

THE CAUSES OF POLISH IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Sister Lucille, C. R.

The history of Polish immigration to the United States is a long one. Some trace its origins to pre-Columbian times; others find its beginnings in Jamestown, Virginia.¹ In any event, both in the colonial and national periods of American development prior to the Civil War, a thin stream of Polish immigration may be discerned.² Its causes were primarily political. With the close of the Civil War, there opens a new phase in the annals of Polish immigration to America. This phase, extending from 1865 to 1930 and viewed in its casual aspects, forms the subject of this study.

The years of the post-Civil War period witnessed the beginnings of large scale Polish immigration to the United States. The current, once started, flowed on at an accelerated rate, until Polish immigration became of first class importance among immigration movements. The decade 1870-1880 added nearly 35,000 natives of Poland to the population of the United States; the decade ending 1880 added nearly 99,000; and the last decade, 1890-1900, nearly 236,000. In 1900 there were 383,407 natives of Poland in the United States.³

Polish authorities give the following data on emigration to the United States during the three or four decades before the World War. Between 1871-1911 the four provinces of Prussia sent about 430,000 Poles to this country. Galicia during the thirty years before 1914 sent about 856,000. In 1890 there were about 19,323 emigrants from the Congress Kingdom. There was a decrease in the emigration from this region for a few years, but between 1901 and 1913 the United States received 596,950 Poles from the Russian Empire.⁴

1 Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *A Pre-Columbian Discoverer of America? Was John Scolvus a Pole?* (New York: New York Public Library, 1932), pp. 737-41.

2 Miecislaus Haiman, *Polish Past in America 1608-1865*, (Chicago: Polish Roman Catholic Union Archives and Museum, 1939), *passim*.

3 E. G. Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), pp. 131-32.

4 Dr. Mieczysław Szawlewski, *Wychodźstwo Polskie w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki*, (Lwów: Wydawnictwo Zakładu Narodowego Imienia Ossolinskich, 1924), pp. 12-19.

Why did they come? What induced them to undertake the perils of the journey? All human beings have ties, such as family, ancestors, property interests, and sentimental associations. These bonds are strong, and men do not migrate unless an inducement surpasses the strength of the bonds. To determine the cause of these shiftings is difficult. The Polish immigrants in most cases were peasants or common laborers and the old chronicles of the various periods are sterile sources for this matter. The material which is found is scattered and scanty, and often even its accounts are colored by prejudice.

Whatever the force may have been which led an immigrant to leave his native land, dissatisfaction with conditions in the homeland was present.

The religious factor was prominent in the early years. Even as late as 1870, religious oppression was one of the expulsive forces responsible for the migration of thousands of southern Slovaks, among whom Poles were found, into the coal and steel regions of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.⁵

In 1871 Bismark determined that all the inhabitants of Prussia, which included Prussian Poland, should speak the German language, and laws were passed to give the government control of the parochial schools; this was very irritating to the Catholics, and especially to the clergy. Another decree banished the Jesuit priests from the empire. In 1872 there was a large emigration of priests, and through their influence a great impetus was given to the movement.⁶

The social factors, though they appear minor in importance, have brought immigrants to our shores until the early twentieth century. The Poles were humiliated by the three partitioning powers—Russia, Prussia and Austria—in various ways. Resentment grew against these stigmatizing practices and led many to emigrate to America.

Another social factor, compulsory military training, also was an incentive to emigration. The law of 1874 which compelled all residents in Russia to do military service included the Poles in Russian Poland. Many emigrated also from Prussian Poland to evade military service because the term was long and cruelty was occasionally practiced.⁷

The immigrant who came to America was not merely seeking money; he was also interested in the distinction which money could secure for him.

5 William C. Smith, *Americans in the Making — The Natural History of the Assimilation of Immigrants* (New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1939), p. 5.

6 Frank Miller, "The Polanders in Wisconsin," *The Parkman Club Papers* (Milwaukee, Wis.: 1896), p. 239.

7 Smith, *Americans in the Making*, p. 12.

In other words, he was interested in recognition and status. A Polish immigrant made this plain:

Yes, I have succeeded in America; but success among new friends is not like success among the old. I think in a year or two I shall return to Paris and Warsaw for a while. It will not cost much. I will get myself a job on the steamship to save my passage fare. It will be sweet to have money—real American dollars to spend over there.⁸

This man wished to go back to Warsaw to spend money among his friends and kinsfolk, thus getting a chance to receive recognition.

Political discontent was conspicuous in the large immigration of the Poles. Tyrannical oppression induced many intellectual and patriotic Poles to emigrate to America, but the survival of the Polish national spirit undoubtedly was a determining factor in the bulk emigration of Poles from Germany, Russia, and Austria.⁹ In Russian Poland while the Poles enjoyed order and opportunity for progress along Prussian lines, they also suffered from the most determined effort to suppress their national feeling, to wipe out the Polish language, and dispossess Polish landowners of their property. Those who remained on their native acres continued to remain there, if only to spite the Russians who were grievously disappointed not to see them diminish under the repressive measures of the government.¹⁰

In Russian Poland, while there was not the racial contempt for all things Slavic which the Prussians were too apt to feel, the Poles suffered from oppressive special legislation, as well as from the tyranny and corruption which were the curse of all parts of Russia.¹¹ In Russian Poland agriculture was backward, and the peasant's land was insufficient to support the increasing population.¹² There was a notable expansion of industry in the last years of the nineteenth century which took care in part of the surplus population in Russian Poland, but an acute economic crisis in 1901-3, prolonged to 1908 by the revolutionary disturbances of 1905, accelerated emigration during those years. The total number of strikers in Russia in 1905 exceeded three and a half million. The strikers drew together wage-earners of all those nationalities which made up the

8 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

9 *Reports of the Immigration Commission*. (Sen. Doc. No. 747, 61 Cong., 3 sess.) Vol. XII (Washington: Government Printing, 1911), p. 56. Hereafter referred to as *Reports*.

10 Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*, p. 125.

11 Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*, p. 125.

12 *Reports*, XII, p. 269.

bulk of our immigration from the Russian Empire, including the Poles.¹³ Of the 2,359,048 Russian immigrants during the fiscal year 1899-1910, the Pole amounted to 27 per cent of the total.¹⁴

The Austrian government, in contrast to the Russian and German authorities, for some time pursued a political policy friendly to the Poles. The Austrian Poles retained many of their liberties and also gained new privileges; they enjoyed a national and intellectual revival, under the impulse of which the peasantry was lifted to a higher level which reacted upon their economic condition.¹⁵

The backward state of industrial development, the scarcity of available agricultural land, primitive methods of production, generally impoverished resources, coincident with a constantly growing population, created a situation of which the natural consequence was emigration. The absence of industrial development and the growth of a population which the land could not support, in a great measure accounted for the large Polish emigration movement from Galicia in the decades before the World War.¹⁶

The Congressional Immigration Commission of 1911 attributed the movement of population from Europe to United States with few exceptions to economic causes. Emigration due to political reasons, and to a less extent, religious oppression, undoubtedly did exist, but even in provinces where these incentives were important, the more important cause was very largely an economic one. The "newer" movement resulted simply from a widespread desire for better economic conditions rather than from the necessity of escaping intolerable acts. The emigrant came to the United States not merely to make a living, but to make a better living than was possible at home. Primarily the movement was accounted for by the fact that the recompense for labor was much greater in America than in Europe.¹⁷

A large proportion of the emigration from southern and eastern Europe may be traced directly to the inability of the peasantry to gain an adequate livelihood in agricultural pursuits, either as laborers or proprietors. Agricultural labor was paid extremely low wages and employ-

13 Isaac A. Hourwich, *Immigration and Labor — The Economic Aspect of European Immigration to the United States* (New York: B. W. Huebseh, Inc., 1922), p. 32.

14 *Reports*, XII, p. 265.

15 Edward Steiner, *On the Trail of the Immigrant* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1906), p. 25.

16 *Reports*, XII, p. 361.

17 *Reports*, XII, p. 53.