

"The Polish American Historical
Association and St. Mary's College
and The Orchard Lake Schools.
A Historical and Historiographic
Retrospective
1942 - 2002"

By

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INTRODUCTION

To mark this sixtieth anniversary of PAHA, Dr. Pienkos has asked me to look at the history of the Orchard Lake Schools, especially St. Mary's College which has been the headquarters of the Polish American Historical Association for twenty-nine years, with reference to its relationship to PAHA.

In this brief paper I would like to review the history of the Orchard Lake Schools as a center for Polish and Polish-American studies in the United States as well as itself as an icon of Polish-American history. They have not only helped to preserve but also to make the story of that experience. As the home of PAHA St. Mary's College shaped the organization and influenced Polish-American historiography.

A second focus of the presentation will be a short and select examination of the historiography of the Orchard Lake Schools as done by PAHA scholars and to examine the historiographic issues raised by the history of Orchard Lake and its role in the Polish-American community. I would like to suggest in the end new questions and place them, therefore, into the agenda for future research by PAHA members and others scholars seeking a fuller understanding of ethnicity in America in particular and the American experience, in general as a contribution to this anniversary.

The Orchard Lake Schools were founded by Father Joseph Dabrowski in 1885 in Detroit as the Polish Seminary in order to train young men to serve the new Polish immigrant community in the United States as priests. This year we are marking the 100th anniversary of his death. The need to prepare young men for the seminary training itself and the demand for education of young men in general in the immigrant community led him to also establish a six-year classics program that covered high school and junior college level programs with a European gymnasium style curriculum. In 1909, six years after Father Dabrowski's death, the Polish Seminary, lacking room to expand in its location in the midst of the first Polish neighborhood in Detroit, purchased the site of the bankrupt Michigan Military Academy on the shores of Orchard Lake. The new campus was in a rural setting about thirty miles from the original seminary building.¹

The Polish Seminary continued its curricular configuration as two divisions for 42 years. The Upper Theology Division which comprised the senior college years (Philosophy) and the seminary training proper, begun originally as a five-year program, became after the first years a six-year curriculum and while the Classics Division was a six-year gymnasium program. In 1929 it was reorganized into a four-year American style all male prep high school, a bachelor's degree level college and a major seminary. The schools and their new configuration became known collectively as the Orchard Lake Schools. The change was most dramatic for the college. Its lower division had once been a part of the education offered to a wide spectrum of students, most of whom were not going on to the priesthood. Now it became a primarily seminary college designed to prepare candidates for the seminary although it did admit some students who were not going on to the priesthood. The attempt by the college to acquire accreditation just before World War II was not successful because it offered too few majors to be

¹ On the history of the Orchard Lake Schools see Joseph V. Swastek, "The Formative Years of the Polish Seminary in the United States" in *Sacrum Poloniae Millennium*, 6 (Rome, 1965); Frank Renkiewicz, *For God, Country and Polonia: One Hundred Years of the Orchard Lake Schools* (Orchard Lake, MI, 1985); Leonard F. Chrobot (ed) *Seventy-Five Years of the Orchard Lake Seminary* (Orchard Lake, MI 1960). See also my article "The Orchard Lake Schools" in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Detroit, Gales Research: Forthcoming)

considered as a liberal arts college. It remained thus until 1970 when it began to expand its offerings and majors and admitted its first female students. It received its first accreditation from the North Central Association in 1976 for a five-year term. In 1998, during my third year as President, it received its first ten-year accreditation. In the spring of 2002, its accreditation was expanded to allow St. Mary's College to offer graduate programs leading to a Master's Degree.

The high school remained a residential prep school with a strong Polish program into the 1980s. In 1989, in the face of declining enrollments, the school was changed into a commuter high school. The Polish language and culture program was gradually abandoned as the school began to draw heavily from the wealthy suburbs that had grown up in the area. By the new century only a handful of Polish-Americans and a few Polish students remained at the school and the Polish program disappeared completely. The school became known throughout the state for its excellent athletic program, its alumni in professional sports and its many regional and state championships. Its enrollment reached 460 students by the fall of 2002.

The Seminary continued to train priests - diocesan and regular - for service in the Polish-American community also until the 1980s. Like the high school, it faced declining enrollments as the number of candidates for the priesthood dwindled in general and as Bishops insisted that candidates for the priesthood in their dioceses attend diocesan seminaries. The latter factor had impacted the Seminary already by the 1940s and the leadership of the Orchard Lake Schools identified this issue as a major concern as early as the eve of World War II. In the late eighties, the Seminary began to recruit candidates through minor seminaries in Poland and after an intensive English language and acculturation program to admit them to seminary study. Upon completion of the course of study, they were ordained for dioceses throughout the United States who agreed to repay the cost of their education and to incardinate them. Only a minority ended up serving the Polish community. The main service the Seminary provides for the Polish-American community is the

weekly Polish radio mass and the preparation of the Polish missalette for use at Polish masses in North America.

In the 1970s and 1980s St. Mary's College, under its new dispensation, sought a new role of service to Polonia. Led by Father Walter Ziemba, as President, and Father Leonard Chrobot as Dean and later as President, it developed an innovative outreach to the Polish-American community that reflected the new ethnicity. In fact, it sought to define it for Polonia. The effort led to the creation of the Center for Polish Culture and Studies and Project Pole financed by a grant from Mr. Edward Piszek. It produced excellent popular and pedagogical materials on Polish history, language and culture as well as the Polish-American experience for the general public and for teachers. The aim of the program was to foster the survival (or even revival) of a Polish ethnic identity and a positive attitude toward Polish language and culture. A second order result of the program was to develop "a sympathy for cultural diversity" in the United States. Father Chrobot's work on Polish-American ethnicity was recognized as a contribution to the understanding of the new ethnicity taking shape in the United States among the children and grandchildren of the immigrant generation. The original research work of some of the faculty, including Dean John Gutowski's work on the polka culture, broke new ground in the reassessment of Polish-American ethnicity. St. Mary's College also became a founding center for the Polish-Jewish dialogue during Father Chrobot's presidency.

In the early nineties, under President Edward Meyer, St. Mary's College moved away from its orientation as a center for Polish studies and in some degree even from its identity as a Catholic college. The new administration placed part of its hopes for growth on a strong intercollegiate basketball program. It was tied to the belief it would grow if it were seen as a less ethnic, more generic small liberal arts college. There were no Polish-Americans in the leadership of the school. The effort bogged down by 1994 and the enrollment stagnated at about 250 students. The intercollegiate sports program was cancelled as prohibitively expensive.

In early 1995, Dr. Thaddeus Radzilowski took over as President with an agenda that called for a revitalized Polish Studies Program together with a new model of a Catholic college with an integrated curriculum for the new century.

The Polish studies program was to focus on building ties to the Polish institutions of higher education as well as to develop for Polish-Americans and American society in general a new, sophisticated understanding of post-Communist Poland. In turn, it was hoped that St. Mary's College would also assist certain sectors of the leadership of the new Poland to better comprehend the Polish and Polish-American experience. A lynchpin of this policy was a new active recruiting program in Poland which by 2002 led to over seventy young Poles as fully matriculated, degree seeking students at St. Mary's College in addition to about a dozen on short-term programs. The exchange with Polish universities brought scholars from KUL, the Jagiellonian University and the new Rzeszovia University to campus on a regular basis for a year or a semester stay.

Between 1995 and 2002, St. Mary's College hosted nine international conferences on Poland and East Central Europe. It also published between 1998 and 2002 four issues of the annual Periphery and other pieces such as an English translation of Professor Leon Dyczewski's Values and Tradition in Polish Culture (with the Center for Research in Values of The Catholic University of America). The college is also assumed oversight of major exchange programs between United States, Canadian, British and Polish universities for the Dekaban Foundation. The Foundation has also funded an annual lecture series in Polish history and culture. The publication of the lectures has now begun.

A second objective of the Polish Studies Program was to reinterpret the Polish-American experience for Polish-Americans and for their fellow Americans and in the process to contribute to the ongoing debate on ethnicity and multiculturalism in the United States. The highlight of this effort was the exhibit The Polish Experience In Detroit at the Detroit Historical Society on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Detroit. The exhibit proved to be the best

attended special exhibit at the Detroit Historical Society in over two decades. It was so popular that it was extended for two months beyond its original six-month booking. The exhibit was supplemented by a fifty page exhibit book detailing the Polish Detroit experience, a CD with a lecture on the theme, a lecture series at the Museum and a poster for the exhibit done by one of Poland's leading poster artists, Wladyslaw Pluta. The exhibit, which cost over \$100,000 to mount, has traveled to Chicago and Milwaukee. Several additional sites have been booked for future exhibitions.

The focus of the exhibit was not just on the internal history of the Polish community of Detroit or on its "contributions" to Detroit. The underlying theme was on Poles as co-creators of modern Detroit during its most dynamic and expansive era. It's postulated that the history of the city could not be understood apart from the history of the Poles who made up Detroit's single largest ethnic group between 1910 and 1960. This general approach marked the College's programs on the Polish-American experience during the period of the Radzilowski presidency.² As part of its commitment to Polish-American history, St. Mary's offered in 1998 to provide a new home for PAHA and to provide a half-time salary for the executive secretary of the organization who was at that time a part-time faculty member at the College.

In July 2000, the Orchard Lake Schools negotiated an affiliation with Ave Maria College of Ypsilanti. Under the agreement, the Orchard Lake Schools created Ave Maria University under its 1929 Omnibus Charter and put St. Mary's College into the University as its first campus. St. Mary's was to be administered by a new Board with a majority of members chosen by Ave Maria College. Ave Maria University was also to have the financial responsibility for St. Mary's College. The new arrangement brought additional resources to St. Mary's College including new faculty. The Polish Studies area expanded to nine faculty with a specialty in Polish or Polish-American topics.

² T. Radzilowski, The Polish Experience in Detroit (Orchard Lake, MI 2002)

On December 23, 2002 Ave Maria College gave formal notice that it will end the affiliation as of June 30, 2003. At that time St. Mary's College will revert to its former status under the Regents of the Orchard Lake Schools with a Board of Trustees chosen as prescribed by the by-laws of the Orchard Lake Schools. Ave Maria may continue to play a role in St. Mary's College for the next few years including some financial support. The exact nature of the involvement is yet to be determined. The end of the affiliation raises anew the role the Polish Studies Program will play at St. Mary's and ultimately in the Orchard Lake Schools, as the College was historically the seat of that program at the schools. The question of how the Polish Studies mission of the schools will be supported and financed is also on the table for the Orchard Lake Board as it reassumes the responsibility for the College.

The location of PAHA at the Orchard Lake Schools between 1945 and 1969 corresponds to the period in which the main emphasis of the research undertaken by members of the organization and of the articles published in PAS were on the religious history of Polonia, including the history of parishes, parochial schools, religious orders and important and notable clerics and religious.³ It was during this period Father Joseph Swastek of the faculty of St. Mary's College guided the organization. The organization reflected his own interest and general historiographic direction of Polonia studies. Father Swastek began the systematic collection of materials into what became the Orchard Lake Archives (now renamed by its current curator as the Central Archive of Polonia). It has evolved over the last forty years into one of the major repositories of materials on Polonia history with an overwhelming strength in the religious experience of the immigration.⁴

The transfer of the PAHA headquarters to the Polish Museum of America in 1969 as Father Swastek's health declined (he died in 1973) also marked the beginning of newer emphases on social, political and diplomatic historical topics. It also corresponded with

³ On the history of PAHA see John Bukowczyk, *The Polish American Historical Association* in J. Bukowczyk (ed) *Polish Americans and Their Communities* (Pittsburgh, 1995)

⁴ Msgr. Roman Nir, "The Central Archive of Polonia". (Orchard Lake, 2001) unpublished typescript.

the entrance into the organization of a new generation of scholars, almost all lay, who began to replace the founding generation of nuns and priests who had built and shaped PAHA for a generation and a half. Given its role as the primary, non-parochial religious institution in Polonia, it was indeed appropriate that St. Mary's College should have been the site of PAHA during its earlier phase. It is likely that its choice as the headquarters of the organization helped to nurture and influence the historiographic questions that dominated the work of the first half of our history. There is no doubt in my mind, on the other hand, that the presence of the organization itself was instrumental in shaping the great archival collection that was begun by Father Swastek at Orchard Lake and served to enhance the image of St. Mary's College as a Polonia center. The St. Mary's programs that were developed subsequently during the seventies clearly were building on that legacy and received their legitimization from St. Mary's history and earlier reputation as the nation's center for Polish-American history.

Beginning in the 1950s and continuing to the present most colleges founded by Polish-Americans either disappeared or gave up their Polish emphasis and became indistinguishable in curriculum and public posture from other American institutions of higher education. The fact that all of them were founded by religious orders of the Catholic Church (with the exception of Alliance College established by the PNA which was closed in the early 1980s) contributed to the process of assimilation into the academic mainstream. The interpretation of the "aggiornamento" called for by the Second Vatican Council in the United States provided a powerful weapon to those who would "Americanize" ethnic Catholicism. The parishes and other institutions founded by immigrants as part of the process of making themselves at home in America were targeted for modernization with ethnicity being equated with the Tridentine Catholicism that was to be superceded in the process. The new outlook born out of the Council also seemed to militate for a worldview that transcended ethnicity. In practice, for American ethnic Catholics this usually meant accepting the norms of the mainstream Church. Vatican II gave strong legitimacy to the already strong impetus felt by the children and grandchildren of the

immigrants to leave the "ghetto" in the wake of the Second World War.⁵

St. Mary's College was able to more successfully than any of the others resist this tendency because of its mission as the guardian of the Polish-American heritage and, in particular, its active role as a center for PAHA. As the activity of the Chrobot era clearly demonstrated it was able to reinterpret the story of Polonia as something more than a fading memory of an Old World village culture. It was also a narrative about a distinct and evolving American culture informed by its living ties to modern Polish culture. SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary, which took on the tasks of providing missalettes in Polish with the new Order of the Mass as approved for the Americas and of interpreting the liturgical and theological insights of Vatican II for Polish speakers in the New World, demonstrated that ethnicity was not the inevitable barrier to aggiornamento as so many Americanizing reformers had insisted.

The drift toward ending the Polish identity of the College in the late eighties and early nineties under President Meyer when the overwhelming majority of the faculty were neither Polish-American nor had an interest in things Polish or Polish-American was reversed in the last eight years. The revitalized Polish program reinterpreted the Polish experience in the United States as an integral part of American history and culture and saw itself as building bridges between U.S. society and Poland to the benefit of both. The return of PAHA to campus (despite some initial faculty resistance) strongly underlined the reemergence of Polish-American identity at the College and ultimately to the entire campus.

The two major critical studies of the Orchard Lake Schools are Father Jozef Swastek's The Formation Years of the Polish Seminary in the United States (Orchard Lake: Center for Polish Studies and Culture, 1985) which was originally published in 1959 in Sacrum Poloniae Millennium, No 6 and Frank Renkiewicz, For God, Country and Polonia: One Hundred Years of the Orchard Lake Schools

⁵ See T.Radzilowski, "Polish American Institutions of Higher Learning" in Frank Mocha, BiCentennial Essays (Stevens Point, 1978) 461-496.

(Orchard Lake: Center for Polish Studies and Culture, 1985). Both provide insight into the history of Polonia as well as into the role Orchard Lake played in that history. Both also open, as historical works always do, a window on the time they were written.⁶

Father Joseph Swastek was among the ablest of the small cadre of historians who shaped PAHA after World War II. His 1959 study of the Seminary is one of the most sophisticated monographs produced by PAHA scholars in the first Orchard Lake period of its history. Nevertheless, the place of its original publication marked it as a work directed at a Polish-American audience, even a Polish-American clerical audience. The introduction bears that out. In it the author notes that he expects his primary readership to be alumni of the school. As a result, the work has many features that mark parochial histories, such as extensive lists of class members and faculty. At the same time Swastek touches many of the most important historiographic issues raised by the early history of the mass peasant immigration to the United States. Consequently, now over forty years after its initial publication, it still provides valuable insights into the history of Polish-America.

Swastek's work demonstrates the extent to which the first leaders of Polish-America and the institutions they founded were shaped by the January Uprising of 1863. Father Dabrowski, the Seminary's founder, as a university student fought with Mieroslawski's partisans. With other leaders of American Polonia, such as Father Vincent Barzynski who was also an insurrectionist, Father Dabrowski was part of the reaction to the romantic revolutionary tradition that had cost Poland so much blood and treasure. The reaction – Polish positivism and organic work which sought as an alternative to build secure economic, social and religious infrastructures for the nation and to shape the emerging national consciousness of the masses by dint of hard, mundane work and education. This became the guiding principle of the founders of Polish-America. The Seminary profited greatly from that spirit which

⁶ See note 1.

translated the dogged determination to survive into small deeds and everyday work.

The creation of the Seminary addressed basic questions about Polish immigrant society's relationship to the American environment. Should Poles create their own institutions for advanced schooling or use those already available with the American church? What kind of consciousness should the Seminary foster in its students? Should they be Polish or Polish-American? What did it mean to be Polish-American and what kind of Catholic culture filled that identity? The Seminary, as Swastek ably shows, tried to answer those questions not only in its curriculum but through popular religious journals, newspapers and pamphlets it disseminated in Polish neighborhoods throughout the country.

In the great struggle between the Polish National Alliance and the Polish Roman Catholic Union, which tore the community apart before World War I, the Seminary under Dabrowski attempted to steer a middle course and to find ways to reconcile the factions. It was severely buffeted in the process, but it kept its autonomy and offered an alternative Polish-American Catholic identity that resisted the politicization of its Catholicism. The Seminary's orientation explicitly signaled that it wished to be an institution which served all Poles within newly emerging Polish-American Catholicism. In support of the universal Church, it also, however, became a bulwark against the independent movements which later coalesced into the Polish National Catholic Church. Swastek's narrative ends with the death of Dabrowski and with the Seminary well established and on its way to becoming a major institution of American Polonia.

Frank Renkiewicz's For God, Country and Polonia issued on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Orchard Lake Schools, carries this story into the 1980s. Renkiewicz, like Swastek earlier, taught at St. Mary's College. He was also a leading figure in PAHA for three decades. Coming into PAHA a generation after Swastek, he represented the new group of professional lay historians who began to work in Polish-American history in the late sixties and early seventies. In fact, he was one of the most prolific and able in that

group. He was also the long time editor of Polish-American Studies and continued that editorship while at St. Mary's College.

Renkiewicz's study leans in large part in the early chapters on Swastek's work for the history of the Orchard Lake Schools between 1884 and 1909. The heart of Renkiewicz's study is found in the chapters dealing with the post-Dabrowski period. Although he still depends heavily on secondary sources, his understanding of American social history and his extensive knowledge of the Polish-American experience provide the background for some insightful and original interpretations of the Polish Catholic experience in the inter-war period. For example, his description of the development of a working class ethnicity that combined equal parts of baroque spirituality and an American sports mania is an especially fine piece of analysis.

Renkiewicz's study of the schools, especially the Prep and College after 1927 when they reconfigured on the prevailing American pedagogical model, is also excellent. The College especially worked hard developing a curriculum that made Polish language and culture part of the emerging liberal arts core program in U.S. colleges after the First World War. This allowed students to study their group history in Europe and America as an integral part of their education. Renkiewicz's study of the curriculum is a virtual compendium of the ongoing debates about ethnicity and identity in Polonia especially in the inter-war period and again in the late sixties and seventies as the College sought once again to open its doors to many more male students who were not candidates for the priesthood and to women. The first period – the twenties – was a time when the first American born generation had to shape an identity in the wake of World War I, the upsurge in nativism and the birth of a new independent Poland. In the second period upwardly mobile third and fourth generation Polish-Americans sought the basis of a personal ethnicity that was no longer solidly anchored in the community of old neighborhoods and ethnic organizations, an ethnicity that would be useful in new suburbs and even in cities distant from old Polonia centers. In both periods, the impact and relevance of the College's programs and outreach extended well beyond its campus and its alumni. The

questions posed by the times were those which could be answered through the kind of reflections about culture, heritage and faith that Orchard Lake was especially well suited to carry on. Renkiewicz's discussion of the impact of the Second Vatican Council and the new ethnicity on Orchard Lake is also very solid.⁷

In the final analysis, Professor Renkiewicz's work is a fine distillation of insights on Polish ethnicity that had emerged through PAHA scholarship by 1984 much of it generated initially at Orchard Lake by Father Swastek's article "What is a Polish-American?" in Volume I of Polish American Studies in 1944 and continued with vigor by Father Leonard Chrobot and his collaborators decades later. The book also placed the history of the Orchard Lake Schools well into the context of the history of Polonia.

The task for the next generation of historians dealing with Orchard Lake is not only to chronicle again the impact of the new relationship of St. Mary's College with PAHA, and the development of the institution since the 1980s but to reinterpret the whole story in light of the new insights our scholarship has given us about Polonia in recent decades. Equally important is the need to use Orchard Lake as a prism to give us a deeper understanding of the history of Polonia. It is the ideal vehicle to begin a study of the distinctive Polish-American clerical culture that marked (and still to some extent continues to mark) life in Polish parishes and shapes networks of support for Polish priests. This culture lays at the heart of the response of the Polish-American church to Polonia issues since the beginning of the twentieth century. Such a history could also illuminate the attitudes of Polish priests to the problems brought by the great upheavals of the twentieth century. Orchard Lake, located in a beautiful pastoral lakeside setting far from the hungry neighborhoods of depression America, had little to offer Polish-Americans as they struggled to maintain family and community or fought the bloody battles of the union organizing wars in the thirties. Orchard Lake produced neither a social gospel nor labor priests. This same period in Poland is marked by the deep involvement of priests

⁷ For a more extensive commentary see my article – Radzilowski, "Old and New Wine in New Bottles: Current Books in Polish American History" Journal of American Ethnic History, 911 (Fall 1989)

like Father (later Cardinal) Stefan Wyszynski in the problems of labor. His reflections were later to be distilled in his essay on the dignity of work in modern society that remains a classic of European Catholic thought.

A second area of research that seeks its historian is the life and work of Father Joseph Dabrowski, the founder of the Orchard Lake Schools. Felician scholars have examined at great length his contributions as the founder of the congregation in the United States and his work on pedagogy, but there have been only two scholars who have examined his role as the founder of the Seminary and his other activities including his writing and publishing that shaped early Polonia. Father Syski, an early member of PAHA, wrote a biography of Dabrowski on the occasion of the centenary of his birth in 1842 in Polish and Father Joseph Swastek wrote a series of articles on Dabrowski as well as the monograph on the early years of the Seminary that was devoted largely to Dabrowski's role. Many of Father Swastek's pieces are short and celebratory but his 1969 article in Polish American Studies (ironically the last issue published at Orchard Lake), "Father Dabrowski Reconsidered", is a first-rate historiographical study of Dabrowski's place in the history of Polonia. It is the last scholarly study of the man who is arguably the most complex, controversial and original of the early priests in the immigrant community.⁸

The year 2003 marks the 100th anniversary of the death of Father Dabrowski and will be marked by a number of observances including a symposium on his life and work. Perhaps it will also stimulate new work on a life that has been too long neglected. In light of the concerns of Polish-Americans about their place in a changing American society and on the way to incorporate the new wave of Polish immigrants who have flocked into some Polonia centers as well as many other regions far from the communities established by the earlier immigrants some aspects of Father Dabrowski's work and thought beg to be revisited. These include his complex attempt to find a synthesis between the preservation of

⁸ Joseph Swastek, "Father Dabrowski Reconsidered" Polish American Studies 26/1 (Jan-June 1969) 30-40.

Polish heritage and a full acculturation into American society and his conscious welcome to Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Czechs, Slovaks and Lithuanians to his new Polish seminary even to the point of planning for special "departments" for these languages and cultures. These students, along with their Polish classmates, were to be educated in a distinctive curriculum of his devising to provide a new style clerical leadership for the new American immigrant communities. I hope that the Dabrowski anniversary just beginning will be marked by a new reassessment of Father Dabrowski to restore him to his deserved place in our historiography.

The relationship between St. Mary's College and PAHA has been long and fruitful. I hope in the new phase of the relationship both continue to prosper in their mission to preserve the history and culture of Polonia.