THE CAUSES OF POLISH IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

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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. 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. 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.

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.

2 Miecislaus Haiman, Polish Past in America 1608-1865, (Chicago: Polish Roman Catholic Union Archives and Museum, 1939), passim.
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.6

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.

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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.
10 Baleh, Our Slavic Fellow Citizens, p. 125.
11 Baleh, Our Slavic Fellow Citizens, p. 125.
12 Reports, XII, p. 269.
bulk of our immigration from the Russian Empire, including the Poles. Of the 2,359,048 Russian immigrants during the fiscal year 1899-1910, the Pole amounted to 27 per cent of the total.

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.

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.

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.

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-
ment was likely to be seasonal rather than continuous.18

As a result of the above conditions, the immigration from Europe to the United States in the early twentieth century was for the most part drawn from the country districts and smaller cities or villages, and was composed largely of the peasantry and unskilled laboring classes. This was particularly true of people from countries furnishing the newer immigration.

Neither the average or typical emigrants represented the lowest in economic or social scale even among the classes from which they came. Emigrating to a strange and distant country, although it was in this period less of an undertaking than formerly, was still a serious and relatively difficult matter, requiring a degree of courage and resourcefulness not possessed by weaklings of any class. As the past so also the newer emigration represented the stronger and better element of the particular class from which it came.19

The causes of immigration were numerous and complex. The economic component, which undoubtedly was the most important factor, also included stimuli from America which need to be considered.

It is generally held that until 1860 the immigration movement was determined mainly by the conditions in Europe. Later mass movements, however, had other factors inducing emigration. In 1863, President Lincoln urged a law to stimulate immigration. On July 4, 1864, he signed a bill authorizing the President to create a Commissioner of Immigration, under the State Department, and permitting the importation of laborers from Europe under contract. The act permitted contracts for twelve months' labor to pay off the immigrant's passage to the United States. Several companies were at once organized to deal in immigration contract labor. Protests against the character of immigrants led to the repeal of the law in 1868.20

The investigation of the Congressional Immigration Commission in Europe did not find any actual contracts involving promises of employment between employers in the United States and laborers in Poland. But it is certain that Polish emigrants, under a literal construction of the law, for the most part were contract laborers. It is likely that many emigrants who embarked for the United States had a definite knowledge where they

18 Reports, XII, p. 54.
19 Reports, XII, p. 21.
would go and what they would do if admitted. Natural instincts dictated such a condition, even though the contract labor law forbade even the semblance of an agreement.  

Undoubtedly conditions abroad spurred emigrants to seek America, but more important still were the efforts of ship-owners. The Congressional Immigration Commission considered the propaganda conducted by steamship ticket agents as one of the most important immediate causes of emigration. The propaganda flourished in every emigrant furnishing country of Europe, regardless of the fact that laws prohibited promotion of emigration in many European countries as well as in the United States. The laws were not broken openly, but local agents and sub-agents of the company persistently and continuously violated the laws in practice.  

From the beginning there operated an effective motive — that of making a profit from the immigrants. The desire to get cheap labor, to take in passengers fares, and to sell land probably brought more immigrants than hard conditions in Europe. In the colonial period, indentured service induced immigrants to come to America. In the nineteenth century, new forms of induced migration appeared. Although the contract labor law was repealed, a new form of importation appeared under the guidance of middlemen of the same nationality as that of the immigrant.

An excellent example of how this system worked is given by Professor Paul Gates in his work on the history of the Illinois Central Railroad. General John Zurchin, a Russian engineer, who had been an officer in the Civil War, was employed by the Illinois Central Railroad to organize the Agencja Polskiej Kolonizacji (Polish Colonization Agency) to bring Poles into Illinois. Zurchin was successful to an unexpected degree in developing both Polish agricultural and mining colonies.

A contributary cause of emigration consisted of the advice and assistance given the prospective migrant by his relatives or friends who had previously emigrated. Through letters from the United States and the visits of former emigrants, the emigrating classes of Europe were kept constantly informed about labor conditions. These agencies were perhaps the most potent promoters of the twentieth century movement of population.

21 Reports, XII, p. 60.
22 Reports, XII, p. 62.
25 Reports, XII, p. 56.
An extract from a Polish letter portrays how effective letters were in stimulating emigration.

And now I will write you how I am getting along. I am getting along very, very well. I have worked in a factory and I am now working in a hotel. I receive 18 (in our money 32) dollars a month, and that is very good. If you would like it we could bring Wladzio over some day. We eat here every day what we get only for Easter in our country. We are bringing Helena and brother now. I had $120 and I sent back $90.26

The importance of the advice of friends as an immediate cause of emigration is also indicated by the fact that nearly all European immigrants admitted at entrance that they would join friends or relatives. Out of a total of 145,670 Polish emigrants, 143,932 stated that they were joining relatives or friends, this equals 98.8 per cent. The Congressional Immigration Commission concluded that letters from immigrants played a major part in the remarkable movement of population from Europe to the United States.27

27 Reports, XII, p. 59.