# Exhibit as Mirror: Documenting the Polish Experience in Detroit:

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## Background:

In 2001, the City of Detroit celebrated the 300th anniversary of its founding with a yearlong program of festivities and events. Among the programs was one that invited groups, institutions and public bodies to compete for small grants to highlight aspects of the city's history that might otherwise be missed or ignored. Saint Mary's College decided to apply to tell the story of the Polish experience in Detroit through an exhibit that would be shown in three different locations throughout the city. (One of the sites would be in the inner city municipal enclave of Hamtramck which had since early in the 20th century been associated with Polish immigration to the area and which still had a very sizeable Polish American and Polish immigrant population.) As president of the college and the person who had written more on the history of Polish Americans in the city than anyone else had, I wrote the grant.[1] We received a grant of $10,000 in April 2001 to prepare the exhibit. In addition, we simultaneously received a request from the Detroit Historical Museum to mount the exhibit at the museum in October on a much larger scale than originally planned. A representative of the museum was a member of the grant evaluation committee and recognized that in conception and thematic approach it promised to offer new insights into the history of Detroit. The museum offered its space and the part-time service of two staff members to assist us. We, in turn, agreed to try to raise the additional funding on relatively short notice that the expanded version of our original idea required if it were to be realized. In the end, it was to cost over $100,000 to mount.

In addition to developing the original conception for the exhibit, I wrote the texts for the panels and for most of the pictures and displays in the exhibit. In addition, I wrote a short popular history of the Poles in Detroit and recorded an hour lecture CD to supplement the exhibit. Most of the pictures and materials for the exhibition were collected and chosen by Dr. Karen Majewska, Special Collections Librarian at Saint Mary's College and executive secretary of the Polish American Historical Association (PAHA). She also became the co-curator of the project. Dr. Thomas Gladsky, president of the Polish American Historical Association, put PAHA in support of the exhibit, assisted with the fundraising and the initial organization and work.

Jill Grannon of the Detroit Historical Society served as co-curator with Dr. Majewska. Richard Kucharski of the museum's design staff developed the design for the exhibit. The eight four-sided nine-foot panels were created for the

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[1] Thaddeus C. Radzilowski "The Second Generation" *Polish American Studies* 43.1 (Spring 1986): 5-12
Thaddeus C. Radzilowski with Don Binkowski "Polish Americans in Detroit Politics" *Ethnic Politics in Urban America* Ed A. Pienkos. Chicago: Polish American Historical Assn, 1978 40-65
Thaddeus C. Radzilowski "View From A Polish Ghetto: The First One Hundred Years in Detroit" *Ethnicity* 1.2 (1974) 125-150
Thaddeus C. Radzilowski "Ethnic Conflict and the Polish Americans of Detroit, 1921-42" *The Polish Presence in Canada and America* Ed. Frank Renkiewicz. Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1982. 195-207

exhibit by Exhibit Design of Detroit. We were fortunate that the person who handled the project from Exhibit Design was Ted Swigon with whom I had worked before at the Polish Museum of America in Chicago. He was then a designer for the Museum of Science and Industry and volunteered his services to the Polish Museum. He had a profound understanding of the project because of his own background in the back-of-the-yards neighborhood in Chicago. He also volunteered generously time and effort beyond contractual requirements.

The bulk of the fundraising was done by Ms. Virginia Skrzyniarz, Vice President for Administration at Saint Mary's College. She and Ms. Kathryn Hartman, my executive assistant, also did most of the administration of the project and the arranging of events, including the grand opening reception and dinner. Ms. Hartman also handled the preparation of all of the text as well as the printing. Karen Gladsky in Chicago assisted with some of the editing.

In the end, the bulk of the work was done by two staff from the Detroit Historical society and four from Saint Mary's. The Saint Mary's staff worked on the project while carrying on their regular full-time employment. Only one member received the equivalent of one course overload pay for summer work.

It is a mark of the fluidity of the roles that each assumed that the poster for the exhibit was commissioned and shepherded through the design process by Ms. Skrzyniarz. The poster was created in Poland for the exhibit by Wladislaw Pluta, of the Jagiellonian University's Fine Arts Department and a leading Polish poster artist. Ms. Skrzyniarz also originated the idea of adding a parochial school classroom to the exhibit. This was to prove the most popular single station in the exhibit.

The exhibit opened on October 12, 2001 after only six months of preparation. It was to close on March 31, 2002 after a five-month run. However, the exhibit proved to be the most popular special exhibit at the museum in several decades. At the request of the museum, it was extended for two additional months until May 30, 2002.

**Conception:**

The exhibit was conceived as an attempt to tell the story of the growth and development of the Polish community in Detroit as a key, if hitherto little recognized, factor in the growth of the city itself between 1870 and 2000. We started with the assumption that great areas of the story of Detroit were unintelligible unless one understood the role of Polish immigrants and their posterity in it. The extent to which Polish Americans shaped the culture and physical space within the city and the extent to which it, in turn, molded them into a unique community distinct in many ways from other urban Polonias elsewhere in the United States. The reaction of Detroit's elites to the explosive growth of this new immigrant population early in the 20th century drove a political reform

agenda that not only squashed any significant participation in Detroit's political life, but also left a legacy that crippled for decades later efforts by African Americans to get a political foothold in the city.

The ethnic dimension of Detroit's history has been largely neglected. In the mid-twenties, at a time when Poles were the largest ethnic group in the city, a 726-page history of the city, written by a veteran Detroit News man George Caitlin, managed to avoid recognizing their presence at all. [2] The emergence of a huge Polish working class immigrant population coincided with the exodus of Detroit's Protestant elites to new upper class enclaves such as Boston Boulevard, the Chicago Boulevard area, Palmer Woods and the Grosse Pointes. In the latter, African Americans, Jews, Asians, Poles and Italians remained excluded or restricted by an internal realtor's point system until the early 1960's. [3] In John Leggett's famous survey published in 1968, 59% of African Americans believed that after themselves Poles were the group most likely to suffer social discrimination in Detroit. Thus, at a time when the black population of Detroit was at less than 2%, a strong pattern of ethnic and class segregation and exclusion had already developed largely at Polish immigrants. [4]

The exclusion took another kind. The reform of 1918 ended the ward as electoral districts for city council elections and involvement of political parties in city elections. It reduced the size of the council, now elected at large, from forty-two representatives to nine and changed most patronage positions to civil service status. The reform shifted power in the city to middle and upper class citizens and non-partisan civic groups. As a result of the new system Polish Americans, despite their large size, were to play only a minimal role in city politics. Nevertheless, their interest in politics was strong and in 1932 Detroit's three congressional representatives were Polish Americans. [5]

There were two distinctive Polish American communities in Detroit history and each mirrored remarkably the Detroit, which they settled and shaped. The first composed largely of immigrants from Pomerania and Wielkopolski (Prussian Poland) with Kaszubians being the dominant group and made up disproportionately of family groups that provided the labor and the artisan skills needed by the new industries that developed in the post-Civil War area especially railroad car, stove manufacturing and the chemical industry. Women found work in the fields of the Ferry Seed Company and the new cigar industry. By 1900, the Polish community made up about 50,000 of Detroit's 250,000 inhabitants. More than half of those employed at that time were artisans, shopkeepers, skilled workers and professionals.

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[2] George Caitlin, The Story of Detroit. Detroit, The Detroit News. 1923

[3] "Poles in Detroit Politics" p41-42

[4] John C. Leggett. Class, Race and Ethnicity: Working Class Consciousness in Detroit (New York: Oxford 1968)

[5] "Poles in Detroit" p46-47

In response to the growth of the auto industry after the turn of the century a second migration brought a wave of new Polish immigrants mainly from Austrian and Russian Poland as well as from the Eastern coal fields and rural areas of the Midwest. By 1920, over 80% of the Polish American community was unskilled workers in the new mass industries. The Polish population grew to over 170,000 in 1920 making up about 17% of the city's people. In the 1950's it was still well over 16% of the population. It was at this point that the African American population finally pulled even with the Poles. In the 1950's every third person in Detroit was either Polish or black.

Thus, Poles were the largest new ethnic group in the city during the period of its most dramatic growth and its rise to prominence as one of the world's greatest industrial cities. They not only contributed to the growth, but also shaped it. In turn, their own identity was shaped by their Detroit experience. A few basic statistics and observances might illustrate this.

1) Most of Detroit, including its inner city, was created out of farmland in the first half of the 20th century. The enclave of Hamtramck was incorporated as a village in 1900 with five hundred people, largely German American farmers. By 1922 when it officially became a city it had 49,000 people, mostly Poles. It reached over 60,000 in 2.2 square miles.
2) Between 1880 and 1929, Polish Americans created thirty-one new Catholic parish communities and four national Catholic parishes in Detroit and its environs, largely out of raw farmland. By 1929, they had crossed Eight Mile Road into what were to become the first ring of post-war eastside suburbs. On the Westside they had crossed into Dearborn. The neighborhoods constituted solid and contiguous belts of settlements. The Great Depression ended expansion until after World War II. The major characteristic of the new Polish neighborhoods was a very high rate of ownership.
3) In addition to the parish churches, convents and schools that marked each neighborhood, Poles created a significant extra parochial network of fraternal halls and other institutional buildings, three hospitals, two colleges, two settlement houses, an orphanage, a summer camp, athletic fields, a veterans home, a dozen theaters and numerous businesses in the Detroit area. A longtime observer of Detroit, the newspaperman C.D. Cameron, credits the Poles with changing the public face of the city. The front yard flower gardens, which came to characterize Detroit, he describes as a "Polish institution". Poles defined the structure and meaning of neighborhood for much of Detroit in the first half of the 20th century.
4) Given the class, demographic and occupational structure of the Polish community, Poles were the key to the union movement in the city. In some plants such as Dodge Main and Plymouth Assembly, they made up an absolute majority of the workers. Polish women constituted 85%

of the city's cigar workers and a significant proportion of its laundresses, cleaners, waitresses and other female operatives. As a result, the institutions of the Polish community served as the first infrastructure of the union movement and, given the fact that a Polish pidgin was the *lingua franca* of the assembly lines familiar notably to other East European immigrants, but also even African Americans and Italians, Polish radio became crucial to the organization of auto workers into the UAW. Polish Americans came over to the unions *en masse* during the thirties and class identity became an integral part of their ethnicity in Detroit.

The dramatic sit down strike of the cigar workers in 1937, one of the longest in American history, which garnered great support and sympathy in the Polish neighborhoods preceded by several weeks the great Chrysler sit down by their brothers, fathers, boyfriends and neighbors. I have argued elsewhere that it served to embolden and legitimize the men's efforts. It is clear that the militancy of the Polish American workers came out of the solidarity of the network of family, neighborhood and institutions that made up the community. R.J. Thomas and George Addes wrote in 1941 that "without the Polish American workers, victory would have been impossible". The first president of the UAW called them "the most militant workers in America". [6]

5) The large second generation of Polish Americans had a distinct impact on Detroit's popular culture. After the First World War they added several hundred new social and cultural organizations to the more than one thousand created by their parents and the creation of a new youth culture built around the polka. From its emergence in the twenties it not only absorbed and altered the traditions and music of the Polish countryside, but also assimilated the influence of jazz and swing and later bebop and rock. It became a bridge to other East European and Hispanic immigrants. Polish American musicians also developed an interest in jazz and many became American by also becoming locally the secondary interpreters of black music for white Detroiters. Because of their wholesale rejection of prohibition, Polish neighborhoods drew large numbers of their own as well as outsiders to its speakeasies, clubs and private parks. [7]

6) The second role of the new second generation of Polish culture was sports. Polish Americans not only developed a rabid interest in the city's professional teams – the Polish Daily News was carrying play-by-play accounts of Detroit Tiger games by 1905 – but also by the 1920's provided athletes for the amateur, factory and semi-professional teams in the area. All Polish organizations sponsored teams. By the turn of the twentieth century the Polish Seminary in Detroit was successfully

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[6] Piotr Tares, Polonia w Detroit, Warsaw, Pallottinum, 1989 p27-42

[7] For a brief summary of the history of Poles in Detroit see Thaddeus C. Radzilowski, The Polish Experience in Detroit. Detroit, 2001

competing in baseball and football with local colleges including the University of Detroit and Michigan State College (later MSU). In the post-World War II period the Hamtramck Little League, Pony League and American Legion teams all won world championships. A number of the athletes from these teams went on to successful major league careers.

7) The final large theme we handled was the impact of WWII on the community. The youth of the community meant that a large number of men and some women went off to war. The city of Hamtramck sent five thousand men to serve. Some Polish Catholic parishes had more than 2000 parishioners in military service. As a result a major part of the second generation underwent the most important experience of their lives away from home. This was as formative an experience for many as the immigration had been for their parents.

The war brought a new set of problems of which separation and danger to its young men fighting on all fronts was only the most obvious. The war effort and volunteer service curtailed many community and parish activities as did long hours of overtime work in war production. Lack of work-the problem of a few years before-was now replaced by too much work. Men, and to an extent not known before, women, worked 10-12 hours a day and the work week and the work week was 6 and even 7 days. Families were often as much separated by the grueling work schedule as by military service. War work also drew some to work in places distant from Detroit. The stress on American Patriotism and conformity also placed a higher value on speaking English and avoiding "foreign" customs clothes and activities. The melting pot turned into a pressure cooker.

Execution

In general, I believe the project was a considerable success. All of the themes noted above and a few others such as a brief overview of relations with the city's elite and other ethnic groups were treated in the essay and recorded lecture. The poster summed up very economically and pointedly the central thesis of the exhibit.

The exhibit itself was strong and informative on the importance of the relationship between the growth of the Polish Community and the growth of Detroit. The institutional of the community and the strength and complexity of the neighborhoods were well documented. Although the Catholic parish was the key anchor of most neighborhoods, the exhibit did not neglect the experience of the Polish National Church, the Polish Lutheran congregation, the Polish Baptists, and even smaller groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Polish Bible society who were always a presence.

The most popular part of the exhibit with visitors was a replica of a classroom complete with a mannequin dressed as a Felician Nun. (Getting a pre-Vatican habit proved to be one of the most serious challenges we faced.) This installation drew a lot of nostalgic comments and reminisces of visitors-all of it overwhelming positive despite the current negative humor about parochial school experiences. Although celebratory, it was also an effective evocation of the complexities of Polish American identity. The religious symbols, the American flag, a text book in Polish on American History and a poem on the blackboard expressing a love of Poland by an American born child demonstrated clearly the successful meshing of Polish and American Patriotism and Catholic loyalty which was at the heart of the ethnicity of the community.

The exhibit had a display of rooms representing Polish American homes in the 1920's and the 1950's. Both were not only well done but demonstrated again through the décor, the pictures, magazines, and other appointments the synthesis of Polish, Catholic and American identities At the same time they showed the important role of class and shaping that identity.

Two of the best sections were those on Polish Americans in the labor movement and on the popular culture they developed in the inter war period. In the former case, pride of place was given to the role of women and to the sit down strikes. The cigar workers strike of 1937 which was a catalyst for a wider strike by women in laundries, restaurant, hotels, and dime stores as well as an example to the men of the community, was dramatically highlighted on its own panel.

The material on the new Polka Culture and other aspects of Polish Detroit's popular culture of the interwar was particularly well documented thanks to the collection of Laurie Palazollo who was in the process of writing a book on the music scene and dance halls of the period. We were able to illustrate this theme with a number of posters, and programs from the activities of second-generation social clubs and pictures of performances, dances and parties at halls and picnic grounds. The story of prohibition was centered on an actual still discovered between the walls of a Polish American home in Hamtramck.

In general, the depiction of the role roles of women were, in addition to the labor section, was reasonably good. In addition our exhibit room was located next to a permanent installation that depicted the 30 Most Influential People in the 300-year history of Detroit. The Polish American representative in that group was Miss Clara Swieczkowska, a social worker who was also the long time President of the Polis Activity League. In her long career of 40 years between the 1920' and the 1960's she created settlement houses, children's camps, a veteran's home, a soup kitchen, refugee resettlement and war relief programs, women's shelter and counseling programs. She was a key figure in the evolution in social work and welfare in Detroit and the State of Michigan. The depiction of her career and that of the work of her associates enhanced our exhibit immeasurably. The weakest section of the exhibit was the one that focused on the World War 11

experience. Partially, because of the press of time we were unable to secure adequate documentation and materials for this section. In truth, we never fully settled on how we wanted to tell this story and what would be needed to do it. The most evocative of this section were the family pictures and posed pictures of couples in their best clothes and uniforms taken on the eve of the young man's departure for the war.

In the exhibit, unlike the essay, we did not seriously treat relations between Poles and other ethnic groups in the city although there were a number of interesting photographs of Poles and African Americans engaged in political activities in Hamtramck. Hamtramck had a distinctive black community as old as the Polish-American community in the city. Given the space available and the time constraints, we did not feel we could adequately deal with this topic and do justice to its complexity without distortion. It should be noted however that we did document the symbiotic relationship between immigrant Jewish merchants and the Polish neighborhoods in which they established their stores between 1880s and the 1930s.

In terms of popular criticisms there were two that stood out. First that we did not deal adequately with the story of the smaller west-side Polish settlement and its role in the development of the Michigan Avenue Corridor nor with the Polish settlement of the downriver suburb of Wyandotte which grew up around the steel and chemical plants south of Detroit. The second criticism was that in the section dealing with sports we should have devoted more attention to the great Hamtramck amateur baseball teams which gave Detroit a national reputation in the post World War II period.

The challenges we did not expect came from the institutional needs and staff interests of the Detroit Historical Museum and a surprising significant difference in the understanding of the meaning of ethnicity in America. The museum pushed for a number of additions, which gave the exhibit a more celebratory tone than we had originally envisioned. Key among them was the Heisman trophy of Leon Hart. Mr. Hart, a Notre Dame alumnus and longtime Detroit Lion was proud of his Polish ancestry. However he had no tie with Detroit Polonia except that he played for a local professional team and then made a business career in the city. During his business career he played no significant role in the Polish community in Detroit. It must be however acknowledged that his willingness to lend his trophy and to attend and give television interviews gave the exhibit some very welcome publicity and in the long run benefited our program.

The other issue was the insistence by the museum staff on including a token representation of pictures and materials on the Jewish migration to and presence in Detroit on the grounds that Detroit's Jewish population was drawn largely from areas that had once been part of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. The case for the inclusion was buttressed by an already existing installation in the exhibit space of a room depicting the dining area of a Polish-Jewish family circa 1900 set for the Passover meal. On a side table prominently displayed in the dining room was a letter in Polish from Europe. A second

consideration was that the museum could obtain and display the medal of honor won by Raymond Zussman the son of a Jewish family that had lived in the largely Polish Catholic city of Hamtramck. Whether the Zussman's considered themselves Polish-American or not was not clear but they did speak Polish. What made the issue more complex was that the largely Polish American American Legion Post in Hamtramck named itself the Zussman Post and the city named a park for him. The Jewish War Veterans named their headquarters elsewhere in the city after him. A final if unaired consideration was that staff had excellent pictures of ancestors who came from Russian Poland, which could be included. They were, in fact, included in the section in the immigration section. I learned of their provenance only after the opening.

The issue caused a long discussion of the question of ethnicity. I argued that we were not documenting the experience of people from the lands of historic Poland who come to Detroit, which would require us to include Lithuanians, Belo Russians, Eastern Germans (The local German organization is the Carpathian Club), Ukrainians and Russians as well as Jews. The people who were the subject of the exhibit were those who became part of an American ethnic group called Polish Americans and that ethnicity included some kind of attachment to Polish national identity, language and culture. The impact of the other groups who acquired different American Ethnicities on the history of Detroit was in some cases dramatically different than the group, which was our main focus.

I was not able to carry my point. In the end, the exhibit concluded the Zussman medals, the Passover room and photos of a synagogue (whose founders included immigrants from Polish lands) a Jewish immigrant family and a local sports hero. I did draw the line at displaying a picture of Detroit Tiger great Hank Greenberg whose family immigrated from Bukovina despite the argument that the area had been under Polish control in the sixteenth century.

Despite the problems and shortcomings of believe we succeed in opening up an entirely new perspective on the history of Detroit and demonstrated that the inseparability of the history of the Polish community from that of the city of large. I think it also raised the need for a genuinely multi-ethnic history of a city that had the highest percentage of immigrants of any major American urban area at the beginning of the century with Poles the largest group and the highest percentage of African Americans at its end.