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Parish and Family in The Cultural Heritage of the Polish Emigrants to Texas in the Second Wave (1867)

ABSTRACT

The article focuses primarily on the institutions of the parish and family in relation to the cultural heritage of Polish Texans of the second wave since 1867. Reaching back to the beginnings of Polish emigration to the United States, which is associated with the settlement of Panna Maria in Texas by emigrants from Opole Silesia, the article presents the second wave of emigration from Galicia and Greater Poland. The analysis was based on the archival materials of the Polish Genealogical Society of Texas (PGST), which cover the periods from 1984 to 2021. The research material was collected from 124 PGST volumes (4,358 pages). The document proves that both the parish and the family were the basic units in the lives of Polish emigrants, around whom everyday family, social and religious life revolved.

KEYWORDS: parish, family, Polonia, cultural heritage, Texas

STRESZCZENIE

Parafia i rodzina w dziedzictwie kulturowym polskich emigrantów do Teksasu w drugiej fali (1867)

Artykuł skupia się przede wszystkim na instytucji parafii i rodziny w odniesieniu do dziedzictwa kulturowego polskich Tekszańczyków drugiej fali trwającej od 1867 r. Sięgając do początków polskiego wychodźstwa do Stanów Zjednoczonych, które wiązało się z założeniem osady Panna Maria w Teksasie przez emigrantów ze Śląska Opolskiego, artykuł przedstawia drugą falę emigracji głównie z Galicji i Wielkopolski. Analiza oparta została na materiałach archiwalnych Polskiego Towarzystwa Genealogicznego w Teksasie (Polish

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Genealogical Society of Texas – PGST), które to wydawało periodyki od 1984 do 2021 r. Materiał badawczy zebrano z 124 woluminów PGST (4358 stron). Dowiedziono w artykule, że zarówno parafia, jak też rodzina były podstawowym jednostkami w życiu polskich emigrantów, wokół których toczyło się życie codzienne, rodzinne, społeczne i religijne.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: parafia, rodzina, dziedzictwo kulturowe, Polonia, Teksas

Introduction

The Polish immigrants to Southeast Texas in the second wave (1867), driven by their Catholic faith and a desire to secure a prosperous future for their numerous offspring, placed immense importance on establishing and sustaining strong family units within the context of the parish. By exploring primary sources, such as periodicals of the Polish Genealogical Society of Texas, this article focuses on the family and the church as two institutions providing support, guidance, and sense of belonging while reinforcing shared values, and expressions of cultural and religious heritage.

Emigration to Texas: Panna Maria (1854) and Waverly (1867)

Polish immigration to Texas began in the early 19th century, with Poles participating in Texas history and battles for independence (Haiman, 1936). Organized Polish immigration and Catholic activities emerged, however, only mid-century. The first Catholic Diocese had just been created in 1847, and bishop Jean Marie Odin successfully recruited Fr. Leopold Moczygemba, a Polish Franciscan from Upper Silesia (Baker, 1996). In 1854, Fr. Moczygemba, entered into an agreement aimed at settling a considerable number of Polish families in what is now Panna Maria, Texas (Dworaczyk, 1937). The Polish Silesians faced oppression and economic hardships in their homeland exacerbated by natural disasters (Brożek, 1985). In 1854, approximately one hundred fifty families arrived, establishing the oldest enduring Polish colony in the United States. The first Polish Catholic church in North America was built in 1855 and soon after, in 1858, the first Polish parochial school was opened. With a few more contingents who arrived in three consecutive years, this initial stock of approximately 1,600 Silesians dispersed across the region around San Antonio, Texas and established more ethnic parishes and communities.

On September 19th, 1866, a group of twelve planters established the Waverly Emigration Society at a general store in Waverly, owned by a Polish Jew – James Meyer Levy. Their primary concern was to secure laborers for the forthcoming cotton harvest. The minutes of this meeting laid the groundwork for the arrival of the first organized group of Polish immigrants in Southeast Texas approximately eight months later.¹

Levy travelled to Europe and recruited individuals primarily from his home village area, including Panigródz, Kcynia, Chraplewo, Słupy, Smogulec, Srebnogóra and Szubin, successfully transporting 110 emigrants, comprised of 29 families, to Galveston, Texas on April 23, 1867. Although the number fell short of the intended 173 laborers, this marked the initiation of organized emigration from Wielkopolska and Kujawsko-Pomorskie, as well as the establishment of a new migration route from Eastern Prussia to Texas.

Father Feliks Aleksander Orzechowski played a significant role in the arrival of Poles from the Austrian partition. By 1867, he tended to the religious needs of Polish families in Walker County and established St. Joseph's Parish in New Waverly in 1869, the first Polish Catholic congregation in Southeast Texas. Father Orzechowski who was from Stopnica near Tarnów, sent letters to West Galicia (*Chłop polski w Ameryce*), that were read in churches from the pulpit, urging his natives to arrive in Texas (PGST, Vol. XI, No. 4, p. 39). In 1872, his appeals resonated with communities approximately 100 miles southeast of Krakow (see Praszalowicz, 2003, p. 77; Brożek, 1985) such as: Bączal-Dolny, Brzostek, Biecz, Jasło, Dębica, Jabłonica, Jareniówka, Jaworze, Sławęcín, Złotoria, and Lesko (PGST, Vol. II, No. 2 p. 15; PGST, Vol. XVI, No. 3). With the arrival of Joseph Bartula and his family in 1875 on the J.C. Roberts plantation,² many eventually found their home in Bremond, where they established a thriving Polish community recognized to this day by Old Polonia as the Polish capital of Texas.³

The arrival of “the Meyer Levy Poles” along with later Galician immigrants and their descendants laid the foundation for a thriving Polish community northwest of Houston that contributed to the cultural diversity

1 By following the financial payments, the list of travel expenses, the 1870 census records of Walker and neighboring counties, naturalization records as well as genealogical research on the families, Felczak Hill (1991) managed to sort and connect the facts to paint the most accurate picture of that journey and subsequent settlement.

2 Bartula's brother-in-law Kasper Szybist left Brzostek for Texas on May 8th 1872. Bartula later became an immigration agent himself and travelled back to Poland to bring more people to Texas (PGST, Vol. XVI, No. 3 p. 10).

3 Nesterowicz, 1910, pp. 80, 85: “I'm in the capital of Texas Polonia ... three hundred and twenty-five families are well able to support and provide for their Polish priest”.

and development of the region. In the early 1870's, Catholic missions and Polish parishes began to proliferate along the Brazos River, particularly in the fertile bottomland areas.⁴ Notable locations include Marlin, Bremond, Bryan, Brenham, Anderson, Chappell Hill, Plantersville, Bellville, Huntsville, Danville, Stoneham, Rosenberg, and Richmond (Dworaczyk, 1937; Przygoda, 1971). New Waverly, the mother colony, situated in the Trinity River Basin, holds the distinction of being considered the birthplace of Polish immigration to Southeast Texas.

History of Polish Genealogical Society of Texas

The Polish genealogical society was founded on October 2nd, 1982 by the offspring of the Second Wave immigrants to Texas after 1867. It began with an informal luncheon organized by Anna Borski Campo for people curious of their family history and keen on upkeeping their Polish heritage. Meetings continued in private homes until Houston Polish Genealogical Society by-laws were adopted on May 5, 1984. Only the groups in Chicago and Detroit predate the Houston society (PGST, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, p. 2). The first newsletter, HPGS NEWS, was published in the summer of 1984. Membership rapidly expanded beyond the Houston area and the name was changed to The Polish Genealogical Society of Texas. As a result, PGST NEWS was published in Spring 1985 (PGST, Vol. II, No.1). In 1995, the periodical was officially renamed to Polish Footprints (PGST, Vol. XII, No. 1). The backbone of the organization were the officers installed for two-year terms: president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and editor. Over the years PGST had had twelve presidents. Teana Sechelski was the founding president, while Denis Kubiak terminated the society in early 2023. The last issue (PGST, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 2) was printed in 2021.

In the Fall of 1989 (PGST, Vol. VI, No. 3) the first Special Edition of the PGST News was released featuring Chappell Hill, Texas. Special editions were intended to investigate the ancestry of Polish settlers and their descendants who had connections to the land in the inspected area. Initially, the focus was primarily on the Polish people and parishes in the areas of Southeast Texas that were less documented and explored. Ultimately, with the growth in size and significance, the society expanded their

⁴ Although New Waverly is located in the Trinity River Basin, because the other Polish colonies were established predominantly in the Brazos River valley, the Polish element in the region and their descendants are often informally referred to as Brazos Valley Poles.

study and included research on Silesian Texans, and settlers from other regions of Poland to embrace all Texas Polonia in their study.

The goals of the society had been to unite, share, publish, and educate, to “keep Polish heritage alive” (PGST, Vol. XXIX, No. 3, p. 17) and “leave legacy for the next generation” (PGST, Vol. III, No. 4, p. 31). The central motto displayed on the front cover of the periodicals says: “Preserving our Proud Heritage.” The study of early Polish settlers in Texas not only provided a glimpse into the past but also rejuvenated the present community. It sparked a renewed appreciation for heritage, fostering unity and a stronger sense of ethnic identity. Additionally, it promoted understanding and respect for Polish customs and cultural diversity, benefiting the wider society.

Content analysis

The purpose of this article was to gain a better understanding of the thematic content of the periodicals of the Polish Genealogical Society of Texas in order to explore their potential as a source of investigation into the life, cultural history and ethno-culture of the Polish Texans in the Brazos Valley since their arrival to Texas in the second part of the 19th century. The authors completed the analysis on every volume – from the first year (1984) to the last (2021) – 124 volumes in total consisting of 4,358 pages. In this section, we are examining content that PGST periodicals provide regarding parish communal ethno-spaces in Southeast Texas as paramount platforms for the formation of collective religious identities and cultural heritage.

The institution of the family of the Polish Texans of the second wave

The peasant family was a fundamental unit of immigrants’ existence, characterized by a strong ethic of labor and shared responsibilities. It was oriented on procuring land to support the numerous offspring in this life, and obtaining eternal life through the devotion to Catholic faith and religious practices. Ancestral family records in PGST periodicals display a high number of children, with ten or more being commonplace among Southeast Texas Poles (PGST, Vol. XIII, No. 2).

In the event of a spouse’s passing, it was natural for a remarriage to occur shortly thereafter, effectively merging families into a single cohesive

unit, often totaling around fifteen members (PGST, Vol. XXXV, No. 1, p. 18). Land ownership held paramount importance, as it dictated a family's social standing and influence within the rural community (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927, p. 162; see also pp. 205–288). The pursuit of self-sufficiency necessitated collective efforts, with men, women, and children laboring together on cotton plantations, while infants rested on pallets beneath the shade of trees (PGST, Vol. XI, No. 4, p. 5). The family toiled in the fields until dusk, pausing only for the mid-day meal. Occasional showers provided relief from the heat and insect bites. Within this close-knit familial framework, children actively engaged in assigned tasks related to farming, tending to livestock, cultivating crops, and maintaining gardens. They also assisted with household chores, such as washing clothes with lye soap and rendered lard, which was a time-consuming process. Any rare reading was by kerosene lamps, before retiring, physically exhausted from the day. The school year tracked the planting cycle, with classes officially starting in early September. However, farm children typically returned in early October, only after the harvest period. Cotton was picked until no more white fluffs remained visible (PGST, Vol. XIII, No. 2, p. 38).

The children's involvement in the agricultural life facilitated the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills, as they learned essential practices from their parents. Their contributions were vital to the smooth functioning of the farm and the sustenance of the entire household, fostering a strong work ethic while safeguarding values and preservation of cultural heritage. As the head of the household, the husband shouldered the primary responsibility of being the breadwinner, assuming a decision-making role, and protecting the family. The wife, on the other hand, was central in managing domestic affairs and the household economy, "wasting nothing". Marriages were predominantly held in October and November (PGST, Vol. VI, No. 3, p. 5), following the harvest season, and were celebrated with the entire community participating in joyous festivities. The Grand March, accompanied by music, was the wedding party's procession to the church for Mass, followed by a triumphant return to the bride's home, publicly proclaiming the wedding and extending an open invitation to the entire village to join in the celebration. In earlier times, formal invitations and mail services were absent, so information about the wedding spread through word of mouth and church announcements delivered three Sundays in advance (PGST, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, p. 5). Young women got married as early as sixteen. At twenty-six, an unmarried woman was considered an old maid. The wife took charge of organizing and overseeing the family's daily routines, nurturing and raising the children, and imparting cultural traditions and religious practices.

Parishes and their role in the cultural and religious heritage preservation

Within the context of rural villages, a significant establishment that stands out as pivotal community-forming space that fosters social cohesion, forges interpersonal bonds, and cultivates a profound sense of belonging among their members is the church. The parish church as a “self-created institution” has been especially influential in the organization of the parish life in the American context (Radzilowski, 2009). Polish immigrants, in their vast Texas rural environs, very quickly tried to reconstruct their peasant ways from their ancestral villages (Koliński, 1995).

The church was a constant in the Old Country landscape, and it had to be replicated to anchor the peasant in the new locality of the New World. An early indicator of an organized Polish settlement in Texas was indisputably the presence of a Polish Catholic mission or a parish (Radzilowski, 2009, p. 27). Within the hallowed confines of the church, villagers discovered solace, guidance, and a wellspring of moral and ethical teachings. Beyond fulfilling spiritual needs, the church functioned as a vibrant hub for communal activities, hosting a multitude of events, festivals, and educational programs that buttressed the bonds among villagers and reinforced their shared sense of belonging.

The religious loyalty to the Roman Catholic church was an integral part of Polish identity. Catholicism was a unifying force that bound the peasants together morally and communally fostering a strong sense of ethnic identity and helping them be a separate group among other Texas communities. For the protestant plantation owner Colonel Jack Blink, it seemed incomprehensible that his Polander farmer – Zemksewski would request a horse to take his three-day old infant child to a chapel eight miles away to have her baptized during a terrible cold spell of weather. “Massa Jack. Babe muss christen make” was the Polander’s assertion (Galveston Daily News).

With the presence of a spiritual leader fluent in Polish, the community residing in the agrarian enclaves experienced a sense of familiarity and belonging. In addition to their religious duties, priests assumed multifaceted roles as community leaders, legal advisors, and advocates for Polish immigrants. Acting as intermediaries between the Polish community and American society, they guided immigrants through the complexities of adapting to a new country, providing counsel on employment, housing, and social integration. Moreover, priests offered vital moral support, extending counseling, solace, and aid during times of adversity (PGST, Vol. XI, No. 4, p. 29). So important for the members was a countryman priest that when Father Piotr Litwora expressed his interest in

coming to Texas, his passage from Poland had been paid by the Bremond parishioners. He arrived in 1888 with his brother, Felix, who was the organist and helped around the church (PGST, Vol. VIII, No. 4, p. 6). Father Litwora's background extended beyond being solely Polish. Having been ordained in the Diocese of Tarnów in West Galicia, and having served in Dębica prior to his arrival, he possessed an intimate knowledge of the ancestral local homeland – the area (*okolica*) of the Bremond Poles. This familiarity encompassed the geographical landscape, the rural environment, the scenery, the mentality of the people, as well as their distinct dialect, different from the “Wielkopolska Poles.” As a result, Father Litwora could identify and understand the yearning for elements from the Old Country. That in itself was a huge psychological and emotional support for many who amid loneliness and sorrow felt uprooted.

Faith helped to deal with harsh realities and religion provided a sense of continuity. Beliefs and practices held immense significance in shaping and defining cultural existence. Active participation in religious festivals, veneration of patron saints, enrollment in parish schools, and engagement in sacraments were integral aspects of immigrant lives. Worship of saints, especially of the Blessed Virgin Mary, distinguished Poles from their Orthodox and Protestant oppressors, and a reaffirmed devotion to Mary was fitting due to her role as the Queen of Poland (Bukowczyk, 1985, pp. 5-32). Three churches in the Brazos Valley had been dedicated to St. Mary (Bremond, Brenham, Plantersville), and four to St. Joseph (Bryan, Marlin, New Waverly, Stoneham). Saint Stanislaus had always had an active Altar Rosary Society (PGST, Vol. VI, No. 3, p. 5). While at St. Joseph, in 1882, there were two Marian devotional groups: Brotherhood of the Rosary and the Most Holy Virgin Mary Society with memberships of 22 men and 36 women respectively (PGST, Vol. XI, No. 4, p. 55).

For the rural society, religion evolved as a blend of formal worship and folk traditions (Olson, 1987). Peasants perceived the natural world as a harmonious entity, attributing spiritual essence to every element. They held a profound reverence for nature's delicate equilibrium and unity, perceiving acts of disobedience or disrespect as inviting swift retribution. Symbolic rituals, such as marking the Three Kings' initials with blessed chalk or using Palm Sunday palms and Candlemas Day blessed candles, were believed to be a force to avert disaster (PGST, Vol. XII, No. 4, p. 8). A rich religious calendar intertwined with the agricultural cycle guided lives and experiences through the lens of supernatural intervention. Sundays and holy days were the days of rest. There were six holy days of obligation: the Ascension, the Assumption, All Saints Day, the Immaculate Conception, Christmas and the Feast of the Circumcision (PGST, Vol. XIII, No. 2, p. 39). The liturgy on Sunday lasted from 9 a.m. until noon. It consisted

of mass, a Polish homily, and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Advent was a time of prayer, fasting, and preparation for Christ's arrival, while Christmas Eve (*Wigilia*) was celebrated with waiting for the first star, breaking the bread *oplatek* and a traditional meatless dinner, including unique regional dishes. "Babkas" were baked as well as other sweets. Poles enjoyed *barszcz* – a beet soup, a custom entirely unknown to Chappell Hill settlers, who came from the Greater Poland region, where *czarnina* reigned on the table (albeit not on Christmas Eve) (PGST, Vol. XVII, No. 3, p. 1).⁵ Fish was served in the families who could afford it (PGST, Vol. X, No. 4, p. 14). Christmas season brought customs like the visit of the *turonie* procession, ensuring protection from evil spirits and an abundant harvest (PGST, Vol. VIII, No. 4, p. 11). The Shepherd's Mass (*Pasterka*) was celebrated at midnight on Christmas Eve. On their way to Mass, peasants carefully observed the heavens. If there were many stars, they rejoiced, for as many stars as there were in the heavens, that many sheaves of grain would be harvested the following year (Vol. X, No. 4, p. 17). Lent was a deeply sacred season, marked by Lenten Lamentations (*Gorzkie Żale*) and Stations of the Cross. Easter Sunday was reserved for enjoying the blessed food, and no labor was permitted on that sacred day. In Bremond, the veneration of the cross on Good Friday was on the knees and worshippers would start from the back of the church, slowly making their way to the main altar where the crucifix was kissed (PGST, Vol. XVI, No. 3, p. 30). The food was blessed on Holy Saturday and was enjoyed on Easter Sunday. No cooking or any kind of manual labor was permitted on that sacred day. Such natural and supernatural realms of Polish folk religion engendered a sense of unity and unwavering solidarity, drawing individuals under one and only Catholic faith safeguarding the collective memory of the people.

The threat posed by Protestantism loomed over the community, compelling Polish priests to recognize the urgency of consolidating scattered families into cohesive parishes. The arduous journey undertaken by Fr. Mosiewicz from Marlin to Chappell Hill, spanning 114 miles on horseback, exemplifies the challenges faced by Catholics in accessing religious services in remote locations during that era (PGST, Vol. XXXII, No. 1, p. 6). To safeguard religious and cultural heritage, they found it imperative to bolster the community's population. Just like Fr. Orzechowski who, through his correspondence, promoted Texas in Poland, Fr. Victor Justynian Lisicki wrote letters to *Gazeta Polska* in Chicago, disseminating

5 *Czernina* often called *czarnina* in Southeast Texas is a traditional duck blood soup that is better known in the Greater Poland region. However, in Texas both groups of settlers were quite familiar with it (PGST, Vol. XIV, No. 3, p. 11).

information about the prospects in Texas to Polish immigrant groups in the North (*Gazeta Polska w Chicago*). Stationed at New Waverly parish, Lisicki harbored a vision of establishing the grandest Polish colony in Texas – the Polish Voivodeship (*Województwo Polskie*).

A sizable Polish Catholic community would also ensure the preservation of language and the practice of endogamy. In the 19th century, intermarriage with non-Poles or non-Catholics elicited strong disapproval. This sentiment transcended the Polish community and resonated among other national and ethnic groups. Once settled in foreign lands, immigrants clung to their national identities, demarcating communities along the lines of “us” versus “others.” Early settlers exhibited a predilection for intra-ethnic marriages, as they upheld a cohesive cultural and religious identity founded on shared language, heritage, and traditions. Such endogamous unions played a vital role in maintaining social and economic ties within the community. Conversely, interethnic marriages posed a potential threat to this preservation, as they risked diluting the culture and weakening the social networks that sustained the community. In Chappell Hill, no mixed marriages occurred until 1940 (PGST, Vol. XIII, No. 2, p. 31). Father Dykal’s 1920 Annual Report for St. Mary’s in Brenham stated that none of the 138 Polish families in the parish were “mixed” couples (PGST, Vol. XIII, No. 2, p. 7).

As it is seen, the institutions of the parish and the family held a crucial role for Polish emigrants of the Second Wave in Texas in the second half of the 19th century. They functioned as a link between individuals and their community in the new world as well as it was a fulfillment of their religious needs. It can be stated that both the parish and the family were the most important elements in people’s everyday life and the two institutions are inseparable when it comes to Polish emigration of the USA. It was in these institutions that emigrants found themselves in the roles of fathers, mothers, wives, or husbands, as well as in their new community or spiritual life.

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