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REMEMBERING POLAND, BUT NOT POLONIA: THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLISH AMERICAN HISTORICAL MEMORY

“We have made Italy. Now we must make Italians.” So stated Massimo Taparelli, the Marquis d’Azeglio, following the unification of Italy. What he meant, of course, was that the consolidation of the Italian peninsula into a single political unit had been completed, but the task of creating an Italian *identity* among the historically disparate and often competing regions was yet to be achieved.¹ His comment is equally applicable to the formative years of American Polonia. The leading edge of the mass migration which began in the 1870s was comprised mostly of ethnic Poles from the German-occupied partition, but these were superseded in the following decade by arrivals from the Austrian partition, who were in turn eclipsed in the latter 1890s by immigrants from the Russian-controlled regions. To Americans, they were all Polish. But to the immigrants there were specific differences in regional culture, dialect, and traditions by which they clearly separated themselves into three or more groups.

In Poland, the rural peasantry that accounted for the largest proportion of the mass migration identified very closely with their village or region. Upon arrival in America, the same predisposition could be observed in various forms. One of these was the New World immigrant status structure based initially on the Partition where one originated. Poles from the German-occupied area enjoyed the highest prestige, partly because as a group they migrated the earliest and had initial control over most of the major organizations and parishes, and partially because they came from the most “westernized” part of Poland with a higher

¹ Massimo Taparelli, Marquis d’Azeglio, was a statesman, novelist, and artist. The original statement—“L’Italia è fatta. Restano da fare gli italiani.”—can be found in his memoirs, M. d’Azeglio, A. Ricci d’Azeglio, M. Ricci (1867), *I miei ricordi*, Firenze: G. Barbèra.

standard of living and level of education. Relations between the three groups were not always cordial. Those from Galicia often referred to Poles from the Russian and German sections by the derogatory terms *Moskali* and *Prusaki*, while they themselves were called *Galicjaki*, each being used as a term of disdain.² Then too, there were similar cleavages depending upon regional subcultures. The *Górale Podhalanscy*, the “Podhale mountaineers,” for example, traditionally considered themselves quite different culturally and socially from other Poles. They took pride in their own distinctive mountaineer cultural attributes and dialect. They often referred to other Poles with the appellation *ceper* or “plainsman.”³ Nor were these distinctions superficial; they were meaningful differentiations to people used to viewing anyone beyond the local rural village as an outsider. There were cultural and linguistic variations from region to region, and in America those from one group tended to live with others from the same group in separate sections of urban areas, or within particular areas of a Polish neighborhood. Most of the early organizations formed by the mass migration were either religiously or regionally based; that is, they were based on the region, city, or village one came from in Poland. Thus, even a small town in America might have a Kraków Club, a Górale Circle, and a Rzeszów Society, all fragmenting a small Polish population. Larger communities had proportionally more organizations, many of which also actively engaged in fund raising for their home village and relatives in Poland. Disagreements frequently broke out between the various groups and social contacts often depended upon these cultural barriers. A resident of Pittsburgh recalled that “One time I was going with a girl from Galicia. Her parents broke it up because we were from [the] Congress [Kingdom].”⁴ This was a frequent occurrence.

Given this lack of unity, and occasional outright hostility, a major problem facing Polish immigrants in America was how to craft a new Polish American identity from such a disparate collection of subgroups, each seeing itself as clearly distinct from the others. Although seldom addressed as a specific issue among the historians of American Polonia, one attempted treatment is Mary Cygan’s

² R. F. Hill (1980), *Exploring the Dimensions of Ethnicity: A Study of Status, Culture and Identity*, New York: Arno Press, pp. 110-11; J. S. Pula, E. E. Dziedzic (1990), *United We Stand: The Role of Polish Workers in the New York Mills Textile Strikes of 1912 and 1916*, Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, p. 46.

³ T. V. Gromada (1982), ‘Goral’ Regionalism and Polish Immigration to America, in: Blejwas, S. A.; Biskupski, M. B., (eds.), *Pastor of the Poles: Polish American Essays Presented to Right Reverend Monsignor John P. Wodarski in Honor of the Fiftieth Anniversary of His Ordination*, New Britain, CT: Polish Studies Program Monographs, Central Connecticut State University, pp.105-06.

⁴ R. F. Hill, *Exploring...*, pp.111; M. E. Cygan (1998), *Inventing Polonia: Notions of Polish American Identity, 1870-1990*, “Prospects”, Vol. 23, p. 225.

“Inventing Polonia: Notions of Polish American Identity, 1870-1990.”⁵ Cygan sees the development of a Polonia identity taking place in stages as various groups attempted to imprint their own vision of what it meant to be Polish on the growing community of immigrants, and later their descendants, in America. One of the groups she identifies is the romantic eighteenth and nineteenth century concept of gentry patriotism. As is common among leftist scholars, she blames the gentry for the partitions and largely discounts their influence in shaping Polonia’s identity once the twentieth century begins.⁶ A second group Cygan perceives attempting to influence the identity of Polonia was the Polish peasantry which she portrays as undergoing its own metamorphosis. Originating as rural agriculturalists who identified largely with local Polish folk culture prior to the beginning of the twentieth century, she sees them transformed by the modernization of socioeconomic life and international affairs into “progressive” advocates of the working class.⁷ The third major group she identifies is the clergy—predominantly those from Galicia—who she credits with initiating in America a clerical press, education system, and other institutions in an attempt to shape Polonia’s identity along Catholic lines.⁸

“Some historians,” Cygan states, “have reduced such clashes to a simple struggle between secular and clerical leaders for control of the immigrant community, but it makes more sense to see the origins of the conflict in the divergent reactions to the [January] insurrection.”⁹ She argues that the lengthy and well-documented struggles between the Polish National Alliance and the Polish Roman Catholic Union were not fundamentally over *control* of American Polonia, but to see which group would define its *identity*. Discounting the ideal of romantic gentry patriotism which she sees being largely displaced by the peasantry/working class group, she perceives the basic struggle to be between the “lud,” or “the people” (meaning the peasantry/working class) and the “cud,” or “the miracle” (meaning “through God’s grace” or the clerical faction).¹⁰ Any way one defines this, it is a struggle between the secular and clerical forces. The “lud” held public commemorations (obchody) based around traditional Polish holidays and national anniversaries such as the Constitution of the Third of May, the November Uprising, and the January Insurrection, along with any special anniversaries of events, births, or deaths occurring in a particular year. The “cud”

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-246.

⁶ M. E. Cygan, *Inventing...*, p. 209.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 213. No evidence is presented for this supposed link between the January Insurrection and attempts to develop a Polish identity in America.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 211-12.

faction tended to celebrate the conversion of Poland to Christianity, the defense of Częstochowa against the Swedes in the seventeenth century, Catholic holidays, important saints' days, and other occasions with religious implications.¹¹ And, of course, contrary to Cygan's assertion that scholars of American Polonia have only defined this as a struggle for control, serious researchers have long described it as a struggle for control of what it meant to be Polish; that is, identity. Would Polonia be defined primarily through religious affiliation as strictly Catholic, or would it be defined in more inclusive secular and patriotic terms? Clearly, this was a struggle, not simply for control or power, but to shape the fundamental identity of emerging Polonia.

Following the immigrant generation, and especially during the interwar period, Cygan discerns a change in Polonia's identity based on an upwardly mobile second generation more interested in "new icons such as Conrad, Copernicus, and Marie Skłodowska Curie, men and women of world science and literature."¹² But, in the end, Cygan suggests that for most Polish Americans their identity is shaped by people like polka musicians and creators of early Polish American radio programs who "helped establish the notion of Polonia as an American working-class subculture."¹³

As interesting as Cygan's theories are, I have two problems with them. First, the premise that Polish American identity is tied to an American working class identity is clearly the product of the author's own political preconceptions. I do not mean to suggest that there is no working class subculture, or that Polish Americans may not be found within it in abundance. Yet, if it were true that Polonia's identity was strictly working class, then what would there be to distinguish the imagined "Polish American" identity from working class identity in general? Would not a working class identity actually mean *assimilation* rather than identification as an ethnic-based subculture? Second, in all of the time periods, and all of the iterations of Cygan's analysis, the references are to *Polish* historical figures, anniversaries, and events—not *Polish American*. Her study is framed from the perspective of which *Polish* group would dominate; the *szlachta*, the *lud*, or the *cud*. Thus, it is more concerned with the image and identity of *Polish* history than of *Polish American* history. This is an important distinction.

More than a century ago Rev. Waclaw Kruszka, American Polonia's first historian, concluded that "The history of our ancestors, of old Poland, and of her former kings, can be very beautiful, absorbing, and useful for a young Pole raised in America; but it would be more ideal than practical. A history of his fathers,

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 214, 217.

¹² M. E. Cygan, *Inventing...*, p. 228.

¹³ Ibid., p. 231.

who have lived on the same soil as he and functioned in the same geographic, economic, political, and religious conditions, will be of more concern to him and a hundred times more useful. Such a Polish American history will teach him a more practical lesson as to how he must live in this country in order not to lose his faith and nationality.”¹⁴ What Kruszkka was suggesting was that while it was desirable for Polish American youth to learn about Poland, it was more important that they learn about the history of Poles in America because that was more immediately tangible to someone who had never lived in Poland. Over time, as generations passed, it would be easier for Polish Americans who grew up in the United States to identify with what their ancestors did in America rather than long ago in a Poland they did not know.

Modern scholars have developed this same concept further. The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, for example, argued that “individual memory can only be recalled in the social framework within which it is constructed.” Individuals, he concluded, belong to many different social groupings — such as nation, religion, and family — and it is through these shared social frameworks that the interactive process of memory and interpretation occurs. In his essay “Historical Memory and Collective Memory,” Halbwachs distinguishes between two differing forms of memory: *collective memory* and *historical memory*. Collective memory exists within a specific group at a discrete time and place, and is maintained only so long as there are people living who have direct knowledge of events that they share with others and understand within the social and psychological context of the specific time and place. By contrast, historical memory occurs when these primary bonds to the original “social milieu” are severed, leaving as a basis for understanding only the “abstract frameworks of chronology and factual detail.”¹⁵ Historical memory is the manifestation of a *lost* past, a past that no longer exists as a collective memory. It is the difference between a *lived* memory and an *imagined* memory. This mirrors what Kruszkka was arguing, that the immediacy of a person’s own life is more important in shaping memory and identity. For Polish Americans, identity based on their more familiar American environment would create a more lasting identity than the remote memories of a past time and place in which they did not live.

¹⁴ W. Kruszkka (1993), *A History of the Poles in America to 1908*, transl. K. Jankowski, Pula, J. S. (ed.), Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, pp. 1, 20-21.

¹⁵ S. A. Crane (1997), Writing the Individual Back Into Collective Memory, “The American Historical Review”, Vol. 102, Issue 5, p. 1376; M. Halbwachs(1980), Historical Memory and Collective Memory, in: M. Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, transl. by F. J. Ditter, Jr. & V. Y. Ditter from 1950 French edition, New York: Harper and Row, p. 83. See also M. Halbwachs (1992), The Social Frameworks of Memory, in his *On Collective Memory*, Coser, L. A. (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press; and M. Halbwachs (1925), *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris: F. Alcan.

To Poles of the immigrant generation, memories of their homeland, concern for family and friends still there, and the comfortable nostalgic feelings engendered by familiar names, traditions, stories, and language were quite real and thus particularly important in their lives. To them, the political factions of the Old Country, the sentimental attachments derived from a lived experience, and the hope for Polish independence were real, in many cases defining their very identity. But what of the second generation? Or the third? Or fourth? Almost none of these people had ever been to Poland. Increasingly few enjoyed command of the Polish language. And as time passed, their only link to the lived life experiences of the immigrant generation were the stories passed on by parents, grandparents, or great grandparents. So what becomes important to understanding the constructed historical memory, and hence Polonian identity, of these later groups is what was transmitted through the generations. So let us look at the primary means of cultural and identity transmission to see what was actually being passed from one generation to another.

“Conceptions of the past,” Emile Durkheim asserted, “are cultivated by periodic commemoration rites,” while Barry Schwartz concluded that “Articulating a symbolic pattern of commemoration” is a fundamental ingredient in defining “memory as a cultural system.”¹⁶ So, one question to ask is: What commemorations were celebrated and passed down to succeeding generations? In large part what survived beyond the immigrant generation, were two forms of commemoration. Contrary to Cygan’s assertions, as has been verified by a multitude of researchers, “Polish” identity in the United States revolved mostly around membership in a Catholic parish. Indeed, this has been so well established that it needs no further explanation here.

Beyond the religious identity of many Polonians, and despite Cygan’s contention to the contrary, there has been very little if any commemoration or celebrations of working class origin, unless one considers the polka a form of working class identity. What *is* evident beyond the religious commemorations are those relating to *Polish* history such as King Jan III Sobieski’s triumph at Vienna, the Constitution of the Third of May, the various nineteenth century revolts, and prominent individuals such as Mikołaj Kopernik (Copernicus), Marie Skłodowska Curie, Ignacy Paderewski, Tadeusz Kościuszko and Kazimierz Pułaski. None of these were working class symbols. And it is interesting to note that celebrations of the anniversaries of Sobieski’s triumph, the Constitution of the Third of May,

¹⁶ E. Durkheim (1965), *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, New York: The Free Press, reprint of 1912 edition, pp. 415, 420; B. Schwartz (1996), *Memory as a Cultural System: Abraham Lincoln in World War II*, “American Sociological Review”, Vol. 61, Issue 5, p. 909. See also B. Schwartz, *The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory*, “Social Forces”, Vol. 61, pp. 374-402.

and the nineteenth century revolts, all of which were regularly commemorated among Poles in late nineteenth-century America, are seldom if ever observed today. As Kruszcza predicted, as succeeding generations born in America grew to maturity, memories of Poland would gradually fade.

But what about other forms of cultural transmission? Theater productions were an important segment of life during the immigrant and second generations in America. In the repertoires of both professional and amateur theatrical productions one can find a preponderance of several genres. Polish patriotic dramas and folk presentations were the most popular, with others including religious performances and operettas (the latter almost always imported from Poland). The clear preference was for productions by Polish authors, with one researcher estimating that about eighty percent of the plays originated in Poland. While Polish themes greatly predominated, those topics pertaining to the immigrants' American experience more often than not featured issues of fidelity, clerical chicanery, the tribulations of immigrant life, or comedies—almost never does one see a play based on Polish contributions to America unless it involved Kościuszko or Pułaski. While many encouraged Polish immigrants to think of themselves as a distinct group with a shared historical and cultural identity, that identity was based clearly on the Old World experience and not the New.¹⁷

Literature was also popular among Polish Americans and provided another venue for the formation of group identity. In her pioneering study of Polish American literature, Karen Majewski concluded that “Although the immigrant audience was of mostly peasant origin, these narratives often reflect the perspectives of their urbanized, politicized journalist-authors, encouraging immigrants to read their flight from Poland in the context of political oppression and to form alliances in America based on national ideologies.”¹⁸ Although immigrant writers produced many works on American themes, these were mostly crime novels and romantic stories about *flaperki* (“flappers”), both centered on the American preoccupation with Prohibition and the gangster era of the 1920s and early 1930s, and not on the contributions of Polonians to America. Perhaps the

¹⁷ E. Orzechowski (2011), Theater, Polish American, in: Pula, J. S. (ed.), *The Polish American Encyclopedia*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers; M. E. Cygan, *Inventing...*, pp. 218, 223-224. See also E. Orzechowski (1989), *Teatr polonijny w Stanach Zjednoczonych*, Wrocław: Ossolineum; S. L. Cuba (1981), Polish Amateur Theatricals in America: Colorado as a Case Study, “Polish American Studies”, Vol. 38, Issue 1, pp. 23-49; M. J. Strumski (1947), The Beginnings of the Polish American Theatre, “Polish American Studies”, Vol. 4, Issue 1-2, pp. 31-36; A. L. Waldo (1983), Polish-American Theatre, in: Seller, M. (ed.), *Ethnic Theatre in the United States*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, pp. 387-417.

¹⁸ K. Majewski (2003), *Traitors & True Poles: Narrating a Polish-American Identity 1880-1939*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, p. 78.

closest that a large segment of publications came to addressing issues of Polish American identity were those novels featuring stories about the “manners and morals of the second generation,” contrasting what were viewed as unsuitable Americanized behaviors to the purer Polish values of the older generation.¹⁹

Majewski argues that Polonia authors often examined issues of group identity in their works, but in doing so “writers used their own rhetoric of regeneration in order to make the American immigrant experience an agent of Polish national rebirth.”²⁰ She asserts that “Polonia authors encouraged the immigrant community to read itself as part of a Polish family, exploring ways of constructing communal identity and of reproducing a Polish sensibility and historical consciousness.”²¹ The priority was on recreating an independent Poland and along with it a mirror reflection of Poland in America, the so-called “Fourth Province” ideal that was so popular among early generations. Like the theatrical productions, Polish American literature leaned heavily toward Polish themes for its definition of Polishness (*polskość*). While there were many stories about the American experience, these usually dealt with the travails of immigrant life. As such, they did not provide a foundation for a Polish American identity separate from Poland. Rather, immigrant literature and radio programming reinforced Polish themes to the virtual exclusion of forming a Polish *American* identity.

Perhaps the most crucial venue for imparting culture, values and identity outside the family is the formal educational system. In an illuminating article published in the scholarly journal *Polish American Studies*, Adam Walaszek provided a revealing look at the textbooks used in Polish parochial schools in America. These schools wielded a substantial influence on the generations from the 1870s through at least the 1950s with one study concluding that as late as the 1970s over seventy percent of all Polish Americans had attended a parochial school at some time during their childhood. According to Walaszek’s research, and that of others, prior to World War I the textbooks used in these schools were generally imported from Poland; thus, they were packed with information on Poland, Polish history, Polish historical figures, and Catholic themes, but lacked anything relevant to the American environment in which the children

¹⁹ K. Majewski, *Traitors....*, pp. 70, 97, 141.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144. On Polish American literature, see also T. J. Napierkowski (2011), *Literature, Polish American*, in: Pula, J. S. (ed.), *The Polish...;* T. S. Gladsky (1992), *Princes, Peasants, and Other Polish Selves: Ethnicity in American Literature*, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press; T. S. Gladsky, R. Holmes Gladsky (1997), *Something of My Very Own to Say: American Women Writers of Polish Descent*, Boulder, CO: East European Monographs.

lived.²² Among the earlier textbooks published in the United States, *Czwarta książka* (Fourth Reader) contained lengthy sections on Polish history, grammar, and geography comprising some ninety percent of the work. The portion covering the United States dealt with history, nature, and a few important individuals, but *not* Polish Americans, their distinct history, or their institutions.²³

Perhaps the most influential of Polonia publishers was Władysław Dyniewicz. His elementary school textbooks were more evenly balanced between Polish and American topics. For example, the primer *Elementarz obrazkowy* presented the letters of the alphabet with a brief vignette to show the student its use. The letter “K” stood for Kościuszko, the letter “L” for Abraham Lincoln, and so on. There was also a mixture of material on Poland and the United States. In Dyniewicz’s third reader, Walaszek found that 46 percent was devoted to Polish topics, 14.7 percent to information about America, with the rest being various stories, lessons, and tables.²⁴ Religiously-oriented textbooks, notably those published by the influential Felician Order, concentrated mostly on religious and Polish topics, with not a single chapter devoted to the reality of living in America or Polish American achievements. The *Czytanka pierwsza* (First Reader) published by Jan Smulski firm was largely devoted to prayers, stories of virtuous behavior, morality tales, and accounts of various animals.²⁵ Once again, there was nothing that would promote a Polish American identity as distinct from a Polish identity.

²² A. Walaszek (2007), Images of Neighbors and Poles in Early 20th Century Polish American Schoolbooks, “Polish American Studies”, Vol. 64, pp. 5-25. For other studies of Polish American education, see J. Miąso (1977), *The History of Education of Polish Immigrants in the United States*, Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers; Rev. F. Bolek (1948), *The Polish American School System*, New York: Columbia Free Press Corporation; W. J. Galush (2006), *For More than Bread: Community and Identity in American Polonia, 1880-1940*, Boulder: East European Monographs; D. Prasałowicz (1994), The Cultural Change of Polish American Parochial Schools in Milwaukee, 1866-1988, “Journal of American Ethnic History”, Vol. 13, pp. 21-45; A. Kuzniewski (1975), Boot Straps and Book Learning: Reflections on the Education of Polish Americans, “Polish American Studies”, Vol. 32, Issue 2, pp. 5-26; W. J. Galush (2000), What Should Janek Learn: Staffing and Curriculum in Polish American Parochial Schools, 1870-1940, “History of Education Quarterly”, Vol. 40, pp. 395-417.

²³ A. Walaszek, Images..., *passim*; *Czwarta książka do czytania dla szkół ludowych w Ameryce* (1889), Chicago: Spółka Nakładowa Wydawnictwa Polskiego.

²⁴ W. Dyniewicz, *Elementarz obrazkowy czyli pierwsze zasady pisania i czytania zastosowane do szkół polskich w Stanach Zjednoczonych* (1907), Chicago: Dyniewicz Publishing Company; W. Dyniewicz, *Trzecia czytanka dla szkół polskich w Stanach Zjednoczonych* (1911), Chicago: Dyniewicz Publishing Company.

²⁵ *Czytanka pierwsza dla szkół polskich w Stanach Zjednoczonych* (1899), Chicago: Smulski Publishing Company.

Much like textbooks, most of the early teachers at Polish parochial schools were from Poland, with the largest proportion being members of religious orders. As a result, Polish and religious topics predominated in the curriculum, with most being taught in Polish prior to World War I. English was offered as a foreign language.²⁶ Thus, as with Polonia theater and literature, elementary schools tended to spend an inordinate amount of space on Polish history and culture. When they did introduce American topics, they were in the nature of general history, geography, and famous people to the exclusion of any Polish contribution other than the ubiquitous Kościuszko and Pułaski. Polish and American topics were treated as almost exclusively separate, with the child encouraged to define his or her identity in Polish terms.

So, what does all of this mean? Let us return once more to the prescient words of Rev. Kruszkka who noted that to keep future generations interested in a Poland they never experienced, it was important to emphasize Polish achievement in the America they did know:

From our young people already brought up in America, it is difficult to demand a nostalgia for Poland, “for those forested hills, those green meadows, those fields painted with various grains, gilded with wheat and silver with rye.” They have never known those forest scents, never tasted bread from Polish soil, never seen these Polish fields. How can they yearn for them? This is psychologically impossible because “what the eye sees also comes from the heart.” *In amore oculi sunt duces* [In love, the eyes are the guides], and so in the love of country the heart follows the eyes. It is not unusual that our young people cling in body and heart to this [new] land which smiles before them, and that they forget the land of their forefathers which they do not even know “by sight.” They know the lands along the Warta and Vistula Rivers probably “from hearsay,” from description, and from the stories of their parents and teachers if they attend Polish schools. Hearing so many beautiful things about Poland, Polish Americans would be glad to go and see it; but not so much from nostalgia as from curiosity. Hearing so much about the injustices and oppression of the old homeland, Polish Americans would be glad to see it free, independent, and prosperous; but not so much from an attachment to this land, which to them is foreign and distant, as from an attachment to their countrymen who are always close to them in blood and spirit. They would like to assist in resurrecting Poland not only through words but also through action; but whether they would want to return with Mickiewicz “to the bosom of the homeland,” is another question.²⁷

²⁶ W. Galush (2011), Education, Polish American, in: Pula, J. S. (ed.), *The Polish...*

²⁷ W. Kruszkka, *A History...*, p. 16.

One cannot expect that generations who have never lived in Poland will hold it as dear as those who have. It is the difference between what Halbwachs defined as the *collective memory* and *historical memory*. The *lived* experience as opposed to the *imagined* experience imperfectly transmitted from one generation to another. To form a lasting group identity, it is necessary for the members to share some common bond; yet, the collective identity of Polonia grows weaker with the passing years because, in large part, the only real Polish American identity that has been cultivated through the successive generations has centered on Poland and things Polish to the exclusion of Polish American achievements that might be more meaningful to the fellow ethnics of those who made them. As a result, we are left with two possibilities. The first is the adoption of the generalized “working class” identity proposed by Mary Cygan. While this may fit some, or even a majority of Polish Americans, it also “identifies” members of almost any other immigrant group. Consequently, it does not define a uniquely Polish American identity, but is merely a masquerade for assimilation.

The second option is what we generally see in America today. With almost ten million people self-identifying as Polish Americans in the 2010 U.S. census, membership in traditional Polish American organizations is at its lowest level in over a century—five percent or less. Local clubs are rapidly aging or closing altogether. New immigrants generally see little relevance in the “Old Polonia” organizations, which appear to exist only to remember the past, and for the most part form their own groups based on professional relevance, popular contemporary culture, or other shared interests. Likewise, few young Polish Americans are interested in joining Polish American organizations, choosing instead to participate in groups based on business and professional affiliations, community service, sports, or other pursuits.

The beginning of the mass migration transplanted the fragmentation of Polis society to America. It was, as the Marquis d’Azeglio observed of his own countrymen, necessary for Poles in America to establish a unique commonly-held group identity. To do this, the immigrants and their successors emphasized Old World Polish customs, traditions, celebrations, and other historical and cultural aspects to the exclusion of Polish participation in, and their influence on, the shaping of American life. By remembering Poland, but not Polonia, Polish Americans have failed to create a distinctly *Polonian* identity independent of Poland. As the generations passed, this identity grew progressively weaker once “collective memory” was replaced by “historical memory.” The lack of a Polonian identity relevant to Americans of Polish heritage left them with only an occasional reference to Pułaski or some famous Pole, hardly enough upon which to develop a strong group identity. The result has been a constant assimilation of Polish

Americans into the general American society, and a corresponding decrease in any attachment the assimilated millions may have to Poland or to their own identity as Polish Americans.