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THE ACHIEVEMENT OF POLISH ETHNOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF POLISH COMMUNITIES ABROAD

Introductory Remarks

The study of Polish communities abroad has a long tradition in Polish scholarship. Started before World War I, research was continued during the Second Polish Republic (1918-1939) both by individual scholars and various institutions, such as Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego [Institute of Social Organization] and Instytut Naukowy do Badania Emigracji i Kolonizacji [Institute for the Study of Emigration and Colonization]. Another institution involved in the research of Poles abroad was the Instytut Badań Spraw Narodowościowych [Institute for the Study of Ethnic Groups] (Boruta, 1985). Although the accomplishments of the pre-war scholarship was no doubt significant, it was not until the 1970s that the studies of Polish communities all through the world gained a proper momentum and were consolidated, and conducted according to the assumptions of a single interdisciplinary program. The effort has produced a number of significant achievements as well as a great deal of disappointment. Currently the early enthusiasm of research centers and scholars appears to be waning and studies — due to political changes. Contemporary research concentrates largely on Poles living in the East (former Soviet Union), where they constitute ethnic minorities, and not “Polonia”, a term reserved for Polish communities established as a result of economically — motivated migrations.

Given the shift in the area of study, it is a opportune time to summarize the previous scholarship. My focus in this paper will be on the research of the last two decades, and I will approach the problem not as a historian of scholarship, but as a participant in certain projects who, among many other scholars, has taken part in the more or less successful attempts to deepen our knowledge about Polish communities abroad.

Research Programs and the Organization of "Polonia" Studies after World War II

In the years right after World War II the general conditions in Poland were not favorable to continue "Polonia" studies. Only in 1959 was the Komisja Polonii Zagranicznej [Committee for "Polonia" Abroad] established as a part of the Committee for the Study of Contemporary Culture of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The "Polonia" committee was transformed in 1970 into an autonomous Komitet Badań Problemów Polonii Zagranicznej PAN [Committee for the Study of Problems of Polonia Abroad of the Polish Academy of Sciences]. This institution has become, and still is today, the main research center, yet along with the decentralization of research in Poland and the changes in financing research programs it has lost its dominant position as the scholarly arbiter and coordinator of studies.

In general, the tasks of the Committee includes, according to the decision of the Executive Board of the Polish Academy of Sciences: (a) initiating and supporting research concerning Polish communities abroad; (b) reviewing research projects in the field and coordinating studies nationwide; (c) popularizing the results of research; (d) evaluating research initiatives and programs nationwide, preparing and publishing collectively authored materials; (e) organizing academic debates and conferences on the subject of Polish communities abroad; (f) establishing regular contacts with foreign centers of studies on the Polish communities abroad; (g) publishing a scholarly annual devoted to the problems of Poles living abroad (Kubiak, 1975, p. 17). The range of the Committee's activity turned it into a "dictator" in the field of research on Polish communities abroad, which was both an advantage and — under some circumstances — a weakness of this institution.

The annual, "Problemy Polonii Zagranicznej", started appearing already in 1960 (Bogusz, 1975) — in 1975 it was transformed into "Przegląd Polonijny" which, first as a bi-annual and later as a quarterly, has been published until today. The journal is not only a mine of information about Polish communities all over the world, but it also brings information about the organization of research on Poles abroad, the activity of particular research centers, their evolution, programs, etc.

No doubt, the Committee deserves credit for encouraging studies on Polish communities abroad, and particularly for creating a solid institutional foundation of such research. A principal role has been played in this respect by Polonijny Ośrodek Naukowo-Dydaktyczny Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego [Center for Polonia Studies of the Jagiellonian University], later renamed as Instytut Badań Polonijnych [Institute for Polonia Studies] and then as Instytut Polonijny [Polonia Institute]. However, it is important to mention other research centers, such as Instytut Migracji Katolickiego Uniwersytetu

Lubelskiego [Institute of Migrations of the Catholic University of Lublin] (today: Instytut Badań nad Polonią i Duszpasterstwem Polonijnym KUL [Institute for the Polonia and Polonia Pastorate Studies of the Catholic University of Lublin]) and Zakład Badań nad Polonią Zagraniczną PAN [Department of the Studies on Poles Abroad of the Polish Academy of Sciences] in Poznań (today: Zakład Badań Narodowościowych PAN [Department of Ethnic Studies of the Polish Academy of Science], which for several years has been publishing a journal "Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria Nowa"). While Cracow, Lublin, and Poznań have not dominated Polonia studies, which have been conducted in almost all academic centers in Poland, these institutions have contributed the most.

A crucial problem was to develop a unified program of Polonia studies which would encompass "all the research upon all walks of life and episodes of the history of Polish exiles, their attitude to the homeland and nations among which they settled down" ("Problemy...", 1960, p. 3). The best known programs were the following: a project of Komisja Polonii Zagranicznej PAN ("Problemy...", 1960), of R. Bierzanek (1968), of W. Szczerba (1973), and, above all, of H. Kubiak (1975). The last proposal was particularly interesting, since it provided basic theoretical assumptions for the comprehensive government program MR III/10, "Transformations of Polish Communities Abroad" (later called "Transformations of Polish Communities Abroad in the Context of the Evolution of Other Ethnic Groups in the Countries of Settlement of Poles"), which was realized in 1976-1985, and then, after minor corrections, in 1986-1990.

Putting forward his program, H. Kubiak started with the assumption that Polonia studies had previously been inefficient. That was caused by a number of factors among which he distinguished as the most important ones: "the lack of an adequate research basis in most centers involved in the Polonia studies, and in particular the lack of proper information and documentation background..., insufficient cooperation with foreign centers for ethnic studies, including Polish academic institutions abroad..., little theoretical and methodological value of most studies determined by their journalistic rather than academic character..., a tendency of most scholars to avoid, mainly for objective reasons, difficult analyses of the present... and to focus on the past... almost exclusively on the basis of sources which are already available" (Kubiak, 1975, pp. 18-19).

In his "unified program of research tasks" Prof. Kubiak distinguished 22 general directions of research which, in most cases, had already been pursued. However, the program mentioned – and this is its strongest point – a number of neglected fields such as: "Transformations of the Polish Spoken by Polish Communities Abroad", "The Stereotypes of Polish Immigrants, Poles, and Poland in Foreign Art and Media", "The History of Polonia Studies in

Poland”, “The Methodology of Polonia Studies” or, finally, “The Protection of Things Polish Abroad”. One of the most neglected problems was the culture of Poles abroad. Among others, Kubiak considered it essential to recognize the mechanisms of transformation of cultural patterns and values as well as the mechanisms of the preservation and transformations of folklore in Polish communities abroad. In an organic development of Polonia studies such tasks were addressed to those disciplines of scholarship which focus predominantly on culture, i.e. to ethnographers and ethnologists. Kubiak’s program was definitely an act of encouragement, an invitation of students of culture to take part in the research on Polish communities abroad. Such research is sometimes called a Polish version of ethnic studies (Miodunka, 1987, pp. 11-12; Stankiewicz, 1994, p. 17). Still, before answering the questions of how far this program was realised and what the effects of the ethnologists’ work were, we must say a few words about the origin and nature of the phenomenon called “Polonia culture”.

Culture of Polish Communities Abroad

The status of the culture of an ethnic community in a multiethnic country of immigration has been and still is a controversial issue. A variety of ideas in this respect may be reduced to three most important perspectives: (a) an (emigrating) ethnic community preserves in the country of settlement its original culture; (b) such a community adopts the culture of the country of settlement; (c) an ethnic community develops a new type of culture which cannot be reduced either to its original one or to the culture of the country of settlement.

If we assume that the emigre community just preserves the culture of the country of origin (even though, for obvious reasons, in an increasingly limited form), then what remains as the only possible object of interest are the relics: material or mental remains of the cultural baggage that have been brought by emigrants to their new place of settlement (Kantor, 1990b). That baggage is suppressed by the culture of the country of settlement, and the immigrants gradually adopt the culture of their new homeland. The degree of atrophy of their original culture will correspond with the degree of assimilation (Symoniewicz-Symmons, 1982).

Adopting the assumption that in the country of settlement an ethnic community develops a new type of culture which can not be reduced to either the culture of their country of origin or to the culture of the country of settlement, we gain legitimate grounds to recognize ethnic subcultures, including the subculture of Poles abroad (Babiński, 1981; Paluch, 1981). Since the countries accepting refugees from Poland were culturally diverse, Polish communities which developed abroad and adopted some elements of the

culture of dominant groups also had to differentiate in terms of culture. This means taking into consideration differences among the cultural baggage of particular groups of Polish emigres, and that there is no unified "Polonia" culture (if we admit, that "Polonia" as such exists at all), but rather a variety of cultures of Polish communities abroad which are more or less varied in spite of their common origin.

With respect to their culture of origin, Polish emigre communities could be more or less unified. An example of cultural unity of Poles abroad are the Canadian Kashubians (Jost, 1983), yet in most cases groups of Polish emigres transforming into Polish communities abroad were internally differentiated according to their regional descent. That regional origin or, more precisely, regional differentiation connected with origin, was enormously significant for the development of the identity of specific Polish communities abroad and their culture. Most waves of emigrants were largely constituted by peasants who in fact became the kernel of almost every Polish community abroad. The emigre waves which founded Polish communities in the United States, Canada, Brazil, France, and Germany did not carry high national culture (though at times these immigrant groups did retain some of its elements), but specific regional cultures — the folk traditions of peasants.

Polish peasants who constituted the majority of emigres acquired their national identity only abroad, under new and in many respects unique circumstances. The institutions which created that identity were Polish parishes and social organizations, with books and the press also playing an important role.

In the initial stage of its development, the culture/cultures of Poles abroad might have seemed an amorphous cluster of peasant, regional as well as national traditions. Still, very much due to the influence of the Polish parish, the annual rituals and customs converged and evolved into one relatively uniform and universally recognized canon of Polishness in every day life and social activity. If not for the external influences of the dominant and other ethnic groups, Polish communities abroad would have probably developed one type of culture which could be called universal, yet in fact, from the very beginning of the history of Polish communities they demonstrated great diversity and specific features related to the country of settlement: American, Brazilian, Canadian, French, etc. Thus, their culture should be defined in precise terms as, for instance, the culture of Polish Americans. However in this particular case the general definition does not suffice, as the differences between a farming community (Kocik, 1990) and the culture of Polish urban communities are significant (Kantor, 1990a).

There is no doubt that the cultures of Polish communities abroad continued evolve under the influences of the societies of their countries of settlement, as a result of internal processes, and under the influence of new

groups of emigrants coming from the mother country. The new waves of emigrants culture as well as later waves of immigrants carried with them a Polish version of mass culture. Joining and changing Polish communities abroad, the newcomers would also impact their ethnic culture.

All the cultures of Polish communities abroad reveal features which result from their common origin, even though specific differences among them may be significant. In many cases those differences have not been recognized until today, but this does not justify an attempt to apply any single common denominator. Such a procedure might lead to neglecting one crucial fact: the enormous impact of the local cultural environment on the evolution of any given Polish community abroad, and the obvious fact that the circumstances in various countries are different, at times even extremely so.

Polish Communities Abroad and Their Culture as an Object of Ethnographic and Ethnological Studies

The past and present of Polish communities abroad and their respective cultures have been studied to a varying extent. They have been attracting the attention of scholars representing various disciplines, and sometimes it is difficult to set clear interdisciplinary boundaries. Most often, due to the characteristics of the studied subject effective research requires a combination of the approaches of history, sociology, and ethnology.

It has been a common opinion that the culture which is best known in all its respects is that of Poles in the United States. It is indeed true that scholars have accumulated a great deal of information about the Polish press in America, Polish organizations, schools, and other institutions. However much less is known about patterns of every day life, family and annual ceremonies, social customs, emigre folklore (Kantor, 1994), etc. This means that our knowledge of the culture of Polish communities in the United States is limited to culture in a narrow sense of this term: to cultural activity in its institutionalized forms or even to high culture, whereas very little is known about popular culture as well as symbolic culture in general, even though recently some progress has been made in this respect (Rokicki, 1986a; 1986b; 1992a; 1992b; 1994).

Moreover, as far as the culture of Polish Americans is concerned, scholars have been examining mainly urban culture (Posern-Zieliński, 1982), while the culture of rural, farming communities which make quite a large part of the Polish American population in some regions of the United States still remains virtually unrecognized (Kocik, 1990; Koliński, 1988; 1989).

Although the culture of Polish communities in the United States is considered to be well known, in fact it has been only superficially understood. Much less can be said about other Polish emigre cultures, such as, for example,

the culture of Poles in Brazil which has been seriously researched only recently (Knothe, 1985) and about which much study still remains to be done. Elsewhere, I have discussed extensively the achievement of Polish ethnography/ethnology in the study of Polish communities abroad (Kantor, 1984; 1987). Having provided a critical account of the hitherto practiced methods of research and results, I have proposed a general approach to the cultures of Polish communities in the world that would allow for the study of culture as such, and not — as was done in past research — of the cultural heritage of Poles abroad. This proposal was based on a critique of the conception of W. Sobisiak who claimed that “what seems the most important is a thorough and comprehensive account of the behavior of emigrants related to the maintenance and cultivation of their original cultural heritage, and only then we should approach such problems as acculturation, assimilation, and integration with a new environment or, in general, develop the study of the contemporary emigre culture or contemporary cultural model of the emigrant” (1975, p. 46).

The same author declared that, to meet the standards of knowledge, “the concept of the original culture of emigrants should comprise the cultural heritage of the country of origin, that is, all forms of human behavior which gave rise to the objectified cultural elements of a given ethos — both material and spiritual values and accepted demeanor — which has been adopted and transmitted by its representatives who live abroad” (Sobisiak, 1975, p. 17).

I have already criticized on several occasions (Kantor, 1985; 1987) the above conception of Polonia studies which leads to the model of research, data collecting, and the presentation of results (Sobisiak, 1983) which is both correctly pejoratively — referred to as “ethnographico-folkloristic” and, in fact, can be reduced to the time-consuming identification of ethnic characteristics in the preserved elements of folklore, customs, language, etc. As a result, ethnography and ethnology (as the latter is often associated with the former) have been pushed to the margins of studies of Polish communities abroad. While the results obtained on the basis of such a conception are not without some merit (including the works of W. Sobisiak), I would argue that his approach is problematic. Even Sobisiak’s students have adopted a much more comprehensive approach to culture reaching far beyond a narrowly defined search for the relics of the original culture and symptoms of its cultivation (Kaczmarek, 1991; 1992).

Another penetrating critique of the approach starting from the concept of original culture was formulated by A. Posern-Zieliński (1987, p. 59). “In its classic... version, the concept of original culture favors the study of the heritage of emigrants transferred to a new environment and of the ways of its preservation in a culturally alien milieu. The student of the original culture is not really interested in the transformation of Polish cultural patterns and values in the process of acculturation or their selection and combination with

alien elements to yield the elements of a totally new subculture, but in the acknowledgement of the relics brought in the emigrants' baggage and identification of all those patterns which may be derived directly either from Polish folk or high national culture. No wonder, then, that the favorite object of study for that orientation, no matter if its proponents use the term 'native culture' or replace it with other concepts, are folk customs, rituals, ceremonies, superstitions, and other similar aspects of the so-called traditional folk culture cultivated in Polish communities because of tradition or because of conscious decisions to refer to the tradition of the country of origin".

As a substitute for such a conception, the author introduces another essentially different paradigm. "An approach — continues Posern-Zieliński — which is, in a way, opposite to the treatment of the culture of Polish communities abroad as a culture of diaspora, both in its elite and folk aspects, is a conception of the 'Polonia' culture as a culture which is ethnically specific as a part of the cultural reality of the country of settlement. It may be considered as a result of acculturation and another transformations related to the process of gaining roots in a new ground, and viewed as a new (though transitory) and original phenomenon which is a complex of diverse elements, including the culture of the country of origin adopted to the particular conditions of the country of settlement, local patterns adjusted to the ethnic identity of the group, and innovative solutions developed only in a given Polish community" (A. Posern-Zieliński, 1987, p. 59).

In recent years, the approach stemming from the belief that the study of Polish communities abroad should reach beyond the "folklore-ethnographic" framework and give up the search for the traces of original culture to focus instead on three basic perspectives: of the country of origin, the country of settlement, and a given Polish community itself, has been widely accepted. Still, it remains an open question whether this will result in concrete scholarly activity: research projects and publications shedding new light on Polish communities abroad and their cultures.

Any attempt to answer this question should begin with acknowledging a book which in the context of "Polonia" studies in Poland undoubtedly has played an inspiring and pioneering role. Even though the scope of its subject was so wide that it could not satisfy the interested audience (some questions relating to a variety of problems were dealt with in a rather cursory manner), over the years the book A. Posern-Zieliński's, *Tradycja i etniczność. Przemiany kultury Polonii amerykańskiej* [Tradition and Ethnicity. Cultural Changes of American Polonia] (1983) has acquired more and more value.

As it is obvious in the context of the aforementioned approach by the author to the culture of Poles living abroad, Posern-Zieliński's goal was to present the culture of Polish Americans not as a series of residues of the

“original culture”, which was a common practice at the time when the book was published, but as “an account of the process of the rise, development, and gradual reduction of the spread of the ethnic subculture of Polish Americans” (p. 11). The author also rightly claimed that “the original culture brought in the baggage of the immigrants was replaced by new forms of culture which are different both from the patterns of culture of the homeland, and from the mainstream culture of the United States shaped by the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant ethos” (p. 12). Those new forms of culture became the object of Posern-Zieliński’s close attention.

Posern-Zieliński’s study included a number of important and seminal conclusions, one of them being particularly significant. “Just as there is no single and uniform Polish community abroad — writes Posern-Zieliński — there is no definite culture of Poles abroad; for despite many common characteristics, it takes various forms, depending on the moment in time and the social background” (p. 288).

While the author showed these common characteristics in a convincing manner, the variety of forms of culture of Polish Americans was hardly delineated. The material available to the scholar indicated the similarities most distinctly, and a thorough presentation of differences required more systematic and profound studies and long-term and continuous contacts with the Polish communities, including, e.g., Detroit and Chicago workers, farmers from the area of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, the mountaineers from Passaic who maintain close ties with the Old Country, and the progeny of pioneers from Panna Maria in Texas.

Recently, the research on the origin of Polish communities abroad and their culture have become considerably more advanced. Of particular importance are the publications by J. Rokicki from Zakład Kultury Polonijnej Instytutu Polonijnego Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego [Department of Polonia Culture of the Institute of Polonia Studies of Jagiellonian University]. In several works J. Rokicki has dealt with the problematic of migration and cultural change in the context of the study of Polonia culture (1986a), analyzed the role of religion and language as the carriers of ethnic values and symbols of an ethnic group (1986b; 1992b), and originally approached the so-called polka-masses, an ethnic element of the Roman Catholic liturgy in Polish communities in the United States (1994). Of particular value is Rokicki’s work, *Więź społeczna a zmiana kultury. Studium dynamiki polskiej zbiorowości etnicznej w USA* [Social Bonds and Cultural Change. The Study of Dynamics of Polish Ethnic Community in the U.S.A.] (1992), which combines general studies on the Polonia culture as an ethnic subculture with detailed analyses of its particular elements. No doubt, it may be put next to the book by Posern-Zieliński, both for its outstanding academic value and inspiration for contemporary studies on Polish communities and their culture/cultures.

Equally noteworthy are other monographs of Polish communities abroad which, to a varying extent, have taken into account their culture in a way that does not, in fact, considerably differ from the approach advocated here. Among others, lately the object of research have included: a Polish American community of farmers in Wisconsin (Koliński, 1989; Kocik, 1990), a unique, century-old community of emigrants from one Małopolska parish in Chicago (Kantor, 1990a; 1994) as well as the Kashubian community in Canada (Kucharska, 1986; 1993). Unfortunately, similar studies of Polish communities from other parts of the world still remain to be written.

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