

# Poland

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Two large waves of Polish immigrants arrived in the first and last decades of the 20th century, and a smaller but significant group came between them. As a result of these multiple waves, contemporary American Polonia—the community of Poles abroad—is a mosaic of diverse migrations and generations: Polish American descendants of those in the early wave, older World War II émigrés and their children and grandchildren, and the newest immigrants and their children. Moreover, Poland has changed considerably over the past century, and with it the causes for emigration and the characteristics of each cohort. Before World War I, Poland was an agrarian territory divided between Russia, Prussia, and Austria; between the wars it became an industrializing independent nation and, after World War II, a part of the communist bloc; and since the “revolution” of 1989 it has become a capitalist democracy. Peasant immigrants from agrarian Poland were quite different from the political refugees of the 1940s, who are different from contemporary undocumented laborers.

Despite these differences, Polish immigrants often resettle in cities with established Polish American communities, and because of these differences the settlement often produces some tensions. Conflict has occurred in organizations, churches, and the media, usually over leadership struggles, cultural and class differences, and divergent identity needs. One of the more contentious fault lines within the community is that between new immigrants and later-generation ethnics. This conflict first appeared in the postwar period, with the arrival of the new émigrés, and resurfaced at the end of the century with the newest immigrant cohort. Of the 9 million residents who reported some Polish ancestry in 2000, only 5 percent (484,464) were foreign-born Poles, but the majority of those were new immigrants, as 60 percent had arrived after 1980.

## Early Immigration

Before World War I, an estimated 1.5 million people immigrated to America from the partitioned lands of Poland. While they included both ethnic Poles and Polish Jews, generally only ethnic Poles identified themselves and were identified as part of the Polish American community, Polonia. This early immigration was mostly labor movement, as rural farmworkers, dislocated by the transition from feudalism, moved to industrializing regions in the U.S. While the immigrants were generally uneducated peasants, often referred to as *za chlebem* (for bread) immigrants (especially those arriving after 1890), this migrant cohort included a small number of intellectuals, revolutionaries, and clergy (many of whom arrived before 1890). The institutional base of early Polonia was Roman Catholic parishes and large fraternal organizations such as the Polish Roman Catholic Union (1873) and the Polish National Alliance (1880). Fraternal organizations are a system of local lodges, with a centralized representative body, established for the purpose of mutual benefit. This early community is well described in W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*.

The Polish immigrant community matured into an ethnic community between the wars. By 1920 native-born Americans of Polish descent already outnumbered foreign-born Poles, and the restrictive quota laws widened this ratio. In several years before World War I, annual immigration exceeded 100,000, but beginning in 1930, Poles were allotted just 6,524 slots annually. By 1940 only a third of the community was foreign-born.

The Polish American identity was decidedly working class. The immigrants migrated to industrializing regions, and their communities abutted their worksites, as evident in the coal-mining towns of Pennsylvania, the Back of the Yards adjacent to the meatpacking industries in Chicago, and Hamtramck near the automobile factories in Detroit. The descendants of this early cohort continued to work in manufacturing industries, and with the help of unions they became high-priced skilled laborers well positioned to take advantage of the strong industrial economy in the midcentury. Polish Americans defined themselves and were defined as white, hardworking, religious, and disciplined people who celebrated a folk-based cultural attachment to their ancestral homeland but maintained a political loyalty to America.

## **The War Émigrés**

After 1939, Polish immigrants were pushed out of their homeland by war, the realignment of geopolitical borders, and a repressive postwar communist regime. More than 200,000 ethnic Poles arrived through the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 and the Refugee Relief Act of 1953, including nearly 18,000 Polish soldiers who had served in the Allied armies in Europe. These involuntary exiles were often better educated, more cosmopolitan, and of a higher social class than the earlier immigrants and their descendants. Émigrés from middle-class backgrounds often achieved higher levels of education than Polish Americans (which as an aggregate lagged behind national averages until the 1970s) and moved into managerial and professional occupations (where Polish Americans were still underrepresented) and into suburban homes outside the old Polish neighborhoods. Their social class and heightened nationalism, influenced by Poland's 20 years of independence prior to the war, the war itself, and their foreign-born status, complicated their assimilation into working-class Polish American communities, which they criticized for not having organized a strong political lobby and disdained because of the folk-based nature of the Polonian "polka culture."

The new immigrants separated themselves occupationally, residentially, and culturally, and they created their own organizations to meet their own needs and interests. As refugees, they established self-help organizations such as the Polish War Refugee Association in the United States; as educated professionals, they helped organize (with the professional stratum of the Polish American community) the Polish American Historical Association and the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America; and as ex-servicemen, they founded the Association of Veterans of the Polish Army and the Polish Veterans of World War II.

Over time these immigrants worked more cooperatively with Polish Americans on matters related to Poland. Both groups were fiercely anticommunist, and within the newly established Polish American Congress (1944), the political wing of Polonia, the newcomers dominated committees concerned with Poland's affairs.

## **The New Immigration**

Contemporary Polish immigration is a result of economic and political conditions in Poland, strong social networks between Poland and Polonia, and liberal U.S. immigration policies. In the first half of the 1960s, roughly 7,000 Poles were admitted annually. After the 1965 Immigration Act, this rate was cut in half for the next 20 years, though the number of Polish newcomers rose steadily throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with the arrival of political refugees and an increase in temporary visitors.

The 1968 upheaval in Poland created a new wave of refugees. Unrest in the universities, initiated by intellectuals but manipulated by factions within the Polish Communist Party, led to an anti-Semitic and

anti-reformist backlash. Most of the Jewish émigrés went to Israel, while ethnic Poles came to the U.S. A larger wave of refugees began arriving in the late 1970s. National strikes in Poland in 1976 and again in 1980 led to the formation of the trade union *Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy* (Independent Self-Governing Trades Union), known in Poland as *Solidarność* (Solidarity). In December 1981, the Polish state declared martial law, disbanded Solidarity, and jailed opposition activists. The U.S., always welcoming of dissidents fleeing communist governments, admitted more than 40,000 “Solidarity” refugees.

While rising political discontent in Poland became manifest in the U.S. as increased refugee admissions, growing economic dissatisfaction was reflected in the escalating number of temporary visitors, particularly “visitors for pleasure,” known within the community as *wakacjusze* (vacationers) or *turysci* (tourists). The number of visitors for pleasure rose from an average of 24,000 annually in the 1970s, to 36,000 in the 1980s, to almost 50,000 in the 1990s. Many of these “vacationers” worked without authorization, and a significant number overstayed their visas (in some cases for decades). Estimates in the mid-1980s were that 95,000 Poles were living (and working) in the U.S. illegally—the second largest population of illegal immigrants. In 1992 in Chicago, 27 percent of all illegal immigrants came from Poland and 44 percent from Mexico (and in that same year, 1,141 Mexicans were deported but only 27 Poles were). Efforts to reduce this population through the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act gave amnesty to more than 16,000 Poles and 2,000 of their dependents. (Most of these amnesty recipients were officially “admitted” between 1989 and 1993, which explains part of the numerical surge in immigration in the 1990s.) In 1996 the estimate of the illegal population was down to 70,000, and Poland dropped to tenth among countries with illegal populations.

In addition to the temporary visitors/undocumented workers, 381,641 permanent Polish immigrants were admitted between 1960 and 2000, nearly half of them after 1989, the year marking the formal collapse of the communist system in Poland. The transitional capitalist market in Poland created unequal rates of development, high rates of inflation that outpaced increases in income, high rates of unemployment (15 percent for most of the 1990s), and, in consequence, a reserve immigrant labor force. While the great majority of Poles immigrated to Germany (71 percent in the 1990s), the U.S. continued to attract Poles, especially with the more expansive immigration policies in the 1990s. The Immigration Act of 1990 raised immigration ceilings, which benefited all countries, but Poles were helped particularly by the new “diversity visas,” available to people from countries adversely affected by the 1965 Immigration Act. Between 1992 and 1997, 53,000 Poles were admitted under this program (known within the community as the “lottery”) before the admission procedures changed.

Adding together the amnesty recipients, lottery winners, and general immigration, 180,035 Poles were admitted in the 1990s, more than twice the number admitted in the 1980s (81,578) and four times the number admitted in the 1970s (42,378). With this surge in immigration at the end of the century, the Polish immigrant community is, in general, a fairly new migrant cohort.

## **Polish Immigrants in the American Labor Market**

With the new admissions, the community has become younger and better educated. In 1980, when almost three quarters of the community had arrived before 1960, over half of the foreign-born population was over 64 years of age, and only 15 percent were between the ages of 25 and 34. By 2000 only a quarter was older than 64, and 31 percent were between 25 and 34. Most new Polish immigrants arrive with craft, technical, and professional skills, especially those emigrating from urban areas (83 percent of all emigrants from Poland in the 1990s came from urban areas). In 1980 a third of all

Polish immigrants had at most an eighth-grade education, while only 15 percent had postsecondary degrees; by 2000 only 5 percent had an eighth-grade education or less, and a third had postsecondary degrees (similar to the native-born American population).

While being educated helps new immigrants secure better jobs, they still pay a price for their newness, expressed in the Polish phrase *emigracja to deklasacja* (emigration leads to downward mobility). While the drop in occupational prestige is generally offset by an increase in the material standard of living, new immigrants nonetheless feel a status decline when their occupations are not commensurate with their education. Compared to the Polish American population (which has rates similar to the general white population), Polish immigrants are more likely to work in semi- and low-skilled positions and the personal service sector (and almost twice as likely if they are new arrivals). Over time the immigrant population begins to resemble their ethnic population, although they still remain slightly overrepresented in service and manual labor occupations. According to the 1990 Census, a quarter of the Polish foreign-born worked in professional and managerial occupations; however, when broken down by time of arrival, 30 percent of those who arrived before 1980 worked in these occupations, compared to 17 percent of those arriving in the 1980s.

Even after the influx of a fairly well-educated cohort in the 1990s, Polish immigrants were still underrepresented in professional and managerial occupations and overrepresented in manual labor and service positions. According to the 2000 Census, 45 percent of Polish immigrants worked in professional, managerial, technical, and sales administration occupations (compared with 63 percent of the U.S. native-born population, as reported in the 2002 Current Population Survey), but Polish immigrant women were twice as likely to have these positions as men (56 percent compared with 26 percent). Polish men were more likely to be working in skilled and unskilled labor positions in the construction and manufacturing sectors: 50 percent of all Polish men worked in these industries. Polish women were more likely to work in the professional and personal service industries.

## **Incorporation of New Immigrants into Polonia and America**

New immigrants often resettle near established Polonias. Over half of all foreign-born Poles live in Illinois and New York, and another fifth live in New Jersey, Connecticut, and Michigan, all states with established Polonian communities (e.g., in Chicago, Brooklyn, Buffalo, and Detroit). In addition, immigrants have built new communities in Florida and California. While these two states have only a small share of the total Polish immigrant population (10.6 percent), twice as many immigrants live there as in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, states with established Polonias.

Recent immigrants, temporary migrants, and undocumented workers are the most likely to live in the older Polish neighborhoods in the inner city. These urban centers are best characterized as immigrant consumer service communities (rather than traditional ethnic neighborhoods), and they include retail shops, professional offices, restaurants, and businesses specializing in immigrant services (e.g., travel agencies, passport and visa services, translators, and shipping companies). Because of their limited English-language skills—in 2000, roughly a third of the Polish foreign-born population was living in linguistically isolated households—new immigrants supply a clientele for Polonia's commercial and professional community, which has grown significantly; for example, the Chicago Polish-language phone book had more than 1,500 pages in 2001. These consumer service centers are found in cities that have a steady flow of immigrants (e.g., Jackowo and Belmont/Central in Chicago; Greenpoint in Brooklyn; Broad Street in New Britain, Connecticut). In Jackowo, 90 percent of the businesses are owned by Poles and serve primarily Polish customers, most of whom do not live in the neighborhood.

Most Polish Americans have left these old neighborhoods and moved to the suburbs; for example, two thirds of Polish Americans in metropolitan Chicago live outside the city. An increasing number of new immigrants are also resettling in the suburbs. In Chicago, the destination for one third of all new Polish immigrants, the number of new arrivals listing a suburban zip code as their intended residence more than doubled, from 16 to 36 percent, between 1983 and 1998. In addition, more immigrants buy homes in suburban areas five to ten years after their arrival. The presence of immigrants in the suburbs is also evidenced by the growth of Polish Saturday schools, organized and funded by members of Polonia to teach Polish language, history, and culture to the children of immigrants. In 1983 there were 18 Polish Saturday schools in the Chicago metropolitan area, and all but one were located in the city; by 2002 there were 27 schools, 14 of them in the suburbs.

Polish immigrants move to the suburbs for the same reasons the general American population moves—the schools are better and housing is more affordable. Beginning in the 1920s, the growing presence of blacks in the cities increased contact and conflict between blacks and Polish Americans in neighborhoods, worksites, and public spaces. By the 1960s, Polish Americans and other whites began leaving urban areas because of the decentralization of the economy, which relocated industries outside the city; the construction of new suburban housing; fiscal crises that eroded city services (in particular, education) and depreciated the quality of urban life; and the increasing number of racial minorities. While the older generations often remained entrenched in their communities, their adult children bought homes in the suburbs.

When Polish Americans moved to the suburbs, they did so as later-generation ethnics who easily assimilated into the white landscape. In contrast, when the newest immigrants move, both assimilation and accommodation take place as the suburban space is transformed to meet their needs. Suburban immigrant communities look different from their urban counterparts. Rather than being in a concentrated consumer center, Polish video stores and delis in the suburbs are inserted into strip malls beside national chain stores. The community is more dispersed and integrated, so that Polish-speaking tellers, hygienists, and legal secretaries work in non-Polish banks, dentists' offices, and law firms to meet the needs of Polish-speaking clients. Their presence is also noticeable in the churches. Polish immigrants and Polish American ethnics are predominantly Roman Catholic. In urban ethnic neighborhoods, the community was built around the parish and the parish reflected the ethnic identity of the neighborhood. Today suburban parishes do not become “Polish” parishes but instead are Roman Catholic parishes accommodating the language needs of a Polish-speaking congregation. Polish is spoken not in an effort to preserve ethnicity but in order to sustain Catholicism.

## **Organizations of New Immigrants**

Unlike the earlier waves of Polish immigrants, the newest migrant community is not formally organized, although there were efforts to organize the political stratum in the 1980s. The international Support of Solidarity organization, founded in 1982 by Solidarity refugees, created chapters in 13 countries, including 12 chapters in the U.S. and a dozen more affiliated organizations. Immigrants established these political organizations working to support Poland's independence in old Polonian centers such as New York, Chicago, Buffalo, and Detroit, as well as in places like Seattle and California (which had 7 chapters of Solidarity California). With the political and economic changes in 1989, however, this organizational structure collapsed, and no new national organization has replaced it.

The new immigrant community has taken advantage of modernization of communication. A national (and international) network of virtual associations has been created through a growing number of Polonian

websites and listserves that provide information, venues for discussion, and social networks (such as Polish Global Village). New immigrants are also responsible for the revitalization and dramatic proliferation of Polish-language media. In the 1980s there were two Polish-language dailies in the U.S. By 2002 there were six Polish-language dailies (three in New York and three in Chicago) and dozens of weekly and monthly magazines. *Nowy Dziennik*, first published in 1971, had a circulation of 30,000 in 2003. In addition, the community has access to Polish radio and cable stations that broadcast Polish-language shows 24 hours a day in large cities, as well as several hours of Polish-language programming weekly in smaller cities. Some programs are produced in Poland (for example, *Wiadomosci*—the nightly news program) and broadcast through a direct satellite feed; others are produced in the U.S. for a Polonian audience. These media provide news from Poland, local news (in Chicago or New York), international news, and national news, generally in that order of importance.

While new immigrants have not created a large formal organization, they have organized locally around more specific interests. Polish immigrants are active in professional organizations such as the Polish Medical Alliance, the Polish Teachers' Association, and the Advocates Society. They have created small associational clubs as well, often named after a city or university in Poland (e.g., the Krakow Society, the Jagiellonian Society), for socializing. New immigrants also provided the impetus and expertise to develop Polish-language collections in public libraries, where they have also organized Polish book clubs. The Chicago Public Library, whose Polish-language collection dates back to 1883, was expanded and modernized in the 1990s and today has 15,000 Polish-language volumes in its collection.

Culturally, the new immigrants work mostly within their communities, but plays by Polish playwrights produced for an American audience (such as Janusz Glowacki's *Hunting Cockroaches*) and the reopening of the Chopin Theater in Chicago are examples of Polish theater marketed to a wider audience. In addition, art galleries featuring contemporary Polish artists were opened in the 1980s, and exhibits such as "The Independent Culture in Poland," on *samizdat* publishing, toured cities throughout the Midwest in the early 1990s. Moreover, Polish artists, actors, and musicians arriving for permanent and temporary stays have an increasing presence in mainstream venues in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago.

The present community is a transnational one, much as it was 100 years ago, when circular migration brought money, experience, and information to Poland and low-cost labor to America. Restrictive U.S. immigration policies in the middle of the century combined with cold war politics to limit contact between the two communities, but the collapse of the communist regime reopened transoceanic ties and made Poland more accessible to tourism, cultural exchanges, and business investments. At the same time, alterations in U.S. immigration policy made America more accessible to Polish tourists, temporary workers, and permanent immigrants. Advancements in communication and transportation (e.g., an increase in the number of air flights, computer banking procedures, and cell phones) also make it easier and more inexpensive for scholars to work together, capital to make business, families to stay in contact, and money to flow back to Poland (between 1994 and 1999, Polish workers' remittances totaled \$4.41 million). Dense social networks will continue to encourage immigration, as will the instability of Poland's economic system and U.S. immigration policies designed to encourage a global labor force.

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