Polish Immigrant Communities in Chicago: 1970-2000
Mary Patrice Erdmans
Presentation at *Chicago Catholic Immigrant Conference: The Poles*
November 13, 2015, Chicago, Illinois

This presentation is a modified excerpt from a chapter, "New Polonia: Urban and Suburban," in *The New Chicago: A Social and Cultural Analysis*, ed. John Koval, Larry Bennet, Michael Bennet, Roberta Garner, Fassil Demissie, and Kiljoong Kim (Temple Univ. Press, 2006). All sources and references are in the original publication, which you can access here: <http://sociology.case.edu/publications/mary-patrice-erdmans/> The references to the tables, figures and maps in this presentation are to a power point that accompanied the presentation. The figures and maps are from *The New Chicago*, which should be given credit.

Introduction

According to the 2000 census, 133,797 foreign-born Poles were living in metropolitan Chicago along with nearly 900,000 Americans of Polish heritage. This contemporary migration stream has some resemblance to the earlier wave – the majority were still coming in search of jobs and a better life and most still worked as skilled laborers or in service positions. Contemporary Polish immigrant men, however, worked in light industry and electronics (rather than the meat packing and steel industries), as well as the construction trades and as automobile mechanics. Moreover, in the latter period, more educated professionals emigrated and Polish newcomers arrived not only as immigrants, but also as political refugees and undocumented workers. And finally, while the majority of new immigrants continued to live in residential clusters in the city, an increasing number of immigrants resettled in suburban communities.

The New Immigrants

In the 1970s, Poles began arriving in significant numbers, a consequence of the failing political and economic situation in Poland that brought in political refugees and economic immigrants. The 1968 upheaval in Poland produced the first wave of refugees with the largest numbers after the national strikes in Poland in 1976 and 1980 led to the formation of the trade union *Niezalezny Samorzadny Zwiazek Zawodowy* (Independent Self-Governing Trades Union), popularly known as *Solidarnosc* (Solidarity). In December 1981, the Polish state declared martial law, disbanded Solidarity, and jailed opposition activists. The U.S., receptive to political exiles from communist countries, admitted more than 40,000 Polish refugees in the 1980s.

In addition, after 1970 an increasing number of temporary "nonimmigrants" arrived, particularly "visitors for pleasure" known within the community as *wakacjusze* (vacationers) or *turysci* (tourists). Many of these vacationers overstayed their visas for significant periods (in some cases, for decades) and worked without authorization. Their numbers rose from an average of 24,000 admitted annually in the 1970s, to 36,000 in the 1980s, to almost 52,000 annually in the 1990s. (See Table 1) While the majority of *wakacjusze* intended to return to Poland, estimates in the mid-1980s were that roughly a third had overextended their visas, and that 95,000 Poles were living (and working) in the U.S. illegally. Efforts to reduce this population through the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) gave amnesty to more than 16,000 Poles and another 2,000 of their dependents.

Along with the increase in nonimmigrant arrivals, the number of permanent immigrants grew exponentially. Just over 42,000 Polish immigrants arrived in the 1970s, this doubled to almost 82,000 in the 1980s. In the 1990s, more than 180,000 Poles were admitted into the United

States. (See Table 1)

Metropolitan Chicago attracted the largest share of the new immigrants. One-third of all new Polish immigrants in the United States live in Illinois (mostly in the Chicago metropolitan region). Between 1972 and 2000, roughly 100,000 Poles immigrated to the Chicago metropolitan region and two-thirds of them came in the last decade of the century. (See Figure 1). In the early 1990s, an average of 11,000 new Polish immigrants resettled annually in Chicago.

The increase in immigration in the 1990s is explained by a variety of factors. First, not all new admissions were new arrivals. The recipients of the 1986 IRCA program had arrived in the 1970s and 1980s but they were not officially admitted until after they received amnesty. As a result, most of them were entered "on the books" in the early 1990s. (See Table 2)

The increase in Polish immigration in the 1990s is also explained by the instability of the economic system in Poland and changes in U.S. immigration policy. With unemployment rates as high as 12 to 15% in the 1990s (and as high as 25% for 15-24 year olds), the "shock therapy" introduced to jump start the Polish economy destabilized traditional labor markets and led to an increase in emigration.

At the same time, the U.S. had a more open immigration policy. The Immigration Act of 1990 created more permanent visas and temporary work visas. First, it raised the ceiling for all immigrants from 270,000 annually, to a level of 700,000 for 1992-1994, and then 675,000 beginning in 1995. Included under the numerical cap were slots for "diversity immigrants," defined as 'aliens from countries adversely affected by the 1965 Immigration Act.' This included Poles, and between 1992 and 1996, more than 50,000 Poles were admitted under this program (See Table 2). Second, this Act expanded categories and ceilings for nonimmigrants arriving for

cultural exchange, business, employment, and tourism.

Many of the newcomers arrived with skilled, technical and professional training**.** (See Figure 2 Polish Immigrants to Chicago Metro Area by Occupation) By the 1990s, roughly half of the Polish immigrants coming to Chicago had had professional and managerial positions in Poland or technical, sales, and administrative. For men, the percent of skilled workers coming to Chicago doubled from 21% in 1972 to 46% in 2000, and the percent who had had unskilled and semiskilled occupations in Poland declined to less than 20% in the late 1990s. For women, those with professional and managerial positions in Poland rose from roughly 15% in the 1970s to almost double that in the early 1990s; while the number of semi-skilled workers dropped drastically from a high of 40% in the early 1970s to the single digits by the 1990s.

The newest Polish cohort was also relatively educated compared to native-born Americans. According to the 2000 data, 76% of Poles who arrived in Chicago in the 1980s had at least a high school and 18% had at least a bachelor's degree; for those arriving in the 1990s, 64% had at least a high school degree and 12% had at least a bachelor's degree. This drop in education level reflects the decline in political refugees in the 1990s and increase in older immigrants and immigrants from rural areas.

Community Building in Chicago

In the 1990s, two of every five Polish newcomers to the U.S. settled in the Chicago metropolitan region, as did almost half of the Polish refugees in the 1980s. They settled here because of habit, because they knew people here, and because the established ethnic/immigrant community made it easier to locate jobs and housing, secure bank loans and health insurance,

and find a doctor, priest or herbalist who spoke Polish. Social networks attract new immigrants because they are conduits for information, reduce the risk of working illegally, and counter the threat of loneliness with restaurants, nightclubs, churches, theaters, sports clubs and media. Polish-language newspapers and employment agencies help new immigrants find jobs and facilitate their incorporation into American society. And finally, because of the way our immigration laws are designed, family networks bring in new immigrants.

At the turn of the 21st century, Chicago Polonia was a vibrant community with more than 100 Polish organizations, three prominent Polish-language radio stations with 217 different programs, four television stations, three daily newspapers and more than two dozen magazines, weeklies and monthlies and fifteen Polish bookstores. At the beginning of the last century the heart of the Polish community, *Trojska Polska* ("Three Corners" at the intersection of Milwaukee, Division and Ashland avenues) was anchored by the spires of the first Polish churches, St. Stanislaus Kostka and Holy Trinity. Over the century, Poles moved north up Milwaukee Avenue and out to the suburbs. In addition, a large community of Polish immigrants settled on the southwest side of Chicago and during the 20th century this community moved southwest down Archer Avenue and eventually out to the suburbs. (See Map 1) Today, new Polish immigrants settle along the tracks laid down by their predecessors (that is, in communities along Milwaukee and Archer avenues and at the southwest and northwest edges of the city). In addition, new immigrants are also moving into the suburbs.

I will begin by talking about these contemporary urban communities that I refer to as consumer-service immigrant communities, and then turn to the new immigrant suburban communities.

Consumer-service immigrant communities: *Jackowo* and Belmont-Central

In 1990, there were 81,417 Polish immigrants living in metropolitan Chicago, and an additional 40,413 Poles arrived between 1990 and 1995. Three-quarters of the new arrivals resettled in the city, mostly on the Northwest Side. In 1990, the highest concentration of Polish immigrants was near St. Hyacinth Church, in an area known as *Jackowo* (intersected by Milwaukee, Central Park and Belmont avenues in the Avondale community). (See Map 1) In 1990, in census tract 2105, where St. Hyacinth is located, 65% of the population was Polish and 81% of the Poles were immigrants (N=3,880). By 2000, however, this tract was 65% Latino (N=5,341) and only 30% Polish (N=2,865), still 86% of the Poles were immigrants. The Poles were more concentrated in the areas surrounding Milwaukee Avenue and St. Hyacinth parish.

Jackowo was still the iconic heart of Polonia, primarily because of St. Hyacinth parish and the retail and professional services in the area. Founded in 1894, St. Hyacinth had almost 4,000 registered families in 1990 (40% of whom were new Polish immigrants) and once again as many Polish families who attended masses but were not registered (most were also new immigrants). From 1985 to 2000, as many as 10,000 Poles attended weekly one of the sixteen Polish-language masses (four on Sundays and two each weekday), more than 4,000 Easter baskets were Blessed on Holy Saturday, and at least 2,000 people participated in the Feast of the Corpus Christi in June.

While *Jackowo* businesses provide goods and services in Polish, *Jackowo* does not resemble a traditional ethnic neighborhood. There were no ethnic organizations no fraternals, political, cultural, nor intellectual organizations. The Poles attending the masses and shopping in

the stores came from the entire Chicago metropolitan region, and those transient shoppers and churchgoers did not contribute to building a community, though they did stabilize the area as a market region. Mostly this was an immigrant consumer-service community of retail shops, professional offices, and immigrant services that included Polish-speaking doctors, dentists, lawyers, and accountants, meat markets-delicatessens, liquor stores, bakeries, florists, travel agencies and the central shipping company, Polamer. The businesses that expanded between 1985 and 2000 were those providing immigrants services (travel agencies, passport and visa services, translators, and shipping companies) as well as the deli-liquor stores. On this strip, there were only three restaurants and three bars (there were more herbalists than bars), and few other public places for gathering or community building – no theaters, concert halls, auditoriums, libraries or even parks. It was not a companionate neighborhood but an urban strip where Poles bought goods and received services.

Farther west on Belmont Avenue a newer Polonian community was developing: the Central/Belmont intersection (See Map 1). According to the 1990 census, in the tracts adjacent to this intersection, a third to a half of the population was Polish, and half of the Polish population was foreign born. Throughout the 1990s, this area continued to attract new Polish immigrants so that by 2000, half of the population was Polish and over three-quarters were immigrants, the majority having arrived in the previous decade.

The community had several cafes and bookstores, interspersed with the professional, retail, and immigrant service businesses, as well as restaurants, night clubs, the headquarters for a Polish-language newspaper *Kurier*, and a Polish Medical Clinic. Several Polish businesses in the area developed a pan-European marketing strategy by substituting “European” for “Polish” in

their names and advertising: European Foot and Ankle; European Optical; Continental Café; European Kwiaty; European Quality Tuckpointing; European Motors; and European Music.

The Belmont-Central community was a more traditional ethnic neighborhood in that there were more owner-occupied homes, renters lived in the area long term, and there were more community spaces in the bookstores, cafes, and the library. In 2000, eleven branches of the Chicago Public Library, and five suburban public libraries housed Polish collections. The Skokie Public library had more than 630 Polish-language books and a large number of Poles used the internet to read Polish newspapers. This growth in Polish collections at suburban libraries paralleled the growth of suburban Polish residents.

Suburban Polish communities

While temporary immigrants and the most recent arrivals often initially resettled in traditional Polish quarters in the city, an increasing number of immigrants moved to suburban communities. Between 1983 and 1998, the number of new arrivals listing a suburban zip code as their intended residence more than doubled from 16 to 36%. In addition, within five to ten years after arrival, many immigrants bought homes in the suburbs. This represents a marked difference from the earlier immigrants who lived and died in the urban neighborhoods, and whose descendants had assimilated culturally and structurally before moving into the suburbs. The suburbs on the northwest and southwest borders of the city, that is, those adjacent to the Polish communities in the city, experienced the largest influx of new immigrants (See Map 2).

Immigrants' move to the suburbs reflects a general population trend. From 1960 to 1990, the overall city population declined, especially the white population, while the population in

Cook and the collar counties increased. According to the 2000 census, 60% of all people reporting some Polish ancestry in Cook County lived outside of the city. Most Polish immigrants and Polish Americans moved for the same reasons as the general white population – better public schools, more affordable housing, and increased quality of life (e.g., larger yards, better air quality, lower crime rates). Suburban life also represents social mobility – as immigrants become established and more secure in their occupations, they want to "move up," and moving up meant moving out of the city.

Polish immigrants who move to the suburbs tend to be homeowners rather than renters, permanent immigrants rather than working vacationers, and better-educated professionals and skilled laborers rather than lower-skilled workers. While English-proficient immigrants are more likely to move to the suburbs, speaking English is less necessary if they move to more Polish-populated suburbs such as Harwood Heights, Niles, Norridge, Des Plaines and Park Ridge where they can rent Polish videos, visit Polish dentists, and get checked out at a chain store by a bilingual cashier. Shoppers can buy the *Dziennik Zwiazkowy* in their local Osco or Jewel, and residents can socialize with compatriots at Polish sports clubs and social groups organized in the suburbs of Des Plaines and Park Ridge.

According to realtors, the immigrants buying homes in the suburbs usually have been in the U.S. five to ten years. Their move often corresponds with their children's educational needs (e.g., moving to the suburbs when the child is entering high school).

While bilingual programs are located in the city schools, the Polish Saturday Schools are increasingly found in the suburbs. These schools, which teach Polish language, history, geography, literature and culture three hours a week from September to June (mostly on

Saturday mornings), are independent indigenous institutions but the classes are often held in the parochial schools. In 1983 there were 18 Polish Saturday Schools, with 130 teachers and 3,000 students; by 2002, there were 27 schools (14 located in the suburbs) with 647 teachers and 13,425 students. Before 1974, only one of the schools was located in the suburbs, by late 1970s, six schools opened in the suburbs, one more in the 1980s, and six more have opened since 1994 (while only four have opened in the city).

With the delis, video stores, Polvision television, internet, Polish-speaking professionals, Saturday schools, bilingual clerks, many immigrant needs are met in the suburbs, but not all of them. Krystina Flaherty, Director of the European American Ministry for the Archdiocese of Chicago said in an interview I had with her in 2002:

> Everything moved out there. They don't want to come to the city [because] all the Polish stores, moved there – Polamer, Koligowski Sausage, and when you have that, people say, well why not churches? They used to go [into the city] shopping for the Polish food, stop for the mass, and then go home. Now they don't need to do that because they have all these things available where they are, so they think, people are very comfortable with their nice homes and shopping malls, so what's missing, the missing part would be a mass. The problem is, from the church point of view, that there are not too many services offered for ethnicity in general in the suburbs. Suburbs are perceived very American.

Even when immigrants are comfortable buying toothpaste speaking English, they prefer to pray the *Our Father* in Polish. As Flaherty said: "I know many people who are living in the suburbs, driving a Volvo, having a huge villa and speaking perfect English and still preferring to go to a Polish mass."

Parish life in the suburbs: Integrating Polishness to maintain Catholicism

The presence of immigrants in the suburbs has led to an increased number of Roman Catholic churches offering masses and other services in Polish. Unlike their urban counterparts, however immigrants today are not building "Polish" churches but instead they are integrating themselves into Roman Catholic parishes with the help of Polish-speaking priests. The function of the Polish-speaking priest is not to retain their Polishness, but to retain their Catholicism. Prayer and spiritual attachments are deep, emotional, and more easily accessible through one's native language. One immigrant said, "Praying in Polish has a special feeling. It helps to connect me." Maintaining her Catholicism is what is most important to her, and for this reason she attends a Saturday Polish mass for herself, and a Sunday English mass with their children. Another Polish parishioner said, "Praying in your own language is praying from your heart. Mass is not for obligation but for true prayer."

In 2002, in the Chicago metropolitan region, 54 churches offered Polish masses, and one-third of these were located in suburban parishes. The traditional "Polish" churches in the cities were larger, they often had several masses in Polish, and they had Polish-speaking priests in residence. In comparison, suburban churches were more likely to have only one or two masses in Polish, often said by a visiting priest. These suburban churches were not defined as "Polish parishes" but, instead, as parishes with a Polish mass. Even a parish such as St. John Brebeuf in Niles where Polish immigrants made up 40% of its members, the resident Polish priest stated, "this is not a Polish parish." Whereas in the past, urban ethnic churches attracted a particular group to the exclusion of others, today Polish- or Spanish-speaking priests serve the purpose of

opening the door wider not creating a wall. One Polish suburban priest stated:

> We believe Jesus is the same in your language, in my language. Jesus connects us. When we have to express our emotion in English, in Polish, in Spanish, it is okay, you can. But we in Catholic Church have one very good point to connect all the nations. . . . Jesus will never divide, Jesus always connects. . . . It is a Catholic church not Polish."

The initiative for Polish-speaking masses came from the parishioners, and more requests for Polish masses were made than could be satisfied because there was a shortage of Polish-speaking priests. The diocese kept adding more Polish-language masses "but there is never enough," said Flaherty. In 2002, the archdiocese had 30 priests from Poland and a few more arrived each summer. These priests, however, like the immigrants, needed to adjust to the new country so they were often placed in urban churches before they were moved to the suburbs. The recruitment of Polish priests is aided by changes in immigration policy through the Immigration Act of 1990 which included a new category for workers in religious occupations (R1 visas). Between 1993 and 1997, the U.S. admitted 60-65 Polish priests annually, but in 1998 this increased to 144, and to 177 the following year.

In addition to the shortage of priests, the dispersed nature of the suburban population also makes it more difficult to serve the needs of Polish immigrants. Unlike urban settlers who clump together, immigrants are more spread out in the suburbs. And as immigrants move to the collar counties, they move out of the Chicago archdiocese, and other archdioceses (for example, Joliet) are less able to accommodate their needs. As a result, suburban parishes with Polish-language masses attract immigrants from surrounding areas, sometimes even surrounding archdioceses. On some Sundays or special holidays, 1,000 or more worshipers may overwhelm the church

creating parking problems and safety issues. The community where the church is located sometimes resented the intrusion of these "outsiders" who were not always respectful. One priest said: "They park everywhere on sidewalks, people's lawns. Nobody cleans up. Nobody takes care of it. That's why there is a conflict. It used to be, "I'm from *Jackowo*, I'm from *Brunowo*." That's their neighborhood. Now they're coming from Naperville, what do they care?"

In these cases, the Polish-language mass doesn't build a geographic community, but instead serves a clientele's language needs. This was true even for larger and more permanent parishes in the suburbs where Polish immigrants were local parishioners. St. Zachary Catholic Church in Des Plaines, a parish of roughly 2,400 families, had mostly white parishioners (Irish, Italian, Polish) with a growing Hispanic population. Roughly 10% of the parishioners were Polish immigrants and in 2001 they introduced a Polish-language mass on Saturday that attracted 600 to 700 Poles from Des Plaines as well as Arlington Heights, Park Ridge, Mount Prospect and other Northwest suburbs. The visiting priest (a Carmelite who traveled from Indiana) said mass and heard confessions in Polish.

St. John Brebeuf in Niles was one of the few suburban churches that had a Polish-speaking priest in residence in 2002. The parish was composed of roughly 3,000 families, 40% were Polish immigrants and most had joined the parish in the last 10 years. Twenty years ago mass was said in Polish by a visiting Jesuit priest, but in 2002, Father Galek, a Polish immigrant priest joined the parish. At that time, the visiting Jesuit priest said the Saturday mass (400 people attended on average). The resident Polish priest said the Sunday noon mass in Polish (for roughly 1,000 people), as well as the English-language masses for the other parishioners. Half of those who attended the Polish-language masses were parishioners and the rest came from surrounding

suburbs. In addition to the two Polish masses, there was a Wednesday evening Marion worship group for the Polish-speaking parishioners, a Bible study group, and a first Friday devotion. They was also a Polish Saturday school.

Father Galek contends that the immigrants strengthen the church by bringing in new members and that the church is there to serve Catholics, not Poles. He states that for new immigrants, the "experience of the feeling of the mass in Polish language is better for them . . . We care that the Polish community become good Catholic Americans."

Krystina Flaherty often hears Americans criticize the Polish-language mass as potentially fragmenting the church and taking away from the parish "because they don't bond if they go to a Polish parish. My answer to them is if there is no Polish [mass] they won't go at all, so instead of losing people, it's at least better that they hang on." She said the suburban priests resent the ethnic-language masses more than the urban priests who are used to the multi-ethnic community and "don't make a big deal out of it. If we were to open up more masses in Polish in the inner city, we would not have half of the problems that we have in the suburbs." Regarding resistance to Polish-language masses in the suburbs, Flaherty said, "I think the bottom line is that the suburbs don't want to be called ethnic. They all want to be Americanized. The churches in the city were built by the immigrants, so they become the 'Polish' church. But in the suburbs, there is an American church."

Conclusion

The two types of neighborhoods represent both old and new forms of integration. The immigrants in the *Jackowo* and Belmont/Central areas are living in Polish communities –

working, praying, socializing, and shopping with other immigrants. The immigrant neighborhoods are necessary for those who have not acquired the language skills, the money, or the confidence to move more freely around the larger metropolitan region, and as such represent linguistically insular communities. The immigrant neighborhoods also serve as consumer centers for the dispersed immigrant and ethnic Polish American -- the Polish shopping strip.

Polish immigrants resettling in the suburbs are unlike their Polish Americans counterparts who were assimilated before moving to the suburbs. The new immigrants are still in the process of culturally assimilating even as they are more rapidly structurally assimilating into labor markets and educational institutions. This means they are moving into the suburbs as immigrants, not homogenized ethnic whites, and as such they bring some cultural variation into "white bread" suburbia. But their parishes are "American" or Roman Catholic," rather than ethnic parishes. The parishes serve their linguistic needs in order to meet their religious needs, and are interested in maintaining a Catholic American, not Polish American identity.