

# QUO VADIS, POLONIA IN AUSTRALIA?

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*The summary address given at the Polish Community Conference sponsored by the Australian Polish Community Services and opened by the Hon. Gary Hardgrave, Federal Minister of Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs. It was held in February, 2003 at the Moonee Ponds Civic Centre.*

Firstly, may I begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people, the original owners and custodians of the land that we are standing upon. It was more than ten years ago, that we gathered to consider the plight of the Polish community in Australia. Again, the Australian-Polish Community Services are to be thanked for bringing us together to reflect on the past ten years and to consider the future, an uncertain future, a globalizing future. It was timely then, and it is timely again. The quality of the papers has been high, and yet there was expressed this uncertainty about the future. The Polish community has some unusual features inasmuch as the first post-War wave who arrived mainly in the late 1940s and early 1950s was a wave not subsequently supplemented with any chain migration process and the second major wave with very different social characteristics arrived in the 1980s to change very substantially the community's profile as well as to renew the community. This has now become more obvious.

Now that the Jewish component is only a very small element of the Polish-born statistics from the 2001 census, it has become much easier to interpret them. During the 1980s, the needs of the Polish community had been swamped by the needs of the larger Italian and Greek communities and by the diversion of resources to the arriving Vietnamese refugees. This, fortunately, changed during the 1990s as focus shifted to the care needs of the Depression and WWII generation of Australians and, by extension, of the ethnic aged. The driving force behind the 1992 conference was the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs whose personnel had realised the Polish community with its growing aged care problem needed to be focussed upon. Its secretary of the time, Chris Conybeare, admitted at the 1992 conference the Polish community had been neglected. In the intervening decade, much has been achieved. Government departments, both Federal and State, need to be thanked for the funding they have given, here in Victoria, to APCS and, to a lesser extent, to the Polish Community Council of Victoria. And those Polish people who have worked long and arduous hours to make this achievable need to be thanked, including Bill Nowak, chair of the Australian Polish Community Services.

At the 1992 conference, I asked the question: *why had the Polish community missed out in the allocation of resources? why had the Polish community been the losers rather than the winners?* The Polish community are no longer the losers, and certainly in the area of aged care resources, their needs have been met except in the area of residential care where, however, the solution is not easy due to the excessive reluctance of Poles to enter into residential care, especially hostel care.

In my analysis a decade ago, my answer to the question was, firstly, to focus on the residual refugee mentality which Professor Jupp has today outlined in more depth than I did - as Roland Sussex and Jerzy Zubrzycki said in 1985, "Many resented Australia. Probably all, to different

degrees, yearned to return to Poland. This refugee mentality dominated their early years in Australia and, in some cases, has never been overcome” (Sussex & Zubrzycki 1985: 7); secondly, the lack of communication patterns within the community which focussed on the second-generation group and their failure to involve themselves in the affairs of the community - this issue, as was stressed today, is still with us though the presentation by Franek Nowicki provided a welcome but small antidote to the general trend. As a young person, he drew our attention to unsupportive organizations and access to venues.

Thirdly, I focussed on the Polish ambivalence to multiculturalism which has been further confirmed by the research of Elizabeth Drozd (1997) on the Solidarity group, the young, urban, well-educated group of emigrants. I want to pursue this issue in more depth today because it is a serious issue. She showed that they were overwhelmingly opposed to the entry into Australia of Middle Easterners and Asians. More dramatically, the study showed that, in the case of intermarriage, these Poles would not welcome Turkish (87%), Muslims (85%), Lebanese (81%), Vietnamese (77%) and Indians (72%) into their families, the percentage representing the proportion who said they would not welcome them into their family even though the Catholic Christian ethic says, “Welcome the stranger”. But they would welcome Australians (15%), Catholics (20%) and Europeans (20%). This fear of the stranger, this xenophobia, remains a serious problem within the community which the clergy and others need to address - the attitude seems to be “I’ll shake the hand of a Vietnamese Catholic at the sign of peace during Mass but I am opposed to his son marrying my daughter”. For many centuries, the Polish intelligentsia has had an open attitude to otherness but this seems less pervasive today. Unlike the Dutch, for example, the Poles are not natural multiculturalists yet the future throughout the world is with cultural diversity.

In my analysis, I focussed, fourthly, on the lack of political and academic leadership in Victoria, in other words, the lack of political participation which Adam Jamrozik focussed upon. The situation has improved over the past decade, and, as we have seen today, politicians now take the Polish community seriously since they are a middle-sized community not without some limited voting influence. However, as James Jupp highlighted, it cannot be exaggerated. The fifth factor was the attitude to welfare and the extreme Polish reluctance to make donations to Polish welfare and other agencies, “we Poles are more generous with our blood than with our money” as one respondent told Rachel Unikoski (1978) back in the seventies. However, as the Hon. Gavin Jennings highlighted today, volunteerism is an important aspect of welfare practice. It is thus gratifying to see so many Polish volunteers, serving the Polish aged, here today and this marks another step forward in the self-help philosophy that was not present a decade ago. The sixth issue was the image problem which still has not changed though the community now has a slightly higher profile within the broader community - at that time, I summed it up and I think it remains true, that it is “a community, conservative with a fundamentalist type of Roman Catholicism, somewhat closed in upon itself, but basically O.K.” It was gratifying that Fr. Slowik, who has done so much to help the Polish community, endorsed my summation.

*Quo vadis, Polonia in Australia?* In answering this question, I want to focus my summarizing remarks around the (1) welfare, (2) the pastoral and (3) the cultural; whilst I will be critical, even provocative, I do so as a sympathetic yet critical outsider. I hope my remarks will be received with a spirit of realism and acceptance so that the Polish community can better understand itself and position itself accordingly. A microscope has again been placed upon the community which can be painful but, more than most people, the Poles know that from suffering and critique great advances and progress can be made.

**The Welfare:** Poverty has not emerged as a major issue within the community though it remains an issue for a small but significant number of Poles for whom migration, always a risk, has not been a success. A small number of recently arrived Poles are not able to draw unemployment benefits during their first two years in Australia, leaving them and their families in desperate straits. However, the APCS, in particular, can adequately handle this situation at the moment once they know about particular situations. Meeting the needs of aged Poles, certainly in Victoria, has made great advances in the past decade. This task is now long-term, at least for the next 35 - 40 years, since the aging of the second-generation Polish Australians and, more particularly, the aging of the Solidarity wave will begin to have a marked impact in 15 - 20 years as the last cohorts of the immediate post-War wave pass on. Accordingly, there needs to be unity in the community to ensure that a body such as APCS is supported and made strong. As James Jupp has said, it remains very important to sustain an organizational structure, yet there are very definite signs that community infrastructure is cracking. As we move further and further away from the welfare state, the emphasis will be upon strong and innovative welfare agencies, well-connected and well-positioned. Bigger will be better, and professionalism in delivery will be paramount. There are many smaller Eastern European and Slavic communities not able organizationally to meet their needs which, however, could be met by a broader umbrella organization centred around the Polish community. This has already started to happen with APCS delivering some services to the Ukrainian community, but it will all need more careful thought, flexibility and more innovative thinking.

The lack in the Polish community is for residential care though the need is not yet fully apparent. As was shown in another APCS study (Drozd 1998), many Poles have been scattered across hostels and nursing homes - in fact, of the 252 responses from aged care institutions, 118 Poles were found to be present in 62 aged-care homes. There is the Polish home in Bayswater which seems, at this stage, a little too small to make it viable over the longterm. Small aged care facilities are finding it difficult to survive. The cluster solution which was the strategy followed more in the western suburbs seems to have failed. It would seem that the issue needs to be given much more thought, and I would like to suggest that conversations begin to be held with organizations such as the Catholic Homes for the Aged and the Scalabrini Aged Care agency which has done so much for the Italian aged, particularly in Sydney. I am not a great advocate of private providers.

Secondly, the Polish welfare organizations need to think beyond aged care. Imprisonment rates for the Poles are not high, drugs seems not to be a major issue and family breakdown, whilst present, is certainly no worse than the general community. But there are needs, and perhaps in co-operation with other organizations, family and community needs could be more focussed upon. Late in the conference, attention was drawn to two issues which will need careful reflection: the issue of mental health amongst Polish Australians and their over-use of legal drugs, and the issue of domestic violence.

**The Pastoral:** For today's conference, a major feature has been the input from the long-serving Fr. Slowik and Sister Paula, newly arrived in Melbourne. This has been very welcome - there is a strong link between religion and culture but the two are not identical, neither in Poland nor in Australia. All countries as a result of globalization and the movement of peoples are having to deal with culturally diverse peoples. As a result of the September 11<sup>th</sup>. attacks and also of the sex abuse scandals, religious leadership is now under greater scrutiny from both the public and the community. The sex abuse scandals have greatly impacted upon the Catholic Church, though fortunately not upon the Polish Catholic community. Nonetheless, we need to be aware that, as

we look world-wide, Catholic clericalism is in its death throes and a new Church will be born in the next three or four decades. Because the Catholic bishops of the world did not deal adequately with the celibacy and other sexuality issues in the 1960s and 1970s, they are now paying a terrible price for their intransigence and incompetence.

There is much that is very attractive about Polish Catholicism, its long history, its strong foundations, its understanding of the force of popular religion and its opposition to Communism, all summed up in the figure of Papa Wojtyla. But there is also something about it that worries Poles themselves. And it seems to me that it is not motivated by anti-clericalism. It seems that only about 80 per cent of persons with a Polish Catholic background tick the Catholic box whereas the same statistic for the Italians and Maltese is 95 per cent and 93 per cent respectively. Here, in Australia, the Polish chaplains have served their people well though they have been partly hamstrung by the Australian bishops and their assimilationist policy. In her research with the Solidarity group, Elizabeth Drozd found that between a third and a quarter regularly attended either a Polish or an English Mass. Certainly, there had been a very reduced rate of Mass attendance between Poland and Australia. Her results showed that, whilst for exactly half there had been no shift in their religiosity, about 30 per cent said they had moved away from religion and 15 per cent had grown closer to religion, though perhaps not necessarily closer to the church. There was shown a high degree of distrust and dissatisfaction with the Polish priests. In the Polish clergy, I do not see the same degree of leadership and innovation that I see in the Scalabrinian (in particular) and Capuchin priests, each in very different ways, for the Italian community. It is not so much their theological conservatism that worries me as their lack of innovation and imagination. In her study, Drozd found the Australian church with its priests to be a more comfortable place for her subjects than with the Polish Australian church - this is surprising to me but they had a more positive view of the mainstream Australian Church than the Polish Church, the former being "more friendly and closer to the people and a church that meets people half way (*wychodzina przeciw*)" (Drozd 1997: 167)

Fr. Slowik described in great detail the infrastructure of Catholic Poland in its work for its own migrants and for the Australian Church. It is an impressive contribution. Fortunately, for the foreseeable future, unlike other Catholic communities, Polonia Australia will be well-served by Polish-speaking priests but, as the research evidence suggests, they need to change their style and work to create greater social capital in all sections of the community. The Sisters of Christ the King, led by Sister Paula, who described her work with Poles in the evening of their lives, will be able to make a wonderful spiritual and welfare contribution but this will only happen if their financial base is made secure. This is the responsibility of the community. At the moment, they are relying on the generosity of APCS and its ability to win government grants. But this cannot last. The Polish community needs to become united to ensure the nuns are looked after, beginning with paying for the costs of their convent. This is not a large, but an immediate challenge for the community. The nuns also will need to move beyond merely visiting aged Poles.

**The Cultural:** The Polish Australian heritage goes back over 300 years, and it has been well-researched, thanks to Lech Paszkowski (1982, 1988) and others. However, it seems to me that it has not been linked to the Polish Australian community, and nor has it been disseminated well enough within the Polish Australian community. And there have been missed opportunities. In 1996, the three hundredth anniversary of the first Poles to step onto Australian soil when a group of Polish Lithuanians were part of the crew of a Dutch ship that explored the Western Australian coast in 1696. The Polish could easily have joined with the Lithuanian and Dutch communities

for a series of memorable celebrations. But nothing happened. Later this year, there will be the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the first permanent Polish resident in Australia, Joseph Potaski, a convict who was involved in the failed settlement at Sorrento in 1803 - later, after his release, he became a successful wheat farmer in Tasmania. The Strzelecki heritage needs to be linked to the Polish Australian heritage through plaques and monuments.

In preserving the Polish Australian heritage, there is now no need to build a physical museum. Rather, a virtual museum can be constructed in virtual space on the internet, properly controlled by the community and added to as the years go by, and to be viewed by successive generations of Polish Australians, including in their school time.

Polish Australia has been reasonably loyal to Catholic Australia, yet the Polish community has not been demanding enough of the Catholic schooling system. How many Catholic secondary schools have taught the Polish language? taught about Poland, linking it to the Pope's background? about the contribution Polish people have made to Australia? How many of the thousands of Polish Australian children sitting in Catholic classrooms have been made to feel proud of their Polish heritage in an informed, not superficial, way? How many know something about Strzelecki, one of Australia's first greenies? About the contributions of many Poles to Australia's artistic patrimony? Of course, the government schooling system also needs to hear the same demands.

In conclusion, I want to address three issues. The first is community infrastructure, organizational death and community cohesion. Over the next decades, many organizations, long established by the post-War wave, will die; many have assets and, for these not to be dissipated, a plan needs to be developed to ensure that the assets are brought together for the future of the community and its heritage. To achieve this, the community will probably need outside assistance. Secondly, there is a lack of cohesion in the community due to the longstanding mistrust and animosity between the two major organizations here in Victoria - it is part political, part geographic, part personality and all history. Both need to keep their identity but there needs to be a greater spirit of co-operativeness built around a series of confidence-building measures.

The last issue is the failure of the second-generation and the Solidarity wave to involve themselves in Polish community affairs. While the immediate post-War community were fundamentally a displaced refugee community, the Solidarity wave seems to exhibit the characteristics of a diasporic community, living in Australia but not overly committed to it, strongly Polish but wanting an updated, modern expression of Polishness, more problematic in their thinking about where home is to be found even though they will almost certainly live out their days in Australia and being totally committed to family, and family alone, and ensuring not only its financial welfare but also making sure they enjoy life. This can be changed but only if the image of Polishness that is projected is not one frozen in a past that is long gone but is modern and appealing. In conclusion, as has been said elsewhere and in different contexts but with the same purpose in mind, "it is not a sin to go back into the past, but it is a sin to remain in the past". The future cannot be allowed just to happen, especially in these years of profound change; the future must be embraced but this means that communities and their infrastructure of agencies and organizations will need repositioning in order to continue to achieve their missions.

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