

THE POLISH IMPACT ON AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

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Poles, like the Irish and Italians, have emigrated in their millions over the past two centuries. Most have gone to the United States, but many found work in the mines and factories of France and Germany. Losing their independence with the partitions of the late 18th century, many Poles also sought freedom in the west. The brief period of independence between 1920 and 1939 also coincided with the world wide depression and the rise of fascism. There were always good reasons for leaving Poland. But there was also a strong desire to preserve Polish culture and especially the language and the special role of Polish Catholicism. It should not be forgotten, however, that many who left Poland did not share this aspiration, being Yiddish-speaking Jews. In more recent years many have also come from the German-speaking minority incorporated into Poland from 1920. The Polish-born population has never been exactly the same as the 'Polish community' - which is also true for many other so-called 'ethnic communities' in Australia as in other immigrant societies.

Polish emigration to Australia was minimal until after the Second World War. There were plenty of other places to go and no encouragement either from Britain or the Australian colonies to come. The majority of the few who arrived were Jewish. Consequently the Polish community which arose after 1947 had to be created from scratch and around the concerns with Communism and the fate of Poland which were so central to the Displaced Persons. Certainly some Polish individuals made an impact before then, most notably Sir Edmund Strzelecki . But he spent much of his life in Britain and his main contribution was to name our highest mountain and several other geographical features. His contemporary, John Lhotsky, though born in Lwów was not of Polish origin. Almost the only Polish Catholic community which was created was at Polish Hill River in South Australia by the Jesuit father Leo Rogalski. The Polish

impact on Australia thus came after the society had entrenched its basically British and Irish character, with the Catholic Church very firmly Irish in its origins and leadership. Unlike the South Australian Germans, with whom many Poles and Wends arrived from the 1840s, the small Polish groups became absorbed within much larger entities and eventually lost their distinctiveness. Few families of Polish origin survived into the 20th century, the Broinowskis being a rare exception.

Creating a Community of the Displaced

When the post-War migration program resumed in 1947 there were only 6 573 Polish-born in Australia of whom 4 000, mainly Jews, were in Melbourne. In the next seven years there was a huge jump of 50 000. Melbourne remained the favoured city as it still is, but large communities were also created in Sydney, Adelaide and Perth and smaller but active groups in places like Hobart and Maitland. With a small exception for German-speakers, most of these new settlers were Polish-speaking Catholics. This encouraged the creation of a very wide range of community organisations. A viable Polish language press was created to replace the small, occasional publications which had appeared since the 1920s (Lencznarowicz 2001). *Tygodnik Polski* has been published weekly since 1949 and *Wiadamosci Polski* was published between 1954 and 1996. Even more important than the media - which had a limited circulation - was the growth of clubs and organisations., An official listing of 1977 shows 109 Polish organisations. In each major city permanent club houses (*Dom Polski*) were created. This level has been well sustained but "attempts to assess the percentage of Polish people active in organisational life varies from five to 10 per cent.... But these numbers seem to be inflated" (Lencznarowicz 2001;625).

The communities created by the inflow between 1947 and 1954 were unable, to expand their numbers. Further emigration from Poland was forbidden by the Communists. Numbers peaked at 61 600 in 1966 and then went into a slow decline until the early 1980s. Nor was there much change in location, except for a slow movement of retirees towards Queensland as with many other European communities and the majority

population. Melbourne remained as the largest community but only Adelaide has actually increased its numbers in recent years - contrary to most other settlement trends which have passed South Australia by. Poles have not concentrated their settlement very strongly in the major cities. There remain some favoured areas, which are mostly in industrial suburbs. These have included the western suburbs of Melbourne such as Sunshine and Keilor and the southeast around Dandenong; western suburbs of Sydney such as Fairfield, Liverpool and Auburn; and northern suburbs of Adelaide such as Woodville, Enfield and Salisbury. In few of these areas do Polish-speakers make up more than three per cent of the population. There are also considerable numbers of middle-class Poles and Polish Jews in more residential areas such as Caulfield, Malvern and St Kilda in Melbourne and Bondi in Sydney. None of these areas are sufficiently concentrated to make up the large voting blocs which are possible for some Greek, Italian, Vietnamese or Chinese local communities, nor can they support the same range of ethnic shops and restaurants. To some extent, then, the Polish population, though large, remains 'hidden' from those among whom they live.

As there was almost no recruitment between 1954 and 1981 these communities have steadily aged. Their organisations have often become less active unless they have been able to recruit the second generation of Australian-born children. These now outnumber the immigrant generation, as is true for most European communities other than those from former Yugoslavia. Nor did the advent of the 'Solidarity' migrants of the 1980s make much difference. Nine thousand Polish-born were added between 1986 and 1991 and this brought the Polish-born numbers to a record high level of nearly 70 000. But decline set in again. By 1996 the 'new Poles' account for a bulge of about one-quarter of the total who are aged between thirty-five and fifty. Even so, forty-four per cent of the Polish-born were over sixty years of age, of whom the majority were over seventy. This is the essential and inescapable fact with which Polish communities have to grapple.

Cultural Cohesion and Social Division

The Polish-born population in 1996 was predominantly Polish-speaking and Catholic in its origins, as it had been since the early 1950s. While almost one-fifth switched to using English in the home, Polish was still normally used by 70 per cent, with a small residue speaking German, Russian or Ukrainian. This shows a high degree of language retention, bearing out professor Smolicz's claim that use of the language is a Polish 'core value'. It also provides a strong basis for media and organisations. With 70 000 speakers (apart from those who use Polish and English) Polish is the twelfth most commonly used language other than English. But this should not be a cause for complacency. Polish is very much an "immigrant" language, its local media is poorly supported and, like the other Slav languages, its position within the academic curriculum has been seriously undermined in recent years. Its use has, however been better maintained than for some other European languages. The numbers using Polish were exactly the same in 1996 as they had been twenty years before., though the Census definition was slightly different.

The common experience of arriving over a short period of time gives this aging population a continuing cohesion. Three-quarters are Catholics and less than ten per cent are Jewish - as the Polish Jewish population is even older and declining more quickly. Only a few claim to be non-religious while smaller numbers are Lutheran, Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses or Seventh-Day Adventists. While there is a variety of educational and social backgrounds, most of the Polish-born could be described as 'working class'. But there is a considerable divergence, with one-quarter holding university degrees, which is higher than for the general population and much higher than for immigrants from southern Europe. This reflects the influence of the Jewish and post-1980 generations. Occupationally about one-third are professionals and semi-professionals, which reflects educational and trade qualifications. But well over one-half work in the traditional industrial occupations of tradesmen, production and transport, elementary clerical and sales and labourers. This largely accounts for Polish residence in the industrial areas of the major cities. Of course a considerable part of the community is now retired but was previously also concentrated in 'working class' occupations. Indeed, the social position of the current Polish-born population is better than that of their predecessors. In 1976 sixty-one per cent of Polish-born males were tradesmen and

labourers, a level comparable to that for Greeks and Italians and almost twice that for the Australian-born. As with other European communities, the second generation is better educated than the first and more likely to become professionals.

Linguistically, religiously and as victims of the Second World War, Australian Poles are relatively homogenous. Socially they are divided and leadership has normally gone, as in other communities, to those with professional occupations and qualifications. This may account for the relative weakness of the media and many organisations, as Unikoski noted over twenty years ago (Unikoski 1978). It is also relevant to the relations between those who have led the organisations, often for many years, and the newcomers of the 1980s and the second generation. These latter are much less likely to use Polish in everyday circumstances and much more likely to have tertiary education than their parents. They are not dedicated to the overthrow of Communism, as this has been achieved (to a large extent by resistance within Poland). They can, however, freely return to Poland and establish links with individuals, organisations and governments, which their parents always refused to do. The relationship with the original homeland is thus more fruitful than it had been for nearly fifty years. Such a relationship is essential for cultural maintenance and in avoiding what has been called the 'fossilisation' of diasporic communities.

Sustaining a Polish Presence in Australia

Polish-born immigrants and their Australian descendants now make up about one per cent of the population. Poles constituted the largest refugee nationality ever to arrive in Australia, even outnumbering the Vietnamese. In contrast to the United States, then, most Poles came to Australia to escape the political conditions in their homeland rather than for economic reasons. This has tended to make the organised community very conscious of Polish politics and rather less interested in Australian affairs than many other comparable groups. Moreover, because many Poles came as Displaced Persons between 1947 and 1952 the community was ageing - a problem faced even more acutely

by those from the Baltic States and Ukraine. The post-War generation was not replenished until the 'Solidarity' emigration of the 1980s and was centrally concerned with the impact of Soviet Communism. It is unlikely to be replenished again now that Communism has been defeated. The entry of Poland into the European Union will open up the possibility of short-term migration into Western Europe. European emigration to Australia - even from Britain - has steadily declined and is now almost non-existent from the EU states. Poland, like Ireland, is likely to benefit considerably from EU policy. Short-term and short-range migration is always more welcome than movement to the other end of the world. Most people - and most Poles - do not want to emigrate unless there are compelling reasons to do so. The most compelling reason in the past was often the threat of Russian and German imperialism. Polish membership of NATO and the EU greatly diminishes this incentive. While Poland is certainly not a rich country it has been more competently governed with more beneficial results than is true for several other post-Soviet states, including Russia itself.

This presents the Australian Polish community with the same sort of dilemma which it was starting to face twenty years ago, but with important new twists. The solidifying influence of anti-Communism is no longer relevant. The 'myth of return' has faded for the elderly, who are bound into Australia by their children and grandchildren. Return visits are possible now, but the Italian experience has been that most who go back feel alienated from the society they left behind - mainly because it has changed out of recognition. Over twenty years ago Rachel Unikoski, in her study of ethnic organisations in Melbourne, foresaw the possibility of "protracted decline and general demise in organisations in groups with static immigration, e.g. East Europeans". She qualified this by arguing that "a new flow of migrants" might form vigorous new organisations or rejuvenate the ailing old ones". To some extent this happened with the Polish migration of the early 1980s. But another wave of immigrants from Poland is very unlikely. Moreover those who arrived even under the disintegrating Communist regime, found themselves often at variance with those of their elders who looked back to the world before 1939. Unikoski's critique was not well received at the time by many ethnic community leaders. But it retains validity.

Future Agendas

The major challenges to the Polish community (as for many others) are:

- Caring for the increasing proportion of immigrants who are elderly
- Cultural maintenance and relationships with Poland
- Retaining the interest of the Australian-born.
- Sustaining an organisational structure and media which can cater to and reflect the interests of Polish Australians.
- Co-operating with others in defence of multiculturalism, access, equity and mutual respect.
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Of these the care of the elderly has probably received most attention, as it has for several other of the post-War European communities. This requires both the provision of ethnic-specific services and, where necessary, accommodation. It is resource intensive and requires close co-operation between community organisations, state agencies and NGOs. A significant role is played by the institutions of the Catholic Church. But the state has a major responsibility which should not be diminished in the era of privatisation and 'user pays'. The principles of access and equity - that society is made up of groups with differing cultures and needs - are very relevant and should be emphasised.

Cultural maintenance has been much less of a concern for governments than the provision of welfare services. This is likely to continue to be the case in the future for a variety of reasons. Conservative attacks on multiculturalism over the past twenty years have discouraged the use of the public sector and public funds to maintain languages and subsidise cultures. This is particularly a problem because of the considerable proliferation of the variety of cultures in the past twenty years and the expanded emphasis on Indigenous cultures. Essentially in the future ethnic communities will need to look to their own resources, preferably in co-operation with the homeland governments. Many European governments now devote resources to diaspora communities. With the defeat of

Communism this need no longer be controversial provided that there is no political "hidden agenda". As the accumulated wealth and education of ethnic communities has grown, there is no longer strength in the argument that the resources are not there. Certainly at the university level the teaching of most languages is heavily dependent on private support or the encouragement of overseas governments. There is no immediate prospect of this changing. This does not mean that communities should not keep asking for support from public funds - but these are unlikely to increase very much in the current political climate. In the short term at least, they are more likely to be forthcoming at the State rather than the Commonwealth level.

In a relatively elderly community cultural maintenance must involve retaining the interest of the Australian-born descendants. There need be no crushing pessimism about this. The North American examples suggest that it is quite possible to preserve an interest in Polish culture for several generations, even if this means the loss of language. Such an interest is most fruitfully maintained by ease of travel. This is no longer a serious problem and many are returning regularly to the European homelands of their parents. The extension of dual citizenship makes longer stays important. Some Polish institutions, most notably at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, already run cultural exchange programs for the diaspora and Polish Australians should take full advantage of this. But it has to be recognised that 'cultural maintenance' does not mean 'fossilisation'. Poland is changing at least as fast as Australia and locally born Polish Australians will not be very interested in some traditional aspects of a Polish life which has passed away. All honour must be paid to those who resisted Communism and Russian and German imperialism - as is true for honour for the Anzacs locally. But Poland is a thoroughly modern country with a very healthy intellectual, cultural and sporting life. Young Polish Australians now have the opportunity denied to their parents of sharing in this and developing it locally and internationally.

As the community changes from an "immigrant" to an "ethnic" community new approaches are needed to retaining the interest of its members. Other ethnic communities have found that language fades over time but that a minority at least does

not lose interest altogether. Folk dancing may give way to an interest in film, theatre, music or literature in translation. Here again close collaboration with public and private agencies in Poland is essential. It is also important for Polish organisations and individuals to give full and active support to the collective defence of multiculturalism through organisations like the Ethnic Communities' Councils and the various State agencies which fund them.. There has been a consistent attack on multiculturalism for years now which can only lead, if successful, to assimilation and the eventual diminution of public support for ethnic variety. Poles have in the past made an important contribution to developing and sustaining multiculturalism. Much of the theory fed into public policy was developed by professors Zubrzycki and Smolicz. George Wojak was one of the most effective presidents of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils (FECCA). Sev Ozdowski has had a significant influence, most recently as Human Rights Commissioner. In recent years the emphases have shifted from the European to the Asian communities and from the Commonwealth to the States. But there is no reason why Poles should not continue this work. If multiculturalism declines and is run down as public policy Polish Australia will also be diminished.

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