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Robert M. Zecker, *Streetcar Parishes: Slovak Immigrants Build Their Nonlocal Communities, 1890-1945*, Susquehanna University Press, Selinsgrove 2010, Pp. 329.

Scholars of American Polonia often focus on how, in its heyday, Polish immigrants to the United States frequently settled together in particular districts of cities like Chicago or Detroit. Areas that sympathizers called „Polish neighborhoods” and critics „Polish ghettos,” were often identified with a local parish church, like in Milwaukee or Cleveland. Sometimes, particularly in its early days, Polish immigration to America involved whole villages or substantial parts of them, such as the Silesians who founded Panna Maria (Texas). Occasionally Polonia even strongly dominated a particular area, like Greenpoint (New York), New Britain (Connecticut), or Hamtramck (Michigan).

What about places where the number of Polish immigrants was sufficient to speak of a local group but insufficient either to dominate a particular area or found a parish of their own? Poles settled in the various mill towns of northeastern Connecticut, for example, but established few ethnic parishes. How did those immigrants amidst such circumstances form a Polonian community?

Robert Zecker’s study of Slovak immigrants in Philadelphia provides what could be useful clues. Slovak immigration to the United States was significantly smaller than its Polish counterpart and, in some sense, less ethnically conscious: Poland after all had been a self-governing state prior to the partitions, whereas Slovakia had no comparable experience of independence. What Zecker learned about Slovaks may provide insights into the Polonian experience.

The study deals with Philadelphia because Zecker says that Slovaks never dominated any one city neighborhood: although Slovaks lived in certain areas, they shared those same streets with Poles, Italians, and other ethnics. Nor were Slovaks as religiously homogenous as Poles. Eventually, they founded two Latin Rite Catholic churches in Philadelphia, but they would also establish a Uniate church and a Lutheran parish. There was never enough Greek Catholic or Lutheran Slovaks in

any one place for their parish to be identified with that place. But even in the case of the two Roman Catholic parishes, some Slovaks were members of the parish that was farther from their homes. Why?

One explanation traced back to the origins of the Slovak community: Philadelphia Slovaks came primarily from two different parts of Slovakia, either the Trenčín or Zemplín regions. Affiliation with a particular parish was therefore sometimes a function of roots. While Catholic parishes typically have some connection with territoriality (either *de jure*, in territorial parishes encompassing all Catholics living within their boundaries or *de facto*, when Catholics choose to go to another nearby church), early 20<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic Slovaks in Philadelphia often joined parishes for reasons other than proximity. Zecker maintains that they were creating „translocal communities of worship, recreation, support, and work” bound together by „cognitive mapping” (p. 21) and the available means of transportation. St. John and St. Agnes were not (just) parishes in particular parts of town. They were parishes not of geography but of choice, whose parishioners were joined together by freely undertaken travel—as the book’s title indicates—on streetcars.

Zecker also makes the case that Philadelphia Slovaks neighborhoods were never just Slovak. They were often ethnically heterogeneous, with institutions of other nationalities interspersed throughout the neighborhood. The author contends that Slovak immigrants (like the Hungarian, Irish, or Italians among whom they lived) simply „airbrushed” these other elements out of their minds. The result was a Slovak „neighborhood” that included those institutions like churches and fraternal clubs where one felt Slovak, regardless of their geographical dispersion, while omitting from the mental „neighborhood” physically contiguous institutions that were not Slovak and to which Slovaks did not go (e.g., the „Irish” parish around the corner or the Italian social club across the street). Such a Slovak „neighborhood” thus included institutions scattered across wide territorial swaths of Philadelphia. Indeed, it even transcended the city, as in the case of Slovak Lutherans who, given their tiny numbers, maintained fellowship with believers in nearby cities like Camden or Pottstown. According to Zecker, „Slovak Lutheran Philadelphia” arguably ran from Trenton, New Jersey to Pottstown, Pennsylvania, a „neighborhood” more than 100 km wide.

The author also argues that such geographically dispersed „neighborhoods” were nothing new for Slovaks. A parish in Slovakia might encompass several villages, among whose chapels a priest rotated on a weekly basis to celebrate liturgy. Slovaks thus learned early that one’s fellow parishioners could be widely disbursed. Also, when Trenčín *drotári* (wireworkers) hit Europe’s roads in the sixteenth century, they showed how far itinerant craftsmen might travel to ply their specialized trade. Given such a background, Philadelphia Slovaks might think little of working in one section of Philadelphia, going to church in another,

and joining a *Sokol* group in a third. Modern transportation—streetcars—just made it easier.

Zecker contends that traditional studies of ethnic groups focused on set neighborhoods obscure the dynamic mobility of immigrants, who may have been more peripatetic than we usually imagine they were, more creative (and broad-reaching) in building communities than the typical „closed enclave” model suggests.

The relevance of this book to Polonian research could be high. As noted above, there were groups of Polish immigrants who were scattered among other groups in places where they did not found their own local parishes. Zecker’s model would help us account for them. Just as Karen Majewski’s *Traitors and True Poles* (which focused on early Polonian publishing) suggests that even immigrants had brains to read as well as brawn to work, so Zecker suggests they were also more mobile. Given his frequent references to Passaic (once home of a Slovak community and still a place with two Polish parishes), that New Jersey city might be a good place to test his thesis on Polonia.

Finally, in this era when Catholic bishops in the United States are rapidly closing Polish parishes with the excuse (among others) that neighborhoods have changed and Poles have moved out of inner cities, Zecker’s study again suggests that the primarily geographical concept of parish community was already inadequate a century ago. When today’s Polonians live in the suburbs but drive into the inner city on Sundays to go to church (like at Our Lady of Częstochowa in Harrison, NJ) or when they bypass other territorial parishes to drive 35 kilometers to the nearest Polish church (as in the case of St. Joseph’s Basilica in Webster, MA), they are not hanging on to lost causes. They are doing what their immigrant forebearers chose to do. One would hope that some bishops would be smart enough to figure out, after 100 years of such experience, that the problem lies not in their behavior but rather in a geography-alone model of parish.

