

## RE INVENTING THE CENTER

# POLISH IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THE NEW WORLD

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"I remind you that you should not  
listen to anyone, only come to America,  
because in America it is very good for women" (1)

Letter of Franciszek Tystolski  
to his wife in Poland, March 22, 1891

Historian Timothy Smith has observed that the immigration experiences is deeply rooted in the emotions of hope and guilt: hope for new life and opportunity and guilt over leaving family and friends and a lifetime of obligations that will never be discharged. As such then, it is an invitation to theologize for those same emotions are the two of wellsprings of theology. The immigrant must not only find God in the new place, but tell the stories that will localize and domesticate God again for her -- for all gods are local -- as well as assuage the guilt and give meaning to the hope that the migratory journey has aroused. (2)

Essayist and photographer John Berger has seen the immigrant dilemma in another way. The home, he writes, is the center of the universe. It is that place where the horizontal line that represents all the world's roads which lead away from and come back to the center crosses the vertical line the marks the axis of Heaven and the underworld. God, the village church, the honored dead and all the important living are at that juncture. It is also the intersection of all of the narratives that explain what it all means. Thus, at the heart of the immigrant experience is the destruction of home and the end of a personal universe with a coherent center. It brings with it a deep longing to recreate it in the new place. With the breakup of the center comes the growing incoherence of its stories. To be "at home" again each immigrant must re-imagine herself in the new place and re-cast the stories that will give meaning and boundaries to a new center for the universe and tie it to the old one. It is out of those longings and emotions, out of the dialog between old stories and new experiences that an immigrant literature was born. (3)

What are the experiences that marked the passage from old world to the new one for women from the Polish lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century out of which they reconstructed home? First, it is important to note that Polish women were living in a world in considerable flux. Serfdom has been abolished in the Polish lands during the course of the nineteenth century and by mid century the first stirrings of the industrial revolution and the urbanization and population growth which accompanied it were in clear evidence. The Polish country side was torn by the uprisings of 1830, 1831, 1846-1848 and 1863-1864 and the peasants in affected areas were increasingly forced to choose between the governments of the partitioning powers and the nationalist insurgents. Indeed the very ideas of Polish nationalism began to infiltrate the villages itself brought by schoolmasters, newspapers, revolutionary agitators or by peasants returning from work in the cities.

The population growth, the rising price of land, parcelization of family plots, governmental policies to force Poles off the land drove more and more men into migration -- at first short term and near then for longer periods and at greater distances -- or into permanent emigration. The migration often changed the condition of women who remained in the village. Marriages were delayed, new responsibilities were assumed, male authority declined and marriages were strained or even broken as a result of the new conditions.



Women, of course, did not just wait at home for the men to return. They too were migrants and emigrants. They had taken part in seasonal migrations since the eighteenth century and by 1900 were probably the majority of seasonal agricultural migrants. (4) Polish women, especially the younger, single ones, often traveled together in groups to work in the beet fields of Germany and Denmark or the potato or grain fields of Russian Poland. According to one observer the women and girls would cross the Vistula River into Russian territory to work in the fields.

They would go on foot in groups of two or three score, carrying in big kerchiefs their clothes and food with them. They would leave home in the spring and return after the potatoes had been dug in the autumn. (5)

The emigration of women from the Polish countryside was, of course, driven by the same structural forces which caused male emigration. At the personal level, the motives of women emigrants were as varied, complex and idiosyncratic as those in the individual stories of the men who migrated. Women went abroad because there was a better marriage market, because their wages were needed to sustain a family on the land or because they were called or taken by husbands, fathers and fiancées. Emigration was also for women, as for men, a chance to escape from an oppressive personal situation. (6)

The lure of modern life, the shining image of America, and the hope of material improvement in their lives also drew women as strongly as it did men. One young immigrant woman, her imagination excited by stories of those who have been in America, remembered that, "nothing in Poland was good enough for me." Whenever she saw well dressed people she fantasized that, that is how everyone in America dressed. "Why don't we have it like that," she thought. "Let's go to America." Another young woman envious of a much poorer friend who sent back a photograph in which, "she looked as pretty as a countess" decided that, "I am going to that America. I don't want to work on a farm ..... I came to this America because I wanted to send back a photograph to show I am also such a lady." (8)

Many of the women who emigrated were going to join husbands. They often made the arrangements themselves. They sold or leased the family land, bought tickets, arranged local transportation and border crossings which were often illegal. They were aided only by vague, often unreliable, and outdated instructions from distant husbands. Women who had little experience beyond the village or who had traveled as migrants only locally and regionally now traveled across Europe and crossed the ocean alone or with small children. They carried most of their valuables with them. (9)



After arrival single women often lived with friends or relatives. Sometimes, however, they ended up as boarders with people whom they know slightly or not at all. Grace Abbott counted over two thousand young Polish women or girls, who came without family to Chicago in an eighteen month period before World War I. Of these only 81 had parents in the city and 626 came to "cousins" and "friends." The majority had no contacts in Chicago. Abbott also discovered that many of the "friends" had not known the girl at home. (10) Many worked some distance from their place of residence and among men and women of other ethnic groups. Wherever their residence or place of employment, they found that the social networks of kinship and gossip that had exercised social control over them in the village were much weaker and less pervasive here. (11)

The young immigrant woman quickly developed a new sense of her rights and the possibilities for greater control over her life choices in the United States. She changed jobs on the advice of friends, got her own paycheck, and often negotiated with her family about how much she would keep and how much she would contribute to the common purse. She picked her own husband and arranged her own wedding, aided only by sisters or girlfriends. Her knowledge of sex and birth control, learned from co-workers, was often more sophisticated than her mother's. Some even took advantage of skills, such as sewing, to open their own businesses. (12) The new freedom often brought conflict and misunderstanding with parents in Europe or the United States or with relatives or siblings who acted as parental surrogates here. These painful strains on familial solidarity paralleled and merged with the equally disruptive conflicts of American born daughters with immigrant parents. (13).

The immigration experience strongly changed the situation of married women also. Most immigrant women made their new homes without the assistance or advice of their mothers, mother-in-laws or aunts in an environment radically different ✓ from the one in which they were reared. Their children grew up without grandparents in a strange world. More and more immigrant mothers came to depend on friends, neighbors, and outsiders for support. They sought advice from these sources on making a home and preparing their children to succeed in a world they did not wholly understand. In the absence of the usual network of female relatives, the women had to expect more help, support, and companionship from their daughters and their husbands than was customary. (15)

Married women, like their single sisters, quickly developed a new sense of their rights in the United States. They began to feel that they were entitled to a certain level of treatment and a standard of life that was often at variance with old world practice. The files of the Chicago Legal Aid Agency studied by Thomas and Znaniecki show that Polish immigrant women were quick to turn to police and social service agencies in case of abuse, non-support, or desertion. They soon learned that they would have to develop new strategies for coping with life's problems in urban America. In the village, many of these problems were dealt with informally by gossip or recourse to family and friends. In their new homes, immigrant women came to be more dependent on public agencies for assistance and support than their sisters in the old country. (16)



Recently historians of women's experience have begun to use the metaphor of reproduction to speak of their roles in society. The metaphor extends the meaning of reproduction from the biological reproduction of the next generation as mothers to the reproduction by their nurturing of the ability of their families to maintain daily life to the social reproduction of communal and familial networks and the creation of the new "webs of signification," to use Clifford Geertz's phrase, which give meaning and value to all aspects of human life. The work of reproduction in all these senses stands out in stark relief in the story of immigrant women because they were pioneers who were creating new social groups with institutional and familial forms that were often novel to them. (17)

Polish immigrant women carried on this work of reproduction as operators of boarding houses, as teaching and nursing nuns, as founders of a myriad of local, parochial, regional and national social, religious, educational and insurance organizations and most importantly as wives, mothers and kins women. It is this last form of reproductive work that Miceala di Leonardo has aptly called "kinship work." (18)



Despite the patriarchal form of the family, sometimes recast and actually strengthened by the immigration experience, and despite a division of family labor, resources and support that was often unequal and disadvantageous, most Polish immigrant women, like their counterparts in other ethnic groups, probably found their identities and most of life's satisfactions in their families. For all of its faults, the family and the community in which it was embedded were, after all, more immediately and consciously their own creations than anything their mothers had ever known. In a recent historiographic study of immigrant women, Donna Gabaccia has pointed out that the notion that most immigrant women identified with their families is strongly supported in the sources. The negative evaluation of that identification by some feminist scholars is, she notes, the product of class and cultural biases. Except for some scholarship on more recent Polish immigrants, most research on Polish immigrant women, has generally supported Gabaccia's idea of the family as a major source of positive identity for women and the setting for the most of their satisfactions and accomplishments. 19

In the process of creating homes and families in a foreign, urban world, Polish immigrants laid the basis for the creation of key elements of Polish ethnicity in America. They had to think consciously about what it meant to be Polish and how to translate that into the rituals of daily life. They had to decide what could be kept, what could be abandoned, and how to celebrate holidays and rites of passage in an unfamiliar environment. They shaped many of the features of personal ethnic identity around home, food, celebration, child rearing, and marriage. This creative adaptation and new signification was done initially by young women separated from their mothers and traditional communities. (20)

Polish immigrant women also formed a wide variety of formal organizations to replace the informal networks they had left behind. The most important national, secular organization founded by Polish women in the United States was the Zwiazek Polek w Ameryce (ZPA) or the Polish Women's Alliance. Founded in 1898, it created a national insurance fund run entirely by women, published a women's newspaper Glos Polek (The Polish Women's Voice), ran education programs, summer camps, and established libraries for women and children in many larger Polish communities. By 1920, it enrolled over 25,000 women and the weekly edition of Glos Polek was read by about 15 percent of Polish American women. (21)



During the period of immigration, the ZPA, through its education programs, political lobbying, service work, and its publications, especially Glos Polek, emerged as a strong voice for feminism, political reform and progressive goals in American and Polish American society. It favored women's suffrage and the opening of all educational institutions and professional careers to women. It championed the rights of workers and programs of industrial safety. It informed Polish women of the progress of women's causes throughout the world and in the United States. It also tried to help rural immigrant women adjust to life in an urban setting and to become aware of the latest advances in child rearing, hygiene, education and nutrition. Finally, the organization worked tirelessly to preserve and propagate Polish language and culture in America and to win Polish independence.

(22)

During the early decades of the twentieth century, a significant number of Polish immigrant women were exposed to the ZPA. As a result, they learned the message of equal rights, of the rightful claims of women to education, advancement and a place of dignity in modern society through an important and respected source established and run by women of their own community.

The ZPA, whose founding came in reaction to the refusal of the Polish National Alliance to enroll women, resisted all later attempts to get it to merge with male dominated Polish American organizations. The leadership of the ZPA allowed that, at some distant future time, it might be possible for men and women to join together in the same organization but that would only come when, "the will to rule disappears from man's soul," and when he can accept a woman as a "truly completed, equal person and not as a minor child." (23) The ZPA remains, still today, a strong and independent women's organization in Polonia and one of the largest ethnic women's organizations in the United States.

No look at the organizational life of Polish American women could be complete without an analysis of the Polish American religious orders. A few Polish American religious orders were brought from Europe but the majority were founded in the U.S. by immigrant women. In addition, young immigrant women and the American born daughters of immigrants flocked to the sisterhoods in such large numbers that within a half a century most of the European orders had become primarily American ones with the bulk of their members in the United States. The rapid growth of the religious orders represented a yet unstudied, spontaneous outburst of religious commitment from women from whom too little had been expected in the past. It clearly marks a dramatic change in the nature of peasant religiosity in the new world and provides an example of how immigration opened new religious and social roles for women which offered greater opportunities for service and commitment. (24)



The growth of the religious orders represented the mobilization of the talents of tens of thousands of Polish American women for service to their struggling communities. They also acted as a major agency for social, educational, and occupational mobility for women who would otherwise have had few such choices. The religious life appealed to those women interested in positions of power, responsibility, travel, social status, and education. It also represented a chance to leave home and offered an attractive alternative to marriage, domestic service, or factory work.

The main function of the Polish religious orders in the United States (unlike Europe) was education. They staffed the vast network of elementary and secondary schools (about 1000 at the height of the System) created by Poles in America. In fact, without them the existence of that system would have been impossible. In addition, they also wrote the texts for their schools and developed curricula that attempted to inculcate a Polish Catholic consciousness as well as American patriotism in their charges. Through their schools, curricula, and texts, they taught immigrants and their children the meaning of Catholicism in the new American context and sought to create a Polish American identity that would make them feel at home in America. If the home environment created by one group of Polish American women was one pillar of ethnicity, the educational and social service system created by another was second. The very existence of Polonia itself is thus to a significant degree the product of the efforts of the women of the religious orders. In addition, through their schools, hospitals, orphanages, clinics, day care centers, and old age homes and through their commitment, education and labor they made a major contribution to the humanization of the harsh environment of the American industrial city in this century. (25)

Polish American women were also workers. Almost all single women worked. Before World War I, the pay for various jobs Polish American Women did ranged from \$4.00 to \$20.00 per week with some of the jobs such as domestic work including maintenance. After marriage, the rates of work outside the home dropped off sharply. However, some evidence indicates that ten to twenty percent of married women did work. If there were children, a working mother usually signified a family in serious straits. The rates of employment for married women, however, varied a great deal from one area of the country to the other. In areas such as Lawrence, Massachusetts, Central Falls, Rhode Island, Passaic or Paterson, New Jersey, textile production was the major industry and employment rates for married women were much higher. In such areas, men's work paid much less and a great many of the jobs were open primarily to women.

Many Polish American men, however, were attracted to work in mines, steel mills, and other heavy industry. In areas where such industries predominated, wages for men were higher and much fewer opportunities were available for female labor. In rural or semi-rural areas women, married and single, and children often found employment, usually seasonal, in canning and food processing. Certain operations in meat packing plants, which attracted Polish male labor, were also open to women. In the Midwest, Polish women went into cigar factories. In some cities such as Detroit, once a major center for cigar manufacturing, cigar making was practically dominated by Polish women. In all areas of the country Polish women, married and single, found employment as domestics. (26)



The women who stayed home with their children did more than just care for the house, cook and clean. They kept large gardens, raised animals, preserved food, and sewed clothing for their families. Many also earned money by working at home, doing sewing, weaving, or home manufacturing. A good seamstress could easily make as much as her husband did at the mill. A skilled seamstress made about \$100.00 a month in 1914. Many also ran small retail businesses out of their homes. Among early Polish immigrants the operation of a saloon in one of the rooms of the house was a common enterprise. In the Polish neighborhoods of Chicago before the First World War, for example, there were over 3000 saloons, most of them home operations often run by the woman of the house. (27)

The most common enterprise for women, especially in heavy industrial areas, was a boarding house. Eva Morawska's study of Johnstown, Pennsylvania showed that at one time or another in the family cycle, 50 to 60 percent of Polish American families took in boarders. This was heavy work which involved doing cooking, cleaning, and laundering for as many as a dozen men. For this difficult and tiring job, wives earned two-thirds to three-quarters of the income their husbands made in the factories. (28)

If we have a significant amount of information on the work life of Polish immigrant women, we have considerably less on other aspects of their public life and activities inside and outside their communities. Most of their time and energy was obviously devoted to their families' welfare and needs and to their work. However, there is enough scattered evidence to indicate that they could mobilize and maintain a high level of public activity for considerable periods of time when issues important to their communities arose. The creativity, intensity, and sometimes even violence of their responses, demonstrates also that they were far from being the patient and submissive immigrant Griseldas of popular myth.

The accounts of social worker and settlement house staff indicate that Polish immigrant women could and did engage in political lobbying, organizing, and demonstrating on issues such as safety of their streets, health and sanitation, and the cost of living. Mary McDowell, for example, reports on the campaign of Polish and Czech women in Chicago to get clean water and improved sewage removal in their neighborhood. (29) Polish immigrant women went to the streets in 1915 in Hartford, Connecticut in support of a bakers' strike for higher wages. Their response in this case was quite sophisticated. They successfully pressured the bread companies to raise wages and improve conditions for the workers without raising the price of bread. (30)



There is hardly a Polish Roman Catholic or Polish National Catholic parish which did not experience a major disturbance over issues of leadership, control of parish resources, and relationships with the church hierarchy. In many of these struggles a key role was played by women. For example, in the well known struggle over the control of the first Polish parish in Detroit in the early 1880's mobs of women seized control of the church to hold it for the pastor who had been ousted by the Bishop and to deny it to his appointed successor. In the process, they not only defied ecclesiastical authority but also civil authority and fought the police and courts to maintain their position. The Detroit incident was only one of the first of numerous such affairs. (31)

In the bloody battles in the coal fields, the women fought with skill and courage in support of their men. In the wake of the Latimer massacre in the Pennsylvania anthracite fields in 1897, "Big Mary" Septek led a "wild band of women" armed with clubs, rolling pins, and pokers who waged a guerrilla war against strikebreakers. In one incident they routed over two hundred male washery workers. It finally required the intervention of state militia to end the so-called, "foreign women raids." (32) During a 1910 strike in a Brooklyn sugar refinery, when threatening shots were fired at strikers, Polish women rushed into the streets holding their children on high, daring the police to shoot. (33) Frank Renkiewicz, in his study of Polish American workers, notes that during strikes: "Time and again, women, wives usually, bolstered the flagging spirits of their men and took the lead in demonstrations and in sustaining resistance." (34)

In many cases, the women acted on their own behalf as workers and family wage earners. It was the walkout of the Polish women weavers, in response to a pay cut, that sparked the famous Lawrence Strike of 1912. (35) Polish immigrant women showed the greatest energy and boldness when they were involved both as workers and as the defenders of their families and communities. No incident makes that more clear than the rioting in the Back-of-the Yards neighborhood during the great Chicago packing house strike of 1921-1922 when the employers sought to cut wages and break the union. The ferocity of the attacks by Polish women astounded even the Polish press. (36) The militance, intelligence and fearlessness of Polish immigrant women was to be echoed with even greater sophistication and persistence by their daughters in the great labor wars of the 1930's. (37)



To an outside observer the women of the Polish American community looked for the most part like a group of rural central Europeans transplanted awkwardly into the cities and countryside of North America. There was nothing about them that hinted that they had anything to say to their new homeland. Yet within a space of a less than two generations they had created a whole new society complete with richly complex institutions and as well as the narratives to explain them. In the process of making themselves at home in the new place they changed it. Whatever light, beauty, love and humanity appeared in the ugly landscapes of early industrial America was in large measure their work. They humanized the city. They told their stories in the school text, minute books, letters and newspapers they wrote as well as in the walls of schools, churches and sororital halls they built. A surprising number told their new stories of the America they encountered, the Poland they remembered and the Polonia they created in songs, poems, plays, essays, short stories and novels. It is to those writings born out of their own experiences that we must turn if we are to fully understand their stories and their time as well as our own.