

## **Szczęśny Zahajkiewicz: Performances of Polish-American Identity in Chicago 1890-1910.**

Although few people recognize his name, Szczęśny Zahajkiewicz not only had a prolific drama career, but also had a significant impact on the way Polish Chicagoans presented themselves to the rest of the city at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century in Chicago. A poet and teacher from Galicia, Zahajkiewicz immigrated to Chicago in 1881 at the behest of the Resurrection Fathers to take a teaching post at St. Stanislaus Kostka. Once there, Zahajkiewicz began the St. Stanislaus Dramatic Circle—a long-running amateur play-producing and actor-training organization—for which he wrote a dozen plays and musicals. St. Stanislaus's many jubilee books and some broader histories of Polonia in Chicago's praise his contribution to the parish arts. What fewer people realize is that in addition to his work as a playwright and teacher, Zahajkiewicz helped develop the first large Polish Constitution Day Parade in 1891, the events for Polish Day at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, and the Polish National Theatre in downtown Chicago in 1908. Today I am going to give you a brief overview of these three events and institutions to show how Zahajkiewicz's unique vision for Polish-American identity was performed both in and outside the parish, and how these civic performances of Polishness helped non-Polish Chicagoans become advocates of their Polish immigrant neighbors.

### **Zahajkiewicz and the first Polish Constitution Day in Chicago, 1891**

The first large and collective demonstration of Polish nationalism in Chicago was the one hundredth anniversary of Polish Constitution Day in May of 1891. The Chicago Polish immigrant community had observed the date in years past, but the 1891 celebration surpassed all previous years and set a precedent for Polish civic performance of national identity. Polish Constitution Day in Chicago in 1891 was a four-day-long event celebrated with religious services, parades, lectures, concerts, and plays between Saturday, May 2, and Tuesday, May 5.

One Polish newspaper described the largest Polish parish neighborhood, St. Stanislaus Kostka (called Stanislawowo)<sup>i</sup> during the event:

Almost all buildings were beautifully decorated, and thousands of flags, Polish and American, fluttered from the roofs and the windows. Large portraits of Polish patriots decorated the sides of many buildings and here and there one could see large portraits of George Washington, father of our country, with appropriate inscriptions. The streets were filled with people, almost everyone wearing some kind of medal, badge or tricolor ribbon indicating that he or she was a participant of the celebration.<sup>ii</sup>

As the décor and language in this description suggest, the Polish immigrant community saw US and Polish nationalism as interconnected. In part this was due to historical factors: both countries had drafted constitutions within a few years of one another (1781 and 1791), and two Polish national heroes, Tadeusz Kościuszko and Kazimierz Pułaski, fought for the colonies during the American Revolution before returning to fight for Polish freedom. To the Polish immigrant community, the shared history left them hopeful that Americans not of Polish descent would join them in their fight for an independent national homeland in Europe, perhaps adding their voices to the Polish community's in lobbying the US government to help make this a reality.

In addition to the holy masses and the parade, Stanislawowo turned out for special programs in the evenings during 1891's Polish Constitution Day including a historic recitation of the history of Poland's Constitution and the story of Poland's partitioning, a reading of the defunct constitution, and a choir and orchestra concert of Polish music, including a new work called "The Hymn of the Third of May," written by Zahajkiewicz.<sup>iii</sup> Perhaps the most important events were the theatrical productions. On Monday night the St. Stanislaus school girls performed a play called *Religion and Happiness* under Zahajkiewicz's direction. The play depicted "seven goddesses, namely, Wealth, Art, Wisdom, Beauty, Singing, Music, and Poetry [who] offer their services to a girl of luck...[who] is seeking absolute happiness, which appears to her in the form of Religion and Faith."<sup>iv</sup> While this play was not written by Zahajkiewicz, the

story demonstrates how he was drawn to allegorical figures and large, humanistic themes, both of which were used in future Polish parades and other civic performances in Chicago. Tuesday night Zahajkiewicz mounted another play, his own *Jasnogóra*; or, *The Siege of Czestochowa*, which was so popular that Polish Hall was overcrowded, many were turned away, and a local Polish newspaper declared that “a play so successful was never staged in Chicago.”<sup>v</sup>

The theatre pieces performed during the 1891 Constitution Day and in the years afterward helped to unify and construct Polish-American national identity in Chicago, and Zahajkiewicz was at the center of that idea, and therefore was an obvious choice to help plan performances of Polishness at the World’s Fair.

### **World’s Columbian Exposition**

Performing Polishness at the World’s Columbian Exposition was difficult because, as a partitioned country ruled by three empires (each of which had its own national building), Poland had no national pavilion in the White City. The Polish immigrant community in Chicago had no homeland government to enter any exhibits, nor did it have a consulate in Chicago to advocate for Polish space at the fair. The Poles in Chicago, however, understood that having Polish national representation at the fair was politically and culturally advantageous, and therefore organized the World’s Fair Polish-American Reception Committee of Chicago (PARC), a restaurant, a Polish art display in the Fine Arts Palace that competed with other nations’ entries, and Polish Day at the fair. These entities were each created by Chicago’s Polish immigrant community to give the international Polish diaspora a home at the World’s Columbian Exposition, and to remind those who were not Polish that the Polish nation existed in spirit, if not on a map. For this presentation I will talk exclusively about Polish Day at the fair.

In their continuing effort to demonstrate Polish national identity, their desire for a sovereign Poland, and their contributions to the United States, Chicago’s Polish immigrant

community began planning Polish Day two months after the opening of the fair. An article in *Dzeinnik Chicagoski* in July 1893 argued that Polish Day would “show that we exist as Poles, that we have not forgotten our homeland and past, and...that we already constitute something of a power here in the United States.”<sup>vi</sup> The PARC started holding meetings in mid-August and requested representatives from all Polish parishes.<sup>vii</sup> The committee wanted to host Polish Day on September 12 to honor the anniversary of the Siege of Vienna, but settled on October 7, 1893, because it gave them more time to plan. In planning meetings, the community voiced what they hoped Polish Day would do for them. It was their way of “manifesting themselves, for saying to the world: 'Here we are.'...We Poles...must keep pace with other nations. This is required by our national self-respect and by our duty of manifesting our national vitality before our enemies... 'Polish Day' will announce to the world that 'Poland is not lost—nor ever will be!'”<sup>viii</sup>

In less than a week from the initial meeting, the community created a separate committee with representatives from St. Stanislaus, St. Michael the Archangel, St. Adalbert, Holy Trinity, St. Casimir, and the Poles of Bridgeport to oversee the Polish Day plans, with Zahajkiewicz and Rev. Barzynski leading the group from Stanislawowo.<sup>ix</sup> The committee asked that various Polish Chicagoan business owners finance parade floats; that Poles from Joliet, Illinois; South Bend, Indiana; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, participate; and that local Polish-American children participate in the parade dressed in national costume.<sup>x</sup> Ninety-nine societies agreed to march in the parade.<sup>xi</sup> In addition to the parade, Polish Day hosted a program of speeches and music in Festival Hall, a gymnastics demonstration on the fairgrounds, and a fireworks display.<sup>xii</sup>

Polish Day overall made manifest issues of Polish-American identity, but the morning's parade specifically reconfigured the space of citizenship by moving Polish-Americans from the margins to the center, and reenacting Polish history with a backdrop of Chicago's iconographic

Michigan Avenue. In these ways, the parade was an “explicitly performative act” that trained the audience’s gaze to see the city's Poles as part of Chicago.<sup>xiii</sup> It was the second largest parade in Chicago history to that date (the largest being the one for WCE Dedication Day) with more than fifty thousand Polish-Americans marching and lasting from 8am to 1pm.<sup>xiv</sup> At 8am the paraders met at their local parishes and traveled to the central meeting point near Union park, just west of downtown so they could converge and march into the loop together. From there they marched as a unified group along Jackson Boulevard to Michigan Avenue, which was, even in 1893, Chicago's most iconic street. Then they marched south to 12<sup>th</sup> Street, and then back north to Van Buren Street before dispersing so that people could board trains to the Exposition. The mayor and several city aldermen (none of whom were Polish) led the procession, followed by members of PARC, and then the Polish policemen of Chicago, who were given the day off so that they could march in the parade.<sup>xv</sup>

After the policemen came sixteen floats made by the various Polish parishes and clubs in Chicago (and in nearby cities) that told a deliberate story, much like a play educating onlookers about Polish heroes, history, and nationalism, and portrayed the similarities between Polishness and Americanness. Some of the most crowd’s favorite floats included: “John Sobieski after the Victory at Vienna.” “Constitution of the Third of May” “Poland in Chains,” “Washington, Kościuszko, and Pułaski,” “Poles on American Soil.” and “Resurrection of Poland,” with an actor playing Poland emerging from a broken prison gate. All the floats were overseen by Zahajkiewicz, who used his skills to create a feat of Polish-American storytelling on the streets of downtown Chicago.

The Polish Day parade floats were a performative intervention that used ideas of national identity on display at the World's Columbian Exposition to advocate for a sovereign Poland and

place for Poles in the American nation. The floats' historical scenes, allegorical characters, and the huge casts of local Poles performing a shared culture created the nation of Poland in the diaspora. Certain stories, flags, and clothing were loaded symbols that became shorthand for Polish-American performers and for non-Polish audience members in future demonstrations.

### **Polish National Theatre in Chicago**

After the fair, Zahajkiewicz continued his work in parish theatre. By 1900 St. Stanislaus Kostka, St. John Cantius, St. Hedwig, St. Hyacinth, St. Mary's of Perpetual Help, and St. Adalbert's all had parish drama clubs that presented Polish-language plays throughout the year. In 1903, leaders of these parish drama clubs initiated a plan to make a centralized Polish theatre in downtown Chicago. According to an article in *Dziennik Chicagoski*, over thirty delegates from nine parish drama clubs met to determine "a way to combine all organizations into one large main group...[in order to give] a better and higher level in their dramatic performances"<sup>xvi</sup> By 1906, the Polish National Theatre (sometimes called the Polish Theatre and sometimes the National Theatre) was founded in Chicago with Zahajkiewicz as artistic director.<sup>xvii</sup> Although the archive offers only the motive of making "better and higher level" performance for founding the Polish National Theatre in Chicago, events concurrent to the theatre's founding suggest that the theatre served a socio-political function as well.

The Polish National Theatre in Chicago was active throughout 1906 and 1907, during a period of increasing concerns about US immigration both from the native-born and from immigrants themselves. In addition to the Basic Naturalization Act passed in June of 1906, Congress amended the (1903) Immigration Act in February of 1907 to raise the head tax and continued to debate adding a literacy test. Congress also formed a special committee to investigate US immigration—the Dillingham Commission. Chicago's Poles were not immune to these discussions. In the context of debates about immigration, starting a visible Polish theatre in

Chicago's downtown could show Poles to be good, assimilating immigrants, immigrants who mark themselves out but act as ambassadors between their community and the city at large.

For two years the Polish National Theatre mounted famous Polish plays with Polish national themes in large theatres in downtown Chicago. While the title of the first play is lost to history, it opened at the Auditorium in April of 1906. Reactions suggest the production rivaled other professional playhouses in the city center and hence the theatre would be good for the community. According to *Narod Polski (Polish Nation)*, the theatre "promised to become a regular theatrical institution... [that would] stage regular Polish theatrical productions in the larger theaters of downtown Chicago. If these promises and beautiful intentions are realized, then this city of the Poles in America will take another step forward from an intellectual viewpoint."<sup>xviii</sup> Although the Polish-language press stated that the theatre would cement Zahajkiewicz's legacy in Chicago, the mainstream newspapers took little notice of the new theatre.<sup>xix</sup> Perhaps this was in part because Zahajkiewicz produced comedies famous in Poland but unheard of in Chicago. The second play, produced in August of 1906, was Fredro's *Dożywocie (The Annuity)*.<sup>xx</sup> The third play at the Polish National Theatre was Franciszek Zabłocki's *Fircyk w Zalotach (The Dandy's Courtship)* at the Garrick Theatre in February of 1907.<sup>xxi</sup> Like Fredro, Zabłocki wrote uniquely Polish comedies, although a generation before when he was commissioned by the National Theatre in Warsaw in 1780s.<sup>xxii</sup> The choice of plays at the Polish National Theatre in Chicago reaffirmed a distinct Polish heritage, but also presented hyphenated Polish-American identity. In part the theatre did this by putting on comedies, which would have required less familiarity with the Polish language than other genres. At this time, downtown Chicago theatres frequently hosted international touring theatre troupes that put on operas or comedies written in other languages.<sup>xxiii</sup> These still drew crowds of English speakers

since the music or physical action made the play understandable without knowledge of the language. Zahajkiewicz's choice comedies for the National Theatre (even though he was famous for dramas in his work at St. Stanislaus) and his desire to have the theatre downtown suggests he was mindful to attract a mixed audience.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Sadly, the Polish National Theatre ended in 1908. The Polish-language press is silent on why. One article in the *Chicago Tribune* suggests the company was hard to maintain because the Polish community was distracted from supporting the arts by persecution of Poles in the homeland.<sup>xxv</sup> Despite the difficulty in retaining an audience, the *Tribune* lauded immigrant theatre in Chicago in general for escaping the decadence of most professional theatre, for mounting important productions with professional, European-trained actors, and for reaching thoughtful audiences.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Zahajkiewicz's three projects beyond parish theatre—Polish Constitution Day, Polish Day at the World's Fair, and the Polish National Theatre of Chicago—allowed Poles to rally around a specific image of the Polish-American, and perform it for their non-Polish neighbors. Although the theatre closed, the yearly Polish Constitution Day parade in Chicago gives testament to Zahajkiewicz's lasting legacy.

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<sup>i</sup> Marya Lilien and Malgorzata Pyrek-Ejsmont. "Polish Churches along the Kennedy Expressway," *Chicago History* 9 (1980): 19–29.

<sup>ii</sup> "Poles Celebrate Proclamation of Their Constitution (1791) Commemoration of the Hundredth Anniversary of the Polish Constitution of May the Third." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, May 4, 1891.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> "Poles Celebrate Proclamation of Their Constitution (Second Day, May 4)." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, May 5, 1891.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> "Polish Day—And a General Council of Poles." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, July 18, 1893.

<sup>vii</sup> "Polish Day in Chicago." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, August 9, 1893.

<sup>viii</sup> "Date of Polish Day Announced." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, August 28, 1893.

<sup>ix</sup> No headline. *Dziennik Chicagoski*, August 14, 1893.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> "Polish Day Meeting Held at Pulaski Hall Central Committee Named." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, August 21, 1893.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Lisa Merrill, "Exhibiting Race 'under the World's Huge Glass Case': William and Ellen Craft and William Wells Brown at the Great Exhibition in Crystal Palace, London, 1851." *Slavery and Abolition* vol 33 no 2, June 2012: 322.



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<sup>xiv</sup> "Poles Have Freedom: Their Day at the Fair the Realization of Fondest Hopes." *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1893; "Polish Day Central Committee Meeting." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, October 2, 1893; "Polish Day Celebrated in Chicago Fifty Thousand Poles Participate in Greatest Day in History of American Poles." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, October 10, 1893.

<sup>xv</sup> "Polish Day Meeting Held at Pulaski Hall Central Committee Named." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, August 21, 1893; and "Polish Day Celebrated in Chicago Fifty Thousand Poles Participate in Greatest Day in History of American Poles."; "Poles Have Freedom: Their Day at the Fair the Realization of Fondest Hopes." *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1893; and "Polish Day Central Committee Meeting." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, October 2, 1893.

<sup>xvi</sup> "Poles in Chicago Organization of Dramatic Circles." *Dziennik Chicagoski*, June 29, 1903.

<sup>xvii</sup> "Poles in Chicago News Item." *Narod Polski*, February 14, 1906.

<sup>xviii</sup> "Polish Theatre." *Narod Polski*, May 2, 1906.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xx</sup> "Polish National Theatre." *Narod Polski*, August 1, 1906.

<sup>xxi</sup> "Local Chronicle." *Narod Polski*, February 27, 1907.

<sup>xxii</sup> H. B. Segel, "Foreign Drama in Eighteenth Century Polish." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring, 1959): 35-42, 37.

<sup>xxiii</sup> The Authur Lyon scrapbook collection of the Chicago History Museum Research Center shows a huge array of productions from Itlain operas to French comedies that toured to Chicago between 1897-1948.

<sup>xxiv</sup> An article in the *Chicago Tribune* suggest that in addition to the Auditorium and the Garrick, the Polish National Theatre also performed at the Whitney Opera House, another large venue in downtown Chicago. For more see "Chicago Has More Foreign Theaters than Any Other City in the World." *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 1908.

<sup>xxv</sup> "Chicago Has More Foreign Theaters than Any Other City in the World." *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 1908.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*