columns titled "Women's Chronicle" (Kronika Kobieca) dealing with the accomplishments

[15] New York Times, October 17, 1975.
[16] Głos Polek, November 3, 1910.
[17] Radzilowski, "Immigrant Nationalism and Feminism," 186-187.
[18] Ibid., 187-189.

of contemporary women around the world and "From the Women's Movement" (Z Ruchu Kobiecego) which concentrated on the struggle for votes, admission to universities, medical schools and law schools and other feminist issues of the day. Side by side with these regular features, Głos Polek ran special stories on subjects such as the beginnings of a new role for women in Turkey, Persia, and China, on the history of women in medicine, especially on the work of Dr. Maria Zakrzewska, and on leaders of the battle for political rights such as the Pankhursts and Susan B. Anthony. On the editorial pages, the editors frequently commented on women's issues and the progress of feminist causes. The immigrant readers of the weekly edition of Głos Polek were probably as knowledgeable about the problems and activities of contemporary women as any group of people in America. Furthermore, they received the news in a context highly sympathetic to the political and social progress of women and in a newspaper controlled and run entirely by women.

In regard to the education of women the Alliance took a strong feminist position. Women were to receive whatever education they wished and no educational institutions or courses of study should be closed to them. Women were urged especially to study science and mathematics even if they did not make careers in those areas, for such knowledge was useful in modern life. The editors of Głos Polek made a very eloquent case for coeducational institutions in which they summed up the essence of their feminist views:

> Yes, women should get higher education. And the same kind of education men get if they wish it and they should go to universities together with males. This would give men the opportunity to acquire the best of feminine characteristics, i.e., humanitarianism in the broadest sense of the word.[19]

As Feminists, as representatives of an ethnic group whose members were largely laborers and as persons who believed in a progressive and humane society, the ZPA leadership were often found championing the rights of workers, especially of women and children employed in the mines and mills. They reported many of the strikes of women workers and supported them enthusiastically. They deplored the "hunger and want" often facing strikers and condemned the "barbarous abuse" of women and children by the police during strikes. The condition of workers, especially Polish workers, and the abuse and exploitation they suffered, led Głos Polek to a condemnation of the American industrial system and even of the country itself. After a disaster in the spring of 1911, in the Pennsylvania anthracite fields, the paper denounced the "indifference of the capitalists," and asked rhetorically "How many of our brothers are lost in those gloomy pits, condemned to death by the frightful greed of the exploiters and the indifference of the government."[20]

Sometimes the support of workers was combined with feminist sentiments. For example, in April 1917, Magdalena Milewska, a leading figure in the ZPA, addressing a dressmakers strike meeting in Milwaukee, said:

[19] Głos Polek, February, 1903. In its earliest days Głos Polek was a monthly newspaper. It did not become a weekly until 1910.

[20] Głos Polek, May 4, 1911.

The average women . . . does not realize that every time she puts on a silk dress to go to a ball, she is putting on the shroud of a sister woman who is unable to eke out a mere existence at this work. Your battle is just. It is the protest of women against abuse. It should meet with the support of all Polish organizations, and the Polish Press . . . Your victory will be a woman's victory . . .[21]

The ZPA publicly acknowledged the Church as the single most important agency in the Polish community and regarded it as crucial to preserving and propagating national identity and moral uplift among the immigrants. Nevertheless, the organization itself did not hold back from criticism or ridicule of the church hierarchy's position on women's issues. In reponse to an editorial in the Dziennik Chicagoski, a newspaper edited by the Resurrectionist Fathers, which allowed that the "Church has nothing against and certainly does not condemn equal rights for women, except that it is necessary that women be mature enough for them," the editors of Głos Polek shot back defiantly:

Ha . . . a people become ready for freedom when they get it, as the Negroes grew into it when they were emancipated, as the Chinese matured when they won freedom for themselves. In the area of rights everything must be taken. One must never wait to be given them for they will never be given. And so with Woman when she struggles for a right she must win it and take it.[22]

In regard to organizations which have both men and women members, Głos Polek wrote that they "do not today give a free and independent field for work and thought to women" and in them "the shaping and influencing of decisions" falls always to men. This happens even when the men with the best will "want to let women participate" because "of the centuries old arrangements by which men rule and decide and the women always obey."

The editors of Głos Polek acknowledged that at some future time it might be possible for men and women to join together in the same organization but that can only happen when "the will to rule disappears from man's soul" and when he can accept a woman as a "truly completed, equal person not as a minor child."[23]

A significant minority of Polish American women were exposed to the message of the ZPA by World War I. As a result, they did not need to learn the message of equal rights and the claims of women to education, advancement and a place of dignity in modern society from American women. The lesson came out of their own community and culture in America.

A tiny handful of the Polish immigrant women who made the voyage to America were nuns. Better educated and often of middle or upper class origin, they came to minister and teach their countrymen and women in the new Polish settlements. They also transplanted their orders, some of quite recent origin in Europe, to the soil of the new world. They were quickly joined and in surprising numbers by women from the new

[21] Dziennik Związkowy, April 11, 1917.
[22] Głos Polek, April 11, 1912.
[23] Głos Polek, November 24, 1910.

rural immigration. The enthusiasm of the new recruits represents not only a response to new opportunities but also a genuine religious awakening.[24]

The village faith immigrant women left behind had a very local focus, narrow expectations and reflected the culture and social structure of the Polish countryside in which it was embedded. That faith was changed dramatically by its ocean voyage. Beneath the surface of rites and observances which approximated those of the village church it demanded different roles and required a broader commitment. It offered new and more varied outlets for religious feelings and service. The new conditions brought a spontaneous outburst of religious commitment from women from whom too little had been expected in the past. One of those responses was to join one of the transplanted religious orders or, in a few cases, to found a new one.[25]

Within a generation peasant immigrant women and the daughters of immigrants founded seven new religious orders. They also took over the transplanted ones founded in Europe as few of the women who dominated altruism and religious philanthropy in the Polish lands made the voyage over to America. These quickly became Polish American orders. For example, the largest of the Polish American orders, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Felix, founded in Europe in 1854, had more than 80% of its world wide membership in the United States by its one hundredth anniversary.[26]

The growth of the religious orders represented the mobilization of the talents of thousands of Polish American women for service to their struggling new communities. The orders also acted as a major agency for social, educational and occupational mobility for women at a time when the world outside was seen as threatening and dangerous to community and faith. The religious orders were an eminently acceptable - even highly commendable - and inexpensive way to have a career and to serve.

We have not yet come to a full appreciation of the extent to which the rapid growth of Polish women's religious orders represent a dramatic change in the consciousness of Polish immigrant women and a response to immigration. It's worth noting that the influx of young Polish American women into the European based religious orders quickly brought an end to the sharp social distinctions that the orders had been brought over with them. As new Americans, Polish American women insisted on the equality of treatment and careers open to talent that lay at heart of the national ideology. In one dramatic case, a young nun threw away in rejection the apron she was handed at the altar during her installation ceremony as a mark of her future career in the order. Her European peasant and U.S. working class background notwithstanding, she would not be a menial while

[24] The material on the Polish American sisterhoods is vast. For an overview see Sister Mary Tullia Doman, CSSF, "Polish American Sisterhoods and their Contributions to the Catholic Church in the US." Sacrum Poloninae Millennium VI (Rome, 1962), 371-612.

[25] My remarks here are based on my own research on the history of the Sisters of the Congregations of St. Felix. See my article, "Reflections on the History of the Felicians in America," Polish American Studies, XXXII, 1 (Spring, 1975), 19-28.

[26] Ibid., 19-20

others moved on to education and more interesting careers.[27]

The religious life appealed to all those interested in positions of responsibility and power, travel, social status and education. All of this could be attained within a highly regarded religious framework of service. Their choice of a vocation to the religious life also conferred honor and status on their families. It gave the women who joined the order the kind of respect from their male relatives they would not otherwise have gotten, as well as a certain moral authority over them. Given the limited opportunities available to immigrant women and their daughters, the sisterhoods obviously represented a very attractive alternative for many women to marriage, domestic service or factory work. In many immigrant communities, nuns represented the majority of people, male or female, with education higher than elementary school and some pretension to professional status. Ostafin's study of Detroit shows that in 1905 more than two-thirds of all of the persons in the community with a professional or semi-professional position were women in the religious orders.[28]

The religious orders not only performed services for the community that it needed and wanted, but also expanded the conception of those needs in response to the new milieu. In the process, the religious orders created a strong vested interest for investment in education, care of the sick and destitute and other social services. The women of the religious orders mobilized a significant amount of the resources and capital of the community for these ends as well as for their own education and institutional needs.

The women who joined the religious orders left family and friends to enter a life of service but they did not leave family and community as far behind as is usually imagined. They often mobilized family and friends to assist with money and/or time for the causes of their orders or the parishes, hospitals or other institutions to which they were assigned. In turn, because they often had access to or control of jobs and resources such as scholarships, they were able to contribute to the well being and mobility of the family with patronage. They also served as family exemplars of the value of education and promoted it for nephews and nieces.

The religious orders also created networks of the parishes they served that involved bringing together people from widely scattered Polonian neighborhoods for social and fund-raising functions and common efforts. These networks often served as means to exchange and transfer resources between parishes. Most orders created auxiliary organizations drawn from the women of the parishes they served, that provided one of the major sources of inter-neighborhood cooperation among Polish American immigrant women and their daughters.[29]

[27] My thanks to Sister Ellen Marie Kuznicki, CSSF for this story. Sister Ellen Marie is the leading historian of the Felician order in the United States.

[28] Peter A. Ostafin "The Polish Peasant in Transition: A Study of Group Integration as a function of group Symbioses and Common Definition", Dissertation, The University of Michigan, 83.

[29] I expect to examine in future works the role of Polish American Religious Women in integrating neighborhoods and assisting the mobility of their families in future publications. On the role of French Canadian Nuns in stimulating migration of family members, see Lamphere, 72.

The main functions of the Polish religious orders in the United States (unlike Europe) was education. They staffed the vast network of elementary and secondary schools (about 1000 at its height) created by Poles in America. In fact, without them the existence of that system would have been impossible. In addition, they also wrote the texts for their schools and developed the curricula that attempted to inculcate a Polish Catholic consciousness as well as American patriotism in their charges. Through their schools, curricula and texts they taught immigrants and their children the meaning of Catholicism in the new American context and sought to create a Polish American identity that would make them feel at home in America. If the home environment created by one group of Polish American women was one pillar of ethnicity, the educational and social service system created by another was a second. The very existence of Polonia itself is thus to a significant degree the product of the efforts of the women of the religious orders. In addition, through their schools, hospitals, orphanages, clinics, day care centers, and old age homes and through their commitment, dedication and labor they made a major contribution to humanizing the harsh environment of the American industrial city in this century.[30]

What do we know about the work and public lives of those Polish American Women who did not join religious orders? Almost all single women worked. Before World War I the pay for the various jobs Polish American Women did, ranged from $4 to $20 per week with some of the jobs such as domestic work including maintenance. After marriage the rates of work outside the home dropped off sharply. Some evidence indicates that ten to twenty percent of married women worked. If there were children, a working mother usually signified a family in serious straits. The rates of employment for married women, however, varied a great deal from one area of the country to the other. In areas such as Lawrence, Massachusetts, Central Falls, Rhode Island, Passaic or Paterson, New Jersey where textiles were the major industry the employment rate for married women was much higher. There men's work paid much less and a great many jobs were open primarily to women.[31]

Many Polish American men, however, were attracted to work in mines, steel mills and other heavy industry. In areas where such industries predominated wages for men were higher and fewer opportunities were available for female labor. In certain rural or semi rural areas women, married and single, and children often found employment, usually seasonal, in canning and food processing. Certain operations in meat packing plants which atrracted Polish male labor were also open to women. In all areas Polish women married and single did domestic work and in the Midwest, Polish women went into cigar factories. In some cities such as Detroit, once a major center for cigar manufac-

[30] Doman. 371-362. For a survey of the work of the Polish American Sisterhoods in education, see Sister Ellen Marie Kuznicki, CSSF, "The Polish American Parochial Schools" in Frank Mocha (ed.), Poles in America: Bicentennial Essays. (Stevens Point, WI: Worzalla Publishing, 1978), 435-460.

[31] Morawska, 123-4, 195-6, 217-8, 288-289. Lamphere, 77-82, 159-168. For a summary of the employment of Polish American women according to the census of 1900 see Edward Pinkowski, "The Great Influx of Polish Immigrants and the Industries They Entered" in Mocha, 330-348.

turing, cigar making was practically dominated by Polish women.

The second generation of Polish American women began to move, after the Great Depression, into more varied employment than had been open to their mothers. As barriers of prejudice began to fall in the forties and early fifties, Polish women moved into white collar, clerical and retail sales positions outside of the Polish community. The new opportunities required a good knowledge of English and skills such as typing or stenographic skills. There are indications that as a result, the educational level of Polish American women increased and in some areas the number of women going on to high school exceeded that of men.[32]

The women who stayed home with their children did more than just care for the house, cook and clean. They kept large gardens, raised animals, preserved food and sewed clothing for their families. Many also earned money by working at home, doing sewing, weaving or home manufacturing. A good steamstress could easily make as much as her husband did at the mill. A skilled seamstress made about $100.00 a month in 1914.[33] Many also ran small retail businesses out of their homes. Among early Polish immigrants the operation of a saloon in one of the rooms of the home was a common enterprise. In the Polish neighborhoods of Chicago before the First World War, for example, there were over 3000 saloons, most of them home operations run mainly by the woman of the house.[34]

The most common enterprise for women, especially in heavy industrial areas, was a boarding house. Professor Ewa Morawska's study of Johnstown, Pennsylvania showed that at one time or another in the family cycle, 50 to 60 percent of Polish families took in boarders. This was heavy work which involved doing cooking, cleaning and laundering for as many as a dozen men. Wives earned two-thirds to three quarters of the income their husbands made in the factories for this difficult and tiring job.[35]

There is a prejudice that immigrant women, submissive and home bound by children and household chores, had few opinions and took little part in public life. This prejudice is the result of ignorance about the history of Polish women in America. As a result, it is assumed that their's is merely a story of immigrant Griseldas, dominated in the home by husbands and fathers and in the public sphere by priests whom they obeyed with superstitious awe.

The reality, as we are coming to know it, however, is far different and more complex. Indeed what is striking once one begins to explore their history is how active and continuous was the involvement of Polish-American Women in the events that shaped their communities. It is a dramatic history marked by profound and sometimes violent struggles. In those struggles to shape and defend their community, Polish immigrant women

[32] Pinkowski, 331-337. On the Polish Cigar makers in Detroit see Jan Dobija, "Women on Strike: Polish Solidarity in Detroit" Monthly Detroit, April 1982, 60-63; and Margaret C. Nowak Two Who Were There (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988) 28-42.

[33] Morawska, 196.

[34] Edward Kantowicz, Polish American Politics in Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) 30. Kantowicz estimates that 3% of Poles in Chicago were Saloonkeepers.

[35] Morawska, 130.

and their daughters were often more militant than their men and ahead of them in defining the issues for which they fought.

The militance was evident from the beginning of the imigration. There is hardly a Polish Catholic or National Parish which has not experienced a major disturbance over issues of leadership, control of the parish resources and relationship to the hierarchy. These were, at times, excerbated by old world regional differences as people who would have been strangers and even aliens to each other in Europe tried to create community in the new world. In many of these struggles a key role was played by women. For example, in the well known struggle over the control of the first Polish Parish in Detroit in the early 1880's, mobs of women seized control of the church to hold it for the pastor ousted by the Bishop and to deny it to his appointed successor. In the process, they not only defied ecclesiastical authority but also civil authority and fought the police and courts to maintain their position. The Detroit incident was only one of the first of numerous such affairs.[36]

A public expressions of militance in defense of their families and community was joined to a variety of causes. In Hartford, in 1915, Polish and other Slavic women took to the streets in support of a Bakers' strike to help the workers hold out for a wage settlement that would include a promise by the owners not to raise the price of bread to pay for the raise.[37] In the bloody battles in the coal fields, the women fought with skill and courage in support of their men. In the wake of the Latimer massacre in the Pennsylvania anthracite field in 1897, "Big Mary" Septek led a "wild band of women" armed with clubs, rolling pins and pokers who waged a guerrilla war against strikebreakers. In one incident they routed over two hundred male washery workers. It finally required the intervention of state militia to end the so-called "foreign women raids."[38]

The incidents bewildered the authorities. General Gobin, charged with maintaining order, was "in a quandary over the foreign women raids" and the problem of how to deal with the "Amazons."[39] The Wilkes Barre Record criticized the unseemly behavior of immigrant femininity:

> The appearance of women as a factor in a coal region strike is a novelty of a not very pleasing nature. Those who have made themselves so conspicuous the past week in . . . the Hazleton region were the wives, mothers, and sisters of the Hungarian, Polish and Italian strikers, and it is assumed that they had the sanction of their husbands, sons and brothers in their ill-advised and unwomanly demonstrations.[40]

The reporter mourned the passing of better times when "such scenes would have been

[36] On this conflict see Lawrence Orton, Polish Detroits and the Kolosinski Affair (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981).

[37] Laura Anker, "Women, Work and Family: Polish, Italian and East European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940," Polish American Studies, XLV, 2 (1988 Autumn) 37.

[38] Victor Green, The Slavic Community on Strike (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 1965) 143-145.

[39] Ibid., 143

[40] Ibid., 144

impossible in the troubles between capital and labor . . . when our mines were manned by English-speaking men. This . . . is only another . . . forcible illustration of the great change that has taken place in these coal regions since the importation of cheap European labor comenced.''[41]

In a similar struggle in the coal mining region of the Ruhr the wives of Polish immigrant miners attacked strikebreakers and seized their lunchbuckets, returning them later filled with excrement. During the 1910 strike in a Brooklyn Sugar Refinery when threatening shots were fired at strikers, women rushed into the streets holding their children on high and daring the police to shoot.[42] Frank Renkiewicz in his study of Polish American workers notes that during strikes: ''Time and again, women, wives usually, bolstered the flagging spirits of their men and took the lead in demonstrations and in sustaining resistance''.[43]

In many cases, the women acted on their own behalf as workers and family wage earners. It was the walkout of the Polish women weavers in response to a pay cut that sparked the famous Lawrence Strike of 1912.[44]

Polish immigrant women showed the greatest energy and boldness when they were involved both as workers and as the defenders of their families and communities. No incident makes that more clear than the rioting in the Back-of-the-Yards during the great Chicago packing house strike of 1921-1922 when the employers sought to cut wages and break the union. The ferocity of the attacks by Polish women astounded even the Polish press, as the following excerpts from the Dziennik Chicagoski (The Chicago Daily News) indicate:

> ''Many women participated in the rioting this morning and they withstood the onslaught of the Police longer than the men.[45]
>
> The women who lead the males with the cry ''Beat the Cossacks'' threw themselves at the police.[46]
>
> Amidst the crowds, women with ruffled hair, torn dresses and ragged skirts could be seen scuffling with the police as they tried to break up the gangs.[47]
>
> One of the women workers, Mary Buczynska, pounced upon Policemen Mueller and Jungblut. The crowd dragged them from their motorcycles and beat them.[48]
>
> The women with bags full of pepper, flung the powder into the eyes of the police,

[41] Ibid., 145

[42] F. Renkiewicz, ''Polish American Workers, 1880-1980'' in Pastor of the Poles: Polish American Essays edited by S.A. Blejwas and M.B. Biskupski (New Britain, CT: Polish Studies Monographs, 1982. I.), 17.

[43] Ibid. After the lecture I was approached by Mr. Paul Wiercinski a member of the audience, who remembered as a young boy in Jermyn, PA, in the twenties, a group of women including his mother, who urged their sons to climb up on boxcars and throw stones down on a mounted Coal and Iron Police Patrol during a bitter coal strike in the anthracite fields. The Police, unable to reach the boys, beat the women with their clubs in retaliation.

[44] Samuel Yellin, American Labor Struggles (New York: Monad press, 1974), 176.

[45] Dziennik Chicagowski December 8, 1921.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Dziennik Chicagowski, December 9, 1921

rendering them temporarily blind.[49]

A second important encounter took place at 49th St. and Racine Ave. Here again a woman, Miss Sophia Horoszka, threw herself at five policemen who were patrolling the area. One of the officers fell to the ground as he was struck on the head with a club. Meanwhile, Miss Horoszka escaped with her colleagues. When police attempted to extricate her from one of the houses, they were showered with pepper; however, after the long battle, the police succeeded in making the arrest.[50]

A women was arrested at 49th and Racine Ave. when she flung an empty bottle at a mounted policeman, striking him with such force that he dropped to the street.[51]

Women took about half the casualties and suffered about as many arrests as the men in the failed struggle. They also took a major share in the organizational effort. More than 40% of the strike relief committee, for example, was made up of women workers. They were also one-third of the committee to aid the strikers created by the Business Association of the Town of Lake.[52]

The 1930's were another period of crisis for the Polish American community and ordinary Polish women again reacted forcefully. The activities of these Polish women of the second generation in the nineteen thirties were, of course, not without precedent. Almost all of them would echo the militancy of the immigrant first generation and would be responsive to the same kinds of threats. Now, however, they were organized with greater sophistication and an awareness of class that garnered wider sympathy and response from those outside the Polish community.

The Great Depression, like nothing before it, attacked two of the most important pillars of Polish American working class life: a secure job and a homestead. These had provided the fabric of respectability, pride and dignity which held the community together. A threat to jobs and homes also threatened all of the other institutions of the community, including the parish. The records of one large Polish American parish at the height of the Depression in 1933 showed that 75% of the parishioners gave less than $10.00 that year and 18% (71 families) gave less than a dollar. Only 2% or eight parishioners gave more than $30.00 per annum. Hungry children of the parish lined up daily at the door of the convent to get a warm meal before school. Many took from the parish more than they gave in those years.[53]

Other data from the period give additional indications of the problems and marginal condition of Polish American families as a result of the hard times. The tuberculosis death rate in the Polish neighborhoods of midwestern cities ranged from 40 to 79 per 100,000, a rate exceeded only in some of the poor Black and southern White areas of the same cities. The infant death rate in Detroit's Polish neighborhoods in the late thirties was one

[49] Dziennik Chicagowski December 8, 1921.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Dziennik Chicagoski, January 23, 1922. See also Dziennik Chicagoski December 21, 1921.
[53] Florianowo St. Florian Parish, Hamtramck, Michigan March 4, 1934.

of the highest in the city, ranging from a low of 40 to over 60 per 1,000 live births.[54]

In response to those conditions and to the threats to the fabric of their community life, Polish American women responded with vigor and imagination. We are just beginning to uncover the history of their activities and we are far from having a complete picture of them. But what we know indicates a compelling and dramatic story. Let me cite from my own research on the history of their activities in Detroit, one of the largest Polonia centers, as a case in point.

In July 1935, a small group of Polish American women led by Mary Zuk, the young wife of an unemployed Dodge worker, organized an "Action Committee Against the High Cost of Living" in Hamtramck. Their major complaint was that the rising cost of food, especially meat, was making it impossible for them to feed their families adequately. The first action of the group was to call a meat boycott. They threw up picket lines in front of butcher shops and grocery stores. The pickets attempted to dissuade customers from purchasing meat at the high prices. The action spread quickly to other East side Polish areas and then to the smaller Polish area on the West side of Detroit. Within a few days women of other European ethnic groups and some Black women joined the growing movement.

In some places the confrontation between customers and pickets became heated and violent. Meat purchases were snatched from customers and thrown to the sidewalk. As a result a number of demonstrators were arrested at several sites. The majority of those arrested were married Polish American women in their thirties and forties. Most of the handful of male supporters taken into custody had Polish or Slavic names.[55]

The action committee also gathered support by organizing meetings and rallies. The largest rally was held at midday on August 16 at Perrin Park in the heart of the East side Polish neighborhood across the street from the Dom Polski. Over 5000 men and women attended the meeting which was addressed by Mary Zuk and women representing other neighborhoods and groups. The rally passed a resolution to send a delegation headed by Mary Zuk to Washington to testify in support of a resolution by John Dingell, the Polish American Congressman who represented the Polish West side neighborhood, to establish a committee to inquire into meat prices.

The strike received national publicity and by the beginning of September had not only spread into working class suburban areas but also to other cities such as Chicago, Cleveland

[54] City of Detroit, City Plan Commission, Master Plan Reports: The People of Detroit (Detroit, 1946) 33-34. Today infant mortality rates of 15-20 per 1000 which occur in drug ravaged inner city neighborhoods and the poorest Indian reservations are considered shocking. See Indians of Minnesota edited by Judith Rosenblatt. (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 202.

[55] For an easily accessible account of the meat strikes see the article by George Schrode, "Mary Zuk and the Detroit Meat Strike of 1935" Polish American Studies, XLIII, 2 (1986 Autumn). The article originated in a Master's Essay at Wayne State University. While useful, the article should be used with caution. The author unable to read Polish could not use many important sources. He also made several errors that weaken his arguments at points. For a critique of the article see my comments in Polish American Studies XLIVI (1987 Spring) 96-97. References to Schrode's work in this paper are to his more detailed master's essay Polonia's Working Class People and Local Politics Wayne State University, 1985.

and Milwaukee. Nevertheless, despite large rallies, aggressive picketing, arrests and marches, the strike lost its momentum by the end of August and with the failure of the bill in Congress to investigate meat prices died out in September.

The strike had its origins with and its strongest support from Polish American women who obviously perceived the high prices as a greater threat to their families' well being than did other women and/or had the social networks and community tradition to create cohesive effective action. At the height of the strike, 75% of the meat dealers in Polish neighborhoods had closed while less than 25% in other sections of the city were affected by the action.[56] Some of the women had their own cultural explanation why Polish women were at the forefront of the movement and why they were more militant. One of the stikers, according to a reporter for the Dziennik Polski, related that "Polish women feed their men more meat than do other women." She went on to say that "English (sic) women buy less meat and more pies and pastries" although she allowed that "their men seem healthy enough nevertheless."[57]

The two month meat boycott gave many Polish American women their first experience in direct action and political lobbying and showed them new possibilities despite the failure. Many of the women who had first become active in the summer of 1935 formed the cadre of activists who later organized political campaigns, support for the union organizing drives and who themselves formed unions.[58] One Polish American politician wrote later of the women he met on the picket lines during the meat strike:

> Many of the women whom I saw for the first time on that picket line I met in subsequent years helping in the organization of the auto workers, many of them were on the picket lines during the strikes and carried food to the strikers. The battle against the high cost of living was for these women their first involvement in struggle and at the same time a valuable lesson.[59]

The most important figure to emerge out of the meat strike was Mary Zuk. Her leadership, sense of timing, and vision was a contributing factor to the spread and early success of the meat boycott. Building on the strike experience and networks it created, Mary Zuk established a political movement, the Hamtramck People's League in Autumn 1935 and used it to launch a political career. The People's League initiated a sixteen point program of progressive policies that called for among other things: increase in welfare allowances and medical and dental care for the indigent; union conditions and wages on public projects; city support for union organizing within the city coupled with opposition to use of strikebreakers, black lists and anti-union guard and spy agencies as well as the use of city Police against strikers; end of national, religious and racial discrimination in hiring or welfare; better pay, benefits and job security for city employees; and

[56] Detroit News. August 6, 1935

[57] Dziennik Polski (Detroit) August 15, 1935. Mr. Emil Schwarz of the Meat Dealers' Association in an August 4, 1937 statement which appeared in the Detroit News on August 5, 1935 supported the idea that Poles ate more meat than other groups.

[58] Stanley Nowak, "Zorganizowanie Kampanii Wyborczej" Głos Ludowy (Detroit) October 2, 1976.

[59] Stanley Nowak, "Dalsze Poszukiwania Pracy" Głos Ludowy (Detroit) November 1, 1975.

the construction of youth centers, playgrounds, public toilets, a library, hospital and clinics by the city. She ran for City Council on that platform and was elected in the Spring of 1936.[60]

Mary Zuk's tenure in office lasted for only a single term but it was an important one. She emerged as the advocate of the poor, the welfare recipient and organized labor. Her period in office coincided with the most intense period of the struggle to unionize Chrysler and General Motors which has large plants in the city. Her role was crucial. She repeatedly forced the timid city administration to confront issues it had hitherto avoided. Under her prodding the city council voted time and again for the cause of labor under the eyes of their overwhelmingly working class constituents. The council voted unanimously, for example, on March 11, 1937 for her resolution to put the city in support of the Dodge sit-down strike. During the organizing drives she joined the picket lines and spoke to strikers' rallies and even took a role in the organizing work itself.[61]

Mary Zuk had created new possibilities for the way municipal power could be used to support the interest of her large Polish American working class constituency. Out of that developed a symbiotic relationship between the city and Labor that facilitated the organization of unions in the great East side industrial belt in the midst of which Hamtramck was located. The city was a labor sanctuary in the heart of the industrial corridor.[62]

The campaign to organize the CIO unions in Detroit was to bring almost the entire Polish American community into the fray. It engendered an unusually high level of engagement and militance in Polish Americans. It is important to note that the basis for this activity and organization was laid down by the actions of women such as the meat boycotters a year or more before the great strikes in the auto factories. To separate the struggle to organize unions from the meat strikes and political campaign by Mary Zuk's People's League is to fail to understand the full development of the unity and militance which became a part of Polish ethnicity in the thirties. All of these elements were present in the movement of the women long before the men's actions in the work place developed.

During the period of the most intense organizing and strike activity, Polish American women were found in all phases of the work: running strike kitchen and offices, organizing support demonstrations and appearing on the picket lines, doing relief work and political lobbying. During the Dodge sit down of 1939 when it was rumored that outside forces were to be brought in to dislodge the strikers, a reported 10,000 people most of them from the area and the majority of them women and their children assembled in the front of the plant to put themselves between their husbands, fathers, brothers, fiancees and friends and any assualt force. The mobilization of so many women on such short notice attests to the continuing presence of the militant spirit that first motivated the meat strikers.[63]

[60] Schrode, 40-41

[61] Dodge Main News, March 11, 1937

[62] Schrode, 45-46

[63] Steve Bobson et al., Working Detroit (New York: Adams Books, 1984) 71-78

In those cases where the women were part of the work force they were also to be found among the strikers and sit downers. In some auto plants where the majority of the workers were women as in the case of the Ternstedt factory, Polish America women who represented a large part of the work force, were well represented among the strike leadership. At Ternstedt they were part of an unusually disciplined action during which the plant was operated at full capacity and the workers worked apparently at top speed but very little production was turned out. The action finally forced the management to begin serious collective bargaining.[64]

No events in the nineteen thirties better demonstrated the determination and courage of Polish American Women than did the strike of the cigar workers. Detroit, as noted above, was one of the major centers of cigar production in the United States. The cigar factories were located in the East side Polish areas and the work force drawn largely from neighborhood women was between 80 to 90 percent Polish. The women who worked in the cigar factories came from neighborhoods in which the meat boycott had been the strongest and many of them were from families with members who worked in the auto factories. By early 1937 the women had developed a large number of grievances over pay, work speed, unsafe and unhealthy conditions and sexual harassment. They also had before them examples of their own earlier militancy or that of other women in their neighborhoods and more recently of male factory workers they knew. The first Detroit sit downs were two brief strikes at Midland Steel and Kelsey-Hayes. They were staged in late November and early December 1936. (The strike headquarters for the Kelsey-Hayes strike was at the Dom Polski where the meat strikers had met earlier.) In January, the Flint sit down less than 60 miles north of Detroit captured the public imagination.[65]

Bolstered by these examples the cigar workers began to organize and went to the UAW asking for the assistance from a Polish speaking organizer. The UAW unable to meet the requests for assistance that were pouring in from auto plants refused, whereupon twenty-five women threatened to stage a sit down in union headquarters. Embarrassed, the UAW leadership agreed to their request. Just after the Flint sit down ended in mid-February more than 2000 women cigar workers seized control of five of the largest cigar factories in Detroit and began the longest and one of the most bitterly contested sit down strikes of the nineteen thirties. Despite enormous pressure and brutal violence against them by company thugs and Detroit Police, the women hung on in some of the cases well into April. Even women who were breast feeding children had the babies brought into the plant several times a day rather than break ranks.[66]

The strike and the vicious attacks on the women brought an outpouring of sympathy from the entire Polish community. According to one observer:

They won the support of the whole neighborhood. Churches and priests supported

[64] Margaret C. Nowak, Two Who Were There, 28-42

[65] Dobija, 60-63.

[66] Ibid., 62.

it, small businessmen supported it, Polish newspapers supported it. Everyone was in sympathy with these women.[67]

A neighborhood fact finding committee headed by the respected Judge Nicholas Gronkowski held hearings on the conditions in the cigar factories and delivered their findings, which supported the strikers, to the governor.[68]

The sit-down of the cigar women generated other sit-downs in emulation, in other places which employed women, especially large numbers of Polish American women. The first to be struck was Woolworth's downtown store on February 27th. Women at other Woolworth stores, other retail stores such as Penney's, speciality food stores such as the Goody nut shops, restaurants and coffee shops, bakeries, laundries and hotels also went on strike. All of the sit down strikes had a large complement of Polish American women and in many, Polish America women constituted a majority of the strikers.[69] More importantly, two weeks after the cigar women went on strike and received wide spread community support from Polonia, the great Chrysler sit down began at all nine Chrysler Plants. Seventeen thousand workers sat down. In all of the plants Polish Americans were the largest single ethnic group and in several such as Dodge Main and Plymouth assembly they represented a majority or near majority of all of the workers. While the Chrysler strikers were clearly governed by the dynamics of the internal situation they were also influenced by the spirit of militance that had seized the city and especially the Polish neighborhoods in early 1937. It is clear that Detroit and especially its Polish neighborhoods were already in a high state of excitement and mobilization as a result of the Cigar Workers strike on the eve of the Chrysler sit down. The men who sat down in March were following the example set by their mothers, sisters, wives and neighbors when they took over the huge Chrysler Plants.

The long term mobilization and the immediate militance of Detroit's Polish workers and ultimately of all its workers, male and female, owes a great deal to the courage and perserverance of Polish American women of the city and its surrounding area. In the wake of the Chrysler strike and the later massive GM sit downs the president of the UAW called Polish Americans "The most militant workers in America".[70] That may indeed be true but it is important to remember that the example for the men was set by the women of Polonia.

In the 1930's when other Americans - often descendants of the founding fathers - would have denied dignity and basic human rights to their fellow citizens ordinary, Polish American women were willing to jeopardize their livelihood, their safety and even their lives to widen the meaning of liberty and justice for all Americans and they deserve to be

[67] Quoted in Bobson, 77

[68] Margaret C. Nowak, Two Who Were There, 37.

[69] Ibid. 40-41.

[70] Thad Radzilowski "Class, Ethnicity and Community: The Polish Americans of Detroit and the Organization of the CIO." Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, New York, November, 1986.

remembered for it. From those who founded the great variety of local and national organizations such as the Polish Women's Alliance, to the women of the religious orders who made a parochial school system possible, to the working women such as the cigar workers who fought for basic rights, to the mothers of Polish American families who sustained neighborhoods and parish organizations and struggled to translate memory into living tradition, Polish immigrant women and their daughters performed an extraordinary service to the community they created and to the wider society in which it was embedded. They remade and helped to humanize the harsh moral and physical landscape of industrial America.

Even though we have barely begun to write the history of these women we are already at the point when we should be starting to talk about recording the experience of the granddaughters of the immigrants. What we know about it indicates it is quite different from that of their mothers and grandmothers. They have, for example, demonstrated an extraordinary social mobility and educational attainment.

By the 1980 census over 90% of Polish American women under 25 had completed high school. This is the highest percentage for any group on which the census reported on. About 30% of women by age 24 had also completed four years of college. Reflecting those changes and the increased years spent on education, only 22% had married by the time they were 24.[71] An interesting but disturbing fact is that Polish American women between 16-44 according to the 1980 census, had the lowest fertility rate for all major American ethnic groups: 1.1 child per women.[72]

Whatever the ultimate record of this most recent generation of Polish American women - and I predict it will be one of considerable success and accomplishment - it is important to remember that it does not come out of thin air. They are building on the rich and complex heritage of the strong, resourceful and courageous women who preceded them - women whose work and sacrifice created the conditions that made possible their success. The story of those women deserves to be preserved and remembered by all of us.

[71] U.S., Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Census of Population 1980, Characteristics of the Populations: General Social and Economic Characteristics United States Summary, I, Chapter C, Part 1. (DC80-1-C1) Table 173.

[72] Ibid., Table 175.

POLISH STUDIES

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 Janaury, 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 commuity. 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.

The Copernican Polish Heritage Endowment, which is located in the CCSU Foundation, Inc., supports all aspects of the Program, including the Connecticut Polish American Archives and Manuscript Collection. Donors are commemorated on the plaque hanging in the University Library. Individuals, families, businesses, and organizations are listed in the following categories:

Founders	$1,000 or more
Benefactors	500 or more
Friends	250 or more
Patrons	100 or more

Individuals and families may also endow ($10,000 or more) a special lecture series, a named scholarship, a book and publishing fund, a fund to bring an exchange professor from Poland to CCSU, a student exchange, or some other activity. These donations are commemorated with individual bronze plaques which also hang in the University Library.

Our ultimate objective is to endow a chair of Polish and Polish American Studies at CCSU.

For further information about the Program contact the Coordinator of Polish Studies, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT 06050-4010. (203) 827-7469.

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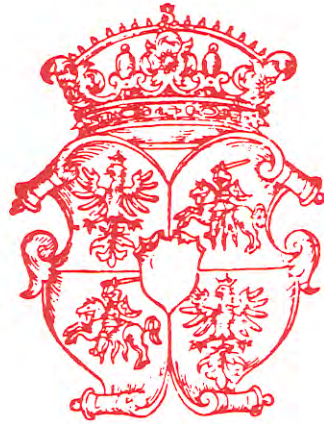

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